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Eastern Shore Stories: Technology, Place, and Local Culture

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Eastern Shore Stories: Technology, Place, and Local Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media, Art, and Text at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

EASTERN SHORE STORIES: TECHNOLOGY, PLACE, AND LOCAL CULTURE

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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The Eastern Shore of Virginia is a narrow peninsula separating the Chesapeake Bay from the Atlantic Ocean. Residents of the rural counties of Accomack and Northampton County share a strong sense of cultural identity based on geography, rooted in a distinct communal sense of place reinforced by an agricultural lifestyle.

Storytelling around dinner tables and on front porches at dusk, speeches at high school graduations, family recipes talked through in a grandmother's kitchen – it is through oral language that Eastern Shore people have primarily shared the knowledge that sustains their sense of communal identity. Oral knowledge of farming techniques and land use are handed down generation by generation through material lessons in the fields and woods. The most natural and effective research method for understanding Eastern Shore culture and its peoples' sense of place is the collection of oral histories.

The interviews collected for the Eastern Shore Stories project focus on farm life on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in the mid-twentieth century, before the widespread use of electricity, tractors, or chemicals. The stories from the interviews seem quaint individually – nostalgic stories of how things used to be – but as a body of interviews, they accrue a weight and a coherence that offer interesting counterpoints to pervasive assumptions about progress and technology. It is those interesting counterpoints that this dissertation explores.

This researcher expected to hear about plowing behind a team of mules and scratching out potatoes. She did not expect to hear retired farmers speak of the loneliness of modern farming, of how 2,500 acres used to support fifty families and now barely supports one. What emerged from the collective interviews was a sense that the industrialization of agriculture in this local community has caused unforeseen losses and those losses, however intangible, have been deleterious. Despite this, people from the Eastern Shore struggle to retain a sense of communal identity, defined by geography and familial connections. Their sense of belonging to this particular place persists in the face of rapid technological and cultural changes, creating tension between the place as it was and the place as it evolves in the twenty-first century.

The Angel of History –

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (259)

Chapter One: Is Anyone Home?

Scott Russell Sanders begins his essay “The Geography of Somewhere” by telling of Gertrude Stein’s return visit to her hometown of Oakland, California, after ten years of living in Europe. He writes, “She could find no trace of her childhood home, no durable landmarks at all, leading her to remark that she could not imagine settling down and writing in Oakland, for ‘there is no there there’” (93). Her enigmatic statement *there is no there there* reverberates in the American experience of place today, even as its meaning is hard to pin down. For centuries scholars, writers and artists have assumed a relationship between communal identity and place when exploring the idea of “home.” As global economic and cultural pressures homogenize local communities worldwide, the relevancy in investigating culture from a geographically defined perspective becomes problematic in ways unimagined even a hundred years ago.

For most of human existence, men and women have relied on their bodies to define their position in the universe. *Global* was the tall tale told by the adventurer or sailor over ale at the tavern. *Local* was the real world, the world experienced directly and personally through a person’s senses. Spiritual beliefs may have animated the physical world, but no one questioned how *real* or *authentic* their local environs were. Travel was slow – by foot or by animal – so even the adventurer, the traveler, the sailor experienced the global through the direct experience of his body first. Only on his return did he communicate through story the experience of the global to those who stayed behind.

In the past one hundred and fifty years this has changed for reasons well documented.

The combustion engine revolutionized both transportation and the experience of work. Printing presses mechanized, allowing for the rapid expansion of mass media, which has steeped Western culture with imagery, information, and narrative, and created cults of celebrity. Advances in communications and transportation technologies have progressed layer upon layer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, until the global seems instant and more real than the real that is seen, heard, touched through the body. Scholars claim that technologies like photography, film, and radio complicated human experience by conflating space and time, creating a dissonance they label modernity. Advances in electronic technologies after World War II have led to powerful handheld computers and mobile phone technologies that are proliferating around the globe. Adventurers now hunt for the *authentic* – cuisine, dress, local customs – yet even inhabitants of the most remote regions on Earth have cell phones. *Authentic* becomes a marketing opportunity for *locals*. The words do not make sense anymore.

“Home”

Webbed with tidal creeks and marshes like capillaries between woods, farmland, and small towns, a peninsula rises above sea level to form the eastern boundary of the Chesapeake Bay. This sandy landmass, which divides the Atlantic Ocean from the broad shallow Bay, is frequently called the Eastern Shore. The southernmost and narrowest two counties, Accomack and Northampton, are among the poorest and least populated counties in Virginia.

Isolated and separated from the rest of the state by the Chesapeake Bay, the rural farming community on this peninsula was the *local* of my childhood, already saturated with access to broadcast television and radio, and easy to leave by automobile. Since May 2009 I have been making aural recordings in this geographically distinct region. When I developed and found

funding for the Eastern Shore Stories project, my interest as an oral historian and writer was simply to collect stories and photographs of farm life from these two geographically isolated counties in eastern Virginia. I was interested in documenting accounts of rural life in the mid-twentieth century before the industrialization of farming altered this community in unanticipated ways. The stories seem quaint individually – stories of how things used to be – but as a body of interviews, they accrue a weight and a coherence that offer interesting counterpoints to pervasive assumptions about progress and technology. I expected to hear about plowing behind a team of mules and scratching out potatoes. I did not expect to hear retired farmers speak of the loneliness of modern farming, of how 2,500 acres used to support fifty families and now barely supports one. What has emerged from the collective interviews is a sense that the industrialization of agriculture in this local community has caused unforeseen losses and those losses, however intangible, have been deleterious. Despite this, people from the Eastern Shore struggle to retain a sense of communal identity, defined by geography and familial connections. Their sense of belonging to this particular place persists even with the loss of family farms and the building of multiple strip malls and, in 2010, a Super-Walmart.

What is it about a place that makes one say, *there is a there there*? While wild places of incredible beauty inspire awe, these are not places where men and women choose to live, raise families, grow food, and build towns. Humans alter geography to suit their economic needs and their cultural customs, and yet their intimate knowledge of specific geography plays a role in the creation of a community's cultural customs and rituals. It is the symbiotic relationship between place and culture that creates a communal sense of geographical identity. Would Appalachian culture have emerged without the mountains and their coal? Do Hawaiians need their volcanic islands rising in the Pacific Ocean in order to be Hawaiians? Geographic and social isolation

only intensify a group's sense of cultural identity grounded in place. That people define themselves by the place they call *home* is not disputed. Post-structuralist scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and Giles Deleuze, however, argue that using a sense of place as a source for cultural identity is an act of the human imagination.

With modern diasporas driven by economic hardship, political instability, or even prosperity, people worldwide find themselves in foreign places, naming *home* as separate from the place they are living. A refugee from Hurricane Katrina may be living in Boston, Massachusetts, but it is likely they still consider New Orleans *home*. I have lived in Richmond, Virginia, since 1986, and yet I call the Eastern Shore *home*. I am not alone in this. Standing beside a food cart on Virginia Commonwealth University's campus, having a casual conversation with another customer, I learn that she considers Keller, a small town on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, *home*. In our conversation I learn that she moved to Richmond from Keller when she was ten, that her mother and brother and she have made a home for themselves in Richmond, but that they return *home*, where her extended family resides, whenever they can. A few days later, in a conversation with the Director of the Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Dr. James Victory said it was about time he and his wife "went back there." *Back there* for Dr. Victory and his wife is a place in Bayside, a small community between Onancock and Parksley on the Eastern Shore. He has lived his adult life in southside Virginia, earning a doctorate in Education and working in school systems as an administrator and superintendent. And yet, on a mild February day, the Eastern Shore as *home* calls him back. An act of human imagination, fueled by family connections and memory – yes – but powerful and rooted in a physical place. Unlike Gertrude Stein, the woman from Keller and the man from Bayside would say that *there is a there there* and they go back whenever they can.

The History and Development of the Eastern Shore

The Chesapeake Bay watershed, particularly the land and water on its eastern boundary, is known for natural beauty, thriving wildlife habitats, and for the evidence of a long history of European and African settlement. While the story of this place does not begin with the English, its written record does, with the Virginia Company and Captain John Smith. In 1606 the Virginia Company put together an expedition of three ships to claim a piece of the “New World” for England and to search for a northwest passage to India. One hundred and forty men and boys made the five-month voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, landing in 1607 near what is now Lynnhaven Inlet at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay after a stop in the West Indies. They were directed by sealed orders to establish their settlement fort a distance up the river from the mouth of the Bay because the Virginia Company and the English monarch feared retribution from the Spanish more than they feared the indigenous population. The explorers named both the river and the settlement after King James I.

Captain John Smith “took seriously the order to explore,” according to John Page Williams, author of *Chesapeake: Exploring the Water Trail of Captain John Smith* (23). The workboat *Discovery*, as historians have named the unnamed barge that “had been built in two halves in England and stored in the hold of one of their ships” (17), was what Capt. Smith and his crew used to explore the Chesapeake Bay watershed. “During the time [Smith] spent in Virginia, from the late spring of 1607 to the fall of 1609, he and his crews covered more than 3,000 miles in [Discovery], including two trips to the upper Chesapeake in the summer of 1608” (Williams 23). What John Smith found was not the northwest passage to India nor gold like that found by the Spaniards, but a “faire and goodly bay” with “fruitful and delightsome land.” The first stops Captain John Smith made were in southern Northampton County. He continued up the

shoreline, explored the coast, and followed the largest rivers to their fall lines. In 1612, after his return to England, he published a remarkably accurate map of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Using his map and his published writings as a guide and testament, English settlers traveled to Virginia and claimed land around the Bay. The Eastern Shore still has evidence of the earliest English presence in the Americas – buildings that have survived, family names whose ancestry can be traced to original land grants from the 1600s, and the oldest continuous court records in the country.

One reason the Eastern Shore was quickly settled is that the area is easily accessible by boat, a boon in the 1600s when settlers used the waterways as highways. Later, this asset led to physical isolation and the lower Eastern Shore remained rural and underdeveloped as other parts of the Chesapeake Bay watershed were developed and urbanized. Literally a backwater, the natural beauty and wildlife habitat was largely undisturbed. A small number of farmers, watermen, and shopkeepers populated the Shore and many of their descendants, including the woman from Keller and the man from Bayside, still call the place *home*. Although the railroad's advance in the 1880s radically improved the economic fortunes for many in this isolated area and led to a population boom, it was electricity and the automobile that wrought seismic changes in demographics and in the area's economy. According to Williams, the population of the Chesapeake Bay watershed has exploded. He writes, "Since 1607, the watershed's population has swelled by an astounding 16,000 percent, to 16 million, and it is now increasing by 100,000 per year, the same number as the total population in John Smith's time." Accomack and Northampton remain among the least developed counties in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, still somewhat isolated by water, but that is changing. Once bridges linking the Shore to Hampton

Roads in the south and the Annapolis / Baltimore urban area in the north were built, the area became more accessible to travelers and more attractive to new residents.

Memory and Place

Memory plays its part in the perception of a landscape. Lucy Lippard, in her 1997 book *The Lure of the Local*, likens memory of a landscape to a palimpsest. She writes, “A sense of place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today” (33). She delineates two ways places are generally experienced. One is “‘the ability to know a new place quickly and well, and to adapt to its circumstance,’ a source of mapping in indigenous societies” (33). She explains that modern city-dwellers as well as indigenous peoples still use this ability to “map” a new place quickly, both for its riches and for its possible dangers. More relevant to most Eastern Shore experience is the second way Lippard says a place can be known – this one largely through memory. She writes, “On the other hand, memory is stratified. If we have seen a place through many years, each view, no matter how banal, is a palimpsest” (33). Many long-time Eastern Shore residents give directions based on buildings that have long since been overgrown by honeysuckle and trumpet vine. They begin conversations with someone they have just met by trying to place that person within family connections or other markers that bridge time. When a long-time resident drives down a back road, they recount who has worked and lived on that particular piece of land, not only in their lifetime, but in the lifetimes of their parents and perhaps their grandparents – local memory and knowledge that is orally shared and remembered. Geographer and scholar Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “The meaning of a real place is constructed ... through accretional layers of gossip and song, oral history, written history, essays and poems; and through pictures” (692). Because the Eastern

Shore population has remained stable over time, the knowledge of place has mainly been shared orally and sometimes passed down in writing through the keeping of court records, newspaper accounts, and family bibles. Because of the boundedness of the peninsula by water on three sides, geography has enabled the Shore population to define itself as separate and distinctive, in much the same way inhabitants of islands frequently do. Beginning with Captain John Smith, maps of this region show a land mass shaped like a small finger surrounded by water and punctured with creeks and inlets flowing into the Bay and ocean. To inhabitants, this narrow finger-shaped piece of land resonates with memories and meaning.

The invention of geographical maps is thought to parallel the earliest alphabetic texts, according to Peter Turchi, author of *Maps of the Imagination*. He writes, “The earliest maps are thought to have been created to help people find their way and to reduce their fear of the unknown” (11). Captain John Smith’s map of the Chesapeake Bay watershed brought English settlers to the Bay. Creating the map was, as many maps of that time were, an act of both capitalism and imperialism. The map was also remarkably accurate, as far as any map is accurate. As Turchi points out, “Cartographers must continually confront the fact that there is no such thing as objective presentation. ... The first lie of a map ... is that it is the truth” (73). The few indigenous people living on the peninsula when the English arrived had maps of the place, but not maps drawn, printed, and shared. They knew where the best shellfish could be found. Where the pleasant places to camp in summer were located. The bays where ducks and geese stopped on their migrations south. They would have passed down this knowledge orally. English settlers also learned the geography, the location of game and shellfish, the best places to grow different crops, and would have passed this knowledge down in their customary ways – mostly through oral means within family and extended family groups, but also through writing, a

technology the English settlers brought with them. The English settlers and their African slaves also brought their cultural practices and assumptions with them, combining to create what is now considered Eastern Shore culture.

Culture and Place

Maps of the world presume autonomous nations with cultures delineated according to arbitrary lines – lines that, according to cultural anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, create “an inherently fragmented space, divided by different colors into diverse national societies” (34). They argue, “It is so taken for granted that each country embodies its own distinctive culture and society that the terms ‘society’ and ‘culture’ are routinely simply appended to the names of nation-states, as when a tourist visits India to understand ‘Indian culture’ and ‘Indian society’ or Thailand to experience ‘Thai culture’ or the United States to get a whiff of ‘American culture’” (34). This is problematic, of course, because it assumes that cultures can be observed and described according to the limits of geographic boundaries, ignoring inherent incongruities and imbalances of power. In the opening pages of their anthology *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, Gupta and Ferguson argue that rooting identity in “locality and community ... haunts contemporary anthropological approaches to local communities” by setting up a dichotomy between “‘the local’ ... as the original, the centered, the natural, the authentic” and “‘the global’ ... as new, external, artificially imposed and inauthentic” (7). The problem goes back to the question of whether culture exists outside of a narrative construct, an act of human imagination. Ethnography, the primary methodology of cultural anthropologists, uses direct observation of customs and ritual, extensive and detailed field notes, and the recording of interviews with “subjects” – or members of the

culture being studied. In the early years of the twentieth century, these “objective” observations were published by anthropologists using writing, photography, and recordings to preserve human customs primarily from non-literate cultures, cultures that would have handed down their knowledge, customs, and rituals orally. Cultural anthropologists now question whether ethnography, as it was practiced as an “objective” methodology, was ever a viable social science method. Gupta and Ferguson write that “studies of ethnographic writing have revealed the apparent boundedness and coherence of ‘a culture’ as something made rather than found; the ‘wholeness’ of the holistically understood object appears rather more as a narrative device than as an objectively present empirical truth” (2). Norman Denzin, in *Interpretative Ethnography*, goes further to write, “... humans live in a secondhand world of meanings. They have no direct access to reality. Reality as it is known is mediated by symbolic representation, by narrative texts, and by cinematic and televisual structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world” (xvi). And because “humans live in a secondhand world of meanings,” it calls into question whether there was *ever* any “*there there*.” Gupta and Ferguson posit that assumptions about ethnographic practices and about the connection between place and culture must be challenged “for an anthropological exploration of ‘the local’ to proceed without succumbing to a nostalgia for origins” (7). Nostalgia, as defined by Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia*, is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii). A home that no longer or never existed, sense of place as a narrative construct, identity connected to place a complex act of the human imagination – *there was never any there there*.

While scholars argue convincingly that sense of place as a source of identity is an act of human imagination, what this means for individuals is harder to parse. The woman from Keller and the man from Bayside might agree that imagination plays a role in their identification with

the Eastern Shore, but their emotional attachment to the place feels no less real. Groups of people are quick to identify themselves with place, perhaps because humans have bodies that move in space and time. People who have family connections on the Eastern Shore, particularly those who grew up in these rural counties, would likely argue that *there is most definitely a there there* and not merely one they have imagined or constructed. “The Official Eastern Shore of Virginia Page !” (the exclamation point appears in the page’s title) is a Facebook community of 5,900 people (as of July 24, 2012). Many of the posts are nostalgic memories of the Eastern Shore of their childhoods. A typical post on December 24, 2011 – “When I say Eastern Shore Christmas, what do you think of? I think of turnip greens, sweet potato pies, and the Santa that used to go up and down in Bundick’s store window in Painter...the good old days” – elicited nineteen “likes” and twelve comments about favorite Eastern Shore foods or memories of Christmas lights and Santa visitations in small downtown Main Streets. Some posts are more current and more political. Following the closure of Fresh Pride Grocery the day after Christmas 2011 (which happened without press or employee notification), “Mr. Jimmy Crab” who runs the page posted: “RIP to the 2nd ES victim of Big “W” ...Onley Fresh Pride. Feeling for the employees & their families, and especially at this time of year.” The “W” here refers to Walmart and this post garnered a spirited discussion of local versus corporate business practices. Thirty-one comments ranged from “Friends of mine who were die hard Walmart lovers have even admitted that they see the creeping prices I had warned them about starting already at Onley Walmart. Kill out small business then jack up prices – that’s the Walmart way” to “Sorry but fresh pride sucks and is way over priced specially the one on chinco! Walmart has better priced items and more to choose from.” One of the comments: “Fresh Pride and Roses were irrelevant long before Walmart came to Onley. Anyone do their Black Friday shopping at Roses? As for

the Mom and Pop stuff, maybe if they had better hours and better prices it wouldn't be a problem. I'm hoping for a big box hardware store down in Onley since the locals close up at 4! It's kind of hard to shop at places that close before most people get off work" is followed by "Bryan, you said it best. If you decide that M-F 9-5 allows time for everyone to get to your store, don't be surprised when you go bankrupt. Sorry folks, it's not 1950." A conversation is happening, not in the local news outlets or in a physical public venue, but in the digital public sphere. This group of almost 6,000 people who self-identify online with a specific geographic place are talking economics – and although this is hardly an exhaustive discussion of the issue, it raises the questions of what is valued and respected in a local economy and, by extension, a local community.

The Interviews

In the interviews I have recorded with individuals who remember what the Eastern Shore was like before World War II, many are saddened by the sense that a vibrant community had evaporated because of forces that seem both invisible and inevitable. No one described how global economic pressures and federal policies had dismantled a vigorous local economy in a generation or two; they simply described how many people used to go to the main street in Parksley on Saturday night and shop at local stores and how that no longer happened. Loss of community was a constant in the interviews. Two other veins running through the interviews are significant in understanding how a place might become more than land as commodity or lines on a map. One is the satisfaction that comes from knowing a specific place intimately over a long period of time, something Lippard claims is more rare now than it used to be. Many interviewees, in fact, told stories that they had been told by relatives long deceased – their

palimpsest of the landscape layered with generational memory, handed down orally and shared with me orally. The other vein is a lifelong satisfaction that comes from knowing how to do things – how to plant and harvest string beans, to harvest meat from a hog, to sew, to grow a sweet potato, to milk a cow. Interviewees repeatedly expressed pride in specific skills that had made them self-sufficient. These threads in the interviews have led me to ask other questions about the importance of knowing a place well, about the importance of the physical body's experiences in space and time, about modernity and progress, and about the unanticipated side-effects of the mechanization of food production and globalization of local economies.

Others have identified and written about these losses in rural communities across the United States. Wendell Berry, in a 2005 *Orion* magazine article, describes the changes he noticed when he returned to Kentucky to live in 1964. He writes, "It was evident at once that the human life of the place, the life of the farms and the farming community, was in decline. ... The little towns that once had been social and economic centers, thronged with country people on Saturdays and Saturday nights, were losing out to the bigger towns and the cities" (41-42). American national mythology glorifies migration – the freedom to leave home and conquer new frontiers – but the value of a vibrant local community has been less recognized or lauded. Scott Russell Sanders, in an essay "Staying Put," muses that Americans have always been a restless people: "Our Promised Land has always been over the next ridge or at the end of the rail, never under our feet. ... In our national mythology, the worst fate is to be trapped on a farm, in a village, in the sticks, in some dead-end job or unglamorous marriage or played-out game" (357). While my interviewees are mostly people who remained geographically situated in a stable community – hardly the migrants that Sanders takes issue with – the mythology he references has influenced both those who stay and those who migrate. It also affects the reception, the

homecoming, of those who have migrated for economic or personal reasons and return “home.” It affects the self-concept of those who choose to stay.

Since this project maps acts of human memory and imagination, there is the risk of sliding into uncritical nostalgia for a return to a perceived simpler time and way of doing things. Of course, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, in their book *The Imagined Past*, quote Lowenthal who writes, “George Eliot was glad she had not lived ‘when there were fewer reforms and plenty of highwaymen, fewer discoveries and more faces pitted with small-pox’; Dickens summarized ‘The Wisdom of our Ancestors’ as ‘Ignorance. Superstition. The Block. The Stake. The Rack. Dirt. Disease’” (27). No one I spoke with wants to return to working the land with a team of mules. What they were nostalgic for was the vitality of the local community that existed when hundreds of family farms were viable and small towns were filled with local businesses. Where have the people gone? – this was the refrain. Boym, who defined nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii), also writes, “Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (8). Given the economic and demographic changes on the Eastern Shore, which mirror those happening globally, it makes sense that most of the posts on “The Official Eastern Shore of Virginia Page !” on Facebook would be uncritically nostalgic. The posts that are not are those that deal with the day-to-day economic reality of living in an isolated rural community. The most nostalgic people I have spoken with are those in the diaspora. Both the woman from Keller and the man from Bayside expressed sadness at changes they have witnessed, but both have also chosen to live away from the Shore. Most of the people I know who live on the Shore are at best pleased and at least resigned to shopping at the Super Walmart. The Eastern Shore, the one filled with small farms and happy people, becomes a mythic place

more for those who have left than for those who stayed. Boym writes about this in *The Future of Nostalgia*: “The nostalgic is never a native but a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal” (12). The longing for something that is lost, that is nostalgia. “When we are home, we don’t need to talk about it. ... To feel at home is to know things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn’t depend on an actual location” (Boym 251) and “The home we miss is no longer a geographically defined place but rather a state of mind” (Chase and Shaw 1). The home longed for is the mythic place, of a different economic and social reality, memories perhaps cleansed of the more painful or unjust realities of that economic and social reality.

Us and Them

Nostalgia is an individual feeling, but there are communal attitudes that persist regardless of whether someone is a lifelong resident of the Shore or a member of the diaspora. Both groups make a distinction between Shoremen – people who were born on the Shore – and everyone else who are called “come-heres.” Polly Stewart, in her chapter “Regional Consciousness as a Shaper of Local History: Examples from the Eastern Shore,” describes her observation of how deliberately and intentionally Eastern Shore people set themselves apart. She writes, “Membership in the group is rigidly determined: the only way one can be a Shoreman is to have been born in the Shore. Those who find it necessary to secure employment away from the Shore yearn to come back, and many do come back upon retirement, because of the ‘sand between their toes’” (77). “The sand between their toes” saying is one I have heard my entire life. Mythically, Shore people believe that, once you have Eastern Shore “sand between your toes,” you may leave for a while, but you will always return. Stewart, who lived on the lower Shore of

Maryland for about ten years, wrote about the strong us / them dichotomy she observed in Shore culture. I am reminded of the film *Stranger With a Camera*, in which Appalshop filmmaker Elizabeth Barret explores the Appalachian code that had locals defending Hobart Ison, even bringing him homemade cakes in jail after he had shot and killed the Canadian filmmaker Hugh O'Connor for filming one of his tenants. This insider/outsider code seems to say, "He may be crazy as a loon, but he's one of us and we take care of our own."

Defining identity by a geographical location is a common practice in human culture, but drawing lines between people as "natives" and "come-heres" can have destructive consequences. Using historical and sociological examples from recent conflicts in Rwanda and commentary from scholars like humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan and political philosopher Hannah Arendt, scholar Liisa Malkki interrogates the idea that soil determines nation and culture. In her essay in *Culture, Power, Place*, she warns of the implications of using rootedness as an overarching metaphor in nationalistic rhetoric. Malkki quotes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari from their 1987 book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, "History is always written from a sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of history" (61). The idea she proposes is that this soil-based rootedness metaphor "is taken for granted to such an extent that it is nearly invisible" (61) and, as such, is dangerous, particularly in a world of refugees and diaspora. She writes, "To plot only 'places of birth' and degrees of nativeness is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them" (72). People form attachments through their senses and through their imaginations. What they see, feel, touch, smell in a place becomes a part of their memories and their life experiences – no matter whether their grandparents were born where they

find themselves or whether they have had to find a new “home” because of war or famine or the desire to be someplace new. The human mind and imagination allow people to embrace places they have traveled to as if those places are deeply familiar. People can even form attachments to places they have never been, purely through their imaginations. Globally, migrations due to climate change, economic disruption, and war are displacing large numbers of people. For Shoremen, changing farm policy that favors large producers and the opportunity to do work less physically demanding than farm work are the primary forces driving the Eastern Shore diaspora. For those moving to the Shore, the chance to live in a rural setting near the water is what brings newcomers to the area.

