

Louis Blum Interview

Interviewers : Don Davis and Carl Brasseaux

Carl Brasseaux: Memories and recollections...

Don Davis: And your father's. Um, uh...

Louis Blum: And my father's.

D: Wearing a beanie at LSU, okay?

L: Oh, okay. That kind of stuff, yeah.

D: Um, how shrimp was used by um, the Middle Americans and the, the, banana plantations, the importance of having your own barrel making facilities – all of those are really important to the story. And you have the barrel making equipment – those are all important because it's hard for people to realize that this is a product that you used to produce by the ton.

L: Yeah.

D: Alright? That when you go buy shrimp today they are almost finger food, and you were shipping them by the barrel – and not one barrel, hundreds of barrels. So you would just sort of reminisce...

L: Okay I'm gonna start with my uh, at the time that my grandfather started in business. That's the way I know how to tell the story.

D: Okay.

L: So that's what I'm gonna do. Around 1900 or so, my grandfather was in an orphanage in New Orleans. And got out of the orphanage, and he and got to uh, went to work for his uncle at uh J.H. Baking Company and it was a bakery and dry good company at that time in New Orleans and their names were (Levie?) - and they ran the company. And uh, they gave him a sales territory, which was the lower part of Terrebonne, Lafourche parish, and St. Mary parish, all of South Louisiana. And uh, so what he would do is he would make his rounds about, you know, once start going making rounds, and probably took him 2 weeks to make all his rounds by horse and buggy or whatever – whatever type of transportation he had at that time. And uh, so one of his places he used to stop is down in Houma where they had...and you know they told him he needed to go down Montegut and uh, Little Caillou and Grand Caillou and stuff like that, and visit those people down there. And uh, because the communities were developing and they needed some uh you know, goods to sell down there, so that's what he did. He just followed the little path that brought him down the bayous. And uh as he would go down the bayous he would make his sales to different little grocery stores or different people he would run into and stuff like this. But they didn't have any money because uh, they were very poor. But they had dried shrimp and uh, furs and whatever else and my grandfather would say, "well I need to sell my stuff. Why don't you give

me your dried shrimp – it looks like something I could sell in New Orleans and at Chinatown.” And uh, he uh, would take the shrimp back to New Orleans and sell it in the little Chinatown they had in New Orleans and he would sell it to these Chinese people and he would get his money. And uh, he would bring it to his uncle and say, “here uncle. Here’s what I produced this month or whatever, you know, and uh, his uncle said, “well you’re doing real good down there. He said you need to go and uh, start your own business with the dried shrimp.” He said, “that looks like a pretty nice little business.” So while he was in Houma uh, one day, uh, he was staying at a boarding house, and uh, he used to like to go on uh, main street and they used to have a little place where he could play cards and they had a little barroom and stuff like that. And the man that owned the barroom was a man by the name of Shelly Bergeron. And Shelly Bergeron liked my grandfather. He was a young man, he was uh, a man on the go he liked to make you know do good business and stuff like that. And uh, he kind of took my grandfather under his wing. And so after a couple years he told my grandfather - he said, “Look, why don’t we go into business together – you take the shrimp and you sell it in New Orleans” and he says, “and we’ll become partners and stuff like this. He says I got all my cousins and relatives and things like that run business down there and we can do well together. So at the same time he told him that there was a man in Houma by the name of Dr. Leon Discrepski who was owning a canning company who was canning shrimp. Large size shrimp. And uh, my grandfather went to visit with uh, Dr.(Discrepski?) and Dr. Discrepski gave him the name of his broker in California. And uh, his broker’s name was Henry Loose. And Mr. Loose uh, was a man of uh, some stature in California because he was in the San Francisco earthquake. And if you survived the San Francisco earthquake, and you were there you were someone of stature. Plus the fact that he was six foot five and he wore one of these great big old hats that make you look taller – but he was an old um, lumber jack. Uh, and uh, but he had moved to San Francisco and had a little brokerage business working selling different kinds of products, selling all over in Chinatown and all over he place. And uh, my uh, grandfather got in touch with him by letter, and sent him some samples of the dried shrimp, and he said that he was going off to Hawaii and uh, he had also to China on a sales trip, and he was going to take that product with him to see if he could sell it. So lo and behold, when he got back to my grandfather, he said “Leopold, I have sold a half a boatload of dried shrimp in Hawaii and another half of a boatload of shrimp in China.” And uh, so my grandfather uh, was kind of amazed at it and uh, they took him several months to get enough dried shrimp to get a, to send over there but they did it. And that’s what started our dried shrimp business in uh, in any kind of capacity. An uh, over the years up till about 1936 my grandfather and uh, his partner and Henry Loose sold up to two million pounds of dried shrimp a year to China and Hawaii. And uh, that’s part of the story that I know about.

D: And your family owned some shrimp drying platforms..

L: Yes we did

D: And that’s an important part of your story.

L: Okay. Well after, after they, they uh started selling dried shrimp they couldn’t uh, the um, the process had uh, had to evolve. And uh, they had to get enough production in order to get to 2 million pounds of dried shrimp a year. So my grandfather, his partner, bought boats and they bought um platforms that existed already and had some already built, and that already were in production. And some of these

platforms uh, were located offshore. What we call offshore up in the marsh grasses and stuff like this and a little bit you know at the end of these bayous like uh, like (Epolie?) bay uh, Bayou Carencro, uh, Basa Basa, uh, Seabreeze, uh, you know and all along the coast of Louisiana. And uh, I think my grandfather and his partner owned three or four platforms at one time plus other people owned platforms including the Philippines, Philippines who were in um, Grand Isle. And uh, they had uh Grand Isle of course that was called the Manila Village. And they were there for some time before my grandfather had started his business. They were probably there in the 1860s, 1870s, around that era. But in the Terrebonne and Lafourche parish my grandfather had started most of the drying of the shrimp and stuff like that. And those platforms uh, were built on little stilts floating in the marsh. And the way they made them float in the marsh and be able to have support themselves was that they would drive some little pilings down in the ground, maybe six or seven foot down in to the ground and six or seven feet about the ground. And in between the two little uh, poles, or the hundreds of poles they would put a little board, and it would support enough weight on those the little boards that attach those pilings together to have it just float on the marsh. And above that they would get cypress and you know and uh, pine and stuff like this and they would make uh, the platform on top of it and it was made in waves. It would have a peak and it would come down to another valley and it would come on up to a peak again and down to a valley. And some of those platforms were maybe uh, a football uh, or two football fields uh, big. And they made villages around. And the people lived out on those platforms and they could catch oysters and they would catch shrimp and they would trap furs and they would make lives out there on those platforms. And uh, some people would be born and die out there on those platforms. The priests, they had to go out there and make them jump the broom to get married. And stuff like that over the years.

