

Interview Log

Interviewee: Ernest Kitching
(E.K.)

Tape #: (n/a)

Also, Mrs. Kitching
(MRS. K.)

Interviewer: Virginia Jenkins
(V.J.)

of Tapes: 1

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of Sides: 1

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Topic: Food

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Comments:

BEGIN SIDE A

MRS. K.: You want to start?

V.J.: Yes. Tell me your name so we can get the level of the microphone right.

E.K.: We start --

MRS. K.: Honey?

E.K.: Yeah.

MRS. K.: Tell her your name so she can get it on the microphone.

E.K.: Yeah. My name is Ernest Leo Kitching. We were married in '34, let me see. March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October -- October the 24th.

MRS. K.: We weren't.

E.K.: Huh?

MRS. K.: We weren't married October 24th. We were married September the 8th.

E.K.: Well we'll get to that.

MRS. K.: So why do that?

E.K.: That was in '34, September the 8th, 1934.

MRS. K.: Right.

E.K.: We had been on our honeymoon, and we come to the Western Shore, and we got, time we got to the island, captain was S.C. Lewis, Charles and Eddie was waiting for me for to go dredging. We left. It weren't no come back then. It was stay 'til Christmas, seven weeks away. And it was a good trip. It was -- it meant money to us, dollar, few dollars. You take in '34, that was in the depression. But the good Lord was good to us all. You know, I wonder sometimes why -- but He has a reason for it, and I thank Him for that. I thank him for the reasonable health and strength. I'm 83 years old, and you take it. That's me today, work. And we'd leave here and go to the head of the bay and start dredging. And at Christmas, we come home. It was a beautiful sight to see the island and see our family. And I don't know if I have a lot to say about life, but it's been in God's hands 'cause he's formed my life many a time.

V.J.: What was your job on the boat?

E.K.: (Indiscernible) oysters and cooking. Cooking then weren't like it is now. What I mean by that, you take now you got a place to keep stuff, and you can prepare a week ahead. But you could only prepare -- today you'd have little beans, tomorrow you'd have butter beans. Next day, it was little beans, next day it was butter beans. On a Friday, if it was any way possible, I told one of the crew they walked up to the store, if they could get a row steak, get it, we'd have a vegetable soup. And that would be on Friday. Then it was make a cracker pudding.

V.J.: How do you make cracker pudding?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: How do you make cracker pudding?

E.K.: Well you take crackers and mash them up with your hand and put them into a bowl or a pot, pan, whatever you have for the stove. Add milk to it, a little vanilla, let that soak and then put it into a square pan and bake it. That was mostly our dessert, and every one of 'em enjoyed it, they liked it. And actually, I did because I made it.

(Laughter.)

[Mrs. K: Eggs!]

E.K.: But it was a rough life `cause it's out in the weather every day in, day out. Some days it would be overblow, we couldn't work, we'd have to stay in the harbor. And the most things that bothered me more than anything was I had to get up every morning and start a fire while the others slept under their cover, and I had to shiver and shake awhile. But it didn't take long to heat it up and cook their breakfast. Then we'd get ready, under way to go out on the rocks, start dredging. I would prepare my meal, I would have the beans pretty well done, everything ready and I -- to help them get the oysters. And it was healthy because we're out in the wind, out in the weather. And I give God credit for taking care of us.

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

E.K.: You -- I would aim to put enough water into a pot that would -- time they got through -- that it would be done. All them things, see, you had got used to. You knew what to do.

V.J.: Did you soak them overnight first?

E.K.: Ma'am?

V.J.: Did you soak the beans overnight?

E.K.: Sometimes I would, sometimes I would. Sometimes you can get `em, they go soft in no time. Some other times, you get `em, you soak `em and they're still hard to cook. But through it all, we lived a good life together, we were together. We'd carry on. It was good living even though it was close quarters. One thing that I dreaded was the first night, first day. The next morning when the clock would go off, I would raise up, you know, not used to -- used to at home when you get up, boom, and down you go. But that was all, that was all in the game.

V.J.: Were you responsible for getting the provisions, for buying them?

E.K.: Oh, yeah. That was up to me. They would furnish the money. What we'd do was let it go 'til along Friday when we shared up. First things come out boat parts, then they racked it all up together.

