

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Norman Shannahan, Jr.

Oral History #71

Interviewer: Richard Dodds

Date: November 10, 1989

Location: Longhaul Creek, St. Michaels

Topic: Norman Shannahan discussed the history of the St. Michaels Packing Co., which was started in 1910. Part of the discussion included the moving of the train shed from Claiborne for use as a warehouse. Also discussed were Shannahan properties on Mill St. including "Willow Cottage." Mentioned was the filming of the movie "First Kiss."

Comments: Towards the end of the interview the recorder jammed and the tape broke, the space marks the end of the interview.

Documentation:

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BEGIN SIDE 1

Richard Dodds: ... I've been over the years doing some research on the various packing companies – seafood packing companies here in town – but one of them I've never been able to get much information for is St. Michaels Packing Company and I know your family was intimately involved with the creation of it, and that's mainly what I'd like to talk to you about, if you can tell me what you know. I'll tell you what I did do...I was in the Court House one day up in Easton looking in the incorporation records there and I noticed that the St. Michaels Packing Company was chartered on 29 November, 1910. So it does go back a ways.

Norman Shannahan: I didn't know that. I know it was way back.

RD: It was Norman M. Shannahan? Is that your father?

NS: Yep, that's right, it was my father.

RD: Solomon, Kaplan. Is it Solomon Kaplan – is that his name?

NS: I think it is.

RD: That was a mistake there – Howard Gillis (ph) and “To operate and conduct a packing and canning factory for all kinds of seafood, fruits, vegetables and products of the kind.” The principle office is St. Michaels and capital stock was \$10,000, divided in 400 shares. Then in 1911, they increased the capital stock to \$25,000 and then Norman Shannahan, your father, was president. John S. McDaniel was the secretary.

NS: Well, secretary I guess (ph). I don't know if he was the treasurer or not, but during the first war in 1917 and 1918, we put up a lot of tomatoes that were shipped overseas and McDaniel was I guess the broker. He was the broker, so he made all the arrangements (ph) and sent them overseas and then they sent all that damn stuff back they didn't use and flooded the market over here so it put the packing company \$100,000 in the hole. They owed that much money. Then my father took over the brokerage (laughter). He thought he could do better and from 1918 when that happened until 1936, my father worked that plant and paid off every damn cent...he didn't declare any bankruptcy. They didn't know about those things then.

RD: That's pretty good to pay off \$100,000 worth of debt.

NS: Well, \$100,000 in those days is worth a million dollars now.

RD: That's a lot of money.

NS: But he did. He paid it off with the plant, the oyster business, and of course, they had three or four farms that belonged to that company, too.

RD: I said in 1920 the capital stock was increased to \$50,000 and that's the last entry for the company. The only thing I did note here, in 1918, there was the Certificate of Incorporation of the Shannahan Canning Company – Norman M. Shannahan of St. Michaels, Harry P. Shannahan of McDaniel and Emma M. Cork (ph) of McDaniel.

NS: See, that was a different plant. That was in McDaniel where Jarboe had their plant. That was a plant there, too, but that was a different company as it says there.

RD: Yeah, 1918.

NS: Shannahan Canning Company.

RD: How long was that company in operation, do you remember?

NS: Well, let me see, 1920.

RD: Was it after the Second World War?

NS: No, oh no.

RD: It was finished before the Second World War.

NS: I think it had to be before 1935 even.

RD: What were they doing down there mainly?

NS: Well, they canned small cans of tomatoes and I'm not sure whether they put up any oysters or not. They had cans that had gotten rust on them you know, from moisture, and boy, I'd go down there and grind those things with emery and shine them up and my god, then the labeling machines – which you don't have labeling machines like that today – would label the cans and all that stuff down there, but small. Down there at the plant they used just gallon cans.

RD: Just gallon cans. I was going to ask you what they started off with.

NS: Down here?

RD: Yeah, down here in St. Michaels.

NS: You mean the Shannahan Company?

RD: Well, no, the St. Michaels Packing Company.

NS: Of course, I can only go back as far as the tomatoes and oysters. They are the only products that I know about here. Of course, the oysters were after dad took it over. But, he'd get us up 4 o'clock in the morning and go down there and sort oysters and then go to school at 8 o'clock.

RD: Is that right? (Laughter). So, basically, you'd switch during the season. You did oysters during the winter obviously and then switch...

NS: Down here we steamed oysters and shipped them all the way to California and somehow one whole carload got rejected or something was the matter with it, so that's the last time he shipped anything out there.

