

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Larry Mathews

Oral History # 83

Interviewer: Richard Dodds

Also Present: Brother of Larry Mathews

Date: July 26, 1991

Location:

Topic: Mr. Mathews was born and raised in Townsend, Virginia, at the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula. He worked on the water on both sides (Bay and Ocean). Mr. Mathews knew Hanson Downes, builder of the *Bessie Lee* (82-14), who also lived in Townsend. The tape contains information on Mr. Downes and racing seaside skiffs in the area in the 1920 and 1930.

Comments: Voice of brother was hard to discern; a lot of background noise and he was not close to microphone.

Documentation:

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BEGIN SIDE 1

Richard Dodds: Were you born here in Townsend?

Larry Mathews: Uh huh (affirmative).

RD: Born and raised?

LM: Born right here here. That's my home place.

RD: Is that right?

LM: But, I hadn't lived here all the time. I worked for a seafood company that (unintelligible) from here to Churchtown (ph) and then after that all went bad, and the oysters all died, I went to the Smith (unintelligible) in (unintelligible) and lived there until my children were all grown. My mother died and I went back home and I rebuilt the home site.

RD: You know the area pretty well.

LM: Both sides pretty well. Because I worked on the water on both sides.

RD: Yeah. Did you ever actually own ...you know, you've seen the boat that we have and they were I guess at one time, fairly common around here...

LM: The *Bessie Lee*.

RD: The *Bessie Lee*, yeah.

LM: That belonged to Mr. Charlie Wyatt (ph) and his wife.

RD: That's right.

LM: It was built by Hanson Downes. They've got (unintelligible). He lived in Townsend.

Brother: Yeah, we haven't been able...

LM: That's my no count (ph) brother there

RD: Pardon.

LM: That's my no count (ph) brother.

RD: Oh, okay. You probably know why I'm down here because your brother mentioned that you knew Hanson Downes.

Brother: Oh, yes.

RD: And you know, we had this one boat built by him. We knew a little bit about him, but not that much.

Brother: Was it a sailboat?

RD: Yeah.

Brother: He specialized in that (unintelligible).

RD: Yeah. Our records indicate she was built in Capeville (ph) was it.

LM: That's what they got – Capeville on that, but, he lived in Townsend and at the time, he was living across the street here. It was the first house built here.

RD: Did he build his boats there for the most part do you know?

Brother: I think he built it right here in Townsend.

LM: That's his daddy's place I think out of Townsend, out close to the post office. His daddy and his uncle were house carpenters. I don't know why they got Capeville on that. I have a lot of nice snapshots, though.

Brother: He never did live in Capeville, did he?

LM: Not that I know. Now the *Bessie Lee* was from Capeville.

RD: Yeah. But as far as you know, Mr. Downes lived pretty much all his life right here in Townsend.

LM: He married a girl right near this house and then in the latter part of his life, he lived north of the post office.

RD: What do you call those types of boats down here? What's the common name?

Brother: Bateaus they were called. We call them bateaus.

LM: Bay bateau, I think.

Brother: They have a narrow bottom and real wide sides. They sail them on the sides a lot.

RD: Sometimes, you see the word seaside bateau.

Brother: Right, seaside bateau.

LM: I don't know if they really had a name because they were unique. He built them and he was the only one who would.

Brother: The only place that I ever saw them was on the seaside. I don't remember ever seeing them out on the bayside.

RD: Never saw them on the bayside.

Brother: Either they were built here and used here or they were designed for it.

LM: As near as I can find out, he built six of them.

RD: He built six of them?

LM: And I saw (unintelligible) last night and he said he didn't have any idea where *The Grace* went. That was his mother's name and boat name – *The Grace*. And that was the one I sailed on.

Brother: His mother was our mother's cousin.

RD: Were they all pretty much the same, did you know?

Brother: Exactly, yeah.

RD: *The Grace* looks like the one up in the Museum there.

LM: Exactly.

Brother: You have one up there, huh.

RD: Yeah, we have one up there.

Brother: (Unintelligible). I'll be darned.

LM: He didn't live around here. He lived in New Jersey. So he doesn't know about all this.

Brother: I was a damned Yankee for a while. Laughter.

RD: So, there really weren't that many around here then, or were there?

LM: Six of them is all I know of.

RD: Yeah. Do you know of any that's left other than the one we have.

LM: No, I've tried to find out and nobody seems to know. Henry Wise (ph) had one. That's three that I know of.

RD: Did they have names other than Grace?

LM: I think *Sweetheart* was Henry Wise's boat.

RD: *Sweetheart*?

LM: They all had names, but I can't remember now, it's been so long.

RD: Yeah. When was the main time that he was building these boats?

LM: Well, I went to work down here in 1929, I think. And that was the prime time do a race on these boats down here. It was a big event.

Brother: It had cord wires that came down the sides (background noise).

RD: Where did they race them?

LM: Right down here on the Bay. We can ride down there if you want to.

