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

Earl W. Ross

Interviewer: Barbara Hester

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Biography

Mr. Earl W. Ross was born on December 13, 1947, in Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mr. Wildon Ross (born April 22, 1922, in Biloxi) and Mrs. Ruth Wallis Ross) born September 27, 1929). His father was a police officer, taxicab owner, and shrimper in Biloxi. His mother was a bookkeeper. His father's family were shrimpers who owned local businesses, including grocery stores, clothing stores, and taxicabs. His mother's family were shrimpers and bakers. On November 17, 1968, he married his wife, Charlene (born December 14, 1947). They have three children, Johneen Ross (born December 5, 1969), Brent Ross (born February 18, 1972), and Matthew Ross (born March 15, 1982).

After being graduated from high school, Ross served in the US Navy as a seaman. From 1968 to 1985 he was the general manager of his taxicab company in Biloxi. From 1985 to 1989, he also shrimped for a living. From 1990 to 2004, he again managed his taxicab company. From 2005 to the time of this interview in 2011, Ross shrimped for a living.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

EARL W. ROSS

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Earl W. Ross and is taking place on November 4, 2011. The interviewer is Barbara Hester.

Hester: This is Barbara Hester with the University of Southern Mississippi, the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. And I'm here today with Mr. Earl Ross. (The address of the interviewee has not been transcribed in order to protect his privacy.) We're actually sitting in his dining room, in his home. Today is Friday, November 4, 2011, and the time is approximately nine a.m. Good morning, Mr. Ross. Would you state your name for the record, please?

Ross: Yes. Good morning. My name is Earl Ross.

Hester: And Mr. Ross, what is your occupation?

Ross: I shrimp.

Hester: You shrimp?

Ross: I'm a shrimper.

Hester: How long have you been doing this?

Ross: Off and on for about twenty-five years.

Hester: Wow. Is this a occupation that your father pursued or maybe grandfather?

Ross: Well, fishing has been in my family. (0:01:02.1) My grandfather fished. My father fished. I didn't fish with either one of them. My mama didn't want me to fish, and so I didn't start shrimping until [19]77.

Hester: I see. So you never went out with your father or your grandfather?

Ross: I had a little skiff, and I'd go by myself. Me and my wife would go on a little boat. Yeah. But the first big boat I bought was in [19]76.

Hester: I see. And what did you do before that?

Ross: We were in the transportation business. We had taxicabs in Biloxi and shuttles and stuff like that.

Hester: And that would have been you and—

Ross: Well, it started off with me and my wife, when we got married, we had four kids. And then we built it up to about forty or fifty cars.

Hester: Wow. And what made you decide—I'm just curious. What made you decide to leave the cars and go for the boats?

Ross: I loved it. I just like being on the water. (0:02:21.7) It's so peaceful and quiet and just there's nobody to—

Hester: Yeah. I can understand.

Ross: —bug you.

Hester: Yeah. I can understand that. So how did you actually learn the techniques of fishing? Who taught you how to fish? (0:02:37.6)

Ross: I reckon it was just trial and error. You know? And just talking. I had a cousin; I called him Uncle Bill. He taught me how to patch. And I'm left-handed, so I was tying knots wrong all the time. (0:03:02.3) And then I got off of Cameron and tore all my nets up and just had to get back there on the back deck, myself, and just do it. When you have to do it, you have to do it. But it [was] just picking pieces up, trial and error.

Hester: What was the first boat that you had? (0:03:25.4)

Ross: The first real shrimp boat?

Hester: Uh-huh.

Ross: Was the *Little Pumpkin*. It was a wooden boat. It was fifty-four foot long and drew about seven, eight foot of water, and it was, at that time it was a big boat.

Hester: I see. And then you had another boat before that?

Ross: Well, we had littler boats. I had a little twenty-eight-foot boat, and then I had a little seventeen-foot skiff, wooden, cypress skiff that we built.

Hester: And did you start—I mean, those boats were shrimping as well, or did you have other—

Ross: Well, we played with them boats. That was just kind of like that's when we learned how to do it.

Hester: I see. Did you do any oystering at all?

Ross: No. I've never oystered.

Hester: Or finfish?

Ross: No.

Hester: No. It's always been shrimping.

Ross: Always shrimping.

Hester: Neat. What type of equipment do you use when you would shrimp, and how has it changed over the course of time? (0:04:27.7)

Ross: Well, with the *Pumpkin*, I had two thirty-seven-foot nets, (0:04:31.7), and they were otter nets, just the regular shrimp trawl. And we pulled them everywhere. Now, we've got twenty-five-foot otter trawls for inside Mississippi waters, inside Louisiana waters; you got sixty-foot nets for inside the Chandeleur Sound. And then we pull all the way up to four thirty-two-foot nets for outside in the Gulf waters or in the outside state waters in Louisiana, with the bib lines. So it's—

Hester: With what?

Ross: A bib line, it's another point on the trawl that raises the top up higher so you'll catch the white shrimp.

Hester: I'm curious about the different-sized nets. When you go out to shrimp, do you carry all of these nets with you, or do you know where you're going and what size you need when you leave?

Ross: I keep it all on my boat. A lot of people just'll take what specific nets they need, but I carry it all because we carry anywhere from inch-and-three-eighths mesh to two-inch mesh nets, and depending on the shrimp, like I don't stay here. I don't stay on the Coast when I shrimp. I'll go to Louisiana, Alabama. And I might go, and my boat might stay in Louisiana for six months, eight months. (0:06:08.0) I'll come back and forth home, but—

Hester: Where would you dock it?

Ross: There's a little town called Dulac, and I unload there, and I bring my boat up to a friend-of-mine's house and park behind his house, and he watches it while we're at home and babysits it for me.

Hester: That's neat. So it's a larger scope than just the Mississippi waters? (0:06:34.0)

Ross: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I shrimp from—well, I carry four licenses. (0:06:42.2) I carry Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and federal water or federal permit, so I carry the license for the three states and the federal waters.

