

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

Alfred “Al” R. Sunseri, Sal Sunseri,
And Salvador Blake Sunseri

Interviewers: Stephanie Scull-DeArme y and Linda VanZandt

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An Oral History with Alfred R Sunseri, Sal Sunseri, and Salvador Blake Sunseri, Volume 1043
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Biographies

Mr. Alfred “Al” R. Sunseri was born on May 3, 1958, in New Orleans, Louisiana, to Mr. Salvador Raymond Sunseri (born April 25, 1925, New Orleans) and Mrs. Bobbie Prest Sunseri (born September 10, 1931, Winnipeg, Canada). Raymond Sunseri worked as a certified public accountant in Beverly Hills, California, (1949 to 1950), and from 1952 to 1986, he was owner of P&J Oyster Company, Inc.

Al Sunseri’s father’s family was of Sicilian descent, from Trabia, Sicily. His paternal grandmother was Olvira Federice Sunseri. His paternal grandfather, Alfred R. Sunseri, was in the banana business, Standard Fruit Company and United Fruit Company. Alfred R. Sunseri is one of the founders of P&J Oyster Company. Al’s mother, Bobbie Prest Sunseri, worked as an actress before becoming a wife and mother of seven children. She was a homemaker until the age of thirty-nine, when she returned to school and earned a master’s degree in special education. She taught special education in four parishes in Louisiana. Her mother’s family emigrated from Scotland into Nova Scotia, Canada, in the 1800s and worked in the timber business, growing, harvesting, and milling wood.

Since he was twelve years old, Al Sunseri has been working, including cutting grass, cleaning construction sites, working in games on Pontchartrain Beach, doing oil field work, as an iron worker, a room-service waiter, and in men’s retail sales. At the time of this interview he was co-owner and President of P&J Oyster Company in New Orleans, Louisiana.

From 1963 to 1968, Al Sunseri attended Immaculate Heart of Mary; from 1969 to 1972 he attended Christian Brothers School; from 1972 to 1975 he attended De La Salle; from 1975 to 1976 he attended St. Paul’s High School; from 1976 to 1977 he attended Nicholls State; and from 1978 to 1980 he attended Southeastern Louisiana University. Al Sunseri is a member of the Louisiana Restaurant Association, the Louisiana Oyster Task Force, the Gulf Oyster Industry Council, the Louisiana Oyster Dealers and Growers Association, the Governor’s Oyster Advisory Committee, and the Governor’s Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection, Restoration, and Conservation. He has been an advocate for the oyster community for over twenty-five years, serving as president of the Louisiana Oyster Dealers and Growers Association for seven years; Plaquemines Oyster Association for two years; and chair of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force for seven years. He has been advocating coastal protection and restoration in Louisiana for over twenty years.

Al Sunseri enjoys football, basketball, golf, politics, reading, walking, working around his family’s country home in Poplarville, Mississippi, cooking, and being with his family and friends.

On February 14, 1984, he married his wife Sally Lincks Sunseri (born December 2, 1957). They have three children, Salvador Blake Sunseri (born April 1, 1986), Alexandra Elizibeth Sunseri (born August 22, 1988), and Victoria Grace

Sunseri (born July 9, 1993). Their son Blake works at P&J Oyster Company, with his father and uncle, as manager.

Mr. Sal Sunseri was born November 16, 1960, in New Orleans, Louisiana. He is Al Sunseri's brother. He and his wife, Victoria (born in May, 1964, New Orleans), were married in 1993 in New Orleans. They have one son, Dominic Sunseri (born August, 1998).

Sal Sunseri is co-owner and Vice President of P&J Oyster Company. He attended the University of Southwestern Louisiana, earning a degree in mass communication in 1985. He enjoys fatherhood, husbandhood, church, family, and sports. He coaches Little League Baseball, serves on the French Quarter Management District, Renaissance of Rampart, and Louisiana Restaurant Association.

Mr. Salvador Blake Sunseri was born April 1, 1986. He is Al Sunseri's son, and he is the manager of P&J Oyster Company. Blake Sunseri attended St. Matthew the Apostle Grammar School and Heritage Academy High School. He enjoys long-boarding and bonsai cultivation.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ALFRED "AL" R. SUNSERI,
SAL SUNSERI, and
SALVADOR BLAKE SUNSERI

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Al Sunseri, Sal Sunseri, and Blake Sunseri. The first part of the interview takes place on November 1, 2011, and the second part of the interview takes place on November 8, 2011. The interviewers are Stephanie Scull-DeArmey and Linda VanZandt. Editor's note: This interview was conducted in the offices of P&J Oyster Company, in the French Quarter of New Orleans, and the sounds of the city can be heard, occasionally, in the background of the interview.

Scull-DeArmey: This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Project at The University of Southern Mississippi, done in conjunction with the NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] Voices from the Fisheries [Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster-Gulf Coast Fisheries] project. The interview is with Al Sunseri?

Al Sunseri: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: Sunseri. His brother Sal [and] his son Blake [are] also here with us. And it is taking place on November 1, 2011, in the morning, in New Orleans, Louisiana. We are at their place of business, which is P&J Oyster Company. Is that right?

Al Sunseri: Yes, P&J Oyster Company. It stands for Popich and Jurisich, which were the original owners and one of them being a cousin of ours, Joe Jurisich.

Scull-DeArmey: Great. The interviewers are Stephanie Scull-DeArmey and—

VanZandt: —Linda VanZandt.

Scull-DeArmey: And first, I'd like to thank you-all for taking time to talk with us today. And I'm going to ask you for the record, could you state your name and spell it, please?

Al Sunseri: It's Alfred Sunseri, and I'm called Al. It's A-L-F-R-E-D, S-U-N-S-E-R-I.

Scull-DeArmey: And we'll ask Sal to do the same.

Sal Sunseri: Sure. Sal Sunseri, S-A-L, and then S-U-N-S-E-R-I.

Scull-DeArmey: And Blake?

Blake Sunseri: And my name is Salvador Blake Sunseri. I go by Blake. It's S-A-L-V-A-D-O-R, B-L-A-K-E, S-U-N-S-E-R-I.

Scull-DeArmey: Thank you so much. We will just jump into the questions that NOAA asked us to address. And so I'll start with Al and ask you when and where you learned to gather oysters? (0:01:49.7)

Al Sunseri: Well, I actually started learning how to harvest oysters in 1987, which was some seven years after I started working here. I went out with a friend of mine who owned an oyster boat on opening day of the oyster season. Today happens to be opening day of the oyster season in Louisiana. (0:02:18.5) And so it was the opening of the oyster season, 1987; I learned how oyster farmers rake the oysters off of public ground and then place them onto their vessel and transported them, once they filled the vessel, over to their farms for grow-out, to where they would be fatter, fuller, and saltier oysters.

VanZandt: What prompted you to show up and do that, that day? What were you doing before then?

Al Sunseri: Well, actually, that summer we had a National Shellfish Sanitation Conference, the first one that I attended, and met a number of oyster farmers at that convention and decided it was time to learn from the beginning to the end, not just the processing end of the business that we're in, but the farming end as well.

Sal Sunseri: But Al was in the business for many, many years prior.

VanZandt: OK. And what were you doing, in what capacity before then?

Al Sunseri: Well, I was working for my father in our processing facility, which y'all are in right now. (0:03:40.3) The P&J Oyster Company is the oldest continually-operating oyster business in the United States, having started in 1876. And I came to work here by accident. I was just coming to help my dad for a little while, in between semesters of college because his manager became ill. And I told him I'd take off a semester until his manager came back. Well, I never went back to school, and his manager never came back. So I just stayed in the business.

VanZandt: What were you studying? Just curious.

Al Sunseri: I was studying business, you know, with the intentions of going into law. And that's something that I really do like, is the law. (0:04:32.6) And I've learned a lot about oyster law and fisheries law, not only Louisiana but, you know, federal laws

about it.

Scull-DeArmey: And about what year was it that you began?

Al Sunseri: I started here in August of 1980.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. So seven years later, you decided to go out on a boat to see what they did out there. I wanted to ask you, for the record, if you could tell us what an oyster rake is. What does it look like? (0:04:59.9)

Al Sunseri: Well, there's a number of different types of oyster rakes. There's tongs, which look like big scissors that have rakes on the ends like you would use in your garden, and they're connected. And oyster gatherers, harvesters, farmers will collect them by going back and forth, and filling up those rakes, and lifting them onto a boat. As years went on, they started using rakes that were connected to a winch that would drag along the bottom of a reef and be collected into a bag that was attached to the back of the rake. And those were initially mechanical by hand, where people used a turning mechanism where one farmer got on one side, and the other one got on the other and turned it. And that changed in the [19]20s, where they became fully mechanical, with engines that turned those wenchers that would bring the oyster rake onto the vessel in which, then, they were culled, made single, and then sacked up to be sent to dealers.

Scull-DeArmey: And how were they preserved on the boat?

Al Sunseri: Well, you know it's changed significantly over the years. There wasn't refrigeration requirements. Oysters'll live a very long time unrefrigerated. Once they leave the water, they will close up and seal. When they know that there isn't water surrounding them, they know they can't feed, so they will just go into a state of osmosis where they do not try to feed. And so oysters'll live quite some time. In the summertime, they don't live as long because they're in a weakened state after spawning occurs. (0:07:27.1) But when they start fattening up in the fall, throughout the winter and early summer, the oysters can last unrefrigerated for well over a week. And if they're refrigerated and handled properly until they're refrigerated, they can last for literally weeks and remain alive.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. Very interesting.

VanZandt: Hearty, little guys.

Al Sunseri: They are. It's very interesting. I was never one that wanted to go to the type of refrigeration practices that we are required to use today, where they have to be immediately refrigerated because I think that they should be tempered. They last longer if they will be refrigerated after more of a longer time, where they're not shocked immediately with the cold air. (0:08:38.4)

VanZandt: So sort of tempering with their natural state?

Al Sunseri: Yes. And what they used to do after being harvested on the boat, they would move those oysters upriver, which has a cooling effect of not only the coolness of the water from the river, but the movement of the air surrounding them from the time it took to get down from South Plaquemines Parish up to New Orleans, that cooled them down. And once they were brought up every day, they would be distributed to the local oyster bars and saloons and then to shucking facilities, like ourselves. If they were not sold in that day, then they would go to a shucking facility where they could open them up. And then the next load of oysters would be coming in the following day.

Scull-DeArmey: At the shucking facility, what happens to the oyster after it's opened up? (0:09:39.8)

Al Sunseri: Oysters are shucked from a hundred-pound sack of oysters into a bucket, like a milk bucket, a stainless steel bucket with water and ice in it, to retain their integrity by keeping them cold. And then after a sack of oysters is shucked, they're washed, and then chilled, and packaged to go to restaurants and grocery stores and distributors, to be eaten by consumers all over the country.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you have a pearl business on the side? (laughter)

Al Sunseri: No. It's very interesting. Oysters from different areas from the country, from different areas of the growing waters here in Louisiana, will have more pearls (0:10:46.7) than others. And it's usually from a area that has a sandy bottom and a lot of current, where you'll find the pearls. But I've never, in my thirty-some-odd years here, have seen any pearls that were good enough to be put on a necklace. (laughter) A lot of small ones, and then odd-shaped ones, some that look like teeth and just different types of shapes.

Scull-DeArmey: For the record, can you paint us a picture of shucking? (0:11:21.9)

Al Sunseri: Shucking is done, especially in the old days, what we'd call the press-knife opener. You'd use a wooden-handled knife that was taken from a handle of a broom and cut. And a blade would be tapped into the end of the handle, and that utensil, that shucking knife, would be used to open the oyster away from—they take the abductor muscle on the inside of the oyster away from its shell. And you would go into what we call the hinge end of the oyster, and pry it open, but not too far because you don't want to tear the abductor muscle. So you slide, after you've pried it apart, you slide the knife of the oyster on the top of the shell to disconnect the abductor muscle away from the shell and throw the top shell off. Then you'd see the cut side of the oyster, and you would shuck the bottom of it, and then throw it into the bucket.

Scull-DeArmey: What happens to the shells? (0:12:56.6)

Al Sunseri: The shells are discarded below. In our shucking facility, we have our stalls, what we call oyster-shucking stalls, that are up high. And the shuckers stand on platforms, so that they could shuck an entire day without the pile blocking up the hole in which they drop the shells. And once they were finished shucking, those shells would be gathered and placed into containers to be sent back to the oyster farmers, to be dried, and then replaced back onto the oyster reefs to enlarge their oyster farms.

Scull-DeArme y: Wow. That's amazing.

VanZandt: Yeah. So it's a sustainable kind of a resource that's recycled back in. I just thought you'd say they were crushed for pavement.

Al Sunseri: Well, a lot of them were. But we shucked a lot of oysters in this location here. Literally thousands of sacks of oysters were shucked weekly in the old days. And in our days, the most that we probably ever shucked in a week was a thousand sacks. But like in Mississippi, there's a shucking house there that still shucks between five hundred and a thousand sacks in a day. But since we're in an urban area, the most that we would ever shuck in one day would be about three hundred to four hundred sacks in two shifts that would take to do it. And they would have to unload these shelves out of here a few times a day so that they could continue operating. But we don't process that many oysters here because of where we're located. It kind of hinders our ability to do much more than what we have done in the past.

Scull-DeArme y: How do they get back out to the beds? Does the oyster farmer come and get them from you? Does he pay for them?

Al Sunseri: Well, we don't do that any longer. But back when my grandfather was partners with the Popichs and Jurisichs, the P and J in our group, they used to shuck the oysters here, recontainerize them in either the sacks or later on, into, right directly into dump trucks. And those dump trucks were brought back to the oyster-growing areas and placed onto their boats, and then brought back out to the oyster reefs after they piled up enough to dry out because you'd always dry your shells first, before you placed them out. The shells that were just shucked were what we called green shells. And a green shell is a fresh shell. And the better, the more that those shells are dried out, usually about a year, the better catch that we would get once the oysters spawned and then spat. You would have a much better spat catch on those fresh, dried shells.

Scull-DeArme y: What is a spat? (0:16:27.4)

Sunseri: A spat is a baby oyster that's attached to the reef. They spawn. The American oyster that grows from Maine to Texas, *Crassostrea virginica*, (0:16:46.7) is a species. That oyster spawns in a larval state. The European oyster spawns in a

microscopic shell. So as different people, when they settled here, the colonists, they thought that those oysters would be like theirs, but they're different. So our oysters, when they spawn, they have the larva that kind of swims around and settles to the bottom. If they find a good surface, as soon as they touch that good, firm surface, the shell will begin to form around it. But looking at it microscopically, that larva looks just like an oyster except it has this little thing we call a boot on it, which is what adheres to wherever it's going to settle, or what we call set.

Scull-DeArmev: What are the public grounds you talked about? Do you still have public grounds? (0:17:53.3)

Al Sunseri: Oh, yeah. Louisiana is loaded with public grounds that range from the far eastern part of the state all the way to the western part of the state. Some of these public grounds are strictly set aside only for public use for direct harvest for market. But many of these public grounds are set for both planting, for young seed oysters to be transplanted from those public grounds, to the leased areas, to the farmers, to grow them out to be fatter and saltier. And here in the state of Louisiana, we have probably the largest oyster-farming industry in the entire nation and probably in the world, when you look at the vast area in which it's being farmed.

VanZandt: Why is that? Is it a sheer factor of the geography and topography?

Al Sunseri: Well, it has a lot to do with what we learned from what the colonists had done. If you go to the Northeast, through the mid-Atlantic states, you find that the oyster fishery was a public fishery, mainly. And when you have a public fishery, it's a hunter-gatherer type of attitude, where you take, and you don't put back. (0:19:40.6) You don't look over it as you would if it was your own. And some of the northeastern states saw the demise of their business because of this natural human instinct to just take and not put back. So they started their own leasing or selling of water bottoms to people so that they could grow. Well, from that, we learned very early, as going back to the 1870s, in which the parishes along coastal Louisiana—(brief interruption; end of track one of three, dated 11-1-11; beginning of track two of three, dated 11-1-11).

