

Interview Log

Interviewee: Daniel Harrison
(D.H.)

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Interviewer: Virginia Jenkins
(V.J.)

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Comments:

Phonetic Spellings: Brightson Creek, Ray Crocket, Lowell Parks, Issac Dize.

BEGIN SIDE A

V.J.: Let's see if I can pick you up with the microphone.

D.H.: Okay. My name is Daniel Harrison.

V.J.: Okay. Were you born on Smith Island?

D.H.: Yup.

V.J.: Can you tell me what year?

D.H.: 1913.

V.J.: 1913?

D.H.: Yup.

V.J.: And you told me that you worked on a dredge boat.

D.H.: Yeah.

V.J.: For how many years?

D.H.: I really sailed the bay and Tangier Sound all together about 71 years. That one skipjack particularly, I I worked her 52 years on the bay. Yup. I've caught as many as 600 bushels of oysters in one day back then there in the 40's. A lot of oysters then.

V.J.: Did you have one cook that worked with you?

D.H.: No. I had different ones.

V.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Do you remember the names?

D.H.: Golly, so many. Some of `em was from Tangier, Virginia. Ray Crocket, Lowell Parks, Issac Dize. I done some cooking sometimes.

V.J.: Who was the best cook?

D.H.: (Laughter). I guess I was `cause I done a lot of cooking when I was a child. My mother died when I was a small kid, and it fell into me to help with the family. And I learned how to cook at an early age.

V.J.: Who taught you?

D.H.: I was just taught from seeing other people, I guess, self-taught.

V.J.: So on the dredge boats, what was a week's menu like?

DR.: Most of the times way back there in the early days, it was -- lunch we'd have beans, boiled beans, you know. You'd have something that you don't have to keep down there in the cabin, put `em on, let `em cook their self Jump down there once in awhile to stir the pot, you know, keep it from sticking, burning.

V.J.: Put anything in with the beans?

D.H.: Oh, yeah. Put ham.

V.J.: Ham?

D.H.: Yup. We ate good when we're there. Had plenty --didn't have a lot of variety, but we had plenty good to eat.

V.J.: What kind of beans did you use?

D.H.: Lima Beans and Navy Beans mostly.

V.J.: And for breakfast, what did you have?

DR: Oh, we had ham and eggs, bacon and eggs. Whatever the crew wanted to eat, we always tried to have.

V.J.: Bread?

D.H.: Home-baked bread, yeah. They call it around here dredge boat bread.

V.J.: How did you make that?

D.H.: Just flour, and lard, and salt, yeast batters, worked it out with your hand, you know. It was good.

V.J.: Did you have an oven?

D.H.: Oh, yeah. Wood cook stove. I say a wood cook stove. I mean you use wood for the heat.

V.J.: Did you ever use coal?

D.H.: I never did. One or two of them did there for awhile. Later on in years, they started using oil.

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

D.H.: Western Shore of Virginia. We'd bring it over there every spring, pile it up and let it season, dry out, dry the sap out of it. Had it all foot length to fit.

V.J.: Where did you store it on the boat?

D.H.: Down in the hole, down under the deck, forward at the time.

V.J.: How long was your skipjack?

D.H.: Overall, about 65 feet.

V.J.: Where did the crew sleep?

D.H.: Three of us slept on the back part of the cabin, in the back part, and the other sailors (indiscernible) up in the bow.

V.J.: So the captain and the cook and one other person would sleep in the cabin?

D.H.: Yeah, and the mate.

V.J.: And the mate.

D.H.: Pretty close quarters. Right under the deck there. It was right close to your head. In the real cold weather, it would be frost hanging all over.

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

D.H.: Most times, I had anything from fried potatoes, and onion potatoes, hash, potato hash, most of the time.

V.J.: Dried fish?

D.H.: Yeah, sometimes we had.

V.J.: What kind of meat?

D.H.: Oh, we carried roast beef aboard.

V.J.: What was your favorite meal?

D.H.: My favorite meal that time, it was beans. It still is. I still love `em. They must be good for you `cause everybody ate `em and everybody was healthy and strong.

V.J.: What did people drink when they were on the boat?

D.H.: Coffee. I wouldn't allow `em to drink booze.

