Susan "Sudy" McKnight
Mathews County, Virginia

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Location: Susan McKnight's home, Mathews County, VA
Interviewer: Patrick Daglaris and Jessica Taylor
Transcription: Shelley M. Chance
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Project: Tidewater Foodways

[*START INTERVIEW*]

PD: Hello, this is Patrick Daglaris and Jessica Taylor, sitting here with Miss Susan or Sudy McKnight in her house in Mathews, Virginia. Today is May 21, 2018 and Miss Sudy, if you don't mind beginning with when and where you were born?

[00:00:16]

SM: Well, I was born in Pensacola, Florida and I was born January 23, 1948.

[00:00:23]

PD: All right, and could you please name your parents' names and occupations?

[00:00:28]

SM: My parents were Dunbar and Sally Bet Lawson. My dad was a Navy Pilot and he was located in Pensacola at the time instructing for the seaplanes and my mother was– she graduated from high school from Mathews and went onto William & Mary and graduated in 1942 from William & Mary.

[00:00:55]

PD: And were they both from the area?

[00:00:59]

SM: My dad was not. He was from—his father was a chemist for DuPont so he lived in Wilmington, Delaware and New Jersey. My mother, though, was born and raised in Mobjack, Virginia.

[00:01:19]

PD: And so, did they meet at college then or how did they meet?

[00:01:22]

SM: No, my father's parents had a boat and they would go on trips on this boat. And one time, my father's brother and his two parents, they came into Mobjack Bay and my grandmother decided that she was not going to eat any more fish because that was the deal. When you went on the boat you ate fish, you caught your fish. So, my grandfather so kindly got off the boat and went down the dock in Mobjack and went into the store that my mother's parents ran and asked if there was any restaurant that he could take his wife to because she was on the verge of mutiny. And so, my grandmother, being the hospitable person that she was, she invited these strangers into her home that night and they had something other than fish. I don't know what their meal was. And so, my uncle met my mother at that time. So, there were the three of them and the three of my mother's—and my uncle took a shine to her. And when he went back and told my father, who was at the time a plebe at the Naval Academy, said that there was this really cute young thing in Mobjack, and my father I guess decided– because they were so competitive, the two boys, because they were sixteen months apart, he started writing my mother and asking if she would be interested in coming up to visit the Naval Academy and visit him. And she turned him down for many years. She was a freshman at William & Mary and he was a plebe at the Naval

Academy and finally, he wrote to her, asked her again, and her roommate said, "You're going to have to do it this time. You're just going to have to go." And my mother said, "I can't because I've got this test on Monday and I can't do it." Now, I think she's a junior by now and so my mother's roommate said, "If you go I promise that when you get back I will help you study for that test." And so, that's what she did. And some people just have a real knack for picking out what maybe a professor is going to ask on a test and my mother did real well. But in essence, she met my father for the first time.

[00:04:21]

PD: Wow. And do you know why his parents were in the Mobjack Bay area?

[00:04:30]

SM: Well, they were just touring.

[00:04:31]

PD: Okay.

[00:04:33]

SM: They were not—you know, it was just a very nice boat. It was called *Vamanos* and they just toured around on the waterways, like some people do. It was big enough to sleep four people and they just enjoyed it.

[00:04:51]

PD: And did they own that boat? Was that a service like the steamboat or—?

[00:04:55]

SM: No, they owned it. Yeah.

[00:04:57]

PD: Okay, all right. And do you remember your grandparents and can you say their names?

[00:05:04]

SM: Yeah, my dad's mom was Emma Stewart Dunbar and then she married my grandfather who was Walter Eastby Lawson. And they had two boys and the older of the two was my dad, and she used her maiden name Dunbar, she gave it to him. And then, she had another boy and he was Walter Eastby Lawson, Jr. So, kind of shows you which name was more important to her.
[Laughter]

[00:05:37]

PD: Um-hm, and what about on your mother's side?

[00:05:41]

SM: My mother's side, my grandfather was William Stanley Walker and he was born and raised in Mobjack as well. And he married Virginia Natalie Billups who came from Green Mansion. And they got married and had one daughter. Actually, they thought they were having a son and so when the daughter was born they couldn't decide on a name. They had a boy's name, they just

didn't have a girl's name. And finally, after you know women at that time stayed in the hospitals for like what two weeks? And finally, her uncle came and said, "You've got to name this kid." So, he named her, he named her Sarah Elizabeth and they called her Sally Bet Walker. But I will have to say that on her birth certificate he didn't do it fast enough because the birth certificate had been filled out and it was Female Walker. [Laughter]

[00:06:52]

PD: And do you know how far back at least your mother's side goes back in the area?

[00:06:58]

SM: Yeah, the Revolutionary War.

[00:07:03]

PD: Wow. And do you remember some of the, I guess the big family names through the generations or—?

[00:07:10]

SM: Yeah, the Whites, Billups, Williams.

[00:07:21]

PD: Okay, and I believe you even remember your great-grandparents right?

