

FRED WICHMANN
Longtime customer of Bowen's Island Restaurant and friend of
Robert & LaNelle Barber - Lives in James Island, SC

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Date: January 18, 2007
Location: Mr. Wichmann's Real Estate Office – James Island, SC
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour
Project: Bowen's Island Restaurant

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Southern Foodways Alliance
www.southernfoodways.com

[Begin Fred Wichmann Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, January 18, 2007. I'm in Charleston, South Carolina, at the office of Mr. Fred Wichmann. And if you wouldn't mind please, sir, saying your name and your birth date for the record.

00:00:18

Fred Wichmann: My name is Fred Wichmann; I was born 21 February 1930 at Cape Romaine Light Station, where my father was the lighthouse keeper in Charleston County, ten miles out across the marsh from McLellanville, South Carolina.

00:00:37

AE: And I'm with you today to talk about Bowen's Island Restaurant and your friend Robert Barber, whom we enjoyed a meal with last night, but I—I wondered, too, if we could spend some time talking about your growing up on the island because you started sharing some wonderful stories last night, but I think it would paint a good picture of how the island has changed and your experiences here over the years.

00:00:58

FW: Well that's James Island Restaurant, Bowen's Island; it's connected to part of James Island, and it's a grand place and has a great history. And I've known it for many years, since Robert Barber's grandmother [May Bowen] ran the restaurant, and she had a little railway where we could haul our boat. We've got an old 45-foot Herreshoff Ketch built in 1935 that we have

restored. And we hauled her on Miss May's Railway some twenty years ago, where she sat for three months while we repaired and fiberglassed the bottom.

00:01:47

AE: Now when you say railway, there's that kind of train trestle conveyor belt, the thing with that big machine—rusty machinery that's still there on the island. Is that what you're speaking of?

00:02:00

FW: That's correct. Boat railway is a common thing for hauling large boats. Our vessel displaces about twenty tons, so she can't be hauled by an ordinary travel lift always, unless it's a super-great travel lift. She's a heavy old boat. But she's a piece of work we think [*Laughs*] and we plan to keep her. She's written up in the Library of Congress. And she is the original Mobjack built in Saugus, Mass., 1935.

00:02:41

AE: And so what year was it that you hauled the boat up there and—and fiberglassed the bottom that you were working on it?

00:02:49

FW: It was about twenty years ago, around '85—'86—'87, somewhere like that. And my son did most of the work when he was in his early 20s. And it has been a great asset to the vessel; since then we have sailed her to the Bahamas over a dozen times and back inside and outside in the ocean. My son also sailed her up to Block Island in New England for the last America's Cup Races held in this country—1983.

00:03:32

AE: Wow. Wow, Sailing is in your blood and in your family, huh?

00:03:36

FW: Yes. My son is a very enthusiastic sailor and very enthusiastic about the Mobjack.

00:03:44

AE: And what is your son's name?

00:03:46

FW: His name unfortunately for him is Fred, Jr. His mother named him, but we've always called him Bunkie.

00:03:56

AE: So I—I know that Mr. and Mrs. Bowen started a—a café on Folly Island in the '30s, if I remember correctly, Bob's Lunch. Do you have any recollection of that or—or ever heard any stories about it over the years?

00:04:10

FW: No, the first I knew Mrs. Bowen—May Bowen was on Bowen's Island. But I do remember going to Folly in the '30s—the late '30s when we went across a wooden one-lane bridge, which was the only access to the island, and it was a five-cent toll to get on the bridge. **[Laughs]** I remember that very well. Some of the young boys would drive around through the marsh to avoid having to pay the five-cent toll. And Santos Sottile, who ran the tollgate, would call their

parents and tell them that they owed him five-cents or ten-cents or whatever it was. *[Laughs]* It was important in the '30s.

00:04:57

AE: Can you talk about what Folly Beach was like back then in the '30s?

00:05:01

FW: Well Folly was very primitive. Some of those houses had been floated over to Folly on barges from the Navy Yard, where they had been originally used by the military during World War I, and they could be bought for practically nothing, but you had to transport them over to Folly. And those were the original houses on most of Folly. Folly Beach was bought by the Seabrook family, one of whose descendents I was in college with—Moosehead Seabrook; I think his name might have been Robert Seabrook, *[Laughs]* but we all called him Moosehead in college. His family owned most of it.

00:05:54

AE: Do you remember when they did away with the wooden bridge and—and built a causeway across the marsh there?

00:05:59

FW: I think it was during World War II that the old wooden bridge went on its way, and new modern transportation required a better accessibility to the beach.