V.J.: No booze?

D.H.: No booze. Too dangerous. I'll say never had been any aboard out of line. I didn't do it myself. I never smoked a pack of cigarettes in my life, I never drank in my life. Anybody drinks, when he takes his first drink, he's half-crazy. I've seen too much of it. Say things they wouldn't normally say. You've seen it too, I'm pretty sure.

V.J.: Did you ever have dessert with your supper?

D.H.: Yeah, most time we had it for lunch.

V.J.: For lunch.

D.H.: Yeah. Bread puddings most the time, and rice, cooked a lot, much rice, rice with raisins in it.

V.J.: Rice pudding?

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

V.J.: Have any vegetables?

D.H.: Yeah. Sometimes we had cabbage. Most of the time it was cabbage.

V.J.: How did you cook the cabbage?

D.H.: Took water in a big pot, put a piece of ham in there, boil the ham for awhile, get the water all seasoned, get the water seasoned. Then take the ham out, put the cabbage in, then put the ham back on top of the cabbage. We'll teach you how to cook, I guess. (Laughter.) I bet you're a good cook too.

V.J.: So what kind of cooking equipment did you have on the boat? What did you cook with?

D.H.: You mean utensils?

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

D.H.: Old iron frying pan, stove had an oven to it, bake anything you wanted. Any kind of size pot you wanted. According to how many crew you had, you had to carry the size pot that would feed the crew.

V.J.: And where did you store your provisions?

D.H.: Out on deck, had a box built. Keep it outside on deck with a good lid to cover, well cover the box, and then cover it over with -- we called it canvas. Just like sails made from -- keep it from leaking, keep it from leaking through.

V.J.: Where on deck was it located?

D.H.: Right in front of the cabin.

V.J.: In front of the cabin?

D.H.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Outside.

V.J.: And how about water? How did you carry water?

D.H.: We had two barrels. One on each side back aft right where I stood the steering wheel there, they were 50 gallons barrel wood, charcoal bottles -- around `em. They were really made for making whiskey. I'll tell you a story about it one time. We were harboring up to Annapolis, another guy and myself, the filling station that we filled up with gasoline, we stopped by when we come home, once in awhile we'd stop by there and pay him for so much gas and tell him to put it aboard the boat while we were gone. So they sent this old man down -- I know it's what happened, it had to be what happened, sent this old man down to fill in -- he told him to fill them drums up front of the boat which had two 55 gallon drums of gasoline, told him to fill the drums -- he told him to fill them barrels up with gas. Instead of putting them in the drums up the foredeck, he put it in the water barrel, filled the water barrels up with gasoline. (Laughter). And the dumbest thing has ever happened -- ever happened, a friend of mine, he poured his right overboard there. All them Skipjacks in that harbor at the -- and they poured that all -- that whole harbor up full of gasoline. Done that now, he'd been executed. That's all you had done, threw a match there, that'll -- throw gasoline overboard, then throw a match right in, it'll catch fire. Dangerous.

V.J.: So how did you secure the barrels?

D.H.: Oyster house, packing house, place that shucked the oysters, we'd send them down there and had them steamed out.

V.J.: Where did you get your water?

D.H.: Right there in front, from Annapolis, right in town there.

V.J.: Was there a hose?

D.H.: Yeah, a hose.

V.J.: Where did you usually grub up?

D.H.: When I was harboring in Annapolis, right across the street from -- there was an A&P store at that time across the street.

V.J.: Here on Smith?

D.H.: Huh?

V.J.: Get your provisions here on Smith Island?

D.H.: No. Most time in the mainlands.

V.J.: The mainlands. Mostly in Annapolis?

D.H.: Yeah.

V.J.: Did you go into Baltimore?

D.H.: Sometimes we used to harbor in Baltimore quite a bit. Of course, I've harbored over the whole bay, everywhere. It all depended on where the most oysters were. Wherever part of the bay where the most oysters at, that's where we went out of there. I've sold oysters as cheap as 17 cents a bushel back in the early 40's. During that depression time, 17 cents a bushel.

V.J.: That's hard work.

D.H.: Yeah.

V.J.: Now how big was the wood stove on the boat?

