

JAMES & BETTY MCNEILL
Indian Pass Raw Bar - Indian Pass, FL

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Date: March 22, 2006
Location: The McNeill's Home – Indian Pass, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 55 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

[Begin James & Betty McNeill]

0:00:00.0

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Wednesday, March 22nd, 2006, and I'm—am I between Indian Pass and Cape San Blas, or where are we right now?

0:00:14.9

Betty McNeill: You're on Indian Peninsula.

0:00:16.0

AE: On Indian Peninsula, okay. And I'm with Jimmy and Betty McNeill, and their family has the Indian Pass Raw Oyster Bar, which is being renovated as we speak. And we're in their little house here visiting, and I'm going to ask each of you to introduce yourselves for the record. Mrs. McNeill, please ma'am—?

0:00:34.2

BM: For the record, I have been at Indian Pass since I married Jimmy in 1947 and I—there's no point in trying to lie about my age as thirty-nine. **[Laughs]** I will be eighty this year, I think, because I was born in 1926, so that figures out. Anyway—but we've lived at Indian Pass all of our married life. And you're dealing with—particularly with food, which we didn't get into until

after the 1985 storm[, Hurricane] Kate. But as far as introducing myself, I grew up in Port St. Joe and married Jimmy, who grew up here at Indian Pass, and we have not left here. **[Laughs]**

0:01:17.0

AE: And Mr. McNeill?

0:01:19.0

James McNeill: I believe my wife—her mind is either slipping a little bit, or she's putting something off. **[Laughs]** We haven't lived at Indian Pass all our lives, since we were married.

0:01:33.0

BM: No, but you were born here.

0:01:33.9

JM: Well, yes. **[Laughs]** We had the pleasure of going to school—I did—at University of Florida. I had already—before World War II—got a scholarship to the Georgia Military College. I couldn't have gone to college. Things—the family was not rich enough to pay any—any college fees at that time. But then I went into service and became a—a pilot of air—excuse me—B-17 pilot during World War II and got out, and I wanted—I went during that time, and they sent me

to the University of Tennessee for some highfalutin electric—electrical stuff. And I wanted to go back to Tennessee after I got out, but they were tied and up, and they were full at that time, so I managed to get into Georgia Tech. And I went to school there for a couple of semesters, and then I got a scholarship to the University of Florida, and I finished there.

In the meantime, I had met Betty. She was a—she was a sister of a good friend of mine and we—he played football, and we were all in the band. And anyway, Betty and I got to going together, and we fell in love, and so far we have made a solid thing of it. We were married in 1947, am I right?

0:03:07.6

BM: I was. *[Laughs]*

0:03:11.5

JM: *[Laughs]* And I'm eighty-one years old, and we've been married all that time since then. And it seems like a short time, really. But I was born here [at Indian Pass]. My dad came here in 1902. He was in the turpentine business; he was originally from North Carolina.

0:03:31.4

AE: I can hold this [recording device], if you want, and then you don't have to worry about it.

0:03:34.6

JM: Am I spreading it out too much?

0:03:34.6

AE: No, you're fine.

0:03:37.4

JM: He—he was born in North Carolina on a farm. During the War Between the States, his dad was killed. And he left his home when his mother married the second time, and he began to raft trees—lumber—trees for lumber down the Cape Fear River. And then he worked on down 'til they got down—down to the edge of Florida and got involved in the Naval stores—rosin, turpentine. And he gradually worked on up, until he had rented some places and operated for them and then came to Wewahitchka [Florida]—well, got down to Hahira, Georgia, and he had a friend there that he rented land from and then another one that he got in business with. Anyway, moving on down, he came to Wewahitchka, Florida, and he had the turpentine operation there. And all of these had been rental places from people that had property—owned. But he—he and a couple of bankers got an opportunity to buy acreage in this area—Port St. Joe area—and down through Indian Pass to the county line, Franklin County, which Apalachicola [is in]. Anyway they had about 13,000 acres and began turpentine.

And I was born 1924 here at Indian Pass. I have a sister that was born fourteen years before me. And I grew up here. And the turpentine business gradually played out, and the people other than my father died off, and we ended up with about 13,000 acres at the end. And then we began to sell some of it for various things: beach development and developing. And I got into the seafood business after I got out of school. I've rambled long enough. Now, what else?

0:05:56.4

BM: But the [Indian Pass] Raw Bar, itself, evolved from the turpentine operation, which was a commissary for the hands that worked there. And it was also used in that capacity for the oystermen that were employed by the Indian Pass Seafood Company, when we went into the oyster business and—any kind of seafood—mullet, whatever—for oh, until [nineteen] eighty-five, when the oyster beds were depleted. We had the oyster bottom leased in Choctawahatchee Bay, as well as over here [on the west side of the Apalachicola Bay at Indian Pass], and we—that didn't pan out in Choctawahatchee Bay. We had [*Laughs*] a disastrous experience there. But the oysters here are of such quality and they're so limited. It's like the Belon oyster in a way, and it doesn't—it doesn't have, really, the reputation, and I don't guess it ever will because we won't have that quantity to produce but like the—what's the one in Long Island? Is it Blue Point? That's—just a brand name of oysters, you know, for a connoisseur, but—

0:07:02.1

JM: But we've—we've sold a lot of oysters to Mississippi and they, at that time, were in the canning business in a big way and we—we were just shucking them raw and selling them out. But we had a number of oystermen working for us. At one time, we had three oyster plants in Eastpoint, Apalachicola, and Indian Pass.

0:07:22.4

AE: So were these things that your father started or that you started?

0:07:23.8

JM: No, that I started.

0:07:25.4

AE: Okay.

0:07:25.9

BM: He passed away before he got into the oyster business, didn't he?

0:07:29.6

JM: Yes, he—he died in 1941.

0:07:33.6

AE: What was your father's name?

0:07:34.6

JM: James T. McNeill. And I'm also James T—James Thomas, Jr. And we have a son that's now almost fifty years old, who is named James T. McNeill III so—

0:07:50.5

AE: So can I back up and ask you a few more questions about—

0:07:52.4

JM: Sure.

