



James Pitts Sr.

Life Along the Rappahannock: An Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Woodie Walker  
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Since 2016, Friends of the Rappahannock has been interviewing individuals with unique knowledge related to significant events affecting the Rappahannock River watershed, and the communities that inhabit it. This project's goal is to collect and preserve significant and endangered oral histories of people living along the Rappahannock River, from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay. These audio-visual documentaries will be available for generations to come.

Oral history refers both to a method of collecting information through recorded interviews of informed narrators with singular perspectives on significant historical events, and to the product of that process. Recordings are transcribed, and reviewed by the narrator, to provide researchers with primary source material. These accounts reflect the narrator's experiences, perspectives, and historical understandings rather than a definitive account of history.

Friends of the Rappahannock is a non-profit, grassroots conservation organization based in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It works to educate everyone about the river and to advocate for actions and policies that will protect and restore the Rappahannock River. This project is a collaborative effort with the University of Mary Washington Department of History and American Studies.

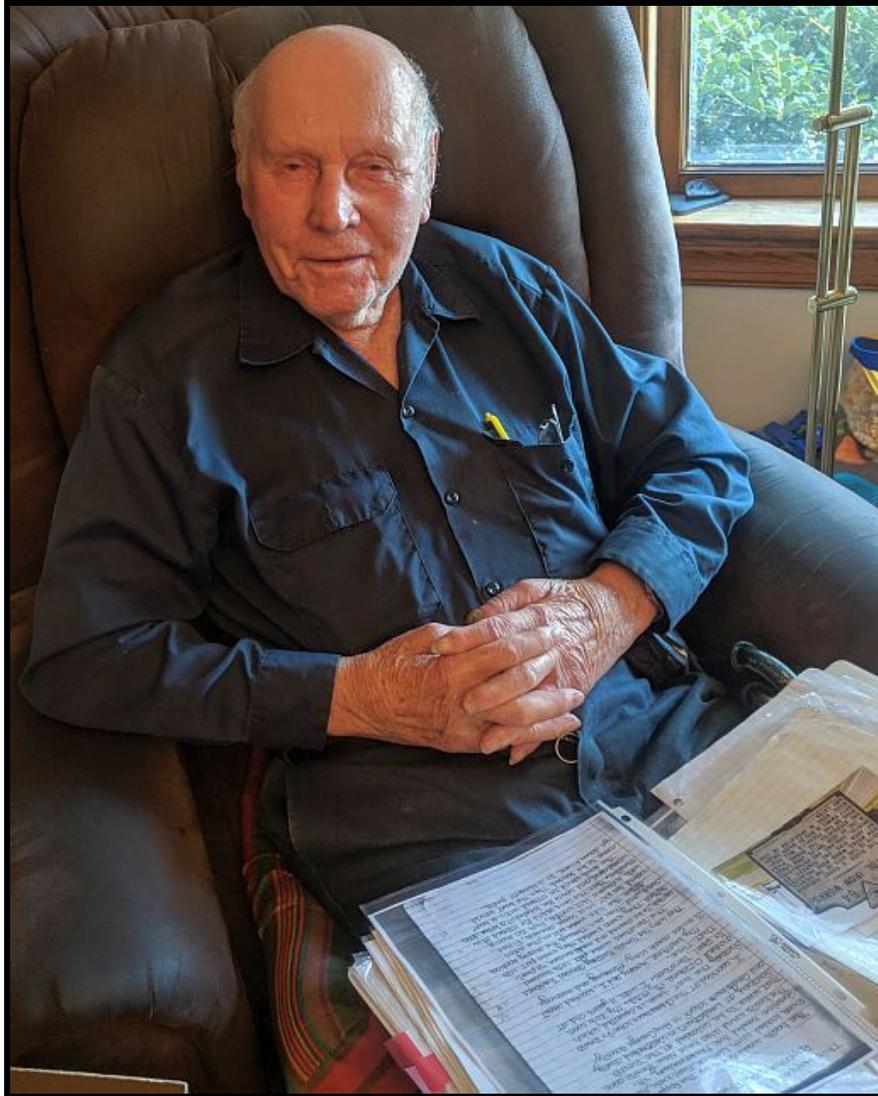
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Friends of the Rappahannock requests that researchers submit a bibliographic citation of any published work in which "Life Along the Rappahannock" interviews are used, and, if publishing in a digital medium, include a link back to the project's homepage.



James Pitts Sr.

James Pitts Sr. has spent his life on or near the Rappahannock River. Born in 1921, he still lives in the Rollins Fork area of King George County, near where he grew up. One of his fondest boyhood memories is from the mid-1930s, when he caught a ride with a generous neighbor and traveled to Colonial Beach to see a steamboat arrive from Washington, D.C. In his interview, Mr. Pitts tells of growing up on a farm during the Great Depression, and commercial fishing for shad with his father. He also fished the Rappahannock River commercially as an adult, and shares his recipe for “salt fish” – herring and shad preserved in salt. His is a remarkable story, full of warmth and humor about Life Along the Rappahannock.

[0:09] Walker: So, we're here today with Mr. James Pitts Senior. We're at Mr. Pitts's property at 16240 Rollins Fork Road in King George, Virginia. We're just a few miles from where Mr. Pitts was born. With us today is our intern from the University of Mary Washington, Janelle Behm. Janelle's a senior at Mary Washington and she's working with us helping edit and do video work, and work on our website. So, to get started, Mr. Pitts, I want to ask you a couple things about where you were born, and your early childhood years. Tell me a little bit about where you were born, and what it was like.

[0:57] Pitts: When I was born? Well, one thing we did have no hospital, so we were all born at home. And, I think we did have what they call a midwife.

[1:24] Walker: And if you want to refer to your notes, I'm happy with that. I want you to use that, so that we get those things that you've prepared.

[1:31 ] Pitts: OK. Alright, read this, give my name and everything?

[1:36] Walker: Yes, sir.

[1:38 ] Pitts.: My name is James Evans Pitts Senior. I was born at home February the 27, 1921, on Bristol Mine Farm, located at the extreme southwest corner of Westmoreland County, Virginia, in the Washington district. Our farm was bounded by the Rappahannock River on the south, and the King George County on the west. I was the youngest of five brothers and one sister. The oldest brother was born in 1898, and all of us were born at home. All are deceased except me. I am now 97.

[2:45] Walker: The farm that you were born on, that was your dad's place?

[ 2:49] Pitts: Yeah, but it was a small farm.

[2:51] Walker: How big?

[2:52] Pitts: Maybe 15 acres.

[2:54] Walker: What did he grow?

[2:55] Pitts.: We growed corn, and [3:00]peas, and hay, and a big garden.

[3:07] Walker: And a big garden. Was that big garden as much for you guys, your food as a family, as it was for selling?

[3:16] Pitts: Well, yeah. We didn't sell nothing.

[3:19] Walker: I got you.

[3:33] Pitts: We only raised, we raised enough for the feed, but we had one horse and one cow, and two pigs, and about couple dozen of hens, and about a of dozen turkeys. Alright, now my mother, course we couldn't raise sugar, or coffee, or tea, so she would save the eggs up for a day or two and take them to the store and trade them off for sugar, coffee, and tea, and eggs at that time was 18 cents a dozen. Then, the hams, we very seldom ever ate a egg, because that was money. The hams, the country hams off the hogs, we'd take them to Colonial Beach and sell them to the hotel for 20 cents a pound, something like that.

And we never ate no country hams, we ate shoulders, and ribs, and all that stuff. And we had one horse, I guess, I was behind a horse and plough when I was nine years old, probably. And we had to plough the land and get it ready. We had to start in February, start to ploughing because we only ploughed one plough, that wide. And then after we got it ploughed the land would set for a while, want to plant corn about the middle of April. So then we had to harrow the land or what, we didn't have no disk or nothing. We had to harrow the land over, two times. Then we planted it with a single-row planter. That planter, [6:00]first before we plant it, we had what they call a marker. One horse pulled that, the corn rows were 42 inches apart, so that marker would make a groove like that, and you go up to the end of the field and turn around. When you come back you kept one of them things in the groove, and that kept you parallel across the field. Alright, so we only could plant one row at the time, and the planter we were using, we only needed one kernel, and it would plant about four or five, and we had to go back and thin it.

[6:38] Walker: Sure.

[6:39] Pitts: Thin it down.

[6:40] Walker: And once they came up a little bit, go back through, and thin them down to one plant.

[6:44] Pitts.: Yeah, right. And so that's about the way we did the corn. And the peas, I don't know much about the peas, but must have broadcast them, because we didn't have no drill, to drill them.