Some places are more attractive than others when looking for places to settle. Words like “authentic” betray a bias toward an idealized version of a hometown. So, when Stein says *there is no there there*, does she have a pre-conceived idea of how a place is supposed to appear and feel? Perhaps there is something more universal at work – something that draws from the human senses, which have evolved in a way that make some places more pleasing than others. James Howard Kunstler, in *The Geography of Nowhere*, uses the price of real estate as a “clue” for the “kind of place that people find most desirable” (126). He cites Georgetown and Charlestown as two examples and analyzes why people might find them more attractive than the suburbs that ring every U.S. city. “The arrangement of streets, the human scale of the neighborhood, and a splendid architecture featuring deep porches that connect the private world of the home with the public realm of the street” – these are features he cites that people are willing to pay for when they are looking for an ideal place to live. But is it merely pleasing architecture and well-designed neighborhoods that make a *there there*? Or is there more in the search for an ideal home? “The search for homeplace is the mythical search for the *axis mundi*, for a center, for

some place to stand, for something to hang on to,” Lippard writes. “For indigenous people, home is often a much broader and shared concept, ‘an extension of their soul and spirit,’ as Pueblo writer Rina Swentzell has put it” (27). Calling Eastern Shore locals “indigenous” would likely be offensive to the few remaining members of the Nanticoke nation whose ancestors lived on the Eastern Shore for thousands of years before the British sailed their ships into the Chesapeake Bay. But the Pueblo definition of “home” as an “extension of their soul and spirit” describes the way Shoremen with family roots would describe their feelings about the Eastern Shore. Could the descendants of the first British settlers and the first African slaves be considered native to this strip of land in North America after four hundred years of habitation? Do they need to have lived on the Shore for six hundred years to be “indigenous?” A thousand years? Does time give one more “rights” to claim a soul connection to a place? This kind of thinking seems to illustrate the “soil-based” prejudice that Malkki describes in her essay.

A Better Question

Perhaps these are the wrong questions to ask. Scott Russell Sanders wrote his essay “Staying Put” in response to ideas Salman Rushdie put forward in his collection *Imaginary Homelands*. Rushdie’s volume of essays and criticism is, according to Sanders, a celebration of “migrants” as the “only species of human being free of the shackles of nationalism” (358). What would happen, Sanders asks, if more of us were to stop celebrating the freedom of landless mobility and commit to a place, a natural habitat, a human community. Sanders quarrels with “the belief ... that uprooting brings tolerance, while rootedness breeds intolerance; that imaginary homelands are preferable to geographical ones; that to be modern, enlightened, fully of our time is to be displaced” (358). The real danger, Sanders writes, comes from carrying ideas like

luggage into new places and carrying on as if nothing is different. He writes, “Migrants often pack up their visions and values with the rest of their baggage and carry them along. The Spaniards devastated Central and South America by imposing on this New World the religion, economics, and politics of the Old. ... The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was caused not by drought but by the transfer onto the Great Plains of farming methods that were suitable to wetter regions” (358). Even though Malkki argues that our mythologies of culture circle around rootedness, Sanders makes the argument that humans are by nature restless and migratory. He writes, “Mobility is the rule in human history, rootedness the exception” (359). Often technology is credited or blamed with our increased mobility and restlessness – as if the automobile caused us to travel more – but Sanders argues that, “on the contrary, our restlessness gave rise to the automobile, as it led to the bicycle, steamboat, and clipper ship, as it led to the taming of horses, lacing of snowshoes, and carving of dugout canoes” (359). Given our evolutionary history, putting down roots, staying put, is the more unusual choice for humans. What has changed in the twenty-first century, however, is the homogenization of places around the globe. Borrowing terms Thomas Friedman used as the title of a recent book – the world is becoming *hot, flat, and crowded*. Human restlessness, when combined with climate change caused by human technology, “the rise of high-consuming middle classes all over the world,” and the addition of “roughly a billion people every thirteen years” (Friedman 8), may not be something to celebrate. Sanders writes, “In this hemisphere, many of the worst abuses – of land, forests, animals, and communities – have been carried out by ‘people who root themselves in ideas rather than places’” (358). He, of course, argues for rootedness – for making a commitment to a place and working to make it a place where *there is a there there*.

In the interviews, vital small towns surrounded by functioning family farms are the

landscape longed for. According to Lippard, “In 1860, six of out ten Americans lived by farming; now it’s two out of one hundred – even though farming remains the nation’s biggest business” (150). Not only the farms are disappearing, but “every decade some twenty small towns in the United States disappear along with the farms” (Lippard 155). A few farmers farm larger and larger plots of land. Fewer people on the land mean fewer patrons at local stores. The automobile, in particular, has also made it easier for the few people left to travel longer distances to larger towns for goods and services. A shared local economy has not exactly disappeared, but it is a small fragment of what once held the community together. Dr. Victory, the man from Bayside, said that when he returns to his family’s homeplace, he does not know anyone. Bill Davis, a retired farmer and lifelong Shore resident, talked about how there is “more traffic on this [back] road here in front of our house” than there used to be on Route 13, the main road.

Bill Davis: Used to, when I was a kid, you very seldom ever saw a car come by here.

Very seldom. ... and I don’t know anybody. I don’t know where they’re all coming from, but I don’t know ‘em. Little place like New Church ... used to [be] you’d know everybody in town, around town. Don’t know anybody anymore. Of course, a lot of the people I knew are dead and gone – I realize that, too, but people are so much more mobile now than they used to be.

Even if the drivers wanted to purchase their groceries in New Church, there is no longer a general store there in which to do their shopping. There is no school. The bank that is there is not a local one. But perhaps these drivers have moved to the Shore because they could afford more land and had dreamed of a simpler life in the country during their corporate career in Northern New Jersey or Philadelphia or Baltimore. They drive twenty minutes north of New Church to the larger town of Pocomoke to get their groceries at the Super Walmart, or perhaps

forty minutes north to Salisbury, where they visit the doctor and eat lunch at the Olive Garden before going to a first-run movie at the mall on the bypass. Davis and his wife are likely to be in the car behind them, headed for a medical appointment or an afternoon trip to the movies. New Church is almost deserted. Lippard asks if “a town [is] still a town when there is no school, church, general store, bank? ... The homes may be well tended, but Main Street – the real barometer of communal life – is dead. The town is empty in the daytime because people ‘don’t really live there’” (157). Where did everyone go?

Many of Bill Davis’s neighbors are probably newcomers to the Shore, people who have moved for the benefits of a rural landscape, a form of gentrification that is replacing the American family farm. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard writes, “People ... want to live in pastoral surroundings but have little interest in rural life. ... urban escapees want solitude, authenticity, a good cappuccino, and a nearby health club” (152). While these “come-heres” frequently take an active interest in civic life on the Shore, they also frequently do not understand the “natives” or appreciate local approaches and customs. “If only you let us run things, we could make this place better” is an unspoken refrain – seldom articulated but clearly heard by Shoremen who remain. At Onancock School, which has been converted to a nonprofit art center, I overheard several newcomers talking about how they would never issue another building permit on the Shore if they were in charge. They would require folks to fix up the abandoned houses first. I did not overhear their opinion on trailers, but I imagine they would not allow those either. As Lippard points out, “Middle and upper-class eyes are hypersensitive to ugliness they perceive as bad taste – like abandoned trucks and doublewide trailer homes – but are mellower about weathered barns and crumbling adobes” (154). The barns, the adobes, the crumbling farmhouses – those are “authentic” in a way that doublewide trailers are not.

Lippard does assume that some places are more *authentic* than others, although she never clearly delineates her scale of authenticity. Obviously, she prefers places where *there is a there there*. Beauty is not what Lippard believes makes a place authentic, however. About aging suburbs, she writes, “it seems both human and hopeful when an artificially homogenized happy-face facade has given way to a multifaceted place that reflects difference, the lives within it, and the social forces that form it from without, even when such a reflection exposes some ugliness” (231). For Lippard, authenticity of place seems to mean that the place is not a commodity to be consumed but a community in which to live and work. The place is more than a stage set for an atomized life.

One of the problems with mobility and gentrification is that most Americans seem to prefer the stage set, the idealized notion of community and home, rather than its messier counterpart. To describe the difference between an idealized notion of community and an authentic community, Lippard quotes Micki Clark, leader of the Open Lands Coalition in Douglas County, Colorado, “home of Highlands Ranch, the fastest-growing ‘planned community’ in the country” who says, “Yuppies have a couple kids and then they want a place that fits their idea of a small town in the Midwest. But I grew up in one of those Midwestern small towns, and believe me, it doesn’t look like Highlands Ranch. For one thing, in a small town, half the people are poor” (232). The ability to move and to choose is a luxury of abundance; it takes financial resources to act on the impulse to search for the idealized homeplace, for authenticity with a cappuccino on the side. Media studies scholar John Durham Peters writes, “The improvisation of identity is wonderful if you have the cultural and finance capital to cushion you against the traumas of postmodernity, but most of the human species still lives out its days in localized spaces, dependent in various ways on people they have known for

years. ... Distance from the local is often a luxury” (91). The homogenization of American landscape and culture is a direct result of prosperity, of the frontier ideal of endless growth and motion that Americans are exporting to the world with alarming environmental consequences.

Loss of community – that phrase has been referred to in almost every interview – but what does the word *community* mean? One long-standing definition for the word is a group of people who physically live near each other. However, groups of people who live near each other in almost any locality in 2012 no longer share experience in the same way or develop the closeness, the intimacy that interviewees allude to in their descriptions of communities in the past. In 2012, *community* is frequently a group not bounded by geography, but by intentional creation – like-minded people coming together to create a group. With increasing frequency, these intentional groups are virtual, existing in digital spaces and sometimes among people who know each other only by voice or avatar. The closeness and shared experience that the word *community* connotes is assumed to be most likely to evolve from groups who share beliefs or values in common.

Occasionally communities connected by geography are created by default through circumstances that bind unlikely people into a cohesive group. Perhaps this sort of grouping is more indigenous to humanity than we realize. In the essay “Got Tape?” BK Loren describes the unlikely creation of a community in her neighborhood when she and her neighbors decided to try and protect a 108-acre tract of land from development. In her down-to-earth analysis, she writes, “Before I stepped out of my house that cold morning three years ago, I might have told you ‘community’ was some kind of Up With People fantasy – like-minded folks sharing a Norman Rockwell moment. Now I think community has little to do with like minds. It has to do with very differently minded people finding a way to get along because we all live in, are connected

to, and share a sense of place” (51). Her definition is one bounded not by people who agree with one another, but one grounded specifically in place. When I asked retired Eastern Shore farmer Hume Dixon what he missed about farming, his answer was “the people.” The fields were once filled with local people, particularly during harvest time. Bill Davis and James Victory both miss knowing everyone who drives past their front porches in New Church or in Bayside. Perhaps the relevant question about place is not *is there a there there*, but *is anyone home?*

It is never a simple matter actually to see what is before your eyes. You notice what memory and knowledge and imagination have prepared you to see. Scott Russell Sanders

Chapter Two: Calling a Place into Being

Maps can be whimsical, with drawings of mermaids in the margins, or they can be official, laid out with precision, route numbers assigned by the appropriate government agency with roads color-coded to show size and maintenance schedules. I like to look at maps now, but when I was a teenager, my friends and I liked to “get lost.” It was easy to get “lost” on the back roads of the Eastern Shore. With the immutable boundaries of water or Route 13 (the main road) at the eventual end of every road, it was improbable for there to ever be a real crisis. We would ride around in our parents’ cars for fun, getting lost and finding our way again when we either arrived at a recognizable landmark or had to turn around because the road had ended at some water’s edge.

The language in the car was the language of youth, laughter and drama, oral, ephemeral. In the 1970s, we did not have mobile phones or GPS systems, but we did have the stories of our parents and grandparents, and the knowledge that we were traveling roads they had traveled before. Even when we were lost, we were in a familiar place. The Eastern Shore was our world, our point in space, but we were barely conscious of this. We were like fish, the land around us our pond. Scholar Kent Ryden, in his book *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, writes, “A place ... is much more than a point in space. To be sure, a place is necessarily anchored to a specific location which can be identified by a particular set of cartographic coordinates, but it takes in as well the landscape found at that location and the meanings which people assign to that landscape through the process of living in it” (38). My friends and I did not question that we belonged to

this place. Maps of the two Virginia counties that comprise the Eastern Shore of Virginia – Accomack and Northampton – hung on the walls in our homes (see Appendix 1 for map), the familiar strip of land, seventy miles long and only a few miles wide at the southernmost point, swelling to almost thirty miles at the point where the Virginia / Maryland state line is drawn at a rakish angle because Colonel Scarborough’s mistress Ann Toth wanted her northernmost property, near present-day Greenbackville, to be completely in Virginia and not straddling the state line. She got her way.

I know this story because Bill Davis told me: “Ann Toth, she owned a lot of property back in colonial times, up in this part of the country, and Colonel Scarborough, he was a friend of hers . And she didn’t want her land to be in Maryland, so he arranged it so that the line ... comes across, it goes over and goes toward the northeast, to include her land, like Greenbackville on up ... that part of it.” Ann Toth has been dead hundreds of years, her property long since broken into pieces and sold and resold. And yet, Ann Toth is not forgotten, her story still shared orally in conversations – hundreds of years of history shared as casually as if we were talking about the basketball game my niece and his granddaughter had played the weekend before. That “unseen layer of usage, memory, and significance” is what Ryden calls the “invisible landscape, if you will, of imaginative landmarks – superimposed upon the geographical surface and the two-dimensional map” (*Mapping* 40). The knowledge of imaginative landmarks that Bill Davis and I both apply to this landscape comes from a complex tapestry of personal experiences and orally shared knowledge, and it comes from regional books about the Eastern Shore. Even though most of the local information shared among Shore people is conveyed orally, the culture is steeped in written language and cannot be considered, therefore, solely an oral culture. As Walter Ong argues in *Orality and Literacy*, literacy shapes oral discourse in literate societies.

When I asked the clerk at the Book Bin, a local bookstore in Onley, Virginia, if a bibliography of Eastern Shore literature existed, she asked if I meant books by Eastern Shore writers or books about the Eastern Shore. This distinction is more significant than it sounds. Ryden, in an article in *Geographical Review*, explains, “To be a regional writer in the full sense of the term, after all, means more than being an author whose current home or place of birth happens to be in a particular state” (523). He defines a “regional writer” as “one who ‘writes the region’ in two significant ways. ... First such a writer takes the region as his or her subject matter, with region construed not simply as territory but as the prevailing defining histories that lend identity to that territory” (523). His second point concerns the synergy between the regional writer and the creation and perpetuation of regional identity. He writes, “the regional author writes the region in that the very existence and perpetuation of popular regional identities is in part a function of the author’s writings” (523). Examples prove his point – Southern writers like Eudora Welty and Robert Penn Warren, Western writers like Wallace Stegner and Terry Tempest Williams, Midwestern writers like Willa Cather and Scott Russell Sanders. These writers mine their cultural and geographical knowledge as a wellspring for creative work, but their writing also works to create and perpetuate regional identities. Which comes first? Perhaps the written words *ring true*, articulating what people of that region already know. While this is certainly accurate, it is also possible that the written description of a place can shape and form how groups of people experience that place. Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “In a modern society in which empiricism, hard science, and control over matter are highly valued, people still find it difficult to accept the seemingly magical idea that mere words can call places into being” (691). While it is tempting and logical to say that the regional writer is one who articulates successfully what the group observes and knows, it is also possible that writers create

a sense of place, solidifying a more fluid sort of knowledge through their words, sentences, ink and print, calling into being through their words the region as a unified place.

The Eastern Shore's distinctive boundaries, natural beauty, and history have attracted a number of regional writers and their output has been prolific. On the back cover of *Glimpses of a Vanished Eastern Shore*, published in 2008, author Kirk Mariner writes that it is his eighth book "about his native Eastern Shore." Naturalist Curtis Badger had written sixteen books by the mid-1990s, most about the salt marsh and tidal wetlands that weave throughout the lower Eastern Shore. He published another in 2007. Brooks Miles Barnes has written and published half a dozen Eastern Shore histories. Around the time bridges linked the Shore to Hampton Roads in the south and the Annapolis / Baltimore urban area in the north, there seems to have been an increase in regional writing. This possibility matches Ryden's observation that, "as a genre, the essay of place arises frequently as a response to the same sense of danger that drove [Barry] Lopez to the California desert to see the stone horse: the threatened, or already achieved, destruction of a place" (*Mapping* 251). Since no comprehensive bibliography of regional writing about the Eastern Shore exists, it is impossible to know for sure that an increase in regional writing occurred after 1960, but it is likely that more books have been produced because of a felt need to record what is perceived as threatened or lost and because advances in print technologies made these publications possible.

There is no question that language can be used to create a unifying sense of place. Tuan argues that human language and story shape our perception of a place as surely as natural geography and architecture. He writes, "The meaning of an actual physical place is the result of a historical and social process, built up over time by large and small happenings" (692). Groups pass knowledge of those "happenings" down orally. Writing fixes those happenings in a more

permanent way. Ryden writes, “Essays of place capture in verbal permanence the lived and learned meanings which the essayist reads in the landscape. Like oral narratives, such essays serve to annotate the flat objective of that landscape, structuring themselves around those stories which ... comprise the identity of a place” (243). “Capturing in verbal permanence” an interpretation of a “happening” through writing and publishing raises issues of power, of whose story gets told and remembered and whose stories are forgotten – an issue oral historians seek to counter. It is worth remembering that Eastern Shore regional literature reflects the power structures and interests of the times in which each work was published, reinforcing a certain kind of sense of place that lives on whenever the solitary reader picks up a volume.

Influential Regional Publications from 1950 - 1970

The Eastern Shore’s possession of the oldest continuous court records in the country has led directly to the publication of many histories and legal records. One of the most influential has been Ralph T. Whitelaw’s two volume *Virginia’s Eastern Shore: A History of Northampton and Accomack Counties*. His 1,500-page book is a reference guide to land transactions in the two counties starting with the earliest settlers. Primarily interested in old houses, he photographed them and then researched and compiled a comprehensive history of their ownership. According to his brief preface to volume I, “This work had a modest beginning with the taking of occasional snapshots of interesting old houses still in existence on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.” (The pages in Whitelaw’s preface are unnumbered.) As his collection grew and became more comprehensive, he writes, “Then came the insatiable desire to know more about them: what was the history of each site, who had lived there, when were the houses built, and by whom?” He began to search old records in 1935 and the Virginia Historical Society

published the finished volumes in 1951 – a sixteen-year labor which resulted in “a story of the land and its owners, rather than the usual chronological history of its economic and social development” (Whitelaw preface). Since the records in Northampton date back to January 1632/3 (according to Whitelaw) and the records in Accomack from 1663, when the counties were divided, this was a considerable undertaking – one that directly spurred interest in historic conservation on the Eastern Shore, particularly in restoring old homes.

Given that the Eastern Shore of Virginia consists of only two counties with a combined population of less than 50,000 residents, regional writers have frequently chosen to self-publish or publish through small presses. Between 1961 and 1964, three prominent Eastern Shore residents published influential books through *The Eastern Shore News*. *On Land and Sea* by Dr. John William Robertson, *Over On the Eastern Shore* by Henry A. Wise, and *The Eastern Shore of Virginia: 1603 – 1964* by Nora Miller Turman are three books that can be found on many Eastern Shore family bookshelves, and these three in particular have helped to further legitimize the belief among Shoremen that the Eastern Shore of Virginia is a unique place.

Dr. Robertson’s *On Land and Sea* seems to have been the first regional publication to use photography solely to depict the unique qualities of the Shore. The book is unsophisticated in design, seeming almost naïve fifty years later, and is striking partly for what is not included in his *Pictorial Review of the Eastern Shore*. Robertson had been taking photographs on the Eastern Shore since 1902, when he received his first camera as a boy. In 1961, probably at the urging of friends and social acquaintances, he published *On Land and Sea* through *The Eastern Shore News*. According to the introduction, written by Turman, “This book contains 284 representative pictures of Virginia’s Eastern Shore, arranged geographically from the bridge and tunnel system at Cape Charles to the Maryland line” (7). The photographs extend through Dr.

Robertson's lifetime taking photographs and therefore vary in theme and style. A few were made on glass plates as early as 1904. A majority of the photographs are of historic Eastern Shore homes and buildings; a few are of the Chincoteague pony Misty and the Beebe family who owned her. The only African American in the book is a smiling old man leaning on a walking stick, standing in front of a small house. Even though the majority of Eastern Shore people made their living from farming, there are no photographs of agricultural activities and very few portraits – so few that the one of two children and a dog near the center of the book in a well-manicured yard and another of a young woman with a Labrador Retriever silhouetted on the bow of a boat stand out in the book. A precursor to coffee table books depicting restored historic homes and beautiful natural landscapes, what is most striking is what was left out of this *Pictorial Review of the Eastern Shore of Virginia*.

More pointed in its stated agenda is the small volume *Over On the Eastern Shore*. A former superintendent of Accomack County Schools, Wise published this strange, small book in 1962. In the forward, he writes, "This is not a history of the Eastern Shore. ... It is simply a compilation of various things, things that many of us have known and perhaps forgotten ... In this fast changing life of ours, perhaps we need to be reminded that the Eastern Shore has a past, a past to which we can point with pride because that past was filled with men and women who worked and trusted and dared, and through whose struggles and failures and successes we are what we are today." The book is dedicated to the school officials and teachers of Accomack and Northampton Counties and includes an exhortation to "The Boys and Girls of the Eastern Shore of Virginia" to "Know your heritage" and to "Study your heritage" and to "Value your heritage." It is a small volume, only one hundred pages, with chapter titles like "School Games Of The Long Ago," "What People Wrote In Their Wills," "The First Permanent White Settler," "A Little

Bit of This and a Little Bit of That,” and “Two Illustrious Citizens.” The book is truly *a little bit of this and a little bit of that* – I suspect Wise published this volume because he feared what he saw on his black and white television set in the early 1960s. Perhaps he wanted to protect “The Boys and Girls of the Eastern Shore of Virginia” from a future he feared by reminding them of their *heritage*, or his sanitized, moralistic version of their heritage.

More professional than either of the two previous publications is Turman’s *The Eastern Shore of Virginia: 1603 – 1964*, published by *The Eastern Shore News*. The 1964 volume is the chronological prose account of Eastern Shore history that Whitelaw’s title led me to expect. Divided into twenty-eight chapters – titled by spans of years – her history starts in 1603 and ends in 1964. Fitting with historical conventions of her time period, she has compiled a fairly straightforward and comprehensive history of the powerful and landed people on the Eastern Shore. While not overtly racist or sexist, what is omitted would be striking if this volume were published today. For its time period, however, she seems to have compiled a thorough recounting of Shore history over a three hundred and sixty year span. In the acknowledgments, she points out that this book was published in 1964 to coincide with the “350th Anniversary of the first English settlement on the Eastern Shore, and the year of the opening of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel” (271). Ironically, it was the opening of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in lower Northampton County that improved access to the lower Eastern Shore and that has since brought suburban development pressures from new affluent residents who either commute across the 17.5-mile-long bridge to urban Hampton Roads or enjoy their retirement on gentrified “farmettes” – causing land speculation and increasing property taxes.

Residents rarely question the bridge as a sign of progress, but the accessibility has wrought irrefutable changes. The bridge has allowed local Eastern Shore residents opportunities

they would not have been able to take advantage of when they were dependent on a ferry to make the trip across the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The bridge has also lessened the isolation that helped shape the Eastern Shore that Wise, Turman, Robertson, and Whitelaw celebrate in their books. But, as has been documented in other localities, when property values and taxes rise with gentrification, it becomes difficult for less affluent residents to continue to live where their families have lived for generations.

Conservation Writing

The creeks, marshes, undeveloped barrier islands, and rural landscape make the Eastern Shore a natural focus for conservation writing. A healthy portion of Eastern Shore regional writing falls in this category. Every fall thousands of wildfowl migrate through the region. Because development was slower on the Eastern Shore than in other parts of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, wildlife habitat survived and, through land purchases and the creation of wildlife sanctuaries, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Nature Conservancy has protected substantial acreage.

Curtis Badger is a local writer who has built a career writing about the natural history of the Eastern Shore. According to an author biography included in his 1993 book *Salt Tide: Cycles and Currents of Life Along the Coast*: “Curtis Badger is a former editor of both *The Eastern Shore News* and *Wildfowl Art Journal*. *Salt Tide* is his sixteenth book, and he is also the author of several hundred magazine articles on various outdoor and natural history topics.” By the time his book *A Natural History of Quiet Waters: Swamps and Wetlands of the Mid-Atlantic Coast* was published by UVA Press in 2007, he had published among other volumes: *Virginia’s Wild Side*, *The Wild Coast*, and *A Naturalist’s Guide to the Virginia Coast*.

In *Salt Tide*, Badger is reserved in his first person accounts. The bulk of the book describes in detail the habitat, flora and fauna, and natural history of the barrier islands that protect the Eastern Shore of Virginia from the Atlantic Ocean and the salt marsh habitat in the wetlands behind the islands. By highlighting the setting's natural beauty and more subtle characteristics, Badger argues for the protection of this wilderness setting. His books privilege the natural over any human landscape – both agricultural and gentrified.

