

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

William C. Stewart

Interviewers: Barbara Hester and Louis Kyriakoudes

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*An Oral History with William C. Stewart, Volume 1043*

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## Biography

William C. Stewart was born on February 11, 1963, at Gulfport Memorial Hospital, Harrison County, Mississippi, to Mr. William Stewart (born in 1933, in Woolmarket, Mississippi) and Mrs. Barbara B. Stewart (born in 1940, in New Orleans, Louisiana). His father was an attorney and a judge in Gulfport, Mississippi. His father's family were schooner captains, loggers, and shrimpers. His mother was a homemaker, who worked as William Colmer's secretary and as a medical administrator. His mother's father was in the shipping business. Stewart is the oldest of three children.

Stewart attended East Ward Elementary School, Gulfport High School, and St. Stanislaus College. In 1987, he earned his BS in English from The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He worked as a commercial salvage diver in the Gulf of Mexico. He has fished commercially from an early age in shrimp trawling, crab fishing, and commercial gillnet finfishing. He had a sixty-two-foot trawl boat the *Gulf Prince*, a forty-two-foot trawl boat, the *Naomi Charles*, and several smaller gillnet skiffs. He also works at salvage wrecking, Bob Cat work, welding, bucket truck work, dozer/trackhoe work, slab removal, land clearing, and tree work.

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AN ORAL HISTORY  
with  
WILLIAM C. STEWART

*This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with William C. Stewart and is taking place on September 9, 2011. The interviewers are Louis Kyriakoudes and Barbara Hester.*

**Kyriakoudes:** (A portion of the audio regarding setting up the recorder has not been transcribed.) This is Louis Kyriakoudes with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at The University of Southern Mississippi, and it is Friday, September 9, 2011, and it's about 1:15 in the afternoon. We're here at the Gulf Park College Library, and we're with Billy Stewart, a commercial fisherman here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. And we're going to talk to Mr. Stewart about his career and his experiences as a commercial fisherman here. To get us started, Mr. Stewart, first I want to thank you for taking the time out from your day to share your stories and your knowledge with us. I'm very grateful for that. Secondly, let's start off by just having you state your full name and your address for the record.

**Stewart:** My full name is William C. Stewart. I live at (the address of the interviewee has not been transcribed in order to protect his privacy). I've been a lifelong resident of Harrison County in Gulfport, Mississippi. I'm a ninth-generation commercial fisherman, Harrison County.

**Kyriakoudes:** Well, let's just go ahead and start talking about your youth and how you learned to fish and how you learned to become a commercial fishermen, how you learned the business. When did you first learn to fish, and who taught you?  
(0:01:52.9)

**Stewart:** Approximately four or five years old. My father was a avid sports fisherman. He never sold a fish in his life. He was committed to going out and preserving the ecosystems and fishing in the Chandeleur Islands and Ship Island and the Mississippi barrier islands of Gulf Islands National Seashores. We fished Louisiana marsh and as far as Dauphin Island, Alabama. And he was just an avid fisherman. He was a lawyer by trade, and then I was raised going fishing every weekend for fifteen years.

**Kyriakoudes:** And just for the record, your dad's name?

**Stewart:** William L. Stewart. He's deceased. And he was a chancery judge in Harrison County for about thirty years.

**Kyriakoudes:** When you'd go out as a kid, what would you fish for, what species? (0:02:46.6) What was—

**Stewart:** Redfish, speckled trout, flounders, mullet, ground mullet, whiting, that's the main species. We were inshore fishermen basically. We fished around the barrier islands, and occasionally we'd go to the oil rigs and catch snapper and stuff like that.

**Kyriakoudes:** What was the fishing like then? I mean, in terms of your sense of the number of fish and (inaudible).

**Stewart:** It was very prolific. They was a lot of fish, but I've never really seen a big decline in fish, if you knew how to pursue the right fish. Not everybody caught fish back then, and not everybody catches fish, now. If you knew you had the skill, and you were able to read the issues that the good Lord put in front of you, the wind blowing certain directions, looking for bait fish, learning where the tides flowed and where animals like to hang out and hide, then you can go and find the fish and go catch them.

**Kyriakoudes:** What kind of boat did your dad have? (0:03:55.7)

**Stewart:** He had a twenty-four-foot Continental, and with a two-hundred-horse motor. It was strictly made for sport fishing, and it was good for going to the islands. It'd run fast and take to waters good. When we mainly fished Chandeleur, and that was usually about a twenty-four-mile run to the light, and then if we went as far as Curlew or Grand Gossier or Breton Island's about ninety miles down there, so we fished the island chains.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. That's great. When did you make the transition into commercial fishing? (0:04:26.6) How did you learn? Who taught you that business? How'd you get involved in it?

**Stewart:** When I was fifteen, I started doing it on my own. I got a gillnet from a shrimper friend of mine, and I started gillnetting off of Bayou Caddy in a fourteen-foot skiff, and I needed to make some money, and I was going to high school, and there wasn't any way to make money on land too much besides cutting grass and working hard, and I did that, too. But I also, I went to the ocean, and I started pursuing some of the farming of the sea, the gifts of God that he gives to us. And I trained myself from there on. I also met some men when I was about twenty, out of Marathon, Florida, and they were commercial fishermen, and they were top-of-the-line commercial fishermen that they had caught kingfish, fifty-thousand-pound-plus quantities a day. And one gentleman that I worked with, name was Peewee Wilson, Alfred Wilson, out of Gulfport, Mississippi; he was registered as a fishermen and caught one million dollars worth of fish in one week in Marathon, Florida, in the newspaper. The articles can be brought forward. And at some point the federal government outlawed (0:05:49.0) commercial fishing in the Keys because they said that they were taking too

many. So that's the way that went. That fishery was basically shut down. [They let the Cubans and the Japanese get them.]

**Kyriakoudes:** So I mean, these guys had, I mean, to catch that amount of fish, what kind of boat, what kind of equipment were they using? (0:06:06.2)

**Stewart:** Fifty-foot boats with turbodiesels and stuff, but we never fished anything like that in the state of Mississippi. You can make a good living with a twenty-four-foot skiff. And that's what I fished. Predominantly that's what my fishing gillnet boat was, twenty-four foot. Once I got established and paid for it and got up, I fished fourteen-foot skiffs to a eighteen-foot skiff and just worked my way up.

**Kyriakoudes:** Interesting. That's interesting. Tell me when you were just starting out, for example when you were a teenager in high school or in your early twenties, starting out on your own as a commercial fisherman, just take us through how a typical day went for fishing. (0:06:49.2) I mean, what time did you start? How long did it take you to get out to where you were fishing? What equipment did you use? You mentioned gillnetting. What were you hoping to catch? Just take us through a—

**Stewart:** Basically when I got serious with it was when I was about eighteen, twenty years old, and I was in college. I had a eighteen-foot Bosarge skiff that was built in Alabama with a forty-horse motor. I'd run to Cat Island or L'Isle a Pete in the Louisiana marsh, and I'd set my nets around shell banks, following tide ebbs that were coming out of lakes, and I'd catch speckled trout, redfish, flounders, ground mullet, and regular mullet. And I would work till I had a load. Basically you work all night long, and if you didn't want to see anybody to find your fishing holes, you left at night; you finished at night. You worked all night, or you worked all day. If it was a situation where the fish run in the daytime, where the tides were right at the daytime. You had to work the tides. You had to work the high tide and the fall. And basically that's when you catch the most.

