

Interview Log

Interviewee: Betty Lou Middleton **Tape #:** OH140

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

Date: December 2, 1999 **# of Sides:** 2

Location: Woolford, Maryland

Topic: Crab Picking Project
Home Pickers, White & Nelson

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: This tape recording was loud and clear, a pleasure to transcribe! Phonetic Spellings: Tim Rippins, Joe Bricada, Chan, HASIP regulations [HACCPI, Dr. Monaque.)'

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: To me, it's an art.

K.F.: Well that's what we're going to talk about.

B.M.: Okay.

K.F.: So let me go ahead and say the date. Today's December the 2nd, and we're in Woolford, Maryland talking with Betty Lou Middleton about crab picking. Okay, Betty Lou, if I could just have you say your name and the day you were born, the year.

B.M.: My name is Betty Lou Middleton, I was born in 1929, the first -- and the 11th day. I will be 71 this coming January.

K.F.: Okay. And did your parents pick crabs? Did your mom pick crabs?

B.M.: My mom picked crabs.

K.F.: Okay. Where did she pick?

B.M.: She picked at White & Nelson's.

K.F.: Oh, she did. All right.

B.M.: At that time, it was on the old steamboat wharf.

K.F.: Okay. Now where exactly was White & Nelson located? Where was that steamboat wharf, 'cause I know it's not there anymore.

B.M.: That was located in Hoopersville.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: And it was a long wharf. It's where the steamboats came in.

K.F.: Okay. Is it near where Tim Rippins has his business, do you know?

B.M.: Yes, very closely.

SPEAKER: Excuse me one minute.

(Off the record briefly.)

K.F.: So they were down there near where Tim Rippins has his business.

B.M.: Yes. Used to be a store by the name of Simmons, and you could drive that far, and then I believe at a time you could drive over there.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: I remember walking there with my pretty bonnet on, and the wind was blowing so hard, and it blew it away.

K.F.: Oh, really?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: So did you grow up in the Hoopersville area?

B.M.: I did, yes. Although I didn't pick crabs until I got married, which was very young.

K.F.: Okay. And can I ask, why didn't you go into the crab house? I know most girls did with their moms.

B.M.: Because my mom had so many children, I had to babysit.

K.F.: Oh, okay. How many were in the family?

B.M.: Nine.

K.F.: Wow. Were you the oldest?

B.M.: I was the third.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. So how did you learn how to pick crabs?

B.M.: I had to work. And so I wanted to learn, and I wanted to be good at it.

K.F.: Why?

B.M.: I shucked oysters when my mom wasn't working. I was 13 then. I watched, and still wanted to be aggressive, I think. And when I was 13, I can remember shucking thirteen gallons, which was very, very good.

K.F.: Yeah, that really is. And did you do that for White & Nelson too?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. So at what age did you get married and start picking?

B.M.: I got married in September, I would've been 16 in January the 11th. I didn't have any children until April, I was 18 in January, and my son was born in April.

K.F.: Okay. And how did you get into the crab house?

B.M.: I don't know exactly how you mean that.

K.F.: Well you said you were shucking oysters. Did you continue to shuck oysters after you got married?

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). They didn't question my age.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay, okay. And can you tell me, do you know who taught you how to pick crabs, or how you learned how to pick `em?

B.M.: Just by watching. It is definitely an art. And I love showing people how it's done.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: There's a certain way that you cut down on that crab, the top, to get your beautiful backfin. I mean, not backfin, lump.

K.F.: Okay. Can you describe it to me? I've had most of the women tell me how they do it.

B.M.: I kind of -- showing is better than telling.

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: When I get it all ready, it's from the top, and I slice it down. And, of course, I pick the top. And then I go in from like forward, and I go under that lump, and out comes the beautiful piece. Which sometimes I go in, there's a

little cavity there that might have a little piece of bone. Sometimes you might get a scrap of that, but you come out with a beautiful piece of lump. And no trouble to discard that little piece of bone that would be in the lump.

K.F.: Okay. Now what do you think is the art about crab picking?

B.M.: The art of picking it is being concerned about it, wanting to do the best, and trying to strive to really do it right where it will not be all that cavity, I mean bones in it.

K.F.: Right, right.

B.M.: And I think that it's best for business when you know you've picked that can of crabmeat yourself, that there aren't little slivers of bone in it. And that I pride myself on. I know my pickers, I have to be on them all the time 'cause when you go through it, there's little slivers. I don't like it. My son called me about two months ago, and he said, mom, first time I ever ate a whole pound of crabmeat. He said but, mom, I never found a bone in it. And I said who's initial was on the back of the can? And he said there wasn't any. And I said that was mine.

K.F.: Okay. How many pickers do you have working for you?

B.M.: I usually only have two. Sometimes I just work by myself.

K.F.: All right. And who are these pickers? Were they relatives, or are they just ladies you know?

B.M.: Usually relatives.

K.F.: Okay, okay. I don't want to jump ahead here. Can you tell me what it was like your first day in the crab house at White & Nelson?

B.M.: Nervous, but extremely delightful, I think.

K.F.: Why?

B.M.: It was being able to work, wanting to work. And at the day's end, I had done good. And I was complimented on my meat.

K.F.: Oh, really?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: On your first day there?

B.M.: On my first day there, yes.

K.F.: Now was your mom known as a really good crab picker too?

B.M.: Yes. Fast and good.

K.F.: Does that tend to run in families, do you think?

B.M.: I think so. My mom died last year, and she worked up until she was 86.

K.F.: Wow. Who was she working for?

B.M.: She was working for Rippins Brothers at that time.

K.F.: Okay. What was her name?

B.M.: Sue Ruark.

K.F.: Okay. Now did you have any other siblings who went into crab picking?

B.M.: My sisters do. My children are in the seafood business, except my daughter. She's in Colorado. She works for MCI, she's an artist.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Wow.

