

Interview Log

Interviewee: Wilfred Henry Laaksonen

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BEGIN SIDE A (tape 170.1)

W.L.: You have to tell me, today's Tuesday, the 10th. Is that what we're trying to say?

K.F.: Do you need a cue card?

W.L.: A cue card for the name.

K.F.: Your name – all right, go ahead.

W.L.: It's Tuesday the 10th of April. I'm Wilfred Henry Laaksonen, commonly known as Will Laaksonen. I was born in northern Michigan on the Canadian border in the year of 1936 on Mother's Day, May 10th.

K.F.: Wow. This looks like it's okay for us. Will, when we were speaking on the phone briefly, you mentioned your family had been in the fishing business before. Is that correct?

W.L.: I grew up on the water, and I've been working, I can remember renting out rowboats, I think the Great Lakes, fishing off Sugar Island. I can remember the first boaters we even had. So I've been at it a long time. My dad was part farmer, part fisherman. I have a brother that's, though he just retired as one of the deans of Western Michigan University, spent his whole life charter fishing. And his family of four are all on the Great Lakes, and they're all chartering. You can find them underneath Finlander on the web sites all over, I suspect.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

W.L.: But they're well known up there.

K.F.: Now one thing we've been talking to people about here on the Bay is how charter fishing got started. And I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your own memories of how it maybe started there in Michigan, so we maybe can see –

W.L.: Well charter fishing in Michigan, the honest truth, I was in the service at that time.

K.F.: Okay.

W.L.: Remember, I went in the service in, I suspect it was April of 1954.

K.F.: Okay.

W.L.: During the Korean –

K.F.: Korean War.

W.L.: -- part of the war.

K.F.: Yeah.

W.L.: And six weeks later, that's where I was at.

(Laughter.)

W.L.: But I was in the Navy. And so when I left, what we were doing, we weren't taking people on charters, we were renting them boats. And then after I left, my brothers picked up the charter business. So I suspect it happened in the 50's and 60's as far as the Great Lakes. They were behind a lot of people. The fishing was real bad in the Great Lakes in those years. The eels had come in and killed the fishery.

K.F.: Okay.

W.L.: That was the first one, when the ships started coming from the Ocean up into the Great Lakes and bringing with it some sea life that was detrimental to the sea life that was already there.

K.F.: Okay.

W.L.: But, no, I spent 20 years in the service running. And in that 20 years, I probably fished everywhere I went. I spent 17 years outside the United States in Asia from one area to the other. But running vessels, mostly as chief navigator, running boats. I picked up the first astronauts, I did the first nuclear –

K.F.: You picked up the first astronauts – well, back up. She's an astronaut fan, but you picked up the first astronauts?

W.L.: First ones that landed. In fact, the first two sets that landed in the Pacific Ocean I did all the navigation, the set-ups, the radars, and we went aboard the carrier Keer Sarge (phonetic) as part of the flag which I was in charge of communicating with the – I would say with that time was President Kennedy. In fact, he told me to get off the line.

(Laughter.)

C.B.: Not everybody can say that.

W.L.: Well they thought it was someone else. And the reason he did that is because I was on this carrier, and the communications were supposed to have been quite secret as to who we were talking to. But the news people have a way of getting into everything that was on board. And during our testing, I found out that they were listening in, so I would politely tell them to get off the line. So when I as just as the astronauts were landing, I was connected to the White House, and what's his name, Pierce Salinger was the person I was talking to. And as I anticipated the president come on, I heard a lot of noise and talking. So in my polite way again as the chief, I told him where to get off the line.

(Laughter.)

W.L.: And I heard this man say this is President Kennedy. So needless to say, I as a little embarrassed.

(Laughter.)

W.L.: So anyway, the astronauts came up, and I communicated with them. The first one we picked up, I picked up their spaceship at 301 miles on radar. That was the very first. I was in charge of the radars, and you could see the blip, and then the next blip. And our navigation as fairly accurate. Both times we were within a mile.

K.F.: Was that on the Wasp?

W.L.: No, Keer Sarge. It's in the Pacific. And then the following year we picked up – they did it again. The first time was just a one time around. And then the following year, it was, I can't imagine now, it was Mercury at that time, but I think it was like two, three days, and so we were back out there doing the same thing.

C.B.: That's a little added extra.

K.F.: Yeah.

C.B.: That's interesting. Do you want to get your coffee?

(Off the record briefly.)

W.L.: I did a lot of things, but it still isn't written.

C.B.: We won't write that history today.

