

**Eddie Willis**  
**Mr. Big Seafood, Harkers Island, NC**

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Location: Harkers Island, NC

Interviewers: Keia Mastrianni, Mike Moore

Transcription: Shelley Chance

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START OF INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:05*]

Mike Moore: May 4, 2016 this is the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Project. We're interviewing Mr. Eddie Willis.

[00:00:22]

So Eddie, introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about where you're from and what you do.

[00:00:27]

Eddie Willis: Well I'm a fourth generation commercial fisherman, born and raised here on Harkers Island. My name is Eddie Willis. I've done this all my life. I started fishing—going when I was about six—seven years old and started drawing a full—full-share the time I was nine and just started full-time at about thirteen.

[00:00:59]

MM: And your father was a fisherman before you?

[00:01:02]

EW: Yeah, a boat builder and fisherman. His father was a boat builder and a fisherman before him and—and his father was just—just a fisherman.

[00:01:13]

MM: Uh-hm and your father's name?

[00:01:14]

EW: Was Weldon Willis, Weldon E. Willis, and my grandfather's name was Weldon Willis.

00:01:20

MM: Uh-hm okay, and you were—when you were born and—and raised here obviously you were under a lot of impression from an older generation here of fishermen. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

00:01:33

EW: Yeah, I—I grew up with—with [*Laughs*]*—*I grew up with a crowd of old men, well—well they were old to me. They were—now they're not old 'cause they were fifty but [*Laughs*] now I'm fifty, they weren't so old. But anyway, no, I grew up with a crowd of old men and I fished with them and they—they taught me every trick of the trade and—and the easiest way to do something and the best way to do something and—and I tried to—tried to model my life from—from—from what they told me and—and what they showed me and—and just really tried to model my life by them.

00:02:09

MM: Uh-hm.

00:02:12

EW: And I've just always fished.

00:02:15

MM: And these older men are still around, a few, right? They're still on the island?

00:02:19

EW: Hmm, god they probably ain't—there probably ain't a half dozen left.

00:02:25

MM: Wow.

00:02:27

EW: I don't think there are. There probably ain't over three or four of the original fishermen that—that I—that I started working around and—and—and got to know and you know—. Yeah, they—there's probably not god there's not—there's probably not—there's probably not three of them left.

00:02:50

MM: Uh-hm, uh-hm.

00:02:52

Keia Mastrianni: Can you talk about someone who had the biggest impact on you or you know what lessons you've learned from them?

00:02:57

EW: Well I—when I was little I was—I was like—like mama says I was a listener, so if one of them had something to say I—I listened to what he had to say. I feel like my—my great—my granddad's brother which his name was Calvin, I think he was probably my biggest influence and had the biggest impact on me.

00:03:23

KM: Why?

00:03:25

EW: He—he was—he was a very, very smart man. He was a—he was a very good fisherman and great net man. His life kind of—my life was kind of like his with the exception of my dad didn't die. My—my dad got sick and his dad passed away at thirteen. And he left and went on a menhaden boat in Louisiana at thirteen years old with thirty-eight grown men. And he stayed in Louisiana from May until October and sent his money home.

00:04:09

And his mother and seven brothers and sisters was home and he had at the age of thirteen more or less took on the role of their father and—and fed them. And that always had a really big impact on me, it really you know I thought about that all through my life of—and never realized that I—I more or less—I grew up that way myself. I mean you were—you were a child today and you know—and but you never thought of yourself that way. And—and of course when my dad got sick I was—I was thirteen and I turned—well I turned fourteen in May and he got sick the September before, I was—I was thirteen at the time. And—and sorry to say but I quit school and I came home and I went to work and I don't—I don't regret quitting school but I—I regret not having a proper education.

00:05:10

KM: But you took over the fishing business for your dad?

00:05:11

EW: Yeah until he got well and then me and him went to work every day for thirty years from the time I was old enough to remember until the night he passed away. There had never been one day that I hadn't spoke to him. Now there had been days I hadn't seen him but it had never been a day I hadn't spoke to him. And it might have been three o'clock in the morning, may have been nine o'clock of a morning or two o'clock of an evening but sometime during that day we spoke for a long time. *[Laughs]* Yeah—

00:05:49

MM: What did you do when you were—when you were a little boy on the boat with your dad? What was some of your duties that you—some of your first responsibilities?

00:05:56

EW: Well when—when I was—when I was a little feller we—Daddy pound netted and I was the middle man. He worked in the boatyard and—and he shrimped nights and—and he pound netted and he crabbed. And—and such as you are at that age and what you can do is very limited of course, but we—they would take me with them pound netting and—and of course you saw by the day you went that my job was to hold that slack webbing up in the middle of the—in the middle of the boat so it didn't—you know the fish didn't run back under the boat.

00:06:32

And—and I crabbed with him and when I could or when I could—them days when you could lift the pot he would let me fish the pots, he'd run the boat, and—and shrimping I got to—I got to pull the ropes in for him 'til he got down close to the—to the—to the trawl board which got everything by hand in them days and I got to cull and—and play in the little fish and the crabs and—and daddy you seen this one, daddy you seen that one? *[Laughs]* You know so that was my—that was my function there.

00:07:05

And—and then in the summer, we—we mullet fished on the banks and—and I can remember not sleeping all night waiting for daylight to get here so you could go. I mean that was—that was the excitement and the anticipation of—of going. You just didn't sleep that night.

00:07:24

MM: You didn't sleep huh?

00:07:24

EW: Yeah and—

00:07:25

MM: Do you still get that way?

00:07:25

EW: Oh I stay that way. I don't get any sleep now so it doesn't matter. *[Laughs]* But no, no, I—I—I'm sad to say I'm just as excited today as I was the first day I ever went.

