

OH 501 GeneAustin

BRENT LEWIS: So, my name is Brent Lewis. Today is July 18th, 2023. And I'm interviewing Gene Austin for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Watermen Story Swap Oral History Project. And in interest of full disclosure, I'd also like to mention that Gene and I are first cousins. My dad and his mom are siblings, and our shared grandparents were Frank and Ella Lewis from Chester, Maryland on Kent Island. Gene, do we have permission to record this interview?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:00:29] Yes, you do.

BRENT LEWIS: Can you tell me your full name, and do you have a nickname?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:00:34] [laughs] Eugene Franklin Austin.

BRENT LEWIS: And do you have a nickname?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:00:40] Buckwheat. Thank you, amen.

BRENT LEWIS: How'd you get that nickname?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:00:46] In high school. Pete Baxter. I always had real curly hair. Pete Baxter started calling me that name and it stuck with me. That was my CB [Citizens Band] handle, on the CB on the boat, Hey, Buckwheat.

BRENT LEWIS: Where did you grow up?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:04] On Kent Island my whole life. I was born there and raised there. When I was real young, I

remember my parents moved to New Jersey for during the summertime with my grandparents, and they come right back that same summer and that was the only time I ever moved away.

BRENT LEWIS: Where'd they move to?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:19] New Jersey, Port Pleasant.

BRENT LEWIS: New Jersey. How long were they there?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:22] Just a few months during the summer.

BRENT LEWIS: And you were just a baby?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:25] Real small.

BRENT LEWIS: So, Kent Island all your life.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:29] yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: What part of Kent Island?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:32] Chester.

BRENT LEWIS: What was your childhood like, growing up?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:01:38] I don't know. It was good childhood.

My father died when I was eight years old. And two years later, I moved in with my grandparents. I went down there, spent two weeks summer or...did a little vacation, never went home. And I was the apple of her eye, so I did no wrong. Anybody else around done wrong, old Gene never did nothing wrong.

BRENT LEWIS: We're talking about Frank and Ella Lewis?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:01] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: So, how old were you when your dad died?

GENE AUSTIN: I was eight.

BRENT LEWIS: And how were you...how old were you when you moved in with Frank and Ella?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:12] About two years later, eight, I mean, 10, something like that.

BRENT LEWIS: And Ella, you are the apple of Ella's eye.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:18] [laughs] I've done no wrong in front of her.

BRENT LEWIS: What were they like? What were Frank and Ella like? What were their personalities?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:27] Best grandparents anybody could ever have, because I could get away with murder. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: But you weren't a kid who was prone to murder.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:35] Oh no, I behaved myself. They raised me, I guess, different what you see on television.

BRENT LEWIS: Did they live on a farm at the time?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:46] No, they lived right next door to where I live right now.

BRENT LEWIS: What did Frank do for a living at that point? Was he still working?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:02:55] When the ferry boats were working, he worked to control the traffic on land, and my grandmother worked in the concession stands on the ferryboat.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you remember the ferries?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:03:05] Oh, I rode back and forth all day long
on my bicycle on there

BRENT LEWIS: No kidding. You'd just get on the ferry and ride
it?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:03:12] All the people down there knew me.
The person who was the one to collect tickets, well, he
knew me. And all rest of them, and they knew Grandmother
worked up in the concession stand, knew my grandfather
worked on the shore, so I'd just get on there and go back
and forth on the ferryboat. When I'd get tired doing that,
I'd get on my bicycle, ride down the lower part of Kent
Island somewhere. It's something to do.

BRENT LEWIS: Rode your bike all over Kent Island.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:03:33] The lower part at that time, all them
new developments were just being made down there. And
then, on weekends, my grandfather took care of the
ferryboat at Claiborne. They'd come over at Romancoke, and
he'd have to take the chain down, let the traffic off the
boat and on the boat, and they would bring the cook on
there, and knew if I was down there on the weekend, he'd
had to set a box of food for Grandfather, if he knew I was
there, he'd fill that box up, because he knew I could eat
something.

BRENT LEWIS: So, that was... the Romancoke ferries were where Frank worked on the weekend.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:04:08] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And he more or less stayed on shore and facilitated the...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:04:12] Yeah, there weren't nothing to do, just put the chain down when the boat come in and put the chain back up so nobody would run out there and run overboard.

BRENT LEWIS: How many people would be on board one of those ferries like that?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:04:22] I don't... Well, they had a full crew, whatever...whatever it was. And they had a cook because they had to feed the people on the boat. And they knew we were over there. So, they had a plywood box they put the food in and set it out at lunchtime.

BRENT LEWIS: How long did it take to go across?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:04:42] I'm sure it must have been like three quarters of an hour, or something like that. I don't know exactly. I was little, then. Real little. You want to hear a little story about me and the soft crabs down there?
[laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Absolutely.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:04:57] Well, during the summer sometimes, the Rock Hall fishermen, they'd carry fishing parties, they'd come down there and tie to the pier overnight. Well, they had a couple of rich people with them, and I used to go out there and soft crab right at shore, and I caught two great big jumbo soft crabs. And the man that was on the fishing boat said, "I'll buy them from you," he said, "We'll cook them right here on the boat." I said, "All right," I said, "How much what do you want?" He said, "How much do you want for them?" Well, I said, "I don't know." And of course, this is when I was a boy, this is a long while ago. And I got 35 cents apiece for each crab. And I thought that was fantastic. [laughter] Thirty-five cents.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that...That's probably your first making money working on the water.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:05:45] Well, I wasn't working on the water, then, I was just playing, you know, down there, just the summertime, you know, be able to catch soft crabs.

BRENT LEWIS: There were a lot of soft crabs around at that time?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:05:54] Oh, yeah. Yeah. Sometimes you couldn't go swimming, there's so many crabs around the shore. When they'd come in and go to shedding, they doubled up and they'd come in there. Every time you

stepped on a piece of grass; you'd have a big double underneath your foot.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. That's not like that now.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:06:10] No. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: What do you think the difference is with soft crabs?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:06:14] Probably pollution is 90 percent of it. A lot of people chase them, too.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. The demand. What...Frank, I remember him as being a quiet, gentleman. Ella, not so quiet.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:06:33] [laughs] Not so quiet. I'd come home on school bus one day and I was limping when I got off.

The boy that was working the door, he was a bully. And when I got on the bus, he hauled off and kicked me hard as he could in my ankle. Well, you know, I limped... When I got off the bus, I limped, come on across the road.

Grandma, "What's wrong with you?" I said, "I got kicked on the bus." She waved for the bus to come back from down the Main, he'd come out of there, and walk down the street, and held him down, "Stop." She knew the bus driver, little Bill Denning. He said, "What's wrong, Ms. Ella? Did your grandson leave something on the bus?" "No, he got something." She read him his name up some side and down the other, if that's what you want to call it, and come on

back, and that was about the end of it, then, that's all I can remember of it.

