

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Charles (Buck) Palmer

Oral History #74

Interviewer: Richard Dodds

Date: July 19, 1990

Location:

Topic: Buck Palmer sailing with his father in the summer months on the sailing scow *ELSIE*, the last scow on the Bay. This was in the 1930s. The interview mainly concerns Buck Palmer's recollections of the boat and his father.

Comments:

Documentation:

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BEGIN SIDE 1

Richard Dodds: ...Oh, the *Widgeon*. It's the only model I've ever seen of the *Widgeon*.

Charles Palmer: It's the sister ship to this one here. These models are not block models either. They are detailed (ph).

RD: Is that right? Did you make this model?

CP: No, my father did.

RD: Your father did.

CP: The owner of this model was the captain of this boat. He built two boats and one of them is in the Smithsonian Institution as far as I know.

RD: The model?

Mrs. Palmer: Yeah. I know it's there because Jackie (unintelligible) had seen them.

RD: You don't know which one it was though? We have two models of the *Elsie*, but this is the first I've seen a model of the *Widgeon*.

CP: See where the forward cabin is on this?. They were sister ships. They were both built in the same place.

RD: Now your grandfather had this built...had the *Elsie* and the *Widgeon* built?

CP: My grandfather had both of them then my father took over until he died.

RD: What was your grandfather's name?

CP: Charlie Daniels (ph). No. I could find out.

Mrs. Palmer: It seemed to me like his name was Edward.

CP: It might have been.

Mrs. Palmer: I'm not sure, I forgot.

RD: But, it was your grandfather that had them built.

CP: I have no idea where they were built. Somebody said they were built over in Delaware, but I don't think so. They were built for the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay. I don't really believe they were built over in Delaware, I think they were built right around this area.

RD: But, they were built for your grandfather for his use?

CP: As far as I know. There were only two of them on the Chesapeake Bay. Years ago they came out with a brown paperback (unintelligible) American News and they had a brown sheet in there of a boat race they held down there -- a workman's boat race -- and he got into it somehow and beat the whole damn fleet...Emaw (ph).

RD: Now she has a top mast to her I see.

CP: Yeah, she's got full sails out.

RD: Now your father then took over from your grandfather.

CP: Right.

RD: Did he take over both boats or just the *Elsie*?

CP: Just one.

RD: Okay. So the *Widgeon* was sold.

CP: Probably. But the *Elsie* had two Palmer (ph) engines in it.

RD: Yeah, later on she had two engines, yeah.

CP: They were put in about 1920.

RD: Yeah. What did your father use it for mainly...the *Elsie*?

CP: Grain.

RD: Grain hauling.

CP: Grain hauling and fertilizer and stones for rip rapping all around. Then he used it for duck hunting and then he used it for fishing.

RD: Did he have to make, as far you know...hauling grain...using it for grain is one thing, but taking out people ducking is something else. He had to make some changes to the boat to do that?

CP: He took them out a day at a time, a party at a time. He wouldn't go out for two or three days, just for the day.

RD: Just for the day, okay.

CP: They mostly come from out of New York or Philadelphia for sporting.

RD: Yeah.

CP: But I've seen them boats come in down there at Havre de Grace after (unintelligible) and you couldn't see nothing but ducks hanging (unintelligible)...geese and ducks.

RD: Where would you normally trade to?

CP: The upper rivers here to Baltimore. He hauled the grain off of Souci (ph) Island. He hauled the grain off of numerous ponds around the Elk River and the Northeast River and he hauled stone from Fort Deposit stone quarry to the Elk River mostly for riprap to be used to shore up the river (unintelligible).

RD: When did you start working for your father?

CP: I never worked for him; I just worked in the summertime out of school. I was four years old when I first went on it.

RD: Starting working young, huh?

CP: I wasn't working; I never did work on it. I was on the boat clear up until 1939.

RD: Is that right?

CP: That's when he sold the boat. Pennsylvania Railroad bought it. They wanted to get it off the river so they wouldn't have to open the bridge.

RD: But you helped your father work the boat?

CP: I've seen him work it. It only takes one man to operate the whole thing.

RD: It's a big boat to be operated by one man.

