

CHARLES THOMPSON
Shrimp Net Maker – Apalachicola, FL

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Date: January 11, 2006
Location: Thompson's Net Shop - Apalachicola, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 54 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

[Begin Charles Thompson]

0:00:00.5

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday January 11, 2006. I'm in Apalachicola, Florida, with Mr. Charles Thompson at his home and net shop here; he's a net maker. Mr. Thompson, would you mind saying your name and your birthday for the record, please?

0:00:16.9

Charles Thompson: My name is Charles Thompson, and I was born May 8th, 1942.

0:00:23.3

AE: That's my birthday.

0:00:23.4

CT: Is that right?

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AE: It sure is.

0:00:24.5

CT: Well how about that? That's a good day.

0:00:27.3

AE: Yeah, I would say so. So tell me how you got into the net making business.

0:00:31.8

CT: Well it—it started out—I started shrimping probably in the late [nineteen] sixties. I bought my first boat in 1972; I've owned three large boats in—in my time for over about a thirty-year period. And back in 1998 we decided to—well let me say that I started making my own nets, probably in the late eighties—1980s—there somewhere, and I had my little shop, and then I—I wanted to kind of semi-retire. And I could see what was happening to the shrimp business, so I sold my last boat in 1998, and I started just doing a little net repair and making a few nets for the—for the guys around and—and—and it seemed like the Golden's [Golden's Net Shop] over in Eastpoint was kind of fading out, and so they wanted me to expand a little, so we have and it's—it's—and they finally went out, and it turned out to, you know, to work us pretty hard. We don't do it full time. I semi-retired a few years ago and—and the guy that works with me, James Beckton, he's—he's in about the same shape I am, just kind of semi-retired. Some—some weeks we have a full week, others we don't—we don't and sometimes we have to take a week or so off,

you know, and that sort of thing. But—but it's been good. We—we started in 1998 and now we—we're the only net shop around, and we make a good many of the nets. I won't say we make all of them because a lot of the guys make their own nets. They maybe buy the webbing from me or something and make their own nets and—and that. But we do make quite a few and—.

0:02:19.1

AE: How did you learn to make a net?

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CT: [*Sighs*] Just on-the-job training, so to speak, and a guy—a good friend of mine that was in the net shop business here years ago back when I bought my first boat, back when I started shrimping, a fellow by the name of James Copeland had a big net shop downtown, and we got to be real good friends and he—he made all my nets at that time and the people that I worked for when I first started it, and he made all of their nets. He was about the only one around at the time here, but he was a real big net shop. But anyway, he give me a lot of the patterns and helped me out a lot. And then here lately with the bay shrimping all my—all my shrimping was big boat Gulf [of Mexico] work. And then, when I started this, a lot of the bay shrimpers—we had to make smaller nets. And we put all of our heads together and I—I'd listen to them [talk about] what would work and take my experience and put it together and we—we'd come up with something that seems to be doing a real good job. And we pretty much just stayed with the same pattern. We built all size nets from twelve-foot—ten-foot try nets [which are miniature nets that

are dragged first over possible shrimp locations in order to locate a good shrimping spot before the large net is lowered] on up to fifty, sixty-foot nets for big boats, you know, so—and everything in between. Whatever size they want, we—we have a formula. James Copeland give me that formula that he had for many, many years, and I can take it with that formula and a calculator and figure out the size net I want and—and it works out real good. And the boys wanted me to kindly expand and put a few net supplies in, so we do. We sell a little rope, twine, shackles, supplies for—for the boats—whatever they need. And if they need cable we don't stop the cable. We're just a little backyard—you can see—a little backyard business and—and we don't stock a lot of—of product because we don't—we don't have room, for one thing. And we didn't want to get in that big—big because, like I say, I am kind of semi-retired. And so we do—but we do—if they need some cable or—or shrimp doors I have a set of shrimp doors sitting around there now that I ordered for a guy. But we can order most anything the guys need or want. It might take us a couple days to get it but—but that's kind of the way it's happened and—and we just—.

0:04:47.5

AE: What is a shrimp door?

0:04:49.0

CT: Well, we call them doors, and where that came from I have no idea. But it's what spreads the nets; it's two of them. They're made out of aluminum and wood, and they've got a big iron

plate on the bottom of it that drags on the bottom. And the cable comes off of the boat—off of the winch on the boat, hooks to those doors—we call them—and that's what spreads the nets. When they lay it down in the water, those doors, you know, and go to the—and takes the net to the bottom, and—.

0:05:18.4

AE: You just have a supplier for those?

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CT: Yes, uh-huh. It's Bio-Boards is the name of it in Bayou La Batre, Alabama. And then I buy all my supplies from Tide Marine Supply there in—in Bayou La Batre. It's a real good guy; I've got acquainted with him. His name is Harold—first name is Harold, and we've been real—made real good friends over probably about, I don't know, an eight or ten-year period of time here, and whatever I need, I just call and tell him I need it and—and he'll get it to me. Sometimes I have to go get webbing, and I got my truck and trailer, if I need something. I'll—lot of times I'll go get it because freight is high, you know. So we can haul our own freight, if we can. But, like I say, it's just a part-time thing and we don't—we're not full time, but I'm what the boys have left **[Laughs]**—such as I am and I just—we work hard but we—we do the best we can and it all works out, sure does.

0:06:18.6

AE: Do you make cast nets also?

0:06:20.4

CT: We do not. Now I—I have a guy—I'm acquainted with a guy up in White City [Florida] that I can get cast nets from. He makes them. And I have sold one or two but mostly shrimp nets—just the shrimp nets and such.

0:06:37.5

AE: Why is that? Are they different enough to make that you don't want to fool with them or—?

0:06:41.5

CT: Yeah, most of the cast nets are made out of the mono-filament—the plastic webbing—and I—I just never did get into that, you know. And—and I wasn't a mullet fisherman, and I never did get into the cast net, so we just kind of stuck with the shrimp nets and—and that gives me all I want to do and can do so, you know.

0:06:57.8

AE: Can you describe the process of making a net and what materials you use and what it entails?