Hester: But you've always lived in Mississippi. That's your home base.

Ross: I've always lived here. My grandfather come from Dauphin Island in—I don't know when. And that's where we've been ever since.

Hester: Got you. Interesting. You said shrimping. One of the questions that we ask is the species of fish, but you've basically just stuck with the shrimping.

Ross: Yeah. All we do is the brown shrimp or Brazilian shrimp (0:07:28.1) and the white shrimp and the seabobs. That's what I do. But I did notice something this year I've caught, and I've never caught it before in my life. And that's—I'm worried about it—a new species. (0:07:42.8)

Hester: Is that right? Could you tell us about it?

Ross: It's called a black tiger shrimp. It's an invasive species from probably—I don't know—around the equator that's come up here. And it's supposed to be a—I don't know. I'm kind of worried about it taking over one of the other species or taking all of them. It's a big shrimp. They grow real big, but—

Hester: Are they marketable?

Ross: Yes, they are. I say they are. You see them. You know computers, today. We go on the computer, and you check prices all over the world, and you see them; they're being sold, yes.

Hester: Do they pull in a good price in relation to the others?

Ross: What you see on like the Fulton markets and stuff, they pull a good price, but are we going to have enough down here to market, or is it just going to be enough to mess up our species? I don't (inaudible).

Hester: Have you any idea what's driving them up here?

Ross: Different people say different things. If you're in Louisiana, they tell you something about they had some over in Pascagoula, and they got loose during the hurricane, and they multiplied. If you're over here and you're talking about it, they

tell you something happened over in Louisiana. I mean, there's fourteen different rumors, and you can just pick the one you like.

Hester: Do you know of anybody who's doing research on them? Maybe GCRL [Gulf Coast Research Laboratory]?

Ross: I know LSU's [Louisiana State University's] doing because you call. When you're over there, you call a number to a scientist, and you give the location. You bring the shrimp in and all of that. Over here we just got a bulletin from the DMR [Department of Marine Resources] to start calling the DMR and give our locations and everything where we caught it at. I don't know what exactly they going to ask because I hadn't caught one in Mississippi yet. All of them's been over in Louisiana.

Hester: Is that right? I've done a few of these interviews now, and I never really had an explanation on the different types of shrimp. Is there a preferable type of shrimp? I know probably large is the best. Could you tell us a little bit about the types of shrimp in a little more detail and your preferences? What would you prefer to catch? (0:10:26.9)

Ross: I prefer catching the white shrimp. I like to eat a white shrimp better than the brown shrimp, but we catch brown shrimp from May to July. And then you can go out in deeper water, and you can catch them all year. The brown shrimp that we catch range from like a sixty/seventy to a twenty-one/twenty-five. And when I say twenty-one/twenty-five, that means there's twenty-one [shrimp] to twenty-five to a pound. (0:11:09.4) In the [19]30s and [19]40s, this is just, again—they wouldn't catch the brown shrimp. They thought it was something wrong with them. They were turning brown, or they turning bad. And at that time they had federal inspectors at each factory, (0:11:31.6) and they didn't start accepting them until the late [19]40s, early [19]50s. But I've always liked the white shrimp. And then, I don't know. You catch a white shrimp—well, we catch them eighty/hundreds in the wintertime. We call them our Christmas trip. We go out and catch little, bitty white shrimp, and that's usually a good trip. But we catch a lot of twenty-one/twenty-fives, and you can tell a difference in the ones that just come out of the marsh (0:12:11.6) and the ones that are in deeper water because of the color of them. The white ones are coming out of deeper water. They got a little black look to them. They got just a little, not black, but like they're dirty, like their legs are dirty, and their gills might have a little black in them.

Hester: Is that natural?

Ross: Yes. That's natural. And actually the ones that's coming out of the marshes are better tasting than the ones that's coming out of the deeper holes that's off the sand bottom.

Hester: And you mentioned some other type. I think two other types.

Ross: Well, a seabob is just a little [shrimp]. They never get big. (0:12:57.9) The largest I've ever caught was a forty/fifty. Most of them are hundred/overs. It's like, I reckon it's like you catch them large amounts, so I imagine it would be like you hear about the whales eating and stuff. They just so thick. And we catch the seabobs. And it looks like a brown shrimp, but it's got a little longer horn on it. And then the other shrimp we caught was the—what is it called? Pandalus. (0:13:47.5) And all it is is a blood shrimp. It's a real small fish you catch in deep water, and you just catch them by the tons. But I hadn't caught any Pandaluses in about fifteen years, but we'd bring them in, and they'd dry them, or I don't know what they would do because you'd have to call the factories and see if they would take them before you'd go.

Hester: Some wouldn't take them?

Ross: Oh, a lot of them wouldn't take them.

Hester: Yeah. Are you not catching them anymore, by choice, or is it because they're not out there?

Ross: I reckon we hadn't been hungry enough to go look for them.

Hester: I got you. I heard from a number of people that fuel prices are so high (0:14:33.7) that it restricts how far out you can go and so forth.

Ross: Definitely, definitely. That's why I'm sitting home, not on the boat right now, not the fuel prices only, but the amount of shrimp you can catch versus the fuel and overhead and all, you might as well stay home, rather than go out there and break even or have your liabilities so great.

Hester: Could you explain the procedure you would go through to make that decision as to whether to go out or not? How do you pull all of the factors in to make that decision? (0:15:09.6)

Ross: Well, you pretty much know what your fuel cost is right now, today, this particular second. And your ice, you know what it's going to cost. You know what your overhead's going to be when you leave. And you call; like I have friends in Louisiana I call and see if they doing anything. And I have friends over here in Mississippi that's out, and then on the east side the river in Louisiana, I have friends. And you keep up. There's a network just like in August and September, I went out. It was my turn to go, and I went out, and I checked from Atchafalaya to Mobile Bay, looking for shrimp. It was my turn to go look.

