

Interviewer: Julia Thomas and Victoria Barrett

Interviewee: Leon Skipper

JT: My name is Julia Thomas and I'm a student at Georgia Southern University and I'm here with Leon Skipper conducting an oral history interview as part of the project Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures: Oral Histories of Commercial Fishing in Georgia. I've already received informed consent and permission to record from Leon, but could you please just confirm that out loud?

LS: Yeah. Yes.

JT: Thank you. I have some questions to guide us, but we really want to just hear your stories and what you have to say. So that being said, my first question is, if you could tell me where and when you grew up?

LS: I grew up here right in McIntosh County and my home was (Bolin?) Georgia and after we (unintelligible), we moved to (Meridian?). And this County it, it's a shrimping county and I grew up around my dad I used to go out with them on weekends and during school, in the summertime when I'm out for school. That's what inspired me because it was a good thing to do and it was money to be made and on down through the years you know things have changed, but I was shrimpin' for about 50 something years now-50 something years. Still doing it. I'm about 69 years old and I'm still doing it, because I love it. I just love being on the water, all the fresh air. I just love catching shrimp-I just love catching shrimp. And I've traveled from North Carolina to the Gulf Coast to Texas and to Campeche Mexico and back up to Tampa, Florida. That's where we used to shrimp for (trentally?). And I've worked here right at home a lot and those-some of those old fishermen they've gone on now you know, but they taught me a lot, taught me a lot. And when I first started, I used to go just to help out and then when I learned the trade then I worked my way up to the first mate next to the captain and that's where I'm at today. Doing the same thing, I just love shrimpin'. A lot of times it, you know when you... I got married early in the 70s and lot of time- I've been away from my family a lot, you know, but we had to do what we had to do and my wife she realized it and she took care of things at home while I was. I used to be gone sometimes 2 months, 3 months at a time before we come back to our families and right now today it has changed you know, we go we leave about 3:30-4 in the morning, we come back in every day so I'm home every night with my family now. And shrimping is, it ain't, the price is what's got us now, the price. It ain't about the regulation it's just about the shrimp price. You don't have buyers like we used to have back in the 60s and the 70s and the 80s and the shrimp price is not the way it used to be back then, cuz we used to get prices for shrimp back in the 70s and 80s and 90s, six seven eight dollars a pound. And now (unintelligible) getting at most four give dollars a pound for your huge, for your large shrimp, but you just got to do what you got to do. But I'm still in it, and my wife asked me the other day "when you going to give it up?" I said, "baby as long as I can work I'm going to work, I'm going to work." I just love shrimping, I just love shrimping. And we work with a gentleman, LC and I, we work on the same boat and his name is Reggie Sawyer and we don't have no problem, we don't have no problem with the captain we just do what we got to do. Started at a young age, went to see a lot of places,

made good money, and it's just good and I still love it today. Right now, we at a standstill now because we generally start shrimping roundabout May, but now with the cold weather that went through I believe that's going to postpone us a while. They got us closed out to 25 miles and they say they're not going to open back up until June 6th. But we just waiting to see how the shrimp, what do the shrimp look like when they go and test it to see the shrimp. But I was married, I got married in 1971- March 26th, I left home and we went to Campeche Mexico-never forget. And I just got married, young man about 3 days after I got married we left. We gone about 2 months, 2 and 1/2 months and while I was gone my first baby girl was born in 1971 and I didn't see her till I got back home. And still married to the same wife, we'll be celebrating our 47th wedding anniversary this Monday. And it's been good, and shrimping is still good now, you don't have as many boats as you used to have back in the day and some of the boats now they got larger and some of the boats now they're pulling four nets and some of them pulling two nets and I've worked on boats that work four nets, but now I'm on a boat that's pulling two nets and the catch is still good, it's still good...So you have any more questions or?

JT: You mentioned going out with your dad on the weekends, can you tell me a little bit more about that and your childhood and what kind of role shrimping played in your family while growing up?

