

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Ben Gowe

Oral History #69

Interviewer: Richard Dodds

Others Present: Joe Liener, Ed Faye

Date: September, 1989

Location: Willey Street, Tilghman

Topic: Mr. Gowe is a retired waterman who has pound-netted and harvested oysters and crabs. He owned a deadrise powerboat called *Gypsey Girl* (sp?). Topics discussed included his career as a waterman on Tilghman Island.

Comments:

Documentation:

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BEGIN SIDE 1

Ben Gowe: Yep, I've been living here all my life.

Richard Dodds: Yeah?

BG: But, I'll say about half the people on the Island I don't even know now.

RD: I know, it's changing.

BG: Boy, it is changing. Everyday, it's changing,

Joe Liener: Oh, yeah.

BG: Yes sir. I lived down in Fairbanks. You know where that's at, the lower part, a little village down there – I lived down there for 15 years. I was living down there when I got married. I got married when I was 19; she was 17.

RD: Well, Ed told me to come and talk to you because...

BG: Who did?

RD: Ed Faye.

BG: Oh, yeah.

RD: Because he said, well maybe you got something the Museum would be interested in listening to.

BG: I don't know about that. I can't remember stuff...

JL: Not everybody went up the Bay like Ben did for fishing. Is that right?

BG: I was up there 15 years.

RD: Well, let me toss you this, Ben. When you said you were born here on the Island – you went to school here?

BG: I went a little while. I haven't got much education.

RD: How many years did you go to school?

BG: Six.

RD: Six years?

BG: But, then I was playing hooky and fighting and everything else, scrapping with the other boys (laughter). I didn't want to learn and I didn't try to, ha ha.

RD: What happened when you left school?

BG: I went to work on the water then.

RD: Work on the water?

BG: Uh huh.

RD: How old were you then?

BG: About 15, 16.

RD: Is that right?

BG: Uh huh. As soon as I quit school, yeah.

RD: What did you start off as mainly when you left school?

BG: Went crabbing.

RD: Went crabbing?

BG: My mother died when I was 12 years old and then my sister lived down in Fairbanks so I lived with her and her husband and myself used to crab together and, of course, I'd give them all the money what I made. Of course, money was hard to come by then.

RD: Twelve years old; so what year would that have been, I mean 15, sorry. You were 15 when you left school?

BG: About 15 or 16.

RD: What year would that have been then? See, you were born...

BG: 1917.

RD: 1917, so it would be 1933...right in the middle of the depression, too.

BG: Times were tight all right (laughter). We had winters a whole lot more than what we have nowadays.

RD: That's what I hear.

BG: Yes sir.

RD: You had some bad winters back in the 30s.

BG: I was eating ducks. I never ate so many ducks in my life – wild ducks (laughter).

Of course, everybody on Tilghman's Island, or just about everybody, had pigs and chickens and stuff that they don't have no more or you're not allowed to have 'em.

Everybody had pigs – two or three of 'em. That come in good, too, in a freeze-up.

RD: You had a bad storm here too that came through in '33.

BG: Oh yeah. They called it the August storm.

RD: The August storm? It did a lot of damage down here.

BG: Oh, it did...tore up boats. A lot of them used to have 'em out tied to a stake, you know. They never had no harbor like this and they come ashore and tore up. I was going to ask you a question now? Are they gonna open this rockfish bill up next year?

RD: Uh, they're kind of making noises about it, aren't they? Yeah, they might do.

BG: A friend of mine got a boat down here from Wilmington, down here to Henry Reeser's (ph), and he comes down just about every weekend and we got in there talking about it, and I said, "Well, they said when they passed that bill, when they opened it up, that it was going to be for the commercial too." He said, "Yeah, that's right." He said, "They should let the commercial fisherman have some of 'em." And I said, "Well, it's going to be hard to put a limit on them, 'cause when you lay that out, you don't know whether you're gonna catch anything, and then again, she's liable to float on top of the water, full of 'em and then half of them be dead." Now pound net and a haul seine and stuff like that, that's something different; but a gill net, it kills a lot of 'em and he said, "Well, I think the watermen ought to have anywhere from 75 to 100 pound a week." I said, "Yeah, that would be pretty work." Ha ha ha. That's how much he knew about it.

RD: Well, Ben, you started off crabbing, you said. Did you do any oystering?

BG: No, I oystered on a drudge boat then.

RD: Oh, did you?

BG: When I first got married. I'm gonna tell you a little story about that drudging. I got married in June and that winter – the following winter – I went on a drudge boat and I never did do it before. You know, I was a beginner. So the first week I made \$45. Of course, I got all three meals on the boat and my wife, she was getting the food by the week, you know, putting it down on slip on the book. So, on the weekends, we'd go over there to the store and pay off. Her bill was four bucks – \$4 and I made \$45. I said, "I don't know what we're going to do with all this money (laughter)." Yes, sir. I said, "Ain't nothing that's going to stop us from getting rich (laughter). We paid \$7 a month rent and now it's about anywhere from \$3-500.

RD: What boat were you on when you first went drudging? Do you remember the name?

BG: I was on several of them. Yeah, I remember 'em. Her name was *Claudia S* (ph), and I was on the *Ruth*...Ernie Jenkins' (ph) boat. I was on several of 'em.

RD: How did you like it?

BG: Oh, I loved it.

RD: You did?

BG: Yes, sir, I liked sailing. But, after I got a little older, and I got oystering with hand tongs, well then, that's a young man's job I can tell you that working on one of them. Your rear end's looking at the sun all day (laughter).

RD: How long did you stay on the boats?

BG: I'd say that I drudged for about 10 years at least.

RD: Did you?

BG: Yeah. I had done some drudging after I moved up to Tilghman.

RD: Where were they drudging mainly?

BG: In the river most of the time.

RD: In the river?

BG: Uh huh. When I went hand tonging, well then I tonged in deep water all the time...28 and 30 foot shafts.

JL: Oh my!

BG: I tried to get out there where the Indians left 'em (laughter). Yeah, I was one of the best tongers on the Island – not bragging – because I tonged in deep water.

JL: You didn't get off of them big logs (ph) with 32's did you?

BG: No, they were a little too much for me then. I went over there looking for a pair of rakes over there in Bellevue and I knew some of them cutter guys over there was hammering (ph) on rakes there on the Tred Avon and we went to this man's house, rapped on the door and his wife come out. I had my buddy – my cousin with me. I said, "We heard your husband had a pair of rakes he wanted to sell." She said, "Yeah, said he's got a pair underneath the house and the doggone rakes was as long as the house. They were underneath there and we started pulling them out – and I bet they had \$5 worth of copper metal on them. You couldn't even get your hand around them and they were 36ers.

JL: Holy smokes.

BG: I shoved 'em back up underneath there. Maneaters they were, yes sir.

RD: Where did you get your rakes from around here, Ben?

BG: We had people over there to Stevensville that used to make 'em and people here on the Island up Harris's Creek used to make 'em. One old guy up there was making rakes. They used all wooden pins then you know – not no brass things like they have nowadays, and this fellow would make you a pair of rakes while you were standing there waiting for 'em and he'd drill a hole down through them rakes. He said, "Now I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do." He said, "I'm gonna whittle this wooden pin off and if it don't go in there squeaking the first time, I'm not gonna charge you for the rakes." Boy, he'd whittle that pin off, shove it down in there and come out there squeaking just as neat as it could be. He said, "I'll give you the rakes free of charge if that pin don't fit."

RD: How much were they charging for the rakes.

BG: Oh, you could buy a pair of rakes then for about \$15 or \$20, now they're \$6 or \$7 a foot. I've caught high as 40 or 45 by myself.

RD: Is that right?

BG: Of course, when you open that ground up there at Cambridge the first part of the season, I licensed my wife and I'd take her with me until the weather got cold, then I made her stay home or asked her to stay home.

JL: You weren't like old Elliott up there in Wittman. He had his wife out there culling for him and he was loading the culling board up too fast.

BG: She couldn't keep 'em clear.

JL: She would push them off the end right overboard until he found it out and he stopped her right there and he says, "I'm running the boat right ashore and you get off and don't get on her no more." He dumped her off out there at Rabbit Point and she had to walk home. (Laughter).

