

Randy Wade
Fisherman, Harkers Island, NC

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Interviewers: Keia Mastrianni, Mike Moore

Transcription: Shelley Chance

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START OF INTERVIEW

[Transcript begins at 00:00:04]

Keia Mastrianni: Well this is—this is May 2, 2016. We are recording oral history for the Southern Foodways Alliance and we are with Randy Wade. And so tell me about the—you started shrimping at what age?

00:00:16

Randy Wade: At seven years old.

00:00:17

KM: And—

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RW: I used—I used to hang out with my Uncle Mervin and he used to build boats and he also shrimped on the side and I started at seven. During the summer that's all I did. Every day when I got out of school I was to the boathouse with him. In the summertime I was clamming with my daddy every day. He worked night shift at Owen Corning and he would always go clamming every morning before he went into work. And I went with him every day and it's all I've done. *[Laughs]*

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KM: Yeah, and Marvin Rhodes was it?

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RW: Mervin.

00:00:53

KM: Mervin Rhodes.

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RW: Yes.

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KM: And what was it about shrimping I mean that caught you?

00:01:00

RW: Well when you live around the saltwater that's—when you got it in your blood. My daddy, he did it, my daddy's daddy, I mean right on down the line, so—.

00:01:09

KM: Uh-hm.

00:01:09

RW: Which my daddy, he—he did it part-time but he did work at Owen Corning which he—he retired from there but he still does it now some off and on.

00:01:18

KM: When did you start making a living shrimping?

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RW: Before I graduated from school. [Laughs] When I was eight years old I bought me a brand new motorcycle. I paid cash money, \$825 money I had saved on my own.

00:01:34

Mike Moore: Wow, at eight years old?

00:01:34

RW: Yeah.

00:01:35

KM: That's—

00:01:35

RW: My mama and daddy built a new house when they were—when I was eleven and I bought my own bedroom suit to go in there. I paid \$1,100 for it. I will never forget it.

00:01:46

KM: Wow, goodness.

00:01:48

MM: That's awesome.

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RW: And that's again how many years ago?

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MM: That's enough to convince you right there you know that this is what you want to do.

00:01:54

RW: Thirty-four years ago.

00:01:56

KM: So what was it like shrimping back then to what it is now? Are you still doing it the same way that your father and grandfather taught you how?

00:02:05

RW: No, used to we didn't have to have the turtle shooters and the fish eyes and all that stuff. But I mean the other way—yeah it's basically the same. I mean some ways the turtle shooters they really do help us and I mean they get rid of—they just don't get rid of turtles. I mean they get rid of other stuff, too.

00:02:23

MM: So what's a turtle shooter?

00:02:25

RW: The turtle shooter is what you see right there. It's got the big flappers on it and when anything big goes down that net and it hits that—those bars they have—it has to go out of the hole on it. Now we do lose shrimp out of it. It—it doesn't like help us and [*inaudible*] all the time. Now they're saying that they—we need to start putting the bars closer together because of little turtles. I've never seen a little turtle, not the first time that I've ever been shrimping. I have never seen a small turtle. But now they're talking about changing again but they always do. They do it to us all the time.

00:03:03

MM: So—so what that's meant to do is supposedly—supposedly it's mean to—to you know when the turtle comes through there that you don't catch it or whatever.

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RW: That's right, yeah. It comes down and it hits those bars and it shoots right out the top of it.

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MM: Right and you're—and that's a regulation you have to have—?

00:03:19

RW: Yes, that is a Federal regulation.

00:03:22

MM: Federal regulation, all through—?

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RW: Yes. Each—some states may be a little bit different or something but yes, every state you have to—they have to have turtle shooters.

00:03:31

MM: Right, okay.

00:03:32

KM: Did you utilize the fish houses when they were on Harkers? Is that where you'd bring the shrimp in there too?

00:03:37

RW: Yes, yep. They used to be I can't even hardly—I mean tell you exactly how many but there used to be a bunch of fish houses around here. Now the closest one really is in Beaufort and Cedar Island. It was one in Davis but they've closed down now.

00:03:55

KM: Do you think that was a lot of—part of the community on Harkers people would gather at the fish houses and—?

00:04:00

RW: Oh yes, definitely. Yeah every day I mean people that worked on regular jobs and everything they'd come home—in the wintertime when they'd come home from work they went down to the fish house just to see the guys in there with all the croakers or trout or what—yeah that's right.

00:04:15

KM: Tell some tales?

