# DONALD SMILEY
## Beekeeper & Former Oysterman – Wewahitchka, FL

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Date: December 6, 2005
Location: Mr. Smiley's home & honey house- Wewahitchka, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 36 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast


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**[Begin Donald Smiley-1]**

0:00:00.3

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans on Tuesday, December 6th, 2005, and I'm in Wewahitchka, Florida, with Mr. Donald Smiley at his home in Smiley Apiaries. Mr. Smiley, would you say your name and your birth date, which is today, for the record, please sir?

0:00:18.9

**Donald Smiley:** Yes, my—my name is Donald Smiley. My birthday was December sixth, 1955.

0:00:26.4

**AE:** And where were you born?

0:00:29.2

**DS:** Born right here in Wewahitchka.

0:00:30.9

**AE:** Okay. And how far back does your family go in this area?

0:00:36.9

**DS:** That's a good question. It goes quite a ways back sometime in the [nineteen] forties, I think.

0:00:49.1

**AE:** And what business were your parents in in this area?

0:00:52.4

**DS:** Well my father was—was already retired when I was born, and he was a carpenter. And he was also in the military when he was young and served in France in World War I.

0:01:09.4

**AE:** What were your parents' names?

0:01:10.3

**DS:** My father's name was—we called him CW, but his name was Cyrus Walter Smiley. And my mother's name was Lula Mae. Her maiden name was Cook, and she was from Jackson

County, Florida. She was raised on a farm. My father was from South Georgia, and he was also raised on a farm.

0:01:33.6

**AE:** What brought your father to Wewahitchka?

0:01:38.1

**DS:** My mother. **[*Laughs*]**

0:01:39.2

**AE:** Okay.

0:01:41.5

**DS:** And they actually lived up near Blountstown. They owned a small farm up there, and my mother wanted to move to Wewa. We call it Wewa—Wewahitchka. And so they moved down here and bought a place in town, and that's where I was born.

0:02:06.1

**AE:** Do you have any brothers and sisters?

0:02:07.1

**DS:** I've got four brothers, five sisters, one half-brother and two half-sisters.

0:02:18.4

**AE:** Where do you fall into that lineup?

0:02:20.6

**DS:** I'm on the bottom. My—my twin brother and I.

0:02:24.5

**AE:** What's your twin brother's name?

0:02:25.5

**DS:** Ronald [Smiley].

0:02:26.8

**AE:** Is he still here in town?

0:02:28.0

**DS:** Yeah, still here.

0:02:29.3

**AE:** What does he do?

0:02:30.8

**DS:** He's unemployed at the moment.

0:02:35.5

**AE:** All right. So what was it like growing up in Wewa?

0:02:38.9

**DS:** Well it was fun; it was a good place to grow up, and there was a lot of activities for—for a young boy to do. It was a lot of hunting and fishing and learning how to swim right down the

road here in the river. It was one of those situations where you—you swim or drown. **[*Laughs*]** And so I had to learn how to swim real quick. **[*Laughs*]** But it was fun, you know; it was always something to do and never got bored. I never really left here. I moved to Franklin County when I started—started oystering in nineteen—1980 moved down there and lived down there for about thirteen years.

0:03:33.6

**AE:** What made you want to get into oystering?

0:03:36.0

**DS:** I wanted to make some money. At—at the time I was working for an air-conditioning company. I had went—went to trade school and learned the air-conditioning trade. I worked for an air-conditioning company in Panama City [Florida], and I just couldn't live on the wages I was earning. I decided I—I will work for myself, so I went into oystering—started looking at oystering. And I went down there and found me an old boat and got a motor, bought some oyster tongs, and went down there—worked one day and made more in one day than I made a whole week working in the air-conditioning business, and I didn't even know what I was doing then.

0:04:16.8

**AE:** Did you buy all that equipment before you even got out on the water to oyster, or had you had some experience before then?

0:04:21.5

**DS:** I—I bought the tongs. I had been out with some buddies of mine before, just messing around. But yeah, I bought—I bought all of the equipment. The motor—the outboard motor I already had. The tongs I had to buy; it seemed like they were about 112 dollars.

0:04:39.8

**AE:** Do you remember who you bought them from?

0:04:43.5

**DS:** I remember where I bought them, but I don't remember the guy's name. He's probably dead now. He lived in Eastpoint. And the boat I got from a guy—it wasn't a real good oyster boat. It was too small. I got it from a guy on loan and made enough money the first week to pay for the boat and it was 300 dolalrs.

0:05:09.6

**AE:** So what was your—

0:05:10.3

**DS:** So I used that boat for about three months, and then I bought a bigger boat.

0:05:15.2

**AE:** What was your first day out on the bay like, do you remember?

0:05:18.0

**DS:** Yeah. It was—it seemed like it was in November—may have been in October. I'm not—I don't remember for sure but it was—it was a day about like today. It was cool, sunny, and kind of warm. It wasn't real cold. That water was calm. And I went out of a place called Eleven Mile *[which is eleven miles west of downtown Apalachicola*]. There was an oyster house there. A guy named Sammy Crumb owned—owned the oyster house. And he sent me out to his lease—his oyster lease. And he said, "Just go out there where those boats are; you'll find a fellow out there named Cecil and," said, "you'll be in the right place." That was my first day of oystering.

0:06:12.0

**AE:** And using the tongs and—was there a learning curve there for you to—?

0:06:15.0

**DS:** Yeah. Well, I already knew how to—how to use the tongs. It's pretty simple. But how to use them right, you know, that took—took some time.

0:06:24.2

**AE:** Just the right way to use them?

0:06:26.3

**DS:** Well I was digging too hard and getting too much mud on the oysters; they were kind of muddy. But eventually—eventually, I learned how to get them up with them and then I had—I was digging down too hard. It was you know—

0:06:44.0

**AE:** How many pounds of oysters does one generally pull up in a—?

0:06:47.7

**DS:** Oh gosh, I don't know. Sometimes you'd get—your tongs would be full. They'll be—you know, they fit together like—like rakes. Sometimes when you bring them up they'll be opened up

like that [*gestures to illustrate the heads on a set of tongs to be about twelve inches apart*]—real wide and you can't close them up all the way, and they'll be full of oysters. I don't know; maybe thirty to forty pounds, maybe. Sometimes, not—not usually that much, but sometimes it can get pretty heavy.

0:07:15.7

**AE:** And you do your own culling onboard?

0:07:17.3

**DS:** Uh-hmm, throw them up on the cull board and kind of just break the oysters apart and clean them up, you know, and throw them in the—in the boat.

0:07:31.4

**AE:** So when—what time of day would you go out, and what is kind of a day on the [Apalachicola] bay?

0:07:36.3

**DS:** Well we'd go out early—probably six-thirty, seven o'clock be out. In the summertime we'd go out to—before daylight we'd start heading out and try to beat the heat.

0:07:46.7

**AE:** Then you'd stay out there how long?

0:07:50.8

**DS:** Well the longest I ever stayed out was probably about six o'clock and this is in the early fall in September and October from probably six o'clock in the morning until six-thirty or seven [in the evening]. There's been some times—a lot of days we'd do that.

0:08:14.0

**AE:** And then you oyster—

0:08:14.6

**DS:** Go out when the sun is coming up and head in when the sun is going down.

0:08:16.3

**AE:** You oystered steady all day long?

0:08:20.5

**DS:** Uh-hmm.

0:08:20.4

**AE:** And there are no bathrooms or anything out there. You've got to take your lunch and—

0:08:27.1

**DS:** Uh-hmm.

0:08:26.6

**AE:** Did it ever get—?

0:08:27.7

**DS:** I didn't—I didn't eat much—hardly ever ate lunch. I ate breakfast and then that was it.

0:08:34.9

**AE:** You ever eat on some oysters while you're out there?

0:08:38.0

**DS:** The oysters? Yeah, uh-hmm.

0:08:41.8

**AE:** And are there slow times during the course of the day or times that you rest, or is it just steady [work]?

0:08:46.4

**DS:** Well yeah, you can take—we'd usually take a break around lunchtime sometimes and drink some water or a cold drink, you know. And I—sometimes I did have lunch. I'd bring a lunch. On hot days, yeah, we'd take breaks about—it was real hot out there.

0:09:14.8

**AE:** And hang out.

0:09:15.9

**DS:** I ruined my eyes working on the water.

0:09:17.1

**AE:** How's that?

0:09:18.9

**DS:** From the sun—the reflection off the water and then the sun glaring in my eyes, it—it caused me to have a growth on one of my eyes called a pterygium. That's caused from working out in the sun.

0:09:33.4

**AE:** And nobody wearing sunglasses or anything—they get in the way?

0:09:38.0

**DS:** Yeah, I didn't wear sunglasses because when you're culling you get all that splatter on your glasses and—and you had to keep washing them off all the time. Didn't wear sun-shades, hardly anybody does.

0:09:53.0

**AE:** During the course of the day when—

0:09:53.4

**DS:** I wish I had now, though.

0:09:57.2

**AE:** During the course of the day, when guys are out there, is there communication between boats?

0:10:02.3

**DS:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, you know, you—you'd kind of hang around and hang out where your buddies are—your friends—and y'all could talk back and forth and—and then there were a lot of days I'd just be off by myself working and moving around. We moved around a lot to find the best—the best spots where the oysters were. If we'd had GPS(es) [Global Positioning Systems] back then, we could have—if we'd find a good spot of oysters, we could mark them and be right on them every day until they were gone. We didn't have that kind of stuff back then.

