

Interview Log

Interviewee: Donald Todd

Tape #: OH-

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond

of Tapes: 1

Date: March 1, 2001

of Sides: 1

Location: In the folklife office at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

Topic: Skipjacks, 1930's-70's, week away from home, dredging with sails, *Rebecca Ruark*, *Lady Katie*, Todd Family, Emerson Todd, Wilson Todd, *Sally Bramble*, *J.T. Leonard*, Ballard Biscuits, working the Choptank River, Accidents and Insurance, Depression, Bill Buck, *Nellie Byrd*, Orville Parks, *Rosie Parks*, Gene and Ralph Wheatley, raising children, Mary Todd Tyler, Scott Todd, Save our Skipjack restoration project.

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments:

Donny Todd has been working at the museum while his son's skipjack the *Lady Katie* is on the rail way as part of the Skipjack Restoration Project. The interview took place early in the morning before he went to the boat yard. Donny was very nervous about being recorded but did well. As we started recording, he began rubbing a paper across the table in front of the mic and I interrupted the interview briefly to ask him to stop.

At one point in the interview Donny becomes upset when remembering a drowning so we stopped recording and took a break. Donny brought several historic photos for the museum to copy and he has some Super 8 footage he would donate a copy of if we can find someone to do the reproduction.

BEGIN SIDE A

S.D.: All right, let me begin. Today is March 1st, I'm with Donald Todd, and we're doing an interview, and you used to work on the *Rebecca Ruark*, your dad owned the *Rebecca Ruark*?

D.T.: That's correct, yes.

S.D.: And the year is 2002. So tell me about where were you born?

D.T.: Where was I born? I was born in Dorchester County, Cambridge, Maryland Hospital. Parent -- son of Emerson Todd and Linda Todd. It was back in 1937.

S.D.: What did your dad do?

D.T.: My father worked on the water all his life. He started very young to help support a large family.

S.D.: Hold on one second.

D.T.: Okay.

S.D.: Let's not, if you cannot touch this --

D.T.: 'Cause you can hear that?

S.D.: Yeah.

D.T.: Yeah, okay. Okay, start all over again?

S.D.: No, that's okay. You can go on.

D.T.: Oh, we're still being taped?

S.D.: Yeah.

D.T.: Okay. Yeah, he had to go to work very young to support a large family, and he worked on the water all of his life. Of course, when I got out of high school, it was an opportunity for me to do so also, so that's what I did.

S.D.: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

D.T.: I just had one brother. He worked on the water for a while, but he -- he didn't like it for some reason, so he went to work on -- what do you call, watermen call -- he went to work on the land, get a land occupation.

S.D.: And how long did you -- what age did you first go on the boat?

D.T.: I started when I -- I guess was big enough and intelligent enough to go to work, which was about 11 or 12 years old. I had a boat of my own. Wasn't very big, but I made a living out of it. For a person who was single, and a person who was 12 or 13 years old which didn't need much money, so I didn't have to work very hard.

S.D.: So you started working at 12 and 13?

D.T.: I did. That's the truth, yes. It was, it was very young. Like I said, it was very, it was a small boat. I guess she was about 25 foot long. No cabin, and it was -- it was what I wanted to do.

S.D.: What kind of boat?

D.T.: It was a wood boat with a six-cylinder engine into it. Like I said, no cabin. It was, it was my first boat. I still remember it. I have a picture of it. And after that, I just got to a bigger boat, bigger engines, and got involved more into the catching of seafood, more expensive. And, of course, here I am 65, and don't regret any of it.

S.D.: What were you catching originally, crabs?

D.T.: Crabs. That was first. And then when I got big enough, got out of high school, I like to work with dad aboard the drudge boat, *Rebecca T. Ruark*. That was from about

'56, 1956, the first week I went with him, it was, it was hard work. I only weighed about 130 pounds, and here I was aboard, aboard his boat with muscular men, and I said to myself the first week, I said if I ever get off this thing, I'll never go back to work on it again. But I got paid, I think it was around 85 or \$90 that first week, which was a lot of money then. And after that, it was, I think, 15 seasons later or 15 years later I quit and went to do something else.

