

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Frances Grunden

Oral History # 205

Interviewer: Lila Line

Date: About Sept 1, 1981

Location: Rock Hall?

Topic:

Comments: Interview takes place in Ms. Grunden's fish store – location was not given. During interview, there are background conversations with customers coming in and out of the store. The quality of the tape is very poor. There is a lot of background noise which sounds like chopping and running water making it difficult to decipher some of the interview.

Documentation:

Transcribed by:

Marge Berman
29709 Lyons Drive
Easton, MD 21601
410-770-4814

BEGIN SIDE 1

...tape starts in middle of conversation.

Frances Grunden: ...some brine on there. Just like I said, I hadn't done anything but raise hares. (Unintelligible)

Lila Line: (Laughter). You're from this area, aren't you Frances?

FG: Born and raised right next door. I'm 69 and will be 70 years old ...

(Unintelligible), (background noise, sounds like car engine)...conversation with others.

Come on in Shorty (ph). You delivered your children already.

Customer: Yes. I'm going down and gonna cut some herring (ph).

FG: I've got some beautiful spots Shorty and I've got a few hardheads. I think your best bet would be some spots today.

Customer: I'll be back here about 2 o'clock.

FG: (Unintelligible conversation.) How many did you want?

Customer: About 14.

FG: Now do I take the heads and spin (ph) them.

Customer: Leave the heads and tails on 'em.

FG: Just clean them. I'll go ahead and get yours right now.

Customer: All right.

FG: Okay. I'll see you.

LL: I thought you'd leave early. Two o'clock is not early.

FG: Well, me saying...I'm telling him 2 o'clock. By the time I get out of here and scrubbed up and everything, I'm telling you...I go to work and scrub everything and if anything happens to me they'll find no dirt. That was the intention of mine. I try to keep everything as clean (voice fades).

LL: He wants 14 spots. Who will eat those 14 spots? He has a big family.

FG: No, I don't think so. But, they put them in the freezer like that you know. He drives a school bus and picks up all down around St. Michaels, and picks some Easton children up. (Unintelligible).

LL: How much is that?

FG: Ten dollars and 50 cents. (Background noise, sounds like chopping) I don't know what this guy over here just (unintelligible).

LL: ...right next door.

FG: I'm the oldest of 10 and my son is the only one that wasn't born there. He was born in a hospital.

LL: So, that was your mother's and father's home.

FG: No, it was my mother's. My father died and my mother bought it, well, I guess. My father died and mom just kept staying there and making the payments. At that time, you could buy a little with nothing. Today, why I could have sold it two or three times. I got (unintelligible) home now where a man come over from Washington two or three years ago, (unintelligible). He made his offer. I wouldn't want to sell it no how, but I don't know what he thought he was buying; \$45,000 couldn't hardly cover the ground.

LL: So your mother raised 10 children

FG: When papa died. Yeah. I was the oldest and I helped her. I went fishing and crabbing and worked for 75cents a day spent many a day house cleaning before I did go

on the water The brothers did the most (unintelligible) skinned many muskrats in my time..

LL: What did you say (unintelligible).

FG: Marsh rabbits are the proper name for them (unintelligible). I'd skin them – my brothers used to catch them and they'd come home and I'd skin them and dress the hides. In those days you didn't get very much. Well, then during the war though, we did get \$4 or \$5 dollars and I think maybe \$10 or \$15 last year for the same thing that they got. Now they don't do it anymore, but a couple of the nephews sort of followed, but my brothers don't bother with it anymore, they've gone into the geese business, picking geese like that you know.

LL: So you went out muskrating.

FG: No I didn't go. I skinned them. My brothers went did muskrating. I fished, oystered and crabbed.

LL: You fished, oystered and crabbed?

FG: Yeah. Caught many a bushel of oysters for my brothers. Right in the boat with them. They caught them and I'd cull them. You know, you have to take all the shells off the little ones (ph) and throw some (ph) away.

LL: When you went out culling with your brothers...how many brothers are there?

FG: There's three brothers, but I used to just go with the two; the one you see. I have somebody else to go with him. It was mostly just my brother and I. Every one of them had boats of their own you know and many a bushel of oysters we picked up and many a hundred dozen crabs made a healthy catch.