B.M.: Won trophies when she was about 13.

K.F.: Fantastic.

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

K.F.: So your whole family was really in the seafood business then.

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: And what did your husband do?

B.M.: My husband's dead.

K.F.: But what did he do?

B.M.: Oh. He worked for his brother, Joe Rippins. He worked for Chan.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: My children are all by my first husband.

K.F.: So you still had some strong connections to that Hoopersville area with your kids and --

B.M.: Yes, yes. I used to take my first son in the office.

K.F.: Oh, really?

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And the nieces used to watch `em. And so I was able to work.

K.F.: Well when you were working for White & Nelson, how many pickers did they have?

B.M.: A lot, a lot.

K.F.: More than 30, 40?

B.M.: Older, older. Lot of coloreds. And to me, there was never no racism whatsoever.

K.F.: Was the picking house segregated at all, or did everybody sit together?

B.M.: Everybody -- well the colored stayed in a different part, although it was still open. But you mixed, you talked. That's why I guess I never knew racism.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: When they would take their meat to weigh it or the oysters to weigh those, you always chatted. It was always a friendly atmosphere.

K.F.: Okay. Now do you remember when White & Nelson closed?

B.M.: Yes. A very sorry day for me.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: Why?

B.M.: A very sorry day for the island. Because he was such a nice person to work for, he always communicated with all his workers, and very low feeling because we always looked up to him, and he was always so good to his workers.

K.F.: What do you consider being good to a worker?

B.M.: Your wage was what everyone else was getting, and the contact between the employer, and his sensibility, his warmth.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: All this is seeing that he cared.

K.F.: Now why did the plant close?

B.M.: After he died, then you know, it's normal. I guess the sons didn't want to take it over. So it was sold.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: But I think everyone in Cambridge, Hooper's Island, they will always remember White & Nelson.

K.F.: So were there pickers from Cambridge that came all the way down --

B.M.: He had a place in Cambridge.

K.F.: Oh, he had a place there.

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: Oh, okay. I didn't know that.

B.M.: Yeah. Close to -- or to East Cambridge Bridge.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: Yes. It was a place where the crabbers had their dredge boats, and they took their dredges and their tongs, there was a man by the name of Joe Bricada. They're very well known. He fixed all their equipment.

K.F.: That name does sound familiar to me.

B.M.: And there was a grocery store, and a bakery where everyone that was associated with the dredge boats, they went there to get their groceries. And got ready for the next weeks of harvest.

K.F.: Right.

B.M.: I was young then, but I still remember it.

K.F.: And did you go up there for -- why did you go to Cambridge?

B.M.: To take something, tongs or things like that to have repaired.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: In fact, Oscar Nelson, Junior and my husband had a dredge boat in partnership.

K.F.: Oh, okay, okay.

r1

B.M.: So I would go there in case they had something wrong with the winders, and have Mr. Bricada work on those.

K.F.: Do you remember the name of the boat?

B.M.: Ruth. The Ruth.

K.F.: I ask because the museum's doing a separate project on dredge boats.

B.M.: Oh, okay. Good, good. Yes.

K.F.: And what did the crab house sound like when you were picking at White & Nelson?

B.M.: Very busy. Everyone talking. There were no radios or t.v.'s, anything like that. Just people chatting. And naturally, the sound of the crabs. And I think that White & Nelson is the first one that had a conveyor belt.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: And what did they use the conveyor belt for?

B.M.: To carry your trash away. Whereas we used to pick in containers, and they were emptied and brought back to you.

K.F.: Okay. Well you must've been around for the 1933 storm, a little girl.

B.M.: Yes, I can remember that.

K.F.: And what do you remember about that?

B.M.: I remember my uncle bringing his family to my mother's because they were in a smaller house. We had a porch. I remember them tying the boat, the skiff to the porch. I remember them getting the pigs, putting them on the porch. I remember being very scared. I remember my grandmother lived across the field from us. I remember her getting Uncle Grover, come get her to make sure we were all okay. He took her back. And oh, God, I loved my grandmother.

K.F.: Yeah. What did you love about her?

B.M.: I think I loved my grandmother more so than I did my mom.

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: Because being in a big family, it seems like there's always pets. And I think I was her pet. When she cooked something, she'd always say Betty Lou, I've got this and that for you. I'll keep it warm. Now make sure Sue let's you come over. I can remember on October the 3rd, I was in school when I got word that she had died. I felt like my world had ended.

K.F.: What year was this?

B.M.: I can't remember. But I was in elementary school.

K.F.: And did she pick crabs too?

B.M.: Yes, she did.

K.F.: Okay. Now what would happen in the crab house if one of the pickers passed away? Was there any kind of -- did people have a ceremony or anything like that in the picking house or --

B.M.: There was always talk, and everybody got together and gave a little something.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: But then the colored, I don't think at that time, would go to the church with the white people. There were a lot that would go and visit the family of the colored and white. That was always allowed.

K.F.: Okay, so visiting --

B.M.: Was allowed, yeah, on all parts. It wasn't that because they were colored, they kept away, you know. It was, as I said, that's why I -- it wasn't racism to me. I thought, you know, you didn't marry in the group, but you sure were friendly, and you treated them right.

K.F.: Well they were really your co-workers.

B.M.: Yes, yes. It's the way I feel it should be today, you know. But things do change.

K.F.: Yeah. Well what did you do when White & Nelson closed?

B.M.: Well after White & Nelson closed, Rippins Brothers was brothers to my husband. He was never owner or part owner. But in '47, which was the year my son was born, it's the year they put the plant in, and so went to work there.

K.F.: Oh, so you worked for Rippins.

B.M.: Rippins, Uh-huh (Affirmative).

K.F.: So you must've worked for Chan's dad.

B.M.: Yeah, Chan, Junior. Yes.

K.F.: Chan, Junior's dad.

B.M.: Which was my brother-in-law. See Chan, Junior, is my nephew.