0:07:52.5

AE: —your parents and that generation of folks here in this area? When he came down here, was Indian Pass already known as Indian Pass?

0:08:03.9

JM: Well it might have been known as that. On the map—some of the maps I have seen Indian Pass, yes.

0:08:11.8

BM: It's a geographical fact that the pass from the Gulf of Mexico into the Apalachicola Bay—and the Indians used it, and that name came from there. And so the Indian Pass itself is—is a little body of water at the end of this peninsula. This is Indian Lagoon out here, and the Gulf [of Mexico] is over there [points west towards Port St. Joe]. But there was nothing here except the geographical fact [*Laughs*] of it being land here.

0:08:37.0

JM: And the lighthouse at Cape San Blas—

0:08:39.9

BM: Right.

0:08:40.5

JM: —was the only—well only family.

0:08:45.6

BM: Inhabited area.

0:08:45.9

JM: Yeah, yeah right. Now the—all the rest of it was just woodlands, some swamp land, and, of course, the rivers and the bays, and it was used primarily for turpentine. So it was to get the gum out of the trees and eventually end up with it in the paint business. But we went into the sawmill business after the—

0:09:15.5

BM: You mean pulpwood?

0:09:15.6

JM: Well sawmill first—

0:09:18.3

BM: I didn't realize that.

0:09:18.3

JM: Yeah, cut a lot of saw timber—went into St. Joe and was cut.

0:09:23.0

BM: I didn't realize that.

0:09:23.6

JM: Well it was there and then went into the pulpwood business. We had several pulp—
pulpwood operations and the mill—St. Joe—

0:09:37.9

BM: Paper Company?

0:09:38.0

JM: —Paper Company had gone in and built up a paper mill in Port St. Joe,, and we sold the paper—trees to go to them, though, to make paper.

0:09:52.0

AE: Did your father, when he came down here and when you were growing up, did he talk about what it was like when he first arrived in the area?

0:09:57.8

JM: Yes, he liked it very much. There were very few people. He brought people down with him from Georgia and places that he had been and had operations going. And then people from Wewahitchka who came down and stayed here then—quite a few people that lived here later, they went to Apalachicola when they—.

[Mrs. McNeill brings over a photograph of Mr. McNeill standing next to his father.]

0:10:27.3

BM: *[Talking about the photograph]* Jimmy's father and Jimmy—ten, twelve—?

0:10:29.5

JM: Let me see, I was about ten, eleven years old [when the photograph was taken].

0:10:34.8

AE: You look like you weren't getting into too much trouble back then. [*Laughs*]

0:10:38.4

JM: [*Laughs*]

0:10:39.0

BM: That's one of their outbuildings [in the background of the photograph]. I don't know which one it was.

0:10:42.7

JM: My—my mother or her family were longtime settlers in Wewahitchka. And—and that's my great-grandmother, my—my mother—[*points to the oil painting hanging in the living room, where the interview is taking place.*]

0:10:54.9

BM: It could be great-great, I'm not sure.

0:10:57.8

JM: Great-great.

0:10:58.9

AE: This painting on the wall is your great-great grandmother?

0:11:00.9

BM: Caroline Bush.

0:11:01.7

JM: Yeah, right.

0:11:03.9

BM: Or Wood.

0:11:05.2

AE: Caroline Wood?

0:11:06.4

BM: She was a Wood and married a Bush.

0:11:08.2

JM: Married a Bush.

0:11:09.7

AE: Okay.

0:11:10.0

BM: Or she was a Bush and married a Wood; I never have gotten that straight.

0:11:12.4

JM: [*Laughs*]

0:11:13.2

AE: [*Laughs*] Well and so Mrs. McNeill, you're—you were saying [when we were standing] in front of the [Indian Pass] Raw Bar [earlier] that your father worked at Port St. Joe Paper Company, is that right?

0:11:21.4

BM: No, it was the St. Joe Lumber and Export Company, which was a cypress mill that went into business in Port St. Joe about the time that the St. Joe Paper Company opened the paper mill. But he was in the lumber—in the logging end of the sawmill business and really had nothing to do with the paper mill. It's—it's—coincidentally—start up—

0:11:41.9

AE: Okay. And what is your—what is your maiden name?

0:11:43.8

BM: My name was Lane.

0:11:46.7

JM: But she—she was not aware of it in any consequential amount, but her—the company that she worked—her dad worked for did cut some of our timber and—

0:12:01.5

BM: Cut some by mistake, I remember. [*Laughs*]

0:12:04.0

JM: Well, yes [*Laughs*], some of it belonged to my mother by her—but they did—sold them to the—logs to the thing and then it was—went through a—a more—get my words mixed up there—did a finer job dressing the lumber down and so forth instead of just a rough type.

0:12:28.6

BM: My dad was working for St. Joe Lumber and Export Company when they took the virgin timber off St. Vincent's Island, and they used the hard pine that was cut from over there to make the decking for the submarine decks in World War II. And he built a bridge, which would never be allowed now with the ecological concerns, from the mainland over to St. Vincent's Island. And it's been removed since; it's no longer in use. But that was an engineering feat that I didn't think they could do. [*Laughs*]

0:13:03.5

JM: Yeah, she needs to take a look at the pass where the island—the bridge used to be to the Island. We'll drive you down there before you leave.

0:13:11.2

AE: Okay, okay.

0:13:12.0

JM: If you don't mind.

0:13:13.0

AE: Yeah. No, I'd love that. And so Mrs. McNeill, you're—you were saying, too, that your father built a restaurant for your mother to run?

0:13:21.2

BM: No, he didn't build it. He bought it for the interim before his job opened up with St. Joe Lumber and Export Company, and he had bought a little restaurant that was for sale. He had come down to scope the place out before we left Alabama, and **[Laughs]** he had acquired this

restaurant. It was small restaurant, and I don't know how long we had that. We sold it to somebody.

0:13:46.1

JM: Two or three years is all—.

0:13:47.3

BM: Yeah, but it was—I know we had it when we came down here in [nineteen] forty-seven.

