

# Oral History Interview

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

“The Culture of Tugs and Tugs in Culture”

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Interviewee: Dennis Palmer Berg (D.B.) and Janet Berg (J.B.)  
DOB: December 24, 1928  
POB: St. Michaels, MD

Interviewer: Michelle Zacks (M.Z.)  
Peter Leshner (P.L.)

Date: October 6, 2011

Location: 7560 Ryders Rest Lane  
St. Michaels, Maryland

Comments:

Documentation:

Audio:  
Video:  
Digital Photos:  
Slides:

Transcription by:

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M.Z.: Today is Thursday, October 6th, 2011. We're in the library at Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Pete Leshar is here, Michelle Zacks, that's me, and Dennis Berg and Janet Berg. We're here to talk to Denny about his life and history in the tugboat industry. Your name comes up a lot. I've been talking to a few people, and a lot of people mention you, so I can tell you're –

D.B.: I'll be darned.

M.Z.: You're an important person around here. I just want to start out, if we can, with some basic information, just to make sure I have some of the kind of nuts and bolts down. So it's Dennis, right?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: I think people call you Denny. But is your given name Dennis?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: And Berg, is that B-e-r-g?

D.B.: You don't need it, but my middle name is Palmer.

M.Z.: Is Palmer? Okay.

D.B.: Nobody ever uses it.

M.Z.: And what is your address?

D.B.: Tell her. What's it?

J.B.: You want the physical address?

M.Z.: Yes, please.

J.B.: 7560 Ryders Rest Lane, R-y-d-e-r-s Rest Lane, St. Michaels.

M.Z.: Okay, St. Michaels. I'll get the phone number and all of that later. Today is October 6th. If you don't mind me asking, what is your date of birth?

D.B.: 12/24/28.

M.Z.: 24/28. You're a Christmas Eve baby.

D.B.: Yeah. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: I am assuming that you are retired from your tug life now. Is that right?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Can you recall how many years you worked on tugs? You recall when you started?

D.B.: Oh, not exactly, sometime really in either the early or mid-fifties.

M.Z.: You had told me on the phone when we chatted a bit that you started working with your dad, is that right?

D.B.: Yeah, he and my older brother, I guess the way it was, is my older brother had gone through the – I forget the name of it – well, he got the – he come out of it with the –

M.Z.: King's Point?

D.B.: – mate's license for –

M.Z.: King's Point.

D.B.: Yeah, King's Point. He wanted to get interested in towing. My father decided to get into it with us.

P.L.: He already had a boat guard at that point?

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: Yeah. And it was only when Chris (ph) graduated from King's Point that he got into tugs then?

D.B.: Yeah. Oh, it was a year or two after that that.

M.Z.: Chris is your brother. Chris went to King's Point and got his mate's license.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: He got into tugging, and then he kind of dragged you in? Is that –

D.B.: Somewhat so. Yeah.

M.Z.: Your father had not been involved before that in tugging? Or had he?

D.B.: No. What we did in about 1930 when I was like a year or two old, moved from Wilmington down to Fredericktown on the Sassafras River. He bought a waterfront property there and started a boatyard for yachts. That kept right on going right up to when World War II started. During that, he built some boats for the Navy.

After the war, partly because the government kept income taxes so high that people didn't have a lot of money to spend on yachts, the yacht business wasn't very good. Eventually, he decided to quit that, and by that time, of course, was interested in getting in tugboats. He'd been to King's Point, and then he'd worked on other people's tugboats for a while. So my father and mother went and bought a tugboat, and started in business.

P.L.: When did you get dragged – did you start as a deckhand? Or did you get to start as a mate?

D.B.: I started a mate, I guess, 'cause Chris was the captain, and I was the mate. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: What was your experience before that with boats? I guess you maybe worked in your dad's shipyard. Did you, in the boatyard?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: But had you had a lot of experience operating a boat yourself? Did you grow up on the water?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: What was your experience as a young man or as a kid on the water?

D.B.: Well, as a young man or a kid, it wasn't working on it, but riding on boats and that sort of thing.

M.Z.: Was that mostly just for pleasure? What kind of boats were you messing around with at that age?

D.B.: Yachts, mostly. And mostly stuff, you know, when I was real young, it was for pleasure. After a while, when I got older, I might have been a crew on a boat or something.

M.Z.: It seems like all of your family is pretty oriented towards the water, it sounds like.

D.B.: Seems like it, yeah.

M.Z.: Did it seem like a natural thing for you to then be working with your brother and being a mate?

D.B.: Yeah, it was pretty good, you know. You know, for quite a while, I had hopes of buying a boatyard, but as you probably know, you probably got to be a millionaire to buy enough waterfront for a boatyard, so that's why I don't have one.

P.L.: Your father ended up accumulating several tugs in time.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: When I look up these names, there was the Berg Boat Company. Now, was that your father's?

D.B.: Yeah. That was the boatyard company.

P.L.: Oh, that's the boatyard company. But they owned several tugs, didn't they, under that name?

D.B.: I think maybe so. I mean, still had the corporation after he sold the property and everything.

P.L.: I see. So he kept it under the same name.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: So the *Polyester* (ph), was that the first of his tugs or just one of them?

D.B.: That was a barge.

P.L.: Oh, that was a barge. Okay.

D.B.: Chemical barge. I guess that's why it's named *Polyester*. Maybe it's one of the chemicals they were carrying. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: I was wondering. That's interesting.

D.B.: They did most of that for the DuPont Company.

P.L.: Okay. *Queen Bee*?

D.B.: That's a push boat that we built. I don't know whether I got any pictures of that here or not. I wasn't exactly the man in charge of it, but I was the man that took the hull lines, and laid them down in whatever you call it where you lay them down.

M.Z.: Loft.

D.B.: Yeah, mold loft. Made all the patterns and stuff and ended up supervising, putting it all together.

P.L.: This is when the family still owned the yard?

