

Interview Log

Interviewee: Jay Newcomb
Evelyn Robinson
Roy Harrison

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Comments: Tape quality is not terribly clear. There are a few indiscernible and inaudible portions of the tape which are so noted in parentheses.

BEGIN SIDE A

K.F.: This is the second year that the festival has had these narrative stations here. We've been inviting professional crab pickers and owners of crab picking houses and managers of crab picking houses to come to the museum so that you all can learn about the crab picking industry from the people who work in it. It's a rare opportunity to learn what it's like to work in a crab picking house, and to hear some of the history of the crab industry. Today, we were supposed to have our new book here, *It's How You Pick The Crab*. Unfortunately, it is still at the publisher's. So I do apologize for that. We were going to have a book signing with some of the people who are featured in our book who are here today. The book will be ready by the end of the month, and it will be available in the museum book store, so I encourage you all to look for it then and look for an event here at the museum at the end of the month where we'll invite some of the crab pickers back and some of the other people that we interviewed to have a book signing, to have, you know, a nice premier for it. So keep your calendars open at the end of the month.

Today we have several people from the crab picking industry here with us today. The first one is Roy Harrison. Roy Harrison managed Harrison and Jarboe Seafood that was here on museum grounds. It was over on Navy Point out where the lighthouse was.

R.H.: It was by the lighthouse and the boat shed.

K.F.: Okay. So if you all wander over there and have some food later on about where that tent is, there used to be a crab picking house there. Okay. Roy's been in the industry since the late 1930's, and has managed crab picking houses here in St. Michaels, in Cambridge, and on Hooper's Island, which is in Dorchester County, south of here. If you all want to see some really beautiful wild land, head on down to Hooper's Island. Jay Newcomb, who's supposed to be in that middle chair and is on his way here, he had a late crab delivery at the crab house, so he's on his way, he manages A&E Phillips. How many of you all have eaten at Phillip's at Ocean City? Just a couple. I thought the whole room would have done it. (Laughter.) They still have their original picking house down in Hooper's Island, and that's been there since the 20's, one of the older picking houses down on Hooper's Island. He'll be here. Jay's been in the business for a very long time. He's the first manager who brought in the Mexican women to pick crabs. How many people here knew that your crabs are no longer -- in most cases, no longer picked by local women? They're picked by Mexican women. Three people who work at the museum knew that. (Laughter.) Jay's going to tell us about that first year bringing the Mexican women here to pick crabs, what it was like, why he did it and all the steps that he had to go through to do it, and how it's really changed the industry.

Evelyn Robinson, right here, has been picking crabs since she was five years old. Let me get out of the way so people can see you, Evelyn. She picks at Marion for Marion Seafood in Toddville, which is also down around the Hooper's Island area down in Dorchester County. Evelyn's parents were in the industry as well. And so today here on the stage, we have quite an expansive history. You're going to hear about the industry from the 30's all the way up until today. But before we get started, I want to give you guys just some historical points so you can set your compass today. I want to let you

know that the crab picking industry began in 1878 in Hampton, Virginia with McMinamon and Company. They were the first ones to pick crabs, can it and then ship it nationally. So it was more than a local market when they started, and they really opened up the industry to the national/international trade. And in 1949, this one will get some of you upset, in 1949, the State of Maryland picked so many crabs and caught so many crabs that by the end of the season, the packing houses had to limit the watermen's catch to 1000 pounds a day. (Laughter.) Even then, they had so many leftover crabs, they told the watermen don't catch anymore. So at one point, this really was the zenith of the industry back in the late 40's through the 50's. You have just tons and tons of crabs caught here in Maryland, picked and shipped overseas, nationally, to Canada, Mexico, everywhere. This was a huge, huge industry.

The other thing I'd like to let you know, people always ask me well why haven't they figured out how to raise crabs in captivity? Why haven't they done that? Here's the obvious solution to the resource problem. Well the State of Maryland has been trying to raise crabs in captivity for 95 years and has never been able to do it, ever, until this year. They raised one. One crab. (Laughter.) Okay. And, yeah, you should know that when a crab lays its eggs and starts going through that cycle, it lays billions. One out of billions was raised. So this was obviously not a great solution to our resource problem. The other thing that you should know is that women have always picked crabs. They have always been the mainstay of the labor force for the crab picking industry. All right? So I'm going to start with Evelyn. I'm going to ask Evelyn to describe to you how the crabs get from the watermen to her picking table, and what a picking house looks like today.

E.R.: Good afternoon, folks, friends. You'd have to be friends to come listen to a crab picker. (Laughter.) I started out, she said, when I was five. Actually, I can remember being in a crab house when I was three. And I was a little queen because my parents were involved, and you might say I was the boss of the show. Let me give you a walk through. A crabber and his boat, and there's a man on the old wharf back in 1928 who will name the crabber by the sound of his boat that's coming in. Here comes Ed Bradford. Well you knew right away whether he was a good crabber or not. So you got ready. He was, probably had the big load. But anyway, you hoisted those crabs out in a barrel. They were always in a barrel at that time, and they wheeled them to wooden steam boxes. At that time, everything in a crab factory was wooden. The steam boxes would measure about a four by six by at least four foot depth. And usually, there were at least four steam boxes. These crabs were put in those steam boxes, and then there was a tremendous boiler as high as this building that was fed with wood. Now some would go to coal to build up tremendous pressure to steam these crabs under live steam. That's a very important thing to remember. Back there, we steamed with live steam. After the crabs were cooked, and when they would feed this big boiler, living on the Eastern Shore I remember this, but when they opened the door to that boiler, I almost knew what hell looked like. (Laughter.) It was truly Dante's Inferno to get up the tremendous amount of steam that was needed. Then, as I say, everything now remember was wooden. Those wooden steam boxes were dunked after those crabs were steamed. Sometimes you build up so much pressure, you would have to let off steam, but you let them sit for a while, then you took the lid off, and you dumped them on this wooden floor. Just a wooden

