LEROY DUVALL
Retired Shrimper – Biloxi, MS

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Project: Ethnicity in the Seafood Industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

[Begin Leroy Duvall-Part One Interview]

00:00:03

Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Friday, August 22, 2008. I'm with Leroy Duvall at the Fleur De Lis Society here Biloxi, Mississippi, commonly known as the French Club. Today we're going to be talking about the French community in Biloxi and also his time as a shrimper. Mr. Leroy would you mind telling us your name, age, and occupation?

00:00:26

Leroy Duvall: Leroy Duvall; my age is 64. I was born in 1943 and actually right now I'm semi-retired or retired. I'm not working anymore right now.

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FL: And before you were retired your occupation was?

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LD: For 30 years I was a commercial fisherman in the shrimping industry in Biloxi. I owned two vessels, the *Southern Pride* and the *Southern Comfort,* and I ran them successfully 'til—in about '92—1992 I sold the boats and got off the—out of the shrimping industry and I basically was—got into the French bread. We had a bakery here—my sister and I we—it's called Desporte's and we made a lot of the French bread and I did that for the last 14 years until Katrina took the business away and then I was semi—I'm retired actually. Right now I'm President of Fleur De Lis Society.

00:01:26

FL: Oh I want to talk to you about the bakery also in addition to the shrimping, but let's—let's turn it back a little bit. Earlier you had mentioned that you were born and raised here Biloxi. But your parents came over from Louisiana; could you talk about where they came from and when and why?

00:01:45

LD: My mother came from Jeanerette, Louisiana. The year I don't exactly know—it was—it had to be in maybe the '30s because—and my father came from New Orleans, Louisiana approximately about the same time, probably in the 1930s—early '30s or something like that. It was the '30s and they met in Biloxi and so they got married and I was—myself and my two sisters were born right here in Biloxi. We all you know are from—they're from Louisiana and we're from here. They were born over there and we were born in Mississippi.

00:02:22

FL: And do you know why they came here?

00:02:25

LD: My—they both actually came here for—seafood industry; my father was in the seafood industry and my mother worked in the factories. My father was a fisherman—commercial shrimper; he was a Captain for many years and my mother worked in—in the seafood factories.

00:02:42

FL: Okay; and we'll get to that in a minute too but—so you were born here; could you describe a little bit your neighborhood you lived in when you were growing up? Who were your neighbors?

00:02:53

LD: My neighbors were mostly—were commercial fishermen. My uncle and them lived across the street. He was in the fishing industry. My next-door neighbors, the Broussards they were in the seafood industry, just approximately everybody in this area, they were in the seafood industry or related to it some way you know they was either on the factories, on the boats, or—everybody did the same thing. That's the only occupation around here at the time; you either worked in the seafood plants or you worked on the boats. The men worked on the boats and the women mostly ran the plants or worked in the seafood processing plants.

00:03:26

FL: And were many of your neighbors French as well?

00:03:29

LD: Yes. They was the Broussards, the Heberts, and the—I mean there were some Slavonians around our area too; there was a lot of Slavonians on this end of town and they were here, the Vojanoviches, the Talijaniciches and—but we were all—we were all raised together and all of us—all the kids went to school together and—and the parents went out to dances together. It wasn't—it was on negative at all between the two ethnic groups; they were just—they all got along because they were all neighbors and they all did the same thing, worked in the same place, and the men worked on the boats and the women in the factories. Everyone got along.

00:04:03

FL: So it sounds like the community you grew up in here—on The Point was very tight-knit. Has that—has that changed over the time?

00:04:13

LD: Well in years like my parents and—and my friends' parents and my cousins, they—as they grew up in this area where we all came from—East Biloxi, there was no place for the younger ones when they got old enough to get married to move or buy a home so they moved into different areas like Ocean Springs across the Bay, North Biloxi, you know. People—the kids didn't live in this area because there wasn't no place buy anymore; it was just older—most of the older people and they kept getting older and you know like my parents and the other people's parents that my friends—we'd move to different towns right close but they—the old people started passing away and all and after they had gone it just—there wasn't nothing left. And then Katrina finished it off by taking everything out and there was nothing left down—you know homes there.

00:05:01

FL: Yeah. And clearly when—when you walk around this part of town in particular you see a lot of empty lots still even three years after the storm. People are trying to rebuild it looks like, but—.

00:05:17

LD: Yeah. A lot of the older people—lot of the older people they are—they're too old to try to come back down here and start over again, so they—most of them moved away and to different places or they're living with their children somewhere out of town but it's just too much for the older people to try to start new. They owned everything and a lot of them didn't carry insurance because they were the old group and they didn't think they needed it. And a lot of them didn't and—you know didn't have the—they owned the property and still own their property but there's no place—they don't build. I don't think they'll ever come back to this area; I don't really do.

00:05:47

FL: Is it still possible to keep in touch with them through the club or—?

00:05:52

LD: Oh yes; they—they come to the club. That's one reason we put the club back down here. In our Charter—back in 1934 in our Bylaws—it said, one of the first paragraphs says the French Club, the Fleur De Lis Society will be at 182 East Howard Avenue. And that's why when we, after Katrina took our building away there was no consideration about going anyplace else. We knew we were coming back; we owned the property and we were going to come back to our property and this is where we built at. That way our people, no matter where they're at, they know whenever they come back, we're here you know. And that's why the building is back where it's at, so when the people come back around, you know or go out of town and moved out of town for some reason and come back to Biloxi, they'll always know if they come to this area the French Club is still here. We're back again; we're getting ready to open back up and everyone is wanting to go. We have a lot of older people that—a lot of our members passed

away—were elderly and every day we see them they ask when are we going to open, you know. They want to come back and that's what we're trying to do; we're trying to get it back for the people. It will be the same club, just—we had to build a new one but we—we're back in our own property again.