LL: Well, I bet.

FG: No telling. (Unintelligible) the amount that limits (unintelligible). Twenty-five cents a dozen for what's over. The year before last they were \$2 a piece, \$24 dollars, but they were extra jumbo. Now 15, 18, 12 is what they sell for (ph). We sold them for .25 cents, 15 cents a half, 25 a dozen.

LL: Twenty-five cents a dozen.

FG: A dozen they got the year before last and last year they brought \$2 a piece; \$24 dollars a dozen. You could only find during the whole season I guess that size, so they were big males; extra jumbos they were.

LL: What rivers did you go on?

FG: The Miles, Wye, Tred Avon. Docked over at (unintelligible) his place...Goldsboro Creek, Island Creek, down with Mr. Bill Willis and all of Island Creek where Ms. Alberta Pew's (ph) just before you get to her place and all of that there which is all homes now built.

LL: Oh, really.

FG: Yep. (Door slamming – customer entering store). Hi there, how are you?

Unidentified customer: Fine, and you? (Unintelligible background conversation).

FG: You get the heads and tails off. [Microphone turned off and on.] ...come out you know and the wind blowing; the boat going through the water and the wind blowing it back. Picked fish out one night (unintelligible) that the (unintelligible) turn right black and then in two weeks (unintelligible) and it came back. ...had 1400 pounds of perch and only a handful of rock and the Wye Landing Mr. Charles (unintelligible) brought us a lantern so we could see. Just before we got in Mr. Charles (ph) jumped overboard 'cause

we pulled nets and everything after it was getting dark my brothers and I did. They come to look for us; State Troopers and everything thought we gotten drowned.

LL: Oh, really. You wore gloves, but they weren't good enough.

FG: Wore gloves, but you picked so many, I guess probably it was just so cold you didn't even realize you were pushing hard on them, I guess.. The only thing I could figure, it turned black and came right over and nothing came home in about two months' time (ph).

LL: Especially when you were oystering and culling.

FG: No, that was fishing. Had 1,400 pounds of fish.

LL: Oh, you pulled nets?

FG: Oh yeah. We pulled nets and everything. You just caught the fish at the edge of the bar, just at the edge of the bar. We fished all day long and didn't have a half a bushel. Just at the edge of (unintelligible) my brother laid the net out and I said, "Every (unintelligible), catfish, mud shad or old carp. I said, "(unintelligible) let me take the oar and lift up the net." (Unintelligible) nothing but big white perch and a few rock. I think that night they dropped \$5 on a hundred. (Unintelligible) I remember very clearly – about 14 years ago just before I was operated on for cancer.

LL: Oh, for heaven's sake.

FG: I had 56 treatments and (unintelligible) operation. They gave me four pints of blood right on the operating table.

LL: I had never known that you weren't the healthiest woman (unintelligible) all the time.

FG: I shove (ph) all the ice in them boxes when I go there to get the ice (background voices and noise, unintelligible conversation with customer). (Microphone turned off.)

LL: Ms. Frances let me take some pictures.

FG: But, I never have. When my granddaughter was getting ready to get married, I told my son never to (unintelligible). I guess I didn't really realize how it's been. I said, "Harry, I don't think I got time to go to no wedding. He said, "Mom, you mean you got but one granddaughter and you haven't got time to go buy something." He shook his head and walked on and said, "Okay then, if you want to go." But, I went anyhow. (Conversation with customer—unintelligible).

LL: I've been fishing in my time.

FG: Oh, I imagine you have, Lila

LL: Not like you, but I mean I have fished (unintelligible) Virginia Beach. My mother gave me a big bucket like for 25 cents and I'd take them home and put them in the freezer. Only way to do it. Certainly, not like Ms. Frances does.

FG: Now, these are yours Ms. Warren (ph). (Sound of wrapping paper). (Unintelligible) ride this morning and saw your truck (unintelligible) dipping and diving so much, I guess he'd been (unintelligible) there too. How many did you want for your daughter?

Customer: Give me one of them.

FG: Did you say one Ms. Warren? My gosh, she must eat like a little bird (unintelligible). What do you want, two or one?