[00:07:26]

SM: I do, I do.

[00:07:27]

PD: Could you talk about them and their names a little bit, too?

[00:07:30]

SM: Well, I remember him in particular. He died in [19]53, I think. But we were, my family, we were living in Northwest Washington State, Oak Harbor, and he was getting sick. My great-grandfather's name was Oscar Milton Walker. He came out of Middlesex County. And I'm not sure how he met up with my grandfather's mother, but they found each other somehow and she was born and raised in Mobjack, too. So, Oscar Milton became sick and my mother wanted to see him one more time. So, we got on this little puddle jumper and we flew up and down and up and down all the way across the United States, and finally arrived in Virginia and I was done. But we went over to visit with him and he was– they put the bed in the living room and they had the—I remember the fireplace, so I know where it was. And he pulled me close to him and he says, "You know, whenever I don't feel good I just look at your picture up there." And you know, a young person like that, what a gift, because I really had no other interaction with him. But he was real special to me because of his comment.

[00:09:15]

PD: Um-hm.

[00:09:16]

SM: And of course, I got that picture. [Laughter] And it just means so much. Now, I don't remember her as well, because she didn't make any statements. Maybe she was too worried about him and, you know, there are lots of reasons. She had a good sense of humor. Her name was Ginny Lee, Virginia Lee White Walker. But she had a good sense of humor and she passed it onto her son, my grandfather. But I don't remember her as well. I think she was quiet at the time.

[00:09:54]

PD: Um-hm. Was it difficult for your mom to kind of be a Navy wife, so to speak, or you know moving around, because it seems like such a tight-knit communities here?

[00:10:06]

SM: No, I think she had a very adventurous side on her. She loved it, absolutely loved it, loved going into a new kitchen, loved a new house, or a different one for her. She made it easy on herself. She didn't have a lot of furniture. She didn't have a lot of stuff. One reason was because in those days you had oh, maybe seven thousand pounds, and anything above that you would pay for. And that was just too expensive. They did start to up it, the poundage, and that helped because then you could take some of your things. But otherwise, she liked it that way. She had one of everything maybe, and I've got five of everything, but she only had one. And that worked so well for her, and she had a great time. Now, you know, there were times that were hard because my dad was gone. 1950 he was gone almost a year, and that's tough when you have small children. Actually, I found out how tough it was because at the time we were living in Oak Harbor and [Laughter] my mother would—my brother was four years older than me, we slept in

the same double bed. And she would put me in bed at five o'clock in the afternoon. Now, putting a two and a half year old in bed at five o'clock, that's dangerous because you've got to get that two and a half year old up to potty and then bring her back. Anyway, she didn't, I don't think. But she would put me in at five o'clock and then there was a couple that babysat and they would come down and they would sit. And then, my brother would go to bed after I was asleep. So, I wet the bed a lot and my brother would yell out, "Mother, she's done it again." So, I don't think it was quite my fault. But anyway, it did take a while for me to learn.

[00:12:29]

PD: And I wanted to ask, being away from Mathews, how often would you come to visit or when was it that you finally moved here?

[00:12:39]

SM: Well, my dad was gone in 1961 for a year so we moved into Mobjack, one of the little houses down there. And that was such a sweet treat for me because I was accustomed to going to new schools and not knowing anybody. I didn't know any different. But I knew it wasn't fun for me. I just wanted a friend to walk into the classroom with but I didn't have anybody so I had to make them, learn to make new friends because we moved every two years. And so, when I moved here, the minute I went to Mathews High School people knew my people. People knew who I was, where I was from. They knew where my grandparents were, lived. And I had both sets at that time here because my dad's parents also moved from retirement, they moved to Moon. So, it was the neatest gift and I had more fun that year. And then, my dad got orders to Northern Virginia and that's where we moved. But I wasn't real happy up there. I loved it here.

So, we would come holidays, since it was Northern Virginia at that point, we would come holidays or birthdays. We were on that road a lot. And came down and stayed with my grandparents. Otherwise, we lived in Maine and so we would make the trip at Christmas time by car or we lived in Newport, Rhode Island and we'd make the trip, you know. I would get out of school and we'd get in the car and off we'd go. So, [Laughter] I loved it.

[00:14:34]

PD: Um-hm. I wanted to ask, were you considered or are considered a come here or from here?

[00:14:40]

SM: [Laughter] I don't really care.

[00:14:43]

PD: [Laughter] That's a good answer.

[00:14:44]

SM: It does not matter to me. I'm happy. I'm just happy.

[00:14:50]

PD: Um-hm. And is there any meals that you remember as a kid that your mom made?

[00:14:57]

SM: Well, yeah, and my grandmother, too. My grandmother made . . . what kind of cookies were they? They were kind of sugar cookies but she'd put lemon on it. And she'd store them in a container and she'd put a piece of bread in there and that was supposed to keep it from getting maybe moist. I'm not quite sure. She made spoon bread. Have you ever had spoon bread? [Gasps] And so, what they'd do is they'd go out and fish, get spot, bring it back, fry it up, have the spoon bread. That would be breakfast. Now, I really wasn't so excited about spot because it's sweet. It's a sweet meat, but there are a lot of bones. And for a kid having to work through those bones, you just want to stick it in your mouth, you know. Don't want to mess with the bones.

