

Interview Log

Interviewee: Nicey Turpin Tape #: OH 114

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault # of Tapes: 1

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Topic: Crab Picking Project

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: Good quality. Phonetic Spellings: Hesser, Darcell "taker.

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: Well if I could have you say your name so I can make sure that this --

N.T.: Nicey Turpin.

K.F.: Okay. And you worked at Maryland Crab Meat Company. Correct?

N.T.: Yes.

K.F.: And how long did you work there, Miss Turpin?

N.T.: Oh, I guess about 41 years or more. Somewhere along there.

K.F.: And how did you start working there?

N.T.: I worked there -- I went there when the place first opened. The place where I worked at went out of business.

K.F.: Okay. And was it in the same building it's in now down there?

N.T.: No, no, no, no, no. Huh-uh (negative). This was a new building they built.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: No. They used to work in another building, not too far from there.

K.F.: Okay. And you were the shop steward, is that right?

N.T.: Yes, yes. Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Let me ask you, at what age did you start working at Maryland Crab Meat, do you remember?

N.T.: Oh, huh-uh (negative). Not the age. Really, I was young, very young.

K.F.: And what was the first job you had when you started there?

N.T.: Same I always had, picking, crab picker.

K.F.: Okay. Did you start out picking the claws, though, or did you --

N.T.: Picking the crabs and the --

(Brief off-the-record discussion.)

N.T.: Picking the meat out of the crabs, cracking the claws.

K.F.: Okay. And how did you learn how to pick crabs?

N.T.: Oh, I didn't learn here.

K.F.: Oh, where did you learn?

N.T.: I learned in Sherwood, Maryland. That's across the bay. I was very young, about 15 or 16.

K.F.: When you learned there in Sherwood?

N.T.: Yeah. When I learned in Sherwood.

K.F.: Okay. Is that the Sherwood up in Talbot County?

N.T.: Yes. I used to live there.

K.F.: Okay. Is that where you were born?

N.T.: No, no, no, no, no. Marion, Marion is my home.

K.F.: Oh, here in Marion.

N.T.: Yeah.

K.F.: All right. Did anybody else in your family pick crabs?

N.T.: My mother. But my mother died when I was young. My mother picked. My mother was a crab picker.

K.F.: And did she work for Maryland as well?

N.T.: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. My mother died when I was very young. Huh-uh (negative). She wasn't even living then. No.

K.F.: What company did she work for?
 N. T.: Huh?
 K.F.: What company did she pick for?
 N.T.: Carson was the company she used to work for.
 K.F.: Carson. Okay. And can you -- do you remember some of the earliest experiences you had working in the crab picking house? Or do you remember your first day that you went in?
 N.T.: What, to learn?
 K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
 N.T.: What, to learn how to do it?
 K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
 N. T.: Oh, yeah. I know I didn't like it at first. I didn't like it.
 K. F.: Oh, no?
 N.T.: Huh-uh (negative). `Cause you would stick things in your, you know, you had to be careful that you didn't cut your hand with a knife or stick claws or whatever, the crabs in your hand. But after I got the hang of it, it wasn't so bad. But I didn't care for it at first.
 K.F.: Well how did you know -- how long did it take you to kind of get the hang of picking crabs?
 N.T.: Oh, it didn't take long after you learn. About, you could learn how to do it in a day. Learn, just, you know, learning how to separate your meat and whatever. But it took, it took a little while for you to get your speed up. You had to learn the hang of it.
 K.F.: And what's the key to being a good, fast crab picker?
 N.T.: A good, fast -- well, you pick, you know, fast and pick the meat right, like the employer wants, and keep the bone out. Yeah, you have to keep the bone out. But that's mostly to it. And grading your meat right like he wants it.
 K.F.: Grading the meat? Now how did you have that set up? Did you have individual cups you had to put the meat in?
 N.T.: Yes, yes. Yeah, you have two different cups. We always pick two different cups. The expensive meat, now when I pick -- learned, back then we had two grades of meat, which was backfin and regular. And now it's graded a little different because -- it's graded a little different because we have the jumbo lump, which is the highest meat that there is, the most expensive. Then they had the backfin, which is a grade, jumbo lump and special mixed up in it, picked in it. Then they have another grade of special, where it's nothing but certain part the crab goes in that.
 K.F.: Okay. And what part of the crab is it that goes in special?
 N.T.: Anything go -- any part the crab besides the backfin, the back part where the big lump comes out.
 K.F.: Right.
 N. T.: And then they have the claw legs where you crack then, you know, separate. And that's the grades. We, had different grades that we picked where 1 worked at. So that's it.
 K.F.: Okay. And what did the picking room look like? Can you describe that tome?
 N.T.: Big room. You've never been -- have you been in there Tim's?
 K.F.: Been in the one they have now.

N.T.: Yeah. Uh-huh (Affirmative). That's the way it looked. You been in there Tim's?

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). In the crab part?

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). They have tables. Yeah that's where -- table where you carry meat up where you was weighed at. Uh-huh (Affirmative). Scale, where they kept the scales at. And not, wasn't all that much. Tables. It's really mostly what's in there. And the place where you can, where they kept cans on one side in boxes where you put for packing up your meat with.

