

William Vircie Birch

April 21, 2015

Interviewee: William Birch

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ENNIS BARBERY: Today is April 21, 2015 at we're here at the home of William Birch, or Bill Birch on Main Street on CI Island and we're doing this...

WILLIAM BIRCH: It's five sets of William Birches.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, yes.

WILLIAM BIRCH: But I always use my middle initial, William V.

ENNIS BARBERY: Vee

WILLIAM BIRCH: Vee like Victory.

ENNIS BARBERY: What does it stand for?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Vircie

ENNIS BARBERY: Vircie. How do you spell that?

WILLIAM BIRCH: VIRCIE

ENNIS BARBERY: Okay, okay, I never heard of that one before. I have an interesting name too...

WILLIAM BIRCH: That's why I use my middle initial. My mail and anything, mail that way anybody, who wanted it they put that in it because it might go to some of the others.

ENNIS BARBERY: I just want to introduce who's here in the room. There's me, Ennis Barbery, I'm interviewing today. And then we have Estelle Elliot and she is helping to do the videography and interviewing today. We're doing this interview for the CI Life History Project with the CI Island Library and the Museum of CI Island. Okay, what's your full name one more time?

WILLIAM BIRCH: My full name William Vircie Birch.

ENNIS BARBERY: When were you born?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I was born in 1920, February 6 on this island. I'm the oldest man living on the island that's lived here all his life. There's three other people, one of them, there's Roy Jones who's six month older than I am. He worked for me for 40 years. And the other one was George Hall he come from Maryland. He's about two months older than I am. But he lived in Maryland. He never lived here all his life. The other one was Jacob Ross from down at Accomack moved here. He never lived here all his live. He's about two months older than I am. But I'm the oldest man living that's lived here all his life.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. You're the oldest, the oldest one.

WILLIAM BIRCH: So I guess I made history.

ENNIS BARBERY: You have, you definitely have. What were your parents' names? Your parents' names?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Vircie Birch was my father's name and my mother's name was Minnie Harold Birch [check spelling].

Video break, audio continues.

ENNIS BARBERY: Vircie Birch was your dad's name?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah.

ENNIS BARBERY: But your middle name.

WILLIAM BIRCH: He didn't have no middle initial.

ENNIS BARBERY: Like you middle name. That's the middle name you got, right? That's the middle name you got, Vircie?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah. That's where I got it from, yeah.

Video resumes

ENNIS BARBERY: And what did he do?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Had a dairy back here on Ridge Road where Mason Oil is and off of that, the houses there are vacant buy, sell. That's over a hundred years old. That's where I was born and raised and my sister was born there too. She'd been 101 if she'd been living.

ENNIS BARBERY: Those houses are still standing?

WILLIAM BIRCH: She died when she was 28 years old. She had cancer.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh no. Terrible. Those houses are still standing?

WILLIAM BIRCH: The house is still there, its over 100 years old. And they remodeled it and fixed it up and you wouldn't know it.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. And so it's right beside Mason Oil?

WILLIAM BIRCH: All the buildings where they had the cattle are all gone. It's just a house there.

ENNIS BARBERY: Is it right beside Mason Oil.

WILLIAM BIRCH: No, no, it's north.

ENNIS BARBERY: North of Mason.

WILLIAM BIRCH: It's north, I guess so maybe 1,000 feet.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did the dairy have a name? Was there a name for the dairy? What did you call it? Just the dairy?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Birch's Dairy. A little history behind that because I was married in 1936 and my father bought the farm over on the highway here on 13 [U.S. 13] in 1939. It was a dairy over there. He moved his cattle over there with those cattle and he had a dairy over there. It's still called Green Hill Dairy.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, Green Hill Dairy. So that used to be your father's.

WILLIAM BIRCH: North. When you go over to T's [Corner] you go north. It's before you get to New Church and you'll see the house sitting up on a hill with trees around it. A sign board's north of that. All that is the farm; 159 acres farm. And there's a history on there I guess, you call it, because my father died in 1942. I was in the service. My mother couldn't handle it. It was put up and sold. And my father-in-law bought it.

ENNIS BARBERY: Your father-in-law bought it?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Father-in-law bought it.

ENNIS BARBERY: Was that when you were already married? Yeah.

WILLIAM BIRCH: People come along wanted to buy part of it or buy all of it and he said to me, he said, "Would you sell it?" I said, "You don't need the money do you?" And he never would sell it. Never would sell it. He died and his wife died. Her grandmother was still there.

And she died. Nobody left but me and my wife with two children got married and moved out. We still own the farm. Still own the farm now.

ENNIS BARBERY: You still own Green Hill Dairy now. I didn't realize that. So you did eventually get it back from...[last sentence not in video]

WILLIAM BIRCH: If you ever go out to T's, T's Corner, and turn north you'll see it. It's on the left hand side going north sitting up on a hill.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did you work at the dairy on CI when you were young?

WILLIAM BIRCH: It did when I was young.

ENNIS BARBERY: What did you do?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Milked cows. And did a little everything. Delivered milk.

ENNIS BARBERY: How many cows did you have?

WILLIAM BIRCH: About 30.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow, 30 cows. That's a pretty big operation. Did your father have other staff too, or was it just the family?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No, just the family. My mother and father and me. I got married in 1936 and my wife come home at night, come here. She wasn't going to tell her mother and father for a while. So she [unintelligible] the door. She [unintelligible] the door she told them. She didn't tell them nothing, just told them. Her mother cried. Her father laughed. [laughter] Her father knew a lot of people and knew that I was from a good family. So that was 1936. We moved in this house and I worked for my father for the first year, '36. In '37 I started working for my father-in-law. I didn't like that seven day week. You never get a day off year around. In the oyster business you got Sunday off. You worked six days a week. And its hard work, but you had Sunday off. So I started working them in 1937.

