

Interview Log

Interviewee: Delmas Benton

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Comments:

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: Okay. Let me have you say your name.
D.B.: Delmas Benton.
K.F.: Okay. And, Captain Benton, where were you born?
D.B.: Salisbury PGH.
K.F.: Okay.
D.B.: Hospital.
K.F.: Can I ask what year?
D.B.: 1954.
K.F.: All right. That's the same year the Bay Bridge went up.
D.B.: Do what? Oh, yeah.
K.F.: Same year the Bay Bridge went up.
D.B.: Same year the Orioles came in town. (Laughter.)
K.F.: And you're currently the captain of the Fanny Doherty, right?
D.B.: Right.
K.F.: Okay. How long have you had that boat?
D.B.: Since 1989.
K.F.: And how did you get her?
D.B.: I bought her from my father. He bought her in 1969.
K.F.: Okay. Yeah, I had a note that Norman Benton was the previous owner. Is that your dad?
D.B.: Yeah.
K.F.: Okay. How long has being a skipjack captain been in your family?
D.B.: Well daddy always worked on them, his grandfather had them and owned them. I mean they've always been in the family, right on down the line.
K.F.: Okay. All right. And do you know how your dad got the Doherty?
D.B.: Yeah. He bought her from Dan Dali's (phonetic) on Smith Island.
K.F.: On Smith Island. Okay. How long was he the captain of her?
D.B.: Who, my father?
K.F.: Yeah, your dad.
D.B.: From '69 to '89, 20 years.
K.F.: Twenty years. Okay. And let me start with how you – your first time on a skipjack.
D.B.: Well I started working with daddy as soon as I graduated, 1972.
K.F.: Okay.
D.B.: And I worked for him until, you know, he got health problems. When he got health problems, I bought her from him.
K.F.: Okay. And what was your first job on the skipjack?
D.B.: Working middle deck. (Laughter.)
K.F.: Can you describe what that's like?
D.B.: Hard work. It's nothing, nothing good about it. Some of the hardest work you'll ever do.
K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

D.B.: That's why you can't get no crews nowadays. Ain't enough oysters, and you just, they're hard to keep up, hard to handle. But back then when he had her, there's a lot of oysters. Makes a difference. You know, you could get good crews.

K.F.: Well can you tell me about those days when you were working the middle deck with your dad as the captain?

D.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: What was it like then?

D.B.: Well it was gravy. I mean out in the Choptank River, you'd have your limit, an hour, I mean an hour and a half. So I mean if you were in tied up, you'd eat three meals a day into the harbor.

K.F.: Really?

D.B.: Yeah. You'd eat breakfast, lunch and dinner all – you'd stay right aboard the boat then.

K.F.: So you're eating the three meals onboard the boat –

D.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: Even though you're in the harbor at –

D.B.: Yeah, 'cause we knew we could get our limit that quick. It wouldn't allow you to have breakfast before you went out. You'd go out there and work an hour, hour and a half. You'd have your limit, come on in, eat breakfast then, then lunch at lunchtime, and supper at supertime.

K.F.: And would you sleep aboard the boats then?

D.B.: Yeah. Yup.

K.F.: Okay. Now what year did they open the Choptank? I can't remember.

D.B.: Let me see. The first year I went, I think we were up the head of the bay. I believe it was '73.

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

D.B.: '72 or '73, 'cause soon as I got out of high school, I mean I went the right time. Seemed like they opened it up. So it was '72 or '73, I'm pretty sure.

K.F.: Okay.

D.B.: But it was clear oysters.

K.F.: And what did, what did the deck look like with that many oysters coming in?

D.B.: It looked good. You knew you were making a few bucks. (Laughter.) Now you, I – you could catch more in one week then you're supposed to catch up to Christmas. (Laughter.) Yes, sir. I mean you could go out there with sails and get your limit. All you had to do was have enough breeze to pull one, you'd catch your limit.

K.F.: Okay

D.B.: Didn't need two. But I mean oysters were abundance then. I mean plenty of them. Never see that no more.

K.F.: Well let me back up and ask you, what did you guys eat on the boat?

D.B.: Well we had a cook aboard there, and he cooked regular breakfast stuff: eggs, bacon, scrapple. For lunch, you'd even have a pot of beans, or ham and cheese sandwiches or something, and supper, you always had a good supper, like chicken, beef or whatever. I mean they cooked three good meals a day. I mean it was good food back then.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). What did you guys do in the evenings since you were tied up in Cambridge. (Laughter.)

D.B.: On the record or off? (Laughter.)

K.F.: Whichever one you want. (Laughter.)

D.B.: Well I'll put it this way. We just didn't lay aboard the boat. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay.

D.B.: I mean 'cause if you went out and stayed half the night, you knew you only had to work a couple ours the next day. I mean anybody could suffer that long. (Laughter.)

