

Mississippi Oral History Program

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Louis Lipps

Interviewers: Barbara Hester and Louis Kyriakoudes

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An Oral History with Louis Lipps, Volume 1043
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Biography

Mr. Louis Lipps was born on September 24, 1950, in New Orleans, Louisiana, to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Joseph Lipps. After finishing high school, Lipps entered the seafood industry, crabbing, shrimping, and fishing. At the time of this interview, he was the owner and operator of The Crab Trap Restaurant in Frenier, Louisiana, as well as his crab marketing business. His children are Kenny, Dennis, and Brian Lipps, all born in New Orleans.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

LOUIS LIPPS

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Louis Lipps and is taking place on March 12, 2012. The interviewers are Barbara Hester and Louis Kyriakoudes. Editor's note: The first nine minutes of the audio of the interview have background noise from pumps on tanks for crabs and crawfish. After nine minutes the background noise is minimized, though there is some background noise from a thunderstorm.

Hester: This is Barbara Hester with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, and we are at the seafood establishment, The Crab Trap, of Louis Lipps in LaPlace, Louisiana, and we're standing in his factory, I guess, or building where he has The Crab Shed, and he harvests softshell crabs. And so we'll listen to what he has to say about it. (A portion of the interview that is inaudible has not been transcribed.)

Kyriakoudes: Have you seen any change in the amount of crabs coming out of these waters here?

Lipps: The spillway, the following years, (inaudible) any crabs, but for some reason they always say it hurts the lake [Lake Pontchartrain]. It don't hurt the lake. It replenishes the lake. It hurts it while it's open because that cold water coming in the lake, and then the crabs will move further out because of that cold water, but it don't hurt the lake. It helps replenish it. (0:01:34.8) This year we're going to have—that box of crabs that guy brought me, I had at least 40 percent of them was nothing but select crabs. We don't normally get big, select that much. You might get one dozen per box. This time we got at least three dozen per box.

Kyriakoudes: I guess there's so much nutrients in that river water.

Lipps: Right. That's what it is. I don't know why they say it hurts it. I wish they'd leave it open just a little crack all year long (inaudible) it would bring that temperature, and they'd get used to that temperature. They would still stay on this end of the lake because the spillway's only a mile—

Kyriakoudes: Right. I know. I saw it coming through.

Lipps: Three miles from here.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Why don't you just take us through the whole process of working the crabs here to make the softshells? (0:02:13.3)

Lipps: Well, when you get the crab, the shedders, they have a little, on the flipper of the crab they got a little, red line. It's called a red line. It takes a red line anywhere from twenty-four hours, seventy-two hours to shed, up to seventy-two hours. All the fishermen, when they bring them in, they check their red lines because we give them a dollar a crab for them. And I used to catch them. I have six hundred traps, and I used to shed softshells here. I did on average fifteen, twenty dozen a day before [Hurricane] Katrina. (0:02:39.5) After Katrina, for some reason we had two feet of water in this building; put a lot of salt over here. For the last four years I never averaged a dozen a day. Couldn't catch them. And I was buying them from four fishermen besides mine. Just couldn't get them. The salinity of the water hurt them on this end of the lake for a long time. Now, last year after they closed the spillway, again, the spillway helped it. Right after they closed it, it went up to three to five dozen of softshells a day, my two boys I used to buy from. So this year if they show up, I'm going to start shedding softshells, again, but with the restaurant it's kind of hard because it's just three days a week I work the restaurant. But when I close, I mean, during the week, I got to watch them all night long, just be, every two hours you got to come get them. If not, they turn paper-shell, (0:03:24.7) and they not restaurant-grade at that point.

Kyriakoudes: OK. And so could you explain, just for the record, just the way you got the red line crabs. And are you giving them salinity, more salt, less salt? How is the—

Lipps: I actually use well water, and it's got a half a part per million salt content. The lake [Lake Pontchartrain] is three parts per million. Now, after the storm it went up to eight parts per million, so I had to bring the salinity up in the tank. But right now, the last two years, I don't even use salt at all. (0:03:54.0) I got away from it. I just use the well water, but I turn my crab over kind of fast. The red lines, like I said, is three days, usually, they shed. Plus I run well water through here. That tank there is 3500 gallons for these back tanks, and I got 7000 gallons inside. Inside I got the shedding tanks. (0:04:13.9) Come see the shedding tanks, filtration tanks. See, there's a filter bed here. That's just like an aquarium. You got to have filter bed in order for the bacteria to eat the waste from the crabs and the crawfish. I got a tank there and then all filter beds. And I got 7000 gallons of water, so if I load all these tanks up at one time, most people would overload the system, which means they going to be so much ammonia from them peeing and poohing, whatever, they drown in they own waste. By me having 7000 gallons of water, bigger volume, I don't lose as much as most people. LSU [Louisiana State University] says it's normally—I want to say they said 5 or 10 percent loss every day, what you lose. I don't really lose that because I turn my water over too much.

