

OH 432 - Turkle North

PETE LESHER: We're here in Saint Michael's. It's October 23, 2008. I'm Pete Lesher, and I'm interviewing Douglas North. But nobody calls you that, isn't that right?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:00:18] That's right.

PETE LESHER: What do they call you?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:00:20] They call me Turkle.

PETE LESHER: How did you ever get that name?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:00:24] When I was a baby, I was crawling across the floor with my neck kind of stuck up. And my father didn't pronounce it Turtle; he said it looks like a Turkle. And that stuck with me all my life.

PETE LESHER: Since you were crawling.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:00:41] Yeah, since I was crawling. A lot of people don't even know my name.

PETE LESHER: Tell me about where you grew up.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:00:39] I grew up in Cornersville, that's down west of Cambridge, Route 343. I lived with my parents and my father's mother. And I've lived there... The house was willed down to me, and I still live there, been living there all my life in the same house. Except for when I got married the first time, I moved out for a short time. And the marriage didn't last, and I went on back home.

PETE LESHER: So you've been in the water business for a good part of your career. Tell me about how you got into that.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:01:45] Well, the very first of it, when the tide was low, my father would take me down to the end of Castle Haven as far as he could get with his car. And we would take burlap bags and take them down to the stone pile down on the end of the point. And we'd pick these oysters up and drag them back to the car, and we'd take them to town and sell them. They were a dollar-and-a-half a bushel then. And then when I grew up a little bit, he had built me a skiff when I was small, and when I got big enough to use that, I would take my skiff and leave Chapel Creek and go down to the end of Castle Haven and nipper those oysters.

PETE LESHER: This was just a small skiff?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:02:40] It was twelve feet long. He built it for me when I was four years old, but I couldn't use it by myself until I was probably six or seven, something like that. And then when I was 14, he built me a bigger skiff. You could put an outboard motor on that one, and then I could go all over the place with that one, a seven-and-a-half horsepower. And I guess I started getting my license about when I was 14 probably. And I've had my license

every year since I was 14 until I sold them this spring, I sold my license.

PETE LESHER: Is this a tidewater fisheries license?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:03:33] Yeah, that's right. And then when I got out of school, I started tonging with somebody else. Then when I was 24, I bought my own boat. I worked pretty well all over the Bay, worked over on the Potomac River for eight years, [inaudible] fishing bay a little bit, on the river quite a bit. My home port was Little Choptank, but I harbored in Cambridge and worked the Big Choptank a lot too. It was fun, I loved tonging more than I did crabbing.

PETE LESHER: And what was the last boat that you worked?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:04:36] It was named the *Marie*. She was built in 1953. I bought her in 1964, and she's still going.

PETE LESHER: And who built her?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:04:49] [Slim Hubbard?] built that boat. He built a lot of boats. He built this for an elderly guy, and his health got bad, and he sold it to George Harrison... That's the Dorchester County George Harrison. And he didn't make it on the water, so I bought the boat from him. I've done a lot of work to it, in pretty good shape. I had the boat for a long time.

PETE LESHER: Can you tell me something about how you would distinguish a Slim Hubbard boat? Did he have a distinctive style that you could tell them from something else?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:05:37] No, not really. He didn't build two boats exactly alike. I couldn't tell... Well, I could mostly tell his boats because I knew he built them because I saw him, I saw a lot of them when he was building them, and I worked around them. They were just an early '50s model boat, they weren't real wide like they are now. The boats now have a wide stern. The stern on my boat was a little bit over six feet, and the boat was 37 feet. Now they build them a lot wider than that. She wasn't as full up forward as they build them now too. She was only eight and a half feet wide.

PETE LESHER: Standard box stern?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:06:55] Standard box stern.

PETE LESHER: Any tumblehome or anything like that?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:06:59] Her stern was rounded a little bit.

It wasn't straight across; it just had a couple inches around it. The sheer on her, it was pretty sheer, she come down, and when she got back by the engine, she just curved up a little bit, and her sides were, where the sides met the stern, they were rounded a little bit too. He built a good boat.

PETE LESHER: I wanted to talk to you in particular because in our conversations over the last few days, I've understood that you have known a lot of boat builders and have a good eye for Chesapeake workboats.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:07:51] Yes.

