

Pierre Lee Interview

Interviewer: Don Davis
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Don Davis: Okay Mr. Lee. First of all, thank you Mr. Lee for meeting with us today. Um, the reason we're here is that the Vietnamese have made an enormous contribution to the Louisiana seafood industry and just to the history of south Louisiana as a whole. But that history is not going to be recorded unless people like you share their memories with us. And basically, what we're trying to do is to, uh, record these, to preserve these memories for the next generation. So, I'd like begin by getting your permission for us to record these materials. Copies of them will go to the university here in Lafayette, to LSU, and to Louisiana Sea Grant. Also hopefully, the national Sea Grant headquarters in Washington, D.C. where they will be used for research in the future. Is that okay with you?

Pierre Lee: That's okay.

D: Unfortunately there's no money involved in any of this. No one's making any money off of this. But it will be used by researchers who'll be writing the history of the industry, of the area, and of the contributions of the Vietnamese.

L: I'm very glad to hear you talking about that. I come here so many year. My dream...to make my people come up. When we come here, we so miserable. And so we do any kind of job to be survival. And we get a lot of [inaudible] people, by the jealousy, by everything. And we still stand still because we are thinking about how we lucky to get over here. And we try to do anything for our children. And finally now, I think the children grown up and they made it. I'm very happy

D: Well I think it's one of the great success stories, not only in Louisiana, but in American history.

L: Yeah.

D: So um, we'd like to begin by talking, well first of all, we would need your full name, your birthdate, and where you were born, Mr. Lee.

L: Do you want me to speak the Vietnamese?

D: Yes, please.

L: [Speaks Vietnamese]. I go back in the Vietnamese history. [Speaks Vietnamese from 0:03:00-0:12:20] For understand what I'm saying. You don't understand what I said. The American bring equipment, gun, munition, tank, airplane, everything [inaudible] fighting with the North. Why they did that? See, that is uh, they owe interest. They never gave away nothing. They say, "Oh, uh, my finance people say no. You have a lot of mineral. They come [inaudible]...You have a lot of mineral. You have a lot of thing like that. Gold mine. Diamond mine. Everything." See, we (produce?) that. You don't have nobody to produce. We have equipment. We have everything to produce. And when we produce, we take only 25%. Just like that. And you take 75%. Okay. And one year they produce about 2 billion. And today, sit down with my finance people and said okay. They said, "Here; 2 billion. Our share of this 25% is 500 million [inaudible]. And 1 billion and half for you." And my finance people bring it up, "Oh, you owe me 5 billion. Airplane, tank, munition, gun, everything. So [inaudible]...you still owe me 2 billion and half or 3 billion and half." And they continue, continue. But nowhere...You can see one war the Americans

stayed long like that, over 20 years. And they get killed 50,000 soldiers over there. My share, my country share, about 1 million people get killed for nothing. For the interests of the rich people. And that is...I get away like that [inaudible] like that. And the Americans stay over there and we fighting with the North. In that time, they consider it the Vietnam-American army. For the certain...the strongest in the war. After the American, after the Americans entered Vietnam. Everything American [inaudible]. And the North people just ambushed. How that can be? And in, I don't (remember?), but in 70...In 1970 some time, Westmoreland, the General Westmoreland, over there, brought our army through to the North in one week. We take over the half way, half of the company. The White House pulled him back. He lost one star because he don't obey the order from the White House. And right now, Westmoreland wrote the book, the war never win. And we in that [inaudible]. And in 1975, nothing's going to fall...in that camp. I flew a 730. At the beginning of 1975 in January, February, more, they open, they just open for the company's coming. No defense. And our army go to fighting and support American [inaudible]. And when over there become so hard, we look at the American withdraw a long time, we don't know. That reason, when I come here, I try in [inaudible] try to figure out why we lost. Family. I guess, I'm not very very positive, but I'm [inaudible], you see. Because the interest of...the American interest, they have to let us loose. We remember in 1974, evacuation from uh January, February, March, April. Every city, after a week of evacuations, (seguntary?) picked up and...take a lot of people evacuation, the army evacuation. [Inaudible] from the North, right, the South, almost to here, not the South. They say, "No way. We lost." And how much...my children, only 4 year old, 2 year old. I told my wife, "I don't know, maybe. Or I die. We have to do something." And in the end, you see, they dropped the bomb in the North. The American B-52 dropped the bomb day and night. We thought we won because they dropped the bomb...dropped the bomb day and night. The North pulled a white flag. That means surrender. They stop. They come to negotiation. And they let the North win. When they let the North win by, they have to make a deal and we lost. In April 1975 [inaudible]. Everybody run except the army and all the military people don't know nothing. The last minute, I don't have no choice. I stole a C-130 and I bring my family. I went to U-Tapao. That is the one runway for B-52 from the American over there. They say, and we can go here. That is the shortly, to make you understand. I focus and that made a very long story.

D: Where did you fly the C-130 from Vietnam to where?

L: Through U-Tapao in Thailand.

D: To Thailand?

L: That U-Tapao, that is a long runway airport so the B-52 can land over there. And they picked up over there to drop the bomb in Vietnam. And we came over there.

D: How did you get from Thailand to the United States?

L: When we came over there, one thing always [inaudible]. I come over there, they have a high class officer there already and we'd [inaudible]. And I look at they shake their head. And when I land the airplane there, I called to landing and nobody answered. So I just checked the (wind?). That is the law. Say, "Emergency--I'm going to land." And they like, a one follow car, they follow us to the end of the runway and they stop us. Right there. We stop and they have a one big, they have a big car with a high ladder. And they run after the airplane. In the end of the tail, they climb over that. They erase our flag. They have a paint, paint over the...I sit in the plane, I say, "We lost." We go to the end of the runway. And in other day...I have 3 flight crew members with me when we stole that plane. And I said, "Damnit,

we lost." And they say...they say, they take us out to go, go out to the parking lot and stay there. Open the door. And I think I'm funny, I say, "Maybe this is my last time to fly." See; come, how many in that plane? And I stand in the door, in the front door...This is on a runway and I count 280 people. Oh there's a single soldier, because they met them in the airport. When we stole the airplane, they just run, because that time, they shoot the rocket in the airport. Explode everywhere. And they run in and...except my wife and two children, female and children. And I count 285, and my family, that is 285 that's on my last flight. And one general, one star, (Kopf?). And they look and they say, "Who want to sign the airplane over? [Inaudible] to leave the airport." And I sign. No, I think captain, one major, not major, he's a major. He signed it. And um when we walked to the ship, to the hangar, I saw all the high class officers. They all [inaudible] everything. And the guy, major who was with me, he said, "No no no, when you come back, man will put you in jail." I said, "Then we lost everything. They over here and we fight them over there. We lost everything. We just so [inaudible]." And one come over here and come there. And they ask for the flight (conduct?). Everybody have to go to the...to fill out the paperwork to do the immigration thing. And I said, "I don't do." The one star asked me, "What do you want?" I said, "I don't want to stay over here with those people." And he smiled. He smiled. He said, "What you want?" I said, "I want to leave." That night he put in one C-141, me and my family, flight straight to Arkansas. Took me only about five days from Vietnam to Arkansas. And those people stayed about three months after that before they made in Arkansas. But that is uh, the best, because, uh, I come over here...

