

Interview Log

Interviewee: Kris Turner and John Fitzhugh

Tape #: OH-

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond

of Tapes: 1

Date: October 17, 2001

of Sides:

Location: Workshop of John Fitzhugh, Cambridge, Maryland

Topic: Dipnets, crabbing, Dorchester County, School for the Blind, board (loom used to make nets), chair caning, hydraulic dippers, Speddens' Lumber, pole and bow.

Corresponding Photography Log #:

Comments: Frequent tape malfunction. Snippets of conversation are lost.

BEGIN SIDE A

S.D.: All right, this is Shelly Drummond with Kris Turner and John Fitzhugh. They make crab dipnets, and I'm recording for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Maryland Traditions. You've been showing me some of the stuff. First, I'd like to get just a little bit of information on where you were born. John?

J.F.: I was born down Lightsville, down where -- Crapo.

S.D.: Where is that?

K.T.: It's down in -- down below, they call it down below, down the country.

J.F.: It's way down.

K.T.: Crapo, Maryland; Lakesville, Maryland.

S.D.: Okay.

K.T.: It's down the opposite way of like Hooper's Island.

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

K.T.: Actually heading towards Wingate and --

S.D.: Okay.

K.T.: Yeah, down that way. That's where he was raised and along with mom, his sister. My mom's his sister, and seven other kids.

S.D.: Oh, goodness.

K.T.: So that's where they all grew up.

S.D.: What were your parents' occupation?

J.F.: My mother did mostly work for the packing company.

S.D.: Okay. Did they pick crabs or --

J.F.: No, they all -- tomatoes and string beans -- for the packing company.

S.D.: Okay.

K.T.: -- worked in the field picking tomatoes and --

J.F.: This was back --

S.D.: Well what brought you here to Cambridge?

J.F.: That's a long story. We moved here in 1950 to Cambridge.

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

J.F.: Well we're in Cambridge every Saturday night.

S.D.: Yeah?

J.F.: That was the big thing. If you didn't get to town on a Saturday, you didn't -- the week went bad. (Laughter.) That was just one of them things. I mean everybody come to town on Saturday night.

S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). How old were you when you moved to Cambridge?

J.F.: I was about 21.

S.D.: Twenty-one?

J.F.: I got shot when I was 16.

S.D.: You got shot when you were 16?

J.F.: Rabbit hunting.

S.D.: Rabbit hunting.

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

K.T.: Gun went off and hit him in the face. He was standing on a log, and the gun slipped out of his hand. And the hammer hit the log, and the gun went off, went through his wrist and just sprayed him in his face. Shotgun.

S.D.: Oh, gosh.

J.F.: Blew my wrist right off.

K.T.: Only four fingers on his hand.

J.F.: Take this finger off to give span to this one. See, they all was like together.

K.T.: The skin graph --

J.F.: Off my belly.

K.T.: Off your belly for your --

J.F.: Hand. Had a hole they filled in.

K.T.: He was hunting with his brother, James, my uncle. James Fitzhugh. Was 16.

J.F.: I was 16.

K.T.: Yeah. And then he went to the Maryland School for the Blind when he was 17 until he was 21. You can only go till you're 21.

S.D.: Right.

K.T.: So he went for four years. He got a degree in piano tuning and learned to cane chairs.

J.F.: And tune pianos. I don't do that no more.

S.D.: What got you interested in making the dip nets?

J.F.: My brother-in-law.

K.T.: My father.

J.F.: His father.

S.D.: You talked to me a little bit about how your father had gone to and seen someone making the nets?

K.T.: Yeah. He just happened to stop into a shop of a guy he knew --

J.F.: Yeah.

K.T.: The guy was trying to, the guy was trying to make, was just fooling around trying to make the nets.

J.F.: Well he got it on -- he sold, I mean crab nets. He sold them.

K.T.: Yeah, boat supplies and stuff like that. So he was trying to make them for his self and just caught my father's eye. So dad was always up for a challenge, I could tell. (Laughter.) How I am. I mean I was only four when he passed away, but he --

S.D.: What was the name of the store? Do you know?