00:07:38

MM: That's awesome.

00:07:38

EW: I truly am.

00:07:39

MM: That's love of what you do right there.

00:07:41

EW: Yeah, it's—I tell people I've never had a job. I just got up and wanted to go fishing, so it was *[Laughs]* you know it was—it was—it was pretty good.

00:07:50

MM: Can you tell us a little bit about you—? You were saying at one point before how you had noticed at one point in your life as a young man and fishermen that a lot of the fish, you know they weren't getting a lot of money for and you kind of changed. You kind of went a different direction.

00:08:09

EW: Well I—I was brought up on volume. If you didn't catch—well take the fall for example, if you didn't catch a million, a million and a half pound of spots you—you weren't doing anything. You know you were just—you just weren't doing anything. So like I said I was

brought up on volume and it didn't matter if they were five-cent, twelve-cent, twenty-cent, you went just as hard, you caught all you could catch and that was the mindset.

00:08:35

You know more is better.

00:08:39

And the turning point of my life was I got up on a Monday morning and I put a pair of chest-waders on and I had never took my feet out of them until two o'clock Friday morning. And somewhere 2,000 boxes, 2,500 boxes of fish later that week, I—that Friday evening we came over to the house and everybody was all excited and we shared up and—and I was sitting there and everybody was talking and everybody was excited. We had—had a big week, you know we had made I don't know \$1,500—\$1,700—I don't know how many dollars we had made. But anyway it was—it was over \$1,500 and all the old men was all excited.

00:09:24

And—and after they left we sat down to the supper table and I told daddy I said, "I'm not going next week." And of course dad was a little on the—he was a little sarcastic—sarcastic and he said, "Well what are you going to do, pick huckleberries?" [*Laughs*] And I said, "I'll make more money."

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I said, "I quit. I'm not going no more." He said, "Why are you not going anymore?" I said, "Well, Monday morning I put a pair of chest-waders on and I never took my feet out of them until this morning two o'clock when we finally got home and got cleaned up." And I said, "And I've sit here and done the simple math on this and I made eight-seven cents per box, my part. And I can pick up beer cans and make this much money. And I'm not going no more." He

said, “Well what are you going to do?” I said, “Well, I’m going to the banks in the morning, somewhere, and I’m going to catch me four or five, six, eight hundred pounds of something and I’m going to come home and sell it myself.”

00:10:29

And he said, “You’re going to do what?” I said, “You heard me. That’s what I’m going to do.” So the next morning when everybody got up to go fishing I didn’t go. I went on my own. And I’ll never forget it. I caught about 750—800 pounds, could have been 850 pounds of spots and I came home and called a friend of mine and I told him I needed—I wanted to sell these fish but I wanted to sell them myself. And he told me where to sell them. And I called the man and you know it’s—it’s pretty miraculous. Them spots we were getting twenty cent for, I got sixty cent for just because I put them in a box and put some ice on it.

00:11:15

And of course we had been shedding soft crabs for years so I was somewhat set up and had a cold room and—and a little ice machine, you know just—and I—and I told daddy I said, “I’m going to order me an ice machine,” and I bought me an industrial ice machine and I called the man that sold the cartons and I bought me 500 cartons. And—and little sarcasm from him—him again, “Do you think that’s enough boxes to hold you?” [*Laughs*] And I said, “Probably for a long time.”

00:11:50

And you know it wasn’t very long before those boxes were gone. And I had a really big box of money.

00:12:00

KM: How old were you when you made that decision?

00:12:02

EW: Oh I was oh god I don't know. It's been—I was probably thirty-five. I could have been thirty-seven. Time you know—time doesn't—time doesn't matter to us. It's just every day is another day but—. But anyway and I made some really bad decisions and I made some really good ones since.

00:12:30

I never thought that the day would come when I caught this amount of stuff and I came home. I stopped when I could have kept another boat load and I just quit and I came home. And I—crabbing pots full of crabs and take them up and bring them home because they weren't—they weren't worth no money. And the days in—in my life, now I say I'm different than most people, I understand that but the days of handling stuff for nothing until my kids are hungry is over with for me. I'm not going to sell twenty cent crabs, fifteen cent crabs, I'm not going to do it.

00:13:18

I'll let them just swim free. And once me and Allison started dating and got married we both had the attitude that quality was where the money was and if you couldn't get paid for quality then we would release it back in the ocean because I was not giving it away anymore. And I've tried to stick to that and so far it's worked out for us.

00:13:45

KM: Sure.

00:13:45

EW: So that's where we are with that—'til this morning. [*Laughs*]

00:13:51

KM: You value your work and you have come to a point where you want other people to value it just as much.

00:13:59

EW: Well I want—I want people to have good food and I want them to have quality food and I—and I—and I’m proud of the quality of my seafood. And people pay for quality. They pay for it other places and they’ll pay for it here. And so far that attitude has—everybody has been pretty happy with it. They’re happy with the product. I’m happy with the—they’re happy with the price and—and I’m happy with the revenue from it.

00:14:30

MM: Uh-hm.

00:14:31

EW: There’s boys crabbing today that’s crabbing for twenty-five and thirty cents a pound. I—I quit at \$2.00. You know it just—I’m not working—I mean I’ve—believe me, I’ve done more \$2.00 jobs than any human alive, so but I don’t—I’m not above that and I’m not saying they are—you know they’re below that but I’m not crabbing 500 pots to make \$60 when the evening comes.

00:14:58

MM: Uh-hm.

00:14:57

KM: Sure, sure.

00:14:59

EW: I’m just not going to do it.

00:15:01

MM: Been there, done that.

00:15:02

EW: Uh-hm.

00:15:02

MM: Yeah, Makeley Lewis yesterday was telling us a lot about how there was hardly ever any money in fishing when he was a kid you know—

00:15:09

EW: No, there wasn't.

