FRANK PARKER
Commercial Fisherman – Biloxi, MS

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Interviewer: Francis Lam
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Project: Ethnicity in the Seafood Industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

[Begin Frank Parker Interview]

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Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Monday, December 1, 2008. I'm with Frank Parker at his home in Biloxi, Mississippi, and today we're going to be talking about his experience as a fisherman here. Will you please state your name, age, and occupation for the record?

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Franklin Parker: Franklin Parker, age is 35 and I'm a commercial fisherman, a shrimper predominantly.

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FL: And where were you born, Frank?

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FP: Biloxi.

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FL: You mentioned when we talked on the phone the other day that you are a seventh generation Biloxi fisherman. Where did your family come from?

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FP: The majority of my family came from Strasbourg right on the border of France and Germany. They were the Ross family and they—they come here around the 1850s—1852, 1853, around in there and they come here for the oyster industry, mostly, back then. They didn't have a whole lot of the—the shrimp and stuff, so—. But that's what they come here for was to catch oysters.

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FL: Do —do what drew them to that work?

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FP: No; I hadn't really done a lot of family history. I think it was just something—it's—Strasbourg isn't like a water town or anything; I'm not real sure. I guess it was just the American dream just an opportunity.

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FL: So they came and—so when they came to the country they came directly to Biloxi or did they stop around somewhere in between?

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FP: I'm not real sure about that. I do know that a part of the family lived on Dauphin Island in Alabama for a few years and that side of the family did come from Dauphin Island to Biloxi. That was some cousins and stuff. Well actually, yeah; it was cousins and uncles. They all come here, I want to say, in the 1890s from Dauphin Island to Biloxi and that's where they settled permanently in Biloxi that— the rest of the family.

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FL: So then how did you personally get involved in fishing?

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FP: It's just something I grew up in. When I grew up in Biloxi it wasn't a—it was a sleepy little fishing village. , it was totally different than the Biloxi we have today. We knew all our neighbors. It was very small; everybody knew everything. We all knew our neighbors and just growing up, there was really not a whole lot in Biloxi to do then other than tourism or the Air Force Base was a—a big aspect of Biloxi then. But I just grew up playing around the docks and the wharfs. My father, he shrimped for a little while with some of my uncles but my mom didn't really like him being gone all the time, so he had a small boat and he would fish mainly to supplement his income like when the seasons would open and stuff like that. So I was around it a little bit just growing up as a little kid running around the fish docks and stuff and I'd see all these boats and it was just something that—it just lured me; I guess you can say it was in my blood, so—.

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FL: So how did you get started? Did you get started by working with your father or with other members of your family?

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FP: I actually got started, like I said, my father had a small boat but I actually started running—working my own boat when I was 15 years-old. It was a small boat, a 16-foot boat. My father

bought it for me and I started running crab traps and catching fish. And I would sell the crabs and the fish all through—and I did that all through high school and I went to college. When I graduated high school I was—I wanted to get in the fishing business directly out of high school. The college, you know, I was interested in it but my father, they want better for their kids and he really wanted me to go to school. But that's how I started paying my way to college was deck handing and commercial fishing, my small boat. I actually started working with one of my uncles and he was kind of like my grandpa. He's—well he's actually my—I call him my uncle but him and my grandpa are first cousins so he was 70 years-old when I started working with him. And he showed me a lot about the business and things like that. I went to college. I got about 12 hours from my degree and I said, "Shoot," on this. I don't want to go to school. I dropped out and bought a shrimp boat and that—24 years old and that's what I've been doing since then.

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FL: And do you do mainly shrimping? You said you started with crabbing; do you do other types of fishing as well?

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FP: Right now I'm probably a 98-percent shrimper. That's all I do; I go wherever I want, wherever the shrimp are being caught to go shrimp but I've done just about a little bit of everything. A lot of the other businesses I just—I can do, I'm capable of doing—I just don't want to do it; I want to be a shrimper, you know? There's like oyster season and stuff like that; if the economic times show where I need to go catch another product then I'll—I'll be forced to go do it but right now as long as I can make money shrimping that's what I want to do.

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FL: Why do you prefer shrimping?

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FP: Uh, I don't know; I just like catching them I guess. It's hard to say. I really—I really enjoyed running crab traps and actually since this last year, this last winter I bought a—well a few years ago I got married and had some kids and I don't like going off in the wintertime and I actually bought me a small boat and a few hundred crab traps and I thinking about getting back in the business but we're still catching shrimp so as long as I can catch shrimp here close and stay, stay relatively close to the house I'm not going to do it unless I have to, so—.

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FL: And if you were—if you were to do crabbing that would be a different season? That would be the winter season?

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FP: Right; I would do that in the wintertime and I figured I could catch some fish or something, just something to supplement my income in the wintertime when it's not shrimp season.

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FL: And would you have to go out for longer periods of time?

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FP: No; crabbing, or in fishing and stuff like that is you come and go every day, whereas shrimping, on my boat it's—this time of year we make anywhere from a week to 10—12 days.

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FL: And what type of boat do you have now? What size and is it an ice boat or is it—or do you have to stock the boat with ice?

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FP: Yeah; it's a, I guess you would call it a traditional Gulf shrimper. It's got a cabin on the floor; it's a—it's all aluminum. It's 60-foot long, 20-foot wide; it's got one engine. It's an ice boat so we've got to get ice every trip but I am—eventually going to put a freezer on it, so—.

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FL: So let's talk a little bit about the actual process of going out. Where—how far do you go and how long do you go out? You had mentioned seven to twelve days but does that mean you stay around here? Do you go far afield when you go?

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FP: I've shrimped from—my boat I would consider would be an in-shore: lakes, bays, sounds, outside beaches; it's not as far as go way out in the Gulf and fish deepwater. It's a shallow water boat, say inside—anything shallower than 70 or 80-feet of water. And I've shrimped—I'm licensed to shrimp anywhere from Florida to Texas and I traditionally shrimp from—these last few years it's—we've been staying kind of close, you know? The way that shrimping has really changed economically in the last few years it's hard to go off and make a lot of money because

of the cost of—the rising cost of fuel and your overhead and things like that. And the way that I've—feel like I put my foothold in the business and stayed in the business since I market a lot of my own product, so that means trying to catch a fresher shrimp and selling a fresher shrimp and getting a higher price for it, so that means you can't go off as far with an ice boat, you know? But I've—in the past I've shrimped anywhere(s) from Key West, Florida to Cameron, Louisiana, so we—we—the boat is capable of going. It's just it depends on when and where and how. But here the last few years we've been staying mainly close, from Alabama to Louisiana, Mississippi.

