

Interview Log**Interviewee:** Janice Marshall**Tape #:** OH144**Interviewer:** Kelly Feltault**# of Tapes:** 1**Date:** April 12, 2000**# of Sides:** 2**Location:** Smith Island, Maryland**Topic:** Crab Picking Project**Corresponding Photography Log #:****Comments:** Phonetic spellings: Lowell Stoltsfas, Liton,

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: Okay, if I could have you say your name, Janice.

J.M.: My name is Janice Marshall.

K.F.: Great. And we're going to talk about crab picking today, and we're sitting in your crab co-op.

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: Well let's start a little before the crab co-op began. And, briefly, if you can tell me about when you were born and where.

J.M.: Okay. I was born on Yule. That's the other part of Smith Island. I was born there. They used to have a doctor's home there. But I've lived in Tylerton all my life. I've never had another home except Tylerton, except for two years while my husband was in the Army in North Carolina. But other than that, we've always lived on Smith Island, we've always depended on the bay for our living.

K.F.: Right. Can I ask what year you were born?

J.M.: I was born in 1945.

K.F.: Just at the end of the war then.

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: Okay, all right. Well before the tape was turned on, we were talking about getting the co-op started and stuff, and can you tell me a little bit about how the women's economic, I guess, importance here on the island, how that started before the co-op, and what it has meant for women here to be able to earn a living?

J.M.: On your trip here, I guess you might realize how isolated Smith Island is. So it would figure that if women want to work, it's not too many career options.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: So, you know, if you don't want to work in seafood, you're sunk anyway.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: And over the years, women have found out that working with seafood, that is picking crabs, crab meat, it helped provide a little extra money for the family. Well, you know, everybody started looking forward to summertime coming because they knew crabs would be crawling, it would be some nice crabs, pick some crab meat, sell to your mainland friends and family. That's how it started, and make a little extra money. Maybe save up for Christmas, school clothes, whatever. And women realized it was such a strain, you know, getting by on Smith Island because it used to be only the watermen would do the work. The women stayed home and tend the family. It's pretty much still that way today, but the women have found a way to market this crab meat when they found out everybody kept wanting crab meat. You know, it started becoming a little business.

Excuse me, I'll go turn this ice machine off That's going to come on hard in a minute.

K.F.: Okay.

(OFF RECORD BRIEFLY.)

J.M.: Women discovered they could make a little bit of money in the summer. It started being a little encouragement, you know, give `em a little bit of freedom. Because I remember when I was a little girl, no women ever drove cars because for one thing, you couldn't *afford* to have one on the mainland. And I thought that was the greatest thing. And one thing picking has done for women, I think it's made `em have a feeling of

independence, of being a help in the family, and it's give `em the chance for that extra money to buy a car on the mainland. And most women now have cars on the mainland.

K.F.: Their own cars?

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Well family cars, but picking has provided these things that once was not possible. And over the years, I guess, you know, women would say well if I pick so and so pounds last year, I think I'm going to try to pick more this year. And each year, it just started to develop, and as mainland friends and family would get this crab meat, they'd say to their neighbor, would you like to try a pound of this? You know, well the neighbor would try it. They'd say gee, that was good, could you get me five pounds the next time you get it? And then their neighbor would say to their family and friends, and it was just developed into a business like that, just by word of mouth.

It was not meant to be a big commercial thing, but just a little something here that, with no career options available, that the women started saying, hey, here's something I can do, and I think it'll be nice. And they only didn't pick the crab meat. Once they picked it, they knew who that crab meat was going to. And the people that was receiving that crab meat knew who it was coming from, so there made a little bit different thing here. The women said this is my crab meat, they know who's picking it. So, you know, it's going to be the best you can get. And I believe that's how it developed into the business because not only did they want to pick the crab meat to make the money, but they took the pride in the product they were putting out. So I think that's how it evolved.

K.F.: And do you remember the time before women were picking crabs and helping out their husbands? I mean were you growing up at that time?

J.M.: Yes. That's when it was first starting to get, you know, when I was a little girl, it was not a lot for women to do. And I don't think they had realized that there was a little option there because it used to be legal picking houses in Yule. It was two picking houses, crab picking houses. So when the men would come in, the male jimmy crabs that we pick, you know, the hard shell crabs, a buyer would come down and buy `em so the men were still getting the money for their crabs. And that -- but when two or three started picking and found out your neighbor made \$50 this week picking a few pounds of crab meat, well you know, by word of mouth, everybody says well I think I can do it. It was a long time before I even tried it because for one thing, it was hard work and it was hard to learn. But once you get the hang of it, you're hooked for life.

K.F.: Well now you opened that door, so let me ask you how did you learn, and what pushed you into learning? I mean --

J.M.: It's so funny. Yes, my elderly neighbor, her name is Miss Margaret, she had a daughter the same age as me. When we were teenagers, she would pick crab meat in the summer, not a lot, but she would get orders for this crab meat. And I think way back then, it was only like 50 cents, 75 cents a pound is all she was getting. That was a lot of hard work. But, you know, it was good work for her and she was earning extra money. So that's what I remember starting. But as I was, you know, I was an early married woman with a young family, and you can always use extra income then. And I told my husband, I said bring me a bushel of them crabs, I'm gonna try picking.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: Which was funny in the beginning, because I didn't know how to get in the crab. So I went over to her, I said you know, I had to get the right kind of knife. I was just using a regular table knife that you put butter on bread with, that's what I was using. That was very bulky. But after a while, I got the hang of it, and it's not hard to learn, it's just a little trick to learning it, and like I say, once you start it, you're hooked. Don't ever sell a pound of crab meat, or you'll be here picking too.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: Because once you sell that first pound, that's the encouragement. And that's what started giving women their feeling of worthiness. Even though they were always hard-working women, toughest women in the world lives here, you know, making do for a family. But still, they weren't earning their own income. And I think it's something about that, even though you're doing your part in the family, if you're not earning that extra income to help out, you don't feel like you're doing much even though you are.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: But that's what picking did for Smith Island. And I believe it helped, you know, our economic background. Because I remember when I was young, we couldn't go and do things. We didn't have cars on the mainland. Of course, they didn't have malls then, but we didn't go shopping either. I don't remember going shopping anywhere when I was little. Only to Crisfield to pick up what we need. So it's improved, I believe, our quality of life here on the island. It's allowed us to have modern conveniences like everywhere else. And plus we live on Smith Island, which is a big plus, because I'm very proud of where I was born and raised. I love living here. It's a good place to live. The only drawback was, you know, if you didn't want to work in seafood, you've had it. But I look forward to crab season. I mean I'm getting antsy now. I'm ready to start picking.

K.F.: Right. Well let me ask you this. I know some of the men oyster, or used to oyster quite a bit.

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: How come a shucking house never started?

J.M.: It used to be years ago when it was a lot of oysters in the bay and sound, it was some shucking houses on Smith Island. It was two or three I remember in my lifetime. But I think the shucking houses kind of went away when the oysters started dying. When disease started getting into oysters, and they weren't doing good, then the shucking houses couldn't get the oysters because the men, most of the time, left home and went on up to the head of the bay to work. And that's what, you know, that's why it's not been a lot of oyster houses around here. And quite frankly, I don't want to learn to shuck. Do you, Louise?

SPEAKER: Picking's enough.

J.M.: Picking's --

(Laughter.)

J.M.: We thought about that once, you know, if the men wanted to turn this into an oyster house in the winter.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: We had thought about that when we built it. Everything's here that they'd need. But like I say, we've not been to the position yet that it's been enough to -- that the men wanted to get into that business. And our island, the population is steady dwindling. It

h goes down every year. And the older people like this way of living, but the younger people are looking to mainland jobs for the security, for one thing. You know, watermen don't know what they're going to make from one week to the next. They don't know how long a season's going to be in between each like crabbing and oystering. And there's no retirement, no special benefits. And so I think that looks better to the young people too.

K.F.: And we were talking a bit about the politics of starting this crab plant. And in reading some of these articles, I had gotten the impression that the head of the health department at the time, Mr. Sabatini --

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: He seemed to be very against having anything here on the island.

