

Interview Log

Interviewee: Lena Trower Tape #: MAAF/KFNA/FT3.2.408

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault # of Tapes: 2 of 2

Date: 3/2/98 # of Sides: 3 and 4 of 4

Location: Exmore VA; in Lena's home

Topic: conch picking; foodways; aphrodisiac qualities of seafoods;

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: File name: Vaft408.doc. See Fieldnotes: FN03.02.98. *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information not on the tape or asides by fieldworker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription."

This is a continuation of tape Vaft407.doc, MAAF/KFNA/FT3.2.407.

BEGIN SIDE A

Farming; raising ducks, geese and hogs; go to their house to get the ducks; she used to pluck them; how to pluck them: boil water, get a plastic trash bag; dip duck in boiling water, wrap in newspaper, put into plastic bag, sit for 5 minutes; then feathers come right off; only have to pull on the wings;

Story of her mother on the farm;

How Stevon came to live with her;

SIDE B

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END TAPE

Interview Log

Interviewee: Lena Trower **Tape #:** MAAF/KFNA/FT3.2.407

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault **# of Tapes:** 1 of 2

Date: 3/2/98 **# of Sides:** 2 of 4

Location: Exmore, VA; in Lena's home

Topic: conch picking; clam shucking; African American community; foodways; work; raising children

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: File name: Vaft407.doc. See Fieldnotes: FN03.02.98. *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information not on the tape or asides by fieldworker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription."

Lena Trower is Stevon Sample's mother. I met her the day I went to interview Stevon, and after we began talking I learned that she had worked in seafood factories all her life. She no longer works in these factories but has recently started taking in children to baby sit.

BEGIN SIDE A

BIO: Lena Trower; born Northampton Co.; in Machapongo;

[radio on in background, religious service]

OCC: worked at Bernie[?] Conch, picking conch; also worked in clam house; shucking clams in Cheriton; worked by the piece opening clams; open, pull out "nasty piece" then the last 2 pieces go in separate containers; Bernie worked in clams before conchs too; called it 'squeezing' clams; she was the fastest; made \$80-90 dollars a day; paid by the bucket; bigger than a gallon bucket

Clams came down conveyor belt and buckets were in front of you; stand and clean the clams; tongues in one bucket; hearts in another; "girl, you could make some money. Oh well, it's gone." [laughter]

Use a clam knife; [asks Stevon to get clam knife out of kitchen] stopped dredging for clams in low part of county but still do it further north; clam strips; describes clam parts that are edible;

[Stevon finds knife]

clams go through hot water first which opens them up a little bit; then knife goes in easier;

other girls try to keep up with her; worked the other "girls to death";

LEARNING: "just came natural"; worked in the fields first and went to "inside work" on the clams; had to raise children by herself, 4; didn't like fieldwork; always had Sunday Off,

Story of some other jobs she's had; taking care of invalid man; getting him to do things for himself, stories of working for this man [can't remember his name]; man was wealthy, owned lots of land, kept peacocks; not making enough salary so had to leave that job; wanted her kids to graduate from college so had to earn more money;

Lists off her kids and where they graduated from high school and who went to college; raised them by herself, success of her children; story of oldest son; defining success of her family and grandchildren by their marriages, number of children and if they own their own home

CLAMS: 25-30 women worked there and then some men; diff; jobs there: shucking, cleaning clams; cleaning out black stuff and small shells; then ice them up; she has iced them up too; how cold your hands got; place was heated but you are hot up top but your feet are cold; boots, 4-5 pairs of stockings plus "paper in there too" in the winter;

CONCH: not long to do it; go through water; dumped on belt, take ice pick and pull meat out; take off shell [this is not the hard shell but the foot that closes the hard shell]; pops off; "shell go one way and meat go the other"; can go really fast;

SHUCKING HOUSE CULT: talking and laughing; if not careful forget to do your job and people start beating you; she didn't take part in that because it slowed her down and lost money; talk very heavy on a Monday morning after off the whole weekend; hear some bad tales;

How when you get down to the last 2-3 "cages" of conch everyone starts working really fast trying to pick as much as possible because when those are gone the day is done and you need to make your money;

Somedays go to work at 6 a.m. and be home by 8 or 10 a.m.; now even slower she hears; conchs slack off in the winter and get better in the spring; Bernie doesn't care, he makes his money because conch are so high on the market

[odd that some of the summer crabbers turn to conching in the winter in VA, why is that?]

if really bad only making \$100 per week;

Bernie, Olivia, Olivia's husband; were the only white people; everyone else is black; people used to come watch them pick; would sample the conch; recalls two other white ladies that picked: one lived in Machipongo, Della Mae Brady and Francis and when Lena quit they quit because she gave them rides to work;

