

Mississippi Oral History Program

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Joey Keller

Interviewer: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey

Volume 1043
2012

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JOEY KELLER

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Joey Keller and is taking place on April 12, 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. Joey Keller, and it is taking place on April 12, 2012, at nine a.m. in the morning. And Mr. Keller is in Fernier, Louisiana. The interviewer is Stephanie Scull-DeArmey in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. And first I'd like to thank you, Mr. Keller, for taking time to talk with me today and just ask you, for the record, if you would state your name, please.

Keller: Joey Keller.

Scull-DeArmey: And can you spell it for me, Mr. Keller?

Keller: J-O-E-Y, K-E-L-L-E-R.

Scull-DeArmey: And when were you born?

Keller: June 13, 1949.

Scull-DeArmey: And where were you born?

Keller: In New Orleans.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Where did you grow up?

Keller: I grew up in St. Charles Parish.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. And what do you do now, Mr. Keller, for a living?

Keller: I'm retired.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. What did you do before you retired?

Keller: I worked at a chemical plant for twenty years, and then I had my own motorcycle shop for ten.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. And I know from talking to you off the record that you're a crabber. Can you tell me how you learned to crab? (0:01:36.2)

Keller: A friend of mine that has a restaurant, now, down here, he's the one that taught me how to crab. I used to go out with him in his boat, and I learned from him. That was about six years ago, now.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Why did you decide to do that?

Keller: Well, I've always loved being on the water. I've recreational-shrimped all my life, trawling and never did any crabbing. I've always just trawling and caught, you know, a lot of crabs trawling. But when I got into this with Louis, it was fun, and it's a good way to get good exercise, being out on the water and working with the traps, the crab traps and stuff, so I just do it. And like I say, I love to eat boiled crabs.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. (laughter) When you were trawling for shrimp, did you own a boat? (0:02:36.0)

Keller: Yes, I did.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. And what did you do with your shrimp?

Keller: Back then we sold them to all our friends and relatives. We used to keep all our friends and relatives stocked up year round.

Scull-DeArmey: When did you do it? Was it like a weekend?

Keller: Yeah, weekends, in the evenings after work. We'd come out here at night and trawl all night, sometimes, in the lakes.

Scull-DeArmey: For people who've never seen a shrimp boat or a shrimp trawl, can you kind of explain how it works? (0:03:14.2)

Keller: Well, it's a big net that you pull behind the boat. You got boards and ropes that open up on the bottom of the water, to open the net up, and the net is tapered like a funnel from a big opening in one end to a real small pocket in the bottom where everything goes. And then you pull the trawl up; you empty the pocket into your boat. I guess that's the best way to explain it.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. And where was it that you were trawling for shrimp?

Keller: Right here in Lake Pontchartrain.

Scull-DeArmey: Lake Pontchartrain. Over the years—do you hear that? That snapping sound? [A portion of the interview related to quality of recording has not

been transcribed. Brief interruption as new phone connection is made.] Over the years that you have been getting shrimp and crabs out of Lake Pontchartrain, (0:05:46.8) have you noticed any change in the appearance of those species?

Keller: Oh, yeah, most definitely. Back in the 1980s when I used to trawl a lot, all we would catch, majority was just big, number one male crabs. We very seldom ever caught a female crab in Lake Pontchartrain. And now, it's almost fifty/fifty. There's almost just as many females in the lake as there is males.

Scull-DeArme y: Are you able to keep both of them, or do you have to throw the females back? Are you able to keep both the males and the females, or do you—

Keller: Oh, yeah. We don't never have any of the females with eggs out here. That's always in the saltwater in the Gulf [of Mexico].

Scull-DeArme y: OK. What kind of bycatch did you catch? Did you have anything in your nets that you couldn't use? And what was that? (0:06:54.7)

Keller: Well, you know, you'll catch trash fish that you don't want to keep. Now, we do keep flounders that we catch. And then you can't keep any game fish (0:07:17.1) like speckled trout or redfish or nothing like that. You got to throw that back in the water, now, redfish. You have to be fishing with a fishing license to have that. But other than that your crabs and the shrimp and the flounders and catfish and stuff, you keep all that.

Scull-DeArme y: OK. Can you describe what equipment you use for crabbing? (0:07:42.1)

Keller: Crabbing, we have what they call a pot puller. Most of us use a pot puller, or you either pull them by hand. It's a square cage, roughly two foot high by two foot wide. And it's got little funnels in the bottom of it where the crabs go into it. And then in the center of it has a round cage, like a bait box. And then you have a rope attached to it with a cork, a big cork that floats on top of the water. And when you pick it up, you either pick it up with what they call a pot puller, which is like a gear-driven wheel that you wrap the rope around, and it picks the pot up off the ground, or you can pick it up by hand and empty it, bait it, and throw it back out.

Scull-DeArme y: What kind of bait do you use? (0:08:41.3)

Keller: We use what they call a pogy fish. It's kind of like a sardine, shad-looking fish.