In *A Natural History of Quiet Waters*, Badger smoothly moves between first person accounts of exploring swamps and wetlands, including his attempt to purchase “a swamp of my own” (1), and a more detached natural and social history of the geography of Mid Atlantic swamps and wetlands. His style incorporates dialogue and other creative nonfiction techniques that have become more widely accepted in the years since *Salt Tide* was published. Unlike *Salt Tide*, which concentrated on the Eastern Shore of Virginia barrier islands, his later book ranges geographically from southside Virginia and the Dismal Swamp to the headwaters of the Pocomoke River, which reaches into southern Delaware. Even with an evolution in writing style and a slight expansion in focus, his intent throughout his writing career seems to remain the importance of preserving a unique, fragile ecosystem.

George Reiger is another Eastern Shore-based conservation writer, one who writes in a similar style to Curtis Badger but whose New York publishing connections are evident in his prose and in his publication history. He moved with his wife to Locustville, a small community on a seaside marsh near Accomac in the 1970s. In *Heron Hill Chronicle*, he tells the story of this move and of his creation and management over time of a conservation sanctuary on his Locustville farm. Like Badger, he moves smoothly between first-person accounts and the natural and social history of the geography of this place. In *Heron Hill Chronicle*, however, he

keeps to the geography of his farm and its immediate vicinity. The book, published by Lyons & Burford in 1994, is a contemporary of Badger's earlier book *Salt Tide*, but more similar in style to Badger's later book *A Natural History of Quiet Waters*. By the time he'd published *Heron Hill Chronicle*, Reiger had published fifteen books and, according to the author biography on the back cover, was "Conservation Editor of *Field & Stream*, and a frequent contributor to many national and local magazines. His books include the Pulitzer-Prize runner-up, *Wanderer on My Native Shore*, *The Wings of Dawn*, *The Wildflower's Quest*, and many others." While Badger argues for preservation, Reiger's intent is to encourage conservation – a more active approach to protecting the natural environment.

In *Heron Hill Chronicle*, Reiger recounts his personal experience with conservation to illustrate the underlying theme of how to be effective in one's conservation efforts. He writes, "Preservationists have converted conservation into a precious attitude rather than positive action. They discourage the participation of pragmatists who know that real conservation is about planting filter strips along erodible stream margins ... It's not about save-the-whale rallies" (137-38). For Reiger, "Real conservation is hands-on, net-gain, local habitat manipulation and species management. It's not about nature taking its course" (138). His argument is persuasive, particularly since it is woven within fifteen chapters of essays chronicling his attempts to practice "real conservation" on his farm in Locustville. Michael Pollan seconds this point, that "real conservation" is more complex than most would like it to be, in his bestseller *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. In a chapter on "The Ethics of Eating Animals," Pollan writes, "It is doubtful you can build a genuinely sustainable agriculture without animals to cycle nutrients and support local food production. If our concern is for the health of nature ... then eating animals may sometimes be the most ethical thing to do" (326). To eat animals, we have to kill them, which is the main

criticism Reiger attempts to counter in his writing on “real conservation.” Pollan also argues that predation is part of nature and “however it may appear to those of us living at ... a remove from the natural world ... predation is a matter of symbiosis” (322). He writes, “Brutal as the wolf may be to the individual deer, the herd depends on him for its well-being. Without predators to cull the herd, deer overrun their habitat and starve – all suffer, and not only the deer but the plants they browse and every other species that depends on those plants” (322). Restoring a balance, even if it involves actively taking our place in the food chain, is what Reiger and Pollan both argue for, pushing against a “feel good” brand of conservation that they see as disconnected from the natural world. Reiger, in particular, uses his Eastern Shore setting to argue a larger point – not that his locale is unique and precious, but that his approach could be applied anywhere and that it should be.

Rachel Carson is generally credited with the rise and popularity of environmental writing. Her book *The Sea Around Us* became a best seller in 1951. She also published *The Edge of the Sea*, *Under the Sea World*, and *Silent Spring*. *Silent Spring* is directly credited with the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s and the banning of DDT. It is a small jump from Carson’s *The Edge of the Sea* to William W. Warner’s book *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs and the Chesapeake Bay*, which successfully portrays the natural and social history of the Chesapeake Bay crab industry. His book won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 1976, following Annie Dillard’s Pulitzer for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in 1975. Following this literary tradition, Warner, Reiger, and Badger weave natural observation, research, and personal narrative into compelling essays about the geography and habitats of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Their books have maps and line drawings throughout, making them attractive artifacts. The maps, in particular, define them as Eastern Shore or Mid Atlantic bioregional

publications. More importantly, all three argue for wildlife habitat preservation or conservation, using the natural geography of the Eastern Shore as their example.

Publications about Shore History

While natural history informs a strong current in Eastern Shore publications, the majority of regional Eastern Shore publications evolve directly from an interest in human history on the Eastern Shore. Three recent books, *Gallows on the Marsh*, *Glimpses of a Vanished Eastern Shore*, and *Landmarks: Black Historic Sites on the Eastern Shore of Virginia*, illustrate the range. All three draw extensively on historical research, but use varying approaches with different outcomes in mind. Two of the three authors run their own small presses to produce their work and one also publishes the work of others, including the third author's book. The digital revolution, along with the ease of marketing small press run books on the Internet, has made it possible for these authors to publish more prolifically than their 1960s counterparts, which may explain the recent increase in regional writing.

Historian Brooks Miles Barnes published *Gallows on the Marsh: Crime and Punishment on the Chesapeake, 1906* through Hickory House Press in 2006. The 130-page book tells the story of black sailor William Lee's crime of rape and robbery and his execution on a remote sandy stretch of Smith Island in the Chesapeake Bay. Barnes reconstructs the story in detail using newspaper accounts and court records. Lee's guilt does not seem to be in question. The story largely recounts how the law circumvented locals from lynching Lee both before his trial and before his execution. In addition to a prose recounting of the story, Barnes includes fourteen pages of historical photographs, photo credits, an extensive section of endnotes, and an index. While Barnes takes a thorough scholarly approach, he has written a story that is hard to put

down, even while packed with historical information. Unlike earlier Eastern Shore histories, his approach takes into account race relations, therefore, presenting a more accurate, less sanitized version of Eastern Shore history.

Kirk Mariner's *Glimpses of a Vanished Eastern Shore*, published by Miona Publications in 2008, is not a pictorial history in a traditional sense. In his introduction, he writes, "The Eastern Shore of Virginia is ... a palimpsest. For land, like paper, can be used again ... What one century builds, another century changes or moves or tears down to do its own new thing. ... This book is an attempt to peel back some of the more recent landscape of Virginia's Eastern Shore to reveal what was once there, but is no longer." (The pages in Mariner's introduction are unnumbered.) He chose to include sites that were "no longer standing," that were "depicted in a photograph," and that were "sufficiently well-known to be identified and described" (Mariner). Like Robertson's *On Land and Sea*, his organizing structure is roughly geographic. He begins in lower Northampton County with the Old Cape Charles Lighthouse and ends with the Shingle House, which he places as "almost in Maryland" (131). On each page is a photograph with a title and location, followed by a three to six paragraph essay. At the bottom of each page are his sources – both for the photograph and the background research. While his approach differs from Barnes, each page is packed with historical information, written and compiled for a general reader. The result is slightly melancholy. The version of Eastern Shore history presented in this volume is limited to places that are "no longer standing." The subtext is nostalgia, defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary as "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past." The book is a pleasant and interesting excursion, but I wonder if there could be more analysis.

While a wealth of photographs, postcards, courthouse and newspaper documents exist for Anglo-Eastern Shore history, the history of Eastern Shore African Americans is harder to trace.

Relative poverty and illiteracy made personal family records more scant. Because of racism, court documents and newspapers either omitted or distorted African American history. Frances Bibbins Latimer, whose father was an independent black farmer who lived near Cobb Station in lower Northampton County, has worked to reconstruct the history of the African American community on the Eastern Shore. Blacks settled the Shore along with the English in the early 1600s, both as slaves and as freemen. To research and write her 2006 book *Landmarks: Black Historic Sites on the Eastern Shore of Virginia*, Latimer interviewed “people with knowledge of each site” (Latimer xiii) and combed primary sources. Unlike Barnes and Mariner, who could rely on a wealth of printed material, Latimer had to rely on oral testimony, which she followed with archival detective work. She organizes her book through five general arenas for public life – businesses, cemeteries, churches, lodges, and schools. By locating and then researching the sites, she reconstructs post-Civil-War African American community life. Photographs accompany the entries, and the final thirty-eight pages of the 140-page book include GPS and map locations, extensive end notes, bibliography, a list of interviews, an index, and a fold-out map of the Eastern Shore with the locations marked, placing her volume closer to Barnes as a scholarly publication. And because her scholarship and writing reclaim an important and valuable part of Eastern Shore history, one not previously documented, this book avoids the nostalgic tone that Mariner’s volume evokes.

Latimer started Hickory House Press with the express purpose of publishing “genealogy books, history books, court records, and books of general interest that relate to the Eastern Shore.” Her publications include *Eastville at a Glance*, *The Journey of a Multi-Racial Family: Six Generations of the Frances Family*, and the *Register of Free Negroes for Northampton County: 1793 – 1861*. The press has published other histories, including Barnes’ *Gallows on the*

Marsh, and a range of books by other Eastern Shore authors. Miona Publications, under which Mariner publishes his books, seems to be an independent imprint. I could find no online record of this press beyond his books.

Of the books I have described, only three do not contain maps of either the Eastern Shore or the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Since Eastern Shore writers define themselves first and foremost by geographic boundaries, the appearance of maps in their books is not surprising. In 2006, the National Geographic Society published *Chesapeake: Exploring the Water Trail of Captain John Smith*, which includes a map that traces the Chesapeake Bay explorations of John Smith and his crew. The book is a remarkable combination of historical research, natural history of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, conservationist treatise, and a personal account of retracing Capt. John Smith's Bay explorations in a re-creation of the barge *Discovery*. John Page Williams, a naturalist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, wrote the text. The Foundation's logo appears on the front of the book along with that of the National Geographic Society. As would be expected of a National Geographic Society publication, the book is packed with full-color photographs, reproductions from John Smith's drawings and maps, and compelling writing. Published to coincide with the 400th anniversary of Smith's Bay exploration, it was also published with the express purpose of encouraging eco-tourism in the Bay and support for Bay conservation efforts.

Regional Writing: Gentrification & Nostalgia

Chesapeake: Exploring the Water Trail of Captain John Smith is the slickest of the books profiled. Ironically, this beautiful and evocative book with its sophisticated presentation of the Chesapeake Bay watershed may actually encourage its development even as it elevates the

preservation of habitat. For Reiger and Pollan, conservation is “about choices in our daily lives” (Reiger 138). The problem, as Reiger sees it, is that “the human biomass – and consequently the exploitation of nature – is growing at a pace that we can barely comprehend, much less control” (137). Although Reiger limits his focus to conservation of the wild, Pollan promotes the conservation of small-scale, sustainable agriculture – a return to the family farm. On the Eastern Shore, the shift from family farm to an industrial-scale farm has seemed inevitable to most Eastern Shore families. The sadness over the losses this change has brought is palpable in the interviews I have conducted. Lippard writes, “Once the epitome of local, land-based, independent Americanism, the farm (and farmland) is in deep trouble across the country, in areas that few artists know and fewer care to address except when they come to live on former farmlands as agents of rural gentrification” (149). In the Midwest, towns are emptying of residents as fewer farmers till larger and larger plots of land. The Eastern Shore, with its access to water, its natural beauty, and East Coast location, is an attractive choice for gentrification, so the population drain is less drastic than other rural communities. Instead, the population is demographically shifting, and the distinct local culture that evolved out of farm life is disappearing.

In the summer of 2010 the field that surrounded my parents’ home was planted with corn – not corn for direct human consumption, but corn to be sold on the commodities market for processing into livestock feed or corn syrup for processed food production. Across the road from the field, houses have been built on five-acre plots of land. These lots are sometimes advertised as “farmettes” even though they all look like suburban homes surrounded by five-acre swaths of grass. In an interview with my mother Pat Bloxom – who is the daughter of an Eastern Shore potato farmer – she talked about how perplexing she finds the choice to convert high-quality

farmland into tracts for housing development. “There’s farmland in other parts of the state with two inches of topsoil on rock,” she said. “Here we have prime soil for farming and it’s being lost to houses. It doesn’t make sense.”

One response to change is to document what is being lost. Another kind of regional publication that is impossible to catalog is the self-published autobiography, books created solely to share with family and friends. Because of the *Eastern Shore Stories* project and its focus on farm life, I was lent a copy of *Backward Glances*, a privately published 138-page memoir of Margaret Downing’s childhood and adolescence as a “country girl” on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Fourteen chapters with titles like “Daddy – Muskrats – and Strawberries,” “Sandhills and Summertime,” “Granddaddy Edgar and Grandmother Roxie,” “Fat Backing,” and “Fodder Stacking” tell stories familiar to me after recording fifty hours of Eastern Shore life histories, and yet, because these are written down, they present a more formal voice. In the introduction, the author writes, “This book, with its descriptive epics of times gone by, is a memorial to my family, mostly my Mom and my Dad. ... For my grandson Clay, may it instill in him the desire to know something of his heritage before it is too late” (9). Her first chapter begins on May 28, 1975, at her father’s bedside in the hospital, but moves back in time to other family stories and to memories of her childhood, as well as forward in time to more current observations. The book ends with a “Glossary of Down-Home Terms” – so that readers in the future will know that Fat Backs are *jumping mullet* (a kind of fish) and Fodder is *the stalks and leaves of corn*. She has included family photographs, a map of the Eastern Shore, and hand-drawn illustrations of tools and household items. The volume is dedicated to her three sons.

Of her father she writes, “Though he early in his married life discarded the white gloves for heavy work gloves in the field, he was, for as long as he lived, always meticulous about his

hands” (16). This observation might not have occurred to her in an oral interview, but writing encourages this sort of reflection. “Writing heightens consciousness,” Ong writes. “To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity, but also distance” (81). Earlier in his book *Orality and Literacy*, Ong asserts, “Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself” (68). The process of writing encourages connections that create meaning and narrative out of life events. Oral reflection is more fluid and ephemeral.

While *Backward Glances* is the least polished regional publication I have examined, it may be the most charming. Like much Eastern Shore literature, it is also nostalgic, describing the past as she wants her family to remember it. Some stories, of course, will never be included. Some aspects of her family story, in fact, will never be closely examined. While this is appropriate for her intended goal to leave a family history for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, it does raise the question of where the untold and unexamined stories will be told.

The term *nostalgia* is used easily and frequently, both to evoke warm feelings about the past and to dismiss as shallow unexamined reflections about the past, but functions in a more complex way than this simple dichotomy. In her 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a continuum between two distinct types of nostalgia she calls “restorative” and “reflective.” She writes, “Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). *Nostos* is the Greek word for homecoming, *Algia* the Greek root for pain or longing. Boym writes that the word “*Nostalgia* is only pseudo-Greek, or nostalgically Greek ... the word coined by the ambitious Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer ... in 1688” to describe a medical condition suffered by “various displaced people of the seventeenth century” (3). The distinction between the two types of

nostalgia is a crucial distinction in any analysis of memory, the true subject of oral history according to Michael Frisch and Alessandro Portelli.

Not only is the distinction between types of nostalgia crucial to an understanding of memory, approaches to interpreting history influence the present and future. The word “heritage” that both Downing and Wise use signals an attitude toward the past that is on the “restorative” end of Boym’s scale. Of restorative nostalgia, Boym writes, “Restorative nostalgia knows two main narrative plots - the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory, characteristic of the most extreme cases of contemporary nationalism fed on right-wing culture” (43). This stripe of nostalgia generally ignores social, racial, gender, or economic inequalities in the past, as well as the advantages of a raised standard of living, and seems to advocate a wholesale return to an idealized version of an earlier age. This is a hazardous turn. As Boym points out, “... much of twentieth-century violence, from pogroms to Nazi and Stalinist terror to McCarthy’s Red scare, operated in response to conspiracy theories in the name of a restored homeland” (43). In comparison, reflective nostalgia is focused “not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time” (49). Because it is a blending of past, present and future, reflective nostalgia is a more subtle kind of nostalgic thinking, more complex in its approach to the past. Boym writes, “Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home ... the home is in ruins or ... has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future” (50). Telling stories around a dining room table, compiling stories into a book to be shared only with family and friends, publishing volumes of Eastern Shore history and photography – determining which type of nostalgia each of these incarnations primarily takes gives a sense for what sort of

future each encourages. Examining the nostalgia embedded in a narrative is a question worth asking.

Another distinction Boym makes is between prefabricated nostalgia and a more creative nostalgia. According to Boym, “The problem with prefabricated nostalgia is that it does not help us deal with the future” (351). Creative nostalgia seems to be a logical outgrowth of reflective nostalgia. It “reveals the fantasies of the age, and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born” (Boym 351). In the interviews I hear nostalgia, but I also hear instances of potentialities. Boym writes that “one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future” (351).

An impediment to creative nostalgia in both the oral interviews and the written Eastern Shore canon is that most skirt issues of social, racial, gender, and economic inequality. Confronting those issues would mean acknowledging the history of lynching on the Eastern Shore, of sharecropping and labor relations, of aristocratic wealth coexisting with extreme poverty and hardship, and of rigid gender roles – it would mean being willing to recognize the complexity of human history on this narrow peninsula that looks like a slender finger pointing south on a map.

The natural history books carry their own brand of nostalgia. The Eastern Shore is not a landscape of old growth forests and pristine wilderness, no matter how many times Curtis Badger uses the word “wild.” Only two barrier islands that protect the Virginia peninsula from the Atlantic Ocean have bridge access, so the other islands and the marshes behind them, which can only be accessed by boat, are the closest to untouched wilderness in these two counties. But even remote barrier islands are marked with evidence of human habitation. Kent Ryden quotes Cape Cod resident and natural history writer Robert Finch who thought he was building his

house in “ ‘what appeared to be unspoiled woodland,’ ” but who has “ ‘gradually come to realize that, despite the landscape’s wild aspect, there is hardly a square foot of ground ... that does not bear, directly or indirectly, marks of the past hand of man” (222). The Eastern Shore may look wild to a casual observer, and certainly the Shore is less populated than most places on the eastern seaboard, but in every square mile there are “a web of hidden human leavings and ghostly human history” (Ryden 222). Ryden’s descriptive litany gives a visual sense of what “a web of hidden human leavings” looks like: “old roads and paths that have been all but reabsorbed by new-growth forests, orchards and decorative plants that have grown wild in the former yards and lots of long-vanished houses, derelict stone walls and crumbling foundations now concealed by trees, the memories of longtime residents which adhere to obscure and unremarkable landmarks” (222). Just as nature documentaries can be deceiving – the “migrating birds” seen in the nature documentary *Winged Migration* were raised by the people who made the film (Garfield) – natural history writing can ignore evidence of human changes to the natural landscape in order to emphasize the natural beauty and wildness of the place. This leaves part of the story untold, and can be as misleading as failing to mention the reality of racial, gender, or economic inequality.

Regional writing on the Eastern Shore seems to fall into two main categories. One is a celebration of the natural beauty of the woods, marshes and wetlands of the Chesapeake Bay watershed and a call for the preservation of this landscape. The other is an exploration of the past, particularly through photography and sometimes through extensive historical research. Sometimes this exploration into the past is unabashedly nostalgic. The scholarly approaches taken by Barnes and Latimer, who use established historical methodology, are more balanced. Likewise, the approach of Reiger, who argues that preservation of the environment is not

enough, that true conservation involves a more active human role, recognizes the complexity of sustaining the natural beauty of the place.

If, as Tuan writes, "... mere words can call places into being" (691), then what has been written about the Eastern Shore has shaped the narratives Shore people use to define the place they call "home." Perhaps, in the twenty-first century, additional narratives will emerge that acknowledge the full history of the Shore, the injustices and inequalities as well as the Shore's celebrated natural beauty and heritage. These narratives, "nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been," can help articulate a future modeled on a creative "past perfect," one that preserves the best of the past while moving the people of the Shore toward a better future.

Listen. ... If you do, people will talk. They'll always talk. Studs Terkel

Chapter Three: Oral Narratives: Theories & Methods

Storytelling around dinner tables and on front porches at dusk, speeches at high school graduations, family recipes talked through in a grandmother's kitchen – it is through oral language that Eastern Shore people have primarily shared the knowledge that sustains their sense of communal identity. Oral knowledge of farming techniques and land use are handed down generation by generation through material lessons in the fields and woods. Stories of ancestors seem as real as today's headlines. Conversation overheard by children standing next to parents in the post office lobby are followed by regional histories recounted on drives in the car. The most natural and effective research method for understanding Eastern Shore culture and its peoples' sense of place is the collection of oral histories.

Historians have relied on oral testimony since Herodotus gathered information on the Persian Wars in the fifth century B.C. (Starr 40). With the emergence of the academic discipline of history in the nineteenth century, however, scholars regarded written records and archives as a more credible and reliable source than oral accounts. Although written records continue to be the preferred resource for historians, current oral history methodology was developed in the mid 1940s in response to technological and cultural change. Not only did portable tape recorders facilitate the collection of oral histories after World War II, but historians recognized that the development of communications technologies like the telephone meant fewer people were writing letters and that fewer traditional written documentary sources were being archived. This change has only accelerated with the advent of digital communication technologies.

Oral History Methodology: Interviewing

In my research, I record individual histories that are like aural snapshots of individual memories of the past, recorded at a given time and place. My interaction with individuals colors the stories and information that is shared, as well as the manner in which it is shared. With the exception of one or two interviewees, most never planned to record this information in any kind of written document, so the recording and the textual transcript of our interview is the only material record of their memories.

The Eastern Shore Stories project, from which the interviews in this dissertation are taken, is a geographically defined audio documentary project based on the collection of oral histories from people who have first-hand knowledge of Eastern Shore farm-based culture in the mid-twentieth century. The recorded oral histories range in geography from Townsend in lower Northampton County through Accomack County and north to Pocomoke and Snow Hill, Maryland into southern Delaware, with occasional forays to the South Pacific, Texas, Montana, Florida, New Jersey, and – of course – Norfolk, Hampton, and Baltimore. While the interviews range in subject and location, they center on the relationship of individuals to a specific place, the Eastern Shore of the lower Chesapeake Bay, where many have lived their entire lives and most have deep family roots.

Since June 2009, I have interviewed thirty-four individuals out of approximately 50,000 Accomack and Northampton County residents, hardly a statistically relevant sample. Nor do I plan to follow this oral testimony with extensive historical research in the Accomack and Northampton County archives in order to correct individual factual errors. My intention is to record these individuals' stories, told from memory, about their life and work on farms, primarily during the Depression, World War II, and the years shortly following World War II.

Interviewees relate memories of farm life and work, of their parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Through their stories, they also reveal a relationship with this particular place.

The primary methodology for conducting an oral history is to record life narratives, sometimes around a theme, using face-to-face interviewing. These life narratives are then transcribed verbatim and archived. Oral history interviews are generally longer and less specifically focused than journalistic interviews. The primary product in a traditional oral history project is the textual archive of transcribed interviews.

Oral history practitioners vary slightly in their opinions of the best practice for preparation for an interview. The chapter on “Conducting Interviews” from Donald A. Ritchie’s well-respected text, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, gives detailed instructions on how to prepare and execute an oral history interview. Ritchie advises, “Construct meaningful but open-ended questions” and “Do not interrupt responses” as two of his eight fundamental rules for conducting an oral history interview. Studs Terkel, whom many consider to be the twentieth century’s most skilled interviewer, said that he never wrote his questions down. Terkel asserts, “I’ll not do it because it’s false and it’s unnatural and it’s not what you do when you’re having a conversation and it’ll make them feel – here’s that word again – interrogated” (166). The interview with Tony Parker, from which this quotation was taken, was conducted near the end of Terkel’s long and successful career. Perhaps he meant that he no longer wrote questions down before an interview. Or perhaps Terkel was so exceptionally skilled that he never needed to formally prepare questions ahead of time, even as a beginner in the 1940s. Either of these interpretations may be correct, but I am convinced that Terkel is not giving a “fundamental rule” to follow, but is describing an interviewing ethos and style that served him well. He would likely encourage practitioners to use whichever method comes most naturally, as long as it

recognizes the interpersonal nature of the exchange between interviewee and interviewer.

Tony Parker, a respected British oral historian, published his unusual biography *Studs Terkel: A Life in Words* in 1996. The book consists of interviews with Terkel and with people who worked with him or were interviewed by him, as well as excerpts from transcribed interviews, mostly from Terkel's radio program. The chapter on interviewing is relatively brief; Terkel's main advice is to listen. He said, "The first thing I'd say to an interviewer is ... 'Listen.' It's the second thing I'd say too, and the third, and the fourth. 'Listen ... listen ... listen ... listen.' And if you do, people will talk. They'll always talk" (164). Italian scholar and respected oral historian Alessandro Portelli echoes this principle: "The essential art of the oral historian is the art of listening" (61).