BRENT LEWIS: I bet you never got kicked again.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:07:30] No, I don't think so. [laughter] But he was just a bully, and he was bigger than me. And of course, I was really little, then.

BRENT LEWIS: You were a little boy.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:07:39] Yeah. You want to know how small I was?

BRENT LEWIS: Yes, sir.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:07:42] Well, when I went to Grasonville Elementary School, they still had outside bathrooms. So, when I went there, they decided they're going to put inside bathrooms. When they put the urinal in the bathroom, they knew how tall to make it. Well, I was shortest boy in class, so they carried me up there, let me stand in front of the urinal, measure me, and they picked me, so there is, they'd fit everybody else. Everybody can't say things like that. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: That's hilarious. What school was that?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:08:09] Grasonville Elementary. The school wasn't even there, it's where the church is, there.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that Carolyn Courses [?]?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:08:19] She was there.

BRENT LEWIS: She was a teacher there.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:08:20] I think she was like the principal.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:08:22] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Where else did you go to school? Did you go to school on Kent Island, as well?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:08:26] Yeah. My father died when I was going to elementary school in Grasonville. Then we moved, she married Nick Ozer, my mother did, and we moved to Love Point. Then we went to Stevensville School, which were having a lot of exciting times, too.

BRENT LEWIS: Ella was a Coleman. Her family was the Colemans. So, the Lewises, the Colemans, the Austins, all very traditional Eastern Shore families. What do you remember... We talked a little bit about the Lewises, is what do you remember about the Colemans or the Austins in your time?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:09:02] Well, there was a lot of... She had a lot of brothers, Grandmother did. And they all worked on the water. Well, when I got old enough to work on the water, get my own boat, they sort of taught me what to do and how to do it, and all that kind of stuff, you know, little basic things you got to know. Well, my grandfather worked for old man David Nichols up Love Point. He had

built all the developments down the island and everything, and he had big farm up where the clubhouse is, now. Like the Cloverfields. So, I'd go up there and cut grass and take care of the animals, stuff like that was him. And I made really big money. I made five dollars a day. Not a dollar an hour, but five dollars a day, and was glad to get it. Money was scarce them days. I bought a brand-new boat, I paid 175 dollars and 50 cents for it, delivered from Taylor's Island.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that your first boat?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:10:04] Well, I had a rowboat before that, but that was really the first big boat I had. But it was 18 foot.

BRENT LEWIS: So, we kind of moved into that territory that I want to ask you about anyway. Those brothers of Ella, were they your first mentors working on the water? Were they the first people you kind of knew who worked on the water?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:10:26] Yeah, really, yeah, because they were all big, close family. And they all worked on the water. And I guess I went out with them a few times, you know, on the boat and stuff like, but when I got my little boat, man, the buttons would pop off my shirt. I had my boat, I was going on the water, then.

BRENT LEWIS: How old were you?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:10:46] I don't know, 12 or 13, I imagine, around like that.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:10:52] That was the life for me.

BRENT LEWIS: You immediately knew that's what you wanted to do?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:10:57] I guess so, because you can make a few dollars more doing that than you could on land. Like I said, I was making five dollars a day working on land, cutting grass, taking care of animals, stuff like that. But then, go out there, well, I don't...I can't remember how much crabs were, then, but whatever it was, it was a whole lot more than what I could make on land.

BRENT LEWIS: And the independence and all that you were able to have...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:11:22] And I was my own boss. And if it was a bad day, come up, go hunting. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: So, those brothers, we're talking about Paul Coleman, Purnell Coleman, Axley [?] Coleman.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:11:33] Yeah, and Smut [?], Dick Coleman's father. And they had another brother named Joe Coleman, Joseph, and he lived down in Dominion. I think it was 11 head of them, altogether, sisters and brothers.

BRENT LEWIS: When we talk about them being watermen, what did they do? What was the market? Did they crab? Did they oyster? Did they clam?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:12:00] They'd trotline and hand tong. There weren't no clamming when I was a boy, they were just a little bit too early for that. But they weren't long before they start clamming. Some of them started clamming, they took an outboard motor, put it on a trestle bench, set it overboard, and put a net behind it and run that motor, and blow the clams in that net, then pick the clams out of the net. Then the fellow named Leonard Brown, he become a good clammer, and he had speedboat. So, he took the wheel of the speedboat, and anchored the boat, and blowed the clams up in there. But a lot of people that eeled for a living... I mean, not for a living, to get crab bait with, they would do the same thing. They'd take their work boat and put a big net behind them, and then they could top off their bars with that wheel, and blow all the clams back in the net, then they'd pull the net up and pick the clams out, and they'd go set the eel pots with them.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. Clamming, when the clam rings came along, did that kind of change that...that changed all that obviously.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:12:57] Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it did change. But the first clam rigs weren't much to them. Some of them had hand cranks they turned to conveyor. Some of them had chicken wire for a conveyor belt, that they turned like that. And they had a boom in front of the boat with a mast in the front with a boom in the bow, and a boom to the stern that would lift the elevator up and down, whichever way they wanted it to.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow, it sounds like it was an ongoing effort to make the machines better, make things work better. And you've always had to figure out stuff, it sounds like.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:13:36] Yeah. That was life. You know, you make it a little better, and make a few dollars more, make it a little easier. That was the life.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you feel like you had to be a little bit of a carpenter, or a little bit of a mechanic, a little bit of all those things?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:13:54] You had to do everything. You couldn't afford to pay somebody to come down work on your boat, you had to do it yourself. So, you learned how to work on it yourself. After you work on it for years and years, you get, I won't say good, but if something goes wrong, you can fix it. And that makes a big difference. And that's the way with a lot of clammers. They got so

they were building their own rigs, and anything broke down, they fixed it themselves, and they didn't have pay another man all that money to do all the repair work. And it was always a few of them that had to get somebody, or something that you couldn't do. It...it turned out pretty good.

BRENT LEWIS: Then when that first little boat you have, what did you do? Did you crab out of it and oyster?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:14:38] Yeah, and oyster.

BRENT LEWIS: Hand tonging?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:14:40] Yeah. It was 18 foot, but I guess something like six foot wide. But it was brand new. And it had, what you call it deadrise bottom, A V-bottom, and little box stern on it. So, it was just like a big workboat, except it was a miniature.

BRENT LEWIS: So did you...And how did you find it in Taylor's Island?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:14:59] Well, it was a fellow who lived down the road past me named Casey White. And he sold boats for this man on the side. Whenever he could find somebody wanting a boat, well, he'd get the order for two of them, and then he'd call the man up, tell him, "Build me two of them," and then the man would bring them up here and drop off wherever. Well, he talked me into buying one of them, and I bought it.

BRENT LEWIS: You pay cash?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:15:24] Oh, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And you saved up...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:15:26] From making five dollars a day cutting grass and doing whatever.

