

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Buck Garvin

Oral History #197

Interviewer: Lila Line

Date: October 27, 1989*

Location: Unknown

Topic: Mr. Jim Richardson

Theme: Mr. Buck Garvin describes his long-term business relationship with Mr. Jim Richardson. He discusses Mr. Jim's generosity, his many acts of kindness, boat building skills and expertise.

Comments: *Date mentioned during taping, not part of interview.
Interview for a book on Mr. Richardson.

Documentation:

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Lila Line: Okay, you were telling me when you owned skipjacks, about when?

Buck Garvin: Yeah, well it was many years back as I have owned skipjacks. I have owned skipjacks for the past 25 years and I started out to do business with Mr.

Richardson when I first started years and years ago. As I say, I didn't have the money, the wherewithal to do anything with anyone. But Mr. Jim, after my first encounter with him (laughter), he knew how poor I was and he would, as I told you, he would make it a point to, during his slack period now, he would call me and he, believe it or not, god bless his heart, he'd say, "Mr. Buck," and I had a devil of a time... "Well Mr. Garvin," I had a devil of a time getting him to call me Buck, but, anyway, he'd call me up and say, "Mr. Garvin?" I'd say "Yeah, Mr. Jim." "I'm not too busy right now, do you want to bring your boat over?" And Mr. Jim knew, and I knew when he called me like that, there was nothing ever said--- he wasn't that kind of man that he would ever insinuate that he was-- I don't know, giving help, charity, whatever, he gave it without saying. So, he'd call and it was all business like, and I'd very graciously say "Yes, I believe I can get time to bring it over right now" and, of course, I wasn't doing a damn thing, you know, I didn't have any money, so we both knew that Mr. Jim would furnish the lumber and usually when this happened, the men that he had hired for him were working on something else. So, Mr. Jim spent a lot of time on my boats and I'm certain...there's no way in the world, Lila...I'm certain, that it could not have been a full charge. You know, there's no question about it. I had sense enough to know it, uh, but he didn't say anything about it and neither did I and uh, I never did really manage to my satisfaction to repay the man for all the things he did for me. If I was in a jam, he would help me out and he pulled my boat on his railway and the railway...the poor railway...groaned and moaned and the boat was so darn large; it was a 70 something foot boat, and it should not have been on that little railway. But Mr. Jim would pull it because he knew I didn't have money enough to go up there to Dorchester Yacht Basin, or even Johnson's. Johnson had a railway up there at that time, and Mr. Jim knew that they charged more than he did and I couldn't afford it. So Mr. Jim hauled me and he pretty well took care of me too, and he'd let me do any work that I could do. He didn't sell me any paint. He let me get my paint wholesale and he, you know, it was just tremendous the things that he did and, well, I just never could repay him financially, or otherwise, really.

LL: What did you mean he helped you out in other ways? You meant the other ways such as bringing up that big 70 foot boat...was that a buyboat?.

BG: Yeah, that was my buyboat and as I say, actually, the only place that could haul that buyboat comfortably was in Cambridge and they used to charge like the devil. I couldn't afford it. I really couldn't. So Mr. Jim would haul the thing and I can't remember now, I guess I could look the bills up, but the charges were so minimal.

LL: How did you feel when you picked up your boat?

BG: Oh, you know, to be honest with you, I felt, I guess you might say, ashamed. But he wouldn't let you feel ashamed. He wouldn't let you. I don't care if he was doing something for you for nothing, and he knew it. He'd make you feel like you were the most important customer he had ever had in his life. You were the one, even though he knew you didn't have money enough to pay his bill, he still treated you like he just had to fall all over himself to help you.

LL: And he did a good job?

BG: Oh, oh, oh well, yeah. Now there was something else, too. His work, and the work he demanded of his employees, was so far above Cambridge or anyplace else locally, that if I had had the money I would have gone to him anyway, because he was, he was good.

