

Interview Log

Interviewee:	Ruke Dize	Tape #: (n/a)
Interviewer:	Virginia Jenkins	# of Tapes: 1
Date:	August 9, 1999 and August 20, 1999	# of Sides: 1
Location:	Ruke's Store, Ewell Smith Island, Maryland	
Topic:	Workboat Foodways Project	

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Comments: Phonetic Spellings: Elmer Evans, OtisTower

BEGIN SIDE A

R.D.: Ruke Dize.

V.J.: Born here in Smith Island?

R.D.: Born here, 73 years old.

V.J.: And this is the 9th of August, 1999, right?

R.D.: Ninth of August, that's right.

V.J.: And the museum is going to reconstruct the galleys on the workboats in the collection, so I'm asking people who lived on the boats what it was like, and who cooked and what you cooked.

R.D.: Oh, I had a special man that cooked, and we had four -- five head on the boat.

V.J.: What boats did you work on?

R.D.: I worked on Seagull, Skipjack. The name of it was -- the last two years, I worked on a boat called Sommerset.

V. J.: When was this?

R.D.: This was quite a few years ago. I don't know, I guess it's been 10 years or better, I guess.

V.J.: How old were you when you started working on skipjacks?

R.D.: I was about 15. I worked two years and then I went in the Navy, spent three years in the Navy and come here back. Then got on Skipjacks, got on Skipjacks, 20 years or so. Long, hard haul.

V.J.: Did you ever -- were you ever the cook?

R.D.: No. Never was the cook. Had a special man cook.

V.J.: Do you remember the name of the men who would cook?

R.D.: William Tyler was one. And then on the other boat, last two year I was on a Skipjack, Ken Evans his name was. He was --

V.J.: He was good?

R.D.: Good cook. Good eating aboard that boat.

V.J.: What would a typical day's food be like, breakfast, lunch and supper?

R.D.: Well we have eggs and bacon for breakfast, beans for dinner, lunchtime, that's probably what we'd get. And suppers we'd have, we'd eat steak and all that kind of stuff. It was hard work, but it was healthy.

V.J.: So for breakfast, you'd have eggs and bacon?

R.D.: Yeah, different varieties, scrapple. And mostly for dinner, we had beans.

V.J.: How were they cooked?

R.D.: How were they cooked? Real good. They'd have like boat bread -- they call it boat bread. And it's good too.

V.J.: How was it cooked?

R.D.: It was cooked in the oven. We had an oven.

V. J.: What kind of stove did you have?

R.D.: We had a gas stove. At first, when we first started, before they come out, used to have a wooden stove. Put wood in, you know, and cook that way. But then gas came out, we used a gas oven.

V.J.: Was it propane?

R.D.: Yes.

V.J.: Where were the propane tanks kept?

R.D.: Outside on the boat, outside.

V.J.: They had ovens?

R.D.: Yeah, they had ovens. For a long time, first went on that boat, for a good many years, we used wood.

V.J.: Where did you get the wood for the stove?

R.D.: Well they'd get it from different places, and they'd chop it up. They can't put the whole thing in, they'd have to have it in small pieces like.

V.J.: Who did the chopping, the crew?

R.D.: Crew. First one in done it.

V.J.: Where did you carry the wood? Where was it carried on the boat?

R.D.: Well we carried it, put it outside in some kind of a wooden box.

V.J.: Whereabouts? On the deck?

R.D.: On the deck.

Vi.: Yeah?

R.D.: Have to be on the deck.

V.J.: Get in the way?

R.D.: No, it wouldn't be in the way. We had water barrels.

V.J.: Where were they located?

R.D.: Water barrels on the stern on the side by the (indiscernible) wheel -- push boat.

V.J.: And how did the -- who put the water in the barrels, and where did it come from?

R.D.: Oh, we did that right here with a hose. We'd go to a -- you know, outside, take the hose and fill them up that way.

V.J.: How big were the barrels?

R.D.: Pretty big. I guess they're 50 gallons or better. We had one on each side of the boat.

V.J.: What did you drink on the boat?

R.D.: Coffee and water and pop.

V.J.: Pop?

R.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). In the wintertime, you didn't need no ice. Just put it outside when it was cold.

V.J.: Are you saying you had beans for dinner?

R.D.: Yeah, a lot of times, most time.

V.J.: What kind of beans?

