

Oral History Interview

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

“The Culture of Tugs and Tugs in Culture”

Interviewee: Robert "Duty" Matthews (R.M.)
DOB 10/18/1934
Karen Matthews (K.M.)
Unidentified Male (U/M)

Interviewer: Michelle Zacks (M.Z.)

Date: February 22, 2012

Location: Matthews' residence: Churchton, Maryland

Comments: Robert “Duty” Matthews is the son of the late Howard Matthews (b. 1910, d. 1977) and Bernice Gross Matthews (b. 1911, d. 1990). Both of his parents come from a long line of watermen in Churchton. In 1947 or 1948, while out crabbing, Howard Matthews was approached by one of the brothers from Smith Brothers, a marine construction company in Galesville. A couple of years after started to work for them, Howard became the Captain of the Smith tug *Argo*.

Robert “Duty” Matthews (the interviewee), left school after the seventh grade, at age 13 (1947). He was strongly drawn to work on the water, and did so his entire life. He and his brothers crabbed during the summer months and oystered in the winter, to help their mother out. At age 17 (1951), he began working with his father off and on aboard the *Argo*.

1958-1960: Military service, Ft. Sill, Oklahoma

1960: Worked with Smith Bros., off and on; also oystered with his maternal great-uncle, Earl Gross

1962: Bought his own boat. Oystered in the winter, worked for Smith in the spring.

Eventually, he began working on the water 12 months a year (oystering and clamming; when clams were shut down, crab pots).

ca. 2001: Essentially stopped working on the water

Documentation:

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M.Z.: Today is February 22, 2012. This is Michelle Zacks for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum and this is an interview for the upcoming tugs exhibit at the museum. I'm in Shady Side, Maryland. Is that right? This community is called Shady Side?

R.M.: This is Churchton.

M.Z.: Oh, Churchton.

R.M.: If you live on that side the road, your mailing address is Shady Side; but if you live on this side the road, your mailing address is Churchton. So our mailing address is Churchton, Maryland.

M.Z.: Right, you had told me that. I had your address. I saw the sign for Shady Side, so I was thinking Shady Side.

R.M.: Yeah, Shady Side, I don't know where Shady Side begin and where Churchton begin, I don't know. My wife was originally from Churchton and I was born in Churchton.

M.Z.: Okay, so let me just back up a minute. So I am in the home of Mr. Robert Matthews, and everybody knows you as "Duty" is what I heard.

R.M.: Yes, that is right. I don't know how I got that name.

M.Z.: You don't know?

R.M.: Not really, I don't really know.

M.Z.: Did it start when you were a kid?

R.M.: Well yeah, when I was a kid, yeah. In fact, all the boys had nicknames, but we had two sisters – they didn't have a nickname.

M.Z.: Oh, really?

R.M.: No, no nickname.

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

R.M.: Two.

M.Z.: And all three of you, did you all work on the water?

R.M.: All of us worked on the water at times. I was the one that made a career of it.

M.Z.: What year were you born?

R.M.: 1934.

M.Z.: And you were born here in Churchton?

R.M.: I was born right up the road here about a half a mile. And before I was born, I was living over here in South Creek.

M.Z.: Before you were born?

R.M.: Yeah, that's right, with my mother and father, that's where they was living at.

M.Z.: Okay. So your family goes back in this area for a while?

R.M.: Yeah, all their life, yeah.

M.Z.: I mean, like the generations.

R.M.: For generations, yeah. For generations, yeah.

M.Z.: Like your father and mother's family, they were from here.

R.M.: Yes, they was all from this area.

M.Z.: Very interesting. Is Churchton pretty much an African American community, or is it mixed?

R.M.: No. It's kinda mixed but like years ago, it was a lot of us here. I mean, you know, a lot of watermen that was here. In fact all the people in this community was watermen.

M.Z.: Black and white, or mostly black?

R.M.: It was both. Both was watermen, black and white, because that was the only thing to really do around here. You know, if you didn't want to work on the water, you had to leave out of this community. Yeah, you had to leave, you couldn't make it here. But my father, he worked on the water but how my father got with Smith was he was down on the river crabbing one day and one of the Smiths saw him and he thought it was somebody else. He thought it was Harrison, and he was hollering, "Come here, Harrison."

M.Z.: Harrison, was that the last name or the first name?

R.M.: No, that was another man named Harrison. And my father thought he was saying, "Come here, Howard." So he went over there and he said, "Oh, I thought you was Harrison, but

I need somebody to fire the boiler on this rig.” And so my father went to work with Smith that same day.

M.Z.: No kidding? So your father was a crabber.

R.M.: My father was a waterman, yeah. My father did a lot of things, yeah.

M.Z.: Now your father's name was Howard.

R.M.: Howard Matthews.

M.Z.: And did he have a nickname, too?

R.M.: No, no nickname.

M.Z.: No nickname. That was your generation, huh?

R.M.: No nicknames and no middle name.

M.Z.: Oh, okay. Do you know about what year that was that the Smith Brother guy approached him?

R.M.: I'm a say about '47 or '48. I was born in '34.

M.Z.: So when you were born, your father was still working on the water?

R.M.: He's still working the water, yeah.

M.Z.: Did he crab in the spring, and then oyster in the winter?

R.M.: He did everything. Yeah, he did everything on the water.

M.Z.: Can you tell me a little bit about that as far as you remember? I guess you were pretty young.

R.M.: Yeah, all the men around here oystered on the water and my father was one of them. But every spring after oyster season was over; all the men around here left and went to New Jersey to work on the dredge boats up there.

M.Z.: Oh, no kidding?

R.M.: Yeah, in fact, I went too. You'd work up there for nine weeks. It was no work when the men came back home, they worked on their oyster boats until oyster season.

M.Z.: What about crabs?

R.M.: At that time, crabs wasn't so popular like they is now. You could crab, but you couldn't really sell them. Nobody ate a lot of crabs; nobody sat around and ate steamed crabs and everything. So you caught a few crabs, but not that many.

M.Z.: Are we talking now like, the forties or what kind of time period?

R.M.: Like the forties, yeah. I started crabbing when I was thirteen, so I don't know. I was born in '34 so that's when I started working on the water.

M.Z.: Let's stick with your dad for a little while. So when he was oystering, was he a tonger?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, he was a tonger; he had his own boat.

M.Z.: Was that the main thing that he would do?

R.M.: That was the main thing to do, yeah, that was the main thing to do.

M.Z.: What about seed oysters, moving seed oyster around? Was that something he was involved with?

R.M.: No, nobody moved seed oysters in Anne Arundel County. My father, in the wintertime, he took out ducking parties.

M.Z.: Oh, did he?

R.M.: Yeah, his uncle had a blind down here on Bay Shore and he used to take people out duck hunting. That's what he did.

M.Z.: Was that well before you were born, or like when you were growing up?

R.M.: No, I was born, I was living down there. We was living down in Shady Side, yeah. Of course I was born, yeah.

M.Z.: So who was it that had the duck blind, did you say that was your uncle?

R.M.: Yeah, Uncle Jim Crowner.

M.Z.: And he had a blind?

R.M.: He had a blind.

M.Z.: Was that typical or unusual for an African American man to have a blind?

R.M.: Yes, he was the only one that had one, so it was typical.

M.Z.: It was typical? It was unusual.

R.M.: Unusual, yeah.

M.Z.: Because that's property, right?

R.M.: He had a blind plus also he had – well they owned almost all of the property going down Columbia Beach towards Gun Beach (ph), the Crowners.

M.Z.: Columbia Beach?

R.M.: Going towards Columbia Beach, yeah. He owned a lot of property down there.

M.Z.: How did he come to own that property, do you know?

R.M.: I don't really know. But he always knew how to make money.

M.Z.: But that was unusual, right? Or am I right?

R.M.: Yes, it was. Yeah, it was unusual. Sure it was unusual. It wasn't unusual for people around here to work on the water, but it was unusual for him because he had a pound net he fished.

M.Z.: This is Uncle Jim?

R.M.: Yeah. Yeah, he was my father's uncle, yeah.

M.Z.: So he's your great uncle.

R.M.: Yeah.

M.Z.: So he owned a lot of property.

R.M.: Yeah, he owned a lot of property, big house.

M.Z.: Going down towards which beach did you say?

R.M.: Columbia Beach. Yeah, lot of property. He had a lot of property. But he had a polly parrot.

M.Z.: He had a what?

R.M.: He had a polly parrot, you know, that was amazing. I mean a polly parrot would – polly parrot. And he would talk to you. He would tell him, "Shut up, Polly," and then Polly said, "Shut up, Polly, shut up, Polly." I was a little boy, and we loved to hear that polly parrot talk. Didn't many people have no polly parrots. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: I don't understand what you're saying, he had a what?

U/M.: He had a parrot.

R.M.: A parrot, a parrot, yeah we call him a polly parrot. I don't know why we did, but he had a parrot, yeah he had a parrot. That's what we call him, polly parrot, that's what we call him. And now why we call him polly parrot, I don't know.

M.Z.: He would talk to you?

R.M.: Yeah, he would talk to you. I don't know where he got it from.

M.Z.: What did he say, do you remember?