00:07:02

FL: And earlier you had mentioned that you had just gotten your CO ***[Certificate of Occupancy]*** two days ago or yesterday?

00:07:07

LD: Yeah; yesterday at 3 o'clock.

00:07:09

FL: And right now the noise you might hear in the background of the recording is they're putting away the very first beer older which I'm sure is monumental.

00:07:16

LD: Yes; it is. Well, what it is that we couldn't get—we couldn't order anything for –you know—our building has been—we've been working on it every day. There's a lot of the building put together by the volunteers, you know—did a lot of the work here and saved a lot of money. And well we couldn't never order anything until we got a CO from the City, Certificate of Occupancy so we could get into the building. And once we got it—I got it at 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon. I was notified we have it. The first thing I did was got on the phone and ordered—called the beer companies and said, "We got it!" What I'm trying to do is get it stocked up, and

we're only—not only beer; we have Cokes and stuff like that but—. And that way we can open our club up after—these new boxes we have, where you got 50 or 100 cases of beer or Cokes putting in them it takes a day or two for them to cool. And probably we'll try to get the club open by Sunday or Monday and that's—that's the reason we're rushing and trying to get this stuff in here. That way when the people do come, sit down and watch a football game, or talk to each other or just watch a little television or if they want to have a beer or a Coke they can just sit around and have a good time.

00:08:17

FL: Any Barq's Root Beer?

00:08:19

LD: Yes; we do—definitely Barq's Root Beer. They're from this area, so we got Barq's Root Beer.

00:08:26

FL: So how many members do you have right now?

00:08:29

LD: Approximately 300. I think the—we have—see actually the French Club, Fleur De Lis Society is a men's organization but we have a Ladies Auxiliary and most of it is made up of our wives. As a matter of fact, I'm the President of the French— Fleur De Lis Society here; my wife is the President of the Ladies Auxiliary in this club and the Women's Auxiliary what they do is help us on our cooking or different functions we have. They—you know we work together but

the French Club, the Fleur De Lis Society is a men's organization. It was formed as a men's organization and it still is. It's no—no shadow on our wives or mothers or aunts; it's just that it's always been that way and we've always had an Auxiliary. As a matter of fact—not always; in 1934 the Fleur De Lis Society was established and I think it was 1952 before they ever had a Ladies Auxiliary. It used to be strictly a men's organization and now it's—they have an Auxiliary and the women—we work side-by-side with them. Anything we do they'll help.

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FL: Earlier you had mentioned though that the membership at 300 is a lot of people but actually it has come down from the peak of maybe 500 or 600 you said at one point. Why—why—why was there that decline?

00:09:44

LD: Well I think most of the decline is a lot of people from this area were getting older and they kept getting older, and like I said before, most of the younger—like myself and a bunch of my friends or—they're—you know their mothers and fathers lived here but eventually they all passed away. Well my son is a member but he doesn't—he doesn't—he's not as active or don't come around as much but a lot of people it's just after—East Biloxi started dying away and the older people got older and nobody just—the club just declined in occupancy more or less but not because they didn't like the club, but they passed away; they weren't here anymore and that's actually what's caused it.

00:10:25

FL: But at the same time you're also—you had mentioned earlier that some of your membership which you know was displaced because of storms still come back around just to come to the club even though they don't live in the area anymore. Do you have a lot of members like that right now?

00:10:38

LD: Yes; we do. Most of the—most of the members now—in the years past most of the members lived within walking distance and now most of the members don't live in Biloxi anymore. We live in places like Ocean Springs, D'Iberville, St. Martin area, Gulfport, or even up in Vancleave and it's just—it's more spread out. And for the simple fact that East Biloxi just got devastated so bad that a lot of people didn't come back down here, you know, because it was just—it was a bad—not a bad—I'd never say it's a bad place to be and that's why we're back here, but it's just a place that a lot of people are devastated and they—they just felt like they didn't want to come back.

00:11:18

FL: And a question I have too; so you have to have French heritage to be a member.

00:11:24

LD: Yes; you have to be French on your father's or your mother's side—either your mother has to be French or your father to get into the French Fleur De Lis Society.

00:11:35

FL: And do you have events or some kind of activities that actively try to promote or preserve French culture?

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LD: Well we have what they call a Fais-Do-Do and a Fais-Do-Do is—is what the French people call a street dance. You know it's just like a big party; a lot of people bring food and—and you set up little booths and have dancing and have a little band and it's called a Fais-Do-Do. We have shrimp boils here; we have the crawfish boils here; we have functions for like some of our members or people we know in the community that is—is in bad shape financially or something we give benefits to help them out like cancer patients or somebody that really needs help. We—we put on functions. We are a non-profit organization; we're—we're not here to make a lot of money. We're just here to let the people have a good time and try to serve the community. We—we are not a place that is trying to make a lot of money; we're just trying to survive that's all—for the people.

00:12:36

FL: And when you were growing up living in a community where there were a lot of French families as you mentioned, was there a strong—was there a strong sense of—of being French? Was there a strong sense of that culture?

00:12:49

LD: Yes it was—actually it was. My mother and father a lot of times when the—and my mother's sisters especially, they would come to our house or some—you can go to some of the neighbors' houses and the mothers and fathers would be speaking French. That's what they

spoke. They could speak English but they spoke—chose to speak French. Most of them did; that's all they did and now when you were there or someone was there that actually couldn't speak French, they would talk English because they—just out of respect for the person standing—that didn't understand what they were saying they would go ahead and talk English then. But between each other they just spoke French. And I'm sorry that we lost that heritage. I don't really speak very much French. I wish I did but I don't. And a lot of us don't—the younger people, you know. I'm saying younger—50 to 60 years old—a lot of our older people they speak French very well.