K.F.: Okay, great.

B.M.: Okay, got that straight. Yeah, Chan, Senior, was my brother-in-law.

K.F.: Well we've heard some wonderful things about him.

B.M.: Good, good.

K.F.: That he was a very good story teller, and a very funny man.

B.M.: Oh, he was. Oh, he was. And had the most grip in his hands.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yes. When he gave you a handshake, you would know it.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: Very nice fellow.

K.F.: And what was he like to work for?

B.M.: Very nice, very nice. And my husband, he drove the truck for him. So I know what hard work is. I would get up 2:00 in the morning or three, and work. And the family was always good to me about babysitting. And I would go on the truck with my husband at nights.

K.F.: Oh, you would?

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Drive back for him.

K.F.: Did you do that all the time?

B.M.: Did it an awful lot.

K.F.: After you had worked all day picking crabs?

B.M.: Yeah. I would sleep going up, and drive coming back.

K.F.: So your day started at 2:00 in the morning then, and would end --

B.M.: Many a time I've come on back from the truck and gone to work.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yeah. I know hard work.

K.F.: Now were they picking crabs all year round at that time?

B.M.: No, no. No, I enjoyed my winters.

K.F.: Well that's one thing we've been asking people is what do you do when you're not picking crabs.

B.M.: It was very hard for us. We drew unemployment.

K.F.: Okay. Even back in the 40's and 50's?

B.M.: Yeah. We drew unemployment then. Very little. Not like it is today. But I did enjoy my crocheting.

K.F.: Oh, okay. So you had a hobby.

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Oh, yeah. Crocheting and that's mostly what I did. When I got the children to bed, it was me sit up rest of the night crocheting.

K.F.: Okay. Now how many children did you have?

B.M.: Five.

K.F.: Five. So another big family then.

B.M.: Yes, Uh-huh (Affirmative). Three boys and two girls. I lost -- my son was in the seafood business too. Tony Rippins.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: He died, let's see, in '91. Yeah, in '91. And he's very much missed from the island. Very much missed.

K.F.: Yeah. Okay, now one thing we're trying to figure out is how did women use the money they earned picking crabs. What did you use your income for?

B.M.: Definitely to buy groceries. Because then it seemed like the winters were so much harder. The water was frozen, or it was so windy they couldn't

get out. Or with the dredge boat, there wasn't enough wind, you know, to work the dredge boats 'cause they didn't have power, you know. I also did that with them.

K.F.: Oh, you would work the boats with them too?

B.M.: I worked the dredge boat with them.

K.F.: Wow. Well you ended up doing everything, didn't you?

B.M.: I did. I took my oldest son with me. So he followed the water too.

K.F.: So is he a waterman now?

B.M.: Oh, yes. Yeah. He lives in North Carolina now. Yes.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Does he work down there as a waterman?

B.M.: Oh, yes.

K.F.: Fantastic. What part of North Carolina?

B.M.: In a little place called Manns Harbor.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: Just a short way from Nags Head.

K.F.: Oh, I know where that is, okay.

B.M.: Yes, he's still in business. Pardon me.

(Off the record briefly.)

K.F.: So your income really helped put food on the table then for your family.

B.M.: Yes, yes.

K.F.: Okay. And what kind of relationships did you have with the women who would sit at your table?

B.M.: Oh, I always have a good relationship with everyone. That's me.

K.F.: Okay. Do you remember who sat at your table?

B.M.: Most of the time, it was my sister, and Miss Hazel Dean, and my mother and myself.

K.F.: Okay. Now did you guys have any competitions to see who could pick the most during the day or --

B.M.: Lots of times we would. Lots of times we would.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: How would those get started?

B.M.: By watching to see what they were weighing.

K.F.: Oh, really?

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

(Laughter.)

B.M.: See what they had on their tray when they took it up. And you see well, let's see who does the best. Lot of us in there did that.

K.F.: Yeah, okay, okay.

B.M.: And especially with a newcomer, you know, the younger ones would try to boost them to get them encouraged.

K.F.: Now what did -- let me ask you what did you do like the first day of a new person. Like if I came into the crab house on my first day, what could I expect?

B.M.: Oh, I would go over and show you how, and then repeatedly do that, you know, and they always felt free to come over and ask me to check their meat to see if it was right. I was always willing to help anyone. I like that.

K.F.: Okay. And how long did it usually take someone to get up to a good speed?

B.M.: Good standards?

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

B.M.: With my teaching, I didn't find it much trouble at all because I always showed them exactly how I do it. And I think that's the way something should be done. Don't let them wonder. And I would show them how to nip that little piece of bone that would aggravate me if I found it in my meat and encouraged them to not put that in there. I had no problems.

K.F.: Okay. Now how long did you work for Chan, Senior?

B.M.: I worked for Chan up until '62. That's when I moved away. And then I worked in Cambridge, I went to Western Printing, and I worked as a clerk there. And then when I remarried again, I moved here. And set my business up here in '86.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Now how do you have this set up according to -- I know the state is very picky about these operations.

B.M.: Yes. I'm health regulated.

K.F.: So how did you have to do that?

B.M.: How did I have to do it? It wasn't easy. It took a lot of time, but I'm trying to think of her name -- the lady that was the head of it anyway, she came and showed us just what we had to do. My sister had put one in, so I went by her, you know, telling me. But the lady helped me an awful lot to make sure everything was right.

K.F.: Was it someone from the health department?

B.M.: Yes. I'm trying to think of her name. Can't think of it. But everybody was really helpful.

K.F.: Now how long did it take you? I mean I'm sure you had to apply for permits and all.

B.M.: All the permits and everything, yes, yes.

K.F.: How long did it take you from applying to being able to open your door for business?

B.M.: I think it took me, I'd say the most parts of two years. You had to get the septic system in. Everyone from the state was very helpful. And today, it's working nice. I have the steamer, the crate, the cooler, and the picking room. And I use my home for the toilet.

