

Interview Log

Interviewee: Mary Lowery **Tape #:** MAAF/KFIMD/FT1.30.99.323

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

Date: 1/30/99 **# of Sides:** 2

Location: Tilghman Island MD, in Mary's home

Topic: crabbing, sense of place, waterwomen, gender, soft crab shedding, foodways

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: File name: Mdft323.doc. See Fieldnotes: FN01.30.99. *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information not on the tape or asides by fieldworker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription."

Mary's son Darren recommended that I speak with her regarding occupational traditions. When I spoke with Darren on the phone, he said his mother had worked the water with her own boat and then had shedded soft crabs for a seafood company on Tilghman. Interviewed Mary for both the Delmarva project and for the Crab Pickers' Project.

BEGIN SIDE A

[pendulum clock ticking in background]

states name; born in Easton and lived near Oak Creek bridge on the creek. Born in 1938. Parents were waterman and mother worked in sewing factory

father crabbed in summer; no crab buyers around like today; railway station was next to them and he would ship them on the train. As kids it was their job to make shure he had the "mercal" [miracle, mercurial?] bushes to use in the baskets to keep crabs alive. Snap off branches to put in baskets to keep them alive; somehow kept them alive; shipped alive in barrells or baskets.

Father tonged oysters, clammed; used to back boat on to sand bar and gun motor so propeller of boat would dig up clams; no clam dredge then;

Learned from father; went crabbing with him; [why not tong with him? In school then? Only did summer activities?]

How when you watch someone when you go to do it yourself it is still entirely diff.; know how its supposed to be done but still diff; went eeling with him; enjoyed going on the water;

"early morning like you were in the world all to yourself. It was relaxing, a lot of fun, no pressures. Be in the boat out there by yourself and the sunrise would come up-it was like you were in heaven. Really. You felt like you were the only person around, even though other boats were around you could hear the sounds of other boats. But you were just like, 'My, how lucky you are to be alive. '"

Very powerful thing you carry with you all day; nothing any prettier than that; "makes the work fun instead of work."

Trotlining; dad taught her how to cook a crab properly; steaming and flying a soft crab; also showed her how to pick a crab; watched mostly to learn; and she would ask questions a lot; then decided to try it herself.

She took out one of his little boats and trotlined; her husband fixed it for her [Mary's husband and brother in law were boat builders; why didn't they build her a boat?]

Used to go out with a girlfriend to work water; "we got the line baited after my husband got the boat fixed up. And our first laying the line out was starting from daddy's pier going up the little creek on oak creek. So when we got the line over with no tangles we woke up everybody in Royal Oak we were so tickled. OH Golly!"

They made \$78 that day;

Dad used to have lots of watermen tied to his pier and sometimes they would say they were going to stay in the next day to watch the women crab; put chairs on the pier and watch; it was a joke;

"We crabbled there 3 days in the creek. And it's a lot of art in crabbing. You have to know the 'edges,' the muds. What they call the edges, how to lay a crab line out. And of course I knew nothing about the edges so when it was time for me to go out in Miles River I had graduated. Because see I had layed, we had crabbled there in the creek about 3-4 days and then daddy said, 'Now it's time for you to graduate. Tomorrow morning you're following me.' So we waited until he got his line laid out, and then he would come and say, 'When I put my hand down you throw your anchor for your crab line and then you follow me up and I'll show you a lay.' So he showed me a lot of different lays there in Miles River, lays that we call lays."

Lay in same areas for trot lining; depends on where crabs are; Mary still doesn't know what an "edge" is but it was always said that the crabs are on the edge.

Crabbled that summer and then next year father had a heart attack and couldn't go alone in boat. Used to sit on the porch and watch the other watermen go out and saw that he was getting depressed so she called the doctor. Asked if daddy could go on boat and do nothing but just be there. That was ok; so converted dad's boat from left hand crabber to

right hand crabber; husband reworked the boat; and then she and her father crabbed for several summers.

Mother died young;

Restrictions

Connie Haddaway worked water with her; mary's sister crabbed and had her own boat too; had 2 brothers, one did work the water; children would ask dad if they could go on the water and he always let them

Shedding crabs: Conely's seafood; used to be up where the Osprey is now; [Nan Haddaway worked there at the restaurant]; had own floats, Sonny asked her to do it; not many people who can shed peelers or tell what one is;

Father passed away and she left crabbing; would do it today but waiting list for license; couldn't do it down in Tilghman area would have to go back to where she knows the lays; too many restrictions and now ruining bay

Restrictions when she was crabbing; paper work then;

[tape paused so Mary could talk confidentially about feelings toward Bay cycles, restrictions, environmentalists etc.]

rock getting lice in gills; how they get rid of that themselves; things her dad taught her about nature; "sliming eels" dump into barrell add salt, they die and then you wash the slime off the eels and barrells, used for crab bait

SHEDDING: Mary was in the Nov. 1990 issue of Chesapeake Bay magazine

[gets up to get article]

had a deal with Cole's restaurant next to him that he would supply with soft crabs instead of rent; sonny shipped them out and also sold to tourists;

Mary asked Sis Gall to help here because it was so much work; did the bookkeeping too; watermen arrive around 12 with peelers; go up in the morning and fish tanks; then clean the tanks; then go through the green peelers everyday especially if hot; crabs changed based on how red their swimming fin was; by time that was done the crabbers were coming and then sonny would show up and sorts had to be ready to go on the truck