ENNIS BARBERY: Before we get to that, what other things do you remember about your childhood? Do you remember going to school on CI? Did you go to school over on Church Street?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I remember old little stores on there. About seven or eight little stores. There's one right up the street here. Still standing there next to that motel. That's Charlie Gold's [check name] little store. He had two sons. One was in the Coast Guard. The other one was there working for him.

ENNIS BARBERY: What kind of stuff would you buy from the stores?

WILLIAM BIRCH: His mother and father worked there too, see. My mother used to raise a little of everything. Had a garden, she raised peanuts, popcorn. She would go to the store buying candy and everything. That's what we got for use.

ENNIS BARBERY: So you didn't go to the store and buy a lot of candy?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Not much candy. They had a big showcase, penny a piece you paid for your candy. My mother used to raise a lot of chickens. Used to carry a bushel of eggs to that store every week.

ENNIS BARBERY: So you would sell the eggs to that store.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Sell them to that store.

ENNIS BARBERY: How much did you get for them?

WILLIAM BIRCH: You'd get a dobill. Nobody now knows what a dobill is. A dobill is you take that paper and go in and buy anything in that store with that paper from them eggs.

ENNIS BARBERY: So how much would you get for an egg?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Oh I just don't remember now. That's been too long ago.

ENNIS BARBERY: What about when you delivered milk. Do you have any stories about delivering milk and things that happened?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Milk back then was 12 cents a quart.

ENNIS BARBERY: Twelve cents.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Forty eight cents a gallon.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow, wow. Where did you deliver it on the island? Which neighborhoods?

WILLIAM BIRCH: All over the island. We went all over the island. Restaurants and stores back there then. We went to those too. Also bottle chocolate milk. They made chocolate milk in half pint bottles. We put that out to the restaurants and filling station and place. You'd go in a buy that just like you would a coke cola.

ENNIS BARBERY: I would buy that. That would be great.

WILLIAM BIRCH: We sold quite a lot of that.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did you ever have any trouble when you were delivering the milk? Anything that happened?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No, never had nothing ever happen with the milk. It was delivered fresh.

ENNIS BARBERY: Always fresh. That would be great.

ENNIS BARBERY: We had refrigeration and things for it.

ENNIS BARBERY: How many years did you do that for? How many years did you deliver milk for?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I started delivering milk when I was 10 year old. And back there then—people goes on about the winters we have now. They have good winters now than they had then. They didn't have stock law back then. The horses and cattle they run loose. And everybody had a fence around their home. And we'd have snow in the winter over top of those fences. I mean we had several snows like that. People goes on now about they have a bad winter. We have a good winter now then back there then. But we still delivered milk in all those snows.

ENNIS BARBERY: So on CI you had cattle and horses that were wild?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah.

ENNIS BARBERY: And ran around?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah the horses and the cattle run loose because they didn't have no stock law. Everybody had a fence around their home to keep the cattle out.

ENNIS BARBERY: They didn't have any stock, what'd you say stock law? I don't know that word.

WILLIAM BIRCH: You say they come out with the stock law. They had to put the cattle in fences. Couldn't run loose.

ENNIS BARBERY: Which neighborhood were you a part of there? Were you part of Down the Marsh? Which neighborhood were you? There's Down the Marsh.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Down the Marsh where we lived. That's what they called it, Down the Marsh.

ENNIS BARBERY: Where was the store for Down the Marsh?

WILLIAM BIRCH: All the streets down there where Mason Oil is, all that was called Down the Marsh.

ENNIS BARBERY: Right. Did it have it's own neighborhood store?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Another street over on the shore, western side they called that the West, the West Side of the island.

ENNIS BARBERY: The West Side of the island. I've not heard that.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Over here they call this East Side of the island.

ENNIS BARBERY: I've heard of East Side.

WILLIAM BIRCH: They had names for all of them.

[pause to restart video]

ENNIS BARBERY: Well this is great. I never know about the dairy at all. Did you know about the dairy Estelle?

ESTELLE ELLIOT: No. I figured there had to be one at some point in time.

Video resumes

ENNIS BARBERY: When did your father close it [the dairy] on CI?

WILLIAM BIRCH: My father died in 1942 when I was in the service. At which my mother had to sell the Green Hill Dairy because she couldn't handle it by herself.

ENNIS BARBERY: And the Green Hill dairy that was in Pocomoke, but did you all still deliver to CI?

WILLIAM BIRCH: We delivered all the milk on CI. We didn't deliver it nowhere else.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, even when you were in the Green Hill Dairy on the mainland you still delivered to CI.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah. He still delivered on the island when he moved it over there. That didn't change.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did you have any siblings? Did you have like brothers or sisters? You mentioned one sister.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I had a sister five and a half year old when I was. If she'd be living she'd be 101. The home where I was talking about there. Way over 100 years old. When my father married—when they got married they moved in that house. So its way passed 100.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did you have any brothers?

WILLIAM BIRCH: My brother years later he worked for me in the oyster business and then he got a good job up in Ohio working for a road construction company. And he moved up there. He built a home up there, and he had children and they're still up there.

ENNIS BARBERY: What's his name?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Vircie.

