

Interview Log

Interviewee: I. T. and Casey Todd

Tape #: OH117.1 & 2

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault

of Tapes: 2

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of Sides: 3

Location: Metompink Seafood; Crisfield, Maryland

Topic: Crab Picking

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: See fieldnotes FN012799. Tape 117.2 side A quickly becomes difficult to hear. There seems to be a malfunction of the cassette tape. The volume drops off dramatically. Therefore, there are many more inaudibles during that portion of the transcription.

Phonetic Spellings: Hollow's Island, Charles W. Hollis, Gene Croner, Sy Betcher, Stan Ramport, Woskowitz, Dan Brixton, unidentified speaker, Kirby Booth, Bud Collins, Booker Ward, Charlie Lackerman, Beven's, Lake Howard, Picone River, Little Wicomico, Bill Ferkler,

BEGIN OH117.1 SIDE A

K.F.: Well, Mr. Todd, if I can get you to say your name and then we'll make sure that this is going to pick you up.

IT.: Yes, my name is I. T. Todd.

K.F.: Okay, and where were you born, Mr. Todd?

I. T.: I was born on Hollow's Island.

K.F.: And can I ask what year?

I. T.: Yeah, 1917.

K.F.: All right, and when did you start with Metompkin?

IT.: I started with Metompkin after I got out of the Army in 1946, 1945.

K.F.: Okay, and was Metompkin here already? Was this a family business at that time?

IT.: No, it was not a family business. My family was never in the packing. My family was commercial watermen. They had pound nets over on the western shore at Flagg Pond which is exactly where the Baltimore Nuclear Power Plant is today. Have you ever been over there?

K.F.: No, I'm actually familiar with like the Potomac area, western shore, the Virginia side.

IT.: Well if you're over there, you ought to go down to Flagg Pond. They have the old fishing shore, of course the state is doing this. And the cabin and where they all stayed and the whole thing, they've turned into a state park.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

IT.: It's very interesting. Right on the beach, right on the Bay.

K.F.: And how did you get involved in this industry then?

I. T.: Well --

C.T.: Tell her about when you crabbed, how many crab houses, how the crabs -- back when you crabbed.

IT.: Well that's before we were into it.

C. T.: Yeah, but you were in the business. You weren't in that end of it, but you can tell her about all the rest of it.

IT.: I started out when I was a kid going to high school and going to college, I used to crab in the summertime.

C.T.: Tell her what year you started crabbing.

I. T.: Oh, I don't even know that myself

C.T.: And who you sold to, what crab houses were existing then. That's got to be kind of neat.

IT.: Well I first started crabbing along about, oh about 1930, during the summertime when I was going to school. I went to high school, trot lines, and pulled my crabs here in the Charles W. Hollis here in Crisfield, that's when Crisfield had the bridge. They didn't have the marina then, they had a little bridge. There's pictures of the bridge you ought to look at.

K.F.: Okay.

IT.: And then I came back, I went to crab, all my summer vacations, I crabbed. Then I came back and went to the University of Maryland, got in the Army, came out of the Army, had no idea -- got married during the war, had no idea that I would come back in

the seafood business. Accidentally, during the war my father was a commercial waterman, and he ran oysters to the people who shucked them here in town. And this was in the 1930's, which was right in the middle of the Depression. Things were not very prosperous. And he was a fairly prosperous waterman. In fact he was one of the premier waterman in, really, the whole Bay. Gene Croner, he was always -- remember Gene? You know Gene Croner?

K.F.: Huh-uh (Negative).

IT.: Gene Croner was the guy who ran Solomon's Island laboratory in those days.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

I. T.: He just died, by the way. And he was a really good friend of my father's. He always considered Hollows Island people the best watermen on the Chesapeake Bay.

K.F.: Why was that?

IT.: Well they were stuck right out there and he was a buddy to `em, but he knew `em well. He knew `em well. A lot of `em were gathered around Solomon's Island, where he was located, and he got to know `em well. And they, I think his assessment was correct. Of course, I'm prejudiced naturally enough. But they were, they were out in the bay. And they really got started on the island, and they were not watermen as we know them, what they were, what they really were, if you ask `em what they were, they would say sailors.

K.F.: Okay.

L.T.: They were sailors. That's what their occupation was. Now watermen these days has got an outboard motor that goes two miles off the bank with a crab pot, now that's your average waterman. He never gets out of sight of land. But these guys had these big sailing boats that pulled down to the West Indies and north, up and down the coast and (indiscernible) and so forth and so on. And they were exceptional watermen. And Gene always, of course, you get this name everywhere, but they really were sailors. So that's where it came from. And I moved over here, of course I was the only son with three sons. But I'm kind of off track because during the war he'd tell you he was a prosperous waterman. And he found, and these were desperate times in the packing business. Right before World War II. And a lot of `em really had no capital.

K.F.: And that was because of the Depression?

IT.: Yeah, because of the Depression. And a lot of the packing houses were on, you know, were on thin ice. But he would buy oysters and sell them to the packing houses. And a lot of times you would have to trust `em almost all winter long before he'd get paid, until they got paid. Well during the war, he found out that this present building was a lumber yard and it was for sale and he bought it.

K.F.: This building?

I. T.: This particular building here, where we're sitting in.

K.F.: Okay.

IT.: And he went into the same partnership, he was unfamiliar with the packing part of it because he was buying them and selling them and he went into partnership with two other guys that, in town, that did shuck oysters. And when I came back, that's how he got into it, I -- before that, I worked with, at one time I worked with, when I got out of college, I worked with the State of Maryland Income Tax Department, and I worked with the (indiscernible) department for a while before the war. I never did go back. I came

back and, as I say, I'd been married during the war. You know, life is that way, you know, things just happen. Some things don't get planned. You just kind of fall into them. Happened to be at the right place at the right time, and things developed from there. But I started here with the oyster business (indiscernible) and I started the crab business eventually. Went over to picking crabs and, fresh soft crabs and frozen crabs developed, and continued the thing.

K.F.: Do you remember about what time it was that this business started doing the crabs?

I.T.: I started doing crabs almost about a year or so, I'd say about 1947, '48.

K.F.: Okay. And what did you start out with first? What part of the crab?

I.T.: Well they were, the two partners up, there were three partners, three partners. Sy Betcher took over my father's, you know, third of the business. And I started the crab -- these were never been picked, I started picking crabs first, picking crabmeat. At that time, there were about 15 to 17 crab picking plants in town. Some of them quite sizable. This one was, this was really the high point of the crab picking business in town. You know, after World War, going into World War II, a lot of them were broke, they came out of World War II with a lot of money. They made a lot of money in World War II.

K.F.: Why is that?

I.T.: Well, of course you had rationing. Seafood was not rationed. And the prices went up and, of course, it made quite a difference.

K.F.: I didn't know seafood was one of the things that had not been rationed.

I.T.: Yeah, it was not.

K.F.: So --

I.T.: It was not price-controlled either.

K.F.: Yeah. Okay.

I.T.: And I gradually built the business up and (inaudible). Of course, right at this point, we're probably the most diversified business in the whole industry, because we handle -- we pick crab, we've got fresh and frozen soft crabs, and crabmeat was fresh and pasteurized and we do oysters. I can't really think of one other one that does all three of them. And we've gone from 17 packing plants to, right now to three. And the thing has been downsized, instead of getting larger plants, we're getting smaller plants. Of course, it's almost entirely of mom and pop operations, except Clayton, and, and I guess (inaudible). But most of them are, you know, the wife, kids or aunts and uncles. Some of them, few of them have hired a couple of Mexicans to help them out, but it's a small operation.

K.F.: How many crab pickers did you start out with in those early years?

I.T.: Oh I started out with, you know, I don't know, seven or eight. But at the peak of it, I had about 45. Right now we're, right now -- well, at that particular time, along about 1930's or in the 1940's we picked year-round. You know, in the summertime we picked, dredged crabs in the wintertime, it was a year-round operation. And now it's gradually gone back to being a summertime operation. We don't try to pick crabs in the wintertime at all.

K.F.: Okay. And what was it like in those early years having a new business and the new technology that was coming out?

I.T.: Well the technology that did come out, we -- I was sitting here one day and a guy from North Carolina come up and wanted a place for his claw-picking machine. I had a spot to do it, and I let him do it. And from that we, that was the first claw-picking machine in the State of Maryland. And after that, Clayton got one and so did Meredith and Meredith I think.

C.T.: Meredith and Meredith never had a clawing machine until about five years ago.

II.T.: Yeah, but they eventually got one.

C.T.: Not -- they didn't get one until after everybody in the United States had one.

I.T.: Well they still -- the only ones in here was Jack Brooks' and ours for a long time.

C.T.: For years and years, that's what I'm saying.

I.T.: For years and years.

C.T.: They had them down in Norfolk and down in Carolina.

K.F.: So that came up from down in North Carolina?

I.T.: They never really had any in Norfolk. The first guy that had one after Carolina was us.

C.T.: You mean the clawing machine.

I.T.: Clawing machine, right

C.T.: Yeah. Stan Woskowitz was the guy that had it.