J.M.: You know, I don't know what to say about Mr. Sabatini. Looking back, I can't believe he pursued how he did, the project. I don't want to say anything negative, but at one while there, he made my life very miserable. I mean he threatened with lawsuits, jail, high fines up to \$5,000 a day. I mean these are some of the threats. And you come to Smith Island, you've seen our isolation, how hard it is to get building materials, you know, it took a while to get this building here. It was a lot of hard work. And we needed a lot of time to do it in. You know, like he would give you 90 days to get set up. Yeah, sure. If you've got plenty of money. We had to look for money. We didn't have the money to begin.

And to this day, I can't understand why it was done in that manner. Because you've seen some -- I've kept these newspaper articles over the years. They're funny to me now. I can look back and laugh at `em. But, you know, I mean, State threatens Smith Island Crab Pickers. It's funny now. But it weren't funny then because the state, his office was very threatening. And I know the year that we started this, crab meat had been confiscated off the depot in Crisfield, off the island ferry, two or three times that year.

And it hadn't been my crab meat, you know, but I was just holding my breath. We were afraid to even send it over. And one day, low and behold, I get on the boat with my box of crab meat and go on to Crisfield, and there they are waiting. Health Department. And make a long story short, they got me that day. And soon as they did, you know, it didn't come home to me because it's other people's crab meat being took that day, them other days that nobody said anything. But the day mine was took, it come to me. You know, this is what you've come to depend on, this is why you're able to live and stay on the island. This is coming to an end right here today and now because they've got you. That's the very thing come to my mind. And, you know, a way of living, you depend on. It'd be like telling a farmer he can't sell his tomatoes. So I just called our state senator, Lowell Stoltzfus. He told me everything I didn't want to hear.

K.F.: Like what?

J.M.: He said -- I thought he was going to tell me well, you know, being you're over there, you can't help your circumstances, go ahead and pick, I'll fix it.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: That's what I wanted him to say. But he said well, Janice, you know, the laws -- the State of Maryland says what you're doing is illegal, even though it's the best crab meat in the world, it is illegal. I can't help you stay illegal, but I'm going to do everything I can,

if you want to, to go legal. There was the beginning. That's where we started with them few words. And he did, he stuck with the project the whole way.

K.F.: Right. Now what did the health department do to you that day at the dock?

J.M.: That day they took the box, I had put it on my father's, step-father's truck to take it to my mother's house. They lived on the mainland. And they just took it out of the truck. And I asked for a search warrant. They said they didn't need one. You know, I even had packages going back to Sears that day. They had gone through them. I mean it was very, very invasive. And to this day why I didn't pursue it, I don't know. You know, you don't think -- foresight is a lot harder than -- hindsight is easy. But I felt very violated that day. You know, that was mine. I hadn't sold it to any commercial places. This was going to all family and friends that had been buying over the years. And they just took it and went with it. I never did hear anything from it, the state never offered to pay for that crab meat. I never did know the going of it or anything else. But we had a slight confrontation on the depot. I threatened to throw the health department man overboard. (Laughter.)

J.M.: And DNR, the DNR police department, the Natural Resources Police was there, I guess to make sure nothing went on. And I asked the DNR policeman. I said if I accidentally bump this man and knock him overboard, can you arrest me? He said well if it was an accident -- I said it's an accident, here he goes. But he moved just in time. (Laughter.)

J.M.: I mean I was bad. But you know, when your way of life is threatened, you fight back.

K.F.: Right, right.

J.M.: So the fight got in me, I guess. I don't have that fight left anymore. If it happened again, I don't have the fight for it. You know, I mean it just took a lot out of me. I learned a lot over the years. It's brought a lot of publicity to our island. You know, I think it's made people realize that we're not bad people living here. We're just trying to make a living and do it on our own with what we have here.

K.F.: Right, right.

J.M.: So if nothing else, I think it showed people that we are willing to work with whatever we have. It's a lot of people and a lot of places that's not. So but we got a lot of help, and we asked the Lord to help us a lot of times, and he come through many times. The first time we went to meet with a business advisor because we didn't know where to start. I don't even know where the word co-op come from in my head. I believe the Lord put it there, because I didn't know anything about a co-op, how they operated or anything. But I figured if we're going to do something, we've got to get some money somewhere 'cause we didn't have the money. And I'll tell you how naive we were. We thought we were going to put this building here for about \$60,000.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: Which is so funny now. It ended up costing 300,000. But that was not our fault either. You know, with state regulations and health department rules, you have to do what they say. And the price kept escalating. You know, you just couldn't do it. And I told our business advisor, I said we have got to find grant money somewhere. He said you'll never find it. He said you can't do it. Profit-making business does not qualify for grant money. I said well I figure the State of Maryland has put us out of work. We're an

isolated island, that's all we had here. We're minorities. All we are is women. We don't have the money to do it. We need to start looking. He said well we'll start looking, but I don't think you're going to get it. So Dan Keene and his professor to the college in Princess Anne wrote our first grant. First one come back. We were expecting 20 to \$30,000. First one come back, 155,000. Now you tell me that weren't a miracle.

K.F.: Well now what was that day like when you heard about it?

J.M.: Well I just about dropped dead. You know, I weren't expecting that. And our business advisor, you know, said you'll never get it, but we'll try. So you tell me if that was a miracle or not. First one. Well that weren't the only one we needed, honey, we had to go other places. And we ended up, I think, 84,000. The State pitched in. And 4,500 another group put in. I can't remember `em all now, it's been a while. Plus the ladies had to put in 4,000 a year, and then we had to borrow some to finish it. But this year is our last year paying on the loan.

K.F.: Wow, so this is it, and then you really own it.

J.M.: Yeah. So you've got 15 women, you know, banded together. It weren't easy. You take women that's been used to working on their own in their own houses independently, and one summer you throw them all together in one room to pick their crabs. It was very hard.

K.F.: Why don't you tell me a little bit about what it was like before the co-op to be picking at home, and then what that first summer was like.

J.M.: Well the co-op -- I don't know if walking around, I should've showed you, pointed out some little back yard sheds. We call `em outhouses on Smith Island. We figure that's why the state got after us. But what they really are, they're back yard sheds on an underpinning, because the land is so low here. It would be equivalent of a mainland garage is what it is. So give you an idea. So every woman had their own back yard shed. And they would steam their own crabs every evening, they would go out there in their own little place and pick with their own radio, their own t.v., whatever they wanted to watch. It was theirs. That's how life was, you know.

And we were around home, we were close to home. If you wanted to put supper on, if you wanted to put a load of clothes in to wash, you were there to tend to it. And that's how picking was. I mean you pretty well worked on your own. And getting this place up and running, you know, it was very hard. We had never done anything like this before. And the first year was very hard for everybody because nobody wanted to be here, including me. You know, a change is very hard for anybody, including me. I did not want to change. So we'll start with me first. And, you know, you take putting everybody here together, and nobody wanted to be here in the first place. There was a lot of tension. And it took a year or two to get used to it, and to get used to each other. And now it was like we couldn't wait to get down every evening to see what everybody had to say, what they had for supper, what their husbands did that day, what their youngens had done that day. You know, and it ended up being like a -- even though we're working, we're socializing too. It brought us closer. So something that caused a lot of heartache and, what else could I say, I don't know, it just separated us for a while. But eventually has brought us together, I do believe. And we were talking last year if we had to go back to picking in our old sheds like we used to, we wouldn't want to.

K.F.: Really?

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative). So that's how far we've got. And I think it's a success story right there. Because we didn't know how we were going to start the business and run it 'cause everybody wanted to pick their own husband's crabs, they wanted to sell to who they wanted to sell to like they always have. So how you gonna do that?

K.F.: How did you manage that?

J.M.: Well we've tried every way in the world. How were we going to steam all these crabs? And the health department didn't like it much, but we come up with the only solution we could come up with, 'cause you can't dump everybody's crabs in a big basket, you know. And you've got to know which ones yours, so when they're brought in, we steam 'em in the basket, put our name on it. That way, everybody gets to pick their own crabs, you get to sell to your own customers. Very simple. And every pound that's picked, every lady that picks here, everything is done on the honor system. They do their own bookkeeping. At the end of the week, they tally up how many pounds they've picked, and for every pound of crab meat I pick, I pay \$2 to the co-op. So if I pick 100 pound one week, the co-op gets \$200 of my money. That's how we run the business. And it's proved to be very successful. And I was to a meeting in Princess Anne, Dan Keene, the one that wrote the first grant, he was telling these people, he said well this is our fifth year, which is unusual for a co-op 'cause most of 'em fail after the first year, believe it or not.