0:07:02.3

CT: We buy the material on bales; they make it with a machine. It's a nylon material and this is—what we're looking at here is—is a plastic, so to speak, webbing that we're making some [nets] out of now. But we buy that webbing already put together on bales, and then, like I said, we—we take the patterns that we have or either we come up with a pattern and then we just—we cut it out, the net out and—and the tapers on the side, top, and bottom—and then we just sew it together. It's just a process. In fact, James inside there is putting—putting one together now, actually.

0:07:45.0

AE: And that—this tool you have in your hand is—would you call it—?

0:07:47.6

CT: This is what we call a sewing needle, yeah, that we sew them together. We are fixing what we call the salvage around that line there, and that's what hangs it on the—the line. We have several different size needles, according to what size twine we—I mean, size webbing we're sewing. But this—like I say, I was fixing to put the salvage around the line—around the top of

the net—and then we hang it on combination cable. I have some over in the warehouse over there, but it's kind of—it's got steel cable in—in it and we hang some on rope on a Poly-Dac rope. But a lot of the bigger boats prefer the combination cable. It's a little tougher, you know, and don't break as easy and don't stretch. So it's just a little process. It's kindly interesting, but it's just all in a day's work. *[Laughs]*

0:08:38.5

AE: How long does it take you to put a net together?

0:08:41.2

CT: According to what size it is, one thing, but these little—these are twenty-fives here that we're making, and we're making four of them for a guy. By myself, if I—if that's all I do, I can probably make one of those nets easily in a day. But [James Beckton] and I work together, and most of the time he puts them together in there, and I'll hang them on the line. I'm just helping him. I'm getting the salvage put on this last one, and then I'll start hanging here in a little while. We've just got a little process that we go through. But he and I together can probably make two or—or so a day, maybe—possibly three, if we work hard. Of course, now the bigger the net gets, the longer it takes, you know. There's a lot more webbing and that sort of thing. One of the bigger nets like—for instance like one of the fifty-foot nets, I would say it would take probably about two days to put one of those together for us. Now there's a lot of people that's a lot faster

than I am, you know, and probably could do it quicker, but—but that's—that's about the way it takes us, you know.

0:09:39.3

AE: What is the cost of some of these nets?

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CT: This net—particular net here, just the net, this is not including the TED [turtle Excluder Device] and the bag that has to be put on them now, but just the net is around 325 dollars. And then [with] the TED put in, webbing will run about 225 dollars, and then the bag is about ninety-five dollars.

0:10:01.3

AE: And this is like a twenty-five-foot net, you said?

0:10:03.3

CT: This is like a twenty-five, yeah. One of the fifty—just to average size—but around a fifty-foot net would run probably around 850 dollars and then the TED probably—it's a bigger TED—and put in webbing, it's probably around—close to 300 dollars—around 300 dollars, and then the

bag is about 250 dollars. So add that up. You—you're getting a lot of money, and a lot of the boats—well, just about all of the boats this day and time—the big boats I'm—I'm speaking about—pulls four—four [nets] at a time, so if you get like a—probably fifteen hundred dollars to the—fifteen hundred dollars per net, by the time you get the TED and the bag and chafing gear and all and—and you got two [nets] on each side, see, you got 3,000 dollars [worth of nets] on each side of the boat—just nets—besides the cable they have to have. It's a lot of expense to it. I was in it a long time but—and it's changed real fast. I'm glad I got out of it when I did because with the regulations—it's so many regulations now and they're—some of them good. I'm not, you know, downing that, but these turtle excluders, these TEDs was—it liked to put us all out. It was very detrimental to us, but we finally worked it—.

0:11:31.1

AE: That's the turtle shoot in the—in the nets? That's what you're calling a TED?

0:11:33.7

CT: Yeah, right, that's what I'm calling a TED. It's a TED—it's a Turtle Excluder Device is what they call. That's where they come up with the TED at, you know.

0:11:41.5

AE: And do you build that in or is that something different?

0:11:43.8

CT: No, yeah, we have to put it in. It's metal. I got some in some nets laying down over there, and I got some in the warehouse over there that's not [already installed] in webbing. I could show you one of those, if you'd like, but it's—it's a metal device that—that goes in the net, and it goes in the net on an angle, and it's a big hole in the bottom with a flap over it, and the turtle comes down and hits it and goes out. In fact, I've even got two—what they call turtle nets laying over there. They're big nets—those big piles of webbing there [points across the yard], those are turtle nets for a guy in Panama City [Florida]. They're doing a beach re-nourishment where the storm washed along, and they got a dredge over there that's scooping the—the sand up and then they're pumping it back up on the beach. But he is a shrimp trawler but he—he got the contract to—he drags those nets in front of the dredge, moving the turtles out of the way to keep from catching them there. A lot of expense. We've spent billions and billions of dollars trying to save the turtle. I hope we have, but—. [*Laughs*]

0:12:46.0

AE: Well, you were a shrimper before you got out of the business; were you coming across a lot of turtles?

0:12:50.5

CT: Very few, very few. The shrimpers, in my opinion, was not the problem. They might have been a little bit of it but over my—I would say the—the amount of turtles that I've caught, I probably could count on two—two hands. It might have been the location where I was working, you know. I don't know, but [I] killed very few. I would say less than five in my career in the thirty years that I shrimped. I—I don't believe I ever killed very—very many. But you know, they—they said the shrimpers were a lot to do with it. I think a lot of it was the development and stuff on the beaches and my—that's my opinion, you know. But—but anyway, they're here and—and I think they're here to stay, so we—we had to adapt to them, and the guys have, and it came in before I got out of the business but, you know.

0:13:42.5

AE: When you got out of the business, was it something—you say that you saw where shrimping was going. Was it the regulations or what was going on in the bay?

