

Interview Log

Interviewee: Jay Cherrix **Tape #:** VA/FT/12.11.203

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault **# of Tapes:** 2 of 2

Date: 12/11/97 **# of Sides:** 1

Location: Jay's gallery behind his house on East Side Dr., Chincoteague Island VA

Topic: the mural he painted; how his tools feel when he uses them

Corresponding Photography Log #: VA/PS/12.11
Fieldnotes: FN121197.doc

Comments: Filename: ft12203.doc (See also ft12202.doc for part 1-VA/FT/12.11.202-of this interview). *Italics* indicate song title or emphasis; "quotations" indicate direct transcription; [brackets indicate additional information not on tape].

Jay and I went in his gallery after I shot a few photos in his workshop. I decided to record his explanation of the mural and also asked him to repeat some comments he made in the workshop about his tools.

SIDE A

How he started the mural; decided to go into carving and believed that if you were an artist and were going to make a living at it you had to do a mural. Painted things he liked and then sat down and tried to figure out what it meant, and here's what it means:

the girl angel represents all beauty and is giving her love in the form of a kiss to the boy angel who is innocence who only gives its love to truth in the form of those flowers represented by the two turns [white birds] the only universal truth is peace and love; male has olive branch for peace and the female has the 3 cherries in her mouth which represents the family and love; corner angels ring out the pulse of life one is melody and the other is lyric; the angel in the middle of the mural represents the soul of all mankind and if we strive for high ideals we can almost touch the wings of heaven represented by these birds in the lily which is christ

story of how he designed it; shares story with visitors and in his brochure is a line, "be sure to see the mural of love on the sistine shed painted in Jay's shop."

discussion of painting of pony he did; carving after he finished the mural; carved some ducks while making the mural; story of first duck he carved;

Jay's tools: the wrasp is his favorite tool, the way you move it is like your thought brought out and you create [in a spiritual progenitive sense] the bird; translates more sublte line than any other ; translates the thought you have in your mind; it's the way a bird should be formed; making the eyes and heads with another special wrasp; uses whatever tool he can to achieve the shape he wants; carvers are shapers; changing woods' physics, molecular structure; it becomes the idea you have;

explains some family photos that are displayed along the wall with some ducks; story of family members and what they went on to do; one was a boat builder in ocean city; some of the photos are in a book on carvers

END SIDE A

END TAPE VA/FT/12.11.203

Interview Log

Interviewee: Jay Cherrix **Tape #:** VA/FT/12.11.202

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault **# of Tapes:** 1 of 2

Date: 12/11/97 **# of Sides:** 1 of 3

Location: Jay's workshop and Kayak office, then his decoy gallery; 7721 East Side Dr., Chincoteague VA

Topic: decoy carving, his grandfather Ira Hudson, Jay's philosophy of carving and living as one, Chincoteague history, family history.

Corresponding Photography Log #: VA/PS/12.11.
Fieldnotes: FN121197.doc

Comments: Filename: ft12202.doc (See also ft12203.doc for part 2-VA/FT/12.11.203--of this interview). *Italics* indicate song title; "quotations" indicate direct transcription; [brackets indicate additional information not on tape].

This interview took place early in the morning, 9 a.m. at Jay's studio and buisness. He is an early morning person and it looked like he'd been working for a few hours when I arrived. The studio smelled of wood and a little kerosene, and reminded me of the old sculpture studios as an undergrad. The interview went well, Jay loves to talk about his work and life, and has plenty of energy that sweeps the listener into his stories and explanations. He was extremely generous, loaning me a video of old footage of Ira Hudson in the 1920s shot on Chincoteague at Mr. Hudson's workshop.

After the interview I took a few shots of the studio, and Jay invited me to see his gallery. We crossed the street and entered a one-room approximately 8x8' outbuilding behind his house. Here he showed and described to me the mural on the ceiling and how some of his tools worked and felt [see vaft203.doc, VA/FT/12.11.203 and the accompanying photos].

SIDE A

Jay tests the Marantz by saying his name and the date, I play it back to check the levels and we begin the interview.

Jay born on Chincoteague in Tick town; story of how chinco. divided up and the names of the areas: north neck, tick town, south end, piney island, deep hole; house still stands where he was born.

Occupations: helper for survey company in high school, gunfighter in amusement park, army, meat cutter for 20 years, house painter, home improvement business, then

woodworking and the kayak business; always been a surfer or boater on the water.
Natural progression.