00:15:10

MM: Yeah.

00:15:10

EW: Wasn't any money.

00:15:12

MM: Because he was always saying how there's so much—the fishermen make so much more money today.

00:15:18

KM: I'm sorry to interrupt. Can you talk to me a little bit about the way you do your fishing? I mean it's kind of old-style. I mean you're still doing it with the netting and—

00:15:31

EW: We—we do pound nets. We do crab pots. We do haul seines. But everything we do has been modified. We still do it the old way but we've—we've modified it to the point that it's more efficient. It's cleaner. It's easier. When I was haul netting I would say this professionally

[Laughs] there was seven of us in crew. Now we do a more efficient job and catch cleaner stuff with three of us. But we had to change the—the way we did it and we had to change the nets we used. We have really large escape panels now that let all the juvenile fish go. So we don't have to handle them. That's where you need the manpower because you handle such volume to get what you wanted out of it. Well now I let the volume go and I just keep the best of it.

00:16:34

KM: And with the pound netting you're still doing kind of traditional way like going into the woods and chopping down—

00:16:38

EW: Yeah. We cut our—

00:16:40

KM: —saplings?

00:16:40

EW: We cut our own poles and we—we hang our own nets, we mend our own nets, we make our own net leads, uh we—we dip our own nets, we stick our own poles from—from—we do it from A to Z, all by hand. Gosh well I shouldn't say by hand because we load with a boom truck but you know what I'm saying. And that's the way it's always been done.

00:17:06

KM: Yeah, I mean like your great-great grandfather would probably chop down wood and—and set it up the same way?

00:17:12

EW: Yeah, well, my—my grandparents did not pound net. My—my dad—my dad set the first pound net that was ever set on Harkers Island in 1971. He—that was the first one that was

ever set here. And he did not have enough money to go buy large webbing like we use today for—for pound netting, so he used old purse seine, shrimp net webbing. That's what the first pound net was made out of here. And he made it and he set it and he caught so many little pinfish with the flounders that it was impossible to handle it. I mean he would go and have to bail 5,000 pounds of tiny pinfish to get 500 pounds of flounders.

00:18:02

So he ordered a piece of webbing out of Memphis Net and Twine and it was—he was using one and a half inch stretch netting and he bought a piece of four-inch stretch netting which that's what we make pound nets out of today. And he cut a hole in the back of the net and he put a window. And when he would go to fish the net, all the little fish swam through the window and he was just left with the big ones.

00:18:30

So many years later when—when he gave up hauling and we gave up the crew men and—and I started hauling on my own I thought back on that. So I put a piece of big marsh netting in my haul net and like I was telling you earlier we pulled the fish to the beach and you sat there and you pulled two feet of net ashore and you wait five minutes. And you pull three or four feet of net ashore and you wait five minutes. And every little fish swims away and you're only left with what you want to bring home—sellable product. And it's—it's really made a—made a big difference for—it allows me to handle my own fish because I have to do it by hand, so instead of having to bring home 20,000 pound to get 3,000, now I just bring the 3,000 home and I pack it myself and—and I get everything from it. So it's—it's—all that's changed a lot for us.

00:19:36

KM: Uh-hm.

00:19:41

EW: Our crab pots, the law requires you to use two—two and five-sixteenths rings in your pots to let little crabs go. We use four. People say, “Well why do you use four?” I got a friend who uses six. I don’t want to be on the water another two hours every day handling little crabs that will swim away when I’m not there. So when I get there, what’s there is what I want to bring home. I don’t have to worry about anything else. Nowadays out of ten boxes of crabs we won’t have fifteen illegal crabs that we have to throw back overboard when we’re—when we’re crabbing because the rings let them escape. So it’s—you know we—we just—we just try everything we can try just to make our lives simpler and easier and quicker for us when we get—when we get home.

00:20:37

KM: Sure.

EW: The days of staying on four or five days—nah, not so much no more with me. *[Laughs]* I want to get it done. I want to get home and I want to get it over with. And because I don’t have time and I have—the average fisherman catches it and he brings it home, somebody else handles it, then markets—they market it, they ship it, he gets paid Friday. If I catch it I have to come home, I have to wash it, pack it, I have to sell it, I have to wait for a freight truck to come get it, you know so I’ve got another five—six hours every day on my day. So if I stay gone five or six hours I don’t have the five or six to market it, sell it, and get the money for it, so therefore I’m—I’m not doing better. I’m going behind.

00:21:25

KM: Right.

00:21:26

EW: So that's—that's the attitude I have towards it and that's what we try to do.

00:21:30

KM: Yeah, can you tell me how you came to make Alberto as an acquaintance? How that—that relationship formed and what that relationship means to you?

00:21:42

EW: Well it means the world to me 'cause he's—he's greater than sliced bread. [*Laughs*] He—he is the man. Uh pretty funny, I had a really good friend. His name was—his name—we called him "PD" and his name was Percy Mason but we called him PD and I was sitting and watching television one night about 10:30. And the phone rings. Well my phone is never cut off and of course never—never go to bed no way but—and so I answered it and he said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm watching TV."

00:22:15

He said, "You got a minute?" I said, "I believe I have." [*Laughs*] 'cause any time you wanted you know—PD called, you listened to what he had to say.

00:22:23

And he said, "I'm gonna give you Alberto." I said, "PD you can't—you can't give me Alberto." He said, "Yes, I can too." [*Laughs*] He said—he said, "But before I let you have him you've got to promise me something." I said, "Yes, sir?" He said, "You got to promise me he's got a job every day that he wants one." And I said, "Okay." And he said, "Now I'm serious now, he's got to have a job every day." I said, "Well he's got one."