K.F.: Oh, really?

J.M.: Yeah. You know, so that was another thing against us. But we're entering our fifth season, and he told these people gathered there, this is the only co-op that I know of pays their bank notes three months in advance. So I think we're paid up 'til May or June. (Laughter.)

J.M.: We tried to get everything paid, you know, before the winter months because we're not working, so we're ready to start up again. And we worry about getting behind. So that's, I think that's taking pride in your business when you want to keep your bills paid up on time.

K.F.: How much of it do you think is really -- you've got to live through for this season, and then I had one person describe it to me, somebody on Chincoteague, say that summer was like you had to breath in very deeply, because in the fall you were going to have to hold it until May.

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: How much do you --

J.M.: It's very much like that because it's hard. You know, you have to budget your money to last from one season to the next. Now the last time I picked a crab was in October of last year. Now that's been a long time.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: Until June probably's when we start, sometime in June. And we go from June through October is the best of it. You know, and it's not a very long season, and everybody just goes upon life and death trying to do what they can do to make the money in that little allotted time, which is not a long time, but we end up doing it. And young people have a hard job with that. You know, I guess it takes living here a while and learning that to be able to do that. And it's hard for young people to even think about

doing it, especially with families and the obligations they have now. But can you imagine your check not coming every week or every two weeks? Maybe getting paid five months out of the year, and the rest of the year, you work and don't get a cent.

K.F.: Well since I became an independent contractor, that's about how my life is.

J.M.: Yeah, well, yeah. You understand. It's very hard.

K.F.: Time things, and budgeting.

J.M.: Yeah. And sometimes, you know, you wonder if it's worth it or not. But then when the season comes in, you know, you got a job, you're ready to go.

K.F.: That's right. That's right.

J.M.: But it's not too many young people, you know, wants to live like that. They want to know what they're going to get every week, you know, and what they can depend on. And still, the water business is not dependable. You know, we're ready for crab season. We don't know if it's going to be a plentiful year or a scarce year.

K.F.: Right. Well I was going to ask you about, you know, the crabs have been falling off the last couple years.

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: How's that been affecting you all here?

J.M.: Well we've not really felt it so much here. I don't know if it's because we don't go into it big like other places do. A lot of, you know, places go into these really expensive big rigs to get ready, but I don't think we've experienced it here. Now we were off slightly year before last, but that's because we lost two pickers, you know. So, you know, our production has stayed pretty much the same over the years. So I've not really noticed that much. Now the quality sometimes is not there. Some years, crabs stay good and fat and big the whole year, and then sometimes they're not good at all. But for the most part --

K.F.: I think you're probably the only crab house that's still picking only Maryland crabs.

J.M.: I wouldn't doubt that.

K.F.: Now everybody's importing from Carolina stuff now --

J.M.: Yeah. See we couldn't understand why the state made us do this because we are such a small business. You know, it's very small compared to anybody. And even if we wanted to import crabs in from, say, South or North Carolina, can you imagine us doing that? How are we gonna do it? You don't get in a truck, go down and get `em and drive `em here. It would be so much handling. The crabs would probably be dead before you even got `em to Smith Island. So that was another thing we had to consider. Because once you go and get `em in a truck, they still -- took off the truck, put on a boat, took off the boat, put on a truck -- so where we are, it just don't -- it's not logical to even consider it.

K.F.: Right. Well tell me about the other four women that helped you start this.

J.M.: I had to beat `em up, sign a paper. No. Nobody wanted to start this co-op, including me. But after checking with the lawyer and all, how do you start a co-op and things like that, he said well you've got to have five people willing to sign and say I'm going to be a member of this co-op. I didn't know that. So I signed, I was ready to sign. Well my daughter, you know she was gonna sign or you know what would happen to her. Then the other one was my sister-in-law. But the other two were not related, and they

come in willingly. So that's how it got started. It was hard for them to put their name on that. It was a lot of hard work, a lot of trips across the sound to meet with people, and you weren't getting paid for that work, you know. Four years of a lot of hassle. And, plus, I had to do all the dealing with the health department. I would get the calls from Nelson Sabatini and Alan Taylor and all of `em. And, you know, it was just hard because we had to call our Senator, you know, to call Nelson Sabatini and say look, these women's doing everything they can do, they just can't get it done when you say. And that's what I never could understand, why it was done like that after they knew we were working hard as we could do to do everything we could do. So I don't know.

K.F.: I don't know. Some of the articles I read, I just kept thinking, gosh, I mean I guess I had the same thing, anybody who would sort of know Smith Island would think gosh, has he never been there, has he never --

J.M.: I don't know if he had or not. You know, I really don't know if he had been here or not. But that was the hardest part for me to understand.

K.F.: Well you were describing some of the difficulties of trying to get materials here to work on a building. Can you tell me about building this building and renovating it a bit?

J.M.: This building we're in now used to be a little store, like a little grocery store, sandwich shop. Well it hadn't been used for a long time. And this was the ideal location. This is where we wanted to put our co-op. But it seemed like when we started, you know, with government regulations and you're using government money, they have their rules and regulations to go by too. So they would rather for us to find another site. And the one they approved was further down the road. This is all landfill. Like dredge spoil, when they would dredge channels, this is where it would be put. And I guess you could say it's not really that solid ground under it. So when we started, the government said, you know, if you're going to use our money, you've got to build according to our standards. Well the first thing they had soil testers come and started testing the soil. Well you can imagine what it was like. So the first word come back, it's going to have to go on pilings down in the ground. How deep? Well you're going to have to have timber pilings say 30 to 40 feet. Well the second soil test come in. Well you'll probably need concrete pilings, 40 to 60 feet.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I mean these are the kind of things I was dealing with at the time. And plus, Nelson Sabatini and the health department. I mean they were, it seemed, impossible at the time, some of the things I was hearing. And me, I'm not trained in business. I'd never done anything like this. You know, you can imagine how overwhelmed at times I was. But finally, you know, with the help of the architect, she said look, this building's been here. It's been standing I forget how many years, it's not the same foundation it's been on. It's not shown any signs of deterioration. Why not let `em renovate this and use it? Well there's another miracle. They said yeah. Go ahead.

K.F.: Wow.

J.M.: So that, you know, when you're using government money and get that kind of approval, that's a miracle too. So that's how we began. But it was a lot of headache to begin with. Then we had to go to the process of finding a contractor. And a lot of contractors put in bids a lot cheaper, but they had never been to Smith Island. So they didn't know what they were dealing with. And when we did the bid openings, I asked

them to consider who they picked, not necessarily the cheapest, but the one that's most familiar. So thank the Lord, another miracle happened. They picked a contractor out of Crisfield that was familiar, you know. I mean it was one miracle after the other. And that's how we got started. So we were more satisfied somebody in Crisfield knew the island, knew what it was going to take to get materials here. `Cause one contractor, the lady called me, she was putting in a bid for her company. And she said well how will we get our concrete trucks over to dump the floor? I said no way. You won't.
(Laughter.)

J.M.: She said well we have to. We'll get a barge. I said well, you know, you're talking a lot of money to get a barge to bring a concrete truck two or three times a day. But they bought their own portable equipment, and here we have it. A lot of times things seemed impossible. And when we started this project, I didn't dream we'd have a nice place like this. And it is state of the art. I mean everything is so nice.

K.F.: How did you envision it?

J.M.: Well I just envisioned it a little place that we'd come in, and sit and pick, and leave and little dull place. You know, I didn't envision the nice white walls, and the nice lights, and the nice floor, and the nice tables we have and plenty of room to work. I just couldn't see it at the time. So that's one thing turned out nice. And this building is always here for my community. That's one thing. If crab picking was to die out, it's always here. Maybe something, you know, could come about. And that's what I'm hoping. And I think through this co-op coming here, it's been so much publicity, a lot of people have offered different ways of making a living. Nothing's ever come to be yet, but we're looking into different possibilities.

