

Mississippi Oral History Program

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Thang “Peter” Nguyen

Interviewer: Linda VanZandt

Volume 1043
2012

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An Oral History with Thang “Peter” Nguyen, Volume 1043

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Biography

Mr. Thang “Peter” Nguyen was born in 1967 in Vung Tau, South Vietnam. His parents were fisherfolk and told him the story of escaping Vietnam in the family boat two weeks before the Communists took over South Vietnam, when Mr. Nguyen was just eight years old. They were intercepted by an American ship and stayed briefly in Guam before being sponsored by the Catholic Church first to Minnesota, then to Oklahoma, Texas, and finally to New Orleans, Louisiana.

In 1979, Mr. Nguyen’s uncle, Mau Nguyen, and extended family were recruited by the Gollott Seafood Company to work in the processing industry in Biloxi, Mississippi. After one year, they moved to Biloxi where Mr. Nguyen has spent most of his life. He attended Biloxi High School but made shrimping his full-time occupation beginning at age eighteen when he became captain of his father’s boat. In 2000 Mr. Nguyen purchased his own boat. After losing his boat in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Mr. Nguyen worked with the Biloxi office of National Alliance for Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA), then began work as a liaison to the Vietnamese fishing community through his position as Fisheries Technologist at the Mississippi State University Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi. He is married and has four children.

Table of Contents

Memories of Vung Tau, Vietnam	1, 37
Arrival in United States	1
Leaving Vietnam in fishing boat, ahead of Communist takeover	2
American ship picked them up, sojourn at Guam	2
Life in the United States, shucking oysters in Louisiana	2
Uncle who is fisherman, first Vietnamese family in Mississippi	3
More Vietnamese families arrive to make a living in seafood industry	5
Building fishing boats	5
Price paid for catch, fuel costs	5, 12
Shucking oysters, Vietnamese work ethic	6
Vietnamese community in Biloxi, large family of Nguyens	7
Deckhands learn to shrimp	8
Infrastructure for shrimpers	8, 14, 16
Helping his parents shrimp	9
Family obligation facilitated his becoming a shrimper at age eighteen	9
Making a good living fishing	12
Marketing catch	13
Challenges after Hurricane Katrina	14
Safe harbors announced for mooring boats as Hurricane Katrina approached	15
Shrimp on his freezer boat before Hurricane Katrina, shrimp factory closes	16
Infrastructure for shrimpers gone after Hurricane Katrina	16
Underpaid for shrimp catch after Hurricane Katrina	17
Regulations	17
Turtle excluder devices	17
Making a living shrimping after Hurricane Katrina was difficult	17
Bank repossesses his boat	18
Working in hurricane-recovery demolition	18
Working for the MSU Coastal Research and Extension Center	19
Duties as Vietnamese liaison at MSU Coastal Research and Extension Center	20
Best experiences shrimping	21
How fishermen coped after Katrina	22
BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster	25
Gulf fishing and shrimping waters closed	25
Vessels of Opportunity	25
State of shrimping, circa 2011/2012	27
Imported shrimp, high fuel costs	29
Assessment of future of seafood industry	29
Regulations	29, 41
New technology for shrimping	30
His multigenerational fishing family ends with his fishing career	33
Characteristics of successful commercial fishermen	34
Mutuality and reciprocity in Vietnamese fishing community	36
Communists' reprisals against people of South Vietnam	38
Meaning of being an American in America	41

Safety training for Vietnamese fishermen	44
Language issues regarding lost-income claims against BP	45
White shrimp season, 2011, freshwater intrusion	45

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

THANG “PETER” NGUYEN

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Thang “Peter” Nguyen and is taking place on February 16, 2012. The interviewer is Linda VanZandt.

VanZandt: This is Linda VanZandt with the Center for Oral History at The University of Southern Mississippi. Today is February 16, 2012, and I’m here in Biloxi, Mississippi, at the offices of the Mississippi State University Coastal Research Center. Is that the correct name?

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: OK. And I’m here with Peter Nguyen, and we’re going to do sort of a life history and a history of his time in the fishing industry here in Biloxi and in Vietnam. And we’ll see what we can get to, and we may have to do a part two, if we don’t get finished today, at another time. But thanks for being here, Peter.

Nguyen: Thank you.

VanZandt: This has been a long time coming.

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: And if you can, spell your name for the record.

Nguyen: My name is Peter Nguyen, P-E-T-E-R, N-G-U-Y-E-N.

VanZandt: And was that your Vietnamese name?

Nguyen: My Vietnamese name is Thang Nguyen, T-H-A-N-G, N-G-U-Y-E-N.

VanZandt: OK. And Peter, where and when were you born?

Nguyen: I was born in Vung Tau, Vietnam, 1967.

VanZandt: OK. And Vung Tau, V-U-N-G, T-A-U?

Nguyen: V-U-N-G, T-A-U.

VanZandt: OK, which is a beautiful fishing village.

Nguyen: Yeah. That’s where my dad grew up in Vietnam, and I was young. Well, when I came to the United States, I was, I think, about eight or nine years old, with my family. We got sponsored by a Catholic church from Minnesota, Minneapolis, a very

huge community of a Catholic church over there. We came over. They sponsored all of our relative. We have about, uncle, and we say in the family about, I think about ten family altogether, so.

VanZandt: Did you-all come together?

Nguyen: Yeah, came together. Well, when the war started coming, started coming and invaded our country, my parents already are fishermen over there already. That's what they do for a living, and they fish, you know. So we know. This is a story I heard from my father told me, and my uncle, and from a friend and relative, but I heard it from my uncle and my father that when the Communists invaded back in Black April, that so—

VanZandt: April 30?

Nguyen: April 30, so we got ahead out there about two weeks early, so we have a fishing boat. Our uncle and relative, we are fishing back then. So we know they were coming, so we head out there about two week earlier, is what the story my father told me. So when we got out in the open water, and we had a lot of ship, American ship, a big ship, like they stand by there and ready. So we got lucky because we got there, and they pick up; take me to the ship. And we had to abandon our ship and let our boat go and drift into the sea. But they took us to Guam. That's where we stay there, I think about two week. Two week, and our family and relative, we all go together. That's the good thing about that. So we got out of Guam about two week. I still remember when I was at Guam. I just like a kid. We like eat hot dogs over there and swimming pool. (VanZandt chuckles) They put us staying in a nice place like Guam, a hotel, so we didn't stay long.

VanZandt: Oh, OK. So it wasn't like a refugee camp situation?

Nguyen: No, no, no. It's like, really like a very nice island. I can still remember where I swimming and watch movie and eating hot dogs and hamburger, you know.

VanZandt: Sounds like vacation time.

Nguyen: Yeah, but (chuckles) we didn't get to like that. We didn't get to stay that long, but so when we got a call from a sponsor, from the Americans, so they take us to I think it was, the state was Oklahoma, yeah, Oklahoma. And so we got shipped around. We'd go here and there. I think we totally live in all the state, like we live in Oklahoma; Minnesota first, Oklahoma, Texas, New Orleans, Louisiana, and yeah, probably that about it. So five state, yeah. And so back to where my family with the other fishermen in Vietnam already, and that's how I grew up. When I came here, United States, and I go to school, I help out with my family when we live in Mississippi. Biloxi, Mississippi, we stay here, most of our life here in Biloxi, Mississippi. And back then we having—we heard about shrimping, my family and my uncle. And he lived in New Orleans first. We go to New Orleans and live with him a couple of year, and we heard that they—back then we didn't shrimp yet. We were shucking oyster for Mr. Richard Gollott. So our first family was back here in 19—I think it was '78 or '79—in Biloxi, Mississippi. We were just shucking oyster

and helping Mr. Richard Gollott. Back then he just an oyster processor, like he had an oyster factory. We didn't get into the shrimp business until Mr. Richard know about the shrimping, seafood processing, so we just shucking. We still live in New Orleans, but he came back like from here to New Orleans, about forty-five-minute drive, and he usually came back, would come back and pick up everybody. My parent—I wasn't shucking oyster yet—my parent, they had no job, and it was the only thing they know about is shucking oyster, and they heard a lot of people shucking oyster, American people there, but he had no Vietnamese. So my uncle, he got a big family; the whole family was shucking oyster over there. So he introduced us to Mr. Richard Gollott and—

VanZandt: What is your uncle's name? Can I ask that?

Nguyen: His name is Mau, M-A-U, yeah, Nguyen. He live in Houston (**inaudible**) right now, but he probably is seventy-something years old now. He got a big family. He got, I think, about twelve kids. So he's my role model. He is very strong and healthy man. He's a very working hard. He own about four boat, fishing boat in Vietnam, and he build his own boat.

VanZandt: Did he?

Nguyen: He build, and he give it to his—when his children grow up, he got a lot of son, like my cousin. He gave every one of them a boat. And he even build our, my dad two boat, for back in Vietnam, too. And he, when he came to the United States he even build his *own* boat over here.

VanZandt: Did he? And Peter, that's one of the reasons why I wanted to sit down and talk with you, because I interviewed Mr. Gollott years ago, early after [Hurricane] Katrina. And he mentioned bringing the first Vietnamese family. And he said Mr. Mau Van Nguyen.

Nguyen: Yeah, he was the—

VanZandt: So that was your uncle.

Nguyen: Yes, that my uncle. He even got a picture on his—he and his wife, in his office. So that's it. Our family were first in Mississippi.

VanZandt: The first here to bring—which really established the Vietnamese community here.

Nguyen: Right, right.

VanZandt: And the fishing industry when it was beginning to kind of wane.

Nguyen: Yeah. And I heard a lot of story that my family were here first, and his family, “Oh, I don't think so because we were the first here because we wasn't living in Mississippi. We live in New Orleans, like Versailles [community in New Orleans East].

VanZandt: *Yes.*

Nguyen: And Mr. Richard Gollott would keep coming with a big, old van every four o'clock in the morning, pick up our family and my uncle to come over shuck oyster for him, back and forth every day.

VanZandt: And so you were in school at the time, elementary.

Nguyen: I was in school because I was talking with Mr. Richard, and I interview him and then talk to him, and even my uncle tell me, and my parent tell me about the story. So we were the first Vietnamese since. And we making a little money, and then he started renting like a project home for us, like tried to give us in this [area].

VanZandt: So he found housing.

Nguyen: So we closer. Housing, yeah, housing, so. And won't be long in a year, so we all, our family and everybody, cousin and relative came over here.

VanZandt: All moved here.

Nguyen: All move here and live in the housing and—

VanZandt: How did you feel about that move?

Nguyen: (laughter) I was too young, but—

VanZandt: Too young to care.

Nguyen: Yeah, to know about, but when we move here, we live in a house, and we just, you know.