Scull-DeArmev: So you were talking about hunting-gathering and sustainability, and the leasing of—

Al Sunseri: Yeah. Well, here, in the 1870s, the parishes and coastal communities along the Louisiana coastline started leasing water bottoms to residents within that parish, so that they could transplant from the public oyster grounds—because it was all public oyster grounds—to areas in which the parish determined someone could use as their own private oyster farm. (0:00:42.5) And by the latter part of the nineteenth century, in 1898 the state legislature requested the US Fish Service to do a study on the public grounds to find out exactly where the natural reefs were and to make recommendations to the legislature as to if the water bottom should be kept as public use only, or if certain parts of them should be leased or sold to oyster farmers to encourage the growth and sustainability of the oyster business in the state of

Louisiana. What was determined when that study was completed in 1898 (0:01:43.6) was that they should allow the state to let farmers lease those state water bottoms to oyster farmers, to encourage to grow; not to sell them, not to keep it as a public fishery, but to encourage the sustainability and growth. And because of that, Louisiana has been the number one oyster fisheries in the country for nearly thirty years. (0:02:22.8)

Scull-DeArmey: So in 1898 they were already thinking about sustainability of the fishery.

Al Sunseri: They actually started before that. But that was when the, in the 1870s was when the first laws came about. People were doing it before that. They have studies that were done, dating back to the 1840s where people were transplanting natural, young oysters to other areas that grew a fatter, fuller, saltier oyster that they could sell easier. (0:02:58.4) And that was how this whole—it encouraged this type of farming practice that sustained and grew the reefs in the state of Louisiana. We're blessed because of all the hard work oystermen have done over this past century and a half, in growing the oyster reefs that would not be there, had [it] not been for their hard work, moving them and growing those reefs.

Scull-DeArmey: Over a century.

Al Sunseri: Well over a century, people in the state of Louisiana, these oyster farmers, have done that.

Scull-DeArmey: You can't buy that.

Al Sunseri: No, you can't. And the state, as far as coastal restoration goes, oystermen in the state of Louisiana were the first coastal restoration preservationists in not only Louisiana, but around the world. (0:03:58.4)

Scull-DeArmey: There's nothing that can accomplish that except time and effort. (laughter)

Al Sunseri: Absolutely.

Sal Sunseri: Just imagine if we didn't do it, and where we would be right now. We would have waterfront property right in front of Rampart Street.

Al Sunseri: And you think about the effort that it took. All of this by hand, with these rakes that were done, those tongs initially, and then shoveled overboard. (0:04:31.1) And that's how it was done for fifty-plus years before it became mechanized at all. And even after that, it was still not completely mechanized. And it wasn't until really the 1970s, in which people started to use fire pumps, hoses on their boats, to spread the young oysters they planted onto their own private farms. Before that, it was strictly done with shovels, off their deck of their boat, onto their farms.

And when you start talking about a thousand sacks of oysters being shoveled onto a boat and then off of the boat, all within the same day? That was some real men that did that. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: I'll say. Yeah.

VanZandt: I was just thinking, as we're talking about this, that, I mean, the oyster is truly the identity of the state as the orange is to Florida, or potatoes to Idaho. And so how does that sort of really innate, to-the-core culture manifest itself in the culture, and your community, and your family, and the people who work in this kind of field and industry? (0:06:07.3)

Al Sunseri: It's interesting you ask that question. The people in our business, I think a lot of us believe we have oyster liquor running through the veins of our bodies (laughter) rather than blood. We spend so much time, not only farming them and then processing them and selling them, but we enjoy them as much as all the people that get to eat them at restaurants around the country. We talk oysters a lot. It's a big part of our life, and not only to us, but people that live in southeastern Louisiana, more so even than south/central or southwestern Louisiana because the eastern side of our state, with the Mississippi river, it's that that is the reason we have such a great natural resource. (0:07:12.5) We have this great Mississippi River that has built that marsh area. And its nutrients that are brought down have given us this great crop of oysters that we've been blessed with. And we've taken that to another level with the farming part of it. But as the culture, people that came here, they were astonished by the fish that we had here, the shrimp, and the oysters that were just so abundant. (0:07:57.6) And you have a restaurant like Antoine's, that started in 1840 here and came up with Oysters Rockefeller. It was just such a great product that was there always. And they were highly sought after in European communities, these oysters. You go back to Roman times, and we come here, and there's just this great abundance of it. And Indians, (0:08:32.3) you find mounds of oyster shells in the central part of the country that it goes to show you how important it has been to the Native Americans that were here, as a food source. Not only did they use them as food, but they used them for other things to build with and all. So it's very much a part of our nature here, not only in Louisiana and the Gulf states, but around the country.

Scull-DeArmey: What is the typical depth of an oyster bed in the water?

Al Sunseri: Here in Louisiana, you're looking at probably about five to six feet in which the depth of where the oyster is grown, but it can be in areas that are intertidal, that will come up out of the water at low tide. (0:09:32.7) And here in Louisiana, as well as in Mississippi and Alabama and Florida, we don't have these huge tide surges. You're typically looking at a one- to two-foot tide. It's not like in the Northeast or the Northwest, where they literally have ten- to fifteen-foot tides. And their oysters are grown in what would truly be considered intertidal, in some areas. But there are some areas, like in the Northeast in Connecticut and Long Island, New York, New Jersey that those oysters grow twenty feet underwater.

Scull-DeArmev: Are they harvested?

Al Sunseri: They're harvested. And they're just done in a different manner than they're done here. They all were started either being hand-gathered or with tongs. And as time went on, we found them in deeper waters, and those waters were developed more. But you will always find them close to a freshwater source because oysters only grow in brackish water, and they grow best between five to fifteen parts per thousand salinity levels. (0:11:07.0)

VanZandt: Five being?

Al Sunseri: Five being the lowest to the freshest, and fifteen actually isn't the saltiest because you go in the Northeast, the typical salinity will be twenty to thirty parts per thousand. But it takes a lot longer for their oysters to grow up there because the water temperatures are colder, so they don't grow as quickly as they do down in the warmer waters of the Gulf states.

VanZandt: So here's where there's time for a shameless plug. What makes Louisiana oysters taste different than others that you can get around the United States? (0:11:52.7)

Sal Sunseri: Well, first of all—Sal here—the combination of freshwater from the Mississippi River and the saltwater from the Gulf create a perfect environment for the flavors in which we derive our oysters from. And in different areas, there are different flavors. So to me, it's just a consistent, balanced flavor, a year-round product, and not everyone can boast that. Yet we can. We don't quite do the promotionals that the East and West Coast does, in reference to naming the origins, but we're getting better at it. So when you compare that, we have, above and beyond, more areas to draw from, and different origins. So hopefully we'll start doing the same things, where our restaurants will start pointing out exactly where they're from. But all in all, we have the best; we have that perfect balance of flavor from the Mississippi and the Gulf and the ways we create them, also. Our chefs create more oyster dishes than most anywhere in the world. We thrive on our bounty, and we love the history and culture of this product. But we are innovative and visionary when it comes to the chefs, and how we generate all these different flavors of oysters.

VanZandt: And what is the relationship between [you] and the restaurants here? It's got to be so close—I would think—and tight-knit. You discover maybe some evolution of the oysters, and they then create; that informs what they're creating. Just talk about that, that relationship. (0:13:53.4)

Sal Sunseri: Well, just recently there was a meeting here in New Orleans of the Chef's Collaborative. And it's many chefs throughout the nation, and they came down for their summit, their conference. And one of the things that they did was viewed how we do it. And we presented our different varieties. By the way, we had

eleven different varieties of oysters for this event. And they were very, very pleased, and very excited about how we're doing things a little bit differently than we've done in the past. But you know, we're creating these items; we're generating new ideas. I think the chefs realize the bounty, take advantage of it, and know that it's such a versatile item. And these guys just, they're amazing. And many, many of them are already from here, so they just grow up in the industry, grow up in the environment and the culture of our bounty, and take advantage of that. And it just, it's endless on the ideas that come out from the recipes that are derived from oysters.

VanZandt: Can I just, for a second, sorry—Blake, what is your favorite oyster dish?

Blake Sunseri: Raw. It'd be raw.

Sal Sunseri: Natural.

VanZandt: Natural.

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. You get the different flavors of the sea. (0:15:32.3) And it's just amazing how you can just, you can get a sense of like you're sitting on the dock, just like all the boats and the seagulls chirping, you know. And you just, like you get that all in just the taste of one oyster. It's amazing.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you have anything with the oyster that's raw?

Blake Sunseri: Now, a cooked dish?

Scull-DeArmey: I mean, when you're eating the raw oyster, do you have—

Al Sunseri: Tabasco or something.

Scull-DeArmey: Condiments, yeah.

Blake Sunseri: Oh, I do at times, but like working here at P&J, I can remember when the shuckers would be shucking oysters, and I'd would go to a couple of specific shuckers and ask them to shuck a few for me. And I'd eat them just the way they were just because, I mean, it's good to get a taste for the oyster when you're in this business. You can tell the customer how they are, if they're fresh, if they're salty. And they kind of get an idea for what they're looking for and if they want to buy from us by the way we present our description of the oyster.

Scull-DeArmey: So it's research? (laughter)

Blake Sunseri: Yes, definitely, most definitely.

VanZandt: Sample the merchandise. (laughter)

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. You got to eat your own product. You have to eat your own product.

VanZandt: Well, do you feel like sharing, while we're on it now, on this tangent, any special memories, like the first thing that maybe comes to mind when you think about growing up around all of this? (0:17:21.0)

Blake Sunseri: Actually, when I was younger, my dad would try to get me to eat oysters. And being young, it's kind of—you don't see a lot of kids that take to eating oysters readily. But there are a few kids that have. I wasn't one of them. I started out not liking them and gradually developed a real liking for them. I mean, I miss the days that we shuck, and I really miss the whole atmosphere of the shop. The way it is now, it's funny. I wouldn't describe it as morbid as a skeleton of a business, but it's definitely not—the soul is different. (0:18:10.3) The soul of the company is very different. But getting back to the younger generations, (0:18:25.8) I'd see kids come in here on like Thanksgiving and Christmas. And they'd have maybe like a handful of kids that would try the oysters. And there was like one little boy that would come in, and he was just eating them. Like, we had samples out, and he would just eat up like as many raw oysters as he could. And I was just like, "Man, this guy can really pack them in there." (laughter) "He's starting out for the new championship in oyster eating." (laughter) But it's amazing. It really is.

VanZandt: You mention the soul, and I can just—we're looking through these windows here at your shop. Can you, again, sort of paint a picture of what that was like, and what the shucking, in full operation, was like, for people who have never experienced that?

Blake Sunseri: Well, it'll really take you in. It's really amazing, especially because it's on a busy city street where you don't see much processing done in New Orleans like it was done here at P&J. We're right at the mouth of the Vieux Carre [Old Quarter, French Quarter], which is kind of like the gateway of the French Quarter, per se. And as we'd pull up in the morning, it would be very quiet. It's early morning, we start here. The shuckers would get in maybe two hours after we started the day. And you'd start hearing the forklift back up, and pull around, and empty the sacks out. And you'd hear them kind of like fall like rocks onto a table, or onto the ground, onto a concrete slab. And the shuckers would start chipping away with their hammers, and it would just be a *clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack*. And you'd hear that all day long, and you could walk by and hear it going on, if you were just an onlooker. And people would sometimes stop and kind of marvel at what's going on in here because there's not really much activity at five in the morning, so we were kind of the only ones around that were kind of giving the day a start. You know? We'd kind of start the day for New Orleans, in a manner of speaking. And it was really a pride kind of thing. It was really something to take in and appreciate. It was—I'm not sure if I can explain it any better than that.

Sal Sunseri: That's great.

VanZandt: That is incredible. I was right there with you. (laughter) Would you come before school sometimes?

Blake Sunseri: Actually, I had started when I was sixteen in the summer, just to see how the business was and kind of just check everything out. And after that, I moved on to a restaurant and did busing work, so I kind of got to see the backgrounds of a restaurant and how that worked. And it was a learning experience in itself. Restaurants are very high-maintenance programs, and it's really amazing what goes into serving people food. It's really a daunting task for some, but a very rewarding task for many, especially in New Orleans. But after I kind of got fed up with just staying in one position as a busboy and not really having any room to move up, I kind of decided to come back and work at P&J. And I'm sorry. What was—

VanZandt: Yeah, that's great, about how you got started, when you were sixteen.

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. And I'd started to come back, and I'd worked in the packing room for a long time, processing the oysters, (0:23:09.6) kind of seeing how the cycle of oysters shucked, to bucket, to washing them, to blowing them, to packing them kind of went. And it's really a real process. It's really amazing how the oysters would get shucked. They'd go into a bucket. The shuckers would carry them over to a window. We'd take them out the window. We'd process them. We'd put them in a big stainless steel bowl, run water over them, kind of feel around for the shell in the oyster. And it'd be like maybe sometimes we'd get seven pounds of meat. Sometimes we'd get five. It depended on what time of year it was. But we'd kind of fish out the shell, then take that, weigh it up, see how much meat we got, and then take that, put it into a tank. And we'd blow them, which would be running air underneath them. The oysters would be in a big vat, but with a screen, and underneath the screen was a few pipes that would have holes in them. And that would blow air out, up and underneath the oysters, and it would bubble up and a lot of the salt and the rest of whatever, with the oysters, the saltwater and such would come up. And you'd pour it over the top, and it would run onto the ground, and we have a drain in the ground that would kind of drain out all the water. And then we'd take the vat, and they have a hole on the side, and the oysters would shoot out, and they'd drain into a big table with holes in them. And the oysters would be scooped and put into a bucket, either with half-water and ice, and then the rest half is oysters, or we'd pack them solid, depending on what preference the customers had. And it was quite a process. You know? And sometimes we'd get backed up with the buckets, and we'd have to get either my dad or Sal to come in, and they'd help us out with the process. But it was always something to do. There was always something to be done. And they'd have some time for breaks, but not much.

Scull-DeArme: Blake, you have a children's book there. You really do. You have a children's book in that narrative you just gave us, just exactly like you said it, with illustrations.

Blake Sunseri: Thank you.

Scull-DeArmey: It would fascinate first and second graders. It would fascinate them. It would. I guarantee you.

Sal Sunseri: That's a great idea.

Al Sunseri: It's interesting you say that. I know both Sal and I have brought, done show-and-tell at the schools that our kids went to. (0:26:33.2) And I remember when Blake was a youngster, going to the little grammar school, and how the kids thought. We brought in our little props, and we'd have the tongs, as we were talking with you. And we'd have the shucking knife, and we'd open some up for them and see how many of them wanted to eat them, and if they wanted to or not. But it was always, the kids were always very interested in this business because as Blake pointed out, the sounds and all these things that we don't have today, kids loved to see and hear. And it's a very lively thing to see that. You don't see it really anymore in these days. And we were doing stuff pretty much the same way they had been doing for a hundred years.

VanZandt: You described that so well.

Blake Sunseri: Thank you.

VanZandt: And I'm just wondering what the camaraderie was like between—first of all, how many workers would that take? How many on any given shift? And what was the camaraderie with the people? What kind of people do you employ? What kind of person does it really take to make a good oyster shucker? (0:27:57.0)

Sal Sunseri: Well, mainly we have Vietnamese ladies. Not too tall, (laughter) very short, strong, strong-willed, incredible, diligent, on time, always on time. And a couple of other local guys too, but mainly Vietnamese women. And then we'd have our guys that would help in the process room and also on the loading, out in the process area, for loading the big sacks. So it was all an orchestra. It was truly an orchestra from start to finish. Just like Blake was saying, in the beginning, it's all about the clacking, kind of introducing our industry to the waking up of the city of New Orleans. And then it all takes place. It's all the loading, to the shucking, to the processing, then off to the restaurants. So it's just a flow and a process that was just fantastic. But that is the biggest thing, to me, that, when Blake had mentioned the soul, the heart and soul. It's that, and it's the people that aren't here, right now, every morning, shucking. And hopefully everything's going to be right. All the stars are going to align, and by next year we'll be back on track and doing it again and waking up the city in the morning.