BG: Well, I've taken her up her first trip and they had a few mussels on 'em up there you know. There wasn't too many, but a few stuck on and I looked at her and she was taking her fingers and wringing them mussels off. I said, "My land, don't do that. That will help fill up, my land!" She said, "I like everything neat and clean." (Laughter). I said, "Well, I'll bring you a scrub brush tomorrow." Yeah, she was wringing them mussels off. I didn't like that. I was like he was. But, I know who you mean...a little short guy. Did you know him?

JL: Yeah you knew Earl.

BG: Knew where he lived at.

JL: Yeah, Sam McClain (ph). I heard a racket down at the creek there one day, see. And Sam said, "What's going on down there." I said, "I don't know." After a while we found out he was telling her off and put her ashore.

RD: Did you have your own towing boat, Ben?

BG: Yeah, the first one I had never even had no cabin on it, you know. It was a small boat. I named it after her. Then I bought a boat from another guy here. He wanted to go to Baltimore. He wanted \$1,200 for her. She was 37 foot, but she wasn't real wide. So, I said, "Have you got anything against this boat?" He said, "Yeah, Ben. I said, "I got a few bills against it." So I paid the bills off and give him what was left and he just had enough to go to Baltimore. (Laughter). Yeah, he just got enough to go there.

RD: How long did you have her?

BG: I had her I guess maybe eight or 10 years and then I had a new one built. That was a boat, too, buddy. He was 72 years old when he built it – Captain Benny (ph) Fairbanks.

JL: Yeah.

BG: Did you know him? And he was 28 weeks building her. This guy up over this bridge can build one in two weeks. Not like that though.

JL: Oh, no I daresay. A little bit different.

BG: Not like that though. Didn't build her with plywood like this guy does it, but he puts fiberglass on 'em and they're lasting so far.

JL: You didn't have a drake tail did you?

BG: No a box stern.

RD: Is she still around, though, your last boat?

BG: She is still around, but when I go see her I feel like crying. I had this stroke and I had to sell her. I sold her to a boy for \$7,000 up there at St. Michaels. He was on dope. He was only about 18 years old. Never did work on the water. And I told him, I said, "You want to start out with a little boat then work yourself up." But, no. He wanted that boat of mine. I let him have her. I took her up there at St. Michaels and I sanded all the

paint off her deck. She had stripped washboards about two inches wide on her deck you know. We sanded all the paint off of her and let her go all summer without putting any paint back. Now you know she was in nice shape. The cotton and everything just fell right out of there. You could roll a marble right down between her seams. So, he sold her to another guy in Bellevue and he was supposed to be a carpenter. So, he hauled her up down here and knocked the stern out 'cause the stern was getting a little bit bad. So, he put a brand new stern in there. He done a good job. Then he went and tore the cabin off. Then he tore the deck off. Boy, she needed a new deck after that boy in St. Michaels got done with her and took some of the bends off and that's where he left her. Ain't nothing sticking up but the ribs; brand new bottom. I paid \$5,000 for the bottom – put it on a white cedar bottom – 43 foot long and 12 foot wide. A big boat and he ought to be shot. He was good on tidying up, but he wasn't much on fixing. I don't think he had the money enough to quit working and do it. He called me up two or three times. He said, "You think anybody in your family would like to keep that boat in the family?" I said, "Yeah, but not the way you got her, all tore up." Now, I guess, they'll burn her up down there now.

RD: That's too bad.

BG: Makes me cry almost when I go down and look at her.

JL: It's still down here at Henry's or the fellow that got Henry's.

BG: Yeah.

RD: Well, somewhere along the line, Ben, you went fishing.

BG: When I come up Tilghman, I went fishing in the wintertime starting in December and fished on until spring till the fish went up these rivers to spawn.

RD: Pound net fishing you were doing?

BG: No, I wouldn't pound net then, but later on I did.

RD: What kind of fishing did you start off with?

BG: Gill netting in the winter. I caught more fish in the wintertime in one day than anybody on Tilghman's Island. Caught eight tons in a gill net. It took two days getting them out.

JL: By law (ph).

BG: Yes sir, that's a lot of fish. We set six boxes of (ph) net. At six o'clock in the morning; we took 'em up at nine and one or two of 'em floated right on top of the water. It looked like a state road out there. All of them about 4 or 4 ½ pounds; every one of them.

RD: Where were you setting your nets, Ben?

BG: Down below Sharps Island; a place called Cross (ph) Channel. It's a channel that makes up in the Choptank where freight boats and stuff go through.

RD: Were you working with somebody else?

BG: My brother and I.

RD: Did you own the nets together?

BG: Yeah. I'll tell you the truth, I didn't own none of the nets. I had plenty of nets but they were being geared (ph) and my brother's partner was taken sick and he wanted me to go with him. So I happened to be with him when I caught 'em. But, I never was on a boat in my life that they didn't want me to go captain right away. "Alright, Ben, you go ahead and take over." I had to (unintelligible) responsibility, you know it? I don't care whose boat it was, they'd say, "Alright, Ben, here's the steering wheel."

RD: Pretty good.

BG: I had nine men for 15 years haul seining. You'd ask 'em something, "Oh, you're the captain, go ahead do what you want to do."

RD: Nine men for 15 years?

BG: Yeah. You had to make a living or you think you do anyhow. You know, you have to make your decision when to set the net and when to go out and when to come in...in thunderstorms and stuff like that.

RD: Where were you haul seining, Ben?

BG: In the Bay. Well, there was a certain time of the year we'd go in the river.

JL: Ben, he don't know too much about haul seining. You tell him about that.

BG: Well, they were 18 foot deep, the net was, and about 250 or 300 thousand long. That's a very good stretch of net and that's the reason it takes so many to handle it. Of course we had a little (unintelligible) motor with a reduction gear on it – 90 to 1 reduction. That thing would pull up.

RD: Wind her in.

BG: Yeah, wind her in; one end of her. We were allowed to use one boat, but that was all. We set her out in a half moon shape about I'd say, that red building over there, about that far away from shore, and set around a half moon shape. Of course, if the tide was running down the Bay you had to keep this end a little bit ahead because the fish would trail the tide side of a net. You know what I mean...keep this end ahead and this one would be dragging back there hanging back. Then when we got her in the water about up to our waist, we'd bring them two ends together like that, then put the winder boat clean up on the shore and we'd all get overboard and one guy would stay in this winder boat and pull around the end (ph) and we'd be two men inside the net with our feet on the bottom line to keep it down, you know.

JL: And lift the cork line up sometimes to keep from going over (unintelligible).

BG: Yeah.

RD: How long would it take to haul in a net.

BG: It wouldn't take too long. Of course, we kind of keep it sideways like which way the tide was running. It wouldn't take long to haul it in. Of course, we had some hauls that was long and some hauls we had cleaned up and all. See, you couldn't haul any nets anywhere on account of stumps and crab pots. Of course, when we first started, there wasn't too many crab pots, but there is now. My gosh, you can't hardly sail for 'em.

RD: Where were you mainly setting the nets?

BG: Up around Kent Island most of the time. I had caught 35 tons; that was the most I ever caught in one haul. Thirty five ton – after we got overboard, of course we'd never handled a bunch of fish like that, and we didn't know just what to do, you know. It was all new to us, that many. I always caught two or three tons something like that. But, another rig come by and I said, "Hey fellows, if you're not going to set your net," 'cause there was five rigs on Tilghman, five of 'em. So the two of 'em I said, "Jump overboard and come over here and help us." So two of 'em got on board and helped us. And the cork (ph) was going down, they were pushing so hard on it. A fellow from Rock Hall said, "Anytime the cork (ph) line goes underneath say two foot, the bottom line comes off of the bottom that far when they're shoving straight out like that. I said, "I don't know about that, because I never did go down there to find out." But anyhow, we had her about half in and then two guys helped us. So what net we had pulled in, we made

another circle all around them fish just like that... You know what I mean. We call it the wing. We put a wing around 'em in case all them fish going over that cork line going through the bottom line – it would save 'em. You know what I mean. So we got 'em bailed out with our drift boats and everything else and come on home with 'em and I said, "I don't know how to pay you guys for helping me." I said, "You can have what's in that wing for helping us." "There was only two of 'em. The rest of 'em stayed on their boat. So, they were undecided whether to go set their net or take that wing. So, I got up on top of the cabin of mine and looked out into 'em, and boy she was just red as a fire out there. I said, "You better take that wing." I give 'em \$2,500 for the fish and they loaded one of their boats for helping me. That was a right good gift, huh?

RD: A very good catch. You said there were five haul seine rigs on Tilghman?