0:13:51.8

AE: What was it called?

0:13:54.9

BM: Dad's Café, I think. It was right next door to French's. I remember we had—we had several restaurants on the main drag there [in Port St. Joe], and now we're getting that many more. Across the street was the Black Cat Café, and then there was our place and French's, and it seemed like there was another one down the street. But it was a construction time, and a lot of people had no homes that—and it was—well, I guess it's kind of like it is now—a lot of eating places could flourish. But as soon as we could we got out of that business—it's not easy.

0:14:35.0

AE: Well and you said that your mother told you never to get into [the restaurant business].

0:14:35.4

BM: [*Laughs*] Right.

0:14:36.1

AE: And then there you were with the [Indian Pass] Raw Bar.

0:14:38.4

BM: Right. It's not really been my thing, but it's a family thing and it—it—when the storm came and took us out of the oyster business—we've told this before, that we still had more oysters than we could personally consume, but we did not have enough to stay in the wholesale business. So our son [James McNeill III] said, *Well why don't we open an oyster bar and—and retail them, you know by the dozen instead of by the bushel or whatever—or by the gallon?*

0:15:07.9

JM: At that time, the store here was—was being used for retail merchandise, and our crews—oystermen, fishermen, shrimpers—had quite a few shrimp boats operating here, too, that was used—it wasn't anything like a restaurant. But after this other happened, well, then we had—needed something, and Jim [James McNeill III] came up with that thought [to open a restaurant], and we lived on that. It worked out.

0:15:35.2

BM: We used to sell a lot of gasoline in conjunction with the commissary operation there until—when was it we got out of the gasoline business? When the tank is over twenty years old, you had to have a lot of insurance, and those tanks were put in—in the early [nineteen] thirties and so [*Laughs*] they never had a leak, but we didn't feel like it was cost-effective to buy the—the insurance. Is that correct?

0:16:00.3

JM: Yeah.

0:16:00.9

BM: And so we got out of the gasoline business. At one time, during the War [World War II], before the—Highway 98 was back behind us to the north and the east of us—this place sold

more gasoline than any other place in the county, according to our supplier. More Gulf gasoline.
anyway.

0:16:19.1

JM: More gasoline. But—but this area, with the coastline through here, there was a Coast
Guard camp down between—just about a mile and a half—

0:16:34.2

BM: It was at the lighthouse.

0:16:36.3

JM: Well it—no.

0:16:36.4

0:16:35.9

BM: Oh, no, right, the one—during the war, right on the beach.

0:16:38.9

JM: Right, about a mile-and-a-half toward Port St. Joe there's a—well, a restaurant down there, but it—they—well, quite a few people there that were in the Coast Guard and then—get my stories mixed up—where I'm going. But the whole coastline, we owned a lot of property here, having been in the turpentine business and began to sell off parts of it. And as time has gone on, well, it's become more and more valuable. Today it's—well it's—it's very valuable—so valuable I can hardly pay the taxes on what we have left. *[Laughs]*

0:17:25.7

BM: We didn't have any competition because the St. Joe Paper Company owned all the land that we didn't own, and they weren't selling, and we weren't either, so we had no competition, as far as the filling station. Now Simmons Bayou—Mack Miller had a filling station there, but the long trucks and all would come by here, I guess.

0:17:42.5

JM: Right.

0:17:45.0

AE: So Mr. McNeill, when did you get—when did you start working on the water? Did you start with shrimping or oystering or both?

0:17:52.2

JM: No, when I came back from—right after I finished college, my family had been operating the store. They had been running that for the—the other people who were in business. There was a man named Bragdon—Oscar Bragdon—who had gone into the oyster business and shrimp business, and when I came back—he had worked for my father.

0:18:17.2

BM: His father had worked for your father, too.

0:18:20.2

JM: Yeah. And he grew up in our household, and through the years—it was like he was my older brother, and eventually we were in business together. I went in business with him, and that's the way we got into that end of the business and—

0:18:39.6

AE: And when you say you went into business with him—?

0:18:43.5

JM: Well okay, in the oyster and shrimp business.

0:18:47.3

AE: So you—you started an oyster house together?

0:18:50.4

JM: He already—already—

0:18:51.3

BM: He had already started the shucking house.

0:18:52.2

JM: —an oyster house. Have you ever been in a shucking plant?

0:18:54.9

AE: Yes, sir.

0:18:57.1

JM: Okay. Well you know what I'm talking about, then. He had that down at the end [of Indian Pass peninsula] here, where we now have a campground.

0:19:03.5

BM: There's no road out here. The only way to get in and out from there was a village down there where the oystermen lived during the season, and they had to ride the beach. And Jimmy used to pick the kids up down there and bring them up by the beach to catch the school bus by the store because there was no road here until [nineteen] fifty-two or fifty-three, right?

0:19:24.4

JM: That's about right—about [nineteen] fifty-two, yeah. It was a State road, the one—the road right in front of the Raw Bar now ran—runs from Apalachicola to Port St. Joe, and it was State Road 30. And then—then—

0:19:39.9

BM: It was Highway 98.

0:19:40.6

JM: —it became Highway 98 as the—things built up. But that—that was the way they—well, we had a school here in Indian Pass when I—my first and second year I went to school in Port St. Joe. My sister taught school there, but then the third grade through the sixth, it was a school of enough children that there was a school here at—well, one place—building we had is in back of the—back of the store at that time and then when—later we had one down at the Indian Pass itself, which is another mile and a half from here. And the kids went to school there. I went—I had to go to school somewhere else after the sixth grade. They couldn't teach beyond that—the level, so I went to school in Apalach[icola]. And I'd go down to the county line, which is three miles from the Raw Bar toward Apalachicola. The school bus would pick me up there and carry me to Apalachicola and then bring me back to the county line. And most of the time, I'd either hitchhike a ride or I—we had Shetland ponies, and I'd ride my pony to the county line, or we'd catch rides with other people, and everybody was friendly to everybody.

0:21:03.7

AE: Do I remember—because I feel like your son told me that, when I was here before, that some of those benches out in front of the Raw Bar are from school buses from way back when?

