

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Elwood Jackson

Oral History #67

Interviewer: Richard Dodds
Joe Liener

Date: July 25, 1989

Location: 106 Golton Drive, Easton, MD 21601

Topic: Mr. Jackson is the son of George Jackson, a well known boat builder of Wittman who built many deadrise workboats. Subjects discussed included the boatbuilding activities of George Jackson and his son and questions regarding the 1929-built sailing skiff built for artist Louis Feuchter (89-19-1).

Comments:

Documentation: Elwood Jackson gave the Museum a builder's plate and allowed us to copy a photo of his father and some of his boats. See photos: 957.xxx

Transcribed by:

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BEGIN SIDE A

Richard Dodds: I think I mentioned to you on the phone, one of the reasons I asked you down is because we were given this boat. Joe may have talked to you a little bit about it already. She was built about 1929 I think by your father and we've got a lot of information on it, mostly on the artist and on the boat itself, very little on the man who built the boat. Joe has told me a little bit about your father over the years and we've been down to the shop there in Pot Pie and got a couple of things here. I think the anchor came from the shop.

Elwood Jackson: Do you have an adze and a broad axe that he donated here at one time?

RD: Could be. I can check very quickly.

EJ: Oh, you don't have to. No, I was just wondering. I think he did give an adze and a broad axe to this place and I don't know whether there was anything else or not. I can't remember, but, I remember hearing my sister say something about it.

RD: When did your father die?

EJ: I knew you would ask me that question. I can't remember to save my heart.

JL: I think it was around the 60s.

EJ: No, let's see. Let me think a minute. He's only been dead about seven or eight years.

RD: That would make it around 1980.

EJ: No, it was before that.

RD: I was just curious.

JL: He died in the early 60s before the middle of the 60s.

EJ: No, because after he sold the shop in 1957, he lived in Bozeman for a good many years, then he left there and went up to my sister's and lived there. I would say about over 10 years. Of course, time has a way of getting by, probably 12 years.

RD: This is probably a harder question – when was he born?

EJ: I knew I should have asked my sister all these questions because I can't remember – 18 something, but I don't know what.

RD: Probably the 80s or something like that.

JL: I'm pretty sure that Sam and I stopped in and saw him up there at your sister's around the middle 60s.

EJ: I'd have to put my thinking cap on because I can't recall.

RD: Was he born in Pot Pie – was he raised in that area?

EJ: He was raised there. Now I would say he was born there, too, because the old house -- my granddad you know was right there, so I would imagine he was born right there.

RD: Is that where the present house is now?

EJ: The old house is still there, yeah, but it's been rebuilt so much, it's hard to tell. I got it right here somewhere if I can find it. It's hard to see (looking at photographs). Oh, here it is. The only thing you could see there is a porch. See that's my dad's house. Of course that was all tore down and rebuilt. All you could see is the porch where my grandfather lived.

RD: Is that the shop there, the dark building in the foreground?

EJ: Uh huh, yeah.

JL: That's after it was moved down.

EJ: Yeah, after it was moved.

RD: Down to where it is now?

EJ: This shop did set up here, right up in there, and I can remember that he built a 40 foot boat and it stuck out of the shop at both ends and didn't have room enough to get around, so when they pulled that boat out, him and my uncle built it, pulled it down to the shore on logs and then they come back and put the shop on logs and moved it down there and made it wider and longer.

RD: So the reason for moving it was to make it bigger and get it closer to the water.

JL: Had the railway run right up into the shop.

EJ: He dug down into the ground and put cinder blocks all the way around and then of course, we'd set the shop on it and then put the rails right up so we could just haul the boats in and out.

RD: Another hard question – when did they move the shop (laughter). I like dates.

EJ: And I shoulda got some, but I didn't get any.

RD: That's all right. This looks like a 1930s photograph to me, so it looks like maybe it was moved by that time. I may be wrong, but looking at the boats and the type of picture it is...

