

Interview with Thurman E. Price, Jr.
At the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum
November 17, 1999

I first met Mr. Price on November 10, 1999 when Museum volunteer Paul Riven came to find me after my lecture to tell me that Mr. Price and Thomas O'Brien were at the Museum working on Bob Fox's boat Hernandez. Paul Riven had been talking with them and found that Mr. Price's father had been captain of the Edna Lockwood, and that he had many stories to tell about crewing on the Edna Lockwood. I found the two men on the Hernandez at the wharf by the Steamboat Building that afternoon, and Mr. Price gave me his telephone number and I said that I would call to arrange an interview the next week.

After a frustrating series of telephone calls where I just missed Mr. Price, I spoke with Mrs. Price at 8:20 am on Wednesday, November 17. He had just left to go to the museum to see a man, and was hoping to find me there. So I threw my things in the car and drove over to St. Michaels from Takoma Park, arriving at 10:20. I met Mr. Price in front of the Museum entrance and we walked over the Steamboat Building. I had forgotten that there was a lecture in the auditorium at 10:30, but we found a bench in the exhibit that was reasonably quiet and out of the way. I got out the tape recorder, but it was not working, even after changing the batteries. It appears that the record button is the problem because it plays and rewinds. So I had to take notes. I forgot to take his picture and I forgot to show him the pictures of cast iron stoves that I collected at the Enoch Pratt library. Otherwise, it was a very pleasant interview. Mr. Price was pleased that I was interested in his story and said several times that he wants to buy the book that I am writing when it is published. He told me that he had read Michner's Chesapeake. He also said that he had never been interviewed before and he was eager to be helpful. At the end of the interview, he compared the two museums in Cambridge, the Brannock and the Richardson Museums, with the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. He felt that they were too small and too specialized, and was unhappy that he had offered a model of the Edna Lockwood and a homemade knotmeter to the Richardson Museum and was refused. He felt that the Richardson Museum should not be limited to Jim Richardson. He was also aggravated by several recent events in Cambridge that had charged \$50 and \$150 dollars to attend. He had decided not to go to the \$150 event, but had gone to the \$50 one, and complained that they had run out of food. He felt that people should be able to go back for seconds and thirds if they wanted to. He was very complimentary about CBMM, especially the new crabbing exhibit on the wharf. He said that he comes here several times a year. He also likes the museum at the Chesapeake Canal at the head of the bay.

Thurman E. Price, Jr. was born in Cambridge, Maryland in 1931. His grandfather, Charles Henry Price, was a waterman who began working when he was 13 years old. His father, Thurman (Reg) Price, was raised in Choptank, near Cambridge. He was captain of the Armature for seven years when she was owned by Bill Jones and Lee Burton. He was then captain of the Fulton Mister for nine years, owned by Lee Burton, and finally captain of Edna Lockwood for five seasons when she was owned by Bill Jones and George Burton.

Mr. Price started sailing with his father when he was as young as six years old, and went out with him on school holidays whenever he could. His father would go out on Monday and stay until

Saturday noon, unless something broke down. The oysters were sold to a buy boat every day. They dredged in the Choptank, the Little Choptank, out of Oxford, and Castle Harbor. There were six men who worked the boat and Mr. Price said that when he was a boy and went along, he would sleep with his father in his bunk or with one of the other men. He felt that he was a disappointment to his father because he became a carpenter rather than a waterman. His brother did follow the water. He said that he goes out trot lining or gill netting for recreation. He did a little hunting when he was young, but the duck and deer look too pretty to shoot. He went into the service January 6, 1949 and served in Korea, being discharged January 2, 1952. When he got out, he crewed for his father for a year, then got a job with Nichols Construction Company in New York City erecting steel buildings for seven and a half years. He worked with a crew of Misquaw Indians from Mfisquaw Valley, New York, one of only seven or eight white men who worked with the crew. They built buildings in New York, Seaford, Delaware, North Carolina, and other different places.

Captain Price and Lee Burton picked up an Indian in Baltimore who they called Blackie, a full blooded Indian, who worked with them as cook for seven years. They all took a liking to him. Blackie had a hobby that he would work at in the evening after supper was over. He would heat the ivory handle of a toothbrush over the stove and shape it into rings. Mr. Price said that he had one for years with an "s" in the top of it for "Sonny," his nickname. "He was gifted" and a good cook.

Mr. Price remembers that when he was a boy, he found that he could climb through a loose board in the forepeak into the hold and get back to a loose board in the cabin. He could reach in behind the stove to the shelf where the cook kept a bowl of fresh fruit and help himself. The cook complained one day about rats on the ship, and his father told him that it was probably a two-legged rat. Mr. Price said that he was embarrassed to ask for a piece of fruit more than once or twice a day, and anyway, it tasted better that way.

