

Interview Log

Interviewee: James Lane
Cora Ward

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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 Museum has had this here. We've been inviting professional crab pickers and people involved with the crab-picking industry to come to the museum and to teach you all about what the industry is really like, and what their experiences are here in this industry. However, today we were supposed to have – this was supposed to be the premier of a new book that's coming out here in the Museum called *It's How You Pick The Crab*. And the book is based on two years' worth of oral histories and research that we've been doing around the Eastern Shore. Unfortunately, the book is still at the publisher's, so I do apologize for that. We had invited some of these wonderful people here to do a book signing with you. Unfortunately, we don't have any for them to sign. However, look for the book at the end of the month here at the museum. It will be available in the book store, and I'm sure we will have an event at the end of the month to, you know, welcome this book to our store. So look for that, keep your calendars open. I'm sure they'll be a great event. And we'll invite all the crab pickers to that at the end of the month.

Let's see. Today we have a very special set of narrative stages for you today. We've invited James Lane and Cora Ward from Crisfield to come and talk to you about the union that was in Crisfield. How many people here knew there was a seafood workers' union on the Eastern Shore? Do you work at the Museum?

SPEAKER: No, I was a crab (inaudible).

K.F.: Okay. (Laughter.) And they're going to tell you a little bit about how the union got started, what it was like, and what it was like to work in the Crisfield seafood packing factories in the 30's, 40's, 50's and all on up to today. James Lane is a community historian, and has been doing a lot of oral history and research in Crisfield with the union and union members there. He's also given lectures at the Baltimore Aquarium and around the Eastern Shore here locally on his research.

Cora Ward is a crab picker among many other things, I just learned. (Laughter.) She just told me she's been a taxi cab driver, and she now works with some of the prisoners down on the lower Eastern Shore teaching them home economics. So (indiscernible) she was also a shop steward for Crisfield Packing Company for about 20 years.

So before we get started, I wanted to just remind you all a few historical things to keep in the back of your memory as we go through this discussion today. I want you to remember that in 1935, the Wagner Act was passed. And this allowed workers to organize and bargain collectively. It basically allowed them to form unions. It was still very difficult to do it back then though.

I also want you to remember that in the 30's, the depression was on. Sometimes we do have to remind ourselves of that. Okay. I'd like to start by just having Cora describe for us what the inside of a packing house looks like, and what the process is when you're in there working. So, Cora, can you tell us what it looked like inside Crisfield Packing Company?

C.W.: Yes, I can. (Inaudible.) This would be where the – that would be the door, you would come in the crab house, and the first thing you would do in the morning, you would have to wash your pans, put an apron on. They would have your (inaudible), they've already – before they put the trays up there. And the pickers would come in, wash your hands, put the aprons on. And after that, they would have to get their cans. Sometimes those cans would be already in solution. But other times, they'd have set where all you have to do is pick them up to go to the table. You were only allowed about six cans, and picking those six cans, five cans, and carry them up to the scale to be weighed. Well a lot of the times, you pick in the pan, you have – you have more than a pan. So you would take a little off of each pan, and put it in your other pan, your five pans. Still, you have to wash your pans, wash your knives and everything. And we have a pan in our lap to pick in, a lap (inaudible), and then we pick crabs and go back. Years ago, we only got 20 some pounds. That would be -- gallons. Or when the new – came in, Mr. (inaudible) was the president of our union. His daughter (inaudible) and he organized the union, him and Mr. Marvin Collins (phonetic). And then they had shop stewards. And the shop stewards -- (inaudible) and then the shop steward would go to (inaudible) that's where the shop steward goes. And that's the way it went from (inaudible), but before the union, it wasn't like that. We had certain times to close. Ones – at 6:00. And you would pick until 11:30. But it was on the count of the (inaudible), 11:30 to 12, and then you would go back and pick until 4:00. Yes, 4:00 that morning, but when you're picking crabs, you don't (inaudible). And most of you use a mallet. We pick crabs with a knife.

K.F.: Let me ask you what do crab pickers get paid now?

C.W.: They get \$10 a gallon.

K.F.: Yeah. So about 25 or so –

C.W.: Yeah –

K.F.: And before the union came in, what time would you go to work? Was it really early or –

C.W.: We would go to work – well before the crabs – it was 5:00 in the morning. And it was – started to work. Some at five, some at six. But some people would be there right at 5:00 to start the work. And you would pick all day long. (Inaudible).

K.F.: Well, James, let me ask you how the – how you got started.

J.L.: Before I answer the question that Kelly asked me, I think the first thing I need to do is sensitize you to my interest in the labor union. I am the son of a father and mother, of course, who were involved in the seafood labor industry. My father shucked oysters and my mother picked crabs. My mother was not native to Maryland. My mother came up from an agriculture background in Alabama. When she came to Maryland, my grandmother and my great-grandmother had migrated from Nanticoke, Virginia to Crisfield. And, quite naturally, they were aware of the seafood industry because they picked crabs in Nanticoke, Virginia. But my grandmother taught my mother how to pick crabs. And my mother used to say oh, God, I'll never make another dollar picking crabs. So eventually, she stayed with picking crabs until she got pretty good and started making money.