D.H.: Well it was about three feet, I guess, square.

V.J.: Three feet square?

D.H.: She was -- I guess she was longer than she was -- three by two, something like that.

V.J.: How many burners, holes on the top?

D.H.: Four.

V.J.: Who's responsibility was it to get the water and the wood on the boat?

D.H.: Everything on board, that was my responsibility when I was captain, you know. We knew who -- the crew, we -- when we pick our crew, we knew how responsive -- how he would be. The best captain -- best ones, the best -- most oysters. He was the best at making money. The top, best crew, you know how that works. That's the way it worked. Not saying I was the best, but that's the way it worked.

V.J.: Did it matter if you had a good cook?

D.H.: Yeah, it did. Yeah. One time they had a fuss on the boat -- about who was going to cook. And, it was right funny. So this guy, he decided, he said to him -- they asked him to bless the table. And whoever cooked it, the food wasn't good at all. They said he said the Lord above, whom I love, look down on me and Sam. Give us meat that's fit to eat, but this ain't worth a damn. (Laughter). That's what they say he said. I wasn't aboard, that's what I was told.

V.J.: Did somebody usually ask a blessing before you ate?

D.H.: Oh, yeah.

V.J.: Who usually did that?

D.H.: Well it changed around. Would be different ones. Back then those days, we hardly knew the difference between a non-Christian and a Christian -- everybody was pretty reliable most of the time.

V.J.: Did you take vegetables at all from home, fruit?

D.H.: Get `em from the store.

V.J.: What kind of fruit?

D.H.: Apples, pears, bananas.

V.J.: Canned, or dried, or fresh?

D.H.: Fresh. We used to buy bananas -- when I first started sailing, we could buy bananas for five cents a dozen.

V.J.: How did you carry eggs?

D.H.: We put `em -- covered `em, put `em in a pan under the locker there.

V.J.: Where did you get the eggs?

D.H.: Whatever store where we got our groceries most the time.

V.J.: And cheese, did you eat cheese on the boat?

D.H.: Yeah. Yeah, we had a lot of cheese. Always have a big hunk of cheese.

V.J.: Did you put cheese in your coffee?

D.H.: Yeah. It's right funny. In 1963, I had Walter Cronkite and his crew out on the bay. Walter Cronkite weren't right there, but his crew, they made a movie aboard my boat. It's called Sailing Oysters on the Chesapeake. And this guy, I didn't want him to see me, I was breaking the cheese up in my cup. He peaked around and he said what the hell you doin'? I said to him, ain't you ever eat that? He said no. And every Christmas from that day -- I was 63, that day 'til now, every Christmas I get a card from him. He says Captain Dan, I'm still eatin' my cheese and coffee. So it tasted all right to him, didn't it?

V.J.: Did you have chicken on the boat?

D.H.: Yeah. Didn't in the first of the years we didn't, but later on in the years we carried ice aboard all the time, you know.

V.J.: How did you fix it?

D.H.: Huh?

V.J.: How did you fix the chicken?

D.H.: Sometimes we'd fry chicken. Then sometimes we'd have what we call stewed chicken in a pot with potatoes and dumplings, you know, make a gravy too that way.

V.J.: That sounds good.

D.H.: Yeah, that is good.

V.J.: I've been looking at receipts from various stores, and none of them list eggs.

D.H.: Yeah.

V.J.: And everybody tells me they ate eggs every morning.

D.H.: Yeah.

V.J.: It's a mystery to me.

D.H.: Yeah. Every morning we'd have eggs. A lot of times, there's a lot of hake fish aboard there too. We'd fix that up, a batch of it. I'd throw that in a pot, take the bone out, then boil the potatoes, skin `em and mash it up and that was like a big pot of that, fry that every morning for breakfast. Sometimes we'd fry it in round flat cakes, or sometimes just put it in a frying pan and heat it up that way and dip it out with a spoon. It was healthy food.

V.J.: Did you eat oysters on the boat?

D.H.: Oh, yeah. Whenever you want them.

V.J.: How did you fix them?

D.H.: Most of the time, we fried, fried sandwiches.

V.J.: Any fresh fish?