K.F.: Okay. Now how much did it cost you to get all this up and running?

B.M.: Well my husband had retired. I think it took about 40,000. We spent most of his retirement. Then he died two years later, which made it very hard on me.

K.F.: Wow. Now I know the larger crab plants are having a hard time getting crabs, and of course they're having a hard time keeping crab pickers too.

B.M.: So have I.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yes, yeah. I'm hoping that next year I can get a couple Mexicans. 'Cause your younger people seem to want to go elsewhere.

K.F.: Okay. Have you talked to anybody about getting Mexican girls?

B.M.: Not yet. I have a trailer there. I have to see if that will pass by the health department and get that fixed, which is right next to it. So I've been small. Most of the time, I'm there just by myself. Getting older, need more help.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Now who are your customers?

B.M.: My customer has been Curtis Bloodsworth, and he's been taking the meat in New Jersey.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: Also at Crisfield this fall to have it pasteurized.

K.F.: Oh, who do you take it to to have it pasteurized?

B.M.: Curtis takes it there to have it pasteurized.

K.F.: And what do you like about having your own business versus working in a plant?

B.M.: I have liked it, I liked it. But a lot more responsibility. It's like when **you ask me how many** pounds do I pick a day, I can't really tell you with answering the phone and doing all this. I could like go to my sister's and pick. I could tell you then how much I could pick now, you know. But it's so much extra work. Try to keep things clean and all that I'm responsible for.

K.F.: Okay. Now do you have to follow the HASIP regulations too?

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yes. Yeah, that's all hanging up there. Definitely, definitely.

K.F.: Now how hard was it to comply with those?

B.M.: It wasn't that hard. Went to school for it.

K.F.: Oh, okay. I didn't know that.

B.M.: I had a back operation at that time, so I wasn't able to go. But I sent two people.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: So that if anything happened to one, you know, the other would be available. That was in Annapolis.

K.F.: Okay. And what, if any, has been some of the health problems related to picking crabs?

B.M.: What, if any?

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

B.M.: There hasn't been that much problem.

K.F.: No?

B.M.: No. This year, I never had a bad sample at all. So that was good.

K.F.: Right. Well what about your own personal health problems?

B.M.: My own personal?

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

B.M.: Usually, it's been good. But this year, I had trouble with my blood pressure dropping so drastically. And then I had an accident which I'm still nursing today. And my car drugged me. I was robbed, and the door hit me and drug me. So this I had a problem. In fact, I was in the hospital a week. Other than that, my health's good.

K.F.: Okay, okay. What about like problems related to picking crabs, like getting back problems or -- I know some ladies get, there's a rash they may get on their hands.

B.M.: I've heard of that too.

K.F.: You haven't seen that?

B.M.: No. My sister told me she had it.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: No. I have -- I've had a back problem for years. And I've had my back fused. And then three or four years ago, I had another operation over in Easton. And I have, from sitting, there's a place right in here, I could touch it. That drives me crazy. And Dr. Monaque told me it's like related to, not a -- a beaver where they stand or something, and it's like a growth or something. And I never got to question him about that again because I had that accident and I've not been back.

K.F.: That's funny, I haven't heard of that.

B.M.: I hadn't heard of it either. Hadn't heard of it either, but it's very painful.

K.F.: Is it constant?

B.M.: When I'm sitting. Sitting, driving.

K.F.: I know sitting is a big part of picking crabs.

B.M.: Yes, right. And you'll get the numbness in your hands.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: They'll go dead. In fact, my sister just had an operation on both her hands. I had an operation in my hand. Can you see it?

K.F.: Oh, yeah.

B.M.: That thumb, this finger. It has made a difference in picking.

K.F.: Really?

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

K.F.: In what way?

B.M.: You don't realize that this finger helped me guide my knife some how or other. And it doesn't, can't do it. And it doesn't. See you take things for granted. You know, it's like wiping the crumbs off your table. Can't do it with that now.

K.F.: Wow.

B.M.: Yeah. It was like four liters in there, or something that was messed up.

K.F.: Okay. And when did you start having problems with your hands?

B.M.: Oh, I've had it for a few years. Especially in the fall.

K.F.: Oh, because of the cold?

B.M.: Probably the cold. But then you have the big cooks, the big female crabs.

K.F.: Oh, right.

B.M.: Which are harder to trim.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: So I constantly keep running water over my hands, cold, hot. But it's like with -- in your chicken plants, they have trouble with it.

K.F.: Yeah, I've heard some of the people talk about, you know, the same --

B.M.: Yeah, they'll go so dead that you cannot trim a crab.

K.F.: And what do you do when that happens?

B.M.: Run water, cold water, hot water. Shake `em. Sometimes you're two hours, or I am.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yeah. Before I can get the circulation or whatever it, you know, needs. Frustrating, believe me.

K.F.: I bet, I bet. Especially if you've got orders to fill.

B.M.: Right. Very frustrating.

K.F.: Gee, okay. Now I forgot what I was going to ask you.

B.M.: I thought that only happened to older people.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Well I'm wondering if you can tell me what your favorite part of picking crabs is, or why you like it.

B.M.: Let's think about that. I enjoy picking the crabs. I enjoy when it's bringing a good price. We have, it fluctuates. But I enjoy having my own business. Frustrating when the crabs are bad, frustrating when they are scarce. It seems like it's all or nothing. You've either got too much, which brings the price down, or just so scarce, you can't meet your quota. So naturally, that's very frustrating. Other than that, I don't mind getting up early. I love getting up early and getting it done so that I can work in my yard the rest of the day.

K.F.: Okay. Well let me ask you this. Why do people start picking crabs so early in the morning?