0:21:11.5

JM: That long bench there? We had it in the back of a pickup truck and the kids—we would go down to the Pass. By that time, this road that we just came in down here had been built. And we

had two benches in the pickup truck like that [parallel to each other], and we'd fill it up with kids and bring them up to the Raw Bar. It was a store then. And the school bus from Port St. Joe would come down and pick them up.

0:21:38.1

BM: Well after the road was built, the school bus was down there.

0:21:41.2

JM: Yeah.

0:21:42.6

BM: You brought them up on the beach—that's the little benches were on—on the side of the truck that was used to haul the oysters, and then in the afternoon [*Laughs*] all the children back and forth to the—from home to the store to catch the school bus there, riding on the beach, and when the weather was bad and they couldn't go on the beach, they had to come up through the sand dunes. And sometimes you couldn't get them, could you?

0:22:02.8

JM: That's right.

0:22:03.8

BM: In rough weather.

0:22:04.9

JM: We had about thirty families at one time that lived down there in the oystering and shrimp business. And they—they had children, of course, that were being picked up. By that time, I had gotten old enough that I had gotten out of school and was in business.

0:22:21.5

AE: Did you ever go out on an oyster boat yourself, or did you just manage that—?

0:22:23.5

JM: Yes, I did. I—I didn't do it on any regular basis but I—I learned enough that it was hard work and that I needed to hire people to work for me.

0:22:32.9

BM: Well after we got married, he—I did not care for raw oysters, but he was going to shuck some for me, and we sat out in the yard until nine o'clock at night, and he had a half a cup of oysters shucked. *[Laughs]* *[Clock chimes in background]* He is not a hands-on oysterman, anyway.

0:22:47.2

JM: I was accustomed to having people do things for me. It worked pretty good, too. *[Laughs]*

0:22:53.9

AE: *[Laughs]* So you said that you over the years, though, had a few [oyster] houses. You had some in Eastpoint and—?

0:22:59.4

JM: Oyster houses, yes ma'am. I had one in Apalachicola—a small operation and we had twelve shuckers, and in Eastpoint we had oh, it was probably—hmm, thirty—maybe thirty—

0:23:12.8

BM: It was a big payroll.

0:23:14.8

JM: Thirty, thirty-five people who were shucking oysters for us and we—

0:23:19.1

BM: When your husband is oystering, do you know what the—it was kind of a family thing.

The oyster—oystermen would bring the oysters in, and usually, his wife was the shucker for his oysters, and that kept the quality up and the size, too, I think—so to do that. But—

0:23:34.9

JM: And the other oyster house was the one in—in Indian Pass. We had—that was—I guess, thirty-five shuckers there.

0:23:44.3

AE: So in the early days, where were you selling all your oysters to? Just the immediate area or were you able to ship them out?

0:23:51.2

JM: Well we shipped some of them on the railroad—carried them to Apalachicola and they went north. But as times got better, Alabama and Georgia—trucks would come down and buy the oysters for it and then the—the people would have trucks of their own to deliver them. We sold—what was the place in New York we sold—furnished with—?

0:24:18.7

BM: Fulton Fish Market. Somebody—I forgot the name of the company.

0:24:20.0

JM: No, the restaurant that—well, I'll think of it in the conversation. Anyway, one of the bigger restaurants in New York, we furnished all the oysters for—oh, for several years for that. We—we had—had the name of quality products. That was the trick to the whole thing.

0:24:43.5

AE: So how have you witnessed the oyster industry change over these many decades [that] you've been in it and watching it?

0:24:50.3

JM: Well the problems that have come up were not attended to—to begin with. Well having—having—things in—that would infect them and you'd have to—to shut down because of the oysters not being safe. And the biggest thing was people spreading out the—they were not safe to eat, and it wasn't true. The—the labs had not worked enough to tell what was safe and what wasn't.

0:25:26.5

BM: There was a time if anybody got sick and had eaten an oyster in the last year they blamed it on the oysters but it is a fact that damaged immune systems do lend—pose a hazard for uncooked food of any kind of and of course it's just raw oysters that are problem. But the problem with the oyster business is the lack of the habitat now. We're having so much—don't you think—?

0:25:50.0

JM: Yeah.

0:25:52.3

BM: So much settlement along the oyster growing areas that we just are depleting the areas for growth. We have a small lease out here, and Buddy Ward [13 Mile Oyster Company, which is

operated by Buddy's son, Tommy Ward] has got a big lease on St. Vincent's and I—I don't know if—the State tried to start—taking the leases out.

0:26:09.4

JM: That's the only two now.

0:26:12.2

BM: The Shellis lease is no longer—?

0:26:13.2

JM: No, uh-uh. We had 113 acres that we leased from the State [of Florida], and we planted and—and grew oysters and then we finally got down to fifty-one or fifty-two acres.

0:26:33.2

BM: The State is discouraging private leased bottoms. I don't know why because that seems to me that—that—that would enhance the quality of the product, as well as the availability of it.

0:26:48.6

JM: Times change and things are different. The same people are not operating that worked at the time I was.

0:27:01.1

AE: Do you have any other children in addition to Jimmy?

0:27:05.5

JM: We have a daughter who is what, fifty?

0:27:09.4

BM: She was born in 1954, so she will be fifty-two this year in—in November.

0:27:16.2

JM: And have a son who lives—who just—he's not quite fifty yet. When will he be fifty?

0:27:22.6

BM: August.

0:27:23.1

JM: August.

0:27:23.7

BM: He was born in [nineteen] fifty-six and [*Laughs*] in the even years it's easy to do.

0:27:28.0

AE: [*Laughs*] And what are their names?

0:27:29.0

JM: Jim [James McNeill III] and Linda.

0:27:33.4

AE: And so did they grow up working in the oyster house or did they—did you have them put to work at an early age?

0:27:37.8

JM: Not the beginning. Jim, he worked a little bit in the store to begin with and then he—in school—he was going to school and went to college in Panama City and he got a job working with—

0:27:58.3

BM: It was Glidden then, but it's something else now.

