

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

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Franklin Lance Parker

Interviewer: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey

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Louis Kyriakoudes, Director
The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage
118 College Drive #5175
The University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
601-266-4574

An Oral History with Franklin Lance Parker, Volume 1043

Interviewer: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey

Transcriber: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey

Editors: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey, Linda VanZandt

Biography

Mr. Franklin Lance Parker was born on July 4, 1973, in Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mr. Olin Boyce Parker (born April 13, 1944, in Pascagoula, Mississippi) and Mrs. Velma Elaine Terry Parker (born January 26, 1945). His father was a fisherman and a furniture refinisher from 1964 to 1999. His father's family were farmers in the Mississippi Delta. His mother was a homemaker. His mother's family were watermen, including fishermen, ship captains, and ship pilots.

At the time of this interview, Frank was self-employed as a commercial fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico; he began his career in 1991. He attended Howard II, Biloxi High School, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and The University of Southern Mississippi. He enjoys sailing. He is president of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Fishermen's Organization.

On March 6, 2004, he married his wife Rebecca (born September 23, 1978) in Biloxi, Mississippi. At the time of this interview, they had four children, Kaitlyn Leigh Parker (born April 20, 2005), Patrick Eli Parker (born November 17, 2006), and twins Franklin Boyce Parker and Jesse Ray Parker (both born October 27, 2010).

Parker believes that, "Positive things happen to positive people."

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AN ORAL HISTORY
with
FRANKLIN LANCE PARKER

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Franklin Lance Parker and is taking place on October 29, 2011. The interviewer is Stephanie Scull-DeArmey.

Scull-DeArmey: This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Project at The University of Southern Mississippi, done in conjunction with the NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] Voices from the Fisheries Project. The interview is with Frank Parker, and it is taking place on October 29, 2011, at about 2:45 p.m. in Biloxi, Mississippi, in Frank's home. The interviewer is Stephanie Scull-DeArmey. And first I'd like to thank you, Frank, for taking time to talk with me today and just get a little bit of background information. So I'm going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Parker: My name is Franklin Parker, F-R-A-N-K-L-I-N, P-A-R-K-E-R.

Scull-DeArmey: So we're going to just get into these NOAA Voices from the Fisheries questions at first, and then we'll talk about your everyday experiences at the end. What does the seafood industry mean to the people and the culture of the Gulf Coast? (0:01:12.7)

Parker: It means a lot to, like myself. You know, I'm a sixth-generation Biloxian. My family's been here since the 1850s. So of course it is my heritage, my culture. It's something that's bred into the people down here, even the people who don't, per se, participate in the fishery today, their father or their grandfather, somebody, at one time in their family, if they're locals, they participated in this. So they grew up eating seafood. They enjoy fresh seafood. So it's really big to the community. You know, I guess it's family traditions. On Sundays we'll have shrimp boils or crab boils or stuff like that. So it's really embedded into our community, our culture, just the way most people live. I mean, just about anybody that was born and raised down here, you were just a few minutes from water, just about anywhere you want to live at. So a lot of people have a lot of memories of the water and the beaches and fishing, even if they're not directly involved with the commercial fishing aspect of it. But probably at some point in time, somebody's family member was. It's very important to the local people.

Scull-DeArmey: About how far are you, here, from the Mississippi Sound?

Parker: Oh, I'm either way, I'm probably not even a couple hundred yards from Back Bay, and I would think maybe a half a mile from the Mississippi Sound, right here on the peninsula.

Scull-DeArmey: How has fishing and shrimping changed in your experience?
(0:02:50.4)

Parker: There's several things that's changed in the twenty-five years or so that I've participated in it. A lot of it is techniques, and equipment's changed. And also a lot of our habitat's changed. The first with the equipment and the gear, skimmer frames (0:03:18.4) have come into effect within the last twenty-five years. When I was a kid, growing up, we'd rarely ever seen a skimmer frame, and now, majority of the boats are all skimmer-frame boats, and that's just a little different technique. Instead of using doors, they use basically a piece of pipe to keep the mouth of the net open.

Scull-DeArmey: Is the skimmer frame the kind of net or the kind of boat?

Parker: It is the kind of net, the kind of trawling equipment, and you actually push a skimmer frame through the water, compared to dragging the net.

Scull-DeArmey: Does it go on the front of the boat?

Parker: It goes on the side, on each side. And it's got its advantages. It does really well on white shrimp. You seem to catch a lot more white shrimp with them. (0:04:08.0) But the downside to it is it's relatively shallow water, so it's all inshore fisheries. Nobody works in the Gulf of Mexico with a skimmer frame.

Scull-DeArmey: About how far out would inshore fishery be?

Parker: I'd say to the barrier islands.

Scull-DeArmey: And ballpark figure?

Parker: Ten miles, twelve miles offshore, state waters.

Scull-DeArmey: State waters.

Parker: Right. And another one of the major things that's come into changes is the implementation of TEDs (0:04:44.5) [turtle-excluder devices] and fish-excluder devices and things like that. Twenty years ago, there was no shrimper wanted to have a TED, and there's still a lot TED litigation going on now, particularly with the skimmer frame because the way the skimmer frame works is you can pick your net up every two minutes, five minutes, and you never stop fishing. You just basically pick the back end of the net up and dump it on the boat. And because it is a inshore thing, they've been left out of the TED rules. Well, skimmer frames don't have to have TEDs, which I think it's great because TEDs are a big hindrance as far as shrimp loss, and if you catch debris, particularly in the inshore fishery, we catch a lot of derelict crab traps, logs that come out the rivers, debris, things like that, and that all costs us money, when you lose your shrimp. They've implemented a fifty-five-minute-time

tow, which you can only drag fifty-five minutes, which is excellent for saving sea turtles because if you drag around three or four hours, a sea turtle'll probably drown and die. And I think the fifty-five-minute time limit is excellent. It just needs to be more strictly enforced. They need a little more, some tougher penalties if you get caught violating it and things like that because there's none of us want to kill sea turtles. And me personally, I've been skimming about the last seven, eight years, and I would say the mortality rate—I mean, we do catch turtles in the skimmer nets because we do not have TEDs, but I would say that my own personal mortality rate on turtles is probably less than half of 1 percent mortality rate just because I do the fifty-five-minute-time tow.

Scull-DeArmeY: So you pick up the whole net out of the water.

Parker: You just pick up the very back end. You never quit catching shrimp while you pick up. So that's another plus.

Scull-DeArmeY: So any turtle that might be in there would have come to the end of the net—

Parker: To the end of the net.

Scull-DeArmeY: —at that point.

Parker: And then we would pick it up.

Scull-DeArmeY: There's your new, one-year-old—

Parker: Yeah, one of them.

Scull-DeArmeY: —half of the twins there who's joining us for the interview. A beautiful boy. Makes it hard to concentrate—

Parker: That's right.

Scull-DeArmeY: —because he's so sweet. (laughter)

Parker: Cute.

Scull-DeArmeY: He's so cute and sweet.

Parker: Another thing also is the fish excluders, (0:07:05.5) which here in Mississippi we aren't required to use them, but a lot of the fishermen, we do use them at times. It's just, it makes less work when you reduce the amount of fish you catch. If we're working and there's shrimp and a lot of fish, then it's more labor intensive if you're catching a lot of fish.

Scull-DeArmey: And why would that be, for the record?

Parker: That would be because if you pick up, say, you have three hundred pounds of shrimp and you have a thousand pounds of fish with it, it takes a long time to pick them out, where if you put the fish excluder in there, you might lose a little bit of shrimp, but say, if you had three hundred without it, if you had two hundred seventy-five, but you only have a hundred pounds of fish, it's a lot less work.

Scull-DeArmey: So because you are physically, on the boat, having to handpick the fish from the—

Parker: Separate the fish from the shrimp.

Scull-DeArmey: So the fish-excluder devices will go in a skimmer net?

Parker: Oh, yeah. I usually leave them in my skimmer nets year-round just because it seems to me that the skimmer net does catch a few more fish.

Scull-DeArmey: Are you using trawl nets at all anymore?

Parker: Yeah. I had my boat rigged up where I can either trawl or skim, and it takes about thirty minutes to swap over. And that's probably one of the biggest complaints I have with NOAA wanting to force these TEDs (0:08:33.1) on skimmer boats is the one reason, like on my boat, it's really not that big of a factor as far as safety but these TEDs are relatively large. They're approximately three foot by three foot, and majority of these inshore boats are less than thirty feet, so when you have something that's a tenth the size of the boat, it takes up a lot of space; it creates a hazard if it's rough, and they're rocking around. You could get knocked overboard and stuff like that. So I think if NOAA would step up the enforcement on it, it would be a lot better than just shoving it down our throats because like I say, a lot of these boats are small; they work inshore waters and stuff.

Scull-DeArmey: So the TED is the same on every size net?

Parker: No, no. But there's a minimum requirement. There's no maximum. You can have the biggest TED you want, but there is a minimum, and it's like thirty-three inches in inshore waters.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. That reminds me to ask you a little bit about nets. How big are the nets that you tow?

Parker: Well, net size (0:09:48.9) varies from state to state and bodies of water. Here in inshore fishery in Mississippi, we have a twenty-foot-net law. We're allowed to pull two twenty-five-foot nets, and that's either skimmers or trawls or whatever. Now, when we go to Louisiana, they have a twenty-five-foot net, but they're skimmer

nets can only be sixteen foot. So I fish a lot of times in Louisiana, so that's what I have on my boat is a sixteen-foot skimmer net and twenty-five foot trawls.

Scull-DeArmey: Which do you think does a better job for you?

Parker: It all depends on the place, time, area, what you're fishing for.

Scull-DeArmey: What are some of the variables?

Parker: Water depth. Water depth is the main thing. And then the type of shrimp, too, also.

Scull-DeArmey: How many types of shrimp do you fish for? (0:10:36.3)

Parker: Predominantly two, but we do catch three. If we go to Florida in the spring of the year, we'll catch pink shrimp, but majority of the shrimp we catch here are browns and whites.

Scull-DeArmey: Have you seen any white shrimp this year?

Parker: Yes. That's what we been catching the last—since about August has been predominantly white shrimp. The brownie season was very, very short this year.

Scull-DeArmey: What were the catches like in the brown?

Parker: They were pretty good at first. (0:11:06.3) They were small shrimp, but the records were above normal, but it didn't last very long. I mean, I think our brownie season, in the years past, I mean, we should be catching brownies all the way into August, September. This year the brownies were here and gone by June. July, there were no brownies here, none at all. But they had a lot of shrimp at the beginning, but the price—they were so small, and the price (0:11:29.7) was so low, just, you go out there, and you work really hard and catch a boatload of shrimp and not make a lot of money, and it was just kind of discouraging. So I made, this year in particular I made one trip on the Mississippi opening. The Louisiana, Mississippi opening was around the same time. I think there was like two days apart. We had about fifteen thousand pounds of shrimp on the boat. It was a very good trip as far as the poundage, but we averaged less than a dollar a pound for the shrimp. So if you catch fourteen thousand dollars worth of shrimp, and then your fuel bill is seven thousand dollars, and then you split the seven thousand dollars up, you got to handle a lot of shrimp. And when they cut the price, I think we got around ninety-five cents for them, but there were so many shrimp coming in so quick, they cut the price to like forty cents, fifty cents. And I was just like, "Man, I'm not taking my boat out for no fifty cents a pound." So I tied my boat up for about three weeks in June. And I mean, I've never just not worked in June because that is the predominant time when we make good money. You know? And then towards the end of June, I talked to a buddy of mine in Florida, (0:12:40.0) and

they were catching some bigger shrimp, and we went down there and worked a few days, and we come back, and we retailed them.

Scull-DeArmey: So they're [shrimp are] safe to sail from Florida to here?

Parker: As long as you have the proper licenses.

Scull-DeArmey: And like they're refrigerated? Is that how—

Parker: Yeah. I actually have a freezer on my boat.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. So you can freeze them.

