

Interview Log

Interviewee: Patsy Higgs (P.H.)
Joan Elburn (J.E.)
Bernadette Van Pelt (B.V.)
Eleanor Van Pelt (E.V.)

Tape #:

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond (S.D.)

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Location: Home of Bernadette Van Pelt

Topic: Working on the water

Theme:

Waterwomen, gill netting, anchor netting, bluefish, rockfish, culling oysters, Swan Point, Rock Hall Harbor, Susquehanna Flats – shad fishing, boning shad, raising family.

Comments:

Documentation:

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Video: n/a

Digital Photos:

Slides:

Field Notes: We had a waterwomen luncheon at Bernadette's where I explained the project and then we did the interview. The CD ran out and cut off at the last "intro" unfortunately, but I didn't start a new one, since we were technically finished and the women were tired. There is a lot of door slamming, but the recording is clear.

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BEGIN SIDE A

S.D.: Okay. This is Shelly Drummond from the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, and we're here at Bernadette Van Pelt's, and for the transcriptionist, what is today, November the 24th. For the transcriptionist, I'd like for you to say your name.

J.E.: Joan Strong Elburn.

P.H.: Patsy Higgs.

B.V.: Bernadette Van Pelt.

S.D.: Okay.

E.V.: Eleanor Van Pelt.

S.D.: Okay. And, Trevy, I hope that helps. (Yes....thank you!) Well what I'd like to do is, first of all, I'd like to ask you just a few general questions about Rock Hall, growing up. Could you tell me a little bit about the harbor and what it looked like? Either one of you.

P.H.: Rock Hall Harbor was a lot different when I was growing up. It was a watermen's town. But it doesn't look like that now because of all the –

J.E.: Sailboats.

P.H.: -- sailboats and –

J.E.: Docks.

P.H.: Floating docks.

J.E.: It's just, it's not the same. All the old places is gone that I grew up around.

Hubbard's Pier and Seafood, Chesapeake Restaurant. Of course, it was **Evan's Seafood**. All that's gone.

P.H.: In the place of **Watermen's**.

J.E.: Now it's Watermen's, which Isabelle took care of her.

S.D.: What did people do for a living in Rock Hall when you were growing up?

J.E.: Work on the water.

S.D.: All year round?

J.E.: All year round.

P.H.: Unless you were outside of Rock Hall on the farm.

J.E.: Yeah. Now my mom, she worked in Chestertown, had a –

P.H.: Ammunition plant?

J.E.: Powder plant.

P.H.: Powder plant.

J.E.: And it blew up, and she was there when it blew up, which thank God she didn't get killed. Then she went to work at the **Vita Foods** pickle-packing place. But my dad was a full-time waterman. And that's how I got started in it.

S.D.: How about **Tolchester**? Did people work at Tolchester?

P.H.: When I was little, it was an amusement park.

J.E.: Yeah, they had jobs there in the summer when the ferry came over at the amusement park.

P.H.: Yeah.

J.E.: About all of Rock Hall did. All the kids, didn't they, worked up there. Teenagers.

P.H.: Travel back and forth to Baltimore for what, like \$2. That was a lot of money back then.

J.E.: I don't remember.

P.H.: I used to go to **Baltimore** many a time on that boat.

S.D.: What age did you go out on the water?

P.H.: What age did I? From the time I was big enough to go, but when I started working on the water was when, right after I turned 16, I got married. So then I started working with my dad and my brother.

J.E.: I was in my 20's.

S.D.: And how long did you work on the water?

J.E.: I guess maybe like 10 years off and on. I was married to Becky's father was a farmer, so in the spring, I spent that time on the tractor. And in the summer, I went on the water.

S.D.: Did you go out in the winter?

J.E.: No, no. Mostly summer, trot lining in the summer, and early spring white perch fishing in the river. And in the early spring, after perch fishing, then up the Susquehanna for shad.

S.D.: And what did you do on the water?

P.H.: In the wintertime we fished, in the summertime we crabbed, in the fall we oystered. That was it.

S.D.: What techniques?

P.H.: Trot lining, crabbing. Then when we moved up in the world, we got a crab pot rigged. I didn't care for crab potting. Trot lining is so much more down to earth.

J.E.: Fun, more fun.

P.H.: Yeah. It was a lot of fun back then, Joan. But not today, you know. I went out with Donny, and you don't even have a dip net anymore. They burned, you know –

J.E.: Yeah, that's the truth.

P.H.: Everything has changed.

S.D.: What was it like when you first were trot lining? What was – describe a day.

P.H.: Fun, 'cause it was crabs.

J.E.: And there weren't many trot liners out here in the river.

P.H.: No.

J.E.: Now you can't find a place to lay the line.

P.H.: No.

J.E.: No.

P.H.: 'Cause it's so many more watermen.

S.D.: When – I know there's a transition, at least in the lower part of the bay, where the people went from farming to crabbing full time. Do you know – like they would farm in the summer, and then the crabs got more plentiful, and there was a larger market for them.

P.H.: Farmers?

S.D.: No. Just in general. Just in general, the crabbing. Like people started eating a whole lot more crabs, they started using a whole lot more. And so it became more lucrative. Was that – never mind, it's a strange question.

P.H.: No.

S.D.: Tell me – you all were talking a little bit about the shad, shad fishing. Tell us about how people set up their nets and what that was like.

P.H.: Well they – Joan, you know more about that than me. I was more younger than you.

J.E.: Well you have to wait till dark, and everybody, of course, had their nets all ready to lay out. And, like I said, the first bateau would lay his – you had an inner tube with a light lantern.

P.H.: Yeah, the old-time lanterns.

