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Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Nick Collins

Interviewer: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey

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Louis Kyriakoudes, Director
The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage
118 College Drive #5175
The University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
601-266-4574

An Oral History with Nick Collins, Volume 1043
Interviewer: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey
Transcriber: Carol Short
Editors: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey, Linda VanZandt

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

NICK COLLINS

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Nick Collins and is taking place on April 26, 2012. The interviewer is Stephanie Scull-DeArmey.

Scull-DeArmey: This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Project of The University of Southern Mississippi, done in conjunction with the NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] Voices from the Fisheries project. The interview is with Mr. Nick Collins, and it is taking place on April 26, 2012, at three p.m. in the afternoon. Mr. Collins is in Golden Meadow, Louisiana. I'm the interviewer, Stephanie DeArmey, and I'm in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. And first I'd like to thank you, Mr. Collins, for taking the time to talk to me today. And I'm just—

Collins: No problem.

Scull-DeArmey: Thank you. I'm just going to ask you for the record to state your name, please.

Collins: My name is Nick, N-I-C-K, Collins, C-O-L-L-I-N-S.

Scull-DeArmey: And when were you born?

Collins: I was born in 1971.

Scull-DeArmey: And where?

Collins: New Orleans, Louisiana.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. And what do you do for a living?

Collins: I'm a commercial fisherman, oysterman, mostly.

Scull-DeArmey: OK, so mostly oysters. When and where did you learn to oyster? (0:01:21.9)

Collins: Well, I learned to oyster because I grew up with my family on the boats. When I was a baby, we, my parents, literally, would go out, like, my grandpa, my dad, and my mom, and my grandpa would dredge. And my mom and dad would cull the oysters, clean them, you know, separate them. And they would literally like have a couple of my brothers there, sometimes my sister that would all help out, you know,

and they would tie me to the middle post in the boat with, a tent rack, in my walker, and I couldn't go over the side. And I mean, growing up in that kind of environment, it's almost, it's almost just, it comes to you. I mean, I learned very young how to do everything and do it right, and dredge. And I was one of the youngest dredgers, so to speak because when I got into, say, at sixteen, started dredging, and the old people, a lot of the old people was running their boats. And they were the best at it, and I would keep up with them. And there was a lot of jealousy through my learning years and my taking over years, but it was fun jealousy. It wasn't things they did, bad things or nothing. But I learned. And we, also, like we'd get taken out of school early to go shrimping because of the shrimp season when I was a kid. And as soon as I could work, I was my father's deckhand, and my brother was my grandfather's deckhand. And that was just what we done. There wasn't no summer off to go play at a friend's house. On weekends after football practice in junior high, when we turned total oysters, I remember going, helping my grandpa and my dad at the docks sack up oysters. (0:03:33.8) That's when they were making two hundred sacks a day and every weekend, sometimes every afternoon, going to that dock, sack up, as a young kid in junior high. So you learn; I learned all my life. And on-hands. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: How many—

Collins: Hands-on.

Scull-DeArmey: Hands-on. How many of there were you, in the family, how many children?

Collins: There were five boys and a girl.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. So you were one of the boys.

Collins: The youngest, yes, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: You're the youngest. OK. Out of those children, how many also became fishermen, oystermen, shrimpers?

Collins: Ultimately all of them in the beginning; through their younger years as an easy way to make money. Well, very labor [intensive in] some ways, but you wanted to make money, and you had to work. But right now I still have two brothers helping. Since the oil spill (0:04:40.5) I've lost two nephews who were younger and, "Go out and procure yourself a life somewheres else," because we're questionable about the oyster industry, seafood industry for that matter, but it's not enough work right now for everybody. But at one point it was, and it's all family, and sometimes it was big.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. Just for the record for people who don't know anything about the seafood industry, could you explain what dredging is? (0:05:15.8)

Collins: Dredging is the rake we drag off the side of the boat to catch the oysters and we have a little, sort of a little net on the end of the rake, and it drags the bottom and picks up the oysters.

Scull-DeArmey: What happens to the oysters after you bring them up in the rake and the net? (0:05:36.8)

Collins: We dump them on a plate on a cable, and we separate the oysters from the shells or from each other, making them singles or doubles, and knocking off the babies and putting them in different areas. It's almost like farming. (0:05:56.3) You've got squares on a bunch of acres that has reef, and some don't have a reef. And you just, you clean off an area and then you move to the next area, and you start putting your seeds there. And then your oysters, you always are sacking up and bringing them for sale. And then sometimes you're just moving oysters around to break them up and make them healthier, and you just you move them to different spots from the shallow to the deep. Sometimes we move them from the deep to the shallows just to move them around and grow better and be healthier for the sale in the winter. We pull out of that in the summer.

Scull-DeArmey: You pull out of it in the summer?

Collins: We do a lot of moving the oysters around so that they can break up and have a little more space to grow and grow a little healthier.

Scull-DeArmey: Did you say you move them around more in the summer?

Collins: In the summer and the beginning of fall and seed season. But then you can get the seed from the public grounds. (0:07:06.9) You don't have to use your own oysters. We got a lot of our own wild-growing areas. And up to the oil spill it was very productive for us, for our survival. And I mean "our" by Collins Oyster Company.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. I'm going to kind of set that aside for now. We're going to get to talk about BP more, really in depth.

Collins: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: So your family really taught you your career; they taught you your—

Collins: Basically my father taught me everything I know. (0:07:06.9) My grandpa had a little bit of the older-people twist on it, and my next to youngest brother, the one before me, he was stuck with us. And it was me and him and my dad and my grandpa for a long time until my other two brothers came back into the business. There's a lot of commercial fishing to do down here [South Louisiana]. You can shrimp, crab. And one of them loves shrimping, and he's back with me, and one of them loves just fishing for himself, crabs and oysters, and living in Grand Isle, and he lived on the water, so he loved that, but since Katrina he's over here, too, so.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. What's species did you gather other than oysters and shrimp? (0:08:39.0)

Collins: We gathered crabs, snail, fish, stone crabs; that's about it.

Scull-DeArmey: What kind of fish?

Collins: Well, before they outlawed it, (0:08:56.0) we used to gillnet the redfish, speckled trout, flounder, drum, sheepshead. Now, we just fish it sportfully, everything.

Scull-DeArmey: And was there a market for those fish that you were catching?

Collins: Oh, yes, ma'am. There's a market for some. You just can't use a gillnet anymore.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Is there any bycatch in your business?

Collins: What's that?

Scull-DeArmey: Is there any bycatch in your fishing experience?

Collins: What you mean by that?

Scull-DeArmey: Things that you catch that you really weren't targeting. (0:09:33.8)

Collins: Oh, yes, ma'am. You catch, ooh, all sorts of things. We've caught turtles. And when my grandpa was alive, they would save them and eat them. We don't catch that too much anymore. Octopus, baby octopus, seahorses, lots of baby fish that we've never identified. All kind of stuff, baby crabs, little crabs, we call them Mexican crabs, stuff that don't get big enough to eat that come in in the spring. You see all sorts of things this time of year.

Scull-DeArmey: Have the species changed much over your career? (0:10:22.1)

Collins: They have. We don't see the turtles anymore. We don't see as many octopus anymore. Pretty much that's the only things I don't see anymore.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. What about equipment? Has equipment changed very much over your career? (0:10:47.2)

Collins: Very, very, little except for the cables where we dump the oysters on when the dredge comes up. From the side of the boat, we have cables now that you can stand up and work, which is, *phew*, a godsend.

Scull-DeArmey: How did you do it before?

Collins: Before we actually did it on the deck. We had the same plates that we used on top the table but just on the deck. So you had to either kneel down, sit down, or stand bent over and work the piles or shovel from there. Shoveling was actually much better from there, but now what takes the place—we still shovel a little bit, but we have, in planting season we have fire monitors with its own motor and intake, and we just wash back the oysters and wash them over when we get on our reef or wherever we want them. And it's all done by water power. It don't hurt the oysters, it just makes them, helps them.

Scull-DeArmey: Tell me a little more about shoveling. What do you have to shovel and why? (0:12:01.3)

Collins: Well, you got to shovel your shells because we don't—we never used to throw back the shells in the same area as we're making sacks. And when you would load the boats in the planting seasons, you would shovel them on and shovel them off before the water pumps came along. So that was a big breakthrough, too.

Scull-DeArmey: So you're actually—

Collins: On our backs. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: Right, yeah. You're actually shoveling the oysters out of, say, the rake or the net onto the deck of the boat?

Collins: Well, you dump it; you just dump it, one on each side, the one that works the winch, and the deckhand get on each a side and dump it. It's not very big, maybe three, four foot wide, and it only holds approximately about a sack and a half, two sacks of whatever you got, a full dredge. It'll hold about a sack and a half of shell, babies, everything; that's everything. And then you take probably about a half a sack out of that of good retail oysters or wholesale, sellable oysters.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. Do you put the—

Collins: But when you're doing seeds, (0:13:16.8) you just shovel everything. You just take everything because you're bringing it to your reef, so it's usually full of babies, and they're all about the same size.

Scull-DeArmey: I realize we're talking about oyster reefs and assuming that anybody who hears this will know what an oyster reef is, but that may not be the case. So for the record, could you just paint us a picture of what an oyster reef is, where it is, what it looks like if you can see it? (0:13:44.8)

Collins: Well, if you could see it—we feel the bottom with cane poles, and we can tell where the reefs end, and we mark all—I'm a cane-pole fanatic; I like to feel my bottom. I like to know every acreage, every inch of my acreage on every acre of my bottom. I like to know where the reef is, how it grows, how it changes, and I can't see it, so I got to feel it. And by dredging, it allows me to see what's on the bottom. So when I mark off a square at a time, and after twenty-five years you start to learn a lot of area because it's a lot of the same area. Even though we have a couple of thousand acres, I know those acres. And I even know a lot of reefs on the public grounds. Now a reef is a good, shelly bottom that is out of the mud. It's usually in the current line because it'll keep the mud off of it. But if it's like a wild-growing reef, the oysters actually keep that mud off of them, themselves. But they're in the current line, so it helps. But some of them aren't always in the current line. Also, at that same reef, if the current passes good, you have deep spots; you got shallow spots all in the same part of one reef. And you just draw a big circle and, say, this is Lake whatever, and you draw a straight line through it, any which way you want, and that is your current line, and usually somewheres halfway of that line, half of that circle there's going to

be a reef that comes out and passes in that current line. And due to slack current and high-velocity current, that line changes a lot, so in some areas you may go as wide as half of that circle, and that's your reef. Halfway wide and halfway long on half of that circle, and then it varies from there. It'll get skinny down to the current line, and there'll be mud on the sides of that, and it gets shallow. But a wild-growing reef that thrives, it keeps growing. And then I've got to say that in the non-wild-growing area, which one of our best harvest sites are, in Caminada Bay, down by Grand Isle, my great-grandfather saw that (0:16:36.8) when he started this legacy. And he noticed that because they're living down there in Chenier, and he would move oysters from in back the camp in (inaudible) Bayou. And he would move them out the marsh into the bayou when he first started. And then he moved them out of bayou into the bay later on, and he found that the oyster tasted so much better, not a whole, big difference but better than anywheres he's ever seen oysters come from. So he built reefs. So that was manmade reefs in Grand Isle, and my grandfather, my father, my brothers, and myself, we still use those reefs. We bring oysters there in the fall, off of the public grounds or even off of our grounds, and we sell them all winter, and people love them, around the world. But that, it don't grow wild or nothing on that reef. We bring them there, and we fish them out before August because August gets low oxygen in the water. And it's very hard to live through August, an oyster in Caminada. So we usually fish them out before then, and it's all good. But those reefs grow because we keep bringing stuff there. (0:18:14.0) So all that little cultch gets packed in and packed in, and then it becomes like right now; it's a great place for baby fish, baby crabs, everything that's coming out of that [marsh] to go to the Gulf. They come and live in those reefs first, and they get closer to the Gulf, and those reefs provide so much bait and food for everything. So I hope that summed it up and maybe didn't get you more lost.

Scull-DeArmey: No. That's great. That was a beautiful rendition. Can you tell us what cultch is? (0:18:54.4)

Collins: Cultch is like gravel, little, bitty pieces of shell, clam shells, any very small pieces of shell, or stuff like that, rocks, mostly shell from baby oysters that died and just become gravel, broken-up shells, when you work them. And that just packs in there, and it's like, you know, really those reefs, are like, you can feel all the way from that canal when we leave. It's just like sand and mud and sand and mud and mud and mud and mud, and then you get to the reef, and it's just like cement.

Scull-DeArmey: Hm. About how deep are they?

Collins: They're on the average about six to ten foot.

Scull-DeArmey: Is the water clear enough that you could see them?

Collins: We threw fresh-opened oysters, which got a very white shell inside, and on the clearest days, you couldn't quite see it hit the bottom, but almost. But that's only in Caminada Bay. Our more inshore reefs are too brackish, and your visual's only so deep.

Scull-DeArmey: So you don't actually see the bottom?

Collins: No, not at all.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Well, can you put into words what does the business mean to you and your family? (0:20:29.5)

Collins: Well, we never thought about it until the oil spill. (0:20:37.6) And I know I keep bringing it up, but it's at a point that made us think the most about it because I think we just took it—I want to say—for granted, but we really didn't take it for granted. We just took it as our livelihood. Life gives you lemons; you make lemonade, and that's what we did, those of us that stuck with Collins Oysters. And I mean, it meant *everything*. It meant the food on your table, your electricity bill, and an awesome menu, an awesome menu, all the time. So I mean, financially it was your livelihood. Enjoyable. I mean, I wish I knew the people I just brought out, ride, and make a couple of dredges of oysters, just to show them. I mean, all these things are so enjoyable. But I mean, it means so much, and I hope it can continue, but that's very unstable. It has a very unstable answer right now.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. When you first started, which was when you were a child, did the business work differently then than it does now? (0:22:19.3)

Collins: Not, not so much.

Scull-DeArmey: It's really stayed pretty much the same in terms of the business part of it?

Collins: Yeah, because I mean in my twenty-five years I've done, hand-fished, which is going out with your pirogue or a flat boat, getting in the water and pulling them out, off the banks, and breaking them up, in those years when oysters were very scarce. And we made, we paid our bills, and we fed our family, so it helped. And I've also hauled—there were so much oysters one year, they opened up a steam factory, which I only heard stories about as a kid growing up, and so I've got to haul to the steam. And no matter what we've done, we always, we made it. So we just have to work with what God gives us each year.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Tell me about marketing your catch. (0:23:36.9)

Collins: Well, being four generations, in my perspective, we didn't need much marketing. Now I talk a lot about us because that's who I think we're focusing on, but I have a lot of friends in this business, and everybody gets affected differently But marketing, being fourth generation, we didn't need much. People know, the Collins Oyster Company is known throughout the Gulf Coast shore, nationwide, a lot in some places.

Scull-DeArmey: So the people you were selling to were people who you had a history with?

Collins: Oh, yes, ma'am. And even though a lot of people know us from lots of states, they come get it. We don't ship it. Now we sell everything locally. If you want to take it out of state, good. I'm glad you come and get it. That makes me feel great, and I'll fish you some fresh, (inaudible) grade oysters. And we pride ourself on that, delivering a fresh product.

Scull-DeArmey: How do people want them? Do they want them in the shell. Do they want them out of the shell?

Collins: For a long time it was all [in] the shell. Just recently, the last six to eight years I would say, we've been shucking them, and it's about half and half now.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. Can you just give me some examples, typically, of who wants them, restaurants?

Collins: We got our retail open to the general public, and this is just the locals. Now locally, some people come get a few for their restaurant, not all of them. A lot of them think we too pricey, but it's all basically the same, by the pound of meat. But I mean, if we sold wholesale, we had P&J in New Orleans, P&J's Oyster House who we had a great rapport with and fished a great product for them, and they treated us with respect; we treated them with respect. And then we had Black's Oyster House in the west towards Abbeville in Louisiana, and he handled up on Abbeville to Lafayette, and so our oysters were spread out across Louisiana. And it was an awesome little thing we had going.

Scull-DeArmey: Have the prices changed very much over your career? (0:26:54.3)

Collins: They did. They change. They vary. They vary bad. And it's like anything else. When they're plentiful, the price goes down. And when they're scarce, it goes up. Now, I got a big thing to say about that with BP (0:27:13.0) because now the price is up, but a lot of people ain't buying.

Scull-DeArmey: Why?

Collins: I don't know. I don't know; scared I guess.

Scull-DeArmey: Afraid that they're polluted or tainted?

Collins: Polluted.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah?

Collins: Yeah. I have a feeling because you know the oyster is not just a food, which it's a great food, but it plays a bigger part in our world, than its due, to the ecosystem, and the marsh lands, and it does so much for the water. And I don't think people know that enough. But being that it is a filter, knowing there's oil in the water, dispersants, I think a lot of people say, "Well, we're just going to get something else."

Scull-DeArmey: So maybe the fear is that the oysters are cleaning that stuff out of the water and keeping it in their bodies.

Collins: The few people that did voice their opinions to me, that was their scare. And how everybody else feels that didn't voice their opinion, I really don't know, but I have to go with that theory.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you know if the oysters are being tested by anyone? (0:28:33.6)

Collins: Well, they're supposedly being tested by everyone. (laughter) I think. A lot of universities, the state has the Department of Health on a lot of things. And so we're supposedly the best-tested seafood in the world.

Scull-DeArmey: Right, yeah. Do you guys get the results of those tests?

Collins: We could. I mean, we get some at meetings, and there's always a great answer at the meetings about it, but Louisianans here, you know, and even in Mississippi and Alabama and Florida, I mean, we're going to eat what comes out the water because I mean, there's great stuff in there. But Louisiana, I think that's not the big problem; it's out of state. (0:29:51.2) And out of state has the choice of all kind of oysters. You got the East Coast, the West Coast. You've got clams and mussels. You've got scallops, all kind of stuff coming out the water, or they want them, these processed oysters that two of my good friends that own these plants that process them, pasteurize them and one radiates them. And I just don't believe in it because we believe in eating a raw oyster.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm, right. Well, it gives people a choice, I guess. Can you put into words what the seafood business means to the people and the culture of the Gulf Coast, in your opinion?

Collins: I mean, seafood means a lot. I mean even Gulf fishing, the fish boats, it's a way of life for so many people. And I see it changing, and I see the worry being, moving with the younger generation. They're going where the work is, and work's, if you can get it, with the oil field. I mean, right now what I see is a lot of the fast food chains, the Wal-Marts, the everything. The mom-and-pop stores are being taken over for big production. And there's a lot going on in the world today. But the workforce, it's limited. And without the fisheries—and that's a lifestyle in itself. I mean, I love it. It's something I really don't see no other way. But right now since the oil spill, (0:32:10.2) we've been looking at other ways, and that's kind of scary.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. So the oil spill forced you to consider another way to make a living?

Collins: If things don't change, yes, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: I was going to ask you something. Oh, I know what I was thinking. Since I've been doing these interviews, one of the things I've noticed most about fishermen is how independent they are. (0:32:46.9)

Collins: That's a big thing.

Scull-DeArmey: Is that a high value with you?

Collins: It is. It is a very big thing, And I've come to consider that the government doesn't like that very much. And that's only, that's my opinion. It may be false, may be true. I don't know.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Can you think of some ways over your career how fishing and equipment have changed?

Collins: Nothing really changed much up until that oil spill.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. So we'll set that aside because we're going to get to the oil spill. What about state and federal regulations, have they changed? (0:33:56.6)

Collins: Well, they have changed. I'm just going to say that. They have changed, and in 2012, they are changing dramatically. Federal laws are—coolers, to back up a question. Coolers are something that we never used to have. Now, we'd bring home our catch and put it in a cooler in the summer, but coolers on the boat, that's become a thing, too.

Scull-DeArmey: Is it regulated?

Collins: It is. Well, it hasn't been, but this year they're enforcing it big time, so we hear. It didn't start yet, so we don't know.

Scull-DeArmey: How much does a cooler cost to put on your boat?

Collins: A cooler can cost, I mean anywheres from, oh, a small one for five grand to somebody who really does some production, it can cost you up to forty thousand, I mean.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. It's not a small purchase, is it?

Collins: No. It's not, and these machines that make the cool air, they're not cheap at all. And when they break down, the people that work on them are very expensive. And you just can't say, "Well, I'll wait next week and fix it."

Scull-DeArmey: Well, oysters can stay pretty fresh out of the water for a little while, can't they?

Collins: Yes, ma'am, they can.

Scull-DeArmey: But now they're regulating it, they want you to take them out of the rake and the net and put them right in a cooler?

Collins: Well, beginning May first you got one hour to put them in a cooler, so every fifty, forty-five minutes you got to stop, put your catch in the cooler, and in five hours the meat has to be fifty-five degrees, so anything less than that, and they're going back in the water.

Scull-DeArmey: How do you measure their temperature?

Collins: Well, they put a thermostat in there and wait for a reading.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. And so then if they're not cool enough, you throw your catch back on the reef?

Collins: Well, they go designate an area on the reef that you can't fish for six weeks for in case of having disease or bacteria got in them from not being cool enough which, back when I was a kid, we sold out the back of a truck year round, summer and all. The catch was caught fresh every day, but it was sold out the back of a truck. And I can't understand the big difference to today.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: Except for maybe they know more than us. Maybe there's stuff in the water that makes them different. I don't know. I don't know those answers, but I know that that's the new laws.

Scull-DeArmey: And ice won't do it? You can't just have ice?

Collins: Well, you can, but it's like the lowest way they want you to do it on the totem pole. It's like the very, very last resort situation.

Scull-DeArmey: I wonder how realistic it is to get that—what was it—fifty-five-degree reading from ice?

Collins: That's a good question, but I mean because there was talk at that Board of Health meeting about three weeks ago of a chill tank that consists of icy water because in the summer months your water's seventy, eighty degrees. But to me that would shock your oyster to death. But they frown about that, too, but it is a way they talked about if nothing else worked, if you had no other. And then putting them in a cooler, though, not just leaving them in that water because your oyster can't handle that fresh water.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, yeah.

Collins: That's just a dip, dip it in for maybe a minute and let them cool off that outer exterior, and then let the cooler do its work. Now, personally, our company we have one boat and one cooler designated for this cooler issue. And we only got to work it one week when they said they was going to enforce it before the oil spill. After the oil spill, I never seen a biologist or a Board of Health person, a game warden, until about two months ago. Last summer we were fishing, and we didn't fish to sell. We just moved oysters around because we was closed down. (0:39:25.3) We shut down first time in ninety years, ninety years that we've legally been in business on paper because my great-grandfather was in business before that. But that was when leases came up, and you started making a paper trail. And that's been ninety years. So I don't know.

Scull-DeArmey: Can you explain for listeners, for the record, a little bit about leases in the Louisiana oyster grounds? (0:39:58.3)

Collins: Well, people, I guess in the [19]30s, when the oil companies, late [19]30s, I guess they wanted to start drilling so they had to come about a way to procure a designated area that people wouldn't go shrimp or oyster or take up this—however they done it, it become you're going to get charged by the state so much an acre, and you pick what area you want. *Now* you can't get a lease, but everything's pretty much leased out. And then it started, and then in the [19]50s and [19]60s a lot of people got leases and oystered or just got it to maybe, one day, oyster. Most of it was oyster people and oil companies. And then as, like our family business, we started growing and needed more leases and just kept leasing until they stopped us. But a lease is per acre. We got some leases that are seven acres, and we got some leases that are seventy acres. And so it just varies to the reef that's on the bottom.

Scull-DeArmey: How long does the lease last?

Collins: The lease used to last for fifteen years, and right now they're a year-to-year thing.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh. And so who could decide that they wouldn't renew your lease?

Collins: The state can only make that decision, but you can't—unless you don't pay for it, they can't—well, I guess that's what the year-to-year came from because right now, they're getting ready to implement a plan to give the four major landowners of Southeast Louisiana the option to take up all the state leases that are in their areas and sublease them out to the fishermen that want to lease the bottom, which mostly is predominate oyster. But now you have crabbers that also lease, duck hunters, with the land loss, so it's making it kind of, "Well, I own this land." And it's kind of weird. But then three of the major landowners are oil companies, (0:43:09.9) so you lose your right of passage to stop the oil companies coming in with these big, oil rigs and tugboats tearing up your natural reef, your manmade reef, whatever reef. If a tugboat or a rig passes through, your reef, it's done; it's mud. So that's all going to be lost, and then you're going to have to pay quadruple the amount of per acre, so a lot of people are going to let go of these reefs, coming up here. And if oyster sales don't get better, (0:43:40.9) I don't see any way you'd want to pay for a lease that's quadruple the price per acre, and you got a product you can't sell. Now—

Scull-DeArmey: You couldn't afford to.

Collins: —that might not be the case. You couldn't afford to, exactly. But this is what's implemented for our future.

Scull-DeArmey: Who came up with that idea? Do you know?

Collins: What's that?

Scull-DeArmey: Who came up with that idea?

Collins: Oh, I believe it's a lot of elbow pushing from the oil companies.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. Well, if three of the four major landowners are oil companies, they're not interested in oysters or crabs. Wow. That's really a shock.

Collins: Yeah. And oil is one of—it's like the black gold, so you know they got a lot of great lobbyists and a lot of money to throw around, so you really can't fight them as a commercial fishing industry.

Scull-DeArmey: When will a decision be made about that?

Collins: I have a feeling it's already been made; just ain't public yet.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow.

Collins: I have a pretty good feeling. And you know there's BP stuff and their whole killing of all the oysters from eastern Bayou Lafourche to Mississippi is a very, very good place for them to implement this situation.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. I'm stunned, really. I had no idea that those leases were vulnerable like that.

Collins: Yeah. Well, sad but true.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, I guess we'll just move on to one last question before we get to [the BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster]. We'll talk about Hurricane Katrina a little bit.

Collins: OK.

Scull-DeArmey: Over your career, how have you seen the wetlands change? (0:45:55.7)

Collins: Ooh, I've seen the wetlands change daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. It changes every day. Every day there is land loss. I'm going to say a little bit more on that with Katrina and when we could talk about Katrina, but I've seen from a kid, say twelve years old, hunting in the back, in that pond with my dad and my brothers and my grandpa, and ducks, all kinds of ducks, great fishing for inland fishing, apart from the Gulf is what I mean by, for us. And so much land that we don't have today, just in my thirty years, twenty years.

Scull-DeArmey: What does that mean for you as an oysterman or a shrimper?

Collins: Well, it just lets us know that time is limited. How long, we're not sure. Because you know one day—it's getting real bad out there, the marsh. It's almost not there anymore.

Scull-DeArmey: What does the marsh mean to oysters and shrimp as—

Collins: Well, it don't have as much of a meaning for the oysters except for the saltwater intrusion, (0:47:46.5) which everybody wants to say saltwater intrusion is the marsh killer. And I stay hard on my answer that it's not, and I got proof to back it up. It's the oil field that killed the marsh by digging in the [19]40s. (0:48:07.6) They dug

all these pipelines and canals to get to the docks, and it recirculated the currents. They put vulnerable marsh at risk, and they took, they just ate into the heart of the land and dug, I mean, so many canals across the state. It's unreal. And nobody ever wants to address that situation. They think, "Oh, it's saltwater intrusion," and it's this, or it's that. No. It's these big, old dredges. They've been dredging since the [19]40s. These big, old, three-motor tugboats you got in a little, bitty (inaudible). And that's what it is. But for the oysters, it's not the land loss, is so bad yet because as long as we still got current, oysters are going to grow, but for the baby creatures, (0:48:56.6) the shrimp, the crabs, the fish, they need that marsh. They need that for protection; that's their estuary. .

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. It's their nursery.

Collins: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: It's their crib; it's their cradle.

Collins: Right, it is. It's their crib, and they need it, to become strong enough to get out there and wherever they live, in the Gulf, in the bays. And a lot of things stay in the marsh, but in the winter they come out in the bays, but when they're babies, they're in that marsh, and they're holding onto a little strand of grass, and they're not getting eaten, and they grow, and they live. And that goes for so many species; I mean so many that I don't even know. The waters are full of things that we don't know.

Scull-DeArmey: I didn't know until I started working on this project that the Gulf of Mexico has more of a variety of sea life in it than anything else that surrounds the United States.

Collins: The Gulf.

Scull-DeArmey: The Gulf of Mexico, yeah.

Collins: The Gulf is like the ocean's miniestuary.

Scull-DeArmey: The Mississippi Sound, yeah.

Collins: Yeah. I mean, and while we're on that subject, the BP oil spill where that rig, where that pipe leaked (0:50:26.1) was in five thousand feet of water. I mean, I bet you we don't even know half of the things that live down there that we killed.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: Or they killed, not "we," because I had no part of it.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: That deep, in that one-mile deep, what lived down there in that deep, black, and there's so many little microscopic animals that live down there that we don't even know of, but it's part of the food chain, so. And I'm pretty sure a lot of it got killed, and I mean, that was one of the best areas for the tuna to lay. I mean, I'm sure they

moved on to other areas. Thankfully they got to move. What was down there that couldn't move?

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: And I'm sure they're in other parts of the Gulf, too, because there's nothing that was just stuck there, I'm sure. But that was a deep area.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. It's, in some ways, unexplored.

Collins: Right, in a lot of ways unexplored.

Scull-DeArmey: So part of the reason that the, or maybe the whole reason that the Gulf of Mexico has such numerous species and it has such a rich, living marine environment, depends on the marshes. That's where the babies—

Collins: Right. That's your estuary, and that goes from, I would say from the Mississippi—well, actually, east of the Mississippi River from the Louisiana line all the way from one end to the other. I mean, it's a great estuary. But right here, right here in Barataria Estuary, the Timbalier Bay area, that is some of your biggest estuary area right there. (0:52:25.3) It's most of your marsh that's left, and it's going fast. I see daily movement. And I stick a pole on a point, and a point is where the marsh sticks out in a point, in a bay, and I'll stick a pole on a point and mark my lease, and in a year there's twenty feet gone.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow.

Collins: There's water in between that pole and that point, so it's horrible. I mean, it's horrible to watch.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Well, let's move into Hurricane Katrina. How did Hurricane Katrina affect you and your family? (0:53:02.7)

Collins: Well, Katrina, we was very, very lucky. We didn't lose no boats. We didn't lose no houses. We lost electricity for six weeks, and we can live with that. We lost approximately 30 percent of our oysters [in] Hurricane Katrina, which almost every hurricane comes in and brings in that very high tide and salt in, and it gets, it kind of stops after. Well, a baby oyster loves that environment right there. So they stick to everything. So you got a baby spat take. [A spat is a baby] oyster, and they take on everything. And what Katrina did for us, personally, was it washed out the mud out of a lot of reefs that my grandpa and dad fished in the [19]50s and [19]60s, and put babies on them. And we had a great, great baby boom.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. (laughter)

Collins: I mean the biggest baby boom we've seen in our whole history. And believe it or not, it was ready to start marketing the year of 2010.

Scull-DeArmey: From [2005] to 2010 because how long does it take an oyster to mature for harvest?

Collins: About, about four to five years. Three to five years—

Scull-DeArmey: So all of that baby-oyster boom—

Collins: —depending on what areas they're in.

Scull-DeArmey: That whole baby boom of spat that Katrina helped, [five] years later you have the oil disaster on those adults?

Collins: Oil disaster killed them all, well, 90 percent of our oysters. (0:54:59.1) Now Katrina, our friends to the east, they lost boats, houses, factories, everything, oysters, everything. But them, too, also, they got the baby-spat boom. And we survived that, all of them, us [with] a little help they got from the government, very much-needed help [because they] lost their boats and their houses. But as far as staying, sticking it out until those oysters were ready, we just combined all our money. Like my family business, me and my brother and my dad, we combined our money every year to just keep going, keep going, and wait for that market oyster to start. And then we had, just from that boom we had, ooh, we had five to nine crops. A unbelievable boom because [Hurricane] Gustav came in right after and did a boom all over again. So you had multiple—you had crops growing on crops. I had market oysters with—I had four and five-inch oysters with two and three-inch oysters on it with one-inch oysters on them. You know what I mean? It was just unbelievable the oysters that we had. And I feel bad for saying that because it makes me feel like I'm trying to say something that I didn't have, but we had it. And I got the proof; they all still dead on the bottom. So it hurts because I was going to actually take over the business in 2010 and buy my father out. That's how much oysters I had.

Scull-DeArmey: So that was your expectation (0:57:09.8) from the season before [the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster].

Collins: That was my expectation, yes, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: It was going to be—

Collins: Because we'd been just monitoring the growth and the abundance of it, and we had biologists come out with us, and I mean, it just wasn't us. It was the whole state of Louisiana. It was just full. But exactly where the oil came and killed everything, and where they pushed that freshwater that helped kill everything—it's crazy—it was the most productive area in the state. (0:57:44.3)

Scull-DeArmey: Boy, what a roller coaster ride for you emotionally.

Collins: Wow. That's all I can say to that. Wow. I am overwhelmed, overwhelmed. It is crazy.

Scull-DeArmey: What thoughts did you have when you learned of the oil spill? (0:58:02.0)

Collins: Well, we didn't think about it too bad. My daddy would tell us stories about the [19]70s when Shell had a big, old oil spill down in Leeville, which is a few

towns—well, the next town down from Golden Meadow, a big fishery town, but very little to the world. I mean, yeah, it was just—you just didn't—he said that they just shut down oystering for a month. Shell [Oil Company] paid them, compensated them. A month went by. They opened back up the oysters. It had no magnitude to this spill, though. So that's kind of how we felt was going to happen. "Well, let's just keep on keeping on." And then we got stopped. "Well, this ain't going to last long." So then we got oil intrusion, (0:59:01.0) and then it got scary because—

Scull-DeArmey: You saw the oil.

Collins: Yeah. We saw the oil. We did, and then we saw them start—we were still dredging before they closed it, in Caminada [Bay] down by Grand Isle. And we saw these boats coming out with these oil boom and wrapping the islands by us, and I'm like, "This is getting real. This is getting too real." And [I] began to sort of panic, like, "What's going on here? Is life about to change?" You start questioning everything. And sad to say, life is changing.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, just tell me about—tell me your story from that day that you saw those booms coming out as you were gathering oysters. What happened?

Collins: Well, we was just out like a normal day, and I had—let's see. I had two of my best friends, working with us, and one brother and myself. Well, maybe I had my two brothers. I think I had my two brothers that are with me today, and myself, and we was fishing. We had a nice little order, and we were fishing like any other day, and no oil in the water and really paying no mind to it. "We'll watch it when we get home, see what's going on." No big deal. And we were getting to work, back to work after lunch, and this big, old plane flies, comes from south of us, out the Gulf, and he's spraying some stuff. (1:01:03.5) And this plane flew right over us. And I mean, I could've probably threw an oyster up and hit this plane. This is how low he was to us. And he was going down, and I wanted to call Coast Guard. And I'm like, "Man!" But he sprayed us with some dispersant, so my brother started freaking out. And we just kind of—we moved from that reef to another reef to get out of that whatever it was because I had no idea what it was. I still didn't know at all what dispersant was. So but my brother said his eyes burned, and his skin burned, so I got out of it and went and worked on another reef. And then I didn't think much of it. And then we was working, and one of my neighbors and my best friend and kind of family, he says, "Look at that, Nick." He said, "They're coming out with some oil boom." (1:02:06.7) And we could see them coming from Grand Isle with some small boats and a lot of boom. And they came straight to the island [that] I went and worked by and wrapped the whole thing with oil boom and moved on to the next one. And I just went, take some pictures with my phone and, just kind of like, "Wow, man." We just sat there and watched them for about forty minutes, and it was just really crazy, and just kind of kicked in, like, "Man, something's really going on here. This is getting serious, and it's getting close." And we decided just to finish up the day and get on home and see what was going on. And a little further down the line, about ten months later, the University of Connecticut comes down with their class, and they wanted to hear our story. And I got to talk to one of the professors, and she went and tracked down that

plane on that day, and he was going down and was ordered to offload his load. And that has no point, I guess, for telling you all that, but the fact that it happened that day.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, that's the whole point. That's the whole point of the interview, to get your story.

Collins: And nothing is really going to come of it. But I tell you; I learned about dispersant since then. But the oil boom really scared me. It really made it hit home.

Scull-DeArmey: What happened—

Collins: It really, it still didn't hit home till this November when we opened back up for retail, and sales were down like 70 percent. (1:04:15.8) So that's when it really hit home.

Scull-DeArmey: What about your catch? How—

Collins: Well, we sold it, and no one's called in sick, so I guess everything went OK.

Scull-DeArmey: So are you talking about the catch that day?

Collins: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. I was going to ask you about that, what you did with the catch that day. But when your sales were down 70 percent, was your catch down also?

Collins: The catch was down. (1:04:53.9) We used to bring seventy, a hundred sacks a day home, four days out of the week, and the other three were probably fifty sacks. But once like you get into Thanksgiving and the holidays, I mean, people just went to town; people want oysters. And we would sell that in front of our house. And during Christmas, the two or three days before Christmas Eve, you couldn't keep an oyster in the cooler, not a sack of oysters. You couldn't keep no way, no how. Never ever have we in any year that I was there had enough oysters in December and January. This year I brought home thirty sacks of oysters the day before Christmas Eve, thirty sacks. And Christmas Day had ten of those sacks left. And it really made my daddy—that's the first time I'd seen him discouraged in the business.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow.

Collins: And it really scared us because we look up to him.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. It was a surprise to him. It really wasn't like that Shell Oil spill at all.

Collins: It wasn't like that at all. The media really, really got—it was nationwide; I mean, it was worldwide. So people really got scared of Southeast Louisiana seafood.

Scull-DeArmey: How could it have been different you think with the media that would've been better? (1:07:00.2)

Collins: Well, I don't think it could've been better because it was just a horrible disaster, and I think it has to do with the response. The government and the oil companies to decide to spray Corexit, (1:07:23.1) and I think there was other things they could've used.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Tell me about the dispersant. You said you'd learned a lot about dispersant. Tell me everything about the dispersant that you'd like to put on the record.

Collins: Well, early on, I'm trying to learn about it. All these scientists, biologists and people who know it all, I guess, they tell me, "Oh, you don't worry about that. That's like Dawn dishwashing liquid. If I had a cup right here in front me, I would drink it. Not harmful to you at all." Now, what I've learned is that Corexit, the dispersant, has five cancer-causing carcinogens, chemicals in it, and one of them is cyanide, if that makes any sense.

Scull-DeArmey: The poison?

Collins: The poison. Why? I don't know. But if you look up Corexit and the ingredients and—now I don't know. I don't know if they'll still show it to you, but I'm sure they will; it's the ingredients. They got to show it to you. And that was enough for me right there. Wow!. We got sprayed by the stuff. We got our waters sprayed daily, nightly for hundreds of days. I'm hearing rumors right now that they're still spraying the oil-spill spot because there's a leak. I don't know how true that is. That's a rumor.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: Probably. But the main issue is that for a hundred days, for sure, that dispersant was put in our water. Now that dispersant, a lot of it evaporates, some of it faster than others. So being a below-[sea]-level area, some scientists from Alaska (1:09:54.3) told us that that stuff could've went as far north as Thibodaux, as far north as Baton Rouge, possibly even to Shreveport because of the winds at the time, how low we are. Now, these people have been dispersed themselves, so they've got a lot of quality behind their talk, so to speak.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. They've really lived it.

Collins: They lived it. They lived it, sadly. They lived it without any help. They lived it with their families getting sick from the stuff. And over there it had to climb like thirteen to eighteen hundred feet up the mountain to get to the town. So the truths I've found out about it are no good, nothing good for it except that it sank the oil. I mean, the oil became out of sight and out of mind.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. It sank the oil out of sight.

Collins: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: But did it make the oil disappear that's on the bottom?

Collins: No. It didn't, and it won't. You know oil evaporates, (1:11:14.2) especially sweet crude like that was. It evaporates on its own, I mean. Now, yes, that was way too much of a spill to wait for it to evaporate, but I mean, it's still there. So do you disperse it and stop the scare and the panic, or you just deal with it? Because you killed the marsh anyway. I mean, I didn't understand the dispersant there, especially British Petroleum who, British, in England, the queen don't even let them store Corexit in their country. (1:11:57.5)

Scull-DeArmey: That's a very telling detail, I think. Yeah.

Collins: Yeah, exactly, exactly. But you're going to store five hundred million gallons in Texas, and use it? And you got five hundred million gallons in Missouri? Or—yeah, Missouri, I think. They had the other stuff that was biodegradable, very natural, unharmful to anything, but it didn't work quite as good, not quite as good.

Scull-DeArmey: It didn't get it out of sight as quickly.

Collins: Right. And they had so much oil that they panicked, and they pushed the wrong buttons, I think, personally. The freshwater was a bad decision. The Corexit was a bad decision. (1:12:48.5) And going out there unprepared for this situation: bad decision. I can't say nothing against the oil company. I use oil in my boat. I use fuel in my car. I use fuel in my trucks. I mean, just Collins Oyster Company procures six vehicles, five boats. I mean, we have three oyster boats, a speedboat, a couple of speedboats. But I mean, we use fuel because we're dependent upon it because that's what our government brought us up to be. And that's what they made the fuel, so of course we're going to be dependent on it.

Scull-DeArmey: It's one of the only choices—

Collins: And they had every opportunity to make many other decisions, but this is the one they chose, so that's the one we got to live with.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. Mr. Collins, what happened after that you saw the oil coming and the dispersant coming in? What happened to your harvesting? What happened to your business? (1:13:53.0)

Collins: Well, eventually oystering got shut down, completely, shrimping, crabbing, fishing, everything. So then they started one week it's closed, and one week it's open for the shrimping. Then one week certain areas of oystering opened up, and then it was closed back. And then shrimping opened up again and then was closed back. And then it stayed closed. *Bam*! Then we were shut down for a little while, and then we decided to see what was going to happen. And we went and worked for the Vessels of Opportunity. (1:14:41.4)

Scull-DeArmey: Tell me about that. How did that work out for you?

Collins: Financially it was a help, very helpful thing. And then when they cut us short on our contract, it kind of hurt because everything was closed; we're out of work, no income, nothing we can do. Now, while we was on the job for the Vessels of

Opportunity, everything was gravy until, personally, I was out there on the boat because I had three boats working, so a lot of times I stayed home and just handled up on my laborers, my captains, and kind of like a port captain, and just took care of everything, got groceries and made sure everybody was there, and the boats were working and the motors were working. And we had to stock whatever they wanted on us because we were supply boats. But actually being out there when one of my captains wasn't there and seeing the oil come in, that was very, very disturbing, (1:16:03.5) and with nothing to stop it. All that boom and the spray they had for us to spray off the boats and potato pumps was ridiculous because you didn't pick up none of it. We didn't pick up 1 percent of the oil. They say 4 [percent], but I don't think they picked up 1 [percent]. And that was the hardest thing to see, that there was nothing you could do about it. And we were supposed to stay out overnight and this and that. But every time we found oil, they would call us in at night, and, "Y'all go on home. Take the night off. Come back in the morning and see what we're going to do." Well, I found out later that was because they were spraying it all night. (1:17:05.6) So you'd go back in the morning, and the oil was gone.

Scull-DeArmey: So you think they didn't want you to know they were spraying it?

Collins: Oh, exactly, for sure, for sure. No doubt in my mind that was their plan, and it worked until some people stayed out there and seen. But I mean, the plane records are there, and it happened, and they didn't let the media know, and they didn't let the public know. So who's going to listen to a few fishermen? How far is that going to get? But you know what? One thing I don't have proof of, but I'm going to throw in here for history reasons because maybe you're not going to want to put it, and maybe you will. But you know that [Kemp] Ridley turtle? (1:17:59.1)

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: Them same planes that were spraying the dispersant, I'm pretty sure—I can't prove it, but I believe it 100 percent—they were throwing baby turtles out. And they done that in the early [1980s], I believe, when they made the trawlers put the TEDs [turtle excluder devices] on. They did the same thing; they threw baby turtles because that baby turtle ain't a real resident of Louisiana.

Scull-DeArmey: So the Kemp Ridley turtle that is on the endangered species list.

Collins: —species list, yes, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: And which was the first turtle they were concerned about to put the turtle excluder devices in the shrimp nets, you think the planes were depositing baby turtles in the estuaries?

Collins: Yes, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: Why do you think they would—

Collins: I believe it wholeheartedly because of the people that told me this.

Scull-DeArmey: Why do you think they would do that?

Collins: And they have no reason to lie. Well, they do it because, ah, I mean so many reasons. They do it because—they did it in the beginning because we didn't eat the eggs here, so that turtle had a chance. In Mexico, them turtles are all over, and they're laying eggs on every beach. But you know what? The Spanish people eat the eggs, and I mean, hey, we would, too, if we knew where they were. They eat everything out there, turtles. And I mean, my grandpa and daddy, they lived on that stuff, turtles and oysters and shrimp. I mean, that was the menu. But this was the diamondback snapping turtles, and the only name I know for it is a moblien(?). Those are the turtles we caught inshore and off. You saw loggerheads and all these other turtles we didn't eat, but those were the turtles they ate. But I never seen a Ridley's turtle in my life until last year, really, I caught one in my dredge; a baby I mean. And that's unheard of inshore. Yeah. And why do I think they would do it? I think they would do it because there's so much money involved in it. The lady who put it on the—decided she's going to replenish this turtle, extinction, she has a lot of pull. I mean, she was the first one to sue the United States Coast Guard after this BP oil spill.

Scull-DeArmey: How is that?

Collins: And she put pressure on them. Well, she wasn't the first. I'm sure the people that lost their lives were the first, but she was right up there. And she sued because of that turtle and for them burning out there and for the pollution. And when you worked with the Vessels of Opportunity you had to have a Coast Guard with you all the time. (1:21:27.6) And one day it was raining, and it was pouring, and these Coast Guard guys, they came inside with me, and we started talking. And I'm like, "Man, no matter how this is going to be, it's going to be a horrible pollution. So why weren't y'all burning this stuff at the site of where it emerged? Y'all should've been burning it." (1:21:51.4) And he let the cat out the bag about the lady protecting the turtle.

Scull-DeArmey: Because the turtles would have been—

Collins: She's got the United States Coast Guard in a lawsuit, and then if they started burning it when it hit the marsh, oh, everybody would be in craziness. Well, you know what? The trappers used to burn the marsh every year. And you know what? It grew back healthier and thicker, so that's not going to fly with me. And the pollution from the smoke of the oil, yeah, it would've been a lot. But you know what? It's still in the bottom of the Gulf and the bays and our waterways and blocking up our livelihood and possibly, going back to dispersant, it harms reproduction organs. So what is our catch going to be like in ten years? (1:22:46.8) Because I know the herring's just coming back to Alaska, and that's twenty-two years. So who's going to sustain that my industry's going to still be there in ten years, fifteen years, twenty years? Nobody can answer me because nobody knows right now.

Scull-DeArmey: I think you're exactly right. Nobody knows.

Collins: Nobody knows. But you know an oyster is part of this ecosystem, and it's resilient, and it's tough, and it's going to grow, and it's going to go. And even though it's polluted, it's still going to—it don't have feelings, so it's not going to hold a grudge. It's going to keep doing what it does. And it may not be edible at one point, but they're going to do what they're here to do.

Scull-DeArmey: Unless, as you say, their reproductive organs are changed so much—

Collins: Right, well, true.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah, that they—

Collins: True because you know spats are rarely seen nowadays. We don't see any anywheres. (1:23:46.3)

Scull-DeArmey: Is that right?

Collins: Very few. My 10 percent of oysters that survived, my 10, 15 percent that I'm working right now, I hardly see any spats. My oysters that were killed from the oil spill are hardly any spats. Two years later, hardly anything, we got dead shells out there; that's it.

Scull-DeArmey: What's your harvest like now compared to what it used to be? (1:24:26.5)

Collins: Horrible. Horrible, ten sacks a day I bring home. Ten sacks every other day, not even a day. I mean, it's horrible.

Scull-DeArmey: So it might be five sacks a day now, and it used to be seventy to a hundred?

Collins: Right. We're pulling money out of our pocket to keep this business rolling, and not money that BP gave us because they didn't give us any. (1:24:52.9) They gave Collins Oyster Company forty thousand and stopped payment. They gave me, personally, fourteen thousand dollars and then denied me. Now, they gave my deckhands and everybody that worked for us nearly thirty-five thousand. So how did they come to these figurements? I appealed my denial, got denied again, hired a lawyer. What else can I do? Or take the five thousand in comparison to the hundreds of thousands or maybe even millions that they made me lose?

Scull-DeArmey: Especially, yeah, when you—

Collins: That's a spit in my face, and that's the nastiest thing you can do to somebody, in my perspective.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. So I know from talking, from other fishermen that there are people who have money in their savings accounts because they're independent, and they're not depending on somebody else to get them through bad times.

Collins: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: So that's what—

Collins: But that money's running out quick.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: And then who you turn to? What do you do? I've known a way of life, all my life, and it wasn't, it wasn't like movie stars and stuff. It wasn't just extravagant life. But to me it was my life. And I have a house; I have a truck; I got land. I'm part owner in this business, and we've got a few million dollars in equity, and it's getting to be, "For what? What do we have all this for now?" But I mean, we had it for what we did, but if what we did is not going to be anymore, whew! And then who you sell it to? Who's going to want oyster boats when there's no oyster industry? (1:27:01.6) Scary! It's getting scary. Now I could be wrong. I mean, if we can get a few oysters to make babies, and we're having the help of a few biologists that are making spat in tanks and releasing them in the wild, it may help; it may. I'm hopeful. I got to be hopeful, or then I got nothing. But yeah, the saved-up money, it's going quick.

Scull-DeArmey: I read something online, in a newspaper online, about Corexit on the bottom. I can't remember where they were taking these samples. On the bottom was some oil and some Corexit, and then they went down into the sediment, and it seemed like [Corexit] was not just on the surface of the bottom, but it was starting to seep into the sediment under the bottom, and there were some fears that it would pollute our aquifers that we get our drinking water from. (1:28:22.9)

Collins: Well, I wouldn't doubt it. And what would be even worse—and God forgive me for saying it, but how we've been treated through all this—a hurricane could come. Say Katrina comes, again—just a possibility—and pushes up the water it pushed up in Mississippi and in that area where it pushed it over a mile up in there, that big, old tidal surge? (1:28:59.9) If you have that come into towns, you got to relocate. This stuff is toxic, and it is seeping into everything where it's settling at. And where it's settling at is on the coast and out into the Gulf. So it's right there. I mean, and it's all over. There's so much of it. So when a hurricane's going to come—and this might just be my anger towards the whole response/cleanup situation, the lack of government and oil company safety. Sometimes I tell my family and my friends while we're working, sometimes I wish for that hurricane so that that out-of-sight/out-of-mind oil that we forgetting about right there in our water can be seen again because it's there. And whether it's not hurting you because it's out of sight? Well, it's hurting me because it's there. And just right here on Grand Isle, Elmer's Island, Fourchon, and the beaches that nobody goes to, I got a couple of people that still work on these response cleanups, and they're digging up oil. (1:30:39.6) They dig four inches into the sand, and there's oil, but you don't see it until you dig that four inches.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, is anybody testing that oil to see if Corexit's in it?

Collins: Yes, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: They need to.

Collins: But are they telling you?

Scull-DeArmey: They need to. Yeah.

Collins: Oh, they're testing it because they're getting paid to test it, but they're also getting paid to give the answer that BP and the government wants. And I'm—

Scull-DeArmey: Well, I hope it—

Collins: —(inaudible) with me all the way to that, but the truth's the truth, and they're not going to tell you the truth. Sorry.

Scull-DeArmey: I hope it would come out as evidence at the trials.

Collins: Well, I'm sure there's independent studies, and I'm sure BP don't want that in the trial, so they're not going to not pay you because of—I think it's going to—they just not wanting that brought up in the trials. They're going to make everybody pretty happy, I guess. I don't know. I don't know.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: I really don't know.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah, there's—

Collins: You would think people would care more about it. But hey, the news for today is so much different because nobody sees the oil.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: I mean, I got friends that go crabbing on the beach and fishing on the beach and come back and show me their feet. They tarred up.

Scull-DeArmey: And this has not been the case in the past before the spill?

Collins: Not at all.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: Not at all.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: Not at all, no, ma'am.

Scull-DeArmey: This is a big question, and you may not have given any thought to it, but how do you think the cleanup could've been better, more efficient, could've been helpful and successful?

Collins: I've given a lot of thought to that, and I really don't know because I'm not in that business.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: But I really think that America, the United States would've had a better system. (1:32:52.8) Just like I told that Coast Guard guy on the boat that day when I told him they should've burned it as it surfaced. Well, we got in a big, old argument because the lady was suing them. And I'm like, "Dude, you are the United States Coast Guard. You answer only to the government, the federal government, and in this situation, the president." You know what I mean?

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm.

Collins: So, "Really? You're worried about getting sued for a turtle? But let's kill a seafood industry and the villages that live off of it, the people, the human beings, and all the species that you're letting this plume of oil float across?"

Scull-DeArmey: Well, and included in those are the turtle. Right? I mean—

Collins: Well, yes, they are, but hey, let's clean it up, and then let's get the turtles living again.

Scull-DeArmey: I mean, if the choice is to kill a few turtles, burning them, but save them, save their reproductive organs and their—

Collins: Right, exactly.

Scull-DeArmey: —generations down the line—yeah.

Collins: Exactly. I think we can get the turtles back after the water's safe. I don't think that'll be too big of a problem as far as a few burning. Yeah, really. I mean, sorry for the animals that had to die for this and the ones that's going to die and the ones that's not going to produce, and the people that's not going to—I even heard a story from a lady from Iraq that said Saddam Hussein used to spray the protesters in his village with this stuff, or just to try it out, he would spray it on, like, prisoners and stuff so they could never reproduce and lose their name, and that was a big thing to them, their last name. Your family lives on; your name lives on. Well, and I don't know how true that is, but I could believe it.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Burning may have been the better way to clean it up, and it would've killed a few animals in that area, but that would've been—you have to weigh, "Would it be better to do that than to spray this carcinogenic, tons and tons of Corexit, carcinogenic Corexit that you can't control where it goes once you put it out there?"

Collins: You can't control where it goes. (1:35:29.5) You can't control what it kills. You can't control nothing about it, even the people it's going to harm, who's a pretty good amount. And I mean, "Really? That's your choice?" It's like, I mean, the government has dropped the ball on Katrina. The government has dropped the ball on

all major incidences. So I mean, I'm not antigovernment. Hey, you know what I mean? But I mean, you got a responsibility to the people. If you can't do the right things, how can you send someone to prison for doing the wrong thing? It's a very contradictive situation.

Scull-DeArmey: Since this oil disaster, my opinion is that we shouldn't let any foreign companies drill in our offshore waters.

Collins: Well, that's right.

Scull-DeArmey: They won't protect it as well. I think they don't protect it as well as the US citizens would.

Collins: That's right.

Scull-DeArmey: This is our home.

Collins: And BP is one of the oldest, so they got the biggest bank. You know what I mean? Why not be safe? You're getting to go drill here where there's billions of dollars of oil. Why not do it right?

Scull-DeArmey: So do you—

Collins: All this getting away with this and getting away with that. And, "We're going to make it. It's going to be all right. Just do that. Do that. And we'll go around it." For four days before that, them guys was checking that rig. They hit something bad.

Scull-DeArmey: Is that right?

Collins: Yeah. I think it was four days; maybe nine. I'm not sure on the correct—but yeah, that's all in testimonies from the people who [survived], I mean, that was on the rig, or previously on the rig and maybe a shift change or something.

Scull-DeArmey: So you think maybe with better regulations and enforcement of safety at drilling rigs, we would avoid oil catastrophes in the future?

Collins: Well, yes, ma'am, for sure. I mean, some of the things they have changed in the last—I don't know the exact year, but like one of the things for deepwater drilling was going to be *two* rigs drilling so that you had, for in case of an accident, but it never happened. It got lost in the laws and bypassed and delawed, I guess. I don't know how to really say it.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you know how that would help? I don't understand how that would help.

Collins: Well, because you can relieve it with the secondary pipeline.

Scull-DeArmey: Ah, OK.

Collins: You can relieve all that pressure that came out.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: An extreme amount of pressure that this oil—and to me, and I say again: we need oil because we're dependent on it. That's how our government made us, my generation, us, right now, everybody. But to me oil is a coolant, and it's closer to the core of the earth, which is hot. So maybe it belongs there. That's just me. I don't know. But this plume of oil that Deepwater Horizon hit had a magnitude of pressure that has never been seen before.

Scull-DeArmey: They just couldn't handle it.

Collins: They just couldn't handle it, and they want to blame this one and blame that one. And I think that there's a lack of study done on that (1:39:46.6) and a lot of safety issues that they just bypassed, and didn't think. And I mean, I do it myself at a very low process. You cheap-fix things to get by, [get] through the day, but you know it's breaking again. You know what I mean? But it'll get you through the day.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. You're putting off the inevitable breakage.

Collins: Right, right. I don't think none of that should be allowed, and I think any company drilling out there should want that to be right when they go do it. So I think this oil spill's going to make a lot of things happen up there in future drilling. But BP is out there; BP's going to be out there again.

Scull-DeArmey: I know.

Collins: They got reissued a permit.

Scull-DeArmey: I just—yeah.

Collins: So I mean, "Really?" But I don't get it. Why not a United States company?

Scull-DeArmey: Exactly.

Collins: So I'm kind of optimistic about the whole thing, and really losing faith in my government, bad. And I just think they're dropping the ball all over, but they're spending the hell out of taxpayers' money.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. Yeah. I think that there are a lot of lessons to be learned from the mistakes that were made at the Deepwater Horizon site, and it behooves us to find out what those lessons are and to implement them in the future. I don't know if anybody's really doing that.

Collins: I really don't know. You know, I really don't know. When you get down to money, it always seem to be involved with politicians. I mean, it's weird. I mean, and money talks, and you know how the old saying goes. But it's sad, at the same time. It's true, but it's sad. Especially when you're going to start messing with the possible (1:42:26.2) species we've never known, our water that we drink, the future of fisheries, estuaries, endangered species. I think there's a lot to be considered before they put another pipe in that water.

Scull-DeArmey: I do, too, yeah.

Collins: But I'm just a crazy fisherman, as a lot of people put me, because I voice my opinion. I don't care.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, you certainly have every right to.

Collins: That's right. They didn't take that yet.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. Well, Mr. Collins, how long do you think you can stay in the seafood industry? (1:43:10.6)

Collins: I have no idea. I'm staying in it as long as I can; I tell you that.

Scull-DeArmey: And how do things—

Collins: How long will that be? I have no idea.

Scull-DeArmey: How do things—

Collins: It might be over in two years. It might just start back in two years, so I really don't have an answer for that.

Scull-DeArmey: How do things stand for your family and friends in the industry now?

Collins: It's hard. You know, it's hard. The year right before the oil spill: I know there's great years coming up; I know I'm making money, I'm selling oysters, and I'm enjoying my kids. I was coach of his little league baseball team. It was his third year in. He was an all-star. I sponsored the team. I bought unheard of amounts of water and Gator Ade just for the league. I've paid for a lot of food out on the road in All Stars. And this year, it was rough to get his registration fee. And by the grace of God, you know what? They said, "You know what, Nick? You did so much last year, and we know the oil field's hurting you. Don't even worry about none of that." So I didn't.

Scull-DeArmey: Good.

Collins: But that's how different it is. And this year's even worse because we reopened; we reinvested, and we didn't get it back this winter. And we don't know what to do next year. We got so much to do all summer. We got to put the boats up on dry dock. We got to do maintenance and that's three big boats going on dry dock. That's probably about sixty, seventy, eighty thousand dollars right there. And I mean, what do you do? Do you go borrow and get it back next year? I mean, I don't know. And it's a hard thing to decide, and we haven't come to that decision yet.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you have any hope from your attorney that you will be compensated for your real losses?

Collins: Well, I'll put attorneys right up there with politicians. (laughter) They tell you what you want to hear. But until I see a signed check from anyone, the federal

government, BP, Gulf Coast Claims Facility, Judge Barbier—I don't care who signs the check as long as my bank cashes it—that's when I'll believe they're going to give me something.

Scull-DeArmey: So that's a—

Collins: That's when I'll believe they're going to help.

Scull-DeArmey: That's a big unknown like everything else.

Collins: Like everything else.

Scull-DeArmey: Your future is so uncertain.

Collins: My deckhands, when I got that fourteen thousand, and then my deckhands all collected another twenty-thousand-dollar check, you know what? I put myself twenty thousand dollars in debt, and I expected that check. And I'll *never* expect another check until my bank cashes it. I don't care if I get it in my hand. I don't believe it until my bank cashes it.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: And that's scary. That's real scary because my daddy saved up a lot of money in the [19]80s, and sort of keeping up with the Joneses, I mean, I got three kids. I got a grandkid. I want them to be happy as I was as a kid. And not that I spend money foolishly and this and that. We just living life, and it costs to live life nowadays. It costs a lot.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: And it depends on how big you want to live it; it could cost a lot. But you know what? My kids understand, and they're just happy to be, that we could still be.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, that's great.

Collins: And I don't put a lot of this horrible stuff I told you today in their heads. I let them think a lot of things are better than they really are. (1:47:47.0)

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: To make them realize that there's an unknown.

Scull-DeArmey: That's a lesson you've learned.

Collins: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: What do the waters look like to you now? (1:48:02.2)

Collins: The waters, I mean, the water looks all right, I mean.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you still see—

Collins: As far as just what you could see, it looks great. It looks the same. I mean, nothing's changed in the inland bays and not in my area. Now, I know some oyster fishermen that still have oil all over in their reefs. (1:48:28.0)

Scull-DeArmey: Wow.

Collins: And they still haven't got anything, either, except for that little payment they paid you at the beginning, I guess making you think everything was going to be all right. But I'm sure if anybody gets compensated, they'll be compensated first. But I still lost hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of dollars of oysters, personally. (1:48:55.3) Our family business. And just the stress over it all. I mean, can you put a price on that? Can you put a price on me worrying if I'm going to go oystering next year or not? Something I've done all my life, something I—where do I go from here? I'm a forty-year-old commercial fisherman, who, I mean, I got to go start at the bottom of a totem pole anywhere I go. And that's just not—you know, I'll do it if I got to, but it's not what I want to do.

Scull-DeArmey: It doesn't sound fair to me.

Collins: It doesn't sound fair at all. It's not fair. And oh, it angers me. It angers me. It depresses me. It does it all.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: It does everything but make me happy.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: But you know what, if I could go out and I could catch and sell my oysters, I can continue. I can move on. I don't need nobody. But if I can't, I mean, whew, it's scary. I don't even want to think about it really.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. Well, if you can't, I think BP needs to pay you.

Collins: Yeah. (laughter) Well, yeah, they need to pay us. But will they? And you know the lawyers, you asked earlier, and yeah, they telling us all kind of stuff, and they fighting and working hard, and we're not going to—we shouldn't have to worry, and there's always "shouldn't" and "may not have to," and it's never nothing definite because if they make this a class-action suit and you got to wait twenty years like they did the poor people in Alaska, then you ain't getting nothing. You know?

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: Your lawyers are getting it. Uncle Sam's getting it, and you're not getting it.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. It's very discouraging.

Collins: Very, very discouraging.

Scull-DeArmey: We're getting towards the end of these questions. We've talked about this a little bit, but I'll ask you just for the record. How is the health of the oyster fishery from your perspective? (1:51:15.1)

Collins: What you mean, the health of the oyster?

Scull-DeArmey: Uh-huh.

Collins: Or the fisheries?

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. The health of the whole, sort of all the reefs and all the oysters on there, what is the health of the oysters and the estuaries?

Collins: Well, where they weren't killed, they seem to be normal. Where they live no more, they're not really living; there's no babies. So I have to say very poor in the affected areas. In the wild areas, they seem to be healthy, still a very big lack of babies. So in overall, I'd have to say healthy now, the living are healthy, look beautiful, taste great. The future, I can't answer that.

Scull-DeArmey: In your mind, is there a ballpark figure of what percentage of the oysters are alive and doing all right, and what percentage are dead and dying?

Collins: Well, what's dead is dead. No more's dying. What's left is maybe—and as I said earlier, this oil and this freshwater is the most productive part of a state. So we have 20 percent of the state's oysters left, but they're in unproductive areas. Some are in mid-productive areas. Some are in very unproductive areas where they just don't fish that much. They just don't. And people are going fishing, but there's limits on sacks, (1:53:36.9) and you can't dredge, and you got to use the tongs, and I know y'all got that in Mississippi, also, and in Alabama. Just over here, we're not used to that. We're big production, and in the affected area where the biggest production comes from, they're all dead. There's hardly any spat, no babies, and no future, it looks like. That's what it looks like. Now next week, if they full of spats, it might change because this is, late April, early May is when your spats happen. So we're really waiting to go out at the end of May and see what's happening.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. So there might be a lot of spats in a couple of weeks, three weeks, but that would still mean three to four years before those are harvestable.

Collins: Exactly. And in the highest production areas, it still looks very poor, very, very poor.

Scull-DeArmey: I'm really sorry to hear that.

Collins: Well.

Scull-DeArmey: I just have to honor your grief that your life is the way it is right now.

Collins: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: That's all I can offer you (laughter) is just—

Collins: Well, I appreciate it.

Scull-DeArmey: —my empathy.

Collins: You know, interviews like this can let the future know exactly, pretty much what I've passed through, my company, my family.

Scull-DeArmey: Right.

Collins: And at this point, that's more than a lot of things. It's more than—so history don't repeat itself, hopefully. Kids in college will read that and come up with something great for them to, safetywise, for them to drill with, and you never know what's going to become of it.

Scull-DeArmey: I think we might be going in and out. Can you hear me?

Collins: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. The last question that we like to ask: is there anything that we have not talked about that you would like to put on the record?

Collins: Hm. You know, not really. I think we've touched most of the bases that mean anything.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, maybe you and your family ought to just move over here to Mississippi. We've got—

Collins: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: —some oysters here. (laughter)

Collins: Yeah, you do.

Scull-DeArmey: We've got shrimp here.

Collins: Yeah. We got shrimp. We got crabs. Looks like it's going to be a very productive year for the shrimp. I don't think they're going to give them a price, but they got shrimp.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Collins: But you're right. Y'all got it over there. Whew!

Scull-DeArmey: But I don't think—

Collins: It might happen. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: I don't think our oyster grounds were ever as productive as Louisiana's were before the BP oil disaster.

Collins: No, but that's because of the people regulating it. Y'all could've been big and productive because y'all got a lot of oysters. A lot of years I've seen that I went to Lake Borgne, which is right there by Mississippi. And we'd go into Bayou Caddy, actually, and fuel up and unload sometimes. And I got to say I dropped my dredge a few times, and y'all had some big reefs. That was just to see for my own eyes.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, y'all come on over.

Collins: (inaudible) oysters (inaudible).

Scull-DeArmey: Y'all come on over and live in Mississippi.

Collins: We might have to.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Well, you're welcome here. I want to thank you so much for doing this interview with me.

Collins: Yeah, not a problem, not a problem.

Scull-DeArmey: I'm going to turn off the recorder.

(end of interview)