floor. At 4:00 in the morning, my mother and women, that is something else to remember, very important, all women as she said, walked in at 4 in the morning. They walked to a wooden troth it was called because it had partitions on each side. Each worker had its own space. You reached under your place, you got a wooden tomato basket, flipped it over, picked up another wooden tomato basket and put it on top. You had one agate basin. Many times it had a hole in it. This is where you flipped it over, your cans would be put for you to pick in. You took that basket, you walked out, and if you were lucky, some man out there shoveled you a basket of crabs, and then you brought them in, and with your knee, you flipped them up in our troth. Most ladies then stood up and picked crabs all day from 4 until the last crab was picked, and that could be like 10,000 pounds of crabs. There was no air conditioning, just the windows open. Now where we worked, there was a mixed force of black and white people. And believe me, if you can imagine, it was the most beautiful picture you'll ever see. I'm out in the Chesapeake Bay. My crab house is out in the Chesapeake Bay in the ship's channel because attached to this crab house was a terminal for the steamboat to come. And with those windows up, and those ladies singing the old spiritual hymns of the church, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, I thought I was in heaven. They all loved me. I was their child. Now as I told a gentleman here, I never, ever cracked claws. I picked crabs because the crab picker was the elite person. The claw cracker were usually little boys. You know, you gave those little boys the dirty job of cracking claws. And you cracked -- each one had certain pickers that they cracked the claws. If he couldn't do all your claws, then you had to jump in and help him. That was those days. And when you took your meat up, you had no specific amount of pounds. They could sit there all day and pick those pounds of meat before they would take it up. My dad and some others had made wooden trays for to stack your cans of meat. Metal cans, they had the holes in the bottom, and they had a bucket of water with salt in it. When you weighed up, they watered that meat with salt, I guess to preserve it. And then they were put in huge barrels. You picked lump and -- that was it. Jumbo lump because they were big crabs. And we got all the crabs. That's very important too. They were put in big barrels of ice, and then there would be like a tar and burlap sack put overtop. And at that time, they were shipped by steamboat to Baltimore, those crabs were. When you weighed up your meat, the man gave you a token for every pound. Back then, we didn't have the government in our business. We had no taxes taken out, and at the end of the year, a lot of those ladies would have stacks full of tokens to bring down. They had lived on their garden all summer. They didn't need a thing. They had made their clothes probably out of chicken sacks. They did not need a thing. They would bring sacks of these tokens down. Of course, the packer kind of dreaded counting all those tokens and paying them off.

Now let me bring you up another step. We're going to leave this wooden environment, and we now go to the cement floor. The government came in and said no, no, no, in the health department. You must replace this with cement. And the old trough had stainless steel put around it, each one. You had a galvanized garbage can. That was where you put your trash and where you went and dumped your trash and shoveled up some more crabs and put it in your place. And back in those early days, those ladies came to the crab house dressed real elegant. Had I been as a crab picker back then, I would've come like I

went to church today. They wore last summer's silk dresses, silk hose, high heels, white gold watches. Now if you were a little bit poor, you may have worn a gingham dress and the cotton house dress. But all winter, they would have bleached out muslin, made aprons, embroidered them, and they were starched that you snapped your apron. If you didn't snap your apron, you were a poor housekeeper. But then, things changed. As I say, the health department came and the government came. The first thing they did was enforce child labor. That was bad. Killed all of our dreams. Every little child dreamed of summer when I work in the crab house, it gets me a bike. My mother picked for three cents a pound. We were now up to five cents a pound. That was a big increase. The government said no, you can't have children in the crab house. Fortunately, where I moved to, they let children come in the crab houses. When the health inspector came, we put the children in some barrels and put tops on them. (Laughter.) Sometimes, we put them on the bus that brought the pickers and drive them up and down the road. Other times, we had a big sand pile up, we'd send them up there and pretend they were neighbor kids playing in the sand pile. Then we had a lot of things happen.

They started getting real health conscious with the industry. As I say, stainless steel was everywhere. The old Barlow knife that a man carried in his pocket, we picked crabs with, you now have this. We almost died. We would never learn to pick with this thing. But we did. So many things happened then. As I say, the children were there, and it was the best of times. We didn't have day care for the little ones. This is my son. He never got to crack claws 'cause there wasn't enough for him. So he ran and played with all the children around. We had 13 children at one time just playing out on the wharf. And each mother looked out for the other one. But as I say, again, the health department said no. So today, there are no children in the crab houses. There are no children. And I have a long list of things that made a change in the crab house. There are so very many. And, of course, like evolution, I've kind of grown in them without being aware that they actually happened.

Used to be we cleaned up with a rag we brought from home, a flour sack. No more. Now everything is sterilized, pressure cleaned after we would leave for the day. The old agate basin has been replaced with all stainless steel, plastic. We have two stainless steel trays. We must trim up our crabs in the stainless tray now because we don't want them messing the floor. You no longer pick your trimming in there. You must do it in a tray. The health department said we don't want anymore than five pound of meat on the floor. Well some of those fast crab pickers, that meant they stayed on the floor and some of the slower ones, they stayed all day. So our employer came up with we weigh up on the hour and a half. Every hour and a half, he calls and we go, so your meat will always be cold. Cannot let the temperature go up on crabmeat. We pick in air conditioning now too, so they're really making sure everything stays cold.

In the 60's, there was something else that happened in our industry. Where we had picked all the crabs and the packer would sneak out a few big crabs and ship to the city, someone let us in on a secret. Get in on the gravy train. So we started sorting the crabs the crabber did. Now have number ones, mediums, female crabs, sooks, and then us pickers only get

the trash crabs. What you don't eat at the backyard crab feast is what we can have. You all started it with the backyard crab feast. (Laughter.) You no longer get the jumbo lump. It's not there, folks. We can't get it for you. And there's a difference in their steaming process now. It's steamed under pressure in wire crates. They're kept in coolers. They're on wheels, and they're rolled in to us, and they're shoveled in this cold atmosphere. They're shoveled, just kept in sterilization. Every time, it's put back in a vat where it's sterilized again.