00:06:15

AE: You were telling me last night about that accident you had as—as a three year-old. That was off that bridge, is that right?

00:06:23

FW: No, when I was three, we lived out at Cape Romaine Light Station, and my father retired when I was four. But prior to that, my mother hauled my little brother, who is 17 months younger than me, and I was about three-and-a-half—he was around two—hauled us out to the boat dock walkway and stopped us at the edge of the water, although it happened to be low tide and huge beds of coon oysters [*oysters which grow close to shore, close enough for raccoons to harvest them*] were sticking up right at the water's edge, and there was a handrail at the dock. I decided I would swing out on that handrail and my little brother, not able to talk very much, somehow communicated to me, "Mama told us to stay in the wagon." And being a smart aleck myself I said, "I know what I'm doing." And I swung out on the handrail, and my hands slipped as they were wanting to do at that point, and I did a flip and landed facedown into that bed of oysters. Fortunately, I was able to protect my face by my arms, although my elbow got a cut, and my leg was severely gashed to such an extent that I was bleeding profusely. My father, of course, immediately saw the incident and rushed down, pulled me out of the oysters and the edge of the water, and got the lighthouse tender boat, which was a 22-foot—22 or 23-foot power boat with a five horsepower single cylinder gasoline Kermath engine, got her going and rushed me to McLellanville to the emergency room. Of course there was one old country doctor in McLellanville. He sewed up my leg. By this time, I had lost consciousness, I had lost so much blood. And there was some concern as to whether or not I would come back conscious. And my father inquired of the doc what could they do, and the doc's response was, "We'll just have to wait and see." And eventually, I did come around, although I believe I suffered irreversible brain

damage. Otherwise I might have amounted to something—only accumulated ten million [dollars] in life, and I often think I could have done a lot better. **[Laughs]**

00:09:11

AE: Oh, goodness. **[Laughs]** Well and you were talking about the—the coon oysters when you were telling the story last night and the—calling them coon oysters, they’re coon oysters because they’re sticking up in the marsh and the raccoon—and literally, the raccoons eat them?

00:09:25

FW: That’s correct. They stick up in a very vertical position, and they are small but very sharp edges, and the coons are able to bang them around a little and get them open. And so they’re known as coon oysters.

00:09:44

AE: Which is—it’s interesting to me because when I was in Apalachicola [Florida] last spring and they—their coon—to coon is a verb, and people who are able to wade in the shallow waters of the Apalachicola Bay, it’s said that they’re cooning for oysters. Have you heard that before?

00:10:02

FW: No, I haven’t, not in this area. We use the word *coon* here as an acronym for raccoons, which are wild animals and they frequent the marshy areas and they live on whatever they can catch in the edge of the marsh, and oysters are an important part of their diet.

00:10:23

AE: Uh-hmm. I’ve seen a few dead ones on Folly Road.

00:10:26

FW: Yeah, they get out on the highway occasionally, all right. [*Laughs*]

00:10:29

AE: So when you first got to know the Bowens and were—were going out to the island there, were you visiting there when it was a fish camp and there was the—the causeway built or were you taking a boat out there? What was that like?

00:10:42

FW: I really never went to Bowen's Island until after Mrs. Bowen had it connected to the—to the Folly Road, and she did that, according to what I've been led to believe, [*Laughs*] sort of surreptitiously. She was a determined lady, and the reason she and her husband first settled there was because, I think, they probably acquired the property very nominally, and it was a cheap place to live. And they put up a very modest little dwelling, and eventually began the business by just offering a little food to visiting passersby in the creek—shrimpers, crabbers, or fishermen—and soon it became a known place with no access to it except by boat in its original beginning.

00:11:40

AE: Do you remember how old you would have been when you first went over there?

00:11:43

FW: Oh, I was in my teens, I'm sure, when it was open by road.

00:11:51

AE: So in the late '40s-ish, just after it really kind of became established as a restaurant, then?

00:11:56

FW: Right, in the '40s somewhere—'40 to '50.

00:12:02

AE: So what was the general thought then about Bowen's Island Restaurant and Mr. and Mrs. Bowen in the—in the community? Was it just a hangout place or was it—what was—what was the—the feeling there of that place when it started?

00:12:18

FW: Well it was a very unique restaurant because Mrs. May Bowen did not spend any money buying fixtures, chairs, tables, or anything that a modern restaurant would have. The chairs she had were rickety, the tables were sort of slapped together, and people would write on all the walls—even on the ceiling—graffiti, no vulgarities but it would be “Joe and Mary were here” or “FW loves BD” or “everybody is from Massachusetts” or wherever. They'd just write little things all over all the walls and it gave a lot of character to the place covered with all that graffiti.

