

Makeley Lewis
Fisherman, Harkers Island, NC

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Location: Harkers Island, NC

Interviewers: Keia Mastrianni, Mike Moore

Transcription: Shelley Chance

Length: Thirty-five minutes

Project: The Saltwater South: Harkers Island, North Carolina

[*Transcriber's Note: Very difficult audio. TV/radio playing in the background.*]

START OF INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:18*]

00:00:18

Mike Moore: It's Tuesday, May 3, 2016. This is the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Project on Harkers Island. And I'm introducing Mr. Makeley Lewis. So Mr. Lewis, you said you were born right here at Harkers Island. Where were you born, right here in this house?

00:00:38

Makeley Lewis: No, I was born up the road here about—that curve you just come from—

00:00:43

MM: Yes, sir.

00:00:44

ML: —on the right coming this way.

00:00:47

MM: Okay.

00:00:48

ML: I had a big house. You see the stilt house—on stilts, that's about where our house was at.

00:00:57

MM: Oh okay, okay.

00:00:59

ML: And the hurricane, the 1933 hurricane, I can remember it, I was eight years old.

00:01:08

MM: Wow.

00:01:10

ML: Water come in the house and went to the bed and we had to get out of it. It happened in 1933—not—I can remember that far back but I can't remember what I had for breakfast.

00:01:27

MM: Well that's interesting.

00:01:28

ML: It goes right on out, I don't know. I don't know what you call this, tinnitus—is that right.

00:01:36

Keia Mastrianni: Tinnitus?

00:01:37

ML: Itching in the ear and deafening. That's what that is right there.

00:01:43

KM: Yeah.

00:01:44

ML: This side is deaf.

00:01:45

KM: This is your good ear? Okay—

00:01:48

ML: This one here ain't very good because can't understand that and go in there—and mess it up.

00:01:56

MM: Did you—did you have a big family, a lot of brothers and sisters or—?

00:02:02

ML: I—I had three sisters and three—there's three brothers, three boys and three girls.

[Laughs]

00:02:11

MM: Three boys and three girls, yeah. Well can you tell me a little bit about what it was like when you were—when you were being raised as a young boy here on Harkers Island? What was it like with—with your mother and father? Your father was a fisherman and a boat builder, right?

00:02:26

ML: Yeah, he—he fished. We—we fished in the fall during the fishing season. And if you didn't have a boat order and if you had one we had a—he would [Laughs] stay there and build it. He helped me some you know on and off, part-time. But it's fishing and boat building. Fishing is—go ahead with your next question.

00:02:59

MM: Well your father, he was a boat builder and he—he invented a certain hull of boat is that correct?

00:03:06

ML: Right.

00:03:07

MM: Your father invented a certain hull, a flare boat is that—?

00:03:10

ML: Yeah, you want to know about that?

00:03:13

MM: Yes, sir.

00:03:13

ML: Daddy [Brady Lewis] got the title of being the father of boat builder of the flare boat, flare bow boat builder. [*Coughs*] He changed a little bit in the building. He was the first that I know when I helped him build boats as far as the boats. He started it—the best I know about it. And he's changed the style a little bit of the boat before he—he was a commercial fisherman and he knew what it took for fishing boats. So he decided to make the stern round so he wouldn't catch on the net when you pull her up. He changed that square stern to a round stern. And he put flare in the bow and he put like a six-inch curve in the frame and stripped it you know stripped so it would go down to knock the sea waves. Now my boat had a—I called it—we called it dog houses. A thing on the side you'd pull over if it was raining or anything and then if it's pretty you'd slip it back. We called them dog houses.

00:04:42

MM: Dog houses.

00:04:42

ML: And that—that's the way our boat was.

00:04:48

MM: Okay.

00:04:49

ML: I got the pictures of the boat down in the—style of the boat so I got it down the in the book if you want to see it.

00:04:58

MM: Now his—his boat that he invented that style became very popular is that correct?