EJ: I was born in 1917.

RD: You were born in 1917 in Pot Pie?

EJ: '37 I would be 20 years old so it had to have been...it was in the 30s, early 30s.

JL: The old house looks just the same. If you got in the same location and took a picture that would show up about the same there.

EJ: That shop was down there when I was 16 years old. I can remember that.

RD: In that new location. And you were born in '17, so 27 plus 6 is '33, so it was there by '33.

EJ: Probably before that. One way I remember that, because I bought a Model T Ford for \$10 and I tore all the body off of it and put a Richard (ph) body on it and that shop was down there then, so that's how I remember that.

RD: Let me look at the other pictures you got here.

EJ: Sure, help yourself.

RD: Are these boats that your father built? I didn't realize it, he looks like a pretty versatile builder.

EJ: This is the same boat and the Renrall II (ph).

RD: She's a pretty sizeable boat.

EJ: These are all the same boats.

RD: Is this your father standing there?

EJ: No, that's the man we built it for.

RD: Okay.

EJ: Lewis Warner (ph) of Baltimore.

RD: It's a pretty sizeable boat.

EJ: The man offered (unintelligible) before we met them. I used to take all the kids out on it. He left it down home for us to take care of, and he told me, "Anytime you want to take her, take her and go." I'd get 10, 12, 13 kids and we'd all go out and have a ball on it...go to Oxford, Cambridge, everywhere.

RD: Nice looking boat.

EJ: She was a nice boat.

RD: Do you remember how long she was?

EJ: I would say probably 36 feet, but I don't know. I don't know whether she's still living or not. The last time I saw her she was up there in Newcomb. Trippe had it. An old 6 cylinder Palmer engine, a marine engine. Had double plugs in her – battery and magneto both.

RD: Your father didn't build too many of these types of boats then, did he?

EJ: Yeah, he built a lot of them.

RD: Is that right?

EJ: I think this was one that was built for...you know Alec Spencer...well, his brother-in-law, Lester Harrison. I think that's the boat, I don't know.

RD: He built quite a few cabin cruisers, didn't he?

EJ: And this one here, I think that was a 40 foot boat, too.

RD: She's a big one, yeah.

EJ: Pretty near a 40 and she was built for Mr. Gratt (ph). He had the St. Michaels Hardware at one time, some years back.

RD: Where did your father learn to build boats, do you know?

EJ: He just started building them. The first boat he built was called *Flat Iron*. That's what she looked like, a flat iron.

RD: A flat iron?

EJ: Come right out like this, squared off, straight sides. That's what they called her, *Flat Iron*. He built it for himself because he worked on the water and then after that, he sold that one to somebody and then he built another one and that's how he got started. He'd build one and he'd sell it. He'd build one and he'd sell it and finally he just got into it.

RD: Do you have any idea how many boats he did build in the end?

EJ: No, my sister had most of that stuff. Well, she passed away about a year ago and I don't know whatever happened to all of it.

JL: Didn't he work with John Dick (ph)?

EJ: He might have when he was real young. I don't know.

JL: Up there at Havre de Grace (ph).

EJ: I don't know because that was way before my time because as far back as I can remember, my dad always built boats.

RD: Full time pretty much.

EJ: Mostly. Yeah, we worked on the water together and I worked with him in his shop, too.

RD: So, you helped him build a number of the boats.

EJ: I worked there 18 years. I helped build this one. I remember that boat, but I don't remember whether I helped build her or not...1935...I probably did.

RD: This is Geville (ph) 1935? Another cabin cruiser. He did build quite a few of those.

EJ: He built a lot of them.

RD: What kind of wood were you using for the most part on these.

EJ: I can't remember too much about that, but, say, this one was probably built out of white cedar and mahogany. We built one out of solid mahogany – everything, sides, bottom, decks, the whole works. That was for Carol Stewart (ph) of Easton, years back.

RD: Solid mahogany.

