

DAVID THOMAS
Commercial Fisherman, Charleston, SC

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Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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Sara Wood: So it's September 12, 2014. This is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm sitting here at Crosby's Fish and Shrimp with Mr. Dave Thomas. We're in James Island in South Carolina. And Dave I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind saying hello and telling me who you are and where we are right now.

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David Thomas: My name is David Thomas and I'm a commercial fisherman here in Charleston, South Carolina. And I have been doing so for probably the past twenty-five years and it's a generational thing. My uncle was a fisherman in Ponce de Leon, Florida and my grandfather started that town in Ponce de Leon so I have a pretty rich heritage of—of fishing here on the East Coast.

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Sara Wood: And what was your father's name and your grandfather's name?

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David Thomas: My grandfather was Benjamin Gillette Timmons and like I said he was—they basically founded the town Ponce de Leon. He was the mayor there for several years. It's right below Daytona Beach but anyway and my uncle—my mom, my uncle—my grandmother had six kids and my Uncle Frank ended up going into the fishing business. He was a big-time you know commercial fisherman, party boat, had head boats down there for years, all through the Golden Ages, the '60s [1960s] and '70s [1970s] and all that. And that's kind of where I grew up and got the fishing bug really from was going down there to—to Florida and spending summers down

there you know. And I just figured out I could do it here in South Carolina, so I just kind of you know got into it here. And that's what I do now.

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Sara Wood: [*Cell phone rings*] Do you need to get that?

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David Thomas: No. Uh-uh.

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Sara Wood: Did you grow up in Florida then?

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David Thomas: No, ma'am, no. I'm from Conway, South Carolina, grew up here and my dad had a grocery store in Conway and had it for fifty-five years, still has it. He just passed away this year, but Laurie Thomas was his name. And I just—I think the fluorescent lights didn't suit me too well so I didn't—I didn't—I probably should have followed in his footsteps there at the store but I didn't. You know I ended up doing something else and I don't know. Ended up in the ocean. And so here I am. And that's how I got here.

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Sara Wood: And can you just tell me for the record your grandmother's name, your mother's name and is your uncle's last name Timmons?

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David Thomas: Yes, Timmons, yes. It was Frank Timmons, grandmother was Valda E. Timmons. And my mother was Marilyn Elizabeth and she passed away when I was like sixteen so it was me and dad there for a while but I'm a wild child and I have three older sisters you know and anyway. But I settled down there and I kind of knew—I knew I wanted to be outside doing something. It's a hard life. I mean it's—it's—it's the hardest thing you can do—to choose to do and because you're competing with the weather, you're competing with everything, everything is against you, you know. Every time you leave the dock you're in the hole, so you know you're losing money before you even leave the dock you know. It's a hard—it's—it's hard to get in that mindset every time you leave the dock you have to make a certain amount of money. There's no if, and, or but nobody will send you a check just 'cause you showed up—none of that, so it's an interesting living.

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Sara Wood: Do you remember the first time you went out on the boat?

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David Thomas: Well I grew up on the river and I've been running and messing with boats ever—probably since I was probably five. First snapper or first fish I ever caught in the ocean was a red snapper off my uncle's boat. I couldn't have been more than ten or something like that. I was—but yes, I can remember those old days man. He always made me—he'd make fish right up on the bow where he could watch me the whole time you know because I was little and nobody was with me. I was out there by myself and him and I'd be out there on the bow and where he could watch me and that's where it all began, yeah right there, Ponce de Leon. Those

were the good ole days. You could actually walk down this street. I mean I would walk from my grandmother's house all the way down to the—the dock unattended. You know you can't even—those days are over, you know what I mean. Those were the good ole days.

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Sara Wood: So you said the fluorescent lights weren't your thing, they weren't—they didn't look great on—. But I mean is there something about watching your uncle that you said okay I'm going to do this or did it just happen that you—?

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David Thomas: No, I think it was part of wanting to you know because that was my mom's—that was her heritage down there. I mean that was their deal. You know they started that fish camp and like I said started the town basically off of it you know and—. You know nobody in the family does it. I'm the only one out of both sides of the family to still do it and—and you know I want to be the one to say I'm still catching snapper, American red snapper. And so yeah, it's—like I said, I mean with the closures it's harder than ever but you can still—you can if you try you know and you watch your Ps and Qs and watch the bottom line you can still make it but they've made it extremely difficult on us. [*Emphasis Added*]

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But whatever. It is what it is.

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Sara Wood: What do you mean by they?

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David Thomas: The government, the National Marine Fisheries signed—I think they're in the Bush Administration Magnus and Stevenson Act and it basically said that if—if scientists or whoever decided the fish—a particular species is in jeopardy then they have to close it down you know completely all fishing. So what you had was this drastic law, you know it was—it put people out of business. I mean there's people that aren't in business anymore because of it. And you know it's a big ocean you know and the science isn't always you know I'm not so sure about some of the science and been doing it a long time. You know I can remember my Uncle Frank fighting you know. Back in the '70s [1970s] the government paid shrimpers to go out there with what they called roller nets which were basically like an amoeba, it would just roll over the whole rock and catch everything on the rock. I'm talking about from this big [*Gestures*]—whatever. They—they sent them out there to do that. So they did it.

