

Interview Log

Interviewee: Virgil Ruark, Jr. **Tape #:** 27⁸

Interviewer: Virginia Jenkins
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Comments:

BEGIN SIDE A

VT: Can you give me your name and where and when you were born so we can see what the - how we're doing here?

V.R: My full name?

V.J.: Please.

V.R: Virgil Ruark, Junior. Born November 15^m, 1953.

V.J.: And where?

V.R: Cambridge, Maryland.

V.J.: Okay. You were saying that you're the grandson or your father was the grandson of Charles H. Parks?

V.R: My father was the grandson. My great-grandfather started the business, and I think somewhere late 40's, he turned it over to his son, which was Sam Parks, and then in 1970, Sam Parks sold the business to my father and his brother, which is Kenneth Ruark. They had been watermen all their life. Of course, like I said, they were grandchildren of Charles and nephew of Sam, so Sam wanted to keep it into the family, so he come to them first whether they'd be interested or not, so they bought it in 1970 from him and just kept the same names where it'd been operating all the years under the same name, just didn't change nothing in that respect of it.

V.J.: And when did you get involved in the business?

V.R: Well I started work here myself in 1974. 19, I guess 1992, we incorporated and I become president of Charles H. Parks and Company 1992.

V.J.: How did your great-grandfather come to start a business here? Was he a waterman?

V.R: Probably in his early years, I'm sure he probably was because that was, in this territory, that was probably the biggest way of making a living would be the watermen providing for your families and stuff And I guess after being on the water for a while, he wanted to venture in a different direction, so I guess he wanted to try the packing industry of it.

V.J.: And that was 1917?

V.R: 1917 is what I've been told, yeah.

V.J.: Did they start with oysters?

V.R: I'm sure they done crabs during the crabbing season and then they also done, back in them days, they also done oysters during the oyster season also. From what I can understand, the - from what my father told me, I think they shucked oysters here until 1948. I think that's the last year the oysters were shucked.

V.J.: And why did they stop?

V.R: I really don't know. I don't know whether it was health problems, or whether it was, you know, problems with the availability of oysters, or whether it was feasible, you know, making a dollar at that time. I don't know.

V.J.: So you told us that the business was first started down in Windgate..

V.R: From what I was told, yeah. Some point over on Wmdgate, yeah. I don't know if it was - can't say for sure because I'm not real sure.

V.J.: And then moved here to Fishing Creek about in the -

V.R.: I would guess somewhere in the late, real late 20's, I would think. He was at another location just up the road here, and from my understanding, it was that that establishment burnt down, and this place was being built at the time or had been built, which was in 1933, and he just rented this place for four, five, six years, something like that, and then he bought this place.

V.T.: During the depression?

V.R.: Yeah, I guess so.

V.J.: Guess he was doing pretty well.

V.R.: Well, of course, the depression, was that the early 30's, mid 30's, or all through the 30's. I don't - so maybe he got a good deal, I don't know. Maybe the guy that built it early needed money, you know. I mean I don't know.

V.J.: Did they pack oysters or sell them in the shell? They shucked them?

V.R.: No, they packed them, They were shucked and packed here.

V.J.: Where were the customers? Do you know?

V.R.: The bulk of the customers was in Baltimore, mostly through the wholesale fish market that was downtown at the time. I think he also has some - of course, as far as the oyster customers, well I'm not even sure of the oyster customers, but like I said, that was way before my time.

V.J.: Do you know how they were shipped to Baltimore?

V.R.: I would say either between truck or I think I've heard some stories, maybe by railroad cars too. I'm not sure.

V.J.: Not by steamboat?

V.R.: Possibly. 'Cause I know there was a steamboat wharf down Hoopersville at the time. And my father was - I've heard him talk about - it could possibly be some of them were shipped by steamboat.

V.J.: Have you ever processed fish here?

V.R.: Not to my knowledge, no.

V.J.: Do you know how many employees there were in '33?

V.R.: Not really, but I guess I could estimate from what I think I've heard. It was probably in the neighborhood of probably 30, 40 people, probably, something like that.