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

GENE AUSTIN: [00:15:35] But think about the price now. I said 175. It was 173.50 delivered. He charged 15 dollars to bring two boats up on a flatbed tractor trailer. And that was the price of the boat. Brand new, and she had coat of paint on and a coat of copper on her. But she had no flooring to her, no motor, no nothing, no hardware, just a naked hull.

BRENT LEWIS: So, you probably worked... The trotline you devised yourself. But the hand tongs, who made hand tongs locally? Who did you buy your equipment from?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:16:14] When you first start, a lot of times you just buy it from somebody that you know has got three or four pair, extra pair or something, and you just buy a pair of his. But Kirby Bryan used to make a few tongs there, in Grasonville, and a fellow down towards Tilghman, I can't remember his name now, we used to buy tongs from him. And then later on, there was a man down to Mardela Springs. He was a funeral director. And he built tongs on

the side for a living. A funeral director. [laughs] He still does it, unless he just stopped here, lately. But that was for a long, long time.

BRENT LEWIS: Those were skills that are disappearing, too, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:16:56] Yeah, that's right. And I've made a few pair.

BRENT LEWIS: Really?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:17:00] Yeah, a small pair. You get a nice 12-inch fir floorboard, like you build for steps going up the stairs or something like that. And you find one of them and you get a nice long one and then you get a couple pair of tongs out of that. If it didn't have no sap pockets in them. If it had sap pocket into it, there was a big crack that had sap in it, and then once you cut down by the side of it, the thing would split right wide open by that sap pocket. So, you couldn't use that.

BRENT LEWIS: Is fir one of the best woods to use?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:17:32] No, but it was light. And it was available. Real good pine was hard to get. Where most of it'd come from was up in the Baltimore City when they were tearing them old rowhouses down. They had real long floor joists to them. They were made out of Georgia pine. And that's what they'd make out of them. They'd bring them

home, them big things, and take them, punch all the nails out and go run over top of them, trying to make sure, ice picking all the holes, make sure when they did start cutting them up. The old Kingsley Church, right down past me, that's what they did with some of the sills that was in her. Jerry Hoxter got a pair of them, made out of one of sills.

BRENT LEWIS: How big would they run, those shafts?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:18:16] How long?

BRENT LEWIS: How long, yeah.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:18:19] Oh, shorter of them are eight or 10 foot, up to 28 would be long, but one or two people had 32s. There weren't many, but one or two of them had 32s. That's a lot of tongs. It'd take a good man to work the 32-foot tongs.

BRENT LEWIS: How were the heads made? What were they like? A hand tong, the heads of the hand tong, like, were they iron, were they steel?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:18:46] Yeah, and Kirby Bryan used to make some, and used to put teeth on some of them. A fellow up in Stevensville named Melvin Clark he used to make a few pair of tong heads. And he worked on tong shafts, too, the broken ones, the cracked ones. For a quick repair, you'd go up to see him, and he'd fix you up and get you going.

BRENT LEWIS: Did most oystermen in this part of the Bay hand tong for oysters? Was that the primary way?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:19:09] When I was a boy, yeah, that was the only way, when I was a boy. And then they started patent tonging. And I had one of the first hydraulic patent tong rigs on Kent Island when they started using hydraulic rigs. I went up to Rock Hall, a man had one up there, and I bought it from him. Now, either the same year or the next year, some of the rest of them were starting to get hold of them, these hydraulics. But before that, they were called what you call a drop tong. You open the head up on the culling board, throw it overboard, they would drop, you'd step on the foot pedal, it would close up with one rope, it'd come back up and you'd swing it in and dump it. But the hydraulics, you just step on there, it would open its head and close the head, and swing its arm come right on up and we'd dump it.

BRENT LEWIS: So, another advancement making the job a little easier.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:19:59] Oh yeah, and faster.

BRENT LEWIS: When you saw the Rock Hall, was that the first time you had seen one of those?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:20:04] No, I'd seen him before. Most of them had come from Rock Hall, because there was a lot of them up

there. And this fellow, he was getting out of the business, he was in the crab business, big. And he had a restaurant up there, and he was just tired of fooling with it. And they all fished up there in the wintertime. They patent tonged a little bit in the fall up into the winter. But the big part of them would go drift netting, when you could drift net. But of course, you can't do that anymore.

BRENT LEWIS: What is drift netting, how does that work?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:20:32] Well, they take a big, long gill net, and they run it out, and let it drift on up the Bay with the tide. And then they'd wait for a while and then, especially when the tide is getting ready to turn, they'd stop and go pick it and start pulling it into the boat, rope it on into the boat, and keep your fingers crossed.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] That was a big thing that watermen did back in the day?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:20:58] Up in Rock Hall, not Kent Island.

Very few people fish at Kent Island.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:21:03] Yeah, very few.

BRENT LEWIS: Why do you think that is?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:21:04] They all hand tong. And we had oysters, then. You could go out hand tonging, if you cut a

pair of tongs, you could make a living right there to your back door.

BRENT LEWIS: How did the Kent Islanders, or the Queen Anne's County guys get along with the Rock Hall, or the Talbot County watermen?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:21:22] As a rule, they got along pretty good. I mean, once a while somebody would flare up a little bit, but we called them yellow bellies, and they called us yellow bellies. That's the way it was. There was a boy, fellow named... He's passed away now, named Jack Kuhlman [?] who used to live down on Tilghman Island And I used to bowl down in Easton, and he bowled down in Easton, and if he walked in the door and see me before I'd seen him, he'd holler across the bowling alley, "Hey, yellow belly." Well, if I'd seen him first, I holler, "Hey, yellow belly." There was a thing going, whoever seen the other one, first, they'd scream all the way across that bowling alley, make sure that the other one heard him. It was just one of those things. All in fun.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. It was a little competitive, but if you needed somebody, you feel like they'd be there.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:22:07] Oh, yeah. I tied Tilghman Island off and on a lot of times when oysters up our way got scarce.

I never had a bit of trouble anytime there. Made a lot of friends down there.

BRENT LEWIS: But when you came up, did you...were you only allowed to work in your county back then or had that changed?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:22:24] Right in the very beginning, but they weren't long for to change that. Anne Arundel County had oysters, so many oysters over there they were nearly coming out of water. And over here, we were getting scarce. Of course, they didn't have many oystermen over there, they just had a few patent tongers, but no hand tongers, nothing like that in the later years. And they would go, and they just wouldn't let you over there. I mean, the law said that you couldn't go over the county line. And after a while, they changed the law. Then we started going over there. Well, of course, they got upset over that. And you couldn't blame. But it worked itself out.

BRENT LEWIS: Those guys who were working over there got upset about the changing.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:23:04] Yeah, because we were coming over. They called it their oysters, catching their oysters.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:23:10] And there was a load of oysters over there for a while.

BRENT LEWIS: So, that shows that the market was changing, that you guys here locally were having to think about changing what you were going to catch, or where you had to go to catch it, at that point.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:23:25] Yeah, but if you worked anywhere outside, oysters were normally pretty good oysters. If you worked way up in inside, the oysters were trashier oysters, skinny, long, maybe not as fat as they should be. But outside in the Bay or in the Eastern Bay or Chester River, you get outside them places, the oysters generally run really good. There weren't any trouble to sell them, if the market was up for it.

