

Interview Log

Interviewee: Relatives of Fronnie Jones
(J.M. Clayton Pickers)
Rosalie Brown
Nicey Jones
Joyce Jones
Georgia Sephus
Donald Sephus

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Comments: OH124.doc See field notes FN032399. Unidentified person referred to as "Speaker". *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information or an aside by the field worker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription unless otherwise noted."

Complete transcription follows, so all parts are direct quotes. Transcription completed by Trevy Little with additional notes by Kelly Feltault, fieldworker. Interview conducted in Clayton offices with 5 pickers, 4 of whom are related to Fronie Jones, the oldest picker to work at Clayton's. At times, the office gets loud with background noise from the owners talking, and a DNR officer enters towards the middle. This was the time when consultants chose to talk about racial issues at the plant, while their bosses were otherwise occupied and out of earshot.

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: We can start with you.

R.B.: My name?

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

R.B.: My name is Rosalie Brown.

K.F.: Okay.

R.B.: During the winter months when we are -- I mean, I'm sorry, during the summer months when we are working, I live with my sister at 824 Park Lane, Cambridge, Maryland. Are you going to write everything down?

K.F.: Just a few notes so that I can remember and maybe ask some questions later.

R.B.: Okay. I started picking -- well I started cracking claws when I was 12 years old. And I worked -- went to school, I went to school and I came back, you know, like in the afternoon and finished. I worked until I was 20 here, and I left. I went to Wilmington, Delaware. I lived there for 30 years, and I came back, started back working.

K.F.: Okay. Well, Rosalie, let me ask you, what made you decide to come back and start working?

R.B.: My husband passed away eight years ago. And then my mother's health started failing her. And I came back the year after my husband passed away, started trying to take some time off, you know, after he passed away. And when I got here, my mother wasn't too well. So I decided to stay and take care of her. She passed away, and I've been here ever since working.

K.F.: Okay. So do you come only in the summer then to work?

R.B.: Yeah, I come in the summer until we finish in December or January, go back and come back.

K.F.: Okay. So it's really family connections then that brought you back here.

R.B.: Yes.

K.F.: And what was it about crab picking that made you decide to start doing this again?

R.B.: Okay. It's good money. I mean it's seasonal work, and you have to pick so many pounds, so many pounds hour and a half. You can make good money, it's good money if you're a fast -- I ain't going to say -- you don't have to be a fast crab picker, but if you're an average crab picker, it's good money in it.

K.F.: Okay. Can I ask how much like an average crab picker would make?

R.B.: Oh, I guess I would say -- per week?

K.F.: Sure.

R.B.: You can make over \$400 a week.

K.F.: Okay.

R.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: That's pretty good money.

R.B.: So it's good money in it. And to me, I mean you work at your own pace. You have to average so many pounds per hour and a half, but you're still working at your own pace. And I enjoy being with my family and the employees I come in contact with.

K.F.: Okay. And are they the same employees that you had worked with when you were younger?

R.B.: No, no, no. Quite a few of the employees had passed away. Some of the new ones have come in.

K.F.: Okay. Well we'll come back to you and move on to Donald.

(Laughter).

D. S.: Donald Sephus, 852 Park Lane. Off and on, I been here about over 50 years.

K.F.: Really?

D. S.: Yes. I started when I was about seven. And it was summertime job, year-round job for me I think at the time 'cause you had to stop going to school and whatever. And you have to train yourself if you want to be fast at what you do. So I decided to do that years ago when I was about 10 years old. 'Cause my brothers and uncles was pretty fast, so I -- I crack claws.

K.F.: Okay, okay. So you had family that worked here too?

D. S.: Well, it was a family thing. All the people that worked here when I started was family. Most of `em had about six, seven to ten to twelve kids, and everybody worked together.

K.F.: Okay. So you had uncles. Did you have aunts and --

D. S.: All of that, yes. Everyone right from mother to grandmother, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters. Cousins and all of `em, all relations here.

K.F.: Okay. You said off and on for 50 years --

D.S.: Yeah, 50 years --

K.F.: What did you do in between?

D. S.: Went in the service, and then I went to other jobs, but I come back. And I come back I think this last -- been back about four years because it was much better. And I figured out what I was making at my other jobs I could make here and from unemployment. So that's how come that. But it's not like it used to be years ago when I started. I think what we're getting by the hour now, I would have to work no more than about four months out of the year. Because at that given time, I think, especially at the peak of the season from July to about October, November, a person could make I guess about \$15,000 at the rate they're getting now in four months because the crabs was just that plentiful and just that large. But now you have to go far and abroad to get the crabs, and that makes a difference. So the money goes up --

SPEAKER: Let me introduce you, excuse me Donald, to Joyce. This is Kelly.

K.F.: Hi, Joyce. I'm Kelly.

SPEAKER: Why don't you take your coat off and have a seat here. And do you want to move that around?

K.F.: Yeah.

D. S.: The money goes out to Crab Claw. We start working at 5:00 in the morning, you go home for lunch. The whistle blows. They call you back at two or 3:00 in the afternoon, and you work about six or 6:30, sometimes 7:00. And that was in the peak. You're talking about in the late 40's, early 50's. So all that's been changed now because of right now they work -- even in the winter time, they use fresh crabs. Work year round, or they work year round at that given time. This is what they call -- I guess they musta had about over 100 people working here, well over 100 between the grown ups and the kids and all.

K.F.: Right, right. So let me just ask you generally, everybody sort of starts out when they were kids, you remember other kids working here too?

N.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah.

K.F.: Okay.

N.J.: Yeah. Start working, you go to school, you come back.

K.F.: Okay, all right. That's something I want to talk about.

N.J.: Not that you want to do it, but you had to do it.

(Laughter)

K.F.: And was that mom who said you --

N.J.: Yes.

K.F.: Okay. And what was her reasoning for you had to come on in?

N.J.: Well my mother always said a hard day's work wouldn't hurt anybody. And she was a hard-working lady.

K.F.: Do you think that's something she passed onto you?

N.J.: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well right now, a hard day's work, it does hurt me now.
(Laughter).

N.J.: Because I've got older. Maybe it didn't bother her.
(Laughter).

D. S.: No, 'cause she was still going strong when she was an old maid.

N.J.: It kills me now, a hard day's work. But she said that time, wouldn't hurt nobody.

K.F.: I think you have something to say. We'll move on with you. You want to introduce yourself?

N.J.: My name is Nicey Jones. I live at 824 Park Lane, Cambridge, Maryland. And I been here 49 years. And at that time, the work was good. We were getting, back then, we was getting nine cent a pound. Then went up again 10 cent, 15 cent, on up. Right now, we doing good, good money.

K.F.: Okay. Good money, need more crabs, right?

N.J.: More crabs, yeah. Yes, in deed.

K.F.: Okay.

N.J.: At that time, when I was going to work, we come to work early in the morning, then go home, take a bath, and go to school. And after school's over in the evening, you come back, work again.

K.F.: Okay. And how old were you when you started?

N.J.: Sixteen.

K.F.: Sixteen. Okay.

N.J.: Before I had (Indiscernible) 14.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

G.S.: My name is Georgia Sephus, I live in Cambridge. And -- well I'm a baby, I been here 17 years.

(Laughter).

G. S.: I been working (Indiscernible) all my life, and I decided to come down here 'cause my grandma was here. And I came, I stayed, I liked it.

K.F.: And your grandma was --

G.S.: Fronnie Jones.

K.F.: Who here is related to her?

N.J.: All of us.

G.S.: Everybody.

K.F.: And what did you like about the crab house versus (Inaudible)?

G. S.: You work at your own pace. I mean, you know, I had two small kids. And if something happened, I could go and come back. It was no problem. And he's sitting over there. I like the people I work for.

(Laughter).

SPEAKER: I am listening.

G.S.: And that had a lot to do with it too. I used to come down here when I was young, my father was a supervisor.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

G. S.: And during the summer, he used to get me up three, 4:00 in the morning. I had to come down here every morning during the summer and sit and wait until he got off of work. I didn't like it, but I had to do it.

K.F.: Now were you doing any claw cracking or anything?

G.S.: No, didn't have to do anything. I just had to come be here so he knew where I was at.

K.F.: Okay.

G.S.: I'd seen `em pick crabs, but I never started until 17 years ago.

K.F.: So you still sort of grew up in the crab house `cause you had to come down here every day.

G.S.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Okay. Joyce, we're just introducing ourselves so that I'll recognize voices on the tape.

J.J.: Hi, I'm Joyce, and I'm in Cambridge. I started at 13, my mother made me come. I didn't want to.