D: Now how many people would you guess lived on a platform?

L: Families. It was probably anywhere from uh you know maybe fifteen or twenty to thirty or forty people at a time I would think that were out there. So...

D: Now when your grandfather was in the business you know, he had to boil the shrimp.

L: Sure.

D: Was it a brick?

L: It was a uh, sort of a brick boiler that they made at first and uh, they later on out of metal. And uh you know they had a blacksmith making big metal pots and stuff. I guess it was some of those bit boiling pots that they used in sugarcane. And they would ship cards of wood out there on those platforms in order to make the fire. And uh, those platforms uh you know, when they were full of shrimp, you know quite heavy and they, would sink a little bit in the marsh, but at the same time, plus the boilers were heavy and the houses that were on, and so they had to keep building them because they kept sinking but uh, they would do it and it was you know that's how they got along. And uh, some of the - as time went by, and after the uh, World War II was over with, they started building roads and schools and the communities started to really get bigger and bigger and down on the coast. They built roads down there, and so the platforms came to the end of the roads. And uh, the shrimpers got boats and they used to -

by the way I forgot to tell ya'll that – they had very few boats in those times. People would go and (inaudible) those shrimp by hand. And uh, um, they would catch uh, enough shrimp to fill up the platforms, so it was quite extensive and the shrimp were very plentiful in those days. Uh, and uh, so you know, I don't know exactly how hard it was for them to do it but it was a pretty hard life. So...

D: Now, your family owned platforms. I think a hurricane changed your mind about...

L: Yeah, in 1926 uh, a hurricane came and uh, right through Terrebone parish and blew away a lot of the platforms, and my grandfather and his partner had a boat, and I forgot the name of the boat. I wish I could remember the name of it. And they sent the boat to go get the people on a platform out by Seabreeze. And uh, the boat broke down. And they had nine people left out of the platform including a little boy that had gone fishing with his daddy. And uh, they got caught on that platform, and uh nine people drowned, and my grandfather and his partner decided that at that that time they were gonna try to get rid of those platforms because they didn't want to have that responsibility on them. If people wanted to dry the shrimp they could do it on their own you know, and we would buy it from them, and uh, you know instead of having all that responsibility, and they parked the boats and stuff behind the shop and we still have in fact, one of the masts off one of the boats is supporting the building in the back, back there. If you want to go walk back there. Haha – but uh...

D: Tell us about how you got involved – the company got involved in making barrels.

L: Okay well, they were making so much they uh, dried shrimp got so big and uh, I'm falling over in this chair. Haha This is not good. But uh, the dried shrimp industry got so big, uh that they were shipping the stuff in these 200 pound barrels and the company in New Orleans that made the barrels was a company called Mancuso Barrel Company. And they sent one of their men I guess he was a coppersmith I guess at that time. But he would come down here and next door we have a little old livery stable next door and he was placed in that little (inaudible) stable and he used to make barrels for my grandfather and his partner, and uh, so they could ship the dried shrimp. And what they used to do is they used to get the shrimp from down on the coast – a lot of times the boats would bring the dried shrimp – to the shop here in the back and it all floated in the back and my grandfather would take them out of the sacks or however they transported them to him, and whatever they would transport - and he would place it in these 200 pound barrels and uh, those barrels probably in the neighborhood probably the guy would make a hundred of them a week or, you know so a week. And uh, my grandfather would ship probably once every couple weeks or so on the little ferry - the paddlewheel boats that were going up and down the bayous here, and they would go through a Barataria Canal and go to New Orleans and uh, they would catch the steamboat in New Orleans and either pass through the Panama Canal or wherever they had to go to catch the to get to Hawaii and uh, China and down to Brazil and Argentina and Cuba and uh, Central America. And uh, they probably, those steam ships went down before they didn't go through the um, Panama Canal to get to China. I'm thinking he probably railroaded... put the stuff on the railroad...barrels on the railroad go to uh, California, and then from California they would catch the boat going to Hawaii and China. But the stuff that was going to Central America would go down through New Orleans on those steam ships or those paddle wheel boats. And uh, I don't know if that sounds kind of confusing, but -haha

D: But you had stencils

L: Yeah we had those stencils

D: That you would stencil on to...

L: Those barrels yeah. Those barrel stencils. You wanna put some of those in the...

Well, what we'd like to do, I think one of the names is Red Bugs, but you, you actually put several names...

L : Oh yeah, yeah. We had uh, several different names for our stuff we had uh Red Bug brand, we had Baby Brand, we had uh, Houma Brand, uh, and each - there were lots of people who were shipping dried shrimp as well as we were. Each one of them had their own brand names and stuff like this. And they were all trying to ship in barrels and stuff like that. And you could, some of them - I saw one the other day. It was the (Inaudible) Shrimp Company. But they - this was a box stencil, and it was made sometime after the barrels. Uh, I saw one that my friend has one down in the coast down there and uh, but everybody had like Red Devil brand, I think there was a Chauvin name, I'm trying to think of - they Gulf Food products is a uh, company in New Orleans, uh, Robert Hoy and Mr. Hoy and Mr. Hall. And you know it's stuff like that but we probably had the most brand names out of anybody. Um, I mean even today we still require sometimes we have to have ship on to some different brand names and stuff like that. Because the people order from that particular company..and (laughter)..so...

