



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

LIGHTSHIP *LV-116* "CHESAPEAKE"

Recollections, reminisces, and thoughts about life on a lightship from five former crewman and the daughter of *LV-116*'s first commanding officer. The interviews were conducted by historian Frank Hebblethwaite.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

We recently discovered a number of relatively old cassette tapes in the back of a file cabinet and asked our tireless volunteer, Ms. Seamond M. Roberts, to transcribe them for us. She cheerfully obliged and presented us with, much to our surprise and delight, a transcript of a series of interviews with five former crewmen of Light Vessel *Number 116*, each of whom served on board during the 1930's. Also included was an interview with the daughter of the first commanding officer of *LV-116*. The interviews were conducted by historian Frank Hebblethwaite and to our knowledge they are the only transcribed interviews of lightship sailors available on the World Wide Web.

By reading through these men's recollections, faithfully recorded by a dedicated historian of lightships, you may find out what it was like to serve on an incredibly small vessel, forever tied to one location, for months at a time. Their ship was used as an important navigation point for incoming and outgoing traffic through the Chesapeake Bay, so they had to learn to live with near collisions on a daily basis. Imagine how that fear was heightened during the frequent periods of thick fog--with only the booming foghorn to warn off nearby ships. Learn how they fought and survived tremendously powerful storms where waves literally towered above their heads. Here they talk with candor about their duties on board, the endless scraping and painting, caring for the ship's power plant, and cleaning and maintaining the light and foghorn. Read how they looked forward to chow, payday and especially liberty ashore. Discover how the crew passed their time off-duty as well as what it was like to stand watch, both in the pilot house and down in the engine room. Laugh with them as they remember the practical jokes they played on each other and marvel at their ingenuity in obtaining alcohol--even though the nation's laws under Prohibition forbade it.

While reading through their adventures, be sure to remember how these young men risked their lives to serve their country and make life safer for those who travelled on the seas. Once again we would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to Ms. Seamond M. Roberts, without whom these important oral histories would not be available.

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- **Charles Mitchell's Oral History:** Mr. Mitchell served on board the *LV-116* beginning in 1930. He began his career on lightships in 1925 as a fireman and later transferred to the deck force. He served on lightships until 1940. Frank Hebblethwaite interviewed Mr. Mitchell on June 23, 1979.
- **Frank Oliver's Oral History:** Mr. Oliver was a member of the "black gang" on board the *LV-116* and then transferred to duty on a buoy tender. Frank Hebblethwaite interviewed Mr. Oliver on August 14, 1980.
- **Sven Olsen's Oral History:** Mr. Olsen joined the crew of the *LV-116* in 1930. He first began serving on lightships in 1923 as a seaman. Frank Hebblethwaite interviewed Mr. Olsen on August 19, 1980.
- **Madeline Quick's Oral History:** Ms. Madeline Quick was the youngest daughter of Captain Alexander Andersen, the first captain of *LV-116* who served in that capacity from 1930 to 1937. Frank Hebblethwaite interviewed Ms. Quick on August 19, 1980.
- **Burfoot & Mrs. Sears' Oral History:** Mr. Sears served as a crewman on board the *LV-116* from 1931 to 1937. Frank Hebblethwaite interviewed the Sears on August 21, 1980.

Background: A History of LV-116:

When the U.S. Lighthouse Service light vessel, *LV-116*, was built in 1930 at Charleston, South Carolina, the number of total lightships in Government service had declined from what it had been prior to 1930. But the organization of the Lighthouse Service in general and the condition of lightships in particular, had greatly improved. Built at a cost of \$274,434.00, *LV-116* was much better

prepared to serve its function than were the lightships of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If the main anchor snapped in a storm, there was an auxiliary anchor to take its place. If the 30,000 candle power light with its Fresnel lense went out, there was another one to replace it. With practically every piece of vital equipment backed up by a replacement, *LV-116* was well equipped to maintain its station through most any calamity.

With the Norwegian Alexander Andersen at the helm, the 630-ton, 133-foot long *LV-116* left for its first tour of duty at Fenwick Island , Delaware , on August 17, 1930. As lightships generally took on the name of their duty stations, *LV-116* was known as the Fenwick until June 30, 1933. On July 17, 1933, *LV-116* first acquired the name Chesapeake . Until 1939, it was stationed in Virginia waters at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay . The crew's endless hours of routine duty were broken by many a violent storm. The crew also spent time gathering data for meteorological and oceanographic studies. Through it all, the " Chesapeake " served its station faithfully.

In 1939, the Lighthouse Service and all of its ships were absorbed into the U.S. Coast Guard and light vessel #116 was redesignated and renumbered as *WLV-538* [W stands for Coast Guard vessel, LV for Light Vessel and "538" became her Coast Guard hull number]. It was with some bitterness that the Civil Service-staffed Lighthouse Service was absorbed by the more "mechanical" and military Coast Guard. For seamen, it meant a cut in pay from \$62.50 a month to \$36.00 a month which was what an enlisted man in the Coast Guard got paid at that time. All crewmen would now have to wear uniforms and sign up for a three year or six year hitch. Many an old veteran resigned rather than make the transition. A number of captains with no military background and little education were replaced by Coast Guard Academy-trained officers. All men would also have to pass a Coast Guard physical examination. However, the Coast Guard did mean more efficiency, better equipment and better communication with shore.

As with all other Coast Guard vessels, the Chesapeake was pressed into service with the U.S. Navy during World War II and it served as an examination vessel off of Sandwich , Massachusetts . Released from its duty with the Navy in the summer of 1945, *WLV-538* returned to duty at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay . While on duty in 1962, the ship survived a severe storm during which one mountainous wave buckled in the forward bulkhead of the pilot house. It was the third storm the Chesapeake had weathered in which its anchor chain had snapped. The other two occurred in 1933 and then again in 1936. The Chesapeake remained on active duty in the Bay until September, 1965, when the advance of technology caught up with it. Its station was taken by a giant "Texas Tower," similar to oil rigs in the ocean. Easily accessible by helicopter, these new light stations are not nearly as isolated as lightships. They are also less expensive to maintain and they have a much longer life expectancy. In fact, only five lightships have been built since the Chesapeake .

The Chesapeake 's last tour of duty, from 1966 until June, 1970, was at the entrance to the Delaware Bay . At that time, it was replaced by a Large Navigational Buoy or LNB. This type of buoy weights 104-tons and has a base 40-feet in diameter, and is completely automated. It can operated for months without servicing and costs only a fraction of the amount needed to maintain a lightship. Moth-balled at Cape May , New Jersey , from July, 1970 to December, 1970, the Chesapeake was decommissioned on January 6, 1971.

Frank F. Hebblethwaite
October, 1977

Interview with William Rankin

Interviewed by Frank Hebblethwaite

Date of interview: June 23, 1979

Question: You were on the *LV-116*, in the 1930's right?

WILLIAM RANKIN: Yes.

Question: What years were you on the ship?

RANKIN: Oh, I can't tell you exactly the years, because I don't remember when we got it. We got the ship down in Charleston and brought it to Norfolk and I was on it up to until I quit.

Question: So, you were on it when the ship was first built in the 1930's?

RANKIN: When it was first commissioned.

Question: Were you on *LV-52*?

RANKIN: Yes, I had been on *LV-52* for awhile but that was steam and Chesapeake was diesel.

Question: And *LV-116* was brand new when you got on there?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: And did you go out with it to Fenwick Island .

RANKIN: No, it was never on Fenwick Island . It was Chesapeake .

Question: Uh-huh. I mean in the first three years when it went out to Fenwick Island , were you on it then?

RANKIN: Oh, yes. Yes, you are right. I am wrong.

Question: O.K. So, did you stay on it the whole time it was at Fenwick Island , or?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: And were you on it when it moved to Chesapeake station also?

RANKIN: Yes, that's right.

Question: So, then you were on it for a good number of years I guess.

RANKIN: Oh, I guess about seven or eight.

Question: Were you there maybe the whole time that Captain Andersen was?

RANKIN: Yes, I was there when Captain Andersen was, and then Captain Dixon.

Question: And Dixon , right. And he was first mate?

RANKIN: Under Mr Andersen, yes.

Question: And then he became captain after Mr. Andersen –

RANKIN: Retired, yes.

Question: Retired. Uh-huh. I guess you knew Sven Olson then also.

RANKIN: Olson? He was a seaman.

Question: Yes, a seaman. And you were an oiler?

RANKIN: I was an oiler. I was in the engine room.

Question: And as an oiler, did you spend most of your time on the generator watch?

RANKIN: Diesel watch.

Question: Yes, sir.

RANKIN: Of course, there was diesel watch and generators and motors.

Question: Yeah. What were the names of some of the other men that were working on the ship when you were there?

RANKIN: Well, Frank Oliver from Portsmouth .

Question: Yeah. He still lives in Portsmouth .

RANKIN: Well, he was from Portsmouth . Burford Sears was from Coinjack.

Question: Coinjack, yeah, that's right. And he lives in Woodbridge , Virginia .

RANKIN: There was a Randall Morris that was there about a year, I guess, from North Carolina .

Question: I wanted to show you some pictures that we have on the ship now. That's Captain Andersen there.

RANKIN: Well, there's Charles Mitchell. He lives up here.

Question: Yeah, I'm going to try to talk to him today. And Sven Olsen.

RANKIN: Sven Olsen. We always called him Oly.

Question: Oly, right. We got a lot of these pictures from Sven and also from Madeline Quick.

RANKIN: Well, Olsen lives in Baltimore or he did.

Question: Did you ever meet Captain Andersen's daughter, Madeline?

RANKIN: Yeah. She and Sven are still good friends and they've both visited down at the ship in Washington .

RANKIN: Oh, that's great.

Question: And they are the ones that gave us most of these pictures here.

RANKIN: This is taken at the buoy yard.

Question: Yes. Would that be in Baltimore ?

RANKIN: No, that buoy yard was in Norfolk .

Question: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

RANKIN: Right across the river in Norfolk . They had a buoy yard, but the buoy yard in Portsmouth was a big one.

Question: There's an old sidewheeler in there.

RANKIN: Yeah, that's the *Mayflower* they called her.

Question: Look at this other one back here. Do you know who that is?

RANKIN: Well, I can't . . . Is that Sven Olsen?

Question: No, that's the wrong label there. That's Frank Oliver, taken just a couple of years ago.

RANKIN: It is?

Question: Yeah.

RANKIN: Sure looks different. He was on there a long time. I mean he was on there before I was.

Question: You and Sven were on a pretty long time.

RANKIN: Berry –

Question: That's another picture we have on display at the ship now.

RANKIN: Well, yeah, there was two Berry 's.

Question: There were?

RANKIN: Yeah, there was a Hal Berry and Charles Berry.

Question: Charles Berry was the radio operator?

RANKIN: So was Hal Berry a radio operator.

Question: Oh, both of them named Berry and both of them were radio operators.

RANKIN: Were operators. One was on Relief.

Question: That would make it easy to keep their names straight. Here's some other old ones here too. Captain Andersen, there?

RANKIN: That's him, all right. This is Rasmussen.

Question: Yeah, was he from Sweden ?

RANKIN: No this one? Lapland .

Question: Where?

RANKIN: Lapland . Captain Andersen was a Norwegian.

Question: Right. And, Sven too.

RANKIN: Yes, these two were.

Question: And that's a picture that Sven gave us catching a shark.

RANKIN: Yeah, that's a shark. He was fishing. Quite a fish.

Question: I read something in the log book about the day that Rasmussen lost his hat.

RANKIN: Captain Andersen is dead.

Question: Yeah. And this is a picture of Sven, taken just a couple of years ago in Baltimore .

RANKIN: Yes, that looks like him. He must have retired. He was in the Coast Guard.

Question: Yeah, he was in the Coast Guard for a long time after the Lighthouse Service.

RANKIN: Well, he was there before I was there.

Question: He was where?

RANKIN: He was on the ship before I was there.

Question: Oh, yeah?

RANKIN: He must have been there all the time that I was there, I know. I think he lives in North Road in Baltimore , isn't it?

Question: I don't . . .

RANKIN: Or, Old Point Road, or something like that.

Question: It's one of those, yeah.

RANKIN: North or Old Point, I don't know what.

Question: And there's Burford.

RANKIN: Yeah, that's Sears. Now, that was a man. He's retired, you see.

Question: He's working as a maintenance man at a hospital in Woodbridge now. Here's some more of – that's Sven right there.

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: And this is Madeline in these pictures. I hear that she used to come on to the ship a lot.

RANKIN: She was there with her daddy several times. This is our shark cane – our shark bones.

Question: That's one that Sven had. He had made.

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: Do you remember somebody named Ronald Harris?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: He just died a couple of years ago. He was living in Portsmouth also.

RANKIN: He was a seaman. That's Frank Oliver.

Question: Frank Oliver, he worked on the engine deck too? Right?

RANKIN: Yes, he was a big guy. Yes, Frank was there. I knew him there.

Question: Did you have any hobbies that you used to do on the ship?

RANKIN: No, I read a lot in my spare time – when I wasn't on duty, I mean.

Question: Yeah. Each man had two months on and then a month off?

RANKIN: Supposed to have.

Question: I imagine it got kind of lonely out there. Did it get lonely for you on the ship?

RANKIN: No.

Question: Well, you kept yourself occupied with reading or?

RANKIN: When I wasn't on duty, yes.

Question: When you were on duty, what kind of things did you have to do?

RANKIN: Well, I had to clean up. I had to watch the engines, whichever one was going.

Question: When you was on station, did you just have one auxillary running at a time?

RANKIN: That's right. You couldn't say you just had one – when it got foggy, you'd put the diesel on.

Question: One of the big ones?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: Because of the foghorn.

RANKIN: That damned foghorn, yes.

Question: Yeah. I hear that was kind of loud.

RANKIN: Oh it was deafening. See, we had an electric one, but you could hardly hear that one and then this put this umbrella on and you could hear that.

Question: I bet you could. We camped last night at Cape Henlopen . We could hear the fog horn from the lighthouse out there.

RANKIN: There was a ship out there, the Overfalls.

Question: Yeah, I saw it yesterday from the outside.

RANKIN: Was it down there now?

Question: No, it's been retired, but it's on display in Lewes on the canal, but it's only open in July and August.

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: I couldn't go on it. So, you worked – how many stations did you work at, on light stations?

RANKIN: Only on the Fenwick and the Chesapeake .

Question: And on those two ships, the *LV-116* and the *LV-116*.

RANKIN: The old *LV-52* and the *LV-116*.

Question: Did a lot of guys quit when the Coast Guard took over?

RANKIN: No. A few retired. Mr. Floyd. I don't know – Mr. Floyd I think retired and so did Mr. Dixon, and the operator was David Fowler and he retired.

Question: David Fowler. Sven told me that David Fowler was a very big man.

RANKIN: Yes, he was 6 foot and weighed about 300 pounds.

Question: That's big, yeah.

RANKIN: He was up from Charlottesville , Virginia .

Question: I imagine that the cook – his name was – what was the cook's name?

RANKIN: Gus.

Question: Gus Hermanson.

RANKIN: That's right.

Question: I imagine he was kept pretty busy on the ship.

RANKIN: No, not too busy.

Question: You guys didn't eat a whole lot?

RANKIN: Well, you ate what you want. We ate good, but he wasn't kept too busy.

Question: Uh-huh. Did Gus ever have any help in the galley?

RANKIN: Oh, yes. He had a person to help him once in awhile.

Question: Uh-huh.

RANKIN: Helped him in the galley, but he set the officer's mess, and I suppose he helped him. He was supposed to.

Question: Did the officers always eat separate in the wardroom?

RANKIN: Oh, yeah. You had one place for officers and one place for the crew.

Question: And the crew ate –

RANKIN: Forward.

Question: Forward, right near the cabin or?

RANKIN: Well, you know, here's the after end. Well, the officers had their mess in there, the wardroom, and the crew had theirs in here in the peak of it like.

Question: Right. And the cabin's right around where –

WR; Yes, that's where they stayed. The cabins were back of the table. Each had rooms up there with two bunks to a room.

Question: We sort of changed it around now. We have the tables in this area. It's right next to the galley on the port side.

RANKIN: There was a work table on there.

Question: Yes. They've still got a work bench at one end of that area, but we made tables along the port side – the port passageway and so that's the mess area now, and around where the crew's cabins are, that's pretty much open space.

RANKIN: Well, that was a nice room up there between the cabins.

Question: Is that where you would spend most of your spare time up there?

RANKIN: Well, spare time. You didn't have a whole lot of spare time. We were on duty. That is, I was on duty for six hours and off six.

Question: Oh, you had six on, six off?

RANKIN: Sure enough. That was your time, your duty, you know. No, you didn't have too much spare time.

Question: Did you yourself do a lot of fishing on the ship?

RANKIN: No, I didn't do much. I'd fish, but –

Question: I guess from the pictures that Richard Rasmussen - he did a lot of fishing then.

RANKIN: I think that Captain Andersen and Gus, yeah, they'd be hanging it over the side and would tie it and you'd go back to check.

Question: Were there a lot of fish around there?

RANKIN: Yeah. Sometimes you'd catch a cod and then Gus caught some lobsters one time.

Question: Did Gus cook a lot of fish?

RANKIN: When we caught them, he cooked them. And there was a wreck over there and in that direction – that was off of Fenwick that was, and he'd go out there and fish and that was about I guess a half-mile from the station.

Question: The fish would hang around where the wreck was.

RANKIN: Down the bottom the wreck was. An old sugar ship was sunk down there, they said during the First World War and you'd go out there and fish – 4, 5 of them go out there.

Question: About how far away from the lightship were you guys allowed to go, say if you were going out fishing like that? Would it be o.k. to go 2-3 miles away?

RANKIN: Naw, they never went that far. I guess a half-mile was it. They wouldn't stay long. It'd be a clear day when they went.

Question: Uh-huh. Yeah. Did you have a lot of times when it was really doggy and you had the foghorn going for a long time?

RANKIN: No, not too much.

Question: I guess when the foghorn was going, did you lose a lot of sleep at all?

RANKIN: You couldn't sleep.

Question: Could not sleep. Did you miss the sleep.

RANKIN: Well, you'd lay there and rest. You didn't do too bad.

Question: When you were on duty in the engine deck, would there be two guys on duty at a time?

RANKIN: Well, the engineer and the oiler would be all – the officer and the oiler.

Question: And then would there be one sailor on deck?

RANKIN: Well, I guess yes, the captain would be up there – always. You always had someone on watch on deck.

Question: So, on the whole ship, would you have say what – four or five men on watch at any one time?

RANKIN: Well, I wouldn't say over four.

Question: So, two topside and two . . .

RANKIN: And two in the engine room.

Question: And then maybe Gus would be busy there?

RANKIN: Well, you know he didn't get up until you know . . . he didn't stay up all night. By that I mean, he didn't have to. He only cooked up breakfast, lunch and dinner you know – supper, whatever you want to call it.

Question: And then have it ready and waiting for them.

RANKIN: Well, as he cooked, they carried it in. From the mess. And then he would clean up. One washed the dishes – you know he was like a bus boy.

Question: And they would take turns helping Gus out.

RANKIN: No, they'd clean up the crew's mess and they had a sailor that was assigned to the wardroom – the officer's mess.

Question: Did you have any kind of special training to be an oiler on this ship?

RANKIN: No.

Question: You are from Lewes, is that right?

RANKIN: No. I was originally from up in Pennsylvania .