V.J.: How many people do you employ today when you're operating?

V.R.: Local-wise, of course the only thing we do here now is crab picking. And local-wise, I have two pickers. We use Mexican labor to fill the void. After that, normally we run, as far as crab pickers go, we run 15, 20 people according to whatever demand would be, what we think it would take to fill our orders and stuff And I probably have three or four manager jobs in between that. But as far as the actual crab pickers itself, it was probably 15, 20 now with only two of them being local.

V.J.: When was the peak, do you think, of employment here?

V.R.: Oh, I would say probably about, I'm just guessing, probably in the 50's or I would say sometime in the 50's, I guess. I would just guess probably seemed like during maybe the early or mid-60's is when maybe more people had a tendency to go to Cambridge to get a job or something. It's just a seasonal thing by trade, and it's no benefits, nothing like that, offered. So I guess transportation got a little better, roads got a little better and that kind of stuff So I guess they went, I'll say that timeframe they probably went to Cambridge started looking for work more so.

V.J.: When did you start using Mexican workers?

VA.: 1991 was our first year.

V.J.: What did it take to do that?

V.R.: You go through a - you go through the state unemployment agency first, and you have, you know, paperwork and ads has got to be run in papers and all that kind of stuff. Then you have to go through the Department of Labor for your second phase. And then for your third phase, you go through Immigration. The whole trail, paper trail probably takes two months from beginning to end, close to two months, I'll say, from the time you start 'til - so you're finally approved where all you have to do at that point is just make a phone call and you're on the way.

V.J.: I noticed in January, there was an ad in the Daily Banner for 40 openings.

V.R.: Right.

V.J.: Is that part of your paper trail?

V.R.: Right. It's a process you have to go through.

V.J.: Did you get any local response?

V.R.: Had one, one local response. And -

V.J.: Was that to prove that you need work?

V.R.: Yeah, that's to prove to the state that you need workers, that you advertise for work, and you know, you didn't get enough responses to what you would need to work with, so then that shows them the proof that yeah, okay, you've gone through your proper procedures, then they grant you permission to proceed on from that point.

V.J.: For the Mexican workers, do you get the same people year after year?

V.R.: Hopefully, that's the way it works because you've done spent time and money in training them. And I've had one girl, I've had one girl for I guess this will be her, what, 11th year I guess it would be. Anyway, I've had one girl the whole complete time. I've had another girl all but one year of that. Rest of them, I'd say five or six more of them probably four or five years, something like that. The idea is if, you know, if you can keep them coming back, then you've cut down, you know, you've got qualified people that know how you like to work and you know what their work potential is at that point. But it's a two-way street. It has to be, you know, agreeable where both of you want to continue on. If they want to come back, and I don't particularly want them, then they won't be here. Or if I want them to come back and they don't want to come back for whatever reason, then they're not going to be here, you know. But hopefully, when you get them and get them trained, you hope it's a long-term relationship anyway.

V.J.: Where do they stay?

V.R.: We find housing for them here on the island. They're not, they're not subject to accept that if they don't want that. They can go look elsewhere for their own housing. But so far, so far they've always accepted what housing we've found for them because it's *close* to the work and that kind of stuff.

V.J.: Do you provide transportation?

V.R.: From the local housing here on the island, yes. If it was in Cambridge, I would have to say they'd probably be responsible for their own transportation, you know.

V.J.: Do you take them to the grocery store?

V.R.: Yeah. Once a week, we take them to the grocery store in Cambridge to do their grocery shopping. And they go up town to the Lutheran Mission, Salvation Army,

Fashion Bug, Wal-Mart, get to K-Mart too, I mean that kind of stuff Usually make a day of it.

V.J.: How do you market your products today? Do you use a broker, or do you advertise?

V.R.: No. We - I guess back in, probably 40's or maybe 50's, I don't know what it was, Charles Parks was dealing with a company and wholesale fish market called J.J. McDonald's.

V.J.: In Baltimore?