0:10:31.0

**AE:** What are you looking for when you're looking for a good [area to harvest]?

0:10:33.7

**DS:** A lot of oysters, like you know when you tong you get a—a tong full of oysters instead of a bunch of shells with a few oysters in it, you know. Because when you're culling, you're knocking dead shells off and the oysters that are too small, you're raking all that back overboard and those are—they'll pile up. The water is shallow, you know, and they'll pile up right there. It's called the cull pile, you know. you can always tell when you tong into a cull pile, you get shells and little oysters. But eventually they get spread back out by the currents and the waves.

0:11:09.6

**AE:** And so did you sell your oysters to Sammy Crumb?

0:11:15.6

**DS:** Uh-hmm.

0:11:15.6

**AE:** The whole time you were working or did you—?

0:11:17.7

**DS:** No, no, I worked for a lot of different dealers.

0:11:21.0

**AE:** Can you explain how—explain how that works when you bring in your—your oysters and when you sell them and get a ticket and load them up and—?

0:11:30.4

**DS:** Okay. Back—back then when I first started, we threw all our oysters in the boat in the hull, and then when you'd come in in the evening, we'd shovel them out. And if we were bagging—catching bag oysters—we would measure them into a ten-gallon bushel—bushel. And we'd have—we'd kind of—it was like a bucket with a hole on each end, and we'd fit a bag over one end and sit it down in the floor and shovel oysters into it and get it full and pick it up, and the oysters would fall in the bag—sixty-pound bag. And if we were shucking the oysters, that means taking them in the oyster house the next day. And shuckers shuck them out and process them. [We'd] shove them [the oysters] in the wheelbarrow, and roll the wheelbarrow in the oyster house and dump them in the stall. And, of course, bagged oysters, we'd either—they would either go into the cooler or right onto a truck—a refrigerated truck.

0:12:34.8

**AE:** How is it decided whether they're bagged oysters or shucking oysters?

0:12:36.5

**DS:** It depends on what—what the dealer wanted. You—you could do either one. When—when the oysters were real fat, when they—when they were real heavy, you wanted to shuck—shuck the oysters because you get better turnout and make more money. If they were poor, you wanted to bag them.

0:12:57.7

**AE:** So what's a good haul for an oysterman to bring in?

0:12:59.8

**DS:** Well back then I mean it wasn't uncommon to bring in sixty-five, seventy bushels of oysters. That's with two people. A man and his wife working together, they could do that. One person could—most—most I ever caught by myself was fifty bushels; that's a lot, and I caught them in four hours. Yep, that's only happened one time and the way—the way—the reason I was able to do that because the—it was a—a summer [oyster] bar, and it was the first day of the summer season, and it was on a bar called Platform [Bar] over in Eastpoint, right about the Chicken Channel. And the reason they call it Platform is it's flat on top and on each side of it—it just drops off real deep—called the Platform. And everything I tonged up was pure oysters. All I

had to do is just break them apart and throw them all in the boat. They were all legal size—three inches or bigger, no shell hardly—in four hours bushels by myself.

0:14:16.1

**AE:** It's a good day.

0:14:16.2

**DS:** Yeah. But you know a lot of days I've caught forty and forty-five bushels by myself.

0:14:23.7

**AE:** Are there a lot of guys who go out there with the wives and have them culling?

0:14:27.7

**DS:** Uh-hmm.

0:14:27.1

**AE:** Is that generally faster because you're not stopping to cull?

0:14:30.7

**DS:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

0:14:34.0

**AE:** And then when you started in the early [nineteen] eighties, what was—what kind of price were you getting for oysters? How has that changed?

0:14:42.2

**DS:** Five dollars a bag for a bushel. And that was just—that one place there in Eleven Mile; everybody else was paying four [dollars and] fifty [cents]; and I was getting five dollars a bag. I was going right for guys for several years up until what was that—1985 when that hurricane—hurricane came in down here—name of that hurricane—anyway I can't remember. [Hurricane Kate.] It was 1985 a hurricane came in; the first day of September 1985, the first day of the winter season a hurricane hit and they closed the [Apalachicola] Bay down because the—it buried all the oysters. All right, so that put all the oystermen out of work. Of course, I went to work back in the air-conditioning business later—the next year. December we had another hurricane. It did the same thing. The Bay was closed for about a year; when they did open it back up, and I started back oystering, there was oysters everywhere. My gosh, there was a lot of oysters. Then they started putting limits—bag limits. I think it was fifteen bags to a boat. The price had gone up to somewhere around fifteen, sixteen dollars a bag, yeah. And the next year—

you know, I got as high as twenty-five dollars a bag for them from the dealers the next year. But they put a limit—the fifteen-bag limit on all the boats. Didn't matter how many people was on there [oystering], fifteen bags was all you could get. So people started pulling smaller boats—towboats—behind the oyster boats, and they'd put fifteen bags on that boat. There was no—nothing that said you couldn't. So we were getting thirty bags a day. Actually, we were getting more than that because we would double-bag them. Make them over sixty pounds, and that's when the dealers started just weighing everything, you know. It didn't matter how many you had in the bag; whatever the bag weighed, you'd write the weight down, and they worked it out to so much per pound.

0:17:21.0

**AE:** So then how does it work when you turn in your catch? Do you get an invoice and you get paid later or you get paid right there?

0:17:26.5

**DS:** You get a ticket on it. You get paid the end of the week. I mean you could probably get paid every day if you wanted to—if a dealer wanted to do that. I always liked to wait a week. Sometimes I'd wait two weeks to get paid.

0:17:42.1

**AE:** Don't have it don't spend it, huh?

0:17:44.7

**DS:** Yeah.

0:17:45.1

**AE:** **[*Laughs*]** So were you—were you married and having a family when you were oystering?

0:17:49.7

**DS:** Uh-hmm.

0:17:53.0

**AE:** And then you—

0:17:53.3

**DS:** Had two daughters.

0:17:53.5

**AE:** Yeah? What are your daughters' names?

0:17:55.8

**DS:** Lisa is my oldest and Melissa.

0:18:02.2

**AE:** Great.

0:18:02.5

**DS:** And I was married to my first wife, Dena, twenty-one years, and she's history now. Now I'm married to a good—a good woman.

0:18:18.6

**AE:** So when you were oystering—you were talking a little bit about red tide [*which is a bloom of dinoflagellates that causes reddish discoloration of coastal ocean waters, which is often toxic and fatal to fish*] and all that when the bay closes. Can you talk about that?

0:18:28.6

**DS:** Yeah. Well, you know, back then, when I was doing it, we didn't have a red—a problem with red tide. The bay was never closed because of red tide. You'd hear about red tide, but it wouldn't be very bad, you know. It was always somewhere else. The main thing that would close the bay down here was if there was an extremely large amount of rain, and we'd get a lot of runoff, and that would make the bacteria in the water. You know, your bacteria count [would] go up. Or if we was having flood problems, you know. If the river was flooding, like just say they got a lot of rain up in Georgia and around Atlanta and whatever and that raised the river levels. Well, all that water comes down here eventually, you know, and the—if the river got above flood stage, a lot of times they'd close the bay. It—it would really depend on the—the test they did on the—the water test, the Department of Natural Resources and—but I remember, 1981 I think it was, when there was so much freshwater in the bay that it wasn't even salty. You tasted the water, and it was just as fresh as it could be. They didn't close the bay then; they let us keep oystering. They may close one end of it and keep the other end open—a lot of oysters. They were fat and heavy and no salt in them at all.

0:20:09.2

**AE:** And you want a salty oyster?

0:20:11.4

**DS:** Well, they were fresh; you wanted to shuck them. They were fresh and fat, and you'd shuck them. And they—they wash all the salt out of them, anyway [*when they clean the shucked oysters before packaging them*].

0:20:23.9

**AE:** But everybody—

0:20:24.4

**DS:** You buy—you buy shucked oysters in the grocery store, take one out and eat it, it won't be salty.

0:20:29.9

**AE:** But everybody down in Apalachicola is talking about how good the oysters are now because they're so salty.

0:20:35.0

**DS:** Yeah, if you're going to eat them raw, that's the way you want them. You know, eating them on the half-shell, you want them salty. But if you're going to cook with them, you know,

you use oysters already shucked. And, you know, if you buy them out of the grocery store, they run them through washers and clean them up good, and they're not salty.

0:20:57.1

**AE:** You were saying how when they have a red tide that they just check the water, and they never check the oyster?

0:21:03.8

**DS:** Right. They might do it now. I don't know; I can't say—but they probably don't—still don't. And that—that's too—that's when it was along in the—sometime in the [nineteen] eighties. I don't remember when, but that's when they—they started requiring oystermen to have permits. Permits were free, but you had to have one. And then it began to cost five dollars to get a permit. Now we let them get away with it; nobody tried to stop it. And then that permit went up to 100 dollars. And then you had to have a saltwater products license, so that was another fifty dollars. And then you had to have all these things, you know. And then they would get—got to where every time you'd turn around the bay was closed or you heard about someone on—on the news that ate some raw oysters and got deathly sick, which was bad publicity, you know. It makes people scared to eat oysters, and I don't blame them. But they might say the oysters came from such-and-such a seafood house in Apalachicola or Eastpoint, but what they don't tell you is where the oyster actually come from. It come from Mississippi or Louisiana, Texas, South

Florida; they're shipped in here by the truckloads, and they process them down here through the oyster houses and pack them in containers and call them Apalachicola Bay oysters.

