

INTERVIEW LOG

Oral History #62

Interviewee: Max Chambers

Interviewer: Richard Dodd's

Date: April 20, 1989

Location: 118 West Main Street, Preston, MD

Topic: Mr. Chambers was a long-time resident of Caroline County and was for years owner of the Preston "News and Farmer." He asked George Ross to write the column "Minnie Wheeler's Boyfriend" that appeared for a number of years. Topics discussed included the Wheeler Line, career and events in his life, and Choptank River fisheries.

Comments:

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START SIDE A

Max Chambers: ...he said, "Come on there son, come on son, get that there...oh, what's that you're talking about. That son of a bitch...come on." (Laughter). That's about the old man. (Unintelligible).

Richard Dodds: The old captain Perry. I've heard a lot about him.

MC: He was a genteel sort of a fellow. But he could cuss like a sailor.

RD: Is that right?

MC: But, Wheeler was a quiet, easy going sort of a fellow they tell me except when his family got into it. Now George Ross was my first mate on the *Minnie Wheeler*.

RD: Yeah. Well, I've read somewhere that he was a quartermaster. He was a quartermaster on board the *Minnie Wheeler*.

MC: I got the impression he was first mate.

RD: First mate? Okay. I can clear that up.

MC: And Minnie Wheeler on the trip that night going to Baltimore. He left just up there and he went down the river and he got somewhere down in here between Dover Bridge and Gregg's Wharf (ph). Caught them behind the smoke stacks. Maybe a little push. She got him by the ear and she said "You should get your damn gear and go down on the gangway. You can get off at Gregg's Wharf and you go to hell and don't get on this boat again."

RD: Is that right?

MC: Yeah, George told me that. George (unintelligible).

RD: Well, do you think that was the origin of the newspaper column that he typed.

MC: He wrote all kinds of things about what he did on that ship.

RD: He called the column the "Minnie Wheeler's Boyfriend."

MC: That's right.

RD: Was the origin of that?

MC: Yeah, yeah.

RD: Well, I've looked at the paper here in town about a year ago and it looked like it started in September 1938.

MC: That's when it started.

RD: Yeah, and finished off about December of 1942.

MC: You mean George's column. I don't remember.

RD: Were you at the paper at the time?

MC: I owned it for 42 years all the way up to 1980.

RD: Okay. So you owned the paper when George Ross was still writing for it.

MC: Yeah. I got him to write the column.

RD: Oh, you did? Okay.

MC: And he was wondering (unintelligible) you ever saw. He didn't think he could write a column. But people started reading it and laughing about it.

RD: Yeah. It became popular.

MC: He was a pretty good story writer.

RD: There was a lot of good information in those columns.

MC: Yeah. I don't remember what it was now. It was just another piece of researching material.

RD: Yeah. He mentioned in his columns that he based a lot of his materials on about eight log books that he got from the family when the company folded up.

MC: I don't know. I suspect he said something about it, but I don't remember. He talked all the time (unintelligible).

RD: He said he received eight volumes of the log of the *Minnie Wheeler* that he got from Elmer Wheeler, the son, and then he says that he consented to offer the logs to the newspaper.

MC: Yeah?

RD: But, you never heard of any log books there.

MC: He talked about expanding his column to some other papers, but, I told him if that was what he wanted to do, but apparently he never got around to where he wanted to do it.

RD: Yeah. Well, why did he stop writing in '42, do you know why?

MC: I think it goes back to very early in the war. He was having gasoline trouble getting up and down the countryside. He didn't have justification enough. He was just writing something, but it had nothing to do with the war efforts.

RD: Yeah, well, I see. Max, do you remember when he went up to Philadelphia?

MC: What?

RD: When did he move up to Philadelphia?

MC: (unintelligible) Choptank early.

RD: But, then at some point, he went and lived up in Philadelphia.

MC: Well, he worked on the IRT (ph). What's the name of the mass trains (unintelligible) in Philadelphia)?

RD: The trains?

MC: Yeah. The interurban. It runs north, south, east and west in Philadelphia.

RD: I don't know. Did he work on those for a while?

MC: Oh yeah. I don't know whether he was a motorman or a conductor, or something. I think both.

RD: Do you know when he died?

MC: No, but I can find out right quick I think. (Whistling in background). My battery went dead.

RD: Can you hear me okay?

MC: Yeah, yeah.

RD: Does he have any family still living in this area?