R.D.: Little beans, big beans, better beans.

(Off the record briefly.)

V.J.: We were talking about beans, different kinds of beans.

R.D.: Yes. Had to have supper 'cause we worked hard.

V.J.: How were these beans fixed?

R.D.: Just beans like you cook in a pot.

V.J.: Top of the stove?

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

(Off the record. End of August 9, 1999 Interview at Ruke's Store.)

(Being August 20, 1999 Interview at Smith Island.)

V.J.: This is August 20th, and I'm talking to Ruke Dize at his store on Smith Island, picking up our conversation where we left off last week.

R.D.: Uh-huh (*Affirmative*).

V.J.: Can you tell me how old you were when you started working on a dredge boat?

R.D.: Let's see, about 15.

V.J.: What was the boat?

R.D.: The boat was the Virginia W. Her name was Virginia W.

V.J.: And who was the captain?

R.D.: Clyde Evans and Elmer Evans. They had her together. They were in partners.

V.J.: What was your job?

R.D.: Just working in the middle of the deck, tending to the sails, and picking out oysters and all that, just like every -- all the crew.

V.J.: Where did you sleep?

R.D.: Sleep in the bunks in aft -- stern. They had bunks in `em.

V.J.: How many crew?

R.D.: Five. Four in middle deck, and one -- not counting the captain, five all together.

V.J.: Did you all sleep in the cabin?

R.D.: Yes.

V.J.: Who was the cook?

R.D.: The cook then, name of -- first one was Preston Evans when I first started. He was the cook, he lived at Rose Point. The cook after that, went on the Seagull, cook was William -- William Tyler, William Schultz Tyler. He was the cook.

V.J.: Who was the captain of the Seagull?

R.D.: Otis Tyler was captain. One of the best.

V.J.: And how long did you work, how many years did you work on a dredge boat?

R.D.: I guess I worked 20 some years. It was a long time.

(Off the record briefly.)

V. J.: It was a nice night.

R. D.: Yeah.

V.J.: What was your favorite breakfast when you were working?

R.D.: Bacon and eggs, always.

V.J.: And your least favorite?

R.D.: I don't think I had any. They were all good. We'd have pancakes and different things.

(Off the record briefly.)

V.J.: We were talking about breakfast. What did you like on your pancakes?

R.D.: Just syrup. You know, like a regular --

V.J.: And for supper, what did you like?

R.D.: Oh, we had different steak. We had good eating. Steak and different things.

V. J.: What did you have with your steak?

R.D.: Mashed potatoes and different things, hot bread. It was good. Very good.

V.J.: What other kind of meat did you have on the boat?

R.D.: Hamburger and all that kind, different sort.

V.J.: Did you eat fish?

R.D.: No, not too much. Occasionally. Once a year. This your pencil?

V.J.: No, that's yours.

R.D.: Occasionally. Maybe once or twice a year is all.

V. J.: How about oysters? Did you eat them?

R.D.: A little, little bit, about three or four times a year.

V.J.: How were they cooked?
R.D.: Fried. Fried oysters.
V.J.: And dessert, did you have dessert on the boat?
R.D.: We'd have a cake once in awhile. That's about it.
V.J.: Cook make the cake?
R.D.: Yeah, they'd make the cake. They were good cooks.
V.J.: What kind of stove? Do you remember?
R.D.: At first, when we first started, used to have a wooden stove, wood heat too. But then we got a gas stove.
V.J.: Propane?
R.D.: Propane. The tank was outside on deck. That was anew addition. That was nice. Had an oil burner for a stove. Had an oil burner for a stove.
V.J.: What was your least favorite supper on boat?
R.D.: Least? I don't know. I can't remember.
V.J.: Cook ever make something you didn't like?
R.D.: No, not really. See you work so hard, you don't care. It's hard work. Sun up to sun down. As I told you, we had beans every day. You nearly about had to `cause we worked hard and they would stick by you. Lot of strength.
V.J.: Where in the bay did you dredge?
R.D.: We worked out -- before Christmas, we broke on the -- Magothy, Belvedere, out in the middle of that bay. Sandy Point. And we couldn't work around Annapolis because we weren't allowed to. We just (indiscernible).
(Off the record briefly.)
V.J.: What kind of chores did you have to do on the boat?
R.D.: Chores? Well clean up, you know, after you reef the sails and all that, getting them ready for the next day, and net scrape bags -- dredge bags, I knew how to do that. Was only two on the crew knew how to do that, that was the captain and myself. That's what we'd have to do. We'd go off in the evening. We'd go to -- before Christmas, we'd go to Magothy River. The place, it's called Backhurst, it's on a hill. Then we'd go back, get up there, start again.
V.J.: What time did you get up in the morning?
R.D.: I'd say about an hour and a half before light, before it would come light.
V.J.: Did you have an alarm clock?
R.D.: Oh, yeah. I didn't have to worry about that. The cook had to worry about that. He had to do that.
V.J.: What about water and wood?
R.D.: We had plenty for the weekend, weekend we'd go down to the gas dock here, and they had a hose and we'd fill up our water barrels. Sometimes -- we had two, one barrel on each side. That would last us all week, 'til Friday. We'd come home on Fridays.
V.J.: And wood, did you have to chop wood or stack it?
R.D.: We did until we got the gas stove. I had to make kindling, you know. I had a lot of kindling wood to start the fire. That soon passed, then we got the gas stove. And that was really nice. Didn't have to fool with wood. It was a hard life, but I enjoyed it. We had a good time. We had a lot of fun. Cold in the winter, especially after Christmas.
V.J.: Did you provide your own mattress, or did that come with the boat?

