

Interview Log

Interviewee: Bill Cummings

Tape #: MAAF/KF/MD/FT3.2.99.239/327

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

Date: 3/2/99# **of Sides:** 2

Location: Tilghman Island MD

Topic: shad fishing, pound netting, haul seining in upper bay and around Tilghman

Corresponding Photography Log #: MAAF/KF/MD/PS3.2.99.297-203; 212-232

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Roy and Colleen Sadler recommended that I contact Bill Cummings as a local waterman/artist. They also said that he was the most respected waterman on Tilghman and someone who needed to be interviewed. We met at his home, he was relaxed and conversational I quickly realized that his knowledge of the shad fishing industry in the Susquehanna river and experiences there haul seining would be invaluable to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's fishing project. In addition, his work was fantastic and worthy of exhibition, however, he has sold all of it and is no longer making any more paintings. We stood in the kitchen and talked, he told stories and I snapped photos of his sketches. Later I visited Higgins Crab House to take photos of his paintings that are on display there, collecting grease and grime.

BEGIN SIDE A

Who buys Bill's paintings: big business men, New Englanders, people from FL; strung out across country. Suddenly quit making paintings.

Showing me sketches [some sound bumps]

How he starts a painting; materials he uses to paint on; reading books; Gray underpainting [griselle technique]; sketch first, do studies, then enlarge them and put on canvas or board, masonite etc. then do griselle underpainting [grey tones only for entire painting], then glaze over with the colors

Gary Fairbanks owns one, still here on Tilghman; if he liked the grays he wouldn't add the color glazes

Channy Ike; painting slang for doubler crabs; goes through what the sketches are about briefly

[need to possibly look at Bill's paintings from an Art History point of view and look at the elements of Old Master works in them and then the parts that are more like social realism of the 30s and 40s. How do they blend together to actually capture the feel of working the water. What do these two styles lend to the pictures? How do they perfectly enhance the feeling of work and what it was like.]

other paintings up to Higgins crab house

how he started with watercolors and ended up with oil and some acrylic

he did this work at night after working the water, making sketches. Then enlarge them;

how he would type up descriptions of the work depicted in the paintings to accompany them when people bought the paintings. That way they would know something about the work.

Another painting is in O.C.

He never crabbed until later in life; had always fished; pound netted up the susquehanna then in the summer would seine haule around Tilghman and drift net around the bay; how they didn't have any radios or lorands back then; if you broke down had no contact

"you were in an ass of trouble if you broke down"

ducks down tight: his favorite painting, daughter has water color; painting from his memory as a kid; shooting marbles called "ducks down tight"

composition is more difficult than the painting of it; showing me photos of him pound netting recently

how pound netting is making a comeback; but not catching herring and shad like they did at the head of the bay; two pickled herring factories one was Tilghman packing co. and the other was in Havre de Grace. Now catching rock mostly; more about he photo of him pound netting

articles about him from wateman's gazette and from national fisherman.

How he got his son off the water; didn't want him working it;

Pound netting returning to Tilghman; drew diagram for one young guy who is doing well now; first time it's been back for 20 years; first herring left and then the shad; they were

the money fish; Tilghman packing collapsed after that and then the one in Havre de Grace; shad and herring gone. [Agnes ?]

Would leave in April; 5-6 head in a crew; took 8 hours to get to the head of the bay; rented a shanty up there; lived in that for 3 months; set nets and stakes then fished them for 3 months; and by June 4 had to have the poles out and nets off and then come home; this for herring and shad; herring were the big money fish;

Tilghman packing company hired 100-150 people to cut fish; Vita foods;

"how did you all entertain yourselves when you were working up at the top of the bay?"
"that was a very hard thing to do, because no cars" play cards, talk; not much entertainment through the week got up at 2 a.m. got lots of sleep "because if you fell down the man behind you would have to step in and take your slack and you didn't want to put that kind of pressure on anybody"

about 15 miles from town, got \$30-40 a week; somebody owned the shanty and they rented it;

how fish stopped immediately; very quick; stopped fishing up there when age 22 or something;

drift netting in winter; treacherous back then; ice wind, no communications with the shore. Lost a lot of good watermen back then; bay would freeze over then could walk on it;

set double hearts at head of bay no pockets; double heart leader and grip; set only 4 nets all they could handle; if high river would come down you had to take them off and put back on; lot of work to it;

skinned the poles on the shore; tarred the nets; cotton nets; "damn stuff would almost kill you" the tar; tar in big pot the size of his kitchen; cotton nets when drift netting too;

how crabbing was a let down "it was like going backwards" didn't crab until he was 40 something; prefers fishing;

seine hauling: everyone would pay their way into it; 9 head working it then 9 shares had to pay in to get the rig; same with drift netting you owned your third; split wages;

worked up the bay in spring because that was the only thing to do; either that or go eeling which he didn't like; particular what he did

effects of Agnes; thinks it went half way down the bay, all the trash and etc. start of the decline of water business was Hazel and then Agnes was it; too much fresh water from these storms;

20 or 30 shad fishermen up and down the NorthEast river; after agnes everyone out of business; always something to look at with their lanterns etc.; alive with fish; sit on the bank and watch them hear them;

stories of fishing:
hard winter break down story

never went out by yourself back then;

"more room to stretch out in the old days, not as many boats"

capt. Of the crew of the pound netters; sketch of him; first capt. He ever worked with;
stories of the capt.;

'oyster shuckers': from a little place on one of the rivers; little shucking house; owned by the fluharty's [this is also a VA eastern shore name]

[I go to get a new roll of film, explain project to wife]

crew; segregation of crew up the bay; black guy ate at card table; named Chester; all worked side by side, good friends, but wouldn't eat with them or sleep with them; story of chester

learning anatomy for paintings;

working all night when haul seining; locating fish; hauling for croaker;

what he likes about fishing

description of life in the camp; what the cabin looked like; all while pound netting; never had a bath; but in summer you were always overboard working haule sienes so always clean.

Jokes:

"one day come down aboard the boat and this was to go crabbing early in the morning and the back of my boat I had a big organ that had come out of a church somewhere. So I couldn't hardly get aboard the boat for it. I walked aboard the boat, seen this thing and I knew I had to heave somebody help me get it off. So when the boys were coming down her going crabbing, I got down on the organ and started playing it and singing at the top of my voice. And I've had televisions in my cabin, they tie boat all up with rope--one joke after another. And this goes on today. If they think it will get a laugh"

Coordinating the pull on pound and hauls; using hollers or chants; just had to be in coordination;

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Borrowing things to copy and bring back. Gathering up papers.

Started painting when age 25; in the service used to paint things on people's jackets; really liked putting people in the paintings enjoyed it more after that;

Shows me his art library; room full of old master books;

[we wander off to next room, can still hear us]

copies of old masters that he did

jean his wife would like them all back

jerry Janda and Lawrence Murphy; the Gall brothers; all pound netting now;

real mystery is what happened to the herring and shad;

importing the poles from dorchester and hoopers island; hard to find the woods around to get the poles; used to have a horse to haul out the poles;

pulling up the poles back then with no mechanical help, had to do it by hand; had 4 hernia operations;

setting the poles;

Garland Phillips: young guy who died 10 years ago lost whole crew pound netting;

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