00:13:12

AE: Do you have an idea when that first started?

00:13:15

FW: No. It was always that way, **[Laughs]** as far as I recall. Robert Barber might be able to give you some exact timelines on it.

00:13:25

AE: And I'll preface this with the fact that you're in real estate, but can you share what—what you wrote on the wall over there? **[Laughs]**

00:13:32

FW: **[Laughs]** I think I probably just wrote my girlfriend's initials and mine at the time and that was a long time ago when I was in college in the '48—'49—'50 period.

00:13:48

AE: Now your wife was saying last night that you wrote something to the effect of "Everyone should get a lot while they're young."

00:13:54

FW: **[Laughs]** Yeah, I was accused of that. I—I guess I must have written that when I was young and a little less conservative. **[Laughs]**

00:14:05

AE: So when you started going out there, was it a hangout place for you and your buddies, or was it just known as a place to kind of get away, or what was it to you?

00:14:12

FW: It was a kind of place to get away and—and it was some way different. It wasn't your standard restaurant by any means, and Mrs. May Bowen would serve you whatever you ordered. A lot of people had oysters, but sometimes they'd order shrimp. And I recall she would serve you the shrimp, and if you complained about it, she would not hesitate to tell you to get out and don't come back. *[Laughs]* We always thought that was very interesting, so we never complained. *[Laughs]*

00:14:47

AE: So then it was just, obviously then, serving the community primarily and then word got out, I imagine, and—and folks from outside Folly and St. James Island and Charleston started flocking to the restaurant?

00:15:05

FW: Right. It—it was a real place of distinction in the community. There was only one Bowen's Island, and May Bowen's character combined with the restaurant really stood out distinctively as a very unique situation all the way around.

00:15:32

AE: Can you describe her personality a little bit more? I mean you—you have already but the person that she was and her mannerisms and the way she interacted with folks and—and regulars, maybe, specifically, like yourself?

00:15:44

FW: Well she was very outspoken and did not hesitate to talk to anyone. And she was very strongly opinionated and didn't hesitate to give you her opinion. Her husband [Jimmy Bowen],

as I recall, was a very modest, mild-mannered person, who did not really make any waves. She ran the show. [*Laughs*] And he agreed with whatever she wanted to do; it was okay with him.

00:16:16

AE: And do you remember—you and Robert Barber are friends now, but do you remember him as a youngster running around the place in the summers and whatnot?

00:16:24

FW: I guess I've known Robert for 25 or 30 years—when I first went out there probably and we went to church together for a great number of years at St. James Episcopal Church on James Island. Robert has also served in various public offices including the—the School Board and in the Legislature. I think he served as a Legislator. He was a candidate last fall for Lieutenant Governor, and he's a very capable man with a lot of charisma.

00:17:06

AE: And you—if I could add this to our conversation today—were trying to talk him into running for Governor last night.

00:17:13

FW: I would like to see Robert go for Governor. And if he would join the Republican Party, which he's always run as Democrat, I believe that he would have an excellent chance to become elected Governor, if he wanted to pursue it.

00:17:31

AE: Well and with everyone I've spoken to about Bowen's Island, since Robert has been a real specific part of it after his grandmother passed, and it seems like Robert is really the lynchpin to the place and that it is what it is today because of him. Can you speak to that a little bit?

00:17:46

FW: Well, that's correct. Robert is the real personality that's persevered in maintaining the business, the image of Bowen's Island right up until the fire that they had last fall. He is very community minded, very giving to public causes, to charitable operations. He has helped us have fund-raising events for Saving the Marsh Island Lighthouse; he has also helped us with the Friends of McLeod in trying to preserve McLeod Plantation, and we feel he really is a community entity of outstanding caliber.

00:18:41

AE: So could you maybe say that—I'm trying to reconcile in my mind that if people—so many people go there because of Robert Barber and his family and that the—the physical space is almost secondary. But then, too, so many people who have memories of the place the space is the primary attraction because it's kind of a sacred space to people who have made memories there. And I don't know if I'm confusing you by [*Laughs*]—by going where I'm not really headed, but do you have any response to that idea?