Scull-DeArme y: And where do you get the bait?

Keller: We buy it at a supply place right there in Manshac, [Louisiana].

Scull-DeArmey: Is it alive?

Keller: They sell it by fifty-pound box that you buy. They're frozen.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh. OK. Do you know about what depth those traps go down to where you get your crabs?

Keller: The deepest water we have out here is twelve foot in the lake. That's it.
[Brief interruption as train horn blows.]

Scull-DeArmey: Do the traps need to sit on the bottom?

Keller: Yeah. They sit on the bottom.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. What does the crab business mean to you and your family?
(0:09:46.0)

Keller: It's recreational for us. We just do it for the pleasure of catching the crabs and eating them, for our own consumption.

Scull-DeArmey: Would you mind telling me what the prices are like that you get for the crabs? (0:10:02.4)

Keller: Well, Louis sells them at his restaurant. They go anywheres from twelve dollars a dozen for the small crabs up to thirty-five dollars a dozen for large. That's live, not boiled. Boiled is more expensive.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Are there any changes that have occurred in the way that you fish over time?

Keller: No, unh-uh.

Scull-DeArmey: What is your kind of relationship with regulations? Are they something that are difficult to adhere to, or just kind of a way of life? (0:10:50.8)

Keller: No. It's not difficult. I mean, when you apply for your license and stuff, you get a booklet, so it tells you everything you need to know. And like I said, basically the big thing is that if you have a recreation license, you can only have ten crab traps. To have more than ten, you have to buy a commercial fishing license. So when you buy that, then you can have as many crab traps as you want in the lake. Some guys have as many as eight hundred.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow.

Keller: Yeah. And just one trap alone costs right around thirty-five dollars by the time you completely rig it out with the rope and the cork and everything else; you got thirty-five dollars tied up in one trap. So it can get pretty expensive. And—

Scull-DeArme y: How many traps—um-hm.

Keller: And I was going to say—I lost my train of thought.

Scull-DeArme y: Sorry.

Keller: The question you was asking me was what, now?

Scull-DeArme y: Just about regulations.

Keller: Oh, yeah, the regulations. So the biggest thing is is that you can't keep fish, speckled trout, redfish, drum, things like that that are game fish. You can't have that on board your boat when you crabbing. So you have to do that at another time with a fishing license. And of course you got numbers on your traps. Everybody has their own numbers so you can't just go out and pick up anybody's traps. You have to pick up your own. So that's basically it.

Scull-DeArme y: About how many traps do you typically run?

Keller: How many traps do I do what, now?

Scull-DeArme y: How many would you have in the water, on average?

Keller: I got a hundred traps in the water.

Scull-DeArme y: OK. And about how many crabs do you get?

Keller: I average around three, five crabs a trap. You got to leave the traps sitting in the water for at least three to four days. Most people, like now, are leaving them sitting five days before they pick them up.

Scull-DeArme y: Wow. OK. How did Hurricane Katrina affect you? (0:13:25.1)

Keller: Well, of course we evacuated during the storm. When we came back, the salt intrusion from the Gulf, it pushed a lot of crabs in. The guys that crabbed for a living, they made a serious amount of money on the crabs after Katrina because it just pushed in a lot of crabs from the Gulf, I guess, into Lake Pontchartrain, and it was real good for that whole summer.

Scull-DeArme y: Did you have any losses in Hurricane Katrina? (0:14:01.4)

Keller: At that time, Louis had about, probably about 350, 400 traps out, and we found all but about—I guess we lost close to a hundred of them that we never did find.

Scull-DeArmey: And what about boats?

Keller: No problems with the boats. We moved all the boats out of here.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. What about Hurricane Rita [about a month after Hurricane Katrina]? (0:14:35.2)

Keller: Rita, we evacuated also, and it was the same thing, being that it was so close behind Katrina, again, we had to go out and hunt down all our traps. We probably lost another fifty during Rita. But again, we had a real good—that was all in the same year, so we had a real good season on crabs that year.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. So a little blessing there, a little silver lining in the cloud.

Keller: Yeah. Of course for the guys that fished for a living, they lost probably four to five weeks per storm as far as being able to go out and fish because of the high water and everything, by the time you went and picked up all their traps and gather them all up because I mean, the storm surge just scatters them everywhere.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. How high was the surge in Lake Pontchartrain?

Keller: Nobody really, really knows. The best accurate that we can figure that we probably had it, as high at one point, is a twelve-foot storm surge at one point. Now, how long it lasted we don't know because like I said, none of us were ever here. But just from looking at our stuff downstairs on the ground level, our slabs are eight feet above sea level, and I know we had a good four foot of water on top of our slab. So we know we had at least twelve foot of water here.

Scull-DeArmey: So you had water in your home?

Keller: No, no. No, no. Our homes are eighteen feet in the air.

Scull-DeArmey: Good.

Keller: I don't have any—no problems with the house.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Before we got on the record with the recorder on, you were talking about the Bonnet Carré Spillway there (0:16:46.6) and the freshwater diversion. Could you talk about that a little bit on the record, what effect the freshwater diversion has?