R.D.: We'd provide our own mattress. Damp a lot of times, (indiscernible) arthritis, but dampness. Heat couldn't get all the way underneath them bunks. But it was a healthy life, very healthy life.

V.J.: What kind of -- would the cook ever make puddings?

R.D.: Sometimes, yeah.

V.J.: What kind?

R.D.: Vanilla pudding, different kinds. Chocolate pudding, all that.

V.J.: Rice pudding?

R.D.: Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes they make that. We had good cooks. I mean he was a good cook. They're both dead now. The captain and him both, they're brothers. They were good cooks. He was.

V.J.: Did everybody stop -- eat together, or did you eat in shifts?

R.D.: Yeah. Unless -- if we're eating, we'd all eat together. Now if it was busy, you know, a lot of wind, we lay our head to, and we all eat, but if it's like dropping one dredge or something with the sail down, we'd eat one at a time, you know. If it's busy, we'd all have, we'd lay our heads right in the wind. Stop, you know, 'til we're ready to go again.

V.J.: Nice and warm down in the cabin.

R.D.: Yeah, nice and cozy.

V.J.: Did somebody ask a blessing before you started eating?

R.D.: Oh, yes. Very Christian people. Both boats were. Last boat I was on there, pillars of the church. Last boat I was on was Elmer Evans. He lived on here all his life. He's dead now, but he was a big pillar of the church. And our Captain Otis Tower, he was a pillar of the church. And our cook, they all were. They were big in the church.

V.J.: Who asked the blessing?

R.D.: Mostly the captain or the cook would, or one of us would. All taking turns, mostly. Forgot, I never did.

V.J.: Do you remember the last thing that was used?

R.D.: Yeah, just like that -- truly thankful for what we're about to receive -- amen. That's the one we would use.

V.J.: If you got hungry between meals, was there food available?

R.D.: No, not really. Unless you had a piece of candy or something. You couldn't stop. You'd just have to suffer it out. Have candy or something to eat on (indiscernible).

V.J.: Cigarettes, did people smoke?

R.D.: Yeah, I did. I smoked quite a bit. I smoked four packs a day.

V.J.: Wow.

R.D.: But I been quit 24 years. I was a heavy smoker. And I could always -- I could read a (indiscernible) 'cause when the dredge was coming over the roller, you know, I could always light one up. I done it so much that I could do that. It seemed like to me the harder I worked, the harder I smoked.

V.J.: Kept you going?

R.D.: Yeah, kept me going. That was why I quit, I got so that I had to quit because I couldn't hardly shovel out oysters. That when I was -- tonged, you know. I changed then. Skipjacks when they -- I tonged and I know they were about to get me, so I had to quit.

V.J.: Did you have your own boat?

R.D.: Yeah, I had my own boat. She was named Janey -- stern. Then the last one I had was a fiberglass, 31 foot with a Cummings diesel. And I give her to my son. He's using it. He's using that. I got no boat now.

V. J.: What's her name?

R.D.: Miss Charlotte, the last one.

V.J.: Who was she named after?

R.D.: My wife, named after her.

