

CBMM-ButterballThompson

Q: So, welcome. We're doing the interview today, a oral history interview. Can you tell me your name and birth date, and if we have permission to record you today?

THOMPSON: [00:00:10] Absolutely have permission. My name's Calvert Elmer Thompson, Jr. I live in Denton, Maryland, and everything that I've done my whole life is your... at your beck and call.

Q: Awesome. Thank you, man. Tell me what your nickname is.

THOMPSON: Butterball.

Q: And how did you get that name?

THOMPSON: [00:00:31] Well, when I was younger, I was a little chubby, and I still am. [Laughs] So I -- it was gave to me by Furley Baxter, told my father one day, he said, "He's just like a little Butterball." And it kind of stuck. And everybody gets a nickname, I guess. My original name was Buddy, my grandfather gave me, "My little buddy." But it soon went to there from, you know, four or five years old, to right on up. And it's -- now I'm 62, and I'm still Butterball. And...

Q: Do people often -- do you sometimes feel people feel funny about calling you "Butterball"? You...

THOMPSON: [00:01:21] Yes. Some people really do. I had one lady told me, she helped me lose my weight if I would change my name back to Calvert Thompson. I said, "Well, I can -- I never changed my name, it's just my nickname." And everybody would -- if somebody said "Calvert Thompson," they probably wouldn't even know me.

Q: Do they feel it's disrespectful, or something, in some ways?

THOMPSON: [00:01:42] In some ways, yeah.

Q: But they don't understand.

THOMPSON: [00:01:44] They don't understand until I tell them, you know, how I got it. And it's just like any other nickname, I don't care if it's -- if you're nicknamed "Mud"...

Q: Right.

THOMPSON: It's -- you're gonna to be "Mud" for the rest of your life.

Q: That's what people call you. So Butterball, you grew up on Kent Island in Dominion, Little Creek area.

THOMPSON: [00:02:08] Yes.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family. Your parents, grandparents, and particularly regarding the boat building business.

THOMPSON: [00:02:19] Well, my grandfather had a railway. They put a railway in, they built it all theirselves. It was made -- at that time, it was made out of wood, with -- they had railway wheels, that was the only metal part of it. And they made it out of oak, where it was real heavy, so when it went in the water, it didn't float. So -- because oak doesn't soak water, it's just -- it's so dense. And that's what they hold -- and I can remember as a kid, my first job was to wash the boats off. Well, they were pulled somewhat out of the water, but not all the way out. And you'd take a scrub brush and a hoe and straighten the hoe out so we could get the barnacles and the stuff off, and scrubbing everything by hand, just there's no power washers, and anything like that back in the day. Then we pulled up just a little ways further so I could get some sand in the -- from off the ground to kind of sand the bottom, to get it clean, because the copper back those days didn't really do a lot. [Laughs] I've had it, you know, like, two, three inches thick of hair hanging off.

Q: So you were a kid doing that?

THOMPSON: [00:03:40] Yeah, I was a kid doing that. Yep.

Q: So your dad and grandfather, what were their names?

THOMPSON: [00:03:47] My grandfather was Lemuel Thompson, and my father was Calvert Elmer Thompson, Senior. And he built at least 50-some, if not more -- we have record of at least 50-some boats.

Q: That Lemuel built?

THOMPSON: [00:04:12] That my grandfath-- well, all the boys, all the boys built together. But, I mean, Lemuel was the builder.

Q: That was his...it was Lemuel Thompson that...

THOMPSON: [00:04:18] Everybody. Everybody worked on them, and -
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Q: So you say they built about 50 boats?

THOMPSON: [00:04:22] At least 50. But you know my mom, she wrote down people's names and who...who they were built for, what size boat they got, and what it cost at that time. Back in the day, you know, a boat was -- a boat done turnkey was \$300. [Laughs] A whole boat.

Q: That's amazing, man! What did your mom do?

THOMPSON: [00:05:01] My mother was a stay-at-home mom that did the paperwork and everything for the marina. I mean, she -- she took care of us. And as a kid, when you grew up, you had a certain time to be somewhere, a certain time to -- and when -- when that outside light come on in the

house, you'd better be walking in the door, or you had to answer to her.

Q: Do...was that over -- how many decades, like, the '40s? Nineteen forties, nineteen fifties?

THOMPSON: [00:05:29] I would say in the 4 -- you know, in the '40s.

Q: Forties?

THOMPSON: [00:05:32] Yeah, because my father was just -- he was boat racing back in the '50s. So I'm saying in the '40s, they were -- you know, '30s and '40s they were building, building boats, as a kid.

Q: Do you -- now your mom kept that record as to who purchased those boats. Do you have any idea now where those boats ended up? Do you have any idea of any of those boats, where their current location might be?

THOMPSON: [00:06:03] Well, my father's boat, the last boat my grandfather built before he passed away was, I was only six months old, and the boat was built right after I was born. And that boat, still today, has been refurbished. My nephew bought it back, after it was sold two or three times, after my father, got, you know, got rid of it. But my health -- his health dropped, so he just didn't want the burden. And he sold it to Snake Lee, which is Teddy Lee,

Jr. Then it was sold again to Guinea Leg, and Guinea Leg's grandson ended up with it. Then it back -- now it's back to our family again, to my nephews. And he had it redone of fiberglass, the whole upper work. And a ridge stripe, the lightning stripe that used to be on, it's back on it, everything's back together.

Q: Back in family hands?

THOMPSON: [00:07:09] Back in family hands.

Q: That's pretty amazing.

THOMPSON: [00:07:12] And that boat's 62 years old.

Q: That's pretty awesome.

THOMPSON: [00:07:16] And I'm sure there's more -- more out there that are still, still around. But that's the... the only one I can, right off the top of my head, you know, know where it is.

Q: What's your earliest memory, but then also what's your fondest memory?