[7:00] Walker: Would these be like black-eyed peas, field peas?

[7:03] Pitts: They called them gray peas.

[7:04] Walker: Gray peas. Not like a little green split pea, but a field pea.

[7:08] Pitts: Yeah. These they use to, use to eat them, you know, use to take them and beat the hulls off them.

[7:17] Walker: OK.

[7:19] Pitts: I had aunts that would, they had poles about eight foot long, and they had a porch, and they put down the sheet and put the peas, hulls, the vines, and all on top of it, and boom boom, and knock the hulls off the peas. And then they had to wait until a good northwest wind they take it out in the field there and put a sheet down, and let it go out slowly, and the wind would take the trash out.

[7:49] Walker: Sure, and leave you the peas.

[7:51] Pitts: Yeah.

[7:54] Walker: What other kind of chores, now you had brothers and sisters who were older than you, brothers and a sister, that were older than you. What other kind of chores did the young people help with around the farm?

[8:07] Pitts.: Well, I think at times, they all did their share, you know. If they'd had them all at one time, we couldn't have fed them.

[8:20] Walker: Well, good thing they were spread out in age.

[8:22] Pitts: Well see, a lot of them went to Washington and got jobs, but another thing, in 1929 when the, when the stock market fell.

[8:36] Walker: Yes, sir.

[8:38] Pitts: People tell me that people in New York City were jumping out the windows and killed themselves because they had lost so much, lost all their money.

[8:45] Walker: Yes, sir.

[8:46] Pitts: And we never knew that anything went on because we were right at the bottom of the barrel, we had nothing to lose.

[8:55] Walker: Depression didn't change much is what you're telling me.

[8:57] Pitts: Didn't even know it happened.

[8:58] Walker: Still working.

[9:00] Pitts: Yeah, still grinding on.

[9:02] Walker: Something I, when you started talking, I want to make sure I get. Tell me your parents names?

[9:08] Pitts: My daddy's name was Richard Coleman Pitts Senior, and my mother was Josephine Rogers Pitts.

[9:18] Walker: Very good. Was Rogers her maiden name?

[9:20] Pitts: Uh huh.

[9:24] Walker: Early boyhood memories. Now look, you're growing up on the farm there in the 1920s, late '20s, early '30s. Your farm's on the edge of the river. The Rappahannock River.

[9:37] Pitts: Yeah

[9:38] Walker: You ever go fishing when you were a boy?

[9:39] Pitts: Yeah. We were fishing when we were 10 years old, maybe. But we never had a rod and reel, only had a hand line. I didn't get a rod and reel until I was 21, I reckon. Man we was poor no, no kidding. And that farm was a, just a life saver. We raised enough for our own selves. And we'd take the milk to make the butter, and let the milk set, I don't know, at least overnight or maybe more. Cream would rise to the top. Alright, so, we'd take, after we get enough cream, we'd put it in a half a gallon jar, and would rock it back and forth across our knee. And it would turn to butter.

[10:45] Walker: So that's how you churned it. You didn't have a stick churn, you rolled it on your knee.

[10:49] Pitts: We didn't have one of them, but later on we had a crankhandle.

[10:52] Walker: OK.

[10:53] Pitts: you know, a **patterson (?)**.

[10:54] Walker: Right, OK.

[11:02] Pitts: Now that story that I wrote to Hedelt, that he, I mean he, I wrote the story, but he put it in the paper. I had all that stuff in there.

[11:17] Walker: Sure.

[11:18] Pitts: Yeah.

[11:20] Walker: Well, I've got a copy of the story that he wrote about you.

[11:23] Pitts: Yeah.

[11:24] Walker: That will be in our archives, as well.

[11:30] Pitts: How about, would it be too much time if I read it now?

[11:33] Walker: No sir, that's fine.

[11:58] Pitts: Alright this a [12:00] little story that I wrote when I was about 11 years old. OK? (Mr. Pitts wrote the story later in life. He is about 11 when the story takes place). The title of the story is, Steamboat on the Potomac River and Shops on the Boardwalk at Colonial Beach. Original Route 3 from Rollins Fork to Oak Grove and Route 205 from Oak Grove to Colonial Beach. All this happened in the mid 1930s. One Friday morning, I got up and had my usual salt fish and cornbread for breakfast. After breakfast, I decided I would like to go to Colonial Beach and see the steamboat come down the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., and bring people down to Colonial Beach for the weekend. I was told that the steamboat would get down to the town pier about 4 o'clock. So after breakfast, I asked my mother if it would be all right for me to go to Colonial Beach to see the steamboat come in on the Potomac River. She said I know you love steamboats, so I think it will be alright as long as you get the jobs done around the house before you go. So I milked the, I milked and fed the cow first and then I fed the horse, fed the pig, chickens, and turkeys. I then split some wood and carried it in, to put in the wood box so she would have some wood to fry the salt fish the next morning. After I finished the jobs for the morning, I found a big wash, washing tub and put it out at the back of the house and behind a big locust tree where the sun would shine on it for about three hours. I also took a bucket and carried water from the well and poured it into the tub until it was a little over half-full. After the water got warm, I carried out a towel, soap, and washcloth and began to bathing. After I finished bathing, I dried off with a towel. I wrapped the towel around my body and ran back into the house. After that I asked my mother if she had clean white clothes. She said to look in the bottom drawer of the bureau. There is a pair of knickers, a white short-sleeved shirt, and white socks. There is a pair of white tennis shoes under the bed. "Thanks, Mom." I put on the white knickers. They came down below my knees and they had little ruffles around the bottom. This thing, this thing ain't doing good. [15:00] Shoot. Just hanging it up.

[15:23] Walker: We'll get there. I want to hear about this day going to Colonial Beach. All dressed up, ready to go.

[15:32] James E. Pitts Sr.: OK. Then I was, they came down just below my knee and had little ruffles around the bottom. Then I was ready to leave the house, so I asked my mother if I had, if she had any change leftover from the eggs she took to the store after she traded the eggs for sugar, coffee, and tea. "Because the eggs were 18 cents a dozen, I thought you might have some change leftover that you'd might let me have."

"I will let you have a nickel, if you are careful not to spend it at all one time."

"I will be careful." I walked about three miles to Webster Allensworth's store, that's right down here. And I'm walking from Bristol Mines out to route 3.

[16:33] Pitts: I walked about 3 miles to Webster Allensworth's country store and Post Office. I got to the store about 2:30, 2:30 because I needed to get to the town pier at Colonial Beach at 4 o'clock to see the steamboat come down Potomac River. So I waited at the store for about 10 minutes. I had several friends that had horse and buggies. Some had automobiles. I saw one of my friends coming down the road with a 1931 Ford Coupe. It was painted canary yellow with a rumble seat near the back where the trunk should be and a spare tire near the bumper with a chrome cover on the tire. Also it had chrome headlights. He stopped at the post office to get his mail. So, he walked over to me and said, "Son, you are dressed up mighty good. Where are you going"? So I said, "To catch a ride to Colonial Beach town pier, so I could see the steamboat come down the Potomac River." So he said, "Well I need to go to the Bank of Westmoreland, that was at Colonial Beach, to talk to Mr. Williams about a loan. So you can ride with me." "Ok, but I need to catch a ride back home, too. I need to leave Colonial Beach about 10 o'clock, so you might have to wait a long time." [18:00]

"I think that's OK. I will talk to Mr. Williams at the bank. Then I will go up to Washington Avenue to go to the Mayfair Theater to watch the cartoons and hope there will be a western movie on after that. I will meet you at the Fox Bingo at the entrance of Joyland." So we started down toward the Oak Grove on the original Route 3. It was a narrow road from the post office. We went about a ½ mile down old Rt. 3 and took a right on now 634 and Claymont road. We went on that road for about three miles; it was very narrow and crooked. After we crossed a bridge, we went a little further, and then we passed Oak Grove High School, which was on the left. The school was a wooden structure with wooden weatherboard on the outside. How we arrived at Oak Grove. From Oak Grove we, from Oak Grove to Colonial Beach, we took the following roads: we started on now 205 for a short way, and then we turned right on now 638 and Ferry Road. We went about a mile and came out on 205 at Mattox Creek Bridge. From there we went about one mile and turned right onto now 628 Stoney Knoll Road. We went around Morgan's Corner and came back on Route 205 again at DeAtley Service Center. From there we took 205 about ½ mile. We turned left on now Rt. 632, Monrovia Church Road. We went on that for about one mile and came back out on 205. We came out on the left-hand of the Union Bank at the beach, and we were at the beach gate. Then we took Colonial Avenue until we got to the Boardwalk. We crossed the Boardwalk and drove all the way to the Town Pier in front of the Boardwalk. I got out my car. My friend left to tend to his business; he said he would meet me at Foxes Bingo about 10 o'clock. So I sat on a bench near the Town Pier so I could get a good look at the steamboats coming down the Potomac River. Finally I saw it coming. It docked at the end of the pier. The gangplank was put down, so the people could walk from the steamboat onto the pier. A group of people got off and headed for Wolcott Hotel. The hotel had a large front porch with a lot of steps. They would, they would stay there until Sunday evening. Then the steamboat would come back from Washington, to take them back home. [21:00] The Potomac steamboat had a walking beam that went up and down the whole time the boat was moving. I asked several people on the Boardwalk what the purpose of the walking beam was. No one

could answer my question. So from that to this, is still don't know what the walking beam was for. After the steamboat left, I walked up the Boardwalk to Colonial Avenue, and then I started to walk back down the Boardwalk. Following are the shops that I observed on the way back down: Major operation. Come on now.

