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-May 2016
D: Okay. So, today is October 22, 2015. My name is Diana Dombrowski and I’m here with Jessica Taylor, here on Tangier Island in Virginia and we are here to conduct some interviews. Could I ask you to please introduce yourself and tell us how to spell your name?


D: Okay, thank you. And could you tell me when and where you were born?

S: I was born right here on Tangier Island, Virginia.

D: Oh, that's wonderful. Okay.

S: And lived here, I've been here for sixty-five years and wouldn’t trade it.

D: I can’t wait to hear more about why. Could you tell me a little bit about your family, about your parents and their history here on the island?

S: My family, Annie and John Parks, they were born and raised on Tangier also. All of my family, my brother and my sister, was born here also. And they all just love it like I do.

D: So, did they live here too?

S: They did, they passed away.

D: Okay. And what did your parents do?

S: My mother was a housewife, my father was a waterman.

D: Okay. And I know that a lot of watermen learn that from their families, maybe from their parents, his dad. So, did his family also live here on Tangier as well?

S: Yes, they did.
D: Okay. How far does your family go back here on the island?

S: I wouldn’t even know what to say because some of them, I didn’t get to know. So, yeah, no I wouldn’t – a long time.

D: Yeah, it’s the case with my side of the family, too. As far as documentary records that I’m sure you’ve looked up because you work here at the museum, right?

S: Yes, I do.

D: How far do you know that they were here?

S: Gosh, I think about twenty, twenty-five generations.

D: Okay, wow. Wow, that’s amazing. So, your dad was a waterman, did he pass on any of that to any of you guys?

S: My brother, Roger Parks. He’s also a waterman.

D: Oh, that’s awesome. That’s really cool. Could you tell me a little bit about your education here, where you went to school?

S: I went to school right here, Tangier Combined. We’re associated with Accomack County, Virginia. And I’ve been out of school for forty-seven years. Graduated, got married, and stayed on Tangier.

D: When did you get married?

S: I got married, I got out of school as soon as – I’ve been married to my first husband about forty, forty-one years then he passed away.

D: Oh, I’m sorry.
S: And I married my second husband. Both of them was Jack, and I knew that wasn’t going to work. So, he also died. He passed away nine years ago with cancer. We didn’t have any children, I had two miscarriages.

D: I’m sorry. Could you tell me how you met your first husband? Were you in school together?

S: My first husband? We had functions on the Friday night, it was called the MYF. It was a group that met in the Sunday school building and we had a lesson taught us and then we played games, and that’s how I met him.

D: What kind of games did you guys play? Were there dances or –

S: Board. No, not in the Sunday school building. We’d play Rummy, stuff like that and different games like that.

D: I wonder, when you guys were growing up and your dad was working on the water and your mom was raising all of you, working really hard to do that, and you were living on the island, how did you interact with the Bay? Did you often go out on the water?

S: I went out with my father sometimes, not often because I really don’t like the water. Now, my sister loved it. So, she went out with him more than I did. And, of course, my brother worked with him.

D: How long did he work with your father? When did he start going out?

S: He started going on Saturday when he was seven, eight. But then he didn’t graduate. Later on, he quit school to work with his father because my father had a bad heart and he couldn’t be by himself on the water. So, he really had to quit school.
D: I think, from what I understand, because we’ve been doing some reading before we got here, that the island used to be much bigger?

S: Yes, much, much bigger.

D: Could you tell me what you remember about the difference between then and now when you were growing up?

S: Well, it was a lot more trees around then, a lot of trees. And the population, when I was in school, I had over twelve hundred on the island. Twelve hundred people, and now it’s down to about four, four-thirty-five, four-thirty-something, around that. We’d go outside and play. Of course, we didn’t have video games and all that stuff, computers. We’d go out and play hard. We’d play, jump on pogo sticks, we’d have, when I was much younger, a dollhouse outside, that kind of thing. Play hard, hopscotch, hula hoop, but they don’t do that anymore. Very few kids play outside and that’s a shame because they missed out on what we had.

