

Interview Log

Interviewee: Wheeler Baker

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Interviewer: Ceres Bainbridge
Kelly Feltault

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BEGIN SIDE A

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

W.B.: Sure. Wheeler Baker.

K.F.: Okay, great. Nice strong voice. And today is November the 6th, 2000, and can you tell me where you were born?

W.B.: I was born at Easton Hospital.

K.F.: Okay.

W.B.: You want when I was born?

K.F.: Sure.

W.B.: November 26th, 1946, which makes me a sometimes turkey baby.

K.F.: A sometimes turkey baby. Explain that one.

W.B.: Because Thanksgiving falls on the 26th about every four or five years.

K.F.: That's right.

W.B.: A little trivia.

K.F.: Okay. So you were born just right after World War II then.

W.B.: I was one of the first of the post-war baby boom. Yup.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Okay. Well one thing we were interested in is how many members of your family are in the racing business?

W.B.: Well right now, I'm the only one that's doing it. At one point, there were three of us racing boats, and there was four boys. One brother never got involved in it. But three of us were playing with it at one point, and we did pretty good. Since then, my two brothers, two other brothers went onto racing cars.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

W.B.: And they didn't have a clue what they were doing. Like to kill themselves, and right now, I'm the only one that's still playing the game.

K.F.: Okay.

W.B.: But brother number three still has a sprint car he's saving up for his son who's presently in the Air Force stationed in Germany, and he's going to put it back together when he comes, when he gets out of the service. That's his plan. But my brothers got into car racing. I just - they didn't have any idea what they were doing. They like to kill themselves. It was - wanted to get me, and I said no boys, this is something you've got to grow up with. (Laughter.)

K.F.: So then was boat racing something you've grown up with?

W.B.: Yeah. You want me to start there?

K.F.: Sure.

W.B.: I guess it was about '55 or '56. I remember vividly they had a wildcat race on the Wye River. By wildcat, I mean it was not sanctioned. It was just good old boys getting together having to race. And I can remember as a kid watching the boats run thinking I was just struck by just - it was just awesome. And my father took a great interest in it. As a matter of fact, he was the announcer that day.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

W.B.: And he talked my grandfather into buying a boat, and they went racing with that. And then the year after that, Pop really went crazy, and he bought what they call a 280, which was a new class that come out running the stock, small block Chevrolet. And they

were very successful with that boat, and they set all kinds of records, won all the championships that the man used to drive it by the name Alton Pearson. He was my hero. He went to the Golf Marina Racing Hall of Fame, which there is no more, but I always held him way, way up high, you know, as something I always looked up to. And the boat was named Bo Bo. Actually, it was named Bo Bo II. And you'll ask why was it named Bo Bo. Because our family business was we were beer distributors for National beer products.

K.F.: Okay.

W.B.: So National Bo was the big seller back in those days. So hence the name. But about the same time, my father asked me if I'd like to try racing. I was about eight or nine years old at the time. I said well sure, you know. So he bought what he called a J-U, a small outboard utility with a five horsepower Mercury on it. And I'll never forget the first time we put it in the river, he said go out there and get it on plane. I said what do you mean by that? I didn't even know what that meant. So I went out, I went out, and we tried, and tried, and tried, and I couldn't get that thing to go. Finally, it jumped over on plane and I guess we was running maybe 20, 22 or 23 miles an hour. I thought I was going 1,000. I thought I was flying. After that, we got the boat up to about 28. And I think I got one third-place trophy in two years. Didn't know what I was doing. Didn't have a clue. But that was, that was the reason for the class. It was a learning class. You're supposed to learn how to race, how to start, and what to do and all those things. I had a good time, and I think Pop had a good time. 'Cause see back in those days, when you had your regattas, they used to run outboards on Saturdays; inboards on Sundays. Since then, the outboards have moved - have not moved as quick as - well their program didn't advance as much as the inboards, so they run inboards both days now. That's the program. But back in those days, that's the way we used to do it. And that was kind of neat. I did some real dumb things.

K.F.: Like what?

W.B.: Oh, I had a couple, had a couple accidents. Couldn't never, couldn't never make the start. I didn't figure out how to make the start till I got too big to race the boat. (Laughter.) And then after, after two years of racing, I'd outgrown the boat, and Alton had gotten hurt down in St. Petersburg. He almost got killed down there racing. So that was the end of the family pretty much in the racing business, until I got back into it after I got out of the service.

K.F.: So you stopped racing then to go into the military?

W.B.: I, I guess I must've stopped racing when I was about 12. And you couldn't race inboards until you were 16. And I didn't have the money to get it. And Pop, he hadn't lost interest, but after Alton got hurt, he and Alton were real close 'cause Alton worked for the family business. He was, he was - ran the beer distributorship for him. See they had - the family business had a construction end of it, which they did concrete and built roads, and they had quarries. And then you had the beer division, which Alton ran. And when he got laid up, he got his face crushed and his knee all banged up. And he was out of work probably the best part of a year and a half. Like I said, they didn't know if he was going to make it for a while, but he came out of it. So they lost interest, and they didn't want to see anybody else get hurt, and that was it. But I never lost interest in it. My brothers didn't either. I mean we all, that was our - in the summertime, that was our life,

go to the boat races, watch them run. So I remember when I got out of the Air Force in '68, and I found this old boat over in Delaware, over in Lewes, Delaware, owned by Stump Palmer (phonetic). And I went over and bought that, and I think I paid him, I don't know, 4 or \$500 for it. That was a lot of money for me. Didn't have much money. So bought that boat motor and trailer, and brought it home, and we worked on it the best we could. We didn't know a whole lot. We got out there - well we did get it running pretty well. Pop, the mechanic that Pop had that worked on the boat though was a crackerjack from up in Paulsboro, New Jersey. He was a, he was an engineer for Mobile Company, although he wasn't a certified engineer, he was, indeed, an engineer. He worked on oils, and he was in the research department. And he came down and worked on the engine and got it running good. It's like any kind of racing, if your engine is strong, you can overcome a lot of faults, and that boat was quick until my brothers pulled the side out of - well, let me back up a little bit. About the time we got the boat and got it running, I got married and had a little one on the way, so I gave the boat to my brothers. In the meantime, I had ordered a new one because this one wasn't quick enough. So they promptly tore that boat up. But we salvaged the engine and a lot of good experiences, we learned a lot, and we got the new boat, and I remember working around the shop, putting everything together, and I wasn't the best with my hands. I have one brother younger than me that was a pretty good mechanic. I was pretty much an idea man and a gopher. And I had another brother was about halfway simple. And we were trying to come up with a name, and all the names were boats that had Bo in it. So we're running scratching our heads, and Tom says I know, let's name it Boat. That's what we named it. And if you could've seen, when we pulled in the pits of that thing, if you could've seen the people look at that and just bust right out laughing, you know. Here's this brand new boat, you know, you would think you'd have some kind of crazy name on it, and it's named Boat. But Boat was quick. It was neat. So we got that all set up, and my brothers campaigned. I never did run in a race, and we're talking now, must've been about '69 or '70. And ended up, what did we end up doing? We broke it two or three times, and blew a couple of motors, ended up selling it, and then - now you want me to go on through my whole history here?

K.F.: Keep on going, and when I have a question, I'll pop in.

W.B.: Please. Okay, okay. So sold that boat, and then my brother, Tom, decided he wanted to get a 280. So he went down to Florida and bought a used 280, and Walt built him the engine, and we went racing again. And I started getting my feet on the ground a little bit with my business. It was starting to become a little bit profitable, so I could help him some, but Pop was helping. Pop, Tom and myself pretty much had the money into the rig. So, and he did real well with it. Won the nationals with it and flipped it a couple times because he was a, he was an animal. Young, crazy. He was a real charger, good driver. Excellent driver, and did real well with it. And ran that boat for a while. Then about that time, brother Teddy, who was number three, Tom was number four, Teddy decided he wanted to get a hydroplane, and he bought what was called a 225 class, which was faster. Ran a modified engine, and it was quick. It was a 130 mile an hour boat. Tom, the 280 was about 115 maybe, on a good day. And Teddy was real successful with his rig. And the thing about Teddy, he was the one I was telling you had the good hands. He did most of the work himself. Sent the boat back down, Henry Lauterbach, back

down outside of Portsmouth to change the sponges and change the boat around a little bit. But the engine work and a lot of the hardware Teddy did himself, and he did a good job on it. I'll never forget one time we were over to D.C. to a race, and he told me to drive it. And I was a rookie. I really didn't, I knew a little bit what I was doing, but I wasn't real confident in myself. But I thought I could do it. And I remember at the driver's meeting, there was two 225's, a 266, which is even a fast boat, and a 7 liter, which is even faster. Four of us going to be in this race. And they said okay, we'll give you - the big guy said we'll give you 225's, we'll give you the inside, and give you plenty of room, let you play around. And then, you know, basically they're telling us you go ahead and do your thing, and then we'll pass you when we get ready. Well guess what? I nailed the start and I was gone. I mean gone. And the other 225 was a much newer boat and faster. He was faster, but I got him at the start. And he finally ran me down next to the last turn, but boy, what a race that was. That was really, that was fun. I can remember, said well I shouldn't be going this fast, but I couldn't help myself. I was hypnotized. It's kind of like, you know, if you're going 125, you want to go to 127. You want to go a little bit faster. You can't help it. And if the water conditions are good, you just got to do it. So that was -

K.F.: Okay, well let me ask you something.