W.L.: No. Those are boats I ran over there.

K.F.: Is that P.T. boat?

W.L.: That's a river patrol boat. They're 30 foot long, 13 wide, got twin six V71's with turbos on it. Carries 50 forward, 50 aft. I taught people how to use them.

C.B.: Was that Heart of Darkness?

W.L.: Excuse me?

C.B.: Was it the book, Heart of Darkness –

W.L.: I don't know. I never read it.

C.B.: Apocalypse Now?

W.L.: Apocalypse Now, I heard it was a fair movie. I never went to see it.

C.B.: Okay. They went up the river –

W.L.: Right, well that, I seen clips of it and this is the boats, but we weren't that crazy, I don't believe. Pretty close.

K.F.: So you spent 20 years in the service. And is that where you got most of your marine training?

W.L.: That's where – for 99 percent of it. I was born and raised on the water, which was natural, and fished every day. We, you know -- remember in those days the only thing you went to the store for were staples. And you got stamps for those, for your sugar and stamps for your flour. And the rest we went out and got. They've done – up northern Michigan, everything was there for you. The water and the woods. Everything was canned.

C.B.: What kind of fish did you catch up there? What are the fish up there?

W.L.: They had trout, same as we do here. Then those days, we had sturgeon, walleye, perch. Those are the main fish. And we used to eat a lot of suckers and carp. My mother used to can them in jars. And I'd love them. They pickled them such a way, you know, the bones and all were soft. She's gone long time now, but I wish there were some way of knowing how she did it.

K.F.: She never wrote down her recipe.

W.L.: They canned all their meat in quart jars. And canned all their fish. So that's what we lived under in the summertime. Remember, I served in Korea and I served, you know, five tours of Vietnam. I've been to Korea, I've been to China service, and the Navy sent me to a lot of places you haven't even heard of yet.

(Laughter.)

C.B.: Did you do any fishing in the Navy?

W.L.: Every chance I had. I even fished off those boats. But the fastest way to catch fish, I found out over there, was I'd throw a concussion (phonetic) grenade over, and my Vietnamese counterparts who worked with me would all dive in and collect them.

K.F.: Not allowed to do that on the Bay, huh?

W.L.: No. But it was good eating. Thousands of little fish would come up, and that's what you ate.

(Laughter.)

W.L.: But I would think that, you know, they might put you in the – cow or something.

K.F.: Well now how did you get here to Virginia's Eastern Shore?

W.L.: My last tour of duty in Vietnam, I was given a choice of anywhere I wanted to go. Had the choice of – the only thing I had to do was leave Vietnam. And I could not go back on the ship at that time. They wanted me to go to the states. But I had to be near a hospital where I could check in and find out if everything I had was correct. Then checking in there, I found out that the doctors were the ones that were not correct, and I was quite sane. So anyway, I chose Norfolk, Virginia because I had flown through there at one time, liked the water, never been there in my life except for that fly-through. And I

think I spent three days waiting on something, and during that time I went out on a fish boat. I said well I'll go try Norfolk. Met a lovely young lady who's an administrative officer. Now we've been married 33 years. I told her, she knew, when she looked at my record, here was this guy, he hadn't been paid in – you know, trying to get me to take money, come get your paycheck. She knew all about me, single. So she had me caged before I knew it. I told her the only reason I married her is because she was the first white woman I seen in a long time. Well some truth to all this.

K.F.: And so in Norfolk, you decided to stay there for a while and –

W.L.: Didn't have much choice. I did stay there. I arrived there in '71. We flew in during the dark. Civilians were acting like Indians in those days. They didn't like to see us boys come back with our nice greens and black berets, so we had to hide. But anyway, I ended up in Norfolk, had a good job of flying around and installing computers and management systems on ships. And I fished every day I could. And that's exactly how I wound up in Virginia and met my wife. We were married not long after that. Built a house on the water there, and in '74 when I retired, I came – I know. In '71 or '72, I took an exam for charter boat captain. That's how it started. I had no idea what it took to be a charter boat captain, but I knew the water, and I was very good with boats. I mean that's what I did. I mean I ran every size vessel from, I suspect, 1,100 foot down to these little, this one here, the 30 foot gun boats, down to things like this Boston Whaler out here that had guns on them. So I knew the water. I spent my whole life on it, and I was good at navigation, I was good with operations. I'm a good swimmer. I was in the UDT's for a while 'til I blew an ear drum.