S.D.: What were some of your thoughts the first day when you got on that boat?

D.T.: I knew what to expect. It was hard work. I knew it was going to be a long, long week. You left early Monday morning and you got back home Friday evening. You spent the nights aboard, and that's primarily where you went. I mean you didn't go anywhere. It was aboard a boat for five days. And you were so confined, that was your place where you worked, and where you eat, and where you slept. And you had no communication with anyone. We didn't have any VHF, no CB radio, no way to communicate back in those days. It was -- that was a long time ago when I first started.

S.D.: What did you do to pass the time?

D.T.: Worked. (Laughter.) It was mostly work. But if there were days when the wind would fall out, I would get into -- each drudge boat carried a skiff in those days in case you had to make some kind of repairs outside, outside the hull or do something. Every boat, every drudge boat carried a skiff. Nowadays they do not do that. But I would get into this skiff, and go shoot ducks, or go run ashore and walk around the marshes. But that's -- it wasn't much of that either. When the wind would pick up, I'd have to get back aboard the boat.

S.D.: About how many people were on the boat?

D.T.: We had a -- dad had a crew of himself, including himself. A full crew would be seven. That would be six in the middle of the deck, plus him back aft. That's what being successful was all about was your crew. If you had a crew who did not want to work, you could not catch your 150 bushel limit, which you could do in those days. It all depended on the quality of your crew, how much they wanted to work.

S.D.: Do you remember any of the names of the crew members?

D.T.: Only myself. (Laughter.) And that's been a long time ago. It's been a long time ago. I cannot remember any crew members.

S.D.: Were they family members?

D.T.: Only on Saturdays when we would go out just -- that would just be for one day. My brother and my nephew and my son. That would be just about it. That would take care of Saturday.

S.D.: And this was on the *Rebecca*, right?

D.T.: That was on the *Rebecca T. Ruark*. Like I said, it belonged to my father. He had it for several years. He had three different drudge boats. I say drudge boats. No one ever mentioned the name of skipjack in those days. That word was just never used. The word skipjack. It's used now. It's, of course, a different generation now. But we never, it was never called a skipjack in those days. It was called a drudge boat, D-R-U-D-G-E

S.D.: Do you remember the other boats who were out, about how many boats were out with you when you were drudging at that time?

D.T.: It was several boats. Like my uncles, I had three uncles, and they had three drudge boats, including dad, which was four. Four in one family. That was, you know,

that was a lot of drudge boats in one family. If someone, one of them got into trouble, it would always, always be a brother. They always got along, no arguing. They were good drudgers. But it was, like I said, it was unusual for to have that many boats in one family.

S.D.: Who -- who were the boats? What were the boats, and who were the captains?

D.T.: My uncles' names were Wilson Todd, he had the *Sally Bramble*. She, she was hauled up, the last -- she was hauled up yacht maintenance, and she was in such bad shape that they took a backhoe and mashed her, and she was put in a dumpster and hauled away. And my uncle, William Todd, he had the *Nellie Byrd*, and she was sold to a fellow down Tilghman Island. And she's still drudging today. And my uncle Cook, Cook Todd, he had the, he had the *J.T. Leonard*. And she was brought here to the museum. And I think that's where she was dismantled here at the museum.

S.D.: Then your dad's, which was the *Rebecca Ruark*.

D.T.: The *Rebecca T. Ruark*. She's still drudging. Wadey, Captain Wadey Murphy's got her. She's out at Tilghman Island now. He's got her in good shape. I like to see her once in a while.

S.D.: Tell me about the very early days when you were a little boy. Do you remember watching for the boats?

D.T.: No. I was on the boats. Most -- I went with my father. He used to carry me in his arms. I remember him carrying me in his arms aboard his boat. We didn't have a vehicle in those days. We -- in those days, you had your home close to the -- close to the creek or to the place where you kept your boat, and we could walk. We were within walking distance of your, of his boat. And that's when I started. He would carry me, I was so small. And that's where I began. I've been at it ever since.