0:28:01.2

JM: Yeah, Glidden Paint—Paint Company then, during the summer.

0:28:03.4

BM: It's Arizona Chemical now.

0:28:05.4

JM: Yeah. During the summertime, he got a job working with them, and then he told me that he wanted to go on and get—quit working in the seafood business and get a regular job. And I said, *Well you need to go on and finish school, Jim.* And he said, *Well I'm going to when I can.* And I said, *Well now, I will pay your way through school—through college, if you will go ahead and— and work at it, but I'm not going to pay it for you to work part-time at it and do something else.*

You need to devote your time to the job that you have with the company or do it—well, the other way. So he said well, he would go ahead and work with the chemical company, then. And a little bit later on, as our business began to grow more, he decided well, he might like to work with us again. And he did and has worked with us all the time since then—one phase or another and finally became pretty well management of—of the business. He's down in Orlando in—what's the—?

0:29:25.1

BM: Disney World?

0:29:25.0

JM: Disney World with his kids now for a week, while we're trying to put things back together here.

0:29:33.0

BM: And it's spring break.

0:29:34.7

AE: Yeah, he told me he was taking a vacation. That sounds like a good one. **[Laughs]**

0:29:37.4

BM: Yeah.

0:29:37.5

AE: So can you fill in the holes between the oyster houses and that business and then just having the Raw Bar? Or is there still other—other elements of the business that are in operation?

0:29:49.2

JM: Well no, we—I mean the real estate business—we did not push the sale of real estate. But there were some people who wanted to buy, and we cooperated as much as we could with them. We were holding back as much as possible for our family to develop as time came along. And, of course, we had no idea that the prices were going to reach such a fabulous high thing.

0:30:17.4

BM: We have the campground but then that—that was part of our holding the—we tried to do whatever it took so that we could remain at Indian Pass. [*Laughs*] That's about it. So whatever comes up that will enable us to stay here, we try to involve ourselves in. But [our son] Jim has decided that he doesn't ever want to live anywhere else, and that was the main reason he wanted

to get away from—to get back here and involve himself in the business in one way or another. But things just sort of happened. We don't—we wouldn't say it was planned in any way. But from the store to the raw bar was—was—because of a hurricane, really, and it looks like the hurricanes are going to keep visiting us every twenty-five years or so.

0:31:05.1

AE: And that was in—was it [nineteen] eighty-five, you said?

0:31:08.0

BM: Uh-hmm, the hurricane came.

0:31:08.3

AE: And that's when the [Indian Pass] Raw Bar really became a restaurant?

0:31:09.8

BM: Right. He debated whether to build it back or not, and then they opened back—back up as a sort of a convenience store, which is sort of a step-up from the commissary and the Raw Bar, and it just sort of evolved into a—it's going now as—maybe you could tell. It's going to be more of a food establishment than a convenience store [now with the rebuild after Hurricane Dennis in

2005], and we hope that it will pan out. We've had really, really good acceptance. We had no idea that—that the business would be as popular as it—it became and that it was—it—it just filled a niche, apparently, that was not filled before. In fact, people say there's no place like it, **[Laughs]** and I don't know whether that's a compliment or not. **[Laughs]**

0:31:57.3

JM: Here's picture that shows the inside.

0:32:02.4

AE: Oh, I didn't see this one, yeah. So tell me about the days when it was a commissary. Your son was telling me about there being a meat counter and using that big butcher's block to cut meat and stuff like that.

0:32:13.2

JM: Yes, we tried—tried to make it into a—a regular store and—and we had meat cutters and—

0:32:28.1

BM: We bought a quarter of beef every year and it was—it was really a commissary that—and a grocery store to furnish—

0:32:34.1

JM: Well we had—

0:32:35.2

BM: —whatever anybody would need that—people did not go to town, and when they got there, they didn't have any more shopping either in Apalach[icola] or Port St. Joe than they could do at Indian Pass. So that was the way the store operated then. We sold everything from blue jeans and tennis shoes and [*Laughs*]*—well, you name it and—and we had it, sooner or later.*

0:33:06.3

AE: Do you have any stories from those days in the commissary of—?

0:33:09.6

BM: Oh, you don't want to hear all the stories [*Laughs*] of the commissary. We did a charge business then. Almost everybody did—carried accounts, I suppose and we—I guess we came out all right on those. But some of our oystermen, if they didn't get paid, why, but once a week, and sometimes they wanted money beforehand. And they would borrow money and put it on their

account and oh, it was an experience. Like I say, you'd do whatever comes to hand and deal with it.

0:33:43.7

[Hands interviewer a stack of photographs of the Indian Pass Raw Bar.]

JM: Go through these. You'll get a chance there to—to give you a little idea—

0:33:48.2

BM: Well, I got those out to show to—I thought it was our neighbors next door [who are in the picture]. That's a picture of Charlene and Rob and when her sister was down here and—and Rob's friend. We took them up to the raw bar to eat. But I think what made the place popular was the write-up of the travel editor out of—the Associated Press was down this way and wrote, you know—kind of filling in space and mentioned it. And he wrote about it in such a way that it may pique your interest to come down and see so—.

0:34:22.5

JM: We've had people from all over the country call us and—wanting to know if we were still in business and serving. And some of them hadn't seen it. It had been written six or eight years before and—but it—it appealed to them so much, and they had people drive all the way from California here to eat Indian Pass oysters. And the oysters are excellent—

0:34:44.8

BM: I guess it was Craig Walker, this AP article—was out the other day and this is out of a newspaper *The Sun* in Lowell, Massachusetts, you know, and it's in the *New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*. It was in the Washington paper, you know—pick up, you know—I guess they have blank spaces to fill in, so they just fill in with the travel editor but that—that's—shows you what advertising will do.

0:35:13.5

AE: Do y'all remember or have any idea who painted that sign? The Indian Pass Trading Post sign [that's on the front of the building]?

0:35:19.0

JM: No.

0:35:21.3

BM: It was an itinerant, wasn't it Jimmy?

0:35:21.5

JM: Yes, I can't remember who painted the first. Gator did the second part of it.