K.F.: And the cans were the metal ones then with the three holes in the bottom of `em?

N.T.: No, no, no, no, no. We picked in plastic.

K.F.: Oh, you did pick in plastic.

N.T.: We pick in plastic. We pick in plastic. Plastic cups. That's something -- here they were, what we picked in. All places pick in `em now. This type. This type.

K.F.: So Maryland Crabmeat never -- okay. Yeah. They never picked into a metal cup?

N.T.: Huh? Well certain -- you had certain grades of meat, or certain, you know -- certain things. They used to long time ago, cans.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

N.T.: And they have cans, like when they process meat, they process in cans.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Metal cans. Just like cooked meat.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: Yeah. But meat that's -- like you go, you know, unless you want that processed meat. You'll get processed meat, then you get fresh meat. Fresh meat comes in those kind of cups.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: And the processed meat is what's in cans. That's cooked.

K.F.: Right. Okay.

N.T.: Yeah, that's cooked. They have machinery down there where they cook it.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. And Tim told me that he could look at a pile of crab meat, not knowing who had picked it, but he could look at it and tell who had picked it. Was that something you all noticed too, that everybody has kind of a different way of picking?

N.T.: A certain way of picking, yes. Yeah. Uh-huh (Affirmative). You know everybody, the way everybody picked. Yeah.

K.F.: And how did you pick? Can you describe how you would pick a crab for me?

N.T.: Not hardly, because I don't have a crab.
(Laughter.)

N.T.: I don't have a crab to show you. Pull the back off and clean it, and cut it, take out the jumbo lump and put it in one can, and the special in the other. And if you had to make topping, you know, if you had to put topping on it, well you put your jumbo on it. Yeah, if you had to make topping for backfin. But ordinary, when we picked special, ordinary, we just put topping on it.

K.F.: Okay. And when you say cut the crab, do you mean cut the tops off or --

N.T.: Cut it in two pieces.

K.F.: Cut it in two pieces.

N.T.: Yeah, that's the way 1 cut mine, in two pieces. Yeah, you have to pull the back off, the back of the crab. Crab has got a back got to come off

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Then you clean it. You got to clean the dead men and stuff out, got to clean the crab up, dead men off and take off the crab fat, clean it up and then cut your crab and separate your meat as you go along.

K.F.: Okay. And that's how you learned how to do it in Sherwood?

N.T.: Yeah. I learned -- yeah, I learned how to do it. Only we was just picking two grades, you know. That's the way 1 learned how to do it. Uh-huh (Affirmative). We were just picking two grades there when I first learned, backfin and special. And there you picked in pans. See that's been a many, many year ago. Two pans. And one pan here for backfin, and one for your regular. That's what you called it then.

K.F.: Okay. What company did you work for in Sherwood?

N.T.: Oh, I don't even know, 'cause I was really very young. I don't even know the name of that company then. That's where 1 learned at. 1 can't, I'm 65 years old. That's a long time back.

(Laughter.)

N. T.: See I wasn't over 15, about 15, 16. I guess I was 16. Something like that.

K.F.: Okay. All right. And how many women did they have picking the crabs there?

N.T.: Oh, how many women? Oh, well some places have a whole lot of women. Some of 'em have 45 and 50. Some places 18. We didn't have too many. A lot of our women, well there used to be a lot worked there. Lot of 'em older ones retired, some of 'em went from other jobs, you know.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Where they were steady. Steady work. And we didn't have, we didn't have, I guess, over -- I guess 18. Something like that, the last one, about 18.

K.F.: Okay. And you mentioned steady work. What would happen at the end of the crab season?

N.T.: Well, see, then we have to draw unemployment, start it again, if you had enough to draw. But some people went for work where they would work year round. But, see, in crabs, you didn't work year-round, we don't work year-round.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Not this day and time, but 1 have worked all year, but not in this day and time 'cause crabs are, you know, scarce.

K.F.: Right. Well when you did work all year picking crabs, were the crabs coming from North Carolina or something like that?

N.T.: They go dredging right in the water somewhere. They dredged them.

K.F.: Okay. That was still legal?

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). They dredged 'em. Uh-huh (Affirmative). But they would be dirty. That's why they stopped doing that. That's why, you know, you had to have, you would have to wash 'em 'cause they'd be full of mud where they done buried their self So they had stopped most of 'em -- 'cause none of 'em don't dredge now, not here in Crisfield. You don't pick no dredge crabs 'cause they're too dirty and it's too expensive to do 'cause you got to wash 'em and all that before you could pick 'em.

K.F.: Oh, before you could even pick them, you've got to wash them.

N.T.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). They had to wash, would have to wash `em.

K.F.: Okay. Is there a certain month that the crabs seem to be better to pick or easier to pick?

N.T.: Well I don't know. Around the summertime, they're easier to cut. They're not hard, they're easier to cut in the summer.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: But in the beginning of the season, they're a little tough.

K.F.: Oh, they are?

N.T.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Okay. Okay. And can you tell me what the picking room sounded like when everybody was in there --

N. T.: Talking.

K.F.: -- picking their crabs?