Family history: father a waterman [I get up to move the mic closer to Jay who sits in a swivel chair and periodically swivels away from the mic direction]; father fished and drove trucks delivering clams; father drowned when Jay was 2; story of that: pulling in nets, wave swamped the boat from high seas; pulled cabin off boat and stayed on top of it; occurred in April when really cold; stayed afloat for a while, father slipped away just before rescuers got there believes it was hypothermia; 4 men 2 drowned

Consequences of this: mother really young and remarried a pilot from chinco. naval air station; then family moved every 2 years; mother had 3 kids when father drowned and had 4 with new husband; Jay got a real education from these moves and the places he lived; Jay moved back to chinco. after army to raise family; mother from up neck and her father was Ira Hudson, decoy carver, Jay learned some from him, how both sides of family fit into his life decisions.

Started carving at age 40; aunt who is dead now urged him to carve; Jay didn't think he could but she pushed; Aunt Alice Scott; Ira died when Jay was 3; story of how Jay remembers his grandfather holding him and how he [Jay]took a puff from Ira's cigar, Jay remembers Ira better than his own father; story of how Jay's sisters think he is strange because he has prenatal memories from the womb; what he remembers: the space, floating, peaceful, and how he would terrorize his sisters with these stories.

Aunt Alice: baptist church member and Sunday school teacher; how she told him stories of Ira, grandpop, he carried cough syrup in pocket called Balsam Light and had balsam in it because the sawdust would get to him after a while. He would sip on it during the day. Aunt Alice would go and visit and always take \$5 to slip into the pocket of his sweater where the syrup was; and Ira would find it and wonder where the money came from and he never caught on; how sweet Aunt Alice was and how she helped Ira all her life: painting and sanding baskets of duck heads

Ira had a shop but did the sanding at night in the family home at the kitchen table; story of film Jay has about Ira: "grandpop was really better known for making boats than he was doing decoys when he was alive. But after he died, decoys became really collectible and so now he's better known for making decoys." story of car dealer coming down from NY to buy a boat, had ordered a gunning skiff; the guy brought down one of the first film cameras and brought it down and filmed while on chinco. picking up boat; story of how Jay found this piece of film: "One day I was in Snow Hill, I was starting to get into decoy carving because of my aunt and I'd gone to the library to get all these books on art and everything, so-I really took it seriously how you really had to be an artist to do this. I ended up painting a mural which I'll show you before you leave. But anyway, I met this girl there and she said, 'I think I have a film of your grandfather.' I thought that was just absurd that couldn't possibly be right. She said, 'If you'll meet me here next week I'll bring you a copy.' So she brought me a copy on video tape it had been an old 35 or 16 mm or something. I put it in there and my grandfather stepped right out of the past, 40 years later. It was incredible." How Jay tells them about Ira and his father drowning.

types of boats that Ira built; how built them: never used drawings, just looked at the boats or photos and built from memory; story of one boat and how built and the story's meaning for Jay who's very impulsive about his work-the story makes him feel better. How boat was so big when finished that grandpop had to knock down the whole wall of his shop to get the boat out. getting carried away with your work.

How Jay got into carving; as kid loved art but there were several traumatic incidents in early life and didn't go into art: father died, grandfather died, brothers and sisters died; how people have to work things out through the course of their lives before you realize what it is that you're supposed to do in life; "the older you get the more you become yourself." finds that true, found himself at age 40; relation of previous jobs and hobbies to carving.

How Jay left the decoy carving and has gotten into more of a folk art carving; what he tries to express through carving; concepts of beauty and reverence; prayerful objects and lines; expressing salvation; working only for money and how that relates to island consciousness:

"I've done things for money before which is really hard to do-it's very hard to do. Actually, it's hard to do anything you don't want to do. That's the beauty of being born on an island and having it inside of yourself. Realizing one day, realizing that the reason you can't work for someone else is not because there's something wrong with you. It's simply because you have to be independent. And so you live on the edge, the season comes like a breath in the lungs: it breathes in; it breathes out, and when it breathes out there's no money, there's no way to make a living. So when you breathe in, you have to breathe in to the fullest of what you have and earn what you can to provide for your family through that winter time. And after the bite of winter spring comes and everything is renewed and you've made it.

"A lot of people work jobs that they just despise and hate, simply to make a lot of money so they won't have to worry about the security. But when you live on an island and you depend on the seasonal type of things, you learn how to really live but you're fiercely independent. And so what I've found out about myself is that I was just fiercely independent and I want to make sure that my children grow up and they're fiercely independent. Because the best feeling I've ever had in my life was doing a hard day's work. That's the best feeling I've ever had."

Because I was strong, I work a hard day, paddle 1000 miles a season and do my woodworking and at the end of the day I'm tired, and it's a good tired. You just want to come home and not do anything but go to sleep, and it is a beautiful feeling. That's the feeling that's rewarding.

Gets back to the truth of the essence of what we are. No one is going to live for you. And nobody is going to die for you. The day that you die and you lay down, and you give up your last breath that's a job you gotta do yourself. The breath you took to come into this world was a job you had to do yourself. And we go through life and we depend on general motors, delmarva electric or our big conglomerates who have no names

because they're just a conglomerate of bunch of minds, those people aren't going to die for us someday or live our lives for us but we can give over our complete spirit to them. But the people who live on islands or on the shore here are so much more separated from a lot of things that we feel it more intensely. I do. I know that if I fail I cannot say that it is G.E. went out of business; I fail because either my health was broken or it was some fault of my own. I have no one else to blame.