MC: I don't think so. See if that one works right now. (Changing hearing aid battery). His father-in-law was a commercial fisherman and was active in the community. But his father was a delegate in the House of Delegates in Annapolis here in Choptank. Raw boned, suntanned, waterman. He knew oysters. One time we had 27 commercial fishermen up and down the river here. That was when we had a shad hatchery in Denton. (Unintelligible) into a tin can. A little (unintelligible) and then they stripped the roe (ph) into a tin can, a little quart can he got and then he stripped the melt (ph) over that and stir it up with a stick. That's the way he got that and then he poured it in a bottle. Nine days later he got little ones. (Unintelligible) all over the place. At that time we had shad because the shad's a homing fish. So is the herring. Maybe all of them are, rock are. But there will never be any more like we had then until somebody with guts goes down here on the Carolina coast and says, "Look, you stop your damn (unintelligible) mother ships would come here. They take everything. They don't throw anything back. They take the trash fish. Only the trash fish is (unintelligible). You ever eat one.

RD: Uh, uh.

MC: Best thing you had like chicken of the sea.

RD: Is that right.

MC: They are about that long with a tail on it and it has an irregular backbone running down through it, but, no bones. Just one backbone and they'd dip that in a batter and deep fry it. About as good as a fish as you can get to eat. Excellent...chicken of the sea, and they sold them. They'd clean them, guts and all. (Unintelligible). But you (unintelligible) flour. Just flour (unintelligible). I've eaten them. You can't tell the difference. (unintelligible) very tender and I guess that comes from all this extra stuff you don't need, but they catch these fish down there. They throw nothing back and they take the rockfish, which is fine fishing in this part of the country. They don't throw (unintelligible) at all. They make fillets out and send it to other countries and the law is they get to fish 25 miles off shore so we got 200 mile zone limit. We won't get anymore fish. I tried to talk with Roy Saxton (ph) three years ago and I tried to talk with him later at the Queen Anne's County Farm Bureau back then. I said, "Roy, sometime you'll set a time for me and let me come in to meet you anywhere. Something very

important that you need to do and we need to talk about it.” I said, “I’d like to see you.” “What do you talk now.” What are you doing (ph) standing around. I said, “Roy, this is information that’s not privileged to everybody. It’s for you and me till you get to where you can handle it.” “Well, you can talk.” I says, “thank you sir and I walked off.” He said, “Okay, (unintelligible) it don’t make a damn bit of difference to me.” I’m not afraid of him. It just didn’t work out. He (unintelligible). He’s gone this time.

RD: Yeah, it sounds like it.

MC: Yeah, and this November he’s gone. What we’ve got there is to get these fish back in here is to go down and take him down to Moorehead City. I have a fishing guide and go out there 25 miles outside of land which he’s already told us about. We’ve got 34 trawlers (ph), Brazil, Japanese, Finland, Norway.

RD: All over.

MC: All over the place now. If they would just go down and see this thing as I saw it. I got close enough to them to see them haul these fish in. That’s what I paid the guide for and we had a great day of fishing, but he wouldn’t talk. He says, “Yeah, they’d take my license.” I said, “Well, you don’t need to talk, just answer my questions. I didn’t hear you.” But, he was a nice guy. I got along well with him and I got a lot of information. That’s what I want to give to Roy. I didn’t write anything down about it because it’s the kind of thing you don’t want to write.

RD: What do you know about the 9Wheeler headquarters up there in Hillsboro. I understand it was in one of the old granaries.

MC: I don’t know anything about that. There’s an old cannery up there that’s still there. There’s an old church that’s still there, a lot of brick houses. You’ve been up there.

RD: Yeah, I’ve been up there. I was just curious. All the granaries on the water there are gone now.

MC: That’s where they stored the grain until the boats came in.

RD: Yeah. Apparently, Wheeler used to ship his grain from Hillsboro down to Wayman’s (ph) Wharf on a scow. He had a scow he used to ship it down on.

MC: And then pick it up from there.

RD: Yeah, have him pick it up from there.

MC: Well, his ship didn’t draw...the Minnie Wheeler probably didn’t draw more than three or four feet.

RD: Yeah. Wayman’s Wharf was the last point they could get up from the Tuckahoe landing.

MC: Well, George Ross told me, now you’ve made me think some. He told me that the *Minnie Wheeler* was a good boat. She sailed slowly, but she was a side wheeler and she couldn’t get out there in the Bay and take a licking. She could rock and roll like a damn top.