W.B.: Okay.

K.F.: When you said you nailed the start, what does that mean?

W.B.: Well in - we race for, under the flag of American Powerboat Association.

K.F.: Right.

W.B.: That's the sanctioning body. They have various types of starts for different types of boats, but for inboard hydroplane racing, 99 percent of the starts are against a clock. And what you'll have, you'll have a five-minute clock or a five-minute gun goes off, which starts your clock. That means in five minutes, you've got to be at that starting line flat out if you want, if you want to do well. So you have a five minute, and you go around - what you do, you go around the race course, and you pick up marks like you'll pick up a tree, or a car or any kind of a landmark and take a stopwatch and you hit it. Then you open up the throttle and see how long it takes to get from that point to the starting line. Generally, you're talking 9 to 13, 14 seconds, something like that. So when you say you nailed the start - and then after four minutes are gone, then you have a one-minute gun. Then you have to score it for your start. You get lined up and you come around. And that's when you want to be on your mark. Get to your mark and then you nail it and you go. So what you want when you hit that starting line, you want the gun to be, you want the clock to say zero, and you want to be just as fast as you can right there. If not, somebody on the inside or outside of you is going to be, and they're going to try to kick your tail. And as you're headed to the first turn, I always said I sold my first born to get to the first turn first. And it's a lot of truth in that because if you get caught behind a couple boats in rooster tails, you can get yourself in a lot of trouble quick. Because hydroplanes, unlike runabouts, rely on air to run. That's why they call them planes. And when you displace that air with water, somebody cuts you off, and all the sudden where you were depending on lift from the air to carry your boat is displaced with water, guess where you're going? You're going up in the air. So you want to be, you want to be on the gun. So when I say hit the gun flat out or had a good start, that's exactly what I mean. You got your foot to the wood, and you're going just as hard as you can go and looking for more.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. And I heard Henry Lauterbach's name mentioned in that book and a couple other places.

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

K.F.: What exactly did Henry do?

W.B.: Henry and his son, Larry, but Henry was the designer of the boats, started building boats, I guess, back in the - I guess maybe '54 or '55 he must've started building them. And he became the premier designer right on through the 60's and the early 70's. And his boats were just quick. They'd lay down on the water and just go. And they were beautiful. The craftsmanship was just second to none. And he was the man to have build a boat. Smart. Matter of fact, he's 80-some years old, and he's still designing boats.

K.F.: Really?

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

K.F.: Where does he live?

W.B.: Around Portsmouth.

K.F.: Virginia?

W.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: All right. So after you won this race, how did that affect you, or you were in this race, how did that affect you?

W.B.: Oh, I was abysmally hooked then. I was just (Laughter), it was terrible. About the same time, I was playing soccer, town team soccer, and I was fair. I wasn't the best. Here's the results of it. And I enjoyed it, but I was getting, I was 30, 31 years old, and it was time to leave that, and I got very interested in this. Want me to go on through a progression of boats now?

K.F.: Sure.

W.B.: So Teddy, I got into Teddy's 225, and he did real well with that, and I, that's where my last story was. Well in the meantime, Tom sells his 280. And we bought a brand new Ron Jones 7 liter from the west coast. All the trick stuff. And this was going to be the ticket. And it was quick, but it broke down a lot. It had an experimental gearbox in it that didn't hold up. But anyhow, it ran a big block Chevrolet. It was 140 mile an hour boat, and we did pretty well with it. Could've done better, but we did pretty well. Again, it was my father, my brother Tom and myself involved in this venture. And we campaigned it I guess a total of about four years. I think we bought it in '75. About '77, I really started getting itchy. Actually, '76. I told Pop, I said I've got to do something. There was a fellow out in Kawkawlin, Michigan, which is north of Bay City, they was building boats, John Startaker (phonetic), and he was, he built good boats. And I liked what I saw, what he was building, and he had a new 280 out there, and I bought it. Pop - I think Pop and myself bought that. Mostly me. I was really broke. Then my wife, she was gritting her teeth, but I was racing boats when she married me, so I bought this boat and proceeded to go out and start kicking tail, did real well with it. And it had a weak engine in it. So enter Walt Stevenson again. And Walt came along, and he liked the boat, and he had retired from engine building. But when he saw this boat, he decided, hell, I'll build another one. So he built us an engine for that, and we did very, very good with it. I went down, I won the National High Points with it in '77, and the in '78, we won, I think I won high points in '78, but I won the national championship down in St. Petersburg. And I was thinking about that race the other day. I remember talking to the

boat builder. The boat used to fly high. I mean when it was aired out, it would hang three, sometimes four feet in the air, just hang there running 100 and some mile an hour, gets a little hairy sometimes. And you turned on a skid fin which hangs on your left side. And I can remember asking John Startaker, I said John, this boat's going to turn if it's not in the water, will it hook up? And he said I don't know. (Laughter.) Well as it turned out, I won, I won the championship by four-tenths of a second because you run two heats. I had the best time for two heats. And it was an exciting race, it really was. And I was so thrilled. It was one of the highlights of my racing career as I look back on it. 'Cause I never, shucks, I had a family and everything by now and a business. I never really thought I was going to be able to race competitively. And for something like that to happen, I had to pinch myself every now and then just to, just to make sure I was still not dreaming. 'Cause when you really want to do something, you know, when you really want to do something, and you finally get a chance to do it, it's wonderful. It's neat. That's what life's all about. So I ran that boat for a couple years, and I sold it. And I ran into a guy up in Detroit who had a boat built just like that one. And he couldn't drive a thirsty billy goat to water. He was a terrible driver. So he asked me to drive his boat, and I agreed to do it, and I drove that boat for him for a couple years, two years. We won high points with it, and we had a great time. But I had to have another boat, so I bought another one in 1980.

And I'll never forget, we went down to St. Petersburg, which at that time was the premier racecourse, it was a wonderful place to race. And it was a bad weekend, and I only got one heat in it, and I went out there and scalded them with it. And John Startaker said he had never seen anything like it. He had five people order boats just like that. They said they wanted boats just like mine. But I did real good with that boat. I won the nationals that year with it. And I think the next year, I sold it. And I went, drove for another guy. Guy by the name of Skip Gillam (phonetic), out of Florida, was running an entirely different hull. And we won a lot of races with his boat. I won the nationals that year in '82 with his 280. In the meantime, I had ordered a new 7 liter of my own. I think I got it, I got it in the summer, end of the season '82, I believe. Yeah. And I can remember sitting at my store on Saturday mornings, that's when I do all my thinking 'cause it was kind of quiet, you know, and just kind of sit there and dream and sketch stuff, thinking what are we going to name this boat. I called up my father. I had gone through it in my head, and I said Pop, how many boats have we had in our family. He said - he counted up, we went over it, and we'd had 12 boats. So I said huh, I said what do you think we name this boat Baker's Dozen? So that's what we named it, Baker's Dozen. And it was a great boat. It was quick. The thing, what was really neat about it, we got in this class that - this class was really becoming a premier class, the 7-liter class. We were back where the boze - was where I told you years ago, it had moved onto the west coast. But we were running a lot faster than they were now because the technology moved things forward, and there was - it had become a class where a lot of people with money had gotten into it. And I didn't have a lot of money. Pop and I, we had gone together and bought this boat, but it was on a shoestring. And we went out and kicked everybody's tail. And it was great. I flipped it once in St. Petersburg. Same place where Alton had had his accident. Tore it up a little bit. But I remember, I guess it was '84. No, it was - when the boat was brand