Parker: Yeah. (0:13:00.3) Every shrimp we catch is frozen. Well, it's called an IQF, individual quick freeze. And when we catch the shrimp there, a lot of times they're still alive, so when we freeze them, it's instantaneously flash-frozen, ensures the highest quality that you don't get no kind of bacteria or decomposition on the shrimp. And I try to handle my shrimp very well because I retail 99 percent of my shrimp to the public. (0:13:29.9)

Scull-DeArmey: How do you do that, Frank?

Parker: We sell them off the back of the boat, and then because I've been in the business so long, I have a pretty good clientele. People call me, ordering shrimp.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. So you have some orders maybe even before you go out?

Parker: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I've seen a lot of times where we'll make the whole trip, and we got them all sold before they hit the dock, so.

Scull-DeArmey: That is great.

Parker: Yeah. That's the wave of the future. And this year, having the freezer on my boat—I just installed the freezer last year, and it's really paid off this year because I was able to go off to farther distances, catch a nicer, higher-quality shrimp, come back, and because it's been such a bad season (0:14:06.4) in Mississippi, the supply of local shrimp was down, so the demand was still there, and I was able to get a top dollar for my shrimp because there was no competition. I couldn't tell you how many times I'd go into my harbor over there, and I'd be the only one with shrimp. And it's only basic economics. When you have a pie, and you're the only person eating that pie, then you can eat the whole thing. So. And then another thing, too, is when there's a lot of shrimp on the market as far as in the retail, when everybody's catching shrimp, and they come into the dock, people try to get rid of them faster so they can go back out. So they start cutting prices, and a little price war breaks out. But this year it was pretty—I was pretty fortunate this year.

Scull-DeArmey: That's fabulous. How much did the freezer (0:14:53.4) cost you?

Parker: Probably about forty thousand dollars is what I have invested in it.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, man!

Parker: But I figure within, I'll probably have my money back in two to three years because I don't have to buy anymore ice.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, that's right.

Parker: Yeah. And we usually would spend four to five hundred dollars a trip just on ice, and that's every week. So you'll recoup your money pretty fast. Plus you have the—when you go out and catch the shrimp, “Well, I got to hurry up and get back in here. My shrimp are starting to get three days old, four days old.” The time frame's (inaudible). You can keep them for a good while.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah, sure. And until that freezer's filled up, you're free to keep shrimping.

Parker: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. How much does it hold?

Parker: My boat will probably hold about twenty thousand pounds.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. Have you had the freezer that full?

Parker: No. We hadn't filled it up yet. I could have filled it up this year, but they was talking about cutting the price, when I had the fifteen thousand pounds, and they was cutting the price every day, and I was like, “Look. If we don't go in today, then tomorrow we could possibly lose four or five thousand dollars, just on this one load of shrimp.” So it was like, “Let's go on in and sell them while the price is up.”

Scull-DeArmey: Is your boat diesel?

Parker: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: And what are diesel prices (0:16:09.5) running you?

Parker: Diesel prices are high. They're not as high as they've been in the past, but they're—I think on average this year has been about three dollars and twenty-five cents a gallon.

Scull-DeArme y: Couple of weeks ago, or maybe a month ago, I think we were paying like maybe three dollars and seventeen cents for gas. Did you get a break on diesel?

Parker: It hasn't gotten below three dollars all year. That's about the cheapest we've seen diesel this year, and the highest has been about three dollars and fifty cents, three dollars and sixty cents.

Scull-DeArme y: How much does it take for you to make a trip?

Parker: About two thousand gallons. I'll put two thousand gallons in there, and then we can make about fifteen, sixteen nights. And that's plenty enough.

Scull-DeArme y: About two weeks. (0:16:52.7)

Parker: Yeah, about two weeks.

Scull-DeArme y: Anything else about how shrimping or equipment has changed?

Parker: That's really it for the equipment. One more thing with equipment is technology is taking over on equipment as far as the materials they make nets out of. (0:17:13.9) In the old days, it was all cotton nets and linen nets, and you had a lot of maintenance in them, dipping them and tarring them and stuff. Well, nowadays we have all these synthetic fibers. They're making nets out of what's called Dyneema, which is basically like a Kevlar, and you can pull a smaller-diameter twine and have the same strength as a big-diameter twine, which that makes it easier to pull, which means your engine's not working as hard, which means you're burning less fuel. But they're relatively expensive nets. I've experimented with some of them. In some of them the cost, you'll make it up. But some of them, it's a lot of money to go spend if you might make one drag and hang up and tear up a net.

Scull-DeArme y: So about how much would a net cost?

Parker: Just for some Dyneema nets for a sixteen-foot skimmer frame is about four thousand dollars for two nets, and you're subject to wipe that net out at any given time if you hang it on an obstruction or debris or something.

Scull-DeArme y: Can you repair it the way you would—

Parker: Yeah. It is repairable. It is.

Scull-DeArme y: So that's eight thousand bucks?

Parker: No, four thousand for the two.

Scull-DeArme y: For the two, and that's for the skimmers. What about the trawl?

Parker: The trawls are probably about six.

Scull-DeArmey: For two.

Parker: And that's for twenty-five-foot nets.

Scull-DeArmey: So you've got ten thousand dollars in your nets, and then you have to have TEDs in the ones that cost you six thousand.

Parker: Right. Yeah. And then they also have, like I said, with the technology on just the material of the nets, and then they're starting to experiment with some different type doors, (0:19:02.1) which the doors are what actually hold the trawl open, and the trawls, the doors, they're shaped more like a airplane wing where it's less resistance in the water, easier to pull, but—

Scull-DeArmey: But it will open the net.

Parker: It will open the net. And they're pretty expensive, too. I mean, you can have six, seven, eight thousand dollars in your nets, so I mean like there's a possibility if you're pulling big nets and doors, you could have twenty thousand dollars worth of equipment on the bottom that if you hand one sunk boat, you could lose it all. So the gamble's still there. And the economics of the business, a lot of guys aren't tending to it, but like I said, I've experimented with some of it, and it pays off a little bit, but it's just a long return on your money, especially if you hang up and tear one up.

Scull-DeArmey: Would it tempt you at all to just keep using the cotton twine? (0:19:57.9)

Parker: Yeah and no. Like I said, there's benefits to it. There's a lot of places where we drag where there are a lot of hangs and especially after hurricanes and stuff where things come uncovered or things sink. Well, just this last trip I tore up a net on a place where I been dragging my whole life, and there was never nothing there, and it just completely obliterated the net. So.

Scull-DeArmey: Good grief. So I was going to ask about like a global positioning system, (0:20:23.9) maybe—

Parker: Oh, yeah. The technology now. I grew up, shrimping on a boat where all we had was a old loran [long range navigation], which was basically World War II technology, and a compass, and that's all we had. And now on my boat, I mean, I have a computer, desktop computer and a laptop computer on my boat that has navigation system on it, and I can go back on that computer. I can pull back ten years ago where was I dragging on this day, what time was it, how many shrimp I caught. I mean, you can keep a logbook. And like just me, I've had this system on my boat about eleven years now. I have the last eleven years of my shrimping career is in

there. And somebody getting in the business, I can take a disc, take it off my computer, and he knows everywhere where I've drug, where I've been at, my dates, times, all my hangs, everything like that.

Scull-DeArme y: That's intellectual property. I mean, it sounds like that would be marketable.

Parker: It is. A lot of guys sell their hangs, especially to like charter-boat guys, and stuff, where people's going to make money off of it. But I don't know. Here in the fishing business we—I don't really share my tracks a whole lot, as far as where I drag because there's a lot of places where that's just knowledge that I've learned over time, and that kind of gives me my little edge where I know what—drag this spot when the tide's falling; drag this spot when the tide's rising and things like that, but as far as hangs and stuff, I mean, we pretty much share all that with almost everybody.

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. So that's kind of like just—

Parker: All right. Yeah. "Here's a hang. You don't want to lose your stuff on it."

Scull-DeArme y: Right. Just kind of like, "Do unto others as you would"—

Parker: Yeah, right.

Scull-DeArme y: And I guess that's part of what makes you guys a community.

Parker: Oh, it is, I mean, because you think you're just one man out there on the ocean, and if Mother Nature's going to do something, (0:22:20.5) you might need some help one day. And I've seen many times where I've went out the way to help people, and they've come back to help me, so. Even if it's people you really don't particularly care for. (laughter) Still it's just the right thing to do. And you would like to think, "Well, maybe you don't like them. They don't like you." But if you was in a jam, they would help you. So.

Scull-DeArme y: What was I going to ask you? It was something about—oh, do you have a deckhand who goes out with you?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArme y: Are there just two of you?

Parker: I fish a lot two-handed; sometimes I bring three, (0:22:52.9) two deckhands and myself.

Scull-DeArme y: And what's the size of the boat?

Parker: Sixty-foot, sixty-foot long, twenty-foot wide.

Scull-DeArmey: That's big, a pretty big boat. I had a sailboat that was nineteen and a half, (laughter) so sixty to me sounds like a lot to handle. I'm just looking back over what we've talked about to see if I had any questions.

Parker: The other thing that's changed, not related to gear or technology or anything is the way all of our whole ecosystem (0:23:27.9) seems like it's changing to me. I've seen a big difference in just there's so much coastal erosion going on here, (0:23:35.8) not particularly here in Mississippi, but in Louisiana. I mean, the marshes and the islands are just disappearing. And I can think back when I started shrimping, these places where we'd go in, there would be an island there. Well, now, we're dragging over the top of these islands in six, seven foot of water. And talking to the older guys who've been in it fifty, sixty years, there's places where they could go if it was rough or a storm or something, they could go run and get behind an island that basically had fifteen, twenty foot bluffs, tall bluffs with trees. And I think back to like my great-uncle and them, back in the [19]40s when they went into Main(?) Pass, their antenna hit oak trees. Now, there's not a oak tree within ten, twenty miles. There's no trees left. All the trees are gone. The saltwater's killed them, saltwater intrusion because they channelized the Mississippi River. There's no more natural flow of freshwater and stuff coming down through there. That's a big, big factor, I think, is just if we destroy all these, let all these marshes just wash away to nothing, (0:24:48.9) then that's the nursery grounds. That's where all the shrimp grow up; the fish grow up; the crabs, everything grows up in there, and if you lose that, it doesn't matter how much management they do on the fisheries level, if you don't give them the place where they grow up, then that's going to be a bigger effect in the future than I think a lot of people are really anticipating.

Scull-DeArmey: If catastrophic climate change is real, and there are some scientists who say it is, then sea levels will rise, not only because of glacial melt, which would eventually flow into the sea, but also warm water expands. So it could be that some of that really is rising water. But are the Mississippi wetlands like, (0:25:42.9) the marshes, are we faring better than Louisiana?

Parker: Yeah, we are. And I think the main reason why is because our marshes aren't as exposed as the ones down there are. I mean, they're a direct hit to—there's no barrier islands protecting them and things—

Scull-DeArmey: In Louisiana.

Parker: In Louisiana, where here we have barrier islands, and a lot of our marshes are back in the bays and bayous and stuff like that, and it's not, there's not constant wave action on them, washing the sediment away and stuff like that. And then another thing, one reason why I think it's changed around here locally is there's so much bulkheading going on. I mean, people don't even think about—everybody wants to live on the water, and you go right up the Bay [of Biloxi], there's very little places left where it's natural marsh grass.

Scull-DeArmey: Now, for the record, can you tell us what bulkheading is?

Parker: Bulkheading (0:26:33.7) is where they basically put in either concrete or sheet metal or wood, and they line the shoreline with it and fill it up with dirt where there's no erosion. And because I just know in the last twenty years I've participated in this fishery, that when we would get a rain, it seemed like the shrimp would flush out of the bays and bayous and stuff and come out where we could catch them. Well, now it seems like because of the bulkheading, the waters, it used to just naturally disperse through all these little bayous and creeks and come down slow. Well, now it seems like it's real rapid. It just comes through; it's through real quick. It used to be if you had ten, twelve inches of rain, well, you would say, "OK. Well, three days from now, I'm going to go, and I'm going to catch me some shrimp." Well, now, you better be there about two, three hours after that rain because it seems like three days later, the freshwater's done flushed out and went through. It's like it's more channelized.

