

Interview Log

Interviewee: Daniel Elburn (D.E.)
Jessica Elburn (J.E.)

Tape #:

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond (S.D.)

of Tapes: 1

Date: October 30, 2003

of Sides: 1

Location: In the Elburns' netting shed

Topic: Watermen in Rock Hall, gearing net

Theme:

Rock Hall watermen, Pelorus Marina, J&J Seafood, Maryland Watermen's Association, Larry Simms

Comments: Interviewees sound far from microphone. Volume is patchy in places.

Documentation:

Audio: OH interview and gearing net soundscape with interview

Video: n/a

Digital Photos: Danny, his father Jack and daughter Jessica gearing net,
Jessica in the seafood market

Slides: n/a

Field Notes:

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BEGIN SIDE A

S.D.: This is Shelly Drummond, and I'm with the Elburns, and it's October 30th, and they're gearing net, and we're going to just capture some of the sounds in here.

D.E.: Boy, it really turned out to be a nice day today. Jessica, this is 5 inch, so make sure that, I know you're used to gearing bigger net. Make sure you only pick 4 to tie. Did you like using those – Jessica, as opposed to the other?

J.E.: Yeah, they hold a lot more thread.

D.E.: Yeah. Are your fingers getting sore yet, or are you getting used to it?

J.E.: I'm getting used to it. The colder it gets, the worse they get.

D.E.: It's coming out, laying pretty good, isn't it? Pretty good?

J.E.: Yeah. I normally don't like gearing the – net.

D.E.: Yeah.

S.D.: Who makes the decisions on what kind of net you're gearing?

D.E.: Basically, it's a roll of the dice. You keep in touch with your charter captains that are catching in the summertime, and with your recreational people catching good size fish. And you need a certain amount of boxes of all sizes from like, say like 4 boxes of 5 inch, 4 boxes of 5 ¼, 4 boxes of 5 ½ because you never know what size fish is going to come up the bay. The ones you don't have every size net, hopefully, they have the right size net when the right, that size fish comes in the bay. If you have nothing but 5-inch net that catches an 18 to 20-inch fish, and you have a run of big fish come up the bay, 10 pound and up, 30 inches or so, then you're just out of luck, you're just out of luck. And it's just pretty much a roll of the dice, and to stay in touch with it. And, but to really do it right, it's very expensive. What you need are the – rig and you need so many sizes and you need so much, like I say, you need so much 5 inch, right up to 7 inch. And, you know, that's how you determine – so like right now, we're gearing 5 inch. When we get this done, tomorrow, we might be gearing a box of 7 inch. I'm trying to mix it up and have all sizes of nets so I'll be ready for whatever size fish comes up the bay.

S.D.: How long does it take you to get the net in and out of the water if you're not catching fish, like if you decide to change the size nets that you're fishing with?

D.E.: It's according to the weather and the tide, if your net stays straight. Fifteen minutes or under if the net – in perfect conditions, 15 minutes or under, two good crew members can get a box net back in the boat and ready to set off another size and go on again.

S.D.: And how do you know that you need the other size?

D.E.: 'Cause you'll have, set the little net, and you're pulling it in and there's no fish in it, then you'll have a couple big fish that's caught around the lip or something that's not really, that's not too big for the net or something, then you'll know. You'll know it's fish there, but you won't go really with size until you look at your net and see what's going on. If you have big fish, they're just laying in the net, and you've got to, you know, I actually dip them with the dip net because they're not angled in the net. Then you've got to get your big net ready. So that's how that works.

S.D.: Have you ever gone out?

J.E.: No.

S.D.: Crabbing?

D.E.: Clamming, crabbing.

J.E.: Crabbing and crabbing – my big thing was clamming when I was younger. Never been out fishing though. I'd like to go out one day, but sometimes it's a little –

D.E.: It's dangerous.

J.E.: The conditions aren't, you know.

S.D.: What was your first day like when you went out clamming?

J.E.: Oh, gosh.

D.E.: What were you, like 7 or 8?

J.E.: Yeah.

D.E.: She crewed just like any crew member –

(Off record.)

S.D.: This is Shelly Drummond with Danny and Jessica Elburn. They are gearing net today. So what kind of line do you use?