D.B.: No. This was up in Wilmington, which we never – oh, I guess he did own it. I think my father bought – there was a yacht yard up there, which – 'cause most of the yachts were

going down to the country. You know, they weren't doing enough business, so they had part of it, but they were glad to sell. We bought that for a base for tugboats and barges.

M.Z.: So now, it was your brother who really started the tug company, or your father?

D.B.: Well, my brother is the one that wanted to do it.

M.Z.: But you all kind of started it together?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: How long did that go on when you were working for your brother?

D.B.: It was, I guess, at least eight or ten years. I guess I can go back and look it up. (Laughter.) Unless you know, or something like that.

M.Z.: Eight or ten years, and you started that, when? Sometime in the fifties?

D.B.: Yeah, I'm just trying to think what year.

M.Z.: It was after World War II, right?

D.B.: Yeah, sometime in the early fifties, but I'm not sure exactly. I don't know whether I can find out anyway now. I'll see if I can.

M.Z.: You were mate for him and he was captain. Was it just the two of you? Your dad was there too?

D.B.: Well, he never came on the tugboats but, yeah. Actually, I think – I think when we got full growth – I guess there were still only two tugboats they had. They were, you know, good tugboats.

M.Z.: What were the names of those boats? That's going back a ways, I guess (laughter).

D.B.: Yeah. I'm just trying to think. It's got a name, I know, but it's –

J.B. *Matt In Twenty* (ph)?

D.B.: Yeah. It was *Queen Bee*. Yeah. I think that was it. That's the one we built, and I think maybe my father – the secretary in his office is the one that thought of that name. Guess it was a good one.

P.L.: Was *Squarehead* one of his, too?

D.B.: No, that's one my brother bought after the business closed up, and he sold other goods and bought that *Squarehead*. I think that's right.

M.Z.: Well, you told me on the phone that you started working with your brother and your dad in the fifties and that you didn't really intend to start your own business, but that's just sort of the direction that things went in. Can you tell us a little bit, about how you made that transition?

D.B.: Well, the real reason was I always wanted to have and, of course, never could get it, 'cause the prices were horrifying, went up so high. I would have loved to have a boatyard, like any one of those down here. If you had enough money to buy that, you probably didn't have to work for a living.

M.Z.: After a while, you just weren't happy working for your brother? How did you branch off into your own business?

D.B.: That was really the family business. My father was the president of it, but he never went on the boat. He was president of it, and my brother was the chief operation officer. I guess, next to him, I was the senior captain. That's all.

M.Z.: Oh, so it stayed a family business the whole time? I think I misunderstood when we were talking on the phone. I thought you eventually went off on your own, kind of independently, but I guess not.

D.B.: Well, I did, 'cause after a while they sold that business. You know, if I'd had any way I could possibly done it, I would have loved to had a boatyard in St. Michaels. I couldn't, so I ended up buying a tugboat and doing that. My brother did the same thing with two different companies.

P.L.: So he went and bought a tug, and you went and bought a tug.

D.B.: Yeah.

J.B.: Are you sure that your father sold the business? He might have sold the tugs, but he actually retired. That's the reason he went out of business is that he retired.

D.B.: Well, I mean he may have still owned the corporation, but if he did, he sold just about everything that, you know, you could pick up. (Laughter.) I don't know. My brother and I, we both formed corporations when we started, and I – not that I done anything against him, but I didn't really want to go in business with him, because I would have been the junior one from the time I started until I died. (Laughter.) I'd rather started my own.

M.Z.: That makes sense.

P.L.: So you went and found yourself a tug.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: You just showed me a picture of the *Quaker* up in Philadelphia.

D.B.: Uh-huh.

P.L.: Is that where you found her?

D.B.: Yeah, it was up there.

P.L.: Now, *Quaker* was a pretty old tug by the time you bought her.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: What interested you in the *Quaker*?

D.B.: Well, it was an old boat, which was built about 1903 or something as a steamboat. It belonged to a company, which I'm not sure but I suspect that. Oh, I forget the name of the company bought them out. And they had it, and after a while they sold it, because they were getting bigger tugs and stuff, so I bought it. It was good for what I was doing.

M.Z.: What were you doing at that point? What exactly were you guys hauling?

D.B.: Well, I was and I guess my brother was – I don't know that he ever got large or not. I did eventually, but to start with, I was just towing for other people, which was fairly good. It's one disadvantage, that most of the jobs came up in the city, you know. That way, I had to keep and load up around Wilmington or someplace, or Baltimore where I could get to where the tugs came (indiscernible 14:39). But it worked out pretty good, made pretty good money.

M.Z.: Was it mostly grain or gravel, or what kind of stuff?

D.B.: Probably when I was towing for other people, it was probably more oil products, tank barges than anything else.

M.Z.: That seems to be the name of the game these days, you know?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: A lot of people that I talk to, that's what they're doing and they say, "That's where the money is right now."

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: But it used to be a little more diverse, didn't it, a bigger range of products?

D.B.: Yeah. But the thing is that oil, you know, you got to have a place for the tanks and pumps and all this, real easier to unload that and load it than it is grain and that kind of stuff. But there's quite a bit of grain still hauled by barge.

P.L.: Did you do a lot of your own captaining with the *Quaker*?

D.B.: Yeah. For the first few years, I did most of it, and started to get other people into it.

M.Z.: What kind of circuits were you making? What areas were you covering?

D.B.: Ended up mostly with fertilizer barges or barges carrying, not ready-made fertilizer, but the stuff that goes in it to mix up, carrying it from places near Baltimore or up near Richmond and places like that, some down in North Carolina, different chemicals. Then local companies buy all that, and they mix it up and sell it. That's what I did mainly.

P.L.: This was down through the Intracoastal Waterway?

D.B.: Yeah. Not too far but, oh, about two-thirds of the way to, like, Morehead City from Norfolk. There are batches. I can't think of the name of the river at the moment, but a little ways up there, there was a plant that dug some kind of stuff up out of the ground, some kind of chemical actually, which they sold to fertilizer companies.

M.Z.: Was it phosphate, maybe? Was that –

D.B.: Might have been. I'm not sure, really. There's a number of different chemicals like that are powder and that sort of thing for fertilizer. I bought a couple of barges to carry that with.