0:22:46.6

**AE:** Is that mainly done when the bay is closed just so they can keep—?

0:22:49.3

**DS:** Done year-round. Done year-round. I don't know if they're still doing it, but I'm sure they are. They're probably getting and bringing in oysters from Louisiana right now, as polluted as that place is. After that storm out there, the oysters they had at the [annual] Seafood Festival [in Apalachicola] came from Louisiana last month. And they had our bay closed; they just opened it up a couple weeks ago.

0:23:27.1

**AE:** So what year did all of this—all these changes squeeze you out of business?

0:23:30.2

**DS:** Well, **[*Sighs*]** 1993. December ninety-three, orders were so bad—and I had moved back up here [to Wewahitchka] by then; I moved back up here in 1987. The orders—orders were so bad,

I'd drive fifty-some miles down there to go to work, and I never knew what my order would be for that day because they'd put you on a limit—limit of orders. It might be two bags; it might be four bags. I couldn't make a living on that, you know. Two bags back then—I think we were getting nine-fifty [nine dollars and fifty cents] a bag then. The price had already dropped and I can't—I can't even drive down there for that and pay my boat gas and truck—truck fuel. And I said, "Well I've had enough of this." By then I had already went through corrections training. And I said, "I think I'll go ahead and put in an application somewhere." But before I even did that, I got out of the oyster business, sold my boat—motor, tongs, everything—and got away from it. And in February [nineteen] ninety-four I went to work for the Department of Corrections—three long years.

0:24:56.5

**AE:** What did you do?

0:24:55.7

**DS:** That was probably the longest three years of my life. I hated that job.

0:24:58.9

**AE:** What did you do for them?

0:25:01.1

**DS:** I was—I was a security guard in a prison—Liberty County, forty-three miles from my door to their door. It wasn't such a bad job; I mean it had pretty good benefits. It didn't pay enough, but I knew what I was going to do. I had already had the bee business going, too. I started that in 1989. I knew I needed to find something else, so I got into beekeeping. And I was starting to do pretty good with it, but I knew that when I got—I got my bees built up, I needed at least 300 to 400 hives of bees to begin to make a living with it. When I got that many, I turned my resignation in at the prison and—and left and never looked back. I concentrated solely on the beekeeping business, and I've done well.

0:25:59.1

**AE:** When you were growing up, were there a lot of beekeepers here in Wewa or the area?

0:26:04.4

**DS:** When I was growing up, yeah, there was—there was. It was quite a few—a lot more than there is now. Yeah, but you know, they—they got old and sold out and retired and—and I think the—the Laniers is the only family that's still in it that was in it many, many years ago. I mean they're already in their third generation of beekeeping.

0:26:33.1

**AE:** How did you learn?

0:26:34.6

**DS:** Reading and talking to other beekeepers. I read a lot of books—a lot of books. And I talked to a lot of beekeepers. I had a beekeeper friend that was an oysterman. He's actually the one that really got me interested in bees. He was doing it part-time. I talked to a lot of beekeepers. I worked with an old beekeeper at Howards Creek. That's where I got most of my experience from—is from him and his knowledge [Broward Mixon, deceased]. He was—he was probably the best one overall that—that I learned from.

0:27:15.7

**AE:** So how did you get—

0:27:15.5

**DS:** The rest—the rest, you know, you learn by—by doing it. And I—I've been successful at it. I've been—been good; it's been good to me.

0:27:27.9

**AE:** Were there mistakes at the beginning?

0:27:29.9

**DS:** Oh yeah, there was mistakes at the beginning, in the middle and—and right now. I still make mistakes. You never—you never learn everything. I learn something new every year. Every year is different. The beekeeping is the most satisfying work I've ever done in my life.

0:27:48.5

**AE:** How so?

0:27:50.9

**DS:** Well it's—it's a challenge and it's—it's fascinating. A honeybee is a fascinating insect. I didn't realize it at the beginning but honeybees, like right now, their value as pollinators nationwide is about fifteen billion dollars a year just in their pollination benefit. About one-third of every mouthful of food we consume is directly related to the honeybee. That—that was just amazing to me to find that out, and I learned—learned that by reading. And that just fascinated me. And the way they produce honey. And we're able to sit bees out—they're insects—and they make more honey than they need, so we can take it away from them and use it and make—turn it into money.

0:28:54.0

**AE:** How many hives did you start out with?

0:28:55.8

**DS:** Eight.

0:28:58.7

**AE:** And where do—where did you get your bees?

0:28:59.8

**DS:** I bought them from a guy in Ponte Verde Beach over near Jacksonville [Florida]. When I bought them, I didn't—I didn't know how to handle bees or anything, and it was kind of scary. You know, **[*Shew*]**—went over there—the guy I bought them from—we went over there to load them up in my truck, you know, and the bees started running out and **[*Bzzz*]** and it was dark. Ugh, it was kind of scary. I got them home and had to unload them by myself, and they were heavy. I didn't even have a veil to wear, so I made one out of a piece of screen and tied it around my head. **[*Laughs*]** It was something, I'll tell you.

0:29:42.9

**AE:** Did you have a place to put them when you brought them back?

0:29:44.6

**DS:** I set them in the backyard.

0:29:49.8

**AE:** May I ask you what kind of investment that is to get [going]?

0:29:51.2

**DS:** [One] thousand dollars. I bought eight hives of bees and enough equipment for fifty hives.

0:30:00.2

**AE:** And just started rolling.

0:30:00.4

**DS:** That was 1,000 dollars and then the next year I had forty-five [hives] because I figured out how to make increases. I probably didn't do it right, but it worked, and it just grew from there. I'd

buy more equipment and I—I paid as I went. I didn't go in debt. And I just built them all up and learned—kept learning and I'm still learning.

0:30:29.4

**AE:** And so how many years is—

0:30:30.0

**DS:** And I built up—I had built up—last year I was up to about 1,200 hives and one full-time worker. I had some part-timers, too, and I decided one day, I'm just tired of just work, work—work all the time. I said, "I am tired of working like this. I don't get to do anything but work anymore." So I decided I'd sell off 500 hives, so I did. I just figured it where I'd sell 500 hives. And now I'm down to about 500 now.

0:31:11.9

**AE:** How many years was it that you were overlapping the beekeeping with the oystering and corrections—?

0:31:17.5

**DS:** In [nineteen] eighty-seven—let me see, [nineteen] eighty-nine, I started beekeeping—keeping bees. And from [nineteen] ninety-three—so that's three years. I was still oystering while I was—had bees. And then three more years [working] at the prison, I still had bees. So it took me six years to build a beekeeping business up to where I could make a living on it. And when I went into it full-time, I could really get something done, you know.

0:31:50.5

**AE:** So what's this—what's your annual schedule of—of beekeeping, because I know that tupelo has a really short season?

0:31:56.6

**DS:** Okay. I'll start from the—the beginning of my season, which is with the first maple bloom **[*Laughs*]** at the end of December or the first week of January. That's when my beekeeping cycle begins because that's—that's when my spring starts. That's when the bees start getting the first new pollen of the year. And then, when they start getting that new pollen, they—the queen begins to lay eggs, and there's an increase in the hives' population—has new bees hatching out every day. And they build up; they just build on up. And then the titi bloom begins and that's a big nectar source for them. [Titi is a small semi-evergreen tree that grows to thirty feet and is common to swamp edges, wetlands, and streams.] And—and there's a lot of other things blooming, too but titi is the main thing. And they really increase their population even more faster and build up and on into March and then—and we got what we call swarm season. That's

when the bees have reached their peak population and then they get an—an urge to swarm and that's how they re-propagate their species is by swarming, leaving the hive. Part of the bees leaves the hive, not all of them. And the queen usually goes with the first swarm, and they go find some other house—place to live somewhere. It's called swarm season. What we try to do is to prevent that swarm or use the swarm to make a new beehive—trick the bees and make them think they've swarmed; they don't need to swarm anymore. There's a trick to it, and you can increase the number of beehives you have by doing that and still have honey production out of those hives, if you do it right. You got to have the swarms; a hive will swarm two or three times, you know. You'll have—your first swarm is usually the biggest, and then you'll have a second swarm a little smaller and then a third and a fourth, and they get smaller and smaller. It weakens your colony down. Well, it's not going to produce anything—it may not die, because they'll hatch off a new queen. But they won't produce anything. So we—we try to control that and what—what we try to do is keep our bees at peak—you know, peak level—strong beehives, going into the tupelo flow because that's our main crop, and that's the one we make the money on. If we can keep them in—in top form as the tupelo begins to bloom, then they'll make a lot of tupelo honey—if the flow is good. And that—usually it starts in April—fifteenth—anywhere from the fifteenth to the twenty-fourth or later. I've seen it come in later. This year it came in—in May before it came in. But that's unusual. The flow will last—I've seen it last one day and didn't make anything. I've seen it last four weeks. I've seen it last a week, nine days, two weeks—depending on the weather. If we've got good perfect weather, if every—all the conditions are perfect, the trees have plenty of water, the river—river is high, warm sunny days, cool foggy nights, no rain, no heavy rain, no hard wind, you might get the tupelo crop.