D.E.: Use a braided nylon line. Try to use something that's not going to stretch real bad, and definitely something that's not going to – that's got a whole lot of buoyancy to it, you know, that's not going to keep the net from going down. On the bottom line, it's according what kind of fishing you're doing. If you're drift fishing, you want the bottom line to be not, no heavier than what you're using for gear. In other words, if the net's drifting along the bottom and gets hung up, instead of the net stopping and balling off in a pile, you want the, you want the line to break and the net to keep on going. It's better off to have one break in the net than the whole box to pile up in a ball. So you use different size twine and different size rope for different types of fishing. If you have stationary net where it's not going to move much, then you use heavier line, the reason being because it can withstand more tension. Two head can help pull it, and beings it's not moving, you don't have to worry about it ripping or getting hung up. Today we're doing drift net, so we have a heavy top line and we have a real light bottom line. The top line stays up off the bottom, and the bottom line lays close to the bottom. And again, if it gets hung, you got this light twine. It's going to break and keep right on, the rest of the boxes will keep right on drifting.

(Phone.)

D.E.: Okay, we're ready to go whenever you are.

S.D.: Okay, I'm recording again. When did you start gearing nets?

J.E.: About three years ago. I guess that's what it was. I guess this will be my fourth year.

D.E.: It's an art to it, and people are not, they're not that – taking an interest in it because it is an art to it, and it's – it can tend to be very boring at times. And being the people are not – the older ones have died off that used to gear it, and you don't have many people who take an interest in it anymore, I talked her into trying it, and she tried it, and she's natural with it. She picked it right up. And she's very quick, and does a good job, her knots stay tight. So thank God that she liked doing it. And she not only gears mine, she gears for other commercial fishermen too, which is a big help to, really, the industry. Because like I say, it's hard to find people who want to do it anymore. So she's been helping me now for like three years. We had some of the older people besides myself that taught her how to do it. And like I say, she picked it up naturally and went right on with it, which is a big advantage for me fishing because I can tell her, I don't have to rely on waiting for somebody to gear my net or finding somebody to gear it. She just does it, which my wife helps and so do I. With three of us going, we can pretty well keep my rig going.

S.D.: It's my responsibility to get this thing out of the way.

J.E.: Sorry. Once you get gone, you just don't pay attention to anything.

D.E.: You get in like a rhythm. And you kind of get zoned in, and before you know it, a couple hours have gone by. You've really got to pay attention to what you're doing to keep the net, the net's got to be geared pretty much to specs because, if not, it'll hang wrong, and your – will be off center. And some people claim that it won't fish, it won't catch like it should. So that's why you've got to hurry up and take your time at this job. Because it is line – it takes a lot of time to do it. It's mind intense, and you've got to – it's always people waiting for their net, so you've got to hurry up and get it done, but you've got to take your time and do it right. It's one of those deals. Jessica tends to get a – they claim that women are a lot better at it than men, a lot quicker than men, for the simple reason their fingers are much smaller, and they're softer and they can go by feel more than a man can because, especially the commercial fishermen. Their fingers are calloused up and rough. And this little bit of net laying on the fingers, a lot of times, they can't even feel it. So that's why women tend to be a little quicker.

J.E.: Is there any –

D.E.: There should be some needles over there by the –

J.E.: Okay. I see. I'm –

D.E.: Okay.

(Background sounds.)

D.E.: That's enough, Jess. Spin it a little bit. I'm very lucky to have her take an interest in this because you've got a lot of kids her age that don't have a lot of interest in anything, especially doing a job like this, so I'm very fortunate to have her helping. In other words, make a family living, because this is a big part of it. Without your net and without somebody gearing it, well that's the backbone behind starting a commercial, a fishing outfit. And gearing the net is the heart behind it, and the backbone. So thank God she took interest in it. As far as her taking interest in it, I still have to pay her the same amount that I pay anybody else that comes in to have their net geared.

J.E.: The money, it's true you've got – not many people know how to do it or do do it, so people are willing.

D.E.: I thought I would get a break, but I don't. I pay the same as everybody else.

J.E.: No, you don't. You get a \$25 break.

S.D.: How much to do one day?

J.E.: The going rate for like rock net like this is about \$150 a box, which if you, you know, I can do a box by myself in about 8 or 9 hours of, you know, really working steady at it all day long.

D.E.: That's pretty good by yourself, because you not only have to gear the top line, when you get done, you got to jump over, which is going to be backwards, it's going to be backwards to you, you've got to do the bottom line. So like one, the top line, you go down facing one way, which is one side to it, and say your right side to it. And when you do the bottom line, it's entirely different. So for somebody to be able to do that, that's really, that's really something else. It's just like, I guess, driving over in England or somewhere. You know, you're driving on the wrong side of the road or whatever, it would be wrong to us. You would have a time to get used to it. But she's, she can jump from one to the other, which I cannot do. I can do, but I cannot do with any type of speed. And speed is a major factor in doing this.

S.D.: How many feet of net are in the box?

D.E.: It varies.