Hester: So that's a way to moderate the—

Ross: So everybody don't have to go out at one time. You just kind of check the bottom and check, and you just kind of like you're out there, scouting for shrimp, checking up on them. And that way everybody don't have to go out.

Hester: And spend the money on the fuel.

Ross: On the fuel; overhead, putting it on the boat, and then get out there and not do anything.

Hester: Um-hm. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Can you explain; what does the commercial fishing business mean to you and your family? (0:16:49.1)

Ross: What does it mean?

Hester: Um-hm.

Ross: Well, of course it's earning the money part of it, but it's also just, to me, it's just the peace and the quietness and just a way of life. My wife probably would be happier if I sold my boat today. She's saying it's time for me to get off and go, but she likes it. I say she likes it; I don't know. You'd have to ask her if she likes it or not. But she don't work with me, and she stays home and does her thing just like when I had my other business; I left to shrimp, and she ran the other business for five years. I'm sure she wasn't happy with that.

Hester: The cars, you're talking about?

Ross: Yes, yes. Yes. But I just had to get away. I don't know. We had the type of business where you have four or five thousand phone calls a day, and half of them are complaints. And out there on the water, you just don't have anything. You're by yourself. If you want to talk on the radio, you can. If you don't, you don't have to. You just go look where you think the shrimp are at and start trying.

Hester: It's an amazing life.

Ross: It's great. Somebody who likes to talk and everything, and socialize, I don't believe it'd be good. But you can go out there; we stay about ten to twelve days out at a time.

Hester: How many people go out with you on the boat? (0:18:53.9)

Ross: I have two besides myself, two crew members. And then like if you seabobbing, when you catching a lot, you might have to take a third or fourth deckhand, but that's not often.

Hester: Does your wife ever go out with you?

Ross: Never.

Hester: Never.

Ross: Never.

Hester: If you go out on a trip, how long would you stay out? Is it just for a day?

Ross: Oh, no. I stay about ten to fourteen days. (0:19:18.0)

Hester: And how far out do you go, normally?

Ross: Well, my last trip I went from the Atchafalaya to Mobile Bay, but not far out. It was a long ways away, but it wasn't far out. I probably fish in 120 to 150 foot of water. That's my limit. I can't touch bottom after that. Well, what I'm saying is my cables are not long enough to get to the bottom efficiently.

Hester: How do you determine a good catch? Is there a certain size? (0:20:07.9)

Ross: Well, you got to know what the shrimp are selling for. And then you have to know what your overhead is, how much it is an hour. You burning the fuel, and you taking all of these factors, and you put in. And if you come up with a basket of a hundred pounds of shrimp, and you getting two dollars a pound, well, that's two hundred dollars. And did you go backwards, or did you make money? And you figure it all out, and you just got to weigh if you can do it or not. I've had a lot of times where right here outside of Ship Island, the shrimp are so clean and there's no trash in them. You pick up, and you dump it on the back deck, and you look at it, and you say, "It's not enough there. I need to go check somewhere else." And they come in there, and they tell you you got six or eight baskets of shrimp back there. And you say, "Whoa! I need to turn around and go back," because they so clean.

Hester: How has it changed from when you started shrimping to now? How has the nature of the catch changed? (0:21:33.1)

Ross: We used to could go anytime you wanted, and a bad drag was six, eight baskets. I could drag straight from the Louisiana marsh this a-way through the Chandeleur Sound all the way home and get six to eight baskets a drag. And then after [Hurricane] Katrina, (0:22:12.4) the north end was dead, the north end of Chandeleur, between Chandeleur and Ship Island. It didn't produce any shrimp for a while. And then we noticed in 2009, May season of 2009, it perked back up real good, and then this year (2011) for the May season, I couldn't find any shrimp in the Chandeleur Sound. (0:22:46.3) We had to go against the grass, the marsh grasses, or we had to go out in deep water or west of Morgan City [Louisiana] or either to Mobile to find enough shrimp to work on. But we couldn't find anything in the Chandeleur Sound. In Mississippi they had a few shrimp; we caught a few shrimp, but not anything like it used to be.

Hester: What about Alabama?

Ross: Alabama, in the bay was good, and on the beach was good.

Hester: And what do you think accounts for that difference, the lack of the shrimp?

Ross: After Katrina, we called it the Murphy line. (0:23:37.5)

Hester: Why is that?

Ross: Well, they had Murphy Fuel over there in Belle Chase, them big tanks that got washed away and all that oil, and you had the oil line on the marsh grass, and that was just a nickname we gave it was the Murphy line because you had that oil slick on it, and we just assumed that it destroyed the bottom, or it messed the bottom up. And then we didn't work in 2010 because of the [BP Deepwater Horizon] oil spill, (0:24:08.4) the latter part of 2010. So we don't know; I can't tell you about 2010. This year we blame everything on BP, but it could have been opening all the spillways for the freshwater, to keep from losing New Orleans. (0:24:31.7) That might have been something to do with it. I don't know. So we could blame anything we want. It just might have been just a bad year.

Hester: Right. I've heard it called the triple whammy, and it all came pretty close together.

Ross: Yeah, actually yeah. We had 9/11, was buying fuel for less than a dollar a gallon. Well, you know because you were putting gas in your car. And then after that, the fuel went up. (0:24:56.9) Then we had Katrina. Then we had the BP. And then we had the opening of the spillways all at one time. It just kind of, it put you on your heels.

Hester: Yeah. Well, what do you think of the condition of the waters now, and the direction for the future of commercial fishing? (0:25:19.5)

Ross: Well, the water looks good. And I don't have any kind of instruments that tell the salinity and all of that. You just kind of look at it, and you might take a little bit and put it in your mouth and taste it because that's how we caught our brown shrimp this year, is we got in front of the freshwater, and as it went out, we caught shrimp. But I don't know. I've never seen a white shrimp season start out as slow as it did this year. It might be just late, but I don't know. Maybe next year it'll be great. I don't know. We'll find out. If I have another bad year like this, I'll probably stop. (0:26:21.8)

Hester: Is that right?