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FL: But do you recall when you were growing up particular traditions or foods or feast days that—that you would—you would observe as—as a way of staying connected to that French heritage?

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LD: Well the French are predominantly Catholic you know. We—we didn't eat meat on Fridays. We had some kind of seafood every Friday of—of the month. We didn't—you know even when the Church changed and went to just—you couldn't just during Lent, we still didn't. We had gumbos and we ate like just any kind of French food that—that's what we ate mostly—gumbo or red beans and rice which is American anyway but I mean that's the kind of food we had. We had fried fish or fried shrimp or boiled crabs; it's just mostly seafood because that's the way we were and French had a lot of influence and it's hard to beat a French cook **[*Laughs*]**; a very seasoned food.

00:14:34

FL: Do you—do you have particular favorite seafood dishes that you remember growing up with?

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LD: All of them I named they were all my favorites; they were all really good—especially the seafood gumbos; they were—they were outstanding and right now there's very few people that can make it like the old French people could back then. There's—you can't go to a restaurant and—and I'm not cutting the restaurants down, but they just can't make the seafood gumbo like the old French people used to make it when we were younger. Some of the members still make it and it's good but it's hard to beat mama's.

00:15:05

FL: And then since you enjoyed eating seafood I suppose it was—at least that—that part was good considering the fact that you then worked in seafood for—for a long time, as your family did as well. How—you said your father and your mother both worked in the seafood industry—your father out on the water in the Gulf and your mother in the factory. When did you get started working in that industry?

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LD: I worked with my father when I was younger in high school and all and summertime I'd work with him and—and then I went in the military. And then when I got out of the military—I wasn't in the military but a couple of years; I got drafted in '65 and got out in '67 and so when I

got out I went back to the seafood industry and I—I stayed in it for about 30 years. And—and I enjoyed it; it was a good life. It was an honest living and—and it was a good living.

00:15:52

FL: What were some of the jobs you held in the industry?

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LD: I was the Captain for almost—I was—I was a deckhand for maybe two or three years from—and then I became a Captain in 1968 and I was a Captain until I—I got off the boat which I got rid of them in '93—'95 it was.

00:16:12

FL: Can you describe a—a—actually well first of all let's—where—where would you go in the Gulf to—to do your shrimping?

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LD: I shrimped anywhere from Key West, Florida to Brownsville, Texas. I shrimped the whole Gulf; I had two large boats—well large, I'd say 75-footers and we would go the seasons and—and in May and June we'd be in this area here off the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and all and July—August we would be in—off the Louisiana Coast and in September, October, and November, we'd be down off the Texas Coast and then we'd come back here for our Christmas holidays and all and in January, February, and March we worked the Florida Coast, but we worked all over the Gulf. I even been to [Inaudible], Mexico down in the Yucatan and shrimped down there for a while. I mean I actually crossed the Gulf, caught the shrimp and crossed back to

sell them here. We couldn't go into Mexican waters; it was illegal for us to be there but we were off the Coast of Mexico.

00:17:07

FL: And why—it sounds like—so the progression through the season from the summer into the fall is westward. Why is that?

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LD: Just by the migration of the shrimp. See, in the summertime in May and June and July and August, all the way to part of the September, it's called the brown shrimp season. And then from there on 'til Christmas it's a white shrimp season and they're predominantly more to the west. You know you can catch more of them down that way toward Texas and Louisiana than you do here and then—in the winter months there's hardly no brown shrimp or white shrimp in this area; Florida has what they call a pink shrimp and we would go that way to catch those. It was predominantly you were following the—where over the years it's just a migration. You knew where they were going to be, you know—where they should be at that time of year and that's why you'd go there.

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FL: And how could you tell—how would you tell what a good spot would be for you to be catching shrimp?

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LD: Well a lot of it has to do with your friends; you know I knew I had a lot of friends that shrimped and usually like if you were in—at home or something and taking you a few days off then you'd be ready to go back out, what you do is get on the radio and find out where your friends are and how were they doing in different areas, and they would pretty well keep in touch with you and what—what you're doing and you would go to where—if they were doing good or something you'd go to that area. And usually—usually you knew from year-to-year after you did it so many years where they should be you know and that's where you'd go to—for your best catch. You know anybody on the boat after they're there for a while get kind of used to where the—the things are and where the—like over the—you know they're not here this time of year but you know they should be down there; that's where you go and that's—there's usually no problem with that. It works out.

00:18:48

FL: And then with the different types of shrimp—the brown, white, and pink do—were they—did you have to do anything different to catch them—different from one another I mean?

00:18:58

LD: No, not really; the brown shrimp and the hopper—or the pink shrimp is basically the same shrimp. It's just a different—little different species; the white shrimp—the brown shrimp and the hopper is where—or brown—or pink shrimp they stay on the bottom—they stay close, close to the bottom. The white shrimp will stay a little off the bottom; all you have to do is have a higher flying net, higher—you just—different type of net to catch them because they—they're mostly off the bottom and you'd catch them. And—but the other shrimp you'd have nets of shrimp you

know. All nets are on the bottom but these had a little bit higher wings in them and that's how they'd catch the white shrimp.

00:19:35

FL: Do—do they eat differently? Do they taste differently?

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LD: Not a bit; you can't tell them—if you peel them you wouldn't know the difference between one and the other. There is no difference.

00:19:43

FL: Actually could you describe how—can you describe a day on the boat—how you would actually go and catch the shrimp?

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LD: Well you would just—if you were working daytime you'd put over at daylight and you'd work you know put your nets in the water and you'd drag maybe two—you'd pull a little try-net is what you call it, and that actually lets you know what's on the bottom and you determine how long you can pull your big nets, so you don't want to get them too full. And you work until dark and usually the shrimp—a lot of times they'll be strictly daytime or they'll be strictly night. There's very few times they will be both. The white shrimp is predominantly a daytime shrimp; you catch them in daytime. But the brown shrimp and the other pink shrimp is mostly a nighttime; you'd work just nights—no, no daytime shrimping. And you learn that over the years.