0:35:43.7

**AE:** And then you work it—

0:35:43.0

**DS:** I've seen a rainstorm come through at night or even in the day—usually they're at night. See, the tupelo blooms when it's—when it's opened and the bees are working it, it's very heavy with nectar. And it doesn't take a whole lot to knock that bloom out of the tree. A heavy rainstorm or real hard wind can knock all the flowers out of the trees and end the—end the flow. But it's—it's a real heavy nectar flow, and the bees will go at it so hard and so fast that anything else that's blown—never how minor it is—they just pass it up and go for that tupelo because it's a rich source of nectar and pollen for the bees.

0:36:37.7

**AE:** How do you know when you definitely do have a good crop of honey?

0:36:41.4

**DS:** What we've got when the bees are through making it. That's how you know; when we're putting it in the box. When you go out there and open the beehive up and pull a honeycomb

out—a frame of honey—and you turn it upside down and the nectar is dripping out of it, you know there's one good honey flow.

0:37:10.4

**AE:** So how do you—how do you watch that; how do you baby-sit it and know when it's ready to harvest?

0:37:16.4

**DS:** When they—when they stop working the tupelo. You can look at the tupelo trees and tell that—when the flowers are drying up. And when the honey is—is ripest is when it's—when it's sealed with a wax cap, when the bees cap it off, it's ripe and it's ready to harvest.

0:37:35.3

**AE:** And then you have—

0:37:36.4

**DS:** You know these things by being out there every day, going in the bees—looking at the bees, looking at the trees. See when—when the tupelo begins to bloom, we have to strip all the

bees down, strip all the boxes of honey they have on them off, extract, and put clean empty boxes of comb back on, so they fill it up with tupelo.

0:37:55.2

**AE:** What do you do with that other honey?

0:37:58.1

**DS:** We extract it and sell it at bakeries. You get bakery-grade honey.

0:38:04.6

**AE:** Do you do anything with the extra wax that comes off the combs?

0:38:07.1

**DS:** Uh-hmm. Render it—pour it in a forty-pound wax pan molds. I've got a bunch of it out there; I'll show it to you.

0:38:15.2

**AE:** Okay, okay. So where are you putting your bees?

0:38:18.6

**DS:** Well I just started moving them back—back from the farms up—up north of me. That's where I bring them every summer after the tupelo flow is over and move them out and bring them up there. It's better. There's more for them to feed on up there, plus we get another honey crop. Right now, some of them are still up there, and some of them I've got here in the backyard. I set a bunch of them back here because I got to do some mite treatments on them. And then I'll move them out to my tupelo location.

0:38:56.0

**AE:** Do you have a relationship with farmers in the area for pollinating their crops and whatnot?

0:39:00.4

**DS:** Uh-umm. Not—not here but in Jackson County and South Georgia—Southwest Georgia—and around here the tupelo locations, I either own—own them or lease them from the people that own the property.

0:39:22.4

**AE:** So in tupelo—high tupelo season—how many groups of hives do you have along the way?

0:39:28.3

**DS:** Got nine—nine locations.

0:39:32.2

**AE:** And just you and one other guy work that or when—when tupelo is coming in—

0:39:33.8

**DS:** Right now, there's just me and one part-time guy now.

0:39:41.1

**AE:** So what kind—

0:39:42.5

**DS:** No, we—we—when we're harvesting the honey, I have more than just one person helping me. I have to.

0:39:48.5

**AE:** I would imagine.

0:39:50.4

**DS:** Yeah, those boxes of honey are heavy. Some of them weigh 110 pounds.

0:39:57.2

**AE:** So tell me, when you're harvesting and it's, you know, really coming in, what a typical day is like.

0:40:03.2

**DS:** **[*Laughs*]** A typical day. We'll leave here about seven o'clock in the morning, and we'll go out there and get the truck ready. We'll get all our hand-truck pallets on the truck, and these are what we're going to stack the boxes of honey on—hand-truck pallets. And—and I have some six-way pallets that I—I stack six stacks of honey on. I use a forklift to move them around. I didn't use to have that forklift. We'll get all of our Bee Go on the truck and make sure we've got Bee Go, plenty of water to drunk, some ice, and our hand-truck pallets, acid boards, bee blower—

0:40:50.8

**AE:** What is Bee Go?

0:40:53.7

**DS:** It's butyric acid; it's what we put on what's called a fume board, and we set that on top of the beehiv,e and it runs the bees out. It's called Bee Go. Smells really bad; I'll let you smell some of it.

0:41:10.7

**AE:** Okay. **[*Laughs*]**.

0:41:12.5

**DS:** Did you ever smell rancid butter?

0:41:13.9

**AE:** Uh-huh. I can imagine what that might be like, yeah.

0:41:18.4

**DS:** You don't want to squirt it up your nose.

0:41:19.7

**AE:** Okay.

0:41:20.3

**DS:** Yuck. Or get it on your clothes—and then we leave to go to the bee yard. Usually everybody knows what to do and they get out and start doing their thing. I usually light the smoker and get the acid boards ready and the fume boards ready. And as I'm getting them ready, they're over there putting them on the bees. And then we get the truck ready and start setting honey on them. And we get—go through that yard and strip it down, bring the honey in, and put it in the honey house; and then I have a crew that starts extracting the honey, and we may go out and get another yard and bring it in. Then at the end of the day, if we need to hurry up and get the combs back on the bees, we take them out and put them back on the bees—even if it's after dark, which has happened many times—and it's just a matter of going out there and picking the lid up and setting the box on top of the beehive and putting the lid back on. And then the next day we go do it all again. And once we get all of our bakery honey extracted and all the combs are empty we go back to all the bee yards and—and start putting all those supers back on the bees. We just stack them all on there and fill them up with tupelo [honey]. And of course we have to drum—put the honey in drums at the end of the day. And now when tupelo is over usually we—we might pull honey for two days and then extract for a day and then pull honey the

next day and next day and part of the next morning and then in the evening, go get honey. We just—we're getting honey and bringing honey in every day until we get it all off.

0:43:18.9

**AE:** So how many days does it take to harvest nine bee yards of tupelo?

0:43:23.9

**DS:** About a week; we can get it all off in a week or less. Spend another week—and-a-half extracting.

0:43:36.8

**AE:** Then you have enough to sell the rest of the year?

0:43:38.1

**DS:** **[*Gestures*]**

0:43:40.2

**AE:** And then you sell it—

0:43:42.2

**DS:** The best year I ever had was I made 100 drums with—with 630 hives. The year before last we had a little over 1,000, and I think we made 50-something; so it was a short flow. This year I had about 550 and produced 52 barrels.

0:44:09.3

**AE:** You sell everything from the little honey bear to like a gallon?

0:44:12.4

**DS:** A 55-gallon drum.

0:44:12.1

**AE:** You sell a 55-gallon drum? And you were telling me outside that you supply the honey to that restaurant in Ashville?

0:44:19.6

**DS:** Yeah, I supply honey to—to Tupelo Cafe in Ashville [North Carolina], and I've been their supplier since the day they opened in 1999, I think.

0:44:33.8

**AE:** How did they find you?

0:44:35.7

**DS:** The Internet—website.

0:44:41.9

**AE:** When did you get the website going?

0:44:45.5

**DS:** Nineteen ninety-nine I think.

0:44:48.9

**AE:** How has that changed your business?

0:44:50.1

**DS:** Well, to start with it didn't change it that much. The first website wasn't that good, so I had a new one done. And that—I started getting more orders almost immediately; but it's changed—it's changed a lot. I'm able to package more honey into smaller containers and sell directly to the consumer. It's made my life a little more busier because it takes a lot of time to package honey and everybody wants raw, unheated, unfiltered honey; and to get that kind of honey the way I do it is I have to strain all the honey. And if you don't heat honey, it takes a long time to strain it because it has little tiny particles of wax on it, and people don't want to see that floating around in their honey. So I strain it. Now if I was to heat it, I could strain it real fast and bottle it real fast. But the way it is, I have to strain while it's at ambient temperature and bottle it at whatever the ambient temperature is.

0:46:08.2

**AE:** So how does the heat change the honey? Just—?

0:46:09.9

**DS:** Heat—if you heat honey, if you get it over say, 98-degrees, it's going to change the—the nature of the honey. First, it's going to destroy the enzymes and minerals in the honey and second, it—it's going to change the color and the flavor of the honey, and I don't want that. People want raw unfiltered honey—as natural as you can get it. The most—the purest most

natural honey you can get is honey that's still in the comb—in the honeycomb. I have some of that, too.

0:46:54.2

**AE:** Do you sell a lot of that?

0:46:54.5

**DS:** No. Quite a bit—quite a bit—it's high-dollar stuff.

0:47:00.2

**AE:** Are there a lot of locals who buy from you or is it mostly—?

0:47:02.6

**DS:** There are a lot of locals and I—I sell to people all over the country, everywhere.

0:47:07.9

**AE:** What's the furthest place you've shipped your honey?

0:47:10.0

**DS:** Germany.

0:47:14.8

**AE:** Do you have a lot of folks coming by from out of town to your place here?

0:47:19.5

**DS:** Yep.

0:47:19.5

**AE:** Checking you out?

0:47:21.1

**DS:** Uh-hm; getting more and more every year—oh yeah, when this book came out, this—me and this lady, Holly Bishop—

0:47:28.2

**AE:** Uh-huh, [Holly Bishop is the author of the book] *Robbing the Bees*?

0:47:30.5

**DS:** Yeah; we worked on this book for three years, and it just came on the market last—in May of last year.

0:47:37.7

**AE:** Yeah; I haven't seen the paperback. I remember when the hardback came out.

0:47:40.1

**DS:** Yeah, yeah; this is the advanced reaeders' copy, here. My hardback I loaned to somebody. Orders started shooting up, you know. That was—that was a good thing.

