

The University of Southern Mississippi
Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Thomas Gonzales Sr.

Interviewers: Barbara Hester and Louis Kyriakoudes

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Louis Kyriakoudes, Director
The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage
118 College Drive #5175
The University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
601-266-4574

An Oral History with Thomas Gonzales, Volume 1043

Interviewers: Barbara Hester, Louis Kyriakoudes

Transcriber: Carol Short

Editors: Stephanie Scull-DeArme, Linda VanZandt

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AN ORAL HISTORY
with
THOMAS GONZALES

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Thomas Gonzales, and is taking place on March 12, 2012. The interviewers are Louis Kyriakouides and Barbara Hester.

Thomas: (A short portion of the audio unrelated to the interview has not been transcribed.)

Kyriakouides: Well, we'll talk about that. I want to get your view on that. So let me finish telling you about what this project is because it's a little bit different. I'm not a reporter.

Thomas: I ain't worried if you're a reporter or not. I go all over the world anyway. I been all over.

Kyriakouides: I work for the Center for Oral History, so I'm a history teacher at The University of Southern Mississippi, and we're just using the [BP Deepwater Horizon] oil spill as an opportunity to talk to people like you to preserve—we want to know about the oil spill. We'll ask you about that. We'll get to that.

Thomas: It's something dangerous.

Kyriakouides: Yeah.

Thomas: We don't know—

Kyriakouides: We don't know, right.

Thomas: —what's going to happen to us, yet.

Kyriakouides: Yeah. And I mean, like I said, I live in, you know, I live in Hancock County, Bay St. Louis, so it was winding up where we are, too.

Thomas: Yeah, right. (0:01:23.3) They had somebody call me one time about that, on the phone. And he asked me, he said, "BP done a good job?" I say, "No." Then he asked me about distributing the money. Did he do a good job with that? I said, "No, worst of all," I say, "because people with jobs," I say, "I know a boy because his mama was a good friend of ours. He died with cancer, and he was in jail for over two years. He come out of jail after the oil spill; he went to BP, and BP give him twenty-five thousand dollars. Her son-in-law was working on a job. He went to BP; he got

twenty-five thousand dollars. The beautician, cuts hair. She went to BP and put in a claim. She got sixty thousand dollars.” I said, “You call that a good job?” I said, “I’m a commercial fisherman. They shut me down completely.” I say, “I ain’t making nothing.” I said, “They only give me twenty-three thousand dollars. You think that’s a good job?” And then he asked me again; he say “What about the federal government? Did they do a good job?” I said, “The worst job of all.” He said, “What you mean?” I said, “Because the stuff they sprayed on us over here, (0:02:28.7) that it’s illegal to use in their own country, how our government going to leave them use it on us?” I said, “That’s not a good job there, either.” And then that’s when I told him about the Jews. I say, “I found out the reason why, today, why Germany was killing the Jews.” I said, “because they was breaking their country. They wasn’t buying nothing back from Germany.” I say, “And the country was going broke.” I say, “That’s the reason why they killed the Jews.” So he said, “You made a good point.” I said, “I couldn’t understand it in the beginning the reason why, you know, but now as I got older, and then I’d seen what I was dealing with, that’s the reason why.” And I made a good point.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah.

Thomas: Something was definitely wrong there because you ain’t going to go kill people for nothing. It’s like you hear this killing in the city and all that, that’s all for drugs and money.

Kyriakoudes: Well, that’s—

Thomas: But I was born down here by midwife.

Kyriakoudes: Old school. (laughter)

Thomas: A little further down.

Kyriakoudes: So anyway, so this, the way this works is we’re going to interview you, and I’ve got some general questions, but you tell me what you want to tell me because it’s not like a questionnaire. And then we’re going to actually type it up, and then we’ll send you a transcript so you’ll have a nice little book—

Thomas: I got a bunch of that already, transcripts from different reporters and all that from all over.

Kyriakoudes: Well, we’ll do the same thing. And so you can have that for your own use.

Thomas: The other day I went, me and my son—I got a little forty, flat boat. I trap muskrats during the winter back of Caernarvon, and they put that diversion. (0:03:57.7) It’s unbelievable today. I rode where I trapped muskrats in 1957 and 1958 with a boat that I would use to walk in the land and trap muskrats. Now I ride it with a boat. And now the federal government wants to put more diversions and that. That water do not build land. They don’t understand it. That don’t build land. You could build land. They got Miss Murphy(?) right there with a suction, dredging the river.