00:05:02

ML: He was a popular boat builder to begin with. He didn't last a whole lot of long time but they worked—a lot of people worked with us and they learned it. When they learned it they—they 'bout built them a boathouse. [*Laughs*] And they done that. And our house blowed down, the boat house. That ended our work but we went with James Gillikin. He worked with us by the time we was working and him and Clem Willis down there. And we went—or he had started him a boat works down there, so we just went with him. My daddy went as a supervisor for him. I went as a carpenter. [*Laughs*]—cheap carpenter. But that—that's how our boat work ended with James Gillikin after he died. It all went on down.

00:06:08

MM: Uh-hm.

00:06:11

ML: Now the fishing you want to know any more about the boat?

00:06:15

MM: Um, well you've—you were—you were a carpenter so—so what you did with the boats is you worked with wood and to build the boats?

00:06:23

ML: I worked with him part-time you know when I couldn't get in the water. [*Laughs*]
They built the Jean Dale it's down there at the museum [Core Sound Waterfowl Museum]. Have
you seen it?

00:06:35

MM: She's still there, yeah the boat.

00:06:38

ML: Yeah, we built. That boat was built in our shed down there. That's when I got
married so I was busy. [*Laughs*] I didn't pay too much attention to her. I may have peddled on
her some but that far back I can't remember.

00:06:57

MM: Right.

00:06:57

ML: Nineteen forty-eight. [The Jean Dale was actually built in 1946]

00:07:02

KM: You wanted to talk a little bit about the fishing? Did you fish a lot?

00:07:07

ML: Yeah, I—I fished mostly. I love fish. I wasn't making no money but I liked to do it.
That kept me from making any money. I—Moderate nights, calm nights, I flounder fished. I
floundered, me and my brother. And me and him were at the Cape one night in his boat, I had
mine on the shore. And it died out or something and we went—it was windy, Nor'wind. and we
went and got together and said let's go in your boat, and we went in his boat and I stood on the

engine block that day—that's in the middle of the boat. And he was on the bow on a little flat part he was standing on. And we caught thirty boxes of flounder.

00:08:04

MM: Wow.

00:08:06

ML: But we come home and deal them to the fish dealer—\$360—twelve cent, twelve cent a pound. That same catch of flounder now is \$11,000.

00:08:20

MM: \$11,000.

00:08:23

ML: That's how much I lost.

00:08:25

MM: Wow, uh-hm.

00:08:26

ML: That's the reason I said I was born too quick [*Laughs*] and lived too long. Now is the time to catch stuff in the water. It's the highest now it's ever been.

00:08:37

MM: Right, right yeah.

00:08:40

ML: That flounder—the larger flounder now, I imagine is around \$10—about \$5 a pound. And all the flounder that were large like that were in the fall, there was large flat flounder—. Some of them weighed—my brother had one that weighed sixteen pounds and I had

three that weighed thirty-six pounds and that's twelve pounds. They were big flounders—twelve-cents.

00:09:08

MM: Twelve cents wow.

00:09:10

ML: Giving them away. And in June, July, and August—August come, brings the spots, you know like the blows—the cool blows we had in August, September, they—it rounded the mullets and spots and everything outside. And we'd get a long hauler—and we'd haul in there and we'd just catch like 50-60,000 pound of spots hauling up and down these channels and around the island here. But that's a long haul—800 yard net—take the whole thing—drag it all in one pile and bale it, bale it in the boat. But I like to do it. It was—but it didn't make no money—spot is three-cent, five-cent. That's the reason I said I was born too soon. They're now about \$1.50.

00:10:11

MM: Now is the spot—the spot are a fish that you see quite often and what do you fry them? The spot, you fry the spot when you eat it?

00:10:20

ML: Yeah.

00:10:22

MM: Flounder, fried flounder, and fried spot?

00:10:26

ML: Fried them, yeah, yeah.

00:10:27

MM: Fried them, yeah.

00:10:28

ML: He fried them, stewed them, all kinds of ways.

00:10:31

KM: Uh-hm.

00:10:31

ML: Baked them.

00:10:32

MM: Uh-hm.

00:10:33

ML: That is the flounders. Now the spots we fried them and stewed them. Have you ever eat any of them?

00:10:41

KM: I've never had spot.

00:10:43

ML: Never have? It's just another fish.

00:10:49

KM: Hmm.

