

Fell's Point Out of Time



Interview with Butch Romig, October 10, 2003

Interviewers: Jacquie & Kraig Greff

[Jacquie]

Tell us how long you've been involved in Fell's Point and how you got here.

[Butch]

Well, 40 years ago I come down here with my mother and my father. We used to go shopping up at Shoppingtown, the Zephyr Stores (?). And I got to like the water, and I kept coming back, and coming back. And I'm still coming back 40 years later. At Fell's Point.

[Jacquie]

Tell us some of the things you've done while you've been down here.

[Butch]

Well, I worked for the Visitor's Society and different antique shops, helped different people, things like that. Just more or less got, like a neighborhood person down here.

[Jacquie]

Tell us about the neighborhood. What's it like?

[Butch]

The neighborhood's friendly. You got a lot of homeless people, and a lot of good people, hard-working people down here. You got a lot of businesses and stores. A lot of traffic and people and cars. A lot of bars, and different things like that.

[Jacquie]

What's your favorite part about Fell's Point?

[Butch]

The water and the piers. The old piers. The old boats. Talk to the old timers down here about boatin' stories, and different things like that. And goin' up to Bertha's and Jimmy's Seafood Restaurant.

[Jacquie]

What's your favorite boat story? Tell us a boat story.

[Butch]

Well, goin' out on the Nighthawk, being a crew mate on the Nighthawk, goin' down to the Eastern Shore, comin' back, then goin' down to Norfolk with it, comin' back home. We had a good time. Took a week to go to Norfolk and back.

[Jacquie]

People around here know you?

[Butch]

Yea, a lot of people around here know me and stuff. They call me Captain Butch. I had a boat down here for a while. I had it tied up on the other side of the tugboat pier. Then I moved it down the river to the other pier, and had it tied up there.

[Jacquie]

Can you tell us some more about your boat?

[Butch]

Well, my boat, I bought it from Living Classrooms and I fixed it up and stuff and I lived on it for about a year and a half. And I had a good time living on it. I went to the hospital and somebody borrowed it, and I ain't seen it since. [Looks toward camera and smiles.]

[Jacquie]

Tell us about what happened when you went to the hospital. Tell us some stories about yourself, Butch. Tell Kraig some stories.

[Kraig]

Tell me some stories.

[Butch]

Ok. I went to the hospital. Got frost-bitten feet. I was out on my boat sleepin' and fell asleep and didn't realize it got so cold. We had a big blizzard that year and my feet got frost-bitten and I went to Green Street Veteran's Hospital. And they treated my feet and I come out of the hospital. And they asked me to come back into the service for a while and I went back into the service for a while, and I'm still in the service.

[Jacquie]

OK, go back and start telling us again your favorite story about somebody else besides yourself.

[Butch]

Mr. Dick, he had a antique shop and was a master electrician. And I used to work up at his antique shop, and it got to the point where he trusted me to work by myself, and he went out and did his electrical work. And sometimes he'd take me out and do electrical work with him and I got to meet

a lot of people down in Fell's Point, a lot of the houses I went into had been restored, some of them we helped to restore 'em. It was very interesting work. [Pause, then smiles at camera]

[Jacquie]

See, I think other people can tell better stories about Butch than Butch can.

[Butch]

Right. I don't know but I can't. Like I said, most of the old friends that I knew is all dead and buried. There was more Little Italy, stuff like that.

[Jacquie]

You were going to have some stories for me, Butch. I'm disappointed.

[Butch]

I know.

[Kraig]

Come on. Tell some stories.

[Butch]

Tell some stories...

[Jacquie]

Tell us a secret about Fell's Point that not many people know.

[Butch]

Tell you a secret about Fell's Point?

[Jacquie]

Yeah.

[Butch]

I'll think of something...

I seen a lot of fights down here in Fell's Point, a lot of girls fightin', different guys fightin' over girls. Different barrooms I used to go into and seen fights. But, there's a lot of peaceful people down here. I've seen a man that drowned off the pier one time. They fished him in... I was talking to the guy with the little boat over there, pulled him in.

[Jacquie]

How'd he die? What happened that he drowned?

[Butch]

Drinkin', fell in the water, and drowned.

[Kraig]

That'll do it.
[Butch nods]

[Jacquie]

How has it changed since you've been coming down here?

[Butch]

Well, it's been buildin' up more and more. More construction goin' on every day. It's just changing the whole waterfront scene.

[Jacquie]

Is that good or bad? Tell us how you feel about it.

[Butch]

I think it's bad. My opinion. I liked it better when it was the old way, when I was a kid and stuff. And the Recreation Pier they got all shut down. It just doesn't seem like the same place any more. It's getting more modern, than old fashioned like it was when I was a kid.

[Jacquie]

What was the most fun parts of it when you were a kid? What's your best memories?

[Butch]

Well, my best memories were on the Rec Pier playing basketball and having boxing matches, playin' different sports and havin' different games. And you met a lot of kids who didn't have what you had, and you tried to share what you had with them. It was hard sometimes, but we all got along. We very seldom had any fights, except for in the ring and stuff like that. And then we had the police club up on Broadway, and we used to go up there and box, weight-lifting club. We had a lot of places to play and stuff. The kids now days don't have no place to go. They ain't got no Recreation Pier no more, no boxing matches up on Broadway with the police cadets. It's just Fort McHenry, you had the sea cadets over there for the Navy and now they ain't there no more [loud plane overhead], just everything – there ain't nothing for the kids any more. Just [?] and drinkin' and that's it.

[Kraig]

So the kids really have disappeared from Fell's Point almost totally, huh?