N.T.: Well, talking. See they'd be talking and laugh and whatnot. You couldn't, well you could hear the knives cutting the crabs. But they was talking and cutting up, you got used to it, you didn't even pay it no attention. It wasn't no noise that was, you know, that was that distinguishable. Because, see, people be talking and you wouldn't even hardly, you don't hear `em cut no crabs and all that.

K. F.: Right.

N.T.: But they'd be talking and laughing and what have you.

K.F.: What did you all talk about?

N.T.: The every day life. Yeah, every day life. Different things. You know how women are. They can find a lot to talk about. A lot to talk about.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: Yeah, it would be fun. Fun, you know, fun working with different girls from different, you know, communities. Yeah. It would be fun especially when you been working to a place that long, you get to know everybody well. Yeah. Last year, we didn't work any, not in picking crabs.

K.F.: Are you still picking?

N.T.: Well he didn't work last year, I mean he didn't pick. He worked in soft crabs. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). And some kind of snow crabs now, but you know, I mean he might have -- that's a different type of work. We don't do that. I mean his regular pickers don't, you know, work in that.

K.F.: Okay, is there a reason why you all don't want to do the snow crabs?

NT.: Well we never did that, no way. That's a different type of work all together. That's different from ordinary picking crabs.

K.F.: And Tim told me that usually everybody sat kind of at the same spot every day.

N.T.: Oh, yeah. You sat -- everybody had their own place.

K. F.: Okay.

N.T.: Yeah. Everybody sat in their own place. Wherever that was, you know where you picked. Yup. Everybody had their own place to pick. Yup. Every day.

K.F.: So I guess you got to know the people who were next to you or across from you -

N.T.: Oh, yeah, you knew `em because you grew up with -- most everybody know everybody round here.

K. F.: Okay.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Because you grew up, you grew up with one another. Lot of your friends and stuff, you know, were working in the same place see.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: You knew everybody where you worked. This is close-knit, you know, communities.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: And you know everybody around here from Marion, Crisfield, Kingston, I mean all the different areas. You know the people. So that's the way it goes. We knew everybody. And you work with some of the friends you went to school with.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Yup, know everybody. Wasn't, you know, not knowing anyone.

K.F.: And did you all rely on each other outside of the crab house as friends or if somebody was sick or something?

N.T.: What you mean?

K.F.: Well I talked with a few ladies who picked at Tilghman Packing Company, and they said that friends they had in the picking house there were friends they had outside, and if one of their kids were sick or something, they could rely on them to help out or --

N.T.: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, well we -- well same thing. We are all friends, like I say, whatever, you know, you come in contact with your friends, or something they need, well if you could do it, you'd do it.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Yeah.

K.F.: Now what about the hymn singing that went on?

N.T.: Yeah. We would sing. We -- all us would sing. They would sing. Sometimes they'd have prayer, and would sing hymns in the morning. Yeah, we did that. We did that in our crab house.

K.F.: Was there a certain person that always started the hymns or --

N.T.: Yeah, well yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it was certain ones that, you know, would start it ofd Yup. Yeah, we had a right nice crab, you know, right nice line of women, you know, to work with. We had -- we didn't have too much -- we had a sort of a peaceful crab house, nice crab house, nice place to work among, you know, each other.

K.F.: Right. Well I was going to ask you what makes a good crab house to work at?

N.T.: When you can get along well with each other, and you get along well with your boss man. That makes a peaceful, peaceful place to work.

K.F.: Right, right. Now when did you become the shop steward?

N.T.: Oh, Lord. I been the shop steward -- of course, I mean they still call me being a shop steward, but we don't have a union, not now, because we don't work enough to have one. Oh, my, but I've been -- I was shop steward when I used to work over to the other place before we come to this new --

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Oh, boy, was a many year. Can't even keep, I can't even figure how many, how many years. Most of this 40 some, really. A lot.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

N.T.: Yeah, most of that. Yup.

K.F.: What were your duties as a shop steward?

N. T.: Well really it was just something that the union had like was any difference between pickers or the packer, it could be straightened out, you know, with the union or the shop steward with, you know, see what the problem was try to distinguish, you know, between the two like that. That was our -- that was what we did most, but that was mostly all 'cause really I didn't have no whole lot job to do. Not really. Huh-uh (negative). No.

K.F.: Did you have to attend the regular union meetings and stuns?

N.T.: Way back there, yes. When they was having it, yes. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). Yeah, I would go to union meetings. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). Everybody was gonna go, but shop steward was supposed to go anyway.

K.F.: And what were those meetings like?

N.T.: Well most of the duties of the union, and different little something maybe they wanted to do, or when they want to raise, let you know whether you would get a raise that year or not. That was mostly, most of it. They were the ones seeing about you getting raises in your pay. Other than that, it wasn't too much. It was, of course, years ago, they had a banquet for the union members to the fire hall in Crisfield. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). That was really nice for the crab pickers. Yeah. Yeah, it was nice. But all those old souls are dead now. Albert Bell, and Melvin Tyler, they were the head of the union, but they're dead now.

K.F.: Yeah, I know Mr. Bell's daughter, Zenith, I think is trying to give a history on the union.

N.T.: Yeah, Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Well you were talking about raises. How much did you get paid when you first started picking crabs?

N.T.: My land. Let's see. We got paid by the pound. Over there in -- I don't think, I don't think it was hardly \$1 a gallon. Not too much. Here they used to get more than they did over there.