BRENT LEWIS: Let's talk about other boats that you had after that first little boat. How long did you keep that little boat? What was the next one that you...?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:24:00] I don't know how long I had it. I must have had it 10 or 12 years, but I bought a couple other little, small ones in between, just because I like boats. And one of them was a little fantail, something you don't even see no more. It's steady, you've got a box stern, it's square like it was a fantail had a rig come down. Some people call them rig tails, but they was called fantails then. And they'd run down.

BRENT LEWIS: What's the difference in a box tail and a fantail, as far as how it serviced the boat?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:24:34] At the end of this beach is a box stern square hull. The fantail run out like that, to the water, with a big, long, round fan. And it was all closed in with wood.

BRENT LEWIS: Did it make any difference the way you'd do the job?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:24:46] It would make the boat faster, because you wouldn't settle down. But in the rough water, if you had seas coming behind you, they'd roll up that stern, roll right on inside the boat.

BRENT LEWIS: Got it. so, the box stern was more protective against that, and more typical.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:24:59] Especially out in the Bay somewhere, if you had to go out there. But the ones that worked out there that were fantails, they were bigger boats. And of course, the fantail was bigger, but it still would roll up the stern.

BRENT LEWIS: So, after those couple intermittents, then you went on to a different, a bigger boat?

GENE AUSTIN: Yeah, I had about a 35-foot tuck stern. And it was pretty good shape, because the old man I bought it from, he was a...like a carpenter. And he had everything

perfect on there when I bought it, and it was a real nice boat.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that the boat you had the longest?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:25:39] No, I don't think so. Next to the last one was the one I had the longest, I think.

BRENT LEWIS: What was that?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:25:45] That boat was named *Kenny II*. and I got it from my uncle, Billy Lewis. His son was named Kenny, he was cutting grass for the county up by Chesapeake College and it rolled over and killed him on the tractor. And he had his boat named that. And about a year or two after that, the boat was only three years old when I bought it, and he's come to me one day said, "I want to get rid of her, and you want to take her?" I said, "Yeah, I'll take her." So, I ended up with her, and had a brand-new patent rig on it, brand new boat, three years old, brand-new motor, Chrysler motor into it. Perfect rig.

BRENT LEWIS: How long did you keep that?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:26:25] A long while. I don't know. Easy 20 years, maybe longer, I don't know.

BRENT LEWIS: Part of the family, basically.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:26:33] [laughs] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: The boat is part of the family. As long as I've thought about this, I've kind of known you as working out

of the slips down there. Was that always kind of your home? Or did you have other areas that you worked out of?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:26:48] I've worked out of Annapolis, and I've worked out of Tilghman Island. But Kent Narrows was the main place. When I was a boy, I worked out of Goodhand's Creek, because I could ride down there on my bicycle, because when I started, I didn't have a license, driver's license. And I'd get my grandfather, I'd go crabbing down there, get my grandfather to come down in the evening, bring my gas and my bait down, put that in the boat and get ready for the next day. Then I'd ride down there early next morning, go out there, leave the bicycle ashore, and go on out in the boat and go crabbing. And the man come down and bought the crabs in a pickup truck that was buying crabs, Casey Stevens out of Dominion. And he'd buy your crabs, and he'd go on up [unclear].

BRENT LEWIS: So, he'd come to you and buy the crabs. He'd drive around. It wasn't you having to go to him.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:27:34] I knew he was going to be there a certain time.

BRENT LEWIS: Were there other crabbers in Goodhand's Creek?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:27:37] Oh, yeah, there was probably eight, 10, may have been 12, I don't know. Everybody tied to a stake outside the pier, there. Everybody had a little

rowboat that you go out to the boat in. One year, the hurricane was coming up there, a lot of people would bring the boats up in the Creek so they wouldn't get caught in the big wind. And I went and tied to a great big tree that was off the shore, right there close to the pier. And the tide started getting higher, and higher, and higher, and I'd paddle, I think, I believe I can get to this fence row, because the fence row come down the road. I tied to the fence row, and the tide come up, and I'd get in the boat and paddle up the fence row a little further. And then when it started going back down, I'd do the same thing, and started going back down to get my little scow back down, so to keep it in the water, and followed it up and down, according to the tide.

BRENT LEWIS: That's funny, man.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:28:36] You had to do what you had to do. And every Halloween, a bunch of us boys would go down there, take all the boats, the scows that were tied there, carry them back, tie them to a stake outside there, and everybody come down the shore next morning, nobody could get out to their boat, because all the scows were tied to the boat. And the one we come in after the tide, we'd sink her there, so they had a sunken boat, and all the other boats were tied out.

BRENT LEWIS: A Halloween prank.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:29:03] A Halloween prank.

BRENT LEWIS: So, when my dad always talked about growing up down that way, do you consider yourself, not Dominion, right? It's Chester.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:29:12] Yeah. We're up neckers, they're down neckers. [laughs] We're up neckers, they're down neckers.

BRENT LEWIS: Down the little creek...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:29:20] Dominion.

BRENT LEWIS: Dominion, down that way.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:29:23] Another Halloween prank we used to have, Billy Harris was a big-time oyster buyer and crab buyer and all. He had a son my age and had an old man who lived next door to him, his name was Buck Soul [?]. Well, Buck Soul had an outside toilet. And we turned his toilet over every Halloween, and he'd come back there fussing and cussing and hollering, and shooting up every shotgun, saying he'd shoot us all. Well, one Halloween, he was prepared for us. He took, drove locust post down, so it was taut, and took brace wire, wrapped around the toilet and around the [unclear]. Well, the old man didn't have any curtains in his house, you'd look right straight through his house. We could see what room he was in. When he went in the living room, we'd go back there, rip the

wire off the post, turn the toilet over, and he'd come outside just about the time we were finishing up, and he started chasing us. We run over to Billy Harris's house, and ran in the house, and Sis Harris is Billy's wife, said, "Come on, go out the back window here." And she opened the window, let us go out the back window so we could escape so he couldn't catch us.

BRENT LEWIS: You were bad. [laughter] I always thought you were a little innocent fellow.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:30:33] Well, we were all just having a good time.

BRENT LEWIS: It was just good, clean fun, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:30:36] That's right, that's right.

BRENT LEWIS: And Ella would never hold you responsible.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:30:39] No, absolutely. I didn't do anything wrong. If you don't think so, ask her.

BRENT LEWIS: When you were little like that, running around, who was the oldest person you knew?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:30:51] I was probably the oldest one in the crowd.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:30:53] Yeah, because I was like two years older than the rest of the boys around there that was

around that age. So, I guess they're going to blame it on me.

