

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI
MARITIME AND SEAFOOD INDUSTRY MUSEUM
NOAA SEA GRANT

AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD BAKER

FOR THE VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI

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TRANSCRIPT BY
FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Stephanie Scull-DeArmey: It looks like it's picking me up. This is an interview for the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum and the University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mr. Donald Baker, and it is taking place on Thursday, April 15, 2010, at 10:30 AM in Biloxi, Mississippi. I am the interviewer, Stephanie Scull-DeArmey. First, I'd like to thank you, Mr. Baker, for taking the time to talk with me. I'd like to get a little bit of background information about you. So I'm going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Donald Baker: My name is Donald Baker.

SSD: For the record, could you spell your name?

DB: D-O-N-A-L-D-B-A-K-E-R.

SSD: When were you born?

DB: I was born on the second of October 1939.

SSD: Where were you born?

DB: Deer Island?

SSD: Deer Island. Deer Island is how far off the coast of Biloxi?

DB: About three-quarters a mile.

SSD: So, what is your current title?

DB: Fisherman.

SSD: Great. Well, what was your initial opinion of the turtle excluder device [TED] itself?

DB: Well, I didn't think much of it when we first started. It was just an added expense to put on your boat, on the equipment. If everything goes right, bottom condition, clean bottom, it works fairly fair. But when you start catching grass and stuff, it has a big effect on your catch. It shoots stuff out. It gets in the grid, and the grid plugs up, and everything blows out the funnel.

SSD: The grass actually –

DB: The grass is one of the biggest things. Yeah.

SSD: – clogs up the net where things would go on, and since there's a hole there –

DB: Right. Well, you got a grid, and when stuff hits the grid, it just builds up and clogs it up, and nothing goes in the tail.

SSD: Is there any way that you could know that was happening when it's happening?

DB: Well, you [inaudible]. You get a shot, and your drags are moving to an area. That's the only thing you can do. But the grass gets bad at times.

SSD: What depths are you trawling to? How far out do you go?

DB: We work mostly [inaudible] the islands out here – twelve, fourteen feet of water. Fifteen feet at times.

SSD: So there's seagrass that grows at that distance.

DB: Yeah, August and September is a bad season, bad [inaudible]. Sometimes it's earlier, sometimes a little later.

SSD: What's the distance you would say out to the islands that you work within there? How many miles?

DB: Ten miles.

SSD: Ten miles?

DB: Yes.

SSD: Ten miles of the mainland shore.

DB: Yeah, all up and down the coastline.

SSD: I really don't know very many sailing or nautical terms, so don't laugh at me.

DB: We got a bunch of barrier islands that run parallel to the coast. We have Cat Island, Ship Island, Horn Island, Petit Bois [Island].

SSD: Why is it that you stay within the islands?

DB: Well, I shrimp mostly in Mississippi waters. The other boats go out, go to Louisiana. You go to Alabama, whatever, but I stay here most of the time.

SSD: So you buy a license to do that every year?

DB: Yes.

SSD: What does your license cost?

DB: The license, I think it's eight-four dollars I believe.

SSD: Okay. That's not too bad. Can you describe the first TED you used?

DB: The first one I used was this Saunders TED, the main shooter [Super Shooter TED]. It had a [inaudible] in it, this damn thing that was supposed to put stuff into your tail rather than – we had a little trouble with it; we had to take it out. We had a lot of trouble with it, but other than that, it was alright, I guess. We learned how to improve it and stuff.

SSD: Can you paint a picture of what it looked like for people who might be listening to this a hundred or two-hundred years down the road?

DB: Well, a TED is a framework set up and webbing. It's got a grid that the turtle comes in the trawl [inaudible] hits this grid, and it shoots back out through that opening.

SSD: About how big was the first one that you used?

DB: Well, it was regulation, whatever regulation was. They're bigger now.

SSD: Are they?

DB: Yes. The openings in them got bigger.

SSD: Did it weigh very much?

DB: No, it don't weigh that much in the water. You got to have a float on to keep it elevated. No, they don't weigh that much.

SSD: Did you feel like it was dangerous when it was swinging around back there?

DB: Yeah, picking up sometimes, you get to watch it. Other than that, you come up with it; most of the time, you're not by it anyway. It just swings back there. I never had no trouble with getting hurt.

SSD: Did you feel like you were in danger from it?

DB: No.

SSD: Okay. What was your opinion of the TED requirement when it was first enacted?

DB: Well, we always thought a hole in the trawl left out shrimp, and here we are, the government says you got to pull a damn head that's got a hole in it – two foot. So that's the biggest part. We figured if a little bitty [inaudible] you lost shrimp. What would you do with a hole that was three times that big or five times that big? But it's law. So you got to do it.

SSD: Did you realize that pretty much upfront? This is the law.

DB: I figured it'd be. Everybody figured it would be that. Because the boats in the Gulf had it first, you see, and we were exempt from it. Then they started raising hell. So then they put it on us. Everybody's got to pull them.

SSD: So the folks who are out beyond the islands. Because they were in federal water?

DB: Well, the federal government put it on them first. Then the state took up the slack with the federal government.

SSD: How big is this boat?

DB: Forty-four-foot.

SSD: How long have you been fishing in it?

DB: I had this boat built in '85.

SSD: Who built it?

DB: Bill Holland.

SSD: How do you spell his last name?

DB: H-O-L-L-A-N-D.

SSD: Is he still around?

DB: Yeah, he's the one that built the seafood schooners.

SSD: Oh, wow.

DB: I think you all interviewed him a while back; he's always on TV.

SSD: I don't know if we have or not. I'll have to find out because we should interview him.

DB: He's in D'Iberville across the bay [Back Bay] there. That's where the boat place is.

SSD: About how old is he?

DB: Sixty-five, I guess.

SSD: Okay. Did your opinion of TEDs change over time?

DB: Not really. It's just one of them things; you got to have it in your net. If you don't have a couple of TEDs – I pull two rigs. If you don't have a couple of TEDs, if you change rigs or something, [inaudible] you got to cut one out and sew it in. As you put it in, you [inaudible].

