

Edward Robin Interview

Interviewed by Don Davis and Carl Brasseaux

DD: Don Davis

CB: Carl Brasseaux

ED: Edward Robin

Other Man

DD: Alright, we just need you to give us your name, your birth date and permission to record you.

ER: You got the permission.

DD: Alright and name?

ER: My name is Edward Robin.

DD: Alright.

ER: I was born March 9th, 1926.

DD: And when you think of coastal Louisiana, I think that if I remember right, you've been in the oyster business?

ER: Yeah.

DD: How long?

ER: All my life. Since 1947 when I started the business.

DD: Now was your dad involved in oysters before that Mr. Robin?

ER: Ah, no. I... when I came out the Navy... I was in WW2, spent most of my time in the Pacific. When I came out the Navy, I was the one that started the business. And after 12 years that I was in the business alone, I took my dad and one of my brothers in with me. And after so many years, I took a couple of my other brothers in with me and my brother-in-law. And then after, I turned the business over to my sons. That's who's running the business today.

DD: Well the people we've been talking to have talked mostly about the trapping end of it and shrimping. How many people were involved in the oyster business in your part of the parish when you started?

ER: When I first started off, it must have been maybe about three Slovenians that came from Yugoslavia. I was one of the first from the parish that ever started fooling with oysters. When I first started fooling with oysters, I started catching oysters by tongs, tonging 'em.

DD: Now these were native reefs or were you seeding these reefs?

ER: No, no, that was natural reefs. And it was mostly shallow water, and also picking up oysters by hand.

DD: Where did you get your oyster tongs?

ER: Made 'em.

DD: You made them yourself?

ER: Right. In fact, it's just like two rakes just like the rakes that you rake the grass, but you combine the both of 'em together, alright? And that's the rake. In so much feet of water you rake 'em up, put 'em in your boat, and after you get so many in your boat, then you take ... you cull 'em with your hatchet. You take the big oyster, you knock the little ones off, throw 'em back over boat and that's when you sell the big oyster. The little oyster that you threw back overboard, that was for next year.

DD: Right.

ER: So here come along some guy who was a little smarter. He designed the oyster drudge. The oyster drudge is made in the A frame with teeth and actually drags on the bottom. When we first started off, we had to pull 'em up by hand with a rope. Load it up on the deck, and then do the same thing. Take the big oysters, cull the little ones off and throw it back overboard. And like I said, that little one that you threw over board, that's what you went back next year for.

Other man: The oyster drudge had a bag in the back for the oysters to go.

ER: The oyster drudge, it's got teeth, but on the bottom of it, it's made by rings of iron, but on that iron is what you've got the rope tied to it. The reason why they to the time to develop... to come out with that. It didn't just come over night. The reason why the rings are at the bottom are iron, because if you made it all out of rope, it wouldn't last too long because the oyster would chew it up. But we started off with rope, but then somebody else got smarter, and they made the rings on the bottom out of steel. And you attach the rope in the back like it's a bag. And that's where it got more improved. But then like I said, them days you had to pull 'em up by hand.

DD: Now was your boat wooden? Your first boats, were they wooden?

ER: Yeah. It was a skiff. It was a little skiff about 15 ft., made outta wood, outta cypress naturally. No motor.

DD: No motor?

ER: No motor.

DD: So how did you get to the lease?

ER: Most of 'em either by paddling or by oaring. If you had a bigger boat, you had oars. Well it's paddle, water on each side. You have to row it. Or you would push-pull with a push-pull paddle. Then they got bigger boats. They got a little bigger. No motor. Sails. That's the way the sail boats come up. That's how we used to drudge then.

DD: Did you use a sailboat?

ER: Yeah.

DD: Where did you buy your sails?

ER: You make 'em yourself out of sheet or... that's when you started off.

Other man: Canvas, huh?

ER: And then later you went into the canvas, 'cause we didn't know what canvas was. But the first sails were made out of sheets. That's all we knew.

Other man: Then you had that one sail and the motor.

ER: Then comes the one sail and the motor. We call a donkey, huh?

Other man: Yeah right.

(Laughs)

ER: We was getting bigger. We was getting smarter. So wherever you find the reef, say this is the reef, you'd have a cane through. You'd try to find a hidden reef. You have a cane. Go around and around with that cane. Now when you don't catch any more, then you move to another reef, put the cane down there. Now this reef here, you wouldn't touch this reef, part of the reef here 'til next year. "Cause you threw all the little ones back overboard. So now, the donkey comes in. And that's when they start picking it up with the donkey. Picking up the drudge line, you're not taking it up by hand, you have what we call a (inaudible) head on the end of that donkey. So you wrap the rope around the (inaudible) head and it's easier now. So then it starts to get more moderate.