D: And it was a new beginning.

L: Yeah, I come here and I start a new beginning. Um, [inaudible] the low, the small country, low civilization. Not smart enough. That is the (bay?) for all the big countries. Over the bay. That means...I make example, like in Middle East now. They have, oh they have everything. The Americans and Europeans bring them up. Everything go up, like a high tower, high housing division. And when they smart enough, they say, "Uh we don't need you anymore." And they started betray them. And finally they do like a revolution. Like a human...like a...Right now, you have to be fair. You have to be...No dictatorship. Nothing. Then with the revolution, again the dictatorship. You see, after two, three year, the (media?) just drop. And what next? Then the Europeans and Americans come to rebuild that country. And they play them for the business. Same thing. Right now, because of the war, Europeans no have no jobs. And the economy, everything, bank no money. Everything go down. And I guess, maybe next year, everything will be blooming back again. But in the end all the [inaudible], the [inaudible]...they go up, they have to go down. And, but not the big country. The big country. They so smart and everything. With me, the American country, they are (half?) up the wall. One hundred year. This is my planner. Over the computer we use now over here, I used in 1965 in the Air Force. But I mean, behind them, they have a lot of things stacked up behind. They don't use it. Like the war up in Europe. The first war in Iraq, Saddam Hussein. The fighting in Kuwait. Iraq say...Iraq lost but they say, "Eh, America not much." And they go to the Russ...they buy airplane, everything. Strong, higher technology than American. MiG 28, MiG 30 something. I think the best one. And Bush offered them, said "I can let you bring all your people, everything. And your money, everything. And we have a place where you can stay. Just walk away." They say, "No, we stay." Because he believe right now his army's stronger than the American. But they gave them 20 days. At the end of 20 day, they gave 24 hour. They ask them, they say "No." And they start to hit. One week later, they try and take all the airplane, MiG, from Russ. Cannot pick up. Just a [inaudible]...explode right away. They don't know why, you see. Because the technology's so high and nobody know how far the American, how smart the American technology. Right now, for the laser beam, nobody know nothing. The Americans, right now they control all [inaudible] laser beam. And the laser beam we used for the [inaudible] the hospital. But they

all apparently know nothing about the laser beam. And they cannot, they cannot depend on technology. Or like China, China now, become the strongest economic country. Who bring them that. The Americans. American make them become the strongest economy. And they start right now. They start...they start to study what we leave to them, leave to them. They just...they just come and review what we want them to review. But the top, the center in there, the hand in there, Americans still hold it. But right now, the world will worry about China, that China is so strong country. Okay, now, I...

D: You got to Arkansas.

L: I got there.

D: Now you mentioned earlier that you went to Texas. Did you go to Texas before you came to Louisiana?

L: No, no, I'm, I will tell you that. When I get to Arkansas, I get maybe few thousand, few foot thousand. Get to Arkansas, (Fort Chaffee?)...they give me one room, big room, in the front, in the top. My family over there. Every day, I laid out in the barracks to study English. Because, in that I felt, we have to study English. And I studied hard and I studied every day. And my wife and my children go to take care of the food, everything, and bring home to eat. And I studied [inaudible]. And two months after that, [inaudible] American instructor looking for me. They found me in Arkansas. And the minute they found me, they said, "Eh, I know you made it, because you...they call it, very very kamikaze. And you don't scare nothing and you're the top student I have. I know you..." He looking for me in California, in Florida, and they don't [inaudible] for me in Arkansas. And they say, "Hey, do you fly [inaudible]?" They say, "Right now, you will go to school. We pay you 1200 a month to qualify the license over here and fly back and forth on the Eastern airline." Oh man, I'm so happy. And everybody heard that. They so happy for me. See I come home to my wife. "Sit down," I told her. And she don't say nothing and that night she cry. And she say "Over ten years you fly. Every time you walk out of the house, I never expect you to come back. And right now, you think you fly?" And make me think. And I ask (Sacafy?). I say, Sacafy, I say, "I've thought about it." I turned him down. And he gave me the card and said when you change your mind, call us. And I changed my...and I never...and the immigration tell me, "Eh, you get a (option?), you don't take it? Eh, find out what you want. I tell you, I give you one day." I go home. I thinking. All my life, when I flew, I'd rather come back...everything I fly, I just pray with the Virgin Mary. I say, "If you want me to die, let them shoot in the head. No. Let the airplane explode. I don't want broken arm, broken leg. I don't want nothing...I don't want that." And 13 years I am in the military, I don't have nothing. And the last minute, when I took off the airplane, I pray one, pray two. I say, "Eh, can you make me; I don't know where I go, but make me sit in one place somewhere. I promise I make enough money to raise my children and become good people. I don't want nothing." And in that time, that day I come home and I thinking what I promising when I take off. I'll come back to see the immigration and I say, "I want to go somewhere oh Catholic and I like to live in the warm weather. I don't like to live in cold weather." And they say, "Yeah, but all Catholic, we'll have to go looking for that," they say. And I stay there about two months. They call me in. They say, "Hey, this [inaudible], 95% is Catholic. And hot temperature [inaudible]." And I ask, "Okay, what?" The say "Abbeville." I say "I'll take it." They say, "But no help. No big job. Nothing. You have to fight for your life." And I come to Abbeville in August 1975. I come to [inaudible].

D: It was a good month to come.

[Laughter]

D: (Welcome?) to Louisiana. Very hot and humid.