SSD: How much time would that take you to cut it out and sew it back in?

DB: Well, about an hour, I guess, by the time you cut it out and sew it in. Most time, you [inaudible] anyway or quit.

SSD: Really?

DB: I do.

SSD: Yeah?

DB: Get aggravated.

SSD: [laughter] How many pounds of shrimp can you catch on this boat?

DB: Well, it depends how many shrimp [inaudible]. When the season opens, you catch more. Then, as the season goes on, you catch less and less.

SSD: Do you know what your maximum load would be?

DB: The most I've ever had on it was seventy boxes.

SSD: How much does a —?

DB: Seventy hundred-pound boxes. It'd be seven-thousand pounds.

SSD: Yeah. Gosh, that's a lot. That's a lot of weight.

DB: That's over a period of four or five days.

SSD: Do you stay out that long?

DB: Yeah, most of the time.

SSD: I was going to ask you about how long it would take to catch that.

DB: It took about five days to catch that.

SSD: So what happens when you fill-up the boat with shrimp? What do you do next?

DB: Well, you don't fill the boat up. Most of the time, your ice runs out. So you got to come in. But you just go out five, six days, whatever it is; you make a trip, and you come in and unload. You used to go to factories and unload; now everybody sells around the harbors.

SSD: So would you actually unload it to somebody who's close by here?

DB: Well, this is not an original harbor here. Our harbor's on the other side over there. They're rebuilding it. Everybody sells off their boats – the ones that come in every day. I stay out. I work for a dealer up in town, Quality Seafood, and he comes down and picks them up.

SSD: I see. Okay. Quality Seafood. Just for the record, I guess we should say that this is the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor, which is temporary after Hurricane Katrina.

DB: Well, it ain't temporary. They're shuffling people around. They just started on that harbor. They ought to be through with it in eight or ten years.

SSD: [laughter] Which would be twenty years after Katrina. So this is not where the Small Craft Harbor was before Katrina?

DB: This is a sport haul. Commercial haul is over there, the next harbor down.

SSD: So the sport harbor's always been here.

DB: Right. Then you got another harbor down here, a sport harbor.

SSD: So to our east is another sport harbor.

DB: Yes.

SSD: To our west is the Hard Rock Café. A little further west from that is the original Biloxi Small Craft Harbor?

DB: No, it's right here, next door. You pass right by it when you come in.

SSD: So we're just adjoining it, butting up against it.

DB: This harbor's been here. It's been redesigned and built very differently, but it's been here forever this harbor.

SSD: It's been here all my life. That's for sure. How do you think TEDs have affected the shrimp industry?

DB: Well, it put more expense on the fishing to keep up with the deal. A lot of people got out of the business on account of it. A lot of the older fishermen couldn't handle it. They were getting ready to retire anyway. So they just said, "Hell, we'll just get out from under it." It's aggravating at times. You don't realize at night when it's bad weather, you're out there trying to survive, and you pick up, and you got an automobile tire stuck in the damn TED or crab pot – crab pot's real bad.

SSD: So you lose a lot of your catch when that happens?

DB: When you get something – if you don't know it at the time, you drag another two hours, you don't have nothing. It just plugs it up. Ideal conditions, the work, but you don't have ideal conditions all the time.

SSD: What's an average time that you would drag the shrimp net?

DB: Well, we pull [inaudible] nets let us know what we're catching. If you're catching a lot of fish, you got to shorten your drags. Right now, I'd say an average drag is three hours.

SSD: So during that three hours, is it just not practical to stop, say every thirty minutes, and see if there's something stuck in the TED?

DB: You can. Like I say, if the grass is bad, you got to do it. You got to do it. I've seen this make half-hour drags if they have shrimp to make up the difference. A lot of times, you drag for nothing [inaudible] dragging.

SSD: Yes. Well, how long does it take to pick the net up and look?

DB: Just five, seven minutes, something like that.

SSD: Well, what is it like on this boat when you get bad weather? You said you're out there trying to survive? What happens?

DB: Well, like night. If you'd be out there right now, you want to make long drags if you can due to the weather. Other than that, if it gets too bad, you got to quit. You know your limits; you know your boat's limits.

SSD: There's a lot of movement on the boat right now.

DB: Yeah, this ain't nothing.

SSD: We're tied up in the slip. So if you are out on the water –? What do you think the wind is like right now?

DB: Right now, about fifteen, eighteen miles an hour. We [inaudible] it was just about like this.

SSD: What happens to the boat in these conditions, say fifteen-mile-an-hour winds?

DB: Well, fifteen ain't bad. You just jump around. You'd probably get seasick, but other than that, you're used to it. That's all.

SSD: Yeah? Does it affect how the shrimp get caught?

DB: A lot of times, it helps the shrimp when it's rough.

SSD: Really?

DB: Yeah. It does. It helps it. Why? I don't know.

SSD: Amazing. So you stop and pull up your nets?

DB: We don't stop. We don't stop. You just slow down and pick the nets up, and you wind them up, you [inaudible] on deck, you tie it back, and you start over again. Just continue [inaudible]. You make about three drags a night, four drags, whatever.

SSD: How long does that take?

DB: To make a drag?

SSD: How long would you work in a night?

DB: We [inaudible] at dark and pick up at daylight. That's what you call a night. Then, if [inaudible] a few at the daylight, you might make an extra pull or something. But right now, this time of year, it's over with at daylight.

SSD: So you mark your position.

DB: We got GPS and plotters and stuff. It leaves a track line wherever you've been.

SSD: So if you've made a good catch, you'd know where to go back.

DB: Right. You just follow that line back.

SSD: But you haven't always had global positioning.

DB: No, no.

SSD: So where did you keep that before the computer?

DB: Well, you just use lights and stuff. Dead reckon and whatever you want to call it. It's so easy now; a blind man can catch shrimp. [laughter]

SSD: They may not be able to sort them out once they got on deck.

DB: Anybody that knows how to read a plotter – you know where you're at at all times. It's that accurate.

SSD: Yeah. In ideal conditions, when there's nothing clogging up the TED, do you think that you still have a shrimp loss from that hole in the net?