Kyriakoudes: And I mean, do you test the water, or do you just know by looking at it?

Lipps: No. You can test it, but if you see foam on top of the water, that's ammonia. And right away, I'll flush my tank. (0:05:08.2) Most of the time now, I just leave the

well water, I'll leave that running. That's this pipe here. It actually comes straight out the well, and I constantly, when they're loaded up, it's constantly refreshing this tank. So it's hard to overload the system.

Hester: How long have you been doing this, Louis?

Lipps: This is my seventh year. Seventh year with the restaurant. I actually was shedding four years before that, since I moved here. We moved here back in 2001, and I had four tanks underneath the house. Then I added this building. Now, I've got twenty-three tanks altogether.

Kyriakoudes: It looks fun. I want to come out here when you're open. (laughter)

Lipps: The crawfish, you see the crawfish in there. (0:05:52.3) They got, just by them being in that water overnight, they clean themselves so good that you never taste mud in my crawfish. (inaudible)

Kyriakoudes: Yeah, oh, yeah, very clean.

Hester: Yeah. Is this the softshell crawfish?

Lipps: You got to go through them. These are hard to tell when they going to shed because they're a dark crawfish. But if you get them farm-raised, they got a tan look to them. When they turn brown-greenish-looking—some people call it cocoa brown—the whole crawfish'll turn one shade. You got to actually go through every crawfish kind of and grade them. See where it's dark here and light here?

Hester: Uh-huh.

Lipps: It's all going to be one color. At that point he'll shed within three days. (0:06:37.2) And it's a pain. It's more time-consuming than doing softshell crab, more labor intensive I should say because you got to look at so many of them. (inaudible) It's hard to pick them out of here. If this was farm-raised and they were tan-looking, the dark will show up just like that. And it's easy to pick them. Then you got to separate them from the other ones. If you don't, when they come out, they'll eat each other. Same with the crabs. If you don't pull a crab out, they'll eat each other.

Kyriakoudes: You might have said this. I didn't hear you. Do you get your crawfish just from trappers locally that deliver them?

Lipps: Lady comes from Lafayette. She's got two ponds. (0:07:24.7) One's fifty acre and one's forty acre, ponds, and she brings them to me the same day. When she brings them to me the same day, I might lose three or four crawfish a sack. These other guys who I've been fighting for the last five years, they want to bring them to you the next day, and they got them packed on ice, I lose anywhere from two to seven pounds a sack. And it's real labor intensive at that point. Hers, I wash them real fast.

I can wash seven sacks in less than a half hour with her. The other guys with seven sacks would take me three hours because I got to pick out all the dead. And then they're weak, and they die more. Only one's that are dying here, right now, when they get hungry, they eat each other. Other than that, they not going to die. These are healthy crawfish. This is more of a pond-raised here. See the color?

Hester: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Lipps: And this one (inaudible). All these pond-raised ones, she's right next to the Atchafalaya Basin, (0:08:17.0) so basically she's got basin crawfish and very few regular pond ones. That's a different crawfish (inaudible).

Hester: Yeah. It's interesting.

Lipps: The other pond people, they will bring you this type of crawfish.

Hester: Yeah. And this is to sell in your restaurant. (0:08:34.2)

Lipps: Yeah.

Hester: Do you ever sell outside to other people?

Lipps: Yeah. I sell live to people when they place a order ahead of time because I order enough for my restaurant, and if you don't call me a day before, you don't get crawfish. I can't afford to cut my restaurant short. But if I tell you, "You got them," you got them. (inaudible) But I always make sure I got extra (inaudible).

Hester: All right. Well, shall we maybe set up so we could sit around a table or something and just—

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Even under these. Just ask you some questions about how you got started.

Lipps: Yeah. We'll go to the restaurant. (0:09:07.8)

Lipps: Do y'all edit this? I hope.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. And we'll send you a copy. Don't worry about that.

Hester: This is Barbara Hester with the University of Southern Mississippi, the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. And I'm here today with Louis Lipps. He has The Crab Trap seafood business here in LaPlace. He's right on the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Today is Monday, March 12, 2012, and it's about ten minutes to three in the afternoon. Thank you so much for having us here today, Mr. Lipps.

Lipps: You welcome.

Hester: If you would, for the record, would you state your name and address?

Lipps: Louis Lipps. (The address of the interviewee has not been transcribed in order to protect his privacy.)