[21:47] Walker: Let me, let me help you with that. Hang on. There you go.

[21:55] Pitts: First was, first place on the boardwalk from Colonial Avenue, was the Palm Garden that was on the corner of Boardwalk and Colonial Avenue. Next were the bowling alley and the popcorn stand. Up on the second floor was the roller-skating rink with wooden floor, which made a lot of noise. Next, as a I remember, was Joyland. It was several in that area that I don't remember. Foxes, I don't remember, Foxes Bingo was at the entrance of Joyland. Joyland was a place where big bands would play on weekends. It also had an open-air dance floor where you could dance under the moon and stars. The next place on the Boardwalk was Charley's Hot Dog Stand. Next was a Davis Shooting Gallery where you could check your skill at knocking over imitation ducks. I am, I'm not sure, but the next place was the bath house and the next place was Fries Restaurant; then Mrs. Stone's snowball stand. There's where I spend my whole nickel for a snowball. After Mrs. Stone retired, a lady named Milly took over the business. Then the next place was Wolcott's Hotel. It was getting late, so I went back up the Boardwalk to Foxes Bingo where I met my friend to take me back home. We came back on the same old road that we went over on. My friend put me out at Ruby Lane which was near Rollins Fork Post Office. I thanked him very much for the ride and then he, he went home. I walked down Ruby Lane and crossed over a swamp, which was the boundary line between King George County and Westmoreland County; then I walked on a narrow path through the woods that came out on Bristol Mine Road that took me to my home at Bristol Mine Farm. This is only one trip of many that I made [24:00] to Colonial Beach in the early 1930s, '40s, and '50s. This story is true. I made it, made it, made the trip myself. I wrote it myself. Any comments, call me.

[24:15] Walker: Any comments? I got a million! I got a million questions! Alright, here's the first thing, I need that copy. Can I have that copy?

[24:22] Pitts: Yeah, well yeah.

[24:23] Walker: It's gonna make it easy for us when we transcribe your interview.

[24:27] Pitts: Yeah.

[24:27] Walker: To have the place names and that kind of thing. If need be, I'll mail it back to you. I'll take it back to my office and make copies.

[24:34] Pitts: I've got some extra ones.

[24:36] Walker: OK.

[24:37] Piits: I've given away a lot of them.

[24:38] Walker: Well, it would help us, to have this story, if I had a copy.

[24:44] Pitts: OK.

[24:44] Walker: Alright, I'll let you get straight with that, then I got some questions.

[24:47] Pitts: Alright. There's four pages of it.

[24:57] Walker: Yep, that's it.

[24:59] Pitts.: Yeah, OK. So it starts off at the fifth, so this is six, seven, eight.

[25:22] Walker: Perfect. Alright, I'll care of take that. Thanks, Mr. Pitts. That's a fascinating story. Alright how old were you when that, when you that day?

[25:37] Pitts: About 11.

[35:38] Walker: About 11 years old.

[25:42] Pitts: Yeah. Well see, going to Colonial Beach back then, was like going to New York City now. You know, that's the nearest town we had.

[25:53] Walker: Sure.

[25:55] Pitts.: And, Colonial Beach...

[25:56] Walker: Shooting gallery, and a bingo, and you could go dancing.

[25:59] Pitts: Yeah, but now they, they tore all that stuff away.

[26:01] Walker: Is that right?

[26:02] Pitts.: Yeah. They tell me there's nothing on the front no more.

[26:08] Walker: Before I come back to your interest in steamboats, I'm gonna ask you a few more questions about fishing on the river. Because you know, we're from Friends of the Rappahannock, and I've got a lot of interest about the things you were talking about. Such as, you got up for breakfast that morning, and you said you had some salt fish and cornbread.

[26:26] Pitts: Best salt fish...

[26:29] Walker: Salt fish. What is a salt fish? Is that a herring?

[26:31] Pitts: It's a herring, but it's two types of herrings. One's a branch herring, which is a little bit bigger, they come earlier in the spring, and they go up in the swamps and that's what they dip. But the glut herring, is the main herring.

[26:45] Walker: And what did you call that? A glut herring?

[26:47] Pitts: Glut herring.

[26:48] Walker: G. L. U. T.

[26:50] Pitts: They are smaller and they're blue on the back, and they take salt better, 'cause you don't have as much meat.

[26:54] Walker: That's called a blueback herring I think. Now, why do you call them a glut herring?

[26:58] Pitts: You got me.

[27:00] Walker: Glut. G. L. U. T.

[27:02] Pitts: That's what I always...

[27:02] Walker: Alright, and the other was a branch herring, is that because, like we would refer to a creek as a branch?

[27:07] Pitts: Yeah, yeah.

[27:08] Walker: And he'd run up the creeks, so that's running up the branch?

[27:10] Pitts: That's where they go to spawn, yeah.

[27:12] Walker: Absolutely. Now, salt herring, salt fish. Did you help catch these fish?

[27:18] Pitts: Yes sir. I used to, I used to go with my daddy. And he'd fish too, you know. He caught the herring, I used to go with him, and man it was fun.

[27:29] Walker: So we're talking early spring. April.

[27:31] Pitts: Yeah. April, May. Maybe.

[27:35] Walker: Maybe into May?

[27:36] Pitts: Now the glut herring didn't come along until about two weeks after the branch herring.

[27:41] Walker: OK.

[27:41] Pitts: So my daddy, he didn't fool with catching branch herring. He'd wait for the other, and we caught them with a drift net.

[27:49] Walker: A drift net. Setting in the main river.

[27:52] Pitts: Yes.

[27:52] Walker: At the mouth of a creek, that kind of place?

[27:55] Pitts: No, it goes with the tide. Let me tell you something about tide.

[27:59] Walker: Yes sir.

[27:59] Pitts: Maybe you, you know what the tide is? If someone says tide, do you know what their talking about?

[28:03] Walker: Sure, I know when the water rises and falls.

[28:06] Pitts: Yeah, it's movement of the river water flood and ebb.

[28:10] Walker: Yes sir.

[28:11] Pitts: And at this location, the tide runs up 5 hours and runs out 7 hours.

[28:16] Walker: OK

[28:17] Pitts: Every day. It makes a complete cycle every 12 hours.

[28:22] Walker: Yes sir.

[28:23] Pitts: Alright now, this drift net, there's only certain places in the river you could fish them, because you didn't want to hang them there, it would tear them up.

[28:33] Walker: OK. Tear your net up.

[28:36] Pitts: Yeah.

[28:37] Walker: Right. It would tear your net up.

[28:37] Pitts: Oh yeah, yeah.

[28:38] Walker: Right, I'm listening.

[28:39] Pitts: And that's a mesh, I think about two-and-a-quarter-inch stretched, from knot to knot.

[28:45] Walker: OK.

[28:47] Pitts: From knot to knot, stretching.

[28:50] Walker: OK.

[28:57] Pitts: And, alright, we go catch them. Sometime we'd catch maybe three or four hundred. And then again, you might catch five or six. You know. Depending on what was going with fate, I reckon (inaudible).

[29:01] Walker: Sure.

[29:02 ] Pitts: Alright now, when we got caught three or four hundred, that was almost a terrible task to scale. Alright, the way we take a, I still got that basket. Bigger than a bushel basket, a wire basket, you know.

[29:17] Walker: Yes, sir.

[29:18 ] Pitts: Alright, we take it and set it on the sand shore, take the paddle and throw some sand over in there and take our boots like that and go up and down like that. And that would get off about 90% of it.