Secondly, my interest in the labor union is also a result of my involvement as a member of the labor union, because I eventually became a part of the merged – packers and butcher’s workmen union that merged into United Food and Commercial Workers Union in 1983. So at that time, I was working for a distributing company called Mrs. Paul’s Kitchen, which was stationed in Crisfield, and that was a distributor of seafood products and frozen goods. And I was a – member. Along the way, I became very interested in the union, being a union member as well as having parents and grandparents that were involved in the union. My grandmother was actually part of the original Local 453. And I will share a song with you, a little ditty that the union – the union has a lot of different songs to keep themselves together and keep up morale. And I was at Mrs. Williams’ home. Mrs. Williams and I are very good friends and work together. And she had a songbook that Amalga (phonetic) used to have different songs. And a lot of those songs were based on sacred songs. But I ran home, and I thought about it. I said, gee, I got to get myself a union song so people get some sense what the union’s about. But many of you might remember the little kid’s song called Shoefly. Well, here’s the union song that goes like this.

(Singing:)

Packers don’t bother me
Packers don’t bother me
Packers don’t bother me
For I belong to 453. (Laughter.)

Packers don’t bother me
Packers don’t bother me
Packers don’t bother me
For I belong to 453.

I’m free
I’m free
I’m free for the care I need
I’m free
I’m free
I’m free like a ship on sea
I’m free
I’m free
I’m free for the care I need
I’m free
I’m free
I’m free like a ship on the sea.

I am a 453.

(Applause.)

J.L.: So those were the common songs the labor unions would sing to keep morale up because it was a very difficult times. In the 1930's, of course – the Depression was on. It actually begin in 1929. It was very severe times. For people of African descent, it was extraordinarily difficult because many of them were like the first generation of free black people coming out of enslavement. Many of them had not had the opportunity to be involved in the expanded job market. And many of them came from farming backgrounds as well as marginalized jobs that were the periphery of the economy. So during the 29 and 30's, it was compounded by the collapse of the market and the encouragement of depression. Many of the black men and women, to their fortitude and to their credit, were able to carve out livelihoods working in seafood and maritime communities, such as Crisfield from which Cora comes from and myself, because I work in Crisfield which is basically a maritime community.

During the time, the labor union actually did not make an impact upon the industry until in 1942, it was actually chartered. There were confrontations between labor workers in the seafood packing houses, particularly the oyster packers, and eventually the crab pickers. And they – preponderantly, the biggest majority in that labor force, a very powerful impact upon how labor policy was shaped were females, and black females at that. Majority of the crab pickers were black females. And I believe at one time in 1931 when they had a confrontation with the packers, the composition remained three to one in terms of racial composition for the white pickers and black pickers.

As I said before, it was a very difficult time during the depression. Many of the men and women actually got to etch out a livelihood based on the fickle economy, not only a manmade environment, in case being the packers, but also a natural environment. And to realize that many of the jobs that are focused in maritime communities are based on the central core changes of the bay. That's very important to remember. If the crabs are not there, you don't pick. If the oysters are not there, you don't shuck. I don't care how much you're talking about what you're going to do, you are subject to the natural cycles of the environment. And that is true. And not only, not only that, people were also impacted by the financial environment.

In 1931, in 1947 – actually, 1943, up to 1943 – I'm sorry, 1931 – 1929, '31 and '43 were very pivotal years for the labor union. A gentleman by the name of McKinley Jones, who was also an independent – a fairly influential person in the community, had gone to Port Norris, New Jersey. The population of black people in America was very vocal. You might remember that there was a great migration during the First World War in the 19, later 1919 and 1920's. And black folks were coming out of the south, and they migrated towards the north because of the availability of jobs. As a result of that, a lot of family members also migrated to various seafood communities in and along the mid-Atlantic region. In this case, there was a lot of exchange between the community and Crisfield and Port Norris, New Jersey.

Mr. McKinley Jones, and we call him Mr. Pie Jones, would go to Port Norris and shuck oysters, as well as Mr. Albert Melvin (phonetic) from (indiscernible), and there they came

in contact with labor union members. The labor union, at that time, was focused primarily in Camden, New Jersey. During the time they were shucking in the oyster packing houses in New Jersey, they had mentioned that the conditions in Crisfield were a little unacceptable and fairly appalling. If you've ever been in a packing house in the 19 – believe me, I could not even have been in the packing house during the 1919's and 20's because I'm too young. But from my interviewing primary sources and people that lived and worked during that time, it was not the very best of environment. There were work conditions, there was water constantly around you, it was cold often. The temperature was frigid. There were very difficult conditions in terms of labor. So it was a very, very tough situation and environment to work in. So they asked the labor union if they would actually come and take a cursory visit to Crisfield and see what they were enduring as laborers. So actually, that was the first intimation that a labor – of labor movement activity emanating out of New Jersey and eventually coming to Crisfield in the form of a labor union field operative looking at Crisfield and just checking out the packing houses.

