

OH 502 Tom Willis

BRENT LEWIS: My name is Brent Lewis. Today is July 25, 2023.

And I'm interviewing Tom Willis for the Chesapeake Bay
Maritime Museum's watermen's Story Swap Oral History
Project. Tom, do we have your permission to record?

TOM WILLIS: [00:00:16] Yes, you do.

BRENT LEWIS: And just to get us started, can you tell me when
and where you were born?

TOM WILLIS: [00:00:22] I was born in Easton, Maryland on
December 23, 1943.

BRENT LEWIS: Nineteen forty-three. And who were your parents?

TOM WILLIS: [00:00:33] My father was Thomas Bronson Willis,
senior. And my mother was Dorothy Mae Walters Willis.

BRENT LEWIS: Where did they live when you were born? At the
time you were born, where did your parents live?

TOM WILLIS: [00:00:46] On Metzdorf Lane here in Queenstown.

BRENT LEWIS: And what did your dad do for a living?

TOM WILLIS: [00:00:51] He worked for Friel Canning Company
all his life.

BRENT LEWIS: What do he do for them?

TOM WILLIS: [00:00:58] He started off just working mechanic
and then he ended up, he was the maintenance supervisor.

BRENT LEWIS: Was Friel's Cannery a big business here in Queenstown?

TOM WILLIS: [00:01:06] Yes, it was. They used to have a tomato juice factory there. In fact, they developed V8 tomato juice, V8 vegetable juice, whatever you want to call it, and sold the recipe to Campbell's, who now still does V8.

BRENT LEWIS: So, they had developers working at Friel's putting... and canning together, came up with [both speaking-unclear].

TOM WILLIS: [00:01:32] That, I don't know. That was something that I was told but I don't know when it was sold to them.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that before your time?

TOM WILLIS: [00:01:40] I probably... I guess I was a little kid when that happened. So, it's all kind of hearsay.

BRENT LEWIS: Sure. How many people worked at Friel's then?

TOM WILLIS: [00:01:53] When I was there, when I was in high school, there was approximately 700 people. And through automation, they've gone, they've cut back, I do not know how many, but I do know they don't employ as many people as they used to. But the cannery --

BRENT LEWIS: But they're still operational.

TOM WILLIS: [00:02:13] Yes, and the corn cannery is still in operation. The tomato juice factory was closed some years ago and demolished, sold off the equipment. And now it's just lumber company out here. And it was right out here where the lumber company is now.

BRENT LEWIS: People often think of this area as just being so working on the water, seafood, and agricultural, which certainly the canning plays into the agricultural end of it. But canning was big business here locally when you were a kid, right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:02:50] Yes, it was. There was one... There's still one in Smyrna and one in... Outside of Preston, I believe is where it is, I don't know who owns them now because they've been sold in the past.

BRENT LEWIS: But it's a historic aspect of the economy here on the Eastern Shore. You probably kind of saw the end of it, the end of the glory days of it.

TOM WILLIS: [00:03:19] When I was a kid growing up here in town, this was the hub of the universe. There was a big hardware store. There was two barber shops. It was two bars, a restaurant, three grocery stores, a drugstore, a movie theater, and a phone office with phone operators.

BRENT LEWIS: So, everything you needed was right here in town.

TOM WILLIS: [00:03:52] And it was in the 40s, the people would come here, and in fact, the town was packed every Saturday.

BRENT LEWIS: Shopping, [both speaking-unclear].

TOM WILLIS: [00:03:59] Shopping at the grocery stores and everything. And then along came Acme, and people started going to Centerville and going to Kent Island and as progress came along.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, and so that brings me up to those questions. What are some of your earliest memories of growing up here in Queenstown?

TOM WILLIS: [00:04:23] Oh, going to the movie theater, going crabbing. I used to hang around with a waterman, Will Shellberg [?] and he lived over there right behind where I live now because that's where I grew up in the house that I'm living in right now. And I used to be out on the water with him all the time. He taught me how to crab, fish, we caught turtles in the wintertime, fishing nets, caught clams to put them in eel pots, and all that kind of stuff.

BRENT LEWIS: You were a little boy?

TOM WILLIS: [00:05:01] I was about 12 when I was hanging around with him, 12, 13, 14. He died when I was 16 because I drove my father and two other of my father's friends, and Will's friends, and we went to the funeral.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that down to the Queenstown landing? Is that where...?

TOM WILLIS: [00:05:26] Well, he also had a boat down in front of his house, which is where, well, his nephew bought the house from his heir, and they used to keep a boat right there and walk right down the front yard, and I had a boat there and he had a boat, and you'd had a pair of oars, and paddle. And every morning I got up, crack of light and I went down and got in my boat and rode all the way out to the middle of Chester River, tied up to a buoy, and he picked me up and I dipped crabs all morning.

BRENT LEWIS: There's a lot to unpack there. Your house, first of all, you live in a house you grew up in. Were your parents the first ones in your family to own that house?

TOM WILLIS: [00:06:13] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And so, do you know who they purchased the house from?

TOM WILLIS: [00:06:19] Pop had the house built.

BRENT LEWIS: He had the house built, so it's only been...

TOM WILLIS: [00:06:22] And he bought the land from Will Shellberg's sister and her husband.

BRENT LEWIS: And it's a waterfront piece?

TOM WILLIS: [00:06:33] Water view.

BRENT LEWIS: Water view piece. Will Shellberg, what was he like as a man, as a person?

TOM WILLIS: [00:06:40] He was a... He was a character. He was never married. He would hang out at the beer joint every once in a while, and worked on water, he used the seine hall [?] fishing for fish, and had a crew and a bunch of boats. And then he stopped. When he stopped that, he ran a clam rig for somebody, I don't remember who. It wasn't his. And then he just crabbed, and fish netted, and I went with him in the fall, spring, winter, whenever. Whatever he was doing, I was with him.

BRENT LEWIS: So, he was pretty much your mentor.

TOM WILLIS: [00:07:16] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And so, we've talked to some of the other watermen that we've done these interviews with about trot lining and catching clams. One of the skills that most watermen, modern watermen don't have or do anymore is net fish, right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:07:35] Right.

BRENT LEWIS: That's kind of a thing of the past.

TOM WILLIS: [00:07:37] Well, there's a few people that still do it. But the Department of Natural Resources changed the regulations to where you can't anchor and leave a gill net out. You have to go out, you lay it out, it goes with the

tide, and you have to stay within a half a mile of it, I think it is. And then, it floats along with the tide, and then you pull it up and whatever you catch. Or you can circle fish, which you can see a bunch of, say, white perch, mostly, all in a ball, and then you just lay net all the way around them and then catch them that way.

BRENT LEWIS: What is... Is that seine trawling, or what is that?

TOM WILLIS: [00:08:22] No, that's just gill net, and just circle fishing.

BRENT LEWIS: Got you. And that's something that used to be a popular way to make a living. But...