BRENT LEWIS: You were the bad one. We talked about oyster and crabbing. Did you clam?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:31:11] Yeah, I clammed two or three different times.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:31:13] That was the best job, I made the best money I ever made in my life one season, we had. It was really good. And I mean, you'd catch your limit every day, you'd catch it early in the morning. I mean, eight o'clock, we'd be coming in with our limit, and had put ice on them, then. And we'd come in and the first two bushels, they had to reach a certain temperature. They had high school kids on the pier that they stayed it hard to stick a thermometer in the clam. You couldn't pull them out unless there were certain temperature. I can't remember what the temperature was now. Well, the first two bushels you catch, you covered them up real good, ice in there. Then when you get up to the pier, you pulled them first two out so that you knew they had to be ice cold. They measured them and everything was fine. So, that's how you got away with it.

BRENT LEWIS: What was the limit? How many could you catch?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:32:04] I don't remember, I don't know. I think it was 15, but I'm not sure. I think it was.

BRENT LEWIS: And clamming kind of came on around here, like the eating clams wasn't really a thing when you were a kid, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:32:16] No, up north, that was their thing. They tell me they had stands on side of the road that you could buy just clam sandwiches, or steamed clams any way you wanted, that's all they sold, was clams, what we call nanos, then.

BRENT LEWIS: Mostly we used them for bait, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:32:31] Yeah. And then the rock fish got so they liked them, because the clam reef were chumming them up. And then, they started selling a lot of rock fish bait to the bait stores. And that was a big market for a while there, too. The clammers were doing really good, especially in our area. I don't know how other areas are doing. But when they started out, everybody just had small work boats and they were putting these clam rigs on little, tiny boats. And one fellow, the rig was long enough, it was sticking past his stern, he cut a hole in top deck of his stern, and he's standing there and picked clams out, because the boat weren't long enough to reach in the clam rig. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. So, that was a highlight of your career, that season, those seasons clamming.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:33:23] Probably, yeah, because it was a good summer and by August, the water got hot. And you could tell when the water started getting hot, the snakes started getting longer and longer and longer. And some of them would get that long. You went and grabbed a clam; you'd reach down and grab a handful of snakes and put them in the basket. Well, it got so they would get poured in, nobody wanted them. And within a week, it changed from fantastic to zero. In one week, it went down that fast.

BRENT LEWIS: What would cause that?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:33:58] All we know it was just the hot water. The water got hot. The water got hot, and it was just that time in August, usually. It puts you out of business, you would go back crabbing.

BRENT LEWIS: So, working on the water is a risky business.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:34:13] Oh, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: If those were some of your best years, what were some of the worst years? Do you look back and remember a particular time that was a struggle for local watermen?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:34:26] Oh, yeah. I've seen times when it'd be hard for one man to get three or four bushel. And I don't remember what the price was, but usually, if they're

real scarce, the price was up a little bit higher. But it sometimes it would go right off of nothing, and then you'd have to take off and try to go somewhere else. If you thought they were catchable, or say, like I'm going to go down to Tilghman Island, I'd go down there, and usually, you could catch just a few more. But it was good times and bad times.

BRENT LEWIS: How about freeze ups, and those kinds of things? Did that affect your business?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:35:03] Well the funny part was a lot of people and near everybody starved during a freeze up, but me and my buddy, we done better. He had a little tiny fiberglass boat and he put washboards on it, and a culling board, and build it all fiberglass and all together, made it one thing. And we'd go in Kent Narrows channel, on them shoal bars, and work around them shoal bars, and we make a good day's work in there. And we'd done real good while it was froze up. And sometimes we had to break a hole to where there was a hole open that we could work at. And we'd done good. And nobody else was selling oysters, so the price would go up. And most the time during the freeze up, we'd done real good.

BRENT LEWIS: No kidding. Have you ever eeled?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:35:46] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Tell me about that.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:35:49] A friend of mine, he worked on Western Shore, and he was coming through the tollgate, he had a heart attack. And his brother took the rig over and he had it for a little while, and then he went got a job with the county, and I bought the rig, and then I went on with eeling. I don't know, I think I had between 500 and 600 eel pots, if I can remember right. And they were the bigger ones, then. We used... When you caught them for regular bait, for crab bait, you had a little tiny pot, a five-and-a-half-inch pot. That's all it needed. But when you started catching them and selling them live, well, you had a bigger pot. And the ones I had I think were eight inches. And they were nice... It was a nice rig, the fellow had. And I bought everything he had, just so I can go jump right to it, and go on go eel. And it was pretty good deal. You can make a few dollars out of it. and it gave you something to do early in the spring when oyster season was over, drop the pots wherever they were, and go right on and work. So, it turned out pretty good.

BRENT LEWIS: It was kind of a filler thing between other seasons.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:36:54] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Early on those eels, when they were using them
for bait, that was for crab bait?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:37:00] You mean eels? No, they would put
them on a plane, and send them to New York.

BRENT LEWIS: The live...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:37:09] Yeah, large eels.

BRENT LEWIS: For?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:37:11] Eating. They had an Asian market over
that...

BRENT LEWIS: A food market.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:37:16] Mm-hmm. And there was one fellow
named Robeczech [?] from down in Virginia. And I think
something happened to his plane, when they were flying
these eels over, and they opened the doors and bailed all
the eels out so to lighten the plane up, was what the story
was one time. And so, he would keep it from the plane
going down.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that one of the challenges of working on the
water, having to adapt to the markets and...?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:37:43] Oh yeah, yeah. If you had a little
bit of everything sitting in the backyard, whatever was up,
you could jump and grab it, and jump out on your boat and
go do it.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that the way you approached your career, is being prepared to do whatever?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:37:55] Sometimes. Sometimes, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: What was your favorite out of all those jobs?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:38:02] Patent tonger.

BRENT LEWIS: Why? Because of the money?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:38:05] Well, the money was good. And I was pretty fast at it. I could make that rig jump, come up and down real good. Of course, I was a young man, then. Ain't nothing fast now with me. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Did you work by yourself then?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:38:17] Sometimes, sometimes. I've had three rigs. One time I had two on the boat and I had another one in the woods. But anytime somebody had extra parts or something, I'd buy these parts, carry them home and stick them in the woods. I got some parts home now still in the woods that have been there for 30 years. But like the heads and stuff like that. But it just... When you run up on a deal you buy, you know? Because you do going to need it some time or another.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you ever take up diving for oysters?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:38:50] I had a diver. I never done it myself.

BRENT LEWIS: You had a diver?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:38:52] Yeah, I had a diver. But some of them were so lazy, they wouldn't get out of their own way. They weren't used to working. And I had one diver that, he dove a little while, he was catching a few oysters, he said, "I've got to take a break." And I think he'd been out drinking that night. He wound up sitting back in the cabin, and I heard a noise, looked, he was up there snoring. [snoring] Man, what have I got here? And we're out there trying to make a living, he's sitting back in the cabin snoring.