LS: Well, shrimping role in my family was...I was a little fellow, I used to go out with my uncles them a lot. Little fellow and didn't know nothing about shrimping, used to get seasick all I did was just stay in bed. And my dad he used to, when he would go, he would carry me on the weekends and sometimes when his crew member didn't show up, he would come back and get me to go with him and that was- hey, that was just extra money in my pocket and that was the thrill of it right there. And that was me, "hey Pop any of the crew members showed up today?" Child today, but it was good it was good. We grew up during that time that we had, we were in school, we used to go head the shrimp when the boats come in. We'd come out of school and go head the shrimp. That was extra money in our pockets, we would buy our school clothes with that money and you know it seem like it wasn't much, but it was a lot during that time. A dollar was worth something back in those days, back in the late 60s the 70s the 80s. And my dad then, he was running a boat it wasn't a huge boat, but it was..(laugh) The railing probably caught me to my, just below my knees, it was a small boat but he would go out it would be just me and him and I remember. I just love talking about it, spending time with him that was just that was fun for me and enjoyment being out there with him and right now he is retired, but he retired from-it was Glencoe at the time but it's (Flexi?) now. He retired from there, he'll be 90 years old this year, this year. **Enjoyed my growing up in the shrimping industry: my stepfather and my dad, my uncles this was all what we did in McIntosh County.** Everybody had, oh now you've got docks you've got some of the docks they just fading away. Slowly fading away. And we don't know what's going to happen to the shipping industry later on down through the years and you got a lot of young fellows now they are not interested in it. And it's a dying industry. I hope there's something could be done you know to keep it going, keep it going. But you got a lot of people don't even want their kids to become shrimpers...But during the time that I was coming along hey that was the thing and we did good. We did good. Matter of fact we still do good. I don't have to stay away from home, but I mean it's still good, it's still good. Started early and still

doing it and I thank God for healthy shrimp so I can keep doing it until I get ready to quit you know to step down from it and just hoping that somebody will take it up. But I don't have no boys all my girls, nothing but girls. My daughters are girls and my granddaughters, so he (LC) talks about it a lot and I've got pictures at home from places where we've been and from the Gulf of Mexico and I'm going to get them out and bring them to her and let her see them so...that's anything else, any more questions?

JT: So you mentioned that your dad is now retired, have you ever brought him out on the boat with you?

LS: Well, we talked about it but he don't want to, he's up in age now and he can't- his leg ain't as steady as it used to be so he don't care about it now. But he always askin' for shrimp, now he loves his shrimp.

JT: Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like when you used to go out for longer periods of time having the family back home and maybe how- if you ever brought your daughters out with you?

LS: Well, uh. I've had my oldest daughter right here, working here on the East Coast. I've captained the boat for a while but that wasn't my cup of tea, I just wanted to be on the deck where. And she went off with me one Saturday and-actually, that brings back memories she had on my boots on the deck you know she just a little old thing and my boots about 10 and a half foot on her foot you know you can imagine what that look like. And when I started staying away from home you're so far away from home, you can't come home regular like you want, you're missing your family, but you've got to do what you've got to do. And you know, we go and stay a couple of months: two months, three months in Texas and then after a while we take a plane and come home for about eight or ten days and then we come back and do it over again. But those long period of times, fella ask me you know he say, "skip you going to Florida?" I said. "nah I'm past that no brother, I'm past that. I did my Florida time, I did my Florida time. I did all my staying, I'm done with it." But it was good, it was good, I can say it was good.

JT: What was maybe your Florida time like or any of the other places that you've traveled to?

LS: Well. I did a lot of working out of Fort Myers. I worked for the Hagens and I've worked for the Herrings and all those people they have connections. They have families here and they were good people to work for. They finally went out of business and some of them died out you know and everything just- even in Florida things just...It's just a dying industry you know it's going down and a lot of the old fellows they've gone on now you know. And majority of them have gone on, they've already retired like my uncles or whatever, and my biological dad. He passed away in '93 so all the others, there's very few old fishermen that's around now and they really up in age they really up in age but they left a legacy for me. For me. This is something that I enjoyed and that's why I accepted that what I wanted to do, and they taught me, and they taught me well and I could take my hat off to them. To the old fisherman-white and black. I worked for the Tod's, I've worked for the Brannan's you know through the years and everybody was good, everybody was good they look out for everybody.

JT: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? The Legacy and learning from people?

