

OH 500 TroyWilkins

BRENT LEWIS: My name is Brent Lewis. Today is July 10th, 2023, and I'm speaking with Troy Wilkins for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Watermen's Story Swap Oral History Project. Troy, do we have permission to record this interview?

TROY WILKINS: [00:00:15] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And can you tell me your date and place of birth?

TROY WILKINS: [00:00:21] 11/21/66, Eastern -- Eastern Maryland.

BRENT LEWIS: And where are you from? When somebody says, "Where are you from?", what do you tell them?

TROY WILKINS: [00:00:29] Kent Island.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughter] What was your family like? Tell us about your mom and dad and any siblings you might've had.

TROY WILKINS: [00:00:37] Mom and Dad, Mom and Dad. My mom was a O'Donnell? from Grasonville. They've been here many, many years. My dad was from Kent Island. I'm -- my family goes back, Queen Anne's County, many generations, so we've been here quite a while.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have siblings?

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:01] I have a sister, yes. I have one sister, four years younger than I am.

BRENT LEWIS: And what is her name?

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:05] Wendi. Wendi Rhodes.

BRENT LEWIS: Were -- was anybody in your family -- did anybody in your family work on the water when you were a kid?

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:14] So cousins, uncles, and, like, some of my family was, like, part-time, in-between, stuff like that, but for --

BRENT LEWIS: But your immediate family wasn't.

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:25] No, no, unh-uh, no.

BRENT LEWIS: What did your dad do?

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:27] My dad was in road construction, and my dad told me every day, "Do not work on the water. Find a real job."

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:37] Yeah. Oh my God, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: He discouraged you from the get go.

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:39] Yeah, yeah. All my family did, grandparents, everybody, yeah. They seen the decline -- I guess it was probably, like, in the '70s, you know. So, yeah, they were certainly trying to talk me out of it.

BRENT LEWIS: Did they have -- had any of them worked on the water?

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:56] Yes, yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And so they have personal reasons for not --

TROY WILKINS: [00:01:58] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- encouraging you to do so.

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:01] Yes, yes, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Where did you live on Kent Island?

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:05] I grew up in Harbor View, Chester.

BRENT LEWIS: Harbor View's in Chester --

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:10] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- a housing subdivision?

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:12] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And did you -- were you around the water at all when you were a kid?

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:21] Yeah, at Harbor View, you know, as a kid, we could ride our bikes, not very far, and be at the water, fishing, crabbing, soft crabbing. Some of the kids that I went to school with that were my age that lived in Harbor View lived on the water, and, you know, we could hang around there, and fish off the piers, crab off the piers, whatever.

BRENT LEWIS: So you were a little kid then?

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:48] I'm saying... Nine, ten, like that probably.

BRENT LEWIS: And so the fishing and the crabbing, did all of that appeal to you --

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:57] Oh, yeah, sure, man.

BRENT LEWIS: -- [both speaking-unclear]?

TROY WILKINS: [00:02:58] The water -- yeah, everything about the water, you know? Fishing, crabbing, hunting, catching muskrats, all that. The water was the thing.

BRENT LEWIS: You were outside most of the time.

TROY WILKINS: [00:03:10] Sure, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: You talk about muskratting. When did you start doing that?

TROY WILKINS: [00:03:14] Mm. Probably nine, ten years old, like that, 11.

BRENT LEWIS: Was anybody in your family --

TROY WILKINS: [00:03:22] Oh, my neighbor --

BRENT LEWIS: -- trapping?

TROY WILKINS: [00:03:23] No, my neighbor -- my neighbor was probably -- let me see -- he was probably three or four years older than I was, so I would tag along with him. And then he had his license, too, and they had some property down, like, down Route 8, and we could go down there and go muskratting. We had a couple places we...

BRENT LEWIS: Was that one of the first ways you made money off the water?

TROY WILKINS: [00:03:45] Yeah, sure, sure, sure. Yeah, we would -- we would, you know, make a couple bucks.

BRENT LEWIS: How's that work? How did it work back then?

TROY WILKINS: [00:03:51] Back then, we would skin the muskrats, and we had, like, these stretchers you would stretch the hides on, and we usually, like, give the meat away, you know, to whoever.

BRENT LEWIS: How many would you catch?

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:03] Oh my gosh. I don't even know.

Enough to make a couple dollars. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah?

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:08] I'm thinking... I mean, we would go, like, after school to check them. I'm going to say we'd catch three or four or five, maybe eight or ten.

BRENT LEWIS: So set maybe a couple dozen traps?

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:17] Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And there was a robust market. A lot of kids, a lot of guys --

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:22] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- our age did that --

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:23] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- back then, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:24] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Who would you sell your --

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:26] [Auto Cable?].

BRENT LEWIS: [Auto Cable?].

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:27] [laughs] You know, right there on Bennett Point Road was the -- was a man right there, and his father would take us -- my neighbor's father would take us down there and sell our hides when we had enough.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that kind of the end of the market for muskratting?

TROY WILKINS: [00:04:41] I -- well, I think there's some now, but the meats are more valuable than the hides are, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm. And there's a certain cache, like, they have these muskrat festivals and that kind of thing now, but back then it was a pretty standard way to start making -- earning a little bit of money.

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:01] Yeah, yeah, make a couple dollars for a kid. I mean, what was there -- you know, there was, like, not a whole lot on Kent Island then for a kid to do, and, I mean, we really, like, as a -- as a kid, we didn't -- we didn't leave Kent Island. Everything we -- everything we needed was right there. We didn't really leave.

BRENT LEWIS: When -- how long did you trap? Until high school?

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:25] Mm, I'm thinking, like, maybe not quite that far probably. I'm thinking I got on a -- I got on, like, a fishing party boat, like, around 12, 13 years old, I think.

BRENT LEWIS: So is that the next move you made --

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:38] Yeah, that was --

BRENT LEWIS: -- into being a waterman, working on a fishing party boat?

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:40] Yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Who for?

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:42] Captain Warren Sadler.

BRENT LEWIS: And -- Captain Warren Sadler. Where did he fish out of?

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:49] Captain Warren Marina.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] And what was that experience like? What was your job as a --

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:55] Clean.

BRENT LEWIS: -- young kid?

TROY WILKINS: [00:05:56] Clean the boat, bait on there, take the fish off the hooks, keep the rods straight. Guess we -- I don't know if we cleaned the fish when we got in. Maybe we cleaned the fish, too. So that was -- it was interesting, and -- but there was no rockfish then back in them days. Everything was bluefish. We didn't catch any rockfish.

BRENT LEWIS: And how do you fish for bluefish versus, say, rockfish?

TROY WILKINS: [00:06:19] Yeah, today -- well, back then we were trawling all the time is what we did most time. I think, like, today, they do a lot of live line and stuff, catching rockfish, but trawling was the game back then.

BRENT LEWIS: Do people still fish for blues?

TROY WILKINS: [00:06:35] I don't know.

BRENT LEWIS: Not much.

TROY WILKINS: [00:06:36] Not -- I don't think around here much. Maybe some smaller ones, but nothing like what they used to, you know, catch.