R.M.: "Shut up, Polly, shut up," and Uncle Jim would talk back to him, he wouldn't talk to nobody but my uncle. He wouldn't talk to nobody but him. And then the only way he would get him to shut up sometime, he would just cover him up and it would look like nighttime, then he would shut up.

M.Z.: I wonder where he got that parrot.

R.M.: I don't know, because they was expensive.

M.Z.: Yeah.

R.M.: And they expensive now.

M.Z.: Do you think he got it in his travels, like on the water, you know?

R.M.: I don't know. I don't know where he got it, but I know he had it. Yep, that was the first time I ever seen a bird that talked.

M.Z.: Uncle Jim, he had a pound net, right?

R.M.: He had a pound net.

M.Z.: What kind of fish would he get in the pound net?

R.M.: Rock, perch, he caught all kinds of fish. At that time it was a lot of fish, you know, it was different fishes that came at different times. Like this time of the year it would be herring, and rock and perch.

M.Z.: And that's wintertime moving into the spring?

R.M.: Wintertime. And then soon as it got a little bit warmer, it would be spot and croakers and trout, butterfish (phonetic). It would be all kinds of fish.

M.Z.: And what were the markets for those fish?

R.M.: Well he sold most of his out of his car. He went from door to door selling his fish, that's how he did, yeah.

M.Z.: Was that pretty common at that time?

R.M.: It was pretty common for him.

M.Z.: But I mean did other people do that?

R.M.: No, nobody else did that, no.

M.Z.: And who would buy it, just local people right around here?

R.M.: Local people bought fish if they didn't fish, yeah.

M.Z.: And was it mostly African Americans who would buy it or mixed, whoever?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, yes, yeah. Most white people don't buy fish unless they clean. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: So it would be whole fish.

R.M.: He did buy the whole fish, yeah.

M.Z.: And he'd go door to door, or would he set up in one place?

R.M.: He'd go door to door. He had a old Dodge car that stood about yea tall.

M.Z.: And people would kind of know when he would be coming, like he would have a routine, sort of.

R.M.: They'd know when he's coming around, yeah, he'd go around, "Fresh fish," and you know, and they'd come out and buy the fish. Yeah.

M.Z.: I lived in Florida for about fifteen years, and I'm actually working on my dissertation right now, and I did a lot of oral history work with commercial fishing people down there who would catch a fish called mullet.

R.M.: Yeah, mullet, I don't like mullet for some reason. There's mullet up here.

M.Z.: Well, you have different mullet here than what – I'm it's the same species, but the habitat and everything is different.

R.M.: Yeah, they look the same. I seen them on TV, yeah.

M.Z.: But I mean their lifestyle, the conditions are different so they taste different.

R.M.: My father used to catch mullet.

M.Z.: Oh, your father did?

R.M.: Yeah, he used to catch mullet.

M.Z.: Where?

R.M.: He got a pound net, he had a little gillnet.

M.Z.: But where, I mean like where in the bay?

R.M.: Right down here on the water, we used to in the summertime.

M.Z.: I didn't think they came up.

R.M.: Oh, yeah. In the spring every year, mullet came. We caught mullet, yeah.

M.Z.: And you didn't like them?

R.M.: I don't like mullet.

M.Z.: Why don't you like them?

R.M.: I just, they got a different – a mullet and a German carp.

M.Z.: German carp?

R.M.: Carp, yeah, well some people call them carp; we call them German carps because they came here from Germany. Ever since I been a little boy, we called them German carp. They got a different taste and I never liked them. He like them.

M.Z.: You do?

R.M.: He like any kind of fish, but I didn't like carp and I didn't like mullet.

M.Z.: Was there a kind of taste, can you describe what you didn't like?

R.M.: It just, all it is—

M.Z.: I'm just curious because I've done a lot of research on them.

R.M.: It's not good like a perch and croakers and rock and fish like that. They didn't taste that good, not to me. Had a funny taste.

M.Z.: Well, part of it might be what you grow up with and you're used to.

R.M.: That could be it. That could be it. But we ate well about, you know like when my father caught herring, that's what you ate. You ate whatever my father brought to you. You didn't say, "I don't want this," and, "I don't want that." If he brought you herring, you ate herring, you know. And you said, "We gonna grow scared of eating so many fish." And he said, "Well, you eat the fish before they eat you," and that would be it. And he wouldn't say no more. My father, he was a tough man. I mean, you know he wasn't mean to us.

M.Z.: He was strict.

R.M.: When he wrinkled his lips up, and he loved my mother. Oh, Lord, he loved my mother, yep.

M.Z.: How did they meet, he and your mother?

R.M.: I don't know. They got married when they was like fourteen and fifteen.

M.Z.: Oh, yeah?

R.M.: Yes.

M.Z.: So maybe they met in school or whatever, in the neighborhood.

R.M.: No, they didn't meet in school, because there wasn't that much schooling, not at that time, no. My mother got a couple years in high school, but my father just went to – but my father's mother was like a teacher.

M.Z.: Your father's mother?

R.M.: Oh yeah, she was very intelligent.

M.Z.: But your dad didn't stay in school?

R.M.: No.

M.Z.: He had to go work?

R.M.: Well, that's what he wanted to do. That was like me. I didn't have to get out of school, but I wanted to get out of that building. Like my brothers and sisters, all them went to school, but it was me that wanted to go work on the water.

M.Z.: 'Cause it was in your blood.

R.M.: I just didn't like being inside. And when it got warm, I look out the window all day long because I didn't want to be in that building, you know, I didn't.

M.Z.: What about your father's father? Your father's uncle had the pound net and the duck blind.

R.M.: Well my father's father, he lived down Annapolis. He didn't really do it. He oystered and he worked in the seafood market in Annapolis, my father's father. No, he didn't really do a lot.

M.Z.: How did your great uncle Jim get into doing what he was doing?

R.M.: I think his people before him. You know the Crowners had lots of property. I don't know how they got into it, but I mean, you know, uncle Jim made a lot. Uncle Jim was making like a hundred dollars a day back in the thirties.

M.Z.: That's a lot.

R.M.: Oh, good Lord, that's a lot of money now. And at that time, yeah, that's the kind of money he was making. He was making big money, yeah.

M.Z.: And your father's father, that's your grandfather.

R.M.: Yeah, Walter Matthews, that was his name.

M.Z.: He was from here?

R.M.: Oh, yeah. Yes, he was from here, but he moved to Annapolis. Yeah.

M.Z.: And you said he was oystering? He was actually harvesting oysters?

R.M.: Yeah, he harvested oysters but mostly he worked in the market that's downtown Annapolis, that's where he worked at.

M.Z.: At a seafood –

R.M.: Seafood market, yeah.

M.Z.: Was he selling stuff retail, or shucking?

R.M.: No, he just worked for somebody else.

M.Z.: Processing the fish?

R.M.: He would clean fish and do stuff like that, that's what he did.

M.Z.: But for a while, he was actually tonging.

R.M.: Oh, yeah. Everybody around here was. If you didn't tong around here, you didn't stay here. There wasn't nothin' else to do. And no tobacco around here, this land won't produce tobacco; you gotta get up the road farther. All that people raised around here was tomatoes; no tobacco.

M.Z.: So the farming just wasn't a big thing.

R.M.: Well, it was a few things. Some of the Hollands had a lot of property and raised a lot of tomatoes.

M.Z.: Who was that?

R.M.: The Holland family. They're raising a lot of tomatoes and stuff like that.

M.Z.: Was that a black family?

R.M.: Yeah, definitely. They had like sixty-some acres of land. Now I don't know how they got it but they had lots of property, lots of property, yeah.

M.Z.: So your dad, he kind of got started with his father or with his uncle?

R.M.: He started with his father, you know. He started really with his grandfather. He really started with his grandfather working on the water.

M.Z.: So that's your great-grandfather.

R.M.: Great-grandfather, yeah. I can't think of his name. That's who he started with.

M.Z.: And what was he doing, oystering?

R.M.: He was oystering, yeah.

M.Z.: How did that work? Did they have their own boat?

R.M.: Oh, yeah. My father had his own boat, yeah.

M.Z.: And your great-grandfather?

R.M.: Yeah, they had their own boats. All the people around here had their own boats, everybody.

M.Z.: And were these pretty small boats?

R.M.: Well at that time there was regular size boats; there wasn't boats like that one there, like that is my boat. But there wasn't boats like that because you didn't need a boat that big.

M.Z.: For tonging.

R.M.: Not for tonging, no. They had boats that would carry like a 125 bushel of oysters. That's the kind of boats they had. Yeah.

M.Z.: So it's like one man, one pair of tongs, one boat.

R.M.: No, most time it was two men and probably a culler, somebody that cull the oysters.

M.Z.: Two men plus a culler?

R.M.: Yeah, two men plus a culler. Sometime one man plus the culler, it depended on how good a tonger you was. Like I always tell him, I never had my boat so I couldn't work it by myself because I didn't want to depend on anyone. I didn't want to go down to my boat and have to stand there and wait for someone to come. So if you didn't come, the boat still went. (Laughter.) That was the way I worked.

M.Z.: So your father started with his grandfather, and your father was pretty young when he got started?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, he was young. Sure. He got married when he was young, so he had to start. (Laughter.) You get married when you're fifteen, you start doing something.