Ross: Yeah.

Hester: Do you have any children that might be following in your footsteps and going into commercial fishing?

Ross: No. I reckon I'm like my mother and father. I tried to steer all my kids away from it.

Hester: And so if somebody would come to you and say, "Mr. Ross, I'm thinking about going into commercial fishing as my career," and today would come to you and say that, what would your answer be?

Ross: I'd tell them, "You need to make a few trips with me, just to see what it was all about." Where I had to learn from trial and error—and I said that earlier, but I even took some, in the [19]70s they had the *Georgia Bulldog*, University of Georgia, and I went to some classes and learned how to set tickler chains and all (0:27:17.3) through the University of Georgia. But I think if they did it, (0:27:22.6) I think they'd have to get a deepwater boat or either a shallow-draft. I mean, we're at a point now; either you've got to go offshore, or you got to get against the beach. You can't get a midwater-boat. That was so good for so many years; it would be versatile. But I think if you did it you'd have to be more versatile. I mean, you'd have to go out in the deeper water. You'd have to be willing to work a larger area, and I'm saying larger; I mean from Key West [Florida] all the way to Brownsville [Texas], just follow the shrimp. You'd probably have to do like the Vietnamese (0:28:20.1) fishermen; you'd get a bigger boat; stay gone but—

Hester: But then you're battling the fuel prices. Right?

Ross: You still battling the fuel prices and the [price] of shrimp. (0:28:34.7) When I started, a dollar, seventy was not bad for forty/fifty. Now, we're getting a dollar and a quarter. It might be up to a dollar, forty right now because the season's winding down. But over thirty years, you assume the price would go up a little bit. And you having to change your way of thought, like, ice boats like I have? (0:29:06.5) That's a dinosaur. You need a freezer boat, and you want a freezer boat that you just sell to the wholesalers, to the factories? I would say, "No. You want something that you can retail because you got to try to"—[2009] was the first year I ever sold shrimp across the deck of my boat. (0:29:31.4) Before that I'd just go unload everything at the factory, and I was happy. Two thousand nine we started selling shrimp off the back of the boat to try to make a trip. And I think if you had a freezer, that would give you quality shrimp. And that's what I'm looking at now. (0:29:57.3) I'm looking at having to put something on the boat where I can retail my own shrimp, sell my own label.

Hester: I see. So what would be the normal routine on marketing your catch? Do you go straight to the retailers, or do you go through a wholesaler?

Ross: Well, what I do, and what friends of mine has is, they go straight to the retail. They sell straight to like—I have one friend sell straight to Winn-Dixie. And then one guy in Dulac, he's got Rouse's(?). He goes ahead, and he packs his shrimp. They give him boxes, and he puts his shrimp in their boxes, off his boat, straight to the

retailers. And then you go to restaurants and stuff like that and individuals. And then whatever you can't sell, then you might sell it to wholesale to get rid of it, or just hold it until the price goes up. If you had a freezer, you can do that.

Hester: Who are the wholesalers in this area?

Ross: Well, you got St. Michael's(?), David Luke(?). He's got a little shrimp shed. And then you have M&M. And then you've got Lesso's(?) and Gollott's(?). And that's all we have left, I think.

Hester: Well, how many were there before?

Ross: Oh, golly. When I first started, about eighteen.

Hester: Wow. Have the casinos done something? I know there's been a lot of changes on the—

Ross: Well, I'm sure the casinos gave them an out. Like a lot of them that were in business, they just gradually get out. And the casinos, I don't think the casinos have anything to do with it but give them an easy out because you see it all over. Like in Louisiana, I unload at Grand Isle. There used to be four; now, there's one, and Dulac. So we always blame somebody else. You never wrong; everybody else is wrong, but we'd always blame. "The factory's making all the money, and we're making nothing." But if they going out of business, why? And you see it. There's steady less and less wholesalers, and that's another thing. Twenty years ago you could pull up to any dock and unload. Now, you have to make an appointment. You have to make sure you can unload there before you go, if they'll buy your shrimp. You just can't just pull up and sell your shrimp to them. Like if I'm going to the west, I'll drive down there before I go and talk to everybody and see if I can unload. And even when you switching over, and when you see like the little white shrimp are starting to slow up, and you're starting to catch the seabobs, you need to call the factory and see if they'll take them.

Hester: So a lot of advance planning. I didn't realize so much advance planning went into fishing.

Ross: Yeah. And that's why I bring all my nets (0:33:57.6) because it switches, and I don't stay right here where I can come back and forth every day. And the size of my boat limits that, also.

Hester: Right. Can you talk a little bit about how the prices have changed over the course of your career?

Ross: Like I told you, the price is going down. (0:34:25.5) What did I say? A dollar, seventy for the forty/fifties; now, it might be a dollar, forty now. We used to get

seven, eight dollars a pound for our big white shrimp tails. And I think this year we got like, I think we got four, ninety or five dollars.

Hester: Big cut.

Ross: Yeah. So it's just dropping. And again, that's the reason that I'm telling you that if you're going to go in it, (0:35:05.8) you better be diversified, be able to get somebody on the beach to sell your shrimp while you're gone, to make your contacts with the restaurants and whoever and try to bypass the factories, and all that's going to do: we bypass the factories, and they're not going to make a profit, and then they're going to close up, and then we're going to have less places to sell. And I can just see it just kind dwindling down every day, and yeah, it's going to be less and less. And if we sell everything to the retailers and the factories close up, then where we going to get our ice and fuel or unload the rest of our shrimp?

Hester: So there are a lot of changes going on in the industry right now.

Ross: Yes.

Hester: That you're not too sure where, the direction things are going.

Ross: That's correct. I called Bayou La Batre in May, and they had a good price. And I say, "a good price." And they didn't tell me, "No." (0:36:12.6) But they told me, "Well, you can come in. We'll look at your shrimp, and we'll tell you after we get them out, if we want them or not." And that would be just a disaster to pull your shrimp out of the ice and then they tell you no, and then you'd have to put them back on ice, and—

Hester: Yeah.

