

## Interview Log

Interviewee: Ronald "Ronnie" Fithian (RF)

Date: 2.20.2011

Location: The Rock Hall Municipal Building

Topic: working in Rock Hall, crab potting, tonging, Rock Hall, watermen, women, race relations.

Interviewer and Transcriber: Julie Broadbent (JB)

Field Notes: Ronnie Fithian is the current Town Manager of Rock Hall.

JB: So today is February 20th. Yeah 2011 am with Ronald H. Fithian. Is that ok if I call you Ronald or do you prefer Ron?

RF: Ronnie is fine.

JB: Ronnie is fine.

RF: Yep.

JB: Ok so how did you start being a waterman?

RF: Well I grew up in Rock Hall as a kid. I was born and raised here. And back well I was born in 1951 and during the 50s and 60s it was just, it was hard not to be part of the seafood business because the town of Rock Hall, I always say, whether these numbers are exactly right or not but I have always said that I think probably 80% of the people who lived in this little town at one time years ago made their living in some way off of the water. Whether they went out on a boat and physically were waterman whether they shucked oysters, picked crabs, drove trucks, seafood trucks, painted boats, pulled boats up, something associated with the seafood business. This entire town was really involved in that. I remember a gentleman that had a grocery store on Main Street his name was Mr. George Myers. He said, there is a very large oyster bar outside here it's called Swan Point and he used to say that his yearly income depended on the oysters on Swan Point because if the fellows had a good year obviously they spent money at his store and he had a good year. If it was a bad year on Swan Point then he obviously had a bad year. So the whole town revolved around the seafood business. I got out of school in 1969, I went away in the service for a little while and I come back and went right to work on the water. Even when I was a kid, I had my own little tiny boat used to go up in these little creeks and stuff and catch perch and fish and try to sell them. Muskrating, going around the shore catching muskrat, I did that right up to when I was a teenager when I had to put gas in my car. Fishing, hunting, trapping, that's what I, was my life and I'd always go down to the shore when the older fellows

were coming in with their boats and they would have fish in the nets that needed to be taking out or oysters needed to be shelled. There was always a job for a young boy on the waterfront. So when you ask me when I got involved in it, it was almost impossible not to get involved in it, if you, especially if you were a young fellow who liked the outdoors and like that kind of stuff and I did. I just love the idea of working on the water especially fishing. That was the thing that I enjoyed the most 'cause you really got a sense of accomplishment I guess when you went out there and caught a lot of fish. 'Cause there is, you know, despite what people say there's hundreds of reasons why there can be plenty of fish there and you still wouldn't catch them. Whether the water is too clear and they see the net or it's not warm enough or it's too cold or it's not cold enough. There is just a million reasons why so the day you finally get things right and you manage to have a good dip of fish you felt like you outsmarted something I guess. It was a sense of fulfillment that you had accomplished but any-who the whole business was great. We made good money.

I was thinking just the other day back in the early 70s, I actually when I first started oystering we were using these hydraulic patented tong rigs. There would be one on each side of the boat and they would go down like a little clam shell and pick the oysters up and then bring them over, dump them on a cull board we would call them where you would pick the oysters out and throw the shells and stuff back overboard. So a friend of mine, an older friend of mine had a boat and he was about ready to put two rigs on it and I got a job running the other side. We were allowed 25 bushels on each side, total of 50 bushels. We'd go out day break, we'd come in 12, 1, 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We always had our 50 bushels and we got 5 dollars a bushel, that was 250 dollars. He took 10 dollars out for gas, left 240 dollars and, he gave me a third of it. It was 80 bucks and I would do that five days a week. And then the early 70s I was making 400 a week and a lot of young people today in the year 2012 around here can't make 400 dollars a week. So we were making, to make 400-500 dollars a week back in the early 70s was good and then when other jobs like when we were fishing, I had years in the 70s and 80s clamming. Regardless of what we were in, there were some years, you know where you would make 100,000 dollars a year working on the water and it was a great industry. It was something you could get married, buy a house for a family off of this industry. And then unfortunately it all started going downhill when I think I'm going to live to see the end of it actually because it is getting close as it is right now. I told you I was one of 127 oyster boats that went out there every day and oystered. This past year there was none. I was one of 47 clam boats. We used to catch those soft shell clams, the ones with little neck on them.