RD: Okay. But on the ocean side.

LM: Right. Inner bay (unintelligible). We did take them to Norfolk a couple of times and raced in the competition over there only in their own group and they beat the time of some of the fastest boats over there.

RD: Is that right?

LM: the Star – call them Star boats, is that right?

RD: Do you remember how many raced around here?

LM: Just them. They were local farmers around here during the good potato times, they all had a lot of money. It seemed like horse racing to me...an expensive hobby; they were all the same, the only difference would be the skipper and the suit of sails that they had on it.

Brother: Hollow wooden masts.

LM: They were hollow?

Brother: (Unintelligible) when Scott broke one...

LM: I remember that.

Brother: Turned red (ph) too much. It went off like a shotgun.

LM: Yeah, huh.

Brother: Now, I don't whether they all are that way or not, but I remember just where I live, I lived here 30 (unintelligible) laughter. I still have nightmares. (Laughter).

RD: What were they used for, mainly oystering?

LM: Just sport.

RD: Is that right?

LM: Now after they stopped racing, Mr. Scott did use it to go out fishing in the channel. He stayed here for several years leaving it where my boat is.

RD: Because I was thinking it would make pretty good boats.

Brother: No. I think they were designed just for sailing and it would be hard to navigate (unintelligible) a sailboat. It was just too narrow and you had to do a lot of tacking. Today, you'd have a little motor on the back of it.

RD: Right.

LM: I bet he's a waterman.

RD: Me? No, it would be too hard a life for me (laughter).

Brother: It's a good life if you don't have to do it.

LM: I did it all my life.

RD: This is the only picture I've seen of Mr. Downes. Is that a good copy of one?

LM: Uh huh (yes).

RD: I didn't realize that he also made decoys too.

LM: I guess he did. I don't think he was famous for it. Now my brother-in-law – I'll tell you about him later – he is well known (unintelligible).

RD: Is that right?

LM: Yeah.

RD: That looks like him.0

LM: Yeah, that's him.

Brother: That's before he died I guess.

LM: It was a couple of years ago that he died.

RD: I was going to ask you, do you remember what year it would have been?
LM: No I don't.
Brother: About 19 years (ph) and half of that seven or eight years ago.
LM: I can find out for you.
RD: It hasn't been that long ago.
Brother: Seven or eight years ago.
RD: It sounds like it hasn't been that long ago.
Brother: No, he used to come to church.
LM: No, I'd say three or four years ago.
RD: He was born in 1892 it says and it was '91 when this picture was taken so he must have lived for quite a few years.
LM: Yeah, he lived several years after that.
RD: It mentions about his father, John Henry Downes.
LM: Right. He was a house builder. He did a lot of work on this house.
Brother: Henry and his brother Sam
LM: He and his brother lived next to each other. They were both good house carpenters.
RD: Hansom Downes – what was his main occupation?
Brother: I don't know. Did he work with his folks, I wonder? I never knew.
LM: I never knew him to do you know, work at a job. He married this girl over here and I guess she supported him. I don't know.
RD: I wonder how he got into the boat building business.
LM: I don't know. I was just growing up then.
Brother: His father built boats (unintelligible).
RD: So you actually sailed on one of his boats – it was the *Grace*?
LM: That was the *Grace*.
RD: Is that when they were being raced?
LM: Yeah, two of us would be crew. If the wind died down, overboard we'd go (laughter). That wouldn't be legal now I guess if you're racing now. Somebody else would pick us up.
RD: How were they to sail?
LM: Very, very nice.
Brother: The one you have up there does it have a framework that goes out over the steering wheel holding up the (unintelligible).
RD: You had the (unintelligible) three holes up forward.
LM: They said that's one of the things it was noted for – three steps.
RD: You know, it must have been quite a job, though, to move that mast. That mast is not light.
Brother: (Unintelligible).
LM: It would be hard.
Brother: Even the hollow ones would be heavy.
RD: I mean, you wouldn't move them normally when you're out on the water.
LM: No, all I knew of is it stayed in one hole. I guess they had a reason for that, but I don't know what it was.
RD: It is my understanding that with the three holes you could, of course, move the mast around and change the sail area a bit and if you needed to, you could just use the one mast and not take out the other one.

Brother: (unintelligible).

LM: Let's drive up one day (ph).

Brother: I'd love to and Virginia would like to do go too. Now do the boys in the Museum (unintelligible).

RD: Oh yeah.

Brother: I think my father-in-law...would the name (Edward Drummond (ph) ring a bell to you. He's quite famous. He's in this old timers (ph) carving (unintelligible). We got a lot of decoys worth about \$1,000 (ph). And he's (unintelligible) a lot of them himself. He started (unintelligible) my wife to take up the art. She's so busy with (unintelligible).

LM: You know...talking about decoys...do you know anything about Roy Poole (ph) and his collection that he had were sold here recently.

RD: No. Was that down here?