DB: They claim not. I had fishermen say that they tried one against the other, and it wasn't that much different.

SSD: Is the TED that you use now very different from the first one you used?

DB: I just took one off the other day, and it was the first one I used.

SSD: Really?

DB: It went out on me, yeah. Turned loose and [inaudible] rot.

SSD: When did you put it in?

DB: Well, I've been pulling it off and on for years. I guess it was fifteen years ago, ten years anyway.

SSD: When you all first started having to pull them?

DB: Yes. We were exempt for a while. If we shortened our drags, they let us get by. Forty-five minutes I think it was. They raised hell with that and said, "No, everybody's got to pull them." So start pulling.

SSD: Now, did you all get an extension after Katrina?

DB: Some people. To the west, they did – all kinds of debris on the bottom. We should have had it here, and they wouldn't give it to us. There's junk out there right now from Katrina.

SSD: Yeah. Why do you think they let them do it out west?

DB: Well, different people got a hold of the right ones.

SSD: So it's kind of political.

DB: It is.

SSD: Well, do you have time to go through these other questions?

DB: Yeah, I guess.

SSD: If I had interviewed you strictly for the Center for Oral History, I would have started with question number six about your growing up years because we feel like in years to come, in a hundred or two hundred years, things that seem ordinary now will be of interest to people in the future when they're looking back. So what was it like to grow up in Biloxi when you were a little boy?

DB: Well, everything was different when you're a boy. Like I said, I was born on that island right there. Back then, if you weren't in school, you just roamed the island, did what you wanted to do – swim, fish, whatever you could do.

SSD: Yeah?

DB: Then we start working on boats. My daddy had a charter boat. When we got old enough to deckhand with him, went to deckhand. Then when he got a bigger boat, I took his boat, and I went shrimping.

SSD: What did you catch on that charter boat when you were a kid?

DB: Well, they trolled for mackerel and lemonfish and ling, stuff like that.

SSD: You said it's a charter boat, but they used a trawl.

DB: It was a troll or two. Eventually, that's what he was when he was coming up. He started shrimping. He had the boat [inaudible] converted over to charter boats – day trips in a little small boat; it was forty-foot.

SSD: Mackerel and what?

DB: You had Spanish mackerel, king mackerel, dolphin, bonito, stuff like that.

SSD: Are those things still being caught out there?

DB: Yes, they catch them. Yes.

SSD: Do you think there's a difference in how many there are?

DB: Well, now they got limits to everything – size and limits and stuff. They do alright. They catch a lot of fish. Depends on what kind of fish you want and how far you want to go and all that. They got a big fast boat now, most of them.

SSD: I'm surprised that they weren't line fishing, and they were trawling instead.

DB: Trolling with a rod and reel.

SSD: Oh, it's trolling, T-R-O-L-L.

DB: I saw trawling, but it's trolling.

SSD: Okay. So they were using a rod and reel. That's what I think of when I think about a charter boat.

DB: No, it was trolling. All them boats right there are charter boats. These boats here.

SSD: Was it fun? Did you think that was fun as a kid to be a deckhand on that boat?

DB: It was something to do. It was all right. You'd rather be off somewhere playing.

SSD: How old were you?

DB: I was twelve, fifteen.

SSD: Yeah? Did he pay you?

DB: We got a little bit; it wasn't much. Five dollars a day, I think, when I first started on the boat.

SSD: Well, that was probably good money to a twelve-year-old in those days.

DB: It wasn't much.

SSD: Yeah?

DB: It was something, I guess.

SSD: So what did people do with the fish that they caught?

DB: Most of them, eat them. A lot of the trips he [inaudible] up in Laurel, Hattiesburg, and them places. They were meat fishing. They went down, and they caught fish, and they took them home with them.

SSD: Would you remember what it would have cost them to rent for the day?

DB: No, ma'am. Eight people, towards the last [inaudible] it was seventy-five dollars for up to eight people. I think it was ten dollars a head over that – bait, tackle, and [inaudible]. Now they get about five or six-hundred dollars for a half a day. That's why a lot of your poor people can't go.

SSD: So I guess ten people would split it up.

DB: That's what they do, yeah.

SSD: That's still pretty steep.

DB: The price of fuel and everything else each had to be added on. That's our biggest trouble. This boat right here, to operate for a full night, costs about a hundred-and-seventy-five, hundred-and-eight dollars a night just to work.

SSD: What can you expect to get for the shrimp that you –?

DB: Then you go out and catch two-hundred-and-fifty dollars' worth of shrimp. That don't give you much money.

SSD: Wow. Does that happen a lot?

DB: Right now, it's happening damn near every night. The fuel's going up. We're paying 2.35 right now for fuel.

SSD: That is really rough.

DB: Every time you go to the fuel dock, it's a dime more.

SSD: 2.35 a gallon?

DB: A gallon.

SSD: Is it gas or diesel on here?

DB: Diesel. After the storm there, I paid as much as 4.15 a gallon.

SSD: Good grief.

DB: You didn't make no money. [inaudible]

SSD: Just barely breaking even.

DB: Wasn't even breaking even a lot of times. Expense is everything on a boat.

SSD: Yes.

DB: Shrimp right now is fairly cheap [inaudible] twenty-six [inaudible] was 2.35 the other day, 2.35 a pound.

SSD: What's the best you've ever gotten for that amount? Do you remember?

DB: A few years back there, we used to get three, four dollars a pound in the factory. You don't see that no more. Now with the [inaudible] and stuff.

SSD: That's about half.

DB: Every bit of half, yeah.

SSD: Do you ever just retail it yourself?

DB: I do it once in a while. If you work all night, it's rough to stay up all day the next day.

SSD: Well, you can't.

DB: I can't do it.

SSD: No. You might be able to do it a few times, but not [inaudible]

DB: I take a few orders. If I'm out [and] somebody wants a hundred pounds, I do that. A lot of times, sitting down here all day – everybody's doing it, you see.

SSD: So if you're not the first one on the pier, it takes a little while.

DB: Right. Everybody's cutting each other's throats. "Don't buy them; buy mine. Theirs is old, and mine's fresh." All that takes a big toll.

