

FRED C. MILLENDER
Owner, Fred's Best Seafood – Eastpoint, FL

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Date: December 4, 2005
Location: Fred's Best Seafood - Eastpoint, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 21 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

[Begin Fred Millender]

0:00:00.9

Amy Evans: This is Sunday, December 4th, 2005; this is Amy Evans in Eastpoint, Florida, and I'm at Fred's Place. Mr. Fred, would you say your name and your birth date, please sir?

0:00:13.5

Fred Millender: Fred Millender and birthday is September the 22nd, 1926.

0:00:19.5

AE: Were you born here in Eastpoint?

0:00:20.6

FM: Born in Carrabelle and moved here [to Eastpoint] in [nineteen] forty-two.

0:00:24.6

AE: Your whole family moved over here?

0:00:26.6

FM: Most of the whole family moved in Eastport, uh-hmm.

0:00:29.6

AE: What brought your family down this way?

0:00:33.6

FM: We had more fishing areas, shrimping, and oystering and crabbing and some scallops—and you's right at the seafood here in [a] cluster—more handy, more economic.

0:00:46.3

AE: So what did your family do? What did your parents do when you were growing up? Did they have an oyster house, or were they working the bay?

0:00:53.4

FM: We fished then. There was nine boys [in the family] and we—we went totally fishing—offshore, in-shore, anywheres we wanted to fish.

0:01:04.5

AE: Do you know how old or remember how old you were when you first went out on a boat to fish?

0:01:09.2

FM: About four or five or six years old.

0:01:13.9

AE: Here we go, we got a friend walking up. [*Recording is paused for about ten minutes, as Mr. Millender speaks with a neighbor.*] [*Recording resumes.*] All right, so what were your parents' names?

0:01:21.2

FM: My mother was named Willie Mae Millender, and my papa was named Marion Francis Millender.

0:01:31.6

AE: Marion—how do you spell that first name?

0:01:33.9

FM: M-a-r-i-o-n.

0:01:37.9

AE: Okay. And so what do you remember most about growing up in this area and living off the bay?

0:01:42.5

FM: Well it was real joyful in the good ole days. [*Laughs*] Right now, it's a push and a shove and crowding out of your mind, and it's going to get worse—worsen and worsen. And the people—right now, they want to take Christmas out of Christmas. I noticed Wal-Mart made the statement they want—they want to take Merry Christmas away from their store next year, you know—how to say Merry Christmas. So they coming for that, and they coming for several more like the—like the eagle on coins and—and all the American parts on different items they want—I think it's mostly Atheist, but they probably surprised at what they're hearing today. Merry Christmas—Merry Christmas and Christmas—that's going—that's going to live on though with old tradition. All right, go ahead.

0:02:36.1

AE: And so then—this picture is of your father over here [on the wall inside Mr. Millender's seafood stand] with this wheelbarrow of oysters, when was that taken?

0:02:42.2

FM: That were about forty years ago.

0:02:49.0

AE: And was he—he had an oyster house then?

0:02:51.0

FM: Yeah, we—it was four of us in the business. We had three—three [processing] plants, yeah.

0:02:56.5

AE: All along?

0:02:58.1

FM: The hurricanes got them out of here.

0:03:00.5

AE: I'm sorry, what?

0:03:01.9

FM: You know, [in nineteen] eighty-five, hurricanes and things and the hurricanes—
[Hurricane] Camille and all back in there, they show you on—on [the television program]
“Storm Stories” on whatever channel—all them hurricanes that hit.

0:03:14.1

AE: So the hurricanes took him out of business?

0:03:15.6

FM: Gradually tearing it up.

0:03:17.9

AE: Yeah? And so is this—where you are now, is this one of your family's original spots on the water here?

0:03:25.3

FM: From this beach here, from that [seafood] house [Fred's Best Seafood] and back over here [towards the east] and about 400 or 500 foot, maybe better, was where all our business—we had a crab house one time, picked—[had] about forty pickers.

0:03:42.1

AE: And when was that?

0:03:43.8

FM: That was back in the late [nineteen] fifties and sixties.

0:03:49.8

AE: And so you just came up [or grew up] here working and working in all the houses and—

0:03:52.4

FM: Yeah.

0:03:53.7

AE: —and working—?

0:03:53.0

FM: And that's why we left Carrabelle down there—thirteen miles that way [to the east]. Now that was a fishing port down there, but now they—now it's tourists.

0:04:02.0

AE: When your family came here [to Eastpoint], how many other oyster houses were along here?

