

Interview Log

Interviewee:	Rachel Collins	Tape #: OH137
Interviewer:	Kelly Feltault	# of Tapes: 1
Date:	November 10, 1999	# of Sides: 1
Location:	Byrd's Seafood Crisfield, Maryland	
Topic:	Crab Picking Project	
Corresponding Photography Log #: see Byrd's series		
Comments:	Singing - Lord's Prayer. Phonetic Spellings: Hesser, Darcell Whitaker	

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: We're in Byrd's Crab House. It's November the 10th, 1999, it's two of nine, and we're going to hear the Lord's Prayer that they sing every morning.

(PAUSE.)

(SINGING.)

K.F.: Lovely. You all are in perfect harmony. Beautiful. You're in perfect harmony. It's beautiful.

R.C.: Thank you.

K.F.: Now do you always start it in the morning?

R.C.: Yeah.

K.F.: And how did that come about, how did it --

R.C.: (Inaudible) -- when I first got saved, when I first got saved, something happened to the boss down here. But we had gone, I had went to another crab house and picked crabs.

K.F.: Okay.

R.C.: And the Lord spoke to me and told me ask my boss man could I have prayers, you know, the prayer down here.

K.F.: Right.

R.C.: I went up there and asked him, and I told him that Miss Hesser, she dead now, Lord told me -- told me tell the old lady, her name was Hesser, told me to tell her to bring 'em down and I brang 'em down, I brang the people down, you know, and she sing the prayer, she sing the prayer is how it come about. Weren't nobody in here singing no prayers then. And then the Lord spoke to me over to another crab house and told me to tell, ask my boss man can I sing, can we sing prayers in here. So that's how it come about. That's how it come about.

K.F.: Wow. Okay.

R.C.: Yeah, Uh-huh (Affirmative). So we been singing 'em ever since, ever since.

K.F.: Like 30 years, right?

R.C.: Oh, my -- yeah, yeah.

K.F.: Thirty years.

R.C.: Yeah, 30 years because I got saved in 1966. And it was about 19, it was about in that, 1966. It was 1967, something like that, but it was round about that, you know what I mean. Been 30 some years that my baby, my friend's baby, they was -- they was a year old, two years old probably. I got saved and it was baby, you know.

K.F.: Now how long have you been picking crabs?

R.C.: My Lord. I've been picking crabs 40 some years.

K.F.: Okay.

R.C.: Picking crabs, my daughter, she's 45 years old. And I start picking after I got pregnant with her. So that's been 46 years, 46 years, yeah. As long as I start picking, I was about 16 or 17 I came out of, came out of school. I was sorry too, sorry I came out school, came out school. And I had her. I had her. And I'm picking ever since. Forty-five, I had her -- I was picking crabs before I had her. Picking crabs before I had her.

K.F.: Now who taught you how to pick?

R.C.: Somebody taught me how to. I don't know now. Been a long, long time. Over the other -- we were picking over another crab house. It was another crab house we was picking at downtown but it was still Byrd's Crab House.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

R.C.: It was still Byrd's Crab House. Yeah. I don't know who taught me how to pick. Somebody taught me how to pick. Long time now. My mama libel liable to taught me. My mama liable taught me how to pick. Yeah. My mama liable taught me how to pick.

K.F.: Now did you teach your daughter how to pick?

R.C.: No. I taught one of 'em -- some of 'em, no. No, I didn't taught them. Somebody else must've taught them how to pick, because they didn't pick to the same crab house. When they start picking, they didn't, some of 'em didn't pick to the same crab house that I picked. All of 'em don't pick. All of 'em don't pick. About two, three of 'em that does it, you know, two or three of 'em that pick. Not now. They don't pick now. One of 'em pick sit in front of me. She's pregnant now. She can't pick. Yeah, long time. I been here, I been Byrd's long time. But this is Jim Dodson now, this is Jim Dodson now.

K.F.: Right. It's a different owner.

R.C.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). But I've been picking crabs 40 some years, baby. Forty some years I've been picking crabs.