LL: Do you think that he dealt that same way...I mean, did you have reason to know that he dealt the same way with other people who couldn't afford...are there other owners you think?

BG: I know he dealt that way with different skipjack captains, yeah.

LL: Yeah.

BG: He was helping out. Oh, heck, he was like I was Lila. I save parts, and I don't know if you know this or not, but I am a dumping ground. I buy the remains of old boats and so forth and store them. And if anyone ever needs a certain part, they come into my place and they get it and usually the charge is, I tell 'em, "Okay, replace it if you can," and this is what Mr. Jim used to do. If he had a mast, it was either replace it, or there was such a minimal charge, it didn't make sense anyway--something like this.

LL: Yeah. How long have you known Mr. Jim?

BG: Twenty-five years, I guess, maybe more. I can't really say.

LL: But he had his boat yard there when you knew him.

BG: Yeah, oh yeah.

LL: You said he worked at Cambridge. From around World War II he owned his boatyard.

BG: Yeah.

LL: Okay. Can you think of any particular incidences when you brought anything there?

BG: Oh my god, there were so many. To pick any one out is almost impossible. I just can't pick one out and say, he did such and such at this time.

LL: Can you think of approximately how many times you brought boats down there. Was it pretty often, pretty regularly?

BG: Oh yeah. I'd bring boats, usually two, maybe three times in the winter and then I always had at least six or eight times during the summer...and I'm talking about large boats, I'm not talking about small ones. So it was...

LL: What do you mean large boats?

BG: Well, the skipjacks and the buyboats.

LL: Yeah. So, when you brought them down in the winter, were they working boats that needed repair then?

BG: Yeah, uh, huh.

LL: By then, they had gotten all rotted and they needed to be fixed up then.

BG: And Mr. Jim would do everything in his power if he had a yacht on the railway, he would actually launch. I've seen him launch a yacht and put it off to the side for a while until he got one of my boats repaired so that he could go back to work and make money.

LL: Yeah. Two things, when he realized that you could start affording his work, did his price go up?

BG: Uh, well, I don't think you could say his price went up. I think he began to bill for his work which was still the most reasonable in the area. In other words, the people that could afford his work he did bill them accordingly. Of course, if he was ever mistaken or wrong, it was always in the customer's favor. I never did see a bill that wasn't lower than what I really thought it should be.

LL: How do you get a boat from Tilghman to Richardson's. Which way do you go.

BG: Well, you come up the Choptank past Benoni Point, past Castle Haven Point, and then turn right into Le Compte's Bay, go all the way up to Le Compte's Bay and then head southwest and just follow the little gut up into Mr. Richardson's. It takes...it's according to how badly the boat is fouled... it takes anywhere from an hour and a half to four hours to get a boat from Tilghman to Mr. Richardson's.

LL: Do you have somebody meet you there (unintelligible).

BG: Yeah, uh huh.

LL: You know, the boat isn't very far, you realize it's so close.

BG: Well, actually, as far as mileage, oh, I don't think it's over eight to 10 miles, but to get there by car is at least 45, maybe 50 each way.

LL: Thirty-five.

BG: Thirty-five from Tilghman?

LL: Oh, from Tilghman, no, no, no.

BG: I was going to say...

LL: Right, 45 to 50...

BG: Yeah, I was going to say, from Tilghman, it's got to be 45 or 50, yeah and I used to, when I had men working for me, once I started men working for me, I used to ride there every day with my crew because Mr. Jim would let me use men that were in my employee or men that were just helping me...he would let me use them instead of his men.

LL: To work on the boat?

BG: Yeah, to work on the boat.

LL: That's really (unintelligible).

BG: Yeah, you're not kidding.

LL: Did he have a full crew most of the time?

BG: Yeah, uh, huh. Oh yeah, as far as I know he always did.

LL: Did you ever meet her...Genova (ph)?

BG: Mr. Richardson's wife? Yeah. I haven't seen her for quite a long time, though.