00:23:00

So the next morning we were packing fish and PD's truck pulls up and Alberto gets out and PD pulls away. And I look up the driveway and there comes Alberto and he walks on up. Of course we knew one another very well but—and I said, “Alberto how you doing?” He said, “Fine.” And he went to work. He didn't say, “Do you want me to shovel ice or do you want me to make cartons or you want me to dump fish or do you want me to weigh fish, or—?” He just started doing. *[Laughs]* And we worked on 'til late that evening. It was 5:00—5:30 and of course we stopped for lunch and throughout the day we'd talk like we've always talked, you know conversation and—. And that evening when he got ready to leave he said, “What time in the morning boss man?” And I said, “Same time.” I said, “But hold on a minute.” I said, “You—you came this morning and you went to work and you never said, ‘You know Eddie are you going to pay me, how much are you going to pay me, when do I get paid?’” I said, “You never said nothing. You come and went to work.” I said do you—he said, “No matter,” said, “PD said come to work.”

00:24:09

And I said, “Well we pay Friday and we buy you lunch every day and you work as many hours as you want to work as many days as you want to work and any day you don't want to work don't come to work, just call me.” He said, “I'll be here in the morning.” And he's been here every morning since. If he—if he is not in the hospital or on his death bed or has lost a limb he is going to be here the next morning when you tell him to. If it's five o'clock, three o'clock, nine o'clock, he is going to be here.

00:24:45

As far as I'm concerned he is one of the greatest people on earth. He—he can, will and he'd do anything, he really can and he doesn't complain. He doesn't ask questions. He wants it done like you want it done, when you want it done, and—and I mean it's—he's just I want a dozen of them.

00:25:10

KM: Yeah.

00:25:10

EW: I want a dozen just like him. [*Laughs*]

00:25:12

KM: Yeah, and he—he—he got here kind of in a precarious way didn't he?

00:25:16

EW: Yeah, yeah. Alberto—Alberto as a young man swam the Rio Grande with—with a two-liter Pepsi bottle full of water, him and three ladies, and—he did not know—and I don't know much about it—the geographical area of where they—but I can imagine it was a desert because one of the ladies got sick and got dehydrated and he wound up and gave her his bottle of water. And he got—he made it to Texas and got on a shrimp boat and worked in the Gulf and then from there I think he wound up in Georgia on another shrimp boat and then he wound up here and worked for a man here for a little while and didn't like the man. I don't think the man was too nice. And PD found out about him and picked him up and he stayed with PD thirteen—thirteen and a half years and he's been with me now almost four.

00:26:18

KM: Wow.

00:26:19

EW: But he is—he is very—he is very honest, very reliable, he's just a—just an all-around great person. He really is.

00:26:26

MM: And you guys rely on each other now.

00:26:29

EW: Oh god, [*Laughs*] it's—it's I mean we've got to the point now we even think alike. That's real—that's real scary. But we—we work together and we shrimp and when we shrimp we split—we split the money right down the middle. And we don't split wholesale, we split it all, what—whatever we get back from it, me and him splits it, so it's a—I made him a channel net last year and—and we went shrimping and we split the money and when we were—when we were through I gave him the net to just—just as a bonus for him to—you know to help him. And—and he's—you see him out there right now. He come at 7:30 and went to work. If I had said 5:30 he'd have been here at 5:30, so it's—.

00:27:21

KM: Oh yeah.

00:27:22

EW: But that's Alberto for you.

00:27:25

KM: Uh-hm.

00:27:25

MM: Eddie, can you talk a little about how Harkers Island has changed since you were a kid until—and compared to today?

00:27:32

EW: Oh my god. [*Laughs*] When I was a kid there was—give me just a minute, I think there was like nine fish houses, five scallop houses, like six boatyards, there was probably 400 or 500 men fishing, another 200 working in boatyards. There was one, two, three, four, five, six stores. We had a hardware store, a marine supply store that the guy prided his self on having a million items. Can you imagine a place no bigger than this with a store that you could walk in and buy a ball of twine, pocket knife, or a radar? Hmm, and then go down the next aisle and buy your groceries. I mean daddy always joked and said if I called—and we called him Cav. He was—his son is the founder of Jarrett Bay Boat Works and his name was Cav Ramsey. And he was a fine, fine man—fine man and he would do anything—if you were from the island and you worked for a living the sky was the limit in what you could get.

00:29:02

But daddy always joked and said if I needed a helicopter Cav would have her the next morning. I don't care when you told him tonight, the next morning—and I don't understand how he did that but you could come in there and say, "Cav, I lost an anchor today. I need a sixty-five pound anchor." "Well I don't have one but I'll have it in the morning at six o'clock." Nine o'clock tonight there's no stores open and the next morning at six o'clock your anchor would be there. You know I just don't—I don't know how the man did things he did but—but he kept us all going for a long time, yeah.

00:29:35

He carried net and every kind of marine supply you could imagine and he was—he was just—he was like—he was a bigger Billy's. He was—he was a—a lot bigger Billy's is what he is—was but—but he was a fine man.

00:29:54

MM: And Billy—is Billy's one of the only general stores—?

00:29:57

EW: That's it, Billy's is—is the only grocery store, hardware store, marine store, and Billy is that way. If you tell him you need it—now it does take Billy two days because he has to go get it [*Laughs*] but—but no, it was—it was a great place to grow up. There was a couple hundred women that worked in the scallop houses and the fish houses and they headed shrimp and opened scallops and opened clams. We—we had a big clam hatchery here and a clam house. And just I mean anything you needed done, you could get done here. I mean if you sunk a boat it was twenty people jumping around you and you got the boat up and got you back to work.