K.F.: What are some of your memories of picking crabs for 40 some years?

R.C.: I don't know. Sometimes I'm sorry I'm picking and didn't go and get another job.

K.F.: Oh, really?

R.C.: Yes, sir. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yeah.

K.F.: Well now what is it about this job that you like?

R.C.: I love picking crabs. I love picking crabs. I love picking. I really do. I love picking crabs. But I've been doing it all my life. Ever since I was about 16, 15, 16, 17 years old.

K.F.: Right.

R.C.: Doing it all my life. I love picking crabs. Sure do. Yeah, I love picking crabs. Try and get the bone out the meat.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

R.C.: Try and get the bone out the meat.

K.F.: Now do you come in with a set goal of how many pounds you guys want to pick in a day, or you just go through it?

R.C.: No. No. Sometimes we don't, you know, come into that because we don't --

K.F.: Whatever you've got.

R.C.: Yes. Now we make good money picking crabs if crabs is good.

K.F.: Right. Let me ask you this. When did you notice the crabs start to kind of be bad?

R.C.: When they're little tiny. When they're little tiny. When they're little tiny, they ain't got no meat in 'em. When they're little tiny, ain't got no meat in 'em, baby, and can't get no meat out, can't get no meat out.

K.F.: Is this really recent that they've been bad, or has this been going on for 10 years or --

R.C.: Oh, oh, sometimes -- oh my, God. When we were picking crabs, we had big Jimmies like that.

K.F.: Right.

R.C.: Oh my, God. Couldn't hold 'em in your hand.

K.F.: When did you all stop picking the Jimmies? Do you remember?

R.C.: We've been picking 'em off and on. We've been picking 'em off and on. We've been picking 'em off and on. We've been picking 'em off and on. Yeah, yeah. We've been picking 'em off and on. These, see these, good this morning. See the lump?

K.F.: Yeah. Yeah, that's pretty good.

R.C.: Picking 'em off this morning. See all this meat I got? See all this meat I got?

K.F.: Yeah.

R.C.: Yeah. You get all that meat --

SPEAKER: That's what you call (inaudible).

K.F.: Right, the number ones.

SPEAKER: Yeah.

R.C.: Honey, sometimes sorry I didn't go back, sorry that I didn't go back to school. I'm sorry for, sorry that I made that mistake, you know. But I've had 12 babies.

K.F.: Twelve, you have 12 children?

R.C.: Yeah. Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Wow.

R.C.: My husband, my husband died about 14 years ago. My husband died about 14 years ago.

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

R.C.: Yeah. And I had my, my last babies, they were twins, had two twin girls. Where you from?

K.F.: I'm from Virginia originally.

R.C.: You are? Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Well you must be awfully proud of your children.

R.C.: I am. I am. Because to a certain -- they're good to me.

K.F.: Good.

R.C.: They're good to me. My children are good to me. Yeah, my children is very, very good to me. I thank the Lord for my children. I do. I thank the Lord for 'em. I thank the Lord sometimes one -- I don't really have to buy no clothes not unless I want to buy some. She buys all my clothes for me. Yeah. My children are good to me. You know what I mean.

Especially them girls. Especially my girls. Yeah. Good to me. Yeah.

Yeah, I had 12 babies. My mama had 17.

K.F.: Now I've been told that picking crabs is actually a really good job for moms and grandmoms.

R.C.: Huh?

K.F.: I was told by a couple crab pickers that picking crabs is a good job for moms and grandmoms.

R.C.: Yeah. Good for young people too because young people be in here picking too, don't they?

SPEAKER: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

R.C.: Yeah. Young people picking too. Young people pick crabs. Lot of young people pick crabs. But not that much that they used to pick 'em, you know. Got themselves a job and everything. Got herself a job. You won't believe, I got so many grandchildren.

K.F.: Oh, I bet you do.

R.C.: I got 20-some, 20-some grandchildren. And great grands, I got 15. Fifteen great-grands.

K.F.: Wow.