M.Z.: Did they set up their own household, or were they still living with their parents or something?

R.M.: No, when he first got married – when I was born, he was living in that little house, that little house is still back over here. That's where my mother was living. And then finally in '40, they bought a house in Shady Side. They bought a house, and my father bought a house and a boat.

M.Z.: So could you make a pretty good living tonging at that point?

R.M.: Yeah, indeed you could, yeah, sure you could, yeah. Sometime oysters brought a dollar a bushel; sometimes twenty-five cent, but they would catch a hundred bushels.

M.Z.: Sometimes a bushel of oysters would be twenty-five cents?

R.M.: Twenty-five cents, yeah. Sometimes fifty cents, but most the time, they tried to get them up to a dollar, yeah. That's what it was.

M.Z.: That was in the forties.

R.M.: In the forties, yeah. The year they had the Second World War, my father was making like \$30 a day. The year when the Second World War was going on, there was a lot of oysters. And they was getting like thirty dollars a day and that was a lot of money, a lot of money.

M.Z.: So your father didn't serve in the military.

R.M.: My father was in the Navy. They draft my father with five children.

M.Z.: So he had to go overseas?

R.M.: No, he didn't go overseas, but he left us and went in the service, my mother and five of us. And my father had a boat, and we had to keep that boat floating while he was gone and we did it; we wasn't more than little small boys. We kept that boat going until he got back home.

M.Z.: Did you actually work it?

R.M.: No, we didn't work it; we just kept the water out of it and stopped it from sinking.

M.Z.: How long was he in the service?

R.M.: About ten months. Because the war ended, and he got out.

M.Z.: Was he able to send some money home?

R.M.: Well at that time, each child got so much money, and the wife got so much money.

M.Z.: So that kind of kept you guys.

R.M.: That kept us going. My mother was a smart woman when it come to handling the money. She knew how to handle money. Plus she was working, too.

M.Z.: Was she?

R.M.: Oh, yeah.

M.Z.: What kind of work did she do?

R.M.: Housework.

M.Z.: For other people.

R.M.: For other people, yeah. My mother, she –

M.Z.: With five kids, too, she must have been a hard-working woman.

R.M.: She was a hard-working woman, yeah. My mother was a tough little woman. Yeah.

M.Z.: Where did they sell the oysters?

R.M.: When I was a boy, it was like Leatherbury's Oyster House and Woodfield's .
Leatherbury, that oyster house still down here. It's not open, but it's still there.

M.Z.: Where is that?

R.M.: In Shady Side. And Woodfield's, that's not there anymore, but Woodfield's was the largest oyster people in, I would say the United States. And then **Bennett**, over at Rhode River. It was a lot of people that bought oysters. Then there would be power boats that came from other places, you know, that came here and bought oysters.

M.Z.: So for these places that were local, like Leatherbury, Woodfield's and Bennett –

R.M.: Yeah and **Gruster Henrich** (20:58). It was a lot of oyster houses.

M.Z.: And would your father and grandfather and whoever, would they deliver it there?

R.M.: Yeah, they would deliver them the oyster houses, yeah.

M.Z.: And then other like buy boats would also come.

R.M.: Yeah, buy boats would also be out there buying.

M.Z.: So oystering, everybody's oystering. And when you started, you were thirteen you said?

R.M.: Thirteen, yeah.

M.Z.: And you started oystering?

R.M.: Yes.

M.Z.: So that would have been about what year? You were born in '34.

R.M.: Thirty-four.

M.Z.: So that's around '47?

R.M.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: And at that point, crabs weren't still really –

R.M.: Me and my brothers crabbed. We made our first – me and my brothers crabbed, yeah.

M.Z.: But just kind of on the side?

R.M.: We sold them to Leatherbury's Oyster House. We'd catch maybe like a bushel a day. The crabs only brought three dollars a bushel. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: And you sold them to Leatherbury's?

R.M.: Yes.

M.Z.: So that was kind of just a little extra?

R.M.: Well during the summer, help our mother out. Yeah, that was a whole lot of extra. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: How many bushels would you get a day?

R.M.: One, one and a half.

M.Z.: How did you catch them?

R.M.: The trotline. It wasn't any crab pots, they ain't even made crab pots, not then, no. No crab pots.

M.Z.: But mostly when you started out, when you were thirteen, you were mostly oystering?

R.M.: Yes. Well I had stopped school and I was oystering, and that's what I doing.

M.Z.: Were you just working for your dad or for your uncle?

R.M.: We had a little boat that we used to crab in. It was my father's boat. He had a little rowboat. It was a nice boat.

M.Z.: And you worked with him?

R.M.: No, at that time he had went to work with Smith.

M.Z.: Okay, yeah, that's what I was looking for. So in about 1947, you said?

R.M.: Yeah, he been working with Smith. Yeah.

M.Z.: But you said your father was out crabbing when the Smiths approached him.

R.M.: He was.

M.Z.: So crabbing was starting to kind of take off, or it was still just pretty low level?

R.M.: It was still pretty low. That's why he went working with them because it was more secure. You know, it was a job and he got so much a week. Not that they paid a lot, but that's the way it was. He went with them and he stayed with them; he never really went back on the water anymore, no.

M.Z.: And what did they ask him to do?

R.M.: Fire the boiler. Lot of their rigs – I did it when I was with them – all the rigs they had, the equipment they run off of steam. They wasn't running off of gas, they was running off of steam. So they had to have a boiler that run their rigs.

K.M.: Like in the movie *Titanic*?

M.Z.: Yeah.

K.M.: When they told them to fire up the boiler, and that's why the boat – 'cause they started firing it too much. So that's what firing the boiler is.

M.Z.: Yeah, okay. And so that was coal?

R.M.: Coal fired, yeah.

M.Z.: So that must have been hard work.

R.M.: I didn't mind it for some reason. It was hot. I fired the boiler for some men. It was hard, but you know, I don't know, if you learned how to control your fire, you didn't have to just stand there all the time and throw coal, you could just kinda let the fire go alone, yeah.

M.Z.: So you get the hang of it.

R.M.: You get the hang of it, yeah. It was hot. And that's what my father did. Smith had a lot of rigs and equipment that was on the water, and they moved it with their tugboat.

M.Z.: So when he's firing the boiler for these rigs, exactly what rigs are we talking about?

R.M.: Smith had a dory scow. They called it a dory scow, a little dory scow, that's what they had at the time. And then after my father started with them, they had some equipment they had to move to Washington, up the Potomac.

M.Z.: For a construction project?

R.M.: For a construction project. And he went up there with one of the brothers, Cawood, on the *Argo*, that was a tugboat.

M.Z.: What was it called?

R.M.: *Argo*. And he went up there with them and took that rig up there with Cawood. And after they got in Washington, they got ready to come back home and Cawood say, "Okay she's all yours."

M.Z.: Who said that?

R.M.: Cawood, Cawood Smith. He was one of the brothers. He told my father, "Okay," he said, "take her back home; she all yours." And that's when my father started out as the captain on that tugboat.

M.Z.: And he had never been behind the wheel on a boat like that before.

R.M.: No, he had never done any towing or anything like that up in the Potomac and places like that.

M.Z.: But he knew how to handle a boat.

R.M.: He knew how to handle a boat. And for some reason or other, I don't know if he was gifted, but he knew how to go everywhere. I mean anywhere they sent him, he could go, you know, he could go.

M.Z.: So from that point on, he became the captain of the *Argo*.

R.M.: Became the captain of the *Argo*. And that's what he did.

M.Z.: So what kind of work was he doing then?

R.M.: Just towing their rigs. Whenever they'd finish a job and they had to move that piece of equipment somewhere, they would tell him and he would go there and get it and take it wherever they wanted it. He went to Chincoteague, Virginia. He took one of the rigs down there.

One night he told me – I was like seventeen – and he said, "I want you to be home tonight 12:00, we going towing." And I was young; I snuck into bed about quarter to twelve, and 12:00, he called me. We got up and we went to Galesville, and it was warm and foggy, I'll never forget it. And he went down there, and he started that boat up and we hooked onto, they had a scow called it a **Linem Up** (27:46), that's what they called it. That was the name of the crane that was on it.

We started out, and it was foggy and you couldn't see nothing. I don't know how he knew where he was going, but we went on out and when we got to Thomas Point Lighthouse it was almost daybreak. That was a slow project. All of the sudden the wind came up northwest. I don't know why it did it then, you know. It blew real hard and fog

cleared up, it got real cold and it was so rough on that boat. We had stocked food to cook, but he couldn't cook it because it was so rough. So he told me to steer.

M.Z.: Was it just the two of you?

R.M.: Just the two of us, yeah. He went down and made coffee and he had to hold the cup out on the stove because it was so rough. After he made the coffee and we drank coffee and we went on to, there's a place in the bay called Worthington Creek. It's way up on the other side of the Bay Bridge. And we took that scow up there and we got there from 12:00 at night to, it was 2:00 the next day we got there.

M.Z.: Two o'clock in the afternoon?

R.M.: In the afternoon. That was really a journey. I mean that was a journey, but we did it.

M.Z.: And you were towing some stuff then?

R.M.: We was towing a big scow. And I mean that thing was jumping and snatching. Whew, that was a trip.

