

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

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

William Thiroux

Interviewers: Barbara Hester and Louis Kyriakoudes

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An Oral History with William Thiroux, Volume 1043
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Biography

Mr. William “Billy” Thiroux was born on July 4, 1937, in Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mr. Louis Thiroux and Mrs. Katherine Pauli Thiroux. His father was a commercial fisherman. His mother worked in the seafood plants as a shrimp picker and a crab picker. His mother’s family were commercial fishermen.

Mr. Thiroux finished the eleventh grade, and thereupon joined the US Navy. After his military service, he became a commercial fishermen, a career in which he was still working part-time at the time of this interview.

On June 21, 1956, he married Jane Ferrill in Biloxi, Mississippi. They have one son, Billy Thiroux.

Table of Contents

Learning to fish as a child.....	1
Father's boat, equipment.....	2
Factory limits on catches	2
Seafood processing factories of Mississippi Coast, circa 1930s.....	3, 5
Fishermen strike at DeJean's plant	3
Factory-owned boats	4
Prices paid for catches	4
Military service, US Navy	5
Injury while fishing alone at Ship Island	6
Species caught for cat food	7
Crabbing.....	7, 12, 14, 18, 20
Limits on crabs.....	7
Shrimping.....	7, 16
Oystering.....	7, 15
Crab traps	8
Regulations against catching egg crabs	8, 24
Changes in crab populations	9
Male crabs	10
Biloxi lugger, shrimping	11
Marketing catch	12
Changes in crabbing equipment.....	13
Losses of crab traps.....	13
Regulations	13, 17, 24
Crabbing with line and roller	14
Baits	14
Changes in shrimping	14
Boats	15
Regulations, oysters	16
Conchs killed oysters in Ocean Springs.....	17
Changes in wetlands	17
Species in Mississippi Sound.....	17
Changes in regulations	18
Catfish.....	18
Finfishing	19
Hurricane Katrina, 2005.....	19
BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster.....	21
Vessels of Opportunity	22
Closing of Mississippi waters after BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster	22
Bait left uneaten in crab traps after BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster	22
Opening of spillway.....	22
Peeler crabs	23
Appraisal of seafood business, circa 2012	24
Marketing catch	24

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

WILLIAM THIROUX

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with William Thiroux and is taking place on January 24, 2012. The interviewers are Barbara Hester and Louis Kyriakoudes.

Hester: [A portion of the interview related to taking photographs has not been transcribed.] I'm Barbara Hester with The University of Southern Mississippi, the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. Today is Tuesday, January 24, 2012, and I'm here in the home of Mr. William "Billy" Thiroux at (the address of the interviewee has not been transcribed in order to protect his privacy). Thank you so much for having us in your home, Mr. Thiroux, to do this oral history. Just to make everything official getting started, would you state your name and address for the record?

Thiroux: I'm William Thiroux at (the address of the interviewee has not been transcribed in order to protect his privacy).

Hester: Mr. Thiroux, what is your occupation?

Thiroux: Commercial fishing.

Hester: And how long have you been pursuing this occupation?

Thiroux: Fifty-some years.

Hester: And did you learn from your father? Was your family a—(0:01:41.2)

Thiroux: My father, yeah. I was on a boat when I was a young boy, you know, going to school. In summertime he'd take us, and that's how I got hooked on fishing.

Hester: How old were you when you first started?

Thiroux: I guess—I don't know—ten, twelve years old, you know. We was real young.

Hester: Was that here in this area?

Thiroux: Yeah, in Biloxi.

Hester: In Biloxi. Was your father from Biloxi?

Thiroux: My father was from Louisiana, but he's been in Biloxi most all of his life. He was.

Hester: I see. And what is your father's name?

Thiroux: Louis, Louis Thiroux.

Hester: Louis Thiroux, that's a Cajun-sounding name.

Thiroux: Yeah. He was born in Louisiana, and they moved here.

Kyriakoudes: This is Louis Kyriakoudes. What brought him to Biloxi?

Thiroux: I really don't know. I really don't know, but—

Hester: What year did he come to Biloxi?

Thiroux: Choo! I don't know, but I'm seventy-seven years old, and he was in—and I had older brothers, too, and we all from Biloxi, so it's been a long time.

Hester: I got you. Yeah. OK. So when you first went on the boat with your dad and were first exposed to commercial fishing, could you describe the boat and the equipment that you used then? (0:03:08.7)

Thiroux: Well, it was a big, shrimp boat, you know, and there was so many shrimp. We were shrimping then, and there were so many shrimp that we was on a limit.

Hester: What do you mean by that?

Thiroux: Well, we could go out and catch twenty barrels, and we had to come in. And they'd all have to be big ones, no little ones. And a night and a half, two nights, we'd get it.

Hester: Was somebody supervising the size, or was that something you imposed on yourself, that you would only select the—

Thiroux: No. The factory did that. They wouldn't let us because they couldn't handle them. They was so many, and then we'd have to wait in turns to go.

Hester: How would you determine the size? I mean, this is probably going to be a silly question, but did you have some kind of a measurement that you could—

Thiroux: The shrimp?

Hester: Yeah.

Thiroux: Yeah. We'd catch mostly all big shrimp, sixteen/twenties, twenty-one/twenty-fives. They wouldn't let us catch forty/fifties or nothing. They didn't have them picker machines then to pick them. (0:04:11.2) The ladies had to pick them in them factories, and they couldn't handle them little ones. They just picked the big ones.

Kyriakoudes: Do you recall where the factories were located? (0:04:24.4)

Thiroux: We worked for DeJean Packing Company; was right across the street from the Grand [Casino] then. And then another one, Sea Coast(?) was down there by the Isle [of Capri Casino], and Marvel's(?) was on the other side of DeJean's.

Hester: Marvel's?

Thiroux: Marvel's Seafood. And there was a bunch of them. All of Back Bay was full, and the Gollott's was there and Southern Shell and Legerget(?) and Fayard. There was a lot of factories then. Now, you ain't got nothing.

Hester: How did you determine which one to bring your catch to? Was it preordered?

Thiroux: Because we ordered. We worked on their boat. See. They owned the boat. We just worked on them.

Hester: I see. So how did you decide who to go to? I mean, was it like, "This season I'm going to work for this particular seafood company," or did you rotate it?

Thiroux: Well, you could if you wanted to leave the company and get on another boat, but we stayed there for a long time. Then I went to Sea Coast. We went on strike at DeJean's. (0:05:35.0)

Hester: How did that come about?