0:04:05.2

FM: Hmm, about three. And it was about fifteen or twenty in here, but the State come in and the hurricanes—so many violations. And it's—it's no way on muddy oysters that you can keep the spots—when they hit them, then when you wear out like—like a lot of these ladies here that works for a living and the husband out on these cold weather days and low tides, you know, they wore down and they got a house full of youngin's to go tend to, they can't just stay right down

here. We get out. Men that works in the house do a lot of it, but they wear down too. But I like to get some of those fishers out at Tallahassee in here and give them a job and be a number one priority to keep everything right up to date. I just—he'd probably leave me the next day. He'd sing that Johnny Paycheck song [begins to sing the lyrics to the song “Take this Job and Shove It”] *Take this job and push it; I ain't working here no more.* That's what I'd tell them.

0:05:10.3

AE: So how—

0:05:09.9

FM: I don't—I don't work—I work as I want to. I put forty-some years and I don't—I don't get in here and—I used to work 'til three o'clock in the morning putting up 5,000 times—10,000—run out on orders like South Florida, Tallahassee, Montgomery, Birmingham, all up in there and back towards Pensacola. We sold to all them in them seafood places, even as far as Gulf Shores, Alabama.

0:05:44.1

AE: So when your family had all these oyster houses, were you working primarily in the houses or in the retail—wholesale part or were you still—?

0:05:52.8

FM: Wholesale. I just put—I just do this little market just to have—just to do something. Because as you go through life that many years tied up to the gills like a mullet in a net, you just can't sit around. I got a lot of music I play, you know. I got a Dobro. The bluegrass [music] I learned from Roy Acuff—Smokey Mountain Boys, Nashville, Tennessee—where I learned most of my music from.

0:06:24.3

AE: You spent some time in Nashville?

0:06:27.0

FM: Ma'am?

0:06:27.2

AE: You spent some time in Nashville?

0:06:29.5

FM: I haven't been there, but they came down in this area, and I would—we—we fished and done—done such as that, and we'd always accommodate them such as that. They loved that. They—you know, the most of the things that the Smokey Mountain Boys would ask for down here, catfish. They got them ponds out there—they'd go out and fish with a fishing pole like Andy Griffith and his little boy back here—that little fellow that had the—always toting that little fishing pole.

0:07:00.2

AE: Opie?

0:07:01.7

FM: Opie. [*Laughs*] You know him, don't you?

0:07:05.3

AE: So the man that was in here yesterday said that y'all played in a band together.

0:07:08.3

FM: Uh-hmm.

0:07:09.0

AE: When was that?

0:07:10.6

FM: That was in the late [nineteen] fifties and sixties.

0:07:14.6

AE: What did y'all call yourselves?

0:07:16.2

FM: Apalachicola Valley Boys.

0:07:19.7

AE: Were y'all together for a while?

0:07:22.8

FM: We was—we was together I imagine for twelve or fifteen years—twelve or fifteen years.

[*Mr. Millender reaches behind the counter and holds up an old Apalachicola Valley Boys concert poster.*]

0:07:33.1

AE: All right. That's a poster. Oh, cool.

0:07:35.5

FM: This was found in the Dixie Theater; we played over there in Apalachicola.

0:07:42.1

AE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. My goodness. So when you play now you—you just kind of play for yourself? Are you still playing with some folks in town?

0:07:49.1

FM: Well, I play for myself, and I got a son that plays. I got a grandson right down here in this picture [*points to a photograph on the wall*] that has been auditioned—he's seventeen [years old]—four times at the Grand Ole Opry. My daughter, it cost her—costed her—see where General Jackson's picture—is on that tire thing?

0:08:11.3

AE: Yes, sir.

0:08:12.0

FM: They went and spent two trips there right at the Opry—close to the Opry House—it was four times—2,500 dollars—and now he's got his foot in the door with the record—record and the man—a young boy, a little—just a little older than him pulled him in and let him spend nights with him, talks with him, and walks him through things. Usually when—as they go along, there is—the main singers is out on the road with that band, they place in these guys—they fill in like on the O'Reilly Show, they already got somebody pulling in—filling in all the time on the agenda—music.

0:08:52.3

AE: So how often do you play [music] for yourself?

0:08:53.9

FM: Well I played some this morning, and I'll probably do some tonight and—.

0:09:01.2

AE: What's your favorite thing to play?

0:09:01.1

FM: Huh?

0:09:01.8

AE: Do you have a favorite thing to play?

0:09:03.6

FM: I—I use all of the [nineteen] fifties right on up to—to the nineties and up through here now. There's still singing some of the fifties songs on TV now—on the satellite radio. This satellite starts from the fifties and sixties and seventies. You can turn it on in spots, and it will just play continuous to that and go to the next—next one. I—my wife, she sings with me.

0:09:32.7

AE: What's your wife's name?

