

Interview Log

Interviewee: Dot & W.T. Ruark **Tape #:** OH128

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

Date: April 27, 1999 **# of Sides:** 1

Location: W.T. Ruark Seafood

Topic: Crab Picking Project

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: Phonetic Spellings: Kiken

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: Well if I can have you say your name.

W.R.: William Ruark, W.T. Ruark and Company.

K.F.: Okay. And when did you start this business?

W.R.: 1948. School right across the road?

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

W.R.: Come from over there over here.

K.F.: Okay. Was the business already here then?

W.R.: No. Just built it that same year. Father.

K.F.: Okay. Your father had built it. And how did you all get the money to start the business?

W.R.: Borrowed it, local bank.

K.F.: How many pickers did you have when you started?

W.R.: About 65.

K.F.: And were they all from around here or --

W.R.: Mostly all from around here, yeah.

K.F.: What was the picking house like then?

W.R.: More or less just like it is now. You know, we built on, made some improvements into it. Business same size then. We used to have two plants. We had one up here as you come on the island. Right there by where the store's at, Alan Pride's store.

K.F.: Oh, right.

W.R.: Back on that shore.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: But now when the pickers started dying off, no new ones taking it up, we just had to close that one up.

K.F.: Okay. When do you think the work force started to die out?

W.R.: Ever since they started, you know. The older ones would die down, no new ones come. So just, in a period of 50, 50 years, 51 years. Takes a toll.

K.F.: Yeah, yeah. Okay. Well --

W.R.: The other people, they don't want to do that type of work no more, you know.

K.F.: Right. I've been hearing that. Well what about when women could bring their children into the picking house?

W.R.: Yeah, they used to bring `em in, when they're 12, 14 years old, you know. Now the federal guidelines won't let you do that no more. They got to be 16 years old, then they got to have a work permit.

K.F.: How do you think that contributed to --

W.R.: That was a major part of it. `Cause if they don't learn when they're younger, as they get older, when they get around 16, boys got girls on their mind, girls got boys on their mind.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. Well what was the picking house like then when the women were in here working, and their kids were here too?

W.R.: It was full. I mean, you know. Every seat in here would be filled up. The way of steaming and the way of -- the type of steaming we did now and then, back years ago, it's a lot different.

K.F.: How's it changed?

W.R.: We used to have big wooden boxes, we'd just dump `em into, you know. And I'd just let the steam run in. Now I just, you know, like a lot of steam. Now we cook with pressure, and we cook with temperature, you know, we have to cook 250 degree temperature. Back there then, you didn't know what temperature you had `cause steam was going everywhere. But they're still cooked, you know. Still cooked. But the regulations were stricter and more stricter.

K.F.: Right. Well how did that change how you all did stuff here when you had to make these technology changes?

W.R.: Well we just had to abide by it, go with it. You know, had to do it.

K.F.: Was there any government help to get the new equipment?

W.R.: No, no. You had to do it on your own. It's still that way. You know, farmers get help, these people get help. But it seems like this type business, you don't get no help. You got to borrow it from the banker, or a friend of yours or something, if you get sharp.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. And before you all got the Mexican pickers to come in, how many local people did you have in here picking?

W.R.: We were down to about 10 or 12.

K.F.: Ten or 12? Now how did that -- how did that affect your business?

W.R.: You were just about out of business, you know. Overhead was getting, eating you up. Have to pay overhead.

K.F.: And did the ladies have to work overtime or --

W.R.: Back there then, when they get that age, they don't like to work much overtime. If they work 40 hours -- you have some of it, but they don't like that. These Mexicans, they work all the overtime you can give `em.

K.F.: Okay. When did you all --

W.R.: They like that `cause, you know, they make time and a half.

K.F.: Time and a half, right. That's all I remember when I was getting paid that way too, I kind of liked time and a half too. And when did you start -- when did the Mexicans come?

W.R.: It's about four years, Dot?

D.R.: I think this is the sixth year.

W.R.: Sixth year. Time goes by so fast I can't hardly remember.