new, we were in Essex, Maryland, and I went out and broke out in front of everybody, and blew the motor up. So we put another motor together. We knew the boat was quick. Went down to St. Pete for the October race, and they kept boxing me in, not letting me go. I'd win the race, but they'd box me in enough where I couldn't set a record. That was my goal, to set a record. Couldn't do it. Went down there in February, and the first heat out, we popped a record. I think we popped it to like 108, something like that, which at that time was pretty quick. So there's a lot of champagne flowing, and beer, and everybody was happy. It was just wonderful. But we'd come out, and we'd really made a mark for ourselves with this boat. And the boat builder was very pleased. Everybody was happy. Again, Walt Stevenson built an engine for us. So they started building boats like that, and I couldn't win every race then. They started catching up with me. And I'll never forget. We went down there in '85. February the 5^h of '85, because it was my anniversary. My wife was down there. And I went out the first heat, and we had, we had it set up what we thought was right as far as the cam shaft, and the carburetor tuning, the propeller and the skid fin, everything felt good. And I went out, and a fellow by the name of Jim Cropfelt was driving for Alan Bordermeyer, a fellow from down in Florida. And Cropfelt was the premier driver of the world, far as I was concerned. He was driving Ms. Budweiser at the time. And he got the start, and I couldn't catch him. And he beat me the first heat. So we went out the second heat. And I remember coming in, and I came on shore, and the guy that was doing my engine work said what do you want? I said don't touch it. It's perfect. And what had happened, a front had moved in, and air density had gotten very good, which means the engines were making a lot of horsepower, and things were perfect. And we went out the second heat, and I nailed the start. And I'll never forget, my boat, when it got to about 130, 135, always wanted to get light, and it would get kind of scary, and I can remember going to the first turn thinking I better open this thing up now, but my foot was already planted. (Laughter.) It was fast as it would go. And I kept waiting for Cropfelt to try to come around because he was driving a real fast boat. So I got him chasing me. But little did I know that I was wasting him. So I ran the race, and about halfway through the race, my face mask started coming off. So I'm driving with one hand holding my face mask, still flat out, so I'm going pretty quick. And I couldn't believe it. When the race was over, I came in, and I had upped the world record again. (Laughter.) And that was, that was sweet. Oh, I mean I had no idea I'd done it. I was just trying to survive the race. I wanted to win the race at all - I'd have done anything to win the race. But to set a record on top of that was wonderful, which goes back to my engine man. And I said - I had told him that everything was right, and we were, we were right on the money. That was, that was another grand, grand time. That was really neat. And to set a second record with it, and we had also set some smaller records on smaller race courses, and I'd won national high point titles with that boat, and she was a great boat.

Well as things would happen, the guy, Alan Bordermeyer, I guess he liked what he saw, and he got a new, he got a new boat, and he couldn't get it working right. And I don't remember how it happened, but he called me and asked me to drive his boat. And I was, about this time, I was, I'd spent all the money I could afford on this boat. I mean in the meantime, I've got more children coming. I've got three kids now, and I'm trying to

grow the business, and fill the house and all that. So I'd spent as much money as I should, more than I should. Alan called me up, asked me to drive his boat. Well Alan had a pretty good reputation. I had driven a smaller boat for him a couple times and done pretty well with it. I said okay, I'll try it. So I started driving his boat, and we won a couple races. Did pretty good once we got, once we got it straightened out. I remember that he had done some work to the sponson, and it wasn't right. But once they got it right, and I told him, I said your sponson's wrong or something. Get the boat up to about, I'd say 125, it would want to go all over the place. It was nuts. So we got that straightened out. And then in 1987, we went out with that boat, and we won every race except one, and that was, we were running a larger class, we were running the Grand Prix class. We were 7 liter, which means we were about, I want to say 650, 700 horsepower. Grand Prix's were 12 to 1,500 horsepower. And I almost won the race too. They boxed me in at the start out in Toledo, Ohio. Man, what a race that was. But that year, I won everything. I won the nationals, won high points, set a world's record. I bumped the record again. I mean, and it still stands to this day. That was set in Essex, Maryland in September on Labor Day of '87, and I took the record up to 117 and change. My last leg was almost 120. I was flat flying. I mean I was going. And that record stands today, so that's 13 years it's stood. And that was another grand day. In the meantime, my dad had died in '87, it was kind of a wild year. I dedicated that race and that record to him. That was pretty emotional time. Same time in '86, I got elected to County Commission in Queen Anne's County. I was a busy boy. So we were most successful in '87. So we're real successful. And the guy I'm driving for, Alan Bordermeyer, he wants to take on the - he wants to go after the big boys, Ms. Budweiser and all these guys that are running these 200 mile an hour boats.

Well he's got the bright idea, see they run in the unlimited class, now they run the lycoming helicopter engine, which is a jet engine. Make about 3,000 horsepower, 900 pound power plant runs all day long. We're going to beat them - we're going to beat them with two big Fords, right? We're going to beat them with all motor power. And what we set up, John built the boat, and Ford Motor Company was involved in this, and they had two 585 blocks, aluminum blocks, with alcohol injection with nitrous oxide on them. So you got all these moving parts, and we're going to whip the jets, right? Wrong. It was an abysmal failure. Didn't work. Like to kill myself. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I'll tell you anyhow. We were up to Detroit for our maiden voyage, and I couldn't get started. It was kind of hard to get both of them started at the same time. It was tough. So the guys that built the engine said when they were starting them on - they'd give them a little shot of nitrous, and they'd go ahead and fire up. Nitrous oxide, if you don't know, it's - when you put that in an engine, it's automatic explosion. I mean it just, you can make horsepower just like that. Shouldn't do it when you're starting, an engine should be running before you do that. So I'm on the headset. Now you've got to understand now, this is the first time I've driven a boat in a capsule, so we've moved on now, we're getting, I'm getting cipher, I'm strapped in, I got capsule, I got an air mask. It's a low, it's a high altitude paratrooper's mask with scuba tanks back here, so we got air all the time, plus got radio. So we got all this stuff So I'm trying to start, trying to start it. Won't start. So Cooper, this is so funny, Cooper says give her a shot. Well I'd

asked those guys to give me a big peddle so I could - so I'd know what I was doing when I'm giving it a shot of nitrous with my left foot. My throttle's in my right foot. I wanted to use nitrous in my left foot. Well they gave me a little button. I gave it too much, and when I went to start the engine, I blew both of them up right there. Pow. Blew them up. Stuff was flying everywhere. Here I am floating down the Detroit river in a brand new boat. Son of a gun, back in the engine compartment, I look in the mirrors, it's on fire. I can't, I can't get the capsule open for some reason, there's something wrong, I couldn't get it going, couldn't get it open. Finally, they dragged me in next to the pier and they put the fire out. The people from Latrobe, we were sponsored by Latrobe. People from Latrobe Brewery were there. I threw plywood and stuff all over them, you know. It was embarrassing as hell. Finally, get on the pier, and my thought then, which was in 1988, my thought right now was, and this is exactly how I felt, I said I just want to get on this pier and walk off here, and go home and never come back. That's what I wanted to do. Well the guys worked all night on it, and they put a couple more engines. I blew - I tore up probably 70, \$80,000 worth of stuff just in a blink of an eye. They put everything back together best they could. Next day, they're going to try again. So they send me out, and I get one engine fired, and I'm trying to get the other one to go, and I'm driving the boat by radio because I got - not going fast enough, and I got water coming over the canopy. I can't see where I'm going, so my brother's on the radio telling me where to go, then I lose radio contact. So I keep trying, keep trying, finally I said the hell with it, so I shut it down. I was just about to run into a Coast Guard cutter. Antique Coast Guard cutter sitting there. Oh, man. Then I can't get out of it again. There was something wrong with the canopy. So I'm sitting there, and it's getting hot. And I called Tom. Said, Tom, tell them to send a patrol boat out to get me. Well they're slow getting there. And then I said Tom, I took off my helmet, my life jacket, took off my racing top, and we have a hatch down the bottom. I said, Tom, if they don't get here soon, I'm going out the bottom of this thing. But they showed up and got me out of it. It was another embarrassing mess. Then we went out, went ahead and flogged through the year. I think I had one second place, and that was running against some slack boats, and it was horrible, and I'll never forget, I was going to call Alan Bordermeyer, and tell him that I was going to quit, that I just couldn't go through another year like that 'cause I knew he was not going to put the money into a new boat, and he wasn't going to go to the jet and all this stuff. I called him up around Christmas time, and he said I'm glad you called. I got some news for you. I said what's that, Alan? I was thinking he was going to say well we got a new boat ordered, or this. He said we lost our sponsorship, we're not going to race next year. I said, darn, that's too bad. (Laughter.) So that worked out for absolutely the best. Well in the meantime, a guy that was crew chief for Alan when he was running the 7 liter by the name of Carter Parish - want me to keep going?

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

C.B.: It's riveting.

W.B.: Huh?

C.B.: This is riveting.