THOMPSON: [00:07:36] My earliest memory. Yeah that's a stumper. My earliest memory was just having our closeness of family, where when one hurt, we all hurt. If one did well, we all were, we all were. We just -- your brother or your sister, and I lost my brother. My brother had brain tumors when I was...when he was 14 years old. And he -- that was a

memory that it's hard...hard to forget. I mean, he went through a lot. But they said he would never have a family, and he ended up with three...three children. And then he passed away some years later. But at least he got... he outlived the doctors -- what the doctors said. And that's -- that -- he was everything to me. He was my little brother, but he was everything.

Q: What was his name?

THOMPSON: [00:09:00] Joseph Patrick Thompson. And the closest of my family, and I think the funnest time when we went on -- we took trips, like, to Ocean City, we all went to Ocean City. That was a big thing for us to go to Ocean City, and, you know, sometimes it'd only be two or three days, but to us, it was like the trip of the year. Or we'd maybe go up in the mountains, so, you know, that was -- as a kid, that was some of the best times we ever had.

Q: Who were some of your best friends, growing up, and where did you guys go hang out? And what did you all do, growing up?

THOMPSON: [00:09:45] Well...

Q: I mean, other than the water. Like, anything around the island?

THOMPSON: [00:09:54] We went bowling and stuff like that, as kids. But we were... we rode bicycles a lot. My neighbor, Alan Rutherford, he's gone -- moved to South Carolina now, but he was, growing up, we were good buddies. And some of the crazy stuff we'd done, I can remember the first time I was -- I was -- I knew my mother was gonna be mad, but they had gone away for the day. And we were riding bicycles, and I had a pack of -- I'd stuffed a pack of cigarettes in my pocket. And I seen my mother coming down the road, so I throwed the pack of cigarettes, and throwed out \$100 bill, and never did find it, the \$100 bill. So it kind of...it kinda stopped me from smoking for a while. And then my father caught me smoking one time, he said, "I want you to go get all your money," I used to keep it in a little thing I got from Ocean City, it was like a treasure chest. I had, like, \$3,000 saved up in that, you know, from working and stuff like that. And...my father said, "Go get your money." And I brought it out there. And he said, "I'm gonna show you something." He said, "I want you to take that" -- he took a cupful of gasoline and poured it on that \$3,000 and set it on fire, and burned it up in front of me. He said, "And that's what you're doing if you smoke

cigarettes." I never smoked another cigarette for the rest of my life.

Q: I've -- I've heard some stories about quitting, like parents and kids, I've never heard anything like that!

THOMPSON: [00:12:03] Set \$3,000 on fire and burned it up.

[Laughter] Man, broke my heart. I was, like, "No!" I was going like this, trying to -- he goes, "Oh, no, you're gonna" -- he'd take...he took a ruler and smacked my fingers like that with it, while I was trying to put the fire out.

Q: You know, that's funny, in a way he may have saved your life.

THOMPSON: [00:12:19] Yeah.

Q: Three thousand dollars, but -- do you remember your first vehicle and how you got it? Whether you bought it or acquired it?

THOMPSON: [00:12:27] My first vehicle was a van. And it was a -- I had put on...on the van, "Taking Care of Business." I had it embroidered on the back -- or painted on the back of it. And when I got married, my wife took the -- she took the van up -- she had gone from the corner store, she called me up, and she said, "Your van's smoking." She said, "It's overheating." She called me up. I said, "It can't be overheating, you just" -- because you're, like,

not even 300 feet up the road. I said, "It can't be overheating that fast." So I come up from Little Creek to...to 1st Avenue, and I said, "You'd better call the fire company, it's on fire. And I've got two five gallon cans of gas in the back of it!" By the time they got there, it was ablaze. I said, "Well, I ain't taking care of any more business in this." [Laughter] So...

Q: What was your neighborhood like, growing up, down in Dominion?

THOMPSON: [00:13:47] Well, we, as kids, we -- I rode my bicycle, because we were, like, right across the field, the marina was. And when I, you know, like, it was a big...big deal, when I get home from school, is head for the shop. And I'd work til, like, 11:00 at night, putting holes -- when they were -- had the boats upside down, I'd be putting the holes on the -- on the bottom where they put the, you know, fasteners in it, and that's what I did as a kid. I -- and then my mother, they'd call my mother, says, "Becky, send him down. Send him down, I need him." And I'd go straight from there down. Of course, in the meanwhile he come looking for me, because I'd be out there with a dip, and dipping doublers off the pilings. "You're supposed to be helping me!"

Q: Hard to keep a kid straight on that kind of stuff.

THOMPSON: [00:14:47] Yeah.

Q: But as a child, you worked a lot?

THOMPSON: [00:14:49] Oh yeah, in fact, a lot of times, like I say, it'd be 11:00 before we come home, at night, and I fall asleep in my books, to do -- get my homework. It wasn't get your homework done, and then come down. It was the opposite way now. I mean, back then, it was -- we had to get this work done to make it, you know? Because there wasn't a lot of money -- it wasn't a lot of money per hour for anything. I made -- I made \$1 an hour when I first started.

Q: So it was a true family business --

THOMPSON: [00:15:31] Yes.

Q: -- to keep the family in food, and a roof over your head.

THOMPSON: [00:15:34] Yep.

Q: Etcetera, etcetera. So when did you start working on the wood? Or actually go in and out...

THOMPSON: [00:15:43] Well, I always, on days off, I had -- I would take a little green skiff across, like, across the way, at like, 12 years old. And I caught as much as 18 bushel with nippers. Not tongs, but nippers. And I would take six bushel at a time. I'd go come in with six bushel

close, and then I'd take and sell those. And then I'd turn around and go right back across the creek again, because I couldn't put so much in that little green, you know, [both speaking-unclear]...

Q: You had to make trips back.

THOMPSON: [00:16:12] Yeah.

Q: That's amazing, that's...