I.T.: Yeah, right.

C.T.: He had it down there in -- what's the name of the town? Blue Channel? Beaufort, South Carolina was their big plant. What was that, the 50's that they had the big plant in Beaufort, South Carolina?

LT.: In Beaufort, yeah.

C.T.: Beaufort.

IT.: Sterling is the guy, I'm trying to think of his last name, that really owned it, Stan Rampart.

C.T.: Woskowitz.

IT.: Woskowitz.

C.T.: He ran it for another company?

I.T.: Yeah. The guy that owned it was a guy from here originally.

C.T.: From Crisfield?

I.T.: Yeah. But the technology has done its -- gone back, and right now this whole -- the entire thing's in a crisis because of imported crabmeat. But you're interested in the history more than anything else.

K.F.: Well we're, the contemporary history too. I mean we'll get to the current issues you guys are facing after a little bit of this history. And what about refrigeration? When did that come into being?

I.T.: When I started out we -- we didn't have a cooler, we didn't have an ice -- we got all of our refrigeration, we either carried products to the local ice plant, 'cause we're right down the street here, and we bought ice from them. They delivered it by truck, chopped up in a bag. That's what we did. People today, when we put all the product in a 20-gallon barrel, there was not any boxes like we have today, everything went in a great big barrel.

K.F.: Were the barrels made locally or --

I.T.: We had a local barrel factory.

K.F.: Here in Crisfield?

I.T.: We had one in Crisfield. I think the only one left today is up, I think there's one in Cambridge up there, mostly.

K.F.: Yeah.

IT.: Not very servicing, I don't think. And I think they make decorative barrels better, more than they do wood, you know, barrels for use.

K.F.: Right, right. Their market's changed too.

I.T.: Yeah, right. (Laughter). But they all started out making barrels for the industry. Put a hundred pound of crabmeat in `em with twenty barrels of oysters.

K.F.: And use the same kind of barrels for the oysters and the crabs?

I.T.: Yup, same kind of barrel.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: They had different sizes. I mean you've got a 10 gallon barrel, a 5 gallon barrel, 12 gallon barrel. Twenty gallon barrel was the largest. That was, that was large enough, that weighed about 250 pounds after you got through.

K.F.: And what kind of health regulations were there back then?

I.T.: Well the health regulations back then were not as stringent as they are today, of course. Food and Drug has come on. It's changed a lot. In the 40's, Food and Drug was coming to a town, they had a moving laboratory that they brought in with them.

K.F.: Oh, really?

I.T.: They would come in and park it for a couple of weeks, take samples and so forth. But now they have the laboratory technicians or their agents come in and pick your product and carry it back to the laboratory and in Salisbury or Baltimore, wherever, wherever they do the testing.

K.F.: What about the changes in the health regulations? How has that made you change the process?

IT.: What do you mean health regulations?

K.F.: Well --

IT.: Well that really hasn't changed that much. But the pasteurizing process, you might be interested in that, that got started by a guy named Clifford Bird. He was working at the University of Maryland, a local guy. About a half a dozen of Crisfield packers subsidized him for two or three years, we put up about \$10,000 to subsidize him to develop the process.

K.F.: Okay.

C.T.: What did you get for your money?

I.T.: Nothing.

C.T.: You got nothing. He patented it and you got --

I.T.: He patented it, after he got it over, he patented it himself.

C.T.: He patented it, and you didn't -- you had to pay him royalties, even though you subsidized him.

I.T.: That's right.

C.T.: Well that's kind of a weird deal.

I.T.: Well that's the way it was.

C. T.: Yeah. Why would you pay for him to develop a process that you didn't --

I. T.: Well we thought -- we thought we were going to get it, you know.

C. T.: What's that?

IT.: We thought we were going to get it, the process. We thought when he developed it, it was problematical to start with, nobody was quite sure he could do it.

C. T.: Right. You thought you'd get to use the process, and then you ended up paying him a patent for it, royalties.

I. T.: That's right. We thought we would. Of course if you know, it really wasn't patentable to start with, you know. We started up paying royalties and that didn't last very long. In fact, I think Dan Brixton got it broken, he refused to pay him and they carried it to court and really it was simply a heat process and, and it turned up that it wasn't patentable and everybody went from there. Of course, the government got into it, they published how to do it and so forth and so on. But that's how it got started. He's the one that did it.

K. F.: And about what year was that?

IT.: There are really records on this somewhere.

K. F.: Okay.

IT.: There are really records on this that could give exact dates and times and places. He did his work over the University of Maryland is where he did his work. Clifford Bird. And he came -- after he did it, he came back, he went into picking crabs himself here later on.

K. F.: Is that -- is his work still here?

IT.: Yeah. The Bird's place is still here, but there's nobody there, it's not open, no, this time of year. But the people that are involved are -- none of those people that are now were involved in the original thing.

K. F.: Okay.

IT.: Never had very much luck herewith what I was doing. We also, a group of packers got going time -- everybody was getting an ice machine for themselves, and refrigeration became diverted from the local ice plant level, owned by one man. So that everybody, all the seafood houses were getting in-plant refrigeration, had their own cooler, and finally everybody bought an old ice machine.

K. F.: Okay.

I. T.: But before it got that widespread, the local management and ownership of the ice plant died. We were looking for an -- the resident packers, everybody put -- again put up some money to buy that. That was just about the fiasco as the pasteurizing process.

(Laughter.) We all lost that too, we all lost that too.

C. T.: That didn't work out either.

I. T.: That didn't work out either. (Laughter.) Same thing.

K. F.: Why didn't that one work out?

I. T.: Change of times.

C. T.: Everybody got the little smaller machines, didn't they?

IT.: Everybody had their smaller machines, they did their own ice machines, they got the freezer, they only did their own. I remember 19 -- April, I think it was 1954, when Hazel came through. At that time, we were still, we were still carrying our crabs on

weekends over to the ice plant, you know, putting them there and taking -- if you kept them all over the weekend, it would spoil. Had to get `em refrigeration. Didn't have any in-house. And I remember -- had the truck backed up to take, put my trucks on to carry the ice, just right after noon. And the roadway was dry when he backed in. And before we could get about 50 barrels of crabs on there, they were up to his -- the tide were rising that high and blowing a gale. But things were just -- at that time. We were going from the local ice plant to refrigeration storage in-house. We do it all now in-house. We freeze in-house -- here in our plant we've got several coolers and freezers, you know, just to do this very thing. So that part has really changed.

K.F.: Probably made your job a little easier.

I. T.: Makes it a whole lot easier. I mean well you couldn't do the volume that we do to start with, and you couldn't get people to work like they would in that time in this day and age, they wouldn't do it. You have to be a little more convenient and a lot more adaptable now than it was before.

K.F.: Tell me about the work force you had picking crabs. Has it always been black ladies picking crabs here?

I. T.: Well, no, no. It hasn't been. Matter of fact, one time we had one full house here in town that had entirely white pickers. But there's occasional white picker now here in Crisfield. And in Dorchester County, you have a lot of white pickers.

K.F.: Right, right.

IT.: You have a lot of white pickers. And the same thing -- they have a white -- but around here, they have always been predominantly at least 90 percent black.

K.F.: And always women?

I. T.: Occasional man. Even now, if we have -- we've got one man in the summertime, he's white. Rest of `em are black.

K.F.: I know, because the oyster shuckers are usually men and women, a good mix.

I. T.: Well they're more men than women because oyster shucking takes a lot more strength than picking crabs do. I mean more adaptable to a man, he's stronger, contrary to what everybody in this world is equal, men or women, they're not when it comes to strength and what have you. The man has his advantages -- women oyster shuckers. When I first started, I had quite a few. Yeah. But the years have gone by, the older women have dropped out. Now we have two, about three that come in occasionally. One regularly. But by and large, Crisfield is men.

K.F.: And what did the picking room sound like when you first started?

I. T.: Well that goes from place to place. Some of them, you know, some crab houses are only about -- they all want to sing hymns because they're, you know, they're more (indiscernible). And a lot of people walk by, they love that if they see picking crabs, and all of the sudden they'll burst in song and sing some of the older Methodist hymns are great. But the black folks are, you know, typical.

K.F.: Are they still singing?

I.T.: Are they what?

K.F.: Are they still singing hymns?

C.T.: I'd say you're more likely to get a prayer now than you are --

K.F.: A prayer.

C.T.: We had a couple younger ones, they'd get up there at prayer time. I don't think they wanted lightening to hit `em. (Laughter.) There's two of `em. Every time they had prayer time, that really bugged `em. They don't go for that. They get up and get out.

SPEAKER: Why does Miss Mary Handy get up and come out every morning at prayer?

C.T.: She always has. She won't sit here for prayer. Don't ask me why.

I.T.: Which one is that? Is that --

SPEAKER: She always comes out.

C.T.: Little Mary.

I.T.: Little Mary.

C.T.: She always gets up and walks out here. I don't know whether she's -- I don't know what the deal is there.

I.T.: Got one of `em is a halfway preacher. She went to the other extreme. She wanted to give a sermon every morning. (Laughter.) Some of `em didn't appreciate that either.

