

INTERVIEW LOG

Interviewee: Randolph Murphy

Oral History #OH 99

Interviewer(s): Pete Leshner and Lila Line

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Topic: Building his boat *Water Dog*, hand tonging and patent tonging.

Comments:

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BEGIN SIDE 1

Pete Leshner: You say you're 42 now.

Randolph Murphy: Yeah, I think so.

PL: Why don't you start by telling us something about your family and all their work on the water and your childhood and getting into it?

RM: Well, we'll start, I guess, my mother's family settled the area in the early 1700s, late 1600s. Came on the ships that brought people here. Actually, I have a shadow box of my great, great, great, grandfather whose ship coming across the Atlantic fell on (ph) the sister ship carved and we've been here for a long time. We're not natives as my mother would tell you. We moved the natives out apparently. My father said a few years ago – older folks and I crashed a party and my parents were the only local people there and I said, "I see they have the token locals here," and this fellow jumps up and says to my father, "Oh, you're a native," and my father says, "No, my family has only been here a couple hundred years. If you want to talk to a native, you have to talk to my wife. Her family's been here 350 years." We've been here a while. Working on the water is just something that's all you have around you. There was always a job when I was a kid. There was always something to be done and I started working at 8 years old working charter boats seven days a week in the summertime. The first job I started with Buddy Harrison for \$3 a day. I thought that was a load of money.

PL: You were working on Buddy Harrison's boat?

RM: Worked for Captain Buddy. I guess at 8 years old, whatever the year was, you figure it out. That was my first paying job other than helping my dad for \$1 a year or something like, but as far as working for somebody else, I worked for Captain Buddy for a summer or so and his brother Ronnie was alive then; I worked for him some. Then I went to work for Captain Jim Spurry who is dead now. It was my decision out here. Well, actually, his wife hired me to work for him. I worked for her. I went with Jimmy, but she hired me. I got a raise; I worked for \$7 a day. At the end of the week, she gave me a \$50 bill and I usually made that much also in tips. It was a lot of money. I guess I was about 11 then. I bought my first boat – I was 13 years old. Brothers – McQuaid (ph) brothers, both dead now; been dead a long time. One of them was getting out of the business and had a little work boat – I guess about 28 or 30 foot. I bought her in the fall and kept her pumped out and it was a bad winter that winter, a lot of snow, a lot of ice. I kept the ice out of her, kept her afloat and sold her at spring for twice what I paid for and bought my dad's boat from him which he had built – Captain Percy Marshall built it up Harris Creek – a Harris Creek Boat.

PL: Who was the builder?

RM: Captain Percy (ph) Marshall.

PL: Okay.

RM: He built a lot of what we call Harris Creek Boats; nice boats. You couldn't find a better boat for working for hand tonging or trot lining and most of them run between 28 and 32, 33 foot. Real nice little boats. She's still on the Bay, that boat's still on the Bay and I saw her somewhere. I saw her in Deals Island the last time I saw her.

PL: What was the name?

RM: Well, she was named *Danaran* (ph) after my sister and myself originally. I don't know what the name of her is now. I really don't, but she was left here. I sold her to a

fellow here and he sold it to another fellow here. She ended up in Kent Island and the last I saw her, she was in Deals Island. She's built well; she's still around. I don't remember what year she was built, but probably the early '60s. Anyway, I bought her and used her for several years and it just wasn't quite big enough if you want to be traveling the Bay; it's great for the Choptank River and Harris Creek. That's when I built the *Water Dog* in '79 and I started on her in '78. We launched her May 17, 1979. Donny Hicks and I brought her up the Bay and blew her engine on the way up. Actually, we didn't blow it up as we had some real low balls (ph) came – a brand new motor – marine Oldsmobile brand. It started popping about Sharps Island Light. Danny said, "Shut her off." I said, "Like hell. I'll shut her off when we get to Tilghman Island." Bob Marino (ph) said, "I'm going home with it tonight." We didn't have a radio. Was just in a hurry to get the boat home. I don't know. Where are we going from here? (Laughter)

PL: You built the boat new.