Thiroux: Well, it was about, we was catching fish for cat food. And during that time there, you'd catch twenty ton of fish. And they cut the price so bad on us till we went on strike, and we stayed on strike for—I don't know—two or three months. And then it just dissolved, and we didn't make no money then. I lived in Biloxi then. I was about to lose my house, my everything.

Kyriakoudes: When was the strike?

Thiroux: Choo! I don't know.

Kyriakoudes: Roughly. Roughly, if you can recall.

Thiroux: I guess forty years ago or so. It was a long time.

Hester: This is when you were working with your dad?

Thiroux: No. I was working with my neighbor, was next door, was Mr. Jack Williams. But we was working on the company boat, DeJean's. They owned the boat.

Kyriakoudes: How did they pay you?

Thiroux: They paid you by the pound, (0:06:41.7) by the barrel. We used to get twenty dollars a barrel. That was two hundred ten pound to the barrel. But that was big money back then.

Hester: Could you describe your boat? How big was your boat? (0:06:54.2)

Thiroux: That boat there that was DeJean's, it was about sixty foot.

Hester: So how many barrels would you get on—

Thiroux: We couldn't catch but twenty because we was on a limit, but we could have caught plenty. But like I say, in a night and a half, two nights, we'd have our limit, and we had to come in, then unload, and then wait. (inaudible)

Kyriakoudes: Did most people work company-owned boats, (0:07:19.7) or did some people own their boats?

Thiroux: Yeah. No. Very few owned it. You was likely a rich fellow to own a boat then.

Kyriakoudes: And so you were obligated—

Thiroux: To sell to him. Everything we caught, oysters, everything, we had to bring back to him.

Kyriakoudes: So this strike about forty years ago, try to remember, if you can. You mentioned that they had cut the price. Tell us a little bit about that time period (0:07:47.1) and what it was like to interact with some of the other fishermen, who were some of the people that you worked with and how you came up with the idea of holdout.

Thiroux: Well, everything back then was cheap, compared to now. Like ice was six dollars a ton. Fuel was eight [cents] a gallon. We didn't have no big expense, just the groceries and all, but a dollar was a dollar back then. But now, it ain't. And like crabbing, right now, we get a dollar a pound, which most of them we sell to the

market, but most of them don't get but seventy-five, eighty cents. You see. But the price of fuel's so high. The price of bait's went up on us, and the crab pots, they about doubled; the price of crab pots, they about doubled. I guess it's because they coat the wire with plastic, and it's made out of fuel. I don't know.

Kyriakoudes: But going back to when you were working for DeJean's, what was the price you were getting for shrimp then? (0:09:07.5)

Thiroux: I think it was twenty dollars a barrel, and we couldn't catch but twenty barrels.

Kyriakoudes: And when they sought to cut the price, what did they cut it to? Do you recall?

Thiroux: That was the fish, when we started fishing. We was getting thirty-five dollars a ton for the fish when we went on strike. (0:09:30.0) And they cut us down to twenty-five. So back then that was a lot of money. We went on strike, and just about everybody left DeJean's, went somewhere else after the strike.

Kyriakoudes: Did other processors cut their price as well?

Thiroux: Well, they wasn't nobody else, hardly, besides Marvel. Marvel and DeJean was the only one handling the fish for cat food, and that's where it got started. It got started at Marvel's, and then DeJean picked it up because there was plenty fish. And I don't know.

Hester: Going back to when you started with your dad, and you were working, how long did you say that—or did you say that—you were working on your dad's boat? (0:10:26.5)

Thiroux: I worked every summer.

Hester: How long? Till you were how old?

Thiroux: Till I was seventeen. Then I went and joined the Navy. (0:10:35.5)

Hester: And where'd you do service?

Thiroux: California mostly. I was on the *Princeton*, USS *Princeton*. It's an aircraft carrier. Put four years on there, and I come back, fishing.

Hester: OK. So you would have been then about twenty-two when you came back?

Thiroux: Yeah. And I'm seventy-seven, now. August I'll be seventy-eight, so it's been a long time.

Hester: How did you get back into the commercial fishing industry? Can you explain how you reentered that field? (0:11:13.0)

Thiroux: Well, I come back, and I think when I first come back, I bought a little boat there, and I was shrimping and crabbing, by myself, small boat. I'd go out and fish, and that's how I got hurt one time. (0:11:28.2)

Hester: What happened?

Thiroux: I was out there under Ship Island in a small boat, and it was rough, and I went to check, see if I was leaking or anything, and I fell in the coupling, and the coupling grabbed my shirt, and we was going around, and it killed the engine. I was dragging for shrimp, and it was a gasoline engine, and all the spark plugs and all got wet and everything. And looked like to me on the last round it started. That saved me. And so I got where I could pick the boards up and drag the net to Biloxi. And I could come into Gautier and Verdin(?). I had to hold my hand up because that blood was—I was just—had a white shirt on. I was plumb red. I didn't pass out; I guess. And they took me to the hospital, and I put twenty-nine days in there. I had gangrene, and they talking about taking my arm off, and I was lucky. But back then, they just—when I went to the hospital, they cleaned it out and everything and wrapped it up there, and my arm just got black, and then it busted. And that's when they put me in the hospital. And they gave me so many shots I couldn't walk.

Hester: You were in the hospital for twenty—

Thiroux: Twenty-nine days.

Hester: Twenty-nine days. And how long was it before you were able to get back into fishing?

Thiroux: It wasn't too long after that because I had to go. I mean, everything was—my wife was working, but it was tough back then.

Hester: Was she in the seafood industry as well?

Thiroux: No. She, most time, was in the grocery store business. She worked for National, A & P, and she retired out of National. And then she still went to work and went to work for the Grand [Casino] first. Then she went to Treasure Bay [Casino]; I believe she put ten years in. Then she was at Boom Town [Casino] when she had a knee replacement. And after that knee replacement it was a rough time. She come home one night. She never did work night shift in her life, and she come home, and she fell, and she broke the femur. And she was three months; I had to wait on her three months, couldn't put her foot on the floor. (inaudible) work, too.

Hester: Had to be a difficult period.

Thiroux: It was difficult. And she's got where she can walk now, but she wobbles. (laughter) But she goes ahead.

Hester: If I can turn the clock back a little bit, again, back to your leaving the Navy and starting to fish, again, as I understand it, before you went in the Navy, you were basically fishing with your dad.