Ross: Yeah. So you just—

Hester: I'm hoping to go over to Bayou La Batre, and I've heard Bryant's is—are there other places in Bayou La Batre that are wholesalers?

Ross: Yeah.

Hester: Who would they be?

Ross: You've got Sea Pearl. You've got—I'm trying to think of what Devon's(?) little factory is. It's not little, but Devon. You can say what you want, but the Vietnamese fishermen did well, (0:37:18.9) and they are really aggressive. And this Devon I'm talking about? He was an orphan, little Vietnamese orphan. And I say, "little." He's big as me. And he's done great. He's got a factory going now. Matter of fact he's got a freezer where he unloads freezer boats and ice boats, and he's just doing good.

Hester: And he has boats, as well, (inaudible).

Ross: And he has boats, as well, but it's deepwater boats. Yeah. Most all of Bayou La Batre's deepwater boats.

Hester: Interesting. How has the equipment changed? And you might want to touch on regulations, state and local regulations. How did that influence the change in the equipment? (0:38:08.9)

Ross: Well, when I first started, you could pull anything you want, anything you could pull. And all we pulled was thirty-seven-foot nets, and two of them was plenty enough, learning how to do it. And now, with the different regulations, you got to have twenty-five-foot nets for inside waters and bigger nets for the Chandeleur Sound, your four-rigs for outside in the Gulf. And so you have to have a combination of different-sized, just to abide by the laws. And then this year, matter of fact, it was—I belong to a little association, a fishing association. We got it passed that the door law, the size doors we could pull in Mississippi would be same as Louisiana. And Alabama don't have a door law, so you can pull anything there. That you wouldn't have two sets of even six-foot doors. You could just have one size door, and if you worked it right, that would be a good enough door to pull on your big nets and your small nets. So we got that accomplished, but up until this year, I had to have two sets of doors on my boat. If I wanted to come in Mississippi, I had to put little, six-foot doors on. Now, I can pull eights, but as far as the state rules and regulations, there's not too much. Federal, well, we had to get our federal permits; that's new. And we have to record our shrimp. Matter of fact I've got to renew mine. I got it in the mail the other day. You've got to keep a log of where you caught your shrimp, what size, what kind it was, and report it to the federal government. You just can't just go catch your shrimp and throw your receipts, pay your people off in cash, and walk away. Now, it's a real business now. You've got to keep records. Coming up in the future, it's federal law that we're going to have to have more safety equipment on our boat. We're going to have to have inflatable life rafts. Going to have to have somebody on the boat that is certified in CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation]. You're going to have to have safety meetings every—so it's changing from just to go out and throw your net in the water and come in, to you're going to have to have everything planned out, every so many days or whatever, every trip, once a trip, twice a trip. I hadn't been to the class yet, so I don't know what it's going to be, but we're going to have to—there's a lot of changes coming up shortly, as well. And I think it's more coming up. Like we're going to have to get certified—and I don't think that's that bad—on navigation because we're the only people left that doesn't have to have a captain's license. But I can see that coming, as well. All boats and the ships and all, they have tonnage license. Well, we'll probably have a fishing-vessel certificate that we're capable of running a boat. So that's short-time. That's within a year, I think, this is going to happen. So it—

Hester: Are you pretty happy to see it regulated?

Ross: Well, I think it's necessary, and I like it. I don't believe I care for spending all the money to gear up to it, but that's natural, too. But I don't have a problem with safety meetings and the inflatable life rafts. My little life raft I have, I think is good, but if they want us to—and the one I have, I call it a chum bag because it's the life raft that's round, and it's got the little webbing thing you stand inside in the water. If they want us to be comfortable and in an enclosed, well, that's fine. I just, my problem is going to be paying for it. But you've got to, I reckon, things has got to advance. You can't just stay still.

Hester: Um-hm, yeah. That makes sense. You mentioned an organization you belong to. Is it a local fishing organization? (0:43:41.0)

Ross: Yeah. It's just a little local Gulf Coast fishing, and it includes oystermen and the finfish and the shrimpers and everybody like that.

Hester: Do you meet like once a month?

Ross: We meet once a month unless it's shrimp season or oyster season, but when we're not meeting, when we're out, the members that are oystermen, they meet. And when we're not doing nothing and the oystermen are working, well, we meet, and they're working. So I mean, it's kind of like a—but yeah, we meet once a month supposedly.

Hester: Do they keep abreast of all the regulation changes and everything and inform everybody?

Ross: Yes.

Hester: That's one of their functions. And is there a newsletter or something that goes out?

Ross: It's just a little e-mail. And if you don't have a computer, well, everybody's telling everybody.

Hester: Word of mouth.

Ross: Yeah, word of mouth.

Hester: What's the name of it?

Ross: It's the—you asking me now. I don't know. It's a bunch of letters. It's about fourteen letters long. (laughter) Nobody could decide, so we just throwed everybody in.

Hester: Put it all in there, alphabet soup.

Ross: Yeah.

Hester: I was wondering if you might explain for us. I've heard a little bit about the doors, and how they work. But could you explain? You said they were two sizes and so forth, but what are they used for, and how are they used?

Ross: A door (0:45:35.0) is a—we call them doors. They're trawl boards. They go from the boat. You have cables going through your outriggers, back, down into the water, and the cables hook to these doors. And you set them at such an angle that the water pressure pushes them apart. And as it pushes them apart, it opens your net. And if you have it at too great of an angle, it'll open the net up, but as soon as you get weight in the net or your catch, it'll start closing it up. So ideally, I would say about, if you have a fifty-foot net, if you could open it 80 percent, would be great. And that way your doors wouldn't close up on your catch. It just hugs the bottom. You want to put weight on the bottoms to make them hit bottom, and then you have them at such an angle with your chains and everything and the way you cut them—and the cut, what I mean, is how you regulate your chains to fish high or low or whatever. And that's another thing, a setting. Your doors is how you fish, like if you're fishing brown shrimp, you want your doors to hit on the backside. If you're fishing white shrimp, I like my doors to hit on the nose. And everybody's got their own, but that's fishing. And how do you set them? If you want more economy, trying to burn less fuel, you might set them a different way. And it's just you set them how you feel, what you find. But I like to set them, for the brown shrimp, on the heels; on the white shrimp, on the nose, at about a—

Hester: And you're talking about heel and nose. Can you explain them?

