

Interview Log

Interviewee: Thomas Mills
Shriver Mills

Tape #: MAAF/KF/FT1.26.99 235/612
235

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault

of Tapes: 1

Date: January 24, 1999

of Sides: 1 (Side B Only)

Location: Golden Hill, Maryland

Topic: Delmarva Folklife Project
Muskrat trapping, marsh life, National Outdoor Show, conservation of muskrats,
shipping to Russia; foodways, local identity

Corresponding Photography Log #: MAAF/KF/MD/PS2.24.99.686-688

Comments: Thomas and Shriver are brothers, both have trapped the Dorchester marshes all of their lives. they are considered one of the old families of trappers in the area and have continuously won the skinning competitions at the outdoor show. We talked in Shriver's kitchen and then Thomas and I went into the skinning shed out back.

Transcriber Notes: The tape I have begins on Side B only, after interview has already begun. There is nothing at the end of Side A, as indicated on the Interviewer's notes. There may be something missing from the tape. As a result, I have had to guess at speaker identification because my recording does not include introductions.

BEGIN SIDE B (tape 235)

T.M.: A muskrat will come on top, and he'll run through these leads, but you can't catch him. If he's running on mud, he won't trap. The trap we got sets up where he runs straight through, and he won't do it.

K.F.: Right.

T.M.: What do you think about it?

S.M.: Most times, the best time for a muskrat is get the tide working just right the first part of the night.

T.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: Run him straight to the top of the bank.

S.M.: On a flood tide on that bank, coming up, getting more the top of the bank he works good, 'cause he stays – he's out eating then. But when the ebb tide strikes, he comes home, he stays in. He lays still.

K.F.: Okay.

S.M.: He feeds on a flood tide. That's what he does.

T.M.: He used to gig muskrats.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

T.M.: Which is illegal now.

S.M.: It's illegal now.

K.F.: Okay. Well what tools did you use to gig them with?

S.M.: You walked up on the house and shoved that gig right in there.

T.M.: It's called a gig.

K.F.: Right.

T.M.: The thing with all these sharp points here. It's about that long.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: Long, they're made out of metal. And when you throw it through that house, then you – you get them.

S.M.: You're getting the prongs of it.

K.F.: Okay, okay. I've seen a frog gig before.

S.M.: Used to do it where you couldn't catch them with traps and stuff, banks and stuff, plenty on the banks, and they do it for to clean them out some.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

S.M.: So there'll be somewhere else.

T.M.: It's been a many a years since anybody ever used a gig.

S.M.: Yeah.

T.M.: That's been outlawed.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: See, Russia never had – this is something that a lot of people don't know. Russia never had a black rat. Your black rats that they got now came from Dorchester County.

K.F.: Oh, how did that –

T.M.: They come right up here to Gibbs' property. Old Man Gibbs caught these, he invented a trap that would – a live trap –

K.F.: Right.

T.M.: -- that would catch that muskrat, swing it up a pole so it wouldn't drown.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: Now they had people stayed out in that marsh all night long. And when that trap caught a muskrat, they had to go to it.

S.M.: The light come on it.

T.M.: The light came on it.

K.F.: Oh.

S.M.: They'd put him in –

K.F.: Well isn't that genius.

S.M.: They'd put him in buckets.

K.F.: Okay, okay.

S.M.: Take a bucket, lead him and take him out.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And then they shipped him off to Russia.

SPEAKER: Justin's at the door, I think, Shriver.

S.M.: Okay.

(Justin, Rhonda Aaron's son, comes in.)

J.A.: Muskrat's –

S.M.: Never got skunked. I know you caught 'em.

J.A.: Yeah.

K.F.: And then they sent them off to Russia after they caught them all?

T.M.: They put them in a can, and then they carry them up to the house, and they had cages and stuff there they put them in. Then they'd ship them to Russia, that's how Russia got their black rat.

K.F.: That's interesting.

S.M.: They couldn't catch them with them live traps. On that marsh, they had to fence it in.

T.M.: And he made a rig.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: Old Man Gibbs made this rig.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

T.M.: That go right along just like that, and he'd dig the trench, and put the board in as he went. Had that whole place fenced in with boards.

K.F.: Wow.

S.M.: The whole marsh was fenced in.

T.M.: It's all gone now, but that was something to look at. All that board fence all the way around it, about this tall.

K.F.: Now how long did –

T.M.: Nothing could go over it, nothing could go through it.

K.F.: Right.

S.M.: What he caught was his on –

K.F.: I bet.

S.M.: If the marsh comes -- it was his. (Laughter.)

K.F.: And how long did he do that?

S.M.: He done it several years.

T.M.: Yeah. My, God. I – he would take and go set in that old house, and he had one place there where he had muskrats, and they were loose, and had cement runs for them.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

T.M.: Everything in there, and had all wired in so they couldn't get out. He'd go up in that old house, and would watch them, study them.