M.Z.: How many barges did you have?

D.B.: I had two of those big ones and maybe sometimes other little ones. The big ones were like 195 feet long and maybe 35 foot wide and carry, oh, probably between 1,500 and 2,000 tons of bulk fertilizer, which they'd dump in and take it out with a clamshell bucket and crane. We took a lot of that.

Our first main customer was Norfolk Fertilizer; I think is the name of it, which is over in Delaware. We took it up to Seaford on the Nanticoke River. There was a place there that docked for oil and stuff like that. It had a good bit of room and stuff, so they would let me come in there, for a price, of course, and unload it there and put it into the fertilizer company's trucks. For a while, I had my own crane there to do it.

M.Z.: Sounds like quite an operation.

D.B.: Yeah. Well, it was like about, oh, probably averaged about ten hours. Sometimes it'd be a little less and some longer, but about ten hours to unload 1,500 tons out of a barge with a crane and clamshell bucket.

P.L.: I take it this was not the sort of work that you did between nine in the morning and five in the evening.

D.B.: No. (Laughter.) No, I worked when – I'm trying to think of the name of the firm, larger company. I don't know if it was Norfolk or what.

J.B.: Pocahontas?

D.B.: Huh?

J.B.: No, it wasn't Pocahontas.

D.B.: No.

M.Z.: And how many people would be working then? Just you –

D.B.: On tugboats?

M.Z.: Yeah. You, as the captain and one mate; is that it? Or did you have other deckhands?

D.B.: Yeah. We had a captain and a mate and two deckhands. And –

M.Z.: And six on, six off, that kind of schedule?

D.B.: Yeah, it worked out pretty good, seemed like a lot of hours, but mostly, it wasn't too hard work. The deckhands, they did the cooking on their watch. And most of the time, they got to be pretty good, you know, so we ate pretty good. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: What kind of stuff did you eat? Do you remember? Do you have any memorable meals you can share with us?

D.B.: Not offhand.

J.B.: A lot of steak. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Got a lot of steak?

J.B.: I'm the one that paid the bills. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Oh, I see. Did you do the shopping too?

J.B.: No.

D.B.: No.

J.B.: They did. That was the problem. They did the shopping. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: But you had to keep the books. Oh, dear.

D.B.: Well, it didn't pay to cut back on their food, because they'd cut back on their work if they couldn't have some (laughter). Pays to take good care of them, especially me.

M.Z.: So that was part of the price of doing business.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: So steak, huh?

D.B.: Um-hm.

M.Z.: And what else? A lot of coffee?

D.B.: Yeah, quite a bit of coffee.

M.Z.: Was that a staple?

D.B.: Um-hm.

M.Z.: I imagine, to stay awake at night in the wheelhouse.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Yeah. Are you still a coffee drinker?

D.B.: Yeah.

J.B.: Oh, yes.

D.B.: I never counted how many I drank, but other people might drink fifteen or twenty cups in twenty-four hours.

M.Z.: This might seem like a silly question, but how did you make the coffee then? Was it a percolator or what? I just want to have an idea of what the scene is like there in the tug in the galley.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Can you describe that a little bit?

D.B.: Yeah. It was mostly percolators. The galley stove, it looked like – well, that kind of stove could be built either as a coal stove or with burners in it to burn oil, which ours were. That's the kind of stove it was, and kept a fire in it twenty-four hours a day.

M.Z.: So it was hot.

D.B.: Yeah, and so you could always get a hot cup of coffee whenever you wanted.

M.Z.: What was the smell like when you'd walk in that kitchen? Do you remember?

D.B.: Not really. I got used to it. I don't think it was too bad. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: How about you, Janet? Did you ever go on the boat? Do you remember?

J.B.: Oh, yeah, yeah. But I – you know, I didn't pay too much attention to it. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: I'm just picturing the coffee on the stove and the burner going. It was oil that you were using or coal? Oil, did you say?

D.B.: Actually, it burned oil but it was like a coal stove, and they had some kind of burner that was put in there and fed oil up and it burned there.

P.L.: Same oil as the engine burned?

D.B.: Yeah. Which makes it pretty convenient, and it's less trouble than having to go shovel coal all the time (laughter) all day long.

M.Z.: So coffee, steak. What else was going on in that kitchen?

D.B.: Well, that's about all that I know of. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Twenty-four/seven steak. What about breakfast? A lot of eggs and bacon, that kind of thing?

D.B.: Yeah. Yeah. We had three meals on time. Of course, if they got hungry, especially in the nighttime, a deckhand can come down there and get anything he wanted to eat. The captain or a mate wanted something, they'd have to ask the deckhand (laughter) to bring it to him, plus, of course, coffee all the time.

M.Z.: Did you have a freezer down there, or how did you keep all this food?

D.B.: Yeah, we had a freezer. I think it was like one that you'd buy for a house or something, because we did have 110 volts in this room.

M.Z.: How long would you be out at a time? Like, how long would you have to keep the food? I mean are we talking weeks at a time, or were these pretty short trips that you were making?

D.B.: We would – when we got groceries, we'd get at least a week, sometimes more, if we thought we might be making pretty long trip. Of course, some places, you know, it's – especially like going down Intracoastal Waterway, there's land all around you, but there's not very many places where you can tie up, and go to a store.

M.Z.: So you had to –

D.B.: We were going to Florida, we'd stop, try to have enough to get there when we left.

M.Z.: Wow. That's a long trip, down to Florida.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: How long does that take?

D.B.: Oh, probably six or seven days, something like that.

P.L.: Were you doing that by the Intracoastal Waterway, or were you going down in the ocean?

D.B.: Mostly in the Intracoastal Waterway. Sometimes, we'd go outside, but not too often with a tow. And depend on the weather, if there was any bad weather, we wouldn't go outside.

M.Z.: What was it like navigating that? Would it get pretty hairy, or was it pretty straightforward?

D.B.: In the Intracoastal Waterway?

M.Z.: Yeah, with a barge and everything.

