

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

Milton Zirlott

Interviewer: Barbara Hester

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An Oral History with Milton Zirlott, Volume 1043

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Biography

Mr. Milton Zirlott was born on December 29, 1925, to Ellis Zirlott (born 1898 in Fowl River, Alabama) and Nittie Rhodes Zirlott (born around 1906 in Bayou LaBatre, Alabama). His father was a commercial shrimp fisherman and a boat-builder. His mother's father was a net-maker. Zirlott went to school at Alba in Bayou LaBatre, Alabama. He had one brother, Robert Zirlott. Milton Zirlott worked with his father as a fisherman, and off-season, helped his father build boats.

In 1944, Zirlott entered the US military, Naval Construction Battalion. He was sent to Williamsburg, Virginia, for training at a CB base. From there he was sent to Oakland, California, and then to Okinawa where he served on a tugboat as a deckhand. After four days, he was promoted to captain, based on his experience with boats. Zirlott liked being a captain on a tugboat; it was safer than some of his friends' wartime assignments. A typhoon came through the island and destroyed the boats the CBs operated, as well as the ship dock they were building. World War II was coming to an end, and Zirlott was sent back to the States to be discharged. On June 23, 1946, he married Rosalie Ulery (born April 10, 1928, in San Joachim, California). They moved to his home in Alabama. At the time of this interview, they had been married sixty-five years. They have four children, Perry Zirlott (born September 1, 1948), Russell Zirlott (born July 30, 1950), Joyce Zirlott (born April 5, 1955), and Diane Zirlott Lumpkin (born April 1, 1960).

Zirlott finished grade school, and he took some training during his military service in shopfitting and to become a boatswain. During his military service, he was a Seabees machinist mate, a crane operator, and became a tugboat captain. He was awarded the Asiatic Pacific Victory Medal. He was a member of the Southern Shrimp Alliance. Zirlott enjoys sport fishing, oystering, and crabbing for fun.

Mr. Zirlott writes, "I have enjoyed my life. If God has any more time for us to be together, we would sure accept that."

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MILTON ZIRLOTT

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Milton Zirlott and is taking place on December 1, 2011. The interviewer is Barbara Hester.

Hester: So we're going to go ahead and get started. I'm going to check the volume and make sure everything's recording on here, this one as well. OK. Let me move this microphone a little bit. There we go. It's making better contact there. This is Barbara Hester with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage with The University of Southern Mississippi. I'm here today with Mr. Milton Zirlott at the public library in Bayou LaBatre on Padgett Switch Road. It is December 1, 2011, and 10:30 in the morning. Good morning, Mr. Zirlott.

Zirlott: Good morning.

Hester: Thank you for coming today and meeting me here at the library to do this interview. Would you state your name and address, please, for the record?

Zirlott: Name is Milton Zirlott.

Hester: And what is your occupation?

Zirlott: Retired fisherman.

Hester: Retired fisherman. Are you completely out of the business, or do you do some—

Zirlott: Well, pretty much out of the business. [The address of the interviewee has not been included in the transcript in order to protect his privacy.]

Hester: So you're retired now from fishing. Do you have another occupation?

Zirlott: I do a little bit. I still stay active.

Hester: With the commercial fishing?

Zirlott: Right now I'm working a little bit with my daughter. I buy repossessed homes, and she sells them.

Hester: I see. When did you begin fishing?

Zirlott: I began fishing at a very young age. Let's see. I went in service in [19]44, but I fished with my father, started a little bit in the [19]40s. (0:02:12.0) Did that full-time before I went into service; spent two years and then come back, got back into the business again.

Hester: So your father was a commercial fisherman?

Zirlott: Father was, grandfather.

Hester: And your grandfather. Does it go back further in generations?

Zirlott: I believe that's about it. I think my great-great-grandfather, I believe he did do a little bit of fishing.

Hester: Did they work in this area, or did they work—

Zirlott: They worked in this area.

Hester: So your family's been in the Bayou LaBatre/Coden area for generations.

Zirlott: For quite a few years.

Hester: Yeah. So who would you say taught you how to fish?

Zirlott: I didn't quite understand the question.

Hester: Who would you say taught you the occupation of fishing?

Zirlott: Well, I learned from my father.

Hester: You learned from your father. What type of fishing did your father do?

Zirlott: Well, he done some oystering, but mostly shrimping.

Hester: Shrimping, uh-huh, mostly shrimping, but he has done some oystering?

Zirlott: A little bit of oystering, but the main thing was shrimping, just maybe in the winter months he would do a little bit, but then summer come, we back shrimping again.

Hester: Again, OK. What type of equipment did he use?

Zirlott: You mean on the boat? What type?

Hester: Yes, sir.

Zirlott: We first started; there wasn't much equipment on the boat. (0:03:59.9) We did have a hoister to pull the nets in. And then they had a scoop net and a rack on the boat that you could pull the tail bag up and fix it so you could scoop the shrimp out of their tail bag, you know. Then later that become the lift rigs. They could lift the shrimp more. Made it quite a bit better. But then as years went by, the equipment got much different. I got my own boat in [19]56, and it was equipped pretty much like the boats are today. They've got some things different. (0:04:52.3) The navigation equipment is a lot better now. Things just changed quite a bit over the years. Now, [19]56, we were doing things just about like they do today, just pretty much the same.

Hester: So you bought your boat in [19]56. What type of boat was that?