So, you know, and I love fishing. So it just all fit in. And when I seen the fish that were being caught on the ocean and then in the bay while I was in Norfolk, they said I sent more time during that than I did on the Naval base. So I talked to people, and I said look, I can do a better job than most of these people. I can operate a boat. And I didn't like – some of the boats that I've been on for chartering, some of the people, some were good, but most of them looked to me like people who had just come off the street and told them to go out there and take the boat out. They didn't understand how the water worked, how the temperatures affected things, they didn't understand the tides, the currents. And so anyway, I said how do you get to be a captain? So I went up the Coast Guard and looked at my record. He says you don't need anything except take the test. I said where's the test? He says well you should study for it. I says well I'd just like to take the test. So he says all right. So I took it, and I think I averaged between 97 and 100 all the way through. And they looked at me like I as crazy and said what do you do? I said well, you read my record what I did. And so it was so simple. And while I took it, I met a couple charter boat people up there were taking exams, four or five, in fact. And I was the only one that walked in, took the exam, was out in – I don't think it took me 30 minutes to do the whole five tests. The charts were so easy, it was ridiculous. The questions were –

C.B.: What kind of questions were they?

W.L.: They have questions on general seamanship, and a seamanship area of the exam. And in that area, they'll ask you questions on firefighting procedures, and you have to remember that these are Coast Guard initiated exams which come out of Oklahoma City. And most of these information is what is every Naval person that I know of has to have

before he even makes seaman. And then as you go up in line, you get to know what publications to use.

So the questions were like on weather, identifying clouds, high pressure, low pressure systems, there were questions on hurricanes, how they move, how the wind patterns move, how the tides occur. Tide exam as to what time the – they're always having the question in there of what time the high tide or low tide would be at a certain time, at a certain entrance at a certain place. Well I'd been doing this all over the world, so this just wasn't any challenge to me on this. And they have a complete area on ships. They'll ask questions. It's so varied as to what they ask that there is no one book a person could really study for unless they wrote a book on the exam. And that's what schools are doing now. They're writing a book on the exam. Because they can ask you about how would you plug a hole in the after part of the ship, and then turn right around and ask you the size fitting you would use for a certain plumbing or near the keel on the forward part of the ship. It's just that varied.

In other words, for a person, if he came into it new, he'd have to sit in the library for six months and study. They're going to ask things on your engines, your diesels, the gas types, you'll have questions on the rules and regulations which the Coast Guard applies to every vessel that you're on, inspected and otherwise and, you know, how they're – what they're made of, the type of equipment. They'll even ask questions as to how high your rails are at for certain size vessels. And then there's always the May Day questions, security, pawn – well that was every day for my people that work for me, we use this information. Phonetic alphabets, you know, this was no problem.

So I found it quite simple. They – so I had a few people say well could you help me. And so they did. They came to me and helped. Well I probably have now helped, I feel - - 2000 people get their captain's license up and down this coast. You can probably go to Baltimore, Florida, New York. Tangier Island, I helped all the people in Tangier Island that has their license. So when I moved over here, I said – people kept saying Will, could you help me with this? Well before you knew it, my neighbor right here, they wanted to get on tug boats, fishing was bad. And these watermen were so good at what they did. I found something, finally here's an area where I found that people know the water. Now they were not educated in a book, but they knew the water, and they can get from one point to the other in this particular area, if they could see or not see. I'm talking about how heavy the fog, the weather or so forth. And a lot like me, I could smell when the weather changed. You could tell because you've been under it a long time.

K.F.: Let me interrupt. The comment about how the water worked, and smelling how the weather changes, can you talk a little – because that's really a learned ingrained –

W.L.: You know that low pressure systems, that the winds turn, you know, in a counterclockwise direction, and in high pressure system, the winds will normally turn in a clockwise direction and outward. So low pressure is counterclockwise and the wind will come in. Well certain things happen as the pressure drops or rises and it affects the winds, and it affects the atmosphere as to how much moisture is out there. Will it bring me a thunderstorm, or will it bring me a northeaster, or will it bring me a hurricane? It'll

rough up the water. So if you're out on the water, and I'm out there fishing, and it's a nice day, and I feel – all of a sudden, I feel a little breeze, and I feel a little coldness in it or anything like that. But then I also notice that, wait, this thing has just shifted from wind, so it's coming out of the west, and now it's coming out of the southwest. What does that tell you in your mind? The wind is coming around counterclockwise. Well that's not a good sign if it continues that way. That means you're building up a low pressure system.