K.F.: And actually, we – in some of our research on this subject from the good old National Archives, we unearthed this letter written on Jones Sanitary Seafood Company letterhead by McKinley Jones written to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Washington, D.C. “Your Honor, I am speaking for Jones Sanitary Seafood Company, Crisfield, Maryland. I am speaking of labor class of crab pickers and oyster shuckers, that the pickers are not satisfied with 25 cents a gallon for picking of crab as the Crisfield, Maryland packers want. I would seek to know why the crab packers want to cut the crab pickers when they know that a family cannot be supported at the rate of 25 cents a gallon as high as food is now here in Crisfield.” This is dated 1935. He wrote another letter to President Roosevelt in 1940 specifically asking would you please send someone down here to help us start a union. They wanted to be affiliated with the AFL. So it's been an interesting project locating these kinds of documents and still having people around that you can go and talk to who lived through this. And I just want to ask Cora, how do you become a shop steward? How did you become the shop steward at Crisfield Packing Company?

C.W.: I was selected by the people of Crisfield Packing Company.

K.F.: And how did they vote? How would that happen?

C.W.: It was a unanimous vote. (Laughter.) They gave it to me, and I accepted it. I think I did a good job at it.

K.F.: What were the duties of a shop steward?

C.W.: Well it's more being a liaison between the packers and the employees. So if they had any disturbance or whatever, I was there to take over. Everything went along nicely. I never had any interruption or anything. Seemed like they were just like one happy family.

K.F.: But it wasn't always like that. It really was a struggle to get the union and to get –

C.W.: Yeah, it was. Well, see, the union was there, but it was a struggle. It was a lot of turmoil and everything. Someone – some wanted to do it, and some didn't because they thought maybe, you know, it would affect them some kind of way, which it didn't. It helped them.

K.F.: And, James, can you tell us a little bit about some of the early visits of some of the labor leaders to Crisfield? I know there was some violence on a couple of occasions.

J.L.: Sure. There were quite a few occasions I can, from reading documents and talking with other members that eventually came into the labor union in the later years, there were at least three occasions I know where there were physical confrontations and violence involved. For example, Leon Shackter (phonetic), who Mr. McKinley met during his first trip to South Jersey and Port Norris, he was a labor union leader that came out in Camden, New Jersey among Meat Packers and Butchers Workmen's Union. Of course, at that time, they were affiliated with the AFL, the American Federation of Labor. And the split, the split had not yet – well the CIO hadn't even formed at that time 'cause it was in the later years that CIO came out of AFL through disputes of organizing industry rather than specific craft unions. However, Leon Shackter befriended Mr. McKinley. As I said, we called him Mr. Pie Jones when I was growing up. And out of the deferment discussion that Mr. Jones had with Mr. Leon Shackter, he was interested enough to come to Crisfield to check out the situation in terms of the packing house conditions and also the wages. Because according to – Kelly has too with the literature, the packers wanted to cut the labor wages from 35 cents a gallon to 25 cents a gallon.

Now you might think, you might wonder to yourself, my God, that's an awfully low wage. You must remember, we were in the Depression. At that time, just a mere 10-cent cut could make the difference between survival and starvation. So you wonder why people so fervently fought and maintained that 35 cents, it was very important for them to survive as families. They were already getting minimum wages. They were already marginalized workers because they were unorganized workers and they did not have access to very high paying jobs. And the seafood labor industry has never been a high paying job until it was organized with labor unions. And they're just big enough. But Leon Shackter came to Crisfield. He came surreptitiously because there were positions against labor unions at the time. Actually, any discussion about organizing seafood – seafood workers and them imposing upon the packers for more money, packers like their money. And you might recall if you have read any of the Chesapeake literature, your oyster (indiscernible), and I call them oyster families, made their money harvesting the bay. They made a good deal of money. And the most important thing about seafood, seafood was not regulated like a food industry during the Depression or during the wartime. Actually, it was a necessary food. And because of the natural environment, the bay was – the bay could be harvested. This is one reason why people fared well in terms of eating. They could eat oysters, they could eat crabs, they could eat fish. If they didn't have money, they could certainly go and hook a fishing line, catch a crab or catch a fish or throw a crab pot or a net. So in terms of having food, it was very important, being at that time it was advantageous being near water.

But getting back to the labor union, when Mr. Shackter came, word got around that unions were in town, and people began to intimidate the laborers about wanting to organize and to ask packers – actually, the packers were horrified. The packers actually wanted to call out the militia, and threatened even the mayor of the town in 1931 when they were having discussions about the wage increase or the wage cut. Many of the packers swore that they would never ever open again and allow seafood workers to come in there. Before they would increase the pay or remain at 35 cents, they would move

somewhere else. In fact, Elroy Carson (phonetic), whose family still remains in Crisfield, was one of the oyster packers as well as the crab house packing house, had several places. One in St. Michaels, one in Hampton, Virginia, and one in Crisfield. He decided not to allow any pickers to come into his crab house at 35 cents per gallon. He said absolutely not. And they actually took out the seafood from Crisfield to St. Michaels so that they could pick. Violence was sporadic between the – actually packers, the packers didn't really get involved. They had people that would sort of be their intermediaries and would force pressure on some of the laborers and intimidate them, but the laborers did not succumb in many cases, and actually refused to go back to the crab houses to pick at a reduced rate at that time.