Taking responsibility for actions and life; wealth a family brings; when you don't worry about money you prosper; spirituality of children; how Jay's kids are home-schooled and why; values he is trying to pass on to children: responsibility, integrity, respect, family is your purpose; how he got these from his relatives; experience of Vietnam and seeing what men really do and not liking it;

Carving: woods you prefer to use and woods you can afford to use; uses pine mostly; glues some up because can't afford a full piece; trades for wood; grain finishes and how they fit certain carvings; cedar as a good wood; cuts good and with any tool; tupelo wood is spongy so can only use certain tools on it; doesn't use hard woods; doesn't have the patience to wait for hardwoods and carve them for so long

Paint: primer, antique finishes; relation of consumer demand and his product; types of carvings and painting techniques: country, primitive and fine; fine he would use oil paint which sags on 3-d must be careful, a few secrets for that; mainly uses acrylics and a hair dryer to dry them quick;

gluing up: also does it because old timers did it, lack of wood, had to find it, no wood on island; Ira bought old telephone poles from light company made from cedar; whatever they could find like ship's masts from the ocean; [Jay picks up a ducksitting on the table and demonstrates how he glues by pointing to the seams on the head and neck, see drawing,]

Lines of a duck: exaggerates some of the lines, uses upholstery tacks for eyes, family has always done that, get a nice round surface and light reflects off; does lots of mergansers likes them, they are really quick fast birds; types of mergansers, colloquial terms for them;

painting techniques: doesn't use iridescent sheen but uses polyurethane to protect and give a shine; especially good if dust in house and then on duck they are easier to dust then [interesting market consideration]

Jay does slick bodies also used by most hunters, old timers used marine paint used on boats and that's why so many decoys are still around that are old; lots of lead in the paint and had slick surface; Ira used to take turpentine and thin it; but Jay believes the solvents will get you one day

[at this moment in the interview I flashed back to undergrad days as a painting student and the chemicals we consumed through our skin by touching them-all of which I am now allergic to.]

Jay makes all his feathers with a brush; art especially folk art is always evolving; article about Ira and why he had changed his style so frequently through his life; the reason: same as any artist, #1 is economics when first started he had primitive tools, wood was hard to get and difficult to cut so product was primitive; as time went on and he prospered he got better brushes and tools and more experience and skill the product improved; #2 artistic liscence developed own style over a period of time; Jay went from a very fine style to a very primitive one and now back to fine, but still does the primitive; real question is how can you express beauty in many forms; Jay's style of primitive ducks sold to foreigners mostly from overseas; Scandinavia etc.

Market is not driving his style, but he makes it and the market or niche finds it; why people come to chinco. and souvenirs; make the collector happy but also make the person who just wants a souvenir happy; most tourist want something for 30-35, a good product but you haven't spent a lot of time on; those wanting to display the object in a great room or similar will buy something more expensive; Ira had 3 different grades: weighted or not, [I interrupt]

Difference between those made for hunters and tourists: tourists don't want the weights because the lead will scratch their tables or whatever; hunters want it to right itself if tipped over; must be water proof and the head must be "rugged:" "and that's where all hunters grab, they don't grab them by [the body] they grab them by the head. It's the easiest and they take that duck and throw it over their shoulder. They want that duck to float the correct way, not backwards or forwards [tail or nose tipping into water] it must sit straight and if it turns over he wants it to flip back over with its own."

How you find the correct weight and add it to the decoy; must have a thick neck and fat head, bill can't be too skinny because it will break; Ira's ducks are made for men to hold, men have big hands and the head is made to fit in your hand with certain proportions; bill fits in inside of fingers and thumb goes across the top and fits your hand perfect; men like that, hunters like that; and that's why his heads are shaped the way they are. Jay is doing similar techniques with 1 line of ducks; also using Ira's patterns

Jay started to make duplicates of Ira's work this year; using his patterns; painted the way Ira did; 3rd generation collectors item with certificate; Ira's patterns: Jay learned this year about them from cousin, what the patterns look like; how Jay comes up with patterns: year thinking about it, week getting it right; uses old wood for pattern; Ira did the same; Jay searches for some of Ira's patterns which are on paper, shows me; cousin traced the patterns from wood; cousin also carves but not around the shore and not for a living;

Difference between folk art piece and utilitarian or fine pieces: utilitarian are more plain and bulky; folk art ones are made in traditional shape but with artistic liscence; this releases Jay to do what he wants in the art of line without worrying about detail; his is far away art, from a distance it is appealing but up close it has its flaws because he doesn't have the patience to spend the time; compares it to your skin up close and far away;

Some of the birds Jay does;

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B: VA/FT/12.11.202

carving memories from childhood; birds of prey, ducks, egrets,

Kayaking business and seeing birds in summer on trips influences what he carves in winter; uses books as color references; kayaks twice a day everyday in the summer for 2 and a half hours each trip; carving in winter, does over 200 each winter; first year to have all the wood he wanted so can make all the things he's put off: giving ducks emotions; full-sized waterman [phone rings tape turned off for a moment] first time he's had heat in whole building; process of getting to this point.