V.J.: What store did you go to?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: Where did you buy the groceries?

E.K.: Didn't quite catch.

V.J.: Where did you buy the groceries, what store?

E.K.: We was selling to the buy boats. See we would go out on the rock and catch `em, bring `em in, and sell `em to the buy boats. That's the way it was.

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

E.K.: Most the time, wherever we were, in Annapolis or whatever harbor we were in, there to -- or North Beach. Go up there to the store. One thing I had to keep my mind on, keep stuff aboard the boat.

V.J.: Would the store deliver to the boat, or did you have to carry it down?

E.K.: What was that?

V.J.: Did the store deliver the provisions to the boat, or did --

E.K.: Oh, yes.

V.J.: Yeah?

E.K.: Sometimes they would, sometimes they wouldn't. And that's the way life was. Sometimes one of the boys aboard the boat would go up with me and help me. In case

they wouldn't deliver, they would help me bring it down the boat. But that's the way life was as a waterman.

V.J.: What did you have for breakfast?

E.K.: Sometimes, most the time it was bacon and eggs or ham and eggs. Sometimes I'd put down flapjacks, some of the boys wouldn't love `em, some would, just the way life was. Always had something for them.

V.J.: What did you put on the flapjacks?

E.K.: Syrup, this King Syrup. Some liked molasses. We had both aboard. Whichever one they wanted.

V.J.: Did you bake bread?

E.K.: Oh, yeah. Made bread and baked it. I wasn't baking any biscuits `cause too much trouble. Make it in a pone, we'd call it. One square, a little larger than that box. Make two, sometimes bake three. Well I would bake three anyway for dinner.

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

E.K.: First going off, it was a wood stove. Take -- nearly every port we went in, the stores would have that pipe wood, just a certain length. Seemed like we were always, always had that aboard. Most times, we'd get a quarter of a cord, put it up board under the bow where it was dry. That was most of the time. Two barrels of water.

V.J.: What did people drink with their meals?

E.K.: Coffee. That was straight, coffee straight. Well you take then, a lot of things, a lot of sodas weren't even on the market. Just plain old -- Coca Cola was one of the first in the bottle, as I can remember. You know how they started bottling? Colored fellow was in prison, and he came out and he told me, he says I could tell you a way that you could gain a lot on your profits. Said well we'd like to do, and they started to bottle it. They couldn't keep enough. I imagine that colored fellow started to get a piece of money out of it. But nevertheless, he give `em the right idea.

V.J.: What was your favorite meal?

E.K.: My favorite meal? It was no favorite. Beans one day, butter beans one day, little beans the next, butter beans one day, little beans the next. And on Friday, we'd have a vegetable soup. That was the favorite, that was the menu.

V.J.: What kind of vegetables in the soup?

E.K.: What kind did I use? Had the canned corn, canned tomatoes. Everything was in can on the count of keeping it. Had a beef, roast beef that was left over, all that, it went right into that soup. Made it go.

V.J.: Why were biscuits a problem?

E.K.: It take a minute. Take a minute. Take a little longer. I'll tell you something else I wouldn't do. My father, he would save the bacon grease. He'd get so much, then he cooked bread into it. It was just the same as a Ritz cracker. He'd have to cook another extra batch. So that was the reason. I know once you start something, you've got a job to get out of it. So that was the easiest, just putting it -- pinch off so much, put it in there and flatten it out and throw it into the oven.

V.J.: Did you ever make dumplings?

E.K.: I don't think I did.

V.J.: And puddings?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: Puddings?

E.K.: Yeah. Occasionally, we'd prepare ducks aboard, cook them.

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

E.K.: Put `em in the pot, just a little bit of water, and let that -- their breast start to brown, then I add enough water to finish cooking `em with potatoes and turnips. I never did have no trouble with the leftovers of that. Up the bay, there's people down on Remington Farm shoot geese. Captain say well here comes our dinner, here comes one and he peeled out -- we sailed right up to him got him, picked him, got him ready to cook. We were coming home on a Sunday, I believe it was, and about 10:00, I started to boil him on the stove. He said what are you doing that for? I said it'll be tender. He said get everything ready or I'll starve.