00:20:31

FL: And so you would—you would throw out a try-net to see what was on the—what was—?

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LD: What was on the bottom and you can tell how long you can drag or if there's any amount of shrimp there and maybe you don't want to stay there because you're not catching many shrimp in the try-net so you pick up and you know you don't waste a whole lot of time in the place there's not nothing going on.

00:20:49

FL: So then you throw out the big net?

00:20:52

LD: Uh-hm.

00:20:53

FL: You drag the big net; do you keep pulling it up or do you—?

00:20:58

LD: Well the try-net determines how long you can drag it, you know whether—if you feel like you can drag it two hours you pick it up and you dump it and then your crew has to go through it and sort out the shrimp from the other by-catch, you know fish or whatever else—crabs whatever you catch and push that back overboard and they have to pick the shrimp out of that. It's a lot of work involved in that.

00:21:17

FL: What's—so you would just keep doing that over and over through the course of the day or night?

00:21:22

LD: Yeah; just over and over until you decided you had—caught a good catch and you'd come home. Sometimes you'll stay five or six days; sometimes you'll be gone ten or twelve days and the boats were big enough that you had all of the conveniences of home. You had—we had air-conditioning; we had television; we had bathrooms and we—we'd buy enough supplies to keep us going that long.

00:21:42

FL: What would you eat on the boat?

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LD: The same thing you'd eat at home. We had freezers on the boat; we'd bring steak, chicken, you know we had three meals a day and just like you would at home, we just made sure we enough groceries on the boat to you know keep us going.

00:21:57

FL: Who did the cooking?

00:21:58

LD: We had shrimp and fish or some you know—but I mean we didn't eat that all the time; we ate just like everybody else would.

00:22:04

FL: Who did the cooking?

00:22:05

LD: Usually you had a cook aboard the boat—not a cook. He was actually part of the crew but someone on the boat always—they know how to cook, everybody, you know—you got to learn how to cook and they would be your cook. They would you know but also that wasn't their only duty; they would work out on deck and do whatever else they're supposed to do too.

00:22:24

FL: So now—now you have all the shrimp; you're thrown all the by-catch in the water. What happens to that shrimp on the boat?

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LD: Well you put them in ice and you keep them iced down real good. You carry—**[*Interruption*]**; I'm sorry—10 or 12-ton of ice you'd take with you and you'd keep them iced down for as long as you could and until you determined you know you'd make sure—as long as they were on ice they were good and you can make sure they stayed fresh.

00:22:49

FL: And that ice could last for—for 10—12 days?

00:22:52

LD: Oh yeah; the hulls were well insulated—yes.

00:22:58

FL: Did you—so you did this for a good long time you said—20—30 years. Was there a—a favorite part of the work that you really enjoyed in particular?

00:23:09

LD: I enjoyed—I just enjoyed the freedom of being out on the water and you know you didn't have to report to work at 8 o'clock in the morning and get off at 5:00 in the evening. You just—you—you actually—you knew what you had to do and—and the way it does it out there, the more work you do and you know when to do it is that's how you make your money. If you don't work you don't make money, so you knew when you should go to work and when you shouldn't but I mean you was never pushed. You just—it was the freedom of it.

00:23:37

FL: What was the hardest part of the work?

00:23:41

LD: Well a lot of it was hard; it was a lot of hard work. And I imagine when the weather would get bad and you was working it would get rough out there sometimes and you'd just have to either fight it or try to get to some kind of protection.

00:23:55

FL: Was it dangerous?

00:23:56

LD: Sometimes, yes. Yes, it was.

00:23:59

FL: Do you remember any sort of scary or hairy kind of situations?

00:24:03

LD: I never got scared. It just you know you'd get concerned because as a Captain of a boat you're not only responsible for yourself, you're responsible for your crew too so you take into consideration what the boat can take and what you could take and you knew when the weather was coming and you determined whether you could stay or you would try to get to some kind of—some port, get into a port—safety and get you, yourself, and the crew out of danger. **[*Beep*]**

00:24:31

FL: And you owned two boats?

00:24:32

LD: Yeah.

00:24:32

FL: So you would go out and Captain one of them; who would captain the other one?

00:24:34

LD: I hired another Captain I knew real well. It wouldn't be just anybody—it's somebody I knew well.

00:24:43

FL: So why did you—I'm sorry; and so you—when you come back to shore with your catch after 10—12 days or five or six days depending on the length of your trip, where would—where would you take the shrimp?

00:24:55

LD: To the seafood processing plants right here in Biloxi and I'd run a load to one of the guys that you know—whatever plant I really had—was paying the highest price; I'd go to them because I was an independent fisherman and I'd unload to whoever had the highest price.

00:25:10

FL: So you would—would you arrange that before coming back in or would you come back and actually just sail around until you find the one that was—?

00:25:15

LD: No, no; no, no, I usually had that preset, you know I knew what—we were going to get a good price before I left and I knew who I was going to come back and unload to.

00:25:22

FL: How much could you—would you get for your catch?

00:25:26

LD: Well it varies, you know. It varies on the size of the shrimp, you know. You've got shrimp that run from a very small shrimp to a very large shrimp and you'd get your better price for the larger shrimp. It depended on what you caught that—you don't know; you know you can't predict what you're going to catch. You know, just whatever you can get—the price that you can get—it's kind of hard to say a price; you go for $1 to $3. We don't—you know I can't name a price there.

00:25:50

FL: And how would they—well you wouldn't sort the shrimp; you wouldn't grade the shrimp on the boat would you, so how would they—how would they determine what size shrimp you were bringing in?