K.F.: Well let me ask you, what makes a good crab picker?

IT.: (Inaudible.) This has been a particularly mild winter. We've had a lot more work in the days than normally. Maryland is just not -- it's just not there. That's my oldest son, Casey. I have another one around here somewhere. All they do, they just let me come in once in a while.

K.F.: I think they do more than that probably.

I.T.: I stay out of the way as much as I can.

K.F.: Well I know some of the picking houses here in Crisfield had pickers who were members of the union when it was around.

IT.: Members of what?

K.F.: Of the union, the Seafood Workers Union.

IT.: Yeah, I remember the union. We had a big strike one time. Had it all summer long.

K.F.: You did?

IT.: Yeah.

K.F.: Oh, okay. No one's told me about that yet.

IT.: Oh, they haven't?

K.F.: Huh-uh (Negative).

C.T.: When was the strike, back in the 50's?

IT.: It was in the 50's.

C.T.: I remember the oyster strike. They used to have the oyster strike.

IT.: Well that didn't last very long, but that crab strike --

C.T.: It lasted long.

I.T.: The oyster strike was over oysters.

C.T.: For catchers, for catchers.

IT.: Over the price of oysters.

C.T.: `Cause I remember -- of course, you had oysters right this very year, so it -- I mean you had oysters this fall.

I.T.: But the crab picking, we had the only -- in the industry. This was in the 50's, in the 50's.

K.F.: Okay. And what were they striking over?

I.T.: Well they argue over the union for prices and -- I mean over the rates of pay, and a few -- as unions go, I mean their demands were very mild. They were affiliated with the seafood -- with the food workers in Baltimore. And for one time, they had -- we had -- it was always just, you know (indiscernible). And one year we had -- every year we had to renew the contract. It was on a yearly basis. And one year, in particular (indiscernible) they wanted more raise than we thought we could give `em, and it lasted all summer.

K.F.: And you didn't have anybody to pick all summer?

IT.: Well it started back in the fall. But it lasted quite a while.

K.F.: And what did you do that summer?

IT.: Nothing. Well we -- some people, the soft crab part of our business, we still had a few soft crabs, so that continued. But the crab picking, it -- they never did organize the oyster shuckers. It was the crab pickers that they organized.

K.F.: Why do you think they never organized the oyster shuckers?

1J.: Well I'm not sure that I'm telling you right there. There might've been a few of the oyster shuckers in the union, to tell you the truth.

K.F.: But they weren't as well organized as the crab pickers?

I. T.: They were not well organized. And the more rambunctious ones were in the crab union. And every spring, a guy would come down from the food workers union, the same people that organized Giant Food, and A&P and so forth, they were affiliated with that branch of the American Federation of Labor. But eventually, the crab pickers got fewer, the members were fewer. It was more trouble than it was worth. It really just kind of died a natural death.

K.F.: Okay.

I. T.: But for about 15 or 20 years, it was pretty active.

K.F.: And what happened that fall when you started back up after the strike?

I.T.: Well we went back to normal, just like, you know, tried to pick up a little bit. You never do.

K.F.: So did that mean that all the crab pickers here in Crisfield were --

I. T.: All the crab pickers in Crisfield did, yeah. At that point, we kind of set the price war, and everybody else in Deal and Cambridge and everything was waiting to see what, how we came up with a union contract so they could decide what they were going to do. We were the only people had the union. So we bore the brunt of the whole work.

K.F.: Okay. Well what about shipping? How did you ship your product when you first started?

I. T.: Well that's, you know, that's something that's changed dramatically. I was telling you when we first started, everything was in a wooden barrel, various sizes. And we had primarily crabmeat. And, of course, soft crabs were made in wooden boxes, they made wooden boxes for it. Before the days of wax containers that seem somewhat waterproof. And we shipped everything went -- most of it from here went by railway express, railway, believe it or not, by railway. Had the train back up here every day, leave about three or 4:00 in the afternoon.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: And everybody put their seafood on it for Baltimore and Philadelphia, New York.

K.F.: So it all went north?

IT.: Yeah. It almost all went north. The thing gradually evolved in the seafood business, just like you did in everything else. The trucks got more prevalent, it was more convenient, more acceptable, could reach more places. And we gradually went from -- one thing about railway express that was always good was the fact that they would take wet produce, you know. And, of course, truck lines did too, but airplanes don't, of course. But we went from the railroad to the trucks. But at first, it was simply local. Before the 16-wheelers and big tractor trailers like you see unloading now, they were --

K.F.: Right.

I. T.: -- small trucks. We've always had, from the very first of that, we had a trucking line here that was all nothing but seafood. We had one to go, like Tidewater's doing this now, they have a truck to go to Baltimore everyday, one to Philadelphia every day, one to New York every day, one to Boston every day.

K.F.: Okay.

IT.: And they get seafood not only from here, but they get it from down the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Comes local here and they will also pick up by Cambridge, pick up and carry it on up. But a lot of the major houses will have trucks of their own now, they'll deliver it. That's my other no-good son, Michael. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. And --

I.T.: But they're like me. They never intended to come back here either. So it was an awful great big accident.

K.F.: Well while we're talking about family, what's it like to run a family business and work with your sons?

I.T.: Well the business lends itself. It's a lot like restaurants. You know, it lends it to a family business because if you have a lot of bad hours, and it takes a family to do it. Hillary Clinton said it takes a village to raise a child, well it takes a family to run a business. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. Are there any other family members in the seafood business?

IT.: In this one? In this particular business?

K.F.: Or in other ones. Yes.

I. T.: No. We're unique in that point in time, I guess. In fact, there aren't many businesses left. Your typical example -- well you got two in Cambridge. There's the Brooks family there, Clayton Brooks, his family. And Todd's. And Meredith and Meredith, of course. You know, (indiscernible) quit, And J.C.'s having a real struggle. Times are kind of desperate. A lot of `em do only crabmeat. Imported crabmeat. It's so cheap.

K.F.: Now where does the imported crabmeat come from?

I. T.: Everywhere. For years, it came primarily from Venezuela and down around the Gulf of Mexico rim. But with the last five years, with pasteurization, most of it's coming from Asia now, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, China. China raises a lot of seafood. I remember -- Hong Kong, went off the island there to the territories and look down in the town itself, and all you could see is you're looking down into a valley, kind of, a river, and nothing but these acres and acres and tons and tons of where they're raising fish. They have a facility you wouldn't believe.

K.F.: So how are you guys competing with that?

I.T.: What's that?

K.F.: How are you competing with that?

I.T.: How are we competing with that?

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

I. T.: You know, if you can't beat `em, join `em. Ever hear of that?

K.F.: Yeah.

(Laughter.)

IT.: That's what some people are doing. Phillips did it in a big way. Phillips Restaurant. Started out with a seafood place in Hooper's Island. That's how they got started. Went from there to the restaurant business. And they imported tremendous quantities of crabmeat. Asia now, Philippines, Indonesia. And several are doing the same thing. Not a pretty picture. If they aren't doing that, they're hiring Mexican laborers because labor is not available, for a number of reasons. The government's -- for purposes, told them they don't have to work. And everybody is adaptable, and they -- vacations in the summer. You don't tend to do that, come back and pick crabs.

K.F.: Right.

I.T.: Although the money they make is pretty good here shucking oysters, you know.

K.F.: So what's a crab picker make these days?

I.T.: Well a crab picker is in worse shape than the oyster shucker is. You know, an oyster shucker will, he'll work six hours a day, and depends how good the crabs are. They'll make anywhere from 50 to 100 bucks a day.

K.F.: Okay. And --

IT.: But it's seasonal work.

K.F.: Right.

IT.: Now some people (indiscernible) they work six months and they draw unemployment the other six months. Matter of fact, your engine's revving up. (Indiscernible). When I first started, when I was trot lining, there were three or four really sizable places, picking houses in town. And they all had 40, 50 shuckers. It was old timers. Talking about crabbing time before one or two (inaudible).

K. F.: Okay.

IT.: And then after that, they started going downhill. And they multiplied by number, but they had like people in each.

K.F.: Right, right.

IT.: But another difference between then and now is that when I started the business, and all the people before me were getting all the product at the dock, you know, right here on the waterway across the dock. Well that gradually changed with the invent of the truck carrying it away from here. It also changed, just like trucks were bringing it in.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: We got it from various places. And for 30 years, I -- well over a period of time from 1945 when I started (indiscernible), and then I would get an old Chesapeake Bay -- then I'd be graduated from that to the crabs from North Carolina, get oysters, get a lot of oysters from Louisiana and Texas in the winter time. We also import oysters -- in Washington State. They're shucked oysters, they fly in. And the reverse is true of products that we send out. First started, when I first started. I said well we're -- I said

(indiscernible) -- for Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Philadelphia. We went from -- we thought -- BWI every day and put soft crabs out every day.

K.F.: And where are they headed?