00:19:15

FW: Well Robert's personality, of course, is important to be tied in with the property and with his grandmother and he—he would not have been able to—no one else would have been able to maintain the continuity and identity with Bowen's Island that Robert has. Everyone originally, of

course, connected it with his grandmother, but since his grandmother passed away, Robert has kept the restaurant going, having oyster roasts and regular restaurant service—has not altered—had not altered the interior of the building before the recent fire and maintained that casual old image of complete relaxed informality, with all the graffiti on the walls still preserved, never painted over—never modernized with any new furniture or chairs, just the originals. So Robert is identified with that and the image that exists today. And we're hopeful he will be able to somehow rebuild the property. And a number of the charitable entities that he has stood up for and allowed to use the premises will assist him in some way.

00:20:51

AE: I've been hearing about a lot of people wanting to give back to—to the Barbers and to the restaurant, definitely.

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FW: Absolutely. I believe there is a groundswell of community support for Robert restoring, preserving, and maintaining ad infinitum, the Bowen's Island image and restaurant.

00:21:14

AE: How often do you go there? Has there been a regular schedule over the years at all?

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FW: Very irregular. It is something that we have to hit a special mood and special people to go to Bowen's Island, but everyone should go there at sometime or other because it's such a unique experience. You could never repeat it anywhere else in the world.

00:21:39

AE: Might you have some stories of maybe taking some out of town guests there or—or any unusual reactions to the place?

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FW: [*Laughs*] Yeah, I've had friends come over from Germany, Sweden, Norway, Japan, England, and they've all enjoyed it but were a little bit surprised at the absolute relaxed atmosphere.

00:22:10

AE: Would you always have oysters when you go, or would you branch off to shrimp or some other things on the menu?

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FW: I always have oysters because I love them. And I've got some of them embedded in my leg still, I think, so I think they're part of my bread and butter and blood.

00:22:30

AE: Can we talk about the oysters here and—and oyster picking and the tradition here? Can you speak to that a little bit?

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FW: Well of course we've got local oysters, which are not the large singles that we sometimes get in from the Gulf of Mexico—Apalachicola is one of the famous spots on the Gulf Coast where the big single oysters come from. And they are good. But the real aficionados claim the

flavor on those big oysters is not as good as the little clusters found locally that you have to fight a little more and they're much smaller, locally.

00:23:18

AE: Growing up, did your family have oyster roasts regularly, or was that something here in the community that happened fairly often?

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FW: Oh yeah, oyster roasts are a regular thing. I belong—I'm an Honorary Life Member of the James Island Yacht Club. We were founded in 1898, and one of our regular functions is the annual oyster roast at the James Island Yacht Club, which is on the other side of James Island from Bowen's Island but still on the same island.

00:23:51

AE: Can you speak to the—the history of that tradition a little bit and, you know, maybe if there is some kind of difference in the tradition from when you were a youngster and to what goes on now—?

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FW: I don't know of any real differences, as far as eating those steamed oysters. There is one thing, I guess: we used to build a little stand out of brick or cement block and put a sheet of metal over the blocks and have a fire built underneath that sheet of metal. We would dump the oysters on top of that metal sheet, and we would take a crocus bag—a burlap sack—wet, and lay it on top of the oysters until they steamed. And that would be the steaming of the oysters. Now, of course, we've got big pots with a mesh net inside—metal mesh net where you dump the oysters

and there's water in the pot and as it steams, have a lid on that pot—when it steams up you pull that off—a more modern version than we used to have when I was young.

00:25:22

AE: And you're a fan, I assume from last night's little oyster fest at Robert's house—you like them a little bit closed still when they're steamed?

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FW: I like them just a little bit cracked, not too much. If you cook them too much, the oysters will dry up, and you don't really get the taste of them. It's just too dry. But cracked a little bit and they've still got their moisture, and they're delicious.

00:25:53

AE: Do many people not eat them raw here?

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FW: Some people are afraid to and, of course, if an oyster batch happens to come from a contaminated area, they could be seriously lethal. I had a friend in North Carolina—Kingston, North Carolina—who got some Moorhead City oysters and they came from a contaminated area, and poor Tony died as a result of those oysters being contaminated. He loved them, though.

00:26:31

AE: That's a good way to go, then. So if—have you had one of these creek oysters raw? And if so, can you describe the difference in taste with a raw and a steamed?

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FW: Yes, ma'am. A good raw oyster taken from a good clean area is incomparable. And I have been out on small boats, where we have banged up against pilings of an old bridge and knocked a few of them off and opened them right there on the boat—absolutely raw—and they're great. Of course, they're great when they're steamed and had a little crack when they began to crack open—as long as you don't cook them too long.

00:27:17

AE: Do you think that steaming brings the sweetness out or more of the salinity, or what does that do taste-wise?

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FW: I think it brings some of the sweetness out in them, and it makes it easier to get to them. If they don't crack open, it's very hard to get them open. You have to know how to get to the key of the shell with your oyster knife. And don't try it with a pocket knife; use an oyster knife.