B.M.: That is -- I just answered your question there, I think. So that I can have the rest of the day to do the things that I want to do, not the things I have to do. You're working there because this is your living. The afternoon, I love to get out and, like in the spring, get your little transplants in. And I'm crazy about my yard. Rather do that than anything. But I think that is why that you start so early. It gives you the rest of the day to do the things that has to be taken care of.

K.F.: Now is that why people picked so early in the morning, you know, back in the 30's and 40's too?

B.M.: Yeah. Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah. It gave them time with their children and, you know, well then they had gardens. So naturally, the woman is the head of the house most of the time.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: Why is that?

B.M.: I think they take it upon themselves. It's like if you don't do it, you don't get it done.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: I find it that way.

K.F.: Yeah.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: And everything is so quiet, it's not --you have the time. You're not busy with the phones, you're not busy with customers, so you have that much

more time that you, yourself, can do it. And I think the pickers themselves want that. See.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: And also with the people that own the business, it gives them time to take care of their crabbers. By the time they get through with the picking, then they've got time to devote to the crabber that's bringing the crabs in. So many different things you have to do.

K.F.: Right, right. I always thought it was because it was cooler early in the morning, or something like that.

B.M.: Well that can be. That can be too, you know. But it's quieter, and they get used to it. I guess where the older ones are used to it that that gets the younger ones to do it also. And they find it out also with their children. They have more time to spend with them, to run in town and do their grocering. See.

K.F.: Okay. Well now you have been a crab picker and now you also run a picking plant, so you can see both sides of it.

B.M.: Both sides, yes.

K.F.: How have you come to appreciate say the work that Chan, Senior, and White and Nelson were doing as the owners?

B.M.: I've come to, by doing it myself, I've come to appreciate it much more deeply. You're devoted to it. And I know that when the crabs aren't coming in, I know what a problem the watermen are having, and what their families are going through. Because it's not always out there, you know, that you're making that much. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't. And it seems like that when they're getting a lot of crabs, then the price drops. So it can be very confusing. But I respect everything the watermen do. By me having my own business, I can see where they suffer a lot.

K.F.: Right. Now who do you usually buy your crabs from?

B.M.: My son usually sells them to me. Other than that, I buy them from P.T. Hamilton.

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

K.F.: Well let me ask you if you remember some of the strikes that happened in South Dorchester. I know there were some in the 50's. And there might've been one before you were born actually.

B.M.: Probably so. Yeah, I remember some of the strikes. But it seems that they don't last that long. They can't afford to stay, you know, off too long. But it seems like they get it together. It isn't like your big strikes, I don't think.

K.F.: Well what do you remember about the strikes? Do you remember anything?

B.M.: I don't remember too much about those strikes because I wasn't in the business at that time.

K.F.: You were working at the printing place then?

B.M.: At that time, I was -- I left in '62. But at that time, my husband wasn't a waterman, he was a truck driver. So I didn't pay that much attention to. But it bothered me, you know, when I didn't have the crabs to pick. But I was usually always there. In fact, I've opened up many a time for Rippins Brothers.

K.F.: Oh, really.

B.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: Okay. Well what do you think the visitors should know about crab picking when they come to the museum?

B.M.: What they should know about it. I think that a lot of the picking factories or plants are going out of business because of the lack of crabs. I think that the -- it stops, I believe, we usually stop around November because the crabs aren't here, you know, they drop off. I don't really know what to say about that. I like for them to see it, experience it. I think it's nice that they visit the plant to see how it's done. I'm very disappointed in the outdoor show that we have here.

K.F.: Oh, really. Why?

B.M.: Because they don't have the crab picking anymore. And I don't think much of the oyster. And I don't know why people doesn't want to take part in that. It seems like they have a job getting the people together. It seems like it's still today, they're embarrassed about being a crab picker.

K.F.: Why do you think that is?

B.M.: I don't know. To me, it's just their way of thinking. I'm proud to be one. I'm proud to know the art of it. Proud to show anyone how to do it. Because when you see them break 'em in two you think, you know --

K.F.: Or smash them with a hammer.

B.M.: Right, yeah, right. There was an article with Martha Stewart. She had this guy from Baltimore from the brick house, and he was showing her how to pick the crabs, and what he was doing was breaking 'em like that. And I thought gee, you ought to call me. I'll show you really how to pick it. Because that is really the right way. That's how they get the crab meat in the can, you know. So I think that, and I guess they really are, any visitor would be allowed into the plant to see what's going on.

K.F.: Yeah, I think they're going to set it up so that people can come in and sit in the chairs and --

B.M.: Oh, I would love that, I would love that.

K.F.: Hopefully, they'd be able to pick a crab.

B.M.: I would take time to show them. And they would walk away knowing more about it than they did when they came. Really would. I would love it.

K.F.: Now what do you think -- I know back in the 40's and 50's it was okay to bring kids into the crab house, and lots of people did it. What was it like with people's children in the crab house then?

B.M.: I don't really know because I didn't do it. I had -- my first, as I said, he was in the office, and I would go back and forth until the niece came down. And, of course, she watched him rest of the day, most of the time took him home. But I didn't do -- I didn't, you know, I didn't go through that.

I've seen it. But they take those big boxes that the cans came in at that time.

They brought their bed, and put `em in -- on another table or something.

They did what they had to do at that time. But that doesn't happen today.

K.F.: Yeah. A lot of women have said that they miss that, and that that is the reason why young people don't want to come into the house.

B.M.: I think it is. I think it is. If a child is 12, 11, 12, or even younger, because they grow up so quick, and they're taught to start cracking those claws, then they want to pick the crabs. It's not allowable. That is a lot why. Because they wait until they get older, and they don't have that enthusiasm about learning. I've said that all along. That's why the younger ones are ashamed of picking. They feel it's dirty or, you know, because they haven't been taught. It's like a crabber, like a child when you take him out on the boat. Usually follows his dad's footsteps. So same thing there. And usually if a child, especially a girl, has done this, cracking claws with her mom, then when she's 15, 14, 15, you know, I sneak in there, you know. I do it, I've got my money, I've made my money. Don't have to depend -- and then, as they grow older, they know how to do it, and they know how to make quick money.