ENNIS BARBERY: Vircie is your brother. And what about your sister's name?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Her name was Addie.

ENNIS BARBERY: Addie, okay. So you said you went in the service. When did you go into the service?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I went into the service in 1942. I worked on the war and I showed then in the Army. I wanted to be on the war. So I signed up for the Coast Guard. As soon as I put my name on there I had three men in charge. I was in charge of the boat. I worked 18 months on Assateague Island where the station is. From there to Cape Shoals. All those stations.

Submarines back there then were blowing up ships off here right and left. And they were expecting them to come ashore. So the Coast Guard boats went to every one of these inlets and stood watch. Watch for them.

ENNIS BARBERY: So that was your job was to stand watch.

WILLIAM BIRCH: And the Army—we took the Army over to the beach every night. And then they had the CG patrols with these dogs controlling the beach too. They had hundreds of men,

CG boys up and down the coast here. They were expecting the Germans to come ashore. And the Army went over there too. But they never did come ashore. That went on for about 18 months when I was in the service. And then they take the boats off. And then I—this is a little history too. I was transferred to Little Creek [North Carolina]. Every ship in our place for everything overseas. I couldn't figure why I didn't go. I was shipped to [unintelligible] Head Carolina. There was another ship in that place. Everything overseas. I still didn't go. I went to [unintelligible], Virginia. Another ship in that place. And everybody shipped out. I couldn't understand it. I didn't know nobody for say. And the Lord come one night in my bunk and say that. Then it made no difference where the orders was, I was going to be there that place. When I got there I got 10 men in charge. I was on these ships where they were loading everything that goes overseas. All the ammunition and everything. I had the guard duty over those men to watch everything that went on. Whether it was loaded right, done right. I had that for way over a year. One night, it was around Christmas time, everybody was saying, "You can't get no liberty for Christmas." I said, "I'm going in and ask." I went in and asked and wish I'd done everything I was suppose to do, and told the [unintelligible] explaining to him. He wrote me out a pass for three days and I come home. All them other boys were sad they're there. But all I did what I was supposed to do. I carried everything. And that's the reason why I got three-days pass.

ENNIS BARBERY: Yeah, because you're always doing it. What was your rank?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I was captain of the boat.

ENNIS BARBERY: You were a captain, okay. Did you ever serve overseas during the war? Did you ever go overseas?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No. I know what I got. I got one of these landing barges where they landed troops ashore. That would have been my job and the reason I I got in. I never did get it. The Lord didn't intend it.

ENNIS BARBERY: When did you leave the CG? When were you done with your service? When did you return to CI?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I returned to CI in 1945. It was in the winter time. Oyster business was going on. I went to work the next day up to the oyster house.

ENNIS BARBERY: You didn't take any days off?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I walked out on the dock and I seen all these big bunches of oysters, dead. And I said I guess I just take responsibility, see if I can't do something better than that for my father-in-law. So I went to Tom's Cove. They had 1,226 acres of oyster ground out there. I took oyster stakes like you get out of the woods and stuck up it in squares. You dredge a squared down. And if you need more oysters you put more boats on thick ones or the thick square, but you still have boats cleaning up as you go. And my father-in-law seen me doing that. He didn't do a thing but walk out and turned the business over to me. Had 28 dredge boats working. Imagine 145 men are working and my six in the oyster house up there. We got all our shipping out. We sold all our own oysters ourselves. And we shipped all over the United States including Canada. And there was a lot to attend to. All the shipping out and tell all the men where to go. We had 15 oyster houses on the island back there then. They opened oysters, shucked oysters. We didn't sell them all the oysters. We sold some to every oyster house. If a man didn't have work tomorrow, the oyster house didn't need him I placed him somewhere else to go. He never lost a day.

ENNIS BARBERY: That's great, that's great. And this was the WC...

WILLIAM BIRCH: I worked with people. The little children; when I was 10 year old and I never did stop doing it, helping people. And all of us looked out for them. They never had to stay

home. They always had a days work. And I'd go to any of them and ask them to do anything for me they'd do it. And I'd do the same for them. And I still do the same now.

Video break, audio continues

WILLIAM BIRCH: I go Sunday mornings for these long tootsie rolls. It's still [?]. Go right to the door and hold that tootsie roll out and children just can walk come up there and get a tootsie roll.

ENNIS BARBERY: Sunday mornings at church?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Every Sunday morning. I really enjoy seeing the little children they call [?] dad.

ENNIS BARBERY: You do this at your house here, or go to church?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I go to the Union Baptist church. And if I miss a Sunday the little children won't know where I'm at.

ENNIS BARBERY: I bet they do because they don't get their tootsie roll.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yup. I've been doing that a long time. I bought a big tootsie roll up there at Sam's in Salisbury. They come in big jars. I'll give you one. You've been a little child too.

Video resumes

ENNIS BARBERY: This oyster company that was your father-in-law's, its called the William C. Bunting Oyster Company, right? When did he found it? Do you know when he started it?

WILLIAM BIRCH: When my father started it?

ENNIS BARBERY: When he started the oyster company.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Back in the 30's. I couldn't tell you what date. He went down to the bay oystering and clamming on a boat. And my mother bought two, three cows and started a new business. After she got it started, it kept getting larger all along. My father quite going down the bay and went into the dairy business. That was back in the 30's.

ENNIS BARBERY: Now your father-in-law, when did he start his Bunting Oyster business

WILLIAM BIRCH: He didn't start it. It's my father-in-law,

ENNIS BARBERY: Right, your father-in-law.