LS: Well I first started with my dad and then went on from that by learning with him. I started really with the Todd's. I've worked with Willie Todd, he's old Patriot, old Patriots they're gone now. Old Patriots. And they would take time to teach you these things. I've worked with the Todd Brothers: Lewis, Willy. Robert Todd, Bobby Todd and even Bobby Todd's son now I've worked for him, I've worked with him about 18 years. And growing up as a child shrimping that was what I wanted to do I would look forward to it, I would look forward to going on the weekends, when we get out of school for the summer. I look forward to shrimping the whole summer until time to go back to school that's what I wanted to do. And that's what I did, that's what I did. And still doing it, I'll turn 70 this year and my doctor told me as long as you can work, work and as long as I can work it's going to be shrimping, it's going to be shrimping. I just love it when you test try and you've got them in the test net, what we call it, and when you take up your big nets you've got a deck full that's just a joy to my heart. I just love it when they come up like that, counting the dollar bills then.

JT: So then on average what might your day-to-day routine be like on the water so you know waking up and the first thing that you do to like the very end of your day?

LS: Oh no, we don't we don't stay, we don't stay we leave from here say 3:3- 4 o'clock in the morning we come back in the evening. That's it. We don't stay anymore that's the best part of it. Don't have to worry about pulling out anchor rope.

JT: So then during the day when you go out and then come back what might be you know your process of shrimping just kind of walk me through that?

LS: Well we go and we...if the shrimping looks good, we stay the full day and if it don't, we call it a day come in and go back and try it again. That's the way it works. If you find the shrimp you've got to stay there with it because they might not be there tomorrow. If you go and you don't find anything come on back, but you got a lot of folks that go out for 8 to 10 days if they don't find shrimp here they'll move somewhere else that's the trade of the business, if you don't find them here or move somewhere else.

VB: So you said a minute ago about the legacy and how people took the time to teach you. What sort of things were they teaching you to do? Like are we talking netting like how to sew your nets or are we talking about how to do shrimping?

LS: That and there's a lot to it, how to let the, you know, outriggers, you know the long things that's up in the air, you've got to know- that's something you've got to be really be careful with letting it down because if it gets away from you, you could get caught in the ropes. They're teaching you how to be careful, how to coil your ropes, all of this is a very important even when you're setting the nets out. It's just a tedious thing and you've got to watch what you're doing because if you don't anything could happen in just a blink of an eye. And they taught me this and I thank God. If I could have somebody I could teach it to I would teach it to them right now today that's right. Mending nets that's all goes with the game that's right.

JT: Do you ever want to teach your daughters or did they ever have any interest in it?

LS: No. (laughs) I don't think that's a place for them. But they, you know they- my granddaughters- when they come in during graduation they always want to come down to the doc and take their pictures on the boat and stuff like that, that's far enough for them. That's far enough.

JT: Can you just maybe describe a little bit more about you know trying to be careful and not getting caught in ropes and things like that?

LS: That's because you know a lot of fellas have lost their life or limbs by not being careful and paying attention to what they're doing. Because a lot of time when you bringing your nets in off the bottom, you've got cables you've got to push it back and forth on the drum like that and sometimes you might slip. You just got to be careful and watch what you're doing and when you coiling your ropes up and pulling your nets in and when you're letting the nets back out, you've got to watch that rope because it'll throw (half at?) around your ankle just like that. It's a tedious job and you just got to watch and be careful what you're doing. And if y'all could just go out there and see how we do this thing.. And then you'd be amazed how we set the nets, how we bring them in. It's a, it's awesome. If you could see how it's done.

JT: Is there any way you could describe that a little bit without us seeing it?

LS: Well I would rather you be there to see it and then you know how it's done, maybe you'll get a chance this summer and come down and go with us.

JT: What are maybe some positive or negative changes in the shrimping community that you've seen over the course of your lifetime?

LS: The prices, the buyers. That.

JT: Can you tell me more about that?

LS: Well it ain't too much to say because you know, before the storm, a lot of buyers used to come out of Louisiana, Texas. They used to have these big plants you know and when Katrina went through, it ruined all these plants and they never did get back into doing it so we just got buyers here. You know, local buyers and seems as though they handle things the way they want them handled. And a lot of times you just got to go and sell your shrimp right straight off the boat to different people to get the price that you want.

JT: Is that what you do, sell your shrimp right off the boat?

LS: Sometime we do, that's right.

JT: And what are your thoughts on the changes that you've seen?

LS: My thoughts? I get angry when I think about it. (laughs) But just like I said, you know, I don't like it but I can't do nothing about it so it's like I said before, I just got to do what I got to do to keep the money coming in and hoping that on down through the years things will change.

