

Interview Log

Interviewee: Myrtle Butler (M.B.)
Cordelia Hynson (C.H.)

Tape #:

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond (S.D.)
Leslie Raimond (L.R.)
Kent County Arts Council

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Topic: Rock Hall Clam and Oyster, Vita Foods in Chestertown, Hubbard's Restaurant, Rock Hall African American Community, Eadesville, Rock Hall Harbor, Edna Marie Sutton, integration of Hubbard's Restaurant, powder plant explosion (Chestertown), cutting fish and shucking oysters.

Theme: Working in packing houses of Rock Hall and Chestertown, African American experience in Rock Hall, segregation of Vita Foods, desegregation of Hubbard's Restaurant.

Comments: Transcriber has some difficulty hearing all speakers clearly.

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Field Notes: Miss Myrtle is also known in the community as "Hard" Myrtle. Cordelia Hynson was crocheting during the interview. While the content is excellent, the audio quality is just fair. In addition to a room of people, background noises and heating system fans, I had problems with my long cord and couldn't follow the speakers closely with my short cord. (I never really figured out what was wrong with the cord. I tried working with it when I should have stopped the interview and switched earlier. I changed cords at 14 minutes.

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BEGIN SIDE A

S.D.: All right, this is Shelly Drummond with the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, and I'm at the Senior Center in Chestertown, and we're talking with Ms. Myrtle Butler. Ms. Myrtle, can you tell me where you're from?

M.B.: Rock Hall.

S.D.: And what did your family do for a living?

M.B.: They worked on farms and different things.

S.D.: Did any of them ever work on the water?

M.B.: No.

S.D.: What was the community like when you were young?

M.B.: The community was – well it was like this. You didn't get much money or nothing. About 75 cents a day, my father worked for a lady.

S.D.: What – on a farm?

M.B.: No, it was in a house. Where they had the funeral home, that place down there. It's not very far before you get to Rock Hall. That's where he lived, for Miss **Lolly Lear** (phonetic), she was there, and he did work outside for her.

S.D.: What did most of the people in the community do in Rock Hall for a living?

M.B.: Well some of them oystered, and some of them fished, done fishing. With some of, they went with some of the people that fished, had the boats and things. That's why they had to go oystering and fishing with them.

S.D.: Did they have their own boats or –

M.B.: The ones that – had their own boats, the white people did. (Inaudible).

S.D.: Were there any watermen in the community who did have their own boats?

M.B.: No.

S.D.: How about the school?

M.B.: Well they had little side store up in **Eadesville**. And then we had some stores down Rock Hall. The little Eadesville store was just a little small store, bought bread and milk and flour and stuff like that, sure. But if you want to go to really shop, you had to go down Rock Hall to the big stores. They had an A&P down there, grocery store. And they had one little – a meat store.

S.D.: What about the school?

M.B.: We went to **Eadesville School**. And it was – we had it in part of, in the bottom of the church.

S.D.: You had a school in the bottom – at the church?

M.B.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

S.D.: Which church?

M.B.: Holy Trinity.

S.D.: How many children were in the school?

M.B.: It was around, I guess it was around 15, 16, something like that.

S.D.: And what ages do people go to school, generally?

M.B.: They went to school until they went to the 7th grade, and then that was as far as they could go.

S.D.: What year are you talking about? Do you remember the years?

M.B.: No, I (inaudible). That's when I went.

S.D.: Were there any other schools in your community that the people went to other than the one at the church?

M.B.: They went to the one in church, and then after a while, they built another one right in Eadesville. And the lower grades, they went in the one in the church, and the other little – another grade went in the new one.

S.D.: Do you have brothers and sisters?

M.B.: I have two brothers.

S.D.: And what did they do, growing up? Did they work?

M.B.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

S.D.: What – on the farms?

M.B.: They worked – no, they didn't work on no farm. They just worked doing day work like that.

S.D.: So where did you work in Rock Hall?

M.B.: I worked in seafood, a shucking house in Rock Hall.

S.D.: Which one?

M.B.: Huh?

S.D.: Which one was it, the name of it? Did you just work in one, or did you work in a couple?

M.B.: There wasn't nothing but one down there. The name of – I don't know what the name of it is now, but I belong – I stopped working down there, and then in '97 I quit.

S.D.: When did you start?

M.B.: Oh, I started – it was ever since I was around 16 or something like that.

S.D.: Did you have family members that worked there?

M.B.: Yeah.