V.R.: In Baltimore. And to this *day*, he probably handles probably 95 percent. Well, I'd say up to the last couple years, he handled 95 percent of what we sold probably. But we also deal with another broker here on the Eastern Shore. But I'll say 90, a total probably 95 percent, 98 percent probably goes through these two brokers, these two wholesalers. The rest of it might go to outside restaurant or a little bit cash sales, you know, come through here, something like that. Probably 95, 90 percent of it goes to the two wholesalers.

V.J.: You have your own trucks?

V.R.: Yeah.

V.J.: How many?

V.R.: Two, I'll say two that we really put on the road for long distance, for that type of run. I mean we - Baltimore, you know, Baltimore's about as far as we would have to travel, or Jessup, really.

V.J.: And who drives?

V.R.: If we have to make them kind of runs, most time it would be myself. Most of the time, we - what freight we have for them two places, we meet Tidewater Express or Crisfield, they come to Cambridge every day of the week, and we just put it on them and they go ahead and deliver it.

V.J.: What are some of the biggest changes that have occurred in the industry? Mexican labor force would be one.

V.R.: Yeah, definitely. I mean don't have as many crabbers as what you used to have, really. A lot of your, even prior to say five or six years ago, a lot of your crabbers have gone, have turned to fishing, pound netting, that kind of stuff. So I'd say between the Mexicans and then the crabber itself is, most of them is - a lot of them have turned to pound net fishing. Some more of them was just gone to Cambridge and got, you know, better year-round jobs. So I'd say that's the two biggest changes as far as the industry part goes, labor-wise, you know, if you want to count crabber as labor, of course, he's a supplier, you know.

P.T.: But they're independent, aren't they?

V.R.: Yeah, they're independent. Have a right to go where they want to go. Normally, if they start off with you, they'll stay with you unless you have a dispute of some situation, which -

P.T.: I see. About price.

V.R.: Occasionally that will happen about something, you know, with the price or the quality or something like that. But most of the time, the crabbers I got now, I've had one now probably seven or eight years. I've really only got two local crabbers anyway. And I just picked up another one this year. So -

V.J.: Do you ever buy crabs from Virginia or North Carolina?

V.R.: Yes, occasionally. When I need them. I'd rather deal with Maryland crabs as long as I can, but it's not always the case. You have to fill in with something or other.

V.J.: So how does that work, if you need to buy from out of state?

V.R.: Well we had the names of some dealers in Virginia. And most of the time, they'll bring them up here to us if we call for them. In Carolina, we have freight trucks coming in Carolina, or you have different dealers around here that will buy in excess of what they need if you want to place an order with them that, you know, like let's say I can use X amount of crabs tomorrow, if he can get them, if he's in Carolina, he'll buy just that many more crabs, figuring on myself. So -

V.J.: So how often does that happen, or does that happen at a particular time during the season?

V.R.: Last couple years, last couple years, it's been most the time. (Laughter). Until, most of the time until last of September, first of October when you finally get that last, we call it a fall run coming down the bay. Usually at that point you have ample enough to work with here at that point. But up to the end, you probably be, you'll be looking for crabs elsewhere because your local crabbers yourself won't be catching the full amount that you need to operate with.

V.J.: Do you have a brand name?

V.R.: Captain Charlie brand.

V.J.: Does that go all the way back?

VR: Well, no, I think that was something that we just maybe labeled 15, 18 years ago. I don't know, his name, I don't guess he was a captain, but back them days, you know, you always picked the older guys, always picked up the name captain this, whatever your name was, you know. They called him Captain Charlie, so we just, I think really when we switched to plastic cans, we had it put on the can Captain Charlie brand at that time.

V.J.: What about some of the changes in technology, the machinery or equipment?

V.R.: In our case, probably not much. Our ice machine's probably older, it's older than I am. Probably over the years now if you go back all the way back to 1933, you do have an ice machine where before they used to have to buy like block ice and chip it up, cut it up their self.

V.J.: Was their an ice company here in fishing creek?