**Kyriakoudes:** Would you go out by yourself? Did you have a partner?

**Stewart:** I worked by myself. When I got out of college, the first night I went out, I made six hundred and fifty bucks, and I never looked back.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. When you'd come in with your catch, where would you sell it? Who'd you sell it to? (0:08:16.1)

**Stewart:** I worked out of Gulfport, and I sold to Gulfport Purchasing, a man named Joel Waltman. He was a buyer, and he bought all our fish; had a good market for it. We caught black drum, sheepshead, puppy drum, speckled trout, redfish, and everything else, and he would sell it to New Orleans or truck it out of here. And we supplied all the local restaurants. Vrazel's bought a lot of fish from us and Little Ray's and all these other restaurants would buy fish from us and stuff like that. But the Gulfport Harbor has since been diminished and taken away from the commercial



fishermen, unrightly so, in my belief, that we have a lease to it. Port of Gulfport, state of Mississippi (0:09:08.5) doesn't believe that we have the rights to it, and our logistics with the deep-water harbor have been taken away from us so we can't, we don't have the competition in Gulfport anymore. And they're putting us all in one place in Pass Christian and Biloxi. They're trying to pack everybody together.

**Kyriakoudes:** Tell me about that, so that future people listening to this interview can know. Tell us about the Gulfport Harbor and why that situation—

**Stewart:** Well, after Hurricane Katrina (0:09:39.1) they had perfect pilings. There was nothing wrong with the piers except a few boards needed to be renailed, and they decided to pull up all the pilings that they just put in about two years before. W.C. Fore put them in, and they hired a company; I think it was Matthews Marine picked them up and pulled them out, and I think, if I'm not mistaken, they got them and took them and disposed of them, either sold them or got rid of them, perfect, good pilings, sixty feet long. And FEMA (0:10:09.0) money paid for it. And they never replaced our harbor. We had an ice house. We had a fuel dock that was dedicated to us that was put there for us and was to be maintained by the casinos. They also had a contract for that. We also have a lease from back in the [19]30s from the [Illinois Central] Railroad Company that gave us that harbor for commercial fishing uses only. And this has all been verified, and we had an attorney approach the port, and the port said they wasn't going to budge, and they wasn't going to give us anything. And the attorney for them was Ben Stone, (0:10:50.3) and he denied any usage of it as a commercial harbor and us having any rights to it. And basically they gave it to the casino because [the casino has its] own private piers in there with a couple of little boats. That's the gist of that. They busted up our interstate commerce. They busted up an easy place to unload, and they got rid of our production. And they took away all the competition that was here. And then they cut back on our competition level because now you have less buyers, and they have more control over the products [as they truck fish in from other states where gillnetting is legal, like North Carolina and Alabama].

**Kyriakoudes:** So you don't get as good a price. And Pass Christian is not a viable [commercial port]? Explain why.

**Stewart:** Pass Christian's off the beaten path, and people just aren't aware of it. When they come down Highway 49, all the truckers and all the people from out of state used to see us over there readily, and [with] easy access, and we had one large retail market. The price of shrimp dropped so low (0:11:55.2) that if you can't retail it now, you can't afford to stay in the business. And I'm not the only one having this problem. You can ask any commercial fisherman on the Gulf of Mexico. The same product: they're paying a dollar a pound for what they used to pay two dollars a pound, and the diesel's three dollars and forty cents, and it used to be eighty-eight cents. So it's a no-brainer. And then we lost our retail where we can make an extra buck, and we didn't have to take that stupid price over there at the processor. But now, your options are limited. Now, you have to peddle everything, and if they're not big shrimp, [there is no] good price on small shrimp, so it's hard to make a living.

That's shrimp. You can make a killing off of fish. Any kind of fish you catch, you can sell it. It's a high price. It's demanded, but the state of Mississippi has outlawed (0:12:50.3) commercial fishing with gillnets and will not let you use plastic. Shrimpers use plastic trawls. Crabbers use plastic-coated wire. Pogy boats use plastic. Sports fishermen use monofilament plastic line, but the commercial fisherman with a gillnet has been discriminated against. They also allow freshwater gillnetters in the state of Mississippi to use monofilament gillnets. The saltwater version, which is what was on the Coast, has been discriminated against since 1997.

**Kyriakoudes:** We were talking about that before the interview started, and so let's go back. For future listeners why don't you explain exactly how you would employ a gillnet, (0:13:38.2) the kind of equipment you would use when you were allowed to use it before these changes came in. And then just take us through that period in the 1990s when they moved against gillnets.

**Stewart:** When fishing was prosperous [and feeding the local population with fresh fish was legal].

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. Just tell us; let's talk about the before period. Just tell us how it worked, and then we'll just take the story forward so that we can get all of that down.

**Stewart:** On the before period, we iced and fueled our boats. We went to the islands. It was still open. We've been fishing the islands for the last fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty years. Before me, people had fished the islands for fifty, sixty years. Since time began, there was no restrictions. We'd go to the islands. We'd ice up. We'd go out and catch a couple of thousand pounds of fish if they were there. Sometimes we'd catch ten thousand pounds, sheepshead, puppy drum. Sometimes we'd catch twenty thousand pounds. It's all what the good Lord give you. You'd make as much as, sometimes you'd make five hundred dollars a week. Sometimes you can make ten thousand dollars a week. It just depended on what was there, and every fish has a seasonal migration. (0:14:46.2) Fish don't just live in Mississippi. They migrate inshore and offshore. They migrate in the Gulf. They have a circular rotation. Some fish swim through certain times of the year, like mackerel, and they only come through here for a couple of months. And you catch mackerel in August, September, and October. And then they have roe mullet. You catch them in October through December. And then you have spring mullet, which is the ones that go offshore and then come back in. And you catch them year round, pretty much, but in the springtime it's more predominant. And trout come in in the spring. And you have sheepshead, puppy drum, and they all have, everything's got a cycle. Flounders come in in cycle, and they go to Lake Pontchartrain. They used to have a bunch of crokers that'd come into Lake Ponchartrain. And we'd catch them in different areas. You'd have to go down to the marsh. In the wintertime, you'd have to go down the mouth of the river and fish when it got real cold in January and February because it was closer to offshore, deep water offshore. All the fish kind of migrated. So everything had a season, and we were allowed to fish it, and we prospered. We went out and worked. We'd take haul-seines (0:15:55.7) and work Ship Island. And it's like taking a fence

made out of nylon and just going around the fish, and you pulled up the edge of the bank and scoop them up. And then we had gillnets. (0:16:11.1) We'd ride along till we see what we wanted. Each net was specifically designed for each fish. I might have thirty nets [at my house]. If I wanted speckled trout, I took a speckled trout net for the wintertime, which they were bigger. If I wanted one in the spring, it would have mesh size that was smaller, but they were all legal mesh sizes that the biologists said we could take and go catch these fish, and we weren't hurting them. We were leaving a sustainable (0:16:41.2) product in the water for next year because all the little ones would go through the mesh sizes, and they wouldn't be caught. We were catching the ones that have had four or five sets of babies, and it was their time to leave, or they were going to die after they'd done hatched four or five times.