K.F.: Like what?

J.M.: Well one man wanted us to do gun locks, which we were excited about doing. I'd like to do gun locks to make guns safer. But it didn't work out because he wanted us to try to find the money to do the marketing and all this. So it's his product, he can market it. We just make the locks. So that didn't workout. And then another guy wanted us to make fishing lures. Well he come try to teach us that. Well really most of the women, after picking crabs all summer, are not interested in -- and if you're not interested in it, you might as well forget it. So that fell through. And oh, another company called for some piece work if we could, you know, assemble little maybe mechanical things, you know, assemble. Which we would like to do that, but it never worked out. I don't know why. And now we're in the process, you know, high tech world, we're trying to learn computers. And if that was to happen, all this come about, you know, people have been interested in helping through the co-op. Which is not only available to co-op members. It would mean, you know, work for anybody in the community, which is nice.

K.F.: Yeah. I've heard a lot of crab pickers who either left picking and went to work at, I think Air Packs is one of the big businesses and they're assembly, it's more mechanical.

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

K.F.: And I've talked with several companies like that, and they would love to hire crab pickers because they say they are so good with their hands, and they're very loyal workers.

J.M.: They're dependable. That's how I -- I don't know if it's people that depend on the bay for a living, if that's in their blood to be like that. In Westover, Princess Anne, ECI,

Eaton Correctional Institute, you wouldn't believe how many people from Smith Island are guards there.

K.F.: Really?

J.M.: And I think it's like almost 30 people there now. That's a lot from this little island. And, you know, it's because they are dependable. When they're called into work, they'll be there. And I think that says a lot for the island too. Not only the island, but maybe it's just seafood workers in general. When you're depending on the elements for your living, you learn to work when it's there. So maybe that's what's built in `em. So that's good to hear that they like seafood workers.

K.F.: Yeah. I thought it was interesting that so many of `em --

J.M.: Uh-huh (affirmative). I'm glad to hear that.

K.F.: Yeah. The guys *who* had hired us say we're always on the lookout for crab pickers who are ready to give it up.

J.M.: You better not say that this evening or you're liable to get the *whole* Smith Island Co-Op.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I'll tell `em. I think we might have `em a job offer.

K.F.: They've got to drive all the way to Cambridge.

J.M.: I don't know. Sounds pretty good. They're going to get a retirement and hospitalization and what else? Pay every week, *which is* something *you* don't get here.

K.F.: Well now let me ask you, one thing we've been asking other people is about new pickers coming into the co-op or into the crab house.

J.M.: Uh huh (affirmative).

K.F.: And we know there's a labor shortage throughout the crab picking industry. How about here on Smith Island? Do you all have young ladies who are willing to come in and learn and want to be members?

J.M.: It's so funny. Here on Tylerton, anyway, you know, the other two parts of Smith Island don't come in. But on Tylerton, we don't even have a work force to draw from. Now my granddaughter, a couple years ago, sit down and she said grandma, teach me to pick some crabs. I said all right. But the main thing, I'm going to show you the basics. You do this, you develop your own skill. And I said you're not going to pick like me at first, but you'll get there. And you know what she does? Every evening when she gets off school when picking's going on, she's here to pick her bushel of crabs. And all summer, you know, she has at least a bushel of crabs to pick a day.

And I think it's been good for her to know that, you know, it's not the best work in the world. It's smelly, it's hard work, but it's something you make an honest living. And it's something, she's supplying a product there that she's done herself, and it's very good, she takes pride in it. So that's been good, you know, and my niece, she comes in here once in a while and picks, and it's taught `em, you know, you want something, you work for it. And it's provided `em a place to work. Now I don't know if they're going to want to do that forever, `cause I think they're both thinking about leaving after high school, which is one of the things young people do. I don't know what they'll do, but the people that are here that do work to the co-op, I think they've made it work, but the thing worries me more than anything is the work force is not here to draw from. Most of the women that

could work here are here on Tylerton. Now it's open to both parts. You know, Yule and Roads Point's very welcome here. Anybody wants to join's very welcome. But I don't think nobody's chomping at the bits to get here.

(Laughter.)

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

J.M.: Well they're having a good time. You know, they were like we were. We were picking in our own little shed, picking our own little crab meat and selling who we want and nobody to bother `em. That's just why it is like that. And they don't want to change like we didn't want to change. But after working together and -- I mean we're even to the point we're trying to have a little gift shop here offering little crab earrings and all. So I think that says something. Everybody wants to see it work.

K.F.: Yeah. Well you were talking about people who were still picking in their outhouses.

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

K.F.: How did that work with the state? I mean did they come down at some point just to make sure that this co-op was filled with people picking, or have they bothered to come

J.M.: I can't imagine what went on with the state. `Cause once this picking house was open and they were, you know, they were satisfied that the pickers were in here working, they never did come down any more. I never -- the only people they come see and harass is us because they have to come in with their health department inspector ever so often. And, you know, sometimes we get wrote up for little things that don't amount to a lot, but you know, we have to go for a license every year. But, you know, it does say we're licensed, we're legal. And I think the women like that thought. So if they didn't want to go back to picking the way they used to, it must say something. I believe, I believe it's got to the point that it's a lot better here. And I'm hoping when we do get in full season you can come in and just be with us and watch us at work.

K.F.: Sure, sure. I'll bring my crab knife.

J.M.: I'd love it.

K.F.: You all can have --

(Laughter.)

J.M.: We're even thinking about putting on a web site later on.

K.F.: Good idea.

J.M.: We thought if we could ever do anything, if we could get together enough to practice our songs and sing `em, you know, maybe that would be one of the things we'd offer, a picking knife like we use, we would offer that, our crab jewelry, our tee shirts, you know, things like that. And we would like to hook up with maybe -- I don't know if we could do it on this end or not, like overnight shipping and things like that, if we could hook up with a seafood dealer that would do that.

K.F.: Right. There's one in Crisfield that's selling crab meat over the internet.

J.M.: Yeah, Liton. He buys from here. So we're hoping, you know, if it's anything we could do to help his business out, we'd like to be able to do it.

K.F.: That would be great `cause even on the web site, you could put the women singing, the singing on the website.

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

K.F.: Very good idea.

J.M.: So we'll see how it goes.

K.F.: Well tell me about the singing, since you brought it up. How did that get started?

J.M.: It's so funny. I guess singing has always been a part of living on Smith Island.

You go to church, you sing, you sing in school, and it's always been -- I don't care what kind of ceremony or anything we have. We usually end up singing a song or two. And when we moved into the co-op, I don't really know the first song we even tried. But I said let's try singing a song. I don't know if it was the first or second year we were in here. And things were still tense a little bit. And, you know, it seemed to ease the tension too when we would do that. And a lot of the women was not convinced that it sounded good anyway, which I do. I don't know if you ever got a tape from Elaine or not, if you heard any of it.

K.F.: No. I haven't heard the group singing. I've heard you singing.

J.M.: I've got a tape of the group singing home. Of course, it needs improving, it's just an amateur tape, but you can tell pretty much how they sound. And I think they sound great in here. And I think the more crabs they got, the better they sound.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: Doesn't that sound crazy? But I think it's, you know, you're caught up in the minute of making a living, and you're here with your friends, and things are happening. You sit down and sing a song. You're just sitting there minding your own business just singing away. And that's how it got started. And then I think one evening we were in here, and a thunder storm come up real quick. And we get, you know, pretty good-size thunder storms. And a lot of times the men's out on the water, your children are up in Yule in little skiffs running about, playing ball or something. And some of the women say my, Lord, I don't know where my youngen is, here it is a coming this storm. And I don't know if it was me or who it was, we started -- let's sing a verse of Till the Storm Passes By. That was the song we sung. And that become our theme song. Seems like every time a thunder storm would come up, we'd say let's sing our song. And, you know, it was like our little prayer offered up too for the Lord to keep our people safe and keep us safe. And from there, we said well let's try another one, I'm tired of singing that. So that's how we got started in singing different songs.

K.F.: And are they mostly hymns?

J.M.: Mostly hymns. Once in a while, we'll sing *Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way*. Once in a while we do that one. But we have fun. It's mostly hymns.