L: One thing. When I first come, so miserable. I'm the first Vietnamese come. Nobody know me. And sometime, the people think that is a prejudice, because people don't know nothing about the Vietnamese. And, but a lot of soldiers from America go to fight in Vietnam, uh to Vietnam and get killed. And they don't like...They see me and they think, "Oh you are Vietnamese?" I say, "Yeah, my family and I don't like it." And uh, I start to, I don't know, and I have to learn to do everything. And I come to Ray Chevrolet...Chevrolet. I come over there, I say "I want a job." And they say, "Okay, you need a job." I read the license, the Air Force license, I have license. Flight engineer too. I say, "I'm very mechanical engineer too." And they say, "No we don't need the engineer. We need mechanic. But, you work on a car before?" I say, "No." They say, "Now, what do you want to do. Wash car?" I say, "Yeah, take me. I wash car." And they pay me two dollar minimum wage to wash car. I'm happy. But I'm from the south district. I walk to the, I walk to the Chevrolet every morning. And that day I walked in the street. One American [inaudible]. And they stop. They come down. They say, "You Vietnamese?" I say, "Yeah." And he say, "Eh, I went two year over there. And I fight. I'm in Vietnam war too." He said, "Would you like to be friends?" I say, "Damn, I need the friend real bad now, you see." [Laughs]. And he brought me home. I rent the house in the south district. The room, about 120 dollars. I have a one bedroom and kitchen in the front. I have like 120 dollar. And they had a lot roaches. Every night I turn the light, the roach spread around. But we don't know how to kill the roaches. In that time, we saw [inaudible], we know nothing. And she's so scared and I go to work like that. And they call me, see. How do I know [inaudible]? And he work in the rice mill. And that man is Glen Swill. And he brought me, on Saturday and Sunday, he'd bring me go to the, in the farm somewhere to shoot the (probi?) for the fruit for me, I think. I never forget that. And people meet and go fishing. Because, I say "If I have water, if I have rice, I just go fishing and I make my living and I don't worry nothing." And they bring me to go fishing and then we become friends. And in that town, [inaudible] I'm the one to start Boat People. The Boat People. Because the boat people run away from the Vietnam. You got the pirate from Thailand kill and rape in the Gulf. And I start that program. I talk in the Rotary Club and the people start to sponsor Vietnamese coming to Abbeville. And I started to teach them the American language. In the nighttime, I started teaching the American language. And after six months, we're looking for jobs for them. And I don't have no job yet. I still washing cars, you see. And I go to trade school to study in nighttime. And I study about the oil field technology. Something like the work in the oil field. And we'd bring at least about 10 or 15 families to Abbeville. And they are fisherman. And we were looking for job for them. So easy, because they come to the coast city, they have a net shop over there. And they come to just repair the net. They make three dollars an hour and I still wash cars two dollars an hour. But I still do it. And I enjoy it today. And one day, they bring me to go fishing down to the Pecan Island and I see the oil field, the oil field. The smoke is coming up. I say, "What is that?" They say, "Oil company. That is the big money over here." I look and I say, "I want to be there. I want to work there." And they say, "Oh no, I'm a veteran...Vietnam veteran and they don't hire me. How they hire you?" And in that time, the Chevrolet sell me one car, a Chevrolet 69. No air conditioning. Nothing. It's just the frame. And I run, I working, I started mechanic working and uh I working good. And I go back in one day, I want to apply to job over there." They say [inaudible]...after not quite a year, about 1976, I want to apply to job over there. I went to go put application. Nobody know me. I'm so skinny. At that time I'm 120 pounds. Skinny, tall guy coming to put in application. And he gave me the application. I went in the corner to write it out. And after about 20 minutes, I finish. I bring it to him. And he looked up. I look at him. He look. I look at him. And I said, "Uh sir, [inaudible] I just put my application." I backed out to the door. He look at me. He say, "You got the job." I say, "No joke?" I said, "No joke?" He said, "No joke." I am so happy. I say, "When I can come to work." You go to the Abbeville, to this doctor. He gave me the

name, but I wrote it. Check the...physical check and come in. I said, "So simple like that?" And I'm so happy. I back out. I go home. I talk to Chevy. In that time, Chevrolet gave me become, they [inaudible] to work in the mechanic...mechanic working. And they put in electronic and everything. And I start...a lot of people like me because, I [inaudible] I've become a good mechanic over there. And they said, "I need you to notify us 15 days before I go to work somewhere." They say, "Where are you going?" I show them the Columbia Gulf. They say, "Damn this is a top job in this, over here. Just go work. Don't have to...15 days nothing." And uh, I got to go.

D: That was Columbia Gulf at uh Pecan Island?

L: Pecan Island at the high [inaudible]. And I come over to work, but before that I have to remind [inaudible] when I come to work at Chevrolet. First day I come to work at Chevy to wash car. He gave me the key. Rode the Camaro. The Camaro in that time is about \$5,600. That is a fancy car. In Vietnam I drive the Jeep. I don't know nothing. I go okay, I said, "Damn it, I have to look..." Took me half hour to put the key...to put the key. I say, "Damn it, I can fly the airplane but this one I cannot start."

[Laughter]

L: I put the key...I turned the key on. I started put it in reverse...and I back up and I forward. It took me about 45 minutes because I run slowly...

[Laughter]

L: And I went about two weeks and nobody know I don't have no driving license.

[Laughter]

L: They call and said "Hey, give me your driving license so that I fill out the paperwork and everything." I say, "What?" He say, "Driving license!" I'm like, "Okay." Because if they don't have nothing, go take your driving license. And they show me where the driving lesson. They gave me a company truck to go to take the...

D: Wow.

L: I went to the (place?) uh driving license. I went over there. The guy said, "Hey you have a written test?" I say, "What?" He say, "You have to have a written test first and then you have a driving test after that." I said, "No, I don't have nothing." "Did you learn...you have a book to learn?" "No." And they throw me a book. I say, "I have to get the license." And I walk out to the lawn. And they have, in that time, they very simple, in the south. I walk out there. They have a bench like that. I sit down and I open the book. I read it. Took me a hour and half to read and re-read it. Read and re-read it. They have over hundred questions. And I tried to remember everything after hour and a half. I come in. I say, "I take the test?" And I don't know how I pass. And they say, "You passed." I said, "Damn it, how many questions?" He say, "You don't...you don't miss nothing." I don't know. We go out to take the test. I drive. Put the signal right. The car don't have no signal.