S.D.: Tell me what it was like going to work there one day – like a day. Could you describe to me?

M.B.: Well you had to go early in the morning. You had to go around 4:00 – and you didn't get off until in the evening. You shucked oysters down 4:00 until -- in the morning until round about four in the evening before you went home.

S.D.: Did you shuck clams too?

M.B.: Yeah, we shucked clams last.

S.D.: And did they have crabs? Did you pick crabs there?

M.B.: No, I didn't pick no crabs. They had another house where you picked crabs at.

S.D.: What – how many, like how many people do you think were working there at that time?

M.B.: Oh, about 50.

S.D.: Men and women?

M.B.: Men and women.

S.D.: Did people give you a hard time because you were a woman coming in to shuck?

M.B.: Oh, no. No. We all worked together, and we got along good together.

S.D.: Did people sing?

M.B.: Huh?

S.D.: Did anybody – were they ever singing?

M.B.: Yeah, sometimes they would sing. Uh-huh (affirmative). I guess they thought that made it, the work go easier, I guess. Which it did help.

S.D.: What songs would people sing?

M.B.: They sang hymns. Most of them was hymns.

S.D.: Any particular one stick out in your mind?

M.B.: They sang *You Can't Make Me Doubt Him, Got the Lord Jesus in my Heart*. They sang a whole lot of different ones.

S.D.: Tell me what, about the tools and how you set up to work for people that don't know anything about oyster shucking, which would include me.

M.B.: Oh, you had a storage to work in, like a box, and you was in that. A booth, they called it a booth. That's where you had all your stuff at. You had your board and everything, your pans and everything set up.

S.D.: Who made your box?

M.B.: Huh?

S.D.: Who made your box?

M.B.: They were already made. The storage was already made when you went in the oyster house. But they don't have them anymore now, see. They just have a plain table.

S.D.: Did you use – tell me about the shucking knife.

M.B.: Oh, my Lord. Don't say nothing about it. Sometimes you would break it. An oyster knife was rough, and you had to wear gloves, you had to be careful that you steadied your hands. If the gloves got a hole in them, you had to get another new pair. Couldn't work with your fingers out. It would cut your hands up.

S.D.: Do you remember any changes when the Health Department came in or like the difference between working before the Health Department got involved and after?

M.B.: No, I didn't see any different change because the Health Department was there all the time, checking out the food. And you had to wear nets on your head too. You couldn't have it being bare like they do now. Any food that you work in, you're supposed to have a net on your head to keep that hair out of the stuff.

S.D.: How about the aprons?

M.B.: And you had to have aprons too, yeah.

S.D.: Where did you get your apron from?

M.B.: Had to buy them. Sometimes they cost a dollar and a half like that, but they would last a long time because they were heavy aprons.

S.D.: Did any – like you said your family members. Which family members worked in the shucking house with you?

M.B.: My nephew –

S.D.: Who?

M.B.: My nephew, my sister's children. They would put up the oysters and stuff like that.

S.D.: Did your mother ever work?

M.B.: No. She didn't work there. She worked – she worked taking care of people.

S.D.: Can you describe what the harbor was like at that time?

M.B.: The harbor was – you really didn't get no money or nothing. I think when I first started shucking oysters, I didn't get no more than 25 cents a bucket. Then it went up to another quarter, 50 cents. From that, it went to 75, and it kept on going till it got to a dollar a gallon. I could do right smart gallons a day. And that's where I made my money.

S.D.: Did you ever – here I can stop, let me stop.
(Off record.)

S.D.: Okay, we're back. How did you learn how to shuck oysters?

M.B.: I just went on and learned it. Teach me how to do it, and I just went on and done it.

S.D.: Did you jab yourself?

M.B.: Yes, a whole lot of times. Hands got sore and everything else. But you had to have, you had to get a hard corner in there. And after you got that in there, you could go on about your business, it was all right. It was rough, I'm telling you.

S.D.: And where was the corner that you're talking about?

M.B.: Where you put the knife at, see, at this end. You had to hold the oyster in this hand. It was rough, I'm telling you. When you first started, I didn't get but one gallon that one day, that's when I was starting. I said if I can't do no better than that, I'm going to quit. No, I guess I can keep on. I kept on. I went to two, then I went to three, and then I went on a little further. I said well I'm doing good now. I'm going to keep on going. So I did. I got up to shucking 15 gallons a day and like that, and kept on going. I wouldn't stop.