PETE LESHER: And you've known a number of boatbuilders too, haven't you?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:07:54] Yes, I have, I've known a lot of them.

PETE LESHER: One that we talked about a little bit was Harvey Hurley.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:08:03] Yeah, now I didn't know Mr. Hurley.

He wasn't building many boats when I was... I think the last boat he built was in the '70s. But he didn't build them where I lived at. He built them down in lower Dorchester. And the last boats he built were on [Bucktown Row?]. But I never did get acquainted with Mr. Hurley. He built an awful nice boat.

PETE LESHER: And you've got an eye for his boats. You were telling me how I can tell a Harvey Hurley boat from another one.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:08:36] Yeah, most of his boats, on the log rail, would be a little bit deeper up forward than it would back by the cabin. And he would notch his rope chocks right in the [log overn?] instead of putting metal chocks

on top the log, he would notch them right in the log. He made a nice-looking job of it. And back to stern, he had a different way than I had ever saw it, where you put the knee back to the stern, he rounded it. And he come up the side and rolled it back under the washboard so he could fasten the washboard right to the knee. It was fastened three ways: It was fastened to the strong back across her, it was fastened to her sides, and fastened to the washboard too. It made a strong boat.

PETE LESHER: Tell me about some of these builders that you knew personally.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:09:55] Well, there was [Tony Odane?]. You could tell most of his boats, you could just tell the model of them. He had a distinctive pilot house on them that most of them, you could tell by the pilot house. And Roger Bloodsworth, he built one, it was just a style that was different. Most of the boatbuilders built a style that you could tell from one boat to another, whose it was. Now other people, some of them built every boat different.

PETE LESHER: Like Slim Hubbard.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:10:39] Yeah, like Slim. He would build them more like you ordered... He didn't build them to sell to the public; he built them for a certain person, and he built it kind of the way they wanted it built. And some

people had a different... Well, a lot of the boats Slim built, they didn't even have a pilot house when they were built because the people thought the pilot house would make them slide off of a crab line, the wind would catch into it. And in the older days, a lot of boats were built without a pilot house.

PETE LESHER: Just a low cuddy?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:11:20] Yeah. They had a slide at the doorway. They had a slide in the cabin, in the cabin top, and you could shove this slide ahead, and step down in the cabin. It's something I'd have to draw and show you. You've probably seen them in the older boats. Mine was built that way. Somebody else put the pilot house on her after she was built a few years.

PETE LESHER: We were talking, too, a little bit about how different folks did the forefoot. I remember observing Harvey Hurley did vertical staving, maybe fanned out a little bit. But they didn't all do it that way, did they?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:12:19] Harvey, he put staving. He started with staving up to the bow, and it went crossways the boat. In later years, in World War II, there were two guys in particular that worked at the Cambridge shipyard, and they learned how the government made what they call a PT bow. And this guy, Paul Jones, and another one, John Elliott,

they were the first ones to put this lengthwise planking up for it, and it made a nice job of it. I don't think it was as strong as the staving because it was cross grain, staving it was cross grain going through the water, where this PT bow lengthwise planking went with the grain. If you got into ice or something, it would go right through that grain.

PETE LESHER: Okay, I never thought about that in regard to ice, but that makes sense. Were there others, besides Paul Jones and John Elliott?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:13:31] Well, when they started, a lot of people copied after them. Most of the guys down in the lower part of Dorchester learned their boatbuilding skills from [Brownsie Parks?] because Brownsie was an old-timer at it. And in the wintertime when people were froze up from oystering, they'd go to work for him because he'd have several boats underway at one time. And they would go to work for him, and they learned from him how to start a boat. And there was a lot of good carpenters that learned from Brownsie Parks. Now he used the staving up until he died because... Or I'll put it this way, I don't know of any boats that didn't have the staving that he built. I've been around boats quite a bit, worked in a boatyard for quite a while one time.

PETE LESHER: What yard was that?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:14:39] I worked for Galen Mills. He built a couple boats later on in life, but he was more of a boat repairman. He did excellent work, and he learned from Milford [Aggett?] how to get one started, and he built... The only workboat he ever built was named *Leona* after his wife, and it was a very nice boat. It had some of the old features on it, like the narrow stern, which the narrow stern made it good going headwind because the stern would go down and allow the bow to come up more than a wide stern boat would.