00:04:16

RW: [*Laughs*] I got a lot of tales but—I can tell you one Thanksgiving I—I remember one Thanksgiving, I was probably six or seven years old. My mama took Thanksgiving dinner to my daddy. They used to have what they called run boats when they had long haul—they done a bunch of long hauling around here. And that's what they baled all the fish on. Well in the wintertime they would take those—some of them and they would use them offshore gill netting and stuff.

00:04:46

And at dinner time—lunch time that day my mom went and took my daddy turkey and everything to the fish house, they came in with that boat banked up with croakers and that's where he ate his Thanksgiving dinner that day.

00:05:01

MM: Right there at the fish house?

00:05:02

RW: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

00:05:04

MM: That's awesome.

00:05:06

KM: Hey when it's good you got to get on it, right.

00:05:07

RW: Oh yeah definitely.

00:05:09

KM: So who was the big cook in your house?

00:05:12

RW: My mama.

00:05:13

KM: Uh-hm and how did she prepare shrimp when it came in?

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RW: Any way—stew-fried—

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KM: You had a mosquito on you.

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RW: Oh did I really? We don't have those around here. The mosquito truck just went by. He forgot one.

00:05:33

KM: What did your mama cook?

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RW: She cooked stew-fried shrimp, fried shrimp, stewed shrimp, what did Bubba Gump say? *[Laughs]*

00:05:46

MM: It was always fresh seafood in—on the kitchen table?

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RW: Oh yes, definitely yeah.

00:05:49

MM: Yeah, yeah.

00:05:50

RW: Fresh fish, shrimp, anything you want. You can't get it any better.

00:05:55

MM: Did she make any light rolls or any—any traditional things?

00:05:57

RW: My mom, she did. My grandmama was the big light roll lady.

00:06:04

KM: You guys—were you two close, you and your grandmom?

00:06:06

RW: Oh yeah, definitely. She passed away [*phone rings*]—she passed away right—right—let's see, right before Thanksgiving. And matter of fact that was the—one of the—the biggest drag that I had made shrimp and I had just hauled back and had seventeen-basket drag and mama called me and said that grandma was dying. And I had to go in. That was the first time—and ever since that they just kept getting bigger and bigger. I ended up making a thirty-basket drag and three more thirty-basket drags.

00:06:46

KM: Feel like your grandma has something to do with that?

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RW: That's what mama said. She must have had a hand on me. [*Laughs*]

00:06:52

KM: Well now when your grandpa and your dad went out did they go by themselves out shrimping or—?

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RW: Most time it was my dad and his brother and my granddad. They were like a little team like—

00:07:05

KM: Uh-hm, when did you start going out by yourself?

00:07:06

RW: When I graduated from school when I—when I started really doing it. I mean I had been like out in the boat and stuff you know to go clamming and stuff like that. But I used to—I remember we used to go bay scalloping every Monday and Wednesday and I never went to school until 11 o'clock that day 'cause I went with daddy scalloping that morning. And I went to school at eleven o'clock so I wouldn't be counted absent that day. [*Laughs*]

00:07:37

MM: It was important right, I mean it was—that was—

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RW: Yeah.

00:07:39

MM: —that was the fight for life and the family so it was an excuse. It was an excused absence I guess.

00:07:46

RW: When I was sixteen years old I had a brand new car and I paid the payment on it.

00:07:49

MM: Uh-hm.

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RW: And I was in—I mean I graduated from school.

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KM: Any chance you got, you got on that water?

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RW: My wife tells me, “When are you going to quit? When are you going to get a job?” Which I did tell her at one time when Erica graduated from school that I would stop, and then I said, “Nah I’m not,” now I’ve ended up buying a boat. [Laughs]

00:08:14

KM: Kind of something that gets in your blood. I mean—

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RW: Yes, it’s hard to get it out. Yes, definitely.

00:08:19

KM: I don’t—so tell me about what you were doing today to prepare. So I caught you this morning and what were you doing this morning and what have you been doing all day?

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RW: I was putting the turtle shooters on the nets. I had just got all the nets fixed, all the holes and everything and got them re-dipped. Sewing the turtle shooters and the tail bags back on, getting them ready to go back.

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MM: They’re called tail bags?

00:08:41

RW: Uh-hm.

00:08:42

MM: What is that?

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RW: That's what I was telling you about the bag right here with the—where the shrimp gather.

00:08:47

MM: Got you, got you.

00:08:48

KM: And then you take—

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RW: My wife still won't let me smoke in the car. So I had to have me an electronic one in there.