(Laughter).

J.J.: I started at 13, and we come down when we was out of school, or Saturdays if they worked. I never liked -- I started out cracking claws. I had to get away from that real fast. And picking crabs, I was slow. Still am.

(Laughter).

J.J.: But I've been off and on for, like I said, ever since I was 13. During my pregnancies, or after my pregnancies, or working at a job somewhere else, and fired or laid off, come back. It's just like riding a bike.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

J.J.: Once you learn it, you'll never forget it. So I could always -- I knew I could always come back here. And I've been back here now, what, five years? Four, five. I think four or five, one of `em.

K.F.: Okay, okay.

J.J.: And I like it because you can leave when you want to, come when you get ready. That's what I like mainly about it.

K.F.: So there's some freedom involved in coming and going to work.

J.J.: Yeah.

K.F.: And what did you all think of the crab house like the first day you came into it, if you all can remember that?

N.J.: When we first started?

D.S.: Didn't like it.

J.J.: Didn't like it.

G. S.: I almost cried. I almost cried. I couldn't stand it.

R.B.: No. At a young age --

D. S.: I don't think no one liked that coming down here at 4:00 in the morning.

J. J.: In the morning, yeah.

(Laughter).

R.B.: And like your first day, everybody's been here. And when you come in, all heads turn.

G.S.: Yeah, everybody's sitting up watching everybody else.

R.B.: You go back, you get ready for school, then you have to come back in the afternoon after school's out. You just didn't --

D. S.: You didn't mind it so much when you was going to school because you know you had a lot of time off But after the school break, that's when you mind it really.

R.B.: During the summer, yeah.

D.S.: Because you have to be here everyday regardless.

R.B.: Saturdays.

D. S.: And we had a special time to go to bed at night. Now if you want to stay up a little later and sleep while you're down here, then you know what kind of trouble you're going to be in.

K.F.: Okay. What time did you have to go to bed?

D. S.: Well mostly in the summer time, it'd be -- you'd have to be in the house around 8:30 anyway, 8:30. At least I did. Let's put it this way. I was fortunate, like some might have to --

N.J.: We had to be in earlier than that.

J.J.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

N.J.: We was in the house before the sun went down.

D. S.: A Iota times, you wanted to be in there `cause the mosquitoes was so bad. (Laughter).

J.J.: We was in 'til it got dark. We had to come in,

K.F.: Okay. You were describing when you would walk in and you were the new person. What does that feel like? What is that day like?

J.J.: You really knew just about everybody, but it was just the fact that soon as you come in, all heads just turned your way. I didn't like it.

D. S.: I imagine that's -- when you come into a place of business or any factor or location, even an office sometimes, when a new one come in, they're going to look and say I wonder what she's all about, or I wonder what he's all about. In fact, when we was coming up, all they would say I thought it's about time they brought you down here when you're young. `Cause see they know that if anyone have a child, they're look for to come down here after they got a certain age.

J.J.: Sure did.

D. S.: And that's the way they would take care of the baby-sitters and all the rest. Most of `em come down here, then after they got down here they said well you're going to do something. And, of course, a lot of `em didn't like it. I never did like it. I still don't like it, cracking claws. But I know what I can do, you see. I know that if I decide I want to come down here at a given time, and if everything, all the conditions is pretty good, then I know I can leave in a certain time and made \$100. So it doesn't take long to do it.

K.F.: What do you mean by if the conditions are good?

D. S.: That means you have to be motivated for one thing. And then whatever you're working on have to be good, the crabs. They have to be large. I would say the crab pickers, if crabs are fat, and if they're not too small, they can do pretty good. But I'm a claw cracker, so if the claws are small, that means I have to crack too many of `em to get anything. So that's the difference. If the claws are large, like years ago when I think about that, when they were so large, this is the truth, that you could take about 17, 18 claws and get a pound of meat.

K.F.: Really?

D.S.: Now that's very large. The crabs that they selling today, it was the crabs that, as far as number ones concerned, the crabs that was smaller than what we was picking back then and there. I think most crabs that was average -- something like about -- the big crabs are number ones, between eight and eight and a half for being a number one crab. And that's a very large crab. And today, I think that I'm probably down to maybe about seven, maybe seven inches. So you figure that -- and if they had a little soft spot and it was large, that would be a reject. But today, it's different. That's because of the, maybe over-harvesting of the water. I don't know. But something messed `em up, let's put it that way.

R.B.: Yeah.

D. S.: If you have to go too far, any time you have to go to Florida, Texas, Louisiana, and all that kinda stuff just to get crabs, and wait 'til -- back when I was coming up, you could get all the crabs you want --

N.J.: Plentiful.

D. S.: --right from the Choptank, Little Choptank. And now you can't find `em here anymore.

N.J.: Big crabs. Big jumbos. Jumbos.

K.F.: Now are the jumbos easier to pick for you all than the smaller ones?

R.B.: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

G. S.: Yes. `Cause you have great big pieces of lump coming out of the crab, And it doesn't take you very long to fill up a can of jumbo. Yeah.

N.J.: Good crabs, I can go. I can go --

K.F.: Well what is the -- that you have to do when you're picking? Can you all describe to me, I know this is a -- get into picking crabs --
(Group discussion.)

D. S.: What did you want to know?

K.F.: I know there's a certain rhythm when you get into picking crabs and -- your body, what is that like?

D. S.: It's just like whoever use a typewriter, everybody have their own style of doing something. Everyone have their own style of doing something like that. And you know, I said one thing, I always tell people if I try to teach `em, I try to teach a person how to crack a claw, I say well you have to go at your own pace. I say now this is the way I open the claw up. And after I open it up, I can -- but you have to, coordination's everything even in picking a crab. If you don't have coordination, then you can forget it, because really you're not doing very much. And sometime, I guess you get disgusted yourself I get disgusted if the claws are too small, I get disgusted if I make too many mistakes. Then I know that I'm off for that day, and I might just get on up and go home because I've messed my hands up, and -- mess up too bad, then you're -- it's a very dangerous job. Don't let nobody fool you.

K.F.: Okay, okay.

D. S.: That's why sometimes if they're really good -- when they was real good, and we were -- sometimes -- be over there at a certain time of the year, but they shuck oysters over on this side, and we would be over on that side. And that be in October -- so good, six -- three pounds, in a six-hour.

(Group discussion.)

D.S.: Make 225 or \$230. So that's why -- go back pay high prices where, you know, because I think if it was like that today, it would be maybe half of the people that would spend all day picking crabs. I always have a goal when I come down here.

K.F.: Okay.

D. S.: If I think I can't reach my goal, I say maybe tomorrow it might be better. And then I know that I would have to do much better the next day --

K.F.: Okay. Do you all do that same --

R.B.: Oh, yeah. I have a certain amount of pounds I would like to pick.

G. S.: Yeah.

N.J.: I pick as many as I can. I don't have a whole --

R.B.: A goal is, you know, a goal is you have certain many pounds you want to pick that day. Like you said, if you can't get it that day, then the next day you're going to try a little bit harder. But you have to come in with something on your mind, you know.

G. S.: I've tried with a goal and it don't work for me. Because once I get that goal, I'm ready to leave. That's what --

R.B.: When you pick whatever you come in with -- if you said you want maybe 40 pounds, and you might get that 40 pounds before maybe 2:00. Then --

G.S.: Then I'm ready to leave.

R.B.: Maybe --

J.J.: They're talking pounds beyond me 'cause I'd never get there. The pounds they talking, I don't get there.

(Laughter).

J.J.: I'm nowhere near as fast as they are.

N.J.: But you know, when you was talking about oysters, it was in back of my mind, I knew they had oysters here because I learned also how to shuck oysters. I wasn't fast oyster shucker, but I did learn how to shuck oysters. But I was going to ask you -- it skipped my mind, but I knew they had one here, I knew they had one here years ago which they don't now.

K.F.: Did you prefer picking crabs over shucking oysters?

N.J.: Oh, yeah, yeah. You'd have to find most of that oyster with that knife in order to get that oyster open. Am I right?

D. S.: That's a dangerous job.

N.J.: Yeah, yeah, with that knife. And --

D. S.: But that was never hard to shuck oysters.

J.J.: You shuck oysters?

N.J.: And I couldn't make no money shucking oysters.

D. S.: I could get into the oysters very quick, but then -- because I cut him up. And they wanted `em whole.

(Laughter)

K.F.: Now was there -- I'm talking about the few crab pickers who said that they always thought that picking crabs was better than shucking oysters and that people who pick crabs were more skilled than oyster shuckers. Did you all find that?

R.B.: I don't know.

