

MONICA LEMIEUX
Former officer, Franklin County Seafood Workers' Association -
Apalachicola, FL

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Date: January 11, 2006
Location: Mrs. Lemieux's office, Apalachicola State Bank – Apalachicola, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 46 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

[Begin Monica Lemieux]

0:00:00.4

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, January 11th, 2006, in Apalachicola, Florida, at the Apalachicola State Bank, with Monica Lemieux [pronounced *Lem-uks*]. And Monica, would you mind saying your name and your birth date, if you don't mind, for the record?

0:00:17.8

Monica Lemieux: Sure, it's Monica Lemieux, and it's November 18, 1954.

0:00:21.5

AE: Can I ask you where your [last] name comes from and the pronunciation of it?

0:00:25.8

ML: Well, actually my husband's family was from Eastpoint and it—it should be French. Their ancestry, of course, is French. But when the two grand—great-grandfathers came over, one went north and one went south and the south in Eastpoint, Florida southernized it to pronounce it *Lemucks* instead of *Lemeau*.

0:00:48.1

AE: Oh. And so you grew up in Apalachicola or Eastpoint or—?

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ML: I did. No, I grew up in Apalachicola. My husband's family is all from Eastpoint.

0:00:57.6

AE: Okay. And can I ask you—just kind of a general question that you can maybe condense is, what it was like growing up here?

0:01:05.4

ML: Sure, sure. I grew up—I'm the oldest of—of children in a family of five [siblings names are Kevin Martina, Kenneth Martina, Janice Hicks, and Marcia Johnson]. My dad [Bill Martina] was a fisherman, and his dad before him was a fisherman. My dad actually primarily shrimped, and he built one of the very first shrimp boats that was built locally. It was built in Eastpoint [by Allie Smith] and put overboard there, and it's still in our family. My brother [Kevin Martina] operates it as the Captain today. It's called the *Irish Town*. It was named after the downtown area of Apalachicola where he grew up. And growing up we—we ate a lot of fish, of course. We

enjoyed the beaches and the water and the—the beautiful environment that we have here in the estuary.

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AE: When did you start—when were you put to work in the industry?

0:01:58.2

ML: Working, I—I never actually worked myself, personally, in the seafood industry until I was grown. My parents [Bill and Burnell Martina] discouraged us from—from—they wanted us to get an education, which is something that my parents and the parents before them really—it wasn't that—you know, they didn't put a lot of value on education but—but my parents wanted all of us to be educated, so actually I never really worked in it until I was grown. I actually went to college, came back, had a career here with a local company that ended up closing, and then after that I had to get into the seafood industry because there wasn't a lot of opportunity.

My husband [Leslie Lemieux], however, was out of high school. He joined the Navy to see the world and, of course, he didn't see a whole lot of the world but we came back. We got married while he was in the Navy, and then we came back home, and he began oystering immediately. So he was probably twenty-two [years old], and he oystered for probably fifteen or twenty years. And things just got really hard for us to make a living, you know—the closures of the bay, weather issues, permitting, licensing—I mean a lot of issues. So he sought other

employment at probably about age thirty-five, which is a little unusual. But we loved the seafood industry, and most of my family still is employed in one way or another in the—in the industry.

My brother [Kevin], like I said is—is the Captain of my dad's shrimp boat [the *Irish Town*], and he does do other things in addition to supplement it because it's—it's a difficult living to make year-round. And then my other brother [Kenneth Martina] is a guide fisherman. So whereas he's not really a commercial fisherman, he takes people out for pleasure in the guide industry. So he fishes for a living, which is a lot of fun for him and—and he likes it and enjoys being on the water. And he knows every creek and bay and lagoon that's here. So they grew up, you know, in the [Apalachicola] river. My dad was really big for my brothers to be in the river and to learn the river and learn all the tributaries and be real environmentally conscious and, you know, that type of thing.

0:04:22.5

AE: As your father's daughter, were you also brought up in that?

0:04:25.6

ML: Oh, absolutely. You know we—we—you take care of the environment, and you don't pollute, you know—you don't litter and, you know, my dad was always very outspoken about the—you know, making sure, you know, the river was kept clean and protected and so that everybody can enjoy it. Because it's a natural resource for, not just the people that live here, but

the visitors and everybody. It's Florida's resource, so to speak. So yeah, we were real—real conscious of the environment.

0:04:53.3

AE: What is your father's name?