M.Z.: I mean, these days they have all this safety equipment and they have new synthetic fibers for the hawsers and everything, but back in that day –

R.M.: I mean, they had nothing; they had a little stove to make coffee on it and you had a compass. It wasn't no GPSs and all that stuff. You just had to really know where you was going, you know. He didn't have anything and he went right up there.

M.Z.: He didn't have any other deckhands?

R.M.: Nobody but me and him. And then when you got up there, you'd have a long line that would be hooked to the scow, and then when he would slow down and he would back up and you would take in all the line, you know where we coil it on the deck. And then when you got real close, you would tie it, and then he would take the scow on in and dock it up beside the pier.

M.Z.: He must have been so skilled to be able to do all that.

R.M.: He was skilled. He could take that boat and like, sometime we had to run anchors for a rig and he could be backing that boat up like that, and Cawood would say, "Go over that way a little bit," and he would just turn that wheel and that boat would just, I don't know, he just knew what he was doing.

M.Z.: I've interviewed several people in the tugging industry who are working in the industry now, and some of them have a background of being a waterman and a lot of them have a background of just at least messing around on the water. So do you think, like for Smith

Brothers, do you think they specifically wanted somebody like him who had that experience?

R.M.: I would say yes, because when we used to go up in New Jersey to work on those dredge boats up there, all of those captains up there, it was hundreds of dredge boats up there, they wanted the black men out of this area. Because all of the men out of this area knew how to work on the water and that's who they wanted. That was the truth. It would be hundreds of boats in New Jersey, and all of the crews would be us.

M.Z.: And the dredge boats, I don't know if I get what that work was.

R.M.: In New Jersey at that time, it was in the Delaware Bay, you took up little oysters like this. This is what they caught.

M.Z.: Little oysters like that. So we're talking maybe an inch.

R.M.: Yeah, not a half-inch and you culled them out of the shells and you took them to they –

M.Z.: You culled the meat out?

R.M.: No, all you did was cull, kept that little oysters. And then you would take them down near the ocean and you would put them overboard.

M.Z.: To seed those areas?

R.M.: The captains had grounds, they had them staked off, and they would put these oysters on the grounds. And then when they grew big, they would go back in the winter and take them out, take them up, which took about three years. And then we'd take these oysters to New York and places. Them captains, they were rich men.

M.Z.: And those captains were African American?

R.M.: No, no, the captains, no, all the captains were white and all the crew was black. Even the cook, everybody, the mate and all was black. The only white man on the boat was the captain.

M.Z.: And he was making good money.

R.M.: Making good – I'm telling you, they were rich. They were rich.

M.Z.: And what about the crew?

R.M.: You made fifty dollars a week.

M.Z.: You made what?

R.M.: Fifty dollars a week.

M.Z.: Was that decent?

R.M.: At that time, yeah, that was good money. Because the season lasts nine weeks and you would stay there for nine weeks, and if you was good with your money, you could come home around \$400. Because you got all your food and everything, you know, free. The captain they fed you; we ate good.

M.Z.: Did you stay on the boat?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, we stayed on the boat. It was sixteen of us on the boat. Yeah, indeed we did stay on the boat, yeah. In fact, some men when they went there, when they got on that boat, they never got off anymore 'til they got ready to go home. And they would come home, they'd have around \$400. That last you the whole summer.

M.Z.: So what was the season, like what months was that?

R.M.: The season, May, June and sometimes one week in July. Sometime nine week. Most time it was eight weeks; sometime it would be nine weeks.

M.Z.: So they wanted all the black watermen from the western shore; also from the eastern shore?

R.M.: Yes. A few from the eastern shore, but most of them was out of this – they had mates, men that took care of getting their men; men that they contacted when the season was getting ready to start to bring them their crews of men to New Jersey. So we all went to New Jersey.

M.Z.: How would you get there?

R.M.: Car, van, trucks, something like that, you know. That's how we went. It was a long drive going up Pulaski Highway at that time. And that's what we did, and it was hard, you talking about hard.

M.Z.: And now what part of New Jersey, where was it?

R.M.: Bridgeton, Bayville, Port Norris. A lot of men around here went up there and stayed and never came back. I mean they made they home. But I didn't want to make New Jersey my home.

M.Z.: Why not?

R.M.: I didn't particularly care for it. I didn't care for that work. That work was gruesome.

M.Z.: Was it?

R.M.: Oh, good Lord.

M.Z.: How so? What was it like?

R.M.: Can you imagine being on a boat with 3 or 4,000 bushels of oysters and you gotta shovel all them overboard by hand?

M.Z.: Just back breaking.

R.M.: And you just stand there and every time you throw one shovel full, another come back to you. And then I got alongside of a guy named Mike Sanders and he knew how to shovel, he liked to kill me. I mean he didn't get tired. It looked like to me he didn't get tired. But, no, that was some hard work. And you was on your knees. When they pulled the dredge up, it was eight men on each side of the boat. When they pulled that dredge up and they dump all them oysters, about five bushels of oysters, you had to get on your knees on a steel deck and pick all them little oysters out and throw them back in a pile. That was some hard work.

M.Z.: What kind of dredges was it?

R.M.: They had big dredges. These dredges they had was humungous. I mean, like they had four men on each side to dump it. It was terrible.

M.Z.: And what were the boats?

R.M.: The boats were like ninety feet, hundred feet long. They had big boats. They had sixteen men staying on them, sometime eighteen men, so you know they was good-size boats. They was big boats.

M.Z.: What kind of fuel was it?

R.M.: Diesel fuel. When my father first done went up there, they was under sail.

M.Z.: The skipjacks?

R.M.: No, the skipjacks, they were way bigger than skipjacks, way bigger. Yeah, skipjack, they could carry a skipjack. Yeah, they was big boats, oh my Lord.

M.Z.: How long did you do that for, you personally?

R.M.: I did it for about two years.

M.Z.: And that wasn't for you.

R.M.: That wasn't for me.

M.Z.: Now when was that, in your life, what period was that? Like how old were you, do you think?

R.M.: I was like sixteen when I went up there. I was sixteen.

M.Z.: After that, you started working with your dad on the tug?

R.M.: I worked with my dad. When I went to work with Smith, I was like seventeen. My father took different people at different times. He took me and he took my brother and we would go on the tugboat with him.

M.Z.: And were you mostly kind of a deckhand, mate? Did you ever captain it yourself?

R.M.: Deckhand, yeah. Oh yeah, you had to, you know, yeah, yeah.

M.Z.: You would trade off.

R.M.: If you're gonna be out there for seventy, eighty hours, you know, my father can't steer all that time. My father was sharp. One time we went in the South River, and when we was going in the South River, the wind was southeast and it was behind you. And so I steered the boat going up in South River and it was so hot, it was in the summertime, it was hot, when the wind behind you, it be hot on that boat. It was hot. So when we got ready to come back, my father said, "Okay, you steer back home," and we turned around and went back home, that wind was coming through that window, and it was so cool. And I could hear my father snoring. (Laughter.) I mean, he was sharp, he was sharp.

This one guy, he's dead now, he went with my father one night, they was going to Solomon's and when you get out in that bay, the bay is off of this way, and you could look down the bay and you could see Cove Point light. And he told Keith, he said, "Now, you steer for that light, and when you get there, you wake me up." Keith said he steered all the night long, because you could see Cove Point light a long ways off. I mean we're like thirty some miles away. And he said my father come out the next morning all fresh. (Laughter.) He had steered all night long.

But my father, he could tell you how long it was gonna take to get everywhere you went. He knew what direction to go, and he knew how fast she was going. He could look on that chart and he could tell you so far to here and so far to there, he could do everything. Me and him left out of the Wicomico in Salisbury one night and when the boat had sunk, and Cawood, they needed a rig to get it up. And we left out of Salisbury, I guess one night about 12:00. And coming out the Wicomico, the Wicomico is only about 200 feet wide and it goes like this. And how in the world he came out of there, I don't know. You come out through a marsh and it's no lights, it's no nothing. He come right on out the Wicomico. Next morning, we was out in the bay. I don't know how he did it.

M.Z.: Well how did he do it, do you think?

R.M.: It had to be in his mind because you couldn't really run a course on your compass because the Wicomico goes like this. I mean I been down the Wicomico.

M.Z.: Do you think he just was so familiar from having gone up and down and he just could remember?

R.M.: I don't what it was.

M.Z.: I'm wondering if there were things like onboard the boat itself that helped him do that. Were there kind of vibrations or anything like that that you could tune into?

R.M.: No, it was nothing on the *Argo*.

M.Z.: So you couldn't feel.

R.M.: You couldn't feel nothing. All was on the *Argo* was a big compass and you could hear that diesel behind you running. And he can't – I don't know how he came on out of the Wicomico. The Wicomico just like a snake and that's how he did. And next morning, we was in the bay. And by 12:00, we was over at Chesapeake Beach.

But the worst thing was all, one night we went into Baltimore. How he got into Baltimore, I don't know. When you go into Baltimore in the night, it's thousands and thousands of lights. And I don't how you know what light to head to, but he went 'round up into Baltimore, no problem, picked up a scow and, one of Smith's rigs, and brought it on back out. And then you could see, evidently dumping fire or something in Baltimore. You can see fire, and you can see lights, you can see thousands and thousands of lights. And how he knew which one to head to, I don't know but he went up there.