[29:31] Walker: So I've got the basket sitting on the bank, on the sandbank.

[29:34] Pitts: Yeah on the sand shore, yeah.

[29:36] Walker: Right, alright. And I'm gonna put some sand in my basket.

[29:39] Pitts: Yeah.

[29:40] Walker: This is a mesh basket.

[29:41] Pitts: Yeah.

[29:42] Walker: And I'm gonna put some, I'm gonna put some herring in there, and then run my foot and my boot along the outside, to rub that mesh wire up against their scales.

[29:53] Pitts: Yeah, you take the foot and go all the way around the basket. You know, make sure you got as much as you could off.

[29:58] Walker: And it would help scale all them fish.

[30:00] Pitts: Yeah.

[30:00] Walker: Got you.

[30:01] Pitts: And, you know, it was maybe 10 percent left on them, but...

[30:05] Walker: Alright, did you still have to come back behind that, and scrape them a little bit more?

[30:07] Pitts: No, no.

[30:08] Walker: You'd eat that.

[30:09] Pitts: Yeah. Alright, then we had about seven vats, something like a half a whiskey barrel, you know.

[30:17] Walker: OK.

[30:17] Pitts: But bigger. That big, I reckon.

[30:20] Walker: OK.

[30:21] Pitts: Alright. My dad had them filled up with water. Alright, he'd put them herring in there. First came over, we'd have to add salt to that water. And how we could tell if we had enough salt, is when it would float an egg. If you would make it a brine, and when it floats an egg, it's enough salt.

[30:44] Walker: OK. Now that's pretty cool.

[30:46] Pitts: You probably not going to make no brine, but...

[30:49] Walker: I've make some brine to smoke fish, like salmon.

[30:52] Pitts: Yeah.

[30:53] Walker: But, we didn't have to make it that strong. OK.

[30:55] Pitts: Alright now, let's see what... we were. Scale them, and he got the thing full of water, and then got the water all salted up, now he's gonna dump the herring over in there. I believe it was seven or nine days, but I think it was seven days. Alright, then he say, he thinks they were struck, which I guess meant that the salt had penetrated it.

[31:17] Walker: And when you say, say that word again? They were straw?

[31:21] Pitts.: Struck.

[31:22] Walker: Struck.

[31:22] James E. Pitts Sr.: S. T. R. U. C. K.

[31:24] Walker: S. T. R. U. C. K. OK, struck. That means they're ready.

[31:28] Pitts: That might not be what they said, but you know, back then they all had some kind of a nickname for everything.

[31:31] Walker: I understand. But I wanna make sure I spell it right when we get your record, because I want it right.

[31:36] Pitts: Yeah. And, so they stay in there for I believe it's seven days, alright. And then he'd say, "Well they're ready to come out, they're already struck." And, and then we would, it was a steep hill there where we lived at. You barely could walk up there, really. We'd have to take, people would come by, my daddy would sell them for two cents a piece. People would come and buy them by the hundreds you know to put up for the winter. So they were ready to be, some people used to put them in a barrel you know what, a lot of people put them in a lard can. And so, when you put them in there you had to put them in with the bellies up, maybe, I guess with their bellies up, no it wasn't, their back was up, I remember. You place them in there, you put them straight up and down like this. Alright, and then you keep on going back and forth across until you get a layer, alright. Then you put another layer of salt on top of that. And then you do another layer, another salt on top of that. Just make sure you get enough salt.

[32:54] Walker: Did you have to gut them and cut heads off?

[32:59] Pitts: [33:00] No. Not until we were to eat them.

[33:02] Walker: So salting them, when you put them up to preserve them. That was the whole fish?

[33:06] Pitts: Yeah.

[33:07] Walker: Roger that, OK.

[33:09] Pitts: And last time I've priced salt fish, it was six dollars a pound, or something.

[33:15] Walker: And your dad sold them for

[33:17] Pitts: Yeah.

[33:17] Walker: Two, how much, two cents apiece?

[33:18] Pitts: Two cents apiece. Now we had to lug them up a hill. I'd put a raincoat on 'cause that stuff was running all down your neck. Put a raincoat on, so it would...

[33:29] Walker: The brine..

[33:30] Pitts: Yeah, the brine, you couldn't get it all of the time.

[33:32] Walker: Right, OK.

[33:33] Pitts: Just like wringing out a washcloth..

[33:37] Walker: Alright, so you line these fish up, you do them in layers, you salt your fish down, and this is in April and May? And those fish would keep all year until next April or May?

[33:48] Pitts: Some people could, yes, depending on how good you got the salt in them..

[33:53] Walker: What's that, when you said you got ready to go to Colonial Beach that morning, that you got up and had some salt fish and cornbread. And this was in the summertime?

[34:02] Pitts: Oh yeah, you know.

[34:03] Walker: So was that a standard, was that a regular breakfast for you?

[34:07] Pitts: Some, yeah sometimes dinner and supper, too. Both.

[34:11] Walker: Got you.

[34:12] Pitts: Three days a week, you take it or leave it you know.

[34:14] Walker: I'm with you, OK. Now, do you get salt fish now, do you ever go eat them? Like, as far as going to a restaurant?

[34:21] Pitts: No, you can't. You can't buy them.

[34:23] Walker: Can't get them.

[34:24] Pitts: No, they got a moratorium on herring and shad.

[34:28] Walker: And I'm, right, so I'm a little familiar with that.

[34:30] Pitts: Only ones who can get them is the Indians.

[34:33] Walker: Interesting, OK. So thinking about shad, shad ran the same time, and historically the colonials, the settlers they would. They would catch shad. Then we got the big American shad, we got the smaller hickory shad. Now, did you all do anything with those, did you catch any shad and keep them?

[34:54] Pitts: Yeah.

[34:54] Walker: And put them up for food?

[34:56] Pitts: No, no we shipped them to Baltimore.

[34:58] Walker: Shipped them to Baltimore, tell me about that.

[35:02] Pitts: OK, we had a drift net, I believe about 175 yards long.

[35:07] Walker: I need to know exactly what a drift net is.

[35:10] Pitts: A drift net, is a webbing. The webbing was probably 20 feet deep, you know.

[35:17] Walker: So 20 foot tall.

[35:18] Pitts: Yeah, and, and a top line on it with corks on it.

[35:22] Walker: Yes, sir. And was that because it drifted? Did you tie it, down did you stake it down?

[35:27] Pitts: Oh no, it drifted, it drifted, see it's a drift net.

[35:30] Walker: That's what I want to understand. It's a drift net. So you would stretch that out across the river.

[35:34] Pitts: Yeah. Yeah, it drifted, it drift the tide.

[35:37] Walker: And let her go.

[35:38] Pitts: It's a secret today, that you couldn't just take, and put it out there. You had to put it out there when the tide was right.

[35:45] Walker: Well, when is the tide right?

[35:47] Pitts: Well, I know this is getting complicated, but it's certain truth. On the, on the river shore you know, lot of places, the sand is, is, is not [36:00], doesn't have much a degree of it, you know, right at level. Alright, if I'm, if, if it was ebb tide and I want to lay out, to catch slack water, slack water is when it stops.

[36:13] Walker: Before the starts, it starts to go out or come in?

[36:18] Pitts: Well, now it, it the tide is still going out.

[36:23] Walker: OK, got you.

[36:23] Pitts: Alright, we took a little stick, you know, and push there right at the edge of the water, alright. Now the tide was, the water was still going out, but it would rise on the shore.

[36:39] Walker: OK.

[36:40] Pitts: So, when, when that tide would start rising here. You could, more or like tell what going be about 45 minutes to an hour before it's gone slack. So that, that's when you lay out, roughly.

[36:50] Walker: Got you, and you get, get your drift net laid out, and then, after that slack tide, after that ebb tide...

[36:58] Pitts: Yeah.

[37:00] Walker: Then, what's the tide gonna do then?

[37:02] Pitts: I'm going to take it up.

[37:03] Walker: It's, so, but does the tide start going out, or is tide start coming in?

[37:07] Pitts: No.

[37:07] Walker: After your ebb tide?

[37:08] Pitts: It's been gone out, now it's coming back in.

[37:10] Walker: Alright, do you fish, you leave it out there for the whole incoming tide?

[37:14] Pitts: No.

[37:15] Walker: No.

[37:18] Pitts: Well, a lot of times, the net would, the tide changing it would bundle up together.

[37:25] Walker: OK.

[37:25] Pitts: All tangled up.

[37:26] Walker: OK.