CP: One man could do it. One man could put that sail up and everything else. I've seen him do it many times. I've seen him climb up and put reefs in it and everything else.

RD: Is that right?

CP: Damn right. I've seen him carry 60 tons of passengers in the hold (ph). 20 tons in the hold and another 32 tons on deck of wheat.

RD: How did she sail? How did she handle? Do you remember?

CP: Good. I've sailed her.

RD: She had a long tiller didn't she back there.

CP: Yeah, they all had tillers then...those did and leeboards.

RD: Did you operate the leeboards?.

CP: You tramped on them you just tramped on them and (unintelligible).

RD: You stepped on the end.

CP: You stepped on the end (unintelligible), unshackle it, and you'd come up and the bottom went down. It was on a pivot—an iron rod, shaft-like and it was stuck on there with a (unintelligible) through it.

RD: Right. Went through the hull. And she had a big open hold there I guess.

CP: Clear back to here and back here was the engine room. It was right there. It was partitioned off.

RD: She had a little cabin on board I see.

CP: I was board captain. It had two bunks in it.

RD: Two bunks? Is that where the cooking was done up there?

CP: It was convenient, I mean it wasn't big, but it was all right.

RD: It appears like she towed a skiff, too, behind it.

CP: They all towed a skiff. I forgot the name of it, but it had a name, too...*Little Annie*, I think.

RD: She kind of looks like what they called a bushwhack boat.

CP: No, it wasn't big. It was a small boat.

RD: She was smaller than that.

CP: Small. I think it was only 6 foot long.

RD: Is that right? It looks like he carried up to the limit.

CP: Oh yeah. He always did. Sometimes he had 60 tons in the hold which was capacity and on deck he'd carry another 30 tons which would bring it right down to here. Right down to the marks.

RD: Yeah.

CP: It used to take him about eight hours running from Souci Island (ph) to Baltimore.

RD: Is that right? He just used the engines for getting in and out of harbor.

CP: Yeah, he used the engines getting in and out of the harbor, yeah. But, he was a sailor; he knew what he was doing. In fact, he helped survey the Chesapeake Bay, part of it—the Upper Bay—and he made charts of them. He helped survey it. That was back in the early 20s.

RD: He was born and raised here in Northeast.

CP: In Havre de Grace.

RD: Havre de Grace?

CP: That's where this boat was out of—Havre de Grace.

RD: That's right, yeah.

CP: Yeah, he could go down the river when I was a kid and you wouldn't see another sail in sight all day. It was scary. No yachts, not like today. You didn't see no motor yachts. Very seldom would you see a motor yacht.

RD: Now when you first remember, she didn't have a topmast.

CP: No, it was cut off so it could go underneath the railroad bridge.

RD: Oh, up on the Susquehanna.

CP: They took it off. That way he could get under the bridge without having to do anything to it because he was too high...

RD: Why did he put the topmast in? Do you know why?

CP: Well, we had to take it down, so that way he could run under the B&O when he had to have the railroad bridge open up for this, because he was too high for it.

RD: Oh I see. The topmast was there all the time, but sometimes it was housed...

CP: No, when he took it off, he took it off completely.

RD: Oh, all right.

Mrs. Palmer: Because it was a 90 foot mast.

CP: It was a 90 foot mast and the boat was 65 feet overall. Capacity was 20 tons total and it was documented.

RD: Right. I have seen that. So whether she had the topmast off depended on what bridge he had to go under.

CP: Right. Where it had to go and what he had to do. But if he had to go someplace that didn't have a drawbridge, he couldn't go. So I guess when you go under the B& O, they built it high enough where he could get under it with this mast, but not this mast, so he took this one along. But, then, he was the only boat the Pennsylvania Railroad had to open the drawbridge for. So there you are.

RD: I guess he didn't like to go to all that trouble.

CP: No, they saved money. They paid...I think father only got about \$1200 for the boat.

RD: Is that right?

CP: And they bought it and left it in a marsh over there and it went to pieces in Havre de Grace.

RD: They bought it with no intention of using it...just to put it up on the marsh I guess.

CP: Yes, they had no intention of using it. They just bought it to get it off the river.

RD: Was your father ready to retire by that time?

CP: No, he went to Aberdeen Proving Grounds.