K.F.: This is a real different story from some other ones I've heard around here. They talked about working all day long.

D.B.: Oh, well, it has been like that too. Don't get me wrong. I mean when oysters played out, and then the oysters were good home there for a few years, but when they started dying out, they didn't tell you no lie, from sunup to sundown. And then you wasn't catching many. But they didn't tell you no joke. But I'm just talking about the good days.

K.F.: Okay. (Laughter.)

D.B.: Yes, the good days.

K.F.: Okay. Now how many skipjacks would be working the Choptank?

D.B.: What, when I started?

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

D.B.: On Hallis Point, one day I counted, I think they were all out there at that time, there was 36.

K.F.: Wow.

D.B.: There was 36 of them.

K.F.: Seems amazing that 36 of them could maneuver in that river and not have any problems.

D.B.: Yup. I'm telling you.

K.F.: Well what did you learn from your dad about being a captain?

D.B.: I learned what little bit I know. (Laughter.) I learned what little bit I know. I mean you got to pick it up. I mean you work with him all them years. What you don't pick up, you learn on your own, you know. But you can't help but pick up things. You boat with him for 20 years just about. Daddy was a good captain. He played it safe best he could. I mean sometimes, you're going to get hung up in situations you don't want to be in, but for the most, he was a good captain.

K.F.: Well let me ask you then what makes a good captain.

D.B.: Well – well back then, see, nowadays you don't go on days like you would back then because it takes you all day to make a showing. Back then, if it blowed 25, 30 miles an hour, you were going. You knew you could get your limit in two or three ours. I mean you're going to battle some rough weather to get them. And that, I don't know, safety come first with him, I'll give him that. But I don't know. It's just – I don't know how you, what you say was a good captain. A good captain, I guess he looks out for the safety of his crew first instead of worrying about the buck. But now, like I say, it's not no crews. I mean in the run of a year, I'm liable to have 15 or 20 different head working with me.

K.F.: Really?

D.B.: I mean you get two or three you think's going to go regular, and all the sudden, one of them don't show. You got to pick somebody else up. Then next you know, another one's gone. You pick a straggler up, and that's the way it works. Works on your nerves is what it does.

K.F.: Well let me ask you how you go about finding crew then at this stage of the game. (Laughter.)

D.B.: I'll put it this way. Most our crews are riff-raffs and derelicts, if you want to know the truth about it. I mean anybody, I guess, that ain't got a job that wants to work, you'll try him. I mean the ones you got, half of them ain't no count. I mean wherever some of these I took out the bay, if I could catch 50 bushels with them, you could've took a good crew and probably caught 90 or 100, you know, but you have to take what you can get. But it ain't many crews around.

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

D.B.: 'Cause it ain't no oysters. I mean you ain't working but two days a week, and after the first few weeks, you can't catch over 40, 50 bushel, and it's got to be perfect then. I mean they can't make no money like that staying out the bay. And now we don't stay aboard no boats no more. You have to stay in a motel room and eat, I mean that takes a lot of money. Can't make no money is what it is. You get good crews if you catch your limit. Catch over 100 bushel -- you get crews. Ain't nobody wants to do it, and I don't blame them.

K.F.: Well how about when your dad was captain? Did he have a regular crew that stayed with him?

D.B.: He had a -- for the most, he had a -- there was a colored guy named Levin White that cooked, and there's another black guy named Marion Johnson. He died. Both of them's dead. And he had another one named Clarence and Chauncy and myself, and -- well he had my two brothers. They broke in then till they got their boats. I mean, yeah, he had a good crew. I mean they were regulars. He always kept regular crew.

K.F.: Does a crew that's been working together for a long time, do they -- you know, sports teams, you know what you're --

D.B.: Well like back then, if we're working sails, and sails blowing 15 miles an hour and all the sudden it breezes up to 25, and he had a boy out -- the crew that daddy had them, he wouldn't have to miss a dip. We could reef going about and keep right on dipping. Never miss a dip. They were that fast, and they knew what to do and what to grab, when to do it. Now (Laughter), I could probably leave out here and reef, I'd be Smith Island before they get one in her. (Laughter.) I'm telling you, they're pitiful. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Well tell me about some of your experiences working on the skipjack.

D.B.: You mean when I was with daddy?

K.F.: Yeah, let's start with that one.

D.B.: What you mean, bad experiences?

K.F.: Well, weather.