Keller: Well, the diversion canals is an experimental thing that they started almost ten years ago now. And they've proven to help a lot of the areas that don't get any kind of

filtering, flushing system to them. And one of their major projects was to divert Mississippi River water into Lake Pontchartrain year round to help purge Lake Pontchartrain. And we'd love to see it happen. Like I said, it hasn't happened because the money that was allocated for it, from what I was told, ended up being used for the levees' protection; that was more a high priority, so it's still there. The drawings are still there, and possibly in the future it could still happen. I'm sure there's people that are still pushing to try and make it happen because it definitely would help Lake Pontchartrain a lot.

Scull-DeArmey: Did you say that in some areas of the lake, it does work, or it has worked at times, the flushing?

Keller: Yes. Any time they open the locks to divert the Mississippi River into Lake Pontchartrain, it really, the silt, just, there's a lot of feed(?) in it, and it really brings in a lot of crabs and fish into the west side of Lake Pontchartrain. It really helps.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Is there anything else about the spillway that would be interesting for people to know, who don't know anything about Lake Pontchartrain or the spillway?

Keller: Not really, no.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Well, when you first heard about the BP Deepwater Horizon, what they call a spill, but that's kind not the right word to describe it, when you first heard about the oil escaping from BP's Deepwater Horizon well, what were your thoughts and feelings? (0:19:20.8)

Keller: Well, it was a first-time experience for all of us. I mean, none of us had any idea what kind of effect it was going to have. Our biggest effect was that a lot of the crabbers and stuff moved all their traps from the mouth of the river over east toward between Mississippi and Louisiana coast, by the Rigolets. So that prevented a lot of crabs and stuff from coming from the Gulf into Lake Pontchartrain because there were so many crab traps out there in that area that never were there before. So that was the biggest thing that we noticed, that it just stopped a lot of crabs from coming into the area, our area.

Scull-DeArmey: Did it make a big difference in the number of crabs that you were able to trap?

Keller: Well, yeah. We wasn't catching anything hardly, hardly any crabs.

Scull-DeArmey: How did you cope with that?

Keller: Well, you just didn't have no crabs. I mean, you had crabs, but just not nowhere near the volume that we normally had. We had less crabs. We just had to—Louis would have to buy from other crabbers instead of just the ones that he usually

bought from. He'd have to get crabs from other people to have enough. I mean, we survived, but it just made it more difficult.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Did it have an adverse effect on your income?

Keller: No, no.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, that's good. Glad to hear that. Did you work in the Vessels of Opportunity program? Did you happen to work in BP Vessels of Opportunity program? (0:21:24.6)

Keller: No. No. I didn't have anything to do with any of that.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Did you ever see any oil?

Keller: No.

Scull-DeArmey: Did you notice a difference in the way the lake looked or anything?

Keller: No, didn't affect us at all.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Well, in your opinion, what is the health of the fishery for crabs? (0:21:45.4)

Keller: I think they need to—they may have to eventually put a season on it or else they'll end up fishing them out.

Scull-DeArmey: Really?

Keller: There's so many people, crabbing. It's unbelievable. It's just crab traps from one end of Lake Pontchartrain to the other.

Scull-DeArmey: Now, it's a year-round season? Is it that now you can trap year-round?

Keller: Yeah. You can trap year-round, yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. In your opinion, where does the Gulf Coast seafood industry stand now?

Keller: I have no idea.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. How has this season been for you? (0:22:37.1)

Keller: It's been a good season. It's been real good so far.

Scull-DeArme y: OK. Last three questions. We've been asking everybody what their favorite seafood is. (0:22:50.8)

Keller: My favorite, I like a seafood platter, which is fried fish, fried shrimp, fried oysters, stuff like that, but I also like a crawfish stew.

Scull-DeArme y: A crawfish stew.

Keller: Yeah. That's a Southern dish.

Scull-DeArme y: Have you ever made it?

Keller: Oh, yeah.

Scull-DeArme y: Well, how do you make [crawfish stew]? (0:23:17.6)

Keller: You have to start off with a brown roux gravy.

Scull-DeArme y: How do you make that?

Keller: You make that in a pot with a little bit of oil and flour. And then you add your water, and then you add seasoning, your salt, your pepper, your onions, your bell peppers, all that stuff. And then you put your crawfish tails in it, and you cook it down and serve it over rice.

Scull-DeArme y: Now, for people who don't know about crawfish, how do you prepare the crawfish, and what do you mean by the tails?

Keller: The tail is like a lobster tail. You know? Well, the crawfish tail is the same thing. That's where all you meat's at. So you boil the crawfish, and then you peel them, and you take the meat out the tail, and that's what you put in the stew.

Scull-DeArme y: OK. Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to get on the record?

Keller: I think that pretty much covers it.

Scull-DeArme y: OK. Well, thank you so much. I'm going to turn off the recorder now.

(end of interview)