I.T.: They go to Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver. And then in Los Angeles the next morning, just like our truck is in Baltimore. Cost a little more for transportation, but the product is there. It's a little less -- the delivery, the range that we accept product from and ship to has changed. Not only gone country-wide, it's also gone world-wide. Because we ship -- and we buy, believe it or not, we buy soft crabs from Thailand and sell here, buy crabmeat from Indonesia and sell here.

K.F.: Okay. Now how did you get into --

I.T.: So when you hear the president talk about a worldwide trade organization, he truly is. And we're a small company, you know, doing this. And when you can see that we're doing it, so many other people in this country do the same thing. Not only in this business, but other business even more so.

K.F.: Right. Now how did you all get into those markets in Japan?

[T.: Well we were kind of lucky in away because we, original contact with a guy that wanted to buy our frozen crabs to sell in Japan. That's how we first got started.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: And he, himself, is a story in himself He got started, his firm got started by selling French fries in Japan. The name of his business is Superfries, S-U-P-E-R-F-R-I-E-S.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: That's the name of his business. But he's a remarkable cosmopolitan Japanese, well-educated. He buys, now he buys food all over the world and finds a niche somewhere who wants it. That's what he does for a living. Not only he, but his organization, when I say he, it's an organization, he and his people. They buy bushels of crabs. Wherever he can locate a product and find a niche somewhere who wants it, he'll fulfill the need. He did that for us with frozen soft crabs, and he also -- located on the other thing, ship us the frozen crab and pasteurized crabmeat to us, you know. It's cheaper if you have people in this country looking for cheaper product. It meets all the health requirements and what have you.

K.F.: Okay. Now what about the soft crabs? Have they always been part of this business, or when did they --

I.T.: Well that's -- the biggest -- for our soft crabs, here they (indiscernible). Have you talked about that?

K.F.: Not yet.

I.T.: Yeah. Well they were -- they're very reasonable. We started with -- the local guy, and bought out by a guy that used to work at Perdue about three or four years. And then it was bought, he sold it to a Japanese oil firm, believe it or not.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: And currently it's owned by Japanese. You could talk to them, but they're not going to give you much history. You have to go back to -- I guaranty you Andy's still living.

K.F.: Really?

I.T.: Not the old man --

K.F.: His son?

I.T.: The son. I went to school with him, he's my age. I graduated with him in my high school class.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B (117.1)

K.F.: -- became the delicacy that, you know, city people had to have. Do you remember when the demand for it really went up?

I.T.: Well when I was crabbing as a kid, you know, when I was a teenager, I started crabbing when I was in high school, came back to it -- University of Maryland, College Park. At that time -- University of Maryland was a guy name Kirby Booth. He's a native of Crisfield.

K.F.: Right.

I.T.: But soft crab business was doing that. In fact, it was doing it earlier than the crabmeat business was. It started a little earlier, a little more primitive. Picking crabs, that started in Hampton, Virginia. And developed from there to here. And the soft crab business, my father on the island, on Hollow's Island, dealt in they were primarily fishermen. They were business fishermen, they made money fishing through pound nets. And then they would dredge oysters in the winter. And they played with catching crabs in the summertime, soft crabs, just to fill in. Really no money makers. But in those years, I'm talking about early 1900's, soft crabs were going pretty good. And this whole river here was lined on both sides with these shanties out on the water that they had, you see pictures of `em on poles where the -- inside.

K.F.: Right, okay.

IT.: Well all that changed so everybody done it on the bank now, and you've got farmers out there with an outboard motor catching crabs and what have you. It's all different.

K.F.: Okay. So the soft crabs were really earlier than --

I.T.: They were a little bit earlier than crabbing, yeah.

K.F.: And were the soft crabs, were those being sold to Boston and stuff before the picking started?

IT.: Yeah, they were being sold to the same place. That was -- the freezing of soft crabs started right after World War II. Prior to that, prior to that, everything went fresh. It was packaged fresh with straw and ice and put it in a box and shipped it primarily to the wholesalers in the big cities, like Fulton Fish Market or fish market in Baltimore.

K.F.: I didn't know the soft crabs had started earlier than the crabs.

IT.: A little bit, they did.

K.F.: Before the freezing and refrigeration, how would you have to pack the soft crabs to send them out?

I.T.: Well the packing of fresh ones hasn't changed very much. You take seaweed and put them in one by one, put paper on, a little grass on top, ice and ship `em. They'll live that way for 24, 48 hours. You lose some, but if they're fresh, they do pretty well if they're not too soft. It's still quite a demand for it. Like anything else, freezing doesn't improve anything. It stays -- but fresh is always better, I don't care what it is. That fresh pea you get in the spring of the year is better than a frozen pea any day.

K.F.: That's true.

I. T.: And a fresh peach is better than a frozen peach or a canned peach, or any other peach.

K.F.: That's true.

IT.: Some things freeze better than others.

K.F.: And you said you saw a big drop in demand on crabs and crabmeat during the war?

I. T.: Yeah. The one here, it went from -- a lot of trouble to come out of World War II with --

K.F.: What do you think it was that suddenly people wanted to eat crabs?

IT.: Well I think they always wanted to eat `em, but they were -- everything was coming together at this time. Started with the fact that -- a lot of it got started price-wise because they were not under price restraint during World War II. They made a lot of money -- unable to pay their bills readily on time, no problems at all. But just -- you're gradually getting, have gotten a better product because it's more sanitary and refrigerated better, tastes better, packs better, and you have increase in population all the time. We've got, what, 240 million people in this country now. Chesapeake Bay can't do it all. So demand is greater. I'm typical. Invariably, I'll go in a restaurant and I invariably order seafood. I don't like -- but I always eat seafood of some kind.

K.F.: Now have you guys ever tried to do fish or anything as far as --

IT.: What is that?

K.F.: Have you ever tried to pack fish or anything here or experimented?

I. T.: No, I never have. Crisfield itself is not a very good fishing place. You wanted to talk to somebody that packs fish, the Handy Company did. They were, at one time, they were a big fishing -- here in town. You ought to go see him. John Handy, Junior. John T. Handy, Junior.

K.F.: Okay.

I. T.: Want to know his address?

K.F.: Sure.

I. T.: Main Street extended in Crisfield.

K.F.: Main Street?

IT.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Are you familiar with Crisfield?

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

I. T.: Right alongside the library.

K.F.: Okay.

IT.: You know where the library is?

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

I. T.: The red brick house. Tell him I sent you. (Laughter.) He'll kill me. No, we've been buddies. We've known each other a long time. Like 70 years, not quite that long, but I'm old. And he's a buddy. He's a little older than I am. (Inaudible). But he's a little more decrepit than I am. (Laughter.) You can tell him I said that too.

K.F.: All right. Maybe when I'm done talking to him.

IT.: Yeah, don't do it right away. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Now how about down here in Crisfield? Is there a labor shortage here?

I. T.: A what?

K.F.: A labor shortage? Or have you seen it decline?

I.T.: Yeah, there's quite a bit of labor shortage. We're really not worrying about it too much on picking crabs because there's -- actually none of us can see much future in picking crabs in Crisfield. We hold onto it because we've always done it and it goes along with the rest of our products, but we don't do it in the wintertime at all, when I used to do it year-round, and we only do it -- actually we only do it about six to eight weeks a year when crabs are running. And it's hard to keep a labor force that way. People can't afford to stick around and pick crabs six or eight weeks of the year. Some weeks, some years, it's a little longer than that.

K.F.: How was last summer?

I. T.: Last summer was very poor. Summer before that was pretty good. But last summer was pretty good -- last summer was bad. And they say the prospects for this coming summer are not much better.

K.F.: Has there been talk of the state closing the fishery or --

IT.: Well they're talking about closing some of the clam operations, some are restricted, some are -- they've already had some restrictions. They're taking a day off and this, that and the other. Fisheries world-wide are gradually becoming restricted because so many people think they're being depleted everywhere. For various reasons, pressure, or pollution or what have you. At first, I think fishery pressure has got much more to do with it than pollution. Pollution-wise, the bay is in pretty good shape.

K.F.: Now what about big storms that have come through Crisfield, like a great big storm or --

IT.: Well there have been quite a few, quite a few. I remember in '33, when the '33 -- was an August storm. I was a junior in high school. That's when they flooded Ocean City. And that was bad. We'd get a storm by two things. One is how high the tide comes up, and essentially how hard the wind blows. You know, you can take your choice of which is worse. And they usually come together to a great extent. Now the August storm was more tide destructive than wind destructive. But the worst wind we ever had undoubtedly was back in '80. Went right straight up the Chesapeake Bay, right straight up. Went through here, went over to the island of Tangier, Smith Island right up the bay. That was by far the worst damage we've ever had.

K.F.: And we're trying to ask owners, how would you describe this business to somebody in say Idaho who might not even know what a crab looks like?

I. T.: What was that? How would I describe it?

K.F.: How would you describe this business?