K.F.: Now were most of the early meetings held for the union? Was there a space for the worker? Obviously, it was in the crab house.

J.L.: Well most of the laborers, most of the men and women that were laborers in the packing houses, they met at churches, they met in fraternity organizations like the local Elk Lodge. And sometimes, there were probably house meetings and any other impromptu setting that they felt that they could meet in safety and in privacy. But primarily, it was churches and your Elk Lodges. I would say that primarily, the think tank for the labor movement in terms of the men that I know, Mr. Elderfeld (phonetic), Mr. L.J. Wilson and a few – Cora probably knows, might ring a bell with you, they were involved in the Elk Lodge, and they were quite influential and even in one case, there was a gentleman that was involved in the community that had quite a bit of rapport with the soon-to-become governor of Maryland, J. Tawes. Actually – he belonged to the Douglas family, and Mrs. Douglas, who is with us today, would know him, two brothers, Lincoln and Princeton Douglas were very powerful organizers in the community. They were part of the Democratic machine. And as you well know, the Democrats were ruling Maryland during those years since Governor Tawes came out of the Democratic machine. And one of the Douglas brothers was responsible for calling votes and also getting the African American community back in the elections. So as a result of that, there was some patronage involved, and it worked. It allowed some influence to happen at some levels that the black community ordinarily would not have had employed in order to concretize and solidify the efforts of labor unionism.

K.F.: Now what did the union do for the community as a whole, outside of the job situation? Sort of in general.

J.L.: In the words of the last president of the labor union before it merged into Local 27, it became United Food and Commercial Workers, in an interview with him, he quoted to me, he said, James, Local 453 was a shrine to the laborers in Crisfield. What it did for them, it allowed them an opportunity for self-empowerment and self-determination. And it also allowed them an opportunity to make decisions that affected their survival within the community. And it also allowed them to produce and to maintain their traditions in terms of a people as well as a culture. So actually, what it did, it elevated people's sense of self, and also it gave them a sense of having a place. Because as I keep reiterating, the populations in America during the 20's and 30's were very local. We had over a million African Americans leaving the south coming to the cities on the eastern seaboard looking for work in the industries at that time. So people were non-stable. And this was true not only for the black population, but for the white population too because of the Depression.

So people, when they have a chance to really settle in and find a place that they could call home and actually contribute and create, that was something of note, something to really be proud of. And that happened through the labor union imparting to the people a sense of empowerment and self-determination.

K.F.: And how did the union progress? What is the history of it? I know it amalgamated and changed into some other things. What happened to the union once it got started, and who (inaudible)?

J.L.: It metamorphosized into a very powerful presence, not only in Crisfield, but the Union was able to migrate outside of the immediate Chesapeake Bay area. They even went up into areas like Texas, into Louisiana. Also in Mississippi, one of the members of Local 453 who was a part of the team, his name was Mr. Melvin Tyler, Mr. Melvin Tyler was the treasurer of the Labor Union 453. Interesting enough, during the 60's, Mr. Tyler went down to Mississippi to organize the fishermen in the Midhaven industry. But unfortunately, he was arrested and incarcerated, and it really shook him up. But it shows you the spread and the influence of the labor union coming out of a small maritime community and impacting and touching lives outside of its immediate vicinity. Also he was involved with the Midhaven fisheries in the Delaware Bay area, quite naturally New Jersey and more to the point locally, St. Michaels, Tilghman Island, Oxford, Hooper's Island, Rock Hall, Chestertown, those places you're probably familiar with, those areas are also touched by the Seafood Labor Union, 453 at that time.

K.F.: Now how long did the union last?

J.L.: The union lasted up to 1983 when it merged into Local 27, which was the United Food and Commercial Workers. It was still Local 453 up to 19 -- at 1981, it was still Local 453. In 1983, there was some questions about its longevity because at that time, the seafood industry was on the decline. There were some problems. Of course, the oyster industry had been decimated with MX disease, dermo, a few other infestations. There's also a -- decline in the crab industry. So there was some consideration about the union's ability to sustain itself. So Mr. Orlando Purnell (phonetic), who was the last president after Mr. Albert Bell, he came in in 1973 after Mr. Bell deceased, he made a decision that in order for the unions to survive, that they need to merge. So he submitted a proposal to Local 453 that they should merge, and they did in 1983 with the United Food and Commercial Workers, which originally was along with the Meat Packers and Butcher's Workmen Union. And as a result of that, they actually -- with a labor force of about a million, half a million people. And at that time, they were only maybe about three or four picking houses. So even the labor force, in terms of the packing houses, had diminished tremendously. So we're talking perhaps maybe less than -- well the highest amount of members at one time during the labor union strikes, you could get at least 700 people in a gathering. In 19 -- in the 1970's to 1980's, you were lucky if you had 100 people together. So you could see a precipitous decline in terms of population and people working. Young people did not gravitate towards the seafood industry because they had better opportunities outside of it, even with the labor union there.

K.F.: Well that begs the question of what is the state of the seafood industry in Crisfield today? We have to ask this question. (Laughter.)

J.L.: Not a popular question. I think I'm going to let Cora answer that.

C.W.: I think we have, is it two -- (inaudible).