BRENT LEWIS: Always heard that the fun of the bluefish was the fight, that they always --

TROY WILKINS: [00:06:45] Yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- had more fight in them.

TROY WILKINS: [00:06:46] Yeah, they had fight in them, for sure.

BRENT LEWIS: What's the difference in the rockfish and the bluefish as far as the meat goes, as far as the fish itself?

TROY WILKINS: [00:06:54] Mm, for me, the rockfish is much better to eat. Bluefish has got a lot more fishy taste to it. I'd rather have rockfish. Definitely.

BRENT LEWIS: And Captain Warren, how many of you guys would he have out on the boat with him?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:10] How many people?

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah.

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:11] I think there was, like, a six-pack,
six people.

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm. So you would be the only kid working for
him?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:15] Yep, yep.

BRENT LEWIS: He would pay you?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:18] Yep, and then you get a tip from the
cook --

BRENT LEWIS: And you would get tips.

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:20] Yep, yep.

BRENT LEWIS: So what's the next step? You --

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:26] The next step was got my own boat.

Before I even have a -- before I had my driver's license I
had a boat. I had to get a ride to wherever my boat was
tied up at.

BRENT LEWIS: Get out.

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:37] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: So how old? You're 14 or 15?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:38] Fifteen, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: [both speaking-unclear].

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:39] I'm thinking, like, 15, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: What was that boat? What kind of boat was that?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:42] A little -- just a small boat with a little inboard in, maybe 20-foot long.

BRENT LEWIS: But where'd you keep it at?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:48] Thompson Creek.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] Lot of guys kept their boats right in Thompson Creek, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:52] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: What's the name of that boat, Troy?

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:54] I don't think it had a name on it.

BRENT LEWIS: A no-name.

TROY WILKINS: [00:07:57] I think -- don't think so. I don't remember.

BRENT LEWIS: Had a little inboard on it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:03] Yes, yes, yes. I got it from Bill Duty, Wild Bill.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you remember how much you paid for it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:09] No, I do not remember that.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] How long'd you have it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:14] I think I had it [clears throat] a couple years, and I traded it to my uncle for a pickup truck.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:25] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: When you turned 16.

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:26] When I got 16, yeah, had to get on the road then, you know. [laughter] The women weren't on the water; they were up the road.

BRENT LEWIS: What were you doing on that boat? Crabbing?

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:35] Yes. Yeah, just crab--

BRENT LEWIS: Trotlining?

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:37] Yep, just trotlined, yep.

BRENT LEWIS: So how's that work, for someone who's never seen a trotliner operate? How do you run -- or particularly back then, how did you do the trotline?

TROY WILKINS: [00:08:47] Pretty much same as it is today: had a weight on each end. Had a line from the weight to the buoy, and then from the buoy, another line that had a chain down there, and in between the two chains, the line was probably 2,000 foot, something like that, and it had baits every six foot or so on it, and you'd just go down it and dip the crabs off as they come up.

BRENT LEWIS: You worked by yourself in that first --

TROY WILKINS: [00:09:16] Yeah, yep, yep.

BRENT LEWIS: So you were working as a crabber, kind of as a -- as a pretty young teenager --

TROY WILKINS: [00:09:23] Yeah, sure, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- still going to school.

TROY WILKINS: [00:09:25] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: That was probably about the time that your parents and all start saying, "Uh-oh, he looks like he really likes this," right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:09:31] Mm-hmm, yep.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that when they started kind of discouraging you --

TROY WILKINS: [00:09:35] Oh, yeah, I was always -- just, yeah, yeah, get a job where you got a retirement, you got --

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TROY WILKINS: [00:09:40] -- steady income. The water business is very -- I'd say your income is like a rollercoaster. You know, you're at the mercy of the weather. Is there the product there? Is not product, you know? So... But when you get older, you learn to even out those peaks and valleys, you know, but as a younger person, it's kind of probably a little tough, you know?

BRENT LEWIS: What did you think that was drawing you so much to it when everyone around you was telling you no?

TROY WILKINS: [00:10:16] I think the independence, you know? Kind of like you could kind of come and go as you please, to a certain extent. You know, I mean, even as a waterman, you've got still answer to your buyer, you know. You still got bills to pay, you know, just like somebody has a nine-

to-five job, you know. So I don't know, I think the -- I think the independence was a lot of it for me.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you work -- did you crab all the way through high school?

TROY WILKINS: [00:10:48] No, after I got rid of the first boat I had, and, and, and, and got a truck, I, I went to work, like, in the summer -- in the summer when I was in high school, I would pick clams. The soft-shell clam industry around here was booming then, and that was a pretty good job for me in the summertime.

BRENT LEWIS: Anytime in that young -- in your youth did you have a job that you didn't work on the water? Did you ever have a job --

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:17] No, I didn't -- I never did.

BRENT LEWIS: -- [both speaking-unclear]?

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:18] No, I never did.

BRENT LEWIS: Hourly gig or anything like that?

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:20] Nope, never did. Never did. Like, all my buddies were, like, dishwashers at Fisherman's, or this restaurant or that restaurant, and I never did that. I just didn't do, like... I would go clam in the summer, and then when I was at school I put all my efforts into my studies. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: That summer job soft-shell clamming, who were you working for?

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:42] Oh, Stanley Jones.

BRENT LEWIS: And Stanley was a Kent Islander?

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:46] Yes, yeah, down Dominion.

BRENT LEWIS: What was -- was -- he worked with a clam rig?

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:52] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Can you describe that for someone who doesn't know what a clam rig is?

TROY WILKINS: [00:11:55] A clam rig is kind of like a conveyor that would sit on the bottom, and it has water that washes away any of the bottom around where the conveyor is, and the product -- whatever's on the bottom -- shells, stones, any kind of solid material -- would just wash up on that conveyor belt, and be transported right to the surface, and then when it comes up there you just pick off what you want, and what you don't want just goes back to the bottom.

BRENT LEWIS: You said the clam business was booming back then. My understanding is that the New England clam industry kind of fell. They opened it up here --

TROY WILKINS: [00:12:39] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: -- for a good decade or so. That was one of the primary things local watermen did, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:12:46] Sure, yeah. They were processing them here. Several places were processing them, and, yeah, I think it was a good business for a long time.

BRENT LEWIS: Some of those got together and would sell their -
- would take their clams to New England. Did you ever get involved with any of those kind of --

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:02] No, no, I did not, no.

BRENT LEWIS: -- gestures?

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:04] Nope.

BRENT LEWIS: But a lot of the local guys --

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:05] Yeah, they did.

BRENT LEWIS: -- did at that time.

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:06] Yep, yep, they would -- they teamed up and would take their product to New England theirself, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you ever go on to clam out of your own boat, or was that something that you just did when you were younger?

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:19] Just did when I was younger.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you oyster?

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:22] Yes, yeah, yeah, still do.

BRENT LEWIS: Hand tonging?

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:25] Yes. Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: Where -- when did you first start oystering?