00:08:56

KM: You get it. *[Laughs]* So I mean you just learned by jumping on the boat with them huh and just watching them or did they show you kind of—?

00:09:05

RW: And I had a good friend over here. He used to own that Leona boat. His name is Al Gillikin and me and him got to be good friends. And that's really when I graduated from school I went with him. And spent a bunch of years with him and then I just ventured off on my own and—

00:09:22

KM: Yeah, so he—I mean some of these old guys are the ones you looked up to just—?

00:09:27

RW: Yeah, which he wasn't—he wasn't really older. I mean he was like three or four years older than me. Me and him really got—yeah, he had just bought that boat. Matter of fact, my wife's grandfather Leslie Morris, he had this boat, that one, and a—the other sister boat. He had all three of these boats built. Well my wife's father did this one, he had the other two and then he had a smaller one and Jamie Lewis built those.

KM: And your wife's father is Julian Morris?

00:09:53

W: Yes.

00:09:55

KM: And now you got them back in the family so that's kind of meaningful.

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RW: Yeah.

00:10:00

KM: Very cool.

00:10:02

MM: Where is Al Gillikin today? Is he still—is he not shrimping anymore or is he—?

00:10:04

RW: He works with the park service, yep.

00:10:08

MM: Okay, so he got out of fishing for a living and—

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RW: Uh-hm.

00:10:10

MM: I got you.

00:10:11

KM: You've seen a lot of that, a lot of the guys you grew up with—?

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RW: Yes because when the fuel prices and everything went so high it was like \$4 a gallon on the fuel and a lot of people they had to back out of it and everything. And of course since fuel and everything has gone down and it seems like the shrimping is coming back, I mean pretty good right now.

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MM: Are you seeing more and more new shrimpers on the water or—?

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RW: Not right now. But after this past year we probably will.

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MM: Yeah because of the—because it's just—

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RW: Yeah, there's bunches of people now looking for boats and everything and wanting—because they've heard of all the money that was made and all that and now there's people thinking that's—it's that easy but they may get fooled. They might want to get rid of their boat next summer. *[Laughs]*

00:10:53

MM: That's when you get a new boat, right?

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KM: So what time of day does it start when you're out shrimping? I mean what time are you—?

00:11:00

RW: In South Carolina they have a set date, a certain time of year you can set out at 6:00 and you have to quit at 8:00 and then when the time changes you can set out at 6:00 and you have to quit at 7:00. So I mean there it's pretty much set. Here, in the inside waters it's from Sunday afternoon at 5:00 until Friday afternoon at—or hour before sunset or something like that. In the ocean you can shrimp 24/7 out of there.

00:11:36

KM: Have you done that?

00:11:37

RW: Oh yes, Pamlico Sound in the summertime from Sunday until Friday, yes. It—yeah it's been done.

00:11:45

MM: Hmm.

00:11:45

KM: Growing up in these waters do you feel like you know the spots where you can find the most shrimp or do you—can you kind of watch the water that way?

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RW: Well yeah, I mean as far as like with the channel netters and stuff they know when to go and when to stay home and where to set and according to which the way the wind is and when is it going to run at and stuff like that. But my main thing is South Carolina.

00:12:08

KM: Yeah, that's—that's where the big—

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RW: That's where the—well and it's better working. You have those set hours and you go there and—

00:12:15

KM: Yeah, so you don't run yourself into the ground.

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RW: Right.

00:12:19

KM: Tell me what it's—what it's like to pull up a haul like what you showed us on your phone.

00:12:23

RW: Oh it's unbelievable.

00:12:24

KM: What does that feel—?

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RW: Yeah, I mean it's—I mean it's like the best feeling in the world. I can't really explain it. I really can't. The first thing I do is run into the cabin and grab my phone and start taking pictures. *[Laughs]*

00:12:35

MM: And when you're out there and you're—you're trawling or what have you for these shrimp I mean you're—you don't know necessarily that they're there? You're just—

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RW: Well no, that's what the try-net is for.

00:12:48

MM: Okay, tell me how that—

00:12:47

RW: I pull my try-net every fifteen minutes. Some people they'll pull it thirty minutes. I don't care if the shrimp are running off that table and running in the floor and I'm on that boat by myself that try-net is coming up every fifteen minutes.

00:13:00

MM: And when you pull that up what—what are you doing?

00:13:03

W: Well you can tell how many is there. I mean we go by like if you get ten in ten minutes that's one a minute and that's what we go by and—and you get accustomed to that and you know how many you're catching by what—how that try-net is doing.

