

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Joe Valliant

Oral History # 28

Interviewer: Richard Dodds
Joe Liener

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Topic: Mr. Valliant discussed the history of the W. H. Valliant Packing Co., of Bellevue, MD. See also tapes 19 and 25

Comments: Poor quality of tape recording, voices muffled.

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BEGIN SIDE A

Richard Dodds: There was a study that these operations in this area, and I'm just starting to learn it, but, I'm picking up things on the way out. I got from speaking to Joe was with me when we went to see Robert Valliant now, how's he...

Joe Valliant: Cousin, first cousin.

RD: ...and he gave us quite a bit of information of the Valliant Company and he let us copy some photographs and I found a fire plaque of the company which I gave him a copy which has quite a lot of detail on the packing house.

JV: (Looking at photographs). Oh yes, the offices, I remember that well. In my childhood, both the canning house and the oyster packing house were in operation, but, I have just faint memories of both. The business ceased entirely the year my grandfather died in 1949 and he died in July, and this storage area out here was gone by that time. The warehouses were still there. In fact, we were breaking cans open when I was in my early teens. This was a wonderful place for teenagers to play and the young hoodlums who made up the population around here then. We all congregated happily in this area and fought pitched battles with throwing canning lids in a sort of a primeval Frisbee I guess. You'd get a stack of those things and fling them in that way. I nearly was killed here. I fell through the warehouse. We called it the box factory. I climbed into the second story of it which was just cluttered with endless amounts of junk. I broke through the rotting floor and saved myself by throwing out my arms. But, it was a good 15 feet down. God only knows what the junk was up there. It was just huge piles of stuff. Um, this I believe marks the site of either a garage...there was a garage down here then...in fact the garage is sitting in John Valliant's backyard now.

RD: Is it?

JV: Yeah. That's the building I remember...

RD: It may be one of the only survivors of the company's buildings, right, because they are pretty much all gone now.

JV: This building I'm not familiar with. There was a power plant – an electrical power plant there – and the slate slabs that were the mountings for the switches and the dials are now in my back walk.

RD: Are they?

JV: Yeah.

RD: It's funny where these things wind up.

JV: My grandfather's house would be here I think. These buildings here are too far away. This was a barn and a garage and it had an upstairs in it and in a similar kind of building were smokehouses, outhouses, and ancillary buildings for storage.

RD: Joe, you remember those buildings pretty well, don't you?

Joe Liener: Yeah.

JV: This thing here was the thing that killed you.

RD: Which was that?

JV: It's the shell crushing mill.

JL: Shell grinder.

JV: Yeah. Uh, the decline of the company started I would imagine in the aftermath of World War I. For a few years after the war was over, things seemed like they were pretty flush. My grandfather had big ideas for expansion on the profits that they made for

canning for the government during the war and he bought a tremendous amount of war surplus stuff over at Ft. Meade in an auction including army trucks. They're still in McClellan's saddle (ph) one of several around that my father used when he was young and rode horse back regularly. I remember steel helmets in quantity around there. I think I still have one someplace.

JL: Called a washbasin.

JV: Better than nothing I suppose, but they were the devil. They were a British pattern...

RD: What did they use them for?

JV: Darned if I know; planting stuff in I think, for plants. It was said of him that he would buy a mad dog if the price was right (laughter), but at any rate, this stuff sat in a field across from his house for a long time, in trucks, mostly Fords I think that were built beyond their specifications and they were used into the 30s I believe judging from some of the photographs I've seen.

JL: Probably some internationals in there too.

JV: It may well have been. They were cannibalized endlessly. I remember that. I can remember honeysuckle and poison ivy covered hulks out here. But, the shell crushing mill came at the end of a decline in agriculture. The agricultural economy that began right around ...

JL: They started with synthetic fertilizer and that knocked some of that out.

JV: That may well have been. It probably was why he got into the fertilizer business because he was well aware of things, but ten years after the war was over, American agriculture was in a fairly sad shape. It was due to over production in many cases and a lack of effective marketing, distribution. So by this time he could see a lot of trouble coming. The Great Depression, which began around 1930 helping the stock market crash, had anything to do with his decline except as a cause of the decline of the economy.

JL: Everything in the 20s to the 30s.