**Kyriakoudes:** So with a gillnet, is it correct to think that there's less bycatch with a gillnet? (0:17:03.9)

**Stewart:** If you know what you're doing, there's less bycatch. And we were the type of fishermen that were called haul-fishermen. We would ride around until we visually saw the fish that we wanted. We would identify them at that time and make a record in our mind, mentally, for about two seconds, and then put the net around the fish, circular, and scare the fish in the net, and then retrieve the net within fifteen to twenty minutes with our catch in it. And the reason you did that is because you didn't want to catch pogies or catfish, stingrays, and all this other stuff. So we would pursue that one species. If you just put a net in the water and left it setting there, it could fill up with trash, and you don't make any money. A good fisherman is going to go out [to target a specific species]. So you're going to pursue the species that you're looking for, and you're going to train yourself. And there's not very many people like this even left. But at the time there were less than two hundred licenses, and out of that two hundred licenses, a hundred and fifty of them were set-netters, the ones that like pick trash. And there was about fifty that were haul-fishermen like me, and we were what you call top-of-the-line producers. We made a little bit of money, and we paid for our equipment and had better equipment. And that's what should be legal and should be left open, type of haul-fishing. I'm not in love with set-fishing because you put a net out, and they let the water and the tide flow, and the fish hits it. It's not productive for me, but it also catches other bycatch, and you have a trash element. But the bycatch you catch, all you're doing is feeding sharks, [birds], and crabs, [and] it's usually pogies and catfish.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. Those catfish with their stingers.

**Stewart:** Yeah. You got to pick a lot of catfish when you do this. It's not for the lighthearted. And if somebody doesn't know what they're doing, they can lose a net. [If] you put it in catfish, you'll never get it back out of the water because it just rolls up in a big wad. You're not going to be in the business very long because you can't lose a thousand-dollar net like that and stay in business. So usually the families that fish, turn on their relatives to the fishing element. It's just like going to school and studying how to be a lawyer. You have to have some training, and if you don't,

you're not probably going to be in the business too long. And you're not going to really prosper.

**Kyriakoudes:** You mentioned that multigenerational line of fishermen. Your dad was an attorney, but grandfather?

**Stewart:** My grandfather was a logger, and his, before him, (0:19:44.6) they were schooner captains. They worked out of [Biloxi River], Stieglets Landing in Woolmarket, Mississippi, and they seined shrimp, and they hauled cotton and trees and lumber and tung oil and whatever agricultural products were hauled between Mobile and New Orleans, Louisiana, and Florida. Sometimes they'd run to Florida and Galveston. And I had one of my great relatives ancestors; his name was William C. Stewart. He was killed in the 1800s in a hurricane. He was a schooner captain, killed while he was running a schooner that was built out of Biloxi, Mississippi. And they named me after him.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. That's neat. That's a great story. Getting back to the gillnetting issue, you mentioned that in the 1990s, federal policy towards gillnetting changed. (0:20:46.0) Tell me your perspective on that. What you saw happened. How it affected the fishermen, and how it impacted you personally.

**Stewart:** Well, actually it was state and federal policy with the state leading the way. The federal government came in and backed the state up because we have the Gulf Islands National Seashore, which we had fished. As long as I can remember we were fishing commercially there, and it is documented in the Gulf Islands National Seashore Development Plan that was written and implemented by William H. Colmer, House of Representatives, 1962, thereabouts. My father was his aide and secretary and worked with William Colmer until he decided to come back to Gulfport, Mississippi, and became county attorney around 1968. But the Gulf Islands National Seashore was developed, and it was copied from a plan in North Carolina in the Pimlico Sound area where they had a national seashore there. And they had a set of islands, tributaries, rivers, and island banks, and commercial fishing was allowed there and was sustainable, and it was supposed to be implemented over here. But around 1978 or 1980, the Gulf Islands National Seashore changed its policy. I don't know how they changed it because they had to break Congressional law to do it, and I don't know what kind of documentation was adhered to because they were supposed to do all kinds of studies if there was going to be a limited extent of a closure for commercial fishing. In other words, commercial fishing was to be allowed in the seashore, and at no time taken away from the seashore, as it had been done for the last fifty to sixty years, before the seashore was implemented. And my father wrote this program in 1962 and helped William Colmer write it. And I was born in 1963, so it didn't have anything to do with me being here as a commercial fisherman. And he didn't have—his uncle was a commercial fisherman. They caught lemon fish (0:23:05.6) right here off the beach back in the [19]30s and [19]40s and would go out to the islands in small rowboats. And they would row out to the islands and catch fish.

**Kyriakoudes:** That's old school.

**Stewart:** They were hard. They were old school. And he made a living fishing. And he fought in these traveling circuses where they had the tough-man contests, bare knuckle. That was his gig. He didn't lose. (laughter)

**Kyriakoudes:** Tell me about that. He'd just go from town to town?

**Stewart:** Actually he went and whipped three of them. He whipped the big one, and he whipped the next big one, and then they put two of them together, and then they got it three on one, and he whipped them all three. And then they made him the next guy that went round and round. So he went everywhere. He was kind of a tough guy. My grandmother said he'd pull his own teeth with a pair of pliers. (laughter)

**Kyriakoudes:** Well, so as I understand it, they began to restrict the places you can fish, and then they began to restrict the equipment you can use to fish with.

**Stewart:** In 1997, it seems like with the hysteria and going along with the Coastal Conservation Association, (0:24:21.1) the little redfish stickers that you see everywhere, they say they were trying to implement conservation, and they said that we were overfishing the product in the water or the seafood, but the biologist Tom VanDevender who was employed at the Bureau of Marine Resources in Biloxi said that we weren't overfishing it. And he was the biologist that regulated everything, and the Coastal Conservation Society, which had no documentation, but they had numbers and politics, and all they did was steer a bunch of paraphernalia and lies to the newspapers, and they got sport fishermen, which was in excess of forty or fifty thousand people, to come out against the commercial gillnet fishermen, which was less than two hundred on licenses. And the board of supervisors in each county changed their minds on their opinion of fishing because these Coastal Conservation representatives stood up in front of them and told them a bunch of lies, and they decided to form an edict to go to the Bureau of Marine Resources, which was a state department, and they got three letters from three coastal counties. They did no scientific studies. It's all by word of mouth and all by politics and all by hysteria of the Coastal Conservation Association along with the politicians that were seated. And they outlawed commercial fishing around 1997 and made monofilament gillnet usage illegal. And there's prima facie laws that are on the books right now that are unconstitutional. Basically if I had a gillnet in my presence right now, and somebody called a game warden and said I was going to use it this afternoon, they could come up into this room, right now, and arrest me for prima facie evidence.

**Kyriakoudes:** And as you explained earlier, there are responsible ways to use a gillnet.

**Stewart:** It's the most efficient way, and it's proven to be the most scientific way to catch legal fish without taking bycatch because it discriminates. It lets smaller fish flow through the net to come back and breed next year. And you can take out the

larger-size fish that you're targeting and put it on the market. And it's going to die anyway, and the crabs or the sharks are going to get it when it rolls over. But a hook doesn't discriminate. (0:27:06.2) A hook catches any size or anything. It catches turtles. It catches crabs. It catches little fish. It catches unwanted fish. I'm not saying that gillnets don't catch unwanted fish occasionally. But if you get a turtle (0:27:22.7) that runs up and hits it and you're attending it, as a haul-fisherman you can roll him out immediately, and he can swim off, and he doesn't get hurt. Porpoises have sonar. They don't get caught in gillnets. They either jump over them, or they wait until you open it back up ten minutes later, and they swim off. I've never caught a porpoise or a turtle in my life. And there's been a lot of hysteria about that type of stuff, that nets—now, the Japanese use a type of gillnet, (0:27:52.7) they put out in the ocean, like I was telling you about, set-netting earlier, where they just leave it set in the water, and anything runs into it or bumps into it gets tangled up in it, from the size of whales, turtles, and mammals, porpoises. But that's a Japanese ship, five hundred feet long, and that's called drift-netting, and it's illegal (0:28:15.4) in the United States. To my knowledge we don't do that, and we don't gear up to that size. We are conservationists ourselves. (0:28:25.0) We want a sustainable product in the water, and we want to maintain the population of fish like it is, but we do like to fish and catch what God gives us to feed consumers. And the consumer, his right hand has been cut off if he wants fresh fish in the state of Mississippi. There's no one to go to except for a sport fisherman that goes and buys a commercial license to keep the catch so he can sell them. And if you go see how many people file their income taxes on commercial fishing, you're not going to find any sport fishermen with a twenty-four-foot boat that's going to file his income tax on commercial fishing. I grant you that.