Hester: And what is your occupation?

Lipps: I run the restaurant and do softshell crabs.

Hester: OK. How long have you been doing this?

Lipps: The restaurant, we've been there seven years.

Hester: Seven years in the restaurant. And how long have you been crabbing?

Lipps: Many, many years. I used to have a place in Little Woods, lived on the water, back in [19]83.

Hester: So we were in Delacroix this morning. That would have been pretty close to where you started out?

Lipps: It's (inaudible) Boulevard, in New Orleans East, yeah. It's about halfway there.

Hester: So you were crabbing in the Gulf of Mexico then?

Lipps: No. Lake Pontchartrain, the south shore. This is the west end of the lake, and that was south.

Hester: Um-hm. Well, could you tell us a little bit about how you came into the crabbing profession or the seafood, commercial seafood business? (0:11:03.3)

Lipps: Well, back in [19]68 my daddy ran a seafood wharf up in Venice, Louisiana, for George Danos(?). And I used to run crab traps up there in one of the canals and sell my crabs on the weekend and my fish. And then I went in the printing business for about twenty years, and I always went fishing every weekend with my kids out of Fourchon. And my girlfriend wanted to move. Well, I lived in New Orleans East for about five years at a camp, and I crabbled over there for five years and then moved in with this other lady, Sharon Blanchard(?). And she wanted to move close to LaPlace to help her daughter with her weight problem, be walking and exercising and all that. And we would come across the bridge, and I seen these camps back here. So I said, "We're going to go find that, wherever I got to go to find it." So soon as we came back here, we bought property, moved back here. That was back in 2001. The first year we worked on getting the house ready and all that. And the following year I

started shedding softshells underneath the house. Then I added that big, metal building, that forty-by-sixty Quonset hut, and I started shedding crab in there. And I did that for four years. And then after that I had a snowball stand upstairs where my restaurant is right now, and I was (inaudible) off that other restaurant across the street, called Pebonne's(?) Snack Shack. Well, after Katrina, they decide one day they going to open, and one day they not going to open because they were burned out on the restaurant. And I told my girlfriend—this went on for about five, six weeks. I said, "I ain't waiting on nobody to make up my livelihood for me." Not that we lived off of snowballs only, but my crabbing, that was our little side money to snowballs. I decided to start boiling seafood because I always boiled, anyway, for my family. And that's seven years ago. So here we are. (0:12:48.6)

Hester: And you opened The Crab Trap Restaurant—

Lipps: Yes.

Hester: And seven years ago.

Lipps: Yes.

Hester: Going back to your working with your dad in Venice, did he do anything other than crabbing? (0:13:02.2)

Lipps: Well, my daddy actually bought seafood for the George Danos Factory, bought shrimp and fish, and I helped him on the wharf, plus I had my little traps out, less than a block from where his business was.

Hester: So he was sort of a middleman or dealer?

Lipps: Yes.

Hester: He didn't actually go out and catch the—

Lipps: No. He was just a buyer. And I worked with many of the fishermen up there. If they needed a deckhand, (0:13:25.5) I'd go work with them when I'd need to.

Hester: Could you tell us a little bit about your experiences there when you were—how old were you at that time?

Lipps: Eighteen.

Hester: And could you tell us a little bit about what was involved, the equipment you would use maybe?

Lipps: Mainly worked on the Lafitte skiffs, sometimes a little double-rigger. The double-riggers go out anywheres five to seven days, called ice boats. That's kind of

long, seven days on the water. But (inaudible) anybody just needed help that day, or they would let you know a day ahead of time, and you'd just jump on the boat. You'd get a third of whatever the catch is. They take out expenses, share for the boat, share for me the deckhand, and a share for the owner. That's the way they work it.

Hester: And what were you mostly going out for?

Lipps: Shrimp, mainly shrimping back then, yeah.

Hester: And when did you start going into crabbing?

Lipps: I did that in between. Back in [19]68 I had my own crab traps, and I ran my own little boat down the canal, which is only a block from where the wharf was. So I been in crabbing quite a while.

Hester: Can you describe how you would go about catching the shrimp, and how you would go about catching the crabs? (0:14:40.0)

Lipps: Well, the crabs, just put them out, wherever line you want to put out. In my case up there, it was just a canal, so I'd put them all out on one side the canal. Every two days, three days, you go run them, pick them up, and rebait them. And I had a big box by our house, in the water, where I could just throw them all in a box on the weekend. I'd winch the box up and pull the crab out and sell them. It was hard to sell them during the week up there in Venice. You get all these sports fishermen come down; they want to go back with seafood, so we sold them. Trawl boats, some had regular trawl that you pulled, bottom trawlers, and some had wing-nets. Back then they didn't have skimmers. Nobody knew what a skimmer was.