00:13:16

MM: I got you.

00:13:18

KM: Yeah and making a living on the water, I mean I'm sure there's all sorts of discussions about it's so difficult and it—I mean how do you feel about it? I mean is it just something you've always done so you're just going to keep on doing it?

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RW: Until they stop me, yeah.

00:13:34

KM: Uh-hm, okay.

00:13:37

RW: Yes.

00:13:39

MM: And they've done a lot of slowing down. I mean they've done—we were talking to Eddie [Willis] about the regulations and things like that—that have happened and you know that's—I'm sure you could probably—it's safe to say from seven years old until now you've seen a lot of changes and a lot of stricter regulations in—in fishing around here.

00:13:56

RW: Yeah, yeah we—it's changed a bunch. I mean they're still—they're still—they're trying to push us out. I mean that's all it is to it. I mean they're all the time coming up with something that we're killing this or we're killing that and it—they go and protect one thing and they don't realize that the one thing that they are protecting is killing something else. And it's—it's like a—it's a chain reaction. I mean it's just like on the striped bass. I mean we can't even deal with a striped bass but there—I mean there's—it went viral on Facebook about they went and cut a striped bass open and he was slam-full of little baby hard crabs, I mean like 30 or 40 of them in one fish. I mean so now there's a whole lot of striped bass and they're eating all the hard crabs and now they want to know where the hard crabs are going. So now they're wanting to regulate how many crab pots that the hard crab—I mean so it's—it's a chain reaction.

00:14:49

MM: Uh-hm. Yeah—

00:14:52

RW: Just like the dogfish. We used to go in the wintertime and we would go up to Hatteras and everything and catch dog fish. It was good money. We didn't get much money for them but we caught so many a day. We were catching anywhere from between 20,000 to 30,000 pounds a day. They went and stopped us from doing that and then the trout started disappearing and they wanted to know where the trout went. The trout is a—dogfish most favorite food. Any time you want to split his belly you're going to find a trout in it. Well there's so many dogfish now but now there's no trout, so when are they going to realize. I mean I ain't—I ain't got to go to college to figure that out. [*Laughs*]

00:15:33

KM: Right, right.

00:15:33

MM: And so you were fishing dogfish off the coast of Hatteras?

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RW: Yep which we did it here some, too. But the weather—the water temperatures didn't get as cold here so they were usually we went up there and done a little bit better.

00:15:43

MM: Yeah, do you—when you—when you caught that did you—did you send it to markets that went up north or—?

00:15:47

RW: Yes.

00:15:49

MM: Because I've never really seen dogfish—

00:15:51

RW: They went up north to New Jersey and places they have what they call cutting houses. And I think a lot of them sent like to England and stuff, from what I understand and it went as fish-n-chips.

00:16:02

MM: Yeah, the chef that was here with us earlier Dave Santos is from New York City and has been a chef and restaurant owner there. And he—he—dogfish is very popular there, you know, yeah.

00:16:13

KM: Yeah, well do you take any pride in the fact that you're doing what your father and his father did before?

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RW: Yes, I take a lot of pride in it. I really do. I mean until somebody goes and they—they've got to do it for a living and then they will appreciate it. Anybody can sit back and look and say well they're killing this or killing that, but until they go and do it or got to do it for a living, then they will appreciate it. And once you appreciate it, I mean when you catch like some of those pictures like I showed you just now, it's unbelievable. That—that's like an oh my gosh, that's—that's what I've been waiting for all my life.

00:16:55

MM: That's cool.

00:16:56

KM: That's really cool.

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MM: That's awesome.

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KM: And who are you going to pass it on to, who are you going to teach to shrimp?

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RW: [*Laughs*] My daughter is not. She wants to be some kind of a surgeon.

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MM: Some kind of a surgeon. [*Laughs*]

00:17:07

RW: Yeah, she's—yeah. No, she's not going shrimping.

00:17:12

KM: Well you can tell her she can practice being a surgeon by mending nets and—

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RW: Right, yeah. [*Laughs*]

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MM: There you go.

00:17:17

RW: Yeah.

00:17:18

KM: Well cool. Mike do you have more questions?

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MM: I don't think so. I mean what—what always strikes me, I love the look of these shrimp boats. I love the chains and the ropes and it's just beautiful. It's you know but you can

tell and I've always known this and I've never really known what it was, when it comes to cooking there's a lot of technique in cooking obviously when you cook well. And I'm sure there's a lot of technique to running this boat. You know how long did it take you to master a shrimp boat as far as technique goes?