LL: But you knew her when she was well. I understand she was quite a person. She did a lot of the work around the boatyard too. She kept the books and ordered clothes and got the lumber.

BG: Right.

LL: Yeah. You'd often see her there.

BG: Well, you know, a lady would have to be quite a lady to be married to him. You know, she'd have to be something else herself to be able to survive in his shadow, so to speak.

LL: And yet, there were only strong women in his family and he says that he'd have to be strong to survive with all these strong women...who knows. About other boat builders in the area, how do you feel about his (unintelligible). Do you know of any other boat builders that are up to Jim Richardson in the vicinity (ph)?

BG: Oh, uh Lila there haven't been any boat builders with Mr. Richardson's knowledge and I guess you'd call it expertise. I don't think there have been any in this area that in my knowledge, oh I'd say in 15 years, possibly more. Mr. Richardson is one of what I call the old time boat builders. He's not only a craftsman, he can be an absolute cabinet maker, but you know building a boat just doesn't mean that you can fit two pieces of wood together. It's how you fit the two pieces of wood together. You take a man who

can make a very strong arch, but that doesn't necessarily mean he can build a boat. A man can make a lovely seam that you can't even find, but that still doesn't mean that he can build a boat. But, Mr. Jim knew how to take a number of pieces of wood and put them together so that the stresses and the strains were distributed in such a way that that boat was as strong as it could ever possibly be and, okay, I knew this man, Mr.

Davis...okay...I'll tell you another one I knew, Ernie Tucker. I don't know if you ever knew him or not. Okay, he was a boat designer. He was a crippled man, but he designed boats and we've talked about boats. I've sat and talked with Ernie before and he has commented on different builders' products, and a lot of the recent builders. It wasn't very complimentary. A boat can be designed so it looks like a boat, performs like a boat, but as far as strength, no such thing. Mr. Jim builds one that looks like a boat, performs like a boat and is strong as a damn piece of stone, but will still perform the function he designed it for. In other words, what I'm trying to say, I guess he's a designer and a builder. So, he can start from scratch, which is, Jesus, that's no longer possible, people can't do it anymore.

LL: You know that's the unique part of the whole thing. What do you think of him taking on this bugeye. He actually started it when he was 66 and now 10 years later, what do you think of a man that would do that?

BG: Well, Lila, that too, that's Mr. Jim. I had not the slightest doubt in my mind when he decided to do this. I didn't have the foggiest notion that he wouldn't complete it. You know, it was just a foregone conclusion and I was sure that he would complete it at his leisure, when he wanted to, and if he decided, it would be done, period.

LL: He says that it'll be ready to sail by next summer. That's another year....

BG: Well, if he said so, you better believe it will be. You know, that darn boat, well, you heard people talk about it, and that cockeyed thing was one of the worst periods I think in Mr. Jim's whole life. You just wouldn't believe the effort that went into that thing. It was impossible almost to imagine and, whew, if that boat had been...well if the boat had been charged for or paid for the way it should have been, Mr. Jim would have done very well, but, well you know what the story was on that.

LL: I have the story in the book. He might not let me use it, but I have the story. He came away with them owing him money.

BG: Yeah, it's a crying shame. And I'll tell you something else. Of course, you knew he's done restoration work with the Smithsonian and all this, and he has never been paid right for that. He really wasn't. He has a talent that no one else that I know of has for the work that he did and he was paid peon wages. He really was.

LL: It might be that he didn't demand any more.

BG: Well, yeah Lila, but...

LL: He is so bent in that direction.

BG: But, I tell you what...when I finally got so that I could afford to pay Mr. Jim what he should have gotten, I actually looked for ways to pay him more than what he asked.

LL: And you couldn't?