Scull-DeArmey: What exactly are the hammers for? How did they use those? (0:29:43.1)

Sal Sunseri: Well, that actually clips the bill. There's a beak to an oyster and a bill. And the beak is the hinge area, and then there's a bill, a flatter edge. And that's what they clip, on the edge of the bill, and then take the knife and go in that way directly to the muscle, and then sever the muscle, both sides of the muscle.

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. They'd have these stainless blocks. It's like these circular blocks that are maybe—I don't know—thirty pounds? And it's like really compact but heavy material. And they'd set them on these blocks, (0:30:28.8) and they'd hit the oysters like that. They'd either hit the hinge to kind of—

Scull-DeArmey: Could you just hold that thought while the siren goes by. (brief interruption) So they'd either take a hinge—

Blake Sunseri: Well, they'd take the oyster and hit it on the hinge to offset the laying of the oyster, the set of the shell, or they'd actually take the whole bill off and go at the meat like that. But it was really nice, the camaraderie, (0:31:02.0) like you said. The ladies would bring us egg rolls, in December, like around Christmastime. And they'd cook homemade egg rolls for us, and they were like some of the best egg rolls I've ever eaten. I don't know if they were packed with beef or something, but they were really, really good. I miss that.

VanZandt: Oh, man, I know. You're making me hungry. (laughter) I've interviewed several Vietnamese women who shucked oysters. And one of them told a great story of not understanding and not being very good at it in the beginning, and she didn't do a good job. And then her husband was a shucker, and he kind of showed her the technique, and how to do it. So it sounds like it really takes some skill, and particularly to get that, kind of like you said, that orchestration going, where you've got a real rhythm and speed to it.

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. They'd have to shuck the oyster very clean first, to keep them on with us. And they were pretty darn quick, for what kind of work they were doing. They had to wear these thick gloves, either like, many layers, and sometimes they'd have Band-Aids all over their hands. (0:32:17.0)

Scull-DeArmey: And it's pretty rough on your hands. Isn't it?

Blake Sunseri: It's very rough.

Sal Sunseri: But they don't cut themselves, though. They don't cut.

Al Sunseri: Yeah. They'd just use the Band-Aids to create more layers.

Scull-DeArmey: Right, for padding.

Al Sunseri: Yeah, that's what they'd—they would use those little cot things on the ends of their fingers as a padding sort of thing. And you know, it was amazing. In all

these years I worked here, so few people got hurt. Even though they're all handling knives, opening up thousands of oysters a day, each of them, and it was a rarity—knock on wood—that anyone ever got cut. But there goes to the highly-skilled position. Shucking oysters is a highly-skilled position. And it's always been an immigrant's business. (0:33:11.8) If you go back to the beginnings of our business, if it was not the Islenos in the eastern part of our state, in St. Bernard Parish, to the Croatians in Plaquemines Parish, or the Italians in Jefferson, and the French, which went from all over, but mainly from Lafourche Parish on west, but the French were from all parts of the state, being that this was a French settlement. But that was kind of how it went, and it's always been that immigrant's business. And the shuckers were originally the French. We had Spanish. And as time went on, we had the black people that were sharecroppers, that actually came from north of New Orleans, that worked here during the cold time and then went back and worked in the fields and all during the warmer times. And from there, we had immigrants as the Vietnamese came in after the Vietnam War. And then now, more recently, we have the Hispanic community that's come up from South America and Central America.

Scull-DeArmeY: Well, moving on, we're going to skip to [question] number seven, because we've really covered [questions] one through six. And I'm going to ask you, what does this business mean to you and your family? (0:35:05.9)

Al Sunseri: Well, we've made an entire career. Five generations of us now, have made a living on this business. It's been something that I really never thought I would be involved in but became involved in and then learned to love it. It means a real lot to me and what is probably the hardest thing is after this last disaster, man-made disaster with British Petroleum, (0:35:56.3) is having these people that we grew up with, these ladies that Blake was speaking about that, he came in as a baby. I mean, we literally brought him in here. His mom would drive him up with him in the car seat and carry him in. And they got to see Blake from being a baby all the way to being a young man, to managing the outside of the plant. And that's the toughest thing, seeing these ladies and these men. I had one of the men come in here today that I hadn't seen in a few months, that used to work for us that we had to lay off, that we're not providing for them. Our company that had (0:36:42.2) provided an opportunity, a career to—our company that's provided a career to, that they could raise their families and send their kids to college. I mean, these ladies, these Vietnamese ladies have had their kids that are now doctors, neurosurgeons, attorneys. They're world-renowned. And they were shuckers here. And to have had that ability through their hard work and labor, that made us successful. I miss that about what we used to be here. But I also know that it means so much, because the pouring-out of sympathy and their feelings from people, not only from Metro-New Orleans area but all over the world, that came here, following that oil disaster, that knew who we were. And we didn't realize. We're just a little, small, family business, and I had no idea that we had touched so many people around the world, that have eaten our oysters at restaurants here in New Orleans, or in New York, or Los Angeles, and never knew until we were on the television and in the newspapers and stuff like that. So it means a real lot to me as one of the owners of this business to know what we have meant to

our community. And I just want to be back to where we were before.

Scull-DeArmev: I'm thinking that we could very easily segue into the questions on the oil spill here.

VanZandt: That's what I was going to say. Why don't we? And before we do that because this is a perfect time—Sal brought up, too—y'all have all described the changes and how things are so different now, but we haven't talked about why they are. But before we do, Blake, would you like to share anything? Your dad just had a chance to say what this has meant to him. Do you want to take a minute before we get into it—why you are where you are today? If you don't, that's fine. I just wanted to give you the chance if there is anything you wanted to add.

Blake Sunseri: I mean, I owe my whole past, present, and future to the oyster company. (0:39:34.2) And I had taken off a year because of trouble at the company. I felt I couldn't handle the pressure of what had happened in the [BP Deepwater oil] spill, and how the future of the company was going. And I had to take off a year to kind of get my head together. And I'm glad to be back, but it's just that it's really still not the same as what it has been for so many years of my life. And I don't know; I'm just glad to be back. I'm glad that there's still a business.

VanZandt: Well, let's move into that, then. Stephanie, did you have something?

Scull-DeArmev: What thoughts did you have when you learned of the [BP Deepwater Horizon] oil spill? (0:40:30.1)

Al Sunseri: Initially I remember hearing about it and then seeing about the eleven people that were killed with the explosion. And I thought, "They're not telling us the full story." And the reason I say that is because of my experience with oil companies as it relates to the oyster business. I have been involved with lots of dealings with the oil and gas business, with the regulatory part of it, with coastal restoration, for nearly my entire career here. (0:41:22.8) And I've seen where they don't tell all the story. They miss a lot of the story, and it's not until they're proven wrong that they admit to that wrongdoing. And I've seen that my entire life. I look at our estuary that has ten thousand miles of pipeline, canals that are open, and they weren't supposed to be open. They were supposed to be enclosed and/or weired off so that we wouldn't have this erosion take place. Yet, it's taken place, and it's continued to be allowed. So when that happened, I knew it was more than what it was. And as time went on, we learned that it was more, and more, and more because they kept saying it was less, until it was actually shown. And once you saw the video, going twenty-four/seven, for four months, and you saw this oil gushing out, and you saw the planes dropping dispersants, and all these things occurring, I was concerned about our future because it impacted the oyster people pretty quickly because right after it happened, we had a tropical storm enter the Gulf, and our state precautionarily closed all the oyster-growing areas that were north of the oil spill. (0:43:40.1) And I say "spill." It should never, ever be called a spill. A spill is spilling a glass of water on the table and being

able to clean it up with a paper towel. This thing is not a spill. It's an environmental disaster. (0:43:57.5) It will affect us here for some time, and it's shown us so far that the life cycle of the oysters here in Louisiana has been affected. (0:44:12.3) People can claim that it is all because of the freshwater that we had, but it's more than that because we're not seeing the "set" that I talked about earlier. Something's occurring in our environment. What it is, I don't know. The oysters that remain alive and that have continued to thrive were in an area that had not been affected. I know that I'm confident in everything that we sell because I know it's been tested and tested and for all of the things that could not allow us to sell them. So I know that they're good to eat, but what my concern is about this life cycle, and what we've been blessed down here in Louisiana and the Gulf states to have this continually, naturally reproductive product.

Scull-DeArmey: That centuries-old process.

Al Sunseri: Right. This natural resource that reoccurs, that is *not* reoccurring. And it's not from any fault of what we're doing because we continue to try to plant the cultch material, to get the set. (0:45:46.5) We continue to work the areas, to try to bring the reef back to the top and get rid of whatever sedimentations occurred. But it's something more there, and I just would hope, and I continue to pray for the time where we see a really good set, so that from that point on I'll have more of a feeling of promise to our future. And I'm not normally a negative person, and especially since Hurricane Katrina, (0:46:32.9) I'm a very positive person because I know after that storm, if we were able to come back from that and grow our business, which we were able to do, under the absolute—what I thought was—the worst conditions. And it was all coming back and doing real well, and then have this occur and go through four spawning cycles and not see a good set. It concerns me about our future, as to the volume of what our business once was. I'm not talking about just P&J right now. I'm talking about the Louisiana oyster business and the Gulf oyster business, (0:47:12.6) which has been the large producer of oysters in this country. Seventy percent of the oysters that are sold in the United States came from the Gulf; of that, 40 percent of it came from Louisiana. And this year, this past year, we're not 40 percent any longer. We've lost that number-one position that we held for twenty-five years. And that is a concern to me.

VanZandt: Where, do you see, are the needs and areas for investment, and who should be investing in that future? (0:47:53.7)

Al Sunseri: Well, I think that all the steps are being taken. There's a NRDA [National Resource Damage Assessment] process that's in effect right now in which the Oil Pollution Act is in place to have those responsible parties having to pay fines to redevelop and to repair the damages caused by what occurred. I think that the states are working well together to encourage that repair, to make sure that the birds' nesting areas are made whole. We have plans in the oyster business in the state to develop a state hatchery here in Louisiana (0:49:00.5) that can be utilized by all, through a new program in which farmers can get their young oysters, their spat, from

the hatchery, and use that on their private farms that are new to us. Around the world, people mainly have a farm that is in a much smaller area, in which the oysters are not 100 percent natural like they are here. They're started off in a laboratory, in a hatchery and then placed into an area for grow-out. Well, to try to jump-start and get back to where we were, that's part of what the plan is, to try to redevelop the oyster business here in Louisiana. And I'm hopeful and confident that that is taken to the next level, from the planning stage to the implementation stage. As time goes on, we'll see.

Scull-DeArmey: So the state hatchery then would be taking place in a laboratory?

Al Sunseri: It would be in a, from my understanding, it'll be at the Wildlife and Fisheries lab that's in Grand Island that was built following Hurricane Katrina, and would be added onto, to have a bigger hatchery to provide for a service to the oyster farmers and to the citizens of the state, so that we're able to do something again, which is new and provide for this great abundance of oysters, that we've come to know, to continue. And if they take the plan out to fruition to where we'll be able to have new farms set up, that we'll have a sustainable resource again in the interim until these other areas that were natural come back to a point in which we were accustomed to seeing prior to the oil disaster.

Sal Sunseri: But I feel, though, with the bigger picture, that federal government is still not fulfilling its obligation to coastal restoration as a whole for the state of Louisiana. (0:51:40.2) We are doing our specifics in reference to the oyster industry, but to me the bigger picture is going to be whether or not there's a sustainable coastal environment. And hopefully we'll get some answers soon enough, to where they'll start putting in the monies that are needed to create that environment. And I just don't see it yet.

Scull-DeArmey: How would they do that, Sal? Do you have any ideas on—

Sal Sunseri: Well, there are different—Al serves on the Coastal Restoration Board, the state board, but some of the things that we feel is appropriate is not exactly what the state and federal government are going to do, but what we would like to see are smaller freshwater diversions that mimic the way it used to be; building up the barrier islands; moving silt to fill in the deeper areas that have been devastated, and then fill in the canals that are no longer in use, that were cut in order to make thoroughfares directly to offshore rigs. So there's a combination of many things. And planting trees and grasses, and refurbishing marshes through, you could actually use oyster shell to help build up the marshes. So it's just a combination of things. Now, state and federal feel like bigger, larger freshwater diversions are a more cost effective approach and will change the environment fairly quickly, meaning that although it will devastate fisheries, it will devastate environments closer into that diversion, they feel that it would replenish the marshes quicker. And again, it would be a more costly approach, the approach that the oyster industry feels is best. But we will soon find out. We don't have the money as an oyster industry, so we rely upon federal and

state.

Al Sunseri: It's interesting. When you question those coastal experts about these large sediment diversions (0:54:37.4) and ask them, "When will this big forty-five-thousand-cubic-foot-per-second sediment diversion—how long will it take for them to build the land back? Will it be a year, five years, ten years? How far? Show me where it's going to be on a map." None of them, none of these experts that support this initiative will tell you. But *I* can tell you. If you use sediment placement and place it where you want it to be, build it to where you want it to be, you'll know exactly what it looks like in short order. They've done it in too many places in southeastern Louisiana, on both the eastern side and the western side of the Mississippi River. You saw the Chandeleur Island berm that was built over a matter of months. So what can be done with sediment placement and then enhancement if you put rock barriers on the southern end of those barriers, you'll have sediment that will build it back up again. But they won't *do* that, and I don't understand it. I've fought for that sort of thing on the commission that I sit, but I'm one voice. I'm an oysterman's voice, and it's a very highly politically-charged thing. And oil and gas being number one that leads what direction it'll go; navigation being number two, which include not only the corps of engineers but also the shipping industry (0:57:04.3) because both rely on each other. And it was proven out even more this year when they decided recently they were going to close the West Bay freshwater diversion, even though this past year with the high river, this historic high river, and a huge sediment deposit that was placed there; it interrupted navigation, yet it built a very large sediment supply. And they're going to go ahead and close it off, rather than allow it to collect the sediment to be used and placed in places. Instead, they'd just like to see it all be shipped offshore. And that is discouraging to me, as what I believe myself, being an environmentalist, because I believe all oyster people are environmentalists. They've done back-breaking work over these years to protect our shore, as well as enhance what we do. (0:58:20.6) We want to grow more oysters so we can sell more oysters. None of us are multimillionaires in this business, but we've all worked very hard for a very long time selling a product that people love to eat, and we love to work at. And so these others who just take and take and take, and don't put back, are the ones that are determining where our future is going to be, as far as the coast and Louisiana.

Scull-DeArme: So for example, the oil company comes in and taps a natural resource. They did nothing to put the resource there. They're doing nothing about replenishing the resource. They're just taking it away. *And* they're destroying the environment to some degree.

Al Sunseri: Yes. I'm also a capitalist and a realist. We need these natural resources like oil and gas to live in today's world. That's the real thing. We are in a lighted office with air-conditioning. You hear the vehicles driving outside, the traffic lights that are going on and off, and we couldn't do any of this if we didn't have the energy that we have. So I want that. I just want those who are benefiting from the natural resources to be environmentally friendly and to do the right thing. When you take

that on and get permitted to do a project, to put in an oil rig or to put in a gas line, you need to be environmentally friendly and make sure that you left it better than what it was. And that's been the fault of the energy industry in the Gulf and in Louisiana. They've not been friendly to the environment. And our regulators, our politicians, have allowed it. And it's not just in Louisiana. (1:01:03.9) It's all over that that's occurred. And so I *do* want oil and gas to thrive. We all need it. I just want them to be as environmentally safe and protective as we are, as people who are consumers of that oil and gas are, too.