RM: Yeah. I built my boat, well like I said, I started in the fall of '78, late summer or fall and we lost her May 17. I hired a fellow by the name of Roger Bloodsworth who is dead now. I was just down by his house, saw his wife last weekend. I asked Roger one day where his plans were. He said, "On the hood of the car." We had the keel laid out and started on the (unintelligible). He had an old Ford – '64 Falcon or something like that. Roger, "They must have blown off the hood 'cause I don't see it." He said, "They're on the hood." He had some markings and a couple of scratches and a couple of numbers down there. I said, "Oh, my god, I got \$8,000 worth of material laying on the man's car." Oh, my goodness (laughter). What have I gotten myself into? But, we ended up with a real nice boat. He built for me what I thought I wanted. I went around and measured a bunch of boats – what I wanted height-wise, in the bow, and to work out on the Bay for crabbing and oystering. You can build a boat too big for the job or too small for the job. He built the boat for just about anything I can do on the Bay with her. Sometimes on a day like today, she certainly isn't big enough (laughter), but when you get into the yard to work on her in the spring, she's way too big.

PL: Why did you decide to build it yourself? Did Roger Bloodsworth sort of (unintelligible) you to do that?

RM: Well, he was actually the contractor; the boat builder. He was the builder. He set her up and he was always holding my hand, myself and my friends, and to anybody for free labor I could get for a day here and there. Roger worked (ph) with me, work on her. When he needed a hand, we were there. Donny Barrett (ph) and I nailed the bottom on her one day. Of course, we drank quite a bit back in those days. On the way down, I always stopped to buy a beer for Roger and we drank enough beer to fill my boat to sink her (laughter). It just came out of (unintelligible) bottles. I stopped in Cambridge. A fellow used to teach me in high school, a Mr. Intracosto (ph) bought the Beer World in Cambridge at the time. He owned that. I stopped there to get my beer. He always gave me a better price than anywhere else. I'd take it down to Roger. The day we put the bottom on, I put the beer in the refrigerator and Donny never could drink any more than four or five without getting too drunk. He was a three beer burrito (ph) we used to call him as a joke, but anyway, I said, "Donny, pleases, whatever, don't start drinking." I said, "Roger is a terrible alcoholic and if you have a beer, then he's going to have a beer and we won't get a damn thing done." We got $\frac{3}{4}$ of the bottom on her from the cabin back planked and from the cabin forward lengthwise plank. We worked on the back

planking. We got ¾ of it done by about 1:30. Donny says, “I don’t give a damn how much Roger drinks, I’m going to have one.” (Laughter) I said, “Okay, I’ll see how many (unintelligible).” We had a couple and you miss a nail and you bang your wood. Okay, we’re done on the boat for the day. Donny and I pretty much put the bottom on her in one day and Roger still guaranteed it and promised me she wouldn’t leak and we put in the water and he had a lot more faith in me than I do. But, she didn’t leak. The day we set her in the water, not a drop of water comes in her. There was no caulking in between the planks or anything...

PL: What was she built out of?

RM: Pine and oak. She had cedar trim like around the side of this drawer here; the bright work. He cedared and varnished it. No waterman really wants varnish. I just took all that cedar off the sides of her this year because she was holding water; she was rotting behind her or getting rotten. I took all the paint off the cabin and put (unintelligible) to tighten her up. If I didn’t do something now, I was going to have to replace my cabin. It was cheaper to spend \$3 or \$400 than it is to spend \$3 or \$4,000 down the road.

PL: What have you done with the boat since then?

RM: Well, I patent tonged, eeled. I oystered. I was eeling when I built her (unintelligible) other boat. As soon as we got her home, we put the eel (ph) tank and ball bearings (ph) and eeled her and that winter, we oystered and of course, hand tonged. I guess I just grabbed an oyster boat because she (unintelligible). I built a patent tong rig for her as I was building the boat, but I didn’t put it on for several years – just patent tonged her; carried a few fishing parties, (unintelligible) parties, hunting and fishing. A little bit of everything, whatever it takes. I dug a few docks out and did some things that sometimes you’re not supposed to do to make a buck which you have to do...

PL: You mean propeller wash?

RM: Propeller wash right, you understand.

PL: Had you put up (unintelligible) with the name of your boat.