0:47:53.1

**AE:** So tell me about your relationship with your bees.

0:47:56.6

**DS:** My relationship with my bees. I love my bees. Before I married my wife that I have now I told her—I said, "I'm married to my bees first, and then I'm married to you." The bees are number one. I take care of them, and they take care of me. I love them. I love what I do; I like my work. It's getting harder because I'm getting older. But I still love it.

0:48:25.3

**AE:** Does your wife help you out?

0:48:25.8

**DS:** Yeah; when she can. She's—she's got a real job.

0:48:28.8

**AE:** What does she do, if I may ask?

0:48:29.7

**DS:** She helps me—she'll help label the bottles, she'll help bottle some of the honey, sometimes she'll deliver some honey for me and—but she's a big help, a real big help.

0:48:45.9

**AE:** Have you ever had anybody express an interest in apprenticing with you for learning—?

0:48:49.7

**DS:** What—pardon?

0:48:51.0

**AE:** Apprenticing with you to learn the trade?

0:48:52.1

**DS:** Yeah, yeah; I've apprenticed a couple of people, yeah. There's a young boy right here in town that he started—well he showed an interest in bees quite a few years back. He was about fourteen [years old], and I worked with him quite a bit. As a matter of fact, he's the one that bought half of the—half of my bees last year. He's real good with bees—handles bees really good. As far as whether he's going to make it in the beekeeping business or not, I don't know.

0:49:35.0

**AE:** What do you think it takes to keep a good honey business?


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0:49:40.9

**DS:** A willingness to work, discipline—be very disciplined—a certain amount of toughness, and you've got to—got to love it. If you don't love it, it's not the job for you.

0:49:56.2

**AE:** So how did that—

0:49:56.6

**DS:** Because beekeeping can get painful at times—getting stings. And I get bee stings today; it hurts the same as it did the first day I started the bee business. It still hurts. It just don't swell up. I won't swell—I have an allergic reaction to it.

0:50:17.2

**AE:** Tell me how that transformation happened when you started and you didn't know how to handle bees when you picked them up, and now you have such an appreciation for them.

0:50:27.6

**DS:** Well the—the—the way you learn how to handle them—the way I learned how to handle them was when I started helping a man at Howard's Creek named Broward Mixon—an old man. He needed some help, and I needed to learn, so I got with him, and we just went out there and got in the bees. And I remember the first day down there he opened up a beehive and I—I opened it up. He was standing there holding the smoker. I had a veil on, and I didn't even know how to tie my veil properly. I just had it hanging on my—on my head. And we opened it up and looked in there and he said, "Pull—pull a frame out and see if the queen is laying." So I did, and she's laying. I looked down at the bottom board and I said, "You want me to clean that bottom board off?" He said, "Yeah." I took more frames out, and I started bumping that propolis [bee glue, a resinous substance bees use to construct and maintain their hives] off the bottom board, and the bees just got me on the back of my hand, and they got underneath of my veil and—stinging him and kind of a cool east wind blowing and—those bees were mean. Of course, if he had smoked them a little bit, it might have helped. He just wanted to see what I was made of. And he said, "I think it's a little too cool to mess with these bees today. They're biting us too hard." I said, "Yeah; I think you're right." **[*Laughs*]** But my hand swelled up about twice its normal size and by—anyway, when I went back I—I knew I better tie my veil this time and I—I learned how to handle them by handling them—just by getting in them and—and just doing it—learning how to handle them.

The first year was the hardest. I remember the first—the first—my own bees now, the first time I moved bees at night during a honey flow, that trip from Jacksonville was nothing; that was easy. I had bees sitting out here on the Titi yard; the tupelo was starting to bloom. So I went out here and took the honey off—off the bees and I brought it in, and I went back that night to move the bees. And they were on the trailer. So I hooked my truck to the trailer and drove off,

tied the bees down and drove off, and these bees were strong bees—strong beehives; and I got to where I was going with them and it was pitch black dark. And so I brought a spotlight with me. And I had my wife hold the spotlight, you know, so I could see. She shined that light on that trailer, and you could see—all you could see was bees. My God, there were bees everywhere. That trailer was real rough, and it was a rough road I went down; it was real bumpy and they were—they were mad. And I was smoking them—way over smoking them; the smoke just made them run everywhere. The thing about bees, they won't fly in the dark. They can see in the dark but they won't fly in the dark, but they'll crawl everywhere. And I had bees crawling all over me—up my britches leg, up my shirtsleeve; you could feel them. I had some slits in my veil; you could feel them in there on top of my head. I don't know how I got those bees off of that trailer that night, but I did. And I tell you what, that night, if someone would have said, "You want me to help you with those bees?" I'd have said, "You can have them, if you can get them off the trailer." I'd have gave them away that night. **[*Laughs*]**

0:54:29.0

**AE:** What turned you around the next morning?

0:54:31.5

**DS:** A good night sleep, I guess. But anyway they—they were on that tupelo flow and—and I went back—we went back after the flow was over and took the honey off of them, and that's when I learned what I had read in the book about robbing—how the bees were robbed. When I

was taking that honey off I—I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't cover the honey—the boxes of honey up when I took it off, and some of the boxes were rotten and had holes in them. And I stacked them on that trailer. And I kept wondering why are those bees going in those boxes. We got all the honey off and got it back here—up to the honey house, and when I started taking the boxes of honey off the trailer, they were still full of bees. Where are these bees coming from? I had a little shack I was using for a honey house, and it wasn't been proof—full of cracks and crevices, where you know things could get in. And I swear to God there were more bees in the honey house than there was in the bee yard. And there were so many bees in the honey house hanging on the window, you couldn't see out the window. That's my first year of extracting honey. But I extracted it by myself. Had to wear a veil getting the honey out; but I did it. But anyway, then I went and helped Mr. Broward [Mixon] take his honey off, and he showed me how to do it, so then I learned how to do it. But that never happened again—that's the only time that ever happened.

0:56:18.2

**AE:** Well what do you—

0:56:18.4

**DS:** Now—now when I bring in a load of honey, there might be a handful of bees that you bring in with it. I can move bees now and not even get stung—sometimes. I can work—I can work 100 beehives in the time it took me to work those eight back then. I've learned a lot. It's just

learning—it's just a matter of learning how to handle bees and learning what the nature of bees are and how they react.

0:56:52.5

**AE:** What was it like working on this book [*Robbing the Bees* by Holly Bishop]?

0:56:54.6

**DS:** What was it like? It was interesting. I kind of looked—looked forward to seeing the book completed. What I wanted the book to accomplish, I think it did, and that was to let people know or—or teach people that what honey bees really are and what they're about, and that they're not something to be afraid of and that they're really beneficial. I think that book got that point across very good.

0:57:27.9

**AE:** Well did—how did [the author] Holly Bishop find you?

0:57:30.5

**DS:** I guess she—she found my website, but she emailed—she emailed a lot of beekeepers about, you know, wanting to do this book, and she was looking for someone to help her research. I was the only one that responded to her. I was the only one. **[*Laughs*]**

0:57:51.7

**AE:** So she came down and spent some time working with you?

0:57:55.5

**DS:** Yeah; she came down during the spring buildup and while we were taking honey and extracting honey for three years in a row.

0:58:09.4

**AE:** So what do you think the—

0:58:10.2

**DS:** It was interesting.

0:58:12.3

**AE:** What do you think the future of tupelo honey is?

0:58:13.9

**DS:** The future of tupelo honey looks pretty good. For me and my area—the way development is moving in, I'm probably going to lose some of my locations—my tupelo locations—because of high property value and more and more people moving to the area. And that's what I think is going to happen, as far as my business is concerned.

0:58:55.5

**AE:** Are you going to stay in the business as long as you can?

0:58:58.1

**DS:** Uh-hmm.

0:59:01.1

**AE:** Do you think—are your daughters interested in the business at all?

0:59:03.5

**DS:** No, my youngest daughter is scared of anything that flies or walks or crawls that looks like a bug. My oldest daughter, she was a good help when she was at home. But she's got her own life now. She comes over and keeps my books for me about once every two weeks.

0:59:25.9

**AE:** Is there someone to pass the business onto when you retire or—?

0:59:28.7

**DS:** No, no; I'll have to sell it. I'll have to sell it out.

0:59:34.3

**AE:** Do you think—

0:59:35.9

**DS:** I was hoping my—my nephew—my nephew worked with me for a long time, and he was probably the best—best worker I ever had. He wasn't afraid of anything, and he certainly wasn't afraid of hard work. But I had—he had to go last year. He had—he had drug problems; I couldn't deal with him. He just had to go. I was hoping I could turn it over to him; it's what my plans were. But he had—he had other problems, too, just getting in his way, and he wouldn't work.

1:00:18.5

**AE:** Do you think there—because a lot of the conversations I'm having with folks in Apalachicola is, you know, this—the next generation coming up has a different work ethic and—

1:00:29.2

**DS:** Yeah, they do.

1:00:30.3

**AE:** —and so do you think that there's a younger generation that will carry on beekeeping in this area?

1:00:38.3

**DS:** I doubt it. I doubt it. I was—I was hoping that Ryan—the guy I sold half my bees to—would keep it going; he's young. He's in his early 20s—about 22—23 but I don't know if he will or not. I don't know. It's hard to get these youngsters to work now, I'll tell you. I remember when I was in school there was a lot of beekeepers around here. When it come time to harvest honey, I mean, you couldn't hardly find a boy in school, you know. They were out in the bee yard working for these beekeepers. And it was work, too—for a little bit of pay. Of course we thought

it was a lot of pay back then. But—you get one out there now and he starts sweating—what—what is this? Let me get out of here. They don't want—anything that involves sweat, they don't want to do it.