THOMPSON: [00:16:17] So I caught as much as 18 bushel. And I was 12 years old, looking forward to Saturday so I could go oystering.

Q: What was a bushel of oysters going for at that point?

THOMPSON: [00:16:25] Sometime two fifty, two seventy-five, for a bushel.

Q: And you were a 12-year-old, working on your own, basically?
[both speaking-unclear]

THOMPSON: [00:16:35] Well, yeah, I mean, when I was tonging by myself. But then, you know, I went to work with my father, you know, on weekends, and if we had a day off from school or whatever, I'd go out and cull for him, cull the oysters [both speaking-unclear]...

Q: So tell people, what is the -- what is the job of a culler?

THOMPSON: [00:16:50] Well it's a way that, you measure the oyster and get the shells off, the excess shells on there,

or a spat, which is a small oyster, and you have to knock those off. And it had to be at least three inches. If it wasn't, and then when the law man pull up there, my father say, "You'd better have them right. You'd better have them right."

Q: So there's a lot of responsibility for a kid.

THOMPSON: [00:17:25] Lot of responsibility for a kid. And when you see the tong head sitting open, like, that far with solid oysters in them, and you've got -- he's going to be coming back in about two minutes or less with the same amount again, you don't have time to -- it's -- it's not -- being a kid is, like, "Come on!" He's, like, you're trying to speed me up. But I'm scared to death that I'm going to get one in there that's not right. So...

Q: Get everybody in trouble.

THOMPSON: [00:17:55] And if you get a box, you learn to hit the box, you can hear the hollow sound. You know, 'cause if you throw that in there, that goes in the cup, too. So as a kid, I learned...I had to learn a lot. But I learned a lot, and also I learned that when we were working on boats and there were fish flipping outside of the creek, then the work always went to the side, somehow. [Laughs]

Q: So would you guys net -- would you go net fish? Or just go fishing?

THOMPSON: [00:18:36] No, we -- if we'd, say, dad would take a trip at, like, noontime, he'd ride down to -- he called it the "Shell Wharf," which would wash oyster shells down there then. Now it's paved. But, let's go down to Shell Wharf, [unclear]. We went down there, sometimes there'd be bluefish jumping out of the water, like this, and head for the boat. And...

Q: Go fishing.

THOMPSON: [00:19:05] We'd go fishing. And then when the fish was -- you know, when they'd go back down and we had a bunch of fish, we'd come back and go back to work.

Q: Time to go back to work.

THOMPSON: [00:19:10] Go back to work, just like that.

Q: That's a true Eastern Shore lifestyle, there.

THOMPSON: [00:19:15] But even...every evening when we got done work, every evening we'd catch a half bushel of fish. And then we'd come in and clean them. We had -- I mean, that was a good meal for us all...all the time.

Q: I was going to ask, as a family, did you eat a lot of seafood?

THOMPSON: [00:19:33] Yeah, I mean --

Q: You ate what you caught?

THOMPSON: [00:19:36] You at what you caught, yeah. It was a way of life, you know? For us, it was like -- like you, you want to go to a restaurant now, you want to go to seafood, well, we had it right at our beck and call.

Q: That's awesome. So your dad was one of your first mentors. You mentioned to me before that Chester Jones was another mentor of yours?

THOMPSON: [00:20:02] Yeah, well, I went crabbing with Chester Jones, and we called him Gumps. I don't know how he got that name, but somebody gave him that name, of "Gumps." But I went crabbing with him, and one day there was a -- he used to call them "chicken neckers," and he laid across our line, and we were in Holaga Snood's, and he said, "Hey boy, go up there and get my lunchbox!" I went up and got his lunchbox, and he had -- he pulled out a .44 magnum and started zinging bullets across the sky there. I mean, he wasn't shooting at him, but he...

Q: But he was shooting around him.

THOMPSON: [00:20:45] He's shooting bullets all around him. As a kid, I didn't want to tell my mother, but I didn't really want to go back out. But then I figured if I didn't go

back out, I'd have to tell my mother why. So she -- so it was kind of dang if I don't, dang if I do.

Q: So did you?

THOMPSON: [00:21:00] I eventually told her, but it was a long while before I told. And she says, she said, "Are you kidding me?" I said, "No, I'm not kidding, mama." And that guy, we never did see him again. He left his line, and everything. [Laughs]

Q: So Gumps was one of your mentors. Who else was someone who taught you how to work on the water?

THOMPSON: Oh, Joe Buck Baxter.

Q: Joe what?

THOMPSON: [00:21:27] My uncle. He was a -- I worked with him oystering and picking clams, picking clams. And of course Joe Buck's boys all, Captain Billy B., Billy Baxter, and Pete Baxter, Peter Gunn, Freddy Baxter, Mr. B. Those -- we, like, his father, which always tried to get his limit before the boys got his, and we'd always be, like, one or two short. And either one of those boys would say -- they call him "Pappy." "Pappy, you got enough?" "We only need one more." They'd throw it right on, they'd put it right on there, because they had an extra one for -- they always dug an extra one for us.

Q: Take care of dad.

THOMPSON: [00:22:28] Take care of dad. I can remember, when they were patent tonging, it was Glennie, Glennie White, which was Joe Buck's grandson, and Freddie was on one side, and Glennie's on the other, and Pappy was in the middle. Well, the two heads come up at the same time, and one of them caught Joe Buck's ear, he caught his ear with the teeth on the patent tong rig, and Joe Buck come in with blood all over the side of it. He said, he told us, he said, "No, you just stay there, stay here and get your limit, I'll be all right." Then he go get stitches in his ear when he got back here.

Q: These is the tough dudes, weren't they?

THOMPSON: [00:23:19] Yes. They didn't stop for nothing.

Q: Right.