RD: Yeah. Did he ever mention anything about the company’s other boats—the *Chesapeake* and the *Easton*.

MC: No. I’ve got some books here that will probably tell about them.

RD: No, I’ve got some information. I was wondering if he had mentioned anything about it.

MC: I’ve got one book that may be different. Have you seen the Caroline County history.

RD: Yeah.

MC: Have you seen (unintelligible) history.

RD: Yeah, the Eastern Shore?

MC: Yeah.

RD: Yeah. In none of this book, I’ve ever found a biography of Captain Wheeler.

MC: Can’t find it, huh.

RD: I’ve got his obituary.

MC: I haven’t even got that. Here’s the Caroline County History. We’ve worn it out.

RD: Laughter.

MC: But, I’ve got a new one here somewhere.

RD: Yeah. I’ve checked them pretty well.

MC: I think you're probably doing what I understand you now want to do. I can go up there to the library in Denton. They're the most comfortable people to be with that I know of. Yesterday, I was in there and asking for some information on the Crow Foot and the Black Foot Indians and they would take the time to talk with you. They got three or four girls up there that are wonderful. You want their names.

RD: That's all right. I've been up to the library there. I've tracked down I think most of the likely sources that I could find. I doubt that there are too many left now. Did you know Captain Wheeler had a partner in the business called James Holt (ph). Did you ever hear of him.

MC: Yeah.

RD: He was his secretary and treasurer.

MC: Money man.

RD: Yeah. Did George Ross ever speak of him.

MC: Yeah, oh yeah. He used to sail with him sometimes. But, I don't know in what capacity. But, I knew he was treasurer.

RD: Yeah. And then Wheeler had a son called Elmer.

MC: I don't know him.

RD: He was the freight agent over in Baltimore for the company.

MC: I'll think about it tomorrow and come out just what George said about him. He talked about all of it.

RD: Yeah. I'm sure he did because it's been many years ago.

MC: I have a (unintelligible) picking up those things. When you get to be 39 you lose words you know and you reach out and they don't come. But tomorrow morning I'll have them, maybe five minutes later.

RD: Do you remember when George Ross moved up to Philadelphia.

MC: No, that's what I was trying to find out.

RD: Okay. I guess it was probably after the war or during the war.

MC: ...7930. Let's try that. If it don't work, I'll get the book. Let's look at the phone book....George Price. Cissie...Cissie Price...sorry.

RD: What's the name.

MC: Lloyd...L l o y d Price, Choptank. See, here's what I use to find those numbers (using magnifying glass?). You don't need them.

RD: Not yet. Lloyd Price, 673-7390.

MC: See what we get now. You might want to go down there and talk with her and see what you can do with it. Cissie, how are you doing? Oh, you are? Got a bone in your leg (ph). Oh my. Now look, I got a man here from the Maritime Museum in St. Michaels. He's trying to get a run down on George Ross. When did he leave here to go to Philadelphia. Where was he raised...was he raised around here? Yeah, he was on the *Minnie Wheeler*. Well, look, here's Mr. Dodds here. Let him ask you a few questions. He may want to come down and see you. He's a nice looking guy...a good boy (laughter).

RD: Mrs. Price? Yes, this is Richard Dodds. I'm with the Maritime Museum in St. Michaels. I've been doing some research on the Wheeler Company and I've got quite a bit of information and I went to see Max about the company and I was just curious though about George Ross. I've got quite a bit of information from the article he wrote for the paper up here, but I know at some point he went to Philadelphia. (Long pause.)

MC: ...subway, IRT (ph) I think...rapid transit.

RD: Phone disconnected.

MC: Didn't hang it up tight apparently. Now if you had come along 30 years ago, you know Admiral Carmine could have told you about all of them.

RD: I know. Apparently Admiral Carmine (ph) used to ride on the *Minnie Wheeler* quite a bit.

MC: Admiral Carmine as a boy.

RD: As a boy, yeah.

MC: Well, he lived down here at the top of the hill. (unintelligible). Now he lives at the Hill Manor.

RD: William Hill Manor.

MC: Yeah. He's a retired chairman of the board of (unintelligible). He might be one you get something from.

RD: All right. Anything else you can think of about the company or George Ross.

MC: I'm trying to think of what books I have around here that might have it. First time I'm up at the library I'll call for them.

RD: I've read most of those that would have anything in them, so, I've done most of the research. I'm just kind of finishing off with anything else that I haven't touched on.