Zirlott: My father was a boat-builder. We built it. I helped him as he was building other boats. (0:05:28.8)

Hester: What type of boats did he—

Zirlott: It was a wooden boat.

Hester: A wooden boat?

Zirlott: Wooden boat, and it was actually a nice boat. Everybody liked it when it come out.

Hester: Over the course of your early years in commercial fishing when it sounds like the major changes in equipment were occurring, did the design of the boat change as the equipment changed, or was the boat the same? (0:06:03.5)

Zirlott: Well, they went from wood to steel, was one of the big changes. And I think the reason they was a little later getting into steel, they learned how to treat the steel so much better as years went by. But I had four wooden boats built by Landry Shipyard after my dad passed away. And then I had, I'd say, four steel hulls built by Johnson. I think that was J and J at that time; no, Gulf Coast Marine, and then it turned to J and J on the last boat. I had one boat built with Jemmison Marine. He's still in business, too. [A portion of the interview determining spelling has not been transcribed.]

Hester: And what was the name of your father's business?

Zirlott: Zirlott Boat Works. They did have a Zirlott Boat Works later. There was some boys learned from my dad, and he sold the boatyard.

Hester: They learned from your father. They worked at his boatyard?

Zirlott: Yeah. They worked, worked with him for a while. They learned the trade.

Hester: And they kept the name?

Zirlott: Yeah. They kept the name. My father had passed away when they built they place.

Hester: Is there still a Zirlott—

Zirlott: No. That's not there no more. The owner of it passed away, and they don't have it no more.

Hester: What year was that, about?

Zirlott: When the second Zirlott's closed up?

Hester: Yes.

Zirlott: I'd say maybe ten years ago.

Hester: Oh, OK. So not too long ago.

Zirlott: Yeah.

Hester: OK. So the equipment went from, you said—

Zirlott: Well, from wooden boats to steel boats. And then they started getting better equipment.

Hester: And then the actual equipment to catch the fish started with scoop nets and—

Zirlott: Right, it started with the scoop nets (inaudible).

Hester: And then went to a lift type of equipment.

Zirlott: Right.

Hester: And then it stayed at a lift. Is that where it is now?

Zirlott: Yeah. It's maybe a little different, but they still stayed—they went from [one net] to two nets, and now, they're pulling four nets. (0:09:27.8)

Hester: Does that require a bigger boat, to have that many nets?

Zirlott: Mostly the bigger boats have their four nets. They don't allow it on the inside waters where the small boats were.

Hester: They don't allow the—

Zirlott: Not even the double nets. Well, if they pull two, twenty-fives, they can. And then if they pull a four, they'd have to pull twelve-and-a-half-foot nets, and it wouldn't be practical.

Hester: I see. When you had your boats, you were talking about the different boats that you purchased along the way. Were you building a fleet or—

Zirlott: Well, I had four at one time. And didn't necessarily mean to build a fleet, I don't reckon, but just kind of happened that way.

Hester: Did you have like the four of them going out at the same time? I mean, did you have—(0:10:32.8)

Zirlott: Yeah. Most of the time it didn't go out exactly the same time. They worked individually. I might have one on the east coast of Florida and one in Texas at the same time.

Hester: I see. And how long did you have the four boats?

Zirlott: I can't remember. It was in the early [19]90s I sold two of them to go to—they went to Africa, Nigeria, Africa.

Hester: Is that right?

Zirlott: And then as years went by, I sold one and built a new one in the place of it. And then later I built another new one. I believe [19]99 was the last year I built a new boat.

Hester: And how many boats do you have now?

Zirlott: I don't have no boats now. I got one financed, but still drawing a check on it, so I'm interested in the fishing business, due to that.

Hester: I understand. So another fisherman is using your boat now, and sort of renting it from you?

Zirlott: Yeah. They got—right.

Hester: Is it in this area?

Zirlott: It's in this area.

Hester: Uh-huh. That's good. Could you tell me about the species of fish? When you started with your father, you said you were doing mostly shrimping, but oystering some. Did you do any finfishing?

Zirlott: No. We never fooled with fish too much. Just what few we caught in the nets, we'd sell, but never went out for the fish, but just mostly shrimping. Now, we did start off with white shrimp only. (0:12:21.7)

Hester: And then from—

Zirlott: And then the brown shrimp showed up. (0:12:26.7) Nobody wanted the brown shrimp when they first showed up. And then later they become plentiful. Then we found out they go to deeper water, too, and we started going deeper for the brown [shrimp]. Then we started going to Key West, Florida, for pink shrimp. (0:12:50.4)

Hester: I didn't realize that there were so many different types of shrimp.

Zirlott: And the last boat I built, talking about equipment, it was equipped to go in deep water for royal red shrimp. (0:13:02.1)

Hester: What is the difference in marketing these types of shrimp?

Zirlott: To market them?

Hester: Yeah.

Zirlott: Well, that something we left up to the fish-houses, but then when we got into the red shrimp, we had to kind of do that ourselves. We'd find a market for them.

Hester: Why was that?

Zirlott: I don't know why the market was a little bit slow on the red shrimp. I reckon a lot of people didn't understand them.

Hester: About what years did you go for the red shrimp?

Zirlott: That was from [19]99 on to about [2006]. I went backwards, didn't I? I told you I wasn't straight this morning. (laughter)

Hester: Oh, I think we're doing great. I'm not too sure how to ask this question. You're the expert at this. Did you fish for the white, the brown at the same time?