S.D.: How about the – was it cold in there?

M.B.: Yeah. They didn't have no heat. Sometimes they would have ice in them and everything else. Was lucky to even be living. All with arthritis and everything. It was rough.

S.D.: Where was the ice?

M.B.: Huh?

S.D.: Where was the ice?

M.B.: The ice would be in the oysters. That's where it be. You have to have some hot water to stick your hands in, warm them up every once in a while. It was rough.

S.D.: How did you get to and from work?

M.B.: Huh?

S.D.: How did you get to and from work?

M.B.: We had – I mean they had a van. We didn't have to pay nothing for going to work, but you had to be ready 'cause they had a van pick you up. And then the later years, after that, you had to find your own way. You had to pay somebody to carry you. That was out of your money too, what you made. When we first started out, we didn't. Had a truck pick us up, a

van. Would be early in the morning around 4:00. You had to be ready, 'cause they couldn't wait for you. Had to get there.

S.D.: What was the harbor like early in the morning? Can you tell me a little bit about the sounds and the lights?

M.B.: Getting up out of that bed early in the morning, yeah. Cold weather, snowing and everything else, rain. It was rough. I ain't kidding – so then after that, I just went on to Vita, but it wasn't much better, you know, certain time anyhow.

L.R.: You worked at Vita Foods?

M.B.: Yeah. Worked there till it closed.

L.R.: What do you do down there? I'm sorry, I'm –

S.D.: That's okay.

M.B.: I mean I packed beets and pickles. Fish, pickles, melons, all that kind of stuff. The old hot tub would burn your hands. I hate to see summertime come, 'cause I know what that does to me.

S.D.: So you worked at Vita Food in the summer and Rock Hall in the winter. Is that right?

M.B.: Yeah.

S.D.: Did – is that what most of the people did?

M.B.: Yeah, 'cause – I mean every once in a while you'd have a layoff, and we would have to go. See, and last I got on – I said well, if they keep me this time, I don't have to get laid off. So I stayed. Stayed until Vita Foods closed. Vita Foods closed in '72, 1972.

S.D.: Did you, or did anybody in the packing house ever walk out for more wages, or –

M.B.: I don't think so. Definitely didn't have no work no how. They couldn't just walk out or else you wouldn't have no job – it was – every layoff time, we had to go.

S.D.: So there will be some employees that would stay.

M.B.: The old ones.

S.D.: And what would they do during the – like basically, you're saying they would stay over in the summer?

M.B.: They stayed the whole year around, the old ones. But we didn't. We were just, just the ones that come when they need us real bad until – and then I got on out too. I didn't have to go no more. I said well I'm going to stay this time, and I did – they were getting ready to have a – on the cucumbers, that's when it settled it. They did not, here you didn't have them, so that's how we just had closed up.

S.D.: Did you encourage your family members to go into the packinghouse?

M.B.: No. No. They went anyhow – filled out application and they take them.

S.D.: You worked at Vita Foods, right? Can you say your name?

C.H.: Cordelia Hynson.

S.D.: Tell me a little bit about what Vita Foods was like.

C.H.: It was a packinghouse that done pickles, and fish. Pickles in the summer months, fish all year round. Packed fish in jars, and it was called Vita Foods Creamed Fish. Pickles was kosher and sweet pickles, and dill pickles, and relish. And that was about it for the packing. Most of it's pickles and fish during the summer months.

S.D.: What was it like in there? Was it hot?

C.H.: Hot in the summer, cold in the winter.

S.D.: And how did you get to Vita Foods?

C.H.: In Rock Hall you could pick up, and then most people drove, had their own cars. And that was it.

S.D.: And where are you from?

C.H.: I'm from Worton.

S.D.: Worton?

C.H.: Worton, Maryland. Worton Point.

S.D.: And what did most people do in your community?

C.H.: Mostly of them worked on farms -- mostly the men worked in Wilmington at different jobs up there, and mostly the women, what few women that was able to work at that time that was of age worked in Vita Foods because it was about, I'd say about eight of us from that community. It was a small community that worked in Vita Foods. And then that was it.

S.D.: Did people encourage the children to go into --

C.H.: Mostly, our kids was in school. Then after they got in age to work, Vita Foods would take them on for the summer months, and then they would get laid off when school-time come. And that's the way we worked. And the women worked mostly during all year-round.

S.D.: What age did you start working?

C.H.: I started when I was, I was 30, in my 30's. And I worked there for 17, 18 -- about 20 some years when they closed down.