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:35] I think, like -- I'm guessing probably, like, when I was in high school. Back then, you could go on Saturdays, so I could hop on a boat on Saturday and go make a couple bucks, you know what I mean, to get me by, get me through the week, you know, put some gas in your car, and, you know, go out and have a little fun here and there.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TROY WILKINS: [00:13:56] Yeah, I'm thinking probably, like, 14, 15, 16, something like that.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have...? You were still working on someone else's boat.

TROY WILKINS: [00:14:05] Yeah, yeah, I would just get on there and cull oysters for the most part.

BRENT LEWIS: And culling is?

TROY WILKINS: [00:14:10] Sorting. Whatever they catch, you pick the three-inch oysters out, and the rest of the stuff would be pushed back overboard.

BRENT LEWIS: How many bushels were they catching back then?

TROY WILKINS: [00:14:21] I'm thinking the limit was probably 50, but I can't remember if we were catching 50 back then, you know, or maybe less. You know, I can't really remember, but I think the limit at that time was probably 50 bushels.

BRENT LEWIS: And that's also about the time that diving became popular.

TROY WILKINS: [00:14:38] Yeah, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you ever involve yourself with that?

TROY WILKINS: [00:14:42] Yeah, I tried it one year. I just wasn't crazy about it. There wasn't nobody to talk to down there all day long, so I kind of got bored with it.
[laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Right. What's that like, though? What do you -- if you're the guy in the water, what are you doing? How are you harvesting those oysters?

TROY WILKINS: [00:14:57] Just swim around, picking them up.
Look for somebody to talk to. [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: [unclear] find someone, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:15:05] "Anybody out here?" Yeah, I... I don't know, I just wasn't crazy...

BRENT LEWIS: Right. Some guys still do it, though, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:15:12] Yeah, yeah, yeah, a lot of people still do it. Sure, sure, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: Those kind of new techniques sometimes are met with distaste from older generations, though, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:15:24] Yeah, sure. There's a lot of people that's not crazy over the diving still today, probably.

BRENT LEWIS: What's their main problem with it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:15:31] I think the main problem is, like, when you -- when you oyster, you're kind of cultivating the bottom with hand tongs or patent tongs, or just whatever gear you use, you're kind of cultivating the bottom, where a diver, he's just picking up what he wants. Nothing else gets touched. So it's kind of like... I think that's just the main issue is just the not cultivating, and, you know, picking up... He can pick up everything that's down there if he can see it, you know, I mean, where when you've got hand tongs or other gear types, you know, you're not going to get to every one of them, where he sees them and he's going to get every one of them.

BRENT LEWIS: He can just deplete the whole bed.

TROY WILKINS: [00:16:23] Exactly.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you think that that turning over of that bottom is important?

TROY WILKINS: [00:16:28] Sure, yeah, yeah, most definitely, because there's considerable sediment in the Bay today that wasn't there, you know, years ago, with development, Conowingo. Everybody knows what's going on, you know, with the dam and stuff when they have to open gates up. It's so much sediment coming down, and you're not going to... The shells need to be cleaned for the spat, the larvae to affix to it, and, you know, if it settling in the bottom, and the

amount of sedimentation that we have today in the Bay, it's hard for it to -- for Mother Nature to make it work up here now.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. So has that had an impact on the harvest?

TROY WILKINS: [00:17:14] Oh, absolutely. You know, the Upper Bay is really -- at 2022, 2023, you know, we're really on the down side of things right now. The majority of the oysters are harvested in the Lower Bay. Queen Anne County Watermen's Association has been -- the last two years been doing some oyster bar restoration with dredges, trying to recover shells that are buried in the mud, to try to help out a little bit, you know, try to give back a little bit some kind of way, and, you know, we raise money through Crab Feast, and we have the Christmas tree basket down in Kent there, so we use those moneys to pay local guys couple bucks in the spring when there's really nothing for -- you know, no product for anyone to catch. Gives them a couple dollars, and try to, you know, do the right thing to clean these bars up so maybe, you know, help Mother Nature out a little bit.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow, that's kind of amazing, because I think traditionally, historically, people have this idea that watermen in general don't think long term.

TROY WILKINS: [00:18:27] Sure, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: So that's kind of a more modern way of looking at stuff, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:18:32] Sure. If you don't -- if you don't put back into your business, you know, any kind of business, you know, you're going to end up going the wrong way. So, you know, we just -- we just took it upon ourselves to try to do something to benefit ourselves, you know? If no one else is going to do it, at least we're going to try something, and if it doesn't work, next year we'll try something different, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have partners that the Association works with on that, or is it pretty much just you guys?

TROY WILKINS: [00:19:04] Well, we have to work with Department of Natural Resources, which is -- I guess kind of oversees, and, you know, we have to -- we give them a detailed plan of the areas that we want to do, and what we want to do, and, you know, so we have to work with them to make it all happen.

BRENT LEWIS: Right, to get the permission to do that.

TROY WILKINS: [00:19:26] Sure, sure, yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And so what actually do they do? How does that work when they go out there to replenish that?

TROY WILKINS: [00:19:36] So one of the things that we do, one of the -- we have a couple techniques that we developed,

and one of them that we started this year is the majority of the oyster bars are on harder bottom shallow water, but tides, wind action, just everything moves the bottom around, so a lot of shells end up off the edge, let's say... Let's say the bar's in 10 foot; off the edge is 25 foot. Down in the 25 foot is really, like, a soupy kind of sediment, mud, and nothing's going to survive down there. So one of the things we've been doing is taking dredges, and go off the edge, and scoop up these shells, and take them and put them back up on top of the bar, where there's a chance for oysters to fix on the shell, or we also plant oysters on top there. So it has some substrate for us to plant on. So that's one thing we do, and then another thing we do is we'll use a dredge and just leave the bag open and just drive across -- just ride across the bottom, and that'll flip the shells up and get the sediment off of them, and cleans them up. So we try to do a couple weeks every year, maybe eight or ten boats, you know, try to help a couple guys out, and hopefully we're doing the right thing in the process.

BRENT LEWIS: How do you judge if it's a success? [pause] Or how will you judge if...?

TROY WILKINS: [00:21:13] Well, I think that just getting the shells that are down in that mud, that are never going to

do anyone any good, and put them up on top of the bar, I think that's a success right there. The price of shell right now is, I'm thinking, at this time about \$8 a bushel, \$6, just for the shells, so if one man could move a couple hundred bushels a day, and put them on top of the bar, and we pay, like, \$300 a day I think is about what we pay, so I think you can't do anything but call this a success, because if the shell price is -- even if it's \$2 a bushel, the availability of them is very limited, so, you know, we're trying to come up with techniques that we can recover shell that used to be on top of these bars, that maybe the wind or the tide washed off, and put them back on top. So maybe it will help. And I -- and, you know, we look at it, like we're talking right now, as what's the benefit for the oyster, but let's look at the -- maybe, like, the picture a little bit bigger. We have -- in Queen Anne's County, we have a pretty good size head boat fleet, and when they fish, they need to be fishing on some kind of substrate. So if you take these shells and put them up here, that's a place for fish to habitat for fish, for crabs, you know, for everything. So it's -- I just think it's a win situ-- a win/win for everybody, you know, not only the commercial people, but -- I mean, the commercial oystermen, but, like,

fishermen, crabbers, I mean, just the water in general, you know?