A list of questions, however, seems a wise preparatory approach, especially if the researcher has specific information she would like to gather. This, perhaps, is where the advice to simply listen transforms into a guiding principle – both Terkel and Portelli allow space in an interview for their interviewee to ramble, to go off topic, even to control the conversation. Terkel maintained, "I want them to talk about what they want to talk about in the way they want to talk about it, or not talk about it in the way they want to stay silent about it. I'll keep them to the theme - age or the Depression or work or whatever - but that's all" (166). Portelli takes it a step further, recognizing that both interviewer and interviewee have agendas for the interview experience. "Both subjects bring to the interview an agenda of their own, which is constantly renegotiated in the course of the conversation. ... Of course, interviewees *will* talk about really irrelevant private matters, but we should listen and wait, before we judge" (Portelli 10). Portelli emphasizes that an interview is a learning experience for the interviewer; Terkel attributes his success as an interviewer to curiosity. Interview questions can serve as a guide, but the interview

will not be as successful if prepared questions interfere with the flow of the interview.

For the Eastern Shore Stories documentary project, a list of prepared questions was a requirement for the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities grant funding committee. Questions I used in the Eastern Shore Stories project include questions about crops and farming, about family entertainment and chores, about animals, and about race and gender issues. A complete list of these prepared questions is available as Appendix 2. During the field interview, however, I used my discretion about following this list. In some cases, the questions aided the interview by making the interviewee more comfortable. In other cases, the questions were unnecessary.

The difference between a field interview and a conversation is that the field interview is mediated by equipment, usually an audio tape recorder. Another of Ritchie's eight fundamental rules is to "know your equipment thoroughly" (84). Terkel's ineptitude with tape recording equipment was legendary and he called it one of his "biggest assets" (164). He said, "Would you be frightened of a little old guy who wants to tape-record a conversation with you - *and he can't even work his tape recorder?* We won't go into what you might feel about him, but the one thing you wouldn't for sure feel is scared" (164). He did not fake his ineptitude in order to put his interviewees at ease - he really was inept with recording equipment - but he recognized that being himself made his interviewees more relaxed and willing to speak openly. Being genuine was a guiding principle for Terkel and it is excellent advice for any interviewer.

Cultivating a sense of humility and gratitude toward the people interviewed was and is a correlative guiding principle for both Terkel and Portelli. Terkel said, "Something else you should always keep in your mind, and remind yourself constantly about it - they're doing you a favor. This person you're talking to is entrusting you with their memories and their hopes, their realities and their dreams. ... handle them carefully, they're holding out to you fragile things"

(164). Portelli's similar advice is couched in slightly different language. When student collaborators asked him to teach them how to conduct an interview, he said, "All I could teach them, the only technique that came to my mind, was to mind their manners. ... Having good manners means you don't go to somebody's house and take somebody's time and start asking questions. You go to somebody's house and start a conversation" (61). Good manners go beyond accepting a glass of iced tea or saying "please" and "thank you." One interviewee in Harlan County, Kentucky, told Portelli later that she allowed him to interview her because, when he entered her messy home, he didn't look for a clean place to sit down.

Portelli repeatedly emphasizes that recording an oral history is a collaboration involving the agreement of trust between interviewer and interviewee without the assumed erasure of differences. Conducting an oral history interview is a process he names "history-telling" (24). He says, "Story-telling is a direct tapping of existing outcropping memory; history-telling, as a cooperative effort ... [is] an attempt to reconstruct memory. ... While story-telling is largely an end in itself, history-telling aims at the production of an artifact (a tape) and eventually a text" (25). Portelli is interested in history as remembered by individuals, history as told with all its inconsistencies, biases, and complexity intact, the history that floats between official accounts of historical events and in the memories of those who lived through those events.

The dialogic nature of the interview relationship is central to Portelli's theory and practice. His understanding of this relationship affects how he conducts himself during an interview and how he interprets the material. He disagrees with fieldwork handbooks that suggest that interviewers "be neutral, be detached, don't interfere" (62). He attributes his reasons for disagreeing with established fieldwork guidelines to "good manners." He advises, "Be open, tell them about yourself, answer questions (if they ask!) I would not reveal much of

importance about my life to someone who talked to me in a neutral, detached, impersonal manner. Why should I expect others to tell me about their lives if I am not willing to tell something of mine?” (62). This contradicts general guidelines in the practice of ethnography – considered a more scientific approach to field interviews and emerging from the fields of Anthropology and Sociology – but these scholarly guidelines are changing. Postmodern and postcolonial theorists have called into question the myth of the neutral, objective observer in social science research and a continuum of self-reflection within the practice of ethnography is the more common practice among social scientists today, ranging from awareness of one’s own biases when collecting data to auto-ethnography, which foregrounds the researcher’s experience. My fieldwork experience has led me to reflect on the complexity in the dialogic relationship. My ancestors are from the Eastern Shore and most of my family still makes their home in Accomack County, making me an insider with interviewees. Yet my choices to seek advanced academic training and to create a life away from the Shore sets me apart. The tension between being an insider and an outsider means I am not a neutral observer; to pretend to be “neutral” or “detached” in my interactions would be disingenuous. As Portelli points out, it is poor manners to refuse to answer direct questions when one has been welcomed into a home and is asking people to share and record their life histories and memories with one. The fact that my family and I have relationships with some of my interviewees only underscores this dialogic reality.

Oral histories are by nature individual histories, colored by individual assumptions, biases, and memory. Portelli writes, “Oral sources are not *objective*. This of course applies to every source, though the holiness of writing often leads us to forget it.” He elucidates three “specific intrinsic characteristics” that set oral testimony apart. First, oral sources are “*artificial*” By *artificial*, he means that a planned, taped interview is not and will never be a natural speech

occurrence. Portelli explains, “The documents of oral history are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony. ... Oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence” (Perks and Thomson 38-39). By *variable* and *partial*, Portelli means that no two interviews with the same individual can ever be identical, nor can an interviewer ever exhaust another’s life memories, so all interviews are by definition *partial*. Concerning credibility, Portelli writes, “oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility.” He argues, “Very often, written documents are only the uncontrolled transmission of unidentified oral sources. The passage from these oral ‘ur-sources’ to the written document is often the result of processes which have no scientific credibility and are frequently heavy with class bias” (Perks and Thomson 37). The rigid dichotomy between oral and written sources, particularly the bias for credibility given to written sources, must be more thoroughly considered.

Avoidance of conflict is also not a goal. Portelli writes that “good manners ... do not consist in always agreeing with the other person” (62). In his experience, a “well-mannered challenge” can yield “expansions, explanations, or analyses that would remain untold otherwise”; a challenge might even give the interviewee permission to “voice less conventional views” (62). In addition to conflicts during an interview, feminist scholar Katherine Borland suggests that oral historians “extend the conversation we initiate while collecting oral narratives to the later stage of interpretation” in order to “more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority” (73). In “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretative Conflict in Oral History Research,” Borland uses as a case study a conflict between herself and her grandmother over her feminist interpretation of a family narrative, which leads her to question research methodologies that avoid conflicts over the interpretation of oral narratives. In the article she summarizes the

narrative and her reading of the narrative, describes her grandmother's reaction, analyzes that reaction and its subsequent resolution. She writes, "I am suggesting that we might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms once we are safely ensconced in our university libraries ready to do interpretation" (73). While the conflict was uncomfortable for Borland and her grandmother, ultimately the "fieldwork exchange" became something Borland calls "a true exchange" (74), satisfying for both herself and her grandmother in that it provided for a more open and honest dialogue and a more complex and shaded interpretation.

The exchange between interviewer and interviewee exists along a spectrum of possible exchanges, "from a one-way *questionnaire* to *thick dialogue*" (Portelli 11). Portelli alleges that "neither form is 'better' than the other; rather they are suited to different ends" (11). He is generally interested in "thick dialogue" or what he calls "deep exchange." Although I do not have access to Portelli's raw interview transcriptions, in *The Battle of Valle Giulia* he describes in detail several interviews that demonstrate the range of his work. In one instance, the conversation described involved frequent give-and-take between him and the students he was interviewing. In another case, the interviewee delivered a monologue and Portelli listened. In this second case, the Reverend Cowans and his wife were the first interview in Portelli's Appalachian project. Rev. Cowans asked Portelli the first question and then spoke, without pauses or interruptions, for forty-five minutes, delivering "what was largely a set piece, a public performance, which developed into a more personal dialogue only after his wife entered the conversation" (26). Portelli attributes this to three factors: the Reverend Cowans is an experienced public speaker, he is blind, and neither Portelli nor his wife asked any interrupting questions. In "Deep Exchange: Roles and Gazes in Multivocal and Multilateral Interviewing,"

Portelli describes the other case – a very different interview situation in which he interviews two students in his office. While he did not sit behind his desk, he and his students were aware of their mutual roles as professor and students. He chose this interview to analyze because it illustrated “an especially articulate and complex example of the multiplicity, doubling, and role reversal between observers and observed, interviewers and interviewees, narrators and narratees, in a multivoiced dialogue” (73). He is the designated interviewer, yet this does not stop the students from asking questions and taking the lead in the conversation. He writes that the “‘deep exchange’ aspect of the interview was reinforced by my dialogic approach. Good interviewers always make information on themselves available on demand in exchange for the information they gather” (74). A third student joins them and, for a time, he finds himself excluded from their peer-to-peer conversation. The give-and-take of this conversation is an example of what he calls “deep exchange” or “thick dialogue,” found at one end of the continuum. While Portelli would not place the interview with Rev. Cowans and his wife on the “questionnaire” end of the spectrum, their exchange was less overtly “thick dialogue.”

Distance and difference played a role in both interviews, a fact Portelli uses in his analyses, and he does not judge one encounter as more successful than the other. It is his analysis that makes each “successful.” Both interviews offered him an opportunity to investigate how “difference and distance are as necessary to research as identity and nearness” (78). In the Cowans interview, Portelli reports that Mrs. Cowans tells him “although you might not have done a thing in this world to me, ... because you’re white ... I don’t trust you” (37). He writes that she spoke “in general terms, using the impersonal *you*. But I could not help feeling that this broad, political mode was indissolubly twined with a very personal, immediate mode: she was talking in general, but she was also talking to me” (37). He reports that this was the most

important lesson he learned that day, one that has obviously stayed with him. “One part of the lesson was political: Why, indeed, should she trust me, just because I may have acted and spoken nicely and sympathetically? ... It takes more than good will and good manners to overcome the historical barrier between blacks and whites” (Portelli 37). Portelli takes this lesson beyond instruction in American race relations to a deeper understanding of the history-telling process. He writes, “One of the clichés of field work is that the interviewer must endeavor to win the confidence and trust of the interviewee ... [But] much of the eloquence and drama of the interview was generated precisely by the awareness of the distance and difference that still stood between us. When Mrs. Cowans said, ‘I don’t trust you,’ in one breath she both drew the line and erased the line; as she declared her inability to ignore the line, by recognizing it openly, she was already speaking across it” (38-39). Portelli’s sophisticated approach to the interview relationship is belied by the simplicity of his methods, but it is made possible by his understanding of the relationship. Oral historian and scholar Michael Frisch writes that “the issue of quality in oral history programs has less to do with who is in control than with how the method is being understood, used, and presented” (186). Portelli combines an open and respectful approach with a deep understanding of the dialogic nature of an interview, as well as a willingness to engage the material at a sophisticated scholarly level.

Understanding Oral Narrative

Oral historians and scholars Michael Frisch and Portelli both state emphatically and repeatedly that a collection of oral narratives has more to teach us about the meaning of history in individual lives than about empirical history. As such, oral history bridges the distance between past, present, and future with a fluidity that other forms of historical documentation do

not do and this has implications for how to interpret this type of research material. In an interview with scholar Betsy Brinson, published in 2001 in *The Oral History Review*, Portelli reflects on how his academic background in literature gives him a different perspective on the strengths in oral history. He says that his contribution to the field, which is widely and internationally acknowledged, “has to do with the fact that I brought a literary approach to narrative, that I looked at the narratives as narratives rather than as testimony. ... The relationship between what happened and what it means” (108). This approach takes into account the complexity of oral speech, as well as the ancient and continuing role of orality in the transmission of culture.

This idea that the narratives are about memory and acts of the imagination does not diminish their power or significance. In an interview with Pierce Barnes Taylor, Jr., the retired carpenter and farmer told a story from the Depression. It was a story that must have been retold within his family – how else would he have known about this important family event that occurred before his birth. His father “was getting to start his junior year ... at Colgate” and “the aunt that was here on this farm ... had borrowed a couple hundred dollars from a lawyer” because “the Depression had gone so bad” (15). He said, “it hadn’t been very long, [the lawyer] come back and put that note in her face and demanded the \$200, and she didn’t have no \$200. She wouldn’t have borrowed it if she had it. She couldn’t do anything about it, and she had to call daddy home from his schooling, and he came home and never went back. And he stayed here and took care of the farm and got us out of trouble” (15). Notice that Mr. Taylor said, “he got us out of trouble.” The farm had been in the Barnes / Taylor family for many generations. I conducted the interview on this farm; if we looked out the window we could see the fields that his father returned from Colgate to save and the farmhouse he eventually lived and died in.

According to Mr. Taylor, his father “went down to Dr. Byrd ... I don’t know all of it, exactly, but Daddy knew him anyway, and he borrowed money, the \$200 to pay that lawyer off and get the farm back and [he] stayed here on it. He died here” (15). More than seventy years had passed since Mr. Taylor, Sr., had dropped out of college to save the family land, and yet his grown son was so overcome with grief at one point in his recounting that he had to pause to finish the story. While it is logical that his father’s personal sacrifice caused Mr. Taylor to feel grief, years after his father’s death, only a year before his own death, it is likely that he was also responding to the narrow escape from the loss of family ancestral land, a loss familiar during the Depression but no less devastating for its commonality.

Other families were not so lucky. Mr. Taylor shared another story, one that belonged to a less fortunate family. “The man told me, he says, ‘I got down in front of that man on my knees and begged with him. He wouldn’t give a bit.’ And he ... that was for less than \$200. He [lost] his farm, home and the whole business” (Taylor 15). The accounts of these losses, particularly in the twenty-first century when \$200 is more easily earned, are told with the obvious perspective that this should not have happened. That, no matter what legal rights the attorney had to claim repayment of a debt, it was an immoral act to take a farm, a home, and a livelihood away from a family.

Oral histories are “a powerful tool for ... exploring ... how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them” (188), according to Michael Frisch in *A Shared Authority*. The historical truths in the two stories Taylor shared from the Depression are less important than his abiding sense of the injustice behind them, which has taken on a nearly mythic meaning. How debt as unsubstantial as a few

hundred dollars can result in the loss of land and how an individual's personal dreams or goals should be sacrificed for the good of the family group – these are the subtexts clearly communicated to me and, I assume, to the family through repeated retellings. In *A Shared Authority*, Frisch postulates that most critics forgot or ignored the assertion Studs Terkel makes in the first sentence of *Hard Times*, his volume of oral histories about the Depression, when he writes, “This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic” (qtd. in Frisch 9). According to Frisch, Terkel did not consider either the “intense subjectivity” of oral history narratives or the “thirty-year lag” between the recording of the interviews and its subject, the Great Depression, problematic because he was not concerned with providing “information or a pure sense of how it ‘really’ was” (9). Frisch writes, “the question of memory – personal and historical, individual and generational – moves to center stage as the object, not merely the method, of oral history” (9-10). This significant theoretical distinction sets oral history apart from other historical methodologies. As empirical method, memory is unreliable, but memory can provide critical “evidence” that other sorts of historical documentation does not provide. Frisch writes, “Oral history is unique in that it creates its own documents, documents that are by definition explicit dialogues about the past, with the ‘subject’ necessarily triangulated between past experience and the present context of remembering” (188). He articulates that oral history interviews, rather than being simply another document for historians to use as raw material about the past, have the potential to tell us how we remember and interpret the past, and what our interpretations mean for the present and the future.

Treating oral history interviews as “raw material” also “reinforces the already deeply-rooted, class-based ideology that sees ordinary people as sources of data, rather than as shapers and interpreters of their own experience” (Frisch 160). About “ordinary people as sources of

data,” Portelli writes, “In oral history and autobiographies, the sources are persons rather than documents or artifacts, and persons have an (un?)fortunate reluctance to reducing their lives to data for someone else’s interpretations” (79-80). The “person-to-person encounter” in an oral history interview is central to Portelli’s theory and practice, and his critical analysis of his interviews always takes into account that “oral history is concerned with versions of the past, that is, with memory.” He writes, “Although [oral history] is as concerned as sociology and anthropology with patterns of culture, social structures, and historical processes, ... it seeks to explore them ... through their impact on individual lives as transmitted by conversations with individuals about their personal experience” (57). Frisch writes that memory is the subject of an oral history. Portelli’s writing on memory is even more perceptive and specific; he writes that he “never thought of memory as an archive, as a freezer that preserves data and meanings, but rather as a processor that transforms and elaborates them in osmotic fashion and yields ever new data and meanings that include the old ones ...” (44-45). He also writes, “Like language, memory is social, but it only materializes through the minds and mouths of individuals” (57). This is why he does not use the term “collective memory” in his analyses. Although he is “working to construct memories that can be shared and used collectively,” he warns against “locating memory outside the individual” (57).

If “collective memory” is a misnomer and if “locating memories outside the individual” leads to faulty assumptions, then how does this researcher who has collected more than fifty hours of recordings with thirty-four individuals reach any conclusions about what the narratives collectively mean? Portelli addresses directly this tension between the subjectivity of memory and the cultural and historical facts that exist outside of the human imagination. He writes that dealing “with the soft facts of subjectivity, memory, and storytelling ought not to lead us ... into

the postmodern euphoria of dissolving the materiality and referentiality of the external world into the dizzying possibilities of immaterial discourse” (64). He urges scholars to resist both a positivistic rejection of oral narratives as “evidence of the unreliability of memory” or “in postmodern fashion, conclude that it makes no difference” (64). His response is to “take seriously both the unreliable oral narratives and the plausible archival record, and look for meaning in both, and in the space in between” (64). He models this in his own work, including his most recent book published in 2003, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*. In the case of Mr. Taylor’s Depression-era story, the actual historical happening he relates – while basically true – may be missing salient historical facts in its retelling. Perhaps even Mr. Taylor’s father was unaware of some of the details of the event, which is now more than eighty years in the past with no living survivors left to tell the story. None of that matters. What matters is what this story meant to Mr. Taylor and what he conveyed through the telling of the story – about justice, about the importance of family connections grounded in family property, about sacrifice and narrow escapes. This is the story’s subtext, lost neither on me nor on his children and grandchildren.

Transcriptions, Editing & Publishing

While an excerpt from Mr. Taylor’s interview has been shared in this chapter in textual form, the cadence of his language and his emotion are lost on the page. [\[link to audio excerpt\]](#) Taking aural recordings and transcribing them verbatim into text is not a value-neutral exercise. The general practice is to create a transcription as faithful as possible to the recording, understanding that punctuation must be added, intonation may be lost, and some interpretation is therefore unavoidable. This is why historian Linda Shopes argues, “It is a mistake to rely solely

on visually skimming or electronically searching transcripts for a sense of what interviews contain or for specific information and useful quotes. ... information conveyed orally by tone, pacing, and inflection is lost when spoken words are translated into writing” (592). Shopes goes beyond recommending a historian check the transcribed textual excerpts against the source recordings for accuracy; she recommends immersing yourself in the recordings of an oral history collection if you plan to use the material in your research. She writes that her understanding of the significance and subtleties in oral testimony increases the more full recordings she listens to within a collection. Of course, she is referring to the way a historian works with an extant collection of recordings someone else has made. If the collection is one the historian has created herself, then she is not coming to the material “cold.” While she will still find it helpful to return to the recordings as a reference, she was immersed in the sound and context of the material when she made the recordings and already has the aural knowledge Shopes is urging scholars to include in their research.

Once interviews are gathered, interpretive methods vary based on presentation or publishing intentions. While Terkel and Portelli describe very similar approaches to the interview process, they presented their interviews in different ways. Portelli publishes his excerpts in academic publications for a specialized audience. His articles and books are examples of rich interpretation and analysis, peppered with substantial excerpts from his interviews that are heavily contextualized. Terkel published his oral histories in thematically grouped excerpts without narrative commentary and with minimal contextualization; his audience is the general public. Both approaches require “substantial editorial interventions” beyond the transcription stage. Portelli writes, “Perhaps the old pun - *traduttore traditore*, ‘translator traitor’ - applies to the creative job of translating words from speech through tape to

page, by exercising selection, choice, even artistic judgment, in harmony with our interpretation of what we hear and with our strategy of presentation” (15). Certainly Portelli provides an excellent model for a complex scholarly treatment of oral history narratives.

The work of historians Melissa Walker and Kathryn Nasstrom provides additional scholarly models for analyzing oral narratives. Walker chooses a less layered, more direct style of analysis in her articles about southern farm families from East Tennessee. Although she interweaves her analysis with excerpts from her interviews, she seems more inclined to summarize and paraphrase than Portelli, particularly when she is pulling from more than one interview. Her work is interesting partly because her interviews on farm life sound so familiar.

Kathryn Nasstrom’s article on activist Frances Pauley contains only one substantial excerpt from their interviews. The article mostly concerns the process of negotiating with Pauley how to present her life work as an activist. Nasstrom found it worth examination that Pauley naturally ends her life story as an activist with the 1960s civil rights movement, even though she continued to work as an activist for about twenty more years. Although Nasstrom interviewed Pauley about her post-1960s activism and included that period of her life in Pauley’s eventual published life story, Nasstrom found the tone and narrative structure of the later activist years markedly different from Pauley’s accounts of the earlier work. She made those differences in tone and structure the central focus of her article.

Most oral histories, outside of academia, are presented in the style Terkel has chosen – substantial excerpts presented without narration or extensive contextualization. These can be organized in at least three ways, as Portelli enumerates: “An individual life story is a different genre from a book in which a number of interviewees are presented one after another as a series of monologues ... and both are different from a chronological or thematic montage of interview

excerpts” (16). The choices between these genres of oral history presentation are not value-free. All “display a strategy of objectivity (the interviewer’s voice is silenced), [but] the voices of the sources interact in different ways with that of the historian through the form of presentation and the paratext” (Portelli 16). Publishers name Terkel and other oral historians “authors” rather than “editors” of oral history collections because of these significant editorial choices.

Documentarian Robert Coles says, “The stories such documentarians tell us are, in a way, the surviving remnants of so very much that has been left aside” (100). The act of deciding how to present the material, what to include, what to cut, how to order it, is every bit as interpretive as a scholar’s analysis. In some ways, a scholarly presentation is more honest in that the author’s biases and editorial decisions are more evident. And yet, as Portelli writes, “Ironically, the originary orality of the sources tends to be retained much more extensively in works not intended primarily for a scholarly audience” (18). While the documentary form may obfuscate editorial choices somewhat, it gives readers more direct access to the orality of the material than the academic essay form does. In writing about documentary work, Coles says, “We who cut weave, edit, splice, crop, sequence, interpolate, interject, connect, pan, come up with our captions and comments ... have thereby linked our lives to those we have attempted to document, creating a joint presentation for an audience that may or may not ... consider all that has gone into what they are reading, hearing, or viewing” (100). While the editing of interviews for publication may seem value-free, it is not and that bears close consideration.

The textual editing of an oral history manuscript is fraught with editorial decisions that have class and cultural ramifications as well as interpretive ones. Frisch is generous and specific with his advice on the issues surrounding the “translation from sound to print” (85). He writes, “For most documentary purposes I believe it is far better to edit in close-to-standard

transcription: character, culture, and voice come across via the overall syntax, flow, and word usage of transcribed spoken language, rather than through the attempt to create sound itself” (85). He also suggests, “the integrity of a transcript is best protected, in documentary use, by an aggressive editorial approach that does not shrink from substantial manipulation of the text” (84). While Frisch’s approach to textual editing is pragmatic, he is also sensitive to the class and cultural differences that make editing choices a political and ethical act as well. The word “respect” applies to Frisch’s approach; he points out that “to encounter the narratives of common people or the working class only in the somewhat torturous prose of ‘faithful’ transcription is to magnify precisely the class difference ... [and denies] such speakers the privilege of communicating their fuller experience or understanding as they know it, and indeed as they spoke it, broadly understood” (86). The truth is that the speech of the powerful is frequently transcribed differently than those without power and that this is more than problematic. As Frisch explains, “the powerful ... are almost never encountered in such rough form, even though they drop as many g’s, utter as many uh’s, and would seem as inarticulate as anyone else were their discursive interviews or rambling thought presented as literally expressed” (86). Following his lead, I have chosen to edit interviews for publication in the *Eastern Shore Stories* blog by keeping original syntax and word choice largely in place, but cleaning up dialect and the messiness of spoken language so that it closely resembles standard English.

The Oral History Association and universities like Columbia and Duke have established guidelines for oral history methodology, but debates about the credibility and verifiability of oral testimony continue and this has extended into the assessment of final products. For example, since the 1940s oral historians have debated whether the end product of an oral history is the archived textual transcription of the interviews or the sound recordings. While acknowledging

the unique qualities recordings have, historians using oral histories have generally agreed that the transcriptions are more useful. The consensus is that text can be easily indexed and, therefore, is a more accessible resource. Advances in digital technology, however, are eliminating the advantages of textual transcription and reviving the debate over the desired end product of an oral history project. In “Oral History and the Digital Revolution,” Frisch writes, “We have, for decades if not centuries, operated under the sometimes explicit, sometime implicit, sometimes simply unexamined assumption that the gains from transformation into text ... are worth the price of lost meaning and texture rendered inaccessible” (Perks and Thomson 103). Advances in software may soon make original sound and video recordings as accessible by algorithmic search as textual transcriptions. Once audio indexing software is fully developed, the dominance of textual transcription in oral history will fade. What is lost in the “meaning and texture” of a recorded oral history will no longer be defensible to scholars or historians.