Ross: OK. The heel is the back of the door where you're dragging the back of the doors touching more than the nose. The nose might be just kind of bouncing on the bottom while the back end is dragging in the mud. And then in the white shrimp, I like my nose digging where my back end is kind of just touching. And then you put your, you hook your net to the back of the doors. And on the brown shrimp, you hook your lead line to the very bottom back of the door. On the white shrimp, there's the grass, comes in, or your bottom trash or even your fish. You'll raise, you adjust your leads of your net on the back of the door to accommodate your catch, what you're catching. And we even, we call it a jack ass. I don't know. But it's a little extension that comes up off your doors that you put your cork line on or your top, your lead for your top of your net. And it'll raise your net up another eighteen inches higher where you can use those.

Hester: Can you comment on how the wetlands have changed? Or have they changed? (0:49:36.6)

Ross: Drastically.

Hester: Have they?

Ross: They've gone away. Well, they pumping the islands back in now. But the grass is gone. Over here in Louisiana you got Point Chico(?). It's completely underwater. We had a gap we could drag through, and you can still hit the stumps, and you catch the old trees and stuff, but that's gone. Doe(?) Point's gone. It's backed up about—

Hester: Doe Point?

Ross: Yeah. You got Doe Point. Then you have like Brush Island, Deepwater Pass. We still call it these things because at one time Brush Island was there. At one time Mitchell(?) Keys was there.

Hester: How long did it take for it to be submerged? Was it over a short period of time or a long period of time?

Ross: You had natural—it was disappearing pretty slow, and then after Katrina, (0:50:51.4) it wiped a lot of it away. And you see spurts, like Tiger's Pass. When I first started working, we could go in the mouth of Tiger's Pass and hide behind the marsh grass and get out of the bad weather. Now, it's almost all the way to Venice; there's no grass. And it stops, and then it looks like it's going to grow back, or we just wishing it was going to grow back, or we just thinking. But it looks like they stopped, and I think it's still going away, but I think it's slowed down a lot because of the canals and all they were digging in them. They were just digging canals all over the place, (0:51:59.4) and saltwater was getting too far up in there. I don't know. I don't know what it was. I'm not a scientist. I just have an idea.

Hester: Yeah. You just have a good idea what's going on out there from seeing it. Can you just take me through a day? Suppose you were going to go out fishing today. What would be the procedure? I mean, you would start in the morning, and what would you do? (0:52:24.6)

Ross: If I was leaving today?

Hester: Um-hm.

Ross: Well, the night before, me and my wife would go get groceries. I'd tell my crew to meet me at the boat, depending on where we were going, but I would tell them to meet me at the boat about ten, eleven o'clock. We'd go get our fuel and our ice, and that would take about two hours. And we'd try to get down the—I'd get inside Deer Island and put my outriggers down, get everything set. And I'd be talking on the radio or talking on the phone or talking, trying to find out where to go, and who's catching what, and everything. And we'd run probably—well, it depended on where we were going. If we were going to Cat Island, we'd run there. If we were going in the Chandeleur Sound, we'd start running, and as we'd run, well, we'd go back, and

we'd check the nets. I'd have somebody checking, make sure they wasn't no holes in the nets, patching the nets, just checking the tickler chains, make sure they were set right. And every once in a while, stop, slow up, and make a try. Work our way to where we wanted to go, where we thought the shrimp would be, hopefully. And then we would start trying. Sometime even, you just put overboard and try with your big nets. And again, this is thinking we're working brown shrimp at nighttime or white shrimp at nighttime. And as it gets close to dark, you'd go ahead and put overboard and start dragging, making tries the whole way till you found something, picking up every—I like to pick up every three hours. I don't like to drag over three hours, picking up every three hours, checking, listening, trying to—you know what the tides are doing because you've done checked that out. You know if the tides are rising or falling, or what you got, knowing where to go, what (inaudible) to get in, trying to outsmart the next fisherman. And so I'd say we'd put over about, this time of year, about 5:30 and pick up about three hours later. If we had a fair drag, we'd put back over and stay in the same area. If not, we might put back over and just drag somewhere else. And this would just go on till maybe eight o'clock in the morning until you didn't see any signs left in your try net. Then you'd pick up. And then if you wanted to run somewhere else, then you would run that day for that next night. Otherwise, you'd just anchor and wait till nightfall unless the shrimp was there in the daytime. Then you'd just keep working. You'd work twenty-four hours. And then while you were in these little, between pickups. Well, your crew, everybody gets a turn sleeping. I don't like to have one person awake. I like two people awake at any one time, but one person, we just take turns in rotation, who's sleeping, who takes a little nap. But it's just once you get going, and you get out there, you just kind of just drag or look.

Hester: And you typically would be out for, say, fourteen days, working?

Ross: Ten to fourteen days.

Hester: Ten to fourteen days. It's hard work.

Ross: It's not hard work. People think it's hard work. You pick up; you got winches. I mean, everything, it's harder on a little boat where you don't have anything. But on a big boat, it makes it easy. Again, normally if you pick up every three hours you can get finished in thirty or forty minutes, and you got two hours to take a break. It's not hard work.

Hester: Let's see. Let's talk a little bit more about Katrina. Did you lose any boats or equipment in Katrina? (0:57:43.3)

Ross: I didn't lose a boat in Katrina. Me and my wife stayed on my boat in Katrina.