K.F.: And is it anybody who sort of gets the spirit at the time who might sing?

J.M.: Yeah, Uh-huh (Affirmative). Now I'll admit, I do instigate a lot of it. But once they start, they'll say well let's not sing that, we do that every time. Let's sing this. You know, and that's what I like, the other women offering up songs saying let's try this one. Because a lot of times, they won't instigate it. And then mainly when we have visitors, each visitor for some reason or another, have heard that we do some singing here. And every time, sometimes we have to sing the --

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

J.M.: -- bed and breakfast, this is a must stop on their tour. So I guess one thing led to the other, and sometimes we sing off and on because people request it. And I'm so glad they do because sometimes we get some of the nicest letters about how the singing inspired `em, and some will stand around, you can see `em crying. You know, and that makes me feel good knowing that you're touching something in them. And then one man even come and said that reminded him of his grandma.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: But I took it as a compliment because he remembered his grandmother singing Amazing Grace. But I think it could be a good thing. And the main part I like, it's a witness for the Lord. We all love and trust in the Lord, and I believe he's helped in this business with his miracles. We wouldn't have had it here. And I think it's a little witness we can do just to share with others how we feel about the Lord, and how he helps us in our work. So that's the main reason I like to do it. And I think the women are, the other women are seeing it too. They like to share. Even though they don't say anything, you *know*, it's like their little testimony. And it's not professional, it's not fancy, but I think most of us do it from the heart. And I think it's, what do you say, transferred to the other person. They feel it like that. I mean we even had one, it was a girls' school, all-girls' school, I think it was St. Mary's County, and they wrote us the nicest letter after that. It inspired them to go home and write their own song, and they would sing, they'd come and sing it for us some evening. And when they went home, they said we talked, that it almost brought tears to our eyes, it sounded like angels singing. If they only knew, that we're that nice to say that. Thank the Lord they don't know. But that's what they said, it sounded like angels singing. So I thought that was nice.

K.F.: That was nice.

J.M.: And that's what I like to encourage the women with, you know, because a lot of `em don't think they can sing good. We all, well all are not singers. I don't think I can sing good. But I think all of us together make a pretty good sound.

K.F.: Right, right. It's the group effort.

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

K.F.: Okay. Well part of what we're trying to understand with the crab business is some of the economics of it. So if we can talk dollars and sense for a minute. How much does each woman usually make during the week?

J.M.: You know, it varies. Every woman does not make the same thing.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: I might have two bushels some day, my neighbor might have one. Then one day she might have five, I'll have one. It's not a set thing. But as a group, I guess you can average it out. Some make more than others. But one year we picked, first year in here we picked 14,000 pounds for the year, which I thought was good.

K.F.: Wow. That is pretty good.

J.M.: Second year, we picked 19,000 pound. Third year we picked 17,000. And this year I don't think we've added it up yet. But, you know, on an average, you take 12 to 15 women producing that kind of crab meat, it helps. And we usually get \$13 a pound. But, of course, \$2 of that's going to the co-op, so we usually clear \$11. It's not clear because, you know, the watermen have to spend money in fuel and baskets and bait. But still, it's a pretty good living while it's going during the season.

K.F.: And how does that work with buying -- well I guess you don't have to buy it off your husband.

J.M.: You know, it's so funny. Everybody can't believe it. This is the only picking house we don't buy any crabs.

K.F.: That's right. I didn't think about that until just now.

J.M.: It is such a different set up. We don't buy crabs. Our husbands furnish the crabs, and you know, I guess it's just like carrying on part of the soft crab business. This is still the family business.

K.F.: Right. So that \$11 that you bring in then has to go to also help them buy bait and that kind of stuff

J.M.: Oh, yeah. Helps to buy bait and fuel, baskets, we go through a lot of baskets. That steamer, you know, tears them up. But still, overall, it's still, you know, you can make a pretty good living.

K.F.: And the soft crab business, the men run that?

J.M.: Yeah. That's the men's business, soft shells. The women help in packing and fishing up soft crabs, but that is their main way of making a living in the summer. And the women use the hard crabs that the men don't sell.

K.F.: So you guys get to pick Jimmies then, the big number ones.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). That's why -- you know, everybody will say I can't understand why your crab meat is better. And it is, but we have the best supply of crabs, you know. We always get the best crabs, and we put the whole crab in the pound. It's not separated, and that's another secret.

K.F.: So you're not dividing them into --

J.M.: No. This is the only picking house we specialize in Smith Island crab meat. That's what it is. The whole crab goes in the cup, from the lump to the claw, in.

K.F.: All of it.

J.M.: All of it. When you want to eat a crab, you eat a crab.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: And that's where the taste is. Just like our singing, when all of us is here together, it's better. When you throw all that crab meat in, it's better. And plus, we have a good supply of crabs. You know, we get the best because the watermen don't sell `em, they bring `em here.

K.F.: Right. And you guys don't have to pick the "trash crabs".

J.M.: Huh-uh (negative). We never pick trash crabs. We always have good crabs. And that's, you know, that's another thing.

K.F.: That's a difference.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I guess, and another thing, you know, on the mainland, you take one owner with workers under him, they don't care if it's a bone or two in that crab meat. It's not their crab meat, you know. They're just getting paid by the pound anyway. But here, what I sell is my crab meat, and that's why we try to keep it nice.

K.F.: Well that's becoming a very hot topic right now because the Asian crab meat has virtually no bone in it at all.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I know.

K.F.: And a lot of the companies, the bigger plants now are trying to get their workers to have no bone in it so that they can compete.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative), Compete.

K.F.: But it's difficult, you know, because the state law --

J.M.: I think the Asian crab is a lot bigger too.

K.F.: It's a little bit bigger, but do you know how they get the bone out?

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

K.F.: They -- you know, Maryland has that law where you have to pick into the can, you're not supposed to dump it and pick through it.

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

K.F.: Well in Asia, they dump it all into a great bin, and flatten it out and they turn the lights off and turn on a black light, and the bone glows in the dark.

J.M.: Oh.

K.F.: And they go through and pick it all out, and then they pack it.

J.M.: I've had Asian crab meat. And it was as pretty, a presentable crab meat as you'll ever see. But it did not have the taste, Nothing. All you're getting if you get that crab meat, you're getting the Old Bay Seasoning or something like that. You're not getting the crab flavor. And I hate to see it take over like it has. Because people, I guess it's modern living. People have got to the point they'd rather pay less for something and not have the quality.

K.F.: Right, right.

J.M.: And they don't understand, you know. If you don't pay for the quality, you're not going to get it. Same way a car, a coat, anything.

K.F.: Okay. Well then who are some of your -- who are the people you're selling to?

J.M.: Well Liton's Seafood in Crisfield, they get most of it. The Rusty Rudder in Dewey Beach, Delaware, they get a big portion of it. He even buys some and has it pasteurized in Crisfield for over the winter months. We don't pasteurize, but we send it to Crisfield to a packing house, and they pasteurize it for him.

K.F.: Which one?

J.M.: Bird's.

K.F.: Bird's.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). In Crisfield. Jim Dodson. So he's been doing that for us for a long time. And it's been a big help because, like I say, we don't have a big market close by. It's so much crab meat around, and cheaper crab meat. And it's hard to get that market.

K.F.: Are you still selling to friends?

J.M.: Oh, yes. Still selling little amounts to friends and family. And what's so funny, people don't think they can just call here to the co-op and put their order in. They think they've got to go through a middle man. And I've told so many people, just call here. If you order 10 pound or more, get your neighbors together, and say let's take a day and order 10 pound of crab meat. We'll box it up, ice it down, put it on the ferry, take you a nice little ride to Crisfield that evening, pick it up. You know, you buy directly from the crab pickers. And you pay, you don't have to pay an extra high price. You just pay what we require, \$13.

K.F.: And what about people who might live in Baltimore?

J.M.: Well that is a little hard. See that's what we're trying to find a way for overnight shipping. That would be nice to be able to send it anywhere in the country. But I was

thinking if it would be worth our effort to try to get into it on this side of the water or on the mainland side through another person. Which I think it might be better just to send it to the mainland and let it go out from there. It could go out early morning, you know. So it's something to think about.