D: What do you think they’re doing instead?

S: They’re playing on the computer, playing video games.

D: Were there any buildings or different neighborhoods or streets that you remember from that time?

S: The streets were more or less the same. But like I said, a lot more trees and a lot of old homes that really needed repair back then. But all of those have been torn down now.

T: What did the older homes look like? Do you remember how old they were, who owned them?
S: Gosh. One of them that I know was over a hundred years old. And it was like when stuff wears down and it's just bare wood, that's how most of them looked, but still people lived in them for a while.

T: How did they look different from the newer houses?

S: Oh, gosh. They didn't have siding back then, they didn't paint as often as they do now. So, one-hundred-and-ten percent improvement now.

T: Were the layouts any different, were they any bigger or smaller?

S: No, could have been a little smaller, but the layouts were pretty much the same as they are now.

D: Do you know much about the history of this building?

S: Yes, it's been open eight years; it was opened in 2006, the year my husband died. And all of the people got together and donated all the stuff you see in here. This is pure donation. People had things in their attic that they forgot they had. And the one director that ran it, her name was Debra Howard. Her and I got real good friends and that's how I come to work here with her. So, I love it here. It's all voluntary and we don't get paid. At the end of the year we have a nice dinner of the fishermen and he gives us all a gift of money. There's eight of us that works during summer. We all love it, we're very happy with this museum and we're very proud of it.

D: I ask because I wonder, since we were talking about some of the older buildings, whether or not this building was new or if it was here and turned into –
S: No, it was a gift shop. It was called The Island Gifts. And Susan and Neil Kay moved here and they got all this going. They bought it from the lady that had her gift shop in here and they got everybody together, had a big meeting to see what we had stored away and if we’d be willing to donate it and they were. So, here we are.

D: I notice on the wall that a lot of veterans have served.

S: Yes, for such a small community island, we have the highest per capita. And we have the pictures and we have some down the side of the wall and names that we don’t have pictures of. So, we had two deaths for the servicemen and the rest made it out okay.

T: I noticed that there were several people killed in action during World War II. What was the effect of the Second World War on Tangier?

S: Other than people being called to go into service for the fighting, to fight the war, it had an effect on us because everybody knows everybody here. And whenever children had to go into service, we all prayed and we just didn’t want anything to happen to him. Two of them obviously died, but the rest made it out okay. The first one died with a hand grenade, was threwed on him and blewed him to pieces. The second one, he was a young guy and he had been joined about three years and he was working on this piece of machinery and he forgot about the drop down. Well, he was in front of it working on it and it was heavy, and it ran right over him. It killed him. That was tragic, too. That was awful.
T: Can I ask you about, if that’s okay, can I ask you about women’s health and what it’s like to be a woman on Tangier?

S: Our health is pretty good. I have arthritis and I’m a diabetic but that’s under control. Most of the women here they’re either diabetic, arthritis, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, that kind of thing. And Ines Pruitt takes care of me. I call her my doctor even though she’s not a doctor, she’s a PA. But I love her dearly, we all do. She takes care of us. She also gives physicals and if she thinks you need to go to the hospital, you’re out of here like that in med-evac.

T: What was it like before the new – that looks pretty new to me.

S: It is. We had one across from the Sunday school building called the Benson. That’s where she worked at, right there, and we all went up there and didn’t think nothing about it. And Dr. Nichols, he’s the one who said we should have a new building, so he’s the one got everything started. Didn’t even have a chance to work in his office, he was diagnosed with cancer and died right away. But he’s the one who did it. We can give him the praise and the thanks. God first, but him.

T: So, before Dr. Pruitt and Dr. Benson, who was before them?

S: It was a man by the name of Dr. Gladstone. Then, we all had one called Dr. Andrews. When he stopped coming, Dr. Raul, which is my physician, also she started coming. And it got too much for her, she’s got a big practice over on the Eastern Shore and she had to quit, so I followed her
there, she gives my physicals. She’s been doing it for years and she can do it like that, that’s what I like.