So it tells you well, let me look out here and see what the clouds are doing. And if you find in the distance, you might see some cumulus clouds and maybe they're building up. We call it thunderheads or so forth. So you know that old thing, you know, you put your back to the wind and put your arm out to the right and that's where the storm's coming from. And if it's coming that way, you look at it say well, will that storm come between where I'm at now and where I have to be. And if it looks that way to you, then you should be getting yourself in. And if it's going to go the other side, well then just keep an eye on it. And that's where a lot of people make some big mistakes out there. They look at it and say hey, it's a beautiful day. But once that wind shifts, you have about 20 minutes, normally, if the storms going to be on you. And that could be at the horizon. But in 20 minutes, it'll be there somewhere in that area. And it can go from complete calm as that picture I showed you, to a full scale storm. And it happens on the water all the time. So there's a lot of little things you watch for. I watch the birds, which way they're pointing. Birds will point to the wind, you know, if they're sitting, and are they flying. So it's just things you pick up from almost 20 years on the oceans, and I've been in every ocean there is, you know, and just traveling.

K.F.: What about the smell? How does the smell change?

W.L.: That's a little bit more difficult. How do you describe smell? But you can, like if you have a real dry end here, right, dry day, and then do you ever get that nice kind of a, I don't know, you get a – a little cooler, but it's like a dampness. You can almost smell the changing of it. Like a moisture almost. And you pick up a different, I don't know if it's almost in your taste buds, but I can almost feel the difference as I breathe it in. And it's like saying well is this good or bad? And, you know, you're saying to yourself is this good or bad because you've been doing this for so long. And you can pick up the smell of maybe the top of the water from a long ways off. Maybe there's a lot of fish out that have been working or something, and they've got oil in the top. Now you say to yourself why am I'm picking this up from knowing that they could be a ways off? That tells you things are moving in that direction, you know, it's going along the, you know, close to the ground or close to the water level I should say. I'm not too sure. I know how it feels to me, and when I'm out there, I know exactly. And so there's many of these things that happen. You look – is the wind going against the current? Is the current coming in earlier today than it should? Many times in this bay, this bay can be as bad as any ocean, except the seas don't get that high. But to me, they feel like they get that high. I was in 100 foot waves off the mariner's one time. Took the whole top of the – and this is an 1,100 foot ship. Took the guns mounts right off of it. Took all the radars off of it. We rode it out for 10, 12 days. No one knew it was coming. In those days, you didn't.

But out here, they can jump up four, five, six feet, eight feet in no time. But a four-foot sea out here, a five-foot sea is dangerous to a lot of boats. They're short, they're choppy, and it's not like they're far apart and you get a chance to greet it. It dips that bow down and it's up over your bow before you know it. I was coming in here on the Rosie Parks boat, the old Fishing Fin One, coming in the harbor, and I'll never forget it. This is probably 15 years ago. And bringing my people in early, and they said captain, why we coming in early? And I said there's a storm coming. They said well it's nice out here. I said but it's a storm coming. I said I'm going to go in towards the Nancock and get what we call storm area inside. And I had no sooner reached there than this wind came up out of nowhere. And if you can look out on that water, it looked like a black cloud just coming at you as fast as you could – you know, one moment it's not there, and then it's there and it's just coming. And when it surrounded my vessel, you couldn't see the bow from the stern. It was that fast. And the boat felt like it was floating. And just like it was just floating. And then in the seconds that – in that time, it seemed a lot longer, but it may be 30, 40 seconds at the most, it was gone. It was by you. I mean then there was the rain and stuff behind it. But what I'm getting at and what I really remember is that during this time, I seen the compass swing 180 degrees. And I said, thinking, well what would make my compass swing like that? Well it had apparently picked my boat up and turned it. When it stopped, I was pointed straight out that channel. And this happened in seconds. Now that boat was 15 gross ton.

Now people just, they were just amazed, but it shows you it happens. So you say what happened to that boat out there that we can't find? Well things happen. And what type of force, how it hit me, how it could do that, but it did it.

C.B.: Captain, I wanted to ask you, you mentioned that you helped some of the local – there were thousands of captains, get their commercial licenses.

W.L.: Yes.

C.B.: And they knew intuitively what you knew in the books, or necessary to pass the test. How did you work with them? How did you get to translate their intuition into book learning?