D.B.: Well the worst one, I guess, is we were working in Hooper's Straits one day, and they were giving off 20, 30 southeast, and it was blowing 20. And next thing you know, we had to shove in to Windgate's, and lucky to get there. They clocked it at 80-some mile an hour. And all the boats had to go in there. And Charles Abbott, he had -- the

time he slide in, he had a heart attack coming in there, and two or three boats come in there half sunk. But I mean that was a breeze that day. And we had to stay there overnight. And next morning when we woke up, the storm was so bad that the National Guard was coming down the middle of the road in his outboard showing them where the road was, the tide was all over the road that high. It was up to the top of tellers on the National Guard truck. And then when we went in that one, my brother and them that time that Stanford turned over up there by the bridge, my brother was in that one, but his skipjack's gone now, Susan Mayo. They were in 90-some mile an hour winds up there that day. But I don't know, you been in a lot of places where you had a scud in, 50, 60 mile an hour. We've done those a lot of times right in the Choptank River. You'd be out there working, and you'd have to shove up under a bank, pull the boat and all up, and put a fore reef in and scud to Tilghman's.

K.F.: Now can you explain what scud means?

D.B.: You've just got a piece of the sail up is all. Just no jib, just a piece of the foresail up, fore reef, and you shove up under land to get your boat up, and then you pay it off, just that little piece of sailing, your boom right up the scud till you get in the other harbor. But we've done that several times in the river. But other than that, in just routine, bad weather, I mean no more than what we have every day.

K.F.: Well I guess not everybody works outside in the wintertime, so that makes it, you know, a little different, and especially working on the water in the wintertime.

D.B.: I guess you're right. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Most people are in an office. (Laughter.)

D.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: So can you describe some of the ice storms or anything that have happened? I know there's been some –

D.B.: Yeah.

K.F.: -- in the 70's.

D.B.: Well I never did go through it, but the first year daddy bought her in '69, they were froze in Love Point, and they opened up Old Rock, and the Coast Guard pulled a string of them, and he thought he was going to bust her open first year he had her. I mean it was blocks of ice coming up on deck big as this – he was telling me about it. I mean I don't know that. But I've heard the stories. But I wasn't in that. No, we – if it's ice, you know, if you bust through it, you go on out. If it's cutting, you're froze up. I mean we wasn't in no, nothing major, I ain't been. Don't want to be. The only thing I can remember, I remember '76, '77, we're froze up in Tilghman's Island, and the sound was froze over, and me and a couple guys walked from the Wenona Harbor out there to the bell buoy to the – channel where the tugboats were going by, and we're setting up on about a 30-foot iceberg watching tugboats go by. You could sit right up there. I wouldn't do that no more. I was young and dumb. (Laughter.) I was young and dumb. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Well what does, when does – with a wooden hull, what does a skipjack sound like when there's ice?

D.B.: It sounds like they're coming through her. I mean they got metal right on them for the ice, but it rocks. Like if you hit it hard when she's shaking, you see your mast and everything, she trembles, you know. It ain't a good feeling. But ice is dangerous. Very

dangerous. My brother didn't have no metal on one year at Tilghman's, and it wasn't nothing but windowpane glass. I mean that is nothing, and he cut her right through. He had to work on her when he got in. I mean he actually cut her through. But it don't take much. Thin ice is worse than heavy ice far as tearing the boat up, cutting them.

K.F.: Why is that?

D.B.: 'Cause it's so sharp when it's thin. Thick ice just block, you know, don't do it. Only thing is, you ain't got no business being in it no way when it's like that. But thin ice will cut you quick.

K.F.: Well what is the, I've had a couple of crabbers tell me that the water in the bay smelled different when a storm is coming. Is that the same in the wintertime? Does it change a little?

D.B.: I don't know. I ain't never heard of it smelling no different. I never ever heard that. Where did that come from?

K.F.: Well, actually, a guy in Virginia just down the road here.

D.B.: He probably smelling that fish factory. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Maybe. (Laughter.)

D.B.: You got a fish factory over there to Reedville or somewhere. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Well let me ask you how much did you get paid when you first started working on the boat?

D.B.: Well that's according to what you got. Like when I graduated, you could make 4 or \$500 a week. That was big money in '72. I mean that was good money. I mean if you worked, you could make 4 or \$500 a week. Like I said, that was a lot of money in '72.

K.F.: And that got split, the total take got split between –

D.B.: The boat gets 30 cent out the dollar. And then if you had six head working middle deck, it's the other 70 cent split up between seven heads. Captain gets his share, and they get 10 cent out the dollar. If you got five head, they get 11 and 2/3 cent. If you got four head, they get 14 cent out the dollar. But the boat gets 30 cent. And some people takes a third for the boat.

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

D.B.: But all daddy ever took was 30, and that's all I've ever took. And the last, I'll say, 10 year, I probably ain't took that because when we're up the head the bay, most time, I got to pay the expenses and everything just keep a crew so they can make them 150, or \$100 a day or whatever clear, you know. I try to make them – first going off, they make 3 or \$400 them two weeks – them two days if, you know, if you can catch 80 or 90, 100 bushel. But oystering is pitiful. See oysters died in the sound here too. They died in the Choptank. That's what hurts. You ain't got but one place where you can work. That's up on the other side the bay bridge, and take every boat can find up there and 50 or 75 patent tongs there a month before you get there. I mean we don't get nothing but crumbs. That's the way it works.