00:30:42

I had a boat burn at the age of about seventeen. I mean it burnt to the water. All we saved was the bottom. And we came home. We towed it home and put it on a trailer and put it here in the yard and of course dad was a great boat builder. And—and that night we took the sides off of it and we saved the bottom but we took the sides off of it that night. And the next morning he went to the—which is now Hard Wire, but we went over to the—to the lumber yard and got a truckload of lumber and we came home and when we got home there was three or four people here. And we started cutting new frames and ripping lumber and long before the evening ever came the sides was back on the boat. And we sanded the sides of the boat that night and the next day there was a couple more of the guys that showed up and we put the decks on it and within—and of course then we had to go back to fishing but within eight or ten days we were back to work again.

00:31:48

MM: With a brand new boat.

00:31:49

EW: Brand-new boat, old bottom, new boat. [*Laughs*] Yeah, yeah old bottom, new boat, but—.

00:31:57

MM: Well there's a lot of hard working resilient people here and it always has been it seems like you know.

00:32:00

EW: Yeah.

00:32:02

MM: It's been a way of life.

00:32:02

KM: And everyone is good with their hands.

00:32:04

EW: Most anybody here you can give a piece of bailing wire and they'll get you going. It's just you know—it's—and I think that's always—that's been our salvation that regardless of what we have to do, we do and we get ourselves going again. You know where most places you go 90-percent of the fishing communities north of us if something breaks, they have to come here to get it fixed. And I'm not—not being bold about that but they always have, if they need a boat worked on they came here to get the boat worked on. If they wanted a piece of net, they—nobody did anything their selves. And I have a group of friends in Cedar Island that—that always hired everything they wanted done—done and when we went—when we went in the fish

business ourselves I kind of talked one of the—one of the boys into going his self because he was selling his stuff for—for pennies.

00:33:08

And I went down there a couple Sundays and built him an ice room and he bought him an ice machine. And he started handling his own stuff. And I would go work on his pound nets for him. And one day I said, “This is it. I ain't doing this no more.” I said, “You need to get your butt over here and you need to learn because some day I’m going to die or I’m going to quit or you know—and someday I’m not going to be able to come. And you need to know.”

00:33:35

And he said, “You know, I reckon you’re right.” And he—he—and within just a couple of days I said—we were making pound nets and I said, “Okay. The next one you’re going to make.” And I said, “I’ll be here to watch you and—and I’m going to hang one off here to one side and I’m just going to stay out of it and you make a mistake then we’ll correct it, but until you make a mistake we’re not correcting anything.”

00:34:03

And now they all make their own. You know so it’s—the guy that made all their nets passed away. His name was Roger Harris. He run a net shop for forty years before he passed away and he was a fine man. He’d credit anybody and make you anything you wanted and you paid him when you could. And it’s—it was a really big asset to—to all the fishermen. But when he passed away there was nobody to pick—there was nobody to do it and they—and they had to learn their selves. I mean it’s—

00:34:38

KM: Is that something you’ve always been taught to just learn how to do?

00:34:41

EW: I've always done. I'm not afraid to try anything [*Laughs*]. I may mess it up but I'm going to try it. It was funny, when you said you interviewed Mr. Makeley, Makeley Lewis, when I was a—when I was a young man I spent a lot of time with him. A lot of nights we'd sit down and watch television but neither one of us slept. And in the winter, we would watch television and talk and—and—you know about fishing and—and any day that daddy wasn't going and he needed somebody to go with him I would go. Or, his brother needed somebody he would say, "Well, why don't you—why don't you go with Oliver tomorrow? He ain't—he ain't got nobody to go with him," and of course daddy wasn't going or the weather was bad or—.

00:35:32

So I was real flexible. I could jump around from anywhere and do any job, you know if we were clamming or we were—we were drop netting or we were shrimping or whatever we were doing, if we weren't going I would go with somebody else, you know just as—just to go. Or a few winters rather it was so many fish that everybody didn't have markets. I'd have a market today, you'd have a market tomorrow, you know so—and—and—and get back the volume. Fish were cheap and people would say I'm not going to catch 15-cent fish you know. Well, you went and caught \$2,000 worth of fifteen-cent fish and there weren't but three of you. People were working all week long for \$40—\$50 on a job making \$1.00—\$1.50 an hour you know, \$2.00 an hour you know so you—you were—people were working in Cherry Point all week long for 100-bucks. And they weren't bringing that home. They were just making that you know and taxes and all came out of it.

00:36:28

So if you could go fishing and—and make you \$200 or \$300 you went fishing to make \$200 or \$300, you know. You didn't care if they were cheap. And—and but I never realized until later on in life how much work we did for that few hundred dollars, you know. And I don't know whether we just got smarter [*Laughs*] but it—it's not that way anymore. It's—it's really not. We—I kind of adapted—adopted a philosophy of I wanted to work smarter and not harder and well them days it was all just harder. It was—yeah, it was the more you went the better you thought you had done. And it's not that way, it's really not.

00:37:20

KM: Can you tell us where we are right now and—and—what this is? [*Pointing to a wooden oar inside the fish house. Currently being used as a curtain rod*]

00:37:25

EW: Well we're in my market, Mr. Big Seafood and that is an oar my daddy made me for Christmas one year when I was seven years old. Well actually I wasn't seven until May, I was six and I turned seven in May and got—got the oar and a fourteen-foot pole skiff for Christmas. And there was like five of us got skiffs that year for Christmas and everybody else got outboard motors. They were three, four, five horse, seven horse motors, whatever, some of them were Sea Kings and Scott Atwater and they were old junk motors but they still got them. And I asked daddy, I said I really—I mean I was crazy over my skiff and I said, “Daddy I mean I appreciate the skiff more than you'll ever know but why didn't I get a motor?” I said, “You made me an oar.”