M.Z.: Sounds like he was a very intelligent and skillful man.

R.M.: Yeah, he was, he was. Very skillful.

M.Z.: Did you ever get to that point yourself?

R.M.: No, I just, right now I can't picture in my mind how he did it. I guess right now, well now they got GPSs. He didn't have no GPS. I don't know how he did it. But he went up there with no problem, no problem. He went up there, got that rig and brought it on back down.

M.Z.: So they must have really depended on him, Smith Brothers.

R.M.: Well this is what Cawood said. We was working down on the Potomac, down to Indian Head and he was supposed to be there with another rig at 12:30. And at 12:00, we was eating lunch and he looked down the river and there he come. And Cawood, one of the brothers said, "You can depend on him." That's what he said. And you could.

M.Z.: Was he the only captain over there, or they had a few?

R.M.: He was the only captain over there. He was the only one. He went out in the ocean and Chincoteague. When they went out in the Chincoteague, they had to get a man to put a boat with him, because he didn't know where the deep water was.

M.Z.: He didn't know that area.

R.M.: No, he didn't know that area. But when he came back, he came back by himself.

M.Z.: That was enough.

R.M.: That was enough. Once he went there, that was it.

M.Z.: Wow, sounds like he had amazing instinct.

R.M.: We worked in Delaware; he took the rigs to Delaware. We worked up in Delaware putting the pipeline in. I been through the canal with him, Delaware canal. The Delaware canal is – when we went through there, tide was running so hard it seemed like we wasn't moving. And it was hot. And then all of the sudden, the tide changed. And it just seemed like it just took right off. Yeah.

M.Z.: So when did your father pass away?

R.M.: Seventy-seven. He been dead now about thirteen or fourteen years.

M.Z.: And when was he born, do you know?

R.M.: 1910.

M.Z.: 1977 is when he died, and he was born in 1910.

R.M.: 1910, yeah.

M.Z.: That must have been a sad thing.

R.M.: It was. But you know, the day he passed, he was in the hospital and I had my boat in Annapolis and it was ice and I had a clam rig on it. And I said, "I'm not going out today. I'm going back to talk to my father." I went back and me and him talked all day long. I mean, just like normal, and soon as I got –

M.Z.: You must be grateful that you had –

R.M.: Yeah, as soon as I came back home, they called and said come back to the hospital. He died that night. But he had a good life. That's him right there. Kevin, show her my father. That's my father and mother.

M.Z.: Yeah, Jeff said that you had pictures of him. Thank you. Oh, he's a big man, huh?

R.M.: Oh yeah, he was a big man, yeah.

M.Z.: Aw, that's nice. What's your mother's name?

R.M.: Bernice.

M.Z.: Bernice. And when was she born?

R.M.: In 1911.

M.Z.: So they were about the same age?

R.M.: Yeah.

M.Z.: And when did she die?

R.M.: She died thirteen years after him.

M.Z.: So that was in '90, 1990.

R.M.: Yeah. When my mother died, she didn't owe – I mean this is amazing, my mother didn't owe nobody, not twenty-five cents. Every cent that she owed anybody, we got papers that she had wrote down how she had done paid them. I think that's kind of amazing when you die, you don't owe nobody nothing. I mean her slate was clear, and she had insurance to bury her because she didn't want to leave nothing on nobody. That's how she was. She was a little small woman.

M.Z.: She sounds like an amazing woman. Small but tough.

R.M.: Yeah. She was strong.

M.Z.: Strong.

R.M.: Yeah, she was. And all she had to was tell us, "I'm gonna tell him when he come home." And then you be scared to death rest of the day. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: 'Cause your dad was pretty strict.

R.M.: Yeah, you can put it back, Kevin. Yeah, he was an amazing man, yes, he was.

M.Z.: And your mother's maiden name?

R.M.: Was Gross.

M.Z.: Gross.

R.M.: Yeah, she was a Gross. Her grandfather owned all this land down this road here. He came here from Calvert County, our great-grandfather. He bought all this land and well, he let some of his children have it and it's all gone now.

M.Z.: How was he able to do that?

R.M.: I don't know, but some of the older people, they say he had boxes full of money. They say he always had money, I don't know how.

M.Z.: Was he a waterman?

R.M.: Yeah.

M.Z.: He was?

R.M.: Yes. Everybody in this community was a waterman. All his children was watermen.

M.Z.: And that was oystering, too?

R.M.: Yeah, oystering. Well, one of his sons had a boat that he used to deliver stuff on. He had a good size boat on the side. He was a cook, too.

M.Z.: He was cook also?

R.M.: Yeah, he was also a cook.

M.Z.: So after you started working with your dad on the tugs, you were still working on the water, too? You kind of did both?

R.M.: No, when I was working with my father on the tug, I really wasn't working on the water as much at that time.

M.Z.: You were about seventeen then?

R.M.: Yeah, and then I went in the military. And then I got married, and I went to Oklahoma.

M.Z.: Oh, you did?

R.M.: Yeah, I took my wife and children out there, Karen and Kevin, I took them to Oklahoma. And one of my daughters was born in Oklahoma.

M.Z.: What were you doing in Oklahoma?

R.M.: I was in the military. I was a soldier in Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

M.Z.: How long did you stay there?

R.M.: Two years.

M.Z.: What branch were you in?

R.M.: Artillery.

M.Z.: And when was that, about? What year?

R.M.: It was '58 to '60.

M.Z.: And then you came back here?

R.M.: I came back here.

M.Z.: And what'd you do when you came back?

R.M.: Well I worked with Smith for about six months, and then I went back on the water oystering.

M.Z.: Why did you make that decision?

R.M.: Because it was making a lot of money.

M.Z.: Oystering?

R.M.: Yeah, I went to work with my uncle. And then two years later –

M.Z.: That's Uncle Jim?

R.M.: No, that was Uncle Earl, Earl Gross. He's my great-uncle.

M.Z.: That would have been your mother's uncle.

R.M.: Yeah.

M.Z.: So you went back to oystering. So that was around 1960?

R.M.: 1960. And then in '62, I bought my own boat.

M.Z.: And still oystering?

R.M.: Yeah, still oystering, yeah.

M.Z.: What did you do in the spring after the oyster season?

R.M.: I would work with Smith.

M.Z.: So that was nice that you could do both.

R.M.: Oh, yeah.

M.Z.: What were you doing for Smith? Were you captaining?

R.M.: Most of the time, I was firing the boiler, something like that.

M.Z.: Oh, okay. Was their company growing at that point?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, yeah. When I first started working with Smith, they had nothing but a bunch a junk. But I mean, but you had a job. And they started getting better equipment. They got to be big time, yeah. Oh, my land, yeah.

M.Z.: How did you feel about working for them?

R.M.: Oh, good, because they were nice people, I felt good working with them, yeah. And I learned a lot, you know. I mean, I work with Cawood, there was just so many things that I learned that helped me all the time on the water, you know.

M.Z.: Like for example, what kind of stuff?

R.M.: Like I knew how to **reeb up** (48:56) blocks, I know how to handle equipment.

M.Z.: Knew how to what with blocks?

R.M.: When you got blocks and you're gonna pour something, you gotta hook 'em up right. And I knew how to do all of that kind of stuff just by working with them. And I knew how to build piers; I knew how to drive piles. I knew how to do everything.

M.Z.: How many employees did they have at that point, like in the sixties?

R.M.: About thirty-some. Each one of the brothers, it was five brothers that went out and did the work. One brother stayed and run the office, so each brother would have a crew about three to four men, sometimes five. Like Jeff, Jeff wasn't even born when I first started working around here. But I remember when he was a baby.

M.Z.: And then he started working with them, right?

R.M.: But when he started working with them, I wasn't working with them anymore. I worked with his father, Kenneth. That's who I worked with.

M.Z.: When did you stop working with them?

R.M.: Sixty-two.

M.Z.: Oh, so that was just a couple of years then.

R.M.: Yeah, but I worked with them some time during the summer. And then eventually, I worked on the water twelve months a year. I bought a clam rig and I bought another boat in '68. I bought another boat, and I bought a clam rig and then I went to work on the water twelve months a year.

[End Matthews FR-1. Begin FR-2]

M.Z.: Can you tell me kind of what you would do seasonally, like oystering?

R.M.: At that time, oyster season began the 1st of September and last till the 15th of April. And then as soon as we finish oystering, I would paint my boat.

M.Z.: So starting in April.

R.M.: Starting in April. And then by the 1st of May, I would put my clam rig on and then I would clam until almost time to go back oystering again. And then I'd paint my boat again. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: So how long would you clam until? Until about September?

R.M.: I would clam until – oyster season would come in September, I would clam 'til about the middle of August.

M.Z.: So then you'd have some time to work on your boat.

R.M.: I'd have some time to work on my boat, yeah.

M.Z.: So there were no crabs in this picture. It was just oyster, clam.

R.M.: When I started crabbing was the year they had – I can't think of the name of the hurricane they had, but they had a hurricane and it killed all the clams. Well, I won't say it killed them all, but the health department closed the bay down for clamming.