1:01:49.4

**AE:** Well you said there are about 2,000 people in Wewa[hitchka] now; how many were there around when you were growing up?

1:01:54.1

**DS:** Probably about the same number. **[*Laughs*]** I'm not sure about that; now I'll look it up if you want me to.

1:02:05.5

**AE:** That's okay; no, I can find out on the Internet somewhere, I'm sure. Well do you ever miss oystering?

1:02:13.5

**DS:** I don't miss oystering; I miss being on the water a lot. I like—I like being on the water—on good days.

1:02:26.9

**AE:** But you still go out—

1:02:27.3

**DS:** See the thing about oystering, if you're doing any kind of seafood business that you're—if you're making your living on the water, you're out there on good days and bad days—when it's rough and when it's calm, and when it's hot and when it's cold. If you want to make—make a living, you've got to go and that's the way it was with oystering. I missed very few days of oystering when the [Apalachicola] bay was open. Unless it was just absolutely too rough to go out, I mean—but we'd go—most everybody would; they'd go. It may be blowing 20 knots and we'd go in the wintertime. I've been out there in days like today—a beautiful day and a front come through—a northern—northwestern or a northeastern one and the wind pick up and it may be blowing 25—30 knots and you're out there seven miles offshore on St. Vincent Island. It's going to be a rough ride home. It's not so bad out there on that shallow oyster bar, but when you get off in that deep water, it's going to get nasty. I've run across that bay before when the—the waves would hit my boat and throw all that spray, you know how the boat—the waves throw that spray? I couldn't even see out of my window. I had to follow my compass in, hoping I wouldn't sink. I'd make sure I had a good bilge pump on my boat. Now a lot of guys have sunk down there; just a couple years ago some boys I knew, they were out there and it was a calm day and all the sudden a nor'easter came through and they—they got—they drowned. They sunk. One of

them drowned, and the other one froze to death after he crawled up on St. Vincent Island beach over there about three miles from where he was last seen. That's the way it is.

1:04:52.9

**AE:** Well do you have a favorite thing about keeping bees?

1:04:57.6

**DS:** Yeah; **[*Sighs*]** other than being independent, my favorite—my favorite thing—at least it used to be—was watching the—the beehives grow and in the springtime watch the brood nest expand and the population increase; the bees were working really hard. The Queens—beautiful Queens laying lots of eggs every day; those are my favorite things. As far as beekeeping goes that—that is my favorite thing—in the spring of the year when I'm going through all the brood nests and—and the bees.

1:05:51.3

**AE:** How about a least favorite thing, is there one?

1:05:53.1

**DS:** Working in the honey house extracting the honey. That's why I always try to have somebody else in there besides me.

1:06:07.2

**AE:** Well is there anything I haven't asked you about what you do and have done that you'd like to add?

1:06:15.0

**DS:** I like to fish. **[*Laughs*]** I used to go fly-fishing every day in the summertime right down here—Chipola River and up until—up until 1994 I did—I fished quite a bit. I haven't been—I've been fly fishing one time since 1994. I lost interest in it; I got into offshore fishing for a little while. You know, deep-sea fishing. But—

1:06:53.3

**AE:** What kind of fish were you catching over here in the river?

1:06:56.6

**DS:** Brim, perch, speckled perch, brim, bass—

1:07:05.6

**AE:** And you just got too busy to keep doing it?

1:07:06.5

**DS:** Yeah; well it just—still a lot of that gets old, you know. If I never catch another fish the rest of my life, I've caught my share. You know I've caught a lot of fish. I got two fly rods laying on the back porch I bought brand new. Used them one time; I just got them out the other day and cleaned them up and put new line on them. I thought I'd use them again. I cleaned them up and put new line on them, and they're still using there on the back porch.

1:07:34.8

**AE:** Well one day they're ready for you.

1:07:36.0

**DS:** Yeah.

1:07:37.0

**AE:** Have you traveled much and had time with family?

1:07:39.1

**DS:** Yeah; since—since me and my second wife got married in 1999, yeah we've traveled quite a bit. We've traveled to Nevada three—two—yeah three times, Reno and Las Vegas and Colorado and North Carolina, California, Hawaii; we're going back to Hawaii in January. Alaska, we went to Alaska two years ago. We'd like to go back—probably will next year—and plan on doing a lot more traveling.

1:08:27.7

**AE:** Do you miss this place when you're gone from it?

1:08:31.6

**DS:** Not really. As long as all my work is caught up and I got nothing to worry about, then it don't bother me.

1:08:41.5

**AE:** What about growing up with the [Apalachicola] bay in your front yard and rivers in your side yard and—?

1:08:46.4

**DS:** I'll never leave it. I've never been anywhere I'd give up this place—this part of Florida for—never. And there's a lot of beautiful places here in this country. I like to go see those other places, but this is where I'm going to stay, right here. I may build another house but—but I'm going to stay in this area.

1:09:10.6

**AE:** Well all right; well I appreciate your time, sir. Thank you so much.

1:09:13.2

**DS:** Was I any help?

1:09:14.9

**AE:** Yeah, definitely.

1:09:15.9

**DS:** Okay.

1:09:17.2

**AE:** And now, if I may, I'd like to see your honey house.

1:09:19.0

**DS:** Okay. Yeah, sure. No problem. You want some more coffee?

1:09:21.8

**AE:** No, I'm—

1:09:22.0

**[End Donald Smiley-1]**

**[Begin Donald Smiley-2]**

0:00:00.0

[*The interviewer and Mr. Smiley are now outside, walking the area in the side yard of his home, where he has his honey house, a small workshop, and a small bee yard*.]

**DS:** [*Recording begins with Mr. Smiley mid-sentence*] Uncap—uncap honey by hand.

0:00:05.2

**AE:** You used to extract honey by hand, and now you're getting a new system. What's that?

0:00:08.1

**DS:** Yeah, well, I upgraded to—I started with 133-frame extractor and then I—I grew to a 233-frame extractor, and you will see what those are out there. I'll show them to you. And then I graduated up to 272 frame extractors and an automatic uncapper, which is a machine that takes capping off the comb, where we used to do it by hand. Now I'm getting one that takes the combs out of the boxes—takes the whole box of the combs out of the boxes, loads them into the uncapper and runs them through the uncapper and loads them into the extractor. The extractor comes on and runs through its cycle, and then it unloads itself, and the only thing I'll have to do is just put the frames back in the box. And when we walk out there you'll see what an improvement that's going to be.

0:01:08.0

**AE:** All right; so I was asking another fellow about the color of his bee boxes. Do you just accumulate boxes from different places and—?

0:01:16.9

**DS:** Yeah, I've bought a lot of used equipment—bought other people out. Most of my boxes are new that I have built myself. I have some new boxes that are factory-made. I started out with all used equipment.

0:01:38.6

**AE:** This is beautiful. [*Speaking about the outdoor buildings*]

0:01:40.3

**DS:** Now when I put stuff into use, it's usually— **[*Wind Blowing*]**

[*Sound of screen door creaking open*]

0:01:54.1

[*Walking into honey house*]

**AE:** It smells good in here. **[*Laughs*]**

0:01:56.6

**DS:** That's that beeswax back there that you smell back there. Everything is kind of in disarray right now because we're not using it. That's my bottling tank there; that's one of my tupelo honey—this is beeswax right here. That's what you smell, beeswax.

0:02:17.5

**AE:** It smells so sweet.

0:02:19.3

**DS:** Uh-hmm, see that—all that light colored wax like this?

0:02:22.7

**AE:** Yes, sir.

0:02:23.1

**DS:** That comes from the cappings from the tupelo combs; this darker stuff came off of the bakery honey.

0:02:33.0

**AE:** So is it graded as such or does just—just beeswax is beeswax?

0:02:35.1

**DS:** No, I get—I get the same price for all of the—the lighter color, usually the better—the better grade it is, but it's all good wax.

0:02:45.1

**AE:** Whom do you sell it to?

0:02:46.8

**DS:** I—I bank it at Dadant's; they're a bee supply company.

0:02:54.3

**AE:** Okay.

0:02:56.4

**DS:** And usually I just trade it in for more supplies, and they give me whatever the market price is on wax towards my supplies. And then they charge me a little make-up fee. But this here, I

don't need very many supplies on this. I'm going to take it over here and drop it off. What we call banking. And if I never need anything, I just call them and say send me whatever, and they deduct it from the wax.

0:03:21.5

**AE:** I see. And then do they make stuff with it, or do they sell it to people who make stuff with it?

0:03:27.4

**DS:** Well, they sell it to other manufacturers, and it's made into candles, or it's made into shoe polishes or furniture polishes and cosmetics. And there might be some in that lipstick you use. Caterpillar Company, they use it to waterproof all their machine parts. They liquefy it and spray it on. You know, like the crankshafts and valves and heads and cylinder blocks. It's all got a coat of beeswax on it.