SSD: How much could you get for retail today? Do you know?

DB: You can get three dollars or better right now for the same shrimp I had the other day.

SSD: Well, that's not a big difference than 2.35.

DB: No.

SSD: It adds up?

DB: You can probably get more than that if you wanted to [inaudible]

SSD: Yeah?

DB: The foreign [inaudible] is killing us. [inaudible]

SSD: Right. The imports?

DB: Right. But they're buying them.

SSD: Some people say you can really taste the difference, though. Like if it's an aquacultured shrimp from Asia compared to –

DB: I've never eaten them that I know of. I've heard that, too. You can taste the difference. It's hard to beat the shrimp right here we catch if it's fairly fresh. It's hard to beat.

SSD: Yeah. I think maybe people need to be educated that if they're eating imported shrimp, they might be finding some funny chemicals in there that they don't want to be eating.

DB: Yeah. Especially the farm-raised shrimp. That's the ones that they put – a while back, they took them off the market. Remember? Something got into them.

SSD: Yeah, I think it was an antibiotic they were using because they're overcrowded. So to keep diseases down, they give them this antibiotic that was a known carcinogen, I think. But

most people don't know that. I didn't know that until I started doing these interviews. So people just sit down and order shrimp or buy it at the store. They don't know. I think if they were educated, it would make a difference to them.

DB: People don't know. There are a lot of fellows – they did it this past year. They don't even go out and catch shrimp. They go to the dealers, and they buy these IQF [individual quick freezing] shrimp.

SSD: IQF? What does that mean?

DB: Individual quick frozen. Say, a big boat comes in, and they freeze these shrimp, and you can go buy these shrimp and come back, and they sell them to the public and tell them they're fresh shrimp. The people don't know.

SSD: So they buy it for less than what it retailed for and come down to the dock and retail it.

DB: Down here and jack it up a dollar a pound. People buy it. It might be thirty days old when you buy them. People don't know. You're right. People buy any damn thing.

SSD: It's true. [laughter] You can sell anything. I think eBay has proven that. How did you all get back and forth from the island?

DB: We had boats and stuff – skiffs, row.

SSD: You would row?

DB: A lot of times. A lot of times, we had big boats.

SSD: Did you eat a lot of fish growing up?

DB: Oh, yes. Ate a lot of mullet.

SSD: So you would catch them, bring them home, and eat them?

DB: Yes.

SSD: Now, mullet, is that what they call Biloxi bacon?

DB: Yes. The one that jumps ship.

SSD: Did you catch those with a [inaudible]?

DB: Cast net.

SSD: Cast net? Now, how does a cast net work, for the record?

DB: You spread it. You throw it, and when you throw it, it makes a circle, and you bag the fish in it.

SSD: It's round?

DB: Round, yes.

SSD: Do you throw it from a dock?

DB: Off a dock, off a boat, or off in the water – any way you can throw it.

SSD: Do you ever cast net now?

DB: Yes. Damn near every week I go.

SSD: Do you find you're catching the same thing you did when you were a kid?

DB: Yes, there's plenty enough fish around. Just sometimes, it takes a while to find them. You can get fish. Right now is a good time for fish when it's blowing.

SSD: When it's blowing?

DB: Blowing like this, yes.

SSD: What kind of fish would you catch in a cast net today?

DB: Well, actually, you're after mullet; that's what you go after. But you catch the fish, too, at times – catfish or redfish or speckled trout, stuff like that. Anything you cover with the net, you'll catch most of the time.

SSD: Any flounders?

DB: Yes, you'll catch a flounder or two.

SSD: That's my favorite fish.

DB: Yes, they're alright. I'd rather have a mullet myself.

SSD: Really? Well, now, how did it come about that your parents were living on Deer Island? Did they own Deer Island?

DB: They owned some of it. We owned where we lived, owned most of it at one time. My grandpa had. They sold it during the Depression years. But we owned quite a bit of it.

SSD: Do you still?

DB: No. There's one part of the family that owns a little piece over there. We sold out after [Hurricane] Camille.

SSD: After Camille.

DB: We moved back to Biloxi and lost the house in Camille in 1969. Then we bought this house over here on Keller Avenue, and we lost it in Katrina.

SSD: Golly. Katrina was 2005. Were you on the island during Camille?

DB: No, no. I was on the island in '47, stayed over there in '47.

SSD: What was that? The hurricane of 1947. Tell me about that.

DB: Well, I was ten years old. At that time, they said it was a bad hurricane, but it wasn't nothing compared to Katrina.

SSD: What do you remember about your experience?

DB: Just the water coming up, and you had to get out of the house and go down to the house [on] a hill on the island – my grandma's house. We went down there, stayed there, and rode it out.

SSD: So you went to higher ground.

DB: She never even got water in the house?

SSD: She didn't?

DB: No. We only got about six inches in the house.

SSD: That's enough to grow mold and ruin everything.

DB: Camille got about twenty-foot [inaudible].

SSD: Out there on Deer Island.

DB: There wasn't no house left. That's the difference in the water. [inaudible] fourteen, fifteen-foot in '47, I reckon. I think Camille had twenty-six feet.

SSD: So, after the 1947 hurricane, did they not build back?

DB: Well, yes. There wasn't anything wrong with the houses. My grandpa's house washed off the foundation, but he built it back up.

SSD: What about after Katrina?

DB: No. Nobody lived on the island since '69.

SSD: I'm sorry. Did I say Katrina?

DB: Yes.

SSD: I meant Camille. Did anybody –?

DB: Nobody lived there since '69.

SSD: Just too risky.

DB: There's nothing left of the island. The island took a beating, especially this last hurricane; it really took a beating.

SSD: Is anybody allowed to go out there now?

DB: Yes, yes. People go out there all the time.

SSD: I would really like –

DB: You got to go by boat. There's no way to get out there.

SSD: You don't think you could swim it.

DB: I swam it already, but I didn't like to do that. Something might happen.

SSD: I think what I'd be most afraid of is a boat running over me.

DB: Most of it you can walk now. There ain't much water. Once you get out of the channel, you could probably walk it.