W.L.: Talk to a lot of these people here. They come by all the time. I have – I go to Tangier Island or Smith Island. They treat me like, they'll say, they bring their children down and say this is Captain Will, this is who taught your granddad, got his license. 'Cause now, where are they? I have all these friends that are all over the United States, outside of the United States running vessels that would've never been there with the education in order to pass it. And what I did, I wrote the books myself in a layman's language. And I put a thing on the front, this was written for the watermen. And oh, at the time, I had 14 Pruitts sitting out here trying to teach them. All 14 were named Pruitt. Tangier. And trying to teach them. And you get, it really took some doing to try to take your knowledge and give it to them in such a way that they could understand it in order when they read an exam question as to what to put down. So I've always told my wife, I says I was teaching school, but I was doing it in a layman's way. Because in the service, we receive a lot of people up there in the combat information center who were not that well educated. So you had to teach them. And I had little shortcuts for them all the time. East is – less is west – all these little shortcuts, you know. And as far as, these people had

no idea, probably – well an example, was trying to point out where the Great Lakes was at. And the young fellow shows me Russia, right? And I said well, you know, we're just a few countries from that, right. And I asked him, after two, three questions, I says to him, have you ever seen a map? Oh, yes, I've seen a map. Show me the United States. And the boy couldn't point out the United States. This was a boy with a 12th grade education from a little island.

Now I'm sure they've changed a lot since then, but most of the people I had, and they told me straight out, I've got three, four, maybe five years of education, I can't learn this. I said you can learn it, and they did learn it. And that's what I did for – this is the first year I've not had it. It was just so – I started doing it just in the wintertime. It takes so much of my time. But I hate to turn them down because they really need it. And so what I do, and I still keep books, and they still come up, and I'll explain things to them. But more and more, their children are becoming, I guess, better educated so that they can do, but their fathers and grandfathers were not. But it's a great feeling to go out there and no that these people have real good jobs on ships and vessels. And how many is in the towing industry. I did the clam industry, the towing industry, I did Allied, I did the ones in Baltimore. I've licensed up to 5 to 700 ton on the Manhaden boats. I did 22 clam boats, the captains, the crew and the engineers, did them all. I taught engineering too. Teach them how to pass the exams. So I was hired by companies to go in and help them. I've, in my time, I did a lot of the marine people, the conservatory, the – what's that, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. In fact, last year they hired me to come down. When I say hire, I do it for – (laughter). But anyway, all their captains went over and gave a briefing and updated them on everything. And they never cease to ask the good questions. And you can stay with them all day long. They won't let you out.

C.B.: What a gift.

K.F.: Yeah, it really is.

C.B.: A wonderful gift to give back to the community.

W.L.: And so, like I say, it's odd. Like Crisfield, most every charter boat captain there I can name. I did their fathers and them, the boats out of Cape Charles. Up and down the coast. If they came here, and I always done right here, except for the times I went to Tangier or spent a month at Smith Island back in the early 70's, late 70's, I should say.

K.F.: But you said the watermen here knew the water, they just –

W.L.: But they could not get a job that required a Coast Guard license. Couldn't pass it. There's no way. Navigation. They had no idea how to navigate. Put a chart in front of them. Now you've got to navigate, you've got to find your course speed, set and drift. The Coast Guard has these problems that today, I call them chart problems, and I believe they still should have them because if all this good equipment we have, this technology we have fails, and that's what I tell you, if it fails, you're right back to a pencil and the chart and the book. So you have to have that, and I'm glad to see the Coast Guard continuing that, though they've been challenged a few times to quit it. Your equipment quits, that's it. And so I love to teach navigation charts. I don't mind that. And I love to teach the rules of the road. I wrote my own book on the rules of the road. I know my people that went up there to take the exam, the Coast Guard, they used to say well you must've came from Captain Will down there because you walked right through it, and

that's exactly the way. My people would pass – well it's up in the 90 percentile, and the normal Coast Guard is less than 20 percent passes. And even your best of schools don't do that. I mean they're less than 30, 40.

K.F.: Yeah. Well how have you found that the watermen navigate? I mean if they don't –