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, man. I mean, it sounds like, you know, that whole ecological chain is under such stress --

TROY WILKINS: [00:23:20] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- that anything that you guys who were on the frontlines can do to combat that has got to be a positive. Do you have other initiatives that you guys are doing that are similar to that?

TROY WILKINS: [00:23:34] Well, we get some funding... When you go oystering, you have to buy a surcharge. It's \$300. So those moneys come back to each individual county, and then every bushel or shell, there's a tax on it, whether it goes out of state or stays in the state. That money comes back for restoration work, too. Also, there is some funding from the Department of Transportation, when they do maintenance on the ship channels, so we get certain money for so many yards of material that they move out of the ship channel comes to oyster restoration. So we use a lot of that money to plant spat on shell, which is a technique that's pretty new to this area -- I mean, maybe 15 years, 20 years. Like, in hatcheries, they'll take shells and put in tanks, and they produce larvae themselves from brute

stock, and then they put the larvae in the tanks, and they get the oysters growing, in a controlled environment --

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: -- and once they get them started, they'll put them on boats and bring them out, and we'll plant them. So we do quite a bit of that in Queen Anne's County.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow, that sounds cutting edge, man.

TROY WILKINS: [00:25:03] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Sounds like new stuff.

TROY WILKINS: [00:25:05] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And I do want to get to your involvement with the Watermen's Association, but let's backtrack a little bit and talk about you moving from those earlier jobs to what you do now, which is eel.

TROY WILKINS: [00:25:24] Yeah, catch eels now.

BRENT LEWIS: Catch eels. And you've been doing it over 20 years?

TROY WILKINS: [00:25:28] Around 20 years, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: What motivated you to get into that business?

TROY WILKINS: [00:25:33] Well, like, in the spring, really, around here's probably a month or two, month and a half before crabs start running, and had a guy oystering with me that had a few eel box. "You want to go this spring?" I'm like, "Sure." Well, you know, ain't got nothing else to

do. Why not, you know? So we started, and then it just snowballed from there, you know, and --

BRENT LEWIS: Did you find that you really liked it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:02] Oh, yeah, I love it, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: How so? What do you love about it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:06] Not many people do it, for one thing.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:10] And you can -- you leave your -- you leave your traps out, so while we're sitting here working, my traps are working for me right now. I hope they are, anyway. [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: So when -- do you go out and check them?

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:24] Every day.

BRENT LEWIS: Every day?

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:25] Yeah, mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: How many do you have?

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:27] How many traps do you have?

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah.

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:29] I probably have a couple thousand, but I only have, maybe, 600 over right now.

BRENT LEWIS: And how's that market work? Where do you sell them? Who do they go to, and where do they from there?

TROY WILKINS: [00:26:42] So, like, in the summer months, from June -- from June to September, the Cobia Fishery in

Virginia takes the most part of them. In the spring and the fall, we're catching mostly food eels, probably, bigger eels. The cobia fishery takes small eels for bait.

BRENT LEWIS: And the bigger eels?

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:07] Are for -- the bigger eels -- it's not too many big eels being caught this time of the year.

BRENT LEWIS: Gotcha.

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:13] So, you know, it's easier -- it's a lot easier to catch smaller ones for bait than it is to try to catch big ones.

BRENT LEWIS: And what do -- what do they use the eel as bait for?

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:23] For cobia fish.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, for cobia fishing.

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:25] cobia fishing, yes. And he's -- I think he's relatively newcomer to Chesapeake Bay, and seems like they are kind of, like, maybe migrating farther up the Bay every year.

BRENT LEWIS: We're seeing a lot of that, anyway, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:41] Yeah, yeah, like --

BRENT LEWIS: Like, migration.

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:42] Like, now, Maryland has a shrimp fishery. I think it just got going last year, maybe, the

last year or two, so we have a limited shrimp fishery in Maryland now.

BRENT LEWIS: Which is new.

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:55] Yes, yes, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you know anybody who's shrimping?

TROY WILKINS: [00:27:58] The only ones that I know, I think -- I think there's, like, five boats out of Ocean City that do it, but I really don't know any of them, how it's working out or anything, I don't really know details, but...

BRENT LEWIS: And -- but up here in our part of the Chesapeake, you are seeing species of fish and waterfowl and things that we've never really seen before, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:28:21] Yeah, but, you know, sometimes you see those kind of things years ago, too, you know. It just depends on the salinity a lot, to me. Like the porpoises: there's lots of porpoises around, but you used to see them years ago, too, on occasions, but I think there's more now than it ever has been.

BRENT LEWIS: How does any of that affect your business, any of those species? Do you see it -- maybe not you specifically as catching eels, but watermen in general -- has it had an impact?

TROY WILKINS: [00:28:53] I think -- well, I think that the dolphin is the premier fisherman. He -- you know, he can't

be restricted. He can fish whenever he wants. He don't have to have times, you know. He's... And he's pretty efficient, too.

BRENT LEWIS: So you're competing -- fishermen are competing with him.

TROY WILKINS: [00:29:12] Sure. And, for me, and the eel -- and the eel industry, I'm competing with cormorant. Cormorant has just showed up here in the last 20 years, and he's a pretty good eeler, too.

BRENT LEWIS: No kidding.

TROY WILKINS: [00:29:29] Yeah. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: They consume a lot of eel?

TROY WILKINS: [00:29:32] Yeah. Yeah, he likes the little eels, for sure.

BRENT LEWIS: You've been doing this for 20 years. How has the equipment changed since you first started eeling? Maybe not the crab pot, or the eel pots, so much, but the mechanical stuff you use onboard. Has that changed in your career?

TROY WILKINS: [00:29:52] No, pretty much everything's the same.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:29:55] Yeah, pretty much the same.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you feel like a waterman has to have those basic skills to be proficient in the --

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:04] What basic skills?

BRENT LEWIS: -- at the job? To be able to make and be part
mechanic, be a part carpenter--

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:12] Yeah, sure, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- be part welder.

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:14] Yes, yes, yes, for sure.

BRENT LEWIS: Right? You got to know all that stuff a little
bit.

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:17] Yes, for sure, and a lot of common
sense.

BRENT LEWIS: I would imagine a lot of watermen who lack common
sense haven't lasted too long out there.

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:27] Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's probably --
it's a little -- that's a little different, if you ain't
got common sense.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you see yourself eeling for the rest of your
career?

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:38] No, I want to retire -- I want to
retire after this video's over with so I don't have to do
nothing anymore. [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: [unclear].

TROY WILKINS: [00:30:44] No, yeah, I would think I would -- I
would love to be able to eel long...long as I'm capable.

Just oystering, in the wintertimes, it just seems like the older you get, the colder it gets. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Do you still going oystering?

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:01] Yeah, I still hand tong in the winter.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:04] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have your own boat now?