Makes things for the future, for his kids to have as memory of him; story of mother selling a duck a few years ago because she needed the money, that is an example of her father still looking after her even though he was dead [phone rings again] we try to get back to the point; things that Jay does now if done with integrity will make a way for his children when they come of age and need a way to earn a living; training them to work in the kayak business and talking with different types of people; how Ira is still providing for Jay and other carvers on the island through his name and work; things the family has taught Jay

Passing on of values through activities; respecting the environment; story of kids getting a letter from natural resources department; kids know all the common birds; respect for older people;

[phone rings, recorder off]

almost everyone on island carves, people related to everyone else in some way; carving that Ira and others did for market gunners has grown and tourist industry too because of decline of seafood industry; result is that lots of guys can work part-time at carving; good area for it; big cottage industry even outside shore; easy on chinco.;

market gunners not necessarily carvers; Hog island group was guides and carvers; nobody in Jay's family hunted or owned guns; reflection on Bob Boothe's entry into carving;

remembering the day Jay's family left the island after his mom had remarried; life as turmoil during the moves; only things that change on chinco are tides and light; effects on his mom (moving);

"how will island maintain small town atmosphere as more people move here, for whatever their reasons?"

Jay's philosophy: whites first arrived Indians reported as sedate easy-going friendly and we pushed them out; not a sedate gentil thing to do; people who come to chinco. always say well they're an easy-going sedate kind of people; it's not the people that are here it's the environment here; NJ etc want to change place but the environment changes them and the steam dies away; they become the easy going laid back people; don't have to worry about the outside influence but must have confidence in what we have to give here and it really changes people; barring that Disney builds something on 13; and we don't have a centralized sewer system so no big hotels. People drawn to ocean city don't like it here, so they don't come.

seasonal changes: dividing the seasons up is perplexing; summer and winter have their good parts, they're a whole

Uniqueness of Jay's carving: does it because he wants to; story of the day he realized that the carving was *his* work and it didn't matter that it wasn't exactly like the bird; comments from the Ward brothers about painting that influenced him; does what he feels compelled to do; hard to take commissions; prefers someone to say, "I'll give you x amount of dollars for the *next* thing you make. I would hug them."

some memories of relatives when he was young; story of black man punching a horse; playing on wrecked boats behind Ira's shop; getting into Ira's paint and painting polka dots on some geese carvings that were primed; story of how you held your breath as you crossed the bridge; story of his birth;

Jack Williams story; old chincoteague waterman; not in his right mind;

jay recommends that we speak with his aunt Thelma Bowden when she returns from Colorado; found her husband dead in his boat in the bay from a heart attack; dangers of being a waterman; popcorn storm in the summer time; running his business with the weather; a few incidents; reading the weather and growing up with having to know it;

END SIDE B

VA/FT/12.11.202

[see VA/FT/12.11.203 for additional/continued comments]

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Interview Log

Interviewee: Victor and Bernice Simpson **Tape #:** VA/FT/12.11.205 D H E

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault **# of Tapes:** 2 of 2

Date: 12.11.97 **# of Sides:** 3 of 3

Location: Victor's home in Willis Wharf VA

Topic: boat building done by his father and Bernice's husband; techniques

Corresponding Photography Log #: VA/FT/12.11.

Comments: File name: ft12205.doc (See also ft12204.doc for part 1-VA/FT/12.11.204-of this interview). *Italics* indicate song title or emphasis; "quotations" indicate direct transcription; [brackets indicate additional information not on tape, and asides by fieldworker].

Bill Young, a local boat builder in Willis Wharf, recommended that I speak with Victor and his mother. He told me that Bernice had been involved in the water business more than most wives (in Virginia. See articles on Watermen's wives in NC and MD and their involvement with organizing associations). Bill spoke to them after our conversation and called me back to say they were interested in doing an interview. This interview took place at 5 p.m. after Victor returned from his work with the phone company. I had interviewed Jay Cherrix in the morning, stayed up late talking with Barbara Luehning the night before, and managed to get a short nap and shower before arriving at the Simpsons. I left their house at approximately 8:30 p.m.

Victor's wife, Jerleen, was present during the interview which took place in the living room.