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ML: Bill Martina. And my dad raised five children. He's completely deaf; he can't hear. He got spinal meningitis when he was about sixteen [years old]. But like I said, his dad before him was a fisherman, and he was of a family of nine, and he grew up working in the industry. Because back then, they all had to work when they got big enough to really learn how. But he loved the independence of being a fisherman, and he loved the outdoors and being able to be his own boss, you know, and make his own hours. And he provided a great living for all of us kids, you know. He educated five kids, and he and my mom are still married, and all five kids are still married to the same person they married so. He—he was a great role model for us because he truly—he still loves the—the fishing and he still fishes. He's seventy-seven [years old]. He crabs—he has probably 100—150 crab traps that he does in the spring and summer of the year, when the season is in. And I think he does it—naturally, he likes the money, but he just still loves being out on the water, and he's just got it, you know, kind of like sand in your shoes. I guess he's got water in his blood so. **[Laughs]**

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AE: How many generations does your family go back in this area?

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ML: Actually, you know, before my—my grandfather, I really don't know because I don't know a lot about my great-grandparents. I—I know that my great-grandmother was Indian, and they were settlers here so, you know, I'm sure they probably did fish because that's pretty much all the—the history in Franklin County is commercial fishing and the cotton industry, primarily. And now we're getting more into tourism but, you know, of course it was always—the fishing was the backbone.

0:06:46.3

AE: And what did you—what did you go to college for, and where did you go?

0:06:48.8

ML: Okay. I went actually to Jones Business College in Jacksonville, Florida, which was certainly a culture shock, going from small town Apalachicola to the big city. And I studied Business Administration. And then, like I said, I got married, and my husband was in the Navy, and we moved away. And, of course, we came back home, and I've been in banking ever since

then. But I would—I love it here. I mean I don't want to live anywhere else and—and my husband and his family don't. And we have two girls—we have two daughters, and they both live here. They teach school, and neither of their husbands are in the seafood industry because it really—unfortunately, it's—it's a dying industry. It's very difficult to make a—a year-round living at it anymore, and it's not anyone's fault. It's just everything, you know, that—the elements, the licensing, you know, the pollution that has, you know, been caused from years of development upriver and—and there's just a whole lot of things. But for the people that are still in it, like my youngest brother [Kevin], you know, they are going—that's—that's what they're going to do. I mean they enjoy it, and they want to stay there.

0:08:05.8

AE: And when you came back to Apalachicola and you lost your job and were forced to enter the industry, what—what did you get into?

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ML: Actually, we oystered. My husband had already oystered, so I went on the boat with him and you know culled the oysters and worked for probably three years doing that, and unfortunately in the '80s there were a couple of really bad hurricanes here and they closed the entire oyster industry for about nine months, so we were forced to find something else to do. So that's when I got into banking full-time again and, of course, we had the children at that time. So he—he stayed oystering, though, even though the bay was closed. He left here and went to Cedar

Key and oystered down there until the bay reopened here and—and came back here and oystered for another, you know, seven or eight years. But it just got to the point where it was difficult to— to make your bills—even though he was a very hard worker and went every day that he could, you know, with the bay being closed or weather, you know, there were a lot of days that you just couldn't go at all. So he went and got a regular job [at the] paper mill at Port St. Joe [Florida], and then it closed down a few years after—ten years—he worked there ten years, and then it closed, and now he's working at the [Apalachicola] Post Office. **[Laughs]** So, you know, it's been—it's been a roller coaster for us but he—if—if he could make a living, he would still be in the bay.

0:09:41.2

AE: Well it sounds like, with people I've met across the board, that anymore now, people are doing like five or eight different things.

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ML: They are.

0:09:47.8

AE: Because they want to be on the water, but they have to do something else.

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ML: And that's like Kevin, my—my youngest brother. He's got the shrimp boat. He keeps his oyster license, you know. He's a really avid fisherman and—but he lays tile as a sideline job, so when things are slow or the bay is closed he can—you know, he has another trade. And I think that's probably true, especially the younger people, you know. Most of them are trying to get some sort of fallback trade, but when they can, they're going to be on the bay. I mean they're, you know, that's their first choice, and they'll do that as long as they can make, you know, make a living. But if—if the bay is closed like it has been this summer for red tide, for, you know, months on end, you know, they have to—they're forced to—to have a fallback and a follow-up plan.

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AE: Well what do you envision the future of the oyster industry being?

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ML: Personally, I think there will always be an oyster industry here because we have very productive beds, and there have been tremendous efforts made to preserve and protect the bay. The State [of Florida] has done a great job of, you know, buying lands and protecting wetlands and that type of thing, so I think we'll always have an industry. However, you know, it won't be of the magnitude that it was in the [nineteen] sixties and seventies, just because there aren't a

number of people [oystering] and there aren't as many outlets. We used to have thirty or forty oyster houses; now we're down to probably five to seven that—that truly operate. So I think that, you know, we'll always have it, but it's—it's not going to be of the grandeur state that it has been in—in the past.