As I say, the government came in, and here were social security and taxes and everything that you could think of, child labor. And guess what? If we work on Saturday now, we get paid overtime. (Laughter.) If you can't make your amount, a smart employer will have you declared disabled or else he's got to pay you by the hour. My mother got 3 cents a pound, I now get \$2.30 a pound. But then my mother bought three dresses for a dollar, and I may have to pay 100 for mine, so that does make a difference. (Laughter.) Now the barrels are over and done with. It's all put in boxes and iced down, insulated boxes. It doesn't go by steamboat, it doesn't go by the old trucking system. Each packer has his own truck with a logo on the side, and he takes it to the city himself. Whatever his haul is for today is, that's how I pick. There is something called straight-up, and believe me as an artist of a crab picker, I don't enjoy picking it. I love it when I pick the big lump and the regular, and I could show it off as a prized possession. Now we pick the crabs straight in one can and they split the cost. There is some jumbo lump. But when you buy it, don't gamble that you'll get jumbo lump because we don't have the big crabs anymore. As I stated, they pick it per order.

Back when the old crab house, we had the big boiler, in the evening, there was a whistle that blew. It told you how many pounds of crabs that day. Long was 3,000; short was 500. Six longs, one short, you had -- pounds. And then he'd pause for a moment -- now he had nine crab houses, but each one had its own whistle. We could tell which one was blowing the whistle. Then he paused and he blew the whistle for what time you would come to work. And the same process. Long, you went 7. Some of the crab houses would go to work as early as 2 in the morning. I fell into a community where they went to work at 7 in the morning, but we did a different process. We worked from 7 till 12, then we went home. We came back in the afternoon and picked hot crabs. That was the difference. Each crab house has its own regiment of how they operate.

K.F.: Evelyn?

E.R.: Yeah?

K.F.: Let me go ahead and introduce Jay who just arrived.

E.R.: Okay.

K.F.: All right. Jay, this is Jay Newcomb, folks. Jay works at A&E Phillips Seafood. Go ahead and have a seat there. All right, well I'm going to go ahead and bring Roy Harrison into this conversation. Roy, when did you start in the industry, and how did you get started in the industry?

R.H.: I started right out of high school, and I worked for one year for Harrison and Jarboe. Part of the year -- well, Harrison and Jarboe was two different companies. One was a tomato and fish company. The other was crab and oyster and clam. And when I

got out of high school, I started with them, and I worked with both companies for one year. And then after that year, I decided that I would like to -- I didn't know whether I wanted to do this anymore or not, so I went to business college for two years -- business in Wilmington. And then when I graduated from there -- well Harrison and Jarboe had a place right on Navy Point, the seafood company. And it was an old building, and that's one reason why I was not going to come back. But anyway, while I was in school, they tore the old building down, they built a new modern plant there, and they had the two offices upstairs, a private office, and it was really elaborate for a crab house. And then they asked me if I would come and keep books and take care of the office and learn the business. So since I wanted to live in this area, I thought it was a good opportunity. So I work -- let me see, for two years out here. And then they built a plant in Cambridge on Cambridge Creek. And then they put me over there as manager of that plant. And with some of the -- a couple of the owners, they went with me to get me straight and all. So after that, they sold that plant to General Foods Corporation, and brought me back to Saint Michaels. And that's where I went the next 35 years, right out here on this point. You see, I started in the Depression area, and crabmeat in those days wasn't a luxury like it is today. It was a basic food, and -- do you want me to go on? Do you want me to --

K.F.: Continue on.

R.H.: Well out on the -- this plant in Saint Michaels, as I say, I came back here, and the junior owners, the offsprings from the Harrison and Jarboe, they wanted the boys to get into the canning business because that was a big company. They had about eight or nine plants, tomatoes. So they left, and they turned the seafood business over to me, but with the idea that they would come back in the wintertime and run the oyster business, which I didn't like anyway. I didn't want that.

K.F.: Why didn't you like the oyster business?

R.H.: I hated the oyster business. It was rough and cold and dirty and everything else. You couldn't make any money. But the crab business was a year-round thing, and I enjoyed that really.

K.F.: So it was a year-round thing, which is not the case today really.

R.H.: Pardon?

K.F.: It was a year-round operation then, which is not the case --

R.H.: Yeah, it was year-round. We got the crabs, dredge crabs in the winter. And, of course, we wash the meat year-round, which you didn't do, I'm sure, Evelyn.

E.R.: The crab house did it.

R.H.: Did they? Anyway, we washed -- our customers liked the white meat, and after the crab was bought, then they washed out all the fat and the dirt and so forth, and it seemed our pickers liked it that way, didn't get all between their fingers and everything else. In fact, you know -- and then they came out with the glass tops, and it looked much better with white meat rather than the fat squished up all against it. (Laughter.)

K.F.: Can you explain what the glass tops are for everybody?

R.H.: Oh, it was solid tops when we first started, but then they came in the summer, the top was plastic. And then they put the big pieces of meat on the top. And then when you flipped it over on top, it had a nice facing, you know. We faced up all the crab meat to make it look good, you know, especially after we had the glass tops. And --

K.F.: Were there any differences with the way crab pickers picked here in Saint Michaels and the way they picked in Cambridge or Hooper's Island?

R.H.: No, it was mostly the same. The only difference, we had a crab house at Hooper's Island for a couple of years. It was a Hooper Applegarth plant. And the only difference was the claw meat, they would break the claw off. They didn't take that bone out of the center, the country bone. And we had a problem there for a while, because we always remember that. And we had a little trouble, we had to pay them a little more to crack the claws and all because we couldn't sell it with all that country bone in it, you know. But outside of that -- well the washing, of course, was different. After they got a bushel cleaned and prepared to pick, they would take it to the wash, spray it up and drain it and bring it back to the table. It was a little more time consuming, but that's the way they wanted it.