VanZandt: Your approach, you *all*, is more targeted, focused, longer-term, it sounds like. Like you said, it might be more costly, but in the end, the other end, it's more of an investment, which then you'll see the greater returns.

Al Sunseri: Absolutely. And that is the whole thing. I wish that everyone in America would look at our coastline and understand the importance of this Louisiana coastline to the rest of the country. If you were to look at the amount of food and items for construction that are transported up our river to inner parts of the United States, if you look at the oil and gas that's transferred from pipelines in all of coastal Louisiana to the rest of the country, (1:02:45.6) pipelines that go throughout the country—

VanZandt: Including DC.

Al Sunseri: —including Washington, DC—you would realize the importance of Louisiana to the rest of the country. Cut it off completely and watch the economy really—if we think we're in a bad economy today, cut off the energy supply tomorrow, and we'd be in a big depression in a short order because where Louisiana goes, the rest of the country goes. We saw it with Hurricane Katrina. (1:03:22.0) When the infrastructure was damaged, when oil and gas companies couldn't get out to their rigs, where vessels and all that provides services to those rigs and everything couldn't work because their boats were either up on the shore or whatever, it meant a lot. And the same thing could happen, and will happen, if we don't start doing something as a nation to try to protect and restore coastal Louisiana to a point that will continue to be sustainable.

Scull-DeArme: Al, in April of 2010, you were pretty much having your normal life and normal flow of oysters. And then we had this catastrophe of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico. What were the consequences for you? Can you kind of paint a picture for us of what happened to you and your family and the business after the oil started contaminating, and the oil dispersant started contaminating out there?

Al Sunseri: Well, the contamination part, I don't know if we truly have contamination. That's yet to be seen. In certain areas, of course there was some actual oil that was settled and is *still* there. In fact, we were getting oysters from an area near a place that they call Bay Jimmy, in the Barataria Bay, right before that, in Creole Bay and in Barataria Bay, very near Bay Jimmy, where there's still oil today.

VanZandt: But Governor Jindal, then, the freshwater—

Al Sunseri: Right.

VanZandt: Maybe it was after that.

Al Sunseri: Yes. But that freshwater I supported and will always support Governor Jindal and his use of freshwater to try to keep the oil outside the marsh. (1:05:32.2) We had that tool in the toolbox. Let it operate. And if it helped, or if it didn't, we'll never know. But if we didn't use it when it was there, that would've been a shame because we had that tool to utilize. And with the amount of freshwater that came down in 2010, we had also another high-river year in 2010. So we had the water to actually keep going for much longer than normal. So you wonder, [if] God saw this coming and allowed for that river to remain high for as long as it did. When I saw [the oil disaster] (1:06:25.7) happen, I was very concerned about how our business would have to deal with it. We started buying as many oysters as we could, knowing what the impact could be, especially after we got to see what the flow was actually doing, of that oil. We just would load up the coolers and shuck as much as we could. And we were selling almost as much as we could produce because people were concerned. They wanted to have their oysters for this coming Thanksgiving. And I'll never forget when I knew that we were coming close to a point where we couldn't get any more oysters and the state was getting ready to close down all of the growing areas. And that day for us, when we had our last oyster to shuck, was June 10 of 2010. And the only reason we were able to shuck that long is because we kept collecting the oysters and stacking them everywhere we possibly could, and working as much as we could until the last day we could get oysters.

Scull-DeArme y: Hold that thought, and tell me when would you normally have stopped getting oysters?

Al Sunseri: Never.

Scull-DeArme y: It would be year-round.

VanZandt: It's year-round.

Al Sunseri: It's a twelve-month thing. In my career, that began in 1980, we *always* shucked. Now, if you had a storm, sure, we would close down. In fact, for Hurricane Katrina, (1:08:18.5) which I thought was going to be the biggest obstacle I'd ever see in my lifetime, we loaded up like we always did with oysters. When we saw a storm coming, we would load up so that we would have oysters when our competitors didn't have them. And for many, many years [Mr. Sunseri knocks on a wooden table], through many, many storms, we had all the oysters we needed, and we were the king of the hill. We had the oysters for all of our customers. And (laughter) with Hurricane Katrina, we had a lot of oysters, but we lost power here for a very long

time. So my brother and my son and a couple of other guys came here and cleaned out oyster coolers and threw them away three weeks after the event.

Blake Sunseri: It's amazing. You'd think they'd smell bad when you open the cooler, but it's actually just a bunch of ammonia. It's ammonia hits you in the face, and it just burns your eyes and your throat. Oh, it's amazing. I walked in the cooler, and I was like, "Hey, it doesn't smell that bad in here." Then the ammonia hit me, just like all in one cloud and it just was like, "Oh, wow!" I couldn't breathe. Yeah. Watery eyes, it was a burning sensation.

Sal Sunseri: The household freezers were worse.

Blake Sunseri: Oh, yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, really? (laughter)

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. (laughter)

Al Sunseri: Well, that would make you gag. (laughter) The ammonia would kill you, (laughter) but the different reflex that you would get from the deterioration of the proteins in a refrigerator.

Blake Sunseri: And the worst thing that smelled at our house was this cup of coffee that we left on the kitchen counter. (laughter) Yeah.

VanZandt: So just how big are your freezers at home? I'm just imagining. (laughter)

Sal Sunseri: Any size! Just a little, bitty freezer with all the different stuff in it. And the fridge, you know. Just the whole—

Al Sunseri: When you're unable to open it up for weeks, and then finally get to open it, I mean, we literally could not clean the smell out. And we spent hours to try to clean the smell out and to let the sun bleach it and everything else for weeks after we cleaned it, just to see if we could salvage it. And we were unable to salvage our refrigerators for use after that. But we were able to do it here because we came in. We had fiberglass walls that are easily cleanable, and we had pressure washers and lots of bleach and all when we came and cleaned all of our coolers, so that we were able to get back and utilize them. We still didn't get to use them for another month and a half after we cleaned them up. So they had time to—and we sanitized them three times prior to use, again.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, ammonia is kind of a cleaner in itself. Isn't it?

Al Sunseri: Oh, it is.

Scull-DeArmeY: It could kill every biotic thing.

Al Sunseri: Yes.

VanZandt: There's a product invention in there somewhere. (laughter)

Al Sunseri: You actually asked a different question, Stephanie, that went off on a tangent. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmeY: That happens in oral history a lot.

VanZandt: We like to go on those tangents.

Scull-DeArmeY: And it's a good side trip, which is why we keep notes so we can come back to. You said that June 10, 2010, was your last day to gather oysters. The beds were closed by the state.

Al Sunseri: They were actually closed before that, but that was when we had the last of our supply to shuck. (1:12:32.6)

Scull-DeArmeY: And then what happened?

Al Sunseri: Well, then it became a media blitz on our hundred-and-thirty-four-year-old company at the time. Someone happened to call, and it was a reporter from CNN [Cable News Network]. And we were on the news at five o'clock in the morning, on CNN. From that, we probably had fifteen media outlets come that day. And in fact, three local news companies parked satellite trucks in front of our business and waited until we shucked our last oyster and interviewed us all through the day. We had CBS and NBC here that day. We had already been on CNN a number of—that was the *national* CBS and NBC. And we had all the local stations here all day. And it became a media blitz on what was happening to our old company. And it was a trying time because we didn't know what we were looking at and how long. This thing's still gushing along and no end in sight. They're talking about the different ways, a top kill, and all these different things that they're going to use, the golf-ball thing, and nothing's working. And so we tried to figure out how we were going to operate. (1:14:24.4) And we were blessed in that we were close with two of the largest oyster suppliers in the country. One of them happened to be a son of a guy that worked for Mr. Popich, that bought a bunch of our old farms and then added onto those farms. And another guy bought farms that were adjacent to some of our old farms. And we [were] very close friends over the years, and they had been able to supply us with enough oysters to keep a certain portion of our business. We had to reinvent ourself, again. After Hurricane Katrina, we had to reinvent ourselves. We did. We were successful with it, and we had gotten back to where we were, (1:15:25.7) with all the same people working for us, almost, and back almost to the same sales capacity and

production capacity. This next thing [BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster], we're still, a year-and-a-half out from when we stopped shucking, pretty much in the same predicament that we were that day that we closed down. But we figured it out, how to operate and be successful enough to pay for our salaries. Now, that's just us in the family. That's not the rest of our family of oyster shuckers that we grew up with, or the other processing people that worked with us, or drivers that worked with us that we don't have positions for any longer. (1:16:25.6) We are on a skeleton crew and operate very efficiently and work on very small margins just enough to be able to make it. And it's worked for us. (end of track two of three, dated 11-1-11; beginning of track three of three, dated 11-1-11)

VanZandt: I'm curious, because we've heard Al's background as to how he got into this, but we haven't heard yours [referring to Sal].

Sal Sunseri: Sure, sure.

VanZandt: Is there anything you'd like to share about your role in the company and your background?

Sal Sunseri: Well, first of all, let me tell you about my first experience with the oysters. (0:00:14.3) I think I was four, could have been three; I don't know. But my mom introduced it to me. And she just had a regular, smaller oyster. She would always choose a smaller oyster for the kids when she started them off. Right? Well, I didn't like the texture. So what she would do was cut the belly of the oyster off and only serve me the muscle. Right? So I'd at least get acclimated to the flavor. And she put sauce on a cracker, and so it was nothing. Piece of cake. (laughter) I could do it then. Cocktail sauce. So that's kind of how I started getting acclimated to the texture and the flavor and whatnot of the oyster. And then I'm sure within a year I was eating them, all the time. But beginning here, I was actually in college. I was at USL, University of Southwestern Louisiana. And I needed some money to be able to make it in college. (0:01:27.7) And Al was here already and offered the opportunity, through my brother and my father, to deliver oysters back to Lafayette restaurants. So I would come here early in the morning, pick up oysters, bring them back, and distribute them, all shucked oysters, no whole oysters, in my VW (Volkswagen) Bug. (laughter) Oh, yeah. I could fit forty gallons, fully loaded, forty gallons, and that would earn me enough money to help out with all the expenses at college. So that's the initial phase of P&J. Well, I ended up graduating, or actually, I came back for a year in 1984 for the World's Fair because it was extremely busy, and could use the help here, so I was here for the year. Helped out financially for me, too, and then went back to finish up my schooling. So I graduated in [19]85.

VanZandt: With a degree in—what were you studying?

Sal Sunseri: Mass communications, radio, TV, production, everything.

VanZandt: And your dream was to?

Sal Sunseri: Phsst. (laughter) At that time, I don't know. It didn't matter. It was just moving forward and finding a career path. And I was willing to work at television stations or production of filming. But the calling was here, so I came back in [19]85. And then stayed on with the family and learned all about oysters, more so than just distributing. And in [19]89, there was an opportunity to go out to San Diego and open up [P&J's] Old New Orleans Seafood House, and to boast the name of P&J, and our history, and to gain market share in Southern California, in San Diego. (0:03:54.8)

Blake Sunseri: It was P&J's Old New Orleans Seafood House.

Sal Sunseri: P&J's Old New Orleans Seafood House.

VanZandt: And what *was* the market? What was it like in San Diego then? Was there a good niche there?

Al Sunseri: Well, let Sal tell you how it started because it was a very interesting way, path to success.

Sal Sunseri: Well, the people that approached us were actually managing the hotel next door. And their other business was riverboat gambling. So they opened up in Dubuque, Iowa, I believe, stationed in San Francisco, one of the main players. And the manager was living here, and also running the American Queen, I believe. And they approached us and stated, "Hey, there's a great opportunity. What do y'all think? Open up in San Diego, talk about the history, and I feel that it's going to be a great business plan." So sure enough, we went out. I went out, managed it. The source of oysters were scarce, so it was a very difficult time to get product. There were oysters on the East Coast and West Coast. That's who our competition was. And so we had to come in with the Gulf oyster and try and penetrate the market.

Al Sunseri: But they started off with flying the oysters there every day. We flew oysters there every day. And they had a pickup truck that they would pick up the oysters at the airport every day and deliver them straight to the restaurants. And we did that five days a week, until the point that within a year they had built this one-pickup-truck business to a million-dollar-a-year business and having two refrigerated trucks and a plant to distribute oysters. And that's the point I wanted Sal, because he lived, he was with three guys, one of which he—or two of them, I want to say, that he went to school with. One other guy he went to school with.

Sal Sunseri: Ridgeland(?), yeah.

Al Sunseri: And they slept on the floor (laughter) in a very small apartment in Coronado, until they were able to build this business up. And it was a true success story, from what was started, and just being an idea.

Sal Sunseri: And it didn't matter, being in the little commune because it was in Coronado, and walking distance to the Hotel Del Coronado. So it didn't matter. (laughter)

VanZandt: That's what I was envisioning, that beautiful hotel.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. And I was twenty-nine, I guess, when I started.

VanZandt: Life was good.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, life was good. (laughter)

VanZandt: So this was the first introduction of *Gulf* oysters to the West, or that area?

Sal Sunseri: They were there, but not nearly as the abundance. And the introduction, they had already been there. It's just, not in this quantity and consistency and quality, either.

Al Sunseri: The quality was what set us apart.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

Al Sunseri: They had a local competitor that had a business out there that when our product came out there, it was just superior to their product. And it wasn't what they thought of as being a Gulf oyster or a Louisiana oyster. It wasn't until they got to see P&J brand oysters and what they were, and they had a good gift of gab, with a good product, and were able to be successful at selling what we do best here.

VanZandt: That mass communications degree came in handy there.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, I guess it did. I guess it did, but that was probably the biggest learning curve for me is the ability to go cold-call into these restaurants, through the back kitchen, and like, you know, "Who the heck are you? What the heck are you doing here?" And that was a great learning opportunity, and it was a lot of fun, a lot of hard work, but a lot of gratification, and to be able to uphold the name of P&J. And so it was all good.

Scull-DeArmy: What is that business doing today?

Sal Sunseri: It's no longer, due to the changes in the California State Health Department and the misdealings with the partners that we had. That was the other part that was a great learning opportunity, to learn from mistakes in business. And they tried to take advantage of us.

Al Sunseri: Yeah. Excuse me. Two of the people that Sal trained are two of the biggest oyster dealers in Southern California today, though.

Sal Sunseri: Yes.

VanZandt: They learned well, huh?

Sal Sunseri: They sure did, and they take a totally different approach to the type of product they sell. But you live, and you learn. And then what else did I—oh, I wanted to tell you one other thing is in the—this is fun. Every year, Al was talking about how we go into either restaurants or schools and kind of teach about oysters. Well, one thing that I always want to do is go back to our grammar school and my son's grammar school, which is Christian Brothers School, and it's fifth through seventh grade. (0:10:08.8) Well, the first year I had done it, it was the entire school. And the teachers, the principal, everybody just *loved* it. It was fantastic. So each year now, I do the fifth grade. All the new guys. And one of the things that's *really* cool is talking about the oysters, show them oysters. For lunch, we have cocktail sauce. And you can't provide raw oysters to the entire school because you have to get OKs from parents or something. So the principal kind of shooed that off. But we at least have crackers and cocktail sauce for them to where they have a taste of the oyster cocktail. But the explanation throughout is pretty incredible. And what I do is I choose different people, kids, and separate them into oyster eaters, for raw and cooked, and then the other guys that only eat them cooked, and then the third group that don't eat them. They don't like them or never tried them. Well, in the end of the entire learning experience, we have a little race. So I pick one person from each group, and it's a little race. And it just so happened that for the past five years, or whatever it's been, four years, the oyster eater of both raw and cooked always wins. (laughter) It's amazing. I don't know how that happens. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: It's the oysters!