Oral History, Documentary, or Journalism?

While the research methodology for the Eastern Shore Stories project most closely matches oral history methodology, present and planned publications for the project fall more clearly under the broad mantle of documentary. Robert Coles, in his 1997 book *Doing Documentary Work*, writes, “The word *documentary* certainly suggests an interest in what is actual, what exists, rather than what one brings personally, if not irrationally, to the table of present-day actuality” (5). Documentary work, therefore, is defined as work that is bounded by a connection with the *actual* or the *real*, a reference that makes *documentary* a contested term at best. Farm Security Administration photographer Walker Evans questioned the word *documentary* in connection with his work. He said, “When you say ‘documentary,’ you have to

have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. It should be documentary style, because documentary is police photography of a scene and a murder ... that's a real document" (qtd. in Coles 130). He goes on to say that documents have use, but art is "always useless" and therefore documentary art is a style and not truly "documentary."

While there is no question that the word *documentary* is a challenging term, documentary work is indisputably rooted in journalism, with well-articulated best practices and ethical standards. Coles claims that he learned to do documentary work "from the great reporters I was lucky to meet and observe" (138). Journalists "know so well how to go meet people, talk with them, take pictures of them, right away take their measure, decide when and how to go further, look for others to question. ... They know, many of them, and they know well, how to pose the toughest, most demanding and scrutinizing questions ..." (Coles 138). Journalists provide a model for documentarians, but the two words – *documentary* and *journalism* – are not synonyms.

One difference is that journalists have the time pressure of deadlines – what Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* called "the limits of journalism" (qtd. in Coles 137). In Mark Feldstein's article "Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History," Feldstein draws this comparison: "oral historians are taught that 'good interviewers never shine, only their interviews do.' But journalists typically shun such monologue-like interviews as boring or inefficient uses of time" (13). Journalists rarely have the luxury of interviewing a "subject" for hours.

Another difference is the documentarian's willingness to be subjective in their interpretation of material. This project uses the oral historian's approach with long rambling interviews and a slower pace the norm, and is grounded in the actual – as both journalism and documentary are grounded in the actual. The presentation of the work, however, will be more clearly documentary than journalistic in form.

Audio Documentary

So far the focus has been on the interview relationship, the textual products possible from those collected interviews, and the ethical and theoretical issues that arise from documentary work of this kind. Another presentation choice is possible – that of the audio documentary. Because the original interviews are created as sound documents, it makes sense to consider what scholar Charles Hardy calls “authoring in sound.” He writes, “Those who would author in sound must learn to ‘think’ in sound” (Perks and Thomson 400). As with textual publication choices, there are a variety of styles and forms an audio documentary can take and these choices are interpretive as well as pragmatic. While many audio producers continue to create audio programming for radio broadcast, most of that programming is now available online and through inexpensive or free downloadable podcasts. Online broadcast also affords producers the opportunity to embed their creative work within a multimedia presentation platform. The range and complexity of contemporary audio programming is exciting and presents other “publication” options for this project.

Ira Glass, the producer of [*This American Life*](#), has strong opinions about what he believes makes a successful audio story. His team produces unusual stories full of humor and pathos, stories with structures that break rules. Glass says, “I usually think of a radio story as having two basic parts to it. There’s the plot, where a person has some sort of experience. And then there are moments of reflection, where this person says something interesting about what happened” (Biewen 60). This sounds like a simple formula, but he says, “Half the interviews I do never make it onto the air. ... If you want to get hit by lightning, you have to wander around in the rain for a while” (65). A Chicagoan like Studs Terkel, Glass is curious and takes risks, saying he “keeps trying different things until luck kicks in” (66). Glass decided early on that it was natural

to hear his voice as interviewer in his writing for sound.

[The Kitchen Sisters](#) “do extremely long interviews” (37). Out of these interviews they create “highly composed” audio pieces, a process they describe as “writing with other peoples’ words” (Biewen 37). They take an oral history approach to interviewing, saying that “really compelling radio doesn’t usually come from tiny slivers of sound. It comes because people got comfortable and spilled the beans or told a long, involved story” (39). They describe the work they do as the “power of listening, of talking to strangers until they are no longer strangers, ... of adding the voices of people whose stories aren’t usually part of the national conversation” (43). Unlike *This American Life*, the Kitchen Sisters produce highly composed audio pieces with little or no narration. This is possible only because they have the patience to record hours of tape and then splice it together like a mosaic, providing a different model for an audio documentary product.

A third model for audio documentary work is [StoryCorps](#), a national oral history project that, since 2003, has “collected and archived more than 40,000 interviews from nearly 80,000 participants” (StoryCorps website). The recordings are stored in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and edited portions are aired weekly on National Public Radio and online at *StoryCorps*. While staff provides equipment and support for the collection of these narratives, the interviews themselves are conducted by people who know each other – family members or close friends. The intimacy and depth in the interviews can take one’s breath away, which again raises questions about how the relationship between interviewee and interviewer affects an interview. Democratizing the collection process is definitely a model worth emulating, but I do wonder if conflicts are avoided or difficult questions not pursued when the interviewee and interviewer have a close, often familial relationship.

[Katie Davis](#) provides a fourth model for how to “author with sound,” one that uses a more scripted narrative approach than Ira Glass takes in *This American Life*. Davis does not keep an objective distance when she writes “essays with tape” (Biewen 69) about her neighborhood and the people who live there. She narrates her audio essays, so her voice is clearly heard in her pieces, and she weaves mundane sound and interviews in with her narration. She writes, “The man who runs the local teen center heard my radio story about the false accusation at the bike shop, and he told me he’s glad there’s a storyteller in the community to gather up the threads of the many stories. That is how I’ve started to think of myself - as a storyteller” (Biewen 75). This is the approach that seems the most natural fit for my work as a documentarian interested in Eastern Shore farm-based culture.

Although identity based on geography may be an act of human imagination, this act of the imagination is still a powerful human reality, as shown in Pierce Taylor’s oral narrative. Through the collection and examination of these individual oral narratives, the question of how technology, place, and local culture interact can be explored more effectively than if these individual stories of place and culture had never been shared and recorded. The collection of oral narratives about Eastern Shore farm-based culture allows for a perspective that might never have emerged from the written Eastern Shore canon, a perspective that I plan to share both textually and through audio documentary work.

From hand to machine and from the team or the mules to tractors, and the tractors over the years have grown larger, larger, larger and larger, and there's no sight to where they'll stop.

Pierce B. Taylor, Jr.

Chapter Four: Eastern Shore Stories

My uncle Bud Killmon was a practiced, accomplished oral storyteller, but not the sort who performs at libraries or folk festivals. He was “old school” – swapping stories in barns and later over the counter of a general store he owned and at stops he made as a truck driver for Cisco-Lankford Foods. I was always thrilled when he made it to a family gathering because I knew that, after the meal, I could get him to tell stories about the Eastern Shore. As far as I know, he never wrote a single story down, but he had variations of dozens he told and retold. The stories were funny and poignant. Most of the ones he shared with me were about our ancestors and their misadventures. I took a few notes and planned to record them some day. I never got the chance. On a Sunday afternoon in May 2005, he died of a heart attack in the bedroom of his modest Eastern Shore home. He was sixty-two years old.

Although I wish I had recorded or written down his stories, I know that the fluidity in oral speech performance is set and therefore changed when the story is commuted to paper, tape, or digital file. His stories will always retain the fluidity of a memory for me and perhaps that is for the best. Although shaped through human memory and heard contextually, a collection of recorded life histories remains a project that fixes oral speech in time through the recording, transcription, and publishing process. While I believe that what is gained through this project is worth the loss of fluidity, the complexity of the interplay between memory and oral speech should be acknowledged and assumptions about memory examined.

Memory

Recording technologies have always been promoted as memory aids. Photography's main attraction was as visual historical artifact. In the 1860s, photographic technology made the mass production of individual photo cards possible and Americans were quick to have their photographs taken and copied so they could share them with their friends and acquaintances. Most Americans embraced the idea that having a photograph of someone meant you could remember them better, but a few questioned this, including the poet Emily Dickinson. When *Atlantic Monthly* contributor and literary editor T. W. Higginson asked her for a photo card shortly after they had begun a literary correspondence, she replied, "Could you believe me – without? I have not portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves – Would this do just as well?" (L268 qtd. in Frank 3). Dickinson resisted the idea that a photograph could render an accurate representation of experience. In the article "Emily Dickinson and Photography" Adam Frank points out that "Dickinson is skeptical of such idealizing of the new medium, and competes with it in offering Higginson a verbal self-portrait that emphasizes what no photograph of the time could render accurately – color" (5). He also cites a letter in which she comments on receiving a photograph of a deceased friend, "Again – I thank you for the face – her memory did not need –" (L246 qtd. in Frank 5). Dickinson apparently rejected photography as a memory aid, preferring to rely on her internal memory and her writing. Her rejection was rare, however, and a reliance on internal memory seems to become more rare with each technological advance.

The technology of writing is much older than photography. Socrates is reported to have argued that writing would be detrimental to the human capacity for memory. Plato, ironically, wrote down a story Socrates told about the Egyptian king Thamus who said, "The written word

is ‘a recipe not for memory, but for reminder’” (Carr 54). Annie Dillard goes further when she asserts that writing about one’s life is “cannibalizing your life for parts” (156). She chooses to do this willingly because of her love for nonfiction writing, but she also realizes that there are permanent costs. In the essay “To Fashion a Text,” Dillard writes, “After I’ve written about any experience, my memories – those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling – are gone; they’ve been replaced by the work” (157). The technologies of writing and photography are so widely accepted that their use as an aid in remembering goes unquestioned. Because we believe memory to be fixed or static, we regularly create records of people and events in some manner in order to “save” them for later memory retrieval, but research is showing that this static view of memory may be flawed.

Our current view of memory is that it works like the machines we use to “save” our memories. As Joshua Foer, in *Moonwalking with Einstein*, writes, “The metaphors we most often use to describe memory – the photograph, the tape recorder, the mirror, the computer – all suggest mechanical accuracy, as if the mind were some sort of meticulous transcriber of our experiences” (27). The conviction is that human memory functions like a computer, with discrete bits of data stored away, and that we “search” our brains to “access” memory. While this current metaphor – the brain as computer – is pervasive and widely accepted, this view does not match a “growing body of evidence” about human memory. In his 2011 book *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr writes, “The old botanical metaphors for memory, with their emphasis on continual, indeterminate organic growth, are, it turns out, remarkably apt. In fact, they seem to be more fitting than our new, fashionable high-tech metaphors” (190). Researchers are finding that memory is flexible and dynamic, and that the act of constituting long-term memory actually builds synapses and brain capacity. “In contrast to working memory, with its constrained

capacity, long-term memory expands and contracts with almost unlimited elasticity, thanks to the brain's ability to grow and prune synaptic terminals and continually adjust the strength of synaptic connections" (Carr 192). Remembering and sharing stories from the past not only strengthens "synaptic connections," but also reworks the memory around new contexts.

This matches the way we experience remembering. Recalling memories works in a "nonlinear associative" way which "makes it impossible for us to consciously search our memories in an orderly way" (Foer 34). Instead, Foer writes, "A memory only pops directly into consciousness if it is cued by some other thought or perception." (34). Reworking the memories in new contexts and connecting memories across time is an organic and dynamic process that forms new synaptic connections in the brain. Even more relevant to this project, research shows that memory plays a role in the collective transmission of culture. Although memory is always individual, as Portelli has argued, the sharing of memories transmits culture in an organic and complex way, perhaps mirroring the associative way we remember.

Listening and remembering in unmediated, real-time encounters seems a radical act in the twenty-first century. Ironically the most significant, transformative part of this project may have been the face-to-face visits and the oral transmission of culture that happened while the recordings were being made. Increasingly the transmission of culture has been entrusted to mass-produced media and to virtual web-based communities. Yet, as Carr argues, "Culture is more than the aggregate of what Google describes as 'the world's information.' It's more than what can be reduced to binary code and uploaded onto the Net. To remain vital, culture must be renewed in the minds of the members of every generation. Outsource memory, and culture withers" (197). Memory, it turns out, functions dynamically within individuals and creates culture through communication within groups. The oral sharing of culture is what is most at risk.

I question whether virtual communities like “The Official Eastern Shore of Virginia Page !” on Facebook can provide an adequate substitute, or whether any written record or digital recording I produce for this project can approximate the transmission of culture that occurred in the moment of my face-to-face encounters with the interviewees. What, therefore was achieved by recording memories of mid-twentieth century farm life?

Stories and the Imagination

On March 17, 2010, I drove north on the Seaside Road. I had an appointment to interview Pierce Barnes Taylor, Jr., in his modest home on his family’s ancestral farm. It was spring break and my third interview of the week. I have known the Taylors since childhood as fellow members of Mappsville Baptist Church, but I could not recall ever visiting their home alone as an adult. Because Pierce was now bedridden with Lou Gehrig’s disease, my visit had two purposes – to record his memories of Eastern Shore farm life and to visit an ailing family friend. I turned off the paved road and onto the rutted field road that led to their house in the far corner of the field next to the woods. As I drove slowly to avoid the worst potholes, I casually looked to the left, my vision taking in the other family houses, including the original farmhouse at least a mile across a field of soybeans. Beyond the houses lay the creek and marshes that border this farm.

On that first visit, I realized that these two people felt as close as family to me, like an aunt and uncle I had not seen in many years. While I did not feel that close to every interviewee, every interview has left me with feelings of indebtedness and gratitude that these people, who are like ancestral elders, have been willing to share stories from their lives with me, and that I can receive their stories partly because of common cultural experiences that extend to an irrational

love for a sandy peninsula covered with modest farms, towns, and woods scattered between two large bodies of water. This affinity, grounded in geography and cultural customs, seems to bridge racial and economic divides. It does not erase or condone racist or classist actions from this community's past, but it did allow me to bridge those wounds in the present and connect with interviewees at a depth that surprised me.

About four hours later, I slowly rolled my car out the rutted field road toward the paved road. The landscape around me was the same, but the way I experienced it had changed because of the stories Pierce Taylor shared with me. His was my eighteenth interview. After each one, the stories stayed with me in a visceral way and they continue to permeate my experience of the place in a way that is difficult to articulate because it functions like layers of memory superimposed on sensory experience. As I looked across the same soybean field toward the original farmhouse on the Taylor farm, I saw the skinny boy in knickers walking across a chilly field with newspaper stuffed under his socks against the cold ocean wind. I saw the young man on the tractor with his captured terrapin, held upside down in his lap, turning its head to "bite the dickens" out of his upper thigh before he could reach the end of the row where he had secured the others, ready for transport to Chincoteague to earn a little extra money from a buyer in the market for turtle soup. When I reached the crossroads and turned left to return to my family's home – a crossroads I have traversed thousands of times – I saw the Persimmon Point Tavern, overlaid in my imagination over an empty corner, and I imagined the men gathered there, just as they had gathered to wait for Pierce's ancestor in the family story he shared with me.

Alessandro Portelli has eloquently described this experience of interaction between the present and the past, mediated in the imagination through shared narratives, but I can attest to its staying power. Two years after these interviews were completed, I still think of individual

stories, particularly when I see geographic markers functioning like palimpsests on the landscape.

In addition to my memory of our shared face-to-face experience, I also left the interview with a digital recording. This I copied and sent to Leigh Gutches, whom I had hired to transcribe the interviews. What I got back, after several months, was a verbatim transcription of the conversation. In most cases, the typed record of the interview, ready to place in an archive, is considered the actual product of an oral history interview.

An unedited interview can be a choppy read. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, oral speech has to be translated for written speech and much is lost in the translation. In order to give you a richer sense of the oral experience, what follows is the unedited beginning of my recorded interview with Pierce Barnes Taylor, Jr. with a link under the first line to the audio recording. Obviously, there was conversation while I prepared the digital audio recorder and clipped a lavalier microphone on his t-shirt. His mind and speech were clear, but the disease made it hard for him to move his legs and his hands.

[P. Taylor: She's gonna ask me the questions. That's better.](#)

Bloxom: This is just to give you an idea of where I'm going.

P. Taylor: Go that way then – go to it.

Bloxom: [on observing him touching the microphone] Is that bothering you?

P. Taylor: No, I just wanted to know what it was. I see what it is now; it's the mike.

Bloxom: Yeah, it's a mike. It just gives a better sound. Okay ... did you live on a farm as a child and where did you live and who lived with you?

P. Taylor: Well, born and raised right here on this farm, 1932. ...

He proceeded to precisely name the elderly aunts who lived and died in the main house with his newly married parents before and shortly after his birth. He also precisely named his siblings by their full names and where they fell in the birth order. He is the oldest. Not everyone I interviewed gave as much precise detail in his or her responses. Perhaps he did this because of his medical condition – possibly he was more aware of leaving something behind for future generations. Or perhaps it spoke to his life work as a carpenter – the lifelong attention to details expanding his ability to relate details of family and personal history from memory.

The farm had been in their family for many generations. Within a few minutes of our recording, I stopped asking questions and listened as he told me story after story. John P. Barnes, the great-great-grandfather who owned the land we could see out the bedroom window, “loved to attend court in Accomack ... and there were no automobiles and no driving at that time.” He would meet a group of men at the crossroads where I had turned off of the Seaside Road to get to the farm. Apparently there was a tavern there – on the old stagecoach run – called Persimmon Point. The men “would place bets there in the morning who was going to be the first one down to Accomack ... they would actually race down from here to Accomack with their horses ... But they said John P. was right good at collecting that wager when he got to the other end, because he had a large Vermont Morgan horse that stood high, was bigger than most of the other horses around here. He had a lot of wind, and he could outrun them all.” I interviewed Pierce twice for the oral history project, others only once. Some interviewees told more stories, others shared more methods and factual knowledge. While each of the interview sessions was distinct, having a mix of anecdotes, family stories, geography, and farm methods within the interviews was consistent. Together, the fifty hours of recording constitutes a remarkable compilation of pre-industrial farm life knowledge and Eastern Shore family history.

The Interviews

From June 2009 to August 2010, thirty-four people's stories and knowledge were preserved in these recorded audio interview sessions. Sixteen women and eighteen men were interviewed. Of those, twenty-eight were white, five were African-American, and one had Native American heritage. Four of the interviewees were more than ninety years old. Most were between seventy and eighty-nine years old. Five have died since I began the project. In three cases, an adult child participated with his or her parent in the interview, turning the conversation into a multigenerational reflection on the family's experiences. This was interesting also as a reflection of the storytelling culture in Eastern Shore farm life. Frequently these younger adults, who ranged from about forty-eight to sixty-eight years old, contributed their own stories and recollections, both from their life experiences and from stories they'd been told.

It was difficult to find African-Americans still living with memories of mid-twentieth century farm life. Not only is their lifespan statistically lower, but fewer African Americans owned their farms and, therefore, they were more likely to encourage their children to seek better economic opportunities elsewhere. The African Americans I interviewed were among the youngest interviewees, but it appears that African American farmers on the Eastern Shore used the older methods of farming longer than their white counterparts. I suspect this was because African American farmers had less access to capital and were justifiably more leery of borrowing money and, therefore did not purchase tractors, for example, as early as their white neighbors.

Twenty-eight of the thirty-four interviewees owned the land their families farmed. Many still live on those farms. It was more difficult to locate people to interview who had worked as tenant farmers or sharecroppers, partly because they encouraged their children to seek economic opportunities away from farm life and many no longer live on the Shore or have family

connections to the Shore.

Some of the interviewees had worked on their family's farms as children, but had chosen other ways to earn a living as adults. Several individuals had become retail merchants. Attorney Norris Bloxom had grown up working in his father's mercantile business and declared that "it was the most boring thing ever." Unlike the farm-based families for whom Saturdays are remembered fondly as an outing to town for supplies and recreation, his Saturdays were spent behind the counter of his father's store. These variations on farm life enriched the project by giving a more rounded sense of life on the Eastern Shore in the mid-twentieth century. Farming touched everyone's life, even if people had other means of a primary income or chose later to leave a farm-based life.

The proximity of water and the abundance of shellfish and fish was also a theme. While most people I interviewed did not work the water commercially, almost everyone supplemented their food supply with fish or shellfish they gathered themselves and shared stories of how living near the water had been an important part of their experience.

World events, in particular World War II, dramatically affected Eastern Shore people. The same man who spent his Saturdays behind the counter in his father's store recounted his wartime experience as a gunner in the Pacific Theater during World War II. He narrowly missed being killed in action several times, including close encounters with Japanese kamikaze pilots.

Farm-based men could count on being excused from military service since they were needed to grow food. Some embraced that option saying, "I could feed a hundred people or more, but I can only carry one gun." Others claimed they would "never hide behind a horse's ass" (alluding to walking behind a plow) to avoid serving their country. Richard Parks was one of the men who chose not to seek a deferment from military service during World War II. He

attributes his military service with providing his post-secondary education, “That was my formal education; I was drafted in the Army.” A number of interviewees attribute their education to the military, both through life experiences and sometimes through the GI bill.

T. Hume Dixon also chose to serve in the military during World War II, even though he could have taken a deferment to work on his family’s farm. In his August 11, 2010 interview, he described his experience in Marine boot camp, “... the summer I spent in the boot camp wasn’t as bad as being on the farm during the summer here. ... I said, ‘Lord, I’m on a picnic.’” He was interviewed with his son Thom; both are now retired from farming, although they continue to live in two houses on their family’s original land grant farm in lower Northampton County.

When I asked the Dixons what they miss most about farming, their answers vocalized two themes that illustrate the unintended consequences of the industrialization of farming. One is that people have disappeared from the landscape. Harvesting by hand required a large number of people and it was a social activity. Before the widespread use of chemicals, it was safe to bring children to play near you while you worked. Picking a strawberry or two to eat warm off the vine while you were working was not only safe, but was an accepted practice. Farming was communal, which made the repetitive nature of the work more fun.

[T. Hume Dixon: ... I enjoyed just being around people.](#) There were plenty of people on the farm. You don’t have that today. I mean – of course it’s rented out now, but you’d be lucky to see ... a couple, three people that have something to do with the farm in the course of the week.

Thom Dixon: We’ve got two people working for us now. That’s it. I liked all the people on the farm. I enjoyed that, but I like planting ... planting row crops – I can drive a pretty straight row and I like that.

This second observation, spoken modestly, expresses Thom's satisfaction in the skills he developed as a farmer. Human pleasure derived from the satisfaction of doing something well is frequently dismissed as superfluous, and yet this seems to have been an integral and fulfilling aspect of farm life. As equipment becomes more sophisticated and farming more automated, "driving a pretty straight row" becomes less important as an individual skill. Farm work, like manufacturing work, has been transformed by the certainty that maximum efficiency, particularly through automation, will produce the maximum productivity.

Farming was a constant and ubiquitous presence in the landscape and culture of my childhood and adolescence. After World War II and accelerating throughout my lifetime, the industrialization of farm techniques has profoundly changed Eastern Shore farm life and culture. After World War II, the Rural Electrification Project and the widespread adoption of tractors led the mechanization of farming techniques. The chemical industry's push to find new markets at the end of World War II led to intensive sales to farming operations, which also radically changed farming methods. Changes in federal farm policy and subsidies accelerated the consolidation of family farms into agribusiness corporations. Other scholars and writers have documented and analyzed these changes and they are not specifically the focus of this paper. My interest is in how interviewees choose to remember and articulate the evolution of Eastern Shore farm life in their lifetimes and the implications for the future of farming on the Eastern Shore. While individual interviews may seem merely nostalgic on a superficial level, the repeatedly described loss of communal activity and of meaningful skilled labor leads me to question the wisdom of applying industrial "efficiency" methods to agriculture. Sustaining a viable rural community means more than converting farmland into bedroom communities for commuters from nearby urban areas or turning working farms into pleasant places to retire.

By the time I was born in 1960, the earlier farming methods recalled in the interviews and the vibrant local culture that went with these methods had almost evaporated. And yet, memories of this culture and farm life persist, overlaid in people's imaginations with the present. Interviewees seem to dismiss the dissonance between farming as it used to be practiced and contemporary farming; each technological advance is seen as inevitable and desirable. The belief persists that the new farming methods are more efficient and productive. While the discrete interviews function mostly as a mix of nostalgic remembrances and explanation of specific techniques, they cohere into questions about the inevitability and desirability of embracing the industrialization of agriculture wholesale, which seems to have gone largely unquestioned as a sign of progress. Although the progress narrative is alive and well in American cultural practice and imagination – particularly in the form of the “cool” and the “neat” – the word “progress” no longer seems to be the term of choice when thoughtfully justifying technological decisions. But it is still used to dismiss troublesome thoughts about technological decisions, as in “Well, that’s progress,” usually accompanied by a shrug.

Do You Remember ... When Our Poverty Was Different?