S.D.: How many people were working in Vita Foods?

C.H.: Close to 300. Close to 300.

S.D.: Mostly women?

C.H.: Women and men. Women worked on the lines. They had lines. They had a packinghouse for pickles, two or three lines for pickles. Then they had, I think, four lines of fish, and each line was full with women.

S.D.: Where did the fish come from?

C.H.: North Carolina. I think North Carolina. Different places. I can't remember, say where it comes from. But the original place was in New York. That was original. And I think it's quite a few in New York right today. (Inaudible).

S.D.: Do you eat fish now?

C.H.: Uh-huh (affirmative). I love fish. I didn't eat much of their fish because it wasn't my kind. It was pickled, and brined, and kosher and all that kind of stuff, and we weren't used to it. We were, well, we packed it.

S.D.: So what kind of fish was it?

C.H.: Herring.

S.D.: Herring.

C.H.: Creamed herring. Creamed fish. Creamed. Pack it in jars in little 8-ounce jars, 12-ounce and 16-ounce jars.

S.D.: Do you eat oysters?

M.B.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

S.D.: Do you like them?

M.B.: I love them.

SPEAKER: I don't. I hate them. I can never get an oyster down my throat. No way.

S.D.: Tell me, was it, as an African American woman going down into Rock Hall Harbor, was it hard to be there, or were you ever scared?

M.B.: No.

S.D.: Did people mostly get along, or were there ever problems?

M.B.: Yeah, we got along all right. (Inaudible).

S.D.: What do you think about – was there any difference in the way people got along in Rock Hall versus some place like Chestertown?

M.B.: Not that I knew.

L.R.: Did people get along?

C.H.: Well everybody was friendly. Of course, you could find some that wasn't. And mostly, everybody got along very good for a small community at that time. Chestertown is built up now. Got more people, and more nationalities come through. At that time, it was just black and white. So we really got along pretty good together.

S.D.: What about during the early days of integration?

C.H.: I can't say about that because I never was out there into that. I guess they got along pretty good, I don't know, together. They had to take it as it came along, so they just got along. It was something they had to do to go through.

L.R.: Can I ask something? What year was all this when this was going on, you worked at Vita Foods and all?

C.H.: What year was it, Myrtle?

M.B.: I don't know – I know you started before I did.

C.H.: Yeah.

M.B.: You all worked there before I did.

C.H.: It was in the 70's.

L.R.: In the 70's.

C.H.: It was in the 70's.

M.B.: We worked at Vita Food before that.

C.H.: Before that? 50's?

M.B.: Yeah, before that.

C.H.: Because when I started to work, my paycheck was 29 -- \$28 a week. \$28 a week from then on. Then it started going up. And my father worked there, and my stepmother worked there, and they were older people, and they worked there years before I did. So it was going on a long time.

SPEAKER: I think you started in the 50's because Juanita was born in '54, Alice – working (inaudible).

C.H.: Yeah, it was a long time. I think it was way before I was even married.

S.D.: Could you say your name?

SPEAKER: No.

S.D.: All right. You'll be the unnamed voice. Chime in if you want, really. What did people do to relax like after they got off of work? Where did they go?

M.B.: After they got off work? They went home. That's where they went.

C.H.: I can tell you where I went. Went home and taking care of my family.

M.B.: Had families to take care of. That's what they had to do. Had to go home, wash clothes and everything else. Cook too.

C.H.: Wasn't too much relax, too much pleasure. Not in my day, it wasn't.

M.B.: It wasn't too much pleasure no how. Sometimes they wanted you to work on Saturdays too.

C.H.: Yeah. We worked Saturdays, some Sundays, when things was really bad that they wanted to get rid of some of the pickles or the fish. We had to work to get rid of that. Maybe not all day, but part of the day.

S.D.: How about at church? What did – when you worked on Sundays, did you not go to church?

C.H.: No.

M.B.: You couldn't go to church if you worked.

S.D.: What kind of functions did the church have? Like homecomings?

M.B.: Yeah, homecomings and stuff like that. (Indiscernible) and stuff like that.

L.R.: I'd like to interrupt for a second and just suggest that Myrtle might tell the story of when the powder plant blew up in Chestertown. She was working –

M.B.: I'm not going to say nothing about it no how.

L.R.: Please, Myrtle, tell us about it.