TOM WILLIS: [00:08:32] Yeah, I used to do that. My father, when I was going to high school, my father and I, we used to do it in the spring. And on weekends, I would go out with a friend, I'd take a friend of mine, and I would do it and check the nets, and that way gave Pop a break, so he didn't have to go and, you know, I was off from school on weekends. But during the week, Pop and I were out there at five o'clock in the morning, cold, didn't make any difference, and we were fishing them in the dark with the lights on the boat. And then, I had to come in and take a shower and catch a school bus at eight o'clock.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. So, that's a pretty traditional Eastern Shore youth for that time, growing up for that time.

TOM WILLIS: [00:09:17] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: And you mentioned catching turtles. How would you do that?

TOM WILLIS: [00:09:23] In the wintertime we went out and we had a... And I still have the apparatus, it was a straight rod on one end of the pole, and a hook on the other end of the pole, and you'd go along and hit the... in the mud, and hear something, sounded like you hit a board. And you flipped it over, you went down, and you hooked on to the turtle when they were in hibernation and pulled them out of the mud. Will Shellberg taught me how to do that, too. I don't even know if it was legal or not.

BRENT LEWIS: How many would you catch on a good day?

TOM WILLIS: [00:10:00] Most of the time, we'd just go get them to eat. We didn't go get them to sell.

BRENT LEWIS: So, there wasn't a market?

TOM WILLIS: [00:10:05] No. And we'd catch three or four sometimes and sometimes it'd be three people, Drowsy Morris [?] would go, he used to hang... He used to go with Will a lot, basically when I was in school, because I he had to wait for me come home from school before I could go help him with fishnets.

BRENT LEWIS: Didn't you think you found a treasure chest or something one day, with the nets?

TOM WILLIS: [00:10:30] Yeah, I was out there by myself, soft crabbing. And, I know nobody's ever going back to get it, there was a chest sitting there, the edge of the chest was sticking up. It had a big old ring that was on, and I could see that part of it, and I could see, like, maybe a foot and a half of it. And the tide was exceptionally low, one of those. They had a monsoon or something over on the other side of the world, pulled all the water away, and the tide's never been, and the water's never been clear enough to be able to go back, so it's still there.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. So, in Queenstown Creek?

TOM WILLIS: [00:11:15] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that the strangest or most amazing thing you ever saw out there, working on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [00:11:24] Saw a manatee.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:11:27] Yeah, when I was out crabbing, I saw a manatee and people that were trying to catch it, which they finally did, and shipped it back to Florida. And then it came back again.

BRENT LEWIS: To be up here.

TOM WILLIS: [00:11:40] Yeah, we had good food up here.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] There was no market for turtle when you came along. But people were still eating turtle soup.

TOM WILLIS: [00:11:55] Yeah, there might have been market for them, but I'm not sure that was you were even allowed to catch them in the winter. I was still just a kid when I was going with him. So.

BRENT LEWIS: What about trapping?

TOM WILLIS: [00:12:08] I used to trap muskrats. Loved doing it. And even did it after I moved back to Queenstown. I moved away to go to work and was raised in a family over in Delaware working for a chemical company. And when I moved back and went back to work on the water, I went ahead, and I did a little trapping in the wintertime. I always loved doing that.

BRENT LEWIS: What'd you love about it?

TOM WILLIS: [00:12:32] Just the fact of being out in the morning, you always went out... You know, I used to go at crack of light when I was going to school. And whenever, you know, you're just walking along. And I've always been a morning person. My problem is, is that I'm also a night person. [laughs] So, I don't get as much rest.

BRENT LEWIS: You don't get much rest. [laughs] You would sell fur?

TOM WILLIS: [00:13:00] Mm-hmm, and the meat.

BRENT LEWIS: And the meat. Were there two different buyers for those products? Or were they the same person?

TOM WILLIS: [00:13:06] When I was... When I was doing it, I was selling the meats to individuals, when I was in high school. And the furs would be sold to Pete Beecher who had a junkyard here in Queenstown. He also took hunting parties. And later on in life I took some hunting parties for him. And but he wasn't buying muskrats then, and I ended up selling them to Tom Cable [?], down at Bennetts Point. He was a buyer. And what few I was trapping after I went back to work on the water would only, you know, like a couple of weekends, just because I liked doing it, I just sold everything, just took the whole thing to him. Right.

BRENT LEWIS: Is there anybody that still does it? Still traps muskrats?

TOM WILLIS: [00:13:58] I haven't seen anybody.

BRENT LEWIS: Me, neither.

TOM WILLIS: [00:14:01] I think they still do some in Delaware.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, because...

TOM WILLIS: [00:14:05] And probably in Dorchester County. They probably still do it down that way.

BRENT LEWIS: But not around here?

TOM WILLIS: [00:14:13] I don't know of anybody that's doing it.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you grew up hunting?

TOM WILLIS: [00:14:17] I used to go hunting with my father, and Will Shellberg and Charlie Bishop, and we used to go and that's how I got my start in waterfowl hunting, shooting ducks.

BRENT LEWIS: Tell me about that. How did you get your start?

TOM WILLIS: [00:14:33] Yeah, well they took me down to, we had the Bishop's farm. Tim Bishop has it now, it was his father had the farm, and I guess they rented a blind and went down there. I was about 12, Pop got me my first shotgun and they took me hunting.

BRENT LEWIS: Up on the Chester River?

TOM WILLIS: [00:14:52] No, that was on Why River. And later on, you know, I hunted everywhere. Anytime I could go with anybody, I hunted here, everywhere. Eastern Bay, Chester River, where if somebody had a place, I'd go with them if I got an invitation. And then when I wasn't... When I stopped working for the chemical company, one of the things I did was take hunting parties during the winter. So, I went ahead, and I worked for Matt Walsh out of Churchill, worked for Pete Beecher, Joe Judge. And then I went to work for Pete Henry and Bobo Hampton.

BRENT LEWIS: Were you primarily a waterfowl hunter?

TOM WILLIS: [00:15:39] Yes. I've never been... The only deer I ever killed was with my truck. And I didn't like it.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] So, back then, people here were... Waterfowl hunting was a big thing.

TOM WILLIS: [00:15:53] It was a big business back in the 80s, 80s on into the 90s, when the moratorium was put on goose hunting.

BRENT LEWIS: Where's that stand today, waterfowl hunting locally? Do people...?

TOM WILLIS: [00:16:08] There's still people that take waterfowl parties, but it's not as big a business as it used to be.

BRENT LEWIS: Because of regulation?

TOM WILLIS: [00:16:18] Well, there's not as many birds around as it used to be. At one time, the outfitter that I worked for, Pete Henry and Bobo Hampton, we, I think one winter, we killed 11,000 geese. But there was some days there was 30 parties.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. That's impressive.

TOM WILLIS: [00:16:43] And then there was three, you could kill three geese, and then you could kill two geese, and

then you get down to one goose. And then there was a moratorium.

BRENT LEWIS: That many people coming in, it sounds like it was an economic boom to the area.

TOM WILLIS: [00:16:55] It was. It was for restaurants; it was work for... because all, most all of us were watermen that that took hunting parties in the wintertime. When I wasn't working on the water, which was only basically in the summertime, and I took hunting parties in the wintertime, I worked... One season, I worked every day, including every Sunday, working on blinds, working on boats, and moving decoys, and breaking ice, and getting ready for the next day for the parties, and got paid, you know, for doing all that.