Question: Oh, so how did you happen to start working on the lightship?

RANKIN: Oh, I was down here working in a saw mill and a fellow asked me about where you could get a person to go off there and I said, how about me?

Question: Laughter.

RANKIN: So, I quit the saw mill and went out there.

Question: Out to Fenwick?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: And the fellow that asked you, was he working on the ship himself?

RANKIN: Yes. His name was Arthur Hart and he lived over here by Little Creek, Arthur did.

Question: Had you been a mechanic or anything before?

RANKIN: No.

Question: When you were working in the engine deck, what specifically was your job?

RANKIN: Oh, just to see that the engines were running, oil and clean them and if they broke down, you helped to repair them.

Question: So, you learned while you were working on the ship?

RANKIN: Yeah, that's true.

Question: That's pretty much what I've been doing on the ship, too. I never really had any experience on a ship at all.

RANKIN: You see on the *LV-52*, you were a fireman.

Question: Right.

RANKIN: And on the *LV-116*, you were oilers.

Question: That's right, and when you started on *LV-52*, you spent your time shoveling coal a lot, yeah.

RANKIN: The ship didn't run. You just kept steam on it. You kept steam in case of foggy weather and it was auxillary steam. You'd keep your regular boiler, but you didn't push it.

Question: And did *LV-52* have – what kind of engines did it have to move the ship...

RANKIN: It had two steady engines. Low power and high.

Question: It was steam?

RANKIN: Steam.

Question: And then on *LV-116*, as far as the four main diesels. Did you ever start them up if you weren't moving the ship? Did you start them up every now and then?

RANKIN: Oh, no. You only started them when you needed them.

Question: And you said maybe sometimes you would need them if you had the foghorn going?

RANKIN: Yeah, you would use them, but you never moved the ship when she anchored on the station. When you anchored on the station, you stayed there unless you were blown off it in a storm.

Question: Were you yourself ever in any big storms on the ship?

RANKIN: Yes, we were in hurricanes. That was a big storm.

Question: I guess if it was a hurricane, yes, it was. Were you ever scared on the ship?

RANKIN: No.

Question: No? Didn't bother you?

RANKIN: I don't think anyone was. It was a storm and had to ride it through that was all.

Question: Uh-huh. Did any ships ever come close to hitting you when you were on station?

RANKIN: No.

Question: I guess you guys got lucky then.

RANKIN: You had signals and stay clear of you is all I know. Then, of course, you had Cape Charles and the other – Cape Henry – you had those lights there I think.

Question: So, there were a lot of aids to navigation around that area?

RANKIN: Oh yes. Well, never I knew came close to hitting us.

Question: In the time that you were there, were there a couple of storms where you lost the anchor, the main anchor?

RANKIN: No.

Question: You never had to put down the spare? While you were on the ship?

RANKIN: Who would tell you that?

Question: Sven Olsen.

RANKIN: Why, I don't remember dropping a spare.

Question: No?

RANKIN: I remember dropping the anchor, but it wasn't a spare, it was the regular anchor.

Question: Uh-huh. You don't remember ever having lost the main anchor.

RANKIN: No. It might have happened, but I don't recall it.

Question: One thing Sven told me was once in a storm he and another fellow – I don't remember who the other one was – but they bet each other that they couldn't go up on the flying bridge and stand up and he went up there and they couldn't do it. This was in about a 100 mile an hour winds.

RANKIN: Oh, that could be true.

Question: He told me he wound up flat on his face.

RANKIN: But, I don't remember dropping the spare anchor.

Question: Hmm.

RANKIN: See, when you drop an anchor, you had to go to the engine room and have to go up and operate the release mechanism.

Question: All right.

RANKIN: They did the anchor on the side, but I don't remember them to drop it on the bow you know on the edge.

Question: Right.

RANKIN: I never knew them to have to drop it in a storm. They may have done it when I wasn't there, but I never knew it while I was there.

Question: The spare anchor is one of the things we don't have on the ship now. It was retired in 1970 from the Coast Guard and one of the things they took off to use somewhere else was the spare anchor and the chain from it and they took off the fog horn, so we don't have that, and they took off the wheel. We got a replacement for the wheel.

RANKIN: The bridge wheel or?

Question: Right, the new bridge wheel. What we have now is a big brass wheel.

RANKIN: Well, you see, it was wood before. A wooden wheel.

Question: Yeah. When you went from station into port or from port out to station, would it be a seaman that did the steering of the ship?

RANKIN: That's right.

Question: So, they would be the guys in the pilot house in moving the ship?

RANKIN: Yes, that would be the ones that would handle the wheel.

Question: I wanted to show you some things here that we use on the ship now. First of all, I want to give you this picture of the ship.

RANKIN: Yes, that's it.

Question: That's one of the last times we moved the ship. Everything on the ship still works and that was when we made a little trip down to Alexandria , Virginia from Washington . That was just about ten miles each way.

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: I'll let you have that and these also. They tell a little something about what we do on the ship now.

RANKIN: You want me to read these now?

Question: Oh, no, you can read them later. I just wanted to give them to you. Do you have anything yourself from the days when you were on the ship?

RANKIN: No, just memories.

Question: Memories. Got them all in your head then?

RANKIN: Yes. I have no other stuff.

Question: You said you spent a lot of time reading when you were on the ship. What kind of things did you read?

RANKIN: Science and the general run of stuff like mysteries, but I read quite a bit of scientific magazines at the time.

Question: So, you were pretty much mechanically inclined?

RANKIN: Curious is what I was. About different things and what caused them to act as they did. Stuff written by a professor.

Question: What things bothered you on the ship?

RANKIN: I don't know. Just being there I guess.

Laughter.

LADY: How long did you work there?

RANKIN: About 7 or 8 years I guess.

Question: And always two months at a stretch, right?

RANKIN: Sometimes you'd overlap, you know.

Question: Would that be because of rough weather?

RANKIN: No, because you didn't have a replacement.

Question: Oh. Did they have a hard time getting people to take that job on lightships back then?

RANKIN: No, it was Depression and you were glad to get anything I'd guess.

Question: Yeah. So, how come sometimes you wouldn't have a replacement?

RANKIN: Well, they serviced it with a tender, a buoy tender, and it would be rough and they couldn't service you and you'd have a couple of days or three days to wait.

Question: Sometimes you'd have to wait a little longer?

RANKIN: Yeah.

Question: And would that take away from your leave time?

RANKIN: No.

Question: You'd still get a whole month.

RANKIN: Oh, you might miss a few days, but you could get the days later on.

Question: Right. I think it was Frank Oliver that was telling me that sometimes instead of waiting for the tender ship, he would catch a ride with a ship going into Portsmouth .

RANKIN: That's true.

Question: And how did you signal another ship? Did you use signal flags?

RANKIN: By your air horn that we had on there.

Question: And that would get their attention and they would come over?

RANKIN: Yes. Sometimes you would have a signal flag up there, but most of the time you would signal by blowing.

Question: Did you always use the signal flags to identify the ship? Did you put them up sometimes?

RANKIN: I don't know.

Question: But mostly you always had the light on.

RANKIN: At night.

Question: And the fog horn if it was foggy?

RANKIN: That's right.

Question: And you also had a submarine bell, is that right?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: Was that off the stern?

RANKIN: Yes, off the side of the stern. On the side back on the stern.

Question: And how did you ring that?

RANKIN: That was rung by electric.

Question: Electric. And if you used the bell up on the bow?

RANKIN: That was by hand.

Question: You rang it by hand. And did you use the bell as a back up to the foghorn?

RANKIN: Yes. If your other signal wasn't working, you'd stand out on the bow on the forward deck and ring the bell.

Question: Uh-huh.

RANKIN: That was a good-sized bell.

Question: Yeah, we still have the bell. That's the easiest way we can tell when the ship was built. It has the date on it, 1930.

RANKIN: Robert Telack was the mate on there one time. He's from Baltimore . He knows Olsen. Oly knows him.

Question: When you retired from the Lighthouse Service, what did you do after that?

RANKIN: I didn't retire. I quit!

Question: Oh, you quit. O.K., and that was about in 1937?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: So, what did you do after that?

RANKIN: I wound up in the building trades. First I worked as a construction clerk for a couple of years. I went into the building trades.

Question: And was that around here?

RANKIN: No, it was up home.

Question: In Pennsylvania ?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: And what part of Pennsylvania ?

RANKIN: Philadelphia .

Question: So, you went into construction work then?

RANKIN: I worked down here in construction too for a while.

Question: So, when did you actually move into Lewes?

RANKIN: See, my wife lived in this same house, her father owned this place.

Question: Right.

RANKIN: And that's the reason I'm down here because she was originally from here and I had a stroke a few years ago and they thought if she'd be better here around if anything happened to me I guess.

Question: So, did you meet your wife about the time that you started working on lightships?

RANKIN: Somewheres in about in that time. I asked her because Sam Sockrider was there and he's dead and has been dead for several years and his wife and Helena was good friends and that's how I come to, how we come to getting married.

Question: And Sockrider was from around here?

RANKIN: He was from back over here by Conyer's Chapel, but he's been dead for years now. Charles Mitchell knew him.

Question: Uh-huh. So, several of those people who worked on the ship were from around right in here?

RANKIN: Yes. So was Arthur Hart. He worked there. After he left. He left after me. He's dead. He's been dead for a long while.

Question: Arthur Hart?

RANKIN: Arthur Hart. Charles knew him.

Question: And Arthur Hart, he worked in the engine deck also?

RANKIN: Yes, on the old *LV-52*? Never on the *LV-116*.

Question: Oh. Except for Mr. Hart, did all the rest of the crew go straight from *LV-52* onto *LV-116*?

RANKIN: Yes. Those that were there at the time went to it.

Question: Did they have to add any new crewmen for *LV-116*?

RANKIN: No.

Question: Because there used to be?

RANKIN: One engineer, yeah.

Question: An electrician?

RANKIN: No, no, instead of two engineers, it carried three then. The first, second, and then the chief. The chief was first and then we had a first engineer and a second engineer. So, we had three engineers.

Question: So, how many people worked on *LV-52*?

RANKIN: The same amount except one that I knew of.

Question: So, there would be about 15 on the *LV-52*.

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: Was the new ship – did it seem like a big change for you when you came on.

RANKIN: No.

Question: No? Was it about the same size ship?

RANKIN: No, I think the *LV-116* was a bigger ship. It displaced more water, you know . I think the *LV-52*, it must have been a real old tub when I went on there because I had never seen engines like they had, with low-pressure cylinders.

Question: The engines on *LV-116*, the diesel electric power, that was a new idea, wasn't it?

RANKIN: No. They had some other boats – not in the government service – but in the private service with diesel electric, and the diesel had been in for a long while. It had been used for a long time in several . . .

Question: Yeah. So, *LV-52* was pretty old when it was retired.

RANKIN: Yes, I don't know how old it was, but it must have been very old.

Question: What was the big advantage to having diesel electric power rather than say having a diesel engine to make the ship mover? Is there a reason for using the diesel electric instead of a?

RANKIN: Steam?

Question: No, instead of a diesel engine, a straight diesel to make the ship move.

RANKIN: Well, you had the big diesel is what you called it. You used those for your fire corner. You had to have something with enough fire to turn the air compressor and so you had a bigger air compressor for that, so you would have air for the horn.

Question: Right, so that was something. You didn't move the ship very much?

RANKIN: No, only when you went in for repairs.

Question: It was better to have it with the electric motors. They've got a lot of work-shop space in the engine deck now. Did you ever have a lot of tools down there?

RANKIN: We had three storerooms, and the one on the left as you went down was where the tools were. You worked in there and the other side was your storage for parts and in the back – in the stern – it was a storage space.

Question: And what kind of things did you put in there?

RANKIN: Well, you stored lubricating oil. You know, when you change your oil on a motor, you had that and then you stored paints and – what else was the big item there? I guess that was it and, of course, in the bow you kept in the other side.

Question: Did you have a lot of spare parts with you out there?

RANKIN: No, not too many.

Question: Yeah, just mostly little things that . . .

RANKIN: Well, you very seldom had to use any spare parts for the engine because they were well built.

Question: Uh-huh. I understand that they were Winton engines?

RANKIN: Yes, they were Winton. You see, there used to be an automobile by that name.

Question: Yeah. I've never even seen a picture of one. Did they make good engines?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: I remember reading in one of the log books that when the ship was in Charleston , Mr. Winton came on board the ship.

RANKIN: That was young Winton.

Question: Winton? That was his son?

RANKIN: That's right. The young one.

Question: He came on to inspect the engines?

RANKIN: I suppose so.

Question: You were there when he came on?

RANKIN: He was there when we got there and he came from Charleston up to Norfolk with us.

Question: Oh, he rode with you on the ship?

RANKIN: Oh, I guess a trial to see how they worked, how they operated.

[SKIP IN TAPE]

Question: When you were out on station at Chesapeake , what kind of – did you say you ate well?

RANKIN: Yes, good, normal food.

Question: And that always came out on the tender ship?

RANKIN: Yes.

Question: What kind of things did you eat?

RANKIN: Well, you had eggs for breakfast, cereal, different cereals, and sometimes you would have eggs and hot cakes, and then you always had soup you know with the main meal. I mean with the solid food.

Question: Was Gus a good cook?

RANKIN: He did all right.

Question: That's good.

RANKIN: He's not living now, I don't suppose.

Question: No, I know he's not. He was German, is that right?

RANKIN: No, he was a Finn.

Question: A Finn? O.K.

RANKIN: He was supposed to be Finnish. His folks was in Finland . I always understood he was a Finn.

Question: A Finn. So, you had Gus was a Finn and Andersen and Sven Olson were Norwegian?

RANKIN: Norwegian.

Question: And, then most of the other guys that were – well, all the rest of them were from this country?

RANKIN: Yeah.

Question: They must have been from – let's see, Burford was from North Carolina. And Frank Oliver from Portsmouth?

RANKIN: Portsmouth .

Question: And, you're from Pennsylvania .

RANKIN: Yes. Charles Mitchell and several others were from Delaware, I mean had worked on there and had left, and then, of course, there was some from Virginia, Mr. Floyd, and Mr. Garrison, they were from Virginia. There was Mr. Dickson. There was Robert Tulagi, he was from North Carolina. He was on *LV-116*.

Question: So, most of the crew was from right around the Chesapeake Bay area?

RANKIN: Yes, they were all from Chesapeake . Then, of course, we always called them from Baltimore and see like Captain Andersen, Oly, and the deck, I think they was all from Baltimore.

Question: When you had to leave, did you go up to Pennsylvania? When you had your time off, did you go back home?

RANKIN: Oh, yes. I always went home.

Question: You had plenty of time off from the ship, right?

RANKIN: Well, I didn't have too much.

Laughter.

RANKIN: You served your time and sometimes some of us would take six months without any time off, you know.

Question: Why would they do that?

RANKIN: Well, I guess. I don't know why they would do it. It was up to them I guess.

Question: Uh-huh. That could get pretty lonely after awhile.

RANKIN: Oh, you bet.

Question: Let's see, the cane that Sven made? Out of shark bone?

RANKIN: Yeah, it was shark bone.

Question: Did you ever catch any sharks yourself?

RANKIN: No, I helped a couple of times.

Question: Did any of you ever go swimming around the ship?

RANKIN: Yes, they went. I never went.

Question: Yeah? They weren't afraid of sharks?

RANKIN: No.

Question: Sven never told me where he got that woman's leg idea for the handle.

RANKIN: Well, usually he would take a cast – and he would cut the end off and make his mold and they would pour aluminum in there and when it cooled, it was made.

Question: Was that something he could do on the ship?

RANKIN: Yeah. They did it on there.

Question: He had molds for casting?

RANKIN: I don't know if he had them. Mr. Floyd and Mr. Culpepper did.

Question: Uh-huh.

RANKIN: Yes, Mr. Culpepper did.

Question: Where was he from?

RANKIN: He was from Virginia? I had almost forgotten.

Question: And next year, we are almost starting to work on a big birthday party for the ship. It will be 50 years old. We are going to try to come up with a big party on August 17th, which is the day that it went out of Charleston to go up Fenwick, and we are trying to put together something for the 50th birthday party.

Question: And we will invite – be sure to send you an invitation.

RANKIN: Oh, I appreciate that. I'm sure I can't go.

Question: Well, I'll make sure that you get an invitation anyway.

RANKIN: Thank you very much.

Question: And we will try to get everybody that we can to come to the ship and – well, I've got all these plans in my head anyway. Maybe we will have a chief of the Park Service down there and we could try to get Sven and Mrs. Quick and Charles Mitchell, to see if he could make it, and Frank Oliver, and Burford Sears too. Last year, I did something similar to that. I had Sven and Madeline and Burford and Frank Oliver – they all came down to the ship one day to talk to visitors. Mostly, what we do to the ship now is we get tours of the ship and explain to people what it used to be used for. And, it's a funny thing, the job you guys did was very important, but very few people even know that there was such things as lightships. Well, back then, did other people have more of an appreciation of what a lightship was?

RANKIN: I don't know whether they did or not. That was before they had electric lines. Before you got to use electric for most everything and you see they got the electricity – I can't think what they call that now – but three sections of electric. Say, you had one over there and one here and one there and when these points met, which is electric sound, would be where radio navigation.

Question: Oh, long range aid to navigation?

RANKIN: Not, long range, but that was your direction finder.

Question: Right. You had that in the 30's?

RANKIN: No, that's what they had. They had three stations nearby.

Question: Did the ship itself, the Chesapeake , serve as a station for direction finding?

RANKIN: Oh, yeah. There was direction finding on there.

Question: What kind of radios did you have on the ship in those days?

RANKIN: Well, I don't know too much about the radios. The operator, the man was on call you know, and if it was called, you answered. They all had call letters.

Question: Would that radio have direct voice communication?

RANKIN: No.

Question: It was more like a telegraph?

RANKIN: Well, it was just sound.

Question: Just sound. And you also sent out a radio signal as an aid to navigation, right? So, was the radio operator usually a busy man?

RANKIN: A busy man? Yes, he had regular duty. He also had a typist if the Captain wanted a letter to type, he would do it.

Question: Oh, you had a typewriter on board?

RANKIN: Oh, yeah. In the radio room.

Question: I don't remember who it was. One person told me there used to be a bath tub on the ship.

RANKIN: The officers had a bath tub, down just outside the quarters for them, and the crew they had a – they didn't have a bath tub. They had a place to take a bath with a bucket and the water at one time was hooked up to the sea water, the scour.

Question: I guess it didn't get you very clean.

RANKIN: No, you didn't need clean. I was a clean man. I never could see going dirty, except when you was working, you know. But when they had to clean up, they cleaned up.

Question: How did you wash your clothes on the ship?

RANKIN: Well, all you would get was cold water, you know. Then you had a steam pipe about that long that hung down and you'd put that in the bucket and turn that steam on them and boil your water, and then when the water got hot enough, the person using it would cut the steam down and scrub our clothes, our overalls and with a scrub brush.

Question: Uh-huh.

RANKIN: They always were clean. The shirts they would do. And, the underwear they'd wash by hand, you know, in the buckets.

Question: You all wore your own clothes?

RANKIN: Yeah, oh yeah.

Question: You didn't have uniforms.

RANKIN: No, we did not.

END OF INTERVIEW

Interview with Charles Mitchell

Interviewed by: Frank Hebblethwaite

Date of interview: June 23, 1979

Question: How long did you serve on LV-116?