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FL: But you had mentioned the—well that's interesting, the economic incentive for you to stay closer. Well what do you mean by that exactly? Why is it that if you stay closer you can get a higher price versus going out further and—?

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FP: Because we sell our shrimp to locals. It's more of a retail market instead of wholesale, where if we go out for eight, ten, twelve days, well when we come in with our shrimp, our shrimp might be two weeks old. They're not going to pay you nothing for the shrimp because they're wholesale prices, which over the last—since '02, '03 the price of shrimp have declined drastically because of foreign imports and different things like that. So a shrimp that we were getting $8-bucks a pound for, say, 10 years ago this year we were getting $1.50. And diesel 10 years ago was 60—70-cents a gallon and this past year it was almost—it was over $4 a gallon. So when you're getting $1.50 for your shrimp and $4 a gallon for diesel to go off and work eight, nine, ten days I burn more diesel and have more overhead. If you can come and market your shrimp right off the boat to the public, or to different outlets that you can get lined up, you can

get an average—I think we average around $4 for our shrimp instead of $1.50. So if we can come and go every few days and keep a fresher product, change the market, instead of selling straight to the wholesalers and processors, we try to sell to some different restaurants, some people who buy our shrimp and haul them up north and sell them for a profit and things like that. So that's—that's mainly why the last few years I've really—when a lot of people have been getting out of the business I have been able to remain in business because of my market.

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FL: And how did you—how did you—actually so what are some of these direct streams? You said you sell directly to restaurants and you might sell directly to people. Do you set up shop somewhere; how do you do that?

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FP: Well that's—that's where I guess the—the family business has come in. My family has been in the business a long time and they—we've always sold shrimp to the public and things off the boat but it hadn't been where we had to. When the times were good and we could go sell the shrimp then they would. And I kind of stepped in—and my father, he's kind of semi-retired now and he's—he's kind of my salesman, so he goes off and tries to get sales and I'll give him some money for selling the shrimp for me where it's a win/win situation for everybody. But that's—that's really the only reason why we've been able to survive. It is—now the price of fuel is coming down and the price of shrimp is coming up a little bit I think as long— there will always be a demand for fresh shrimp locally.

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FL: When you talk about the price of shrimp coming back up, I've heard—in my conversations with other people in this industry over and over again you hear about how the—the price of shrimp has—has dropped dramatically. Even you just said it used to be $8 a pound and now it's $1.50 because of foreign import competition. But let me just ask, why is that the price of shrimp can come back up and what has that trend been recently?

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FP: This year, I don't know; I'm not a—an economist I guess, how things work with supply and demand, but this year we were getting a pretty decent price for like our big tails. We were getting almost $6 a pound in the beginning of the season for them, which was great and I think they've really had to do that as far as on a wholesale level because the price of diesel was $4 a gallon and it's just—there's no way that you could make money, you know? And I don't know if they just tightened the belt up a little bit on their end to cut down on their profit margin some or what it was, but the price of shrimp did come up a pretty good bit this year. But now since the fuel has gone down the price of shrimp has done down with it, so—. It seems like they only want you to make x-amount of money.

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FL: It'll—it'll come back around the other—in some way anyway?

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FP: Oh well yeah; I mean as long as my family has been in the fishing business, in the early '80s it was horrible. There was no shrimp; the price of shrimp was up but the fuel was relatively okay but there was just no shrimp, I guess because of biological or economical—environmental

factors. There was just something but it was very, very bad in the early '80s. And several of my family members lost their boats and homes and stuff like that. So I mean we've seen bad times but it's just—like I said as long as there is demand for fresh shrimp I'm going to try to hang in there as long as I can.

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FL: How—so how is the—so in the '80s then you're not talking about price necessarily you're just talking about the catch being low. And how was the catch this year?

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FP: The catch this year was—I would say was maybe a little above average. Last year it was extremely above average. In my own personal beliefs is that because of the economic issues with the industry prior to Hurricane Katrina and Rita, there was a lot of people getting out of the business for economic reasons. Well then, when Katrina and Rita come through that destroyed a lot of boats that operated. Well because the economy of the shrimp business was so bad nobody wanted to invest a lot of money to get back into the business. Well what that means is that's just a bigger piece of the pie. If you have less hands in the pie then the pieces of the pie gets bigger. And because there's fewer boats out there catching, they're catching more shrimp but there's more of them getting away and maybe that's one reason why because there's—there's more mom and daddies left to—to lay the eggs , so—.

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FL: And talk to me a little bit about staffing and getting deckhands. Obviously I learned about you and came to you because I know someone who happens to work for you. But, I mean and I

wanted to talk to him but I thought that maybe—maybe talking to Ben who had come here to Biloxi for other reasons and I believe found work with you— Is that something that you still come across? Is getting staff easy, or is that situation sort of unique in that someone has moved—is still moving to Biloxi and working in shrimping? Because I've talked to people over and over again who say, "I'm getting out of the business. My family is getting out of the business. It's too hard to make it; it's too hard to pay staff," and I'm just wondering in terms of not—people who own the boats but deckhands and—and just the employee—the employee level—how hard is it to find people working?

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FP: It's—it's very hard to find adequate help. I've been one of the—that's another reason why I've been so fortunate, and been able to stay in the business the last four or five years, is because up until this—up until really Hurricane Katrina my mother and father worked with me. My father was retired, my mother—they just seen it an ample opportunity when I bought my new boat back in 1998; they said hey we're going to work with you. So staffing has never been a problem with me, as far as a lot of these other guys. It's just—it's something—the money is not as good as what it used to be so when you—when you bring a man out on your boat and you're gone for eight or nine days and he's gone from his house 24-hours a day for 10 days and all he makes is $400 and you—okay well, "Hey I worked—let's see; I worked about 200 hours for this $400. This isn't a whole lot of money, you know?" It's kind of hard to keep good help, but like I said with me it was mainly family. Almost all of my business is family run; my wife—even my three year-old daughter, she helps ice the shrimp whenever we sell them to the public. And but I've been pretty fortunate; since the storm, I've had a lot of people that I guess we call greenhorns. They don't know anything about the business, but that's really some of the best help you can get.

