

THE CENTER FOR ORAL HISTORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE
of
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

Recording Log

Interviewee: Tuan Tran, Biloxi shrimper

Interviewers: Linda VanZandt; Angel Truong Phan, interpreter

Date of recording: September 23, 2011

Recording format/notes: Recorded digitally on an Olympus WS-321M voice recorder using an external microphone on table base stand. Recorded in cabin of Mr. Tran's small shrimp boat (Sweet Mary) at Back Bay Gollott's Seafood dock; filmed brief video recording on Angel Phan's SBTN-DC camera of Angel interviewing Mr. Tran. Also audio recorded Mr. Tran giving brief tour of the boat. After the interview, Mr. Tran offered to take Linda out on the boat to tour Deer Island, the Mississippi Sound, and Back Bay at a later date to be determined. Primarily Vietnamese spoken with English interpretation.

Recording length: 02:03:04

Location: Back Bay of Biloxi, Mississippi; Gollott's Seafood dock.

Subjects/Topics: Life and fishing in Nha Trang, Vietnam; father's death on battlefield as ARVN soldier and difficulties afterwards; going with mother to identify body (burial custom for soldiers); mother sold fruit in market and he started own shop; seven children in family; love for reading; reminiscing with old friends on return trips to Vietnam; brother, wife and 2 children living in Nha Trang; shrimping in MS to support family in Vietnam; son is fisherman in Vietnam; effort to bring them to U.S.; desire for U.S. citizenship; daughter's talents; description of Tet celebration in Vietnam; decision to escape while shrimping in Vietnam; dangerous journey and fishing to survive; route to U.S. through Philippines (one year) and correspondence with family; unfair treatment by Communists after war; pride as fisherman; attachment to Sweet Mary boat where he lives; feels he has been blessed, lucky; adjusting to life in U.S. (Minnesota); confusion with food stamps; impressions of America and Americans; learning English and quitting school to shrimp in Biloxi; daughter's illness; comparing fishing in Vietnam to U.S.; surviving Hurricane Katrina on boat in Industrial Canal; faith and God; personal and community impact of BP oil spill; lack of shrimp and work; uncertainty of livelihood post-oil spill; closing advice to his children.

*Times noted below are English interpretation of interviewee's response to the question, unless otherwise noted.

Time/Counter	Topic
00:00:14	Mr. Tran expresses understanding of our oral history interview – it is his “legacy.”
00:00:44	Linda's introduction – recording on Mr. Tran's boat, called Sweet Mary, on Back Bay in Biloxi, MS.
00:01:10	States and spells name; born July 28, 1963 in Nha Trang, Vietnam.

00:02:32	Mr. Tran misunderstands Linda saying Nha Trang is north of Saigon – he thinks she means in North Vietnam and corrects saying Nha Trang is in “the middle.”
00:06:50	Growing up in Nha Trang – lived near beach in a tourist city; currently it’s a tourist attraction with many visitors on vacation.
00:07:21	Father was in South Vietnamese Army but died when he was 12 or 13. He had to quit school in 7 th grade to help mother to make a living.
00:08:53	At the time of his father’s death, his mother was selling fruit in the market – mangos, jackfruit, potatoes. He helped his mom by selling whatever he could - ice cream, candy, and started his own little shop.
00:09:25	(speaking in English) “Yeah, my family poor.”
00:10:52	Seven children in his family, four boys and three girls; hard during those times after father died; couldn’t go to school anymore and when Communists took over, we didn’t have any more rights – hard time.
00:13:05	Father died on battlefield; he remembered they called his mom and he had to go with her to identify father’s body; mom decided to take body back to bury on their land (chuckles), as was customary.
00:14:05	Normally soldiers would bury other soldiers if family didn’t take them; otherwise it’s normal to bring body home to your home land.
00:15:31	Wasn’t another male figure in his life after father died, but good thing was mother made him go to school and he got a lot of it from books – I love it, I love reading.
00:17:30	Linda’s question about his favorite books brought him a lot of memories and took him back to his homeland, his dating stage, and to such a beautiful place.
00:21:17	Angel summarizes – he was taken back to moment living near beaches of Nha Trang, having fun with friends; bonfires, cooking, everyone pitching in to bring food and drinks; even though it was hard times, those are the moments I remember most; even now I’m in America but I get to go back and visit and the rush of memories come and I see my friends that I used to hang out with; some have kids and even grandkids but some are still struggling and I visit them and we get to go down memory lane and those are the moments we get taken back and laugh about.
00:22:46	Nha Trang now – streets are different but his house is still there.
00:23:36	His brother lives in his home in Vietnam but he’s been fortunate enough to come to America and make a living and go back and buy a piece of land; I have a wife and children that live in the home. Bought the property and sent money to wife who had it built.