T: What was it like for your parents’ generation? You said you were born here, what was that experience like for your mother, did she ever tell you?

S: We had a live-in doctor at the time, so he delivered us. She said she didn’t know no different. She hadn’t ever been in a hospital to have one office, so she didn’t know no difference. Before I was born, she had a wood stove, cooked on a wood stove, scrubbed the clothes on a washboard and tub and hanging clothes out, of course. We didn’t have a bathroom for a long time. It was just like she said, she said she got used to it and when the modern things came along, it was hard for her to get used to that but she did. She never complained. She got cancer and died and still didn’t complain a bit. You know what her words were? I’m no better than nobody else to have it. I hope I could say that, if I was diagnosed with cancer.

T: What was your wedding day like?

S: My wedding day, we got married on the Eastern Shore and went across the Bay and went on our honeymoon and then came back home. My first marriage, we lived with his mom. I don’t recommend that. Second marriage, I lived over here in the trailer, so I had a home, a place of my own. And we did the same thing, we went and got married on the shore and we went up Salisbury, Maryland and Ocean City and all for our honeymoon and come home and made a life together, until he killed himself with cigarettes. That’s what killed him. I begged him to stop, but if
you’re not ready, you’re not going to. The only family I have on here now is a nephew, Tony Whitley. He works with Freddy Whitley, and he’s the only family I have on here. My brother lives on the Western Shore, my sister lives on the Eastern Shore. So, I get to see her more than I do him because in the summer, I’m here. So, we do have a homecoming, I don’t know if anyone has told you about that.

D: Oh, yeah. I’d love to hear more about that. We just heard about it in passing.

S: We usually have it in August, sometime in August, and all the Tangier people that’s moved away, they come back and people that has been here before, like tourists, they’ll come back because they love it so much. And it’s just a good time for the kids, they have fun and everything. They have a hula-hoop contest. We have had before a children’s pageant, beauty pageant. And we have a lot of games, a lot of blowed up games for the kids. Like Cindy Parks, she does crafts, that’s her work right there in back of you. Well, she’s took some of it away, she had to have it. She usually has a table and everybody that’s talented and can make things will have a table up there. It’s held on the airport, three nights. It’s very good. The money goes to the fire department, so that’s what we all like. Plenty of food, oh, God, the food, seafood, regular food, snow cones, cotton candy.

T: That’s actually something else I wanted to know about. Has food changed over time?

S: It got more expensive but no, not really.
T: Not the type of food?

S: Now, my mom and her sister, we used to have gardens over there because back then the tide didn’t come up there but now it does. We used to have our gardens and I loved going out there and picking the stuff. I didn’t want to help in the planting, but I wanted to pick it. Other than that, we have to go to grocery stores now. When I’m off the island, I usually go to Wal-Mart or Food Lot. But I buy stuff up the road, to Daley & Son’s Grocery Store. It’s expensive because they have to get it down from wherever they order it from, they have to put it on their boat, they have to bring it over here, unload it again. So, they really can’t help but put the prices up.

T: What kind of food would your mother make for dinner?

S: Oh, chicken, turkey, and, of course, vegetables to go along with it, roast. We used to have good dinners. That’s why I’m fighting the battle of losing weight right today.

D: I wonder, because we talked a little bit about how the size of the island has changed, and you mentioned how your mom reacted when different kinds of technology came to the island. So, what kind of changes have you seen in your life?

S: Well, I’ve seen a lot more trucks, a lot of golf carts, scooters, four-wheelers. Back then, we only had bikes, if we were lucky and our dads could afford them. Have a lot more stuff on the roads, a lot. And I worry about small children because when they’re on those four-wheelers, zoom,
they go. I, myself, have a handicap scooter so I can get around, but she only goes four miles an hour. But she makes me be able to get to Ines, to the post office, and here. Well, I don't have to have it here, I live right in the back of here now.