0:13:48.1

CT: That, and it had gotten to where I had a big boat—the last one I had was an eighty-foot steel boat, and it had to go where the shrimp were and—and I had been off of the boat and had—I had—like I say, I had three [shrimp boats] at one time, but I had guys operating the boats for me. Captains, you know. And it got to where it was hard to get good men that would take care of your equipment because the good men that was interested in it had their own boats and had worked up and got their own boat. And it got to the point where I didn't want to get back on the

boat and fight it like I had for thirty years. I was getting to where I wanted to be home and been away an awful lot of my life, and my wife raised our children. And—and so—and like I say, it got to where it was—it got down to where you—you was making wages anyway, and so I just decided to sell out and semi-retire and—and just do this as a kindly supplement. We do have a mini-warehouse business over there [in the front part of the acreage next to the house and net shop] that—that supplements too, and it's been real good for us. So—so that was the biggest reason I got out of it. I just didn't want to stay on the boat and fight it like I had for so many years and—and stay home for a while. And so it's worked out real good for us and we—we're glad we did that—not sorry of it. But—.

0:15:10.1

AE: Were you born here in Apalachicola?

0:15:11.9

CT: I was actually born in Port St. Joe [Florida] it was—about twenty-five miles west of here, but I've been in Apalachicola all my life. I—I think—my daddy worked at the St. Joe Paper Company over there at the time, I believe. And I was actually born over there, but my grand-daddy was down on—he had a seafood business down on the beach, and my dad and my mom stayed over here most of the time. And then eventually we just moved over about a year after I was born, and I've been here ever since.

0:15:42.5

AE: Can you tell—

0:15:43.8

CT: And I'll be sixty-four years old in May so— *[Laughs]*

0:15:47.5

AE: Can you talk a little bit about growing up in this area and what it was like?

0:15:50.0

CT: It's been great. Of course we had problems just like everybody else, but the young people— I'm glad I'm not a teenager, or I don't have teenagers *[Laughs]* in this day and time with all they're confronted with. But it was good. It was real good. Like I say, my family has been in the seafood business for—for years and years, ever since I can remember. My grand-daddy before my dad and my dad at one time had—he had crab houses and oyster houses. He never did get into shrimp that much, but he had three oyster houses at one time where they—the catchers would go out and catch oysters and they processed them, you know. And—and so—and also a crab house—he had a crab house at one time when I was coming up as a boy.

0:16:37.8

AE: Did you work in there?

0:16:38.2

CT: I helped him. I helped him in that and—and after school I had chores I had to do and on the weekend and summertime. Summertime was real big in the crab business and all. That was generally when it was going the best, and so I was out of school at—you know, during the summer, and so I worked in the business some. He had a grocery store one time. I can remember when I was a teenage boy, working in the grocery store with him. But we've been—I guess, in some kind of [seafood-related] business pretty much all my life. And like I say, back in the late [nineteen] sixties [I] got started shrimping to keep from oystering. That oystering was hard work. **[Laughs]** And so we started doing that and got in with a guy downtown. It was [called] Quality Seafood but it was Bobby Kirvin and George Kirvin. It was a father and son. And [I] got to know them real well and got acquainted with them and got started with them and then—and then that's who I bought my boats from, you know, and so we—**[Dog Barks]**—that's my brother [Donald Thompson] coming up [the driveway]. But—but anyway, that's the way we—we done and—and my wife, I married my wife [Faye] in 1961. We were childhood sweethearts from the sixth grade up and—so we've—we'll be celebrating—.

0:18:02.4

Donald Thompson: [To James Beckton, who is working inside a shed next to where the interview is taking place] Every time, when I come out here, you're the only one ever working.

0:18:05.2

AE: [*Laughs*]

0:18:08.0

CT: [*Laughs*] [To his brother, Donald] I'll be in there in just a minute. [To interviewer] But like I say, we—we got married in 1961, and we'll be celebrating forty-five years here pretty soon, and so we're thrilled to death. I've got three boys and all of those—they're doing good. They got families of their own and got good jobs and all, so life has been good.

0:18:34.5

AE: Are any of your children in the area working—?

0:18:38.1

CT: No. Along about the time the seafood—that was one reason I had the multiple boats. When the boys come up and was getting out of school, I thought I had to have something for them to do, and so we kind of stuck our neck out and got other boats. But along about the time the

TED—and then they were getting married and things like that and didn't want to shrimp and didn't want to stay gone and so they—they got jobs. I've got a son that lives right up on the corner here [in Apalachicola]. He's in the heating and air-conditioning business and has been for years—doing well. I got one son that's in Orlando [Florida]. He's—works with Progress Energy; he's got a good job. He's worked up into management now making—doing good. And I got one son that lives out north of Pensacola in a little town—Century, about 40 miles north of Pensacola and he works with the railroad—CSX [Transportation]. He's a maintainer for the railroad, and he's got a good job. So I'm proud of all my—all my boys, I sure am. And so—.

0:19:35.0

AE: Well I'm curious, when you say that you—you came up in the seafood business and your father was in it and you were—you know, crab house, oystering, grocery and all this—and when you said oystering was too much work, so you went to shrimping?

0:19:47.8

CT: *[Laughs]* Yeah, that, and it just—a lot of times in the summertime, as I said before, oystering was—was down and the crabs got to where they wasn't as good and—and I just—I don't know. I just fell into the shrimp and—and it seemed like I could do better—could make more money. I had to stay away from home, but—but in the summertime it was hard. It—it was hard because the oystering was down. That's what I was doing making a living when we got married. But in the summertime it—it—when the oystering was shut down, it was just kind of

rough, and I got started shrimping and—and I liked it. We done well; we made good money at it. And so after I had worked with them down there for just a few years, he offered to sell me a boat and so—and financed it for me and just kindly helped me get started in business, and then it went from that.

0:20:46.3

AE: Can you describe a little bit, kind of, the personalities of an oysterman or a shrimper because at—you know, the oystermen are so—I mean, everybody works the—the bay and the Gulf as independent and, you know, it's that way of life. But you know, a lot more investment [goes] in the shrimp boat, and you have more people who are working for you and it—it's a very different kind of dynamic.