D.H.: Not too often fish. We could've had it whenever we wanted it, but we never had fish very often.

V.J.: Why do you think that was?

D.H.: Well we just wouldn't be around where they were catching `em, I guess, is one of the reasons. You say you work out of St. Michaels?

V.J.: That's right. The Maritime Museum there. What kind of plates or bowls were there on the boat for eating?

D.H.: What kind of --

V.J.: Plates, bowls.

D.H.: Plates and bowls?

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

D.H.: Just small bowls. I don't know what kind to tell you they were.

V.J.: What were they made out of?

D.H.: China, the old kind of china.

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

D.H.: Speaking of that, I have a dish home it's called Iron China. It's made in England in 1700 and something. My wife's great-great grandmother. I don't know how old that is, I think it's 1787 or `86, I don't know. A lot of (inaudible).

V.J.: Did the food on the boat and the way it was cooked change over the years that you were working?

D.H.: Yeah, some.

V.J.: Give me an example?

D.H.: Well I don't exactly know how to tell you. Just different ways of cooking, I guess. My mother's brother, Smith Island when he was a boy, and he went to college and studied to be a druggist. And he had his own drug store up there in York, Pennsylvania for 50 years. And about three years before my wife died, we went to Wal-mart over there in Salisbury, and they sort of met us to the door and said -- had some kind of a pin, smiley face, some kind of a pin on. And my wife had on her coat writ on there Jesus was the reason for the season. So he said to my wife, he says I've been a Christian since I was a small boy. He said my father was a minister. And my wife asked him where was he from. He said from York, Pennsylvania. And he said -- I said my mother's brother had his drug store in York, Pennsylvania for 50 years. He said what's the name of it? I said Edward T. Evans and Sons Drugstore. That's where they dealt at. That was some coincidence, I thought.

V.J.: So what time of year in the fall did you leave to start dredging?

D.H.: We'd leave here most the time last of October. The season begins first of November, latter part of October. Depending on how far away we were going up the bay. If we just worked here in the sound, we didn't leave at all 'til the day the season started.

V.J.: How long were you away?

D.H.: Well when I first -- I guess the first 20 years or so I dredged oysters, we didn't leave, like I say, 'til the last of October, wouldn't get back home 'til Christmas.

V.J.: And how long were you home at Christmas?

D.H.: Weeks, a week. Come back.

V.J.: After Christmas, how long would you be gone?

D.H.: After Christmas, we harbored right here. We'd put oysters down -- each day's catch, we'd put it down under the deck, in the hole. When we got it loaded, we

(inaudible). Had more time home. In 1936, 1936, it was the hardest freeze-up on the Chesapeake Bay and Tangier Sound that I ever saw in my life. And we all stayed away, we got caught up a part of the Bay, a place there called Bodkin (phonetic) Creek, we harbored there. We stayed there a couple weeks. No way, no shipping, anything went up the bay. Everything stopped. And we got, stayed there couple or so weeks, decide we'd drive down to Crisfield, might find some way to get home here. Wasn't any transportation at all. And after we stayed Crisfield three or four nights, we tried to jump on the ice, and we walked to Crisfield here, right across Tangier Sound. (Laughter.) Foolish thing to do. I'd only been married about a month, a few months. I forgot exactly how long I hadn't seen my wife. I'd go out in the Ocean to see her. I'd like to see her now. Bless her heart.

V.J.: Bet she was glad to see you.

D.H.: Yeah. She passed away about a year ago. She didn't know I was in 100 miles of her, and she turned around, she was washing dishes when she spotted me coming through the door. I can see her now how she looked. Sixty-three years we were married.

V.J.: Did you have a garden here on the island?

D.H.: I didn't, no. A lot of people did. Two-thirds of the people had gardens. I was always very busy, away working. That's the greatest thing on this earth you can have, in my opinion, is have your health, and eat, be able to eat what you want, and married to a good woman or a good man. It works both ways, you know. Nothing could ever buy that.

V.J.: Did you ever eat cornbread on the boat?

D.H.: Yeah, a lot of times.

V.J.: I've seen the grub bill orders that have meal written on it. Is that cornmeal?

D.H.: Yeah, yeah. And all you do is put a little sugar in and butter, stir it up with milk, make it like that.