K.T.: Spedden's Marine Supply.

J.F.: Right up town.

K.T.: Yeah, they're still open. Mr. Spedden passed away, but his wife still keeps, opens it like four hours a day.

J.F.: She's buying nets from me now.

S.D.: Yeah?

K.T.: Yeah, she'll buy a couple dozen a year.

J.F.: Used to buy a dozen about every two weeks.

S.D.: A dozen every two weeks?

J.F.: Yeah, before this -- before they started to sell the crab nets. They got these big bags now with --

K.T.: Hydraulics, they work off of hydraulics. Big baskets.
 S.D.: Oh.
 K.T.: They just hang down.
 J.F.: They probably got them in St. Michaels.
 K.T.: Oh, I'm sure. Anybody that trot lines. They use these now instead of using dip net.
 J.F.: They're too lazy to dip them. (Laughter.)
 K.T.: Yeah. They run down the whole line. Make believe it's a big net right in the water.
 J.F.: Run down two or three times.
 K.T.: Yeah. And then they, then they bring it in and dump it. Whereas these, you got to go down and depending on how many crabs you get, you got to dump it -- catch any crabs.
 J.F.: Well the bag itself be that --
 K.T.: Yeah, about three foot by three foot.
 J.F.: Yeah, three foot deep.
 S.D.: The earliest dip nets that you've ever seen being made, how old do you think metal dip nets have been made?
 K.T. We talked about it a little bit.
 J.F. I had no -- in fact, my brother-in-law's the first one I ever seen made, I mean he made them. I mean out of -- I mean galvanized. People complained about them rusting so bad. So then we went to stainless. Everything's stainless now.
 S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). And the stainless lasts longer?
 J.F.: Forever. Don't even rust. Saltwater don't even --
 K.T.: The only way the crabbers will get a new net is when they lose a net.
 J.F.: Yeah. Lose --
 K.T.: Too much weight.
 J.F.: Or beat the bottom out of it.
 K.T.: Yeah. Bang it up too bad, or get too much weight and the pole will snap.
 J.F.: They lose the whole works.
 K.T.: I'd like to know how many nets are out in the bottom of the Choptank River or the Chesapeake Bay that are ours, stainless.
 S.D.: Did you ever know anyone that used the rope nets?
 J.F.: Yeah, back -- I used to use --
 K.T.: Then it was a pain because the crabbers would get all --
 J.F.: Tangled up.
 K.T.: Tangled up into them, grab a hold of them.
 J.F.: My dad used to use them.
 K.T.: Yeah.
 J.F.: They were net, made out of fish lines.
 S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
 J.F.: They weave like holes in it. Just like them nets.
 S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
 J.F.: They tangle so bad. But that's what they used to use too, years back, way back, you know, even before I was ever born, 'cause they didn't have nothing else to use.

S.D.: Who do you think the guy at the store got them from before he started trying to make them himself?

J.F.: He didn't get them because nobody made them.

S.D.: Oh, okay.

K.T.: He just started to do it his self.

J.F.: Just started making them.

K.T.: I think he just kind of gave up on those.

J.F.: Well he made them on a board like that, but he -- he hung them all over them I boards down around that board, and then he used a piece of wood, and twist the --

S.D.: Against the piece of wood?

J.F.: Yeah, and they'd pour that and go to the next one.

S.D.: This is the round tool that you're showing. What is that called again?

J.F.: What, this tool?

S.D.: No, the round one. The one that --

K.T.: The board on the wall?

S.D.: The board on the wall?

J.F.: It's just a board. That's all.

S.D.: Okay. (Laughter.)

K.T.: I guess its a crab net board. Yeah. A wall-mounted crab net board. Never really had a name for it.

S.D.: Okay. That's okay. (Laughter.)

J.F.: They made the board the size of the net. See that board is same size original bow is, they used them on the --

K.T.: The bow.

J.F.: The bow.

S.D.: So your dad was the one that saw this being done.

J.F.: Yeah.

S.D.: And decided to innovate.