W.B.: Guy by the name of Carter Parish, who was, who was the brains behind the 7 liter success, who was smart enough not to go with the unlimited program because he knew it was going to be just - I won't, I'll keep it clean. It was going to be just a, just a mess.

Just one problem after another, Carter had ordered a, had ordered a new boat from John Startaker in the two and a half mile fly class, which is one class I had never really run much in. Run a couple races for other people, but never much. And Carter's a bit of a - I'm not going to say he's an odd duck. He's very particular and peculiar to do things the way he wants them done, period. I mean there is no exception. He wants it done a certain way and will not settle for anything other than that. He's very, very good, and I knew that. I said, Carter, when you get your boat, I want to drive it.

Well, sure enough, he got his boat and he asked me to drive it. In this class, in the two and a half modified class, it's a lot like midget cars. You can run - back in those days, it was 155 cubic inches and do anything you want, so I put a blower on it. Most people run alcohol injection. So most, most the people in those days were running Pontiacs from the Fieros. Remember the Fiero cars?

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

W.B.: Well they were using those engines and Chevy two engines, four cylinders. And some guys would take a 350 and cut it in half and make a V-4, other people were running Datsun engines and Porsches, BMW's, all kinds of stuff. It's a real neat class. But Carter's hardheaded. He wanted something American, which I liked because I'm pretty patriotic. I'm a veteran. I like to support our country. He took a Ford, he took a Ford V-8. Now you got to understand, V-8's, you got eight cylinders, and he put a block-off plate on one side. And now he takes the technology from Nascar and gets the cylinder head from a Robert Yates cylinder head 'cause he's in tight with these boys, these fellows up in outside of Detroit who do the research and development for a lot of Ford stuff. So they've got these good heads. So he's got this head, and then he does alcohol injection on it. It's the weirdest thing you've ever seen in your life, and does it run. Brother. So I started driving that in '89 for him, and we won the nationals in '89, and we weren't real fast. We were quick, but we weren't fast then. We were just starting to work it out. And progressively, we've gotten so that boat is very, very fast. And through the years, we've won the nationals. I own the one mile record with it. Hopefully, we're going to take a shot at another record next year. And he's steadily made more horsepower for me. And it's been very successful. It's been a lot of fun. This year, we ran two races, only ran two races this year. We ran against the big boys and kicked all their tails. It was wonderful. And what was really neat about this year was we went to Raleigh and cakewalked them down there. But about, I'm going to say August, Carter started having some heart trouble, and he's down in Florida, and they wanted to give to him open heart surgery. You want to hear this story?

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

W.B.: And he wasn't too keen on it, and he's going back and forth. And in the meantime, I've been elected to the legislature. I'm in the legislature now. So I said, Carter, I can help you if you need help. If you need a second opinion, give me a holler. So finally, he acquiesced, and he called me up and he said I need some help. I said, okay, I'll see what I can do. So I have a friend of mine in the Senate who works at Johns Hopkins. So we got him up here, and they did an angioplasty on him. He stayed at our house, and we nourished him back. I didn't do much nourishing, my wife did. So we got him in shape. So he said, you know, I think I'm in good enough shape, we can go down

and pick up my boat, and we come back to a race up in Ohio. So that's what we did. I booked out of my business and cancelled a couple of appointments and jumped in the truck with him. We drive back down to - Ocala, hung around there for a couple days, got the boat ready, and up we come to Ohio. Went out there and won four heats, kicked them all again. Spanked them real good for the end of the year, you know. Just give them something to, give them something to bitch about. And the best part about it is we're still running, in the meantime, they've allowed this class, the modified class to gain another 11 cubic inches, which doesn't sound like much to the average person who's going to listen to this, but that's at least 22 horsepower, 2 horsepower per cubic inch, which is a ton when we're running, say we're running 320 horsepower, you could pick up and run close to 350, means a lot. But we were able to kick everybody's tail with the small engine. I keep telling them to build a big one, but he won't do it till he gets beat, I guess. So that's the tale of that boat and that rig.

About 1992, I went - I got a phone call from a fellow up in Jersey by the name of Ray Lyn asking me if I'd be interested in testing his boat for him. He had a new five liter, which was the old 280 class which I really love anyhow. I love stock small blocks. Really neat. And I'd been successful, as I told you earlier. I'd been successful previous years in this class, and he asked me to test it, and I did. And it was a pig. Had a lot of problems with it, but we worked on it, worked on it, worked on it. Finally got it so it was right quick. So, naturally, I ended up driving it. And we went out the first year after we got the bugs out of it. I think we may have won third one race, and we won all the rest of them. And then the next year we went out and won every race we ran, and set a new world's record with it, and we were happy campers. So Ray is an engineer, and his father was an engineer, and they have a manufacturing, small manufacturing plant up in Jersey. And anytime I wanted something different - see, the secret to making a boat work is the driver having the ability to know what's wrong or what you need to fix, and articulating your position to the people that own it, and say listen, I need - you need to change something here or change something there. And these guys were boat racers before, so they knew exactly where I was coming from, and we worked together, and we were a heck of a team. As a matter of fact, we still are. So we set the first record, like I told you. Then we came back the next year, back over to Essex, one of my favorite places to race and bumped it again. And this time, I ran over 100 miles an hour with a stock boat and that was quick. Although one lap was over 100, the average is 99 something. So next thing you know, everybody starts building boats like this one. (Laughter.) And we couldn't win every race. And I told Raymond right from the start, I said, Ray, I don't - like I've told everybody I've raced with, for or with, I said I don't mind losing a race, I just want to make sure I have a chance to win it, though. You know, if I lose it, that's on me. But if I don't have a chance to win, that's on you. So this boat, the technology had changed in six or seven years, and the boats were lighter. The new ones were lighter. And although I could run with them on a big race course, on a short race course, I couldn't accelerate with them. So Ray said well, what do you think we try putting another engine and changing classes? I said well, we've got to do something.

So sure enough, we went from a 200 and - about a 230 horsepower 305 and put a 550 horsepower 350 in it. Well that was an experience. I mean you're taking something, it is fast. But uncontrollable. I just couldn't - it was wild. And we made some changes. Changed the rudder and the fin and got it better, but it was still a crazy ride. I did some things I should've never have done -

K.F.: Like?

W.B.: Low and behold, in 1999, I won the nationals with it. (Laughter.) And I did it with my brain. I wasn't the fastest boat. I was probably the second or third fastest boat there, but I can remember coming up for the start down at Hampton, and I had a 7-second mark where I was going to nail it in seven seconds. Well these boneheads come up there, about 8 of us out in the race, and they all hit it at 9 seconds, and guess what? They all jumped the gun. And I held back 'cause I knew they were wrong, and I ended up winning the nationals that year. So I won that with my brain, not the brawn. But I told him after a year was over, I said Ray, I can't drive the boat. I can't use the horsepower. It's just not enough boat. So over the winter last year, they added two feet to the boat, made some other changes, and the boat felt a lot better this year. And we did real well with it. And I was out front, the nationals this year, and remember me mentioning, I mentioned Lauterbach? Well his son, Larry, had just built a new boat. And in this class, you can run two different engines. And I'm running stock engine, he's running modified. He ran me down, and I had a little altercation, got her airborne a little bit, brought her back down. Got beamed, but it was fine. That was interesting. But she's quick. And as we speak, we're lobbying for an engine change. We need another about 50 or 60 horsepower, and nobody will run me down. (Laughter.) I won't have to worry about getting damn near blown over backwards. That was, that was one of the hottest races I've ever been in in my life between the two of us. I mean we were going fast. Quick. Fun. God, it was neat.

K.F.: Well let me ask you -

W.B.: That's about all I can talk about far as -that takes me through all the boats I've driven.

K.F.: Okay. Well then I'm going to backup and ask a couple of sort of detail questions then. You talked a couple of times about certain places being a good course. Now what makes a good course?

W.B.: Well I love boat racing, so any racecourse is a good one far as I'm concerned. But they all offer different challenges. Like the race we have at Kent Island and the race, when they used to race years ago out near St. Michaels, used to race right out here. Each racecourse offers a little, has its own idiosyncrasies. The race, the racecourse at Kent Island is one of the toughest in the world because it's shaped like a cigar. It's long and narrow, and there's not a whole lot of room at one of the turns. Matter of fact, go too wide at one turn, you're going to end up in a duck blind. Been several people almost do that, which makes for some anxious moments. But if you took - the really good race courses are kind of like egg shaped. They're, I guess the word would be elliptical. And what you do, you - when you - and they are generally record courses because you put your foot into it, and when things are right, you put your foot in and you leave it there, and then you see just how fast you really are. The Essex course was like that. That's where I set a 7-liter record and two 5-liter records over there. And the St. Petersburg

course was a big round, big round oval racecourse, and it's exciting, 'cause you're really going fast. You really find out what you've got. But like I said, I cut my teeth years ago river racing. We used to go up in Pennsylvania a lot and race on the rivers up there, which were long courses with tight turns. And I just love doing that stuff. It's neat. So as far as I'm concerned, all racecourses are good. Unless it's real rough. If it's rough, you can't really find out how fast your boat is, you just find out how much nerve you got or how stupid you are, how fast you push a boat in bad conditions. I don't - I've never really liked to do that. I don't like to beat the boat up in equipment, and plus, I kind of like my -

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

C.B.: Do you need a break?