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And then I think in the mid-'70s [1970s] you know here's my uncle in court fighting to say man, you got to quit with the roller nets. You're killing the freaking reefs you know. And you know they did all that. What I do on that Bandit boat, we fish with Bandit reels. We're the most environmentally friendly fishery hands-down of any fishery anywhere and I will bet everything that I own on it. You show me another fishery that has as little or no by-catch as we do, show it to me, because I want to see it, there's not one. We don't catch sea turtles, seals, whales, I mean everything we catch is what we target. Our hooks, the trigger fish and little fish clean our bait out so fast it's like your bait is down there and it's clean. It's back up. You don't have a grouper or snapper you ain't got no bait. We—we don't catch you know turtles or anything. We're using two-hook rigs, hard drop, you know each drop.

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And—and we've been doing it like that for years and—and to me it's—I mean we—we know what we're doing and we catch fish and I mean we can catch them really good. And yeah there probably does need to be some—some laws in place but some of them were just a bit too—too—too much, too fast, you know okay. Here you're making a living stop. That's it. No more. We're shutting it off. And well then you're like well wait a minute. There went three grand out of my check or you know—where is that coming back for the budget for the house and the kids and everything? So that's the hardest thing about it man, you just got to figure out a way to you know take up the slack somewhere else and you can't hardly do it you know, anyway—.

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Sara Wood: Why do you keep doing it?

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David Thomas: 'Cause I'm so vested in it and I—it really is—I mean it's—it's like the Army saying, it's the toughest job you'll ever love. I mean it's—it's brutal. It's brutal but we call it sea-have. When you had enough on the hill you go out there and you get sea-have. You just go on on the ocean you know and—even if the fishing is crappy or something like that it's still a lot of times better than what's going on here. And I don't know, I mean like I said I'm vested. There's nothing else I can really do with the fact of the closures and all that. I have really valuable permits but at the same time the whole closure has belittled the value of the business, not so much the permits, but nobody is just going out and saying hey I want to be a commercial fishermen. Give me a permit you know.

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So I'm just staying as long as I can man. I mean I like—I think what I do is viable. I think it's totally you have—if you're not eating fish from that freaking ocean when you come to Charleston or you're not eating it—you go to Mississippi or you—Alabama, wherever the hell has got an ocean near it and you can't get a fish from it, something is wrong. You know if you come to Charleston you should be able to eat a freaking red snapper or a grouper and not an orange roughy from whoever—I don't even know where that comes from. A Chilean sea bass for the record is not even a real fish. No, it's a Patagonia tooth fish. Look it up on the computer. It's the ugliest thing you've ever seen. Chilean sea bass was a made up name that they gave to that fish so they could sell it, 'cause sea bass sounds good. Stick Chilean in front of it I'd eat it. It's all—all high. But meanwhile, our red snapper population is off the chain out there, totally out of control. We can't keep any of them. This is what I mean by the over—overkill on the rules.

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We just had a season, we could keep seventy-five pounds. We caught seventy-five pounds of red snapper in two drops of the line. They're this big. They're huge. Seventy-five pounds is like three fish, you're done. And this is on a seven-day trip. This is the first five minutes of the trip. This is one spot. The ocean, there are thousands of rocks as big as this table that will support fish. They can be big as this house. There's stuff like that all over the place. It's not just a barren desert. There's fish everywhere and it just sucks for us man. I mean we're just you know struggling. All those guys are making these decisions and all got a big fat 401K and they don't give a rip what happens to us. They're just making a decision, oh well let's you know have some for the second generation of grandkids. Dude they're fine, the fish were there before you did this. Now you've just—just made it stupid. I mean you can't go inshore anywhere out

there and fish for grouper right now because of red snapper. You can't catch anything but red snapper. Do you follow me? You—your bait, your time, everything you're doing is way—we have to go way up towards Georgetown Hole to fish just to get out of the red snapper. That's how ludicrous it is. From here all the way down to Florida it's—it's—they're off the chain.

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Sara Wood: And so what you're saying you can't get away from the red snapper but there are regulations on catching red snapper?

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David Thomas: Yes, heavily regulated. And this is what's funny about it. My family the whole Timmons Fish Camp that was all based around red snapper. I mean that's all they ever caught. I have pictures of just walls of red snapper. You know that's what my uncle did. And it's funny. I'm—it's like I'm—my life is—it's like from that first red snapper I caught it seems like it's just evolved red snapper. [*Laughs*] All my freaking life, man, but—but getting back to the roller nets. This is what I was trying to tell you.

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You know my uncle finally had to go to them and say the reefs, y'all are crushing the reefs. There's no reef left. He had to actually go to court. They had a court and um, where he got up there and the judge said, "Well have you ever been out there and found no fish?" And Frank says, "No." He said, "I've been out there though and found fish and no bottom 'cause they had just wiped out the freaking reef with the freaking roller net." And so I mean you know he—he

fought that and I mean—that's what I mean. You—we understand as fishermen that you know we—we're not trying to catch the last freaking fish. That's not what we're there for.