K.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Yeah.

S.D.: Tell me a little bit about that, what he --

K.T.: Well that's Uncle John was here.

S.D.: Okay.

K.T.: I wasn't born till 1970.

J.F.: Well he seen him make it, and then he put that board up. And then he made one. It take him three and a half hours to make one.

S.D.: The round board.

J.F.: Around the board, yeah. Run it down long as they wanted. And he come in the house and showed it to me. And I said well it's a simpler way than that. He wanted me to do it, see. He made it for me to do, and I told him that was too hard, too much problems. (Laughter.) And I said why can't you just make a loom, just like this board, got a loom. Then make the net. And then he said well how you gonna put it together? I said you put the two ends together. I said you can hold it across, you can take a nail and suspend it and twist it. So he made that tool down here.

K.T.: This.

J.F.: And I showed him that -- work bench. I said the whole side of the work bench --

K.T.: Bring the two ends together and then he made this out of it. It's a piece of metal.
J.F.: Key.
K.T.: Then you just twist the net together.
J.F.: That ties it together.
S.D.: Okay, so that's the key.
J.F.: Yes.
S.D.: What do you call this?
J.F.: Well we just call that, just something to hold it, I guess.
S.D.: Something to hold it while you tie it together.
J.F.: Yeah. See, that holds it to -- which you could take a pair of pliers on each end, a pair of knuckles to hold, somebody hold it and somebody twist it.
K.T.: This way, somebody can do it by themselves.
J.F.: You can do it by yourself.
S.D.: Oh, I see. Okay.
K.T.: And it just twists right together --
J.F.: You go right down, do all three of them. Twist them together.
K.T.: That's a regular size net. Then we make a deep net which is two rows deeper. Then it would be four times.
J.F.: Well I can make them deep as anybody wants them.
K.T.: Oh, yeah. As long as the wire -- bring the net.
J.F.: I made a net for a man. He had a bow to get that -- big as that box down there.
K.T.: Oh, yeah. Bigger than that. It was big -- the bow was this big around.
J.F.: Yeah.
K.T.: And he wanted John to make a net, so Uncle John did. And it was -- mom took pictures of it.
J.F.: He wanted it 10 rows deep.
K.T.: It was this big around, and about that deep.
S.D.: What was he going to do with it?
J.F.: Dip nets with it. He didn't want to dip too often. He just wanted to --
K.T.: He said he just wanted to stand on the side of the boat and just hold the net in the water.
J.F.: And let crabs fall into it.
S.D.: Okay.
K.T.: And Uncle John told him, said well if you put too many in there, you're never going to pull it back in the boat.
J.F.: Right.
K.T.: So I don't know what ever happened to him. If he's still got it or not.
J.F.: I don't know. (Laughter.)
K.T.: It was huge.
J.F.: Well the bow was at least half an inch, it was bigger than that, wasn't it?
K.T.: Yeah, it was about a half inch thick metal, metal rods.
J.F.: He's got stain --
K.T.: All stainless.
J.F.: Stainless company make it for him, weld it together. They bent it and weld it.
K.T.: It was heavy.

S.D.: So the normal size nets that you make, you make two sizes?

K.T.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Regular and a deep.

J.F.: That's the deep ones over there on that --

K.T.: The deep, the deep it, like I said, it's two rows, two rows deep.

J.F.: Two rows deep.

K.T.: And a row --

J.F.: A regular net's only got six rows on it. And the deeper net's got eight, two extra rows.

K.T.: Some guys, some watermen like the deep nets. They can do more crabs.

J.F.: I got one on that block that's 10 rows. And nobody -- I ain't never sold it. (Laughter.) Nobody wants it.

S.D.: Because it'll be too heavy?

J.F.: Yeah.

K.T.: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.F.: If you filled it up, 'cause you can't, you can put no -- you can't touch the bottom of it. It's that deep. You get it half full of crabs --

K.T.: It's heavy.

J.F.: If you don't dump it, you're going to break it.