J.E.: On each end. And the first one would lay out, and you'd wait a while. And then the second bateau, they would lay their net out, and they would all drift right on down – there would be about 10, 15, 20 nets, and they'd all drift right on down the Susquehanna. And then you'd just wait about a half an hour or so. And then the first boat, he'd start pulling his in and then the second boat on down, you know. And you did that a couple times, and then you came on. By the time you were way down – 'cause the current just took you so fast down the bay. So then you'd come on in with your catch. The boats were loaded down with –

P.H.: Shad.

J.E.: -- Shad. Like Patsy said, the eels were thick up there because they were, they were up there with the shad –

P.H.: You couldn't leave your net over too long because the eels would eat, and nobody wanted them shad if she didn't have no roe in her.

J.E.: That's right. You couldn't leave the nets over long 'cause the eels would eat up all the roe.

P.H.: They'd suck her dry.

J.E.: Yup.

(Off record.)

S.D.: Okay, we're recording again. What was your job when you were shad fishing?

J.E.: Mine? Just help shoot the fish out of the net. And then when we got to the end, I can't remember, did they take it up – yeah, we took the net up as we pulled it in the boat then.

S.D.: What did the nets look like out in the water?

J.E.: Well you just see corks bobbing, you know. Of course, it was pitch black dark unless the moon was shining. So but it was really nice, it was wonderful in those days fishing up there.

S.D.: Where did people stay?

J.E.: My father had a 40-foot fishing boat tied up on **Garrett Island**. And they lived right there. They – well to take a bath, you just jumped overboard. I mean the water was fresh. (Laughter). I don't know, they had barbecue, they cooked on the island and everything. Nobody ever chased them.

P.H.: Seen some sites though, didn't you?

J.E.: Yeah. They lived up there for, I guess, the whole month when shad fishing started.

S.D.: What kinds of things were you talking about?

P.H.: I don't know what you would call the people that – I guess they were hauling us, you know, and they'd want a handout, you know, they would do something for it. 'Cause, I mean, what sticks in my mind, 'cause I was only 10 or 12 back then, and dad would come get me every Friday, and my mother 'cause she worked during the week, and we would go up for the weekend. But what sticks in my mind is this man, he looked homeless. Wanted to know if we had anything to drink. Daddy said no. He said, man, I'll take anything. Vitalis, anything you

got. That has stuck in my mind all them years. Somebody'd just drink a bottle of Vitalis. That's the kind of stuff you seen, you know. Of course, it was all Rock Hallers, they stuck together, you know. Like in the evening when they got done, before it was time to go out and wait for the time to lay his net off, you would go to the diner and maybe sometimes get something to eat. But most of the time, you ate on the boat.

S.D.: You told me that you used to debone shad.

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

S.D.: Tell us what that was like.

P.H.: It's like surgery to a surgeon. (Laughter). That's the best way to explain it, right, Joan?

J.E.: I guess so.

P.H.: You had to know where to make the cuts. She was better at it than I was.

J.E.: I don't know about that.

P.H.: Yeah, you were. A lot better. I give credit where it's due, and you were good at that. 'Cause they had to be pretty. When you got done and you put them in that Saran Wrap, they were pretty, when you rolled them.

J.E.: I can't remember. How much did we get paid for that?

P.H.: It wasn't much, Joan. Wasn't it like a dollar a fish?

J.E.: A dollar forever, wasn't it? We never did get a raise.

P.H.: Never did get a raise (laughter).

J.E.: A dollar a fish.

P.H.: Yeah, a dollar a fish. And you know what they would sell it for? Probably about \$80 a pound, didn't they?

J.E.: Yeah, they did. Sure they did.

P.H.: 'Cause that's a, you know, a delicacy, filleted shad.

J.E.: Some of those big roe shad, see, they take the roe out of the shad, and then they would throw the fish away. But if you bone it, then they make double money. And some of those big roe shad were three pound.

P.H.: Easy.

J.E.: Three pound bone, yeah.

P.H.: But didn't you think she would wash the bone and, the buck?

J.E.: Oh, yeah, softer.

P.H.: Oh, a lot softer because of that roe.

J.E.: Oh, the buck is the best fish to eat because the meat's firm.

P.H.: Yeah, he was solid and firm.

J.E.: Yeah, that's right.

P.H.: Like a lot of good men. (Laughter).

J.E.: Pause.

P.H.: Tell it like it is.

S.D.: Tell me what the – what were people doing, they were going for, like how the process, like they'd catch the fish and then like the process that they would go to and where the markets, where they would send them to market.

J.E.: Owen's. The name of the market up there was **Owen's Fish Market**. And it was right. And it was right there in **Perryville**. And that's where you'd take the fish. Just pull right up in your bateau.

S.D.: So the fish would be caught. And then was it mostly women doing the –

P.H.: Huh-uh (negative). You didn't see too many women.

J.E.: No.

P.H.: Just nuts like us. (Laughter).

S.D.: Did people give you a hard time?

P.H.: No. Nobody ever gave me a hard time.

S.D.: Was there anything that the women were, that you two were better at doing than the men because you were women, do you think?

P.H.: No.

J.E.: I don't think so.

P.H.: Speaking your mind. That's about all I can say. Because we were out there one day fishing, and this yacht's coming up from Florida. I mean he's – you know, and he runs right over our rig. And the stupid thing backs up, throw her in reverse. So he's really wrapped up in our nets now. So we had to go to him and cut him out. And I can remember him, you know, telling daddy, he said here's \$20. Of course, daddy says oh, hell, forget it. I said forget shit. I said it costs a lot of money to gear these nets, and I grabbed the \$20. Of course, it cost him a lot more when he got ashore because he had to get pulled up. But they have so many people out there like that that could care less about the watermen and their rig and what it cost them to have this stuff out there to work for them. You got your 10-cent millionaires, I call them, setting up in a \$500,000 boat.