K.F.: And I guess the Potomac's not open?

D.B.: No. They used to rush Potomac a long time ago, and they told them that they were going to close it for a year or something like that, and that was 50 or 60 years ago, and it's still closed. But they used to rush Potomac. I don't know that, but I've heard, you know, you always heard stories, the old timers.

K.F.: And so trying to understand some of the economics today about oystering, how much would it cost you, say, on average for the upkeep of the boat in season?

D.B.: Well just to take her to Goody's Railway and do nothing to her but paint her, it'll cost you 2,500 to \$3,000 just to paint her.

K.F.: Okay. And is Goody's up in –

D.B.: Crisfield.

K.F.: Crisfield. Okay.

D.B.: That's if you've got nothing else to do on her whatsoever. And it's never that. You always got something to do.

K.F.: Right.

D.B.: But it'll cost you that. Can't get off no cheaper than that, if you get off that cheap. But I mean to fit her up for dredging and everything, it'll cost you close to \$10,000 a year.

K.F.: Yeah.

D.B.: I mean if you work on anything.

K.F.: Right.

D.B.: Now if you let her go, you know, you drag – seem like you always have problems to me. You have to get work done to your dredges every year. That's – I mean just to get a set fixed up, set of mud dredging and a set of hard bottoms, you'll have 7 or \$800 in it by the time the blacksmith charges you.

K.F.: Are there any blacksmiths around still that'll work on them?

D.B.: It's only one guy I know. Well, yes, one in Tilghman's. And it's a guy up there, his name's Les Phillips, he's done mine and my brother's for two or three years. He's real good. You know, they catch good when he gets done, but like I say, he's high. But, you know, you have to get it done.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And he's in Tilghman?

D.B.: No. This Les lives – I don't know if it's Federalsburg or Denton or somewhere. It's way up the road.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

D.B.: Now that one blacksmith lives Tilghman, who is it, Doug Raymond, or – I ain't sure. It's one of them there that works on some of them Tilghman Island's dredgers. I've heard them talk about it.

K.F.: What about sails and repairs to those? Because I know they get –

D.B.: Well we got a boy down here that tries patching them up best he can, but it ain't nobody down here got no decent sails. I mean daddy bought that set of Dacrons in '72 or '73, and they're – well, like I said, they're dry rotted. I mean you can't, people can't afford to buy them. I mean you don't work the sail day, if it wasn't for breaking down so I could get somewhere, I wouldn't even have a motor.

K.F.: Really?

D.B.: I wouldn't. I wouldn't want a motor. It ain't no good to me. Right in the way. We don't work neither sail day, but you know, if you all want to cut through, you might be able to get somewhere. I wouldn't have it on her. And you can't afford no 12, \$15,000 for a new set. But I ain't worked a dozen sail days since I've had her, that long.

K.F.: So then you've got to pay the crew. And do you pay taxes on that?

D.B.: No, I give them a W-2 form.

K.F.: So they like –

D.B.: They have to file it their self.

K.F.: Self-employed.

D.B.: Yup. Self-employed.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. And well, if you're not putting the sails up on her, then how come you're not tonging?

D.B.: 'Cause I ain't able to tong. I've had two or three back surgeries. I can't tong. Nope. And not only that, I hand tong enough. I don't never swing another pair.

K.F.: So you've done that in the past too?

D.B.: Oh, yeah. I've done it all. Patent tong, hand tong. Ain't much I haven't done. See when we first started oystering, they used to start September 15th. That was six weeks before dredging started. Well I'd go hand tong or patent tonging that long just before daddy'd get ready.

(OFF RECORD. TELEPHONE.)

K.F.: Okay. Let me see.

D.B.: Have you talked to any other captains yet?

K.F.: I'm talking to Wadey Murphy tomorrow, and Russell Dize next week. And I've tried to contact Art Daniels down here, but –

D.B.: You should've, you should've swung to Mount Vernon. Walton lives there.

K.F.: I have left a message with him. Is he your brother?

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

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). I left a message with him, and I figured next week, I'll probably try to talk to Captain Daniels and your brother. See if they're available.

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

K.F.: Well can you tell me how you learned to navigate? That's something that I'm always interested in with captains, how they learned to navigate.

D.B.: What do you mean, to get where they're going and stuff?

K.F.: Yeah.

D.B.: I mean you – I picked up what I know from my dad. Then once you get on your own, seem like you just fine-tune it.