BG: Uh huh. And we were the last one who went down to the bank. We had 62 ton that week. We were the last ones to go down there to the bank to get our money and you know they never had enough to pay us.

RD: Is that right?

BG: We broke the bank (laughter). They give us a little slip of paper to go up to St. Michaels and get the rest of it (laughter).

RD: That's pretty good.

BG: And the cashier of our rig – he never had no car, he walked down to the bank and the cashier said, "Tyler," he said, "You take my car and go to St. Michaels and get your money." So somebody said you go up the road in the banker's car, you know. He said, "My god, you got every cent he got and he got his car, too" (laughter). Yeah, he got his car, too. But, talking about pound net fishing, I was up there for 15 years and some of the guy's wives would go up and cook. There was four of us or five in a rig, you know, fishing. I had four pound nets up there in Northeast River, right above Turkey Point a little ways. Maybe you know where it's at – call it Giller's Hole (ph) and Beaver Dam where I fished at, and yeah, I went up there, and she said, "I caught a million and a half herring the last year I was there and I don't know how many tons of roe shad and never made no money. And she said, "Well, if you go Ben next year, I'm gonna stay home." She'd just get up all hours of night and cook for the crew you know. Then we had two kids going to school in Northeast and she had a job.

RD: Well, I was going to say, how long did you spend up there?

BG: Three months. Went up in March and come back in June. Had to move stuff up there and then move it back. That was a problem.

RD: You had to move all the gear up too, all the nets...

BG: Yeah. We had to bring our nets home on account of a lot of 'em would burn up up there. The people up there didn't want to sit there you know. Years ago before I started, they'd wait about three or four weeks, two or three weeks before they got ready to go and then they'd burn 'em up. Poles, pound nets, it would take me 700 poles to set 'em – 35 foot long – 700 of 'em. Of course, in shoal water, they weren't that long, they were short poles then.

JL: You fished out of Hollica Snooze too, didn't you?

BG: No, we haul seined over there, but not pound net.

JL: Did Clarkie (ph) let them fish for you?

BG: No. He fished though – haul seine. Yeah, he was captain.

RD: When did you haul seine then, roughly what years were you doing that?

BG: The last year there was any croakers – any hardheads – was in '61.

RD: Sixty-one?

BG: Any amount, now you might have caught a few hook lines or something.

RD: Who were the others? You said there were five rigs...who owned the other rigs?

BG: Margaretta (ph) Harrison down here. She owned a net and got somebody – (unintelligible) Haddaway. They called him knuckle buster (laughter). They were always fighting and scrapping. And like Clark Lednum. There was a crew of 'em. All of 'em owned a share into it. You know what I mean. Howard Branham...that was four, Lenny Murphy...he had a rig. Yeah, we was the last one down to the bank and never had no money (laughter). Oh they have to keep a certain amount down there. They can't get rid of all of it, you know what I mean. That tickled me and Tyler said, "We broke the bank." How about that fellow up there at Kent Point? It was Clark Lednum who was in the gang and Russell Phillips and a bunch of 'em...Garland...and all them one ones that got drowned. They had 75 ton in one haul. That was a bunch. They were two days in getting 'em out. They just bring 'em out a little bit at a time, you know, as they could handle 'em, keep 'em alive. You know what I mean, keep 'em fresh.

RD: You said the law restricted you to only having one boat in haul seining.

BG: I only pulled the net with one boat. Now after you got the ends together, one boat could take both ends and pull 'em, but only when you first set it.

RD: When you got the fish out of the net, I guess you dipped them...

BG: Yeah, they didn't gill in net (ph). You scooped them out with a skelp (ph) net.

RD: Load them right into the boat.

BG: Haul about 100 pounds or 150 pounds to a dip.

JL: (Unintelligible) Faye (ph) had a boat just like that one you got up there in the Museum.

RD: Yeah, a big flat bottom boat.

BG: We used three boats, we did, in case we hit the fish so we'd have something to run 'em in – a boat about like mine – haul about 15 tons.

RD: Where did you bring them to?

BG: Brought 'em right here at Randolph Harrison's in (unintelligible) close to Cambridge I used to buy 'em. I can't think of his name.

JL: Wherever they could put them out, the best and easiest access place.

BG: We'd put 'em right alongside the dock – without weighing 'em up.

JL: Did you ever run any in Wharton Creek, up there at Buck Landing.

BG: Yeah, I've been in Wharton Creek and sold fish in there. That was gill nets when I was fishing gill nets. But, all the fish I caught with pound nets, I'd take them to Northeast, Boyd's Fish Market, Arnett's Fish Market, up there around the Harvey's (ph). You heard of them.

RD: How long did you pound net, Ben? How many years did you pound net?

BG: Fifteen.

RD: Fifteen years?

BG: My brother-in-law had the rig and I don't know how long he had it and the last year he fished, he fished for three months and he had \$16,000 cleared in three months. But you know some of his men that he had hardly given them a dollar a day (laughter) and food was cheaper then what it was when I was up there and you had to really feed them guys. I mean, to work like that, you had to eat.

JL: That's how you held them.

BG: Doggone right. Sometimes four meals a day.

JL: Just the same as the oyster boats – the ones that fed the best, they didn't have trouble getting a crew.

BG: Yeah, darn right. Yeah, they had four meals a day a lot of times. My cousin and I, they were on three weeks straight going and if you don't get them fish out of them nets, they drown, you know what I mean, and then you can't raise them. I've heard of other people who had to take a knife on the end of a long stick and go underneath the bottom of her and cut her and let it fall right down on the bottom all drowned. So my cousin and I – we went three days and nights without taking our boots off. What sleeping we done we done right in the chair, you know stretched out, get up and eat and go again. Had to keep (unintelligible) there. Tilghman Packing Company down here and had a tractor trailers hauling them down, but the last year I fished, two-thirds of 'em went for fertilizer; 35 cents a bushel.

JL: Yeah, that's one of those starter (ph) dual factories down there.

BG: Now, you got to catch a lot of fish to make any money – 35 cents a bushel – about 225 to a bushel of herring. Shad was cheap too. Yeah, she said you can go back up there, but I'm not going. She had enough of it.

RD: Did you ever catch any odd things in your nets?

BG: Odd things? Yeah, when I did haul seining, I had as many as three or four sharks at one time.

RD: Is that right?

BG: Yes sir. Brought some of them ashore here for people to look at; about 200 pounds, 250, something like that.

RD: They damaged the nets, though, don't they?

BG: Yeah, we have had some of them go through it, but if you got a shark in there with some fish, say two or three ton of hardheads, and you got a shark in there, by the time you get back to the back end of her before you brung them up, she's pretty well had it, you know beaten up against the fish line and all. But, them doubleheads, I've seen them come right on top of the water. That happened too with them sharks, and hardheads floating on top of the water. We had gone I don't know how long without catching any fish and the fellow in the rowboat was around the back of her, come ashore and he said, "Ben, got a shark in this net and about three or four ton of hardheads," and we'd gone about two or three weeks without making (unintelligible). Doggone, if we don't capture him. Yes sir. So, we started buttoning 'em up, you know, got her about half in. Every now and then, you could see a wake coming with that shark...you could see 'em coming right straight for us and we'd jump out on the outside of the net, you know, and hold the net together so we'd rinse out of her, had to put on a bottom line. That doggone sucker come up and struck me right there on that shin bone and I thought sure as Dickens, I felt blood running down in my boot. So I raised her up out of the water with about up to my waist. Wasn't a scratch on that boot, neither one. I said, "If he does that one more time, you can have every fish in this net. You have my part if he does that one more time." So we hollered to the man's wife – she went out with us just for the trip, you know. I said, "throw that engine house top overboard." So she'd give it a sling (ph). One of the guys went over there and picked it up and we'd see him coming, that shark, and we'd throw it right down in front of our legs, you know, and he'd go ram bam right up against it, you

know, and then he'd turn around and go the other way. Well, when we got to the back of her, he pretty well had it and the kind of sharks that we were catching...their mouth was underneath of them...they wouldn't ...you know, in other words, he had to go like that to bite you or swim over top of something and turn over on his side. He had two rows of teeth. We got him up real close in within three or four ton of hardheads and we'd put a little jigger anchor – a real small one –and stuck it underneath of it and give it a pull right up in his mouth, you know, and yank him aboard.

JL: Did you catch very many small sturgeon in your...