Hester: Can you describe a skimmer? (0:15:22.1)

Lipps: It's basically like a butterfly rig, but it don't have a bottom frame to it. It's just got a weight, and it'll go along the shoreline. If the shoreline gets shallow, the skimmer will actually come out the water. It won't bind and dig in like a butterfly net would. Butterflies don't work in shallow water.

Hester: And could you explain the butterfly net? (0:15:44.7)

Lipps: It's just a big, square frame. Some people got them ten-by-twelve. That's small ones, ten feet by twelve. Depends on the size of the boat. And they just drop down like big wing nets, like butterfly wings, and you just push real slow. Most of the time it works in the channels like Rigolets, (inaudible) Gulf Outlet; sometime they drop them in there. You got to have current, or you could push it, but you got to have some current.

Hester: So for the butterfly you would need the current.

Lipps: Right.

Hester: But for the skimmer?

Lipps: The skimmer you just go along the canal, from what I understand. I never worked a skimmer. I've just seen them, and I know how they work, but I've never actually been on a skimmer boat.

Hester: Did you ever go out into the Gulf waters?

Lipps: Oh, yes.

Hester: And is that when you would use the trawl net?

Lipps: Right. You use a bottom trawl for that.

Hester: And could you describe it for anybody who's listening to this? (0:16:36.3)

Lipps: Depending on the size of the trawl and the boat, again, your trawl'll be—be sixty feet of water, but you might have 300 foot of rope on your trawl because it pulls way away from your boat. Some guys like the wheel-wash into the trawl. They pull it up closer; they think it helps kick the shrimp in there. But everybody's got their own theory. Most people have it way behind their boat, and when they in the Gulf, they just go zigzag back and forth, basically, try to keep the wheel-wash out. Some want it in; some don't.

Hester: Would you market the shrimp in the same way that you marketed the crabs? (0:17:13.4)

Lipps: The shrimp, you just take them to the wharf, and they got a new price every day. They set a price for it; depends on how much came in that day. If they're not catching plenty, the price stays high. If they catch plenty, they drop it big-time on you.

Hester: And did you sell to the individuals, or did you sell to a dealer?

Lipps: Them guys up there, they used to sell to my daddy at the wharf. I used to buy them from my daddy, and I used to, during the week, I'd come down to New Orleans, and I would peddle the shrimp on the street. (0:17:40.8) I had a little, [19]54 Chevy station wagon, and I had a icebox in there. And I used to weigh them in the cooler at the dock in five- to ten-pound bags, Ziploc bags. I didn't weigh them on the street. If anybody wanted them, they had to buy five pounds. And of course, I had two old ladies, they could never eat five pounds, so I always had to split the bag. I said, "Well, I'll split. Y'all got to pick out whose got the most shrimp."

Hester: So you said that you went into the printing business. Well, let me ask you this first. Did you do any finfishing or oystering?

Lipps: No. I just rod-fished, and that's it, at Fourchon. We used to do that for seven straight years. (0:18:19.7) I used to take my family down there, my two boys and every kid in the neighborhood. For seven straight years we used to go down Fourchon beach, spend the whole weekend on the beach. But far as catching, gillnetting fish and all that, no, never did that.

Hester: What made you decide to go into the printing business and get out of the seafood business?

Lipps: Because seafood back then was seasonal, (0:18:43.9) so when the seafood was over, I found a job at a print shop. A friend, my neighbor when I lived on (inaudible) Street, New Orleans, says, "You want a job printing?" I said, "What's printing?" He said, "Running machines." I said, "What's a machine?" Had no clue how it was done or what it was done on. So I went to work for Busy(?) Printing, and after four months, I left and went to Harvey(?) Press, and I worked, basically it was a label company. I can't think of the name of it, Mandola(?) Brothers for a year. He's the longest one I ever worked for. After that I got my own print shop with my mother and my sister, and I did that for about fifteen to eighteen years, somewheres up in there. Then I got out of that because my thirteen employees drove me nuts, literally nuts. And I got out of that, and I went to buying and selling printing equipment. But in the meantime I still went to Fourchon beach. Every weekend we went fishing or crabbing with my family. I did that constantly. That's what I lived for. So going in this business was a snap, was a no-brainer. I love being around seafood. I love being around water. (0:19:52.8)

Hester: Well, tell me, over the course of your career, and starting out in Fourchon and then coming back into it, have you noticed any particular challenges? Were there any restrictions or laws or anything that affected your practice of commercial fishing?