MITCHELL: Well, for years, I don't know, from the beginning to the 1940s.

Question: Was that when they took it off station?

MITCHELL: No, that's when I quit. See, I didn't sign up in the Coast Guard.

Question: So, you stopped right about the time that the Coast Guard took over?

MITCHELL: No, I stayed about two years after that. They couldn't fire you.

Question: Oh, in other words . . .

MITCHELL: If they found a job, either you had to take it or then you was out.

Question: In other words, then you didn't have to enlist in the Coast Guard.

MITCHELL: No.

Question: You could stay on as part of the Lighthouse Service. I never knew that before.

MITCHELL: Yeah, that was the ruling. They couldn't get rid of you, but if they found a job, something like on a survey boat or something like that, well then, if you didn't take that, why you was out.

Question: You would have to stay on like you were before.

MITCHELL: They wanted to me send me on life patrol and I didn't want to go.

Question: I wouldn't want to do that myself. Then, altogether, you worked on lightships for how long?

MITCHELL: Well, approximately around 14 years. I had two summers off, without pay. I was at 14 years.

Question: And you started out on the *LV-52*?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: That was about what year that you started on the *LV-52*?

MITCHELL: Well, around 1925, I think.

Question: Altogether you were on lightships from about 1925 to 1940?

MITCHELL: Yeah. I got married in 1940 and it wasn't no place for a married man, I didn't think.

Question: Yeah. I know some of the guys were married.

MITCHELL: Oh yeah, yeah.

Question: I don't think would be very good, staying out there when you were married. I was just going to show you the pictures here, the pictures of Sven Olson just two years ago now and this is Madeline Quick. They both live Baltimore now.

MITCHELL: Yeah, I know that they did at the time.

Question: They are both still good friends.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And that was the cane that he made. Is your cane also from shark's bone?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh. A small shark. He was a chief engineer. He has a mold. He makes a . . .

Question: I was wondering what he had – a woman's leg . . .

MITCHELL: Yeah, he made them all about the same way.

Question: And he had equipment on the ship to cast these?

MITCHELL: Yeah. He did.

Question: Out of aluminum?

MITCHELL: Yeah, he carried out old scrap aluminum and stuff like that and had a sand mold you know and he melted the aluminum and poured it in there and of course we had to finish it off.

Question: Uh-huh. That's real nice. It's the same kind of design almost.

MITCHELL: Uh-huh. Some of them are bigger. Now, this man, he makes a right nice sized ones. They were right nice.

Question: He was on lightships about the same number of years as you were, is that right?

MITCHELL: He was still there when I left. Of course, I was there before he was. And this girl, she wasn't even married.

Question: She was Captain's youngest daughter?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: What kind of man was Captain [Alexander] Andersen?

MITCHELL: Well, he was a pretty good old fellow. He was strict, but he was good.

Question: He was good to his men?

MITCHELL: Yeah, he stuck up for his men. Yeah, when we first started. That was coal. We had to drag coal in bags and stuff and put it on board.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: And, of course, when we were in the shipyard in Portsmouth, the captain of the yard would always want us to load up the tenders, you know, to carry out to the other ships?

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: And he wouldn't allow it.

Laughter

Question: That's not quite your work.

MITCHELL: No, he said that we had enough to do when they bring it to us.

Question: Yeah. That's right. Yeah, and you'd be doing it every time they came out, once a month, and you'd be doing it out there.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Here are some other pictures of things that he made and carvings.

MITCHELL: Yeah, I remember him making that too.

Question: Here's a belt.

MITCHELL: I don't remember the belt, but I do remember several pieces in there, where he would cut out the small pieces and glue them together.

Question: And you, yourself, what kind of things did you do to keep busy?

MITCHELL: My hobby there was reading and eating. I liked to read quite a bit, so that was a good place to read and I always got out magazines and stuff like that to read.

Question: Mostly magazines to read?

MITCHELL: Yeah. Of course, the papers used to put out a magazine in that. I don't suppose you remember that, but they did.

Question: The what?

MITCHELL: The papers. They would put a magazine in all the papers. And I would pick all of them out and read them up.

Question: Did you ever get – on the tender ship when they came out – did they ever bring you a fresh batch of newspapers or something like that?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. They always brought papers out for us, and, of course, we got mail through the passing coastwise coal boats that they used to run coastwise up to Philadelphia, you know, running coal.

Question: How often would that come in?

MITCHELL: Well, sometimes if the weather wasn't too bad, we would get it once a week.

Question: That's pretty good.

MITCHELL: If the weather was bad, why, we would have to wait until the next trip.

Question: Did you get a lot of letters from home?

MITCHELL: Well, about every time we got mail. Of course, there were 2-3 in it, you know.

Question: Where was home for you?

MITCHELL: Well, at the time, the last part of it, it was right here. My father and mother lived here.

Question: Well, the next picture here, that was taken about two years ago when he came down from the ship.

MITCHELL: Well, he quit and went on the Bay Line, didn't he?

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: Did he say anything about that?

Question: Yeah. The steamship line from D.C. to ---

MITCHELL: From Baltimore to Norfolk .

Question: Yes. And he said that he spent a year on that.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And Captain Andersen on Brenton Reef right here. Here are some other old pictures here.

MITCHELL: Yeah. I remember. That looks just like him.

Question: And there's a shark. I don't know who caught that one.

MITCHELL: Yeah, we caught that one on 4th of July.

Question: Oh yeah? How do you know that?

MITCHELL: Well, I remember it very well. It was over 15 feet long.

Question: Oh! And that's why he took the picture?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: 4th of July. Here's another.

MITCHELL: Old Dick Rasmussen and that's Olson.

Question: Where is Rasmussen from?

MITCHELL: He was from Baltimore. I imagine he's dead.

Question: I tell you what. He was originally from some place in the Scandinavia, right?

MITCHELL: Right. He called himself a Russian Finn. I don't think he was from Russia.

Laughter.

Question: Yeah, I guess he was probably from a place that maybe after one war was part of Russia and the other one was part of Finland.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Andersen and Olson were from Norway?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And where was the cook from?

MITCHELL: He was a Swede I think. You don't have his picture there, do you?

Question: No, I don't think we've got a picture of him. Most of these pictures that we have here we got from either Sven Olson or Madeline Quick. They've been real nice in giving us some pictures and they gave us the picture and there is a place where we can get them, even without the negative, we can have copies made and then we just keep the copy. Now, this is Sven again. It is a scrapbook that he has here. Do you have anything like that? A scrapbook, I mean?

MITCHELL: Well, I did, but I can't find it. I was look for it last night.

Question: Oh.

MITCHELL: I had a picture of the whole crew where we had had a bad storm and we was in the shipyard and all lined up and had the picture taken.

Question: I have never seen a picture of a full crew together.

MITCHELL: Well, this was just about the whole crew. Some of them got hurt and some of them didn't.

Question: Can you describe that storm a little bit?

MITCHELL: Well, as far as I'm concerned, it's about like all the rest of them. It was just bad.

Laughter.

Question: Did you go through a lot of bad storms out there?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. Every year, we had one bad storm anyway. Of course, it was – you might say you was scared most all the time, but I guess you got a thrill out of it for some. I just don't know how to explain it. You . . . Of course, you was glad when it was over with.

Question: Did you ever go through a storm where you lost the anchor?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. That was the picture that I had. We lost the anchor and actually we went about 7-8 miles off station or something like that before we ever got the anchor aboard again.

Question: What kind of guys did you serve with?

MITCHELL: Well, they were just all-around good fellows. Of course, some liked to take a drink now and then to "help their nerves". . .

Question: Yeah, that's what I get in there. I've heard that from Sven.

MITCHELL: Of course, I know Sven didn't drink much.

Question: No, but said that Rasmussen and Hermanson drank.

MITCHELL: Well, they sure did.

Question: He said that Rasmussen and Hermanson were the two guys that would have a drink now and then.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Now, Frank Oliver was telling me that one time he rigged up a distiller so it would work like a wood still.

Laughter.

Question: Is that right?

MITCHELL: Yep. The mate.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: Dixon ?

Question: Let's see. No, not Dixon --Frank Oliver?

MITCHELL: Frank Oliver, yeah.

Question: Uh-huh. Sven had one comment he mentioned to me. He said that – the way he put it – he was a good guy. I really liked Sven's accent.

MITCHELL: He is a good old fellow.

Question: "I was the only one who used to keep shipshape."

MITCHELL: He was the only one the captain could depend on.

Laughter.

MITCHELL: Especially after being in dry dock.

Question: He said he used to go up and down the mast.

MITCHELL: Oh yeah.

Question: Several times a day, just for the exercise.

MITCHELL: Yeah. The operator, he rigged up some kind of bars and stuff along there. We used to take exercise in the nighttime. Sven got pretty good at it.

Question: Yeah, but, some of the other guys did it too?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. We all done a little of it.

Question: And he mentioned another guy, a David Fallon. Remember him?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. Old Dave.

Question: Really.

MITCHELL: The operator. He was blind in one eye. Of course, there had been several operators on there. I can't even remember the names of them any more.

Question: A Mr. Rankin was telling me that at one time the radio operator was named Berry . . .

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And his substitute was named Berry ?

MITCHELL: His brother, come on the ship.

Question: Oh, it was his brother?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: O.K.

MITCHELL: This first Berry , he was not a very big fellow and was he kind of off the hatch a little bit?

Question: Did that happen sometime?

MITCHELL: He was the only one that I knew anything about.

Question: Kind of getting too lonely?

MITCHELL: I guess so. Too confined out there.

Question: Most of the other guys had things that they could do?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. Well, perhaps the rest of them didn't have the brains that he had, or something like that. Or it didn't bother them.

Question: Well, there were times when I was on a ship for a long time, but I always get to go home at night, except for one time last year when we took the ship up to Baltimore and we put it in dry dock and that was three days.

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: And, man, it's o.k., but doing it for two months, I don't know. I don't know if I could handle that.

MITCHELL: Well, that was your duty. You were supposed to stay out there for two months at a time and had them on call, but I stayed six months when I was coming to her. Just . . . well, just saving a little more money.

Question: Well, that you would get . . . Would you be paid enough for leave time?

MITCHELL: No. But, you see, I'd have to give my leave to somebody else.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: The captain. He only went along with so many on at one time and if I didn't want to take my leave, why he would give it to somebody else. Well, there was one fellow who lived around here. His name was Sockrider, and he has had as high as 3-4 months time off.

Laughter.

Question: He took everybody elses! He'd take leave!

MITCHELL: Yeah. He had a job down that home working – and the old cook, he'd stay out there a year at a time.

Question: He didn't have any substitute at all?

MITCHELL: Well, he did. Sockrider would relieve him when he wanted to, but he would . . . well, he –

Question: He didn't mind doing this?

MITCHELL: No, he wanted to be there. If he went ashore, he got drunk – stayed drunk.

Laughter.

Question: Well, I guess if he could handle that.

MITCHELL: Of course, every month, he got drunk. Sent out to us and we always had a little party spirits you know – not too much.

Question: Was some of this during Prohibition?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. Most all of it was.

Question: Like kind of being out there by yourself, you could get away with a lot of things.

MITCHELL: Well, at that time, there was a grocery store in Portsmouth called O. H. Williams, I believe it was. Something like that.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: And they'd order a bag of potatoes.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: Something like that – and there would be a gallon of something.

Question: Uh-huh!

Laughter.

Question: So, that's how they did it.

MITCHELL: Of course, he did it himself, you know.

Question: Uh-huh. I guess anything to keep up the morale.

MITCHELL: Yeah, had to have a little something out there. And you were talking about that distillery he rigged up. That was the funniest thing. Well, we used to get a lot of bananas out there.

Question: Yeah, that's what he was telling me.

MITCHELL: And we made a lot of banana wine.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: And the old captain – or the mate at that time – we could distill some of that. So, we put this stuff in a pot and it had an aluminum lid like that there and we turned it upside down and had an aluminum handle on it.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: And we put water in the top of this lid and just kept the steam up on that aluminum thing and it dipped down in a bowl. We had a bowl sitting down in the bottom.

Laughter.

MITCHELL: And when we got a bowl full, why we would sample it.

Question: Did it taste good?

MITCHELL: Not too bad!

Question: Did you ever trade for other things, like, I don't know what you would trade for, but?

MITCHELL: Naw, we didn't have too much to trade for out there.

Question: Yeah. A lot of banana boats that came by there?

MITCHELL: Yeah, you know those fruit boats would come by. Sometimes, we'd get 13 bunches.

Question: Whoa!

MITCHELL: And we had to do something with them.

Question: What did you trade for them, fish?

MITCHELL: Nothing.

Question: Nothing?

MITCHELL: No. They'd just call up on the radio and tell us they were coming by and to be out there with a boat to pick them up and they would throw them overboard.

Question: You had more bananas than you knew what to do with!

MITCHELL: Well, we'd eat fried bananas and green bananas and . . .

Laughter.

Question: He didn't tell me that he didn't like bananas.

MITCHELL: Well, I've never ate many since!

Laughter.

Question: Was Gunther a good cook?

MITCHELL: Yeah, Gunther was very good. He would – most of the time, he'd have a least different kinds of meat for dinners and stuff like that.

Question: And you could choose?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Very good.

MITCHELL: And he would cook your breakfast any way you wanted it, near abouts.

Question: I was going to ask you when you were saying before that he was there for a year, when you were saying that sometimes he would stay for up to six months. When he stayed there for six months and he'd built up that extra pay, was that because you didn't get paid anything when you had leave? Your month off?

MITCHELL: Nothing extra. We had just straight salaries all the way through.

Question: Hmm. So, you would get paid your normal pay for two months and then you would also get paid for the month off?

MITCHELL: For the month off.

Question: So, you could – Could you build up more pay if you kept working on the ship?

MITCHELL: Nah-nah.

Question: No. Oh.

MITCHELL: You got so much a month, whether you was on or off, and then, of course, the captain wanted you off when it was your time because he got paid just the same – well, I won't say more, but he got paid.

Question: The captain was good to you?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. The captain was great.

Question: I've read some records in Washington about the very, very early lightships in the 1820s and the 1850s, and in those days a lot of the captains were very harsh and there were several cases where a mate or the crewman took them to court because they found out – they would sign on and they would sometimes sign on you know, green, and the captain would tell them, "Your pay is \$12 a month," and the guy didn't know anything better.

MITCHELL: No.

Question: And it was really \$15, and the captain would keep the other \$3, every month.

MITCHELL: No, we had no trouble like that. It was all up and above board with him as far as I know.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: Of course, we got our checks. He didn't have a thing to do with that. They were sent out.

Question: Right, government checks. How did you feel when the Coast Guard took over?

MITCHELL: Well, it really didn't make any difference to me. The only reason I didn't sign up was because I couldn't quit when I wanted to.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: And I stayed on like I was, I could quit any time that I felt like it.

Question: Yeah. And, when you did quit, what kind of work did you get into?

MITCHELL: Well, my brother called up out there and he said if I wanted to quit - -
- Of course, I hadn't been married but about three months, and he had a job for me, so I came and went painting and I've been a painting just about ever since.

Question: Hmm. So, you went into painting afterwards?

MITCHELL: Yeah. I spent one year in civil service – at the Civil Air Patrol –

Question: When you were on the ship, you were what? You were an oiler?

MITCHELL: No, I started as a fireman, on the old . . .

Question: A fireman - - - .

MITCHELL: . . . on the old boat, but on the new boat, I was a sailor.

Question: Oh, so you kind of switched. You went from engine to deck.

MITCHELL: Yeah. I went on deck.

Question: So, when you went to the 116, you worked a lot with Sven and . . .

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. And, we all went down to Charleston together down there that night and got it.

Question: Who were the other guys on the ship that were . . . You were a seaman or called sailors?

MITCHELL: Yeah. I was a seaman. And, of course, Olsen was a seaman. Well, I think you would class him as a boatswain's mate, or something like that, because he was sort of the head of us.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: And Rankin, he was down in the engine room. And Oliver was down in the engine room. And there was a North Carolina boy – he was down there.

Question: Yeah – Sears?

MITCHELL: Sears was down there, yeah. And there was another boy. He later became judge some place in North Carolina.

Question: Hmm.

MITCHELL: Gladstone Morris. Yeah. Gladstone.

Question: He's a judge now?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: I hadn't seen that name yet. I'll have to look it up.

MITCHELL: Well, he was on the same time Sears was.

Question: And he was from North Carolina.

MITCHELL: Well, I called him Sears.

Question: I think of Sears and Roebuck.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And you used to call Sven Olson, "Oly" right?

MITCHELL: Oly. Yeah. Oly Olson.

Question: Oly Olson.

MITCHELL: He had a cousin that was on a relief ship. I can't even remember his name now, but he was the same as Andersen.

Question: The one that relieved you guys?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And when the relief ship came out. That would be once a year, right?

MITCHELL: Yes.

Question: And it would take the place?

MITCHELL: Of our ship and then we went into the shipyard.

Question: Yeah. How many different stations did it relieve, do you know?

MITCHELL: Well, at that time I think it was Diamond Shoals and one off Chincoteague called Winter Quarters and Chesapeake and Fenwick Island when I first started. Of course, they had done away with that when we moved to Chesapeake.

Question: Three or four different stations.

MITCHELL: Yeah. About four different stations.

Question: Were you one of the youngest men on the ship?

MITCHELL: No.

Question: From looking at this picture –

MITCHELL: Well, I am in that category, yeah. But, later on, when the Coast Guard had taken over, there were younger boys who came out there.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: There was another Mitchell that come out there. A Robert Mitchell. He was from Carolina.

Question: And he is set up on the Coast Guard list because he had worked for the Coast Guard.

MITCHELL: Uh-huh. He had.

Question: And I called him up last week, but I said hello and told him who I was and what I wanted and I asked him, you know, if it was you and I asked him if he ever worked on the Lightship Chesapeake, *LV-116*. "No." I asked, "Did you work in the Lighthouse Service?" "No." I didn't know what to think then. I asked, "Didn't you ever work on a lightship?" "No." And then he said that he worked in the Coast Guard, he had worked on land in Lewes. And, I didn't know what to think then. I invited him to come to the ship if he was even in Washington and I said good-bye to him and then I talked to Rankin and I found out that we could have had the wrong name down and we got the right one.

MITCHELL: Yeah, Rankin and I used to be pretty good pals on there.

Question: Well, he just started living here two years ago, right?

MITCHELL: Well, to start with, he married a girl down there and she died a couple of years ago, but he has been living down this way quite awhile. His first marriage, he lived up in Jersey some place, I don't know just where, but he's been down here at least kind about 30 years.

Question: When I first called him up, about two years ago, I told him who I was and that I worked on a lightship and he says, "Oh, no, none of that. That can't be. I worked on that years ago." I said, "Well, I know you did. I work there now."

Laughter.

Question: And he didn't believe me. Finally, he said, "I heard that that ship got blowed up in the war," and I said, "Well, all I know is that I work here every day," and I invited him to come down to the ship and finally I got him to come down one day and he was walking around and he said, "Yeah, this is it!" "It's still all here," and he told me that he was married while he was working on the ship.

MITCHELL: Yeah, he was.

Question: When they put the Texas Tower on the Chesapeake station they made *LV-116* mark the entrance to the Delaware Bay. I don't know exactly where---

MITCHELL: Off from Virginia Beach.

Question: No, I mean after the Chesapeake Station. After '65, they took it up to Delaware Bay . . .

MITCHELL: Oh.