0:11:27.5

AE: Do you think it will be worked in the same way because, I mean, just the tonging and the—the old tradition of oystering and being independent [working] on the small oyster skiff, do you see that evolving at all?

0:11:40.4

ML: No, I think it will always be that way. There's—the only other way would be to dredge for oysters and that truly destroys a lot of the—the bed area, and I think that the local people would never really want to bring dredges into the area. Quite honestly, we don't have the magnitude of resource for dredging like they have in Texas and Louisiana; they have miles and miles of oyster beds that they can utilize that technique, and we don't have that. Our beds are very small, concentrated in certain areas of the bay, and they're only productive if the elements are right. I mean, if you have too much salt or, you know, too much fresh water or whatever. So, you know, I don't think they could ever dredge because there's not really enough resource for that. The—the tonging is the way the locals want to do it. They—that's what they enjoy and they, you know, they can do it, and they make a good living when they, you know, are able to actually work

because you can go and make, you know, 100, 150 dollars in a day and have twenty or thirty dollars of expenses and that's, you know, that's okay. That's not too bad.

0:12:54.9

AE: Can you tell me what it was like being out on the boat with your husband?

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ML: Oh, it was great. You know, it's kind of hard to work as a husband and wife at anything, but he tonged and—and I culled. And I guess what the good part was, is that we had so much autonomy as—as to hours that we wanted to work. And we worked together, and then when we were home, we were together. At the time, our children were small and so we would—basically, you know, I would take them to the [baby]sitter's, while he was readying the boat, you know, and meet him at the dock. And then when we came in, you know, I would just leave—go home, you know, go get the kids and—and he would have to unload. So actually, a lot more of the work fell on him than—than it did on me. But it was great to be out there on the water. And at that time, there were lots of women out there. There aren't as many women out there now as there were then. But we limited our hours. I mean we didn't work all day. You know, we would work a few—a few hours and then as a wife and a mother, I could always say, you know, I need to do housework today or something else and not have to go. So, you know, in that respect it was—it worked out really good for us. But it's not something that I would want my children to do because the work is very hard, and it's back-breaking and the weather and the elements—I mean

your skin just is like leather because you can only wear so much sunscreen and so many—so much hats so, you know, I wouldn't want—I'm glad both of my girls teach school. But I wouldn't want them on the water.

0:14:32.6

AE: Yeah? And I know the process, I guess, is relatively straightforward, but would you mind kind of going through what it was like culling, and like how many oysters your husband could bring in at a time and—?

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ML: Sure. Basically, you know, we would get to the [oyster] bar and anchor down. He would start tonging. And, you know, the tongs are kind of teeth objects, and they dig on the bottom and you—when you dig it up, you dig up shells—oysters and conchs and whatever else is down there on the bottom, you know, old gloves or rubber boots or whatever has been thrown over—cans and bottles. So you basically have to cull through it and, you know, you rake over[board] what is not kept. So basically, you have a little cull iron that is probably six or eight inches long, and it's made out of metal, and you use it to break apart, you know, the oysters from the—just the shells. And basically, you just separate the good oysters and put them in the bucket and throw the—the trash away. And he just keeps replenishing by tonging up whatever is down there. And then, of course, he would always get a lot more than I could cull through, so he would have to sit down and help cull, as well. But on a good day, we could probably—some days we could get—we

averaged probably twenty to thirty bags a day, which would be—we only got paid six dollars a bag back then, but now they're ten or twelve dollars [per bag], so you could probably get, you know, 200 or 300 dollars a day now, a husband and wife. Back then it was probably more like 160 dollars [a day], which was still really good, you know, for the days that you went. And what we had to do is we had to go every day that the weather let us—even Sundays when the bay was open because in the summertime it's only open four days a week, but in the winter it was open seven [days]. So you had to go on Saturdays and Sundays, you know, or whatever day because you never knew—there may three days of the week that it would rain or be really rough. Because the bay is very dangerous, if it gets really rough. I've been caught out there in bad weather, and it's not a pleasant experience at all. It's really kind of frightening. But, you know, it's a hard—it's a hard laborious job, but there's nothing like the sunsets and the sunrises and, you know, the glistening on the water and just the—it's quiet, and it's serene, and you can hear the seagulls and—so it's—it's an easy way to relax. I mean you don't have the pressure that I have here; you don't have the stress, you know. You just basically—it's just hard labor.

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AE: Did y'all take lunch out there?