00:17:46

RW: You never master.

00:17:47

MM: You never master?

00:17:48

RW: You never figure it all out 'cause it always changes. You always say, "Well how come I never thought of this?" And then you think you've got it figured out and then you'll do some different and that worked and you'll say well—. And it's—it can—it's a continuous thing.

00:18:02

MM: Yeah, yeah.

00:18:02

KM: And it's got to be constant problem-solving just like—

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RW: Yes.

00:18:07

MM: Something breaking down and you have to be a universal mechanic knowing how to fix everything I'm sure.

00:18:13

RW: Yes.

00:18:15

MM: Knowing how to read the water and knowing how to read Mother Nature, you know knowing where to go and when—.

00:18:20

RW: All the electronics, all that stuff, I mean it all—it all adds up, yes.

00:18:25

MM: And what were you installing earlier today with the—you said the Coast Guard regulated—?

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RW: Oh the life raft.

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MM: The life raft.

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RW: The inflatable life raft.

00:18:36

KM: Hmm, so is there a certain like excitement you get before you head out for open—like the season opening?

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RW: You always have that feeling, “I’m going to get them.” [*Laughs*] “I’m going to go get them.”

00:18:50

KM: Like Christmas, every time you pull one up.

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RW: Yeah, that's right. That's just the way it is. Just like a three year-old or a four year-old at Christmas time.

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MM: Well I guess it's worth it because I assume that it pays well you know when— when you end up with a jackpot like that.

00:19:04

RW: Well at times it does. It all works out for the better. If there's less shrimp most of the time you'll get a better price. The more shrimp you'll get a less price but like I said most of the time it'll average out and but you get out of it what you put in it.

00:19:18

MM: Right, right.

00:19:18

RW: When I go like in South Carolina if they say you can shrimp from six o'clock that morning until eight o'clock that night, I go as it's just like a job.

00:19:28

KM: Well it is.

00:19:28

RW: Well yes that's why I'm saying, if they tell you to go to work from 8:00 to 5:00 you're going to work from 8:00 to 5:00 aren't you? That's what I do. A lot of people don't do that. A lot of them they'll go down and five o'clock they're hauling back. They're going in. Not me and I do it by myself.

00:19:43

KM: How many people are normal boats bringing with them on the boat, is it two, three—?

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RW: Most of—well on a boat that size just about everybody takes—I mean they always take at least one person with them.

00:19:57

KM: Uh-hm and what do people tell you for going out on your own?

00:19:59

RW: [*Laughs*] They tell me I'm crazy but—. Everybody just worries about if something happens and I understand. But I—I try to be as cautious as possible. I don't wear anything baggy on—around that wench when I'm winding back and stuff. If it's raining I won't wear an oil skin jacket because the oil skin jacket hangs down over your hands and stuff. I won't ever wear it. Whatever I wear is something tight around my sleeves where nothing will hang down.

00:20:27

KM: What's the closest call you've had or worst storm you've been in?

00:20:31

RW: Well we've been in some bad storms. I did fall overboard. I've only fell overboard one—no, I shouldn't say that. But that was right after [*Hurricane*] Hugo and we were in South Carolina in McClellanville. And we caught a big tree. Matter of fact I was on the boat with Al Gillikin on the Leona and we had the tree was to the stern of the boat and we had a line up there hooked off on a piece of chain. And there was another boat coming at us and he had to break it down on her and when he opened her up a little bit she popped that chain and it caught me across

the waist and slatted me overboard. Of course with those notes hanging they—when you take the whips off they're—they droop down in water like that. Of course when I was down I grabbed ahold of the bottom of the net. I went up and come back down the boom and come back on the deck of the boat.

00:21:18

MM: Just held onto the net—

00:21:19

RW: All the way up the net and come back down the boom and walked on the deck. And he said, “I don't even believe you can pour any water out of your boots.” [*Laughs*]

00:21:28

MM: Wow, that's awesome.

00:21:29

RW: Yeah.

00:21:31

KM: What a cool story.

00:21:32

KM: Good gracious.

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MM: That's really cool.

00:21:35

KM: Well should we let this young man get his boat ready for getting on the water?

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MM: Yeah, I think so.

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KM: Any more questions from you?

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MM: Thanks man.

00:21:44

KM: All right, we're going to—I just have to record about thirty seconds of silence so feel free to get back and thank you so much for our interview. I appreciate you.

00:21:53

RW: Okay.

00:22:22

END INTERVIEW