Scull-DeArmey: Because the shrimp are reacting to the salinity change?

Parker: Oh, yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: When the freshwater comes into the saltwater—

Parker: It'll push them. Yeah. They'll actually—

Scull-DeArmey: They're trying to get into saltier water, I guess.

Parker: Right. The fish, shrimp, crabs, all of it's like that.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. Yeah. So any kind of thing that people would do that affects rainwater, any kind of—what do you call that when it washes off?

Parker: Runoff?

Scull-DeArmey: Runoff, yeah. Any kind of runoff would affect—

Parker: Yeah. Well, that's the big problem in the Gulf of Mexico, now, is with the channelization (0:28:08.4) of the Mississippi River, we have a huge dead zone every year because of all the nutrients that the farmers in Iowa and Indiana and all the places that are on the rivers that come right down. It all ends up out here.

Scull-DeArmey: So is it algae overgrowth that causes lack of oxygen and a dead zone?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: And maybe the fertilizers—

Parker: Yeah. Well, I mean, algae are plants, and you fertilize your plants, and water, when it gets in there, then the algae love it, and they're going to bloom and take all the oxygen out of the water.

Scull-DeArme y: Not good for the fish or shrimp.

Parker: No.

Scull-DeArme y: Do you know if that dead zone's growing every year?

Parker: It fluctuates. I'm looking for it to be huge this next year with the high floodwater we had this year, record floods and stuff like that; I'm sure a lot of it came down, and I think there's trends to where, if I'm not mistaken, the trending does have to do with the amount of freshwater that flows down the river. The years where there's a lot of freshwater, more nutrients, then that's the years that they'll have—the year after that, that's the year that the algae blooms will peak, and the dead zone gets bigger. But I think overall it grows on average. It's getting bigger all the time.

Scull-DeArme y: Maybe the shrimp and the fish can sense it and just move out of the dead zone.

Parker: They do. They do. I have a brother that works in the oil industry out there, and he said even though it's a dead zone, there's still a lot of activity on the surface because wave action does create oxygen. The majority of the dead zone is on the bottom, which is mainly where your crabs and shrimp and all that lives.

Scull-DeArme y: So you don't fish there.

Parker: Yeah. I mean, they'll still catch tuna and things like that because there's a lot of bait fish in the water. Like I said, the top part of the water will still have oxygen, but the bottom won't.

Scull-DeArme y: Very interesting. Anything else about change that you want to get on the record?

Parker: That's really about it with the changes in the industry.

Scull-DeArme y: Is there anything you can think of that would like save the wetlands and marshes so we have nurseries? How could we do that?

Parker: I don't know. I mean, I feel like I'm a pretty strong Christian, but I don't think there's nothing that man can do to change God's will. I mean as far as the wetlands and all that. It's changed over time, just like with the global warming. Yeah, it might be happening. I mean, global warming is probably good for Mother Earth, but it's probably not very good for humans. And there's a lot more extinct

species on this planet than ones that aren't. And who's to say we're not to be extinct? So I mean, if you look at history, and they say, "History repeats itself." I mean, the Mississippi River for example, over the past millions of years, it changed basins from the Atchafalaya to the Mississippi River Delta. It's been wanting to go through the Atchafalaya for years, and we don't let it. So. You got to change the whole way society is. I mean, how you going to close down the City of New Orleans, the City of Baton Rouge, all the major ports that go up, to move this river back to the Atchafalaya, then decimate this whole Atchafalaya River Basin where these people live at? I mean, there's things you could do like the projects that are going on now as far as with the barrier (0:31:39.0) islands. They're spending a lot of money on our barrier islands here, Ship Island, Deer Island, and I think that's great because we need to. Whether it's a financial responsibility to spend that much money right now when our economy is so bad might not be very good.

Scull-DeArmey: What are they doing to them?

Parker: They're actually dredging material back onto the island, the material that's washed away over the last fifty, sixty years. And they're planting vegetation.

Scull-DeArmey: For the record, could you tell us what dredging is?

Parker: Dredging is where they take a dredge, which is basically like a cutter, and they cut through the sand, and they pump the sand up through a hose back into one spot and just basically pile it up till it sticks out the water, and they creating land.

Scull-DeArmey: So kind of like a giant vacuum cleaner that slurps—

Parker: Right, sucks it, slurps it up—

Scull-DeArmey: —from the bottom of the Sound.

Parker: From the bottom of the sand, yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. And that's how the beach was built, isn't it?

Parker: That's right.

Scull-DeArmey: Because here in Mississippi we have a manmade beach. So there are men making some barrier islands out there.

Parker: Yeah. They're rebuilding them.

Scull-DeArmey: Adding.

Parker: Adding back to them like Deer Island was cut into by Hurricane Elena in [19]85, and they spent a little bit of money trying to stop it, but it never materialized.

It just wouldn't work because they didn't want to spend the money to do it right. And the way they're doing it now, they're doing it right. And I think it's going to have a bigger impact as far as helping our little local ecosystem and stuff. And then they're doing Ship Island, and Ship Island's going to be ten times more of a job than Deer Island.

Scull-DeArme y: Because it's bigger?

Parker: It's bigger, and the cut, it's been eroded since 1969.

Scull-DeArme y: [Hurricane] Camille cut—

Parker: The Camille Cut's been getting bigger and bigger and bigger every year. But other than basically to go back and rebuild all them marshes and wetlands and stuff, that would be—I just don't see how it's possible to build them back. The only thing is you could rock it off and save what you got now, just keep it from eroding.

Scull-DeArme y: How would you rock it off?

Parker: Just pile a bunch of rocks around the grass where when the waves come up, it's not washing the material away. Make basically a rock jetty around every little island that's left, which—

Scull-DeArme y: That's a great idea. I like that.

Parker: But it'd expensive, and I don't know. It'd probably have the same effect as far as giving it a little—the thing about the marsh grass: that's where a lot of the little shrimp and fish and stuff hide, and they could probably hide in the rocks just as well as they do the marsh grass.

Scull-DeArme y: One of the interesting things I learned about sea turtles (0:34:12.3) when we were doing those TEDs interviews is that the turtles go out, and they range all over the world eating, and then when they come back to where they were born, and they deposit their eggs, that's a whole lot of, those are a whole lot of nutrients that eventually get into the grasses, and then the grasses stabilize the dunes. I mean, some of the little turtles don't make it, but all of them that do make it leave behind the shells, and so there's a lot of nutrition in there that stabilizes islands. And if there were no people here and there was more wildlife, that'd probably really be significant, that many nutrients put back in. Well, how have state and federal regulations changed since in your career?

Parker: The federal regulations (0:35:14.3) have changed pretty drastically. The Gulf of Mexico shrimp fishery was the last open-access fishery in the United States, which basically if you wanted to go shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico, all you had to do was go buy a boat and go. And now, they've permitted us where we have to buy a permit, and they've limited the number of permits. (0:35:39.6) If you don't have one,

you can't get one unless you buy one from somebody else and buy them out the business.

Scull-DeArme y: Oh, no new permits.

Parker: No. No new permits on the Gulf of Mexico. And back in my younger days I was pretty adamant against any type of limited-entry programs. I just felt it was my right as a citizen of Mississippi, if I want to go shrimping in Mississippi, then I should be able to go. But now, looking back and getting older and everything, I see all the disadvantages to it to somebody like myself. I mean, I am the sole provider of my family, and I make 100 percent of my living off of the water whether it's catching fish or crab, shrimp, whatever. And then when you do have people that come into your business, and then they have a forty-hour-a-week job, and then they come out and catch shrimp. Well, then they'll come back. Well, they'll sell the shrimp cheaper because money don't mean nothing to them. I mean, it's just extra income to them, so they're actually cutting you out of some of your profits. And then another big thing with that was after Hurricane Katrina (0:36:50.8) it pretty much decimated our fishery, and the federal government, they pumped a lot of money into our fishery, and the states did a lot of good things, trying to help our fishery, to revitalize it. But there was just as many people with a forty-hour-a-week job that received all the benefits that I received, and some of them received more benefits than me, just because they owned a boat.

Scull-DeArme y: So they have a forty-hour-a-week job that has nothing to do with the water, maybe.

Parker: Right. There's a lot of firemen, shipyard workers, stuff like that.

Scull-DeArme y: And in their spare time, they fish.

Parker: They fish.

Scull-DeArme y: Or shrimp.

Parker: Right. And that's one of the things we've been fighting for with the State over the last five years, is how do you do it fairly? And there's a few states like Florida—well, Texas, they're a limited-entry state. You have to buy a permit if you're going to participate in their fisheries. And Louisiana, they're open-access as far as anybody can go buy a license, but they have what's called a certified commercial fishermen where you have to bring in your taxes, and you have to show that 50 percent of your income comes from commercial fishing. And what that does is it, "OK. Well, you're a certified commercial fisherman. If we have any federal or state programs that's going to benefit you, then only certified commercial fishermen are eligible for it." And Florida, also, has some type of limited entry where you have to show that you sold at least ten thousand dollars worth of shrimp to a licensed wholesaler.

Scull-DeArmeY: So then that means the state can control the federal money as well?

Parker: Yeah. They can control some of the federal money. It depends on how it's divided up.

Scull-DeArmeY: OK. So maybe some of the federal money they can't control. They control all the state money, and some of the federal money they do control so that it's—I don't know how to summarize that. It's kind of like limiting the monetary help when there's a catastrophe to the people who are serious fishermen.

Parker: Who truly deserve it.

Scull-DeArmeY: That's their career.

Parker: I just don't think it's fair for somebody whose wife has a forty-hour-a-week job, [and] he's got a forty-hour-a-week job, [and] they're both getting benefits, and he supplements his income with commercial fishing, and when a disaster comes—just say for instance if they give out a grant for ten thousand dollars, why should he get that and somebody like myself not get ten thousand dollars too? He's eligible just as much as me. Why not say, "OK. Well, let's give it to the guys who make all their living"? And we possibly could have made fifteen thousand if they would have gave it to—it just doesn't seem fair because I can't go over there and—I know how to weld, but I can't go say, "Well, I'm a first-class welder. I need to get twenty-five dollars." I can't go get a job at a shipyard, or I can't go become a firemen, so it just doesn't—that's one of the reasons why I'm pretty much pro limited entry. I mean, I'm not saying, "Well, you can't do it at all." If you want to go out there and play and have your hobby and do that, then that's fine, but you shouldn't interfere with my livelihood.

Scull-DeArmeY: Right. Because they maybe are only doing five hours a week of fishing or shrimping.

Parker: Oh, yeah. I mean, there's boats in my harbor over there that they might make two, three days a year. That's it. And there's a couple of them; they just go out there to catch shrimp for themselves. They don't even try to sell them. And they (inaudible). Or if they want to have a shrimp boil, they'll go out there and catch shrimp. Well, when disasters roll around—that's just like with this BP oil spill. (0:40:35.5) They had the VOO [Vessels of Opportunity] program. It was a great program. I think they had the right intentions, but there was a lot of true commercial fishermen who got the raw end of the deal with the VOO program.

Scull-DeArmeY: Remind me what VOO stands for.

Parker: VOO was Vessels of Opportunity. It was basically they wanted to hire commercial fishermen to help with the cleanup. And like I said, I did get to participate in the VOO program. Both my boats were on it, and I was pretty fortunate.

I felt like they treated me right, but when I would see my fellow fishermen that I knew was full-time fishermen, and they can't get hired, and yet you have somebody whose got a boat, and their boat gets hired, but they can't work it because they got a real job, and they got to pay somebody to run their boat for them, and it was a good bit of money. They did a pretty fair job, but it was just all misconstrued. And then once we started doing all the complaining, well, here in Mississippi, anybody can go buy a commercial license, so we had a huge spike in license sales around that timeframe because everybody, if you had a fishing boat, "Well, I'm going to go buy me a commercial fish license, stick on there, as a commercial boat so they can hire me."