You can train them and tell them what to do and how to do it and it seems like the—the last three or four I've had has really been enjoyable. They're really good guys; they really enjoy doing it. They make pretty decent money but as far—but all of them have been single; they're not married and they don't have kids, so they're getting free room and board. You don't have to pay rent and they're making some money and they get to eat all the shrimp they can eat, so this is—it's a plus. But overall it's—it is very hard to find good help in the—in the fishing business but I've been very lucky.

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FL: But this is interesting; so you have been hiring people of late and you said you've seen that sort of supply of workers sort of jump up a little bit. Do where they come from? Do you have a sense of why it is that these people are here looking for this kind of work?

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FP: Well actually the last three workers that I've had have all been people that's—aren't from here. There's one guy from Nevada; he come here after Katrina to do relief work and he worked with me for about four or five months, and he really thoroughly enjoyed it. And then he was off doing other things and then so—. I have two now; one of them is from Virginia and he come down here after Katrina looking for work and then one is from Chicago and he's—all of them have been working out great. It's just—I guess there's a lot to it; everybody that we talk to now, it used to be well, "You've seen that movie *Forrest Gump*?" And but now, with like the *Deadliest Catch* and things like this where they actually put commercial fishing in the house, all across the—the world, I guess it's just allure that people see that and there's still that sense of adventure and they're just striking out to get your fortune. So that's really helped the business on

that aspect because like I said, everyone that's worked for me they've all seen commercial fishing on TV and things like that. And it's a different ballgame but it's still a pretty adventurous job.

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FL: So speaking of adventure, do you ever—when you're hiring someone do you ever feel nervous? Do you ever feel like well— obviously you need to have a strong sense of trust in all the people you go out with, for a lot of reasons. Do you—how do you—how do you think your way through that; how do you deal with that?

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FP: Well **[*Laughs*]** that's a good question. You hear—you meet people and it's—a lot of times when they come down there looking for a job, a lot of them just kind of are drifting around and I've heard it all. They tell you all kinds of stuff, but I don't know; we just go out there and I do my job and I have—I don't—that's the main thing I expect out of them is do what I tell you and try to do it safe and if you got any questions, ask; there's no stupid questions and just—. I don't know; it's—I don't sleep a whole lot until I really get to have somebody on the boat and they've been on the boat three or four times—three or four trips and they're getting a feel of it. And I try to teach them different things, things—you need to look out for this and look out for that but it's, I mean it's a dangerous job; stuff can happen all the time. You really have to be on your toes but I—I don't—it's—it's not as bad as I guess what you think. I mean it's all worked out pretty good.

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FL: And—and again you go out seven, ten, twelve days sometimes at a time. How long—how long do you give yourself when you come back in between trips out?

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FP: It all depends. Here, like I said in the past when my parents was on the boat, if we would—if we would be in Florida we would go down there and unload and we'd maybe take a night off and go right back out. And that's really what I've been trying to do, and since the storm it's been a lot of things —a lot of different factors in there. But normally, me I like to spend a little bit of time with my family but if I can really hustle the five, six, seven months that the shrimp are really so-called biting good, then if we can take a night off and get right back out the next day that would be excellent because the more days you can work when the season—when the season is really hitting hard is when you can take off three months in the wintertime. And that—so it kind of gives you a motivation but it all really depends on my deckhands. If I have some really good gung-ho guys like I got now, I mean I don't think that if they was—if they was home for a day or two they'd be happy and we'd be going back .

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FL: And so do you—what do you do in the off-season?

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FP: Family time—do a lot of—got a honey-do list about three miles long and we do maintenance on the boat and work on nets. We—we—I got a lot of things to do; we're really—we're still working, we're just not getting paid. But here since the storm it seems like I've been working on houses, but we—it's—we do all different kinds of things. Like I said there's—

there's also other things we could do to go make money in the wintertime, as far as catching crabs or fish or things like that. But we just try to stay busy and like I said, most time we—if you hustle a lot in the summertime and then you put a lot of stuff on the back burner as far as maintenance and things like that on your boat so all that takes time.

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FL: And do you do all the maintenance on your boat? Do you have to learn all those skills and is that something you do personally?

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FP: Yeah; yeah we do—I do just about all of it. A lot of it—if it's something like—I can weld and all but if it's something that we're going to be picking up a heavy load or something that would be over your head where it could be dangerous then I want a professional welding it, you know? I just, I don't feel that confident in myself but I pretty much can do just about anything and everything as far as rebuilding motors, hydraulics, welding, of course a lot of chipping and painting and things like that. Some—some things it's better to let the professionals do. It might cost you a little more money but it saves you money in the long run.

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FL: How did you learn those skills?

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FP: Pretty much all of it is self-taught. Like I said, I worked with a man when I was in college and he taught me a lot about the fishing business.

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FL: Your uncle?

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FP: Yeah; my—I call him my uncle but he's really a cousin but he—like I said, he had been in the business 55 years whenever I started working for him and he was 70 and I was 18 so I was the muscle and he was the brain. And he taught me a lot about building nets, repairing nets. Back then on my old boat, I had a wooden boat—my first boat I bought when I quit him when I was 24 and he taught me a lot of the wooden boat-building skills and things like that. And he taught me a lot of different places to trawl and just a lot of stuff that he—he sees —he—he fished very traditional. He had the basics; he didn't have all the modern electronics and depth finders and GPS (es) and things like that; all he pretty well had was a compass and a stopwatch and there towards the end in did have a Loran, the predecessor to GPS.

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FL: Uh-hm; and what happened to that first boat?