THOMPSON: [00:23:23] Didn't stop for nothing, you know? When I first learned to dive, Glennie was a mentor for me diving for oysters. He said, "Just go" -- I would go over to the side, just as I'd have a tank on, he'd have a hose, I went down just to see what he was doing. And I come up and told Joe Buck. Joe Buck was culling that day. I said, "Joe Buck," I said, "He looks like a shoplifter." He said, "Why?" I said, "He's stealing all he can steal," I says,

"He's going, like, fast as he can go, just like that." I said, "I don't know how he sees them as fast as he's picking them. But now you know how much better he was than everybody else, because he hustled."

Q: How do you feel about diving? Was that a good thing overall? A bad thing?

THOMPSON: [00:24:15] Well, back in the day -- I don't know if it was good or bad, because it was good at the time, because there were people that couldn't catch five bushel from sunup to sundown, where we could go out there and catch, you know, our limit. And yes, did it deplete the oysters? But yes, no, because the oysters died anyway.

Q: Right.

THOMPSON: [00:24:41] MSX hit, and the oysters died. And if that hadn't happened, we'd still be -- it would have still been just like it was this past year.

Q: You could still cultivate those oysters --

THOMPSON: [00:24:51] Yes.

Q: -- if it hadn't been for MSX and Dermo.

THOMPSON: [00:24:53] It -- when I went down there that year, and I sent up 50 crates, and I only got 30 bushel. And, I mean, mountains of them all sitting there dead, with the meat hanging out of them.

Q: What?

THOMPSON: [00:25:13] It was sad. It was sad. Everywhere you went was like that.

Q: You realized, probably, it was a turning point.

THOMPSON: [00:25:20] It was. It was. It was devastating, because people were -- people that had bought their home and, you know, they're used to making this amount of money, all of a sudden when you're used to making, say, \$600 a week, and you fall down to \$200 a week, you still have the bill to pay. They had cars, they had new trucks, you know, everything's good when everything's good. But when it ain't good, you still got to come up with the money. And there was some people sweating. A lot of people hurting for a while.

Q: Let me ask you, we talked about your mentors. Let's talk a little bit about boats. Your boats. What was your first boat?

THOMPSON: [00:26:08] Well, my first boat was *Leon*. I bought it from my Uncle Leon. And he...he had that boat for so many years, that I didn't want to -- I thought it would be fit for me to name it after him.

Q: Was that your mom's brother?

THOMPSON: No, that was my father's sister's husband.

Q: Got you, okay. Leon --

THOMPSON: [00:26:31] Her name was-- Leon Young.

Q: Okay.

THOMPSON: [00:26:33] And he... I just -- I -- when I got the boat, it had, like, a piece of bolting rod going through, up by the cabin, all the way through to hold the boat. It was so rickety, the cabin was just sitting on the top of it. And it was just a little pilot house, about yea big with some glass in it. Well, it wasn't even fastened to the boat, it was just sitting there. And he would go up there, and you had to crawl...

Q: With a bar holding the two sides together.

THOMPSON: [00:27:10] You had to crawl underneath of that bar to get inside the cabin. And that was what -- the boat was so rickety when I got it. I'm, like, I paid \$1,000 for the boat, which, back then, \$1,000, everybody said, "Man, you paid \$1,000 for that piece of junk?" Well, guess what? I rebuilt it. I put a new cabin on it. I took the bar out. I restrengthened that boat, and I worked in it for probably 15, 20 years. And there's times where I made \$2,000 a week out of that boat. So you can laugh at my \$1,000 --

Q: Well, it makes sense.

THOMPSON: [00:27:51] -- all you want. [Laughter] And that boat was -- when I parked it, the Maritime Museum [Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum], I offered it to them, and they took the boat, and I think they made three replicas of that boat. They built three replicas of that boat, which is still today, I'm sure they still have the boats somewhere at different locations.

Q: Can you describe that boat? How big was it? Was it a tuck stern, or...

THOMPSON: It was a 38-foot tuck stern, deadrise. It was -- I'm not sure of the builder. I can't remember what the builder was, but it was built for Captain Herman Thompson, which had a shucking house down the Kent Narrows, and it was built -- it was supposed to be \$275 to build a boat. And because he didn't have quite that much, they tucked the stern even more to save \$50, so he got a boat built for \$250.

Q: By tucking it even more?

THOMPSON: [00:29:09] Tucking it even more than the normal tuck stern. It was really narrow at the back, to save wood, I guess, and save time.

Q: Does that affect the properties of the boat in any -- in use?

THOMPSON: [00:29:22] No. I mean, it actually -- the old tuck sterns, some of them had a -- later on they put, like, a platform on the back, underneath of it. Mine never had that. So when we were oystering, working from the back, diving, that old boat with those tapers underneath would ride the sea just like if you were riding it, going forward. It -- I could lay there with the rest of them, where a box stern, it would smack, and all the water coming over it, it would...

Q: You didn't have that with *Leon*.

THOMPSON: [00:30:08] No. I didn't have that. I mean, I had as much as 100 bushel in that boat for...

Q: A hundred bushels of oysters?

THOMPSON: [00:30:14] Yep.

Q: Tonging? Hand tonging?

THOMPSON: [00:30:17] No, not hand-tongs, diving.

Q: Oh, diving.

THOMPSON: [00:30:20] No, hand tonging, probably I had over 50, 60 bushel.

Q: So you really started culling, then hand-tonging, you crabbed the whole time.

THOMPSON: [00:30:30] Yeah.

Q: And then went into diving as a young man?

THOMPSON: [00:30:34] Yes. Yes. Yep.

Q: Diving for oysters.

THOMPSON: [00:30:38] Yep.

Q: What next? What did you do after diving?