S.D.: What are some other stories of the things the recreational boaters –

P.H.: Oh, you have, we've had them take these bullhorns and tell us to take them, I can't use the words, out of the water, and all that kind of stuff. And there's markers, it was, on every net. But, of course, they ain't got enough common sense to go around the marker.

J.E.: That must've been mostly in the bay, 'cause in the river –

P.H.: Yeah. Well in the river too, Joan, you know sometimes when I was trot lining, they'd bell-hell by you and roll you over, you're trying to dip a crab.

J.E.: Oh, yeah. That's right.

P.H.: They could care less.

J.E.: They will roll you.

P.H.: I mean it's not like the watermen are bothering them at their job. It's a lot of inconsiderate people in this world, and you got them on the bay.

S.D.: How do you know where to put – I mean it's a stupid question, I know, but the answer will be good. How do you know where to put your nets or your line?

P.H.: Back then, everybody pretty much had their own set. Like, you know, we set between Love Point and Swan Point.

J.E.: For fish?

P.H.: Yeah, for fishing. And everybody knew that, that the fish stuck this way. And they, you know, it wasn't no worry whether you got there and somebody was in your lay or not. You didn't have to worry about that.

J.E.: And for trot lining, you just laid up and down the creek or river –

P.H.: Yeah.

J.E.: -- along the grass at the edge of the channel where the grass stops. And if you got your line in grass, you were in trouble because you couldn't pull it up without gobs of grass. And

then, of course, you might as well forget crabbing. But now there isn't any grass. You can lay your line anywhere now. There's no grass.

S.D.: What about when they started putting piers out for marinas?

P.H.: Never had that problem in the creek where I crabbed. Are you talking about the landowners?

S.D.: Uh-huh (affirmative). As development started coming in, did that affect –

P.H.: Not me, but I mean I know I've heard my son and everybody talk that a lot of times if you were in a creek, and it's a private home there with a wharf and everything, they think they – even though they –

J.E.: They don't want you there.

P.H.: They don't want you there, in plain words, they don't want you there. They might have that wharf in the water and they own that water too, they think.

S.D.: In the past, how about the shoreline?

P.H.: What about the shoreline?

J.E.: Washing?

P.H.: Washing away?

S.D.: Well just, what kind of activities did people do on the shoreline?

P.H.: Nothing much 'cause most of it's marsh, you know, marsh and farmland.

S.D.: Well did people mind if you crabbed along the shore in front of their house, like if you were just dipping?

P.H.: It didn't matter if they cared or not. (Laughter). I mean they show me a deed to that piece of water then, that would've been a different story. But just like one time I went out there trot lining. I laid my line off –

J.E.: Where is this, in Swan Creek?

P.H.: No, this is over there by Corsica. I was into Corsica. And I'm not going to mention his name, but he had crabbed there that morning. And he came back out in the afternoon. Of course, I was already crabbing, and he laid his line out. I was in his lay.

J.E.: Right alongside of you?

P.H.: Oh, he laid over top of me.

J.E.: Okay.

P.H.: And I went to run my line. I couldn't run it because he was over top of me.

J.E.: That's another crabber.

P.H.: Yeah.

J.E.: Yeah, they would get mad if you laid in their line.

P.H.: But, Joan, he wasn't there.

J.E.: In their crab lay.

P.H.: He wasn't there. He had crabbed there that morning. I was there that afternoon. He wasn't even in Corsica when I was crabbing. He come out. And because I was there, he laid over top of me.

J.E.: Is that **Clay Larrimore**? (Laughter.)

P.H.: No, it wasn't.

J.E.: I tell you – that was his trotline lay.

P.H.: Was it? Oh, he got so mad and everything, I just stood my ground. He was going to pull his line back up, and he did. He almost fell overboard in the process, but I could've cared

less. And when I got in that evening, I talked to **Meryl Stevens**. You know who I'm talking about. He's dead and gone. Water cop.

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

P.H.: He said I should've cut his line, 'cause I asked him to move.

J.E.: That's right. Just take that hatchet that you chop the eels with, and chop the line. (Laughter).

S.D.: Did you work on the boat when you were pregnant?

J.E.: No.

S.D.: Did you?

P.H.: No, I was on the tractor then. It's too hard to be doing that kind of stuff when you're pregnant.

J.E.: Yeah, you might slip or something. You know, it's not worth the risk.

S.D.: How about when you're just being sick in general?

P.H.: Sick, many a times.

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

P.H.: So sick you didn't know what you were going to do, but you had to go to work. Be so cold, you didn't know whether you had a rear end, a hand, feet.

J.E.: Feet. (Laughter).

P.H.: Cold. I mean cold.

S.D.: If you were working on the water, who took care of the kids, or did you take them out with you?

P.H.: My mother took care of my children. I got them up every morning and took them to her house.

J.E.: I was lucky. My grandmother, she took care of Becky and Ross.

S.D.: How about when you come home? Did you have help around the house?

P.H.: Yeah. Well my husband and I. When we got married, he was working at Southern States. And I guess he got to liking the water too, so he went to work with us. And when we come home, we shared everything, the housework, the dishes.

J.E.: Well, I did most of it. (Laughter). I wasn't that lucky. Harold, my husband, he just, he was a farmer, and he didn't do any dishes or cooking. My grandmother or I did it.

S.D.: What did your mother think of you being out on the water?

P.H.: It didn't bother mom. She knew I loved it or I wouldn't have been out there. You got to love it to do it. If I had my life to live over, and know what I know now, I wouldn't even think twice about it.

J.E.: You'd go back out?

P.H.: No, I wouldn't.