[00:15:56]

PD: And moving around the country a lot, was there anything that stood out to you about the food that you would eat in this area, how it was different or things that you didn't encounter or weren't the same?

[00:16:08]

SM: Oh yeah, there's a lot of differences.

[00:16:12]

PD: Um-hm. What stood out as—you would come visit and this is the food of Mathews or, you know, Mobjack?

[00:16:18]

SM: Spoon bread would be a big one, yeah. Aspic, you know, using the word tomato/*to-ma-to* instead of tomato, that's what I grew up with. My grandmother said tomato/*to-ma-to*, and when you were around my mother or my grandmother that's the way you pronounced it. Actually, one time as a freshman in English class I was—the teacher asked me to read something and so I was reading it—and I can't remember what it was from, but you know how you can kind of scan ahead? And I was reading it and I was scanning ahead and I was—and that word came up, tomato/*to-ma-to*. Don't know which one to use. I'm in class, but I'm so accustomed to being sensitive to that. And so, I went with it, I decided I was going to say *to-ma-to*. And so, I was reading and I had said *to-ma-to* and the teacher stopped me in my tracks and he goes, "Where are you from?" And I went oh no, you know, of all—I don't want any attention drawn to me. And of course, then you start to flush and perspire. And you go Tidewater. And he goes, "I haven't heard that word in so long. I'm from North Carolina and that's the only way we said it." And we were great friends from that moment on. And so, that's my story about *to-ma-to*/tomato.

[00:17:53]

PD: Wow. [Laughter]

[00:17:55]

SM: But you asked about food. Cornbread, I guess cornbread, it's not sweet—it's not supposed to be sweet but I don't know where they do that, make cornbread that's sweet. I do like spoon bread.

[00:18:10]

PD: Are there any other special foods you remember when you would come here?

[00:18:14]

SM: Oh, yeah, I'm trying to think. [Laughter] Crab. Crab imperial, I mean, because they could catch—my parents caught their own crabs all the time and sat out here. I should have taken a picture of them. But every afternoon they picked crabs. Do you know how hard it is to pick crabs? [Laughter] Oh, I would sit with them but it would just be torture because you'd want to eat it but you couldn't eat what they had just picked because that's not fair. I mean, they worked hard on that. And they would take all—they were very systematic. They would take the two groupings, you know, the back fin and they would try to make it very lump. They wouldn't break it up. It was gorgeous, it was perfect. And then, she'd put a sauce in it, which was an imperial sauce, and she could freeze it. And so, we would—that was a special deal and she gave it a way to people that were sick. It was used as a gift. I loved it. But my dad would also get soft crab, and he would bring the soft crab and he would cut the face out [Laughter] and freeze it, freeze the crab, the soft crab. And then, they'd have it in the winter. Many a time we'd sit down and he had grown the vegetables and we were eating something that he caught, you know, the fish or whatever. And he was very proud of that.

[00:19:49]

PD: Um-hm.

[00:19:50]

JT: What kind of appliances did your grandparents use and like cookware did your grandparents use?

[00:19:57]

SM: My grandmother used the pressure pot a lot. Actually, I still have hers. I'm not sure if I trust it but I got it. [Laughter] I don't know whether I should ever use it. My husband bought an electric pressure pot and so we use that a lot. But she used that a lot.

[00:20:16]

JT: Did she have a modern stove at the time?

[00:20:19]

SM: Well, it was gas. And I wouldn't call it modern, no, I would call it an older model. The other thing that I do remember is when she would mix things, she had a mixer. It was a hand mixer—manual, so you held it and you had a little wheel and so you did this [gestures] you know and that's what she used.

[00:20:44]

JT: Wow.

[00:20:47]

PD: Wow. I wanted to see if you could talk a little bit about what Mobjack was like—or your memories of it when you would come to visit or when you were younger?

[00:20:59]

SM: Hm, it was full of people and it . . . if you remember what Johnny Machen said that there were a lot of people. It was a lot of activity. The store was always busy and in the summertime you'd walk in—of course, no air-conditioning—but you'd walk in and you'd get on that cement and you'd be barefoot and oh, it felt so good because it was cool. The cement was cool. And you'd get a drink out of his Coca Cola machine, which was run—it didn't—it was not electric, you put ice in it every morning. The ice-man came. So, you'd break—you'd put it there and you broke it all up and then it would fall into the different– it had three different compartments. There was a shallow one in the center and then there were deeper ones on either side. And George Philpotts, Captain George, he was frugal at times but he would come into the store and he'd get his Coke and he'd open it up and he'd take a couple sips and then he'd put the lid back on the top. These are glass bottles, you might remember. And they weren't that big. And he'd put it back and shut the . . . so, he let my grandfather hold his drink. And everybody knew that was Captain George's drink and you didn't touch it. Of course, I don't know that I'd really want to. And I remember that it was seven cents, the Coke was, and they would put a dime on the counter and my grandfather would get the change and he'd—I don't know how he did it but he'd just toss it and it would land flat on the counter. And then, they'd the three cents and— no, it's got to be more than that. Anyway, I don't remember. I'm getting myself all mixed up.