Thiroux: Um-hm.

Hester: And you weren't doing it on your own. Right?

Thiroux: Um-hm.

Hester: And it was mostly shrimp and finfish for cat food, and so forth. What type of fish did you use for the cat food?

Thiroux: It was mostly croakers and stuff, just the trash fish. (0:14:46.2)

Hester: Was it one particular seafood plant that processed that particular product?

Thiroux: There was two plants that processed it back then, Marvel's and DeJean's.

Hester: So when you came out of the Navy you got a little boat, and you were starting with the crabbing and shrimping.

Thiroux: Crabbing and the shrimping.

Hester: And so where did you go from there? Did you go to a bigger boat?

Thiroux: Yeah. I went to a shrimp boat, (0:15:15.9) big shrimp boat. I went crabbing at first. And me and another fellow went together, and we all crabbied Bayou La Batre, I guess twenty, twenty-five years. We worked in Biloxi, and I'd say there was about a dozen crab factories in Biloxi then. And it was so many crabs you couldn't sell them. They put you on a limit (0:15:40.0) and all. So we went to Bayou La Batre, started in Bayou La Batre. We did good in Bayou La Batre. We went to Baron's(?) Seafood, and I know we worked there probably twenty years, hauling crab. (0:15:51.0) And I just got tired of being on the road, so I bought a big, shrimp boat. I went shrimping by myself. (0:15:56.9) Take the wife there when she wasn't working. (laughter) And then I had three boats. One I'd gillnet with. I'd catch my crab bait with; go catch the mullet and everything for the crabbing. Then I'd go crabbing the next morning. And then even when I was shrimping—I bought the big, shrimp boat—I still stayed crabbing. I'd crab one day and shrimp the next. I'd catch all my bait with the shrimp net and crab the next day. And that went on. In the wintertime we fished out of Pass Christian most of the time. In the wintertime when the crabs would get scarce, (0:16:43.7) we'd go catch oysters. When the water gets too cold, the crabs bury up, and they won't bite. Soon as it warms up, they come back. And that's what

we'd do every winter and summer. But we hauled crabs from Pass Christian to Bayou La Batre, I guess, for twenty years. That was a long time. Back then, though, you didn't mind it. We'd leave just daylight and just about dark, getting back home. It was—I don't know. He'd drive one week, and I'd drive the next week.

Kyriakoudes: Where would you lay your traps? (0:17:22.7)

Thiroux: We was outside of Cat Island, in Mississippi Sound, Lake Pontchartrain, and we was all over, down the marsh, Cabbage Reef(?), even Square Handkerchief, Telegraph, all over.

Kyriakoudes: How many traps would you lay out at one time? I mean, would you have out in the water?

Thiroux: In the water, well, I'd have a hundred and something, and he'd have a hundred and something. And we couldn't sell the crabs we was catching then. Now, (0:17:49.3) I run a hundred and something, and I can't get a box of them. That's how much difference it is. To me, really what killed the crab business was when they passed a law (0:18:01.7) we couldn't catch the sponge crabs. That hurt the business bad because Mississippi's got about 95 percent female crabs where Louisiana has about 95 percent male crabs. And see, when they did that, that pushed us from offshore; made us come inside because there wasn't nothing out there but sponge crabs. You couldn't just stay there and feed them. And it just shut it down where Mississippi then had about a dozen crab factories; they got one now. Alabama still catches them; they got about forty crab factories. So you can see. And I've tried and tried to tell them; if the research lab agrees that we catch them, conservation wants us to catch them. But one fellow stops it all, Tommy Giarda(?). I don't know if you know him. I was raised with him. Lived at the same house when we was young; renting the same house, my daddy and his daddy. But he just—I don't know why. He didn't have no recommendation to do that. We caught them about two weeks after they'd passed the law. We didn't know it. Then they finally come out, and they stopped us. And it's been stopped ever since, and he come to my house last year and said, "Billy, we going to let you catch these sponge crabs this year," because the conservation's been on him. The research has been on him. And I said, "Well, that'll be good." I said, "I've lost a many a dollar." And so he brought the bill up this year, and he had a friend from Jackson to shoot it down. Now, what that fellow know in Jackson about the egg crabs? It don't make sense to me. And now, even in the summertime when they ain't no egg crabs right now, but in the summertime, we might catch one box of good crabs, and four or five boxes of egg crabs, which all them egg crabs go to Alabama, and they catch them. They make the circle.

Kyriakoudes: And because this is for posterity, when you say sponge crabs, you mean the females with eggs.

Thiroux: The females, yeah, um-hm.

Kyriakoudes: Yes. And you just said—I couldn't understand what type of crab you just said now, the ones that go to Alabama.

Thiroux: Well, them sponge crabs, they go on and make a circle and go to Alabama. They just come from [mostly Pass Christian, outside of Cat Island] and they make they turn.

Hester: Was it an A crab?

Thiroux: Egg crab.

Hester: A crab, like the letter A.

Thiroux: Right now, even in the summertime now, we catch one box of good crabs; we catch five or six boxes of egg crabs. We got to throw them back. And look how much money we losing. It used to be they'd pay a nickel less for egg crabs than they did for good crabs, that didn't have the eggs because they say the sponge weighs it.

Kyriakoudes: What's your sense as to the number of crabs out there? (0:21:14.7) Is it about the same when you started? Has it changed?

Thiroux: Ooh, it changed drastically. Like I say, it shut down when they stopped us from catching egg crabs. And we'd catch twenty-five, thirty boxes a day, every day, all in Alabama. But now, choo! You can't catch nothing. It's terrible. I went yesterday. We run a hundred. And the fog was bad. The research lab went with us. They count them crabs and everything. And we run a hundred and four pots. A couple of strings we didn't run. And I had a hundred seventy-one pound. So that's just to show you. Back then when we first started, we'd have had twelve, fifteen hundred. And back then if we didn't get our twenty boxes there, me and this fellow, we'd run them again. They'd get in there that fast. There was that many crabs. But like I said, they was sponge crabs.

Hester: What is the difference between an [egg] crab and a sponge crab?

Thiroux: I don't see no difference. They say it's the same. But they say about the meat. Mississippi gets all the sponge crab meat because they get all their crab meat from Alabama. They can't get none from Biloxi because they ain't but one little factory, (0:22:39.2) and he don't handle enough to do nothing. [A portion of the interview in which a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Thiroux occurred has not been transcribed.]