J.E.: Oh, you wouldn't.

P.H.: I don't miss it at all. I'd go maybe once a year.

J.E.: You don't miss freezing to death?

P.H.: No, I don't.

J.E.: Soaking wet?

P.H.: No, I don't. And I'll tell you right now, I mean the watermen, every cent they make, they earn it. It's a rough, rugged life. Rain, snow, sleet, whatever. They're out there in it. Lot of times, I didn't know whether I was going to get home or not alive. Be so rough, you

couldn't even get back in the big boat. You had to run all the way from where we were fishing to Rock Hall in the bateau.

J.E.: It was rough out in the bay, you know.

P.H.: Rough.

J.E.: It's not like the river and the creeks.

P.H.: Then the fog set in, you can't find the big boat. Oh, my God. Please, God, let us find it. You never know when the fog or something is going to set in on you. And I mean it can be as thick as pea soup, and the boat can be two feet from you and you can't see her. 'Cause we almost got killed one day, was a ship. I looked up. All I could see was –

J.E.: That would scare me to death.

P.H.: -- big black hull. And I'm screaming to my father.

J.E.: And to hear those horns –

P.H.: Well he didn't blow his horn till he seen us. He'd have run over us and they'd have never known what happened to us. And the guy that – oh, I'm having a senior moment here. Had the **Mariner's Motel** built. Lived on Bayside Avenue, Joan, where Harvey lived. What was his name?

J.E.: I don't know who built that.

P.H.: Ain't this awful? Well anyway, his brother set right above us. And the ship run over his rig, tore it all to hell.

J.E.: Ship was probably lost too.

P.H.: Huh?

J.E.: Ship was probably off-course.

P.H.: Yeah, he wasn't in the channel. But he went to -- about it, 'cause he could've killed us. I'll be thinking about this all day, this guy's name. **Hilton Crouch.**

J.E.: Oh, Mr. Hilton. I forgot that he –

P.H.: And his brother was Irving. Been out there in the ice. You could get out of your boat and walk to another boat. Be hung up in it, you know. No, I don't miss it. (Laughter). But I take my yearly trip.

J.E.: I'm glad I never had to do any of that.

P.H.: See, I worked year-round, whether it was wintertime. I had to go. Went out the creek one day. It was so much ice, what it did, it moved offshore. Well, honey, we're no further from here to that woods outside the jetties, and it shifted. The tide shifted that fast. Well it shoved us up to Ferry Point, Joan. We're laying over on the side.

J.E.: Oh, my God.

P.H.: Had my mother scared to death because they were talking on the radio that the boat had hit stakes and had come up through her. That was – oh, my.

S.D.: How about like a squall coming up or hitting you?

P.H.: A squall? A lot of them.

J.E.: Maybe thunderstorms. I was scared to death of them.

P.H.: I hated being out there in a thunderstorm.

J.E.: Out in the little bateau. Thunderstorms down on Grason Point would just, I mean they'd come up.

P.H.: Oh, I know. I was over Corsica one day crabbing with **Dewey. Raymond Price.** Remember him?

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

P.H.: Donny and Brown, they were little, they were with me. And we hurried up and pulled the line in because we seen the storm coming. And they always told me if it's coming off that southeast, it's going to be a doozy. Well she was a doozy coming across that river. Lightening. Oh, my. You prayed the whole time. And that one puff of wind, Joan, turned me around, I'm going right back to Corsica. (Laughter). Sailboats, they were having the regatta into the yacht club that weekend. It was sailboats all up capsized, people hanging onto them when I got back in Piney Neck Creek. No, it's not fun when you get caught out there in a storm.

J.E.: But I was lucky because I wasn't far from where my grandmother lived on, she lived on Grason Point Farm. And where I crabbed was just like a stone's throw. I'd see the storm coming, run in shore, go up the house, wait till it was over and then come back and crab line. I was lucky. I know my father told me many a time, said don't go across the river 'cause there's going to be a storm today.

S.D.: How did people know when storms were coming? What were like the signs that they could tell?

P.H.: Thunderheads. Daddy always said look out, watch out for the thunderheads, the cloud.

J.E.: That's right.

S.D.: What's a thunderhead look like?

P.H.: Big cloud. And it just –

J.E.: Circled round.

P.H.: You know, it's hard to describe.

J.E.: Just the big puffy black clouds.

P.H.: Yeah. Usually, if it's going to be a nice day, you ain't going to see any clouds.

S.D.: What were other things that helped you make decisions about what you were going to do that day? Like tides, how did you know the tide, when it was coming in and out?

P.H.: It's just something you kept up with every day. You knew you had so many hours, you know. Well we liked to fish on a certain tide, and you made sure that you were there on that tide.

J.E.: Or when the tide changed?

P.H.: Yeah, well slack water for a right good while, you know. And you can't do nothing in slack water, not fishing anyway, not with the nets. Then it's, sometimes the tide's running too hard. You can't hardly get the – you couldn't hardly get the nets across the boat. It was like they were – like a – they were tighter than strings on a violin. That's how tight they'd be. The tide would be bellowing, you know. Tide was everything.

J.E.: Something funny about my father when he used to fish up in the Chester River. In the spring, all the women would trim the rose bushes up there. And you know they throw all those stickers overboard. (Laughter). And they'd fill up the nets, and oh, what a mess, all these rose bushes. Oh, he hated that.

P.H.: I guess so.

J.E.: Try to get that net back in shape to put out the next day, what a mess.

S.D.: Who geared the nets?

P.H.: I did.

J.E.: I didn't do a whole lot of gearing. I untangled. (Laughter). Shad nets, perch nets. That was what I liked to do, just keep them straight

P.H.: I used to get so tired of gearing nets. Of course, today what they gear is a lot different, a lot longer. What we geared was 35 yards, 30-yard at least, 'cause we put our nets like 12 in a row. But the boys today, they use 100 corks. That's a right good-size net.