S.D.: What did you do? Did you get to play on the boat?

D.T.: No. No. It's so far back, I can't remember what I did. But it's been a long time ago.

S.D.: I've talked with you a little bit about your first day. Do you remember anything about the sounds or the smells?

D.T.: That was the, that was the worst. To be thrust into a situation like that, and I was just out of high school. It was unbelievable, the amount of work, and the noise, and the cold. It was, it was a difficult time for -- difficult week. But I overcame that.

S.D.: Who cooked on the boat? Do you remember anything about the cook or the food?

D.T.: There was usually one who was designated who was the cook. He was a cook from the very beginning to the end. It wasn't a different cook every day. He would start cooking the meal. He would be the first one up and the last one to go to bed aboard. He had a few advantages over the regular culling crew. He could quit early, earlier in the day to go start the meal. The meals we had were mostly fried. But he would make some soup occasionally. Until the rolls or Ballard Biscuits came out, all the bread had to be made by hand because you -- maybe Monday or Tuesday you could use light bread, but he would have, I remember he had to make it. But like I said, when the tubes of Ballard Biscuits came out on the market, we had those all the time for bread.

S.D.: How about sleeping?

D.T.: We had a, we had a wood stove. We did not have a kerosene stove. That's how far back we go. We had a wood stove. And when you first went to bed or got in your bunk, it was comfortable. But later on that night when the fire would die down, it got

cold. It got extremely cold in those bunks. You can imagine being under a deck of a boat in the wintertime, and we had -- we had special made -- mom would make special thick quilts. But still, that -- you would go to bed with your clothes on that you finished working with, except for your rain suit. You had the same clothes on five days. And, of course, those five nights also.

S.D.: What do you remember about the quilt?

D.T.: She would make it out of flannel. It would be real thick. It was a homemade quilt. She would make, they were not as big as a regular quilt. But they were, you had about three of them. But still, it wasn't enough to keep you warm. After, after maybe early morning, you would start to get cold, and it was, it was just a cold, it was just a cold time. You would wake up in the mornings, and you didn't have a warm bathroom to go to. You would step out on deck, and you would wash your face and brush our teeth out on deck, and that would be the start of your day.

S.D.: Did -- do you remember what you had for breakfast?

D.T.: We had, for breakfast, like any other breakfast food. Something that was quick to make, something that would hold you until lunchtime. It was a long stretch from breakfast until lunchtime. You could not, you know, pick up a lunch box or go get something to eat. It was just steady working until it was lunchtime again. We ate, we ate lunch in two shifts. I was fortunate enough to eat first shift all the time because I was captain's son. That was the only advantage I ever had aboard the boat. I worked just as hard as anyone else. But lunchtime was a long stretch until what we called supper.

S.D.: Well tell me about the docking at night, and how many boats were docked in that area at night?

D.T.: We, we drudged mostly in Choptank River. We would harbor in harbors that you could really see Cambridge, which was really tough. You would go into a harbor, and you would come out on deck later on that evening, and you'd look and see the lights of town and, you know, you were that close to town, but you could not, you could not be in town because you were standing on the deck of a boat in a harbor. Mainly it was two, two reasons really, they anchored out or stayed down the river is because one is to keep their crew, they always knew they had a crew the following morning. And, two, it would be a lot more convenient just to hoist, raise a piece of sail and just drift on out to the oyster rock. You wouldn't have to go down the river on cold mornings. It was an advantage to staying down the river, but it was cold. It was just cold all the time.

S.D.: How about some of the oyster reefs? Do you remember the names of them and where they were?

D.T.: It was, anywhere you went, it was just oyster shells on the bottom, plus oysters. But now, it's -- all that's gone. That was the demise of the oyster -- drudging for oysters to begin with. The lack of oysters to catch. The crew. We would finally lose, eventually lose some members of our crew. And, of course, that was the downfall. If you don't have a crew, you can't work. And some of the problems with the crews, with the crew -- if they got sick or got hurt, there would be, they learned about lawyers and lawsuits, and eventually, dad had his boat incorporated. It was a dangerous occupation. Always ice and cold. Something always -- everything was always slippery. He had two, two of his crew drowned two different occasions. One of them, one of them fell over the side. We

had the sail up, and of course, that was the low side of the boat, and he fell in the water and went under, went under the boat. And all we saw was his cap.