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ML: We did. We took lunch, and I always—I didn't eat a lot out there, to be honest with you, because there's no bathrooms, and so I didn't want to have to go to the bathroom because you

have to use a bucket, and so I didn't do that very much. I didn't—I usually didn't take much lunch, but we usually only stayed four or five hours. So don't drink very much coffee before you go, and don't drink anything while you're there and you might can make it 'til you get back in. But that's—you know, that's the real downside. But you have little, what we called dog houses on the boats. I mean you have a little bit of privacy but, you know, for a guy, it was a lot easier. But for the ladies, it's a little difficult out there.

0:17:53.0

AE: Well when—during the course of the year, when certain parts of the bay are open or closed, and you go to a particular part of the bay, what is the kind of dynamic on the water between the boats? Are you close enough with other oystermen and you—?

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ML: A lot of times you're close enough that you can actually carry on conversations, you know. Guys tonging will be talking back and fort, you know, and—and but generally, there's not a lot of conversation because everybody is there just to mainly get what they're—you know, get as many bags [of oysters] as they can and get gone. There's always the camaraderie and people helping each other. If somebody is running low on fuel or, you know, somebody's motor is not running just right, well hey, you know, don't leave us because, you know, wait until we crank up and make sure our—our motor is okay. But as far as just, you know, a lot of conversation, there's not a whole lot of it. I mean we didn't ever have a whole lot of conversation out there. Now we

always had a radio, and I think just about every boat out there has a radio. And in the summer we always had big umbrellas to keep the sun off [of us], you know, trying to—to cull in the sun because it's really hot. But I guess the radio really—probably—I mean we turned it on when we got there, and we listened to the radio and—and always watched the weather. You always watch the weather before you go so that you know—you know what—what may be coming up because you really don't want to get caught out there in bad storms because the boats are small. They're usually eighteen to twenty-four feet [in length], and they're low to the water, you know. So you don't want to be out there when it's too, too low.

0:19:29.0

AE: Is there any competition for particular parts of the beds that are being worked or people who like to go to the same—?

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ML: No, it's kind of on a first come, first served; whoever's boats shows up—you know, the bars are all—they're—they're big enough to accommodate everybody. And a lot of people have a preference on what bar they particularly like to work, and generally, that just goes by how close you are. I mean in Apalachicola, a lot of the boats work down in what we call the Miles area [on the west side of the bay] because they're in close proximity. And in Eastpoint, of course, Cat Point is the biggest bar, and it's generally the most productive, so most boats, you know, from Eastpoint area always go to Cat Point. And then East Hole is the other one, which is over near St.

George Island and—no, there's not any competition or, you know, designated areas or whatever. It's just whoever gets there first and you—you have to push around and shove around your boat to try to find—because I mean when you're tonging, you know, naturally, if you put them [the tongs] over, and you don't really get anything, you're not going to stay in that spot. You're going to be moving constantly. And the boats they do that. They move all around on the bar until they find an area that they can actually find a product.

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AE: Has it always been that some women would choose to go with their husbands or is that something—

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ML: Oh, yeah, the women—yeah, absolutely. In years past, when my mom and dad were actually in the oyster industry, most of the women did not actually go out in the bay in the [nineteen] fifties and sixties. They shucked oysters. Most of the women shucked what the—the men caught. Later, when—when we oystered, it was mostly bag stock which people—they were sold [whole] in the bag, so they weren't—I mean there were still lots of oysters shucked, but there was always a market. If you didn't have a shucker and you just wanted to market bagged product, because people really—the half-shell markets really got going more in the [nineteen] seventies and the eighties. So probably in the, you know, the early days when my mom and dad were in the industry, my mom shucked for my dad and so basically, whatever he caught, she

shucked out. And they didn't sell in the bag or very, very little in the bag. So for the most part, the women were in the oyster houses doing the opening of the oysters, which also evolved from hammer—from the hammer and knife to the electric machines that they use now.

0:21:56.6

AE: Can you explain a little bit to me the relationship of the oystermen to the oyster house and how like if—if you were—if you and your husband were selling what your mother—now I'm confusing your family—but if—if a man and wife were oystering and the woman would shuck, she would shuck for an oyster house that the man would sell those oysters to. There was that kind of—

0:22:17.3

ML: Right. But the way that worked is you were assigned what they call bins and stalls. The bins were where the oysters were when they were coming—they were brought in from the bay. They stored them in the bins. And so each person was assigned their own bin, and then the women were assigned the stalls. And the oyster house provided what they called house men, who basically shoveled the oysters from the bins to the stalls for the women. But you shucked your own, so basically, you know when the husband came in he put his oysters in his assigned bin, and then the wife the next day would have—would shuck the oysters from that bin and hopefully have them all shucked out before the new harvest came in that afternoon.

0:23:03.0

AE: But then, as an oysterman, the man would have—he would have the freedom to change oyster houses to get a better price, right?