K.F.: Yeah.

J.M.: Because, you know, even though you say Smith Island is different, people don't understand until they get here and if they've stayed a while. It really is different. And I don't say it trying to make it sound like we're asking for special favors or anything like that. It's just different.

K.F.: Now is there a similar situation on Tangier, the women are picking their husbands' crabs?

J.M.: I don't think the women down there ever got into the picking thing like we did. They get a lot of tourists down there, and a lot of people have put up little gift shops in their own front yard. You know, things like that. So I think they cater to tourists in that way more than they did in the picking. Now some do it, but I don't think it was like Smith Island. Even Tylerton, we don't get a lot of tourists in. Only in the past three or four years have we started getting a lot of people in here. And nothing compared to like Yule and Tangier gets.

K.F.: Right. What do you think's bringing them here?

J.M.: Huh?

K.F.: What do you think's bringing them here?

J.M.: Well I think Tylerton over the last few years, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation has made Tylerton available to a lot of people. And I think when the kids go home and tell their parents, you know, and then the bed and breakfast opened and they sent a lot of brochures out, and they're on the Internet, and they're listed with Maryland Bed and Breakfasts. So it has started bringing a few more people in. And that's how come we've started getting them. But it's still not a big amount to, what would you say, provide a big gift shop business.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: Although we do, we do sell, you know, pretty much our nautical jewelry and our tee shirts and things. But still, it just helps us out. But, you know, I'm always thinking, how can we do something. And I get tired of it sometimes. I'm always trying to think of what I can do to help make this business be -- I've been wanting to put out a cookbook from the co-op, which I think would be a big success. But it's getting a committee together, and just sitting down and saying all right, this is what we're going to do. What I wanted to do, how I wanted to do the cookbook, I wanted to look around, maybe you could know of somebody, to find a publisher that would help fund it. And I would like for each picker to do her own chapter. If she chose to do it on her family, on her grandmother, or how she grew up, things she remembered about living on Smith Island, and then include maybe 10 of her own special recipes. And I thought that would be a unique gift. Maybe include some pictures. And each picker would do her own chapter, which I think would be nice. But maybe that's a big project to start off with. So I --

K.F.: It depends on how big you want the chapter to be.

J.M.: Well, you know, each chapter wouldn't have to be, if some wanted to write a big one, and some wanted to write a small one. But I think it would give people an idea of

what it means to live on Smith Island, to be born and raised here. And the recipes are not only seafood recipes, you know, they're simple, plain-cooking recipes. And I think it would, I think it would be a nice project. So I want them to do a tape, I want them to write a book.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I imagine I'll end up being shipped off of this island before long.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: But I think they're good ideas myself, but I don't guess everybody agrees. We've not done it yet, but I'm still working toward it.

K.F.: Well I think the cookbook is probably a very good idea.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I do too.

K.F.: Certainly a very good idea.

J.M.: But if we could get a publisher, I think, interested, and that's the hard part. Now we could do a simple cookbook, you know, like publish these cookbooks for organizations. And I think it would be nice, but I'd rather do something special too. So I don't know. And then when we do our book tour, we could sing a song, and everybody'd hear us singing and come buy a book.

K.F.: Well you just have this planned right out.

J.M.: This brain, I think this perm's done a little something to my brain today. But I don't know. It is hard in the winter, and I think it'd be something if the women could do something like that. And a lot of people don't think they can do something like that, and they can.

K.F.: Yeah, yeah.

J.M.: Every one of us here has got a different story we could tell.

K.F.: What do you think is your story?

J.M.: My story? My Lord. If I ever started. I don't know if I would start with some of my family living when I was a little girl, some of the traditions and how it was. Somebody could do maybe a chapter on Christmas and how it could be. Somebody could do a chapter on cant meeting, you know, we have annual cant meetings in Yule. What cant meeting met to Smith Island. Somebody could do a chapter on, you know, church socials and how they come about, and what we do and how we take part in them and some of the foods we serve. It don't sound interesting right now, but I believe once the women got into it, and then, you know, some could share just a story of living here. If one of their children got sick one time, what happened, and if somebody had a baby aboard of a boat, you know, they could include that as part of their chapter. And it's happened before.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I don't think anybody in this building, but people know people in their families. It wouldn't just have to be about that picker, but something in their background or their family. Or they could share some of the old island stories, the miracles that happened years ago here.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: And early living. And it could be a big variety. I don't think it would be boring.

K.F.: No. Doesn't sound like it already. I think it's a good idea. It's a very good idea. Well let me ask you about any celebrations or traditions surrounding crab or crab season or the start of crab season.

J.M.: We've not had too many celebrations on that. I don't know if it's because when crab season comes in, everybody's just so busy they get involved, and you know, and I think the main thing is they just thank the Lord every day, and they go to church on Sunday and I think they give the Lord the credit for providing for us and protecting us all these years. Now we did have a blessing of the fleet ceremony a couple years ago. And it was very successful and we're thinking about doing that again May the 7th. But I have to write a book in three weeks, so I won't have a book published. I have all these crazy ideas and work myself to death. I want to do a little booklet to hand out to everybody that comes with watermen's miracles. Include six stories from six watermen on Smith Island, and tell the miracles that have happened to them while they're working on the water. And that's what I'm working on now, that's where I've been today trying to get some stories, but I didn't have a lot of success. They have to think about it. One, I got one to share their story, and it was a very good one. So we'll see where it goes. If we get the booklet or we don't, we're going to still set it for May the 7th.

K.F.: Okay. I'll have to see if I can come out then.

J.M.: And it'll be in the afternoon. You know, anybody could take island ferry and come over and go back that evening.

K.F.: Okay. I've been to the Chincoteague blessing of the fleet.

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Now we don't have a big elaborate service. We have a little bit of, we have maybe some punch and cake after. But we do read out a list of the men that have lost their lives on the water over the years. And we have a prayer. And this year, I want to have a all-man's choir, waterman's choir.

K.F.: Wow.

J.M.: And they dosing, good too. I've heard these men sing. And have a couple songs by all watermen. So, you know, it's just a simple ceremony. But we're going to go for May the 7th.

K.F.: That sounds really good. Well let's talk about some of the traditions associated with crab picking.

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

K.F.: We've already talked about singing, which you guys have made a tradition for yourselves. What are some of the other traditions here on Smith Island?

J.M.: What do you mean, other than crab picking?

K.F.: No. Associated with crab picking.

J.M.: Associated with crab picking. Gosh, I don't know. I do know usually when we have a supper or something, a community supper, crab meat's always involved. And a lot of visitors find that amazing. You know, mostly it's an abundance of crab meat, crab cakes, crab imperial, which you know, we do that once in a while. In fact, we're getting ready for a little luncheon, and that's what we're planning to have, crab balls. We're planning a luncheon for 150 people for this erosion control project.

K.F.: Oh, right.

J.M.: For the signing ceremony. So that's a lot of crab balls to be made.

K.F.: Now is that done in the church or is it --

J.M.: We're going to serve it to the church. And I don't know. I guess seafood is a lot of our, part of our suppers and things like that. But other than that, I don't know. Maybe give me an idea. I can't think of anything right now.

K.F.: Oh, let's see. Well food's a big one. Oh, some -- I've seen some of the pickers, they have to have certain pillows under certain --

J.M.: That's so funny. Some women do. And, you know, I've found the more pillows you have, the more you hurt.

K.F.: Really?

J.M.: It sounds crazy, but I do. So I just sit in my chair and pick away, forget I hurt and walk around a minute. But, yes, some do. And we all have, well you can look under the tables. See the foot stools? Everybody has their foot stools.

K.F.: Oh, right.

J.M.: `Cause this is too far to reach.

K.F.: It's too far away.

J.M.: Yeah, `cause you got to be a certain -- we're like a piano player. When we all come in to sit down, we pull out our chair, and this is how we're going 'til we get it just right. You know, `cause we pick with our tray on our lap.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

J.M.: And that's why our feet are propped up on these little stools. And the crabs are here. And but other than that, I can't think of anything.

K.F.: Well the tray in the lap is a big one.