D: That’s nice. Has the internet changed at all? How many people come as visitors here?

S: Yes, the internet. We have open internet to the tourists and we’re all, the majority of us, is hooked up to Wi-Fi. They got it free. Because it’s a business, I’m able to get it over on my house, so I don’t have to pay for it because I work here.

T: People were talking about how TV and the internet has changed how people use language.

S: Yes, very much so. I mean, they don’t realize it has a channel changer and an off and on button. When all this common talk, filthy talk, comes on there, I turn it off. I’m a Christian, I’m living for the Lord and I don’t think that’s for me to look at. But you see children, TVs in their bedroom now. They look at it and it’s repeated over and over and over. So, more children catches on and they use it too. I don't use it, language.

T: Oh, I meant the dialect, the accent.

S: Oh, no. That hasn’t changed. Our accent’s more or less the same as it’s always been. They say we’re from – it’s old English.

T: Were there phrases or stories that your parents or grandparents used to tell that maybe you don’t hear as much around anymore?
S: 1976, there was a bad freeze. I mean, the Bay out as far as you could see this way all froze to the fact that people could walk on it. They could go from here to Crisfield, Maryland if they wanted to. We had ships out there then that the military was bombing, you could walk out to there, no problem. It was a hard freezing. One freeze before that, I don't know the year, a blimp landed on the ground, I bought food. And last year we had a freeze for two weeks so we had airplanes come in with food for the grocery store. One girl had just had a baby and she was going to run out of formula, so she called channel ten on your satellite and they flew formula, diapers, anything she needed here to her. I'm sure she was worried, but it all worked out okay. We had to have the ice cutter cut in two or three times. But the one in 1976 and the one before that one, when I wasn't even born, was awful.

T: When was that?

S: Oh, about 1937. See, I wasn't born until 1950, so my mom would tell me about that, how bad it was. It was awful. Stores, one store they had, little store, shelves were bare. You couldn't buy anything, so the blimp came in. See, they didn't have ice cutters back then and airplanes and stuff.

D: What did she do to make it work for her?

S: Well, in the summer she tried to can all the vegetables she could and my daddy, they'd have pigs back then, and my daddy would have them slaughtered and they'd be hanging in the shed. The stuff, you know the hens and whatever and whatever. And that's how they made it. So, that
taught me to get supplies on hand, keep them on hand, like canned food and stuff. So, that's what I do.

T: Did you see the relationship with alcohol change over time?

S: Oh, yes. Back when I was born and going to school, there was no such thing as alcohol. But it started on here and it went from bad to worse. And the drugs went from bad to worse. I mean, we could leave our door open overnight back when I was a teenager, but now you can't. If you take any kind of medication, they'll fight you for that.

T: What kind of drugs have come onto the island and when?

S: It's been about twenty years ago it all got started. Whatever, they take speed, uppers, pot, they smoke pot, they drink. That sort of good stuff.

T: To what do you attribute that change?

S: Well, I attribute that to nothing to do on Tangier; they don't have any place to go. For recreation, they have nothing to do on here except play on the computer and video games and the young teenagers get together and drink and smoke and take pills. There's nothing to do. I mean, absolutely nothing for them to do. So, that's what I attribute that to. We didn't have a whole lot to do but, like I said, we went outside and found things to do. But they don't do that anymore. It's bad.

D: You mentioned people feeling like they don't have something to do. Has that contributed to how many families have remained here on the island or how people stay connected to the island when they leave?
S: When they leave, of course, it's phone. They connect by phone, internet, and all of that. But we got about fifty-seven men that work on tugboats. And some of the families moved off the island because it was easier for them to get home. Like when it freezes up here, they can't get home unless they spend all this money to fly. A lot of people has moved for that purpose, but a lot stayed, including myself.

D: Because I know, too, that environmental regulation has changed a lot of the way that watermen make their living.