V.R.: It was a local guy. He had, I guess he dealt with an ice company maybe in Cambridge or something, but it was a local guy here that used to distribute ice to the plants. He had like a storage building or storage place, whatever. So I know he used to deliver block ice around, I guess even home small blocks to people's refrigerators back then when they used to take a smaller block and put in, you know. So I'd say definitely the involvement of the ice machine itself. Used to be boiler-wise, you had cold-fire boilers where you had to start the fire every day and shovel coal and keep coal going to her, and keep pressure and stuff on her, where now you have oil fired or gas fired. Most of them's oil fired I'm sure. So that's, you know, automatic now on that part of it. Refrigeration, didn't have refrigeration back in them days neither. So naturally, refrigeration would be innovation of it.

V.J.: Did you ever try one of those crab-picking machines?

V.R.: Never tried one, no. We looked at, I guess at Meredith and Meredith, I guess it would be, had one. Of course, they got one and Clayton's got one, and there was a guy down in - all three of them, I think, worked together on the project, I think. But we never really looked into it because our theory was from what we seen or heard, you couldn't get any jumbo lump out of it. And that's a big, that's your biggest money getter is the jumbo lump. And it takes, from what I understand, it takes 15, 18 heads to even operate the machine properly to keep it going, you know, if you can start, from start to finish with getting crabs on it and getting, you know, having an assembly line operation. From what I can gather, you're talking about probably 15 head anyway. So we never did really pursue that avenue.

V.J.: What about state regulations, federal regulations? How have they changed the way you do business?

V.R.: I guess the biggest change, I guess the biggest change since I've been here in 1974 is probably the HASIP (phonetic) plan that we have to have in effect and keep updating and all that kind of stuff which I guess has been for the last three years, I don't know, two, three years, something like that.

V.J.: What is that?

V.R.: It's a federal mandated thing where, I mean before you - periodically you checked your coolers and all that kind of stuff anyway, I mean just to make sure everything was up. Now you have to record everything on paper, what time you looked at your cooler, what temperature it was. I mean you're doing your cooking process, you're cooking, you're watching your gages anyway because now you have to record what temperature you cooked at, what time you turned the box on, what time you started the cook process of the crab. So it's just a long paper trail of stuff now of what you always did do, but you got to stop and record all of it now. And I don't know, I guess supposedly it's got its purpose. I don't know if it accomplishes what it's supposed to accomplish or not, my opinion of it.

V.J.: Anybody else in your family work in this business?

V.R.: Well my father and my uncle still work here. I got relatives that, well W.T. Ruark is first cousin to my father. So I mean, and really he's not in the business no more, but Russell Hall Seafood was - well was Sam's brother-in-law, was Captain Charlie's son-in-law was, I guess, a way of putting it, I guess originally. But -

V.J.: What about the next generation?

V.R.: Won't be none. Don't know if the business will last that long or not, to be honest with you, the way things are going. Because with the decline and availability of Maryland meat, I mean used to be, you know, it was so much availability of crabs, you always had Maryland meat. And now the seafood, even the crab part of it alone is like a 12-month thing for restaurants anymore. It more or less used to be, from what I can understand, it was, you know, your crab season run. After that, you had some pasteurized meat. If not, they took it off the menu, but now they try to keep it on the menu 12 months a year. And the foreign crabmeat is available to them 12 months a year. Used to be, probably five or six years ago, the restaurants were probably the first one to try it, to venture into it. And they've more or less accepted a lot of it. Now the wholesaler itself is going into it. And it's something that's hard to compete with. Its meat is very compatible to ours, its -

they're 12 months a year. Right now, it's price compatible to ours. So it's - in some cases, some cases it's prettier than ours. But -

V.J.: Paul, do you have questions?

P.T.: My basic questions have to do with how the building, you know, works, and different rooms and so forth.

V.R.: Well the building, originally, the building was completely built overboard, it's all on pilings.

P.T.: Oh, I see.

V.R.: It was - my father worked up here in the late 40's. It was probably, I think he said probably 10 feet from the shore. And they used to have like ramps, ramps coming through this like garage here, and the doors, wherever you see doors at was ramps, or like a dock built to them, you know.

P.T.: To cross open water?

V.R.: Right. And this oyster-shucking process, they took the shells and just filled in, gradually filled in the land 'til they got it to the building.