D: Now how did the industry change when you know, we got the ability to put shrimp in cans?

L: Well, the industry changed they were always putting, canning uh, the shrimp at about the same time that my grandfather went into the business as well. But drying shrimp was a way to preserve the shrimp and uh, for uh, years and months and for God knows how long dried shrimp will last. It's supposed to be the safest product in the world - as far as what the biologists told me at one time. And uh, and it has no harmful oils or resins or anything in it that get rancid or anything like that so it stays almost forever. You uh, because you take them out of where the bacteria that likes to grow in it - which is the water. And it gets down to probably about at the most people get dried shrimp down to having about 6% moisture content in it. You know if you stop dry it up enough, we usually the breaking point is usually 10 to 12%. And uh, that's a little scientific stuff maybe ya'll should put that in there. haha

D: Now you also mentioned - that was it your father that went to LSU?

L : Oh yeah my dad you oughta know that story. Okay. Uh, my daddy started to go to LSU around 1930 or 1933 or something like that. And he was a freshman and they had built the LSU stadium and everybody that stayed at LSU stayed - that's where the dorm were in the stadium. And uh, everybody that went there was supposed to be in the ROTC. And my dad uh, being a freshman, was uh...

(inaudible)

I start over again.

L: Get out of the quickbooks and you get it? What you doing – paying bills? Sorry.

D: Not a problem. You gotta keep working.

L: Haha

D: Uh, okay. My dad went to LSU in 1933 I think. And uh when he got there everybody was in the ROTC staying in the stadium, in the dorms of the stadium. And LSU was an agricultural college at that time. But anyway uh, the uh, guy that was the head of the ROTC uh, was, I think he was a captain or a major or something like that. And my daddy was a little intimidated by him being a young man and everything like this. One day he had forgot his hat at home in Houma, and my grandfather packed up his hat in a box and wrote on there the address and stuff like that and put a sticker on the box and shipped it off to LSU. And uh, the captain of ROTC got it. And he called my dad out of class. And uh, my dad, man, feet across the quad as fast as he could go. He was nervous as could be, you know, and he got in his office the uh, head of, captain of whatever it was told him he says uh, "you Louis Blum?" He says uh, "yes sir." And uh, he says "this your hat right here?" he says "yes sir." He says "well," he says, "uh, I was looking at this label on the box he says uh, Blum and Bergeron. Red Bug Brand Shrimp. Is that related to you?" and my dad says "yes sir." "Well let me tell you a story." He says, "When I was a young officer uh, I was stationed in Shanghai at the harbor in Shanghai, China. And he says I used to watch those coolies unloading barrels of shrimp from Houma, Louisiana. And he said Red Bug Brand, Blum and Bergeron." He says, "I often wondered where that shrimp came from and who had sent that shrimp over here, and said it always made me a little homesick." And he said, "it was a little touch of home." And he had a tear in his eye. And my daddy saw that tear coming down his cheek like that and he says, oh. He said "I got it alright now."

(laughter)

L: And so after that he says, "Son" he says, "That brought back a lot of memories to me." And so after that my daddy felt alright being in the ROTC at LSU. Haha

D: Well now how did the industry change when you know, you don't sun dry them anymore.

L: No, uh, industry changed around uh, I would think around 1962, '63. The price of shrimp doubled. In fact it actually tripled, and uh, before that when my grandfather first started in business, he was paying uh, the people down on the coast 6 cents a pound to 8 cents a pound for dried shrimp, and he was selling it for 10 cents a pound. And uh, so if they had uh, around of shrimp the whole platform of shrimp that went bad, uh, because they couldn't dry it because of weather or for some reason or another it just got rotten sitting on the platform, waiting for it to dry, they would shovel a whole thing overboard and they'd just go back to work again. It was costly and it cost them a lot of labor and everything like this, but overall, they were catching a lot of shrimp and stuff like this so they would just replace it. But when the price of shrimp got up to uh, over uh, a dollar a dollar fifty a pound, they couldn't afford to uh, throw it away anymore. So my dad, in a bout 19 I guess 48 or so like that came from New Orleans after working for (inaudible) industries in New Orleans during the war and a little bit after the war, uh came and helped my grandfather in the shrimp industry. And uh, he took uh an old heater out the bathroom

and made himself a drying machine. And he was drying shrimp and all the fish in drying machines here in the shop for about 15, 20 years and after that he had developed a method of doing it and he knew what he had to do. He had all the test run on it and found out it was even better than the sun drying shrimp. And uh, so the about 1962, '63, when the price tripled, those people said, we don't know what to do. We're gonna really have to be careful about how we're drying shrimp. And so my dad says well I got an idea. I got a drying machine that I've been drying shrimp with. Why don't I come down here and put a drying machine in each one of the platforms and ya'll can try it out and see how ya'll like. It. And it probably cost him about maybe a 150, 200 dollars apiece at the time to put a drying machine on the platforms. What they would do they would get some little old time uh, people would throw away industrial-type heaters, uh that, now you use them in your house to heat your house they call central heating units and stuff like that. And my daddy hooked them up and he put a blower on the back of them. And he built a box uh, about uh, six or eight by ten foot or six by ten foot wide and uh, with the heater bellowing underneath in the box and he had a screen sitting up on the top of the box, and they would pour the uh, the boiled shrimp on top of that screen and the air would be forced through the shrimp and it would dry it. Anywhere from 4 to 6 hours depending on uh, the time of year it was. And how much humidity or rain or whatever was going on, it could dry a batch of shrimp. In that thing - they could put 3 barrels of shrimp about 640 pounds or something like that and uh, so at first, they were still had they, they had a drying machine and they had their platform. And when the weather would get bad they would try to put as much, you know they would take the stuff off the platform and would dry it in the drying machine. But a lot of people who were selling dried shrimp at the time didn't want their shrimp that was coming out of the dryer because they didn't know about it. They didn't know if it was gonna be good or it was gonna be accepted or anything like this. But my dad knew because he dad been doing it for a long time. And uh, so we got a lot of that dried shrimp that came out of those drying machines. And uh so as time went on, the Board of Health would come, and said "Oh, we can't have ya'll drying shrimp on platforms like that. You know birds coming and dropping their stuff on it and uh, neutras, raccoons eating the shrimp and during what they gotta do and the maggots are coming and getting in the dried shrimp and everything like that and it's not sanitary." So eventually they would uh, you know new laws and new you know, safety regulations and stuff lite this, they all started using drying machines. And the price of shrimp kept going up and going and going up. So it saved all you know, you don't lose any shrimp today with drying machines.