IT.: I really don't know. It's not typical of most businesses. The greatest drawback to it, the greatest drawback to it is the uncertainty of supply. The people that tried to come back to us, especially in oysters -- plan`ing, and other places, Virginia, and Louisiana and other places, Long Island, they've been very successful. It's always been public policy in the State of Maryland not to allow this because the watermen -- social pressure. In a way it's a shame because we probably had the most ideal planting ground for oysters than any place in the United States. But we got wiped out by MSX about 15 years ago. We're gradually recovering from that. We're shucking almost entirely Chesapeake Bay oysters

now. Ten years ago, we weren't shucking any. We got all our supplies from the south that we wanted to pick. So we're gradually coming back. I guess over the last couple of days, that Long Island -- had been wiped out this last summer with disease. So there's always a danger you could get wiped out one year.

K.F.: Now what percentage of the business is crabs here?

I.T.: Well actually we like to think it's about a third, third and third. But actually, it used to be -- it's changed over the years. When it started it was mostly crabmeat. And then we went to -- money-wise, it's been a little heavier on the soft crabs, and the least is crabmeat. But actually, a third, a third, a third is not a bad way to put it over a period of time. But as I say, you know, we've been -- that part of it. You're going to find most people have only one, some of `em two. But I don't know anybody that's ever handled all three in the volume that we do. Now Handy has branched out. They went to -- the government, I mean the Japanese -- soft crabs only. She'd go on and make some crab cakes, so forth and so on. She is probably the most -- well she has a Perdue background. And they have a merchandising background. And they're more advanced in that than any of us.

K.F.: Okay. Has anybody else here in Crisfield tried to do the crabcakes and the actual food product?

I.T.: Well in small quantities. But it all started here, you know. And I have no desire to get into it, because that is a racket. I don't know why the reason it is tough. To make a really good -- make a really good product, the only way you can do it is to put a lot of crabmeat into it, for a crab cake.

And I have serious doubts that the average American public is willing to pay for it. I think that's been the problem. Now Handy is upscale on both the soft crabs and crab cakes. They put a lot of, a lot of effort and energy and cost in packaging -- you'll see that when you talk to him. But they also have, I really doubt if it's any more profitable than the rest of us, to tell you the truth. A lot of people that will look beyond the package if they really want to know what's inside.

K.F.: Okay. Well how do you all prepare for crab season?

I.T.: How do we prepare for it?

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

I.T.: Well we don't. You know. We don't prepare for it. We just pick up where we left off last fall.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: That is a simplification. Because here in the winter, whether it's crabs or oysters or what have you, all of us would have an off season. Like the off season for oysters in the summertime. Off season for crabs in the wintertime. But they use the off season to repair and maintain and fix up and pick a little bit, and see customers and what have you and so forth.

K.F.: Okay. Now do you use the same room to pick crabs in that you do to shuck?

I.T.: No. We have different rooms and different people.

K.F.: Well let me ask you about some of the equipment that you might use. Where did you all get the steamers?

I. T.: Well I mentioned the claw picking machine. We were the first one in the State of Maryland to get one, and we got it from down in Carolina. And after that, Jack got one, Meredith and Meredith. Now the crab picking machine, we just went the other way. Jack Clayburn and Meredith and Meredith developed the crab picking machine, you know, (indiscernible). And we stole -- we didn't steal it from them, but we got that from them. So it's the reverse of that. But the problem with that is we're perfectly good to sit down in the room. We haven't used it for three or four years because it cannot compete with the imported crabmeat. It's in direct competition. And the disadvantage of that is that we'll lose the backfin. You'd only get the white meat out. And it's in direct competition with the cheap imported crabmeat coming through the country. Beautiful machinery, all stainless steel, nice room. We'd love to get it lined up and ready to go. (Laughter.) We had a guy for several years after we got it, we had a guy in Baltimore we'd sell 34, 50,000 pounds of crabmeat -- never used. Made a big crab cake. Now he buys it all cheaper. And the picker, absolutely no bones, believe it or not, no shell. They're that meticulous. Aren't you bored with me yet?

K.F.: Not just yet.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: What about the steaming machines, what kind of machine do you have? And I've had a couple people tell me they've refitted boilers from canning factories, tomato canning factories.

I. T.: Well that's the way it's been done, you know. The State of Maryland requires you to steam your crabs under pressure. Now the -- for years and years and years would let people boil `em, just in hot boiling water. The State of Maryland won't let you do this. You have to put `em in a standard -- and cook `em under 245 degrees for a certain number of minutes. Standard regulations on how long you have to do it. So that's pretty universal. And everybody's gone to the stainless steel baskets. That varies somewhat. Some people use the basket like we do, holds about 400 pounds. Other people -- that we put in and out of the crab cooker -- other people put them in a crate where you roll them in elongated.

K.F.: Okay.

IT.: Same process, steam.

K.F.: I'm wondering if there are any memories that stand out for you working in this industry.

I. T.: Any what?

K.F.: Any memories that stand out for you while you've worked in this industry.

I.T.: Yeah. Not really. Personal memories. Things happen to me that normal people hasn't happened to. (Indiscernible). People that -- several people that worked for me over many, many years. One of `em couple years ago, had no idea he did it, he made a wish that he would be cremated and his ashes scattered over in front of our dock.

(Laughter.)

I.T.: I don't know whether that's a compliment or not. I guess it is. But I had no idea that I'd ever come here. My oldest son is a lawyer, you know, he went to law school. Went to William and Mary to start with, graduated from William and Mary. Went to law school, became a lawyer. We got notice, I remember that real well. Came in the mail

here. And I opened it. I'm the mail opener, among other things. (Laughter.) He said that he had passed his bar exam. I walked out and told him I said you did pretty good. He said well, I'm going to go with you, I don't think I want to practice law. If he'd have told me that four years ago, I could've saved myself some money. My other one got luckier. He went to University of Maryland premed and went to medical school for two years. Decided he didn't want to -- when he got into the clinical part, sending people in the hospital, it turned him off. He decided he didn't want to do that. So that's a matter -- and they're both perfectly happy. And everybody tells me how lucky I am. Most people to build a business, they have the opposite experience. They can't get their sons to work with them. And mine went the other way, I can't get rid of them. (Laughter.) Not the worst thing that could ever happen to me, I've been very fortunate. I've had amazing health. My health is -- I'm 81, and I'm very active. I don't take anything in the way of medicine. I don't know how long it will continue, might drop over tomorrow. But it's amazing. I can still -- pretty good. Sometimes I think these fellows, they hate to hear that. (Laughter.) Pretty good effort. But I didn't think, you know, I wouldn't have thought that -- I would've long since sold this business and been gone. I'd have been playing golf and doing something, but I'm still here. But my wife dared me to come home, and maybe she might be right. She (inaudible). You all through?

C. T.: Yeah.

K.F.: Right, right. Okay, so maybe I could get you to remember a few things while you're here.

C.T.: Since when?

(Laughter.)

I. T.: He wants to know about what. His memory is a lot better than mine at this point in time.

K.F.: Okay. Well I'm sort of curious how you all have worked this expanded market where you're now into Thailand. Your father and I were talking about that a little bit.

I. T.: I gave him a little -- go ahead. A little bit of background how we got started -- everything going from the other way. It was a two-way street.

C.T.: Oh, yeah. We got exporting a few soft shell crabs to Japan to a customer there. And then Asia went down the tubes, the economy's terrible there. They can't buy. Let me get the phone.

(Off the record briefly.)

I.T.: Let me show you. Come here. Look at this desk. See this over here, WPA?

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

I. T.: That's a government desk.

K.F.: And when did you get the desk?

I.T.: I got it when I came out of the Army, this desk. Everybody wants to get rid of it, but I'm not going to do it. I've had it for 60 years. WPA is a government desk. That's Work Progress Administration --

K.F.: Right.

I.T.: Roosevelt started. It's got a number on it. Now how old do you think that desk is?

K.F.: Well WPA was in the 30's, wasn't it?

I.T.: That was in the 30's, that's correct, that's correct.

K.F.: And how long has this desk been here?

I.T.: Ever since I've been here, 60 years. Just want you to know.

K.F.: Yes.

I.T.: I have a daughter. I have a daughter who owns a business of her own in -- she lives in Annapolis, but she works out of -- her office is near National Airport. And this is what she does. She outfits office furniture, turnkey operations for office furniture. And this (indiscernible).

(Laughter).

C.T.: You want to go through that?

K.F.: Yes.

C.T.: Asia, their economy went terrible and they can't afford -- soft crabs is kind of like a luxury there. So they had no purchasing power. But they started producing crabmeat and crab products there that were real cheap. And once you -- the currency changes around and the economy's changing around. All the sudden, we started buying and importing the stuff, which is quite a hardship on us and other people because domestic operations aren't profitable anymore. There's a tremendous pressure on us financially because, I mean we import a little bit, but there's companies across the United States that import tremendous amounts of crabmeat, and it's putting a real financial hardship on us and all the other manufacturers. So there's been a big change. I don't know what's going to happen in the future, but it's not good right now.

K.F.: So have you all found any strategies to market the blue crabmeat?