M.B.: Well that was '54, July the 16th. You heard this noise. After a while, them remaining said run, run. So we left, running on out. Didn't have a chance to get our pocketbooks or nothing, had to go. I know I run out there to the cornfield – I kept on running, 'cause I couldn't help nobody, I had to help myself. They were old. I ain't going nowhere, my pocketbook's in there, and all that kind of foolishness. I said the devil with pocketbooks, whatever's in there. Lunch and stuff. I'm going back and get my stuff. I said go on back and get it then. I'm going on. So we went on, running on through the cornfield, right to the road. After we got out there to the road, it was a truck out there. Great big truck. Yeah. So he said come on, get on there. So we got on there, he carried us on. (Laughter). Brought us on home. I was living down there in an old house then.

SPEAKER: Did it blow up? Is that what happened?

M.B.: The powder plant blowed up, blowed all the windows out.

SPEAKER: Oh, that was before I was born.

M.B.: Blowed all the windows out of Vita Food.

SPEAKER: Oh, my God. Oh, that's awful. We had to run. I ain't have no time to run back to, they're hollering I ain't going nowhere because my money's in there, my pocketbook. Well what you doing carrying your money with you? Could've left your money home. I said well I'm going on. I ain't got time to fool with nobody. I can't help nobody. I can get out of here. So I kept on. After a while, we got to the road, there was her husband truck out there, and he loads us on, and we went on.

S.D.: How did, did he –

C.H.: He was coming from work because he worked down to Southern States, and he was driving the truck, and he happened to be coming up through town, and he knew where I was at, he knew I was at Vita Foods. So when he found out it had blowed up, he stopped, seemed like they were stopping the cars and whatever on the highway. And that's where he saw me, and I got in the truck with him, and he brought me on home, and – he brought me home. And all the other people, other people were there, they jumped in the truck too, so he was carrying them all. So that's what made the day.

L.R.: It was international news that the powder plant had blown up. The whole world knew that all these people had been actually killed in the incident. The powder plant was in one area close to Vita Foods. And people who were at Vita Foods, from what I understand, didn't

know if it was their building that had actually exploded. There was, I guess, panic and lots and lots of concern.

S.D.: Do you have any other stories of, any funny stories about somebody that you worked with?

C.H.: No.

S.D.: How about the owner?

C.H.: Can we talk about the owner?

M.B.: Yeah, go ahead and talk about him.

C.H.: You talk about him. Because he was a man that was, he was a good – he was good to a lot of black people because that's where they made their money from. But he had his ways of doing things. And, of course, -- had to work every day, you had to do your work good, you had to be a good worker, you had to be a person that came to work mostly all the time. You couldn't lay off, stay off, I don't feel good or whatever. And he was, what, he wasn't the best of the worker – of a boss man, but he was good in a ways – in some ways. 'Cause we could go to him and ask him for favors, and he would do us favors. And he would loan money out to people that was in need at the time, he would loan them money. But he always, you know, taking it out of their paychecks or whatever, and things like that. So we can't, we couldn't complain at that time.

S.D.: Where was he from?

C.H.: I think he was from New York. What was – he from?

M.B.: From New York.

C.H.: From New York?

M.B.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

C.H.: I think it was from New York.

S.D.: How about Rock Hall Seafood?

M.B.: Rock Hall Seafood was all right, but – it was all right, but I don't know. Had to wait for your money and all that kind of stuff. I didn't like that on Fridays. I figure like this. If you worked all the week, around 12:00, you should be getting your money. But no, huh-uh. What's the man's name? **Gilbert**. He would wait until sometimes we wouldn't get our money until around 3 or 4:00 after we'd worked all the week. And I didn't think that was right. But we couldn't do nothing about it. And we need that money to go shopping with. You always got money in a check. You had to go to the bank. Of course, on Fridays, the bank stayed open till late, don't it – so that wasn't no problem there about getting it cashed. But you wanted your money. You'd worked all the week. Everywhere else they pay off around 12:00 like that. But huh-uh. Not him. I think that wife had something to do with that. We never had that trouble when the other man had it. But she, I think she was the one. Wouldn't go get the money. I mean no, be 3:00 like that. Well you'd be tired. You'd want to go get your money, go on and do your little bit of shopping, go on home. Especially on Fridays. Kind of sad Monday, he'd want you to go back in there, and I wouldn't go. I know I wasn't going.

S.D.: What did you do while you were waiting for your money?