JT: And any positive changes over the years?

LS: I don't know...No. Uh uh. No.

JT: So with that being said, what have been some of the most rewarding parts of your career?

LS: Rewarding... Learning the job that a shrimper have to do. And knowing this means a lot to me, because I came down through some old Patriots, they were hard. They were hard if you wanted to learn you were going to learn it the way they taught you, and not the way you wanted to do it, that's the way they were. And they, if you wanted to learn they were willing to teach you if you didn't want to learn well you know what they do- they just. That's right. It was good, it was good. Coming up under the older folks I learned a lot because coming up under them they were strict, they were strict. When they said something, they meant what they say, and you didn't mouth off, you didn't mouth off. No mouthing off because if you were going to mouth off then this is what they would do. And coming up under them really made a better person out of me, I know how to carry myself amongst my family and anyone I come in contact with, white or black. I treat people the way I want to be treated.

JT: Can you tell us a little bit more about learning under the old folks and kind of coming up in that and your experience in that time of your life?

LS: Oh well I was young. I was young and just like I said before, it's something I wanted to do, and I got seasick so many times now it wasn't easy. I got seasick a many time but it's what I wanted to do, and I just hang in there, I just hang in there. And you know every time someone says if it's something you want to do, and you want to do it, put your full effort to it and go straight forward and go head first. And that's what I did. I went head-first and I'm not bragging, I'm just as good as some of the younger ones coming up now. 70 years old, gets up at 3:30 in the morning I believe that's, that's good.

JT: So when you got seasick what did you do, what was your process?

LS: To get rid of it? I just had to let it wear off. (laughs) I had to let it wear off but- and after getting over the sea sickness it made me a better man. And now it's just an everyday thing, no matter what I eat it don't bother me. Sea sickness is just a thing of the past.

JT: You also mentioned it making you a better person, has shrimping and this lifestyle changed you in any other ways or can you tell me a little bit more about that?

LS: Well in other ways, I mean it just. It was just coming up under the older Patriarchs because during that time it really... there were jobs but this right here home. Shrimping right home. That's why I wanted to do what I'm doing right now and coming up under them really taught me a lot, taught me how to be a man. Because you can't send a child to do a man's job and that job there shrimping- It ain't easy, It ain't easy. Sometimes you got rough weather, sometimes you got stormy weather, lightning, thunder, and rain, and we don't want to be out in all that mess but that's what I choose. But it's like I said before it's all good, it's all good. When you grow up in it and you know what you're facing, when it's time to go to work rain or shine. Had an old man told me one time, "it don't rain on a shrimp boat." So, you just prepare yourself and be ready to work in rain, rough weather, cold weather, whatever it is that's your job you got to do your job. You ever see the Deadliest Catch? You ever watch that? You see what them guys go through, it ain't easy. My job ain't easy either.

JT: Can you tell me a little bit more about the rough weather and things like that?

LS: I've been in some rough weather. I was- oh man I was about 20 or 21 years old I believe- a partner and his dad, I was working with his dad out of Tampa, Florida working for Sam (trengally?). This was in the 70s, 1978. We were on our way going to Campeche, Mexico- that's across the Yucatan Peninsula- and it got rough and...Lady, let me tell you. For a young man, when your boat go up on the sea and the other boat, you can't see nothing but it's radio antenna, let me tell you. It's time to pray. It's time to pray. I've been in some rough weather and you know I just thank God. It be, me and my partner will be talkin, thank God he kept us, and he brought us he carried us and brought us back I thank God for keeping us to be here today.

VB: So you said that you were taught by the old Patriots, have you taught anyone yourself? Have you passed on those lessons?

LS: I've taught my little younger brother Will, he is my first cousin but we grew up together, my mom raised him and we grew up together and he worked with me and I've passed it on to him. He's a shrimper also.

VB: Are you teaching him the same way? Like the same kind of hard act of it?

LS: It's every boat you get on it's just the same thing. I teach them be careful, watch where you put your ropes, where you put your hand, and be careful. A lot of people, the cables is- see a lot of people take their foot and push the cable. Unh uh. That's a bad idea. I teach them everything to be careful on the Shrimp Boat just like driving down the highway, just like they said, person looking out for you you've got to look out for that person and I taught him the same thing and I mean he's about the only one that I've taught you know. Under me.