RM: At the time, I think (unintelligible) in your article you asked me that same question. I was dating a gal by the name of Carol Lynn, and I was dating a gal by the name of Patty Lynn. Somebody asked which one of the Lynns as I was going to name it after, and I said the first one who pays for it. But, I had a little (unintelligible) with me all the time. Honest Mike (ph) was his name, named after my brother-in-law and Honest would ride with me – (unintelligible) Eastern Shore dogs are. I guess dogs were (unintelligible). They love a pick-up truck. I never could leave the yard without Honest. He’d ride with me. It was funny; I’d ride to Church Creek. You know where Church Creek is, when you’d turn left to hit George Golden (ph) Hill? Well, he would lay down when we’d get in the truck and as soon as I took that left at Church Creek, he’d get up. Of course, I’d drive down that old road at 70 or 80, whatever. Every time I’d come up on a turn, he’d start leaning against the turn (laughter), but he was great. I named the boat actually after him – after my little dog; Honest Mike. He was a good one. Terrible about my dogs. I’d take one down – I had a black lab for years. I’d breed (unintelligible). I got him home in a Folgers coffee can and take him down and have coffee with him at 5 in the morning. Of course I had my Aunt Grace there. I had tea with her occasionally (laughter). Aunt Grace just died not too long ago. Mom asked me what I was going to do with her ashes. She was raised in Neavitt. Of course, my mom’s family’s from Neavitt. I said, “I was thinking about taking her over to Neavitt and spreading her around on the beach over

there.” She said, “Oh, my god, she hated Neavitt. She’ll haunt you; don’t do it because I’ve got a ghost in the house in Neavitt.” She said, “Don’t do that, Grace will haunt you there.” (Laughter)

PL: When Lila did the interview with you before, you were taking a diver on board.

RM: Yeah, oyster diving.

PL: How did you get into that?

RM: Well, it seemed to be the thing at the time. It was efficient; catch a better grade of oyster, pretty much what you wanted on the bottom. You didn’t have to handle what you didn’t want. There was plenty of them. It was I’d say easier work. In a way it was easier. No job on the water is easy. It seems like it’s easy when you’re making money. You can go out and work the same amount of hours and make less money and it’s harder if you’re more tired. Of course, it was the thing at the time in the late ‘70s or early ‘80s, so that’s what we did and we were damn good at it too; too good some people would tell you when you did a job too well. Not just us, but all the divers. I don’t know.

PL: Did you have lessons to dive yourself, or was it just your partner who dived?

RM: Oh no. I didn’t build that boat to go swimming underneath of her. Just like I told him one day, we had I guess about 45 bushel limit with 25 per man at the time and we needed five or six more judging the pile and Paul came up and said, “I’m tired.” I said, “You need four, five or six more.” He said, “Well you get here and you get down here and do it, I’m tired.” I didn’t build this boat to be swimming underneath of her and I had the ladder aboard. He was swimming towards the ladder and he said, “Put the ladder in the water.” I said, “Get down there and get five bushels and then I’ll put the ladder out for you. He said, “Your cold.” If it’s cold this winter, you’ll be glad you caught those five bushels now. Work when the weather’s good and you can make some money. You pretty damn safe to put the time in – catch what you’re allowed to catch – too many days like this, especially in the wintertime.

PL: You say you put a patent tong on this.

RM: Oh, yeah, I patent tonged last winter and I’ll have it on the first day of October unless something drastically changes crabbing. I had the worst summer crabbing I’ve ever had (ph).

PL: Where do you do to do that?

RM: Oyster tonging? Wherever. Normally up the Bay a little bit. All oysters around here – not all oysters – but oysters in the Bay for the last three or four years have been dead – most of them, there’s some live oysters out there, but as far as being able to make a living off of them, we need some shell stock. We’ll never have oyster soup if we don’t shell stock for something to catch on when we have young oysters and I just read in today’s paper where they’re going to dredge – take some of the spoils in Baltimore Harbor and dump in a trade-off. They’re going to charge like a dollar a cubic yard and that’s all going to go in the oyster recovery program. Now if the money goes into the recovery program instead of new cars for the DNR or whoever is going to supervise this program...money seems to go that way a lot of times, but it should be going right...well, that’s in anything. I’m not going to sit here and knock the DNR. In the last few years, they seem to be trying to cooperate with the watermen. They seem nicer when they come aboard the boat at that end and nicer when I pick up the phone and call Annapolis for something, they’re pleasant on that end also.

PL: You don’t do hand tonging and that sort of thing anymore?

RM: If you work on the water, you have to do it all. Whatever is hot at the time. If everybody dumps into one thing then it floods the market.

PL: Say they open a new bar for hand tonging, you'll go up and do that?