[37:27] Pitts: But, they claim slack water was really what you're looking for that the fish came up on.

[37:31] Walker: Interesting, good OK. So you really did fish the ebb tide.

[37:35] Pitts: Yeah

[37:35] Walker: You fished the, you fished the slack tide, the ebb tide.

[37:40] Pitts: Now we did same thing for the flood tide, you know.

[37:42] Walker: Got you. Flood tide meaning the tide coming in?

[37:45] Pitts: Yes sir, five hours.

[37:47] Walker: Alright. So, you are now after shad, are you catching American shad, hickory shad, or both?

[37:55] Pitts: American shad.

[37:55] Walker: The big ones.

[37:56] Pitts: Yes sir, five pounds about. They're about his long, and that thick.

[38:02] Walker: You know, we hardly have any in the river today.

[38:04] Pitts: No, well you can't catch them if you had them.

[38:06] Walker: Right, I understand. But there were enough of them in the 1930s, you were catching these fish and doing something with them, send them to Baltimore?

[38:14] Pitts: Yeah. Alright, we, we'd fish, caught them fish them fish practically all day, sometimes the net would get so tangled up, we have to go to shore and clean them. You know, you-

[38:22] Walker: Sure

[38:22] Pitts: Catfish get in there and tie that knot up, so you couldn't hardly get him out.

[38:27] Walker: Right.

[38:27] Pitts: But, yeah and see when I was working, I was still doing drift netting, sort of. And we'd go down there and, and fish after work, and take them to Colonial Beach to catch the freight truck going to Baltimore.

[38:48] Walker: This would have been in the 1950s?

[38:53] Pitts: Yeah, 50's and '60s.

[38:54] Walker: OK, still enough fish then, still enough shad coming up.

[38:59] Pitts: Yeah.

[38:59] Walker: To make it worth your while?

[39:00] Pitts: Some years were, some years you could lay them down and, and you might catch one or two, something like that.

[39:06] Walker: OK.

[39:07] Pitts: And then other times you would catch, I don't know, you could catch maybe 50, 60 at a time, and. I had a bigger mesh net. It was five and a quarter inch, the net.

[39:17] Walker: Five and a quarter. Alright. So did you have to preserve those fish, the big shad, the American shad, did you have to salt them down or anything?

[39:24] Pitts: No. We'd get over to Colonial Beach and get, at the ice house over there.

[39:31] Walker: OK, and ice them down?

[39:33] Pitts: Guy over there would grind up the ice. They use to make ice over there.

[39:37] Walker: What did, OK so, I got an American shad, and I'm in Baltimore, was this going to a restaurant?

[39:43] Pitts: No, it was going to Commission Merchant. He, he sells them for you and takes out what he wants and sends you the rest.

[39:50] Walker: Commission merchant.

[39:52] Pitts: Commission, yeah.

[39:53] Walker: Commission merchant would sell the fish. Who, who did he sell them to?

[39:55] Pitts: E. W. Labde was one of them. I don't, can't think of the rest of them.

[39:58] Walker: E. W. Labde?

[40:00] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, L. A. B. D. E. E. W. Labde.

[40:03] Walker: And they were a restaurant? I'm wondering who's using the fish.

[40:08] Pitts: Yeah that's, the commission merchant, he'd, well he'd sell them to restaurants or whatever.

[40:17] Walker: Got you.

[40:17] Pitts: And who'd ever would want them, you know.

[40:18] Walker: OK.

[40:19] Pitts: And then, he'd take commision, I don't know what it was.

[40:23] Walker: So, lemme ask you this, I've known a lot of people that's tried to figure out a way to eat a shad. And we've tried smoking them, and they have shad plankings. Do you eat, did you like shad, would you eat it?

[40:39] Pitts: Yeah, I'd eat it fried.

[40:40] Walker: Big shad, like an American shad.

[40:42] Pitts: Yeah.

[40:44] Walker: Fillet it out?

[40:44] Pitts: Yeah, fillet it out, and maybe put some gashes across it.

[40:47] Walker: So it cuts, score the bones? OK.

[40:50] Pitts: But we didn't eat many, you know, maybe buck shad.

[40:54] Walker: That's the small; a buck shad is what I call a hickory shad, is that right?

[40:58] Pitts: No, no.

[40:59] Walker: The male then is the buck. The male is the buck.

[41:02] Pitts: When they, when they spawn, and he has the white serum, or whatever you want to call it.

[41:08] Walker: Right.

[41:09] Pitts: Comes out of his rear end.

[41:11] Walker: Yeah.

[41:11] Pitts: And the other one has roe.

[41:13] Walker: Right.

[41:14] Pitts: It's a Roe shad.

[41:15] Walker: So the, the buck shad was a little smaller, easier to cook?

[41:21] Pitts: Yeah, I guess so yeah, yeah. I don't think cooking was a problem, really.

[41:29] Walker: Interesting, OK I got to try that. OK. Now.

[41:33] Pitts: So many things...

[41:33] Walker: Sure, I understand, that's a lot of good stories.

[41:36] Pitts: Yeah.

[41:38] Walker: How, did you continue to fish commercially like that through the '60s? How late did you continue fishing?

[41:51] Pitts: Well, let's see. I don't know, I guess about '60, '65, close to '70 probably.

[42:00] Walker: OK.

[42:02] Pitts I retired in '76.

[42:05] Walker: And, I want to ask you real quickly, you, you worked at Dahlgren.

[42:08] Pitts: Yes.

[42:09] Walker: At the naval base.

[42:09] Pitts: Yes.

[42:10] Walker: And how long did you work there?

[42:12] Pitts: 34 years and four months.

[42:14] Walker: From 1942 to '76.

[42:16] Pitts: January 6, 1942, to April, April, May. What's the fourth month, April?

[42:25] Walker: April.

[42:26] James E. Pitts Sr.: April the 13th, I believe.

[42:28] Walker: Alright. In '76. So you worked there 30-some years.

[41:31] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[41:32] Walker: What did you do at Dahlgren?

[42:34] James E. Pitts Sr.: I worked at 'change out.'

[42:35] Walker: Building things?

[42:36] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yes and making...

[42:38] Walker: Turning metal.

[42:39] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well when I went there, I was hired as a classified labor, because I had no experience. In nothing, but walking behind a horse.

[42:45] Walker: OK

[42:46] James E. Pitts Sr.: So, classified labor paid 18 dollars and 52 cents a week. That's about 48 cents an hour. And I, I worked at that, I worked in the shop you know. I would clean the steel chips, chips out of the lathe pan you know. And I would clean the bathroom, and all that, sweep the floor and all that.

[43:15] Walker: Right.

[43:15] James E. Pitts Sr.: So I did that for three or four years, I reckon.

[43:18] Walker: And then-

[43:18] James E. Pitts Sr.: Then I got a break.

[43:19] Walker: And they moved you up.

[43:20] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah. Oh you see, there, you know one time, you had to, to get, to get to be a machinist, you had to have a four-year apprentice.

[43:33] Walker: OK.

[43:34] James E. Pitts Sr.: But now, well during the war like that, I, I never went and got no apprentice thing.

[43:40] Walker: They trained you.

[43:41] James E. Pitts Sr.: But I taught, they taught me working within. I worked with the helpers first, and I worked with the machines. So I had a lot of common sense, I thought. I ain't bragging on myself, but looking back...

[43:55] Walker: Well I know some machinists in my world, and it takes a little something else to be able to do all that. There's a couple things I want to touch on, we're wrapping up here in a little bit. I still got about 15 minutes I want to go, but there's something that, while we're talking about fish, we talked a little bit about herring, and about shad. You mentioned to me that your dad, when he was a youngster, or a young man, that there were enough sturgeon in this river, that he could harpoon a sturgeon.

[44:24] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, we used to catch sturgeons, yeah.

[44:26] Walker: Here? This far up the river?

[44:27] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, but it's kind of, you may catch one a season, something like that.

[44:34] Walker: And how, so, when we're talking about the time frame, when he was a young man doing this, would we be talking about 1910, 1915, right?

[44:46] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, well he died in 1938, so.

[44:48] Walker: OK. So maybe even closer to the early 1900s.

[44:51] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah. Because I don't, you know, I don't remember nothing until maybe 10 years old.

[44:58] Walker: Right

[44:58] James E. Pitts Sr.: Nine or 10.

[44:59] Walker: Did you ever [45:00] see sturgeon in the river?

[45:02] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, I caught, no I haven't caught one. Yeah, I've seen them.

[45:05] Walker: Were, when you were young in the 1930s, were there still sturgeon coming up enough to where people were harpooning them?