S.M.: He could tell you how long he could stay underneath the water without drowning.

T.M.: Yes, sir.

K.F.: Wow.

S.M.: Come on in, Justin.

J.A.: Sorry – I'll be back over later.

K.F.: Come in, Justin.

S.M.: Come on –

K.F.: Come on in.

J.A.: I'm going to go home and be –

S.M.: Want you to save me a dozen muskrats for the weekend.

J.A.: Huh?

S.M.: Save me a dozen muskrats for the weekend.

J.A.: Only caught three today. (Laughter.) How many you catch?

S.M.: Me?

T.M.: Eight.

S.M.: I caught zero.

J.A.: How many did Thomas catch?

T.M.: Eight.

S.M.: Eight.

J.A.: They're tight, aren't they? (Laughter.)

S.M.: That's my sister's boy.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

S.M.: Yeah. He traps good. He's got it in his blood. (Laughter.)

T.M.: Not your sister's boy. Your sister's grandson.

S.M.: My sister's grandson. Yeah.

K.F.: What other local legends are there about some of the trappers in the area?

T.M.: Huh?

K.F.: What other sort of legends or stories are there about some of the trappers in the area besides Mr. Gibbs?

T.M.: Shriver, do you know any?

S.M.: No.

T.M.: I don't know. I don't know of any. Not right offhand.

K.F.: Okay, okay. Well Rhonda said there was – I don't remember exactly what she said it was, but something that I had to see that was in the skinning show, something black or – I don't –

T.M.: Black?

K.F.: Yeah. Something she said to make sure that Thomas and Shriver show you that thing in the –

T.M.: Oh, we each one got a plaque.

S.M.: Huh?

T.M.: Have you got your plaque?

S.M.: Plaques?

T.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: Oh, it was a retired – a retired trap?

S.M.: Oh. Oh, my God. That. Oh. (Laughter.) I know what you're talking about now. Yeah.

K.F.: Okay. Well what's the story on the retired trap? (Laughter.)

S.M.: That DNR came in here, game warden, and for to turn an order in, we gave him – the trap was loose. Set it in this ditch. And just for fun, I kept a record of what I caught in it.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

S.M.: And it was getting so bad, I said well I'm going to retire that trap. (Laughter.) I brought it home, we wrote it right on there, retired trap, caught 35. (Laughter.) I did. In a ditch, I caught 35, and, she was ready --

T.M.: Thirty-five straight, 35 straight days.

K.F.: Oh.

S.M.: She was ready to fall all to pieces. That don't count people who trap ditches a lot of places.

K.F.: Right.

S.M.: And I said get – and so he looked at that a long time before he said anything. (Laughter.) Him and Shaw were looking at it. That's who looked at it.

T.M.: Yeah.

S.M.: Said he never seen nobody retire a trap before. (Laughter.) It's still hanging up in the barn out there. (Laughter.) Piece of paper right on it, in the jaws of it.

T.M.: At first, I thought you were talking about that plaque that each one of us got, each one, Arthur, Shriver and myself, each one got one up to the outdoor show.

K.F.: Oh, okay. Okay.

T.M.: For our part. Recognition of our part in the outdoor show.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Uh-huh (Affirmative).

T.M.: We've been doing it ever since we've been kids.

K.F.: Right, right.

S.M.: I got one first time myself.

T.M.: Yeah.

S.M.: Then Wilson – and I got the other one.

T.M.: The last one you got was you, Arthur and me.

S.M.: Yeah. The Mills Brothers.

T.M.: Yeah. Wilson, he died, he died that same year. He died, he died – well he died the year before because he died kind of in the spring.

S.M.: That's the way we sold fur, when we were trapping, Mills Brothers.

K.F.: Okay. (Laughter.)

T.M.: 'Cause we were all in it together.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Now what were some of the early outdoor shows like? Did they have the same kind of competition or –

S.M.: Oh, they changed some things. They changed mostly skinning. It was, it had to be a legal muskrat, a big one, he was supposed to be prime. Prime muskrat.

K.F.: Okay.

S.M.: Prime muskrat, and he had to be skin – everything decent. He weren't pulled or nothing, everything had to be perfect.

K.F.: Okay.

S.M.: But now then they don't do it anymore like that. They just snatch him and he goes any kind of way.

K.F.: Okay.

S.M.: They skin him, they have to be skinned neat.

K.F.: Okay.

S.M.: But they changed that, they did. They changed that a lot like that. And they come back giving bigger prizes. And some of them said I ain't going to do it if they don't give me a certain, certain thing and all that.

K.F.: Okay.

S.M.: Got big money in it. (Laughter.) Got into big money.

K.F.: Got big trophies in it I noticed too.

S.M.: Yeah, got big money.