RD: Oh, is that right.

CP: He worked down there until he retired. He went and built bridges and then he went to Aberdeen Proving Grounds. He built Georgetown Bridge.

Mrs. Palmer: He worked on the Georgetown Bridge over there and then he went there. He worked there 22 years in Aberdeen.

RD: Well, we made a mistake there. We thought the caption that came with this photograph said he was smoking a pipe, but you say he never smoked a pipe.

CP: Never smoked a pipe...cigars.

RD: Here's a drawing. This drawing was done back in the 1930s of the *Elsie*—the bow—then you can see the leeboard here, the arrangement of the forward cabin. I guess that's a water tank there. You must be one of the few people around now that sailed on the *Elsie*, I imagine.

CP: I was the last one.

RD: I imagine you are.

CP: I'll show you my version of what it looked like when I was a kid to me.

RD: All right. That's pretty close. How old were you when you did this?

CP: I just did that about four or five years ago.

RD: Oh, okay.

CP: But he always had the American flag and he always had the pennant until his later years.

RD: Did he have anything on the pennant?

CP: Oh, just the Union Jack more or less.

RD: Oh, okay. She has two jibs here it seems.

CP: Yeah, on this one.

RD: She's only got one rigged up on here.

CP: She's only got one here. The *Widgeon* had two on it. The *Widgeon* had a (unintelligible) jib.

RD: Did the *Elsie* just carry the one jib?

CP: That's all—just one.

RD: Whatever happened to the *Widgeon*, do you know?

CP: I have no idea. That was long before I was in the picture.

RD: I haven't been able to find out. I was just wondering.

CP: I doubt if you'll ever find out.

RD: There was a schooner rig up this way...the *Ella Bernard*, but I think she was probably long gone by the time you remember.

CP: Probably was.

RD: She was a bigger boat, though.

CP: Probably, yeah, much bigger.

RD: She had leeboards, too.

CP: But, they (unintelligible). You see, the ones on the *Elsie*, they were more of a counterbalance. These were counterbalances. You just step down on it and unshackled it and it would just go down by itself and then when you stepped down on it, it goes back up and you shackle it.

RD: I thought they were going to be a bear to move up and down.

CP: They're center bound (ph). They just took one push...pushed it down and then shackled it. There was a shackle I think back here someplace and you just shackle it back in place.

RD: Did your father normally just sail by himself?

CP: Yeah, most of the time. I was with him from about 1933 to '39 in the summertime.

RD: Right in the middle of the depression, too.

CP: Until right out of the depression.

RD: He must have been a good seaman to sail a boat like that by himself.

CP: He was.

Mrs. Palmer: He went on that boat with his daddy when he was eight years old and worked on it.

RD: So he was familiar with that boat for a long time, wasn't he?

Mrs. Palmer: It was only his father on the boat.

CP: I worked on a three mast boat...a schooner rig, too...*Christine Bennett* (ph).

RD: Oh yeah, I've heard of it. The Ram Schooners (ph).

CP: The Ram (ph). Yeah, I worked on it for three years.

RD: I didn't know that. Yeah, she was a bigger boat.

CP: I think it was 180 foot long. Hard to handle.

RD: Clumsy.

CP: I'll tell you one thing, when you got motion, you got a full rig on, you were gone. It took two of you to hold the wheel. With one man, he'd dance all over that deck trying to hold that wheel. That boat would go when she got a full head of steam which wasn't very often. It leaked like a sieve. No matter how much water would come in that damn thing, it was just like a waterfall. "We're gonna sink, we're gonna sink." "Nah, it ain't gonna sink."

RD: How was the *Elsie*? Did she take on much water, do you remember?

CP: No. My father pumped it maybe once a day in the evening.

RD: It looks like he took good care of it. She looks pretty good.

CP: He did. He pulled it every spring. Every spring of the year. After he got done with hauling season, he'd pull it up in the marsh. He never pulled it out on dry dock or railways. He'd just floated it up on the marsh on the high tide. When low tide came, he went out and did all the work he had to do on the bottom...checked the bottom and everything...never painted the bottom. He always scrubbed it with baking soda water and he always painted the boat with linseed oil and that was it.