J.E.: Have to have a long building, don't you?

P.H.: Quite a few stretches. I mean where Donny gears, it takes him, I guess, 5, 6 hours to do a box.

S.D.: Do you remember the first day you ever went out on a boat?

P.H.: Yes.

J.E.: I don't.

P.H.: It was in the summertime crabbing. And, of course, daddy had a bateau then, and I was up in the bow of the boat ask – fix the, you know, to keep sun out of my eyes and life preservers, I got all over top of that. Daddy would let me sleep till 10, 11:00, and I'd get up, I'd fix us lunch. Then he let me dip crabs. He was hooking me into working on the water. But he'd always let me sleep in the morning because you got up at 3:00. And as soon as I got on that bateau, honey, I fixed my bed. (Laughter). That's how I got started.

J.E.: Fixed yourself a little bed up in the bow.

P.H.: Up in the bow of that bateau, and could sleep like a baby.

J.E.: Yeah. Beat you to death, rock you from here to there.

P.H.: Well couple times, some seas would come over the bow and wake you up. But it was fun.

S.D.: How about your own kids? When did you take them on the boat?

P.H.: From the time they were big enough to go, in walkers. Not, you know, this was for pleasure, you know, hook and line. Oh, we lived out there in the summertime. Took supper out there every night of our life. The kids were raised on the boat.

S.D.: What do you mean you took supper? You would –

P.H.: I would have, this is before my husband started working with us. And he would get home about 4:00 in the afternoon. I'd have supper all ready. If we were going to have fried chicken, it all went on the boat with us. And that's where we ate our supper, and we stayed till dark every night.

S.D.: And what did you do? Just relax or –

P.H.: Fished.

J.E.: Rockfish or –

P.H.: Yeah, hook and line.

J.E.: Yeah, Blues and all.

P.H.: 'Cause this one night –

J.E.: Hardheads.

P.H.: Well, you know, we didn't catch Hardheads till this year. They were nice ones.

J.E.: They disappeared for a lot of years, didn't they?

P.H.: Yes, they did, but they're coming back.

J.E.: Well in the 60's, there was loads of Hardheads. And then they all disappeared, and now they're all back again.

P.H.: Yeah, they're a nice catch too.

S.D.: How about those kinds of fluctuations in the bay? I think we talked about earlier a little bit about the cycle.

P.H.: I've seen – you talking about when there was – you thought the water business was dying? Oh, yeah. I've seen that. And then you wonder the next year where did they all come from. But I have been out there fishing, and you were lucky if you made \$50 a week. That's how scarce they were. And then they were just –

J.E.: And then the next year, there'd be a load of them.

P.H.: Next year would be a different year. Same way with crabbing. But that could be over crabbed now. A lot, you know, different now than it was when we crabbed. So many more people doing it, bigger rigs.

S.D.: What do you think is affecting the populations now in the bay, the crabs and the rockfish?

P.H.: Pollution. The watermen's not doing it. The city and these places, can you imagine the sewage that comes out of there every day.

J.E.: Those plants, yeah. The plants and –

P.H.: And with the farmers, the runoff. You're not going to tell me there's not runoff when they put stuff on the field, you know. But farmers have a bad year, the farmers get help. How much help do the watermen get? Very little, if any. And I'm telling you the truth.

S.D.: Can you tell me about the days of the moratorium and the impact of that on Rock Hall?

P.H.: That was a sad day when that happened. I mean Rock Hall really went downhill, I thought, after that.

J.E.: After that. Then all the sail boaters moved in.

P.H.: Yeah. (Laughter). Well, see, that's just –

J.E.: That helped it.

P.H.: Oh, yeah, that helped Rock Hall. It's a lot, I mean Rock Hall is going to be another St. Michaels. I might not live to see it. But in time, where we live on Williams Street, you ain't going to pay taxes. Property value has gone out of sight because it's so many out-of-towners moving in. Forty years ago, you went down to the shore, to the creek I called it, you seen watermen. You don't see many watermen today. It's almost like they were just shoved right out of their territory by the sail boaters, yacht, you know, everybody's got boats today, everybody.

S.D.: What kinds of things are people doing to keep places for the watermen?

P.H.: Keep places? Well **Ronnie Fillion** (phonetic) did help when he –

J.E.: Watermen's, where they can dock.

P.H.: Yeah. Watermen had the first say over the slips. But –

J.E.: One thing good about the sail boaters, a lot of them are all retired and buying places up around Rock Hall. I mean, years ago, homes were falling down and everything, you know, and they'd come in and buy them and they'd fix them up beautiful.

P.H.: Oh, yeah.

J.E.: They really do fix them up beautiful. So –
(END SIDE A.)

J.E.: So that's one good thing.

P.H.: But 40 years ago, it was charter boat capital of the world. I'm telling you the truth, honey. It was two parties run every day. My brother run parties, my dad run parties, 'cause I would go out and mate, you know, for my dad. It was – but now, everybody's got their own boat. I don't know what it costs to go on a fishing party today, but back then, it was like \$150 for

six people, and the extra you had to pay \$2 for a ride, you had to pay for your own bait. Of course, soft crabs back then, at the most, would be \$10 a dozen if you had to pay that. 'Cause we take 5, 6 dozen soft crabs. You couldn't take 5, 6 dozen soft crabs today at \$34 a dozen.

J.E.: That's right.

S.D.: What kind of customers were the customers in the early charter fishing business?

P.H.: Fishing party days? They're your average, everyday people.

J.E.: It only cost – if there were six of them, it only cost them \$25 apiece, right?