K.F.: Okay. And what was that first year like when they were here?

W.R.: It was a big help. I mean, you know, they catch on fast, they're good with their hands, and they'd catch on fast, and they pick pretty crab meat, beautiful crab meat.

K.F.: What does that mean when they pick pretty crab meat?

W.R.: That means the customers like it, you know, the people that purchase it.

K.F.: Right. Okay. And did you have somebody here that taught them how to pick?

W.R.: Yeah, my wife and Joyce Flowers and, you know, some of the local pickers.

K.F.: And how did you all teach `em how to pick crabs?

W.R.: They knew how to pick, the ones that taught `em, so they just went through the bends, you know, go round to `em, clean the crab up.

D.R.: The first year, we had an interpreter.

K.F.: Oh, you did?

DR.: She came down too.

W.R.: Yeah. Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). But they catch on pretty quick what you say, you know. A lot of `em speak learn to speak some words, you know. Dot can make `em all understand. She speaks some Spanish now she learned from `em.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

D.R.: And, of course, now if anybody needs -- we get new ones, we have our old Mexican girls teach `em how, you know. They can explain to `em better.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

W.R.: Each year, you'll probably get one or two new ones. You know, some that don't get married and have children, and they can't come back that year, you'll get extra ones. And these girls will teach, the old Spanish girls can teach the new ones.

K.F.: So it is similar to the way it used to be where older pickers are teaching the newer ones or younger ones really.

W.R.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Okay. What about the traditions of the picking house? I mean I know there are certain traditions --

W.R.: They always want to start here about 3:30 in the morning.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: And they won't change, especially the Americans, you know. They been used to starting at 3:30 in the morning, and that's when they want to start.

K.F.: Right. I know you guys are like the only ones who still start that early in the morning.

W.R.: It's just a tradition. We've always done it, and you can't change `em.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: If you say you want to start at 5:00, you know, 5:00, don't like that.

K.F.: They like getting off early in the day?

W.R.: That's right.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Now why did you, I guess in the beginning, start so early in the morning?

W.R.: Well back there then was refrigeration purposes, you know. When you get done in the evening, a lot of times, these crabs, don't have no place to keep `em. So you start early in the morning like at 3 or 3:30. And what you do, you get `em done before the middle of the day.

K.F.: Okay. So even after refrigeration, people didn't want to change.

W.R.: No, they didn't want to change.

K.F.: So what's the typical schedule of this picking house? Is there somebody working here 24 hours a day?

W.R.: No. We live right here, so most the time here, our local crabbers are in by 3:00 in the afternoon. But we have -- have a truck in Carolina, he's down there today. That's not enough crabs here. No more to work full time. So we're down there three or four times a week. Plus we have some brought in from North Carolina on the truck.

K.F.: Okay. And then you guys steam --

W.R.: My truck!!! probably be in here about one tonight, so we'll start steaming when he gets in.

K.F.: Okay. And then the ladies come in about 3:30 and start picking `em?

W.R.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I usually keep some cool. I got a couple, 50 bushels back there now from yesterday. I just keep `em start on while these is cooling in the morning.

K.F.: Okay, right.

W.R.: See that'll be cooking, we put the fan on, then we put `em in the big walk-in back there. The walk-in's about 38 degrees, and it can cool fast.

K.F.: Okay, okay. And what about last year? I know it was a hard year for crabs in the State of Maryland.

W.R.: Well we'd -- we got what we wanted out of North Carolina and Virginia.

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

W.R.: We never missed many days.

K.F.: Right. When did you guys start to see a drop in the Maryland crabs?

W.R.: We've seen that for the last seven, eight years, 10 years.

K.F.: What do you think is the reason?

W.R.: Well, you know, the Rockfish don't hurt `em now, but you've seen a big difference since these Rockfish come back.

K.F.: Okay. And what do you think right now is the biggest issue facing your industry?