Hester: Mr. Thiroux's wife Janet?

Thiroux: Um-hm.

Hester: Just walked in and brought us some pictures of Mr. Thiroux's boat. So we'll take a look at those when we're—thank you so much—when we're finished the interview. Talking about the sponge crabs, it seems to me if that's restricted in Mississippi, if I'm understanding it right, you cannot catch sponge crabs—

Thiroux: I can't catch them.

Hester: —in Mississippi. Then there should be lots of little crabs everywhere, and you could catch tons of them. But that's not the case.

Thiroux: No. Well, what's happening, they've run us in here, and we catch the male crab. And that's what mates with the female, and they ain't no more males to mate with them. So they just come out, but they don't put no crabs out.

Hester: Are the males going to another environment, or how would they—

Thiroux: They mostly hang about the freshwater, a male does; like Louisiana's got all this freshwater, and Mississippi's got different. But we catching these male crabs that these females ain't got nothing to breed with, where before, we worked offshore. We didn't bother them. I guess they could produce then.

Hester: Do any of the Mississippi crabbers go to Alabama or Louisiana to harvest the male crabs, or do they pretty much stay in Mississippi waters?

Thiroux: Well, right now, we used to go around Bayou La Batre, but I just got too old to get on the road. I don't even like to drive no more. But most of them, they got out of the business. (0:24:39.3) I meant, you can't make it.

Hester: What is the name of the guy that worked with you when you started doing the shrimping and crabbing? You said you went to work with somebody.

Thiroux: When I first started you mean?

Hester: Yeah. The guy that, when you first came back from the Navy and you were on your own, and then you went to work with somebody else, who was that?

Thiroux: Jack Williams, Mr. Jack Williams.

Hester: Is that the guy that lives next door to you? Did you say?

Thiroux: No. He died. He lived next door to me when I lived in Biloxi. He lived next door to me. I got on the boat with him, and when I bought my first house, DeJean Packing Company owned it. So he sold it to me, forty dollars a month back then. That was big money, and he was my neighbor there, but he's been dead a long time.

Hester: Did you-all have a crew, or it was just the two of you?

Thiroux: Just the two of us, um-hm.

Hester: And you did the shrimping and crabbing and no finfishing?

Thiroux: No, no, no. We didn't do no fin—me and him, well, we was finfishing, but he wouldn't stop and go on strike with us. (laughter) That made it bad. Like I say, we went on strike, and his son was head of the conservation one time, George Williams. And he's the one got us to go on strike; George was because that DeJean cut the price.

Hester: How did that affect your relationship when he continued—

Thiroux: Oh, I still talked to him and everything. He just got another crew. (laughter) That's all. And I went with another fellow, just died yesterday, Dego Trahan(?). He was a hundred years old. That's who I went and worked with. I worked for him a good while.

Hester: And that was after Mr. Williams?

Thiroux: Yeah, after Mr. Williams, yeah.

Hester: Yeah. So could you tell us about your fishing experiences with Mr. Trahan?

Thiroux: We was good. We was on a big boat. We first went to—he was on strike with us, too, at DeJean's. He run another boat for DeJean's, and he got a boat there from Sea Coast Packing Company. And we got, we call it a Biloxi lugger (0:27:17.7) with the pilothouse on the back. And this fellow, he had a hoisting(?) rig, and every time he'd put it overboard, they'd go in the wheels and all, and he couldn't catch those shrimp. So they give that to us, and we got that boat. (0:27:36.8) And we made some money with that boat. They used to take a captain there, every Christmas, buy him a new suit and everything. They liked him. We'd get new nets and all. They wouldn't give the other ones new nets because they wasn't catching no shrimp. But we doing good. But we put some miserable nights and days out there in that Gulf.

Hester: Can you share with us the secret of your success?

Thiroux: Well, it was good. I don't know. I stayed with him a long time. That's when I got off from him, and I started crabbing, and I started the crabbing business here, me and this fellow. But the last trip I made with him, we made eleven dollars, (0:28:28.7) a Christmas trip down there in Louisiana, Lonesome(?) Bayou. The weather was so bad you couldn't get out, and I said, "I had enough of this." So I got off.

Hester: And so you went back on your own at that point?

Thiroux: Yeah. I went back on my own then.

Hester: And could you tell us about your experiences back on your own?

Thiroux: Yeah. I did good, and then me and this fellow, I went back crabbing. I had a skiff; it was twenty-one foot, just a open skiff with a outboard motor on it. And we done good. We run crab pots and hauled them to Bayou La Batre. Well, we started in Biloxi with two cents a pound, catching crabs. (0:29:12.7) And like I said, they was about a dozen crab factories in Biloxi, but we couldn't sell them. So a fellow told me in Bayou La Batre—a Broussard(?) boy; he said, "Billy, they paying a nickel over here in Bayou La Batre." So I went to Bayou La Batre for that nickel. Then I worked two days for a fellow over there, Johnson(?). And I see him again; he said, "You check with Bryant?" Said, "Maybe Bryant went up seven cents." Said, "No." So I went over to Bryant's. (0:29:45.0) I never will forget that. The fellow that owned the place was setting on the back steps, and I come back. I says, "Cap, how's the crab business?" He said, "That's a joke." So I thought. I said, "Well, ain't no use in me wasting your time." He said, "No. I ain't getting none." I said, "You ain't?" I said, "Well, you'll get some tomorrow." (laughter)

Hester: Did you say his name was Brown?

Thiroux: Bryant, B-R-Y-A-N-T, Bryant Seafood.

Hester: Oh, OK, Bryant.

Thiroux: Yeah.

Hester: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: They're still there.

Thiroux: They're still there? And he died. I believe his brother's still living, that was in the shrimp business. He was in the crab business. His brother was in the—his daddy owned it all when we first started with him. His daddy, we started, and his daddy would go buy us bait and everything and bring to us. He was retired; he just overseeing everything. But I like old George Bryant. We was working six, seven days a week for him. He took the crabs for that seven cents, which back then was big.

Hester: You said Mr. Trahan continued with you in this, or did you—

Thiroux: No.

Hester: —get a new partner?

Thiroux: I had a new partner; Dewey Cruise(?) we called him. It's Morton(?) Cruise.

Hester: Dewey?

Thiroux: Morton.

Hester: Morton Cruise.