K.F.: Oh, really?

N.T.: In Talbot County, yeah. But it would be five pounds, five pounds a dollar. That's what it was. Dollar a gallon. And see now, it's \$10, \$10 a gallon. Had to pick five pounds. Yup.

K.F.: Was there anybody who was known as the fastest picker or anything like that?

N. T.: Oh, yeah. You had a lot of -- you had a lot of -- yeah, you had a lot of people could really pick. Yeah, could pick, yeah. Yeah, a lot of people could really pick, fast pickers. Yup. Hazel Cropper, she used to be the one that win the championship.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Yeah, Hazel. She don't pick now no more.

K. F.: She's retired?

N. T.: She was working to Salisbury. See when they got so couldn't pick no crabs, lot of them people go look for other jobs, used to work at Perdue chicken plant.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

N.T.: Yeah. She was the fastest one in Crisfield, really. Her and another girl named Joyce, but they got other jobs.

K.F.: Well how does a crab picker retire? I mean is there any way, or you just --

N.T.: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. No, 'cause it's not a job to retire from.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: I mean not like some people, you know, like these plants, I mean like the plants, you know how plants have plans with retirement?

K.F.: Right, right.

N.T.: They don't have no plan from that. You retire from there, you're 62 if you want, when you retire you can draw social security.

K.F.: Okay.

N. T.: But they don't have a plan like a regular plant because it's not a year-round, it's not that type of job, it's not a year-round job.

K.F.: Right, right.

N.T.: No, they don't have no plan.

K.F.: So I guess it's just when you feel like you don't want to pick anymore, you just --

N. T.: If you feel like you don't want -- you stop when you get ready. At 62, if you feel like you want to draw your, you know, old aged social security, you stop and draw that. If you want to go look for another job paying more money, you can stop, and leave the crab house and go, *you know*, find another job and do that.

K.F.: Right, right.

N.T.: Yup. Yeah, that's the way that worked. It's not a compelling job. Huh-uh (negative).

K.F.: Would you recommend crab picking to anybody else as a job?

N.T.: Huh-uh (negative).

K.F.: No? Why not?

N.T.: Because-- no, not now. Because they don't, you couldn't, you know, they don't work like they used to. You -- it's not substantial.

K.F.: Okay, right.

N.T.: Huh-uh (negative). They don't even have crab houses in Crisfield like they used to. Used to be a crab house everywhere. Now I don't think it's over, they said three. It's not -- the job is not like it used to be. Huh-uh (negative). No. You want to make a living, you better go find something else.

K. F.: Right.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yup. You better find something else. At one time, you could. You know, when crabs were plentiful. We used to work day and night.

K.F.: Yeah?

N.T.: Yeah. We used to work nights. We worked --

K.F.: So would the crab picking house be open all, 24 hours or something?

N.T.: We'd be working nights. We worked our regular time during the day. Then we stopped in the afternoon and have, you know, eat our dinner, go to restaurant and get our dinner, and rest a bit and come on back work about 5, 6:00, work week. Three or four hours.

K.F.: Wow.

N. T.: Yeah. That's how plentiful they were.

K.F.: Now what time were you going in there in the morning?

N.T.: We go in there -- well we worked, most time we worked to about 7:00, 6:30 or 7:00. That's what time we went to work. Yeah, when we were working nights.

K.F.: That makes for a long day.

N.T.: Yes, yes, yes.

K.F.: Now how do you balance going to work on those long days or any day, and taking care of your family, and house, and all that stuff?

N.T.: Well you did it in between. Because it wasn't something that you did all the time no way.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: It was just in the summer months or those early fall months when the crabs were plentiful.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: But you didn't do that all the time. Huh-uh (negative). You might do that just a little while. Maybe couple or so weeks, or you know, something like that. Maybe three weeks. And then you didn't do it every day no way. You didn't do that every day. Might be once or twice a week. Yeah. That's the way it was done in our crab house.

K.F.: And how was your income used here with your family?

N.T.: Huh?

K.F.: How was your income from the crab house used here with your family?

N.T.: Oh, how did I fare?

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

N.T.: Oh, I made good money. I was a fast crab picker. Yeah, I made good money. Yeah. Yeah, I made good money picking crabs. And most people that can pick 'em and really get the work done, they made money. Yes, sir. They could make money. I mean some of them girls was really fast, three and \$400 a week.

K.F.: Wow.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Good bit of money.

N.T.: Yes, sir. When they was really putting in time. That's right. Yeah, I used to make 300 and some dollars a week. That's putting in time. Yup.

K.F.: And then that money you had to stretch throughout the winter, though, right?

N.T.: Well -- well you draw, you draw unemployment.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: See after they closed up, well see then you would draw unemployment until it ran out, until you went back to work again in the spring.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: Yeah. That's the way that was. And that wouldn't last, I mean you know how it is. You draw unemployment where you would get, you know, so much a week. That's the way it was, that's the way it was. Yeah. That's the way it was.

K.F.: And all the people who were, all the women who were picking crabs, were they all African American?

N.T.: No. It was -- yeah, most of 'em in our setting. Of course, now over there Smith Island, I think it was, you know, they were Caucasians because that's, you know, what lived over there.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: But in our setting, that's what it was.

