

Interview Log (Index)-Franklin I. Wright

Interviewee: Franklin Wright
Interviewer: Kelly E. Navies
Interview Date: August 19, 2012
Location: Hebron, MD. Home of Mr. Wright's daughter, Iris Hart.

Topic: This is an oral history of Franklin I. Wright, a third generation oysterman on Maryland's eastern shore. Mr. Wright's father and grandfather made their living as oysterman, while Mr. Wright, the beneficiary of their hard work, learned the trade, yet was also able to go to college and become a middle school teacher.

Subject Headings: African American watermen, Eastern Maryland, African American farmers, African American businessmen, the oyster industry on the Chesapeake.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

Tape Index

00:00-3:42	Introduction. Interviewee gives full name, place and date of birth, number of children, siblings. Mr. Wright discusses his education from elementary through college. He graduated from Salisbury High School in 1955 and Bowie State College (now University) in 1959. He talks briefly of how his wife died two years ago and that one of their six children is deceased.
3:44-7:44	In response to questions regarding his earliest memories of being on the oyster boat with his father, Mr. Wright explains that he started to go out on

the boat when he was 15 and that, he, “loved it.” He mainly loved being with his father, “I wanted to be like him.” He details how he first learned to ‘cull’ the oysters, then eventually learned how to do the “tonging,” which was more difficult.

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| 7:45-10:00 | Describes a typical day on the oyster boat which began “before daybreak.” |
| 10:00-14:15 | Discusses the amount of money they made per day on the oyster boat and how that money was divided between boat expenses, and the three men on the boat, including him, his father, and usually one of his grandfathers. |
| 14:17-18:30 | Describes what they would wear on the boat to stay warm and various strategies for staying warm, “We’d beat our hands.” Says that beating or clapping hands was similar to clapping hands in church. |
| 18:32-20:20 | Talks of how he continued to go oystering with his father on weekends, even after he began teaching and didn’t stop until around the time his father died-sometime in the 1970’s. (he wasn’t sure of the date, but we have that information, see field notes.) |
| 20:23-22:20 | Discusses the variety of work his father and (by extension) whole family was involved in: “oystering, crabbing, fishing,” and says, “They were the best days of my life,” referring to his family’s general store in Wetipquin and how his parents were able to put him and all of his siblings through college with a combination of oystering, crabbing, fishing, farming, and owning a general store. |

- 22:20-24:30 In response to question of whether he remembered ever having a dangerous experience on the boat, he says, no. Mr. Wright says that they never had any accidents on the boat. Discusses a cherished memory of family outings they would take on the boat after oyster season ended, in the summer.
- 24:33-25:20 Describes how oystermen would sing spirituals while they were out on the boat.
- 25:20-30:22 Mr. Wright describes the boat that his father bought used in the 1940's- (according to our records, this boat was actually purchased in 1957) he says that most blacks who owned boats, owned used boats, except for one of his uncles who owned a new boat. Describes how they would steer the boat with ropes. Talks about how they would scrape the barnacles off the boat with a shovel or spade, before painting it.
- 30:24-33:24 Briefly discusses his memories of his paternal and maternal grandfathers. Also tells a story about getting in trouble for taking an apple from his grandmother's tree against her instructions to get one off of the ground.
- 33:25-37:45 Talks about his reverence for his father and how important it was for him to please him, "As far as I was concerned, he was a great man." Then talks about how his father was in a gospel quartet with his brothers, the 'Wright Brothers Quartet.' This leads into a discussion of the camp meetings the men would have where they would sing, clap, and stomp in a circular formation
- 37:45-39:40 Mentions that he met his wife in the tomato patch. Then responds to questions about how his father may have felt about working on the water and why he chose that profession. He says his father and the other men loved being watermen.

- 39:45-43:05 Discusses the close knit community of watermen, how you could go to anyone's house for a meal and everyone was your parent. Then, Mr. Wright goes on a brief tangent to talk about when he first saw electric lights when he was in the 8th grade. Also talks about his first experience with telephones.
- 43:05-44:50 Returns to discussion of the community and how African American watermen looked out for each other, helped each other dock, waited for each other to come in and went to look for those who were late. Compares the community to that of a family. "I never seen a family...a community like that that was so close together."
- 45:00-53:45 Asked about relations between white and black watermen, Mr. Wright says that they got along well. The only differences he notes are that they (whites) had bigger and better boats and thus were able to get to the oyster bed quicker and get more oysters. This question also leads him into a discussion of segregated schools, which he feels were the real example of blacks not being treated equally. He talks about the hand-me-down books and being taunted by white children on school buses as they walked to their segregated school. When asked about it, he acknowledges that blacks did have more difficulty acquiring loans, but, he says, his parents didn't have such problems, because they were respected in the community. He repeats that blacks usually had used boats in contrast to the newer and better boats that whites had, "evidently they [whites] had more money." But, he also talks about an uncle who owned a new boat and had a lot of property, John Hull. This particular uncle owned 32 acres of land. Wright shares memories of working for his uncle and going on Easter egg hunts on his land.
- 53:46-56:25 Wright discusses the decline of the oyster industry-how it became commercial, and then how there were fewer oysters-how a bridge was built which forced the black watermen to build another dock with wood donated by a white-owned firm. Finally, he says, the younger generation wasn't interested in oystering, but wanted to attend college and move away.
- 56:25-1:00:48 Wright explains that he was encouraged to go to college and become a teacher by his mother, who had also gone to college and taught school. In fact, she also went to Bowie State. He graduated with a degree in Junior

High School education, which prepared him to teach all middle school subjects. He still substitute teaches. He described an arts and crafts project he did with one of his classes where he taught them how to make a, “titty bag,” for holding money.

1:00:50-1:03:52 Wright talks about taking a science class on a field trip to an oyster boat in Wetipquin.

1:03:53-1:10:24 Talks about the enormous influence his mother had on his life. “My mother played the main role in the family.” Describes how the general store was her idea and she borrowed the money from a family member to get it started. She did all the bookkeeping, cooking, most of the discipline and made it possible for all of her children to go to college. Wright says she had more influence on him than his father.

1:10:30-1:12:45 When asked what he would like people to learn from his family’s experience, Mr. Wright begins to share his family’s values: get an education, own a business, don’t use drugs.

1:12:50-1:13:48 In response to the question of what he would like people to learn about his father’s work when they come to the museum, “My father was a waterman and that was his life-it was my life, for a while. He was a leader in his community. He loved going to church.”

1:13:50-1:19:58 Mr. Wright begins to discuss how well known he is as a result of running a convenience store for twenty years. He says that after teaching for 18 years, he wasn’t making enough money to send his six children to college, so he borrowed money from the government and opened a convenience store. He is very proud of the fact that he was able to send his children to college as a result of his successful business ownership.

End of Disc One

00:00-2:50 Continues to talk about his experience as a business owner, but says he got bored after 20 years because he felt confined and worked in the store

almost every day. The only time he got away was to attend his son's funeral in Kentucky. His son was killed in an automobile accident. Mr. Wright is very proud, however, of how well-loved his son, (called Bucky) was by the community. His funeral drew a large crowd, which included such dignitaries as the Mayor and Chief of Police.

2:50-5:30

When asked if he has any final thoughts, he emphasizes that what is most important to him is encouraging young people to get an education and helping people, in general, in any way he can.

End of Disc 2

Note: Oral histories rely upon the memories of interviewees; as such they often contain factual errors. Therefore, oral histories must always be supplemented by documented research.