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FP: It sunk at the dock. **[*Laughs*]** It was a 60-year old boat and it had a lot of—I had a lot of pride in it. It was my first boat and it was—it—I guess you could say it was a lost cause when I bought it, but I shrimped it for about three years. And I made good money with the boat and I tried to put a lot of money back into it but I just—it wasn't enough to keep—it's years of being fished with; it was ready to retire. And when the—it was funny; when the—probably the only

job I've ever had in my life, I do have a—a Coast Guard Captain's License, a 100-ton license and when I went to college I was going to school for Fishery Management. And I would deckhand sometimes on the research vessel at the Gulf Coast Research Lab. Well, getting to meet all these scientists and different people and stuff, well that got my foot in the door to one of the Captains was retiring. And I was 26 I believe—27. I had my boat a couple years and I knew it needed some work. And this job opportunity come up to run a research vessel for the Gulf Coast Research Lab, so I took the job and I tied the boat up and my game plan was I was going to work at the Research Lab long enough to fix my boat. I was going to live on the boat; I was single, fix the boat up and get it in top-notch shape; take all my money and put it in this boat and then quit that job and go back shrimping. Well, that weekend that I was supposed to go pick the boat up and haul it up on the shipyard, I go down there and the boat was sunk. And it was pretty well—I couldn't get it up; it was history. So I worked there for about a year and a half and that—I just—I hated it; I mean I liked the job. I really liked the part of going out and catching different things and I learned a lot of the management side of it and different environmental things and scientific things but it just—it wasn't my cup of tea. I just didn't like the fact of working for somebody else. Like I said I've been working for myself—pretty well self-employed since I was 15 years old and it just—the opportunity arose that I could buy this new boat and I just—me and my father jumped into it head first and I guess you can say the rest is history —just—. Don't have no regrets at all; you—and that's something if you're not making a whole lot of money but if you can pay the bills and you wake up every morning and you're happy, what else do you want to do ? As long as you live the life that you want to live and live comfortable then it's not—I guess it's not really about the money—just going out there and seeing the sunrise and sunset and knowing you're your own boss. If you don't feel like going to work that day then hey we'll take

off, you know? That's just something—I guess that's what—what I love the most about it just the independence.

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FL: And speaking of that happiness, you had mentioned earlier that when you were 15 you started working on the boat and you did that all through high school and you were just really interested in continuing doing that and your parents wanted you to at least go to college. How did they feel when you decided, "Hey, you know, I'm going to finish with this and I'm going to go—I'm going to go back out on the water?"

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FP: Well I mean they—they was kind of disappointed but at 24 years old you've got to kind of step up and say okay well look; I should have done been done with school by now. I've been dragging my feet, and that's what I told my dad. I said I know you want better for me and you want me to at least have an education; that's the one thing that he's always told me. That's one thing nobody can take away from you, is your education, but it's all about being happy, you know? And the one thing about it is when I did—when I bought my new boat in '98 my father went to work with me and we have become so close since then. I mean if you're with somebody 24 hours a day, seven days a week, you just know everything about him. We butt heads and stuff like that but that's just something that I wouldn't change for anything. And I think it's something that he wanted—he always wanted to do but like I said my mother kind of—she didn't want him gone all the time. And so I guess he was— he thoroughly enjoyed it; I've thoroughly enjoyed it. And it's—it's just been like I say one hell of a ride. **[*Laughs*]**

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FL: Well it certainly sounds like you got your education; it's just maybe—you might not have the paper diploma at the end of the day but the education is certainly there, the experience. Your mother didn't want your father gone, so he was sort of a part-time shrimper. What did he do for the rest of the time?

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FP: Actually it's my mother's side of the family that we're all fishermen, all of her brothers and father and stuff like that. My dad's—he come—his father come down here back in the '40s to work at the shipyard and he run a gas station. He had a gas station in Ocean Springs. My father grew up—he was around the fishing industry too and he had worked with my uncles and stuff and like I said my mom didn't want him gone, but he had got into the furniture refinishing business and he did that for about 35 years. And he would also supplement his income with fishing and shrimping and stuff like that. So that—that's what he did; he was a furniture refinisher.

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FL: But then when the opportunity came to help his son out, he jumped on that and then that became full-time for both of you it sounds like.

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FP: Oh yeah; yeah, oh definitely full-time. It was more than full-time and like I said I got to live on—it's I guess it's every kid's dream. You've got your mother and your father on the boat with you and your mama cooks all the meals, washes the clothes, takes care of cleaning and stuff and

my father, he's my grunt; I'm the boss, you know? I mean what—what **[*Laughs*]**—what more could you be I mean. I'm joking like that but it was—I don't know; we're just a very family oriented people and I wouldn't change it for anything. It was—it's been great, the last—the first eight—nine years I had my boat it was great with my mother and father. Like I said it really helped us both out; my father he was too young to retire, but he was really too old to if he wanted to change occupations he was too old to be a viable asset to somebody that wanted to hire him. And we've gone a lot of places and met a lot of fine people and it's just been a bunch of adventures.

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FL: So what about your mother? How did she decide to come out onto boat with you?

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FP: I don't really know; I mean she's always been the—she always went out on—on the little boats and stuff with my father and we'd go fishing and things like that and she always enjoyed it and I don't know. I guess she just come along for the—to be a referee I guess between me and my father. **[*Laughs*]**

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FL: So aside from—aside from the feeling of freedom and in this case it sounds a real personal thing you love about the work in terms of working with your parents and your family, what's your favorite part of this work? I mean obviously this is something you do because you love and something you've been doing for a long time because you love it. What are some of your favorite parts of that?

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FP: One of them would have to be you—you never really know what you're going to catch. The excitement of when you throw that net down and you drag it around, you—when you pick it up you really don't know what you're going to have. You kind of have an idea; but you don't really know what you have or what you're going to catch. And it—it takes—10 years ago, if you asked me if we was going around and looking at boats and I said well you see that guy right there; he can—he catches shrimp. He can catch it. You see that guy; he don't catch a whole lot of shrimp. You see that guy; that guy right there catches a lot of shrimp. Well now, I mean I don't mean to be blowing my own horn or nothing but I feel like if somebody was 25 years old or 20 years old looking at me and they seen me—hey that guy right there he catches a lot of shrimp. He's good at his game, and that's how I feel about myself. And I guess that's just some pride I take into it is that I'm successful enough at catching the shrimp to remain in the business. It's not like oystering or crabbing where you just go out there and you—the oysters—the oysters don't move; they stay there. The crabs, they're a little bit more lucid but shrimp, they're—I mean they're a totally different animal. You always have your aces and then you have your jokers and I really feel like I'm one of the aces in the business.