00:10:50

ML: They got a little dot—back dot on them.

00:10:52

KM: They do and that's why they're called spots?

00:10:55

ML: They call them spots. They named it spot. I know who named them—Miss [Anna] done it. [Laughs] I didn't do it. [Anna] must have done it. But in the summer, we floundered, day and night. And in the fall we spot—catch(ed) spot and in the wintertime we built boats. And I mean when I got my boat we with a seine net and in the winter we done some winter fishing seine netting. That's when the ice and the bit, made your fingers achy and stuff, That's pretty work there. [Laughs]

00:11:41

MM: Uh-hm, that's a lot of work huh?

00:11:44

ML: That's pretty work.

00:11:46

MM: Yeah, yeah.

00:11:46

ML: Down there and it's sleeting on you and [inaudible]. But I loved to do it. That's the reason we didn't make no money.

00:11:57

KM: What did you love about it? What was so wonderful about fishing?

00:12:00

ML: What did I like about it?

00:12:02

KM: Yeah.

00:12:03

ML: Just the way of living is all. I loved to fish. We loved to eat them so we'd leave the head on them.

00:12:11

KM: Yeah.

00:12:11

ML: We didn't live in the farm, we lived in the ocean. That's the difference in those commercial men and somebody else. Most people live on a farm. But we lived out the water, clams, oysters, scallops, fish, shrimp, now first of May—no, about middle of May we started—I started channel netting for shrimp. And I'd catch like 2,000 pounds of shrimp out there by myself. I was by myself shrimping. And ain't nobody with me 'cause when I got ready to go, I went, I didn't want nobody to discourage me, slow me down, and when I got ready to go I went and got in the boat and went. [*Sentence retracted*]

00:13:16

[*Section retracted*]

00:13:36

[*Section retracted*]

00:15:23

[*Section retracted*]

00:16:09

[*Section retracted*]

00:16:42

[*Section retracted*]

00:17:35

MM: Hmm.

00:17:37

ML: I made my money from that mostly. [*Sentence retracted*] But I loved to do it and didn't make no money either, so I didn't get but—I got fifty cent for shrimp then. I'd catch like 2,000-pound but didn't have no money. Now you catch 2,000-pound and it's \$8,000. Ain't that too much difference?

00:18:14

MM: Big difference, yeah.

00:18:18

ML: That's the way—that's the way it was but I kept right on doing it 'cause I loved to fish and loved to shrimp and loved to do it. I loved to eat them. I had—what I wanted to eat see when I was commercial fishing. I had shrimp, flounder, scallops—whatever I wanted. And no—no farm [*inaudible*—I hardly ever ate any farm fowl. That's the reason I ain't no healthier than I am. I never did—I didn't never live off the farm—seafood.

00:18:56

MM: Seafood, it's what you ate mostly as—as a boy.

00:19:01

ML: Yeah, seafood. My daddy got that boat or started it and all these people come in and worked with us and he got to learn what he wanted and he'd go out—build him out and build a house and built a boat in it. See, they'd take the rule [*inaudible*] and get them what they want and then they can go get it. He can look at it and see and do it a lot for it. But if you made it and get the length and everything you can do it yourself then. But that started them off in boat work and

that did give a lot of people a lot of work to do. But it hurt the ones that they worked with 'cause it cut them short, the ones they worked with. Of course they would leave him and they'd go to work and hire people and—. But that's life I think. That's life.

00:20:06

KM: Sure. Was it exciting when you would finish a boat and set it out? Was that an exciting time to set a boat into the water?

00:20:15

ML: Yeah, that—that's the enjoyable. When you get one finished and you'd go ahead then and launch her you know. But we started though—it wasn't no money in boat work but we built those boat—I remember building a boat up there on the island there for \$600, thirty, thirty-five-foot boat I believe she was.

00:20:39

MM: Wow, wow.

00:20:42

ML: Yeah, \$600 wouldn't buy the night off of one now.

00:20:49

MM: Truth.

00:20:51

[Section retracted]

00:21:26

MM: Right, right.

00:21:26

KM: What happened to your finger?

00:21:28

ML: I got that in boat works.

00:21:30

KM: In boat works?