0:09:33.3

FM: Minnie. Minnie—and when she gets really aggravated with me sometimes, I get my guitar, and I sing that short [Stonewall] Jackson song that comes on about twelve at night on the Grand Ole Opry. And he's been bleeped up by that time. They get wild. I don't think they use much charged stuff; they use that Mountain Dew up there—that liquor. And they get kind of tipped and they always come in and out singing, *Don't be angry with me darling for the things that I have—*. [*Laughs*] *Don't Be Angry*. I sing that and we—we get along good. I got—I was clerk of our church for twenty years and I had my music—I'd go all over this country—fellowship meetings, youth rallies, and things like that and they always wanted—my family and these girls sang with us—this one and that one.

0:10:44.5

AE: All your family?

0:10:46.0

FM: Uh-hmm.

0:10:46.0

AE: Okay.

0:10:46.6

FM: [*Pointing to a photograph on the wall*] See that one on the end with the red?

0:10:50.1

AE: Yes, sir, [with] the red shirt on?

0:10:50.8

FM: That's my oldest daughter, and the neighbors sang with us at church.

0:10:55.2

AE: How many children—how many children do you have?

0:10:57.1

FM: Three.

0:10:59.3

AE: What are their names?

0:10:59.5

FM: I have—I have a son—I'll show you his picture down here in a minute—three children—
three children—a whole woods full of grandchildren and great-children.

0:11:10.7

AE: What are your children's names?

0:11:13.3

FM: Hmm?

0:11:13.4

AE: What are your children's names?

0:11:14.5

FM: Different. It's just many, many, many names—I got some named Aston here, and I got some named Randy, and I got some named Andrea. I got some named Ashley, and I got some named Skylar, and I got some named Peyton.

0:11:39.9

AE: What about your three children?

0:11:40.8

FM: Is Susan, Marsha, and Randy.

0:11:45.3

AE: Okay.

0:11:46.9

FM: Susan, Marsha, and Randy.

0:11:50.2

AE: So how long have you had this little market here?

0:11:52.7

FM: This here's been here about probably three or four years. I didn't run it for a long time. I let a guy—elder guy that used to work for me, he would—he wanted to use it a while, and I just let him get in here until I could—'til I could get that reorganized over there [at the oyster house].

0:12:15.6

AE: The oyster house?

0:12:16.3

FM: Uh-hmm.

0:12:17.2

AE: And so now the oyster—

0:12:18.4

FM: And my daughter [Susan] wanted to come in on it and do some work and her husband. Then, by my experience and the timing that I was in this business—seafood business—she run

into a rock and a hard spot. She was coming to me—what to do. So I would tell her, I said, *It's just something you're going to have to work out. One day you might do it two hours, you might do it, but it'll pick right back up. Don't give it up.*

0:12:48.4

AE: They're the ones I met yesterday that were working up there?

0:12:50.4

FM: Uh-hmm.

0:12:50.8

AE: Okay. And so then you keep this market upfront here for—?

0:12:55.7

FM: I work in this—I work in this about—I come down just before you did from—I had a guy over there tending to it for me. He would watch out and come in here. I just keep this up. I meet a lot of people like you in here. I got people, I told you, from Connecticut, Birmingham, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, right on up in Maine. They like this village up in here.

0:13:24.2

AE: Do you like that best, meeting the people who come through?

0:13:27.2

FM: Uh-hmm. I like to meet—I always did that. Right now, my wife says, *I want to go somewheres people don't know you that we can shop and have a little time out there*. So we went to Dothan [Alabama], and I had to go do some collecting way back here. So when we got up there, and she says—asked the guy that was right in Dothan—said, *Where's the shopping center at?* He told her [to] take one of the truck routes—the roadways right out—and so we did and went north of that. So when we got there, we pulled out in front of this shopping center—huge thing. The first thing when I walked in, somebody in the back said, *Hey, Fred!* **[Laughs]** She said, *Well there ain't no place we can go.* **[Laughs]**

0:14:13.7

AE: Do you have some folks who come and spend summers on St. George Island and come back and see you every time?

0:14:19.3

FM: Every day they'll come back here.

0:14:25.1

AE: Well, I know I want to—

0:14:24.6

FM: The first place that they'll come in is look—I mean, if they don't find me, they'll walk around and around and around. But I don't—I stay home and do my own thing figuring—doing what little figuring—talking to my daughter, running, and walking her through some things she's never been through before.

0:14:46.7

AE: So she's taken over the oyster house basically? Is that—?

0:14:49.7

FM: Right now, mostly, uh-hmm. And see, like this bag [of oysters] I pulled—she's not here, but I cover for her. I know these people. By me being here, she feels more safer with it. So that's—that's the family life.

0:15:07.3

AE: Are you glad that she's carrying on with [the business]?

0:15:09.5

FM: Oh, yeah, she's—she's pretty smart. She's a pusher—pushing and shoving and crowding of the mind.

0:15:16.5

AE: And that's Susan that's over there?

0:15:18.6

FM: Uh-hmm.

0:15:19.8

AE: Okay, yeah. And so I want to know about your mullet that you smoke out here. You [have been] stoking the fires [in the smoker out front] a couple days that I've been here in a row. Tell me about that.