WILLIAM BIRCH: After I got married I got into that.

ENNIS BARBERY: Right, right. I was saying your father-in-law, Mr. Bunting, when did he start his oyster business?

WILLIAM BIRCH: There's a history on that. It started in 1855. John Bunting was his grandfather; started the business in 1855. He had two sons. he had Ken Bunting and William C. Bunting senior. Ken Bunting went to his self. William C Bunting stayed into his business. He had a son, William C. Bunting Junior come along. That's my father-in-law. He works with his father. He died in 1935. Me and my wife was in the movies when he died. I used to deliver milk there. I know all about it. I'll show you the street house by and by. It's up there where Shore Stop is now. That whole block was a house and in back had a house for his horses. I'm talking about way back. That was a really nice home and he's standing out front of the house. I'll show it to you by and by. It's up there on there on the shelf.

ENNIS BARBERY: Okay, we'll take a picture of it. I think we might have a picture of it in the Museum too.

WILLIAM BIRCH: He started with his father. And when his father died in '35 he's taking the business over. None of the others, the family did. It's five children in the family. Three girls and three boys. None of them would take to it. After WWI, William C. Bunting Senior, he went back in it with his father and runned it. I got a lot of things I can tell you about property. It originally came from him.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, yeah, tell us about it.

WILLIAM BIRCH: The last is wound up with me.

ENNIS BARBERY: When he gave that oyster company to you, it because he thought you were making a really smart; you were harvesting oysters in a really smart way, right? Can you talk about that more, like why—what were you doing that was going to make more successful? Why was it going to make them more successful?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Well see, we planted oysters different from anybody up and down the coast.

ENNIS BARBERY: How so?

WILLIAM BIRCH: We planted oysters, and seed oysters. We left them for two years before we take them up. Everybody else was taking them up in one year. Nobody did that. We shipped out oysters here in barrels in the shell, single oysters for half shell and different things for hotels and restaurants. We had good trade. We had one restaurant the oldest grandfather, shipped to him. Her father shipped to him and I shipped to him. All in that generation. We had several customers like that. It went down in the family. We got along good and if they said was anything wrong, it was something wrong. He never complained about anything. [unintelligible] off he ever had a complaint.

ENNIS BARBERY: So you shipped them in the shell and that was different.

WILLIAM BIRCH: We shipped them in shell back there then. Oldest grandfather, he did both shipped in the can and shell. Her father got out opening oysters. He got out that and just stuck with shipping in the shell.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, so then you didn't have to hire shuckers. You didn't have to have shuckers shucking them if you were shipping them in the shell.

WILLIAM BIRCH: That large house was an oyster house where they had places where they shuck.

ENNIS BARBERY: When did you first—how did you first meet Olga?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I used to deliver milk there to the house. Way back.

ENNIS BARBERY: And so that's how you guys met, she would get the milk?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Later years we got acquainted with one another.

ENNIS BARBERY: Were you guys pretty much the same age or was she younger?

WILLIAM BIRCH: She's six months younger than I am. Just six months different.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did you know her from school too? Did you guys go to school together?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No. I never went to far in school. I got my education out. I did quite a lot of things. We had a railway where we pulled out boats. I went in that and remolded that and made a nice place out of that for—I could pull boats a hundred foot. Big boats out for painting and doing work.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. When was that? How old were you when you were...

WILLIAM BIRCH: My father-in-law had that, see. After he died I did all that work. I didn't make any difference what kind of boat. We had a place before that. When Pennsylvania Railroad went out of business I bought some of that—it had the railroad track. That's what I built it out of.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, so you used the railroad track to build this that would...

WILLIAM BIRCH: It had these railroad wheels that on cradles that you pull the boats up in.

ENNIS BARBERY: Where did you put that on the island? On CI? Where was it?

WILLIAM BIRCH: North Main Street up there you know where the dentist office is?

ENNIS BARBERY: Yes, the dentist office.

WILLIAM BIRCH: That used to be all my property. There were no house there, was a house sitting back farther. We house that we rented out. In the back of that was the railway. Now a days that motel took part if it. That building on it.

ENNIS BARBERY: With the oyster industry, did you always reseed the oysters? You talked about planting oysters, right?

WILLIAM BIRCH: We planted oysters September through April.

ENNIS BARBERY: Right. Where did you get the spat.

WILLIAM BIRCH: We got the little ones from here on Smith Island. It had public ground back there then that they saved, put shells on and the seed oysters on.

ENNIS BARBERY: Where was that? You said Smith Island?

WILLIAM BIRCH: We had boats and barges. They went down with men and pick these oysters off and brought them home. We took them out to Tom's Cove and planted them and left them two years. We didn't take them up for years. Some oysters were as big as your hand. Some was just about an inch long. And we took them up in two years. And the little ones was as big as my hand. In two years, that's the increase.

eg: And would you then return the shells to re-seed...

WILLIAM BIRCH: We took the shells after we opened them and planted them down in Oyster Point where you got that big light up there. I built a watch house down there for watch the ground.

ENNIS BARBERY: Where was the watch house?

WILLIAM BIRCH: They had a man and his wife that stayed in there and watches the ground and also worked the ground.

ENNIS BARBERY: So that was Oyster Point where the watch house was. Where's that? Is it on the south end of the island, you're pointing?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Down near Atlantic.

ENNIS BARBERY: Atlantic.

WILLIAM BIRCH: You know where Atlantic is?