BEGIN SIDE A

Built a boat a week for Terry's oyster company; talking of how another interviewer from the paper wrote article on Simpson Sr.; boat was painted by owner; Simpson sold Wallsey brand paint and hardware too; Neptune was a grade of Wallsey that was an antifouling and had chemicals to repel barnacles etc.; cost extra than copper paint;

Bernice: Vinlast was a paint you had to have a special solvent to clean your brush with; story of how Victor Sr. got the solvent for free but watermen had to pay for it; Lumber co. story; in Nassawadox big lumber company and hardware store

Victor: father used Charlie Byrd lumber co. if building a big monitor; pick out logs; mill in Belle Haven;

Bernice: building the Stillman monitor, bigger than usual monitors, had to go to Baltimore to pick out log, nothing big enough on the shore;

Victor: got white cedar from NC; near Sunbury NC; mill called South Mills or White Lumber Co.; Mr. White owned it; Mr. McDaniels yard foreman; story of how they got the lumber back to the shore: father didn't have a large enough truck so borrowed a beer truck from Blue Englers [?] beer distributing company; sometimes Buzzy Terry drove the truck or Bill Shockley; Bill got a set of ducks for each trip, that was his pay;

[Sunbury NC is in Gates Co. just over the VA state line, on the western side of the Great Dismal Swamp at the intersection of Rt. 32 and Rt. 158].

Differences in the lumber companies on the shore and off; used mules on shore and things were automated in NC; boards on the sides for the monitors were all one length so if 16' boat then 16' board;

Bernice: used drift bolts to join some; had no heads; used a washer and bolt; not threaded rod but smooth; drill a hole and hammer that into it; hired helpers when building a monitor; boards were 3" thick and had four sides: 2 outside and 2 in middle; heavy boat; sometimes only had one in the middle;

description of construction of monitors; used to move houses off Hog island; fastened two together and rolled houses on logs onto the monitor; began in 33 until 40s;

Bernice: story of how it didn't cost anything to move the houses from Hog island; coast guard helped too; Ballards helped on this end; why the houses were moved: cheaper; August storm of 33; height of water; covered whole island except high spot; had another in Sept. of same year; owned the home and just had to buy the land; Oyster has 17 homes too like W W;

style of Hog island homes; not large some are 2 stories others 1.5 stories; Hog island lane across channel is all hog island homes; the one house not from Hog island was built by a hog islander for his daughter; Mae Bowen lives in a hog island house across from Mary Ellen; height of water in Willis Wharf during 33; story of how Buzzy Terry says that Walter and Mary sleep in my bedroom--they live in the house that Buzzy was born in;

friend helping friend; not as much today; not as many close friends, lots of recent arrivals and the culture of the day; story of how victor paid the guy who fixed his boat by taking him out in his boat to Cobb island; not as many close families any more; used to go to grandma's every Sunday; story of history of E.L. Willis which used to Johnson's store, able to hear granddaddy sneeze from store; [shows pictures of family];

chat about me; chat about the project; pfisteria talk;

story of how this summer people were asking if fish was bay side or sea side; didn't want bay side; Chess Atlantic south of Painter is a fish market that it might have affected; not

sure how that affected net fisherman; more people fishing on the seaside than the bayside too; parking lots full of people;

gun collection of Victor's; muzzle loader; made kit guns; hunts some, deer; but not much; son duck hunts; own 100 acres in Piggin in Accomack; rent out cleared 30 acres
[Jerleen begins to laugh] Bernice replies, "Don't laugh Piggin is a community."

[Is this an African American community?]

Trapping: father trapped raccoons; brother trapped muskrats; muskrats are left but no outlet for selling the fur; Jerleen worked in a grocery store that sold muskrat meat as teenager

Jerleen: small grocery in Exmore; bought from locals and sold to locals; how offensive eating a raw oyster is

Bernice: "That had to be a brave man or woman, I tell you."

Victor: "Can you imagine that [the first time someone ate an oyster]?"

[this is the third time I've heard this conversation among locals and recent arrivals: see FN12.8.97, Malcolm and Carol for more]

story of how father would shuck oysters and find little pink crabs inside and he'd eat them raw and alive; Victor did same; body size of finger nail; crab fed on oyster's food; doesn't like raw oysters;

Jerleen: how Victor Sr. would eat fish and just push the bones to one side of his mouth; fork full of fish into his mouth with right hand and with left hand be pulling bones out of his mouth; no stopping in between;

Boiled fish for breakfast: traditional shore breakfast: salted overnight and boil it next morning; fry bacon grease to pour over it or butter; sometimes fat back too; salting the fish firms up the meat and when boiled doesn't fall apart

[Jerleen had never eaten this before and she talks about cooking it for the first time, how surprised she is about it not falling apart. It seems that foodways differ greatly with one's proximity to water. See also foodways of Johnson's United Quilters, Lucille Snyder, etc.]