EJ: And the bottom fell off of it. The acid in the mahogany eat the nails up and we pulled up on the railway to clean her up and paint her and somehow we did something

and pulled the (unintelligible) right off of her and knocked the bottom off and put a white cedar bottom on with screws.

RD: In later years, didn't he build mainly the small skiffs or was that what he built all along.

EJ: Work boats. We built them anyway.

RD: Deadrise, skiffs, yeah. Because there are still a number of those around.

JL: The old tuck sterns.

EJ: Got some of them and then in later years we got working with tuck sterns and built box sterns.

JL: They built one for Tom (unintelligible) I know. That was after the war.

RD: Any reason why he built tuck stern...he chose that type?

EJ: Well, actually back then you only had single cylinder motors and a tuck stern was easy to push because it was tucked up and the water would start away start away from her, where a box stern brought the water right to her and then I went into box sterns until I got high speed motors.

RD: Joe's brought me down on a couple of occasions to photograph that one down there that's hauled out every year.

JL: The last one that your father built was for Lock Brando and that's the nicest little boat on the creek. Twenty six foot long I think she is.

RD: I took some photographs.

JL: That was built over there in Bozman.

EJ: He built her in Bozman?

JL: Yeah. That was the last one of that kind of boat he ever built. I think he built a couple of small skiffs for an outboard motor, but I mean a tuck stern...

EJ: You just let 'em go on by and you don't think about it and I can't remember all that stuff.

RD: He built so many boats. He was a very prolific builder apparently.

EJ: We built a work boat every month right after the war.

RD: One a month?

EJ: One a month. Well, during the war, we worked out in the boatyard and there were 4, 5 or 6 of us that worked over there.

RD: And after the war, he built one a month. Like an assembly line.

EJ: Almost. And we got orders for workboats. Everybody wanted workboats. It was quite a few years we just didn't build any and then we went back.

RD: This picture, is that your father and mother?

EJ: No that's not my mother, that's his aunt. They had a birthday the same time. I looked everywhere. I couldn't find any pictures. I went to one of my sisters and she didn't have any.

RD: If we could copy this one while you're here, would that be all right? We're looking around for a picture of your father, because it's nice to have a picture of the builder.

EJ: The sister that died might have had some. I don't know what happened to them because a lot of them got destroyed. She had a whole bunch of them in an old chicken house. We had a hurricane and everything just went to pieces and just went everywhere.

RD: That's too bad. You haven't seen pictures of captain (unintelligible).

JL: I've seen some other ones.

EJ: We used to have a lot of them. My oldest daughter when she was young she got into them with a pair of scissors and that was the end of them and cut them all up (laughter).

RD: You helped build boats for a while, but then you moved away or left it.

EJ: Yeah in 1950 I left.

RD: You left in '50. Was that because the trade was slow?

EJ: Well, things got a little slack and I had a chance to go with RCA Service Company in television, so that's where I went and that's what I did until just about '81 or '82, or something like that.

RD: Did you ever get a hankering after that to build more boats.

EJ: Oh, I've built a couple.

RD: Have you?

EJ: I built the houseboat that sits up there on (unintelligible) and would run it up there...19 feet long and put a house on it. I started to bring that picture. I wish I had.

JL: What happened to that houseboat?

EJ: I tore the house off of it.

JL: Oh yeah?

EJ: I did. I went up to Wittman in it and I had a couple of my grandchildren and a storm came up. She started banging against the dock. Lightning was flying everywhere and I threw an anchor out trying to turn her around into the wind. I couldn't get her around. I told my wife, I said, "If I get this thing home, I'm taking the house off of her." And, that's just what I did. I made an open boat out of it. I sold it when I sold my home up there a couple of years ago.

JL: I don't know whether I got a picture of that around or not.

EJ: I got some at home.

RD: Looks like George Jackson written on there.

JL: That's made by the old method that the pattern makers used to use. See you could by those letters made out of lead and you could screw them right on the patterns.