0:35:29.0

BM: Yeah, he—he touched it up after the storm, but—

0:35:33.0

JM: Yeah.

0:35:33.6

BM: —I do not know. I thought it was the Boyer boy, but somebody else said no, they didn't do that.

0:35:38.9

JM: No, not that one; he did another one.

0:35:45.4

BM: I don't know how we'd find out.

0:35:46.3

JM: Well one of them—

0:35:47.8

BM: The records, you know, a lot of them—a lot of stuff got destroyed.

0:35:49.3

JM: —one of them—the painters that did it was a man that worked for us, and he was nicknamed “Gator” because I graduated from the University of Florida and was a gator. And Jim wanted to be a gator, and he didn't go and finish that but anyway—

0:36:11.6

BM: Well, I thought that was Gator's nickname when he came here.

0:36:13.5

JM: He picked it up, Betty. That sign—it was down at the campground. He picked that up and hooked it on that road there, and it said “Gator” and he took that over. He inherited that, so—

0:36:25.4

BM: His name is John. *[Laughs]*

0:36:27.7

AE: *[Laughs]* Well John/Gator did a good job. And I—Jimmy was also telling me about that air pump out front, that it's always given free air for all these eighty years or whatever?

0:36:40.9

JM: Yes, right.

0:36:42.2

BM: Well we was just talking about that last night—whether to have the—the compressor reworked or—it's still there, I guess.

0:36:50.2

JM: I don't know; I haven't looked.

0:36:50.6

BM: You didn't look?

0:36:51.7

JM: I need to see if it is—

0:36:53.0

BM: The only thing is, people kept stealing the gauge on the thing and [*Laughs*]—and that was expensive, so we started taking it off, so people didn't—didn't take it during the day. You know, we kept the gauge inside [so] that you could use [it], but the thing was attached to it. And it was so handy to use, even in self-service for me, which I despise. I could do it without too much difficulty. You probably didn't grow up having a full-service on your car.

0:37:20.3

AE: I know a little bit about full-service gas stations.

0:37:24.7

BM: Weren't they nice? [*Laughs*]

0:37:26.7

AE: *[Laughs]*

0:37:27.3

BM: Clean your windshield and check your tires.

0:37:28.1

AE: I know it.

0:37:29.3

JM: Another thing that went on during the time we're talking about—the oystering and the store and all—we had several shrimp boats that we operated out of the same place—the dock where the oysters were unloaded and so forth. And we were loading the shrimp out of all of them, and they would go to Louisiana, and a lot of them went to Mississippi and to the plants over there.

0:37:55.3

BM: Well the crab vats, too, you remember?

0:37:58.1

JM: Yeah, that's right. I forgot about that.

0:37:59.8

AE: Where was that?

0:37:59.9

BM: In Apalachicola.

0:38:00.2

AE: In Apalachicola.

0:38:01.7

BM: We had briefly operated one over in the Jacksonville area—Bell River Crab—because there were a lot of crabs over there, but we had a shipment on the market to New York, and they called back and said it smells like kerosene. And we had to start investigating, and it seemed that

the State of Florida had given a paper mill permission to dump into the Bell River any time they needed to, their—

0:38:26.3

JM: Fernandina, Florida.

0:38:28.9

BM: Yeah, any time they needed to but the—the paper mill was in Georgia I thought—St. Mary's, Georgia.

0:38:36.2

JM: Well it was one there, and it was the one in Fernandina, too—

0:38:39.1

BM: In order to—

0:38:40.2

JM: And Fernandina is what got us in trouble.

0:38:42.0

BM: It was?

0:38:42.4

JM: Yeah.

0:38:42.8

BM: Well the State of Florida would have control over that—to give them permission to dump, to encourage industry to come in. We already had an industry, [*Laughs*] but it wiped that one out in a hurry. So we closed that one down when we realized that—what we were up against.

0:38:56.7

JM: It was several thousand dollars worth of crabmeat that was—had to be poured overboard in New York City, and we had to stand the loss on all of that, so we got out of the crab business over there and back here where we could control it.

0:39:13.9

AE: About what year was that that you got out of the crab business there?

0:39:18.1

JM: Oh, this was—

0:39:26.4

BM: You'll have to ask him that.

0:39:26.1

JM: When—when the Turnpike Authority—when the turnpike was being built.

0:39:31.9

BM: It was [nineteen] sixty up to sixty-five.

0:39:35.0

JM: Yeah, right in—in the early [nineteen] sixties is when this was going on. I was serving on the Board—

0:39:45.0

BM: Florida State Turnpike—

0:39:46.3

JM: —Florida State Turnpike Authority—a dollar-a-year job, but I stayed gone from the operation here for months at a time. I'd be home on weekends, and Betty had to run the business while I was gone.

0:40:01.5

BM: But you had a good secretary then. She did a lot. The kids were little.

0:40:08.7

JM: But to get back to the shrimp boats, we had several boats that were working for us selling the shrimp to us and then we, you know, would unload those and sell them. And then at the [Indian] Pass out here has closed up through the years. It used to—you'd have six or eight feet of water through the channel that you could get out, and through the years it's closed up, and the boats that used to come in no longer could come in and come to our docks. So that—

0:40:38.1

BM: It's a combination of building the dam at Chattahoochee [River]—the Jim Woodruff Dam—and cutting the St. George Island—the Bob Sykes Cut—it reduced the water flow that came west here, so the Pass is sort of silted in over—it won't be too much longer before St. Vincent's Island will probably be connected to the mainland here, or do you think so?

0:41:00.5

JM: Well, I don't know, Betty. It will be a long time but it—it's eventually coming.

0:41:06.4

BM: Yeah, unless somebody decides to dredge it out.

0:41:10.9

JM: Yeah, right.

0:41:11.9

BM: We did run a deepening project there one time, but the shrimpers' interest in the City of Apalachicola had more political clout than we did, so we couldn't have it dredged out. We didn't have that many boats that came—we would have had though, but—

0:41:29.9

JM: Now they've—

0:41:34.5

AE: And so you were talking about a shrimp boat.