One repeated theme in the interviews is self-sufficiency. Richard Parks grew up on a small farm, working about forty acres of land alongside his father and brother during the 1930s. “We didn’t have any money. Nobody had money” (Parks). Others described similar family situations. “People didn’t have anything. People were poor. But everybody was poor, and nobody knew they were poor” (Davis). They may have been poor, especially by today’s standards, but people who grew up on these small farms talk about abundance, not poverty. “I can remember my mother saying that we fared a lot better in the country than the people did in

the city during the depression years because we had our own food” (Patsy Thomas). Since farms were self-contained and self-sufficient, very little money was needed to meet the basic needs of life. “The farm ... was self-contained. They didn’t have to go to the store for any type of food. Everything you wanted was on the farm. My grandmother ... used to can, preserve, and she would do everything within season.” (Christian and Press). “When he was a boy, his daddy said that if he had a hundred dollars cash money at Christmastime, he was alright until spring – on a hundred dollars. Isn’t that crazy? Only thing they had to buy was kerosene. Flour, sugar ... and a doctor’s bill once in a while, which was probably five dollars” (Parks). There seems to have been a dignity and security in needing so little money to meet one’s needs. Interviewees do not describe being critically hungry or cold; the fact that Parks’ father could purchase everything he needed with a hundred dollars cash was not unique to the Eastern Shore. This sort of independence was apparently the norm in rural farming communities throughout the United States before the 1950s. As the character Ruby Archuleta says in the film *The Milagro Beanfield War*: “My friends, my cousins, do you remember when we were not rich, but when our poverty was different – not a thing to be ashamed of?” Knowing how to do things, and having basic needs for food, shelter, and community met simply and directly – these led to a sense of security and wellbeing.

The ideal of self-reliance was tempered by reliance on community, self-sufficiency and independence embedded in shared labor. Patsy Thomas observed, “Things were slower back then. The work was harder. But I think we were more content. We had less, but we were happy.” While it is tempting to dismiss her observation as that of a seventy-year-old woman reflecting on a happy childhood, I think there is more to her observation than uncritical nostalgia. Bill McKibben writes, “The statistics about happiness and satisfaction indicate that, deeper

down, we know we've been overliberated" (128). More than our "moral choices" he argues that it is "our *economic* lives ... that play the crucial role in wrecking or rebuilding our communities. We need to once again depend on those around us for something real" (128). Growing, preserving, and preparing one's own food, making clothing, building shelter – these are ancient human skills. Only in relatively recent history have humans been free to pay others to grow food or make clothing or build shelters. The human skill for creating technology has led to wealth and the freedom to pursue individual goals – this has seemed an unqualified blessing. But is it becoming clear that excessive wealth and hyper-individualism not only have the capacity to destroy the natural environment, but also seem to be making most Americans deeply unhappy. "We had less, but we were happy." What if this is not merely a statement of uncritical nostalgia, but a statement of reflective nostalgia, challenging us to pull the best from the past in order to fashion a better future.

When Richard Parks returned to the Eastern Shore after serving as an infantryman in World War II, he needed to find a way to earn a living. Returning presented a problem then, as it does now, and the socioeconomic inequities were harsh. Parks said, "Back then, you still had sharecroppers. The lawyers and the doctors owned most of the land. ... They got that during the Depression, when the poor farmers lost their land and the doctors and the lawyers wound up with it. ... I wanted to farm, but I wasn't going to farm as no sharecropper." Instead, he farmed with his father and brother, married his high school sweetheart Nora Lee in 1946, and was able to purchase a farm in 1952. The GI bill helped them get started. "The government after World War II, they paid anybody who wanted to go to college, ... and the farm boys, of course, they didn't have sense enough to go to college, most of them, so they gave us ninety dollars [a month] to go to school. They hired this guy to teach farming. ... They paid us ninety dollars a month,

and ... we put that away. Put it in the bank.” For Parks and his wife, these funds helped them get started as independent farmers. In this excerpt, Parks demonstrates the accepted cultural practice of denigrating oneself - “didn’t have enough sense to go to college” – which reflects the value of humility as it is practiced in Protestant faiths on the Eastern Shore. The same humility was evident in Thom Dixon’s brief mention of how skilled he was at planting a straight row. More importantly, the statement that “farm boys ... didn’t have enough sense to go to college” also illustrates the denigration of skilled manual labor, a cultural belief so widely accepted it generally goes unnoticed and unremarked upon. This unexamined cultural bias toward knowledge work and the denigration of manual labor affected how farming operations changed after World War II.

The Mechanization of Farming

The number of acres an individual is able to farm using large machines, chemicals and engineered crops would be unfathomable to farmers of the mid-twentieth century. The financing of expensive tractors and equipment, as well as the high cost of fertilizers and seed has driven all but the largest operators out of the farming business, something interviewees recognize but seem to regard as inevitable, even though it was this unquestioned embrace of industrial technologies that has de-skilled farm labor and depopulated farm communities.

Richard Parks: You don’t have any sharecroppers now. And to show you how much farming has changed ... my nephew David Rew is tending my ground. And I don’t know how much David’s got this year, but as I said when we came along, my Daddy had thirty-five to forty acres with us two boys. That’s all, that’s all we had. The last I knew, Dave was tending around four thousand acres. He’s got two men and so ... he

hires a lot of custom work now. He hires all of his spraying done. And now you spray everything, weeds and grass and bugs and varmints and you don't hoe anymore. Hoeing is gone; that's a lost art. That's been a lost art for a long time. The only thing he has to worry about is harvesting.

The difficulty in finding labor is one reason David Rew grows grain. Growing vegetables, even with increased mechanization, requires more labor, some of it skilled manual labor. Not only have the crops changed and the average size of a farming operation increased exponentially, but as Parks emphasizes when he points out that Rew "hires all of his spraying done," specialization within farming has increased. Only a few men are needed to work four thousand acres. Almost none of the work is done by hand. Farming has become a lonelier proposition.

The disappearance of sharecroppers and of the hard manual labor that hoeing represents are both signs of social and economic progress, beneficial to Eastern Shore people. Yet despite this social and economic progress, rural communities like the Eastern Shore are experiencing a widening gap between income levels, increased social segregation between races and socioeconomic classes, a declining and aging population, a lack of economic opportunities, problems with alcoholism and drug trafficking, and a generalized sense of despair. Making a living from farming remains a difficult proposition, perhaps more difficult than when Parks was a boy and family farms lined every road.

Richard Parks: I reckon it's pretty tough making a dollar now. Things have got so dag-gone high. David told me how much fertilizer was now compared to years back.

Of course, rent hasn't gone up that much I was getting forty dollars an acre up to last year, and he did raise me to fifty dollars an acre last year. So, the time you paid your taxes, there's not a whole lot left, and yet that's all he could pay, really, to make a living.

To be clear, eighty years ago in Accomack and Northampton Counties, family farms grew strawberries, potatoes, string beans, and other vegetable crops for sale in cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Grain was rarely grown, because the soil is rich and yields excellent vegetables. Back then the work was done manually, with the assistance of teams of mules or horses, and produce was shipped by rail north. One hundred acres was considered a large farm. Today, as Bev Fletcher said, “One hundred acres is an annoyance.” The dominant crops today are grain crops. A few remaining farmers are responsible for thousands of acres and they use large, complicated, expensive machinery to farm it, aided by chemical support in the fields and bioengineering in the crop choice. This is widely accepted as the future of farming.

While interviewees did not overtly question this future, they did comment on the oddness of present practices. The mechanization of farming, in particular, has been a curious progression of larger and more sophisticated machinery. One reason “one hundred acres is an annoyance” is that it is hard to work a small field with a large machine. It is barely worth the effort and fuel cost to drive the equipment to a small field. Once there, it is hard to navigate around the field. The size of equipment is not expected to change. In fact, the expectation is for the machinery to get larger.

Pierce Taylor: From hand to machine and from the team or the mules to tractors, and the tractors over the years have grown larger, larger, larger and larger, and there’s no sight to where they’ll stop. I read a magazine that Nadean [his daughter] gives me here called “Farm Show,” and it’s unbelievable ... the size of these tractors They show them from the world over, all over the world, ... some from overseas that’s larger than anything we have here.

Large machines may work well overseas or in fields in the Midwest, but there are physical limits to how large a field can get on the Eastern Shore. The peninsula is bounded by water on three sides, with an average width of six to eight miles (Thomas et al). Bisecting these fields are tidal ditches and creeks. It is hard to imagine a local equipment maker who would not take local geography into account. It seems that the economies of scale used to justify consolidation have led agribusiness equipment suppliers to apply one model for modern farming, making the assumption that the same equipment that works on the high plains of Kansas will work just fine on a coastal farm in Virginia.

Not only are machines growing larger, but, with advances in digital technologies, they are also becoming more sophisticated. A former classmate, who has managed to make a living as a farmer since the 1980s, recently purchased a planter that works by GPS. He complained to my brother that an “idiot could drive this machine.” He drives it along the edges of the field and the onboard computer guidance system does the rest of the work. He sits in the temperature-controlled cab of the machine and, once the first pass around the field is complete, does nothing while the machine does its work. He said he could read a novel while the machine plants his field. But, because this particular piece of equipment costs a quarter of a million dollars, he is the only person he trusts to drive it. So, aided by a computer guidance system and alone in the air-conditioned cab of an expensive machine, this farmer plants his field barely having to touch a steering wheel. Gone is the skill inherent in the work, replaced by the farmer as industrial machine operator, in debt to an agribusiness equipment supplier. Thom Dixon’s skill, to “drive a pretty straight row,” has been replaced by a technological solution, supposedly using a more efficient approach that should maximize productivity on this farm. But at what human cost? This human cost should be factored into the economic equation.

Questioning technology as progress is a form of apostasy in our culture. “In US culture, the idea of progress has been closely allied with the idea of technology, and vice versa: technology is progress, just as progress suggests more and new technology” (Slack and Wise 9). In farming, the widespread adoption of the tractor after World War II is an example of a technology few question as beneficial for individual farmers and for the industry as a whole. Winter Cullen is a retired farmer from Mappsburg who talked about tractors in our September 2009 interview:

I remember when my dad bought his first tractor. Before that we had mules and horses. And that first tractor was like you’d almost died and gone to heaven, because you didn’t have to walk behind that mule all day or that horse. You could get on and ride all day, and it was really a wonderful invention to agriculture. He bought his first tractor in the early forties ... I can see that first tractor right now, H John Deere, and it was small ... in comparison to today’s tractor, it was probably what we would call today a garden tractor. Once tractors were widely used in farming, mules and horses were no longer needed and disappeared from most farms. Tractors required fossil fuel, which could be purchased cheaply, and the fields that had been used to grow the corn that fed the livestock were now available for cash crops. Unlike a mule or a horse, tractors do not need to rest, so farmers could work longer hours. Because tractors have to be fueled, not fed, farmers could also work through meals. The seemingly simple and obvious change from working with a team of animals to driving a machine to plow the same field changed the rhythm of farming in a profound way, almost overnight. In his analysis of this change, Wendell Berry writes, “Year after year, agriculture would be adapted more and more to the technology and the processes of industry and to the rule of industrial economics. The transformation occurred with astonishing speed because, by the measures it set

for itself, it was wonderfully successful. It ‘saved labor,’ it conferred the prestige of modernity, and it was highly productive” (41). He writes, however, that there were costs, that “Mechanical farming makes it easy to think mechanically about the land and its creatures” (43), and that this has had wide-reaching consequences for the land, for the people who farm that land, and for the communities they live within.

Questioning a labor saving technology like the tractor seems arrogant, particularly to those who have experienced the hardship of walking a field behind a mule on a hot summer day. Farming in this intimate way was dirty, grueling work and I have yet to interview anyone who would choose to return to it. But the unintended consequences of adopting the tractor include the exponentially increasing size of the average farm and the shrinking number of people who work that farm. The dissonance between what made farming a satisfying occupation and its present incarnation is difficult to disregard. And yet, as Slack and Wise point out, “Progress and technology have become articles of near religious faith held in the heart of North American culture. To question them, to stand in the way of progress and technology, is heresy” (13). No one I interviewed questioned the industrialization of farming on the Eastern Shore, even as they mourn the losses wrought by the changes.

The de-skilling of manual labor did not begin with the purchase of tractors for farm work in the 1940s. The principles that produced the industrialization of manufacturing were first applied to the mechanization of the textile industry in England in the nineteenth century, but it was Henry Ford who most successfully created the modern assembly line. Ford’s assembly line produced affordable Model-T Fords for Americans who were ready to leave their horse-drawn wagons behind. Applying “scientific management” principles, every job is divided into its smallest elements and, to achieve maximum productivity, workers master single components of a

job and work repetitively at those components. The view is mechanistic, labor interchangeable like cogs in a machine. This way of thinking about work, which was revolutionary at the end of the nineteenth century and more fully realized in the twentieth century, still drives management theory today. “The tenets of scientific management were given their first and frankest articulation by Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose *Principles of Scientific Management* was hugely influential in the early decades of the twentieth century. Stalin was a big fan, as were the founders of the first MBA program, at Harvard” (Crawford 38-39). In his 2009 book *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, philosopher-mechanic Matthew P. Crawford scrutinizes the ideological and successful attempt by Taylor and others to divorce craft knowledge from skilled workers and disperse this knowledge into “the hands of the employer, ... doled out again to workers in the form of minute instructions needed to perform some *part* of what is now a work *process*” (39). He writes, “It is a mistake to suppose that the primary purpose of this partition is to render the work process more efficient. It may or may not result in extracting more value from a given unit of labor *time*. The concern is rather with labor *cost*” (39). These same mechanistic theories and approaches have since been applied to agriculture, deskilling farm work. In factories, machines have rapidly replaced workers, who either become machine operators or find themselves out of work. The same has happened in agriculture.

Conventional wisdom states that these efficiencies are necessary to produce the yield needed to feed the world’s population. “We assume, because it makes a certain kind of intuitive sense, that industrialized farming is the most productive farming. ... As it turns out, however, this simply isn’t true” (McKibben 66). Research shows that the most productive farm in terms of yield per acre is the small, intensively managed and diverse farming operation – similar in many ways to the farms Richard Parks, Pierce Barnes Taylor, Bill Davis, and Patsy Thomas

experienced in their youths before the industrialization of farming. In his 2007 book *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben writes:

If all you are worried about is the greatest yield per acre, then *smaller farms produce more food*. Which, if you think about it some more, makes sense. If you are one guy on a tractor responsible for thousands of acres, you grow your corn and that's all you can do: one pass after another with the gargantuan machines across your sea of crop. But if you're working on ten acres, then you have time to really know the land, and to make it work harder. You can intercrop all kinds of plants: their roots will go to different depths, or they'll thrive in each other's shade, or they'll make use of different nutrients in the soil. You can also walk your fields, over and over, *noticing*. As one small farmer recently wrote in *Farming* magazine, spending part of every day in the pasture gives you a "grass eye," "a keen awareness" of where small seeps of water are muddying the fields, or whether "earthworms and other soil life are properly disposing of cow pies." (66-67)

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the most productive farms are not those governed by industrial measures of efficiency, but small farms worked intensively by a skilled craft-farmer, one who knows his land and soil intimately and who modifies his methods to match his situation. A craft-farm on the high plains of Kansas will use very different methods than a craft-farm in Accomack County, Virginia. Although conventional wisdom and practice tends toward large-scale industrial operations, interviewee Bill Davis acknowledged that carefully managing a smaller farm will yield more per acre: "If you intensely farm an acre of land, it's amazing what you can get off of one acre, but it's intensely farmed, intensely managed." The question then becomes – is this a better model for the future of farming than the current industrialized model with large-scale operations primarily growing grains? Perhaps the manner of working which yields the

most food per acre also yields the most satisfaction for the individual farmer and does the most to improve the local economy and community. If this is true, then the farming techniques described to me in an oral history project are the same techniques that need to be resurrected, if slightly modified, in this alternate scenario for the future of farming.

The intimate knowledge of land and of the craft of growing food was impressive in the interviews, making me wonder how much knowledge will be lost when the generation that knew pre-industrial farming dies. Knowledge was passed down in apprenticeship-like relationships on these small farms, conveyed to young people in the course of doing real and valuable work. In our September 2009 interview, retired farmer Winter Cullen talked about a time in the 1950s when he showed poor judgment in loading potatoes and what he learned from that about growing vegetables.

[Cullen: When we were growing potatoes ... I was working at the packing shed.](#) I always thought I was a little stronger than the next person, and I would exhibit it once in a while. And we always put four hundred-pound bags, burlap bags of potatoes on a hand-cart, and that way you could push them very easily up in a tractor-trailer, and of course, two stackers would take them off and put them in place on the tractor-trailer Well, I got a wild idea one day I was going to take four across, then three, then two and then one – pyramid ‘em.

My father happened to come out of the office when I was getting ready to go in the trailer with them, and he said, “hey, boy.”

I said, “yes, sir.”

“That’s not coal in those bags; that’s potatoes.” ... He said, “Don’t take but four. What you’re doing is you’re bruising the ones on the bottom.”

Cullen (continued): So, it's how you take care of what you got, and a lot of times, for example, if you've got a crop like snap beans that scar very easily with wind blowing on it, especially in the fall of the year, when you have a lot of northeast winds or whatever, if you'll plant them in a protected area, wooded area, so that the wind can't hit 'em, then you don't have to worry about your scar. You got a pretty bean.

That was the point of all the effort – to “get a pretty bean” to sell in the marketplace. Taste was also important, since everyone ate what he or she grew. How to “get a pretty bean” meant knowing one's land and soil, knowing the microclimates in the different fields, and knowing when to plant and when to harvest. Some did it better than others and it was undeniably uncomfortable, dirty work. It was also challenging work that kept one engaged and learning throughout one's lifetime. Bill Davis considers his true education the one he received in his fields.

Davis: Somebody said I went to the college of the burning bush, hard knocks and experience – that's probably the most expensive education you could have, but it's a lasting one. So much of farming is ... you're farming and you do something this year, maybe next year, and it works pretty good, and you think, “I've mastered this art – I know what to do.” And you do it the third year, and it'll fly up in your face.

[Farming's] an inexact science.

Because of the challenge and the satisfaction that came from mastering genuine skills, the men and women I spoke with found the work deeply satisfying. The awareness that skill and attention makes a direct difference in the quality of the crop made farm work rewarding for many people. It is the memory of this satisfaction and the love for specific land that has kept families in farming, even though their present daily work experience may be less personally satisfying.

The issue of satisfying work may seem idealistic in the twenty-first century, and certainly being limited geographically to a specific piece of land and through a craftsman-like skill set runs counter to a postmodern, nomadic sensibility, but this is an issue worth revisiting. Crawford argues that skilled manual labor is inherently satisfying and cognitively challenging. “Most people take pride in being good at something specific, which happens through the accumulation of experience. Craftsmanship means dwelling on a task for a long time and going deeply into it, because you want to get it right” (20). According to Crawford, this runs counter to current best practices in management theory and to the advice of college and career counselors. “The preferred role model is the management consultant, who swoops in and out and whose very pride lies in his lack of particular expertise. Like the ideal consumer, the management consultant presents an image of soaring freedom, in light of which the manual trades appear cramped and paltry: the plumber with his butt crack, peering under the sink” (Crawford 20) or the farmer sweating in a field under the mid-day sun. The knowledge worker is freed from uncomfortable manual labor and the limitations of knowing specific manual trades, freed to work in comfort using his or her full intellectual capabilities – at least that is what is told to the ubiquitous college graduates in the twenty-first century. The reality of knowledge work is better told through Dilbert comic strips. “Those who work in an office often feel that, despite the proliferation of contrived metrics they must meet, their job lacks objective standards of the sort provided by, for example, a carpenter’s level” (Crawford 8) or a field of “pretty” snap beans. In fact, “genuine knowledge work [seems] to be concentrated in an ever-smaller elite. It seems we must take a cold-eyed view of ‘knowledge work,’ and reject the image of a rising sea of pure mentation that lifts all boats. More likely is a rising sea of clerkdom” (47). The knowledge economy is driven by abstractions and by shifting perceptions of what the global economy will need next; skilled

manual labor is grounded in the reality of a carpenter's level or a field of vegetables growing under the summer sun. If we are, as Crawford writes, "inherently instrumental ... all the way down, and the use of tools is really fundamental to the way human beings inhabit the world" (68), then perhaps his argument for a return to skilled manual labor has something to add to the arguments surrounding the future of farming.

Even though there is significant evidence that mechanized farming technologies make for a less satisfying work life and are potentially unsustainable with rising fuel and fertilizer costs, the answer from interviewees continues to be "better technology." When I asked Thom Dixon about compression of the soil, which Wendell Berry cites as the reason his grandfather refused to use a tractor in his fields, Dixon's response was about a newer type of tractor – one that "floats over the soil." He said that these tractors could "run over your hand" and not injure you. Why is it that among the Eastern Shore farm families I've interviewed "bigger, better technology" continues to be the answer to questions about the future of farming?

It could be that, just as memory seems to be a more organic process than common metaphors lead us to believe, tools are more influential in shaping consciousness than we realize. In at least one scientific experiment, tools became an extension of a primate's limb – at least as far as the monkeys' brains were concerned. In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr writes, "The rakes and pliers actually came to be incorporated into the brain maps of the animals' hands. The tools, so far as the animals' brains were concerned, had become part of their bodies" (32). The implication is that the tools and the monkey cease to be separate, that the technology of the tool affects the way the monkey experiences itself.

Two ideologies – technological determinism and instrumentalism – compete for analyzing how humans and technology interact. According to Carr, technological determinism

holds that technology “has been the primary factor influencing the course of human history” (46). Instrumentalism holds that “tools [are] neutral artifacts, entirely subservient to the conscious wishes of their users” (Carr 46). The monkey experiment seems to support technological determinism in that the tools are not “neutral artifacts” but interact with the brain. This supports the assertion that tools interact with brain synapses in a way that rewires the brain. Using a tractor, for example, may have done more than provide an easier way for a farmer to work more land with less physical exertion. It could be working to change the farmer in evolutionary ways. Anthropologists seem to support this view when they argue that tool use was not the *result* of brain development but directly *responsible for* brain development, that it was the use of specific tools that caused our brains to evolve in specific ways. Current brain research is showing a similar rewiring of synapses in the human brain, particularly through the extensive use of digital technologies and powerful small computers. Technological determinism is not the prevailing view of technology and humanity, however – regardless of how well it was articulated by Karl Marx, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Marshall McLuhan. According to Carr, “Instrumentalism is the most widely held view of technology, not least because it’s the view we would prefer to be true. The idea that we’re somehow controlled by our tools is anathema to most people” (46). As research about neuroplasticity reveals more about the human brain and its continual rewiring based on where we place our attention, that view may have to be revised. It might begin to explain why we become so attached to technologies and defensive when their use is questioned.

Ultimately, it is likely to be a reliance on cheap fossil fuel to run heavy machinery and produce artificial fertilizers that will make current farming practices obsolete. McKibben writes, “Because of its reliance on cheap energy, the efficiency of our vast farms and the food system

they underwrite is in one sense an illusion, and perhaps a very temporary one” (64). Farmers in the Great Plains are facing the additional physical limitation of a shrinking aquifer and inadequate rainfall. With climate change, this may become an issue in other regions of the U.S. The July 2012 issue of *Harper’s Magazine* features an article called “Broken Heartland: The looming collapse of agriculture on the Great Plains.” The author Wil Hylton stayed with a Kansas farmer, Donn Teske, who “farms the same land his family has owned for five generations” (26). Teske uses only organic seed on his farm “although he was quick to clarify that this was ‘not just for moral reasons.’ ... Decades of innovation had turned conventional farming into such an expensive and technical proposition that it was hopeless for anyone but agribusiness conglomerates to attempt it. This, [Teske] said, was the real cause of depopulation. ... The only way forward, Teske figured, was to reject all those modern innovations, at which point you were basically ‘organic.’” (27). Later in the article, the author and Teske traveled across Kansas speaking with farmers. Hylton writes, “The farmers we stopped to talk with seemed to break his heart more each day. On a 12,000-acre plantation near Weskan, Kansas, we stood inside a cavernous warehouse of gleaming tractors and combines while the owner chattered and Teske interjected questions about loan terms and well output. He nodded gravely at the answers and chomped on the stub of his cigar until, as we headed down the driveway, his face collapsed and he moaned, ‘That poor bastard can’t even see the cliff he’s going off’” (31).

As Wendell Berry has pointed out in his analysis, “by the measures it set for itself” the industrialization of agriculture has been “wonderfully successful. It ‘saved labor,’ it conferred the prestige of modernity, and it was highly productive” (41). And yet, Dixon says “I could drive a pretty straight row” – a row that wasn’t necessarily headed toward a precipice. Returning to simpler measures of productivity and success would be advantageous both for

individual farmers and for the communities in which they live and work. Perhaps the taste of a vine-ripened tomato or the sight of a “pretty bean” provides a more accurate measure of productivity than the metrics offered by business schools and agribusiness corporations. And if we are “inherently instrumental” as Crawford claims, “all the way down, and the use of tools is really fundamental to the way human beings inhabit the world” (68), then leaving the air-conditioned cab of the GPS planter to walk the field, perhaps even hoe a few weeds – this might prove to be the best way forward, not because we are nostalgic for what was, but because we are interested in what the best might be. If another researcher were to gather a collection of life histories, this time in 2075, perhaps they will find that the industrialization of U.S. agriculture was merely a detour, one that declining oil reserves and climate change ended, even when our own fascination with technology threatened to send us over the cliff.

What good is a hometown if everyone you know is gone?

Ruby Archuleta, *The Milagro Beanfield War*

Chapter Five: Main Street

“When we moved over here in 1936 (to a farm near Fisher’s Corner), the people who lived [across the street] would walk through our yard and walk clear to Parksley on a Saturday night,” Ralph Young said during our June 30, 2009, interview. The distance from his house to Parksley is only a few minutes by car, but would take an hour or more to walk. I asked him what happened in Parksley on a Saturday night – what made everyone want to get there, by any means they had? The Main Street he described was vibrant, the several blocks that comprised downtown lined with grocery and retail stores, the sidewalks crowded on a Saturday night.