Scull-DeArmey: So that's different than the license that you have to buy out the business to get.

Parker: That's only in the Gulf of Mexico.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, OK.

Parker: Yeah. Not in state waters of Mississippi. Anybody can go buy a license in the state waters.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. In your experience here, really your whole lifetime—I mean, you spent time on the Mississippi Sound, in the Gulf of Mexico as a child even—how has the Mississippi Sound and the Gulf of Mexico changed over time?

Parker: Well, that's what I was talking about earlier. It seems like there's more saltwater because the islands were eroded away. And some of the fish that we used to see, we don't see a whole lot anymore. (0:42:48.1)

Scull-DeArmey: Like what?

Parker: There was a small, little fish when I was a kid. It was called a whisker fish, what we called them, which I think it's an Atlantic threadfin—they call it—and they were real annoying when they got in the net. Well, you don't hardly see too many whisker fish anymore. I mean, you'll catch one or two, but we used to catch—they're kind of like a eel fish. They got like a fish head but a eel body, and they go in one—like your net, they'll go in one hole, go out the other, kind of weave themselves in there. And the whole net, I mean, thousands of them. You'd have to manually pull these fish out of there. You don't see anymore them. Another thing—

Scull-DeArmey: Which could be a relief, right?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Sounds like they're a nuisance.

Parker: Well, it seems like we seeing a lot of more soft corals, too. (0:43:29.7) Used to, you'd throw something in the water, you'd get barnacles on it. Well, now, there's soft coral growing there.

Scull-DeArmey: Instead of the barnacles?

Parker: Well, there's barnacles, too, but there's soft coral growing on it, also, which I don't ever remember as a kid, seeing any of that.

Scull-DeArmey: Interesting. Where would the soft coral be normally? Do you know?

Parker: I would say the deeper water, the saltier water. It would tend to be more of a brackish environment around here, not a true marine salinity. That'd be more out in the Gulf, but it seems like our salinity's staying higher now, than what it used to.

Scull-DeArmey: Closer to shore, in the Mississippi Sound?

Parker: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Is there any other change that you could put your finger on?

Parker: Not that I can think of.

Scull-DeArmey: And you said changes in species, the little whisker fish and the soft coral. Anything else come to mind about changes in species, like even bycatch? (0:44:36.7) Is there bycatch that you—

Parker: There's more bycatch now, today. It seems like the last three or four—really, the shrimp business, (0:44:48.8) the economics of it went on a major downturn probably around [20]01, [20]02, and then Katrina came along and wiped out a huge portion of our fleet, and it seems like we have a lot less boats now than we did, so of course there's not going to be quite as many fish killed, so maybe more fish live to reproduce, but it seems like the amount of croakers and bream and stuff like that, I mean, they're just ungodly, I mean, the amount of fish we been catching lately.

Scull-DeArmey: That you're catching in your nets. And you can't use them at all?

Parker: Some of them we do. I mean, like I said, I market 99.9 percent of my fish, so—

Scull-DeArmey: Do you really? So that would be the bycatch?

Parker: Well, the bycatch we do save is for crab bait and stuff like that. I have a little outlet that I sell to bait shops for chum and things like that, but it's only a certain amount.

Scull-DeArme y: So you're thinking you can sell about 99 percent?

Parker: Well, what I meant by that is I retail 99 percent of what I catch, but out of, as a total for my shrimp, but like with the pogies and things like that, I do sell. I can only store so much. That's the problem I have now. I can catch it, but I don't have the capability to hold it for very long because it takes up a lot of space.

Scull-DeArme y: How do you have to store bait fish?

Parker: Well, we freeze it, with a walk-in freezer and put it in a storage freezer to hold it. But the pogies, I mean, it's not a whole lot of money, but any little extra bit helps, and that's that much more fish that's not just going to waste, which it seems like here lately, there's not a whole bunch go to waste; there's so many sharks, and dolphins, and seagulls. There's not very much [bycatch] make it to the bottom for the crabs.

Scull-DeArme y: A couple of things for the record. Can you just define what bycatch is for the record?

Parker: Bycatch is anything that it's a by-product of shrimping. If you drag your net and you pick up, you catch everything that's down there, pretty much. And when you sort out your shrimp, that's anything other than shrimp, which it could be crabs, fish, squid, anything like that.

Scull-DeArme y: And for people who might not be familiar with it, that means that the deckhands are standing on the deck of the boat, and they're actually—

Parker: —sorting the catch.

Scull-DeArme y: Throwing what they don't want overboard.

Parker: Right.

Scull-DeArme y: And there are dolphins and sharks and seagulls all around—

Parker: —that hang around the boat all the time, all the time.

Scull-DeArme y: For a free meal. (laughter)

Parker: For the free meal, that's right. They've become accustomed to; they know where the buffets are. (laughter)

Scull-DeArme y: That's great. You've got them trained out there. And I know there've been changes in the market. (0:47:45.7) Can you talk about that some?

Parker: Well, like I said, since [20]01, [20]02, the price of shrimp's drastically decreased, and the price of diesel has drastically increased. It's just about flip-flopped. Well, just for example I bought my boat in 1999. The average price for a medium shrimp to the wholesaler, not to the public, was around two dollars and fifty cents, two dollars and seventy-five cents a pound for a medium shrimp. That first year I was getting upwards of ten bucks a pound for my jumbos, and the price of diesel back then was fifty-five cents a gallon, was my first fuel that I put on my boat. And now, ten years later, it's just about flip-flopped. This summer an average price of shrimp was probably about a buck, fifty for a jumbo, a dollar and sixty cents for a jumbo, instead of ten dollars, and the price of diesel was three something. And back in [20]08 it got really bad. The price of a shrimp went to fifty cents. It didn't matter if it was one that was an inch long or one that was twelve inches long, it was fifty cents a pound for shrimp, and diesel was over four dollars. And because of that economic downturn, a lot of people got out of the business and things like that.

Scull-DeArme y: How did you make it through that?

Parker: We retailed a lot of shrimp. We worked less days, which meant our overhead was lower, and we sold as many shrimp as we possibly could to the public to turn a bigger profit. And we were blessed that there was a lot of shrimp. We caught a huge volume of shrimp, and we could go out there. And that's some of my friends, when the shrimp was hitting really good, they would go work two days, and then they would go in and peddle. Well, if they'd catch, say, three thousand pounds in two days, then they would go peddle. Well, me, I had the mentality, "OK. Well, I'm going to put a pencil to it. If I can catch me—if I'm catching fifteen hundred pounds a night, and I'm averaging a dollar a pound, that's fifteen hundred dollars a night. Well, it's only costing me six hundred dollars to catch these shrimp, so that's a thousand dollars I'm putting in my pocket for me, my boat, and my crew. As long as I can clear a thousand, I'm going to work every night I possibly can." Where a lot of these guys, they would work two nights and then go in and peddle, and it'd take them eight, nine, ten days to sell all their shrimp. So in the end, yeah, I was giving my shrimp away, but I actually made more money. So.

Scull-DeArme y: It was more efficient to sell that way.

Parker: Right. Yeah. If you can look at the bottom line and say, "This is what it costs me. This is what I'm clearing," well, if then you're clearing enough money to make it, then I'm going to catch shrimp.

Scull-DeArme y: How are the imported shrimp (0:50:38.6) affecting you?

Parker: Well, that's another thing. That's the reason why the price of shrimp got so high in the late [19]90s is because aquaculture was taking over in the last twenty years. Well, they had a huge die-off in the foreign ponds, with diseases and stuff. Well, then there was a few years there where they couldn't get any shrimp, and then

they started putting antibiotics and stuff and letting the shrimp live longer, and they started flooding our market.

Scull-DeArmey: Of course it [the antibiotic] kills people (laughter) (inaudible).

Parker: Yeah. But the government checks it all, so they say it's good to eat, but I don't buy all that. But it's really affected the price of our shrimp, and the thing that I don't understand. I'm pretty good with economics, but I just don't understand how the processors—the processors have got to be making money somewhere because when you can look with the Internet nowadays; you can go on the Internet, and you can see what the world market is for shrimp. And when our shrimp are still cheaper than foreign shrimp, as far as we go in there and do them, and they're only giving us X amount of money, and the foreign shrimp are more expensive. They're paying, say, four dollars a pound for foreign shrimp, but they only want to give us seventy-five cent, eighty cent a pound. Well, why can't they pay us the four dollars? So somebody's getting the wool pulled over their eyes, and the probability is it's us. As long as we go catch them, then they're going to take them. And that's something I've heard my whole life is when the shrimp get plentiful and they're cheap, "Well, we don't want them, but we'll buy them for fifty cents a pound. We'll give you fifty cent a pound for them, but we don't want them." Well, if you don't want them, then why you even want to buy them?

Scull-DeArmey: They know that you have to sell.

Parker: Well, you have a perishable product. That's one reason why I put a freezer on my boat because it's not a perishable product anymore. It's got a longer shelf life, and I'm not stuck with selling my shrimp to somebody who doesn't want to give me nothing for it.

Scull-DeArmey: The last time I talked to you, you were doing some crabbing. You had some crab traps set out. You doing that now?

Parker: Yeah. My father, he is running the traps for me. He's semiretired; well, he's retired, and my great-uncle, he's retired, and it gives them something to do. My father, he's sixty-eight. My uncle's seventy-two, so they like the water, and as long as it's been nice, warm weather, they don't mind going, and they keep my clientele up for me for when the winter does come, and I have to go crabbing. (0:53:18.8) Then I'll still have my customers. The crabbing's been pretty bad this year.

Scull-DeArmey: Has it?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Is there a crabbing season?

Parker: Here in Mississippi we can crab year-round. But it's got cycles. The water temperature means a lot and stuff like that.

Scull-DeArmey: And how do you catch the crabs?

Parker: It's basically a chicken-wire type, metal mesh that's bent into a square, and it's got some funnels in there, and you put some crab bait in there, pogy, some fresh fish, and the crabs go in there, and they can't get out for a while. They'll eventually work their way out. Then you pull the trap up every couple of days or so, and you pick it up and dump the crabs out, sort them by size.

Scull-DeArmey: So what kind of customers do you have? Restaurants?

Parker: I have a couple of restaurants. I have a couple of seafood retail markets that buy them. Then a lot of it's just local people, a lot of local people.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. That's great. It's kind of like the old days.

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. This is moving on to Hurricane Katrina. (0:54:33.2) How did Hurricane Katrina affect the seafood industry?

Parker: Hurricane Katrina had probably as much positive as negative or negative as positive, however you want to look at it. The positive, one of the positive/negative things is it wiped out a lot of the fishing vessels, and because of that—that's bad in a sense. But in a positive sense, it goes back to the basic economics of the pie. If you got fewer people eating the pie, then you get more. So the shrimping, it really helped. The shrimping really got better after Katrina, as far as biologically. There was less boats, so the effort was less, so there was more shrimp living to reproduce and things like that. And it seemed like Mother Nature dealt us a good hand as far as the years afterwards; we had good conditions for shrimp growth, not a lot of freshwater, not too much saltwater, not a lot of cold weather. And the seasons since Katrina have been pretty good. The five years after Katrina was great as far as the amount of shrimp. But on the down side of it, of course it wiped out a lot of our land-based things, our amenities such as fuel and ice docks. The processors, anyone who was on the water, well, they got wiped out, and it took a few years before you had a place to go sell your shrimp, and that was one of the things. It wasn't just Katrina. You got to look; there was Katrina [August, 2005], and then a few months later there was [Hurricane] Rita [September, 2005]. (0:56:08.6) And because Katrina was such a vast storm, I mean, it affected, it destroyed stuff basically from Bon Secour, Alabama, all the way around almost to Houma, [Louisiana]. Well, then Rita went in around Houma and eradicated everything to the Texas line. So you could go out here and catch a boatload of shrimp, but you'd have to run to Florida or Texas to unload them because there was no place to sell them, no place to buy ice, no place to buy fuel. So it—

Scull-DeArme y: Well, you were relying on ice at that time, weren't you?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArme y: How'd you solve that problem?