(Laughter.)

E.K.: It was nothing to do but go ahead. And there was a part of the wings that was left, and I was going to throw that away. One of the boys said no, don't you throw that away, I can eat that. It must've been all right. I'm still living. That and my wife's cooking.

V.J.: Where did you buy your eggs?

E.K.: Where did I buy the eggs? At the store.

V.J.: How many at a time?

E.K.: Couple dozen. You had to buy everything, flour -- five pound and, I believe, it was 10-pound sacks then, flour.

V.J.: Did you ever make cornbread?

E.K.: No, I don't think I ever did.

V.J.: Cook hominy?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: Hominy?

E.K.: Yeah, we cooked hominy occasionally. Most times, the boys, some didn't love it, and I try to cook everything that everybody loves, and that way, you know it's going to be eaten.

V.J.: Did you cook chicken?

E.K.: I had cabbage once in a while. They loved it, but they said it don't last no time. Oh, boy.

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

E.K.: Just put it in plain water, and when it started to cook, put a piece of beef, sometimes I'd have piece of ham. I'd throw that in there and let it come get tender. That's all there was to it. We were working down in North Beach, and they had just graded that hill down, covered with snow, got cold. One of the guys -- both of the guys they'd been -- and the youngest one says I can do something that you can't. He says ain't nothing you can do I can't. He says I can run down that hill, you can't. Come on, I'll show you. He got half way and his feet got tangled up and he rolled. It was mud. And he didn't want to fight him. He said you done that just to get me. Oh, golly.

V.J.: How old were you when you started?

E.K.: How old was I? Let's see. I was married, I was --

MRS. K.: On the boat.

E.K.: Yeah, I was married when I was 18. I started working that same year I was married. I was never scared of work, I love to work, always did. Well I guess my father taught that. But I didn't get much school, I had to come out to find a family. The

depression, boy that was something. But we always had something to eat. Don't ever remember going hungry.

V.J.: How did you learn to cook?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: How did you learn to cook?

E.K.: How did I learn? Get down there and do the best you can, all I remember. Yeah.

Both my parents, they taught me the way of life. My dad, he was a heavy drinker until the last seven years that he lived, and he switched around. He was an A-1 Christian. But even when he was drinking, he never -- he always taught us to never take nothing from anybody unless you ask him. He says the reason of that, you take a man's -- kids like to play in skiffs. If we take somebody's and they come down want to get to the crab house, it would aggravate 'em. He says don't you ever take unless you ask him. It was a good, sound honest living. I had a uncle that -- called him Uncle Ed. You went to him, Uncle Ed, like to borrow a paddle. When you gonna have it back here? And if you didn't have it back there on that time, don't ever come back again. You wouldn't get it. But if you had it on time like you promised, and he said a man's word is his truth to him. You take way back there, if a man say I'm going to do something for you, you could say it was done, it would be done. People's -- from Tangier borrowed \$100. He told him, don't expect it 'til next year by a certain date. He says that date, next year, I'll be there. Well there weren't no power boats then to sail or shove, and that night, he told his wife, he said prepare tomorrow a little extra, he'll be here. She says do you think he'll be here? He says just as sure as that sun rises. About 9:30, 10:00, here he comes. That's what you call being honest to your profession. But this day and time, you can't take a man at his word.

V.J.: Can you tell me about the pots and pans that you cooked with? What did you have to cook with?

E.K.: Well we had a spider, had a couple of them pans, one's a little larger than the other. Use them for cooking bread in, and use it for cooking puddings in. The spider, and a right good size pot. I don't know what to say the size was. It was about that tall. Always had to go in the fall of the year when you got ready -- go aboard to get ready for dredging, clean up everything, that was my job.

V.J.: Where did you store the flour and the eggs and other things?

E.K.: Where?

V.J.: Yes.

E.K.: We had what we call a boiler, so big around, and that sat right up in my corner, that's what I kept my flour in.

V.J.: And the other provisions?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: And the other provisions?

E.K.: Well we had the little places up the side there. Sometimes it would be behind the stove, you kept stuff in.

V.J.: How did you carry the eggs?

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: Eggs. How did you carry the eggs?

E.K.: How?

V.J.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). To keep them from breaking. To keep them from breaking.