S: It has, it has. The ones that are going oyster dredging here this winter, they can only work four days instead of five. Crab potters have to be in by two no matter what. They have to be in by two o'clock, and if they're not, they'll get a ticket. It's hard to work on the water now. Now, back when my daddy worked on the water, there was no regulation. I mean, he could do what he wanted.

D: Do you think that was a good or a bad thing?

S: It was good. But then I can think and understand maybe why they're coming down on oysters. Maybe it'll last longer or there will be more for the following year. A day can make a lot of difference. So, it's good and bad.

D: I wonder in the time that your brother has been working on the water, and they've changed maybe how many days he can be out there, has he seen a change in –
S: Yes, a big one. Yeah, like I said, he lives across the Bay and he works in the summer. He’s got a crab house, he shells crabs and he’s seen a big difference. After one inch or half an inch over what you’re supposed to save, he’ll get a ticket. Back when he first moved over there, he didn’t have to worry about that.

D: Has he noticed whether or not that’s had an effect on how many oysters are out there?

S: Yes, it has. He’s a diabetic, like myself, and it’s affected his feet and his hands so when it’s cold, he can’t work a lot. He let it go too far before he got on insulin. Now, the first time the doctor told me she wanted me on insulin, I went. I mean, you don’t fool around with that. If you don’t get it, it will get you. It will.

T: I think you might have visitors, I’m not sure.

D: Oh, I don’t know. Are you expecting anyone else today?

S: Well, I believe they said something about eight, eight people.

D: Oh, that was us. Our group was eight. I guess they’re just hanging out.

S: Oh, they’re Tangier kids.

D: Okay. That’s nice. So, Tangier kids usually go all over?

S: Sometimes they’ll sit here on the deck here and use the internet.

D: Oh, that’s nice.

S: Yeah, with those little gadgets that they carry around with them, iPods and phones. But that’s okay, we don’t mind.

T: I might have missed it, but what did your husbands do?
S: My first husband worked for the corps of engineers which is a dredge boat. My second husband painted these homes for people; he was a contractor, painter. He could do a good job too, of course, I’m prejudiced.

T: So, for your second husband, that was his life career?

S: Uh-huh, it was. It’s odd I know.

T: Did you notice that maybe he was doing that more for tourists than local people? Or do you think –

S: No, he did it more for local people.

T: When did the tourist economy start to kick off here?

S: I don’t know for sure, but I’d say about fifteen to twenty years ago. It started with just a few coming over on our ferry boat. They’d come over on there and then later on, I’d say about ten years, they started from Onancock, bringing them in and then across the Bay, Reedville, Virginia, and then Crisfield, Maryland. So, it really caught on.

T: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

S: A good thing. I mean, I myself enjoy talking to different people and nearly everybody who walks in this museum tells me how good it is, how beautiful it is, the great job we’ve all done. So, I appreciate that. And we just love seeing them, and we have a bed and breakfast, the Chesapeake House, Hilda Crockett’s. It’s open all summer and they have, you sit down and they bring the food to you. Which, the other restaurants you order off a menu and a lot love to go down there. Good food caught on quick. You got to go to Chesapeake House, you got to go to Chesapeake House.
D: We talked to a couple people when we got in last night who, when they heard that we were coming here, mentioned that they and their family had come to the area for duck hunting and that sort of thing for a while. Was that one of the original tourist draws?

S: Well, men, the men that wanted to hunt that was held up at Uppers. It’s Tangier, but it’s almost washed away now. My good friend’s father, Kenneth Pruitt, he owned that, that’s where they go out all day and come stay at the trail. And they have women out there to cook for them and everything and it was nice. Now, the trail has washed away and graves have come up and washed away. See, that was inhabited back in the late [19]20s, my grandparents lived over there. But they moved here when it started eroding, they came here.

D: What were some of the first signs or what first started to happen when they noticed that things were changing?

S: The northeast winds, when they blow hard, you can see where more water’s coming in and it stays and you don’t see as much land as you used to. And, of course, effects from hurricanes, that kind of thing will do us in. If we don’t get a sea wall, I’d say about twenty, twenty-five more years, this place is going to be gone. And I would hate to see that happen.