C.T.: Yeah. Mainly our strategy is just to call our old existing customers, the ones we've sold to for years, and we offer `em our domestic crabmeat. We also offer our imported crabmeat and let them choose. Some will buy one, and some will buy the other, we just try them both. That's our main marketing strategy is just to diversify a little more, handle a few more products. Maybe we'll find something we can make a living at. Of course, this change is not new. Did you go through all -- how we went from oysters into - - did you tell her how it went from oysters to crabmeat?

I.T.: Yeah, we talked about that.

C.T.: The main -- the main business of Crisfield from the late 1800's or early part of the century was oysters, this was oyster kingdom. No crabmeat was produced here.

I.T.: I'll tell you another story. My father, as I told you, was a fisherman. And he had pound net over on the Western Shore, Flagg Pond near where -- well he sold all of his fresh fish to the Baltimore market to a guy named Willie Hilderberg. Which you've never heard of him.

K.F.: No.

I.T.: But Willie Hilderberg was a prosperous --

C.T.: Baltimore businessman.

I.T.: Baltimore distributor. Buyer in the fish market. And he bought my father's business. He came to my father's funeral, they were really good friends. Willie came in there, he didn't have anybody, and my father trusted him with the fish, and he was -- but he would own a quarter of the Baltimore Colts when they first came to Baltimore.

C.T.: He bought a quarter of it?

IT.: I think it was a quarter.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

IT.: It might have been he and Carol Rosenberg.

C.T.: This is all from the fish business?

I.T.: This is all from the fish business.

K.F.: Okay.

C.T.: Didn't they do a lot with shrimp too? Later on.

IT.: Yeah. What reminded me of it is -- see my jackets over there, see how decrepit they are?

K.F.: Right.

(Laughter.)

I.T.: Well that reminds me of a story. The reason why it does, when I came out of the Army, my father was -- and I started this business. He says well go up and see Willie. Willie was there in the market, and I was starting the crabmeat division. I went up, and I went in his office there in the fish -- above the fish market. Not there anymore, you probably were never in it, but they had the offices above the floor.

K.F.: Right.

C.T.: The old fish market was downtown Baltimore.

K.F.: Okay.

IT.: Downtown Baltimore, Lexington Street.

C.T.: Down where -- it's hard to explain. Where all those fancy high rises that used to be --

I.T.: It's down there where the girlie shows were.

C.T.: Yeah, near the block. It was only about two blocks away from the block.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: But I walked in Willie's office that day. You know, he owned a good part of the Colts and was really well off at that time. And I looked at -- his jackets were more decrepit than mine were. He was out on the floor all day long.

C.T.: Selling fish.

I.T.: And he come up and hang his jacket up. And it wasn't bothering him, but when I saw mine how bad they were, I been in good company.

K.F.: Was he the first guy you sold crabmeat to?

I.T.: Yeah, he probably was the first guy I sold crabmeat to.

K.F.: Okay. I'm sort of interested in how -- I know people here in Crisfield ate crab, and people on the shore ate crabs, but you know, oysters were the big export. How did you get people off the shore to eat crabs?

IT.: Well gradually --

C.T.: There was only one, they started out with just like one crab house. And then he was successful, and the people -- they saw him making money, so the people copied. Who was the first crab picking house here in Crisfield would you say?

I.T.: Well it was really two. Bud Collins and Booker Ward were the two people. Of course, Charlie Lackerman. Of course, he went broke.

C.T.: He went bust.

I.T.: Yeah. He went bust because a guy owed him so much money went broke.

C. T.: Was Lackerman from Crisfield?

I. T.: Yeah, Lackerman was Crisfield. And he located -- I used to sell him soft crabs -- I mean crabs, hard crabs when I was trot lining, back where Bird was.

C. T.: You mean when you crabbed, you would put out to him?

IT.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

C. T.: Yeah.

I. T.: I put out to him when I trot line crabs.

C. T.: But mostly, they were all oyster houses.

IT.: Yeah. They started oystering in this town, this town is built on oyster shells. Oysters started around about 1860.

C. T.: And then it peaked out in the early 1900's. Everybody --

I. T.: Peaked. And the crabs were just starting coming on in 1900.

K. F.: Right. Now somebody called the museum about their great, great grandfather had been the first guy to shed crabs in the old wooden floats. I think it was Tom Landen.

IT.: Who?

K. F.: Captain Tom Landen.

I. T.: Well that's debatable.

(Laughter.)

I. T.: You know, that's debatable. Who knows the first guy that ever shedded crabs.

K. F.: Right, right. Yeah. I guess they gave a date of late 1800's.

C. T.: That's possible, in a small way.

IT.: I could tell you the guy that first floated was --

C. T.: You've told me that before. The first indoor on-land floats where they had trays and pumped water to `em.

I. T.: Was Mr. Wellington (indiscernible), our bank president, believe it or not.

C. T.: Now what a bank president was doing shedding crabs, I don't know.

IT.: He's the brother of the governor of the State of Maryland.

K. F.: Okay.

IT.: He's the first guy down here -- he had the idea that he could put crabs in a float --

C. T.: In a tank.

IT.: In a tank in a building and shed `em without -- that's the indoor tank.

C. T.: By that time, they had outside little rafts.

IT.: He had one thing -- he had one thing wrong. His idea was that he was going to put oxygen in `em, you know, instead of running water, instead of pumping water.

C. T.: And it didn't work because the crab waste --

IT.: It didn't work real well because the crab waste would eventually kill `em.

C. T.: Eventually they die from the crab build-up, you know.

K. F.: Right.

I. T.: But he shedded some there, and he had the first, and had built the first float and moved it down and started it.

K. F.: And do you remember what year this was?

IT.: Yeah. It was about -- I don't know, about 1945. Something like -- no, not -- about 19 maybe 55, between `50 and `55.

C. T.: Up to that time, they all shedded `em overboard.

K.F.: Yes.

I.T.: Up to that time.

C.T.: Didn't soft crab development parallel crabmeat, though, because there was very little soft crab done live. It was kind of a smallish industry.

IT.: What's that?

C.T.: Soft crabs.

IT.: No, soft crabs were first -- came before -- ahead of crab picking.

C.T.: They were ahead of crab picking.

I.T.: Yeah.

C.T.: I didn't realize that.

I.T.: My father, they all shedded soft crabs on Hollis Island.

C.T.: Oh, did they?

I.T.: In the summertime. Sure, they crabbed.

C.T.: Back in the 20's.

IT.: That's what they did. They crabbed and shedded soft crabs.

C.T.: How did they get them over, just sailed them?

IT.: Sailed them over here.

C.T.: In live boxes.

I.T.: In live boxes.

C.T.: So there was a good soft crab live --

I.T.: They packed it.

C.T.: But they didn't freeze back then.

I.T.: They didn't freeze, but they packed them up.

C.T.: Packed them up live.

I.T.: Like they do the -- that's what they did. I'm not fooling you. I used to go crabbing with my grandfather in the summertime on the island. That's what he did.

C.T.: Right. And he shedded crabs.

IT.: He shedded crabs. That's what they do.

K.F.: And were people picking crabmeat out --

CT.: That was all live business.

I.T.: No.

K.F.: No.

IT.: Picking -- whole pickers is a recent development. When I say recent, I'm talking the last 15 years, 20 years.

C.T.: I just assumed that --

I.T.: The thing that opened it up, when the State of Maryland gave the home picker a license.

C.T.: It was illegal up to that.

IT.: It was illegal.

C.T.: Because they couldn't -- the sanitation.

I.T.: The sanitation.

K.F.: Right.

I.T.: And I, frankly, think it's the worst thing that ever happened to the industry.

K.F.: Did they give `em a license?

C. T.: Well they didn't have a health license. So you couldn't ship interstate.

I. T.: They couldn't ship interstate, they didn't have a number, couldn't identify their product.

K.F.: Right, right.

I. T.: But there was a lot of political pressure, there were so many of `em, especially in Dorchester County --

C. T.: They want to be able to do it. Now there's no, very little control over it. It's decentralized. They don't have a -- it's hard to keep track of what's going on.

IT.: Worked out pretty good because the average housewife is fairly, you know, is fairly --

C. T.: Yeah, I think most of them, for the most part, they're all clean.

I. T.: Most of `em are pretty good. Most of `em are fairly sanitary. They're used to cleaning up after they have a mess and all that stuff.

K.F.: I was sort of interested, back in the 20's when your family was shedding the crabs, were people picking crabs just for home and not to sell? I mean was that --

IT.: Well I've often wondered how the people did -- started with all this seafood around. Why did they? There was always -- oysters were always in plentiful supply year round. You could live on oysters alone if you wanted to. Crabs were always here if you wanted to catch `em. I guess they didn't know enough about `em to do it. Besides all the deer and all the animals you can shoot out in the forest for that matter.

K.F.: Right, right. Now, Casey, what changes have you seen since you've been in this industry?

C. T.: I came here in `75, really in `75. And my father was doing three things: soft crabs -- he was picking crabs, doing soft crabs and doing oysters. Each one of `em was reasonably healthy. I think the soft crabs was in expansion phase at that point because I think up to that time, they just sold to the live market. But, see, people started freezing crabs and that opened up -- you could only, soft crab business was only the east coast, as far as you could truck `em overnight. Baltimore, Philadelphia. Once you're able to freeze `em, you could sell `em out on the west coast, you could sell `em in the midwest, you could sell `em down south. And it was in an expansion phase. More and more crabbers were starting to produce `em. I guess it was a big industry before that, but it got even bigger.