BRENT LEWIS: Seems to me it's kind of the historical nature of the watermen to have to adapt to...

TOM WILLIS: [00:17:44] It's kind of like that with everybody. Everybody, you know, if your way of life is on its way out, then you have to adapt or you're not going to be making what you need to make. So, I adapted from working on the water to being a contractor.

BRENT LEWIS: And so, all through your life, you've adapted a way to make a few bucks, either on the water or otherwise.

TOM WILLIS: [00:18:12] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: So, let's start with that first boat. Where did you get your first boat when you were 12 years old?

TOM WILLIS: [00:18:17] My father bought it from somebody. It was a rowboat. It was just a wooden 16-foot boat and had a pair of oars, no motor, and I just paddled around.

BRENT LEWIS: What would you... Would you crab out of that?

TOM WILLIS: [00:18:35] No. I soft crabbed out of it.

BRENT LEWIS: Soft crabbed out of it. Was there a market for soft crabs?

TOM WILLIS: [00:18:39] Oh, yes. When my mother would take me out to sell crabs, I was sloughing peelers, or buying, even buying from some people, and had some big floats, and sloughed some crabs, and then sold them to Ms. McGrogan's restaurant, which was out... It ended up being a hardware store, and right next to where Kumble's [?] was, out there toward the Catholic church on that piece of ground right there by Greenspring. And she had a restaurant there. I got 25 cents apiece for soft crabs.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. How many would you sell her?

TOM WILLIS: [00:19:15] Oh, probably four or five dozen, at least a week, sometimes more. Then people would come to the house and want to buy a dozen soft crabs and whatever. I had a refrigerator in the garage. And I did that until I was 16.

BRENT LEWIS: I didn't ask you; do you have brothers and sisters?

TOM WILLIS: [00:19:33] I have one brother and one sister.

BRENT LEWIS: And give me their names.

TOM WILLIS: [00:19:38] Bob, Robert Norman Willis, and Nancy Karen Willis.

BRENT LEWIS: And what were you...

TOM WILLIS: [00:19:48] I'm the oldest, Bob's in the middle, and Nancy is the last, the youngest.

BRENT LEWIS: So, your parents expected you to go to school and work?

TOM WILLIS: [00:19:59] Well, I don't know about... Pop expected me to help him with the fish nets. And then in the afternoon, we'd have to go over them, straighten them out, they'd have knots in them and whatever, so we'd get them ready, dry them so they'd be ready to put back over again. So, you rotated them all the time.

BRENT LEWIS: Were you responsible for your younger siblings at all?

TOM WILLIS: [00:20:23] So, once in a while, but my brother was a little hard to manage.

BRENT LEWIS: What did you all do in Queenstown for fun when you were young?

TOM WILLIS: [00:20:33] Oh, me, I was on the water as much as... To me, that was fun. Went to the movies, played baseball, soccer. We had two different places. We had a park that we played baseball in, and we had a field down toward where I live, and we played soccer. Every afternoon, there was everybody from 25-year-old people to kids 14, 13 years old playing soccer. It was a fun time. Queenstown was a fun place to grow up in. Still great to live in.

BRENT LEWIS: In the winter, would you skate and that kind of stuff?

TOM WILLIS: [00:21:18] No, I couldn't. I never... I'd go out on the ice, but I could not ice skate. I tried. I tried ice skating. And then after I got my driver's license, I used to... I did roller skate a lot.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:21:32] Yeah. My wife and I, when we moved to Delaware when I was working over there, there was a roller rink. And we used to go to the roller rink and try to get there at least once a week.

BRENT LEWIS: The landing, it was there when you were a little kid?

TOM WILLIS: [00:21:48] No, it was just a place on the shore.

Where the where the piers are now were built in round '83,
'84.

BRENT LEWIS: So, a relatively new facility down there.

TOM WILLIS: [00:21:59] Yeah, there was just like little water
[?] was there at the end, homemade things, and people would
put a boat on the shore and throw an anchor out or put a
stake out and pull the boat in and pull the boat back out
whenever they weren't using it so it could sit there and
float around.

BRENT LEWIS: A lot of people who are not from here, when you
tell them about tying up to a stake, they're like, "You
mean a bottom leave [?]?" No, a stake. Right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:22:23] Yeah, it was just a little... You
used to go out and get a tree as straight as you, could
probably four inches across at the bottom, 20 some feet, 22
feet long. And you sunk it in the bottom and let it sit
there for a couple of days, and the mud would get hard
around it, and then you'd tie a boat to it.

BRENT LEWIS: You'd keep it a little deeper, then, is that the
reasoning behind it?

TOM WILLIS: [00:22:49] Yeah. Yes. That and to have a place
because you might not have access to the water from land,
but you could always go from where you did have access, you

could take an... I used to keep mine in the water at one at one time across on the other side over where the golf course land is, but it was in the water out there and I had a stake over there. Because the winds were blocked from blowing very hard, if you were over across on the other side.

BRENT LEWIS: And you'd take a skiff back and forth to the boat?

TOM WILLIS: [00:23:26] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: So, you mentioned the golf course. That was originally My Lord's Gift, [unclear] what was that like when you were a kid, then?

TOM WILLIS: [00:23:35] It was just a farm. It was Mr. Eddie Greaves used to be the farm manager over there. And in fact, I did some work over there. When I started working for myself other than on the water, I used to go over there and they had a big manor house and a couple other houses and whenever somebody needed something done, they would get a hold of me, I'd go over there. And I'd say Chris was 13, I think, 14, and he was helping me one summer when we were painting on the main house over there. One of the owners used to live in the big manor house up there, which is no longer there. They tore all that down.

BRENT LEWIS: You mentioned Will. I ran across some other names of watermen from Queenstown. Do you remember Frank Anthony?

TOM WILLIS: [00:24:30] Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Frank, that was Jeff's grandfather. Jeff lives in the house down there that his father and mother had. And they used to call him Zep.

BRENT LEWIS: Zap?

TOM WILLIS: [00:24:45] Zep. I don't know where that nickname came from. But that was Mr. Frank's... I think it was his nickname. I think it was.

BRENT LEWIS: Sidenote, do you have a nickname?

TOM WILLIS: [00:24:57] Me? Tom-bo. And Will Shellberg gave that to me.

BRENT LEWIS: How so? Just alter your name?

TOM WILLIS: [00:25:06] I have no idea. He'd just holler out of his truck, I'd be out there in the backyard, he'd say, "Come on, Tom-bo, let's go."

BRENT LEWIS: And called you that ever since. That's funny, man. As Zep, what was he like? He must have been an old man, then.

TOM WILLIS: [00:25:20] Oh, he was an old waterman, just went along just like Mr. Chalk Anthony. He was... I think they were cousins. They would just work on the water when they

were younger. You know? Mr. Frank was probably, I don't know, he was, I guess, 80 when he passed away. I really don't know for sure. But I was only 11, 12, when he died now. Now, Mr. Chalk Anthony was, later on, I was grown when he passed away.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that Chalkeye [?]?

TOM WILLIS: [00:25:58] Chalkeye's grandfather.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, what about Benny Lane, was that a name?