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

D.B.: I mean the first few years, I guess it was exciting. I mean you just pay attention and everything, I did. I wasn't one of them kind that could sit down the cabin. I mean if he was going somewhere, I was on deck, you know. But now things are easier. I mean back then, it wasn't no GPS, and now everybody's got GPS. All you got to do is follow them. I mean ain't nothing to it now. But we left with daddy one time in a fog. We were going to Annapolis for the appreciation races. And he certainly took us there, and it was foggy the whole way. Yes, sir. I mean we left Wenona. But like I say, now everything's so much done for. You got machines for everything.

K.F.: Well did he explain to you how he worked in the fog?

D.B.: Well when we're working with power, he didn't explain nothing to you. You're up in the middle deck. (Laughter.) Sail days, you wasn't out there no way wit fog. If it's foggy, it's slick cam, I mean most time. But you wasn't out there under sail or something if it was real foggy, sail day. One thing, it's too dangerous. I mean power days, you could go out there and shove on the rock, you would. But you just, you just know. I

mean just like wherever you live. I mean you know which reach you're on and stuff. I mean when you're around it all the time, you know.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And what do you use to sort of mark your way or know where you're at?

D.B.: Well you use your compass, most time. But like I say, nowadays, everybody's got a GPS. Once they get to a place, they punch you down, they punch their beacons in –

K.F.: Right.

D.B.: And that's what they use. I mean I bet half the people don't even look at a compass no more. I guaranty it. And they're full tilt. I mean why have them machines if you don't use them? But like I said, back in them days, they never had nothing but compasses. They would go with them, them old-timers were tough. They were good captains and tough.

K.F.: How does a captain earn the respect of his crew, and able to manage them and –

D.B.: Well if you got the boat, I mean if they ain't gonna listen to you, you ain't gonna put up with it. Plain and simple. Captain's word is law. That's the way it is, that's the way it will always be. I mean I wouldn't have nobody come aboard my boat telling me what to do, and I'm sure nobody else will.

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

D.B.: That's just the way it is. I mean if they don't like it, fine, hit the road. That's the way it works. You don't have no trouble with that. People know when you treat them right and what goes on. I mean they understand. You try to treat people right. I mean you don't – try not to do no hoping and hollering at them, nothing like that. It's unnecessary. That don't amount to a hill of beans. Only time I ever heard daddy holler if look like something was getting ready to do something, might cause somebody some injury or something, you know. Then he's yelling so you can hear. I mean he ain't yelling at you. He's yelling 'cause you have to watch it. I mean working with wanderers and stuff, you can't have people laying out there half asleep with their hands up by the rollers and all that. I mean you just, you got to be careful. It's easy to get hurt, for one. It's been several people that's been wound up in winders and stuff, fingers gone.

K.F.: Have you ever seen anything like that?

D.B.: Well I've been up there when like – not on our boat, but when Junior Benton had the Geneva May, his son Gerald laying up there half asleep, leaning up against the winders, and she caught it all, wound his arm and stuff, like to cut his arm off, but he still has trouble with it, but I mean he's got it and stuff, but he's a long time getting over that. If it hadn't been somebody cutting her off real quick, he would've lost it. Two or three of them I've seen, like Ting Webster (phonetic) lost a finger putting – on, she had a stone at the time. I mean it's easy. Things happen. And it happens fast when it does it. Like one time, I'll tell you one incident we had with daddy. We were working on Sandy Point, blowing a gale northwest, and it's a little – I don't know if it's a marina or what, but right there between Sandy Point and Magothy River, Stanford White used to go in there, had the F.C. Lois, and it's just a gut. And we used to work off there. Well it got blowing so hard, we tried following him in there, but Stanford didn't draw no water. He was a small boat. And we got almost in there, and sure enough, we got ashore, we put little tiny piece of jib up there on her, bet it wasn't high as that curtain. Tried to lower bow around so we could shove back out. And when we put that up, the top of the mast fell, broke, the boom

fell down across the stack board and broke in a big sea of something, all within about 10 seconds. I mean she looked like somebody struck her with a bomb just that fast. All we were doing was put a little piece of jib up, try to pull her bow around, and all that happened that quick. I bet it was faster than 10 seconds. I mean it was like simultaneously. One, when that mast fell, the boom fell and broke across the stack board, and a big sea struck the yawl boat and sunk her, all one clip.

K.F.: And what were you guys doing on deck?

D.B.: Well we had to get the sail in, head the mast in, broken boom, laid all that stuff across the winder frame on top the cabin, and had to heist the boat up, and pull the plug out of her and let her drain. Somebody towed us in Magothy that afternoon. And that night, we had the motors running everything. Now the mast and boom was broke, but that next day was a power day. And we went out the next day and we caught our limit. And then we shoved to Love Point, and he made arrangements, got a mast and stuff. We're working in another week. On sail days too. I mean we only missed three or four days, went back working.