IT.: Well -- but I told her when I first started before that period of time -- we skipped - - what did I say --

C.T.: And trucks to Baltimore and Philadelphia. Yeah. And I guess Andy was the first one that froze stuff in a big way, wouldn't you say?

I. T.: He was first -- we all froze over the ice plant up 'til then.

C. T.: I mean the first guy to really freeze large amounts of crabmeat.

I.T.: He was the first one to build a freezer and freeze in a big way, yeah.

C.T.: Froze in a big way, yeah.

IT.: She's going to go see him.

C.T.: Yeah.

I.T.: Going to see John.

C.T.: Yeah They froze crabs in a big way. Everybody --

I.T.: Go see Carol too.

K.F.: Yeah, I was going to talk with her.

IT.T.: But be sure to see John, Junior. He'll give you, he's going to give you background on the soft crabs, and also with his father, before he sold to Andy. And also, the fishing thing.

K.F.: Right. Okay.

C.T.: They bought a lot of fish too, didn't they?

I.T.: Yeah. They were big-time fish operator. They used to load truck -- I mean train, car loads of fish out of here every night.

C. T.: Yeah.

IT.T.: Most of it for boats going to the western shore and bring them over.

C. T.: But the change for us was though we really -- soft crabs wasn't really that big a thing for us. We did it some, but it just got bigger and bigger. The crab picking kind of stayed the same, and the oyster business, back in the early 70's, MSX hit really bad. Remember how bad that was?

I. T.: I remember.

C. T.: Yeah. And when I first came here, the Chesapeake Bay was landing about a million bushels a year. I mean there were a lot of oysters landing. And it was almost like I was wondering what I got into in school. I had never seen. I was a greenhorn, and every year, production went down. Every year, the profits went down, and every year, the headaches got worse. It was a real nightmare. It got as low -- I think it got as low as 200,000 bushels a year coming off-- we didn't know what we were going to do. We thought we were going to have to get out the business. People -- when I first came here, there were 11 shucking houses on Chincoteague Island, down there in Virginia. They were a big user of Maryland oysters. The Chesapeake Bay in Maryland have produced more oysters than the Maryland processing houses could possibly handle. So we exported a lot of `em down to Virginia to be processed.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

C.T.: And went out of state. I mean that's how big a producer Maryland was. And in addition to satisfying all the Maryland production, a lot of the raw product went out of state. And the Chincoteague oyster houses, they were all depending on Maryland oysters to process. When the disease hit the Maryland beds, within three years, they went from 11 shucking houses to two, I think it was. The only one left was Reed, Tommy Reed and what's the other guy's name?

I. T.: Mike McGee.

C. T.: Mike McGee. Used to be Connor McGee, now it's just Mike McGee. Yeah. Went from 11 houses to 2 shucking houses.

IT.: McGee and Connor.

C.T.: Yeah. Connor and McGee is what they went by. And that's what happened. And we didn't know what to do. We thought we were going to have to go out of business really, is what it amounted to. So that was the first big change. And then gradually, we substituted -- right about that time, the thing that saved us was Louisiana had tremendous catch of oysters down there, tremendous catch. And they had huge production increases down there, and they couldn't possibly handle `em down there, so they started exporting

their oysters up here to us. So we started shucking those oysters, bringing `em up here by tractor trailer, and that saved us, kept us. It didn't save us, but it kept us from going out of business.

K.F.: Right. Now did you see any difference between the Maryland oysters and Louisiana?

C.T.: Yeah, there's a slight difference, but it's a pretty good substitute.

IT.: They're the same oyster.

C. T.: It's the same species of oyster. So it's a decent substitute.

I. T.: Biologically it's the same oyster.

C. T.: Now a lot of people -- some people use the west coast oyster. That's a different species, and it looks different, tastes different. The Maryland oyster, *crassostrea virginica*, which is our species, the west coast is *crassostrea gigas*, which is a specific oyster, a Japanese oyster. It doesn't look the same.

K.F.: Right.

C.T.: It's not so easy to substitute. It's a big oyster. Some people like it `cause it's real big, but it's not easily substitutable. But the Louisiana oyster was substitutable. That kept us in business. And now, it appears the Chesapeake Bay is rebounding some. We bought, we bought more oysters here in 1978, `79 than we've bought in the last 10 years as far as local oysters. The catches are going up. I don't know -- if we knock on wood, I don't know if that's going to continue, but it looks a little brighter. So we've been through a big roller coaster with the oyster industry. But the crab business is what we relied on.

That was stable. We thought that was -- we take that for granted. Next thing you know, that conked out. It's been really cyclical in the last three, four years. And between the combination of the ups and downs in harvest and all the imported crabs, that's where the oyster business was 15 years ago. We can't -- very unprofitable, very -- it's just bad business right now. So we're right -- the crab picking's where -- I don't know if it'll go through a cycle where we can make a living at it again or not, but it's right possible.

IT.: I think the prospect of crabmeat recovering is less than -- the others you're pretty sure of. Might have a very -- well I don't know. It's pretty bleak in the --

C.T.: That was bad.

I.T.: It was bleak.

C.T.: I just don't know what was going to possibly change that was going to allow us to continue in business. I mean we're talking years and years down the road.

K.F.: Right.

C.T.: Maybe the oysters will comeback, the way it looks. And that's the way crab picking looks. Years and years from now maybe something, maybe the stocks will recover. I don't know.

IT.: I just told her that the -- wiped out last year's, so you might get wiped out next year.

C.T.: Yeah. I mean there's nothing certain.

I.T.: No certaintess.

C; T.: No. You're dealing with nature. They landed, about three years ago, they were the biggest oysters in the country in Connecticut and those rivers up there in Long Island Sound.

K.F.: Right.

IT.: We just heard recently --

C.T.: We heard recently they've had a severe decimation of their oyster stocks up there. Their production's plummeted because of the disease problems on the beds.

I. T.: Where are you from?

K.F.: I'm from Virginia.

I. T.: Oh, whereabouts?

K.F.: From Potomac. Do you know where --

C.T.: You're from the northern neck then.

K.F.: Well a little further up the Potomac than the northern neck.

C. T.: Up near Fairfax or --

K.F.: No, no, no. Not that far up. Do you know where Occoquan Bay is, and there's a marine base?

I.T.: Near the (indiscernible).

K.F.: Right.

C.T.: Lot of big shucking houses there. Beven's, Lake Howard, Picone River, Little Wicomico.

K.F.: I'm up here.

IT.: You're up there a pretty good ways.

C.T.: Yeah, you're way up.

K.F.: Yeah, I'm up there a pretty good ways.

C.T.: Just lower Mount Vernon then.

K.F.: Yeah. It's not salty water up there.

C.T.: Yeah. You're down below Mount Vernon. Yeah. Most of the oysters --

K.F.: But we did have some fishermen there for awhile. Well, you know, they were there and then they built condos.

C.T.: Yeah. Getting the overflow from the D.C. suburbs I guess.

K.F.: Yeah, yeah.

C.T.: You're not quite far enough away, I guess.

K.F.: Yeah.

I.T.: A lot of people moving in building houses?

K.F.: Oh, yeah. It's -- I don't even recognize it when I go there.

I.T.: I'm sure. It's like Solomon's Island. Same way.

K.F.: Yeah.

C.T.: So anyway, getting back to that, now the crab business looks bad. I'm not so sure the soft crab business isn't overdone a little bit. That's more healthy than the rest of it.

I. T.: Right now, this particular time, this particular place is the least likely to survive -- you know, everything has its day. But the crabmeat looks the worst.

C. T.: You said that 10 years ago.

IT.: Because of two factors -- I mean from a picking standpoint. Not only the foreign crabmeat. But a second thing that's killing the picking industry is the steamed hard crabs where people want to sit down with a glass of beer and eat on their own.

C.T.: Yeah. The nature of the business has changed.

K.F.: Now when did that get popular? When did it --

IT.: Well it got -- I'll tell you when it got popular. You don't remember this, but I remember National Bo beer had a jingle going --

C.T.: Yeah.

I.T.: Chincoteague oysters and Virginia hams and Chesapeake Bay hard crabs --

C.T.: I remember that as a kid, yeah.

I.T.: Remember that jingle?

C.T.: Yeah. And they had a little --

K.F.: Do you remember -- how did the jingle go?

C.T.: Yeah, and they had a little -- the shad roe.

I.T.: Yeah.

K.F.: How did it go? Do you remember?

C.T.: I remember the jingle 'cause the shad roe and the frogs -- they had a shad sitting in the boat and he was rowing across the --

I.T.: You ought to be able to get that. The Baltimore Sun can give you that.

K.F.: Okay. And what was the name of the beer?

(END SIDE B - tape OH117.1)

(BEGIN SIDE tape OH117.2)

IT.: It made the Chincoteague oysters really, and truly. Chincoteague, Virginia.