E.K.: Well we never did have no trouble with that. Might sometimes get one cracked, doesn't take much to it.

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

E.K.: Huh?

V.J.: Cheese?

E.K.: Cheese? Yeah. Always had stuff that people ate, easy to get. But you'd always aim to have something that was easy to cook.

(Laughter.)

E.K.: That made it easier on myself There was a fellow there aboard the boat. They were gonna -- one guy says I'll cook provide anybody that squawks got to take over. Good enough. Well two weeks went by and no complaint. So he dumped a whole box of salt into it and stirred it up. They were sitting down and one of `em says boy is this salty, but they're good -- he thought about it, but they're good. Oh, boy. It's just like a young couple that gets married, the lady has never cooked before. No day does she say no I don't want to. Sometimes she'd be sitting on the edge of that chair crying. Honey, what's that. She says what I done is wrong. We'll live together. Now her mother, her grandmother taught her how to cook. Her mother wouldn't let her do it. She says all the time mess the pans up and all. But her grandmother, she was an angel. Every Friday, she would bake extra pies just for the youngsters. And the youngsters thought just as much of her as they would their mother because they know that they're going to get a slice of pie or a slice of cake. And it was out of this world. And she's the only one that her grandmother would let her. She had a little stool or some kind of a crate. She'd see the others coming and shove it under the table, hide it right away. And she had her cookbook in honor of her grandmother. Which she gave the right one because her mother -- not that her mother didn't treat her right, but she just wouldn't let her go ahead with that mess.

V.J.: On the boat, who did the washing up, who cleaned up the dishes?

E.K.: (Laughter.) That was my job. Cook, washer, cook. Bottle washer and all. That was my job. They done the messing, and I done the cleaning. Kept the floors brushed and scrubbed. Through it all, that's the way a dredger has.

V.J.: How did you come to be the cook?

E.K.: How did I come to be cook? (Laughter.) That's a big question. I think when I went aboard, they said Ernest, you got to cook. All right. I accepted it. That's the way it happened. He was a wonderful captain. He was a wonderful man along with it. We were dredging the end of the bay there, come on this place -- this feels funny. He goes throw a buoy. Throw the buoy. Come up, bust it open, everything but oysters. All sizes. And well we had 100 bushels in no time. Say Walter, what are you doing that for? Say wouldn't have another one aboard here if they were \$1 a bushel. We were only a quarter. My gosh, Johnny, they're all right. I don't know. Putting out to buy a boat, the inspector come along, Johnny, where in the world did you get them pretty oysters at? He says I played the devil. Said I should of got more. (Laughter.) That's what you call grieving over spilt milk. You take them old caps, I know -- he kept telling his boys, boy had -- can't think of her name now. Anyway, he kept telling -- he said they're there, I know they're there. I says I think you're wrong. Am I? I know they're there.

So Captain Elmer and Captain Clyde, they loaded their boat. In a day, all you wanted. And there was more hills out there, they found `em. Captain Charlie knows they were there. He told his son you can say what you want, but I know them oysters are there. And that's just the way it were. We were laying into -- we were getting ready to get under way. My son, Joe, was aboard with us. He says Clyde, go down to a number buoy, I'll tell you the number of the buoy, there's all you want there. He says how do you know? He says I dream, I've dreamt of oysters all night. Went down there and sure enough it was. Yes, sir.

We were sometime in Tilghman Island. Told Dan, he says give me the -- for a hill right there. Dan told him funny thing, he says it must be gone. No it ain't, he says, it's there. He come across this place -- when the -- there was his marsh, just what he told him, right on the spot. That made a big day's work. You know, one of the fellows was an older man, they told him to hold by this star while they ate their supper, it was late. Come out says my gosh, you ain't got the right star. He says that one's just as good.

(Laughter.)

E.K.: But they weren't according to the compass and the chart for them to steer by.

V.J.: Did you ever use a gas stove on the boat?

E.K.: Ever use what?

V.J.: Gas stove, propane.