00:25:57

LD: They had graders at the plants you know. You'd catch the shrimp and they'd take them off—they'd unload them off your boat and they'd run them through graders and you got—you got paid for the different sizes of the grade.

00:26:08

FL: So you didn't get paid right then? They would go and they would grade it first and they would tell you how—what you got and then what—what they were paying you?

00:26:13

LD: Yes; well yes, but I mean it's all within—before you moved your boat away from where you was unloading at you pretty well knew what you had because they were doing it while you was unloading it.

00:26:25

FL: How long would that process take?

00:26:27

LD: Sometimes two, three, or four hours—five hours sometimes to offload.

00:26:31

FL: And would you have to do a lot of that work and unloading yourself or would you—?

00:26:35

LD: No, no; the crew and the Captain—no, we didn't—the boat people didn't do anything. It was always the seafood process plants had their own crews to take care of that.

00:26:44

FL: So it was cigarette break time?

00:26:44

LD: Yes; coffee—whatever you want. Excuse me; are we going to be much longer because—?

00:26:53

FL: Well I can—it could be as long or short as you want. We can continue another time.

00:26:59

LD: If you don't mind because I really have to get over here. I'm ignoring everything over here and I should be doing some of this.

00:27:07

FL: So Mr. Duvall had to step away for a moment. I will continue this interview on Monday morning.

00:27:13

[End Leroy Duvall-Part One Interview]

[Begin Leroy Duvall-Part Two Interview]

00:00:02

Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. We're back at the French Club with Mr. Leroy Duvall. Today is Monday, August 25, 2008 and—.

00:00:12

Leroy Duvall: My anniversary.

00:00:12

FL: Oh congratulations; it's Mr. Duvall's anniversary and I hope not to take too much of his time on his anniversary but—

00:00:20

LD: No problem.

00:00:20

FL: We'll be chatting for a little bit. So Mr. Duvall the last time we talked a little bit about your growing up in this neighborhood; we talked a little bit about some of the French cultural traditions you and your family and your neighbors had followed here. We talked about your time and some of the details of—of working in shrimping and—and going on shrimp boats and if we would just maybe start there—continue from there. So the question I have—did you always—I know you worked—your parents worked in the seafood industry. Your father was a shrimper; your mother worked in the factories; you worked with your father when you were young. Did you always figure growing up that you would grow up to work in that industry?

00:01:00

LD: Yes, I did. I did work in the industry before and I got, you know, from—when I was a junior in high school or senior in high school and about a year after I was in high—you know I got out of school and then I got drafted and served the country a couple of years. And then when I came back, I came right back to the industry and I stayed in for it about 25 years as a Captain and a boat owner.

00:01:24

FL: And did many of your friends and family also grow up to work in that industry?

00:01:29

LD: Yes, it was a good many of them. A lot of them did and a lot of them—you know it's—quite a few did stay in the seafood industry, yes.

00:01:38

FL: When you talk about staying the seafood industry, were there also thoughts that you had or your friends and family had of—of moving away from this or going into other types of work?

00:01:46

LD: Yeah, there was quite a few and eventually I did in—back in '92. I was Shrimp King and after that I just actually got out of the business myself because you are gone from home a long time, sometimes 10—12—14 days at a time and you're not home too long, so just more or less stayed more time with my family. I sold the boats and—and just got a job on the beach here and got off—out of it. I mean I always loved it and missed it for many years and I still do, but I have a small boat now. It's a 30-footer and I still do a little shrimping you know when I feel like going out but I don't do it for a living anymore. I actually—it actually is not practical anymore from the imports and stuff like that. It just—and the high price of fuel it's not just—I don't know how the fishermen will make it anymore. I'm glad I'm not in the industry anymore right now.

00:02:37

FL: Do you remember when you actually made that decision to get out shrimping, to sell your boats and get out of the industry?

00:02:44

LD: Yes; and it's nothing against the United States government but when they came up with the turtle excluders and this is a true fact, the turtle excluder is a device which excludes turtles and mainly what it was—the endangered species was the Kemp's Ridley turtle. But I looked in the encyclopedia; they're not even indigenous to the Gulf of Mexico. They're off the island—you know Mexican Coast and they follow the gulfstream up around the East Coast so they're not really here. I have never caught one in my life all the years I was there. But this turtle excluder is not only a device inside that net; it's a 32-inch hole right in front of your bag where all the shrimp go and you lose about a third of your profit. It's a proven fact that you do lose a third, like if you got no tear in one and—and a tear in the other one the one that's got no tear will catch 100-pounds and the other may have 60—65 pounds. The one with the tear—because the shrimp are going to get out of there, and I stayed in that business for a while but there's very few businesses that can actually operate with a third loss. So it didn't take me long to figure out that I wasn't going to stay in this business anymore and I got rid of my boats and—and it's mainly because of the United States government and I'm not scared to say that. They did it and they knew they was wrong when they did it but it doesn't matter; it's over with now. A lot of the people got out of the business because of that. You just can't take a loss like that.

00:04:09

FL: And when was that?

00:04:10

LD: Ninety-two is when I got out right after I was Shrimp King. They—the turtle excluder devices really came in around '90—about 1990 they passed the Federal law on that and I have nothing against the turtles or anything. But it's—these are turtles that are supposed to be

endangered; I didn't even know what they were. I mean it's not like the big turtles—and my whole life, 25 years if I caught two or three turtles, that was plenty. I don't—we don't catch turtles you know unless you—it's—just by accident if you do and we've never thrown a dead turtle overboard. If you leave a turtle on deck a while and just keep stepping on him and he'll—the water he'll be crawling around on the deck and you have to take him and throw him back overboard. We don't kill turtles, but the United States government like other things, they wanted to ensure it and it's something we've never seen before. But when they take one-third of your profit it's time to move on. You can't—and no business can survive like that and that's what's wrong with the shrimping industry right now.

