

Interview Log

Interviewee: Robin Fithian

Date: 2/22/2012

Interviewer and Transcriber: Julie Broadbent

Location: Rock Hall, Maryland in restaurant

Topic: growing up in Rock Hall and working in town.

Comments: There is a lot of background noise from a TV in the restaurant. There are also times where the interview is interrupted by the serving staff.

JB: Okay, so you grew up in Rock Hall right?

RF: Yes I did.

JB: Did you remember when you were little what your parents did?

RF: Oh, I grew up on a farm just until I was one when I moved to Rock Hall because this is where my grandparents were. My father drove a milk truck and my mother was a stay at home mom. And then he probably when I was about 10, got a job down at the federal government come down to Eastern Neck Island and turned it into the federal wildlife refuge. He applied and got that job there. And then he worked there until he retired. My mom, after her kids grew up, she was a legal secretary in Chestertown.

JB: Okay.

RF: I didn't go to college, I grew up in Rock Hall and graduated in '75. Actually went out and worked on the water. I met a guy and I decided not be a secretary, I worked for lawyers, I decided to not be a secretary. So I through off the high heels and go some watermen what do you call them?

JB: Hip boots.

RF: Moleskins and boots and I went out patent tonging. I was probably one of the very few that's ever patent tonged out in the bay because that is hard work and it is all hydraulics and it is very dangerous. And it is hard to hold on to tongs because they are so heavy with the waves going back and forth but anyways I patent tonged for two seasons I think and two years. And then after that I ended up marrying that guy and went into a seafood business that he had, his parents had. So he worked on the water, I worked on the water with him and then we also worked the seafood store. His parents retired and we took over the seafood business and actually had that from 1980 till '97 I left. It was just going down, there was just two years we couldn't pay the property taxes on it, pay your expenses and really make it.

So I had brought oystering to the business, buying oysters, which they never did that before me. So I took that portion of the business and went to, we sold the seafood business but I kept the oyster part of it and went to the public bulkhead and bought oysters off the boats as they came in. So I didn't have any overhead except my truck and my equipment, you know. And I made a really good living back then as far as, and I was single going through a divorcee. So as a single girl in 1997 I was probably making \$55,000 a year only working between, for six months. You can only oyster six months out of a year. So I did really well. Now that's all gone.

JB: Yeah.

RF: You can't buy oysters now. You know the government restrictions so that's gone. Anyways that is a whole lot of information.

JB: I would love to know about when you were with the hydraulics with the oystering like what did you do out on the water?

RF: Oh I oystered, my husband ran the boat out there which I could of too.

JB: You ran one of the sides?

RF: I ran one side, he was on the other. Back then there were enough oysters that you could do both sides. You were allowed 25 [bushels] per side and so I caught mine and he caught his and then we would come in. He as a gentleman would normally shoveled them, you know because, I could some but I could have not shoveled like he did but you know I was very competitive trying to keep up getting as many oysters as he could do and that's all fun too because the one that runs the boat, you know, there is a pile of oysters on the bottom that you could see and he would try to get on them you know. So he would get more on his side then I would on mine. it is also it is harder for a girl to do then a guy and very dangerous. He kept reminding me all the time watch your fingers, you know, you get your fingers cut off if you grab them up in the hinges. You had a foot pedal that you worked: throw them over board, close them up, swing them it, they come up, open them up and drop them. When I first started, the first day, I had all this watermen clothes on and I would stop and take my bandanna, wipe my face, mud off of it and then after like three or four times I was like enough of this. You come in and you are all muddy and it is a mess and you are tired, very very tired.

JB: Is it a lot of upper body work then?

RF: Yeah all day long, fighting against the waves and trying to hold on because it is heavy equipment and being careful so anyway I would sleep at night believe me and there are very few girls or women who have done that on the bay. I don't know of anybody but myself but I'm sure maybe down somewhere someone. I couldn't have been the only one anyway.

JB: Why ladies go out and do it?

RF: Because it was too dangerous and too just it was all men worked on the water back then. Some women did because they went out fishing because you could sit there and squeeze fish out of a net all day, you know, and then they geared net when they came ashore but as far as the dangerous, dangerous stuff like that men didn't let women do that back then, you know.

JB: Did women get nervous with their guys out there, if they lost a finger or?

RF: Oh I'm sure there was one guy that come up a few years back it was probably about 15 years ago and he actually, you're fine, It was a father and son and he hit, so he grabbed it wrong and his finger was in there and his father had to hit the power to go ahead cut off it the rest of the way off because it was, yeah.

JB: So he literally lost a finger, it wasn't reattached?

RF: No. It was stuck in there and he just add to make that decision I can't imagine.

JB: Did you have accidents on your boat?

RF: The only thing I did one time is, this is your cull board. This is where the oysters come up and there is a lip here and it's high and it was dropped here and my husband always told me don't grab it here 'cause that is where the hinges are.

JB: Grab on the sides.

RF: And don't put our fingers on the table because you will mash your fingers. And you wear gloves because the oyster shells are really sharp and I had my fingers here all on the board and they were hitting them and I was like ah you know 'cause I had cuts on my fingers all over the place. So I came close to mashing them but I didn't. Fell overboard one time in the middle of the winter when it was icy and cold. I fished too, when you pull, when you go out on the big boat then you have to go into a little bateau to go fishing nets. When you come back you have to grab a hold of the big boat. And my husband would be in the bow of the boat, in the stern and he would pull up, you know, and you would have to hold...