ENNIS BARBERY: Yes.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Well you go through Atlantic and the first turn off to your left you go down to the waterfront. There's 137 acres down there where we planted these shells.

ENNIS BARBERY: And you had to have the watch; you had to have the searchlight up there because people were trying to take your oysters.

WILLIAM BIRCH: When you turned that on it lighted up just like daylight.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. People stole your oysters though; how did you find out they were taking them?

WILLIAM BIRCH: That's the reason why we put that lights so we knowed they were stealing if we didn't have a light.

ENNIS BARBERY: How did you know?

WILLIAM BIRCH: We seen some of them. We didn't catch them but we seen some of them.

And out at the Cove the same way. The CG back there then would do anything real for you. If you went home and needed anything, he'd do it for you. If he needed anything we give it to him. He wanted a barge for to carry something out the CG Station, we'd say, "Go to a certain

[unintelligible], take a certain number and take it. Do what you got to do. When you get done bring it back. Tie it up there." We didn't charge him anything. Where no charge. If we needed anything, was same way he'd get it for us. That's the way we worked with the CG back there then. And that's the way we worked with everybody. And people; you go around and talk with people now and they'll tell you the same. I worked in the Methodist Church for 30 years. And I did everything but preach and teach and secretary and treasurer. I did everything else in there. Thirty years. At the Baptist Church the Birches clear back to my grandfather were all Baptists on our side. When I come out—I went over to the Holy Land over in Jerusalem. And when I come back from there—I went with a Baptist preacher and his wife and took that trip. It was a trip of a lifetime. And when I come back I decided to come back to my family church. I wasn't mad at nobody. I got the Methodist preacher from there to the house. I sit down with him and told him and I left in good terms. I still go over there once in a while.

ENNIS BARBERY: That's good. That seems that you have a good relationship with those.

WILLIAM BIRCH: And my wife still went to the Baptist Church. I went to the Baptist. And I've been over to the Baptist Church since 1975. I worked 24 years in that church.

ENNIS BARBERY: What did you do for them.

WILLIAM BIRCH: There's a little sign there see. I got that from being a trustee. That's where that came from. I spent 14 years in that and I guess I worked different [from] anyone else. Days here, after I got through working at the motel, I go up there and work three or four hours. I'd paint, fix shelves, whatever need doing. Inside the church, outside. All the parking blocks I painted all of them. I put the light on the parson's door, back door needed. I put, got one of them. I never saw—I paid for it, I put it on there and I did little everything around there for 14 years. I was—sometimes I'd go in the driveway and I didn't know more about what I was going to do than you did. But the Lord told me what to do. I did a little of everything in the 14 years. All the trustees are sitting home the rest of them. I was the only one that worked. I don't mean that to knock nobody.

ENNIS BARBERY: No, no. But you were there. You were doing a lot of work.

WILLIAM BIRCH: That's the reason why the Lord left me here I guess.

ENNIS BARBERY: When did you get out of the oyster business?

WILLIAM BIRCH: When did I get out?

ENNIS BARBERY: Yeah. What happened to make you want to leave the oyster business?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Well up and down the coast there, the seed oysters was gone. There was something in the water killed them. With the seed oysters dying I'm out of business. I can't plant something back dying, so that's the reason why I had to get out.

ENNIS BARBERY: About what year was that?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I think that was back in the '70s.

ENNIS BARBERY: What did you do?

WILLIAM BIRCH: The next year, everything around here folded up in the oyster business. That was it. It's never been like it since. I seen it coming on the wall. Picture on the wall.

ENNIS BARBERY: So it was 15 oyster houses and then it went to—the decline was really sudden?

WILLIAM BIRCH: You'll never see it no more back like it was then. The State now has got laws that they don't know nothing about. You go out here to the oyster rock. You can't take the little ones. You got to knock them off and just take the big ones. Ninety percent of them you knock off is going to die. They don't know what it's all about. I do. In the oyster house we'd go in there, we'd pull these oysters up. The big oysters we shipped. The little ones, a lot of them would

be broke just a knick in the shell. He would die if you leave him in the water. We run them in the shucking house and shucked them see. They got everything.

ENNIS BARBERY: So, if even a little bit of the shell is broken it'll die. You need to shuck it.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah, he would die. Monday through Friday I changed it because Saturday we were working, you know, shuck 'till Monday. We'd put them on the float back in the water and 90% of them would die before Monday. So I said, "Fellows, we're going to work five days but the extra hours Saturday, you're going to spread them out and then five days, you work five days and you get full pay. I did that and we didn't lose no more because we didn't carry them onto the float. Mondays and Fridays they shuck them. So I know what I'm talking about knocking the little ones off. And if you never had no experience to it, he wouldn't know. That shows you right there what's what.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did you always use the floats? When did you start using the floats?

WILLIAM BIRCH: We had seven big floats and we carried about 300 hundred barrels of oysters on it. What we did, we'd throw these oysters up single. The water run out some of them made them weap by banging on them. We carried them on these floats overnight they'd drain that salt water and they'd be all right. So every time we wanted to ship them anyway we'd go over and get the old ones and bring the new ones back and float them. And we never lost any.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. So you developed a really good system, it sounds like. It was a great system. But then when they started dying, then you couldn't do anything about it. That's really interesting.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Couldn't do nothing about that. We got out of it the next year everything folded around here. And it's never been the same and you never will see it.

ENNIS BARBERY: So you were one of the earliest ones to get out of there before you lost a lot of money it sounds like.