00:05:11

FL: Do you know if they—currently shrimpers still have to use the turtle exclusion device?

00:05:16

LD: Yes, they do. Yes, it's a Federal law. They cannot get away with it. If they get caught with one, it's a big fine and they can seize your vessel and it's—most fishermen couldn't stand that you know if they had something like that. Yes, it's still in effect. It probably never will get out because it's an endangered species.

00:05:36

FL: You also mentioned that you—you were Shrimp King in 1992 and that's related to the blessing of the fleet. Can you talk about the blessing of the fleet, what it is and the—?

00:05:44

LD: The Resident Shrimp Fleet is—really it comes under the Catholic—Catholic faith. It was formed back I don't exactly know but probably 70—80 years ago—70 years ago. The Church down here, St. Michael's Catholic Church is just everybody down here was fishermen so they took one day of the year before the shrimp season would—would open and it's usually the first week in June, because the season opens the second week of June predominantly—always did and they would do it like a blessing of the fleet before they went out to sea, you know to catch the shrimp. And the Catholic Priest would get on the back of one of the boats and the boats would parade past him. A lot of them had little decorations on them and all, and they had their families onboard; it was like a day at—on the—at the islands. But they'd pass by the Priest and he would bless the vessels, you know, with holy water and it started like that and then they would always name a Shrimp King. It was one of the guys that always did good in the shrimping industry and was well known and well liked and then what they would do, the girls—the young ladies that would run, they'd usually be teenage girls that were daughters of someone in the seafood industry. And there was a contest. I mean the Shrimp King was actually picked by the Church or the City—nominated and there wasn't no vote to that, you just—you were King and if you wanted it you got it if they decided to let you have it, but you had to earn it. And then—but the girls they'd have a contest—maybe 10 or 12 of the young girls—I'd say teenagers and they would have like a pageant you know. It wasn't no base of the contest or nothing like that but they would you know just a beauty pageant or something or—actually they would ask them a lot of questions of their knowledge. The girls had to have a lot of knowledge of the seafood industry too and they had to be related. It had to be their dad or their grandfather; somebody had to be in the seafood industry. And that's maybe 60—70 years ago and it goes on every year; still goes on today. And it's just a blessing of the boats before the season; that's what it is.

00:07:48

FL: And so how many—like how many boats would line up at this point? Would it—?

00:07:53

LD: Sometimes in earlier days—there's not as many boats in Biloxi now because of the casinos; there's very few shrimp boats left here. Biloxi was known as the *shrimp basket of the world* at one time; it had a large vessel you know—fleet of vessels but sometimes it would be 150 to 200 boats in the parade. And nowadays you're lucky if you've got 30 or 40 because there's just nobody—the casinos moved in here, and the seafood industry was the second largest industry on this—in this area until the casinos—. The first one was Keesler Field ***[Keesler Air Force Base]*** which has been here forever, maybe since World War II, but the seafood industry was the second largest industry. But then the casinos moved in and land got so valuable that everybody sold out to casinos and there's very few seafood plants left in Biloxi. As a matter of fact there's only two or three of them left. They used to be all over these beaches but there's only two or three companies left that actually operate.

00:08:51

FL: Back in '92 there were still—there were still a lot?

00:08:52

LD: Oh yes, yes; that's before the casinos got here.

00:08:56

FL: And when you were—do you remember being chosen as Shrimp King? How did you feel?

00:09:00

LD: Oh I felt—I was proud, very you know it was—it was a—it was just a proud experience you know that they decided to take me, you know, and asked me to be Shrimp King. And I was chose by the Catholic Church and the—the Priest called me and said, "Leroy," he said, "We'd like you to represent Biloxi as the Shrimp King this year." I mean there's a lot of good fishermen out there and I guess they consider me one of them and—and I was—I mean you have to be liked and you have to know the place and they asked me and that was a great, great thing that ever happened to me to be selected.

00:09:36

FL: And what were some of the—you had mentioned earlier that you had some responsibilities as Shrimp King also; it wasn't just entirely ceremonial. What were some of the responsibilities that you had?

00:09:44

LD: Well you'd represent the City of Biloxi if they had different functions somewhere or different—like they had fishing rodeos or some kind of functions in the City of Biloxi you'd represent—or anywhere around the Coast. You'd represent—you served for one year. It wasn't a demanding thing but every once in a while there would be a certain function. They'd tell you to show—you know to come, you and your wife and your children and you'd represent the City of Biloxi as Shrimp King of Biloxi. There's Shrimp Kings in Gulfport and Pass Christian—all of the—all of the Cities had their own Blessings; this is not the only city. Every one along the Coast

has one—Pass Christian, Gulfport, Biloxi, Pascagoula—everybody has shrimp Blessing but if there's a different—certain function they'd invite all—you know you'd represent Biloxi and whoever is King over in Pascagoula would represent them; it was just a—and—and you just served for one year. But it wasn't demanding at all; it was a pleasure to do it.

00:10:35

FL: Do you remember going to some of these functions? What were the functions like?

00:10:38

LD: It was just more or less some kind of like you had a benefit or something or the City of Biloxi would give some kind of benefit or something like that or they'd have something on the Town Green, just any—any you know—one of the other cities would have something; they would just invite us over to—as—as representatives of our City, along—I mean not only us; you know the Mayor and whoever all the big dignitaries but we were, I guess we're called the common people, but we showed up too because we were the—representing our city.

00:11:06

FL: And that—at that time did you know that you were about to make the decision to leave shrimping?