J.E.: It's about 800 to 1000.

D.E.: Yeah, some people are making them shorter nowadays because of the way they're rigged up because they weigh so much. So the less footage you have in a box, the less amount of weight you're going to need to sink the net. So, therefore, it makes it lighter. One reason being that is they have put so many restrictions on us that during the weekend (sound fades) to catch white perch, which you're allowed to catch on weekends, and you're not allowed to rockfish on weekends, you have to take all your rock net off the boat in order just to go perch fishing. You know, it's not only dangerous lifting this kind of weight all the time, it gets to be a pain, moving the net around or lifting it. That's why some people are making the boxes shorter because they're so much easier to handle. Because of the regulations they put on us, you know, it just makes it hard on us. A normal box, I'll say back in the old days, 1000, 1200 feet was a full box of net. They're down to probably 800 feet now, a lot of them.

S.D.: How many boxes do they use at one time?

D.E.: Well you're monitored and regulated by the state. So you're only allowed so much footage per license. In other words, if you're allowed 2000 feet per license, if you have two licenses on the boat, you're allowed 4000 feet. So you're talking basically four boxes of net. Is a crew member of – two licensed crew members on the same boat is roughly two, two and a half – I mean four, four and a half boxes of net is what you're allowed. But it's whatever state, whatever regulation they have, and they pretty much tell you what to do and what not to do. It makes it very hard too because we've got a certain amount of time to catch the fish, and we've got a certain amount of poundage to catch. And it makes the job that much more dangerous, dangerous because we know we only have so many poundage, and I want to get my share like you would want to get your share. And we only have a certain amount of time to do it that the season is in. So it tends to make us go into any type of weather, which makes it, the job, a lot more dangerous because we know if we missed today's catch, the state's not going to let us make it up. We've just lost it. So we tend to go in any kind of weather now. And it's turned into be a pretty, a pretty unsafe job, even though it's on the bay here. Ice conditions, we go in any type of ice conditions, wind conditions. We try to watch one another's back as best we can out there, but sometimes, it's impossible because you've got different areas. And some days I'll go to an area where I don't see another boat all day long. And other days, I'll go to an area where it's 7 to 10 boats around me all day long. So that's basically how it works.

S.D.: Even with the more modern safety features, you think it's more dangerous now than it used to be? I guess equipment –

D.E.: Yeah. I think it's just as dangerous. The safety equipment, I think it tends to make your mind more at ease, but we've had situations where a fishermen has had all this equipment, and something will happen so fast that it's just, it's just nothing you can do about it. It's out of your control. But in my mind, it makes my mind at ease to have this sophisticated safety equipment because I feel like I've got a chance. You know, I would take my chances of spending the money to have the safety equipment for peace of mind than not having nothing. And also, the state's regulated that they realize the job has gotten dangerous, and they're making it mandatory to have certain types of equipment now. So they're not only making the job more dangerous for us, you know, but they're also making us take equipment because they know they made the job more dangerous.

S.D.: Jessica, you're in college, right?

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

S.D.: Are you – what are you studying?

J.E.: Radiology.

S.D.: Are you going to stay in Rock Hall when you graduate?

J.E.: Yes.

S.D.: Why do you think you're going to stay in Rock Hall?

J.E.: I mean I've grown up here my whole life. I love the town. I have a home here. I just, all my family is here.

S.D.: Do you think you'll continue to gear net?

J.E.: Yeah, I'll help him when he needs it, you know. I don't mind it. I enjoy it at first. After you do, you know, three or four or five boxes, it kind of gets tiresome. But I enjoy it.

D.E.: I tend to worry about her. Anybody that enjoys doing this job, I tend to worry.

J.E.: Well it's not stressful, you know. You just – you kind of work at your own pace, you know.

S.D.: Who used to gear your net before, or like when you were working with your father?

D.E.: My dad or his dad, my grandfather, or a cousin, a friend of the family. People like that. Back then when my dad was doing it full time, it was pretty much all kept in the family. They all had a lot more knowledge of gearing net and mending net than we do nowadays. Nowadays, back then, keeping the equipment right and not spending money on equipment was a big factor for them, where nowadays time is a big factor for us. So we tend to throw it in somebody else's lap and let them fix their rig up while we keep on fishing. Because again, we've only got a certain amount of time and catch to deal with. So that's basically where it stands nowadays. But back then, it would be all kept right in the family. They used to gear it right in the dining room after dinner. And anymore, most fishermen do not gear their own. They get somebody to do it. And surprisingly, a lot of fishermen don't know how to do it. That's where, I think, it's an art to it.

S.D.: I'm going to pause a minute.
(End of Interview.)