THOMPSON: [00:30:41] I crab potted with Raymond Thomas and back in the day, we would go to -- we start on crab pots in the backyard, in his backyard, work on, like, 1200 crab pots. And get them ready to go to Cape Charles, Virginia, and soon as we could go to Cape Charles, the first time we went down there, they didn't really -- they didn't really like us coming down on their ground. And when we set pots down there, it was the roughest place I ever worked in my life. I been out there when it blowed 35 mile an hour, and it's 15, 20 foot seas -- you couldn't even see the other boat alongside of you, because it was going down in the swells. And sometimes we had to sit and wait, because we had [unclear] on there with, like, PVC pipe, they were three foot long. And the tide run so hard down there, that the corks would pull under the water, you couldn't see them. You had to wait for the tide to slack up. And then you'd go as fast as you could to pull the pots. Well, when we went down there, a couple of things happened, some of our pots were on the shore, and the guys down there smashed

them all. And the next thing you know, they stole our puller arm off of our pullers. But by the time we called my cousin, Sandy, he made...made the pullers, so he made duplicates by that afternoon. We still went and fished the pots, fished right until dark, and got and every-- and those guys, from then on, we had no problem with them whatsoever. And they all apologized to us. We were just coming down there to make a living.

Q: Sure. And you proved your point by, you weren't going anywhere.

THOMPSON: [00:32:47] We weren't going -- we stood our ground.

And when we left...when we left there, like say, the ones that did the damage were so sorry they did, because we helped them many times --

Q: Got to know you.

THOMPSON: [00:33:02] When they didn't -- when they couldn't fish their pots, they couldn't -- after we got in, the guy broke down, his motor broke down. I seen Bobby Larry. Bobby Larry said, "I got a motor sitting right home in the garage." They had sent one of them guys, brought it down the next day, and had it put in, had it put in for that guy to get him going again. Plus we fished his pots for him, and gave him the money.

Q: That shows what kind of guys you were.

THOMPSON: [00:33:32] When we got down working our job, we went and finished -- and helped them. And to da-- from that day on, we could go anywhere on the Bay.

Q: You told me a story once about a bad storm that came up while you were down there at Cape Charles.

THOMPSON: [00:33:52] Yeah, it...it got so bad that lightning struck -- lightning struck the boat, and busted the antennas off the boat. And we never stopped fishing.

Q: Throughout the whole storm?

THOMPSON: [00:34:16] Never stopped.

Q: Lightning striking your boat?

THOMPSON: Lightning striking the boat, never stopped.

Q: Any fear --

THOMPSON: [00:34:22] Kept right on -- huh?

Q: Did you have any fear?

THOMPSON: [00:34:24] I ain't gonna say that I wasn't scared.

But the bad part was, when he would back the boat up and it would seize, the water was so deep, it was over the top of my white boots on the deck that I was standing on. Well, the Captain's up in the cab with the doors shut, and he don't know it. And I said -- I hollered up, I said, "Ho, Raymond! We can't go, hold on!" And he said, "What's

wrong?" I said, "Look out the window." He looked out the window, he says, "Shit!" [Laughter] Literally.

Q: Did it pass? And then you kept working? Or did you finally go in?

THOMPSON: [00:34:59] Well, we kept working, but we had this -- I told him, let the scuppers, see, it had the scuppers on the deck, but they're only, like, four inches around. And I said, "We've got to let this water get out of her, because she's getting too heavy," because every time he'd back up onto the sea, we come over to stern. Could very easily have sunk that day.

Q: And there's not much around down that way to...

THOMPSON: [00:35:28] No. You can't see shore from neither direction.

Q: Is it deep water?

THOMPSON: [00:35:32] Yes. We're using -- we're using 35-foot lines down there.

Q: And who were you with? Who was the captain?

THOMPSON: [00:35:39] Raymond Thomas.

Q: Raymond Thomas.

THOMPSON: [00:35:40] I mean, Bobby Larry, he was out there, and Joe Coleman of the Coleman Brothers, they were out there. We were all close to one another, but, you know --

Q: And all crab potting?

THOMPSON: [00:35:50] All crab potting at the same time.

Q: From up here, going down there and crab pot.

THOMPSON: [00:35:50] Yeah, we -- those three were like a team.

They always had an extra engine for anybody. All worked in the -- there was always one sitting in the garage, something happened, everybody jumped -- you know, if they couldn't fish that day, then we fished their pots for them, you know what I mean? So nobody ever lost anything.

Q: How many crab pots would somebody put out?

THOMPSON: [00:36:12] Well, Hurricane David was coming. They fish...they fish about -- Barry and Joe would fish about 1500 pots every day, seven days a week. Seven days a week. When you started, it was seven days a week. So Hurricane David was coming, and they were worried about the pots getting sanded in. So we were going to put all the pots on shore. Well, Barry had hurt his back and couldn't pull the pots. We only run 1200 pots, I pulled 1200 pots, and then pulled his 1800 in one day.

Q: That's a lot of work, man.

THOMPSON: [00:37:04] For me. I pulled every one of them.

Q: That's -- and for people who don't understand, just pulling the pots isn't the only part of the job.

THOMPSON: [00:37:09] Oh no, you're pulling, baiting, and everything. Of course, that time of the night --

Q: Right.

THOMPSON: [00:37:12] We're having to put them up on the top. So I pulled the pot and sling it up to somebody on top, on top of the -- canopy top, and they'd stack them three or four high, and however wide that canopy top was, five or six wide. And they'd hold-ring them together, so they would stay, you know? I mean, it got rough, rough out there. You could lose that whole rig there, because once you pull those pots, you put the buoy inside the pot, you never -- it would have been the biggest mess. But we made up a -- I mean, we pulled every one of them. Every pot, I pulled them with Raymond -- on Raymond's boat, because I was used to it. I mean, Barry said, "We can use my boat." I said, "No, just" -- I said, "I just as soon pull them all with this boat, because I'm used to it." So we just -- once we got ours up, I pulled all his up.

Q: That's a big day, man. That's a lot of work.

THOMPSON: [00:38:26] Yeah. But I got every one of them. They didn't never lost a pot.

Q: So while we're talking about weather, tell me about the St. Michael's boat race that you were -- with your dad.