W.R.: Well the biggest issue we got, and it's going to be a serious one `cause if something don't happen probably two years from now, it won't be no more crab house, imported crab meat, foreign crab meat. Fifty cents a day labor over there, you know, other places.

K.F.: Right.

W.R.: Chinese, Chinese, you can buy Chinese jumbo lump five something a pound. We can -- no way possible.

K.F.: Right, right. Now how's that going? I know the state is working with you all to figure out what to do about this.

W.R.: They have us run a study. Now we got to come up with, you know, with some help. We've hired some lawyers out of D.C.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: Of course, they had the same thing happen to them in Louisiana with Crawfish.

K.F.: Right, right. Now they had -- didn't they put a tax or something?

W.R.: Tariff on it.

K.F.: Tariff on it. Okay.

W.R.: They were sending it here 10 cents a pound, and costing -- down Louisiana it was costing 40 cents, see. Just about put `em out. Now they're on an even keel. You don't mind it when you're on an even keel, you know. But when you got 50 cents the day labor over there, and even here you got minimum wage is 5.15 an hour. That's a big difference.

K.F.: Yeah.

W.R.: Can't compete. And it's a different crab. It's not a blue crab.

K.F.: Now isn't there some controversy over them being able to label that crab meat?

W.R.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Oh, yeah. But still, nothing's been passed down yet that they have to label it.

K.F.: Well what are they talking about labeling that as?

W.R.: Whatever type crab -- their species, don't have to put that species on their can.

K.F.: Oh, okay, okay.

W.R.: If we don't get it done fast, you know, we pasteurize our crab meat in the fall of the year, carry us through the winter, it'll cost us, it'll cost us more to put up a can of crab meat just for cooking than they'll pay for labor over there all day.

K.F.: Okay. Well we've been asking other owners about some of the strikes that happened in the 50's, especially down in this area. Do you remember any of that?

W.R.: Oh, yeah. We had a place in Cambridge, I think, the second year. And we just opened it up and we never done nothing all year, just closed it, had to close it right down.

K.F.: Oh, really? What year was this?

W.R.: I think we were paying 17 cents, and they want to cut it to 15. I think -- I can't remember what year it was. It must've been in the early 50's.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And was that the pickers who went on strike, or the watermen?

W.R.: Pickers.

K.F.: The pickers. And what was it like down in this area when that happened?

W.R.: Well down here, didn't have too much effect, you know. But I finally think the following year went back up to 17 cents if I remember right now. Next year was -- started in Crisfield is where it started from.

K.F.: Okay. Then it came, moved up this way?

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

K.F.: Okay. So what other ventures have you guys gone into? You've had another plant here and one in Cambridge, and --

W.R.: Sold that one in Cambridge. That's where the courthouse is at now.

K.F.: Okay.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: Yeah, they tore it down and built that new courthouse. That's it, I guess, you know. Do a lot of live crab business, you know.

K.F.: Okay, okay. To the restaurants?

W.R.: Yeah.

KR: Now has that always been a popular --

W.R.: Back years ago, when we first started out, it wasn't. But three or four years after we were in business, used to pick `em out and sell `em by the dozen in the barrel, put a piece of ice in the trigger barrel, and put the crabs and all, and ship `em on a freight truck to Baltimore. That's the way it started out. Then they come, started putting `em in bushel baskets, that's next. Sold `em by the bushel.

K.F.: So Baltimore really had the live sale business?

W.R.: That's the first, Baltimore city.

K.F.: Okay. And we've been trying to figure out how that started, shipping them live. And also, a couple of plants would steam them and wrap them individually and sell them that way.

W.R.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I think Dave Gardner's about the first ones in Baltimore. Had a grocery store on the corner, and he had a garage on the side of the grocery store. That's where he started steaming `em.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: First one we shipped there, back years ago.

K.F.: Did we come across anything on this Dave Gardner?

SPEAKER: We had a name I just found. I'll look it up here, but no.

K.F.: Okay.

SPEAKER: I've been doing some of the background research for Kelly's project, so the old newspaper articles are my domain.