J.L.: Two.

C.W.: Two? About two houses picking crabmeat.

K.F.: And there used to be 50 at least in Crisfield at one time.

J.L.: Yes.

K.F.: Yeah.

C.W.: It was the seafood capitol of the world. Used to be.

J.L.: I think the -- I think the two houses that are picking now are -- excuse me, Top of the Bay, which also has an oyster packing house as well, and also a soft-shell shedding business. And the other one is Byrd's Crab House. And Byrd's is -- Byrd's is one of the more substantial packing houses, even in terms of the history of Crisfield, because the owner of Byrd's Crab House also has developed the process of pasteurization, is also the president of the University of Maryland, and we call him Mr. Curly Byrd. But he was responsible for working out the process of pasteurization that eventually allowed for greater marketing of seafood on the broad international and national market with the canning process, because the Eastern Shore also had a lot of canneries because there were tomato factories there, and agricultural processing process. So the incline with the processing the canneries of agriculture products also coincide with the canning process and pasteurization process of seafood given the greater marketability. So but there's only two houses currently that actually pick. And those -- a lot of the crabs that they're receiving are not really crustaceans out of the Chesapeake Bay. A lot of them come from the waters, the Atlantic waters in the south from North Carolina. Even though there are crabs coming out of the Chesapeake Bay, but they're not as plentiful as they used to be. At one time, you'd get 100 million pounds of crabmeat picked in a year's time. Now I think it's up to like -- the last was 73 million, and it's decreasing steadily everyday. The watermen are crying wolf, and the governor's getting upset, and everybody's wondering where it's going. But nevertheless, there's always been intent on the bay, the bay's been able to recover. Just like Rockfish. Rockfish is coming back and have come back. So I think there's always divine intervention in this whole process.

K.F.: And what's interesting is with this decline of the industry, the community's also lost several of its traditions, the singing tradition in the picking houses in Crisfield has really fallen away. I don't know if everybody knew that. But there was a tradition while you were picking your crabs, shucking your oysters, you sang hymns. And today, only Byrd's, they sing the Lord's Prayer at 9:00 every morning, and that's it. They're the last picking house to be singing at all. And I was wondering if you remembered any of that, Cora, if you remembered singing the hymns while you were picking crabs, and what some of the hymns were the Crisfield Packing Company sang.

C.W.: Most of the hymns we sang were out of the -- hymns. Jesus (inaudible) they sing that, and then they sing (inaudible). And I can't even think of a lot of them they used to sing. But every morning when we came in at 9:00, we would stop for prayer. Everybody would have to stop for prayer (inaudible). I don't care what they were doing, that was one of the traditions they had. But they sang, a lot of them sang all day long. But they would be picking (inaudible). (Laughter.) And they could pick, because some of them could pick, what, 20 to 20 gallons a day. And now if they had the crabs now like they used to, and they would pick like they do then, it would be a nice community, and younger people would have something to do. But everyone now when they get a certain age or graduate

from school, they leave the community. They go look for other things to do. If they're not going to college, they still leave the community.

K.F.: I'm going to ask if anybody has any questions.

SPEAKER: How many crabs, if you could, do you pick in a day?

C.W.: How many crabs can you pick in a day? Some of them pick 15, 16 gallons.

SPEAKER: How many crabs is that?

C.W.: I couldn't tell you about the crabs. But they could pick that, and then you would tell how much they make a day by --

SPEAKER: Is that a pound, a gallon is a pound?

K.F.: No, a gallon is a gallon.

C.W.: There's five pounds in one gallon.

SPEAKER: Oh.

C.W.: Five pounds.

K.F.: So if you've got 16 gallons --

SPEAKER: That's a lot of picking.

C.W.: So you have to pick five gallons manual so you would have \$10. There isn't any question.

J.L.: At one time, they actually picked crabs, and Mrs. Douglas can verify that they were only getting 10 cents a pound, 20 cents -- but they also -- your Aunt Blanche told me that they only got 10 cents -- (inaudible). (Laughter.) Yeah.

C.W.: A dollar a pound.

J.L.: Yeah. And Mr. Purnell, who was the last president of Local 453, told me that through the work of the labor union, crab pickers and oyster shuckers in Crisfield were some of the higher-end paid workers along the Eastern Seaboard. They had higher wages. And most of the women like in places like Rock Hall, Cambridge, Easton where they were picking crabs and shucking, were really quite envious because they constantly got a wage increase through the labor union constantly encountering and dealing with the packers about better wages, better working conditions and a few other auxiliary benefits that went along with the labor union. So the labor force in terms of the women, the women were able to brag when they went to other places because the women would say, God, you all make a lot of money. You all have more money than we have. Actually, it was through the orientation of the labor union forcing the packers to increase their wages or maintain their wages -- (inaudible) and the laborers that shuck oysters as well as the crabs.

K.F.: Any other questions?