R. Young: The town was loaded with people. ... One or two that lived close to town [would] park their cars on a Saturday night on Main Street, so they’d have it on Main Street to sit in.

L. Bloxom: To sit in? To watch people go by?

R. Young: To watch people, yes. Saturday night was a busy time. Had the movies in those days.

L. Bloxom: There was a movie house in Parksley?

R. Young: Yes, there was one ... It was over the hardware store. That was before the talking movies. ... Then they ... built the main theatre there, and I was there one night, Ken Maynard was there in person. He was like a Gene Autry and the curtain caught on fire, and everybody thought it was part of the act until he looked around – it was flaming. He told everyone to sit still, everything would be alright, and he took and pulled that

curtain down and stomped the fire out. ... Some people got up and went out ... but I was younger and I didn't ... I wanted to see what was going to happen.

L. Bloxom: What was there besides the movies?

R. Young: Ice cream parlor. ... I got about ten cent on a Saturday night. ... A Mr. Taylor from Bloxom raised peanuts and he walked up and down the street with a basket on his arm of roasted peanuts – it was a bag ... for about five cent. And you could get peanuts and an ice cream cone [for ten cents]. [There were] about four grocery stores about that time on Main Street. We went to Pocomoke once in a while, but we planned a month ahead of time before we went that far.

Family outings to go shopping or to the movies on Saturdays were mentioned in at least a quarter of the interviews. Pocomoke City, Maryland, was the most regularly mentioned destination in this pool of interviews, but up and down the seventy-mile length of peninsula were many local economic and social centers in the mid-twentieth century. Families could meet all their economic and social needs without ranging far from their homes, and chose to do so mostly out of necessity. As Young said, “we planned a month ahead of time before we went that far” – in his case about thirty miles to the larger town of Pocomoke.

Parksley's Main Street is mostly deserted on a Saturday night now. The few remaining stores close before 6 p.m. Ralph Young was the third interview I conducted. It was later, when I reflected on his description of Parksley on a Saturday night, that I wondered what had happened. The realization that a vibrancy had disappeared, in just a few decades, moved my reading of the interviews beyond an individual's nostalgia to a more generalized recognition of mild bewilderment among interviewees. Behind their recollections, they seemed to be wondering “what happened?” The economic and social forces that had shuttered the many local economic

centers had been put in motion before I was born. By the time I was old enough to notice and remember my surroundings, Parksley was no longer a gathering place. Driving an hour to go to the doctor, to see a movie, to purchase a pair of tennis shoes – this was what we did. The economic center I visited was Salisbury, Maryland, which is at least sixty miles from my parents’ home, twice as far as Pocomoke. It is logical to assume that cheap gasoline, a consumer culture fueled by advertising, and the rapid industrialization of farming are what disintegrated local economic and social civic gathering places like Parksley. It is hardly nostalgic to observe that the loss of this economic and social center has indisputably impoverished a once thriving community.

I hesitate to use the word “community” because it has become a buzzword, one with connotations of conflict-free harmony – usually imagined as a scene out of a Norman Rockwell *Life* magazine cover. These fantasies of community are pale cousins to the community that filled downtown Parksley on a Saturday night in the 1930s. In *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, Bill McKibben writes, “There are communitarians and social conservatives and progressives for whom ‘community’ has become a magic word, a mystic goal. But it is our *economic* lives, even more than our moral choices, that play the crucial role in wrecking or rebuilding our communities” (128). Ironically, the functioning communities he describes as necessary to cushion the impact of climate change mirror the many local economic centers that existed on the Eastern Shore during the mid-twentieth century, the ones that have been dismantled within the last seventy years, the dozens of Main Streets I heard described nostalgically in interview after interview.

Individual interviewees lacked the advantage I had of hearing the accrual of interview material. For me, the descriptions in multiple interviews of local main streets and general stores,

and of genuine instances of community moved beyond simple nostalgia to something Svetlana Boym names “reflective nostalgia.” I could not shake the sense of dissonance between the descriptions of vital local economic centers as they existed on the Eastern Shore in the mid-twentieth century and my experiences with the more “efficient” national chain stores available in homogenized shopping malls. Engaging in “reflective nostalgia,” this material begs “to narrate the relationship between past, present and future” (Boym 50). Boym writes, “Through such longing, these nostalgics discover that the past is not merely that which doesn’t exist anymore, but, to quote Henri Bergson, the past ‘must act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality.’ The past is not made in the image of the present ... [but] opens up a multitude of potentialities” (50) for the future. The past as it was described to me seems to hold one template for a more desirable future. Could it be that the communities needed for human thriving in a world challenged by declining fossil fuel supplies and climate change mirror the ones that existed a mere eighty years ago?

In 1860, sixty percent of Americans farmed for a living (Lippard 150). Across the U.S, these farms may have specialized in different crops depending on local climate and rainfall, but the communities near these farms shared many similarities. Farms were relatively small, so that families and neighbors could manage the labor necessary to plant and harvest crops manually. Crops within each farm were diversified to cushion farm families against crop failure, to keep the soil healthy through crop rotation, and to provide different foods for the family’s own table. Because travel was more difficult, vital economic centers near clusters of family farms were common. These stores and centers functioned as social gathering places. Entertainment was homegrown; even after radio and movies became common forms of mass entertainment, families still gathered together over shared meals and people visited each other. Such gatherings tended

to be homogeneous as racism, discrimination, and small-town biases were also commonplace, made stronger by the relative isolation, but affection between individuals in those communities was real and sometimes bridged those other divides. Gender roles were fairly traditional, but the sheer volume of physical labor required to keep a farm going meant that all work was respected and valued. This was generally what I heard described in interviews and repeated in general historical research, but, as Alessandro Portelli points out, memory is always individual. Therefore, I will now look more closely at the individual recollections and the past as described through these particular oral narratives.

The Oral Narratives

First, extended families lived near each other and helped each other with the manual labor necessary to keep farms going. Grandparents and elderly relatives lived with younger families. Childcare was shared and young children felt free to wander between nearby houses. Faye Ellis-Jones, now a counselor for Hospice and Palliative Care of the Eastern Shore, remembers her family homeplace in southern Delaware:

We had a large extended family, and people lived with us all the time. ... that was a part of rural life that I think was so common, you know. I liked that part of our life ... all of those children – my grandfather’s brothers and sisters – ... As they each married, they each got a farm, they each got a house, and they all lived in that area around us, so when I was growing up , all of them lived on farms surrounding us. So it was a wonderful, large, extended family ... [and] a wonderful protection ... everywhere you looked, all the way around you was family, you know. Elders. I think the wonderful thing about that is [that] being around old people was normal. You always had elders around you. You had

young people around you all the time, but you also had elders around you. So it wasn't unusual to be around old people ... they lived and died, and that was normal. So you got to see how people actually were.

Others spoke of similar experiences, having elderly relatives live with them or having family as neighbors.

R. Parks: We lived on a farm ... in Lee District, Accomack County ... Mom and Daddy, and I had a brother and a sister. And my grandmother on my mamma's side came to live with us before she died, and she died in my daddy's home. And my grandfather did the same thing a little later. ... I guess my grandmamma lived probably three years and granddaddy lived, probably five or six years before he died at home.

W. Cullen: I lived and grew up on a farm in Mappsburg, Virginia, with my parents, sister – and grandmother next door. ... My grandmother lived in this house, and I was born and raised across the garden. ... I couldn't do anything wrong as a child growing up, and I just loved her to death, and to be honest, I was more at ease when I was with Grandmother than I was at home with my mother and father, because you had to go that straight line when you were with Mother and Father, but when you were with Grandmother, you could kind of do a little weaving in and out.

R. Thornton: When Mother and he were married, he carried Mother to the homeplace, and Granddaddy – he was getting along in years. I forgot how old Granddaddy was when he died. But not old like I am, you know, he was a younger man than that. ... Daddy was farming with his father at that time, and he only lived a little over a year after they were married. And Grandmother – Grandmother was

living there, too. And after Granddaddy died, she bought this little house in Bloxom, and she moved there and that's when Daddy took over the farm by himself and he carried on with the farm ... he enjoyed the farm.

Farms were handed down within families. There was an expected interdependence between generations that usually precluded hiring caregivers.

Crops were harvested by local people – migrant labor as we know it today did not exist. Farmers relied on family members to work their farms, or they had tenants who were provided houses and enough land for a garden, plus extremely modest day wages, in exchange for seasonal labor. On the Parks farm, the brothers and cousins pooled labor to work on the nearby family farms.

R. Parks: It was three brothers and a brother-in-law ... they traded work. They all had boys, and us boys did most of the work. ... As soon as the boys got big enough to do anything, the boys took over. My brother, he milked the cow. I never did have to milk the cow, but my job was tend to the woodpile. Keep the wood split and fill the wood box up when I came home from school. So, that's kind of quaint, isn't it?

P. Bloxom: We children were [dad's] herbicides. We pulled the weeds. My sister and I were commenting about that this past summer – after seeing a field, a potato field with so many weeds. Dad would have – [it] would have been horrifying for dad to see that [field], and we would just walk down the rows, you know, Susie was saying, we'd pull the weeds and then after we got through one field, we'd start over again, because he didn't want any weeds in his fields.

How many people it took for labor depended on the crop and its stage of growth. When I asked how many people it would take to work one hundred acres, Bill Davis said, “[A farmer] probably had at least two or three besides himself, steady. ... During the harvest season, it was much more than that. The field would be full of people.”

B. Davis: That’s one thing that’s happened today. When we were farming back years ago, and we were gathering and doing things by hand – potatoes, tomatoes, whatnot – when you got ready to go, the field would be full of people ...

L. Bloxom: Local people?

B. Davis: Local people. And they would bring their kids with them, and they’d supervise their kids, but you know, the kids helped ‘em. They made some money, but when our government saw fit to put everybody on welfare, that took care of all that. ... And that, in turn, caused our immigration problem, because ... somebody has to do that kind of work.

L. Bloxom: ... Even today you need people?

B. Davis: That’s right. ... potatoes are pretty mechanized. Today ... nobody picks up potatoes by hand. But ... tomatoes and cucumbers and things like that [are] still harvested by hand. Strawberries, that sort of thing. ... Back in those days, there wasn’t any problem getting anybody to help, get all the help you want and more help than you [need] sometimes. But not today.

Strawberries, in particular, were a labor-intensive crop that attracted many seasonal laborers.

Winter Cullen said, “This was ninety-nine percent local people ... when you said you were going to pick strawberries tomorrow, everybody would say, ‘we’ll be there.’ And they would be there. ‘Cause it was just something that everybody seemed to like to do.” Strawberries was a crop that

did not require as much strength to harvest as potatoes, which involved lifting hundred pound bags or barrels filled with the crop. Children and women were as likely to harvest strawberries as men, although men also enjoyed picking strawberries, which are harvested in the cooler spring months and usually early in the day. “[Picking strawberries] wasn’t something that a lady couldn’t do as far as weight, lifting or anything like that. Of course, men, naturally, it didn’t bother them any. So, it was just a family-type thing, really, and if you had a family of colored people that worked with you to pick strawberries and other things, all you had to do was just give them the night before the message that you were gonna be picking such and such or whatever the next day, they’d be right there ready to go” (Cullen). Labor was shared among friends and neighbors and offered the opportunity for socializing as well as picking up extra spending money for helping a farmer with his harvest.

Pocomoke, Parksley, and Cape Charles with their downtown mix of retail stores, movie theatres, and ice cream parlors were attractive for special outings, but there were general stores within walking distance of nearly every home. Ridgway Dunton’s family lived near Bird’s Nest in Northampton County. While Cape Charles was their major shopping destination, he talked about what was available in nearby stores in Bird’s Nest.

R. Dunton: The routine shopping was Bird’s Nest. I mentioned there was Thomas Jefferson Watson’s grocery store, Andrew Jackson Nottingham’s grocery store, the post office was a grocery store, Alec Buchanan had a hardware store, but you could buy shoes and work clothes in there, and candy, other things besides hardware. He sold gasoline from a single pump, and however much – you told him how many gallons you wanted, and you pumped a great big lever. And you pumped up this big, glass tank, and you put in just what [you] wanted. They had little notches inside of

the glass that told how many gallons were in there. And the children used to love to be allowed, and whoever was buying the gas didn't care either, they wanted to get out and work that lever to pump the gas ... But anyhow, you didn't buy much food.

You raised your own. You bought flour and sugar and cheese and molasses, salt.

You could get all that at Bird's Nest. You could get ground beef at Bird's Nest.

Bird's Nest, a crossroads in rural Northampton County, was not unique. Nearly every crossroads had stores where staples, candy, and common farming supplies could be purchased.

These stores also functioned as social gathering places. "Dad let us go to the store most nights. The men always talked around the old country stove – I'm talking about during the thirties now, during the Depression – and us boys played Dead Mule and Lost Track and Hide and Seek and all the other games that boys and girls play. So, it was a good life. We didn't have any money. Nobody had any money" (Parks). The store was two miles through the woods from the Parks family farm. Parks said he "made many a trip out there with a dozen or two dozen eggs or a piece of fat meat to get mamma's groceries, and if it was fifteen cents leftover, you'd get what you'd call a due bill. ... The storekeeper gave you this little piece of paper that owed you for a side of meat or a dozen eggs." These small stores and their barter economy worked well for these small communities before and during the Depression.

According to Ridgway Dunton, "People visited. You just got in the car and went and visited your neighbors. ... Family would visit family and just hear all these stories of the old days, which amounted to nothing, always laughing and carrying on, rather than sad stories."

B. Davis: When I was real small, sometimes on Saturday night, my mother and father would go into New Church. Milton White had a store in New Church. ...

My father would go down to the store with him, and mom would go down to his

wife, Miss Paige, and sit there and talk with her. And that's where I went, [with mom] ... And [Miss Paige] – of course they had no children – and she would have maybe one toy or something or other, and I'd sit there in a chair and play with it. I wasn't all over the house and everything, but sit in that chair and play with the toy. She used to make those popcorn balls. I can remember that. Great, big popcorn balls – they were good, too – delicious. Well, that was what they did for entertainment. ...

L. Bloxom: Did you call first or did you just go, drop in on people?

B. Davis: Didn't have anything to call on.

According to Audrey Holland, "We used to visit. Families used to visit. ... People don't do that now ... People just ... don't have time or they don't take time. ... I can remember [when] we'd pick up the kids and go visit somebody that had three kids. And you didn't call them to see if it was okay. You just dropped in. If they weren't home, you'd go on somewhere else, see somebody else. On Sunday night especially, if somebody didn't come see you before you got away, you would go see somebody. But people don't do that now." In fact, she added, "You'd better not drop in on people unannounced. They don't like it. So, you have to call and make sure it's okay."

Shared meals were another common source of pleasure and companionship. Patsy Thomas said, "We used to visit the aunts and the uncles and the cousins, you know. We used to visit each other's homes, especially on Sunday afternoons. ... That was a lot of fun. ...to eat and we'd have big meals, like we'd have at Christmastime now. We'd have chicken and dumplings and ham and turnip greens and baked corn and baked tomatoes and, of course, mashed potatoes, and all those good things." Because most homes lacked electricity until the 1940s, most of the

meals described in the interviews were cooked over wood stoves. Probably because of the labor involved in cooking a meal, most meals were shared. “We had three black people that worked for us regularly [in the fields]. And my mother, she cooked for them, and they ate two meals a day ... in our kitchen, and so she made biscuits every morning. And pancakes and all that meat that is no longer good for you – that fat meat she fried that’s no longer good for us now. ... We had hams in the smokehouse, so when you got ready for supper, if you were going to have ham, you went down to the smokehouse, you had a big butcher knife that you sliced – a couple slices of this ham, you know? And then you always had potatoes. ... We had our own eggs – we had chickens and had ducks and so we lived pretty well on the hog, as they say” (Thomas). Favorite meals were similar between black and white households. Willie Press talked about her favorite meals growing up:

W. Press: [Ma] would make rolls, and then after she got enough pan of rolls done, then she would flatten the yeast bread out and put cinnamon and sugar and butter and roll them as she went. That was so good. ... I used to love her mincemeat pies. I used to love her biscuits. I used to love her turnip greens, her cabbage, her chicken. And oysters – she made some clam fritters but mainly we ate oysters. We didn’t eat a lot of clams. We ate mainly oysters. ... Fish. See, some mornings – this was the weekends, that was a treat. Pa used to get the hakefish ... It’s a salted fish, and she would soak it, get all of the salt out of it, cook it until it was tender, and then after that, then she mixed white potatoes and onions with it, and fry it, and that would be fish cakes. ... We would have it with biscuits, eggs ... we would have it with whatever jelly she had ... sometimes we would have grape, sometimes we would have fig, sometimes we would have strawberries. Sometimes we would have watermelon rind.

All the foods Press and Thomas mentioned, their families had readily at hand or could easily get out of the creek or from their gardens. Even without ready money, there was a sense of abundance that went along with growing food and having enough to go around. People shared freely with one another. Winter Cullen talked about a neighbor, Charlie Wilkins, who farmed nearby. “If you went to him and asked him, said, ‘Charlie, ... [can we] get some strawberries out of your field?’ Or peas – or any crop as far as that goes? Charlie said, ‘yeah,’ but he said, ‘They’re not ready yet,’ but ... ‘come back about next Monday or Tuesday and help yourself.’ ... as far as he was concerned, if you wanted some, you were certainly invited to them. He never would say no to anybody, but he would tell you quick, ‘I’m not gonna pick ‘em for you.’”

Because “no one had any money” whites and blacks alike described close families, simple entertainment and routines. Ernest Finney said he would “listen at the radio and run up and down the field roads at night with an automobile tire pushing it.”

E. Finney: Once a week, when I was about fourteen, we used to walk from Melfa to Keller to see a movie. And I would say that was a good – I want to lay close to ten miles on it anyway. We’d do that sometimes twice a week. ... And at night, radio. Of course, you didn’t have much time for radio. By the time you worked and got up in the morning, it was time to go back to work, so you needed a little rest ... And you know, we [would] visit house to house. As you got older, you’d go to different neighbors’ houses and have a game of cards or something like that.

Francis Latimer said that her family “talked. Talked a lot. They wanted to know everything when we’d come home from school and we’d have dinner. We always ate together. We never ate a meal without all of us there. ... I would tell all the things we did and, you know, laugh about them.” The radio was also something they listened to at night. “We needed to share

everything, and so when Friday night came, we knew that that was fight night. So, my brother was gonna listen to the fights – and Daddy – and I was gonna tolerate it because it was on. And then there were the music nights that I could listen to the music ‘cause nobody was listening to the fights” (Latimer). Her family “went to church every Sunday” and they “went shopping every Saturday.” (Latimer). Church was segregated, of course, and churches on the Shore are still segregated. “It’s going to be, and that’s okay,” Latimer said. “That would never bother me, because it’s not segregated so much racially as it’s segregated historically. ... Your dad and mother go to the same church that they went to when they were young and that their parents went to or the grandparents went to.”

Fairs, picnics, Fourth of July celebrations and church gatherings were all mentioned as special summer events that broke up the routine of farm work, weekly shopping, and church outings. Keller Fair was an agricultural fair held for a week each August from 1878 to 1957, making it the “oldest continuous agricultural fair in the United States” (Cullen). At Keller Fair, Winter Cullen found “the fairgrounds or the midway” to be “very entertaining,” but he really enjoyed going through “the building under the grandstand where all the agricultural canned goods and fresh vegetables and all were brought by farmers to be judged ... who had the biggest and who had the best and all [that] kind of thing.” Ruth Thornton got to go to Keller Fair “one afternoon with Daddy because Daddy loved horseracing, and he would take me that day that he went for the horseracing, and we always had a hot dog sandwich, and I ... guess [we had a] Coca Cola [to drink], but I thought that was the best hot dog sandwich I ever ate in my life. Oh that was so good – plain old hot dog. But I looked forward to that one day every year, because he would take me – that one day. And he watched the horse racing, but we always got that hot dog.” Keller Fair was a high point, but there were apparently a wide range of diverse events in

which large groups of people gathered to socialize, frequently in ways that cost little money.

R. Dunton: ... church picnics and pretty much anybody who wanted to go to the Bay and go swimming at the beach could go ... the beaches would be full on the bayside. Nowadays there's people wanting to put up fences and you can get arrested if you try to go down on the beach. But churches would go; Fourth of July families would go – and man, that's when you'd have that fried chicken – those young frying chickens. Mother made potato chips and they were big affairs at the beach. ... The picnics and Keller Fair, of course ... and the circus would come once in a while, and the fireman's carnival in Cape Charles, though I don't remember Mother ever going to fireman's carnival. Churches had fairs, and they were big events.

Frances Latimer talked about church fairs: "Capeville Baptist Church always had an August Fair, but they had it in July. I don't know why ... And my grandmother took us. She didn't take us all, but when my brother was a certain age, he went with her. And when I got to be a certain age, I got to get a new dress, a little bow at the back, and she'd hire a cab. ... Dad could have taken her, but she'd call Mr. Church Small, who drove a cab, and we would sit there in the back of the cab ... little prissy ladies, and go to this fair."

The movies were a big draw from the 1920s on. Patsy Thomas said, "We had to go to Pocomoke for the movies. And we went every Saturday night and saw cowboy movies." Although she did not specifically mention a timeframe, it is reasonable to speculate that her family starting attending movies regularly in the 1940s, when "for a couple of years - money was flowing on the Shore" according to Ridgway Dunton. Earlier in the 1930s, however, for most Eastern Shore people, going to the movies would have been a more rare outing. Fairs, church events, and visiting friends and family would have been the more common forms of

entertainment. Ridgway Dunton said, “Churches had fairs, and they were big events, but just what did the family do for entertainment? I guarantee you we didn’t go to movies. That took money,” which during the Depression was harder to come by. “We had to go to Cape Charles,” he said. “Didn’t live close enough to where I was any part of what I hear children talking about now – Saturday afternoon movies and the double features and cliff-hangers. Us boys back in the sticks on the farms weren’t a part of that. But by the time I was twelve years old, once in a while, the whole family would load up and go to the movies.” Dunton’s family would go to Cape Charles. Franklin Holland remembers that Pocomoke City on “Saturday night had two theaters, little town like Pocomoke ... both [theatres] had two shows, both packed.” Rhoda Dalby Young also went to Pocomoke: “We mostly visited family. Now in Westover, when we were teenagers, [the] farmer back of us would go to Pocomoke on Saturday night, and he had a pickup. And two daughters that we were real close to, and we’d all sit on the back of the pickup ... This is when I was about sixteen and seventeen ... and we would go to the movies with Mr. Layfield and his children.” Pat Bloxom also remembers going to the movies with cousins, part of a weekly gathering of family.

P. Bloxom: Mother was the youngest of nine ... many of them lived in the Maryland area. And I remember – they were a close family and every Saturday, we would go to Cedar Hall to see my mother’s family. My grandmother Howard ... wanted to see her children at least once a week and she expected Hattie to come up, so on Saturday we would go and visit. And ... you got to play with your cousins then.

When they got older, and wanted to go to the movies in Pocomoke, her parents would take them to Pocomoke. “My cousin Annabelle and I would go to a movie and they would either stay in town or they’d come back and get us,” she said. Since her parents had met at Pocomoke High

School, they would have seen many familiar faces walking up and down the streets on a Saturday night, waiting for their daughter and niece to see the movie. Simple entertainments like visiting, fairs, church events – these were what people remember. Rarely could anyone name a single movie they had seen, but the experience of a packed town or a simple meal – that is what was remembered.

These oral narratives make farm life as it was lived on the Eastern Shore in the 1920s and 1930s sound idyllic, but it should not be forgotten that the work was physically demanding and the communities potentially bigotted and confining. Individualism and freedom were celebrated in American popular culture then – even more so now – and cultural beliefs echo the free market theories of Adam Smith. As soon as technology matched economic theory, the evolution from small family farms and communal labor to agribusiness happened swiftly. With that evolution, the local economies surrounding the small farms evaporated. According to McKibben, “The social arrangements that Adam Smith counted on to balance his new economics – the sturdy communities where the baker and the butcher actually knew each other, and where they had to show themselves good citizens because they wanted credit from the banker – turned out to be fragile” (127). While most of the interviewees in the project spoke wistfully of general stores and of the pleasure they got from casually visiting and sharing meals, the gains in labor-saving devices and the freedom to visit larger economic centers with more diverse choices from all over the world has been embraced by everyone I spoke with. From the vantage point of the beginning of the twenty-first century, these choices now seem inevitable, if not desirable. Certainly the social gains of the late twentieth century – the civil rights movement and increased economic opportunities for women and minorities – were worthwhile advances that might not have been made had small family farms remained the norm. McKibben does not advocate restorative

nostalgia when he talks about rebuilding communities. On the contrary, he writes, “Living in a community comes with drawbacks; small societies can be parochial, gossip-ridden, discriminatory. There was something liberating about escaping them, about being on your own” (127). While people might be nostalgic for “simpler times” when people visited without calling and shared both work and meals, the attraction of individual freedom and social gains made in the late twentieth century make it nearly impossible to consider any other trajectory.