TOM WILLIS: [00:26:05] Benny and Ms. Anna used to have the grocery store. And they're my two daughters... they were my two daughters' godparents. They lived across the street, and I used to help him with his hams. He used to have sugar cured hams and I used to help him with the hams, and then Bob, after I got married and moved out, Bob used to go help him.

BRENT LEWIS: A couple of the old businesses that were still around when I was a kid was the end of Ms. Hitches' [sp?] drugstore, and Ginsburg's store.

TOM WILLIS: [00:26:43] Yeah, Ginsburg's Hardware Store.

BRENT LEWIS: And so, but they sold shoes and stuff, and boots, and stuff?

TOM WILLIS: [00:26:49] He sold everything, gun shells, clothing. You had to be careful when you bought a pair of jeans. Mom bought me a pair one time and I was putting

them on, and ended up holding, and the knees just ripped right up. They were dry rotting in the store. He'd had them so long or he bought them like that, I don't know.

BRENT LEWIS: Can you think of any other family names here in Queenstown that were particularly tied to working on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [00:27:17] The Morris family. Drowsy Morris used to work on the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Drowsy?

TOM WILLIS: [00:27:24] Yeah, that's what they called him. I have no idea. He used to live in an old house right next to where Chris lives now, in a little rancher that I owned, I still own over there. There was a Benny Halston. Tommy Morris's father, they called him Biscuit. And his and Tommy's so, that would have been his grandson, has also the same nickname. They call Eddie Biscuit a lot.

BRENT LEWIS: That nickname is a family heirloom.

TOM WILLIS: [00:28:09] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: That's pretty awesome.

TOM WILLIS: [00:28:13] I'm thinking. There wasn't many watermen in Queenstown.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. Is that because perhaps the further you get away from Kent Narrows?

TOM WILLIS: [00:28:23] That could have been. Haram Pender
[?] was... The Penders were, one family of Penders lived
here, when this... This before this was renovated again
and made a board house back... We used to be... On that
side of it, there was a restaurant and a bar. And then,
there was a family lived in here.

BRENT LEWIS: And we're in the original Queen Anne's County
Courthouse.

TOM WILLIS: [00:28:54] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: Established...

TOM WILLIS: Seventeen-oh-nine, I think.

BRENT LEWIS: And the county businesses were all moved to
Centerville, but this building stood.

TOM WILLIS: [00:29:08] there used to be a jail right across
the street over there on the corner, where the Williams
family lives now. But they used to lock people in chains
in the basement.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. From court proceedings. And Queenstown I
read somewhere had the last remaining horse hitch in front
Ginsburg store?

TOM WILLIS: [00:29:33] Probably.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you remember that?

TOM WILLIS: [00:29:36] No, I don't.

BRENT LEWIS: Okay. What was... The jail, was there a tunnel that went from the courthouse?

TOM WILLIS: [00:29:41] I had always heard that there was a tunnel that went from the jail over to Bowlingly or under Bowlingly. Once back in the, what was that, in the 90s, I was walking my dog in the wintertime, we would go find driftwood, and everything, take down to Ms. Bukowski. And she and I were walking along there, and I looked up at the bank and there was a great big hole, and you could see way back inside there. But I did not go in it.

BRENT LEWIS: What was that for, do you think?

TOM WILLIS: [00:30:19] I have no idea. If it was up to me, it was a... Would have been, if there was such a thing, would have been an escape route because of the British... When the British attacked here in 1812.

BRENT LEWIS: Possibly Underground Railroad stuff?

TOM WILLIS: [00:30:34] Possibly. I have no idea. Nobody really ever substantiated what it was.

BRENT LEWIS: You're currently a town commissioner?

TOM WILLIS: [00:30:45] I am.

BRENT LEWIS: And I'm off track a little bit. How long have you done that?

TOM WILLIS: [00:30:50] This time, 14 years.

BRENT LEWIS: Fourteen years. And you did it before?

TOM WILLIS: [00:30:53] Back in '95 to '97, I was a commissioner. But I was so busy that I did not run for reelection.

BRENT LEWIS: What can you tell me about the history of this town?

TOM WILLIS: [00:31:06] Well, it's like we... They used to have a ferry, used to have boat... grain ships and passenger ships used to come in. When you go down Old Wharf all the way to the end of it, there was a pier that went all the way out to deep water, and they used to take and haul grain out there with wagons, with horses. And then people would unload and come in and travel into Queen Anne's County. They would come from across the bay. By boat, they would bring whatever was being bought.

BRENT LEWIS: So, in and out, bringing products and people in and out by boat and train.

TOM WILLIS: [00:31:49] Yes, there used to be a train that came in until, I guess, in the 70s, 60s, 70s. When I worked for Friel's, we used to load canned goods on rail cars, and they used to have stuff come in there.

BRENT LEWIS: So, the railroad was still a pretty big part of our economy, even in the mid-20th century.

TOM WILLIS: [00:32:15] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: That's really interesting.

TOM WILLIS: [00:32:18] Still goes into Centerville or somewhere. I know it goes to Tidewater Publishing, which it's not called Tidewater anymore, but the publishing company up on 301, it still goes there. I don't know if it still goes into Centerville or not.

BRENT LEWIS: So, you're getting a little older now. You've been working on the water. You mentioned that you moved to Delaware. How did that come about?

TOM WILLIS: [00:32:47] When I got married, there wasn't a lot around here for jobs.

BRENT LEWIS: How old were you?

TOM WILLIS: [00:32:56] Eighteen. Got married when I was 18. Still married, 61 years ago.

BRENT LEWIS: What's your wife's name and maiden name?

TOM WILLIS: [00:33:03] Nola Norman [?].

BRENT LEWIS: Was she local?

TOM WILLIS: [00:33:08] She and I went to went to high school together last four years of high school.

BRENT LEWIS: Centerville High School?

TOM WILLIS: [00:33:12] Centerville High School. We were friends, and dancing partners, and because we used to dance before school, during lunchtime, and jukebox, we had a jukebox, played jukebox all the time, and dances every Friday night during school season.

BRENT LEWIS: And so, you married at 18, here in Queenstown.

TOM WILLIS: [00:33:34] Got married right in the Methodist church up the street.

BRENT LEWIS: And then, how long before you moved to Delaware?

TOM WILLIS: [00:33:43] Well, we lived here, I rented a furnished apartment. Down close to where I live now was an old boarding house down there that had, like, four apartments in it. My grandmother was renting one of the apartments, but she moved to West Virginia every winter, so we rented that for the winter. And when she was coming back, we rented a house up outside of Centerville.

BRENT LEWIS: Were you working on the water at that time before you moved to Delaware?

TOM WILLIS: [00:34:13] Part time. And then was also working road construction. And I saw that there was an opening they had advertising, so I went over and went to work for a chemical company in Chesil, which was right outside of Dover.

BRENT LEWIS: Was that DuPont?

TOM WILLIS: [00:34:34] No, it belonged to International Latex. And then they sold it to Stanley Warner, and then they sold it to Standard Brands, people who have coffee and then diversified, I guess, and then they sold it to

Reichhold, a German-based company, and I worked for them until I left there in '81.