00:33:32

FL: So when we spoke on the phone I had mentioned some names and I hadn't had the opportunity to actually talk to a lot of people who are still in the business. I've talked to a lot of people who were until recently in the business and who had gotten out of it because of the economic reasons, or whose families had traditionally been in it. So but you knew a lot of those names and you knew a lot of those people. Like Biloxi in itself is a small community, it sounds

like in particular the fishermen and people involved in this industry, it's a particularly small community; a lot of people. How would you describe it? Do you feel like it's a really—it's a close community, or do you feel like there's a lot of internal competition? Do you feel like there's some mixture too? How would you describe that—the community of fishermen and people in this business?

00:34:22

FP: The fishing industry on a whole I really believe is a brotherhood. There's a lot of different things to the fishing business as far as races, cultures, things like that and it is pretty competition. You know, there's a lot of competition to it, but overall there's— there's been a lot of different things bring animosity between different groups and things like that. And there's a real close-knit group that I particularly hang, that we trawl together; we're— that's our little clique, our little rat-pack and all of us do pretty good and we have a good little, I guess a rapport between each other. We'll go out the extraordinary way to help the— these certain groups of people. But then there's the other ones we—if we—we had a good drag that drag we're not going to tell everybody because it is—it is kind of dog eat dog. But if it's come down to where somebody needs some help or is in dire need or needs, it affects all of us; I mean we're all out there doing the same thing and I mean I wouldn't—. Like I said if there was—there's certain people that—that I don't really associate with. We don't—we come and go and we see each other and we talk to each other at the docks and things like that and everything is hunky-dory but when it comes down to it business is business. And if I'm good at something then I'm not going to give you something that it took me my whole life or my family 100 years to learn this edge on such as say a particular place to drag at this time of the year is good, or this spot is good when the tide is rising or this spot is good when the tide is falling, and things like that. That's things that you kind

of keep that in your pocket; that's your ace in the hole. You don't let all that go all the time. But when it comes down to helping somebody I really believe it don't matter who you are. You're going to get help and that's just something—that's where the brotherhood of the whole commercial fishing industry—. And that's not just with shrimpers; that's with all of them, the guys that fish, crab, oyster. You need help and then—because you're not an island out there and you're going to need somebody's help eventually. Somebody is going to have— you're going to need some help sometime but—. It's like I said, it's pretty close but you don't reveal everything in your hand at one time.

00:36:57

FL: So is it—overall there's a sense of brotherhood; when it comes down to it you do all have to look out for yourselves or your closer group of friends or associates or whatever. But at the end of the day it's—?

00:37:13

FP: Oh yeah, yeah; I mean I wouldn't—I don't wish nobody to hang out and tear up a net or little things like that—okay well I caught this hang and I tore up some nets. Hey, I'll give them numbers to anybody I don't wish that on anybody. It is that kind of a brotherhood and I don't think that anybody would personally do that kind of stuff. There might be some animosity between two—two men or something where they might not share that but overall it's really a brotherhood.

00:37:45

FL: And would you—has that sense changed over time given now that it seems that there are fewer people on the water and it seems like the challenges aren't—it sounds to me the challenges are sort of outside of the particular community of fishermen right? The challenges are international imports and the challenges are economic and in a way that's bigger than the guys that go out on the boats on this particular patch of water. Do you feel like that's changed, that sense of brotherhood?

00:38:19

FP: Yeah; a little bit. If anything it's really helped because there are fewer of us out there and as they say conquer and divide, you know? If we don't stand together then something—none of us is going to be doing it and that's really helped out the business as far as getting people to participate more. So I mean I'm the local President of our local fishing organization and it's really hard to recruit new members and now that—10 years ago if you could get three or four guys that could stick together you was doing something great. Well now I mean where there's so many organizations out there; we have an eight-State organization where the eight Coastal States of shrimpers all have one voice now, and it's not just local. It's nationwide. And then now there's another organization that come out in the last four—five years called the Commercial Fishermen of America and it's everybody who makes their living on the water from Alaska all the way around to Maine, so that's really helped a lot, as far as politics and things like that, you know, management. We—it seems like you get a lot more done with numbers and money and things like that and it has helped out a lot.

00:39:34

FL: In terms of advocating for the industry and government and government support and—?

00:39:40

FP: Right, right, right; that's right.

00:39:43

FL: What is the—the local organization that you're the head of—what's the name of it?

00:39:47

FP: Gulf—Mississippi Gulf Coast Commercial Fishermen Association.

00:39:50

FL: And what is it—what do you guys do?

00:39:53

FP: Oh we're—we're mainly an organization of fishermen. What we—what we try to do is—we try to promote our industry. We're just really getting into the promotion of it, as far as trying to get more people aware of—to ask for domestic shrimp. When you go to a restaurant say, "Hey are these local shrimp or do they come from China or Thailand or overseas?" And that's what we've been doing here the last couple years. But the sole reason is we get a lot of pressure, management issues, things like okay well you're going to—the turtle excluder devices, the fish excluder devices, things like this that the government really rams down our throats and they don't even ask the commercial fishermen what they think. I mean I've been in the—the side that they're talking about when I worked for the Research Lab where we would pull these different things and that stuff didn't work. There's no way —somebody who is not making a living at it

when you need surgery you don't go ask somebody walking down the street to do surgery. You got to ask somebody that's—that's making a living doing surgery; you know what I mean? **[*Laughs*]** And that's what we really try—the organization was started to get a closer relationship between the people who manage our business— manage our industry and make new rules and regulations and that's mainly what it was started for. Now we're still a small organization; there's not about—50 members but those 50 members are—really have their foot in the business and they really want to stay in the business. So now we're—we're reaching out and doing different things. We do different things such as like donating shrimp for local charities and raffles and things—to just try to get the word out to people. Okay well, if we get the public to be on our side well that's even better, instead of the image of a dirty old hairy fisherman with no teeth and just— a nuisance to—always drunk and things like this. But we try to give the public a different aspect or a different view of what they see fishermen are. Because I mean we're probably one of the biggest environmentalists out there because we're actually making our living from the water. We don't want to destroy everything out there and there's a lot of propaganda and things like this from environmental groups and different conservation groups and stuff and they really don't even know what they're talking about. They're talking out the side of their mouths. And it's all in the aspect of "we've got to save this or save that" and—and there's really no direct correlation between the two anyway(s). They just—I call them *Fish Nazis*; they just want all the fish or shrimp for themselves, so—. But that was the first thing why our organization was started —was basically to help—have us a better relationship with management.

