

Interview Log

Interviewee: Harold Wornom (H.W.)

Tape #: OH 219

Interviewer: Pete Leshner (P.L.)
Gina Watts (G.W.)

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Transcription by:

Trevy Thomas
920 Truslow Road
Fredericksburg, VA 22406
trevy_thomas@yahoo.com
410-310-5753

BEGIN SIDE A

P.L.: We're in the home of Harold Wornom, interviewing Harold Wornom. It is the 9th of February in 2000, and interviewing are Gina Watts and Pete Leshner. I'll just start by asking you to give your name.

H.W.: Harold C. Wornom.

P.L.: And we'd like to talk to you some about your grandfather, J.G. Wornom.

H.W.: All right.

Pi.: You could tell us his full name.

H.W.: John Gibbs Wornom.

P.L.: John Gibbs.

H.W.: John Gibbs. Some people called him Gibbs, some people called him Johnny.

P.L.: Okay. And do you have sort of his -- he apparently had a large family, but can you give us some basic information on him, when he was born and died, and his wife's name and that sort of thing?

H.W.: Yes. He was born -- can you stop it for me?

(Off record.)

Pi.: Go right ahead.

H.W.: Okay. John Gibbs Wornom was born February 23, 1865, died October 15, 1943. His wife was Diana More Wornom, born January 27, 1871, and died November 23, 1952. They were married December 1890.

P.L.: Okay. And you were certainly around for plenty of time when he was around. You have personal recollections of your grandfather?

H.W.: Yes.

P.L.: Can you tell me something about remembering him at holiday times or the sorts of work that he did, the types of things that you might have witnessed with him?

H.W.: I remember he was very much into farming, especially raising potatoes. He raised a lot of different vegetables. I don't know if they were for commercial shipping or just for family use. Every time we came up to visit when I was a child, I remember our car always went back loaded up with vegetables. Sunday was a time when most of the family who lived close by and didn't see them during the week would come for a visit, and they had no central heat, built a fire every day, of

course, like many people in those days. And on a nice Sunday when company was expected, he always built a fire in the fireplace. He loved his family, and he especially loved his grandchildren and was very affectionate to his grandchildren, and was a hard-working man. I never actually saw him in the woods cutting timber, but I've heard others tell me about seeing him and working with him in the woods. One of his main workers was his bachelor brother named Hardy, who he never married, and he lived there at the home place all of his life. Just lived there, and they took care of him, and he just worked on the farm and did whatever was needed, worked in the woods cutting timber when whenever they were doing that, and worked up here at this sawmill that was next door. I don't know that he ever worked on the boat. I never heard any stories about his doing that. He probably stayed at home and helped prepare for things at home. They were a lot on him to see that there was always plenty of firewood in, and the water kept coming in, used well water. Plus they had a lot of other farm work there to take care of too. They had cows, milk cows, and they had lots and lots of chickens, and usually would have hogs to take care of and slaughter and so forth.

Pi.: Is it your impression that farming was his principle occupation?

H.W.: It certainly was his principle occupation in the years that I knew him. Whether it was that way prior to my time or not, I don't know. I would say from this information here, that his work with a boat and shipping and selling seafood and those kinds of things, I would say that they were probably more prioritized in his life then than the farming was.

P.L.: Earlier in his career.

H.W.: Earlier in his career, right. See, this dates back to 1903. How soon before that he was doing that I don't know. But keep in mind, he was born in 1965 (sic), so he would have still been a fairly young man at that point.

P.L.: And what we're looking at is a receipt that shows that he was in a seafood business of some sort.

H.W.: Right. Seafood, and as it said, manufacturer of barrels, boxes and so forth. And that wharf would have been, as I said, down at the end of this road on the Poquoson River.

P.L.: So he owned this wharf, Hunt's Wharf --

H.W.: Right.

P.L.: -- as a shipping point. And did you tell us that he also owned some boats as well?