J.J.: I'd never do it.

D. S.: I don't think so. Not the ones that I really look up to that shuck oysters. Nothing more beautiful than someone can shuck an oyster that comes out pretty.

N.J.: Yeah, big pretty oysters.

D. S.: You know what I mean? If you cut the oyster, you know you let the water out of `em. The way they go over that oyster and take that oyster out -- you can do so much with the oyster. If they cut `em up, then you got to chop `em up and make something else out of `em. I mean everything that you do in seafood, I don't care what part of the seafood that you're working with, it's a skill. Now some people just create their skill a little better than others, but that's the only thing different. Just like a person that is fast pick crabs, and they can't get the lump out. But then I can look at some of `em that have such beautiful lump that come out of that crab, that center piece of lump, and put it in a batter, drop it in some hot fat, and what you got is beautiful. But then again, you got some people that's very quick at what you do, but the quality of the meat is not the same. But oh they're fast, but you don't get the quality.

K.F.: Okay, and for you all, what's more important?

N.J.: Quality of the meat.

R.B.: Quality.

D. S.: Well I like the quality of the meat if I'm going to buy it --
(Laughter)

K.F.: Well tell me what it means to pick pretty meat if you're picking crabs.

N.J.: Well here they have -- if you pick -- they going to send it back. You're going to have to go through it. So if you do it right the first time, you ain't got to go over it again. That makes a big difference.

D.S.: And one thing now, see, the way I look at it, of course when I was coming up, I could care one way or the other because I wanted `em to send me home when I was coming up, I didn't want to be here.

(Laughter)

D.S.: But then you have to look at it this way. When if I go out and buy a can of meat somewhere and if it's -- see I wouldn't buy it no more from that place, you see. And I feel like the workers, the employees and employer got to work together, we work together on that. Because see this is my job. I mean if he can't -- if we don't get no customers, then I don't have no job here. I have to --

R.B.: Right.

D. S.: And when I go somewheres else to crack a claw, this is the truth, I have been into about six or seven different crab houses, and you're talking about the difference when you go into a place, they always -- or that I hear about how many claws I can crack, then I was not welcome in them places. And they made it known that they made sure that I didn't stay too long. So I had to come back here where -- sometimes I have a lot of problems here too, you know, because of some of the claw crackers when they do come in. But I look at it this way. I said we're all coming down here. If you can't do it as good as the next person, you don't worry about that. You do the best that you can. And anywhere you work with a group of people, there's always going to be some problems.

K.F.: Okay. Now have you all ever worked at other crab houses and been able to pick there?

N.J.: No, I haven't. This is the only one.

J.J.: I did try Todd's one time. Didn't like it.

G. S.: And it is like that, it is a lot of resentment.

J.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

G. S.: And I see it when new people come down here. I mean you know, go back where you came from. That's the way it is. Go back where you come from, come picking up our crabs, we got to get off early. You go back where you supposed to be at, and let us stay where we supposed to be at.

(Laughter).

G. S.: Well I'm going to be honest. Y'all know it, y'all know it.

(Laughter).

K.F.: Okay, okay.

G. S.: They don't really like newcomers, really don't. And I have been places where you go sit down, and they don't want to give you no crabs. They don't want you there.

D. S.: Now how -- what I'm going to do is knowing how many crates the crabs -- they have for that day's work. And it don't matter to me how many people come. If I think they have enough crabs, what I have in mind to how many pounds I'm planning on getting that day, I'm going to get some pounds. So I know that if they got 25 crates for crabs, then I say well all I need is 50 pounds, and I probably will get that.

K.F.: Now let me ask, can you all describe where you sit here in the crab house and who sits around you?

R.B.: I sit so we can be the first -- as you first come in the door, the first row.

K.F.: Do you all sit together?

R.B.: Me and my aunt do.

N.J.: We sit together.

J.J.: I'm on the back table.

D.S.: I'm by myself.

N.J.: You by yourself.

J.J.: You used to be on the back table.

(Laughter)

J.J.: They kept moving him so he got to his self

D. S.: No, the people kept moving me.

J.J.: That's what I'm talking about.

D.S.: Yeah, the -- so bad. Anything, you know, when I crack claws, if I'm at my peak, and the claws was hard, the shells, once I score that claw, a little piece will fly off, I'm afraid sometime, and then sometime I go so quickly that I lose the knife, and sometime I think that might go across the table and hit somebody. So it's good that I'm by myself 'cause -- against the wall or whatever.

N.J.: It's amazing to watch him crack claws. He is that fast. It is amazing. I have to sit down and watch him.

K.F.: We have to come and see, maybe take a few photos.

D. S.: Then I'll probably get on up --

(Laughter)

D.S.: Not too close, I don't like people stand around me too much, you know. I don't get nervous behind it, but sometimes they have a tendency to want to get too close, you

know. People say I can't even see that. And, see, then they on top of me and I don't care too much for that. I really --

J.J.: It's your personal space.

K.F.: Well then let me ask, how do you all have your tables set up when you're picking? I know everybody has a certain way they like things.

D.S.: Oh, everything --

N.J.: Yeah, everything is same, yeah.

K.F.: Okay. And do you all pick directly into the cans?

R.B.: Yeah, I do.

N.J.: Yes.

J.J.: Yes.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. And you all work off of each other? Let's say somebody's picking a little faster than another person. Are you all trying to keep up with her or --

R.B.: No --

J.J.: No.

N.J.: Everybody works at their own pace.

J.J.: I work across from my mother, and she picks faster than I do. I don't try to keep up with her.

(Laughter).

N.J.: I don't have anybody in front of me. I work by myself.

D. S.: But listen, if they're -- you know, I guess there's a lot of people that compete like that, you know, because you can hear sometimes that it's just well, certain people only -- by the pound or something like that.

J. J.: Yeah.

R.B.: Maybe try to pick up your speed maybe.

D. S.: When we was kids, we used to do these things, at least I did. Then after I found out that I said well -- I said, that's why I was talking about one of my brothers and my uncle. And I decided to be the fastest. So I never picked against people, only time. When I work against time, which I know I can't beat, I say I need a pound in so many minutes or whatever, then if I reach that goal, then I say well maybe I can do even better. But you're talking about -- now I feel much older, we just hope we can -- our backs and our seat can stand the stress, 'cause you're sitting on steel chairs --

R.B.: Yes.

D.S.: --eight, sometimes nine hours. You wonder sometimes --arms or the other parts. (Laughter)

D.S.: But you see, you know, a lot of times when I was a drinking man, we used to talk about what we used to do around this crab house. And I always go back to the old days, so great, 'cause I can remember, I'll tell you about 17, 18 claws got a pound. That means I cracked them 17, 18 claws in a minute and a half. So that was some meat coming out because you could take about five claws, and you know you got over a quarter pound of meat, or maybe a third of a pound. And them days are gone. Because you can take two or three crabs to get a pound of meat. That's how large they were. And if you're talking about now, they're liable to take about 20 big crabs, about six or seven, to get a pound of meat. If you're talking about everything in one can, you'll get the meat quicker. But

you're talking about picking a lot that goes into different -- you got your special, and your backfin, lump and the claws. So you have to separate that. See.

K.F.: Right. Well can you all describe to me how you were taught to pick the crabs?

D. S.: Well I think most of `em -- I don't know, this one here, that come down a little later. But I think, I don't know, she said she was 16 --

N.J.: She wasn't 16. She was younger than I was.

D. S.: Well when she started, she learned the same way I learned. If you lied, you get slapped.

N.J.: If what?

D. S.: If you lied, you get slapped.

R.B.: Yeah.

D. S.: And you have to do something, so you learn how to pick them crabs.

R.B.: Yeah, you have to learn. Like if you go sleep like this, you know, when you come down, you have a whipping coming.

D.S.: You're nothing but a child, nothing but a child.

R.B.: So you really have to really learn.

K.F.: Okay. And how did -- who taught you how to pick?

R.B.: My mother.

K.F.: Your mother.

R.B.: Yes.

K.F.: And how did she teach you how to pick?

R.B.: Well you pick the crab and you pull the back off, and you clean the crab, fins and everything. And you cut the fins off, the fins. Then you take your knife and cut that, what you call the backfins, the top shell. You cut that, but you don't cut it down too deep, `cause if you do, you're going to mess up the lump. So you cut that off and you go in, pick them out. Keep so many bones from falling in the meat. Then you take the knife, you go in and you get the regular meat out, then you get the jumbo or the lump out. And you put it in the can. That's the way she taught me.