JV: At any rate, he mortgaged two or three farms. I think they were the Miles River Neck Farm, the Goose Neck Farm. Do you know where Goose Neck is? Halfway between Royal Oak and Bellevue and the Benoni's Point Farm, which is down Ferry Neck Road and covered just a god awful amount of land. He mortgaged those to build this thing. He bought the machinery second hand after it had been in a fire and he had a number of people down there that worked for him who were shade tree mechanics of varying skills and he believed that they could get this machinery working. But, in fact, that shell mill never turned a day.

RD: Is that right?

JV: It never turned a day. I heard my father use those very words many times, it never turned a day, and so this left him in a vulnerable position and he got cross ways with some politicians in the county and some of them – you can see their names – some of them were friends with the board of directors for Easton National Bank and my grandfather was also a director. He was fully encumbered because of this agricultural problem since he was a director and at that time was a relatively wealthy man. He was asked by his fellow directors to help the bank relieve its burdens by taking over some of these mortgages. So, he was all of a sudden way deep in debt to the bank and when he offended the powers that were at the bank at the time, he was in an awkward (ph)

position, they called a meeting that voted him off the board and then called unemployment (ph) and so this tremendous landowner evaporated overnight. This (unintelligible) a lien and that's the way things were. You can see the names of these people on a plaque in the Maryland National Bank's main office today.

RD: I think the urns outside the entrance way came from the old bank.

JV: They were part of the...

RD: Is that how you got hold of them because of his position at the bank.

JV: The bank was remodeled and for some reason these things have been put up there; he liked them and (unintelligible, voice fades).

JL: Did that Goose Neck Farm take in that whole chunk of land out there?

JV: Down to the Point.

JL: Clear on out there where Harper's sister lives.

JV: So, that wouldn't happen to be land (ph) and that house was independent and the one next to it is where Harry Rogers (ph) lives is independent, but the rest of it was all Goose Neck Farm. My grandfather lost his wife at a pretty early age. I think he was 40 and she was 39 when she died of an ailment...I've never said that before...it was syphilis; and upper respiratory tract infection compounded, of course, by pneumonia, and possibly the misguided intentions of a specialist that he brought down on a steamboat from Baltimore.

JL: I think it was a common illness that was not talked about.

JV: At any rate, a few years later, he was courting a (unintelligible). He was living in the big white house that my grandfather bought at the tip of Goose Neck and my grandfather mentioned to his friend – my grandfather was a steamboat agent at Bellevue – that he was going to see Mrs. So and So that night. So they were sitting in the cool, dark porch after sundown and the steamboat came back down the river and when he got into position to do so, the captain swung his searchlight around and caught him in the light (laughter) and that must have been pretty uncomfortable with a range of about a half a mile. At any rate that certainly put him in Dutch with (unintelligible) ship did not prosper for whatever reason.

JL: There were many (unintelligible) the first boat; I think that had a search light mounted on board.

JV: A useful thing.

RD: So you think that the promise of a shell crushing mill was really the main thing.

JV: That was the final straw. I think the oyster packing business always had its ups and downs. It really did. Today's wretched oyster harvest is pointed at with some hard, but (unintelligible) and the folks that don't know better point to that 15 million bushels they harvested in 1885 as some kind of a benchmark. Well, that harvest was never close to (unintelligible) and it was the result of monstrous over fishing by a horde of vessels. It was just wide open and there were no limits, at least not effective limits in those days and no effective policing of the oystering industry and for some reason, they just dragged the (unintelligible) many bushels of oysters. I doubt if they got more than a penny a piece for a bushel (ph). But, in its heyday, Maryland produced roughly 4 million bushels a year and many years were barely in the 3 and 2 ½ million bushel range and government use of 2 ½ million bushels is the target to shoot at and it's pretty realistic historically. So this oyster business here was probably the business that could have flourished had we not lost out on the (unintelligible).

JL: If you had enough capital to see you through.

JV: That it was in '31 that happened. There was a fire in '31 as well, and I'm not sure what it destroyed, but I've seen postcard pictures of the ruins. In 1933 we had a tremendous summer hurricane, a northeast hurricane. It was just a hell of a storm and the sailing vessels which he had used in his business wound up right here.

RD: We've talked about it off and on quite a bit and we've got as you probably know, we have them the windlass down there and the anchor down there. And they never came off (unintelligible).

JV: No they didn't. They were driven too hard aground. I remember him in his last year, the beginning about the year I was born, that my grandfather's mind began to fail. He was probably 70 when I was born, and he suffered from hardening of the arteries and so he would have memory lapses and I remember very clearly one time when he and my father and a black man and I were standing together down right around here somewhere. There were work boats that were tied up around here. Anyway, we were looking toward the wrecks and he was speaking about bringing them off and I remember the expression on my father's face, which was a pained one. Sometimes he wouldn't remember names. It never seemed that his memory would fail me in my case, but he sometimes could not remember names.