RD: Is that right? It's a good distance, all the way across the country.

NS: Yeah.

RD: Was the company mostly doing steamed oysters then; packing steamed oysters?

NS: Yeah.

RD: They weren't doing much in the way of (unintelligible).

NS: No, I don't think...they had to clean them and blow them and all the stuff that you do today with oysters, but then they would put them in these containers and cook them in cookers and cook them. But, I don't think we sold any oysters that were steamed – cooked.

RD: What were they shipped out in? What size cans, do you remember?

NS: I don't know, they might have been a #3 can about so big, maybe not a quart, but a pint maybe.

RD: Pint, maybe? Do you know where your main markets were? Were they here in Maryland, or were they further away?

NS: Well, they sold them to – like with the tomatoes – they had the Sure Go (ph) tomato which was their trade name, see.

RD: Sure Go (ph)?

NS: Sure Go (ph). We have one or two of those labels, but we sold them to American Foods, different stores – the tomatoes – and put their label on it. See we would label that whole warehouse you have with boats in it – that had tomatoes from one end to the other – gallon cans stacked up in a pyramid so they could cool off – wouldn't overcook and put them in there.

RD: But, mostly for other companies' labels, not so much your own.

NS: Yeah, as far as I know. But, I can't remember about that how many went as the trade name Sure Go (ph) tomatoes.

RD: Did the company ever do any other kind of vegetables like corn or peas or carrots?

NS: Not down there. At McDaniel, they may have done some of that fruit cannery down there, how much they did, but I'm not sure just what. See when that was debunked, I guess I was probably 18, 20 years old.

RD: Which one was this?

NS: McDaniel

RD: McDaniel's operation, yeah.

NS: When it went out of business.

RD: When did the St. Michaels Packing Company go out of business?

NS: Well, in 1936 I think was the time that dad paid off that final debt and then that's when it stopped because he was trying to work the well company and he was making money with that to pay off this debt.

RD: Is that right?

NS: But, he made a lot of it out of the packing company. He made it pay for itself to a large extent.

RD: Of course, it was during the depression, too, in 1936.

NS: No, in like '30 to '33, '34. We were just coming out of it at that time.

RD: Well, he decided just to get out of the business then.

NS: Yeah. During the war they were making so much money they didn't know what to do with it.

RD: Yeah, that seemed to be the big period of prosperity for the canners was around the war.

NS: They built that big stack. You don't remember that stack, do you?

RD: I've only seen the pictures of it – got plenty of those.

NS: Beautiful stack there. Let's see what else. They even gave the farmers back a good bit of money.

RD: Is that right?

NS: Yep, sure did.

RD: So the real boom years were what, '14 through '18, or something like that?

NS: Well, I would say later than that, like just a couple of years maybe '16 to '18.

RD: Does that mean because of the war?

NS: Yeah, in all probability. I was only about six years old and wasn't worried about it.

RD: Didn't bother you any. I imagine the government was buying up a lot of it.

NS: Yeah, they were buying it and shipping it overseas. That's what happened and they brought it back to this country and flooded the markets and the price just went down to nothing. They had all these canned goods on hand and they couldn't sell.

RD: What was the work force like? How many people were employed by the company?

NS: I couldn't even hazard a guess, because like tomato season, they had to have probably easy 50 people down there peeling tomatoes. It was a big merry-go-round, you know, it would go around with the tomatoes; you'd just take a pan off and peel the potatoes and you'd put it back on with the tomatoes and keep on going. It was quite a big operation.

RD: The tomatoes, were brought in by road or by boat?

NS: No, mostly by horse and cart – farm wagons – horses.

RD: I have heard somebody telling me they remember seeing people backed up along the road here sometimes.

NS: In fact, I really can't remember even that they were brought in by trucks. Now, later on, of course, the trucks would bring them in from the farms, but the ones that I can remember, and of course, the tomato end of it, I guess we got that train shed from Claiborne, and put up there and that had to be late in '31 say or '32, and we did can tomatoes after that, so in '36 we probably stopped that part of it and just pay off the debt. But that shed – I was up on top of that roof down there pulling nails out, every board we took off that damn shed.

RD: I was going to ask you about that. I've heard a few people say about how big an operation that was to move the shed. I imagine it was. The company acquired the shed mainly as a warehouse for the canned tomatoes? They acquired the shed mainly for a warehouse for canned tomatoes?

NS: Yeah. I drew the plans up for the foundations – got engineering to approve it and had the piling and all put in and we hauled that building up here. The trusses and all were all brought up on a truck, one on each side of it, and lifted it off one of our well rigs and set it place. It was 45 feet wide.