Customer: Give me two.

FG: Okay. That's \$2 .75 altogether. You get the heads and tails off of these?

Customer: Yeah.

FG: Okay (sounds of chopping). (Unintelligible) the fellow who drives the school bus there (unintelligible).

LL: How many fish you think you've cleaned Ms. Frances?

FG: I don't really know.

LL: I bet a million.

FG: I helped to catch about 100 pounds too, don't you think (unintelligible). And as for catfish, I used to hate to see them things get in the net because they are the hardest things to get out of the nets. They put them two spears out you know. You'd have to break them on one side, then on the other. I used to take an old bottle opener to try to pull them out. They were son of a guns. We used to have a colored boy go with us, Charlie Karnish (ph) would go with my brother and I because we knew we'd had a lot of trash that wasn't much good it would take so long to get it out and every time he'd hit a ring perch that had stripes on it, he'd call it the lieutenant. Here comes another lieutenant up.

LL: What's his name?

FG: Charlie Karnish. He's related to you, isn't he?

Customer: (Unintelligible).

FG: Yeah, that's right. He fished with us I don't know how many years. Yeah, way before he ever thought about being married. Ten to twelve years before he ever thought about getting married. He lived right down the road there.

(Background conversation).

FG: There you are Ms. Warren (ph). Be careful going home and I'll be seeing you now. (Unintelligible).

LL: Ms. Frances, when did you open your shop here?

FG: Well, (unintelligible) way on back and everything, about 55 years. Been watermen all of their lives, that is his (unintelligible) parents. Then (sound of chopping unintelligible) we were over next door and they'd taken it for a storage house every year. This has only been here about seven or eight years right here. (unintelligible) the same as over there. Half of them don't even know we would just walk to the fish market and that's it (ph).

LL: About how long have you been working in the store here – about 7 years?

FG: Well, I have been here permanently just the last two years, but I mean all the times the family has had it right along. I mean my mother's been dead 26 years. (Unintelligible).

LL: A lot of changes in that time, too.

FG: I was thinking, hardheads, or croakers (unintelligible) sat out in the backyard 50 years ago. The (unintelligible) you ever saw 5 for a quarter and which three weeks ago, we had them weigh 4 pounds apiece, \$6 or \$7.50 apiece (unintelligible) 5 for a quarter we caught soft crabs. The biggest things you ever saw, extra large jumbos, 25 cents a dozen 15 cents a half. The year before last, we sold for \$2 apiece, \$24 dollars a dozen. This year past just \$2 apiece. (Unintelligible). We sold them for a quarter a dozen, 15 cents for a half (ph).

Unidentified voice: It used to be all these things that are native to this area, we ate all the time because they were inexpensive. Now we have to pay much more (unintelligible).

FG: A loaf of bread was a nickel. A quart of milk was a nickel. Five pound bag of flour was 20 cents, but that's gone forever.

LL: I don't think we'll ever see that again.

FG: Well, Randolph is in the hospital (unintelligible), Been there a great good while so I'll just put it in for somebody for their crabs (ph).

LL: (Unintelligible).

FG: I got three or four I'd give him to, but he got (unintelligible) first you know.

(Unintelligible conversation). I don't really know. Randolph is as old as I am, 'cause my mother and his mother were good friends (unintelligible) together.

Unidentified customer: Will you have blues for a while?

FG: You need today?

Customer: No.

FG: Oh yeah. (Unintelligible) right on up with cold weather.

Conversation with customer.

LL: I'm taking pictures of her cleaning fish.

Customer: Oh, you are? I think I'll take so bluefish today if you got some today.

FG: How many do you want?

Customer: How much a pound?

FG: Two dollars a pound and those there are a dollar and a half.

Customer: Give me three.

FG: All the fish I got are from commercial fishermen (ph). That's \$4.50. (Unintelligible conversation).

LL: Ms. Frances, how far to you ride in the morning to pick up your fish?

FG: One way, I guess, is about 75 or 80 miles. When we go to Crisfield (ph) it's about 110.

LL: One way?

FG: Uh huh.

LL: Boy, that's a lot of riding.