D.B.: Well, it's pretty hairy quite a bit of the time. Of course, you know, with experience you get so you can do it better, but it is pretty tricky.

M.Z.: What's tricky about it?

D.B.: Well, just that – you know, it's just like a ditch, probably about, well, water in this room but maybe like seventy-five feet wide, ten or twelve feet of water, it's supposed to have. Sometimes, it didn't.

P.L.: Did you ever touch bottom?

D.B.: A few times. Not too often, but sometimes.

P.L.: Did that ever cause a serious problem for you?

D.B.: I don't think so. Not down there. I don't know if it ever did, but, you know, it could.

M.Z.: Is that Intracoastal pretty straight, or are there a lot of turns in it?

D.B.: There's a lot of turns and, of course, a lot of it was man-dug, so it may be straight, but then the coast is kind of curvy too, so it's gotta curve with the coast.

M.Z.: How was that, navigating those kind of turns? Was that a difficult thing to learn?

D.B.: Not normally. I guess if you hadn't done it for a while. You know, if I got a mate that's never been down there, I have to be with him for the first trip or two (laughter) to make sure he learned how to do it.

M.Z.: Do you remember any kind of stories about that, having to teach somebody who maybe was new at it?

D.B.: Not too many. Of course, I mean there's so many that were that way, wasn't much of a story. But even if they was, training a waterman or something, when you're going down the Intracoastal Waterway, that's different from something you hardly ever do unless you are going on something like that, and it's a little tricky to know. You gotta figure, amongst other things, where the tides gonna wash the dirt into the channel, and stuff like that. That's pretty tricky.

M.Z.: Yeah. I bet. I'm thinking about the weather, you know.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: In those days, you don't have the kind of electronics that they have now. Right?

D.B.: No, although we did have radar and stuff like that.

M.Z.: But you didn't have GPS and whatnot. Right?

D.B.: No, I –

M.Z.: I don't know. What did you have for, like, a weather channel? Did you have a good radio, you know, a channel that would keep you informed about storms and stuff like that?

D.B.: Yeah. I think a lot of it was just on regular radio, like everybody else listens to. There are on some of those marine stations that they have weather forecasts at certain times.

M.Z.: Were you able to keep pretty well informed, or were you ever taken really by surprise by anything?

D.B.: Not too much. A few times, were probably some, but most of the time you can tell what was gonna happen, not always how soon it was going to be, but you knew it was gonna happen sooner or later.

M.Z.: I guess you can read some of the signs yourself, even without the radio, right?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: What about those times when you were taken by surprise? Do you remember anything in particular?

D.B.: Not too much. If it was a light barge, if you got too big a, like a thunderstorm or something with a gale wind blowing, it might blow the barge off. Then you might just have to sit there until it gets over and get it all – light barge, that is. When they're loaded, they're pretty easy to steer, but when they're light they can blow around pretty easy.

The barges were 195 feet long and 35 foot wide. There are barges you carry dry cargo that hatch covers were high enough that we weren't much too high in the pilothouse. We could see over them, but sometimes you couldn't see for a ways in front of the barge (laughter) and that sort of thing.

P.L.: This is pushing the barges?

D.B.: Yeah. Yeah. We hardly – very rarely, if ever, towed them in the waterway there.

P.L.: I see, because of the tight maneuver. You needed to be able to maneuver these things pretty well?

D.B.: Yeah. Yeah, and amongst other things – of course, they might always go off some and go aground. But if it was a yacht passing you and something and decided to take it, shear it and might run into your yacht. Didn't pay to take chances on that.

M.Z.: I'm trying to imagine what it must have been like for you when you first started out. I mean your brother went to – what was it called – King's Point?

D.B.: King's Point. Yeah, of course they didn't know anything about running in channels like that and all. It's all about navigating in the ocean and such.

M.Z.: He had to just learn by doing, and I guess you had to really learn by doing. Right?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: What was that like when you were first starting out?

D.B.: Oh, I don't know. It was a little scary sometimes, but mostly made out all right. Of course, sometimes we got aground. Hopefully, most of the time, if you got aground, it would be maybe not mud, but dirt that's pretty stiff and all. But if there's – somebody dropped a rock or something over there and you ran over that, it might make a hole in the bottom of the barge.

M.Z.: Did you ever have any real close shaves that you can remember?

D.B.: Not that I can think of, you know, as far as running aground and stuff.

P.L.: You told me that you brought a bunch of logbooks in here, and you said, "Most of them for from the *Quaker*," but clearly, you owned more boats than the *Quaker* over time.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: So *Blue Star* was another one of those tugs that you acquired.

D.B.: Yeah, I think that's the one that sank.

P.L.: Tell us about that. I take it you were not aboard at the time?

D.B.: No. We hired a new man, which he'd been a tugboat captain for some contractor, was doing, loading and all. I took him. The boat at that time was – he just brought a barge into Seaford the day before. I took this guy over there and he got aboard it about 8:00.

The captain there, who was the man, Ronald Shorts (ph), which you'll see that his name that he's been with me all since I started. He stayed up at his watch from six to twelve, and the mate's watch would be from twelve to six. And since he just got there, you know, at six o'clock in the morning, he could stay up, watching the captain on his watch and then take his.

They went down the river there and everything seemed to be going fine. But then when they got out and they were coming – this was the Nanticoke River. Then they were coming up and went by that lighthouse where this house down here came from. What's the –

P.L.: Hooper Strait?

D.B.: Yeah. Went right by that, and then this guy had been steering most of the time. The captain was there, you know, looking after him, made sure he did right. Just as they went by that lighthouse, he decided – he went down below. I think he was going to pee over the side or something, and then all of a sudden, for some reason, the rudder went hard over and the boat turned around and keeled over so much, it filled up with water and sank. Fortunately, nobody got drowned or hurt. But it sank in just a few minutes, 'cause the engine room doors were open.

M.Z.: Oh, my God.