0:03:58.2

**AE:** Hmm.

0:03:58.5

**DS:** That's a nice camera.

0:03:59.4

**AE:** Thank you.

0:04:00.6

**DS:** I need to get me one like that.

0:04:02.9

**AE:** I've spoiled myself with digital. **[*Laughs*]** It's easy to use.

0:04:06.2

**DS:** Yeah, I got one but I don't use it. This is one of my extractors right here—72 frames. Got enough light?

0:04:18.3

**AE:** Well, with the flash I do. Let me—if you wouldn't mind holding that open for a second.

0:04:29.2

**DS:** This is the uncapper.

0:04:33.0

**AE:** Okay.

0:04:33.6

**DS:** These are flail chains. What I like about this—it doesn't use any heat; no heat ever touches the honey. It's noisy—it's—it's noisy, but it's fast. And the only other thing I don't like about it is these chains make a lot of little tiny pieces of wax that has to be strained out of the honey. I don't like that. It takes forever for honey to settle with that stuff in there because, you know, honey is a thick dry liquid. But it's fast.

0:05:03.9

**AE:** So on this conveyor—where does this end up when it comes down the line?

0:05:07.3

**DS:** All right, this—this is usually sitting right here—.

0:05:09.5

**AE:** Over this hole in the ground, okay.

0:05:11.7

**DS:** No, right here. The sump tank goes in there. I've got a stainless sump tank that goes in there. And underneath this thing is an uncapping tank that catches all the wax cappings. Okay, the person at that end lays the frame of honey up there, and the conveyor belt takes it through those flail chains, and they're spinning around real fast and knocks the cappings off. And got another person standing over here and what they do is—the pick that up **[*Loud Noise*]**—the extractor with the lids propped open. And they get it full, reach over there and turn it on, go around the other side and load that—do the same thing; get it loaded, turn it on and come back around here to this one ready to unload—to unload it, refill it, and go back to that one. It's back and forth all day long.

0:06:05.0

**AE:** How many frames does one of these extractors do?

0:06:07.6

**DS:** Seventy-two.

0:06:07.9

**AE:** And then how quickly will it extract all the honey?

0:06:10.9

**DS:** It takes about fifteen minutes for one of these to go through a cycle. The new one I'm going to get is a smaller extractor—it's only a sixty-frame, but it will do what both of these in the same amount of time. And the extractor is—will be self-loading and self-unloading.

0:06:34.1

**AE:** So right now with these how does the honey get from the extractor to your filler?

0:06:39.4

**DS:** Oh, okay. The—the honey drains into the sump tank that goes in that hole there. When it gets full the pump switch is on; I've got an automatic switch on the pump. It pumps the honey over in that settling tank which holds nine barrels—nine 55-gallon barrels of honey—and there it's left to—to settle out. You get wax sometimes that will float up. And there's three sections. Most of the wax stays on one end; the honey at the other end comes out reasonably clean of wax.

From there it goes in the 55-gallon drums. From there it goes through that bottling tank and then from there into our individual containers—little honey bears, eight ounce bottles, gallons, five gallon buckets, whatever. What do you think? We can bottle about—well in the summertime we can get about two barrels a day strained and bottled.

0:07:46.4

**AE:** That bench looks like a hard bench to sit on and bottle all day. **[*Laughs*]**

0:07:49.3

**DS:** It is. We usually have a chair in there—a soft chair.

0:07:55.5

**AE:** How long have you had this building that this stuff has been housed in?

0:07:58.4

**DS:** Since 1999, I think. Yeah, '99.

0:08:09.9

**AE:** What is this right here?

0:08:11.7

**DS:** Well, that's a hive elevator. What we have—our honey is on little pallets we can roll around with the hand truck and we roll them up here. And—and they fit right on these things, and this keeps that stack of boxes at waste level so you don't have to bend over; you can work from the same height all the time. You get one box empty and take it off. It raises up—back up here. It keeps from having to bend over. The humidifier is running in here 24 [hours], 7 [days a week] to keep the air dry. We're bringing our first loads, and we'll have honey from that wall all the way back to that wall [about forty feet in length], and then I've got another storage room over there in that other building, and we'll fill that full of honey.

0:09:07.9

**AE:** What is that like—40-feet long or something like that?

0:09:09.0

**DS:** About that—yeah, yeah.

0:09:12.0

**AE:** And so what would happen if it were humid in here? Would it just be too sticky to work, I guess.

0:09:16.5

**DS:** No. No, honey—honey is a dry liquid. It absorbs moisture. It's the way—at night we close the building up and run the humidifiers and fans to keep the moisture—moisture down. It wouldn't—and the honey to get over seventy-and-a-half percent; eighteen—eighteen percent is a good, safe level but you don't want to get over that. The honey will ferment. The less moisture there is, the thicker the honey is.

0:09:52.7

**AE:** Do you know anybody here in Wewa[hitchka] who makes a honey mead [or wine]?

0:09:58.6

**DS:** Uh-um, I've been wanting to do it. I've got customers that make it—a lot of it, and I've had some of it.

0:10:06.2

**AE:** They'll buy your honey to make it with?

0:10:07.4

**DS:** Uh-hmm. Most of the mead makers are in California. I'm serious. The people that buy honey from me to make mead, most of them are in California. And a few in Alaska.

0:10:19.8

**AE:** How do you explain that?

0:10:20.4

**DS:** I don't know. I guess they like honey wine.

0:10:26.3

**AE:** So you think you will start making it or—?

0:10:29.0

**DS:** Probably one day when I get old and can't do nothing else. Yeah, this—this place is all kinds of disarray right now. It's not set up—.

0:10:41.4

**AE:** I understand. It's not your high season.

0:10:45.8

**DS:** Yeah, when they're not being used.

0:10:49.0

**AE:** Okay, [we're looking at the] comb storage room.

0:10:50.0

**DS:** Yeah, I'll open it up in a second and let you see it.

0:10:52.4

**AE:** Okay.

0:10:52.7

**DS:** But when—when we're not storing combs in there, we're bringing honey in; and when we run out of room in there, I start bringing them in here. And I've got dehumidifiers and fans in here too to keep the honey dry and the air circulated and—and to keep the air dry. And also I have—when we store our combs in here, the room has to be fumigated to keep the moths out. That wax moth will get in their comb and destroy the comb. So we have—have to take care of the comb. It's too cold out now to worry about that. See if I can open it up here a little bit.

0:11:40.2

**AE:** Oh, wow. That's a lot of bee boxes.

0:11:45.4

**DS:** We'll have this much honey in here, too.

0:11:56.1

**AE:** Okay.

0:11:57.8

**DS:** You didn't even notice that one sitting right there did you?

0:11:59.5

**AE:** No, sir.

0:12:00.2

**DS:** That's a live beehive.

0:12:01.9

**AE:** Okay. No, I don't—I would never have known. **[*Laughs*]**

0:12:06.6

**DS:** Let's walk over here; they're not very active today. It's too cold.

0:12:12.8

**AE:** Yeah?

0:12:12.7

**DS:** They're huddled up in their house. These are some I just sat out here last week. These all came out of Georgia. Farmers love to have bees around.

0:12:32.6

**AE:** What were they doing in Georgia? You just bought them out there or they were—they were stationed out there?

0:12:36.4

**DS:** No, I brought—just some that I brought up here after the tupelo flow last year. They've been up there all summer. And they make—they work the cotton fields and do some pollinating on some watermelons, cornfields. See with all that farming going on up there, there's something for them to feed on all year. These are flying. I'll be darned. And I think I just saw one with some pollen on his legs. Yeah. I'll be darned. They're getting pollen! Watch when one of them flies in. Look on his back legs. All right, come on, get in there. **[*Bees Buzzing*]** See it? See that pollen? See right there?

0:13:31.9

**AE:** Oh, yeah.

0:13:32.3

**DS:** Here's one right here. I'll be dog-gone.

0:13:36.0

**AE:** Yeah.

0:13:37.0

**DS:** Don't tell me maple is blooming already. It's too early. [To the bee] Go on in your house.

0:13:47.9

**AE:** What is that Titi tree like?

0:13:52.1

**DS:** It's a native tree; I don't have anything right here I can show you, but it grows—it usually grows in low—low wetland areas. It will be real thick; it's kind of a scrubby tree with a lot of limbs on it and has a white bloom, a white flower. Usually in February you can see it blooming and it will be all white. When it's in full bloom, you look at it across there and you see a bunch of white blooms; that's what it is—Titi. Y'all got Titi in Mississippi.

0:14:30.6

**AE:** I never heard of it before.

0:14:31.6

**DS:** All over the Southeast.

0:14:33.8

**AE:** Does it have another name?

0:14:34.9

**DS:** No. Titi—well, it's probably got a scientific name, but I don't know what it is.

0:14:41.0

**AE:** Right.

0:14:41.5

**DS:** Step over this way. Fire away.

0:14:43.5

**AE:** All right. Tell me about building these bee boxes.

0:14:47.0

**DS:** Bee boxes?

0:14:47.5

**AE:** Uh-huh your little workshop here.

0:14:50.9

**DS:** Okay, well these boxes you see right here I'm putting together now, they're all factory made. They're already pre-cut—everything. What we—what we've been doing for the last three years is I've been buying the lumber and building my own boxes and cutting them out and cutting the dados [rectangular grooves cut into a board so that a like piece may be fitted into it] in them. And I got the saws and all the blades that I need to do that. Here's one that I built right here last year, see. And it's just like a factory box. It's built different from those. These—these are—these have a cut all around them—the front and the back of it, which is the kind of box I like. And I don't like these kinds.