THOMPSON: Well, we -- it was actually not St. Michael's Boat Race, it was Cambridge Boat Race.

Q: Gotcha.

THOMPSON: And we were on the way back from Cambridge. And we -- and the storm come up where -- and when the storm come up, the wire shorted out against the shifter. The shifter come apart. When the shifter come apart, it shorted the wires out and caught the wires on fire on the motor. And that -- and then the storm hit. And there were seas out there, 15, 20 foot seas. And we had no motor. And the boat that we beat, *Vernon Conway*, was out there with us, and he hooked a line on to us and towed us in. And they clocked the wins at 93 mile an hour in a 30 foot boat, in the middle of Choptank River.

Q: How old were you?

THOMPSON: [00:39:50] With no motor. Ten years old.

Q: Ten years old.

THOMPSON: [00:39:55] I mean, scared to death. You know, we had no floor in the boat, none whatsoever.

Q: Because of racing?

THOMPSON: [00:40:04] Take the -- all the weight out of the boat. So we took all of the full framing, all the framing out of there. We're standing on the bottom of the boat. And in

the cabin of the boat, we had took the glass out to stop -- let the wind blow through the cabin to get more miles per hour.

Q: So no protection.

THOMPSON: [00:40:32] Nothing. And that was the only time in my life that I seen Ted Lee put a lifejacket on. I knew we were in trouble.

Q: So Ted Lee was a very well-known local waterman.

THOMPSON: [00:40:43] Yeah.

Q: Not scared of much of anything.

THOMPSON: [00:40:44] Not scared of nothing. But I see, put his lifejacket on.

Q: That probably scared you more than anything.

THOMPSON: [00:40:48] Oh, it did. From that point on, we had a hand pump, I don't know if you ever seen the old hand pump, but you -- whenever all the seas coming into the boat, and I'm pumping as hard as I could go, for 10 years old. I never stopped. I mean, scared to death.

Q: How did that end? How did that story end?

THOMPSON: [00:41:06] Well, we got -- we finally got to Tilghman Island. We got towed in by Vern Conway, which is one of the guys we raced with. And we got towed in to Garland Phillips' house, which the *Hayruss* sunk years later, and he

lost his life. Well, we were at his house. There were three yachts that had come through the Knapp's Narrows Bridge and leveled them off. They said the tide raised 15 foot in 15 minutes. That's how high the tide was from that storm.

Q: Did you get back in the boat afterwards?

THOMPSON: [00:41:50] Yeah, we went. We fixed it. There at this house, we fixed the wires, and seen what happened, the shifter had come apart, you know, just one of those things, you know? So we fixed all that and got the boat running. And of course, the storm was gone then, but we had -- we were on the way home, and Billy Lander was in his boat, and Ralph Lee was in his boat, in *The Twilight*, and Billy Lander was on the engine box just like this.

Q: Sound asleep?

THOMPSON: [00:42:32] Sound asleep. Sound asleep. Boat's going all over the place, and Ralph finally -- we finally called up to him, and Ralph took a buoy and throwed it and it landed right in his arms. And buoy -- was looking at the buoy like this, and never moved. [Laughter] And we were hollering and hollering, "Billy, wake up! Billy, wake up!" Finally, he's looking around, like, "Where are we at?" He had no idea! He was tore up from the floor up. [Laughter]

Q: Tore up from the floor up. And he slept through the whole damned thing, you think?

THOMPSON: [00:43:14] Huh?

Q: And he slept through all of that?

THOMPSON: [00:43:16] Oh, no. No, he --

Q: Wore out.

THOMPSON: [00:43:18] He had got to Knapp's Narrows before we --

Q: Gotcha.

THOMPSON: [00:43:20] -- got there. He was there. But, you know, we all made out like we were coming home, and he fell asleep.

Q: He was going.

THOMPSON: [00:43:27] And we were on the way home. Everybody -- all of a sudden, Billy just starts veering off.

Q: So you're pretty well-known here regionally as the "anchor throwing champion," "undefeated anchor throwing champion." You told me a story one time about -- and you didn't put it together until later as to how it might have led you to those championships, but you told me a story once about breaking down in Holaga Snood's. Could you tell me that again?

THOMPSON: Yeah. So, well, back in the day, we worked from sunup to sundown. Yeah, we didn't leave the rock until sundown.

So we put out in the dark. And this particular day, everybody had left, everybody going in. I worked til sundown like I normally would. I went to pull -- I went to pull the anchor up, and I had the motor running, and the motor cut out. Didn't really think much of it, somebody had pulled -- pulled the anchor on in, and the battery was dead. The alternator belt had broke, which killed the battery. And of course all day had been broke, probably. And he was just sitting there, and finally he said, "I'm done." So the battery had no juice whatsoever. I had a radio, but couldn't call anybody, because I had no juice. So you kind of, at that point, you're by yourself. And I knew -- so I took the anchor, and I got up on top of the cabin. I throwed it as far as I could throw it. And I got -- I would pull it real slow and get a steady -- until I could get the speed up, and I'd go all the way back to the stern of the boat with the anchor line, so I could get the most speed up. Then I'd wait until it was almost stopped again. Then I'd get up on top of the cabin, and throw the anchor as hard as I could throw it again, and do the same thing over again. Two and a half hours from seven and a half miles.

Q: Seven and half miles, you pulled yourself across, what, Eastern Bay?

THOMPSON: [00:45:53] All of Eastern Bay.

Q: How old were you?

THOMPSON: [00:46:00] I was -- I want to say probably 17, 18, maybe 20 years old.

Q: So you pulled yourself across the Eastern Bay by throwing an anchor? No one knew where you were, probably.

THOMPSON: [00:46:09] Well, my father probably knew where -- he knew where I was working.

Q: Where you were working.