BG: No, never did, but I caught 'em in gill nets in the wintertime about 10 or 15 pounds, them little ones.

JL: Mamoose...they called them mamoose.

BG: I don't know. Oh, yeah. Boy, them people from Rock Hall – they went crazy over them. But, I tried 'em; I didn't care much for 'em. They look like pork chops when you cut 'em up. Cut 'em between the joints, you know.

JL: They were all illegal, them little buggers.

BG: Oh yeah? I think they had to weigh a certain amount, didn't you, before you could save 'em –35 pound or something or other like that.

JL: They had to be 6 foot.

BG: Six foot? Hmm. A friend of mine set pound nets right above me; he caught one 500 pounds; female.

JL: Loaded with caviar.

BG: Damn right. You know what, he had a lard can full of roe and he'd put the wax paper in the bottom, then his roe, then another piece of wax paper and some crushed ice. Boy, he had them things fixed up like I don't know what and they sent him a letter or called him on the telephone and said they weren't taken care of right. Never got a penny. Somebody made some money on that. I don't know how he could have done any better from what he done with it. I was watching him when he was doing it. Keep burning him up. He happened to have an axe aboard the boat and hit him in the head with the axe and killed him. But, even the meat is worth a lot of money...sturgeon meat.

JL: (unintelligible), never bothered about the meat. All they were after was the roe. Up there at Bayside, that was a big spot.

RD: Ben, how did you drive your poles? Did you use a scow?

BG: We stuck 'em random down. Three or four of us get on it and shove them down in the mud.

JL: Jumped them down.

BG: Until we hit close to the shore where the bottom was sandy and then we'd pump 'em with air (unintelligible) motor you know.

JL: Generated (ph) them in with a pump.

BG: Had a piece of rod that goes down alongside of your pole with just a couple of nails to hold it on there.

RD: Oh, okay.

BG: And if you had one with too much force, you'd blow the hole so big that it wouldn't settle up around the pole. They'd pop up. Had to be about the right size; about an inch pump.

JL: Especially if those poles had been laying out all season, they would just dry out.

RD: You had to bring – at the end of the year – you had to bring all that gear back here to Tilghman.

BG: Oh, not the poles. I'd pull them right on the shore right up there in Northeast, but, all of our nets we'd get them hauled home.

RD: Where did you store them?

BG: I've got a garage out there I'd put them in. I had four – all of them the same size. Grab any piece of net and put it anywhere. You know what I mean. All the same depth. That was good.

RD: Did you have to tar them in the spring.

BG: Tar 'em all. I like that job, too.

RD: You do? (Laughter).

BG: No, I didn't. Tarring didn't bother me too much. Some people it would take the skin right off, but it didn't bother me much. I guess I got used to it or something.

RD: You'd tar them right here in the garage?

BG: No. We done that up on the shore up there where we fished at.

RD: Oh, okay.

BG: I paid \$400. I had two shores running up there. I paid \$400 for each one. Now you don't have to do it. That was a law that the fishermen made – called it some kind of rights. They owned 800 yards from shore, a landowner did. You know that's a lot of water zoned – 800 yards. People done that to keep other fishermen from coming up there, you know. But, now, you don't have to (unintelligible) about anything. If you get licensed at a certain place, you can go ahead and set your net.

RD: Some local fishermen didn't like other people coming in.

JL: No, he was walking on their territory (laughter).

BG: Do you know how to measure? I know you don't though. I'm going to ask you anyhow. Do you know how to measure the distance on the water without some of these new fangled (unintelligible) that they got.

JL: No.

BG: You get a hundred fathom coil of rope. Most coils of rope is 100 fathom. You take yourself a rowboat and tie the end of that coil to the rowboat and then run the whole coil out and when it comes tight when you come to the end of it, it will start that rowboat off shore because it's made fast in the bow of her. As soon as that rowboat starts off from the shore, you throw a block of wood overboard and every time that rowboat goes by that block of wood, he'll hold his hand up like that and you throw another block over and go right out and measure. Pretty (unintelligible). See we were only allowed 800 yards off from shore. That's all they'd allow us and if we went over that after you stuck them poles in, you have to take her up or they'd arrest you.

RD: Yeah. You'd have to put lights on the end, too, don't you.

BG: Lights on the end, a cedar bush on the end. You had a tag on with your license number.

RD: Did you have any problem with boats running into your nets?

BG: I had one. And you know what I done to that one? I lost over a million dollars by not knowing what to do. It was a tugboat coming out of Northeast River. It had about five barges in tow with airplanes on it, but no wings, just the airplanes. I got up the next morning to go out there and fish that net and I seen this great big old barge up on the shore. So I went there and I got on top of my cabin and I just could reach the bow line.

It was about that big around. Just could reach it with a boat hook, so I hooked her and I pulled her on high water and pulled her right off. But that doggone scow was so big, it pulled my boat right around sideways like that. I had to run her wide open to every (unintelligible), so I got towing her out from shore and I seen a boat coming. The fellow said, "Doggone, if you ain't got something there now." He said, "A fellow lost her going out of Elk River last night. He said, "He's on his way. After he got good light, he found out that he lost her, you know." And here comes the tugboat up the river. And I went back to him and got the tug company's number – I mean the name and where they were from and all. So I got a lawyer. Tore the net up. Went through one of my pound nets and tore her up. But, it was almost taking up time anyhow, the last part of the season. So I got a lawyer, Lee Gillis (ph), to write to the company you know to try to get some money. He said, "You stay there 10 days and we'll send a man there to check your net to see how bad it's tore up. But, he didn't say anything about me getting that boat off, you know. So, that was the last we heard. I had the men hired and I wanted to get them poles up and get home, you know. I didn't want to stay there 12 days and wait for him and then he might not show up. So I come on home. So, a fellow had a great big ship that run ashore over there at Poplar Island and I had taken him out there. She was on the shore and he had tugboats out there working on her. So, I run him out there in that boat of mine and I was telling him about it, you know, with that barge going through my net with them four planes on it. He said, "And you give her up that tugboat." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Everything on that boat belonged to you, everything." He said, "You give it away." When he said that, I felt like crying. That's not knowing the water laws, you know. That Lee Gillis (ph) he didn't know nothing about it. I'd give her up then when I called the lawyer, so I had been too late anyhow. But, I had it over harbor, I should have put her right in there.

JL: And tie her fast.

BG: Yeah, put a lot of lines out to it. But that guy that had that boat out there at Poplar Island that run ashore, he gave two men on the island \$100 a day to stay on it. He said he was afraid somebody would come out there and claim her. I could have done that, put a man aboard on her with a shotgun. He said if it had been a dog or anything like that aboard there you couldn't do it. But if there was nothing on that boat, you could claim everything on it. Yeah, when I got on top of my cabin, I could see down and see what was on it – jet planes. Lee Gillis said, "Ben, it looks like to me you ought to be able to get one of the motors out of one them anyhow." I got nothing. He said you lost a million dollars that man told me. Yeah, he broke my heart when he said that. Too late then. I caught high as 25 ton of roe shad up there one year. (Unintelligible) fish – haul roe shad. Couldn't hardly give the bucks and skiffs (ph) away.

JL: Did you hang your own nets, Ben?

BG: Uh huh. I had to get it weight (ph) so on rainy days I would do it in the house. I had big home up there, big rooms so I could stretch it out on rainy days and then we'd tar it. Of course, that new tar had to be tarred twice.

RD: How many rigs were operating up there?

BG: I guess there were about five or six. Harvey had the biggest rig up there. He had nets all over the Northeast River, the Elk River, and everywhere else. But, I had one of the best. Best shores it was up there. Yes sir, I wouldn't trade it for either one of 'em. They claimed that he was the one that was doing all that burning stuff up there – Harvey.