Zirlott: Yeah, sometimes we did. We'd just move a little bit of difference in the depth of water and run a little bit offshore to fish for brown shrimp and back in closer to the beaches for the white.

Hester: What was the preference for the—

Zirlott: For the different—

Hester: (inaudible)

Zirlott: Well, it'd just give us more fishing time. White is mostly daytime shrimp. (0:14:45.9) They do fish them at nighttime. And the brown, it's almost all nighttime fishing. And once in a while, if the water's a little bit muddy, you can catch them at day.

Hester: So the brown shrimp like the murkier, muddy water?

Zirlott: Yeah. It kind of likes the dark water. And sometimes when the sun comes up, or just breaks daylight, they shut off.

Hester: Uh-huh. Would they just go deeper or something and wouldn't—

Zirlott: I don't know where they went, really. Some say they bury up. Some say they come up. I kind of believe they buried up.

Hester: They bury up?

Zirlott: Yeah. They just bury theirselves in the sand or mud or wherever they's at.

Hester: OK. I kind of got a sense that it was all white shrimp at one time.

Zirlott: It was.

Hester: And then the brown shrimp you said, came in?

Zirlott: Yeah.

Hester: Or it was just that they were there, but—

Zirlott: Well, I don't know they was even now. When they started showing up, they was just small. And then I reckon they'd grow up and go offshore. But I don't believe they've always been there because just about in my early times, we would see none. Then we started a-catching a few, and we'd notice there was a difference in the shrimp. (0:16:08.7)

Hester: About when did that happen? Were you still fishing with your father?

Zirlott: Yeah, I believe I was at that time. It was probably in the early [19]40s and maybe a little before that.

Hester: When did you basically go out on your own?

Zirlott: Well, I took my dad's boat out some before I went into service. That was in [19]44 (inaudible), and about [19]42, [19]44 he was letting me take the boat out at times.

Hester: Where were you in the service? What kind of service did you do?

Zirlott: What kind of service?

Hester: Yes.

Zirlott: I was in the CBs [Naval Construction Battalion, Seabees], the Naval CBs. (0:16:59.1)

Hester: Where were you stationed?

Zirlott: Well, I started out in Virginia, and then I went to California and then from there to Okinawa.

Hester: Have you seen any change in the wetlands over the course of your career?

Zirlott: A little bit. (0:17:26.1)

Hester: How was that?

Zirlott: Well, just getting less wetlands and a little more water in different places. And the outer islands has changed quite a bit in my time. (0:17:41.9)

Hester: Where is that?

Zirlott: The outer islands, like Sand Island has moved quite a bit. Where boats run now, it used to be dry sand.

Hester: Is that right?

Zirlott: I can remember when the Sand Island Light[house] was still sitting on Sand Island, but it's probably a mile from Sand Island now, or more.

Hester: And that was a lighthouse you're talking about?

Zirlott: Yeah, the lighthouse.

Hester: Uh-huh. That's interesting. Is there an area of greatest impact?

Zirlott: Where that's happened more so than—

Hester: Um-hm.

Zirlott: It seemed like—well, no. Sand Island area is the worst, even the last storm we had has just about pushed—they still call it Sand Island, but it was Pelican Island at one time. It's almost pushed up against Dauphin Island. (0:18:40.7) They got a pier on Dauphin Island, and the island is right up, underneath of the pier, now.

Hester: Is that a small—where is it in relation to Dauphin Island?

Zirlott: It's on the east end; be south of the east end of Dauphin Island, where the fort is. You can actually see the lighthouse from the fort, but you can't see no island there anymore. I think they trying to restore that a little bit, now. I hope they do.

Hester: Yeah. They really need to. Wow. Have the state and local regulations changed over the course of your career? (0:19:17.2)

Zirlott: Quite a bit.

Hester: How's that?

Zirlott: Regulations, just you got to get permits for everything now. Started out you just bought license and fished. Now, you got to have permits.

Hester: When did that change?

Zirlott: Let's see. I reckon, I know the early [19]90s we was having to have permits for the East Coast a little bit before we did over here [Bayou LaBatre, Alabama].

Hester: So that would be the Atlantic Coast you're talking about, the East Coast?

Zirlott: Yeah, the East Coast. They really put it on rock shrimp. That was another shrimp I didn't even mention.

Hester: Oh, OK, rock shrimp, OK.

Zirlott: Yeah. That was the rock shrimp. (0:20:15.1) They protected them over there. They could tell you when to fish and when not to fish. Then you had to get a EPIRB [emergency positioning radio beacon], I believe they called it, piece of equipment that they could tell whether you was fishing in close waters or not. (0:20:37.9)

Hester: In cold water?

Zirlott: Yeah. There was a piece of equipment on the boat.

Hester: What was it called?

Zirlott: I think it's called a EPIRB.

Hester: E—

Zirlott: EPIRB, it sent out a signal that—

Hester: EPIRB?

Zirlott: The National Marine Fishery had one set up that they could watch it and tell whether you was in the wrong place or not.

Hester: OK. EBURP, B-U-R-P? Am I hearing that correctly?

Zirlott: I believe it's—

Hester: That's what it is?

Zirlott: It's something like that.

Hester: Something like that.

Zirlott: I might not even be pronouncing it right.

Hester: Yeah. Well, that's close enough.