RM: Sure, if I'm catching eight bushels for patent tonging and I can catch 15 hand tonging, I'm going to pull my tongs off. I won't take my whole rig off. I'll push my boom up tight to my mast, tie it down, take my tongs off and some of the equipment to get out of my way and put my hand tongs on and go hand tonging and that's exactly what's going to happen this winter. I'll put my rig on and start probably end up around Rock Hall. We work what they call snake rip (ph) on the chartered side of Mountain Point last year where they had the controversy. They let the drudgers work there. I don't know if you saw that on the news, but our oyster money...we pay \$300 oyster surcharge to go oystering. A couple hundred patent tongers here in this area counting Bozman, Neavitt on this part of the Bay, everybody's money went to put the put the oysters on the bar. They were going to have the drudgers working for two weeks and we went down and went to work. By 2 o'clock that afternoon, they changed the law; a backroom deal anyway. You know about that, it was a back room deal. We paid \$300 apiece; every oysterman on the Bay to go oystering. We paid \$310 for our license or TFL, not a fisher's license and that covered everything except you had to pay your surcharge for oysters. A skipjack captain pays the same thing I pay. He's got six men working on that deck – if it's good, he's got six men if he can catch his limit or four men or whatever he's got. They don't pay any surcharge. They don't even have to have a license. What right do they have? They can come from anywhere. People come from all over to work on a skipjack. What right do they have to catch the lower rung? I say my oysters or the State of Maryland's oysters, the lord's oysters as Gilbert Byron would say; but what right does somebody from out of state have to my oysters when he's not paying to catch them like I have to pay for them.

Lila Line: Do you oyster alone or do you have somebody else aboard?

RM: Both. Last years I took a man patent tonging with me when I started. This year I don't think I will. At a 30 bushel limit, if I hired a kid out of school or somebody totally unskilled and paid him like a minimum wage, it might pay for a while; but to hire a man that knows what he's doing, I can't make that much more money. It's just not worth my while. I'd be better off instead of catching 30 bushels or by myself I'd catch my 15, or you're allowed 1 ½ over 10%. Say if I caught 17 ½ bushels everyday, which you're not supposed to sell the extra bushel. If you put them out, you're supposed to give them to the State which nobody does. You can sell all you bring to shore as long as the marine police aren't there to say you're over your limit; but I figure you're better off if I can catch 20 bushels by myself, which I've done many times. I'm better off that way. So this year I'm not going to take any help patent tonging. I'm going to go hand tonging probably. When the weather gets bad, that's the thing, it's always great to have somebody aboard the boat with you. That's why more so, I've always hired somebody more than needing them for the job, just having somebody around. You never know what's going to happen.

PL: How long did you patent tong last winter then?

RM: I patent tonged all winter. Actually, I crabbed the first two weeks of October. I don't know why, I didn't catch any all summer. I don't know why I thought I was going to catch some in the fall, but, the boys were doing good. They harbored up at Annapolis

– Atkins and Towers (ph) and his wife. I put the rig on and started the third week and did good right up till Christmas and then of course the weather...I was harbored up in Queen Anne Marina. I never really got froze in; locked in there. We had some bad weather, but you lose so much time working in the Bay when you got that kind of bad weather.

PL: So, you drive up to your boat in the morning and stay down here

RM: Drive to Queen Anne, if my boat was faster. Like some of these fellows who've got pretty fast boats, they leave here and run there; pretty slow; old *Water Dog*'s, not fast...

PL: So, you worked through the end of March patent tonging.

RM: Well, when I ended up in March I hand tonged some. I brought the boat home; I patent tonged a couple of days where I shouldn't have been and lost my nerve and then went hand tonging (laughter). It doesn't bother me. They know it too (laughter).

PL: What do you do in the spring then?

RM: Well, this spring all I did was work on my boat. I stripped the paint off the cabin and put West system (ph) on her. The spring before I went to Ireland in March and when I got home, I worked for a friend of mine. If you live on the farm for Kenny Bloodsworth. I worked for Kenny last spring and the spring before actually.

PL: Just working on the shore or working on the boat.

RM: Yeah, I worked on land landscaping. I actually had a landscape contractor and I worked for him. He liked to kill me. I hadn't slept in sixty something hours between leaving Ireland and getting home. Well, he picked me up. A friend of mine picked me up at the bust station and brought me to his house and Kenny picked me up from there and took me home and said, "I'll see you tomorrow morning." I'm like, what? 'Cause I had worked for him in February during some bad weather. Of course, the ground was frozen and he could get on the ground. He had a job to do, so I helped him in February. He really needed me in March. I said, "Buddy, I'm going to Ireland; I got a trip planned, I can't." But, he put me to work as soon as I got home and treated me fairly. I hate to step away from the water, but sometimes you gotta do it. I've done a lot of different things. I love working on the water, but you can't always make a living at it unless you've accumulated enough, or you just sit back. I don't know any waterman my age that can really afford not to work. If it's not on the water, if you can find a job doing something for a little while, you better take it...anybody our age for that matter. In this economy, finding a little help, well, you better do it.