W.B.: I could talk all day about this stuff.

C.B.: This is great. It's exciting to hear.

K.F.: It is. One thing I wanted to ask you, you talked about Baker's Dozen and then a couple of the more recent boats as being slightly different than the rest of them, and everybody then sort of modified their boats. Can you describe what was so different about these two boats that made them so special?

W.B.: Well when I bought Baker's Dozen, I had been arguing with the boat builder for about a year about how to design it. He had designed boats before that, most of them he had designed in that class, he had started putting S bottoms in them. Well an S bottom, for those that don't know what it means, you concentrate your lift at a certain point on the bottom of a hull, and you get your lift from that. Well the problem with that is you're concentrating your lift in one point, and it can get you in trouble if you have too much. I wanted a straight bottom which would spread the lift out throughout the whole hull. And John didn't really agree with that, but finally, he saw things the way I wanted it and he built the boat like that, and he never went back and built another S bottom after that. So that was pretty neat that I could talk someone of that caliber into seeing things my way. He's since, he's not building race boats anymore, he's building airplanes. Building stunt planes and that kind of stuff. Pretty neat guy. That was good.

The boat before that, my second 280, it was an S bottom, and that class was different because you didn't have horsepower, and you needed the lift of the bottom to jump you up on top, and use the - use the air more to get the lift out of the hull. And we had changed the S in it compared to one he had built before that, and that was pretty neat. One thing we did with my 7 liter that was, a lot of people still don't understand, back in those days, well let me take you to where we are now. When I'm driving the boat now, with my left foot, I'm flying - I have a canard that I use with the left foot to control the attitude of the boat.

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

W.B.: And like I said, we got the mask on and radio communication and all that, but the left foot is doing a lot of work. When my - in the early 80's, when my 7-liter was built, you couldn't have any moveable objects on a race boat. Everything, you couldn't have that. And I told John when he built the boat, I said John, I need something to hold the bow of this boat down so I can keep my foot in the throttle. So I said why don't we figure a way to put the water up front, put some water up front and hold it, and then let

me dump it once I get to the turn. So he came up with a rather novel idea. We called it the toilet. And what it was, we would take the water from the engine, the hot water from the engine, and run it up through this box, this sealed compartment. And normally, the water would go on out. But if I wanted to trap it, I'd just push down on this little tube. I'd push down on this flap, and it would, like a toilet, would hold - the flap would go down, and a standpipe in there to control the level of water I wanted. And it would put this water up in the bow of the boat, which would give you ballast, would hold the bow down. When I'd get to the turn, I left my foot off, and it's spring loaded, and the flap would open up and dump all the water out. Neat. Great idea. Really was. And it worked. People couldn't understand what the hell we were doing. They said what are these guys up to? And it worked. And we were able to use that and go quick. But since then, they've allowed moveable wings and all that. Hell, I've had wings on the bow, wings on the stern, all kinds of stuff Always trying something different. What was your question?

K.F.: That was it. How they were different and how everybody wanted to copy them. I was curious as to what it was about those boats that people wanted to copy, you know, and how they were different from the -

W.B.: Mostly the bottom design. And then they did copy and change, they changed them and made them faster. They had old Baker's Dozen, now she's in splinters in a landfill somewhere. Somebody destroyed it. But my old 280's are still running. And they're fast.

C.B.: Tell us about going fast. What's it feel like to go that fast, or sound like?

W.B.: Well -

C.B.: Are you scared?

W.B.: No, not most of the time. Well if something happens, you get scared. Well I'll - when - I'll tell you how I felt when I was working with this last boat when we were developing it. You knew, you knew that when you made your start, you were going to have to do something you shouldn't have - you didn't want to do, but you had to do it anyhow. And I would make some timing runs with it and get the boat up to maybe 120, 122, 123. And I was scared to death because I didn't know exactly what was going to happen. But you know when you get a boat alongside of you, you got to go. And when you finally get there to the starting line and you've got your foot into it, you just got to let the tail go with the hide. And as long as the boat's fairly controllable, you've got to do everything you can to get to the first turn. And what does it feel like to go that fast? Pretty neat. When things are right, you're hanging about four to six inches off the water. Hopefully, you're not walking too much. When I say walking, lots of boats will sponson walk, they'll tiptoe. It's okay. What you want, what I like is a boat that just barely touches. Just goes very lightly on the water. And you don't really - sometimes you don't realize how fast you're going till you get to the turn and set your fin. And that's when it throws you off, throws you to the right, and the G forces pin you to the right side. I guess the fastest I've ever been was going back to 1987 when I was driving Alan's 7 liter. We were racing down to Raleigh, North Carolina. And I was racing against this Cajun by the name of Johnnie Prebost (phonetic). And he had a new boat, it was a beautiful boat, fast. But he, when he put his helmet on, his head went out of gear. And he jumped the gun, went out there and jumped the gun by about - God, he must've jumped the gun by five seconds, which five seconds at 130 or 40 mile an hour is a ton. And the time I went

across the starting line, he was going into the first turn. I had hell into me too, and I let Alan, that big old Ford, I got that thing wound up and started chasing him down. And I remember going into the pit turn down there, I must've been going 150. And that's before we were strapped in. And I just was determined to catch Prebost, and I caught him. Ran him down, and just blew him away. I was really going fast. But that was probably the greatest sensation of speed I've ever had. I was going so fast in a turn, I couldn't see where I was going. It was just throwing you around, and shaking and everything. But I knew generally where I wanted to be, and I looked, checked it out pretty close before I got there. There wasn't any, there wasn't anybody hanging around, wasn't any boats around there, so I could do what I wanted. But I was really, really, really going fast. I'll never forget that. And I had the same sensation somewhat last year in Ray Lyn's boat. I wasn't going as fast, but the sensation was there because it's a smaller boat, and it just felt like a little rocket ship. So what does it feel like? It's pretty awesome. When things are right, it's just terrific. The noise is not too bad because the engine's behind you. And it's throwing the exhaust out behind you, but you hear, you hear all kinds of noises when you're inside the capsule. You hear the boat when it hits, when it hits waves, and you start hitting small waves or something. You go into a turn, you start sliding sideways, and you're running 130 or so. You hit these - you hear all these strange noises, but you get used to it. To dampen it, I wear ear plugs, not to keep the noise out so much, but I have communication with shore. The owners, usually they're talking, talking to me, telling me what's going on, which is fun.

C.B.: In the rest of the race, because they can see it, you mean?

W.B.: They can see it better than I can.

C.B.: Right.

W.B.: See, back in the old days, we just kind of look around, you know, and see what's going on. But now we're all strapped in. We rely on mirrors and good sense. But it's good to have another set of eyes watching what's going on, and that's what he does.

He'll tell me who's around me, what's going on, what to look out for.

C.B.: What can you see from the cockpit? I mean are you blocked in the front 'cause the boat goes up?

W.B.: Oh, if the boat goes up too high, you can't see anything. But generally speaking, I can see pretty well. I can see where I'm going without any problem. Yeah.

K.F.: Now what sort of safety equipment was in the boat? Obviously, you used to not be strapped in.

W.B.: Right.

K.F.: And now you are. So what are the safety precautions?

W.B.: Well years ago, up until I guess about up till - I guess it was when I first started driving Ray's boat, '92, everybody in the limited classes, most in the limited classes, the smaller classes, we just ran open cockpits. And we would wear life jackets that had parachutes on them that had a static line hooked to the boat. And the idea was if you got thrown out - if you got thrown out of a boat, a parachute would open up and put you into the water feet first, which works pretty good. It worked for me once, maybe twice.

K.F.: Can you tell us about that --

W.B.: Oh, my accident?

K.F.: -- experience? Yeah. I mean flying out of a boat in a parachute. (Laughter.)

W.B.: You want to hear about that, or you want me to - want me to go through the equipment and then come back to it?

K.F.: Come back to it, sure.