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I mean I'm just as much a farmer as—as the guy over here planting peanuts dude. Every time we—we catch a snapper that's rode up and we ventilate it correctly and we throw it back and it lives and it goes in there and spawns and it does, we farm that fish. I mean by god, you might as well give us part of the freaking farmers' subsidies. I mean we're—that's a tractor. It's a sea tractor. But I'm telling you our Bandit Fishery and I just—I guess I'm on my soap box about the Bandit Fishery is—is maligned because we—commercial is front of it, commercial fishermen is the first two words, and people think along the line—sea turtle killers, marlin killer, everything killer. That's not us man. We are so, I'm telling you—there's no by-catch, none, nothing. I can tell you ever sea turtle that was caught in thirty-five years—maybe three and they were all like hooked in the flipper 'cause they swam by the hook and the hook nipped them in the flipper. Never, I mean it—it's—and you know like I said man, a lot of people—we get a bad rap and I don't know—I'm not even speaking on behalf of any other people that fish. I'm just talking about fishery as a whole, the Bandit Fishery is totally environmentally friendly and it just—we get a bad rap man and it sucks.

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Sara Wood: Will you tell me a little bit more about Bandit Fishery and how it started? I mean—

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David Thomas: Well this—it was—basically what it is, is a—if you can go down there and take a picture of them when you leave—those three reels on our boat, those three big things that stand up—basically stand up rod and reel. On the East Coast here unlike the Gulf you have little or no current. Here on the East Coast the current if you jump out the boat and hold onto the boat it will rip your bathing suit off and it'll be gone. That's what kind of current we have. Our anchors are huge. It's nothing like the Gulf. It's totally, totally different.

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And so we use these Bandit reels and you see they got a six-pound weight on them. Sometimes we have to use more weight than that. But what we end up doing is you know you're out there and you have to anchor the boat on what we're fishing is basically the old continental shelf that runs up and down the East Coast just like this [*Gestures*]. It's about forty or fifty miles out and we go straight out to it and it's a big in some cases eight to ten foot ledge, some places it's smaller, some places it's bigger, but that's all these fish—that's what these fish are—the group and snapper, the vermillion snapper, all this stuff, triggers. And we got to get out there. You're—you're dealing with current, wind direction, and the whole ocean issue of whether the fish want to bite or not. You got to get the boat anchored up right, you know into the current and that's what you're using those Bandits for. You put your—you have two hooks with long leaders and a bungee cord which takes the shock out of when the hook, when the fish gets the hook in his mouth. If it's not for that bungee cord it would just rip the hook right out—it would straighten the hook out—these groupers, big grouper.

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So you have a bungee cord going to your line and going to your hooks and that coming off your weight right there and—and we have to use those heavy weights and that heavy equipment just because you're fishing 180-foot deep, 250-foot deep. You know, you can't stand there with a hand rod and reel and do that. You—it's not going to work. So basically what you have is a standup rod and reel. You can bait it, drop it, you could step back away from it. The bungee cord, the fact that we use circle hooks, we've been using circle hooks which are a hook designed you know to hook in the outside of the lip. They're now you know all the fisheries want you to use them for—because they don't swallow a hook. You can release the fish live. Well here's a news flash. We've been using circle hooks for like thirty-five years. That's how kind of like behind the times the government and the scientists and everything—I mean it's sad. I'm not kidding you. And anyway—uh that's how we do it. That's what the Bandit—that's how we use the Bandits and I mean they're basically a standup rod and reel like I said and just because you can't stand there and hold one all the time when you're out there for a week you know or five days or whatever, so—.

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Sara Wood: Can I ask you a question about that? Is that how you started and then—as you grow, as you get into the business you start using more advanced equipment like that?

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David Thomas: Well no, it's just you know it's how—how much you know what do you want to do? You know how much money do you want to make? How much money do you want to put

into it, you know? If you want to be a long liner and you want to put a bunch of money and a bunch of gear and go out there and maybe you have you \$100,000 trip and whatever—that's fine. You stay out there for a month but you know that's just not for me, man, this is a—you got out for five to seven days. You know you're back home with your family. You—you usually—we made a relatively good enough check. I'll probably have to do two trips a month maybe you know or something like that. And I'm making payments and paying—I mean I don't owe—I mean I didn't go to college [*Laughs*] so I mean what else am I going to do? I mean as hard as work is to find nowadays or whatever I mean especially if you have no college education then you know it's pretty good money for me. You know it's the way it is. I don't know how else to make seven or eight grand in a week. I don't know how else to do that—crack dealer—take that off the record. Stop that.

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Sara Wood: I don't even know if they're making that much.

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David Thomas: They might not be. [*Laughs*]

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Sara Wood: Do you have time for a few more questions?

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David Thomas: Yeah sure, go ahead.

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Sara Wood: You're a really good storyteller and I feel like there are a bunch of questions I have that I don't understand how things work, so—.

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David Thomas: Go ahead.

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Sara Wood: When you go out there I mean can you talk about do you—and in a year's worth of work do you follow the seasons? Do you go out to the same spots? Do you go out to places that you have a hunch about, like how does that even work?