Parker: Well, my boat—well, for Hurricane Katrina I lost my house. It was completely destroyed, and my boat had about thirty thousand dollars worth of damage. So I had insurance, and I had a note on my boat, and I had insurance. And I went and talked to the bank, and I told them, I said, "Look. My boat had thirty thousand dollars worth of damage." I said, "I need to put my boat on a shipyard," which that was another thing. It hit in August. My boat was damaged, but all the shipyards are on the water, so they all got wiped out. And one of the first ones to open was over in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, so I brought my boat over there in November, and that's what I told the bank. I said, "Look. Y'all can either work with me, or y'all can come get a damaged boat. It's not like I can go make a living. I can't." And they was understanding. They deferred my payments, and it didn't affect my credit or nothing like that because they knew what was going on. But when my boat, when Katrina hit in August, my boat got hauled up on November, we really didn't have no place to live. We was living on the boat (0:57:44.8) in the bayou until I hauled it up, and then we moved to Florida and lived with my sister in Pensacola. So I was kind of driving back and forth with the boat. But the boat didn't get off the yard till February, so around March is when I went back to work. And there was a lot of shrimping. There was one or two little places that kind of threw enough stuff together to start selling fuel, bring some temporary tanks in and get their ice machines going, and then we had some pretty good seasons since then as far as the amount of shrimp biologically. It was great for the shrimp population, but the economics was horrible, as far as the price of the shrimp being cheap, and the price of diesel being high.

Scull-DeArme y: That was 2005, Hurricane Katrina. And then Rita was what? A few—

Parker: About a month or two after that because I remember I have a bunch of friends in Louisiana. I said, "Look. Here comes a hurricane. I don't want it to go to y'all. It really needs to come over here because there is *nothing* left here. Let's just let it go ahead and let it come through here, and it ain't going to destroy nothing." (laughter)

Scull-DeArme y: All those FEMA trailers would have—

Parker: Oh, yeah. (laughter) At that time we didn't even have a FEMA trailer because it was about a month or so after Katrina.

Scull-DeArme y: There really weren't that many FEMA trailers here.

Parker: No. The only people who really had FEMA (0:58:58.5) trailers that soon after the storm was mainly like your police officers, firemen. It seemed like those people got them first, the—

Scull-DeArme y: Um-hm, the first responders.

Parker: First responders.

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. So you got your boat back up and going. You had to rebuild your house.

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArme y: And here it is. It's beautiful, on stilts.

Parker: I started building it in 2007, yeah.

Scull-DeArme y: Did you live on the boat till then?

Parker: No. My mother and father, where I grew up was about three blocks away, and their house was still standing, and like I said, we lived with my sister for a few months. And we took and completely regutted [my mother and father's] house because my house was completely destroyed. I had to start from the ground up. Theirs was still standing, so we gutted it out, and we all, we lived in our FEMA trailer until November of [20]07. That's when my oldest son was born. So two babies, me, and my wife in a little [FEMA trailer] just wasn't getting it, so we moved in with my—we worked really hard on my mom and dad's house, threw it together, got us a place to live, and we all just kind of lived together. (1:00:17.0)

Scull-DeArme y: Who would have ever thought that living with your parents could look better than (laughter) living where you are. Tight?

Parker: Well, we're pretty family-oriented people. I don't know. My family, we're different compared to most of the families, and that was just something. Today, I mean, my mother and father just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, so I don't know. I guess we have real strong moral values my father raised me with. And just with my kids the other day, here we are. I'm down there, and they're playing with the neighborhood kids. Well, they want to play house. Well, I hear the little girl. She was like, "Well, you can be the mommy, and I'll be the stepmommy." And something like that, I just never—here we are. I'm in the twenty-first century, (laughter) stepmamas and mamas and this and that. So the world's definitely changing.

Scull-DeArme y: It is, maybe not for the better. Has the business of fishing and shrimping changed since Hurricane Katrina?

Parker: No, not really. Like I said, there was a few problems, and it changed at first with just, none of the amenities was there, but it's pretty much back to normal. I mean, the oyster industry really hasn't recovered, but as far as the shrimp, I would say it's recovered from Katrina.

Scull-DeArmeY: Was the oyster industry hurt by Katrina? (1:01:45.9)

Parker: Yeah. There was a lot of silt covered up the oyster beds. And I want to say it was somewhere around 90 percent mortality rate on the oyster reefs.

Scull-DeArmeY: Do you know if there were any left like, say, in Alabama or Louisiana to reseed?

Parker: Yeah. Well, there was a few places. Louisiana, the majority of their reefs are private, and them guys do a pretty good job because they own them. They own the oysters.

Scull-DeArmeY: How is that possible?

Parker: They lease bottom from the state. They'll lease a thousand acres or a hundred acres or whatever, and they'll plant. (1:02:15.6) They'll put shells down, and they'll go get oysters off a wild reef, put it on that reef. But oysters, because it's such a—shrimp, they come and go every year. Oysters, it takes about three, four years. And the oyster industry was just, it was recovering very, very slowly, and a lot of it had to do with the fishing effort. There was just so much effort because the shrimping had gotten so bad, a lot of guys went to oystering, and there was an increased effort, which was putting the amount of oysters in a downward trend.

Scull-DeArmeY: Because there was more gathered.

Parker: Because there was more fishery effort, more people getting them. And then because it does take three years for the oysters to grow, here we had BP oil spill, (1:03:08.8) and that was probably one of the, as far as the fisheries itself—OK. Well, the BP oil spill came along. They didn't want to catch no oysters, and it was really kind of good because a lot of the guys participated in the VOO [Vessels of Opportunity] program. They had a little bit of money, and we went up there last year and told them, "Look. We do not want a oyster season. We've made some decent money with BP. Let's keep what we have there for seed stock and let them grow one more year. There'll be no fishing effort, which means they should be good." Well, what happens? This big flood where they open up the Bonnet Carré Spillway. (1:03:46.2) The freshwater comes down there and pretty much eradicates the whole reef, kills them all.

Scull-DeArmeY: Because oysters need a certain amount of salinity.

Parker: That's right.

Scull-DeArme y: And the spillway let freshwater—

Parker: —come in. But we don't have that crystal ball. If we had have seen, "OK. We have a crystal ball. We're not going to have any oysters next year. Let's go catch them all. Let everybody make more money, and let's catch them all."

Scull-DeArme y: Instead of having them all die.

Parker: Right. But that's the thing where, that's the whole thing with the fishing business.

Scull-DeArme y: You guys didn't go have your palms read?

Parker: No. (laughter) If it was that easy, we'd all be going, "How many shrimp am I going to catch this week? OK. Well, honey, you can spend this much money on bills because I'm fixing to catch this." (laughter) I wish it was that easy.

Scull-DeArme y: So you said that you-all agreed, "OK. We won't fish oysters this year. We'll leave them for seed stock." Now, who was that exactly?

Parker: Well, we have a little fishermen's organization, (1:04:40.2) and it's made up of probably about a hundred members, and some of them are oystermen, and some of them are fishermen, and this is what we agreed to when we went before the Department of Marine Resources, which are the people who manage our industry. And we asked them; said, "Look. This is our organization. This is what we would like to see y'all do from a fishery standpoint. We don't want y'all to open up oyster season." And they agreed. They were glad. We have pretty good interaction with them sometimes, but there's a lot of people from Kansas with a biology degree that think they know everything because they learned it in a book. A lot of fishermen aren't credible.

Scull-DeArme y: Does it have a name, the fishing organization?

Parker: It's the Mississippi Gulf Coast Fishermen's Organization.

Scull-DeArme y: And what about after the spillway opened and the oysters died, did you decide to hold off, again?

Parker: Well, most of the fishermen, they knew it was going to be bad. Well, they just opened up oyster season last Monday, I believe it was, and they're closing it today. So it was only open for six days this year, and I don't think they harvested twenty sacks of oysters in six days. That's how bad it was.

Scull-DeArme y: I wonder how they decided to close it so soon?

Parker: Because there was such a small amount of oysters coming in, they figured, “We better save all of them we can.” I mean, when you have five boats go out, and they say, “OK. Well, you can have a ten-sack limit.” Well, then five boats go out, and they don’t get five sacks between the five boats when they’re allowed fifty, something’s wrong.

Scull-DeArmey: And it’s not going to get any better for three to four years.

Parker: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Minimum three years, that’s *if* we don’t have another hurricane, or we don’t have another flood. If everything’s right, if the environment’s right, the salinity’s right, yeah, *minimum* three years, minimum.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you think we need to give your wife a break with the babies?

Parker: We can. (brief interruption; end of track one of two; beginning of track two of two)

Scull-DeArmey: So speaking of the BP oil spill, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, how did that affect the seafood industry? (0:00:15.6)

Parker: Probably the biggest effect it had on the industry is all the negative publicity. Like I said, ten years ago when the imports started taking over, we’ve had a huge amount of money spent on marketing of, “Buy American shrimp. Buy USA. Demand Mississippi shrimp.” You see the billboard. You see it all. Well, then that was the only thing that we really had was the quality of our product.. Well, when this happens, it doesn’t matter that it’s the most tested seafood in the world, that they’re testing it more now than it’s ever been, and there’s no bad tests, but yet you see all the media. And somebody from Kansas isn’t going to know. “Well, I don’t want to buy that. They got oil. That’s all oil.” That’s probably the biggest impact it’s had on our fishery, is it’s ruined the reputation, and that’s the one thing we’ve always had is we could always say, “Look. We got some of the finest seafood in the world here.”

Scull-DeArmey: Right. None of those antibiotics. None of the overcrowding.

Parker: Right. No preservatives, no additives.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm, yeah. Not the overcrowded conditions of aquaculture in a foreign country where the regulations are supposed to go up to a certain standard, but enforcing it’s another—

Parker: And that’s one of the things, too, is we only catch about 10 percent of the seafood that’s consumed in this country. And the other 90 percent comes from somewheres else. Well, less than 1 percent of that 90 percent is tested. I mean, it’s just too much coming in for them to absolutely test every case of shrimp that comes in.

Scull-DeArmey: Spot checks, random checks.

Parker: That's right.

Scull-DeArmey: So they [foreign shrimp suppliers] know that they can get away with a certain amount of—

Parker: Yeah. And so what if they send this one shipment back? Maybe this other one will get through. It's such a volume.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. So the wild-caught, native, American shrimp and fish had a kind of a pristine image going for it, and then all of a sudden it looks like it's contaminated with oil and dispersant.

Parker: That's right. Yeah. That's the biggest thing that I see. As far as the amount of oil here in Mississippi waters, I worked in the VOO program for over two, three months, and as soon as I got laid off from the VOO program, I went, and the waters was opened back up. I went right back to work, and I have yet to catch one single tar ball. I mean, even working with the VOO program, I saw very little oil, very little oil here in Mississippi.

Scull-DeArmey: I think we get down to the work in VOO, so rather than ask you about that right now, I'll just go ahead and follow the questions. What thoughts did you have when you learned of the spill? (0:03:22.4)

Parker: Well, I had my boat on the shipyard, and I remember I seen on TV where this oil rig had blown up. And that was the first thing, was, "Well, where's my brother at?" Because he was working in the Gulf. He doesn't work on the rigs, but he works on a boat, and I figured maybe he was around there somewheres. And then when I heard that it had burned up and had sunk and was spewing oil, I thought—I wasn't right off the bat really worried about it because like I said, my brother's been involved in that industry for thirty years now, and the technology they have is just great, and I was going, "Well, it'll probably spill some oil, and they'll get it capped and all that." But for it to run, what? Two, three months, whatever it was, over a hundred days or something like that. Probably when the first attempt failed, whenever they couldn't get the valve shut, that's when I was, "I mean, this ain't going to be good." And when all the attempts they were making was failing, I actually, because my brother was in the oil field all them years, I know a lot of people that work in the industry, too, and one of his friends was actually the boat captain that brought the bell out there, to drop the bell over it at first. That was supposed to work, and it didn't off the bat. And, "Oh, man, this ain't going to be good."