W.R.: Yeah.

K.F.: She has all the historical articles in her head.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. Well what about some of the traditions that the pickers have about their chairs and their knives?

W.R.: Yeah, they got the same chair, use that same chair. And like I said, they got their knife, they'll have it filed down to where, just like the way they like to cut the crab and use it.

K.F.: Okay. Do you have to number their chairs to --

W.R.: No, they can recognize it. Some of `em will write underneath the bottom of the seat, you know, their initials. But they use `em so much, they recognize `em. Most of `em will come pick their chair out before the season starts.

K.F.: Oh, really?

W.R.: Yeah.

K.F.: Okay. Yeah, I've had several people tell me the chairs area really big deal to the pickers.

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

K.F.: And what about the singing? Did that ever happen at the plant?

W.R.: What?

K.F.: Singing? Any hymns?

W.R.: We don't have -- the American people don't do much singing. These Mexicans once in a while --

D.R.: They used to though. Billy (inaudible) used to --

W.R.: Years back. Huh?

D.R.: Some of them that could really sing --

W.R.: Yeah, they used to go to church, the older ones, they're all gone now see.

K.F.: When did that stop? Do you remember?

D.R.: When she died, I guess. Or when she stopped, you know, coming to the crab house. But I guess the ones that work now aren't very good singers.

(Laughter.)

D.R.: They sing happy birthday or something when somebody's birthday. And sometimes the Mexicans will sing.

K.F.: Oh, they will?

D.R.: Oh, yeah.

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

K.F.: Any idea what they're singing?

D.R.: No.

W.R.: It's in Spanish.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: That's when the fisherman just came in here. They have pound nets.

K.F.: Oh, yeah.

W.R.: He said the hard heads, first 1,000 pounds only bring you 15 cents a pound.

K.F.: I think the last time I heard they were 8 cents a pound, so I guess 15's a little better.

W.R.: Yeah. It was 8 cents in Carolina about a month or so ago.

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

W.R.: Hard head's a good-eating fish too.

K.F.: Yeah, they are. They are. Well let me ask you, I've actually done some interviewing with some of the net fishermen, and they say that Americans just aren't eating seafood the way that they used to.

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

K.F.: Do you find that with the crab meat too?

W.R.: Crab meat's not as bad, no. I don't think the crab meat sales is dropped off. We just, the imports is what hurt us. They're eating crab meat. People goes in restaurant, you'll find more people eating crab meat than you do anything else, crab dish dinners.

K.F.: Now how do you guys get your crab out? Do you have a distributor you go through?

W.R.: Yeah, we deliver on trucks.

K.F.: Okay. And who are most of your sales to?

W.R.: Well we got here in Ocean City, Rehoboth, Baltimore, Washington.

K.F.: And is it restaurants, or --

W.R.: Restaurants, carry-outs, wholesalers.

K.F.: And what are some of the really big changes that you've seen in this industry? We talked about the refrigeration.

W.R.: Well you see a difference in sales. Like I say, when this imported crab meat, that's one of the biggest changes I think we've seen. It's hurting. But otherwise, you know, regulations, EPA, you got to -- your discharges and all is monitored now. It's all part of the scene, you know.

K.F.: Right, right. And what do you all do with your chum now?

W.R.: We carry it up recycling up here to Hickory Road. They recycle it like on farmland, bag it or, you know, for flower beds and that kind of stuff.

K.F.: Right. Was there ever a dehydrating plant down here?

W.R.: Yeah. Come on down that big place where you get on the island, they used to dehydrate.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: Used to be called Crisfield Dehydrating.

K.F.: Right. And they had this one up here?

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

K.F.: 'Cause I know they had one in Crisfield.

W.R.: Same company. Got this one here to start with. But then they said they never had enough protein or something to it, like fishmeal or chicken feathers. They didn't bring enough money, so they had to discontinue it. The overhead, they couldn't -- used to pay

us for it when they first got it. Come get it and pay for it. Then they come got it for free. Then you had to carry it to `em, give it to `em.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: Now you got to pay `em for taking it.