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:06] Yes, sir.

BRENT LEWIS: And tell me about that boat. How big is it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:10] It's 40 foot, and it suits me well.

BRENT LEWIS: What's its name?

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:17] *Misty Tango*.

BRENT LEWIS: *Misty Tango*.

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:19] And what that means, I have no idea.

It was -- that was the name when it was built.

BRENT LEWIS: How long ago did you buy that boat?

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:27] 2010.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:31] From William [Edgar?] Benton.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, I know that fella.

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:35] You know that guy?

BRENT LEWIS: I do know him. [laughter] And William Edgar

Benton, he's a, primarily, clammer, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:43] Yes. Yes, he is.

BRENT LEWIS: He's been clamming a long while.

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:45] Very long.

BRENT LEWIS: So we've kind of run through some of that stuff.

I want to ask you some kind of personal questions a little bit.

TROY WILKINS: [00:31:55] I'm not answering any personal questions, [laughter] because I -- you know too much of my history.

BRENT LEWIS: How's your family been involved in your career?

TROY WILKINS: [00:32:07] Well, like, my wife and my son, we -- they help, like, when we do the crab feasts and stuff, and my wife actually fishes with me now, you know, on weekends, if need be. So, yeah, I mean, they're all involved. And my son, he's a -- my son's a steamfitter. He got laid off this winter, so he oystered with me all winter, which was, you know, pretty cool, having someone on the boat with you when you're by yourself all the time, you know, so --

BRENT LEWIS: Sure.

TROY WILKINS: -- yeah, that was pretty neat. I don't think he thought much of it, but...

BRENT LEWIS: Opportunity to bond.

TROY WILKINS: [00:32:43] Pardon?

BRENT LEWIS: The opportunity for...? I mean, because your son's an adult now --

TROY WILKINS: [00:32:47] Oh, yeah, he's 25. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: He's 25. So that's kind of a different bonding experience --

TROY WILKINS: [00:32:52] Yeah, sure, yeah, yeah. When you're with each other eight hours a day, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah.

TROY WILKINS: [00:32:56] Yeah, definitely, definitely.

BRENT LEWIS: Standing on a washboard, or --

TROY WILKINS: [00:33:00] Yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- of a boat, or --

TROY WILKINS: [00:33:01] Yeah, trying to teach him how to do that a little bit, too. That's kind of comical. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: A lot of those skills, you feel like they're disappearing, a lot of the skills that the watermen --

TROY WILKINS: [00:33:12] Yeah, sure. Sure, especially in Queen Anne's County, you know. Like, some of the -- some of the counties -- Talbot, Dorchester -- there's some younger guys there, but up here not too much younger guys. So everything's so regulated anymore, the government wants to be in charge of everything, so it's tough for some --

BRENT LEWIS: Well, that kind of plays into my next round of questions, which is in regards to the Queen Anne's Watermen's Association. Tell me a little bit about the

Association first. Like, how many members it might have, how long has it been around.

TROY WILKINS: [00:33:49] It's been around since, like, I think, like, around the early '70s, and I think Mr. Warren Sadler, the man I fished with, was one of the founding, you know -- founders of it, I'm pretty sure. And, let me see, let me see. I guess we just kind of, like, try to keep the working watermen in Queen Anne's County, we just try to keep them working, you know? It's -- Queen Anne's County's really changed a lot, you know, and there's a lot of different -- there's a lot of people here that, you know, think different -- a lot different than the way we think, you know? And so it's definitely a struggle to keep --

BRENT LEWIS: How'd you get involved with the Watermen's Association?

TROY WILKINS: [00:34:39] Well, it was like... In 2011, when my oldest son died, it was really a struggle for me, and just -- it was, like -- I don't know, it was always on my mind, and I think I really needed something to do, and I kind of started getting involved a little bit, and it just snowballed from there. And, you know, just was -- for me, it was something to do to get -- keep my mind off of that, and now it's just -- now it's got to the point where I just

-- I just want us...to keep everybody working, and do what we got to do to, you know, to keep us in business.

BRENT LEWIS: And you're the president of the Association?

TROY WILKINS: [00:35:21] Yeah, yeah, uh-huh.

BRENT LEWIS: You've been for a while, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:35:22] Yeah, yeah. I don't know how long, but [laughter] --

BRENT LEWIS: Right, [both speaking-unclear] --

TROY WILKINS: -- probably longer than I need to be.

BRENT LEWIS: One of the things you've done as a representative of this association is to go to Annapolis and represent watermen.

TROY WILKINS: [00:35:34] Sure. Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: What's that been like for you?

TROY WILKINS: [00:35:39] Talk to the wall.

BRENT LEWIS: Really?

TROY WILKINS: [00:35:41] Sure. Those people don't understand. Our way of life is a lot different than -- over here on the shore, compared to the average person in, let's say, PG County. They don't understand the way we live, you know, the way we -- the way we look out for our neighbor, or when we wave to each other going down the road, you know. That stuff doesn't happen over there, and it's really -- it's really a struggle, for sure, you know. And, you know, just

one thing: I would hate -- I hate to even say this, but, you know, money really says a lot, you know, and the watermen don't have the money as, like, let's say, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, so it's hard for us to... I feel like it's hard for us to be taken serious, you know.

BRENT LEWIS: You don't feel like you have the political pull that --

TROY WILKINS: [00:36:51] Yeah. Well, I don't think I have, like... I think that the knowledge that I have, or not just me, but what water-- the knowledge that watermen have is not taken serious, compared to the person over here that has the letters and numbers or whatever in front of, behind their name, you know what I mean? But -- and I look at it, like, completely opposite: I have more respect for someone that does X for a living and sees it every day than someone that sits in a cubicle and looks on Google Earth and studies the computer, and wants to tell me what I see every day is not what I really see. I don't know if that makes sense or not, but --

BRENT LEWIS: Absolutely.

TROY WILKINS: -- that's just, you know, how things seem like they go over there.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you feel like you've made any headway in some of your goals with --

TROY WILKINS: [00:37:56] Yeah, maybe somewhat, but very limited. I mean, we're still -- we still have a job, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have any champions? Do you have any other -- and maybe local legislators, or people who you feel like are in your court?

TROY WILKINS: [00:38:11] Our county commissioners are, for sure. The county commissioners Queen Anne's County certainly on your side. Other than that, yeah, I don't see much help nowhere. I mean, some of our legislatures seem like they might want to help, but I wouldn't let them tie my safety line, I can tell you that. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: I hear you. Despite those challenges, you still are involved. You still fight the fight, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:38:43] Sure, sure, sure. Why...? Yeah, I'm not going to --

BRENT LEWIS: You're not going to give up.

TROY WILKINS: [00:38:47] No, sure, no, no. I'm not going to give up. And that's --

BRENT LEWIS: It sounds like you try to figure out ways to make it work, even if you don't have the help necessarily.

TROY WILKINS: [00:38:57] That's what you got to do, man. That's what we do over here: we make it work. I mean, I don't know, that's just... I don't know, that's how I was brought up, I think, you know, to figure it out, get it

done, you know. Why worry about somebody else if you could do it yourself?