P.T.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

V.R.: So but the whole building itself is really completely over water. You know, it weren't built on land. It's not like part of it's on land and part of it's overboard. The whole works is overboard.

P.T.: I see. So it's just a marshy edge to the land, and they -

V.R.: Yeah.

P.T.: So it's a timber frame.

V.R.: Everything, yeah, everything's a timber frame. The building, I think's 30-foot wide and 108 foot long, I believe.

P. T.: Was it sided with, originally, with vertical board or, do you remember -

VA.: Probably before this final siding was put on, it was the - like the two or three-foot rolls of asphalt - you know what I'm talking about?

P.T.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

V.R.: Tar, like tar shingle.

P.T.: Right.

V.R.: That's what was on it. That's what was on it originally, and I'd say 'til 19, somewhere in the mid-70's, mid to late 70's, the vinyl siding was, we put vinyl siding on it at that point.

P.T.: But there was probably wood underneath the tar shingles.

V.R.: Yeah. It was probably -

P.T.: Vertical board.

V.R.: Vertical board like this probably underneath.

P.T.: Right. Often cases, the board and batten was used where they had vertical boards, and then those narrow strips that -

VA.: Probably. I don't know.

P. T.: Have you ever seen any old photographs of the building or complex before --

VA.: No.

P. T.: -- maybe those changes were made?

V.R.: Huh-uh (negative).

P.T.: So this has always been the office, I guess.

V.R.: Originally, yeah. Originally, well originally the office was from this wall right here, right straight down, this part over here was - I believe my father said it had a generator or something.

P.T.: So it was just this little space.

V.R.: Just this little space here was the original office.

P.T.: Okay.

VR: And then I don't know. I think this part here had a generator or something here into it. But then after electricity come to the island, took the generator out and stuff is when they converted the whole works into an office.

V.J.: Do you know when that happened?

VR: I think 1947, '48, maybe. Something like that.

P.T.: Must've been a big change in the operation, just the way it worked, the wiring.

V.R.: Yeah. Yeah.

P.T.: Electric lights. Did they have kerosene or something?

V.R.: Well he had a generator.

P.T.: The generator, okay.

V.R.: He had a generator, so he still had electric. But, of course, a lot quieter anyway.

(Laughter.)

P.T.: So then we have the little hall here or passage to this next room?

V.R.: It's called the packing room.

P.T.: The packing room's the next room?

VR: Yeah.

P.T.: And that included, that's for the crabs -

V.R.: That's where the meat comes through.

P.T.: Oh, I see. The picking room's beyond that?

V.R.: The picking room is the next room beyond that.

P.T.: And that's where the tables are set up?

V.R.: That's where the tables are set up where the people actually pick the crabs, pick the meat out of the crabs.

P.T.: So that basically is all sold the way it has been.

V.R.: Basically. I think they had said originally, along with having tables. And right now we have six tables in there that we can seat 24 comfortably. He said originally, they had tables like more such as the center room, and they had like bins that come off the walls all the way around also.

V.J.: Are they oyster shuckers?

V.R.: Oyster shuckers and crab pickers both, from what I can understand.

P.T.: Yeah, the photographs I've seen are oyster shucking interiors, they have little stalls right around the perimeter of the room inside.

V.R.: So but I guess like in the late 40's when they, when they done with, quit oyster shucking here, they just took them down all together and went with tables and stuff.

V.J.: So was there a heat source for the building, or is it -

V.R.: It's a good question. (Laughter.) I -

P.T.: Does it operate in the winter?

V.R.: Well they shucked oysters in the winter, I mean up until 1948, I mean shucked oysters. So I guess-

P.T.: Must've had a stove.

V.R.: Maybe they had, maybe they had them wood stove or something in the center of the floor or something at the time. I don't know. I do remember, yeah, I do remember it was a chimney, it was a chimney in that picking room at one time, so they probably had a stove, I would say. Either a coal stove or a wood stove. Probably a coal stove, 'cause they used coal and stuff for the boiler, so they probably used coal for the stove too.