M.B.: Just wait around there. Get done shucking around 12, but we had to wait, had to wait all the evening just for our – until, you know, the check come down. Come from somewhere. Said well the checks ain't got here yet. You don't want that kind of foolishness. When you're working, you want your money.

S.D.: Did you – what did you do for lunch?

M.B.: We carried our lunch. Always carried something for our lunch. They didn't have no lunch down there. But they did give you coffee.

S.D.: How about at Vita Foods? What did you do for lunch?

C.H.: We had a cafeteria. And you either brought your lunch, or you could buy your lunch.

S.D.: Did people all break and eat together?

C.H.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Unless you had to work through lunch hour. Then you would have a lunch hour after 1:00, and you would take your break then. But, ordinarily, we would have lunch at 12:00, and then we'd go back to work at 12:30 or 1:00.

L.R.: I remember hearing stories about other activities during your break like sewing activities. Was that at Vita Foods?

C.H.: That's where I learned to crochet.

L.R.: Tell us about that.

C.H.: A bunch of us girls would get together, and we would sit together at the long table, we had long tables, we would sit together, and each one would bring like my bag here, crocheting, and we would teach each other different ways to crochet, or knit, or whatever. And that's where I started crocheting.

S.D.: How about at Rock Hall Seafood?

M.B.: What about it?

S.D.: Did they do anything other than eat lunch during –

M.B.: There ain't no time to do nothing after you eat lunch and then go back to work. No way, we didn't have no overtime. Just like I said, around 12:30 or something like that, had to go back to work.

S.D.: What about church suppers? What church did you go to?

C.H.: I went to St. James. **St. James Methodist Church** in Worton Point for a while. Mostly my time, mostly all my life – I won't say all my life, mostly all the time, I went to St. James Methodist Church. And they had suppers, dinners, activities, songs, preaching, quartet singing and different plays for the kids. Would have like Christmas plays and things like that for the kids.

S.D.: Who wrote the plays?

C.H.: They just probably go in – they had books, catalogs, and they would get them through different schools and stuff. Things like that.

S.D.: Who did the costumes for the –

C.H.: For the children? Mostly, generally, the parents done the costumes, whatever they needed. They'd take old clothes and cut them up and make costumes out of them and things like that for kids. In them days, they didn't go out and buy a whole lot of stuff because you didn't have the money. They mostly made, the parents made them.

S.D.: What kind of church dinners did they – what did they serve, like oysters or fish?

C.H.: Turkey, oysters, fish. They have fish fries. They have dinners down there now, fish fries and dinners. And, of course, they have everything that goes along with it, with a turkey dinner and chicken dinners and whatever.

L.R.: Who cooked the fish and the oysters?

C.H.: (Inaudible) – the fish cookers.

S.D.: How about when the packinghouses closed? When did the packinghouse in Rock Hall close the first time?

M.B.: I know it's closed now. (Indiscernible) could tell you about that because – but he won't tell you nothing. They were the last ones that worked there, shucking oysters and clams. I come on out there in '97. I didn't shuck no more. I said I'm done. I'm going to get my money, and that's it. I don't care if it ain't nothing but \$200, I'm getting it. So I didn't go back to work no more then.

S.D.: Did you prepare for that day, or did it just sort of –

M.B.: What?

S.D.: The day you left. Were you –

M.B.: No, I didn't prepare for it. I said I'll make enough to get my, to get this – to file my income, and that's all I was worried about. I said 'cause I ain't going back no more.

S.D.: So they had like a retirement?

M.B.: Huh?

S.D.: So did they have retirement?

M.B.: What?

S.D.: At Rock Hall Seafood.

M.B.: A retirement?

S.D.: Retirement. They didn't have any retirement?

M.B.: No, they didn't have none. I was 62. I could retire my own self. (Laughter). I didn't need, I didn't need no –

SPEAKER: Miss Myrtle, can I ask you how old you are now?

M.B.: I'm 86.

SPEAKER: Oh, wow. Getting up there in age.

S.D.: So you quit in '97.

M.B.: Yeah. That was enough. I'd worked long enough. Don't want to work no more. I ain't going to work now. Only work I do now is around to my house. No more. I do what I want. (Laughter). I feel like doing this, I do it. If I don't, it don't get done.

C.H.: That's right. That's right.

S.D.: When – do you feel like the packing house was good for the community or –

M.B.: Yeah, it was good for it, because that's the only, that was the most important job they had, and then they had a sewing factory down Rock Hall. A lot of them went to that, and it closed down. Then they didn't have nowhere to go.