[Butch]

Well the kids, most of them, yeah. Only thing you get is the visitor's kids comin' in. You don't see that many young kids no more because everybody's got careers workin' on 'em.

[Jacquie]

If you could change one thing about the way Fell's Point is changing, what would you change?

[Butch]

I'd like to say go back to the old ways.

[Jacquie]

What would you do? Would you, like, tear down a building? What would you do?

[Butch]

No, I'd try to restore 'em and keep them all original like they were when I was a kid. It makes a lot more better atmosphere and more people would come to see it. Cause right now, it's getting so modernized, most of the old buildings are all gone or falling down and nobody lives in 'em or nutin'. Just changes. Progress they call it. I can't see where it's progress.

[Jacquie]

I don't know what else to ask you, because I'm not getting any good stories out of you.

[Butch]

Right. Like I said, it's hard to think of them. Cause, you know, most of the stories have been told about Fell's Point.

[Kraig]

What's one that you've been involved with? Something hard for you?

[Butch]

Well the hardest ones is the drownings down here in Fell's Point cause there's no safety rails around the piers and stuff. And they ain't got no life rings to throw to people or nothin'. It needs more security around the piers. And around the water edges. Some parts are fenced in. Some parts ain't.

[Jacquie]

What do you think about the way the developers are doing stuff?

[Butch]

I don't care for it. Like I said, it's taking all the private people's rights to walk down to see the water. They keep building buildings, you ain't going to be able to go on people's property to see the water. You won't be able to see it through the condos or nothin'. They're taking all the land away from the animals. They ain't got no grass or anything any more. Everything's gettin' blacktop and brick.

[Jacquie]

We had a discussion one time about animals that live in Fell's Point. What kind of animals live down here?

[Butch]

Well, you got beavers down here, you got foxes. Mice. Rats. Dogs. Cats. Snakes. You name it – they're down here.

[Kraig]

Urban wildlife?

[Butch]

Urban wildlife, yes.

[Kraig]

What's your favorite animal? If you were to see one, what would you like to see, "Wow, I like that animal"?

[Butch]

I like to see the beavers. Ain't too many of them down here, but we got a couple of them.

[Kraig]

Who doesn't?

[Butch]

People live here.

[Jacquie]

Tell us about when you were living on the pier.

[Butch]

Well, when I lived on the pier, I enjoyed myself. I come home, eat, sleep. Get up the next morning, go out and help somebody. Work at the antique shop or work down at the Preservation Society or work for Mr. Dick. I always had plenty of work to do. Or I worked over at Streuver Brothers with Mr. Fred on the Bond Street Wharf and the parking lots and stuff like that.

[Jacquie]

And what did you live in on the pier?

[Butch]

I lived in a little shed I built out of some pole scrap plywood and stuff.

[Jacquie]

Tell us the story of when I woke you up with the police.

[Butch]

Well, she thought somethin' happened to me. Miss Jacquie come down and called the police and they come down and woke me up cause I was sleeping. I was hibernating, she said I was like a bear.

[Kraig]

How cold was it out there?

[Butch]

I think it was about twenty-some degrees or thirty-some degrees outside.

[Kraig]

How about two below?

[Butch]

Oh, it couldn't be that low.

[Jacquie]

What is the nicest thing people have done for you down here? Tell us some stories about nice things people have done.

[Butch]

Well, people give me food, give me clothes. Always had enough to survive with. Seemed like I had enough. Cause I'm still here, and they're still my friends.

[Jacquie]

And what are you doing these days?

[Butch]

These days, I'm in the military. In the Army. Getting ready to go to Iraq for a couple of months, then I'll come back to Aberdeen Proving Grounds.

[Kraig]

Any other place you've been in the United States that is kind of like Fell's Point or is this pretty much...

[Butch]

No, it's a place by itself. It ain't like any other city or state or anything else. It's just a place by itself. Most of the people are real friendly down here. They care about each other.

[Kraig]

And not other places?

[Butch]

Oh, yeah. There's other places that care about each other, but Fell's Point's got a whole different atmosphere. It's the water and the waves. It changes every day.

[Kraig]

So of all the pier cities, you'd say this is one of the best ones?

[Butch]

It's one of the best ones. Yes. I'd say that. But like I said, you keep buildin' and buildin', you can't get near the water half of the places. If it wasn't for the Broadway Pier and a couple of other places, you wouldn't be able to see the water. By the time you get done, you ain't going to be able to see it.

[Kraig]

Unless you buy a million-dollar condo, then you can see it.

[Butch]

Well, that's about it. You buy a condo facing the water, you got the end condo facing the water.

[Jacquie]

So you were just here helping out with the Fell's Point Festival.

[Butch]

Right.

[Jacquie]

Tell us about the Festival. What is it and what did you do?

[Butch]

Well, the Festival is where a family-oriented bunch of people get together. And I helped clean up the trash and helped run the Festival. Did the best I could at it. Everybody said I did a good job on it. I had a lot of fun meeting different people from different countries and different parts of the city.

[Jacquie]

Now, you're kind of a master carpenter in some ways. What stuff are you doing for the Preservation Society?

[Butch]

Well, I'm working with some doors for them, fencing, general home products, winders – paintin' em, scrapin' 'em, resplitin' 'em. Helpin with the trees and brick work that they gotta do. Helpin with the sidewalks. I get up in the morning and sweep them off real good. Sweep the sally port out. Keep the place clean.

[Kraig]

See those ducks, Butch. What do you think?

[Butch]

They're beautiful. The ducks, seagulls, all the different kind of birds we have down here. Blue herons. We got mallard ducks. We got white ducks. We got black ducks.