P.L.: Did you figure out what the problem was? Was a steering cable –

D.B.: I don't think so. I think it was just that that guy steerin'. I don't know what he did wrong. But could have been any – one thing, it had a steering wheel and also other things, that on each side we had little rudder switches. They worked the rudder, push it one way, it'd go one way, and the other way it'd go the other way.

I don't know whether he pushed that and held onto it or could have been something went wrong in the wiring or something. But anyhow, all of a sudden the rudder went hard over and runnin' light, so he turns so far so he keeled over and filled up with water through the engine room doors and sunk.

They're lucky nobody got hurt, but they all got off and were floating there. Fortunately, they just passed a boat with some people fishing a few minutes before they – that happened. They saw the tug with just the pilothouse sticking out of the water and ran over and saw them. Well, they were drifting on down, and picked them up.

M.Z.: Good Lord.

D.B.: They went ashore on the islands out there and called Janet. She went out and get them. I was up in Delaware at that time with my brother. He had a job taking ammunition to, oh, can't think of the name of the company that's – but it's one – it's a fairly big company, and it's a little bit north of the canal. You may know what it is. But what happened, for whatever reason, something to do with politics; the government wasn't giving them the ammunition, the weapons and stuff. It was giving it to a country in the north end of South America.

M.Z.: Honduras.

D.B.: Yeah, Honduras. My brother got the job of carrying all that stuff down, which he rented a barge for me to do it. He made a number of trips, carrying all that stuff down, and then that company was giving it to Honduras, not us. I'm surprised that never got out, so hope you all don't tell anybody. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Okay. We won't put that in the exhibit. (Laughter.)

D.B.: All right. Pretty bad stuff sometime, stuff that got out in the news.

P.L.: Did you end up salvaging the *Blue Star*? Did you get her back?

D.B.: Yeah. We got it up and got a salvage company, the insurance company did. Got a salvage company out of Norfolk that came up there, and did stuff to somehow pump it out, and I guess some kind of crane to pick it up enough to where they could pump it out.

So they did that and then brought it up to a shipyard in Salisbury – no, a shipyard in Cambridge. They gave me complete, you know, full amount of the contract. They paid me. I didn't see much point in taking it back, 'cause it would have been a whole lot of work getting it fixed up and everything.

P.L.: So the *Blue Star* left your fleet at that point.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: And wasn't there also the *Mustang*? I think I've heard people talk about that. Is that another one of your boats?

D.B.: Yeah. Now, I'm trying to think. Which one was that?

J.B.: That's the one that you replaced the *Blue Star* with.

D.B.: Oh, yeah. That might be a – yeah, that's it right there. That was a push biller (ph). I brought that in – used in New Orleans, but it turned out to be a real good boat for our work. And that's the kind of barges we had there, called covered hopper barges. They did it with steel hatch covers, covered up so you can carry grain and stuff without it getting wet.

M.Z.: And with those barges, could you switch between different products? I mean, could you go from hauling grains to hauling the chemicals for the fertilizers?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Or did you have to just dedicate it to kind of like one product?

D.B.: No. We could carry – of course, those barges, they were dry barges. You couldn't carry liquids in them. But you know, we could carry one kind of chemical one trip, and something else another, or sometimes gravel or stuff like that, too.

M.Z.: Who would do the cleaning out of it in between products? Was that something you all were responsible for, or did the companies handle that?

D.B.: Well, supposedly the companies handled it. Of course, our main thing we carried most of was fertilizer and stuff from different places up to Seaford, Delaware. Up there, we rented dockage at a place. I bought a crane and had a crane operator dig it out. The Norfolk Fertilizer Company was who we hauled it for.

They hired – mostly had some of their own trucks, but also most of the customer farmers had trucks. When they didn't have something else to do, they'd like to get work, so they hauled a lot of this stuff. They also would sweep it out when they got done so we could

get something out with some other stuff we had to do and stuff like that. You gotta be careful you don't put something in there that you can't get out quick.

M.Z.: Yeah. I bet. I just can't imagine cleaning a 195-foot long thing like that. (Laughter.)

D.B.: Well, you gotta have a bunch of people with brooms and stuff, so –

M.Z.: Pretty basic work, I guess.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: I recall you told me a story a few years ago, and I'd love for you to remind me about it, about losing a rudder.

D.B.: Uh-huh.

P.L.: Was that on the *Quaker*?

D.B.: We lost one on the *Quaker*. Yeah, it may have been. I forget what the story was. I think actually – I know I lost one coming up the river to Salisbury, or going down. I forget which. But there was something in the design that up above there, and would move a little bit. After a while, it would get so it would just break off.

P.L.: The rudder post broke off?

D.B.: Yeah. I think actually, well, it had – it was that time and maybe one more, I lost a rudder. Then we just had to make a new one and put it on.

M.Z.: But what happens when you lose a rudder? How does the ship behave at that point?

D.B.: Well, it goes wherever it wants to, so you got to stop it. Then you send somebody out to haul it in, send out another tugboat or whatever.

P.L.: You were aboard on this incident in the Wicomico River?

D.B.: I don't remember. I might have been. But we had, you know, several different incidents.

M.Z.: That sounds like it could be pretty hairy.

D.B.: Yeah. (Laughter.)

P.L.: Having that sort of thing happen in confined waters like Wicomico River sounds a lot different than having it happen out at sea.

D.B.: Yeah. Well, in some ways it's better, because you're there, you know. If you're out at sea, you might have to get the Coast Guard to come tow you. (Laughter.) Of course, if

you're inland like that, you can end up, when it came off and trying to stop it, might run into something, wouldn't be so good. But we never had that happen to us.

M.Z.: That was lucky.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: I talked to Mike Grosh last weekend.

D.B.: Oh, yeah.

M.Z.: He's actually my neighbor. I live out in Claiborne. He said he had worked for you for a number of years.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Sounds like he was maybe in over his head a little bit, how he describes it, when he started.

D.B.: He might have been some, but he got good. He was one of the best employees I ever had.

M.Z.: Well, that's nice. I'll tell him you said that. He works for Vane Brothers now.