They packed all the crabs; at night other people fished the crabs at night; any peelers with knicks in the shell won't come all the way out so they made soft nuggets out of them; crab nuggets: clean the soft shell (take top shell off, take the legs off and just left with the body); wrap 5 in a pack and box held 100

Enjoyed talking with people who came down; taught people how to tell

"I even had a marine policeman come down one time. I got so tickled with him. He was a young fellow, very nice. He come every morning. And he'd say, 'Mary do me a favor.' And I'd say, 'What?' he said, 'teach me how to tell a peeler.' And I looked at him and I said, 'what do you mean, don't you know how to tell a peeler?' he said, 'I know how to tell a peeler by the book.' they went to school. But he said, 'I couldn't tell a peeler.' I said, 'do you mean to tell me that if you went aboard one of these boats out here and they had small crabs if they said they were peelers you would just say Oh, OK?' he said, 'I'd have to. Cause I can't.' And every morning that fellow would come over and I taught him how to tell a peeler. I showed him the ring in the fin when it's green and then the stages of pink and pinker until it was a bright red and the crab would bust. Every morning when we'd go to clean them tanks here he'd come."

Working at Connelly's was like a family; best boss; still calls her at Christmas; easy to work for; lives in easton; now selling sook crabs to Chinese in NY, buys from PT Hambleton; lives on route 50; Thomas Connelly

Women and float tanks; working co. tanks

"it was just a job, but I enjoyed it"

never thought about why it's always women working the soft crabs

start floats early in spring and Connelly would go to Crisfield to get peelers cause they would catch them earlier than Tilghman; their peelers were way smaller; really small; she thought sonny was going to get arrested for how small they were; DNR thought too small too and measured them one day but all were just 3".

How DNR checks soft crabs and not the health dept.

Peelers in Tilghman are bigger; start catching them according to how warm the spring is; when locust tree in bloom then the first shedding of peelers begins.

Just and everyday job

Arrived at 7 a.m.; hard job for one person to do and they had someone else work the nights and Sundays; off so she could have a day off, not about going to church or anything but more about a day off

Sis Gall: lives on Chicken point road; peelers were coming in so heavy and she ran into Sis Gall and asked her; Mary taught her to tell a peeler; used to crab with her husband too; [and picked in her home for sale to local restaurants]

Worked for them 2 summers; then bridge sold; and tanks had to go; and then the next summer was really bad for peelers

[darren comes in]

how new bridge has affected the island; more traffic and more boat traffic now; back up for one boat is pased Fairbanks tackle; boat traffic so heavy now and none of them want to sail around the island all have to go under bridge; bridge so slow

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Oyster market now; talk of her daughter Colleen and her husband's work on the water;

How media is hurting the waterman; what it will be like when there are only one or two watermen left; really sad thing is that they don't know how to do anything else bot work on the water;

Regulations;

How St. Michaels is not why people come here, people come here to see watermen and then when gone there will be no tourism

Regulations

Skipjacks; moving in diff places with the oysters;

Rebuilding of Pauper island near Tilghman; what they will mean to environment; how nobody is behind this locally; erosion in area;

Tilghman Packing Co: what island was like then; when everyone worked there; like a family; how when people come down from the city to Tilghman they like it and buy property; then want to change everything so it is like what they just left; very sad for her and other locals; nobody ever thought St. Michaels would be like it is today, remembers it as factory town; and not busy

Recalls the day the factory caught on fire; she worked in the frozen foods dept.; describes seeing factory on fire; whole sky lit up;

Fertilizer factory on the island; odor of that thing; awful; used to be where the Tilghman Inn is now; today you couldn't get that started here; forced you to stay inside when wind was NW; nobody missed it when it closed up; remodeled it so now beautiful inside;

Living on an island; sense of community on the island; sense of place stories from family; children leaving and realizing they have to come back

Clam factories; Wittman, St. Michaels; but not one on Tilghman;

Her children working the water; all learned but only Colleen stayed with it;

How you never forget the memories of working on the water; stand out more than the memories of shedding crabs; how she and connie had some great times soft crabbing

Would get up early in the morning and see how fast they could get the house clean and then get on the water; don't forget that fun stuff; had a license to crab;

How women today don't know how to organize and when she was crabbing and had 3 kids; sometimes older kids looked after the younger ones; and sometimes would take the kids with them crabbing; or her husband would watch the kids; gave the kids some experiences along with them;

I ask her a question about if you had to leave the area and couldn't come back what would you take with you to remind you

She gets very excited and says she just couldn't leave; she can't answer that question; can't move away from here;

END TAPE

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this is part two of an interview, see Mdft323.doc for part 1

BEGIN SIDE A

Snapping turtle story; caught while crabbing, father loved them and made turtle soup;

Her boat was 16" with a Briggs and Stratton motor, only held 2-3 baskets of crabs and would off load them onto her father's boat; says she wasn't making a living at it; not making a living at it

Used her money from crabbing to purchase a freezer the first summer; it was her money; next summer bought a dining room set; made her feel good to save her own money to buy these;

She chose to work; husband was a boat builder; didn't make much money and so she went to work; as a waitress she found that to be a steady income;

Maynard Lowery still around; building cat boats; her husband was elmer Lowery; they built skipjacks; and elmer built the skipjack that was in the lobby of the pier 5 in Baltimore; when that closed they brought it down and it's now in front of the Chesapeake house [photo]

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

END TAPE