W.B.: Okay. So we used to, used to wear these - I don't know if I'll tell you. I'll tell you anyhow. We're all grownups. We used to wear these pants overtop our driving suit. 'Cause if you went I, what happened, the parachutes would put you in feet first, but you'd get these high speed enemas, and they would - it killed a guy because the water went up and exploded him. So we started wearing these pants to prevent that from happening. And then we, you know, had a helmet and all that stuff So that was a very, very - it wasn't very safe. If you had an accident, you were in a lot of trouble. Now we are in a safety cell. It's Kevlar and all kinds of carbon fibers, which makes the cell strong, which will withstand an impact from getting run over or if you go upside down, it'll hold up to those pressures. And we're sitting in there, and we've got a five-point safety harness, so we're strapped in a seat. Not all the boats, but most of them, have air systems with it. It's not mandatory that you do that. But the main boat that I drive, the one for the Lyns, which is called Big Bird, because it's a big yellow boat and kind of peculiar looking, but it's quick. We have an air system on there, and it's a scuba tank mounted on the back of the capsule with a line coming up like into a mask where we can draw air if we need it. And like I say, we've got radio communication. And the idea is to keep you with the cell, and if you flip or have an accident, you have a chance to survive without getting mangled up. And we have the rescue crews have come light years in their work now. We have divers on board the rescue crews, which will go underneath the boats and get us out if we need that. Most of the boats have safety hatches on the bottom, so if a boat is upside down, they can take the hatch out and pull you out. So that's the difference in the safety gear then versus now.

Go back to then, when I - I had two accidents in St. Petersburg, same place. Remember Alton Pearson, I was talking about him about an accident?

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

W.B.: Same place, I had two of them. Matter of fact, first one I had was in my 280, and we were going to the first turn. This guy came from the outside to the inside, and blew two of us over at the same time It was horrible. My boat landed on its feet. It landed right-side up, but it thrown me out. And I'll never forget. I was - water wasn't very deep. It was about chest high. I was standing in the water, and I had come down on my neck and it stunned me, I guess. I couldn't feel my arm. I thought my arm had been severed. It was horrible. And my buddy, Ray Lyn, the guy I was driving for, he came to me and he helped me get through that. The funny thing that happened was that alligator is full - I mean the lake's full of alligators. And when he got out, he stepped on the bottom, and he stepped on my cowling, and he didn't know what it was, but he thought maybe it was an alligator. He was scared to death too. Well, we got through that, and they patched the boat up, and my brother went out and won the next heat with it. That was trick. But the, I guess worst accident I had were right in the same place, going in that first turn to St. Petersburg. Guy cut across the front of me and up I go. And there was about six or seven boats in the race, so I was in the front bunch, and I just - I remember the boat going up, and I just curled myself up in a ball, and when the boat came around, it threw

me out. And I can remember trying to stay underwater as long as I could because I knew the boats were going to be coming around me. Scared to death. When I finally popped up, I saw this orange flash and heard this bang. Well what had happened, the boat had landed upside down, and Alan Bordermeyer had - remember I was talking about Alan earlier? He had a boat in that race, and after the spray cleared, the guy that was driving it hooked his boat to keep from hitting my boat or me, and when he did, my rudder hit his boat about four foot up the side and cut the back of his boat off. I witnessed that. Bang, just like that. So that was pretty harrowing. That was scary as a matter of fact. But that's the only accidents I've had. I've been airborne plenty of times and brought her back down. My brother, Tom, he's had, he's probably had four or five accidents. He was a charger. The worst one he had, he was racing up in Canada running a Grand Prix boat, which is 160, 165 mile an hour boat, and he was coming up for the finish and his rudder broke, and he went across the finish line upside down and backwards. He always was one

K.F.: Did he win?

W.B.: He won. He was always the one for dramatics. (Laughter.) So that was, that was, looking at the films on that, he was a lucky boy. But that's really knock on wood, only serious accidents I've had. I try to stay up front and stay away from everybody. (Laughter.)

C.B.: Does your wife go with you on all the races? Can she stand to watch the races?

W.B.: Not all of them. She used to go to all the races years ago, but I kind of burnt her out.

C.B.: Yeah.

W.B.: I mean I've been doing this now for along time. I'm, shucks, I'm- probably shouldn't be doing it. Got grandchildren now and gray hair and all that stuff.

C.B.: How long do you want to keep doing it?

W.B.: I don't know. That's a good question. I know I shouldn't be, and I know, I know my reflexes can't be what they were when I was younger. They can't be. But I know how, I know what I want to do and I know what can happen, and I think I have the ability to avert problems before they happen. Like anybody with experience driving a racecar, motorcycles or whatever you get involved in, and in life in general, you know how to stay away from those pitfalls. So that's what I try to do. I've been pretty good at it.

K.F.: What are your goals for the coming years in your racing?

W.B.: Well assuming I race this year, which I'm sure I will, I just had my foot operated on, and if it lets me race, I'm pretty sure I'll race another year, my goal is to win every race. And there are just as many, everybody out there is going to want to whip me. I know that. And that's the way it is. I just really get a kick out of, especially kicking young boys' tails. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Why?

W.B.: Well you get these young chargers, you get these young chargers in there, and they're going to whip the world and everything, and I just kind of sit back and listen to them, and watch what they're doing, and go out there and just do them, you know. I remember we were down the Mississippi racing four or five years ago. One of them said, Baker, when you gonna quit? I said, young man, I've just started. (Laughter.) We had aced them down there that weekend. We won four straight heats, and we were fast. So

when, I don't know. I just go out and do what I do. Do the best I can. It's neat. You have to go to a race. You have to check it out. Where are you from?

K.F.: Yeah. Virginia, originally.

W.B.: Where do you live now?

K.F.: Silver Spring, Maryland.

W.B.: Yeah, you have to come over to our race.

K.F.: Yeah. Well we should. We should take some photos during the race. Video.

C.B.: Right. Well the day we went, it was really windy.

W.B.: Oh, yeah.

C.B.: Cancelled it.

W.B.: Yeah.

C.B.: It was a local thing. We'll get your next schedule.

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

K.F.: Well I'm wondering if you can tell me who some of these people are in this photograph.

W.B.: Okay. I didn't need these things before either. (Laughter.) See, this was my baby here. This is Baker's Dozen. She was a sweetheart.

K.F.: Right.

W.B.: And up here is where we had the ballast tank up here.

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

W.B.: This is brother Tom. Teddy, brother Al, he's number two. So that's me and my sister. Alton Pearson, and my mom. My dad had passed away. So in succession, it's one, two, three, four, five of us.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And did your sister ever get into racing at all?

W.B.: No, no. We kept her out of it. Teddy's the one that had the good hands.

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

W.B.: He's very mechanically inclined. I'll tell you something else that happened one time. Tom had an experimental Grand Prix boat, and he was testing it out in front of mom's house where we do our testing. And he was driving the boat harder than he should've, I thought, and he got away from it. And as it happened, remember Evening Magazine, when they used to have the Evening Magazine show?

K.F.: Yeah.

W.B.: They were down there shooting both of us, and I had done my thing, and Tom was coming down and doing his bonsai run, and he lost it. And the boat shot off to the right. These things aren't supposed to go to the right, and the next thing you know, there goes Tom, right through the scantling. It's when we were sitting, we weren't strapped in. And they caught Tom flipping. I think he did three or four cartwheels. But one cartwheel, you could see his helmet coming off. Another one, you could see a shoe coming off. And it was phenomenal. He tore his ankle up. It was phenomenal that's all he did. I just thought he may have killed himself on that one. I was out in the patrol boat then watching him. Got there to him, couldn't believe he wasn't hurt more than he was. That was something else. But the irony was, it was a big capsule, a big cockpit. And the guy from Evening Magazine was a small stature, a man of small stature, and he wanted to ride with Tom with the camera. (Laughter.) Of course, Tom wouldn't have pushed it that

hard if he was in there, but we always said that that would've been some picture if he'd have flipped with the camera in there with him. Yeah, right. (Laughter.)

K.F.: So what does it feel like when you see another driver, especially a family member, have a flip?

W.B.: I'm glad you brought that up. When was it? Let's see. Maybe '93 or so, I built a little boat for my daughter. Actually, Larry Lauterbach built it for me.