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ML: Yes. Well he could change oyster houses, absolutely, and people did, but it wasn't because of pricing because, pretty much, the prices were the same everywhere you went. You were paid by the gallon, and the husband and wife together got X-dollars per gallon of oysters shucked. So the pricing—until the 1980s, you know, it was pretty set and—and the people just basically had to work for it.

And then in the [nineteen] eighties, I was involved with the [Franklin County] Seafood Workers Association, and we felt that because we had never gotten a raise, and the pricing was still the same that it had been for twenty or thirty years, we banded together and said, *We're not going to work for six dollars a bag anymore; we want seven or eight dollars and*— I don't remember what the pricing was. And the—the seafood workers actually went on strike and refused to go in the bay and refused to get anything—any oysters. And so the houses had no product. And so after several weeks of—of no product and no work, pricing was negotiated, and now the oystermen get a lot better price than they used to get for the product.

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AE: So then what dictates which oyster house you choose to work in?

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ML: Now—right now, it's pretty much supply and demand because there's only five or six houses. And, you know, if you work for one, you pretty much stay there. Now that's not to say—I mean they're independent contractors—the oystermen and the shuckers—and they can actually go from house to house, if they don't like someone or whatever. But pretty much it's—it's all pretty fair and it's pretty across the board, so I think more location dictates—now, you know, you want to work close to where you—you unload and where you work out of, pretty much.

0:25:13.9

AE: And now, across the board, is it pretty much true that there are shuckers employed that are separate from the people who are working the bay?

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ML: Yes, yes.

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AE: When did that change?

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ML: It changed probably in the [nineteen] nineties, for the most part. The early—the late [nineteen] eighties and—and early nineties because more people went to just bag stock. The houses went more to buying the oysters just in the bags because they were doing what they call washed boxes, and they just washed the oysters out of the bay and repackaged them into boxes and shipped them in the shell. So the shucking—mainly now, the shucking is very limited to the bay oysters. They're not—because they're so good on the half-shell, and they're not very big, they're not shucked for the most part. Most of the oysters that are shucked in the houses locally are shipped in here from Texas and Louisiana. So those people work for the house, and they're paid—again, they're paid by the gallon—so much per gallon.

0:26:16.1

AE: Okay. And so now tell me a little bit more about the Franklin County Seafood Workers Association.

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ML: The Seafood Workers Association was probably organized back in the [nineteen] sixties, and it was mainly just to try to be—have everything fair and then have some representation.

0:26:31.2

AE: And it covers people who de-head shrimp and pick crabs?

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ML: It's any—absolutely, [people who work with] any seafood product and—and the dues was like five dollars to join, so it was a very limited, very small amount. And the Association is still going today. Mr. Leroy Hall is the president, and the primary thing that they do now is they oversee the oyster planting program for the State [of Florida]. The state—the workers got together back in the [nineteen] eighties and decided they needed a way to fund replanting of the bay that would not be reliant on general revenue tax dollars. And so they imposed upon themselves 100-dollar license fee per year, and they also imposed a fifty-cent per bag surtax—surcharge. And those funds go into a trust fund at the State, and they're used annually to replant the—the [oyster] beds. And the way they replant them—there's two ways: they put shell product down, and they also transplant oysters from closed areas—areas that will never be opened to harvesting—to the bars. Like in the summer, you transplant to the winter bars because they have to have a cleansing period and then vice versa. So they transplant from inland areas that are considered polluted areas to areas where they can, you know, actually harvest that product once they're, you know, gone through the—I don't remember the days. I think it's thirty days that they have to—because they're filter feeders, and they have to cleanse themselves.

0:28:07.5

AE: So who actually does that—the County or the State or—?

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ML: The State oversees it through the Department of Natural Resources—Department of Environmental Protection—and the Seafood Workers Association administers it. They actually set up the days and the times and decide where they're going to plant from and to, and they do all the paperwork, and they do the payroll and pay the people, you know, the workers for that—that service. And generally, they do it on the off days. Like in the summer it's only open four days a week, so they—they plant on the fifth day. They plant on the Fridays, for the most part.

0:28:43.3

AE: Did you hold a position with the Franklin County—?

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ML: I did. I was—I was an officer for years back in the [nineteen] eighties, and I was very instrumental in that strike [that demanded a higher wage]. [*Laughs*] So I'm well known locally for—for being one of the instigators. But, you know, the—the people needed a voice, and not everybody is willing to get up and—and speak, and not everybody is willing to go to the Legislature and approach, you know, elected officials and try to make things better. But we're

real proud of the, you know, the licensing because we can perpetuate the bay forever, you know. We have the funding, and we don't have to rely on the State—which we shouldn't rely on the State for our own industry. So that—I was part of that—I was part of that licensing. And then I worked for a State Senator for a four-year period. So I was always looking out for the safety of workers. So my heart is still with them. Even though I'm not an officer [any longer], I still help them with the planting program, and I still prepare letters to the Legislature from time to time for them. So my heart will always be in the bay, but I have to make a living so—. **[Laughs]**

0:29:48.8

AE: I hear you. What's your position here at the bank?