Lipps: You always had to get your license, you know. (0:20:19.0) I mean, that wasn't no—in Venice, I didn't even have a license back then. I just put my crab pots out. We didn't worry about the (inaudible) for some reason. Back then they weren't real strict. Now, they watch everything.

Hester: You're the first person that I've interviewed that actually fished in Lake Pontchartrain, so I don't know if there's a difference between the Gulf laws and lake laws. Can you talk about that any?

Lipps: From what I understand, if you're catching shedders in Lake Pontchartrain, you're not required to put a—it's a two-and-five-eighths-inch hole, I think, rings, they call them, on the side your trap. Every trap's supposed to have two of them. From what I understand, in Lake Pontchartrain you don't need them; however, if you catch anything under five inches, you got to throw back in the water. If it's a shedder, it

could be any size. It could be three inches, you can keep it, as long as it's a shedder, but you also got to get a shedder's license for that.

Kyriakoudes: So the ring on the Gulf crab—

Lipps: (inaudible)

Kyriakoudes: —allows the softshell crab to squeeze out.

Lipps: The smaller crab, period, yes. Now, I don't know why they don't enforce it in Lake Pontchartrain. They enforce it in the Gulf. I don't understand that, but you're going to throw it over anyway, if it's less than five inches. But that's what I was told, and that's what I read up on. In Lake Pontchartrain you don't need them.

Hester: What about female and male crabs? Are there any restrictions on—

Lipps: The females, you can't keep them if they have a sponge on them. Now, in the Gulf you'll catch them with the sponge, which is the eggs, this big, orange cluster on the bottom of the crab. Lake Pontchartrain, you'll never catch a female with a sponge on it. Like I was telling the gentleman in the back, Lake Pontchartrain is a brackish lake. (0:22:11.6) On this end it's three parts per million. By the Seabrook Bridge it's probably going to be about fifteen parts per million, and from what I understand, the Gulf is like twenty-one parts per million. The females lay their eggs in high salinity waters. They will never lay them in the lake, so they don't get their sponge in the lake. I used to fish the south shore. On this end of the lake and on the west side here, you might catch one female for every five hundred males. On that side, you'll catch one male for every five hundred females. (0:22:37.4) So that's all I used to catch over there, when I did that for five years over there because that's where the Rigolets and the Mississippi Gulf Outlet comes in and comes into the industrial canal and dumps into the lake. That's more salt content, so the females have a tendency to stay there. They don't migrate on this end of the lake. And as many females I caught over there, I've never caught one with a sponge in Lake Pontchartrain, not one time.

Hester: That's amazing. So you left the printing business, and you came out here, and you started with the—

Lipps: With four tanks underneath my house, yes.

Hester: Yeah. Can you talk about that period of your career?

Lipps: It was hectic. You come down in the middle of the night, and every two hours you supposed to check your crab, and you got to fight the mosquitoes, but in the building made it a lot better. For the first two years, I used to get up every twenty minutes. (0:23:31.6) I used to live in the shed, back there. I slept on a 1956 Chevy seat, and I had a darkroom clock, and it would buzz. And I'd set it for every twenty, thirty minutes. Well, when you get up, sometime you stay up because you see some

come out. I used to want to take them out in twenty minutes, not two hours, because I hate paper-shell crab. (inaudible) two-hour crabs are paper-shell. And all shedding facilities do a two-hour trip around the clock, so when you go to a restaurant, two-thirds of those crab are going to be kind of paper-shell. Only one-fourth of them is going to be what I call softshell, a true softshell. I've ate softshell (inaudible). I've ate them at (inaudible). And both times—this is years and years ago, before I was even in the shedding business—they were paper-shell, and I didn't enjoy them. (0:24:20.0) And I don't like selling something that I don't enjoy. So for the first two years I actually got up every twenty, thirty minutes around the clock and do the softshells. Well, my dealer who I sell to, (0:24:32.5) he said, "Louis, I don't care if you do them two hours, because when you do them two hours, they stretch, and they look bigger," which is true because all the wrinkles come out of them. And he says, "And that's what they used to buying." So at that point I started at night, I do a two-hour shift. During the day, I'm in there all day long, back and forth. And those I would sell to people in the restaurant, over here across the street. They got to a point where they were selling twelve to fifteen dozen every [Friday]. Every Friday they would go through that. And I got at least seven, eight major restaurants that eat at my place here, (inaudible), Fourchon's, (inaudible), all them big-time restaurants come here to eat my barbecue shrimp and all, and I ask every one of them, "What's the most softshells you sell on Friday night?" And they say, "Three to four dozen." So they were selling more than three or four major restaurants in the city here because I gave them a true softshell crab, which was better tasting. It wasn't a shell taste. They had a fried crunch to it, not a shell taste. So that's why they did over a million a year in that little, bitty hole in the wall there.