[Laughter]

L: And they stop. They come back. They said...they give me the license. But they call Chevrolet, "Get a man on that. Hey you send one to take [inaudible], you send a truck that don't have no [inaudible]." And then I have that. And then I come to work in uh Pecan Island. The guy who hired me manages (John Brecca?). He's superintendent. And the foremen threw me a thick book. Here. That is the blueprint for the plant. The plant involved 50 [inaudible]. And they have dehydration, dehydration plan. They put everything underground. And I thought, I take the book, I go home, I say "Man, I can learn to fly the airplane." But I now have the book and the plant like that. I can read it. I studied day and night. And I studied studied. So then, I go to work over there. And one day, the superintendent, (John Brecca?), he walking out in the yard to go around. He very very tough guy. When he go around, everybody...have about maybe 28 people working the yard running (inside?). Nobody want to see him. Except me. I continue to do what I have to do. And he come to me. He tapping my shoulder, "Hey why you don't run?" I say, "Why?" Say, "Because you see, they run to the corner over there?" I say "No. [Inaudible]. I do what I have to do." And he say, "(let that?), go with me." And I go with him. He say "Hey, you work while here three (minari?)?" I say, "Yeah." "You tell me what you know about this plant." I say...And I (saw?)...I bring him to the inlet lot. That be the pipeline 38 and 36 in pipeline. And the engine, the compressor, the whole engine, the pump. You know the pump? How many horsepower the pump? The pump 28,000 horsepower.

D: 28,000?

L: And I read...I just read that. And I follow...I go from the inlet lot, I go to the (knock out?)...go to the...go out to try the gas and (knocked out?) of the (quick?) and go to the engine pump out. Think me and him work about three hours. And we go to the engine, after the engine, the pump pump to the live pump. From here pump up to...We sell the gas in New York and Maryland and Washington DC. We have a 3,000 mile pipeline, 36 inch pipeline. And I say, "Out of this one, I don't know nothing." And he don't say nothing. He say, "Come in the office." And me and him walk in. He go in the office. He sit down. He look at me. He say, "Son, you know." I say, "What?" "You know more than the guy work ten years over here." [Inaudible] In six months, Supo, the we call the (ATVT?) Man, when we come to work, to be a Operator B, have to be three years. Six months he bring me up to be Operator B and make everybody jealous. And in two years, he bring me to Operator A, you see? And one man bring me to Operator B, a lot conflict. A lot of people conflict, especially the (cumes?) down there. And some people, some guy, he's retired from the Vietnam War, in battle. And they don't like him. I have, I get the trouble after the Vietnam War. I work with the guy. He hate me. And when I changed a [inaudible], I have a hard hat. I used a pipe wrench and I changed the valve. He took the wrench, hit on top my hardhat. And he say, "Damn you. How come you come here take all the jobs of people over here? We don't want you over here." And when he bump in my head, I have a pipe wrench in my head. I try to swing to hit him right away, you see. I get up. I think on my children and I (jumped?) down. I'm going to say nothing. And around 2 year and half, one day I work in the yard...They have an instrument with them to take care of the jet engine, the pump. And they (pump?) out...And the superintendent told me, "I will [inaudible]." I take note for all the compressors, all the levels, how they run, everything. And when I walk through there, the instrument repairmen there. And they test the engine is there. And the superintendent tell me, "Eh Lee, you think you can run this, this engine?" I've been watching them. I say, "Can I try?" When you bring up that engine, it's so big. The building bigger than three building like in my home. But the big building, when they bring up the engine, the building shaking. Because the surge for the air, the pressure, they pump about 2,000 PSI pressure in the pipe, 36 inch pipeline. If you don't control it right, you see, it shakes, you see. Even the, in (Navy City?) now they have the instrument repairmen bring up, they still shifting the air energy. And he say, "You have to let him...the engine, because I heard you fly in the jet engine. Try to bring this up." And I come over there to bring up. I start

engine. I bring from the bottom up to the level to pump it out smoothly. And everybody look at amateur..."Never tried before and you did that?" And the superintendent smile. And then, after that, two years. Supo six years to become operator A. Two year, I become the operator A. And he don't want it. He say, "No, no classification, nothing. I bring him to the operator A." Then a little other conflict again. And I take guys working after three shifts. Like the graveyard, late, and evening. In the graveyard, I sleep by myself. I work in the yard. But when I get to operator A, Supo (left?) the valves open. One of the time I come to...I have to check everything. The valves open, they close. Before they left the ship, they close. I have to go look. I check everything. That take me real hard. After first three months, I have to check everything. And other four guys working with me--sleeping. I can tell nothing, because they big mouths. They rude with all the American friends [inaudible] and (always to me?). I thinking on how I can take over this one? And I walk by with camera in night time they sleeping. I took the picture of everyone asleep in the corner. I put in my truck, [inaudible] operator [inaudible]. I go work in the yard. Oh, they found the picture. Oh they cursing...they gonna...I say, "Hey, you will go before I go. Don't try to push me out to go to these places. Hey, this one is proof. You tear it up, I have some, a lot ...

[Laughter]

L: ...of leverage," you see. I say, "You will go before I go. Right now, every night you come work over here. I let you work three or four hours. The other four hours, you do what you want." But the four hour, I give the (position?), everyone have to do what they have to do. And I go, I just go check them. "If you don't agree with that, all you go or I go." They say, "And after that, I start." And finally, about 8 years and everybody start to love me over there. And then when I up...they take, they send me to go offshore. They take me to platform offshore. And in the same time I working like that, I helped the Vietnamese to work in the boat. So the boat people come to work. And I put the money together to buy the wood boat first. The boat was like a 40 foot boat. And those people Vietnamese.

D: And this was at Intracoastal?

L: No, in uh (Delcom?)

D: (Delcom?), okay.

L: And they bought about two, three wood boat like that. One [inaudible]...Supo, the boat only 20,000. They told me 50,000. We still buy 50,000. We put the money...two, three guys put together, put the money. We buy the wood boat, and I, all the Vietnamese come to work in...over here. They don't know. They, all the fishermen, they don't speak English. Even now they don't speak English. Even I taught them every day, they still don't know nothing. They say...they cannot open their mouth to say nothing. And only one thing to get the good thing...One thing I see, they good in the welder. And in the night school, we sent to the help...uh, welder, not helper, not welder...uh helper for the welder.