00:24:16	Thao Phan is wife's name; has 2 children – boy and girl; points out photo of him and his family on Nha Trang beach taped up on boat cabin wall behind us.
00:25:23	It's called Monkey Island (referring to photo), where my family vacations.
00:25:40	Daughter's name is Thanh Nga Tran and son is Quoc Huy Tran. Daughter is 23, and son is 25.
00:26:27	Son is a fisherman in Vietnam.
00:27:13	In that area there are a lot of fishermen; his brother, their uncle, taught them; I was in America; I tried to bring them over here but I didn't follow up on their paperwork to get them here.
00:28:08	I want to bring them to America but the thing that's stopping me is I'm not an American citizen; I want to take the citizenship test but I still need to learn more English and I'm afraid I'm going to fail it if I take it in English; so maybe when I turn 50 I can take it in Vietnamese.
00:28:42	If you've been in America for 20 years and you're 50, you can take it in Vietnamese.
00:29:47	His daughter is very versatile and is interested in many things; she's been a seamstress and done nails and she also had a fashion shop, clothing store.
00:30:23	She does nails and she likes to design clothes then go out and sell it.
00:32:45	Nha Trang is quite different now than during the war when he was growing up; the roads are different, they built a lot of things; of course the beaches are still there and the water is blue and there is still a lot of history there; tourists like to visit because they've set up a lot of monuments; I really like it when I go back home.
00:34:20	His last trip to Vietnam was in 2010; he takes frequent trips there; works 8 months here then takes 4 months off to go to Vietnam; he goes quite often.
00:35:31	He restated working for 8 months, then because it's cold here for 4 months, he goes back to Vietnam for 4 months.
00:36:00	Stays December through March; then tax season comes so he comes back (laughs).
00:38:07	He described that Tet, New Years in Vietnam, is a lot more fun than here; says you guys (referring to Angel) don't get to experience that here; growing up there I got to experience it; it's really lively with children walking around, adults play music, and you get little red envelopes; people are really hyped up about it.
00:40:32	He's very lucky to be in America; when he was 24, after he went to the Philippines, then he came to America.

00:43:56	Reason he left Vietnam – father was in the South Vietnamese Army and during the fall of South Vietnam, we weren't treated fairly but living there I had friends who had boats, so when the opportunity came for me to go I took it and went to the Philippines; it wasn't easy for me to get there; it took me 15 days.
00:46:30	He was married and a fisherman at the time and was on a boat with about 10-15 fishermen one day fishing, and there was another boat that was trying to flee Vietnam and they had stopped because they ran out of fuel; they asked if anyone wanted to go; his wife and kids just thought he was out at sea working; he just took the opportunity and got on the boat and left (laughs); he didn't bring any food or clothes, just decided to go at that moment.
00:49:16	He had a lot of friends that had left before him; they wrote letters saying life was a lot better over there than here; he didn't think anything of it but when the opportunity arose, he left; he did have a picture of what it was like through the letters he received.
00:49:55	The journey from Vietnam - he remembers fishing for food because he didn't bring any food with him; the motor went out and they drifted back and forth; I didn't know where we were going to land; a Filipino boat rescued us after 15 days (laughs).
00:53:09	His trip to America was difficult; he remembers when they ran out of food they were lucky to know how to fish; the boat was made of wood and they would carve out pieces of wood from the boat to cook the food; that's how they were able to survive. (Angel asks about cannibalism among refugees) They didn't experience that but did witness a story that there were people that were actually doing that.
00:55:43	(Angel asked why people would have resorted to cannibalism) There were people who weren't fishermen and lived on land and just left on boat to come to America but knew nothing about the sea or the boat so when motor went out they did what they had to do to survive. I'm just lucky enough to be a fisherman; I know how to fish and we fished and cooked our food and were able to survive on it.
00:56:28	Angel – He's a proud fisherman!
00:56:39	I been lucky.
00:56:44	In Philippines, one year, then American.
00:57:25	I was very fortunate that I only had to stay there a year; my family had sent my father's Army records over so they were able to help me.
00:59:30	He's remembering the date and time of when he left – September 1, 1986 and got to the Philippines September 16 th .