K.F.: Okay. And did you just watch her do this, or did she actually --

R.B.: Showed me. She showed me how to do it. Once you learn, it's something you will never forget. Now some people saying that they, you know, they had picked so many many years ago, then they come back later on and they forgot how to do it. But you know, what I learned, I came back after 30 years, and my speed was kinda slow, but I picked it up within a month. But once you learn how to pick crabs, you never forget. Yeah, you never forget.

K.F.: And did you all learn from a relative as well?

J.J.: I learned from my mother.

G. S.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.J.: Of course, I liked it when I came down because everybody helped you out then. I had meat coming from everywhere. We had meat coming from everywhere. That helped out the pounds.

K.F.: Oh, so people would help you --

J.J.: Yeah. They would just give you meat, that's all.

R.B.: And during the time when my mother started, I don't know anyone told you or not, she started on with this island, Hoopersville, where J.M. Clayton Company was. And

she started eight years old standing on a box picking crabs. And then she would go to school and come back. And then later on during the years, the company moved to Cambridge. Was my father -- my brother with her too? Well you can -- anyway, the company moved to Cambridge. She followed the company to Cambridge. And she started picking, and she moved here and she married my father. My father also worked here. Where that picture at?

(Laughter)

R.B.: You know, I been looking for a picture all these times. This is my father. She don't remember. That's my father right there.

J.J.: That's her father -- grandfather.

K.F.: This is your grandfather?

J.J.: Yeah.

R.B.: This is my mom probably in her -- I would say in her 20's. This is my mom. I found this picture two years before she passed away, but I had some made.

K.F.: And tell me your mom's name.

R.B.: My mom name Fronnie E. Jones.

K.F.: Fronnie. Okay. And who --

J.J.: This is my father.

K.F.: Your father.

J.J.: Yeah.

R.B.: That's my brother.

K.F.: Your brother.

R.B.: James Jones.

K.F.: And this is?

R.B.: That's my father, Joshua Jones, yeah.

SPEAKER: And I can tell you, that's Ellison Clayton.

R.B.: That's a old picture. Joyce had that one. I didn't think nobody family had one of my father. My father was tall. Yeah, my father was her size.

J.J.: And see this is my mother's mother.

R.B.: Down through the years, these are the clippings that was made of my mother here, picking crabs.

SPEAKER: Yeah, I remember --

J.J.: Years ago -- you know, Pearl worked here with you. That's Pearl.

R.B.: That's him.

SPEAKER: How about that.

R.B.: She didn't --

J.J.: Aren't you the oldest?

(Group discussion.)

J.J.: This is my mother's mother. This is my grandmother on my mother's side, and this is her granddaughter, Pearl, which she used to work here too.

SPEAKER: Pearl Anderson.

J.J.: Pearl Anderson. This is Bay Anderson. And that one there is the one with daddy, and granddaddy.

R.B.: Yeah, see during the time my mother was working Hoopersville and she came here, this is sort of what she looked like.

K.F.: Now did she ever tell you why she decided to move with the company to Cambridge?

R.B.: Yeah, well she married my father. And my father was in Hoopersville, but he moved here. And so he bought a house, and so she enjoyed working and picking crabs. That was all I think she could do at that time. So she stayed here like -- she was here 80 some years before she died. She worked 79 years.

K.F.: Wow, here at Clayton?

R.B.: Yes, yes.

J.J.: That's a lot of years.

R.B.: She died -- she passed away when she was 90 -- she worked until October of 1990. And she passed away September the 25th, 1991. And she was only out of work one year before she passed away, so she worked all those years.

K.F.: While we're talking about that, how does a crab picker retire?

R.B.: I think you just --

J.J.: Just stop.

(Laughter).

R.B.: Most of `em --

J.J.: Most of `em stop when the doctor makes them stop.

R.B.: Yes. Most of `em either pass away or they get sick and that's it. Most of `em stays here.

J.J.: Hopefully, I won't.

G. S.: I've seen some of `em leave out, go right in the hospital --

R.B.: Yes, and don't come back.

G. S.: -- never come back.

R.B.: They just, you know, they be sick and they be working, I guess. You know.

K.F.: Okay. Now how does somebody like your mom who really, you know, was a cornerstone of this company as one of its workers, how is she remembered here at Clayton's?

R.B.: Well I think for one thing, she had a number, a number 10. And they retired that number. Nobody can get it. And another thing, they have something here --

J.J.: It's a photo.

R.B.: Some photos and clippings, yeah, that you can walk in and look at, you know, and read, yeah.

K.F.: Okay.

R.B.: Because some, after she passed away, some of the employees wanted that. A few of them wanted number 10, and Jack said no, they couldn't get it because she had it so many years, they was not going to let nobody use that number. They kinda thought they was crazy.

K.F.: Well let me ask you all, when you started and you were kids, what did the picking room sound like when you were in it?

J.J.: Oh, it was just a buzz.

R.B.: In the morning --

(Laughter)

R.B.: Oh my, yes. Everybody was working, and talking, and laughing, yeah. It's fun, you know. You're together, and you're cracking jokes, and it makes the time go fast.

J.J.: Everybody be quiet, then you wouldn't know what's wrong.

(Laughter)

J.J.: Could you imagine, you walk in and everybody's talking at the same time? When it's all different conversations, everyone's working, he's cracking claws.

D. S.: -- picking up a crab. But you know back then when we was kids coming up and all of that, it was so packed in the place that just sit together like this, that must seem like a lot of room. Wasn't that much room when we started because --

K.F.: So you were shoulder to shoulder working?

D. S.: Yeah. You had a box -- you had to make a little box -- I don't know what they called it then.

R.B.: It's like two people on one table.

N.J.: Yeah, you have more room now.

R.B.: Yes.

K.F.: Is it easier with more room?

R.B.: I think so. Yeah, yeah.

G. S.: To me it is.

R.B.: When I get my speed up, I throw --

(Laughter)

R.B.: But for a long time, we had no -- you know, we had to sit where, you know, where we was squeezed in we had to sit. You couldn't say nothing, you better not say nothing, you know.

K.F.: Now what kind of things do you talk about while you're picking crabs?

R.B.: Oh, I talk about -- I talk about church, and I talk to my niece. Sometime we go back to old days, older days. Like her mother, she used to work here also, which was my sister, she passed away. Sometime we talk about my sister, I talk about my mother, my brothers, you know, like that.

J.J.: Everything and everybody.

(Laughter)

J.J.: Anything and everything.

N.J.: You know, what's in the news, what's on television, lots of things I see maybe in Delaware on t.v. or something I see -- I come and talk to her. And we talk and work too.

J.J.: Oh, you be over there laughing and talking, I hear you.

R.B.: Yeah.

J.J.: She be over there laughing and talking.

R.B.: I don't talk that much.

N.J.: I sit down and somebody'll say something, I start laughing and go right on doing my work.

J.J.: Well see when I talk, my hands stop. Right, Donald?

D. S.: That's the only thing about -- you can tell the ones that don't do too much.

R.B.: Oh, my God.

(Laughter)

D. S.: Now see, some people have never learned how to talk and work.

N.J.: I can talk anywhere.

J.J.: Now if I'm real quiet, not talking to anybody, I can work, can't I, Donald?

D. S.: That's true.

J.J.: Or if I'm angry about something.

D. S.: Same thing with myself You know, when people come over and they watch me and talk to me, I look up at the time, I say two minutes of And I say you got to go. You'll mess my money up.

(Laughter)

D. S.: `Cause I always have a certain time I want to get out of a place. If I get the jump on it, even if I -- even if I (Inaudible). Somebody else probably would stay and -- they would finish. But I say no. I notice one thing when you're working down here picking crabs or cracking claws, you have to learn one thing about when you get tired. You got to hang it up.

R.B.: Yeah.

J.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

D. S.: Because see you got -- now the women have, they sharpen their knives. I don't sharpen no knife, but I got a very -- the knife that I'm using now is very hard, and when I'm at my speed and my mind is not clear on what I'm doing and I miss the claw when I go into it, I generally stab this finger here right to the bone. And once you do that once or twice a day (Inaudible) -- that pain. But it's dangerous work when you're picking crabs and cracking claws. And I say always -- they'll say, the ones that go home with not too many scars --

J.J.: Now you go --

(Laughter -- Group Discussion)

R.B.: I think everybody goes home with their hands cut up --

J.J.: -- too long.

D.S.: A guy asked me one time, he say you cut your hands up pretty bad. I say yeah. I never cut my hands up. I said how many pounds you get a day? I say that's the reason why. It's because one thing about it, you know -- and that's another thing when you're doing a lot of talking without paying attention, crabs is a dangerous job.

R.B.: Oh, sure it is.