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David Thomas: Here's the deal. As the water temperature changes that's what dictates where I fish and what I catch. When the water temperature heats up like it is right now it's all hot inshore. The fish are scattered everywhere. They're all over the place. You have grouper that are this big [*Gestures*] inshore with grouper that are this big [*Gestures*]. They're just—they're all mixed up. Okay, so as soon as the water starts cooling down and it gets into the sixties that's when all the—like the sea bass, black sea bass will start congregating inshore sixty-feet, seventy-feet, eighty-feet but yeah. Literally I can fish the same spots all year long basically because it—they just re—I mean fish, the—the common misconception is that a fish is born on a reef, let's say in sixty-feet of water, let's say a red snapper, all right I'm going to make it sound stupid but this is the way the wildlife—. Two red snappers have a baby red snapper and it's on the reef in

sixty-feet of water. Well it stays there for a little while but as soon as the water temperature starts cooling down and things start getting weird and bait moves in and bait moves out the fish move. They just don't stay on the same stupid place because the bait is not on the—they have to eat something.

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If—if your schools of sardines and things like that they're feeding on move offshore that's where they're going to go—offshore. And—and the same thing like when it gets really cold inshore and the water is in the fifties, low fifties and mid-sixties that's when all you'll have is sea bass in there because they're cold-water species. All your snapper, all your grouper, all that stuff goes out to deep water. So if you want to catch snapper and grouper there you're going to have to go out in the deep. If you want to catch sea bass you can stay right up in that cool water and catch sea bass 'til your boat sinks.

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But that's how I'm pretty much going to the same areas just all the time but that's how the—the ocean is man. It—look, when you drop a hook down to the bottom and this is the total difference between a net and a diver with a spear gun and all—every other thing, when you put the hook down there the fish has a choice to bite the hook or not. Okay, when a diver goes down there the fish has no choice of getting shot in the head. He's dead. That's the beauty of our fishery. You see even if we sit there and catch ten or twelve fish I guarantee you there's some still there that didn't bite. I guarantee you. I just—I mean that's the way it is.

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Sara Wood: Do you feel like you're—like what you do is always under attack somehow?

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David Thomas: Totally and I'm telling you because of the whole—I mean you have people like—I mean you know my wife is a biologist. She's a freaking tree hugger, but she and I get along fine. She knows what I do—what is going on out there. And—and what—I mean it was like the—the lady from DNR [Department of Natural Resources] one time explaining—trying to tell me about how I would never be able to catch bass in March again in my lifetime which we used to do really good in March. That was what kept us going through the winter. I said well why not?

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And she said this is the direct quote, *well that's when they have their babies*. And I said, “You mean that's when they spawn and have millions of fry right 'cause you're humanizing the fish now? You're making it have a baby.” You see where I'm going with this? So you got people like that and like the [Pure] Organization and just different things that they're—they criminalize us, they're humanizing the fish, you're never ever going to take a red snapper out to sea and put it on a leash and take it home with you and keep it in your bathtub and take it and walk around town. “Hey this is my pet red snapper. Don't touch him 'cause he'll snap your finger off.” It's never going to happen. But that's what they want you to believe. It blows my mind. This woman is talking about people's living and she's sitting here saying yeah, you—the bass are having

babies. Bass fish fornicate and spawn on every moon that we have all year and it's not like we do like once every blue moon. That's not how it works with fish. And I'm—I'm sometimes I'm wondering did the scientists actually—did they even—are they—have they forgotten that? It's basic science man. We—we're out there every moon, full moon. There's spawning roe and eggs all year long. It is not just like a one-time deal. But that's what they want you to believe. These fish, you think they don't roe up during the summer just like they roe up during the winter? You're—you're way off if you think that. It goes on out there every moon man. And so yeah, we just been—just ludicrous thoughts like that just make you want to get out of the business, but at the same time they make you so pissed off that you want to persevere and see it through so you can say ha-ha you stupid son of a bitch. I told you, I told you that wasn't the way it was. And so that's I guess maybe that's why I do it. That probably is or either I'm really stupid. I don't know what it is. **[Laughs]**

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Sara Wood: And you were talking about you mentioned, you said this thing earlier about going out there and targeting. Can you talk about what that is like can you actually like the way you fish you can—?

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David Thomas: Oh yes.

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Sara Wood: Can you talk about how that works?

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David Thomas: Well yeah, I mean on these like for instance some grouper, normally let's see. What happens usually is you're using a circle hook that's about a twelve or thirteen—it's about that big around [*Gestures*] so basically your little fish aren't going to be able to eat the hook, right. So what you're doing is basically throwing down big baits for big fish and usually that's what you catch you know what I mean. By the time—if a little fish comes there and eats all your bait he's never going to get the hook so you just end up with an empty hook like I said.