M.Z.: Do you remember when that was? Like seventies?

R.M.: It was in the seventies, yeah. Right about '74. And the next year, I got crab pots and went crabbing.

M.Z.: And that was kind of a new thing around here?

R.M.: It was a new thing for me, yeah, to crab pot, yeah. But I asked different watermen what to do, and they would tell me different things. In fact, 'cause I knew I was gonna be by myself awhile, my son was in college and I was waiting for him to come home to work with me during the summer so he would have a job.

M.Z.: What's your son's name?

R.M.: Kevin.

M.Z.: And he eventually started working with you?

R.M.: No, he just worked with me during the summertime to make money to help pay for his tuition. That's his (indiscernible 02:05).

M.Z.: Oh, okay. He was going to college?

R.M.: He was going to college, yeah.

M.Z.: Where did he go?

R.M.: Morgan.

M.Z.: Okay. What did he get his degree in, do you remember?

R.M.: He didn't finish Morgan, he went to Sojourner-Douglass. What did Kevin get his degree in, Karen?

(Telephone)

K.M.: Business Administration.

M.Z.: But he went to a different college then, after that?

R.M.: Yes. He's a smart boy.

K.M.: He got his degree at Sojourner-Douglass.

M.Z.: Oh, okay.

R.M.: He was very intelligent.

M.Z.: How did he feel about working on the water?

R.M.: He was good. He was good. He was real good, yeah. I mean it was good for summertime. It was definitely good, and he was making good money.

M.Z.: Did you have an opinion yourself about what he should do? Like, should he work on the water, should he go to college?

R.M.: No, no, no. I wanted him to have an opinion what he wanted to do. He also clammed with me in the summer. Kevin used to clam with me, too. But no, I didn't have no opinion. He was going to school. All my children went to college. She went. And my other daughter, she went, they all graduated from college. She just graduated community college.

M.Z.: That's great, you must be proud.

R.M.: Oh, yeah. And Roslyn, she graduated from – she got her master's, working on her doctorate, my youngest daughter.

M.Z.: So what about you then, you gave up the clamming and that was it? You never went back to that?

R.M.: Clamming, it seemed like to me everything went downhill. Clamming went downhill, oystering went downhill, and I was getting older.

M.Z.: Like around when? Is this now, like eighties?

R.M.: Maybe about three or four years ago. I ain't been doing nothing now for a while, like on the water. I still got my boat, but you know, I should get rid of it because I can't work on the water anymore. You have it in your mind (Laughs.)

M.Z.: That you're going to go back.

R.M.: That's you gonna do it but I don't think – my legs and things are gone. Working on the water is hard on your legs.

M.Z.: Is it?

R.M.: Oh, yeah.

M.Z.: Just 'cause you're on your feet all the time?

R.M.: You're on your feet, and the boat going like this and all like that. It gets hard on you, yeah.

M.Z.: Do you miss it?

R.M.: Oh, good night, do I miss it? I loved it. When oyster season would come in, I couldn't even sleep nighttime. It was just like a kid going somewhere for the first time; that's how excited I would be when oyster season would come in. I loved to oyster.

M.Z.: What was it about it that you loved, can you say?

R.M.: Just the freedom. And I knew how to catch oysters. I wanna say, I was the best oysterman around here. Couldn't nobody never beat me, I beat everybody every day. You wouldn't believe that. I tell Kevin some people used to call me Two Man.

M.Z.: Two Man?

R.M.: Yeah, because I caught more oysters than any two men out there. And some of them called me the king of the road and all like that. I was a good oysterman. I was a good oysterman.

M.Z.: You must really miss it.

R.M.: I do miss it, yeah. I love to oyster.

M.Z.: What do you think now about the situation with the oysters?

R.M.: They say that the watermen caught up all the oysters. I don't agree with that. I think the oysters died because of pollution and all these storms. Down here now we got a, it's a big sewage plant down here, and they run the pipe right in the middle of one of our main oyster bars. They done sand the bars over and, I just don't know. I don't like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation because I don't really think they do anything. I really don't. All they do I think, is getting money out of the government. I don't care much for 'em.

M.Z.: What do you think should be done, do you know? I mean, what would be the right move to take to improve the situation?

R.M.: It's hard to say, but I think when they wanted to plant them Asian oysters, I said they might as well go ahead and let them plant them because at least they would have had oysters out there that would have kept the bay clean. And plus, the oysters would have lived. But ours just won't survive. And like you see them on television saying they're raising oysters and growing oysters.

M.Z.: Like that Aquaculture, you mean?

R.M.: Yeah. And so one guy that lived down here, he's an old man now, he started maybe thirty years ago trying to grow oysters. And he can really get oysters to this size, but when he put them on the bay, they die.

M.Z.: Because of the water quality?

R.M.: I don't know. He don't know either. Because he never got any of them to live.

M.Z.: He's just a regular guy, or is he a scientist?

R.M.: No, he's not a scientist, you know. I watch the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, they bring kids out there and they throw oysters overboard and you a waterman, some of these oysters die before they hit the bottom. I just think they just wasting time and money. Like they (indiscernible 07:23) put oysters balls and all that kind of stuff. It don't work. It don't work. I say the only thing that works is if you put shells. Years ago they used to get **Langefellow** shells. Langefellow used to dredge shells from up the head the bay and then would bring them down here, or wherever you want them, and they would plant these shells. The shells made a good foundation for the oysters, and the oysters lived.

But now, nobody around here works on the water, they don't work on the water because there's nothing to catch. There's nothing to catch.

M.Z.: What about the crabs?

R.M.: Crabs, they put so many restrictions on crabs. I got my thing yesterday for crabs. This is what they send me every year for crabs. And you gotta fill out and send back in and all this but I'm not –

M.Z.: That's like, for your license?

R.M.: I got my license. They wanted to buy my license last year. They offered me \$7,000 for my license but I'm not gonna sell them my license. You know, none of us got no license, I'm gonna keep my license. I probably could use the money, but like I told my brother, if I had a sold my license by now, the money would be gone and I still wouldn't have no license. And I wouldn't have the money either. And I don't really be – I'm not rich, but I don't be never hurting for no money. I mean I have as much money as I need. I can get anything that I want, which is not that much, but I can get what I want.

M.Z.: Are you keeping it in order to give it to one of your kids or your grandkids?

R.M.: Yeah, of course I am.

M.Z.: Are there any specific family members who are interested?

R.M.: He probably would be interested. I got another grandson; they might would be interested. But I don't really know. But I'm going hold on to it for a while longer.

M.Z.: Have you taken them out, have they crabbed with you?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, he was good on the water. And my other son, he was good on the water. You know, he used to oyster with me, her son, and I used to let him steer the boat home. We'd be way up the bay. And I would ask them, I would say, "How do you know where to turn that without me telling you?" He'd say, "I go by the land that come down to the water and stop." And that's the points, you know, like Thomas Point, Hawkins Point; they're points that come down to the water. And that's what he go by. He knew them points. He said, "I know when I get to this point that I'm supposed to turn."

M.Z.: You must have taught them a lot.

R.M.: I didn't tell him that.

M.Z.: Well, probably just by watching you though, you know.

R.M.: Yeah.

M.Z.: That's great. Well that would be nice if they keep on with it.

R.M.: It would be. It would be. You know, I really believe in my heart a lot of these guys now say they can't make a living on the water. I know that if I was able, that I could. Because I can really catch oysters and I put a lot of effort into it.

M.Z.: Even now with the oyster population the way it is?

R.M.: Even now with the oyster population down, I think that I could really catch enough oysters to make a living.

M.Z.: Would you be out there tonging or what would you be doing?

R.M.: I would be out there tonging now. I would be doing something on the water. I kept up with the times when there was money made clamming, I went clamming. And when it was money made oystering, I went oystering. Then when they had no clams and no oysters, I went crabbing. I did whatever, and I had license to go fishing. Now you know, it's ways to make money, but the guys just don't. I don't know, they really don't wanna do it. They don't really get into it. I put my heart into it. I guess maybe because I loved it, maybe that's it, I don't know.

M.Z.: It's a different time, too, though.

R.M.: It is different.

M.Z.: When you were coming up, it was like everybody was doing it. These days it's much fewer. I wonder if that makes a difference, you know. It's just like, it's not the whole community.

R.M.: Well, right now, the number of boats that we had at one time working on the water, they wouldn't have anywhere to tie them up at because they got all private yacht club and all that kind of stuff now. You wouldn't really have anywhere to tie your boat.

M.Z.: So that's part of the problem.

R.M.: That's one of the problems.

M.Z.: And then maybe all this kind of stuff, all the regulations and paperwork.

R.M.: Paperwork, it ain't no problem for me to do that because if I couldn't do it, my wife could do it. I mean, there's no problem; I can do that. We used to go to Solomon's, and down here in Solomon's in Calvert County, it doesn't get as cold down here. So it froze up up here, we would leave here and go to Solomon's. And when we went to Solomon's it was the time of the year when most of the pleasure boats was on shore in dry-dock. So the man that own the marina, he would give us a place to tie our boats because he said the only cash money that he saw during the wintertime was what we brought there. You know because we dealt in cash money. And that's what they look for; they look for cash money. So he always reserved a place for us. If we went down there in the nighttime, we could just go in and tie up, and next day go ahead and tell him we was there.