WILLIAM BIRCH: We planted more oysters than everybody on the island. When you have 28 ridge boats working every day that's moving a lot of oysters.

ENNIS BARBERY: How many oysters do you think you sold in a year at the height of the season?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I don't have no idea.

ENNIS BARBERY: But a lot. It must have been a lot.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I was shipping out and then selling all these shucking house oysters too, see. I had to go around and collect my money every week from all them and these fellows working, some of them working by the day and some working for the bushel. I had to estimate my payroll.

ENNIS BARBERY: So some would work by the day and you paid them a rate for the day, but some would work by the bushel. How much would you pay for a bushel?

WILLIAM BIRCH: It depends on thick the oysters were, see. That what you graded them by. If they were thick oysters you didn't pay as much. If they were scattered oysters you paid more. And then when you got down too scattered you pay them for the day. He worked five hours and you got a day's work.

ENNIS BARBERY: You said scattered? I don't know that word. Like scattered, small?

WILLIAM BIRCH: That means it's not many on the ground.

ENNIS BARBERY: Hum. And you paid more for that though, okay.

WILLIAM BIRCH: When my father-in-law had it I used to have to estimate my payroll. That wasn't easy to do. Some working for the bushel, some working for the day. Back there then he didn't pay off a check. It'd been easier. He paid off cash. He come around and get my estimate,

he'd go across the street to the bank, right across the street. He'd go the bank get this money, and bring the money down to me. He'd going about his business.

ENNIS BARBERY: And you had to do the payroll?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I done all the payroll.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. That must have been hard, difficult.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I evey carried the money to the bank deposit. Did all the deposits.

ENNIS BARBERY: Did people ever argue with you about how much you were giving them for a bushel?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No, no. They knowed I was going to treat them right. Never had nobody to argue about anything. People won't believe this, the whole time I was in business I never had nobody complain about anything. I had colored men. I had colored women and white women and white men they worked for me. And we all worked together like a family. Weren't no cussing, no arguments. And if you tell that [to] some people now they don't hardly believe you. That's the way I've always worked with people. I never had no problems working with people. I'm passed the 95 mark and I never had but trouble with two people in my whole lifetime. One of them was a thief and I felt sorry for him and I give him a job. Then he turned around a stole from me. Lawling. [check name?] worked for me and he won't get nothing. I didn't have nothing to do with it. The State give him five years in the penitentiary. And the [unintelligible] flew open I never had nobody else to steal from me. And the other one, fellow come from Washington. He bought land over this old bridge. But the waterfront, I owned the waterfront clear back from Olga's grandfather back in '20s. I offered to sell it to him for a cheap price any time Robin. He said I didn't own it. So we went down to Accomack. I took him down there. I pulled these blueprints out. I give them to the judge. He went up one side and down the other with them. He had to pay me much for damage for going down there his offer to sell it to me for. He still didn't get it. And I wouldn't sell it to him then. Russell Eldridge bought it from him later years. I sold it to him for the same price that I offered sell it before. So that's how far I went with it.

WILLIAM BIRCH: The Island was out there where all those houses are set.

ENNIS BARBERY: Say that again.

WILLIAM BIRCH: That's the original Piney Island. All this other Piney Island was nothing but woods. There wasn't nothing there.

ENNIS BARBERY: Where's the original?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Was nothing there. Then there was a road from the old original Piney Island running up through Maddox Campground. It was a dirt road. It runned up there to the north end of the Piney Island, you know. It's one house up there. And he's a bootlegger.

ENNIS BARBERY: What kind of boot leg did he make, moonshine?

WILLIAM BIRCH: The old corn liquor he sold.

ENNIS BARBERY: Corn liquor. [laughs]

WILLIAM BIRCH: I used to go there with my father-in-law as a boy. I wasn't over 10 years old back then. Delivered milk to him. I know his name but I won't give his name off.

ENNIS BARBERY: So you delivered him milk. Okay.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I knowed all his family.

ENNIS BARBERY: I bet you learned a lot from delivering milk. You learned a lot about different people on the island, right? [laughs]

WILLIAM BIRCH: So all those roads and everything weren't nothing there. Just that one dirt road running up through that campground. Ocean Boulevard, Maddox Boulevard, neither one of them streets were there. They were all put in. I can remember when they were put in.

ENNIS BARBERY: When was Maddox put in? You remember the year?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I don't know what year it was. It's been a long time. Wyle Maddox—my son married his daughter. He came from the mainland. He didn't live on here. And his wife did.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wyle Maddox's wife, yeah.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Her family was down the street here.

ENNIS BARBERY: What was her maiden name? What was her family name?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Bowdens, her family.

ENNIS BARBERY: The Bowdens. Okay.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I knew all them. See when you live so long you know everybody.

ENNIS BARBERY: I heard you also built Sunnywood Manor. Did you build Sunnywood Manor?