BRENT LEWIS: Does that motivate you as a leader in the association? Do you often find yourself thinking, like, oh, well, I'm just going to do this --

TROY WILKINS: [00:39:26] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- kind of stance?

TROY WILKINS: [00:39:27] Sure, sure. Yeah, I'm not going to -- I'm not going to bow to those people. You know, I feel like when I go over there and I speak at the legislature, I speak the truth, what I see, what I know. I'm not there for political gains. I don't want to be this; I don't want to be that. And I think one day, you know, for people that can't tell the truth, and make stuff up, they're going to pay down the road one day.

BRENT LEWIS: What can the general public do to help? Like, is there some kind of...? I mean, obviously the most simple thing is to buy Maryland seafood.

TROY WILKINS: [00:40:16] Sure, Maryland seafood, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:40:18] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: But what else? Are there other things that could help awareness of the challenges you guys face?

TROY WILKINS: [00:40:23] Yeah. I don't know, it just seems like today people, the climate issue, and the environment issue -- and I think they kind of look at us as, like, maybe we are, like, part of the problem. I don't know. You know, I kind of, like... I don't know. I just... I don't... I can't quite just give you, like, a definite answer that what someone in the general public could do, but eating Maryland seafood is a start. [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: I'm going to ask you some kind of general questions about your career, and then we're going to move into some wrap-up questions, Troy. When you think back over all your days working on the water, do you have any days that really stand out as your great days, as your best days? Either because it makes you happy thinking of a specific memory, or a day that you scored and made the most money you ever made, or any...? What do you think of, maybe, looking back as your best days on the water? And, conversely, do you have bad days that pop up?

TROY WILKINS: [00:41:46] Oh, sure, there's... I mean, you know, when you do something every day, it's -- you know, you're going to have ups and downs. I just -- I don't know -- I can't say that... I can't say that something sticks in my mind as a great day or a bad day. I try to stay pretty on the even keel, because I know that you're going

to -- that rollercoaster we were talking about at the be--
when we started, you know, is -- it's every day.

BRENT LEWIS: You mentioned Captain Warren. Who were your
other mentors when you were starting out? Did you --

TROY WILKINS: [00:42:24] Well, Stanley, for sure, of -- picking
clams, you know, really had a good time doing that. Let me
see, who else... Keith Horney. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Tell us about Keith Horney.

TROY WILKINS: [00:42:40] He was fun to party with. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Keith passed away a few years ago.

TROY WILKINS: [00:42:47] Yeah. Good friend. Good friend to
all of us.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TROY WILKINS: [00:42:51] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Absolutely.

TROY WILKINS: [00:42:52] Yeah, I worked with him quite a bit.
Just, I mean, there was, like... I'm always thinking I'm,
like, kind of self-taught, really, you know what I mean? I
mean, I kind of, like, was on this boat for a while, and
then maybe another boat, and back and forth until I had my
own rig, you know. Then I kind of just -- kind of...

BRENT LEWIS: And watching how others --

TROY WILKINS: [00:43:12] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- did things.

TROY WILKINS: [00:43:14] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Do -- in your career, have watermen pretty much stuck together? Can you count on other watermen [both speaking-unclear]?

TROY WILKINS: [00:43:22] Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. I don't think -- you don't -- I'm -- I mean, everybody's got friends and then, you know, there's the person over here, how you speak to him, but he -- maybe you don't talk to him every day, but that person over there don't talk to every day, if something was to happen to him, or vice versa, it -- we would help each other, just, you know... I'll give you -- I'll give you an example on one of the guys that's in our association. His boat sunk the other day, and don't know why, but it did, and I get a phone call, can we help him out, and we give him some money to help him out, get his boat fixed back up. So, you know, it -- we're pretty tight-knit. And that's, like, statewide. I don't think it's just here in Queen Anne's County. Like, Queen Anne's county has helped other watermen, you know, up and down the shore, Western Shore, whatever, all up and down the Bay, you know. There's a -- last year, year before, a guy that does a boat docking contest with the -- something Cowboys -- I don't -- I can't remember what they're called -- but they go around, do that boat docking.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TROY WILKINS: [00:44:36] He was in a motorcycle accident in Georgia, lost his leg. You know, we sent him some money, helped him out, too. So we kind of -- I think everybody kind of looks out for one another.

BRENT LEWIS: You feel like maybe that -- to an extent, you guys can relate to the challenges within your industry --

TROY WILKINS: [00:44:53] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- you know, more than anybody outside --

TROY WILKINS: [00:44:55] Sure, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- so you have empathy for those people --

TROY WILKINS: [00:44:58] Yeah, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- and those [both speaking-unclear].

TROY WILKINS: [00:44:59] And a lot of watermen are not going to sit here, talk like we are now. They're going to be on the down low, and, you know... Like, if we go to Annapolis to testify in favor or against a bill, you -- if 200 people go over there, 20 of them would speak; the other people wouldn't want to say anything, you know what I mean? So it's -- sometimes it's kind of hard to -- you know, you got to pry words out of people.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever had any close calls out there, like weather-wise? Have you ever had an experience that you thought, oh, I'm --

TROY WILKINS: [00:45:39] Yeah, I fell overboard February last year by myself, and couldn't get out of the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Last year.

TROY WILKINS: [00:45:45] Yeah, last year.

BRENT LEWIS: What happened? [both speaking-unclear] --

TROY WILKINS: [00:45:47] I fell overboard. I didn't like it.
[laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Were you on the bow and slipped, or...?

TROY WILKINS: [00:45:51] I was in the harbor, and I took the boat hook and pushed on the pole, and it slipped off, and I went over.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: [00:45:57] And they had, like, a two-by-four ladder that was probably 30 years old, and didn't work. And I kind of got a little panicky, and I kind of settled myself down, and I heard somebody hollering, and I climbed up that ladder a little bit, and across the road from where I was tied up was some people working. I hollered. They came over, helped me get out of the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: [00:46:24] Yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: So even as a very experienced waterman, you can find yourself in those moments of --

TROY WILKINS: [00:46:32] Absolutely. Absolutely.

BRENT LEWIS: That's not the first time you've fallen over,
right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:46:36] Unh-uh, unh-uh. No, I've... But
[laughs] hope it's the -- hope it's the last, and if it
ain't, I got a rope ladder to get back in the boat with
now. Amazon. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: I think you told me you've fallen overboard about
one time where you were with the Horneys and you fell over?

TROY WILKINS: [00:46:52] Yeah, I fell over with them, yes.

BRENT LEWIS: Can you tell me that story?

TROY WILKINS: [00:46:54] Yeah, yeah. I fell overboard, and he
had the boat in gear, pulling away. I was trying to grab
hold of the cleat, and he said I was so cold I couldn't get
cleat out of my mouth. I was going... [makes "khh" sound]
Cleat! [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: You were ready to go home, too, weren't you [both
speaking-unclear]?

TROY WILKINS: [00:47:10] Yeah, yeah, and they wouldn't take me
home, and he made me get some clothes from a couple other
people, and made me go back to work. I'd fallen overboard
January. [laughter] But they're -- them guys are my
friends, too, right?