RD: It must have been a Dickens of a job to disassemble that building.

NS: Yeah, well we did that board by board, you know. See that's when times were so bad, I got \$9 a week and I paid my mother \$5 a week board.

RD: Is that right?

NS: (Laughter).

RD: That didn't leave much left over, did it?

NS: No. We had one fellow, he'd take the men down in his car, an old Ford sedan, but this one particular morning, one guy left and for that money, he walked all the way down to Claiborne.

RD: Is that right?

NS: Your damn right (laughter).

RD: Yeah, the building was moved in our records say, in 1933. Is that about right?

NS: Yeah, pretty close, yeah.

RD: Because that was in the middle of the depression. I imagine people were lucky – were glad of the money. How long did it take to disassemble it and move it?

NS: Probably – I don't really know. I couldn't tell you. I can't attach any time to it.

RD: But, you were personally involved in moving it.

NS: Oh yeah, all of it.

RD: Obviously, the roof, the sides were moved, the floorboards – the floorboards in the building now were the original floorboards in the building.

NS: I think so. I'm not sure about that. The trusses, the siding, the roof, all that came down. The whole roof down there was covered with tar paper and when you got done a day's work with the reflection of that tar paper on you, boy, you were burned up. Oh boy!

RD: It wasn't a shingle or metal roof over it. It was just tarpaper.

NS: Just tarpaper, yeah, and we used a nail puller to pull the nails out so we didn't hurt the boards.

RD: Yeah. Geez, what a job.

NS: It was when you think of all the nails and that other equipment for a 45' shed.

RD: That's a big building. Then everything was moved by truck.

NS: Our trucks.

RD: And then, of course, you had to reassemble it. Did you have to number the pieces to get them all back together?

NS: No. The trusses we knew what they were. No, we didn't have to do that. But all the stringers (ph) to tie the trusses together, why we knew where they went. They were all alike.

RD: Because it was a pretty well built building. It has pretty heavy pieces of wood in there.

NS: Those trusses, they were good trusses. All reinforced and tied together with bolts – you know, bolted together.

RD: Because it makes an ideal boat shed for us.

NS: Oh, yeah.

RD: It's fantastic.

NS: Well, it made a good shed for us for the well company, too.

RD: Yeah.

NS: We kept machinery in there.

RD: Oh, after the packing company closed up, yeah. (Sounds of shuffling papers.) I've got some pictures in there. I've got this map – it's a fire insurance map. You may have seen it. This was 1927, but it gives you a pretty good idea of the layout of the company. That was before they moved the train shed. That's where I guess this whole thing was St. Michaels Packing Company here.

NS: Yeah. The property went up to the tank that was here. An old cannon is buried right there somewhere.

RD: Is that right?

NS: Yeah. It's right around there somewhere sticking up. I believe the butt ends up in the air.

RD: That's interesting. I never heard of that.

NS: They might have taken it out and put it up at the Museum.

RD: I think that may be the one right there. Looking at the area, St. Michaels Packing Company was the biggest in area-wise, the biggest in the whole Navy Point.

NS: Yes.

RD: Interesting to see a bunkhouse indicated here.

NS: See, they had migrant workers that would come up here and they had a shed for them to live in with compartments there and they had their own oven. They cooked their bread and boy, was that good bread!

RD: Is that right?

NS: Oh, man.

RD: Where would he work his farmland?

NS: I don't know, south somewhere – (unintelligible).

RD: South, (Unintelligible)?

NS: I think so. See, we had to extend this. This is the river line here and we had to build this out here to get a shed on it and extend it 10 feet over the bulkhead that was there.

RD: So, basically, he tore down the bunkhouse accommodations to put the shed up.

NS: Yeah, all of this is shed. Of course, that was gone, too.

RD: Do you know what this building was?

NS: No. It just says a shed; some kind of storage shed.

RD: Yeah. And then they got another building here that says warehouse; kind of a large building. Do you recall that?

NS: No, I can't recall that.

RD: Then, they got the biggest building right here. I've seen pictures of that if I remember correctly...

NS: That's the plant. There's the stack over here. That's the boiler room there. The new building that you have is like where this building is, but only pushed out over the water because it is now right within 30 feet or 40 feet of where the boilers are of this building.

RD: Oh, okay.

NS: All of this is just gone and of course, this is gone.

RD: Looks like it was split up. You had the canning on one side of the property and the shucking operation on the other.