SSD: I'd like to see it. I'd like to take some photographs of it.

DB: It's really [inaudible].

SSD: So what kind of trees are those [inaudible] on it?

DB: Mostly pine trees, and there's live oaks, cedar trees.

SSD: I can't imagine any of those trees making it through Katrina, but it looks like some did.

DB: It's a lot of young growth coming up, but there's a lot of dead stuff that maybe you can't see. Yes. Ship Island really took a beating. There's very few live trees out there.

SSD: Do you think somebody will plant back?

DB: They'll come back eventually if they get a chance to grow. Somebody set [inaudible]. There's a lot of little ones coming back on the island there.

SSD: Now, during Camille, Ship Island was actually split into two.

DB: Cut in two, yes.

SSD: Do you know if Deer Island has lost any of its size?

DB: Oh, yes. Plenty of it.

SSD: Really? It's getting smaller and smaller?

DB: Yes.

SSD: Do you think it's just daily erosion, or is it mostly storms?

DB: Well, right now, it's [inaudible] right now.

SSD: They're always changing, aren't they?

DB: They build up on one end and take away the other end. The eastern ends they lose, and they build up on the western end, most of the islands.

SSD: So when you were growing up there, did you have some woods that you could run around in?

DB: Oh, yes. There's a big difference back then. They had a lot of – the island didn't have the underbrush it's got now for some reason. It just [grew] up more or less like a jungle. We had trails. They had the cattle and stuff over there, where you could follow the cattle trails.

SSD: There were cattle on that island?

DB: Yes.

SSD: When was that?

DB: Back in the '50s, I guess. They just took them off.

SSD: So they were raising cattle –

DB: Well, just a small herd. It might have been ten or fifteen cows.

SSD: Was it for beef or milk?

DB: Well, we didn't own them. Somebody else owned them, and they took care of it. My grandma had a milk cow. She had one.

SSD: My grandmother did, too. So they would get them on a boat to sell them?

DB: Well, when they sold – when the fellow out of Jackson, Mississippi bought the island, he wanted – the [inaudible] was taken off of it. So kinfolks and stuff went over there, and they pinned him up, and carried him off, and brought him back out [inaudible]. But there's no animals over there now.

SSD: Not even wild raccoons or anything?

DB: Well, coons, yes, coons and possums, stuff like that.

SSD: I guess they can go and catch crab.

DB: They had a few hogs over there, and I think Katrina got them because I haven't seen any since.

SSD: In one of these casino parking lots, in an interview we have, a guy had parked his vintage car up there, thinking this is the safest place for it – it was very high. There was a dead boar next to his car after the storm.

DB: I'll be darned.

SSD: He found it. I just can't imagine what kind of boat you put cows on.

DB: Well, they made a little barge.

SSD: A barge, okay. Yes.

DB: They take over a certain amount, half a dozen or so at a time.

SSD: That would have been a great photograph. Do you remember when you first learned to swim and what that was like?

DB: Oh, Christ. I don't know.

SSD: You can't remember. You've been swimming –

DB: I've been swimming all my life, so I don't know. We couldn't go swimming before the first of May. That was it. All kinds of cold water, but we'd slip once in a while.

SSD: [laughter] Seems like a great childhood, Mr. Baker.

DB: It was. Back then, a lot of the boys we knew from Biloxi had come over on weekends and just do regular things – go fishing and roam around more or less, go floundering at night, and stuff like that.

SSD: How do you flounder? For the record, can you tell us?

DB: With a light. You got a light that shines in water, and you got a spear.

SSD: Do you walk?

DB: Walk. Yes, walk in the water. If the water's clean, walk in deeper water. If the water's dirty, you got to go in shallow enough water where you see the bottom. You see a flounder; you spear him with the gig.

SSD: What do you put it in after you –?

DB: Put it on a string?

SSD: And pull it?

DB: Pull it behind you, [inaudible].

SSD: A stringer, just for the record, is –?

DB: A piece of cord, just a string to string them up through the gills.

SSD: So you got through the gill and out the mouth, and they stay on it.

DB: Right.

SSD: Did you ever have anything follow you, like a shark when you were stringing?

DB: No.

SSD: No. [laughter] Is the flounder clear when you see? You can tell?

DB: Oh, yes. It's a dark complexion.

SSD: Darker than the sand?

DB: Yes. You can see it. You see the shape of flounder, shape of the fish unless he's bedded. If he's bedded, sometimes you just see the eyes or his head.

SSD: What does that mean, he's bedded?

DB: Bedded down. They bed down, and the sand covers them up a little bit [inaudible] sleeping or whatever they do.

SSD: Oh, yes. The flounder is the fish that has both eyes on the same side.

DB: Right. That used to be a common sight around here at night. You see lights all over fish. You don't see that no more. Kids go home and play the computer now.

SSD: They want fish you can put in the microwave for five minutes.

DB: Yes. But that used to be a big thing – that and soft shelling.

SSD: Soft shelling? How do you do that?

DB: Well, at certain times of the year, when the moon's right, like in June, you go out at night, and the crabs shed. That's how they grow; they molt, and they shed. You pick them up when they're in the soft stage. You don't see much of that anymore.

SSD: So they're shedding that hard outside. I think it's called a carapace. Actually, their skeleton is on the outside.

DB: It takes about an hour or so to get back hard again.

SSD: An hour? That's all it takes.

DB: It don't take long. It don't take long. Well, a paper shell, they call it.

SSD: It's a degree then.

DB: Yes. You want them when they're right alongside the shed. That's when they're real soft.

SSD: How do you get them out of the water?

DB: Reach down there with your hand. They ain't going to bite. Shit, can't bite you.

SSD: Have you ever been pinched by one?

DB: Yes. If you see one run, you think he's soft, and you grab him, and he's hard, he'll bite you. Most of the time, he will anyway.

SSD: He'll get his pincer back on you.

DB: Right.

SSD: Well, why can't they do that when they're soft?

DB: Well, they're just mushy.

SSD: Even their pincers are?

DB: Yes, everything.

SSD: They shed their pincers?