E.K.: No. We had -- now we used the fuel oil. Last one off, but I had got off then. I had an agreement, I told `em about it when we got married, I said Francis, if we're lucky enough to get a home, you're going to be boss of that home. Don't try to boss me out on the water. Now a lot of the wives I knew would tell their husband that if they didn't do what he said they'd get mad. I said if I go out and look for something and I make a failure, that's bad enough. But if you come home and you get to jumping on me and whatnot, it's going to be trouble. So she laid off and we got along good that way. I was a great one for looking. You know the bible says seek and you shall find. And I always was very successful. The good Lord would guide me. He take -- we had revival meeting two weeks. I told my oldest son, I said all we want this week, two weeks is expenses. Well I left here, and I went up -- I started to Rock Hall, I drug around, there was flood tide. He says dad, here's a pretty -- I said I'm not interested, son. My mind's on the back of the island. Well when we got to there, we went around, and it was, it was all you wanted, I mean crabs by the store. Daddy, he said, here's plenty of `em. I said yeah. I ain't satisfied. He says what? Nope. Well when you went around the bay side to go back there, when you got to the edge there to turn in, it was black tufts, and I told him, it was black grass, and I told him, you count your doubles -- I don't mean -- I mean the doubles, and I'll count my side. He had 37 on his, and I had 35 mine, that one place. There were 72 crabs that one place.

Well the latest we crabbed day to day the whole time the revival was going on was 8:00. I'd go fishing, and I'd come out in the bay, come in that way, then another day I'd come through Mussel Hole, come that way. And another one of the guys said well I seen him, he come through Mussel Hole. But he still didn't know where I was. And it was on a Friday. One of the guys that was crabbing for a shanty that I was working with, he found me. Boy, he says, you ain't need a crab, I says -- you ain't been looking for me. There

was 25 scraping boats scraped there five weeks before we got started to break it up. I wanted to crab. You can take a -- and see the doubles coming across, see the fins coming out the water.

The other time, Clyde, Daniel and myself, we were going and coming, we -- each other. They says where we going tomorrow? I said I'll let you know, that was on Sunday, I said I'll let you know the more -- big channel, as we go out, I'll tell you where we're going. All right. He says where we going? I said Mussel Hole. Mussel Hole? Yeah. Say they was trot lining there -- Terry and Russ (phonetic) was there, two guys from Rhodes Point, say no time before they had their boats full. Good enough.

We went. Hot. Man it was hot that morning. Went up there, they was there, no question. Went around on the north side, northeast side. Fellow from Rhodes Point, he had his son, his son was laying up on the -- asleep. He says -- get up from there, here's these northenders (laughter.)

We went down to North Carolina. Let's see, there was Joe, Mickey, Bobby, somebody else, Wad. They called me up,. says Dad, put you some pots on and come on down. Good enough. I broke ice going out that morning. Went down, made Norfolk that night. Next morning going down through the waterways, engine, something happened to the engine. And I couldn't run her fast 'cause it would get too warm. Every night I would go into a place -- and talk to `em. We went into -- down there in the one little, we call a run, they were little crabs. Go into another, there were big crabs. Well we run our pots out, I had 60 pots, and the next morning, go in, some was cut off. Mickey said them black men down there. No, Mick. I seen one of my corks up in the -- 'til I could get out and went up there, and I said it's been cut off by a propeller, ain't been cut off by no hand knife. So we picked up where we could, and we went there, we went to the gut, first -- I had some pots on the stern. One of my corks was overboard, I said pull that in, I'll get this pot. When I seen her, I couldn't believe my eyes. It like that much in a number two tub full of everything but jimmy crabs. Not a sook into `em. Mickey said they're staying in there. Good God. And it was like that the whole way back up. Well we run the rest of `em on out there anyway. It was 61 or 65. We come home on a Friday, Mickey and myself did. Joe and them finished. They got 32 bushels out of them 60 pots, plus the twos. Says we're crabbing now. That's the way it was. When we left there, we told the colored fellows, all them -- guys, I said there's all you want there. He's libble to be dead now, but he stayed in there for a long time so there was plenty of them. This is a rumbled story you got. Oh, boy. (Laughter.) But that's the way life was. When they hear -- pretty story.

V.J.: Thank you very much.

E.K.: You're certainly welcome.

MRS. K.: You talked more about crabs than --

E.K.: What I've done you're certainly welcome. That's for sure.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)