V.J.: And Janey?

R.D.: Janey, I bought her from a guy that lived in Tangier. And he thought the world of that boat. He cried when I went and got her in Crisfield. He saw her going out when I was leaving. She was named after his daughter. She's a nurse too. Janey.

V.J.: So when did you start the store here?

R.D.: We've had it 39 years. And we used to sell nothing but groceries, like Rich food. And we sent a boat across to Middle River, and they would meet us in a big truck and they would bring it over to us. But now they have a boat that comes in -- I mean they have a truck, they come down to Crisfield now. It was a lot easier for us then, but then they didn't come down to Crisfield. We're very easy. He's convenient, it's nice. I'm used to it. I love it here. My children lives away. They like it on the mainland. My granddaughter, she's a teacher. She taught -- last year was her first year. Prior to that, she got her master's prior to that. Jill Holland now. It was Jill Dize. I can't get used to Jill Holland.

V.J.: What are you going to do when you retire?

R.D.: Nothing. I'm not going to retire. Believe me -- well I really don't, I don't -- seems like to me that they fall apart. We had two people that bought my son's house over here. He was -- very smart man, he was one of the big shots in the Veteran's Administration, and he was appointed by Richard Nixon. And his wife was a lobbyist for a California company, and they retired, but they've had bad health problems. They're doing pretty good now, but they're nice people. Close friends of mine. They worried me a lot 'cause they got real sick. That's the way it goes. That's the way it goes in life too.

V. J.: Well thank you.

R. D.: Are you done?

V.J.: Unless you can think of something else about life on the dredge boat.

R.D.: I tell you, it was a cold rough scene. Weather didn't stop us unless it was a storm of wind. And I got frostbite in my toes now from it. Feet so cold, you know. I been to the doctor, says that's what it is, frost bite. And they been cold. Fingers, I ain't never had no trouble out of my fingers. You had to beat yourself, you know, to get warm. You had to know what to do to get warm, you know. That was after, of course, when the ice come, you know. Have you ever been to the Inner Harbor?

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

R.D.: Well the (indiscernible) she was one of the boats we work around. We dredge around here a lot, and she was the best for cutting ice. I think I told you that.

V. J.: No.

R.D.: Didn't I?

V. J.: No.

R.D.: She was the best boat for cutting ice. She was good -- but she never did -- one boat cut into it. The captain was -- I was here sitting to the table, and he was coming in

one night, and he cut her, and she sank to the dock. Ice, sharp ice. Cut wood, cut it just like a saw. Glass ice. If you want to know anything else, just let me know, I'll try to get back to you.

V.J.: Thank you. Did you have a sleeping bag?

R.D.: Yeah, had a sleeping bag. Yeah, we did. And it was cold. But we got used to it. I don't believe this generation today could do it. We had basins.

V.J.: Did you shave every day?

R.D.: Pretty well every day. We'd heat our water on the stove.

V.J.: Go out on deck and shave, or did you do it --

R.D.: Down in the cabin. We'd take it in turns. Had a big mirror.

V.J.: There was a mirror?

R.D.: Yeah, we had a big mirror. We shaved. Sometimes we'd go off, we'd stay about three weeks at a time, around Annapolis way. Later, later on we stopped doing it, we'd come home every week. We'd come in our cars and stuff.

V.J.: Your family must've liked that better.

R.D.: Yeah, they did. That's the way it was in them days. This generation, they couldn't do it, I don't believe, not what we done. I know my son couldn't. He wouldn't leave home that long. He lives in Crisfield. My daughter too. She works at the police station. She graduated (indiscernible) Wilmington. She got her job in Crisfield.

V.J.: I appreciate you taking the time.

R.D.: Anything else you want, just let me know.

V.J.: Thank you.

R.D.: It's not much, but that's the life aboard a Skipjack. You had to do what -- I tell you, you had to know what you were doing aboard `em. Storms and stuff, you know. The Halyards, having them straight so when you had to lower that sail real fast, they weren't tangled up. And I always made sure of that. And reefing. It's not easy. But I enjoyed it. I couldn't do it now, but that's it. Anything else you want to know, you just let me know.

V.J.: Thank you.

R.D.: I'll be glad to help you.

V.J.: Thank you very much.

R.D.: It won't be as busy, I don't think, you know, this afternoon. Maybe not. Is that it?

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

(END OF INTERVIEW.)