B: What was the power supply for the blowers?

L: The blowers they had electricity

B: Alright

L: ...that they used at that time in 1960s, most of the platforms and stuff were down the bayou. Anybody that was offshore whatever, they still dried shrimp the old fashioned way. 'Cause either that or they got a generator, but it was too expensive for them to run that. Uh, to dry shrimp at that time. And uh, power uh, stuff for the gas dryer - there as a gas dryer - they used gas to dry hem. And um, so they still using that today. Still using the same drying machine my daddy put down you know, they drying

machines they used in those days. And uh, they – the people who are still in the dry shrimp business still use them.

D: Yeah, explain to us you know, dried shrimp arrived at this dock.

L: Where the dock in the back on the boat.

D: How did they go from the, the dock did they in a cardboard box, what's the process? How does the process work to move whatever you get – and the little ladies are out there, whatever they're doing...

L: You want me to go through my process?

D: Yes! Please.

L: You want me to tell you how from the point that the shrimp come off the boat?

D: Yep.

L: Okay. The trawlers go out and they catch the shrimp in their nets, and they put them in the ice holes on their boats. When they get back to the docks, they unload them into a big vat of water – they have ice and everything like that. And there's - this is kind of a way they wash the shrimp out. And out of that vat it's conveyed and weighed in baskets and stuff like this. And the shrimp that is going to the factory is iced down again and put on the side. The freshest product that they have that they want to dry is - goes to the boilers machine. And it's put on the side. And they unload the different boats and stuff. What they got enough to boil, they'll transport it to their boiler and the boiler is just um, a big old boiling machine where they can boil probably three or four uh, to six boxes of shrimp at a time. And uh, the boxes of shrimp that they used now are hundred pound boxes. And so they'll boil it and then from there, they'll either wheelbarrow it or they have a machine to convey it to the dryers, and it they just take it and dump it in the dryers and they spread it out, and they just turn the fan on to cool it off. And after it gets cooled down, then they'll start turning the heaters on. And the heaters dry the shrimp. And for a good while before the shrimp dry, it's not as hot as you would think it would be. Where that like some guys have 27 dryers. It's not as hot in there as you would normally think because the shrimp has moisture in it and it's trying to cool of the uh, heat, See? But after a while they're just overcome by it. And about the last hour to an hour and a half, that they drying the shrimp the temperature starts rising and some of those places get up to 140 to 150 degrees while they're still drying shrimp. And uh, you know in the places, and those people are really you know when they have to go and turn all that shrimp over they have to turn that dryers off to kind of let air out a little bit. You know some places they have some ventilation and it might get up to 120 or something like that. But I've been in some places where you had to crawl on the floor to get to the...haha. Because your eyes are burning but uh, the uh, it's a hot process that they use but anyway the shrimper boiled and put in drying machines and they shell the heads and everything like this. And after they dried, they'll take them they'll shovel them out back in some barrels or whatever it is. Bring them to the uh, to the beaters. Where they're loaded into the beater and uh, the beater is a, a big screened barrel. And it's a tumbler. And inside that, that, uh tumbler you look in your drying machine, you got some little things to make it hold – same thing with the dried

shrimp. Uh, unfold the dried shrimp. And what they'll do is they'll turn this drum and uh, it takes the shell and the head off of it, and the shell and the head crush up and it falls through the screen, and the meat of the dried shrimp remains and stays in that drum and so uh, we call the uh, stuff that falls out underneath the stuff - the head and the shells - shrimp brand. And the uh, meat, of course is dried shrimp. And we sell both. We used to try to sell the by-product which is the brand and also the meat product and it's reduced and we collect over a period of time. But anyway after they finish beating the shrimp, they move that brand out the way and they'll get under there and they'll open up the beater again and they'll either dump the shrimp into some troughs or shovel them into some sacks for us, or they'll just shovel them into sacks straight from the beaters. And from there. I uh, I come in to play and I come down the bayou and I pick the shrimp up. And I transport it back here. Then from here, uh, I unload it out my truck and I bring I tout to the uh, ladies in the back and they'll uh, put it in my grading machine. And my grading machine uh, is uh, homemade. Some people have some different type of graders like nut graders and uh, fruit graders or whatever it is to fit the dried shrimp. We made our own machine. And what it is it's just an old, uh, machine that just goes back and forth and there's different size screens inside of it that grade the different sizes of dried shrimp. And uh, from there uh, they'll take it and do what we call blowing it. It blows out some of the trash - some of the stuff that's remaining in the lighter parts of it, and then my ladies will be sitting on the uh, on the belt - a conveyor belt and the shrimp fall on to the - comes off from the blower and falls on the conveyor belt, and uh, they'll hand pick it. They'll pick the remaining heads and pieces of fish and trash and everything out of it. And of course, the bigger the shrimp you know, during the grading process the easier it is to clean. The smaller the shrimp, the more trash remaining in it so it takes a longer time to clean the smaller ones out than it does the larger ones. And from there, we uh, pack it in 50 pound boxes as it comes off that conveyer - depending on what size they're doing and we uh, seal it up, and we either put it in inventory or we ship it. And that's the process.