**Kyriakoudes:** Earlier, before the interview, we were talking about the process by which the gillnets were banned, meetings, and the ways in which they gathered the opinions of fishermen. Tell us about that, how that process worked, or what you thought was deficient in it, or what worked well.

**Stewart:** Uneducated, let's say—I would say—people that were just citizens that hated commercial fishermen went up in front of the board of supervisors first of all. They had no scientific (0:29:42.0) data, no credible evidence. They had their word of mouth and their opinion. They went in front of the board of supervisors, and they got it started. Then the Department of Marine Resources in Biloxi, the department that's supposed to regulate us, had public hearings, and allowed the charter boat captains and all the other entities, the Coastal Conservation people, to get up and speak about how bad commercial fishing was and how bad it is, and then the biologists would get up and say we're the most efficient and we're the safest way to take a commercial species out of the water to feed people. And they were upset because they were in direct conflict with us because they catch fish and give it to tourists. And when the casinos (0:30:34.9) came in here, there was a bigger demand for charter boats and tourism. When the casinos came in here, all the fish factories were bought up, and they were turned into casinos. All the political power that the state of Mississippi had offered to the fishermen was bought out and turned into casino sites. Casinos need patrons. They need people to go in there and lose money so they can pay for these places.

They need people to have a draw. The Beau Rivage had a fishing camp, and they even offered free fishing trips if you come down here [to] gamble at the Beau Rivage. They had a accidental-death situation, so that ended their fishing operations. There's been many types of fishing tournaments held down here by the casinos for the five-hundred-thousand-dollar boats, for these boats that cost a half a million, and the prizes are real big, and they cost thousands of dollars to enter. That's the sport-fishermen element, which I have no problems with. I think these people (0:31:50.2) should catch everything that they're entitled to. But the commercial fishermen in the state of Mississippi at the same time should not be taken away from plying the waters in small skiffs and working and feeding their families, and a bunch of people were put out of business by the political interests of a very small few that own casino sites, and indirect, they also own factories, shrimp-processing plants (0:32:21.4) and freezer houses. And if you stop local production and you truck everything in here from other states that have legal commercial fishing, like North Carolina, then you can sell to a market that is not tainted, or nobody can bring local fish to the market, so you have a monopoly. And that's basically what's happened. You have to truck everything in here.

**Kyriakoudes:** Well, I'll just make a personal observation. It's almost impossible to buy local redfish and specks [speckled trout] at any store that I know of. I catch my own. (laughter) That's the only way I get it. So in [19]97 when the gillnetting ban came down, how did you respond? Did you stop commercial fishing? Did you just change your equipment? What happened with you?

**Stewart:** I kept fishing until I got a ticket from Gulf Islands National Seashore, and we took my case to federal court, and there was twenty thousand dollars worth of charges. I've got newspaper articles. I was an alleged poacher (0:33:34.1) of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, which the year before was totally legal to haul-seine, totally legal to fish. It might not been the year before, but it was at some time prior to that, it was totally legal to fish the Gulf Islands National Seashore as a commercial fisherman using a gillnet. I know it was prior to 1970 for sure. But they took us to court, and it was thrown out of court because we filed a lawsuit with the Gulf Islands National Development Plan, written by William Colmer and my father, and the case was thrown out of court due to lack of evidence. And our lawsuit to keep and maintain commercial fishing at the islands was thrown out, and the political powers that be won in that essence because we didn't get a determination from the court whether it was legal or illegal. They just said, "Bring another case up." And it costs a lot of money to do this, and at the time it was not profitable for me to try to fight it. I had fought it as hard as I could.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. I mean, that's legal fees.

**Stewart:** That's when they made gillnets illegal with monofilament [plastic]. You could still fish a cotton net. Nowhere in the union of the fifty states is this like this. Everywhere, in all other states you can use plastic nets. Alaska promotes their seafood and commercial fishing. They catch salmon with gillnets. They catch fish in

Alabama, and they catch fish in Louisiana with gillnets made out of plastic, but in Mississippi it's a high misdemeanor, and they were talking about confiscation laws where if I go here and do it in Mississippi, then I can go to prison or go to jail, and if I do it in Alabama with the correct license, (0:35:34.2) which they won't sell me because they went limited entry, it would be legal. Florida filed a Constitutional amendment. I think it was overturned by a federal judge. I'd have to look into the paperwork on that, but I'm pretty sure it was overturned by a federal judge, and it is now illegalized in some parts of Florida, gillnet fishing. And they had the same problem with the hysteria and the Coastal Conservationists Society with the redfish stickers, people coming in. That started in Texas. They outlawed it in Texas so they could bring seafood into Texas and sell it. You had to gut the fish and have a tag on the fish before you could bring it into the state, and that means the processors control the volume of the fish, the type of fish, and where it comes from, who catches it, and how it's trucked in.

**Kyriakoudes:** You'd mentioned cotton gillnets earlier. What are the problems with cotton gillnet? (0:36:29.7) Why are those inadequate or unsuitable?

**Stewart:** You can go to Wal-Mart and buy you a roll of string, and if you got about two years, you can make one. And if it doesn't rot by the time you finish making it, you can use it. It won't catch a fish. It won't last. They supposedly made some in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Mark Elderer, a guy that makes net [webbing], made some linen webbing and tried to make a biodegradable product and gave it to a few commercial fishermen, which I would not take it and receive it because I know it was a ploy to get other fishermen to take it and try to use something that wouldn't work. So I didn't receive any. I didn't want any. If you going to fish, you have to use an efficient product, and what they did was make something that they said would work, and then they wouldn't make anymore on the weaving machine that he had because he said it caught on fire, and he wouldn't make anymore. So there was no more product left, and the Bureau of Marine Resources said that was the standard that we had to use, although the other forty-nine states in the United States let their fishermen use plastic monofilament or trifilament [webbing], which is a plastic.

**Kyriakoudes:** Between the period where the monofilament [plastic] gillnets were banned and the ticket that you got, how did you fish. What did you use?

**Stewart:** I continued using plastic monofilament, I guess you would say, illegally or not in accordance with the present laws that they had changed overnight, which a fine fellow named Mr. Sherman Muths, who as a citizen of Gulfport, Mississippi, was made a chairman of the Bureau of Marine Resources Board. And some people who have opinions, like Vernon Asper who's the present chairman of the board, they had opinions to outlaw commercial fishing because they thought it was detrimental to society or to the water, state of Mississippi. But yet the Constitution allows us to fish with optimum yield as long as we use and have a sustainable product and let the biologists and the people that do research, allow to set the amount of fish that we catch and what species to catch, with a product that we can catch it with efficiently that's



updated into the twentieth century. They quit using cotton nets back in the [19]20s and [19]30s, and actually they started dipping them and putting a plastic type product on them, but they wouldn't even allow us to dip this product. If it would work, it had to be dipped so it would withstand mold and abrasives in the water because when you [are] cleaning a net in the water, if something doesn't slip off of it, it kind of sticks to it, and you get tree limbs; you get crabs; you get grass. You get all kinds of flotsam, stuff that's floating in the water, sticking to it, and it you never get it clean.