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So yeah, I mean and if we want to catch—all right. Let me get back to the grouper. The grouper relate totally to the ledge. They are in if the ledge comes up high ten feet and drops down five or eight feet he's going to be down here at the bottom of the front of this ledge. And he's going to take your rig. He's going to face into the current all the time, that's why anchoring and everything is so key in this business. He's going to take your bait and take it right back up on that rock and try to cut your line off and you'll never even know you had a fish on it. That's their deal but that's how we target them. We just use super-big baits, fish in the frontal ledges and stuff like that. If you're fishing for vermillion then you're going to want to get off of the deep shore—offshore side, the deep side of the ledge and they're always suspended. So what you're going to do with them is you're going to put on little tiny hooks with tiny bait and you're going to come probably—you're going to bring your line up shoot man sometimes twenty or thirty-feet and you'll catch—that's all you will catch is vermillion. So we're good at—at catching what we want to catch you know what I mean. If they're there and they want to bite and then we can do it. You know and that's what I mean about this whole fishery deal. Man we—we don't—I mean our

only by catch right now is red snapper. That's what we're throwing back every day, every day, every, you know by the boat-loads.

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That's what our by catch is now.

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Sara Wood: And Dave what—so you mentioned a lot of fish but can you talk about some of the like just to give an example like some of the things you catch depending on—when you talk about the season for it?

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David Thomas: Yeah, well just you know right now we're fishing for grouper but you know there will be a closure. They will probably close in I don't know man, November or December. And then they won't open again until May so we're pretty much—and—and what that's going to do this year is I'm going to probably end up going you know blue fin tuna fishing up in North Carolina with the boat because we don't have anything to catch. So how do you make your payments? You know how do you—? And yeah, everything is seasonal man I mean like triggers right now are closed. I think right now we can catch grouper, pinkies, and hammer jack and hammer jacks aren't really a value—they don't have that much value to them so really grouper and pinkies are going to be my target species now, I mean which is ridiculous. I mean that's just—that's like going out there where you're tying one hand behind your back. That's what it's like fishing with one hand tied behind your back. You throw back half of everything you catch.

You come back with a mediocre trip and everybody goes where—? Well we threw—we threw it back. We threw everything back. We had to throw it all back. I mean you know it's crazy.

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I mean you go out there and spend exactly the same amount of time, the same amount of money fishing, same amount of bait and same amount of fuel and come back with half the fish 'cause you threw them all back, so—. Until I mean something needs to change, that's for sure, but we're seasonal on everything. I mean everything now is seasonal, so—. And like I said with the black sea bass, that's the most densely populated fish out there probably. And to shut them off is just like I don't know, that's—they're like ants. I mean they're everywhere—everywhere, almost worse than the snapper because the bass are up in the creeks. I mean they're up in here.

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Sara Wood: And that's normal?

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David Thomas: Yeah, yeah the little ones always come in the creek. But that's what I said. I mean they're just you know they started closing the season on them and like I said we're all sitting around asking ourselves well, who is not catching sea—? Like you know we—we just never could figure out what made the fisheries decide the sea bass were in trouble? You know what I mean? And I'm going to tell you it's a—it's underhanded the way they did it because here's how I think they do it.

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If I'm out there targeting fish instead of just you know going out there and catching like I used to go out in the middle of winter when it was cold as crap and you couldn't—it was rough and you'd go out there and catch bass 'cause they were close you know. But then you know when you're targeting other fish during the rest of the year like the grouper and snapper because they're more snapper and that's what restaurants want—that's what you need to catch, so you don't catch bass well then they look back at the records and say well you didn't catch any bass you know all through the here and here. But I didn't fish for bass. But because I—but I fished for them before you know. But then they'll look at that and go well you know, you know what? David didn't catch any bass and you know maybe there aren't any bass out there. And you look at so and so over here and his records and say well dag-gone. He didn't really catch any bass either. Well maybe we better shut the bass down. That—that's not even the case.

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It's a case of nobody is targeting the fish because they're targeting something else that makes them more money. I mean do you—you follow me there? But that's just what I'm saying, the science—the guy, the marine fisheries people it's just like they—they've figured out a way to kind of twist and construe it every which way to where it ends up they're doing the right thing and you are definitely doing the wrong thing. and I mean I'm telling you, I'm telling you my wife is a biologist and I don't have a problem with laws and regulations and—but sometimes it gets to be too much. It's just too much. And that's how it is now. So here we are struggling. And I'm sure there's guys down there on the Gulf Coast—well see, the thing about the Gulf Coast they implemented catch shares. I don't know if you know what that is but you should probably do some research on it.

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Sara Wood: What's a catch share?

00:33:15

David Thomas: But a catch share is something where they basically said we are going to divvy up the snapper quota. In other words, I would have to really talk to somebody that's doing it but my buddy has got a boat in the Gulf but it basically allows you to have on reserve like let's just say 10,000 pounds of red snapper. But you could catch them when you wanted to. Do you understand? They've given you this share. It's up to you when you want to catch them. That way you get rid of the derby—oh let's go out here and kill ourselves and dude don't have any weather in the Gulf. Where out here it's falling forty and freaking blowing stuff off the top of the freaking boat. I mean waves crash and knock the whole freaking wheelhouse off. I mean this out here is—is totally different than the Gulf. It's like a bathtub down there. And so but they got it set up right man. They got it done in catch shares and the guys can go out there and they don't have to you know worry about missing a trip. They can go do something else with their family and then come back and run the trip when the weather is good or what—. You know what I mean and that's the point of it. You don't go out there and have to kill yourself to try to produce these fish before the quota gets caught up. And that's what the beauty of the catch share is.