NS: No, no. The shucking operation is right here. But, this is another company, Coulbourne & Jewett.

RD: Okay, it looks like this was all at one time St. Michaels Packing Company.

NS: I don't think so. This could be Oyster Crab Packing. I don't think so, no.

RD: So this is probably wrong here. It just says St. Michaels Packing Company came up just up from here.

NS: Yeah. I think so and down here is the wharf. See, down here, they owned this wharf, the packing company. This is where they would come around here with the wagons and drop the tomatoes off here and go on out.

RD: 'Cause Coulbourne – you see where Coulbourne & Jewett were down here.

NS: I don't know.

RD: Because this was in '27. It's got soldering machinery there, cutting and filling, storage of oysters, shucking, storage of barrels, packing.

NS: Well, that may have been the St. Michaels Packing Company. I'm not sure of that, because the work that I did when I was down there was in this area right here adjacent to this plant here.

RD: The big one.

NS: This was the oyster shucking room and all of the steamers were right in here next to the boilers. That's where they steamed the oysters. Like they used to bring canned goods down from Baltimore – not canned good – cans, and they'd bring it down in a schooner that the packing company owned – the *Nellie Jackson*.

RD: The *Nellie Jackson*.

NS: They would go up to Baltimore, load up the cans, come down here and tie her up outside this building right here and have a conveyer that would take the cans up to the top...all the empty cans. They were always stored up at the top and then come tomato time where all the tomato peeling and stuff was down here, we'd put the cans in the chute up here. That was my job up until 12 o'clock Saturday night (laughter).

RD: Quite an operation. So when the tomatoes were canned, they were shipped out for the most part in trucks at that time?

NS: You mean, hauled out?

RD: Yeah, hauled out.

NS: From the time that they were stored in this warehouse here, I can't remember how they were hauled away...whether they were hauled by freight car out to the station. I know the oysters were hauled out there.

RD: Oh, they were?

NS: That far back, yeah, they were loaded in the freight cars. Of course, they stopped that. That had to go on up until probably 1935-38. The same time that they paid off the debt, like '36, what I told you. That's about the time they stopped the whole operation.

RD: Whatever happened to the *Nellie Jackson*?

NS: I don't know. I've got a little model of her at home.

RD: Do you?

NS: But, that fellow that would sail her...it's a schooner now and he would sail her up to Baltimore, and get it moored up there and when he got ready to sail, come back; he would hire somebody up there to help hoist the sails up and he would sail the thing by himself.

RD: Is that right?

NS: One summer with a load of canned goods, he got ashore up (ph). I can't remember where now...whether it was Rock Hall or up that way...and went up on a tug boat (ph) or something to get him off. No, he said the good lord put me up here and the good lord will take me off. And sure enough, the tide came up and brought him off. But, he was a religious man. He really was.

RD: He couldn't be hurried about it.

NS: But, he sailed that thing by himself. He had a little kicker on the back. That was typical. But, she was a pretty boat.

RD: The company only owned the one boat.

NS: Yes.

RD: She was mainly used to bring in cans.

NS: Empty cans. Never hauled out full cans. Never shipped those out on the boat.

RD: I'll just check on her. Maybe I'll come across a photograph of her and find out what happened to her.

NS: See, during the oyster time, I was about 16 years old when we were going down there early in the morning, like I told you, and all I can remember is what we did down here. It was dark when we got down there, but I know this was oyster stories, and I guess probably that was it, because their place was over on this side. I know the packing company owned all that wharf, that part. That was all decked over. I don't know if it still is or not?

RD: Decked over?

NS: This was all decked over the water, just like the wharf. And this is where they had the steamer for the tomatoes back here. They'd steam them and then they would come on through a conveyer in here to the roundtable and the shuckers would shuck them.

RD: Now the chimney...the great chimney was where?

NS: Here.

RD: Oh here it is. Oh it's got a brick chimney about 80 feet. Is that about right? It's a beautiful chimney...a brick chimney. It had the St. Michaels Packing Company initials in it, didn't it?

NS: That was a pretty one.

RD: Quite a landmark. That was used to vent the boilers for the...

NS: That was a stack for the boilers.

RD: That was quite an operation. I imagine the company was probably one of the biggest employers in the area wasn't it, in its heyday?

NS: I don't know...probably in the immediate area it was. I think in the area clear down to Pocomoke....

RD: I'm talking about the county, I suppose.

NS: Of course, the one up at Frio's (ph) place. I don't know how early that was. That's up on Route 213 and 50 as you're going towards Centreville. Go up 50, turn to the right on 213, it's Chesapeake College, catty-corner to that.