R.C.: I thank the Lord. I mean I didn't want all them, but I try to get all of 'em present a piece, you know. Try to get all of 'em. We had last year, got everyone of 'em something. Yeah. Even no more than about a \$10 present, you know what I mean.

K.F.: Yeah.

R.C.: Yeah. No more than about a \$10 present. Get all of 'em something. Yeah. Yeah.

K.F.: Can I ask your name?

R.C.: Rachel. Rachel.

K.F.: Rachel.

R.C.: Rachel.

K.F.: Rasha.

R.C.: R-A-C-H-E-L.

K.F.: Oh, Rachel.

R.C.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah. Collins. Yeah.

K.F.: Now does the same person usually bang their knife on the corner of the table every morning to get their attention or --

R.C.: No, no, no. The one that's in the white sweater.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

R.C.: Yeah. I used to do it but, you know, I left here and went to another crab house. I left there and went to another crab house. Another crab house. You should do it -- I went to another crab house. I'm the one that, you know, first thought the crab -- first one starting it. Oh, let Meaty do it. They told me what to do, and I done it, and we've been having prayer ever since. What I did, oh Baby God. Look what I did. And been singing it in here ever since. Ever since, been singing it. Yup. It's pretty. Sometimes Grady Mace sing it too.

K.F.: Okay.

R.C.: Yeah, the one that's in the white sweater, she sings it. Yeah.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible).

K.F.: Okay. Now how do you all like to keep your knives? I know everybody has a different way.

SPEAKER: Everybody has a different way. Some of 'em are real (inaudible).

K.F.: Do you all like 'em real sharp, or kind of dull or --

SPEAKER: In between.

K.F.: In between.

R.C.: See I'm trying to get the bone out my meat. I don't want the bone in my meat. Sometime I see that many bones in my meat, send it back.

They'll send --

K.F.: Oh, will they send it? Oh.

R.C.: Yeah, yeah.

K.F.: Do you all have to put a number on the bottom of your can?

R.C.: Yeah, they do that too. Yup. They do that too. Number on bottom of the can so they know who it be. You know what I mean?

K.F.: Yeah.

R.C.: Know who it be. Nobody can't say they're -- nobody can't say they're (indiscernible). Take a right good while pick the bone out the meat. I pick right many bone in my meat. If I pick in a can, I won't. If I pick in a can, I won't pick that many bone out my meat. I won't get that many bones in my meat.

K.F.: Do you all usually pick in the pasteurized cans or --

R.C.: Yeah. Where you live in Virginia?

K.F.: Well I live in Maryland. I'm originally from Virginia though.

R.C.: Oh, where you live at in Maryland?

K.F.: You know where Silver Spring is?

R.C.: Oh, yes. Uh-huh (Affirmative). My daughter husband got in Silver Spring. My daughter husband. Yeah. My daughter husband in Silver Spring.

K.F.: Well would it be all right if I took a photo of you while you're picking crabs?

R.C.: When I come back.

K.F.: Okay.

R.C.: Okay.

K.F.: All right. Let me talk to some of these other ladies.

R.C.: Yeah.

K.F.: Thank you all for talking with me today.

R.C.: You're welcome, babe.

K.F.: I'm certainly learning a lot.

R.C.: Yeah, yeah.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible).

K.F.: Yeah, I'm going to go to the Harold Bozman picking house.

R.C.: Where?

K.F.: In about 20 minutes or so.

R.C.: Where?

K.F.: He's over in Fairmount.

R.C.: Oh, that's right. Yeah. Them people, yeah, they pick crab too.

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

R.C.: Sometimes they pick crab in the winter too. They pick crabs in the winter sometimes.

K.F.: Oh, do they really?

R.C.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah, pick crabs in the winter.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

K.F.: Well thank you very much. You all have a productive day today.

R.C.: Yeah.

K.F.: With good crabs. Hi. I'm with the Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, and we're doing a history of crab picking, from the crab pickers' stories, and I came down this morning to record you all singing the Lord's Prayer and talk with some of the crab pickers. How long have you been picking crabs?

SPEAKER: Long time because I was a young teenager.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And always here in Crisfield? Who taught you how to pick crabs?