Wait staff: Can I get you something to drink?

RF: I am going to have a glass of wine.

Wait staff: Okay.

JB: I'm good with water.

Wait staff: Water? I'll be right back

JB: Thank you.

RF: And he told me to grab hold of the big boat and I did. And he said and don't let go cause it was rough out there. So the sea went this way and I still held on because he told me so the boat, the bateaux we were in went over there and I was still holding on to the big boat and it was icy cold water and then I let go. so than he just reached in and scooped me up and put me in the big boat because it was sinking fast. It was like yeah it was in February I think it was icy and cold and then I was wet all day and cold, it was a mess.

JB: What kind of net were you using? Anchor nets or...

RF: Anchor nets.

JB: Anchor nets, okay.

RF: Those are fun too I guess you heard all about that but that's when you get the great big catch, let's see now.

JB: Were you catching anything other than rock fish? Where you trying got get perch?

RF: Yeah perch, yeah perch there were different seasons. Rock fish, well now it is all regulated but there are certain times you can catch rock fish, certain time you can catch perch.

JB: Did you have a commercial fishing license?

RF: I did, is this on? Ok I will turn it off.

JB: You're okay.

RF: Ok what did you say?

JB: Did you have a commercial fishing license?

RF: Yeah.

JB: What kind did you have?

RF: A TFL.

JB: Ok. So I was talking to Patsy Higgs she said when she first started she didn't need a commercial license and she was oyster tonging.

RF: No, because she probably got her oyster license since she did oyster tong.

JB: Yes.

RF: Did she hand tonged or patent tonged?

JB: She hand tonged.

RF: Ok and I never got to do that. I patented tonged. Yeah, I guess, see I fished so I had the whole license shebang.

JB: Ok so you oystered and fished. Did you crab at all?

RF: No.

JB: Ok.

RF: No, I don't know why I didn't crab. He did before I met him. I guess because then it was so busy we were working the seafood store and I guess you learned about sloughing soft crabs I was up all night doing that and I had kids.

Wait staff: I will be right back to get your order.

JB: Thank you. We can pause this for a second. We can look at the menu and order and then we can go back.

[Part 2]

RF: Hey Lauren.

JB: He was very nice to me. He gave me your card because the front door was locked, where you worked. So I was just like oh I need her phone number.

RF: Oh how wonderful and I heard you knock but we don't use that door we come through the kitchen but anyway he is getting ready to buy a house.

JB: How exciting.

RF: It is his first house. He is in the merchant marines. His parents own this place so there you are.

JB: It is exciting buying your first house. So when you were a little growing in Rock Hall did you go fishing?

RF: I would go out with my parents when they would go trotlining like on the weekends, it was just a pleasure boat. It wasn't work at all. My parents didn't work on the water. My husband I married did, my first husband and his parents owned this seafood business they had start years ago. They used to come down here on vacations they started it. And actually she started just a little bateau that she put peelers in that turned into soft crabs. And then they did more and more and they ended up with the seafood business but they started on their own, which is pretty cool. And that was a woman who did that, her and her husband did it together but he actually would go out and fish. And she was pretty much running the business and then we took it over somewhere around '83, '85 something like that. And then but it then started off going, you know. We had some really good years in there but then it just started going downhill and my now husband, Ronnie that you met, we met just about '97, '98 when I ran the other seafood business he was shucking clams and selling them. He always worked on the water but he also

had his little business too because he would export or ship the soft shell clams and stuff up to New England. So we both owned one.

JB: How was it running your own seafood business?

Wait staff: Here you are.

JB: Thank you.

Wait staff: You're welcome.

RF: Hard work but if you enjoyed it which you have to. I mean, my husband, my first husband, got very tired of it and so he just went out and fished.

JB: Ok

RF: He went back on the water and left me running the business. It was very hard work but it's gambling. You know, you work all day and you buying these fish and then you try to get them, it's like playing the stock market. You try and get them in there before the market gets flooded with fish because the prices start going down on them. If everyone is catching them by the time you get yours to the market the price could drop. So I would be down there and fish would come in at night time and I would be packing them and making your boxes, taking your ice, and you know packing and then throwing them on the truck, send them into Baltimore or New York or where ever it was and you better get there quick because everybody else is to. They start coming in and the prices start dropping. I've had it when I made such good money, unbelievably, when they all come in and pack them in there. I have also seen on the other side where the price is so god awful by the time you get them to the market you take a less then what you paid.

JB: Oh you take less.

RF: Oh yeah when I got my checks back they cut my ticket because so many hit the market at the same time and they cut it and you ended up, I bought my boxes, I paid for my ice, my labor, the truck, the shipping, you know the gas if you are shipping them and all that hard work and then you come back and you get less money. You actually lose money, gambling process.

JB: Yeah. So where did you ship to from the...

RF: I mostly shipped to Baltimore most of the time. Sometimes well Baltimore and D.C. and a few times into New York. Now if you got really, really loaded up they'd go to Virginia or North Carolina because you had that many, you know, the bigger places can buy larger quantities where in Virginia and North Carolina.

JB: Did you focus on one species or another species?

RF: No, in this area it was always perch and rock fish. I mean you might get a few boxes of catfish or something if they were hitting. You know enough that you could put them together to ship but mostly in this area but it was mostly perch and rock fish.