D: Welder helper.

L: And they become the wel...

D: Welder.

L: Right, they become the welder. And they start to work in New Iberia...all the Vietnamese start to welding. And which one good in the gulf. I looking for to him to work, put together to work with the American by (Dekha?). We don't know nothing about the equipment run in the boat over here. But let them walk the bow. One season, they know everything. Oh look winch, and the way to drop the net. The way to pull the door, everything. They got...and we will put the money together and buy one boat for three best guys to work in that boat. One year, they pay off that boat. They sell that boat to the next guy. And we do like that, step by step. We bought about 10 or 15 boats in (Delta?). And in that time, I still work offshore and I study about the...I look and I say, one day I see like that...I come to Delcom, I saw they unload for one freezer boat. The freezer boat about 70 foot. And they go fishing all day, about...not quite three weeks. They come over there. They unload the shrimp. Freeze them. About 75 to 80,000 in three weeks. In that time, produce the top money, because every boat make about 20,000, 20,000 a ship. At that time, 20,000 is big money, you know that. Because in that time, we just see only the 20 dollar bill. You never see the 100 dollar bill, you see. And I saw that, I said, "There." And the Vietnamese started building boats a lot. We bought about 20 boats [inaudible], we had it. And I have an idea to build a boat. And I have a friend in New Iberia who come for the welding. But he's a marine engineer. And I sit down, I say, "Can you draw the blue print to build the boat?" He say, "Yeah, I can do it." I say, "Well, write the bill." And in 1986, 87, I build 17 boats. 91 foot. Engine is a, engine is, what is uh...

D: Is that the caterpillar?

L: The caterpillar engine...The one is uh...That is uh, the one is the big engine at that time, the 30...the 34 oh A, 34oh...B...on a boat, 34 oh A (340A). Well I have two engine 340A. Two engine for one boat. But the one big engine I put in one boat. I build 17 boats like that. And, you know what I do. I make a project, because I help...They call. They told me I'm owing the bank over here. Because everybody I bring to the bank, the bank approve. If somebody else will bring, they do not approve, because they know I check the people real good. I call. "I don't have to go sign nothing," I said. But this one he will approve it. And they say, "Approve." They approve a 100, 150,000 to buy the small boat. And the people [inaudible]. I have a company in the bank, called Vermillion Bank in Kaplan. And I just go to him and the bank see I do real good and everything. And one day I bring the project. I told them, "I will build 17 boats." They say, "You can do it?" And, "so I need some money." And they [inaudible]. I say, "Project, I build 17 boats. I'm not build to make money. I build for the Vietnamese. And after these, I will open the shrimp house. And those boats will come to sell the shrimp to me." After they have meeting, board directors meeting, they say...Lend me the money. After I build 17 boat, I lost 100,000. You see, well because, the...they call it (money no name?). You see, you don't think, but they [inaudible] and you don't control it. And then, the [inaudible] and I lost money. After I build 15, 17 boats, those people pretty much turned me out. The one in Intracoastal...the first one in [inaudible]. All the big boat...

D: What was the name of that boat?

L: Vermillion Seafood, I open the first one.

D: Yeah but the boat's...

L: Oh, the 17 boats? I don't remember all the names.

D: What were some of those? You remember any of them?

L: All of those boats now still running good. No trouble. The one that's two engine now is usually come to (check block?) over.

D: Okay.

L: Yeah, it had the two engine. And I open the shrimp house. And I took all the business from Americans. And I have trouble with them. After all, you know, I have all kind of trouble in one day. They have about 4, 5, 7 shrimp house around here. Every year around April, they have meeting. And I have meeting too. And they call me to come meeting with them. And I sit down at that meeting. When, in the meeting, all those people now die, except me still. I survive. In the meeting, they say, "It's not fair." After they say everything, they say, "Somebody have a idea before we ship out?" I raised my hand. They say, "What?" I point the finger in everyone's face. I say, "If one day happen to my family or to my (dog?). If one member of my family get killed or like you trick to kill me," I say, "I would trade all of it." I say, "I [inaudible], I come over here very hard to get on to make my living. I don't want to conflict with no one. I love everybody. But don't try like that." I say, "I do the business same way, because I share them. Because I (call?) all the boat. I cannot (go?) to you. I spit out the share. I'm not greedy. But don't do that, because I'm fighting in the war. If you push me to the end, I will kill all of you and I suicide." I said, I told them, "Remember that. Don't do that to me." And after that everything quiet. And I'm so happy. And I did a business so happy until Chuck start like that. And one day, after Chuck and Kyle betrayed me, I sit down. Usually I sit down, I don't have no friend looking, I went in the church by myself. I sit down in the church. I thinking what I have to do. And finally I remember, I say, the chief make me, (pop?) me up, "Eh, what you promise when you push the power to take off to run away from your country. What you promise me?" "I promise, I will come one place. I don't need big money. I just need enough money to raise my children become someone." And right now I have a big job in the gulf make about 80 some thousand a year. I work only five months out of the year. I work [inaudible] and I have one month of vacation. Five months out of the year. And you have a seafood business. And right now, they betray you and you try to destroy them. No. I thought, so many days I just passed the church not thinking about that. I thought, I sacrifice. Oh, oh good Lord. Virgin Mary, you remind me, I will sacrifice. And so I went to him. I just let him have the business. I don't, technically, I can take half of the business easy, but I don't take it, and just take it. I make a deal with (Locke?). I say, "Okay, I withdraw, with a condition. You have to let my children become someone in the world." And I withdraw. I withdraw. I work in the gulf. And every afternoon I stand in the platform. I look around. I say, "Damn, why we have to do that?" And I say, "We did finally." And one day, I say, "I have to do something." Because I have a lot of families still survival in Vietnam. They very miserable. With my 85,000 enough for my children education and the house, everything. It's not enough to help them over there. And I say, "I have to do something." And I tried to kamikaze one more time. I say, "I reopen that shrimp house." I thought, "I'll reopen the shrimp house." And I come down there. That is uh, who's the lady?

Daughter: Rosie?

L: Huh?

Daughter: Rosie.

D: Oh Rosie.

L: Rosie, she end up buying it. And in that day, suddenly I come to visit.

D: Oh I forgot about Rosie.