JB: Yeah the little necks.

RF: They were really soft you could take them and smash them with your fingers if you wanted too, the clams. But they could sell lots of them up in New England they fry clams up there, the steamer clams. Well we caught probably 90% of those, the clams that they sold up in New England in the 80s and 90s because their clam beds had the red tide up there. They wouldn't let them harvest them because of pollution and they had, to harvest them by hand up there with these little racks, they'd go out.

Where we were doing it with hydraulic equipment, the water blowing them out of the bottom and they come up a conveyer. Well we had plenty, we had a lot of clams and it was nothing to go out there and catch, you were allowed 15 bushels a day we catch them every day by 12, 1, o'clock or something. But we supplied New England with those things for fifteen or twenty years.

There were 47 boats of us out of Rock Hall that were doing it and there's none left today. They are all gone so the fishing industry, they've, they're pretty much I mean when I fished you could catch all you could catch, at any time you could catch it, almost any way you could catch it 12 months of the year. And population of the fish got down to where they started putting restrictions on it. It actually put a moratorium on striped bass for a number of years and then when they brought it back, it's brought back to where the fisherman were allowed eight or nine days a month and something like 3 to 500 pounds per license. There's plenty fish, there's more fish then there's ever been but it's so limited that you can only do so much with it. And I tell you on the other hand it is also so limited that it is good for the fisherman because the price is up but only by allowing them to catch a small amount of fish the prices stay so sky high because the majority of them are going to your big restaurants in Washington, Philadelphia, New York. But the local people, I mean you can't hardly, you can't afford to buy them. They're like, I don't know like 10- 12 hours a pound for fileted rock fish. Well years ago we used to feed most of the county off of fish because they were cheap we were catching a lot of them and the price would get down where people, a lot of people ate fish around here all the time. It has almost priced the locals out of feeding fishing because you are allowed such a small portion that they get a lot of money for them. So anyhow it is good for the watermen except they certainly could afford to let them go more than 8 or 9 days a month but anyhow about the only thing that hasn't been messed up is the crab industry. It seems to be holding its own. It's hard for a waterman though to make enough money in the summertime crabbing to carry him all winter. So that's when I started, when I saw the seafood business starting to go downhill and my salary going downhill with it was when I decided to kind of get out of it and try and do something else and I also am an elected official here in Kent County I am one of the three county commissioners. I have been dabbling in politics a little bit and I was sort of involved in it because we would have to go to Annapolis every year and fight some of these new laws they wanted to put in place for the seafood business. And then I was president of the Watermen's Association here in Kent County for 10 or 12 years. So I got involved in being an elected official for the county and then when the job of town manager of Rock Hall come about I applied for it and got that and for the last 15 years I have been doing this and being a county commissioner at the same time for the last 15 years.

JB: Wow.

RF: And people ask me if I miss the seafood business and I would miss it, I miss it the way it was 20 years ago when we could make a living out of it and catch the stuff and it was a great livelihood. I don't miss it

the way it is today. The pollution and stuff that just about ruined all the, certainly ruined the oyster industry, the clam industry. The governmental regulations have ruined the fish business and you know they open these gates up in Conowingo [dam] and get this large influx of fresh water goes down here and that's what killed the oyster off the last two or three times and I don't think there is only clear answer to it. And I unfortunately don't think that it is going to be long before the seafood business is going to an end and in some aspect it already has such as the oysters, the clams. I Would love to think• that there is a light at the end of the tunnel but I'm not sure that there is. And this town, Rock Hall is basically built on oyster shells. I mean and this year you couldn't buy a bushel of oysters. We used to• harvest hundreds of thousands of bushels of oysters out of here. As a matter of fact in the bay itself, on the Chesapeake Bay, we used to harvest two or three million bushels a year and now even state wide, the whole bay it's down to about 100,000 and that is in the lower bay. So we had the diseases that took a toll; Dermo, MSX. They hurt the oysters a lot and the clams but and then it is always the constant battle in the fish business between the sport fisherman and the commercial fisherman. How much of the pie do they get and how much of the pie do the commercial people get and so it's always been a battle for that ever since I can remember. I'm glad that I made the move that I did and doing a different job but it was certainly a special time in my life. I would have wanted to do nothing else then what I done and when I was in the business. There was nothing like it the harder you worked the more you made and I enjoyed it if I had to say so myself I was pretty good at it and I made a good living out of it. Loved it but things change.