BRENT LEWIS: So, how long were you there?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:01] Almost 19 years.

BRENT LEWIS: And what did you do?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:05] Everything from being a ditch digger all the way up to a supervisor.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. Before you got married you were in the military?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:14] No, I worked for Friel, and then I went into the military.

BRENT LEWIS: You enlisted?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:22] I did.

BRENT LEWIS: In the Air Force?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:22] In the Air Force.

BRENT LEWIS: What encouraged you to do that? What made you make that decision?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:27] Well, as much as I loved the water, for some reason, I went in the Air Force, and I don't like airplanes. But the Air Force recruiter, Herb Boone [?], lived right here in Queenstown. So, when he came around to the house, he came to the high school when we were seniors, trying to recruit people to go in the Air Force. And a

bunch of my friends that I graduated with all went in the Air Force. So, I went in the Air Force.

BRENT LEWIS: How'd that work out?

TOM WILLIS: [00:35:59] I ended up, got an early discharge, had pneumonia, was in the hospital. And so, they said, "You've got a choice. You want to go," now, I could go back to work. But I wasn't going to the tech school where I wanted to go. So, you can also have a medical discharge. So, I got the medical discharge and came home, went back to work for Friel, and then I went to work for road construction, and then chemical company.

BRENT LEWIS: And while you were in the Air Force for that short time, you were still dating the woman who would become your wife.

TOM WILLIS: [00:36:39] Mm-hmm. We were engaged before I ever went in the Air Force.

BRENT LEWIS: And I'm sure she was happy to see you back home.

TOM WILLIS: [00:36:46] I was happy to see her.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] And so, what made you make the decision to move to Delaware to take that job?

TOM WILLIS: [00:36:56] Well, there wasn't a lot going on around here. Even watermen weren't making much money.

BRENT LEWIS: This is the early 60s?

TOM WILLIS: [00:37:04] This is... Yeah, 1963 was when I moved to Delaware. So, I could get much a better... I could get... I was making 50 cents an hour more going over there than I was making here. And 50 cents an hour was a lot because when I got married, I was working five and a half days, bringing home 43 dollars and 50 cents.

BRENT LEWIS: That's where you started your family, in Delaware?

TOM WILLIS: [00:37:32] Started it... Well, no, started it when... Started... The oldest ones was started here. But she was... She was born when we lived up by Centerville.

BRENT LEWIS: Got you. So, how many children do you have?

TOM WILLIS: [00:37:47] Four.

BRENT LEWIS: Can you name them for me?

TOM WILLIS: [00:37:49] Amy [?], Kimberly [?], Christopher [?], and Jeff [?].

BRENT LEWIS: And that's the order that they were born?

TOM WILLIS: [00:37:55] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: Were all them born by the time you guys moved back to Queenstown?

TOM WILLIS: [00:38:04] Yes. Amy was born in Easton Hospital. Kimberly, and Christopher, and Jeffrey were all born in Dover Hospital.

BRENT LEWIS: What made you leave that job and come back here?

TOM WILLIS: [00:38:17] They didn't need me anymore. And I was really looking for something anyhow to move away from there and move back here, because I could see that that company wasn't headed very far. And after I left there, about, I guess, eight years later, they closed, demolished everything, and there's nothing there but a piece of land now.

BRENT LEWIS: [unclear] Were your parents still alive?

TOM WILLIS: [00:38:46] Oh, yes.

BRENT LEWIS: How long did your parents live?

TOM WILLIS: [00:38:49] Pop lived until March 30, 1996. And Mom lived till August 11, 2006.

BRENT LEWIS: So, by moving back you still had a lot of time with your parents.

TOM WILLIS: [00:39:06] Yes, I did.

BRENT LEWIS: They were still in the house that you live in now?

TOM WILLIS: [00:39:10] Mm-hmm. I got to hang around Pop a lot, and Mom. And then after Pop passed away, I was down there giving Mom support, I guess you would call it, somebody to talk to. I was there every afternoon because I lived right here. So, I went down there every afternoon when I got off work. I took her mail to her when I could get in time enough to get the mail and everything.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you go back working on the water when you got back here?

TOM WILLIS: [00:39:44] Mm-hmm. I would go working on the water, crabbed, oystered, eels.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you buy a boat?

TOM WILLIS: [00:39:53] I had boats.

BRENT LEWIS: You never lost... [both speaking-unclear]

TOM WILLIS: [00:39:54] No, even living in Delaware, I owned boats down there.

BRENT LEWIS: Who took care of them while you were in Delaware?

TOM WILLIS: [00:40:02] Bob kept it a little bit and I'd meet him on his day off, if I could get a day off and he and I would go out on fishing or crabbing together.

BRENT LEWIS: So, you always kept a boat.

TOM WILLIS: [00:40:15] Always. I've had a boat since I was 12 years old. Now, I've got a fleet.

BRENT LEWIS: How many?

TOM WILLIS: [00:40:20] ust sold one and we have four more, I think.

BRENT LEWIS: What's the boat that you've had the longest?

TOM WILLIS: [00:40:27] I sold that one back in 2008. I bought it in '84 but it was just about finished. It was built in 1932. And it was just a wooden boat, and it was getting in bad disrepair... getting in disrepair.

BRENT LEWIS: Where did you get it from? Where did you buy the boat?

TOM WILLIS: [00:40:53] I bought it from Medford Thomas, when Medford had a boat yard.

BRENT LEWIS: And he was a local Queens County boat builder?

TOM WILLIS: [00:40:59] No, he was a boat refurbisher. And this boat was built in 1932 and was a yacht, and he cut it down, made a work boat out of it, and I bought it in 1983 in the summer, and sold the smaller boat that I had. I just kept working my way up. And I think that I had more fun when I had a little boat than when, each time I got a bigger boat, I had less fun and more work.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have any little boats now?

TOM WILLIS: [00:41:31] There's a 14-foot aluminum boat on a trailer. And then there's a 21-foot boat on a trailer. There's a 35-foot boat that's being crabbed every day in the summer. There's a boat out being worked on now, it's about 30-foot, 32-foot and it's going to be crabbed out of whenever we get it finished, and I just sold a 32-foot glass boat because it needed work on it, and I don't have time to work on anything.

BRENT LEWIS: Who's crabbing those boats?

TOM WILLIS: [00:42:07] Jeff. He's crabbing the big boat. We used to use the smaller boat for duck hunting, and soft

crabbing, and there's not any grass anymore around here, so. And Chris doesn't duck hunt anymore like he did. He was using the boat to duck hunt out of.

BRENT LEWIS: That boat that you sold, that boat that you had so long, who bought that?

TOM WILLIS: [00:42:32] A guy from down in Telemenawl [?].

BRENT LEWIS: Would he have had to refurnish it, or was it just for parts?

TOM WILLIS: [00:42:39] I think he bought it for the parts, and the motor, and everything. It had a good motor in it. But all I know is that he left Queenstown, and he was happy.

BRENT LEWIS: What did you like doing the most when you worked on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [00:42:54] Crab.

BRENT LEWIS: Was it all crabbing?

TOM WILLIS: [00:42:55] Crabbing.

BRENT LEWIS: [unclear]?