**Kyriakoudes:** When did you have the ticket that you mentioned that you had told me how that had come about before we started the interview? Maybe if you want, tell that story. (0:40:05.1)

**Stewart:** In 1997 or thereabouts, the state of Mississippi decided to close commercial fishing and outlaw monofilament [plastic] gillnets, and I was on a fishing expedition that we had gone to federal waters, off of Dauphin Island, and we had stopped at the south side of Petit Bois Island to drink some coffee. And a research airplane was flying down the island and saw us, sitting in a twenty-two-foot, gray skiff, three gentlemen with slicker suits on and a gillnet in the back of the skiff. They followed us as we went home. It was about December the twentieth, twenty-five degree weather, rough Northwest wind blowing thirty knots. We had been looking around all night long, off in federal waters for roe mullet, which they come out on fronts. And we sit out there and look for the large schools, and it's kind of like finding a needle in a haystack, but if you can find them, you can make a large profit because usually you can catch five or ten thousand pounds or whatever your boat would carry due to circumstances of the wind and waves, you could possibly make a living. We came into Bayou Cumbest, and upon coming into Bayou Cumbest on a mud flat, some federal rangers stopped us and said we had been commercial fishing at the islands, and they had not seen us at the islands. They were radioed from the airplane and had not seen us doing anything illegal. They stopped us at that time, searched the boat, found no fish on the boat. I pulled them off this mud flat. I had stopped for them, and they wrote me two five-thousand-dollar tickets and said I was going to see them in federal court under mandatory obligations. And we had two more tickets sent to us in the next month or so. And we all went to federal court over twenty thousand dollars worth of illegal fishing violations that had been legal in prior years, before, several years before had been totally legal. And it was adjudicated by the judge that there was not sufficient evidence to convict me under those stipulations, but that I had filed a lawsuit against Gulf Islands National Seashore, and it was also thrown out of court at the same time, and I was basically told that I would have to reestablish another lawsuit. And lawsuits cost a lot of money. And the quickest way to get into court is to get a ticket. And at that time my father, who was a seated chancery judge, said I needed to let everything cool off for a while and go find another occupation because apparently the politicians and the politics around here weren't going to allow commercial fishing to exist anymore, (0:43:13.6) which he was not for or against my commercial fishing. He wanted me to be something else; basically wanted me to be an attorney, and he was in hopes that I would go back to school. But I continued to commercial fish and built shrimp boats after that and went into the shrimping business fulltime.

**Kyriakoudes:** So did you switch out boats and get a shrimp boat? (0:43:38.6) Tell me about that.

**Stewart:** Basically [I] had to stop commercial [fin]fishing. They put me out of business, no income. So I started doing whatever I could do to make a living. And I found a boat that I could buy. And I rebuilt it, and a gentleman held it for me for three years. He waited till he retired, and he let me work the boat, and I finally got a forty-two-foot, steel-hull shrimp boat out of Gulfport Harbor, named the *Naomi Charles* and worked it for the last fifteen to twenty years. And in 2002 I bought a sixty-two-foot boat out of Anahuac, Texas, from a man named Alvin Otter, who had been fishing this boat from Key West Tortugas to the Brownsville, Texas, Mexican line, and he had fished this boat that I bought for twenty years. And he had been working it in the Gulf of Mexico his whole life. And that's the boat I'm presently underway of putting new windows in the cabin, redoing the cabin. I've redone the rigging, motors, the bottom, and I'm getting set up for the next twenty years to try to commercial fish with the boat while shrimping.

**Kyriakoudes:** And do you shrimp in the [Mississippi] Sound, further out in the Gulf, both? Tell us about that.

**Stewart:** I have before with the smaller boat, basically fishing the Sound, and you fish Louisiana marshes and the Chandeleur Sound and stuff like that. We don't work offshore in that small boat, the forty-two-foot one, but the sixty-two foot, you can go offshore and work just about wherever you want to. Now, like I said, this other boat went from, he worked from Key West to Galveston mainly, and he was out of Galveston, basically.

**Kyriakoudes:** Does the larger boat have freezers? How did that work?

**Stewart:** This is a ice boat. A lot of larger boats that are owned by Vietnamese, and some Americans own freezer boats. It just depends on how many days you want to—you have more of a private life with a ice boat. You can stay out nine or ten, fifteen days at max. Freezer boats'll stay out as long as forty-five days, (0:45:53.0) and then you have issues. You have power plants that run the freezers, and if you catch too many shrimp, the freezers can't handle sometimes. But you can stay a long time; you burn a lot of fuel and the price of fuel—I'm more into the retail market and having some sort of lifestyle on land, too. The big boats, you'd have to take your wife with you if you had a wife or a girlfriend. You wouldn't want to stay forty, fifty days at a time.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. That's a long time to be out on the water. How many crew on your forty (inaudible)?

**Stewart:** Usually one to two men on either boat can handle it. I've worked it by myself before. It's very dangerous, but I've worked it and worked it under Ship Island

and Horn Island. They also are arresting shrimp trawlers (0:46:53.0) if you go within a one-mile perimeter of the islands. And they're giving them five-thousand-dollar, first-offense fines, which it should be legal for us to shrimp there because we shrimped there all our lives before they changed, or they broke Congressional law that William Colmer wrote. And I don't understand to this day why we are getting arrested for fishing at the islands because the original plan and the original documents say that there is commercial fishing to be allowed there and won't be ever illegal.

**Kyriakoudes:** How did you fare in [Hurricane] Katrina? (0:47:36.2) How did Katrina affect your business and your equipment?

**Stewart:** Katrina tore us up. It tore up our rigging, and some boats got beached. We had to do a lot of work on our boats after that, but we made it through it. But this BP spill (0:47:55.0) has hurt us worse than anything.

**Kyriakoudes:** How's that been? Tell me about that.

**Stewart:** Basically BP, in my eyes as a commercial fisherman, has tried to clean up everything, but they've put a band-aid on a big cut, and the band-aid's doing its best to keep the cut, but I think it's going to start bleeding again before it's over with. I've heard a lot of hearsay information, and I'm not going to give anything that's just hearsay, but we didn't have a shrimp season this year. (0:48:32.2) It was very small. The shrimp never grew up over forty/fifty count. Usually in August you catch twenty-one/twenty-fives, and you get the big, jumbo brownies, and we didn't see any of that this year. The profits were down. The price of shrimp was down; it was small. A person that put an investment didn't get his return this year. There's no way he could get his return.

**Kyriakoudes:** When the spill happened in April of last year because that was just before the Mississippi Sound season, a few weeks before, what specifically happened to you? (0:49:15.5) Tell me about your personal situation there.

**Stewart:** We were preparing to go to Louisiana because it opens before Mississippi, in the Breton Sound, Chandeleur Sound area. We usually run down and work around MRGO [Mississippi River Gulf Outlet], which is the old channel that goes into New Orleans. And around Breton Island Ship Channel, that's where we make a living, by Point Chicot, Point Lydia, Morgan Harbor, Mitchell Key, on down in that area. We go down there, and they open that season, and we go down there and fish. Well, they open it up in an emergency, overnight situation, three or four weeks prior to the original—it usually opens around May the twentieth or May the eighteenth. Between May the fifteenth and May the twentieth, they usually open it. To my understanding, I think they opened it up in April, somewhere in April, the thirtieth or somewhat in there, in that area. And we were preparing to leave and be ready for about the fifteenth, and they opened it up overnight. And what shrimp were there got caught up, and it was kind of early for the brownies to show up. So it was kind of a [mess]. It just kind of screwed up everything, and nothing worked right. It kind of [cluster-

messed-up]. And then the oil came in, and they shut it down. (0:50:47.4) So it takes your whole system where you had a kind of a schedule, and then it deschedules you, and you can't operate with it.