Kyriakoudes: Were you one of the first restaurants to locate at the end of this road?

Lipps: No. It was Pea Vine(?) Snack Shack over there, and then we built a snowball—we built this building for the snowball stand upstairs. And I was just giving my girlfriend something to do on the weekend. We picked up a few bucks doing that, plus I was doing my softshell crab for me. And again, right after Katrina, (0:26:03.0) Barbara and Chip(?) at the Pea Vine Snack Shack, they got burned out. So they were thinking about not opening for five, six weeks, and went back and forth. One week, they open; one week, they ain't going to open. That's when I stepped up and told her, I said—and we were feeding off of them for the snowballs. And I just told my girlfriend, I said, "I'm not waiting for nobody to make up my mind." I said, "I'm just going to do boiled seafood only." If Cane's can sell just chicken and French fries, I can sell just boiled seafood and make it. And I do very well with it. I don't do no fry. I won't fry nothing if they brought it here. I don't want to (inaudible) because that means I got to get another employee to fry, another one to prep, and I could have the best softshells in the state, far as I'm concerned, but I just don't want to do it. I don't need more employees. I had that once, thirteen of them.

Kyriakoudes: It seems to me this has become a real, like a destination.

Lipps: That's what it is. Just like Mendoss(?). That's why Mendoss is so popular. They been there since 1934, and it's a destination. It's not location, location, location. We're a destination. And unfortunately Pea Vine sold out to another young guy. It took him a year and a half to gamble it away, so they closed. And it stayed vacant for two years. And then this other gentleman bought it, and he leased it to these other two young guys, and they lasted one year, and they closed. Now, for Near Landing?) over here, they're a fou-fou restaurant. They're high-priced, little bit of food for your money. You want to read all about it, look up Urban Spoon. I ain't going to say nothing more about them. (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: Fair enough.

Hester: You also go out, and you crab in the lake, and you get your crabs. Could you talk about that process some? (0:27:40.2)

Lipps: Well, before I opened the restaurant, I used to have 600 traps out there, and that's the way I used to catch all my shedders, and I would buy off of three or four other fishermen, buy their shedders. That's why I was doing fifteen, twenty dozen softshells a day there for a while. After Katrina, that's when I opened the restaurant, and I turned my traps over to a buddy of mine that lives right over here, and he was running them, and we did a third split, just like we do on the boats in Venice, a third, third, and a third, after expenses. But we down to maybe 150, 200 traps all we got left. And that's been five years ago. So they don't last forever.

Hester: How much would 150 traps produce? How many crabs would you get out of that in a day?

Lipps: I really don't remember the numbers. It's been five years since I touched a trap. I been in this restaurant, well, actually seven years. I just haven't been running, but they got a couple guys go out, two brothers. They run 350 traps a day, and they'll come with fifteen, eighteen boxes of crab, and it's usually about average sixty pounds per box. They're the two best fishermen out here. And another guy by the name of Phil Tucker. He's very good. That's the three main crabbers. My guy with 200 traps, he might run 50 or 75 a day. It's no real count I can get out of him. He doesn't do it for a living. These other guys do it.

Kyriakoudes: To pay the bills.

Lipps: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: Some of the people we've been talking to have said that, particularly on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and areas like around Pascagoula, they felt like some of the fisheries are not as productive as they used to be. We get a mixed picture on that. But I was wondering if you have any sense, or not, of this fishery here? Has it always been good? Has it changed any direction, or no? (0:29:32.9)

Lipps: We got a lot of people who just like to cry with a loaf of bread on their arm. It's like anything else. People complain because they want to get more, or they complain because they want to go up on their price. I don't buy none of that. There's a lot out there to be caught. You just get out there and work for it. I don't see where it hurt me. Now, two years ago when BP happened, (0:30:00.0) yeah, the crab went up from \$2.25 a pound to \$3.00 a pound. Well, I had to go up on my price. The public paid for it. I mean, I make the same price regardless what I pay for it. I mark it up the same thing every time. So did it hurt me? No. In reality, it didn't. Did I collect money from BP? Yeah. I collected a few bucks from BP, but not what I should have collected. And again, a lot of people cry for nothing. I don't think it hurt the lake at all.

Hester: Could you expound a little more, talk a little more about the effects of the BP oil spill on Lake Pontchartrain and the businesses around?