TOM WILLIS: [00:42:58] It was just sitting, just going down that trotline and dipping crabs. You know, it was just, you know, I just liked it. Always did, from the time I was a kid and Will Shellberg taught me how to do it. I just, you know, he taught me well, too. He said, you know, because he paid me three dollars a week to cut his grass,

he had, like, three quarters of an acre and I had to push it. And so, he owed me three dollars a week. And every time, he said, "Every time you miss a crab, cost you a quarter." There wasn't many days that I lost money. Maybe a quarter once in a while, and then I got smart. When the crab dropped off, I just didn't dip. That way it wouldn't cost me a quarter to try to catch one. I dipped all the easy ones.

BRENT LEWIS: You found the work around. Do you still dip when you go crabbing?

TOM WILLIS: [00:43:57] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Because a lot of guys have changed, right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:44:00] Yeah, there's a lot of people use dippers.

BRENT LEWIS: And you still get the pleasure of...

TOM WILLIS: [00:44:05] Yeah, if... This new boat the one that we've got that we're refurbishing, putting a motor in it, the motor was bad and everything. But it's going to be a nice boat to crab out of, and it's got a dipper on it.

BRENT LEWIS: Do they sell commercially? You crab to sell commercially, right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:44:27] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And so, who do you sell to?

TOM WILLIS: [00:44:29] Well, and I don't crab any more commercially. Jeff, he took the boat. And so, I just work on land now and he goes ahead, and he crabs every day and I help him some.

BRENT LEWIS: When did you officially retire from working on the water? Because I know you still work. When did you kind of stop that as your career?

TOM WILLIS: [00:44:58] About 2016.

BRENT LEWIS: So, relatively recently.

TOM WILLIS: [00:45:07] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And what's your business now?

TOM WILLIS: [00:45:10] A contractor. We do everything from paint your front door to build your house.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that something that you did over the years to supplement your working on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [00:45:21] That's how I got started. And then I started in painting, in between crab season and whatever, or between oyster season, and crabs again, and whatever, I would go ahead and paint a little bit just a, you know, job here, job there, and saw where it was fairly lucrative. So, I went ahead, and I never really liked the cold weather anyhow, so I went ahead and started painting more. And then I started going carpentry work because I couldn't find anybody... Everybody, all the carpenters were busy to fix

something so you could paint it. And then I hired people who were carpenters to paint, and carpentry and we just went on and evolved into doing whatever.

BRENT LEWIS: And historically, watermen had to often have other careers, right, other skills. Is it true that it would be hard to find guys to paint or do carpentry some time, as soon as oyster season would start, they'd disappear. They'd go and...

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, there was people that did that. There's people that... You know, most of most watermen would go right from crabs into oysters. But once oysters were over, some went into fish netting and everything, but some of them just would work. I had some used to work for me, painting. So, we'd paint for a month and a half. And then crabs were getting ready to start, and they and myself would all go ahead, and that would be finished painting for a while and then we'd go crabbing.

BRENT LEWIS: And eeling was kind of in between seasons, then, right? [both speaking-unclear]

TOM WILLIS: [00:47:15] In the spring. Yes. I basically eeled for bait for crabbing. I kept them. I did sell a few.

BRENT LEWIS: For your own crabbing.

TOM WILLIS: [00:47:26] For my own crabbing, yeah. I loved crabbing with eels. And back when things were simple and easy. Now to use bags with clams in them, and it takes hours to bait lines and...

BRENT LEWIS: It was more fun.

TOM WILLIS: [00:47:45] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever rescued anybody or been rescued out on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [00:47:51] You mean, like, people falling overboard.

BRENT LEWIS: Yes.

TOM WILLIS: [00:47:54] No. I've gone, and people were broke down and I had been broken down, so I had to be towed and anything, but I've never rescued or been rescued.

BRENT LEWIS: You've been lifted out of a few boats, maybe unconscious at times.

TOM WILLIS: [laughs] [00:48:15] Yeah, yeah, I was rescued when I fell over in about four inches of water and mud. Actually, you know, I was intoxicated.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] Oh, okay. Well, that's a rescue.

TOM WILLIS: [00:48:29] And it was Bob's fault.

BRENT LEWIS: What happened?

TOM WILLIS: [00:48:33] He used to... When he was working for, I don't know who it was, was it a furniture company he was working for at the time...

BRENT LEWIS: This is your brother.

TOM WILLIS: [00:48:41] Yeah. And he had these two friends that would come over once a year. They always brought food and beer. And we took them crabbing. I was crabbing, anyhow. We go out on morning. I hadn't anything to eat. We got out there and I started to get hungry. I said, "Well, what'd you bring to eat?" They said, "We didn't bring anything. We just brought a lot of beer." Well, I hadn't had anything to eat since the day before. And they kept forcing beer on me. And then, I had used to keep some medicinal purpose bottles in the cabin. And we drank all of them. And by the time I got in that evening, I was trashed. So, we're in the skiff and getting ready to paddle across from the other side of the creek, paddled on over, and when I went to get up like this, I just went right catapulted right on into the water. So, they picked me up and took me up, put me... By the time they got me to the pickup truck, I was snoring or whatever. And they took me home and put me in bed with my white boots, mud, clothes, wet everything, pulled the thing right up around my neck and left.

BRENT LEWIS: That's a good brother.

TOM WILLIS: [00:49:58] And my wife was not very happy.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you still like a [unclear] once in a while?

TOM WILLIS: [00:50:06] Oh, my, yes.

BRENT LEWIS: You know, back in the day, my dad and them used to drink Lord Calvert and Seagram's. That's the whiskey of choice around here.

TOM WILLIS: [00:50:21] It was. Four Roses. My father used to do it, but he and his cronies drank Four Roses at one time. Then they went to a lot of them went to Lord Calvert. Now when I drink, I drank Kentucky Gentleman or Jim Beam. I drink a little bit of that every evening if I'm at the Moose, after drinking beer, and I'll have dinner while I'm out there playing pool. I play pool three nights a week, in the leagues.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you shoot pool a long time?

TOM WILLIS: [00:50:54] I made more money playing pool until I got married, up until I got married, when I got out of high school, and before I went into Air Force, I made more money playing pool than I did working.

BRENT LEWIS: You mentioned there were a couple bars here in Queenstown. What were they?

TOM WILLIS: [00:51:12] The Rathskeller, and I forget what the guy's first name was, it was Dr. Hurwitz's [?] brother, had

a... Right here on the end of this building, there was
a... Right on the end of it, it went all the way to the
street and there was a bar restaurant in there, he had it.

BRENT LEWIS: Would you shoot pool at restaurants?

TOM WILLIS: [00:51:40] I did. I shot pool down there, played
poker down there, played shuffleboard, played everything
down there. And most of the time, it was for money.

BRENT LEWIS: It stayed open a long time, right?

TOM WILLIS: [00:51:53] It was opened until, in the 80s I
guess it was. Billy Higgs [?] had it. And when I was
crabbing, Billy had it and his father had a key to it. And
on nasty days or foggy, when you couldn't go crabbing, we'd
open up about five o'clock in the morning. By Tom Billy
got home from the Acme, there was a jukebox there bouncing,
and there was watermen coming from everywhere, and we were
all partying and gambling in there, and playing liars
poker, regular cards.