JT: So with teaching it sounds like there's a real Community aspect is that right?

LS: Right. That's right, in the shrimping industry you've got to have somebody there to lead you. You can't have all chiefs cuz if you have all the Chiefs and no followers... You've got to have somebody to lead you. And if that person is leading you can tell if he's leading you right. And if he's leading you right everything will work out.

JT: How might you be able to tell that someone is leading you right?

LS: Well I believe in doing things right. I believe in doing things right and when I do it right it always comes out right you know, the Bible says you don't fight evil with evil you fight evil with good and that's me I'd rather, just like I said before. I treat people the way I want to be treated and I like meeting people and that's my part in life and I teach my daughters the same thing.

JT: With meeting people, does shrimping give you a lot of opportunities to meet different-

LS: (talks over JT's last word) Yeah. Yes ma'am. Meet different nationalities of people from about time I'm traveling from North Carolina to Mexico yes it has. It has.

JT: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

LS: Well it's been a long time, it's been a long time and a lot of the people I haven't seen you know, because some live in Texas, some of them are Mexicans, you know we met across the water and Tampa, Fort Myers, up the coast like that. Haven't seen them in a long time but the- it's good to meet people. Cuz you never know when you go back to these places, you got to have a friend everywhere you go, you got to have a friend. That's all right.

JT: Was there ever a time where having a friend in another place kind of came in handy when you came back there?

LS: That's what I'm talking about. That's what I'm talking about. Having a friend in a place if you went back there, if you weren't shrimping and say you're just going on vacation and having a friend somewhere. It's good to have a friend in strange places. And I mean, just like I said all the old Patriots there gone, but you know like if I go back Fort Myers now there's a lot of them gone today- there's nobody there. There's nobody there that I knew you know then, it's the younger generation coming up now you know. I'm just old school and all the old ones they're passing on.

JT: When you would meet people would it be you know at the docks or-

LS: Yeah, off the docks. Off the docks, that's right. When we come in off of a shrimping trip and meet people like that you know, and they'll get to show you around town or whatever show you where everything goes just like I said you could tell when somebody is not the... how to say, not on the same page you're on, you know what I mean. Cuz you can tell, you could tell good from bad and that's me. I stay away from all that bad stuff. If you're good people, you got me.

JT: So what do you think that younger people or those who maybe don't live on the coast should understand about the history and Heritage of Coastal Georgia?

LS: What they should... Repeat that again?

JT: What do you think maybe young people or people not as familiar with the coast should know about Coastal Georgia's history and the heritage?

LS: Ah. There's a lot of history here, there's a lot of history. And shrimping on this Coast in McIntosh County that is history, that is history. And I think that kids who don't know, I think it's a good idea for them to know. To know the history. Sometimes you could just go on the dock and you could see some of the fellas you know standing around, just ask them about it. Cuz this history here goes way back, goes way back before I was born when fellas- they didn't have the winches then. They had the rope breaks they had to pull the nets in by hand. And then, you know technology started getting better and they had the winches and everything like that, and back in the day you know when we used to load the boat with block Ice. 100 pound block Ice. And we had to shave ice with an ice shaver. That's what we had to do. With an ice shaver. You go back and look over, it improve a lot. Back in the day, when the fellas at the dock, when they used to take the shrimp go to the vat, they used to use a dip net to dip them out to put in the scale to get a hundred pound before they could ice it in a hundred pound box. Now they've got conveyor belts. When you unload your shrimp, run into the scale and now all you have to, just dump it into the hundred pound box. It got a lot easier from what it used to be back in the day. It has. It got a lot easier.

JT: Could you maybe tell me a little bit more about, you mentioned there was a lot of history could you maybe describe that a little bit more?

LS: Oh man...where could I go. Shrimping started way back, just like I said, way before I was born and the history of it is. The places that you go, to catch the shrimp, and you know you've got to know your way around because you've got banks and you got breakers and you're working with the tide and the way that the places was years ago now they're starting, everything starting to close up. With all the storms and everything, everything is changing. And some places that we used to work, we don't shrimp there anymore. Everything has changed. Just like when Irma went through, right off of Sapelo they had an inlet there called the (Ca-) Inlet and now when Irma went through there's another Inlet back there the Island used to- the (Ca) Inlet used to separate Blackbeard and Sapelo and now you have another Inlet there, everything is just changing up.