DD: So with the motor, you're able to cover more reefs per day? I mean it helps you get in and out.

ER: Oh yeah.

DD: So how much more were you able to do a day with a motor?

ER: Well you can imagine, let's put it this way, if you're walking and then you learn how to run, how much faster would you get to your destination? Same way with the motor. Before you got the sail or paddle, you got a donkey oh man.

DD: Now when you were involved or you heard stories about the sail boats, did the oystermen live at their leases because they couldn't get back and forth quickly? Or did they live at the end of the road? I mean it's a long way sometimes to a lease.

ER: Well yeah, you do have to stay out there 'til you made your load. Alright? And that would take maybe a couple of days or so. That's when they came in and they says that oysters is only good with the month of "R". The reason for that is because it was cold months. And that's why. Today? No. Today everything is much more moderate. Everything now today is hydraulic. The only thing that has never been improved, you still gotta take that big oyster and cull the little ones off it. There ain't nothing you can do about it. Outside of that, everything else has improved.

Other: And you gotta dump the drudge. You gotta dump the oysters out.

ER: And then you start getting more moderate, alright? So now you shove them back. You gotta take it out there and shovel back. You load your boat up. Then you go to your destination and you start culling it off, right? That's more improvement. Today, we got refrigeration on our boats. You can go out there, you can spend a couple of days and no problem as long as you got the refrigeration on. Now, you don't shovel back no more, okay. You pump it with water, like if we gotta go big. The way we come out with it, we put so many boats to make sacks. That's where you fish in the wild reef. You take so many boats to make sacks. And we take and put two or three boats to bed. When I got off the boat around 7 o'clock, and that was the last thing I was doing... all I was doing, pumping 'em off, it would take me about 12 to 15 hours to load my boat up. Take me about 2 hours to pump 'em off.

DD: Now that's the ones you're culling?

ER: No, that's when you pumping back. That's when you bedding.

Other man: That's when you bedding.

ER: When you culling, no. When you culling that's a different crew. It's only me and another guy that would bed. That's all I needed on that, but when you culling now, you got about 4 men on the boat. You got two on each drudge. You've got 'em coming over and they're culling all the time, culling.

DD: So there's a dredge on both sides of the boat.

ER: You got one on each side, and it's on the bottom. And not just anybody knows how to drudge.

Other: That's right.

ER: You gotta let so much chain out. If you leave too much chain out, you gonna catch more mud than anything. So you gotta set that drudge right where it would just be right on top of the oysters. And when you picking up, you washing. If you let too much chain out, it's gonna go further back and you're gonna catch mud and oysters. So it's a trick in setting that chain. That's the nick of it. You've gotta set that chain right. And then, let's get back to planting oysters. Nature performs a funny thing; you can take this reef here and plant oysters on it and it'll produce an oyster (inaudible) maybe 500 feet or more. That's

something that you don't know. And what that really is is the current. You've got to find a place to bid your oysters. You gotta find a hard body. Say you're gonna start it off alright. You better find a hard place to bed it. And if you throw your oysters in soft mud, they gonna sink. You throw oysters where it's hard, and the bottom is hard, and it's clean mud. Clean mud is hard. You cannot plant oysters in sand neither, because the sand... the grain of sand will get in the oyster and kill it. That's what kills the oysters when the hurricane comes. The hurricane comes and that water too. A grain of sand gets in it, and that's what kills it.

DD: Now where did you get your ice when you were... before refrigeration you had to have ice. Where did that ice come from?

ER: I never had no ice.

DD: Never had any? So you came in every day.

ER: No you wouldn't come in every day. You come in maybe every second day until it got hot. When it got warm, they you had to come in every day. Just like right now. Now we got laws out. When you head to that reef now, you gotta log it down. Every lease has got a number. You gotta log it down the number of the lease where you're at, when you started, when you quit, how many sacks you picked up? How long do you drudge? And where did you get, when you got to your destination, the discharge? You better have it logged down and you better have it right.

DD: Now what's the weight of a sack? How do you determine a sack?

ER: Uh, it's a measurement. You got a regular standard measurement. And the measure is a wire basket, and it's just about 100 lbs. Just about 100 lbs. That's a sack. Now today they got what they call a little sack, which is half of that. So out of one big sack, you make two little sacks. And what they're doing now, these little sacks that they're doing, it's mostly for half shell. Big sacks are going to the plant where they opening oysters.