Question: And it was marking the entrance to Delaware Bay from '66 to '70.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And in 1970, it was when they replaced it with one of those large navigational buoys, the kind that weigh about 104 tons, with a mast on it and a

light on top and a fog horn and a radiobeacon, run by generators. A lot easier than a lightship I guess.

MITCHELL: Well, not as many people involved in it.

Question: Well, I guess there are hardly any lighthouses with people in them nowadays. That's why it's good, at least we have the chance to talk to some of the people who actually worked on the ships.

And, when you were out there on Chesapeake station, I guess you said that you did go through a lot of storms.

MITCHELL: Oh, yes. Most every year, there was one or two, you know. Well, I can't recall the years, but every once in awhile, some would be worse than others, you know.

Question: Yeah. You remember them. And awhile ago, you were talking about a guy, Sockrider?

MITCHELL: Yeah. Sam.

Question: Sam. Burford was telling me. One time, when he came to the ship, I asked him if he was ever scared and he said "Yes," and, "I'll show you," and he took me to the catwalk and he says, "One time, I was down there with Sockrider, Daniel Sockrider, and we looked up to the catwalk here and up through the rigging and all we could see was water, coming on top the ship. I was scared then."

Laughter.

Question: And he said, "That was the only time I ever saw Sockrider get down on his knees and pray." And he said that Sockrider said to him if they made it

through that storm, he was going to quit the next time he had leave and he claims that what he did after that. He said that Sockrider used a lot of leave.

MITCHELL: He did use a lot of leave. If nobody would want it, he was entitled to use it and they gave it to him.

Question: Uh-huh.

MITCHELL: Well, we had one bad storm that I remember and you couldn't do any cooking because the water would wash right down the smokestack. It would douse the stove and the oil would run right out on the floor. Every time she would roll, this thing – and it was still burning right across the floor.

Question: Burning?

MITCHELL: The oil on top of the water, and the captain says, "Gus, you ain't no good down here. You've got to go up on the pilot house and relieve some of them boys, get the mess boy." So, old Gus went up there and had his own boy from Baltimore for a mess boy. He went up there with him and huddled over the wheel and Gus said to the goy – his name was Chester – said, "Chester, you sweating?" He said, "No, sir, I'm crying!"

Laughter.

MITCHELL: He said, "I'm scared!"

Question: How young was he?

MITCHELL: Oh, he was only in his 20s. Early 20s.

Question: Did Gus always have a mess boy, somebody to help him?

MITCHELL: Some of us always helped him, except a lot of times I would go up there and help him wash dishes. Didn't even have to, but we'd go up and help him because he was always good to us.

Question: Yeah. Good to keep friends.

MITCHELL: Yeah. One time that was storming and she went down in a swell like that and when she come up, she would come up with green water all over the top of her. Gus would say, "If that son-of-a-bitch ever comes up!"

Laughter.

MITCHELL: Cooking.

Question: That's like something I get that it was kind of exciting to go through, but –

MITCHELL: Well, you get a kick out of it, but you're scared the whole time.

Question: You're glad when it's over.

MITCHELL: Even after the storm is over with, why, it's a continuous roll, backwards and forwards. That's worse than the storm –

Question: Like that all the time?

MITCHELL: The tide changes, you know, and that swell is still running, just rolling.

Question: Yeah. But, I guess at least it's better than having a ship that rolls a lot.

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: It would roll a lot, but it still is staying in the same place pretty good.

MITCHELL: And you could tighten up all the portholes and the cargo port and stuff like that – had rubber gaskets around it and when you'd tighten it up there wasn't much water that got in her.

Question: And the deck goes through about near the galley?

MITCHELL: Well, between the galley and the place where the crew slept.

Question: Yeah. Well, the way we have the ship now . . .

MITCHELL: Are both of them sealed up?

Question: Yeah. Was there one on each side?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Yeah, they are both sealed up. I could see a couple of places on the ship where you could see the weld marks and you could tell something was there.

MITCHELL: You see, we had them open on account of taking in any cargo there – I mean supplies or stuff like that you know.

Question: What they've got now – I don't know – maybe you had this before is a deck hatch. There's a hatch same place, but –

MITCHELL: On top? No, not like that. They must have put that in later.

Question: No? They cut that in and they had the sling over the deck here and you could drop it down instead of going straight through.

MITCHELL: No, we always pulled it with a boat davit and somebody there to reach out and get it.

Question: Like this guy standing there?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: You would just reach out and grab it. Hmm. And I know there's another door that was welded shut, I saw on the radio shack on the starboard side.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Now, there are only doors on the port side of the hull, except for the pilot house and I think there's a door in the pilot house on the starboard side, but for getting inside the ship, you've got to do it from the port side from there. I guess you used to have a couple of doors on the starboard side where you used to get down to the lower deck.

MITCHELL: Well, you know that the stairway goes up from this main deck up to the pilot house.

Question: Right.

MITCHELL: You could go on out or you could go right in the operator's room. He's got a room right there, or if you could go right straight on and go right into the radio room.

Question: Hmm.

MITCHELL: And the captain's quarters are right up here. You could come out on that same side.

Question: You can't do that either. What was it like on *LV-52*? Was it a big change when you went on the #116?

MITCHELL: Well, as far as the boat, yeah. Because she had all wooden decks.

Question: Oh.

MITCHELL: Steel hull and wooden decks, and, of course, the top deck had canvas on it, but she was old and in the storms, the mate always kept checking seams on account of the seams cracking open or something like that you know.

Question: What was the cabins like on the *LV-52*?

MITCHELL: Well, you was all down the hold.

Question: Below decks?

MITCHELL: Below water, yeah.

Question: And the captain?

MITCHELL: And the captain, he was down aft in the hold. All the officers.

Question: Everybody was sleeping below the waterline?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: I'll say. If you are down low like that, do you get rocked around more or?

MITCHELL: No, it didn't seem to be. It seemed like the top rocked more than the bottom did. And it was cooler. I mean, you was below water.

Question: Yeah, that's a thought.

MITCHELL: But, you couldn't open your ports to get no air. You had to have a big wind chute up on the deck and that would shoot it on down through where you'd come down below.

Question: And when you went on the *LV-116*, then you got cabins that you would just share.

MITCHELL: Two to a cabin, yeah.

Question: And we still had it like that on the ship forward. I guess one part that was changed was now if the crew's mess is right alongside here where the hatch was.

MITCHELL: It was all forward.

Question: The port hatch was.

MITCHELL: It was all up there by the coordinator.

Question: Right where –

MITCHELL: And the bunk rooms was on each side of it.

Question: And you used to have a table up there?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: Would it be alongside the mast or something?

MITCHELL: Well, it was inside of the rooms. We had rooms on this side and rooms on this side and up towards the bow, you went up there where the winch was, you know, where you pulled the anchor and stuff up, bathrooms and stuff like that was up there.

Question: What was it like living on the ship? About taking showers or washing your clothes and that kind of thing.

MITCHELL: Well, it wasn't too bad. You could do a lot with steam. Steam pipe you know. Get your water and soap and stuff and put your clothes in there and stick your steam pipe down in it.

Question: Was there a pipe that you could just take it away from somewhere and just put it in the wash?

MITCHELL: Well, all it was was only a union or a Tee. You'd just raise it up and drop it down in your bucket or stuck your bucket under it.

Question: And then?

MITCHELL: And you could steam your clothes right clean.

Question: Like coming off of the boilers?

MITCHELL: Yeah, uh-huh, where you got the heat and stuff and hot water.

Question: And we've still got all the radiators. So, when you got on the *LV-116*, you did some work in the pilot house?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: When you would come back and forth to port.

MITCHELL: Yeah, everybody would stand his own watch.

Question: Were they mostly 4 hours watch in the pilot house?

MITCHELL: Uh-huh.

Question: O.K., and how long a watch were the engine watches?

MITCHELL: Well, I guess it was about the same thing. Of course, I was never down in the new boat on the engine room. On the old boat, it was 4 hours.

Question: Uh-huh. And you were a fireman?

MITCHELL: No, no. Not 4 hours. It was 2 on and 4 off, that is what it was.

Question: 2 on and 4 off!

MITCHELL: Yeah. That's what it was on deck, I mean in the pilot house. You had 2 hours on, 4 off.

Question: The work as a fireman, was that really hard to do?

MITCHELL: Well, I didn't mind it.

Question: Did you have to shovel coal constantly?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. I know I was just a farm boy when I went out there and the old chief engineer, when it would come time to go to the ship yard, he said, "You'll never stand it." And they had another boy that was pretty tough. He said, "I know Hart can't stand it." – that was the boy's name, Arthur Hart. Well, I had to stand Arthur Hart's watch part time going in.

Laughter.

Question: And he shared it with you.

MITCHELL: And we had to shovel a lot of coal. Of course, in the meantime, before you went off of watch you had to rake your coals over and pull out all the clinkers and, of course, that stuff right down in front of you is right hot.

Question: What did you do? Did you have a chute to put the old coals down and let them out the ship or what did you do?

MITCHELL: You'd put them in a bucket and a man would haul them up and dumped them overboard. She was old.

Question: And try to get rid of them as fast as you could.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And you were on the *LV-116* – well, I guess you got along well with most of the guys?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: It was a good crew to work with?

MITCHELL: Yeah. I don't know as I had an argument with any of them, but one time, Olson and I had a little argument and that was the end of that, so –

Laughter.

Question: Did you fight?

MITCHELL: Oh, we didn't fight. We just had a little disagreement was all. I don't even remember what that was all about. I don't suppose he does either. He probably don't even remember it happened.

Question: I guess it was really important to get along with each other on the ship.

MITCHELL: Yeah. Of course, I wasn't nothing but skin and bones in them days and Olson could have whipped three or four of me and I knew that at that time.

Laughter.

Question: He's in good shape now. The only thing he has trouble hearing anyone and he told me, he said, he lays all that on the foghorn. He said that there was a time in the '30s.

MITCHELL: Well, did he retire from the service?

Question: Oh, he went . . . he went into the Coast Guard.

MITCHELL: Yeah, I know it.

Question: And he stayed – yeah, he's retired now, but he was doing that until the early 60s I think and the last 10-12 years he was on a buoy tender up and down Chesapeake Bay and so he was on boats all his life I guess.

MITCHELL: Well, the Norwegians. That's what they are raised on.

Question: Yeah. He never did get married I guess.

MITCHELL: No. He used to go a little bit with this girl's sister, the captain's girl.

Question: Oh, I didn't know that. What was her name?

MITCHELL: I can't even remember. That's Madeline, isn't it?

Question: Yeah. Well, that's the captain's daughter.

MITCHELL: Well, the captain's daughter.

Question: This one.

MITCHELL: Well, the oldest one. I can't remember her name. Rankin went out with her for awhile. While we was in the shipyard.

Question: One thing, that they are started to work on now is the 50th birthday party for the ship next year. So they are sort of aiming for August 17th, when it was first taken out of Charleston.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: You guys went out with it from Charleston, huh?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And where did you go from there?

MITCHELL: We went down to Portsmouth and had her outfitted.

Question: Portsmouth ?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And from Portsmouth, you went to?

MITCHELL: Fenwick.

Question: Fenwick and then it was a good while before you actually got out to Fenwick Island ?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. We was in Portsmouth quite awhile. Of course, we was in Charleston, South Carolina for quite awhile.

Question: And you did a good deal of traveling before you got out to Fenwick Island?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: And then it was just three years that it worked there?

MITCHELL: I expect it was. Dates don't mean nothing to me any more, I mean I don't know how long we was – it wasn't too long.

Question: And then you were at Chesapeake?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: What we are going to try to do is, at least we will invite everybody that we are contacting, I mean you and Wayne Rankin and Burford Sears and all of them, Sven Olsen and Madeline – try to get at least everybody that we know of and that we know are still around and invite them to come to the ship next year and then we will try to get some big shots from the Park Service. Sometimes we feel like they don't pay a whole lot of attention to us.

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: I mean, did you ever feel that way on lightships?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: And the Lighthouse Service that sponsored you guys?

MITCHELL: Well, in a way, yeah. Of course, we looked up to the captain for everything that we wanted anyway. And he had to battle it out with the others.

Question: And were you pretty good about getting what you needed on the ship?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Did you ever have a treat like ice cream?

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. We made it.

Question: Oh, you made it. You had an ice cream maker then?

MITCHELL: Yeah. Had a freezer. That boy made ice cream!

Question: Ah-ha.

MITCHELL: That thing had rusted a little bit and he took steel wool and cleaned it out and everybody got lead poison from it but me and another fellow.

Question: Oh, no!

MITCHELL: They called the Coast Guard to come and get them and take them to shore.

Question: Oh, no. That ruined the whole crew, huh?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: Did he get lead poisoning or he didn't?

MITCHELL: Yeah, I think he did, too. I'm not sure. Whoever ate the most of it got it.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: I didn't eat much of it and it was my job to take them to bed and the bath and so on.

Question: Gee. I hope it tasted good while they ate it.

Laughter.

MITCHELL: It was all right. It tasted all right. If the thing hadn't rusted and if he hadn't used that steel wool, on it, it'd been all right I guess.

Question: Yeah. That's too bad. Nothing like ice cream. I know that it gets hot on that ship.

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah. But, not as bad as you'd think because we had a big awning up over the stern, you know, and we'd go up there and sit down. Of course, we weren't supposed to and that was supposed to be the captain and the officers' quarters, you know, but they didn't care. We'd go up there and sit down, same as they did, because they stayed down there and in our part you'd gamble and play cards.

Question: Did you play a lot of cards on the ship?

MITCHELL: Some of them played cards all the time. I never was much for playing cards. I would always read most of the time.

Question: Did they do a lot of betting when they played cards?

MITCHELL: Well, no. Just to make it interesting and sometimes they'd be betting matches or something like that.

Question: You didn't have a whole lot to bet I don't imagine.

MITCHELL: No.

Question: At least in the way, that would be about the only way you could spend money out there.

MITCHELL: Yeah. And most of the time whoever went out there didn't have no money no way because they spent it before they got there.

Question: He had a whole month to spend all his money before he got back out and made a little more. When you were on the *LV-52*, I know that one big change – was that you had these electric refrigerators on it.

MITCHELL: Oh, yeah.

Question: And I think it was Oliver was telling me about when he used to get a big chunk of ice.

MITCHELL: That was a long ice box. You'd fill it full of ice and then . . .

Question: Would that last a month?

MITCHELL: Well, not too far from it. And about the last part, you'd be eating canned goods and stuff like that and fish if you could catch them.

Question: Was Fenwick Island a good place for fishing?

MITCHELL: Pretty good, yeah. There was a wreck out there.

Question: Did you do it?

MITCHELL: Well, I've done a little bit of fishing. I wasn't too much for fishing, but that the only way I would go fishing was just to get out of work.

Question: Yeah.

MITCHELL: You'd go out there and fish in the morning and you didn't have to work.

Question: Every day you'd have two 4-hour watches?

MITCHELL: Yeah. One man at lunchtime – everybody worked in the morning and done something or other, shining brass, cleaning the deck . . .

Question: Housekeeping?

MITCHELL: Yeah. But, after lunch, why everybody – most of them – would go take a nap, but one man who would be on watch in the pilot house, he'd be on watch. And of course, he'd have to stand watch all night. The first watch the captain takes from about 8 to 12, and then sailors would take – whoever or however amount there was on there, why maybe two hours I'd be on and the other fellow two hours. The cook got up around 6:30 I guess it was.

Question: And he'd be getting up, getting ready to cook?

MITCHELL: Yeah.

Question: How many men would you usually have on the ship?

MITCHELL: Most time, there was around ten on there all times, and there was about 15 in the crew. There'd be about five on all the time.

Question: That time that everybody got sick after they ate the ice cream, what did you do then?

MITCHELL: All I know, we just did best we could.

END OF INTERVIEW

Interview with Frank Oliver

Interviewed by Frank Hebblethwaite

Interview dated August 14, 1980

Question: I wanted to ask you a little bit about when you were growing up.

OLIVER: Uh-huh.

Question: You said you grew up in Portsmouth?

OLIVER: In Portsmouth, right. Went to school – went to Catholic school.

Question: You graduated high school?

OLIVER: Yeah, right.

Question: And then that's when you joined the service?

OLIVER: That's when I joined. Otherwise, jobs were scarce at the time and I had a connection with the Lighthouse Service and that's when I got a job on a lightship.

Question: And, just kind of thinking back about the whole thing, do you think it was a good thing to do?

OLIVER: It was a good experience. A very good experience. It helped me to progress in my other jobs that I got with the government. Otherwise, we knew on a ship that you do all kinds of work.

Question: Right.

OLIVER: You are called on to do everything.

Question: In a way, it really has to be all kinds of things because it's more or less –

OLIVER: That's right.

Question: - A world of its own.

OLIVER: And you have to make quick decisions also. If you don't, you'd get in trouble.

Question: And did you learn about electronics on the ship?

OLIVER: No, I had taken a course in electronics.

Question: That's how you picked that up.

OLIVER: That's right.

Question: But, when you were on *LV-116*, and it was a diesel electric ship, and when you were standing watch, what were the main things that you had to do?

OLIVER: You had to keep your pressure gauge – each nozzle – we had Winton diesels and each one of them had injectors. They had four injectors and each injector had a gauge. Be sure that you was getting the right air and the right fuel at all times. Then, you had your low pressure gauges and you had your high pressure gauges. And each engine had a three stage compressor on each engine, and you had also check your high pressure bottles and your low pressure bottles, and you'd pump your air into the high pressure bottles and transfer them over to keep the low pressure filled. And you would have to be transferring all the time. And, your duty, when you was on watch and it was underway, was walking between your four diesels. And, then sometimes the engineer would go topside and he'd taking care of the panels. Your panels had a control and a switch for each engine and when you cutting one engine in, you had relays. A little bit of voltage would go – the relays would close and voltage would step up until you got – it wouldn't shoot all the voltage to it at one time, which would kind of burn something up. You'd just gradually shot the voltage through your main generator and your main generator was on the end of the screw/the shaft.

Question: So, you did have pretty good control of how much power you had to move it.

OLIVER: Right. That's right. Uh-huh. Otherwise, you could put two engines. You could put the front starboard or the aft or port one on, or you could put all four on or one on, but when you was on station, you had generators, auxiliary generators to run. You didn't have to run your main engine. You could run your small generators and you had one on the port side, one on the starboard. One day,

you'd run one of them and the next day you'd turn it off and run the other one and then you'd kind of overhaul the one that you'd run for 24 hours. Clean out the injectors, the fuel injectors, and be sure you were getting the correct air and everything.

Question: So, four mains?

OLIVER: You had four main engines.

Question: Did you run the engines for the whole trip?

OLIVER: Only while it was underway. And then if you had a big storm and you wanted to keep the ship heading into the wind, see, you'd start the engines and keep going ahead. That would kind of keep the ship from rolling too much. You'd keep it heading into the wind.

Question: If the fog horn was going, did you have to do anything particular in the engine deck?

OLIVER: Had to be sure that your bottles – your high pressure bottles – were full, because she would blow by air you see.

Question: Was there ever a time when it was really foggy out there?

OLIVER: Oh, yeah. It'd get so thick sometime you could hardly see your hand before you. That's right. And it'd set in quick. (Snapping fingers). That's why you had the bell, the automatic bell on the bow. You could just throw a switch and that'd start ramming that bell.

Question: And that was controlled from the engine deck?

OLIVER: It was controlled from the pilot house.