W.L.: It's like I told them, you can navigate here, but you take this group and you set them in another area completely foreign, they're going to be lost, except that they will be able to handle a boat, they know how to handle the water and they have common sense up here, you know. That book learning is not going to give you the common sense that you learn from your fathers and forefathers before you. And if you go to these islands and around here and the shore, you'll see these youngsters start out, and they're pushing boats when the motors are taller than they are. And they continually do it. Don't know why, you know. And like I – this old timer I had, the oldest I've had is 79 years old. And I've also did the old man from Washapreague, dead now, bless his heart. Zeb Lewis. There is local folklore about him. But he would refuse to get a license because he couldn't read. But he would take charters. And finally the Coast Guard kept telling him, right, they locked the boat up. And I said – they come over to me and brought me from Florida a bunch of oranges and something else, and said Captain, he said I heard you can do miracles. He said I've got to have the license. Well he got his license. And there was an old timer from Tangier. I'll never forget that. Teaching him lights. I said, you know, every light you see out there speaks to you. Every single light. I said – and I just happened to pick out a light that I knew was near Tangier. And I said there's a blinking red. I said any time you see in the channel a blinking red, it means there's a turn ahead. I said if it's red, it's going to be turning to the right. If it's green, it's going to turn to the left. This old fellow – says bye, golly, Captain. He says I wondered why that light was blinking all them years red. He said I never could figure that one out. But he says you're right, it takes me right into that channel if I turn right. And I just busted up.

(Laughter.)

W.L.: But you see, the local knowledge, they know that that light coming in here, but they don't know that it blinks so many times a minute, and there's a purpose. It's a certain color. And as you go through the channel, each light was telling you a story as you go in. It's like going down the highway. So I'd equate that to them. I'd say hey, you're coming to a stop light. It's red. It's blinking, tell you to stop, you know. So when you see a blinking red out there in the water, if you don't know what it is, stop and think. Because if you don't turn right when you get there, you're going to go aground, more than likely, or somewhere you should be.

C.B.: Tell us about fishing here, Captain.

W.L.: Fishing.

C.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: When did you get your first boat, your charter boat?

W.L.: First charter boat was 1972, '73 maybe. And I ran offshore. It was a 26 foot Searay. But in the meantime, I have to say that people would call me up and take their vessels down to Florida to the Gulf. So I had been doing that also in my spare time. And I didn't care which size it was, I would just take it and we would go. So during that winter months, I had two doctors that had large boats down there that wanted them

chartered. So in the wintertime, that's what I would do every winter when it got too cold here, then I would take their boats and charter them out of Florida to Bimini or around Key West or so forth. So I was really running those vessels at that time more than I was running mine really. But when I moved here, I moved in to Nancock in 1978, though I'd been coming to the shore since '72. But I did all my fishing out of Cape Charles, and I was taking parties out of Cape Charles. And in '78, I picked up Ronzy Parks' boat. It was in fair shape from up in Baltimore. And it only had one owner. He had – he was the person that had ordered it from Ronzy Parks. And everybody knows the story of Ronzy Parks. And you should have that in your museum –

K.F.: Tell us.

W.L.: Well I only hear what I heard now. I wasn't there. But I understand that he was from Windgate, Maryland. And one of the best builders, I think, he knew the water. But the story goes, and this is the story. And I'm sure up Windgate, Maryland would tell you right. But he was building in 1958. My boat was built in 1953, okay. But in 1958, he was building a large boat for a man that lived in either New Jersey, New York, I've heard both of them. And I understand it was probably the most expensive boat that he'd ever built. Well the man had been coming down and making changes. Well he finally came down and made a change that Ronzy Park did not agree with. And it was an all out argument. Apparently, Ronzy Park said there was no way he was going to make this change. It would affect the boat's ability and stability on the water. Well now this part of the story I heard correct, I believe, because I've heard it from different people. The man went back to his chauffeured vehicle, came back and shot Ronzy Parks dead. And so there was no more Ronzy Parks boats. And he got in his vehicle, left and went back. So I'm sure there's a story around there somewhere, but the part that he was killed and shot was true. And it was over the boat.

K.F.: I'll have to ask Pete.

W.L.: So Ronzy Parks was so happy to be able – I knew very little about Ronzy Parks except that I had a very good friend in Baltimore who mated for me as a chef and so forth every time I delivered boats in the wintertime. And this man could buy his own fleet of boats, but he liked to mate for me. And he's the one that told me about a friend of his had this Ronzy Parks boat, and he was getting old, and he had two, three sons that would not take care of it, didn't want anything to do with it. And so he had told this individual about me, and we got together, and I walked – when I seen it, I just said what do you want for it. We agreed immediately. And the next day I was taking the Ronzy Parks boat from up near Annapolis, or actually it was near Baltimore, down the bay to a Nancock.

K.F.: What kind of shape was she in?