00:43:01

FL: And do you feel like those efforts have been successful? How do you feel the industry has changed in the 20 years that you've been involved in it?

00:43:12

FP: Probably the biggest change that I would see in the industry is technology. Like I was talking about earlier about dragging different places and things like that, a lot of shrimp hang out like on edges where there's contours in the depth of the bottom and things. Excuse me and these were places that were traditionally learned by people who shrimped there. So well if where this spot is, okay well you—you might catch a few more shrimp than somebody else. Well nowadays with chart plotters and GPS(es) and radars and depth sounders and things like this, you spend $15,000 well, you know every spot that I know and it's all on the chart. So that's probably the biggest change in our industry in the last 20 years has been technology. Not that the shrimp are easier to catch but we're—we got a lot better equipment to find them and the tackle we use is a lot more effective. A lot—as far as in the old days they had cotton nets and nylon nets. Well now we have nets now that are made out of Kevlar®; they're stronger, they're lighter, less drag, burn less fuel —less water pressure, you catch more shrimp, and there's all different kinds of innovative designs and techniques that they have nowadays that's—that's changed up the whole game.

00:44:38

FL: But and what about the—but all the challenges you talk about, like—so those are advantages that you have—you've picked up over the years and yet a lot of the challenges that have also come through time—increased imports and things like that. A lot of the people that I've talked to have been very pessimistic about this industry—at least here, particularly here in Biloxi and maybe in general but specifically here in Biloxi. What do you think about the future of this industry here?

00:45:15

FP: Oh I—I feel great about it. But just to ask you a question, the people who are pessimistic are they still in the business?

00:45:22

FL: Well no, but that's why.

00:45:23

FP: Yeah; that's—that's the whole attitude. I mean, I could have a few years ago got out of the business and done something else but it—it's just hard to be pessimistic when you're doing something you love. And if you— yeah you're not making as much money as what you used to or as much money as your grandfather made back in the heyday or things like this, but as long as you're doing—doing what —no matter what it is as long as you're doing what you love and you're paying the bills and you're floating by, I'm a firm believer in positive things happen to positive people. And I—you won't ever hear me say anything negative about the fishing business, never-ever. I mean it's—it's got its negative aspects to it but you have to stay positive. If you don't—if you don't have a positive— you don't go to a football game with a—well we're going to lose today **[*Laughs*]**—you can't—you can't be that way in this business.

00:46:15

FL: Sure; and so overall I mean obviously that—that's the definitely the case. But there has—there have to be individual—like you said, there are certain things that you're negative about.

What—what are some of the things that you—you don't enjoy about it? What are some of the things that are a little bit of a drag? What are some of those things?

00:46:30

FP: When you're—especially here in the last few years since the storm or even here recently when we've had a couple storms you—you're out there and you're catching a lot of shrimp and you pick up and one—we—we pull two nets. You pick up one net that's got 2,000 pounds of shrimp in it and the other net has got about 50 pounds because you caught a dryer. **[*Laughs*]** And it's plugged up and made a big hole in your net and you lost everything or the—. The days when you—when you bog down your net and you catch a bunch of mud or you hang up a new wreck and you wipe out a net or you run aground or something—I mean what am I doing out here? I've had those days but over—overall you got to stay positive. Just a bad day shrimping is better than a good day working.

00:47:22

FL: Well certainly it's still—it's still work; I mean I think it's—it's really telling that you keep referring to shrimping and work as being separate. I mean obviously you really love it. You're also a young man; you're 35 years old. It's tough physical work; how long do you think realistically you're going to be able to—to do this—just in terms of body wear and tear?

00:47:45

FP: I don't know. I have to go back to my Uncle Elie. Like I said he was 70 years old and I was 18 years old as his deckhand and that's what I always asked him; I—I said Uncle Elie when—when —when you're 70 years old you ought—you shrimped when it was good; you ought to be

kicked back in your recliner. He said, "Son," he said, "I'm going to stop shrimping when I can't pick my leg up over the rail to get on the boat." And believe it or not he pretty well did; he—he worked until he was around 78 years old and he got sick and it was really the doctor's fault. They gave him a bunch of medication that messed him up and he couldn't have no equilibrium and he was taking all kinds of medication that was just really messing with him. And he sold his boat; he couldn't lift his leg up over the rail no more so he sold his boat and retired, but about two—three years later he got straightened out and he bought another boat. So this is something I want to do until I die; and I'll have to quote my Uncle Elie, *I'm going to stay on that boat until I can't lift my leg over the rail*. and if it's something my kids want to get into hey; if they want to get into the business and they have the hustle and the drive and the motivation to do it, then I'm going to back them 100-percent and I'm going to try to make it as easy of an industry for them to make money. And you know, I'm going to teach them everything I know about it if they want to be it. No; but I'm not going to push them to do it; it's—because I really don't think if you don't have a love for the business you're not going to make it in it. You really have to have a passion for it and I'm very, very passionate about the shrimping industry.

00:49:25

FL: That's good; that's interesting because I was look at your kids obviously very young and they're very cute little kids. And yeah that's another thing that I haven't heard yet—a lot of people I talk to have said like they didn't really particularly want their kids to be in the—it was sort of—people were proud of the work they did certainly, but also felt it was a little bit of a stepping stone. And I think traditionally in the communities in Biloxi generally I think a lot of the communities people came here to fish because that work was available and then people—as soon as they made enough money to send their kids into other professions they really encouraged

that. It's not a question here really but it's just something I've heard a lot and I think your perspective on that has just been very different.