Lipps: Well, actually, it never did actually get in the lake. They said it got in by Slidell, by the north shore. They said they had a little slick over there. Did I see it? No. Was it mentioned a lot? No. I didn't hear it mentioned a lot. I just heard it was over there, which entitled anybody that fished Lake Pontchartrain, at that point, for BP. Far as hurting the business, not my business. I mean, I do top-quality, fresh stuff. You see my setup back there. I won't buy it if it's not fresh. I won't buy it if it ain't live. I won't sell it if it ain't live. I really didn't have a big effect from it. And I did start selling Dungeness crab because we had less—I can't say we had less crab. I just did it because a lot of people didn't want to pay the high price of the crab because it went up. So I did put Dungeness crab to substitute for the ones that wanted that, but this year I'm not fooling with Dungeness. We have more crab than we know what to do with this year.

Hester: Oh, so it's going to be a good year this year?

Lipps: Because of the spillway. (0:31:38.8) They opened the spillway last year. We going to have an abundance of crab this year. If somebody tell you different, they lying.

Hester: My thoughts are going to, when you were describing the fact that the male crabs are further north, and the female crabs like the greater salinity, I guess the female crabs would have been more—would they have been more affected by the storm? Can you talk about that a little bit?

Lipps: If that oil slick hit Fourchon Beach—I've actually seen them shed their eggs at Fourchon Beach one time. (0:32:08.2) It was a phenomenal sight. I mean, we got there on a Friday night, and Saturday morning at eleven o'clock, the (inaudible) broke loose. When we got there Saturday morning, maybe from the shoreline, twenty feet out, solid crab, nothing but females with the sponge on them. And when they started shedding their eggs, you ain't seen a sight like this in your life. I mean, the full length of the beach, everybody was going nuts, scooping up fish. We threw a cast net and

caught two and a half boxes of speckled trout, throwing a cast net (0:32:36.2) on speckled trout. One guy grabbed a gigantic redfish. He had one of them big, round nets. He ran it up on shore and actually grabbed him. He was a block away, and you could hear him screaming, and you could see how big the fish was. Eight flounders ran up on the bank. They had so many flounders. It was like groups of trout, and it would be moving after—the tide would be bringing it down, maybe one mile an hour, two miles an hour. If you stay in the same spot, you could see trout, then redfish, then flounders. It was phenomenal. When eight flounders ran up on the banks, and my exwife stabbed them with a knife to get them, that's a lot of fish. And it lasted about twenty, twenty-five minutes. And when it was over, you wouldn't have ever knew it happened. There wasn't a fish to be found. There wasn't a dead crab to be found. They spawned their eggs. And that article I was telling you I pulled up on the Internet, it said each female sheds seven hundred fifty to eight million eggs per crab. They need to because the amount of fish that was there to eat it. When they shed, they look like they're a plankton, a microorganism, and they look like a shrimp-like crustacean for the first five weeks, before they even look like a crab. That's what that article—I'm going to find it for you before you leave.

Hester: And this was the first time you'd ever seen anything like that.

Lipps: It was the first time I seen that, one time. I'd love to see it every time, just to see it, even if I didn't have a cast net, just—it was phenomenal.

Hester: What time of year—

Lipps: That's in August.

Hester: What year?

Lipps: Had to be at least ten years ago. No. More than that. I been here eleven. I'm with Sharon fifteen. About eighteen years ago.

Hester: Well, to go back to the male crab and the female crabs in the southern part of the lake, if the BP oil spill affected the lake any, would it impact the female crabs more?

Lipps: It would hurt they eggs, yes. If that slick got, in August, late August, normally when they shed their eggs, if that oil slick was along that Gulf Coast, I think it would have hurt us big-time because it would have killed a lot of the larvae and all. I don't know exact timing when all that really happens, so I don't know. On the other hand, if the oil slick was out there, it might have kept the females on the inside, along the Mississippi Gulf Outlet and along the marsh and all. If they stayed inside and they shed their eggs there, what brings their little, bitty egg—we got little, bitty crab in the lake, like this. You would think they shed over here, but they don't. The tides bring them in. So if they shed their eggs, and there's a big surge, especially if they shed they eggs and we get a storm out in the Gulf, the current brings them in. That's when

we have an ample supply. And they telling me they got a lot of little crab out there right now, so that's a good sign.

Hester: Well, we talked a little bit about Katrina. Could you describe how this area was hit by Katrina? (0:35:26.6)

Lipps: You sitting in water right now. It was seven feet above sea level, and the street out here is two feet above sea level, and this is five, so we had about two feet in here. And across the street, the Shed's six feet above sea level, and they had a foot in there for Katrina. [Hurricane] Gustav, we had seven, a foot and a half in there. It was seven and a half feet above sea level.

Hester: How does that affect your business?