DD: Now where's the closest plant that you might send oysters?

ER: We sending ours to Biloxi and Gulf Port.

DD: That Mississippi connection again.

CB: You said "now", when you first started out, where were you sending your oysters?

ER: We used to bring 'em right here in Violet. Certain time of the year then they had lots of oysters. Violet Canal, Violet Factory was the only one that shucked oysters. And it shucked oysters for years. And then it stopped. Right now, there's no factory that I know of that's canning oysters, but they are opening oysters on the half shell, but they are putting 'em in gallons. But they are not canning 'em that I know of.

DD: Now one of the things Carl and I had a hard time finding are cans. The original oyster can with the label, because it gives us the story of where these canneries were located. We know there was one at Happy Jack many years ago.

ER: Many years ago.

DD: There was one, we believe there was one at Nester many years ago, so we're always interested in labels and cans because they tell us the community that had the cannery. Because at one time, before the countertrade, canned oysters were the way to go because we didn't have refrigeration.

ER: The reason why they had that in Happy Jack, because that's where they had the oyster fishermen over there. We was in the only factory we had in Violet. We couldn't afford to take our oysters from here and bring 'em to Happy Jack.

DD: Gotcha. Sure.

ER: It was too far.

Other man: What about Lopez?

ER: They had one in Caernarvon.

Other man: They didn't have it in Pointe à la Hache?

ER: In Pointe à la Hache they had one, but we had one right there in Caernarvon.

Other man: Oh yeah, they had one in Caernarvon yeah.

ER: Well that one's closer too, because the oyster fishermen that was fishing in Plaquemines Parish and were fishing in St. Bernard waters, it was closer to come in over here by Caernarvon and like us that was in Yscloskey, Oakdale and Lake Borgne, our closest was Violet Packing.

DD: Now did you ever take any oysters to Biloxi or Gulf Port?

ER: Yes. And then they had a factory in... going to Biloxi on Highway 90 they had a factory there. That was the last factory. When Violet closed, they'd open up.... We hauled. That was the last place we hauled.

DD: And have you ever heard of the Dunbar, Lopez, and Dukate Companies? Do you recognize those names?

ER: Dunbar yes. Yeah I remember they had a company there.

DD: Well we know there was a cannery between Slidell and the Mississippi border on the river at a place called Dunbar. We know there was one at the rig lease, where we found information. So there were lots of canneries that were functioning at one time and clearly they've consolidated down. Almost all of them had rail. Your railroad out to Shell Beach was really important, but I think what we're asking is: you see a can with a label, let us know.

Other man: Well Lopez-

ER: Now they got... I've seen in a couple of places where they got cannery oysters, but to be honest with you I think most of the cannery oysters that you see today are from overseas.

DD: Yes, that's right, but the cans were really important. We were doing some work and we were looking for an oyster can from Houma. Found one. It was on eBay. I was bidding on it. The bid went to about \$125 for a rusty can. I decided my wife might not be too pleased if I spent that much money on a rusty can. It sold for \$2,275 and the important thing to remember: it took two people.

CB: So if you've got some-

(Laughing)

DD: They're probably worth-

CB: Don't throw them away.

DD: You'll appreciate this because talking about recycle, when you had a can you cut out the bottom to plant your tomato plants. They're really hard for us to find and we've been looking for 7 years. So just keep that in mind, those kinds of things.

ER: You can't find that.

DD: No. It's just like your rake or your early oyster tongs are very hard for us to find. We just want a photograph.

Other man: Oh they got that.

ER: I doubt that you would every find any... maybe. We have the first box of... I got one in my house right now. The first box that we made with our name and everything on it. The boat painted on. (Inaudible) When we came out with that, it's oysters on the half shell. We got one box at my house, I got one.

DD: Now where did you get the boxes?

ER: There's a company that made boxes. The old man, I think the original owner is dead. I think he died, but I think the company is still making boxes, which we don't use no more. We use now like onion sacks. And the reason why onion sacks, 'cause more air can go through it when you put 'em in the cooler.

DD: Not coffee sacks?

ER: No, no. Big sacks. Big sacks is coffee sacks, too.

DD: That's 100 lbs.

ER: That's 100 lbs. Now the little sacks is about 50 lbs., because it's two little sacks to a big sack.

Other man: They're red.

ER: But they are... these onion sacks. That's what it really is. And the reason for that is because more air can go through when you put 'em in the cooler, and it's much more easier to handle. And less expense.

DD: And do you remember any stories? Now these are going back a long time when the cannery was on a barge.