THOMPSON: [00:46:15] But my father would never -- he wouldn't see me, because I didn't -- I was put out at Gordon's, so he wouldn't see me that day, because he had seen me in the morning, or whatever. But he wouldn't see me, you know, later on. There was not -- you know, we see each other once in a -- you know.

Q: Right. So he wasn't even aware that --

THOMPSON: He wasn't -- nobody was aware. And back then you had no cell phones or nothing. There was no cell phone. There was no nothing, you know?

Q: How long did you say it took you? Two and a half hours?

THOMPSON: [00:46:49] Two and a half hours.

Q: So it was dark when you --

THOMPSON: [00:46:49] It was seven and a half miles.

Q: It was seven and a half miles, pulled yourself across Eastern Bay. So later on, as you become a grown man, how did you get introduced to the anchor throwing competition?

THOMPSON: [00:47:01] Well, I went to -- I heard they were going to have this anchor throwing contest, and I -- you know, I'm pretty good, a pretty strong fellow at that point.

Q: Yeah.

THOMPSON: [00:47:11] And I never really thought much of it. But when you go out there, as a Thompson, I guess, it's in our blood to win. I don't care whether it's shooting pool, throwing an anchor or boat racing. We give it our all. I just -- I went to win. And I won -- the first time, I won by, like, 20 feet further than anybody else. I thought, shoot, I can do better than this. I mean, I could throw it a lot further than this. So I went in the yard, and I started practicing. And I got to where in the yard I could throw it maybe 100 feet. But I never, in competition, never threw it that far. During competition, they used to have me -- I would be the first thrower, which was great, because the rope wasn't wet. Once the rope got wet, you lose 15 feet.

Q: So that was one of your tricks, making sure you got to throw it with the driest possible rope?

THOMPSON: [00:48:29] Yeah, but then they caught onto that after a while. They caught onto it. [Laughter] I mean, literally, once you -- if you throw a nylon rope, you know, it stretches. So you really don't ever get that first -- the first one, the rope's light and everything. By the time they pull it back in 15, 20 times, you know, it's longer anyway, so you probably throwed it 100 feet. But the rope would stretch a lot. But you never, never got that measurement, but -- because the marks were already on the rope. You know?

Q: That makes sense.

THOMPSON: [00:49:15] You know what I mean? Because you can gain a lot.

Q: Yep.

THOMPSON: [00:49:16] But the marks don't lie. They're still going to give it to you, even though you gain. But I throwed it in Rock Hall one time, I went to throw, and this guy told me to throw to -- "You're here to throw the anchor?" And I said, "No. The boat's coming in." He said, "You can't hit that boat." I said, "Let me tell you, I just don't want to throw the anchor." He said, "Well,

just wait, then." So I wait for the sailboat to go back, and I throwed a 15-foot pass where the boat was. He said, "I'll never doubt you again." Old man Harry White.

Q: So you threw it further than --

THOMPSON: [00:49:45] Fifteen foot farther. Where --

Q: Past where he wanted you to throw it, to start with?

THOMPSON: [00:49:48] Yeah.

Q: Holy moly!

THOMPSON: He said, "I'm glad you waited. I'll never doubt you again."

Q: I'll bet that sailboat was glad you waited, too.

THOMPSON: [00:49:57] He shook his head. He's, like, he couldn't believe it. The guy on the sailboat was shaking his head, and they were cheering. The whole crowd just lit up.

Q: That's awesome.

THOMPSON: Because they all heard what he said.

Q: When's the last time you threw?

THOMPSON: [00:50:15] The last time I... was when in St.

Michael's, the guys were there for The Deadliest Catch.

And my wife had just -- she had had this surgery go wrong, and this was our first time out with her, and I took her down there to the festival and all, just to wheel her around. Not to go there for that, but Johnny Corsey was

there, a bunch of guys was there. Said, "Man, they're going to have the anchor throwing contest. You got to get in it." I said, "Man, I ain't throwed an anchor in five years." And he said, "Yeah, man, come on." So I went over there and I throwed it, and I won again.

Q: Get out! That's awesome.

THOMPSON: [00:51:01] I mean, that's -- that was -- I throwed it consecutive 19 years, and that would have been the 20th year, but 5 years in between the last time I threw it.

Q: That's awesome, Butterball.

THOMPSON: [00:51:20] But I never -- never neither time I lost.

Q: Never -- no one's ever beaten you?

THOMPSON: [00:51:28] Never.

Q: That's pretty awesome, man. A couple of the things I wanted to ask, have you ever seen anything that you couldn't explain out on the water? Anything weird, or something that freaked you out, that you still can't -- you think about it, and it's kind of unexplainable?

THOMPSON: [00:51:50] Not unexplainable, but a lot of funnel clouds. I don't know if you ever...

Q: I've never been out and seen one.

THOMPSON: It's not -- like this particular day, I was out there, probably seen 25 or 30. All day long.

Q: What creates those?

THOMPSON: [00:52:08] You'll see the -- it'll pick the water up.

It literally is like a torn-- a miniature tornado. It would just -- you could see the water going like this, with spraying everywhere, just like if you pulled it up right out of the, you know, out of the Bay.

Q: How big do they get?

THOMPSON: [00:52:27] Oh, they'll go up -- I mean, depending on what size they are, I mean, when you look at them from a distance, they don't look that big. But they're definitely a funnel cloud, and definitely you see the water -- pick the water right, you know, pick it right --

Q: Could it damage a workboat? Would it, if one came up near you? Could it be dangerous?

THOMPSON: [00:52:55] I would say yes. Because for it to have that much power, even though they were little. But, I mean, they were everywhere that day.

Q: Right.

THOMPSON: [00:53:02] Every time you looked there was one over there, there was one over here. You know? They were kind of all around us, but they never really -- and just as you try to get close to them, you know, to see what -- like you -- you know, we were trying to close to them, you could see

them coming. And you'd get to it, and just like that they'd be gone. Like, poof, they're gone.

Q: Wow.