S.D.: There was a tomato cannery down there. Was that opened when you were –

M.B.: Yeah, but that was real early. I went down that when I was about 16 and skinned tomatoes. And they had fish down there, cut fish down there too.

S.D.: What time of the year did they do the cut fish?

M.B.: In the fall of the year.

S.D.: Before oysters or –

M.B.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Around about September, like that. Cut fish. Tomato season was over with. Then they had to cut fish.

S.D.: Did you ever get that stuff on your hands from getting cut? It's like – they call it different things. It's called – well they'll call it fish disease or crab disease depending on, you know, when people get their crabs –

M.B.: No, I never had that. Some of the people had it, but I didn't.

S.D.: What did they do to help their hands when they got that? Do you remember?

M.B.: They had to go to their doctors, get some medicine for their hands. (To other participant:) Wake up. (Laughter).

S.D.: What would you want people to know about the packinghouses, and growing up in Rock Hall? Because this is going to be going to National Mall in Washington, D.C. What would, if you had people around, what would you want them to know about Rock Hall?

M.B.: About oyster houses, all that? Some of them still shucking now, but they ain't shucking right, you know, right to the oyster houses. They shuck them for different people, different places, like down to (indiscernible) – down Rock Hall. They're shucking oysters down there.

S.D.: How about Hubbard's?

M.B.: **Hubbard's?** I worked to Hubbard's.

S.D.: You did?

M.B.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

S.D.: What was that like?

M.B.: What?

S.D.: Working at Hubbard's.

M.B.: It was rough too. I worked there a long time. I worked in the restaurant, and then I went over there, Hubbard's Shucking House. After closed down and we sold all the stuff, and then they just busted that up. Ain't no more. Ain't no more restaurant down there. No more. They've got boats and everything else down there now. It doesn't take no – it was good, it was good restaurant – restaurant was the good place. I used to work down there every Saturday and every Sunday. I didn't get the chance to go to church 'cause I worked. I worked Vita Food, and then I worked Saturdays and Sundays down there. I worked in the kitchen. I was a dishwasher, and clearing off the tables. But it was nice. You had to work somewhere to make your ends meet.

S.D.: How about some of the people that worked there? Do you have any stories about some funny events, or a hard day?

M.B.: All them people were nice to me. They give me anything I wanted. If I said I wanted fish, clams or whatever, them cooks, I got anything I wanted. But **Edna Marie**, she wouldn't give you nothing but soup. (Laughter.) Some soup and crackers for you. Miss Gladys said never, whatever you want, you'll get. She was the cook. Crab cakes or anything. I got whatever I wanted, 'cause I had some good cooks down there, and they give me what I wanted to eat. But Edna Marie, huh-uh. All it was, you have some crab soup.

SPEAKER: Who was Edna Marie?

M.B.: She was head of it, you know. It was her place. She didn't want you to have nothing. Some soup. (Laughter). I see her now sometimes. How you, Myrtle? I say I'm all right. I often think about her. They used to come there, my apron – I had an apron on. She come here putting money in my pocket. I said look, Edna Marie, don't put no more money in my pocket. I want to see what you give me. She had – change. Yeah. Can't trust her. So then after that, she laid it on the table where I could see it. I don't want no foolishness like that. I used to work weekends, go shortchanging me. I want to know what I'm getting. I didn't have no more trouble with her with that, because she laid it on the table where I could see it. Don't go putting nothing in my pocket. I don't know what you putting in there. I want to see my money. I didn't have no more trouble after that. She went on and laid it on the table where I could see it myself.

Don't go paying me, sticking it in my apron pocket. No, I don't want that foolishness. I don't know what you're putting in there. Might just put anything.

S.D.: How about the cooks?

M.B.: The cooks were nice. I had a nice time with the cooks. All them girls were nice to me.

S.D.: Where did the recipes for the crab cakes and stuff come from?

M.B.: I don't know. They would never tell you. They had a secret. They wouldn't tell you what to put in them. Miss Gladys, she really could make them too. Miss **Gladys Collier**. She could make them. Crab soup too, she was a cooking woman.

S.D.: How about the customers?