MC: I got one more suggestion for you. I think if you're given every paper around here...if you look at this kind of information...

RD: In fact, your old paper did that for me when I first approached them. They did this little thing a couple of years ago (sounds of rustling paper).

MC: Yeah.

RD: Which was nice of them. At the time, I think you were away.

MC: How long have you been down there?

RD: Pardon?

MC: How long have you been down there?

RD: The museum? About five years.

MC: Oh yeah?

RD: I started on this project about two years ago and I wanted to finally finish it up this year.

MC: Well, I just think you can beat that (ph).

RD: Maybe. Maybe that's a good idea, yeah.

MC: There's another guy you want to talk with...Maritime Press up at Centerville. They publish books.

RD: Yeah. I know him...Art Cudner (ph), Will Lockwood. Well, if you hear of anything? You think it's worth contacting the Historical Society or whoever heads the museum up.

MC: I don't know who heads up the Historical Society anymore. I'm trying to think of the secretary who handled that for the last ten years—Susan Richard (ph). I told you what happens to you.

(Laughter). She's a school teacher. She's got a good memory. Maybe she can think of something. I'll touch base with her. I know how to get to her.

RD: Okay. I appreciate it Max.

MC: So it seems to me that if you tried to (unintelligible).

RD: Tried there and tried the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. I've even been down to the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Virginia, so I've tried most of them.

MC: I was there one time. That's a great place.

RD: It is or isn't?

MC: It is.

RD: It is a nice museum, yeah.

MC: I can't say anything bad about something that I don't know much about in the first place. But to look at it, I know whether or not.

RD: Yeah, it's a nice museum.

MC: I know a little bit about the sea, but not much. In World War II I was in Baltimore. I started training as a machinist (ph). The day my four years were up, was the last damn day I worked at it. I taught school 11 years and got a college degree so I could be a principal. The day I got the damn degree was the last day I worked as a school teacher. I had a lot of things happen like that.

RD: How did you get involved in the newspaper here?

MC: During summer school. Went to Dover (ph) College in North Carolina, Salisbury and a professor

name Lane (ph) he had it all on the tip of his tongue and the back of his head and could roll stuff out just like a barrel. He would always give you assignments the second week of summer school. You've got six subjects and I'll select one for you. I gave him six subjects—Daniel Boone, gold mining, Gold Hills and Chambers Clan. He picked out Gold Hill (ph). I didn't know a damn thing about it except what I'd seen. A lot of it superficial (ph). (unintelligible) George Newman (ph) was the guy who promoted us into Gold Hills. He'd tend mines. He was an extravagant, blowhard guy who had a buggy with rubber tires about that big. He had rubber shoes on (unintelligible). He was quite a guy. I was down at the station one morning to pick up the papers. (unintelligible) who had the Charlotte Observer route. So I went down there April 12, 1912...sinking of the Titanic. I sold about fifty papers you know. I had two bundles of them actually. (Unintelligible)...what am I going to do with all these papers. "Sell them, sell them, damn it. Get out there and holler." The first time I ever learned to holler a newspaper. Yep. "Got a lot of people dead, Titanic sunk. Learn all about it." People coming out of church (unintelligible)...people out on the balcony and the front porch and hollered bring me a paper. "How much for it?" Ten cents...nickel for the paper. When Hennessy (ph) says do it, (unintelligible). No matter who wanted the paper...it was Wright (ph)...Judge Wright. He was my Sunday School teacher. He was getting his eyes focused on who that was down there hollering. He said, "Max, what the hell are you hollering about?" Titanic sunk, 1200 people drowned. "Oh yeah, I want one. Bring it up here." I'll pay you when I see you. I know it's a nickel." A dime! The only one who didn't pay me. But, he didn't mean to. He just forgot it. I sold 200 papers that day and I didn't didn't have one to take home to mama. When I got home, she wondered what I've been doing so late. I told her. "Where's the paper?" I took off just like a rabbit. I went up there (unintelligible) and he had two or three copies left. I got one of them. Of course, mama, she was happy about it. But, I took this course that they had on this gold mine writing. I put together a story. I don't know...twelve or 15 pages that were typed. I turned it in three days before the last day. The last day when I walked in the room, he says, "Chambers, don't go home, I want to see you before you leave. So, I went back there and sat down. A Jewish girl came in and he gave her a B. She hollered like a stuck pig. She said, "I deserve more than that, I did more than that and you gave me a B. I can't stand that. I've got to have an A." "Yeah, well go down there (unintelligible). Laughter. He didn't give it to her, either. When he got around to me, he said, "You know somebody up in Washington or Baltimore at a daily paper that got a magazine that can handle this." I said, yeah, some of them. He said, "you should send this one of the papers. It's good stuff." So, I wrote a little note along with it and sent it to the editor of the *Sunday Sun Magazine*. When I got home a week later, a check came from the *Sun* paper for \$50 dollars and a note from Watson (ph), what's his first name? He was editor of the *Sunday Sun Magazine*. He wrote a beautiful thank you. He had all kinds of stuff—questions to ask me. I wrote, (unintelligible). He knows something I don't know, but we'll find out. I wrote him a note and told him I wanted to come up to see you some day. He said, "Come up any week day and we'll work it out. We'll have lunch or something, whatever you want." I wrote him a note and told him I'd be there at 3 o'clock on Thursday, I think it was. He was all ready for me. He married Harry Black's daughter. Harry Black was the president of the *Sun* there. And he called me up, (unintelligible). I began to wonder, what the hell makes me so damn important. I said, "I don't undrestand this." I told him so. He said, "It's just the way we do things at the *Sun Paper* and wanted if anybody knows who's doing these things (ph). He's the one that got me started in writing. He gave me ten assignments before I left his office—Shenandoah Valley, Daniel Boone, (unintelligible). We were on a date and (unintelligible) get anything in there. But, he kept up with me as long as he was living and every time I'd write a story, I'd send him a copy of it and one time he wrote back and said, "You're getting enough now nearly to put in a book, so you better start writing that book." I never did get around to that book, but I wrote another one a manuscript on the Gold Hills thing, Yellow Rock. That's where they found gold.