VanZandt: Was that around Point Cadet, in that area?

Nguyen: No. You know right there, the housing right across from the dock around Bay View?

VanZandt: Oh, *sure*.

Nguyen: They call Bay View Avenue?

VanZandt: Right off of Back Bay.

Nguyen: Yeah, Back Bay. That's new housing. That's where we used to live before they have Bay View Home, (*inaudible*), Eastern Home, and Western Home; that's the four major of house. Tight now they only have one left in Bay View because of Katrina, but destroyed and everything, so we lived there.

VanZandt: And were there lots of other fishing families, not Vietnamese yet, but other?

Nguyen: No, they—yeah, not Vietnamese.

VanZandt: At the time?

Nguyen: The time, we had—well, when we get here and live here, and we put out the word and every Vietnamese, “This is a good living,” even they don’t know how to [fish] and never fished before in Vietnam and everything. So they starting to make good money and everything, and rumor, word by mouth, they just spreading it, and they come here.

VanZandt: And did many of them build their own boats here like your uncle did, or did they buy them?

Nguyen: They buy them, but most of them, back in the [19]90s, they starting like building a couple, a couple of people because my uncle, he very talented. He very—

VanZandt: What kind of boat did he build? Was it wood?

Nguyen: He build what we call a fiberglass boat with—

VanZandt: Fiberglass.

Nguyen: Made out of plywood, yeah, but it not really, really totally 100 percent fiberglass, but it made out—first he build with the plywood, and then he cover with fiberglass, so. But if you build a totally like fiberglass boat, well, that’s too much money because you can’t afford that because fiberglass is very expensive.

VanZandt: And did your father help with that, or did any other family members—

Nguyen: Yeah, all of our family. We build like our—well, first, and then he start a business, shrimping, here. And once we get the shrimp business and we got a place to stay, he move back to Texas; Port Aransas(?), Texas, like about an hour away from Corpus Christi. And they live over there [referring to Biloxi], and he built, he got a big house, big place, and he start building his own boat. I mean, his backyard like, oh my God, he can put three or four boat with his family and build right in front of Back Bay. And all the people around, living around [were] all Vietnamese. They starting, “If he can do it, we’re going”—I mean, it’s amazing. I still have a lot of picture where he built boats. I could probably get them. I don’t have them, but he probably, his memory. I can see those picture. And I was there, and I was helping him, nailing, when I was a kid, and hammer and trying, helping. And then he start building a boat for my father. And it’s not really big, like it around like a forty-, fifty-foot boat. Yeah, like inshore boats. Back Bay, that kind of boat is, back in the [19]80s really big. And shrimp price is high, and fuel is cheap, and we making good money. And after he got in that business and people saw him build boat and copy him and get pattern and the whole (**inaudible**) people, anybody build their *own* boat. It was amazing! And if then you can’t build boat from him, then he sell it to you, like thirty, forty thousand dollar, on a contract. And he’s amazing.

VanZandt: He was such an inspiration to a lot of people.

Nguyen: Yeah, I mean, oh, my God, I can’t.

VanZandt: And why did he move to Texas? I was just curious. Why did he leave here?

Nguyen: Because Texas, he liked the—over there it's bigger, open water. And there's a lot of land you can shrimp, and it's, you know—

VanZandt: Bigger scale.

Nguyen: Bigger scale and maybe his family would—his children, they all lived here.

VanZandt: I see.

Nguyen: That's why he left, lived there. And his kids, his children like, he lived in Texas; he used like—(sneezes) Excuse me.

VanZandt: Do you know—and back to *your* parents, your mother and father were shucking oysters.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: In New Orleans. Do you know who they worked for?

Nguyen: Yeah, for Richard Gollott there, too.

VanZandt: Oh, here, too, right. I didn't know if they—

Nguyen: In New Orleans, they just lived there, but like I said, Richard Gollott, he'd come back every four o'clock in the morning and pick up, take all of the people. Like the bus stop, back and forth, until shucking oyster about half a day, like you start at four or five o'clock in the morning.

VanZandt: Early. (chuckles)

Nguyen: Probably you out at ten or eleven o'clock, and then noon, lunchtime; by noon then you'd be done. But he got about, what? Oh, a hundred people in his shop, so all Vietnamese. And back then some American, when the American saw when Richard start getting Vietnamese people in there, and then we working so fast, and the American go, "Oh, my God! We can't take this." (chuckles) And in a couple of year, all you see is all Vietnamese. And you work so hard.

VanZandt: They couldn't keep up.

Nguyen: Yeah, like the American, when they say, "I'm going to work four sack a day. I'm not going to go five sack. It's tired," and everything. "I'm not going to be greedy." But Vietnamese, they work like, oh, my—until you ran out, until you have *no more* oyster (VanZandt chuckles) because they sell by gallon. The more, whoever work fast, you know. Back then I think about five dollar or fifty-five dollars a gallon.

VanZandt: So if you could just shuck four—the more gallons that fill up, you make more money.

Nguyen: Yeah. And you make ten gallons a day; that's good.

VanZandt: Yeah.

Nguyen: But every day like that, you do the math, like. But they work until Richard say. Sometime I saw they had four or five hundred sacks in the trailer, and if Richard say he need to work hard, they'd finish it.

VanZandt: Did you do any of the shucking?

Nguyen: Oh, yeah.

VanZandt: That takes some real technique, doesn't it?

Nguyen: I'm good at shucking oyster now, too. I can open and shuck about—before I can open about thirty minute, but now probably—I'd be longer, probably an hour for me right now.

VanZandt: A little rusty.

Nguyen: Yeah. But I haven't—but yeah, I was shucking, helping them. I was in school when I back here, when we move down here, and I was in school.

VanZandt: Where did you go to school?

Nguyen: I go Biloxi High. Yeah, back then it was Nichol and then go to Biloxi High.

VanZandt: Right. How were you accepted here? It sounds like, I mean you sort of blazed the trail with the Vietnamese community just starting in Biloxi.

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: Did you experience any kind of challenges with that? Because New Orleans already had a pretty large establishment of Vietnamese in the community.

Nguyen: Yeah, so when, like I said, when—

VanZandt: As far as fitting in in the community.

Nguyen: —our family, everybody relative here, and we got a really, like, we got a big relative, like about four generation. We got Nguyens everywhere, (VanZandt chuckles) and so when they came over here, and we have like two hundred or three hundred people in Vietnamese family here, so we start—we go like American children, so we, all our family and uncle and friend got together, “We need a priest.” Go to the [Catholic] diocese and see if they can get Vietnamese priest.

VanZandt: *Really?*

Nguyen: Yeah. So we got Vietnamese priest, and then—

VanZandt: Who was that? Who was the first priest?

Nguyen: That was Father, I think Father Thang. Yeah, Father Thang. And after that Father Dominic [Phan Duc Dong]. And then Father Thang, and when we get first priest, and I think Father Thang was the first and Father Dominic was the second, and we was in the—back then we was, it's still in like St. John and then St. Seelos, so. And back then was like St. Michael, St. Michael.

VanZandt: Um-hm. And then, before they built the Vietnamese Church of the Martyrs.

Nguyen: Yeah. That's way back then. We have big community.

VanZandt: Well, I guess I was wondering how was that adjustment being one of the few Vietnamese here in the beginning. Was there any kind of difficulty as a high schooler, adjusting? How you were treated? Any discrimination or any difficulty blending in?

Nguyen: No. We family. We just family and friends. And when they came over here and settled down and know what, "This is *it*. This is the way we're going to stay here because it's make a living here, and we're going to be something, or we on our own, independent." So everybody start shrimping. And back then, then they, Richard Gollott got a brother that he was his partner with his friend like Dave Gollott; he was oyster, but Richard just helping him out, and then Richard find something like shrimping and stuff and know my uncle. My uncle before didn't know nothing about shrimping here, but he went as a deckhand on one of them American shrimp boat, and he started to—oh, he can get this in the money. He know net and everything, work hard. He know *everything*. Only thing he doesn't know how to navigate the—

VanZandt: Right, the waters, sure.

Nguyen: Yeah, water. But it didn't take him long, and then when he got his son in the business, and in a couple of months, so he got his own boat, and everybody starting—a few year later, everybody start shrimping, and that's why Richard say, "Wow! It's *amazing*," how we shrimp so fast. And he get out of oyster business, into the shrimping, started building like a pier and renting a pier from his brother on Back Bay. **(Inaudible)** right now, and he started building tank and everything and get into the shrimp business.

VanZandt: And that really changed his business—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —from oysters to shrimping.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Interesting.

Nguyen: And it won't be too long, he got out of it. He left the oyster business to his brother, and he focus on the shrimping and—

VanZandt: And when did you get into it? When did you start going out?

Nguyen: I won't get in till I was—well, I was like every summer I would go out; I would help my parent, but back then we have a small boat, like forty, fifty foot boat, like. So I, summertime, I go and help with my parent in shrimping. Those day we just like small boat on the Back Bay. So I start helping him, learning, until I reach [age] eighteen. And he transfer the title of the boat in my name, so you have to be U.S. to be legal to like, like to be a captain.

VanZandt: You had to be a U.S. citizen, right.

Nguyen: Yeah, U.S. citizen to operate the boat.

VanZandt: I see. And you were and he—

Nguyen: I was, so I work for three year. (chuckles) And when I was eighteen, he can't barely count every day and—(chuckles)

VanZandt: (chuckles) He was counting the days until you—

Nguyen: He'd make sure I learned the history and check with him and make sure he'd check that, so that—because he had to pay for somebody, a friend, to be a citizen and to own or pay for a captain to operate a boat, an American citizen. So we hire, he hire American to be a citizen to—he don't have to do nothing. He just being like, “Oh, you are an American citizen.” We got by the Coast Guard because we got an American citizen on our boat, so he just operate the boat, but as long as (chuckles) we got an American citizen on our boat, that's OK, so.

VanZandt: (chuckles) Well, then you really had your path laid out for you.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Your future, Peter, it sounds like.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: How did you feel about that?

Nguyen: I don't feel too good about that. (laughter) I had no choice. He would say I'm the oldest son in the family. I got my two older sister, but I'm the—and my brother. So [he said], “You have to be,” because I work with him. My sister got married early, and so only I and my brother, so he can't wait till [I was] eighteen, and he put me in a boat, and he was *hard* on me. He'd say if I don't do homework, or if I go out, or I party on weekend with my friend—I ain't got a chance to go and hang out with my friends.

VanZandt: No play time for you.

Nguyen: No play time for me. So I work, work, work. And I said, “You're ruining my life. I can't go to school. I can't even focus on school.” I said, “Well, make him

happy.” I’m very easy, and then I said, “OK. And you want me to be a captain or owner or work with you. OK.” And I just quit school then. (laughter)

VanZandt: Did you quit high school?