00:34:46

Everybody around here doesn't want a catch share. They're afraid they're going to get you know somehow bought out of the business you know and not going to get a share. So I don't know where I stand on it. I just—I really don't, I don't even know what to say about it. I don't even know what to say about this—what we're going through now. I mean and—and all the

catch shares have been totally shot down so—for here, so I mean I don't even know where we're even going with it now. I don't even know. But the Gulf guys have—have kind of got it a little bit better than we do you know.

00:35:22

Sara Wood: What did you uncle say when you decided to take—?

00:35:28

David Thomas: He told me that I wouldn't get rich but I could make some money. [*Laughs*] But he was—he—I was still—I was doing a lot more. I was in Edisto Island then and I was doing a lot more charter fishing. I was doing some commercial fisherman—not as—I didn't have as big a boat as I do now and I just wasn't—. What happened with the charter was I realized it was totally seasonal. It was fun and it was decent money but it was just totally—too seasonal. You know you just couldn't count on it. So I just sold the smaller boat and got into that boat, got in the bigger boat.

00:36:03

Sara Wood: What is the difference between charter and commercial fishing?

00:36:05

David Thomas: Well charter fishing is basically you're taking people out and taking them fishing and you know they're fishing under your license and all that stuff. But it's you know I used to enjoy it. I mean I—I love taking—I'm—I guide duck hunters in Louisiana so I'm—I you know I'm a natural at taking people to do things. And so chartering was fun for me. I liked it man, seeing people catch things they'd never catch and people on the ocean that never been on

the ocean. That's a lot of fun you know And—but like I said just the—when the tourists, when the trickle—got down to a trickle you know and there's just no money and you kind of you know—. And Edisto didn't work out as far as commercially because you couldn't hardly pack any fish out. I needed to be near Charleston, closer to Charleston so I got over here. That's how I ended up here.

00:36:55

Sara Wood: After the charter?

00:36:55

David Thomas: Yeah.

00:36:56

Sara Wood: And how old were you?

00:36:58

David Thomas: I was doing charters back then I was thirty I guess. How old am I now?

00:37:03

Sara Wood: Well I have your birth date. Did I ask you your birth date?

00:37:05

David Thomas: No.

00:37:06

Sara Wood: No, what's your birth date? I always ask people for the record their birth date.

00:37:09

David Thomas: May 22, 1968.

00:37:11

Sara Wood: Okay, well how old were you when you moved to Charleston to fish?

00:37:14

David Thomas: I don't know. I'd have to ask Joanie. I don't know, it's probably ten years ago or something like that—maybe longer. I'm not sure, something like that.

00:37:28

Sara Wood: What do you love most about this work? I mean we've talked a lot about regulations but I'm wondering what—what are the—?

00:37:34

David Thomas: Just like I said the sea-half part, the part about getting out there and actually catching the fish. I mean look, even though you have to you know throw them back there is still something awfully fun about catching thirty-five pound red snapper and I mean it—yeah it makes my stomach hurt when I have to throw it back. But you still are doing what everybody wants to do and you're going to get a check out of it. And I don't know, I mean it's in the blood man. It—it all came from the whole Daytona deal probably, the good ole days.

00:38:16

Sara Wood: [Inaudible]

00:38:19

David Thomas: No, they turned it into a restaurant. My uncle had a really great business down there and had a—Down the Hatch, it's still there. And he had a—I mean they owned the whole waterfront. He ended up owning a lot of that down there and when he passed away his evil wife Mert—son the fires don't burn hot enough for her. Anyway she just cut it all up and sold everything and said screw the kids and sold everything right out from under them. So everything is gone. He had a boat works. He had everything. He had all kinds of stuff down there man.

00:39:02

Like I said I mean you went to the end of the road that was all us. I mean I went down there and I—nobody could tell me anything when I went down there. I was all powerful.

[Laughs] I was Frank's nephew you know. And it was—it was the good ole days, man. Hippies, you know like living all out in the little fishing shacks in these little cottages and just classic, man, the good ole days. And Ponce de Leon back then was beautiful. It was like a jungle you know, it was kind of like—it looked a lot like this just thick, just thick, thick, thick, thick. And like I said walked down the road and never worried. I mean my grandmother you know hey, walk on down the marina. Never do that today. I'd freak out you know. I'd say, "Oh, you can't do that son," you know so—.

00:39:57

Sara Wood: Do you and your wife have kids?

00:39:58

David Thomas: We have one kid, one little boy.

00:40:01

Sara Wood: Do you ever think about the possibility of passing this tradition to him?

00:40:06

David Thomas: I totally—and I totally don't want him to do it but it—if he did it and he was good at it I wouldn't—it would be fine, you know. It's just kind of like you know I used to talk to my dad about the whole store. I said, "Man, I guess I've—you know disappointed you by not you doing, going, and—and taking over the store." But I just knew my heart wasn't in it. Man, you just know when your heart is not in something. It just wasn't and I don't—you know I question myself all the time about that and my life could have been so much easier, so much easier, but I wouldn't have—I wouldn't have any sea stories. I wouldn't have any stories to tell I guess. I don't know. I don't know.

00:40:59

Sara Wood: Can you tell me a sea story or two something that really—the story that you—maybe a story or two that stays with you the most?