BRENT LEWIS: Well, they want to get their workday in.

TROY WILKINS: [00:47:25] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: It wasn't their fault you fell over.

TROY WILKINS: [00:47:28] I blamed them all.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh my God. Have you ever seen anything -- have you ever seen or found anything interesting, amazing, or unexplainable out there?

TROY WILKINS: [00:47:44] [laughs] Yeah, when I was clamming, we found a stone. I guess it was maybe three or four inches long, maybe a quarter inch, half inch thick, very -- like, kind of oval-shaped. And it had a hole drilled in it. I thought it was a decoy. I was getting ready to pitch it overboard, and the man I was clamming with, Stanley Jones, grabbed it before I did it, and he had somebody look at it. It was like a -- some kind of ceremonial necklace.

BRENT LEWIS: It's called a gorget.

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:14] What do you call it?

BRENT LEWIS: Gorget, G-O-R-G-E-T. I found two of them right in the Narrows area.

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:19] Is that right? We found this --

BRENT LEWIS: [both speaking-unclear] Native American. They're like 3,000 years old.

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:22] It was -- we found this one down Pink Castle. I don't know if you know where that is, when you go in Miles River there. Yeah, yeah. I thought it was a

damn decoy, the way I was getting ready to pitch it overboard.

BRENT LEWIS: And what'd you do? You dig it up, or you were hand toggling, or --

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:34] Oh, clamming.

BRENT LEWIS: Clamming.

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:35] Yeah, yeah. I think most of the clammers have -- they got some good artifacts, good stuff. Yeah, yeah. I got a couple bottles. I got, like, a chipped-up tomahawk. He let me have -- he let me have the seconds. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: He kept the really good stuff.

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:51] Yeah, sure. That's captain's prerogative, right? [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever rescued anybody out there?

TROY WILKINS: [00:48:59] Mm... No, no, not that... Yes, I have. Yeah, I have -- I seen a little boat sink a few years back, around Shipping Creek, and they were, like, on -- right next to shore, so I went and picked them up and took them into Shipping Creek, called Coast Guard for them, but they were onshore when I picked them up.

BRENT LEWIS: And a lot of those guys are funny. Who are the funniest watermen?

TROY WILKINS: [00:49:24] Oh my God, all of them are.

BRENT LEWIS: They're funny.

TROY WILKINS: [00:49:27] Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that part of the joy of it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:49:30] Absolutely, ragging on each other, you know. I mean, naturally, we don't want to see one another get hurt, so when you fall overboard and you get back in the boat, that kind of stuff, then it's game on then.

BRENT LEWIS: That's good stuff there. [laughs]

TROY WILKINS: [00:49:45] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: So I'm going to ask you, like, four or five kind of wrap-up questions. How would you describe your life working on the water? Has it been good?

TROY WILKINS: [00:49:58] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: How so?

TROY WILKINS: [00:49:59] Yeah, yeah, I just -- I... I just... I don't know. Golly day. I...

BRENT LEWIS: What do you love about it? What do you love about your job?

TROY WILKINS: [00:50:14] Best thing about it is by myself, man. [laughs] I mean, it's like, you know, I don't have to rely on this person to be on time, to pick up, to help me do this, that, or the other. It's like, you know, I'm pretty much independent. I come and go as I please. If I feel a little sleepy this morning, if I'm ten minutes late, there

-- I don't have somebody calling me, you know, whatever.

I'm -- I do what I want to do. I feel like I made a honest living, you know. I don't feel like I took advantage of anybody to get what I got, and I worked for everything I got, so I'm happy about my career, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: That's awesome, man. That independence, that freedom that it's given you.

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:03] I mean, it's -- it is -- you do have freedom, but you still -- everybody answers to somebody.

BRENT LEWIS: Sure. Well, like you said before, you still have your market you have to answer to.

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:12] Yeah. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: You're dealing with the weather conditions --

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:16] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- that may or may not be favorable to you on any given day.

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:19] Yeah. Yep, sure. Yep.

BRENT LEWIS: Has it taught you things about life in general, by working on the water, or are there lessons you've learned out there that you kind of carry around with you in your regular life?

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:31] Oh, yeah, you don't mess with Mother Nature, for sure.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah.

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:34] Yeah. I think it makes you -- it makes you appreciate when things are good, you know, when -- like, when the weather's nice, you can work with a t-shirt, and, you know, it's a nice day, and you got a beautiful sunrise every morning. You appreciate that, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: That's a pretty good place to go to work, isn't it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:51:58] Yeah, for real. It was probably better 20 years ago, but it's still nice.

BRENT LEWIS: The beauty of it doesn't change, does it?

TROY WILKINS: [00:52:06] Depends on where you're at now, because, you know, 20, 25 years ago, or even farther back than that, you know, there was no houses on the water, you know, and now it's like everywhere you go you see a house.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you still sometimes, though, feel that moment of, like, grace where, like, it is just you out there with nature?

TROY WILKINS: [00:52:26] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: What's that feel like, those --

TROY WILKINS: [00:52:29] Home.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah?

TROY WILKINS: [00:52:31] Yeah. Yeah, feels like home to me. For real.

BRENT LEWIS: That's pretty awesome. What do you see as the future for your industry?

TROY WILKINS: [00:52:51] I see a very regulated industry. I think it's still going to be here, but I think it's going to be really, really regulated, where... I don't know if it's -- if people will be able to make a living the way I did, or the way the people before me did. I think it's going to be different, for sure.

BRENT LEWIS: Would you recommend it for someone who -- for a young person who wanted to get in the business?

TROY WILKINS: [00:53:27] I think... Like, [laughs] I tell my son, you know, I wish he -- I kind of wish he was in it, but I'm glad he isn't, because, you know, like, things were just so much different when I got into it, you know? And people before me. It was just so much different. The world is so much smaller today, and... I don't know. I think if somebody wanted to do it, sure. Why not go for it, you know what I mean?

BRENT LEWIS: Are the costs different getting in now [both speaking-unclear] --

TROY WILKINS: [00:54:03] Yeah, absolutely. Everything's more money now, yeah. Everything's more money. Everything.

BRENT LEWIS: If I wanted to get into your business, if I wanted to next week start being an eeler, what would it cost me to start my career?

TROY WILKINS: [00:54:21] First, you have to find a license, and I think that's probably the -- would be the hardest thing. There's a limited amount of them available. So how much one of them is, I really don't know. A boat is 50 grand, easy, 30, 50 grand, you know. I mean, of course, you don't have to have top line stuff. You know, you could get started in a smaller rig. Yeah, I don't know, you -- it's --

BRENT LEWIS: And what about eel pots? What do they -- what would they --

TROY WILKINS: [00:54:52] Probably about -- I would say buy one right now is probably around 30 bucks. I --

BRENT LEWIS: Uh-huh. So if I wanted a hundred of 'em, that's a signifiant investment.

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:00] Yeah, sure, sure. I just -- I do everything myself.