P.H.: Yeah. And they had a good day. You had your Amish people, you had your Catholic priests we had, you know, but they were average people, working class people.

S.D.: Tell me about the impact of the moratorium on the charter fishing industry.

P.H.: See that was past my day. 'Cause when they put the moratorium on, we pretty much, you know, well my brother was going blind, and when he sold the boat, the moratorium was put on in about '85, was it?

J.E.: I don't remember because I – I didn't fool with any of that.

S.D.: How about, how did charter fishing, like did the same people that crabbed during the week charter fish on the weekend, run fishing parties on the weekend or –

J.E.: No. I think they did one or the other, don't you?

P.H.: Yeah. When you were a charter boat, you done two parties a day, seven days a week.

S.D.: How about net fishing in the winter, though?

P.H.: What about it?

S.D.: Would the same person that was running a charter boat net fish in the winter?

P.H.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Yeah, because you don't charter in the winter.

S.D.: Was there ever any competition or rivalry between the charter fishing watermen and the people that were crabbing?

P.H.: No.

J.E.: What kind of oystering did you do, Patsy?

P.H.: What kind of oystering?

J.E.: Hand tonging or patent tong?

P.H.: Well, we done both.

J.E.: Did you?

P.H.: Hand tonging will kill you.

J.E.: Well you didn't hand tong, did you?

P.H.: Yes, I did one day.

J.E.: One day. (Laughter).

P.H.: One day. One day. But it – culling them was back-breaking.

J.E.: Yeah, that's right. I used to help my brother do that too, cull.

P.H.: We were right around Nickles' mark –

J.E.: In the river?

P.H.: Yeah.

J.E.: So you were hand tonging.

P.H.: Hand tonging, yeah. Me and my brother. And we were alongside of **Jimmy Wilmer**. You know who I'm talking about?

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

P.H.: He works for the –

J.E.: I know Jimmy.

P.H.: -- Department of Motor Vehicles now. And he was hand tonging alongside of us, and he said something to the fact, you know, Ronnie, why ain't she up there tonging. So Ronnie had a short pair of shafts, so I got up on the side of the boat. Joan, I had so many oysters in them tongs when I got them to the top of the boat, I said Ronnie, I can't do it. He had to help me get them up on the cull board, and I'm not lying, Joan. They were oysters like that. Beautiful oysters. No more. Yeah, we hand tonged. Didn't have a truck. I can see us now backing out of the one, **Skinner's Neck Wharf**. We had an old white car. Took the back seat of her, four-door car, and hulled the oysters in there. And they are heavy. You lift the, you know, daddy would lift them up on the wharf, I'd stack them in the car.

J.E.: Like to have a mess of them now.

P.H.: Oh, they were beautiful oysters back then.

J.E.: No mussels on them?

P.H.: Oh, clean.

J.E.: They weren't – couldn't have been planted.

P.H.: I hate getting on the plants.

J.E.: Snappy.

P.H.: Yeah, snappy. And when we were patent tonging, they were beautiful oysters too, me and Ronnie. 'Cause the water cop come aboard us one day. He was a rookie. And his boss, he was still in the boat, and he sent him on our boat to check the oysters. He said there's no little oysters on this boat – never got a ticket for oystering. Pretty good record.

S.D.: How about you? Did you ever have any problems with the marine police?

J.E.: Oh, yes. It's a different situation with me. (Laughter). My father and my brother, kind of followed them around, I believe, sometimes. My father never had any, enough life preservers for what – they had to have a whistle back then. I don't know what for. I think you still have to have a whistle.

P.H.: Yes, you still have to have whistles.

J.E.: Never did have a whistle. If he did, it was all corroded. What else? I don't know. Small, my brother had some small oysters. He and **Danny Ashley** oystered together, and I culled for them. I think we were allowed like 20 bushel apiece then. Or maybe 15.

P.H.: Fifteen, Joan, I think.

J.E.: And the culler was allowed some too. We'd oyster mostly down the bay around Cambridge, the Choptank and all. And we did real good.

S.D.: So you were staying overnight?

J.E.: I culled, culled for them. I rode back and forth, and they stayed on the boat.

S.D.: You drove in a car?

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Truck. And they stayed on the boat. I got down there to wake them up. (Laughter). They stayed in Cambridge at the harbor.

P.H.: We sold them for \$8 a bushel.

J.E.: Was it 8?

P.H.: Eight. That's what we got. Now they go on strike if they don't get 20, 25, 30.

J.E.: I think they were getting like \$12 a bushel. They were doing – this has to be like '65, '66, 1966, I guess.

S.D.: Did either of you sell in Rock Hall harbor?

P.H.: What?