0:21:07.5

CT: It is—it is, but it—like I say it's good. It's been good to us. I—I started oystering back when I was doing it back in the early [nineteen] sixties—late fifties, early sixties—it was a lot different than it is—was now—it is now. But I liked it because, if I wanted to work hard and do well, I could and if I didn't—I didn't—. [*Dog Approaches*]

0:21:35.0

AE: Hey, pup. [*Laughs*]

0:21:40.1

CT: But anyway, I could do good and—and we made a good living. My wife shucked my oysters and she, you know, opened them and as a team we—we done well. And I could work hard and—and do—do well and then, like I say, we done that probably—I don't know—a number of years—quite a few years and then—.

0:22:03.7

AE: Would your wife go out on the oyster boat with you?

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CT: No, she didn't go out on the boat. She has been but just as a—you know, just—you know—but I would go out and catch the oysters and bring them in. It's not like it is now. It's, like I say, it's been a lot of changes since then. But I would go out and catch the oysters and bring them in and put them in the house. And then the next day, while I was gone out getting another load so to speak, she would stay in and be shucking those, you know, and we'd get paid so much a gallon. The catcher would get a certain amount, and the shucker would get a certain amount and—but—.

0:22:36.1

AE: And she would shuck them at home?

0:22:37.0

CT: No, no, in the oyster house.

0:22:37.9

AE: Okay.

0:22:40.1

CT: See, my daddy, when we first started, my—my grand-daddy and my daddy had oyster houses. We—we worked in those with them, you know, and so—but it was the same place like this but down on the beach. There's one or two still down there now that still shucks oysters. But it—.

0:22:55.7

AE: Was that the way it generally was then, that the wives would be at the houses shucking?

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CT: Generally—generally—a lot of them did. Yes, uh-hmm, generally but—. That's the way it worked out. And like I say, we worked hard at that and then came on up and got in the shrimp business and—and got boats, and eventually we wound up with three boats and—and like I say, I—I don't have any complaint whatsoever because it was good to us. It made us a good living, and we were able to acquire what we have and—and we are not—not rich by any means but we're—we're all right, you know. And so—.

0:23:39.4

AE: What do you see as the future of this area and the industry?

0:23:43.1

CT: I'm—I'm afraid with the tourism—that's not bad, but I can see the seafood industry going out. One thing, in my opinion—now, this is strictly an opinion—but I believe a lot of it is to do with imports. A lot of it is to do with environmental, you know, and we're all environmentalists to a point, you know, but with the regulations and—and first one thing and the other but with the shrimping most especially. And that's what I've been interested in the—the last number of years. The oystering, I pretty much lost contact with that—but the shrimping, the—the imports is killing the guys, and then this high cost of fuel. In the last year, the past two years, but more so in the last year, fuel has doubled and tripled. When I sold my boats in 1998, I was paying anywhere from between sixty and seventy-cents a gallon for my fuel that I was burning, and I talked to a guy yesterday, and they pay them two [dollars and] ten [cents] a gallon for it now. And see, those

boats—my boat, the last one I had, burned about eighteen gallons an hour, and some of them burn more than that. See, so you're talking about—when you're talking about two dollars a gallon for fuel, you're talking about it costing thirty-six dollars an hour just operate that engine, you know, so—and then when the price of shrimp is beat down with the imports, they can't get paid the price that the shrimp are worth. They're catching shrimp cheaper today than I caught them twenty years ago. I got more money for my shrimp twenty years ago than they're getting today for them—the catchers I'm talking about. I don't know what the people that eats them in the restaurants are still paying for them for sure, but—but that's the way I see it, you know and—.

0:25:35.4

AE: And it seems like today a lot of people I'm running into, they oyster and they shrimp and they do a bunch of things.

0:25:41.4

CT: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

0:25:41.5

AE: Is that recent or—?

0:25:45.2

CT: No, not for the small guy, the—the little boats and all, generally—like I said earlier, we oystered. A lot of times we oystered in the winter, and like a lot of the shrimpers right now is oystering. They just opened the bay back up—had some red tide [which is a bloom of dinoflagellates that causes reddish discoloration of coastal ocean waters, which is often toxic and fatal to fish]. They just opened the bay back up, and a lot of the shrimpers are oystering right now, matter of fact, and will 'til probably around the first of March—thereabouts, and then the shrimp will start picking back up and—and they'll shrimp in the spring, summer, and a lot of the fall on up 'til around Christmas time, sometime in—on into January. Now us, when we had our boats, they were big boats—freezer boats. And like I said, we had to go where the shrimp were, but we just followed the shrimp. This time of the year we would be in Key West, working down there and staying down there twenty days at a time and stuff like—I got tired of that. But—in the summertime—spring generally, we would be working anywhere from Cedar Keys up this way for a few months, and then we'd go to the west for the middle of the summer—June, July, and August. We would be out in Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, usually. I—I did go to Texas a few times. A lot of the guys go every—every year but it opens up in—around July—in July we—we would go out there and make a few trips out there and then come back and get ready for the fall. I went to the East Coast and caught rock shrimp for several years with the big boat, and that was good. That was good for us—long ways around. I had to go all the way around Florida, you know, and come up on the East Coast and come into Cape Canaveral. That's where we came in over there. That was good to us.

0:27:30.5

AE: Well, what do you think about—when we were talking about Corky up the road who makes the oyster tongs, and you're making these nets, and y'all seem to be the last two in the area who are still doing that kind of thing—making those tools—what's going to happen when y'all completely retire?

0:27:45.7

CT: Good question. And the guys have told me they—because I've threatened [*Laughs*]—putting it down, but they don't want me to because of that, and there's nobody else around to do it. But I guess somebody will—if—if it lasts that long, you know. But like I say, in the last four or five years I can see where it's went down hill quite a bit, so I don't know. Maybe I'll last as long as it does, I hope, you know. I don't want to just completely quit. I enjoy what I do, you know. Like I say, we just do it part time and—and sometimes we have a full week. Sometimes we don't but—but that's okay and—but if we—if we have something to do, we try to do it and—and every once in a while we'll just take off. Like my partner in there [James Beckton], he works with me. He's about the same way I—like I said before, he's kind of semi-retired. He just took two weeks off here just before Christmas and went hunting. He likes to hunt, so he done that and we—we just kindly do it like we want to pretty much, you know.