ER: On a barge? Uh I think. I'm not sure. I think they might've had one. They tried it out in Plaquemines across the river, because the (inaudible) came across from overseas, they got strong into the oyster business. They was the ones that got really strong into it, and it took years before the locals got into it for that reason. It was hard, hard work and everybody knew something about shrimping, but they didn't know too much about oystering. And like I said, oystering was hard work. Shrimping wasn't that hard of work. Oysters is hard work.

DD: Well we have found a reference to 3 barges, each weighing 49 tons, so there's gotta be some regulation that if you go to 50, never 48, never 50. And we think that because of where we found the information they were actually mobile canneries. We suspect one was towed in behind Grand Isle. And it makes sense because-

ER: Yeah I would say... I think if they tried something out, I don't know if they were successful, it was in Grand Isle. I know it was across the river for months. Over here in St. Bernard parish, not to my knowledge.

DD: Alright.

CB: Now in every business there are good years and bad. Between 1947 and today can you target certain times that were real good and certain times that were real bad for the oyster industry here.

ER: What made the oysters real bad was when they had hurricanes. When they had hurricanes, that's what made it bad, but within the year, you could come back on it again after the hurricane. Alright and what killed the oyster during the hurricane is when the sand would come over the oyster bed off the ground and the sand would get in the oysters and that would be it. And that would cover 'em up. And then by length of time and bad weather, and they get rough, well washed that that sand off of the oyster. Get on the reef after a hurricane, get on a reef (inaudible) and take the bag off and keep going round and round and round and round. And especially when the wind was blowing and it was rough as I don't know what, you wanted that, because we going round disturbing the water and that sand would be drifting elsewhere.

Other man: I didn't know that. I didn't know the sand thing.

ER: Huh? Sand does effect . One grain of sand.

DD: Now if you weren't fishing oysters, what were you doing? Or did you fish oysters every month, every day?

ER: Well I was in the seafood business. I bought everything. Whatever came to the dock. If it was a shrimp come in, I buy it. If it was a crab come in, I bought it. If a fish come in, I bought it. Whatever came in the line of seafood, I bought it.

DD: Now where was your market? Where did you sell it? 'Cause it's all fresh.

ER: Most of it... alright I used to handle two trailer loads of shrimp a day. All went to Violet. And then I used to go to Violet Packing Company and I used to go to _ across the river. 4 trailer loads of oysters a day.

CB: That would go to Violet too?

ER: Some of it's going to Violet, some of it's going to plants where they're opening 'em and putting 'em in gallons. Now the hurricane really hurt us, but it didn't hurt us as bad as BP. BP really hurt us bad. We lost over 80% of our oysters from BP. The chemical that they threw in the water to dissolve the oil, it killed the oyster and anything around it they killed it. Then the little oyster, the spat _ all the oysters they had they called 'em _ Today it is solid oyster shelves. There's no spat on it at all. So what we finding out now and we just learning more and more about that in these past couple of years that BP stopped. We are planting rocks and gravel, that's what they're sticking on now.

DD: So you're having to create your own hard box?

ER: Yep. That's what we're doing now. We are pushing anywhere from 300 to 400 tons of rocks a day. We're pushing 'em out there by barges, plus with our boats. We got barges that'll hold I don't know how many tons. And we pushing it with our barges in the same way come back, we'd all have to shovel 'em. We pumping 'em off now.

CB: Well after the oil spill, I know that many people in New Orleans tried to lay off people, workers, were companies here able to bring those people back? I think the concern at the time right after the spill was that these people, once they got another job, would never come back to the oil industry.

ER: It hurt, quite a bit. Yeah. Like I said, we lost 80% of our oysters.

CB: Right.

ER: Alright, right now we only got three boats that sacking oysters right now. The rest are tied to the wharf.

CB: How many altogether.

ER: We got 8 boats.

CB: Okay.

ER: So now we coming back alright. Before when you take an oyster from the little oyster. The spat would hit on the shell. It would take anywhere from 3-4 years before that oyster would be market size. Now, we're finding out just recently that we got some reefs that we made, we put the rocks on, 'cause

we checking it every so often. Right now, we went and checked it and we got some oysters that's on rock. Just one year old. This one comes September. They just about this size and they got anywhere from 8, 10, or 15 oysters on one rock. Alright, so the way we looking at it, within another year, 2 years, we'll be able to cull 'em and have 'em market size,

CB: Because of the rocks.