Question: The pilot house?

OLIVER: Right, and you'd throw your switch and until you got your air up and you started the foghorn. As soon as the foghorn start blowing, you'd cut your bell off.

Question: And the bell would ring automatically?

OLIVER: Yeah.

Question: Would it have a pattern like the foghorn?

OLIVER: No, no. It just get boom-boom-boom! But the foghorn was worked on a governor and you'd have little recesses on it and as the contacts go over the high ridge, it would blow. When it'd go through the valve, it would cut off, and that's exactly how your light on *LV-52* was working. It was so many seconds on, so many seconds off. That was on the ship's chart and you'd see that light and you'd knew exactly what lightship you was approaching.

Question: When you were on *LV-116*, was there ever a time when you thought, "Aw, what am I doing here?"

OLIVER: No, no. Not at all. Otherwise, you'd look forward to your 30 days leave.

Question: You knew it was coming?

OLIVER: You knew it was coming. All you had to do was put two months out there and you knew that 30 days was coming.

Question: Did you ever have to spend longer than your two months out there?

OLIVER: No, no. Not unless somebody got sick and I've never run into that, but I did stay one year on *LV-52*.

Question: Yeah, you did that on a bet.

OLIVER: Yeah. But we wasn't compelled to stay on it that long.

Question: Did you keep in contact with some of the men that were in the crew?

OLIVER: Oh, yeah. Sure. My wife and I now correspond with Captain Andersen's daughter, Mrs. Quick. She said she just got a letter from my wife the day before yesterday.

Question: When did you find time to get married?

OLIVER: Well, I got married when I went on the *Speedwell*. I got married in 1934. Uh-huh, 1934.

Question: Just after your lightship days?

OLIVER: That's right, after my lightship days. I never got married when I was on a lightship.

Question: Not really –

OLIVER: And when I was on the *Speedwell*, I lived on 3rd Street and my wife would come out on the back stoop. I lived in the second apartment, upstairs apartment, and she'd come out on the stoop and she could see the ship coming in. Some days, we'd go out in the morning at 7 o'clock and work 5 or 6 buoys that were just outside Cape Henry and be back at night at 5-5:30.

Question: And other times you would stay out longer?

OLIVER: Oh, yeah. Sometimes, you'd have a deck load of buoys and you would have to go further than – maybe go up the York River or something like that. We used to lay buoys up the James River too. And then during the winter time, we used to break ice – we was an ice breaker.

Question: Did you do that up the James River ?

OLIVER: Up the James River , yeah.

Question: Did you go as far as Richmond ?

OLIVER: Yeah, oh yeah. Sure.

Question: Pretty much up and down the whole river?

OLIVER: That's right.

Question: Did you ever go through any really bad storms in the winter time?

OLIVER: Oh, yeah.

Question: With ice on the ship in the winter time?

OLIVER: No, no. Otherwise, we'd get the weather report and we'd batten everything down, be ready for them.

Question: And did you –

OLIVER: Just ride them out.

Question: And did you yourselves take readings for weather, keep a report on the ship?

OLIVER: No, no. You see, I was in the black gang. That was the radio operators responsibility, yeah. He always got all of our weather reports, during any hurricane or any storms. Our worst storms used to be a northeaster – all your northeasters would kind of give us – that would be coming not from the inland, but from the ocean side. It would kick up a storm. But, now at Diamond Shoals,

your northwesterners would give them a fit down there, because they were in a different location.

Question: Well, at least, if it was a northeaster coming in for you guys, you didn't have to be worry about being blown out to sea.

OLIVER: No.

Question: Just being blown in.

OLIVER: That's right.

Question: So, you might be washed up ashore too?

OLIVER: But, very few lightships ever drug anchor, because them mushroom anchors when they were down, they'd stay. Sometimes, they used to go out and the relief ship – to relieve them – and the winch couldn't pull it out of the mud. You'd have to transfer your chain to the relief chain ship and come in with one anchor.

Question: Stayed put!

OLIVER: Right, and then you'd change it over when you'd come back.

Question: So, you did have some problems pulling up the anchor?

OLIVER: Oh, yeah, you see it was because they got that mushroom shape. Suction.

Question: Do you remember the Ash Wednesday storm in the early 60s?

OLIVER: Yeah. We broke both anchors in that. That was the worse storm the lightship had ever been in. They broke the main anchor and then they put the temporary anchor, but that wouldn't hold.

Question: That was a northeaster.

OLIVER: That was a northeaster, yeah. Oh, they were rough, boy.

Question: There was something – I want to thank you a lot for coming and talking to us today.

OLIVER: My privilege.

Question: And I'd really like to be on a ship in the old days when it was the lightship.

OLIVER: Well, it was good duty, very good duty. Very good duty. It's the experience a lot of people don't have.

Question: [I just showed him a clipping from a newspaper in 1936, and that a storm in that year in December of 1936.] Were you on board ship then?

OLIVER: No, no, I wasn't aboard then. I left in 1936 and I went on the Tender *Speedwell*. Let me see. Let me get my record here. Yeah. From 10/09/33 to 08/21/38, I was a seaman on the *Speedwell*. That was an outside buoy tender

and that was when they was transferred – they was on the Chesapeake – and that was the hurricane – what was that, the hurricane of ?

Question: That was September then, that one of 1936. So, when you were on *LV-116*, in other words you were only on it when it was at?

OLIVER: Fenwick Island station. Right.

Question: And you quit right before it was going to go to Chesapeake?

OLIVER: Right. See, when it went to Chesapeake, the Coast Guard was getting ready to take over.

Question: Right.

OLIVER: And I didn't want to commit myself and sign up for no four years, so I knew three or four of the fellows on the *Speedwell* and I got transferred from – I didn't quit, I got transferred from the lightship to the tender, the buoy tender. And the buoy tenders, they used to work the lightship once a month.

Question: And did you have to stay on the *Speedwell* for a certain length of time?

OLIVER: No, no. Sometimes she would stay in port for a week if they didn't have no buoys to work. Then, you'd stay aboard and did ship work. But, then once a month, she would go north and work the lightships north, and then in the middle of the month, she'd go south and work the ones down south which was Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout.

Question: So, you still worked out of Portsmouth ?

OLIVER: Right out of Portsmouth Buoy Yard – right.

Question: When you were on the lightship, did you yourself go through any bad storms while you were out there?

OLIVER: Oh, sure! You'd have three or four storms every year. We was in a storm, I think it was 19 and 29, and every lightship in the district got off-station except ours. We was the only one that didn't move off the station. When those mushroom anchors get down in that bottom – and that's a big storm when you drag one of those mushroom anchors – and we was the only one that didn't move off of station.

Question: Did you go through some storms when they did lose the anchor?

OLIVER: No, never lost anchor. No, never lost one. And we had never put our reserve anchor over. A lot of times we almost did, but we come out of it all right. But, I can tell you one time, we had a narrow escape. I had the watch in the engine room from 12 to 4 and I come up on topside about 1 o'clock, and I saw a ship bearing down on us. And, no light on in their pilot house and I run up on topside and give six short blasts. When I did, a light come up and when that tanker – that oil tanker passed us, I could almost jump from our stern to them.

Question: That close.

OLIVER: That was that close. What they was doing, they was steering by an iron mike and whoever was in the watch, whoever was in the wheelhouse, was just goofing off, wasn't paying attention.

Question: What was that you said, they was steering behind what?

OLIVER: On an iron mike – automatic steering.

Question: Oh.

OLIVER: See, you set your iron mike to automatic – in other words, he plotted where the lightship was and he set that mike on the lightship.

Question: So, he had plotted a course on the lightship?

OLIVER: Right, he'd split us in two if I hadn't blowed that.

Question: They'd set the course for the lightships?

OLIVER: That's right. That's just like the admiral was speaking about the one off of New York.

Question: The one that got cut in half?

OLIVER: Yeah, the one that got cut in half.

Question: Do you recognize the guys in there?

OLIVER: Yeah. That's Dickson right here. There's the first mate. There's the cook. Charley Mitchell. Cullpepper. Oly Olson.

Question: What kind of guy was the cook? What was he like?

OLIVER: Gus? Gus was a good fellow.

Question: Did he make good food?

OLIVER: Oh, yeah. He could really cook, yep. This was the storm in 1933. That was a real hurricane. Now, this is the *LV-116*.

Question: Right.

OLIVER: See, there's all your ventilators. All your hatches. See them?

Question: Uh-huh. What color was the top deck of the ship painted back then?

OLIVER: Gray. Battleship gray.

Question: Battleship gray. I always wondered about that and on the old pictures it looks so dark. It doesn't look like it's buff colored. It was all in gray while you were on it?

OLIVER: Yeah. Uh-huh.

Question: Including the fittings too?

OLIVER: That's right.

Question: And were the masts themselves painted gray?

OLIVER: No, they were painted buff color.

Question: Oh, they were buff?

OLIVER: Buff, yeah.

Question: So, was there anything on the top deck that was painted white?

OLIVER: Well, your stanchions, you know.

Question: But that was it?

OLIVER: That's it. Plus your threads on your turnbuckles were never painted. Because every one in awhile you'd have to tighten them up. They was greased.

Question: I could tell you now they hadn't been tightened up very much.

OLIVER: You can't tighten them. I noticed.

Question: They are all painted. You were saying one other time that you used to have a cat or a couple of cats onboard.

OLIVER: We had one cat. We lost him overboard. In one storm, it was so bad and the ship was rolling so bad that we had to put the cat in a toe sack and tie him to a stanchion. He was sliding from side to the other. See, he couldn't get no hold on that METAL deck.

Question: And did you lose him during that storm?

OLIVER: No, nah-nah. Didn't lose him during that storm.

Question: Then, how did . . .

OLIVER: He must have gotten up on the topside. You'd see him sometimes on the top deck, walking around the rails. He must have slipped. We lost him one night.

Question: Just disappeared one night.

OLIVER: Yeah, disappeared.

Question: What was the cat's name?

OLIVER: Tom. We just called him Tom – an old tom cat.

Question: Did you have any other pets on the ship?

OLIVER: No, no other pets.

Question: And did you play a lot of cards?

OLIVER: Yeah, yeah. Played penny ante. One guy had money one night and the other guy would have it the next night. But all looked forward at that one month's leave. That was what you looked forward to.

Question: What kind of things did you do on your one month's leave?

OLIVER: Well, you done a lot of heavy drinking. Yeah.

Question: That figures. I guess to catch up. Well, you had a still on the ship – that you had to catch up, so you were already ahead of the game.

OLIVER: Yeah, that's right, but had to keep it up. But we didn't make it very much. We only made it several times. We didn't make it much. You didn't know who was going to squawk to the captain on something like that.

Question: Did you ever make a still on the *LV-116*?

OLIVER: No, we couldn't do it.

Question: Why?

OLIVER: Because we didn't have the heat down there. We didn't have no boilers. See, we made it between two coal burning boilers.

Question: Oh. Couldn't get it warm enough?

OLIVER: That's right.

Question: So, all your whiskey still days were over?

OLIVER: Were gone.

Question: All the banana brandy days were on *LV-52*?

OLIVER: That was on *LV-52*. Yeah, the old coal burner.

Question: I want to ask a little bit about your own background, like how you got involved with the Lighthouse Service.

OLIVER: Well, when I came out of high school in 1925-1926, jobs was scarce. So, I knew a couple of fellows that was in the service and I found there was an opening on *LV-52*, and I took it.

Question: And had you grown up in Virginia?

OLIVER: Yeah. I was born and raised right within the sight of the Navy Yard, the Norfolk Navy Yard.

Question: So, you had always been at least a little bit sort of

OLIVER: That's right. Well, my daddy before me was in the Navy.

Question: So, was *LV-52* the very first ship that you had worked on?

OLIVER: That's right, the first one I worked on. I worked on three lightships. I was on *LV-52*, *LV-116* and *LV-80* which was the relief ship. I was only on that less than a year – the relief ship. Now, they would go out. They would stay in port six months in a year, but then they'd go out and they'd start north and relieve Fenwick Island and come down to Winter Quarters and then they'd go south and get the two south ones – and then, they'd come in for repairs. They'd stay in sometimes for six to eight weeks and go back out on a station, and after they'd relieved all the lightships, then they'd come in, into port and that you stayed in port too long.

Question: You said that that was *LV-80*?

OLIVER: *LV-80*. . .that was the relief.

Question: Were you on that after the *LV-1166*?

OLIVER: Let me see. Let me check it? Yeah, I was on the Relief ship in – let's see – August 17, 1933 – I was on the Relief ship. But my biggest duty was from 10/09/33 – for five years I was on the *Speedwell*. That was an outside tender and when the Coast Guard took it over, they sent it to Guam.

Question: And then you retired?

OLIVER: No, when the Coast Guard started taking it over, I got out and I went to work for the government . . .

END OF INTERVIEW

Interview with Sven Olsen

Interviewed by Frank Hebblethwaite

Interview dated August 19, 1980

Question: Now, Sven, you were just talking to us a little bit about how nice it was to have a new ship, the *LV-116*. What other things were really different about *LV-116* from *LV-52*?

OLSEN: Well, we had a beautiful pilothouse we could stay inside in the bad weather, you know.

Question: You didn't have that on the *LV-52*?

OLSEN: The *LV-52* was nothing. It was just the open deck and it made an enormous difference when you got onboard the ship and that beautiful pilot house and great big port holes you could look around and see everything. The only handicap – we had a fantastic strong fog horn – and you definitely could not stay out on the deck without hurting your ears. And, the oddest part was in one particular time – it was several years after the ship came on the station – in fact, I

believe it was after Madeline's father retired. We had a snow storm that set in on a Christmas Eve and we had the fog horn going for 21 days – believe it or not!

Question: Jeez.

OLSEN: And, let me tell you, that's hard on the ears, even though we stayed inside. We had to look out through the port holes, once in awhile, open the port hole because the visibility was next to nothing and it, you know, it could be dangerous not to see anything if there was any possible way to do so.

Question: When did the fog start? What date?

OLSEN: Well, it started something like on Christmas Eve afternoon. The tender had been out there the day before with supplies and the returning liberty party and they was going farther north. They were going temporarily for a northern lightship that was at the entrance to Delaware River and they were seeking harbor into Delaware River on account of that snowstorm, so they were delayed by coming back again to Portsmouth which was our headquarters.

Question: Uh-huh. The snowstorm – was that at Fenwick station?

OLSEN: No, no that was on the Chesapeake station. Yes, indeed. We had a lot of nice weather, but this storm that came up that time, that was a terrific long period of bad weather.

Question: Were there some other really bad storms you went through?

OLSEN: Well, we had three hurricanes.

Question: Uh-huh.

OLSEN: In these years that we was at the Chesapeake station and each time we broke loose. You see, when the wind gets over 100 miles an hour – laughter – and it's a terrific strain on the chain. Even though we had a 150 fathom of chain out, the anchor will hold. I believe that the chain wouldn't part, but the chain did part each time, and we managed each time to get the spare anchor over board and also run the engine, you know, full speed ahead until we finally managed to get the bow toward the sea and the wind. But, in the meantime, we could reach as far as 8 to 10 miles away from the station.

Question: Did you manage to get the spare anchors to hold?

OLSEN: No, we couldn't see anything. The visibility was too poor. All this was reported by wireless. You know, we were broken loose and out of the station, so they could send – you know – the information along to the shipping about us, that there was no lightship on the station. And, then, as early as the weather permitted, the relief lightship came out you know and took our place, you know, along the regular station and we proceeded to Portsmouth for whatever necessary repair that had to be done.

Question: And you told me awhile ago that one time you went up on top of the pilot house?

OLSEN: Yeah, that was during one of the hurricanes and I wanted to see for myself if I could stay on the decks, you know, and holding to the rail, and the report was about 125 miles that time that the wind was blowing, so I went up on the pilot house, and I was hanging onto the rail and my feet just blow away – I could not stay on the deck, even holding onto the rail, so I went right back again down to the deck and into the pilot house.

Question: Was that on a bet? Or, what made you do that?

OLSEN: No, I had been told by a fellow in Portsmouth he could stay on an automobile going 100 miles an hour, and I told him that there was no way in the world he could do it. He said all he needed was a little thing to hold himself, he said, and he said he had done this, so I told him, "I do not believe you!" So, I thought to myself, I'm going up on the top of the wheel house and I was hanging onto the high railing and there was only 25 more miles to the wind – and I couldn't stay there – so, I knew, oh, well, he couldn't stay on an automobile.

Question: What kind of work did you do when you were on the lightship Chesapeake?

OLSEN: Well, we, in the summertime, we did a lot of scraping and painting and we always painted the outside of the vessel as well, including the name. And then, of course, after we couldn't do anything on the outside any more. We had painted all the deck parts and scraped all the loose paint if there was any, and then we painted also the inside.

Question: What color was the deck housing?

OLSEN: The deck houses was red.

Question: Uh-huh.

OLSEN: And, if I am not mistaken, and then all the inside – I called them gangways – of course they was white and inside in the pilot house. Yeah, I believe that everything outside was red.

Question: Even the outside on the deck?

OLSEN: No, the deck was gray, but the all the deck houses and the grill work around the ship, that was red, like the hull.

Question: Where the fittings are, would that be red?

OLSEN: Yeah. Yes, indeed. But the deck was the only thing that had a different color – that was gray.

Question: And, the colors have changed a lot.

OLSEN: Oh, indeed! Yeah.

Question: I mean it's green now inside.

OLSEN: Yeah.

Question: That used to be white?

OLSEN: We used to get this gray paint, you know, in the 5-gallon can and that was . . . If you saved it for next year, it was still good. It was mixed with linseed oil and turpentine into it and we could use it well again.

Question: Did you also stand deck watch?

OLSEN: Oh, indeed, yeah. Beginning at sunset, you know, one man had to be on the deck continuously and we split up the night where the first man stayed to

12 o'clock and the next man to 4, and then from 4 to the morning and then we stayed maybe that way for a week and then we changed over to this same man that might have been on from the early evening to midnight – he would come on from midnight to 4 o'clock in the morning.

Question: So, it would be a 4-hour watch?

OLSEN: Yes, that's right.

Question: What is something called "a lazy man's watch"?

OLSEN: What was that?

Question: Have you ever heard of something called, "A lazy man's watch"?

OLSEN: No, I can't say I have.

Question: I think it was you, they were telling me one time, that would use the pilot house to sit and watch the light? Sit near the radiator?

OLSEN: No, we had a big radiator in there, but I was never sitting there. I was more used to moving around a little bit. Yeah, I could never sit still very long. I got tired, if I sat still. I do that today, for that matter.

Laughter.

Question: Maybe that's why you're in such good shape now.

OLSEN: Thank you.

Laughter.

Question: What other things did you do to pass your time?

OLSEN: Well, in the afternoon, I usually worked up in the rigging on the mast you know, 50 times ups and downs, you know to get some exercise.

Question: Fifty times??

OLSEN: To get some exercise, yeah, and then in the evening I had a couple of burlap bags lying on the deck and I had to lie down on my back with a pair of dumbbells in my hand, you know, to take exercise.

Question: Uh-huh.

OLSEN: And that was a big help, you know, to keep active, and . . .

Question: And what kind of exercises did you do down below?

OLSEN: Well, the only exercise to being inside was I had a couple of burlap bags to lie down on the deck and then I would put a pair of dumbbells in my hand to take exercise and then I had a piece of pipe – stretched over – and I would pull myself up and down, you know, for exercise also. Yeah, did that for about an hour and a half each night when weather permitted.