Scull-DeArmey: Did you think it would kill the seafood, or were you kind of clued in this is going to—

Parker: Well, I wasn't real skeptical, I guess, at first because it's so far offshore. I mean, there's a lot of plankton and stuff out there, as far as some of the base of our

food chain, beginning out there, but the amount of water it was in, the depth, I was more worried about—there's a lot of coral reefs (0:05:06.4) out there that people really don't know about, right off the edge of the continental shelf, and that was my first concern. I didn't have really no concern for myself because I said, "Well, they'll get it all scooped up before it gets here." But there was a bunch of failures. I know BP didn't intentionally do it on purpose, and I believe that accidents happen, but there was a lot of other people that could have had—just the federal government—the whole world was there, wanting to help us, but because of our Jones Act, (0:05:45.0) we couldn't allow no foreign ships come into this country to help us because of the Jones Act. If Congress would have said, "OK. Well, let's get off our butts and repeal the Jones Act for this one incident. Any boat that wants to participate from a foreign country can come in." The Dutch are great naval engineers. I mean, they can keep the North Sea out, and they had the technology to scoop it up, and we wouldn't let them in because of the Jones Act. So wouldn't that make Congress just as much at fault for all this oil coming out, or at least hitting the beaches, as BP?

Scull-DeArmey: I would say yes.

Parker: Yeah. So I don't know. I just find it hard to lay blame on anybody because like I said it was an accident. I'm very positive. I try to say, "What's the good things about my business?" I don't want to talk about the bad things. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. But even you were looking at the oil spill, thinking, "This may not be so great."

Parker: Yeah. As far as my industry, I wasn't really worried about the white shrimp so much, but I was kind of worried about the brown shrimp (0:07:02.7) do move off in about sixty, seventy fathoms of water, and that's where they breed, and the eggs, they're hatched out there. And they wash in with the tides and currents and stuff like that, so I was kind of worried about the brown shrimp season. And I still think it's too early to say, "Well, yeah, we've recovered." Because we really don't know. I'm sure they didn't get all the oil. I mean, that was just too much oil to be out there.

Scull-DeArmey: There are some reports now that it's just on the bottom.

Parker: Yeah. Well, I mean, the good thing about that is oil is a natural product, just not good when it's in that much volume. You know what I mean? And there are organisms that eat it and stuff like that, but that's a lot of—

Scull-DeArmey: Are there natural organisms out there that eat it? (0:07:51.0)

Parker: Yeah. There's bacteria that eats it.

Scull-DeArmey: Like I remember hearing or reading about, maybe it was the university, our university, USM, University of Southern Mississippi, having some

bacteria that eats oil, but I thought they were maybe introducing it into the Sound, but maybe it was already there.

Parker: Yeah. No. It's a natural bacteria. I used to run a boat for the University of Southern Mississippi, for the Gulf Coast Research Lab. (0:08:26.0) I was a boat captain for them for about eight—

Scull-DeArmeY: When was that?

Parker: That was back in, from—well, I started working there out of high school, part-time, as a deckhand and commercial-fished, too, because science and biology and all has just always been a passion of mine. My father, he didn't want me to be a commercial fisherman. And he wanted me to go to school. So I said, "Well, if I'm going to go to school, then I don't want to be a doctor or a lawyer or nothing. I want to do something I enjoy." And I went to school for marine biology, fishery management, and like I said, I started working as a deckhand on the boat. And then I was about twelve hours away from my degree, and I was working on the *Tommy Monroe*(?), and the cook had the same degree that I was going to school for. (laughter) And I'm like, "Man. You're a biologist." And he said, "Well, biologists don't make no money. I can make more money as a cook on the research boat than as a biologist." I'm like, "Man!" That was probably the first real job as far as you go in. And I mean, I was my own boss, but as far as having to go to work every day, that just wasn't me. And I had a opportunity to buy this boat, and I just jumped off, head-first. I worked there from [19]97 to about [19]99.

Scull-DeArmeY: But shrimping, you work every day. Right?

Parker: Yeah. But if I get up in the morning and I don't want to go to work, then I don't have to go to work. (laughter) You know what I mean? There's a difference when you're your own boss.

Scull-DeArmeY: I wouldn't know, (laughter) but it sounds like there really would be. You did participate in the Vessels of Opportunity program. (0:10:06.3)

Parker: Yes.

Scull-DeArmeY: How did you find out about that?

Parker: I think it just got out word-of-mouth, as soon as they started hiring some boats. And I actually went to probably about fifteen meetings and signed fifteen contracts. I just kept going and sending in contracts till I got hired.

Scull-DeArmeY: So you would hear about meetings. And what would happen at the meetings?

Parker: They would basically tell you what's going on, and then they'd give you this contract, and you'd sign it. You'd turn it in, and then if you was one of the chosen few, they would send you your contract back and hire your boat. And I basically wrote on there; they had a little comment thing on the back. And every one of mine said, "Look. I'm a full-time, commercial fisherman. I have two small children. My wife's pregnant with twins. I'm out of work because of this oil spill. You need to hire me, please. Thank you." And they hired me.

Scull-DeArmey: What did you actually do for them?

Parker: We basically just, in the beginning we just kind of rode around as observers and looked for oil. And then as time went on, we had to go through the proper training to actually receive the oil, pick it up and all that, but like I said, the amount of oil we retrieved here, my little task force, we got zero pounds. (0:11:21.0) We didn't get any oil.

Scull-DeArmey: Is that right?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Did you see any?

Parker: We saw a few little slicks and tar balls, but it's funny. You'd see a slick a mile wide, two miles wide, and there'd be one little tar ball. And it'd make this huge oil slick.

Scull-DeArmey: Was the tar ball worse somehow than the oil slick itself?

Parker: No. They said it wasn't toxic. It was weathered oil and all that, but because we had such big boats, we wouldn't waste time picking up one little tar ball the size of a golf ball.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah, because you're a sixty-foot boat.

Parker: Right. We would call up one of the smaller, little speedboats, and they would ride over there and pick it up.

Scull-DeArmey: What was your range?

Parker: My area was from Pascagoula, well, basically Horn Island and Ship Island. That's where we patrolled.

Scull-DeArmey: And just a ballpark figure of about how far that is for people who—

Parker: Our little tract was probably about a thirty-mile roundtrip, about thirty miles roundtrip from one end of the Sound to the other and then back.

Scull-DeArme y: Did you see anything else out there that you might have thought was unusual?

Parker: That's the thing, too, with this oil spill. We had extremely high water temperatures. The water temperature was in the 90s for months, and I seen a lot of red tide, (0:12:53.4) and a lot of people seen a lot of red water and was still seeing it with the oil spill, but it was a lot of red tide out there during that timeframe because the water was so hot, [and] the oxygen was low. There was a lot of algae blooms, and that's mainly the only reason I knew it was there because when I worked for the research lab, that was one of our jobs. We'd go out and do water quality samples, and we would look for these things. And when the conditions were right, we could find some, but even when we was looking, if we would have found something like that then, them scientists would have been having a ball with it.

Scull-DeArme y: Were there any scientists out there?

Parker: Oh, yeah. There were scientists out there every day. Every day there were scientists out there.

Scull-DeArme y: Was the higher temperature a result of the oil?

Parker: I don't know. It was a pretty hot summer. I don't know if—it's hard to say. But I know every time I would see these algae blooms, I would call our Department of Marine Resources, and I got a pretty good relationship with the director of our crab and shrimp bureau, and I would tell her, "Hey, look. Here's the coordinates. Send a biologist out and check it out." And they would. They would, and they would say, "Well, it's just algae." But we did see quite a few oiled birds, (0:14:06.2) quite a few oiled birds.

Scull-DeArme y: That's not good.

Parker: No. Mostly seagulls and stuff; seen a couple pelicans.

Scull-DeArme y: Did you guys catch any?

Parker: No. We weren't allowed to handle them. We were told [to] report it, and they had a special group that that was all they did, retrieve the birds.

Scull-DeArme y: Is that Tracy Floyd over at DMR?

Parker: Yes.

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. I think she's going to give us an interview. And is her father a fisherman?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmeY: Yeah. And he's going to give us an interview, too. Did other fishermen you know, other shrimpers participate in VOO?

Parker: Yeah. There was a few. I mean, like I was talking about earlier, there was a lot of honest, 100-percent-commercial fishermen didn't get hired. Like one of my real good friends, he didn't get to work a single day. (0:14:58.5) He just sat there and watched all these guys go out every day, making good money, and he didn't get to work, not one single day.

Scull-DeArmeY: Was there any kind of appeal process for him?

Parker: He called, and he e-mailed them and this and that, and they basically told him to quit calling. Yeah.

Scull-DeArmeY: So they had spoiled his habitat for fishing, and they could just not give him anything.

Parker: Yeah. He just, I guess you say, fell through the cracks, and I'm sure he's not the only one. Well, I know another one of my cousins. He never got hired, either. He's a full-time commercial fisherman.

Scull-DeArmeY: Well, this is the loaded question. Do you think that the Vessels of Opportunity program was implemented fairly?

Parker: No. No, not at all. Not at all. They should have stepped in. But then that's our own fault, too. If we'd have a stronger organization and better representation, then they could have distinguished, "Hey, who needs this?" I mean, there were so many people, even on my crew I had guys that had never been in saltwater in their life, and they come down here and sign contracts, and they get paid all this money, and they tell us, "Oh, well, let's go out here to this place." "Where's that at?" And they're from Picayune and never been on saltwater.

Scull-DeArmeY: I hope they knew something about boat safety. How do you think that could be fixed, the unfair implementation of the VOO program?

Parker: Like I said, the idea was fantastic, (0:16:48.7) but if they would have stepped in and say, "OK. Well, let's find a commercial-fishing advocate. Let's find some local fishing organizations and work hand-in-hand with them and say, 'OK. Well, who's who in the fishing business,'" that would have been one way they could have did it right off the bat, but they never contacted our organization, never contacted any of the organizations in Louisiana, in Alabama, none of them. They just put it out, "OK. Anybody with a boat, Vessels of Opportunity, come to this meeting."

Scull-DeArmeY: One of the guys that we interviewed said that he wished that they had sent a representative to every harbor and just said, “Fishermen, come over here.”

Parker: Well, like my harbor in particular, there’s probably about forty commercial boats in there. Out of those forty commercial boats, there’s maybe one, two, three, about five of them that are full-time fishermen.

Scull-DeArmeY: Wow.

Parker: Yeah. Yeah. The rest of them all do something else. They’re all hobbying.

Scull-DeArmeY: Well, if they had come to the harbors and said, “All full-time, commercial fishermen report *first*.” Right?

Parker: And then after they hired everybody, they was like, “Oh, well, we need people only with commercial license,” because they were hiring a bunch of people that never even had a commercial license. They just had a boat. Well, then that’s when the licenses starting skyrocketing. People was going up there to buy license, thinking, “Oh, well, I’m going to get fired if I don’t have a commercial license.” So they could have said, “OK. Well, you had to have a commercial license before August 21 or April 21, when the oil rig blew up. If you had a license before then, then you’re valid.” Even that would have helped a little bit. I mean, some people made out well off the oil spill. Some people didn’t do nothing.

Scull-DeArmeY: Do you know of any fishermen or shrimpers who were ruined by it, just lost their business?

Parker: No, not really, as far as losing it all. And the Vessels of Opportunity program, it probably really helped our industry in a way because I mean, the guys who did participate in it, we put a lot of money back in the economy. If you make this money, you’re either going to have to spend it or pay taxes on it, so we put a lot of money back into our boats. The shipyards was flourishing. The hardware stores was flourishing, and it really helped our local economy on that type of level. I never would have been in a position to spend forty thousand dollars on my boat, to put a freezer on it.