[45:12] James E. Pitts Sr.: No.

[45:13] Walker: That had already happened, and they had gone away.

[45:14] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, now it wasn't many sturgeons, you know.

[45:17] Walker: OK.

[45:18] James E. Pitts Sr.: You might've catch one or two a season.

[45:20] Walker: So, you know, at one point in time, they were very thick in the Chesapeake Bay system.

[45:24] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah it could've been.

[45:26] Walker: And thick in the Rappahannock, and in the last couple of years, we've had some returning fish. They're starting to come back to the Rappahannock.

[45:33] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah. Now they had a really big spur on their back.

[45:38] Walker: Yes.

[45:38] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, and they get in the net, something, they'll get out, too.

[45:42] Walker: Tear them up, tear your net up.

[45:43] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, you know.

[45:44] Walker: But the fishing technique, as you remember it with your dad, was to use a harpoon, and actually spear them.

[45:51] James E. Pitts Sr.: No, I, I don't know about that.

[45:54] Walker: Yeah, because I thought maybe we talked about that you had the, the harpoon that he had used.

[46:00] James E. Pitts Sr.: M-mm.

[46:01] Walker: M'kay. OK, OK. Now...

[46:04] James E. Pitts Sr.: Now another thing was bullfrogs.

[46:06] Walker: Oh yeah, and I've yeah, gigging bullfrogs.

[46:08] James E. Pitts Sr.: I bet you stabbed them.

[46:09] Walker: I've got them, I'm a good frogger.

[46:11] James E. Pitts Sr.: I never stabbed one in my life. With this hand here.

[46:14] Walker: I go grab them.

[46:15] James E. Pitts Sr.: I've caught four at a time one time.

[46:17] Walker: Yeah.

[46:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: Flashlight in the mouth.

[46:18] Walker: Yeah, that's me, I walk up on them.

[46:20] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[46:22] Walker: Alright, so let me ask you this, one of the things that you like to talk about are steamboats. You've drawn pictures, and we're gonna take a picture of your drawing in a little while, but when you were young, late '20s, early '30s, there were boats coming up the Rappahannock River, and you had steamboats, and you also had sailboats, two-masted schooners like you drew.

[46:50] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[46:50] Walker: Tell me some of your memories of those things.

[46:54] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, the steamboats, I got that all down here somewhere. Now the steam boats, they said went to the city dock, you know.

[47:03] Walker: In Fredericksburg.

[47:03] James E. Pitts Sr.: That's what they said, but I've never seen one there, and I don't know how one get turned around, because a steam boat is 176 feet long.

[47:11] Walker: OK.

[47:13] James E. Pitts Sr.: And, that kind of puzzled me but, I guess they went to city dock.

[47:18] Walker: And there was a series of wharves down here right? There were wharves along the river where the steamboat could pull up, let people off, take on cargo...

[47:27] James E. Pitts Sr.: Oh yeah, yeah I got all them wrote down here.

[47:30] Walker: Where was the nearest wharf to your house?

[47:32] James E. Pitts Sr.: The Greenlaws Wharf.

[47:33] Walker: Say it again?

[47:34] James E. Pitts Sr.: Greenlaws.

[47:35] Walker: Greenlaws wharf.

[47:36] James E. Pitts Sr.: Wharf.

[47:37] Walker: Was it on the north bank, on this side, or on the other side.

[47:40] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well I'll show you exactly where it is. Where's that map at?

[47:46] Walker: Oh, the that one you had out earlier.

[47:47] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[47:48] Walker: Oh let's see, you'll find it, there it is.

[47:56] James E. Pitts Sr.: No can do, because it's up, this is off,

[47:59] Walker: OK.

[47:59] James E. Pitts Sr.: It's off this map.

[48:00] Walker: Greenslaws wharf

[48:01] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[48:02] Walker: Upstream from you?

[48:03] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[48:04] Walker: OK

[48:06] James E. Pitts Sr.: It's not ways up, about two miles from here.

[48:08] Walker: Got you. Well what's your earliest memory, what's, what, tell me about the first time that you remember seeing a steamboat.

[48:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, I, you know, when I was kid I that was a regular thing once a week.

[48:21] Walker: Once a week they would come up the river?

[48:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, come from Baltimore. Yeah, from Baltimore. And you could ship a calf or cow on there. They had a place on there.

[48:33] Walker: For livestock.

[48:34] James E. Pitts Sr.: Fenced off, yeah.

[48:36] Walker: So the steamboats coming out of Baltimore, I assume they come out of Norfolk too, I don't know.

[48:41] James E. Pitts Sr.: It's possible, but I got in here somewhere my dad put down vessels, or I don't know if barges or something. One of those were going to Wilmington, Delaware.

[48:55] Walker: Wilmington, Delaware, OK.

[48:46] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[48:58] Walker: But these, these steamboats, they carried people? They carried produce?

[49:04] James E. Pitts Sr.: M-hm

[49:04] Walker: You know, you said about lumber.

[49:09] James E. Pitts Sr.: No, I don't think steamboat will do that.

[40:10] Walker: OK. Do schooners, what carried the lumber and the railroad ties?

[49:15] James E. Pitts Sr.: Barges.

[49:16] Walker: Barges. OK.

[49:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: I've got one them drawn somewhere in there.

[49:19] Walker: OK.

[49:19] James E. Pitts Sr.: But them barges was, I don't know, 150 feet long I reckon, and they, them barges, they had no engine on them, no engine.

[49:30] Walker: OK.

[49:30] James E. Pitts Sr.: But they had a house on there that people would live on, maybe a man and his wife, maybe.

[49:36] Walker: OK.

[49:38] James E. Pitts Sr.: But, they would live on there all the time. See, down at Horse Head Cliffs, that's where they loaded a lot of railroad ties.

[49:50] Walker: Horse Head Cliffs.

[49:51] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, Horse Head Cliffs.

[49:52] Walker: OK.

[49:53] James E. Pitts Sr.: Just below, right below Bristol Mines. You ever hear of E.W. Embrey, Fredericksburg?

[50:05] Walker: I know the name Embrey, because of the Embrey Mill, the Embrey Dam.

[50:09] James E. Pitts Sr.: I think this guy was a banker.

[50:11] Walker: OK, OK.

[50:12] James E. Pitts Sr.: A lawyer, too, maybe, I don't know.

[50:13] Walker: OK.

[50:14] James E. Pitts Sr.: But he owned a lot of land. He would have people to cut the railroad ties.

[50:23] Walker: Railroad ties. Well did you, did, what kind of wood was used for a railroad tie.

[50:27] James E. Pitts Sr.: Oak, I think.

[50:29] Walker: Oak, a good hard wood.

[50:30] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[50:31] Walker: Not a pine.

[50:32] James E. Pitts Sr.: Maybe white oak..But, they, they use a slab of, you know, to take a, they had, they had a thing it looked something like a grub-hoe they called it an adz (adze).

[50:45] Walker: Right.

[50:45] James E. Pitts Sr.: A.D.Z., you know?

[50:46] Walker: Sure. And you, you could use it to chop, and, and that would flatten out your...

[50:50] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, but see. There was, they called it a 'scorn.' There, like if you had a log here, you chop it here, then you chop it up here, and buckle that off.

[50:59] Walker: OK.

[51:00] James E. Pitts Sr.: And you keep on going up there.

[51:01] Walker: Got you.

[51:02] James E. Pitts Sr.: And then they had to go back and trim it up.

[51:03] Walker: With the adze.

[51:04] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, I mean, we used to burn a lot of them. We use those things, we go to sawmill and get a lot of them.

[51:09] Walker: For firewood.

[51:10] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[51:11] Walker: Sure. Good hardwood. Did you ever ride a steamboat?

[51:16] James E. Pitts Sr.: No sir.

[51:18] Walker: But you were, you were so, you enjoyed them and watching them that you went all the way to Colonial Beach, to get to see one come in, but you never got to take a ride.

[51:28] James E. Pitts Sr.: M-mm. They didn't know I was there already.

[51:33] Walker: I can't help but picture in my mind, I have this image, it looks like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, like you and your buddies standing on the side of the Rappahannock, watching these boats going by wondering where they're going and...

[51:46] James E. Pitts Sr.: I guess you've never seen a steamboat, have you?

[51:49] Walker: I've seen pictures, yes sir, but I'm not intimately familiar.

[51:53] James E. Pitts Sr.: Uh huh.

[51:54] Walker: In some of our videos, and the movie that we made, there's some stuff about steamboats, but if you've got a picture, show me a picture.