0:41:38.2

JM: Well we had—most—most of the boats that we were operating with were independently owned—not by us but the people that worked with us they owned the boat, and they were thirty to forty feet in length. And there were bigger boats, but those were the size that we unloaded here. And it just gradually played out along with—as the hurricane come along, well then the docks were washed away, and the whole thing just changed.

0:42:11.9

AE: About what year did the oyster house that was down here on Cape San Blas close?

0:42:17.0

JM: In Indian Pass?

0:42:18.6

BM: Indian Pass?

0:42:18.7

AE: Indian Pass, I'm sorry.

0:42:21.3

BM: When did it quit producing oysters?

0:42:24.8

JM: When we—we started—with the campground because we were not getting enough oyster business and shrimp business. That would have been in the [nineteen] eighties, nineties?

0:42:50.1

BM: It was before then, I think. I don't remember right off—I'd have to get my books out to see when it was—paying the shuckers and all.

0:43:06.4

JM: I just can't remember, sorry.

0:43:07.0

AE: That's all right. So whose idea was the campground?

0:43:11.6

BM: Actually, we started that when the St. Vincent's Island was sold to the Department of the Interior, and the Federal Government took it over, and they started having managed hunts over there. And they couldn't spend the night on the Island, so they needed accommodations on—on this side, so we opened up some campsites, and we put in a bathhouse, and it evolved from that. We only had seven or eight sites but—

0:43:44.3

JM: We used the old—the oyster business—the family oyster business was playing out and we—we convert some of the older buildings that they lived in to campsites. Got—got into it in a round-about way.

0:44:03.9

BM: The only one that is left, really, is where Gator lives now and—well, to me anyway—the rec[reation] room when we did the campground and put in more sites, but wasn't that—wasn't [it] Miss Lashley [who] rented from us? And George and Zeta Clark lived in it before we redid that.

0:44:24.5

JM: We had about fifteen—

0:44:26.6

BM: That was in the early—see they bought the island in [nineteen] sixty-seven, sixty-eight. It seemed to me it was the early [nineteen] seventies and eighties that we put in the cable for the TV and all that.

0:44:42.8

AE: So has it been interesting to watch folks come into this area for recreation over the years, instead of just coming to hunt on St. Vincent's [Island]?

0:44:53.5

BM: It's just a fact of life. I hadn't thought about whether it was interesting or not, but the camping industry is such, you know, it's a growing thing. I can't believe that people would put the investment they have into these motor homes that cost hundreds and thousands of dollars [*Laughs*] and go around, but we—we had—I don't think the business was very good except for the managed hunts and things like that and people that were aware of it—we never advertised it very much, and we were off the beaten path. By that time the road was no longer designated as [Highway] 98 through here—It's back north of us. But you really have to have that as a destination. We don't just go by that—when we were talking about going with KOA [Campgrounds] or something like that, and we did advertise a little bit in Woodall's, but we never made it a big thing out of it. It was—I guess, it paid its own way.

0:45:54.5

JM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, and it employed some of the people that had been working with us in the seafood business and—put them in the campground business. The storms do make a difference in your business, though.

0:46:12.8

AE: Well and Hurricane Dennis [in July 2005] made a big difference in the Raw Bar's business, obviously.

0:46:16.9

BM: Yeah.

0:46:17.1

JM: Oh, yeah.

0:46:17.9

AE: So and you were mentioning earlier when we were up there [at the Raw Bar], too, about your—your mother having a—the Gypsy Tea Room.

0:46:25.1

JM: Tea room?

0:46:25.3

AE: Yeah, can you talk about that?

0:46:26.8

JM: Yeah, well this was back during the turpentine days, and Apalachicola was a big town—very few people in Port St. Joe that would be traveling to come to the beach. This was a beach that was for people from Apalachicola. They—there was no way to get to the Islands over there then—like St. George's Island having a bridge and all—and people in St. Joe would go to Beacon Hill instead of coming to Indian Pass. The road was paved out there and the—there was a bay there that they could go swimming in, whereas here, the bay was full of oysters. The Gulf was fine for swimming, but that's a different time. And where did I get lost now?

0:47:23.2

AE: Gypsy Tea Room.

0:47:23.6

BM: Talking about the tea room, how—how your mother started that.

0:47:26.7

JM: Oh, yeah. And the people in Apalachicola wanted a place to come to eat. Mama was a real good cook, and she had—had parties during the year when my sister was growing up and quite a few of the young—

0:47:42.2

BM: She loved to entertain, didn't she?

0:47:44.0

JM: Yeah, she—she was real good and was very popular with the people, so they wanted the business and eating—a place to eat, and so they decided that they would put in a little food place. And then Mama decided that they'd name it the Tea Room, and they put on supper on Saturday night for twenty to thirty people to come out and eat. And then it got so it would happen two or three times a week. And they—it helped through—all World War II came along, too, at that time. Things changed then.

0:48:30.0

AE: What kind of things would she make?

0:48:33.1

BM: Do you remember all that?

0:48:34.2

JM: Betty I—I'm—very vaguely.

0:48:37.5

BM: Vaguely.

0:48:38.4

JM: Real country, fancy meals.

0:48:41.4

BM: I don't recall it being there. She catered there on the premises for parties mostly, I gather.

0:48:51.1

JM: Yeah.

0:48:53.2

BM: I don't have any recollection of that, but I did come across a picture where the—a sign was out there on the side of the store *Gypsy's Tea Room*, and I can't find it. I was looking for it to update some of the memorabilia that we have stashed in the big truck out front of the store.

0:49:09.0

JM: There's not a lot of people living—left living that will remember Gypsy's Tea Room.

0:49:16.5

BM: And you didn't have to have a license, and so we don't have any way to go to the courthouse and find out when she started it or when she gave it up, but I know she was not operating it during the War or—or before. Well, because you know you and—she and mother would go to see you and John at various places, and I know she wasn't operating it then—not of her age, because she was forty-seven, I think, when Jimmy was born. And he was born in 1924.

0:49:50.3

JM: My dad was—he was—well I think about how old Daddy was—he was about sixty.