K.F.: So were you guys laid up for three or four days while that was repaired? Did you stay on the boat those three or four days?

D.B.: Well we're up there like – he bought a tree, we had cut the bark off it, shaved it, shaved the mast and all. We had work to do, getting rigging straight and rope straight.

K.F.: So you guys made the mast then.

D.B.: Yeah. Well there's a guy there showing us what to do, but we had to help him. Frank Daniel. He's dead and gone now. That was my father's step-father.

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

D.B.: But he was a smart man. Nice guy. But he could get you working. Now what? (Laughter.)

K.F.: Any other stories like that you got laying around? (Laughter.)

D.B.: Trying to think. That's probably about the freakiest thing I remember. But I mean all that happened within split seconds. I mean 'cause when the mast fell, the boom fell, you know, 'cause sail was up a little bit. And the top of that mast fell, the top lift, that fell down across the stack board, and that broke. Old big sea rolled right in the yawl boat. Looked like somebody'd hit us with a bomb. I mean you're talking about a crippled duck we were. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Now one question I had was I noticed in all the photographs I've seen and whenever I'm on Tilghman and see the skipjacks come in, nobody has any of the oysters in a bushel basket. They're just on deck. So how do you know you've got your limit of 150 --

D.B.: Well you're guessing --

K.F.: -- when stuff's on there?

D.B.: -- but most time there, if you've seen it enough, you can come within two or three bushels one way or the other. I mean you pretty well tell. Now right now, I don't know if I could tell. I ain't seen it in so long. But back then, they were used to seeing it. I mean they could tell. But most of them were right sharp at it. But like I said, been so long now, them boys -- Lawrence Murphy caught his limit up there first day this year. But see, I tried two or three different days trying to get up the bay, but it was blowing a gale. Couldn't get there to, you know, start season. And where they worked at with all them

tongers and stuff, they seed, when you catch it up. I think first day, he caught it early, and the next day, they said they worked till almost dark, don't have over 100, they were gone that quick. When seed's gone, it's gone. It ain't like natural growth. Natural growth, you know, it lasts a long time. But seed, they get it so quick, and that's it.

K.F.: Is that mostly what everybody's catching these days is seed?

D.B.: Seed oysters. They take them up from here, and Eastern Bay, and Parson's Island, places like that, and Little Choptank, wherever they got a good catch. They take them up the head of the bay where they are living some. See last year, where I tied at in Deep Creek, it was only myself. It was a buckeye in there, the Catherine M. Lee. And it wasn't even another skipjack in there until middle of December, 'cause they were working in Choptank too. Well when Choptank died, this year right off the start, it was five or six skipjacks in there at one time. And, you know, that many more boats working the same rocks, they just go and when they're gone, they're gone. Makes a big difference.

K.F.: What is the most useful regulation in your opinion?

D.B.: Most useful, what do you mean, by DNR?

K.F.: Yeah.

D.B.: Most useful regulation. I don't know. I'd have to sit and think on that a lot longer than I got time for tonight. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. A stumper.

D.B.: Damn right. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Well this one might be easier. What's the most useless regulation, the one you'd really like to see them get rid of?

D.B.: Useless regulation. I don't know. I could tell you some stories about things that they done. I don't know. I don't even –

K.F.: That's where I'm headed next.

D.B.: I don't even want to put it on tape. I'm telling you.

K.F.: Well what is it like when DNR comes aboard the boat to check?

D.B.: Well anytime that a skipjack, I don't know how it is across the bay, but when we're in Deep Creek, they're there every evening. I bet they don't miss two days out the year that they ain't watching you. And same way Wenona. When we're down here oystering, they started that power dredging, and I watched 30 boats pull out one night, two conveyors. Them up front, us back here. Two skipjacks. Three DNR down there were watching two skipjacks. We weren't catching over 35, 40 bushel. Thirty boats pull out up there and they never once walked up there. I mean that's the kind of shit, when you own a skipjack, laws around – there's no getting around it.

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

D.B.: I don't know. I don't know if it's 'cause a bad name from years past, or history or what, but it just seems like they flock to 'em. Maybe we're paying for what great-granddaddy done. I don't know. I tell you one thing, they're tough. I mean anybody with common sense can see when you're trying to do right. I mean I tell you what's useless, now that you mention that. It's like I got four, or five, or six men working middle of that deck, and I'm not touching an oyster, but yet I get the ticket. They should be made to give it to one of them that – why should I lose my license for them – like I say, 15 or 20 different head in the run of a year?

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

D.B.: And that's a bad, bad situation. And I'll tell you something else. Just like if I go out there and get two or three speeding tickets, get points on my license. After three year or whatever it is, clear up, five year whatever. Your water record never clears up. When you go to court, if you had a ticket from 1940, they bring that out.

K.F.: Really?