Nguyen: (laughter) Yeah!

VanZandt: So you didn’t graduate from Biloxi High? (chuckles)

Nguyen: I didn’t get anywhere. OK. I quit school. I said, “That’s one thing I hate about my life is I can’t even graduate; quit high school and support family.” I said, “Well, it’s too late now.” But it’s never too late to go back to school, but, so I just, you know.

VanZandt: And what do you think, looking back and remembering that eighteen-year-old boy that you were? What was *your* dream? What would you have wanted for your future?

Nguyen: Well, my future was stay in school and get a good education, and if I can, but—

VanZandt: And do what?

Nguyen: And I trying to be like—I’m very good at science and things like that. See, I remember going to school; I don’t get to study much, but my favorite subject was science, and I (**inaudible**) because I like something that you invent and see something that people do or something creative. And I really, I have a good grade in all my grade, and my science was the best. And history, I’m not good at history. (laughter) But English is good.

VanZandt: I can see why you’re so good at what you’re doing now, then.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: You’re getting to make use of some of that science.

Nguyen: Yes. Yeah, because I had good grade. Even now I will study math and science, but I don’t know how I got that, but my grade was good in science and math and English, but I’m really not good at history. And maybe I’m not into history that much.

VanZandt: That’s OK. I wasn’t either. (laughter)

Nguyen: But—

VanZandt: So you were shrimping at age eighteen, had your own boat.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Captain of your own boat.

Nguyen: No. That's my dad's boat.

VanZandt: Your dad's boat.

Nguyen: I'm just like—

VanZandt: But you were—

Nguyen: —the captain—

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: —like that. I'm just the citizen, like I said. (chuckles) But I don't got my own boat until back in 2000, 2000, yeah. When I got married, and I got married, we work so hard and save up, and they had this SBA [Small Business Administration] program now, the government. So I try to get a loan from them, and I starting build my own boat.

VanZandt: You did? You built it?

Nguyen: Yeah. No, not build, but company built it.

VanZandt: Oh, OK.

Nguyen: Back in the future—

VanZandt: Had it built.

Nguyen: Yeah. So we went through with the financial with that SBA company and this company that build steel boat out in Bayou La Batre, [Alabama], and financial with them, so.

VanZandt: What size boat was your first one?

Nguyen: I can't believe I don't know this. Oh, maybe I was over—I don't know what I'm thinking about that. I only had about, what? Not much in the boat. The financial that boat, I have about say a ninety-five-foot steel hull.

VanZandt: *Oh*, my goodness.

Nguyen: Very big boat, but then I got a freezer boat right now.

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: Ninety-five-foot, steel-hull, freezer boat and—

VanZandt: You went all out, didn't you?

Nguyen: Because my friends, all they have, they all drop out [of school], and they help family, too. And you know like Ri [Nguyen], and have their own boat, financial with it.

VanZandt: Ri Nguyen, oh.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: So you were all kind of doing the same thing, all helping your fathers.

Nguyen: Yeah. I mean like one of our people, I mean my friend and my cousin, when they all drop out and start working with family and they're making money, when you're so young, and you make so much money, you get hooked to it. (laughter)

VanZandt: [You] stuck with that! Better than working fast food. (chuckles)

Nguyen: (chuckles) Yeah. So we all start shrimping and fishing out there, but, yeah, but it wouldn't—because I'm on my own, and all I could do with financial was to the bank. And sometimes I have problem with the boat, and nobody help me; I can't handle that. i pay about ten thousand dollars a month for the mortgage—

VanZandt: Oh, my goodness.

Nguyen: —not including insurance, and not including expenses for the utility, house payment, car payment and take care of four kid and—

VanZandt: Hm. That's a lot to take on.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: And how much would you have to bring in at that time to make that monthly payment when that's due?

Nguyen: See, we stay out a month, usually a month or at least three, three and a half week to a month. And four year from now, if you don't make around, what, Seventy to eighty thousand dollars a trip, I mean, you just barely enough to pay one month—

VanZandt: Profit.

Nguyen: Yeah, yeah, profit, because the fuel is so high and the shrimp is cheap these day and not on, back in the [19]80s or the [19]90s. Those year was, shrimp price very high, [and] fuel price about seventy, eighty cents a gallon.

VanZandt: Good grief.

Nguyen: Yeah, but now, what? Three dollars, two dollars and fifty cents for a gallon.

VanZandt: Yeah.

Nguyen: And maybe sixty cents—

VanZandt: And how much did you get for shrimp, then, a head, about?

Nguyen: Well, if I had make—right now or back then?

VanZandt: In the good days. In the good, ole days.

Nguyen: Yeah! In the good day, if you make four, six dollars, seven dollars a pound, that's very good for that. Like right now you still make four or five dollars, six dollars, but the fuel price is three dollars, something. Back then you'd make three dollars, three dollars and fifty cents for six dollars; from four, maybe from three to six, seven, too, sometimes seven when bigger, but the good thing about it was the fuel price, like a dollar or ninety cents. So you can get very good. But now it's like you make seventy or eighty thousand dollars, and after you take fuel and deckhand and ice or whatever, your expenses, you make eighty and you'll probably get fifty, all that, and you probably have thirty left.

VanZandt: And back then, Peter, were you selling strictly to Gollott's?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: So you would come and unload, so you always knew—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —where you were selling to.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: And that you had a customer *to* sell to.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: So there wasn't as much risk.

Nguyen: We didn't have no like selling off the street here or in the Back Bay or nothing. No. You strictly sell it to the seafood processor, to the dock, whatever you brought. You can't sell to nobody because it's new and everything, and nobody know anything about how this selling shrimp off the four-way stop or the, on the—

VanZandt: Right, Highway 49.

Nguyen: And we still—

VanZandt: Uh-huh. No direct marketing, yeah.

Nguyen: No, no direct marketing out there. And direct marketing is here not too long. It just started a couple of year, like ten year ago because they have a pier, the prior pier behind the Hard Rock [Casino] here, that place where the little boat, skimmer and stuff. That why the people chose it—

VanZandt: The small craft harbor here?

Nguyen: Yes, yeah.

VanZandt: So that wasn't there.

Nguyen: No, no, that didn't—back then there was *nothing* there, no casino or anything out there. It was just like, back then they had a pier, a lot of shrimp, seafood processing them back there, too. We had about four or five back there. And Richard Gollott back here. Before Richard Gollott was there—

VanZandt: Was up front—oh, I see!

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: And what happened, why the move to the back? Was that—

Nguyen: Because the owner of that, they lease it out, because Wynn, Wynn was very, big brother. Wynn Brothers, they own or whatever that, and they have shrimp pier and everything. And they have one back here in the Back Bay right next to the Palace [Casino] here. They own that, too, but they sell it. They sell it for the Back Bay but—

VanZandt: Hm.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Do you know why they sold it?

Nguyen: Maybe they, they had been in the business too long.

VanZandt: Personal reasons? OK. So nothing going on with the economy?

Nguyen: No, no.

VanZandt: OK. I got you.

Nguyen: And he sold at the right time. The people got to know what they're doing.
(laughter)

VanZandt: Yeah. (laughter)

Nguyen: Yeah. (chuckles)

VanZandt: Well, and tell me, since I know that you had tough times post-Katrina—I do want to get back to Vietnam and fishing in Vietnam—but while we're here talking about your experience shrimping, can you tell me then from those good times up to Katrina, and kind of what happened post-Katrina, and how you ended up getting out of shrimping to where you are here in your capacity now?

Nguyen: Well, after Katrina, I mean, I was devastated. My heart was so broken. I had a big mortgage to pay and lucky my house got nothing wrong with it, because I live in Ocean Springs. It was the highest land over there. So—

VanZandt: And you had the same boat?

Nguyen: Yeah, the same boat, that was the same boat, the freezer boat. I only had it about four year, yeah, after Katrina 2005. That's why my boat wasn't destroyed or

anything because I got a big boat. We usually run up to the canal here, the Industrial seaway, right there. That's where we all tie up every time. When a hurricane come, we always tie up, *hundreds* of boat that we tie together. But my boat very big, and we usually take all my family down there. We all stay down on the boat, just leave the house. But when we got back, and I was still shrimping when Katrina was coming, but I was still shrimping. I got about thirty thousand dollars worth of shrimp on my house, on my shrimp boat.

VanZandt: You were still shrimping—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —that Monday or Sunday before Katrina hit on a Monday?

Nguyen: Well, it took about another week Katrina would come.

VanZandt: Yes.

Nguyen: Yeah, Katrina—

VanZandt: So the week before?

Nguyen: Yeah. Yeah, Katrina come about, what day—so we still, we're watching the news, and we know when. We live here too long; we know when, exactly when, and watch the weather and—

VanZandt: So you knew it was coming.

Nguyen: We knew it was coming, yeah. Sometime people shrimp out there until three days until Katrina. Every time when bad weather coming—I don't know why—we can catch a lot of shrimp—

VanZandt: Sure.

Nguyen: —out there, that's why the fishermen like to stay as long as it take. And one day here, the Sound(?), you're not going to come in that—we used to have a drawbridge in Ocean Springs that will open the bridge, so you stuck. You have to stop the boat. So when they see that, hear that news, they had to come. So usually they give them a four day or five day, you better come in or you got nowhere, and they won't let you tie a boat. You have to anchor a boat out there and leave a boat, but they don't like to do that.

VanZandt: So they give you that notice and then they better—

Nguyen: Yeah, they better—

VanZandt: You'd better get there, or it's going to be closed.

Nguyen: None of these, the drawbridge, the Pops Ferry Bridge, they're not going to open, so.

VanZandt: So you came on in a few days before?

Nguyen: Yeah, I came in. I always prepare because I got family, and we got to go home and take care of family and pack everything, too. So when I came in five days before Katrina, and get all my stuff, but the shrimp factory is closed already. They're not going to unload shrimp. They're not going to deliver it.

VanZandt: And you had how much on your boat?

Nguyen: I got about thirty thousand dollars worth on my boat.

VanZandt: Thinking that they would be open still.

Nguyen: Yeah, think they'd be open, but they already closed because they have to prepare, they have to shut down there, too; ship(?) a few days. They don't have time for it, the shrimp going in late and a lot of thing that they process it. So I didn't get to sell my shrimp. So I took on, go up there. The Hurricane Katrina, go by. So after that—

VanZandt: Did you dump the shrimp?

Nguyen: No, no, because I got a freezer boat. I have a generator that run twenty-four/seven.

VanZandt: You kept that generator running.

Nguyen: Running and running, like, wow, almost a month, so I could get to sell my shrimp. When I came back, everything here was destroyed; Richard Gollott's place, the bridge, *nothing* was there, *nothing*.