00:41:10

David Thomas: Um, oh man I don't know. We had—every day is a freaking adventure out there man with this—this trip here we had something happen that I've never had happen before. I—I hooked a—a stingray and it was about—it probably weighed 300 pounds. It was huge. And it's probably you know four-feet by four-feet. I don't know how thick it—it was long. I mean you just—this thing looked like a dinosaur. And we get it up the boat and we're anchored up you know and the current is running pretty hard behind the boat and out behind the boat. So he's just kind of—I'm leading him up there and it's all I can do to pull him to the boat. And he's—and he's kind of just surfing in the current like this [*Gestures*] and I get him right to the boat and I'm looking and I mean—. JT is like my god that thing is huge. He said what is that with it? Is that a shark? And we were looking at it and then we realized that like six or eight cobia had come up with this stingray.

00:42:29

So I got this ingenious, I said well dag-gone they're staying with him. So I tied the stingray off to the corner of the boat where he would just sit there and swim right behind the boat. [*Laughs*] And these cobia were just swimming with him and so we threw a live bait and he ate that and we got him in the boat. Then we ran our live boat and then we—JT had a harpoon so he harpooned one and we got him in the boat. That gave us two. And it's total chaos, the whole boat they're—the cobia, the fishing line, the stingray is wrapped. He's—it—total chaos and we got another one to swim up there right beside the boat with the stingray and I reached out with the gaff, free gaff and JT had to grab me and pull me and the fish into the boat. But we ended up getting three of them. But that was—and then we went ahead and you know we cut the line and let the big stingray go and let him go back but you know that—. I told James I said man that doesn't happen all the time. That was—that was crazy [*Laughs*] and I mean there was lines and

ropes and harpoon and we lost the harpoon pole and it sank and it was chaos, man. Just you never do know out there.

00:43:46

Every—anything and everything man, we—heck one time we were sitting there. It was me and James. He's lucky, he's a lucky dude. Anyway we were sitting there and it was as flat as this creek in here out there, the 220-feet of water. The current is ripping just rolling out the back of the boat. We're anchored up, it's hot as blazes. I put out a minnow on a little drift line which is a small rod, just a regular rod and reel you know, and for mahi-mahi to come by you know. I put out one line, I put out another line. So one minnow is just right here, the other minnow is about thirty-feet out. This little dolphin, mahi-mahi comes by about this big [*Gestures*] shoots right by the minnow and just keeps on going. I was like did you see that? He was like what, you know why didn't he eat the bait? They swim right by the freaking—why didn't he eat it? He almost ran into the minnow? That never happens you know. So we're just sitting there you know scratching our heads going what in the world? And all of the sudden I look out there and it's— it's so flat, it's like oily—the ocean looks like an oil sheen you know. I see this V in the water off to the side. And it's moving real fast you know. And I said damn, I said that's that dolphin coming back, man, that little mahi. And all of the sudden he—the fish sees the furthest out drift line, the minnow flashing you know out there and he—you see the V turn and start coming right towards the boat. And you still can't see anything and all of the sudden I look and I'm looking at this thing and I'm starting to see it and it has—it's moving so fast it's already inhaled the minnow, the first minnow and he's coming to the boat and all the slack is in the line. And I look and it's a—I'm like holy—it's a mahi-mahi and he's like this wide [*Gestures*] coming straight at the boat.

00:45:52

He's eating the one lure, comes up there, gets the other minnow, it's huge. It's the biggest mahi we've ever seen. We're like holy—I'm reeling up the slack to get it—and all of the sudden he eats the other rig and goes tearing off. We've got him on two rod and reels. JT has got the other one. We get him in and gaff him and come to find out it's like—it is right off the State record, like 70-pounds, this monster—monster mahi-mahi. **[Laughs]** And I mean—I mean we—we—I've never caught one that big on a drift line, but what was funny was he was hooked on two. And so we're standing back there at the back and the whole time he's out there jumping and we're both you know fighting him. It was pretty funny.

00:46:35

Again you know stuff like that doesn't happen every day and that's what I mean. I guess it's things like that you know that keep you going back. You don't—you know just you don't see stuff like that—not on the hill. So yeah, but we got some crazy tuna stories and big tuna, yeah.

00:46:59

Sara Wood: What was a particularly scary day out there? I'm sure you see lots of—was there a day—?

00:47:05

David Thomas: Oh I've had the boat—I've hit the bar out here one day coming in—in that boat. I thought it was going—we were going down but it didn't. She held right up, held together. Bent all the running gear up and tore the prop off and tore everything up, but the boat held

together. But that—that—this [inaudible] bar out here is—is unlike anything. There’s nothing like it anywhere else. There’s not a freaking inlet. I mean it’s—you’re basically going out and crossing two bars and if you go at the wrong tide you’re not going to make it and that’s the bottom line. So it’s pretty hairy out there. But I mean I’ve had one boat sink in the winter time coming back from blue fin tuna fishing. It was a little boat and again, it was slick calm and a buddy of mine came over and we jumped on his boat. It was cold, like thirty degrees and that boat had little or no—it was a short—thirty-foot boat you know with no you know real cover, no way to get—it was cold. He’s like, come on let’s eat, and we jumped on his boat.