Boy, parents went off to church (ph) and left the boy home. He had a little bow and arrow and was

shooting fish in the creek, and he shot this fish with the damn arrow right through the fish and stepped in the water. They pulled the (Unintelligible). They pulled that (Unintelligible) out, and a big old stone fell on his foot. Biggest flat iron (ph), 17 pounds. He took it up to the house and all you do is handle it (Unintelligible) he said. Store it (Unintelligible). Anyway, his father came in and he said, "Well." He looked it over. He said, "Well, I don't know if it makes a good door stop, so it was a door stop for 20 years. And and the trading (Unintelligible) for North Carolina, Central Piedmont, North Carolina. Fayetteville was the headwater of the (Unintelligible) River. (Unintelligible) market place is where he took all his grain every year to sell. He (Unintelligible) one day and old (Unintelligible) looked at it and he gave him \$2.95 for it. He sold it. He got back home and told what he had done so some of the people around here said he was crazy, he was nuts. What the hell, move back down and tell him he owes you another \$1,000 and he did, and he got it. But, I kept writing for them. This was in 1934 and two or three years later I started the paper here. A lawyer here in town had the old *Preston News* and seven papers he had (Unintelligible) and the lawyer was a St. John's graduate but his legs were paralyzed playing football...in a wheelchair. He was a sarcastic, good lawyer, but sarcastic guy and if he liked you he'd give you anything, but if he didn't like you, he was spitting on you all the time. I went to him for news and somebody told me he owned the paper here. Dr. Villanova was his editor. Ed Villanova was John Noble's brother and he said, "Well, I got old copies of the old paper and I'll give them to you if you want them." Five years of them. I took them right then -- loaded them up and started a paper and my wife went out and sold advertising for the first issue and it made money everyday since. Sometimes in February it slowed down a little bit, but (Unintelligible).

RD: You retired from it in 1980. You sold it in 1980.

MC: 1980, yeah sold it for \$150,000. I sold it to a pair of youngsters. (Unintelligible) assumed he graduated. He was about 21 and he (Unintelligible) in the country. Jim Lacey's daughter. Smart, (Unintelligible) working over at the *Star Democrat* composing. A (Unintelligible) typewriter and setting it out. And they got together and bought it. I charge them any interest for the first year. Give them a chance to get it going because I wanted them to make a go of it. I told him the first year he was at it and the last day I talked to him. I said, "Look. Jim and his wife (Unintelligible) and you got to get off your butt, get out and sell his advertising is what makes the thing turn and you got a pretty good circulation now, build it up. You better get out there and get this thing turning." He never did and (Unintelligible). I told somebody