JB: Ok so why did you guys decide to leave your panted tonging and go into the seafood business, the selling business?

RF: Well patent tonging is seasonal.

JB: Okay.

RF: Like you if crab in the summertime and then you oyster in the fall, fish in the winter and then you keep fishing in the spring and then it goes around to your crabbing in the summer again. So it was just a supplement. I mean, you know, it is just hard work and you can't do it on windy days. That is when you geared your net you were doing other things, you know, to keep things going. Summertime it was so busy because we had a retail business and we sloughed soft crabs. So you were up every three hours, you have to do that and you only oyster October through March so.

JB: Oh so you did all these things at the same time?

RF: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

JB: Oh ok I didn't know that.

RF: Yes all of it. One goes out, one comes in, goes out and just rolls around to the next year.

JB: Did you slough in a closed system or?

RF: Yeah, we had water coming out of the bay. My husband was very good at regulating that. I didn't know how to do that. We had 24 boxes and we were just steady, when the crab sloughs and if you don't get them out in three hours it starts getting hard again. So you had to keep going over your boxes. You would start every three hours. It was 12, 3, 6, 9, 12, 3, 6, 9, 12 like that. Sometimes if all 24 boxes were full by the time you were done it was time to start again. And your biggest slough was in the end of May beginning of June. And that's what I had all three of my daughters so I was always like 9 months big leaning over these boxes taking these soft crabs out. Yeah.

JB: What was it like working pregnant like that?

RF: It was ok except that I remember the crab steamer 'cause we steamed crabs and I just can't stand the smell of the crab steamer when I was pregnant. So that was horrible. But I was lucky because I got to work my own hours. We had people work for us, you know. So what I would do is get up in the middle off the night at check the soft crabs so I could be home with my kids all day. We had a picking house and a shucking house, you know, where they pick the crab meat. And I did, I ran like 40 some people in there shucking, these women. I mean not shucking, picking

cabs. And I did all the book work so I would stay up. I'd get my time cards on Wednesday and I would stay up all Wednesday night. I never slept Wednesday nights. I would stay up after the kids went to bed and do all the payroll and the book work for the week. Then I could put it away until next week so all you had to do was count the money box and get ready for work the next day but never slept on a Wednesday night because that was when I did payroll and that was my contribution. Then I could be a stay at home mother for my kids. It got busy on the weekends I would go down and help but I got to be with my kids. It wasn't a bad life but not something I wanted my daughters to do. I did not want them working 7 days a week and I physically worked like a man and I really didn't want them to do that hard work. You don't mind doing it yourself but you don't want your kids to do it.

JB: Did you kids ever help you out, either on the boat or in the store?

RF: Yeah, yeah my oldest she used to, when she got her license at 16, she used to go down and check the soft crabs, drive down and check the soft crabs so I didn't, I was doing something else. The other ones yeah they worked the retail but they weren't quite old enough at the time. And when I was getting out of it was when they were in high school then they went to college. And then we got rid of the business. Thank God because you can't make it now.

JB: So what are your children doing now?

RF: Our son is 33 and he works for Verizon. My daughter is 29 and lives in New Jersey, she does graphic design. She got out of school she got a very good paying job and is very successful. She won't come back here until she retires. She loves the area but they can't make the kind of money, you know, she makes there. My 27 year old girl, she went to Savanna College of Art and Design and she is right now a stay home mom with a 1 and 3 year old, she will work later. And then my 23 year old daughter went to cosmetology school and she is in Chestertown doing hair.

JB: Oh wonderful, so none of them are involved in the seafood industry whatsoever.

RF: No, we would not encourage that at all. You can't make a living out there anymore.

JB: Yeah

RF: The only ones that can survive are the ones who already have a house and boat paid for. No way can you go out there and work and take enough money out of what you make to pay for your boat, to pay for your house you just can't. And in fact back in the day, you know, then it was the men who worked and the women stayed home. They might gear net, or you know, they always did their part but you just, now the wives are working they have to work and they are still not making it.

JB: Yeah

RF: I've been very fortunate that I saw the opportunity and go off I was going through a divorce and my in-laws had passed away. I had the opportunity to get out at the perfect time and my husband now he was getting out at exactly same time and he was going through a divorce too and he decided to sell his boat he took up an office job as town manager. We are both very very fortunately we got out at the right time. A lot of people are stick stuck in it.

JB: Yeah I have so many questions running through my head I don't even know where to start.

RF: And I talk sorry, I go on and on.

JB: No that's perfect. So why did you decide to start going out on the water with your husband when you were oyster tonging like?

RF: My first husband that is how I met him. I met him in Chestertown I was working for attorneys and I came to Rock Hall just to go out in the evening I was like 22 or whatever. And I come here a single girl and I was going to go out and I got to talking to him and he had grown up in this town. He was 10 years older than me and I just got to talking to him and said I would love to go out and try it, work on the water. He said come on, you know, takeoff those high heels and come on. I tried it and I like it and then I ended up with him so it just went right on into the and he would take me fishing with him and his parents had the seafood business. I always thought that was really neat to go down there that piece of the harbor there. This is really cool but we have since sold it because you just can't make it, you know. It is a shame, I really feel bad that his mother built it up. It was her life's dream and if she knew we had let it go she'd have been so sad. And my daughters often ask me, you know, mom how come you let that go, that was a piece of the harbor. Why did you sell that waterfront? I'm like because we could not pay those waterfront taxes from the seafood business and I couldn't have put you guys through college and the hell of that and I didn't want you working there 7 days a week. Do you want to go back and work there 7 days a week? And you know and when you look at it that way it would have drugged you down and they wouldn't have had their college experience then they understand.