RD: So she never went on the railway?

CP: No. Anytime he had to have something that he had to do something to it, he'd put it on the mud bank and wait for the high water to get in and high water to come out.

RD: I never heard of that too much.

CP: That's when you had to improvise. They wouldn't pull it on the railway because every time you pull a boat that size and that weight, you hauled it. Even on these old motor launches, the yachtsmen think down there, every time you pulled them, you hauled them and they got all twisted out of shape (ph).

RD: Our records show she was built in 1890.

CP: That's probably right. But you couldn't find out where it was built.

RD: I thought she was built up in the Philadelphia area.

CP: That's what I thought...Delaware or Philadelphia.

RD: I'm pretty sure she was built up that way. So your grandfather may have acquired her shortly after then in 1899. So, the Palmers had a big name around here, didn't they?

CP: All around Havre de Grace. Well they were all seafaring men even way back. His father hauled molasses and rum out of Puerto Rico. That was on clipper ships.

RD: The members of the family that came to the Museum...how are they related to you then?

CP: Brothers.

RD: Okay, because I didn't meet any of them...they were brothers?

CP: Mom was down there?

Mrs. Palmer: Yeah, I was down there.

RD: Oh were you? The model we had...it's pretty good I think, isn't it? Because I got the message that you had been by, so I said well I better give you a call.

CP: Do you know Tom Barons (ph)?

RD: Down in St. Michaels?

CP: Well, he comes down there a lot. He used to go down there a lot. He lives right down the street there.

RD: No, I don't know him.

CP: A husky guy, wears glasses. He looks like a bum. He had been down there a lot. He used to go down there a lot. He said he talked to everybody down there.

RD: The only person I know (unintelligible) is Alan Perna (ph). Do you know him?

CP: (unintelligible). That's his brother.

RD: You have a nice museum here in town.

CP: There's a picture of the *Elsie* down there.

Mrs. Palmer: I just gave Jerry, that's my son in Newport (ph) the last one I had besides the (unintelligible) was a 5 x 7 because he never had a picture, so I gave him an 8 x 10 and it was painted.

CP: There is a painting around some place of the *Elsie* under full sail going up the Patapsco River to Fort Carroll (unintelligible) and I don't know where it's at. My father gave it to me before he died and before I could get it, it was gone.

RD: Is that right?

CP: A hobo on the road painted that picture from memory. I mean you look at it and you'll see the *Elsie* the way it was.

RD: When did your father pass away?

Mrs. Palmer: 1972.

CP: He lived on the boat. He lived there night and day.

RD: If you're interested in it, I know you've probably seen this photograph before, but if you want a copy, we'd be glad to give you a copy. That same photo appeared in an article in the "Baltimore Sun."

CP: They had a good picture in there in that brown sheet they'd come out with and you probably could go down to library in Baltimore and probably get it.

RD: Yeah. I would have to know the year though. That would be tough to find it without it.

CP: It would be in the range of 1928 to 1932 within those four years.

RD: It shows it racing.

CP: Racing right with them, under full sail and going like hell.

Mrs. Palmer: And they stayed over at Fells Point. People over there who knew him knew he was coming up the river before they could see him because they could hear him singing.

RD: Is that right? He liked to sing?

Mrs. Palmer: Oh yeah, they said they could hear him singing before he got into sight.

CP: Oh yeah, he sang all up and down the Bay.

RD: I never heard that before.

CP: The only thing that kept him going. He didn't have anything out there. Oh, he had a radio, but it didn't play half the time. It was an old wireless.

RD: Didn't have any pets or anything.

CP: No. You can't keep pets on a boat like that. I remember an old man who had run that there ram (ph) out of Annapolis down there. Don't know what his name was. One of the last ones.

RD: *Edwinna Maude*(ph).

CP: Yeah, it was the *Maude* (ph) was sunk.

RD: Yeah, the *Maude* was the one that was sunk.

CP: He had 10 dogs on it. He hauled fertilizer.

RD: Oh, yeah, I know it. It's not the *Maude*, it's the one that died up there in Salisbury.

CP: The one in Salisbury? Well, you know, the *Bennett* (ph) died over in Crumpton.