00:38:25

He said, “When you learn how to use the oar you can get a motor.” And he said, “Because the oar will always be there. They get to banks and get broke down we’re going to have to go get them. You’re going to pole home.” And he was right. I—I traveled with them with an oar and they had motors. And that oar was in all my boats for a really long time. And I don’t remember what happened if somebody stepped on it or I do not remember, but anyway it cracked in the middle and I wrapped it with—with twine. And put it overhead in the shed and when we built this market mama said, “I know where there’s a perfect curtain rod.” And I said, “Where’s that?” And she said, “Your oar.”

00:39:22

So we went and got it and that’s—it’s been there ever since.

00:39:27

KM: Hmm.

00:39:29

EW: So that was a long time ago he made that. I poled a many a mile with that.

00:39:37

KM: That’s very cool. That’s very cool.

00:39:40

EW: See when we were little, six, seven—seven, eight years old we all had a little piece of set net, a little piece of gill net. Some of them was 100 yards long, some of it was seventy-five yards long. It’s according to what you could get a hold of of course. I had a piece of 139 yards long and I nailed the decking down on a 150-foot dock. Okay the dock was 150 foot long, three foot wide, and it was six inch planks and one weekend I nailed all the decking down on that dock

for enough money to buy that piece of net. And my—and my granddaddy give me the corks and the man I bought the—built the—nailed the decking on the dock for—now was I about seven year-old now, okay—could have been eight but I think I was about seven—he bought me the leads, a coil of rope, a ball of twine, and the webbing to hang that piece of net.

00:40:46

Now all told that probably wasn't \$40. The man—the man was from—from—was from Durham and had a house here on the Shore and I played on the Shore as a kid and me and him become to be really, really good friends. And of course he showed up one day with a trailer-load of lumber and he had back—back trouble. And he said you know, "Will—will you tote this lumber on the dock for me?" And I said, "Yeah Mr. Bill, I'll tote that no problem." Well I got the first four or five boards and toted it out there and I said, "Well you know I can't walk on these boards not nailed." So he said, "Well why don't you just—why don't you just stick once in a while a nail in it to keep it from sliding so you can walk on it and when my back gets to feeling better I'll—I'll nail it—nail it down?" And I said, "Well ain't no sense in that." I said, "As I go along I'll nail them." So I—along about one o'clock and it was on a Saturday, along about one o'clock on a Saturday man the blisters was hanging—they were hanging in the floor. *[Laughs]* And he said, "You got to quit. Your—your mama is going to kill me." And I said, "No, mama ain't going to kill you. I'm—I'm fine."

00:41:55

And I would—and I can see it right now I would bite that blister and pop it and I knew even though I was that little I knew if I quit my hands would be so sore that I couldn't never pick the hammer up again. So I drove on and I—I worked right on through the day. I don't—it was late when I quit. And then the next day I finished up—finished nailing the docking down.

00:42:23

And we never discussed no money. It was never no money discussed. And he—he left that Sunday evening and the next Friday evening when he come he said, “We’re going to Beaufort in the morning.” And I said, “Okay, I’ll ride to Beaufort with you.” And that was the world I lived in. I mean this was a man from Durham. He was about fifty years old, maybe fifty-five years old that my mother would trust me as a seven year old youngin’ to just go anywhere with him. I mean he was—he was a fine man. I’m not saying that but that—that was the environment we lived in. And you’d jump in a boat with anybody and go anywhere and you didn’t come home and tell nobody. I mean you told somebody to tell somebody to tell somebody. And but you would probably be home before word got back to your mother but [*Laughs*]— anyway.

00:43:11

So I got in a little trouble several times for that but anyway, he said, “We’re going to Beaufort and we’re—it’s a restaurant there now. It’s—it’s right alongside of Spider’s, a man by the name of—of Harold Simpson owned a net shop. And we—and said, “Where are we going?” And he said, “We’re going to Harold Simpson’s.” And I said, “We’re going to Harold Simpson’s?” And he said, “Yeah, we’re going to Harold Simpson’s and you’re going to pick out any kind of net you want.” I said, “I ain’t got no money to buy no net with.” He said, “I’m paying for the net.” So we went to Harold Simpson’s and I picked out just what I wanted. It weighed five pounds, the bale of net did and he bought fifty-pound net leads and he bought a coil of rope and he bought a ball of twine and I said, “Mr. Bill I ain’t—“ he said, “You don’t worry about no money.”

00:44:07

And I came home and I stopped it off to my grandmother's and I told granddaddy what the man had done. And he said, "That was too much, you know for what you did. That—that was too much money." I mean that—that was the world we lived in. And I said, "No, that's what he wanted to do," and he said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll hang it for you."

00:44:26

And my granddaddy had lost his arm at that point and it was—it was a—hmm, it was—it was something to see. It really was. But he did it. He—he hung the piece of net for me and—and I kept that piece of net a long time, a real long time. But we would—we would go every morning. We would go every evening, the four or five of us that had skiffs, and set nets and we would set our nets in the fall. And then the next morning before you went to school, you would fish your net up and then you—you carried your—you carried your fish to the fish house and you'd have a basket or two baskets or three baskets of spots you know and some other junk. And—and you sold your fish all week long. And that—my god that was the biggest thing to go Saturday and get your check, and you would go to the fish house and the man would give you—you were about that tall [Gestures]. You could—just could see over the desk, you know, of course I was always a lot bigger, but—and he would give you that check. And on the back of that check there would be four or five little paper tickets stapled on it and some of them would say thirty-three pound of spots and two pound of trout and nine pound of blue fish and another one would be 140 pound of spot—and I still got some of the tickets somewhere back there. I saw them in a box not too long ago.

00:45:57

But that was the biggest thing to get that check. I mean it may be \$10 or \$30 or \$100 or what—whatever it was, you know but that was a—that was—that was a really—that was a big thing.