BRENT LEWIS: That was a local hangout.

TOM WILLIS: [00:52:30] Yes, it was. And from the time I was
a little kid, I used to went in there with my father. It
was open, I do know it was open in the early 50s. It might
have been before that; I don't know exactly what time it
was open. But it was opened in early 50s. Lester Rayberg
[?] had it. And then it was a bunch of... He left or sold

it. Other people had it, Lester ended up buying it back again when he moved, bought... He had a house right here in Queenstown, right, two doors back from the old Getty station, that was Lester's house. And I used to hang around with his two daughters. One of them went to school with me, one of them was a little bit younger, Barbara and Leslie.

BRENT LEWIS: That was, Rathskeller was the last place that I saw a young local waterman, Sammy Burgess [?], who died. Any thoughts on that? Do you remember that day that Sam [both speaking-unclear]?

TOM WILLIS: [00:53:41] I only remember hearing that he had passed away, and it was told to me that he had committed suicide. And then Mr. Pete had it... Finally got it categorized as questionable, or something to that effect.

BRENT LEWIS: Sam spent a lot of time around watermen as a young boy, like you did as a young kid. Kind of that another generation of Queenstown young men.

TOM WILLIS: [00:54:18] Yeah, his brother Bruce [?]. They had a big boat and were building a fiberglass boat that's still out on the bay. Perry Davidson [?] has it.

BRENT LEWIS: That's the boat that Sam was building, Sam and Bruce were building. I'm going to move towards some wrap

up stuff. What do you see is the future for watermen here, locally?

TOM WILLIS: [00:54:50] There's a future for the ones that want to work at it. And they have to be diversified. They've got to do... They've got to crab, oyster, some of them will have to fishnet. Clammers are doing fairly well because of the razor clams. Now, we bait lines every day. I help Jeff, my wife helps him, next door neighbor's wife helps him. He's paying, you know, he's paying them some money to help him. Because there's so much work to it, so tedious. But the clammers who were catching razor clams, they're making a living. I think a lot of them go to oystering after crab season's over. This year, there was a few white clams. I had one batch. I wish I could have had more.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TOM WILLIS: [00:55:51] But they were good.

BRENT LEWIS: So, that's how these guys stay in businesses, is be prepared.

TOM WILLIS: [00:55:56] Yeah, some of them still fish, some of them fishnet, you know, they drift net and go out in the Bay and have a rock fish allocation. Some of them take fishing parties and then do something else during the winter. You know, it's different, you know, but there's

still an opportunity for a younger person to make a living out there. But you have to be ready to change. You know, you go from crabbing, and all of a sudden, the crab prices go down, and oyster prices are up, and there's some oysters, you have to switch. I mean, there's a couple of watermen that I know that have always made good money because they do that. They've gone from one product to another product to another product through the year and then right back starting over again.

BRENT LEWIS: And one of your sons currently works on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [00:56:55] Yeah, one of them works for me, one of them works on the water. And the one that works for me, he's starting and trying to get into it a little bit of part time. So, I help, you know, because there's not a large amount of crabs anymore. And so, a lot of people have gone out of business.

BRENT LEWIS: Is it something you would recommend a young man pursue?

TOM WILLIS: [00:57:25] If you want to work at it and you want to enjoy life, yes. Yes, it's a great way to make a living, being out there every morning and see the sunrise. I'd much rather see the sunrise than the sunset.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that the best part of the job?

TOM WILLIS: [00:57:44] You're your own boss. It's a freedom of working for yourself. I mean, you're still constrained by prices, people who buy your product, you know, and Department of Natural Resources, they change regulations to where you can't catch as many, you've got to do this to be able to sell them, et cetera, but it's... You're still basically self-employed. And, you know, there's a lot of freedom. If you don't want to go to work today, you don't have to go and you're not going to lose your job. You might not make any money, but you're not going to lose your job.

BRENT LEWIS: You could go back tomorrow, go try tomorrow.

TOM WILLIS: [00:58:30] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: When you go back, are there any days that stand out as your best days working on the water, and conversely, the worst days?

TOM WILLIS: [00:58:41] Well, there was a lot of worst days.

BRENT LEWIS: What constitutes a worst day?

TOM WILLIS: [00:58:44] I mean, rain blowing, you know, you're trying to go out there and make a living, and it's been the wind's blowing 30 miles an hour and, you know, if you can find a little place where you can get out of some of the wind, it seemed like there wasn't much product to catch then, but you were trying. Best day I ever had crabbing

out there, I caught 36 bushel and there were balls of crabs on every bait, and in between the baits, they were swimming, you could see crab swimming trying to get onto the baits. And I had two days like that, two back-to-back, and then wind blew for about three days and went back out and caught a bushel and a half.

BRENT LEWIS: How long ago was that, Tom?

TOM WILLIS: [00:59:30] Nineteen eighty-five.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TOM WILLIS: [00:59:33] I got four dollars a bushel for it.

BRENT LEWIS: That, I'm sure made your day and kind of a career-making day, it gave you...

TOM WILLIS: [00:59:43] Yeah, well, I put them all together. There are... You know, if you don't have a bad day hunting, there's no reason to go every... There's no reason to want to go hunting, if every day you went you just shot, go out, sit down, get up, bang, bang, and you go home. You know, it's... There's no challenge to it. So, if you have bad days, it challenges you to go back and...
[thunder]

BRENT LEWIS: There's severe weather coming up.

TOM WILLIS: [01:00:15] My truck windows are open.

BRENT LEWIS: Let me ask you that, since it's weather, have you ever had any bad weather experiences out there, like, scary stuff?

TOM WILLIS: [01:00:25] I was crabbing one morning and stayed too long, the storms were coming. And when I finally pulled up the line and headed back to Queenstown from Pundy Point [?], it collapsed on top of me. Water was coming over the stern, over the bow, couldn't see, couldn't... The compass was spinning around, and I mean, it shorted the music radio out and everything. And when it finally broke, I was still aimed for Queenstown, because I just... You know, you keep your... You get a sense when you're working out on the water, you know. There's a lot of times when I'll go fishing and I've got a couple spots and I'll go up there, and I'll look at the shore, and I look across on the other shore and everything, I said, "I'm fairly close now." That's the way they did it before there was GPS and radar and everything, you had to get a sight. You know, I went fishing with Mr. Chalk Anthony when I was a kid. He and Pop were good friends, and then Mr. Chalk's daughter, Dolores, and I went with him one night and he was pointing Pop, he told Pop to go over here a little bit, go over this way a little bit, that's it, we're in the right spot. And Pop put the anchor over, and Mr. Chalk would cast out and

come in with a rock fish this big. And he said, "I knew we were coming close to the right spot."

BRENT LEWIS: How do you think he would know that?

TOM WILLIS: [01:01:48] Because he... From just going all the time and had a sense about it. And he'd look at shore and he'd know how far out he was, and how deep he was, without doing anything.

BRENT LEWIS: Are those skills that a lot of modern watermen don't have, because they rely on...?