[00:23:10]

PD: And what do you remember about George Phillpotts or what have you heard either one?

[00:23:15]

SM: Well, I do remember him, he was a businessman and, you know, they have strengths and sometimes your strengths take you to a weakness. And sometimes you can see his weakness, but he also had some strengths.

[00:23:36]

PD: Could you go into a little more detail with that, if you don't mind?

[00:23:39]

JT: Like a story that comes to mind?

[00:23:41]

SM: I'm trying to remember. Well, I told you one yesterday that my grandfather worked for him for a short period of time before he started taking over the store. And so George Phillpotts would make—he made you work. And there weren't laws in those days I don't think about, you know eight hours, they were working twelve hours or whatever. And so, my mother told me this story where my grandfather had worked several hours—or several days long hours and finally I guess one morning he overslept and he came in and, of course, George Phillpotts said, "I hope you're early rising did you no harm." And well, George Phillpotts also owned the house that we rented in [19]61 and the furnace was going bad on it. So, Mother, in the fall, she'd turn the furnace on and it blew all this black soot into the house. And you'd never want to experience that ever because that stuff does not clean up easily. So, she went to Captain George and said, "You know, the furnace needs working on," and he'd get it fixed and then she'd turn it back on and it

happened again. Well, you know, two times, [Laughter] you're not going to do it a third time, so he refused to replace the—what is that—the furnace. It was a floor furnace. So, she went out and bought a propane heater, I think it was, and we put it in the dining room and that's how we heated the house. And that upset him. But it was a good thing she did it because after we left and moved to Northern Virginia the house burned down. So, it was a bad—it was a faulty furnace and had we trusted it again it might not have been so good because my room was right next to the furnace.

[00:26:03]

PD: Could you talk a little bit about—yesterday we walked around the area from Grace Providence to the Bayfront of where the store was. Could you kind of describe what that was like back in that time whether—what you remember seeing if you walked that same area?

[00:26:18]

SM: Oh, yes. Well, of course, if you started walking from the church to the– down the road, the first thing you would see would be the oil tanks and they were right on the water's edge. And that's how they filled up the trucks and the trucks went out—the oil, heating oil. And it had just a big sign. And when I was little I thought—it said Tidewater Oil I think, or anyway when I was little I thought it said Mobjack, you know. And the minute I saw that as you turn way up at Ralph Andertons's house, as you turn that corner, you could see that big sign and since I couldn't read at the time I thought that's what it said and you know that's . . . I am excited now, I can see it. But anyway, you'd walk down that road and then that's in front of you. So, you'd turn where the road turns and there was a big store, old store that was no longer a store but they used it as a post

office. And the postmaster was Scoop Anderton, who was Ralph's probably uncle, great-uncle or something like that, and he smoked a pipe. And it smelled so good when you walked in there. But you would walk into the store and you could see all the store features. They were still there but then in the back was the post office. And another story about Scoop was he– when I would write to my grandparents on the envelope—I'd say, "Hi, Scoop," and then when they would send me a letter Scoop would say, "Hi, Sudy." So, anyway, that was the store. And then, you continue to walk down and that was all where that pole house is now. And in front of my grandparents' home, my mother's home, that was all water's edge. There was no land, and it was filled with oyster shells, lots and lots of oyster shells. And so, then, you continue and you come against another store building that was just being used as storage at that point that I remember. And then, my grandfather's store was next to it and it was busy. People were coming and going. And then, on the left was a very long pier with buildings. And on one side of the pier, if you turned and looked down the pier, on the left side were offices where Captain George had his office, and then the bookkeeper was also there. And then, on the right side was a big warehouse where he did a lot of storing of fertilizer. I mean, he went through his fertilizer stage and lots of stages. And then, if you continue down the pier, there was an old boat and it was sunk right there and it was called *The Dola Lawson* and it's—you could still in [19]61, the wheelhouse was there, the steering thing was there, you could probably stand on it but it was sunk in the water. And you had the rails that went down the pier and then in the center—not the center but where the boats would come up to unload their fish it was just about at the water's—where it started to get a little bit deep so that they could come in, their boats would be just filled with fish. And so, I'd walk down there and the bookkeeper would be down there sorting fish and some other people would be helping. And the fish they didn't want like the blow toad, the blow fish, they'd toss that out.