Scull-DeArmeY: Oh, that’s fabulous. Did the actual spill itself affect the fishing seasons? I can’t remember.

Parker: Oh, yeah. Well, that’s another thing with the BP claims process. (0:19:45.9) They say, “Oh, well, you got to show a documented loss.” They’ll pay you for your documented losses. OK. Well, my one friend in particular, the one I said he didn’t get hired on, he worked, and he had documented that he averaged thirteen hundred dollars a day worth of shrimp before the spill and after the spill. Well, our season was closed a hundred six days, a hundred seven days, something like that. Well, because it was a pretty good season, because he was doing relatively well, he made more money that

year shrimping than he did the year before, on taxes, because the shrimp season was a little better. Well, they said, “Oh, well, you made more money this year than last year, so you don’t have no documented losses.” Well, he said, “What about the hundred days that I could not work at all? That don’t count? Who’s to say that I wasn’t supposed to have a spectacular season this season and make twice as much money this year as I should have last year?” You can’t predict your future growth. You can’t say that in the fishing business because you got bad years, and you have good years. In [20]09 was a bad year. We didn’t have a whole bunch of shrimp, but [20]10 was a pretty good year in between the oil spill. When we got to work, we caught a lot of shrimp. But that’s where he got in a bind. He didn’t even get nothing out of the claims process because he actually made more money in [20]10 shrimping than he did in [20]09 because [20]09 was such a bad year, but they don’t take any of that into consideration. They just look at the black and the white. They don’t look, “OK. Well, the price of diesel was up in [20]09 so not a lot of guys worked. The price of diesel was down a little bit in [20]10, and there was a lot more shrimp; the price was better.” They don’t look at that. They just look, “OK. Well, this is the bottom line, how much money you made this year. This is how much money you made last year. Well, you made more money here than there.” So.

Scull-DeArmeY: I wonder who came up with that process.

Parker: Some dumb-ass accountant.

Scull-DeArmeY: Who works for BP.

Parker: That knows nothing about—he’s definitely not self-employed. I can tell you that. That’s what I told them when I went up there. I said, “Look. If you want to talk bottom line, the bottom line is it was closed a hundred days. We had to lose something.” That was a hundred days out of our season that we could not work because of the oil spill.

Scull-DeArmeY: I had just assumed that they would average your salary, say, for the last ten years, and pay you for those hundred and six days, based on that. They’d pay you for those lost days. That was my assumption.

Parker: That ain’t the way it works. You have to show a documented loss. And then that’s where you see all these—it causes a lot of friction because the economy was already in a downturn when the oil spill happened, and you see all these people with restaurants; you see waitresses. I mean, I know people who have construction businesses and stuff like that. Well, the housing market was in a downturn. They wasn’t doing a whole lot of work. Some of these guys got a-hundred-fifty-, a-hundred-twenty-thousand-dollar checks from BP because their business was down, and they’re not even directly related to the water. A lot of them are economy- and tourism-based, which I’m sure it hurt the tourism, but not as much as it would somebody who makes their living off the water. I mean, I know bait shops that if you got any closer to the water, you’d be drowning; they didn’t get a dime out of it.

Scull-DeArme y: Well, this is what I think. Those are US waters, and the US government and state governments should decide how damages get to be paid, and they [BP] need to have to pay for those lost days and come up with a figure somehow, either last year's, what you caught last year, or an average of the last five years.

Parker: Yeah. I mean, that's like my friend. He didn't work for the VOO program, so he had to work to make money, so he worked every day that he could when it was open, before and after, when there was shrimp to catch, and he was on track to have a excellent season, but because, like I said, he's, "This is what I was averaging before. This is what I was averaging after. Put them together; this is what I was averaging per day. There was a hundred days. Well, I'm not going to work a hundred days in a row. Just say, if I just work half, just pay me for fifty days." They wouldn't even do that.

Scull-DeArme y: No. I think they ought to pay for all the days. I think they ought to pay for all the days. Oil companies are making record profits.

Parker: Well, and that's where I messed up, and that's what I tell everybody. I said, "All this money I got from BP, I should have just invested it back into BP because I'd have a lot more money now than what they gave me because they're stocks went to the bottom. Last year, they've been going up." Buy, you know. (laughter)

Scull-DeArme y: Right. Buy low.

Parker: Sell high. That's basic economics.

Scull-DeArme y: That's right. Oh, boy. We do need a crystal ball. Is there any other thing that you'd like to comment and get on record about the implementation?

Parker: Implementation of?

Scull-DeArme y: The implementation of like the claims process on any level?

Parker: Just something fair. I mean, if you got a—like I say, a lot of these guys that are part-timers, they work for cash, and they don't claim none of that, and they're getting money, but yet the guys like myself, (0:25:08.0) I got very, very little out of the claims process. And I know other commercial fishermen who got zero out of the claims process, but yet guys who are part-time fishermen, they somehow or another, they just threw money left and right to them. I don't have the solution, but it's definitely—they need to not be so critical with the pencil, just look at it, "OK. This is how it's done." It's commonsense.

Scull-DeArme y: Do you think they were trying for a quick fix?

Parker: With the claims process?

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Parker: No. A lawyer's running the show. I mean, he's getting paid a monthly fee whether he gives out one dollar, or he gives out a hundred million dollars. He wants to draw it out.

Scull-DeArmey: Draw it out, paid by the hour. Did you do any other BP work?

Parker: No.

Scull-DeArmey: Have you gone through the claims process?

Parker: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: We've talked about that. You didn't think it was fair. How do things stand for your family and friends in the (0:26:16.0) seafood industry now?

Parker: Really, the ones of us that are left in it, we're here because we want to be here. And like I said, I'm a positive person. I'm going to look at the more positive side. As far as monetary, I don't feel like you have to have money to be rich. I feel like I'm probably one of the wealthiest men in the world. I have a great family, health. I have a business I love doing. I get up happy to go to work every day. I mean, as long as I can pay my bills, I'm going to keep doing it. There's good and the bad. And as long as you keep your head down and you work hard, and when you make money, you need to save a little money because it's not good fishing all the time. That's why they call it fishing and not catching. So.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. (laughter) It's fishing and not catching. I like that. What do the waters look like out there?

Parker: I don't see no difference in the water as far as the quality or anything. I mean, you talk to some guys, and I guess that's the ones that look at the negative side. There's a lot of people out there in today's world that want something for nothing. The squeaky wheel gets the grease? "Well, let's keep raising Cain about it and saying this and that." And half of them aren't even working. For me, here locally, it's been the worst season probably that I ever remember. (0:27:50.1) But I have the capability; I can go off to other places, and it's been probably a average, not higher average, but probably on the medium- to lower-average season so far. But I'm looking forward to the next couple months. I hope it gets better. In the years past we've had, some of my best months have been December, right before it closes. So that's—

Scull-DeArmey: Does it close at the end of December?

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: So you got about two more months.

Parker: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: I think you're very smart to be (0:28:23.3) marketing your own shrimp. That's probably—

Parker: That's the wave of the future. You can't compete with a [foreign] country where somebody can live on a dollar a day.

Scull-DeArmey: You don't need a middle man to take a cut.

Parker: And I think, especially with the economy today, I mean, shrimp, they're not as—in this part of the world, they're not seen as a gourmet. Thirty, forty years ago, if you didn't live on a coast, shrimp was a delicacy. Only rich people ate shrimp. Well, now shrimp are so cheap, I mean, they ought to be on public school menus. I mean, shrimp are cheaper than—like I say, we're getting a dollar, something a pound for our shrimp. Well, you go to Wal-Mart and buy a bag of fertilizer, cow manure, it's five bucks a pound for cow crap. It's more than the shrimp that we're getting. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: But somebody's getting money for the shrimp.

Parker: Somebody's getting it.

Scull-DeArmey: When you go in the grocery store and buy it—

Parker: That's right.

Scull-DeArmey: Or you buy it on a plate in a restaurant.

Parker: That's another thing. With the economy being so bad, people are saying, "Well, we got to watch every cent we spend." People are turning more back to that older way of (0:29:30.5) bartering and buying local. I see it as an upward trend down here. I think it's getting bigger. It's always been because they know they can get a cheaper, better quality product because it's so readily available.

Scull-DeArmey: Buying local, I mean, with the price of fuel, transportation costs add so *much* to your basic commodities that you *have* to have. And if you can buy local food and not have to pay for the transportation costs—

Parker: Yeah. Well, I mean, there's guys that live up in the northern part of the county here that's got gardens, and I'll say, "Hey, look. I'll trade you shrimp for vegetables." "Oh, yeah. We can do that." Or even had people with deer meat, "Oh, I'll trade you deer meat for shrimp." Where can I get fresh deer meat—if my shrimp are \$1.50 a pound, where I can get it for \$1.50 a pound? They think they're getting a deal, and I think I'm getting a deal.

Scull-DeArmey: That's great. That's really wonderful. Do you still see oil out there?

Parker: No. I haven't.

Scull-DeArmey: And from your perspective, how is the health of your fishery? (0:30:33.5)

Parker: The shrimp fishery is pretty healthy. I would say it's been a bad season here locally, but just to say that it's the oil spill that did it, it's too early. I mean, it's really too early to say, "Well, we're fully recovered." And that's what makes me mad about the commercials you see, "Come on down. We're open for business. Everything's normal." Well, that's fine and dandy. I understand the point they're trying to get, but it's really too early to say, "Oh, we're out the woods with the shrimp," because there's things in Alaska with the *Valdez*, it's been twenty years, (0:31:11.6) and some of their fisheries still haven't recovered. Like the oysters, (0:31:14.7) we don't know what's going to happen with the oysters because it was against the law for them to spray Corexit [oil dispersant] (0:31:22.6) in state waters.

Scull-DeArmey: And was that the dispersant?

Parker: That was the dispersant, and it was banned in Europe, and the main reason why it was banned in Europe is because if it gets on things like mussels, clams, oysters, it makes something in their genes where they don't stick to something, so they fall off in the mud, and they grow, and they die in the mud.

Scull-DeArmey: Shellfish, which are oysters.

Parker: That's right. So they weren't supposed to spray it. I mean, there's been reports of people seeing them spray it, but that goes back to the conspiracy theories and all that, but I don't know. It's going to be a while before I can say—it's just like Tracy; she calls me up opening day of shrimp season, "How's the shrimp season going?" "I don't know. Call me in December. I'll tell you." Just because I have one good day shrimping is not going to make my season, and that's how I feel it's going to be with the shrimp and the crabs and everything. You're not going to know until you get a couple generations grewed up in it. (0:32:24.3) Like all the shrimp we caught last year, they was already born, and they were alive, and they were already there. Well, the ones coming up this year, those were the ones that was conceived, born, raised, grew up in this environment, so.

Scull-DeArmey: The post-oil, marine world.

Parker: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. And with oysters if they're not even—if their life cycle is three to four years, how could we know?

Parker: And there's already a couple of studies where they're seeing genetic mutations in certain fish and stuff, with their genes.

Scull-DeArmey: My husband was telling me about some fish with, the spine is crooked.

Parker: I don't know. I can't say that that's oil spill related because I've seen that before. But I can tell you this. The main place where I've seen those at, I've seen a lot of it in Mobile Bay in the northern part of the bay where the Mobile River and all dumps out, and there's a lot of industry there. There's a lot of chemical plants, stuff like that. So it could be, but I have seen that before in the wild, and I've seen it out here, too. So—

Scull-DeArmey: Cause and effect is really hard to establish.

Parker: Yeah. And then the thing, too, I mean, I'm out there my whole life, but a lot of times I don't pay attention to the fine details, but I've seen a lot of shrimp (0:33:54.2) with holes in them, in their shell, like they got, like something ate a whole in their shell.

Scull-DeArmey: For your whole career you've seen that?