FG: Yeah. There's been some bad days and bad nights. I've been on the road when you couldn't even see the road. When it gets so icy, that the cars would slide. I had one day I turned around out in front of the Holiday Inn which was the Holiday Inn, and came back I was so scared because the truck was sliding so bad. There wasn't any snow, but it rained and frozen.

LL: Now, you leave here pretty early in the morning. What time did you leave this morning?

FG: I left this morning, but they were late getting in. They had so much scrap because the LY's (ph) and herring), now the crabs. They can't even sell that (unintelligible).

Well, I guess I left about twenty minutes to five this morning. I got up at 3:30. Hi there (talking to customer). I'll be with you in just a few minutes. (Sound of running water). Some of them get in your way and you almost have to run over top of them to get them out of your way. (Background conversation).

Customer: How much did you say?

FG: \$4.50. (Unintelligible background conversation.)

LL: I want to record it.

FG: What's that?

LL: Just what you said. You have people come from all over.

FG: Oh, I have had people come from all over. They came yesterday, they shipped fish by plane and they carried it by plane to New Mexico and also Kentucky and up Glen

Burnie. I had the biggest seafood owner up there in Glen Burnie which had a big cement block to make some money and he and his three sons together. (ph).

LL: No kidding.

FG: They were here yesterday and then I had them from Baltimore over to Delaware; had them all around yesterday. Most of the time, they were coming through for vacation. Now Baltimore wasn't, but Glen Burnie comes here quite often.

LL: Well, I can understand why.

FG: Well, they come in here. You would think that half of them don't even know, and haven't even seen what...you would think that they knew me for years when they walk in the door, I guess, I don't know. I guess it's just a personality, probably. May not be. I don't really know.

LL: I'm sure it is.

FG: I could go anywhere and would only have to be there only a few minutes and if you want to make friends and I mostly always made friends. I made all the friends I need for a whole day. If I go in a store and there's little children, elderly people and little children sure do (unintelligible) I don't know why. I don't know why. 'Cause as to the family, we've always had a big family and I certainly didn't need to be around children...

LL: With ten children in your family, but then you have one son?

FG: One son, that's all. I had three sons, but one was born dead. He was the only one born that lived. (Unintelligible) One little boy had the prettiest curly hair and weighed 13 pounds when he was born, but he was born dead. He'd been dead from two to three days even when he was born his skin came right off of him, his flesh (unintelligible).

LL: You didn't stop working the whole time.

FG: No, not the whole time. I just kept right on. As a matter of fact to live you have to because my husband made \$28 a week and that's work all day on a Sunday at the gas company making gas for the houses. Today they bring it in by truck, piping it in rather. They used to bring it in by truck, now it's piped in right from Texas.

LL: You raised your son by yourself mostly.

FG: Oh yeah, I helped to raise nine brothers and sisters, a nephew and a niece. My husband worked for the state and my son wasn't quite 10 years old and I raised him. He graduated in '49 and has two children; both of them been to college; one's got his Master's Degree and teaches retarded children and the grandson's Master's Degree is coming up and he's got a permanent job over in Washington when he finishes and that will be this year coming up, in '82.

LL: And you still have a sister living at home with you.

FG: Oh yeah. And I've got a sister living at home and I've got one sister who lives out by the Elks' Club out by [Easton] High School and I've got a nephew I brought home when he was one day old (unintelligible) \$1.79 clothes basket (microphone turned off).

LL: Summarizing interview: Between 35 and 50 people came to the store for fish between 9:15 in the morning and 12:15. Each time, Frances bends to pick up fish out of a box filled with spots and croakers, hardheads and blues and shows them to the people and asks them if that's all right and weighs them and cleans them and wraps them and takes the money and continually there's a banter that goes on between Frances and the customers. She knows most of them, not by name – asks about their children. She talks and tells them what's been happening here. One gets terrifically tired watching Frances wait on customers and answer the phone, and clean the fish and wrap the fish and bend

down and pick them up and clean the fish and wrap the fish and talk and clean them and empty out her tank with the fish blood and people come in for fish heads for their crab traps and brings her vegetables and she gives them crap necks and the entrails and she has something pleasant to say to all of them. If something's bothering her, she talks about it and they talk to her.

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.