Zirlott: They still have to have that on their boats.

Hester: Uh-huh. They have it to this day?

Zirlott: Yeah. They still have it.

Hester: Is that a type of equipment?

Zirlott: It's a type of equipment. It's just a radio signal.

Hester: A radio signal, OK. So how else? You went from licensing to permitting. How else have the regulations changed? (0:21:33.0)

Zirlott: They have closed waters at times, that, some I agree with; some I don't agree with.

Hester: Why did they close the waters?

Zirlott: For protection of the shrimp, so they can grow up and get a little bigger. Now, Texas has a closing, and a lot of boats go to Texas waters when it opens. But sometimes it's a good thing, and sometimes it's not a good thing.

Hester: Is it predictable what time of year it's going to be closed?

Zirlott: Pretty much. Shrimp come out in the spring of the year, (0:22:26.2) the juveniles, and it don't pay to catch them at that time.

Hester: How do they publicize that the waters are closed? Do you belong to a professional organization?

Zirlott: No. They just, the word just gets around. They send the information to the fish houses that you can pick up the sheets, and it tells you when the waters are closed, when it's not closed, and when it's going to be open. And sometimes in Texas water you don't know but about a week in advance. The boats that's fishing off Alabama, and if they want to make that season, they got to start running, soon as they hear about it.

Hester: Wow. Were you fishing when [Hurricane] Katrina hit?

Zirlott: Katrina?

Hester: Yeah.

Zirlott: No, I wasn't.

Hester: You were retired then.

Zirlott: I had one boat still fishing. I was just managing the boat.

Hester: Is this the one that you were renting?

Zirlott: No. It's not that one. I had sold it a little bit ahead of time.

Hester: So you had a boat that you were actually taking out when Katrina hit.

Zirlott: It was still fishing when Katrina.

Hester: How did the hurricane affect you? (0:23:57.3)

Zirlott: They just couldn't fish during that time. Then when they did get to go back, see, the fish houses, a lot of them went underwater, and you couldn't sell your product.

Hester: What were the reasons that you couldn't fish other than the fact that you didn't have a—the fish houses were affected? Was it something with the water?

Zirlott: No. I don't believe the water was—they didn't close it for bad water or anything, maybe inside waters, but not the Gulf. And there was an awful lot of debris in the Gulf in the water, inside waters, too.

Hester: Um-hm. Yeah. That's what I was thinking it might have been.

Zirlott: It was like tree limbs and stumps, just all kind of stuff in the water.

Hester: How long did you have to put up with all that debris?

Zirlott: I imagine it was just about a year that they—

Hester: Were they out cleaning it, or did it—

Zirlott: No. I think the fishermen themselves cleaned most of it, and they did inside waters; they cleaned them.

Hester: Um-hm. Must have been a big job.

Zirlott: It was a big job. They had—

Hester: So Katrina must have caused you to stop doing business for a while because you had no place to market your shrimp. How did you cope with that change?

Zirlott: Well, we just prepared for it. Just had to take that time off.

Hester: Did you do another job?

Zirlott: No. We just, anything to do on the boats, we done it at that time.

Hester: Was your boat injured in any way? Was your boat damaged in any way?

Zirlott: No. The boat was fine. We had it moored down real good.

Hester: Where'd you put it?

Zirlott: Right here in the bayou. It was in a, I wouldn't say a good place, but we had it tied up right, the way it wouldn't get away.

Hester: How long after the storm did you actually go back out and resume business?

Zirlott: I reckon it might've been something like a month that boats was able to get supplies and go back out.

Hester: Who helped you recover from the hurricane? Did you have any family that helped or insurance, government assistance, volunteers?

Zirlott: No. I had crews on the boat, and they pretty much took care of everything.

Hester: I see. How has the business changed, the commercial seafood industry, changed after the storm? Was it business as usual when you went back, or had you noticed a change in some sort of way?

Zirlott: I think it made a change at that time, just be hard to explain how it done it, but it did.

Hester: Was it a financial change?

Zirlott: Well, it was a financial change.

Hester: How was that?

Zirlott: You was talking about the, there was some money give out, and a lot of people's looking for the money, and wasn't interested in working at that time.

Hester: Was that government money?

Zirlott: It was pretty much government; FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], I believe was the one taking care of that.

Hester: Was there also a change in the species of fish from before to after the storm?

Zirlott: Not necessarily. In some spots the shrimp would be better. The waters were stirred up, the bottoms, and it seemed to draw the shrimp to it, and they had some big catches after that time. But that don't last a real long time.

Hester: You were still fishing the white shrimp after the storm and the brown shrimp after the storm.

Zirlott: Had them both.

Hester: The both of them. I guess the pink shrimp was pretty much down in the Key West area?

Zirlott: Well, they [the pink shrimp] (0:29:16.2) started this right off of Louisiana. That'd be the mouth of the Mississippi River. There's several passes, and that was about the end of them, going west. And you'd fish them as far as South Carolina, and that would be about the end. And then there was spots there wasn't none.

Hester: Uh-huh. So you could actually go off the coast of Alabama here, and you could get them.

Zirlott: You could get some royal reds.

Hester: And then the rock shrimp (0:29:57.3) was just Atlantic Coast. It wasn't here, as well?

Zirlott: No. There was some off the panhandle of Florida, not a real big area of them, but they would do pretty good in that area, from Panama City to Carabelle, I reckon, was about.