Question: Did you do it at a certain time every day?

OLSEN: Yeah, in the evening.

Question: Uh-huh.

OLSEN: In the afternoon, I went up in the rigging and in the evening I took the exercise for activity.

Question: And a lot of you would catch sharks, right?

OLSEN: Yeah. I was the only one that was catching the sharks and if anybody wanted it – the shark bone – I gave it to them. And the average shark I was catching was anywhere from 8-10 feet, and the biggest one, the only big one I caught was 16 feet.

Question: Phew!

OLSEN: And that was really a baby! But we didn't want that shark meat or anything from that shark aboard, so we took the shark up in the little davits that was hanging over the side, and I pulled the shark high up then and I got hold of one of the cooks butcher knife and I just opened up its stomach and let all the guts go about and then I cut up all the meat – all I wanted was the bone – and then I took it onboard and I wanted the teeth. So, I had to get the jaw and after I got that, I put that in a bucket of hot water in order so that the teeth could fall out.

Question: Uh-huh.

OLSEN: And I had about 500 teeth at one time, but I gave them all away.

Laughter.

Question: 500 teeth!

OLSEN: After I returned – I gave them all to the kids in the neighborhood.

Question: Nobody ever wanted to eat the shark meat?

OLSEN: No. It stunk to me. Yes, indeed.

Question: Did you ever try it?

OLSEN: No, I don't remember anybody trying it, no.

Question: And what did you do with the shark's backbone?

OLSEN: Well, I made a walking cane. I will show you one before we leave. I made something – about a dozen canes – and one of the engineers, he made a handle for me. I saved all aluminum parts and I brought them out to the lightship and he made a molding and he made these – all I had to do was to file it down and then sand it and it would be real smooth – and I put the length I wanted on the stems and then he put a thread on each end and a washer and I put the bones on exactly like I cut them off. But, they had to be dried for about a year before you could get the stink out. I cut the bone apart and hanged it on a wall – hanged it up in the rigging for six months – to get the stink out.

Laughter.

OLSEN: Then, I took it down and I picked all that meat out from them holes and the skin and I hanged it right up in the rigging again, and then when it was proper dry, then I sanded each piece.

Question: OK, now, when did you first go to sea?

OLSEN: I went to sea when I was only 15 years old. I stayed aboard about 9 or 10 months and we were bound for a place they called Bayonne, that is south of Bourdeaux in the Bay of Biscayne in the coast of France, and the pilot ran the darned ship ashore on the rocks and then the next day the ship broke in two.

Question: What ran into shore?

OLSEN: The pilot we had on board.

Question: Oh, the pilot.

OLSEN: Yeah, he run the ship up on this rock. That was just on the entrance to where he was going on. There was blowing a gale of wind and whatever happened, I can't quite remember, but anyway he ran up on the rock and this ship broke in two the next day. So, we were picked up by a French tugboat and taken into this Bayonne. But, I wasn't going back to Norway after 9 or 10 months. I got a job on another Norwegian ship down there. There were plenty of jobs them days in 1915.

Question: That first trip in France – that was when you were only about 15?

OLSEN: Yeah, that's right.

Question: Were you scared by it?

OLSEN: No, I was never scared of the water and the ships. It didn't bother me or anything. The only thing I've always been afraid of is fire. There were people burned to death and that always made such a bad impression on me, but the water and the ship, never had any affect on me.

Question: When was the first time you met Madeline and Captain Andersen and his family?

OLSEN: Well, that must have been in the spring or early summer of 1923, out to her uncle's house, Neil Andersen, who was the brother to her father. And they must have been having a party because there was a lot of people out there and I remember I was meeting all of them at that particular time.

Question: It was 1923? That was when you had stopped here?

OLSEN: Yeah, I had just been in this country for a short while then. And, I stayed here until the later part of 1925 and then I went back to Norway and I came back again in 1927, in the early part.

Question: And when you first met Captain Andersen, did you have any idea that you were going to be working for him later?

OLSEN: (With emphasis) Never! Never, never, never. But it wasn't many months after I came here in '23 before, you know her uncle, offered me a job on a lightship on Diamond Shoal and that's what I landed and I stayed there for over two years.

Question: So, first you started out working for Alexander's brother?

OLSEN: Yeah.

Question: Neil Alexander -- on the Diamond Shoals?

OLSEN: That is correct.

Question: And that was in 1927?

OLSEN: No, 1923.

Question: '23?

OLSEN: '23, yeah. No, in '27, when I came from Norway, I got a job with her father right away. On Fenwick Island Lightship.

Question: So, you started out working on the Diamond Shoals with Neil?

OLSEN: Yes, sir.

Question: Then, you went back to Norway?

OLSEN: That is right, yeah.

Question: And then you came back and you worked for Alexander?

OLSEN: That is right, yes.

Question: Well, how would you compare the two brothers as captains?

OLSEN: Well, Neil was a wonderful man, but he was more quiet, but Alexander had a wonderful sense of humor and when he started to tell me about all these stories – you know, what happened up in the years back on the various parts of the Chesapeake Bay, it was very fascinating to me and very interesting. Neil was a wonderful man, but he was real quiet, you know. He didn't have much to say. But, Alexander, Madeline's father, he could really – well, both of them had a wonderful disposition – but Madeline's father had a wonderful sense of humor. Now, Neil was also a wonderful man, but he was I would say a quiet person in comparison to his brother.

Question: Did they have different methods of treating the crew?

OLSEN: No, they treated everybody wonderfully, the two of them. Nobody could expect to be with any nicer man than those two brothers. Wonderful!

Question: So, they were both very good captains?

OLSEN: Oh, indeed, they were! I should say so!

Question: So, it was '27 when you started working for Alexander Andersen.

OLSEN: That is correct, yes.

Question: What vessel was that on?

OLSEN: That was on the Fenwick Island , old *LV-52*. And we stayed on board there until the new ship came out, you know, in 1930, and then we went back to Fenwick Island station until 1933. In other words, I stayed three years on the old Fenwick Lightship and then three years on the new ship which really turned out to be the Chesapeake.

Question: So, six years on Fenwick station.

OLSEN: That's right. And that was the place we caught so much fish.

Question: You did a lot of fishing there?

OLSEN: Oh, my goodness! In the summer time we were fishing anytime. You could catch all the fish we wanted whether you wanted a bushel or you wanted a barrel. You could get that. I had 3 or 4 hooks on the line, just threw overboard and you had a fish, but you had to get to a wreck in order to get all that fish. There was an old ship that was sunk there many years ago that belonged to the American Hawaiian Line and that was sunk very close to the lightship to where the lightship was laying. And if you could find that place, you could get all the fish you wanted.

Question: So, you would go out there in a boat?

OLSEN: Yes, indeed, yeah.

Question: And you would go fishing near the wreck.

OLSEN: Absolutely. If you could find the wreck and drop the anchor there and throw lines overboard, you would just pull in the fish all you wanted. Plenty of them. In the summertime.

Question: And what kind of fish did you catch?

OLSEN: Black bass – about 90-percent of the fish was black bass.

Question: And, did you like to eat fish?

OLSEN: Oh, did !! I mean to say. Well, I can truthfully say I never ate that much fish before in my life continuously. Now, this is really true. We were eating fish twice a day, six days a week all the time. There was only about 5 or 6 of us that was eating that and then on Sunday, we usually had a chicken or something else. That was the only day we didn't eat fish.

Question: You would have something special on Sunday?

OLSEN: Yes.

Question: Was Gus Hermanson the cook back then?

OLSEN: Yes, indeed. He was a very good cook. He could cook anything.

Question: What kind of guy was he? Was he easy to get along with?

OLSEN: Well, I'll say . . . he was. It all depends if something went against him. He might lose his temper, but that wasn't very often.

Question: And on *LV-52*, you had an ice box?

OLSEN: Yeah, we had a very poor refrigeration because this ice box was like a chest and after you put ice in there, after there wasn't any ice left, like if the tender was was like in the summer time two days overdue, most of the ice was melted. But, if we got a load of ice, what he had, he then didn't have much place for putting anything, except on the top and then we put a piece of canvas over it because they could not close the top, and, of course, that was just as good as closing the top I would say. At least, near to it to cover the whole ice box with a piece of canvas.

Question: I heard a story one time, I don't remember who it was, I think it was Frank Oliver who said something about the day you made ice cream.

OLSEN: Oh, every Sunday, we made ice cream most of the time. Yeah, we got one of them – it would handle about three gallons and I'm mixing the ice cream on Sunday morning and I saved the ice during the week and all to have plenty on hand. We had one of them 50-pound bags of salt and I would have 4 or 5 men help me to turn this this ice cream maker, you know, after having put all of it in the container. Well, I asked everybody what they wanted into it. They wanted canned peaches or they wanted strawberries or something like that or just plain vanilla. That was up to them and whatever was the choice, we made it. Most every Sunday during the summer. We had a big ice maker and it was making cubes about four times this big as an ordinary cube you see in the refrigerators and that was all just for making ice and we would get all the ice we wanted frozen in about four hours. So, we always had plenty of ice on hand and like I said, every Sunday we made ice cream, if the weather was o.k.

Question: Was there ever a time when some of the people on *LV-52* got sick?

OLSEN: No, I wouldn't say it was. It was very seldom anybody took sick. That didn't happen often, so far as I can remember.

Question: And how many men did you usually have on board the ship?

OLSEN: I'll say about 12 because one-third of the gang was usually on leave and that probably left something like 11 or 12 on board I would say.

Question: And how long would you spend on the ship at a time?

OLSEN: Well, I usually stayed at least three months, because I –

Question: That long?

OLSEN: Yeah, three or four months I stayed on board her.

Question: But you didn't have to stay that long?

OLSEN: No. Two months was all you had to stay, but I was single and I didn't have any particular place I wanted to go, so I usually stayed three or four months.

Question: What advantage did that have?

OLSEN: Well, it didn't have exactly any advantage, but I wasn't particularly interested to go anywhere. I lived with my sister and didn't have any extra space, so I figured out well I would only go – take not more than three times a year.

Question: Uh-huh.

OLSEN: So, I made out fine that way.

Question: I guess it gave you a chance to save up some more money too?

OLSEN: Oh, absolutely and most every summer, I took usually a trip up to Brooklyn, New York, you know, to visit some friends that I had probably known for many years. It happened to be probably about a half-dozen people that came from the same area as myself that lived in Brooklyn and I went to – you know most every year – to see them.

Question: Did some of them also work on ships?

OLSEN: No, I don't believe. Most of them had a job ashore. Guess that's the way they were brought up when they were growing up, so they stayed on the dry land up there.

Question: So, what did you think that you got word that you were going to go on a new ship?

OLSEN: Oh, that was a tremendous excitement. First, there were the beautiful accommodations. The old *LV-52* had nothing! But we got aboard and they said it was like coming into a first class hotel -- there were even two big portholes located underneath the bottom bunk. We couldn't wish for anything better. Oh, that was a first class ship. Big great refrigerator and everything.

Question: And no ice box.

OLSEN: Oh, no ice box. This refrigerator we had there, we could hang in a big cow and a hog.

Laughter.

END OF INTERVIEW

Interview with Madeline Quick, daughter of the first commanding officer of LV-116, Captain Alexander Andersen.

Interviewed by: Frank Hebblethwaite

Date of interview: August 19, 1980

Question: We are at the house of Sven Olson in Baltimore this afternoon and we are going to start talking with Madeline Quick, who is the youngest – is that right?

MADELINE QUICK: Yes.

Question: The youngest daughter of Captain Alexander Andersen, the very first captain on the Lightship Chesapeake, *LV-116*, from 1930 to 1937. Madeline, first I'd just like to ask you what it was like to be the daughter of a captain of a lightship?

QUICK: I was very proud to be the captain's daughter and we were a close-knit family. And, I had three sisters beside myself and it was always like a holiday when Dad came home. So, we just enjoyed – and we enjoyed when he came home, because after all when your Dad is out two to three months at a time and he's only home for a month, you try to make as much pleasure as you possibly can to enjoy yourself as a family.

Question: Sounds good. Did he always have two months on the ship?

QUICK: Either two months or three months. It all depended on just what the circumstances were, and then he was home for about a month.

Question: And who were the other sisters?

QUICK: Well, I have one sister named Jenny. She was the oldest. And then my sister, Eleanor. She was next. And then my other sister, Anna Marie, and then me.

Question: And were all of you born in this country?

QUICK: No. We were all born – my oldest sister was born in Norway and she was going on three years old when she came to this country. And the rest of us were born right in East Baltimore. In Hagerstown.

Question: So, you grew up in Baltimore?

QUICK: Right. That's right. In fact, I was born and raised on Harland or Holland Avenue at 226 S. Harland Avenue and I lived there until I got married.

Question: And how did your mother feel about your father working on the lightship?

QUICK: Well, there was no complaints. It was his livelihood, and we were made to understand what that was, and he – there was no dispute if he should be on something else or he should do something else. He liked his life, and, of course, we didn't like to see him out as long as they was sometimes, but after all that was our livelihood, too. But, he was in my opinion, we were what I call a good family. We were taught from the beginning that our father was a seafaring man and that was the way he made his living.

Question: And when did your father start working on ships? Was it something that he had done for a long time?

QUICK: Oh, yes. In his early youth, he started to sea when he was about 14 years old, and then he came over here to the States and he worked on the tug boats before he went into the Lighthouse Service.

Question: So, when you were a little girl, at first he was working on the tug boats?

QUICK: No. He was on the lightships. I think I'm right on that. I should have brought that book along with me. But, he first worked on tugs when he first came to this country and then later on he went on to the Lightship Service.

Question: And, do you remember what lightship he started working on?

QUICK: I should have had that book with me. I'm sorry.

Question: So, when he started, you - about how old were you when he started working on lightships?

QUICK: Oh, I was small, because I don't recall offhand. Let's see. He retired in 1937, and he was in the service. I was about, I would say 8 or 9 years old if I remember correctly, but he was on the tug boats when I was a baby and like that.

Question: Uh-huh. So, what you remember most is your father being captain on lightships?

QUICK: Uh-huh.

Question: Did he have a special uniform that he wore?

QUICK: Yes, he wore the regulation uniform of the Lightship Service.

Question: And, did you like his uniform?

QUICK: Oh, sure.

Question: Were you impressed by it?

QUICK: Who wouldn't be! Very proud of it and he was proud of it also. Of course, I mean, he had to wear that, you know, because that was the ruling, but he never took and wore it when he was ashore. You know, he wore his civilian clothes.

Question: What kind of things did you do with your father when he had his shore leave?

QUICK: Well, we did a lot of things. One thing for certain, when he was home, him and my mother they always had a trip downtown and he loved to go shopping with us, and he would take Momma to lunch and then they would go to a show. They loved to go see good shows.

Question: A movie?

QUICK: Yeah. So, and then they enjoyed going to church and then church functions and then to go around and visit the family and like that. And, of course, as we grew up and like that, my two oldest sisters – the first one that was married was Jenny. Why, she lived in New York. And, then my sister, Anna Marie, why, after she completed her training as a nurse, she went to New York. So, it meant when he was home on vacations, why we went up there to visit them.

Question: In New York?

QUICK: New York.

Question: it must have been exciting for you.

QUICK: Oh, yes. It was fun driving the old 1926 Buick – on the old roads – because the first car we had a 1926 Buick.

Question: I guess it was a long trip.

QUICK: Oh, it took anywhere from 8 hours or more. You know, all those back roads and no expressways whatsoever. But, it was fun. We had a good time doing it. We would pack a lunch, because there wasn't such a thing as all these restaurants and things like you have nowadays, but we used to pack our own lunch and take our own drinks and everything with us. Then, we'd stop along the way and have lunch and keep on going.

Question: So, it was almost like a holiday when your father was home.

QUICK: Oh, yes. Yes. Because we'd always try to do things that he would like to enjoy, things he enjoyed, and what he liked to enjoy with the family.

Question: Did he ever miss some holidays, like Christmas?

QUICK: Oh, oh definitely. Many a times.

Question: Did you make up for that or how did you do that?

QUICK: If he wasn't home for Christmas or something like that, why, we would make it up afterwards.

Question: Uh-huh.

QUICK: And we always kept a tree up, you know, for a long, long while and we sort of had a little Christmas for ourselves.

Question: You would maybe have Christmas twice?

QUICK: Yeah. But, he used to enjoy Christmas and holidays, but, you know, he couldn't expect to be home every year on Christmas and like that, because the mate and like that, they had to have their chance, too. But, my father never really resented it or anything like that. Like he said that he couldn't be selfish and be home every Christmas, but then they would go back around a couple of days after the first of January and then Dad would come on home, you know, if they was home for Christmas.

Question: When you were a little girl, did you ever get to go onto some of the lightships that he was captaining?

QUICK: Well, I was on the old Fenwick, which was an old wood boat, because my mother and I, we used to go down to Norfolk when he used to come in for repairs. We'd go down on Friday evening and come back on a Sunday, and the same when he was on the Chesapeake when it came in for repairs. We used to go down, you know, just to be with him for a weekend.

Question: Would that be also down in Norfolk?

QUICK: It was down in Norfolk , and then it was up here in Baltimore you know when it first went underway. It came up to Baltimore to be going to oversee that all the equipment and everything was intact on the boat. It came into Lazaretto.

Question: That was right after they came up from Charleston?

QUICK: Yeah, right. And, of course it was there for a little while and we were down on it quite often. I used to do down and pick him up and bring him on home. It wasn't too far from home. I was his chauffeur.

Laughter.

Question: Did you ever get to know some of the other crewmen on the ship.

QUICK: Oh, yes!

Question: What were they like?

QUICK: Oh, they were swell. They treated me swell. They treated me with the utmost respect – and they better had!

Laughter.

QUICK: But, it was really – I think in all the years that I was old enough to get to know the members of the crew and like that, I think they were all very, very respectful. They were a nice group of men. Well, my father thought a lot of them, because he wouldn't tolerate any nonsense.

Question: How did he treat the crew? Was he hard on them?

QUICK: No. No. Sven can answer that, too. He wanted to see them get their jobs done, but I mean he wasn't one of those hard bull captains from what I understand. He treated them all alike. Because from even talking to the men that used to be on the boat and like that, they had the utmost respect for my Daddy, the utmost respect.

Question: Where had your father originally come from?

QUICK: He came from Norway. He came from Vestersonia, Norway.

Question: Is that a small town?

QUICK: Yeah, it's a small place, and it's mostly surrounded by water and to me, it's a beautiful place.

Question: You've been there.

QUICK: I went there and I saw it and also where my mother came from, and now I've been over there twice and it's ideal. It's a beautiful place.

Question: And, when he was growing up, I take it working on the boat was pretty much what everybody did.

QUICK: Yeah, true. And, of course, nowadays over there, it's different, because I mean a lot of them are in engineering and other things, but they all seem like they go to the boats.

[BREAK IN TAPE]

Question: So, you are talking about the expression that a lot of people used to say that a sailor would have . . .

QUICK: A wife in every port!

Question: A wife in every port.

QUICK: Any my father used to get so mad at that. He said that the people don't know what they are talking about. He said that you find good and bad in all types of people, whether they went to sea or they worked on land.

Question: That's for sure. As many jobs I've had – I've seen them all – and I've never worked on the water. Do you remember some about your father's brothers and sisters?

QUICK: Well, tell you the truth, the only brother that I can remember – I meant that I knew – was my Uncle Neil, and he was on lightships also.