But, I worked with him when I was 19. I went up there with a guy from here. He was supposed to be captain. I went up there and fished and they couldn't treat me no better. I wouldn't want nobody to treat me any better than what they did. They must have had a mean streak in 'em, but they treated me fine. But, I got love sick and home sick up there. Now, you know, when you got two of 'em like that, you're in bad shape (laughter), so I was coming home on weekends with this guy down here at Tilghman. Had an old Essex (ph). I'd been getting about \$4 or \$5 dollars to come home to help pay for the gas, that's all. Didn't smoke. I never got no money, maybe to buy some candy bars, or something like that. My land, we were 12 to 15 miles from town, but the man that owned the nets was up in town, you know. So, I went up there one weekend. We was getting ready to come home and I said, "Mr. Harvey," oh, he asked me first, he said, "How much money do you want this week, Ben?" I said, "Mr. Harvey, I'm thinking about getting married, and I want to go home and buy some stuff for the house and I'll take all that's coming to me." He looked me in the eyes and said, "No sir, Ben, I know what you're going to do." He said, "You're going to quit." He said, "Now how much do you want." I said, "Give me \$5." (Laughter) I was going to quit 'cause I was homesick and the guy that I went up with from Tilghman, he said, "I don't blame you, Ben." He said, "I know how you feel." But, I think somebody must have put him wise...one of the crew, you know that I was working with must have told him I was going to quit. He said, "No you don't do that." I stayed there whether I wanted to or not and when I got married, I had \$75 I had saved up there that year - \$30 a month. I had to eat.

RD: That's a lot of hard work.

BG: We had about eight nets and he wanted to set four more and the guy down here that was supposed to be captain, he said, "No sir." He said, "I'll quit first," and I got all I could handle. He had them from Betterton to clean up to the Northeast River, one pound net right after another. But, my brother-in-law said when he first went up there that from Turkey Point to Northeast, he could count 100 nets one right after another and three and four in a row right straight forward.

JL: And they had them big floating batteries out there where they stayed on, you know like a big raft of logs it was.

BG: Well, years ago, they used to have their own cutters up there; cut all their fish, but they salted them then, they didn't pickle none. They salted all of 'em. Yeah, they had their cutting houses right on shore.

RD: What were they doing with the fish that you caught?

BG: They would bring them down here. They had cutters. I don't know just where they were from. When I first started they cut most of them down here; \$6 or \$7 a thousand. He'd give you a ticket up there when you got done putting them out, you know, how many thousand you had. Of course, they had them bushel tubs and they'd count maybe three of them in a boatload and average them up like if they're about 210 and 220, then they'd average them up. They'd take one tub out of the top of the pile - one in the middle and one down....

END OF SIDE 1

BG: ...catching the good fish up the Bay, you know, shad and rock...the good fish. Pay my expenses for what I had down here would be clear. So I went down there to get my money and give him these tickets. He said, Ben, "These five or six tickets you got was marked \$7 a thousand. He said, "They didn't have as much roe into them – in them herring as we figured they were gonna have, so we can only pay you \$5." That's crooked, ain't it. I should have taken him to court, but I didn't. He said, "What are you growling about?" He said, "You had a good spring this year." I said, "It would have been the same thing if I had a bad one, too." If they had more roe than what they figured they had, I bet I wouldn't have gotten no more.

RD: It doesn't work both ways.

JL: Did you ever run across a guy by the name of Bob Vanderver (ph)?

BG: No. Where was he from?

JL: From up there at Havre de Grace.

BG: Uh uh (negative).

JL: He had one of them old great tail boats that Harvey Hurley built down there at Toddville.

BG: What did he do? Did he fish?

JL: Yeah. And he also had a tugboat that they used to haul barge loads of stone from Port Deposit down there.

BG: No, I didn't know him.

RD: He must have worked with Wesley Jenkins, Ben?

BG: I knew him from around, yeah. No, I never did work with him.

RD: 'Cause, he did a fair amount of fishing, didn't he?.

BG: Oh yeah, he done it with his father. Then after his father died, he took over.

JL: Harry Covington (ph)?

BG: Hm hmm. Called him speedball. No, the way I see it, they had pound nets down there and they had a load of hardheads and he didn't even know the legal size and he thought all of them were too small, and he turned 'em loose and he found out the size of 'em and threwed them all away (laughter). Yeah, a whole net full. Turned 'em loose. Well, we haul seined over there at Poplar Island and there was a few rock around, so Ed Tyler, my cousin, said, "Ben, I'll tell what we'll do. We'll take this scow." A man here had a great big scow. He said, "We'll go up there to Sherwood where they're shucking clams and we'll load that scow and go down there and bait 'em where we're hauling out." So we took three scow loads down there – nothing but shells, but they had the snouts and all on 'em, you know, and we waited a couple of days and we made a hauling. Man, I'd never seen so many fish in my life. Every one of 'em too little (laughter). We made a dip into 'em with a skelt (ph) net and had about 150 pound in the skelt (ph) net. We got one fish out of it big enough. We turned the whole thing loose...just opened her up and let 'em go.

RD: It sounded like a good idea, though.

BG: Doggone right. Oh, it was if they were big enough.

JL: ...They'd chum for them (laughter)..

BG: No. See I did. Then the clambers said they could see them swimming right up the back their clamming rig, you know, when you're clamming. They said they were after

them shells and we thought we thought we'd do the same thing (laughter). I'll tell you another fish story. You want to hear it?

RD: Sure.

BG: It was in September, and most of 'em had quit and had gone oystering, but I wanted to keep on rock fishing you know. So, there was about four men and the rest of 'em I picked up – a bunch of kids around here to go with us. So, I was about a mile up the shore from this beacon out here and we had what they called a lay boat (ph). We'd spot 'em out, you know go look for 'em. And he was about a mile down the shore. The first thing you know, the signal went up. So, I had the net and I went as hard as I could go right wide open down the shore, you know. I said, "What did you see?" He said, "Ben, I went to sleep on the washboard on the deck and the fish was breaking so hard, it woke me up." They were about anywhere from 10 to 12 pounds every one of 'em. I said, "Ben," he was my next door neighbor and his name was Ben, too. I said, "Which way were them fish going when you seen them break?" You can look at a bunch of fish and tell which way they were moving, you know. He said, "They're moving down the shore." So, I went on down the shore, oh I guess about 1,000 yards maybe or more, and I put my boat right jammed to the bank and there wasn't a ripple on the water, not a ripple. And I looked out to the west of me and they were making whirls in the water about that big around. I told the guy, I said, "Jump overboard with that brail pole (ph). The water was only up to the waist. I went all around him and when the back of the net went overboard, I looked on the western side of me and they were whirling on the outside of the net. I said, "Oh, my god, I missed 'em." Got that brail pole almost ashore and all the carts and everything went down. Yes sir, went clean out of site and I said, "Thank god, they ain't rock, they're doubleheads, you know, stingray, that's what they are. So, I got the brail poles together, and they come up about two or three times with their fins out of the water and we started to pull that net and we couldn't get an inch. We couldn't get an inch on 'em. We had no winders with us. I said, "What the heck are we going to do now, all them fish in there." We said there were doubleheads. This guy that was with us said, "Ben, I'll show you that there not doubleheads." So, he got in a rowboat and went out there and took this skelt net and went down into 'em like that while they were shoving on the carts, you know, and he caught three of 'em and he brought 'em back and he said, "There's your doubleheads." He said, "Every one of 'em 10 to 12 pounds." I said, "What good will it does us if we can't pull 'em out." They were shoving so hard on her; all we could do is hold her. So, I said, "Go up and get another net off the shore," but, they were all dry. They'd have floated on top of the water, you know. So, we gave that up. But, I know now what we should have done – we should have staked her down and they'd kill themselves beating and banging in that net, you know; they'd have wore themselves out so we could haul them out (ph). So, we got inside and opened the brail poles up and got inside of her and waded around inside of her with oars and everything else and beat 'em out (laughter). Beat them out (unintelligible) and when we thought maybe we had enough in there that we could land, we closed her up. I had one old guy with me. He'd been hauling seining 'fore I was born – hard hearing as a bat he was. So, I went to him, put my mouth right up there close to his ear. I said, "Arthur, you've been hauling seining many a year." I said, "What do you do with a bunch of fish like this." He said, "You've got more in that net than that man caught all his life put together." He said, "You got more in there now than I've ever seen in my life." He said he didn't know

what to do with 'em. So, we had 8 tons – we landed 8 tons. I don't know how many was in there – 25 or 30 a ton I guess. We turned 'em all loose. Went down here to Tilghman Bank Company and put 'em out and the police captain was there watching us. We had one fish out of 8 ton that was 15 pound and a half, and doggone if he didn't have us arrested – one fish out of 8 ton and he happened to see it and put it on the scale and it was a half a pound over. Now you know that was a dirty trick. Yes sir, he could've turned his back on that one I by god I thought.

RD: What did you have to do...pay a fine?

BG: Yeah, I don't know, it wasn't too much. Yes sir, lord knows how many I turned loose.

JL: Ben, do you think that will ever come back?

BG: What, haul seining?