K.F.: Why do you think it's mostly women who pick crabs?

B.M.: Well it is mostly women. It is. I don't know. I know I used to take my son in and get him to crack claws before he went to school. He never felt like he could get the smell off of him.

(Laughter.)

B.M.: He'll tell you that today. He didn't like it. And yet I had a brother, he was killed in an automobile accident, a fast claw cracker. He could whack them, and he loved doing it. He loved making extra money. And it's a lot of

your -- if you find a man, he doesn't usually pick crabs, but there's some will. But you find a man, he'll be a claw cracker, and it's because he did it when he was little.

K.F.: Yeah, I had just been curious why it was always women that were in the crab house picking the crab meat.

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Well that's -- you find one or two, but very seldom. I think they feel it's sissified or what, I really do.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: But it's following the mother, you know, following the mother and watching. And then I guess, you know, a mother really teaches you don't be in here picking, you know, be out and be on the water if you're interested in the crabs.

K.F.: Okay. I hadn't thought of that before.

B.M.: Yeah. Don't be a sissy. It does happen.

K.F.: Well you mentioned the smell, and that's always a big topic when we talk with crab pickers, the smell.

B.M.: Yeah, they're always so conscientious.

K.F.: What can you tell me about the smell the first time you went into the crab house?

B.M.: When I came home, I thought it was terrible. And when you're not around it, you really notice it. But I think today that people are more conscientious about taking a bath, And I don't notice it when I come in and take my shower and go in the doctor. I never hear anything. In fact, I have people say gee, what kind of perfume you have. Maybe it's the perfume I use that does it. But I have no problem with it. I have no problem with it. Some people use the same clothes over and over and over. I can see where that will get embedded. But if I have -- I don't wear the same clothes over and over and over.

K.F.: Okay. So you have a set of clothes for picking, and --

B.M.: Yeah. And I don't get dirty when I pick.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: A lot of people have it up their arms. They don't care how they throw it or how dirty they get. I am different about that. I'm forever wiping myself, my apron and all. But I've seen it go all the way up your arm, and around your titty, let it run your arm, you know, picking all day.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah. So that causes a lot of it. And the cleanliness is afterwards. But I haven't had a problem with it.

K.F.: Well I'm wondering if you can take me, like walk me through a day of you working here at your crab house plant.

B.M.: Would I?

K.F.: Yeah. How do -- when do you get up and start, and what's the first thing you do and all that kind of stuff

B.M.: Oh, of what I do.

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: Oh. First thing go out in the morning, I take and make sure my water's run, and I have all the carving in there that I need, have a double, maybe if I was out there I could show you.

K.F.: Do you want to go out there?

B.M.: Yeah, let's do that.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: Yeah, 'cause that is your first routine to make sure that's all accomplished.

(Off the record briefly.)

B.M.: I'll turn that radio off.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: First thing I do -- first thing I do, come in, turn the light on. I fill this with water or not, half full, and this one here. I have a bucket in here. This I take and dip my cans. See they're all sanitized.

K.F.: Now what do you use to sanitize?

B.M.: Bleach.

K.F.: Bleach.

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah, they said bleach is as good as anything. I used to get the chlorine like you put in the pool, but she said just a bottle of bleach is fine. And my cans have my name, and the health department number. And my daughter, she designed my cans.

K.F.: Wow.

B.M.: Notice what she did, she put --

K.F.: Fingers.

B.M.: Fingernails on it.

K.F.: Oh, that's great.

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

K.F.: That's a wonderful cup.

B.M.: And she did the lid, she did the lid. I'll show you one.

K.F.: Oh, that's great.

B.M.: Cute, isn't it?

K.F.: That's really cute. That's a good idea.

B.M.: Yeah, she passed it around the art department. The Saturday Evening Post put me in something about the fast things in life, you know. So it had a big claw in there and called it fast fingers where I had won one time there at Crisfield. And she passed this around the art department where she was working at this time, and that's what they chose was fast fingers. So that's my name today.

K.F.: That's great.

B.M.: So I take it and have a bucket here, have a bucket here. Sometimes I have two of `em in here. So it's all sanitized. And then I have a bucket over here that to wipe your cans, that's all sanitized. And then I have ice in here. And as I weigh my meat, it is put in there. Most of your places -- a guy gave this to me from Baltimore, and I love it. They take and put it in the boxes, but this, it has the -- pardon, I just brought this back from Florida with me. Have a hose from there, it runs on down there, it goes into the septic. See.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: So then at the end of the day, I take that out and then I put it in the box.

K.F.: Right, okay.

B.M.: Okay. So I take and sign my papers up there as to what time I start, and what time I put the first batch and everything. So I have all this in order, and what my cooler is, the temperature.

K.F.: And that's all for HASIP?

B.M.: Yes. Yes. And then I take and go and I put my crabs on the table, and then I start picking.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: And this is the cooler I have here, this is my hot water tank.

K.F.: Wow, that's a pretty big cooler.

B.M.: So I check the temperature there outside, and this here is my steamer. I have a crate that goes in here. That's the furnace. Keep my boxes, and then my cans we pick in. And then they're transported over here to a bigger garbage can. And then it's taken out here. And then these are the steamed crabs. And there to the live crabs, that's a cooler out there. And these are the pallets we have inside to keep the crabs from off the floor. He's putting plastic around there now. And we take and haul the garbage pails out there, and then they're taken to the garbage, I mean -- yeah, to the trash in Golden Hill.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Now how many people do you have who just come like driving by and see your sign and want to buy a pound of crab meat or something?

B.M.: They just walk up here and knock. And they'll stay out here. And they're clean, you know, so I invite them. If they want to come and watch me pick the crabs, fine.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: Oh, and there's my ice machine here, which is quite a large one. That's the bottom.