V.J.: Was it canned milk, or did you carry milk --

D.H.: Canned milk there most of the time. I never was a fond -- I never was a fond drinker of milk. I never did like milk much. A lot of `em do, but I don't care for it. Keep it out on deck `cause it stayed cold.

V.J.: Who did the dishes? Who washed up?

D.H.: Cook did all, he took care of all that. Whoever cooked.

V.J.: And how did the dishes get washed?

D.H.: How do you do it?

V.J.: Yes.

D.H.: Well just put `em in a big aluminum pan there, put `em in that, pour the water and soap in there. Most times, either use that -- octagon soap, some call it octagonal. And some, that's what we call it, always called it around here octagon. Didn't smell very good either. Didn't have very much flavor to it.

V.J.: And personal washing up, do people -- how did you do that?

D.H.: Well that was a big problem. A lot of times, we'd harbor where you couldn't get in a place where there was any bathroom or anything. We'd have to go out on deck -- what they called take a whore bath, that's what some called it. (Laughter.) I guess I'm talking a bit blunt to you. You asked me what it was, I might as well tell you. That's what they call it.

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

D.H.: Most of the people here on the island have nice cars over on the mainland. Two-thirds of `em have nice big cars, garages over in Crisfield.

V.J.: What about molasses?

D.H.: Huh?

V.J.: Molasses.

D.H.: Yeah. Everybody carried a gallon of molasses aboard the boat. Kept that on deck, place right under the steering wheel there where it couldn't get hit. Had to draw it out of a barrel, 50 gallon -- I guess it's a bigger drum than that was. Wooden drum come from Puerto Rico.

V.J.: What was the molasses used for?

D.H.: Just put it in your plate and run a piece of -- sop it up with your bread, use your fingers, you know. Once in awhile, some of the crew would pour a little bit in their beans and stir it around.

V.J.: Did you ever cook hominy?

D.H.: Yeah.

V.J.: How do you cook that?

D.H.: Just put it in a pot and boil it just like it were. Some (indiscernible) put it out on deck. And then when you want to have it again, you get it, bring it down and heat it up.

V.J.: Did you ever eat cereal for breakfast, oatmeal?

D.H.: Yeah. I still love oatmeal. Good for you.

V.J.: What did you put on your oatmeal?

D.H.: Just a little bit of sugar and milk, pinch of butter.
(Brief off-the-record discussion.)

D.H.: Fifty-four years in a boat where three or four of `em were living in when I went in, 54 years takes a toll on a lot of people's life, you know. Most time you're in the 30's or 40's before you get in there. I think I'm the oldest member in the lodge, Crisfield now. I think I am. A lot of nice people though. A lot of people in Crisfield are formerly Smith Islanders. When you come in and see that big sign across there's Glenwood Division Center and all that, all them were Smith Island. Many of `em over Crisfield, Smith Islander one time, like a few years ago.

V.J.: Did you ever have a propane stove in the boat?

D.H.: Propane gas?

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

D.H.: Yeah. Carry tanks of gas, yeah. They were sort of dangerous aboard a boat. Doing a lot of -- you hit something and sparks fly. We were a little bit afraid of `em.

V.J.: Did you ever have an accident?

D.H.: No, I never did.

V.J.: Do you know people who did?

D.H.: No. I know one time had a fire, but nothing seriously happened.

V.J.: Where did you keep the propane tanks?

D.H.: Out on deck, lying down in a -- thing just sawed out so it would fit right in it so it wouldn't roll. Right in front of the cabin.

V.J.: In front of the cabin? When did you put the propane stove on the boat?

D.H.: I come to use `em, I guess, I imagine I used `em about 20 years, something like that.

V.J.: Starting about when? Do you remember?

D.H.: I don't know what, I couldn't say what year exactly. I wouldn't know what to say.

V.J.: 1950's?

D.H.: About somewhere along there. I think I got him. Look where he bit me.

V.J.: Yeah, they're biting. I hate the way they bite through socks.

(Laughter.)

V.J.: Thank you very much for talking to me.

D.H.: You're certainly welcome.

V.J.: I appreciate it.

(END OF INTERVIEW)