D: Now - okay that takes care of the dried shrimp. Now what do they do with the brands?

L: The brands - I have a building across town that I store it. And brand is a uh, particular kind of process. We grind it - we it's a lot of it is just basically shell and heads of the shrimp and what have you and what we do from there is we have these hammer mills that we grind it up into a fine power and stuff like this and it's used as bird and animal food. Uh, and also my tropical fish foods and stuff like that and I sell it to zoos and aquariums all over the United States. And if you've ever seen pink flamingos, uh, shrimp meal is something in there that makes the called carotenoid, that makes the flamingoes turn pink. And uh, that's the - really what makes them really pink. And uh, today I - not long ago I went to Audubon Zoo, and they were using some other kind of formula - probably some kind of beet meal or something like that - and the flamingoes are a little bit orange. Ha ha - And they're not eat shrimp meal at the Audubon zoo.

D: Now there's a piece of equipment Chauvin and Bergeron developed.

L: Oh yes. That's the, the...

D: Explain what that does.

L: Well, that beats the shell off the shrimp.

D: That's the big beater you were talking about?

L: That's the big beater that beats the shell off the shrimp. Now, that's been adapted and changed over the years, uh, from their original packing that my uh, my grandfather's partner and his friend, Freddy Chauvin made. And uh, but the basic principle is still there to do it. And uh, what happened was that the - in the old days, uh, before they had their beater, the people on the platforms would do what was known as the shrimp dance. And they would - when the shrimp were dry they would put their moccasins on or thick shoes, or thick something with thick soles on it, and they would get out on that platform and they would dance over the shrimp in a little line and they would call that the shrimp dance. And they were crushing up the shells off the shrimp. And what they would they do after they had all of that done, they would take a shovel and throw the shrimp up in the air, and the shells would go one way, and the shrimp would fall back in the shovel. They would put that in their, in their sacks or barrels or whatever they transported it in. And so one day my uh, father's - my grandfather's partner and them were out there on the platform and one of the little boys was running around with a barrel. And he had some dried shrimp in the barrel. And uh, the more he bounced the barrel around on the platform, the more shells came off the shrimp so it gave him an idea. So that's where they went to make the tumbler to tumble the dried shrimp. And uh, they have the patent they made and uh, that dried shrimp tumbler machine that beats the shells off the shrimp.

D: When did you move from barrels to boxes?

L: Probably - I would think probably in 1950s. I think the (Mancuso?) Barrel Company in the uh, must have been right after the war because they couldn't get the barrel material anymore and the uh, my grandfather was getting little older and he was shrinking down his business at that time, didn't need the barrels anymore. But the man that still made them moved across town and I think his family still lives in Houma, you know. That did that. It was a Wallace. I think the man's name was Wallace that did that.. But uh, I think it was in the 1950s that they maybe started using wooden boxes. En probably 1955 that they moved over to the cardboard boxes. Because I could remember when I was a little boy, we used to come and help my grandfather uh either put the cards on - you know putting up the little cards of shrimp to sell locally in the grocery stores, or making boxes. And we used to have used to get uh, the glue from the (Swift?) Company. And it would be some horse hoof glue. And as a little boy we'd take a paint brush and we'd paint the bottom of those boxes, and we had some bricks - I still got bricks by the way - and we'd just put those bricks in those boxes and let them sit there until they dry. I used to make seventeen at a time. I can remember like that because that's all the bricks I had.

(laughter)

L: And I used to wear myself out on Saturday or Sunday - try and make boxes to put dried shrimp in. and I'd make probably 150 or 100 or so at a time. And they would ship that.

D: And you told Carl and I once about your family needed ten thousand dollars, and you went to a local bank.

L: Oh yeah. Yes. My grandfather uh, when he started in his business, he needed to have money to finance to pay the people for their shrimp, and uh, there was bank in Houma called the Peoples Bank and Trust Company, and uh, my grandfather went over there one day and asked them um, if he could borrow ten thousand dollars from him. And they said, uh, "Mr. Blum, can you come back in a few days? We'll let you know." And he had been shipping shrimp and stuff like that they knew him to be a trustworthy guy and stuff like that so, uh he went back in a couple days and uh, they told him they said "Mr. Blum, we met with the board of directors and everything like this, and we agreed to lend you the ten thousand dollars." And my grandfather says, "I surely thank you for doing that." He says, "I know at this time it's a pretty large sum of money." And they said, "I know it is a large sum of money. It's the whole money that we have to run the bank." They lent him all the money in the bank to uh, to buy shrimp and ship it to China. And that was I guess about 1920, 1918 or so, something like that. I don't remember when you know when that was. But how do you say that? The whole, uh....

D: Capitalization

L: Capitalization of the bank. Ten thousand dollars. You know that's pretty good. And this business probably in the 1920s to 1936 was probably one of the biggest businesses - if not the biggest business in Terrebonne Parish.

B: How many people did you employ in that time?

L: I think my grandfather probably employed, probably - with people on platforms and stuff like that - it was uh, a tremendous amount of people. I mean you know, I don't know if he paid a lot of them, but they were all getting money out of it for sure. And uh, so. Anyway...

B: We've seen a photograph of this...

L: What you looking for? M&M? I just processed it! It's one box? Somebody already picked it up!

(inaudible)

D: Well one of the things, uh, Carl and I have seen a photograph that says, I think it says, Blum and Bergeron maybe a Mauler Fur...maybe a...

L: Oh, okay.

D: How did that come to be?