0:50:00.8

BM: Well he was born in 1858, and you were born in 1924. So he was a good bit old. And Jimmy's mother was born in 1881. And we have to go to the cemetery to remember those dates.

[Laughs]

0:50:18.2

JM: But Daddy had been married twice; he didn't have any children by his first wife and she died and—

0:50:30.0

BM: His sister had the Rhodes children, right?

0:50:36.2

JM: Uh-hmm and Mary.

0:50:35.9

BM: So he raised his nieces and nephews, and your mother was the governess, right?

0:50:43.8

JM: Yeah, right. She was the governess. But the children—at the lighthouse at Cape San Blas, that was—they had four or five children down there and—.

0:51:00.7

BM: And they had two families, didn't they?

0:51:02.2

JM: Uh-hmm.

0:51:04.2

BM: That lived down there.

0:51:03.6

JM: The government paid their salaries, of course, for lighthouse keeping. And she—

0:51:12.1

AE: So were you saying that the house you grew up in was a house that was up close to the Raw Bar?

0:51:17.2

JM: Uh-hmm, it's down here. Now, we sold it—how many years ago?

0:51:27.2

BM: I don't remember.

0:51:28.9

JM: Well why don't you ride her down to the Pass and show her those houses as you go by.

0:51:34.9

BM: If she's got an interest, I'll be happy to.

0:51:36.4

AE: Sure, I would like that.

0:51:38.0

JM: This is a big house we were talking about we lived in and grew up in.

0:51:42.6

BM: But we have a subdivision that we started in 1952 and—small lots—well, he lived there. We have a place over there now but the electrician, the one we were talking—I don't—if you were there or not—and asked him if he was getting it back after the storm.

0:52:01.8

JM: And I've got to get busy on that, too.

0:52:04.7

BM: Yeah, are you the one that is supposed to call the power company?

0:52:08.3

JM: Yeah. I've got to call, yeah.

0:52:13.1

BM: Did you want to send that thing to the water people?

0:52:18.2

JM: What thing?

0:52:19.0

BM: The work order for them to run water to the house? We had our own well down there, but we're going to go on the—there was no public—there is a public water system now that comes down here.

0:52:31.9

JM: I'll have to find out about it. I don't mean to cut you off but—

0:52:36.4

AE: Oh, you're fine. You've got business to tend to. [*Bell Rings*]

0:52:40.3

JM: It wears me out.

0:52:43.8

AE: I'll pause that.

0:52:45.9

BM: If you have any other—

[Recording is paused while Mr. McNeill gets up to make some phone calls. Mrs. McNeill takes the interviewer on a short driving tour of Indian Pass, the campground, and Mr. McNeill's childhood home, which is now owned by a woman from Atlanta, Georgia.]

0:52:48.0

JM: Where's the telephone?

0:52:50.3

BM: I don't know. There's one right—.

0:52:53.0

JM: Yeah.

0:52:55.1

BM: It goes on there like—

0:52:56.2

AE: [To Mrs. McNeill] Can you say that again?

0:52:58.2

BM: The geographical features of any place determines in large measure what goes on and how it develops, you know. Cities developed along rivers and that was the only way of transportation, so the seafood business grew because this was really all that you—the seafood only grows in the saltwater.

0:53:18.4

AE: Right. Okay, so we're going to travel for a second? Can I leave my stuff here [at the house]?

0:53:22.3

BM: Yeah, sure. Uh-hmm. The cottage and he built—she built it while he was gone somewhere, anyway. [Recording is paused. Recording begins again, when Mrs. McNeill is mid-sentence] The schools are named after them and all that sort of thing.

0:53:36.3

AE: So—

0:53:36.7

BM: These places have just started developing. That's the new subdivision and that's a private residence. You see a lot of *For Sale* signs up. They've come up like mushrooms. I think the whole county has gotten real estate licenses, and everybody is trying to sell to everybody, I think. I wanted to take you down and show you Jimmy's [childhood] home. That's not it.

0:54:01.6

AE: Well, when y'all were coming up in this area and have spent so much time in this area, what were the hurricane seasons—what was that like when you were growing up and how did you prepare for it?

0:54:09.6

BM: It was nothing like it is now. We—we just were barely aware of it. And this is the house—the big house up here was the one that Jimmy grew up in, and a lady from Atlanta bought it. And she bought this house later and another one, too, and she's moving them down—she has a thing about moving houses. But—and maybe it's economically feasible, I don't know. But I guess she's

going to rehab that one [sitting in a lot in front of Jimmy's childhood home we're visiting]. She's had a lot of work done on it already.

0:54:39.3

AE: So which one is it? This one or am I looking back?

0:54:42.1

BM: This is the one she had moved, and she's had new siding put on it since I've seen it.

0:54:47.4

AE: Neat looking house. So is this house—this is the one that was up on the highway closer to the store [or the Indian Pass Raw Bar]?

0:54:52.9

BM: Well, it was behind the store.

0:54:53.2

AE: Behind the store, okay.

0:54:55.2

BM: That was what we called the home-place. It's 110-feet—the porch from one end to the other—and it had only four bedrooms but—and it's a T-shape deal. But it was awful to live in; we lived in it for a good while, but you can't heat it, you can't cool it, and it was just—she might be home. She must be; there's a vehicle there.

0:55:23.4

AE: Do you think she or you would mind if I got out and took a picture?

0:55:26.4

BM: No, I don't think she would. If she does she—I'll see if she's home. I'll park in the shade.

0:55:34.4

AE: All right.

0:55:38.8

[Recording is stopped for approximately thirty minutes, as we visit with the owner and tour the house]

[Recording resumes back at the McNeill's home]

BM: [To James] Let me run up to the store, and I'll be right back. [To interviewer] It's nice to have met you.

0:55:40.7

AE: It's wonderful to meet you. I appreciate y'all a lot. Thank you so much.

0:55:43.1

JM: Well, you're quite welcome. Let me just ride with you, Betty.

0:55:46.5

BM: Oh, okay.

0:55:46.6

[End Betty and James McNeill]