SPEAKER: I've heard that there's some relationship with the Rockfish and the crab that the Natural Resources not letting the fishing of the Rockfish industry -- the crab --

K.F.: Yeah. The watermen, some watermen currently feel that the Rockfish, because they've come back in such a force, are eating the baby crabs. And I've gone out on a couple of boats with watermen where they catch a huge Rockfish, and you gut it open and lots of baby crabs fall out. But then they've also caught Rockfish that look like they're starving to death as well. So I mean they're dented and mushy and very strange looking. So but again, I don't think we can point to any single reason why the crabs have fallen off in the bay. It's a very complex biological and human issue, and I don't think we can really say this is the one reason.

J.L.: The comment about the decline in the blue crab population or blue crab landing in comparison to the Rockfish decline, there were two theories in history that could illustrate this point. Just as the Long Island Sound -- the Long Island Sound had a depletion of its oyster population during the 1800's and they began to migrate down to the Chesapeake Bay and harvest with the dredger, and people thought that was the immediate demise of the oyster industry because most of the men that are watermen on the bay use hand tonging techniques to harvest oysters. They never use the power dredge. But, however, the oyster population did not take a terrible decline as a result of using the dredge. In fact, local Maryland watermen did exactly what the Yankees did. They took the dredges on dredging and making more money off the oysters. So there's always a possibility of coming back or a possibility of not losing your resources. And the same thing happened off of South Point in Long Island Sound. Years ago, they would catch a Rockfish and it would hang from your neck all the way down to your ankles. I mean Rockfish was that big. During the 1950's, they were catching Rockfish, even in the early 1900's, in the Long Island Sound on South Point out near Montauk and out near the Shinacock Reservation. People thought that was the demise of Rockfish. Rockfish is very -- just like crabs are a very peculiar species. It's a very complex process that caused them to repopulate and replenish themselves. So you can't really pinpoint. But there are periods of time when they're plentiful, then there are times when they're lean. And watermen are -- watermen are correct that there are cyclical periods when certain species of seafood disappear, but they come back stronger than ever, and that can be verified with the Rockfish population in Maryland as well as in New York City, South Point on Long Island. Yes?

SPEAKER: Are there more picking houses outside Crisfield (inaudible)? Somebody's picking a lot of crabs.

K.F.: Yes.

J.L.: That's your question, Kelly.

K.F.: My research covered the whole Eastern Shore. So what I found is that most of the crab picking houses now are located in Dorchester County just south of here, especially on Hooper's Island and Fishing Creek. And also, in the 80's, the state made a new law. They were trying to really crack down on the bootleg crab picking, which is women in their house, picking crabmeat, selling it out the back door. What they did was they passed a special law that allowed you to set up what they call a home picking plant. You were only allowed to employ two people, they should be family members, all sorts of different regulations. But you still had to make it comply with the state health regulations. Dorchester County has a proliferation of these home picking houses that now actually employ 20 to 30 Mexican women, still under these original "home picking" laws. Talbot County used to have a lot of crab picking facilities. There were three here on museum grounds at one time. Now there's one left. It's up the road here. How many people have eaten at Chesapeake Landing up the road? Okay. If you head out towards Tilghman, on the left hand side, you'll see a restaurant called Chesapeake Landing. Excellent seafood. Behind it there is a crab picking house. And they are using a few local women who used to pick here at some of the factories that were on the museum grounds, but most of them actually are Vietnamese women that are brought in from D.C. every day, pick and then go back to D.C. We don't have any Mexican pickers here in Talbot County. Most of your Mexican pickers are in Dorchester County. There's a

couple of houses in Crisfield that are now using Mexican crab pickers, and this is a relatively new phenomenon. I guess started in the early 90's, because the crab pickers were getting older, and they were passing on, and there weren't any other ones coming into the crab house. So suddenly, you have no labor force. And you still had crabs to pick back then, but you had no one to pick them. So they started bringing in Mexican women to pick crabs from about May to December.

SPEAKER: Now they're non-union, right?

K.F.: Oh, yeah. Non-union. But they are legal. They're here under a federal program. They do have visas and all that kind of stuff.

SPEAKER: How much do they make? What are their wages?

K.F.: They make the same as a local crab picker makes, 2.25 a pound. However, their contract stipulates that they have to, within two weeks, they have to be picking in a certain poundage. So if you're new and you come in, you've got two weeks to learn how to pick a crab properly, and then pick it fast. Now you can verify that it takes a good long time to get your speed up. Yes, it does. About how long did it take you to get your speed up when you first started?

C.W.: It wasn't too bad. I think about two weeks.

K.F.: Two weeks?

C.W.: Two weeks.

K.F.: Now who taught you how to pick crabs?

C.W.: My sister.

K.F.: And how did she do that?

C.W.: Well she used to bring crabs home and let me try it like that (inaudible).

K.F.: Okay. Yeah, the Mexican women are basically shown the crabs. There is a language barrier within the crab picking houses because no one speaks Spanish, and they don't speak English, but there's usually an elder crab picker there that shows them how to do it. And you get shown a couple of times, and then, you know, you're on your own to figure out your quicker ways to do things.

J.L.: Just to chime in a little bit, there were men that learned how to pick crabs and crack claws. And Mrs. Douglas has a brother that could crack claws and pick crabs just as fast as anybody, I'm sure, and I learned that when I was a young kid.

SPEAKER: As fast as a woman, right? (Laughter.)