K.F.: And you and Evelyn both remember women singing hymns in the crab houses, right? Can you tell us a little bit about some of the hymns that you heard in the crab houses and some of the songs?

R.H.: Oh, the hymns, yeah. They would -- it would be in the afternoons, maybe 3:00 or 2:30, they'd begin to get tired, you know, and then one would start out and sing, and the others would join in. We had beautiful music. I wish I had a recorder, I'd record it -- could have recorded some of that. And all the pickers got along good together. I think a lot of our pickers were related to one another. We -- of course, we had the pickers, we had one time on the payroll book was 92, that was the most I could recall just at this plant. And like I say, they all got along good. We had a bus, we ran one bus out of Easton, and then we had a bus out of Bellevue, and then one out of Bay Hundred area down here. And then they found out the pickers were unable to walk to work, then we had station wagons and we picked them up. But most of the Saint Michaels people, they walked down. But there was a few that we had to pick up and carry back and forth. That's how they got to work.

K.F.: Now when do you two remember younger people leaving the crab house and not coming into the crab house to work?

R.H.: Yeah. That happened, oh --

E.R.: Well I suppose we had a light back down, not like we're having now, and we had local companies who had moved in Dorchester County, Air Pack and some more, so with no income, women bravely went out and got a job. So is it -- here's the part. There was no problem for us to get a job. I became a government inspector because I had an eye for quality. I was quick with my hands, and we were dependable. They knew rain, shine, storm blow, we were there beating down the doors to get to work. So they were always really eager to hire a crab picker. And then I worked there 17 years, and then we started having a big, I'm going to use our word, a glut of crabs. Plus we had oysters on the bottom that were almost waist deep. And my husband and I could make a fortune. I worked in the crab house in the summer, and worked over here and your Oxford in the wintertime. And this is -- but then I noticed that slowly but surely as we were encouraging our children to finish school, because remember, we were children of Depression, we did not want either child to become watermen. It was hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and the income was uncertain. We encouraged them to graduate, go to college, and we thought that, eventually, the seafood business would be for old people.

But we're wrong. We have more young people trying to make a living today on the water than ever before. And now, as my grandson, who was 16, when he borrowed \$65,000 to buy a boat, and my husband looked at him, said boy, when I was your age, I thought that was all the money in the world. Well, today all those things, they'd gotten a taste of the good life, and they're still boiling, it's in their veins, but a lot -- now too, we have said it was a women's job. Today, we have men picking crabs. I have a lot of young black men picking crabs. And I have to tell you, designer clothes, and designer clothes -- they're wearing Puffy Combs' clothes. (Laughter.) And I said to one the other day, my land, you're a handsome young man. You're so well dressed. He said my grandmother taught me to have good manners and to dress well. I said she taught you well, she taught you well. But we do have men in the industry now picking crabs -- and I find that we still all get along well together. I'm sorry, I'm hogging everything.

K.F.: That's okay. I just wanted to ask Jay, bring Jay into the conversation now. There was a decline in younger crab pickers. And when we talked, you said one day you walked into your crab house and had about three crab pickers. And I was wondering if you could tell our audience about that, and how you solved that problem.

J.N.: That's a story back early at Phillip's in 1986, which we all know the Philip's family. We've got the restaurants in Baltimore, Annapolis, Washington and Ocean City. Just in Ocean City, we use about 1,000 pounds of crab meat a day. So all the managers call, screaming for Maryland crab meat, and 200 bushels of crabs had been cooked, and I had two to three pickers showed up. And it was just not a good situation. We're not quite as fortunate -- we call over the river and around the river. We have like a retirement village and a summer home. Fishing Creek has now become 65 or 70 percent are second homes from people in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. So we don't have the work force. I have two American pickers left. We had nine processing plants in Fishing Creek. If you put them all together, we don't even have enough to run one plant with all the American pickers. So that's when we went to the alien labor force which now comes out of Mexico. Starting out in 1990 was the first year, and we're to a point now all in Fishing Creek with all plants is about 200, 250 migrant workers there picking crabs. So it has really changed the industry a lot. That's why I'm a little bit late today. We're all in the same as a family. I have three sisters picking, and they got a call this morning that my brother had to be taken to the hospital with convulsions in his head somewhere. So I had to get her straight and try to get her a plane ticket to get out tomorrow morning. So I apologize for being late, but that was a problem. So she's flying out tomorrow, the other two sister are going to stay because they all need to work for the money. Work's good for us. We can't get crabs picked, and they need the money to support their family. So it's not just -- here for work. I mean, we have take -- they have church. It's a big article in the Catholic paper the other day. They have a church service. The Father comes down on Saturday afternoon at 7:00, has a nice mass for them. Started out with about 10 or 12, and now they're up -- the church is always full. We have another -- Father comes out of Delaware on Wednesdays and another Spanish class for them. They shop in the community. It was a change for the community, but now they all come a part like family. They have yard sales, they give a lot, give them vegetables and it's really a different community now, everybody's working together, and it's helping to get the crabs picked, just have some more crabs if they didn't put so many regulations on us.

K.F.: Let me just ask Jay one more question, and then we'll take questions from the audience. Jay, can you describe that first year when you got the crab pickers from Mexico? And what is the government program that allows you to bring them in?