K.F.: Okay. And were there like mothers and daughters and aunts and stuff picking together?

N.T.: Some, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, families. Yeah, families. Yeah. Certainly was.

K.F.: What is the strangest way you've ever seen someone pick a crab?

N. T.: I don't know.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: I don't know. I can't answer that. I don't know. I mean unless it was somebody real, real slow.

K.F.: Anybody like that ever work --

N.T.: Yeah. Real slow. Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah,

K.F.: What happened to the people who were real slow? Did they ever, if they couldn't get faster, what would happen?

N.T.: Nothing. You --'cause see you got paid what you made. See, that was piece work. So piecework, you get paid, you know, what you make. So it didn't bother `em. Now one time if you didn't make a certain amount (indiscernible) the government, well you know, they had to make up, the packers had to make up a certain amount to them. So it would average a certain amount.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: But after a while, that stopped, after it started raising the price on it, you know, raising the price on crabs. Well then they didn't, you know, eight, nine, \$10 a gallon, well see they didn't, you know, most people could do right good. I don't care, you know, how slow you were. You still could do pretty good, you know, with those kind of prices. And this is the kind of knife, this is the kind of knife you use.

K.F.: Okay. And was it always that stainless steel knife, or did you ever use --

N.T.: Yeah, stainless. This is only kind I ever used was a regular crab knife. Yeah.

K.F.: How many of those have you gone through?

N. T.: Oh, I don't know. I don't know `cause some of `em got so wore down I would get new ones. Yeah.

K.F.: And I know the Carvell Company's not here anymore, are they?

N.T.: Carvell Hall?

K.F.: Didn't they get bought by some other knife company?

N. T.: Carvell Hall? You talking about down there?

K.F.: Yeah.

N. T.: Carvell Hall still there.

K.F.: They are?

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). You can get `em there.

K.F.: Are they still making those knives?

N.T.: Yeah, Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah, they make `em. You can get `em there. But I got this from Tim. He got `em from somewhere. But I think they still make crab knives.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

N.T.: Yeah. Yeah, but crabbing was a great industry. Was a great, was the industry around here. But they fell off, crabs just fell off.

K.F.: How's it make you feel to see the industry kind of falling off like that?

N. T.: Well we can't do anything about it. Can't do anything about it.

K.F.: Were there any superstitions or anything like that surrounded, surrounding crab picking or crabs that you can recall?

N. T.: No. No. Not that I know of Huh-uh (negative). I don't know of any. I don't know of any.

K.F.: What about in the community? Are there -- I know there used to be a seafood worker's festival. But was there ever anything that --

N.T.: Crab derby.

K.F.: The crab derby?

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Crab derby.

K.F.: Is that when they have the picking contest, during that?

N.T.: Yeah. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). Crab derby. Yeah, they had that.

K.F.: And were there any traditions within your family about cooking crabs?

N.T.: No.

K.F.: Or crab meals or anything like that?

N.T.: No. Huh-uh (negative). No. No. Where you --

K.F.: Pardon me?

N. T.: Where you live?

K.F.: Well I live up towards St. Michaels.

N. T.: You live up that area.

K.F.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

N. T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: And we're interviewing people down here and all the way up into Kent County near Rock Hall.

N. T.: Oh, yeah, all up that way.

K.F.: All up that way too.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: And even into Virginia.

N.T.: In Virginia too?

K.F.: Yes.

N.T.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: (Indiscernible) Seafood.

N.T.: Oh, yeah.

K.F.: Those places down in there.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Yeah, there's not too many crab houses any more that are, well, running full time like you said, but a lot of `em now are hiring Mexican crab pickers.

N. T.: Well maybe that's somewhere else, but not here.

K.F.: Not here?

N. T.: Huh-uh (negative). No, not here.

K.F.: There's still plenty of good crab pickers here in the Crisfield area to work?

N.T.: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Are there young people coming into the business still or --

N.T.: What, working?

K.F.: Yeah.

NJ.: Yes, young people works. Yeah, they have young people that work. Yeah. Yup. Yeah, they have young people.

K.F.: Were there any jokes or anything that you all would play on your fellow crab pickers?

N. T.: No.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: Not, not, no. Not in these later years. Huh-uh (negative).

K.F.: But earlier you did?

N.T.: Earlier, we might've cut up a lot, we used to cut up a lot when we were younger. But, no, see we're old people now.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: Sixty-five years old, you ain't play no jokes on nobody. No.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: No. No. Settled down. Yeah.

K.F.: Are there any memories that stand out for you working in the crab house?

N. T.: Of different people, yes.

K.F.: Of the people?

N. T.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: What are those?

N.T.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). Different people that I work with that have died, I think of 'em. Yeah. Yeah, different ones that, you know, sometimes that I worked with, you think about, you know, people that you have worked with not here anymore, gone to other places, or you know. Other jobs or have died. That will cross your mind. Yeah.

K.F.: What did those people mean for you, or mean to you?

N.T.: They were friends. Like some friends. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). Yeah, some friends. Yup. Yup. Some friends that I worked with.

K.F.: I've heard a few people say that they like working in the crab picking houses 'cause it felt like family, like everybody was family.