JL: I mean the amount of fish.

BG: Yeah, I think there's more now than what we ever had right now, yeah. And I tell you, a lot of people think commercial fishermen had a lot to do with breaking them up and all, but that's not so. Because when I was a kid and used to go with what they call purse seining – I wasn't big enough, you know to own a share or anything like that – and you'd go all summer long and never see a rock. All there was was trout, hardheads and spot and stuff like that. There wasn't any rock to catch, so this is not the first time they said there wasn't any. So they said there wasn't any and it's taken 70 something years to cut 'em down. It's taken that long if they said that's what it was. I remember the whole 15 years we haul seined; I think we caught one blue fish in the whole time. Everybody fighting for 'em. Everybody wanted it. Now you can't hardly give one away, especially, the big ones. Now they come and go. The day before they put the ban on these rock, there was a guy from Rock Hall setting some anchor nets down around the Choptank (ph), So somebody come in and told my wife and I that he had about 1,200 pounds in his boat. So I felt like I wanted a mess of fish, so I went up there and I said, "They're going to put a ban on tomorrow." He said, "Yeah, I got some 1,200 pound in the boat here. It's plenty of rock, plenty of 'em." So he give us two of 'em and he charged us nothing for 'em and the next day you couldn't fish.

RD: You mention about anchor nets Ben.

JL: You never heard the term before.

RD: No.

BG: You set pieces in the spring when they hit shoal water. Start up the river to spawn. Before they get up there, I used to set over here at the mouth of the Choptank. The fish were about from here to that house with a buoy and an anchor on each end of it, then we'd fish 'em every morning and then fish overnight. But, thrift (ph) netting, you'd only (unintelligible) in the winter; dead winter time, you'd only (unintelligible) that hour or maybe two hours, then take 'em up.

JL: You've got some of those anchors up there at the Museum. I got them up at the (unintelligible).

RD: Yeah, I didn't realize how they were used. They're just used one to a net.

BG: One on each end.

JL: On both ends you have to anchor it.

RD: And the net was what, a couple of hundred yards away.

BG: I'd say about from here to that house. We'd figured 50 corks, you know about 11 foot apart – 11 or 12 foot apart.

RD: It sounds like you tried every kind of fishing there is.

BG: Yeah, I fished in the Chesapeake and the Delaware Canal. You went to one of them buoys up there in the Canal and laid there until you seen the tide slack right up, you know, then you'd go down about three or four (pieces) real quick over short pieces go across that channel, you know. Then you'd go back to your buoy – the spar buoy – you know what I mean – channel buoy, and just as soon as you seen that tide just seeping a little bit going the other way, boy, you'd want to grab 'em just as quick as you could. Get 'em up before that tide got off that bottom. You'd go through there with a depth finder and that's the way the depth finder is going, just like that. It's that rough. And we never caught a whole lot; we caught 7 or 800 pounds...a thousand pounds. Of course, if you hit 'em, you never had a chance to take 'em out. You just had to pull the nets on the end...

JL: Net, fish and all.

BG: Yeah, sure, and pick 'em out when you got in 'cause if you didn't, the tide and stuff would...and them sandbags you got a ring on the bottom of 'em, you know. And the sandbag is made inside the ring. And up there in that canal it would hit so many stone I guess, it would pull the sandbag right off.

JL: A terrapin let the sand out of it.

BG: Yeah. My brother-in-law thought of something. He was always thinking of something to do. He got Coke bottles put on there and put water into 'em and made 'em sink and he used them for sandbags. The doggone tide got off on it and the bottles busted and the net come right on top of the water. He said, uh, can't do that (laughter). It busted every bottle he had.

RD: When did you stop fishing then, Ben? When was the last year you went fishing?

BG: In the Canal?

RD: No.

BG: When I first started?

RD: No, when you finished fishing. When was the last year you fished?

BG: Fished? Oh, I fished up until I had this stroke, eight years ago.

RD: Is that right?

BG: Mm, mmm. I was riding a truck when the doggone thing hit me. I went to turn the windshield wipers off with that hand and I couldn't quite reach the windshield wiper to turn it off. Then I come home and laid down on the sofa and I said, "Maybe I'll feel better if I take a little nap," you know. While I was asleep, I rolled right off on the floor. I couldn't talk, couldn't do nothing. So she called in. But when I come out of the hospital I was in a wheelchair. I couldn't sit up straight, I'd fall right sideways. So, I'm a lot better than what I was. But, I've been that way for eight years, going on nine, yeah.

RD: Were you still making any money from fishing up until the time you had the stroke then?

BG: I made a living. I guess I averaged about \$22 – \$21,000 a year.

RD: That's not bad. Pretty good.

BG: I've got five boys and one girl and the boys work with me. They helped me build a home. I don't think I'd ever had it if it hadn't been for them.

JL: Yeah, I know Larry.

BG: Oh, do you?

JL: Oh, yeah.

BG: I think everybody knows him, the way he travels around.

JL: Yeah, he's been up to our house several times.

BG: The appliance thing, working on washing machines and everything. Boy, he'd see something when he went in these homes, too. He'd have to kick stuff out of the way in order to get in there. He don't talk much about it, but he'd seen it all. I met a guy over here. He's a loner. I don't know where he's originally from...St. Michaels or Easton, I don't know. And he was putting down wells. And I don't know whether he was drinking too much, or what, but anyhow, he quit and bought himself a boat; a \$20,000 boat, and he's got a brand new car. And one day, I got him over there on the sofa here or this lounge, and talked to him. He said, "I got a \$20,000 boat and got a brand new car and got a nice little home there, but I'm broke. I haven't got a penny." Never worked on the water before in his life. He was about 30 years old. I felt sorry for him, you know. But, see that basket over there? It's filled up with bottles and cans, whiskey bottles or wine bottles. Comes home sometime and he push it right sideways in that driveway. Come home a week ago and left her running, got out and I don't know how he made it into the house, but he did. He left her running for about an hour and a half to two hours over there. I thought to myself, he might be in there. I better go over there and check. So, I hobbled over there and looked inside. He was in the house and left her running. When a man gets out of the car and goes in the house and leaves her running for that long, it says something...he's in bad shape. So, I opened the door and that heat, you know...take a motor running idle like that, it'll get hot., a lot of 'em will out of gear. So, I opened that door and boy, he come out and hit me in the face and I went around on the other side and cut the switch off. I never did tell him I done it. I never see him. I've seen him, but not to talk to.

RD: Are there many men on the Island that worked in the fisheries back when you were working, Ben?

BG: Oh yeah. Well, see, what hurt the oyster bed, there's one thing's hurt it, say there was 15 to 20 boats –15 boats anyhow fishing in the wintertime for rockfish – every one of them had to go oystering. Well, that just hurt the oyster business, cut them down. You know what I mean. But there wasn't nothing we could do about it after they put a ban on it. And a lot of people from Rock Hall was hurt, too. Boy, that was a fishing place, Rock Hall. Man, I don't know how many nets was up there. But, the only think I know to put a limit on the fishermen is just to give 'em so much twine (ph) and if they caught 'em with over that, well you take their license away. But just so much net. That Garland Phillips (ph) and them boys that got drowned (drowned), boy, if I had six boxes of net, that's what I generally fish, and that I thought was a fairly good rig. Well, he'd have to have 12 or 15, you know what I mean. He had overdone everything.

JL: Well, a lot of that was illegal net, too.

BG: When that diver went down there after that boat sunk and all of them got drowned (drowned), he'd put a cable around everything in that boat and Charley Smith and my brother-in-law was out there watching. He said, "When they hoisted that out of the water, I bet it was 10 tons." They had 30 boxes of net, besides the anchor and all the other stuff. That's over doing stuff.

JL: That was all monofilament net.

BG: Yeah. Now, they had two boats out there smaller than his, and they come ashore and everything was all right, but he had to stay there. He had more net to take up. He come out there along side of me sometimes, lay a couple of pieces of net, then go clean down Cove Point down to Solomon's Island to lay some more. Then if the nets got together, I was the one who had to untangle them and all that stuff. He didn't care. He had so much net. If they got a piece tangled up, he had another box to go in its place, you know. No, he overdone it.

RD: Where did you have your nets made, Ben?

BG: Most of 'em was geared up at Rock Hall. Now, pound nets I geared myself. Rock Hall geared most of 'em. I have a lady over here in this red building who used to gear nets, but she might have geared mine one year.