D.B.: Yeah. Yeah, they – you know, it used to be a company that had a store where they sold stuff for boats and ships, including for ships, all the groceries and all, which they would help them get. When I first knew them, they had one little tanker that they used to take all that to ships, mainly, if they had a galley stove that needed special oil (laughter) and that kind of stuff.

M.Z.: Is that called bunkering when they bring oil or fuel out to ships? Is that where bunkering takes –

D.B.: It would be more so if it was the fuel for the main engines instead of something. But I guess you could call it bunkering, if you bring fuel for the galley stove.

M.Z.: That's how they started out, Vane Brothers, and now they're so big.

D.B.: Yeah. They were for, I don't know, maybe a hundred years or so, they were – I don't know – forget what you call them, but the people that sell supplies and food and stuff to ships.

M.Z.: Chandlery.

D.B.: Yeah, something like that.

M.Z.: I can never pronounce it, but something like that.

D.B.: I don't know whether they still do any that or not. They might have given that up when they got so busy with oil boats.

M.Z.: Well, what I hear is that they – that part of their business is oil. That's what they supply to the ships, not so much the other, you know, food and whatnot.

D.B.: Yeah. Well, probably gave that up.

M.Z.: It's interesting to me that somebody like Mike started out with you, and he had to just learn by doing, as did you, yourself.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Now these days, there are these big companies, like Vane or Moran or all these other companies, and there's more and more of these marine academies – seems like a lot of the younger guys, not all of them, but a lot of them are going through marine academies to get their licensing and whatnot.

D.B.: Could be, yeah.

M.Z.: But back in the day when you were involved, it seemed like – from what I hear and read, it seems like there was more kind of mom and pop type of stuff. People just learned by, there you are. You're thrown out on the boat and you got to figure it out.

D.B.: Yeah. (Laughter.) Well, you gotta know enough, 'cause you gotta take a Coast Guard examination to get a license to be a captain or mate or whatever.

M.Z.: How did you do that, the process of taking that exam? Did you just study on your own?

D.B.: Yeah, pretty much so.

M.Z.: So there's books, more or less like a textbook, that you study? And then you take the exam?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: And then you can just get a job on a boat?

D.B.: Yeah. You gotta get your license first and everything.

M.Z.: Yeah.

D.B.: Pass the exam and the physical examination and you can get it.

M.Z.: But how much of a gap is there between what you learn in the book and what you experience in real life?

D.B.: Well, that's hard to tell, because it depends on what you're doing. You know, everybody learns the same thing in the book. As far as handling tugboats and that sort of thing, you'd have to learn that, you know. Somebody came – doing – told me he just got out of King's Point or something, I would tell him, "You want to go to work for me, you had to start as a deckhand for a few months. Then you can become a mate."

M.Z.: Who were your favorite kind of deckhands or mates? Did you have a particular kind of guy that would tend to be better than another, like with a certain kind of background?

J.B.: Cook, if he could cook. (Laughter.)

D.B.: Not too much, no. Cooks –

J.B.: Cook is pretty – it's very important.

D.B.: Well, the main thing, you want to hope he's not going to be somebody that's going to get drunk every chance he gets. (Laughter.)

J.B.: No alcohol was allowed on the boats.

M.Z.: Really?

D.B.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: On your boats?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Maybe not on every boat. Right?

D.B.: Well, most people, if it's a company boat, they wouldn't allow it on there, you hope.

M.Z.: So I mean, we hear stories these days about a lot of guys from Tangier Island and Smith Island and down there are, in particular, working for Vane Brothers.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: From what I hear. I've heard that they make really good deckhands and mates, as you would imagine.

D.B.: Yeah, they probably do.

M.Z.: Did you have any guys like that that would work for you, like people who had been watermen?

D.B.: Oh, we might have had a few. I can't think offhand. Of course there was, you know, a lot of people were just working sometimes. I never had anybody, you know, from those islands came up to me, and asked if I had a job, which if they had, I might have given them one.

M.Z.: How about military? Did you have many people who had, like, a background in either the Navy or some other kind of, you know, marine service?

D.B.: A few, but not too many. I had, you know, maybe one or two who'd gone to King's Point where they teach you to get your mate's license and stuff. They had a lot to learn. You know, they knew about steering and all that. They had a lot to learn about boats and how to steer a particular boat, and that sort of thing (laughter), and look after them till they learned it.

M.Z.: This guy who I was interviewing last week, a young guy who went to the SUNY Maritime Academy in New York. He's down in the Gulf now. He worked for Vane Brothers in the Bay Area for a while, but now he's down in the Gulf.

D.B.: Oh, yeah.

M.Z.: He was telling me about one guy that he works with who – I don't know, it's been ten years or something that he's been out on these boats, and he just doesn't seem to really have a feel for it. You know, it's like it's not in his blood, exactly.

D.B.: A deckhand, I hope? (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Yeah, I think he's a deckhand, but it just doesn't seem like he's going really be able to rise, you know. Do you have a sense of that, from your experience, where there are some people who just seem to take to it very naturally and then other people, not so much?

D.B.: Yeah, to a certain extent, we did. But if someone – just like, I didn't think they wanted to be a mate, I didn't want them to work for me too long.

J.B.: Denny?

D.B.: Hmm?

J.B.: You should tell them about how they brought that big, red light ship, how you brought that – this is how you got your membership, lifetime membership in the museum. He brought this big, red lightship into the museum. He didn't charge them anything, and that's –

D.B.: Do you remember when that was here?

P.L.: The *Barnegat* Lightship?

J.B.: Yeah, uh-huh. I thought that was called *Barnegat*. Yeah.

P.L.: So you did the delivery?

D.B.: I think so.

J.B.: Yes.

D.B.: Yeah, for free.

P.L.: Now, you were bringing it from the Jersey Coast or from the Philadelphia area?

D.B.: No, I think it was from Baltimore. I'm not certain.

J.B.: Yeah. I think it was. I think it was.

D.B.: I think it was Baltimore.

P.L.: I take it the lightship wasn't making it under its own power. This was a towing job with the tug?