K.F.: Wow.

B.M.: Still got ice in it. So that's about it.

K.F.: This is a pretty amazing set-up. Did you guys have to design this yourself?

B.M.: Yes. And it would've been --

K.F.: And did you build it yourself, or did you have somebody come in?

B.M.: I had it built, yeah. And it would've been much easier, because my land at that time only went just about where the cooler is now. And a week after I put this cooler in, the man sold me the property for \$10,000. Just that little bit of property, 10,000.

K.F.: Right, this little strip here.

B.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah.

K.F.: Geez.

B.M.: So that's what it took. And we built that driveway in here so it all, it made it nicer, so that the trailer, you can't see it from there, but you can see it from this end, is the trailer I was saying that perhaps I might see if I could get a couple Mexicans.

K.F.: Right.

B.M.: So we'll see about that and see how everything goes this winter. Is there anything else you wanted to know about this?

K.F.: Can I take a picture of you in the picking room?

B.M.: Oh, sure, sure. Let me move this.

K.F.: Now earlier you said you really liked running your own business. What do you like about running your own business?

B.M.: Well at my age now is I'm home. Although home takes so much out of everything I think, you know. Too much everything. I'd rather -- it was nice working away from home and then coming back. You want light on or anything?

K.F.: No, I'm fine.

B.M.: Okay. But I love having my own business. I love meeting the people. I like when they congratulate me on my meat. So it's a good feeling. Lot of responsibility, but I can accept that.

K.F.: Yeah. Okay. Are you ready?

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

K.F.: There we go.

(Off the record briefly.)

B.M.: -- could've got here when they was picking.

K.F.: Well when do you usually start up?

B.M.: This year I stated in April, but then everything went haywire, you couldn't get the crabs.

K.F.: Oh, right, right.

B.M.: And it did the same thing last year. But I don't think I'm even going to start in April this year. It's so hard to get started, but yet you have to get started in order to be there, to be moving your meat.

K.F.: Right.

B.M.: Yeah. They want your product, you know, and if it's a little bit, it's best to be in there. Right? You understand that?

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: Because they're -- you know, why not. Of course, I have t.v. out here, but I listen, I don't look. But anything else, ma'am?

K.F.: Well I love all the crabs that you have hanging around.

B.M.: Oh, do you? This is -- my daughter sent me this.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: That's a really great one.

B.M.: Isn't it? She said mom -- she's getting older. She'll be 50 Christmas. But taking care of the pool, taking care of the flowers, it really is a lot. This is where I have my Christmas parties. I have everything out there. And I'm trying to get ready, I go to the grave. Everything pulled out. Got to get all of this cut down. It's really been rough because I've not been able to walk right. But thank God I'm able to a little bit now. I take everything down. Everything out of these rooms downstairs, everything off the walls, pack it up and put Christmas out. Crazy, aren't I?

K.F.: Well my mom does the same thing.

B.M.: Oh, does she?

K.F.: Oh, yeah.

B.M.: Do you live in St. Michaels?

K.F.: No, I don't. Actually, I live on the Western Shore.

B.M.: Oh, do you?

K.F.: Close to Washington, and I come out here about, I don't know, three times a month and do the work for the museum. And my husband works close to Washington so we have to kind of stay close to there.

B.M.: Oh, do you? Yeah.

K.F.: Well I was wondering --

B.M.: These are -- did you see the trophies?

K.F.: I was just going to ask you about those.

B.M.: I don't know if we can get in here or not. I was in the process of trimming my tree, and I had this all straight, and I want to get my wreath up over there, but I didn't get it. And I took my clock down. Was real cute. My son gave me. Where did I put that? Let me put that back up there. You want to take a picture?

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

B.M.: All right, honey, let me put this back up. He gave me this, it's a lighthouse, he gave me that just before he died. It won't look so terrible.

K.F.: Can you get it up there?

B.M.: I think so.

K.F.: Now are these all the trophies from crab picking?

B.M.: Yes, uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

K.F.: Wow.

B.M.: Yes, this was my first one. This one, I -- this was Senator Malkus', yeah, it was sponsored by W.T. Ruark, but it was Senator Malkus' trophy. And I had to fight for that twice.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Yes.

K.F.: Why?

B.M.: Because it was a tie the first time. And the second time, I lost the crab, and I had a short dress on, green dress, and I had blue panties on, and I had to crawl under the table to get the crab, come back. And I won it.

(Laughter.)

B.M.: So these are first place. And this is Rippins, my son caught that off the coast of North Carolina. And he wanted a sailfish, and right after he caught this, he got the sailfish, but you were only allowed to have `em out of the water so long. So he had to keep it, so he gave that to me.

K.F.: So there are several different crab-picking contests then besides the one in Crisfield.

B.M.: Yes. This is the one I started, was in Cambridge.

K.F.: Oh, do they still have that one?

B.M.: Yes. They have started, but they didn't have it this year I was disappointed because I'm always a judge there. They just started it there at Sailwinds. And they started it three years ago. But this year they didn't have it.

K.F.: When did they have it?

B.M.: When?

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: This year, they had it around the 4th of July weekend, week. Bay Country Festival it's called. So that's when it was started. This is my first one. And they needed another girl. They were waiting for someone to come in from Crisfield. And Patty Todd said to me, Betty Lou, you know how to pick crabs. Come on. My husband said to me you got your knife in your purse, do it. No way could you ever get me up there. I said no, no, no. So they finally couldn't get nobody, and Patty said come on, you can use \$25, you can win third place, win 25. So I finally, they got me to do it, and I came in first.

K.F.: And what was prize money for first?

B.M.: Hundred.

K.F.: Wow.

B.M.: Patty said I bet I don't ask nobody again. Because see the Crisfield girl showed up finally. And so that took the \$25 away from Patty.