BRENT LEWIS: Almost made it too easy. Because that was an easy way to harvest, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:39:26] Yeah, it was easy. But if you had a good diver, you were busy, because he could send them... bushels of oysters up just as fast as you could cull them. If you had a good diver.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you feel like you never had that good a diver?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:39:40] He was just average. But I had a couple of them, you know, over the years. Some of them were better than others. But I had one that weren't the best in the world, but he was a worker, and he'd go down and he'd stay down there until he got what he was supposed to get. And if you got somebody putting all that he could do it, you can't ask for no more. And he was a pretty good

diver. But I say, he wasn't the best, but he worked hard at it. And he loved money. And he worked for the dollar.

BRENT LEWIS: So, he was motivated.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:40:11] And he eventually... His girlfriend left him. He got distressed. He pulled his car in the garage and sat in the car and let her run and got rid of himself. That's something, ain't it?

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, that's something. Can you tell us, like, the pros and cons of the differences between diving and hand tonging, for oysters?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:40:37] Well, if you were a good hand tonger, you could make a decent living hand tonging. If you had a real good diver, you could make a good living out of diving. It's just depending on the person that was working with you, especially like diving. If he was a good diver, he could make you some money. If you were good hang tonger, you didn't need a diver. You'd just catch them yourself. And that's more or less what it was. It just depends on who was with you and how good you were. Everybody's a little bit different, you know? You might be better than me. But if we work together on my boat, well, that would benefit me.

BRENT LEWIS: Would the circumstances of the market and the weather and all that help you make decisions as to which of those things you were going to pursue?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:41:31] Not weather-wise, no. It just... You've just done whatever you thought you could do, make the most money out of. That's what it's all about, trying and make a living. And divers was good way to go if you had a good diver. But like you said, I've had some bad ones. And I had one fellow come up that was from Texas, he worked on oil rigs down in Texas, diver. And he was talking about how good he was and everything. And he come up, and he said, "I can't get enough in a basket. Let me carry the shovel down." He carried the shovel down, and was going to shovel them in. And when he got that shovel, I go, "Well, that's the end of him. He ain't going to make it." You can't shovel oysters in a basket on the bottom.

BRENT LEWIS: He found out pretty quickly, probably, too.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:42:14] Yeah, he found out pretty quick he had to get a good job somewhere else.

BRENT LEWIS: So, there's positives and negatives to all approaches to harvesting, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:42:25] One of his stories was that he was out by one of them oil rigs one night, and they were in a big fiberglass boat, they're sleeping all of them, waiting for

next day to come. He had his hand hanging down, he started feeling water. The boat was sinking, water was coming up around his arm, laying in the bunk. [laughs] He said that weren't a good feeling.

BRENT LEWIS: What a way to wake up.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:42:46] We were down in Eastern Bay diving, he was... The same one was diving for me. And it was pretty rough down there. And it was big swells coming in, I imagine they were at least four foot tall, coming in there. Well, I had a board around the stern of my boat on the inside, like, 18 inches taller there to keep the water out. But before I put that board up there, when a big sea hit the stern, just like hitting that table there, it would roll over top everyone in the boat, run all around your feet. Then the pumps would come on and pump it out. And he's seen them big swells come up and roll over top the side of that boat, and he didn't like that. He thought we were going to sink when the first one come up there. But they were just a normal thing, you know? Sit there and ride them out. Every once in a while, one would come in there. He didn't like that.

BRENT LEWIS: Wasn't used to that.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:43:34] No. Too much water too fast. But that was just our life, you know? That's what we've done.

BRENT LEWIS: What was the last thing you did, working on the water?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:43:46] I culled oysters for a friend of mine.

BRENT LEWIS: Tell us what culling oysters is.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:43:52] Well, the man stands up on the wash board and tongs them, throws them up on the culling board, and I stand behind the culling board, I pick out everything from three inches on up, throw them in the basket, push everything else overboard, wait for him to throw the next lift up there. You've got to try to keep it clear if you can, because you don't want to get piled up because you won't get as many culls. You've got to keep that board clear.

BRENT LEWIS: There's a skill to it.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:44:14] Oh, yeah. It's to anything, make these stories up, there's a skill to it.

BRENT LEWIS: So, you're retired. Tell me what physically working on the water has done to you.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:44:30] Worn my knees out.

BRENT LEWIS: Legs?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:44:31] Knees. It wore my knees out. My knees are wore out. And that's... That's my helper.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that really the only physical...?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:44:44] Yeah, the boat... when the boats were smaller, they would go up and down all every day, and we worked near about every blowy day there was, a friend of mine, now. And you put that many years in of your knees just doing this and up and down like that all day, every day, all winter long, something's going to wear out. And it was me.

BRENT LEWIS: People don't think of that.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:45:06] That's right.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever had any close calls or what's the most dangerous situation you've ever been in?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:45:16] It was kind of close. I'd leave one gray blind out early morning up at Marshy Creek that comes up behind Grasonville there, and turned around, and was run the back, get ready to ready those line up, and all of a sudden, the boat blowed up. I mean blowed up. The cabin, top of the cabin went up in the air, flying up, the side windows went out and dropped down on the washboard. They didn't go overboard, they just dropped on the washboard. The top of the cabin fell down on the bottom of the boat. The floorboards open all up down in the bottom, I looked down the bottom to see the floor burning in the bilge. I was standing right next to the motor, the engine box laying right against my leg. Now, this is where the guardian

angel comes in, because I do have a guardian angel. He's good to me. And when the engine box blowed up, I mean the engine blowed up, the front of the engine box blowed way up in the front the boat, the back end of the engine box blowed to the back of boat, this side went all the way over, never made it overboard, this side stayed right here, and I never gotten either hair singed on my arm, everything was perfect as far as that, and I had far coming from the carburetor went right straight up to the top of the canopy. It was a rough time for a little few minutes there. And when I got myself together what was happening, I grabbed that bucket of water, five-gallon bucket and started bailing water like crazy.

BRENT LEWIS: Were you crabbing?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:46:42] Yeah, I laid one line out and I was getting ready to lay the other line out, and that's when she blowed up.

BRENT LEWIS: What caused that?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:46:50] I guess the carburetor had a rubber hose onto it, and if I remember right, it had a little crack in there in a bin. And that may have been dripping. And I never could smell a whole lot, my sinuses are always stopped up. And every day it was dripping, rundown, and that bilge, and I didn't know it that morning. And we'd

been working on the carburetor that afternoon, that night in the day before, so I just assumed that rubber hose was it.

BRENT LEWIS: How did that end, that day?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:47:19] Well, when I got started getting it far under control a little bit, I got on the CB [Citizens Band], and we've got CB right over your head, right where you reach right up and grab it, and I called, there's another fellow named Steve Ruth up the creek father from me. I said, "Steven, I'm on fire." But them boys, some of the other boys on there said that I had blowed up. But I don't remember saying I blowed up, but that's what one of them said I said. And Steven didn't hear me at first, and the boy at the mouth of the creek at the other end of me, he heard me, and he come around, run right up there, and got hold of me. But by that time, I had the fire out, because I'd throw the water in the bottom of the boat, and put it out, and on top of the boat, and put it out.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:48:05] Then, a friend of mine would come down there next day, and we were sitting there looking at the motor. He said, "Let's start her up, see if we can get her started." Turned the key on, she started right up.
[laughs] I have one little ground wire that was melted on

her, it was the only thing that that fire had done to that.
But it had blown the cabin off. Blowed the floor up.
Blowed the engine box off.