Della Mae worked squeezing clams; more description of cleaning conch and clams; how Olivia would call them the night before or that morning to get them to come to work, would promise that there was enough to pick until 2 p.m. but not always;

Bernie; describes him and the xmas and new year's party they would have; always had an oyster roast; drinking and smoking going on so she didn't stay for those;

Della and Francis always worked next to Lena; lunch hour at the conch house; how conch stink when you pick them at first;

FOODWAYS: conch cooking; boils them with vinegar and hot sauce; use only the little ones; eat with cocktail sauce and pepper; how they were delicious; bigger ones you would grind up and fix like clam cakes; use onion, egg, meal or flour then beat up; same with clams and can use jalapeno peppers; use the sea clams; cooking the tongues and strips; cut onion real fine;

Cooks for people every other day: co-workers of Stevon's order meals from Lena; she cooks them and sells them; does ham; one guy called the "pork chop man" because all he wants is pork chops; last weekend she made cabbage, collards, BBQ chicken, homemade macaroni and cheese, sweet potatoes for people; \$4.50 per plate; will do it for people anywhere; one girl comes from Cape Charles;

Crab cakes, fish, seafood platters she makes for sale; her own cornbread recipe; taught self to cook; taught her sister to cook; her homemade rolls are everyone's favorite; loves to cook; keeps you busy; "when you are doing something for somebody else you want to do it the best you can" experiments on Stevon, he eats anything; crab balls; candied sweet potato recipe

More on the pork chop man; prayers she says over the dinners for repeat business; cooking chittlins; story of first time Stevon ever ate chittlins and smelled them;

How she cooks her chittlins: Accent, onions, peppers, celery; cuts down on the odor; also with vinegar; preparing them before cooking; cleaning them;

How she can cook everything but cakes and desserts; "me and cakes just don't get along";

Neighborhood they live in now; buying their house; first one they've owned; moved in 1996; didn't believe they could get this home; what she had to go through to get the house; her sister lives in Philly but still owns property near Lena; Lena is the oldest of bro. And sisters

[Lena mentions that Stevon's mom is her sister, and that she passed away. Stevon came to live with Lena when he was in middle school]

story of how she adopted several young boys who were on the wrong path; got them going to church, stay in school; so more kids than the 4 she birthed; raising these boys; stories of that;

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Working with children; how school is so important; church family as extended family; inviting me to church; convention in Salisbury; for women only; beliefs in God; tent revivals, how she became a member 20 years ago; still have outdoor revivals; don't really do it in VA, have to go up to MD; how young girls really need these; condition of AflAm children today and how she feels;

How boys she took in were trouble makers but when they left her at age 18 they were regular men, working and knew right from wrong;

Lena is married, husband lives in Salisbury; used to live in Hampton VA at one point; story of one day they were reintroduced; hadn't seen him in 30 years;

Decline of picking and shucking work; moved clam house;

SINGING: happened at clam house too; also at conch house; picking crab was too slow for her wanted faster money; friend picks crab houses; name is Hampton and lives in Painter, no phone; very fast picker; friends for a long time; brings her crab meat;

FOODWAYS: Doesn't like working with eels or eating them; especially likes swelling toads, not like fish really; loves hard heads and mullets; stuffed flounder with crab meat; using bacon to wrap fish stuffed with crab meat; seafood salad with tuna;

People call her for cooking tips and to solve cooking problems

Work has always kept her going; always wanted to do for others; African American community in general

Lena offers to introduce me to Hampton; the crab picker; how hampton made cakes last summer and the two of them sold them; in Exmore;

Making macaroni and cheese from scratch; uses 2 kinds of cheeses; little sugar too; egg; assembling it;

CONCHS: as aphrodisiac; eat only a few or "your husband and you might not be able to stay in the house together;" laughed at the girls she worked with because of this; lots of talk about "going out" at the picking house, but always seemed to come back pregnant; women who picked and had decided no more babies, doctors even told some of them no;

but they all got pregnant too; would eat them at work, take them home to; then in a month they'd be pregnant;

Eating them at work; she would pass them by; ate a few at home but afraid of them; recalls fond memories of working at the conch factory;

Watermen would bring the conch; pressure cooker outside; steam them then pick them like crab process; how they stunk even fresh; hard to find nice people to work for these days

PAY: Paid \$1.75 a bucket; wore a card on a string that hung down your back and they would punch holes in it for every bucket you picked so at end of day you counted up the holes on your card; then started working by the hour for \$5.00 an hour; sometimes it was less than working by the bucket; if quit at 9 it was; could pick 10-15 buckets an hour; depended on the meat;

How the meat was pretty after you picked and cleaned them; then want to eat them; didn't smell afterwards either; would crush up the shells or people would take them home and use around flower beds; describes some she took home

Gardens, growing orange trees

END TAPE