D.B.: Yeah. Like to make your water record clear up if you ain't had no tickets in so many year.

K.F.: So it's like a federal record then. You –

D.B.: You keep it. When you go to court, if I go to court, if I get a ticket with DNR and I might go to court, whatever ticket I've ever had on the water is brought out on your record. And, you know, why do something I done when I was 19 or 20, if I had a speeding ticket or no lifejacket ticket, it should be done away with after so many years. But they don't do it.

K.F.: What's it like going to court?

D.B.: You can lose. (Laughter.) Plain and simple. You're gonna lose. You can't win if you do win, because by the time you pay a lawyer, you still lost. That's the way it is.

K.F.: And have you been to court?

D.B.: Yeah, yeah. Got caught with a load of oysters one time. Made us go to court, but who ain't?

K.F.: Do judges tend to treat captains differently than other people in their courtroom?

D.B.: I don't think so.

K.F.: Okay.

D.B.: Like I only went that one time with them, and it was a forced issue, you had to go, 'cause we had 20 bushels of little oysters, and he tried to give us a ticket for each individual bushel. It come to \$6,200 worth of tickets. So we went to court, and lawyer we had, it's just – wouldn't be liability if you won ticket. So the lawyer told the judge, you know, showed the law, and he got up there and this law officer, said that he been doing it this way for 26 years, and when the judge read the law to him, she said well you been doing it wrong for 26 years. So we had to wind up paying one ticket, and the lawyer cost thousands, so I still had 1,300 and some dollars tied up into it. But that still beats the hell out of 60-some hundred. (Laughter.) But like I say, it was a no-win situation. But far as that with the records, that would be the main thing, that and don't give the tickets to the captains. I mean you're not – you get on them, but still, you can't go up middle deck, and leave the wheel and stuff and see what they're doing every day. You just can't do it.

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

D.B.: And the way they got laws now where you get three tickets within a year, they take your license. If they take your license, you're done. So I mean – and if the DNR gets on your back, you can get three tickets oystering, they can make you have three tickets. They can beat and bang on 'em enough to get you.

K.F.: What do you mean, bang on 'em?

D.B.: They can, if you're working on oysters that's three and a half inches, when they beat and bang on him and run him around the ring of their – hammer, they cut the bill off. Next thing you know, it's three inches, a little less. They can get you if they want you. But that's why you can't open your mouth to them nowadays. Long time ago, those old

timers used to cuss them, pay their ticket and go about their business. Now you cuss one, he'll get on your back, you'll get three tickets, you're done. They take your license.

K.F.: Do you think the DNR targets specific captains?

D.B.: I don't know. I don't know. I don't think it's specific. I don't know I ain't gonna sit here and say that, but all I know is certain sides of the bay, laws a lot tougher on some sides than it is the other. Deep Creek it's tough. I've heard them patent tongs say they go in Rock Hall, you said you might see them once, twice a year. I mean they're up there the whole time. We miss them once or twice a year. That's it. I mean that makes a hell of a difference.

K.F.: Well let me ask you a couple things about being a captain. What's it like being at the helm?

D.B.: Well I tell you one thing. It's a lot of responsibility. I mean you're trying to catch enough oysters to feed four or five different families, you know. I mean they're dependent on you. I mean you're doing all you can do. You try to do the best you can. Like I say, it's a lot of responsibility. But, yeah, if you done good, you know, you feel good about yourself. But I mean the crews you get, they ain't nothing but poor old boys, I mean they need ever nickel they make too, especially some of them's got little kids and stuff. 'Cause wintertime, ain't much money made, not on this island. Very, very little. I mean what most money people make, they make in the summer around here. I'm happy if I get my Christmas, just pay my bills and get my Christmas, you know, buy the Christmas for the families and stuff. I'm happy. I don't put nothing away. Ain't nothing to put away. It don't work that way. Do all you can do to keep the old boat up.

K.F.: Well why do you keep her up?

D.B.: Well it's that or sit around do nothing in the winter. I mean I've been on her a long time. Be 30 years next year, between when daddy had her, I was with him, and when I've had her. And if I hadn't done a lot of work to her, she'd already been in a mudflat somewhere, she'd already been gone. I put her home in my yard one time, worked on her.

K.F.: What did you do to her?

D.B.: A lot of sides, a lot of deck and stuff, but I learned a lesson. Bow split and all that in her, new stems. But I tried to put new wood against older wood that wasn't rotten yet, but it don't work that way. In a few years, that old wood's rotted, and it's rotted the ends of where the good wood is, and you're better off just strip it. Ain't been over six year ago, I put all new deck on her, new sides. I got a fiberglass deck now.

K.F.: How does that compare to the wooden deck?