J.M.: That's one thing we ought -- now Christine, right where you're sitting, she's tall, so she can pick on top of the table. My arms would just about drop off I couldn't do that. But I think she's about the only one that does that. I was trying to look around. No, I don't see anybody else doing it. She's the only one picks on top of the table. Everybody else has their tray in their lap.

K.F.: Well describe for me how you feel at the end of the day after picking crabs.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I don't know if you'd really want to hear. At the end of the day. Our day starts sometimes two a.m.

K.F.: Okay.

J.M.: Two a.m., three a.m., a lot of people are inhere. By 4:30, five a.m., everybody's usually here. And we work until the crabs are picked off Then we go home maybe 12:00, tend to the crab house down here where the soft crabs are shedding. Go home, fix supper. Then about 4:00, we're back herein this building. That's what makes our picking house different too. We come in in the morning and pick 'til the crabs are gone. Then when the men brings the new catch in, we have a man steaming, getting `em ready for us. And by the time we come in at 4:00, they're already on the table, we're ready to start again. And sometimes we stay here from four 'til 10, 11, 12. Sometimes it's open 24 hours a day because some women have babies and can't come when others can. So one girl, the one sits there, she likes to sit here until late, 1 or 2:00 in the morning, she's still here picking to get `em done. But then other women can't do that.

So she was leaving one day, and my daughter was coming up. She was leaving around 2:30, and my daughter was coming in because she had a baby home. So it's a place that everybody's their own boss. You have no boss here to work for. But each one of us are, you know, a boss of our own. And we know what's expected of us as a co-op. We know what's expected of us from the health department. And everybody goes about their job

and does it. So I guess you could say -- and when she's done, if she gets done an hour before me, she stands up, cleans up her mess around her table, scrubs off her table, goes home. That's how we do things. So, you know, I'm in charge of keeping my station clean and sanitary. And then at the end of the week, we all get together and we do a big cleaning here every week. You know, along with the daily cleaning, Saturday morning. Saturday morning, we come in give it a big thorough cleaning. More than we do -- you know, we do our sanitizing and all daily. But still, we like to keep -- and I think we've done pretty good. This is the fifth year we've been in here, and we've not had anything done, you know, since we've been in here.

K.F.: So then at 10:00 maybe when you're headed home, what's that feel like physically?

J.M.: I'm still on a high if it's a few people here. Because when you're talking and laughing and you're tired, you know, it's hard to get to bed, go to sleep. But I'm -- sometimes I'm so exhausted, I don't see how I'm going to get a bath and get into bed. But then again, I'm just so keyed up 'cause I'm so anxious to -- I've got this little time table here to make this money, and I'm, you know, I'm keyed up during the summer to do it. Of course, you get down at times like any job. But I guess it's mixed feelings, but I think we're so glad to be working, it evens out. But it is exhausting. We're tired at the end of the day. But everybody else is too when you put in a day's work. So I don't think it's really that different.

K.F.: Now we've been talking to crab pickers about their hands, 'cause it's a very important tool for crab pickers.

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

K.F.: And one thing we've been asking them about is, you know, sometimes people have an allergic reaction to the crabs.

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

K.F.: Has that ever happened to you?

J.M.: No. I don't know of it ever happening, thank the Lord. I think the Lord's looked out for us on that. I've not seen it happen. But I do know one thing I can't stand. Sometimes in the winter my fingernails, this is really too long for me in the summer. I can't stand fingernails in the summer. They've got to go. And that's one thing I have to do with my hands, keep my nails cut. I don't know, it's just something about it. If crab meat gets under a fingernail, it don't sound too clean to me.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I don't like that. And you want, you know, you want your crab meat bacteria free. I mean we've had a lot of training in all this. And we take it serious. Because we're dealing in a processed food product. And we want it to be clean.

K.F.: Now did you have to go through the HASIP training?

J.M.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah, we've all had HASIP training.

K.F.: Okay.

J.M.: Yes, indeed, we did.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: I've seen those notebooks they give out.

J.M.: I know. I've got 'em home. I hope I never have to review. Yeah, we went through all that.

K.F.: And let's see --

J.M.: Have you seen any different comparisons in what we have here and what you've interviewed before?

K.F.: Well some. I mean obviously you've pointed out the schedule's a little different, and the fact that you all are picking your husband's crab meat, which is funny, because on Hooper's Island, some of the crab pickers, their husbands are the watermen bringing them, but the watermen are selling the crabs to the plant.

J.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: A lot of women talk about they used to have a double schedule in some of the plants back in the 70's when the crabs were really plentiful then. That they would go home, cook dinner, and then head back to the crab house. And talk about going home and taking a shower, first of all, is like the first thing they want to do, like you.

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

K.F.: And then lay on the floor 'cause it was a hard surface 'cause their back hurt so bad. So a lot of 'em have talked about bad backs and carpal tunnel.

J.M.: Well I think a lot of the women are suffering with that here too.

K.F.: Yeah. I think the carpal tunnel thing is starting to really --

J.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: I talked to two women who had surgery last winter for it.

J.M.: Yeah. You know, I'm surprised because sometimes arthritis too.

K.F.: Yeah.

J.M.: You know, you keep your hand clasped around a little tiny knife a long time, and I remember one time my arthritis was so bad, I'd just have to peel my fingers off of my knife. I couldn't even undo it myself. I remember peeling them off like that. But thank the Lord, it's not been bad like that in a long time.

K.F.: What do you take when it gets that bad?

J.M.: Tylenol. Something like that. And most of the women, you'll see them put down their knife and just do this or shake their hands, you know, and just do this every so often.

K.F.: Now what kind of knives do you guys use?

J.M.: We have the one piece stainless steel. I don't see any sitting on the tables. We sell some here too. We get 'em and sell 'em. We buy 'em in Carvell Hall in Crisfield.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: And we have Smith Island Crab Meat Co-Op, Incorporated, Tylerton, Maryland, engraved on 'em. And we offer 'em here. That's part of our little gift shop. We don't make a lot on 'em, but you know, we make a little something, and it's fun to have to offer 'em, 'cause when they see us picking, they think it's some kind of magic in the knife you use.

(Laughter.)

J.M.: So that helps us sell knives. I'll say well first you got to get one of these knives. It's awful.

K.F.: Well describe for me the process of picking a crab for you, 'cause I know everybody does it a little bit different.

J.M.: I know everybody does. The way I do, I start, I never remove the apron on the back. I never remove that. I flip the top off, the shell, and just clean the lungs and the fat out of the crab and cut the face off, or the mouth, whatever it is, and then I always cut the fins off on both ends. And then you've got just this little body thing here.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: And then I separate the crab into four pieces. I cut the top off, that's two pieces -- three pieces, I guess you'd say. The two tops and the body I pick. So that's pretty much basic.

K.F.: Okay. And then that top when you cut that off and you're picking out those pieces, do you squish that or do you --

J.M.: Sometimes. It's according to the crab.

K.F.: Okay.

J.M.: Sometimes we squish it out, and sometimes we pick it out. So I guess you have to, you know, it's according to the quality and what kind of crabs you've got.

K.F.: Okay. Now when you're taking that top shell off, do you back it off or do you just rip it?

J.M.: I, with my knife. I rip mine off with my knife. Some just take their hands and pull it off I can't do that.

K.F.: I can't do that either.

J.M.: My neighbor can do that so slick, and it kills my hands. You know, she can flip that off, and I just take my knife and flip it off So I guess it's just like anything else, whatever you get used to. But the results are the same.

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. What would you like people to know about crab picking here in Tylerton?

J.M.: What would I like to know people about crab picking? What would I want people to know?

K.F.: Yes.

J.M.: For one thing, I think when crab picking started, people have always been proud of their product, they've always tried to keep a good quality product, if it's in the picking house or when we were in our own little kitchens. That's the first thing. And the other thing is when the state cracked down, it was a very bad situation. And it's made me proud that the women of Tylerton took this bad situation they were forced into, and I think they've had a positive outcome from it. It's turned out to be a good business so far, and we've been able to work together all these years. The same women joined is still here, you know, so that says a lot, that you can even stand to work around each other. 'Cause so many workers, you know, have such malice toward each other. And we get a joking sometimes. We say we hope and pray to the Lord we don't have any disgruntled crab pickers come in here some evening --

(Laughter.)