K.F.: Oh.

(Laughter.)

B.M.: So that was -- this was from the Jaycees too. And anyway, the next year I went to Crisfield. And I think the first or the -- first time I think it was I won down there I took it away from a girl that had it a long while. She's dead now. A very nice colored lady. And I think the third time is when I won. And I lacked a half an ounce from picking five pounds in 15 minutes.

K.F.: Wow.

B.M.: I don't know how I did it. But I was up to Alexandria, Virginia last week visiting my son, and he pulled out the paper. I've still got -- I used to have `em in the picking room, but the health department told me to take `em out.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: So I did. But that was how I got started.

K.F.: Now do you always carry your knife in your purse?

B.M.: No.

(Laughter.)

B.M.: I just happened to have it that time. Yeah, just happened to have it at that time.

K.F.: Let me ask you about your knives. How many knives do you have?

B.M.: I have several, but I have one that I pick with. Usually you get used to one, and then like the next year if you feel, well, maybe that's getting too

thin, I like a little bit more of a blade on the end of it than I do with not because it breaks up your lump.

K.F.: Oh, can you show me your knife?

B.M.: You have to walk out with me again.

K.F.: Okay.

B.M.: Or let me run out and get it, all right?

K.F.: All right.

B.M.: All right.

(Off the record briefly.)

B.M.: This is the one that I'm picking with now. See that has that kind of blade.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

B.M.: This has got a little bit too thin for me. See what I'm talking about?

K.F.: Right. That's the tip.

B.M.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). When I get that piece of lump, it will like come halfway through it. Like this here. Some prefer this kind of a knife. It has a sharper -- but I like the Murphy or the Carvel Hall. And this is a new one.

Put out by Japan, I think.

K.F.: Really?

B.M.: Can you read it? Carvel Hall.

K.F.: Says Morty the Knife Man, stainless steel.

B.M.: Yeah. These are my two best ones.

K.F.: Wow, okay.

B.M.: It was a Murphy, I don't know.

K.F.: This is Marty the Knife Man.

B.M.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*). Both of them are. They're my best ones.

K.F.: Never heard of that one before.

B.M.: I didn't. I just got that last year.

K.F.: Wow, let me get a picture of those too, if you can just hold `em. I have one that's like that one from Carvel Hall. They gave it to me. I went down there to talk to `em.

B.M.: Oh, you have this one?

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: And this is Carvel Hall.

K.F.: Okay. Is there any difference in their weight, or how they hold up or anything like that?

B.M.: There is a difference in the sharpness, in how it holds the sharpness. And this is the way they usually come real thick, like that. And you file it down.

K.F.: What do you use to file it down?

B.M.: I usually have someone do it for me, and I don't know what they use. I have a grinder out there that has different ones, and I've tried it, and I think that I finally got that one too much so. But that is the kind of knife I like better.

K.F.: Okay. Well what can you tell me about the contest, Betty Lou? What's it like to be in a picking contest?

B.M.: Very frustrating. I get very anxious, I think overly-excited. And I get there, and my leg is just going like that. And I keep thinking what my mom said. Handle it like a hot potato.

K.F.: What does that mean?

B.M.: Get it picked, get it picked, get it over with, go on to the next one. And that is the way, just keep your mind on picking it, picking it right, and going to the next one. You can get like a softy crab, you know, and it will break up in your hands, frustrating. And it's very frustrating in a contest.

K.F.: Right.

B.M.: And I think that in a contest, that everyone should be -- that donates the crabs, or if they're bought, and usually they're donated, I think they should care enough to make sure that we have good crabs.

K.F.: Right. Which are hard to come by these days.

B.M.: Right, right. But I think that anyone that's donating them, and they're going to have someone picking `em out for the contest, they should think about us and how we feel when we get a bad crab. It would really hold you up. It can really ruin your whole contest. That sun is blinding.

K.F.: Yeah.

B.M.: But I know I would, if I was getting for a contest, they would have the best ones that I could get. Anything else?

K.F.: I don't think so. Let me --

B.M.: I'm so glad I didn't have to cancel it. I was so worried here, so worried.

K.F.: Well I thought I would have to because I had the flu.

B.M.: Oh, did you?

K.F.: But I started feeling a little better, you know.

B.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: And I figured I'd had it for a couple days, so I don't think I can give it to you.

B.M.: Oh, don't worry about it, honey. I've had the shot. So I'm not worried about that at all.

K.F.: Okay. Well I can't think of anything right now that I need to ask you, but I might have something come to me next week.

B.M.: If you do, feel free to call me. I don't mind at all.

K.F.: Okay, I definitely will. And I'd like to come back in the spring when you're operating and see how this works.

B.M.: You have an invitation, yes.

K.F.: Great, great. Now I have a good place to come get my crab meat too.

B.M.: Okay, honey. Good, good, good.

K.F.: One thing that we do when we interview people for the museum is we have a form for you to fill out so that we can put this tape in the archives.

And what did I do with my pen? So I'll have you fill this out. Then all I need is you to write your name here, and sign your name here and fill out all this stuff as well. And next August, the museum is going to have -- well every year they have a crab festival. And next year what they want to do is invite some of the women that I've talked with to come to the museum, talk to visitors about picking crabs, but also show people how to pick crabs.

B.M.: Okay, I would love it.

K.F.: And so I would like to ask you if you'd be interested in doing that.

B.M.: I would love it, I would love it.

K.F.: Well I think they would love you.

B.M.: Just hoping to God that, you know, nothing fails, that we can do so.

K.F.: Yes, right.

B.M.: I would love it.

K.F.: Exactly.

B.M.: Yeah `cause I know when they had the 50th anniversary down Crisfield, it was something wrong with my car at that time. I'll come get you, I'll bring you back. They just wanted me there. Made me feel good. But I got everything straight. Today is the second, isn't it?

K.F.: Yes, unbelievable.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)