Hester: Is that right?

Ross: Yes.

Hester: Where was it moored?

Ross: Well, I was fishing on the west side the Mississippi River, and I ran west. I ran to Dulac because I was thinking it was going to hit Grand Isle, and I wanted to get on the west side of it. And so we ran west, and we went up in Grand Cayou(?) Bayou, and we rode it out in Grand Cayou Bayou.

Hester: Was it difficult?

Ross: No. We didn't have any rise in tides. We had the wind, but we didn't have any tides because we were on the west side of it, and I had tied down, and we just sit there and watched the wind blow.

Hester: Is that right?

Ross: Yeah. But we got water in the house, naturally.

Hester: Yeah. How did the storm affect your business? (0:58:47.5)

Ross: Oh, I stopped. What I did was, like I said, I had water in the house. And what the insurance gave me, we put it back together, ourself; me and my son did it. We come in and re-Sheetrocked it and rewired it and did it, ourself. But again, I stopped working because of it because I had to work on—I had to get my house—I couldn't have lived with my wife if I'd have wouldn't have. (laughter)

Hester: I understand. (laughter) I understand completely. But if the house would have been fine, would you have been able to go out and conduct business?

Ross: Well, no.

Hester: Why is that?

Ross: You had no place to get ice or fuel. If you had fuel on the boat, and I reckon if you was a freezer boat, you might be able to go work until you run out of fuel. But there were no ice and fuel docks.

Hester: How long did it take for that to come back?

Ross: You started seeing them—the first ones got back about eight to ten weeks, and that was just on a limited type thing. And most of them at least six months to a year. Yeah. It depends on—

Hester: (inaudible)

Ross: Yeah. It depended on how hard they were hit. If they tanks were still there, they could clean them out and make sure they were still usable, put the new pumps in, and do all of that stuff. They might have got back in ten weeks. Other than that, it was a long time.

Hester: How has the business changed since Katrina, as you can identify it being as a result of Katrina? I know there were the oil spill and then the spillway situation after that, too. You might not even be able to determine a change in the business just on account of Katrina.

Ross: After Katrina, there were less factories. (1:01:38.6) So you had less places to unload. A lot of them just didn't rebuild. And I think because of that the prices, it held the prices down. And then your bottom changed so much and your estuaries. (1:02:01.1) That all changed so much. I think that had a lot to do with the reason there were no shrimp for so many years outside of Ship Island because your estuaries and everything were just kind of—if they wasn't washed away, the salinity and everything was changed so much, so drastically it changed the life cycle. I don't know how to say it, but—

Hester: That makes sense, yeah. It was sort of devastating to the ecology of the area.

Ross: Right. I reckon it would be ecology. So much saltwater at one time.

Hester: Right. Maybe we could talk a bit about the BP oil spill? (1:02:49.5) What did you expect the season to be before the oil spill?

Ross: We worked. (1:02:54.6) We were down, west of Morgan City, and we worked February, March, and April. We were working, and we were catching good shrimp, and it looked like, "This is our year," because you might have two or three bad years, but you're going to have a good year, and it will make it up. You can make up for it. And we thought it was going to be good. And that's how come I was to the west when it happened; matter of fact, I was in Dulac when it happened.

Hester: What thoughts ran through your mind when you heard about the spill? (1:03:45.3)

Ross: Everything was on the television that everything was OK. They had it contained. It wasn't bad. It was drifting this way or this way. It wasn't coming up to the beach. Everything they told us for the first ten days was kind of, "Well, it's not nothing wrong." And then all of a sudden, we started getting oil at Grand Isle. (1:04:13.7) Then they started telling us about it, but at first, all the reports was, "Everything's great, and we got it handled."

Hester: So you were confident that things were going to be fine until you started actually seeing the oil?

Ross: Right.

Hester: Did you have a chance to harvest before the waters were closed at all?

Ross: Well, like I say, we worked up until April, so yes.

Hester: And it worked out fairly well, you were saying.

Ross: Oh, yeah. It was going to be a good year.

Hester: Did you participate in the Vessels of Opportunity? (1:04:52.6)

Ross: For a short time. I did. I did, and I was in Louisiana, and they came to the boat, looking for us. They was coming, getting the people at the boats because my boat was in Louisiana. And they sent me to Venice, and we got to Venice, and I think when I got to Venice, because I wasn't—I'm going to tell you.

Hester: Sure.

Ross: This is me. I think we got there right at the time our governor said that everything we did was going to be Mississippi. We're going to have Mississippi boats. We're going to have outside boats. We were going to do our thing over here. Well, when I got to Venice, I was the only Mississippi boat in Louisiana that got hired in that bunch. So I got sent home. I got over here, and I had a HOU number instead of MOB number. HOU is Houma rather than a Mobile. And I would think HOU would be Houston, but it was Houma. And I wasn't accepted over here because I had an HOU number. I didn't have an MOB number. So I think I slipped between the cracks, I think, when they decided to start pulling between the states, what this state can get, and what this, and who, and all of that. Because I was one of the first ones to sign up and had the HOU number, I got left out in the state of Mississippi.

Hester: So you didn't participate at all?

Ross: In Mississippi, no.

Hester: Not at all. How long was the extent of your participation?

Ross: I worked three days, and I was on active standby for fourteen days. So seventeen days, and then I was over here, and I kept calling, "What am I supposed to do?" And then they lost me. I wasn't in nobody's records. They told me to go standby. And I did. I asked them, "Where do you want me to go? Go back to Dulac, or go to Mississippi, my homeport?" And they said, "Go to your homeport and stay there. We'll call you." And nobody ever called me. And I'm calling people, and they don't know anything about what I'm talking about. And every day I'm calling and calling, going to the BP office on Bay View Avenue, and you can't even get in the front door. "You got an HOU number; you can't come in here." (laughter) Go

upstairs to the attorney general's office, and, "What's the difference in an HOU and a MOB number? I'm being discriminated against because I got an HOU number." And, "Well, we can't do nothing. That's how they do things." So I kept calling and calling, and never could get anything. And finally in June—I can't remember. But it was June the twentieth, something like that, I finally got a-hold of a woman called Terry at BP, and she says, "Oh, you been off-hire," or something like that, "since May the fourteenth." And here it is the end of June. And I said, "Well, how did I know I was off-hire?" And she says, "Well, we called everybody." I said, "I didn't get a call."