Three crew members slept in the forepeak, and three in the cabin. There was a shelf behind the stove in the cabin on which the cook kept pepper, salt, vinegar, as well as the bowl of fruit with grapes, oranges, tangerines, apples, or bananas. The stove was a Reeses cast iron wood stove, about three feet by three feet square. The wood was kept on the foredeck with thirty to forty pieces down next to the stove. The wood was cut on the dock before being loaded onto the boat. The cook would take a hatchet and cut up three or four pieces after breakfast for the next day. They bought five bushel baskets full of wood every week.

Breakfast was fried streak o' lean, eggs, scrapple, homemade bread baked in the oven. The drink was coffee with once in a while a glass of ice tea if you could keep the ice that long. No one drank hot tea. Most men drank their coffee black, two out of six would add a shot of whiskey. Mr. Price drank milk, but learned to drink coffee too.

He told a story about Wesley Burton who one night took the yawl boat into Oxford to buy whiskey and beer. He thought Captain Price would not know, but he was heard. However, there was not much Captain Price could do, since Wes' brother (father?) was one of the owners of the boat. Wes, George and Lee Burton were all brothers and crewed on the Edna Lockwood. Oscar

Perlman from Deal Island was the sixth crew member in addition to Blackie and Reg Price.

The cook worked the middle deck but his main job was cooking. At mid-day they would have hamburger, pork chops, roast beef with gravy and vegetables. The average grocery bill was \$13 a week for a crew of six. A five pound sack of flour would cost \$.89 and baking powder cost ten cents. They might also have potato salad, cabbage, and radishes. There was usually some sort of salad to eat for dinner. For supper, they might have butterbean soup with tomatoes and dumplings and homemade biscuits with butter and jam.

Mr. Price said that his favorite meal was breakfast. Sometimes Blackie would make a western omelet with ten eggs and a pound of ham or baloney to feed the whole crew. He could cook toast on top of the stove.

He did not remember that there was any dessert, although when I asked, he remembered that there might be rice pudding once a week, and that there was fruit available as an evening snack. They bought pies from the Kemper Sisters Bakery in Cambridge for \$1.00, sweet potato, pumpkin, cherry and apple. The cook was responsible for ordering the groceries from Sullivan's Grocery on Market Street in Cambridge. The money made each week would be split with 1/3 for the boat that would cover things such as wood, groceries, and gloves for the crew. The crew split the other 2/3 in equal shares.

Wesley and George Burton and Bill Jones and Blackie were the crew with his father who "generally kept the same crew." In the forepeak of the Edna Lockwood, they kept ropes, anchors, extra dredges along with three bunks. There was a bunk on each bulkhead and "one slept back toward where the mast was at." The bunk back by the mast was "awful small." The forepeak was smaller than the cabin. It was heated by a little tin heater that burned wood. The bunks were wooden - nothing but a wide board. "If you were lucky you had a mattress," if not, you put whatever you could on the board to make it more comfortable. Crew members brought their own along with blankets and pillows from home. There were kerosene lights in both the forepeak and the cabin.

When you went down the steps into the cabin you saw the wood stove and shelf behind it. There was a bunk on each side under the deck and a rear bunk under the stern next to the wheel house. The Fulton Mister had a table on a hinge with two folding legs that hooked to the ceiling. The Edna Lockwood had "an ordinary table" with folding legs that was broken down after meals and stowed under the mattress in a bunk - the men took turns sleeping on it. The table had no fixed place, but it was never put on deck. It was wooden, made of three wide boards put together. The men sat on benches next to the bunks. "It was compact." Some boats had linoleum on the floor of the cabin 8'x 10' no more than 10'x 10'. It was easier to keep clean than the wood floor. Everyone took turns doing the dishes. Mr. Price remembered one time when he was a boy and was helping Blackie with the dishes. There was a "big old plate" painted white and blue with a turkey in the middle which he dropped and broke. The cook told his father that he was a disaster, and to get him out of there.

There were eight regular china plates with forks and spoons and "real thick coffee mugs."

Everything possible was hung on j hooks - pots and pans, mugs. They were washed in soap and water, then rinsed in hot water. Everything was compact. Everyone used the same wash basin to wash their face and hands. There was a foot tub for baths. They would heat the water at night and take the tub (that was kept on deck) into the forepeak one at a time to bathe. They threw the dirty water overboard, rinsed the tub out and then the next one used it. They bathed about three times a week and changed their socks. They would sweat inside their rubber suits and used talcum powder as deodorant.