L: Well, when they started business they not only were in the shrimp - they were in any type of business that they could do - anything. And they had furs here that they were catching muskrats and stuff like this. And uh, my grandfather uh, I mean, the entrepreneur that he was, and got in touch with a company in Chicago and St. Louis to sell furs for them and they had a big fur business. Not only uh, when the shrimp season or when they were catching shrimp, uh, the uh wintertime seasons they would trap furs and stuff like this and we were in the fur business. And he also was in the canning business and cigar business and anything he could sell - dry goods and stuff like this and uh, they owned a farm and all to

uh and they grew potatoes to sell potatoes and stuff like this. Anyways, the fur business was uh, was a big fur business and some of our buyers were uh, (Alan Mauler?) And (B Maud?) and people like that, uh, old time people. And uh, I have pictures of uh, pictures of them, and here's to say on the front of the building, Blum and Bergeron Dried Shrimp and Fur Company. And uh they would ship those furs - muskrats especially - to uh, to St. Louis and such like that. And he uh, they were in the moss business too. They used to sell moss and stuff like that to the Ford Motor Company. I tell you that story?

D: We'll get back to that. I want you to finish the fur..

L: But anyways, uh, back in about my grandfather was getting a little older and such like this and uh, fur business was little bit too much for him to handle so Mr. Mauler, who was his a guy who used to buy shrimp - uh, furs for him - they were all basically in business together. And I don't know if you're referring to the time when my grandfather during the depression when the uh, is that what you want to find out?

D: (laughter) Okay. Yeah.

L: Alright. Well during the uh, when the stock market crashed, the banks failed as well. And uh, my grandfather had, I guess a premonition or whatever it was I don't know what happened, but he didn't deposit his money in the bank. And he went to see his fur buyer who was Mr. (inaudible) Mauler, and uh, they lived across the - well now across the Intracoastal - I don't think the Intracoastal was built in those days, I don't think so - but he went to see him, and uh, and uh, Mr. Mauler was in his kitchen and he had his head in his hands and he looked at my grandfather and he says, "Leopold," he says, "I don't know what you're gonna do. I got all these people working for us you know with the furs and everything like that." He says, "We don't have any money we can't pay them. The banks have failed." My grandpa looked at him and he says, well, don't worry too much. He says I didn't put the money in the bank. And he gave him ten thousand dollars that he had for him. He had 20 thousand dollars - he have 10 thousand dollars to Mr. (inaudible) Mauler. And then he went down the bayou and saw Mr. Gustav Lapyrouse

D: Lapyrouse

L: ...and he was a shrimp man down there for us, and gave him 10 thousand dollars, and he said "tell those people just to keep working." And that's , that's how that went. And so they were able to keep their business afloat because my grandfather kept his money. But Mr. Mauler - well he saw my grandfather with that money he got out the chair and he kissed him.

(laughter)

D: But how did you get out of the fur business?

L: Oh how did we get out of the fur business? Well my grandfather was getting old and stuff like this, and so I think he gave the fur business to Mauler. Either that or they bought it from him. I don't know any records or anything like that but they gave the fur business to him. It used to be right here down the street.

B: How exactly did the fur business work? I mean he had a whole network of trappers that?

L: Oh yeah he had trappers and stuff like this and what have you he had that would come here and bring furs and Mr. Mauler, and my grandfather or whatever it is they would go out, and they would buy - sometimes they would go out and pick up the furs and they would bring them here and grade the furs and stuff they used to fill up this building with furs – you know, with muskrats.

D: How did they make..did they ship by the bale?

L: They must've shipped them by the bale. At that time. They must've baled them up and shipped them. David, do you remember that fur company in St. Louis that had used to buy all the furs from Paw Paw and them? We gotta have some records somewhere on that. If I find that, I'm gonna give that to you. I'll let you know.

B: Alright. St. Louis?

L: St. Louis used to be a - who would know about those people?

B: Fur operations in uh, Victoria? Museum man.

L: Victoria Lumber but but...

B: Right it's the same company. Big international fur operation and uh, boy they were old old.

L: Yeah. You know who would know about that that would be um, the Parkers at um, that own the Parker um, Motor Company?

B: Uh huh.

L: Those people they were good friends with those people in St. Louis, yeah. But not the maulers. The Parkers. Uh, and they could tell you – Mike Parker – I was talking to him about that – not long ago – he remembers the name, Mike Does.. I can't remember.

L: So you got out of the fur business, which you were you got into the Spanish moss business?

They were in that already. They used to - that's a good one. That's even better. Uh, they used to have - they used to sell uh, the moss they used to dry the moss wash the moss and uh, moss out and get the lice and stuff out of it and they would dry it out on fences and stuff like this. And they would bring that all over. My grandfather would have to pack that in a certain size uh, wooden container and ship that to the Ford Motor Company. Okay? On the train. And the reason why they had to be a certain size container was not only were they stuffing the seats and the model T fords with the uh, with the moss, those little cartons, they used that to make the seats with. The backs of the seats. They had to have a certain size to uh - that was Henry Ford's uh, premise.

D: Were the boxes made of cypress?

L: I don't know. I'm assuming probably so. Cypress or something like that. They used to use quite a bit of that at one time. They had a lot of people that were selling that moss. My grandfather used to be one of them.

D: They ship to the Ford Motor Company?

L: Ford Motor Company, or, uh...

D: By rail?

L: By rail I'm assuming, yeah. That's what I was told. Haha They were in the turtle business they used to send little terrapin turtles. Like the Maryland Terrapins? Haha – those little small turtles I don't know if they even still exist.

B: : These were the small ones?

L: No they were making soup with them up in those restaurants up in Maryland, you know. They were famous for that. And my grandfather used to sell those and he they used to catch used to have those turtles behind Grand Isle. And he would go down there and he would stay in Grand Isle and um, (inaudible) it down in Grand Isle and get turtles and bring them back.

D: Do you remember how they brought them back?

L: I would think he had a little truck to get all them back.

D: Alright.

L: Yeah when they would put that in some sacks or boxes of something.

B: But how would they ship them?

L: He would ship that on the railcar. By rail - everything mostly went out by rail.

D: They got there fast enough obviously...so they could stay alive.