Hester: Now where is that? What's the name of the place in Florida?

Zirlott: Carabelle is one of them.

Hester: Carabelle, um-hm.

Zirlott: Maybe just a little bit east of Carabelle up to Panama City.

Hester: The royal reds took a while to start up because people weren't sure what to do with them, or just weren't familiar with them?

Zirlott: I think the market was the main thing on the royal reds. (0:31:02.6) But when they first started, it seemed like the market was better on them than later. It got just a little bit hard to sell.

Hester: Oh. So they dropped off instead of picking up.

Zirlott: Right now, I believe, it's pretty good.

Hester: And so after Katrina, all of these species pretty much stayed the same?]

Zirlott: Pretty much the same.

Hester: Um-hm. In the same locations?

Zirlott: Yeah, about the same.

Hester: OK. What about the BP oil spill? (0:31:30.5) How did it affect your business?

Zirlott: Well, it was just shut down completely for quite a while. I don't know just exactly how long they shut it down, but you couldn't even fish the Gulf of Mexico a long time. There was just a few spots you could fish. And then later they had one

spot that may be the main spot the fishermen like to go to, and they had that closed, where it was closer to the oil spill.

Hester: And you were going out fishing at that time?

Zirlott: No. I wasn't fishing, myself, at that time.

Hester: You weren't doing it yourself, but you had somebody renting your boat at that time.

Zirlott: Yeah, right.

Hester: Yeah. What were your expectations for the season before the oil spill happened?

Zirlott: Just about any other season.

Hester: Nothing spectacular or nothing really bad.

Zirlott: No. I think it was just a good, average season. The fuel prices have been our biggest enemy. (0:32:47.3)

Hester: I've heard a lot of fishermen say that.

Zirlott: Did they?

Hester: Sometimes they even restrict how far out they go because it gets expensive.

Zirlott: That's one thing that's hurt the royal reds, too. You fish, it's day and night fishing; it's the same. No difference at deeper water, and you do burn more fuel.

Hester: When you heard about the oil spill, what went through your mind?
(0:33:15.0)

Zirlott: I just couldn't imagine it being as bad as it was and last as long.

Hester: So you thought it was just going to be something that they would contain quickly.

Zirlott: Yeah. Figured, you know, maybe they'd get it shut down. When they was going to put the cap over it, I had all the faith in the world that that was going to work, but it didn't. And they tried it again, and it didn't work again.

Hester: Did you make any special preparations during the course of watching this news and what they were doing to cap the well?

Zirlott: Not necessarily because I wasn't fishing at that time, myself.

Hester: Did you see people who were fishing, making special preparations?

Zirlott: Well, they was getting jobs with BP. A lot of the boats went to work with BP.

Hester: Is that the Vessels of Opportunity program? (0:34:10.3)

Zirlott: Right.

Hester: Yeah. Well, you weren't fishing there, but did you see that people in Bayou LaBatre had a chance to go out and harvest some shrimp before the waters were closed, after the spill, but before the waters were closed?

Zirlott: I would think so. They had no reason not to go until it was shut down.

Hester: Do you have any idea how the harvest worked out? Was it average, just as you expected, or was there a change? (0:34:49.8)

Zirlott: You mean after they opened the waters?

Hester: After the spill and before they closed the waters, how was the harvest of—

Zirlott: I think about the same right then.

Hester: It was about the same, OK.

Zirlott: Because I think right around where the oil was, pretty close to it, they didn't allow you to go there.

Hester: Um-hm. The people who participated in the Vessels of Opportunity program, how did they find out about it? (0:35:22.3)

Zirlott: Well, the word just gets around.

Hester: But you didn't participate in—

Zirlott: No. I had a small boat. I tried to, but I didn't make it for some reason or another. They filled out all the papers.

Hester: You filled out the papers.

Zirlott: And never got the boat in. But just recently, they have used it for a couple of days.

Hester: How recent was that?

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Zirlott: Just I reckon about two weeks ago, they used the boat for two days.

Hester: And that was the only time that your boat was involved?

Zirlott: That was the only time I got it in. Then they got a half a day after that. But I hadn't been paid for either one of them, not yet. But my grandson's got boats into it, and he's the one said they needed the smaller boats. They asked me would I let mine go, and I told them I would.

Hester: So when you applied to participate in the Vessels of Opportunity program, can you describe that process? What did you do?

Zirlott: Well, I had a lot of papers to fill out.

Hester: Um-hm. Where'd you get the papers?

Zirlott: Got it from them. They had—

Hester: They had an office (inaudible)?

Zirlott: Yeah. They had an office in Bayou LaBatre that you'd go get the papers and fill them out and bring them back to them, and they'd send them off. And they kept them one time about, I reckon about four months. Finally, they faxed me something that said I needed to fill out one more paper and send to them, and I did, but then I didn't hear no more.

Hester: Your son, you said, did participate in the program—

Zirlott: Grandson.

Hester: Your grandson, I'm sorry. He went to the office and filled the papers out.

Zirlott: And filled out papers.

Hester: And he heard from them.

Zirlott: And he had the right type of boats for them.

Hester: I see. So it was a difference in the type of boats they were looking for.

Zirlott: Yeah. It had a lot to do with it.

Hester: What type of boats were they looking for?