3x the salt on fish as if you would boil it; then rinse before cooking; father liked mackerel fish for breakfast; since he mackerel fished; Ballards used to process fish and so did Wachapreague; Edgerton in Cape Charles too; Edgerton would freeze his fish and sell when market was right made a lot of money;

joke about the good old days again

muskrat: called marsh rabbit and prepared it similar to rabbit; souse cake same as head cheese; used to love it and pickled pigs feet too; African American food; hog killings and neighbor helping neighbor; raised own hogs and someone would come to the house to butcher; making lard;

local lard sold in stores; one place from Salisbury makes ham etc.; sugar or pepper cured the meat in their home; pepper deterred more insects; had smoke houses but they didn't use smoke, called it a curing house; used sheep to cut grass then shear the sheep and sell the wool; shipped by railroad; Bernice and Victor Sr. did shearing

Bernice: "So I've done a little bit of everything."

had a goat later; used it to trim the hedge and honeysuckle vines; story of goat and loaning it out once yard cleaned up; raised rabbits too; anything a goat bites will die and they eat everything; raised ducks too;

fudge making; poor man's cake: applesauce cake, nuts raisins spices; didn't need to buy anything for it but the raisins; I ask about a minnie ha ha cake; [Lucille mentioned this cake while quilting]; how Bernice used to make several and them set them up the stairs because it was cold there during the winter;

talk about coming back to take a photo of the boat and Bernice in her shop;

END SIDE A

END TAPE VA/FT/12.11.205

Interview Log

Interviewee: Victor Simpson, Bernice Simpson **Tape #:** VA/FT/12.11.204

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault **# of Tapes:** 1 of 2

Date: 12/11/97 **# of Sides:** 1 of 4

Location: Victor's home in Willis Wharf VA

Topic: Victor's father, James Victor Simpson, the boat builder; Bernice's involvement in the business, her decoy work and furniture restoration

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: File name: ft12204.doc (See also ft12205.doc for part 2-VA/FT/12.11.205-of this interview). *Italics* indicate song title or emphasis; "quotations" indicate direct transcription; [brackets indicate additional information not on tape].

Bill Young, a local boat builder in Willis Wharf, recommended that I speak with Victor and his mother. He told me that Bernice had been involved in the water business more than most wives (in Virginia. See articles on Watermen's wives in NC and MD and their involvement with organizing associations). Bill spoke to them after our conversation and called me back to say they were interested in doing an interview. This interview took place at 5 pm after Victor returned from his work with the phone company. I had interviewed Jay Cherrix in the morning, stayed up late talking with Barbara Luehning the night before, and managed to get a short nap before arriving at the Simpsons. I left their house at approximately 8:30 p.m.

Victor's wife, Jerleen, was present during the interview which took place in the living room.

BEGIN SIDE A

Bernice introduces herself, lived in Willis Wharf 50 some years
Victor L. Simpson introduces himself, lived in WW all his life except one year, transferred.

[I stop the tape and play it back to check the levels]

types of boats built by J. Simpson; chinco. scow; row boats; dredge monitors self-powered; outboard and inboard; shop on the water front for 26 years then near the house; built for anybody: FL to New England; airforce people

Bernice asks for water

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20 foot row boats; made 1 model 4 feet; inboard dredge monitor the Cherry King for the Ballards; Victor remembers using the lumber to make toys; plans in dad's head; used square molding on hull bent across nails and marked it; had stretchers for small boats 16-20 foot

boats had stanchions top to bottom without breaks before bottom in white oak; used bilge strips; other builders went 3-4" from bottom and knock stanchions into bilge strips; J Simpson didn't think a good idea; not as strong; built upside down and then turned over to be completed [SEE: the *Workboats of Smith Island* for more on this construction technique. It is rare in Virginia, at least on the western side of the Bay]; how to turn the boat and how stanchions help from cracking;

construction techniques of upside down building; shop over water especially at high tide; didn't dig [like in MD], but nailed supports to the floor; built up from there; when outside complete then moved out and put in water upside down into railway slip, then another boat turned right-side and pulled back onto land and into shop to finish it. did it this practical way, no cranes.

Victor helped a little as a teenager; how plugs on monitors counter sunk; did some painting but didn't really help; how Victor worked for Bell Atlantic but wanted to learn family business; father discouraged it for health insurance and better money reasons. J Simpson born on Hog island, worked water all his life and knew that working watermen were not rich people

J Simpson was a waterman before building, born in 1913, age 20 sold first boat; always built from white cedar; work boats built out of pine; has a boat he built in 1962 which Victor calls a deadrise boat [the photo they show me looks more like a scow shape]. flat bottom boat; built side consoles; story of building his first center console boat for a guy in Ocean City;

Bernice: biggest pleasure boat built was a monitor for Polk Kellam Sr.; built to carry lots of folks; motorized and had a surry; Polk Kellam was an energy mogul on the shore;