M.Z.: So what about now; can you still do that?

R.M.: I imagine that you could, I don't really know. It's been so long since I been there. But the guy there named Jim, he was a very nice guy, he kept a place for us.

M.Z.: But I wonder if now, if the attitude is the same. You know, it seems like now there's more kind of recreational boats around.

R.M.: It's a few boats.

M.Z.: So I wonder if they still have the same kind of friendly attitude towards watermen.

R.M.: I think that he would, I think that he would. I really do. And plus, most of the men that went there, all them men right here, they had good attitudes about stuff. They took good care of the man's place when they went there. They didn't go in and trash anything.

M.Z.: Respectful.

R.M.: Respectful of his place, you know. And they paid him for staying there. They would never leave without paying him. They always gave him his money. And that's what counts.

M.Z.: So now, I mean when you were growing up everyone around here was working on the water. Now, how many?

R.M.: It was a few people around here that didn't work on the water but that they moved to Baltimore. They moved to places where they could get jobs. If they didn't want to stay around here and work on the water, then they moved because there wasn't nothing else to do.

M.Z.: So now how many watermen, would you say, are around here?

R.M.: The last real waterman that we had, he was a young man of forty-three years old, he died.

M.Z.: A black man.

R.M.: Yeah. He died about six months ago.

M.Z.: What was his name?

R.M.: J. R. Gross.

M.Z.: So he was in your family then, right?

R.M.: Yeah he was, yeah. He was my wife's Godchild.

M.Z.: He died.

R.M.: He died. He got sick and stayed sick. And he was a good waterman. Yes, he was.

M.Z.: And he died six months ago. And he was the last waterman around here?

R.M.: The only real waterman that was left was him, yep. He was the only real waterman that was left. Yeah, J. R. passed away.

M.Z.: That's sad.

R.M.: It was sad, yeah. It was so many watermen there when he passed at his funeral. He was really a good waterman. But that's it. It's no more, it's no more. No more. And then no more of us.

M.Z.: How do you feel about that?

R.M.: Bad. Because it's a industry gone. I mean, it's not only a lot of work gone, like people talking about there's no jobs, that wasn't the best work, but the people that shucked oysters and they worked in the packing houses, like Woodfield's. Woodfield's had like a hundred some people working around here. Maybe it wasn't a top-of-the-line job, but it was a job and all those jobs are gone. They gone. They never will come back. They never will. So work around here is scarce.

But everybody around here seem to be working because I hear them talking about it's no jobs, but it's nobody around here that don't work. Everybody, everybody, like, "It's a recession" and all that stuff, everybody in this community works.

M.Z.: What kind of jobs do people have these days?

R.M.: Well people have different jobs. Some of them work in Annapolis, some of them work in Washington, some of them work in Baltimore.

M.Z.: Is it retail?

R.M.: I don't know. A lot of them been to college, you know, some of them teachers. It's a lot of – everybody around here really has a job that want a job. Nobody around here don't work. My daughter, my daughter was real, real big. And she got out of school, and she was very intelligent but she couldn't find a job. And she went up to the state where this girl was working at and she said, "I tell you what," she said, "I'll work here for free this week and you just give me a try." And the girl let her work there for nothing and she stayed there for twenty years.

M.Z.: Oh, no kidding.

R.M.: Yeah. She stayed on 'til she, well, she got sick. Yeah, she got sick.

M.Z.: She's a go-getter though, huh?

R.M.: Oh, she's a go-getter, yeah. She said that she – (Laughter.)

M.Z.: That was a good plan to work for free.

R.M.: She got a good brain, I tell you, yes, she have. Oh, yeah, she got a good brain, yeah. Her and her sister both. I guess I'm blessed because all of my children were very intelligent. And the boy was the smartest of all, I think, but the youngest girl got all the degrees. She had one son graduated from Morehouse last year, and another one gonna graduate this year.

M.Z.: Wow, that's impressive.

R.M.: Yeah, and she gonna get a doctor's degree sometime in May herself.

M.Z.: Wow, good for her. Well, we've been talking for a while, I guess one last thing I'd like to ask before we turn this thing off is all these black watermen around here and then like for your family also in the tug industry, what was it like just in terms of race relations? There must have been white watermen out there, too.

R.M.: You know one thing? I'm gonna this. Around here for watermen working on the water, really and truly, we got along good with the white guys at work. One of them, Jack Neiman, he's dead now, but me and him, we were good friends.

M.Z.: Would you socialize?

R.M.: Oh, yeah, yeah.

M.Z.: Like in each other's homes?

R.M.: Not really in each other's homes, but like when we went to the meeting and things, we would go to meetings together. He would call me and he would ride with me.

M.Z.: Meetings like for regulations?

R.M.: Yeah, but we never had any, we really never had any problems. When they integrated the schools around here, it wasn't no problems at all. None.

M.Z.: Do you think that was because people were already so comfortable working together and stuff?

R.M.: When we worked on the water, we had no problem, we all sold the same places. I don't remember ever having any problem with anybody. I think all the guys used to like me, I don't care what color they were. You know they did like me, yeah. In fact, one guy down here, him and his son – he's a white guy – he been working on his boat and I was always good mechanically. And his engine was running hot; this was on a Sunday. And I went there and showed them, because when you're drawing water in an engine, you gotta make sure that you make a complete circle back to the tank. If you don't, it's gonna go water against water. I showed them. In fact, I did it for them. I hooked their hoses up so that they ran around the engine right.

And they were so appreciative. And I looked up the next evening, he was out in the yard. He was a farmer, and he had a whole bushel of tomatoes. I didn't really want him to give me anything, I felt like that that's what I was supposed to do. You know, to help somebody out. That's the way I always been. If I feel like somebody needs some help, then I feel like that I should help them. And I think that is a thing you supposed to do.

M.Z.: And that's what it was like around here in general.

R.M.: That's what it was like around here, yeah. Everybody respected my father.

M.Z.: Black, white, everybody.

R.M.: Right. Everybody knew that we was Harold Matthews' boys. You know, everybody.

M.Z.: So he had a really good reputation.

R.M.: He had a good reputation, yeah. We had no problems, no problems at all with race around here. None. We still don't have none. (Laughter.) I don't think we do, I know we don't.

M.Z.: That's a good thing.

R.M.: It is a good thing. It's better like that, it's better like that. As far as I'm concerned it is, yeah.

M.Z.: What do you think about, like just for African American people in this area – I don't know how to ask this question – but what kind of significance did working on the water have for black people in particular? Not just economically.

R.M.: Everybody that worked on the water that lived around here, they had their own homes. That was one thing. And everybody owned their own boats. Nobody in this community didn't own their own home.

M.Z.: And it was working on the water that allowed you to –

R.M.: It was working on the water that allowed that. And my sister, when she got married, she was renting. And my father told her, "Look, girl, you go and buy yourself a house." And he made her buy a house.

M.Z.: Did he help her out with that?

R.M.: No, she had her own money. My father was the only man in this community that all five of his children had their own house. Out of all the people in this community, he was the only one that all five of their children owned their own property.

M.Z.: And he really valued that.

R.M.: He did. That's what he thought you was supposed to do. That's what he did, and that was it. Everybody around here, as far as I'm concerned, I got along good with everybody. In fact, we all tied our boats the same places. You know, you'd be tied here, and you'd be tied here, and that's how it would be. And one guy came here from Calvert County, which was a little different, and he got so used to us, you know, he wasn't used to a lot of us.

M.Z.: He was a white guy?

R.M.: Yeah. He's dead now. And he tied beside me and – that's his boat right there, the **Karen B**, on that picture – and me and him was tied side by side. He told me one day, he said, "If I don't say nothing to you," he said, "I can't hear good." And he said, "I don't hear you," he said, "I lost my hearing." I said, "Well me and you in the same boat because I can't hear good either." And we used to laugh and talk, but he died.

M.Z.: But he wanted you to know he wasn't being standoffish.

R.M.: He wasn't ignoring me, it was just that he couldn't hear me. (Laughter.) And we got to be good friends, you know.

M.Z.: But he was from Calvert County?

R.M.: He was from Calvert County.

M.Z.: And it wasn't like that there, you think, was it different?

R.M.: It was a little different. When we first went to Calvert County, the black men right here could catch oysters, and we would go down to Calvert Country right after Christmas. Those guys down there would be got down to, they would be catching maybe eight to ten bushels of oysters. And we'd go down and catch twenty-five. And I think that really bothered them.

M.Z.: They were mostly white there?

R.M.: Yeah. And we'd go down and we'd catch twenty-five bushels; that was the limit. And they couldn't understand that. But finally, Leroy Russell and Taylor Russell said that we was the best oystermen they ever seen. And we was good, yeah, really good.

M.Z.: What do you think made you guys so good?

R.M.: I don't know. I just don't know why we were so good. I think a lot of them follow after me. I was good, and a lot of them wanted to beat me and they couldn't. They couldn't, no. And even when they was catching oysters with shaft tongs, the black watermen around here was good oystermen, they were good watermen, really good, really good.

M.Z.: So you were mostly patent tonging?