JB: Yeah.

RF: And this certainly has I feel sorry for the people I see that are in it now and don't have no other choice but to stay with it. I know they struggle a lot to try and make ends meet and that's it for me unless you have any questions.

JB: Were your parents' watermen, your dad, grandfather?

RF: Well my parents died, both of them died when I was really young. My mother actually died the day after I was born from childbirth complications and my father, he did work on the water but then he got hooked up with a wealthy family that had a boat that he captained the boat down to Florida every year and stayed down there every winter and come home during the summer. Then he actually was part of running a crew boat when they were building a channel up Chesapeake City and he worked some of that work but my other relatives that are left here in this town, my brother was a waterman and my brother-in-law was a waterman. And we were just surrounded by all my friends were watermen and it was very easy to get involved in it.

JB: Do you remember what the watermen's wives, what they did?

RF: Well a lot of them would have second jobs. They would have jobs of their own. They worked at the shirt factory, places like the little shirt factory here in Rock Hall employed a lot of the ladies. A lot of the

ladies picked crabs and was sort of, you know they weren't approved health department places to pick crabs but the ladies were cleaner than anything then you would ever find anywhere. And they picked some crab meat especially if their husband was a crabber he'd bring home some crabs that weren't really good enough for market but they would pick some or they would buy those number twos and they would pick crab meat and sold it. And the African American community was into shucking oysters and sucking clams and they worked at all these fish houses too, packaging fish and driving the trucks and all that kind of stuff but the women were really if they were working in the seafood business, I mean obviously some of them had jobs cleaning houses or what everyone else does but those that are involved in the seafood business were shucking oysters, shucking clams, or picking crabs. They could stand there and do this work this all day. I used to love to go in there and watch them they would all be in there shucking oysters rocking back and forth and they getting that rhythm going with that knife and they get to singing those old gospel tones and stuff. And there would be 40 of them in there shucking oysters and you never heard such pretty music in your life and that was great.

JB: Did whites and black work together shucking oysters?

RF: Yes some whites did it but a majority of it was the African American population. Back then I'm talking about in the 70s, 80s and before. They were mostly all shucking oysters and clams and they were all mostly the African American population but we all worked side by side. You know if you needed extra hands, help on the boat you got some of the African I mean there was a black fellow who worked with me for several years oystering and you know, back then when they were talking about the freedom riders and all that kind of stuff and doing away with segregation and all, we didn't even know what they were talking about. We worked side by side all you know to this day that great respect for one another. Race was never really an issue along the waterfront in this town that I ever knew. Maybe they would look at it a little differently but everybody worked hard, white and black alike. They all do anything that could to help one another and it was just a great time.

JB: Was there I know there was one oyster building down here was there another oyster shucking plant around?

RF: There was shucking houses that are long been gone all over the place. There were three big ones right on Rock Hall harbor here and where they stood some of the land is not even there. Where those big shucking houses stood that land been, the houses been torn down and the land been scooped up and there is now boats are now floating in some of those slips where some of that took place. Down in the next town, Piney Neck and places they had some little shucking houses. Eastern Neck Island had little shucking houses. There were shucking houses all over the place because there was just an unbelievable amount of oysters and if you wanted to shuck oysters there was no trouble to get them there were plenty of oysters and everybody was into the business.

JB: Where do people pick crabs?

RF: A lot of the ladies would do it in their homes.

JB: Oh

RF: They might have, some lady might have five or six ladies come to her house sit around a table she'd go get her crabs. She would buy her crabs obviously from one of the dealers or from a local crabber, take them down and get them steamed, bring them back to her house. And the ladies were sit there and pick crabs all day and gossip. Sometimes I think they gossiped more then they picked but they were good crab pickers. If you wanted to buy a pound of crab meat you went to one of them. That's where you would get your good crab meat.

JB: Do you remember any women going out on the water and working? I know we talked a little bit about Patsy Higgs.