JB: Yeah.

RF: They are looking at the outside, why did you get rid of that but you got to move on. It's not a smart person that doesn't go with the changes.

JB: Right, where was the seafood store?

RF: It is right in the harbor. Have you been to the harbor?

JB: Yeah.

RF: It is right there at the harbor. If you at Harbor Shack look right you can see Kane's, so then there is the department marina so there is a right chunk that was right over there.

JB: Got it, okay. Did watermen pull right up on the dock there and unload?

RF: Yeah, we sold fuel to everybody. When I was buying oysters sometimes there would be two boats at the end of the dock putting out and then somebody up here closer to land, you know, putting out, two at a time. So it was busy back then now you can't even get an oyster in Rock Hall.

JB: So you specialized in, so it was after the divorce you started specializing in oysters?

RF: Yeah.

JB: Why did you choose oysters as opposed to another type seafood?

RE: Because it was the one thing I had brought to the business that they didn't do until I wanted to, to supplement. What you would do is make all your money in the summertime and in the fall you would lose money because you didn't have a product to work with until fishing came in and then you would make your fishing money. So you would go backwards. They'd make all this money and then you start eating it up before you through to winter. So I thought, ok what can we do to lose ground in the fall and this is before oysters started in October, September then, but October now. So I called around and I hooked up with a guy and I started buying oysters and it did, it helped us tremendously. So that's how that got started.

JB: Yeah.

RF: And then I because I took that to the business I thought I could take that. And I kind of I owe my husband now a lot of credit because he said just leave the area as far as taking care of the seafood business. And I said how? He was like go over to the public bulkhead and buy oysters. It doesn't cost anything to set up. You got all your equipment that you need. They will let you use the bulkhead and you don't have to pay your waterfront taxes and all that and it made sense. I'm like ok I'm going to do it.

JB: So the husband you were getting a divorce from kind of came up with...

RF: No

JB: Oh.

RF: The new one.

JB: Ronnie, the new one.

RF: Ronnie is the one who told me that.

JB: OK

RF: Yeah and I let my ex-husband have the waterfront and all that because it was his parents before and I had some other properties that I had inherited from relatives and we just divided it up. So that what I got what wasn't on the water and he got what was on the water. And that's the way he wanted it and you couldn't even it out and I was like that's fine, let's do that. So he ended up, I gave him the waterfront that is what his part was. He ended up selling it and I kept the stuff that wasn't on the water. I sold some of it later and then I went over to the bulkhead and started buying oysters. We had a very mutual divorce. I mean we had kids together, we had just grown apart. And I was also taking care of his mother and his dad died and his mom lost both of her legs due to diabetes, they were cut off right here. So I took care of her 'cause I was right across the street from the seafood business. So I was raising three kids, working the seafood store, and taking care of her. And I don't have any idea how I did it. So then when we decided to get a divorce and just it was easier. We just did it.

JB: Got it. So when you brought the oysters in did you also then increase the sucking business?

RF: I shipped them away from here. We would shuck enough for retail but I sent them away from here. They come up off the boat in a tub and then you flip them on to a conveyer and then they go back up on to the back of the truck.

JB: Oh so it went straight from boat to truck?

RF: Yeah. From the tub to the truck

JB: And it was your truck?

RF: No, The truck would come up from St. Mary's County or from down the bay. Let me think what it was when I first got started, it was Deal Island. A truck driver would come up back up to the conveyer he would come every day he would come, they would come in, they would go in his truck, and he would come back the next day.

JB: Okay.

RF: I only held what I needed in baskets for retail or to shuck so we could sell some pints and quarts. And then later when I went over to the bulkhead and all I did was oysters, I hooked up with the biggest buyer Robbie Bevens out of Virginia because with all the oysters depleting all the oyster houses did. So there aren't oyster houses in Maryland anymore. Robbie Bevens' Oyster company and Compark Seafood, those two people have the biggest oyster shucking houses in Virginia. So they started sending me up tractor trailers and they come in big trucks. You know we would bring them in and send them down so they would send me a driver every day.

JB: Okay.

RF: I would love to still be getting them but I can't get them.

JB: Yeah.

RF: Then if things don't change this year. See I bought oysters last years and did real estate at the same time but see things have changed so that there aren't as many. So you have to hold them a couple of days to ship them and I have a big truck. So I can work in retail, I can worked the real estate office because of cell phones now and their not catch as many so when they come in and just haul their bushel baskets and they were would come up and put them in my truck while I was doing real estate. Because there weren't that many and not to many oystermen left and then I could ship them like that. I don't know if I will ever buy oysters I don't see it in the future. You know I have my license and I started, I did it this year I bought 50 bushels in the beginning but then there just weren't any. So I don't know if I will ever buy again although I will keep my license and see how it turns out. I like doing it but it's just not going to be there anymore.

JB: Yeah so where did you get, sorry...so I have heard stories that people get their licenses from their family members because it is so hard to get a TFL. So where did you get your license if your family didn't, if your parents didn't work in the seafood industry?