Thiroux: Yeah. Me and him crabbed together. (0:31:13.1) He had a little boat, and I had a little boat. But we hauled the crabs in one (inaudible) haul them. We'd both haul them in his truck, and next week in my truck. And we both bought new trucks to haul them on the road. We tried them old trucks, but they wouldn't hold up, and we both bought new trucks. And we hauled crabs down there for a long time. They used to be a bridge down there. I never will forget that little bridge. We'd get so hot there, and we'd stop and wake us up a little bit.

Hester: About what year are we talking about (inaudible)?

Thiroux: That's been a long time ago. I guess that was in the [19]70s or [19]80s. It's been a long time. They was plenty crabs back then. It was plenty everything, fish, shrimp, and just everything just—I don't know.

Hester: Can you kind of explain since you've done crabbing for so long, could you explain how the equipment that you used changed over the course of the years you've worked in it? (0:32:20.6)

Thiroux: Yeah. When we first started, well, back then when my daddy went, they used to have what they called a hand line. They had (inaudible) every six foot on it, and had a roll (inaudible) beside the boat, and they just scooped the crabs off while they was eating. And then when I started, we had galvanized wire. We used to have to put (inaudible) on them and everything. They wouldn't last too long. They were small chicken wire. And then now, they come out with, well, that plastic's been a long time, but it's getting worse now because the wire I buy now ain't like the wire I used to buy. The wire I used to buy, it used to be double-coated, galvanized, and then plastic. But now, just one coat of galvanized and a little plastic on it. It don't last near as long. But we don't get to cut too many loose because we lose too many. We come inshore here, and these people with the speed boats, (0:33:17.6) they don't know where the channel is to run. They're all out, and they don't watch where they go, and they cut the corks off of them. And then now, it's worse now, I guess, because there's nowhere in Mississippi as I know of, maybe one place in Bay St. Louis there, I believe, handles a few crab pots, but around Biloxi you can't buy a crab pot. Nobody sells them. And so these people up the bay, we can't fish the bay. We used to fish all the way to the (inaudible) Company, Gulfport, around there, but now they got us to the railroad bridge. (0:33:51.7) Tommy Gollotts(?) did that. He's got us outside now. So these people that they can't buy no crab pots nowhere, they come by and get six of ours and bring them up there, and that's where our pots go. And I've tried with the conservation to make them use a smaller pot, maybe six, eight, ten inches. That way

they could tell if they was theirs or ours. But I can't get it to them. I don't know. We lose a lot of crab pots. Back then we didn't lose none. You didn't have the traffic or nothing. Well, we fished offshore. See. Now, we got to fish inshore. So I don't know. It's just, it's bad.

Kyriakoudes: You mentioned you used to just—I guess you'd bait a line and run a line.

Thiroux: Bait a line, yeah.

Kyriakoudes: And just run it behind the boat. The crabs would just grab onto the bait.

Thiroux: No. What we'd do, (0:34:53.9) we'd put a pole down and put a line on it and put another pole down there on the other end of it. OK. And on side the boat there, there was a roller, like a washing machine roller, and we put the line on there, and before the crabs come up, you squeeze them off the bait. We had the bait running.

Kyriakoudes: And the lines were baited.

Thiroux: Yeah. The lines was baited. (0:35:13.9) Every six foot you put the bait on it. Put cow tongues and all that stuff on them, tripe.

Hester: What type of tongues? What did you say?

Thiroux: Cow tongues. We used to use, yeah, for bait, but we don't use none of that no more. We use nothing but pogies, pogies or mullet. In the summertime, croakers, any kind of fish is good, but in the wintertime mostly pogies, the best.

Hester: You've given us this description of the changes that have happened in the crabbing business as far as the equipment changes. Could you tell us something about the shrimp, since you've had some experience with that as well?

Thiroux: Shrimp?

Hester: Yeah. How did that change? (0:35:57.1)

Thiroux: Well, I used to do good shrimping. I shrimped by myself; had a big shrimp boat, and I worked it by myself. Well, I worked this boat here by myself, too, crabbing, till I fell and broke my ankle. Then this past ten years, I guess, I got a fellow to come help me. But I worked all the time by myself. It was long nights, but that's when we had to do, at night.

Hester: So you still have a shrimping operation going on?

Thiroux: No. No. I took it all off. I give it to my little nephew. He bought a boat and give him friction(?), everything. (laughter) But I show you on the back here; this is what we used to shrimp with. See this thing here going out? The friction(?) was right here, and the trawl would go off the back.

Kyriakoudes: OK. Right. And this boat's about?

Thiroux: Thirty-seven foot.

Kyriakoudes: Thirty-seven foot. With a diesel—

Thiroux: Diesel.

Kyriakoudes: —inboard, yeah.

Thiroux: Six, seventy-one.

Kyriakoudes: And what you're pointing to is basically a—

Thiroux: See, this used to be a friction here, and the trawl and boards and all stayed on the back of here, and we'd put it overboard and drag it from behind.

Kyriakoudes: And drag the nets from behind.

Thiroux: Behind, yeah.

Kyriakoudes: Wow. Yeah. Who's this?

Thiroux: That's me.

Kyriakoudes: Oh, that's you. OK. (laughter) Oh, yeah. We might take a picture of these pictures if we could just with our camera just to put it in the file. This is terrific.

Hester: And this is the crabbing boat. Right?

Thiroux: Yeah. I've crabbed with it. I've shrimped with it. I've oystered with it. We used to pull a dredge right off the back of it.

Kyriakoudes: Tell us a little bit about oystering. (0:37:49.8) Where would you oyster, and how would you dredge or tong? Explain that.

Thiroux: I've done by it all, tonged and dredged. I've dredged. We used to in the wintertime mostly. Then some winters there wasn't no crabs, we'd dredge all winter in Pass Christian, Square Handkerchief, Telegraph, First(?) Key, all over out there.

Kyriakoudes: And one of the values of these interviews is down the road in the future people are going to listen to these and after this generation of fishermen has passed, they're going to actually learn how it works. And so keeping that in mind, I was wondering if you could just take me through like a typical day oystering. What time would you start? Where would you sail out of? And tell me about your equipment and describe it for me.

Thiroux: Well, back then we was allowed to pull a sixteen-foot dredge behind the boat with the bagging on it . And we was always on a limit, (0:38:48.9) usually twenty sacks. And we'd go out in the morning, crack of daylight, six o'clock. They had a limit on that there. And 9:30, ten o'clock, we'd have them. We'd come in and unload. It was good. And we done good oystering.