RD: From what I could gather about him, he was quite an entrepreneurial type character. He would go into a lot of different businesses. I know he went into a lot of canning figs

JL: He tried experimenting with a lot of stuff.

JV: Yes he did and it is said that he invented a machine or had built for him a machine that would wash spinach, and that was the first thing he started.

JL: Well, he was growing a lot of spinach and canning them.

JV: Yeah. I remember breaking open some of the old cans of spinach and, lord, what if I had died of botulism.

JL: He was even trying to can cantaloupes.

JV: Yeah. I remember hearing of that, too.

JL: In the can was some figs, not too many.

JV: And we still have fig bushes that he planted. Another thing that he tried casting around was he tried opening a fishing camp somewhere over near Trappe, and not being a retiring person at all, he invited President Hoover who was known to be a fisherman to come try his luck (laughter), and I have a letter from Mr. Hoover's secretary declining the invitation.

RD: Is that right?

JV: I would love to have seen the original invitation itself.

RD: Did he also have a fish fertilizer business?

JV: He ground up fish. I remember signs very well that—I imagine (unintelligible) there was sort of a stink around the place lying there alive (ph).

JL: (Unintelligible) oil.

JV: Yeah.

JL: (Unintelligible).

RD: There were a lot of things going on at different times wasn't there? The oystering part was the one thing that seemed to carry through.

JV: Yeah, it was the last (unintelligible). I remember the people in there shucking oysters and singing (ph) (voice fades).

JL: That was the one of those things that I remember about the piles of oyster shells.

JV: They were enormous.

JL: They were higher than the boiler factory (ph).

JV: The shell piles were right about out here.

JL: Right there in the middle just on the other side of the boiler room (ph).

JV: And this was by the kiln (ph) for lime burning. The shell piled around (unintelligible). (Quality of voice is poor).

JD: Harry (ph) said some of the shuckers lived in one of the camps on Phillips' field (ph).

JL: This house that was a big red one, and there was a smaller one back here I think. This was for the cannery workers who worked in the summer. They were city people and would come down on the steamboat all over the Eastern Shore and this (unintelligible) camp out (ph). My only experience in cannery operation is very much removed from all of this because I worked for two summers in my middle thirties as a cooker mechanic at Fox Foods in Queen Anne and some things don't change. We had in my second year migrant labor from Mexico who had settled in the area and they were hailed to be the best crew that had been there for a long, long time because of their attitude. They were certainly a lot less trouble for the management than the people drawn from the local area. In fact, the year before there had been some kind of difficulty in which one of the management personnel was severely injured in a fight. He was attacked by some of those people who were working there and so the management at that time made a decision that they were not going to have stuff like this go on anymore.

JL: There was bound to be some trouble and resentment there from the people around here having the outsiders...

JV: I never saw any of it, but anyway, what happened was that one summer we had local people and the next summer Mexicans and they spoke little English. The crew boss and I grew to know each other well. In fact, we had lived in Houston roughly the same and I was really familiar with his neighborhood because I had business in that area at that time and I remember passing a street on which he lived and he knew where I lived there because I didn't live too far from the Astrodome, but he had contacted relatives in I think Monterey and had brought up this group of docile, hard working, energetic people who had no more (unintelligible) in mind than getting hold of the Yankee dollar (ph) and passing the summer (unintelligible).

JL: And Monterey was a hot bed place.

RD: Were most of the cannery workers; were they then black like the shuckers then?

JV: Yeah. The people who worked here during the summer were white and they came from Baltimore and they were middle (unintelligible) and collectively (unintelligible) and they tended to avoid them and the Blacks did too, I assume, because they did not speak English or much English and they were clearly quite foreign in their ways. I've seen somewhere a picture that gave me the idea that some of these people were (unintelligible) from Eastern Europe and (unintelligible).

JL: They brought their customs with them...

JV: Some of them. But anyway, the canning house would go both day and night when the season was on because (unintelligible) particularly high apparently.

JL: (Unintelligible).

JV: I can remember the spinning tables in operation; the thing that went around in the center and (voice fades) and in the heat of the day people picking up lumps of salt that

were part of the ingredients (voice fades). And I found out why they did that, because if you think about it, (unintelligible) 110 (unintelligible) which I cared for (unintelligible).