M.B.: The customers was all right. They were nice. But they – I'll tell you one thing, this is what I want to tell you. When they first started, I was in there working. First started, wouldn't let no colored people come in there. They had to come to the window and get their stuff. They had to come to the windows and get it. A lot of them places like that. They wouldn't serve you inside, but you had to come to the window. Well, see, I wouldn't got nothing at all. 'Cause my money was just as good as the rest of the people's money. No, I wouldn't have gotten nothing. In time, I got to go to the window and get stuff, I can't come inside and sit down and eat? Huh-uh. You wouldn't take my money like that. No. I know one fellow come down. He was colored. He had a whole family. They told him no, they couldn't serve him inside. Well he said that's all right, I'll go back. When I go back, I'm going to see about this. It was terrible that they would not let them come inside. Now I was in there working. The colored ones was in there working, but they wouldn't serve no colored ones in the restaurant. Huh-uh. You'd come to the window, you'd get your stuff. No. That wouldn't work like that with me, 'cause my money is just as good as anybody else's. It was a mess.

S.D.: Did it change?

M.B.: Yes, it changed. After that man went back wherever he went and come. They started serving all kinds. Oh, yeah. It changed 'cause he said he was going back and see about it, and he did. You go to a restaurant and you can't even go in, sit down and eat. That doesn't make sense to me. I was black, I was working in there.

S.D.: Were you there the day they came back?

M.B.: No, I wasn't there the day they came back. I only worked weekends.

S.D.: Did you hear about it?

M.B.: Huh-uh. You didn't hear no more. But they were like that even on the busses. You had to get up. If it was a white one, you had to get up and give your seat to them and then stand up. And, see, I never did think that was right, until they segregated the thing. You had to stand up. I stayed just like this. It doesn't make no difference to me what color, but I think that you should have your share too. You got the seat first, why would you have to stand up? That's the way they had to do. It was terrible.

S.D.: When did – when people first started coming into Hubbard's, when they first started allowing people to come into Hubbard's, who was that that first started coming in that you remember?

M.B.: People from the city and everywhere else used to come down for the summer. And they would come, bring their families and eat.

S.D.: They were coming into Rock Hall from –

M.B.: Yeah, from the city.

S.D.: How did they come?

M.B.: They'd come in cars.

S.D.: What brought them to Rock Hall?

M.B.: I don't know. I guess they heard about it, and they want to see what it was like, like these people in Chestertown. Sometimes you see a whole lot of busses comes in Chestertown just to view the town over. And I guess that's what they did.

S.D.: Did they just come like with their family, or did they come in a bus, a bus of people?

M.B.: They used to come in cars.

S.D.: How about some of the watermen that worked with some of the white watermen? I know that a lot of watermen went into Hubbard's.

M.B.: They'd come every lunchtime and eat. If they got a good – the help would come and eat too. If you don't – (indiscernible).

S.D.: How about in the packinghouses, was everyone in the packinghouse African American, or were there some whites?

M.B.: No, it was all different people, all nations.

S.D.: Did they stand in different places, or did they all stand together and talk?

M.B.: And talk?

S.D.: Or shuck. And eat lunch, I guess.

M.B.: They – well they had seats to sit down at.

S.D.: So it was pretty, like you said that they all got along.

M.B.: Yeah, they got along nice together, all of them. I never heard anything, I never heard of none of them arguing, nothing.

S.D.: How about at Vita Foods? Am I saying it right? Vita, Vita?

C.H.: Vita.

S.D.: Okay.

C.H.: Now what you want to know?

S.D.: Were there white and African Americans working in there?

C.H.: Well they started off with white had restroom, blacks had restroom. The men had a restroom, white restroom and black restroom. They all would – the white would sit, had a table in the hall where they would sit and eat. And we would have tables with different friends, relatives, whatever, we'd sit and eat together. They ate together, but then they socialized together some, not much, but some. And that was it. They worked together, they talked together at times. But they all would go different ways after hours.

S.D.: When did the bathrooms change?

M.B.: It didn't change, 'cause then it closed up, after it closed.

S.D.: What year?

C.H.: What year was that? '79?

M.B.: No, no. It was '72.

C.H.: '72 when it closed. So that's – they had all that when they built the new plant, they had an old plant, but they built a new plant, and they had the same setup, white had the bathroom, blacks had the bathroom. They had their own sitting room. The white would have one sitting room, their sitting room, and we would have our sitting room, the black sitting room where we would sit. And that's the way it went.

S.D.: At that time, they were, they had integrated. By the 70's, they had integrated the schools, right?

SPEAKER: Excuse me. We're getting ready to serve lunch now because we have –

S.D.: Okay. Well thank you very much.
(End of interview.)