DB: No, they get soft.

SSD: They get soft. I didn't know that.

DB: Yes.

SSD: Wow.

DB: You eat that. That's what you eat, the pincers and stuff.

SSD: I've actually never eaten a soft-shelled crab.

DB: They're good.

SSD: I'm going to try one. So they're just harvested by hand like that?

DB: Well, they go around [inaudible] something in the water. They like protection when they're shedding, get up [inaudible] something. You walk along at night, you see them, and you pick them up.

SSD: So does that mean that the softshell crabs that I can get in a restaurant have all been picked up by hand?

DB: Well, they got what they call tanks now. They shed in tanks.

SSD: Okay.

DB: The people's got the tanks – peelers, they call them. They're getting ready to shed in the next three or four days. They put them in these tanks for twenty-four hours a day, and they'll shed. When they shed, they scoop them up and sell them. That's big money, good money.

SSD: So they catch them in crab pots?

DB: Crab pots and stuff.

SSD: Then just watch them in a tank.

DB: Yes. You can see when they're getting ready to shed and call them peelers. They buy them – ten cents, fifteen cents or so. When they sell them, they get good money for crabs. Crabs are high right now.

SSD: Do you ever think about crabbing in the offseason?

DB: No. My nephew did a little bit. There's a lot of men [inaudible] all your Vietnamese. They're big time.

SSD: I interviewed Frank Parker. Do you know Frank Parker?

DB: Yes.

SSD: He does that. Actually, I think now, even when he's shrimping, his wife does it some, too.

DB: Yes, his wife and his daddy and mama do it. His pop is right out here.

SSD: Really? Yes. It's one of the ways he's been able to keep shrimping.

DB: Well, it's something to do in the wintertime. That's the biggest problem. There's plenty of crabs. There's a lot of what they call sponge crabs right now. You can't keep them in Mississippi.

SSD: What's a sponge crab?

DB: That's the one that's got the eggs on them, getting ready to – sponge crab.

SSD: Okay. They have eggs on them.

DB: Alabama, you could save them. But Mississippi and Louisiana, you can't.

SSD: They shouldn't be able to in Alabama because it's taking away the –

DB: They do. They tried to get past there, and they knocked it in the head the other day.

SSD: But don't you think that if they keep harvesting those, eventually there won't be any crabs?

DB: They used to catch a lot of crabs years ago when they had sponges on them; they never bother.

SSD: Really? There were always plenty of them. Does anybody eat the crab eggs?

DB: Yes, you can eat them inside the crab. The sponge is the food for the little crabs when they shed.

SSD: How do you know they're sponge crabs? You see the eggs on them?

DB: You got that thing on the bottom of them.

SSD: You can see it?

DB: Yes. Yellow-looking. They're dropping them now, I guess.

SSD: Well, why did you decide to be a shrimper?

DB: I don't know. Goofy, I guess.

SSD: [laughter] Did you like it?

DB: It used to be fun. You made fair money with it, but now it's getting to be a hassle with everything. Well, I'm getting ready to quit anyway. Probably, this is my last year, I guess.

SSD: Is that right? You're going to retire?

DB: Probably from shrimping?

SSD: Do you have something else in mind to do?

DB: I can bum around. I could do anything. It ain't hard not to do nothing.

SSD: Will you keep your boat?

DB: I'm going to keep it for a while, but that's another thing; it's expensive now to keep a boat. It ain't like it was years ago. Just your overhaul, your haul out every year, it's expensive. Plus, we pay fourteen-hundred dollars a year right here for rent.

SSD: Wow.

DB: So you're looking at close to five-thousand dollars just to keep the boat.

SSD: What's a haul out?

DB: When you haul a boat out to paint the bottom, maintenance.

SSD: You do that -?

DB: Once a year.

SSD: Annually.

DB: Unless something happens. Sometimes you go two or three times a year if you hit something, damage. Most of the time, it's a yearly deal. We're going up in May.

SSD: How long does it take?

DB: On the shipyard?

SSD: Yes.

DB: Four, five, six days. Depends on the weather. If there's good weather, it's quick.

SSD: Does the shipyard come down and get it?

DB: No, we'll go around the bay. There's two places [inaudible].

SSD: You can go right out of the water and get hauled out.

DB: They got a lift; they can pick the boat up.

SSD: Does the GPS help you in terms of debris on the bottom that might –?

DB: No.

SSD: No?

DB: Unless you hook something, and you can pinpoint where it's at. If you drop it off, it won't tell you what's on the bottom.

SSD: You don't try to chart it if you know something's –?

DB: Well, we keep hangs – we got hangs in there. One of your buddies hooks a rack, and he gives you the reading on it. That's how we avoid that area, stay away from [inaudible].

SSD: It's called a hang, and there's a record of it?

DB: It stays in memory.

SSD: Does it warn you?

DB: You could put warnings on it, but most times, you just look at it when you're coming up on it.

SSD: But you could have something *beep-beep-beep* and tell you.

DB: Yes, you could do that. This takes a few seconds to come on ...

SSD: It's a map.

DB: See, all these are hangs there.

SSD: Yes. Okay. What's that green and yellow thing right there?

DB: This?

SSD: Is that Ship Island?

DB: It's Deer Island.

SSD: Deer Island? It looks huge.

DB: That's the outside of Cat Island. That's all hangs you see there.

SSD: Oh, man. Lots of them. Now, what's the one that's southeast of Deer Island right there?

DB: Horn Island.

SSD: Horn Island.

DB: This island right here?

SSD: Yes.

DB: Horn Island.

SSD: They look really big on the map.

DB: That's it there.

SSD: Really, really big.

DB: It's changed a lot, too.

SSD: Yes. That is really cool.

DB: This is where we worked the other night here. You see these? You see all track lines?

SSD: Yes.

DB: That's where I [inaudible] the other night.

SSD: Wow.

DB: But like I say, you know where you're at at all times. No such thing as being lost. If you're lost with a GPS, you got a problem.

SSD: I shouldn't be out there. Well, can you kind of paint a picture of a typical day of shrimping or night for you just for the record for people in the future?