JL: Yeah, you used to hang a lot of nets down there.

BG: A fellow wanted to buy it and put a restaurant there, but the neighbors around here got a petition up and stopped it, so he didn't buy it, though. Well, we got enough restaurants here. We'd have cars all parked down here 'cause we didn't have no parking space over there. We'd be loaded up all the time. I signed it, my wife signed it.

JL: You used to set pound nets down here in the park.

BG: Yeah. Oh, they used to set a lot of pound nets on this bay shore here when I was a kid. My land, one right after another. They had pile driving in hard sand. It would take me a month up there at the Northeast River to set the nets – one month. You didn't have much time to make a living, you know make some money. I'd go up the 12th of March. I'd put the purse net on about the first part of April.

RD: How often during the day were the nets checked or emptied?

BG: Once a day. I had so many fish that the Tilghman Packing Company couldn't take care of 'em all, so this guy come down there at Northeast one day and said, "I can handle race (ph) one of them fish for a certain price," you know. He said he had tractor trailers. The way I figured, the man was worth racing with money (ph), you know, just about what he had around him there. So, after I got Tilghman Packing Company fixed up with what they wanted, I'd go back and fish again in the evening for this other guy trying to make some extra money. So, he'd give me a slip of paper; wouldn't give me no money, you know. This truck driver would give me a slip. So when he got what he wanted, as many as he wanted, I quit fishing for him. The herring had dropped off, too. I got a letter from him and said he went bankrupt. That was all blown to pieces. Went bankrupt. Paid 5 cents on the dollar I learned.

JL: Sometimes they'd have so many fish, they'd run out of ice for shipping them. Up there at Rock Hall, that happened a lot of times. They'd go to Chestertown to get ice, lord knows what. Couldn't make enough ice in the ice plant.

BG: Any job that you do on the water – if you make any money out of it, it's hard work. You can't just go cam (calm) days. I fished from December clean up until spring and miss two days all during the winter. You know, I went out some rough times. Then we had a rouse ground (ph) in our motor... she burned some valves (ph).

JL: Garland (ph) never come in only one day out of the year (laughter); Christmas day.

BG: Yeah, he was hard (ph) too. And that boat of mine, I never started anywhere into it in my life that I turned around and went home or went back. Wherever I started, that's where she went 'cause I know she was put together, you know what I mean – breaking ice. These plywood boats, I don't believe they'd break ice like that. Get off up from here

to that little building and throw it into her wide open and ram her right onto the ice. She has to be put together to take that. Then I'd slide that boat of mine right on top of it and then couldn't get back off the ice was so thick, it would hold her a weight. Then another boat would come up in back of me and throw me a line and pull me off and I'd ram her again – 18 inches I was ramming.

RD: What kind of engines does you like, Ben? What kind of engines were you using?

BG: I started off when I first had her built with a Marine Chrysler, but I didn't care much for it. It's a hard start in the winter; had to put two batteries to her to get her started. Oh, I used Chryslers, Plymouths and Dodges, but most of 'em now, I think they use mostly Fords, them big Fords. And the last one I had in my boat come out of a trooper's car; four (unintelligible) Chrysler. Boy, she had the power. I got a trophy I won with her on Tilghman Day when they had the workboat racing down here. Were you ever down here on Tilghman Day?

RD: No, I haven't.

BG: You ought to come down this year. Yeah, you would enjoy that.

RD: I heard a lot about it.

JL: (Laughter).

BG: What's the matter?

JL: You was here when the guy – when that fellow – oh what's his nickname? The guy who took the bottom off his boat?

BG: Oh, yeah.

JL: You know who I mean?

BG: Yeah, he was racing and the bottom come off of it.

JL: Yeah.

BG: He was so fast it beat the bottom off (ph). (Laughter). I don't think it was too much to start with though.

JL: Jitterbug.

BG: He's a jitterer all right (laughter). I had my brother-in-law on this boat one time and running parties in (unintelligible). She had a straight 8 Packard into her and the wheel was too big for it and you had to run her in second gear to get any speed. In high gear she'd knock, you know, ping. So, I said, "Charlie," she was fast, I said, "Let's put her on a race up there in St. Michaels." He said, "Ben, if you do, you're going to tear that motor up." I said, "No, she'll take it." So he went with me; hauled (ph) her up and painted the bottom on it nice. I guess there were 10 or 15 boats – work boats into it. Well, a man shot this pistol and we thought it was to go, but it was to get ready. So, we let her out right wide open. We got from here to that house away from the starting line and we looked back and all the other boats were still laying there. Then as soon as we started turning around and circle back, he shot again for 'em to go. Well, we had to go all the way around the finish line you know and start all over. We were the last boat. We had to pass all them boats and it was just like being on the ocean passing all them boats. We past 'em all but two and she started pinging, started knocking a little bit running her in second gear and she got hot, too. The fresh water tank was boiling over. My brother-in-law took one of them pamphlets that they had for what's going on doing the day, you know, and stuffed her around the carburetor like that to keep the water from flowing down. The first thing you know, she sucked that book right down in the carburetor (laughter) and black smoke went into the air, I don't know how high. If you stuck your

fingers down there, you (unintelligible) and we had a mechanic with us. He was doing the steering and he heard her ping so he slowed her down a little bit. He eased the throttle down on her. When, Charlie, my brother-in-law, seen that throttle shut too, he said, "Who in the hell done that." He pulled her right wide open again. He was afraid of tearing her up, but after he got in that race, he didn't care what happened to her (laughter), and we come in third.

RD: That wasn't bad considering you had to go all the way around.

BG: I know it. That was pretty good. Had to put another motor in it. He said, "I told Chick (ph) what was going to happen.

JL: (Laughter).

BG: Yeah, I used to run parties when I first had my boat built over there at Chesapeake Beach. There were more parties there than there was here, you know. Had long trips (unintelligible) and had short trips, too, you know, and stayed on that side of the Bay. That was some hours, too, you had to put in.

RD: Sounds like you weren't at home for quite a while.

BG: I was, yes sir. Up the Bay and down the Potomac.

JL: That's quite a drive around.

BG: Yeah. But, I had a nice boat to stay aboard on, you know. Only being away from home she had mostly raise the kids to herself. That was some trip down the Potomac. That's a long way buddy. Them days when I was going down, it would take me 11 hours to go down there. Been down there fishing. It used to open up for rock fishing down there the first of March. We'd always go down there a couple of days ahead in case we wanted to set a little piece, you know, see where most of 'em was at and all that kind of stuff. So, Ed and I and my brother and I went there one day ahead of the season and we laid this piece of net out (unintelligible) dark – stake nets – shove 'em down in the mud, you know, tied the net to 'em and run your net on out and stick another stake until you got to the end. We got up the next morning and went out there and there was a police captain out there taking her up. My god, she was full of fish – full! We went along side of it. He was in a rowboat, but he had this big steamer, big boat right along side anchored, you know. And he was from Rock Hall, or he was originally from Rock Hall, because he knew how to take them fish out. As fast as he could get to 'em, he'd take 'em out. So, we went to him, and we said, "My land, capt'n" Of course, we didn't want to claim it (laughter). We said, "You're going to ruin that guy. He come down here to fish this spring and here you are taking his net. You're going to put him out of business." A brand new net, brand spanking new it was. So we drifted off probably a little ways, and he was still there in his rowboat taking 'em out. After he got his rowboat loaded, he'd go to that police boat and put 'em out and then go back and get some more. Ed said to Ben, "He had a straight 8 Buick." He said, "Hold her right straight (unintelligible)." He said, "I'm going to scare the s—t out of him." I said, "Okay." She had a tiller on her, you know and I was back out to the tiller and he was running the motor. He opened her right wide open and her bow come out clean out of the water. She wasn't no speed boat, but she looked like she was going anyhow. So, we got just about from here to that car of yours probably and I was peeking around the corner in the cabin, you know, looking at him and seeing him reach out on his hip and grab that pistol. He pulled it right out. I said, "My god, Ed, slow her down quick." I turned her hard around and I said, "What are you doing pulling a pistol on us like that?" He said, "You think I'm dumb enough to

stay in this rowboat and let you run over me.” I said, “No I ain’t that dumb.” I said, “We weren’t going to run over you.” He said, “Well, if you didn’t look like it.” (Laughter). We never did get that net back.

RD: Is that right?

BG: We had a piece set about maybe a little further from here to that building.

RD: Yeah.