0:28:57.2

AE: If you weren't making nets, is there some way that shrimpers could order them from somewhere else? Is there a manufacturer?

0:29:02.6

CT: Yeah, there is another net shop. I know there's one in Jacksonville [Florida] there and—and there's net shops out in Alabama—Gulf Shores. There's one in Gulf Shores. I'm the only one in this area. Now it would cost them, you know, more money and that sort of thing to get them made and shipped and first one thing and the other, but it is nice to have a—somebody locally and—and supplies is another big thing for them. Like I said, the doors and the cable and if they—and paint. I got a little bit of paint in there. But I order for them whatever they need in the way of marine. There is hardware stores here, but in the way of marine equipment, you know—

0:29:44.4

AE: With all the—excuse me—the hand work that you do on the nets, though, is it something that—this can't be manufactured really. It has to be an independent—?

0:29:52.5

CT: Yeah, it has—well, as far as I know, I—yeah, it has to be done by hand, I would think—that particular part. But it's—but now all the webbing, like I say, it's—it's made with a machine

on a bale, you know, put on bales. We buy 100—100-pound bales and some of it's 200-pound bales, you know it's bigger—bigger webbing that weighs more.

0:30:12.5

AE: Do you know what the guys were using and where they got them when it was not this synthetic material? The old-timers?

0:30:17.9

0:30:19.2

CT: Really, I don't. Back when I was a boy, I can remember, but it had—still had to be made with a machine, I suppose. A lot of it's imported now. Like this webbing here, it come from Taiwan. We get some webbing made in China; we get webbing made in—some of the—Mexico. We get some of them from Mexico, and they do make some here in the United States but not a lot, I don't think. But back when I was a boy, when I first started shrimping, a lot of the guys—small boats—would make them with what they called poggie [*poh-gee*] webbing from the poggie fishing, you know, out there. They would use their nets until they couldn't use them anymore, and then they'd take the webbing and make them—make them a net out of it.

0:31:05.1

AE: What about the colors of webbing around here? Does that signify anything or is it—?

0:31:09.5

CT: This—like—this is a poly-webbing. We don't have to dip that. We—we run the white webbing—you can see a little bit of it scattered over the white—that don't have a dip in it, and that's a nylon, and we make the net [like the one] hanging on the line, and then we put it in that tank. It's got what—it comes in those drums. It's a vinyl dip—they just call it net dip, but it's a type of vinyl. It's green—turns it green. You see the nets [hanging] on the pole over there? Those nets were originally white [in color], and we run them through that. It's—it's a protective coating that we put on the webbing after we put them together, and it just seals everything together, but it's just—like I say a process but—.

0:31:52.1

AE: Now explain to me this situation you have over here with this thing in the ground.

0:31:56.3

CT: Yeah, it's a tank. It's—it's a big fuel tank, is what it was originally but it's got dip. And that's a basket, you see. I got a net that I've just dipped. We put the net over in that, and it's got four or five drums with all that dip in there, and we just lower the net down in it and let it soak for a while—different times when—you know and—and pull it up and let it drain. That's what

I'm doing there now. And then I'll—I'll pull that net up on that pole over on the side of that other one and let it dry. It's kind of like a paint—a little bit like a paint but it's—.

0:32:32.8

AE: Has that always been part of the process?

0:32:34.7

CT: Years ago, back—back when my daddy was doing it and—and James in here he—he said he had—they used coal tar; they used tar and melted it—make it hot and dipped their nets in it. You know this came out—I'm going to say this has been out [on the market] probably—I'm going to guess around twenty-five years or so. It might even be longer than that but—but it works out real good.

0:33:02.7

AE: And that pulley system that you have hanging in there, is that something that kind of agitates [the net] while it's in there?

0:33:07.8

CT: Uh-umm, no, it—we don't agitate it. We just shove it down in and let it—let it soak, you know, so to speak, and then pick it up and let it all drain—everything, it will drain—drain back in the tank, and then we just jack them up on those poles over there and let it—let it dry.

0:33:22.0

AE: How long does it take to dry?

0:33:22.9

CT: Usually—usually twelve hours to—to touch, and but it'll cure and get stiff and harder within probably twenty-four to forty-eight hours or so. It needs—it really needs to dry a couple days, you know, before they use it. A lot of times, if they're in a hurry, they don't wait that long but—but if—but it does a better job, you know. But like I say, it just makes the—the webbing stiff, makes it produce better, and—and then it protects the webbing—puts a protective coating on it and it protects the webbing, you know. It don't tear as easy and that sort of thing. And then, if they do tear them up, we do net repair, too. Some of those nets over there [that] you see a pile over there, some of them we've got to repair, and some of them we've already repaired and—and if they get [their net caught] on a rock or a wreck or something and tear one up, they bring it to us and we—sometimes we have to set new webbing in or—or just sew it back together and—and a lot of times we'll re-hang them. After about a year we'll re-hang them on the line with new twine and then do the same process again—re-dip them, and it makes them tough again.

0:34:34.0

AE: How long will someone use a net, counting repairs and the re-dipping and—?

0:34:39.0

CT: Some of them use them longer than they should because of money [invested in them], really, you know. **[Laughs]** But generally, when I had my boats and the guy that I worked with before, we usually got a new set of nets pretty much every year. But it's—it's according to how much you drag them, what kind of treatment—like if you catch a lot of—working a bad bottom a lot and catch a lot of rocks and wrecks and tear them up a lot, you know it—it depends. It depends on how—how you treat them and—and how much you drag them, so to speak, in the water. Some people that don't work year-round, their nets will last longer than the other guy you know, of course.

0:35:24.0

AE: What about the floater parts [that are attached along the edges of the nets]]? I'm sure there's a name for those. They're on the edges? Do you—

0:35:28.7

CT: Yeah.

0:35:29.4

AE: —include that too?