On Race

Discrimination based on race affected the many blacks who called the Eastern Shore home and certainly affected black farmers. Did they get a fair price for their produce? Would banks work with them to purchase land or equipment? Most blacks on the Shore worked in a cycle of tenant farming or sharecropping, from which it was hard to make the shift to independent farmer. Becoming an independent farmer and owning land seemed to buffer black families from the most destructive aspects of racism. If they weren’t independent farmers, as soon as they had other options, blacks took them, whether it was World War II factory work or, later, steady work at the chicken plants in the 1970s. Pierce Barnes Taylor’s family farm had five or six tenant houses whose inhabitants worked on the farm “when we were using mules.” Taylor went on to say that the tenants “stayed here on the farm, most of them, until World War II broke out, and when World War II broke out, the whole batch of tenants that we had in the houses left here on a wing almost, they left so fast, to go to Philadelphia because the wages were about ten times what they were on the farm, wages for a wartime production that was starting to kick up quick in World War II, very quick, and they left quick.” Of course, white tenant farmers and white sharecroppers also found other options when they could. The issue, while complicated

by race, may have had more to do with socioeconomics and with financial opportunity.

Had I been a black interviewer, I suspect I would have heard more stories of discrimination beyond the hints of violence and injustice that were shared with me. But the story of race on the Eastern Shore would be incomplete if it were limited to stories of discrimination and limited opportunities. Ernest Finney, for example, wondered if the quality of his produce was ultimately more important than his race in his interactions with produce brokers.

E. Finney: Sometimes you wonder why this man [got paid] more for his stuff than you. ... Sometimes his stuff might have been better, mine might have been better. It's just one of those things – the way things are done. Sometimes you might get the wrong impression about it. You say, “well he gave him more because he's white, and gave me less,” but I don't know who had the best stuff. You see what I'm saying? ... I used to take my vegetables over here to Farmer's Exchange. And they paid me [well] for my vegetables. I've been hearing a lot of people [say] they wouldn't go because ... they wouldn't treat them right. ... I can see in the quality of the stuff that you take and how you pick it – that's got a lot to do with it and so that makes a difference. Can't afford to pay you something for bad stuff So I never felt prejudiced about anything, really. There was a lot of places we couldn't go, but that was just the way it was set up. So, I've been happy with the things I could do.

Because Finney was speaking with a white woman he had never met before, he did not say everything he could have said about racism on the Eastern Shore. His last statement, in particular, would probably have been less accommodating had I been black. Both of his children are successful professionals and neither has chosen to return to the Eastern Shore. The woman who transcribed this interview commented, “What's most interesting about his interview is what

he didn't say" and I agree. But his point about skill – that if you grew "a pretty bean" that would sell well in northern markets, you were treated fairly – is also part of the story. When I asked Frances Latimer, whose father was an independent vegetable farmer in lower Northampton County, if she and her mother could shop in all the stores in Cape Charles, or if the shops were segregated like the movie theatres and the churches, she said, "Green equalizes. Mother bought fabric. [Wilson's] had fabric. You know, they had Yargoods, and Mother bought fabric there and her patterns ..." My hunch is that skilled black farmers could do as well as skilled white farmers, but sloppy white farmers probably fared better than sloppy black farmers because of racial discrimination.

Skill brought respect and perhaps fair treatment when it came to selling produce, but segregation and Jim Crow laws functioned to keep the races separate as groups. As individuals, however, the experience seems to be more complicated. Winter Cullen talked at length about his relationships with blacks growing up in the 1930s as a white boy on his family farm in Mappsburg.

W. Cullen: You've got this question here about racial tensions during farm life as a child. I'll be honest. I ... think in my childhood until I was actually in my twenties that I [had] as many black friends as I had white. I grew up with the black people, and we loved each other and worked together.

Mary Tom Cullen: Played together, played ball. They even had a little ball team ...

W. Cullen: My father gave us a piece of land back of the house here, and on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, mainly Sunday afternoons, all the colored children in the neighborhood would come there. And I'd be there. Sometimes, Walt and I would be there or Robert Harris would come, but it would only be one or three at

max white people. Everybody else would be black. We'd choose up sides. We'd have a ball game. ... One of my best friends – his mama helped my mama over here, and of course, they lived right next door. And, he and I were roughly about the same age. And we, like I say, we grew up together, and we would – of course, he went to the black school, and I went to the white school. But Saturdays and Sundays, we'd go 'round to the fields and pick up pop bottles and pick up junk, and we'd ... sell it to a colored fellow here who bought junk ... and that's how we made our spending money. And I mean, if we got a dollar, he got fifty cents, I got fifty cents. I mean, it wasn't I got seventy-five cents and he got a quarter. And I mean, we just, we lived that way, we grew up that way. ... A colored fellow that worked for Dad, and on Saturday – we worked Saturday mornings – Saturday afternoon, I'd say "Ralph," Ralph Sturgis was his name, I said, "Ralph, let's go clamming this afternoon." And he'd say, "alright." I'd take and pick him up and we'd go clamming together. [If] he caught more than I did, he'd give me some and vice versa. And if we had one hundred clams between two of us, he had fifty and I had fifty. ... It was just a wonderful relationship and still is as far as that goes.

Even though public schools and the workplace are legally integrated and the Jim Crow laws are gone, the Shore is functionally more segregated today than it was in the 1930s. In the 1930s, the races labored together in the fields and children played together because whoever lived near you was who you played with. What most of the whites I interviewed remember is affection between individuals regardless of their race. An empathic understanding of what it must have been like to live as a person of color in an overtly racist society seemed to be lacking in most of the interviews with white men and women. Several white men cried during their interviews

when they talked about the integrated play of their childhood, the affection clearly felt by individuals of both races toward the people they spent time with. This real affection between individuals is probably what makes white interviewees remember the “happiness” of blacks. Black interviewees were more circumspect about this. They seem to mourn the loss of close-knit black communities that have been fractured by the same forces that have affected rural communities in general.

Finney said that because his produce was of a high quality, he felt like he had been fairly treated even though he was a black man living in a racist society. Two black farm families I spoke with also talked about how self-contained their farms were and how this protected them from the racism that surrounded them. Francis Latimer said, “My dad and my mom [did] a good job of shielding us ... They were great parents. They just took care of everything. They knew all the things that could hurt us.” Growing up, she had had only a passing awareness of how racist Northampton County was. As independent vegetable farmers, her parents embedded their small family within a loving, thriving black community. Not only did Finney’s skill in growing and harvesting vegetables insulate him from discrimination at the produce brokers, being a skilled independent farmer created a home and work life that could insulate family life from the discriminating society that surrounded it. Skilled manual labor on a small, intensively managed family farm made this insulation economically possible.

Why This Matters: Farming as an Ecosystem

Except for the introduction of radio to household routines and the chance to go to the movies occasionally, Eastern Shore farm life did not change much between the introduction of the railroad in the 1880s and the industrialization of farming in the 1940s and 1950s. Richard

Parks said that his parents and grandparents didn't tell many farming stories, because farming hadn't "changed all that much from ... just after the Civil War" until his lifetime. Once it changed in the 1940s and 1950s, however, it changed radically.

It is theoretically well-established that new technology, which Americans generally embrace without question, produces unforeseen and unintended consequences. The cotton gin was a welcomed technological innovation that allowed for slavery to remain economically feasible in the South. The rapid post-World-War II industrialization of agriculture, which paralleled transportation advances and the development of the interstate highway system, changed the dynamics in local economies and, therefore, rural communities in ways unforeseen and unintended. It turns out that farming functions more like an ecosystem than an industry, but this is not how agriculture is treated. Berry writes, "It has become increasingly clear that the way we farm affects the local community, and that the economy of the local community affects the way we farm" (42). Berry argues that "we can no longer pretend that agriculture is a sort of economic machine with interchangeable parts, the same everywhere, determined by 'market forces' and independent of everything else" without acknowledging the human and ecological costs (42). While the Eastern Shore, because of its location near water and large urban centers, is not losing the population that other rural communities are losing, the demographics on the Eastern Shore are skewing to retirement age. Younger working people are moving away for economic reasons. Schools are shrinking and consolidating. The only stable or growing populations are the poor who can not afford to move, the Latino community, and affluent retirees who want to live near the water for aesthetic and recreational reasons. Because the net population appears stable, the loss in functioning community is harder to pin down. In the High Plains, the cost of treating agriculture as an "economic machine with interchangeable parts" is

harder to miss. “In Kansas alone, more than 6,000 towns have vanished altogether. Nearly a million square miles of the American heartland currently meet the definition of ‘frontier’ used by the Census Bureau more than a century ago” (Hylton 26). McKibben’s analysis and numbers echo Berry’s and Hylton’s: “The costs have been real. As farms declined, so too did the communities around them. Even in the prosperous 1990s, farm consolidation was changing rural America: 676 of the nation’s 3,141 counties lost population, and the drain was so strong in the northern Great Plains that ‘an area the size of the original Louisiana Purchase again qualifies for the ‘frontier’ designation’” (57). The disappearance of population in the fragile ecology of the High Plains may be irreversible and even desirable, if no less painful for the people who call it “home”. But the gentrification, the widening gap between rich and poor, and the loss of arable farmland on Virginia’s Eastern Shore is hard for me to witness. I might prefer a “frontier designation” to gentrification.

Not only are acres of arable farmland being lost to housing development, the crops being grown have shifted from vegetables to grains that are sold on the commodities market and go mostly to the production of processed foods, ethanol, or livestock feed. Farm families who used to be self-sufficient – growing the food they needed on their land – are now in debt to agribusiness corporations and the bank in order to grow grains sold on the commodities market while they must buy tomatoes that are shipped hundreds – if not thousands of miles – to their local convenience store. “The specialization and consolidation [of American agriculture] are so intense that sociologists now designate many parts of rural America ‘food deserts’ dependent on convenience stores and without access to fresh produce” (McKibben 58). How can this be called “progress” for anyone except an agribusiness corporation?

The lead cover story in the May 2, 2012, issue of the *Eastern Shore News* was titled “Shore near bottom of Va. health rankings.” Below the headline is the subheading: “Report shows 33 percent of Accomack is obese, and 1 in 5 Northampton residents excessively drink.” The news story details the findings of the national 2012 County Health Rankings program, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. “The Eastern Shore ranked ... worse in health factors – including behaviors like smoking, obesity, physical inactivity and excessive drinking as well as clinical care, social and economic factors and physical environment” (Vaughn). This is particularly striking given that when farm work demanded more physical labor and was also more social, Eastern Shore people were physically healthier. In his interview Thom Dixon bragged that working on the farm all summer as recently as the 1970s meant not having to train for the fall football season – he and other farm boys, specifically Calvert Cullen and David Jones, were in excellent physical condition merely from working on their family farms. In less than thirty years, this is no longer the case; now Eastern Shore people rank near the bottom of the state in almost every indicator of health. In the news article, Vaughn quotes Patti Kiger, the executive director of the Child Health Coalition: “Health is found and influenced by where people live, learn, work, and play. If we have ‘livable’ towns, communities become more active by design.” What does it mean to have a “livable town”? Patsy Thomas said, “Things were slower back then. The work was harder. But I think we were more content. We had less, but we were happy.” One interpretation of having a “livable town” means driving less and socializing more. Visiting. Growing food. Bill McKibben writes, “Do we just *think* we’re happier in communities? ... No; the body reacts to community in measurable ways. Staggering ways. According to Robert Putnam [of the New Economics Foundation], if you do not belong to any

group at present, joining a club or a society of some kind *halves the risk that you will die in the next year*” (110). Interviewee after interviewee talked about walking, about socializing with neighbors and family, about the hard physical labor of farming that netted an abundance of delicious food in the midst of the Depression. “We had less, but we were happy.” According to Swarthmore psychologist Barry Schwartz as quoted by McKibben: “Every measure of psychological health points to the same conclusion: people who ‘are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not’ ... Which is striking ... because social ties ‘actually decrease freedom of choice’” (109). Living in community has disadvantages for individuals. There is a reason people prefer driving in cars, usually alone, with the freedom of choice that comes with it. These choices, however, are making people unhealthy and contributing to the degradation of the planet. These choices also seem to be making people unhappy.

Digital communication technologies, particularly the rhizomatic nature of Web 2.0 and the explosion of social media, have the potential to reconnect and revitalize communities. At least, that is the utopian promise of these technologies. Douglas Rushkoff argues that democracy is “not about the individual” but “about transcending the self and acting collectively” (191). He writes, “The next renaissance (if there is one) is not about the individual at all, but about the networked group” (193). The promise is that, through individuals taking action through networked groups, change can and will happen.

As with all technologies, however, the utopian promise may come with unintended consequences. Sherry Turkle, whose books *The Second Self* and *Life on the Screen* explored identity and community in online social networking and digitally based communities, has been studying these technologies for several decades. Her earlier books are more celebratory of the

potentials in these technologies, but she writes that she has grown “troubled about the costs of life with simulation” (xii). In *Alone Together*, she writes, “These days ... we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and [to] protect ourselves from them at the same time. ... We expect more from technology and less from each other” (xii). Her focus is the social media networks, but she could just as easily be discussing farm equipment and our expectations that better technology will produce better yields. Hungry for “community” people increasingly seek it online or someplace besides the place they happen to be sitting. Turkle argues for communities “constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities ...” (239), which sounds a lot like Bill McKibben’s charge to rebuild communities through our economic choices. Despite these observations – which seem as rare as Emily Dickinson’s objection to photography as a memory aid – the momentum of digital technology and the Internet seems to be toward a disembodied definition of community, one not grounded in a geographic locality.

Nearly everyone on the Eastern Shore now has a cell phone, many people have access to the Internet in their homes or through their phones, and satellite television is almost as commonplace as sliced bread in the grocery store. Meanwhile digital technologies are connecting an exploding number of grassroots social justice and environmental groups in rhizome fashion; social media gives small organizations a flexibility and reach that is unprecedented. Paul Hawken, in the 2007 book *Blessed Unrest*, researched this phenomenon and makes this exceptional claim in his subtitle: *How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*. His premise is that, because this movement is decentralized, it is functioning like an immune system, mobilizing to take care of global threats to humanity and the environment. He writes, “If the movement in all its diversity has a

common dream, it is process - in a word, democracy, but not the democracy practiced and corrupted by corporations and modern nation-states. It is, rather, a reimagination of public governance emerging from place, culture, and people” (18). Perhaps the social media revolution represents a fusion of the local / global split. “The Official Eastern Shore of Virginia Page !” on Facebook, run by a “Mr. Jimmy Crab,” has added more than seven hundred and fifty fans since mid-April 2011, from 5,181 to more than 5,900. Here is a sample post from April 16, 2011: “Is it my imagination, or are our ES forests being cut down at an alarmingly faster and faster rate?? Is this because of the economy - folks needing money? I see more & more wooded areas being pillaged and left destroyed. Is the ES destined to become a concrete jungle? Will we sell our souls & destroy our lifestyle permanently for the sake of the almighty \$\$\$\$\$\$?????” This post had twenty-three “likes” and sixteen comments. The two most recent posts on April 24 were “Thought I would share, last night was the Spring round up of the Chincoteague Ponies. Time for the vet visit and shots” and “If pollen was money \$\$\$\$”. The post about pollen had thirty-eight “likes” and six comments. Another environmentally related post is this March 5 post: “Hey! I’ve got a great idea! Since 4 Corners [a shopping center in Onley, Virginia] has empty stores, and the Food Lion shopping center has empty stores, let’s BUILD ANOTHER STRIP MALL in the same town!!!! Oh wait, they’re already planning it. Darn.” This one had thirty “likes” and twenty-seven spirited comments. One person commented: “Dont blame Walmart - unless you are self employed, work for Nasa or local government theres no jobs on ESVA, or I would have moved back yrs ago....” If a local grass-roots organization mobilized the people behind these sentiments (as well as those who “lurk” but don’t post), using social media and other digital venues to connect them, the strip mall would probably not be built, landowners might be presented with other economic options besides logging the remaining woods, and there

might be creative ways to revitalize the local economy and provide jobs besides floor greeter at the new SuperWalMart or NASA engineer. No one wants to return to plowing on foot behind a mule or having to be home by sundown every day to “feed up” the animals, but the Eastern Shore is full of local people who know that something is not quite right in their corner of the world. As Boym writes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, “One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future” (351). Through the oral narratives, a past perfect has been uncovered that has potential for transforming this place before there is no there there.

The answer is not to enshrine the past, but to use the past to construct a healthier and more sustainable future. I believe, as McKibben does, that it is daily economic choices by individuals which build or destroy local communities, and that it is in humanity’s best interest to rebuild local economies in order to reconnect people who live in physical proximity with each other – not to create an imaginary Norman Rockwell-like community – but to reconstruct a satisfying and connected community. What Hume Dixon said he misses most about farming were the people – “There were plenty of people on the farm. You don’t have that today ... you’d be lucky to see ... a couple, three people that have something to do with the farm in the course of the week,” – but as more than one interviewee pointed out, the fields used to be full of local people harvesting together and on “Saturday night, you would walk down the street, and you were elbow to elbow with people that thick” (Franklin Holland).

[Bill Davis: About the time we stopped farming](#) ... we were farming fifty farms ...

where fifty families lived at one time and made a living there – fifty families. And we were one family, farming the whole thing ... struggling to make a living. ... And those fifty families, they lived – they might not have lived great – but they lived ...

That's fifty families – they lived, they laughed, cried, grieved – all together – that's all gone. Those fifty families are gone or they're somewhere else or something. They're not there on that farm anymore. I thought about it so many times – you'd see an old house on a farm – about the people that have lived there, you know? And they – what their joys and sorrows and the whole thing was – you never know. You know it happened. But ... I guess it's progress. I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

With declining supplies of fossil fuel and instability caused by climate change, it is imperative that we question the promise of unfettered growth. “In a changed world, comfort will come less from ownership than from membership. If you're a functioning part of a community that can meet at least some of its needs – for food, for energy, for companionship, for entertainment, for succor – then you're more secure” (McKibben 120). I believe that it is time to redefine progress, to make measured decisions about technology and growth in terms of quality of life and preservation of habitat. The oral narratives, nostalgic for a past, have elucidated a past perfect that can function as a template for a future to come. Part of that template is a return of the functioning family-run farm.

Increasing the number of relatively small family-run vegetable farms on the Eastern Shore as a means to improving the quality of human life and community may seem like a modest measure of progress, but it is one that involves the production of food – which is essential for human life and central in human community rituals. Perhaps that is why a quiet revolution in food production is happening all over the United States. While most of the people I interviewed believe that small local farms can never produce enough yield to feed the world, others are attempting it. There are a few organic farms on the Eastern Shore, although most seem to be hobby or retirement farms. Rebecca Solnit, however, in a recent article in *Orion*, writes, “Baby

boomers in their youth famously had sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, but the young now have gardens. Gardens are where they locate their idealism, their hope for a better world, and, more than hope, their realization of it on the small scale of a few dozen rows of corn and tomatoes and kale” (19). She is profiling the growth of urban agriculture, what she calls a “second green revolution” which is concerned not just with production, but with “reconnection” (19). She writes that if urban gardens are “thought of just as [a] means of producing food, the achievements of urban agriculture may be modest, but as [a] means of producing understanding, community, social transformation, and catalytic action, they may be the opposite” (19). After recording more than fifty hours of interviews about farm life on the Eastern Shore before the industrialization of agriculture, I have come to believe that most of what we have called “progress” and considered inevitable due to market changes was neither progressive nor inevitable. Like Bill Davis, I am just not sure that the consolidation of family farms is “progress.” Even though I am too young to have seen fields at harvest filled with local people, I agree with T. Hume Dixon. I miss the people.

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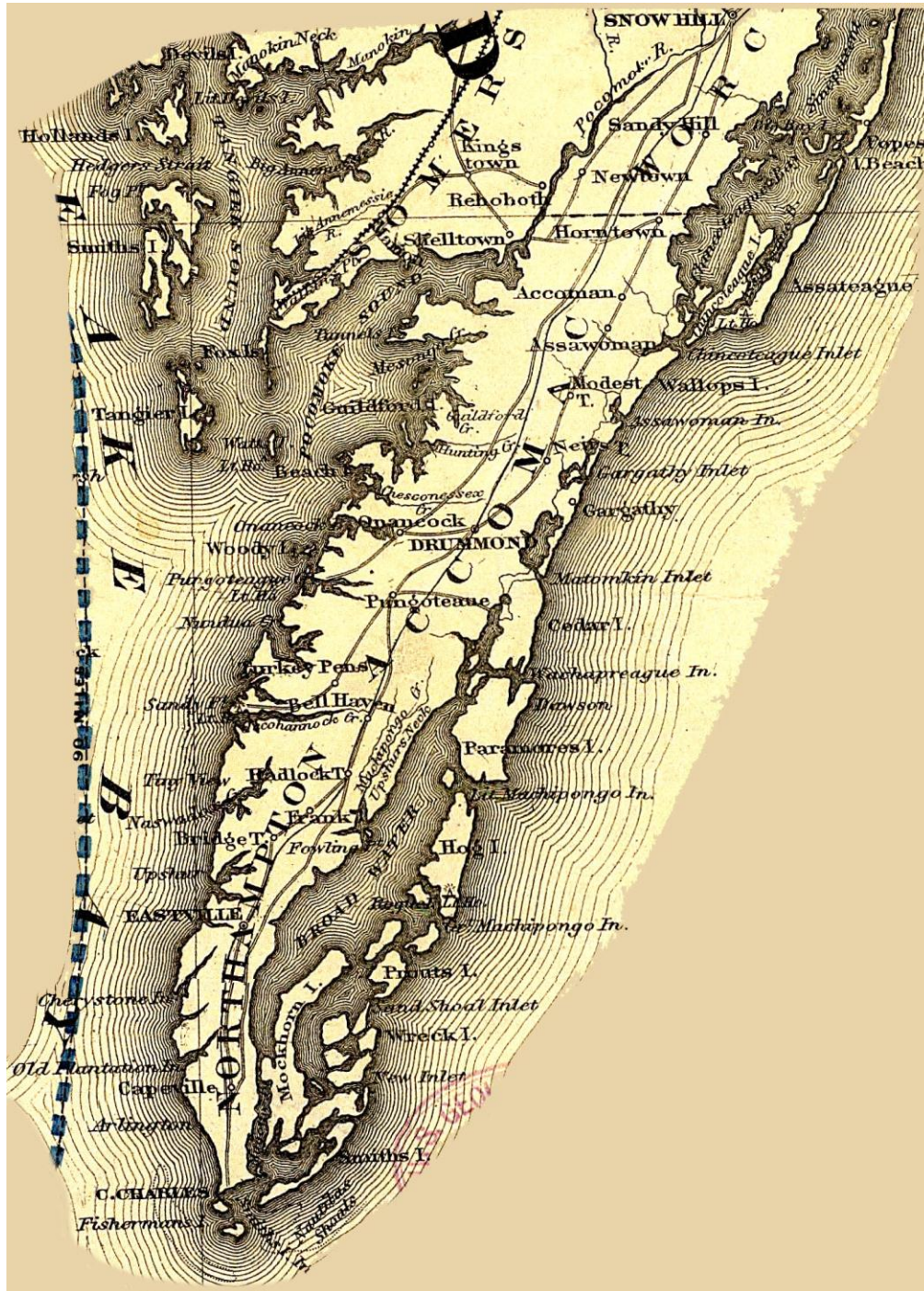
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APPENDIX 1:
Map of the Eastern Shore of Virginia



The Southern Maryland Railroad's Eastern Shore, Colton's Publishing House, 1881. Map. Craig O'Donnell. Eastern Shore of Virginia: 1861, 1881 and 1893. Ancestry.com. 6 November 2002. Web. 18 August 2012.

APPENDIX 2:

Eastern Shore Stories: A Farm Life Oral History Project

Project Director: Lee Bloxom

Proposed Questions:

- 1) Did you live on a farm as a child? Where did you live and who lived with you? What was that like?
- 2) What crops did your family raise? What stories can you tell about planting / fertilizing / weeding / harvesting? How did your family get crops to a market?
- 3) What is your earliest memory of farm life? Your most significant memory?
- 4) What do you remember about the animals on the farm?
- 5) What sort of education did you receive (both formal and informal)?
- 6) As a child, what were your chores like?
- 7) What did you and your family do for fun?
- 8) What is your favorite home-cooked meal? What do you remember about its preparation?
- 9) What role did church play in your life?
- 10) Did you farm as an adult? What crops did you raise? What stories can you tell about planting / fertilizing / weeding / harvesting? How did you get crops to a market?
- 11) Describe your workday.
- 12) What do you remember about canneries?
- 13) How were women and men's experiences different on farms?
- 14) Did racial tension or differences affect your experience of farm life? Did you observe that it affected others and how?
- 15) If your parents and/or grandparents were farmers, what stories did they tell about their experience with farm life?
- 16) Do you think owning or renting the land you worked made a difference in your experience of farming or in the experience of others?
- 17) Did living near the water change anything about the way you lived?
- 18) What changes have you seen in Eastern Shore farm life in your lifetime? What changes were you glad to see? What changes have saddened you?
- 19) Do you have a final story you'd like to share with me before we finish?

Vita

Patricia Lee Bloxom was born in Salisbury, Maryland, on October 2, 1960. She graduated *cum laude* from Wellesley College with a Bachelor of Arts in English and American Studies in June 1983. She worked as a newspaper reporter and communications professional until 1995, when she earned the credentials for a secondary teaching license in English and Journalism. She has taught for a variety of secondary programs, including serving as founding Department Chair of the Literary Arts Program at the Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts and Technology. In 2007, she earned a Masters of Arts in English from Virginia Commonwealth University with a concentration in writing and rhetoric. She now teaches Communication Studies at Longwood University.