N.T.: Yeah. It comes to that part where you do feel that you are family. Yeah. You can work with people so long, you become a part of each other. Yeah. That's the way it is when you, you know, crab picking. And I imagine other forms of work where people, you know, become close to one another. Yeah.

K.F.: Do you think it was because the way the picking tables were set up, everybody was sitting close together?

N.T.: Close. Yeah, everybody was close together. Yes. Yeah. Everybody was close together. And like I say, everybody knew each other. We knew each other before we even worked together. See that makes a difference too.

K.F.: Yeah, it does.

N. T.: Yeah, we knew each other. Yup.

K.F.: What kind of changes did you see in the crab industry while you were working there?

N.T.: I see where you don't have nothing to pick now.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: That's a change. That's a change. You don't have as much work. Because one time I used to work right in that same company with different people, different -- we used

to work all winter. And then if we didn't work all winter, we worked close to it, but then when we returned to work, we come back to work, we had come back to work in March. Now June, anything, July anything. Last year we didn't do nothing before we go back to work. Huh-uh (negative). It's not the same. That's a change. Crabs, crabs have, you know, fell off. Not the same.

K.F.: Did you see them falling off years before this last one?

N. T.: Yes.

K.F.: When did they start falling off? Do you recall?

N.T.: Well they been falling off for the last, I would like to say five or six years. They've never been the same, not like they used to. No. Was a lot of time they would have to get `em from other places and all that kind of stuff, you know.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: So not, so they've been falling off. I don't know, you know, what happened to `em, but they're gone somewhere, or something eating `em up or something. One or the other. So that's the change in the industry, down this way, where I work. And when they do start to run the price up so high, packers can't afford to buy `em, so there it is.

K.F.: What do you think is going to happen to the industry?

N.T.: I don't know. Might end up like oysters, going out of stock in about, if some changes aren't made. Might not even be no industry. I wouldn't, I don't expect.

K.F.: Now were there crab pickers who decided to pick oysters in the winter as part of -
- instead of --

N.T.: Talking about some people know how to shuck. Not in my, my place, but other people -- some people know, during the course of time, they knew, they would shuck, yeah. Some women knew how to shuck, but I never did know how to shuck. I didn't shuck no oysters. But, yeah, some people did both. Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yup, they did both.

K.F.: What did the crab pickers think of the oyster shuckers?

N. T.: No, they didn't think nothing of `em. You know what I mean, they didn't bother them. `Cause they did what they were doing, and they did what they were doing. No, it didn't bother them.

K.F.: Did Maryland always have a soft crab operation?

N.T.: Huh-uh (negative).

K.F.: When did they start that?

N.T.: I mean -- well, well they didn't start that 'til after they got this new place. `Cause we worked to the old place, they didn't have it. Huh-uh (negative). No, they didn't work in soft crabs. But, see, now they do. And they used to do it with the other employer, Bill. But they don't, they don't do that. I mean, you know, they didn't do it then, but they do it now. Been a good while. I can't recall. Is that, you know, time they started. But it's been quite a while. `Cause they got a soft crab, you know, building also. So it's been good, it's been a good while. Yeah.

K.F.: What's been -- what's one of your favorite memories of the picking crab house? Do you have one?

N.T.: Not really. I can't think of one. Huh-uh (negative). Not really. Tell you not really. I can't think of any. No.

K.F.: Did you have a favorite hymn to sing?

N.T.: Well they would sing -- well different girls, well they would, you know, sing it. I didn't, mostly listen, different girls would sing different pieces. Yeah. Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross. They just sing different ones, different pieces. Well that made a nice day when you get devotion in the morning.

K.F.: And what did that consist of?

N. T.: Just devotion. When we had prayer, and sing a few pieces. That's it.

K.F.: Was that the only time you would sing the hymns was in the morning during devotion?

N. T.: Yeah. They didn't sing no more like nothing, huh-uh (negative).

K.F.: So for the rest of the day, it was just talking and --

N.T.: Talking and working, Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Was there a reason to start the day off with the prayer and the devotion?

N.T.: We just liked to. No particular reason. No. It wasn't no particular reason. And we didn't do that all, the time, just some times the girls would want to, they would want to.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Right. Was it something you did in Sherwood too where you started to pick?

NT: No. Huh-uh (negative). No. No, I was very young when I learned how to pick there. No.

K.F.: Can you recall any differences there might have been between picking in Sherwood and picking here?

N.T.: Oh, yeah. `Cause when I learned how to pick there, you had to wash your -- you had to back your crabs and wash your own crabs. And then you would pick `em.

K. F.: Okay.

N. T.: But see here you didn't have to do that. Just pick. You didn't have to do all that. Here you just pick `em, back `em and pick `em. But there you had to back `em and you had to wash `em. But see, that took up a lot of time.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: And then pick `em. So I don't know whether they still do that now or they have some other way of doing, but that's how I learned. That's the way they picked there, that's the way they picked. So they might, I don't know, they might still do that.

K.F.: Yeah, most of the crab places are closed up that way now.

N. T.: I guess it's like it is here.

K.F.: Yeah.

N. T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). They don't have no crab places up there now like that.

K.F.: Yeah, they have fewer up there than all through here in Crisfield.

N.T.: No, like I say, they -- of the past. A thing of the past.