DB: Well, if you start out like we're leaving now to go out, you go out in the evenings mostly. You try to get out there a little bit before dark; you put it overboard and start dragging areas that you know there's a few shrimp or somebody else they're dragging in. Put your trinet in the water, and every half hour, you pull your trinet, and you go from there. If you got a few shrimp in the trinet, you can go back to that track line. If not, you keep going. Then, if you're catching small amounts of fish or whatever, [inaudible] and you pick up. If you have enough to stay around there on, money-wise, you stay there for the night. If not, you move on off. You make three or four drags, whatever it takes for that night. At daylight, you either pick up, come in, or go anchor up, and go to bed, sleep – get something to eat and go to bed. Do the same thing over and over again.

SSD: I see you have a bed back here right in back of me. Ship-shape.

DB: Got an air conditioner and all that. You don't want to rough it.

SSD: Air conditioning is important in South Mississippi.

DB: You got to have it. Mosquitos – it knocks the noise down.

SSD: Are mosquitoes bad out on the water?

DB: At times, they are, yes.

SSD: Yes. What about other boats? Do they show up on the GPS?

DB: No, the radar. They don't show you. Only thing it's good for is navigating. It's a chart, is what it is. It's actually a chart, and it's right in front of you all the time. You ain't got to pull a chart out and look. It's there. It gives you a line wherever you've been, so you can't go wrong.

SSD: What you used to do, I guess, is plot it on paper?

DB: Well, dead reckoning most of the time. You go by buoys and lights and stuff. That's how you used to drag years ago.

SSD: I know you've been on a boat all your life, and this will probably sound like a stupid question, but when you're out shrimping, you keep a watch out for other boats? It seems like it would be easy to run into each other or get your nets –?

DB: No, you got the rules of the road, just like on the highway.

SSD: Okay, you've got rules.

DB: You've got your red and green light. When you see a boat coming, most of the time you pass them [inaudible] one vessel, two-vessel side, whatever you want. If you communicate with him, you don't have no problem.

SSD: What are the red and green lights?

DB: Port and starboard.

SSD: They're on the front of the boat?

DB: They're on the sides of the boat. Red to red, green to green.

SSD: That's how you pass each other. Red light to red light, green light to green light? That keeps you from running into each other.

DB: If you talk on the radio, if he wants to [inaudible] go across your bow, he'll tell you that.

SSD: He asks?

DB: On the one [inaudible]. But they don't have no problem. You'd be surprised. You think that would drag through a fleet of boats, and they'd just go right on through them.

SSD: Well, I know there used to be a lot more boats out there than there are now.

DB: The Vietnamese are a little trouble.

SSD: How so?

DB: They didn't give a damn. They had the impression that you can get out of their way. They didn't go by the rules of the road. [inaudible] burn lights. They didn't care. But they're getting educated now after they got in trouble.

SSD: Really?

DB: It ain't nothing to it. It looks confusing, but it's not.

SSD: If you reported someone for violating, say, a boating regulation, what would happen? Does the Coast Guard come write them a ticket? How does that work?

DB: Well, if you get in a situation out here, somebody runs into you, there's somebody right and wrong. Like running a red light or whatever. If it's enough damage done where the Coast Guard gets involved, or you report it to the Coast Guard, then they're not going to have an investigation to find out who was right and who was wrong. They could fine you then. But, like I say, there ain't no problem. Just surprise, you know. Sometimes the tug boats and stuff at night – they're

pushing a lot of barges and stuff. They get aggravated with us because we're dragging right there where they [inaudible]. We talk to them on the radio, so we know what's going on. If they know ahead of time which way you want to turn or go, it's alright. If you wait until the last minute to make a decision, sometimes it's bad.

SSD: Yes, you need to plan ahead.

DB: We got VHF radios and all that stuff. We talk. Most of these other radios we talked to other boatmen on.

SSD: What was I going to ask? I don't know. I lost it. So after you pull up your net, what happens then?

DB: Trip the tails on the back deck here, middle of the deck on the back.

SSD: What does that mean, "trip the tails"?

DB: Where the [inaudible] in the net, the tail. Tie it back, and we start dragging again. While you're dragging, you're culling the previous drag out, separating. Anything that you can sell, you separate – fish, crabs, or whatever you can sell. You separate that, then you ice them in the ice hole. You throw the rest of the stuff overboard that you can't sell. You do that again. Every time you pick up, you do that – every three hours or so. We use that table back there a lot of times to pick off – I don't like to pick on the deck no more.

SSD: Really?

DB: Yes, trip on that cable.

SSD: It's hard on your knees, isn't it?

DB: Knees, yes. You're standing up all the time back there on that table [inaudible] get tired. Most times, like a half-hour, you're through it anyway.

SSD: Oh, yeah? Half-hour?

DB: Yes, there ain't no shrimp nowadays. Just laying around there.

SSD: It's just keeping you out of trouble now.

DB: That's it. That's about it.

SSD: Well, I want to get some photographs of that. Do you notice anything at night that's eating what you throw over?

DB: Oh, yes, porpoise. We have a big time with porpoise.

SSD: Really?

DB: Yes. They eat our nets up. Right now, sharks are starting to show. They're bad, too. Every night, you got to patch. Every morning, when you quit, you got to patch.

SSD: What does that mean?

DB: Patch holes in the net.

SSD: Oh, I thought you said "batch."

DB: No, patch, P-A-T.

SSD: You have to patch holes in the net. You sew them up yourself?

DB: Yes. If you got a lot of them, you start losing production, you see. You got a lot of holes.

SSD: When did you learn to do that?

DB: Over time.

SSD: Did you start when you were a kid?

DB: When I first started shrimping, I guess I was twenty, I guess.

SSD: Before that, you hadn't patched any holes in nets?

DB: No. You learn from older fishermen you're fishing with. Teach you little bits.

SSD: I know what I was going to ask you about before. Are you alone? Do you have a deckhand?

DB: I've got a deckhand.

SSD: You have one deckhand. So you've got to be constantly alert at night.

DB: Yes, you got to watch your surroundings. This boat here, you can see everything from a distance.