They eat it now. But at the time they threw that one away. But the guy would have a shovel and he'd shovel his fish, and there was a bucket that came down and he'd fill the bucket and then they would pull it on the pulley and swing it over, dump it into their big, big shelf—let's call it a trough or whatever—and they would sort through the fish, change—you know, all and they'd swing it back and let it lower and by then, he was filling it full of more fish. And the process then—and so that's how they sorted through the fish. And then, if you go—continue on down the pier at the very end was—I'm not real familiar with all of this but oysters—big oyster cooking containers, real big ones. And then, they had oyster boats and my brother and his friends would go swimming off the end of the pier because that was deep. And you'd have like two big oyster boats, they're bigger than the deadrise. And they would go under the boat [Laughter]—they would swim under the boat. And that was a little bit dangerous because you could just hit your head on some of those barnacles. Anyway, that was the big fun.

[00:32:32]

PD: So, the boats that were there, were they mainly suppliers, distributors, or did watermen come, too? What do you remember seeing? Who were the different people there?

[00:32:43]

SM: Well, the different boats that I saw were the oyster boats and then the fishing boats and then the crabbers. And they would bring their supply, their crabs to market that way. You know, they would—while they were pulling the crab pots up, they would go through it. The small ones they'd toss. The big ones they'd put into their baskets and then put the lid on it once they were full. And then, they would come in whenever the—I guess the guy who bought your crabs would

come and they'd bring it and put it on the trolley and take the trolley down. And that's really where I came in was that's what I did for a summer is I crabbed and I just copied what they did and it was a lot of fun. [Laughter] But I didn't have to pay for the fish, the scrub fish that you put into your crab pots. My grandfather supplied me.

[00:33:52]

PD: So, what was that experience like that summer?

[00:33:54]

SM: That was unbelievable. I loved it. I'd get up—well, I slept on the porch and because you had to get up so early, I'd get up early and get down to my boat and I'd—I had my scrub fish or my bait—that's a better word, and so then I—and I had my baskets. And so, I'd go out and I had about five, not very many, and pull those things up and, you know, did the same thing that the crabbers did, and then rebaited it and threw it over for the next day. But I told you my story that because they were so amazed that a girl would be doing this and especially my mother's daughter, you know, I guess my mother—she would have never done this but I liked it. And they loved my grandfather. So, I didn't realize they were doing this until one day when I got up early I was going out to my crab pot and I saw one of the crab men—a crabber, he was at my crab pot, and I thought oh, my goodness, he's taking my crabs. [Laughter] And I went over there, you know, I turned the engine on full and it was a very heavy boat. My dad helped me pick it out. It was stable, wood. Anyway, it didn't go fast. And it had this ten-horse which he let me use. But anyway, I went over there and pulled my crab pot up and it was just crammed pack full. And I thought, well, I guess I got there before he got it, you know, and I knew who it was. But I didn't

think that he would ever do that but he was around my crab pot. So [Laughter] I took my bounty and I sold my bounty and then, of course, years later I found out he was putting crabs in my crab pot, he and his brother, because they thought it was wonderful that I—and then, I went away for a week and my brother said, "Since you do so well, with this crabbing stuff, I think I'll help. You know, can I use your boat? Can I crab for a week?" And I went, "Sure, it's really lucrative." [Laughter] Well, he got nothing. And he goes, "What in the world do you do?" It's like, I don't know. [Laughter] Like, it just happens and, of course, I found out that they were putting it in.

[00:36:54]

JT: I also wanted to ask, how old were you when you were doing that?

[00:36:59]

SM: Twelve or thirteen.

[00:37:01]

JT: Oh wow, so who—where did you get the boat from?

[00:37:05]

SM: Well, I had earned money prior to this and so my grandfather and my dad took my money and they found a boat, a wooden boat someplace around Mathews or Deltaville or somewhere. Middlesex maybe. And they said, "We found the perfect boat for you." [Laughter] It won't sink ever. And so, I was just happy to have a boat, but I didn't– you know, I would have looked for something a little more sleek but this one worked so much better especially when you had crab

pots in them, you know, because it was– they put in a false floor because it didn't have one of those. It had the V-floor and so they put a flooring in so you could just put your crab pots down. And that's where it came from, someplace around the area with my money. [Laughter] But I loved it, that was my boat.

[00:38:10]

PD: It's a lot of independence to have at thirteen.

[00:38:13]

SM: It is. I would have never let my children do that. My mother, I think because she was raised on the water, it didn't feel scary at all. And all these different men down there on the waterfront, I just cringe when I think about it. But I was able to start the engine. You know, you have the pull. I was able to do that. I think that would be a deal-breaker if you couldn't start the engine.

[00:38:48]

PD: Were there any other children doing this at the time that you saw? You were not just like a girl that was doing this but you're also just a child, too. So, both those things, were those outliers I guess from what was going on? It was like an older operation I guess, so to speak?

[00:39:07]

SM: Well, no, I didn't know of any girl or twelve-year-old that was doing it, none.

[00:39:18]

JT: Do you want to talk about the general store?

[00:39:20]

PD: Yeah, I was going to start to transition to your family's store and I wanted to ask when your great-grandfather opened it.