TOM WILLIS: [01:02:05] They... most of them don't need it, because you've got GPS. GPS will put you within five feet of wherever you want to be.

BRENT LEWIS: Fish-finders, and all that. Phones, even, right, make a... The apps that are available on phones for people to use.

TOM WILLIS: [01:02:25] Yeah. I would say I don't think... I wouldn't say that people don't have the skills to do that. They just don't need to do that. There's some... You know, there's times where I go out there, I don't look at the GPS, I know pretty well where I am and everything, well, there's a buoy over there, and a bar, the bars inside of the buoys, and I'm going to travel crawl across there and see if I can catch a fish. So, I know wherever...

basically, where everything is in Chester River, because that's where I've lived all my life.

BRENT LEWIS: Is Chris your son who works on the water?

TOM WILLIS: [01:03:01] No, Jeff. Jeff works on the water. Chris works with me.

BRENT LEWIS: And you taught Jeff a lot of this stuff, and you...?

TOM WILLIS: [01:03:07] Yeah, he used to go with me all the time when he was a little kid. I'd wake him up in the morning and I already had a couple bushel in the column box, and then he'd have to get up and cull them. I'd be hollering at him, dragging him out of the cabin, "Come on, you've got to cull these crabs." And then there was...

BRENT LEWIS: But that keeps that tradition alive.

TOM WILLIS: [01:03:29] Yeah, and then there was one morning I was waiting for him to get up and cull the crabs and everything, and I looked and [unclear] across on the horizon looked like little Mexican sombreros, but they were clouds, but they looked like sombreros, a whole line of them all down there. And I just sat there and watching the, and sun started coming up, and they changed color. And, you know, it was just a beautiful sunrise. And one of the guys called me on the CB, he said, "Are you broken down?" I said. "No, no, I'm just watching the sunrise."

He said, "You're out of your mind." He said, "We're making money." I said, "I'll make money whenever." I said, "I'm not going to ever forget this." And I haven't. And that's been... Well, Jeff was 13, and he's pushing 50.

BRENT LEWIS: That's beautiful.

TOM WILLIS: [01:04:18] And I still remember that morning.

So, you know, what else are you going to take with you?

BRENT LEWIS: That's kind of what it's about, right?

TOM WILLIS: [01:04:24] To me it is. I mean, you know, it's a life not a lifestyle. It's a life that you can think about, you can take with you when you leave here, because you're not taking anything else. What people think of you, and what you remember, and that's it. So, you know, those beautiful sunrises and the days when the wind blew 72 miles an hour when the... When I was in the storm out there, tore up all the trees here in town. And I was out there, and they turned the boats over down in Eastern Bay. But, you know, I remember all of them.

BRENT LEWIS: There's something beautiful about life, good and bad, right?

TOM WILLIS: [01:05:10] Yes, it is.

BRENT LEWIS: Those things stick in your head. I'm going to wrap up by asking you if there's anything that I didn't ask you that you'd like to talk about, or if there's something

that came to your mind after we moved on. Like, if there was a question I asked and you thought, "Oh, I should have told him this." Is there anything like that, that we might have...

TOM WILLIS: [01:05:31] No, none of that. [siren]

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, that's the first time we've had it, which is weird, because we've done three interviews, here, four?

TOM WILLIS: [01:05:42] It's either a fire or an accident?

BRENT LEWIS: Are you in the fire company?

TOM WILLIS: [01:05:47] No, but both the boys are.

BRENT LEWIS: Were you ever?

TOM WILLIS: [01:05:50] Yes, I was when I first... When I was a kid growing up here in town, a little bit, and after I got married when we were living here in town, and once I moved away. But I was, when I worked for the chemical company, I ended up as a supervisor, I had to go to Delaware State Fire School, and learn, and then go back and teach the people on the shift, we had a fire brigade, what were they called, it was like a little... It was like for emergencies until the fire companies could get there. So, we had to teach them how to start putting the fire out, or first aid, or whatever it was that we had to... You know. So, I had to learn that. And I didn't... Never was much on fires.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, you know, and so before I ask the wrap up question, it reminds me, your duties as the town commissioner, what are your duties as a town commissioner?

TOM WILLIS: [01:06:54] To make decisions on how to spend money, how to change, how to add to the taxes if we have to, raise them, how to manipulate whatever we're doing to for the benefit of the people of Queenstown.

BRENT LEWIS: What are the biggest challenges that Queenstown faces now, or in the future?

TOM WILLIS: [01:07:21] Well, money. Because every year, it costs more to operate the town. So, if we don't increase our growth, some, then we won't... We'll be charging the same people, and then we have to charge them more money, as having a development which we're in process of, hopefully, having a development out on the Wheatland's farm, that's all been annexed. They're close to wanting to do something out there now. And if they start building, then there'll be money coming into the town of Queenstown, that will help offset the increases in prices of what we have to spend, all that. But there's also things with it, we had to build a new wastewater plant, that was 10 million dollars. But we ended up getting grants and then a 40-year-low interest loan, so do people pay on their water and sewer bill every

month to help pay for that over 40 years what we had to borrow.

BRENT LEWIS: How many people do you serve? What's the population of Queenstown?

TOM WILLIS: [01:08:37] I... Six-fifty or so, I guess.

BRENT LEWIS: Has it grown over recent years?

TOM WILLIS: [01:08:43] Yeah, it was probably only I'm guessing about 300 when I was a kid, 250. You know, and a little bit here, a little bit there. But the town has never really wholesaling grown. One reason is 301, and water on two sides, and golf course on one end, and farms on the other end. So, we're kind of landlocked and it's kept growth slow. There's been some property in here that was developed, put one house on this one, they put 15 condos down here on the piece up on five acres, on Thompson Avenue. But basically, the town hasn't grown a lot over the years.

BRENT LEWIS: [unclear] important to increase that base.

TOM WILLIS: [01:09:36] Yeah, you need a money... a tax base coming in to pay for the people who are employed by the town, which is only... Well, right now it's only four. One of the people in the maintenance just took a job somewhere else. So, now we got to hire somebody else to take his, so it's only five people who work for the town.

And we don't have a police force. The fire company's getting ready to move out of town. They're going to build a new firehouse out on Route 18. So, you know, but they'll still be in town.

BRENT LEWIS: So, that brings me to that final question, is there anything that we haven't touched on that you'd like to...?

TOM WILLIS: [01:10:24] No, it's just that Queenstown is a great place to live. If I was young, I'd be probably back on the water again. I always did love it. But raising a family and having responsibilities, and I thought it was a little better that, for me, raising two boys to have a little bit more stability. So, I made that choice. There's some people that make a good living. I just chose to go off of the water and let Jeff take over. And he wanted to do it and he was younger, so I just let him do it.

BRENT LEWIS: It definitely feels like it made you who you are, though, all those years on the water.

TOM WILLIS: [01:11:10] Oh, yes it did. My love of the water, that's where I'm going to be when I'm cremated. I've already told those boys I would haunt them till the day they die if they don't do what I want done.

BRENT LEWIS: Thank you, man. I really appreciate you.

TOM WILLIS: [01:11:29] Oh, I've enjoyed it.

END OF AUDIO FILE