Sal Sunseri: It's the oysters, and that's what I tell them. But they really love it, and that, to me, is extremely important because we do colleges, we do grammar school, and we do high school, and teaching the kids and kind of helping them respect and know the history and culture and realize how important we are to the city, state, and nation.

VanZandt: That is so great because I can just see them opening their little eyes to make all those connections to conservation. There are so many lessons in there to their environment and where the food comes from.

Sal Sunseri: We talk about the state as a whole, and how much production we have. We're number two producer of seafood in the country. Alaska is number one. So I point that out, and point out why we are, in our estuaries, and the abundance and the richness of our food source, out of the sea.

VanZandt: They need that pride, don't they? Pride in where they live. A sense of place and—

Sal Sunseri: I mean, it's a small scale, but hey, at least those hopeful entrepreneurs of the future will take it and run with it.

Scull-DeArmey: That's great.

Al Sunseri: And if not that, at least become oyster consumers, (laughter) and spread the word.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, exactly.

Al Sunseri: And you always want to encourage that with the young people because oysters is no longer a center-of-plate food item. It's a—

Sal Sunseri: Appetizer.

Al Sunseri: It's something that's side-of-the-plate.

VanZandt: And what made that shift? I mean, what caused that? (0:13:43.6)

Al Sunseri: Price.

Sal Sunseri: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Al Sunseri: It was all price. Oysters was probably one of the most reasonable food items that you could ever get. You think about it. When people came to this country and colonized it, (0:14:02.6) it was a natural resource that when you crossed the shores, you stepped on them, cut your feet and everything like that, noticed that you had something under you. And you picked them up and saw it was oysters, and you ate them. And from there, it was a very inexpensive food item that everyone had because it was a public resource. As I was telling you earlier, the hunter-gatherer, it was in such abundant supply naturally that it was very inexpensive. Even the settlers in Jamestown that experienced a winter that killed a lot of people, oysters was a main food of fare that winter that people survived on. And we've seen this price shift in our tenure as people in the business. It was always a very reasonable and inexpensive food item, up until, probably you saw a shift in the late 1980s. And then we saw the price go down again to a much more reasonable point, where it became closer to a center-of-plate food item. And then after some time, but right close to Hurricane Katrina, (0:15:35.0) that was when it changed a lot because the supply never came back to quite the abundance because you had a smaller amount of people harvesting the same amount. So because of the lack of competitiveness in the business, it caused the price to kind of stabilize at a higher price.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you think that rising fuel costs affected the price of oysters? (0:16:09.8)

Al Sunseri: Sure. Just like all food items that we eat today. I mean, I remember before Hurricane Katrina we probably spent about \$3.50 for a gallon of milk, and now a gallon of milk is over five dollars, closer to six.

VanZandt: It's interesting—(brief interruption as Sal leaves). Thank you, Sal. Thank you so much.

Scull-DeArmey: We will come back to see you again.

Sal Sunseri: Definitely.

VanZandt: We'd love to do more. Yeah.

Sal Sunseri: And then maybe start about nine o'clock or something, and then we'll spend—

Scull-DeArmey: Start earlier.

VanZandt: Well, thank you so much!

Sal Sunseri: It's all good.

VanZandt: I appreciate your time, really.

Sal Sunseri: Thank you. All right. Bye-bye.

Scull-DeArmey: Thanks.

Sal Sunseri: See you.

VanZandt: I was just thinking about oysters, the price shift, and shrimp kind of did the opposite thing. Didn't it? It seems like it was more of a delicacy, more expensive, and now it's just—(0:16:54.9)

Al Sunseri: Well, that's interesting you say that. The domestic supply is a more expensive product than the import. And the imports are the reason that we have so much competition. And the shrimpers don't produce as much, and some get subsidized through the federal subsidies to be able to continue to be in business. But I know the prices at the dockside are far less than what they were ten, twenty years ago for the same product and because of the import supply. And we saw that with oysters years ago, with the steam canneries that all went out of business because we used to steam-can all those oysters that you see in the grocery stores. (0:18:03.1) Those cans of oysters that you see on the shelf? That was all domestic supply. And we saw that change to an all-import because there's not a single steam cannery in the United States any longer. It's all import and almost mainly from China.

Scull-DeArmey: Let's just take a break for a minute. (end of track three of three, dated 11-1-11; beginning of track one of six, dated 11-8-11)

This is part two of an interview with Al Sunseri, Sal Sunseri, and Blake Sunseri. It takes place on November 8, 2011. The interviewers are Stephanie Scull-DeArmey and Linda VanZandt.

VanZandt: Today is November 8, 2011. This is Linda VanZandt with the Center for Oral History, and I'm here in the office of P&J Oyster Company on Toulouse Street in the French Quarter, with Al Sunseri and Blake Sunseri, and Stephanie Scull-DeArmey. And we're going to record part two of an interview with Al Sunseri. And we left off last week, a week ago. It was the opening of oyster season here. Can you just tell us about what the oyster season is going to be like, what you foresee this season, a year and a half past the oil spill? (0:00:36.2) Anything you want to share about that, just thinking about the beginning of the season, and what you-all are doing here.

Al Sunseri: Yes. Since you came here on opening day of oyster season last week, it's always a time of looking positive. You are hopeful, and always want to look to see how your future's going to be. Well, they've already closed a few areas in Louisiana, which is not typical to close an area less than a week following the opening. But the catch is, it's dwindling right now, and it doesn't look like it's going to last a very long time. They're not catching a real, real lot of oysters, so as far as public grounds go this year, it looks like they're not going to be very productive. We're not seeing very many young oysters, or seed oysters that we would normally take and plant onto the private oyster farms, which is a little discouraging. But hopefully, they just did a cultch plant this past week, and if the water temperatures and salinities are all good enough, we may get a catch on that this coming year.

VanZandt: OK. We're going to pause for a second. (brief interruption as client leaves office; end of track one of six, dated 11-8-11; beginning of track two of six, dated 11-8-11)

Al Sunseri: —supporter of P&J Oyster Company, and it's been nice getting to know him over the years.

Blake Sunseri: A diplomat, so to speak.

Scull-DeArmey: A diplomat?

VanZandt: Brian was just in here, just for the record, and his last name is—

Al Sunseri: Landry.

VanZandt: Landry, and he works with John Besh [local chef and restaurateur]. And they're opening a new restaurant here—we just want to say—Borgne, in the French

Quarter, in the Hyatt.

Al Sunseri: At the Hyatt-Regency.

VanZandt: At the Hyatt-Regency here. So he's going to be a good customer, looks like.

Al Sunseri: We're thrilled about it. And it's always nice to get a new customer and especially if they're an existing customer that you've grown to know over the years. You're familiar with their styles of cooking, and I know Brian and John Besh are going to bring a whole new take on seafood because that's what Borgne will be. (0:00:58.7) It'll be John's seafood restaurant, Gulf seafood restaurant. So it's an exciting time. And following the oil spill, John's been a huge advocate for how good the seafood is down here in the Gulf because there's been a lot of question as to its safety and all. We have done so much testing—(0:01:27.1) I say “we.” I mean the Food and Drug Administration and all the health officials at the state level—that we feel fine about the safety of the seafood here. So having John opening up a seafood restaurant is a great thing.

VanZandt: Yeah. I think that bodes well. That's kind of symbolic in a way, too, as he's starting at the beginning of the season—

Al Sunseri: Yes.

VanZandt: —to look at a bright future ahead.

Scull-DeArmev: Al, just for the record, can you tell us what a cultch plant is?

Al Sunseri: Yeah, a cultch plant, (0:02:05.7) cultch material is oyster shells, clam shells, limestone, crushed concrete that are used to develop and build reefs. And it's been more recently, since we don't have clam shells to use, that we were able to take from Lake Pontchartrain for many, many years, or dead reef—that's been outlawed in the state of Louisiana. So what you have is shells that come from oyster shucking houses, and/or from oyster bars, and they're collected, and then they are brought back out to the state grounds. And that cultch plant, we just recently did one last week in the state of Louisiana, in the Black Bay area, to help develop some oyster reefs and put down some new material, so hopefully we'll get what we call a catch. The oysters spawn, and as they spawn, the larva swims in the water column and falls to the bottom. And if you have a nice, clean surface, like a new cultch plant, then you're hopeful that they will turn into spat, which is a young oyster. (0:03:42.2)

VanZandt: And that cycle takes how long?

Al Sunseri: Well, the actual spat set doesn't take a long time if the conditions are right. If the conditions are right, you can have a catch take place within a matter of hours, up to weeks, but as far as a life cycle to get to a market size, it could take two

and a half, three years, depending on where they're at. We typically will take these young oysters, about yearlings, the seed that's about an inch, inch and a half, and transplant it to the private oyster farms for further grow-out to where they can get saltier and fatter.

VanZandt: And can you just describe the difference between—you're talking about public oyster beds and private farms, and your relationship with both, and how that works? (0:04:49.9)

Al Sunseri: Yes. The public oyster grounds are what was there prior to any laws that were put on the books to allow for oyster farming and leasing of the water bottoms from the state of Louisiana. And in many areas around the country, since oysters are a renewable natural resource and are grown in state waters owned by the citizens of that state, that public resource falls under being what is owned by all the citizens in the state. And for many years, and in some states, they didn't allow for those public water bottoms to be leased or bought by individuals because of it being owned by the citizens. But when you have a public resource like that, it's more of a hunter-gatherer type situation where you take and take and take and don't put back. And what we've found and learned from those in the Northeast and the mid-Atlantic states is that if you do not have a private set-aside for farming of the oysters, that you will lose the resource because you keep taking and don't put anything back. (0:06:30.9) And in learning that, our state legislature, looking forward, decided back in 1898 that they would allow for water bottoms in the state of Louisiana to be leased in perpetuity by individuals. (0:06:53.2) And those leases were heritable, and so that they could be developed and continue to be developed for economic reasons. And it was an encouragement of growing oysters, and because of that, Louisiana has become the largest oyster supplier in the United States, producing 40 percent of all oysters consumed in the country up to the oil disaster back in April of 2010.

VanZandt: How does your relationship work with these private leasees or your suppliers? If you can, just kind of talk about that chain, who you work with, maybe how many, what the scope is.

Al Sunseri: Sure. P&J Oyster Company, P&J stands for Popich and Jurisich. And those were the original owners of P&J Oyster Company, Mr. John Popich and our cousin, our first cousin Joe Jurisich, were the original owners of this business. (0:08:01.2) So this business was a farming business that sold shell stock or oysters that were sacked oysters, directly to the oyster saloons or oyster bars, and did not process oysters. The processing facility came later as they found that if they couldn't sell their catch, they needed something to do with those oysters that they didn't sell. So they decided they'd go into processing of oysters and containerizing, and sell them to restaurants and develop the recipes like what you find, Oysters Rockefeller, or Oysters Bienville, or Oysters Foch, all these great recipes, oyster milk soup. And so our relationship, the Sunseris, came to work for the Popichs and the Jurisichs in 1921. My Grandfather Alfred, he was working with the Standard Fruit Company, which is a banana company and was working at the riverfront, right close to where the oysters

were being landed from the west side of the river. And so he knew all kind of what was going on with that and became a plant manager of this business, as well as a salesperson and accountant for P&J Oyster Company. So the farming end was dealt with by the Popichs and the Jurisichs, and the processing end was really held down mostly by my grandfather and developed a whole—

Blake Sunseri: Alfred Sunseri, right?

Al Sunseri: Alfred Sunseri. And he developed that local business, and in turn also developed a national business, which was customers that they sold bananas to nationally. And as time went on, he worked that full-time job with Standard, moved to United Fruit Company, which was owned by the Zemurrays(?), and our family was in the banana business in Honduras and shipped up here. Mr. Zemurray had one of the biggest shipping companies worldwide, and it opened up opportunities there. And our customers that we had in the banana business was just a way in to sell oysters. And my grandfather knocked on those doors and said, “Why don’t you take some oysters and start using them? We can show you how you can use them and how much money you can make off of doing it. And you’d be able to get them the same way you’re getting your bananas,” at the grocery or restaurants or hotels they sold the bananas to because they were shipped the same way, on Railway Express. And Railway Express would pick up the bananas at the dock daily. And in turn, they’d come to the oyster house here, which was less than a mile away from where Railway Express would load their trains. And they’d pick them up, the oysters, here three times a day and ship them nationally. And it was just a great way to develop this business and grow it. And we were much more of a national company than we are today. As Railway Express went out of business in the early [19]60s, our business turned more into a localized company. They did do shipping but not on the same scale because there was a number of companies that bought their own trucks, and our company decided to remain in the French Quarter, where we didn’t have dockside loading. And that’s really what they needed to do if they were going to continue in that national-type business. We started shipping small loads of oysters on trucks that are called LTL [less than truckload] trucks that would pick up small portions and deliver them directly to restaurants, as well as flying oysters on planes directly to the airport, where the customers could come pick them up there, or we worked with delivery companies that would meet the oysters on that end and deliver them to the restaurants and hotels that we sold to around the country. But it was smaller scale than when this company was really big in the national sales of oysters.

VanZandt: And so with the transportation changes in the [19]60s came business changes and adapting to that. And so as you became more localized, did you already have these local relationships with the restaurants and vendors here that you work with, or did that need to be developed? (0:13:52.9)

Al Sunseri: Well, we did have that business developed, but there was a tremendous amount of competition in the local market, even more so than that in the national market. We had that built-in banana relationship that kind of helped us in there.

Here, we're in a place where there's an abundance of oysters in southeastern Louisiana, and there's a tremendous amount of competition. But we had a good clientele, and a very loyal clientele, as our competitors had. My father hadn't been here for nearly ten years, and upon my grandfather's death in 1961, my father took over as an equal partner with our cousin, Mr. Popich. And those guys didn't want to move away from here to increase their, or continue with the national business and invest more in it. So what ended up happening, by the end of the 1960s, Dad had bought out the next generation, his generation of guys, the Popichs and Jurisichs, of this business. And we became sole owners of the business (0:15:26.2) and kept it more localized. Dad was a pretty well-known guy. Dad was a city tennis champion, was on the Loyola National Championship Team back in the [19]40s, so he had a lot of friends in the community that became restaurateurs, that were business owners, that were attorneys and judges and physicians, and he was pretty well known and well liked. And so they frequented lots of restaurants, and with that they developed new businesses just as like Brian Landry, who we met today, opening the restaurant in the Hyatt-Regency. Dad, when they opened the New Orleans Hilton, they had a tennis club there, and he got to be very close with the general manager, Mr. Fredericks(?), at the Hilton and got that oyster business. And it was really, really big business, just as my grandfather had done with the friend of his, at the Roosevelt [Hotel], that they sold bananas to here. And we've continued that whole thing, and as our generations come along, we've been very close with the restaurateurs and hotels, hoteliers, and grocers, local grocers, doing promotions with them, educating their staff about oysters, and doing seminars with them, taking them out on boats so that they could see how the oysters are harvested and handled and processed, so they knew exactly how they started, all the way to how they receive them at their restaurants.

VanZandt: Well, I was going to ask you what difference it makes, being a family-run business versus anyone else. And that to me, you just said right there; it's really cultivating that relationship, and knowing that they're here, having these extended ties over the years. Those relationships have been built a long, long time ago. But you've got to nurture those.