LM: (Unintelligible) and I guess one of the most famous collections I have and they sold it in two different auctions up in Hyannisport (ph) and she has a book there with his picture on the front page. One Brandt decoy – 63 something thousand dollars.

RD: Is that right?

Brother: (unintelligible).

RD: Oh, they had a five barrel...but you don't see them for sale very much.

LM: No, I guess not.

Brother: (Unintelligible).

LM: A lot of them were made out of (unintelligible).

RD: It must have been unusual to have such a big collection down in this part of the world here.

LM: Well, he was the first one in this part of the world who had any inkling of the value that they would be. He finagled them out of different people like us and different ones and some of them not too legal I guess (laughter).

RD: Mr. Downes – did he have a boat shop of some kind or did he build them outside.

LM: He built them outside.

RD: How did he get them down to the water?

LM: No, I really don't know. All I saw, (unintelligible) he had things on poles and I don't know whether that's the way hauled them or not. They might have had (unintelligible), I don't know. I don't have any idea.

RD: Is his house still there?

LM: No he lived in a trailer there. His daughter lived (unintelligible).

Brother: No, didn't he live right in back of (unintelligible) place. The house that Hansom lived in burned. There was a bungalow there. If you're interested, we'll ride up.

RD: No, I was just curious if the house was still there.

LM: Go north from the post office and you'll see a bungalow; a brick ranch and next to it would be the daughter-in-law, the son.

RD: Did you ever see any of these bateaus that were round on the bottom. There was apparently a variation of them that was actually round on the bottom.

Brother: Not here.

LM: No, they must have been on the western shore. Now I was interested when I was up to your place the log canoes that sailed from (unintelligible). They sailed them at the same time we were over there because the wild cherry (ph) masts on them.

RD: Log canoes are probably more common than anything around here at one time.

LM: Well, they were the workboats way back. We'd (unintelligible) like that on the marshes (ph).

RD: Oh, is that right?

Brother (Unintelligible) bottom. Iron pegs in it.

LM: (Unintelligible).

Brother: I think so. The one sitting on the (unintelligible).

LM: Talking about that old barge.

RD: Is that right down there?

LM: Down where my boat is.

RD: I'm going down there and look. Anything else about Hanson? Was he a nice man on the whole?

LM: Very quiet. His wife was just the opposite. He had to be subdued I believe; he'd say very little.

RD: He looked like a nice looking man.

LM: He was a nice man, smart.

Brother: Quiet, real quiet. Now he's from our church. I guess it's (unintelligible).

RD: So they raced these boats in the '20s and I guess maybe into the '30s.

LM: Uh huh, late '20s and early '30s.

RD: And then they died out probably during the depression.

LM: And I left here with the *Cherry Stone* (ph) so I kind of lost track of what was down here.

RD: When you came back, there were no more.

LM: That's right. *The Grace* was the only one. When I walked in that boat place up there, I said, "Well that's what it's like (ph) with no boats." (Unintelligible), *Bessie Lee*.

RD: We have some plans for that boat. We've drawn her up on paper because she's one of the more interesting boats in the collection. Different from anything else we have.

LM: I'm sure a lot of people would like to have one to sail or like to have the plans to build one.

RD: Yeah, we got a lot of interest in those.

Brother: As near as I can remember, she had a fairly narrow bottom, great wide sides.

LM: But she was a dead rise...

Brother: Was it a dead rise? I thought the middle part was just a flat bottom.

RD: She looked like it was quite sturdy.

LM: She had a wide washboard.

RD: They weren't actually worked around here. I found that interesting.

LM: No, they were sport – all sport that I know of because it wouldn't be practical to work here with the tide down and most of the water here is shoaled and you couldn't use a sailboat to go back and forth to work. That would be the reason for that. They did use sailboats (unintelligible).

Brother: I imagine so, yeah. (Unintelligible).

LM: They tell me that three boats were out here yesterday afternoon in all that storm and one of them they were hunting for after the storm.

RD: I saw a lot of your corn got knocked down up there.

LM: Well, we had a knock down drag out yesterday.

Brother: It's a funny thing, I live up in Smith Beach (ph) which as the crow flies, is 15 miles, and we just had moderate rain. Down here all the fields are all under water. I

almost had a (unintelligible) on the farm and I drive slow and I was going around to his right, because I know damn well (unintelligible) he almost hit me. When you wheeled around and when they turn left, he cut it real short.

RD: Looking at your picture up there...

LM: That's Cape Charles Harbor. Right now the Coast Guard Station is exactly where (unintelligible).

RD: Oh, is that right?

Brother: My youngest son is very artistic and is an architect now and it's one of his early paintings. Do you want me to show you a picture of it (ph)?

LM: Do you want a fresh copy of that?

RD: No, I think I've seen it advertised.

Brother: It's all old stuff...way back.

RD: Yeah. You were there?

Brother: Yeah, he's in there, too. There's a little story on that.

INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.