R.M.: I did both. When I started off, there wasn't no patent tong. And when I got out of the military, they had started patent tonging and that's when I went patent tonging. That's something else I didn't hate, I didn't hate the military. My brothers hated the military, but I didn't, I kinda liked it. You know, I still think about the military; I didn't really hate the military at all.

M.Z.: Why did your brothers hate it?

R.M.: Well, my oldest brother went to Germany, and he said it was cold over there. He just didn't like it. (Laughter.) And my other brother, he was an MP in New Jersey. But they didn't like it, but I didn't mind at all, I really didn't. No indeed. I made a lot of friends. In fact, my best friend just died a couple weeks ago that we were in the military. But he

was in Virginia. I went down to his funeral. We was together in the military. We stayed friends for fifty-some years.

M.Z.: That's great. I'm sorry he passed away.

R.M.: Yeah, you know, you meet a lot of nice people. I think the military's a good thing; I think everybody should go in the military now. That's my opinion. I don't think it really hurts a young man to go in the military. I don't see anything wrong with it, I really don't. Man or woman, if you wanna go, I think it's a good thing.

M.Z.: What does it do for you that's good?

R.M.: It helps you grow up. It help you for used to somebody telling you what to do and that you don't know everything. And that's what it does; it helps you grow up, it helps you to meet people, it helps you to get along with other people. That's what it do. You know, once I could look at a person's name and I wouldn't know what they was, but you stay in the military, everybody got their last name on their jacket, and you learn who people are. That's what you do. But the military, to me, was good.

M.Z.: So before I turn this off, do you have anything you want to add? Our exhibit is about the culture and the life onboard Chesapeake tugboats, so I've done a bunch of interviews with people mostly who are still working on tugs. Do you have anything you want to say about that, about the significance of the tug industry in the history of the Chesapeake and kind of how it works together, the watermen, and moving back and forth between working on the water and working on tugs.

R.M.: I would say there wasn't but one tugboat captain around here now and that's K. D. Gross.

M.Z.: K. D. Gross?

R.M.: Yeah, he got his own –

M.Z.: Is he also in your family?

R.M.: Yeah, he's in my family.

M.Z.: He's a captain?

R.M.: His son and him, too. He got a pile driving business.

M.Z.: Oh, so K. D. has a pile driving business.

R.M.: Yes. And he has to move his equipment, and his son runs the boat that do it.

M.Z.: It's a tug?

R.M.: It's a tug, yeah.

M.Z.: And he's here in Churchton?

R.M.: He's in Shady Side.

M.Z.: What's the son's name?

R.M.: Beville Gross.

K.M.: K. D. stands for Kendall.

M.Z.: Kendall, okay, thank you. And they're in Shady Side.

R.M.: They're in Shady Side, yeah.

M.Z.: Do you think that the world of tugboating has been an important part of the Chesapeake over the years?

R.M.: Yeah, because everything that comes through here (laughter), out in that bay, you see all these tugboats they be bringing stuff through all the time, all the time. I was in Portsmouth about a month ago, and my friend got a house right on the water and all these tugboats come right by her house, like in about two or three hundred feet. And they be coming – I mean, I just sat at that window and watched them tugboats all day long. Then it all it hit me, I said, now I know why they call this Portsmouth because it's a port (laughter) of boats. (Laughter.)

But, yeah, it's significant, yeah, you still need tugboats. Tugboats tow a lot of the stuff down this bay, yes, they do.

M.Z.: Do you think it's been important for black people? Have a lot of black people worked on tugs?

R.M.: No, not really, no. No, not really.

M.Z.: So your family, that's kind of an exception to the rule?

R.M.: Yeah, these big tugboats and things, it's none of us working on them.

M.Z.: Why is that?

R.M.: I don't know. I really don't have no ideas, I don't have any ideas. But I think I could be a captain on any tugboat, that's what I believe, you know, (laughter), because I watched my father. When my father was gonna move a scow or something, you'd tie that tugboat to the scow and the lines that you had running up to the scow, you had to have them tight. He would have these lines, every time he would pull ahead and he wants you to tighten

that line up. And he wanted that line so tight that when he was going to dock it, when he went in reverse, he want the scow to come back the same time the boat would.

And if that line had slack in it, it wouldn't do it. And he would make you tighten that thing up and he'd back up, the scow came back. He could really handle that tugboat. He could really. Well he was really the only captain at that time around here on tugboats; he was the only one.

M.Z.: I wonder why that is though, because I know for some watermen, like on Tangier Island, where it's getting harder and harder for them to make a living working on the water, quite a few of them have turned towards tugs. And they work for Vane Brothers and stuff like that. But they're white and, you know, everybody on Tangier is white. And I don't know why some of the black watermen haven't gone that route as well. I mean there are some.

I interviewed a guy who works for Moran in Baltimore doing ship docking and some of the other stuff there, an African American young man; he's like in his early thirties. And he's from Baltimore, like inner-city Baltimore. He didn't have any background experience on the water but he was in the job-training program and he got that job. But I don't think there's that many black people.

R.M.: It's not.

M.Z.: I've been scratching my head about that trying to understand why that is because it seems like such a good career option. They make decent money, they got benefits; it's a pretty good career path. And like this young man who I interviewed, he loves it, he didn't even have a background in it but he's kind of a natural, you know.

R.M.: I don't know. I don't have the answer to that. I don't have the answer, no. I guess because Cawood Smith saw something in my father when he turned that tugboat over to him. I think that's what it was. He saw something that he could do and he did.

One night, my brother was on the tugboat with my father and they was towing this scow for Smith and they was down on the Potomac and it got rough and cold. My brother, he was saying, he said, "Man, I hope I don't have to hit this water." He knew he never would make it. And he said they was barely making headway. And he said my father said, "Catch on the wheel." He said he caught on the wheel, and so he went out the back door on the tugboat and he said when he come back in, they started moving. So he said, "Man, we making good time now."

So when they got into Smith Creek he said, "You want me to take the line up on the scow?" He said, "Son, I turned that scow loose long time ago (laughter)." And he had turned it loose and next day they went back and got it. But he said, they wasn't make no – they couldn't make it it was so rough, ice.

M.Z.: So he just knew what to do.

R.M.: My father, he knew they couldn't tow it, so he turned it loose.

M.Z.: And what did it do?

R.M.: It just flipped and went all over the place. And the next day when the weather had dropped down, they went back out in the bay and picked it up.

M.Z.: Couldn't that have been dangerous? Couldn't it have, I don't know, crashed into something?

R.M.: It could have crashed into the shore. It's nothing down Smith Creek. Nothing down there but land. You been to Point Lookout? There ain't nothing down there. Nothing.

M.Z.: So it wasn't real dangerous.

R.M.: No danger, nothing, no. As my father used to always say, "When you coming up the bay, you come to Point Lookout, then there's Point Lookin, then there's Point No Point," and then he say you point again. And you got a long ways to go. And that's what he used to always say. Point Lookout, Point Lookin, Point No Point and point again. That's how you be coming up the bay. (Laughter.)

My father told me something I didn't know and I don't think many watermen knew, and that's like Thomas Point lighthouse. I don't know who designed it or who built it, but when you in shallow water, Thomas Point light blink red to you; and you get in deep water, it blink yellow. And I don't think many people know that. And I tried it, when I be coming up the bay, and like it would be dark and you could see the light blinking and you hit ashore, and you hit in the shallow water, light start blinking red and all you had to do was head back out. And as soon as you head back out, the light start blinking yellow again.

M.Z.: Interesting.

R.M.: Yep, that's what my father told me. And it's true.

M.Z.: I'm getting the feeling that your father was just a very observant man.

R.M.: He was, yep, he was. We went down on the Potomac one time to get a boat for a guy. And this guy was telling my father how to get out of the river. And all my father told him was that you put the red on the red, he said, you can go ahead. And he knew, he knew. And what my father meant, I don't know, but he said you put the red on the red. I guess he meant you put the red light on the red beacon. And you know, a boat got a red and green light. And then he went on and he said, "I ain't gotta tell you nothing else." He just knew, he just knew. (Laughter.)

My father was a good man, and we used to go there every day, me and my brothers, we went down there every day. After they got older, we went there every day.

M.Z.: Smith Brothers, you mean?

R.M.: No, my father, we went to his house every day.

M.Z.: Oh, to his house.

R.M.: We went there every day. I mean every day we went down to see how they were doing. After they got older, we went down there every day, every day to see how they were doing, yeah.

M.Z.: That's good, take care of them.

R.M.: Yep, and he'd be waiting for us to come.

M.Z.: Well I'm so glad I had a chance to meet you and hear these stories about your dad.

R.M.: Well I hope I told you something that you could use.

M.Z.: Oh, fantastic, really great. I mean, I'd love to talk to you some more. Maybe I'll come back some time, if you can put up with me.

R.M.: I told Karen I would bring them over to St. Michaels one day.

M.Z.: Yeah, we'd love to have you come. Is there anything you'd like to add before I turn the recorder off?

R.M.: No, it's been nice talking to you, I will say that.

M.Z.: Great. Thank you, I appreciate it very much.

R.M.: Okay, I hope that I did say something that help you.

M.Z.: Very helpful.

[End of Interview.]