K.T.: Yeah. Or the pole will break. They'll use the, they'll use the net and the bow. Sink right to the bottom, full of crabs. I used to work with my cousin, and I asked him one day how he did it, he was filling her up. The pole snapped. The whole net and crabs just sunk right to the bottom. We always had extra ones, but he was just, he was trying to weight them down, you know, too much weight. See, you get tired 'cause they got to fill the net up, then they turn around and they got to dump it. And they don't -- in that time, two or three crabs go by. Ain't no big deal when you're trot lining. Crabs will get right back on if he's hungry enough.

J.F.: Right.

K.T.: But watermen are scared -- (Laughter.)

J.F.: They want every one they see.

K.T.: And then they go filling it up too full, and then they'll lose the net, and then they are messed up. They're screwed. (Laughter.)

J.F.: I had a man, I -- one of them nets I get to a man, and he brought it back to me, wasn't -- the hole size, so the peelers couldn't go through. Little tiny tiny crabs. I said well you couldn't keep them no how.

S.D.: Oh, he wanted you to make the holes smaller so the peelers couldn't --

J.F.: Yeah. Yeah, I --

K.T.: Yeah, so small crabs couldn't even get through.

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

J.F.: I went all the way around it. Crossed each one of them holes.

K.T.: They figured out, they figured out the diamond pattern so that if a crab, a crab turns sideways and it can slide through a diamond, then it wasn't big enough to keep.

J.F.: Yeah, wasn't supposed to keep them no how.

S.D.: Okay.

K.T.: Yeah. Which sometimes you'd see, they'd get -- a crab would fall out. If they did, it was a small, too small.

J.F.: Yeah. Too small to keep.
S.D.: Who figured that out?
J.F.: My brother-in-law.
K.T.: Yeah.
J.F.: The hole --
S.D.: Okay.
K.T.: 'Cause you look at a diamond. I mean if you figure, you take a net --
J.F.: The holes -- anything that can go through there --
K.T.: You take a net and look at a crab from the side, he's thin. So if he pulls his claws in, they swim sideways anyway, they can shoot through there. If they can fit through that diamond, then they are too small to keep. So they figured that out.
J.F.: Can't keep 'em no how.
K.T.: And, of course, at the bottom they couldn't -- that's where it twists together. They wouldn't get through there anyway. Like I said, if they did, they're too small.
S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
J.F.: So they didn't -- but they don't want to lose them.
K.T.: I had a guy that I went to school with tell me, he's just like, he's just like I had a net, a hole in that net, I was losing crabs. I said well, they're too small. He said no, they weren't. I said if they were going through them holes, they're too small. (Laughter.) He said I want another net. I said there ain't nothing wrong with this one. I said those are small crabs. You're not supposed to keep them.
S.D.: Conservation minded.
K.T.: Exactly. Exactly. I told him, I said don't be greedy. Man. You can't keep them. But, unfortunately, some of them do. So --
S.D.: So tell me about the tool that you got from Germany, the potato bailer.
J.F.: It was a guy, what's his name, Bob?
K.T.: Bob Sellers.
J.F.: Bob Sellers. He used to come here, and he made, he figured this tool out his self. In fact, he made each one -- weld the rod on there and everything. Well he made a screwdriver the first time, and reversed it. Want of these push screwdrivers you pump screws in, he reversed it around. The regular screw, when you push down on it, you tend to -- whereas I couldn't use that. I had to use -- mine had to be pulled out back, you know, the other way, like this.
S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
J.F.: So you had to be pulled this way for the -- this thing. So he reversed screwdriver, and it worked. And then we decide what the screwdriver didn't hold up. It was too much pressure on it. And he called the company, and he wanted that kit, buy a kit. So he mailed it for me. They said they wanted to know what he wanted it for. He told them. They said well you can't tear our screwdrivers up. You can't reverse our screwdrivers. He said don't tell me. I done done it. (Laughter.) And they said it couldn't be done. But I mean it can be done. He did it. The screwdriver tore it up. He wasn't -- see this here, straight ridges right down the screw.
S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).
J.F.: Well it -- I mean you pump it, you know.
S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.F.: And that's what he said he wouldn't, he wouldn't -- so he had this, he asked me what does he use it for, and he told -- (tape malfunction). I done it, you know. So he said well I got something on my desk I'll send it to you. So he sent it to them. Didn't cost him nothing. He just mailed it. And he put it on, and it worked. And then I've been trying to get the other one. And so he had friends, I mean, from -- he used to know the gentleman. So they would around and they'd see one, they'd pick it up and bring it back to me.