S.D.: Here, let's pause.

(OFF THE RECORD.)

S.D.: All right, back. Tell me a little bit, you were talking about being in the cabin with the men.

D.T.: Like I said, the only time that all seven members of us together when we got into the cabin, which was very small, maybe a 10 by 10 section, you would sit very close together to eat supper. You would have to hold your plate on your lap and your coffee cup between your feet, and part of your food in your hands because there wasn't a table. It was very close quarters.

S.D.: You had talked some also about during the war, like how you managed things during the war.

D.T.: Well I was a little young then, but I do remember these dredge boats would get allocations from the government in the form of food stamps. It wasn't Welfare. It's all families then during that period got stamps that they had to buy food, sugar and things like that. Even shoes and tires. Everything was purchased with stamps in those days. And these dredge boats were allocated stamps. And that was one of the advantages, small advantage during the war that they had. We could really stock up on sugar, which was very scarce in those days. But that was a long time ago, and I don't want to ever go back to that period again.

S.D.: Do you remember any landmarks or places in the bay that you were --

D.T.: Not really. It was just the Choptank River where we went. We did not go up and down the bay. We worked mainly in the Choptank River.

S.D.: What other captains were in the Choptank at that time that you remember?

D.T.: There were several boats. Bill Buck had the *Nellie Byrd*. *Rosie Parks* was owned by Orville Parks. Of course, the boats my uncle had and Gene and Ralph Wheatley, they all had boats. Gene Wheatley had the *Lady Katie*, which is owned by my son at the present time.

S.D.: Did you ever think when you saw the *Lady Katie* out drudging that you would, that your son would own it?

D.T.: No. No way. That was a long time ago. I was kind of perturbed with him when he, he told me, we were crab potting. He told me he was going to buy a drudge boat. I didn't pay much attention to it. And two weeks later, he said he had purchased the *Lady Katie*. And I didn't speak to him for about two weeks after that. I knew what he was getting into, the expense, and the upkeep. He didn't have -- there wasn't time for something like that. It takes a lot of time and a lot of money, and he didn't, he didn't have the time to work on those things. We were crab potting. And to own a drudge boat at the same time was very difficult.

S.D.: What do you think about it now?

D.T.: (Laughter.) The whole attitude has changed now. It's -- it's a good deal. I want to see him. We're restoring her. We're restoring her at the present time. I do want to see it completed; I hope so, in my day. I know I will so he can have something that, that belonged to the past still in the Todd family, which was really a drudging family, a family of drudgers.

S.D.: How about your daughter, Mary? I know she's gone out a couple of times with you.

D.T.: She has. She went out with us a couple times on the *Lady Katie*. Short of crew. Crew is -- getting crew, getting a crew is a problem. And she went out with us. She could cull. She's been, she's been working on the water with me ever since she was a little girl. Very small. I think she started about the same time I did in life.

S.D.: At what age? What age was that?

D.T.: Very young. I would say -- she was a walking age. I don't know what the, maybe five, or six, or seven. She went out crab potting with me, and I would make a rake out of wood so she could rake the crabs into the baskets. She was very small. But she's been with me ever since. She's had a daughter. She was pregnant at the time. She is still working with me crab potting. She's very punctual.

S.D.: Do you remember taking her to the boat for the first time?

D.T.: Not really. It was, like I said, she was very young. Her and Scott. I used to have her and Scott working culling crabs all at the same time before Scott was big enough to get a boat of his own. Then Mary come along. She was big enough to scratch and cull crabs too. So I had both of them culling at the same time.