Parker: No. Well I've never really noticed. I never paid attention to it, and I've seen it a couple times on crabs, but it seems like we're seeing more crabs with that and stuff. So is that oil related?

Scull-DeArmey: Since the spill.

Parker: Or is it because you're aware, "Well, I need to keep a eye out for it"? You don't know to look for something till they tell you to look for it. So is that because it's under such a finer microscope now than it was before? Were we really not paying attention before? So.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. Yeah. They're all important questions that are hard to answer. Where does the Gulf Coast seafood stand now? (0:34:41.4)

Parker: I would say it's probably kind of leveled off. I mean, it was in a downward trend, and you have to change your tactics. Like I said, with me, marketing my own product and trying to catch a higher-quality, better shrimp and get more money for them, that's basically how it's changed. But as far as the days of going out like my father and grandfather and them go out and catch a boatload of shrimp, come and unload them, and turn around and go right back out, I think those days are probably on

the dying end. We'll make a few trips like that each year, but I don't see somebody making a real good living wholesaling shrimp.

Scull-DeArme y: That's what your father and grandfather were doing? They were bringing them back to the seafood processing plant?

Parker: Yeah. They never sold none off the boat [unless] some friends or something wanted some.

Scull-DeArme y: You're retailing.

Parker: Yeah. [I] retail just about all of my shrimp.

Scull-DeArme y: Well, that's adapting, and I think that it's a secret to your success a lot. What do you see for the future?

Parker: I think there's always going to be a demand for fresh, local seafood, just because of the culture and the heritage of the area. People, like we talked about earlier, that was born and raised around the seafood industry, everybody wants their shrimp boils and crab boils. And I think if I continue to get more and more into marketing my own product and getting a bigger freezer to store my shrimp to sell them when they're not around, and adapt a few other ways—I've done a lot more marketing as far as Internet marketing, advertising, things like that, social networks and stuff. And that's really helped the business. And the thing about it is I'm probably one of the youngest guys out there. I'm thirty-eight years old, and most of these fishermen's average age, I'd say, would be over fifty-five years old. They don't know anything about a computer. The word computer just scares them. And I mean, I'm not up to date on all the thing. I've never received a text. I'm just not into doing the Facebook thing and all that, but I am smart enough to realize, "Hey, this is the way the future's going to be, and I need to try to learn that," because it really does boost sales.

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. I'll bet it does, yeah. Would you want your kids to go into shrimping?

Parker: It's kind of hard. (crying)

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. You think it would be a life that's so difficult that you wouldn't encourage them to do that?

Parker: I don't know. I mean, I'm tearing up here.

Scull-DeArme y: That's OK. I am, too. (laughter)

Parker: I kind of think on a personal level that—

Scull-DeArme y: You'd love it if they did it; personally, you would love it.

Parker: But it's just hard.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Well, we never know how things are going to change.

Parker: It's just hard, and I know if they have the ethic, the work ethic that I have, I think they could make it. And I would do everything to encourage them if they wanted to. I would do everything I could to help them. "Hey, look. This is how I made a living." But things might change, too, because the times change all the time, and you really have to move forward. But I would like it. But if they want to do something else, I'm not going to push them to, "Hey, you need to do this." But I am going to work them when they get big enough to work. (laughter) I need as much free labor as I can get, so that might discourage them a little bit.

Scull-DeArmey: They're going to get to try their hand at it. (laughter)

Parker: Oh, yeah. They're definitely—I'm going to get them out of their mama's hair for the summertime when they not in school.

Scull-DeArmey: Do they go out with you now ever? (0:38:39.5)

Parker: They do every now and then, but when I know I'm going to stay out overnight or something, we'll all go out. But I just stay gone too long. And then a lot of times, having young children on a boat, we work mostly nighttime, so sleeping all day, working all night, most kids ain't going to stay up all night and work. And they'll be up in the daytime, and I won't get no sleep and all that.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, safety issues, too.

Parker: It is.

Scull-DeArmey: I mean, it's so easy for somebody to slip—

Parker: But I have so many cousins that, I mean, they have their kids on. I have one cousin in particular; he's got five kids, and they were on that boat since they was little, but he comes and goes every day. And he's got a girl that's, his youngest is about a month older than my oldest, and if it's a Friday night or Saturday night they ain't in school, they out on the boat with their daddy.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, great. They want to be there, you think?

Parker: Oh, yeah. They like it.

Scull-DeArmey: I think, what kid wouldn't?

Parker: Oh, I mean, yeah. They get to see all kinds of stuff.

Scull-DeArme y: Oh, yeah. And it's not the virtual world. It's the real thing.

Parker: It is. And whenever I went to my daughter's school last year (0:39:54.4) and did a little speech and brought all my little goodies that I caught, and man, they had forty million questions. And it was really nice.

Scull-DeArme y: I think nature really hooks kids.

Parker: Oh, it does. And then here, too, and that's the majority of them was a kindergarten class. So I'm in there talking about shrimping, and all of them was like, "Well, one time me and my daddy went fishing. We caught this." Because we're so close to the water, and everybody down here is water oriented, the majority of kids have been fishing, and they've caught fish. And like I said, it goes back to the culture and the heritage of the area. That's just something that we've all done, swimming on the beach and throwing nets and fishing.

Scull-DeArme y: I fished when I was a kid with my dad. He died when I was thirteen, so we didn't have a lot of time to spend doing it, but I remember being on Moses Pier and catching one of those eels that are silver.

Parker: Yeah. The cutlass fish, silver eel. (0:40:55.9)

Scull-DeArme y: Is that what it is? It was beautiful to me. I mean, it was sparkly and shiny, and I was really impressed with it.

Parker: Yeah. "Wow, look at this."

Scull-DeArme y: But I found out it was trash. (laughter) Although, can you use it for bait?

Parker: Yeah. It's good bait, and you can actually eat them. I've eaten them before, and a lot of Asians eat them.

Scull-DeArme y: That's what I thought somebody had told me that they remembered the Asians—it might have been you.

Parker: Yeah. They dry them out.

Scull-DeArme y: In your first interview, yeah.

Parker: They dry them out and—

Scull-DeArme y: In the sun.

Parker: —make like a jerky out of them or something.

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. I think it was in your interview.

Parker: Yeah. I've seen that a lot as a kid growing up on these piers. There'd be little Vietnamese (0:41:34.9) kids down there with their mom and dad, and they're fishing, and we're fishing, and they're catching all this stuff. And a lot of stuff we'd throw back for trash, they was eating.

Scull-DeArme y: That's right.

Parker: So it was just different cultures.

Scull-DeArme y: Well, Frank, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to put on record?

Parker: Well, you said something about NOAA, I guess sponsoring part of this, and I'd just really like for them to get more in touch with the commercial fishermen. I mean, we have some representatives and stuff, but as far as the TED (0:42:08.7) issue's fixing to come up pretty hot and heavy on the skimmers. And there was a huge peak of sea turtle deaths back when the fishing efforts was down.

Scull-DeArme y: And the oil was up!

Parker: And the oil was up. That's right. I just think it's too early to just let some environmental group try to muscle you with a lawsuit to put—

Scull-DeArme y: No. They ought to be suing BP.

Parker: Yeah. Well, I mean, I don't know. And you have all these dolphin deaths happening now. There's going to be a lot of problems with TEDs in skimmer frames, a lot of problems. And I think the accidents are going to skyrocket, as far as fishermen getting hurt. I know with the economics of the business, with the amount of shrimp you lose, especially in the inshore fishery with the amount of debris you catch. And that's what I don't understand. NOAA will let us, if a hurricane comes through, they'll ban; they'll say, "OK. Well, you don't have to pull your TEDs. You got a tow time for two months, three months, or until the debris gets cleaned up." And then we go back to pulling TEDs. But now they just want to put it in anything that catches shrimp. I wish it was that easy for enforcement where they could say, "OK. Well, this is the law, and this is the way it's got to be." It's just too, there's too many variables in there to just make one law for everything.

Scull-DeArme y: Yeah. One of the things that I learned in doing those TED interviews, and I think it might be a good idea to at least suggest to the fishermen and shrimpers—and you may already know this—is that a turtle that gets caught in your net might have just been caught in somebody else's net, and so it might have wound up being in the water for four or five hours. But if you keep it on your boat—

Parker: Yeah. And that's funny that you say that. Just this last trip, I come in last Wednesday, and it was probably Tuesday night we were skimming around, pushing our skimmer frames, and there was probably about sixty or seventy boats in that area within a six, seven mile area. Well, my deckhand come in there. We'd been pushing about thirty minutes. He just so happened to be looking out there, and he's like, "Captain, we need to pick up. We caught a turtle." (0:44:21.7) I said, "We caught a turtle." I said, "How you know?" He said, "Well, I seen him swim in the net." So we picked up, and sure enough, there was a Kemp Ridley's turtle in the net, and we put him on the boat. And he said, "Well, you throw him back." I said, "No, no. Don't throw him back. There's too many boats around here." So we pushed around for probably about five or six hours, and he just hung out back there, and we kept him wet, and as soon as we got out, away from a lot of the boats, we threw him back overboard. And the majority of the fishermen do that.

Scull-DeArmey: They keep it on the boat.

Parker: There's just a lot of negativity towards commercial fishermen. A lot of the American public just think we're a bunch of outlaws, rapists of the seas and all that, but we're probably one of the true conservationists. (0:45:03.3) This is where we make our living. We try to self-govern ourselves, too.

Scull-DeArmey: So that it's sustainable.

Parker: That's right. That's what we want is a sustainable fishery.

Scull-DeArmey: Otherwise there won't be any fishery.

Parker: No. There won't be. And there was even with the techniques, fishing techniques improving and getting better, we still sustained it. As inefficient as my grandfather and them was with their gear, if I pulled the gear they pulled back then, now, I couldn't catch enough to eat. And I don't know. We just don't get—I don't believe—the credit we deserve. They think they got to tell us everything, and they don't put a whole lot of faith in what we got to say, into anything. They'll say, "Oh, we'll have a public hearing." But they already know what they're going to do, a lot of times, before the public hearing takes place. "This is how it's going to be, but protocol says we got to have a public hearing. Let's have a public hearing.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, maybe the fishermen need to just have a stronger voice in it.

Parker: Well, because we are so independent, you can't get two fishermen to agree on much of nothing (laughter) until it's absolutely like a dog backed in the corner. He ain't going to bite you till you got a stick, poking him with it. And that's the way the fishing industry is because we're so independent, we just—and there's a few of us, we try to do things, and a couple of the older fishermen there, they're starting to step up a little bit, but most of them have the mentality now, "Well, I'm fixing to get out the

business. I'm going to let the young guys work." But there ain't very many young guys left. And me, I try to do as much politicking and stuff for the commercial fishing industry as I can, but I'm not in a position where I can miss a whole bunch of work to go to a lot of meetings. And I've had a bunch of people talk to me. I'm college-educated. (0:46:59.6) I try to speak well. A lot of these fishermen, they go in there, and they got their emotions on their sleeves, and they ask a question, and then they'll rant and rave for five or six minutes about nothing that pertains to the questions they want answered. I go in there. I'm short, sweet, to the point, tell them what I want, what we need, what we expect, and it's done. And I've had a lot of people say, "You want to get on this board? You want to get on that board?" Well, I got four kids to raise. I just don't have the time to be an advocate. And that's where the problem comes in.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. I can see that easily. Well, maybe some day you should be in the government.

Parker: (laughter) No, no.

Scull-DeArmey: Never happen. (laughter)

Parker: No. I'm too honest for the government. (laughter) I think, though, when they all go in there they're honest, and then they end up getting corrupt. So all of them's got a good idea.

Scull-DeArmey: If they want to get reelected, maybe.

Parker: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: If you don't care about getting reelected. Is there anything else you want to get on record before we stop.

Parker: That's about it, I guess.

Scull-DeArmey: All right. Thank you so much. I'll turn the recorder off.

(end of interview)