PETE LESHER: Not so much buoyancy back there.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:15:35] That's right.

PETE LESHER: Where was his yard?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:15:38] His yard was in Cornersville, about seven miles west of Cambridge.

PETE LESHER: Right close to where you lived.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:15:45] Yeah. It was on Chapel Creek, which Chapel Creek is between Todds Point and Castle Haven on the Choptank River.

PETE LESHER: And when were you working there?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:16:03] I went to work for Galen when I got out of school. And I worked in the summer for him from '58, most every summer, until the early '70s. I would

always quit and go oystering when oyster season started. At that time, you started the first of September in Big Choptank River, and Little Choptank River didn't start until the first of October. It never gives the guys from the lower part of the Bay... Of course, it was [countywide?] waters then, everybody had to stay in their own county. But it would allow the guys from Fishing Bay and Honga River to come up in Cambridge in Big Choptank and catch those oysters. Then in October, they'd go back home and have another fresh crop. They quit doing that in the early '70s, and then it made... In the early '70s, there was a lawsuit. One county, Somerset County wanted to go in different county waters, and they contested it. And they changed the law to where the whole state could work in any county in the state. You didn't have to stay in your own counties. And then they changed it to the season didn't open until the 15th of September all over the Bay. Then later on, they changed that too. That happened in probably the early part of '71. Because in the fall of '71, I went over to southern Maryland and worked in the Wicomico River, which is in Charles County. Before that, I couldn't go into Wicomico. We had to stay in the Potomac. And that was the first year that I could go in any county I wanted to go.

PETE LESHER: You were telling me some stories about working over on the Potomac River, about stormy days.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:18:44] Yeah, the Potomac River was a hard river to work. The lower part of the Potomac was wide, a lot of tide. And on bad days, we would go different places. When we were tied in Virginia in '65 and the fall of '66, the highway that goes down to Coles Point was called Historyland Highway, it was Route 3 in Virginia. And there was a lot of famous people on that highway. Robert E. Lee was born there, George Washington was born there, James Monroe, President Monroe, who was born in Colonial Beach. And we would go around these places and look at the museums and stuff like that.

PETE LESHER: Did you stay over there basically all week?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:19:53] Yeah, we stayed there. The first year that I went there, we stayed aboard the boat a lot. And then later on, we rented a trailer. There was about six of us that lived in the trailers.

PETE LESHER: And so days when you weren't working, you were touring around?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:20:11] Most of the time, yeah, riding around drinking. [laughs] I used to drink a lot, I used to be a heavy drinker years ago.

PETE LESHER: You told me that one of the boats... You told me you almost got drowned in a boat over there.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:20:32] My god, the *Miss Chevrolet*. We were froze up. I was tonging by myself that winter. I was in Little Choptank, and we were froze up. And a friend of mine had the *Miss Chevrolet* that was on the Potomac, and they weren't froze up there, so I went over with him. And this one particular day in late January, we went over... We were up above the Route 301 bridge, and we went over on the Virginia side. And we were tonging on [inaudible] point and the wind breeze up heavy southwest. We were under the shore. And in come hot puffs, it was real hot puffs, I mean really hot. And then later on, it blowed so hard, we had to leave. We had been [lining?] oysters... Or he had been lining over on the [Maron?] side at Popes Creek. And we got over there, and we couldn't tie the boat up because the waves were too high. And we left there for to go back to our harbor in Aqualand, and knowing that the starter was bad on this engine, sometimes it would take a minute for to get her to lock in. And we were going up that shore side too, and the waves looked like they were 12-15 feet to me. Anyhow, the engine cut off, and I stood there to the pilot house, and I said, "Oh, God." And when he hit the starter, she went off the first pop, the very

first time she went off. And when we got into the mouth of the harbor, there was a boathouse that probably had 40 or 50 boats in it. And as we went in the channel, the wind blowed the whole roof off that boathouse in one piece. It really blowed. They clocked the wind in [Laplaydo?] was about 20 miles up the road, maybe less than that, at 97 miles. And that's the closest call I ever had on the water.