N.J.: Yes, indeed.

R.B.: But crabs is more dangerous.

D. S.: You have to -- how you pick that thing up. You just throw your hand in the back like that --

R.B.: And it'll get you. But no, sometimes --

(TAPE 011124.1: END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B)

R.B.: You have to -- well me, I soak my hands in some salt, warm water. And I soak my hand, leave it two or three nights, and then the soreness go away. My mother, I don't believe I've ever seen cuts on her hands. Her hands just as smooth as they could be. And she said she soaked her hands every night. Yes. And I guess it toughened the skin. But I never saw her hands cut up like mine. Never. Huh-uh.

SPEAKER: Is that Fronnie's hands?

J.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

SPEAKER: Well they were just as smooth and soft --

R.B.: They were smooth, yeah.

SPEAKER: Never a scratch on `em.

R.B.: Yes, There was no scratches, no nothing on `em. She would just --mine, my hands are all messed up. Before Friday, they'll be really sore.

K.F.: Okay. Now what about -- does anybody get the rash that you can get from crabs? I know some people get a rash.

R.B.: Around the nails?

K.F.: Right between here.

R.B.: Oh, no, no. I don't get that.

G. S.: I can get that. And I have to go home and take the hot water, and put a triple antibiotic on it to stop it from itching, and it dries it right up.

R.B.: Well most the time that I get that, it's from sticking my hands in that bleach water.

SPEAKER: The solution?

R.B.: Solution, yeah, that solution.

G. S.: Something between my fingers.

R.B.: That solution. And it starts breaking out, that solution.

K.F.: The cleaning solution?

R.B.: Yeah, you have to dip your pans and things into, yeah.

K.F.: Okay. What are some of the other dangers of picking crabs?

N.J.: That's about it I guess. Cut your hands about the worst you can get.

K.F.: Okay. Let me back up to the way the crab picking room sounds. Now did anybody work when there was any singing going on in the picking room?

N.J.: Oh, yes.

R.B.: They still do.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

J.J.: My grandmother and their mother, she sang every day.

(Singing)

K.F.: Okay, and what were some of the favorite hymns or still are some of the favorite hymns?

(Indiscernible)

J.J.: All the time.

G.S.: -- when she used to get mad.

R.B.: Any way you bless me, Lord, I'll be satisfied.

K.F.: What is it?

R.B.: Any way you bless me, Lord, I'll be satisfied.

K.F.: Okay.

N.J.: Usually when she get upset, she'd sing that then start skippin over --

(Laughter)

N.J.: She would sing that. That would soothe her down I guess.

K.F.: Now how do you all get your crabs onto your tables?

R.B.: Shelf.

J.J.: Shelf.

K.F.: Now how do you tell them you need more crabs?

G.S.: Generally when you pick down to about 12, 24, they'll give you two more, a little bit, like that.

N.J.: Unless they're in a bad mood.

R.B.: Yeah, they're in a bad mood --

K.F.: Unless they're in a bad mood?

R.B.: Then you got to holler and ask for `em. You don't give me some crabs, I'm going to get Jack.

(Laughter)

J.J.: Well you might have to call `em out today.

(Laughter)

R.B.: Donald's mother worked here too. His mother worked here too.

N.J.: Yeah, it's a family thing.

D. S.: Yeah, it's a family thing.

R.B.: I worked right along side of his mother.

K.F.: Well what's it like working, basically, with your extended family in one room?

R.B.: It's fine.

N.J.: It's fine. I have no problems.

R.B.: No, it's no problem at all.

K.F.: Do you think it helped you all stay with a close family or --

J.J.: I would say so, yes.

R.B.: Yeah. Yeah, I would say so.

K.F.: Okay.

D.S.: See when we was growing up like that and everyone worked here, they were closer.

R.B.: Everybody, yeah, very close.

K.F.: Now who in your family did not pick crabs?

R.B.: I had a -- my sister, Mable, she passed away, she left here at a very early age, and she moved to Newark, Delaware. And at that time, she had become a housewife, and that's where she was when she died at 60. She died in Wilmington, Delaware. But she -- and my brother, Henry Jones, he went into the Navy, he went into the Navy. And he made a career of it. Other than that, those was the only two I think that did --

K.F.: But your mom had brought them in as kids.

R.B.: Yeah, they knew what to do. Oh, yes, they knew what to do.

D. S.: It wasn't too many back then was coming up, besides this young lady, it was like you said, it was a must thing. You know what I mean? They would bring you down here and try you out. If you didn't do nothing, then they might let you stay home. But if you couldn't get any kind of pounds, then you would have to be -- it was nothing that you said that you're not going to do it. That's why we were so glad -- when the oyster season started, then that mean you didn't have to come at all.

K.F.: Okay. And as kids, do you guys remember -- what do you remember about being here other than working? Could you go play on the docks or anything like that? Would your mom let you do that?

N.J.: Not ours.

D. S.: Well we could've, but no, we wasn't supposed to.

R.B.: Not go near the water, no, no.

D.S.: But see I tell you, you know, back therein them days, you know, grown ups, everybody was your family, anybody that was grown was your family because they could knock you out --

R.B.: Fight for one of you --

D.S.: Right. They'd knock you out, I mean beat you --

R.B.: Whip you, yeah.

D. S.: You got beat, then they'd tell your mother or father, and then you'd get another whipping.

J.J.: There you go.

R.B.: That's right.

D. S.: When you start playing around the water, they know how dangerous it was because it used to be quite a few people that drowned right around this vicinity just by falling over, didn't know what to do after they fell over. And they would always warn you so that when you got here, don't let me catch you, or don't let nobody else catch you -- nobody, see. But otherwise, now when they was shucking oyster, they had shell pilings all over this area back here. That's where we had most of our fun, I think, running up on the shell pilings -- go to the shell pile. It was great, it was really nice, I tell you. Especially when the inspection came along.

R.B.: Yeah, we had -- had to run out and hide.

N.J.: Hide.

R.B.: That was the best, that was the best time then 'cause you had a chance to run and play and stay out there, yeah, until they leave.

D. S.: And we would hope that they stay a long time. If they stay a long time, then they say -- then someone would go out and say tell 'em to go out and --

R.B.: Go home, that's right.

D. S.: Go home. See when you go home, and that's when you better stay in the yard. Don't let nobody see you go into the store because you knew what was going to happen once, they'll whip you.

J.J.: Or they tell you don't have any children over to the house. I got told that many times.

D.S.: I think that's maybe why they never brought us --if I stop to think about it, I'd say about six of us that were really working out here when my brother was -- and because I have a sister named Freida now, she couldn't do very much. She was something like Joyce.

(Laughter)

D.S.: I'm going to tell you, you can't pick no crabs, stay home.

(Laughter)

D. S.: And that was brother, he wasn't all that good. He didn't like to get his hands cut up.

J.J.: Sam.

D.S.: Sam, he didn't mind.

J.J.: Oh, Sam didn't?

D. S.: Yeah. And but you -- they have to look at it from their point of view. So in that time, in the summer time, back then in them days, you get a pound of anything less than four or five -- so what you made was pretty good money. When you say about \$50, don't sound like very much, but you talk about 50 years ago, \$50 was a lot of money.

R.B.: Everything, yes.

D. S.: And most people didn't work down here to have big -- homes. `Cause they, all they got, at least I got 50 cents in the summer time. And one week I made \$40, and I couldn't figure why I only got 50 cents. See what I'm saying?

R.B.: Yeah, I know I got -- I used to make 95 cents, and I was around 12, 13, I started \$35 a week. But maybe I was lucky if I got 25 cents at the end of the week, but I understood.

K.F.: It went to the family.

R.B.: Yes, my mother needed it. Yeah --

D. S.: -- and a dime. All that stuff, all day long.

R.B.: `Cause my father had passed away when I was nine years old, around nine. So she needed the money `cause it was like seven of us that she really had to take care, we understood that. But I was happy to get 25 cents `cause that would go a long ways with me, during that time.

N.J.: Yeah.

D. S.: And they have families down here, in the course of a day, they would be -- only have one number, and they were putting on that number two to 300 pounds per day.

What would happen with that much today?

R.B.: It would really make it nice.

G. S.: Yeah.

D. S.: That would be the payoff.

(Laughter)

D. S.: Not going to be catching now. Two-twenty-five, and some places tell me getting two-fifty. You don't need many pounds.

K.F.: Two-fifty?

N.J.: Yeah, some places it's two-fifty.

R.B.: Back then during that time the crab came in the barrels, and -- in the crates.

(Group Discussion)

K.F.: Now when did that change? When did they get more strict on not being able to bring your children in?