0:15:31.0

**AE:** Why not?

0:15:31.7

**DS:** They're too hard—they're too hard to put together. I just don't like them.

0:15:34.4

**AE:** How about the handles? I'm seeing like three or four different styles.

0:15:37.1

**DS:** Handles—well that handle there is just a dado cut handle. We do that on the table saw. And they work real good. I got—I got two dollars and forty-three cents in that box right there, I think. If I go buy that box—that same identical box from the factory that box would cost me over eight dollars, and I still have to put it together.

0:16:08.9

**AE:** Now how about the frames? Do you—?

0:16:10.0

**DS:** The frames are all factory frames. I buy those from the wholesale house.

0:16:14.8

**AE:** Do you recycle them like that stack that's over there?

0:16:17.9

**DS:** Those are some broken combs where the frames broke when they went through the uncapper, and I'll just repair them and put them back into use. Old frames—very seldom I ever use them; it takes too much time to clean them up. Now these—these are all frames with comb in them. I can—I can repair that and—and use it—keep using it. See, this is a brand new one that was just put in service last year. See that end just broke off? All I need to do is just nail it back together and use it again. That's a brand new comb.

0:16:59.0

**AE:** Now what about—?

0:16:59.2

**DS:** As far as just—just the frame, sometimes we get frames—my beehive will die, and it will get wax moth damage—wax worm damage—and it will destroy the comb, but the frame is still good. I don't—I don't worry with the frame; I just throw them away and burn them. I don't have time to clean them up; it takes too much time.

0:17:19.0

**AE:** Did I see in a box over there some plastic frames, or is that something else?

0:17:24.6

**DS:** Yeah, those are plastic one-piece frames, yeah.

0:17:26.9

**AE:** Do you use many of those?

0:17:29.2

**DS:** If I don't. Not if I don't have to.

0:17:32.5

**AE:** Why would you use a plastic one? Just so you can clean it?

0:17:35.8

**DS:** No, I don't—that's plastic there. That's called a one-piece frame; they work okay. I don't particularly like them. I like the wood frames with the plastic inserts better. It's just my preference. The only reason I have these is they were with some equipment that I bought; that's the only reason I have them.

0:17:59.8

**AE:** All right; now how about those two upside down jars over there?

0:18:04.9

**DS:** Well that is—that's some corn syrup, which is what I feed the bees to get them through the winter. And what that did—that's some syrup I had in the jar and the weather turned cold and the syrup crystallized. **[*Bees Buzzing*]** That's crystallized corn syrup, and I set them out here in the sun, hoping they would re-liquefy and melt a little bit and the bees could feed on them a little bit, but I really need to dump the stuff out up here and let my bees eat it. That's what that is.

0:18:48.7

**AE:** All right.

0:18:51.4

**DS:** Yeah, syrup—that's what we feed the bees in the fall of the year—high fructose corn syrup. Back a tanker truck in here and pump it into 55-gallon barrels.

0:19:07.1

**AE:** And now I don't believe I've ever really seen much honey. Could I see some honey?

0:19:10.0

**DS:** You want to see some honey?

0:19:10.8

**AE:** Yes, please, sir.

0:19:11.3

**DS:** I'll start—let's start with the big—big honey—honey containers. There they are sitting over here. Watch your step. All those [55-gallon] barrels are full of honey.

0:19:23.9

**AE:** My land.

0:19:24.7

**DS:** Let me show you; this is baking honey over here on this side. From here back, straight behind, and here over there's tupelo honey.

0:19:38.1

**AE:** Like half-and-half, basically, you have?

0:19:38.6

**DS:** Yeah, it's about 32 barrels of bakery honey left. I haven't even tried to sell that. The price is too low on it. And this is all the tupelo that I have left. It's like—let's see; there's—one, two, three, four—there's 12, 15, 18 and 21, 23, 25, 26 is that all I got left—26 barrels and there's two in there—that's 28 barrels out of—so—I had 102 barrels, and that's all I've got left.

0:20:19.9

**AE:** Do you have a schedule of bottling it or just whenever you need it, you just go to a barrel?

0:20:26.0

**DS:** No, I try to keep it—keep a lot of it packaged and ready to go. Getting—my packaged stock is getting a little low, so we're going to bottle some more this week.

0:20:37.7

**AE:** Can you tell me why the barrels say *China*?

0:20:40.0

**DS:** I sure can. Because those barrels came over here with Chinese honey in them. Probably the worst honey in the world comes from China, and I'm not saying that just to be saying it; it's true. That's the awful(est), stink(enist) honey I've ever been around in my life. And when that stuff comes over here it—it stinks; it's—it's not a good grade of honey at all. It comes over here because it's cheap, and they just dump it on our market and—and flood the market with it, and that's why I haven't sold my baking honey there yet. I'm not—I'm not going to give it away; I can't sell it for less than what it cost me to make it. I can't stay in business that way.

0:21:27.2

**AE:** Are there some producers who mix honeys to get more—?

0:21:29.1

**DS:** Oh, all of them do—no, not producers, packagers; a lot of your packagers will blend honeys—take this Chinese honey and blend it with some nice clover honey from the Midwest, or they'll take some tupelo and blend it with some clover honey, or they may even blend it with some Chinese honey to make—make it taste better, to lighten the color; there's all kinds of things you can do with honey.

0:21:56.4

**AE:** So what about the price of honey? Because you can't have honey unless you have people to work the bees? So it seems like with that really—.

0:22:05.7

**DS:** Tupelo honey has always commanded a high price because it's top grade; it is the top grade of honey in the—in the country right now—is tupelo and then your sour woods [?] and your sage honey from California. Those are your top grade honeys. Tupelo—tupelo is favored for its flavor and its long shelf life, which we don't crystallized—don't crystallized. Some diabetics can eat it.


Transcript provided by:
Shelley M. Chance t/a Pro.Docs
www.prodocservices.com

0:22:34.5

**AE:** So are there honey connoisseurs out there who—?

0:22:38.7

**DS:** A lot of them. Yeah, there is. **[*Laughs*]** You'd be surprised.

0:22:44.2

**AE:** Yeah, all right.

0:22:43.4

**DS:** Honey—honey is *the* health food to eat right now for some reason. I mean people tell me honey—honey is the in—the in thing right now. That's—that's the thing to eat. I'm serious. That's what I've been told. **[*Laughs*]** I'm not making it up. I had a lady tell me that just the other day.

0:23:08.2

**AE:** Well no, a lot of folks—

0:23:08.2

**DS:** Yeah; honey is—honey is a healthy product, too. It's clean and it's pure. It's healthy, and it's got vitamins and nutrients in it, and it's fat-free, and it tastes good. And anything you can—you can use sugar for you can substitute honey for—any bake—anything you cook or bake that calls for sugar, you can substitute honey. You just have to cut back on the amount of liquid you use in the recipe. Honey is a sweet—it's a preservative, and it's not refined like white sugar is, which is not a good thing to eat. Your body has to work too hard to process it; honey—honey doesn't have to be processed. It just goes right into your—your bloodstream.

0:23:57.6

**AE:** How much honey do you think you eat? Do you and your wife cook and bake with honey?

0:23:58.8

**DS:** Yeah, I eat honey almost every day—just about every day. I probably consume two or three gallons a year just myself. I put it on cereal, use it in—put it on ice-cream; I like pizza on my—I mean, honey on my pizza. Or just honey but itself—honey and peanut butter, honey and butter, put honey in my tea, my fruit smoothies that I make. **[*Wind Blowing*]** My wife has got some cookie recipes she makes with honey and some other things that she likes—some kind of glaze for ham and me, I—I mix it with barbecue sauce, yeah.


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0:24:57.7

**AE:** You ever put thought to doing a honey cookbook?

0:25:00.6

**DS:** **[*Wind Blowing*]** There's a lot of them; I don't have any of them—very many of my own. But you know what I do like to do ism when I grill fish—grill grouper, put the grouper on the grill, and just before I get ready to take it off, I let the grill flame up and drizzle a little honey on one side of the fish and let the flame sear it. **[*Wind Blowing*]**

0:25:36.1

**AE:** All right. Thank you again.

0:25:38.2

**DS:** Oh, yeah. Here's another good one. Here's a remedy for you.

0:25:40.8

**AE:** Okay.

0:25:43.0

**DS:** Two tablespoons of vinegar, one tablespoon of honey, and a glass of water. Use that; drink it—makes a pretty good drink. Besides that it's good for arthritis. I'm serious.

0:25:58.5

**AE:** What about the bees themselves being good for arthritis—the stings?

0:26:01.6

**DS:** Well they say they are. Some people swear by it. My own personal experience, I can't tell.

0:26:14.0

**AE:** Well it sounds like the drink is easier than the stinging, anyway. **[*Laughs*]**

0:26:15.0

**DS:** And it's less painful.

0:26:20.2

**AE:** You have an honor box for your honey here in front of your house?

0:26:23.1

**DS:** Yeah; I just put that out there a couple months ago because I'm not here a lot of the time and I—I was missing a lot of customers from not being here, so I put this up here and people come up here and make their selection and drop the money in the box there, and it's worked pretty well. Although I just noticed yesterday I've got some jars missing, and there's no money in the box.

0:26:50.1

**AE:** Uh-oh.

0:26:50.8

**DS:** But most people are honest, so I'm not going to worry about a few missing jars of honey.

0:26:56.0

**[End Donald Smiley-2]**

**[END]**