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ML: I'm a vice president. I'm a loan—I'm a lender. I'm a loan officer, actually, so—and, you know, I like it here, and it's a great place to live and raise your family and enjoy the great outdoors.

0:30:02.7

AE: Do you and your husband and your family do much recreational fishing?

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ML: Oh yeah, we have three boats. *[Laughs]*

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AE: Do you?

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ML: Yeah, we—we have a river boat, and we have a bay boat, and we have a Gulf boat. But I don't go in the Gulf, so—I like to see land when I—when I'm fishing. But yeah, we—we—my parents have a houseboat on the river, and we do a lot of camping and fishing and—and take the kids hunting, and we're trying to teach them the river and the bay, as well, so that they can get out and navigate when they get big enough.

0:30:34.8

AE: Now I want to ask you about your mother, too, because I understand that she is in the [Florida] State Archives. [That there's] an oral history with her for her shucking.

0:30:41.7

ML: Her shucking, uh-huh.

0:30:42.7

AE: What is her name?

0:30:43.8

ML: Her name is Bernell Martina. And yeah, she shucked for years, and she, actually, is retired now from the school system. But when all of us kids were little, she shucked oysters until we were probably in high school, and then she sold insurance for a short while, and then she went to work at the high school. She was the principal's secretary for years, but she still—she can shuck a mean oyster, and she can pick crabs really good. But she grew up doing it; she actually grew up picking crabs because that's what they did to make extra money, and things were hard. I mean they were poor and had a hard time, so all the kids had to work and that's—that's what she learned how to do. But then she shucked oysters for a long time and, like I say, she and my dad were real involved with the seafood industry when they were—when we were growing up.

0:31:41.4

AE: How has that mechanical shucking changed the industry, as far as people being employed or quantity—?

0:31:48.2

ML: It's—it's made it much easier. It's a lot harder [opening an oyster] with a hammer. I mean you're—I think, you know, as far as being tired, when you have to manually beat every oyster, versus just, you know, sticking the bill in a machine. So I think, as far as hard labor, I think it has helped tremendously for the women. But as far as danger, it's very dangerous, and there have been lots of injuries. People get their fingers and hands caught in those machines a lot, so there have been a lot of injuries. So a lot of people just still won't use them because they're afraid of them. But for the people that do, I think what they'll tell you is—is if you keep it maintained, and you keep the teeth sharp and, you know—because once it gets dull, that's when you have to really stick it in and, you know, force the oyster. So as long as it's sharp and well maintained, it's not nearly as dangerous.

0:32:41.9

AE: Is it something that just offers a little bit of ease in the shucking, or does it actually make it faster?

0:32:47.1

ML: It makes it faster, and it's a lot easier. But it's a lot faster to do because you can—you can do the oysters and then open them. And it's a lot easier and faster, so yeah, it's definitely—the mechanics of it has revolutionized it.

0:33:01.9

AE: I wonder, too, being part of the Seafood Workers Association, if—this is something that you'll deal with, I would imagine—but physically, the toll that shucking takes on one's body from all that standing, and then I know those mechanical shuckers are so loud. I would imagine someone's hearing has been affected by that. Is that something that—that the Association deals with or—?

0:33:21.8

ML: No—nope, never—never have dealt with—with how to—how to make it easier or less stressed. I mean well it's not stress. I guess it's just physical and how it might affect your hearing or your back.

0:33:38.0

AE: Are those problems—I mean do people accumulate some—?

0:33:40.3

ML: Yeah, it's—yeah, I mean you can—it's hard work but it, evidently, is not too bad because, I mean, I know a lot of really elderly women that shucked for their whole lives and, I mean, even

in their fifties and sixties, they're still doing it. So I don't guess it's any harder than farming or a lot of other things that people do that's manual.

0:34:01.4

AE: Has the industry changed, or has it incorporated any kind of health insurance?

0:34:07.5

ML: No, it's still totally self-employed. People are considered totally self-employed and—however, what the—the Association did get the women that shucked for the house—that shuck the shipped in oysters, they are now considered employees, and the houses do have to match Social Security and—and carry workmen's compensation and things like that for them. So the Association did help to have them classified as a true employee because they were—they were not just casual laborers. I mean they—they were told when to come to work and—and the house supplied everything, you know. I mean it didn't supply the shucking machine or their—maybe their boots and their apron or whatever, but I mean it supplied the facility and—and the product, so now they're classified as—as employees. So at least they have matching Social Security now, which for years they never had.