Al Sunseri: It's a continual thing that you have to nurture those relationships. It's not anything that you can fall back on, just living off of a legacy or anything. We're not US Food Service or Conco or Cisco. We're not one of those big food distributors. We sell oysters. That's what we do. We do it well, and we have to make sure we have the best product available on the market, that's consistent, have it all the time for our customers and at a fair price. And if we can do that, then we'll be successful. And we've been blessed with being able to do that. Even when the Popichs and the Jurisichs were partners in this business, we never produced 100 percent of our own oysters from our own farms. You can't do that because it takes years sometimes to develop a reef. You market oysters certain times of the year, and they play out. And so what we always did was have these relationships with families in the business that had farms adjacent to our farms (0:19:31.3) and produced oysters in the same manner and with the same quality that we needed to get. And those people that my grandfather and cousins did business with, we have continued that with my father,

with that generation and those families that they dealt with, and we, in turn, at this generation, have done the same thing. And Blake will continue that tradition, and so we can keep P&J a successful entity.

VanZandt: Any special memories about your grandfather just as a person, what kind of man he was?

Al Sunseri: Well, it's unfortunate, but my grandfather died really before I knew him. I was born three years before my grandfather passed away, and I don't have any memories at all of my grandfather. All I have is from what my father and my dad's friends and my cousins have all told me about him. And I know he was well loved, that he could sell you your own clothes off your back, (laughter) and he had a tremendous personality. So I have that to go from. His wife, my grandmother, we were very close. I lived with her for a number of years, and she always said that she thought that I was a lot like her husband. And all I could hope for is from everything that I had heard, that I could be that good because not knowing him and hearing all the good things about him, it was a kind of high compliment to get that from my grandmother. But no. I wish I would've known my grandfather.

VanZandt: But you feel his spirit here, I'm sure.

Al Sunseri: Yes, I do. And I feel very blessed. I'll tell you a little bit about my thoughts on this business and how our family was able to get into it, retain it, and develop it further. (0:22:20.5) My grandfather worked for the Popichs and Jurisichs for seventeen years before he became a full partner in the business. And he worked those two full-time jobs. My daddy ended up purchasing the business from those partners, where we had 100 percent of that business to be able to expand and develop on our own, and whatever we did was for ourselves. And my brother, my sister, my son, we've been fortunate enough to carry on that tradition, and it really came to pass after Hurricane Katrina, because the obstacle my grandfather had to become a owner, the purchase of the business that my dad had, and our ability to be able to overcome Hurricane Katrina and just a total change in the city of New Orleans, the business that we needed, all the workforce that we had, where they were displaced, and oyster farmers and boats were displaced. (0:23:44.6) And we were blessed as it went, and God gave us the ability, both physically and mentally, to overcome that obstacle, to be able to work twenty-hour days, picking up the oysters, and processing them the next morning, unloading the trucks, delivering them, working the processing room, having our employees come back, a little at a time, but over a two-year period, where we did a lot of work. And Blake was a big part of that whole thing because we *needed* him here because it was a time where we had our oyster shuckers, but we didn't have all our delivery drivers, and we didn't have the processing people at work. And they came back, little by little, but it took a matter of a couple of years before everyone came back except for the shuckers.

Blake Sunseri: But it took me a few months. It took me a few months.

VanZandt: It took you a few months?

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. I was actually doing renovations in New Orleans. I was helping out with like reconstruction and stuff with a couple of start-up companies. And I was just helping them out kind of, just with what they needed help with. And as the months went on, it was just not as much work to be done, and they had other workers that they had hired, and I didn't really have a place doing that kind of work. It was just kind of like this start-up thing, just helping a few people with a few houses. I mean, I was still getting a paycheck for it. But it was a real interesting thing to do. I was out in Lakeview for a while working on a house, an old lady's house, that was completely gutted. I mean, like you look from outside of the house on the street, and you see all the way through it, all the way through the house. It was amazing to see that, like nothing but studs, nothing but house studs. And then in the middle of Lakeview, where they have Pontchartrain Boulevard, which is like a big median where people do a lot of jogging now and stuff, and there's a lot of trees planted now, new developments, they had maybe a twenty-foot-high pile of garbage, which was like two piles, too. It was mattresses and just kind of like biodegradable kind of things, cloth. And then they had the appliances pile, and it was just like one big pile of shiny stuff and white, porcelain-looking stuff, and then another pile of just like rubbish. It was amazing to see. And I did a little bit of work in Kenner, did a little bit of work in Metairie, and I mean, all of it was just amazing to see what it was, and how it is nowadays, how much has come back to almost full swing. I mean it's what, ten [years]?

Al Sunseri: No. It's six years.

Blake Sunseri: Six years, yeah.

VanZandt: Yeah, it's six years afterwards, really, you feel like, yeah—and that was one of my questions is, what have you-all seen? You're here in the Quarter, but also most people just, of course, identify just the Quarter with New Orleans, but there was *so* much more that was affected. It was devastated.

Blake Sunseri: Yeah. The whole area around the French Quarter in New Orleans, Jefferson Parish, and Orleans [Parish] and what is it? Not Terrebonne.

VanZandt: Plaquemines?

Al Sunseri: Plaquemines Parish was—

VanZandt: Was this building—what kind of damage did you-all sustain here? Anything?

Al Sunseri: We were fortunate. We had a bunch of roof damage, but other than the roof damage and equipment damages, we were not that impacted. We lost all the oysters we had, which was a substantial amount. We had two trailer-loads of oysters

in the shell, plus probably another four or five hundred gallons of oysters on hand because typically what we would always do, prior to a storm, is build up so that when we knew that the health departments would close down areas, and we wouldn't be able to harvest for a while, so we'd always have a lot of oysters available for our customers, and they'd never have to worry. Well, this gamble didn't pay off because it's the first time at that point—

Blake Sunseri: No one was there to kick on the generator.

Al Sunseri: Right. Well, we didn't *have* a generator at that time. We were here for twenty-eight, twenty-nine years at the time, and we'd never lost power here, *ever*, except for about five hours. And so I felt confident. We had a number of hurricanes come through over the years. We'd stayed at the hotel next door for the hurricanes. Blake did as a young kid. And it was actually Sal's turn to stay for Hurricane Katrina, and he stayed. And I remember Sunday morning, looking at that storm that was completely covering the entire Gulf of Mexico. And I was fortunate enough to get in touch with Sal because cell service was really bad because everyone was using it. And I told him, I said, "Sal, I know it's your turn to stay, but you got to get out of there." No matter what, when you saw where that storm was headed, we knew we needed to go. And I think back the year before that, we had Hurricane Ivan. And Mississippi, Pascagoula, and Mobile and Pensacola were impacted significantly. I mean lost a bridge over at Pascagoula, and in Pensacola, as well. And if it would've not taken that cut right at the end, it would've been Katrina that year. Ivan could have been Katrina, but I thank God that didn't happen. And I thank God that we were fortunate, that all our family was safe and away from the city.

VanZandt: So when you say Sal, it was his turn to stay, and you told him he better get out, he did get out. Who was actually here? Did anybody stay here?

Al Sunseri: No one stayed in the city. All my family left. Sal went across the lake and stayed actually with some friends, and then ended up moving over to where my sister lived in Hammond.

Scull-DeArmey: Where did you evacuate to?

Al Sunseri: We evacuated first to Dallas, and then went to the Woodlands in Texas and actually enrolled our daughter, who was a senior in high school, at Archbishop Chapelle, at a high school in the Woodlands.

VanZandt: Which is outside of Houston, right?

Al Sunseri: Yeah, it's outside of Houston, just north of it. And my youngest daughter was enrolled into a little Catholic school there, and the little Catholic school actually paid for all of her clothes, and they were going to give us free tuition. We had no idea what to expect. All the pictures that we had seen about what the city looked like, and what was going to be available, they recommended that we enroll our

kids in schools outside. So we were doing that and living at my sister's house. But fortunate enough, a few weeks later, right before Hurricane Rita came and smacked western Louisiana, we evacuated back to our home here in New Orleans because we only got a little bit of water, and Blake and I went back to the house and cleaned it all up and got it ready for the family to move back.

Scull-DeArmey: A little bit of water is still pretty tough, though. What was that like? Did you have electricity? Did you get mold? (0:33:33.4)

Al Sunseri: Oh, we had mold all over because we got back, I want to say, two and a half weeks after the storm was when we were able to come back into the city. We actually snuck in early one morning, Blake and I. And we only had six inches of water in a few rooms of the house, and we did have mold in those few rooms, and we had the food and all in the refrigerator and freezers that were pretty nasty. But we got to clean all of that up. I mean, we were a lot better. Sal lived in Lakeview, and Sal got flooded completely. They had water up to their roof and for a number of weeks at a time, and then it got reflooded again when the pumps went out by the interstate because he lives close to the interstate, where it turns into Metairie. And that pump that failed because electricity went out again, and so it was unable to work. He ended up knocking down his house.

VanZandt: So as far as getting the business back going again, if you just want to talk about that a little bit. So I imagine you came back here and started looking at what farms were still intact—did you have any oysters?

Scull-DeArmey: You had said that you thought it was the worst thing you would ever have to go through. So I'm curious what made it the worst thing, until the oil disaster. (0:35:15.6)

Al Sunseri: Well, when you came back to the city and saw this place, we had no power.

Blake Sunseri: No fresh water.

Al Sunseri: We had already been in the city for about four days. They opened up to businesses on the seventeenth of September in New Orleans. It happened on August 29. Sal, Blake, and I came here to clean out our coolers. And we had contracted with a trucking company to pick up all that. And we had no power, so I brought a pressure washer from the house. The water was not drinkable.

Blake Sunseri: Could you bathe in it?

Al Sunseri: No. They didn't want you to bathe or anything in the water in the city.

Scull-DeArmey: So you couldn't clean?

Al Sunseri: But we did. We did clean with it. We used a lot of chlorine that we mixed in the water and pressure-washed, knowing that we would have to do it again afterwards once the water was good. We cleaned the thing three or four times before we used any of our coolers again. Someone had broken into one of our trucks trying to steal it because it was high, and I guess they figured they could load up stuff in it and go, but they couldn't get it started, so they didn't—and I knew we didn't have insurance for all the product that we had lost. I wasn't sure of what was going to be covered because of the loss of power, how it happened. So you learn a lot about insurance. (0:37:18.5)

Blake Sunseri: Well, we thought we did have insurance, and then they said, “Oh, well, you didn't renew your policy this year.” And it was kind of ridiculous because every year prior to that, we renewed the insurance.

Al Sunseri: Yeah. It was loss-of-power insurance, and anyway, we didn't have it for some reason.

VanZandt: Were you able to file a claim?

Al Sunseri: We filed a claim, and we got a minimum amount. I was still happy to get what we got because we got our coolers going. And it was huge obstacle to overcome, getting the fishermen back because most of the fishermen that we had, lost their homes, but they saved their boats. (0:38:07.0) And they were willing to go ahead and work really hard, stay on their boats, so that they could get money.

VanZandt: Everyone was ready to go back to work, right?

Al Sunseri: Everyone was ready to go back to work. The restaurants—and it's really interesting how the whole thing worked out because everyone, the oyster [season], it didn't reopen until October 23rd, and it was actually the same day that the water in New Orleans was cleared. So we not only could start getting oysters, but we could start processing them. (0:38:51.7) And we'd already met with a few of the shuckers that lived in New Orleans East, the little Vietnamese ladies that were living in their homes, trying to fix them up. They had no power. They might have had a little generator they could run a refrigerator or something, and we'd have one, three, four shuckers, but we'd never know who was coming and when. And we were going, pick up oysters from whomever we could pick up from to have a few oysters in the shell, and then a few shucked oysters that we could shuck. And so this was all starting very slowly, and this was—all the restaurants weren't open, either. So they didn't have staff. They had minimal menus, and they had no potable water, most of them, to use in the restaurants. And they were using like Kentwood water or distilled water in bottles for their utensils and using paper plates and napkins and plastic utensils. (0:40:03.5) And so we started off slow and kind of built up as our customer base built up. And as our customer base built up, our work staff, at least our shuckers, came back. And we never did get back 100 percent of our shuckers, but we did get back two-thirds of them. And that was pretty much in short order. We only had one driver,

and we only had one of the people that worked in the processing area that would work on-and-off. And that went on for some time. So that obstacle that we had was an enormous one for us because we worked in the office. We didn't go do deliveries. We didn't go pick up oysters. We rarely worked in the packing room. Blake worked in the packing room before that, and Blake made deliveries. Actually, no, he didn't make deliveries before, but after, he started to make deliveries because we needed everyone.

VanZandt: You did what you had to do.

Al Sunseri: We did what we had to do. And so I feel blessed, and I feel like we did our thing to overcome the biggest thing that we were going to in our company.

VanZandt: I'm just thinking about who your clientele was, businesses you'd worked with for years and years. Was there anyone, as far as restaurants and vendors here, who didn't come back? Or did most of them make it back?

Al Sunseri: Most of them came back, but some didn't. We lost some customers. But it was great to have customers that were closed for so long come back. A place like Rocky and Carlo's, for instance, in St. Bernard, that was closed for a year. And then when we would drive out there to go to the place, you had to go through security checkpoints to get there. You had to show them what you were doing, and that we were going to deliver there. And so we were able to do that same thing. Like Mandina's(?) in Center City, it was closed for over a year, and to see them come back. And I can name more and more of those types of restaurants that it was always a great feeling to get to see our customers come back. And we were able to grow with them. So how that all worked out, in that we were able to get a few more oysters, and as we were able to get a few more oysters, we'd have a few more customers come back. And as we had a few more customers come back, we'd have a couple more workers come back. And it was interesting how we grew up to be back to almost where we were before [Hurricane] Katrina by the time the oil disaster occurred.

Scull-DeArme: So the rising tide was lifting all the boats. As it slowly was rising, it was lifting all those boats. How did you communicate to people who worked for you, people who brought you oysters? Did you have phones?

Al Sunseri: Yes, we had phones. All our cell phones worked, and we got to learn to use text. That was when we all started to learn to use text messaging because before that, I don't think I used a text message once or twice. We had the service but never used it.

Scull-DeArme: Do you know what the profit is on texting?

Al Sunseri: No.

Scull-DeArme: It's 600 percent.

Al Sunseri: Oh, I had no idea. (laughter)

VanZandt: But you can text, like you said, a lot of times when you can't make a call. So at least you had communications.

Al Sunseri: Yeah.

VanZandt: And I'm just thinking what a risk that really was for you to have to kind of gauge, and just guess, stab in the dark, or wonder, "How much should I be taking in? What's the demand going to be?" But as you said, you just kind of had to wait to see who was coming back and gauge that.

Al Sunseri: Well, that's the whole thing is, like it all worked out. It was like God was looking over us. Our dad and our grandfather, our parents were looking over us and making sure—that's the way I've really felt. I felt like they were looking over us and saying, "Just work hard. You'll be able to make it work. You'll be able to make it work." And that's really what I thought is that they were helping us along. And to this day, I still believe that, that we were blessed in giving us the physical strength and mental stability to overcome that challenge.

Scull-DeArme: What were the prices like then for oysters? (0:45:15.1)

Al Sunseri: The prices went up substantially. I want to say that the price of oysters went up about, over 50 percent overnight and not quite—I want to say got close to 75 percent higher within a year, and then it kind of started to stabilize.

Scull-DeArme: Did it ever drop back down?

Al Sunseri: No. It's never dropped down, and it's gone up to the highest price they've ever been after the oil disaster.

VanZandt: I'm just thinking about and wondering what Katrina did, too—if you can address this, too—as far as erosion to the oyster beds and farms. And then maybe if you can, talk a little bit, segue into the state of the wetlands today and what oyster beds do to preserve and filter the water, the benefits that they have ecologically, too. But did Katrina wipe them out?

Al Sunseri: No. Katrina wiped out certain areas. What happens with storms is that you never know where and what will be affected. (0:46:37.0) Some places will get overburdened with sediment, and some places, the reef will actually just move because of the tidal surges. It'll just push the reef and take the oysters off that reef and cover them up. Grass that was in the marsh that's picked up will float around for a while, and then it'll die and fall on them and cover them up. So there were some areas that were basically untouched.