WILLIAM BIRCH: [laughs] That's a story on that. Back there my wife's father owned that. His father bought it from J.G. Whealton the man that built the road over here. All them years back there. When he died, all of his father taking it over. He kept it all his lifetime and there never was nothing done back there to it. He died in '52. I kept it until '70. There was never nothing done to it all them years. My wife's grandfather had it back in '26. All them years never was nothing there. It's all the woods until 1970. In 1970—I taking it over back in '52, see, when he died. I decided to make building lots in there. That's one of the best developments is on the island. I don't have to tell you that, you can go look at it. It's got all black top roofs in there. No chuck holes. It's fixed up nice. The streets just fixed up nice. I even put the grass down in the ditches. I also wanted to—it went to the State and got their specifications. It's hard to do. I got their specifications for putting a road in so the State would take it over. I owned 37 acres over there. All that waterfront over there I owned. [unintelligible]. I had 60 building lots in there, Sunnywood Manor. There's three others that owned land in there but they didn't own that much. I owned more than all of them. Every time they ready to do anything they say, "You can do it." I put the first road in there. There was nothing but brambles and bushes. You couldn't see from me to you. You couldn't see three foot in front of you. I didn't have no surveyor. I knew where the back lines were. I went but a hundred foot tape and I moved off how deep I wanted them. I drove stump. And I drove from there over where I wanted the road, and that made my road. I went in there, put a small bulldozer; my two sons, one of them drive till he was tired; the other would drive. I kept them down there until we got that cleared. Later on we went so far, it run out right out to the inch. I'm not no surveyor.

ENNIS BARBERY: Yeah. You did a good job though it sounds like.

WILLIAM BIRCH: The Lord given me knowledge how to do it.

ENNIS BARBERY: Sounds like you did a great job with it. What about the Birchwood Motel. When did you build this, or open this?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Oh, that's another history. In 1965 George Taylor and another one up the street here where he built that one. The store's not there now. It's there up there where those boats are. The marina. He bought ten rows and put in there for trailers. I bought ten down here and an office. I had it back here. I've got a picture in that drawer [points]. 1965 me and my wife were going to try, if we didn't like it. It had wheels under. We could pull them out. See if we dug holes where the wheels go down so the body of the motel would be closer to the ground see. We fixed it up right and even had flowers in the front of it and everything. Had a little office back there. We had that five years and in 1970 we started selling these building lots back here.

ENNIS BARBERY: Selling the building lots.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I started brick part. And people didn't understand why I didn't build it all at one time. I sold building lots there and I vested here. I got appreciation off see. I put in six a year. And the next year I put that many more in. I built that up to 42 rooms of brick. I had it nice. I was out there every day. If there was a nail or anything out of place I fixed it. I had good maids from the island here. I said, "Now when you go in that room and you find anything wrong you put it on paper." That helped me a lot. I kept all the rooms in first class shape. The outside I'd check it. It's run down now. It's not like it was then.

ENNIS BARBERY: I don't know if it's run down...

WILLIAM BIRCH: It wasn't a place on there then. Kept any better than it was.

ENNIS BARBERY: It sounds like you were never in debt. The way you built it you never had to borrow money, right? Or did you borrow money?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No. I could go borrow anything I wanted. In the bank, they all knew me. The oyster business, we'd borrow money for the oyster business on a maybe a six-months [basis]. Got shipping out, our money come back, see, I paid them off. I could go in there and get anything in the bank. Now, same way. I can go in there and get anything I want. You do anything in the world for me. I carry them up some flowers, and in there I said, "Can I make a deposit you aren't hearing me there?" I grow a lot of roses in the yard.

ENNIS BARBERY: That's right. I always see the roses.

WILLIAM BIRCH: I started that business in 1970 as a hobby. Jackson Perkins had won the blue ribbon prize winners of the year. They were the kind of roses I planted.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. What kind was it again, the Perkins?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Jackson Perkins was the name of it. But now a days all the old ones there are not the same.

ENNIS BARBERY: And you sold the roses too, you would sell them?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No I never did sell them. I always give them away. I did all that work and give them away. If I know somebody, close friends of mine were sick, I'd carry them some.

ENNIS BARBERY: That's really nice of you, yeah. You mentioned that you had two sons. How many children did you have?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I had two boys.

ENNIS BARBERY: Two boys. What are their names?

WILLIAM BIRCH: They both work in the seafood business for a while. Then my oldest son, I give him the railway business. He got in to building houses. And he done good. He's been gone a long time. Youngest son, he's still living. I gave him this business.

ENNIS BARBERY: So he runs the Birchwood.

WILLIAM BIRCH: No, he don't run it now.

ENNIS BARBERY: No, he sold it?

WILLIAM BIRCH: I give him this business and all that land across the street where those houses are. Back there then I could have sold that for a half million dollars. I could sell the motel for a million dollars back there then. I give it all to him, even the check book and everything and walk out and give it all to him. And he got into building places like across the street and he couldn't handle it. He never asked me anything. But when you build one building, borrow money for that, you don't borrow no more until you sell that. But he kept building and building more and more. Because he lost it all. The oldest boy was I guess, I shouldn't say that, he was more like me. He had a business head on. So he's out driving a truck for somebody else.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, driving a truck.

WILLIAM BIRCH: All the land in back of this motel I still own. The house over on the next street, I own that. That was over here, next door the house was. Me and my wife decided to build the house, 1950. We moved that house back there. We were going to build a house here. Her mother and father went to Florida that winter. She died down there. I sold the house because I couldn't leave her father and her grandmother still living. We couldn't leave them here by themselves.

ENNIS BARBERY: And your father lived here in this house?

WILLIAM BIRCH: So we just give up the house. And I'm the last one living. Now the double garage and laundry room back there I can go in there and open oysters and anything I want to. I put all that out about 40 years ago. And this I put on. Weren't the original house.

ENNIS BARBERY: Yeah, so you've added this part on. I see. When was this house built? What year was this house built do you think? Not this addition but the original house.

WILLIAM BIRCH: The original house, it was built when my wife was a three year old.

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh wow. So it's pretty old. Pretty older house.