J.L.: Well there is a gentleman that's very good at cracking claws, if not one of the fastest men in the state. He's been here -- yeah, Clayton.

K.F.: Yeah. James Clayton is the fastest claw cracker --

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

J.L.: -- go get me some coffee, go get me a sticky bun, I want a fish sandwich. So I sort of ran to the store getting all this different stuff. So I started, while I was sitting around waiting for these orders, my mother said come here, let me show you how to crack claws. So I started learning how to crack claws. The next thing I know, I started learning how to pick a crab. And during the summer, my aunt would take me with her because she worked at one of the better crab houses. She worked at Byrd's. Curly Byrd's Crab House was the crab house. I mean people made big money because they had good crabs. They were picking anywhere from 41 to 43 bushels a day. I mean that could happen. And I

would go down from school, I would crack claws. And as a young man in '60 -- I started cracking claws in '64. And as a young man in need of money to buy school clothes to help the family, I made about \$125 a week just cracking claws in the afternoon. That was good money. And I will tell you what I made picking crabs because I was horrible at picking crabs. (Laughter.) I did absolutely nothing with crabs. But if they had -- I liked the claws, I really liked cracking claws. And they had, they had a claw process call Fader's (phonetic). Fader's was a specialty product that Byrd's did. And what it is, all those nice fat juicy sweet claws, they would break one finger off of the claw, and they would put it in the cans, and they would ship them to restaurateurs for dipping. And I really liked doing those, and I was very good at doing that, and I was very fast at cracking claws, and I did fairly well. But you kind of start, you start that way. You start -- and mostly young women, it's intergenerational. They learned from their grandmothers, they learned from their mothers, they learned from their aunts. They may learn from a sister, and the skills are passed on that way, intergenerationally, and that's how come many of those women were highly-skilled and excellent pickers in those crab houses. I mean a machine could not beat them. They tried a picking machine, but the quality of the picking machine compares -- does not compare to the quality of the meat and the ability and skills, agility of the women that picked those crabs and crab claws.

K.F.: Yeah, they tried for several years to have a machine that would pick the crabs, but the only way to do it was either to shake the crab, which how many of you prefer that large lump meat? You're not going to get that shaking that crab. Or to soak it in brine, and then the meat would go to the top, and then you've still got broken up pieces and it's salty. And it just wasn't the same product. They used the machine if they had overflow crabs. The machine was the Quick Pick, was what it was called, and it was invented by a gentleman down here in Dorchester County with the help of several other folks, and first implemented, I believe, at J.M. Clayton's where they still have it. And if they ever have an overflow of crabs and not enough pickers, they'll use it, but it's a rare occasion these days that the machine gets turned on. Any other questions?

SPEAKER: When you say 45 bushels, how many people would be -- that's for one or --

J.L.: That's for the whole house.

SPEAKER: How many pickers would there be there?

J.L.: It varies. But at Byrd's, you'd have probably about 50 pickers in the house.

SPEAKER: Okay.

J.L.: And we're talking, at that time, crabs were plentiful. And they have to cook those crabs, remember.

K.F.: And now, James, were these the giant bushels that go into the steamer or --

J.L.: Yes.

K.F.: Okay. These -- the bushels he's discussing, 43 bushels actually hold -- what is it, 15 regular bushels that might get hauled off in a boat?

J.L.: In the steamers.

K.F.: In the steamer. So one of these bushels --

SPEAKER: One of those could do 15 bushels a day.

K.F.: Fifteen bushels a day.

J.L.: They were called -- they called the steam -- they would call those baskets. They picked 43 to 50 baskets. And those baskets would hold anywhere to probably about 15 to 20 bushels.

K.F.: Bushel baskets.

J.L.: Bushel baskets.

SPEAKER: Now the other question I had was, you were questioned earlier too, and I'm not sure if I understood it, was the packing companies have diminished because the crabs are not available? Why are there not as many packing houses anymore?

J.L.: Because they can't secure the labor.

SPEAKER: Okay.

J.L.: Because many of the, many of the traditional laborers in the seafood packing industries were mostly from the African American community, and many of the skills that were passed on, mostly young people who (inaudible) by their grandmothers and mothers, they went on to college, and they were able to secure better jobs with health insurance, better wages, and retirement benefits. So they had not remained in the industry. So the packing houses need laborers. They need people that can pick those crabs. And they -- people don't think that's a skilled job. It's a very highly-skilled job.

SPEAKER: So even if we had the crabs, packing houses wouldn't be here because of the labor.

K.F.: No.

J.L.: No. They would not -- except they would do as they're currently doing, bringing in Vietnamese or Mexican workers and training other people who traditionally were not involved in the occupational culture of the seafood industry.

SPEAKER: Thank you.

K.F.: Yeah. A.E. Phillips really pioneered bringing the Mexican women into pick the crabs. And Jay Newcomb will be here tomorrow to talk about those. When I sat down and talked with him, he said one day I walked into my factory, I had three crab pickers, and I had, you know, bushels and bushels of crabs to be picked, and we just -- this was not going to work. So he advertised in D.C., he went over there, he interviewed people. I mean he was trying to get workers. One worker showed up over here. And that's when he turned to the Labor Department and some of their programs. And that's when he got the Mexican women who -- he was the first crab house to get them, and of course as you can imagine, it was a pretty dicey situation on Hooper's Island. You're bringing in -- the first year, he brought in about 50 women. If you can imagine a small island, now you're going to add 50 Mexican women who don't speak English to the island, and people were upset. They were upset. Other packers said they would close their doors and put a lock on the door before they hired any Mexican women. And now every single one of them has at least 30, everyone.