[Laughs]

00:27:42

AE: And how has this area changed? As far as I understand, it was a lot more agriculturally based here on the island and—and to have so much food in the water and grow so much food on land? When you were growing up was it more just self-sufficiency, and can you talk about that a little bit?

00:28:02

FW: Well, of course, Charleston Harbor, the oysters were not at all edible because the City of Charleston dumped all its raw sewage into the harbor, and the oysters were polluted and contaminated with all that. But in the rivers surrounding, Charleston County has 600,000 acres of land; 200,000 acres of that 600,000—one-third of this County is creeks and marsh and that's where the oysters are—in the creeks. And ideally, it's best to get the oysters that are right at—just beneath the surface and dead low tide, and that's when you go get oysters—at low tide.

00:28:51

AE: Uh-hmm. So when you were a young boy, did you go on oyster runs or was it something that your family did regularly?

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FW: We'd do it on occasion. It was not a regular thing, but if we took a notion to get some oysters, we would go get them. And I grew up on the Stono River, which is a good clean river, ten miles up the river from where I now live on James Island, the same river; Stono named for the Stono Indians, who were here before us.

00:29:26

AE: So you're obviously a waterman, with all your sailing and living on this river all your life. What has living on a river meant to you and how—what is it—how has it made you the person you are?

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FW: Well when I was five, my parents taught me to swim; when I was seven, my father rigged a sailboat for me out of an old rowboat. Of course I—he taught me to row before; I had a little

10-foot rowboat and I could row fine when I was five, six, and seven by myself or with my brother. And we rigged a sail. My father helped us rig a sail out of an old bed sheet, and we sailed down the Stono River, steering with an oar and sailing with an old sheet. And we'd go down the river fine with the wind, and then we'd have to get the sail down and row back home.

[Recording paused for approximately three minutes, while an employee comes in to ask a Mr. Wichmann a question]

00:30:27

AE: We were—I was asking what growing up on the river has meant to you, and you were talking about building the boats.

00:30:35

FW: Oh, yeah. Well I lived on that river with my father until my mother died when I was seven. And I went through public school when we lived on the river, 10 miles up the river from where I now live. And we were in the river all the time. My brother and I bought an old motorboat when we were about 14 or 15, and we rigged it for sail because we couldn't afford the motor; and we sailed it around a little bit, but it leaked pretty badly. It was a wooden boat, so we tied it up to these people's dock that we didn't know and told them we'd be back in a couple of weeks to get it. We came back in a couple of weeks, and it was gone. I don't think they really liked it tied up at that dock because it was about swamped, but it—about 10—15 years ago when I first moved into where I now live on the same river, I saw an old boat in the marsh across the river from where we lived. My brother lives next door, so I bogged over in the marsh to look at that old boat and see if we could salvage it. And lo and behold, it was our old boat from 50 years ago.

00:32:04

AE: No kidding?

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FW: And—but it was buried in the marsh in the mud. There wasn't any way we were going to move it. But the ironic part of it was the bow of that boat was pointing across the river at our house, my brother and I right together. So I think the boat knew where we were supposed to go.

[Recording paused for approximately one minute, while an employee comes in to hand Mr. Wichmann a folder]

00:32:29

AE: All right. So you just finished telling the story about the boat that found its way back to you and your brother after 50 years.

00:32:37

FW: Right. We felt that the boat must have known where we were supposed to be when we found that boat out there in the marsh across the river married to the mud but—pointing at our homes. And that's where we plan to stay the rest of our lives.

00:32:54

AE: How is it that both you and your brother are so dedicated to staying in this—in this area—that both of you have remained here so long?

00:33:03

FW: Well, we're the only Wichmann boys. My father [August Frederick Wichmann] only had two sons, and none of the Wichmann family ever had any more children. My father's uncle had two sons, but they've both passed away and never had any children of their own. So we're the only Wichmanns now. I have a son [Fred, Jr.] and a daughter [Laura Ellen Marie Hipp], and my brother [Henry August Wichmann] has two sons—has lost one, but one son has gone to Washington and is working with the government up there in the computer business, and the other son is still right here. He's my nephew. There's not many of us around.

00:33:53

AE: So is it—it's not only tied to your name but the tie to your place?

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FW: Well we feel like it's appropriate for us to be living on that same river where we spent our childhood. We loved it as young boys, growing up on that river, and we watch the sunset across that river now, and it seems like a beautiful twilight time of our lives. We still enjoy that river, and we still have boats. We got boating regularly. Sometimes my brother and I will get together and go out for a weekend and tie up together and have dinner and socialize on the river.