Question: Oh, he was?

QUICK: He was on the Relief Lightship. Before the Relief Lightship, he was on the Diamond Shoals.

Question: Was he a captain also?

QUICK: Yes. He was a captain also. And the other brothers and sisters were all in Norway.

Question: So, it was just Alexander Andersen and his brother Neil.

QUICK: Yes.

Question: Did they both become U.S. citizens?

QUICK: Oh, yes. Both of them. My father got his citizen papers when he came to the States and after he got his citizen papers and had been able to save up enough money, he went back to Norway and he got married, and then that was

in 1896, and then he went back over to the States again and then he sent for my mother. It was almost three years afterwards that he came to the States.

Question: And –

QUICK: They never did go back.

Question: And then your oldest sister was born?

QUICK: Born there, right.

Question: So, it was between 1896 and 1899?

QUICK: She was born in 1896. She was a 9-month-old baby.

Question: So, when Alexander went back here –

QUICK: He didn't see her until she was almost 3 years old. So, my mother and father were married in January and my sister was born in November.

Question: Hmm. And he had already come back to Baltimore.

QUICK: Yes.

Question: So, she was three years old.

QUICK: But, it was the funniest – my mother used to say that when they got off the train in Baltimore and like that, my mother kept her informed what her father looked like and like that, and when she got off the train in Pennsylvania Station in Baltimore, she ran right to my father.

Laughter.

QUICK: Yeah. Momma and Pappa always talked a lot about that, how she could from just what Momma had taught her that she knew who our father was.

Question: Was he surprised?

QUICK: Oh, yes.

Laughter.

QUICK: Let me tell you, he was. But, like Momma used to say, too. It was hard when she first came to this country, because after all she came from a place where farmland and water ran and then go right into a mid-city.

Question: Right.

QUICK: And live in an apartment and not knowing anybody here.

Question: And did she speak any English?

QUICK: No. Nah-nah. Not a word. And, finally, it was a couple of months afterwards, the first woman she became acquainted with was a German woman and she said, "Oh," she says, "Around the block here, there's another Norwegian woman," and she introduced them and that was the first family that she met here. In fact, we were friend up until the time that they died. And her name was Jansen and she had one son and he was an engineer on a tug boat, so it was – but, it was very enlightening when the boats came over from Norway and came into Baltimore to get to see parts of the family that you wouldn't otherwise see.

Question: Did you see any of his other brothers or sisters?

QUICK: All his brothers and sisters were dead when I went to Norway. I never did see.

Question: In other words, they never did come over here.

QUICK: No. I mean none of them. I have seen – well, what would be my father's and mother's nephews or nieces, but as far as actual – actually any of the family, there was none.

Question: So, you never got to meet his mother and father?

QUICK: No. My grandfather, according to the Bible that I got, my cousin gave me my aunt's Bible. This was my mother's sister's Bible. And, according to that Bible, my grandfather died in 1905, so that even before I was born.

Question: What was his name?

QUICK: What was his name! See, I haven't studied up on all that yet, because I just got the Bible when I was in Norway.

Sven OLSON: She got it just this year.

QUICK: Yes, from my cousin, Margaret. She said she thought I would like to have it and she gave it to me. And, of course, it's pretty well worn, and I haven't been able to decipher out you know all the dates and things like that, but it was really – it goes back to the time when my grandmother and grandfather were married. When they were first married, he bought this Bible, and then he started recording, you know, the names in it. So, and I've been trying – because some of it is smeared so bad – that I haven't been really able to bring it out too much. And, I've got a lot of notes that I haven't been able to put together yet, but now where my father's house was – where he was born – that's all torn down, you know. And, of course, my one cousin is living on that point, and they have a small house there. It's a pretty little house.

Question: Is the town where he was from – is it along the shore?

MA; Alongside the water.

Question: It's not an island?

QUICK: It's an island. Sure, it's an island, because you can't get off of there without going on boat, right Sven?

QUICK: And that was a pleasure riding around on that boat. I enjoyed that. In fact, my book that I brought with me, I've got pictures of the island in there, and pictures I think it's in this book that I brought with me and pictures of the boat that we went on from Irondale out to the island. And I have a picture of my mother's house, too. That's still standing in Veruta and Yeving.

Question: What's the name of the town?

QUICK: Yeving.

Question: Was that close to your father's house?

QUICK: No, they had to come over on a boat.

Laughter.

QUICK: They had to row over.

Laughter.

Question: Any time you wanted to go some place?

QUICK: Yeah, and I used to think it was – when mother told me about it – when they got married, you know, they were married in January and it was cold and like that and here, in order to get to the church which was in Duva, they had to go over in a boat. So, and when I see all this and went out in a boat and the way they would come like that, I would think to myself, "IN JANUARY!!" You know – and that church there in Duva, is a gorgeous little church – beautiful. So, it is something to be worthwhile seeing.

Question: Were your parents very religious?

QUICK: Well, not strict religious, but they enjoyed going to church and things like that.

Question: Was it like a Norwegian church?

QUICK: Yeah, they went to a Norwegian church and they also went – when the Norwegian Seaman’s Church came to Baltimore, well they sort of catered more to that than they did the other church, because it seemed like whenever they went there – they used to have meetings on Thursday nights and Sunday nights they used to have church – and you could always rest assured you would meet somebody from over where they came from, which made it very enjoyable. But, like the Norwegian Seaman’s Church, I enjoy that, too, myself. I like to go there.

Question: Do you speak Norwegian?

QUICK: No, that’s one thing my mother used to tell us. She would speak to us in Norwegian and we would answer in English, and she never forced the issue, because she wanted us to learn to understand Norwegian, and, of course, she wanted to learn how to understand English.

Question: So, you kind of had--

QUICK: Yeah. Because lots of times when we were doing our homework, she would sit there with us you know, and try to help us, but, of course, not knowing the English language. She got to know it more every day. But, she talked very good Norwegian up to the day she died and very good English. And, my father, too, the same way.

Question: And when you went back to Norway, just recently, and you went there, were you able to use your?

QUICK: Oh, yeah. I studied up on Norwegian, and I did pretty good. The first time, I was kidding them and all and I said, "My Norwegian is like Lobscur," and I said, "I don’t know whether you can understand it or not," and "Lobscur" means it is all messed up. It means it’s all mixed up, you know. And it’s like a stew.

Question: Is that something they eat?

Laughter.

QUICK: Yeah.

Laughter.

QUICK: But, I made out just fine on my first trip and the last trip I made up still better.

Question: How many times have you been there?

QUICK: Twice, and I'm the first one from my mother and father's side that went back and I enjoyed every minute of both trips – absolutely marvelous. The hospitality and the way they live and like that, I like it.

Question: I meant to ask you when your father started out working on ships, I assume he was on a sailing ship?

QUICK: That's right – sailing ships first.

Question: And, did he have a preference for what kind of ship he worked on?

QUICK: No, he didn't. Not that I can remember. He might have had a preference like that, but he loved the ships, I mean to tell you. When he was home, I mean to tell you, we would always go down around Pratt Street, you know, and look at the ships and things like that, and he used to say, "Oh, isn't that a beautiful ship?" "Isn't that a beautiful ship?" – you know, all these new ships coming up, you know. And he used to love to go down there and because I know lots of

times, even when he was retired and he wasn't quite well, "Well, how about taking me a ride down around Pratt Street?"

Laughter.

QUICK: "So, I can see the boats."

Question: But, he worked on a lot of different type ships?

QUICK: Yeah, in his earlier days. See, he worked on sail ships and then other ships and then he went to the tug boats and from the tug boats to the light ships. Frank just asked me what they used to call me when I was little and growing up – I was called the Scrogg Cotton of the family.

END OF INTERVIEW

Interview with Burford Sears and his wife

Interviewed by: Frank Hebblethwaite

Date of interview: August 21, 1980

Question: This morning, we are at the house of Burford Sears in Woodbridge, Virginia. Burford was in the original crew of the Lightship Chesapeake, Light Vessel *LV-116*. Exactly what years did you work there, Mr. Sears?

SEARS: From 1931 to 1937.

Question: Did it seem like a long time?

SEARS: Oh, yeah, a long time to stay on one ship.

Question: So, it was six years altogether, right?

SEARS: Yeah, six years and nine months, something like that.

Question: In your years on the ship, how long did you have to spend out on the ship itself?

SEARS: We'd usually stay out 60 days and then in 30 days.

Question: Uh-huh, and while you were out there for the 60 days, what in particular was your job?

SEARS: I was an oiler.

Question: And what kind of duties did that?

SEARS: We stood watches in the engine room, six hours on and six hours off, around the clock.

Question: Uh-huh. Was it hard work?

SEARS: Not really. In good weather, when everything was going all right, you just had to be around and keep things clean and well, just be on the lookout for anything that would probably go wrong, but as far as manual labor was concerned, it wasn't too much. It wasn't too bad.

Question: When you stood watch, did you take a generator watch?

SEARS: Well, in the engine room or around on deck or wherever. You know, you didn't have to stay in one place all the time.

Question: So, even though you were an oiler, you didn't have to spend all your time in the engine deck?

SEARS: Not really, no. You could come up occasionally.

Question: Uh-huh. And would the hours of duty, the watches that you stood – did they switch around a lot?

SEARS: Ay, yeah. The first month after you come back from shore, you would take the 12-6, which, of course is 12 midnight to 6 o'clock in the morning, and then 12 o'clock in the day to 6 o'clock in the evening and we'd keep that for 30 days and then we'd just – the man coming back off from leave, he would take the 12-6 watch and you'd take from 6-12.

Question: So, you would move up?

SEARS: Yeah, just change hours is all. But it made it a little bit better, because sleeping was a little bit better, because it's kind of hard to sleep from 6 o'clock in

the morning until 12 o'clock near in the day, especially when all the other activities are going on, on the ship, see? Those people that to do their job, too, you see? And, it was extremely rough when we had fog for anybody to get to sleep because it was such a loud noise, but we managed some way and in them days – you're young, you don't pay much attention to it. You see, I was quite a youngster when I first went on there, which I was about just turned 21, you see.

Question: Uh-huh. Did you just recently come out of high school?

SEARS: Well, I got out of high school in 1929, and then I went to work with my brother-in-law and he had a Chevrolet agency, down in Coinjack, North Carolina, and, of course, that was the years of the Depression when a job – if you had a job, you just kept it regardless. And, of course, business went down and we wasn't doing too much business and I had this opportunity to go on this ship, see? And, so, I thought that would be a real adventure, so I went in.

Question: Was it an adventure for awhile?

SEARS: Well, yeah, I guess it was. It was something I had never been into before.

Question: Uh-huh.

SEARS: And it was a little bit more money than I was making. Of course, it wasn't much then. Of course, it was almost \$72.50 a month. Of course, that included your meals and board.

Question: Did it seem like a pretty good salary?

SEARS: Well, it was then, in 1931. It wasn't too bad. I was able to buy myself a car after a little while, but then cars wasn't very expensive then either.

Laughter.

Question: So, you grew up in Coinjack, North Carolina.

SEARS: Well, in that area, and then in 1935, we got married, and then we went to into the Norfolk and the Portsmouth area. And, then when I left the lightship, I went on a passenger boat that went from Norfolk to Washington. I stayed on there until I – that's where I finally got to be an engineer then – and I stayed on there for a few years until 1941, and then of course I went over to the institution – over in Lorton.

Question: Did you think that the years that you spent on the lightship gave you a good training for working on the ship later.

SEARS: Oh, well, yeah. You could always learn something, see, but when you take the examination for engineer, see, you have to get a license and you have to go before – it's the Coast Guard now, but in them days, it was the Maritime Commission. You'd have to take this examination. Of course, if you passed, you got a license and that licensed you so to be en engineer, which, of course, meant more money. And, of course, I would say a lightship is not the place for a person to work that's married, because you're gone too long.

Question: You still worked there for two more years after you got married, though?

SEARS: Yeah, we got married in October of 1935. It was about roughly two years.

Question: And I believe that you told me one time that your first child was born when you weren't home.

SEARS: That's right. I got – I think I got home the next day. I think it was born the day before and I finally got home the next day. Yeah, I think that's the way it was. That was in 1935 – no, 1936.

Question: Did they work that out for you special? Make any special arrangements?

SEARS: No.

Question: It just happened to work out that you got back.

SEARS: That's right. She couldn't wait until I got home, see?

Laughter.

Question: I was going to ask you about just before you came onto the lightship, was there any kind of background that you had to have that made you?

SEARS: Not really, I don't think so. I knew a man down in Coinjack that was a good friend of the chief engineer, which was Floyd, Lamar Floyd, and they needed somebody on the light ship. He needed a man and some way or another they found it out, so I guess they came down and wanted to know if I wanted a job, and so.

Question: Somebody came to you, asked you?

SEARS: No. They just – this friend of the chief’s was telling me about and then – he told me to come on down, and so the ship was in Portsmouth over at the buoy depot in Portsmouth and I went down there and so that’s when I started, which I think was on the 23rd of January, 1931, I believe, and we stayed there in Portsmouth. It had come in to have the bottom painted. We stayed there a week maybe, a couple of weeks, before I went out on the station, and so that’s where it got started and I think I got seasick about the first week I was out there.

Laughter.

SEARS: Yeah, that’s quite an experience, a person getting seasick. Man, you don’t care if you get real seasick, you’re afraid you are going to die for awhile and then you’re afraid you are not going to die.

Laughter.

Question: You’d rather you would.

Laughter.

SEARS: Yeah. You even smell food, it will just make you gag, see?

Question: You finally got over that . . .

SEARS: Well, to a certain extent. If you had a real bad one, you might feel a little bit funny, but, you finally get over it I think.

Question: Your first week out, was it bad weather?

SEARS: No, just rolling. You see, when that ship gets out and anchors on station, it’s never still. It continuously rolls, of course, depending on how rough it is, but the ocean can be almost slick calm, but they have them long ground

swells, see, and it just rolls slowly, and it not being very big, you know, and if it's real rough, it bounces around like a cork almost.

Question: And you had never worked on ships?

SEARS: Never been on one before and that was a new experience.

Question: So, did you grow up in a small town?

SEARS: Yeah, a little village. It's a rural community, you see.

Question: Was it near the coast?

SEARS: Well, it's the county in the extreme northeast corner of North Carolina, which is on the coast, you see.

MRS. SEARS: His daddy had a pool and they were playing around the water a lot and they had a lot of skinny dipping.

Question: So, you had been in the water. When you were out on the lightship, Burford, did you go through any really bad storms?

SEARS: Oh, quite a few of them. Yeah, we had one, I believe it was in September. I don't remember which year it was and that was when we lost all the lifeboats.

Question: Was that the one maybe in 1936?

SEARS: Probably. Well, I guess that one in 1936, that was after I left, but we had one I would around 1934 or 1935, was when we lost all the boats. That time, it didn't drag anchor.

Question: It didn't?

SEARS: And the one that they had in 1936 I guess it was, that's when it dragged the anchor, but we managed to stay on station in the worse one I was in. I would say – you'd have a pretty rough blow usually in the fall in the year. Sometime, they were worse than others, but this time one of them stands out in my mind and it was pretty rough. That's the time that the engineer, Mr. Culpepper, he wouldn't stay down in the engine room and I wouldn't stay down there either, so we both stayed up in the gangway. That was a time when the water washed over.

Question: Was it scary?

SEARS: Well, I guess when you're young, you don't have sense enough to be scared, and there's so much to do, you see, it kept you on your toes and you didn't have time to sit down and think about it, but . . .

Question: How high was the water that time?

SEARS: Well, I don't know. I would say 10-12 feet maybe. I don't remember, because when something like that is going on, you've got that thing battened down. You got everything closed up and that thing bouncing around like a cork.

Question: Did the ship make it through the storms o.k?

SEARS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We survived. I'm here. I'm here.

Laughter.

Question: Well, other than exciting storms, was life on the lightship pretty routine?

SEARS: Pretty well. Well, there's nothing to do. You didn't – other than standing your watch – when you were off duty, the only thing to do was to sleep, play pinochle or make belts.

Question: Did you make a lot of belts?

SEARS: Oh, I made several of them. Go in there and see if you can find that one in that drawer in there, in that top drawer in there, in my bedroom. I still got one of them.

Question: Did you play cards for money?

SEARS: No. I didn't have any money. How you going to play for money when you don't have any?

Question: Yeah.

SEARS: No. After the evening meal, which we called supper, of course, and they got everything cleared away, that's about the only thing we could do. We didn't have a radio there.

Question: You didn't?

SEARS: No, no. They didn't have no radios then.

Question: Did they get the radio by the time you left, or not?

SEARS: No, they didn't have a radio on there. Of course, they had – you know –

Question: Wireless?

SEARS: Wireless, yeah, they had that of course, but as far as turning on a radio and getting music from a station, no, we didn't have it then. And then to get exercise, you'd just walk up and down the gangways. A couple of you would get up together and walk up and down the gangways for a half or three-quarters of an hour. You could fish. Of course, you didn't catch much, but you'd have a fishing line. You'd catch some of them old sharks in the summer – them old big sharks.

Question: What did you do with the sharks? Did you eat them.

SEARS: No, no! Sharks are not fittin' to eat; at least, we didn't think so anyway. Then, see the shark has got a round backbone and we used to make walking canes out of them. I've made a couple of them. Anything – something to do. You'd just sit around doing nothing all the time. 60 days! 60 days is a long time, man, staying in one place and never get off of a ship no larger than that, you know. You know, it's only 133 feet long, you know, and 30 feet wide, that's kind of a small space you know.

Question: Only so much space to walk around.

SEARS: Yeah.

Question: Did you try and make things that you could maybe sell when you had leave?

SEARS: No, no.

MRS SEARS: Picture frames.

SEARS: Yeah, I made some picture frames when I was there. Yeah, there's one of them. There's one of them. Yeah, that thing is oh, I guess I made that about 1934, 1935, something like that. I'd say 1934, and let's see, there are 2-4-6-8-10-12-14. I think there are 28 strands in that, and when you get ready to make them to find out much cord you'll have to have, the length of your belt, you have to make it seven times around you.

Question: Seven times!

SEARS: Seven times around you. Now, each one of those knots right there has to be all them ends pulled through twice, which they are just flat knots, that's all they are. Now, when you want to make this – one like this – you just tie them all the same way, but here you tie one one way and the other the other way.

Question: Does it depend on what kind of knots you are using?

SEARS: No, just a plain flat knot.

Question: I mean if you are using a different kind of knot, maybe you have to have more cord?

SEARS: No, no. That will give you some to spare. When you get through, you have some. Now, to make this diamond like thing in here – this part in here, you'd just leave the knots out, see?

Question: Uh-hh.

SEARS: And you'd come start with the one right here, and then keep going across, and then when you get up here and go back on the other side, just keep missing one every time and then when you get down to one, then you go on. And you start on that end down there. That's where you start from, from that end. You take a little board and you have it here – you take a little board and you drive nails in it, see, and start off right here.

Question: The end opposite from the buckle?

SEARS: Yeah, start off right here. And just tie that end and just put another one on each side, just hook them over that nails, and then when you get down here, you are ready to go. And you can do, I guess, 2 to 2-1/2 inches an hour. Now, when you get here, where the buckle to go through – those holes – just skip a knot. Just leave out one.

Question: It's very neat.

SEARS: And you used to could make them out of different colors. I have made them with two different colors. Usually, I think blue and white back in them days was about all you could get, so if you wanted to make one in a color in it, you just put every other one a blue in it you see.