L: I come to visit her. She said, "Look at that. This is the man I want...I want you to take over my business." I said, "Damnit. Why you say that?" She said, "Only you can do. Nobody can do it." And then she say, "I'm in the black." I say, "Why? What happened?" "I still owe the bank 300,000 and the IRS after me and a lot of people after me, everything. I'm sick with the seafood business. Why don't you take over?" I say, "Well, what I have to take over?" [Inaudible] about 400,000. And I come to the bank. I go to the bank the next day. They say, "You again?" I say, "Yeah." But I say, "This time I asking for a million dollars." They say, "Bring the project." And I said, "I bring the project. I have all the boat." And they lent me the money. I contact...I come and quit the job. And the superintendent come and say, "Damnit [inaudible]. I want you one day to be a superintendent one location in the Columbia Gulf. We choose you already. Why you do that?" I tell him the same thing. I said, "I have a lot of people miserable over there. So I have to take the chance. I just pray I can make money. I help people, those people over there, I am very satisfied." And finally, the C.E.O. from Texas come to see me. They jump on me. I say, "[inaudible], okay, thank you." But they so nice. They say, "Okay, I let you off." But oh, like my insurance, everything, protect me until 65. They still let me have it. I'm so happy. I said, "I never believe." [Inaudible] still protect my wife and keep my wife til 65. And before I left, they say, "If you don't make it, come back." To him, I hold his hand, I say, "I'll never forget." And I go. In 7, 5 years, I pay off the bank. And 7 year, they start to play the game, price. And I say, "No, you do like, we waste time, everything." And in that I figure out I have enough money to help the family, help the people in Vietnam. I put about 300,000 to help the people over there. And I put, for this house, to pay off this house. And I have about 200 put in the mutual fund. That's it. I stop. And I come back to Vietnam. And from 96 until now, I raise uh...I sponsor one seminary. And right now, we raise about 61 priests. We have 28 I sponsor by myself. 28. The rest, I call all the friends. Each one sponsor one. And right now we have 61. And we raise the money to build three churches. And every year, they will know Louisiana. I went back about twice a year, I went over there to help that, you see. And the seafood business over here...the Vietnamese were grateful. They deserve. But in the Vietnamese, they have three class of the people different. It's not one class. The have uh...the guy have a education and I'm middle guy. That is, I have education around uh seventh grade. And the guy education, no education. When you do the business with the Vietnamese, we have a, like I have a hundred boats, I have a hundred business different. I have to know that guy, what he want. I have to satisfy him with the way he wants. And the other guy different way he want. The American cannot do the business with the Vietnamese because they don't know, they don't know the Vietnamese that way. They can betray. One war, they get mad. They take the boat. They go away, right away. And to work in the business with the boat people, that is, that is hell. It's not the hell when they (met up?). And when you do business like that, when she come and she help her in-laws to do business, she know. She know like I know. But, when I get out there I always remember who I am, where I come from, and how I can get like today, you see. And one day, I sit down (Lee?). I go. I sat there beside, "Come to visit?" The guy don't [inaudible]...The guy help me get the (Jean Fideaux?)...help to get...to go to (help?) here. And he's...he breathing with the machine in uh...

D: Oxygen?

L: Oxygen. I come. He's so happy. Said, "I've been waiting so long." And "Are you sure?" (Old?) man Lee thinks. Everybody say, "Don't let him talk too much." But he sit. Talk with me about 45 minutes. He don't want...Everybody say, "Put the machine. Put it [inaudible]." He's big talker. And I say...and

when I walk out, I told his family, "What happened to him? You have to let me know." And the day of the funeral, his funeral, nobody know. When the end, the priest blessing the coffin, and they start to stand up. I raise my hand. I walk up there. I honor him. I honor him, because like this, when he work with me in the yard and he asked me what I know about everything. To come to the office. He say, "You know more than a guy ten year over here." And he added one thing. He said, "But it's not because you have a lot of [inaudible]...a lot of aviation and I hire you. No." I say, "Why?" Said, "Because I saw you every day in the church." In that time, I come like around, like around Lent season. And every morning I'm so sad. I walk to wash car at Chevrolet. I pass to the Magdalene church, but for the church. And after the church and I go. And he went to church too and he saw me in there. And he thought, "That reason you get the job." And then I, I honor him. I talk to everybody about his story. How he helped me and how he talked. In that time, he told me, "I speak French." And he said, "Forget the French-English. Over here it's English. Forget the French-English. Forget...don't try to translate in French and English. Just, just English and forget about the French." And I did that. Right now, I still have a accent in...

D: [Speaks French]...at ecole Francaise?

L: [Speaks French] Oh, c'est long time, je parle (I spoke), parle pense (I think).

[Chuckles]

L: I finish college, two years in college French...finish [inaudible] French. And [inaudible, possible French]. And if I speak French, I will mix up everything. Because of the vocabulary of English, vocabulary come from France. About 65% is vocabulary come from French. But the pronunciation is a little bit different.

D: During that time, okay, your children...How old were your children when you left Vietnam?

L: When come over here, Chip, the guy right there, 2 year old. And the daughter right there, 4 year old. Right now he's 41 year old and she's 44 years old. She...he's almost 42 and she's 44. And he's a doctor. And she's a business. She do real good. She do better than the doctor.

[Laughter]

D: Well, I think you can be proud of both.

L: I know. That reason, I say, "I trade my business for the good Lord blessing my children." And so, I never regret nothing. I...

D: During that time, when you were working at Ray Chevrolet, was your wife working too?

L: No, she sewing. She sewing.

D: Ah, she did the sewing?

L: She uh, like uh, if somebody want to fix something...

D: Alterations?

L: Right. She just make three dollars. Every clothes, everything got altered, make three dollars. But, you talk about my wife, I will say like this. Uh, I work like 40 day, normally I would in the Chevrolet or in the off-shore. She work 110 days a month...a week...She work...Among the people who work, how many a week, usually? How many?

D: 40 hours a week?

L: 40 hours a week. But hundred, uh 160. She work 210 ten hours a month. She work three jobs. She alteration from Mary Ellen. And she go to work for the up dollars.

D: Up dollars...