D.R.: Service just gets cutback, and back, and back. And they use it for fertilizer to go on their fields.

W.R.: Yeah, and we have to pay `em to take it.

D.R.: So you pay for their fertilizer.

W.R.: Now they got this guy in Cambridge, you know, he's going to open up that plant going to make Kiken.

K.F.: I haven't heard about that.

W.R.: Yeah, it's a drug, you know, they put it in vitamin pills and different medicines.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: Kiken, I think it's called. So he's got his okay, now he's got to get his permits.

K.F.: Where's he putting it?

W.R.: Cambridge on Washington Street, the old brewery, Hog Goose Brewery.

SPEAKER: I've seen some articles on it. Seems like they think it's good for everything.

W.R.: Yeah, yeah.

K.F.: Supposed to be a miracle cure or something?

W.R.: Kiken. Use it in a lot of drugs.

K.F.: Okay. But nobody -- Cambridge was against it because on the count of there being odor in there. You know how crab chum gets after a day, you know.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Well you said you came from the school across the street to this business, so you were about, what, 18 years then?

W.R.: Sixteen years old.

K.F.: Sixteen?

W.R.: Eleventh grade then.

K.F.: Okay. And what did you do when you first started here?

W.R.: I come in here, we had these women in here, you used to have to bring their crab meat up to the weighing window, women that didn't have to get up then.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: So my job was then to go around and pickup the meat. And time I get it all picked up, I had to go back again, they had their five, six pounds again.

K.F.: Wow. Now you went to all the women?

W.R.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: So there was like about 60 women?

W.R.: Sixty women. By the time you get it all, weighed it, you had to go right back at it again. Now they have to get up and weigh their own meat, wash their hands -- it's different, you know, changes. That's one of the changes.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: So you must've known most of the pickers pretty well if you were picking up their meat.

W.R.: Yeah.

K.F.: Who were some of the best pickers that were here then?

W.R.: Back there then, fastest ones --

D.R.: You don't want to name no names.

W.R.: No, I couldn't. Make the rest of `em, you know --

K.F.: Oh, all right.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: Some fast ones, some slow ones. Some pick no shells, some pick little shell. You know.

K.F.: How about families? Were there families here that picked?

W.R.: Yeah, mothers and daughters.

K.F.: Okay. Can you name those families?

W.R.: Yeah. Some of `em long gone. Remember any of `em, Dot?

D.R.: Who?

W.R.: Mothers and daughters.

K.F.: The families of pickers?

DR.: Miss Bertie and Thelma.

W.R.: Yeah. Thelma's her daughter.

D.R.: Odessa Stewart.

W.R.: Yeah. Nancy and her other daughter was Florence, right?

DR.: Yeah.

W.R.: And you had Sylvia's mother. What's Sylvia's mother's name?

DR.: I don't know.

W.R.: Polly was her other daughter, Polly Ann.

DR.: Polly. But I don't know her name. Melba, her mother.

W.R.: Huh?

DR.: Miss Fergie.

W.R.: Yeah, Miss Fergie. Thomas -- mother and daughter. It was right many mother and daughters.

D.R.: Cat Ruark.

W.R.: Yeah, Cat Ruark.

D.R.: And her daughter, Frances.

W.R.: Frances, Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Now how did you learn about this business, managing the business?

W.R.: I just come here and worked my way up. Been here all these years. Stop one of these days, you know. Been here long enough now.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: I wanted to do it this year, and my wife says better not.

DR.: No comment.

K.F.: Okay.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: I went -- my son, he had a liver transplant, so he's not able to take it over.

D.R.: Can I get you all a soda or something?

W.R.: I'm fine, Mrs. Ruark.

SPEAKER: I'm set. I had breakfast like an hour ago.

K.F.: So who will take it over then?

W.R.: I think it's too much for anybody, you know, just starting out. I've got a cousin, Sonny, been here for all these years, you know. He might want to do it.

K.F.: Do you all have other family members who are in the seafood business?