S.D.: Let's go back to some of the early days. Do you remember any, any particular hardships because you were out all week? Was there anything that, other than just not being able to get out and do the kinds of things --

D.T.: Well, it was an occupation where you had to sort of like what you were doing to spend that much time of your week aboard a boat, you know. You had to like it somewhat. It wasn't much to like, but it was an occupation. I like being on the water, making a living out of it I think was secondary. I think that's the way it is with most watermen. The financial situation is secondary. It's just something you want to do, you're out there days when you don't make a profit, you're still not, you're not disgusted when you come home. It's like they say, when an accountant retires, he doesn't miss his ledger. But I'm sure when a waterman retires, he's going to miss, he's going to miss working on the water.

S.D.: How about -- now I've lost my question. I did have something. Oh, how many days did you sail of that time? You sailed, you worked all five days, so when did you use the push boat and when did you sail?

D.T.: When I started, we had to -- all five days were sail days. And then the state let us have Monday and Tuesday because oysters were getting scarce, and they gave us Monday and Tuesday, which were power days, to guarantee us two days a week so we could at least make a decent living out of it financially. But then Wednesday, Tuesday -- Wednesday, Thursday, Friday would be sail days. Working out on a dredge boat under sail is not like, like someone who owns a sailboat for pleasure. Working on a dredge boat under sail is work. You didn't think of it as any pleasure whatsoever.

S.D.: Was it particularly hard to run under sail? Do you remember that?

D.T.: Sails in those days were made out of canvas. Nowadays, they're made out of Dacron, a light material. But when you got, when you got a canvas sail, mainsail, and it gets wet with ice on it, it's difficult to raise. It's very heavy. It's very heavy to -- very difficult to work with. It's -- when it gets, when it gets wet, like I say, when it gets wet and frozen, it takes all the crew to reef a sail that big and that heavy, which was -- it took,

it took about approximately four people to raise it. And these Dacron sails today, two could raise a mainsail.

S.D.: Did you ever get stuck out in the ice at any point in time?

D.T.: We never had any trouble with ice. We did dredge in the ice. We had, dad had metal on the side of his boat to protect his boat. I remember occasions where we would throw the dredge, and it would land on the ice, and the dredge would just set on top of the ice, and the boat would move along, and the dredge would just be, would just be on the ice. It wouldn't, it wouldn't go through the ice. That -- they are cold occasions in times like that. But we did, we worked some cold days.

S.D.: How did you get it underneath?

D.T.: That was just a short occasion. It wasn't any long periods of time dredging like that. It was just -- but I do remember, and like shoveling shells and small oysters back, what you shoveled back would land on the surface of the ice, and you could see these little piles of oysters and oyster shells on the ice as we shoveled them over.

S.D.: How about with multiple, having a whole lot of boats out in one area? Were there competitions, or did people get upset at other people?

D.T.: Right. My father and his uncles, they never had any disputes, but there was always confrontations. They would run together. Sometimes they would cause damage, a lot of damage, but it wasn't any lawsuits in those days. You respected the bigger boat. The bigger boat always took -- it wasn't, it didn't matter if the captain was small, or the owner was small. If he had a big boat, you got out of his way, and that was the rule of thumb.

S.D.: You talked a little bit about -- I mean the *Rebecca* is one of the bigger boats, right?

D.T.: Right. The *Rebecca* was a sloop. She was a two-masted boat when she was built, so that she could be worked with less, less people. She was converted to a skipjack sail with just one mast. But she was, she was built with two masts into her.

S.D.: Tell me about, we've talked about some of the people you worked with. Do you remember anybody's names or anybody else that you worked with?

D.T.: That's a difficult question. It was a long time ago.

S.D.: Okay, I just wanted to cover that. Okay. How about the very first days? How did you learn what to do? Who taught you to do what you do?

D.T.: (Laughter.) All you had to do was get down on your knees and pick out a three-inch oyster. And that was from Monday morning until Friday afternoon. That's what you did. Besides working, shoveling the excess back into the water and reefing the sails, but that was it.

S.D.: When did -- had you met your wife before you, Scott's mother, before you got off the drudge boat, quit drudging?

D.T.: That was, that was after I -- that was after I finished, called it quits with working on drudge boats. I didn't disgust -- get disgusted with it. I just wanted a change. I went to tonging, then I went to diving for oysters. I did that for about 10 winters. And somewhere along the line, I met, met my, I guess, girlfriend at the time. And her father, her father was a waterman also and a boat builder. And he built, he built me a workboat, a crab boat, 40-foot workboat. He only charged me, only charged me \$600 to build it.