P.T.: Well that's about all I can think of.

V.J.: Do you know what part of Mexico your workers come from?

V.R.: Durango. It's - like my workers will come from Durango, somebody else's workers will come maybe from a different area, you know, they all don't come from the same area of Mexico, they're kind of split up. But each company's girls more or less come from the same area, you know.

V.J.: Who trained them in the beginning?

V.R.: We do. I mean we, at the time, we had some Americans -- they're very quick picking up on stuff, you know, looking, watching and observing it and doing. But we had some of the local pickers, at the time we got girls, we had 10 maybe local pickers at that time, and had one or two women work with them to show them what to be done and stuff.

V.J.: Much of a language barrier?

V.R.: Work-wise, I have an interpreter in Cambridge that if I really have to get down to brass tacks, I use her, and she's helped me a lot in some thing. Work-wise, we communicate real well. Now like going to Cambridge doing shopping and whatever, do okay there. If we really had a problem, really a general conversation with them, then it's still a communication barrier.

V.J.: Have you learned some Spanish?

V.R.: I've learned a little bit. And they picked up on, the ones that's been there four or five years picked up on English pretty good too. So it's coming both ways somewhat.

P.T.: Do they work other industries, like vegetables and -

V.R.: You mean do my girls?

P.T.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

V.R.: No. When they're assigned to come up here, they're under an 1-9-4 work permit, which is specifically, that girl is specifically assigned to me.

P.T.: I see.

V.R.: Like Phillips' girls are specifically assigned to him. We can't even legally, if I'm not working today, I can't send my girls up to help him out or vice versa, you know. So they're assigned to us like through the course of the year. When their employment is done here, they had like three or four days to return to Mexico. If they don't return, go elsewhere, at that point they're illegal, they become illegal. So *when* they come up here, because they're under an H-2-B program, is what it's called, and they're specifically assigned to an employer and that's it.

V.J.: I thought you might like to see what we've actually collected about your company, looking at the newspapers and records, and see if anything there looks odd to you.

V.R.: Yeah. Morgan Tolly got to say about their - that's Meredith and Meredith.

V.J.: What is? Okay, Morgan Tolly, I guess, was a student at Salisbury State and wrote a paper about the crab industry.

V.R.: Okay.

V.J.: I found a copy of his paper down at the archives down there.

V.R.: I didn't know he even wrote one. I mean I know Morgan, but I didn't know he'd wrote a paper on -

P.T.: On this business alone or -

V.J.: No, on the crab industry in Maryland.

P.T.: Dorchester County? Oh, Maryland.

V.R.: I mean it says here Charles R Parks and Company packs under his father's name, Captain Charlie, says I'm proud of what I pack and my daddy would be too. I mean, then it's Morgan Tolly. I didn't know -

P.T.: Interviewed him.

V.J.: He may have interviewed him.

V.R.: Interviewed who?

V.J.: Your father maybe. Or maybe you?

V.R.: No.

V.J.: You don't remember that.

V.R.: He didn't interview me, no.

P.T.: How long ago was that? Seventies or 80's?

V.R.: No, it would be in the 80's for Morgan. Yeah, probably mid-80's, late 80's, something like that. Tom could probably tell you as much as I could tell you. I mean he's a historian of the county and stuff.

V.J.: Tom Flowers?

V.R.: Yeah.

V.J.: Yeah. Would you like to keep that?

V.R.: Yeah. I mean, sure. You got another copy?

V.J.: Yup.

V.R.: Okay.

P.T.: We'll be developing more reporting-type stuff I know the Parks and Ruark name from down in Somerset County. Do you have relatives down there?

V.R.: Not that I know of.

P.T.: Different branches.

V.R.: Different branch, I guess it would be. Different limb. (Laughter).

P.T.: Well some of them are in the seafood business too, Parks.

V.R.: Are they? We're not familiar with them.

V.J.: There's a Ruark on the Western Shore too, got a seafood company.

V.R.: Really? Didn't know that. (Laughter).

V.J.: Well thank you very much.

V.R.: You're welcome.

V.J.: This is very helpful.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)