00:46:12

MM: Hmm.

00:46:13

KM: Yeah, I can imagine.

00:46:16

EW: Yeah, and it was always—it was always—it was so intimidating because you poled in there in this little low sided skiff, the sides were about this high [Gestures] and that was that dock up there, ten foot and you're down here two foot so you know you're not getting up there. And they'd swing the basket over. They had a basket with a rope on it and a—a, you know a boom and rope and a little wench and he'd swing that basket down there to you and you'd throw your fish in the basket. And he'd heist them out for you and I mean you were—you were a big—you were big stuff. I mean—there was people laying around in there waiting to get unloaded that had 10,000 pound and here you—here you are with eight-six pound but you're just as important as he is, you know. And they'd heist your stuff up for you and—and he'd throw a ticket down to you.

00:47:01

But I always got wet before you got home so you didn't never have the original copy.  
[Laughs] But that was—that was—that was pretty cool. That was—that was—

00:47:13

MM: Sounds pretty awesome for a kid.

00:47:14

EW: Yeah, that was—

00:47:16

KM: Yeah.

00:47:16

MM: Pretty awesome, it's like having a paper route you know.

00:47:19

KM: Yeah.

00:47:20

MM: And—

00:47:21

EW: And I got—I got crab pots one year for Christmas. I wanted crab pots. I got it. I want a crab pot. So mama and daddy bought me six crab pots one year for Christmas. And that's all I got now but I got six crab pots for Christmas. And I had patched up four or five old ones I had found to the fish house and around and we'd sit here along the Shore and I would fish them pots after school—evenings and I would peddle crabs all over this island for \$1.00 a dozen.

00:47:53

KM: A dozen?

00:47:54

EW: A dozen, \$1.00 a dozen okay. Crabs were twelve-cent to the fish house a pound so you know I was—I was a high-liner, 'cause see it took—took four to the pound. Well you're

going to get twelve-cent for four. I was getting \$1.00 for twelve. You know I was quadrupling my money. Or I'd pull the back shells off of them for \$1.25 'cause all these old women were—were afraid of getting bit so they wouldn't you know—and I would—I would peddle crabs today and I took orders for tomorrow. I knew every old woman on this island and knew how to get in her house because you'd put them in the refrigerator. If you were lucky and got there late you got to eat with her while you stopped. But you had to eat with them. You were going to come in and you were going to eat. Don't care how much you would eat, you were going to eat again.

00:48:43

And but I peddled crabs all out of a bicycle. I had a double basket on the back and a basket on the handlebars and I peddled mullets six for \$1.00, I mean all over this island to—from one end of it to the other and but I saved all the money and I fixed my bedroom. My bedroom had when I was little all it had was—was the studs on the wall. There was no paneling, no Celotex, no you know no nothing.

00:49:16

And I saved my money all summer and I bought the paneling and the molding and the Celotex and had the ugliest green carpet you've ever seen. It was a long shag but god it was warm and felt good to your feet. I'd be walking on a—a—and it was nothing wrong with what I'm saying now. Mama and daddy done the best they could do so don't—don't get me wrong there. But I'd been walking on a pressboard floor and every nail you stepped on was cold [Laughs] but I saved my money all that summer and fall and—and—and they fixed that—fixed that bedroom that winter. But that was—shew that was a long time ago. That was a real long time ago.

00:50:04

KM: So enterprising.

00:50:07

EW: I don't know about that, it was all fun.

00:50:12

MM: Fifty minutes in, do you want—anything else that you can think of? Did we cover what we talked about?

00:50:18

KM: I think so. I was just curious about a small—just the brief history of your family's legacy. Did they—they come over for the—the Willis(es) came over from Shackleford is that correct?

00:50:28

EW: Uh-hm. They came from Shackleford about the turn of the century and maybe '01 [1901], '03 [1903], it could have been '04 [1904]. I'm not—I'm not—you know but right around the—we had a really bad hurricane and it—it cleaned the beach and—and they said we can't—we just can't live here no more. We—we got—we got to get higher—which was high ground but we got to get to higher ground and trees. We've got to have you know—. And so they moved over here and my great-grandfather married—my great-grandmother come from Sea Level, her—her people did. They lived here but they came from Sea Level.

00:51:14

KM: What was her name?

00:51:14

EW: They were Helmeton(s). Her—her name was Gracie. She had four or five sisters and I think it was five of them and three brothers. And they moved—they moved—they—of course they had moved here and of course I guess they met and they were—they married and they had eight kids and—and now we—we maintained a house on the beach up until about '82 [1982] or '83 [1983] when the park service took over. Had a fish camp on the beach and then that washed away in [Hurricane] Hazel and they built a house on the inside, on—on the Back Sound. It was on Shackleford but it was on the—on the inland waters instead of the ocean side.

00:52:06

And then we built a new house back in the late '70s [1970s], it might have been '87 [1987] when the park service took the beach. It's been a long time. It's been about thirty-two, thirty-three years, so yeah it's probably about '87 [1987]. We kept a house until the park service took over and then of course they—they took it and condemned it but you know burned it, but—but that's where we spent our summers.

00:52:38

MM: On Shackleford?

00:52:39

EW: Yeah.

00:52:40

MM: There's nothing there now, right?

00:52:41

EW: Nothing—nothing, just barren beach. Well the trees has took it since then but—

00:52:48

MM: Does it still flood quite often?

00:52:49

EW: No.

00:52:49

MM: No?

00:52:50

EW: It's a couple places in—in storms that washes across and out by the pony pen it washes across because the beach has got so narrow. But that's—that's about it. It—it's the beach is washed away really bad on the ocean side. It's probably lost—it's probably lost 400 feet in my lifetime in depth but it's—it's in a cove like you know. It's not as a hole but it's washed away—the middle of the beach has. You asked me for something the last time we talked and I've thought a lot about it and if you want to I will tell you about the last time daddy went crabbing with me.