J.N.: The first year was different. Like I say, we brought them here. The program is called a H2B, non-agriculture program. You do not have to supply housing. They do have to pay taxes, so housing is a little bit of a problem. We've -- hard to find locations. So at first, we had to put them in the hotel room in Cambridge and bus them back and forth. That was a difficult situation to pick them up in Cambridge at 3:30, because we started picking at 4:30. But then we got to the point we remodeled the factory, put some dormitory housing upstairs. There's a change, there was a very big change to the community because everything was like a very new community, all natives, and this was, as I said, bringing foreigners into their community, but it's really adjusted now. The program is H2B program. We have to apply first through the local employment office in Cambridge. And then we have to go to the Baltimore employment office. Once we're approved with them, we have to go through the Department of Labor in Philadelphia. We're approved there, and we have to go to the Department of Immigration and Naturalization in Vermont. And from there, it goes to the -- to the Consulate in Mexico. So all the process of the paperwork and government, it takes about 60 days to have the paperwork done. But now, like I say, we have to do the same process year after year, no shortcuts, but now we've been doing it for like -- well since '90, 11, 12 years, so now we know who to contact, and it's working. And our girls will come back. I've got some girls down here eight years continually coming back. And they do, it's another thing, everything in Mexico, I'm sorry to say this, is a rip-off, everything's a bribery. You have to pay a recruiter, you have to pay -- this year, we were very fortunate, one of our girls went to Monterey and she did most of the work on their end themselves, because it would cost them as much as 5, 6, \$700 to get here to pay the Mexico charge just to be able to come to the United States and work. So we found a way that girls will be able to do this their self. I contacted the consulate. They said there's no way, you have to use a recruiter, have to have the proper visas to work. And now it cost them, I think with their visas and everything, about 50 or \$60 this year. And we also get the bus tickets here. We send them down to them, buy bus tickets in advance, they're like \$75, so that's a big savings. They were even charging like \$180 for a bus ticket. We get the same ticket for \$79.

SPEAKER: How long are they here?

J.N.: The work visas we do, we get them approved for April 1st through February. And it depends on the crab situation, but normally they go home just before Christmas. They're very religious. They want to go home. They have a big celebration in Mexico like December 10th, 11th and 12th is their big celebration. Some of them do stay until after the holidays. It depends on the crabs.

K.F.: Okay. I'm going to open it up to other questions. Does anybody else have any?

SPEAKER: Tell us a little bit about, a little bit more about these women. How old are they? Are they mothers and daughters? What do they do the rest of the year? How much money do they make every year, and what do they do with their money.

J.N.: You're talking about (indiscernible) correct? Okay, we have them anywhere -- they have to be at least 18. Most of mine are 19 up to as much as one they call Mamma Chela (phonetic), she's in her 50's, but most of mine are either family that have mothers

and daughters. Like I say, I have three sisters. Last year I had two sisters and two brothers that help around the plant. So they're all different ages. Some are married, some divorced. A lot of them have kids they have to leave with their parents, or their grandparents or their sisters to take care of them because, like I say, they need to come support their families. All the money -- that's another thing, to send the money back, that was a rip-off. So now we've got a way to send money down to a guy charges very little. We put it in the bank and transfer one big bulk rate, and the family has to come with I.D. to show so it's not a rip-off on the peso exchange. That was another rip-off. The housing, they have to pay rent. The program -- we have to pay taxes, unemployment. There's no benefit to us to get the workers versus a U.S. worker. They're all federal, state, unemployment, state taxes on them. They have to pay taxes. The rent is \$25 a week, that includes everything, all the linens, pots, pans, beds, air conditioning, television, everything except for the satellite. We have TV, but they want it in Spanish, so they have a -- they get a satellite. What was the other question you had, money?

SPEAKER: Yeah. How much do they make during this time period, approximately?

J.N.: Well a bunch of the girls now, once they've been here a while, learn how to pick, most of my girls now will pick anywhere from three and a half to six pounds an hour. Depends on the quality of the crabs, depends on their speed. We're very conscious about the shell because the restaurants -- the shell, and that's what U.S. workers are -- we have U.S. workers show them how to pick, so like we said, they know how to get that jumbo lump out. It rolls out just like water. So they pick up very fast with their hands, because a lot of them have picked tomatoes or coffee beans back in their country. When they go back, very few of them can find a job when they go back. It's very few jobs in Mexico. So it's almost like coming here to work, go back home for vacation (indiscernible).

SPEAKER: Okay, and then they come back the next year

J.N.: Yes. When they first came, most of them would not let us see pictures of their house, they were so ashamed. But now they've been able to take their money and add on buildings, kitchens, and buy appliances. So they have really -- they're proud of what they have done for their families too. And they are very religious. I mean they pray every Sunday night at services, so they're good workers.

SPEAKER: So they're mostly from small towns in Mexico. They're not from --

J.N.: They're not from the border or Mexico City, no. They're out from outlying areas most of them, yes, ma'am.

K.F.: Questions for any of the -- anybody else?

SPEAKER: I'm just curious, you said they come from Monterrey?

J.N.: That's where they have to come to get their paper, final paperwork is in the consulate in Mexico. But they come from -- Durango, all over parts of Mexico.

SPEAKER: So they're not necessarily from our type of communities.

J.N.: No, ma'am. They're from all over. Some -- I had one lady that she wasn't able to come back this year because her mother is sick. But she went to a bus for like three hours, then she had to get on the taxi for so many hours, then she had to get up in the mountains for like four hours walking in the mountains. She took very little back with her because it was so far to carry it up through the mountains. Some of them are in very remote areas.

SPEAKER: How are they trained?

J.N.: Just by our workers showed them. And now like I say, myself, I have either family or friends, all my workers, like I just had 11 come Friday. They're either cousins, or friends, or sisters of my workers, so they will show, take time out to really show them how to do the job properly. So that way, they're not missing time to -- it feels like a month like they're off time -- try to show them, help them improve so they can all make better pay. They do a lot of it on their own. Like today, some of the new girls, their cousins are showing some of them today how to start because tomorrow will be the first day for a lot of my new workers. Yes, sir?

SPEAKER: How does your transport back and forth to Mexico work?