VanZandt: All the infrastructure was gone.

Nguyen: So we went about almost a month, and somehow this guy from Florida came in with a eighteen-wheeler truck, and they want to buy our shrimp. And they say, "How much you paying for?" And I say, "Well, we're paying for this price." I don't know. He bargained with us, and [I] said, "Well, I don't like the price, but I got to get rid of my shrimp. I just can't leave my shrimp in the hold forever and run the generator every day and burn a lot of fuel and everything. I've been stressed out for about a month already, and it's not only my shrimp, too, but when the storm comes up, ice boat on the Industrial Seaway, and they just want to put it in the hold until"—

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: I just helped him out, and they paid me whatever, how much I charge with the fuel and help me out. But I said, "I don't care. I got plenty room. I'll just freeze it up. As long as you freeze the shrimp and put it in the hold."

VanZandt: So you took on other peoples' shrimp, too.

Nguyen: I took about *ten* boat; put everything in my boat.

VanZandt: Wow. To keep.

Nguyen: To keep it frozen and run it, and they say, “We pay for the fuel and help you out.” I say, “Don’t worry about that. It’s OK.” And so when we get back here, everything was destroyed, no place to tie. I see that’s heartbreaking. I said, “This work is so”—I mean, it’s real sad. I can’t even, I don’t have time or anything with my family. What I’m going to do? What the future going to be? And I just can’t—tears just coming out from my eyes, and I selling the shrimp, and the guy was like, without waiting, and would just put throw in the sacks into his eighteen-wheeler truck and don’t know how much it is. He don’t weigh them, he just come back in a week or so, “Here. This is what you make, your check.” And I don’t know what. He just give me the sign(?) and how much he charged me for that and the pound he got.

VanZandt: So you weren’t sure whether it was accurate.

Nguyen: He already got. I said, “Oh, my God! I know I make more than that.” And I think I make about over *thirty thousand dollars*, and he came back with like twenty thousand dollars or twenty-something. I think it was twenty-something thousand. I don’t remember. And I said, “This is not working right. I’m tired of this business, and the economy is so bad, and the law and the deckhand problem.” It’s just hard to get these days a good deckhand.

VanZandt: And tell me about the law you mentioned was changing.

Nguyen: The law is; yeah, it is. The law is like coming out, like the regulations, like TED [turtle excluder device].

VanZandt: The TEDs for the turtles, yeah.

Nguyen: Yeah, turtle device, and a certain size, and the fish eye and some—

VanZandt: What’s the fish eye?

Nguyen: The fish eye is like keeping the fish from **(inaudible)**, and you have too many fish in your bag and be aware that we put that in and the fish will, one **(inaudible)** they have an opening, and the fish go out, so you can direct more time on your trawl, on your dragging, when you are working. And [it] had to be legal size. You cannot have it too high or too low, a certain size. And—

VanZandt: A lot of regulation coming down.

Nguyen: A lot of regulation, and it just too much for a fisherman to handle that. But the strongest survive, so the one who have a lot of friend, relative help you out. But by myself, I can’t handle that. Nobody would help me, even they have their own problem, and I can’t get any like, loan from another bank. They expect me, when I—and had been working for about a year or so, but I got a notice from the bank saying that right after Katrina, my mortgage was three month late because with Katrina, there was so many debris out there, nobody shrimping; nobody working. How you expect

me to pay you? And I have a letter from the bank, “If you don’t come up with thirty thousand dollars, I’m going to take your boat.” I said, “Oh, my God.”

VanZandt: So there was no kind of relief program—

Nguyen: No.

VanZandt: —in place then to help the fishermen.

Nguyen: No. There’s no nothing. That’s why the one in the business have to work hard and save on the side, and the family can help you. But I just started. I worked so hard as a deckhand. Got all my family, have my own boat, and go through bank, and finally we find financial, and they help us, but they cannot help us anymore, more than what they already helping us. But I would thought they would give us a couple of month, or I can pay you interest or something, or work it out with me. And they say, “No. You have to come up with thirty thousand dollars for your past three month.” You see, we just got not even recovered from Katrina, and they had nobody working right now. If we catch shrimp, where we going to sell to?

VanZandt: That was a big issue, wasn’t it?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: No infrastructure, fuel, and ice.

Nguyen: And how I’m going to pay you if I can’t—you’re going to make money. How am I going to pay you? Where you want me to go back the other way, what, Texas or Florida to sell my shrimp? And I said, “Well, I have no option, no choice, and they say they cannot help me.” So next day, a week later, I came up every day and go check on my boat every two or three day. One time I come up, and this one day was the worst day of my life, I came back and look for my boat and just, “Oh, my God! Where’s my boat?” (laughs) “Somebody took my boat.” I say, “I don’t see my boat.” And I say, “Oh, my God. Yep. They came, take my boat.” And I came home and so sad, tell my wife, and, “Now, from now on, I don’t have to check my boat no more. It’s not there anymore.” (laughs) So I said, “Well, this is it. I don’t know what to do.” So I starting with a lot of friend, get together and going down and working on like all this building, like they pay us like ten dollar [an hour], breaking down all those houses up and building. I worked for the DM—

VanZandt: A ton of construction, rebuilding.

Nguyen: Construction and we were taking out Sheetrock and beating wall and carry whatever in there. I worked for a while, a couple month, trying to make that living, support, help my wife out. She still have her job, so I help my wife out.

VanZandt: What did she do?

Nguyen: She’s a legal assistant.

VanZandt: So she had a job.

Nguyen: Yeah, she have a job. So that's what I would do for a couple of months. I tried get back in sales, but I don't like the job, very dirty and nasty and hot working, and so nasty I can't even imagine working there. So I found like this place, another **(inaudible)** from down in Pascagoula(?). It's like about the environment there in the what you call, the environment, hazmat [hazardous material].

VanZandt: Oh, sure. Hazardous materials.

Nguyen: Hazardous materials. I went to eight—

VanZandt: Training.

Nguyen: Yeah, eight training, and they say it very good pay, so I don't know what I'm doing, just go take a eight-week class. I got my certificate, and I thought they would pay me more than what I expected, at least twenty or twenty dollars [per hour], but they ended up paying me ten dollars [per hour]. Well, I'm not going to get in that suit for that and all those chemical and that, and somehow I got a call from Dave here, and he talked to me about, "We really need a fisherman here with your background. You're a shrimper, and you know fishermen out there in the Gulf, and you know all those people, and you know"—

VanZandt: How did he know about you, Peter?

Nguyen: He know because my sister, she do nail. And one of the Sea Grant [program], Kay **(inaudible)**, she work with Sea Grant over in Gulf Shore, [Alabama], over there, and she got it. And Melissa was my wife's sister, so they talk woman talk, and then—oh, wow. I don't know what. Peter, say, been looking for a job after with his shrimp, and he's lost his boat; he's got no job, and they talked back and forth. And Kay say, "Well, let me talk to Dave. I heard he was looking for a shrimp fisherman, like translating and community work." And so I was only about three day week. Go to school, study with the hazmat material, and then Dave asked me, "You better think twice about what you're doing." (laughter)

VanZandt: And this is David Burrage, for the record?

Nguyen: (laughter) Yeah, Dave Burrage, yeah.

VanZandt: Burrage?

Nguyen: Yeah, Burrage.

VanZandt: Here at the Coastal Research Center [Mississippi State University Coastal Research and Extension Center].

Nguyen: Yeah, Coastal—and he told me, "I'd think twice about what you are [doing]. Why [don't] you come over here. I interview you and see how you doing, and you tell me about your background." And when I started talking, "This is the guy. This is the guy I've been looking for, so many years." That's what he told me. "And I finally found him." And he talking me into it. OK. [I said], "Can you give me another—I only got about four more week of school, and I don't want to quit." But see how they

pay me, and it seemed like good pay. They told me twenty-something dollar an hour; that's good pay. And let me see. But when I finish, they say they going to look for a job for me and everything. When I finish, they never give me a job. I had to look for myself, and they didn't pay but like nine, ten dollars an hour. I said, "I'm not going mess with that. I'm going to go back to Dave." (laughter) So I go back to Dave and he signed me up right there.

VanZandt: And what did you start doing here in the beginning?

Nguyen: Yeah, outreach. I go out to the dock like every day and talk to people, how fishing was like, or what you need, anything they have problem, or regulation, law, or something that you don't understand, and I translate whatever we have here. We like a bridge together. Whenever I have information here, I bring back to them, and what they have, need, and back to Extension, we talk about it. We have meeting. I go every meeting and help them out. "This meeting is very important to you, and you need to go here, and you need to learn and your license." Like NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration], you have a license, what they do; you need to update, or everything about regulation that they need to know.

VanZandt: And Peter, were you the first Vietnamese liaison here at the Coastal Extension?

Nguyen: Extension? Yes.

VanZandt: That's fantastic—

Nguyen: That's what I said, they—(chuckles)

VanZandt: —because they had been looking for a long time.

Nguyen: (chuckles) Dave said he was looking for *many* years. He don't know someone [Vietnamese] that speak English and into the shrimp business. I say, "I think I'm your man. I'm the guy." So.

VanZandt: You really are, yeah.

Nguyen: Yeah. I know a lot about. I've been shrimping for twenty-five years, and I know what the needs are and how stressful and how hard work is there. And somehow, for the first five years, I start working almost five year for the Extension, and I finally got to recover from it. I don't even want to *talk* about Katrina. It did kind of scare me, but I got over it. But I'm looking for a different career now and move on, besides shrimping. I thought I would be on top, but I got out. And my friend, my relative, they're still in there, but—

VanZandt: Are they? They're still shrimping?

Nguyen: They're shrimping, but I still have connection. I miss the shrimp business *so* much, but—

VanZandt: Tell me what you miss about it, for people who are not familiar at all with that life and what it's like to make a living out in the open ocean on a boat.

Nguyen: On a boat.

VanZandt: It's such a different life. What do you miss about it? What did you enjoy?

Nguyen: I enjoy the beauty of Mother Nature, when you see the first sunrise, sunset, when you know the water, sometime calm, sometime rough. And the shrimping is—the missing when you're catching the shrimp, you're catching the fish, and you see what so many species in there and what good to eat when everything you eat is fresh from the catch, your catch. Aw. I go there and eat seafood every day, crab, shrimp, whatever, and—

VanZandt: And I know you're a good cook. (laughter)

Nguyen: And when we hit a jackpot, or we get a good catch, we have a good day, and like when we're catching shrimp, it was so many excitement in there. Had a bad day and good day, and the only thing, the lonely thing is I feel lonely when I stay away from the family for too long on the freezer boat. You stay about a month, and it's kind of missing family.