Hester: And what would a day be like, if you could, shrimping, say, if you were going out shrimping? (0:39:17.3)

Thiroux: Well, back then, they had—I've seen—I'd stay busy all night, shrimping, catching shrimp, fill all my ice chests up and come in, but there was some nights that was bad. You'd get good nights and bad nights. But it was good. I loved it. I mean, that's all I did. I don't know nothing else.

Kyriakoudes: When you were looking to go shrimping, tell me about maybe watching the tides, or the moon, or the weather. What were favorable conditions?

Thiroux: Well, usually with a rising tide we'd do the best, but sometime during the night, usually right before dark, right at dark, we'd do good, and right at daylight we'd do good. The rest of the night it'd be slow. I don't know why, but that crack-of-daylight drag's usually the best.

Hester: Did you always go to the same location, or did—

Thiroux: No. We went all—

Hester: How did you determine where you were going to go?

Thiroux: Where we'd hear somebody caught some shrimp, that's where we'd go. They'd tell each other. Tell my friend where I got them at. He'd be there the next day.

Hester: But I guess crabbing would be more the same place? You would still go to the same place, or did you vary your places? (0:40:34.7)

Thiroux: We changed up a lot. Now, I don't too much, but we used to run out of Pass Christian, run down Gulfport ship channel, outside of Cat Island, and then we'd go to the west, there.

Hester: And oystering, is it basically the same type of procedure? (0:40:56.4) When you get up and head out, you would—

Thiroux: I'd know where to go because them oysters don't move. They stay right there. (laughter) We know where they at. We could get them.

Hester: Yeah. What about the differences in the oysters along the Coast? Were some areas better for oystering than others?

Thiroux: Um-hm. They are. Some places is better. Right now, I talked to—I don't know if you know him—Kenny Melwin(?). Anyway, he's running a conservation boat there, and he told me that all the oysters out of right there, outside of Ocean Springs and all, are dead. The conchs eat them up. (0:41:36.6) There are so many conchs, and you can't hardly pick the pot up, crab pot. They come in there to eat the bait. And that's where it eats the oysters.

Hester: What brought them in, the conchs?

Thiroux: I don't know.

Hester: When did they first start showing up?

Thiroux: Oh, they been there a long time, but not as thick, like they are now. But I don't know. I got a friend eats them. I bring him some all the time. (inaudible) He loves them. I've never eat them. I don't know.

Hester: Could you describe how the terrain has changed? (0:42:17.4) How have the wetlands changed? How has the habitat for fishing changed over the course of your fifty-plus years?

Thiroux: It's changed it, bad. It's getting worse every year. I've never seen it this bad, this year. This is the worst year I've ever seen. I mean, we go out and run crab pots and go the next day, or go next week. If the weather's bad or something, I don't go for four, five, six days, and the bait'll be still there. There ain't no fish to eat it out or nothing. Nothing went in there but conchs, and they trying to eat it out. I mean, we don't catch a fish no more. And we used to catch enough to where we could sell them, flounders and ground mullet and everything. We used to sell them. Then they put; come conservation and put a license (0:43:10.4) on us. You got to have a commercial license now, a hundred dollars, and I don't know if I'd catch a—I couldn't catch a hundred dollars worth now. So we can't catch no fish at all. I ain't never seen it like this. They ain't no fish to eat the bait. Usually there's minnows or something will come there and eat them pogies, but they ain't nothing. It's bad. I don't know.

Hester: How is it different from last year?

Thiroux: Last year was bad, too, but it wasn't as bad as this year. Last year we could catch two, three, four boxes, but we can't do it now. It's been terrible.

Hester: And the year before? I mean, has it been like a decline, or is it cyclical where you've got—

Thiroux: It's been a decline since, like I say, since that egg crab business, that shut the business down. I mean, completely. Like I say, Billy Book(?) of High Jean(?) Crab Company sat there for four or five years, and he was a big gun in the crab business, and he had to go bankrupt. He bought a place in Vancleave with picking machines, trying to pick the crabs and everything. He finally went bankrupt. He couldn't get no crabs because no sponge crabs. Like I say, even in the summertime now, we get five, six, seven boxes of egg crabs (0:44:31.8); get one box of good ones. And you got to throw them overboard. That don't make sense.

Hester: And good ones being? How would you describe good ones?

Thiroux: Well, the good ones is without the eggs, without the eggs. And conservation told me again this year they going to try again this year; try to get us to catch them, but the way I understand it, he's over the conservation. I don't know. I was raised with him. I don't know.

Hester: Who are you talking about?

Thiroux: Tommy Gollott, um-hm. But to me, when his uncles and all was in the business, he was all right. But soon as they got out of business, they went in the shrimp business and stuff, peeling shrimp, picking shrimp, that shut it down, then. I don't know what he's got against the crabbers. (laughter)

Hester: Could you maybe speak to us a little bit more about how the regulations have changed over the course of your career? (0:45:31.9)

Thiroux: Yeah. There's a lot of regulations changed. We used to crab, like I say, all the way up to the power plant in Gulfport. We used to catch the freshwater catfish. Boy, they was good eating then, and everything. And then he passed a law then, put us outside the bridge there. And I mean, the crabber, he ain't got no chance, really. Wherever he puts a crab pot, they can just about drag a trawl. That ain't right. We don't have a chance. Either the bait fishermen, the live-bait catches them, or the commercial fisherman catches them. You ain't got no place to work.

Kyriakoudes: When you say outside the bridge, do you mean—

Thiroux: The railroad bridge. This railroad bridge, here, we got to be outside of it. We used to work all the way up north. Now, the only people they let in there with six pots, and that's where our pots go.

Kyriakoudes: Six per family.

Thiroux: Yeah, supposed to be, but his brother's got six, and that one's got six. They don't enforce nothing. There ain't no law enforcement. I ain't seen a conservation man out there in I don't know when. I ain't seen too many people out there really because there ain't no crabbers or nothing no more.

Hester: When did you stop finfishing?

Thiroux: That's been years ago. I don't know. I guess in—

Hester: Who were you working with then?

Thiroux: That was Mr. Jack Williams. We were catching croakers and stuff.

Hester: What made you get out of the finfishing?