J.N.: With this type program, also we can not furnish transportation. So we do try to get tickets as soon as we can. They come from Laredo, Texas, where they have to cross the border to Cambridge. And that's, as I say, \$79 bus ticket. And we try to do, on the island now, we try to get like some plants together so we can get almost a whole bus so the bus will come straight through. Because if they have -- returning them, you're talking about four to five days. I had one of my girls got into Baltimore. They just -- busses, and they would have to stay in Baltimore. They got in like 4 in the morning, and the Cambridge bus wouldn't be in Cambridge till 5, so we went to Baltimore and picked them up because they would've had to stay in the bus station all day, and after traveling for two or three days, we wouldn't put up with that. But that's why we try to do it as a group so it's easier for them. Yes, ma'am?

SPEAKER: Do they --

J.N.: Excuse me?

SPEAKER: Do the Mexican women -- do they (inaudible).

J.N.: I don't know why, but my plant is very quiet. They talk among them. Some of the other plants, they laugh and carry on, mine do too, but I mean it's -- talk amongst yourselves across the table with each other. They don't really get real loud like some of these American women do. (Laughter.)

E.R.: I want to know, Jay's (inaudible) (Laughter.) And I faced him down a couple times. Years ago, I went to Brownsville, Texas, and taught Mexican ladies there how to pick crabs. But they had a seafood packer from Cambridge who went down there and bought a factory. I went down there for a week, and they were beautiful people, and quick learners. Then I went to Lafitte, Louisiana where a gentleman had bought a plant there and taught the ladies how to pick crabs. And as I say, they are very, very generous people. When I left, they brought me gifts. And as I say, they were very quick learners. Right, Jay? Very conscientious people. And when you say about singing, we had, one of our small factories had some of the ladies and they came to our church, and they brought their guitar one Sunday, and they sang. We all worshipped together, we all had fun. You know, they added something to our church. And they were sort of overwhelmed because, as I say, we are Methodist, and most of those people are Catholic. But they gave us something, and we gave them something. And they were just beautiful people. Most of them were young, and not -- our factory is mostly retired people in my group. And then you have the other half that are very young.

SPEAKER: Have any of the Mexican women starting winning the crab picking contest? (Laughter.)

J.N.: No, they're a little bit embarrassed about some things. They're very -- they don't like to go out too much in the community. I mean go out as far as to get attention like that. They're not too -- I've asked them to get into the contests, I'm almost (inaudible).

E.R.: Jay, you know (inaudible). (Laughter.) I am -- the fastest of the best at one time. Now I'm falling behind about four pounds a day now. Age does take its toll. (Laughter.) And I feel like I no longer -- see, in a crab industry, I don't care what you pick. You're only going to get paid for what you pick. I concentrate on what I get. What I get by the sweat of my brow, I get. Now the factory, someone can sit there -- all day, and I'm picking up their production, but not in a crab house. When I -- my children needed shoes, I worked hard that day. Now I have all I need. I can kind of relax. (Laughter.)

J.N.: That was too bad a little bit there -- I had two Americans, one of them was Lou Brown, and she's 80. When one of the first girls first came, she showed them, and each year, they kept picking up, and picking up, and she kept racing and racing them, and now they pass her. She said the hell with them. So she -- (Laughter.) She's 80 years old. So she still picks, but she don't try to race them no more.

E.R.: I bet Jay can tell you that we do have a good relationship with them.

J.N.: Yes.

E.R.: I mean after all, we're all workers together. They're working for their families. We know how it feels. We were in the Depression. We knew how it felt as a child to work for school clothes and things. So we can relate to how they work, made money to send back home. I think it's commendable.

J.N.: They're not wasteful. As far as the cooking, like they get together with groups and cook and clean. They're very clean, they're very Christian with everything you do for them. They're a very good group.

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

SPEAKER: -- that indicated how many pounds a person could pick?

J.N.: Okay. It's \$2 a pound also. The offset's \$2 per pound or 5.50 minimum wage, but they're all, once they first learn, they're all past that. They way mine go, we put in the computer hours they work and the pounds, and it spits out an average to them, and most of them are 6 to \$9 an hour for them, so.

E.R.: There was a time a 25 pound picker today, at that time, before you all started raiding crabs, we could pick 100 pounds a day. But remember, that was for (indiscernible.) A hundred pounds a day was nothing. I picked 65 with no problem. But now 25 and 30 was the difference in the crab.

SPEAKER: But I think what's surprising us is that somebody would get on a bus, drive a week, leave their family for six months, nine months, whatever, for 9 bucks an hour, and -

J.N.: Yes, ma'am?

SPEAKER: I wondered if Mr. Harrison could describe a typical day, a typical day in the 19 -- well before World War II, what was the day like? When did it start? How many people would come in? What were the sounds that you heard?

R.H.: You say a typical day in a crab -- oh, at the top, when we first, back in the 40's and 50's, we were turning out about 15 to 1,800 pounds a day. I think our top production was 2,300 pounds. That's from the St. Michaels' plant. Then we bought from some of the