W.R.: Got a cousin down here. The Parks.

K.F.: Oh, Charles Parks?

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

K.F.: Okay. And how about you, Mrs. Ruark, do you have anybody else in the seafood business in your family?

D.R.: No.

W.R.: She comes from up -- she's from up the county. She's a farmer. East New Market.

K.F.: Oh, right.

W.R.: Father come down, and he picked crabs for years.

K.F.: Oh, he did.

(OFF RECORD - TELEPHONE)

D.R.: This year, it's a little bit different. We had to let `em know down to the consulate 30 days in advance before we get `em. Where years before we could call and just as soon as, you know, she could get `em across the boarder, our recruiter, they could go in and send `em. But this year, we have to give `em 30 days.

K.F.: Okay. Well how did you all hear about this H2B program?

DR.: Well A.E. Phillips had `em --

W.R.: First year.

D.R.: -- three years prior to us.

K.F.: And then you got them from them?

DR.: Well our pickers started getting smaller and smaller, you know. They were dying off, and we had to do something to stay in business. That's the reason we went to `em.

K.F.: And what did you all have to do to get ready to have them come here?

D.R.: A lot of paper work.

K.F.: Government.

D.R.: Right. Go through Baltimore, then Philadelphia, then INS to get approved.

K.F.: Okay.

W.R.: Have a place for `em to live when they get here.

K.F.: Okay.

D.R.: But we don't provide it. They have to pay their own.

K.F.: And do they live here on the island or --

W.R.: I built a new Nanticoke home up there, and I've got a big white house as you come on out right there. They stay there.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

W.R.: I got to go get two of my men now. I told `em I'd pick `em up at 10.

K.F.: Okay. Well you all must provide transportation for them.

D.R.: Yes. And we see that they go, you know, to the store and get groceries.

K.F.: Well let me ask you all, how has this made running this business more complicated?

W.R.: Like she said, the paperwork, the time you have to get `em to Cambridge to the supermarkets. Then if they get sick, you carry `em to the doctors. It keeps her busy.

D.R.: But we have to do it to stay in business.

W.R.: And they're nice people. They're friendly people. Clean. We get the same ones --

D.R.: We had the first year that we've ever gotten.

W.R.: First year. Same ones every year.

K.F.: Well that's good. A stable work force, that's what every business wants. And they come in April and stay until --

W.R.: Last year it was first week in November.

DR.: About the middle. I think they stayed here like to 12. I don't even know what day it was,

K.F.: And we've talked with Father Joel or Bishop Joel.

DR.: Yeah.

K.F.: And do you guys hold the church service here?

D.R.: No -- they hold it there.

K.F.: They have it. Okay. We were asking him about church services and that kind of stuff (inaudible).

DR.: I don't think he's started this year yet.

W.R.: They haven't been there that long.

DR.: Of course, they're not all here. Now we have some that goes to Dover to church.

K.F.: Really? Okay. All the way to Dover.

DR.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: I would've thought Georgetown or someplace would've been closer. Is there a special church there that they want to go to?

D.R.: Evidently it must be. Some of their friends from some of the other plants. I don't know. I really don't know how they go to tell you the truth. Now I don't know if they've done it this year, but I do know last year.

K.F.: Okay.

DR.: Now at times during the week, they have somebody come there, and they say it's the one from church. Now I don't know if they have somebody to come and get `em. I don't know. I haven't been able to -- I don't speak that much Spanish to really find out.

KR: And what is your job, Mrs. Ruark? What things do you take care of here?

W.R.: She --

DR.: Everything.

W.R.: Yeah.

(Laughter.)

W.R.: She does it all. Keep the books.

D.R.: Whatever needs to be done. I'll put it that way.

W.R.: She can weigh the crab meat or she can pick the crabs, she can do it all.

(Laughter.)

D.R.: I can steam the crabs.

W.R.: You can steam the crabs. She even drives the truck.

K.F.: Okay, okay. Well if you all had to tell somebody from outside the shore about this business and what it's like to be in this business, what would you tell them?