0:35:30.2

CT: Yes. In fact, these are some small ones [points to a barrel of floats next to where we are sitting], but we put them on the line. These are some of the things we slide on the rope, you know, and that's what we call floats and then the—the bottom line is what we call the chain line. They'll put chain on them—loops of chain to hold the bottom line down, and these will float the top line up, and then the doors are pulling them through the water. And then, of course, we have mud rollers that a lot of people put them on. If they work out to the west and work in the mud, they put these [plastic football-shaped things with holes] on the—the bottom line along with the chain, and this will roll on the bottom and it will keep it from—the net bogging in the mud. You know a lot of people out west use those, you know because it's mud. It's just a process.

0:36:21.7

AE: And so the—the mud rollers, they would request that, and it's not something automatic?

0:36:25.6

CT: Yes, that's not automatic. And a lot of the guys in this area back to the east and down toward Key West and all of it, a lot of them don't pull the rollers because it's a hard bottom, you know, and they don't need them. [*Speaking to Dog*]

0:36:44.5

AE: Can you explain to me this [long] board you have nailed to this tent [wall] over here with [nails along the] top?

0:36:48.7

CT: That is—you can see the net hanging on it? We just have those nails in it, and that's where we hang our webbing for the repairs and sewing the nets. And he's got one inside the building there that—it's—makes it just about right to, you know—I would go over there and show you, but you couldn't hear me. We just use that to hang the webbing onto—to do our thing.

0:37:11.8

AE: You can show me, and we can just kind of narrate. I'd like to see you do that.

0:37:15.0

CT: All right. [Walking over to the board] Well, like I said earlier—this is what I'm doing now is putting—just fixing to start to put—see how that—this webbing here, we cut it, you see, and it's got that knot there. And this is going to be hung on the line, so—so what we try to do is double that and secure that knot, so to speak.

0:37:34.2

AE: Okay. Is there a name of that kind of stitching that you're doing?

0:37:38.7

CT: No, I don't—don't suppose. I just call it sewing, but like—there is—this is what we call the salvage. Now, when I hang that on the lines, see, I'll go through that with a piece of twine and pick up three of those notches, and it will be hung to a rope that will be up here, you know, but—

0:37:59.2

AE: And what about the—I have—I have an appreciation for color [*Laughs*] so this may be a silly question, but the green netting and then the blue string that you're—the nylon string that you're sewing with, is that significant at all or—?

0:38:12.3

CT: No. No, really this is what we call a sapphire twine, and normally I would probably use a poly-twine on that, but I don't have any so—so to speak. But this is a new type twine and webbing that has come in from India. It's—it's a lot tougher webbing. It—with the [Iraq] War and everything, it got to where we couldn't get what they called the Spectra webbing that was used in a lot of the material that makes that webbing in the armor—the guys—the vests and all. So they—they got to wear. They took that off the market where we couldn't get this Spectra webbing, and it's been hard to get. So they come up with this sapphire. There's some of it laying there [on the ground]—and it's turned—it worked out real good. It's a tough webbing; it's better than this plastic. It's more expensive and better than the nylon. But like I say, it's more expensive, but it's not as expensive as the Spectra webbing that we were getting. That was quite expensive, really. But normally—this is a type of plastic, but we just—and the reason why I'm using that, rather than nylon, is because I'm not—I won't dip this webbing, and so I'm using this type of twine. Now a nylon net, I would sew it with nylon twine, which is white, un-dipped twine. We put it together and then just dip it all at one time, you know, and that kind of ties them all together.

0:39:33.1

AE: And you won't dip this one because—?

0:39:34.6

CT: Well it—it don't have to be dipped. See, it's already got a, you know—

0:39:39.8

AE: A coating on it, okay.

0:39:40.3

CT: Yeah, so it don't have to be dipped.

0:39:43.7

AE: And so the green—if it's green, you know it's been dipped. You know it's covered?

0:39:47.8

CT: Yeah, generally, because all the webbing—generally, the webbing is—is white, the nylon webbing is white, but—but now, the sapphire webbing over here, this is—see this is—see, you don't have to dip that either, and it's a braided—it's a real strong webbing. But it's—it's only been on the market a couple years. And—but it's working out real good; it's tough. We make—

0:40:13.0

AE: Is the green easy to see in the water, or is it easier to see your catch in the water?

0:40:17.9

CT: Not necessarily, no. A lot of the guys that—that—one thing they use the Poly for is because of the—coming back to the net shop so often, like I say, you don't have to dip it, and they can do their own work on the boat a lot of times and—and don't have to come back and forth to the net shop. The same way with this. And—and it's light—it's a lot lighter. It sheds jelly. They catch—a lot of time they'll catch jellies—those jelly balls and stuff that—that—and the grass, the grass shakes out of it a lot easier and things like that. But so different folks have different strokes or different strokes for different folks. It's just what people get used to and what they want to pull, you know.

0:41:04.8

AE: And then the bags that you sell them with, are those made out of the nylon, too?

0:41:07.1

CT: Nylon—we can get it out of this Poly also. You can make Poly bags and—and that don't have to be dipped either, but we make—the majority of the bags that we make for the—especially the bigger guys use nylon bags, you know, and it's a lot heavier—heavier mesh. I

thought I'd have some of it laying here. This is just a scrap pile [here under the tent]. We save all our scrap stuff because you never know what you're going to need.

0:41:34.0

AE: So can you make bags out of this [scrap] and other things?

0:41:35.5

CT: No, no, this is just scrap—little pieces that we've cut off and—.

0:41:39.5

AE: Will you use them in repairs?

0:41:40.3

CT: Yes, some of it we do use [in repairs], and that's the biggest reason we keep it. I need to go through it and thin it out, but that's probably five years of [*Laughs*] just scrap stuff—saving it and just—if you get rid of it, then you'll need it, so we—we just hang onto a certain amount of it. And this is my old junk trailer; we go to the landfill with it a lot of times, you know, and get rid of it. That's—that's where we dispose of all of our—when we get—do get ready to you know—

and the nets that come in tore up, the webbing that we take out of them and all we take and—to the landfill and dispose of it.

0:42:17.2

AE: Well now tell me about this *For Sale* sign you have out [in] front [of your home and net shop].