THOMPSON: [00:53:21] Literally, right there, if you blink your eyes, it was gone.

Q: That's amazing, man!

THOMPSON: [00:53:28] Now we just had one go through, up by my house, like, a month ago. It went over into Greenwood, Delaware, and all. It sounded like a locomotive. I looked outside, and you could see the path cutting through my field, where it was just chewing up the ground, and anything on it. And it kind of went around this woods, it didn't go through it. It's like the heatwave, or whatever, was let-- it was following...following the road.

Q: That's [unclear].

THOMPSON: And then all of a sudden it broke out and went right across the woods. And they cut the top out of them trees like somebody -- just took a chainsaw and ripped them.

Q: So the power is almost -- you can't even understand the power of them until you see what they can do.

THOMPSON: [00:54:24] We must have had one the other night. There's a branch on my tree, like, this big, the other

night. I got up, I'm, like, daggone it, I didn't...I didn't know we had a storm that night.

Q: That's amazing, man.

THOMPSON: [00:54:34] But it's down now. It's part -- halfway gone.

Q: Do you still work on the water?

THOMPSON: I don't. I don't work on the water, no. I've actually sold my boat, sold my license because of my health.

Q: Health. What do you think that people don't understand about the job? Do you think people know what the job -- like the general public know and understand?

THOMPSON: [00:55:02] I'll be honest with you. I think that they have no idea what a waterman goes through in their lifetime to go out and get the thing that we love to eat.

Q: What would you tell them that might help them understand? What could you tell someone...

THOMPSON: [00:55:26] Well, when they get to a restaurant and it costs them, you know, \$150, we don't see that \$150. We only get a portion of it. And those guys are working while we're sleeping. Like, you -- I leave the house at 3:00 in the morning to go all the way to Deal Island, or 12:00 midnight to go crab potting in Cape Charles, Virginia, all

day long, and then to come back home and do it all over again. We worked on crab pots with a wire brush back in the day, when the pots got dirty, we didn't have power washers and all the stuff they had today. We painted them all by hand, spraying -- spraying it with a garden pump, when you pump it up and spray the pot. And I seen Bobby Larry's son, Jay Larry, told his father, "I quit," and jumped off -- and he jumped off the canopy top and swam ashore. He said, "I'm never crab potting again."

Q: No kidding? Quit on board and jumped over.

THOMPSON: [00:56:50] Jumped overboard and swam ashore.

Q: That's funny. That --

THOMPSON: [00:56:53] That's true.

Q: That's amazing.

THOMPSON: [00:56:54] He was up top working on -- taking a wire brush and cleaning the hair off the pots.

Q: It's one thing to quit a job, it's another thing to quit a job and have to swim home.

THOMPSON: [00:57:09] That's his son. And then he was a sheriff, or whatever.

Q: Yeah.

THOMPSON: [00:57:17] And then he passed away. But he knew he wasn't gonna crab pot anymore!

Q: Do you see a future for the industry? What do you think this future of being a waterman is?

THOMPSON: [00:57:26] I think that -- I think that there's so many regulations that they're gonna eventually close it. And it's sad to see that they're taking -- I think it's great that they take bottom and they produce oysters, and, you know, shell bottom, get things attached and everything. But I think it's bad that they take it and never give it back, because it's not theirs to take. We were, as watermen, is -- that's our livelihood. And every time you take a piece of ground away, then everybody gets closer and closer together. And then you take and rake that spot. You literally drain it to -- and then everybody says, "Oh, it's a terrible year." But not -- there's oysters right here next to it, but we can't touch it. That's the problem. There has to be a way you can shut down bottom for five years, and let it materialize again so it's healthy and great, and then give it back. And then shut that bottom down and let it come back. You can't just keep taking the bottom away and never giving it back to us. That's -- that's how I see it.

Q: What have you personally learned about life from being a waterman? How did being a waterman inform who you are, make you who you are, or your beliefs about life?

THOMPSON: [00:59:06] Well, it -- it makes you humble that there's a -- it makes you -- when you -- there's something to be said about when you get up in the morning early, and you go out and you've done your day's work and you know that you've done all you can do, it's a way of life, that it's kind of unexplainable. I mean, it's a peace of mind, that says, this is mine. I did this. Yet, whether it was a good day or a bad day, it's still a good day. That's how I look at it.

Q: That's awesome, man. I have one more question. Is there anything that I haven't asked you today that you'd like to tell us, or talk about in regards to the water industry, seafood, being a waterman? Is there anything you have on your mind that you'd like to share?

THOMPSON: [01:00:13] Well, I do think that there's times when watermen need help. I mean, this year was a great year for everybody, they done good. But last summer was one of the worst trotline crab season forever. And I think they have to, instead of punishing by taking their bottom away, they have to give it back. They can't just keep taking,

because, you know yourself, if you put so many people in a ring, you're gonna lose the space, because they're gonna take it away. But if you can spread everybody out, I don't think that one place -- in other words, crabs, if you go -- everybody puts it in the same spot, the crabs are there. But then you catch them all, and you can't go over there and get them. And you can't go over here and get them. You've got to have a way that it helps the watermen. Like, maybe talk about the county slips a little bit here shortly. I think it's got to be a way that you help them guys when they have a bad year like that.

Q: To support the industry, and to support the watermen themselves?

THOMPSON: [01:01:43] Yes. Absolutely.

Q: Because they are an important part of our culture, our history.

THOMPSON: [01:01:48] Without us, a seafood restaurant is no good. You don't have none.

Q: You don't have anything to sell to anybody.

THOMPSON: [01:01:51] Yeah.

Q: Butterball, thank you very much. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today. You know, this project is to make more people aware of what you guys do

and have done, and why it's so important to protect the industry the way you were just talking about. So thank you very much, I always enjoy talking to you and I certainly appreciate you giving your time to me today.

THOMPSON: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely a pleasure to have the opportunity.

Q: You're the best, man. Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE