

The University of Southern Mississippi
Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Joseph D. Jewell

Interviewer: Barbara Hester

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An Oral History with Joseph D. Jewell, Volume 1043

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Biography

Mr. Joseph D. Jewell was born in 1959 on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the small fishing community in east Biloxi known as the Point. His parents were Mr. Thomas Jewell and Mrs. Betty Jane Seymour Jewell. He was the second son in a family of six sons and one daughter. Following the return of his parents to his father's ancestral home in Oregon, Joe was raised by his maternal grandparents in a commercial fishing family.

Jewell was graduated from Biloxi High School in 1978. In the fall of the same year, he attended Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College Perkinston Campus. In 1980 he enrolled at Centenary College of Louisiana, from which he was graduated in 1983 with a BS in Geology. In 1984 he became a member of the US Coast Guard, and he worked at Gulf Coast Research Laboratory until 1993. He returned to college and completed an MS in Anthropology/Archaeology at The University of Southern Mississippi. Additional work experience includes Lance Computers Systems and the US Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg District. At the time of this interview, Jewell was employed at Mississippi Department of Marine Resources as the Deputy Director of the Office of Marine Fisheries. Jewell is a member of the Advisory Council for the Mississippi/Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, Mississippi Coast Basin Team, Mississippi Pascagoula Basin Team, Mississippi Food Safety Task Force, and the Mississippi Association of Personnel Administrators.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JOSEPH D. JEWELL

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Joseph D. Jewell and is taking place on October 12, 2011. The interviewer is Barbara Hester.

Hester: I'm Barbara Hester with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage from The University of Southern Mississippi, and I'm here with Joe Jewell of the Department of Marine Resources. We're actually in his office here on the second floor of the department. And it's October 12, 2011, and it's about 10:15 in the morning. Good morning, Mr. Jewell.

Jewell: Good morning.

Hester: Would you, please, state your name and address for the record?

Jewell: My name is Joe Jewell. [The address of the interviewee has not been included in this transcript in order to protect his privacy.]

Hester: And what is your occupation? (0:00:57.2)

Jewell: I am a marine administrator at the [Mississippi] Department of Marine Resources or the deputy director of the Office of Marine Fisheries.

Hester: And how long have you been in this occupation?

Jewell: I've been here at the Department of Marine Resources for fourteen years.

Hester: And have you done any fishing commercially or sport fishing? Have you been out in the waters?

Jewell: Both, actually, both of those occupations.

Hester: Could you tell us a little bit about your earliest experiences, I take it, with commercial fishing?

Jewell: Right. Well, I was born here on the Coast. I was actually born here in Biloxi. I grew up in East Biloxi down on the Point in a commercial-fishing family. (0:01:39.7) I grew up shrimping, oystering here on the Coast. I grew up down on Third Street, primarily Third Street. I worked with my grandfather on a shrimping boat. I worked with my uncles, my grandfather, oystering in the early, early [19]70s, all the way through

the [19]80s, and late [1980s], I mean. I worked in seafood factories, processors. I had a lot of experience doing that. So I've been in the industry, the seafood industry, for quite a while; my family has.

Hester: That's wonderful. Could you tell us, where did you begin? Where did you actually begin putting a hook in the water, at what age? And who taught you?
(0:02:25.8)

Jewell: Well, just fishing in general, my very earliest memories were fishing, you know. I mean, that's some of the things you do pretty early on. I mean, as the smallest little boy, I remember fishing, you know, just drop-fishing. We grew up in a very poor family. I remember just pole-fishing, cane-fishing from the marsh's edge, at just five, six, seven years old, fishing for crabs off of piers and docks, just as a very small child. So it'd be a very, very early age.

Hester: Did you have commercial fishermen in your family that—

Jewell: Oh, for generations. My family, on my mother's side of the family, have fished here and along the Coast for generations.

Hester: And what type of fishing did they do? Were they shrimpers?

Jewell: Yeah. Here on the Coast there's really only two types of fishing you do primarily. That's shrimping and oystering. (0:03:26.3) As you move through the [19]70s, the hook-and-line industry, the fishing industry, really took off. But traditionally on the Coast, really it's primarily shrimping and oystering—

Hester: I see.

Jewell: —commercially.

Hester: I see. And what type equipment did you use then? (0:03:44.0) I mean, did you use any cast nets, or did you actually go on a boat and use any type of equipment associated with—

Jewell: Yes. Shrimping, there's a couple of different type trawls. But traditionally, you used a trawl, an otter trawl, pulled from the rear of a boat. That's a traditional, here-on-the-Coast type of trawl, but that eventually evolved as the Vietnamese community moved here on the Coast in the mid [19]70s. Now, they have a butterfly trawl; I mean, a push trawl that's in the front of it. (0:04:16.7) Now, that's a pretty common piece of equipment in the fall, this time of the year, for white shrimp. And they'll even use that earlier in the season. But in my age, in my time, when we shrimped, it was all exclusively a pull trawl from the rear of the boat. And then oystering, early on, it was tongers, sort of like a rake. (0:04:43.6) An individual person will use those. It's manual, individual, tonging from a boat. And then there's the dredge, and it's mechanical, pulled from the boat, and it can be pulled up manually with a crank or with a wench. And

they're much more efficient, a dredge; [you can] capture more, quicker, and get in and out. So those are the primary equipments used in shrimping and oystering.

Hester: Have you done any finfishing? (0:05:18.4)

Jewell: Recreationally I have. I've done a lot of finfishing, in charter boat, and hook-and-line from docks and piers. I have cast nets. As you know from the program, that I'm a big cast-net person. I learned from a very early age from my godfather how to make nets and from my grandfather how to repair nets. Marrying those two abilities together is very rare. You very rarely see that. Usually down on the Point, a person became very specialized early on. You either learned how to make a net, or you learned how to repair a net. There was a distinct dichotomy very early on. Rare was the person that could do both. So I learned how to do both of those from my godfather and my grandfather. (0:06:02.5) And so a net was generally the way I fished later on in my life as I moved into my teen years, and it's almost exclusively the way I fish now. I have some very nice nets and very specialized nets. When I was in my teen years, I had nets for different types of bottoms: muddy bottoms, sandy bottoms, deep water, shallow water. I had nets that were designed specifically for that, for fishing on the islands versus fishing in the bay. Now that I'm older, I don't have quite so many nets or quite so different types. And there are legal restrictions on nets now. (0:06:43.9) A twelve-foot radius is the maximum limit of nets now. But back then, in the early [19]70s, mid-[19]70s, there were no limits. The largest net that I had or throw at that time was a sixteen-foot net. Those are really, really big nets. And we would throw those on the outer islands, on Chandeleur. So those were—I mean, you can catch a lot of fish at one time.

Hester: You're talking just put the net in your—I've seen people do it where they put part of the net in their mouths and cast it out. (0:07:17.6) A sixteen-foot net would be—

Jewell: Yeah. And there are different ways you can do that. There are different techniques. That, to throw that big of a net, the most efficient way would be in your mouth. But a smaller net, a six-, eight-foot net, you certainly could. The purpose of that is to hold the net open, to get it open so that you can make that circle, and you can achieve that different ways. You can put it over your shoulder. You can put it over your thumb. You could hold it with your hand. There are different ways to hold that open. But the most efficient way would be to hold it in your mouth because you can get it farther out in front of you, and that's what you want to achieve, especially in the depth of the water that you're in. It depends on the depth of the water that you're in. The deeper the water you're in, it really doesn't matter how you get it open. But the shallower the water you're in, the more the mullet can anticipate where you are, so the quicker and the further out you want to get it, and the maximum way to do that is in your mouth.

Hester: It takes a lot of skill. Last week I interviewed Pete Floyd in Pascagoula, and he spoke about netting as well, and I understand that the two of you have done some netting together. Could you tell us something about that?

Jewell: Well, Pete, you know, Pete's a local fisherman. He comes from a traditional fishing family. He's grown up similar to the way I did. He's grown up a little further to the east. He grew up in Pascagoula. I grew up in Biloxi. He still does—I no longer am in the commercial fishing industry or do a lot of fishing that way. But Pete and his family, they're still in the industry. They still do a lot of traditional-type fishing. They still do a lot of net-fishing, which is, it's good to see that there are still people here left in that industry because it's a dying art. The industry is really restricted at this point. But yeah, I enjoy Pete. I enjoy his family. I know his sons. One of his sons worked here at DMR for a time. But yeah, Pete's a good guy. He does do the traditional net-type-making. Of course, he knits a little bit differently than I do. Each family, especially down on the Point, they had—at the heyday, there were different types and different ways that you knitted nets. Each family almost had a different style in which they knitted a net. (0:09:30.3) So there were traditional Biloxi-type nets, but within that group component, there are very specialized ways that people would knit nets. And if you went over to Pascagoula, there was a dramatic difference. You could tell the difference between nets from Biloxi to Pascagoula. So it's good to know those differences and incorporate them into your net or come up with different styles because some people, they may have a better way or a unique way that you can incorporate in your net to capture more fish. So it was very nice to meet Pete and his family. They're a very good group of people, and they're very good fishermen, very good fishermen. His daughter actually beat me. I came in second place to his daughter in the agency DMR fishing contest one year. (laughter.) So that rivalry's still there between Biloxi and Pascagoula.

Hester: You mentioned something about net restrictions. Can you tell us a little bit about that? I've heard from Pete that there was something about gillnetting. And is that what you're referring to? And can you tell us a little bit something about—

Jewell: Well, I wasn't a big gillnetter. I did knit and make gillnets. (0:10:43.5) And I assume Pete did similar types of things back when they were legal. There was a time back in the [19]60s and [19]70s when gillnets were legal, and back then, I did do some gillnet fishing, primarily to catch mullet. I did knit a few gillnets. But then there was a period of time where the State of Mississippi, similar to a lot of other Gulf states, banned monofilament gillnets, entanglement devices. It is illegal to have a monofilament net in Mississippi. So I'm sure that's what Pete is referring to. And it's real difficult to find materials in Mississippi that are degradable. And so that is the legal part of it right now. So if a fisherman is able to acquire materials that were degradable, they would be able to make a net. But that's the issue, is finding those type of materials that would be durable enough to last out in the marine environment. And so far they have not been very successful. But they're not, per se, outlawed. They just have to be made out of a certain type of material because sometimes these nets will become detached for whatever reason. Wind, wave, currents will detach them, and then if it's a monofilament net, they become deathtraps. They will fish forever. The floats will eventually break off or get cut loose from them, or they'll have so many fish in them they'll be weighted down, and then they get out into deeper water, and then they fish forever. Monofilament doesn't degrade, and so fish just continuously get caught and entrapped into them, and so that's part of the reasoning why monofilament was banned as a material for gillnets.

Hester: I understand. What are some of the other parts? What other reasons were there for the banning of gillnetting?

Jewell: Well, I wasn't really here when all that occurred, so I really can't comment on that. I wasn't in-state when that happened. I wasn't part of that legal process when it occurred.

Hester: Can you tell us about when you made a change from commercial fishing to the job, your present profession? And could describe your profession a little bit for us?

Jewell: Well, that was in the [19]70s. I was in high school. I was an active—I would actively help commercial fish with my grandfather and my uncles. (0:13:24.2) And I really saw the writing on the wall at that point. There was an active wave of Vietnamese fishermen that had moved into the community. They were very efficient. They're very dependent on fisheries. And I saw them as competitors, and they're very good competitors. And my generation was coming up and had to make that decision. Would I be in commercial fisheries, or would I make some other decision? And I didn't see commercial fisheries being a life decision for me. I didn't see it being able to sustain me or a family at that point. There were many factors being played in that decision, factors that are still—people that are in that industry are confronted with: infrastructure, high fuel cost, cheap imports. All of that was occurring; initial steps were occurring in the [19]70s, and I saw the writing on the wall. So I had to make a decision, and my decision was to go to college and try to earn a degree.

Hester: And you studied what?

Jewell: Well, my first study was in marine biology. I got my first degree in biology. And then I got a BS in geology and then a master's degree in anthropology-archeology.

Hester: Interesting. I think we traveled the same path in the final part of that. Why did you enter the business? What brought you to that direction? I mean, is there a relationship between your past with fishing and commercial fishing and where you are now? Can you tell us a little bit about that evolution?

Jewell: Well, I was in, got in commercial fisheries because my family was in commercial fisheries, but my academic choices were definitely influenced by that. My first academic choice was marine biology because of my marine background here on the Coast, and then when I went into geology, of course, it was—it had a zooarchaeology background. I was more interested in paleontology and the marine creatures that were entrapped in geologic time. So I was very influenced by that. And then as you know, when I went into anthropology, you choose your subdiscipline, and it was archaeology. But unlike modern marine biologists, I went into marine zooarchaeology, and it was with a—towards the fish bones that were in the archaeological record. So I'm considered a marine zooarchaeologist. So the very same things that modern-day biologists look at in modern fish populations, marine zooarchaeologists look at in ancient populations. So

those same type of things: fish distributions, seasonality, age and growth. Those are the very same types of things that I wrote about in my thesis, the same modern-day biologists would write in theirs. So very early on, that commercial fisheries experience and background influenced all of the educational choices that I made.

Hester: That's wonderful. And speaking of education, before we started, you showed me a few of the things you have in your office here, which includes some bones of a drum and some fishing devices, cages, and so forth. Could you tell us about your program with education, and how you use these things here in your office? (0:17:22.8)

Jewell: Sure. Our agency, one of our goals here, our agency, especially here in marine fisheries, is public outreach. We let the public know what we do and our interaction with marine resources. And so we have a lot of little minidevices is what I call them. We have a minitrawl, a minidredge, minicrab traps. They're very small replications of the larger equipment and tools that the fishermen will use to capture the marine resources. And there's a drum here. It's about thirty-six, forty inches long. It weighed about thirty-eight pounds, and I'm in the process of reconstructing it. And what we'll do is we'll go out to the public in junior highs, high schools, even colleges, public meetings, and sometimes public hearings, and we'll set up these devices in career days, and just inform the public of what we do, what the fishermen do, how we interact with the environment, the things that we do, what we're out there looking for, the data that we're collecting, the decisions that we've made, what they're based on, to let the public be informed about what we're doing, and how we're doing it, and hopefully influence future generations, the future biologists, the future scientists that may come work for us.

Hester: That's great. How frequently do you get out on the water now?

Jewell: I actually get out more than some people will suspect. I don't get out as often as I would like to, but certainly maybe once a week, twice a week sometimes, sometimes not that often. Sometimes it may be several weeks before I get out on the water. It depends on my schedule.

Hester: And what type of—if I could ask—what type of projects would take you out on the water? Research projects or leisure projects?

Jewell: Well, we don't have any leisure projects. It's a nice thought, though. (laughter) We're a management, regulatory, and law-enforcement agency, and here in Marine Fisheries we do mainly management and regulatory functions. (0:19:37.4) And so inside of our office here, we have five bureaus: Artificial Reef, Shrimp and Crab, Shellfish, Finfish, and Seafood Technology. And so all of those bureaus work together, and they work out in the field for different purposes. They monitor the resources. They monitor their specific functions. They monitor artificial reefs. Seafood technology will be out in the plants and processing facilities for monitoring seafood safety and compliance with the rules and regulations to ensure safe seafood. The shellfish program will be out monitoring the water, the shellfish resource. They'll be monitoring the shoreline, doing shoreline surveys. Shrimp and Crab will be doing their sampling at specific sites, at

specific locations. They'll be interacting with Gulf Coast Research Laboratory. So there's all kind—the Finfish Bureau will be doing surveys. If you fish at any time and you pull up at a dock, you're likely to encounter DMR personnel. They'll want to do a survey with you. It's informal. It's voluntary. If you participate in it, you'll be asked questions like, "Where did you fish? How much did you catch? Can I weigh it? Can I measure it?" And things like that. So there are all kinds of activities that occur all the time, daily, weekend, holidays. And so for one reason or another, I will likely attend some of those events all the time.

Hester: I would imagine that you look forward to some of those trips out on the water.

Jewell: Yeah.

Hester: That would be nice to—it's nice to have two offices—I guess—one outside and one inside. Talking about monitoring and water conditions and so forth, could you tell us how Hurricane Katrina affected fishing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and also the BP oil spill [Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster]?

Jewell: Well, Hurricane Katrina, (0:22:00.3) as you might imagine, those organisms that was able to get out of the path of it, were not as impacted as heavily as those things that were not able to. For instance, shellfish, oysters, they're sessile. They sit down on the bottom, and they can't move. So they were dramatically impacted by Hurricane Katrina. We probably had a 95 to 100 percent, in some areas, impact negatively in the western Mississippi Sound by Hurricane Katrina. So they were the most impacted. But in some components, like marine, pelagic fish that were able to move out of the path of the storm, we had probably very low or little impact. So it depended on what the resource was, its ability to get out of it. We did have some fish kill associated with Hurricane Katrina, so not all fish were able to get out. So it's just depending on what, when, where. There were impacts on all marine resources. It was just a relative statement on what happened.

Hester: I understand.

Jewell: Now, BP oil spill, (0:23:13.3) of course, that's an ongoing process. Mississippi, fortunately, we didn't see the impacts like a state like Louisiana that had landfall of probably some pretty significant oil. In Mississippi, we did have landfall, but you have to keep in mind that's a balanced approach because that oil that came from BP oil, it had to transit about sixty, seventy miles of open water, and during that process, it degraded significantly. All of the volatile, bad material in it evaporated or was degraded to the point where it was very low or minimal impacts to humans. So what really occurred here, we had very little landfall, and it was a very minimal effect on us. And what we're seeing right now is a lot of tar balls. And so right now we're in a phase, the NRDA [National Resource Damage Assessment] phase, (0:24:23.3) which is a resource assessment and reconditioning after the process. So that is implementing right now, taking place. The restoration process is occurring. And so we're moving into that process rapidly, and we're hoping for recovery soon.

Hester: Wonderful. Could you tell me—this is an idea of how Katrina and the BP oil spill impacted the ecology. How did it impact the commercial fishermen, from what you've seen in your experience with them? And how are they coming back, if it's changed?

Jewell: Well, we really have had three major events that have adversely impacted the local fishermen here: There's Katrina, BP oil spill, and then the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway. It's been really a domino effect, one right after the other, and it has really negatively impacted not only the fishery, the overall landings, and the economic benefit to the state, but the individual fisherman. (0:25:34.4) This is their livelihood. This is how they pay their rent, their mortgages. They send their kids to college. This had a very negative effect on them, their inability to achieve that income. And in the instance of BP oil spill, many of them have been able to make claims, some substantial claims from that impact. So they're still struggling with that. A lot of people are still struggling from Katrina because Katrina did multiple things on multiple levels to most people here, but especially the fishermen. (0:26:08.8) All the infrastructure for fishermen, most of it, was either destroyed or significantly damaged. And unlike a lot of other industries that had significant damage, a lot of that has not been built back for a lot of different reasons. One, right after the storm occurred, waterfront property really became a premium. And so there wasn't a lot of rebuilding because that property became very valuable. So building a wharf, a dock, a harbor, a commercial harbor, versus probably some other facility where you could get a lot more money for the property, became a lot more lucrative process. So they didn't see a restoration in that sense, and still haven't. So they're really suffering in that sense. There was no icehouses built. So if they wanted to get back out and fish after Katrina, they didn't have the ability to get ice to go out and do it. Fuel prices just soared. I don't know if you remember those, almost four-dollar gallons.

Hester: I do.

Jewell: They really just didn't get the double whammy. Triple, quadruple, it just went on forever. And some of those processes are still in place today. And they suffered dramatically from that, and are still suffering from that. And of course, just when they thought they were going to get an even-level season, then BP oil hit. And then as you know, all of the state waters were closed for a short period of time, (0:27:52.4) just under two months, and that may seem small to most people, but those areas—all the bay areas were open. Biloxi Bay, Bay St. Louis, and Pascagoula Bay remained open all during that time. But like I said, it was just under two months that all of the out-of-state waters, the Mississippi Sound and south of the islands, was closed. But that to you and me may seem insignificant. It was a short period of time. But that period of time was right during the height and the most productive part of the shrimping season. That's when most of the shrimp are typically in the Mississippi Sound. That's when most of the shrimpers make their most profits, their largest catches, and they were unable to get out and shrimp during that time. And so it significantly impacted their ability to make the most part of their income. And then as the fishermen will tell you quite clearly, they're struggling with making claims with BP and having the economic issue resolved with them. And then this

year, as they're moving towards their first open year, after BP, their first—the Bonnet Carré spillway opened. (0:29:15.6)

Hester: A triple whammy.

Jewell: And the good thing was, is that most of that water, unlike the last time the Bonnet Carré was opened, that water came all the way over to the Gulfport ship channel and made significant negative impacts on the marine resources at that time. But this time, when it opened, most of that water flowed southward through the Breton and Chandeleur Sound area. So it did have impacts on us. It did have negative impacts on the crab and oysters here. It had a lesser impact on shrimp, but it did have an impact. And so our fishermen—and most of that was confined to the western Mississippi Sound. So they really have had a triple whammy. It's been very difficult for them. It's been a hard process for them both economically and emotionally. They've had to deal with this at different levels than you or I would have to deal with it. So it's been very hard for them.

Hester: I understand. In that two-month period when the waters were closed, the Vessels of Opportunity program that BP had, where they were hiring vessels, people with boats were working to spot oil and so forth, did that help with that two-month—did that provide some income for the fishermen? Was it successful? (0:30:45.1)

Jewell: Well, for those that were employed, it did, yeah.

Hester: Um-hm. So how would you characterize fishing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, today, after this triple whammy? Is it coming back?

Jewell: Commercial or recreational?

Hester: Well, let's do both. Let's start with commercial.

Jewell: Well, I think commercial fisherman, they're still suffering. (0:31:05.3) There's no way around it. And I think if you ask them, they're going to tell you the same thing. I mean, those three blows have really done them a disservice. I mean, it's very hard for them to recover from a—traditional seasons have their ups and downs. Inside of the season, there's ups-and-down cycles, and traditionally the shrimp seasons, there's good years and bad years. The oyster season, there's good years and bad years, and it's difficult for them to respond to those or adjust to those. But when you have these events that occur, these three events that occur, and they occur so close together, and this is their way of living; this is how they make their money. It has been very difficult for them, and they are struggling probably like no other industry is doing right now. So the commercial fisheries that depend on these resources, they're struggling. There's no way around it.

Hester: Do you find that many of the commercial fishermen are taking second jobs to help? How would they handle—

Jewell: A lot of them have taken second jobs, and there are some that have gotten completely out of it and moved on to other industries or other jobs, other careers.

Hester: Do you have any sense of the percentage of—

Jewell: I do not. I do not.

Hester: We pretty much covered what I had in mind. Is there anything that I neglected to ask you that maybe you'd like to put on the record?

Jewell: I guess we're talking about recreational fisheries. Recreational fisheries, they're actually doing pretty good. (0:32:54.5) They're still at the same level as far as licensing. That dropped significantly after Katrina, but those levels are rising again. After these events, when there's no pressure on the resources, generally a year or two after, a lot more landings occur. A lot more catches are occurring. And so we generally see that. When the areas were closed, afterwards there's generally good fishing. So we're seeing some pretty good fishing occurring. So things are going really well, pretty good for recreational fisheries right now.

Hester: That's probably a good sign for the future as far as—

Jewell: We're hoping so.

Hester: —fishing goes. Yeah.

Jewell: We're hoping so.

Hester: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Jewell. I sure do appreciate it.

Jewell: Sure.

Hester: It was great to talk to you.

(end of interview)