T: Well, what do you hope for the future of Tangier?

S: I hope number one, we get a sea wall. And I hope there’s enough kids that graduate from here, goes to college, makes a life for themselves. And I hope, wish, that the drug and alcohol problem would just disappear.
T: Do you want those kids to come back after college?

S: Oh, they come back to visit their families. Yeah, they do. Like in the summer, they'll be here all summer. They find jobs around here, like to the Four Brothers, Lorraine’s Sub Shop, Fisherman’s Corner, and down to the Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House, and babysitting. All that kind of stuff. Yeah, we love to see them come back for visits.

T: But you don’t want them to live here after –

S: No, because there’s nothing for them to do. I mean, what are they going to do? Get their education and work at the Four Brothers ice cream place? No.

T: So, then who are the people that are going to live here?

S: Well, I guess we will until we die or until we get washed away. But I think we’re going to get a sea wall in next year. The federal has all put up their part; we’re waiting for the state now. They will. We’re confident. I have the faith that they will.

T: What has been the role of religion on the island in the twentieth century?

S: Most everybody was Methodist back then, the beautiful church up the road. After my second husband died, I had been going down to the other church on Wednesday nights and I loved it so I stayed there. But they had a split in the churches, and so all those people, eighty-five people came down where I was at and the other people stayed.

T: What was the split about?
S: Conference, they wouldn’t come out to conference. They were supporting Palestine and they didn’t stand for Israel much. Some did, some didn’t.

T: Those folks in the main church, the original?

S: So, they thought it was best to get out and go down. My church is the nondenominational and we fully support Israel and missionaries. And missionaries, we’ve got a lot we support. Even more now because when I first started down there, if we had twenty-three people we were lucky, now with those coming in, we got a lot. So, we got a lot more money to support the missionaries and anybody here that needs money.

T: I think it’s really awesome that you’re interested in global affairs. So, why do you care specifically about Palestine and missionaries?

S: Well, you know, God called the missionaries to do his work and they did it and they’re doing it, that’s why our church loves to support them. Send them money, I’m sending them money every two weeks, at least once a month, some of them. And Palestines, I’ve got nothing against the Palestines myself, but I wouldn’t support them ahead of Israel because in the Bible that’s God’s chosen place. Israel’s going to stand, nobody’s going to do nothing to Israel anymore. And that’s why. I’m a firm believer in the Bible and that’s why we, down there, support Israel a lot.

D: I had one last question. In working here at the museum as you have, volunteering, working, what kind of mission or sense of purpose brings people to donate items that are special to them and their family history? What do people say when they come in here?
S: They come in and they bring it and we have to put their name down and make sure it's what it is. And they tell us we can keep it as long as we've got the museum. And it's special because it's Tangier folks that's bringing these items in. Whereas some museums has stuff from all over the place, we just stick with Tangier stuff and it makes it special to us and to other people. And a lot of history is in here. I'll have people say, "You all have the most history in here." And it's Tangier history, it doesn't contain anything but Tangier, and that's special.

D: Okay. That's my last question unless there's anything else you wanted to share about special memories you wanted on the record about what your life has been like here.

S: My life has been fantastic. Like I said, when I was a child growing up, we had a lot, lot, of snow back then. We'd be out playing in the snow, I would…'till mom called me in. And we don't have that kind of snow anymore. And we had a movie theater. I don't remember a whole lot about it, but my sister does. Then, when I grew up we had a dance hall down the road, that's what I say to children now, don't have that. We'd go down and dance and meet our boyfriends there. Another memory is the Heisten Bridge, that used to be the dater's bridge. And if our mom's found out, uh-oh, but I never got told on, I was one of the lucky ones. Mine thought I wouldn't do that. But that's good memories for me. People have had their children, other people look out for them. If I was to see one of those hurt, out there, I'd be out there, helping them. And we're all that way.
[End of interview]

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