S.D.: Tell me a little bit about diving for 10 years. That seems to me like it would be very cold.

D.T.: It was, it was -- you had to like, you didn't, I mean that's the wrong word, like. You had to -- I was really interested in diving from a young age. The equipment always interested me whenever I see it on TV, and when I got old enough to go and take a scuba diving course to be certified, I did, I took it right away. And it was, it was the kind of occupation that wasn't for everybody. It's very dangerous also, that kind of work, to get up, to get up in the mornings and go and put on a wetsuit that was still cold from the day before until you got the -- we had a hot water system where the hot water would go down into the suit, which would maintain the 98.6 body temperature. If you lost your, if your body temperature lost -- I don't care who you are. If you're a big buck or who, in cold water, 40-some degrees, it's going to kill you. But you've got to maintain that body temperature. We had a system where we had hot water going down, and I could maintain my body temperature. But it was the kind of job that wasn't, everybody couldn't, you know, it looked like it would be a nice job, but it wasn't.

S.D.: You said that your father had had to incorporate the boat.

D.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

S.D.: What other ways did he do to protect himself as times changed?

D.T.: Incorporation was a way, another way to protect himself. I can't remember if he carried insurance. I don't think he did on his crew. But his boat was in good condition until he sold it. He got, he got to the point where he could not work anymore, so his boat was in the same condition. They both, they both sort of retired at the same time.

S.D.: And that's when he sold it to Captain Wadey?

D.T.: He sold it, he sold it to a fellow down on Tilghman, on Tilghman Island, Robbie Wilson. And Robbie Wilson sold it to Wadey Murphy, who presently owns it.

S.D.: Okay, now I was going to ask you a little bit about some storms, or any particularly exciting times?

D.T.: No. It -- dad was good. He was a good, he was a good operator of that vessel. I never was scared being aboard there with him. Any time that the boat looked like it was going to capsize or something, you would turn around and look at him, and he would stand there with a confident look on his face. And so we, the point of being scared was, you know, just terminated because he acted like he knew what he was doing. But we never, we never -- one or two, maybe, something like that, but nothing life threatening. That was a long period of time to go out on a sailboat, so to speak, and not have any catastrophic incidents.

S.D.: And you talked a little bit about going out when it was calm and shooting ducks. That was the kind of thing that only happened because there was no wind?

D.T.: Right. That was illegal, but it wasn't anything -- of course, you take someone just out of high school or 20, 21, 22-years old that's going to be rambunctious, and I would just -- that would be something to do. I got so I could just kill a duck with one shot, I got that good.

S.D.: How about dating or anything, did you ever do that? How did you manage that on the boat when you're going out for a week?

D.T.: I remember having one girl, dating one girl. That would be rough. I eventually lost her too, so -- that was it. (Laughter.) I don't have much to say about that.

S.D.: What do you -- what would you like to say to people about dredging and about being a member of a long line of dredgers?

D.T.: It's a bygone era. It never will come back, but that type of work never will come back. The people, the people nowadays will never do that kind of work again. We will never see that amount of dredge boats, that many, that amount of sails working on oyster rock again. The only way we'll see that is pictures of it and films that have been, that have been taken and kept. It'll be a good thing if -- it is a good thing if someone has kept that. I have some films I've kept, and pictures. I've kept them so long, I've thought well no one would ever be interested in something like this, but I'm glad I, I had these pictures and kept them.

S.D.: Anything else you'd like to add?

D.T.: My, I believe I mentioned my son, Scott Todd, has purchased the *Lady Katie*, and we are in the process of restoring her right now at the present time. And I do want to see it completed, and I hope some day that I will see it under sail and working again. But that's the only, the only thing left in the Todd family of dredge boats is the *Lady Katie*, the one that my son had purchased.

S.D.: Well thank you very much. I appreciate you taking the time.

D.T.: You're welcome.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)