[52:03] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, I think I got one. That's where my family had my mother's funeral.

[52:10] Walker: Are you in this photo?

[52:12] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, right in the middle. Bald head one.

[52:16] Walker: That was you.

[52:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, tallest one there.

[52:18] Walker: We'll take a picture of this in a moment. And when is this, was at your mother's funeral?

[52:23] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, it was 1946.

[52:26] Walker: OK, yeah, we'll take a picture of that.

[52:27] James E. Pitts Sr.: But what do you think about my mind is, how it's working, pretty good?

[52:31] Walker: What do I think of your mind? Well let's see you're, 97 years old, trying to tell me about things that happened in 1930 OK. I think your mind's doing pretty good Mr. Pitts.

[52:43] James E. Pitts Sr.: I can remember about 85 years better than I can in the next five minutes, you know.

[52:46] Walker: So a lot of people tell me that. My grandfather told me that as he got older. He said I can remember things when I was a kid-

[52:51] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah

[52:52] Walker: But I can't remember what I ate for breakfast last week.

[52:54] James E. Pitts Sr.: I can be talking to somebody-

[52:56] Walker: Yeah

[52:57] James E. Pitts Sr.: And, the, the name, I can't come up with that, I drop it right off.

[53:02] Walker: Let me ask you a couple things as we wrap up, OK? The Rappahannock River, you lived along it your whole life?

[53:10] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, not my whole life, but I lived there until 1938.

[53:13] Walker: Right, that was down at the Bristol Mine Farm.

[53:16] James E. Pitts Sr.: Right.

[53:16] Walker: But even here, you're not far from the river.

[53:18] James E. Pitts Sr.: No, I still fished from here, you know.

[53:21] Walker: Tell me-

[53:21] James E. Pitts Sr.: I fished in Wilmont, I didn't fish there, I don't got a good steep hill, you couldn't get to the boat.

[53:27] Walker: Steep hill, couldn't get to the boat.

[53:29] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[53:29] Walker: Got you, OK.

[53:30] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, you know, not convenient.

[53:31] Walker: Right.

[53:33] James E. Pitts Sr.: But, of course somebody else - that place been sold many times.

[53:40] Walker: If some, if I , what does the Rappahannock River mean to you? I mean, I'm from Friends of the Rappahannock, we work hard to protect the river. We do advocacy work, we're trying to clean the water, restore the grasses, and the shellfish. Tell me what the river means to you.

[53:55] James E. Pitts Sr.: I truly believe that we'd of gone hungry if it weren't for the  
[54:00]Rappahannock River.

[54:01] Walker: You'd of gone hungry, OK. OK.

[54:04] James E. Pitts Sr.: Because we ate a lot of fish.

[54:08] Walker: Sure, and sold them, and made money off them.

[54:11] James E. Pitts Sr.: No, no not about money.

[54:12] Walker: OK, OK.

[54:14] James E. Pitts Sr.: We had a lot of fun, though.

[54:15] Walker: I love it, OK.

[54:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: I tell you, drift netting is so much fun, I tell you.

[54:22] Walker: Give me a, is there a memory, alright. You're out on the boat and the tide's right, and the drift net is set. Tell me about one them, one of them days out on the water.

[54:36] James E. Pitts Sr.: Doing what?

[54:37] Walker: Just drift netting and doing your fish.

[54:38] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[54:39] Walker: Is there any one particular day that comes to mind, you think about a, a particularly good day, the net was full, and you knew you had plenty of fish.

[54:49] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah. Yeah, I think seeing maybe one day, we caught about 200 fish, fishing the whole day.

[54:56] Walker: Shad or herring.

[54:57] James E. Pitts Sr.: Shad. Yeah, I didn't follow up with the herring business much, you know.

[55:02] Walker: After you grew up?

[55:03] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[55:03] Walker: OK.

[55:04] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah I guess when my dad left wouldn't reckon I... but something stick in my mind about bullfrogging.

[55:13] Walker: Tell me.

[55:16] James E. Pitts Sr.: Myself and another fellow, that fellow was about 80 years old, and he'd ----- paddle the boat through the columns and stuff, you know, and caught 17 bullfrogs.

[55:31] Walker: 17 dozen bullfrogs.

[55:33] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah that's right, yeah

[55:34] Walker: Was that along the river, or was that up in the ponds and creeks?

[55:39] James E. Pitts Sr.: Some of them was on the edge of the river, and some of them was up in the, well most of them were where the collards were. Cow collards.

[55:47] Walker: Cow collards?

[55:48] James E. Pitts Sr.: M-hm

[55:48] Walker: What is a cow collard?

[55:50] James E. Pitts Sr.: Oh, it's got a big old leaf like that, and the bullfrog sat up on top it.

[55:54] Walker: Is, is it what I would call, a lily pad?

[55:56] James E. Pitts Sr.: I guess, yeah. Maybe if had bloom on it, might be that.

[56:00] Walker: Yellow bloom?

[56:01] James E. Pitts Sr.: I, I don't know.

[56:01] Walker: Alright, I gotta look, I gotta look up cow collards. Alright, because I like to brag to people, I'm a pretty good frogger.

[56:08] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[56:09] Walker: You can catch them with you hand, put the light in their eyes.

[56:12] James E. Pitts Sr.: Oh yeah, I put, you know when they're mating the, two, two together.

[56:17] Walker: Right.

[56:18] James E. Pitts Sr.: And at times, I put the light in my mouth.

[56:20] Walker: Right.

[56:21] James E. Pitts Sr.: And catch them, both of them. Catch four frogs at one time.

[56:24] Walker: 17 dozen frogs.

[56:25] James E. Pitts Sr.: That didn't, that didn't happen too often.

[56:27] Walker: I got you, OK.

[56:28] James E. Pitts Sr.: I, I've never, you know, what do you call it?

[56:31] Walker: Gigging?

[56:32] James E. Pitts Sr.: Gigging, yeah.

[56:33] Walker: I've never gigged one either.

[56:35] James E. Pitts Sr.: But, I, I had a-

[56:38] Walker: What'd you do with your frogs?

[56:39] James E. Pitts Sr.: We shipped them to Baltimore.

[56:40] Walker: Now come on, you did, did you eat them? Did you like frog legs?

[56:44] James E. Pitts Sr.: I ate one my brother caught some, some at one time. Ate couple of 'em. And before we get them done, there was little on the stove almost. Them things, keep on jumping I couldn't-

[56:55] Walker: Ah yes sir, that's true. So, so you would sell, send them to Baltimore.

[57:00] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[57:01] Walker: Once again, a little bit of a, a hustle, of money. Make a little money.

[57:06] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, they would sell for about maybe three dollars a dozen. ---- two to three dollars a dozen.

[57:15] Walker: Did you have to dress them out?

[57:17] James E. Pitts Sr.: No.

[57:18] Walker: You could send them whole.

[57:19] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, he had to be live.

[57:20] Walker: A live frog?

[57:22] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[57:22] Walker: So that's why you didn't gig 'em.

[57:24] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[57:24] Walker: You got good grabbing.

[57:25] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, that's right yeah.

[57:27] Walker: A live frog, what'd you ship them in?

[57:29] James E. Pitts Sr.: A box, a wooden box about that long maybe. That high. Couldn't have it too high, because, the frog is got space he's going jump in and it knocks all the skin off his nose.

[57:40] Walker: Yeah, yeah, and tears him up.

[57:43] James E. Pitts Sr.: You ever hear them singing, get them a grass bag and hear them crying in that?

[57:48] Walker: A grass bag and hear them crying?

[57:50] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[57:51] Walker: No, but I've heard them croaking pretty good.

[57:54] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, but-

[57:58] Walker: Well listen, I want to wrap this interview up, because I try to keep this to about an hour.

[58:05] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yes.

[58:06] Walker: But I think I'd like to come back and talk to you some more, if you would be willing to put up with us.

[58:10] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, well you know, if you want to stay long, feel welcome, I-

[58:14] Walker: Well, I want to wrap up the video, then I want to shoot a couple more pictures, OK. I want to take a couple pictures of the boats that you've drawn and thing like that. But then, to, to keep this thing kind of organized, we'll stop the video today, and then have a follow up session, OK? See, I, I'll try to get back down here.

[58:36] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah.

[58:37] Walker: So, I want to thank you very much.

[58:41] James E. Pitts Sr.: Alright.

[58:42] Walker: For-

[58:42] James E. Pitts Sr.: You, you got, you got, you still got it all on.

[58:44] Walker: Yes sir, it's on.