VanZandt: And I've got this map here that we're going to add, too, that has the area numbers [see appendices]. Is there any way you can kind of point out a little bit, like post-Katrina and then post-oil spill, too, as we're looking at this, what areas were most affected? (0:47:36.3)

Al Sunseri: We started to see, before the oil spill, positive things happening on the eastern side of the river and in the central part of the state. The Barataria Basin was damaged a lot by Hurricane Katrina but then came back. And in fact, behind Empire, in areas nine and ten, those areas came back really great following Hurricane Katrina. But all of those areas, except for central areas fifteen on, made out OK. This map does not show the St. Mary and Vermillion Parishes, and both St. Mary and Vermillion Parishes—(brief interruption of knock on the door; end of track two of six, dated 11-8-11; beginning of track three of six, dated 11-8-11) I was talking about St. Mary and Vermillion Parishes. Those areas actually were very, very productive following Hurricane Katrina because they were in the pocket between Hurricane Rita and Hurricane Katrina. And Terrebonne [Parish], areas fifteen on westward, those areas did very well because they were not damaged that badly by those two storms, whereas the western part of the state was really damaged. Hurricane Rita is a forgotten storm, (0:00:45.2) but it was an enormous storm and damaged western Louisiana terribly. But the *eastern* part of the state, there were pockets, and we did get to see some new natural production occur. There were different programs that were set up to try to clean the reefs where the oyster farmers would get paid just to pull the reef back to the top and—

VanZandt: By the state?

Al Sunseri: By the federal government. And the state handled the program. The finances came from taxpayers through federal funds, (0:01:35.5) and they would use oyster rakes over the public reefs to bring the reefs back to the top that were covered through sedimentation. If there was debris like grasses and things like that, they would pick those grasses up, put them on the boats. And that went on for some months. It took probably around eight, ten months to get underway, that program, but that program did help. And we started to see areas coming back. So there was positive things that were occurring following Hurricane Katrina where we saw these areas all coming back. And in fact, in area thirteen, which is in the Barataria Basin, one of the areas that were affected significantly by Hurricane Katrina, was right there. It was coming back. One of our oyster farmers that we deal with a lot in Golden Meadow had a huge crop of oysters that we were getting ready to count on right before the oil disaster. (0:02:53.4) And he had enough oysters that we would be able to get probably about two-thirds of what we needed to shuck for a year or so. And we had been waiting for this crop to come, so it was devastating to him and to us because we had expected beautiful oysters, great growing area, and we have not received a tremendous amount of oysters from him, except for the year before this occurred. They were from a different growing area, in area fourteen, that we were getting oysters from them, in the Barataria Basin, from another farm that he had. But that's what we do in this business. You have to wait for your crops to be ready to harvest.

And that crop that we had gotten the year before, we had gone through, and now, we were getting ready to get onto another farm that he had. And so we typically, as a business, tied up with about four or five families that between them had about ten boats, and we would plan around everyone's schedule. Being a small business and a family business, dealing with other families, we kind of got to know what everyone's schedules were. And they worked within those schedules so that they could take off a certain time of the year, and we would still have oysters to have for our customers year round.

VanZandt: So it is a year-round business; you don't have a break.

Al Sunseri: That's right. It's a twelve-month business, and we don't take off. But that's been our problem since the oil disaster is that these families that we've dealt with for so long, and these number of vessels that we dealt with for so long, they don't have the product to sell to us. (0:05:25.9) And it's only one family with a couple of boats that we've been able to get oysters from, and it's not enough to provide for us to continue to shuck. So until that occurs, we're not going to be able to get back to the—

VanZandt: And are those families getting some kind of help? What kind, and who is helping? Have they filed claims, do you know, since the oil spill, since they've been affected? (brief interruption; end of track three of six, dated 11-8-11; beginning of track four of six, dated 11-8-11) I was wondering if you can talk about those families that have been affected, too. You said you had four or five families, then maybe down to one?

Al Sunseri: Right. I have one family [who] actually, they had both boats break down last week. They were planting some oysters from one of the public oyster grounds that closed, and their boats broke down, and they're not back up and going. But hopefully by the end of the week, we'll be able to start getting something from them again. Everyone's gotten a little bit of money from the GCCF [Gulf Coast Claims Facility] or British Petroleum, (0:00:40.7) just like ourselves. But it's not anything close to what you would make if you were just working.

VanZandt: These little short-term payments.

Al Sunseri: Yeah. Those payments ended a long, long time ago, and we stopped dealing with them. After I found out what happened with the oyster farmer that we were supposed to get so many oysters from, and what they offered him, for what I *knew* he had, what we had been expecting, we ended up hiring an attorney to represent us because we had no intention of hiring an attorney. We were going to deal with [Kenneth] Feinberg, GCCF, directly because, I mean, we have enough records to show where we were, where we had been, and how much we had lost after [Hurricane] Katrina, but where we had built ourselves back to be.

VanZandt: So you could demonstrate—

Al Sunseri: We demonstrated—

VanZandt: —the lost wages.

Al Sunseri: Because we went from 2002, so that we could show how we were in a continual growth pattern until Hurricane Katrina, where we had a huge decline, but how we had built that back up and almost to right where we were, with the same levels poundagewise of both shucked and shell-stock oysters that we had prior to the hurricane. And when I saw what they offered my friend in Golden Meadow, I said, “They’re not going to be fair.” And I don’t know of anyone that, in our business, that’s been satisfied by the Gulf Coast Claims Facility in their losses because in the oyster business, all seafoods, but oysters specifically, because I know that business, we have gone through four cycles of spawning, and since that, we’ve not seen any large amount of young oysters set on the public oyster grounds. Not any. (0:03:02.3) Even though we’ve had cultch plants that I spoke about earlier, those cultch plants did not have a very big set on them, which is abnormal, because the conditions following the oil disaster, because we had a high river and that freshwater event and man-made freshwater from the diversions, when they turned them off, we should’ve had a big set. All previous history shows that. And with the spillway opening this year, (0:03:39.5) it was actually a positive thing for the oysterpeople. We were looking at being, “Great. We didn’t get a set last year”—(brief interruption of sirens) Part of the problem of being in the center of the city. (laughter)

Al Sunseri: Where were we?

Scull-DeArmev: It was, you should’ve had a big set.

Al Sunseri: Oh. We should have had a really big set because of the spillway opening, and we were looking forward to the spillway opening because there’s usually a rejuvenation of all the fisheries, not just oysters. That’s historically what we’ve always seen. You can go back through all the years of when we’ve had freshwater events or spillway openings, and following those events, we had a rejuvenation, very high catches in all fisheries. And that’s not what we’ve seen with the oysters. So we’re very discouraged. I’m very discouraged about what’s happening. And I think there’s something more going on out in the estuary than we even know about. (0:04:59.9)

VanZandt: And could that potentially, could it risk those that are being planted now, any efforts that are going on? Because you don’t know what’s going on, maybe it’s going to continue going on for years to come?

Al Sunseri: Potentially, that can happen. And how long do you keep throwing money at a dry hole? It’s like when oil and gas companies drill for a well, and they spend a lot of money to try to get that well going, and they hit a dry hole, then they don’t continue to throw money at it. They hit a dry hole. We’re dealing with a

natural, recurring resource. All the fisheries in the Gulf states are reoccurring, and sustainable, and always have been. (0:06:05.2) For someone that's in the business that we're in, how long do you keep hope? I want to keep in the business, and I want us to be successful, but I'm concerned. I'm truly concerned. Until I see a turnaround through some kind of means, no matter what kind of means, I'm not going to be very positive about the future of where we're going to be five, ten, twenty years from now. Now, that doesn't mean we're not going to work toward trying to get back. I'm not the kind of person that gives up. I think that Hurricane Katrina shows what we have in us in the Sunseri family, to get back to where we were, just like most of my friends that are in this business. And we have high hopes for usage of the NRDA money, the funds that are gained through the Oil Pollution Act (0:07:21.1) fines.

VanZandt: And NRDA being National Resource Development, is it? NRDA [National Resource Damage Assessment]? Is that what you're referring to?

Al Sunseri: Yeah. NRDA. I'm hoping that those fines are used to help expand and rejuvenate the oyster business in Louisiana and the Gulf states through hatcheries and through new grid systems for oyster farming, where we can have better control over our farms by providing our own seed and not relying on Mother Nature so much because Mother Nature is not providing, and it should have provided. All of our history goes to that. So we've been discussing this with the proper officials in Wildlife and Fisheries, at NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration], and we will be able to gain these funds through the fines to develop this new type of oyster business that will be sustainable that will be something we can count on for our future.

Scull-DeArmeay: I can't remember if we talked about this last time, but if you remember, just tell me. Could you just say a word for the record about the relationship between oysters and estuaries?

Al Sunseri: Oh, I don't know if I spoke about it at all, but oysters are great for the ecosystem. They are not only the canary in the coal mine because where the oysters go, the rest of the fisheries will go. (0:09:19.3) Oysters grow very well if conditions are right. They will come back. They're renewable, and we're blessed in Louisiana especially, but in the Gulf because we have a warm-water environment that's conducive to the growth of oysters. We have the Mississippi River, the Pearl River, the Vermillion River, the Atchafalaya, the Red River, the Sabine River, all these rivers that enter into—and I'm just talking about Louisiana. If you keep going further east to Florida, we have the same sort of thing, where this Gulf estuary is just great for the production of oysters. And they clean up the environment. They keep it clean. They keep it healthy. They provide for an area for other organisms to live that are both the resources that we eat, like fish and crabs, but also for those other, smaller fish and organisms that they feed off of. So oysters are great for the environment, and they will clean up an area. As we've seen in the Chesapeake Bay with the demise of their business, their oyster reefs there, so has the rest of their fisheries have declined. And we're hopeful that that isn't what occurs here, following the BP [British Petroleum]

disaster. I love the idea of being in the business we're in. I'm glad that our family's been in it because we're not taking something that isn't going to come back. Our family, our cousins, our partners, the people we do business with are hardworking people. (0:11:51.5) They have built the largest oyster business in the world today. Through their hard work, we've built reefs all across this state and expanded production through the hard work. It's all been for financial gain, but it's also been a benefit to the citizens of our state and the rest of the country because we have this renewable resource that has grown over the years, and has been sustainable. And through our hard work it's there and available for people to enjoy at restaurants around.

VanZandt: Speaking of restaurants, that's a good segue. I'm wondering how you market the catch here when you get your catch in. Do you already have orders?

Al Sunseri: Say, Sal, do you want to talk for a little while? (laughter)

Sal Sunseri: Sure.

VanZandt: I just wondered about the marketing end here. And you're the marketing guru.

Sal Sunseri: Well, our budget's going to increase by 100 percent this year. Last year was nothing.

Al Sunseri: I don't want to talk like that. I'm still going to look positive and hope that something good will occur. It's changed. What's interesting is that all the conventions that were booked prior to Hurricane Katrina, those groups fulfilled their obligations, which was a wonderful thing. They didn't have to come here, but they came back, wanting to help our city. Our New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau has done a great job in letting people know we're open for business. Our Louisiana Restaurant Association has been there and encouraging people to come and eat in our restaurants.

VanZandt: Great TV spots, I've seen a lot.

Al Sunseri: Yeah. And they go to places and continue to call on these customers, these conventioners that have come here for years. But what we've seen, they're changing their time when they come. They're getting further away from hurricane season, (0:14:31.6) where we used to see, when I started in this business, a real increase in our convention business in September, it's moved back to October, mid-October now, where these conventions start coming in. We see them starting to actually expand later in the year. Where they used to stop in May, we now see them going into June. And it has everything to do with, I think, the time around hurricane season, and when the temperatures are actually more conducive to people being here, in October through May, before it really gets too, too hot, and after June.

Scull-DeArmey: What did the prices of oysters do after the oil disaster? (0:15:36.4)

Al Sunseri: The prices went up by about 25, 30 percent; 30 percent *immediately* after, and they've remained that price to this day.

Scull-DeArmey: Can people afford to eat them?

Al Sunseri: It's much higher-priced than what they used to be.

VanZandt: And I understand some of the restaurants have absorbed that cost. Is that right? And not passed it on to the consumer?

Al Sunseri: No. Most of the restaurants have gone up. I mean, I think pretty much everyone has gone up accordingly. The problem is the volume of oysters aren't being sold. If we had a large quantity of oysters, that concerns me because I don't know if we could sell them all now, because now people who are accustomed to eating them regularly have stopped eating them regularly either because they're too costly or they're concerned about their safety. And so it concerns me, and I'm not, by nature, a negative person. That's not how I am, but you know, I'm a realist.

Blake Sunseri: I feel like it could go either way because we still have to turn people away when we don't have the product.

VanZandt: Right. So you still have some orders that you can't fill?

Blake Sunseri: We do have orders that we can't fill because we don't have the supply, but at the same time, if we had too much of a surplus, it would be another problem.

VanZandt: Yeah. So it seems like a really difficult time in business, converging together to plan and to—

Al Sunseri: You don't plan too much farther than just tomorrow. You really don't. And to invest in the future and spending a lot of money into what we used to know would be growth, you have to manage your business much more closely to make sure that you don't get yourself overextended. Are you ready, Sal?

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. (end of track four, dated 11-8-11; beginning of track five, dated 11-8-11)

VanZandt: Hello, Sal. Thank you for joining us.

Sal Sunseri: Yes. Thanks for having me.

VanZandt: If you'd just fill in a few of the gaps here. But first, tell us what is your official title?

Sal Sunseri: I am co-owner and vice president of P&J Oyster Company.

VanZandt: And how do you market your catch? We understand you've got these great, long-built relationships with a lot of restaurants here in the Quarter, this fabulous location where you are. And so how does that work? Who do you sell to? Who is your typical client? (0:00:31.5)

Sal Sunseri: Well, first of all, we try to embellish upon the name, the tradition, the branding, the components that—(brief interruption) So the main thing is to hold true to that tradition and to hold true to what's brought us to this point, and that is the family. I mean, that's how we've been able to do it. It goes back to the origination of P&J, Popich and Jurisich and just continually being true to the name, being true to the ideals that they've set, our grandfather, our great-grandfather, and great-cousins that have built this name. So again, the main thing is to stay true to what you believe in, try not to waiver, and to kind of encourage the restaurants that the credibility and knowledge that we put forth actually benefits them, too. So no doubt we're benefitted first and foremost by them even acknowledging us and allowing us to provide them with great Louisiana oyster product. But again, the main thing is to point out the benefits of getting their product from here, and building on the credibility, and building on the tradition, and showing them the difference.

Scull-DeArme: Can you give us an example of that? What would that look like?

Sal Sunseri: Well, where we draw our product from, where we have the consistency of the product, the way we handle the product, the expediency of time of harvest to door, and just the continual relationships with the [oyster] farmers that help us through the tough times.

VanZandt: And I guess you just brought up what I—if you could, speak more technically, from the farm to the restaurant door to the kitchen.

Sal Sunseri: What it takes?

VanZandt: Yeah. And who your delivery trucks are going to, what percentage is within maybe just the Quarter here, the small distance that we're in, and how much do you sell to outside the Quarter.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. We have a predominant number that, it's a Metro New Orleans distribution area. And a lot of it is real close. It is French Quarter, and it is right across Canal [Street]. So the time to the door from farm is pretty quick.

VanZandt: So most of your product stays within the Metro New Orleans area. Has that always been that way?

Sal Sunseri: Not always. I mean, at one point, we used to ship to the Ann Page's

supermarket chain throughout the nation, A&P, and we trained the oysters from, actually across here is where the railway was. And at one point, due to our grandfather's connections in the produce industry, we were able to tag onto those items and ship oysters throughout the country. At one point, P&J was one of the biggest producers and distributors of oysters. Now we're just the best.

VanZandt: Quality.

Sal Sunseri: Quality, number one, yeah.

VanZandt: [Referring to Oyster Festival poster on wall] Yeah, Al touched on that.