00:50:21

FP: Well to touch on that if you look— Biloxi has been a melting pot and if you look say back 100 years ago a lot of the family names, there were a lot of Polish and French, Hungarian, a lot of Europeans. Well if you look say, well that was a generation when they come back here in the '20s. Well if you look in the '50s and the '60s a lot of those names—those were your doctors and lawyers and what that was is was that was the immigrants coming here from Eastern Europe. They worked really, really hard; they—they made good money. They struggled to educate their kids, give them better jobs and they became the doctors and lawyers and the business owners of the community. Well if you look say just in the past 25 years with the last immigrants that come here which was the Vietnamese, they worked really hard. They made good money; they sent the majority of their kids went to school; they went to college. They got better educations and now you see that that group of immigrants, a lot of the Vietnamese in this community here they all are business owners, they all—a lot of doctors, lawyers, and things like that and it all just goes down to when the people come here to work, well they just wanted to better their—better their kids. And it's—it's just a big cycle and it keeps repeating itself and that—that's the one thing about the fishing business here. It was always for people with no education, people that couldn't speak the English, the language very well, they could get in the fishing business, you know? They didn't have a boss; they could be their own boss and it's—how much money they made determined by how hard they work. That's the same way I feel about with my kids; if they want to go to college, hey I'm going to support them 100-percent but if they want to say in the fishing business then let's do it.

00:52:21

FL: Talking about the Vietnamese community who, I believe, at this point are the majority of—of fishermen going out there on the Gulf. You've been doing it for 20 years; that community has been here about 28—almost 30 years. Do you remember the sort of earlier days of when they really started going out shrimping and if there was—what the relationship was like between them and the other families who had been here and had been shrimping already? Was there—what was that sort of dynamic like?

00:52:57

FP: Yeah; there was animosity between the traditional fisherman that was already here and of course it goes back to there was—probably the biggest—a couple different problems they had was their work ethics. Like my grandfather and them, they worked—they had their traditional seasons that they worked and their traditional grounds that they worked, and things like this and it was an unwritten law; it was a gentleman's law. Okay; well this is my spot. That's your spot. We do this and that. Well when the immigrants come—when the Vietnamese come in all they knew was hey let's work and okay well they—hey got their stuff on my spot. Even though it's not your spot by law but it's just traditional laws and things like that. And that really caused a lot of animosity was the work ethics because they come here and they worked very, very hard and they caught a lot of shrimp. And it's just because where a lot of traditional fishermen would just traditionally troll at nighttime or they would troll daytime, well the immigrants, the Vietnamese they would come here and they would work 24 hours a day. If they're out there making money let's make money 24 hours a day when the traditional fishermen would anchor up and things like that. So that caused problems, and then a lot of it too is immigrants nowadays have—have it a

little bit easier, than say the immigrants of the early part of the turn of the century because there is a lot of different projects and things like that. Well one of the big problems that—that I know my grandfather and them had was they—they were all very staunch Catholic and they gave a lot of money to the Catholic Church every week, and that was their belief. Well when the Vietnamese community immigrants come, they a lot of them were Catholic; the Catholic Church would sponsor them. Okay; well that's fine and dandy but what would happen is they would help them get loans to buy new boats and things like that. Well the people who had built the church and been backing the church for 60—70 years they're still riding around on these old dilapidated boats that was their grandpa's while the new immigrants come in and are riding around on brand new boats. So of course that caused a lot of animosity between the two groups, but I mean, me, I was born and raised with the Vietnamese you what I mean. I've been going to school with them since I was in elementary school and I don't have no problems with them. They're—if you look at it, their kids are becoming Americanized and things like that; they would —I'm not saying I wouldn't have a problem with them if I lived back then **[*Laughs*]**—just things are different. But I have two or three of them that are real good fishermen that I associate with and let them know my information and they let me know their information and things like that. But it was a big problem back in the '80s but as far as me really remembering stuff, I—I was too young. But there—there were turf wars and things like that and it—it's—I don't know; I guess it's just—it's probably the same way it happened 100 years ago when the new immigrants were coming with the immigrants that had come 100 years before that, so I guess like I said it's maybe just one of those things that happened.

00:56:24

FL: You just said something about them working 24 hours and then—some people only trawling at night and some people—what about you? Like what's—and also earlier you mentioned, particularly when you have new deckhands or people you haven't worked with much, before you don't get to sleep very much—presuming that means you're working 20—22 hours a day or however many. What's—can you walk me through a day on the boat with you? Is there such a thing as a typical day on the boat where right around this time this happens and you'll do that at this time?

00:56:59

FP: Yeah; it all really depends on what season it is. There's—there's two predominant seasons here and that's white shrimp season and a brown shrimp season. Brown shrimp are mostly nocturnal. They can be caught in the daytime, like if the conditions are right such as weather, things like that, if the water is real murky and churned up real rough then you can catch the shrimp in the daytime because the water is muddy and they can't see that good and they might think it's nighttime or for whatever reasons. But the typical day is—regardless of whether it's brown or white shrimp season is: we'll either get up in the morning or get up in the evening whether we're trolling day or night. And we'll get up, drink a cup of coffee or whatever and get everything ready. We'll set out nets and for brown shrimp we usually drag trawls and we—we're—by rules we're allowed to pull two 25-foot nets. We'll set the two 25-foot nets out and then we'll have a small net, a little 10-foot net that we pick up and down every 30 minutes or 15 minutes. We'll pick it up and we'll look at it and that tells us about how much we're catching. If we're catching a lot then we'll make a short drag, say an hour—hour and a half. If we're not catching a whole lot we might stretch it out to three hours. And we'll pick up and we'll sort out—and we'll pick up and we'll dump the catch out and we'll set the nets back and then we'll

get out there and we'll pick —we'll sort the shrimp from the fish and crabs and things like that. And we'll just—just keep repeating that process over until daylight, and you can drag 24-hours a day. Sometimes—well here the last few years the fuel has been a real issue. If you're not catching a whole lot then you might be going in the hole. But in the years past when the fuel was cheap you could just drag. And as long as you was catching one shrimp, you was making money. But that's—and when we—after we finish the night or the day we'll anchor up. I'm not a real big fan of working 24-hours a day myself. If I have a good competent crew, if we're catching a lot of shrimp I might—typically I might make—well I call that a clock; you go around the clock 24-hours a day. I might make four or five clocks a year and that's like on the opening day of the shrimp season and things like that we'll go 24-hours around the clock. But if I can't make my living in 18—20 hours a day, then I'm not going to drag more than that. Now a lot of it is really crew because if you—like I said, if you have a competent crew we'll go around the clock sometimes but most time I got to get some sleep and normally if I can get me three—four hours I'm good.

