

FINDING AID

Willis Coleman's Dorchester County Tour

Date: 01-25-01

Location: Documentation during a tour of Blackwater Refuge and surrounding areas.

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond

Topics: Subjects: trapping, muskrats, nutria, three square marsh, Blackwater Refuge, Spicers Lumber Company, Dorchester Lumber, Madison wharf, E&M Farms, Teddy Brambles Church Creek Café, Bluegrass music gatherings, RSAs, Sika Hunting, Spider Jones, Geese, Audio of Snow Geese

Take Home: Story of tourist and nutria, Sense of place in old trap parcel

Summary:

Captain Willis Coleman is a native of Cambridge, Maryland in Dorchester County. Willis Coleman was a waterman and trapper in Dorchester. He trapped in several parcels in Blackwater Refuge, mostly for muskrat and nutria, however he has also trapped in the woods for raccoon. Willis offered to give me a tour of the refuge and surrounding area and I documented Willis in several places we visited throughout the day. He gives a history of the landscape, a tour of some of his favorite local haunts in Cambridge and around the refuge, we visited Madison marina where he docks his work boat *Cindy*, and we visited an aquaculture and duck farm. Capt. Coleman left the water to work in the Museum's boat yard and he recently received his Captain's license.

Documentation

Audio: Mini Disc 9.17 minutes

Video: Fieldwork 1 Tape- Short amounts, not timed

Digital Photos: 20

Slides:

Because of extremely poor recording conditions on the tour and the lack of a production crew, the video and audio are badly in need of editing.

The listening copy of the audio recording is heavily edited for wind. The content value however is high, especially the moments where Willis reflects on changes in the marsh and landscape over time.

The video is unedited as yet, however edited excerpts will prove valuable and certain sections have a high quality. One section of the video runs with limited visuals but the audio provides excellent background information for further work on aquaculture and duck farming.

Digital photos

Slides

Field Notes:

Includes Dorchester County overview-

English's Restaurant- waitress from Hooper's Island. Hand tonger goes out with her husband. Now he works on Chester River, travel there everyday and not doing very well. She is working as a waitress now. She doesn't miss the long ride everyday to and from the Chester- especially the windy days. It can get very cold and the trip is long.

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge Gill Giese Fish and Wildlife Service
410-228-2692

E&M Farms- "relieves a lot of the pressure off the wild population"

Knows a hand picker who lives down the street- Betty. She actually spread rumors about his machines saying that the pickers bruise the meat.

Church Creek Café (Teddy Brambles) serves Muskrat Dinners,

Willis Introduced me to a man who gets together with a group at someone's house one night a week to play bluegrass. He plays in claw hammer banjo.

Dorchester County notes:

Words: the Rut, Rats, Nuts (newts), Gum Swamp, 3 square marsh

Egypt Road

Much of the land that flanks the road which now makes up Blackwater Refuge was previously owned by the Robinson family who were big fur dealers until the 1960s. The refuge is federal land which means you have to have a license to work it. State lands are public (a commons) but Federal lands aren't. Visitors to the refuge must use walking trails only. Trappers bid on rights to trap parcels. You end up relying on what you catch to pay for the bid. Prior to the refuge, the Robinson family managed the land 'like farmers'. They sold the meat and hides on the market, they would tan and stretch the hides in the outbuildings of the farm. You can sell the meat over the counter/locally from any animal you trap like

Muskrats and raccoon, but you can't sell animals that are shot like deer and waterfowl.

Used to be dirt roads. They were developed for logging. That is when the fields got bigger. Now, there are a lot of large farms but the farmers rent the land. They live there but the farmland is rented to other farmers in the growing season and hunters in the winter. Right now there are a lot of club hunters. For two weeks you pay something like \$4,000. Hunting clubs consist of a central clubhouse which is a more permanent structure, surrounded by trailers. The land is designated and managed as hunting land. Another family who owns a lot of land in the area is the Markus'. (State Senator Markus lives there now.)

One club:

At one time it was a fishing pond where they raised Rockfish. Then they tried crawfish but that didn't work either. Now it is a hunting club.

Fred Markus raises hogs.