BRENT LEWIS: What did you do with that boat?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:48:31] It didn't hurt the boat. I just...
And being in the water business, and got a lot of friends,
people started dropping by, hand me some money, hand me
some money. And they handed me a large amount of money
when it was all totaled up. And that helped me get back on
my feet real quick.

BRENT LEWIS: That's one of the best parts of working on the
water, is that community?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:48:55] Yeah, that's a big part. Because one
time before we had another boy had a boat that slipped, a
clam rig, and he was gassing up, but he had a kerosene
stove lit in the bow. And the fuse went down underneath
that floor and blowed that boat up. I was standing about
three feet, I mean three boat-lengths away from that boat,
when it blew. We were clamming and we were on strike,
wanted more money. And he was gassing that boat up, boy,
when she blowed up, the boy from Kent Narrows to where the
Old Shamrock Inn, you remember where the Old Shamrock Inn
was.

BRENT LEWIS: Yes, sir.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:49:30] It was probably over a mile. He said it rattled his windows in the house. [laughs] It was that big of an explosion when that clam rig blew up.

BRENT LEWIS: Anybody get hurt?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:49:40] No. He got out. There was a boy, I guess, was up in the cabin somewhere, there was another boy there, I can't remember where he was, but he didn't. But the boy had the gas in back his truck with a hose running down there, filling the tank up, and he was getting ready to fill up and somebody stand on shore said, "Man, throw that hose down, and get away from there." And he did.

BRENT LEWIS: That was right in the county slips?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:50:04] Yeah, right in the county slip.

BRENT LEWIS: When you were first starting as a young kid, were the county slips there?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:50:10] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: So, they've always been there?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:50:12] But they were only half as long as they are, now.

BRENT LEWIS: Half as long?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:50:15] Half as long. And the bulkhead behind them was terrible. It was falling over. It would fall towards the boat, and behind it would be clear marsh and mud, and it was a nasty mess. They had like little

homemade ramps up on top of the bulkhead, so you'd get up to your boat and get over. It weren't nobody took care of them; they were just there. That was it. The land was donated to the county from the old man out on the farm that owned all of that around there, old man Wyatt Gardener. And then when the county decided they were going to go spend some money in there and charge a whole lot of money for slips, they thought, this is ours. Oh, no, it ain't yours. That land was donated to you, you didn't pay a penny for it. But they still charge you a fortune. Each year they would get higher, and higher, and higher.

BRENT LEWIS: So, the county does run that.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:51:08] Yeah, the county runs that. It's up there by the Parks Recreation. They're probably the ones that really run it, I guess it is.

BRENT LEWIS: It seems like fewer and fewer actual workboats in there.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:51:23] I believe it's just getting a little bit less all the time. Because the DNR makes so many rules against the watermen that it's hard to make a living. They don't give you a break, nowheres in the world. They just, more rules and more rules. They raise you fines, your fines up, they raise the tickets up, the license...the price of the license. And you can have, on average, from

your average license, you could have 1,000 dollars tied up in your license.

BRENT LEWIS: So, if your first boat cost you 173 dollars?

GENE AUSTIN: And 50 cents.

BRENT LEWIS: And 50 cents. What would it cost a guy now to start in the waterman business?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:52:07] Well first, he would have to get licensed. And that's impossible because they don't issue them out. You've got to get somebody else to start them in. And if you could get licensed, they're depending on what you're going to do.

BRENT LEWIS: Right, if you're a crabber...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:52:22] The cheapest thing you could do is go hand tonging and trot lining. You'd have to get a trotline rig and hand tong rig. But if you got it right now, you would go trot lining, and you would get your crab lines.

BRENT LEWIS: What's the cheapest boat that somebody could, a waterman could buy now? What's the low end?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:52:45] I don't know.

BRENT LEWIS: Ten thousand?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:52:48] It depends what kind you get. If you go buy a used one, if you're lucky, you can buy one at a reasonable price. But you go for a fiberglass and a big

one like that, you're, could have 100,000 dollars into it, with a big motor.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever seen anything out on the water unexplainable, amazing?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:53:09] A friend of mine, I remember one time when they had Chessie, when Chessie was swimming?

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm.

GENE AUSTIN: A friend of mine said, "Man," he called me on the radio, he said, "I found Chessie. I see Chessie going right across here where I'm crabbing at." It was foggy. And so, when he got another good look at it, it was four or five black ducks just flying, and just waving up down as they were going like that across the water. He said, "Man, I knew I'd seen Chessie going out on that water, because I'd seen the humps in his back," when the ducks were going up and down. [Laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Did you ever find anything interesting?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:53:40] No, nothing, nothing really like that. I was crabbing in in Piney Creek in there, and there was a black drum swimming around there. And I guess somebody had hooked him, he'd been wounded. And you don't see them up round our way that often. They're usually down round Tilghman. And he was a big fish. I mean, he was probably as big as that bench you're sitting on, swimming on top of

the water, going around and around like that. But he was hurt. There was something wrong with him. But I've seen porpoises. Amy was with me when I had porpoises, her and her girlfriend. And all the way up to here to Cox's Creek, near about as far as you can go.

BRENT LEWIS: This is pretty recently? Or a long while ago?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:54:22] A long while ago, when she was a girl. That must have been now 100 years ago.

BRENT LEWIS: But you're seeing them more and more, right? Up in...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:54:30] Oh, yeah, yeah, they see them every once a while, now.

BRENT LEWIS: But it was rare back then.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:54:34] Yeah, very rare. And pelicans, once a while you see pelicans come up here.

BRENT LEWIS: You read my mind, because I was just getting ready to ask you, like, I don't remember pelicans as a kid.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:54:44] Best fisherman in the world. When he dove down, he come up, he had a fish. He never missed.

BRENT LEWIS: He's your biggest competitor.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:54:49] He never missed. These little cormorants and seagulls and fish hawks and all that stuff, when they're after something, they miss a lot of them. That pelican never missed. I'd sit there and watch him.

Every time he went down, he had a fish when he'd come up.

He was professional.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that part of the joy of working on the water,
is being out there, and seeing that, Mother Nature...?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:55:12] Being your own boss.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that the high...?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:55:15] That's right. And nobody telling you
what to do. And if you're lucky enough, make a little
extra money, more than what you could on land, that was
even better. And when I was a boy, we all hunted a lot.
And as soon as the first bad day come, man, we'd grab the
guns and go hunting, and that was half our life, was
hunting.

BRENT LEWIS: What'd you hunt for?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:55:34] Ducks and geese.