D.B.: Yeah. It probably could have, but it had no crew on it. It's cheaper to hire somebody to tow it than get a crew, and training them how to run the boat.

P.L.: Now, with a delivery like that, you didn't have to put any crew on the lightship?

D.B.: No.

P.L.: Just with the crew you had on the tug, you could bring that down.

D.B.: Yeah. Yeah, we had a – which we always had on tugboats, you know, like running lights to put on the different boats, so we just put them up there. Yeah.

P.L.: Now for a job like that, would you just tow in the hawser?

D.B.: Most likely, yeah.

P.L.: Not on the hip or – obviously, you can't push something like that?

D.B.: No. No, and it doesn't pay, if you're coming from Baltimore down here. It doesn't really pay to, stay made up alongside it, because the ship or tugboats can come by and make enough so to break you loose. Even if the weather's nice and calm (laughter), it can still happen.

M.Z.: When did you guys get married? How long have you been –

J.B.: 1958.

M.Z.: 1958. So you married into this whole life of tugboats.

J.B.: He had stopped tug boating for his father, and then he tried working in boatyards. He tried clamming, manosing, you know. At that time we were starting a family, and we just couldn't make it. You know, it wasn't enough money coming in. So I think it was my insistence that he went back into his father's business. (Laughter.) He just couldn't make it here, and there wasn't that much as far as boatyards were concerned either. So –

M.Z.: So that would have been in the late fifties, early sixties?

J.B.: Yeah, yeah. It was – yeah, it was, let's see, about '58. It was about 1960 that he went back into it.

M.Z.: How many children did you have?

J.B.: Three. Three girls.

M.Z.: So they were born right into this.

J.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: But by the time they were born and growing up, that's all you were doing is tugging?

J.B.: Yes. Yeah.

M.Z.: So what is that like? I mean I've heard some people say, "Oh, it's really a lifestyle and the whole family is sort of involved." I've heard other people say, "No, not really." It's just sort of a thing that the father did, and it was separate from really the life of the family. How was it for you guys?

J.B.: It was separate. We have a friend whose family was very involved. They had about four or five girls, and all of the girls worked on the tugboats.

M.Z.: Now, could this possibly be the Lamberts (ph)?

J.B.: Yes.

D.B.: Yeah.

J.B.: The girls went away to school in the winter, and then they would work on the tugboats in the summer, and they loved it. I mean they thrived. They loved it. But we girls (laughter), we didn't want any part of that.

M.Z.: Just not your cup of tea?

J.B.: Just not what we wanted to do. We just made out, you know, by ourselves until he came home.

M.Z.: How was that, dealing with the kind of distance and absence? Was that a challenge for you guys?

J.B.: Yes, it was. It wasn't a lifestyle I would have chosen, I'll put it that way because I was home with the kids all the time. I didn't work at that time. I did teach some, but when the kids were in school, there was fifteen years there where I didn't teach. When they got out of school, that's when I would have to start teaching, and I wanted to be there for them. So I ran the business from the house and took care of things and sent out bills and, you know, did everything.

M.Z.: When you say you ran the business, you mostly mean the kind of bookkeeping, accounting?

J.B.: Yeah, and answered the telephone and made arrangements.

M.Z.: So were you kind of like booking gigs? I don't know what you call it (laughter), but you know, making the business arrangements?

J.B.: Yes. I would talk over with Denny, you know, when – if somebody called in and wanted something moved, you know. I would always ask him about it first, because, I was just the coordinator. He was the head of the business.

P.L.: You had to decide whether or not you wanted that job?

J.B.: Yes.

D.B.: Yeah. (Laughter.)

J.B.: Yeah. And then I would call a company back.

M.Z.: Well, it sounds like you had a pretty important role, though.

J.B.: Yeah. It was. It meant that I had to be home all the time, and that was all right because, you know, I had to take care of the girls anyway.

P.L.: What kind of jobs would you decline? Did you decline jobs because of where they were or what the cargo was?

D.B.: Sometimes. Not too much, but for a good part of the year, you know, we were busy with our own barges, and we couldn't do much outside towing.

P.L.: So it might have just been a question of scheduling.

D.B.: Yeah.

P.L.: I see.

J.B.: Yeah. Between trips for fertilizer and grain and gravel and whatever he was hauling in his own barges, we would work for this company up in New York called Hughes Brothers. What they did was they had barges that they rented out to various companies, so he had to go to New York, and move those barges wherever they said to move them. If the time allowed, you know, between trips, that's what he would do. He got quite a bit of work from Hughes Brothers.

M.Z.: So again, in these days, the communication had to have been much more challenging than it is now when everybody now has cell phones and emailing.

J.B.: Oh, yeah. It was all by telephone, land phone.

M.Z.: But they didn't have a phone on the boat, did they?

J.B.: No –

D.B.: Yeah, a –

M.Z.: Radio?

D.B.: Yeah. The people –

P.L.: Did you use the marine operator?

D.B.: Yeah. That's what I was gonna say. They had that to – you know, you can – got a normal radio that's got their channels and stuff on it, so you can call them and place a call, just like you could from a yacht or something or whatever.

P.L.: I don't know that that exists anymore.

D.B.: It doesn't? It's been a while since I've been on it. (Laughter.)

P.L.: Explain how that worked.

D.B.: Well, there's certain channels, and you turn your radio until you're on that channel. And of course you'd have to listen, because if somebody else was going to call or something,

you'd have to wait until they got over it. Then you could call in and tell them where you want to call, and they'd arrange it.

P.L.: So you'd be hailing, for example, the Baltimore marine operator, and they had a way of patching you directly into a phone line then?

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Is that how you would stay in touch with your family or –

D.B.: Yeah, pretty much.

P.L.: Now, if this was over a marine radio, that means that everybody on that frequency was listening to your phone call, doesn't it?

D.B.: Yeah, that's true.

P.L.: Well, were your phone conversations a little different over the marine radio than they would have been over a private phone line?

D.B.: Probably somewhat so. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Janet, I sense that you have a story to tell.