00:11:12

LD: I had a good idea it wouldn't be much longer because it was just—it just—it got to where I was getting—well I mean, I was out there for a long time but the money wasn't like it used to be, you know. I saw it was coming and it was time for me to make the move before it got too bad,

where I could still get rid of my vessels at a good market price before the seafood industry was going so far that you wouldn't be able to get rid of them and I'd you know lose a lot of money like that.

00:11:39

FL: And did—did being the Shrimp King did that emotionally make that decision harder or easier?

00:11:46

LD: Well it kind of—it's—I didn't quit exactly after that; it was probably six months after that but I—I mean I finally made the decision and there was nothing more I could do about it. I had to—it was time to step out and—and that's when I made my decision to go.

00:12:03

FL: And earlier you had mentioned that you still miss it; what are the things you miss about doing that work?

00:12:08

LD: Well it's the—it's a freedom of being out there. You don't have to show up at 9:00 to 5:00 every day. I mean you may be gone a week or so at a time; and you know what you got to do and it's very hard work and sometimes it's a dangerous work out there, but it was just a freedom of being out there. You know you didn't—you weren't—no traffic jams; no 9:00 to 5:00—you just—you worked. You knew you had to work because that's the way you make your money. But it was just a pleasure of being out there and the freedom and the good fresh air.

00:12:37

FL: And how did—how did the things change in the industry through the course of your life? Obviously you talk now about the turtle exclusionary device and how that made—gave you a big hit on—on your bottom line, but in general the industry seems to have shrunk. Can you describe sort of your process of seeing that and—and your own history through that?

00:13:01

LD: Well it's—it wasn't only me; there's a lot of guys I knew that did it for a long time but they just you know—you're gone from home so much; you know you're not with your families as often as you want to be and that had a lot to do with it. I mean my children both went to college, but I mean a lot of times when they were younger, I wasn't there. You know my wife was there with them but I'd be out because sometimes I'd be gone 10, 12, 14 days and you miss that, you know, not being home with your children and—and your wife. And you're raising your kids and lucky you have a good wife to take care of them while you're gone. And they never wanted for anything but it was the idea you miss it; you know you'll decide that you had enough you know. That and then when the turtle excluder came in and the money wasn't quite as good as it was it wasn't no problem at all making that decision to get out.

00:13:49

FL: Did you at any point think that maybe your children would take up the industry after you?

00:13:53

LD: No, I didn't want them to. I didn't want them to. That's how come I sent them to college. I mean, I had a little college too, but I mean I didn't stay at college. I wanted—I liked the seafood industry but I knew there wasn't no future in it so I made sure both of our children got college degrees and one of them is a Registered Nurse and the other one is a CPA. So they got their degrees and they're doing very well. They're not in the seafood industry but that's—that's all right. You know they don't need to be in it now; it's—it's not—the money is not there anymore. It's a lot of hard work and it's dangerous and I wouldn't want—even though my children are grown now, I wouldn't want to see my son out there doing that. You always want better for your children.

00:14:34

FL: Having talked to some of the—some of the people who are the Slavonian Lodge, who are also in fishing, I was—I'm curious to know was there any difference in the way some of the French people would go about business on the water and some of the Slavonian—like was there a difference in the way they would fish? Was there a difference in—was there any sort of difference in the way people would do things?

00:14:53

LD: No, not really—not at all. I mean there was, you know—you'd catch your shrimp or whatever you'd catch and there's only one way to do it right and everybody knew how to do it, so I mean no, there was no difference in how we did it or what we did. Some of them worked just as hard or harder than we did; you know just it was no—never a distinction on the water—whether you was French or Slavonian or anything. You're just out there, and when you're on the

water it's different from anything. You know you rely on your friends if something happens. So I mean there was no difference at all in that—not at all.

00:15:27

FL: Do you remember when the Vietnamese people started coming and—and also getting into the shrimping industry?

00:15:33

LD: Yes, I did and—and that—I mean I'm not a prejudiced person—not really. Some things I am and maybe I shouldn't say but, the only thing I disliked about it is—and I—and I knew it was a true story, that the Vietnamese did get a lot of breaks that the American fishermen couldn't get. They got low—low interest loans where the American fishermen couldn't apply for them because we weren't a minority. And—and a lot of that—they had a lot of things and my ex-wife used to work at the bank and sometimes in the wintertime when the season was slow and most of the fishermen would shut their boats down because it wasn't worth going out anymore, the Vietnamese were getting checks every week for supplemental income. We couldn't apply for that because we weren't a minority. And I think this country did wrong; they gave a lot of the stuff to people that weren't here all this time that worked all their life and paid all this Social Security. I have nothing against the Vietnamese people. I think it's the United States government that was wrong—what they did because they didn't give everybody the same opportunity. And that's—that's one thing I didn't care for. I have nothing against Vietnamese people; they're good hard-working people. I just didn't like the way things happened.

00:16:46

FL: Do you remember any—do you remember how—how the relations were? Was there tension when they were arriving? Was there—was there—did you remember what that relationship was like?

00:16:57

LD: Very tense; the American fishermen did not care for the Vietnamese fishermen at all. They knew what was going on. They didn't want them around and it—there's no lying about it; I mean it's—it's a true story—never cared for them, never cared to have them around us. You know it was just—I guess everybody—and I wasn't the only one. Every fishermen felt the same way—the American fishermen that, you know, here's these guys here that just came into this country not doing nothing and then all of the sudden they got these nice boats that you know they pay for them or they don't pay for them, the government don't care but we had loan notes to make; we had to pay. If we didn't we got repossessed or something. Yeah, there was a lot of animosity towards them. Everybody knew what it was but it was towards them because they were the ones out there with us.

00:17:42

FL: Did that change over the years?

00:17:43

LD: Never did—still feel that way myself. If I ever go out shrimping I feel the same way—always did and I'm not the only one. Any of the fishermen still out there feel the same way. They don't like them. And I imagine they don't like us but it doesn't matter.