W.L.: She was really in fairly good shape. Cosmetic problems, that's all. The paint had started to peel and so forth. And she had the original engine in it, which was a flathead Chrysler Marine eight. And that is a workhorse. And it's a heavy engine. And it had a transmission in it that used the same oil as the engine did. So if you came into a dock, as you threw the thing into reverse to stop it, right, you'd have to wait 'til the oil came back and got picked up. So you better know your timing correctly. And the first time I did it, come in like that, I kept saying grab, grab, grab, because I was aiming for the building, and at the last moment, she grabbed full back and I stopped it. And I had seen a few like that in the service.

(Laughter.)

C.B.: What happened to that boat?

W.L.: Well I tried to – I put it back in shape. Wear and tear, wood boat's a lot of work. And I'd always have to go find the right piece of equipment or the right wood. But anyway, I kept the boat just like it was new. And I loved the boat. There was not a better fishing boat on the bay. And it's real nice when you're out there and all of the sudden a boat comes along and says hey, is that a Ronzy Parks? And, you know, you say my God, there's somebody that really knows his boats. So I did change it to a diesel engine, but I put the old 453 engine, which is the workhorse out of there, these workmen, and changed it. And in 19 – let's see, last year – this is 2001, so it had been 2000, '99 – in 1998, I put it right here in this yard. I lifted it. And I went completely over the boat. And I brought out all the woodwork on it and sanded it. And I finally had accumulated a couple dollars that I could do all these little things that I wanted done over the years that make her just that much better. I mean as far as looks and original. And I had completed it. It took me a long time and I did all the work myself. So then in May – no, October, I'm trying to think the date, and I should know it by heart. But it was in '98, it was the Winter of '97 apparently that we did this, but it was '98 when it went out on the water fresh. And it was later that year towards the fall when this, I can't remember what hurricane come through here at that time. That's what happens when you get to be over 65. But any way, I'm sure we could check, see what that – it wasn't Gloria. It might've been –

K.F.: There were two small ones that fall.

W.L.: Excuse me?

K.F.: There were two small ones that fall. And I say small because I lived in North Carolina and I lived through Fran.

W.L.: Yeah. Was that Gloria, or was it Gloria from –

K.F.: It might've been.

W.L.: I have been in so many different hurricanes that I lose touch as to which one is which. But anyway, it was a, it was so strong that we had water up at the dock we were at today that I was in a small boat driving around over to the dock. So at that time, along the shores here, a lot of buildings went down, a lot of things floated out and moved. But I had a couple from England that flew in to charter the boat. Both doctors. Man and woman. And I've had them before from overseas. They find me somehow. And we were going out after Rockfish, this is right after the storm. But it was a –

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 170.1)

W.L.: -- water was just beautiful. It was picture perfect. And they're from England, and they talk English, and so I took them out. And first thing we did, we loaded them up with trout the first hour. They said, Captain, we've had enough trout. And we never kept a fish, we were just releasing them. What else can we catch? And I said well, we could probably catch a rockfish, you know. They said great. So I said okay. So I went south of Tangier, and about 18, 20 feet of water, which runs along the western side there. And it's a good place for rockfish moving. And we slowly trolled. I was doing, on my GPS was saying from 1.5 to 2 knots. So this was slow. And we're moving along. And the reason I'm doing it is because I have them on the back and they have light rods. Everything we did was very light tackle. And bouncing a jig off the bottom, you know. Just a lead head

with feathers on it. And they were just standing in the back and bouncing it as I'm doing slow. Well we went up within a mile of Tangier, and then we decided, I looked at it, and I said I know I seen some fish on the markers come up. So let's go back, and this way I'll be against the current and I feel we'd do a better job. So with the current against us, the boat was still doing about 1 1/2, 2 knots, which was perfect. And we're bouncing. And somewhere along there as we were moving, all of the sudden I just seen something on my machine that turned my machine red, and at that time, the boat lurched, and it just stopped the boat. This is a heavy boat to do that. And the two in the back didn't fall, but they had to grab to hold themselves. And I said what the – and whatever word I used, I can't remember at this time, but I knew it was up forwards, I just knew. And I also knew it was trouble. Anything that stopped my boat like that was trouble.