RD: How did the company get on with its competitors here?

NS: They didn't have any trouble.

RD: Got along pretty well.

NS: They didn't dare get in any trouble in those days (laughter). They had trouble with {n-----s} in those days.

RD: Well, this was Cork (ph) was over here.

NS: Most of the time we had colored people here...nice people...the {n-----s} had just come lately (laughter)...the young ones. We gave them everything we got and they'd just taken advantage of it. We got along good, but they were bankrupt all the time. It was something. There was that golf course that's over here too.

RD: Yeah. That was a pretty big operation, too.

NS: Yeah, they had a good business over there, too, that's right...

(Microphone turned off)

NS...Ocean City, just this past week, I called down there and they were on vacation. I said, what's this holiday? Well, they said this if the 4th of July. He says, "In Ocean City, we've got to work the 4th of July, so they gave us this day off (unintelligible).

RD: I see, I can understand that, but these state employees and federal employees get all these holidays off.

NS: Isn't that something. I'm not for that. Gee, that's terrible. They do little enough as it is without taking time off.

RD: Are you, as far as the family goes; are you sort of the person who knows the most about the company now?

NS: Oh yes. I'm probably the only one now. Everybody else is gone.

RD: There isn't much left of the company in the way of objects or things.

NS: The Gully's (ph), the Kaplan's (ph), my father, they're all gone and Mr. Dulin, Bill Dulin (ph)...he was a driller for our well company, but also, in the summertime, when this plant ran, he was down here to run this. In the wintertime, he worked drilling wells. But, he was really some special guy, that fellow. He really was a top notch man.

RD: I'm so surprised the company closed when it did. I thought they carried on through World War II, but obviously, they decided they had enough.

NS: No, when he got paid off, that's the kind of caliber person he was. My father was a very special person. We did all the well work every time at the Bethlehem Steel Plant at Sparrows Point and along with it, a couple of years before he died, Mr. Kauffman (ph), who was the general manager Bethlehem Steel wrote him a letter and in it he said, "Norman, your integrity has always been a challenge to me. You can't say anything more than that." If he said do it, then Bethlehem Steel did it.

RD: Norman, if I could just to switch over a little bit, this building here I think was also like a bunkhouse for shuckers and for migrant labors. Do you remember that building? This is a house with balconies on it.

NS: Yeah a little clapboard house, but I don't remember people living in it. Probably did at that time. If it was a place to lay down, they probably used it.

RD: It may have been. That's what I have been told. I've got the deed here which means dwelling, so it may have been a private house, too.

NS: It was more or less of a shed than a place to live. You could do that in the summertime, see. You know, you can sleep in a tent. I remember that building was there and that's what it was...it was kind of low around that place.

RD: Because, when you look at the early maps, ones earlier than this, you see how they kind of built up and gradually filled in the water here and then you filled it in.

NS: With shells.

RD: Yeah. In fact, most of this is shells. In fact, another question I guess I could ask you if you remember. Oyster shells that packing company handled, what did you do with those?

NS: Of course they were piled out here and then they were loaded on a barge and we – I helped to do that too – would tow those out in the river at a designated point that the State said and shove them overboard.

RD: Oh, I see, so you used them for seed planting. Were they loaded by hand those barges – the shells?

NS: Yeah, by wheelbarrow.

RD: That's a big job in itself.

NS: And we would shove them off with an oyster fork.

RD: So the State would pay the company.

NS: No, we didn't have any high pressure pumps to blow them overboard.

RD: Like you do today. So, the State paid the company so much per ton or something like that.

NS: That's right. But that was good, 'cause you would get 'em over when they were still fairly fresh oysters because you had a lot of spat to grow.

RD: Well, were they normally planted here in the Miles River?

NS: In the Miles River. What we did, yeah. Maybe down as far as Herring Island, but not farther than that. We didn't go down farther than that.

RD: Yeah. Can I ask you, just switching tacks a little bit – about this building we're in now, I'm not sure I have it on the map here – oh here it is – there was a house here before this office – do you remember, were you involved when they built this building here?

NS: Oh yeah, I built this building.

RD: Oh, did you?

NS: Oh, yeah. I built this one and I built that one over there.

RD: So then you must have been involved with the moving of the little building next door.

NS: That's right and we gave it to the town.

RD: What about this house? Who was living in this house that was here, do you remember?

NS: I can't ..

RECORDING ABRUPTLY STOPS HERE

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.