0:42:20.6

CT: Well this—we have eight-and-a-half acres here and, like I say, I'm getting ready to retire, but this land and this area has just went out of this world—big price—and so we just decided if we could, we could sell it and get enough money out of it, we would just retire and quit. But—but it hasn't happened yet. We had it out there about six months, and it hasn't happened yet. And like I say, I left that up to the Lord. If—if it does, fine; if it don't, I'll be right here, so it don't matter, you know, really. But—but people were moving in here developing the land and—and condos—wanting to get close to the water, and so we just decided to put [the *For Sale* sign] up there. But like I say, it—it hasn't happened, so we're not going to really be concerned about that too much, you know. It's whatever—whatever takes place.

0:43:15.7

AE: How long have you been right here [living and working at this location]?

0:43:17.0

CT: We bought this place in 1978 and—and moved out here. We—we lived over on—on the highway right close to where the IGA [supermarket] is right now. We lived right in that area for many years, and my wife's family lived over there in that area also. And we got the chance to buy this in 1978 and we—we did and—.

0:43:41.8

AE: How long have you had the storage business?

0:43:44.4

CT: We started that in ninety-four—1994. We put up one building, and then we just kind of phased it in, and it's been real good for us. I'll have to admit that. We just took an acre of our property over there and—and cut it out, and I got a—what they call a variance from the county. It's not commercial property, you know, but I got a variance from the county, and they let me put that [storage facility] because I lived here [right next to it]. I could have a home-[based] business, you know. So we put that in, and we have 127 units over there now and so—and we keep them all rented just about all the time, so it's been good.

0:44:19.3

AE: That sounds like an—an easy little side job to maintain.

0:44:21.5

CT: It is, it is. It's—my wife pretty much manages that. She's the manager of that. I don't have much to do with it. I do the maintenance and cutting the grass and things like that, but she does all the book work and takes care of all that, you know. The same way with the net shop. She does that, too. I's hers, you know—.

0:44:37.4

AE: What's your wife's name?

0:44:38.8

CT: Faye. Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

0:44:41.8

AE: And is that—that old car out there for sale? Is that yours?

0:44:43.5

CT: It is, but now, that actually belongs to her dad. He's had that for many years and he—he's in the house with us now. He's not doing real well. He's—he has emphysema and breathing problems, and he's eighty-four years old, and so he wants to sell it. All he can do is worry about it. And I tell him don't worry about it.

0:45:02.8

AE: What year is it?

0:45:03.8

CT: It's a 1950 Dodge, and I don't know if we'll—I put that out there about two days I go, I think, because it was worrying him to death. [He said,] *I want to put that thing out there and sell it*. So I put it up there. I don't know if anybody here—if we could get it on the Internet, you know, somebody might buy it that's into—that, you know, antiques. It's a good old car—runs good but he just worries about getting rid of it because he can't do anything with it, you know. But—.

0:45:33.3

AE: Well is there anything that I haven't asked you about the net business that I might need to know or wouldn't know to ask that you can share?

0:45:41.3

CT: I can't think of anything. Like I say, it's just a—it's just a way to make a living and—and the guys that's catching the shrimp have—have to have nets and we're—we just do a service and they—they bring the business to me, so I make a little money off of that and—and they take the nets and make a living with them, and so it's just a process of helping on another, I suppose, you know. And we just—like I said, just a small operation. We got it started here right in the backyard years ago, making my own nets, and then just kind of expanded it build nets for other—other people. And I don't know how long we'll be here. We'll just wait and see, I guess, you know. We don't have any immediate plan to—to get out, unless the place was to sell. If it was to sell then—then we would be gone, you know. We'd—we'd get out of it but—.

0:46:39.4

AE: Would you move from Apalachicola?

0:46:40.9

CT: [*Sighs*] I love it and I—I wouldn't want to but we've—we've made a mistake, and we should have bought us a piece of property somewhere else—a smaller piece of property. That's the one thing of getting rid of this. It's a lot to keep up, you know. And I'm getting to the point, you know—a few years I—I won't be able to keep it up. But I wish we had bought us a small

place somewhere that we could have moved to, but since we didn't do that, we probably will move north somewhere. Not too far, not out of Florida, probably, but I don't think I want to go south, so **[Laughs]**. Probably move up, you know, around Blountstown or someplace like that. We've—we've looked, rode around and looked at property up there. And buy us a little acre, maybe two acres, you know, and build us a little house on it. That's kind of what we got planned, but we'll see how it works. **[Laughs]**

0:47:35.4

AE: That sounds good. Is there something James is doing in there that might be of interest?

0:47:39.6

CT: You can walk in there; we'll talk a minute. That's my brother in there.

0:47:41.0

AE: All right.

0:47:42.3

CT: He—. Both of them is—both of them is old-time. This is James Beckton.

0:47:55.1

James Beckton: How you doing?

0:47:55.5

AE: Hello, sir.

0:47:57.0

CT: He's been with me for two or three years.

0:47:57.1

AE: Amy Evans; pleasure to meet you.

0:47:58.6

CT: Old-time shrimper—has been, like myself. That's my brother Donald Thompson.

0:48:02.7

Donald Thompson: Hey, lady.

0:48:03.0

AE: Hey, how are you?

0:48:03.6

CT: He's an old—he's an old has-been also.

0:48:05.7

DT: Yeah, and ain't worth a toot for nothing. Glad to meet you.

0:48:08.5

AE: [*Laughs*] Glad to meet you.

0:48:08.1

CT: She's doing a documentary on the last net shop in town—in the area.

0:48:13.9

DT: Oh, well, it is the last one.

0:48:17.5

CT: Been just kind of sharing with her what we—the way we all come up. He was my bigger brother. He was mean to me a lot of times, but—.

0:48:24.9

DT: Not mean enough, though.

0:48:25.4

AE: *[Laughs]*

0:48:26.5

CT: *[Laughs]*

0:48:28.2

AE: So what all goes on in this—in this shed?