Zirlott: I think early, the shrimp boats fit good, when they was out, dragging for the oil. And they even pulled booms, I believe they called it, to herd the oil up so they could pull it out with other boats. And I think they pulled it up in one spot and set it on fire. I think that's where the tar balls are coming from, is where they burn it.

Hester: They burn the—

Zirlott: They burn the oil right on the spot.

Hester: On the spot, and that's where the tar balls were from?

Zirlott: Yeah. I believe the tar balls probably come from them. It's stuff that wouldn't burn.

Hester: Your boat wasn't a shrimp boat?

Zirlott: Not the little boat, wasn't.

Hester: Oh, the little boat wasn't.

Zirlott: It was just more or less a pleasure boat. I would use it for maybe getting a few oysters some time, and I had some crab traps. I didn't use the boat for that, though. I'd set them off my dock. I was allowed a few crab traps.

Hester: Talking to Mr. Bosarge about two weeks ago, Gerald Bosarge, he was telling me that he still does some oystering.

Zirlott: He does, yeah, just for himself, I reckon.

Hester: Yeah.

Zirlott: That's the way I do.

Hester: Yeah. So you do some oystering as well.

Zirlott: Yeah, I do.

Hester: How are you related to Mr. Bosarge?

Zirlott: Through his wife.

Hester: Through his wife.

Zirlott: She was my cousin.

Hester: OK. His wife is your cousin.

Zirlott: Right.

Hester: OK. You've done some work for BP, or they used your boats just recently. Have you did any other work for BP, or in conjunction with the oil spill?

Zirlott: Not a whole lot. The boat that I finance did work for the oil, and they had got way behind on notes, and they did, through the BP work, they was able to pick up the slack notes pretty much.

Hester: I don't understand. They—

Zirlott: OK. They was paying me so much a month for the boat. And I don't know why they couldn't pay the note, but they got quite a few notes behind. And then when they got on BP, well, they paid them good enough to where they could pay me back for some of the back notes.

Hester: So the people who were renting your boat, BP used your boat, and that enabled them to pay you back.

Zirlott: Yeah, that enabled them to pay me back. So I think they've done real well, then.

Hester: Good. Good. Do you think that the BP process has been fair? (0:40:50.7)

Zirlott: Not completely.

Hester: Why is that?

Zirlott: Well, for myself, I should've been able to get my pleasure boat on. I seen other ones going right in front of my house, even smaller and not as good a boat as I had, and they were getting paid out of it.

Hester: Any idea why? Did you try to call them or something?

Zirlott: I did. I called a number of times.

Hester: Were the people whose boats that you saw out there in the waters working in this program, were they commercial fishermen?

Zirlott: No. They wasn't.

Hester: Who were they?

Zirlott: I don't know. They had just worlds of them. I've seen one go by my house; well, I've seen it a good many times, with three people in it, and it didn't look like it

was over twelve foot long, just about that much boat sticking out the water. If they'd have put something else on it, it wouldn't have floated, and they was going out for a payday. Looked like a bunch of kids on it, but they had the buoys and different things. I could tell, and the bright-colored lifejackets on. It wasn't completely fair. I reckon they done what they could do.

Hester: Were they local people? I mean, did they have—

Zirlott: I didn't know them, but they come from farther up the river than I was.

Hester: Do you still have family that's in the commercial fishing business?

Zirlott: Most of my family's doing other things. I got a son that's still got a boat, and he's kind of derigged his boat. He does different type of work. But he did do—

Hester: What kind of work does he—

Zirlott: He does survey work (0:43:00.1) with it. He worked with some company that would take samples of the water and samples of the bottom, and it was pretty good for him. It's slowed down a little bit now, but I don't think he ever actually worked for BP, very little, if any.

Hester: So your grandson, he is in the commercial fishing?

Zirlott: Yeah. Now, my grandson is working pretty steady with them because he's got just the right boat for them. They take people out to the beaches to clean up the beaches. And they're real shallow-draft boats, and they hold a good many people, and they're pretty fast. I think him and another boy's got three of them boats that they're in partners with.

Hester: And your son is doing strictly the survey work now. He doesn't—

Zirlott: No. He's hauling people out to clean the beaches is what most of his work is. Now, sometime they do survey work.

Hester: Oh, OK. Got you. But neither one really focuses as much on the commercial fishing.

Zirlott: Yeah. My son does the survey work, but my grand—I'm getting mixed up on that.

Hester: That's OK.

Zirlott: Yeah. My grandson has got the boat that hauls people out, and my son has a boat that does survey work.

Hester: And neither one of them do commercial fishing anymore?

Zirlott: Not now.

Hester: They don't go out shrimping.

Zirlott: No. They don't go for the shrimping now.

Hester: OK. If somebody came to you, a young man came to you and said, "Mr. Zirlott, I'm thinking about going into commercial fishing. What would you recommend I do," what would you tell him? (0:44:55.7)

Zirlott: I'd recommend that he—well, one thing I'd ask him, is he experienced fisherman. And if he told me he's going to get somebody to run his boat, I'd say, "You better get a good man. Find out who's qualified for that job. And that's the main thing, is the captain. Sometime they might not look the best, but they could be real good captains. Sometime they could look real good and not be a good captain." I don't know if you watched the shrimp movie, but they got some captains that don't look like they'd be good captains, but I'm sure they do a good job.

Hester: I heard about that movie, but I unfortunately didn't see it. I heard about it after it happened.

Zirlott: You're going to have to watch some of that to understand a little bit more about the fishing.