PETE LESHER: And that engine was an engine that you had sold the guy?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:23:06] I had sold this engine to the guy. It come out of my car. My car rusted out and still had a good engine in it. And I knew the starter was bad when I sold it to him. And I said, "Now, Charles, before you put that engine in, you got to rebuild that starter." But he didn't do it. And that was my last trip on the *Miss Chevrolet*.

PETE LESHER: *Miss Chevrolet* was a dovetail.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:23:37] Yeah, she was a small dovetail, very narrow. I don't know when she was built, don't know where she was built, or who built her.

PETE LESHER: But you do know how she got her name.

TURKLE NORTH: [0:23:52] Yeah. This is what I can go by.

Captain Charlie [Lunthacam?] sold bicycles in [Church?] Creek in the early 1900s. And he got the Chevrolet

franchise. And I would say that *Miss Chevrolet* was built in the '20s, I can't prove that, but that's where the *Chevrolet* got its name, when Captain Charlie got the Chevrolet franchise, and he sold Chevrolet cars. Like I said, it was the early 1900s when automobiles was just coming out.

PETE LESHER: And this Charlie Lunthacam was the owner of the boat at the time?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:24:52] When I was on it, no. His nephew owned it when I was on it. His name was Charles also.

PETE LESHER: You were telling me about some other builders of... Well, some builders of some of these dovetails. And I think what got us started on this conversation was a boat built by Robert Thomas.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:25:19] Yeah, that was before my time. He built a boat for my great-uncle in 1921. He also built the boat that your father has, which I have found a picture of that boat.

PETE LESHER: Did it have a name?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:25:43] No. As far as I can remember, it never had a name.

PETE LESHER: And who was the owner, as you recall?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:25:52] Captain Willy Bennett. I learned from his daughter over the weekend that he was born in 1896. So

she was built around 1920, had to have been built for him. I asked his daughter if it was, and she didn't now because she was born in 1938, and she said all she knows was, she remembers it all of her life, all of her days.

PETE LESHER: And you think that he had her altered.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:26:26 Yeah. The story that I got learned is she was straight-sided. And the guy didn't like that she was so narrow inside, that he rolled her out and put her sides... I'd say they're a foot or more wider at the top than she is on the waterline on each side. They really flared her out. I think the picture I have, she's straight-sided.

PETE LESHER: And Captain Willy Bennett operated her... Was he somewhere on the Little Choptank?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:27:12] Yeah, he was on the Little Choptank in Hudson Creek. He used her, I guess, until he died, and his brother got her, [Leslie?] Bennett got her. And when Leslie went to work for a state hospital, he sold her to a guy named Barney [Pagers?]. And Barney didn't... He used her I don't know how long, two or three years probably. And he sold her to a guy named Fred [Pomeroy?], and Fred only used her one summer because he said every time he got to [inaudible], he had to pump her out, she leaked so bad. [laughs] He sold her to a guy, and she went to Taylor's

Island, and that's the last that I knew anything about her until I saw her recently.

PETE LESHER: When about was that that you think she went to Taylor's Island?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:28:09] Early '70s. Barney bought a John Elliott boat from Curtis Bloodsworth. And Curtis had his boat in 1970, I remember. And I don't remember much him having her after that. I think Barney bought her in 1970 or '71. And that's when he got rid of the dovetail.

PETE LESHER: Any other builders that we should be talking about here?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:29:06] Well, there was Paul Jones and John Elliott. They were some kind of relation, they started kind of together. I don't remember just when, but they both built a lot of boats in the '50s. I think the last boat that John Elliott built was in '54, because I know the guy that's still got her. And I know the guy that still has the first boat that he built.

PETE LESHER: And what are those boats?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:29:40] The first one built is named [Dewayne?]. He built it for [Crawford Windsor?] and Crawford has still got her. He named her after his brother. It was right after the war, right after World War II. And [Robert Cannon?] has the last one he had built,

and it was built in '54, he told me, because he's still got her. And of course, Crawford has still got his too. But Robert has kept his up like [*Sticky Candy?*], she really looks good. He keeps her painted nice, in first class shape. Of course, Crawford takes care of his too because she's lasted as long, since right after the war, so he takes good care of them too.

PETE LESHER: So John Elliott had a relatively... He wasn't building boats for a terribly long time if he started after World War II and quit by 1954.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:30:39] Evidently, yeah, that's right.