RF: My husband, my ex-husband had a TFL. I guess I didn't, I said I did but I didn't I must have just had the commercial because I was a beneficiary on his. And when we through the divorce he changed the beneficiary to his son understandably. Ronny sold his after he was off the water for so long. We kept paying for it and paying for it and we weren't using it so he actually sold his so yeah...

Wait staff: Hi ladies, is everything ok?

JB: Yes, thank you.

RF: Now I think we're good. I keep thinking a crab license or oyster licenses if I wanted to oyster. It makes no sense now but no I guess I just have my oystering, my buying license.

JB: Okay, so it is a separate license to buy seafood?

RF: Yeah and when I oystered I had an oyster license. I didn't have a...let me think how that worked. I must have... Now see I've been gone so long I don't know how long they've had TFLs. I fished out on the boat I don't know if I had to have a fishing license or maybe I was allowed to go with my husband to help him. I definitely had an oyster license I don't know if I was able to you know, for him to sell them he probably had a fishing license and maybe I was just allowed to go on the boat to help do the work I don't remember.

JB: Would you ever back out there to work?

RF: No, no.

JB: No.

RF: No, I'm too old, it's cold no and you know you I think it is really cold out there but when you are out there working it's not cold anymore, it's not bad but no I've moved on. Like I said I really think the smart person is someone who moves on. I'm into real estate now and I really like what I do. You're never going see those big catches like you done. My husband now, Ronnie, he would tell you the same thing. He wouldn't want go out there and do it 'cause it is not like it used it to be. It used to be, you go out and work really hard and you had the opportunity to make \$10,000.1 mean if you hit that one catch, you know, fish or something you made good money now it is all so regulated you just work and work hard and you don't make anything. You can't because if it is any amount they limit you to the amount you can catch. The price is all controlled about how much they will pay it's not any more you know how I told you I could work and send it in and make that big really big money if you were the first one, sometimes lose money. It's not like that anymore. The seafood buyers protect themselves. They don't pay the watermen until after they get their check back. They make sure they get their...back in the day they would make 25 cent a pound I have no doubt they make 75 cents- a dollar I don't know but they are going to take theirs and then give the watermen theirs. They finally wised up on that one so it's not like the harder you work the more money you make it's not there anymore. So no I don't have any desire to go there and fight the elements and work that hard unless you can make for really good money and that's just a thing in the past.

JB: Yeah.

RF: And they do, they work so hard oh my God when I see these guys that are my age. I am 55. There are the guys I went to school and last year I paid attention to them and they were coming in with oysters. They don't catch enough oysters now to be able to back up and shovel them on a bucket to go on a conveyor for the trucks to come anymore. They just don't catch enough. So you have to do more work to hold them for three or four days to get a whole bunch together to ship. So they have to manhandle these bushel baskets of oysters and they weigh 75 pounds, the bushel of oysters. When they come in they have these oysters, they are smarter than they used to be as far as shoveling, well you caught too many before so you had to put them in a pile and shovel them afterwards. Now the tongs come up and they have two or three they can move them right in the basket then move the basket and keep on going. Well they come in maybe 10, 12 bushels of oysters if they are lucky that's a big day. They have to take them, and I see them 55 years old and they would come in and they would take these baskets and lift them up on the washboard, they are my age you know, and then to the dock and then they get out and from the dock, up to the top of the bulkhead and up into the back of the truck and it's all lots and lots of work. And I'm like guys, I wish so bad so that they had not loved the water so much or could have done something else but they didn't go to college. It's what they know, the water. And I'm looking and you know you are my age and I feel bad that you have to work that hard. It would be different if they were making money but they aren't making much. Their wives are almost taking care of them.

JB: So most of their wives have second jobs?

RF: Oh yeah that is how they pay their insurances and probably how they make their house payments and put food on the table. Well hopefully they have their houses paid for by now but the young ones coming up, they're not going to make it. They need to do something else. I mean their boat isn't paid for, their house isn't paid for you know how do you do it? And that the ones that do have their boats paid for are barely keeping their heads above water that's why their wives work, so you know it just isn't there.

JB: What do the women do for jobs?

RF: Well see now things are changed from when we were out there working and I think some of them Chuckie's wife, she works for the Board of Education I think. She works in town as a secretary. I know there are some that work in the school system but they all have jobs just like their husbands. It gets them their insurance, you need insurance more now than you used to.

JB: Do you remember any of the women in the seafood industry that worked around here?

RF: The ones that you named. The other ones are older and I guess gone. I'm trying to think, I know you heard of Miss Edna Marie.

JB: Yes, I have.

RF: I've called on her more than once when we didn't have enough you know if the price was down, I'll just take these to Miss Edna Marie. She must have been really she is older than me. I sold her oysters before but she must have been really tight.

JB: She didn't give a little bit more to the local watermen?

RF: Oh no she was very tight she counted her pennies. Yeah it was a good time while it lasted.

JB: Did a lot of women own seafood, like wholesalers or seafood retailers?

RF: No, it was very unusual and I will tell you what, now that you mentioned that is more now that men are working and the women could sell it when they are out working but you got me, Annie J, Sheila Strong. You know it used to be a whole male dominated thing where you had Evans Seafood, and Hubbards, and J. Jacobs had a place, I don't remember what that one was called, Rock Hall Seafood, Ernie Colman had one. They were all run by men, you know there were never were any women in there. Men did that waiting for the guys to come in with their catch. They were sitting there playing cards drinking beer but it was all men. Now it is switch around so yeah us women are or I mean they are still doing it.