01:02:28	Letters to and from family – first letter was to his mom, a telegram with only a few words in it, “I made it to the Philippines.” His mother told his wife that and 2 days later he was able to write a lengthier letter telling them to send his father’s Army records and his wife was able to reply saying, “I’m so happy that you’re alive. I thought you died and your boat flipped. I didn’t know what happened to you but am so happy you made it to the Philippines.” She wrote to him about how life was there.
01:04:03	(Mr. Tran speaking English) First letter she know me not to die. She very, very happy; after one month letter from Vietnam to Philippine, one month, two month, I tell story me lucky me don’t die (laughs).
01:06:45	He was very, very happy to get the news that his papers went through and he was selected to come to America; (And Angel said it was funny because when she and Linda arrived to meet him for the interview he said he was lucky he was selected to get interviewed. So he feels his life has been lucky and blessed.
01:07:15	He was very happy when he got the news; he stayed in the Philippines for 6 months; his paperwork was accepted and he studied English through ESL for 6 months; he came to America through a church sponsorship.
01:07:54	At the time of his sponsorship he was going to church religiously but since he came down to Biloxi he doesn’t go anymore; when he lived in Minnesota he attended church.
01:08:15	When he came to America, he came to Minnesota; Austin, Minnesota, a small city.
01:09:45	(Angel laughing) When he first came to America he lived in a home with 5 other people in his situation that church had sponsored; they had different people come take them to the doctor and dentist and get them assistance; one of the things that stood out to him was he got \$57 in food stamps and \$250 cash but he didn’t know what the food stamps were for; that’s what he remembers most.
01:10:44	(Did he feel rich?) No, it wasn’t enough!
01:11:02	(Angel laughs) He remembers holding the booklet of food stamps and it was paper and he mimics holding the booklet looking at it like it was so funny.
01:11:50	He was holding his stack of food stamps and asked what he should do with it and they explained how he could take it to the store and pick what you want and give them this. He went to the store and did just that.
01:15:40	(laughs) His first time in America was very beautiful; the people were very helpful and just gave and gave; he didn’t know anything and from transportation to taking him here and there to buy grocery, people were just so giving in America.

01:16:23	But soon after he went to school and his sponsors in church encouraged him to stay in school and just learn the American language before you go anywhere. Of course he had friends who told him about Biloxi, MS, and how he could go fishing again; so he bought a plane ticket and flew to Biloxi to fish.
01:17:53	It was March 1988 when he came to Biloxi, Mississippi.
01:18:15 END Part One	He saved up enough money to buy plane ticket to Biloxi; he had one friend here, that's who he worked for; they were there to pick him up when he came off the plane and he just started working; the boat was maybe 57 feet.
Part Two	
00:00:02	Angel and Mr. Tran chatting in Vietnamese.
00:00:24	Angel showed him a photo of Biloxi beach and asked him if it reminded him of Nha Trang. He responds, "No, Nha Trang's way better!" He speaks in English to Linda: "You travel in Vietnam, very, very nice." Linda describes blue water and mountains behind. He describes water south of there not very blue but island and water there very blue.
00:01:19	(Mr. Tran speaking in English) "I tell you because I remember young boy in Vietnam; I go to island and fish and work and sometime friends and others; I always remember, don't forget, Vietnam now, American; I lucky don't forget, I remember; and Minnesota and food stamps (laughs) – yeah, I don't know, what do you do; the friend help me with the book; the cashier says, 'You don't know.' (laughs) I remember."
00:02:22	(Mr. Tran speaking in English) People say to study but because my daughter, she sick; my wife tell me to help with money so I can't continue study; I talk with my friend help me, I work fisherman, I work, help send money to Vietnam; I see the picture of my daughter; don't have the money, she die.
00:03:09	I work to send money; my daughter go in hospital.
END Part Two	Linda asks Angel for translation help.
Part Three	
00:01:56	His daughter had kidney problems so he was fortunate to be in America and be able to send money to her, but during that time he was in school and he couldn't focus because he knew his daughter was suffering so he quit school and moved to Mississippi so he could make money to support his family.

00:03:40	He had two choices: stay in school and stay there and it would be good for him, but if he came here and made money to send back to Vietnam it would be good for her, because he didn't want her to die; if he couldn't make money, she couldn't get treatment; he thinks he made the right decision even though the ladies at the church said not to go; he felt like he made a good decision when he looked at his daughter; she's okay now; he's glancing over at the picture of him and his wife and 2 children (posted on the wall behind us) and he's glad that he made that decision because today she's alive.
00:05:16	He's very proud of his family; when he goes back there he's very happy that they can all be together.
00:08:42	Comparing fishing in Vietnam to the Gulf Coast – compared to Vietnam, we have generators here and machines that help to operate the functions inside the boat; I can watch TV if I want to and my fridge runs on it and the machines that help me pull up the nets; in Vietnam we didn't have that so it's definitely better here.
00:09:18	(Mr. Tran speaking in English) In Vietnam the people work by hand; the power not the same in America; in Vietnam very tiring.
00:09:46	In Vietnam I work the deckhand, yeah; (chuckles) not the money.
00:09:56	I cannot live America and pay money the owner of the boat; Vietnam, not owner, deckhand (laughs).
00:10:08	(Angel interprets) Deckhand, not a lot of money but owner more money.
00:11:07	In Vietnam being a deckhand is very, very hard for you to climb the ladder to being an owner; there's not an opportunity because you make very little money being a deckhand.
00:11:58	He came to Biloxi in March.
00:12:52	I came here in March 1988 to Biloxi, MS, and worked for a family on their boat in Louisiana waters in May and saved up money from 1988 to 1993 is when I got my first boat, and this is the boat (Sweet Mary).
00:13:32	He really, really liked this boat; it's a lucky boat for him (00:13:47).
00:14:22	(Angel laughs) He described Sweet Mary like it's fate to meet her; and she's very lucky and she's surpassed many, many storms; there have been times I think she would sink; he refers to her that it did not sink and it's a very, very lucky boat and it must be fate that it belongs to me so I'm going to keep her (laughs).