00:34:38

AE: From an ecological point of view, how has the river changed and—and the marshlands in this area in Charleston County?

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FW: I'm sorry.

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AE: From—speaking ecologically and—and just the natural oasis that is here, and now with, you know, all these suburbs opening and developing, how do you think that the river and—and marshland that you grew up on has changed?

00:35:01

FW: Well progress and development is an inevitability of life. We need to understand and accept it; other people will be coming. But there's room and, as I mentioned earlier, one-third of Charleston County is marsh and creeks and rivers, so we've got room for people on the water and plenty of room on the land. We're preserving enough land for permanent ecological advantages, 250,000 acres in Francis Marion National Forest here; some of it in—a large portion of it in Charleston County. Thirty-eight thousand on the Cape Romaine Wilderness, which is completely preserved from all signs of man's presence except the lighthouses; there are two lighthouses out at Cape Romaine and they will stand—the original tower built in 1827.

00:36:09

AE: Can you tell me a little bit about the Morris Island Lighthouse project that you're heading?

00:36:15

FW: Well Morris Island Lighthouse was originally built, I think, around 1876 after the War. And it was situated some 50 or 100-feet from the edge of the beach inland on the island. Then the Corps of Engineers saw fit to build the jetties to harness some of the ebb tide coming out of the Harbor and clear a channel into the City of Charleston without ships having to weave all around sandbars outside the entrance to the City. This was done in the '90s—1890s and that

created erosion on Morris Island, as well as Folly. And as a consequence, the lighthouse now stands about 100-yards out in the ocean away from the beach. As part of its construction, pilings were put down 50 feet under the base of the tower when it was constructed from the surface to the mall underlying all this area. Those pilings were creosoted pilings, and they supported that tower. Unfortunately, since the erosion began, the steel sheathing around—circulating—circling around the base of the tower has deteriorated, rusted away, and is open to the sea. For quite some time now, since probably last 30 or 40 years, toredo worms have been able to penetrate through that steel sheathing into the timber pilings. And toredo worms are a menace to any wood construction; they can penetrate a pinhead into a piece of wood or a boat's bottom. And as a consequence, they have been boring holes that are about the diameter of an ordinary pencil throughout those timbers that are holding the tower up. Ultimately—unfortunately, the tower could fall with the lack of support those timbers have, originally, always given the tower. So what we're trying to do at this point is to raise the sufficient funds, put a new sheathing wall around the base of the tower, backfill it with rock, force-feed grout cement into the toredo worm holes and all the exposed areas that have been exposed to sea—seawater—and strengthen the base of the tower so that it will not collapse. It's an important landmark for the City of Charleston; it is the first thing any ship sees coming into Charleston from the ocean.

00:39:45

AE: And so you've had a lot of community support then to—to rally around the effort?

00:39:52

FW: I've been working with Save the Light Foundation for probably about six or seven years since it was started, and we have raised over \$600,000 from voluntary contributions. Some of us

have given several thousand dollars, personally, out of our own pocket. The Town of Folly Beach has given us \$20,000 on several occasions. The State of South Carolina has also given us a half a million dollars twice, so that they now total \$1 million that the State has given us, plus the \$600,000 that we've raised along with Folly Beach's contribution. And the Corps of Engineers has now approved allocating approximately \$2,300,000 towards the preservation efforts on saving the tower. We have now put the project up for bids, and bidding contractors are concerned that they would be liable if the tower should fall through no fault of their own, during the repair construction.

00:41:16

AE: So does Save the Light—the Save the Light Foundation, is that specific to the Morris Island project or is it a network of lighthouse projects?

00:41:23

FW: No, Save the Light, Inc. is specifically engineered for saving the Morris Island Lighthouse, which is legally the Charleston light. And it had been, for many years, the main signal to Charleston approach; now we have a second lighthouse on Solomon's Island, which serves the same purpose. And it's a modern tower well inland from the ocean.

00:41:54

AE: Well, and this is changing gears, but I wonder if you know much of the history of the area around Bowen's Island, specifically, with Sol Legare Road there and the African American community that's over there and what that—how that's changed since you've lived here.

00:42:12

FW: Well Sol Legare area has always been a stronghold of some very prominent Negro citizens of the community. The Backman family [of Backman's Seafood] is known—known for its contributions—shrimping and running some very capable large shrimp trollers out Folly River into the Stono River and into the ocean, which is a very dangerous inlet but those Backman brothers know it very well. There are also the Richardsons over there, and those Negro men know their business very well.