BRENT LEWIS: Waterfowl?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:55:37] Yeah. And rabbits. Weren't much deer
hunting when I was a boy round. The deer were very scarce
on Kent Island. You hardly ever seen one. But the wild
geese were so many of them that when they were down on that
Eastern Shore, when they take... They go out in the water,
stay all night, come out of the cornfields, and when they
took up, they could actually block the sun out when they
would jump up. There was that many, 1,000 geese, Canadian

geese, that would jump up. It just thousands upon thousands of them.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. As a kid, when you were...?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:56:09] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: You saw that change over the years, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:56:13] Oh, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Diminish.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:56:15] Now, you see a couple of dozen here and a couple dozen there.

BRENT LEWIS: It used to be a big thing though. People would come from all over to come hunting here, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:56:24] I went door... Down to Dorchester County to go deer hunting one time, and I was sitting in the stand, and I kept hearing this noise starting to come over. I looked up there and it was snow geese. And far as I could see, there were snow geese. I said, "I'm going to time them." And I looked at my watch. And I sit there, and I sit there, and it was six minutes before that bunch of geese could get by me to go the other way to get out of sight. So, how many thousands of geese was up there and that bunch? I don't know. They're white snow geese. But I'd never seen that many in my life. It was just six minutes of flying over my head. Now, six minutes don't sound like long, but you sit there and watch your watch for

six minutes. It's a long while. And it's just steady flying, steady flying, coming by going North.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you hunt up until adulthood?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:57:13] Until when?

BRENT LEWIS: As you grew up, like, even when you were an adult, did you go hunting?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:57:16] Oh, yeah. Yeah. But it got less and less of it. Because I can remember my knees were starting to bother me in the older years that I didn't want to walk diagonally across a cornfield to go hunting. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Out in the marsh...

GENE AUSTIN: [00:57:34] Yeah. And all that together, I guess, what ruined the old knees. But one time, I was deer hunting down on the farm back East, and we were renting a farm back there. And I was down there by myself that day and I was coming out. And something kept jumping out of the weeds ahead of me and flying ahead of me, and landing. Now, I never did see it. But the best look I could get it was a grasshopper. And it was the biggest grasshopper I had ever seen in my life. I mean, it was at least big as a hot dog. I'm serious. It was a monster. Now, it might have not been a grasshopper, but that's all I can figure. It would fly a little ways and land, fly a little ways and land. It would always stay ahead of me. But that's what

it looked like, a grasshopper. And that was only one I'd ever seen down there and never seen it after that.

BRENT LEWIS: That's amazing. So, those kinds of things are kind of unexplainable, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:58:29] That's right. That's right. What kind of insect was that big? I mean, have you ever seen an insect as big as a hot dog? Okay, that's what I'm saying. And it was jumping up flying in front of me, he'd go, you know, 20, 25 feet, and land. Well, I'd walk, getting right up to him, he'd took up again. But it looked like a grasshopper. Of course, they claim in other countries they have big grasshoppers, and they destroy everything they get around. I mean, when they leave, there ain't nothing but the stalks there, now, is what they claim.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, we've seen invasive species brought into the ecosystem here on the Bay, too, right? Like with snakeheads and those kind of things.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:59:12] Yeah. I've never caught one of them, because I haven't been fishing, you know, to really go for them. But it looks like it'd be a lot of fun. Get up on the bow of a boat with a bow and arrow, and...

BRENT LEWIS: They said they're good eating.

GENE AUSTIN: [00:59:24] Yeah, they say some restaurants up in Baltimore that serve it on their menu.

BRENT LEWIS: How would you describe life working on the water?

Was it a good career for you?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:59:32] Life working on the water?

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm, was it good for you?

GENE AUSTIN: [00:59:35] The president of United States didn't have as good a job as I did. It was perfect. I could do what I want. I could make a little extra money. And I was my own boss. I'd done it when I wanted to. Now you had to work and put time in if you wanted to make living. I ain't saying that. But when the days were bad, you go hunting, enjoy yourself, get in your car, take off, chase the girls, young now, when I was a boy. [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: You said you didn't feel like you had to answer to anyone.

GENE AUSTIN: [01:00:08] No. And I lived with my grandparents, and I got away with murder. So, I had it made. The president didn't have it as good as I did.

BRENT LEWIS: What have you learned about life working on the water? How did it make you think about life?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:00:20] Work hard, and then you make it. If you want to make a decent living, you got to put some effort into it. And another thing on the water, a lot of people don't like to get up. Well, getting up doesn't bother me and I could get up. So, that puts you there

early. And you could get your spot and keep somebody else from stealing it, if you were crabbing. Because they have certain ones that want to go out, if you're doing better than they are, they want to take your lay. That lay is where you laid your line out there. So, if you've got there early, it was yours. I don't know what it's called, but that's the way it was.

BRENT LEWIS: What do you think the future of industry is for watermen? Do watermen have a future?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:01:07] I wouldn't want to have a son and knew that he was going to start out in the water business. I mean, it'd take a fortune to get started. And I would hate to see him to put all that money into something, and the DNR could shut you down right now. They want to cut back on the amount of crabs that you're catching, and you can't even hardly make a living out of it now, the ones that's doing it. And all they want to do is cut you, cut you, cut you And you can't make a living if you keep getting cut.

BRENT LEWIS: Is there anything that you want to touch on before we wrap up?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:01:43] No. I was lucky when I was a boy. My father passed away and I moved in with my grandparents. And they treated me best in the world. I mean, I couldn't be treated no better. I worked for myself. I made a

reasonable living. I had it made. Nobody in the world was no better off.

F1: He didn't retire until three years ago.

BRENT LEWIS: You're 81 now, retired three years ago.

F1: When Mom got sick.

GENE AUSTIN: [01:02:17] Yeah. It's just my knees. The rest of my body's fine, but I can't do a whole lot on my knees.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you go down there, to the slips?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:02:27] Probably every day, [laughs] find somebody to talk to. Yeah, I go down there a lot.

BRENT LEWIS: Does it feel like home to you, to go down there?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:02:36] Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's my little world.

BRENT LEWIS: And this will be the last question I ask you, do watermen like to gossip?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:02:47] [laughs] No, they like to stretch the truth.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] Very good.

GENE AUSTIN: [01:02:55] Yeah, it's a lot funnier if you stretch the truth.

BRENT LEWIS: Right, never let the truth get in the way of a good story, right?

GENE AUSTIN: [01:03:01] No, indeed.

BRENT LEWIS: Hey, Gene, thank you very much for spending the time with us today. I really appreciate it. I think it's important to get this stuff, because, well, we don't know it, and without you taking the time to spend with us, we wouldn't know it.

GENE AUSTIN: [01:03:17] I've really enjoyed myself. I didn't know what to expect when I sit down here but I really enjoyed myself, because I know you and I always liked you. You were a good fellow. And I enjoyed myself.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, thank you very much.

END OF AUDIO FILE