ER: Because of the rocks, but not all the reefs we been doing that too because the reefs where we do 'em, we planting rocks on top of the reefs that we own and we building 'em up, but not all of them reefs are active like I'm telling you. It's a funny thing. You might be 500 ft. away from you. This one here catching like I don't know what. 500 ft from here this one's not catching at all. But what come's with that too now is the current. The more current that there is when you plant the oysters, you try to find a place that's got a lot of current.

Other man: A lot of current.

CB: Well what you both have talked a lot about today is change and the way things were as oppose to the way things are today and I... Don?

DD: I think if you can just-

CB: I'd like for you to go back to as far back as you can remember here and look at today and tell me: what is the difference?

ER: The difference to today is just like day and night, like I tell you, I mean from... you just look from sailing and now you've got motorboats. I mean you know the big improvement that is? Alright another big improvement is from picking it up by hand and now you've got everything hydraulic. Another deal is shoveling back. Now you got a pump. Now you can't beat that. The only thing that we got to do like we done from the beginning we still doing it is culling the oysters. There ain't no machine invented to knock the little ones off yet and save the big ones.

CB: Well one of the things you kept talking about was how people helped each other in an earlier time. Is that still true here?

Other man: Used to help each other plenty, but then people moved out. And the ones that didn't move out died, you know. You only got two people at the island, Perez and (inaudible) stays down there sometimes, and Thomas Gonzales. He stays down there. Thomas fishes crab.

CB: But in hard times, do people still pull together down here?

Other woman: Yeah, some.

Other man: Some people pull together. I know all my friends, they help me.

ER: You see making soft crabs too. Making soft crabs is a catch. You gotta know what you're doing when you making soft crabs. But it's work. It's 3 hour... every 3 hours you gotta be checking them boxes 7 days a week.

Other man: Every 3 hours.

ER: When those crabs start to get soft and they change. A crab goes through 3 different stages before it gets soft. Now not every crab becomes soft. It's certain crabs that become soft, and you gotta know when you look at that crab, you got know if it can be soft. First when you catch it, it's a green crab we call it. Mean, eat, bite anything. Then at about every 3 days, you gotta discard, because it changes from a green crab to what we call a pink crab. Now he bites and he eats, but not as much. Now after becoming a pink crab, he becomes a buster. Now he'll bite you, but he can't hurt you. And then within a couple to 3 days, that's when he starts to shed. Now all of this time you gotta be discarding them boxes. You gotta separate that green crab from the pink crab. The pink crab from the buster crab. You cannot leave 'em together. If you leave 'em together, when it gets tough, the green crab and the pink crab eat the soft crab.

Other man: The pink crab, you look behind, I call it the flapper, the one on the back, you look and see a little white line, okay that's a green crab. Then you see a pink line, that's a pink crab. Then you see the little crack right in the corner, that's a buster. Then you put 'em in the shedding box. The green crab in the green crab box and all that and you gotta check 'em like he said every day, every day, every day.

ER: And when they come out the shell, the crab comes out the back of the shell.

Other man: Back of the shell.

ER: The shell opens up and it comes out the back. Everything on that crab is empty.

Other man: Everything.

His eyes. His lungs. Everything. When he leaves that shell, just a shell. And that's how it gets big.

Other man: You can take the shell and do that with it. Crush it, ain't got a bit of meat in it.

ER: If you see the crab, if you watch him... you never done that? That's amazing. That's something you all ought to see. If you see the crab when he comes out that shell, that's how it gets big.

Other man: That's how he grows.

ER: You'd say he didn't come out that shell. He's almost twice the size. A lot of people say oh no he didn't come out that shell. That's how he gets big.

Other man: He comes out and he cracks and then the shell... the top of the shell comes up and he does this. You look at the joints and the joints of the crab are doing this. I can go show you some right now shedding if you wanna go see. It's amazing. You all ought to see. He's coming out when he's ready to

come out, he coming out. He's coming out, just like a lady. What happens in birth. Same thing. It's in the same procedure.

DD: Now the one thing I haven't heard anybody talk about are turtles.

Other man: I don't know nothing about turtles.

DD: That's okay. That's okay. I'd expect that, that's fine.

Other man: I know they lay eggs.

ER: Nobody has ever made a living fishing turtles, because they never had that many turtles. The most turtles that ever were sold is swamp turtles. You catch 'em in the swamps and in the marsh and that's the ones we call snapping turtles.

Other man: Snapping turtles, 'cause they got a long tail.

ER: Man they bad.

Other man: Oh they bite.

ER: Oh the bad. Those are bad.

Other man: They bite.

ER: Yeah honey?

Other man: Touch 'em in the back like that to open 'em. Just like a alligator.