H.W.: I don't know how many boats he had. Mrs. Acrum (phonetic), she told me that she remembered that he had a number of different boats which she didn't think he had a lot of them at the same time. She'll be able to fill you in better on that.

Pi.: Okay. And so presumably, the work that he was doing was along the lines of shipping seafood rather than catching it.

H.W.: Yes, right. Right. I don't think he was what many people would call a waterman. I think they probably brought this seafood in there, and he maybe bought it from them and sold it and shipped it.

Pi.: Is there -- the billhead certainly seems to indicate that he's just shipping seafood. Sometimes there's a seasonal nature to this. Would he have been also shipping the potatoes from his farm and that sort of thing, or don't you know about that?

H.W.: I don't know about that, but my guess would be that he probably did, given the nature of things. I think he probably would have. I know he raised a lot of potatoes. And I recall as a young boy, after he no longer was doing this sort of thing, which I had no knowledge of then, I recall being up to visit my grandparents in the summertime during the week, and there would be a number of wooden barrels, big barrels of potatoes in the lane down here. And he would, you know, to put the burlap on top, and put the hook down, and they would -- this thing would have his name stenciled on it, and there would be an address. I think they were being shipped to Baltimore someplace. So they were there for a truck to pick up and take down to Old Point and ship down from there.

P.L.: Okay.

H.W.: But he was heavy into potatoes at that time.

PI.: During the time that you remember him.

H.W.: Right, right.

P.L.: You're giving me the impression that he had quite a complex around here, a farm and a sawmill and so forth. Can you describe some of the property, either as you remember it, or as you understand it was when he was --

H.W.: You mean in terms of the extent of the property?

P.L.: The extent of it, and what all he had going on it.

H.W.: Well, the property began down at this curve by the creek. And it went, I don't know how far it would be, but it went on down the creek a ways to about where Mrs. Acrum lives, and you'll see that. And then come back to this road you just passed, Pasture Road, that was all in his property. And that was a part that he used for the farming.

P.L.: The fields were cleared and that sort of thing.

H.W.: Right. And where I live right here and the next piece of property -- well, from there on up to this corner was probably about five acres. That was his property. And I and two brothers inherited 2.9 acres right in here, and that's how we happened to come and build here. Another interesting thing, you know, it's -- I really regret that I can't get information now that I could've so easily gotten when I had no interest in it. I guess that's the way it is with everybody. I could've asked my dad, who had all these things, I could've even gotten it from an uncle across the road when I first moved here. But I have a picture of a store that was next door to the home place down here, between the home place and the creek. And I remember the store very, very vividly. But it was never in operation as a store in my memory, and I was born in 1921. But I remember the building vividly. And it had a -- are you interested in a picture of it?

PI.: We might take a look of that, sure. We don't have to do that now.

H.W.: I don't want to bore you with it.

P.L.: Sure.

H.W.: But anyway, what I was going to tell you was it was just a catchall, and my grandfather had a farm implement or something he didn't need at the time, he would just -- that was the catchall, he put it in that store building. And in 1931, I think it was, Mrs. Acrum and her husband married. That was during the Depression. Money was tight. And so my grandfather made arrangements for them to have property over here right on this corner. So if you look at that home when you leave here, that used to be a store that I have the picture of. They moved that up here, and then my uncle, who was something of a carpenter, converted it and made rooms in it and all that. And the family lived there until at