EJ: We had a bunch of them made up out of brass. One of my sister's boys got one of them.

JL: They could take a little piece of board and put those letters on and cast the whole thing.

RD: Yeah. I don't know what your father's middle initial was.

EJ: "L"...George Lewis.

JL: All I ever heard him called down there was George L.

EJ: That's what they all called him...George L.

RD: Do you think you would able to find out his birth and death dates for us. I think that would be nice to know here in the museum.

EJ: Yeah, I could find out. It's funny, I started looking it up this morning and I started calling my sister and ask her, because I knew she would remember, but I can't remember. I just can't remember.

RD: Eventually when we put this boat on display – she will probably go on display on the land, but when we do, we would like to have a label with it and a little bit of detail about the person who built the boat along with it, like the birth and death dates, too.

EJ: Yeah, I'll find it and I gave this to my son, but he said you can have it if you're going to put her on display. You can have this if you want it.

RD: Sure, we can probably eventually put this on the boat.

EJ: I'm going to find out if this boat is still up in Newcomb.

RD: Renwall II (ph).

JL: And that one you said there was built for Lester Harrison.

EJ: I think that's the boat, I'm not sure. We built them a couple and Alec Spencer had one of them and I don't know whatever happened to the other; I forgot after Lester died. He's with the Harrison Canning Company. That's where Harrison is. I know of three boats we built for them and I think that sailboat is one of them. Similar to that we built them one and then we built them...

JL: Bud Groff (ph) has got a little sailboat that your dad built up there in his backyard right now. You know, he lives in the Walter Jackson house – Walter Jones' house.

RD: I suppose probably if you started digging around, we might come up with quite a few boats that are still around that your father built.

EJ: Oh yeah plenty of them. You got Kent Island, there's a lot of them.

RD: Is that Kent Island?

EJ: Yeah.

RD: Why there?

EJ: Because we built a lot of boats for those people up there – workboats.

JL: Nobody was building them over there.

RD: Is that right?

EJ: Yeah, we built a lot of them up there...Tilghman's Island we had a lot.

RD: I've seen a number of tuck sterns in that slip next to the bridge up there. I was just wondering.

EJ: I expect there's a lot of them still living...the old built boats, I don't know.

JL: Sam built quite a few of the tuck sterns after he took over the shop there. He built one for a fellow by the name of Lee over there.

RD: Do you have the file on that Feuchter boat over there? The Feuchter boat...it's a name. We'll go down and have a look at her in a minute.

JL: I don't think you'd find a picture of your father in any of that.

RD: No.

JL: Then there are a couple more pages with some more pictures of it.

EJ: I remember this round stern. We used to build some of them; of course, I was just 12 years old, you know, I wasn't interested in it.

JL: See how it shows up a little bit more. It doesn't show on this one very much.

EJ: She was probably built with loblolly pine.

JL: I think it is.

EJ: Because that's the way we built all of the workboats years back. Carrying some old boat boards -- 35, 36 feet long. You talk about legs buckling, whew. Two inch oak 12 to 14 inches wide.

RD: Have you come across the dimension of the boat in here?

JL: I don't know whether it's told about that or not.

RD: Yeah, there's a paragraph in here...let's see if I can find it.

JL: It should be right around that same location.

RD: Here it is. That paragraph there, it talks about when he actually acquired the boat.

EJ: My sister said that this man gave me a model, a carved model of that boat, or a boat that he had carved out.

JL: After the boat was built you mean.

EJ: Probably. Yeah, several small boats and my sister was telling me about that, that she remembered me having one of those little boats.

RD: Is that right?

EJ: I couldn't remember it.

RD: It may be the same boat then.

EJ: It might have been. She was talking about it and I said, "Well, I don't know," 'cause I used to do it myself." I would get a little piece of wood and go down there and carve a boat out of it...take a chisel and chisel her out and I said, "Well, I don't know." I may have done it myself, but, he might have given me one of them, I don't know.