VanZandt: Has that really changed, the dynamic in your family, since you got out of it?

Nguyen: *Yes, yes.* Right now I got hours that, wow—I know I miss you guys *so* much when I got out to untie [from] the dock. And I start missing them.

VanZandt: Because we should mention for the record you have four children.

Nguyen: Yeah. And I just can't take that. Now I'm here, with them, every day. And there's a lot of difference in that. But it is—you're on your own and independent. You do what you want. You can go over there, and nobody tell you or boss you what to do. You have the power of that. That's why I like it, about shrimping. But there's a lot of worry, thinking you don't catch no shrimp, and you have mortgage to pay, and that's a lot of stress.

VanZandt: A lot of uncertainty, it sounds like. With the benefits come the risk.

Nguyen: Yeah. It's very risk, and you never know what kind of problem you're going to have with your boat. And I was praying every day with that because I got a new boat, and I was praying every day, "Don't let this"—that's one reason I want to build a new boat, to stay away from broken down and having any problem when I go to work, but somehow thing ain't going the way I was planning. It always break down. The more—(chuckles) I have so much trouble with my freezer thing, my engine problem. And I say, "My God! What can possibly happen to me?" The reason I want to buy a new boat and everything new so I can have, a long trip and a successful trip every time, so.

VanZandt: So when Katrina hit and you lost your boat, you were kind of to the point where you were ready to get a new boat?

Nguyen: No, no.

VanZandt: You were having trouble?

Nguyen: No.

VanZandt: Oh, OK.

Nguyen: Well, Katrina—I have enough now, after that, but when I got my boat, it was 9/11, 2001. That's the problem with the economy and when—

VanZandt: Oh, 9/11 [World Trade Center terrorism].

Nguyen: Nine/eleven, yeah. I had a problem with that. I think this is (chuckles) just a sign for me or something. And then I got over that in one year and start doing two years good for me, and I thought catching up and working out. Everything was so great. And then Katrina came, and I mean, it is—yeah, but—

VanZandt: How have you seen it—because you're doing such a fantastic thing working with your friends and former fishermen *still* struggling now. So how have you seen things change for them—

Nguyen: For them.

VanZandt: —since Katrina? How have they coped with it?

Nguyen: For them after Katrina they, some of them have problem with their boat like they're damage or something. They got to go to the, what you call the compound, the people that, like you have problem with your house or something like—

VanZandt: Repossession?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Did they come and repossess?

Nguyen: They can claim, but my boat got waived. I had no problem, no anything that hurt me. Some people got (**inaudible**), or have something wrong with (**inaudible**), or something happened to their boat, so they have that, and they go claim. So after Katrina they claimed things. I got nothing to claim with. (laughter)

VanZandt: I see what you're saying, OK.

Nguyen: You know like some boat hit some boat and—

VanZandt: Sure. And they could file a claim and get compensated.

Nguyen: Yeah. They'd file a claim and get them. And some of my friends, they got thirty, forty thousand, and some got fifty thousand, and some got ten or fifteen thousand. I got nothing to claim with, I mean, so.

VanZandt: Right, you didn't have any damage, uh-huh.

Nguyen: Anything. I got lucky because, I got nothing and lucky, so lucky that nothing was wrong with it. I just worried about my family's safe and everything. That's good, so. And in Katrina, that's all. The bank won't let me have any options, so.

VanZandt: And so how do you see—in thinking about kind of the resiliency of the Vietnamese community after Katrina—how do you think people made it through, *including* you, at that time, and now this time?

Nguyen: The people that made it through—

VanZandt: How do they deal with these challenges?

Nguyen: —is they in the business longer than I am. I in the business, but they already ten year ahead of [me], and have money on the side, and their family and friend, that they have more brother and sister that, even they alway prepare. Because I'm new. Like, I know I'm in the business long, but I didn't make—I start a new boat, and everything is new, so you had first couple of year, you have a lot of expense. And your fishing gear and need to repair or whatever, and we got—they know that they have money on the side. They always have.

VanZandt: So some of them depended on—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —extended family—

Nguyen: Extended family.

VanZandt: —that were supportive, and then savings.

Nguyen: And I was by myself and my parent.

VanZandt: How do you think the church and the temple played a part in recovery and resiliency? Because so many of the fishermen lived in a concentrated area of Point Cadet in East Biloxi, kind of around the church and the temple. Do you think that faith and spirituality has had much effect in helping people through these challenges?

Nguyen: Yeah. The community, our community alway help, and we all stick together, everywhere we go. And that's one [thing] about our people. We stick together, and we have something; we do something. The church is everybody help out, and work it out, and listen to the priest, and stay together. But they live here around—they still do live—their property still here; even the house destroyed, but

their property still here. But they're not moving too far from Biloxi, East Biloxi. They're going back in North Biloxi. The reason why they go over there because if they have another Katrina coming, over there is a lot of high land and closer to the water.

VanZandt: Around D'Iberville.

Nguyen: Yeah, D'Iberville, on North [Highway] 15, yeah, so.

VanZandt: So how has that changed the community in East Biloxi? It's so different, isn't it?

Nguyen: Hm, see, everything is we still go to it. Everybody's still here, and they ain't going too far. Some family might go out of state or live in another state, but I see they go, left, but now they came back. They got used to it here too long, and they still come back. But now they have some rebuilt, and some they have their own property and just, I guess it's waiting till, like, you see the casino, to buy their property.

VanZandt: Right. Did that happen for many? Did many who had property there end up in better shape and profit from that, post-Katrina?

Nguyen: Some people, I think a couple of family got their property sell and the business; so business, too. But the one, because you know when they destroyed, they get the total loss, the insurance. Then they pay, so they still have the land, property, but they get that money and go buy a new house or move, move to up there north. But what we still have a church here; one good thing.

VanZandt: People are still coming back to the church.

Nguyen: Yeah, they do. Do you remember the one? We have a festival, a New Year Festival?

VanZandt: Tet, yes! That's where we first met, I think!

Nguyen: Yes! (laughter)

VanZandt: I didn't come this year. This is the first year I haven't been able to go.

Nguyen: Yeah. We have one this year, too. It was just recently.

VanZandt: And you're still having it at the church [Vietnamese Church of the Martyrs]?

Nguyen: Yes, still have at the church. And we got a new priest now.

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: Father—

VanZandt: Father Jimmy.

Nguyen: —Jimmy, yeah. You met him?

VanZandt: Yes.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Yes. So things have changed—

Nguyen: We have two, two now. Father Jimmy and his wife's is Father—what is it? Antonio(?) I think.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Right, Father Dominic retired.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Well, I'd like to get to the [BP Deepwater Horizon] oil spill, too, and I guess why don't we go ahead and do that. And then we'll just back up to a little bit of life in Vietnam. And so 2010, April, as people were still recovering from Katrina, things were beginning to get a little bit back to normal. Of course, the economy tanked.

Nguyen: Yeah, uh-huh.

VanZandt: But then the oil spill hit in April 2010, so we're almost two years since the oil spill.

Nguyen: Yeah, when—

VanZandt: What has happened to the community since the oil spill? If you can, just talk about the challenges now that the fishermen face.

Nguyen: As far as the fishermen, when the oil spill started, was very heartbroken for the—and they don't, for the fishermen, they don't know what going to happen, how they're going to shrimp. They closed the Gulf, and we can't shrimp, and you can't make no money. And so they got the VOO [Vessels of Opportunity] program out [for] the oil spill. They pay—

VanZandt: Vessels of Opportunity.

Nguyen: Yeah. So they got the work for them that they're paying like three hundred dollars a day. And go out there and cleaning or running or tracking oil. It depend on—they pay for your fuel; they pay for your fuel and I think some food or whatever.

VanZandt: So that was a program that would—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —employ fishermen who had their own boats already—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —to be able to use it and participate in the cleanup.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: But how many of the Vietnamese fishermen were able to be a part of that program? Very many?

Nguyen: All of them, every one of them. They were making—and when I—when our job—I work [with] Extension day and night. I went out there, outreach, and I looking for someone that haven't get paid or someone don't have a job. I mean, I saw people when their big boat get paid and ice boat get paid. But the little guy and having problem with their engines, they can't work. And I go out there and look for them and tell them and get their name and number and give it to the BP people and tell them, "These guy need to go to work, too," because he think that they don't speak English, they don't know. And so that's why I step in and help them. And a week later they start calling me, and I call him, but by the time that they—they still get paid, but those guys about—when I see about a couple of month or four or five month, they get well paid already. I mean and it's not right. And we have meeting and meeting every week, and I go to place and place, and I tell them about, "This guy, you need to put some of these guy not having, not in work, too. They need to make a living, too. They can't feed or support their family, or even they have problem or something. You need to give them check so they can fix their engine so they can go back to work." So I got that out of the way, and they were so happy and thrilled about it. But the BP paid big boat and ice boat, freezer boat, very good, very well. I mean, so they have, out of the way, so.

VanZandt: So you're saying, so a lot of the Vietnamese fishermen *did* get to be a part of the Vessels of Opportunity? Because I've only found a few who did and some who didn't get to.

Nguyen: Oh, no. They did.

VanZandt: But a lot of them did?

Nguyen: All of them.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: A majority, that's 90 percent of them.

VanZandt: And for about how long did they work in that program?

Nguyen: I think almost a year.

VanZandt: A year?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: With the Vessels of Opportunity program?

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: Oh, OK.

Nguyen: Let me see if I'm—maybe, a year or less than a year, because I have friend that working for—let me see. But the one who started first, almost a year, but the ones—you have to be called.

VanZandt: Right, sure.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: I knew some of them were sitting around, waiting for the phone call to get to go out.

Nguyen: Yeah. You had to be beckon, call. And we try to check on it. “Well, this guy, he already work a month or two month. Why don't you let him stop? Why not call the other guy, and let him have a chance at working?”

VanZandt: Um-hm, spread it around.

Nguyen: Yeah. But they focused on the big boat, freezer, because they offshore; they pay those guys more.

VanZandt: Sure, they needed the freezer boats.

Nguyen: So and then, well, what about the inside guy, too? And they start working on the inshore and the skimmer, and a couple of month later. Then I saw that everybody start working, and that's good.

VanZandt: So that was good, for a little while. It lasted a short time. And then when that program went away and stopped, what's happened since then?

Nguyen: Well.

VanZandt: Has it been difficult for them to get any kind of work?

Nguyen: Well, when they stop it, I mean, they can, that there's some zone out there in the Gulf that, before they always said they close the zone. When they reopen the zone, I mean—

VanZandt: But, Peter—

Nguyen: People are start going back on shrimping now.

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: When they reopen the zone.