J.B.: Well, he really gave me the devil one time, because it was in the middle of the night. He was calling me and he was telling me something. You know, it was not unusual to get a call in the middle of the night. I was horny that night. I said some things that I shouldn't have. (Laughter.) He said, "Don't say that. Everybody in the world sees it." I said, "I don't care." (Laughter.)

D.B.: It seemed a little bit stupid to me. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Well, absence makes the heart grow fonder, they say.

J.B.: Yes (laughter). That night it did, anyway.

M.Z.: That's funny. Well, what about things you would hear from other people? Did you hear some other interesting conversations that other people –

D.B.: Well, sometimes. I don't know if any of them were quite as up as she was. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: You must have had a reputation (laughter). That's funny. I'm going to pause this for a second.

[End of Part 1. Begin Part 2:]

P.L.: – I guess, didn't you?

D.B.: Yeah, for close to twenty years, actually, never won a race in twenty years.

M.Z.: I screwed up and it wasn't actually recording, so if you want to repeat something, I'm sorry.

P.L.: You had the log canoe, *Daisy Belford* (ph). For twenty years, you were racing her.

D.B.: Yeah, about that.

P.L.: Then was it just that your girls were getting to a certain age that you decided to get out of that?

D.B.: Yeah, and I sold it, which sometimes I was sad, but I did. Got pretty good money for it, 'cause had a racing rig, plus working.

P.L.: Did you ever get your daughters out on these boats?

D.B.: Some. Not too much, but some they did, my wife.

M.Z.: So they didn't quite have the itch for this sort of stuff that you did, it sounds like.

D.B.: Nah.

M.Z.: Did that disappoint you at all?

D.B.: Not too much. You know, girls do what girls do. (Laughter.) But that log canoe, I never did have enough money to buy a set of sails for it, but actually ended up – John North gave me an old set of sails off his big one there. What's the name of that?

P.L.: The *Island Blossom*, or the *J.D.*?

D.B.: *Island Blossom*, maybe.

P.L.: The *Blossom*, okay.

D.B.: Yeah. Then later on – can't think of the name of that. But anyhow, he had a real nice set of racing sails. They went and bought new ones of synthetic material and all, and he gave me the old ones. With those, the boat would sail pretty good, but I never managed to win a race. Maybe part of it was my fault. (Laughter.)

P.L.: These were cotton sails that you were getting secondhand?

D.B.: Yeah, yeah. I never got any synthetic ones secondhand. They were that Egyptian cotton.

P.L.: Good sails when they were new.

D.B.: Yeah, and they were good sails when I had them, but I'm not sure why it didn't do better. It was – know that they worked but it never raced that I know before I got it. It seemed to have a fairly well designed hull. It also was a problem once you get this mast up, if you don't get them down right after a race. I had no way to get them down. A lot of times when I would have liked to gone sailing with the work and rig, I couldn't do it. But sometimes I did, and I enjoyed that as much or more as racing.

P.L.: Just sailing alone or with a small crew?

D.B.: Yeah, I could sail it by myself.

P.L.: You could sail it by yourself.

D.B.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: You could? Wow.

D.B.: Yeah. Of course, sometimes – I mean, you can just sail it with the foresail. I guess the way they rig them up, they planned on that when they were making it for workboats, you know. Put the jib and mainsail down and sail under the foresail and that worked. It was a nice boat.

M.Z.: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add before we close up shop here?

D.B.: Trying to think. I don't know. Is there anything else you want to know from me or anything? Do you want these books? You don't need to keep them if you don't want to.

P.L.: We would love to –

M.Z.: Take a look at these, yeah.

D.B.: You can keep them.

M.Z.: And maybe what we can do is, you know, we can each take a listen to this tape and, as we go along and start developing the whole script, basically for the exhibit, if there's things that we think of, like, "Oh, darn, why didn't we ask him that?" If you don't mind, maybe we can give you a call back or whatever.

D.B.: Yeah. I'll be glad to come on down most any time.

M.Z.: Also for you, if you think of things, you know, or if Janet thinks of something like, "Oh, I should have told them that story," please, you know, give us a call or whatever.

D.B.: Okay.

M.Z.: And I think I screwed up before and didn't turn the recorder back on early enough. But, you know, the question that I was asking you before, if you think about that and if anything occurs to you about, what are the kind of most important points for us to emphasize in the exhibit, we'd love to hear any thoughts you might have.

D.B.: Okay.

M.Z.: Kind of the chronology of the business and, like, the role that it has played in Chesapeake history, but also kind of culture and society.

D.B.: Well, maybe I'll see if I can think up something like that and write for you.

M.Z.: Sure.

D.B.: I won't absolutely guarantee you I'll do it, but I'll do it. I don't guarantee you'll like it when you get it. (Laughter.) You can use it or use some of it.

M.Z.: This is just one little thing that's come up in some of the research that we've done is Pete and another woman who's working on this, Lindsley – you might know her, Lindsley Rice (ph). They've been talking about how interesting it is that tugs seem to have a great appeal in just culture, popular culture. There's kids' books and cartoons and whatnot about tugs.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: We've just sort of been talking amongst ourselves, like, why is that? What is this thing that makes people think they're cute? I mean, I think from your perspective, cute probably is not the word that you would use to describe a tug.

D.B.: No. Well, the fact that, you know, that there's a lot of small businesses with tugs and different – there's more different things going on, then it would be interesting to kids or something. So in that respect, it might be more interesting. Do you want any of these books?

P.L.: We'd love to have these, absolutely.

D.B.: Well, you can have them as long as you want.

P.L.: Okay.

D.B.: You can keep them forever, probably, if you want to. I don't think I need them.

P.L.: All right.

D.B.: Hopefully, by now, nobody's going to sue me for anything. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Statute of limitations.

D.B.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Well, thank you so much for coming in. We really appreciate your time.

D.B.: Okay. Well, I appreciate you all listening to me.

M.Z.: It's our pleasure.

P.L.: Yeah, right. Thank you, Denny.

M.Z.: Thanks.

D.B.: Okay.

[End of interview.]