J.M.: We wouldn't dare think what could happen if a disgruntled crab picker come in. So that's one thing. In fact, my neighbor here, Connie, she's the postmaster. And, you know, when these massacres and all would take place, it always ended up being a disgruntled postal worker for some reason. I'd say, look, you let us know if you're ever feeling disgruntled, all these knives around. But we have fun with each other. We've known each other all our lives, and you know, we know everything about each other, and sometimes that's not good, and then you're forced to work together too. But I think we've took a hard difficult situation, and I think we've proved that it can happen and it can work. And I don't think it was through help of the state. I think that was our own doing. The state put the building here, but it took the women, you know, the crab pickers

to make it work. They could've put the Taj Mahal here, and if we weren't willing to work together, you know, it wouldn't have mattered.

K.F.: Yeah, I have read a few articles where the state tried to take credit for making this a success.

J.M.: Yeah. Well, you know, they did help with the funding, and with the rules and regulations that we had to go by. But still, when we moved in here we didn't have any market. We were going in, we knew we had to charge more than we did when we were picking on our own because we had a building now to pay for. You know, and that's one thing I regret, and that was for me. I was so naive too, you know. Here we are going into this business. Now we need a market for this. That should've been something we were working on too. But like I say, it had never been done so I didn't know what I was - - none of us knew what we were doing when we come in here. Everything's happened through trial and error. And that's how you learned.

K.F.: Now have you heard anything from the larger packers in Crisfield? I mean have you heard anything positive or negative from --

J.M.: No, I've not. I've not heard one comment one way or the other. So I don't know how they feel about it or anything. But that's one thing I've not heard anything.

K.F.: 'Cause I think I read a few articles where they were obviously on the side of the state for cracking down --

J.M.: Yeah. But, you know, I do know that. I really believe they were on the side of the state for that, but I've not heard any comments, you know, once we got up and running. But it's still amazing to me that it's still working and we're been in here, and we're showing a profit. That says a lot for the women. I think.

K.F.: I think it does too.

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

K.F.: Now this may be a silly question to ask you since Smith Island is different than the rest of the mainland, but one thing we've been trying to figure out is why is it that only women pick crab meat. Here, it may be obvious, but --

J.M.: I don't know why. Now sometimes my husband comes in and helps me. He'll clean the crab, and then he'll crack the claws. But I do mainly the picking of the crab. And some of the men can come in and help, but it's not a steady thing. They can help pick `em too. And I think maybe it might be men's hands or fingers are bigger, and you know, maybe it's harder to maneuver that knife in them little cavities to get that meat out. And I do know one thing, watermen want to be out on the water catching `em. They don't want to be in here picking `em. That's their main thing, they like to be out on that water. And I don't know whether that's got anything to do with it or not, but I think women make better crab pickers, I really do.

K.F.: Why?

J.M.: Just because of that. I think they're able to sit down at longer intervals. Men, you know, get restless. And women are used to being in a confined area inside. And for the other reason, their hands and fingers are not as big as a man's, and I think they can handle that knife better. But of course, on the other hand, you know, the men that catch `em can do better than the women that would have to go out there. And maybe it's just a gender thing, I don't know.

K.F.: Yeah, we've been trying to figure out how that happened, because oyster shuckers were always men and women mixed.

J.M.: Yeah, Uh-huh (Affirmative),

K.F.: But somehow crab picking --

J.M.: Crab picking is usually women's work. Uh-huh (Affirmative). I don't know why that is. I have no idea. It's interesting though. But, you know, oyster shucking, you go in there and open the oyster, and the oyster's there, and that's it. Crabs when you open that up, you know, the meat's in different little cavities. You don't just open the crab, scoop the meat out and that's it like an oyster.

K.F.: Right, right. Okay. That's something to think about.

J.M.: I don't know if it helps any or not, but I still think it comes down to hands mainly. 'Cause the knife can't be that big that you're working, you know, on a crab with -- so I don't know if that would be it or not.

K.F.: Okay. So the next plans for the co-op is a cookbook?

J.M.: Hopefully, we can get it going. I'd like to. That would be a little extra. And I'm always looking for some way to help, you know. If it's through selling gifts, or books, or tapes, that more of the profit would come back to the women that are running this building. That's my main goal, that they would share a bigger profit, you know. And if it was to take off, it's just a little chance, you never know what's going to happen, but I'm always looking for little things that we can do here that would take some of the burden if they didn't have to pay -- if the gift shop could handle the running of the building, the women could take home all their money.

K.F.: Good idea.

J.M.: That's what I was kind of leaning toward. And I don't know if the women have seen that far yet that, you know, you got to keep trying things. If it got so the gift shop could handle the running of the building, that would be nice. And that's what I'd like to get to. I guess the women, you can interview 'em, I'll not be -- you know, I was going to say, if you'd rather for me not to be here, or if you want me to be here, either way is fine. But everybody don't share my view, so it'll be fun to talk with some of the other women and see how they feel.

K.F.: Okay. Well I was just about to ask you what it's like being the leader of this group.

J.M.: Well I was the leader, you know, in establishing the co-op. I believe I was the founder. I don't think it would've been here if I hadn't pursued it. I really don't. And most of the women will tell you that. But as far as the leader now, I don't consider myself the leader. We have a board of directors, and we have a president that takes care of the running of the building. And the only thing I guess I'm still thinking what I can do to help this business and what I can do to help the women, not have to pay all that money to the co-op, if we could find another way to run the building. I don't know if that's leading 'em. I'm always trying to come up with ideas and things like that, and I bring 'em before 'em. And that's the only way I look at being a leader now. I mean I believe I led in getting it here, but other than that, I don't consider myself any more than any picker here. I consider myself equal with them.

K.F.: Okay. Well why don't you give me the names of the pickers who are working here.

J.M.: Okay. There's Janice, here's Connie, here's Louise, here's Joan, Donna, Christine, Tina and Betty Lou. And then over there is Robin, and over here is Ruth, over here is Norma. Right over here is Patty and Carol Ann and Dora and Peggy, when we have a full group in. So each station, you know, we picked out our stations when it first opened and we stuck with it. And I guess everybody feels comfortable in that spot. Because sometimes we come in to pick later in the fall, and everybody's not picking then. We can sit anywhere we want, but we always go to our own, our own place and sit. So that's -- maybe you feel comfortable there, I don't know.

K.F.: Well let me ask you why you picked that chair then.

J.M.: Because I told them I was the nosiest. I said if I pick this seat, I can see `em coming from that end and that end, whoever,

(Laughter.)

J.M.: I like to watch outdoors what's going on. And I told `em that's why [ I wanted that seat `cause I was nosy. I like to watch people going by. Aren't that silly?

(Laughter.)

K.F.: Well I'll probably think of other things to ask you just as soon as you get on the boat tomorrow morning to go to work, but right now I can't --

J.M.: Well I come in later on this evening. I told them to be here, start coming in around 5 or 5:30.

K.F.: Okay.

J.M.: If you want, I'll leave you, you can have the key and I'll just come down later on. I didn't know if you wanted to interview `em as a group, or individually, whatever.

K.F.: Well we'll try a group and see --

J.M.: Yeah. I was going to say if you decided to stay and maybe leave on the 3:30 boat tomorrow evening, which would be fun, maybe you could make an appointment. If you find somebody more interesting, you know, that you would like to get more out of `em, because a lot of these women have a lot to share.

K.F.: Right.

J.M.: And maybe you could set it up for in the morning or whatever.

K.F.: Yeah, that would be fine, sounds good. So who am I meeting at 5:00?

J.M.: Well, I don't know. We have a note on, we're going to get ready, and I'll show you how we do our notices on Tylerton. And, of course, we call and you never -- these women are very independent. They -- sometimes they'll be here and sometimes they won't. So we'll just take it as it comes.

K.F.: Okay. That sounds fine.

J.M.: Is that all right?

K.F.: That sounds good.

J.M.: And hopefully, a lot of `em will show up. And if you wanted to leave your stuff here, it'll be fine.

K.F.: All right.

J.M.: Nobody'll bother it. You don't have to lug it all up and down the road all the time.

K.F.: That's good. All right.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)