00:42:57

AE: What—do you have an idea what Sol Legare means, what that translates into?

00:43:01

FW: Well [*Laughs*] it's actually Solomon Legare—two names—Solomon being, of course, a biblical name and Legare—L-e-g-a-r-e—is a family name of French Huguenot settlers in Charleston. Originally, this property presumably must have had some connection with a man named Solomon Legare. It's now—just carries that name Sol Legare Road because of that location.

00:43:36

AE: Uh-hm, okay. Well are there any other—are there any other things or memories you can share about the area and—and growing up here?

00:43:44

FW: Well Charleston, of course, is known to all good Charlestonians as the center of the universe. It's the Holy City, only buildings in the city—the tallest are the church steeples. No other building can exceed the height of the church steeples, and the tallest steeple is the church

where I was christened, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church; it has the tallest spire in the city. Also, any good Charlestonian will tell you this is where the Cooper and the Ashley Rivers come together to form the Atlantic Ocean. This is the beginning of the Atlantic Ocean starting right here in Charleston.

00:44:35

AE: When you were a kid, growing up on the river here, did you all go into town very often or how did that work?

00:44:41

FW: Well we would go into town once or twice a month. And in the early days, we had an icebox. One of the things I remember so well, we didn't have any electric refrigerators, although my house where we lived had an inside bathroom. The neighbors used to talk about us going to the bathroom inside the house. And [*Laughs*] my father also had a generator to have electricity in the house, but he didn't run that generator all the time, only when we had company because it required fuel. And that was the 1930s—1934 on when we lived on the river. When we had company, we'd have lights. Otherwise, we'd use kerosene lamps. But the icebox was operated by a big block of ice, and there was an ice station at the corner—at the edge of the Ashley River Bridge. Julian Limehouse ran a Gulf Oil service station, and he had a little icehouse there, too. My father would buy a 100-pound block of ice from Julian Limehouse and put it on the bumper of our car. There wasn't anyplace to put it inside the car; he didn't want it in the car anyway, and we would drive home, which is 10 or 12 miles from that Ashley River Bridge, to our home on the river at Stono. And by the time we got home, that 100-pound block would be about down to

50, and it would fit in our icebox. That's what kept our icebox cold. That was a modern thing—not many people had a real icebox.

00:46:35

AE: You said your mother passed when you were a young boy. Did your father remarry?

00:46:40

FW: Yes, my father did have a serious mental collapse when my mother [Hazel Wyndham Wichmann] passed away. My father spent about a year in Baker Sanitarium with a mental breakdown. Neighbors took my brother and me in—Wendell Ackerman's family. Wendell Ackerman, an attorney who was a dear friend of my father, looked after us and kept us in their home for a year with their son, who was a couple years older than me. We all grew up like brothers and always were, until Wendell passed away. Doodles we called him, Wendell, Jr. But we finally went back to our home on the river and my father hired a young Chaplin boy to look after us. Guy Chaplin became our driver; my father never drove the car, and Guy became our cook. He also became my father's companion, and he became our companion, too. My brother and me and we were seven and eight years old at that time, and we always revered his assistance, teaching us all about the woods and how to live on the river and the woods. We had a very, I think, happy childhood, in spite of the fact that our mother was gone. My father finally decided that he needed a woman to help look after us and to keep house for him and hired a young woman and eventually decided the neighbors would talk about having that woman living in the house with us, so he married her. Unfortunately, she managed to persuade him to sell our home on the river and put the car in her name, transferred the funds from the sale of our home into her own personal account, and left. My father was then in his late 70s; he was 62 when I was born.

And he and I managed to hold together. I started—I finished high school out in the country at St. Paul's High School near Hollywood, South Carolina, and then I went to college at the College of Charleston and moved to James Island. We rented a little small house, just my father and me. My brother went to work and lived with another family while he was working, but I went onto college and I worked a little at a service station, and I drove the school bus from James Island to the high school in Charleston. There were no schools—no high schools on James Island. And got through some college and then I was called into the Korean War because I had joined the Reserves. I left college and went to England, eventually, where I had veteran status as a foreign military man, and I had an enjoyable experience—three years in England—but never got shot at.

00:50:35

AE: And, if I could go back to your father for a second, you said that he was in his 60s when you were born, so he was born in the 1870s about? Do you know his birth date?