D. S.: Oh, well they always have been that way, but I think -- let's see, I think I was about 13 when they really got strict, and I had to leave from here. This is right here in Cambridge. And I went down the country to another crab house where they wasn't so strict on `em. At least they would -- I don't think they wanted to make that trip down there.

K.F.: The inspector?

D. S.: The inspector didn't want to make that trip. But now they still come down. And then -- at 14, then I came back here --

R.B.: Yes. Now you have to be, what, 16?

N.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah.

R.B.: `Cause at 14 during that time, you got to have a social security card. Am I right?

D.S.: Yeah.

R.B.: You had to file for a social security card at 14 during that time.

D. S.: Fourteen. And then go to the doctor's, they had a company doctor, and they'd -- that's about all they do, they might take your pressure or something like that. And then okay, you all right.

(Laughter)

D.S.: They didn't do nothing but just look at you --from the company, what can you say. But I enjoyed working down there, but it was just so early getting up. We had to leave home 1:00 in the morning. When you're about 12 or 13 years old, that's early. It was a must thing. And then when you, you -- you come back and -- chance to get out and play, then you would play too long -- to be in the house. It's a hard life. That's why I don't like it now. But now I can say well I don't think I'm going to come down there, go down that early. I think I'm going to skip the whole day. And I might even come in and look down on `em and say see you tomorrow. Them times, we was working six days a week. Six days a week. Now you see we come down here on a Saturday at 4:00 in the morning and say work 'til 12, be 1:30 before you leave here. That's all day long.

R.B.: Which we don't work Saturdays now. Which is a blessing. Quite a few years where I used to -- that's a blessing that you have Saturday off.

D. S.: Except these young boys take off or something.

R.B.: Saturday, yeah. But we don't have to pick crabs on Saturdays, which is good.

D.S.: They take `em over there. Changed a few things around here.

K.F.: Like what?

D.S.: Well for one thing --

J.J.: Holidays.

D. S.: -- we don't have to come in on -- we do have --

R.B.: Certain holidays, but not --

D. S.: -- got off anyway, which most people want off anyway. And time, time wise --

R.B.: But we don't start to work as early now as we did years ago.

G.S.: From six to three, and I seen times it was from six to six.

R.B.: Yeah, so now the time is even better now, yeah.

J.J.: Remember when you used to -- the crabs --

(Group Discussion)

R.B.: -- the time really gets changed during the year.

D. S.: For one thing, it's personnel, you know. But you can talk to `em. See back there in them days, you really couldn't talk to the bosses too good. They were all running around looking in the trash cans and shit, picking up -- oh there's a claw, little tiny claw we can't even hardly see, but you had to pack it. Them were the times. All that stuff has changed. That's what's better because the working conditions are better. If you got a complaint, you might not get no action right away, but at least they'll listen to you.

R.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

(Laughter)

D. S.: Let's face it, I mean that's everywhere, `cause most --

R.B.: And you can always comeback with the same complaint. They'll listen.

G. S.: Yeah, they'll listen.

D. S.: But you say look, didn't I come here before with that? Then next time you know something will be done about it.

R. B.: Yeah.

K.F.: So they're more approachable.

R.B.: Yeah.

N.J.: Oh, yeah.

R.B.: And if they think you really upset when you come in with a complaint, they going to listen right then. If you really upset and you say well I'm going to go home, they will listen.

(Laughter).

R.B.: They don't want you to go home, stop working. They will take the time. Sometimes they busy, but they will listen.

D.S.: Different things really changed, you know. And like I said, the working conditions and stuff like that. They seem to be more concerned.

R.B.: And then during that time, I don't even think they had a van for the people out here.

N.J.: Oh, no.

D. S.: That's another thing, yeah, that's right.

R.B.: They either had to pay somebody for bringing `em or walk. Now they have two vans, you know, transport people.

D. S.: You know, the ones in town, them people -- down there, you know, they had a bus for them.

R.B.: But not the ones in -- I know my mother never rode the bus. You know, so that's the difference now they got vans, you know, picks `em up and bring `em, take `em home. It's good.

D. S.: And -- sick --

R.B.: Yeah, if you sick, that's right.

D. S.: -- you don't have to worry about how you're going to get there, wherever you have to go. They'll carry you different places. They concern about you.

R.B.: Yeah, yeah. If you go to hospital, they send you flowers and call, see how you doing, go visit you. You know, they good about that.

D.S.: They want you to get well, get back to work.

R.B.: Yeah.

(Laughter)

D. S.: They worry about you going to show up.

R.B.: Yeah, they worry about you. They call up. You might miss a few days. If you miss a few days, if they don't call you in direct, they going to go to maybe some family member and ask where are you, you know, they want to know where you're at. Makes me think that they really concerned about you, you know.

D. S.: But we know the reason why they do that too.

G. S.: Do they do that for Joyce?

J.J.: No.

(Laughter)

J.J.: `Cause they know I don't come in if I don't want to. No. I mean that's how she is all the time.

R.B.: And then see now we are over here working. Over there, did they -- tell about that.

D.S.: Oh, I don't know too much about that.

R.B.: The machines, yeah, I don't know too much about the machines. They also have a machine that picks crabs.

K.F.: Right, right.

R.B.: Back during that time, they didn't have that.

K.F.: How did that affect you all?

J.J.: What they do over there, we did it by hand.

R.B.: How does it affect us? Well it doesn't affect us too much unless the crabs are short for that day.

K.F.: You mean the --

R.B.: I was getting concerned 'cause they had a machine that -- the machine don't pick back then. And then they were talking about getting one that picked back then. So I was getting concerned, I was getting really concerned. 'Cause they tried to have, you know, enough crabs for over there and here too. But I've never seen that machine work. I've never been down there.

N.J.: I don't know anything about it.

R.B.: I don't know how.

N.J.: -- all we got to do is pick 'em when they come over.

R.B.: Oh, yeah. Did you tell her about that during the winter time they back the crabs?

N.J.: Dredge crabs?

R.B.: Yeah.

D.S.: Dredge crabs.

N.J.: Dredge crabs, they pull the backs off, and bring 'em over, all we have to do is make sure they're nice and clean and everything. All we have to do is pick 'em.

K.F.: Okay. Now how long did you all pick in the winter time, and when did that stop?

R.B.: When I first started working, they were working almost all winter. There was a time that back during those times --

J.J.: -- we used to come in early --

(Group Discussion -- also Background Discussion)

R.B.: All winter, yeah, yeah. So I would say during that time, if I can remember.

G. S.: It's been, what, about three, four years that --

R.B.: No, I been here eight. I been here eight years and we haven't worked in the winter except up to January.

G. S.: I wasn't here, I wasn't here when --

N.J.: That would've been in the late, in the late 70's, I was over there backing crabs over there.

G. S.: I wasn't here when they did that.

D.S.: --talking about working in the winter, not backing crabs.

R.B.: In the winter. It might be. It might've been the late 70's, 'cause I been here eight years, and it might've been the late 70's when they stopped working during the winter.

D. S.: Yeah, that's right.

R.B.: 'Cause I was here eight years.

G. S.: When I came here they were working -- 'cause that's why I came here, 'cause I want to be home in the winter time. And I was shocked when --

R.B.: Yeah.

G. S.: -- I was totally shocked. It wasn't all winter. It might be two, three days a week or something like that.

R.B.: Yeah. When I came here years ago, it was like working up until December, maybe January, two weeks in January. That was it. Except for this year.

N.J.: Yeah.

R.B.: This year, we worked, what, February? We worked a little bit also last month.

K.F.: Okay. When it got warm or something?

R.B.: Yeah, those warm days, yeah.

D. S.: You know, when they can work the crabs, they work it out if they can get some at a reasonable price. You have to -- that's what management's all about -- ain't going to buy, ain't going to get too much out of it. Because I still believe they, down in Louisiana and Florida, they still got crabs.

N.J.: Oh, yeah.

R.B.: Probably 'cause of the warm weather they have.

D.S.: And I'd say maybe they're not going to get the meat out of what they pay for it.

R.B.: Pay for the crabs, yeah.

K.F.: Now what do you all do in the winter when you're not picking?

R.B.: Oh, my.

N.J.: Oh, just sit back.

R.B.: Yeah, rest. I like to shop into the malls. I'm like my mom. I like to stay in the mall shopping. Just travel a little bit, you know. I enjoy being horn. In fact, I hope we don't go back until maybe the next month, may some time. I'm hoping maybe late May, 'cause I enjoy being off during the winter. Yeah. And you rest up, you know, you rest.