Well Ronzy Park built his boats very well. You could get to most anything aft of the wheel. But up forward, he had inlaid oak sort of like a half moon where you walked. And I always said to myself if I ever get hit, please don't hit me in that area because there's no way I can reach that six to eight inches between the hull. And that hull, remember now, we had inch and a quarter to inch and a half of wood on there, cedar, as the hull. And that's heavy stuff. So I immediately lifted up the hatch and surmised that I did have a problem. And I asked the people to come forward. And I said I don't know what the problem is right now, but we're taking on water, and my pumps are working, but I know that we're not working. The boat, whatever we have hit in my mind had lodged and we're still in 18 feet of water. The boat was standing still, not moving back or forward. And I wasn't about to put them engines to make it any worse. So I had them put on their life jackets and sit up on top. And when I checked it out, well the water by then, the next thing I knew, the water was almost to the deck and the inside, my pumps were not going to keep this up. And I said – and this is probably happening in minutes, and it's not the first time I've been down in boats, in service, I've been blowing out – so I'm used, you know, my mind is working, and it's not, the fact is I was really too calm, I believe, because I took the time out to talk to them, tell them we've got a little water problem here. But don't worry about it. I did not send out a mayday, because I could see there was a workboat up ahead. And a mayday is a life and death situation. This is not life and death. This was more like in the water or out of the water.

So and I always impressed that on my students I taught. Mayday means one thing. That is a life and death situation. And when you say that word on the net, Coast Guard goes into action, airplanes take off, people come running. So if -- there's a lot of difference between that and pon, pon, pon (phonetic), which means I have an urgent problem. So I knew I couldn't stop the water, I had the people up there, and I called the Coast Guard, and I said, tried to get home and no one would answer me. Now I have two very good radios. And I could talk all the way to Norfolk with them, and I could talk to right here at my house, which I have a good antenna, and no one would answer. And I said again, and I got no answer. So finally I said well, I'll just shake the troops up then. And I said pon, pon, pon, this is the charter boat fishing Fin, and I gave them the exact coordinates, and I said we have an urgent problem of taking on water. Please answer. Well Norfolk – no Baltimore answered, I'm sorry. Well Baltimore answered. And Baltimore does have a

strong receiving station, and asked me what the problem was. I said look, I've hit an unknown object, I'm taking water. He said where's the water at now? And I said it's around my feet. And I said the people are in life jackets, they're on top, I'm a 40 foot boat, this is my position, and do not expect me to talk any more, because I have things to do. And that was it. And I tried to stop the water the best I could, I could not even get up into where it was at. So the next thing to do was I have a – I had made the engine cover myself, and when you turn it upside down, it's an ice boat.

But I took all the, as I said that, a waterman, an old fellow, again a Pruitt, was coming, I could see him ahead of me, and an old boat. Now this was an old waterman. And he was coming alongside. He said Captain, I can see your boat getting short. I reckon you need some help. (Laughter.) I said yeah, please come alongside and let me get my people onboard. Well by now, the boat had water up to my stomach almost, right. And it was real easy for the people to get off my boat onto his. So but they did not get their feet wet, and they were very, very cool. I mean they treated it as a good experience. They had sailed the Azores, and so they knew. And I handed them all their belongings. And I said now, are you sure you have everything? I knew everything they had. And they got off. So make a long story short, and not hurt the Coast Guard or BRMC's feelings, a young fellow from Tangier Island came out, Tweety. Tweety was his name. With a small boat, and I said I'd asked the Coast Guard, BRMC, nobody would, my boat would not sink, and I told this boat's not sinking. I was told to get off the boat, but you don't tell me to get off my boat, no way. I mean there's no rules that says I must. And my job was on that boat, and I was taking what I could up, that I knew. And on the top – I also knew that that boat would not sink because of the way the motor was placed, the way she's sitting, she came right up to the gunnels, the water, and that's where she sat. And she wasn't going to go down. If she wasn't going to go down immediately, she's not going down, which means that it's made of heavy enough wood, the engine was a single engine, wasn't heavy enough, the buoyancy, there was enough reserve buoyancy to keep that thing at that level.

So I had that young fellow take me into the island, bring out his little bobcat, and while we were gone, it had drifted another two miles to the western shore, but the good old United States Coast Guard was there to watch it. And we went and picked it up and took it back into the island. It took us three and a half hours. By now, the boat was drawing nine feet, right? Instead of the normal five, four feet. Well right into the western entrance of the island, which you can only – and there is a boatyard there, Jerry Crockett's Boatyard. But you did not want to park the boat front where he has – there's one small lane for the boats to get in his shipyard and off. So we brought it up forward as far as it would go, and it was high tide, and so it went aground. And we pulled it as hard as we could. At high tide, we feel well, we'd go around at high tide. That's good. And we took ropes and tied it over to some stanchions on the beach, and there it sat. And the next thing to do is I called the insurance company, and I was going to, I tried to get – I went down below and took things out. As you stepped down below, the water was over your head, but