BG: My brother-in-law was across the river from us. He had some set, but, he got his up before the police got to him. We hit the fish, but they wouldn’t let us catch ‘em. Of course, we caught ‘em after that.

RD: What was the name of the boat that you were operating?

BG: My boat or my brother’s boat? His boat was named Mistra (ph) and mine was Gypsy Girl. That fellow was building boats all of his life and that was the first one he ever named was mine and he gave me three names. I forgot what they were now. But, I picked that one out and he wasn’t quite finished with the boat. He done all the rest of the work free of charge. I’ll tell you something else that happened while I was having her built. He charged me \$35 a week. There was nobody but him and his wife – \$35 dollars a week. I’d go down there every Saturday to pay him and I was winter fishing with Ed, my brother. He said, “Ben, how are you making out fishing?” I said, “We can’t hit a bunch of fish to save our soul; I don’t know what happened to all of ‘em.” He said, “Well, just give me \$25 from now on,” How many people would do that now, huh? You know what a lot of ‘em would do, not all of ‘em, some of ‘em, they’d sell your boat if you didn’t have money to pay for it. He said, “Just give me \$25.” He said, “I can live on that.”

RD: This was captain Fairbank (ph)?

BG: Fairbank (ph). My brother-in-law had a couple of boats built down there – he built ‘em and my brother-in-law was a great one for trying to learn stuff, you know, like to be a carpenter or something. So he was standing over the old man. He never had an electric saw in the place down there. Everything was done by hand, ripped it out by hand. Insides the line was 45 long. He ripped ‘em all out; about that wide. I asked him why he didn’t get some electric saws and he said, “Ben, I’m 72.” He said, “I’d just be buying it for somebody else.” He said, “I’ll keep on ripping her out.” He ripped a lot of oak, too. But anyhow, my brother-in-law was standing over top of him watching him, you know, do stuff. Boy, he got mad and slammed a piece of bolder (ph) up against the tin building. He said, “I don’t like that, somebody standing over me while I’m working.” Charlie said, “I’ll tell you what I’m gonna to do. I’m going home and when you get this boat finished, you come down and let me know how much it is and I’ll pay you and you’ll never see me no more.” The old man went down there that night and rapped on the door and apologized to him. He said, “You come there anytime you want.” But that’s how he was; he didn’t like nobody watching him. Charlie said, “Well, how in the world did you learn anything if you didn’t watch somebody else do something?” Yeah, he got mad but he soon got over it.

JL: (Laughter)

BG: He built a million boats on the Island – some of ‘em still living – a lot of ‘em still in use. When I put that new cedar bottom on that boat of mine, I bet she come out of the water like that. That bull pine was on my boat about 40 years. It took a piece about that big a square when he sawed it off when he was putting a new bottom on. I throwed it

overboard. It went to the bottom you couldn't even see it. You couldn't even see it going.

JL: Water logged for sure.

BG: I think the water soaked right through it all the way through. Makes a boat more able too when you got a new bottom on there. She's more lively, you know what I mean.

JL: Well, that's like this bald cypress that they use nowadays. That soaks it up just like a sponge.

BG: Oh, does it?

JL: But, the fellows that sell it, they sell it for cedar.

BG: Oh, yeah?

JL: Well it looks something like cedar.

BG: Oh, does it? Well, you can tell by the smell.

JL: Not it. No, my gosh!

BG: Well, I went up there to Gary's. I go up there sometimes twiced a day now to hear all the bull up there – all the watermen when they come home. I'm anxious to see people do good, you know, find out what they're doing. It gives me something to do, too.

JL: Well, you gotta keep up to date on all the fishing.

BG: Sure.

RD: Do you miss not being out on the water?

BG: By god, don't mention it. You take me working every day, then stop just like that...whew, that was hard to take. Of course, I worked hard all my life and I thought to myself when it first happened, I said I ain't going to worry about it too much. I'll just take it easy, but it wasn't long changing my mind about that. I wanted to be out there. I've been out there a couple of times, but I have a job to get off. I'd fall in getting off. It take two or three head (ph) to get me out of the boat. But, I'm tickled to death to walk up and down the dock. She takes me out, but when I talk to the watermen I feel a lot better when I come home. I think I've read every Western book that ever was printed. Lewis Moore, when he died that ruined me (laughter). I watch television and get tired of that. But, I enjoy going up there listening to them boys talk. A Rock Haller was down here clamming, catching them razor backs used for bait, you know. And I said, "I'm a has been." And he said, "Yes, that's better than a never was." I said, "Yep." He said, "You forgot more than I'll ever know," he told me, a young guy. A great big fellow he was. It ain't many people on this Island, we got a lot of watermen. I bet it's not over one or two on Tilghman's Island who set a pound net. They've all died off and then stopped doing it, you know.

JL: I guess Ben Harrison was about the last one.

BG: Yeah. They all died off.

JL: Him and Harry Covington (ph).

BG: Yeah, he fished up there and Randolph bought a right up there over on the Elk River side; pound nets. Harry had a shore over there at Sushi (ph) Island. Do you know where that's at? He had a shore over there good shad place, not much for herring I don't think; shad and rock. I said, "Harry," come up there to Northeast one day and went out and fished, "Do you know when they're going to open them gates up there at Conowinga." "Oh," I said, "The hell with the gates," He said, "I put that net there to stay." But, I know he went and got her (ph). Because she had been down here somewhere if they hadn't. I said, "After you take the nets off, tear the poles down," and they were about 6

foot in the bottom, ring 'em right off (ph). So much trash up there, you could walk on it piled up against the poles. Now how are you gonna to keep any net there like that. You take 'em off and put 'em on the shore, you have to wait about eight to 10 days to put 'em back or you'd throw 'em down. Water would get so doggone thick and you'd run your boat into it and you'd leave a track. You would – leave a track behind you. The water was that muddy, just like clay. And sometimes, I never did see much of it, but years ago...

JL: Not in fresh water – it was up on the top – that's lighter than the salt water when it's down at the bottom and that stayed up there. It just looked like you'd gone through a field.

BG: Make a channel. They say they used to have water coming out of them coal mines up in Pennsylvania years ago that would turn it real dark, almost black, the water would get. They tell me you couldn't catch nothing in that.

JL: No, it's just sulfur out from the coal that's in there.

BG: They had 32 gates up there when I was there. I could stand about 10 gates before I had to take 'em on. To get over that, I'd to get 'em (ph). I had to take a chance just about the time herring got ready to hit about the 25th of April when one of them rivers hit, you were out of luck. Of course the time it cleared up again, them fish was spawning and be gone. You had that chance to take.

RD: I guess that's why gamble is involved in fishing.

BG: Yes indeed. Oh, I don't think they'll ever let a person catch as many rock as they want. I don't think that'll ever happen again. There'll be a limit on 'em of some sort.

JL: Them guys from down in Virginia when they come up here a few years ago on the blue fish, remember that?

BG: Seems like to me I heard a sketch of it, yeah (ph). What happened?

JL: They brought a whole big bunch of nets up with them, you know, from down in Virginia.

BG: They weren't allowed in this Bay.

JL: Yeah, and they almost wiped the bluefish out. They put a stop to that.

BG: Well, when I was a kid, talking about that purse net, did you know how it worked? They had half a net on each boat and they'd see a bunch of fish and circle and then they'd all jump from one boat to the other and it was just like a tobacco bag with strings in it, you know.

RD: Drawn together.

BG: No the bottom of it together.

JL: So they'd tie them down and close her right up.

BG: Right. It had to weigh about 3 or 400 pounds.

RD: Is purse seining legal in Maryland?

BG: It's illegal. Yeah, they stopped that many years ago.

RD: Virginia still does it, though.

BG: For eel (ph) wise, maybe, or bunkers (ph).

RD: Menhaden.

BG: Then we went from that to what they call buck net and they gilled in that for bluefish. Then they stopped that and then they went to haul seining. I think you can still get haul seining license.

JL: I think you're limited on the length of it.

BG: Might be. But, these fellows, they tickle me about testing these rock. They go up this river and water about to here – mosquito net-like – waded on around like that and if they haul it in and don't catch none, they say it ain't no rock. Craziest rigs I've ever looked at in my life (laughter).

RD: Well, Ben, it's after 12, maybe holding up your lunch.

BG: I don't eat too much dinner, I eat a pretty good supper.

RD: Do you?

BG: I eat a sandwich or a bowl of soup for lunch.

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.