D. S.: I got jealous --

N.J.: Well you can have some of mine.

D.S.: But all -- when you stop looking -- it was nice. In the winter time, you had to come down here --

N.J.: Oh, yeah. Ice and snow.

D. S.: You're going to have crabs -- back there in them days, not in these waters, 'cause our waters never allow any harvest of crabs. I think that's after December. They couldn't harvest no crabs until April the 1st. So you had to get 'em somewheres else, and most of the time they would come out of Virginia. Now they would come in about, I guess, 11, 12:00 that night.

(Background Conversation)

D.S.: Guys would be down here, they'd start work --we'd come in, I'd say about 6:00 - - get the crab out, wash the crab, then they cook the crab and then they come in -- put the crab -- for the pickings, they had to back the crab, pull the claws off, put 'em in a pan -- then they carry 'em and somebody wash 'em for you, bring 'em back --

R.B.: Yeah, more work.

D.S.: -- picking machine over there. If they was using -- crabs now, they cut the backs off and wash the crab and all, then the boy just come over with a tray and stuck 'em in front of you. But that was back there in them days that you have to do all that work.

R.B.: All that yourself.

D. S.: In order to make that, get that pound. And then it was -- that day. At that time we worked all winter long.

R.B.: All winter.

D. S.: All winter. We didn't have to go to work just because --

R.B.: Weather's so bad.

D.S.: Okay. Then how are you all notified that there are crabs here and it's time to come to work?

G. S.: They have a answering machine, they call in a answering machine and it tells you whether you're working.

K.F.: So you got to call in every morning?

G.S.: At night.

D. S.: And when do you usually start --

R.B.: I call the next --

N.J.: I call here every Sunday night.

R.B.: Yeah, they will tell you what they going to do for that week.

K.F.: Okay, okay.

D. S.: I go by word of mouth. Somebody tell me.

R.B.: And then if we all off like two or three months, maybe four months, then they'll call you. Somebody here in the office will call you -- going back to work.

K.F.: Okay. Let me ask you all, what is the strangest way you've seen anybody pick crabs? `Cause you all are professionals, so --

N.J.: Strangest way?

D. S.: You've seen people pick crabs.

R.B.: I saw, I saw a lady sitting sideways. Not this way, this way picking crabs, which I -- you could pick `em. That's strange to me, sitting sideways trying to pick crabs. I don't know.

J.J.: The table this way, and she's this way.

R.B.: Yeah, the table here, and she sitting sideways picking crabs, that's very strange. Yeah, very strange.

K.F.: Did she have everything on her lap?

R.B.: No, she had it on the table, but she was picking. So I don't know. Maybe was an easy way for her to pick -- she did.

G.S.: Grandma used to sit sideways.

R.B.: Yeah, but this person was sitting, one of the girls last year was sitting all the way around.

N.J.: Well see that sound like somebody trying to be nosy. `Cause sometimes I do it, I'm trying to find out what's going on and I'll turn around.

(Laughter)

RR: No, she just got started picking `em.

D. S.: I think as far as picking crabs, it might be just like you probably would just when you buy some hard crabs. That's the only way I can --

R.B.: Yeah, when they break the legs off and break it in half

D. S.: That's strange -- they take wooden mallets --

(Laughter)

D.S.: I asked a young lady onetime, I said --I said it takes you along time to get that meat out like that. And then she told me the reason why. She said if it takes me two hours to eat this one crab, I'd be satisfied because I enjoy it that much. So hey, what can I say? I could never eat a hard crab. If I have to set and eat a hard crab (Inaudible) spend money for (Inaudible).

R.B.: It don't take that long.

D. S.: No, I'm telling you. I never could figure that out.

(Background & Group Conversation)

R.B.: Yeah, a lot of people don't know how to do it.

J.J.: I'll say you want me to pick a couple for you 'cause they're really -- they're sitting there --

G. S.: My husband used to go get a dozen crabs. He'll have his six and I'll have my six. I've picked mine and ate 'em up and he's still working on one leg.

R.B.: Yeah, they don't know how to get the crab.

G. S.: He's still working on one leg.

(Laughter)

D. S.: -- she started in Delaware, New Castle, a crab house up there, a restaurant. An all you can eat or something like that. And so she went in with her crab knife, and she -- picked so many crabs. They told her never come back again. She picked 'em for everybody.

(Laughter)

D. S.: 'Cause see that's why they say they charge once about 15 or \$20 --

R.B.: Yeah.

N. J.: Yeah.

D. S.: All you can eat, all you can eat, you know. One or two -- 'cause you'll be tired and then go. She picked a bushel and a half, and everybody was just sitting around that table --

(Laughter)

D. S.: (Indiscernible).

J.J.: Who's that, Gloria?

D.S.: Yeah. I'm telling you.

J.J.: I can see her now.

D. S.: We had some people down here talking about people that -- as far as if you take a person that can come, in other words back there in them days, start at 5:00, and 6:30, probably trying to get 'em out so he can wash up so he can go home -- they'd be (Inaudible).

(Background Conversation)

K.F.: Really?

D. S.: That's people that really like what -- people that like to do that, that just stay and stay (Inaudible).

(Background Conversation)

D. S.: -- they sit there and -- give me some more crabs. And they're good too.

R.B.: We had it one Friday, it's been several years ago, remember the craze, jumbo --

N.J.: Didn't nobody want to go home.

R.B.: We stayed 'til 4:30 --didn't nobody wanted to go home. The crabs, they were on a Friday, they was jumbos. And, you know, we were sitting here picking. And bank closed at six. At 4:30 we just kept picking. That's quite a few years ago. But nobody wanted to leave 'cause the crabs were so good. And usually on Fridays, we shut down at 3:00. Pick up your check, I'm ready to go. But when those crabs came out like that, they was jumbos. Nobody. We was looking around see who was gonna leave. Nobody.

D. S.: That's because you don't get that too often.

R.B.: No.

N.J.: No.

D, S.: I could tell when the season, years ago, back 10 or 12 years ago, maybe a little longer, when they start -- the sooks, that's the female crab -- would sell `em. I said any time you start doing that, I said most of the time -- nothing but the male. But when they started shipping our sook -- places like that because of a cheaper crab. A little rough. But you know, at a certain time of the year, even the sooks are monsters.

R.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Now do you all ever pick the cooks at all?

R.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

D. S.: That's what --

N.J.: Oh, yeah.

G. S.: Yeah. Come in here early in the morning, two or three days we have big males. Then you get couple hours of big males. Every now and then --

R.B.: Some of `em so hard to cut, those sooks. Some of the large ones are hard to cut. And that's what really messes up your hands.

D.S.: Yeah, mess up my wrists.

R.B.: Yeah, your wrists and everything. Yeah, it messes you up.

K.F.: Okay. Now how long have the Mexican pickers been here?

R.B.: Two years.

G. S.: Two years.

R.B.: Two seasons, I would say about two seasons.

K.F.: Now did you all have to train them when they came here?

D. S.: Most of them already knew.

G.S.: Yeah, `cause they picked up speed too quick. I mean --

D.S.: Yeah, they knew. But see one thing, they had to get in a rhythm from -- they came from, see most of `em -- a lot of them people, I think, have crossed the border and gone back down Texas. `Cause they have a lot of crab houses down there.

R.B.: Oh, yeah, yeah.

D. S.: And you can always tell when somebody's been doing it. Because I have seen a few people that picked it up, but it would take them the better part of the season to get as quick as they are. Now when she started, she was slower than her sister --

G.S.: It wasn't even a month. Two weeks they had picked up speed.

J.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

R.B.: Oh, yeah. They picked up speed.

D. S.: One thing --

R.B.: See they might've already --

D.S.: They already knew.

R.B.: -- the feeling of picking `em.

D. S.: See only one thing about that, there was -- I think what the t.v. was telling me, there was just something like five cents a pound. You get five cents a pound on meat, and you can go somewhere where you're getting \$2 a pound --

R.B.: It makes a difference.

G. S.: Yes.

R.B.: It makes a big difference.

D. S.: Because when I was down to Secretary, they had `em maybe there. Of course, they used to start early in the morning, about 3:00, about 4, 5:00 or 6:00. Picking something like about 100 pounds a day.

K.F.: And this was in Secretary?

D.S.: Secretary, yes. That's a lot of hours.

R.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

D. S.: That's why I'm talking about -- anybody can endure sitting there picking crabs and cracking claws that long, they have something -- that's all I got to say. I got a cousin, he can do that 20 hours a day.

N.J.: Yeah, that's a long time. `Cause you can come in six if your crabs are good, you can make that kind of money and be gone around 2:30 or 3:00.