smaller houses to make up the orders. We had the -- back in those days when crab meat was cheap, we were selling -- I sold many pound of crab meat for 20 cents for claw, 35 for regular. And back then, if you got 40 to 50 cents, it was really great. And we were running profit-wise on a very narrow thing, maybe a few pennies a pound. So it was very important to have a volume, to pick all you could because that's where you made your money. And then after about '59 or so, we saw the -- we weren't having as many pickers. A lot of them were getting older and they retired, and everything was just reversed. The crabs were being picked out, the good crabs, and the crab pickers had to work more on the cold crabs. They couldn't make as much money, we had to raise prices to do that. And as I say, we had 92 pickers at one time. In 1971, we sold the plant to the museum, and then we had to renovate a factory, tomato factory down the road in McDaniel, and that was in '71. And then we had to -- well let me get back, when you were picking all that crab meat, it was very hard to move because in later years, they ordered by the pound. And back in those days, they called a customer, I want a barrel of claw, two barrels of regular, a barrel of special and a barrel of backfin, you know. Because -- and the same way with Jay's stores. They bought in big quantities. But after we lost so many pickers, then we sold the plant at -- out here on Paris Point and moved to McDaniel. Then we only had about 20 pickers left. That was about 1972. And then we dropped the chain stores. We couldn't any longer supply them. And the wholesale markets, we had to cut them out. And so I had to turn the whole thing around. We went more for retail because we were only picking about 3, 350 pounds a day. And then in St. Michaels, there was a lot of restaurants springing up all around, and we got most of that business, so between the retail and the restaurants, we did keep one wholesaler in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and one in Baltimore, but outside of that, we sold everything mostly retail. And believe it or not, we made more money with the 15 pickers than we made with the 90 pickers, because our margin of profit was so much greater. See, you could ask almost anything you want for crab meat and people would buy it. So it was like a holiday when we moved down to the McDaniel plant. And just had a few pickers, just had more trouble to keep them than you did selling it at that time. So everything just reversed.

SPEAKER: When you had a plant out at Navy Point, and you were trying to buy as many crabs as you could, were the crabbers everyday -- they go out, were the individual crab boats coming up to your dock and selling to you, so there would be hundreds of crabbing boats coming every afternoon?

R.H.: You mean to bring the crabs in?

SPEAKER: Yeah.

R.H.: Well they got a lot over the dock, but that was in the early years. But after they started picking crabs out, then that's when we found we didn't have to be on the water any longer, so we went to McDaniel and everything was hauled in by trucks. They guys would buy the good crabs, and want to dispose of the culls which we took. So we concentrated on picking rather than the big crabs. We didn't bother with that.

SPEAKER: Do you all use mostly females for picking crabs? Female crabs --

R.H.: Female pickers?

SPEAKER: No.

R.H.: Oh, the female crabs. Yeah. Yeah, we had most, most of the crabs we pick were females.

SPEAKER: Why is that?

R.H.: And then the white crabs and the real small male crabs.

SPEAKER: Why is that, because there's a better market for the male crabs?

R.H.: Well all the big crabs went to -- in baskets and went to the sea.

K.F.: For your backyard, you know, crab feasts. (Laughter.)

E.R.: Divide up the cost of a bushel of crabs --

SPEAKER: For both of you, did you take the shells now to the pharmaceutical companies, the crab shells?

E.R.: The crab shell?

SPEAKER: Yeah.

E.R.: Usually take it now to the landfill. They tried some experiments where a gentleman got a billion dollar grant, and he shook something out, said it looked like my peat moss, and that never amount to anything. Where I work, now I can't speak for Jay, we have a -- we load up this truck, and eventually when it gets full, they put it back there. My daughter was back there last week, and if things work out, we may have a ski resort there some day. (Laughter.) The seagulls come down and pick the shells clean, then the sun bleaches them. And all you're doing is accumulating. You know, there's on odor, nothing. It's beautiful. I mean people can't believe it is what it is. Now back in the good old days, the crab chum was thrown back in the water, and I don't feel like today -- this is one of the things that is wrong with the industry. Our crabs are starving. We put things back to the water, now we're not permitted to do that. We must dispose of it. They did for a while make fertilizer out of it, and that went out of business. That was a plant over where Jay is, and that went out of business. That was the last of -- now each packer disposes of their own --

J.N.: Most of them are put on -- we have a couple farmers putting it on their farmland. Myself, I had a few of them put it on there by the square, we couldn't do nothing. I got -- my way right now. Now you're talking about the other --

E.R.: The neighbors.

J.N.: No. But we got a plant, we got a plant in Cambridge that's called Earth Services. And they take it and mix it up with the wood chips and call it Chesapeake Blue Compost. We're still doing some of that. Also they're going down putting it in this big vat and putting it through the chemical reaction, and then dehydrate it, take (indiscernible) out of it, which is for your pharmaceuticals, for your arthritis medicine, and your Viagra drug. So it's in your Viagra and it's in your Thenzine. So that's -- it's very expensive, very costly for me to -- you were talking about the clear container. This is something that Phillips is going to do this year. It's a Maryland crab meat cup. Crab meat has gotten so high, it's going to be eight ounces into it. So this is going to be a new product. It has the snap ring on top.

E.R.: That tells you that's all we're going to be able to afford. (Laughter.) When you see a packer goes to that, it means the price is going so high, and you're going to say oh, this is okay.

J.N.: Plus a lot of people don't want a whole pound, so they -- and then also, you have the pre-crab cake mix on the bottom. So your crab cake, your mayonnaise and mustard, everything will be all pre-mixed. So you just dump the two together, your crab meat -- for your crab cake.

SPEAKER: Jay?

J.N.: Yes, ma'am?

SPEAKER: I know you said a lot of yours crabs are Asian.

J.N.: Not as far as this plant here, but yes, ma'am, we do --

SPEAKER: So how is it that you -- is it just this, just from the Hooper's Island facility that you use local crabs, but --

J.N.: Yes, ma'am. Just the local crabs at the Phillip's plant in Fishing Creek. We have a soft crab plant in Deal's Island. But all the other plants are Asia, Thailand, Philippines.

SPEAKER: And what do you, where do the Maryland crabs, where's the Maryland crab meat?

J.N.: The crab meat here is going to our restaurants and Giant wants this product. They want Maryland crab meat, so they will use product from us also. So this will be done at our Fishing Creek plant. You will see this plant, you will also see this cup similar from our Asian plants, but you got to look on the cup to make sure it's got Maryland on it if you want Maryland crab meat. You have the Maryland plant number's got to be on the cup for crab meat, from Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, whatever. Also, you got a lot of states in the United States now can blend and mix crab meat. But they are still supposed to label their container what country they mix that crab meat with.

SPEAKER: I noticed that your says that your non-Maryland crab meat says something like Chesapeake style crab meat or something.