0:15:30.5

FM: Do what? On the mullet that we smoke?

0:15:32.4

AE: Uh-hmm.

0:15:33.6

FM: A lot of these guys—so these oysterman that come in wanting a mullet, I gave it to them to eat, check out, and they have a piece of bag or something over there they give me. If not, they have some extra mullet they'll give me and [say], *Just keep me up in smoked mullet*. I don't charge them nothing. They over there working in this—and I did that twenty years.

0:16:00.7

AE: What?

0:16:01.3

FM: Out here working on the bay.

0:16:03.2

AE: Working everything?

0:16:03.7

FM: I had my own rigs. I—one time I had twenty-nine boats and motors.

0:16:08.8

AE: For oystering?

0:16:10.2

FM: Uh-hmm. The three places—but this—this bay, the great—the last of the great bay is getting away from us. It's—it's gone. What I'm telling you here right now, you play this in another year or two, it won't be the same thing no more. They want to buy—buy all this out in here from me and to put thirteen townhouses and thirteen on top of it.

0:16:39.4

AE: How has the bay itself changed over the years, do you think?

0:16:41.8

FM: The bay has changed—[distracted by a man in a truck pulling up to the oyster house to deliver his catch] there's another one of my guys—the bay has changed in—in the respect of the State Officials, pretty much from the government down to the lower part of the government, so many laws and bylaws and this laws and restrictions, so many restricted seafoods. They got it where you go out there, they'll put them bracelets on you, if you ain't careful. Black folks don't call them handcuffs no more. They call them bracelets. **[Laughs]** They—they want something to look nice. **[Laughs]** Bracelets.

0:17:26.0

AE: So do you ever miss being out there on the bay oystering? Do you miss those days?

0:17:28.9

FM: Well, yeah. And I—and I'm glad I'm here a lot of days with that rough weather. When you—back then it was nine boys [and] we worked.

0:17:39.9

AE: Do you have some stories?

0:17:40.7

FM: All—all our brokers is pretty well fixed.

0:17:43.9

AE: You have some stories from your time out on the bay?

0:17:45.8

FM: Do what now?

0:17:47.3

AE: Some stories from your time out there on the bay?

0:17:49.0

FM: Well, I got caught in a lot of squalls, a lot of storms, and a lot of bad crossways seas and foggy—you couldn't see from here to that building [about thirty feet]. You'd see a bird on the water, and it looked like a big battleship on it—that's happened right spur of the moment. But we knew about where we was all the time. We knew we was in the water. And we're out—now they got that GGP [GPS, Global Positioning System]. You know, you can mash a button and run out [on the bay] with it, and you can run back on it. Go offshore there to—ten miles offshore where

they put these bridges and things, they tear down where spot—or grouper is and you mash that button on it, and you can come back in and go right out, and it will tell you when you're right there on it. So they got it more modern days. We used—we used to use a sounding lead off of deep-sea fishing. I worked out there when I was younger, thirty days a time with ten men on a boat with two masts, five fishing on each side. And you—we used a lead with the bottom up and put soap on it and out there and drop it and let it hit bottom and pick up and tell them whether it was coral or rock or gravel or sand—it would tell them what it was. Now they got that button. Modern days.

0:19:15.3

AE: Can you tell me about your days oystering and what's that like?

0:19:19.4

FM: Well, I enjoyed oystering. The oystering, I tell these guys, it's like a bank. You got to make it work. You cannot lay up on it. You got to treat the oystering like a business. Go for it. And I tell them that out there it's like a bank. You go out and throw your anchor right and then right then start drawing [money out or the bank by harvesting oysters out of the bay]. You go over to borrow money, if you can get on the list with them, it takes you seventy-two hours before they'll let you. But here you can start drawing just the time you get out there. They—they bring that up to me all the time, those little old bitty boys out there, and always says, *Which pole you want me to go to out there to draw?* And then they come in and says, *I want to talk to you in the office.*

Like you [are] here [in the office]. And I say, *You're right in the center of it right now—go ahead.* I didn't spend much time in the office unless I was going to make an invoice or stuff. And they say, *Mr. Fred, can I talk to you business in the office?* I say, *You in it; just follow me right in and talk to me.* I'd walk through—**[Laughs]**. What time is it?

0:20:33.4

AE: It's four-thirty. Four-fourty, yeah, I got to be somewhere at five o'clock.

0:20:34.3

FM: You've got to meet somebody at five o'clock?

0:20:35.5

AE: Yes, sir. So I'll come see you tomorrow.

0:20:37.8

FM: Hmm.

0:20:38.3

AE: No, I'm meeting somebody over in Apalachicola —.

0:20:41.8

FM: We'll finish it up.

0:20:43.5

AE: Okay.

0:20:43.5

[End Fred Millender]