VanZandt: So if you can, explain, because I'm hearing from a good many shrimpers that they are not finding any shrimp, that they are not able to work and take their boats out because they can't afford to buy the fuel and stock up on the ice to go out when

they're not catching anything. But then the ones who have the freezer boats and can go out further—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —are having more success.

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: Is that correct? Or if you can, kind of help me understand—

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: —who's doing all right, and who's really having difficulty through this.

Nguyen: It depend where they shrimping and where they are, whether they shrimp Mississippi or Louisiana. Sometimes the small, the ice boat, or a small boat, they can't go out that far, but if they don't have shrimp inshore, they need—and they can't do nothing. That's a risk they have to take. Maybe they got affected by the oil or something.

VanZandt: Well, that's what I'm wondering.

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: Do you know why all of a sudden they were saying there's no shrimp?

Nguyen: I think—I don't know that the oil is affecting it, that it may cause that because shrimp, I think that oil really affected it, because usually we never have this kind of problem every year because that place, certain place all have the shrimp every year, same place, and people shrimp here. Since the oil is happening here, I don't know why all of a sudden, you just think it, why it never happened like this, now in a place where I want to shrimp. Well, you can't make no money out there. Maybe that can be the problem. Like, just like Texas, they have, every year they have a season opening in Texas in July. And they see, saying the oil, the BP oil spill, I call down here and ask my cousin how was the Texas season open? “Oh, we didn't get no shrimp this year; not so much, too.” And I ask him, “Do you think you been affect by the oil?” “It could be because usually we have a lot of shrimp in Texas. All of a sudden where did all the shrimp go?” Who know? Who know?

VanZandt: OK. So it's still a big unknown.

Nguyen: Yeah, unknown, because (chuckles) I never seen anything like it. Can't say that the oil was it, but like, every year we do good; we got shrimp, and—

VanZandt: Who's looking at that? Is the Coastal Research Center here doing any of that kind of, those kinds of studies?

Nguyen: That's all NOAA.

VanZandt: That's all NOAA.

Nguyen: All NOAA, all their scientists. Yeah. And then we got no clue what. We just taking information from NOAA, and whatever we receive on the information we got, and we just share it. But we have no right—no telling that, what happened, but we just assume that all of a sudden we know everybody certain month or certain time are shrimp right here, and we catch shrimp. Now they don't have it, but we can't tell what happened to it.

VanZandt: Right. What are you hearing from the fishermen who are—now, it's offseason but they'll be gearing up soon.

Nguyen: Well, after the oil spill and the BP what, no longer supporting it, people start shrimping and back in business now, and they're catching shrimp.

VanZandt: They're catching shrimp.

Nguyen: Not at like before, like they get 10 percent, and they get about 7 or 8 percent now. It's not really bad, but you know.

VanZandt: OK. So that's 7 or 8 percent of what it was?

Nguyen: Yeah, yeah. I think compared to a scale of one to ten, yeah, like before you get 10, and now they get 7 or 8 percent. It's not that bad, but the only thing about the—you can't beat the shrimp price in the imported shrimp. And the [fuel], that what happening, but they still shrimping, but—

VanZandt: So what do you see for the future of this industry? What do you think will happen for the commercial fishing industry in the Gulf?

Nguyen: I just hope that there's no regulation or law or too many rule. That was killing the fishermen. And there was some kind of way to try and [not] put them out of business. That's what they do, and that's what they're good at, and they like to be independent. But too many regulation, law, or what. They still have to work, but if **(inaudible)** they call, like I think they have this from the government that like buyout(?) program, like help trying to put the shrimpers out of business, selling on what they ask for the boat, if they—that's really going to hurt them. And they probably won't like that. But the shrimp, I think they will recover. I mean, shrimp is Mother Nature's thing.

VanZandt: So you think there'll still be an abundance, always, of the shrimp.

Nguyen: Yeah, always the shrimp.

VanZandt: It will just be they are getting squeezed out of their profit—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —by rising fuel costs and imports.

Nguyen: Rising fuel price. And they can—like they will be tough on the one who's still like owing money from the bank or mortgage; they got struck with those kind of

people, but the ones that I worry(?) about their payment or anything on the mortgage, on the bank, on the boat payment. They say, “OK. If the fuel price so high, (inaudible), I just go out and make enough. I don’t have to burn down my fuel.” And I have to do the math for them, because I don’t have to pay fuel to make enough. So I can pay my bill or something. But I don’t have no mortgage to pay, but if it’s so rough because shrimp is always out there, and they have to do the math, and they have to do what if make a profit out there with shrimp. Even you go and you catching big, old, jumbo shrimp, and they supposed to be like five dollars a pound, and you just sell like two dollars a pound, and you like, before you only catch about ten thousand pound, you survive, and you make a good profit of it. Now you have to catch twenty thousand pounds, so that’s big difference, so.

VanZandt: It takes a lot more to—

Nguyen: More to—

VanZandt: —make the same profit you used to be able to make.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: That’s what they struggle with right now.

VanZandt: And we were talking with David earlier, and he mentioned two ways that you-all *here* are really trying to help these fishermen. And one is to get a better price.

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: Try to get a better price, and the other was to try to reduce their operating costs—

Nguyen: Right.

VanZandt: —by coming up with different technology.

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: Can you talk to that a little bit and be more specific?

Nguyen: Yeah, we have this new webbing. They call it Sapphire webbing.

VanZandt: Sapphire webbing.

Nguyen: And it’s imported, yeah, I think maybe from Indonesia or something. It’s not in the U.S., but now they—

VanZandt: It’s a material for the nets?

Nguyen: Material, it’s like a net. It’s just like a net, but it’s lightweight. It don’t soak water, and it’s [more] fuel saving. It’s like before you making a fifty-foot net and say

about two hundred pound, but now this new material is probably only one hundred pound. So the lighter you pull and faster, and you don't burn so much fuel.

VanZandt: That's wonderful.

Nguyen: Yeah. And another thing is a flow scan; we call it flow scan. It's fuel saving. When you hook that system in your engine, like when you're working with sixteen RPM [revolutions per minute] and just say twenty gallons per hour, and you can hook that, and you can say, "OK. I'm going like three knot. If I pull down like a fifteen RPM, and I'm still doing three knot, why don't I use that technology rather than what"—you see how in the engine how much fuel you're burning.

VanZandt: Ah.

Nguyen: So you hook that system in, like a gauge thing.

VanZandt: Yeah.

Nguyen: And you say, "Well, oh, my God, I'm just doing sixteen, and I can do like fifteen RPM and just still burn a half a gallon. Why don't I use that?"

VanZandt: Wow.

Nguyen: Yeah, that's very—and the—

VanZandt: So there's technology like that out there?

Nguyen: Yeah, right.

VanZandt: It's just getting it.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Is any of that getting to the fishermen yet, the new webbing?

Nguyen: The fishermen, yeah, they use the webbing, but they don't believe that the flow scan can—they think they can average by with the measurement on the fuel tank and then make a mark, but they don't see that technology, the scientists that do that. But I put one in Ri [Nguyen's] boat. Actually I put one in Ri boat.

VanZandt: In Ri's boat?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: You did?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: And is he getting used to it?

Nguyen: Yeah, he save fuel but he—

VanZandt: Well, how much does one cost? Are they expensive? Is that why there's resistance to it?

Nguyen: Oh, let me see. I think about—how much I put in? About two thousand dollars for them, but we get them for free.

VanZandt: Oh, you can get them to them for free?

Nguyen: No. I, because I'm doing research.

VanZandt: You did, sure, right.

Nguyen: Yeah. Dave and I are doing research. And we need to get a boat and get the webbing. I get him the free webbing, but he get the—I think he had to hook up the (inaudible) and the flow scan system. And he put it in there—

VanZandt: He's hooked up with you, isn't he?

Nguyen: Yeah. (chuckles) He my cousin, really. So he's my first cousin. So I hooked with him, and he said the net was lightweight, good. Every time you got debris or something, or they soak water and dry out a lot, it's like way easy to use; catch more shrimp, too. And it's only thing about it. He don't like the webbing because when you get caught or hang on the bottom, I mean you have problem sewing. Sewing, it take too long to sew.

VanZandt: Oh, to repair it.

Nguyen: To repair and to sew it, and he don't like that. It's too hard to sew and so—

VanZandt: So do you think he'll stick with it?

Nguyen: Oh, he's still working it out.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: But once he gets used to it, and he always catch more shrimp, and he's been watching his flow scan. He's saving like, every four or five hundred gallons a trip, so three dollars a gallon in the long run, it adds up.

VanZandt: Right, definitely.

Nguyen: For the fuel for the full trip.

VanZandt: But it's about a two-thousand-dollar investment to buy it.

Nguyen: I think so, yeah.

VanZandt: I wonder if there'll be a program that might help, through some of this BP money, that might help—

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: —with that. That would be nice.

Nguyen: People, fishermen need to understand, and they need to [learn] how to work that. And so maybe you don't catch shrimp. Like you're doing three knot, and you can, with sixteen RPM, you can put it down to fifteen RPM or 2.9 or 2.8 knot or fourteen RPM, but you have no shrimp. Why in the world you just don't use that until you catch shrimp? And you see you hit the jackpot, and then you push up the RPM and make it go faster. The thing about the Vietnamese is that like when they hit some shrimp, they like to go *fast*. You should get Dave to tell you about that story. He's so funny. When they hit the jackpot, they want to be loose, and you're trying to burn, to save fuel, but a fisherman, even if you catch like four or five basket more than that guy, because look at the fuel you're burning. You see what I'm saying?

VanZandt: Um-hm.

Nguyen: Why don't just go a normal 3 knot. Don't go 3 and 1/2 knots and you think you get four or five. You have to do the math, "OK. How much is four or five basket of shrimp compared to the fuel?"

VanZandt: The fuel that you're spending.

Nguyen: And you have to do like that, [but] they don't care. "The more shrimp I catch; I come in. I sell him." OK. He make ten thousand; I make fifteen thousand(?). I'm a representative(?)." (laughter)

VanZandt: Right. (chuckles) "I've got a bigger catch!"

Nguyen: Yeah, "I got bigger. I work better than you." That's how they doing. That's why I (**inaudible**). "I work bigger, better. I'm smarter than you. I catch more. I go faster. I catch more shrimp than you. Every trip I make more than you." But look how many fuel you're burning. I only burn ten thousand gallons. You burn fifteen thousand gallons. And OK, now take your catch and compare to the fuel you're saving there. Right.

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: They don't care. They just: the more shrimp you're catching. As long as I catch more shrimp than you.

VanZandt: Uh-huh. (chuckles) Well, that's so funny just to get into the mind-set because you've been there, and you still work with so many, and your cousin's still in the business. And so I know we've talked about the next generation not following—

Nguyen: Oh, my.