0:48:30.0

CT: Walk on in. A lot, but this is some of the white webbing I was telling you about, you know. It comes in bales and—and this is—this is the board I was telling—you got the same situation. We try to work in here when it's cold weather as much as we can. Of course, you can see we don't have a lot of room, but this is some of the net supplies and—for the guys that we have and—.

0:48:53.7

AE: So you net these handled nets too then?

0:48:58.2

CT: We will, but most of them—most of the guys just buys those and—and they'll put a little piece of scrap webbing on them themselves, you know. And—but—.

0:49:07.6

AE: What do you use the scale for?

0:49:09.2

CT: Well, if we sell webbing, we sell it by the pound. And we have to put it in a little box or something. Somebody will come by and they might buy ten-pound, they might buy fifty-pound or something like that of different—it's all different size webbing, you know. But this is some of the bales. See, like this. This webbing, you know, is made in China, so it comes on big bales like that. It's 200 meshes deep and—and the—the Poly webbing we was looking at comes the same way. It's just—big bales. This is some of the bagged webbing that I was—make a—for the big boats—heavy webbing.

0:49:48.5

AE: Okay, yeah, it looks a little heftier.

0:49:49.3

CT: Yeah, it's a lot heavier and a little bit smaller mesh. But we put the bags together, put rings on the bottom; we then tie them and—and—but we do the same process. Once we get them all put together, and then we got and put them in the tank. That's the last process, and we just kind of let them soak and when we—we pick them up—.

0:50:08.9

AE: [Pointing to a drawing in a clipboard hanging on the wall of the shed] That's a pattern?

0:50:09.6

CT: That's a pattern, yeah. And that's just one pattern, but I'll show you my filing system. I like to keep a neat—neat filing system. **[Laughs]** [Opens the top drawer in a filing cabinet and pulls out a stack of loose papers with patterns on them.]

0:50:21.5

AE: **[Laughs]** Neat stack.

0:50:22.3

CT: That's all patterns for different—I try to for—if I make a net for an individual, I try to put—make the net and put their name on it where I can come back, you know. If they come back two years from now and want another net just like that, then I got their pattern, see.

0:50:38.8

AE: Now what all information goes on the pattern? Does—does that—I mean, size is obviously—.

0:50:43.2

CT: Well, see this is the top; this is how I'd cut the top out, and that's the—the tapers [on the side] and the—you know—and the way I'd cut the top out. This is the weighing panel and the same way with the bottom. This is the bottom and then those—those two pieces will go together. It'll sew together right down these seams. This piece will be on the bottom and this—this piece will be on the top, and it'll be a seam right down—sew them together.

0:51:02.3

AE: On the sides, okay.

0:51:03.9

CT: On both sides. That's a two-seam net. Now we—we make four-seam nets, a lot of four-seam. Four-seams, which has a winged panel. See, this is a little bit different. This is what they call a bib-net; it's got the bib for the white shrimp. But it's what they call a four-seam net, and it's still got the top and the bottom, but this winged panel sits in it, you know. This—this will sew to this winged panel and then the bottom will sew in it. It gets up higher in the water, you know—so basically the idea for that.

0:51:32.2

AE: Are there patterns that you've developed in the years of working, and do the customers that you've been working for are they—?

0:51:37.6

CT: Yes, yes, and then, like I said earlier, James Copeland helped me get started years and years ago and that—and I'm sure he had help to get started. It's just something that's passed down, you know, and I'd do the same thing for anybody that—. I'll show you that formula that I have here. He give me that formula years and years ago, and you can take the calculator and put all this in there and come up with what you're going to hang and that sort of thing. You've got to know that and all, but you can take the calculator and take that formula and make—figure out any size net you want. But he give me that, and I got another copy of it in the house, filed, and put in the safe. I don't—I don't want to lose that, you know. And—but it's been a lot of help.

0:52:25.0

AE: Are there any patterns or anything that you've just committed to memory [that] you've made so many times?

0:52:29.4

CT: Yeah, a lot of it—a lot of it we can do by memory. That's true about that but just—especially if you're building the same net over and over again, you know, you can do that. But we do try to refer to the patterns and make sure because it's a lot of work in putting one of them

together, so you don't want—you want the least amount of mistakes. James don't never make a mistake though, he just—.

0:52:51.5

James Beckton: Nah, make a boo-boo every now and then.

0:52:52.9

AE: [*Laughs*] [To Charles] Well, when you first started were there mistakes that you made?

0:52:55.3

CT: Yeah. [Distracted] He's putting the seam together there now that I was telling you about.

0:52:57.6

AE: Uh-hmm, yes, sir.

0:52:59.5

CT: He's got the top—the top is actually on the bottom. I'm pretty sure. It's usually the way you put them together and—and this is the top—this is the bottom, actually, and that's the top, and that's the seam I was telling you [that] is going right down the side of it and putting it together.

0:53:14.2

AE: Hmm.

0:53:16.9

CT: But it's just the trick of the trade, and he's been doing it for years and years and he shrimped—.

0:53:23.0

James Beckton: Well a lot of kids start out on a boat. That's—that's part of the job, you learn to sew.

0:53:29.9

CT: Yeah. And—but the old saying, well, everybody has to do something and it's just—this—this is our job. *[Laughs]*

0:53:42.4

AE: All these pulleys and things over here, this is an inventory you keep?

0:53:44.2

CT: That's equipment—that's equipment that the—the boats has to have you know and shackles and—we sell twine and boots and different things for—the guys has to have, you know.

0:53:53.8

AE: [Pointing to a metal ring hanging on the ceiling] Is this something?

0:53:55.3

CT: This is where we do the TED work. I was telling you putting the TEDs in the—in the webbing, and I hang the webbing up on that, and it makes a circle, and then we set the TED in it and it just—it just holds it for me in place to where I can do what I have to do to the TED—makes it a lot easier.

0:54:11.8

AE: Okay.

0:54:12.2

CT: But we just hang it up overhead, and it's out of the way and that sort of thing.

0:54:16.3

AE: All right. Well thank you for sharing all this.

0:54:18.7

CT: All right, no problem. No problem.

0:54:21.4

AE: I appreciate it.

0:54:21.5

[End Charles Thompson]