00:50:45

FW: My father was born in 1868 in Germany. He came to this country when he was 20 years old in 1888. And his uncle was a tailor in business in Charleston at 123 Meeting Street and had one of the most renowned tailor businesses in the state. He made the uniform for Robert E. Lee, during the War Between the States. My uncle had come to Charleston around 1850 from Germany and gone in the business and prospered, stuck with it very well. He had two sons, who were my father's cousins. One was an artist who only painted during his life, and the other was a musician, Theodore, who founded the Charleston Symphony Orchestra and taught music at Charleston High School for 25 years. My father started in business in various mercantile grocery businesses. My uncle wanted him to run some of his plantations and grow grapes, but my father

found the grape industry was not very easy to get started in this area. All of—the old man owned five plantations and 18,000 acres of land. My father came to work in Charleston and finally opened his own business and got married to his uncle's wife's sister. He married his aunt. And they were very much in love, but their business was located outside the City of Charleston and unfortunately, his first wife died in a miscarriage. So before he was 30, my father was widowed and his business was burned by some ungrateful clients that he had extended credit to. They burned his business and his home. He had a psychosomatic stroke and wound up in the hospital and was in a deep state of despair when word came out that we were at war with Spain. So he felt better about himself and finally realized that he could move, he was still alive; he decided he would go and volunteer for the Army and go to Spain—go to fight Spain on behalf of the Cubans. So he did. He volunteered with the Carolina Volunteers—Palmetto Volunteers, I think they were called—and shipped out to Cuba, where he landed near Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders and camped out on San Juan Hill right next to Teddy Roosevelt and served in Cuba for about a year—a little immigrant German boy who could not speak perfect English had managed to learn to speak Gullah [*a Creole language spoken by the Gullah people, an African American population living on the Sea Islands and the coastal region of the U.S. states of South Carolina and Georgia*] because of his associations on the plantation and in his business. And he was made a Sergeant, appointed Sergeant of the Guard in Cuba. He came back to Charleston very successful in that respect, and uncle was very proud of him. Fortunately, he met a young lady that he had known slightly before, and they were married. She was his second wife; they were married 28 years and no children. She died of a heart attack after being married 28 years to the old man while he was still—he had become keeper of the Cape Romaine Light. And eventually, church parties would come out, Sunday school picnickers and a group of young

people came out holding a big Sunday school picnic and noticed the old man sitting over on the side by himself. And this bright young lady saw the old man and got a plate of food and took it over to him, caught his eye and he caught her eye, and it was a simultaneous love at first sight, although she was 40 years younger than the old man. She had grown up in the country in Berkeley County in a place—Shulerville, legally, but known as Hell Hole Swamp where her father was known as the meanest man in Berkeley County. He used to brutalize his family—children and so forth—and she was very happy to take up with the old captain on Cape Romaine. They were married about 1928 or '29, and I came along not too long afterwards. Well I was born February 21st 1930 and the first son the old keeper had, and he was overjoyed. He retired four years later—1934; Hazel, my mother, was 26 at that time, and he was 66 coming up that year.

00:57:03

AE: Quite a family history.

00:57:11

FW: Having gotten in the real estate business 42 years ago and eventually acquiring some property and income and a home on the river next door to my brother, I feel like this is an appropriate spot for us to wind up our travels and years, and we both plan to stay right next door to one another. We are very close; we communicate regularly. We visit back and forth. We go out to dinner. We do socializing and usually have an evening cocktail once in a while together. Our wives are very compatible with one another, and we are very thankful to have had all the many friends along the way. Our philosophy has always been twofold: to help other people wherever we can and to have a good time. That's what we plan to do. [*Laughs*]

00:58:18

AE: Wonderful. Well if I could also close the circle on the Bowen's Island topic, since that's also why I'm here—I've enjoyed your stories immensely, but is there something that you would leave on that's a final thought about Bowen's Island and what it's meant to the community here, maybe?

00:58:35

FW: Well I feel like Bowen's Island should continue, and it always will be in our memories. But we feel that Robert has the personality, determination, character to continue the image of the reputation of Bowen's Island being a very rare unique place of hospitality. And I do know that the people and the Friends of McLeod and the people in Save the Light are determined to help contribute in any way possible to Robert's preserving that valuable image and property.

00:59:18

AE: What do you envision the day being like when he reopens for business?

00:59:22

FW: Well I'm sure only Robert can say what that will be. *[Laughs]* I don't know how he'll manage to resurrect the graffiti on the walls, since they were all gone—burned out—but I'm sure he will erect some structure that will be reminiscent of his grandmother's efforts through the years.

00:59:49

AE: Well a good note to end on I think. Thank you so much for your time Mr. Wichmann. I really appreciate it.

00:59:56

FW: Yeah, I've got some people coming. *[Laughs]*

[End Fred Wichmann Interview]