Question: How did you get the color?

SEARS: It would come in a ball. You could buy it in Norfolk .

Question: Is that what you did for materials for the picture frames, too?

SEARS: No, you'd use any kind of wood that you could get, just old crates, anything, you see?

Question: And you had some that you could get.

SEARS: Sometimes, when we were in port, we'd pick up crates around the dock and then take them over to the carpenter's shop and have them dressed you know, run them through a planer to get the thickness that you wanted. I think there's one downstairs, I think down there somewhere. I don't know. Has she got it? Oh, yeah. Angie's got it. We gave it to her.

Question: Did you make the picture frames in lots of different sizes?

SEARS: Well, we had a pattern that it was an anchor and it had a cross in it, and you'd take you a piece and make it look like rope you know. You'd whittle it out, and it took a long time to do that because of so many little pieces. See, we'd start with a larger piece and then keep getting smaller and smaller and get it about that thick and you'd have to cut your notches all the way around it.

Question: How did you learn how to make picture frames?

SEARS: Well, some of the other guys knew how, and then there was you take Sven Olson and a couple of them over there, they used to make mats out of rope yarn and they'd plait it and sew it together and just something to do, that's all.

Question: It sounds like you had a lot of different activities going on?

SEARS: Oh, yeah. We'd always had something to do. It wasn't nothing else, you could argue with the cook.

Laughter.

SEARS: He was a nice old guy. Oh, yeah.

Question: What was he like?

SEARS: Well, he was pretty nice old guy, but he wanted you to eat what he cooked and he always cooked too much.

Laughter.

SEARS: We had the name in them days as being the best fed crew in the lightships and he'd cook a lot of food and there was no way the people were going to eat all the food he did and he'd start grumbling and bitching and griping about not eating what he cooked, but he was a good cook and we had plenty of food and we all had to live together you know.

Question: Where was he from?

SEARS: I think he was from Baltimore, best I can remember. Yeah.

Question: So, you ate well.

SEARS: His name was August Hermanson.

Question: What kind of food did you eat on the lightship? You say that you ate real good meals.

SEARS: Oh, we had steak, beef, pork chops, most anything that you would get today. Not much fresh fruit, because we only got supplies I guess once a month and didn't have any milk. And I don't remember even having powdered milk then, but we had a good refrigerating system. We could keep the meats. And, of course, when you first got supplies, you got vegetables and stuff like that, but we had plenty of canned fruits and stuff like that.

Question: And what kind of things did you have to drink out there?

SEARS: Drink on a ship!! It's coffee. If you drank anything else – that was – well, you didn't drink water because that rusted your tubes you know. No, everybody drank coffee. They made coffee about 4-5 times a day. You could always get a cup of coffee from 5 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night. Always plenty of coffee.

Question: So, you had a lot of good food.

SEARS: Oh, yeah.

MRS. SEARS: Did you drink tea?

SEARS: Tea? I guess they did, Mary, but nobody drinks tea. Who wants to drink tea? When you were on a ship, you drank coffee.

Question: Did Gus bake a lot of things? Did he use the oven a lot?

SEARS: Not pastries as I remember, I don't know. I don't think he was too much for pastries.

Question: Did he bake bread?

SEARS: Oh, yeah. You had bread. He made bread. He was a pretty good cook.

Question: And did he order up the food or how did you get it?

SEARS: Well, he'd make out a list and of course he turned it over to the captain and the captain would send the order in and when the tender came out – the buoy tender – that was the supplies, to bring our supplies on out.

Question: So, the crew themselves could pretty much decide what foods.

SEARS: Oh, all you had to do was to tell him to get something or something that you'd like, something like that. He'd do it, but his food was all right..

Question: What were the other crewmen like on the ship?

SEARS: Just like people – just like you and I.

Question: Did all of you get along pretty good?

SEARS: Yeah, we got along real well. We never had any trouble that I can remember. Of course, you might have a little spat once in awhile, but it never amounted to nothing.

Question: Anybody play tricks on anybody else?

SEARS: Well, maybe some, but of course you'd be around a bunch of men, they'd probably play tricks on one another, but nothing of any importance. May take his pants and sew them up you know – sew the hem up in it – hemmed the left leg, because when you put your pants on, you always put your right leg in first, you see, and when you put the other one in.

MRS. SEARS: Yeah, why is that?

SEARS: I don't know. You put your pants on, you usually put them on by the right one, don't it?

Question: No. I always used to put my left leg in first and then after I broke my knee and for almost a year, my right leg was stiff.

SEARS: Well, that's the reason why you changed it, but ordinarily 90% of people, when they put their pants on, they put their right leg in first. Well, we'd sew up the left leg, see, or take safety pins and pin inside, see, and then when they'd go get the other one to go in it, it wouldn't go and then you are off balance.

Laughter.

Question: You've got one leg in and you can't get the other.

SEARS: Yeah. Yeah. Or, take somebody's shoes and stick some rags or something or other down into the toes of them or something – a little horsing around like that.

Laughter.

SEARS: The cook – we called him Gus, and he didn't appreciate that. Oh, no. He didn't appreciate you sewing his pants up and stuff like that. He didn't like that.

Question: When you were first on the ship, was that at Fenwick station?

SEARS: Yeah, yeah.

Question: Sven was telling me that there was very good fishing up there.

SEARS: Yeah, you had to lower the boat. It was a station buoy and there was an old wreck out there and if you'd lower the boat and go over where the station buoy was, they knew about where the old wreck was and the fishing was very good there.

Question: Did you eat a lot of fish?

SEARS: Well, whenever we caught them. If you'd catch them, we'd eat them.

Question: And then, in 1933, you went to Chesapeake station. Did you ever serve on any other lightships?

SEARS: I was on the Relief ship when ours came in. The Chesapeake *LV-116* came in and the Relief ship took our place and I was transferred over on the Relief for 30 days.

Question: So, you stayed out on the station?

SEARS: I stayed out on the station. That's the only other lightship I was ever on and I was on it for a month.

Question: Was it very similar to?

SEARS: Very similar. The only difference is ours was a diesel electric and that was a steam – run by steam.

Question: But, they were about the same size?

SEARS: About the same size. Wasn't too much difference. It was just an older ship.

Question: Any fun things about that ship?

SEARS: I think that was the time when we were painting the fire room and the guy that was working with me, we were working together and both of us were assigned to the fire room, and we were under the boilers and he got in there and painted himself in and had to crawl back through all that red lead and he was

pretty upset about that and, of course, I laughed at him. That didn't help matters much. His name was Gregory, as I remember, but I don't remember his first name.

Question: When you were on that Relief, it was a steam ship. Did you have to shovel coal?

SEARS: Oh, yeah. I had to keep the boilers – had to keep steam on the boilers, yeah..

Question: And how did you like that?

SEARS: Well, it was laying at anchor and it wasn't much trouble. Maybe go down in the morning and clean the fires and get them all burning good and bring the steam up and then you could bank them. That's what you called banking them, you see, and just so the steam wouldn't go any higher, see? And then, you'd have to get out the coal that you were going to use for the next day – and that day until the next day – and get the ashes, bring the ashes up, put them in a can and pull them up and dump them overboard. Now, I remember when we first started, he asked me, he said, "Now, what do you want to do? Shovel the ashes in the can or pull them up with the windlass," and I told him, I said, "Which is the easiest?" and he said, "Pulling them up is the easiest," and so I said, "Well, you take the easy job then. I'll take the other job." And you know, it was much harder to pull them up than to just scoop them up and put them in a can.

Laughter.

Question: He was trying to get to you.

SEARS: Oh, yeah, I figured that out. See, I'm lazy by nature. If there's an easy way to do something, I'm going to find it. So, he couldn't say anything, so he had to pull all them old ashes up.

Question: Because you said you'd take the hard job.

SEARS: I tell you. Or, you take the easy job. You're the regular man on this ship; I'm just here for 30 days! And you take the easy part; I'll take the hard part.

Question: I guess you had quite a bit of exercise.

SEARS: Oh, yeah, well. That don't amount to much because it's not overwhelming to pull the ashes up and dump over. It's just a few buckets full of them, but it just struck me that he wanted to know what I wanted to do and I asked him what was the easiest and he told me which was the easiest and I told him to take that and "I want you to have the easy job."

Laughter.

Question: After you left the lightship, what ship was it that you started working on?

SEARS: The *District of Columbia* . That was a passenger ship that was going from Norfolk to Washington .

Question: And you started off as?

SEARS: Started off as an oiler and then after three years, I took – See, you have to be an oiler or a watertender for three years before you are eligible to take the examination for an engineer, so at the end of the three years I went up and took the examination for engineer's license and got a second assistant. I got the license like today and the next morning I got a job as assistant engineer on the *District of Columbia*, which was a raise from \$82.50 a month to \$104.06, and I thought I felt maybe I wouldn't never need any more money than that. That was plenty. I was proud of them licenses.

MRS. SEARS: Was that when you got first class?

SEARS: No, that's a different one, Mary. A different one.

Question: And where did you go out of?

SEARS: It left 7th Street Wharves. There used to be a dock there at 7th and Main Avenue. What is that, Main Avenue and Waterstrauer. There was a dock there. And I went there, and I left the lightship and I went on that and then in 1941, I left and come up to the institution at Lorton.

Question: At Lorton. What kind of work did you do there?

SEARS: I was an engineer there.

Question: So, on the *District of Columbia* , when you were working on that, was that a passenger vessel?

SEARS: Yes. A passenger vessel.

MRS. SEARS: A ferry and freight.

Question: Did you take a car on it?

SEARS: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Question: How far?

SEARS: It went from Norfolk to Washington .

Question: Was it a long trip?

SEARS: It would take overnight. It would take about 12 hours. We stopped in Alexandria, down there near where the *LV-116* is now, just south of it. There used to be a dock down there at the end of King Street, I believe.

Question: Was it a good business or – I was wondering about it.

SEARS: Well, when the war come on, the Navy, they had three ships: The *District of Columbia*, the *Northland* and The *Southland*, and at the starting of the war, the Navy took over the *Northland* and the *Southland*, which left only the *District*, so they continued running to Norfolk as they'd go up one night and come back the next, and then after I left, they had an accident down at Hampton Roads and a person got killed I think and they finally went out of business.

Question: So, that would have been during the war?

SEARS: That was just after the war when this happened. You see, when automobiles, airplanes and busses and fast transportation – that put passenger boats out of business. It was so much quicker. You can get on a plane in Washington or in Norfolk in an hour you can be one place or the other which on a passenger

Question: Now, you were talking about the *District of Columbia* a little bit, Burfoot, now when the war started did you go into the service?

SEARS: Well, I was drafted in the Navy. I think it was in '42 Mary? Or, '43, I guess it was. I was at the institution at the time and I was drafted into the Navy, and I got over – they sent me over to Bainbridge, Maryland, and about three weeks after I was over there, the skipper off from the *District of Columbia*, Captain Eaton, come over and asked me did I want to get out of the Navy? And I asked him . . .

Question: Did you already know him from before?

SEARS: Oh, yeah. He was the skipper on the *District of Columbia* when I was on there. And, he told me that he could get me out of the Navy if I would go back on the *District of Columbia* for the duration of the war. And, I was a youngster then, too, and I guess I didn't have a whole lot of sense. I asked him did he know what in the hell he was talking about. And he said, "I'm positive!" And, I said, he told me, all I want you to do is let this lieutenant hear you say that you will come back on the *District* and stay for the duration of the war and I told him, "All right, I'll do that." And the next day, I was gone.

Question: Really?

SEARS: The Navy sent me back to Washington . So, I went down on - The *District* was in Washington at the time and I went down there and I stood a watch out that night, which was Christmas Eve, and the next morning . . . I didn't let Mary know anything about it and I walked in on her Christmas Morning and all those Christmas toys all over the floor and it was a mess and she wanted to know what I was doing there and I told her that I was . . out.

Question: He was supposed to be in Bainbridge!

SEARS: And I stayed on the *District* for the duration of the war and I don't remember exactly when I come back over here, so . . .

MRS. SEARS: It was in August.

SEARS: Oh, it was in August you say?

MRS. SEARS: Yes.

SEARS: Well, sometime, in '46 or '45?

MRS. SEARS: '45.

SEARS: No, it had to be later than that because the war wasn't over then, was it? The war didn't end until what '46?

Question: '45.

SEARS: 45? Well, I guess that's when I left, and then I come on back over to the institution and I stayed there until 1965, and I retired then. I've been retired from civil service since 1965.

Question: While you were on the *District of Columbia* during the war, did that count as military service/

SEARS: No, it didn't count as military service, but it counted as civil service because I was there on the condition that I would stay for the duration of the war, so it counted in number of years for a civil service retirement.

Question: And was it exactly the same work that you were doing before?

SEARS: Yeah, I went on it as an oiler and then I finally got to be an engineer and one was a diesel ship and the other one was a steam ship.

Question: But, it was still being used as a passenger ship?

SEARS: Yeah. And then you were underway. You weren't anchored, you see. You left Norfolk one afternoon and got to Washington the next morning and then that afternoon you left Washington and went back to Norfolk, so every night you were either going or coming.

Question: It was underway all the time? Did you not spend a couple of days in Norfolk?

SEARS: You'd get to Norfolk in the morning and you'd left that afternoon.

Question: You only spent a few hours.

SEARS: Well, during the day, you'd just stay there.

MRS. SEARS: It was carrying freight for the government back and forth. That's part of the reason he was put on the ship.

Question: Uh-huh. So, it was being used by the federal government?

SEARS: Well, it carried a lot of military personnel, you see from Norfolk to Washington, and then, of course civilian passengers too.

Question: If you had the chance to give someone, say a young man some advice, would you recommend that he?

SEARS: NOT go on a lightship, no!

Laughter.

SEARS: No, no, no. Well, any ships as far as that is concerned. I enjoyed it while I was on it and a ship fascinates me to look at it, but I have no desire to go on it. Anybody that is in the Merchant Marine has got no business being married, because you are gone too much. You are gone. And for some reasons, women are kind of fussy and may like for a husband to stay with them, you see, which is natural. No, I wouldn't do that.

MRS. SEARS: Our second child was born and he wasn't around at home and I was in the hospital and when he got out home, he didn't know where in the world I was.

SEARS: I was on the *District* then, wasn't I?

MRS. SEARS: Yes.

Question: I haven't actually announced it before, but Burford's wife is here also talking with us. You name is?

MRS. SEARS: Mary.

Question: Mary. And you were saying that when you had your second child that Burford wasn't around then either?

MRS. SEARS: Nah-nah.

Question: Where was he then?

MRS. SEARS: He was on the *District of Columbia* then.

SEARS: Well, I got there the next morning!

Question: The next morning.

MRS. SEARS: The next afternoon.

SEARS: When I come home that morning and you weren't home and you wasn't there and I found out you were in the hospital, so I come back. You remember, it was snowing? It had snowed that night?

MRS. SEARS: That was the second child.

SEARS: That was Hilda, yeah.

MRS. SEARS: Our girl. Our son was born when you were on the lightship.

Question: Were you living in Woodbridge then?

SEARS: No, no.

Question: You were living in Washington?

SEARS: Portsmouth.

Question: Portsmouth, but you were working out of Washington?

SEARS: Uh-huh. Well . . .

MRS. SEARS: He was stationed there.

SEARS: Well, see all of her people are down in that area.

MRS. SEARS: One day it would be in Norfolk and one day it would be at the District, except his day off was in the District.

Laughter.

Question: One day off in a week?

MRS. SEARS: No, every other day you had off, and, of course, if there wasn't anything wrong with the ship or they had any special duties to do, he could come on in, but there was anything wrong or anything broke down, he had to say and fix it. But he got to come home right often, but he had to sleep during that time too.

Question: So you had to put up with this for maybe ten years?

MRS. SEARS: Well, about – we come up here in '41, and we were married in?

SEARS: '35.

MRS. SEARS: About six years. I hardly knew I had a husband. The children –

SEARS: I think I went over to the institution in April.

MRS. SEARS: And I come up here.

SEARS: April in '41.

Question: When you say "institution," you mean?

SEARS: Yes, Lorton. Lorton Penitentiary. Well, it's the workhouse and the reformatory. It's all together. It's the prison system for the District.

Question: And you worked there until?

SEARS: Until 1965, as the engineer.

MRS. SEARS: It was like, you knew you had a husband that you would call by his first name, Burford, and the children would want to say the same thing, so then I had to learn to say, "Daddy," so I didn't want them calling him Burford, his first name.

SEARS: That would have been all right. The thing that you've got to remember is to call me at mealtimes!

Laughter.

Question: Call me what you want . . .

MRS. SEARS: But it was so funny I thought when they were little, they hardly knew, actually how to associate because they saw other friends and other men and, of course, none of them came to the house and went to sleep. I think it was hard for them to associated until they get a couple of years old to really realize what father was.

Question: So, they didn't really get to see too much of him in the first couple of years?

MRS. SEARS: Nah-nah.

SEARS: That's the reason. That's the reason why I don't recommend anybody to go on a lightship or any other kind of ship, if they are going to get married.

MRS. SEARS: Because when we was on our first child, he'd be gone two months and then he'd come home and be home a month. When he first got home, to them he was just a strange man. It wasn't Dad – they were too little to realize – and about time it got used to realizing, he was ready to go again. Because when they are so little, they forget.

Question: When I was talking to Madeline Quick, Captain Andersen's daughter, she said it was kind of like that for her, but every time her father came home, it was like a holiday and they would try to spend it like that.

SEARS: I believe, didn't she tell me that he died in 1941? I think that's what she told me, or 1940.

MRS. SEARS: 1940.

SEARS: Well, he didn't live too many years after I left the lightship.

Question: Was he the captain?

SEARS: He was the captain, yeah, and a fellow –

Question: Mr. Dickson?

SEARS: Dickson, yeah. Yeah. Pretty well the same bunch was on there the whole time.

Question: Were both of them good men?

SEARS: Oh, they were nice. Oh, yeah, they were nice. They were good people.

Question: Was he ever really strict with the crew?

SEARS: Not too much. Well, everybody knew what they had to do and that was it. He'd come down and play pinochle with us, just like anybody else. Yeah, he was all right.

Question: Did anybody try to sneak a drink on the ship? Alcohol?

SEARS: Oh, somebody come back from leave and bring a bottle, but it didn't last long.

Laughter.

SEARS: It was gone. It didn't last long. Now, we had no problems with alcohol on there.

MRS. SEARS: Too many of them to have enough for all.

Question: There'd be about how many men on the ship at one time?

SEARS: Oh, there'd be about twelve I'd say. Well, you see, there'd be one engineer and one oiler, and on leave at all time, and on the deck there'd be one,

maybe the skipper or the mate – one or the other of them would be on leave. Not all the time, because they had to stay two months and off one, and one of them would be on leave and they it arranged so that sometime both of them were there, and then maybe a couple of the seaman would be on leave at all times, so I would say four to six – maybe ten or twelve of us were there all the time. I don't know exactly.

Question: I want to thank you for talking to us today and it sounds like maybe life on the lightship wasn't exactly what you thought it was going to be, but I guess in a way it was an adventure.

SEARS: Well, it was an adventure and you don't know what to expect and you a youngster like that and you don't know what to expect. You just don't pay any attention to it. You just go ahead.

Question: Thanks again for talking to us.

SEARS: Oh, it's been a pleasure.

END