K.F.: Well if you were going to describe crab picking to somebody from Idaho who maybe never saw a crab before in their lives, what would you tell them?

N.T.: Tell them too like I'm telling you. Tell `em just what I'm telling you. And tell them you had to have the crabs.

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

N.T.: -- different, you know, have to explain it to `em about crabs, and how you do this, and show me how you do that. That's it. And then they would have people come in like people wanted to see the work done. You know how people come on these tours.

K.F.: Oh, they would have people come on a tour through the --

N.T.: Yes, the crab house be loaded down.

(Laughter.)

N. T.: That's right. And a whole lot of people ask you this, and stand in front of you, in back of you, side of you. Yeah. Yeah, right there at Maryland. That's right. And then you have to explain it all, everything to `em. `Cause see they had never did it, know nothing about it either. Yeah, had to do that.

K.F.: What was like that, having to explain to them?

N. T.: Well they wouldn't know no more than you do. They wouldn't know no more than what you would tell `em, they wouldn't know -- but they wanted to see the plant and whatnot, `cause see they have never been to a crab plant. And some had never seen a crab. All they know they eat the meat.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: And it was really amazing to them. Yeah, they enjoyed it. I mean loads in there. Yes, sir. They come in busses.

K.F.: Really?

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Did you all get any warning that they were going to be coming?

N. T.: Well sometime Tim would come in and say gonna have visitors. I say look, Tim, I don't want nobody over me today.

(Laughter.)

N. T.: Yes, sometimes, he'd tell you. And yeah, sometimes, `cause like I say, sometimes they come there and Tim wouldn't even know they were coming.

(Laughter.)

N.T.: Yeah. But they would let `em stand there and watch. `Cause they had never seen, they didn't know nothing about it. So they let them stand there and watch. Because inspectors and things don't want nobody in there no way.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Huh-uh (negative).

K.F.: How would things change when the inspectors came?

N.T.: Well they'd be writing and looking. You had to be on your P's and Q's, make sure you had your crab caps on, and make sure you didn't have no whole lot of meat on the table, weigh your meat up as soon as you, you know, got five pound. Make sure you wash your pan, and wash your knife, all that before you went back picking. And like if you had to weigh your meat up when they were there, oh, they were strict. But they didn't pry too much around with our crab house. They kept, our crab house was really kept clean.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: Yeah. So that's the way it went.

K.F.: People get nervous when the inspectors were coming, slow down picking?

(Laughter.)

NJ.: They tried to get our meat up there. They want to get that meat up there `cause see they would be writing it down, writing down everything that was wrong. Yeah, they try their best get their meat up there and weighed. Because see sometimes they would come and they wouldn't know they were coming. You didn't know they were coming. Then they would have loads of meat sitting there on the table, see.

K.F.: Right.

N. T.: And you have to weigh it up.

K.F.: And would all the inspectors come to Crisfield and go to all the crab houses?

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Or one or two --

N. T.: Huh-uh (negative). When they come, they catch `em all. If they didn't get them today, they get `em next day. They get `em all. `Cause they go maybe our house today, maybe I.T.'s house next day, maybe Hotpoint's house next day. They catch 'em all. Yeah, they get you. And some of `em would come in there and stand, I mean all day.

K.F.: Really?

N.T.: Over half a day. Sometimes they come in the morning.

K.F.: And what would they do for half the day?

N.T.: Go and look at everything in that crab house from the cooking room on down, checking everything. In deed they would. You wanted them to leave there so bad. And, see, when they would come, well you couldn't pick like nothing because they wouldn't want you to put nothing but a little bit of crabs up on the table.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

N. T.: And just keep it there messing, messing, messing until they getaway from there. Oh, it was a horrible day when they came. Horrible.

K.F.: I guess you didn't get as many crabs picked.

N. T.: Huh-uh (negative). Not `til they left `cause you had, you know, carry crabs -- you had to be careful how they put the crabs out. They couldn't pile `em up like they wanted to. They didn't want too many crabs on the table. Well there it was.

K.F.: Right.

N.T.: I tell you.

K.F.: Did you all have any nicknames or anything for the inspectors?

N.T.: No. I don't think. No, I don't think so. I ain't heard girls -- no. Huh-uh (negative). I didn't hear `em call `em nothing. Huh-uh (negative). No. Nope. Nope.

K.F.: What about the watermen? I know they brought you all the crabs. Were there any watermen that everybody knew would be bringing in the most crabs, or big haul or anything like that?

N.T.: No. I didn't know nothing about the water -- I didn't know nothing about `em no way. Huh-uh (negative). No. `Cause sometimes when they bring `em on the boat, sometimes they wouldn't have nothing, like nothing. And then a lot of ours came on trucks.

K.F.: Oh, really? Okay.

N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Some of `em come on trucks, different places up there, you know, Kent Island and them kind of places. They didn't have too many come on the boats. That got scarce. Couldn't find none or something.

K.F.: What was your favorite part of picking crabs?