0:35:11.5

AE: When did that happen? That change?

0:35:12.0

ML: That was probably in the early [nineteen] nineties.

0:35:17.8

AE: And the people who are employed in the—in the houses now, are there still a lot of local folks who have jobs shucking and want to shuck because—?

0:35:25.6

ML: There are—there are—there are a lot of local people, but as far as shuckers, there are not any new people getting into it. And they have—they have brought in some Mexican immigrants to—to work in that industry. So I would say, no. I mean people are not—I mean, I did not encourage my—my daughters to get into it, and I don't think any local parents are because it's—it's so—so hard and it's so unreliable. But—so no, I mean, they're bringing in Mexicans to actually work in the oyster houses.

0:36:02.9

AE: And what about the—the waterfront here and how, you know, you were talking about there used to be dozens of—of oyster houses and seafood houses and now there are just a handful and

kind of how that dynamic is changing where the—the seafood houses—houses, do they—I know they've always been on the water, but do they need to and do they—is there going to be a time, you think, when that will be kind of a compromise?

0:36:25.9

ML: Well they need—they need access to the water for unloading facilities. They—they will always need that; however, they don't physically have to be located on the water, and that's what has happened as far as pressure. The real estate has become much more valuable for other uses than for commercial fishing, and so there's a lot of issues out there with the comprehensive plan and what's allowed and the—the land uses and things like that. So there's—and there's—there's a lot of controversy about that because a lot of people are afraid that if—if [the seafood industry] goes away, it will go away 100-percent. You know, they just won't relocate inland or somewhere, and there won't be an unloading facility. So right now, I mean there's—in the City of Apalachicola and in the Franklin County comprehensive plan, they have dedicated working waterfront areas that that's all they can ever be is commercial seafood, but there's a huge push to change that. And I have mixed feelings about that. You know I—I don't want to see it go away, but at the same time, if I was a property owner, I feel like I should have my rights, too; so it's—it's a—you know, it's a Catch-22.

0:37:44.5

AE: Yeah, it certainly is. And I want to ask you again to back up also about your father. You said he built the shrimp boat that your—your brother uses.

0:37:52.7

ML: He did, yes. It's here [in Apalachicola]. It's moored at the Scipio Creek Marina.

0:37:59.1

AE: How did your father build a shrimp boat?

0:38:00.7

ML: Well actually he didn't personally build it; he hired a boat builder in Eastpoint [Allie Smith], who was a local man who just acquired the talent. And my dad handpicked the lumber, and they cut the lumber, and they physically—they cut the lumber. Mr. Allie Smith, he designed the boat and he built the boat, and then they installed the engine and all of the rigging and equipment, nets, and everything on it. But my dad handpicked the lumber that—that went into that boat and they—they built it. And then his brother—my dad's brother—my uncle, Buddy Martina, was also a boat-builder, and he built the boat that my cousins [Ronny Martina] still have and own and operate today. It's called the *Night Stranger*, and it's still—and it's here; it's still a working shrimp boat. So they just had—just a few people had the talent to actually build a boat. And they built it; it's built out of wood. It was built in the [nineteen] sixties, and it's still as good

today as any boat. I mean if you go down to the Mill Pond [what the locals call the Scipio Creek Marina], you can take photographs. This—the *Irish Town* is the name of my dad's, and then the *Night Stranger* is the one that his brother built. But I—I don't know. I don't know how they had that talent but—.

0:39:21.2

AE: Well what do they think about their boys being in the business still?

0:39:23.2

ML: Well now, actually, he—my dad is really glad that—that my brother still kept the boat and operates it and—and, you know, he keeps it up and maintains it, and I think Dad would like for it to be back the way it used to be, when you could really make a full-time living at it. But I—I guess it's the best compromise; at least, you know, it's still in the family. It will never be sold; the boat will never be sold. And he'll always shrimp it. I mean it will always be a working shrimp boat, until it just gets to the point that it's not safe. And I don't know when that will be because it's been forty years, and it's still safe as—I mean I would have no problem going on that boat.

0:40:09.4

AE: Do you ever go out with him shrimping?

0:40:09.5

ML: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

0:40:10.9

AE: What's that like?

0:40:12.1

ML: It's fun. I mean it's—it's, you know, the wind and the sea and the seagulls and the sharks and whatever you see out there. It's—it's a new experience every time you go. You never know what the net is going to bring up and, you know, it's really serene and really pretty. The lights—you can see all the lights from the—from the city [of Apalachicola], you know, when you're out there on the—on the water, so it's really a pretty sight.