Victor: machinist who worked with J Simpson; Mr. Shockley; putting a motor in a sail skipjack-Walkley Johnson ordered it; wanted just the boat without the push boat; Mr. Shockley died last year;

Bernice: born in Belle Haven, married in 1940; 1943 last family moved from Hog Island; Victor born in 1947; Bernice lives in a Hog Island house; Bernice did the books and ordered supplies; from the start helped him; before 1952 J Simpson built some boats beside the house then working on a Mackerel boat from NC to NJ, spare time built boats; Bernice helped him with managing since before 1952;

Bernice: how husband got into building boats; Mr. Jeter Moore built boats before her husband; he died in 1951 and Harvey Bowen an oyster producer bought the railway from

Mr. Moore and hired her husband to go up and run the railway; this is the marine railway; then people started asking him to build boats;

Bernice: what is was like to be a waterman's wife vs when he worked on the railway; early mornings and tides; still worked on the tide when building boats and on the railway; middle meals never at the same time; tide ran life; pretty good living;

Bernice: foodways: seafood; husband as fisherman; husband loved sweets, all from growing up on Hog Island; how to tell a Hog islander-they love sweets; last thing her husband ate before died was a candy an ambassador chocolate

Victor: mom is a good cook, especially sweets; fudge, salt water taffy;

[there is a plate of christmas cookies sitting on the coffee table]

[discussion of food does not go far until Bernice talks about raising five children]

planning food and meals; depression's affects on foodways; didn't get prepared food; baking bread everyday; food on Sundays; making yeast bread on Saturday for Sunday; had more time to prepare the meal; sewing and children and demands on time; no appliances either so time management was different; laughs at those who talk about the "good old days"; heating systems;

seasonal foods; generational foods; baked corn or corn pudding; sweet potato pies and those that are made with pumpkin without the spice;

miniature boats and ducks; J Simpson built miniature boats in 1939 before married; made one for Bernice in 1940; saying about difference between house builders and boat builders: house builders just have to make it square, but boat builders were different nothing is square on a boat;

Bernice: making ducks started in 1968; Bernice thought of idea when her daughter Barbara decided to attend nursing school and bernice thought they needed extra money; at the time a few people were doing miniatures and bernice was sewing for Dr. Mears' children, Dr. Mears' wife-Florence-gave him pairs of ducks from General De Garve top carver on the shore. Bernice borrowed a pair of ducks to show her husband and they started carving; Tad Beach, Florence's nephew, wanted to learn a few things and she asked de Garve and Bernice learned too. Learned his secrets about how to put the feet on etc.; description of attaching the legs; how to make the toes and the materials used; putting in the eyes; materials used;

[SEE: chapters on miniature in Susan Stewart's *On Longing*]

How Bernice and her husband worked together; carved two a night; why white cedar wasn't any good to use; how bernice painted them and how she learned; she found Wendell Gelly's [not sure about the name?] book from Maine the best for reference work

on the coloring of ducks; a carver in Maine; how J Simpson would freeze ducks in the freezer with their feathers on so they could get the colors right and the feather pattern; book told you how to do it from beginning to end and suggested using bass wood;

characteristics of bass wood [I know that bass wood is a soft, easily carved wood used by most model builders whether it be ducks or planes. But I want to know what their thoughts are on the subject]; resin bass wood doesn't bleed and colors stay true

Jerleen says that bernice has started carving in the last few years;

how J Simpson carved them about 6" long but when attending the duck shows they realized that you had to be full-sized or miniature; miniature was cheaper; some of the full-sized carvers gave them their scraps of bass wood; they didn't sell at the duck shows; carved two a night but bernice painted 3 a week; didn't have any to take to shows because they were all sold immediately; never advertised; Buzzy Terry would always come down and buy a pair of ducks which put them in circulation with a crowd that afforded them; was successful-daughter went to nursing school; how it didn't take any extra time; money came in handy with children and hospital bills for oldest who had Lupus

materials: 'oil paints; reason: doesn't dry fast she needed more time and they blend easier; local ducks; how Bernice made clocks that she saw at the duck shows; easier to make a half duck than a full one; the one she saw at the show had birds but she used ducks instead;

where Victor's father was during the 1933 storm on Hog Island; story of that and working the water;

Bernice: more detail on how her husband got the job on the marine railway; 1952

cherry king first oyster boat to have a motor and not need a tow; other boats Simpson made; pile driver boat;

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how tongers were individual watermen and companies had the larger monitor boats; individuals sold to companies too; 4 oyster companies in Willis Wharf: Terry, Walkers, and Ballards, and Bowens in the later years; Harvey Bowen a big producer who sold to other companies and then went into the shucking business too; clams and oysters;

oysters started dying 10 years ago;