RD: Yeah, I saw pictures of her up there in Crumpton. What was the one that died in Salisbury? I've been hearing a lot of people saying, they remember her then...there were all these dogs all over the place.

CP: Probably 10 to 15 dogs, oh yeah. You couldn't go on that boat either. He was anchored off one time when I was sailing on the *Bennett*. He was anchored off Annapolis and we weren't close enough to bother him. The dogs went crazy man. He needn't worry about me going on that boat. I aint going on it. But he did. He had one hell of a bunch of dogs on there. And it was just him and the nigger running the whole damn thing. It only took two men for that boat. I worked with me and one other person, worked all the rigging, the masts, sails and everything on the *Bennett*.

RD: Did you ever go out with your father when he went out with hunting parties?

CP: No, that was school time. I didn't go out during school time.

RD: Did he shoot himself?

CP: I have no idea. He probably did.

RD: How did they shoot? They didn't shoot from the boat did they? Did they have some other boat that they were using?

CP: Well, they put them in blinds, put them out on platforms, put them out on blocks, sink boxes. Got off at Souci (ph) Island where they called it a strong bar (ph), but it's not...it's blocks laid out there in different formations and they'd put these hunters out there on these blocks and that's where they stood and shot. When they got their fill, they signaled the boat and then he'd go get them. That's what they did, they put them out on blocks.

RD: Poor way to spend a day.

CP: They paid good money to do it.

RD: I know.

CP: Then they had a lot of sink boxes around here. They used a lot of sink boxes.

RD: Yeah, we have three in the Museum.

CP: There used to be right down here in the woods, there used to be six or seven along the bank down here all the time. Back in those days, we were allowed to put this stuff (unintelligible) forty years, fifty years.

RD: Except for the Museum, I imagine it's all gone around here.

Mrs. Palmer: (unintelligible) you could buy one for nine hundred and something dollars.

CP: Just like I got a set of running lights out there.

Mrs. Palmer: In the paper here—Hevron (ph) decoys.

CP: I got a set of running lights...brass...for a small boat, but they came off a boat built in the 1800s, but they weren't kerosene, they were dry cell batteries. I used to have the running lights off the *Elsie*, but they got confiscated somewhere along the way. I had two running lights and I had the anchor light. It had the name embossed right on it.

RD: So, nothing has survived of the *Elsie*...no gear from her has ever survived?

CP: No.

RD: You said your father fished in the spring.

CP: Yeah. He usually fished off of it, yeah.

RD: I'm trying to visualize how he worked it.

CP: Well, he used (unintelligible) nets and things, like you would take your net to spread them out on poles. He done basically the same thing on the *Elsie* deck. Instead of having to go in to Havre de Grace, they could do it right there at the spot where he was fishing.

RD: Okay.

CP: See what I mean and he figured most of the time he fished eel nets and he had them on stakes, so that way he could stay on the big boat and take the small boat in and fish over and come out and early in the morning he would take the small boat and take them in to market.

RD: Okay. So he did that pretty much by himself, too. Did he have any help?

CP: My grandfather used to help him once in a while, but he did it mostly by himself. He mostly done everything by himself. Like I say, this man, if he's smoking a pipe, is Mouse Boyd and he used to go on trips with him all the time.

RD: What was his name?

CP: Lawrence Boyd. Mouse was his nickname...racetrack name.

RD: What was his last name?

CP: Boyd.

RD: It's your local accent that gets me. So he sailed with your father on occasion. Maybe that's him there.

CP: Yeah, his boat was down there at the (unintelligible) many a time.

RD: Is that right?

Mrs. Palmer: He stayed there all winter.

CP: (Unintelligible) in the Patapsco with grain all the way. Never had to buy tomatoes, watermelon, cantaloupes, or anything. All he had to do is dig it out of the water, fish it out of the water. Always floating in the water.

RD: Did your father ever get into any kind of trouble out there on the water.

CP: Never had an accident.

RD: Is that right? That's pretty good.

CP: The only time he had an accident was when he had his own power boat just for pleasure and he got drunk one summer....

RD: I guess he didn't want to talk about that.

CP: Not much to say about it. But he worked at Aberdeen since 1940 until he died and that's all he had done there, he'd run boats there....

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.