N.T.: What do you mean?
K.F.: Well what was your favorite part of the job?
N. T.: Well I didn't have no favorite part really. Getting through work and coming home.
(Laughter.)
N.T.: That was the favorite part, unless we were picking nice fat Jimmy crabs.
K.F.: Okay.
N.T.: Nice fat Jimmies, which you didn't get too often.
K. F.: No?
N. T.: Huh-uh (negative).
K.F.: What was so great about those?
N.T.: Have a lot of meat in `em. You could make money picking them if they had a lot of meat, great big crabs and claws. Yeah. That was the favorite part of picking crabs really when you got to pick them. Yup, that was the favorite time. Other than that, you know, we just mostly wanted to go home. Get your work done and go home. Yup.
K.F.: Were there any men that picked crabs?
N. T.: Not very many. Might be a few scattered ones, but not many. Very few.
K.F.: Why do you think that is?
N. T.: They never bothered with it. They never bothered with that type of work. Very few.
K.F.: What jobs did the men have in the crab picking house?
N.T.: Oh, they had jobs now. Carrying crabs, carrying crabs, cleaning up, weighing meat. That was their work.
K.F.: Okay.
NT.: That's right. Cooking crabs. They had work to do now.
K.F.: So they did everything else then.
N. T.: Yeah.
K.F.: And you all just picked.
N. T.: Yeah. Clean up. They did all that. We didn't have to clean up. We didn't clean up or do nothing. But when we got through picking, go home. They did the cleaning.
K.F.: Okay.
N.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). They clean up. But it used to didn't be like that. Long time ago, we used to have to do it. We'd have to clean our own boxes and --
K.F.: Oh, really?
N.T.: Yeah. Clean our own boxes and, you know, tables.
K.F.: Right.
N. T.: Washout your pans and all that, picking pans. But no, we -- when I come to work there, we didn't have to do that. I was glad of that. Didn't have to cleanup. Nope.
K.F.: Now you said that people have their favorite places to sit. Did they also have certain pans or anything like that they --
N.T.: To work in?
K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
N.T.: Yeah, we had your own pan with your number on it.
K.F.: Oh, okay. Okay.

N.T.: Yeah. We had a pan with our number on it. Yeah. Whatever your number was that you worked under, that's the number you had on your pan.

K.F.: And what was your number?

N.T.: Fourteen.

K.F.: Fourteen.

N.T.: That's the number I kept the whole, all those years.

K.F.: For the whole 41 years?

N.T.: Yeah.

K.F.: Now were there people who came in and requested they wanted only such and such a number of meat, whoever had picked it, that number?

N.T.: What, certain people's meat?

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

N.T.: Oh, well. He knew people's meat to give people. No. Well, no, no. Because people that come in and buy meat, they didn't know nothing about who we were no way. Huh-uh (negative). No. No, not as a whole. Them people just come and buy, you know, meat. No. But he knew whose meat to give. I mean boss man knows meat to, you know, to give anyway. Yup.

K.F.: Okay. And just, I guess, one other question. What would happen when a new crab picker came into the picking room?

N.T.: What you mean?

K.F.: Well would they come in and someone would help them, I guess, learn what to do or anything like that?

N.T.: Well they knew how to pick. If a crab picker come in there, they know how to pick crabs. Only thing, if somebody come in didn't know how to pick crabs, maybe somebody would show them. But new crab pickers that came in knew how to pick.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: And somebody would show them, the boys in there would show them where to have place set up for them to pick, give them a place to work. Pan, apron, cap, what have you, trash cans.

K.F.: Oh, right.

N.T.: Yeah. They would fix `em a place for them in there. But they knew how to pick, you know, when they came. Yeah.

K.F.: Now you mentioned apron and a cap.

N.T.: Yeah.

K.F.: Is that what you wore to --

N.T.: What I worked in. Yeah.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: Yeah, you had to have a cap on your head.

K.F.: And was it always that way?

N.T.: Always. Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yup.

K.F.: And is that something that the crab picking house gave to you, or just --

N.T.: Yeah. They provided it.

K.F.: They provide it.

N.T.: Yeah, apron and caps. Yeah, they provided it.

K.F.: And was it that way when you started in Sherwood too?

N.T.: Yeah. Uh :huh (Affirmative). Yeah, they had their aprons and the caps. Certainly did.

K.F.: Well is there anything else you think people ought to know about crab picking?

N. T.: Huh-uh (negative). I can't think of nothing else. No. Huh-uh (negative). I think that takes care of it.

K.F.: Is there anybody else that we should talk with? What about Hazel and Joyce?

N. T.: Who?

K.F.: Hazel Cropper and you said Joyce --

N.T.: Oh, no. No. I don't even know where they're at, 'cause they're probably working. You couldn't talk to them. You couldn't talk, you won't, 'cause I think they work. I don't think -- I don't think you would get hold of them, I don't think. 'Cause Joyce works to the prison, I think. I don't know about Hazel. I don't know whether Hazel's still working up there or not, Hazel Cropper. I don't know. I don't know whether she's still working in the chicken house or not. I don't know. I don't know, but I know Joyce works prison. Her hours, I don't know. But they'll tell you same thing I told you. I don't know. I don't know about them.

K.F.: Is there anybody else that we should talk to, either retired or still picking?

N.T.: No. That's up to you. I don't know about that. I mean, you know. No, I don't know of anybody. Huh-uh (negative). No. I don't know nobody.

K.F.: Okay.

N.T.: You know.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)