WILLIAM BIRCH: So that would have been 92 years old. Of course there's been a lot of work done to it. This house has got weather board siding and it's got the vinyl siding—oh no, asbestos shingles and then the aluminum siding. It's got three sets of siding on it. It's got two sets of roofs on it. It's got a shingle roof and then this asbestos roof.

ENNIS BARBERY: One question I have, you mentioned, this is way different topic. You mentioned the CG and they were using the dogs when you were in the service. What did they use the dogs to do? You said the CG had dogs that they had up and down the beach. What did they use the dogs to do?

WILLIAM BIRCH: In case anybody come ashore they'd use the dogs.

ENNIS BARBERY: They were trained for, they would attack if someone came ashore. Did you just harvest oysters or did you harvest clams or any other kind of seafood or was it only oysters?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Way back my father-in-law fooled with clams He planted clams for a few years there. See all these boats in summertime would catch clams and they sold them to somebody else and he tried for one or two years, but he—I guess I have to say this, he handled it wrong. He planted them wrong. He never made enough success out of it.

ENNIS BARBERY: Okay. But he was good at oysters. He was very good with oysters.

WILLIAM BIRCH: Yeah. Oysters he knew. I know what he done wrong.

ENNIS BARBERY: What did he do wrong?

WILLIAM BIRCH: He handled them wrong. He planted them wrong.

ENNIS BARBERY: How so, how could he have handled them better, do you know?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Well, he planted them all together and if you wanted one size clam you had to dig all for to get that one size. If he graded them and planted them in different grades. If he went to that bed and got what he wanted. See that wouldn't of bother all the others?

ENNIS BARBERY: Oh, I see. He would disturb all of them trying to get...

Video break, audio continues

I think we've covered everything. I wanted to cover.

WILLIAM BIRCH: He knew the oyster business better than clams. That was his business.

ENNIS BARBERY: Do you have anything else you want to talk about today? We could always come back if there's more stories that I think I've covered.

Video resumes

WILLIAM BIRCH: See that boat there? [points to a picture on the wall] She's a sail boat back there in WWI. After WWI my father-in-law bought her. Named the Morris. You've probably got pictures of her over there.

ENNIS BARBERY: We probably do. You know you never see sailboats around here any more.

WILLIAM BIRCH: You should have a model of her.

ENNIS BARBERY: I think we do have the model of her. And she's called the Morris?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Morris. R F Bunting that was the name on her.

ENNIS BARBERY: We do have a model of that, you're right.

*Interruption in video*

ENNIS BARBERY: So they changed the sailboat to a...

WILLIAM BIRCH: Changed the sailboat to a motor boat. See that little boat there.

ENNIS BARBERY: Yeah. I'll take a picture of that one too.

WILLIAM BIRCH: That's a picture of her when I give her to you over there. That's the kind of boat you had.

ENNIS BARBERY: Is there anything else we should talk about for today or do you think we covered it?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Anything you want to talk about, I mean [laughs]

ENNIS BARBERY: Well, you did mention earlier and we didn't get to talk about it these famous radio personalities.

WILLIAM BIRCH: My wife's grandfather over there by [unintelligible]. All that used to be a tater field. White potatoes. Used to been no houses at all there. That was back when I was a boy. Her grandfather had white potatoes there. That whole big block was nothing but a field. I can remember.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. I never knew there was a potato field on the island either.

WILLIAM BIRCH: You know where Chicken City Road is? That used to be nothing but chicken houses where they raised these frying chickens. That street used to be there but...

ENNIS BARBERY: What kind of chickens?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Chicken City Road they called it.

ENNIS BARBERY: What kind of chickens did they raise? What type of chickens?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Chicken that you fry. Fried chicken. They raised a lot of them back there then on that street. Going up and down that street. Nothing but chicken houses. And they had other chicken houses all over the island. And you know back there then before they had that we had mosquitoes but we never did have flies. After them chicken houses we had flies on here.

ENNIS BARBERY: You say the chickens brought the flies?

WILLIAM BIRCH: Over on the mainland they had flies.

ENNIS BARBERY: Wow. And the chickens—and I hate the flies. How did you used to deal with the mosquitoes? What did you do when there were so many mosquitoes?

WILLIAM BIRCH: You didn't have no sprays for mosquitoes.

ENNIS BARBERY: What did you do?

WILLIAM BIRCH: You had a [unintelligible] that you could rub on yourself. I had a garden back there but I had to give it up. You had so many mosquitoes I couldn't even see for them. Used to have a garden right there where that pool is. [gestures over his shoulder out a window]

ENNIS BARBERY: Yeah, but just too many mosquitoes to even tend to it.

WILLIAM BIRCH: They eat you up alive. Now they go over with that play and knock them right out

ENNIS BARBERY: I have another question. What about Pony Penning? Do you remember when they used to have sheep over on Assateague Island?

WILLIAM BIRCH: No. That's before my time. Roy Jones could tell you about that. He's the one you want to see for Assateague. He lived over there. He's just six months older than I am. I had seven in that family worked for me.

ENNIS BARBERY: You had seven of them worked for you

WILLIAM BIRCH: Started working and never did quit. The Bowden family had nine in that family worked for me. Clear back from the grandfather right on.

ENNIS BARBERY: Just hired them all. That's great. Sounds like you gave really good jobs. Really good jobs like you said.

WILLIAM BIRCH: We got along good with everybody. And I want to continue on until the Lord takes me. I think you can go around anywhere and get my record

ENNIS BARBERY: That's a good place to end it for now.