Hester: I would like to do that. Could you tell me, what was the name of the movie?

Zirlott: It's "Big Shrimper," I believe, "Big Shrimping."

Hester: "Big Shrimping"?

Zirlott: Yeah. That comes on tonight, I think.

Hester: It comes on tonight?

Zirlott: Now, I don't know exactly what time, but I think it comes on tonight. They've had three parts of it, so far, and it's completely made right here in the bayou.

Hester: Is that right? Where are they doing it? Out—

Zirlott: They done the film. It's Dominic Ficarino's boats, if you know Dominic.

Hester: I have been in Dominick's Seafood (0:46:38.3) and spoken with a woman there that—

Zirlott: Who did you speak to?

Hester: Is it Debbie Houston?

Zirlott: Debbie, yeah. I know Debbie real well. She's a good lady.

Hester: Yeah. She was very nice. She had mentioned that Mr. Dominic was involved in the film, but I didn't quite understand.

Zirlott: Yeah. Well, he's the one that owns the boats and the process house. Yeah. Dominic's really a fine person. I knowed his daddy and his grandfather before him, when they was owning the business.

Hester: Yeah. I think maybe he's going to do an interview for us. Ms. Houston said to call her back once we got past the holiday. So we'll do that and give her a call. Hopefully we'll get an interview.

Zirlott: Yeah. If you get to talk to him, you'll find he's a very nice guy.

Hester: Um-hm. You know, I was asking you about if a young man came to you and asked you for advice because he was considering going into commercial fishing, how would that change? When you were young and you were working with your father, or say, you were considering working with your father, what would have been different between the advice that you would have gotten when you were first starting out and the advice that you would give the young man today? Do you understand my question?

Zirlott: I think it would be probably pretty much the same. Things just hadn't changed that much, but most of the time a fisherman'll get on a boat as a deckhand, (0:48:36.4) and if he's got plans of working up, he's going to try to learn everything he can learn from working with somebody else because it's times that you got to put somebody else on the wheel when you're a captain, especially when you're working day and night. And you'll pick out one that you can trust more. And if that guy's, if he's got any interest in it, he'll probably wind up running a boat. One of Dominic's boats in that movie was, he had worked with one of the other captains and still speaks of the other captain in the movie, pretty proud that he got to the station he's got now.

Hester: That's wonderful. How frequently do you change deckhands? Do you—

Zirlott: Sometime they keep them for years, and other times they don't last too long.

Hester: I guess if you keep them for years, they become like a member of the family.

Zirlott: Just about. I had boys that worked with me. I think the world of them right now. I see them somewhere, I have to talk, stop and talk to them. And I've had some that I wouldn't want to see. (laughter)

Hester: I understand.

Zirlott: They can be the best in the world until they get at sea, and then they get homesick, and they try to find all kind of excuses to go in.

Hester: What do you think is the future for commercial fishing? (0:50:29.4)

Zirlott: The future?

Hester: Yeah. What do you see in the future?

Zirlott: I think it has a future. It's got to be good management, but I see people like Ficarino, and I think he'll be in for a long time.

Hester: Who's this?

Zirlott: Dominic Ficarino. I think—

Hester: Dominic. How do you spell his last name? Do you know?

Zirlott: I've seen that name a hundred times. I can't tell you exactly. [A portion of the interview regarding spelling has not been transcribed.]

Hester: Do you think that the waters are as healthy now as they were when you first started out? (0:51:25.6)

Zirlott: I think so. Maybe they're righting the worst of the oil, and that was a little deeper than they fish, even for royal reds. They don't fish as deep as that was. But the tar balls I don't believe is hurting it that much. I think that's something's been burned out; that's like asphalt on our road. That hadn't got that hard, but it's pretty much the same thing.

Hester: Are your son and your grandson and your friends that are still fishing, are they still seeing tar balls out there?

Zirlott: Well, they take the people out and pick them up off the beach, and they are getting them off the beach, (0:52:24.3) but now, I think some of the fishermen talks about catching some, but I don't hear too much about other ones doing it.

Hester: Um-hm. Mr. Zirlott, I think that I have exhausted the questions that I was going to ask you today, but I want to just open it up to you and give you the opportunity to talk about whatever you would like to put on the record as far as your experiences, just any statements about commercial fishing, just something that—this is going to be archived with The [University of Southern Mississippi's] Center for Oral

History [and Cultural Heritage]. And what would you like to put on the record? What statement?

Zirlott: I don't know much I could put on. There's one thing I would think about. After they opened the waters back up for shrimping and nobody had drug nets or caught any shrimp at the time, and I think they ought to look into that exact time because it's been some real good catches after that. (0:53:43.5) Well, a boat just made probably six months or so of just real heavy catches, unusually good. And they ought to look at that time that it was shut down and think about having a closure in the Gulf. I can't say too much because I'm not directly in the business right now, but I think it would be a good idea if they kind of studied that, and then maybe it would improve fishing. Sometime they working just for fuel, and if they could catch more shrimp in a shorter time, they wouldn't have to burn that fuel. If they do save they money, but most of them don't. People like Dominic and other operators would do it, but other than that, I really don't know much about it. I stay pretty close to the fishermen and find out what I can.

Hester: How long after the—you're talking about the spill; this happened after the spill when they had the greater—

Zirlott: I think they went probably about six months that they done just extremely well.