I aks about gender roles and Jerleen jumps in with how bernice has worked as a furniture refinisher and caner for the last 20 years; how she worked as a hair cutter and story of how she got into that: mackerel fishing at night and husband out working at night so hair

got long; she cut it for him as he fell asleep in the chair; then cut everyone's hair in W W; how she learned a little from the barber; too expensive to go to the beauty parlor so she would give women a Toni [back in the 70s and 60s this was an early form of a home permanent: Toni curl]; worked as seamstress; always had a job even raising a family; had to be home too; furniture made more money; she is using husband's old shop and tools; how she had a broken china closet door repaired by someone else and it wasn't right, so she decided to fix it herself and that's how she got started

loved antiques and had to know how to repair things; passed around word of mouth; she didn't use husband's tools when he was alive but after he died she had to learn how to use the big tools, "can't do something unless you can cut something"; learned to read a rule from husband, "lot of time if he was measuring something, like a boat or something, and he would ask me you know what is this-like he'd be at one end and I'd be at the other- and I said, 'well it's about.' 'I don't want to know about, I want to know what it is.'" [laughter from all]

victor: learning by watching; Victor's work with the telephone company; one year transferred to Culpepper, VA there for 11 [mos. in](#) 1967 [note: Victor didn't get drafted for Vietnam. Several people told me that few men from the shore went because they were food producers who were exempt by the gov't. Jay Cherrix served though]; story of why Victor didn't get drafted: cut foot and was listed as 1 Y for draft; how got cut oyster shell cut to bone. Medicine: always tasted like licorice; using kerosene, sometimes called coal oil, for cuts; putting fat meat to cuts and rusty cuts which drew out the poison;

Bernice: story of youngest daughter giving birth and trying to breast feed but child wouldn't take the breast; Bernice made suggestion that was rebuffed by the doctor, "I said, 'Well let me tell you something, it worked 50 years ago. I don't see why it wouldn't work today.'" her suggestion: story of her own child with same problem and Ms. Harmon the midwife/granny woman took little finger into baby's mouth and child learned to get tongue under the breast and suck. Story of being smarted than the professional medical people;

Midwife stories in W W; jokes about the good old days and progress

[Bernice has sister in Salisbury]

Ms. Harmon lived in W W behind E.L. Willis, the local store and restaurant; delivered one of Hilda's children [Hilda is in the Tuesday sewing group]; nurse to Dr. Mears just as good as him;

Entertainment on the shore: visiting in the homes; children bringing women together; making up games; make short stilts; making taffy; tv at relatives homes but not theirs; boys made wooden boats and pulled along edge of bay or in puddles; whittled them or with his father made one with a handsaw; Victor grew up with all girls; wading and swimming;

Bernice: story of Buzzy Terry's mother letting children swim in front of her property; Pete lives in grandmother's brick home and first to come back to the shore after leaving for college;

Victor: how people had ponies from Hog Island; tradition of young people on Hog island having ponies to ride;

Bernice: boys all had ponies plus one for the family; Harvey Bowen supplied ponies, he used to live on Hog island too and had a big farm on route 600 near W W; how daughter named it Dexter

Shucking houses: could hear them singing in JC Walker's place from the boat building shop; one guy roasted peanuts in shell and sold out of bicycle basket, still hot when had them; sold to **W W** lived in Exmore; didn't grow peanuts here commercially but some in personal gardens; some commercial peanut growers here but not many, used to grow at edge of town 3-4 years ago; return of cotton, how it is a long season, long to grow it;

talk of newspaper article beside me [SEE file for this interview]; blown up to poster size; Simpson Sr.'s tools; hand tools; fiberglass work that he did; fiberglassing older boats; boat builder in Exmore does only fiber glass, Vic Hardison, who bought out Dick Gaskill who got molds from Simpson Sr.'s boats; Gaskill made molds from scows of actual boats

Hancock scow: similar to Simpson's scow but made in Chincoteague by Miles Hancock; used plywood bottom with planked sides; Simpson didn't like the plywood bottom; hollow on front/bow of boat; how to tell a Simpson boat: 5 holes drilled in storage part of boat in back; set up stern and transom first and go midway; then set stretchers nailed to stanchions take rope and pull it in then set another group of stretchers; at bow bent to shape of his eye; keel one piece of wood and bent to

Bernice: bend the keel by sawing through it a little every so often but not completely through; and then it would bend [I think of this as making the v-cuts in fabric to form a rounded shape, like at a bust line or sleeve]; steam oak and then bend it; irrigation pipe he used to make round combing; steam with hot water in pipe take out and use rope to bend and secure for days to dry;

how ventilation holes were an aesthetic design; also useful; some Chinco. builders used an anchor shape; first to use minell steel nails--didn't rust; even when using galvanized nails used the square cut boat nails

[these are stories of the superior quality of the Simpson boats]

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SEE VA/FT/12.11.205 for continuation of this interview