SSD: You can't just take a nap.

DB: Not when you're dragging, no. You'll run over somebody. You can't do that.

SSD: If you were anchored, would other people be responsible for knowing where you were.

DB: Well, if you got the lights up if you got your anchor light on. They'll watch you. They'll run over – they're not supposed to. Most of the time, when you anchor, you run somewhere where they're not working – work up under the islands or something. But you can anchor anywhere as long as you got your anchor light up. You turn your red and your green off; just have your white light. That tells you that you're stationary. You're on anchor.

SSD: Can you sleep when you're out in the open like that? You feel pretty safe?

DB: Yes. We have a lot of trouble with squalls in the summertime. Late in the year, we get them bad squalls out in the north. They'll wake you up quick when they get right.

SSD: Do you try to move out of them?

DB: Well, most of the time, we just anchor up out there. If the squall gets bad – if it's real bad, you don't know until it comes out. If it's too bad, then we run up north or whatever.

SSD: Try to find some protection?

DB: Yes. Most of the time, it don't last long. Half an hour or so, it's over with.

SSD: So how do you decide when you're done? Obviously, if you filled your vote to capacity, you're done.

DB: Most of the time, I like to start, let's say, on a Monday night and unload Saturday morning. That's what I like to do. Take the weekend off. You don't fill your boat that much. Most of the time, you might have fifteen, twenty boxes of shrimp in a week, which is alright.

SSD: I just don't understand if you're out for five days when you sleep during those five days.

DB: Sleep in the daytime, work at night.

SSD: So you just get right up here and sleep during the day.

DB: Yes. Anchor down.

SSD: Wow. You've been doing it a long time?

DB: Yeah.

SSD: Yeah. It seems like it would be hard at first.

DB: No, it's just a routine, just like an old farmer plowing the ground. You start from one end of the road and go to the other. You turn around, and you come back.

SSD: I guess you're pretty tired.

DB: Well now, yes. Nighttime is a little rough on you, too.

SSD: Staying up all night?

DB: About two o'clock in the morning gets tough. A lot of boys sleep now. A lot of them sleep. I don't. I watch my boat all night. A lot of them fell asleep. You got people on the wheel that don't know what the hell they're doing.

SSD: They're counting on their deckhand to [inaudible].

DB: Yes. Then the ones that [inaudible] shrimp in the daytime, they got to do something. You got to sleep at night a little bit, right? You can't go back the next night.

SSD: So most of your shrimping you do at night. Why is that?

DB: All kinds of shrimp just bury down in the daytime. When it opens up, you catch them day and night, and after a while, they get to where you're just strictly nighttime.

SSD: I wondered if it had anything to do with the temperature.

DB: Not that much. Well, the brown shrimp are just starting to come into the sound here now, the little shrimp. It'll open in June. Our season starts in June, probably the second Monday in June. June, July, August that's our prime months. The white shrimp show up around September. It's a different shrimp, a bigger shrimp. It runs right on up until it gets cold. Most of the time, end of November, December it's over with.

SSD: What kind of turtles have you seen just swimming around in the Gulf of Mexico?

DB: See these old green turtles once in a while. Once in a while, you used to catch a Ridley once in a while. [inaudible] endangered turtle and all that. Most of them are live. You catch them; they're live.

SSD: So you've seen some? Actually, you've had some and put them back overboard?

DB: Right. We keep them on deck most of the time.

SSD: Why is that?

DB: Well, if you throw them back, you're going to catch them again most of the time.

SSD: Right.

DB: We keep them on deck, and they'll come out of it pretty good. They run all over the boat. Then, when we quit the next morning, we throw them over the [inaudible].

SSD: Sure. Did you ever eat them when you were a kid?

DB: Never did.

SSD: Did you ever have a nest down on the island?

DB: Yes, we used to have a terrapin, not the green terrapin, but the terrapin.

SSD: Those are not sea turtles, are they?

DB: No.

SSD: But you didn't see any sea turtles nesting on the island?

DB: No. On the outside islands, yeah.

SSD: Really?

DB: Not recently. Years ago.

SSD: When you were a kid?

DB: Yes.

SSD: Did anybody you know eat the eggs?

DB: Oh, yeah. Everybody used to eat them.

SSD: Really? Have you eaten them?

DB: I haven't, no. About the size of a ping pong ball.

SSD: Do you know how they prepared them?

DB: I heard it was good in cakes and stuff, making cakes. [inaudible] rich.

SSD: Pastries?

DB: I've never eaten them. I've tried terrapin eggs. They're little oblong eggs.

SSD: Would you scramble them?

DB: We used to ball them. They just got yellow in them. I never liked them.

SSD: I didn't know that. They don't have a white?

DB: No. I never did like them myself.

SSD: Are they too rich-tasting?

DB: I don't know about the sea turtle's eggs, but the terrapin – I don't know. My mom and grandma used to eat them all the time. [inaudible]

SSD: I'm sure if you grew up eating them as a child, it would be just like my grandmother's –

DB: They used to eat the turtles, too, the terrapin. Back then, you'd eat any damn thing. Possum.

SSD: Well, if I were hungry enough, I'm sure I'd eat [inaudible].

DB: Well, they grow up doing it. You grow up doing that; you're going to do it, continue to do it.

SSD: My mother grew up in Alabama during the Depression. They were really poor. They would go work in the cotton fields, and on the way home, they'd pick wild berries. My grandmother had a cow and chickens. So she would make a cobbler out of those berries, and that's what they had for dinner many, many times.

DB: We used to eat the blackberry cobbler, mulberry. That was good eating.

SSD: But that's all they had for supper.

DB: Over here, you always had fish.

SSD: Yes, that's the nice thing about –

DB: You had some kind of seafood. It might not have been fish. It'd be oysters, crabs. There's so damn many ways to cook seafood; you never had no problem.

SSD: Yes.

DB: Seafood is good.

SSD: Well, is there anything that you want to put on the record that we haven't –?

DB: No, not [inaudible].

SSD: You don't have anything else you want to add? Well, then, I'll just say thank you, and I'll turn off the recorder.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/13/2021