[00:39:27]

SM: Hm, I'm trying to remember. Probably when he married my great-grandmother, and that might have been in the 18– let's say 1890. I don't know specifically. I don't know that that's a correct date. But my grandfather was born I think around 1893, [18]94, or [18]95, somewhere around there, and he was the first born. Well, there were two boys and they were born pretty close together, my grandfather and his brother.

[00:40:18]

PD: And do you know why he started it and how that was something that he—?

[00:40:22]

SM: Well, I think he was a businessman. I think he saw a need and he decided that he could fill that need. I did try to read up a little bit on him. But now, I can't really remember, but I got that information, but he was known for his fairness and that was a quality that was brought out in the—one of the newspaper articles that I had read about him. He did build two of them. One of them was—it burned down due to a fire and then he had to rebuild it, and he must have been doing well, financially. I think he was a good businessman.

[00:41:14]

PD: And when did it trade hands to his child, his son?

[00:41:20]

SM: I think in the late [19]30s because I remember my grandfather talking about—well, they had a slot machine underneath the counter, but it wasn't legal. I mean, it was just there. I guess it was legal for years and then they decided that it wasn't going to be legal anymore. But his big joke was yeah, that's how he sent his daughter through school, the slot machine. [Laughter] I don't think so but I don't know how they did it honestly.

[00:41:59]

PD: And have you heard any stories about what the store was like when your great-grandfather ran it?

[00:42:06]

SM: Well, they had a phone. I do remember that, and he couldn't hear very well. So, people would call up on the phone and my great-grandfather would go, "What? I can't hear you." And then, he'd hang up, you know, so his wife was there a lot. She was known for her chocolate ice cream. She made chocolate ice cream and in the store there—as you enter the store on the right—was just the sweetest ice-cream parlor, you might say. It had the marble top and then it had a place where she would store her ice cream. And she was known for that. I guess it was a

real special treat for people. They didn't have a whole lot of—well, I guess they did. They made cookies, but . . .

[00:43:02]

PD: And could you describe the store, both the exterior, what it was like, and then walking in?

[00:43:10]

SM: Well, as you look at it, there were two big windows on either side. And there were some flower containers that they could plant flowers in front. And there was a pad out front that was cement and then that pad—that cement pad extended through the store. So, it was all connected. So, you opened—you go in through these screen doors and there were two doors, but only one was open usually. And on the right was your ice cream and a big mirror, which I have still, and the marble top and in front of that was the Coke machine. And on the left, if you turned around, the windows had a window seat on it and you could put more flowers there or plants because it was a nice exposure, especially in the wintertime. But you had the—oh gosh, you had the—what are they called?

[00:44:29]

PD: Are you thinking of a stove?

[00:44:30]

SM: No, the . . .

[00:44:34]

PD: Counter maybe?

[00:44:35]

SM: Counter, that's it. Sounds like—anyway, so the counter and it was just the wood. You know, it was just beautiful. And then, above that on top of that was another showcase and it would have all sorts of different things. Now, my grandfather—I think my great-grandfather had a knack for it. I don't know that my grandfather had a knack. He was a storyteller, he was a people person and he could take your story and make it so much better than you could ever imagine you story could sound. But anyway, he just was joy personified. And you had those big mouthed cookie jars that—and so they had a lid and you'd reach in there and . . . and then display cases. They had the lettuce down here. They had eggs down here. People—loose, the eggs were loose. And if you went around the counter and into the back that was where the safe was and his desk and his adding machine. And, of course, at the end of the day he always had to add up his receipts. And then if you decide—there's another counter that went further down and that's where he had his drawer where he had his money. And that's all he used all the time. He didn't have a register, just a drawer. And then, in back of him, were the shelves and he had cans of green beans or whatever. And I can't remember all the stuff that was there. I do remember he had one of those long things that you can grab a can and bring it down because it—they were even too tall for him, and he was not a—he was a pretty tall man.

[00:46:44]

PD: What were some of the, I guess primary merchandise that he sold?

[00:46:47]

SM: Well, the most desirable was the meats—chicken and, of course, his homemade sausage. And he did that from scratch. He had his hogs in the back. And it was fenced in. And that's where they were fed and that's where they lived and sometimes he'd ask me to go out and feed them. And, of course, you'd have a bag full of whatever it was and you had to mix it with water and the pigs liked it.

[00:47:28]

PD: So, you said when you were around that was the only store open in that area.

[00:47:36]

SM: Yeah. Now, at the Y, if you went out of Mobjack down the road a bit, there was a store called the Country Store or—anyway, at the Y. I don't know if you've noticed it. It's dilapidated now. It's falling in.

[00:47:55]

PD: Is that by like the Emmaus Baptist Church area before that, is that the one you're talking about or you're thinking closer?

[00:48:02]

SM: Yeah, closer. It was brick. But they had a store there. But I don't know how long that lasted.

[00:48:12]

PD: Um-hm. So, what role did your grandfather's store play in the community?