00:15:01	Surviving Hurricane Katrina (Mr. Tran speaking English) After Katrina—my boat small and up high tide; I lucky not to die Katrina (00:15:15).
00:15:20	He's saying during Katrina high tide went up and he thought this boat was going to sink but it didn't.
00:16:25	There were times during Katrina where he thought he was just going to leave this boat alone but it didn't sink and he believes it's good for him.
00:19:43	During Katrina he went to Exit 38 (off I10; Lorraine-Cowan Rd./Industrial Canal, Biloxi) with many other boats and he was tied to 3 other boats. All 3 of the other boats sank; during high tide, he cut off the rope tying his to the others that sank and the other captains and people came aboard his boat; that's the reason why he said this is a good boat; she's been good to me so I'm going to keep her.
00:20:31	(Mr. Tran speaking in English) Yeah, because the 4 boats(?) and the high tide, and the wind pushed, and the boat hit me(?) down and I cut the rope at high tide; and I don't know, I should die.
00:21:33	He's had a lot of memories with this boat.
00:23:28	(Angel's summary after long passage) He said it was God's protection. He summarized all he's been through from Vietnam to here and finally the Catholic Church; yes, God stood by my side; even to this day I'm a fisherman and I just don't want to do anything else besides this. Although I had a decision, to stay in Minnesota or here, I'm fortunate enough to meet really good people in Minnesota, but I also met some really good people here and the lifestyle here is really nice; I try to picture myself doing other things but I can only see myself doing this; I enjoy this a lot.
00:24:31	(Linda mentions boat's Sweet Mary name and that Mary was Jesus's mother; Angel likes that connection and translates that to Mr. Tran).
00:26:08	He went back to during Katrina and talking about faith and God and how his life has been saved; he thought he was going to die in Katrina but it fortunately was God; when the water had risen up his boat was stuck on a cliff; Mr. Tran looks outside to compare it to the dock outside cabin window and said it was higher. So his boat was on land – “35 feet” (height of water); by time water came down, the boat was still stuck.
00:27:41	After water receded, he went out with a group of his friends and some tools and cut down the trees around it and they were able to bring the boat back into the water.

00:28:03	Boat sustained just a little damage.
00:28:24	I'm truly blessed.
00:28:40	He lived (and still lives) on his boat (so really depends on it).
00:29:23	As long as he has his boat, he still has a home.
00:31:18	BP oil spill – After the oil spill, I don't think there's any shrimp out there; no shrimp.
00:31:26	(Linda: Because of the oil spill?) (Mr. Tran speaking English) I don't know; the water and the oil now; I don't know now; no shrimp, no shrimp ; and everybody on the boat, no work .
00:31:58	This is the peak of their season, normally; but if you look around here, everyone's parked, no shrimp.
00:32:13	Yes, the fisherman docked here are my friends.
00:32:27	The Vietnamese community has been really affected by this oil spill.
00:32:41	(Linda: Have all fishermen been affected, big boats and small boats?) (Mr. Tran speaking in English) The big boats in high tide...(continues in Vietnamese).
00:32:53	Just 100 feet below, in the shallow water, no shrimp; but the freezer boats, they can still go all the way out there and still get shrimp.
00:34:37	I really don't know what the solution to this is; all I know is I used to have water that I could just go out and fish and shrimp and survive off of but now there's just so many uncertainties ; I thought about welding but even welders are being laid off; I just don't what else to do, I don't have the solution.
00:35:09	Yeah, because the work and the fishermen no money; maybe go in the welding; I made a friend tell me weld and lay off, yeah, welding.
00:39:33	Closing words translated – You have a pair of hands that God gave you and a brain, so use it wisely; nothing's given to you but you have these hands so you need to work hard with it; if you are in America, it's a land of opportunity; you don't always have to work for other people, you can actually build yourself up and be your own business owner and you can have a better life; there's so many opportunities here in America. (Interview ends with Angel and Mr. Tran conversing in Vietnamese, then taking photos).
END	