L: Yeah. My grandfather uh, could type and he could make papers you know (inaudible), and stuff like this. And they used to have people that would come here uh, and bring stuff up by when they built the roads to New Orleans and stuff like this. And one of the people happened to be a guy by the name of Mr. Sire. Johnny Sire. And he would go to the market in New Orleans, I think they owned a grocery store, and he needed something to bring to New Orleans, and my grandfather would load three or four barrels of shrimp on to his truck. And other people as well, not just my grandfather, but he would transport stuff to New Orleans to have something in his truck. And he would bring back groceries and stuff maybe for Dupont's or his own grocery store for some other people and stuff. And uh, my grandfather would type up – he didn't know how to write or anything – my grandfather would type up all his paperwork for him. And lo and behold, Sire Motor Company. Motor freight company come they got to go and that was a long time ago. And uh...

B: And that's how they started.

L: I think. Haha. That's what I was told. So I was you know I don't know if that's an actual part about it - I know those people were you know industrious enough and he would you know. To do stuff with, my grandfather to type up paperwork for him, and I think he's got some stock in it...

B: When they stopped shipping dried shrimp by rail, I assume you switched to truck...

L: We used motor truck, yeah.

B: About when did that change?

Well when the highways and stuff I guess when they you know when they started building the highways and stuff, and trucking became more popular than rail system. My grandfather shipped to a broker up in New York one time and uh, a railcar full of shrimp. And it got lost in the stockyard. And uh, he had to go to New York and get with his broker to go find it in the stockyards, and uh, I kind of remember my daddy telling me, he said that kind of ended - idea about shipping stuff anymore and freight an all that. But you know that could've been some time, you know. He wanted to find another way to do it. Because the shrimp got lost up there. And uh, there's all types of little stories that my dad used to tell me about people uh, going into business because of the dry shrimp. I'm gonna tell ya'll another little story. His broker - my grandfather's broker - called him up one day he said "I got two, uh guys that are immigrants from Germany in my office. And he says they're in the pet food business in Germany. He said but they immigrated to the United States. They're interested - they saw that we sold dried shrimp - but he said they interested in selling the by-product of shrimp dust and stuff like that. That makes good bird food." And uh, so my grandfather sent out a few sacks of shrimp dust up there. And Mr. Hershey called and he said what you want to charge them for that? And he said, just give it to him! And lo and behold Horse Mountain Company started. Now that's - haha- far fetched. Maybe. But that's what I understand. And uh, we still selling Horse Mountain today. So, still sell it.

B: Now this is, I don't know - if Don asked this while I was in the back - but, uh, asked about the percentage - the rough breakdown of what went into domestic markets and what went overseas? You know, in the shipments of the...

L: Over the years?

B: Yeah, just a ballpark figure.

L: Well when we first started, as I understand it, the first international shipment of seafood from the United States anywhere to any foreign country was my grandfather's business - that he sent to China. Back in 19 early 1900s or something as far as seafood is concerned. And uh, at least that's what we understand. But uh, before the 19 - before World War II, I'm assuming that probably most of the shrimp that my grandfather sent out of here went overseas. Because it was very inexpensive. And uh, during the depression especially, uh, because our - we didn't have any money here. And in China they were on the gold standard. And uh, remnants of the Dao Empress. And uh, their money was good and ours wasn't, so we had a good product to sell to China and so it was very inexpensive and it was good. Uh,

shrimp is red in color from Louisiana and it's something to eat. And so red in China is good luck. And it's also something to eat because they had a lot of families over there so it was a very good product of them. Plus it was preserved and it never went bad and so they could use it anytime - anytime they wanted. And uh, so I'm assuming that probably most of the shrimp prior to World War II, uh, went overseas. You either went to South America, uh, Cuba, or um, China or Hawaii or somewhere like that.

D: Did you know Mr. Loose?

L: Mr. Loose, yes. Mr. Henry Loose.

D: He was your broker?

L: He was our broker.

D: To China and Hawaii. How did you get into the markets in uh, Belize, Cuba, Brazil, Central America...

L: We had some brokers that were down there at the time, and also my grandfather - I think there was somebody at the United Food Company. And they used to run Whitney Building in New Orleans or something with the Whitney banks or some kind of way with that. And uh, I think that uh, what they would do is that they would ship uh food stuff down to Central America including dried shrimp to the plantations where they grew the fruit and vegetables and they would ship the fruit and vegetables back and then uh, dried shrimp and stuff like that were used on those plantations. I think they also used to use a lot of codfish from Maine and stuff at the same time. Puerto Rico their national food - uh, you know their national - how would you call it - meal or whatever it is - is made with codfish, and also you use a lot of dried shrimp too. Down there. And uh, it was a cheap way to feed people that worked on the plantations and such like that - and they had a tremendous sized plantations in Cuba and uh Central America, uh, I think down in Brazil. So....

D: Any idea how much, a ton, you mentioned 2 million pounds. So that's...one million tons. So if you were saying how much went to United Food or Standard Food, would it be a ton? Half a ton?

L : Uh, I just don't know.

D: Just curious.

L: I would think they would buy probably a ton or so at a time. So many barrels. 200 pound barrels.

D: Barrels...

L: 20 barrels at a time I would think. You know whatever they could put on the boat and ship to New Orleans.

D: Now a barrel is 200 pounds?

L: 200 pound barrels.

B: So every ten barrels was a ton.

L: Just to give you an idea my grandfather when he would load the boats and stuff like this, he would get some guys some big men and – I hate to say this - colored guys...and they would pick up those barrels and carry them on their shoulders. That was some strong men in those days...to do that.

B: Um, the dried shrimp...

L: You have to be exceptionally strong - My daddy used to tell me that when he was a little boy those guys used to pick up those barrels and haul them on their shoulders.

B: Um, when I was a kid, the Catholic population ate dried shrimp regularly in the Lenten season every year. About when did dried shrimp start to become a real commodity for something of importance here? Do you have any...