[00:48:18]

SM: Well, people would call him and they would order things. They would—it would be on credit, so he had a ledger. And usually everybody had chicken on Sunday, so they would leave their chicken with him until Sunday morning and then they'd come and get it which meant he opened up the store to let them come and get their chicken. And you would—they would take it home, bake it, that was their Sunday dinner after church. But he would take care of it until it was time for them to come and get it and—

[00:49:04]

PD: And I was wondering, you mentioned the sausage. Is there any other food that he sold that was either locally sourced, the meat, or—?

[00:49:15]

SM: Well, it was a ham. That was a big deal, the cured ham, salt-cure, and he hung those in the back area. There was another building that is not there today but there was another section to that building. And so, he would hang his ham there to cure. And they were—it was so special, it was so neat.

[00:49:46]

PD: Um-hm.

[00:49:46]

SM: I just can imagine anybody doing that but that came from those hogs, too. And I have to tell you one time he was feeding the hogs fish. I mean, it was, you know—it helped, you didn't have to buy meal. And so, my grandmother said, "You better not feed those hogs fish because you're going to taste it in your ham." And by golly she was right. It came out in the ham. So, he never did that again.

[00:50:17]

PD: So, in the Mobjack area, was there any alternative or other stores where you would be able to buy these goods from or was it just that other store that you mentioned up the road?

[00:50:29]

SM: No, they could get in their car and drive to Mathews Courthouse. And they—a lot of them did because it might have been cheaper. Some of their smaller items—I'm sure that most of them appreciated what food he actually did which was the ham, the sausage, and cut up the chicken. He actually had this very big chopping block and he would cut up the chicken on that chopping block, which is still—I still know where it is. Anyway, so, I watched him one day clean it and he had a scrub brush and he would just scrub that thing like this [g*estures*], maybe with water, I hope—anyway, that's pretty much what he did.

[00:51:27]

PD: Um-hm.

[00:51:28]

SM: Nobody ever got sick.

[00:51:33]

PD: What was his relationship with the watermen?

[00:51:37]

SM: Oh, they loved him and he loved them. During the Depression, or maybe let's—just after the Depression, maybe when he was starting to take over, at that point the supplier would come and he would leave the product and what the business owner would do, the storeowner, he would sell the product and when he came back he'd pay for the items. Well, during those times, it was kind of dark and it was hard. So, the supplier said "No, I got to have it upfront. You have to buy it from me." And he couldn't do it because he just didn't have the startup money yet. So, a couple of the same guys that gave me the crab, they came to him and they said, "We're going to give you a no-interest loan." And so, what that gave him was the ability to make this startup money so then he could buy this merchandise when it arrived instead of when it was sold. But he paid, you know, the watermen, the crabber men back, they were crabbers. They were the White Brothers.

[00:53:01]

JT: The White Brothers?

[00:53:02]

SM: The White Brothers.

[00:53:05]

JT: Do you have a sense of if it was a community gathering space and how—?

[00:53:10]

SM: Oh, yes. [Laughter] Yeah. Well, especially in the winter, because they had a potbelly stove and it was warm. And it was fun. And it got them out of the weather. And I remember one time, **Coles**, he babysat the store one time when my grandfather had to go somewhere. I don't remember where and I just was there. You know, I could come and go. And so, I came in and Coles was starting the stove up. And I watched him and he filled the stove and then he put in some gasoline. And then, he threw a match in and the match went out. And I'm just standing there right next to the stove and he said, "Sudy, just move back a little bit. Move back." So, he took a match and he threw it in again and it went out. And he says, "Sudy, stand behind me." [Laughter] And he took that third match and he lit it and he threw it in and it blew the stove completely out. I mean, it singed his eyebrows. I was lucky. I was behind him. But he blew this smoke all in this building. Everything was messed up, everything. So, Coles had to, I guess, repaint the store. I don't know what he did. But he blew the stove apart and had to get a new stove, too.

[00:54:41]

PD: So, was it always a gathering place for people to come? I guess what are the ways that people would gather there or congregate there or—?

[00:54:52]

SM: Yeah, your visions of sitting around and eating pickles and playing checkers? I don't remember the checkers or the pickles, but they did. Yeah, they came and they would talk but they were busy, you know, a lot of times. But yeah, they would, they'd gather and my grandfather would tell them stories or talk about this or that and take your story and make it much better. [Laughter]

[00:55:21]

JT: You know, I was wondering about alcohol at this time. And because there were no bars at least early on, was there alcohol served—I mean, not served at the general store but—but where were people getting it at the time and where were they consuming it?

[00:55:38]

SM: How would you know that? [Laughter] You must have heard that from someone else. Well, my grandfather, yeah, they had a lot of alcohol because it was considered just common, like cigarettes. You know, everybody smoked. But yeah, when he—two things, on Sunday morning he had it underneath the counter according to Ralph. Now, I don't know what Ralph was doing there underneath the counter. But my grandfather had it and so, yeah, they would have some before church, and I don't know if they mixed it with milk or not, but I remember moose milk.