Thiroux: Well, when they cut the price and we went on strike. And then I went shrimping with a fellow, just died yesterday, Dego Trahan. And me and him fished together a good while, then, and like I say, it got so bad then down in the wintertime. The weather was bad. And that's when I quit, though, was a Christmas trip. Eleven dollars, I can't forget that. And I believe we was out about seventeen days. I just got tired of being away from home. That's when I got in the crabbing business. In a little shrimp boat, I started doing it, myself. I worked by myself there a long time. Then me and him got together because we was hauling them to Bayou La Batre, but he worked in his boat, and I worked in mine. We worked with outboard motors back then. Outboard motor would last six months. Then we'd have to either get a new power head on it or a new motor. We put some time on them. (laughter) But they didn't make them like they make them now. They wasn't as good.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about the hurricane and (inaudible).

Hester: OK. Yeah. Let's talk about some of the more recent events, starting with 2005 and [Hurricane] Katrina. Could you tell me how Katrina affected your business? (0:48:47.5)

Thiroux: Well, it put my boat in the woods. I had it tied in the Ocean Springs Harbor, and I seen them big, old, tall pilings. I just had it looped around where they'd have to go up and come down. It went up over them pilings there and went up in the woods. It had two pine trees on it, across it, pow, pow, way up in the woods there. And I couldn't find it for about two days. Didn't know where it was at. Then somebody told me where it was at in them woods back there. So I got back there in them woods there, and mercy! Man, them two pine trees. I lost radar. I lost everything off. The house is all busted up. FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] was getting a boat off Ocean Springs there; had one back there, it was on the dock there. And the FEMA was doing it. So I went to FEMA, and they wouldn't

even talk to me. They said, “No. You got to go to SBA.” [Small Business Administration] So I went to SBA, and the fellow went down there and looked, and he said he’d loan me forty-six thousand dollars, but he said I’d have to put my house up. I said, “No. Just forget it. I ain’t putting my house up. House is paid for.” So I had to take my savings then and get the boat out of the woods and fix it up, but a lot of them got FEMA and all that stuff, but I didn’t. I guess you got a dollar; they don’t want you. Put me to SBA.

Hester: Did you lose your house?

Thiroux: Yeah, had a lot of damage. I had sixty-three (inaudible) ground out back there, those pine trees mostly. I could just about cut the grass in the summertime in the shade, but they got—I’m glad they got all them pine trees out. I had a swimming pool and all out there and covered it all up. It tore all this here part off. My neighbor’s tree got this, here. But I was lucky; I didn’t get no water. I got water in my shed back there. The water come up pretty close to the house, here, but I was real lucky. But I think the bridge helped me. The bridge went to pieces over there, and that water, it held that. When I come back home, that railroad track right there was standing straight up. How they got that railroad track up, I don’t know, but it was straight up all the way there. But I was just lucky. I lost a lot, but I didn’t get no water.

Hester: How long did it take you to get your boat back in shape after Katrina? (0:51:39.1)

Thiroux: Ooh, that was a long time, two or three months there; I guess, a couple, two or three months there because it was a while there before I got it out of the woods and then put the house and all back on it.

Hester: And what facet of the business did you go back into? Was it crabbing?

Thiroux: Crabbing, that’s what I was doing then. I give it all up besides crabbing. I said, “Well, I’m too old to get out there at night.” I was by myself anyway.

Hester: So you were crabbing before Katrina, only crabbing before Katrina and only crabbing after Katrina?

Thiroux: Um-hm, after Katrina.

Hester: Could you tell me how Katrina affected the crabbing industry? (0:52:14.5)

Thiroux: We was still catching a few crabs then, but like I say, it still wasn’t good. We’d get three, four boxes of good crabs and eight, ten boxes of egg crabs. And we could do good if we could’ve caught the egg crabs. You got to throw them away.

Hester: So it was basically the same after Katrina as what you were experiencing before? Would you say?

Thiroux: No. It was about the same, I guess. Before Katrina, though, we was catching all we could sell unless you wanted to haul them to Bayou La Batre because we selling to markets.

Hester: Let's talk about the BP oil spill. (0:53:05.4) You've been through that as well, I take it, only crabbing at that point.

Thiroux: Um-hm.

Hester: How was the crabbing before the BP oil spill?

Thiroux: It was fair, but I don't know what's happened, but the water's got bad because the crab pots we can't hardly keep clean. This mushy-like stuff gets on them. You got to pick them up and pressure-wash them. And it just ain't like it used to be.

Hester: Did you have to do any pressure-washing of your crab pots prior to the oil spill?

Thiroux: Yeah, we did, but it'd be a long time. Sometime I'd go all winter without doing it. But now, about every other week we do it.

Hester: So it's increased.

Thiroux: It's increased.

Hester: The frequency's increased.

Thiroux: Yeah. It's been a great increase.

Hester: When you heard about the BP oil spill, what were your first thoughts? (0:53:59.4)

Thiroux: I figured the business was over. Well, to me, the fishing business is gone. To me, like I say, they shut down the crabbing business, and since then it ain't been no good business. We used to do good, but not no more. Since they passed that egg-crab law on us, it's been terrible.

Kyriakoudes: After the spill began in April of 2010, did you participate in any of the Vessels of Opportunity programs or any of that? (0:54:39.6)

Thiroux: Well, my boat was broke down when that happened. I had engine trouble, had to overhaul the engine. But I got a little money out of BP from bringing my

income tax and all that stuff out, but I didn't get in on the big money, where they went out there and come right back in. And I don't know how much they—got big money.

Kyriakoudes: What did you see happening down on the water? What were people doing? How was that affecting the fishermen? Who was participating?

Thiroux: Just about all of them. Most of them did participate. They done good, really. I don't know how much they were getting a day, fifteen hundred or something like that there. They outrageous, the price, what they was giving them.

Hester: A lot of the commercial fishermen were participating in the program?

Thiroux: Um-hm, yeah.

Hester: Doing well?

Thiroux: The reason, one thing, too, I didn't participate because I worked for Quality Seafood(?), and you give your place up, and they get somebody else; you ain't got a place to sell crabs. I'd have come back, and who would I'd have sold crabs to? I ain't going to Bayou La Batre. I'm too old for all that driving. And that's one reason, too, I didn't participate in it.

Hester: Do you mind if I ask you how old you are?

Thiroux: Seventy-seven. I'll be seventy-eight in August. I guess I'm still lucky to be getting around. But I love it on the boat. When I'm out on the boat, I feel so much better, just the cool air. And I don't know. But I ain't been working but three days a week. I catch about what all they can handle.