SPEAKER: My parents. My mother.

K.F.: Did a lot of women in your family pick?

SPEAKER: Yeah.

K.F.: They did? What do you remember about the first crab house that you worked in?

SPEAKER: I think it was -- I don't know whether it was Dryden Brothers or -- Ward's. I don't know now.

K.F.: And what do you like about this job? What do you like about this job?

SPEAKER: To live an honest living. It's an honest living. Beats (inaudible).

K.F.: You're the only person I've ever seen able to get the lump out when they do that top cut like that.

SPEAKER: Oh.

K.F.: Did someone teach you how to do that or did you --

SPEAKER: Yeah.

K.F.: Do you have any favorite memories of working in the crab house?

SPEAKER: Yeah. Years ago. Crabs were better.

K.F.: Really?

SPEAKER: Years ago, crabs were better than what they are today. Crabs ain't like they used to be.

K.F.: How has that changed the crab house?

SPEAKER: Huh?

K.F.: How has that changed the crab house? How about you, sir, how long have you been picking crabs?

SPEAKER: About 40 years.

K.F.: And how did you learn how to do it?

SPEAKER: By watching my grandmother.

K.F.: So your grandmother taught you how to do it? What do you remember about that first day that she brought you into the crab house?

SPEAKER: Oh, yeah. You either go to school, or you go to the crab house. So I wind up in the crab house.

K.F.: What's it like being a kid in the crab house?

SPEAKER: It was a lot of fun then. 'Cause I didn't want to go to school, so I'd do anything then. But I found out that didn't pay off either.

K.F.: No?

SPEAKER: No. Had to go back. Had to get some education.

K.F.: What is it that you enjoy about this job?

SPEAKER: I don't know enjoy, I just like to do it. I like to be around people. It's not compelling. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to do it. You know, it's not a thing that you just got to do if you don't want to do it. You missed the Lord's Prayer before, huh?

K.F.: No, the first day I came, I missed it.

SPEAKER: Oh, you missed it.

K.F.: So I came today. And I'm glad I did. It was very beautiful. You all are in perfect harmony. Sounds wonderful. And you're really one of the last crab houses doing it still.

SPEAKER: Yeah, uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: Now what do you all think is the secret to being a good crab picker?

SPEAKER: Huh?

K.F.: What's the secret to being a good crab picker?

SPEAKER: Depends on the crabs. If the crabs ain't -- better crabs, you know.

K.F.: What would be the most important thing you think other people should know about this job?

SPEAKER: Try to find something else (Inaudible).
(Laughter.)

SPEAKER: I think we covered all of that.

K.F.: Okay. How long have the three of you been sitting at the same table working together?

SPEAKER: All this year.

K.F.: All this year?

SPEAKER: All this season.

K.F.: You change every season?

SPEAKER: No. They're my sisters.

K.F.: Oh, they're both your sisters. Oh, okay. Is everybody using Carvel's knives or --

SPEAKER: Huh?

K.F.: Is everybody using Carvel Hall knives or --

SPEAKER: Just about, yeah.

K.F.: Just about? Okay. Well I'm probably going to take a photo, so if you don't want your picture taken, let me know.

SPEAKER: I don't.

K.F.: Hi.

SPEAKER: Hi.

K.F.: I'm with the Maritime Museum up in St. Michaels, and we're doing a history of crab picking from a crab picker's point of view. And so I've been talking with crab pickers for the last year. And I was wondering if you guys could tell me how long you've been picking crabs.

SPEAKER: Quite a while, off and on.

K.F.: Off and on?

SPEAKER: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: What do you do when you're not picking crabs?

SPEAKER: I was teaching.

K.F.: Oh, you were? Okay.

SPEAKER: Pre-school.

K.F.: What makes you come back to picking crabs?

SPEAKER: Available job.

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

SPEAKER: Can't find a job nowhere else. If you know how to pick crabs, you can always come back, whether you like it or not.

K.F.: And have you always picked at Byrd's?

SPEAKER: Most of the time, yes. Mostly all the crab houses are closed.