G. S.: `Cause see I come in here at six.

D.S.: But you be tired.

R.B.: Yeah, you be tired. You put in that many hours, you don't put in, you know --

N. J.: But the -- are harder.

D. S.: That's what I'm talking about. Some people just can go a long time. So in my opinion, if I myself, if I'm fast enough, I don't need to put in all that time like they do in order to get a certain amount, you know.

R.B.: Yeah, `cause the most problem I have is with my back. `Cause you sit so long, your back starts to aching. Aching. And so you get up, maybe walk around for five minutes and come back. That takes the pressure off of your back. Yeah.

K.F.: Okay. And do you have to do anything when you get home, any kind of stretching or

R.B.: No, `cause soon as you stop picking, you're okay. When you leave, that pressure starts leaving your back unless you just have back problems, you know. But that pressure just relieves your back once you get up, stop picking. I think it's just sitting in that chair.

J.J.: Well I don't have too much pressure on my back. `Cause I'm up.

R.B.: Oh, I know you don't.

(Laughter)

J. J.: Every time I weigh up, I take a break.

R.B.: You're up in a break. I know.

N. J.: I got 10 pillows I sit on.

G. S.: I couldn't sit on no 10 pillows.

R.B.: You got 10?

G. S.: I couldn't sit on no 10 pillows.

K.F.: How do you have them arranged, Nicey?

N.J.: Huh?

K.F.: How do you have them arranged, your pillows?

N.J.: My pillows?

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

N.J.: I put them in plastic bags.

D.S.: One on top of the other.

N.J.: And one on top of the other. Get some -- tie it --

D. S.: See there's a section of the table in there where she work at is raised up.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

D.S.: She got a section that's raised up, and she got so many pillows --
(Laughter)

D. S.: I'm just kidding on that --
(Laughter)

SPEAKER: I have to hear this.

N.J.: See on my side, the table is kinda low. So I had to get a chair to high -- the pillow, so I got me 10 pillows.

J.J.: Ten pillows --

R.B.: I sit on one, I just can barely sit on one. Yeah, I can't --

N.J.: I got new back on my chair. I told `em I wore it off.

D. S.: You rocked it off

G. S.: I'm surprised. I thought them legs was gonna bend back anyway.

J.J.: Somebody claimed I broke my back on my chair.

G.S.: You probably did leaning back.

J.J.: No, that was just a screw that came loose and it went one side, and he said I broke it.

G. S.: I can sit on that much.

J.J.: Huh-uh (negative).

N.J.: I can't stand still like this and work.

D. S.: You can really do better when you're comfortable though.

R.B.: When you're comfortable, yeah.

D. S.: That's one thing about doing most anything --

J.J.: -- like that too. Comfortable. Remember Miss --

D.S.: Is that what you -- you're not really doing anything. I know I switched them tables of mine, there's two of `em in there, around twice last year in order to get the right height for myself. Because when I work like that, like I said, my arms is not too far from my body, they're kinda close. And I don't have to look at the claw to crack the claw, but I do have to see where I'm picking the claw from. And so if my hands is too high up here when I bring the knife down, that means I'm going to crack the claw from a height like that. So that means I have to have more power. And if I got farther to go down, when I just drop the knife, it just goes in just right. That's the only thing about working when you go from one plant to the other because everything is different.

K.F.: Oh, okay. So you've got to rearrange your whole --

D. S.: You've got to rearrange your whole idea of what you're doing really, you know, because they're not going to change it just for you you see. So when everything's stationery, then you have to adjust to it. And sometimes that's why a lot of people are real tired when they leave because they're not comfortable the way they are seated.

K.F.: Right. Okay. Well let me ask you all now that you're -- except for you, Georgia, this may not apply to you, now that you're picking as older men and women, what do you use this money for? And I'll ask you the same question, but I know that you're a younger woman with children probably. Well we're trying to figure out how the income earned at picking crabs has helped families, and what men and women do with that income. Is it paying bills? Is it paying for medicines or what have you?

R.B.: No, I use mine -- well I save some of mine, and I pay bills with some. If I feel like I need a new car, I go buy me a car, you know. It's not too much medication that I'm on

except for blood pressure. I stays in pretty good health, thank God, so far. That's the only thing I'm on. That's about it. Buying things for the house, that's it. That's what I use my money for.

K.F.: Okay.

R.B.: But, you know, I have to -- excuse me, I have to save for a rainy day, as my mother always says. You have to put away something for a rainy day. So you should know what a rainy day is. Do you know where I'm coming from?

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

R.B.: A lot of black people don't know when you say rainy day --

J.J.: My rainy day come real fast.

R.B.: They'll want to know what is a rainy day? You know. Then I have, that's what old people used to say. And then I have to go back and tell `em, you know, you have to put in in case you need something later, you always can go back and get it.

K.F.: Right. My mom said the same thing.

R.B.: Oh, okay.

K.F.: Anybody else?

J.J.: Mine's just spent. Period.

N.J.: Same for me, Joyce.

J.J.: Couldn't tell you where it goes. It's just spent.

N.J.: Bills.

J.J.: And like I say, if I save for a rainy day, my rainy day comes real fast.

R.B.: Oh, no.

N.J.: In one hand, going in the other.

J.J.: That's it for me. Mine's just spent.

R.B.: Sephus?

D.S.: Well I don't see no difference when I was younger and my age today as far as what I do with the money, it's the same. So if I saved back then in them days a little, then I save today a little. And then rest of it's the same. I think I spend more now on cigarettes. That's about all. It's -- when you stop and think about it, you say -- because the way I look at it, it averages out. I worked in a place one time, and they was paying me by the hour almost \$7. So when I got to \$7 and something an hour, my hours went down by the week. So I said when I was making 6.89 or 6.90, I was getting in more overtime. But this is the same here. We're getting more money by the pound, but if crabs that you're working on is not the same as it was four or five years ago, you're going to average the same. So in other words, since we're not as really -- kicking the goal where we want to kick it at, we're not placing the ball where we want to place it at. Because most of the time, when any time you will get paid more by the hour or whatever you do, they're going to make sure something is cut back. So you can't make too much. So on average, and then again you have to -- you get paid more and everything else is higher. So everything, as far as I'm concerned, is right straight across the board when I was in my 40's.

J.J.: That's what it needs to be --

R.B.: Already --

D. S.: Flash --

N. J.: Yes.

D. S.: Lord have mercy.
 N.J.: Still going (Indiscernible).
 J.J.: I think that's where I need to be.
 N.J.: Don't take clothes --
 K.F.: Now do you all see younger people coming into the crab houses --
 D.S.: No.
 N.J.: No, in deed.
 J.J.: No.
 K.F.: Is this a skill that's not being passed on to younger people any more?
 D. S.: Shucks, not --
 N.J.: -- young people --
 R.B.: Anywhere but here. I don't think maybe they don't want to pick crabs. Maybe they want to --
 D.S.: I don't think they like the smell of it.
 R.B.: Yeah, they just want to go to, you know --
 D. S.: `Cause they'll bypass you a lot of time --
 R.B.: Yeah. It's terrible. It could be that, could be the smell after you get through picking.
 J.J.: But I still say this. It's not as bad as the Bumble Bee tuna.
 R.B.: Yeah. Well, see, they don't know that `cause they're not picking it.
 J.J.: It wasn't as bad.
 D. S.: They don't smell it.
 R.B.: Yeah, it could be the smell. You have that scent after they get through picking.
 J.J.: We get done work, my daughter says ooh.
 D.S.: I know one thing that has never been brought up into this thing. Most of the people that still works now in this is the ones that have been brought up into it. And like I say, really, if they didn't bring in nobody else, they'd have to close down. Because once the old ones go, that's it. There's not too many of us left. Sometimes we lose `em, I think, every year.
 R.B.: Yeah.
 D. S.: Every year, you don't see no one come in. And see if they do come in, see now, see, they have -- have to average, you know. When we started, you didn't have to average. You just have to be here.
 R.B.: You got to pick.
 D. S.: Now you have to average. I think, what, it's about two or three pounds an hour or something like that?
 G.S.: You're supposed to get more than, what, five lump an hour, hour and a half?
 R.B.: Hour.
 D. S.: Well they got that minimum.
 R.B.: Oh, yeah, the minimum. Is it three or four?
 G.S.: About three.
 D.S.: About three pounds, would bring about two and a half pounds -- yeah. So that's the reason why. And I think that -- well the reason why a lot of em `I see come in here didn't average because they're looking at -- looking at the operation all wrong, I think. I don't know. `Cause you can hear people talk about say well if you get that, I know I can