Sal Sunseri: We want to touch on that eventually.

Scull-DeArme: The Oyster Festival? (0:04:56.2)

VanZandt: Talk about that. Is that in June?

Sal Sunseri: Yeah! I mean, why June?

VanZandt: Yeah, why June?

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, exactly, good question.

VanZandt: Aren't they juiciest and plumpest now?

Sal Sunseri: No.

VanZandt: Oh, OK. Well, tell me Sal.

Sal Sunseri: See?

VanZandt: I'm completely wrong. (laughter) Educate me and the public who's listening.

Sal Sunseri: All right. Well, many questions were arising because of the month of June, and having it in June. There are many reasons why we want to have it in June. First and foremost, we want to dispel the myth of the R months [September, October, November, December]. That's when people originally thought that's the only time you could eat oysters. Well, that's not the case. Oysters are great year-round, but it was all due to refrigeration. We've had refrigeration for quite some time now. The other main thing is that oysters are fantastic in June. The farmers are kind of in the beginning stages of their crops, so we're able to, the majority of the time, have plentiful product from our farmers. Now, it's been a little different the past couple of years. And we did start this event two years ago, so right in the middle of all these problems is when we began this incredible festival. So what else? Why else do we

want to have it? The restaurateurs kind of start to slow down, yet they're fully staffed, so it's kind of like, "OK. Well, let's keep on going. Let's just keep going." So that is a component. And just bringing all the different events together makes it happen, like we have the largest oyster contest, and we have the P&J oyster-shucking contest. And we have the oyster-eating contest, which is sanctioned by the International Federation of Competitive Eaters, (laughter) the same group that does the Nathan's Hot Dog Challenge. Oh, yeah. So anyway, all these components—and of course, there's one other big one: no real hurricanes. Right? It's the first weekend. I don't recall the last time we had a hurricane the first week of June.

VanZandt: So you're safe there.

Sal Sunseri: And it's normally not quite as hot, even though the last two years was extraordinarily hot. So it's not in the midst of summer here in New Orleans, which is sometimes a challenge. And all in all, a fantastic event that celebrates the chefs and oyster farmers that have created the oyster capital of America. That's who we are. So this is something we want to continue and celebrate for many generations to come.

VanZandt: And it says, "The inaugural New Orleans Oyster Festival. Save Our Coast." So the proceeds benefitted coastal restoration, generally.

Sal Sunseri: Yes. What we've done is the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation has done an incredible job with the lake. (0:08:31.1) And they had started, a few years prior to our festival, on initiatives to saving the coast. Well, one of the things that they've done successfully is they've taken cages and filled them with oyster shell, and then laid them on the edges of land and marsh. And that kind of draws the silt in and builds marshland. So we were specific when we said, "Hey, we want to rebuild the coast." Well, in a small way—of course, this is a small festival, only three years in, but yet last year it was twelve thousand people. So it's not too small. And we hope to raise more funds and awareness to make sure that people realize how important the coast is and our industry.

Scull-DeArmey: How do people find out about the Oyster Festival?

Sal Sunseri: Well, we generate through all of our media contacts, through the New Orleans Convention Company, who handles production of the event, through Acme(?) and all the incredible restaurants that participate. We have nineteen of the finest restaurants in the city of New Orleans that participate and provide one oyster dish and other signature dishes. So all of their media approach. Last year, we did a partnership with the WDSU local channel, and they put on a *major* media blitz a week prior and reached quite a few. Shell is another sponsor, Shell Oil Company, not BP. Caught that one?

VanZandt: Yeah.

Sal Sunseri: The local steward that's been doing a good job here in our state. And

it's not, the route was not BP. So again, touching on that note, we've worked together for many, many decades, the oil and gas industry and the seafood industry.

(0:11:06.8) People in the same family would work either both jobs, or individuals within a family would work one, and the other would work the other one. So we've worked through the challenges, understand that we're both economically very important to the state and that we want to continue the relationship, but make sure that oil and gas companies adhere to the regulations (0:11:39.2) that are placed upon their industry, because if that would have happened, BP would not have done their catastrophe on our local, beautiful water.

Scull-DeArmey: I wish it would be illegal for any foreign-owned oil company to drill in US waters. I don't see why they need to be doing that at all.

Sal Sunseri: That's a *big* one to tackle, but, hey, the main thing is to adhere to the existing but possibly higher restrictions on how to actually drill and the safeguards that need to be placed, to where something like this couldn't happen.

VanZandt: Oversight, accountability.

Sal Sunseri: Well, other countries do a better job. Other countries have different safeguards that *cost* a whole lot more, but in turn save their environment.

VanZandt: An investment in the future.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

VanZandt: Any other programs that are positively helping with coastal restoration, other than you mentioned the Lake Pontchartrain—what is it, Lake Pontchartrain Foundation?

Sal Sunseri: Basin Foundation. Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation.

VanZandt: And I know Al is on the board of—

Sal Sunseri: Coastal Restoration.

VanZandt: OK. The Oyster Task Force?

Sal Sunseri: Well, yeah, Oyster Task Force, also. He's also on the state board for coastal restoration. Did y'all know that? Did he touch on that?

VanZandt: He did tell us that, yeah.

Sal Sunseri: Because that's two separate ones, right there. I serve on the Louisiana Restaurant Association Board, and also on the French Quarter Management District, which is a cumulation of the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, Hotel/Motel,

Louisiana Restaurant Association, French Quarter business organizations and resident organizations. So never before had we had this representation at one table to create the perfect environment for the French Quarter. But we know we have some challenges as of late.

VanZandt: Well, there's power in that, right, all the different entities that are affected coming together as a common voice?

Sal Sunseri: Yes.

VanZandt: So has that been a silver lining in these disasters, [Hurricane] Katrina, oil spill—

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, that's one.

VanZandt: —more organization than there was before, as far as people coming together?

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, I would say so because I've approached it personally through French Quarter Business Association. And the key to gain ground, on common ground is to embrace resident and business alike, and being at the table together through this forum, we've been able to do some great things. And we hope to do some really incredible things over the next few years.

VanZandt: Good. Well, I know we need to let you guys get back to work, and I just have a couple of things, and then if you have anything else that you're thinking of that we haven't covered—

Sal Sunseri: Sure.

VanZandt: Maybe we've missed on some of this, but I'm just thinking about future generations in your family—

Sal Sunseri: I knew that was coming.

VanZandt: —carrying on this legacy and listening to this. So what advice would you give from your experience at P&J?

Sal Sunseri: To my son?

VanZandt: To your son, to any children, future Sunseri generations who will be carrying on this business. Lessons learned? Advice?

Sal Sunseri: Well, I have one boy. (0:15:33.9)

VanZandt: And his name is?

Sal Sunseri: Dominic Salvatore Sunseri, good Irish boy. (laughter)

VanZandt: (laughter) And where is he?

Sal Sunseri: Well, he's thirteen. OK? And he's a lacrosse player that goes to Jesuit High School. And I hope he chooses a different path, but I wouldn't want him to be limited, too. If he wanted to continue on and help continue this tradition, I would certainly not deny him. But to me, looking back, and if I were thirteen years old and had the opportunities that I see for him, I would certainly want to see him branch out and reach some of the stars that he's looking to reach. And again, he's still thirteen, but he's a mature thirteen.

VanZandt: What is he thinking about for his future path?

Sal Sunseri: Well, he's got different ideas. It all seems legitimate right now. It'll all change, but at least he's on the right path, and he's in the right position.

VanZandt: Who knew there was lacrosse down here in the South?

Sal Sunseri: Exactly, and he's been doing it for three years, since he's ten. It's a great sport.

VanZandt: It's really popular up north.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

VanZandt: But you don't see that a lot down here.

Sal Sunseri: Maybe he could get a scholarship up in—where does he want to go?

Scull-DeArmeY: Chicago?

Sal Sunseri: No, Northeast.

VanZandt: I have a son in Virginia, and it's *huge* in Virginia. And they have the number-one team.

Sal Sunseri: Maybe Massachusetts because they're always one of the tops. So do I want him here? I don't know. I don't want to deny him, but if he had some great career path, then I would certainly want him to reach for that.

VanZandt: You-all have an amazingly successful business, and it's clear that you bring different skills to the table, and talents and gifts than your brother does, and I'm sure your sister, your father, your grandfather. And we haven't heard anything at all about your father, really. Is there anything that you'd like to share about what kind of

man he was?

Sal Sunseri: Oh, shoot. Well, he was the best salesman.

VanZandt: Was he?

Sal Sunseri: Well, Dad and Grandpa, they were fantastic, (0:18:28.5) and just the charisma that when either one of them walked into a room, eyes would light up, and people would know that the Sunseri tradition, he's here, he's going to brighten up the room, brighten up, cheer up people, and make them feel good about themselves, and make them feel good about being around him, too. But his ability to bring the credibility and genuine approach to life to light, he was—you know, Dad and—I didn't know my grandfather as much. He died the year I was born. But my dad, he had all the charisma in the world, and he could sell an oyster to anyone. He would teach kids that never ate an oyster before how to do it, make them enjoy it, helped, encouraged them to enjoy it, loved talking to all the tourists that come through, and just dealing with all the great chefs and restaurateurs. And he was great at it. He was really good at it. I told y'all about teaching at the schools, right?

VanZandt: I was just going to say [that] it sounds like you're carrying on that legacy.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. Well, I'm trying.

VanZandt: I can tell you really enjoy that.

Sal Sunseri: Oh, I do. I do. I like goofing on the kids. I coach baseball, head coach in little league, but it's fun. I think he wants to do one more year of it, my son, so I'll probably carry that on one more year.

VanZandt: That's awesome. Well, you're teaching the kids, too, about coastal restoration and about the importance—

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

VanZandt: That they can have an impact on their environment, too, which there's such a disconnect, now. So that's important.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. And I only reach fifth-grade kids at that level once a year. But it's a step. And I reach existing staff and restaurateurs in *their* environment, in the restaurants, and I do those talks and then college and high school, but limited. It's not like I got the time for it, either. At least it pretty much occurs once a year for each of those, and more for the restaurants.

VanZandt: What are your favorite things about living on the Gulf Coast, and in New Orleans, particularly? You've been here a long time.

Sal Sunseri: Favorite?

VanZandt: Yeah.

Sal Sunseri: Well, I tried it in San Diego. Right? So you have a high bar to reach, meaning San Diego is utopia. It's a pretty incredible place to live. So moving back was something I wanted to do, but it was also leaving a place that was a big part of me, too. Now, why did I want to come back? Well, it actually got boring with the weather. (laughter)

VanZandt: Not sweating enough there?

Sal Sunseri: Not the heat as much as the storms. I missed the heck out of the storms.

Scull-DeArmey: You mean hurricanes?

Sal Sunseri: No! No, no, no, just weather patterns.

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, all right. Yeah. OK.

VanZandt: Precipitation.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah! Thunder, lightning, just give me a little bit of excitement, instead of the same old. Transient type of lifestyle. You know, big difference.

Scull-DeArmey: People come and go a lot in San Diego?

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. There was one little area that was great, was Little Italy. And I became friends with some locals, and that was positive. But it's one little pocket, compared to what we have here. I mean, this is truly a family, traditional area, a cultural melting pot, more so than most cities in the world and just the combination of the character, the food, just like everybody always says. But it's real. The food, the cuisine, the politics, you can't live without having an interesting—

Blake Sunseri: You might not be here now, giving an oral history if you'd have stayed! (laughter)

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Or we might be in San Diego!

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

Blake Sunseri: Y'all missed out! (laughter)

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. I went through a couple of earthquakes, small, but at least I felt it, just the experience.

VanZandt: Yeah. So you know what it's like.

Sal Sunseri: So yeah, the culture, the food, the dynamics, and then the kind of nonreliance upon the powerhouses of economic engines like the Fortune 500 businesses. We are a little bit more in tune and reliable upon ourselves than big corporations coming in and ruling your town and your character, so—

VanZandt: Which means those relationships mean so much more.

Sal Sunseri: Exactly. Exactly.

Scull-DeArmeY: Did you miss kind of the neighborhood feel of New Orleans?

Sal Sunseri: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmeY: I don't know if San Diego has that.

Sal Sunseri: No. I know my neighbors here, for better or worse. (laughter) But I mean, there's a huge Hispanic legacy there in San Diego, but, shoot, we got that now, too. We always have, though. We have, again, a melting pot.

VanZandt: I understand more and more of the shuckers, too, that there's more of the Hispanic population getting into that.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah, and French, and Italians and different—not just Croations.

VanZandt: Anything else that you can think of?

Sal Sunseri: You've hit it all.

Scull-DeArmeY: I got nothing.

VanZandt: Blake, you need to come work with us!

Scull-DeArmeY: Yeah!

VanZandt: I know they need you here.

Blake Sunseri: Hey, I'm always looking for new opportunities! (laughter) (end of track five, dated 11-8-11; beginning of track 6, dated 11-8-11)

VanZandt: Sal, is there anything that you haven't said that you'd like to share?

Sal Sunseri: One of the other exciting things about the city of New Orleans is that a lot of the master plan that actually has generated from the storm, Katrina, is starting to play out. (0:00:23.0) It's starting to come to fruition, anywhere from Federal City across the river, which is going to be the largest single location for our armed forces, to Riverfront Vision, which is a whole new landscape on how we present our river to locals and tourists.

VanZandt: Will that be along where the Riverwalk is now?

Sal Sunseri: Well, the goal is to extend it all the way down river, to Poland Avenue, which is inclusive of the—

Al Sunseri: Oh, really?

Sal Sunseri: —yeah—the cruise lines, the infrastructure of the downtown development area with the sports complex, and Benson(?) continuing on his vision to create a better environment for sports, football first, but also to be able to have that Superdome provide for bigger and better things, such as coming up this year. I mean, this year is just the beginning of an incredible 2012 and into [20]13, kicks off with the BCS [Bowl Championship Series] football bowl. OK? That's the number one game, college. Then the number-one college basketball, [National College Athletics Association] Final Four. And then following year is the Super Bowl. So infrastructurewise, we're gearing up to be able to present our city. Also the streetcars are coming back. It's already started on Loyola, the line from Canal to Loyola to the train station.

VanZandt: That was the hardest thing, when those were down. New Orleans wasn't back until those came back up. And so they're still bringing more on, it sounds like.

Sal Sunseri: And we're getting one next, here, right in front of the shop.

VanZandt: Really?

Sal Sunseri: Yes. It used to be here.

VanZandt: When did it stop?

Sal Sunseri: So we're getting it back.

VanZandt: OK.

Sal Sunseri: When did it stop? That's a good question. Maybe late [19]60s or something, I don't know. I don't remember. I'll be honest. Theater district, Canal Street's changing.

VanZandt: The film industry's doing so much. That's great.

Sal Sunseri: Film is huge! Hollywood South. So we're rocking.

VanZandt: You really are.

Sal Sunseri: The housing developments are a huge component to our future, too. And one of the biggest developments that has been a negative on economic growth and a negative on the economic base of the city, which incorporates Warehouse District, downtown, all the way to the Bywater is the Iberville housing development. Well, that's finally changing, too. And that one entity will become *the* biggest catalyst for economic growth than anything else.

VanZandt: In the restoration effort? Allowing more population—

Sal Sunseri: Yes, and changing the dynamic of the population *of* it because it's now more conducive to mixed-income employees in the French Quarter, anywhere to higher-income levels, to where you have a mix, to where it's not an eyesore, and it's not a festering development for crime. And that's what that is *within* our economic structure, and that is finally changing. It's huge.

VanZandt: As a result of Katrina, yeah.

Sal Sunseri: Yeah. So we hit everything.

VanZandt: We did.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

VanZandt: Thank you, Sal. We got you covered.

Sal Sunseri: You guys have gotten the most out of our last couple of years than anyone.

(end of interview)