PETE LESHER: Though I guess it sounds like he was building boats... Was it for Cambridge Shipbuilders during the war?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:30:53] Yeah, he worked on the government boats for the Cambridge Shipyard. I don't remember who was running that at that time, but not long after the war, there was a guy named [Potts Roberts?] had it, because my father used to work for him some. And I didn't deal there much, I don't know much detail about the Cambridge Shipyard.

PETE LESHER: Let me loop back to the *Miss Chevrolet*. That's the boat that you sold your car engine.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:31:37] Yeah.

PETE LESHER: And what sort of engine was that that they put in there?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:31:41] It was a 1959 Chevrolet 348 block. She was the big block.

PETE LESHER: So she had a type of engine that was appropriate to her name at the time.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:31:57] Yeah, she did. The 348 engine had a lot of power. They come out before the 327. They come out right after the 283s come out.

PETE LESHER: Did you always have automotive engines in your boats?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:32:15] Yes, I did. When I bought her, she had a little V-8... Flathead V-8 Ford, which wasn't much good. So I took it out and put a six-cylinder Ford in and kept that in a couple years. Then went to a small V-8 overhead valve. Then in 1976-1977, I put a 350 Chevrolet in her, and that was really a good engine. It was a year old out of a junkyard, and it's still in her right now, the guy that's got the boat.

PETE LESHER: All these engines were in your boat that was built by Slim Hubbard.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:32:57] Yeah.

PETE LESHER: How long did you expect one of these engines to last in your boat?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:33:06] Well, the way I used them, I weren't into racing like some of the guys. I could get 10 years out of an engine, if they were good when I put them in there. Because I put a couple... I put some in the factory rebuilt, and the factories had a problem finding an oil leak and never did get the oil leak fixed. I had five 292 Fords [inaudible] they all leaked oil until I found somebody to put a rear seal in her, a rear [inaudible] shaft seal. And then it lasted, I used that one for eight years before I put the Chevrolet in.

PETE LESHER: Well, Turkle, I don't want to keep you here. I'll let you get off, and perhaps we can resume this conversation at another time because I'm very interested in what you can tell me about boatbuilders and watermen and others down there in the Little Choptank area where... And other places that you've worked.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:34:20] Yeah, there were several boatbuilders in my area before my time. Well, after I got into it, it was only a few that built boats. Milford Aggett, he lived on [Caseneck?] on Little Choptank. He built a lot of boats. He was still building after I remember, and he built them up until he was 80, I guess.

PETE LESHER: Did he have a distinctive style himself?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:34:53] Yeah, he had a... Most of his boats, you could tell them.

PETE LESHER: On the cabin?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:35:00] Just the lines all over them. Because they were mostly... It was something in her design that you could pick out that he built her. It would be some in the lines someplace. Sometimes it might be the cabin, sometimes it might be the stern, sometimes it might be somewhere else, but you could pretty well tell Milford Aggett's boats. And he built a nice strong boat and used good wood in them. They lasted good. [inaudible] built... He didn't build many workboats, but he built three or four that I know of. He built a lot of yachts. And he got his start from Brownsie Parks. And he did change one thing from Brownsie Parks. Brownsie didn't rabbet the keelson out [inaudible]. He put a rabbet the keelson out and put the skeg on top of that rabbet part. And the bottom one, the bottom didn't butt up to the skeg, it butted up to the keelson. And Milford staved like Brownsie, skeg butted... The bottom butted up against the skeg. [Vayne?] Mills, I worked for Galen, and Vayne was his father, and he built Galen a boat. Him and Galen built a boat in 1939, and it was a nice boat. But they didn't know how to build a pretty boat, they didn't know how. He built her in a shed

and couldn't stand off and look at the model of her. And he'd never built a boat, and he just didn't have the knack for to get a good style on her. And then before he died, he built another one in 1961. And he said, "I'm going to change one thing. I'm going to have a higher bow on this one." And by God, he did. [laughs] It was a funny little boat, [laughs] it really had a bow on her. I've got a picture of that someplace.

PETE LESHER: Well, thank you very much. I'd love to take a look at this photo that you brought in as well.

TURKLE NORTH: [00:37:49] Yeah, all right.

PETE LESHER: Shall we go ahead and do that?

TURKLE NORTH: [00:37:53] Yeah.

END OF AUDIO FILE