JB: Did the guys ever like snicker at you in the business or did you get any backlash for being female?

RF: No, because you worked hard. I think they admire you. I mean they would come in there that was the biggest problem I had. They would say move out of the way I'll grab those crabs. Crabs weight 45 pounds a bushel. So you picking it up and stack them 3 or 4 high and put them on the pallet and put them in a walk-in and move it around and put them in the steam room, cook them, and take them out and the guys would say, "get out of the way let me do that" because they were used to women not working and the men doing that. I was like" no, no, no, let me do this. This is my job I don't want you to do this." Then you would feel like, they worked all day and maybe you would think maybe they would sell someplace else where the men working so they didn't have to do it all. So you did or I did, try extra hard to pull my weight because if I wanted to work in a man's world then you have to do it. But they were always so courteous. More so back 15 years ago then they are now. No, let me do that, let me do that I was like no this is what I chose to do so let me do it and it was nice because I was so much tinier and I was so fit. I had muscles you know. In fact they bothered me I thought I had too many muscles at the time. I should go back and do some of it.

JB: I don't know if I could lift 45 pounds crabs.

RF: You could.

JB: That's kind of scary, sometimes their legs pop out.

RF: Oh stop I should stop if you grew up around the bay. I'm talking and not eating.

JB: I know I should let you eat for a little bit.

RF: Tell me about you-

JB: Okay.

[Part 3]

RF: You can get that.

JB: Oh, it is actually not my phone ringing.

RF: I thought it was.

JB: Nope.

RF: You didn't have to do that. What were we talking about?

JB: Brodie, college.

RF: I never had the opportunity to go to college because we just, you know, we are middle class. We were low income we were middle class this is a seafood place. You didn't talk about going to college you know, you

just didn't. I'm sure if I had thought about it or looked into scholarships maybe I could have gone to my guidance counselor and did it but I didn't think about it. It's just we just didn't go to college just didn't think about it in Rock Hall. So when my daughters came along I wanted them to all have the opportunity to go. I was very proud of that Kerry was the first one, my oldest, was the first to graduate college in the family. Then Mary did 2 years younger and then Brodie she actually did not want to she asked me. I always talked college and I remember one time all, I had three girls had long hair and they were in the bathtub I would wash, wash, wash, cream rinse, cream rinse, cream rinse, dry, dry, dry, comb, comb, comb. You know I would be so tired when they were done but they were done. And one time they were in there and my ex-husband, I said something about you know what when you get older you make sure you can make it on your own I don't care what you do in life but make sure you can make a living on your own, that you don't have to depend on a man. I mean I think that is good motherly advice but he got furious. I mean he is old school, he was a watermen, very religious. He was like no you need to depend on your man. I said you know what we have three daughters I don't want them to depend on a man. I want them to be able to make it on their own. So I never did anything from kindergarten until they graduated except talk college, talk college not forced it but just like it was expectations. You go to kindergarten, you go to elementary, you go to middle school, you go to high school you go to college, you know just one of those things.

And Brodie, my youngest when she came along after her sisters went to college. She said, I want to take a year and I was like I don't care if you take a year off but you are going to go. Ok I just want to take a year off and then I'll go, work for a little bit. I said ok and when she got ready to go she was like ahhh, I don't really want to go to a 4 year college I don't know what I want to do. She was always high maintenance anyways which surprised me. So she decided to go cosmetology school and it was the greatest thing that ever happened because not everybody has to go to college. I think you need to do something, you need to either go to college or a trade school or something. And she did it and she is very good and what she does very well. My daughters, I'm not bragging but they are all very artistic, ones in graphic design, ones in fashion design, and Brodie is in cosmetology. She does a really good job with the color on hair and stuff and she is really good at what she does. So it would have been a waste for her to go to college, not a waste I don't mean it like that. But she was lucky enough that she has the talent that she could do it. Now she is making really good money and I'm like whoa. I'm almost glad I didn't waste that money on college. It wouldn't have been a waste. I don't want to put it that way but she good at what she is doing and is very very successful.

JB: Yeah.

RF: So everybody is different you know but I was at first I was disappointed because I didn't think she was going to college but then I realized that not everybody has to but you have to do something.

JB: And cosmetology is kind of like college. They make you go to school.

RF: She went for 18 months or something like that I paid for it and that was good. So she doesn't say didn't go to that four year thing and here you are going for your masters.

JB: I'm just crazy.

RF: Now turn that off and tell me about yourself.

JB: I have one question for you.

RF: Ok go ahead.

JB: Don't you think it is kind of funny that your husband said that you have to rely on a man when you basically didn't when you were working you did the oysters, you did the seafood selling, you were out on the water with him.

RF: And his mother did too. It wasn't like he grew up with a mother that protected him. She worked, I'd say harder than her husband. She was a hard worker. He was just, he was really just, I guess he wanted to take care of me and had I wanted to stay home, I mean he never asked me to go down to the seafood business and work it was just, I was there and if I didn't have to pay the hours out or I could be there and helped out I wasn't going to sit at home. It's just, he would have protected me and taken care of me and wrote a check to church so the good Lord would take care of us and just not worry. He would think that everything would take care of itself. And I had more than one argument with him and he would say everything will be fine and I said if the good Lord gave me a brain I am going to use it. He just felt that if you gave a certain percentage of money to the church you are going to be fine. Well I'm sorry I am on tape but I think if God gave me a brain and wonderful children and I am going to work hard to take care of what I am lucky to have. So everybody thinks differently its that was fine that was his beliefs but it wasn't all mine. So yeah it is kind of odd that but I'll tell you what in the end though cause like I said we remained friends and he came to my house for my daughters little reception thing one time just a few years before he passed away when our kids were adults and he did tell me I did a wonderful job. Well we did. He said you did a wonderful job raising he was very proud that they went to college, very proud of how they turned out but it just wasn't what he saw, for end results and I know he was proud of them. I did but I just wonder what he would say.