RF: Patsy Higgs, she was about the only one that I know of that I could say that she was a real fisherman. I mean she went with her father and some of her other family members and they had anchor nets set out there in the wintertime. They towed these two smaller boats out with the bigger boat and then anchor the big boat, get in these small boats, pull I these nets, take the fish out and Patsy did that day in and day out. So she was a real, she was just like one of the men and probably did as much work as some of them. But it was not a lot of women that actually went out on the boats they were really few and far between. My wife Robin, I was telling you about, she used to patent tong for oysters and that was not only a, that was really a dangerous job because, you know, when it is rough those things get to swinging back and forth when you bring them up and stop them. And then you want to swing them right over your table so you can get them to open up to drop all the oysters and shells out and then they go back over. You are running this with peddles and then you release it and it goes back down on the bottom. When it gets there you push another peddle and it closes up like a rake, it closes up. Well that's solid going and then in the middle there is a pin there it is like scissors and if you grab the wrong thing you lose your fingers, you know. You got to be careful when at you are grabbing a hold of because these things are worked hydraulically there have been some people got their hands cut off or fingers smashed or something. So you had to pay attention to what you were doing. It really, my wife won't like it if I say it but it wasn't really a job for a woman but she did it nevertheless.

JB: Where there quite a few women out there that went out to cull oysters and do that type of thing?

RF: No there was, you know, a handful in that business it was just wasn't a place that women went very often but like I said there are exceptions. I mean Robin did it, Patsy Higgs did it. Now in the river where they have hand tongs now there were women who went to cull oysters for their husbands once in a while there. It wasn't as dangerous work this was oyster tongs that were on really long wooden shafts. I mean it is hard work for the man standing up on the side of the boat to handle these things all day long but there were some women that used to go with their husbands and cull oysters for them and help out in that way. But most of the women, I got to say, most of the women that worked in the

seafood business worked on shore, shucking, picking and that kind of stuff.

JB: Okay.

RF: Shedding soft crabs, that was a job, that was a very time consuming job, 24 hours a day. Every three or four hours you got to go check the box. You leave them in the water for too long they shed out, you leave them in the water for too long the shells turn hard and they are no good to you to sell. So like every three or four hours around the clock you got to get up out of bed and go out in the cold, damp fish house and check your slough boxes. And Robin did a lot of that, she probably at times had twenty some floats that had peelers in them and the peelers are a little crab. If you look at their back fin there is a place on there that tells you that it's becoming a peeler. And if you crabbed enough you can almost look at the crab and especially if he is a ripe peeler because it is a little crab and on the back fin there is a little ring and when he first becomes a peeler it is almost a little white ring. Then it will turn green or then at first it is green I guess and then it turns white and then it is pink and then the brighter pink it becomes the closer the crab is to shedding. And so you when the crabbers would bring these peelers to you, you have to go through there and put all the green peelers to this box, all the ripe peelers to this box. Cause if the ripe peelers are in with the green peelers, the green peelers will eat it, tear it up. So you have to separate them. And then every so many days you had to go back into this box of green peelers and as they are getting closer then you'll find some pink rings in there then. You know, you have to keep separating them. Plus over here you have to be taking the soft crabs out and throwing the old sloughs out. It's just a constant going through them every day, every three hours. It is a lot of work, the three hours come quick when you are trying to get some sleep in the middle of the night, every three hours you have to get up and go down there; get dress, get up get out of bed, go check your peelers, come back, lay down, and two and a half three hours you go through the whole routine again. So you don't get a whole lot of sleep during that period of time.

JB: Do mostly women run these slough houses or did men run them as well?

RF: Men and women both it depends. There have been a lot of women Andrea Jaquette does it now but there's been men that did it, you know as well. It was something that wasn't real physical, a lot of time consuming but it wasn't real physical and men and women both could do if they decided they wanted to, wasn't any limitations to it.

JB: And women are more likely to catch crabs through either crab potting or trotlining?

RF: Yeah a lot of young girls around here would try trotlining. You didn't see many girls in the crab potting business because that again is done in the bay. Trotlining is up the little creeks, streams, rivers, and creeks. Trotlining, I don't want to say is easy but it is time consuming. You lay this line out and you just keep going back up and down the line dipping these crabs up and there's been a lot of women that

do that in the summertime. Out in the bay where you generally do your crab potting out here you aren't not allowed to do it in the river where they trotline. So it is designated as just crab potting out here but that's a lot of work out there too. I mean you didn't see many women involved in that either.