least one of the children was grown. And I remember my aunt had told me that when they moved it, they couldn't get the job completed in one day, and so they had to leave it sitting in the road out here all night. Well, at that time, you know, Model T's, Model A Fords had just come along, and there weren't very many of them, and they'd just slow down and go around it. But that's the way it was back then. And that was that store. But I've talked to Ms. Acrum a number of times. She cannot recall when it was in operation as a store, or when it ceased to operate. But I do remember one time she told me she recalled somebody who came down, some woman came down the road one morning, came in there and wanted a spool of thread or something but had no money, and said she was coming down here to work for some lady, and she had the money coming back and would pay them, but said that was it, never saw her again. But she does remember that somebody came in and did that. How many of these things he had going all at one time I don't know. I would guess that he had the sawmill going, I'm pretty sure he had the sawmill going when he was going farming. And I could show you a home that I grew up in in Hampton. I don't know if you're familiar with Hampton. I don't know if you're familiar with Hampton, but the home that we lived in, we moved in that home like 1930, '31, and my grandfather hauled all of the lumber with a team of horses down to Hampton for the building of that home. Lumber that he brought up here and cut into boards, and seasoned and carried down there.

P.L.: So he was presumably cutting wood off of his property here or --

H.W.: I think he was cuffing it -- I don't know. I don't think he had that much woods to cut. I think most of his land was cleared. This was still woody, but it wasn't enough to sustain a timber business. I think he did, like a lot of timber people, he wasn't big enough to own a whole bunch of timber, but he bought timber here and there for people who wanted to sell it.

P.L.: That was really a commercial operation. It was more than just a farm implement, the sawmill.

H.W.: Right. I remember it real well. Had this water tank like a lot of them had for cooling, I guess it is. I climbed up that

thing one time, and they got me off of there as quickly as I could, afraid I'd fall in.

PL.: The sawmill was around long enough for you to remember it then.

H.W.: Ooh, yes, very definitely.

P.L.: Did it continue to operate after your grandfather's death?

H.W.: No. In fact, I think it probably stopped operating even before then, but I honestly do not -- I hope Mrs. Acrum can tell you, but I don't know when he stopped that operation. You know, as a kid coming along, you just don't pay much attention. Things that you do remember are just sort of like by osmosis. You just saw it and you remember it.

G.W.: The banking, was that later on as well?

H.W.: The banking, the best I can tell you on that was these two statements that I saw. One of them was 1915, one of them was 1911. And his name was listed on both of those as being the director of the bank. How soon before that the bank was actually formed, I don't know.

P.L.: What was the name of it again?

H.W.: Bank of Poquoson. I still hope those pictures of those things will turn up because they had a picture of the bank, just a little small brick building, a horse and buggy in front of it. I think my father worked in there briefly before he was married.

P.L.: Now you were telling me that it came as something of a surprise to you when you learned that the museum had this boat that was attributed to your grandfather. You didn't know him as a boat builder?

H.W.: No.

P.L.: So he certainly didn't have a shipyard of any sort.

H.W.: No, not that I'm aware of. In fact, Mrs. Acrum said the same thing when I told her about it. She said I remember that at different times, he had boats. Different boats, not a lot of them at the same time, but was not aware that he built any boats. And a cousin of mine who has delved into the family a lot, relatives and so, he seemed to think that my grandfather did not build it either. But as I understand it from the Carmines, the Custom House records indicate that he did build it. He did build it, and he built it for himself, even though he didn't

keep it very long, sold it like three months later. And I'm no prophet or anything, but I think because he was in different things at different businesses, My guess is that he probably decided either he had a chance to make a good profit on the boat, or he needed some cash. His cash flow was low maybe with the dock that he had down here, because the dock, the wharf down there, that wharf business was three years prior to the building of the boat, the registry of it, so he just might've needed some cash.

G.W.: Were you telling me, I think, that maybe around that same time, there was some illness in the family and some other things that he sort of took care of all that?

H.W.: Well, there was illness in the family. The youngest son, there were four boys, four girls. The youngest son was ill and died. I think he was like 27, 8, when he died. And how much medical expense he had from him I don't know. Of course, it was much later in life, the daughter who put this book together, she just died not four or five years ago, she was in her 90's. But in her earlier life, like back in the 30's, she had a lot of illness then. She had tuberculosis and had to go to a sanatorium in Charlottesville. And so all of these things took a heavy toll on him.