JB: So why did you decide to go down to the seafood wholesaler, retailer?

RF: 'Cause I was used to working hard and he had it his parents had it and she needed help. Oh I can remember one time I was with him when we first got married no we were married yet. When I was working there and she would pay me very well cause my husband would go out and work on the water. My mother-in-law worked in the retail seafood business, picking crabs, wholesaling and she is of the area where she was keeping the books and she was running everything and she was the one doing everything. And she got mad at her husband one time. She was like, so she stopped. She

was like you don't appreciate me so I'm not doing nothing. Well I went and filled in...

Wait staff: Do you want any?

RF: What? No. Do you want any?

JB: No, I'm ok.

RF: So she quit. She was like 'I'm done, I am staying home' at their house was across the road. So I picked up all the slack oh my god and I walked into that room one day, in the retail room, and she was like I want to talk to you and I was like what. She took me to the side and she's like I was trying to prove, you know, there was a purpose to my madness here. I was trying to prove something and you are picking it up, now they are never going to give me credit, so I had to stop. I understood what she was doing so I had to stop and I couldn't do anything. So this place is like falling apart and then they could give her credit for what she did. But that was weird you know.

JB: They didn't appreciate her because they didn't appreciate her.

RF: No they didn't and she wanted to prove it but with me picking up the slack as a woman. I mean you know but no you sit there and your question was why did I go down there because I had always worked my whole life and I mean when Gina, my oldest when she was little, it was my way of contributing. I wanted to be a stay at home mom I really wanted to be with her but if I could go over three hours and check soft crabs at nighttime I felt like I was doing my part. If I could do book work I was doing my part. I can remember I was breast feeding I would go down and check them and I would be so nervous I would go as fast as I could because I didn't want her waking up and me not being there. I don't know some women, you felt like you had to do your part. A lot of these women geared net and stuff while their husband who were out working you know. If you could gear the net or whatever you would do to supplement, you know, you did. So that how I was raised, that's what I was used to doing and the more you do yourself you don't have to pay out, you have that more money for your family. So that's that like I'm not going to be some big hero. I was just doing what you have to do to have the most money for your family.

JB: Yeah I don't know. I don't know if I could wake up every three hours. Did you set your alarm every three hours?

RF: Yeah and sometimes you get home you check them at 12 and there are a lot of crabs and you get home and it is like 2 o'clock. You think oh my god I have to get up at 3. It's almost not worth going to sleep but you got to even if it's a few minutes, you know. It is bad when it goes by the time you get over it is time to go again 15 minutes it's not enough time to go home I just stay sometimes you can't get over and start again but you know what no one plans that. No one said I am going to work hard I'm going to do this for so many years. Like you, you don't plan everyday of your life.

JB: You just do it.

RF: Like when you get overwhelmed and you have a whole lot of work to do at school. You don't oh my gosh when I get there I am going to do that it just kind of creeps up on you and all of a sudden it is there so you do what you go to do and it's done. I've been very fortunate all mine's worked out in my life. Whatever I do I get into. So when I was worked on the water I loved it when I was in the seafood business oh my god I loved it because that was so cool because I was the woman in charge you know this boat back over here, this one over here, I'll go over and pay this one, you pay this one and then I got busy so I had to pay someone else to help me and I really couldn't control my bookwork. It was like you do that. It's cool because you are in a man's world and you're like ooh I can do this, that was neat, that was neat and you get a lot of presage out of it, you know, also a lot of hard work but like but see I've always like what I've done and I like doing it and then like when that was all going to hell I was also carrying a little bit of money at the time and I invested in property. No, first I did the stock market, I was like day trading when I wasn't working and I was really, really lucky and I was day trading making money on the side.

So I loved that and when that started going downhill so I thought uh-oh it's not a place to put your money. Not that I had a lot of money but you didn't want to put it in the stock market cause it was just going downhill so I put it in some property. And that was really good for a while switching houses and I don't mind hard work. So I was going in, buying a place, cleaning it all up, you know and wallpaper and paint and flipping it and making some money. I loved it, it is a lot of hard work but if you like what you are doing you don't care. I did that for a while and loved it. And then properties went to hell and so that's when I took a couple classes in real estate just because I wanted to do something to say that I went to school because my kids went to college. I was like it is my turn to take a class, do something. I had been out of school for 35 years so I got to do something. So I did that, scared to death the first day I sat down in the class the teacher said why are you here? I'm like 'cause I had three girls go to school and they were successful, I just feel like it is my turn. It is probably a stupid answer but that's why I was there. So then it turned into this and now I am working like back in the seafood business. I am working 7 days a week, day and night, which I didn't want to do but I like what I do. So if you like what you do you don't mind working so hard.

JB: Yeah.