**Kyriakoudes:** If it had been a normal year, you would have worked Louisiana.

**Stewart:** And after you make three or four weeks in Louisiana and do well there, then the Mississippi shrimp comes mature, and you come over here and work in Mississippi after they let it get to a larger size. But they opened it up this year, and it was very small shrimp, and the price was low, and it just hurt us. It just was no profit in it.

**Kyriakoudes:** How have you maintained things? How have you gotten by? What things have you done to just hold things together? (0:51:36.3)

**Stewart:** BP gave us some money. If you had taxes and you could show where you were a commercial fisherman, and you had proper licenses and paperwork, they gave you some money to take care of your losses and the lack of being able to work in federal waters, which I have federal permits to fish in the Gulf of Mexico, which is a moratorium permit. (0:52:02.8) They don't give that to anybody anymore, and you had to have it back ten years ago to get it, and now it's—I'm not old school or a old-timer, but the older fishermen have it. The younger ones can't even buy it. They've tried to regulate shrimping in the Gulf of Mexico with the government, but they really don't need to because between the hurricanes and the high price of diesel fuel, they've lost the whole fleet probably from fifteen thousand boats down to about twenty-five hundred boats now, and they work the Gulf. In the state of Mississippi you're probably down to two hundred fifty boats.

**Kyriakoudes:** For the Sound.

**Stewart:** For the Sound, the state of Mississippi. From state of Mississippi fishermen, you're probably in the neighborhood of working trawl boats that are over forty foot that work full-time as a commercial shrimping, trawling, and then we still have to deal with the islands where we can't work, and the most prosperous fishing grounds in the state of Mississippi are at the islands, reason being the current comes in and out of the islands, going out to the Gulf, and it sucks real hard by the edge of the islands, and they have twenty- and thirty-foot-deep holes that are gullies. (0:53:17.7) And all the seafood that's on the flats gets sucked into those little gullies, and they get thick, and that's where it's very productive to catch shrimp. We've been doing this for years. Also in the bottom of these twenty- or thirty-foot-deep gullies there's no grass growing, and it doesn't hurt any grass beds, and that's what they're worried about. They have grass beds in six or eight foot of water where the sunshine can penetrate the water, and photosynthesis can happen, but between the oil that's being covered out there and they're fixing to dredge (0:53:53.8) all these sandbars out there—I don't know where they're dredging or what, but if they don't watch what they're doing with the silted sands, they going to kill the grass beds accidentally, and it depends on where

they dredge and how they do this. And I'm a commercial fisherman, and I'm well-versed on what's on the bottom (0:54:11.6) because I study the bottom to make a living. I know more than the biologists do, but they don't ask us. They don't take our opinion. They never asked me, "How many fish are supposed to be here? And what type of fish? And where? And what time of year?" They don't ask me anything. They don't want to ask us because they don't want to know what we've lost. All they want to know is, "Everything's great. There's no problems out there. And bring all the tourists down here," which I'm for the tourism, and I'm for people eating seafood, but we also have to deal with the aspects and the problems that we have locally and not sugarcoat anything.

**Kyriakoudes:** Have you seen oil? I mean, what's the—

**Stewart:** I've seen oil all over this front beach. (0:54:58.3) I've seen oil all over the islands and in the water.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. Give us some sense of that because—

**Stewart:** Well, I didn't work the oil. Some of my friends worked the oil, [but] they didn't hire me. They found that they lost my paperwork, and they didn't hire me to work the oil, but when I was out, moving in the water, pulling crab pots, working on my shrimp boats, riding from one place to another in a boat, we saw patches of oil. We saw oil residue all over the front beaches, in [small pancakes], and the islands were just covered in it.

**Kyriakoudes:** So Ship, Horn?

**Stewart:** Ship [Island], Horn [Island], Petit Bois [Island], Cat Island. And my stepmother owns Round Island, and we went out there and dug on the islands and retrieved oil from the sand dunes and brought it in as evidence so she could talk to BP in references to cleaning her island up, which she is the owner of and has the repairing rights around it, and it's been in the Wymer family since the early 1920s or something, which she is an ancestor of, and she's the main speaker for about fifteen members of her family.

**Kyriakoudes:** And when you say BP wouldn't let you work the oil—

**Stewart:** They didn't hire my boats. I signed a contract with them May the second for standby and cleanup work, which is a VOO program, Vessels of Opportunity. (0:56:34.8) And what happened was the politicians locally got a-hold of the program, and if you knew somebody that was in the harbor, either a mayor or harbor master, you got put on. And they hired realtors. They hired dentists [who] went out and bought four or five boats. People that owned barrooms got their boats on standby, and just a big, vast amount of people that work on land that had no connection to the water got their boats hired, and they let the commercial fishermen fall through the cracks, the ones whose livelihood was directly put out. They didn't hire all of us. They hired

some of us. And some of us for a very short amount of time just so they could say it was done, but they basically implemented the program and did not carry on the true viability that it should have been carried through. It should have gone to the commercial fishermen and the charter boat captains, which the charter boats got hired on because they have an association, and they made sure that they got hired. They also hired all their friends, and then you had mayors that had their sons on. They had politicians that had their sons running boats. They had people that work for the DMR [Department of Marine Resources] had their own cousins and relatives. It just got to be a political thing. People in the know, connected, got it, and commercial fishermen fell through the cracks, which I was one of them.

**Kyriakoudes:** How did you get by after that? Did you just hunker down?  
(0:58:15.9)

**Stewart:** I cut trees. I raked yards. I cut grass. I hauled debris. I fixed trucks. I used my hands to make a living, anything I can do. I put roofs on. I repair houses. I paint houses. I put up fences. I just work. I mainly try to commercial fish, but with all these problems hitting us and the high prices of fuel and losing the Gulfport Harbor, which was a major blow to these local people that live right here in Gulfport, when you have your clientele locally set up on a retail issue. And that's the way you make a profit, is retailing, if you work the Sound, you have to retail it. (0:59:07.2) If you go completely wholesale, which I quit being [a wholesaler] probably [in] 2007 and [early] 2008. I completely changed from no wholesaling to all retailing. I bought two refrigerated trucks and sat on the side of the road in certain places and [got] permits to go out and sell my seafood up the road. And all this was done because they took away our harbor, and we had our main retail in the Gulfport Harbor. And it's also convenient and accessible to the public. [At the Gulfport Harbor] the public could conveniently access us any time they wanted to between working hours, six in the morning, six at night. And if they called you late at night, and they wanted so many pounds, you could go down to your boat and unload at twelve o'clock at night if you wanted to, off your own private boat and unlock your gate. We lost all our logistics, including our fuel and our ice. The casinos were supposed to support us, and we had a contract (1:00:04.5) with the Grand [Casino Harrah's Casino group]. And when the Grand got wiped away in Katrina, the Island View said they didn't want to take over that contract and had no interest in it. So the port didn't make them keep it, and we had give them that prime real estate on that frontage and turned to the side bank on the west, on the east side, and gave them the north side in conjunction for those types of amenities. And they took that away from us, but the Port of Gulfport is the one responsible for getting rid of the shrimpers. They don't want us there, never have wanted us there, and they told us they didn't want us there.