D.B.: Oh, it's worth its weight in gold. I mean it's still a wooden deck. I got an inch and a half deck on her, and it's coppered underneath, tarred in the middle, and I got fiberglass on top, and it's all screwed with stainless steel screws. But yeah, it's worth its weight in gold.

K.F.: Is it less slick, or easier to work on or –

D.B.: No, I got it so it ain't slippery. I got it with a little texture to it with the stand.

K.F.: Okay, like pebbly.

D.B.: Yeah. But it's well worth it. I mean when I take her deck boards up, and I don't nail no deck boards down, we use ply wood and just lay it down in quarters. But when I

take them up, I can take a power washer and wash her off, and she looks like she's been painted again. She's gel-coated on top on the deck.

K.F.: Okay. Well how has she changed over the 30 years as far as handling?

D.B.: She still handles about the same. Now since I've had her, I've scarfed to the mast. I've added two foot to the mast, and two foot to the boom, and the reason why I was holding oystering with them back, I was going to try to get a set of sails, but that way, she would sail better. Then when you sail out here in these races, you'd have a chance. I mean them old big boats has got so big a mast, so much sail, you can't compete with them. And I added that much to her in case –

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

K.F.: Well let me ask you why do you think people are so fascinated with these boats? You worked on one for 30 years.

D.B.: I don't know. I guess when you hear skipjack, and you hear the write-up about the last, part of the last sailing fleet of North America and all that, I guess it kind of gets to them. I don't know. I mean if you ever go out there on one of these races, like Labor Day and stuff, and you see some of them out there sailing, and you got little yachts to start before you're sailing and all that, I mean you ain't going to find nothing no prettier than seven or eight skipjacks with sails up racing. I mean that's pretty as it gets. They're all painted up. I mean they are pretty. There ain't no getting around it. They're a pretty vessel. But I can remember the first year daddy got that boat in '69, we used to tie up Annapolis Harbor for the Sandy Point Appreciation race. And I can remember where it would be two rolls of skipjacks all the way across the harbor. It was that many in there at the race, and we took Buddy Epton, you know the one plays Barnaby Jones and the Beverly Hillbillies? We took him out on the skipjack.

K.F.: Oh.

D.B.: Yeah, we took him out, and got permission from the governor to take him out that Sunday and make a few dips and let him steer the boat, and dump a dredge, and cull the oysters. That was pretty cool.

K.F.: What did he think of that?

D.B.: He seemed all right. I mean he was a nice guy. He brought two quarts of liquor aboard there and told daddy to put them down in the bunk for medicinal purposes. (Laughter.) He looked like he'd been hungover to me. His eyes were red as that lighter. (Laughter.) But as far as a nice fellow, he was real nice. And the very next year – Gary Moore from What's My Line. But he never did come. Had to cancel it. But that was when Benny Evans, he's dead now, but he used to be the race director down here. And he was big into skipjacks, and he knew a lot of people. But when he died off, seemed like a lot of stuff died off with it.

K.F.: Well is there anybody from, say, your dad's crew that's around that we should talk with?

D.B.: Not when he originally – all them older fellows are dead and gone. And like I say, he had my two brothers, and then I came along right behind them, but they had, they got their own boats after a few years.

K.F.: Right.

D.B.: But the last year before he got rid of her to me, I mean he was like myself, you're liable to have 8 or 10 different, 12, 15 different heads in the run of a year when oysters died off. When they died off down the sound, I don't know, they say you just couldn't keep no crew. You weren't liable to have anybody anytime.

K.F.: How did you guys pay the bills for everything when Dermo and MSX hit down here?

D.B.: Well one year I remember daddy had her that he didn't even dredge her, oystering was so bad, and we hand tonged. We couldn't make nothing but 60, \$70 a day. I mean hand tonging was bad too, but it was better than fitting her up and not having nobody. I don't know. You just grovel through. You do what you can do. You can go make a little bit. That's all you make. That's what you do.

K.F.: I guess the charter fishing business was a little more successful?

D.B.: It was a lot more successful. A lot more. There you don't have to depend on no crews or nothing. All you got to do is depend on your party showing up and what to do. I mean after you done it long enough, you weed through the ones that are maybe-so's. But you have regulars that come back, but you stay busy in the summertime. From May to October, you stay pretty, pretty active.

K.F.: Is that seven days a week?

D.B.: I do. I mean you might miss a day here or there or something like that, or hurricanes come up, you'll get, you know, different things. But like this month so far, the month of May, I started May the 1st, I've missed one day. And I guess I've had 10 or 12 doubles mixed in that through the months. And like this weekend, I got – I had one yesterday, and I got one Friday and Saturday. Next week, I got two or three doubles, and every day is taken. But people wouldn't do that if you could make money in the winter too like they used to. But they can't do it. I mean it's summer or nothing now.

K.F.: Okay. I don't want to hold you up from going –
(END OF INTERVIEW.)