L: And yeah...And she'd come home. Somebody come to fit, though, in the clothes. At home, she does that. And she, she come home, just about in the night time to cook. And after that, if I will go shipboard, sometime me and her don't see a week. We don't see each other, you see. But now, we think uh, everything we did like. And all the Vietnamese do like that too...because of the most thing we don't have over here, I mean we don't have no education. And when we come here, we have to use labor to get help. And the labor have to hard, hard-working. And that, and we don't know. But the people...So far, right now I forget everything about all the bad people trick me before. But I'm very humble and love them and think all the Americans so naive. Because the Americans don't know nothing about what the politic doing, what the rich people doing. And, y'all have to send your children to go fighting for them, but you don't know. Because patriotic? No. Because they privileged. They interest. They don't care how many Americans will get killed. The interest...If the American bring one dollar to over, they have to bring back three dollars for that. That is the business. And when one, one country so high technology, so smart in the world now, that is America. And I'm proud to be here. But I say like that. The American will be hundred year ahead of all the countries around the world. And you don't know. You don't know what the technology the Americans have now. Even me. I don't know. But sometime...If some reason you can see like we talking together like this, you see. The satellite bring it in and they show. They can, they can record your voice. They can do everything. And if...They don't let nobody know how they know. And that reason they say, "Smart bomb?" "No smart bomb." They guiding by the laser, you see. Like uh, I heard one time, the (Prish?) you see, the Ho Chi Mihn trail. They transport the munition and gun together. They go to the (Prish?) and have two mountain like this over here. And the Prish course like this and Ho Chi Mihn trail. And we have to drop the bomb on the Prish. We have to go like that to drop the bomb. They have the gun, the gun on the top of the two mountains. And you go in...automatic in the (raid?) and they shot you down. In that one afternoon, they shot down eight Vietnamese airplanes. And the Americans bring one C-130. They have one machine. Small machine, (the box?). I don't know, because in that time, I fly in that airplane. They fly it around like that. And they guiding the line, the laser line to the (Prish?). And one phantom...They drop the bomb, only 250 pound bomb. A small bomb. They fly across. They drop the bomb. The laser guide the bomb explode. Easy. Yeah. In that time, they testing in Vietnam, okay. And we drop, we drop the food, munition and all the supply for the people in the jungle. We have to drop 1200 feet. And big airplane like that 1200 feet, they shot so easy. In one week, we get shot (four?) big airplane. We call them and they bring one C-130 flying. And they fly high. They get shot too. And they come back, they say "Oh stop. Don't drop anymore." I say, "How? We fly 20,000, 25,000 feet above the target?" And in there, they have a beam, we don't know. But the beam, they hook up to...with our, with our (engine?). If you fly, you fly 25,000 feet, you fly across the right [inaudible]. Teh teh teh. If you fly di di di in the left. If you fly right in the middle, they hear, eh eh eh, like that, you see. And they say, "Ten second before you

drop. You come to the line already, eh eh eh. And in ten second you drop. And we have opening door and everything and we're ready to drop and they come. But you don't let the...Teh teh teh. You have right in the eh eh eh. They say, "Drop." Fall like that. And 25,000 feet with the parachute right in water. Ha, miracle. We don't know nothing. You see, they have to think about the wind, the everything. They think they set everything. And the target, that is just like a one football yard. That's it. Drop it there. I said, "Miracle." You see, we don't know. But we lost the war. But now the Americans come back in there. And that's the deal. They make a deal, now they come back, they come back.

D: Do you still have family, brothers, sisters in Vietnam?

L: I have, still have one brother and two sisters over there.

D: Okay. They stayed...

L: When I come, they so miserable. And uh, their children cannot go to school, because we on that side, they call the "enemy of the revolution." They don't let our children and their (relationship?) go to the college. They very smart but...

D: I was wondering if there was any kind of retribution because you were in the army...

L: Yeah.

D: If they suffered because of that?

L: Yeah. And they were [inaudible]. You know what I did? I come back over there. Only 5,000 dollars. I come to feed them. They open...let them go to college. After ten years, right now, I have seven nephews is doctor.

D: Seven nephews are doctors.

L: Now, they very smart, but they say, "Eh, you [inaudible] and do something, don't drop nothing." They say, "Yeah, we don't like that." And my two sisters, right now, in the family have about ten doctors because they married with the doctor and they (have?) that income. And I come over. I help, the first thing helped them for their education. If someone don't have, cannot go to school, I give one lump sum for them to go into business. If you don't make it, that's you. I don't have the chance like you have. I give you the chance. So far, right now, I think maybe three don't make it. The rest, about 40, made it real good. And uh, they have a house, good like this. And everything's good. And they in the high class now, I think.

D: So how many brothers and sisters did you have?

L: I have one brother.

D: One brother.

L: And two sisters.

D: Two sisters.

L: And one sister have a sick children. And one sister have two children. And one brother have one children. And all made it good in college. Because, if without the money, they don't let the people study over there. Because one country, right now, they run by the dictatorship and no reason, nothing you can...We have one million, one million communists uh (doption?)...communist control. 80 million Vietnamese over there. Nothing. They control the people enough for the food and not for living. They don't let you have more food. If you have more food, they thinking you have, you will do something, you are thinking something. If every day you have to work so hard for the food for the family, you forget everything...that is a good one...good, good, good thing. Okay, because when I speak the Vietnamese language, uh, that is a different. I, uh come over here and so...I used to be speak like that, you know. I come to the Vietnamese easy. I have to thinking like this. "Hey, I talk the Vietnamese easy for me." But I talk to the Americans. If I say something, nobody understand nothing [inaudible].

[Laughter]

D: Do you children both speak Vietnamese? Still today?

L: They still. But the 10 children, no. They can hear it and start a convo here. Just uh speak few Vietnamese. I ask them, "Why you don't learn the Vietnamese language?" They say, "Mama don't teach me." Because, there ain't time. Work so hard and go home and just talk to the children in. But it's not because of that. But the Americanized study--they proud. Because if you become the American...one generation, (they cannot?), you forget about everything. Eight hours every day in the school, you figure out all the children come to school. Maybe they come home. They see you only two hours, three hours after school. How you can...what you can talk to them? You don't talk to them too much. Just eat and prepare homework and go to sleep. And being here like that...even you do everything, they still still forget that (anguish?). And they speak...Even right now some family start like them right now. They have to bring their children. Like in the community, we have a teacher, teach the Vietnamese language in the vacation time. Then they come over there. That helps. But when they go to college, they forget. But the American, I say, to me, "super communists." The communists, that is a communistic war like that. But the Americans are super communists. They control the communists. And um, to me, I see like this (one?), to put in the book...To translate, to research. What you want to know?