00:18:00

FL: What do you think will happen—well what do you think the future of the industry is?

00:18:04

LD: I think the future is gone in that industry. It's—it's a dying industry; it really is because of the price of fuel, the imports—it's killing them. You know the price of shrimp is—is killing them because of all the imports coming in, the price of fuel going up and the laws that the Federal government is pushing on them about these excluders and all—I have nothing against the turtles; nobody does. Nobody kills nothing out there, but it's just—it's just no future left in that industry. I don't think so. The few guys I know that's in it right now, that's still in it, they're struggling to make ends meet and they may not be in it too much longer themselves.

00:18:46

FL: So in—

00:18:48

LD: Not only them now; not only them now. Now the Vietnamese fishermen are fighting hard times too because they're fighting it—they got to go by the same law as we do. They have to have the excluders; they have to—they don't get the price for the shrimp that they did because of the imports. There's a lot—I mean it's not just American fishermen. All the fishermen are suffering now and I know because I've been around the business and I've talked to these people that are still in it and they're hurting really bad. And it's about—it's no future in that business anymore—not like the years I knew it was. It used to be great but it's not like that anymore.

00:19:20

FL: And you felt you saw the writing on the wall in 1992—back then. You got out of the industry at that point and then you had mentioned that you then went and opened a bakery. Could you talk about the bakery a bit?

00:19:30

LD: Well my sister and her—and her husband owned a—the French bakery down here and it was good French bread. They had a real great recipe and so I had the opportunity to go in there and run—you know and I worked for them for a little while, and I started running the business. Hold on a minute; I got somebody at the door.

00:19:50

FL: I'm sorry; so you were talking about the bakery.

00:19:54

LD: Yes; it was my sister and her husband I just had an opportunity to work for them and I started running the bakery for them and I stayed there 'til Katrina hit. I was there for 13 years; well from '92 to 2005 and then Katrina took that store—that place away too; it was just down the road from here, about three blocks from here and Katrina took it out. So after that just—just more or less retired. I'm 64 years old. So I just retired.

00:20:24

FL: And what did—what did you make at that bakery? What did you make and sell there?

00:20:28

LD: Mostly kind of French—all kind of French bread. It's—it's a good bread down here for Po' Boys and different things like that and the little pistolettes they called them, the little—it's like little buns. They were really good and just any kind of—just anything you wanted in a bakery. We made all kinds of breads; it was really great. Every store around here had it in the stores and every restaurant had it in the restaurants. We was the only bakery in the area.

00:20:53

FL: Did you do wholesale or retail or both?

00:20:55

LD: Both—both; we had four delivery trucks and they would deliver from every morning—they would go from—almost to the Alabama line to the Louisiana line delivering bread. We had—we had—it was a nice size business. It wasn't a real small business. Before the storm I think we grossed like $2.4 million a year before the storm. It was a big business. All the casinos—we had them all; just about any place you went on this Coast to eat it was our bread.

00:21:25

FL: I'm sorry; the name of the bakery was—?

00:21:27

LD: Desporte's Avenue Bakery—Desporte's Avenue French Bakery.

00:21:31

FL: Are these the same Desportes that own Desporte Seafood down on Division Street?

00:21:35

LD: Cousins—my sister is married to Richard—was married to Richard Desporte. He just passed away but his daddy is the one who founded the bakery. They were cousins to the Desportes that own the seafood market down there.

00:21:47

FL: And did you—you said you helped to run the business. Your role there was largely administrative. Did you get into the baking at all? Did you—?

00:21:56

LD: Oh yes; I was Production. I ran Production and had nine people working there in the Production area. We had machines that would make up to 3,000 loaves an hour you know and we'd put eight—ten hours a day in and we made a good 30,000—40,000—50,000 loaves every day—a lot of bread.

00:22:13

FL: And did you enjoy that? Did you feel that it was an interesting new challenge? Was it—did it feel very different to you to get into that work?

00:22:21

LD: Well it did—it did at—at first and then I got used to it and then I didn't mind it at all after that. I knew there was no way to go back to the seafood industry and I liked what I was doing;

that way in the seafood industry you're out there in any kind of weather—cold in the winter and hot in the summer. And no matter what the weather is you have to work. But in the bakery it was always warm in the winter and cool in the summer, so it was—it was a nice change. But you always miss the seafood industry but I mean you eventually you have to realize you can't keep doing it, so—and I'm glad I got out when I did.

00:22:55

FL: Did it ever feel strange to go from catching a shrimp to putting—making the bread to put the shrimp into?

00:23:00

LD: Oh yeah; definitely so. A lot different, a lot—it's just all the way different, I mean you know it just—. It was just completely—from daylight to dark.

00:23:11

FL: All right Mr. Leroy; was there—is there anything else you'd like to add before we go? I'd like to give you a chance to say anything you'd like to say.

00:23:17

LD: No, not really; everything I—I'm pretty sure we covered everything and I'm just saying this is a great area to be in and I've seen in years past, you know it used to be the *seafood capital of the world* and now it's just getting to be one of the big casino capitals now. I mean I'm not blaming it on nobody; the money is good for everybody. There's a lot of good jobs down here now. But the seafood industry is about gone. You know I hate to see that happen but that was

just a dying thing. They just can't—they can't survive with the pressures they got from the foreign imports and the Federal laws and price of fuel. And I hate to see that go because that was my heritage—mine and many people down here but there's nothing we can do about it anymore. We have no control over that. It was an honest living; it really was an honest living. There's one thing about it nobody could say I mean you were—you was an honest person doing a hard day's work.

00:24:12

FL: Thank you very much Mr. Leroy.

00:24:16

LD: Thank you.

00:24:18

[End Leroy Duvall-Part Two Interview]