RF: So now I have to figure out how to scale down some because I know the harder I work the more successful I am and I am really doing good right now. I'm making money and I love it but I got to find a balance because I am not home enough. It used to be all weekends and everything for my family, my place was the place to go and now for the last two years I have put everything into work. So now I got to find a balance so everybody still comes back to my house on weekends. You know, you don't ever want to think it is not work. Well, that's my story.

JB: How did you find workers like how did you find that girl that helped you with the oysters?

RF: Oh, because she was my daughter-in-law.

JB: Ah that is handy.

RF: And she was very honest. Yeah in fact even through the divorce and stuff if she is looking for work now and if I can work in out I have to hire someone to sit in my office so me and my partner can go out on weekends. She is a very very good worker. So I would love to have her back. She is one of the best employees I ever had.

JB: How did you find people to pick crabs for you?

RF: Because what else are they going to do and I don't want to talk about black people but that's actually what they did and that's I'm not a prejudiced person but back then that's what a lot of the crab pickers and the oyster shuckers and even the fish baiters, which is a whole other story, that's what the black trade did back then. Especially even the oyster shuckers were mostly men but some women got in it and they were clam shucking and we had a shucking house, I'd say that 95% were probably black women.

JB: Black women?

RF: Crab pickers and before that when it was shuckers over to the clam house men and women combine was probably almost 100%. And it's has become a way, you know, now they don't crab but they'd like to do it and they are all older now so they say that but there's nothing of them to do anymore. So they did it and they were good at it and I'm not going to say they didn't make pretty good money at it, you know. It was control only so much per container but still that was the black trade.

JB: Oh okay. Did African Americans do anything in else in town other than picking crabs or oyster shucking?

RF: Oh yeah there was Campbell's Soup were they used to go out and pick the meat off chickens for Campbell Soup Company.

JB: Oh okay.

RF: It was like a half hour away or maybe 25 minutes away. Oh gosh what else did they do? Well they worked in the kitchens around here and worked in the shirt factory. A lot of white women worked at the shirt factory too. 'Cause my grandmother did when I was little, and my aunt, I don't think my mom worked in there, but kitchen staff. Hunting was a big thing back then so they worked in the hunting lodges, and cleaned houses. Which a lot of those girls are still cleaning houses if their husbands are on the water so that's just a change. Ok we're done.

JB: Yeah okay.

[Part 4]

RF: Up to the pylons and you can catch a soft crab with another crab or you can catch peelers and the peelers are what you put in those 24 boxes I told you we slough them. And we were paying I remember, we were paying 35 cents a peeler and so and I had to work to give Brodie something to do and this is a long dock and she was like 7 and I was like ok Brodie, I bought her these pots to hook to each one of the pylons, go check your peeler pots and she would go out there. And she knew the peelers the crab has a little green ring in the fin or a red one. And she would know if it was a peeler or not and she would bring them back and she had a little basket and little dip net and that would keep her occupied while the watermen were coming in and putting their product out. And she would be out of my hair. It wasn't deep and she knew how to swim and all the watermen knew her and she would go do that and keep her occupied. She would bring them in a 5 gallon bucket and I would buy them from her just like I would anyone else and I kept her little ticket going and that is how I paid her and that's how she made her money, and kept her out of my hair at the same time.

JB: You gave her little peeler pots that is so cute.

RF: Yeah. You know, it would be very boring if she went down there with me with nothing to do. And then she worked at that, I don't care, she was making her money and her mom was making her money.

[Part 5]

RF: At the end of the week money was tight and I didn't want to spend more at the grocery store because money was tight back then, I would just eat seafood because it was so cheap. You know so okay so we are eating fish tonight and then I would fish out on the bay and bring it home and we had fish and we had food that night. Oh my God go buy fish now I can't do it I can't buy fish. I'll eat them in a restaurant or something but what you pay for fish is absolutely ridiculous. I guess I have had it for so cheap for so long when I met, you know, I would go see him on a school night for an hour or something and give my daughter would have a pound of crab meat that was a pound of back fin crab meat, here dip it in the butter which she liked and I'll be back. Do that now and it would cost you like 30 dollars you know I had an abundance of it. Seafood come in an abundance and that is what we would eat because it was cheaper than going to the grocery store, not any more.

JB: Yeah.

RF: It is all changed and it's never going to be like it was. You can't go back, but those memories and stories talk about through the years [unintelligible] so that's fine so just change with it and keep on going that's what I do and you have to adapt to the change if you don't you are going to get pulled under. That's probably my big theory.

JB: Yeah. I can see that.

RF: Yeah and we both left at the right time.

JB: Yeah you both left at the same time which is nice.

RF: Yeah, it is like gambling you know when you get up playing blackjack or whatever when you get up from the table. No one hits it right but you are always going to think yeah we made out ok, that was good, that was good and I guess that how it is with us because of circumstances I don't know if we would have planned it that way but because of circumstances we drove at the right time. A lot of these men breaks my heart when I see these men working, they are my age and they are working that hard and everything and they don't have the opportunities and don't know anything else. That is sad part they don't know. Maybe their wives can learn a little more then but the men can't. I don't mean it that they can't don't take it that way.

JB: No, I know what you mean, they are not going to.

RF: They are sad, they are intimidated. It's what they know, they know hard work. So there is nothing lazy about them but I think it is degrading. I think it is a shame 'cause I feel bad for them. I feel like they are being degraded that they can't make it with their muscles like they used to. Men like to be men. Women like to be women you know what I mean. It is hard for them. They keep trying it must be very infuriating. Alright.