Hester: Can you talk about when the period that the waters were closed during the course of the aftermath of the oil spill? How did that affect you? (0:56:47.6)

Thiroux: Well, they wouldn't let me fish for about a month or better. They wouldn't even want us to get out of the harbor. They wanted us to stay in. I don't know how come they did all that, but they wouldn't let us go catch them. Then they finally just opened it up again. I don't know. I couldn't figure out why they stopped us because there wasn't no oil in here yet.

Hester: How was it when you went back? (0:57:20.4)

Thiroux: It was about the same, no difference. But like I say, what surprises me is nothing eating the fish out of the crab pots. You dump the bait out like you put it in, and we never did that. You go back the next day; there ain't no bait. But not no more. You had fish or something, something to eat it out, but they ain't nothing to eat it out.

Hester: Did the opening of the spillway affect your crabbing business? (0:57:50.3)

Thiroux: It could have some. That could have helped some. I don't know. When they opened it before, I was in Pass Christian there, and it hurt us. We couldn't catch no crabs or nothing there for a while. We had to go to Gulfport. (phone rings) But we had to go to Gulfport, go down that ship channel, out to Ship Island and fish there. And then finally it'd keep moving back till we got back in Pass Christian, but it killed all the oysters there, too. The next year there wasn't no oysters. We couldn't catch no oysters. Had to stay crabbing.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Nothing in Square Handkerchief, Bayou Caddy, all that, even now.

Thiroux: No. I know we caught a oyster on a crab pot yesterday there; they was dead. But the fellow told me that; he said the conchs eat them all up. They wanting to get some oysters. I don't know. Maybe they'll get some out of Pascagoula. We used to tong oysters down there, middle of the river and all, Graveline(?). Probably plenty of oysters in Graveline. They let us catch oysters—I don't know. It's been a long time, though, and we could catch three sacks a day. That's all. But back then they paid us thirty-three dollars, I believe, according to the weight, how much you put in the sack. And we'd wind up with thirty-three, thirty-six dollars a sack. So that was pretty good, make a day's work.

Hester: Have you noticed that your friends that are also in the seafood business have continued in the same fashion that you have?

Thiroux: No. They all quit. They got out of the business.

Hester: And that was starting when? What was the real force that drove them to make that decision?

Thiroux: Well, most of them—I got one fellow there, friend; I had him on the boat with me there, and then he bought his own boat and went into Pass Christian, and he's doing a little bit of it. But he's retired, too. But then he got hooked up with somebody in Bayou La Batre, and they working together. And the fellow from Bayou La Batre meets him at Pass Christian, and he hauls the crabs to Bayou La Batre, so he ain't got to get on the road. But I couldn't even get on the road—I don't believe—to Pass Christian like I used to. I just don't like to drive.

Kyriakoudes: What's the best thing for you about fishing, about your career as a fisherman? The thing that you love the most.

Thiroux: I just like being out there, I guess, on that fresh water, and the air I just—I don't know. But I feel so much better when I get out there than I do around the house. Even when they stopped us from catching them egg crabs, we'd come in here, and we was catching peeler crabs then, the ones that's going to make soft crabs. (1:01:02.5) And Harriet Gary(?) from the research lab, she'd come show me how to do it and

everything, and I got a tank set up in there now. But we used to catch plenty. And when we was at Pass Christian we used to catch them peeler crabs, and we'd sell them to Seymour(?) in D'Iberville. And we'd catch them by the half-a-baskets full, but now you don't even see that, no more soft crabs. When we first started, we'd shed ten, twelve dozen a night, but now, you can't shed nothing the season, just about. They just gone. I believe the seafood business (1:01:44.2) is gone, myself. I don't know. I hope it comes back, but I don't see much hope. (1:01:50.4) Everything is getting too expensive, crab pots and everything and nets and the fuel, and the price of stuff ain't never—I'm getting the same as I—I get a dollar now for crabs, a dollar a pound. Been getting that ten years, and everything steady go up, up, up. But to me, people ain't eating crabs like they used to. I don't know if they're scared of them, or what it is. If it's the oil spill, they scared? But man, I used to sell crabs down at the boat all the time. I ain't sold a crab in I don't know when now. They'd see you coming in, man, they'd come buy some. Not no more. I don't know.

Hester: If you had a young man that came to you today and told you that he was thinking about going into commercial fishing, talking a bit about what you perceive of the future of the seafood industry, what would be your advice to him?

Thiroux: Tell him to go get him a job where he can retire. What I tell all them young kids: go to school. Too late for me. You about got to have a college education now to get a good job. It's bad.

Hester: I've asked a number of questions, and so has Dr. Kyriakoudes. And I'm sure there are many more that we could have asked, and it just didn't occur to us. So this is maybe an opportunity for you to answer your own question if there's anything that you would like to state and put on the record. This will be archived with the Center [for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, University of Southern Mississippi]. So would you like to put anything on the record yourself?

Thiroux: No. I just think if they never would have passed that law (1:03:53.8) on the sponge/egg crabs that we'd still have a good crab season. They just shut it down. Even when I was dragging a net, shrimping, I've seen me catch so many egg crabs till I couldn't pick the net up. I'd have to cut it to let the crabs out, but nobody could catch them. And if that would have never happened, I believe you still would have a good crab season; you could make a living out of it. Like I say, even last year, summer, catch five, six, seven boxes of egg crabs, one box of good crabs, two boxes of good crabs. You could make a living out of that if you could sell them egg crabs, but they won't let you. But the conservation's been trying to get, and the research lab's trying to get it. Just that one fellow, I don't know how he pulls all that power, but he does, to stop it. I don't know, but like I say, what goes around, comes around. He'll have to reap what he's doing, and he was a good friend of mine. I was raised with him, all the way from kids. I don't know what he's got—he lives on the bay, back there, and I believe that's why—on the water on the bay, back there, and I believe he said he couldn't catch no crabs off his wharf, so he shut the bay down. I don't know. It's all politics. That's what it amounts to. He's going to let me catch

this year. He come by. Him and Mr. Stewart(?) come down. I don't know if y'all know Mr. Stewart, was principal of schools and all that stuff. And they come by and told me they're going to let me catch them this year. And boy, I said, "I'm glad of that." And he passed the law. I read where he passed the law, and this guy from Jackson voted it down. Conservation said they'll try again next year. I might not be here next year, but you don't know.

Hester: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Thiroux. This has been a wonderful interview, and again, thank you for letting us into your home to do this.

Kyriakoudes: Thank you very much. I've learned a great deal.

(end of interview)