S.D.: Your catch.
P.H.: We always sold in Rock Hall harbor area. Fish and oysters and crabs.
S.D.: Who did you sell to?
P.H.: Back then it was **Evans Seafood**.
J.E.: They'd come get the oysters down Piney Neck, right? When we oystered in the river, there would always be a truck down there.
P.H.: This was before the truck days. (Laughter).
J.E.: Oh, okay.
P.H.: We had to take them in the car.
J.E.: This is before the 60's, you think?
P.H.: Oh, no. It wasn't before the 60's. I got married in '61. I was – daddy was driving. I can't, it was an old white car, like a Chevy. I'll never forget it. Took the back seat out.
S.D.: How about what are some other places that used to be in Rock Hall that don't exist anymore? Do you have any fond memories of, like, Hubbard's?
P.H.: That doesn't exist anymore?
J.E.: I was thinking, the only place that's still there is the **Rock Hall Marine Railway**, Larry's. Isn't it? It's the only place that's still there.
P.H.: It's still the same.
J.E.: Even the ice plant's gone.
P.H.: The ice plant's gone. Of course, back then it was two seafood places that caught seafood. They're both gone. That was Evan's and –
J.E.: **J.J. Phipps**.
P.H.: Well Jay took over when –
J.E.: Hubbard's.
P.H.: -- Hubbard's closed down.
S.D.: What about Rock Hall Seafood?
P.H.: Was it Rock Hall?
S.D.: The oyster clamming.
P.H.: Yeah. They had a clam house and an oyster house. That's something I never done for a living. Did you ever shuck oysters?
J.E.: Huh-uh (negative).
P.H.: I'd probably starve to death.
J.E.: Yeah. I know I would.
P.H.: My mother used to walk three miles to shuck oysters every day.
S.D.: How about when the first condos were built? Do you remember? Were you here at that time?
P.H.: Yeah.
S.D.: I mean, obviously. Were you paying any attention to them at that time?
P.H.: You just were disappointed because a lot of the, like the mansion house was tore down. That was, to me, a historical place. They just, I mean, to move – I don't know how I want to say it. To move on in, up in improving Rock Hall, they were taking away everything.
S.D.: How about some of the early recreational marinas, and the early recreational boats?
P.H.: What about them?

S.D.: Well you talked a little bit about them interfering. What about when they first started locating slips, and building slips for recreational boats in the harbor?

P.H.: That's all you seen. They were overpowering the watermen. You know how like, best way to describe it is when a mother pig has a litter of pigs, and they all root that one pig out, you know, it's going to be the runt. And I guess that's how the watermen in Rock Hall, runt. But, of course, our mayor and everybody, they depend on the outsiders to bring the money in this town.

S.D.: What do you think will be the fate of watermen?

P.H.: Down the road?

S.D.: In the future, yes.

P.H.: I'll tell you right now, honey. I wouldn't want my great-grandson to even think about working on the water. My son has told him, you know.

J.E.: No benefits.

P.H.: Nothing. There's nothing there.

J.E.: No health insurance.

P.H.: No. I mean he works on the water and that's all he's ever known. He's 38. And I don't think he'd ever work on land. He loves it, it's his way of life, he was born and raised around it. He makes a good living.

J.E.: My son-in-law, Becky's husband, he just quit the water. And he's, what, pushing 40 years old now. But he's a correctional officer now. He realized that he needs a retirement and benefits.

P.H.: 'Cause he's got a family, and he needs to think about the family.

J.E.: And that's why he can no longer work on the water. If he does, it's on his days off.

P.H.: But it's always going to be in him.

J.E.: Yes. Has a beautiful boat. I guess he's going to save that for his retirement.
(Laughter.)

S.D.: What do you think will happen to the bay when there's less watermen?

P.H.: I hope I don't live to see that.

J.E.: Probably always be fishing parties.

P.H.: Always.

J.E.: For rock. And gunning parties for geese and ducks.

P.H.: I mean it's hard.

J.E.: Gunning parties.

P.H.: It's hard for a waterman to make a living because there's always so damn many restrictions they want to put on him.

J.E.: And every license cost a fortune.

P.H.: When I worked on the water –

J.E.: A clam license, an oyster license, a fishing license. They don't even give any of them out anymore, do they?

P.H.: When I worked on the water, it cost me like \$80 a year. Now it's, what? If you want to oyster –

J.E.: Three hundred, I think.

P.H.: No, if you want to oyster, it's 600, because 300 surcharge. Donnie pays 350, he don't get the oyster, because that's a thing of the past. It's a dying industry. \$100 for the intent

to rock fish, do you think those people that are riding around in their 60, \$70,000 yachts are paying \$100 with the intent to go out there and catch one? No. But this, I'm not saying that's wrong because it's helping the watermen to try to keep the bay clean, you know. But they're just, it's so many rules and regulations they got to follow, so many things they got to do to work on the water

J.E.: Well the watermen are upset too because of, they said all the money was going to research and to the big jobs, to clean up the bay, all the fish hatcheries, like they're not planning hardly any oysters. So they go out there and they work all day now and come home with five bushel outside of Rock Hall, five bushel, and they're getting, what did they say, 30, \$35 a bushel.

P.H.: \$35.

J.E.: Yeah.

P.H.: But still, Joan –

J.E.: But they said they think that the money is going somewhere else.

P.H.: Probably is.

S.D.: What kinds of knowledge about keeping the bay healthy did your father give to you, or teach you?

P.H.: Just don't throw trash overboard and all that kind of stuff, always told me.

J.E.: Don't put any oil in the water.

P.H.: To respect the water, and the water will be good to you. I mean you got so many people out there on Chesapeake Bay in the summertime, and these young kids, you know, in a boat, they don't care what they throw overboard that's going to hurt the environment, or the birds or anything. Have you ever been out there and caught a seagull that had a six-pack around it's neck and couldn't get it's bill open? That's sad that they can't carry a trashcan on the boat. Everything's thrown overboard. It's just like the, when it comes to the regulations of crabbing and all that. Well if one state don't do it, then the next state – you know, you've got to pull together. Like that commercial on TV with that Indian standing there on the shore with a tear coming down his cheek and all this trash is washing up on the shore. Well that trash had to be thrown in that water.

J.E.: And the watermen, another thing when you talk about that, the watermen down the bay, they get upset because down in Virginia, they're allowed to dredge for crabs all winter long, aren't they? Are they still –

P.H.: Females.

J.E.: They dredge –

P.H.: And knock the sponge off.

J.E.: Yeah, they dredge up all the female crabs and take them to the picking houses. And that's not right. So Virginia doesn't work with us.

P.H.: Right.

J.E.: They know right where the female crabs go in the winter, and they dredge them all winter long. That should be stopped.