00:59:39

FL: But—and during the time when you're dragging do you—do you ever take breaks, do you have lunch, I mean does that ever happen or is just like you have to just go, go, go?

00:59:47

FP: Oh no; we'll—first really if—once we pick up the nets and we set back out, a slow crew normally an hour —hour and a half it might take them to pick out the drag, so you'll get a break between—between drags. And what we do different things; we'll eat. We'll cook lunch or supper—breakfast or whatever the time of the day it is but we'll do different things. In the

wintertime there's a lot of free time because with the water getting colder you can make longer drags and you can make a five-hour drag, six-hour drag and if it only takes you an hour to knock it out well you've got four hours just sitting there twiddling your thumbs . So we'll do different things to be productive; it might—if the weather is pretty we might paint or maybe work on some spare nets or different things like that—a lot of cards and things. I've been pretty fortunate with my crew we have a pretty good time. We cut up a lot and poke fun and things like that so it's always something.

01:00:52

FL: Do you like eating seafood?

01:00:55

FP: I eat shrimp almost every day. I love seafood—fresh seafood. If I go out to eat we—when we're selling shrimp to people and stuff like that or I meet a tourist and they'll say oh where's a good place to go eat some shrimp? Well a good place to eat shrimp is my house or my mama's house. I don't eat seafood out at restaurants. If I go somewhere I'm going to eat some pizza or steak or something like that. But—but I eat—I eat shrimp or fish just—almost every day and thank God my kids love it because they really chow down on it, so it saves on a lot of the bills as far as the food bill there.

01:01:32

FL: Do you cook?

01:01:33

FP: Oh yeah; I'm an excellent cook. You can ask anybody that's worked with me and they're man you got to give me this recipe. I say I don't know the recipe; I just made it up out of my head. I like to do a lot of experimenting and that's how I feel with cooking. It's an experiment and if you have fresh seafood it's really hard to screw it up unless you overcook it. **[*Laughs*]** But anything fresh is always good.

01:02:01

FL: So what are some of your latest experiments?

01:02:03

FP: I don't really—the other day I cooked something and they said it was pretty good. We had—we caught—met up with a friend of mine that was catching oysters and he gave us a mess of fresh oysters, so—. Of course the guys were eating them raw and I took and shucked some and I put them—I really wanted to grill them because I love to grill seafood and—but we didn't have any charcoal on the boat, so I just put them in the oven and I left them on the half-shell and put some olive oil and some garlic and some jalapeno jack cheese over the top of the oysters and I stuck them in there and baked them. And they thought was the best thing since sliced bread. But it's—I don't know; I—I like—I guess that's the scientist part coming out of me, the experiments and stuff like that but like I said it doesn't matter what it is—if it's got fresh shrimp or fresh crabs or—or anything fresh from the sea it's going to be good.

01:03:04

FL: Well I want to know actually if you have any particular thoughts or any particular stories that you want to make sure that you—you can share with the record right now?

01:03:20

FP: The one thing that I try to tell everybody is don't believe everything you read as far as like environmental things. Bottom—we drag our trawls on the bottom; bottom trawlers are not as bad as what a lot of people say and there's a lot of things people from—somebody from Kansas per se wouldn't—wouldn't have the slightest idea but if somebody from the Sierra Club or the Save the Oceans —I got this thing in the email. I log onto all these different sites because I kind of feel like well if you kind of know your enemy then maybe you can kind of see the way they're thinking. And they send all this propaganda out, like the Save the Oceans Campaign. They sent this thing that showed this beautiful coral reef in one picture and then in the next picture it showed this big mud flat that was underwater and that was supposedly after a shrimp boat had come through there and drug his nets across these coral reefs, that they completely decimated this coral reef to where it was just nothing but a mud bottom. That is so not true; first of all we won't want to drag our nets on something that would tear them up. **[*Laughs*]** We haven't invented a net yet that could destroy—completely destroy a coral reef. But I mean it's—it's string, you know? But it—there's a lot of—the commercial fishing aspect whether it's hooking line, trawls, gill nets, things like that—they all have a bad reputation, and it's because of all these environmental groups and things like that. And it's—there's a lot more issues with the environment than the commercial fishing aspect. Over-fishing might be a problem but we don't want to really over-fish. But that's—that's the easiest thing that they can stop first is commercial fishermen because we're all independent; we all want to —we're not a real close-knit band of—of people. So if you can get rid of them first well yeah that is one slice of the pie to the problems with the oceans and seas and stuff like that but that's the one thing I'd like—really like to tell somebody who is not from the Coast who doesn't know anything—do a little research . Like I

said, you wouldn't get somebody riding in the garbage truck to do brain surgery on you, and a lot of that propaganda it—it just—it really makes me mad that they can actually get stuff done and people actually believe it and support this type of stuff, you know? So before you see something like that or—or join a conservation group or something like that make sure it's—it's a good—I mean of course it's going to be good because at least they are trying to help, but they're putting a lot of honest hard-working people out of business that has no —. Like just per se in South Louisiana, the marshes and things are deteriorating every day. They're losing hundreds of acres a day to habitat to Coastal degradation. It's just eroding away to nothing. Well, why not focus your efforts on that? Well let's—let's attack the commercial fishing industry because that's going to be the easiest? We can't fix Mother Nature, so but if we get rid of all these commercial guys that means that we'll have more fish and stuff to catch. We need to work together and that—that's the one thing I'd really like to stress is just somebody who is not from the Coast—from a Coastal community just don't buy into a lot of that stuff and don't believe everything you see or hear—or read .

And another thing is you need to support local. Buy American whether it's shrimp or just—we need to help ourselves because a lot of these foreign imports of everything— the shrimp business was probably the last one to feel the economic pressures of foreign trade. It didn't happen here until four or five years ago, the effects of foreign trade. But we really need to help America and—and buy American products whenever we possibly can.

01:07:34

FL: Well thank you very much for your time Frank.

01:07:39

[End Frank Parker Interview]