VanZandt: —in your footsteps, like your children and theirs. So do you really feel like this is going to be the end of the line in commercial fishing for the Vietnamese?

Nguyen: I think the end of the line of my father, and now it's my generation. I end it, and I don't think my son will go, no, no, because education in U.S. is very important

thing, because only the fishermen, like if their son and daughter, or they don't—they into it, or they don't want to go to school. I know just a couple of people that I ask him; I interview him, and, "I have been in your shoes, too." But you like, "What you doing with your daddy? How you work with your family?" He said, "Yeah, I love it. I'd like to stay with my dad." "OK. That's good." But some of them, like my son, I take him to a trip with me. Oh, God! Next time, we'll be home about a week, and I said, "Son, you want to go down to the boat with me and check it out, check on my boat?" He don't even want to talk to me. (laughter)

VanZandt: Really?

Nguyen: I put him in a month, three week on a shrimping boat with me. He nagging me. The first two week OK, but you know, two week after that he just nagging me. He want to go *home*. And, "I'm tired. Let's go *home*." (chuckles) And when I got home and I say, he didn't even want to go down to the boat. I have never seen him come on a boat with me since he go to college.

VanZandt: You cured him. (laughter) So he's at Mississippi State now?

Nguyen: Yeah, he's at Mississippi State.

VanZandt: What's he studying?

Nguyen: I don't know. What you call eye doctor?

VanZandt: Oh, an ophthalmologist?

Nguyen: Ophthalmology, yes.

VanZandt: Wow, that's fantastic.

Nguyen: He making good grades, A's and very good.

VanZandt: Yeah. Like his dad.

Nguyen: Since I work here, helping out with the [tuition].

VanZandt: Tuition, yeah.

Nguyen: But I just, I enjoy one trip, and I know in my heart for sure that he *never*, he never going to come back out. (laughter)

VanZandt: You're not getting him back out there again. That was it. (laughter)

Nguyen: He see the work I did out there and the hard work day and night, and you know.

VanZandt: What does it take, what kind of character and person, personality traits does it take to be a really successful commercial fisherman?

Nguyen: Well, first you have to be a very hard worker and smart, and you have to have a lot of friend—you cannot be out there by your own—or family because we stick together. I have two or three friend and relative; they close, really close to me, but it's not good enough. Like I remember, be real (**inaudible**), you can spread out, like you have ten people or ten boat on your group or family or whatever, you communicate. So everybody spread out, and I go east; you go west. You go this and this. And when we hit and we find the shrimp, then we connect together. Together, that's the most powerful thing, the thing that you can—you know when you catch shrimp these days, they don't even communicate in the VHF [very high frequency radio]. They communicate on the cell phone. If you want one word-of-mouth by you, one mistake, and you say, "OK. I catch shrimp. Yeah, they have shrimp right here." And they can listen to you, and they can track you, or know where you at.

VanZandt: On the GPS [global positioning system] of their cell phone?

Nguyen: Not the cell, but no, they just name the place. No, they can't track—

VanZandt: They just name the place, and they head that direction.

Nguyen: Yeah. "Oh, I know what this"—and then they, even they used, what called, sign language or tricky sort of—

VanZandt: Like Morse code.

Nguyen: Like name something that you know you—

VanZandt: Oh, code, just a code.

Nguyen: Code, your code, but they still—

VanZandt: So no one else will know. (chuckles)

Nguyen: No one know, but they still know. But that only when you cannot call like, or when you're in the Gulf, you have signal problem, and you ain't got no service out there. That only when you can't use cell phone to cell phone or fax. American, boy, they use fax because they know good [how to] fax. But the Vietnamese shrimper, they don't know how to use fax.

VanZandt: To use a fax, oh, OK.

Nguyen: Yeah, but American, all boat, they use fax. So I, "OK. This is where I'm at. I fax to you." Yeah. So then the Vietnamese, they don't have fax; they use a radio or a cell phone. When you close by, you use cell phone. You're like, you're in New Orleans, I mean Mississippi, and you have no service, or you can't reach; they have to use VHF. So when you're talking VHF, you're making sound kind of like talk a code, you know how.

VanZandt: Because everyone will—

Nguyen: People (**inaudible**). And they were searching for the channel and where you're at, and you don't want people to get to where your spot is.

VanZandt: Right, right, so you learn codes to—yeah.

Nguyen: So the very smart fishermen that do that, but when you call one, you got to call the other one, call two, and the other two will. From Mississippi to New Orleans here, it's a thirteen-hour drive. And I remember one time I used code and everything, my friend. Oh, my God! The next morning I see about a hundred boat here already. I don't know how in the world. (laughter)

VanZandt: The word spread.

Nguyen: I thought the shrimp would last me about three days. A one-day period, it's all gone. Too many boats shrimping. So you have to work smart and be out there because like I say, you have a friend or more group, you find shrimp easy, and that's how you make your money because that's where—but back then, I only have a couple of friend, so it's hard for me to find shrimp.

VanZandt: You really depend on each other—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —as a network, to be able to find it.

Nguyen: Communicate, yeah.

VanZandt: And then help each other—

Nguyen: Right.

VanZandt: —pull it in.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: When you get it, yeah.

Nguyen: These days—

VanZandt: Be first to it.

Nguyen: These days, father and son and brother and brother, even if they catch shrimp, you know what they do? “I'm going to get about a couple of thousand pound, then I'm going to call you.” (laughter) Like I say, or a couple of basket or half day's trawling because I found it first.

VanZandt: Still got a little ego there, too.

Nguyen: Yeah, yeah. OK. You're my older brother. I'm younger brother, but every trip I go and I make more money than you. I mean, I'm smarter than you. It's ego thing.

VanZandt: (laughter) Sure.

Nguyen: Yeah, you got, sometime.

VanZandt: Well, do we have just a few minutes—

Nguyen: Yeah, yes.

VanZandt: —to talk about Vietnam? OK. Let's go back then. Your father was a fisherman. Your uncle—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —did very well, it sounds like—

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: —in Vietnam with their own boats in Vung Tau. So just talk about your memories. You were eight when you left, right?

Nguyen: Well, I don't have—

VanZandt: So you were very young.

Nguyen: —much memory. I don't. I don't. I can't even remember what house I lived in, too young. I finally only remember—somehow I just remember was, my memory was the day on the boat, well, the day I got picked up and go to the ship. That's when the war was there.

VanZandt: When you escaped.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: You remember that.

Nguyen: I escaped. Only about that, but—

VanZandt: What do you remember feeling, Peter?

Nguyen: Oh, I see, oh, very sad things; see people crying, people running, and people trying, fighting, and struggle, and trying to get up to the ship. And I saw people fall down the ship. I saw people got injured. And I saw people got hurt, and I saw a kid, and I saw people like just *crazy*, trying to get away, running away from the boat, their own boat. And when I got to the ship and all, we just like sitting around, a thousand people up on the deck, and making, have their own camp, and eating, and trying to survive.

VanZandt: Do you remember having to climb up? Was there a rope or were you lifted up?

Nguyen: I got lifted up by that palette thing, when they brought down the palette. And my father and my uncle just, when they dropped you off, get your family, and they pick it up, and swing you over, and throw you up there, and that's—

VanZandt: Did you feel lucky?

Nguyen: We feel, yeah, we feel very lucky that we came to the United States and have a—when we get into Guam, we were very lucky that we have a place like this. Some people had to go travel to by their own boat to Thailand and—

VanZandt: Malaysia.

Nguyen: —Malaysia. People, women got raped. And if you get lucky, you get—the enemy, the military people, the government there, they pull your boat, and they sink your boat. They kill you for nothing at all. That's all the story I hear from my friend. And when they go like back in [19]78, or after [19]76, or after the war, they traveled here, and it so hard for them to get to the U.S. But we just got, like I said my uncle, he got everybody, and he built his own boat. He got every, like his family, his oldest son have a pair. He built two for you, your brother; he got like, wow, he got eleven people in his family. The majority's all men, and so the whole family could, everybody get their own boat and everything.

VanZandt: To escape.

Nguyen: We head out; we head out early, then nobody—we just listen to news, and we head out and prepare. We already prepare already because that's the only way that Communists can't get in, while you're in the (*inaudible*). We'd be there a couple of day, open water, and wait for them. Any kind of ship come around and pick us up, like a ship, sometimes a ship was like doing import stuff.

VanZandt: Um-hm. Were any of your father, or uncle, or family members, soldiers in the South Vietnamese Army?

Nguyen: Yes, I have a uncle. I have, my uncle was; he was in the Army, and he came—

VanZandt: Your Uncle Mau or another one?

Nguyen: No, another one, different one. The one I would tell you before I want you to meet him here.

VanZandt: Ah. Is he still living here?

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: He—that's when he—I got two uncle that in the military, and I have one aunt, one aunt, and her husband in the military, but he got dead. He—

VanZandt: Was killed.

Nguyen: Yeah, he was killed. But my uncle, he's, I think—

VanZandt: Were they able to escape then early enough, or did they—

Nguyen: Yeah, they escaped with us, too.

VanZandt: —spend time in a reeducation camp? They did?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: They all escape with us. We have a big family. We came out with like ten, fifteen family at one time.

VanZandt: So they probably knew what was coming because there were some people who say, “We didn’t know that the fall was coming so fast. If we had known, we would have”—

Nguyen: That’s why, that’s why we have a uncle in the military so he even know, “Oh, I’m going to lose this war. I’m going home to my family and tell my family we got to get out now.” So that’s what he did. (laughter)

VanZandt: So that helped you, saved you.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: That information.

Nguyen: That’s why we know; that’s why. He say, “We can’t win this war. It’s coming. It’s coming. I just got off of the war. So are you going to stay here, or are you going to go with us?” So we did. And you know—

VanZandt: Yeah, and Vung Tau was a base. I mean, there were a lot of American and other military there. Do you have any recollection—

Nguyen: No.

VanZandt: —of seeing—

Nguyen: No.

VanZandt: —American soldiers around?

Nguyen: No. I think before Vung Tau was—back in that same time, do they have a base there? I don’t know because thirty-something year now I (**inaudible**). I don’t know what they had.

VanZandt: So you don’t have any recollection of seeing—

Nguyen: No.

VanZandt: —soldiers around?

Nguyen: No.

VanZandt: American?

Nguyen: No. I don't know if the base in there but—

VanZandt: Yeah. Have you been back, Peter?

Nguyen: No. That's what I'm saying. In about thirty-three year I haven't been back to Vietnam yet.

VanZandt: Do you have any desire to?

Nguyen: Oh, I want to go back so much.

VanZandt: You do?