K.F.: That's true too. What was it like in Crisfield when a lot of them were open and everybody was still working?

SPEAKER: It was a booming business. A lot of crab houses, lot of people. Lot of people moving away now.

K.F.: Oh, are they? Where are they moving to?

SPEAKER: City areas, better jobs.

K.F.: What do you all see happening to Crisfield in the next couple of years with the crab industry going the way that it is?

SPEAKER: It might be gone. There's not too many crabs sometimes. And the older people that worked here in crabs many years, they're retired. And the younger people don't like to pick.

K.F.: That's true. Seems like it's a dying art.

SPEAKER: Yeah. But it's the only, only thing you really got in Crisfield.

K.F.: And I know Maryland Crab Meat Company closed down over the summer.

SPEAKER: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: How did you learn how to pick?

SPEAKER: Someone taught me, showed me when I was younger, about 12.

K.F.: And how did they do that?

SPEAKER: I just watched 'em.

K.F.: What do you think is the worst part of the job?

SPEAKER: Not enough crabs.

K.F.: Well how do you guys ask for raises or anything like that?

SPEAKER: Huh?

K.F.: Do you or -- how do you ask for raises, or is that possible?

SPEAKER: They decide every once in a while, which it's been a long while, the last one. No union.

K.F.: Did you pick when the union was working?

SPEAKER: Huh?

K.F.: Did you pick when the union was working here in Crisfield? Do you remember that?

SPEAKER: Yeah.

K.F.: What was that like?

SPEAKER: That was fine. You usually got a raise, usually every year or every other year. Something like that.

K.F.: Who was the shop steward for this plant?

SPEAKER: I don't know. What, for this crab house? For this crab house?

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

SPEAKER: We don't really have one. We have girl up the front, she takes meat sometime or help whatever, I guess. She fills in. I don't know if they call her a shop steward or what.

K.F.: Okay.

(Laughter.)

SPEAKER: I remember when they used to have 'em. I mean, you know, they gave 'em that name.

K.F.: Yeah. Do you remember who it used to be?

SPEAKER: That's been years ago. Since she had the (indiscernible.) Her name was Darcell Whitaker.

K.F.: Okay. So the union really worked for you then.

SPEAKER: Yeah.

K.F.: And how did it stop? What made it stop?

SPEAKER: They just moved their office from here, and it just faded out. Yeah.

K.F.: Well let me ask you how you would describe the smell of a crab house.

SPEAKER: I don't know. You do it.

(Laughter.)

SPEAKER: Once you're in here, it doesn't bother you. It's when you leave out that you can smell the crabs, you know, the scent on your clothes.

K.F.: That's what I've noticed too in the work that I've been doing. Actually my husband notices.

SPEAKER: Yeah, when you come home from work.

(Laughter.)

SPEAKER: Everyone notices.

K.F.: What's the first thing you do when you get home from this job?

SPEAKER: I take my shoes off outdoors.

K.F.: Outdoors?

SPEAKER: Yes. And I take a shower. Get out of these clothes.

Sometimes it'll break you out, you know, give you a rash.

K.F.: Oh, really?

SPEAKER: Yeah. Crab acid.

K.F.: Where do you usually get the rash?

SPEAKER: I get it on my hands. I usually work in gloves sometimes.

K.F.: What do you do to cure that?

SPEAKER: You can get a type of cream from the drug store. Aveno's good.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Like the soap?

SPEAKER: Yeah.

K.F.: Now why did you wave him off?

SPEAKER: I want to get these.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

SPEAKER: Yeah. Sometimes if they pile up too fast, they'll sweat, you know, the ones on the bottom.

K.F.: Oh, okay. I'm going to be taking some photos, so if you don't want me to take your photo, let me know.

SPEAKER: Doesn't matter.

K.F.: Doesn't matter? Okay. All right, well thank you for talking with me.

SPEAKER: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: I really enjoy hearing more about the union. Not too much of that information really around except in people's memories.

SPEAKER: Yeah.

(END SIDE A - END INTERVIEW.)