Lipps: I'm closed about three or four weeks, but that's why it's like it is. I hose down everything. I raised that up a couple feet on blocks, my coolers. This year I got to raise that stuff in the shed, or I'm in trouble because I got more stuff, and I'm doing all that "Storage Wars" stuff.

Kyriakoudes: Did you get any help? I mean, did volunteers help you after the storm?

Lipps: Nah, me, myself, and I; me and my girlfriend. We the only ones stay back. I'm the only one stays. She stays if it's under a Category Three; she'll stay, but Four or Five, she goes. I left for Katrina because it was a Five. I left. See, Katrina hit Monday. I left Sunday, and I came back Tuesday morning. I was walking in water up to my chest and pulling my generator and her in a canoe. So we just stayed back here till they turned the lights on. But I'm prepared. I got generators, and I bring an ample supply of gas.

Hester: How long did it take to get your business up and running again?

Lipps: About a week and a half, two weeks at the most.

Hester: And was it a slow process of getting the same volume of clientele coming in?

Lipps: Oh, no. When the roads clear, they come, yeah. They'll call and make sure I'm open. It don't stop. It's a destination. People want to get out, and it's good weather. This weekend if it's good weather, be the first time—Sunday, yesterday was really good, but we ain't hit our record. Usually during Lent we slammed big-time. On Friday night you won't have a place to sit in here, but it's got to be good weather, makes people want to get out.

Hester: When you first opened the restaurant, up until today, would you say that it's been pretty level operation, or has it been, have you had some—

Lipps: Last year was record numbers, and I actually had a young boy I was training, him and his wife the six weeks I stayed with them. And they lasted eleven weeks, and I had to get rid of them because they weren't on the same page no more. But they did record numbers, way more than I've ever done. So I expect to do even more this year because I'm back. I lost a few people because of it. They weren't doing the same thing that they're supposed to be, and like I said, when you sit there and argue in front of a customer or something, that don't work. I told them that up front, "There won't be no arguing; won't be no discussion. I put you in this business 100 percent." They never put up a penny. And I'm not going to tolerate it because I had thirteen employees before in another business, and I don't put up with no employees. I do it myself.

Hester: I know it shows in the success of the business. This is great. It's a great place. Do you have any other—

Kyriakoudes: No. This is good. We covered a lot of ground.

Hester: Yeah. Before we shut it down, is there anything that you might want to put on the record? I mean, this record is going to be there longer than I'm around. So this is an opportunity to maybe say something about your business or commercial fishing.

Lipps: I don't see where Katrina—the only thing I can say, when they open the spillway, I don't care what any of them geniuses say, it helps the lake. When they stopped the dredging, that definitely helped the lake. (0:39:07.0) Why they didn't do it sooner? Politics, I guess. They should have shut that down a long time ago. But the lake's a lot cleaner than it has been because they stopped the dredging; they opened the spillway. It helps every time. It hurts it while it's open. It was open two or three months last year. It hurt us, and the price of crab went up a little bit. I had to go further to get my crab, but far as my business, it picks up every year. So far this year's start is slow, but you can see I got a open atmosphere here. And every weekend we hit cold weather, wind. That's why all this plastic's here. Soon as it warms up, that'll all roll up, and we got fans, and it stays comfortable in here. It's not no air-conditioning, but it stays comfortable. But I did open upstairs, and I have heat and air upstairs now, plus I got the railing. And you can overlook the lake; a little bit more atmosphere.

Hester: That's nice.

Kyriakoudes: That's nice. That's very nice.

Lipps: Yeah. But far as—

Hester: I've got one final question. What is your favorite type of seafood to eat?

Lipps: Crabs. (laughter) Lake Pontchartrain crabs. Ain't nothing better; 10:30 every morning I sit down and eat breakfast before I open. (laughter) I call it breakfast. I get my fair share every week.

Hester: I'm definitely a fan of crabs.

Lipps: Yeah. And these Lake Pontchartrain, we just have the cleanest, sweetest meat you ever taste. And I never season none of my stuff where—I season it well, but I don't make it hot where it burns your lips. If you make it too hot, you burn off the sweetness of the meat. You can't taste it. And the way you tell that, if I get you a skinny crab, and they got a lot of juice in it, you won't taste the meat as good as you will a fat crab. Now, I had one lady complain, "Why the crabs so dry? You let him soak long enough?" I said, "Baby, when they're full, you can't get juice in them. If you want skinny crab, I'll get you all the juice you want. You want skinny crab?" "Oh, no. I'm happy with these." (laughter) Well, can't have both ways.

Hester: Yeah. I understand that completely. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate your doing this interview with us.

Lipps: No problem.

Kyriakoudes: Thank you for taking the time.

Lipps: All right.

Hester: And I'll go ahead and turn this off.

(end of interview)