**Kyriakoudes:** I remember before the storm there was a market kind of on the back, I guess, east back side of the Grand parking deck. There was a retail store there that sold shrimp and finfish. Is that—

**Stewart:** That's Mike Sevelle's(?) [Boat Fresh Seafood]. He had a family business, and he'd be a good man to talk to, and he will be happy to talk to you on this. He had a family business there. He had his daughters, his wife, his aunts, his cousins. He had four or five boats with his brothers, their sons, their relatives, all running a seafood business. After Katrina, he begged the port to let him go fix his pier. He offered to fix the piers, himself. The port denied him. (1:01:28.6) They denied access. They came in there and tried to tie their boats up on these piers that were a little bit tore up. They told them to get their boats out of the harbor, and Mr. Mike could give you a lot of information on the port.

**Kyriakoudes:** That's where I would buy my shrimp just as an—

**Stewart:** They were fresh shrimp. He had the same shrimp I had on my boat. We were competitors to sell our shrimp, but we were also fishing right side by side in there, and I care very dearly for—he's a good man, and his family's a fine family. And they been fishing there, about four generations, fishing. They've probably been here longer than that, but I know his father fished before him, and he was there at the seafood market, Mr. Mitchell. And I think his father might have fished before him. So they go way back. And the whole family is in the seafood business. He's still in the seafood business. He's in Pass Christian, and he's not happy, like I'm not happy, with it. And they also took away his retail market, and they wouldn't let him re-lease.

**Kyriakoudes:** All right. That's not come back.

**Stewart:** They won't come back, and they wouldn't let him come back. They ran him off. I mean, it's public. It's documented. And we had got an attorney, but basically if you get an attorney locally, everybody is—they said that basically they tell them, "If you want to work around here, don't take on the port because it's the state." At the time it's the governor that's seated, and they have a commission down there, which is full of local hotshots that are politically connected, and it's up to them. It's just one commission down there, and it's the port commission, (1:03:18.4) and they run it. But they say our lease is no good, but it says in there it is to be used specifically and for commercial fishing only, (1:03:33.9) and they say in the statements, that it doesn't mean that it's only for commercial fishing. It can be used for other things, but it specifically states to me—and I'm a college graduate, an English major with a BS from USM [University of Southern Mississippi]—that it's for commercial fishing. And in 1971 the Mississippi Ag Board shut down a truck stop that was going to have a diner in it because it was, first it was an unloading dock and then it had pulled truck stop pier, diesel and gas, and then they were going to open up a little diner, and they closed the man's diner down because he can only unload seafood and not be a restaurant. And in 1971 or thereabouts—some of my timing might be off—the Mississippi State Agriculture Board ruled in favor with the port, stating that it was only for commercial fishing, (1:04:32.3) and it had to be used as a unloading dock only and not a restaurant.

**Kyriakoudes:** It's a big port. There's a lot of space there.

**Stewart:** They could accommodate us, and they didn't have to pull the brand-new pilings that were in there. And they were pretty. The water rises up over the pilings, and the water rises down. It doesn't hurt them. They were not damaged. The pier boards on top were knocked off a little bit, and they could have been repaired easily. We offered to do it ourselves, but they didn't want us, so they got rid of us. FEMA money also took the—I might be wrong. I don't want to say anything wrong, but I think FEMA money was used to take the pilings out, to clean up the harbor. And I know it was cleaned at the harbor, but I think they also retrieved the pilings out of it. And I don't understand why they don't use FEMA money to put the harbor back, myself.

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. I mean, I remember. I mean, I would shop; I'd get my shrimp there, too, so that's a loss for everybody.

**Stewart:** Well, that was 2005, 2006, and it's 2012. There are no plans to build a harbor. They say there are, but there are none, and they're not, anybody, in any hurry to build us a shrimp boat harbor in the city of Gulfport. They're going to supposedly spend a couple million dollars in Pass Christian, (1:05:49.5) which is a small, incorporated area compared to Gulfport. It doesn't have the population base for retail sales, and you going to put more fishermen on top of each other. I'm not going there. My boat's presently docked in Back Bay, Biloxi, and that's where I'm going to work out of, and I have no intention on, which I did go to Pass Christian for about a year and a half and could not sell all my product because all my customers come from Vancleave, Woolmarket, Saucier, and areas thereof and up above, and they're not driving an hour and a half and then drive another thirty or forty minutes that way. And it made it a two-hour drive instead of a forty-five-minute drive, and they just don't want to do it.

**Kyriakoudes:** When you were selling it in Gulfport, when it was working, did you sell off the boat? (1:06:39.1)

**Stewart:** Right off the boat.

**Kyriakoudes:** Right off the boat.

**Stewart:** And I had a number one slot up at the front of the dock, which comes with seniority. And when I bought the boat from this man that'd been there twenty-five or thirty years, he gave me the slot, and I acquired it and kept it for about ten years myself.

**Kyriakoudes:** And in the Pass, you'd also sell off the boat?

**Stewart:** Sell off the boat, but I lost all my seniority, and you get put out on the end of the dock, and you can't sell your seafood because everybody down there has the same situation. The older fishermen have the better slots because they've been there



longer, so they threw us in a position where we're the new man on the totem pole, and you get the worst slot.

**Kyriakoudes:** So tell me a little bit more about this season. You've already mentioned that it's been a difficult season. We've heard from a lot of people that there's just no shrimp.

**Stewart:** The local, commercial shrimp trawler did not catch a lot of shrimp this year because they didn't stay here long enough. That freshwater encroachment (1:07:50.0) with the Bonnet Carré Spillway blew the shrimp through here. The ones that were here that did grow here and usually will stay here and grow up and get bigger, the freshwater encroachment pushed them out, and they didn't stop. They moved. Actually, we tracked the shrimp, and they moved six to ten miles every two or three days. (1:08:12.4) They started out around the Pearl River. They came to Bayou Caddy. They went to Pass Christian. They went to Gulfport. They went to Ma Brown's, which is the old Broadwater, and then they went down there around Belle Fountain Beach, and then they were gone, phew, just like overnight, shutting it off. And we tracked them. That's how you find shrimp, with your try nets, and you catch them. You have to go find shrimp to catch. So they moved. They weren't where they were last week. They were six, seven miles down the line, and we kept following them. And I've never seen them operate like that. I've never seen them move that fast and get. Either something on the bottom was damaged with pollution or freshwater, which is polluted, and it had no oxygen in the water, pushed them out. I think it was both. We've been getting polluted just like up in the Pearl River where that paper company let all that stuff out, that tannic acid (1:09:13.6) water, and it killed the whole river. And then there are some issues with some chemical plants in Bay St. Louis that I don't believe are correctly being—

**Kyriakoudes:** Well, we've got the DuPont Plant (inaudible).

**Stewart:** Well, you can say it. I mean, I'm just—

**Kyriakoudes:** And then we've got it at Port Bienville.

**Stewart:** My father has all the information on the pollution and all the plants that he shut down in Back Bay in the [19]70s, [19]80s, and [19]90s, and I've got it. He's deceased, but he left it with me, and he shut down some chemical plants. He shut down several plants back there, like they had a resin plant. They had a chemical plant, and they had a couple of other big plants that were taking the fluids from the Baton Rouge refinery and the Pascagoula refinery and dumping an off-brand mixture into Back Bay that they were making a paint thinner out of in a company back here. (1:10:11.5) And I've got the paperwork on it. The chemist that did the study said he wouldn't put his big toe in it, in the water. What has happened is that everything has gotten covered by the mud. It's kind of like under the mud, and as long as it stays there, it's not really a bad problem. But there are some issues back there, and nobody knows when or where or how long it's going to take to clean up. And the state of

Mississippi doesn't care about it, but they don't want to say anything negative about anything that has to do with water. They've had creosote piling plants back there, back in the [19]40s and [19]50s.