00:53:46

KM: You will?

00:53:47

EW: Yeah, I will. I've thought about it a lot. It [*emotional*]*—I reckon—yeah. Hmm—* give me a minute.

00:54:11

KM: Sure.

00:54:21

EW: I thought about it one day this week. And people don't realize what fishing is. It's not a job to us. It's—it's a way of life. And when you watch a [*emotional*]—when you watch an eighty-year-old man sit in the doorway of his house and weep because he can't go is a—it's a real powerful thing. It really is. It's not about money. It's not about glory. [*Laughs*] It's—it's about the act of just going and doing. And I've thought about that a lot this week.

00:55:33

And when—when daddy quit he—huh, I'd come every morning at daylight, see him before I left, and—and he'd say, “Boy, I'd like to go today.” [*Laughs*] So I came one morning and it was—it was just like a mirror. It truly was. And I was in the river and my wife had left me and I was in a pretty bad state of mind. And I had been crabbing by myself all year. And I said, “If you want to go come on.” Man you're talking about—he jumped up like a younging on Christmas morning, truly did.

00:56:23

And he got his stuff together and took his medicine and we went to the boat and of course I had got gas and all in the night. I don't know when I got all that but I got my baskets and got everything situated and found him something to sit down on. And it wasn't a Lazy Boy he sat on day either, he took a fish carton, one of those plastic fish boxes and put a life jacket on him and propped that under his butt. Now he sat on the rail going up there but when the—when we got there and started crabbing—I'm getting ahead of the story. But that's he sat on all day and steered and we—. And the boat then had a steering stick. It was a wooden stick in the middle of the boat with ropes running and you—you pushed left to go left and right to go right.

00:57:13

So we—we go on up there and I mean there's a grin on his face like you just can't imagine. And we fished a string of pots and—and the—they're full of peelers and I mean—and—and every pot that comes up he has to look behind him to see what's in it 'cause I'm—I stand behind him to fish you know and—and he's looking ahead. And he looks behind every pot that comes up. He has—he has to see. And so we fished that string and he runs back down the river and I break the crabs and we get to the end of the next string—. See, we'd break all our biters on our crabs.

00:57:47

And we fished the next string going up the river and it's a little better than the other one was man and he is—I mean he's tall cotton. He's the stuff. So we—we fish one string after another and after another and after another. And I call a friend of mine to come to the bridge and they picked—we'd always send our crabs home three or four times a day. You know so he come and picked up seven or eight baskets of crabs, wanted to know how daddy was doing, and I said, “He's making out great—no problem.”

00:58:15

Well after lunch there was this—this black cloud in the northwest. It was a thunder squall but it was inland you know and I said, “Daddy.” Uh he said, “Don't worry about that. It ain't nothing going to happen.” So we fished another string and another string and he—of course this black thing gets closer and closer and closer. And daddy we—we probably need to go. He said, “We can fish one more string. We'll get one more string.”

00:58:38

And so we fished another string and—and it's there, I mean it's—it's in the head of the river. I mean you could smell it. And I said—I said, “Daddy we need to go.” He said, “Let's fish one more string.” He said, “Swap sides and we'll fish back down the river, instead of running we'll fish down the river and we'll—.” He had no more got that out of his mouth man before it struck out of the northwest and it blew fifty, sixty mile an hour. It could have blowed seventy mile an hour. And it rained.

00:59:21

I had a little cabin on the front of the boat just for a water break and I jumped up there and got my coat. Didn't have but one coat with us 'cause that's all—I had crabbed all year by myself. So I give him my coat and he got my coat on and—but he wouldn't give up. We had the worst time fishing coming down that river.

00:59:39

You know let's get under the bridge and get you out of this weather. We—we can finish this string he said. And it started hailing and a piece of hail it was as big as a golf ball I swear it was hit him right in the temple and he had a—he had a big skin cancer which you can't see but it's on this side of his head [*points to a portrait of his father on the fish house wall*]. Would have been on that side of his head looking at us, but anyway—. It frapped him just above that [*Laughs*], I said—I just knew he was killed man. He said, “God there's—“ I was looking at the blood running down the side of his head.

01:00:18

I said, “Are you about ready to go now? [*Laughs*] Have—have you had enough of this?” Now this is a—he's pretty sick and he's—he's humped over sitting with his butt on that box and

he's steering like this with that one hand and—he said, “We can finish this string—four or five pots.” I said, “The only thing we're going to finish is our butts under that bridge until this rain stops and then we're going home.”

01:00:47

So we head this way and we get to the bridge and I don't even stop. I come right on home and towards home. And the closer we got to home the prettier it got. By the time we got to the island bridge it was just like a mirror again, sun out. He said, “See? We should have stayed.” I mean the blood is running down his—of course you know it's clotted up but it's running down the side of his head.

01:01:11

I said, “Old boy I hope you enjoyed today because this is the last time I ever bring you.” [Laughs] And we came home and he took an hour and forty-five minutes to get him out of the boat. His legs had gotten in so bad of shape that day standing on them that he couldn't—they wouldn't work. And I got him out of the boat and got him home and mama got him a bath. And that was the last time he ever went.

01:01:45

KM: That was a time

01:01:47

MM: What a great story.

01:01:48

EW: But it weren't 'cause he didn't enjoy it.

01:01:54

KM: Thank you for sharing that story with us.

01:01:57

MM: Yeah thank you Eddie.

01:02:05

KM: I think we're good with that.

01:02:05

MM: All right, we'll do thirty seconds of—.

01:02:39

END INTERVIEW