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

W.B.: I wanted, my daughter wanted to try it, and I wanted her to try it. The boat was fair. It was fairly quick. And she was a good little shoe. She was a good little driver. Actually, they shared driving responsibilities. I had a man that was building the engine for me, and his son drove some, and my daughter drove some. But what does it feel like to watch? It was hard for me to watch my child race. Very hard. I don't know how my mother stood it, because Tom and I were running the 7 liters. He was running the sister ship to this boat, to the Baker's Dozen. I remember we ran to Essex one day. We got hooked up, and things were just right, and we ran around there within three or four feet of each other flat out. So mom always said that she'd go behind a tree somewhere, take a couple shots before we'd race. Mom's a beautiful person. She's really neat. And she's been around this forever, of course. She keeps telling me, Wheeler, it's time to stop. I say okay, mom, I hear you. I'll be careful. But for me to watch my daughter race was tough. That was hard. She raced on and off for two years, and then she went to school, and now she's a nurse, and she's got a little one, and a husband. She's doing well. But she still talks about getting back into it, and I don't encourage it because it's dangerous, it's a dangerous sport. Insurance companies hate us. We're rated just like small aircraft pilots. But they don't like us to do this. So my premiums, consequently, cost me more for my life insurance. But I tell people it's the most fun you can have with your clothes on. (Laughter.)

C.B.: What would you say to someone who wanted to get into it today, start out? What advice?

W.B.: Well if somebody wants to get into the sport, the first thing you got to do, you got - don't jump into it blind. You need to talk to some people, like myself, or there's anybody in the fraternity of racers will be more than happy to tell you what they think about a certain hull or engine setup or propellers or skid fins. But you need to get as much input as you can from people that know what's going on. I would say that if someone wants to get into it, if you want to go out and just feel the absolute rush of your life, this is the sport to get into. Is it dangerous? No question about it. But it's very fulfilling also. So you just got to weigh the two of them, you know. When I got into my own boats, I told my wife, I said I don't want to grow old and say I wish I'd done this. I want to do it. And everybody wants to do different things in life, plant flowers, or building houses or whatever, you know, do - whatever you're going to do, do it right. Do it to the most, best of your ability. And that's what I've tried to do. And it's paid off so far.

K.F.: What are the financial obligations to this sport? I mean how much does a boat cost, and the insurance for it and all that?

W.B.: Well, depends on the class you get into. You can actually go racing for - I guess you can probably go racing for a little as \$15,000, a boat motor and trailer, but the state of

the art rigs, you're looking at spending 75 to 100 plus. So it's not cheap. But again, if you went car racing, it would cost you a lot of money to do that too. When you get into buying propellers, and spare engines, and not counting what it cost to travel and haul this stuff all over the countryside, you got to have some disposable income, which brings you to sponsors. Sponsors are scarce, because our sport has never really taken off with television. And I don't really know why because, to me, it's a beautiful sport to watch. I mean it's neat. You get, especially down to our race at Kent Island, you get six or seven boats hooked up side by side running at you at 100 miles an hour. You're looking right underneath the boats. I mean and they're throwing rooster tails behind them, they're coming down to you, oscillating from side to side, dumping the air. It's beautiful. I mean it's awesome. But television's never really come into it, never really jumped into the sport, probably because it's hard to. It's probably hard to get enough TV's around the racecourse to do it justice.

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

W.B.: We were ahead, we were getting more exposure back in the middle 80's than we are now with television.

K.F.: Why was that?

W.B.: I don't know why. We had some large sponsors step up to the plate and pay for the television, I guess. One was Mercury. Mercury and OMC Corporation were having a little battle about who was going to be the premier boat racing guru, and we were the benefactors of that. Since then, that's tailed off through corporate mergers, I think, mostly. Cutbacks. So but I truly, I know when it's going to take off. I know this sport's going to take off just as soon as I get out of it. Soon as I quit, soon as I quit, they're going to be paying these guys like baseball players. (Laughter.)

C.B.: Can't begin to -

W.B.: We are the lowest paid stunt pilots in the world. (Laughter.) But you race mostly for bragging rights and fun.

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

W.B.: Beer tastes a lot better after you win too, I'll tell you that.

C.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). (Laughter.)

K.F.: Well tell me about the community of drivers.

W.B.: You want me to describe anything on these other pictures here?

K.F.: Just that one, because that one has your family in it.

W.B.: Okay.

K.F.: If you want to show Ceres who is who in the photograph.

W.B.: All right. The community of drivers?

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

W.B.: Bunch of nuts. (Laughter.) Well you've got, it covers the whole spectrum as far as backgrounds and employment. You got people that work with their hands, that are bricklayers. You got business people, you got doctors. Everybody gets hooked on it. And everybody's not successful, but everybody has a good time. There are some people that like to just go to the races just to participate and say they've been there.

Unfortunately, I've never been able to do that. If I don't have a chance to win, I don't want to go. Now I don't know. When I retire, what am I going to do? I can't see myself walking away from the sport. I'll probably be a sponsor of some race boat or some race

team. I don't know if I'd want to get into refereeing. I don't think I'd want to do that. I may try to get into promotion to make things happen better, which I'll tell you a little story. Down at the Kent Island Yacht Club, they race there from, I guess, '57 to '86 or '87, then the yacht club stopped doing it because it's so doggone much work. It's a lot of work to put on one of these regattas, and a lot of money too. So we were sitting around, a bunch of us got together and formed a club just to put the race on. We brought the racing back in 1990, back to the Kent Island area. And it's been well received. It's a success story that's just wonderful. Our club's done a great job. And the whole community's just embraced us to make this happen, because we will, we will go through - I guess our budget's 50, 60,000 bucks now. We pay some fairly decent prize money, have a nice party and all that kind of stuit but it cost a lot of money to do it.

C.B.: What's the name of your group?

W.B.: The Kent Narrows Racing Association. It's just a bunch of people, men and women that just enjoy speed and camaraderie too. We have a party after the race is over second to none. Have a good time.

K.F.: It's all that adrenaline. (Laughter.)

W.B.: Well, you know, like myself I couldn't do this if I didn't have support from my family. Either that, or I would've gotten divorced by now, 'cause I know I was going to race one way or another, so the wife went along with it.

K.F.: Well now how do you balance racing, and your business, and your family and being a delegate?

W.B.: It's a little precarious at times. Well, fortunately, the racing takes in the summer. My work in the House of Delegates starts the second Wednesday in January, so that's January through April we're in Annapolis, except for some committee work which is done during the week. My weekends are free for that. I've been fortunate enough to have good help with my business, which allows me some freedom to get out. So it all works out. I mean you juggle sometimes. But lots, politically, there's lots of things I should go to on weekends that I can't 'cause I'm racing. But most people understand what I'm doing. I just can't help it. (Laughter.) I've got to go to races. And they knew that when they elected me. I told them straight out. They asked me about that. I said, listen, politically, there's probably a lot of things I should go to, but I'm not going to do it. I'm going to go racing.

C.B.: That's why they liked you.

W.B.: Huh?

C.B.: That's why they liked you.

W.B.: Maybe so. I mean that's the way it is. Can't help it. Hooked. Hook, line and sinker, I'm done.

C.B.: How many races a year do you go to? What's the circuit, a typical circuit?

W.B.: Oh, we'll run six, seven races. I have run as many as 20, but we've picked out, we cherry pick. We pick good races. Let's see, my first race, we'll probably like there's a race up in North Jersey, we go to, it's a pretty good racecourse. Next race will be Raleigh, North Carolina. After Raleigh, we may go up to Valley Field in Quebec. Big race up there. Then we come back to Dayton, Ohio, hopefully we'll go there. Then we'll race Kent Island, which is fun. This year, we ran up to Bush River, which is a new race, a record course, but I was not able to set a record there because it was a little choppy.

'There was more than six or seven in it. Then we go to the nationals, which is in Hampton, Virginia. Then we go to - we go to Rocky Fork, Ohio. Neat racecourse. You race around an island there. Fast. You can really let them go there. God damn, it's fun. Shouldn't say that, I guess, but it is fun. And then there's a race in Jersey. Shucks, just north of Cape May.

K.F.: Millville?

W.B.: No. It's -we used to, I raced Millville before. That was a little tiny racecourse. Oh, shucks. Right north of Cape May.

K.F.: You're from Cape May.

W.B.: What's north of it?

C.B.: Wildwood?

W.B.: Wildwood.

C.B.: Oh. That just didn't seem like a race would be there. (Laughter.)

W.B.: Yeah, we race - that's usually the last race of the year. So but we really, we really want to win four or five of those races. That's where the big boys show up. Every now and then, everybody just converges, just happens to be there 'cause people will race from, people own these rigs, generally speaking, from the Mississippi east that race in this circuit here. And every now and then, the stars will line up, and everybody will - everybody shows up, and that's when, that's when it's fun. That's when you know if you done - if you can do well at that match, you're - you got your act together.

C.B.: What's the, back to the camaraderie, I'm imagining you pack your trailer. What's your little routine? You know, you get ready, you're like going all over the place. Do you haul your boat yourself or do you camp when you're there? What's it like?