**Kyriakoudes:** Creosote Road.

**Stewart:** They've had things back there with DDT in them. Agent Orange leaked out of cans over here on the CB [Naval Construction Battalion, Seabee] base for fifty years after the Vietnam War and flowed through a ditch that goes all the way to Back Bay. It's called Bayou Bernard, and it travels all the way from there, that a-way to water. There's all kind of things, but people are not going to look at that. That's not in their face, and they're not going to talk about it. It's just like they're not going to talk about gillnetting or catching fish because the majority of the sports fishermen (1:11:29.1) don't want us because they do the same thing, and they sell their fish. And they think we take all the fish that's in the water. And we usually pursue species that they don't even pursue. Like sheepshead, I could make a living off of sheepshead, puppy drum. If they allow us to catch redfish, we'll catch them. If we can catch trout, that's fine. I could care less if I caught either one, the redfish or the trout, if they'd say, "Go fish everything else." We used to make seventy cents a pound off of ladyfish. You'd catch a couple of thousand pounds a night accidentally when you're trying to catch bluefish and puppy drum and stuff. Well, a couple of thousand times seventy cents turns into some money. But when you're running a twenty-thousand-dollar motor, and you're burning three hundred dollars worth of gas every night, and you got three people on the boat, and you got a couple-thousand-dollars net, (1:12:17.5) you have to make five hundred dollars a night to break even. And commercial fishing is just what it is. You have to roll. You have to make a lot of money. You have to make a high gross to make a small net. And people don't understand that. They think you're getting real rich or something to that effect. They think you taking more than your share. And you're feeding people who are crippled. You're feeding women who have kids; they can't afford protein. I can produce protein for fifty cents a pound. (1:12:49.2) I can produce protein and sell it to wholesalers for twenty-five cents a pound. They won't let me do it.

**Kyriakoudes:** And you could still make money at that.

**Stewart:** Oh, yes. I caught forty thousand pounds of roe mullet one year in an eighteen-foot skiff with a forty-horse motor when I first started. They paid us a dollar a pound for them, forty thousand pounds in five days. I, personally, by myself did that. I unloaded them in Gulfport Harbor, right here.

**Kyriakoudes:** What's the market for the ladyfish? (1:13:23.9) I mean, a lot of people just throw them back. I mean, (inaudible).

**Stewart:** There's a market for everything that swims in the water. Asian people buy them. They might send them as far as—fish that we caught would go all the way to New York City to Fulton Fish Market, or they'd go the West Coast and go to

Chinatown. It's interstate commerce, and they don't have it anymore right here. They do have it, but it's not with the local, gillnet fishermen producing in local Mississippi Sound waters, bringing fish in, fresh, and selling it. We do not have that happening. You've got purse-seiners, and you've got people trucking it in here, and that's where the fish are coming from. And that's about it.

**Kyriakoudes:** Any final thoughts? I just have a couple of follow-up questions.

**Stewart:** Basically, ever since the casinos came in, (1:14:24.2) we had to fight for our rights, and they took them away from us, and all the political structures have been reallocated to sports fishermen and to bringing tourism down here, and the commercial industry was being blocked and denied its access to the commercial-fishing species of finfish. Shrimp trawling hadn't changed a whole lot except they blocked us from the islands and want to arrest us, and that's wrong. And crabbing, (1:14:52.1) you can't crab inside the National Seashore or whatever anymore. It's twenty-six miles, or let's say twenty-six to thirty miles across the state of Mississippi, one mile on both sides of the islands. It takes up at least a quarter of the most productive fishing grounds that's in the state of Mississippi. We also have a very limited amount of fishing area. We have the half mile across the front beaches, which is twenty-six miles. If you take out the restricted areas (1:15:22.6) square footage and leave us with what's left, we probably have about half the waters that are available to us in the front to fish. And they've taken away our fishing rights and gave us, they've cut down our areas in the most lucrative, and the most safest areas for us to shrimp are under the islands. When it blows forty knots out of the southeast, if you get kind of close to that island, you can stay there because the waves aren't but four or five feet tall, but if you're in the tugboat lane, they're ten feet tall, and it'll beat you slap to death. It's unsafe. And the powers that be do not care; they say they do, but they don't care because they're not actually out there doing it, and they don't understand what it really takes to do it. They actually understand everything, but they don't want to because they trucking everything in here, and they've got a monopoly to sell everything.

**Kyriakoudes:** Any of these NOAA advisory boards or other ways to—

**Stewart:** I've written letters to just about everybody you could think of, including NOAA, and when I had fishing permits, and they're aware. It's a federal government law; it's on the books. It was in the papers. It was in the *Daily Herald* for two years: should gillnets be illegal? What's the controversy about? And so forth and so on. Actually it just came down to reallocation (1:16:53.5) of the product of the fish, the finfish that do swim in the state of Mississippi are reallocated to the sportsmen and to the tourism industry and the charter boat captains and taken away from the gillnet fishermen, period. It was a reallocation of resources. It was not a redistribution of a product that was being overfished or anything. There was no biological reason set forth in the paper or any book or any study that said that we were overfishing any species because the biologists were regulating (1:17:28.0) our mesh size, and they regulated the quantity that we caught every year and so forth and so on, each species that they wanted to regulate, and they still regulate speckled trout, the black drum, and

the flounder. And they use monofilament gillnets to check the regulations. They use a monofilament gillnet that they outlawed me from using to go out and check the populations of fish because it's the most efficient and clean way to do it. And to this day, they still use plastic monofilament, the State of Mississippi. Yellowstone Park catches a type of trout out of their lakes because they overgrowing, a certain species of trout. I think it's a brown trout and a rainbow trout conflict. And they use monofilament gillnets in Yellowstone Park, and that's a Department of Interior Park, like the Department of Interior out here. They have commercial grizzly-bear-killing seasons. They have fishing seasons. They don't allow us to fish within one mile of our most prized possession, the islands, which we fished for fifty or sixty years before. And it's our most productive fishing grounds, and they won't let us fish, right here in the state of Mississippi because our local politicians turned their back on us because of the numbers of voters, not because what was right or wrong. Numbers.

**Kyriakoudes:** I've learned a great deal from you. I have a couple of questions. You'd mentioned your boat was a Bosarge skiff.

**Stewart:** The first skiff (1:19:07.2) I started was built by a man named Bosarge, and he was a famous skiff builder in Bayou La Batre, Coden, Alabama, and his ancestors are young men that—I don't know if he's still alive, to tell you the truth, but he built a fine boat, and I've got one, still. But they're sea skiffs. You can run in fifteen-foot seas with a twenty-foot boat with twenty-four-inch sides, and you can carry eight to ten thousand pounds of fish in them, and they're very economical, and they're one of the finest skiffs made, in my name, because I ran them for twenty-five years. And that's our preference here, the local gillnetters' preference because you can get shallow-water access easily. They'll run in four inches of water if you know what to do to them.

**Kyriakoudes:** Wow. Yeah, that's neat. And then it was Mike Sevelle?

**Stewart:** Mike Sevelle, I can give you his phone number right now. You definitely want to talk to him.

**Kyriakoudes:** I'm going to stop the interview now. I just want to thank you for sharing your story with us. It's very important to get this down.

(end of interview)