00:21:31

ML: Dr. [*inaudible*] boat—I put the windshield on her and the bevel in the bottom that fits down—[*inaudible*] when that planer cut that one off and this one off. That one grew back a little bit and this one here—like that up there. He didn't charge me nothing. I was working on his boat. [*Laughs*] He didn't charge me one cent.

00:22:03

MM: Mr. Lewis how long does it take from start to finish to—to build a boat, about how long is it?

00:22:10

ML: It all depends on what you do. I worked twelve months, eleven months, on a sport fisher and went to Florida. But I had to build her special. I even make her a keel solid from her stern to her stem, thirty-nine inches. He wanted to run Nassau Island and places and Florida.

[*Sentence retracted*]

00:22:51

MM: Yeah—

00:22:53

[*Sentence retracted*]

00:22:56

MM: He went to a man he knew could build one though.

00:22:57

ML: Yeah, that's right. But they got her there, that boat didn't cost no money because we didn't charge nothing to him. I was getting \$1.50 an hour. I was a boy—whole lot of us getting \$1.50 an hour, \$1.75. I bet I got \$1.75. I even forgot that. *[Laughs]* It's been so long—and then there weren't nothing after that boat work for a while so we went fishing too when the time was right. Now it's different now. Fishing is different and the boat work's different.

00:23:36

MM: It's not the same as it used to be. It's not made the same you're saying?

00:23:38

ML: Not—

00:23:40

MM: It's not made—the boats aren't made the same you're saying right?

00:23:44

ML: They were.

00:23:45

MM: Are you saying the boats are not made the same as they used to be?

00:23:51

ML: Well daddy changed it—the boat from a flare to a straight flan. He bent them so he cut a six-inch curve out of them. That's called flare—flare bow. It goes in the bow of the boat. And the round stern was like I said we'd pull a net over the stern and she'd get hung on that square corner. So he said we'll round that corner off so it won't hang. He—he got that in his head his self. He was the inventor of that. That's why he's called the father of it.

00:24:35

But the house blowed down and that ended there and he went—he went and built with James Gillikin. Me and my brother and my daddy went to James Gillikin and worked with him ‘til he died. And that’s about the most of it. I mean there’s too much to tell back in those days to now.

00:24:57

MM: Sure, sure.

00:24:58

KM: How is fishing and boat building different today?

00:25:02

ML: Ma'am?

KM: How is it different today?

00:25:06

ML: What fishing?

00:25:06

MM: Yeah and boat building?

00:25:08

ML: Boat building is you get more money now. [*Laughs*] You get more money for it.

00:25:13

KM: Yeah.

00:25:15

ML: You go there now and catch some fish you get the money for it. I'm telling you while ago, we got 360 when we ought to got 11,000. That's what we lost then. I was born too soon and you know I lived too long.

00:25:35

KM: Now do you remember when there was the fish houses all lined up on the beach here?

00:25:39

ML: There used to be seven out there.

KM: Seven?

00:25:44

ML: I believe—wait a minute now. Let's see, one, two, three, four, five—five, one down at this point, one along there, one on the other side of that one, one on the other side of that—three, four, five. [*Inaudible*] up yonder had one. I'd say five all together.

00:26:13

KM: And what went on there? Was there a lot of carrying on down there at the fish house? Was there a lot of carrying on at the fish house?

00:26:21

ML: Ma'am?

00:26:22

KM: Did people have a fun time at the fish house?

00:26:25

ML: They're gone. They're gone now. Every one of them are gone.

00:26:28

KM: What—what—but what used to go on there?

00:26:32

ML: The fish house?

00:26:33

KM: Uh-hm.

00:26:34

[*Sentence retracted*]

00:26:42

KM: Uh-hm.

00:26:43

ML: That's what it amounted to.

00:26:45

KM: Yeah.

00:26:45

ML: And they'd get those fishermen in there and talk—talk it over and they'd come out with radios and stuff on a boat and people would sit there that owned them fish houses would sit there at the desk and listen at us. [*Section retracted*]

00:28:13

MM: Right, right.

00:28:13

[*Section retracted*]

00:29:23

MM: Uh-hm.