PL: You got the boat in shape in time for crab season then?

RM: Well, if I had the money I would have never stop working on it. (Laughter)
Actually, I crabbed in the morning. I was tied up at a friend of mine's dock equipment and had some power to his dock. I was working up Harris Creek and I crabbed in the morning, then come in, finish baiting up and all that and then I'd work on the boat for tow or three more hours. I worked on her a couple of weeks or so before I went crabbing. But I was tied right at the head on Dogwood Harbor. I was coming in where the (unintelligible) lighthouse is. See that little lighthouse? Well, that's Wilson Road (ph). Wilson's good to us. We have no power in Dogwood Harbor slips and Wilson (unintelligible) use his electricity. Being there at the head of the harbor, everybody's riding by and talking to you and you can't get a lot done with people talking to you. I worked there a couple of weeks. A friend of mine up the creek (ph) and worked at his

dock and got a lot more done. I did more in two hours there than I could in six down here.

LL: Watermen can talk.

RM: Oh yeah. Well, I hadn't been anywhere in this country, in Europe or anywhere people didn't talk. If you're lucky, and you can come up on a great bunch of people, you'll find the gift of gab.

PL: You trot line then?

RM: Oh, yeah.

PL: Do you ever go potting?

RM: Not crab – I've been there with other people and when I had my eel pot rig on, I've had people break down or something, I fished or crab pot rigged for them to help them out, but as far as my own crab pot rig, no.

PL: Do you have a regular spot up Harris Creek or something?

RM: Well, there's no such thing as your own spot. If you're working in an area, we kind of work on the respect theory, you know. If I've been working some spot everyday, then that's my spot until I'm not there for a couple of days and somebody else can go there. Of course, if I'm catching some crabs, if people ask me, I'll say yeah. I don't go to the tackle shop and walk in there and say I've caught 20 today, but if somebody comes to me and asks me, I'll tell them what I did just out of respect for all independent businessmen, but if you don't help your brother, you're in bad shape.

PL: How many lines do you usually run?

RM: Well, I have too much rope aboard the boat. I've got 5,400 feet and that's nine-600 foot sections. About the least amount I'll put aboard is 1,800 feet. You can catch a lot of crabs on 1,800 feet of rope. That's all you need if you're on crabs. That's as much as you need. The reason I carry three times that much, is normally I crab 3,000 feet, what we call a coil for 600 feet of rope of ¼ inch nylon. That's we call a coil. I crabbed six coils, five coils, 3,000 - 3,600 feet; you see a crab going one way, a crab going the other way up the creek. But, in the river, you can't hardly do that; the tide's flowing, the wind's blowing; you crab on line and you still crab 3,000 – 3,600. Sometimes I might do 4,200 feet. Sometimes I might have it all on board looking for crabs; lay a piece here in 18 foot of water and go to 22 foot of water and lay another piece and go up to 15 foot of water and lay another piece. The next thing you know, you got all this rope overboard and you're still not on anything. I say, okay, now I got to take all this up and move it and start again, try again. (Laughter)

PL: What do you use for bait now?

RM: Well, I've got some chicken necks – I'm a chicken necker (laughter). I thought I'd never hear myself say that about myself, I'm a chicken necker and bull lips. I have some bull lips also – eels, well we used bull lips (unintelligible). When little crabs got real thick, you used bull lips. You can't afford to use eel anymore. All the eels are sold live. Even small ones now are sold live.

PL: Is that because there are fewer eels or just because there's a better market for them in other markets.

RM: There are better markets for them (unintelligible). You can't afford to use them for bait anymore, because of the price.

PL: How long has that been the case?

RM: Ten years roughly. We were still buying (unintelligible). My dad's been in the bait business. Actually, it was my mom's business. My dad didn't work. My mom kept the books; it was her business. He sold a lot of eels for bait. He sold them out of Jersey, but I think the last eels he sold for like \$1.35 a pound. A lot of money spent for bait. If that's what's working and that's the best and it's working good, then it's worth it, but you can't count on that. Chicken's good bait. I don't know why we weren't using them when people were coming down here with their chicken hanging off of docks and we were laughing at them. Chicken's a lot of work, though. You had to change every bait every day. It was a lot of work, especially if you crab as much rope as I do and no more crab, you can't afford to hire somebody to help you. You don't mind using eels if I was going out to catch \$300 or \$400 worth of crabs every day, I wouldn't mind spending \$75 in bait.

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