RD: You'd take the salt and wash (voice fades).

JV: (Unintelligible) but made you feel better.

RD: I understand your grandfather was a little bit tight at times about when he was buying oysters. He would strike a pretty hard bargain from some of the watermen.

JV: Well, that's formula for success of oyster packers. He would buy cheap and sell it dear and they would go back and forth quite a bit. There are a few old folks left in Bellevue that remember him and remember working for him. I talked to a man that I had not suspected had anything to do with my grandfather – Bo Bo Tenant (ph) who is about 60 and (unintelligible) and he worked for my grandfather as a boy and he said my grandfather was always interested in seeing that he got value for money and tended to be a pusher. He was stocky and strong built and not very big as I remember. He bore a superficial resemblance I thought to Teddy Roosevelt although my grandfather was a reconstructed democrat in politics as far as I know. He was postmaster. He was judge at the election out here in the office my father inherit (ph). (Unintelligible).

RD: Quite a local man of means.

JV: He had a largest payroll in Talbot County at one time and was sure that the people who worked for him voted. Now, how they voted, I don't know whether he offered any advice, I couldn't say, but I think if he did, he would not be the first (ph). He regarded taxation as theft. Quite the opposite of (unintelligible). I have a round robin letter that he apparently fired off to sundry positions of power denouncing the tax (unintelligible) and advising them that he had been tearing down buildings on the property to avoid the taxes and the money is being misappropriated and should be put back into the war effort. He tried oyster propagation in a number of ways; one of which was apparently used to build suspended culture (ph). Nowadays, it takes some kind of a loaded (unintelligible). He was (unintelligible) in hard wire and the mesh was about like that – bigger than an index card – one of the bigger index cards. They'd roll them up and send the spats overboard and when the oysters would grow, then they'd knock them off. It didn't work for reasons that are pretty obvious and so they (unintelligible) stay in the ice and just cut them off (unintelligible) right at the wharf. They had so many of these on the wharf, but suspended culture has never worked, will never work, and people (voice fades).

JL: (Unintelligible) a lot of that stuff down here at the mouth of Harris Creek. The (unintelligible) was all right but when you got down to (unintelligible).

JV: Oddly enough, the oyster reproductions affected certainly at different depths (ph). I think probably also he had trouble because of the waste material that was put into the water which is all manner of organic stuff. The problem of organic waste material creates a tremendous demand for dissolved oxygen and the water (unintelligible) in oxygen nothing can live in it.

JL: It's starved out.

JV: Now today's waste materials are far more dangerous because most of them tend to be biocides because there wasn't much of that around, but we put everything in the water.

JL: There are lots of reasons (unintelligible) were around so they could dispose of the stuff.

JV: He also had a way of trying to increase his crops he had by experimentation. I can remember truck loads of tomato wastes spread on the open fields. I can also remember a

shed over on one of the farms he owned which was at the junction of St. Michaels and Bellevue Road and it was full of crab pickings in the last stages of dissolution and (unintelligible) filled up (unintelligible) and shoveled them out onto the land. The crab picking truckers found it real hard to follow that road in all that ...

JL: Yeah, especially when it splashes out on your car.

RD: (unintelligible) do any canning of oysters as well?

JV: Yeah, he tried that too. He even canned oyster stew. What happened was that during the bad times, he made sure that all the people who lived around him at least didn't go hungry, no matter what else. (Unintelligible) any of the canners out there the same way (voice fades). He brought in sides of beef and when the oyster season was brought to a halt by bad weather, particularly ice, and he made sure credit was extended at the store up here...

RD: I got some photographs of it.

JV: ...and credit was extended and when remotely possible it would be paid back and he made sure that the people had something to eat. I can remember a number of people speaking to me of this. There's also a self defense measure in terms of (unintelligible) I suspect because he was the only one in the neighborhood who had anything to speak of and I think because of the way he was brought up, it would have been hard on him to (unintelligible). He was born around 1870 (unintelligible) and his father was evidently a highly intelligent man, but (unintelligible). My father said that old Captain Sam, his grandfather, was a condescending doctor (unintelligible). The only conclusion I can draw about a condescending doctor might have been something like a chiropractor or herb doctor or something like this. The 19th century was just rife with all kinds of quackery and mail order courses...

JL: Medicine men...

JV: Yeah and mail order courses were nothing new. they had

END SIDE 1

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.