Parcel D: Willis bid on it once and won it by a small amount. His friend Ronnie Robins was mad because he was interested in the same parcel. For each parcel the hunters get a number of live traps for raccoons. There is no market for them but the refuge wanted them trapped. They caught 75 one year. Once he went out with his son, and they came on a raccoon in a trap which was so sick he shot it. Jake didn't like that and he won't trap now.

Another big change in the area is a lot of the rivers are silting in. It makes it hard for boats to get up into the marsh. Where a deadrise previously could get to an area, now it is strictly flatbottom boats or no boats at all it is so shallow.

This year only about 9 trappers bid on parcels- there isn't much value in hides anymore. No reason to do it. There isn't any money in trapping so the only folks who do it anymore do it just because they like to trap. Maybe they like eating the meat.

Sika deer is a real popular exotic hunt. People pay \$300 a week to hunt sika. Many people bring in deer too small to hardly eat. A 100lb sika is big, Michael Spear says he's been asked to butcher a 27 lb. sika.

Volunteer organization- Friends of Blackwater Refuge

Refuge accepts offers to purchase land in the area and they would like to be contiguous, but they, "Don't want to push land owners to sell".

VIDEO

Important changes affecting management of refuge

Early 1940's began use of corn pickers

Other bird friendly plants- clover, buckwheat, corn and sorghum

Impoundments drained to give environment, planting of sunflowers, managed for beneficial plants, freshwater using rain as source.

Nest boxes for squirrels, wood ducks and other animals that use hardwoods for nesting.

Delmarva Fox Squirrels- grey

Wood Ducks were dependent on old growth forest and suffered when area was logged.

Resident geese are nuisances

Mute swans as well. They are aggressive nesters, they displace other birds and speed up destruction of marsh by pulling up plants.

Land is subsiding now as well due to sea level rise- global warming and ground level being pumped up for use by humans. Hunt club on barren island is an example of land subsiding.

Marsh burning.

No trapping 100 yards off the main roads now so visiting folks don't see people doing it.

We also went to Madison Bay Wharf where Willis keeps his boat the Cindy. The owner ? and his son Jake were repairing 3 sets of pound nets. They were restringing the main line along the sides through the netting and repairing the netting. The nets had been sitting on the dock in the sun for two years and had dry rotted / sun damage. The skiff to

pound net was docked at the nets. It is a heavy low skiff. The shanty on the dock has a nice wood stove and the office has a stuffed shark head on the wall. It is a bull Shark which Jakes dad caught in a pound net. I got pictures of the shark, the pound nets and skiff, peeler pots (small because of peeler size) and a house. There is a house on the property that is in extensive disrepair. It looks to be about 100 years old. Someone lived in it up until the 1970s.

TERMS

Gum swamp because of gum tree. Wooded land that floods is called a swamp. White tail like a cleared area and sika like bushy areas.

Hard lead, soft lead- get Willis to describe this again.

Bank Rats: nest in the banks underneath the undercut areas.

Game farms

You can't use corn bait. Must leave crops standing and flood it every year. Everyone knows it is the same as baiting but it is legal that way.

RSA Liscensed state approved game farm area. Can raise the ducks and feed them.

Land use is turning to renting for hunting and farming

Lumber Companies

Spicer's Lumberyard- recently closed

Dorchester Lumber- Largest lumberyard and landowner in Dorchester

Spider Jones- Last of the "Roamers" Used to walk around with a shotgun, just walked. Probably lived in abandoned houses but you'd see him one day in one area and then almost 30 miles away the next.

Robert Meekins custom boat building

Church Creek Café- Teddy Bramble

E&M Farms

Michael Spear 410-228-2393

Uses duck pickers- Ashley Machine in Ohio is the maker of them. He also grows and sells Talapia to a company in D.C.

Raised ducks for 12 years/ fish for 4 years Each year he raises approximately 32,000 ducks which are mostly sold in Dorchester County. It relieves the pressure on the wild population. He used to work at Detroit Diesel until he bought the farm and began raising ducks. He was new at it, learned by reading books. It is not labor intensive but you have to watch it all the time.