SPEAKER: So the price of the crab meat would not, you know --

K.F.: The price of the crab meat is going up because the crabs are so scarce. Supply and demand has more to do with that.

J.L.: Packers have never been one to be at a loss for profitability. They know how to market their product, and they know where to do it. And they're very astute business people. Even during the period of the labor union, they knew that by cutting 10 cent off of the wages of the workers, there would be a substantial increase in their profits, even at

that time, especially during the Depression. And some of your more notable families at that time are quite wealthy as a result of being in the seafood industry, particularly at picking crabs and in the oyster packing industry. So they're very astute business people. K.F.: And it's interesting too at that time in the 30's, in 1931, Japan had 63 percent of the canned crab meat market in the U.S. And the packers got together and petitioned the government, we would like you to put some kind of trade tariff on this. And finally, in 1940, it was passed. Of course, in '41, we ended up in war with Japan, so that was the end of Japanese products here in this country. But also, during the war, seafood was not rationed. So the industry just took off. They see that as the big (inaudible) really, especially in Crisfield and Cambridge and here in St. Michaels. World War II really, especially the crab picking houses, before that, everybody shucked oysters. A few folks picked crabs in the summertime, but in the 40's, everybody started doing crabs. You know, people wanted -- it was the poor man's lobster, you know.

SPEAKER: Is it exported, or is the market around here? Is it exported?

K.F.: It's completely exported. (Laughter.) Yeah, we have got records of them shipping it to Asia, and Texas, and California, and Canada, and Mexico and all over the world, really. And now it's kind of reversed back to the 30's where the Asian imports now have two-thirds of the U.S. market versus the local meat, which is why you're local meat is going to be really expensive, you know, \$19 for a pound of lump meat. But that's local. But if you buy the Asian, it's \$5 a pound for the lump meat. So if you're a restaurateur, you know, what product are you going to buy? So, Lindsley, have you got a --

SPEAKER: I'm remembering something that you told me once about picking house owners trying to have their employees declared as handicapped because they couldn't meet a certain quota. Can you explain that again? Because I remember it being interesting, I'm just not remembering the whole story.

K.F.: Yeah. I don't know if the labor union got into this, James, but in 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, basically saying you had to have a living wage and you had to pay a minimum wage. Well the seafood industry was exempt from this, as were several other agricultural industries until 1961 when the Federal Government said that's it, you have to pay them a minimum wage. You cannot pay them by the pound anymore; you must pay them a minimum wage. So they implemented this. Many of the pickers could not meet the minimum wage so they were either let go, or at this point, you were starting to see a decline of young people coming into the crab house, so you couldn't really let go of your labor force. You had to hang onto it. So they called the Labor Department, what are we going to do with these pickers? They're not meeting the minimum wage, which means we have to kind of meet it for them, and we have to pay them a minimum wage even though they're not meeting it. And the Labor Department said okay, fine, we will give you a special exemption for them. You can declare them handicapped, which means they don't have to meet the minimum wage. Basically, this was your older workers who had been picking all their lives and, you know, just were not as fast as the younger girls anymore. And then they petitioned the government to have that revoked. They didn't want to be under minimum wage anymore. It was, but then it was reinstated. They went round and round in the 60's. And now it's a minimum wage, you have to pick at least -- what's the minimum wage now, 5.38 or something like that? You have to -- 5.25, you have to pick 5.25 an hour, which means you've got to pick at

least two pounds an hour. Otherwise, you're not meeting the minimum wage. And that's why the Mexican women are under contract now, within two weeks, you have to be picking minimum wage, otherwise you're going back to Mexico.

J.L.: But it's interesting to note when the packing house owners need someone to pick their crab meat or to shuck those oysters, that whole consideration goes out the window sometimes because that -- to illustrate that, that was probably the reason why there was so much opposition to home co-ops like Smith Island, because most of the women who picked crab meat did it not under the eye of state officials, but they were picking crabs that their own watermen husbands caught, and they were able to sell it and market it because they were harvesting it. But they eventually came up in the purview of state officials so much so that if Janice Marshall was here, she would tell you that they just took her through the ropes when she tried to set up a cooperative -- well she had to set up a co-op actually to pick legally. But packers have been doing some things illegally for many years because they want the seafood picked and harvest because it doesn't profit them having it sit around the dock or sitting in the crab house without anyone picking or shucking it. And because seafood is so versatile. My, God, even with soft shell crabs, I mean they can market soft shells now internationally and locally in the national market, do quite well even without fresh seafood being sent out. Actually, soft shell has become the premier labor form now in terms of crab profits.

K.F.: Any other questions? No? Well I want to thank you all for coming, and I hope this was enjoyable and educational for you. (Applause.)

(END OF TAPE.)