W.B.: Well I've done it all. I had a camper at one time, but I got away from that. When I was campaigning hard, my own stuff, you get home Sunday night, and I always took Monday off just to kick back and catch up, get some rest. But Tuesday, you start getting ready for the next weekend. And sometimes, that means you got to pull the engine and rebuild it, or at least check the bearings on it, or the hull will, generally speaking, needs something done to it. Hopefully, you can have all that done by Thursday because Friday, you're on the road for the next race, usually you drive Friday night to get to the racecourse. Big race down in, if it's - down in Florida when we were racing down there, you'd leave Thursday, Thursday morning because you wanted to test on Friday the races for Saturday and Sunday. So when you're racing hard and you're running back to back weekends, you pretty much got to have a spare engine because, especially in the modified class because you're going to waste - you need to check your stuff between races. It's a lot of work. I even got to the point where I had my wife helping me put the engine in that boat, many years ago. But now, I'm just a hired gun. I just kind of show up and drive the stuff for them. Break it, tell them to fix it. (Laughter.) I tell people, I said anybody has any age that listens to this will remember Palatin, have gun, will travel. That's me. I walk through the pits with my helmet, life jacket.

C.B.: Just get in.

W.B.: Yeah. Just drive the stuff.

C.B.: Do you have any superstitions?

W.B.: Yeah. I like to get my feet wet before I get in the boat, and I always like to get in the cockpit on the left side. Don't know why. But I'll go out of my way to enter, to get

in the boat that way. I usually say a prayer before I go out. I'm not overtly as religious as I probably should be, but you know what you're getting yourself into, and you better have, you better have a little communication before you go out there is the way I figure it. So that's one thing. And then also I wonder why in the hell am I out here? Why am I doing this? But then the five minute gun goes - I still get the jitters at a big race before, before it starts. I get nervous. But after the five minute gun goes off and you go out there, I guess the adrenaline takes over and it kind of washes the nervousness away from you because then you have to perform, That's what happens to me anyhow. I guess when you stop getting nervous, it's probably time to hang them up. But you also have to, although I don't consider myself a daredevil, you know you've got to do some things you shouldn't do, especially in the first lap 'cause that's when the competition is fierce.

C.B.: What does that mean, you do some things you shouldn't do? Are you -

W.B.: Hang the boat, hang the boat in the air higher than it should be, go into a turn harder than you should. That's generally what I mean. When you, when you see the boats coming to you, sometimes you see too much air underneath of them. You know the guy shouldn't be driving it that hard. But if you got somebody alongside of you, you have no choice if you want to win. But then sometimes they get too high, and you've got to back off of them. Just figure well, I'll get you another day or figure a way to keep it down. And that's where I've been, like we've been successful in having boats set up so that we can drive in pretty much any condition. If it gets windy, we'll give her, give her some wing with the left foot, the canard I was telling you about.

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

W.B.: And lay her down so you can get to the first turn in pretty good shape. First turn can be harrowing because if you got somebody on the inside and the outside of you, and they decide they want to tighten it up, you're in the middle, there's nothing there but water. (Laughter.) It's kind of like going through Niagara Falls. Can't see a thing. You just have to wait for things to clear and hope there's nothing in front of you, like that duck blind I was telling you about in Kent Island. Nothing like coming out of a spray and having a duck blind right in front of you. (Laughter.)

C.B.: Would be good TV though.

W.B.: Oh, yeah. Yeah, have TV onboard, right?

C.B.: Yeah.

W.B.: Have a camera onboard. Yeah. Yup.

K.F.: Now what are the boats made of these days?

W.B.: There's still a lot of them made of plywood.

K.F.: Really?

W.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Plywood is still a good material to build these with, in the limited class. In the unlimiteds, they run such rough water, they won't hold up. But plywood. And then some of them use, when you get on an airplane, the aluminum honeycomb. On the flooring on an airplane that's made out of aluminum honeycomb, and some of them are built with that for the bottom, and then they attach sponsons, which are made of fiberglass and plastic and all kinds of exotic stuff. Kind of glue them together. And then the decks can be either a fiber material on plywood. Generally plywood because you're making - you're bending, you're making some curves, and it's easier for the plywood, plus for repairs, you know. It's easy to find that material. They're - although

they are complicated, and it takes a craftsman to build these boats and repair them, it's not rocket science. But generally speaking, most people have craftsmen, like I was telling you, Lauterbach or - there's a half a dozen people in the country that work on these things.

K.F.: Is there anybody in the Chesapeake area that -

W.B.: Yeah, Larry Lauterbach's located in Chester on Kent Island.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

W.B.: That's what he does. He builds and repairs them. Does good work. Does beautiful work.

K.F.: I'm wondering if there are any other people here in the Chesapeake area that we should talk to, like Larry obviously, who've been involved with the sport.

W.B.: Yeah, you probably should talk to Larry.

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

W.B.: You ought to talk to Bobby Brown.

K.F.: Okay.

W.B.: I wouldn't know how to get in touch with him off the top of my head. He's listed, he has a business then in Parsonsburg, Maryland, called - I think it's B&J Market. He's been racing a long time.

C. S.: Parsonsburg?

W.B.: Parsonsburg.

C. S.: Parsons.

W.B.: I think it's B&J Market. He's pretty neat. He and a couple old guys, they build the boats, Bobby builds the engines. And he's pretty, a pretty savvy dude.

C.B.: So I have one question just about the race team. Who would be the key members? You obviously, you always rely on others. Do you have a team like for your boat, and what -

W.B.: With the main boat that I drive, the Big Bird, have a crew chief Walt. Ray Lyn, Junior is the owner of the boat, and he would be the brains. His son-in-law, Dave, would be the crew chief. He does all the grunt work. And then they've got, they bring one or two people from their business to help with other things that need to be done. So it usually takes three or four people to keep it running.

K.F.: And is Walt Stevenson still there?

W.B.: No, he died. Died last year, brain cancer.

K.F.: Oh.

W.B.: What a good brain, too. I'm telling you, he was smart.

K.F.: Okay. Anything else you need to know?

C.B.: I think we covered everything on that list, didn't we?

K.F.: I'm just curious about the Cambridge races. And is there anybody in Cambridge that we should -

W.B.: You should probably talk to Tommy Thompson down there. He's pretty much the guru of Cambridge. I don't have a phone number, but I imagine it's in the phone book.

K.F.: Yeah.

W.B.: He works for Tri Gas, or used to. Probably get a hold of him there.

K.F.: Okay.

C.B.: Have you ever raced at Cambridge?

W.B.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I'll tell you a little story about Cambridge one time.

K.F.: Okay.

W.B.: I had my 7 liter, and they had a record course set up there, and I was going to go for a record. I'll never forget. My father and a whole bunch of people down there to watch 'cause they knew what I was going to try. Water condition were fair, but one of the problems with Cambridge is they didn't control their boat traffic enough and rollers would come in. So I busted around the first lap, and I was flying. I was coming around, I looked at the clock when I went around and I was right on the record. About that time, I hit a roller, and she took off on me, and I - somehow, grace of God, brought her back down on the water. When I looked around, everybody was way behind me. I said oh, God, this is terrible. So I got off on the far side of the race course and shut it down. Got out. Made like I was looking in the engine compartment. They caught up with me, I fired it up and ran them down. (Laughter.) When I got in there, my father wanted to kill me. He found out I shut the engine down. He says, boy, what in the world's wrong with you? I said, Pop, I just didn't want to run by myself. I couldn't set the record because it was too rough. And he never did see the humor in that one.

C.B.: So you missed a lap? Is that when they came around to you?

W.B.: No. I was - I was a half a lap ahead of them.

C.B.: Oh, I see.

W.B.: I was flying, and after I got in trouble, after I hit that roller, I looked around, there was nobody around me, so I just shut it down. Let them catch up with me, then I ran them down. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Sounds like the chase is half of the fun really.

W.B.: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. If you - what's fun is if you screw the start up and you got the fastest boat running everybody down. That's fun. Absolutely. That's neat. I mean you just inch up on them, you know, pick up a few feet in every turn, whatever you do. Just next thing you know, you're going by them. It's just neat. Nothing like it. Nothing like it. 'Cause you know the guy in that boat's saying oh, crap. (Laughter.)

K.F.: That's true. Okay. Well let's go through the release form. And what we do is have, we send this tape to a transcriber who types up, types the whole thing up verbatim. And then we'll look at it and see, you know, usually what happens is tomorrow we'll think oh, we should've asked this question or whatever. So we'll listen to it, look at it, and if there are, you know, some other things we need to clarify, we might give you a call.

W.B.: Okay.

K.F.: But this tape and the transcript will go into the library here into the oral history archive. And to do that, we have to -

W.B.: That's fine.

K.F.: -- have you go through this release form. So we need you to print your name.
(END OF INTERVIEW.)