00:29:25

ML: But I can't understand why it's so good now—worth so much now and it weren't worth nothing when I caught it. I had some of the prettiest flounder you ever seen caught in the fall. That was twelve pound, mine was—twelve pounds, 3,000-pound of flounder for \$360.

00:29:52

KM: Did you—someone said you invented something called the fish box. Did you make something called a fish box?

00:30:01

ML: Did I make something out—? No, we had a fish box, we had found on a beach and stuck around the side of the boat that night we loaded her and to keep them from going overboard. I think that's what you heard of.

00:30:16

MM: What—what is a fish box?

00:30:20

ML: Fish box?

00:30:20

MM: Uh-hm.

00:30:21

ML: It's a thing you put fish in. [*Laughs*] It's a thing about this long [*Gestures*] and it's about this deep and about that wide. It's a fish box. They pack 100-pound of fish into it.

00:30:37

MM: Hmm.

00:30:39

KM: Cool. Well someone said you had made that fish box that you invented it.

00:30:49

ML: Hmm?

00:30:49

KM: Someone said you made it. [*Laughs*]

00:30:55

ML: I—I—something I had to do. I got to walk for my legs and for sugar. I'm having to walk every day two hours. I start at quarter to two and walk to four.

00:31:16

KM: You do?

00:31:17

ML: That's two hours—the whole two hours.

00:31:21

KM: It's a long time.

00:31:23

ML: [*Inaudible*], I don't walk for it, I walk to it. So that's two—three, fifteen minutes ahead of time, see.

00:31:36

MM: Well thank you for your time today Mr. Lewis. I appreciate it.

00:31:40

ML: Well I hope I could help you some.

00:31:41

MM: Yes, sir.

00:31:44

ML: I don't know nothing else to say.

00:31:46

MM: Well you've said a lot. We—that's what we wanted to hear.

00:31:49

ML: And I can't tell you nothing 'cause I don't know the time.

00:31:53

KM: Now is it true that Ira—Ira Lewis is your best friend?

00:31:57

ML: Ira is one of my best friends.

00:31:58

KM: He is?

00:31:59

ML: But I can't understand him and he can't understand me. We can't understand each other but we're good—get along fine.

MM: That's how you get along. [*Laughs*]

00:32:13

ML: I can't understand nothing he says, Ira can't understand nothing I say.

00:32:18

MM: So fun.

00:32:18

ML: But we have our chat and that's it. He comes mostly to find out how I'm doing.

00:32:24

MM: Yeah, yeah.

00:32:25

ML: He's ninety-seven year old. And he's coming to find out how I'm doing.

00:32:30

MM: He's older than you.

00:32:31

ML: I'm ninety-one. I'm in a lot of worse shape than Ira is though. I had a lot more head injuries, brain surgeries—congestive heart failure and heart attack. I had one heart attack. Macular degeneration and things getting in your [*inaudible*] and macular degeneration of the eye, all that stuff is happening in my head, my head ain't worth a nickel—ain't nothing in it.

00:33:03

KM: [*Laughs*] Well tomorrow is your birthday.

00:33:06

ML: I might be there. I might be better off I think—. I appreciate y'all coming.

00:33:16

MM: Yes, sir.

00:33:17

KM: Thank you, sir.

00:33:18

MM: Thank you very much.

00:33:18

ML: I'm glad I could help you a little bit.

00:33:20

KM: Yes, sir, you did a great job.

00:33:23

MM: I'm going to do thirty seconds of silence.

00:33:26

ML: That's fishing. That learnt you to not go fishing—you don't make money. *[Laughs]*
Of course you could make it now couldn't you? It's the money now. There's money in it now.
My daddy's name is Brady Lewis.

00:33:53

MM: Brady Lewis?

00:33:55

KM: Uh-hm.

00:34:00

ML: *[Inaudible]*

00:34:04

MM: Run it. *[Laughs]*

00:34:09

KM: Can I take a photo of you over in the light? Can I take a picture of you?

00:34:14

ML: I don't like you to do that. I don't take a good picture.

00:34:19

KM: You don't take a good picture?

00:34:20

END INTERVIEW