L: Oh it's always been because it was because they didn't have any way to preserve meats and stuff like this. They would - they would preserve like uh, stuff they would soak it in lard and stuff you know big vats and stuff. But as far as dried fish and dried shrimp, was concerned, it was something that they could preserve and they could keep all year long. They was like beef jerky or something like that - those guys out west would carry beef jerky with them and eat them like that – but the same thing here – the Chinese would eat dried shrimp just like, like, uh, beef jerky. And uh, it was always a tremendous product. If you go back in history and you take the uh, when the Spanish and the English was - when the you know they uh Spanish tried to invade England I think it was 19- not 19. I think it was 1512 or something like that, uh, they never stopped trade of codfish between the countries because it was that much of an important product and such. And uh I'm assuming it was dried shrimp was the same thing in the far east, you know. And such. And uh, in fact, dried shrimp is even supposed to be better than dried shrimp because it doesn't have any of those harmful uh, nothing to get rancid with. And uh, you know the idea of drying fish in uh, in dried shrimp probably dates back to right after the invention of fire because people needed to preserve foods. And stuff like that. And that was, you know - drying it is the best way to do it. So...

D: I don't know if Carl asked you but you know that Chinese played a very important role at least on the platforms and, you know, and at least in New Orleans...

L: Yes.

D: The Kwan Sun Company. If we can't find much information about the Chinese, if you have any knowledge about Chinese we would appreciate your comments.

L: As far as the Chinese, when they came here to..

D: Yes.

L: Well, uh, the Chinese - when they first came to the United States, Chinese had been a very secretive about who they are what they are or anything about it because they'd been oppressed so harshly in their countries – not just uh, recently, but for the whole history of it. And uh, when they first came to United States, a lot of them had to come here illegally. And uh, you know they would take the you know

- a name or some kind and stuff like this, and nobody knew how many Chinese were here or anything like that.. And uh, still to this day, some of the Chinese people are very, very particular about who they you know if they don't know you real good, they won't trust you enough to let you take their picture or anything like this. And even if they're regular citizens of the United States and to some extent, I understand that happens. I think the younger generation is a little bit more lenient. But some of the old people are a little bit more, particular. But it stems back to the early days when they first coming to the us they had to smuggle them in and uh, when they started doing that they wanted to come to the United States to work on railroads when they were coming across, you know, when they were trying to get them to join each other, and they were very good workers and such, and they could get into tight places because they weren't as big as the, the uh, Irish men that were there. And they worked hard and stuff like that. But they didn't like to eat too much uh, of the American food. They like their own food. Rice and shrimp and seafood, and uh certain vegetables and stuff like that. And when they first came to us in the San Francisco Bay that's where really - I think was the first dried shrimp operation. In the United States. And if you go to San Francisco and you go out on the water, there's an old boat that's sitting out there, where they used to catch shrimp in the bay of - the San Francisco Bay, and the guy the uh, it's a uh, it's a (inaudible) will tell you about the drying of the shrimp. That the Chinese when they got there. And uh, the Chinese in San Francisco uh, on the top of San Francisco, you have one area. But below San Francisco, they made tunnels, and there's tunnels all over underneath San Francisco and stuff like this and they keep it keep a lot of food stuff and things like that and uh, my grandfather had gone to Chinatown uh, probably in 1930s and 1940s and stuff like that and uh, he went to see some of the people he was selling shrimp to in Chinatown with this broker and they brought him underneath down there. And not only were they uh, selling dried shrimp and they had food stuff down there they had other things that were for sale, opium dens and stuff like that. A lot of people were down there sleeping and doing stuff that's kind of against the law, but it's not just the Chinese, they had a lot of people doing that opium. It was a little bit under - the under the cover, but um, uh, the uh, when they started uh, coming here to work on the railroads, and such uh, they needed something to eat, and so they spread out trying to look for certain areas and Louisiana happened to be similar to the climate they had in China. With the uh, marshes and bays and fresh water, marshes and bays and stuff like this and they came here and they started rice farming here. And with the rice farming they also started drying shrimp. And uh, while they did that they had a lot of Acadian people where who was trapping furs and they were drying they had come from uh, Acadia, and they had been drying fish and stuff up in Acadia and uh, so they knew the natural match. So the Chinese showed them how to make those platforms and stuff like this, build them up on the marsh and things like this. And the Acadians and them, they all you know work together and they learned how to make their livings together and uh, which was good, you know. And so the Chinese got the dried shrimp to eat while they were building those railroads I think, and uh, the uh, Americans learned how to make a living - so it was all pretty good. And uh, when my grandfather had got into it, they had been preserving dried shrimp and fish and stuff like this. They had some Chinese that lived here, and they had Acadian people and lived here and stuff like that, and Philippines was like you were telling me uh, not saying but telling me uh, manila village and you and all that's in and that was the Philippines and Chinese together. And uh, so there's a population of Philippines in New Orleans uh, that that uh, their family's in dried shrimp and that's what I was trying to get you to do with uh, Robert Hoy, and their family was Mr. Hoy and Mr. Hall and they were in New Orleans on St. Louis

Street. And they have a big complex down St. Louis Street, and I think it's across the street from the mint. And uh, they had apartments there where the Chinese were staying in the uh, I call it the quad but you know it was all open air and stuff like that - they used to haul the shrimp there and he would work the shrimp and people lived in apartments would work for him. They would ship their shrimp all over the place and, but of course I you know that's just my idea about it. You have to talk to Robert he could tell you that. But I remember those people when I was little and going there with my daddy to get some shrimp from him, and later on as I got older, Mr. Hoy and Mr. Hall had passed away and Ms. Chi was there, and that was their - either sister or, aunt or, somebody. And then Robert Hoy's mother was there. And but uh, they have a really interesting history. And uh, Robert was a physics teacher at UNO. And uh, he's got a lot of knowledge about his family and stuff and that's a really interesting uh, history probably as well. You could probably get some good information on them. Anything else?

D: Not this time! We've enjoyed it! Thank you!

L: Well I don't know how good I did...

Oh, hey. You're just telling the truth.

L: Haha - Oh no I lied a little bit

B: Oh no you didn't. We'll never know.

L: If ya'll need to make a reshoot I might be able to...