Hester: What does off-hire mean?

Ross: It means that you're not getting paid anymore. I'm thinking, because when I left Venice, they said, "Well, we don't need you here. You just go. We going to put you on active standby." We were still getting paid, and they were going to tell me where to go, and I kept, for two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, I'm still calling. I'm calling two or three people, trying to find out what to do. If I'm getting paid, I need to work. And I never could get anybody. Then finally we got a-hold of this Terry woman, and she finally told me that I was—I can't remember the exact word she said, but I was not active anymore. But we went all the way from Houma, got a copy of my contract and brought it over here. We even took it to Mobile, and I never could get anything. But it was just because I had a HOU number, I wasn't allowed in Mississippi to work.

Hester: So that stopped it at that point in June?

Ross: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was finished in May. I got my seventeen days and lost a whole year of fishing.

Hester: Wow. Let's see. I've heard from some other commercial fishermen that the Vessels of Opportunity program worked well for some people who actually weren't commercial fishermen and worked not so well for commercial fishermen, themselves.

Ross: That's true. That's very true.

Hester: Do you know any commercial fishermen that experienced, had negative experiences?

Ross: Yeah. I got a good—

Hester: Or positive experiences?

Ross: I got a good friend that never did get called. I got a cousin that never got called. And they did all the paperwork. Everything was done like they supposed to, and they just never did get put to work. And they're fishermen. They fish every—I mean, that's their job. And then you got people that owned paint stores that are out

there in the VOO [Vessels of Opportunity] program every day, (1:12:33.6) and then all of a sudden, they climbing the ladder. And I know that for a fact because I know him. We coached our kids' baseball together. (inaudible) "What are you doing?" And he said, "Well, I'm"—and I reckon—I don't know. It just, it was not fair at all. If you were going to—the way they said they were going to take care of the fishermen, well, they should have took care of us. If they would have never said that—and it's their money. They can clean it up the best way they could. If they wanted to hire doctors, lawyers, and Dr. Walker's son, they could have. But when they said they were going to take care of the fishermen first, and then they backtracked; I think they didn't follow through.

Hester: I understand. So how did you make it through that summer of the oil spill?

Ross: We didn't do anything. We just kind of sit here and waited. I didn't work. We just kind of just—and again, we got some money from, we had them seventeen days. And then we got some money from the—what is it called? The Coast Claims or something like that. They gave us some money, so we had enough money we made that year, but it got us through the year, but we were short, but we could do it.

Hester: Maybe just, we touched on the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway. Can you talk a little bit about that? How has it impacted you, the industry, the waters in this area? (1:14:49.1)

Ross: Well, when the brownie season opened, the little brown shrimp, May season, that's about the time they opened the spillway. And so what we did is we went over to the Rigolets, right there at the mouth of Lake Pontchartrain, and we worked. We worked right at the edge of the freshwater and the saltwater, all the way out to the Chandeleur Sound. So we did good the first two trips because we was kind of following that edge that it was pushing them out. And then after it got out in the Chandeleur Sound, it just kind of, we come over here, and we worked on the other side, in Jackson County. We made a trip over there, and we made a trip over outside of Dauphin Island. And every time we'd go to the west, we couldn't find anything to work on. There was no shrimp. I don't know if it was—who you going to blame? Was it the BP? Was it the freshwater? Was it just the third year, or the fourth year? It could have just—

Hester: Just a cycle is what you're saying.

Ross: The cycle. I don't know. I could blame it on my nets had a hole in it, but everybody's net would have had a hole. But you don't know. You don't know if it was a cycle. You don't know if it was the freshwater. You don't know if it was BP or what. But the freshwater had to have something to do because we stayed right in front of it all the way out to the Sound, and once it got out there, it was kind of hard to find shrimp after that.

Hester: Backing up to the BP oil spill, do you still see oil out there?

Ross: I can truthfully say I haven't seen it. My deckhands come in, and they say, "Man, there's a slick out here." And I go look, and I don't see it. I can't.

Hester: Do you experience it underwater at all when you're scraping the bottom more, midway?

Ross: I have caught some tar balls. (1:17:48.5) And I don't know—

Hester: From the bottom?

Ross: Yeah. Yeah, as you're dragging the bottom, you pick up; I call them tar balls. But we've caught a few of those.

Hester: I'm just curious. You were talking about the Murphy Oil line after Katrina. Was there anything of that sort, tar balls or anything, associated with that, or was it just a visible mark in the marshes or something?

Ross: I don't believe there was enough oil for it to make tar balls, or maybe it was refined where the tar and everything was out of it, but we didn't have any tar balls after that. We seen this line on the marsh grass, and even going in, even if you—I don't know if you remember the pictures of downtown New Orleans? After it was over with, they had that line, and it was not a mud line, but it was a black line. I don't know. That's what we call the Murphy line, but we never did see tar balls after it. It might have been a different kind of—it might have been refined. It might have been a different kind of crude or whatever, but I didn't see any.

Hester: I think we're pretty much at the conclusion, here, of the interview. I'm sure there are things that I didn't think to ask. Is there anything you would like to put on the record or say? Many people will listen to this. It'll be in the files in the archives of the Center for Oral History. Are there any comments that you would like to make?

Ross: No. Just, fishing is a great life. Lot of people thinks it's hard, but it's not.

Hester: Well, I can see you love it. Thank you so much, Mr. Ross.

Ross: OK.

Hester: This has been great. It's a wonderful interview. And I'll go ahead and turn this off.

(end of interview)