P.H.: Yeah, 'cause when I worked in the picking house down – he would truck crabs in, and you'd be surprised the sponge crabs. Never saved one in my life, always threw her back.

J.E.: No, we had loads of two's. It's funny now, there are very few two's. It's just females and one's. Makes you wonder what happened to the two's. (Laughter).

P.H.: I don't know.

J.E.: Of course, they say up the bay is a lot of small crabs.

P.H.: Yeah.

J.E.: And down the bay, small ones too.

S.D.: How about some of the music and art events that go on in Rock Hall? Do you ever attend those?

P.H.: Sometimes.

J.E.: I've wanted to go to, what's the place?

SPEAKER: Fall Fest?

J.E.: Oh, I go to Fall Fest. But –

SPEAKER: Mainstay?

J.E.: Yeah, Mainstay.

P.H.: Have you been there?

J.E.: Huh-uh (negative).

P.H.: I haven't either.

J.E.: We'll have to go. I'd love to go some time.

P.H.: We should've went up when they had all the Rock Hall artists.

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

P.H.: I mean it's so much in Rock Hall that we really don't know about, Joan. There is. It's a lot of town, Rock Hall.

J.E.: Yup.

P.H.: It really is.

S.D.: What do you think about the artists? How are they contributing to the community and helping or harming?

P.H.: Keep it alive. That's one thing I like about this one artist in Chestertown, **Marcus Dely** (phonetic). He wants to keep the watermen alive. You know, their way of life. And I like that because you've got to go out there and see it, and experience it to know what we're talking about. It's nothing for somebody to get up at 6, 7:00 in the morning, take their shower, get dressed, go to work. Most of their, probably, their worst time is the traffic back and forth to work. And I'm telling you the truth. When my son comes home, sometimes it almost kills me now 'cause he's so cold being out in the weather all day. First thing he does, turn that thermostat up. And I'm sitting there, I guess, going through (Laughter) – the window up in the kitchen.

J.E.: Put the window up.

P.H.: Yeah. But I can recall – relate how he feels because I remember coming in, your face would feel like it was on fire, it'd be so flushed from being out in the wind.

J.E.: Windburn.

P.H.: It would actually sting because you'd be out there all bundled up, and it would be not cold enough to snow. It would be raining, and you talk about sting when it hit your face, snot running to your knees. (Laughter). Oh, my God. No, I don't miss it. You could never keep your nose dry.

S.D.: How about a particularly beautiful day?

P.H.: Beautiful day? Nothing any better. See, that's the only time I – know it was going to be a beautiful day. Have a lot of them, but you have a lot of bad ones too.

S.D.: If you wanted to tell someone not from Rock Hall what it was like to be working on the water, what would you want them to know?

P.H.: That it is a good way to make a living, honest way to make a living, lot of hard work, lot of long hours. But I guess in the end, you know, you look back and you think well my

dad done it, my grandfather done it, my great-grandfather done it. So I guess it's in the genes. But it's a very good way of life.

S.D.: What would you want people to know about working on the water?

J.E.: I agree with Patsy. It was a wonderful way of life. But things have changed.

P.H.: Yeah. Lot of changes.

J.E.: My family were farmers too, see, so they worked on the water and farmed. They had something else to fall back on, I guess that's what I'm saying. Patsy's didn't.

P.H.: But your – I mean Buff and them now don't.

J.E.: No.

P.H.: They are full-time watermen.

J.E.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Well he's a full-time waterman catfishing. He catfishes years – they catch them live and send them, these trucks come down and they send them to different places like Chicago, and -- live fish, live market they call it.

S.D.: How old is that? When did people start doing the live market fishing?

J.E.: Just like they catch eels and sell them live too.

P.H.: Yeah. They got to be alive too. You got to keep them alive.

J.E.: That's not – oh, well, this has been going on since, my father had that business too, since the 60's. So the live catfish market is –

P.H.: Catfish used to be a good industry, but it has dwindled right away, just like the eeling.

J.E.: I guess the catfish were up there too after the shad roe. You know that?

P.H.: Them black cats, and channel cats –

J.E.: Mississippi cats. I think it's the Mississippi cats. Mississippi cats they catch in the rivers. Mostly in the rivers now. He goes to Tuckahoe and, where else? I don't know. Up Fairlee Creek.

P.H.: You know, the best way to describe the watermen's industry today, it's either a shithouse or a castle, one or the other, you know. If it's good season, you got a castle. (Laughter.) And you have a lot of them shithouses.

J.E.: Or outhouses.

P.H.: Yeah. But the reason I worked on the water, it's a gamble, and I'm a gambler.

J.E.: Oh, gosh.

P.H.: You couldn't have paid me \$500 a week to work inside. I liked it outside, being my own boss. Nobody really telling me what to do, and that's what the watermen like. They're their own boss.

J.E.: That's nice too.

S.D.: Okay, what I'd like to do real quick is I'd like for you to say, like to do an introduction, like say your name and what you do for a living, and the same with you.

P.H.: I don't do anything for a living now.

S.D.: Or what you did.

P.H.: My name is Patsy Higgs, and for 21 years, I was a commercial waterwoman.

J.E.: My name is Joan Elburn, and I still work. I work at a retirement development in Chestertown called Heron Point. And I have full benefits, and I really like it.

S.D.: But you worked on the water as well.

J.E.: Yes, I did. I worked in my younger days.

S.D.: Okay. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything you want people to know, something I might have missed?

P.H.: Not that I can think of.

J.E.: Maybe we'll see you again.

S.D.: Okay, real quick before I turn it off, I just want to run, it's called empty silence. So this is going to be like the longest minute ever. Oh, it's already over.
(End of Interview.)