W.R.: Well they'd have some ups and downs, you know, it's like any other business.

Seasonal, your supplies --

D.R.: Long hours.

W.R.: Comes out of the water, all got fins on `em, they swim. So some years you have fair supply, some years you don't have hardly any. But we can struggle along for a little while longer, I guess.

K.F.: What would you like visitors at the museum to know about this business?

W.R.: Well you're gonna set up a place up there at the museum for --

K.F.: It's going to be a permanent exhibit on the crab industry. You know, they have a lot on the harvesting of the crabs, but there's nothing on the processing. And so that's why we're trying to do these oral histories with owners and pickers and various people to do an exhibit on the history of the processing of the crabs and crab meat.

DR.: What you need to do is get some of these women, you know, to show you how to pick a crab, and not the way you see, the way a crab is picked in magazines and things, which is not the right way.

K.F.: Well how do you pick a crab, Mrs. Ruark? Let me ask you that.

DR.: You clean all the fins off, you don't pull `em off, you cut `em off.

W.R.: People sit and eat `em, they don't even hardly use a knife. They pick it with their hands, fingers, you know.

K.F.: Right.

D.R.: But even in magazines and all you see, you know, where you break the crab in two, you pull the apron off. You don't do any of that. And you know, after you cut the fins off, and you cut the top piece off, and then pick the meat out.

K.F.: Right.

D.R.: But most magazines or books and all, they pull the apron off and break the crab in two and pull the fins off

K.F.: And who are some of the pickers who are still here who are local that we might want to interview?

W.R.: She's interviewed Nellie, she says.

DR.: Nellie Flowers?

K.F.: Yeah.

W.R.: Thelma?

D.R.: I don't know. Some of `em are touchy, you know.

W.R.: Yeah.

D.R.: They don't want anybody to watch `em pick. Now Edith wouldn't care, Edith Thomas. That's Nellie's sister. I don't know if Betty Carps right down here would or not. She's a good picker.

W.R.: Fast.

DR.: Melba Simmons. Frances Robbins. I'll give you the names of our --that might. You could put Thelma Cooper down there. And I would say that would be it.

K.F.: Okay. And would it be possible to come back?

(OFF RECORD - TELEPHONE)

K.F.: And what was the crab house like then when you started?

D.R.: Well it was a lot of pickers here then. I think it was about 60. All local.

K.F.: Okay.

DR.: And that's how much it's gone down since then. And if I remember right, I think I got 17 cents a pound when I first started.

K.F.: And what did the crab house sound like when you first started?

D.R.: What did it sound like?

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

D.R.: Well it was noisy.

K.F.: With what noises?

D.R.: A lot of talking.

K.F.: Everybody talking about --

D.R.: Anything at all. You know. And, of course, I guess, that many people, it's a lot of conversations going on, you know.

K.F.: And how did you signal for someone that you needed crabs, or your meat needed to be picked up?

D.R.: You holler out crabs.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: There was some hollering going on too.

D.R.: Right. So I mean they do the same thing now if they get out. Of course, it's very seldom they ever have to holler.

K.F.: Okay.

D.R.: And if you need your trash emptied, you just holler trash.

K.F.: And I know some of the ladies have told me that they like to have their knives ground a certain way.

D.R.: Yeah.

K.F.: Do you all have -- what do you all use to grind those down?

D.R.: We don't.

K.F.: Oh, you don't?

D.R.: They all do their own.

K.F.: Oh, they do their own. Okay. Do you do your own too?

D.R.: I just take the knife and use it. And as you use it, you know, it would grind down itself or, you know, kind of work it down. I can't use the narrow blade like some of those women do. Some of `em have `em so real tiny, and I can't pick like that. But they just have, you know, the knack that they do it. Now either -- no, Sun, I think it is, she'll ground some down, our Mexican workers.

K.F.: Oh, okay, okay. Are any of the Mexican ladies continuing to do things like needle work or anything like that that they've done?