Nguyen: I really, really, I hope one day I can. Maybe my kid grow up a little bigger, I can take them back to see our country. But yeah, I'm really working hard through that, and it's not cheap to go bring your whole family up there, exactly. (laughter)

VanZandt: Right, uh-huh. It's cheap once you *get* there. You can eat cheap, yeah, but not getting there.

Nguyen: But I really am looking forward to that. I think that's the first country I will visit is back in my country. I want to see that, how it's like now from thirty-three years.

VanZandt: That'd be amazing.

Nguyen: That's my friend; Ri went back. Ri's in Vietnam right now.

VanZandt: Oh, he is?

Nguyen: He took his whole family back there.

VanZandt: Wow!

Nguyen: Yeah, he—

VanZandt: Has he been back before, or is this his first time?

Nguyen: No, he go back there, married. He's been back so many times. That's why he went. He get married and back and forth every year. He went five, six times, so he's taking his wife back to visit her family again. Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Well, let me ask this, too, as we kind of begin to close. You were primarily raised here in America.

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: As an American—

Nguyen: Um-hm, American citizen.

VanZandt: —with ties to Vietnam in your heart and your family and stories that you’ve heard. So what does being American and living here mean to you?

Nguyen: I don’t know nothing about Vietnam, where living in America is a great country. I mean, it’s freedom and educated. And I really loving living in America. You have a lot of thing you want to do, and it’s a beautiful country. It’s so huge. And you can learn a lot of thing and get educated there, and it’s meeting a lot of people. But I really, I don’t know if I could go back to a country I don’t know how is it over there. I heard people say, these young people, it’s fun and everything, but you get free; it’s not too many like you do whatever you want in here. In America you have to abide the law, and that’s one different. In Vietnam you can do whatever you want. If you have a business or something, you have the right to do—but here you have to—

VanZandt: You’ve got all those rules and regulations, like in fishing.

Nguyen: You can eat anything you want. (laughter) Over here you have certain kind you can’t eat and species you can’t catch or animal you can’t catch or whatever. And then you see that’s one big different, changing it. And even though I’m not in our country, but I—

VanZandt: You knew from your uncle and it’s been—

Nguyen: Yeah, and friend and then—

VanZandt: Yeah.

Nguyen: —fishing this.

VanZandt: And it’s still that way there.

Nguyen: Yeah, it’s still that way, and that’s the one thing that’s different that I see. And you go your way and you see your own people.

VanZandt: Well, what do you think are the *positive* aspects of the Vietnamese culture that have stayed with you, through your family, that you’ve practiced that are real benefits that you don’t see with American-raised children?

Nguyen: My family and my own, raising mine, this is my personal family—I live in it right now—is I’ve been married for like twenty years now, and none of my son and daughter speak Vietnamese.

VanZandt: Really.

Nguyen: That’s what hurt me. And I try to tell them, I say, “You go to school. You go to school, and you speak English at school. When you come home, you talk Vietnamese with Daddy and Mommy.” And they walk home. They watch TV. They hang out with friend. And I try to teach them Vietnamese, but my wife, she don’t

speak Vietnamese as well as I do. And when she speak with me, she kind of have accent. And when I twenty year been shrimping out there, and she raised my children, if I'm not home, speaking it, there you go. Now, not even, none of them are speaking Vietnamese. My oldest son, if I speak Vietnamese, he can understand, but he can't talk back to me or speak back to me because the mother always talk, speak English. And that's what really hurt me the most that they—right now we just speak English in my home, (chuckles) and we are Vietnamese. And I see like my friend or cousin, and I saw their children speaking Vietnamese, and I just feel so sad about it. Nothing I can do, but I just wasted my time when I was being fisherman out there too long and from the beginning. And that's what hurt me. And I can't speak and tell them about the culture of Vietnam, and how our family, every New Year we go to Grandpa's house and, "Happy New Year, Grandpa," or something like that.

VanZandt: You remember that.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Tet in Vietnam.

Nguyen: Yeah, I teach them, that's what. Well, at least you can do—I show them, (speaks Vietnamese), and Happy New Year (speaks Vietnamese) in Vietnamese. They learn that, but for what? A couple of hour. (laughter)

VanZandt: Right. (laughter) It's not a part of their core identity like it is with you.

Nguyen: (laughter) I know, but I just feel so—I don't know what. There's nothing I really can do.

VanZandt: Well, I've heard some twenty-something-[year-old], Vietnamese, young people saying, "I'm learning now. Now I want to learn Vietnamese." Because their parents and grandparents are getting older, and they realize—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —that the language may be lost, and they're actually taking classes and learning. So you never know. That may come. That often happens as you age. You want to get more in touch with your past and culture.

Nguyen: Yeah. If I have some kind of way or church or something, or we have a kind of grant or somebody in the priest and hire somebody to teach them Vietnamese for free and for the community and for the church. Now they're teaching Vietnamese but only in the Bible Study.

VanZandt: Right.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Like CCD.

Nguyen: CCD, CCD, yeah, but it would be great for someone even my age or like my wife, she speak because she want to learn Vietnamese more often and all, so anybody that want to learn it, it would be great for them.

VanZandt: That's good.

Nguyen: But that's the one thing that I don't like, for my family and my son can speak only [English], which you know they're *losing* the language.

VanZandt: Sure.

Nguyen: You're supposed to be getting, learn more, even your own culture.

VanZandt: Right. Right. Thank you, thank you so very much. Well, I know we need to let you go and have lunch and get back to work. (laughter) But Peter, I just—this has been a long time coming, and I want to thank you for sharing all that you shared.

Nguyen: Yeah, my pleasure.

VanZandt: And is there anything that we haven't talked about—because of course there's so much more that we could talk about—that sticks in your mind right now that you want to just have on the record, whether it's anything personal of your time growing up, or adjustments to America, fishing, a message to your children, anything at all that you want to add that we haven't talked about?

Nguyen: Nothing (chuckles) I can think of right now, but you know like my job here, I really enjoy this job and with helping the community with staying close together with the fishermen. And they know me, and I know them, and any kind of training I help them to understand. I know they have been hardworking. The shrimping is very tough now, hardworking living. But sometimes they have problems when they go to a meeting or something that they don't understand, or just like you get with my work and learn more. And I have somebody that represent them in the future if they have a problem with their way of living and they need somebody to understand and what kind of problem they got or if they're struggling or they need help with something. I'd like to stay and help them because I'm in this, too. I work with them, and I know what they need, and I'm just hoping I can help them in the future, and who knows what will happen in the future?

VanZandt: Um-hm. Well, like David said, they needed someone like you here for a long time, and they're so lucky to *have* you.

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: The fishermen are, because you, like you said, you've been there and understand.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Have a heart for them.

Nguyen: Yeah, but like I say, I don't have a degree for anything because I've been—but I'm still trying and learning and whatever go by each day, but I still training. Like we're going this March, we're going to have another training like drill, conduct like a safety drill in Vietnamese, and I have to do all those, translate and all those law. How to fight fire on a sinking ship, how to rescue people. And I have a certificate over there from the AMC from Alaska. Dave and I went to like—let me see—a whole week class.

VanZandt: Did you, in Alaska?

Nguyen: No. The Alaskans they came down here. They teach us the whole week. Oh, my God! That was a (chuckles) hard week, long week for us, and we had to study. We had test. We had everything, and now I have to do it in Vietnamese so they can survive if anything happen to their boat. And how to call a Mayday sign or abandon ship or a firefighter, or whatever, because they need to know that. When the Coast Guard come in and check them and you have training or anything, you have to have that. If you don't have it, they—

VanZandt: You have to have that now.

Nguyen: Yeah, at least know how to survive.

VanZandt: It's so important.

Nguyen: Yeah, save lives.

VanZandt: And I'm sure it must be very difficult to translate because there's lingo and there's so much that's difficult to find—

Nguyen: Do you know—

VanZandt: —words for in Vietnamese.

Nguyen: —Mr. Tung Bahn(?)? You know Tung Bahn?

VanZandt: No.

Nguyen: No?

VanZandt: No.

Nguyen: Oh, you need, you need to know him.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: Tung Bahn, he work for the diocese here.

VanZandt: Oh, right across the street, the Catholic Diocese.

Nguyen: Yeah, the Catholic, that's where they have the office at the refugee office over at the—

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: Mag Dau(?), Mag Dau, she is in charge of that, but Tung Bahn is Vietnamese, and he help me out, too. That's where they teach people in ESL [English as a second language] or a refugee like, Spanish people who want to learn.

VanZandt: Sure.

Nguyen: Vietnamese who want to learn. They want to learn ESL.

VanZandt: Yeah.

Nguyen: They teach it over there, and anytime the Vietnamese have problem or language barrier or something the diocese, the Catholic, you go to them. But I think Tung Bahn will give you a very history of that.

VanZandt: Oh, I will have to get his contact information from you.

Nguyen: Yeah, let me see if I can.

VanZandt: OK.

Nguyen: I think I have his business card out there, but he know a lot of people because he work with the diocese.

VanZandt: Yes, sure.

Nguyen: And a lot of Vietnamese and work with them, and he help a lot of people here, too. It's one of our big community here that we get—

VanZandt: And what would you say has been the major challenge post-Katrina and oil spill with getting through this bureaucracy and filing claims? And has there been language issues?

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: Difficulty with lack of—

Nguyen: And we have, too, just a lot of meeting, and we have to open our—we go to the American meeting, and we come home; we get a group of people, Vietnamese meeting, and we have to translate. And it was, BP was (**inaudible**). And we lucky somehow survive, and everybody got over that. Before the Vietnamese, they can't shrimp; they can't do anything. Well, BP come in and help them out.

VanZandt: So BP has been helpful.

Nguyen: Yeah, helpful, very helpful with all that, very helpful. And they got through the stage, and now they're back in business right now, and everybody started shrimping, and the seasons are starting to getting better and better. But only last year I think we had the problem with the white shrimps, and we lost the white shrimp season because they bring in that freshwater [Mississippi River diversion] thing in.

VanZandt: The freshwater diversion, right.

Nguyen: Um-hm.

VanZandt: We didn't really get to touch on that.

Nguyen: But usually we have white season is what, that's why we, they make a lot of money and somehow did.

VanZandt: Do you look forward to a good season then coming up?

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: White shrimp? Even with the freshwater and the changing of the salinity of the water, you think things will be back to a better state?

Nguyen: I hope so. Yeah, I hope so, too. I hope they don't kill all those baby shrimp, but we'll see because I don't know how much, if they're still leaving the water coming out, or if they stop it or whatever.

VanZandt: OK. Well, I hope for the best. We'll hope for a really banner season coming up because it's been hard, and everyone deserves a break now. Well, thank you, Peter.

Nguyen: Thank you.

VanZandt: Thanks so much. OK.

(end of interview)