J.N.: That's probably crab cakes. They're made in Chesapeake crab style, but they're made with the Asian crab meat.

SPEAKER: For your crab meat --

J.N.: For the crab cakes.

SPEAKER: That's how you get around it, but it had Maryland style or Chesapeake style, that means your crab meat came out of the country. And you put it on the table, somebody (inaudible).

SPEAKER: How do you all feel about that?

E.R.: Well what crab meat (inaudible). (Laughter.) Like I can go to bat for a gentleman who was, we call it dumping crab meat, imported crab meat and putting it in a Maryland can, and I've had to go to bat and tell them why because he wants to stay in business. We cannot let the crab house go out of business like we did our oyster houses. Because then we lost a whole industry. So whatever it takes during this slump, we must keep our crab houses open and really running. So we kind of turn head and let them dump for a while. Now when it changes, and we have a whole lot of crabs that we want to sell and we can, we may change it soon. But for now --

J.N.: Maryland has the strictest regulations of anybody. We're stricter than any other state as far as the regulations. And we have a meeting this week, they're talking about Maryland Health Department to let you blend and mix meat in Maryland, so I don't know what's going to happen with that, but I mean like I say, you can label -- you got to label your cup, but unless that inspector actually comes and catches you and sees what you're blending with, you don't know what you're buying. But the way it is now, you cannot in Maryland, that's where -- we had one guy got a \$5,000 fine two times because he was dumping -- it was Pakistan, I think?

SPEAKER: (Inaudible).

J.N.: Picking it from one Pakistan meat, dumping it and selling it for Maryland crab meat.

E.R.: He gave at that time the reasons why.

J.N.: Yes, ma'am?

SPEAKER: Now is the reason that Hooper's Island still picks local crabs is because you can still get local crabs there where it's really hard to get them at the other plants? Are there crabbers still working out at Hooper's Island?

J.N.: Well that's where Phillip's started from back -- he wants to keep it open. His son, Steve Phillips, and now his grandson -- as long as they are living, there will be a crab plant at Hooper's Island because that's where it started from.

SPEAKER: Okay. So are they --

J.N.: And that's what they use in the restaurants too is mostly is their meat. If there's a (indiscernible), yes, they do have to use some of the Asian, but they try to use as much of their own plant as they can. They're making the crab cakes smaller, and they're doing about 80,000 a day in Baltimore making those crab cakes. So they're really selling.

K.F.: Does anybody else have questions?

J.N.: She has one. (Laughter.)

K.F.: All right, Linda. Wait, there's a gentleman in the back.

J.N.: Yes, sir?

SPEAKER: Just a quick question. Why has the crab industry dropped so much? You were talking about the zenith of the crab industry, I think you said like 1949 or so, and now we're like -- it's hard to find crab pickers. What's happened?

E.R.: Why has the crab industry been in decline?

SPEAKER: Yeah.

E.R.: Well the scientists can't figure it out, we can't figure it out, and I tell them you've tried science, now try God. Whether you believe it or not, you all here are familiar with technology. Us older people realize that the industry would only take so much technology. You have to kind of balance nature and your industry. And you have to realize there is a tomorrow. Unfortunately or fortunately, however you say it, we have young people in the industry today. They brought in technology. And I say to them, I say to our -- our industry will not take this new technology. So we've got to sit down and go back in common sense of what our industry will take, what we can live with, and what they can live with. And I'm hoping this winter, we can do exactly that. It's no use for me to point my finger say the farmer did it when I have a failing septic system. It's no use for me to say it's that dumb buck over there that's catching everything on the bottom, because his mortgage is due tomorrow. And that's a hard habit when you've got no dollars and you know they're there to sell. So it's a thing that we're going to have to sit down, and I think our technology has gone so far ahead of nature that she can't balance herself. Plus, all of us building -- all the waterfront, we're putting a lot of things in that bay that was never meant to be (indiscernible.) Back in 1994, Talbot County honored me with special recognition because I wrote a poem about our skipjacks. It was a vanishing breed. I never dreamed it would be us crabbers too. And this is what it says.

Life, death and resurrection
skipping, dipping sails along

white canvas spread like a baby swan
On her deck sands are wrinkled,
weathered man lovingly caresses her with a calloused hand
Skipjack, dredge boat, the love of his life
closer to his heart than even his wife
From break of dawn till close of day
they dredge back home out of the bay
With the back of his hand, he wiped his hair
Old -- he says, the end is near
We've raked the land and dirtied the sea
No oysters are left for you and me
You'll die in your harbor of worms and decay
It's best we drowned out in the bay
I'll wax the wheel and heist the sail
You'll die the winds of a northwest gale
Tattered sails hanging, rails covered with sleet
Angry seas rolling down, down to the Murphy deep
Spanish galleons -- together you'll rest
In Neptune's graveyard you'll sleep with the best
Ballads will be song, men and women will wail
For the captain, the dredge boat and the northwest gale
I, St. Peter, the waterman will stay on the --
For the sea and the land to give up their all
Out of the deep, a golden ship will arise
Sails rigged and heisted sailing under rainbow skies
Skipping and dipping, she sails along
Its old canvas spread like a graceful swan
On her deck stands a giant golden man
Lovingly he caresses her with a youthful hand
My fair lady, he cries, it's the dawn of a new day
Forever and ever we sail the crystal clean Chesapeake Bay

And that's the answer. That fits the crabber -- (applause).

K.F.: I think that's a good place to end today. If you have more questions you're welcome to ask our three guests. I want to thank you all for coming and educating folks about the crab picking industry, and I want to thank you all for coming, and I hope you enjoyed it.

(Off record.)

J.N.: -- hand out these new crab tours we have at our plant in Fishing Creek. If you want to take it back, we have this year, like 22 busses coming this year, come by busload to our the plant, they go to a local restaurant for a meal, they tour Dorchester for our all-day trips.

(END OF TAPE.)