D.R.: Yes, and I've carried it home. They do beautiful work. Crochet and embroidery. But they brought me some back from Mexico with them.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

D.R.: And they do beautiful work. And all summer. And I, you know, I don't know how they do it because most of the time when you pick crabs, your hands, you know, get sore. But they don't have a problem with it. They crochet or whatever.

K.F.: We're sort of -- we're interested in the traditions of crab pickers, and what that might mean for Mexican crab pickers who are going to come here. I know a big tradition with women in Mexico is needle work. I was curious if they were still doing some of that.

D.R.: Yes.

K.F.: Okay. And Nellie had told us about some dinners that the women had hosted and had people over --

D.R.: Yeah.

K.F.: And give everybody a taste of Mexican food.

D.R.: Yeah. They had one and invited everybody. They made some that wasn't so hot. Of course, you know, they like everything hot, hot. And, of course, any time you go up there, they invite you to have something to eat.

K.F.: Okay. Well like I said, we're interested in coming back and taking some photos of the plant when it's in operation.

D.R.: Yeah.

K.F.: And trying to talk with a few more both local and Mexican pickers. Well who would be the Mexican pickers that we should talk with?

DR.: Do you speak Spanish?

K.F.: We are going to have somebody starting in a week who does speak Spanish, and I actually understand more, but have a hard time making sentences myself

D.R.: Now I can't make any sentences. I mean I just say a word, you know. Really any of `em, I guess.

K.F.: Is there one woman who seems more like a mother-type figure that the women look up to?

D.R.: No.

SPEAKER: Do any of them speak English?

D.R.: Maybe a word like I do Spanish. I can usually make them understand. They like understand but can't say it. But, you know, and of course the two Mexican guys that we have, one of `em speaks a lot of English, and the other one, he caught on fast. He can, you know, he knows what you're talking about, and he can speak.

K.F.: Okay. So you're saying May would be better to come back? You might have more regular hours?

D.R.: Yes, because you wouldn't want to take pictures of sponge crabs, you know, to have for --

K.F.: Why not?

D.R.: Well I wouldn't.

K.F.: Okay.

DR.: I mean, you know. Well you're not allowed to catch `em in Maryland.

K.F.: Okay.

DR.: You can bring them in North Carolina. Their laws, they can catch `em, and Virginia can catch `em, but they can't in Maryland.

K.F.: Okay.

D.R.: So I don't think, you know, I wouldn't do that.

K.F.: Okay.

D.R.: And even after you set up a time, call the day before to make sure. Because it could be a shortage of crabs at that time too, you know, and try to work something out, you know. If it can't be that day, another day or something.

K.F.: Okay. Yeah, what I'd like to do is come in at 3:30 when the women do and go through the whole day with them and watch `em pick and take some photos.

DR.: A whole day?

K.F.: A whole day, a whole day. Then it's easier for us to sort of write about what it's like to pick crabs. Because a lot of the visitors to the museum, you know, they see the crab meat, but they don't understand the work that goes into getting that meat out. And

I'm doing this at all of the plants, going and spending the same time that the pickers are there.

D.R.: Well you'll hear a lot of moans and groans.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: About getting up so early?

D.R.: No, they don't complain about that, because they want to come. They want to come early. They'd rather, they say then they've got the day to do whatever they've got to do. If they have to go to Cambridge, or to the doctor, they usually make it in the afternoon, and then it's not a problem.

K.F.: Right. Okay. Now we've had a hard time getting a hold of you and your husband. Is there a phone number that's best to call you at?

D.R.: Have you got the plant number here, 3133, or home is 3142, but we're here 75 percent of the day, or probably more than that some days.

SPEAKER: You certainly have a comfortable chair.

D.R.: We just got these this winter. We thought, well, we have to get a sofa 'cause we're here at nights waiting for trucks so many times, you know, so many hours.

K.F.: Right.

D.R.: And we got 'em to put in here. Sometimes we only get about three hours' sleep.

K.F.: Okay.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)