JB: So you are more likely to find women in the bays, or not in the bays, in the rivers?

RF: In the rivers yeah the creeks and rivers or helping her husband trotline or they're trolling themselves or years ago they would help their husband hand tong for oysters but other than that not too many women participated in that occupation.

JB: I heard a story about a gentleman who actually took his girlfriend out on the boat and that was a like great way to spend time when you were dating. Did you do something similar to that while you were dating?

RF: No, I can't say I ever took any girls out on the boat on a date now I took them out in the evenings. After your day's work in the summer was over you might take your girlfriend or wife or family and go out on the boat and just go out there and take a barbecue with you and cook out there or go fishing, hook and lining just for relaxation. The kids jump overboard, go out and go swimming. I mean you could do that kind of stuff, we all certainly we all did that kind of stuff.

JB: Yeah what was your favorite thing to do out on the bay, either for fun, for pleasure, or for work?

RF: I love drift fishing for rock fish that was my forte I guess. I liked a lot of it but that was my biggest thing in the wintertime. Years ago there wasn't a lot of us that did it but, you know, things had to be just right to catch a lot of those fish. You know I went months at a time and never got a paycheck and then made a seasons work in a week and that was the difference in that job or oystering. I could have been oystering in the wintertime cause you oystered then from September 15 to March but come that first of January I would always go fishing. And the reason being well it is just like I don't know it is like people in the gold rush. I knew that if I stayed oystering I could make a couple hundred dollars a day if I went out oystering and I put the time in I could make a couple hundred dollars a day or I could go fishing and I could take a change of making nothing or making \$20,000 in a week and I liked that excitement. I liked that opportunity to be able to strike it big and I've had winters Where I fished all year and didn't do very well and wished to hell I stayed oystering making a hundred or two- hundred dollars a day. I would have been much better doing that but then there have been winter like I said that I have done extremely well were I was glad I went fishing. So it was a little iffy but I like that excitement of that and I liked the challenge. There are some years I've done so made fishing that I had to quit and go back oystering just to help pay the bills a little bit. Then I'd quit again when it looked like it was changing but I always liked the excitement of having the chance of really doing well, of doing better than average.

JB: Is it easy to jump back and forth between fishing and oystering?

RF: Yeah it is a couple days you can be out of one and in the other. We've done it so many times I can take an oyster rig off in half a day and put it back on in a day and to go fishing it was really a matter of doing that, taking your oyster rig off and then putting your boxes of net onboard and you were ready to go. I never liked having to go back to oystering 'cause that was like you admitted failure. You know if you were oystering and you then you quit to go strike it rich fishing and then you had to come back and go oystering. It was like you never wanted to see that happen so we would have to do it once in a while but I don't know we just, that was that what I loved about it. I just like that.

JB: What was your least favorite part?

RF: Well there were a lot of those. I guess the least favorite job I had on the water when you went crab potting you set all those crab pots and then eventually after a certain amount of time the grass will start growing on them. Once it starts growing on them, if you let it go it will cover that crab pot to where you can't even see through it and the crabs won't go in it anymore when it gets dirty like that. Which means you have to stop the whole thing. Stop what you are doing and you got to start bringing them all to shore again. You got to get a power washer and spray that grass and stuff off of them and re-dip them. I just hated to have that process you had to go through because you knew for the next week or however long it took you do to that you weren't going to be making any money cause you got out of the crab business you were bringing your pots in to get them cleaned up to put them back and I hated that job.

JB: What did you dip them in?

RF: It used to be you just put them in tar, just tar, liquid tar but that was really that's, that stuff actually grew worse on them. That was done basically to silence the rattling of the pot, the stake, so that it would catch better. Then later on they came out with this anti-fallow paint sort of like putting copper on paint the bottom of the boat to keep it. That had this anti-fallow paint you would dip them in and you would get a longer length of time out of it. It would keep actually it would still grow on that. It was expensive to dip them all in that stuff. Sometimes you would have to, you still have to do that probably two or three times a year completely. Bring your whole rig in clean it off and dip it and take it back out and set it.

JB: Well thank you.

RF: You're welcome.

JB: I appreciate it.

RF: Not a problem.