0:40:35.8

AE: I've been learning about, you know, kind of the investments that are made with the boat and the nets and the tongs and all those—all the equipment.

0:40:43.6

ML: It's a lot.

0:40:44.7

AE: And gasoline. I wonder, being a lender here at the bank, what—if you have an idea of maybe what—more of what the history of this bank has been with those in the seafood industry.

0:40:55.8

ML: The bank has always supported the seafood industry and made loans to boat owners for equipment, you know, everything. Probably they did—they did a lot more lending for the seafood processors because they had land and they had equipment based. There aren't many boat financings anymore. I mean people just, you know, if they want to buy a boat, you know, they use their house or some other collateral. They don't really use the boats [as collateral] anymore. The—the oyster boats, generally, people just buy outright because they're pretty inexpensive. And not many new people are getting into shrimping. Now Kevin actually, in trying to adapt even more and keep the boat operating, because it's important to actually use it—the engines and everything need to be working and the wenches and stuff—so what he does is he also does tours. It's called *Irish Town Tours*, and he takes people out shrimping, and he lets them, of course, keep the catch but they—and so he does tours, and he takes people out in the bay and, you know, they see the sights, and they actually experience a working shrimp boat. So we're trying to keep the culture alive and—and it's profitable for him, and it also keeps the boat, you know, operational because they can't just sit idle. They have to, you know, they have to be worked.

0:42:24.2

AE: Has there been a lot of call for people to go out and experience—?

0:42:26.2

ML: Yeah, he takes a lot of people out. Yeah, more—more in the summertime, you know, and—and the thing is, he has to work around the seasons because sometimes in the summer you can only go at night. You know, the bay is only open at night, and then sometimes it's only open during the day, so you have to work around, you know, when the bay is actually opened, so that you can take people out there, too. But yeah, that's what he does. He does that, too. So that's really good because hopefully it will keep the boat operating for a long time.

0:42:57.6

AE: I wonder, too, if there's any—or if you know of any tradition that may have been then or still is now, of trade going on for boats or nets or materials—people trading—?

0:43:11.5

ML: Oh, well—people bartered?

0:43:11.5

AE: Uh-hmm.

0:43:12.4

ML: Oh, sure. You know, a lot of people bartered, and it was more services that you would barter. If—if you could weld, okay, I'll—you know, I'll help you. Or if you could build a net or whatever, you know, one would build the net for some welding services. Or, you know, if you were a mechanic, you know, or whatever you could do, you bartered more services than—than actual items.

0:43:42.3

AE: Is there much of that still going on, do you think?

0:43:45.2

ML: No. No, I think you pretty much have to pay for everything you get now. **[Laughs]** I think you have to pay if you need something welded or you need a net repaired. I think you pretty much have to hire it done from somebody.

0:43:59.0

AE: Well is there something that I haven't asked you or may not have known to ask?

0:44:04.3

ML: The only thing probably would be, you know, how—how does something [that's] not here affect the bay. And, you know, it's a huge issue, but Atlanta and the water supply from the Flint and Chattahoochee River system flowing into the Apalachicola—it's a huge issue because if we don't have enough water, the bay will not survive. And Atlanta tends to continue to draw more and more water out of the system. So at some point there's not going to be enough water to go around, and if we—if we get to that point, we're at the end of the—the you know, we're at the end of the line, and we're going to be the ones—the bay has to have a certain amount of flow of fresh water and, you know, nature made it, and now we came in as man, and we dammed it all up so that we could build cities and whatever. And I would—personally, I would love to see those dams just blown up so that it could just go back to the natural flow. But that's not realistic. But I think there's got to be some compromise between Florida and Alabama and Georgia as to the—the sharing, the water sharing on the river and I hope that—that they can come to some kind of agreement. I know that there's been negotiations for years and there are all kinds of agencies and people—I'm just a lay person but, you know, I think that we have a right to have a clean and productive bay, and we need the water more so than maybe they need to build another city around Atlanta. So that's my two cents worth of that. *[Laughs]*

0:45:42.8

AE: Taken.

0:45:43.3

ML: Okay.

0:45:44.1

AE: All right. Well Monica, thank you so much.

0:45:44.9

ML: You're welcome. I hope I helped you some. And—and there are a lot of real interesting people, but if you—if you do come—do go by and see the *Night Stranger* and the *Irish Town* at what we call the Mill Pond—Scipio Creek [Marina]—because they're really neat boats, and they definitely represent the local shrimping industry.

0:46:07.1

AE: Okay. Well, thank you.

0:46:08.0

Interview of: Monica Lemieux
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interview Date: January 11, 2006

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[End Monica Lemieux]