RD: It wouldn't still be around, would it?

EJ: No indeed.

RD: So, she was built and launched in '29, and probably she was built where the old shop used to be.

EJ: Yeah, the old shop.

JL: If Norman Haddaway was alive, he could tell you more about that boat.

EJ: Yeah, he probably would remember some of that. Of course, in them days, they were young, too. They were running around so they don't remember too much about it.

RD: This is a rough sail plan of it that was done a number of years ago.

EJ: When I keep thinking back, it still seems like I can remember some of it, but when I look at that picture, I don't. But, I can remember him building one because when I used to go through here and come back through that hatch when I was young. You know, it might not be the same boat.

RD: Have you ever seen or heard of any other sloops that he built similar to this apart from this one?

JL: I never saw one anything like it, very seriously.

EJ: I doubt it.

JL: It was one of a kind.

EJ: He never built many sailboats, very few.

RD: He tended to specialize in power boats.

EJ: I mean not that I can remember that he built many sailboats. I bet you my mother probably made the sails. That's what they used to do. I can remember him laying the material out in the yard and cutting it out and she'd put the bolt ropes on, sew the eyelets in. She probably did that. There's a lot of water in the dam since then. I can remember when you used to put what they call head blocks into them. They didn't board the bow up. They had a big log about this wide and it came up to a sharp point. It was about 6, 8 feet long and about that thick and you'd set that in there and then you'd take the old adze and you'd adze that thing out till she shaped right there and made her shape out this part...head blocks..

JL: That changed it from the V up to dying in to the rabbet in the stem.

EJ: And of course, it showed the inside where there were just square blocks inside, but they were called head blocks is what they called them. It was late years before they ever started to plank that bow.

JL: Staving it up.

RD: Why were they changed?

EJ: Well, it was a lot easier and a lot lighter, too. That old head block was heavy.

JL: If she got to rotting, then you had a mess to repair.

EJ: I can remember me and my dad would have a race. He'd get on one side and I'd get on the other side. I'd put these plank bows in. Sometimes he'd beat me, but it wasn't many times.

JL: That's staving it up.

EJ: It wasn't many times he'd beat me.

JL: You never had a crosshead block in there, did you?

EJ: Not a crosshead.

JL: You'd always put it with a grain running fore and aft. Well, I can show you a boat down here that's got crossing blocks in her.

EJ: I bet that was something to work in.

JL: And across that grain...they're about that square, four of them at each end of the boat. You could see the annual rings in the end grain you know.

RD: You haven't been through the museum, have you before?

EJ: I lived here all my life and never been down there.

RD: Joe and I will have a quick tour in a minute.

EJ: I don't know if you're interested in this or not, somewhere I have a picture of an ice boat.

JL: They got a canoe sail on it.

EJ: There it is.

RD: Oh!

EJ: And I've got a set of runners I'll give you if you're interested.

RD: We have an ice boat already in the collection.

EJ: I didn't know if you'd be interested in runners or not.

RD: Was this boat made by your father?

EJ: No, I built that.

RD: Oh, you did that?

EJ: Yeah that's mine...

JL: See that tabernacle through the mast?

RD: Canoe sail, that's pretty good.

EJ: I've got one at home now...sails. The last ice boat I built. I don't know whether that was...no that probably wasn't the last one.

RD: Let me just get my camera out and I'll copy this one. I don't have many pictures of the boats your father built. We have some of the skiff, but nothing any larger than that. This is the first pictures of large boats I've seen. It's quite nice.

EJ: (unintelligible). Like I said, I had more fun on that thing.

JL: That's the way it is. When you grow older you wished you had...

EJ: I wish I had paid more attention and maybe stayed there, but you know how it is, like I wanted to get out and do something else.

JL: That's not a dead man laying there covered up, that's a half model of a schooner (laughter) (other unidentifiable voices in background).

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.