On a slow day when there was no wind, the men would sit around, tie different knots, joke, splice rope, drink lots of coffee, tell stories or sleep. Power dredging was not allowed then, it was strictly sail. Sometimes men played cards, but they never played for money, just matches or cigarettes. They also played checkers.

One day Blackie left and went away for the weekend to Baltimore. He had made \$488 that week. He was found three days later floating in Baltimore Harbor, knocked in the back of the head. His father went to Baltimore to get the body and Blackie is buried somewhere near Cambridge.

Everyone ate together in the back cabin. They would drop the sails at dinner time. If you wanted to you could take your plate up to the fore cabin, but usually everyone ate together. The week was enlivened by practical jokes - usually once or twice a week. Once Wes told Captain Reg, I bet you \$5 I can do something you can't do. You can't drive a nail in this board in 3 hits. He had the nail head side down. They also did rope tricks, or tied people's shoe laces together or to a dredge or hid their shoes. Anything to cause a little chaos. One time one of the crew stole his father's chewing tobacco and substituted a pack of leaves that he had cut to the same size.

I asked about the custom of putting cheese in coffee. He said that his father liked to drink other people's coffee after they had taken the cheese out of it - he liked the cheesy flavor. They had black strap molasses in a jug and ate it on bread. You would pour the grease from fat meat onto some molasses in your plate and mix it in with a fork or spoon, then eat it with bread. They also had pancakes, buckwheat (hot cereal), and cornbread.

The cook was the main person on the skipjack, the heart of the ship. "As far as I'm concerned, the cook was the man." Sometimes he would serve stewed chicken and potatoes, or cabbage and potatoes. The cook never asked anyone what they wanted, they ate what he fixed. Mr. Price remembered chicken and dumpling at least twice a week "and I despise chicken and dumplings." Some would cook gizzards - "never could eat that stuff." The cook made the boat.

His father kept working until his health got to him, then had to get off the water altogether. Emerson Todd is the only captain still around Cambridge - the last of the old timers.

Water was kept in wooden kegs, 25 - 50 gallons. They were kept mid ship near the winders, two one each side of the boat back toward the cabin, secured by chain, cable or rope. They rested longways with a square opening in the top. Some had metal covers, others had canvas tacked on one side to the barrel with a piece of metal in the other side to hold it so it wouldn't be flapping back and forth. There was a dipper to dip the water into a basin. The long-handled ladle held

about a pint of water. It had a piece of rawhide that hung on a nail on the mast or on the water keg. The water was carried down to the boat in five gallon buckets to fill the barrels, from Sullivan's Store or the Kemp Sister's Bakery. They called it the bucket brigade, using two buckets, the whole crew `walked until you filled them all up." Sullivan's Store delivered to the boat, the boxes would have the name of the boat written on them. Sometimes Mr. Sullivan would come with five boat's orders at once.

On Thanksgiving they would have baked chicken or a turkey cooked at home. The cook would make stuffing and gravy. On Christmas Eve, the crew would be out there singing Christmas songs while they were working - "it was comical." In 1937, you started dredging in the middle of October until the first of March, starting earlier and ending earlier than today. His father spent the rest of the year crabbing, trot lining, and taking out fishing parties. He also sailed in skipjack races at Deal Island.

They did eat oysters in stew or fitters. Once in a while, Blackie would but oysters in with the butterbeans. The men could also eat them raw, dipped in vinegar, salt and pepper with a cracker. If they caught crabs in the dredge the cook would make crab soup. Once in a while they might catch a flounder and he would cook that up. Salt hake fish was stewed up with potatoes and onions and salt mackerel was fixed basically the same way.

Mr. Price told me that they used powdered eggs. If you got fresh eggs, you tried to use them up in the first two days or else they would break. The breakfast menu might be Monday - eggs and scrapple, Tuesday - pancakes, Wednesday - buckwheat or oatmeal (hot cereal), Thursday - heck fish with fried onions and potatoes. He's eaten many heck fish for breakfast. It was wholesome food that would stay by you. You had to have something that would stay with you.

I asked if they had anything other than butter beans. He said yes, they would have pinto beans, navy beans, dried lima beans and black eye peas. Black eye peas were eaten on New Year's day for lunch if you was out dredging, or at home if you weren't. If you ate black eye peas you'd have a prosperous year, if you ate any other stuff you'd have a bad season. You would be sure to eat cheap food on New Year's Day. On December 21" or 22"', they would put a little small Christmas tree up on the mast. Anything painted blue was considered bad luck on the boat. Denim jeans were not included in this prohibition.