C.T.: Made that a brand name that was identifiable in the market.

K.F.: Right.

C.T.: Chincoteague oysters still to this day bring a premium.

I.T.: Right to this day.

K.F.: And this was even though they were really Maryland oysters.

C.T.: Right.

IT.: Even though they were really -- they still are. Even though they were really Maryland.

C.T.: Because of that marketing campaign and those jingles.

IT.: They were national -- it was a national campaign and they were advertising, you know, National Bo beer.

C.T.: Really --

IT.: But the seafood went around on their own.

C.T.: Yeah. They were really selling beer. But it helped the steamed crab business tag along with it. Everybody thought when they had beer they had to have steamed crabs. So that really promoted it.

I.T.: And Baltimore is the heartland of steamed crabs and beer. That's developed by the place -- other places do it too.

C.T.: It kind of spread gradually. The other big things is -- yeah, mention the Asiatic --

IT.: They've taken it up and they want --

C.T.: Chinatown in New York, they want female crabs.

I.T.: They like the female crabs.

C.T.: They eat the eggs out of `em.

K.F.: Do you sell female crabs now? I thought there was a ban on --

I.T.: Well you're talking about the eggs.

K.F.: Okay.

I.T.: But I'm talking about --

C.T.: An adult female, not with external eggs. But they started eating a lot of whole -- they wanted live whole adult females.

I.T.: Not only that, you've got the other end where people kept the small crabs to shed crabs so there aren't enough crabs left to pick anyway.

C.T.: Yeah, the rise of the peeler business. That took a certain portion of the -- a certain portion goes for steamed crabs, certain portion for the Chinese community. All in all was taking -- there's very little left for picking.

I.T.: Picking crabs is not all that attractive. That's why we only operate six weeks a year, eight weeks a year.

K.F.: Okay.

C.T.: Yeah. If you had to just rely on picking crabs, you'd go home and take gas.

(Laughter.)

C.T.: That's like the guy fixed my -- Robbins, the guy who fixes are can machine, he says yeah, my daughter just got -- she's just turned 16, she's got a red sports car. I think I'm going to go home take the gas pipe.

(Laughter.)

C.T.: He was going to go home and commit suicide is what he said. I never heard committing suicide say I'm going home and take the gas pipe.

(Laughter.)

I.T.: Who was that?

C.T.: The guy from -- he's from up Taylor's Island. You know, he always has that big cigar in his jaw. And he talks a blue streak when he comes in here. You know, he's the Continental Can --

I.T.: Oh, that guy. Fixes the machine.

C.T.: Yeah, Continental Can. He says my daughter just turned 16, she's got a red Corvette, I'm going to go home and take the gas pipe. Can't take it anymore.

(Laughter.)

C.T.: Well I think you'd want to take the gas pipe if you were just picking crabs for a living. You can't make a living at it.

K.F.: Well let me ask you about your canning process. I don't think we talked about the cans themselves and how those have changed over the years, the cans.

C.T.: When I came here, even in 1975, packed everything in metal cans. In 1975, the crabmeat was in metal cans from Steel Tin Can Company. You had these little pop-top lids. To open them up, you had to put them on the edge of the table and flip the lid off of `em. They had a little clear seal in `em. Remember those?

I.T.: Yes.

C. T.: And that's how they packed them. And plus, you had a metal pasteurized can. But even the fresh cans were metal. The gallon cans were metal, the 12-ounce cans were metal.

I.T.: If you had that gallon can metal now, you'd (indiscernible) quite a bit. They were one of the most original ones, one of the few left.

K.F.: That one up there on the shelf?

C. T.: Yeah, that's the old-time metal gallon, Metompinkin gallon can. Even the 12-ounces and pints were metal.

I. T.: Everything was metal.

C.T.: And the oyster business. All the oyster cans were metal.

II.:T.: We've still got a lot of them left.

C. T.: Still got some 12, 12-ounces back there. I remember those Silver Seed brand 12-ounces, they were packing in them when I came in.

IT.: They were pretty.

C.T.: Yeah, they were a pretty can, that Silver Seed brand. They had like a little cream-colored outside to it. And within three years, within three years, it was 100 percent plastic. The plastic was superior because when you took the oysters, they were always packed in ice. When they went in the grocery store, they were packed in ice, and they rusted quickly.

IT.: It was a hard job to keep --

C.T.: Keep `em looking nice. And you put that plastic can in there, a week later, it looks like it's brand new. So it sold 10 times faster. Not that loss.

I. T.: You -- you put it on the shelf dry it -- most of it will last quite a while. But you take the same can, put it in ice, four or five days, it starts to (indiscernible).

C.T.: Yeah. It was such a superior --

I.T.: It had a very thin coat of tin on it.

C.T.: Yeah. That metal doesn't have much paint on it. The plastic was such a superior leap in technology, it just completely decimated --

IT.: On top of that, it was cheaper.

C.T.: And it was cheaper.

IT.: That didn't hurt.

(Laughter.)

C. T.: You might want to put that in there too. But the price alone, it drove -- that wasn't -- it was the fact that it looked so good. That really speeded up the introduction of it. It completely ran the metal cans right out of business.

K.F.: Where did you get your metal cans, and then the plastic?

C.T.: The old Steel Tin Can Company.

IT.: Usually the same place.

C. T.: They manufactured both of them.

II.:T.: They didn't make the plastic can, but they bought them and printed them and -- same supplier.

K.F.: Are they here on the shore?

I.T.: In Baltimore. Still at it.

C.T.: It wasn't over two, maybe three years it went to all plastic. Because I remember Bill Ferkler and all coming down here showing `em to us. And we started trying `em. Next thing you know, that's all we used. And it didn't take very long.

IT.: It didn't take very long --

C.T.: Within a year, that's all we used.

IT.: You know, worldwide in the grocery stores, there's plastic -- there's still a lot of can left because it's a dry environment.

C.T.: Yeah. The shelf-stable can, yeah.

IT.: There is some plastic too.

C.T.: It's cheaper than glass. I think metal cans are still cheaper than glass.

I.T.: Yeah.

K.F.: Yeah, they are.

IT.: They are.

K.F.: Some people still prefer the glass?

C. T.: Yeah. We still pack oysters in glass for that very reason, yeah. Pack oysters in it - even though it's a little more expensive, the customer will pay a little more for it so he can see what he's buying. You can actually see the oyster.

IT.: But the plastic is pretty clear too. A can you can't, but plastic you can.

K.F.: Right.

IT.: Most of your plastic cans are decorated on the can itself so it's not a clear thing, whereas in the glass, it's all on the lid.

C. T.: I remember the first crabmeat customers started using glass. That was first was Virginia Design Pack, first company.

IT.: I remember when I was a kid -- used to have the little steamboat that come into the dock. When I was crabbing up into the -- I could see that steamboat coming up and going to Baltimore.

K.F.: And that was the only way (inaudible).

IT.: Yeah. At that time, it wasn't on truck. It was either going by steamboat or going by railway.

K.F.: What was it like, the railways --

I. T.: Used to come all the way down.

C.T.: Mid-Atlantic Foods. They want 150 pounds of machine they're sending the truck right now. Are you going to be here at all?

I. T.: Yeah. Where are you going?

C.T.: Well I got to go -- well I ain't going nowhere. I might be here -- I will be here, but I got to get -- I got to take that --

I. T.: I'll probably still be here talking to her.

C. T.: Probably.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Well sometime I'd like to take some photos. (Inaudible.)

IT.: I've got one of the greatest pictures in a magazine of me cooking crabs down there. It's a tremendous picture.

K.F.: Well that's a question that we have, photographs and (inaudible).

I. T.: Not much.

(Laughter.)

I. T.: I'll tell you what, we've learned more about the future than we have the past to tell you the truth.

C.T.: I can't think -- I've got a picture of my grandfather over there in his fishing gear.

IT.: I just (inaudible). We were the first ones to have a computer.

K.F.: Really?

C.T.: Had the first computer in Crisfield. (Inaudible.) The clerical help was directly related to it. Had a minimum amount of clerical help because it did all the payroll for us -- we used to have --

I.T.: (Inaudible).

C.T.: I don't even know what year it was. I could tell you, 1980. They weren't selling any computers on the Eastern Shore. When I came here, they did their payroll manually. They look up, they had a little payroll chart, and they look up the amount, it would tell you the taxes to take out of the payroll. Then they upgraded big time, they had that little Sharp calculator, it had a programmable clip in it, like a calculator with a clip in it and it had a memory, like 1 meg of memory. And it would remember -- it would remember the state percent tax, federal and FICA. And it was -- that was a big advance.

I.T.: That was a big help.

C.T.: That was a big help. You didn't have to run down those pages manually. And so we didn't sell any -- there were no -- when I went to college, the computer -- we had one computer -- like an IBM mainframe. (Inaudible). Shared it with the whole -- (Inaudible). In 1980, they had that calculator. We were doing soft crabs. With soft crabs, make -- (Inaudible).

(END OF ALL AUDIBLE PORTION OF SIDE A TAPE 117.2)