00:48:08

And that night a storm blew up just like that [*Finger Snaps*] and I mean it started blowing thirty, thirty-five knots and we couldn’t even get back to the boat. And my nephew wanted to jump over and swim to the boat and do all that. I said, “Man, it’s February, it’s thirty degrees, people die.” I said, “We’re not doing that.” I said, “I’ve got all my stuff on that boat but we’re not doing that.” And the damn thing, a freaking wave hit it and sank it in the night. Woke up the next—we—well we never did go to sleep but we got up one time there and looked and we were right beside it. And we were on a boat as big as mine and my little boat was anchored right there and she—man, a big wave came right over. It had no bow on it. It wasn’t built to take that kind of stuff. And a wave came right over the bow and smashed the window in it and it was gone buddy right there just like that.

00:49:05

And you know who knows man? I just think—I mean I didn’t want it to sink. I didn’t try to collect insurance or any—I mean it was insured but that wasn’t you know—it wasn’t like that.

I lost a lot of stuff that I didn't get any money for that I wish I had of—you know what I mean. It—if I was going to do something like that I'd have taken every damn thing off of it before I did that. But anyway that was a pretty hairy night but you know I think stuff happens for a reason man 'cause after I had that happen I went and got that boat and you know we were out there one night and a wave came over the bow of that boat. That was a massive wave and if it had been in any other we would have been dead. There's no doubt in my mind, so I mean stuff happens, man you know for a reason and I think that's just one of them.

00:49:54

But you got to you know that's the whole ocean deal dude, you got to remember what you're dealing with. It's—it's there to look at and commerce around and make money but it'll kill you in a skinny second man. You get jerked overboard. I mean I've—you know been out there blue fin tuna fishing and a dude right over in a boat near me got jerked over and drowned. You know I mean it's—it's—anybody that thinks that stuff is mundane and it's not, it's crazy out there—crazy.

00:50:33

Sara Wood: I have two more quick questions for you. One is—the guys that are with you—they're pretty young. Are you seeing a lot of younger people come into this? And I'm wondering if you could tell me their names and how long you've been with them.

00:50:48

David Thomas: Yeah, James—James I've known for a long—I don't know probably ten or fifteen years but he is the luckiest human on earth and that's why I like to carry him on the boat

with me. We always have something good usually you know happen. But now he—he's a good fisherman. Yeah, there are some younger guys that are getting into it. I mean because like I'm telling you, I mean a lot of the old guard, a lot of the guys they're doing it for years, when these regulations set in they're not—. After what they caught they're not going to go out there and piddle around with that. They're not going to do that. What you're going to tell me I can't catch red snapper? I've been fishing for fifty years. They're not going to—.

00:51:30

So they just got out of it, so yeah, you got you know guys that are—that are you know young coming up and they want to—I mean they see me out there you know making a little money and—and hey man. I can go out there and go fishing and just like I was. They don't know what in the hell they're going to do with themselves probably you know. Now James, I could probably see him being a career because he's got a captain's license and he's run a charter boat. He—he's kind of green still on the Bandit but I mean he—I could see him you know doing it as a long-term thing. But it's—

00:52:06

Sara Wood: What's his last name?

00:52:07

David Thomas: Smyth, yeah, yes. He is—his father I'm sure is mortified because they're all lawyers. And he is very much not a lawyer. *[Laughs]* He—but yeah, you know I don't man. It's a weird thing. It's kind of a changing of the guard you know because of all the regulations so you're seeing a lot of dudes that were in it getting out and who knows? You know I don't know.

I just—you know like I said, “Man, I think it’s some—I think it’s a viable thing,” you know what—what I do. I don’t think—I don’t think you’re supposed to eat your fish out of a net from wherever. I think you’re supposed to be eating them right here. Somebody has got to go do it. Somebody has got to feed the lawyers and doctors snapper and grouper when they go out to eat. You know somebody has got to do it. That’s the little people. I’m almost done.

00:53:12

Sara Wood: One more question. Can you just tell me, so do you—do you have certain markets that you come back and deliver to, like how does that work? Do you always drop off—?

00:53:20

David Thomas: Usually Crosby’s will get this—this—the retail will get enough to you know—what they want out of the retail and then a lot of my bigger grouper, the big freight trains, the ones that weigh you know thirty pounds and up and stuff, we’ll send those to the wholesale market which is—they’ll sell that to you know then—delivers them to restaurants and then if I have excess especially like on bee liners or vermilions and things like that or black sea bass then I have a guy up in New Jersey that I ship to and Pennsylvania. So actually you know they—that’s mainly the three—three places that they go. And—and most of it stays local to be honest. I mean you know if they—if they just—if there’s too much overflow I’ll send it up north. But most of it stays right here.

00:54:14

Sara Wood: Is there anything else—I know you have to go so I don't want to take any more of your time but is there anything else you want to add that you think is important that I didn't ask—?

00:54:20

David Thomas: No, I pretty much talked your ears off haven't I?

00:54:25

Sara Wood: Well I'm going to turn the recorder off. Thank you for doing this Dave. I appreciate it.

00:54:28

David Thomas: It's no problem.

00:54:29

[End David Thomas Interview]