P.L.: You think it's likely that if he, indeed, built Old Point, that he probably didn't build any other boats, this was probably his only one?

H.W.: I really don't know. I really don't know. I just don't have any way of knowing. I was finding it hard to, you know, to believe that he had built this one from alit was getting until I learned what the Custom House records showed over there. Now down behind the old home place up here, I remember when I was a boy, and I would go out, we came up on a Sunday afternoon visit, I'd just kind of roam around the back. And I remember very, very well there was the remnants of an old wharf there, and it wasn't just a thing you would put there to tie up a bateau or something. It had, you know, sizable pilings like a sizable boat would tie up there and load or unload. But it was all dilapidated and most of the decking boards had fallen off and were hanging in the water and that sort of thing. Whether or not he came up in there with his boat, other boats that he had later on and loaded and unloaded, I

don't know, or whether he was using the one on down there. But that wharf was -- it had to have been there for some purpose, but I don't know. If you look at that creek today, you know big boats like that don't even come in there because it's so shallow. But I'm not an authority on this, but I've been told that when boats go in and out of a place a lot, they kind of keep a little bit of a channel. Is that right?

P.L.: That can be true, yes. Just to orient me, what is the name of the creek that his farm --

H.W.: Lyons Creek, L-Y-O-N-S.

P.L.: And does that flow right into the Poquoson River here?

H.W.: I'm pretty sure that goes right into the river.

(Off record - telephone).

P.L.: Just before we were interrupted there, you were telling me about this creek and the wharf along it. The wharf was right on his own farm property?

H.W.: Yes.

P.L.: So he had potentially a wharf to use for his own farm products here in addition to the commercial work at the end of the road here.

H.W.: Right.

(Off record.)

H.W.: Are you real acquainted with the old Bay Line?

P.L.: Oh, certainly.

H.W.: To the extent of where it stopped and what places?

P.L.: Well, as far as I know, for most of their existence, they simply ran a line from Baltimore to Norfolk with an intermediate stop at Old Point Comfort.

H.W.: Right. Well, there was a time, I'm going to say back in the 1930's, when the old Bay Line stopped at Yorktown. I don't know if that's in the records or not, but I know it did. And I know that one of them caught fire up there in the York River. I don't know if anyone was lost on it or not. But when I first moved here in 1968, I was told by somebody that the old Bay Line came in down at the end of Hunts Neck Road. And I didn't know if that was actually facts or not, but I talked with an uncle of mine who was, well, he'd be about 105 now if he was living. And I asked him if that was true, and he said absolutely, that he

had boarded the old Bay Line down there at Hunts Wharf and gone to Baltimore.

P.L.: And you're talking about again your grandfather's wharf.

H.W.: I assume it would've been the same wharf. I don't think it would've been more than one there.

P.L.: It wasn't only sailing vessels or small motor boats that were coming here, but the occasional steamboat as well, at least in a certain period of time.

H.W.: That's my understanding from what this uncle told me. He seemed very definite about it. He said absolutely. I boarded the boat there and went to Baltimore.

P.L.: Are you familiar with these waterfronts as they are today? Is there evidence of the old wharfs?

H.W.: No, the old wharfs, they're long gone now. But I know the wharf was down there. Of course, this was my first indication, but a friend of mine who is 91 years old now, if I went down to the end of the road and looked across the creek that way, I could just about see his house or where he lives on down the river. And I asked him one time if he remembered anything about the wharf being in existence. He said no, he didn't remember anything about that, but he remembers the wharf being there. And as a teenager, he said he and his friends would sometimes jump in the river and say let's swim over to Captain Johnny's Wharf. He said there wasn't much left there then except some pilings that was kind of dilapidated, but again, there's someone who says he remembers that it was there, and he's like almost 92.

P. L.: I thank you very much.

H.W.: You're very, very welcome.

(End of interview.)