BRENT LEWIS: You make them yourself?

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:05] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm, yep, do everything, keep them up myself.

BRENT LEWIS: How'd you learn to do -- where'd you learn to make eel pots?

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:11] Just my -- self-taught.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:15] Home economics for the sewing --

BRENT LEWIS: Very good.

TROY WILKINS: -- in middle school, yeah. I don't think it's too many men that can say that they can sew, but I can sew.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, that's another example of a skill that a waterman has to have, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:26] Sure, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Or to not have to pay someone else to do it.

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:29] Yeah. And, to me, somebody should learn that in school. Like, I think when we went to school, we had home economics. You learned to cook.

BRENT LEWIS: Absolutely.

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:38] You learned to sew. I mean, that's stuff -- I mean, that's the commonsense stuff that people don't probably know anymore.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, absolutely. Let's go back on the environmental stuff a little bit. What do you think are the biggest environmental challenges that you guys face?

TROY WILKINS: [00:55:59] Mm. I think the -- I think the Conowingo is -- for the Upper Bay -- is a really big factor, and all the sewer treatment plants that are on the Bay now that weren't there, you know? If you start

counting them up, there's quite a few of them that, you know, weren't here 20, 30 years ago, you know? It's just - it's just so different, because... And the amount of people, you know? And --

BRENT LEWIS: It sounds like development in --

TROY WILKINS: [00:56:34] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- your point of view might be one of the biggest challenges that you face.

TROY WILKINS: [00:56:37] Sure, sure. Sure, development is. I think so, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: How -- in obvious ways, those sewage treatment plants, pollution, right? Kind of simple things, too, though, right? Like making noise outside of someone's subdivision that wasn't there --

TROY WILKINS: [00:56:56] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- a year ago can be --

TROY WILKINS: [00:56:58] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: -- a challenge, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:57:00] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I think in Queen Anne's County, they passed a law here several years ago where there's a right to work for watermen and farmers, so, you know, if you -- if you're allowed to work in front of someone's house, and they don't like it, that's -- sorry about your luck, because, you know, we do have that here.

You know, we can -- you know, in Queen Anne's County, you have the right to be there.

BRENT LEWIS: Since you've been eeling, you've been able to work in your home county without traveling a lot, right?

TROY WILKINS: [00:57:31] Yeah, mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: In the past, did you go other places? I know some of these guys have, you know, gone on down to Deal Island --

TROY WILKINS: [00:57:38] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- or down in Tangier. Did you ever have to --

TROY WILKINS: [00:57:42] Yeah, sure. I've crabbed in -- I crabbed down Nanticoke River for two or three years, you know, when we didn't have crabs here, Fishing Bay.

BRENT LEWIS: Would you keep your boat down there --

TROY WILKINS: [00:57:52] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: -- and drive down? Is that how you would --

TROY WILKINS: [00:57:53] Yes, mm-hmm. Couple of us would, you know, carpool together, two or three of us, do what -- you know, do what we had to do.

BRENT LEWIS: Go where you had to go.

TROY WILKINS: [00:58:02] Go what you had to go, yeah, right.

BRENT LEWIS: Is there anything that we haven't talked about, or any questions that I haven't asked you, that, maybe, during the time that we've been talking, or when you were

thinking about coming down here and meeting us this
afternoon, that you, you know, you'd like to touch on?
Anything that we haven't talked about?

TROY WILKINS: [00:58:30] Yeah, not right off -- I can't really
think of anything right off the top of my head right now.

BRENT LEWIS: You feel like we've covered --

TROY WILKINS: [00:58:36] Well, soon as I walk out the door or
we turn the camera off I'll be like --

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] I should've said that.

TROY WILKINS: [00:58:41] Yeah, I should've said... [laughter]
Yeah. I can't think of anything. I just -- I -- just
everybody that, you know, that... All the watermen in the
state are just -- just seem like me. We're -- they're all
good people, you know, and you get such a bad rap from,
like, I guess, media or whatever, you know, social media
and stuff, you know. I just... I just would like people
to know that we, you know, we... We don't have a patch
over our eye and a sword and a peg leg, and walk around and
steal everything, you know what I mean? That's not what
watermen are, you know? I think watermen are just as much
environmentalists as the environmentalists themselves are,
you know, and, you know, we're stewards. We take care of
everything. And, I don't know, just seem like we get a bad
rap a lot of times.

BRENT LEWIS: Does it help that people -- when people know who you are, like, as opposed to -- like, in the old days, everybody had a waterman in their family --

TROY WILKINS: [00:59:48] Sure, sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- and now that's not the case.

TROY WILKINS: [00:59:51] No, yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you think that makes a difference, that...?

And is that part of the reason, like, the Queen Anne County's Watermen's Association works so hard to have a public face?

TROY WILKINS: [01:00:01] Yeah, we try to, and we probably should do more, but the president is not very social media -- what's the word? [laughter] He's not --

BRENT LEWIS: Talking about yourself.

TROY WILKINS: [01:00:15] Yeah, yeah, he's not on Bullface.

[laughter] So he don't know all that. But, I mean, most people seem like, you know, they're very understanding to us. It's... I don't know, just seems like -- I don't know -- lot of times we have a bad image, like, for, you know... I mean, there's bad apples everywhere, you know? Somebody robs a bank, you don't close all the banks up, you know what I mean? So, you know --

BRENT LEWIS: You feel like do people only hear about the bad [both speaking-unclear]?

TROY WILKINS: [01:00:48] Yeah, the negative stuff, right, right, right. Yeah, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: But that doesn't really represent your industry, nor the people who work in it.

TROY WILKINS: [01:00:54] Right. Right. Exactly. Like the oyster planting we do, we're looking at planting, like, around -- I'm thinking probably around 50, 60 million oysters this year, and, you know, we probably should do more PR that we are doing this, but, you know... I don't know. Do we need to go out and gloat? That's what I'm thinking, you know what I mean? Like other groups need to gloat how they do this, this, this, and this, you know? I'm not one for, you know, getting upfront of everybody, beating on my chest, saying, "Hey, I did this," you know? We do what we have to do, you know what I mean?

BRENT LEWIS: And generally those guys you know are like that. Most of --

TROY WILKINS: [01:01:40] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: -- the men that you work with --

TROY WILKINS: [01:01:41] Yep, yep.

BRENT LEWIS: -- are very private --

TROY WILKINS: [01:01:43] Yep.

BRENT LEWIS: -- don't like to talk in public --

TROY WILKINS: [01:01:46] Right.

BRENT LEWIS: -- and so if you have the least inclination, as
you do, to step up, like, that's really necessary, right?
Like, somebody --

TROY WILKINS: [01:01:56] Yeah, sometimes. Somebody's got to
say something sometimes, [laughter] yeah, right.

BRENT LEWIS: Somebody's got to say something sometimes.

TROY WILKINS: [01:01:59] Yeah, yeah. Yeah, sometimes somebody
has to say something, right.

BRENT LEWIS: Hey, man, thank you a lot for taking the time to
do this with me this afternoon.

END OF AUDIO FILE