K.T.: That's what makes the eyes.

S.D.: Okay. You're going to have to show me that again (Laughter.) I've got to get a photo of that. That's pretty amazing.

K.T.: I put a wire here and use that tool where you make the eyes.

J.F.: You used scrap wire?

K.T.: Yeah. I know how I am. I like to see stuff when I have something explained to me.

S.D.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). Well don't take it apart because I am going to get a photo of that one.

K.T.: Especially when I -- when you ain't never seen nothing like this before.

S.D.: Yeah. Well so who buys the crab nets then?

J.F.: Everybody from St. Michaels onto Bay Bridge and on back.

S.D.: Are you the only one?

J.F.: Yeah.

S.D.: You're the only one that makes them.

J.F.: Ain't nobody else wants to fool with it. Who's got patience for it?

K.T.: Nobody else wants to do it.

J.F.: See I got all kinds of patience. I got nothing else to do. (Laughter.) That's the way it is. It's like caning chairs. Who does it? Who wants to fool with it?

K.T.: Only like a couple other people that did it.

S.D.: How much do you sell them for?

J.F.: What, these crab nets?

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

J.F.: Twelve bucks, 12 and a quarter.

S.D.: Twelve and a quarter?

J.F.: Well when somebody come in and buy one, we sell it for 14 or 15.

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

J.F.: Most times, they only want one.

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

K.T.: If you buy a half dozen or more, then that's what --

J.F.: See most people buy them, you get a dozen at a pack.

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

K.T.: Local businesses usually get at least a half a dozen.

J.F.: I let them, you know, a little cheaper because they buy a whole dozen. At least I can afford, you know, to let them go a little cheaper.

S.D.: How about in the past? What, how much did you sell them when you first started?

J.F.: Oh, back when we first started, we only sold about 43, 50 \$4 when we first started. (Laughter.) That was back in the 60's, late 60's, 70's.

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

K.T.: Before I was born.

J.F.: See we didn't make them -- for years ago.

S.D.: Well what's your idea of a good net?

J.F.: A real good net, you can't buy no better than the net I got right down there. (Laughter.)

K.T.: Yup.

J.F.: Ain't nobody makes a net no better than that. In fact, ain't nobody even makes them. Not stainless. You couldn't buy them nowhere.

S.D.: Do you have one that you made that was special that you've kept?

J.F.: No.

S.D.: No?

J.F.: They're all special. They all --

K.T.: Well I was going to say, they turn out the same. The net turns out -- there's no net that is the same.

J.F.: Cook went up Monkton, and that -- by that door. He found that in the post office up in Monkton. That's my net.

S.D.: It's a post card, a picture of it?

K.T.: Yeah, my brother was down there --

J.F.: It's a post office. He said it's just like a post card you can mail it to somebody.

K.T.: It says Discover Dorchester County, Chesapeake's Treasure. Prize catch net, famous Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab.

S.D.: Oh, and that's your net.

K.T.: Yeah.

S.D.: And you recognize it because of --

K.T.: The diamond pattern. (Tape malfunction).

S.D.: Oh. That's great.

K.T.: Yup. One right here. That was pretty cool.

S.D.: Yeah.

J.F.: He was up there and seen it in the post office. See, he used to work for the post office in Easton.

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

J.F.: And he quit. And while he was up there at that post office, he seen that card. He got it. There's a whole bunch of them there. Guy made them.

S.D.: Well let me stop recording for a little while and make, take some photos real quick.

K.T.: Sure.

J.F.: The whole net --

S.D.: Yeah.

(OFF RECORD.)