BG: Well, I used to insist on paying him more for the lumber in later years than what he really asked for it. I used to try to buy all my...anything that I thought he might make a profit on...I tried to buy it from him. And if he had men that weren't really engaged in productive work, I used to leave my men home and just say, well they can't make it Mr. Jim and use his men. Well, I guess what I'm trying to say is, these people that used his

talents, like the Smithsonian, they should have realized what they had. They had something unique and they misused it. They really did.

LL: Yeah, I now know what you're saying. It's human nature to get something for less and show that they're good guys on paper and (unintelligible) got paid less. I got this guy down here that did it for much less and aren't I good.

BG: You know in this book, I hope you can, but I doubt it. I know you're a talented lady...

LL: Thank you.

BG:...but I don't think even you can really say what this gentleman is. I just wish I could. I wish I could for a short time at least be endowed with the words, the descriptive phrases, what have you, to tell what this man actually is...

LL: There are no words for him.

BG: It's a shame.

LL: Yeah. Hoping that getting all this together might give an inkling.

BG: Yeah.

LL: All I can ask for is an inkling because you can't capture the whole person, all this person...

BG: Well, as I've told you before, I just wished to god I had some of your talent and I'm sitting here talking to you telling you about him, but yet, I'm not. All the things that I really want to say are inside and I can't get 'em out.

LL: They're feelings, they're feelings, more than facts.

BG: Yeah.

LL: I know there's been others and I think that so many people go down to look at him because they get this feeling from him like who was it, oh, Randy Pepper (ph) was saying in an article which I'm picking up from the magazine. He said, people follow him around like he's the pied piper sort of.

BG: He is.

LL: He is. He's like the pied piper.

BG: You better believe it.

LL: And they do follow him around. Ask any questions, and he very calmly answers all of them while he's trying to work. You know, people have kept him --- reporters and others --- have kept from his work.

BG: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

LL: Everybody's waiting for him to finish the bug-eye, and he's waiting to finish it, but if people would just leave him alone and not come to see him so much, he would probably have finished. It takes a lot of time and energy to answer questions and people think they're doing him a favor by coming to see him and he is glad people come to see him. He's proud that they come to see him, but on the other hand, it takes up a lot of precious time and school children come and follow him around. There have been articles with school children. National Christian (ph) had an article, Waterman's Gazette (ph), Country Magazine...have you seen all the articles in the last year about him.

BG: I've seen a number of them, and as you say, that accounts for a tremendous amount of his time, but he's also much too much of a gentleman to not do these things. He's much too much of a gentleman. And you know one thing, there are a lot of people, Lila, that try to be Christians, but Mr. Jim is.

LL: He practices.

BG: Well, okay, I wouldn't really call it practicing. He just is. To me, he is the embodiment of what I call a Christian. I'll be honest with you, I have a rather low opinion of most Christians, so called...

LL: May I quote you?

BG: You may, you certainly may because I certainly make enough noise when I tell people about it. But Mr. Jim is what I think a Christian is. I'm not positive what a Christian is, but if there is such a thing as a Christian, if they could all be like Mr. Jim, that's what Christians should be.

LL: Uh hmm. That's what they say you thought about him. How do you feel when you go to see him? Is there a sentimental feeling?

BG: Oh now, I feel heartbroken.

LL: Why is that?

BG: Uh, boy he has changed. He really has. He has changed in the past few years and to see someone that you care for as much as I do him, to see this person's physical strength deteriorate, his faculties just leave him, and his mind, of course, is just as sharp as ever, but his hands tremble and he is a little weak as far as lifting is concerned, as far as stepping, he's unsure of himself. He doesn't walk with the firmness he used to. His bearing is still upright and I call regal, but it's a shame, he's losing, he really is.

LL: It's more than age. Mr. Richardson is 77, but had he not had these other problems, he might very well have held onto his strength.

BG: Yeah.

LL: It's beaten him down. His wife's illness, the dog (ph) has done it.

BG: That's true. And he hasn't, well, I don't think that should be put into the book either. But I don't think his...

END OF TAPE