K.F.: Very big trophies.

S.M.: Yeah.

T.M.: Back when Arthur skinned, they had a jar that you could go to and take a tablespoon, reach in there and – what was it, one minute you had?

S.M.: I think it was one minute.

T.M.: You dip in that jar and get all the money that you – you could keep all the money you could get for one minute.

S.M.: It was filled up with 50-cent pieces.

T.M.: Yeah.

K.F.: Oh, okay.

S.M.: You know, that's a job take a spoon and get much out of it.

K.F.: That's right, that's right. That is a job. (Laughter.)

S.M.: A spoon and get them out.

T.M.: They won't stay on a spoon. A spoon's on an angle.

K.F.: Right. Right. Okay. (Laughter.) Win what you can get.

S.M.: Yeah, \$5 was the big price for the one that got first place. That's what it was for several years.

T.M.: Yeah.

S.M.: Then it got about 10, like that. Then after -- King (phonetic) got it, then they went up in the big money. They got the big money when somebody else took it over from Cambridge. Got bigger money all the time.

K.F.: Okay. When did it move to this part of the county?

T.M.: Huh?

K.F.: When did the show move to this part of the county?

T.M.: In the last 15, 16 years –

S.M.: I don't know how many years it's been up here, Hon. How many? Hon?

SPEAKER: What?

S.M.: How many years has that outdoor show been up here?

SPEAKER: I don't know.

S.M.: Been 12, 15 years, ain't it?

SPEAKER: I don't know.

S.M.: Been a right good while.

T.M.: Yeah.

S.M.: It was getting so down in Cambridge there, got so low that nobody wanted to fool with it.

T.M.: They were expecting too much to take in.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: And when it come down here, it didn't – it weren't like that. We didn't expect no big take in, and –

S.M.: It did take in.

T.M.: It did take in. (Laughter.) It really caught on.

K.F.: Right. Right.

T.M.: I've been at it ever since one way or another, helping or you know, with the show and all. Just something I like to do.

K.F.: Yeah, yeah. Seems like a real community thing, like church suppers here too, you know.

T.M.: Yeah, that's right.

K.F.: Brings everybody together.

S.M.: We were picking a goose for – I think, we see the snow coming like that.

T.M.: Good Lord.

K.F.: It's really coming down.

T.M.: It is.

S.M.: I don't think it's going to amount to much. A couple inches, somebody said I think.

T.M.: It would have to. It would have to do some more than this for get a couple inches.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

T.M.: -- got it, bet on that.

K.F.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Now how do you have to change your trapping when, say, the marsh is frozen overnight, some parts of it are?

T.M.: If it's froze over, you can see the bubbles where it goes.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: That's easier trapping.

K.F.: Oh.

T.M.: That's the easiest trapping.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: Rest of it's hard.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: Of course it can be, it can be hard when it froze up too because it could freeze too hard.

K.F.: Right.

T.M.: And the more you cut ice, you cut it out today, when you come back tomorrow, it's that much thicker. If it's that thick today, it'll be that thick tomorrow, almost double its size or its depth.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: And you can finally cut until you can't cut. I've done that.

K.F.: All right.

T.M.: Took trap, bring it right on in. Every time he'd go. Muskrat won't work underneath the snow.

K.F.: Oh, okay. So do they just sort of hibernate at that point or –

S.M.: He feeds, but he don't come away from his home.

T.M.: He don't come away from the house.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: He comes – he'll feed under, way underneath he'll feed on those roots, carry them right back in the house.

K.F.: Right.

T.M.: And when it thaws up and you can – or some snow goes away where you can trap, when you see where you think it'll lead, first thing you know, when that tide come in and then that tide start back out, then that's when his leads start clearing out. You'll get nothing but filth in your trips. Trip every one of them.

K.F.: Really?

T.M.: Muskrat's not dumb.

K.F.: Okay.

T.M.: All that cutting comes back out.

K.F.: Right.

T.M.: That's the first thing comes out instead of him.

K.F.: Okay. Okay. So what tricks do you guys have to outsmart the muskrat?

T.M.: There's none.

K.F.: There's none.

T.M.: You just wait him out.

K.F.: Okay, patience.

T.M.: That's right. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Okay. Now how do you all get prepared for trapping season?

T.M.: For what?

K.F.: How do you all get prepared for trapping season? What do you have to do, is there anything?

T.M.: Have to cut holes for to put traps on, wash traps up, we oil them up in the spring when we put them away, and we have to wash them off and get with – set them back in.

K.F.: Okay. Well can I see this retired trap?

T.M.: Yeah. (Laughter.) Want me to go get it, Shriver?

S.M.: What?

T.M.: That trap.

S.M.: It's back there in the barn.

K.F.: Or I can come out with my camera and take a photo. Would that be easier?

T.M.: Whatever.

K.F.: All right.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)