D: No, no. What you have told us is...You have done an outstanding job. We're pleased that you could speak with us today. We've been doing this for an hour and a half. Normally 45 minutes and we could all sit here for another three hours. And I think what we would like...

L: I said a lot of things, but to me, like this one, or when the Rotary Club invite me to come. I say, "Hey, how long you want me to talk?"

[Laughter]

L: They say, "One hour." They say, I look up and I speak. And before one hour, I say, "Okay, right now, want to conclude? You want to ask me?" They say, "One hour already? That's it?" But why like that? Because I don't prepare nothing.

D: No, but it's...

L: Everything...

D: It's a remarkable story, Mr. Lee.

L: Everything made me, because if you go back to the war for the Vietnam and the communists, war over there, in the war. That very complicated. You know, because to me, one small country and low civilization. Like if you go in the jungle and all the mountain people. And they don't know nothing. They just have something to cut the tree. They so innocent. But in the jungle, they have a lot of mineral and they don't know. And you know and you know. You're smart, you know. And you say, "How I can get that?" So, to get in there I have to help. To get make friend with them. And after they make friend with the, they took it. And they don't know. That is the way for the smart country do it. I feel sorry for all the low education country and low civilization. We now...But if the rich country don't do that, they start to go down too. If they want to keep on the top, they have to be on the top all the time. You see, one way to the other way, they have to do...But to me, the Americans, they control everything by the computer. The computer make the plan at least about 20 years. With my mind, with your mind, I cannot make a plan for one year. They pre-plan for one 20 years. What they have to do in 20 years? And they so many...Like the Americans have so many plans to do the business. If right now, the Vietnamese won't work. And they go to Salisbury. Or they go to Africa. They go there like that. Everywhere. They complex. That is C.I.A. and F.B. I. They complex. They so smart. To me, the FBI and the CIA can make white become black and black become white. And they can...they destroy. They can flip over a revolution for one country so easy, just one flick of the finger. They study for that, they study for that. And they learn them so. When I get up there, everything, the first time I come aboard here, day and night I learn everything. I dig now in the library and everything. I say, "Why we lost? Why we so strong like that and we lost?" After ten (years?), I say, "Americans don't need to win. They need what they want." They don't need to win. They can (proud?) to say to the world, say "We lost the war in Vietnam." But, that is not it. What they, what make? You, you just thinking like I thought. Like in Iraq now. 3,000 soldiers get killed. Withdraw, withdraw, right away. And have to withdraw. And then you go, 50,000, still no withdraw, because there has to be something very important for them to stay that long and get killed 50,000. I don't know. But sometime, like I fly, and I know I flew enough...A jungle, like a big jungle, you see. The Americans build, build a runway in the middle of the jungle. No one, no Vietnamese can get in there. What you know? They landing and takeoff every day. You don't know what in there. See. A lot of secret things we don't know.

D: Did you ever fly here, in the United States? Did you ever fly again since the war?

L: I fly up on...crop dust one time.

D: Oh, you did?

L: When I get there, he think I'm a pilot before and he show off. He flip around. Make the spin. I have to, I have...I say, "Eh, I don't know. So long I don't fly. I throw up everything. Don't let me throw up. Would you please?"

[Laughter]

L: "...would you please land for me?" [Inaudible]. When he landing, I (pulled?) to his face and I said, "Damn you, [inaudible] showing off."

[Laughter]

L: "Because you know all the pilots get killed because they show off. I don't want to get killed with you. I have to breath [inaudible]." I say everything for him to land. That's it. No way I can do it again.

D: What pilot was that? I might know him.

L: No, he's a long...right now he's retired.

D: Not somebody from Abbeville.

L: No he's somewhere now. In...What is it?

Daughter: Caddo.

D: Caddo? Oh, okay. That's not Shannon's dad, Swyer (sp?), Llyod Swyer?

L: No, he old guy, you see. Right now, I'm 72. And he's around there too. But I say, "Damn it, you never do that."

D: Well, Mr. Lee, we can't thank you enough just for sharing this information with you. We've got to get him to a meeting.

L: Yeah.

D: But we very much want to thank you.

L: Yeah.

D: For sharing all of this.

L: Now, the most important I want to say right, this one. The Vietnamese work very hard. But they work very hard with the seafood business. They will make it. If the shrimp house will make it, but the seafood, like the shrimping...Because some people are smart enough when they make it every time. But right now, everybody make it. You know why?

D: Why?

L: BP.

[Laughter]

L: The BP. That is the one come from the sky to help them, you see. And uh, I told them, the first thing you have to remember is your tax. You have to prepare the tax. Don't get the money and spend and no have, don't pay your taxes. Dangerous. And the second thing, if you have, you want to continue in business, use your money, keep up with your boat. Take care of your boat in a good shape. And from there, continue to do business. Before, because they try to buy a big boat with the money loan, too high. Hard for survival. And the insurance is so high. And the (note?) is so high. Almost, almost, oh, almost about 80% give up. If the BP don't come help. Now the BP come help and I think they survival.

And everything like that, your, you build the meetings, you build the thing to teach them. And uh, for everything, I very appreciate that. And I know, you over here, you only want to do, try to do everything. And right now have a (heart?).

D: She's good.

L: Yeah. And she will help you out a lot, I think.

D: Well, Mr. Lee, you and I are not separated by many years. Trust me, alright. And I've been to lots of meetings and if it wasn't for two, you couldn't have what they did today.

L: Yeah.

D: That's true. And I'm only saying that, without her translation from our English speak, which is not always perfect translatable. But she...Carl and I are sitting in the back watching and she does a wonderful job. It wouldn't have happened. And so you have large numbers of Vietnamese working in the industry, that we all enjoy, but to make that happen, it's a Sea Grant funded project with Sea Grant agent growing up in the industry that can talk to the people. And since Carl and I, neither one are Vietnamese...

L: The [inaudible] over there. And uh the one I sponsor all the priests over there.

D: Oh.

L: The church thinks there are 3,000 people. but when we finish it, we will put 4,500 people in there, because everybody just get one seat to come and sit or they have to sit on the floor.

D: Where is the church? In Ho Chi Mihn City?

L: No, in uh, Play Coo (sp?). In Kungtu Mesa (sp?). In a high plateau in Mirin Totan (sp?).

D: Middle...?

L: Close to the Laos.

D: Well thank you sir. Thank you very much.

L: I thought you had to interview me something else, but that is so easy.