That's what they called it, moose milk. But I think moose milk came when they went out fishing early in the morning.

[00:56:29]

JT: What's in—what's the liquor or the—is it—?

[00:56:31]

SM: Probably whiskey, I don't know. I have no idea. I never tried it. [Laughter] It didn't appeal to me because I like milk.

[00:56:43]

PD: Could you talk about, if you know, your grandfather's routine, like the schedule he worked, how early he'd get up, the days he was off, holidays?

[00:56:50]

SM: Very early, because let's see, when we were there, we would get up—my brother or I, one of us would sleep in by mistake because we always wanted to go with him. But if I got up, then I'd be very quiet to tiptoe out and we'd be sitting by his potbelly stove in the house, because that's how they heated the house, and put on your clothes and then go down to the store and he would—whatever he had to do there and then get in the boat and go fishing. And that was more fun because he'd catch breakfast. There must have been a bigger bounty in the Mobjack Bay at that point, but—and my grandfather was sneaky, too because, you know, I learned that somebody can sit in your tide and he would catch fish and I wouldn't. And we're in the same

boat, you know, why is he catching fish and I'm not? Well, I figured out, he was in my tide. So, the fish—they were floating against the tide and his lure was there before mine was. And so, they would snag his. Bring it in, bring it in. But you learned those things out of desperation.

[00:58:22]

PD: What were the hours of operation normally that the store would be open?

[00:58:27]

SM: Well, I guess eight o'clock until 5:00 or 6:00, whatever time they wanted to go home and have dinner. But I can remember my grandmother saying in May, "I've invited so and so over and I told them we were having rock for dinner tonight. Would you go get some?" So, he'd go out and catch rock.

[00:58:55]

JT: What were people getting at the supermarkets that they couldn't get at the store as in your grandfather's?

[00:59:01]

SM: Probably milk, juice. I don't remember seeing any milk but I might have missed that one. I don't know about butter, you know, some of those things.

[00:59:18]

JT: Okay.

[00:59:20]

SM: But they did have fresh eggs.

[00:59:22]

PD: I was wondering what would be the—someone's routine shopping there. Would it be a daily thing, would they shop there once a week or . . . ?

[00:59:31]

SM: Yeah, more daily than not. They would walk down there with their bag and get what they needed maybe—or maybe every other day go and get their meats or whatever specialty they needed, because they did a lot of canning in those days and they did the gardening. So, they had some of their stuff.

[00:59:58]

JT: How often did people go to the supermarkets in your estimation?

[01:00:03]

SM: Today?

[01:00:03]

JT: No, no, no. Then.

[01:00:05]

SM: Oh, then?

[01:00:06]

JT: Yeah.

[01:00:09]

SM: I don't know. I know my mother used to stockpile and, you know, when you went you got five cans of green beans and you got five cans of corn and you know you—[Laughter] And so that you didn't have to worry about that. And then, your fresh items—but she did all her shopping at my grandfather's store when we lived there just to help him out if nothing else. But, you know, the meats were good.

[01:00:43]

PD: I wanted to ask, you mentioned that people would gather there like in the evenings. They would sit around. Why do you think they did that? What did the country store have that made them, you know, like why was that a space that they did that at?

[01:00:57]

SM: Well, men, you know, it was really nice for men to be together and to laugh about what they wanted to laugh about, or to tell their story of the day or maybe what they caught or it was just healthy. You know, it's just wonderful because women would gather, too. And back in those days the big thing was at four o'clock—you did everything you needed to do, for a woman

anyway, and I mean she would be ready for any visitor at all to come after four o'clock, maybe between 4:00 and 5:00. And you would have maybe a little sherry with glasses or whatever you liked or wanted and a little container full of cigarettes in case they would like to. Anyway, at four o'clock you'd—it was called—it was referred to as making a call. And people didn't call you before they came. It was just you were ready or you weren't home. And so, if they called on you and you weren't home, that's okay. But they didn't call because a lot of people didn't have phones. But they were real social and I thought that was nice because back in those days there wasn't a whole lot of television to pull you away. But people would come into your home and you would invite them in and you would offer them something to drink and, of course, cigarettes [Laughter], and something to eat I guess if you had that. Kind of from the English when they have tea in the afternoon around 4:00, it's just a nice thing to do. But they did that in this area.

[01:02:56]

PD: And I just have a couple more questions. How long did the store stay open and when did it close?

[01:03:06]

SM: Well, it closed in [19]67. My grandmother died in [19]66 and he just couldn't stay by himself. So, he came to live with us and then my grandfather put it on the market. Actually, he sold the store and the house together.

[01:03:31]

PD: And what did it become after that?

[01:03:33]

SM: Well, of course, the house then was resold to somebody else and the building became what—Texas Oil—or Texas, no—

[01:03:48]

JT: Texaco?

[01:03:49]

SM: Texaco Oil Company, and it might have changed companies after that. I'm not sure. But he redesigned so that he would have a restroom and—[knocking].

[*END OF INTERVIEW*]