Hester: So the waters were closed for six months, and when they opened it up—

Zirlott: Well, I don't know just how long it was closed, but six months afterwards, they seemed like they done awfully good. Now, the boats could go on the East Coast and even over in Florida, and I think they could work off Texas. But right in this area was closed at that time. Now, they have a closure in Texas, and that seem like that helps out a little bit.

Hester: Have you seen that there are fewer commercial fishermen now than there were in your earlier career? (0:56:05.3)

Zirlott: The fleet has went down pretty good. There's nobody building shrimp boats nowadays, hardly. There's one boat being built in Coden by Rodriguez and that's Dominic Ficarino's boat. But I was told that's 2.5 million to build that boat, and that's (laughter) unheard of to pay that much for a boat. But he's got other boats'll help him. He's got a business, and I think knows what he's doing. He can't buy other boats, now, that's worth anything. Repossessed boats or somebody wanting to sell one, that's not what he wants. He wants a certain boat. He's having it built. So I think he's wise by doing it.

Hester: I've got a question in my mind about what you were saying about closing the waters for a period of time, which would increase, I guess you would say increase production or increase the size of the harvest. But in the same token you have fewer

fishermen now than you did before. Maybe because the equipment is more efficient that the waters are being fished so heavily—

Zirlott: That could have something to do with it, but that's why I suggested that closed waters. I don't know if the crews would come out too much on it, but the boats would for the fuel. Now, some crews take the fuel off the top, and it would help the crew and the boat at that time.

Hester: Can you expand on that a little bit? I'm not sure I understand it.

Zirlott: OK. They would catch more shrimp in less time and burn less fuel is what it all amounts to, and you're not wearing your equipment out, either, (0:58:15.5) if you had a closure where the boats could just lay at their dock during the closed time. Some of them would go to other places where they wasn't closed.

Hester: But it would take the pressure off of this area, if they could go fish somewhere else for the time being, anyway, for the fish to replenish?

Zirlott: Yeah. The main thing is just that expense is—if he's not a good fishermen, he just works for expenses.

Hester: It's been a good career for you?

Zirlott: Yeah. It has. I've enjoyed it. My wife wasn't from this part the country. She's from California, but she adapted to it, and she'll tell everybody she's had a good life. Never had no piles of money, but we had enough to get by with. And we prepared ourself, in our older age, to live. But it has been a real good life. (0:59:50.1) I do miss it, but I know I don't need to be out there now. I reckon you know my age.

Hester: What is your age?

Zirlott: (laughter) I'll be eighty-six—

Hester: Eighty-six, my goodness.

Zirlott: —this month.

Hester: Is that right? Well, you certainly don't look it.

Zirlott: Yeah. Gerald's getting up in age, too, but he's not as old as I am.

Hester: Who is this?

Zirlott: Gerald Bosarge, the one you talked to.

Hester: OK. Yeah.

Zirlott: And he has been in the fishing business. He's shrimped and he's snapper-fished a lot, snapper and grouper. He's even fished in Honduras.

Hester: I think he mentioned that, yeah.

Zirlott: Yeah. He would fly to Honduras, make a trip, and come back home.

Hester: I had not interviewed a commercial fisherman yet that said they didn't love what they did or regretted having pursued this occupation. It seems like it's a commitment that you don't see in many occupations.

Zirlott: Yeah. I did take the boat out of the country one time; went to Colombia, South America, to shrimp; spent four months down there. (laughter) And they wasn't no better than here; the catch wasn't; (1:01:32.3) the money wasn't, and we'd signed a contract. They had broke the contract. We was supposed to been ready to go fishing when we got there. It wasn't ready. We spent, I believe, two weeks at the dock before they'd let us leave. We had to get the rest of the paperwork, but all that was supposed to been done. So that was a break of the contract. So I spent about three months, and I asked for permission to leave, and they told me they wouldn't give it to me. I couldn't go. I had to pay a certain amount of money if I—and that's in [19]62. Money wasn't too free at that time. So I fueled my boat up and put supplies on it and took one crew member and left the dock and never returned.

Hester: And that was the last time you went.

Zirlott: I didn't go back to Colombia no more. (laughter) But it was good experience. That's all I can say for it. The boy, it was a local boy from here, stayed with me, and I was thankful to have him.

Hester: How long did he stay with you?

Zirlott: He got off the boat after he got back home. I think (laughter) that was enough for him for a little while. (laughter)

Hester: Did he go into the business, at all, for himself?

Zirlott: He did. He went into business. He owned boats for a little while. He got a big boat, and then later he went to a smaller boat and kept it for quite a few years. And I imagine he's like I am now. He's probably retired. I see him once in a while, but not real often.

Hester: What is his name?

Zirlott: Ray Steele (?).

Hester: Ray Steele? He's from Bayou LaBatre?

Zirlott: He's from Bayou LaBatre.

Hester: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Zirlott: I don't know of anything. Just maybe some of the people that's still real active in it can help you along. But if you can talk to Ficarino, I think that would be a real good person.

Hester: I'm going to try to do that.

Zirlott: Yeah, and Debbie is a good lady.

Hester: Well, if you should happen to see her or speak with her, if you would, let her know that I'll be calling her soon.

Zirlott: Yeah. I will.

Hester: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Zirlott. This has been a wonderful interview. And it's been an honor to meet you. I wish you all the best. And I'll go ahead and turn the tapes off now.

(end of interview)