[58:45] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well, if you don't want to-

[58:48] Walker: I want you, I want to take some pictures of that with the camera.

[58:51] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, OK.

[58:54] Walker: But, I want to thank you very much for letting us come down here.

[59:00] James E. Pitts Sr.: OK

[59:01] Walker: And I want to, we'll wrap up the video and then take a couple pictures, OK.

[59:07] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, now the last, I got it here somewhere, but I don't know exactly what time, last trip that the steamboat made from Fredericksburg was 1932. September twenty third I believe.

[59:20] Walker: September 23, 1932, the, the-

[59:24] James E. Pitts Sr.: It was the last-

[59:24] Walker: Steamboat left Fredericksburg.

[59:25] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, last trip.

[59:27] Walker: Coming down from Fredericksburg

[59:28] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah right.

[59:30] Walker: Did you see it on that trip?

[59:31] James E. Pitts Sr.: I don't know.

[59:33] Walker: But you found that in your research?

[59:34] James E. Pitts Sr.: Yeah, my daddy had did his-

[59:37] Walker: 1932. Hm.

[59:38] James E. Pitts Sr.: He, he had, he had, he record a lot of things, no pause.

[59:42] Walker: Was he interested in that kind of stuff?

[59:44] James E. Pitts Sr.: What?

[59:44] Walker: He was interested in steamboats and things like that too?

[59:47] James E. Pitts Sr.: Well I guess so yeah, you know. The water, you know-

[59:53] Walker: Yeah.

[59:53] James E. Pitts Sr.: Kind of...

[59:54] Walker: I got you. Alright, well, thank you Mr. Pitts, we're gonna shut this thing down, and we're gonna take some more pictures, OK.

[1:00:00] James E. Pitts Sr.: OK.

[1:00:00] Walker: Thank you for having us.

[1:00:01] James E. Pitts Sr.: Alright.

(copy of story)

**Steamboat on the Potomac River and Shops on the Boardwalk at Colonial Beach  
Original Rt. 3 form Rollins Fork to Oak Grove and Rt. 205 form Oak Grove to Colonial  
Beach**

We had no electric or plumbing in the 1920's and 1930's.

All this happened in the mid 1930's.

One Friday morning, I got up and had my usual salt fish and cornbread for breakfast. After breakfast, I decided I would like to go to Colonial Beach and see the steamboat come down the Potomac River from Washington and bring people down to Colonial Beach for the weekend. I was told that the steamboat would get down to the town pier about 4 o'clock. So after breakfast, I asked my mother if it would be all right for me to go to Colonial Beach to see the steamboat come in on the Potomac River. She said I know you love steamboats, so I think it will be all right as long as you get the jobs done around the house before you go.

So I milked and fed the cow first and then I fed the horse, pig, chickens, and turkeys. I then split some wood and carried it in the put in the wood box, so she would have some wood to fry the salt fish the next morning.

After I finished the jobs for the morning, I found a big washing tub and put it at the back of the house and behind a big locust tree where the sun would shine on it for about 3 hours. I also took a bucket and carried water from the well and poured it into the tub until it was a little over half full.

After the water got warm, I carried out a towel, soap, and washcloth and began bathing. After I finished bathing, I dried off with a towel. I wrapped the towel around my body and ran into the house.

After that I asked my mother if she had clean white clothes. She said to look in the bottom drawer of the bureau. There is a pair of knickers, a white short-sleeved shirt, and white socks. There is a pair of white tennis shoes under the bed. "Thanks, Mom." I put on the white knickers. They came down just below my knee and they had a little ruffle around the bottom. Then I was ready to leave the house, so I asked my mother if she had any change leftover from the eggs she took to the store after she traded the eggs for sugar, coffee, and tea. Because the eggs were 18 cents a dozen, I thought you might have some change leftover that you might let me have. I will let you have a nickel if you be careful not to spend it all at one time. I will be careful.

I walked about 3 miles to Webster Allensworth's country store and Post Office. I got to the store about 2:30 because I needed to get to the town pier at Colonial Beach at 4:00 o'clock to see the steamboat come down the Potomac River. So I waited at the store for about 10 minutes. I had several friends that had horse and buggies. Some had automobiles. I saw one of my friends coming down the road with a 1931 Ford Coupe. It was painted a canary yellow with a rumble seat near the back where the trunk should be and a spare tire near the bumper with a chrome cover on the tire. Also it had chrome headlights. He stopped at the Post Office to get his mail. So he walked over to me and said, Son, you are dressed up mighty good. Where are you going? So I said to catch a ride to Colonial Beach town pier so I could see the steamboat come down the Potomac River. So he said, I need to go to the Bank of Westmoreland to talk to Mr. Williams about a loan. So you can ride with me. OK, but I need to catch a ride back home too. I need to leave Colonial Beach about 10 p.m., so you might have to wait a long time. I think that's OK. I will talk to Mr. Williams at the bank. Then I will go up to Washington Avenue to go to the Mayfair Theater to watch the cartoons and hope there will be a western movie after that. I will meet you at Fox Bingo at the entrance of Joyland. So we started down toward Oak Grove on the original Rt. 3. It was a narrow road from Post Office. We went about ½ mile down old Rt. 3 and took a right on now Rt. 634 and Claymont road.

We went on that road for about 3 miles; it was very narrow and crooked. After we crossed a bridge, we went a little further, and then we passed Oak Grove High School which was on our left. The school was a wooden structure with wooden weatherboard on the outside.

### **How we arrived at Oak Grove**

From Oak Grove to Colonial Beach, we took the following roads:

We started on now 205 for a short way, and then we turned right on now 638 and Ferry Road. we went about a mile and came out on 205 and Mattox Creek Bridge. From there we went about 1 mile and turned right onto now 628 and Stoney Knoll Road. we went around Morgan's Corner and came back on Rt. 205 again at DeAtley Service Center. From there we took 205 about ½ mile. We turned left on now Rt. 632, Monrovia Church Road. we went on that for about 1 mile and came back out on 205. We came out on left-hand of the Union Bank. We were at the Beach gate.

Then we took Colonial Avenue until we got to the Boardwalk. We crossed the Boardwalk and drove all the way to the Town Pier in front of the Boardwalk.

I got out of the car. My friend left to tend to his business; he said he would meet me at Foxes Bingo about 10 o'clock. So I sat on a bench near the Town Pier so I could get a good look at the steamboat coming down the Potomac River.

Finally I saw it coming. It docked at the end of the pier. The gangplank was put down so the people could walk from the steamboat onto the pier. A group of people got off and headed for Wolcott Hotel. The hotel had a large front porch with a lot of steps. They would stay there until Sunday evening. Then the steamboat would come back from Washington, DC, to take them back home.

The Potomac steamboat had a walking beam that went up and down the whole time the boat was moving. I asked several people on the Boardwalk what the purpose of the walking beam was. No one could answer my question. So from that day to this, is still don't know what the walking beam was for.

After the steamboat left, I walked up the Boardwalk to Colonial Avenue, and then I started to walk back down the Boardwalk. Following are the shops that I observed on the way back down: First one was Palm Garden that was on the corner of Boardwalk and Colonial Avenue. Next were the bowling alley and the popcorn stand. Up on the second floor was the rollerskating rink with wooden floor which made a lot of noise. Next as I remember was Joyland. It was several in that area that I don't remember. Foxes Bingo was at the entrance of Joyland.

Joyland was a place where big bands would play on weekends. It also had an open air dance floor where you could dance under the moon and stars. The next place on the Boardwalk was Charley's Hot Dog Stand. Next was Davis Shooting Gallery where you could check your skill at knocking over imitation ducks.

I am not sure, but the next place was the bath house. Next place was Fries Restaurant; then Mrs. Stone's snowball stand. There's where I spend my whole nickel for a snowball. After Mrs. Stone retired, a lady named Milly took over the business. Then the next place was Wolcott's Hotel.

It was getting late so I went back up the Boardwalk to Foxes Bingo where I met my friend to take me back home. We came back on the same old road that we went over on. My friend put me out at Ruby Lane which was near Rollins Fork Post Office. I thanked him for the ride and then went home.

I walked down Ruby Lane and crossed over a swamp which was the boundary line between King George County and Westmoreland county; then I walked on a narrow path through the woods that came out on Bristol Mine Road that took me to my home at Bristol Mine Farm. This is only one trip of many that I made to Colonial Beach in the early 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's. This story is true. I made the trip myself. I wrote this story myself. Any comments, call 540/775-7740.

James E. Pitts, Sr.  
September 2015