She built jungles. She built land and jungles and swamp. They got houses all over, off of Judge Perez [Drive], all that. That's all built from the ship channel, from the river, with a suction dredge, hauling it all in with dump trucks.

Kyriakoudes: Well, let's just start, let's start at the beginning, by just telling us—I mean, when we first met, you told me where you were born. But now that we have the recorder on, tell me where and when you were born, and where you grew up. (0:04:53.1)

Thomas: I was born March the sixth, 1938, right here on Delacroix Island.

Kyriakoudes: And you had mentioned that your parents were involved with—

Thomas: My daddy was a fisherman. They migrated here. When they first moved here, they used to live across that main bayou. They used to live on that side, and then they moved to this side. But the first place my daddy lived when they got this way, him and my grandpa, was at Oak River, palmetto huts. And they migrated from there because Oak River used to go into the river. There was a branch off the river. And that's how they started. And from there they kept moving down. From here, they moved from here, Yscloskey, Reyjaux(?) and all that area where you go. But most of the people, the old people was from here, all Spanish.

Kyriakoudes: And your parents were born and grew up here?

Thomas: My daddy was born—I don't know where he was born, but he died. If he'd be living, he'd be about a hundred and eleven, a hundred and twelve years old, my daddy. See?

Kyriakoudes: Yeah.

Thomas: So I grew up with all Spanish. The first language I learned how to speak was Spanish because my grandfather couldn't speak English. My daddy couldn't speak English. All his sisters couldn't speak English. And then the three sisters he had married Spanish men from Spain; Catalan(?), Gayaves(?), and Andalou(?), originally from Spain. So that's how—look, over here it was over 90% was Spanish, over here. They had a couple of families of French, but mostly was all Spanish.

Kyriakoudes: And when did you learn English?

Thomas: Went to school.

Kyriakoudes: In school.

Thomas: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: And they taught you; the teachers taught you there.

Thomas: And in school we could not speak Spanish, and if they caught you speaking Spanish in school, they'd punish you.

Kyriakoudes: Wow.

Thomas: So the English, like I used to tell the teachers, I'd say, "Look," I'd say, "I'm Spanish; I'm not an Englishman." But I couldn't speak it, the Spanish in school. They used to punish us.

Kyriakoudes: Where was your school?

Thomas: It was further down. The old school was wooden, and then they built a big, brick school. Down here they didn't bus nobody. It went all the way to the seventh grade. It was all kids from here. It was all big families, most five, six kids to their families. And they was all from down here. This was a big village at one time.

Kyriakoudes: And your family was large.

Thomas: Oh, yeah.

Kyriakoudes: Tell me, for the record, how many siblings you have.

Thomas: How many I got?

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. I mean, still surviving, but your mom, how many children did your parents have in the family?

Thomas: My mother—they had eight. I tell you what. She had three sons over here by midwife, and she had a little girl the first time she ever been to the Charity Hospital. And she went to her grave saying they killed her baby at Charity Hospital, out of that birth. After that she had four sons down here by midwife. So that's why she always did say they killed at Charity Hospital, the little girl.

Kyriakoudes: That's terrible.

Thomas: I tell you what. People don't understand about life, but there's destinies in life. You don't know. You don't know how you're going to die. You don't know what's for you, in store for you, the way you're going to go.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. And, just for the record, your dad's name?

Thomas: My daddy's name was Severo Gonzales. My grandfather was Severino Gonzales, in Spanish.

Kyriakoudes: And how would you spell your dad's first name?

Thomas: What, the first one?

Kyriakoudes: Yeah, his first name, just because we're going to have a transcriptionist.

Thomas: My name?

Kyriakoudes: No, your dad's name.

Thomas: My dad's name, S-E-V-E-R-O.

Kyriakoudes: OK.

Thomas: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: And then the grandfather is Severino.

Thomas: Yeah, Severino.

Kyriakoudes: And so your grandfather and your dad were both fishermen?

Thomas: Oh, yeah.

Kyriakoudes: And when they were active, I mean, did they catch crabs and finfish?
(0:08:49.8)

Thomas: Crabs, fish, shrimp. They used to seine the shrimp in them days with my grandpa and them. When they grew up, they used to seine shrimp and seine fish. I used to seine fish and trammel net, too. I used to fish with all that, (0:09:02.3) but they took it all away from me. I was a redfish—I used to love to fish redfish and drum with a strike net, but they took all that way from me. They took part of the heritage because the trammel net and the seine was a Spanish equipment, come from Spain. My uncle brought that over here from Spain.

Kyriakoudes: And one of the things we want to do with these interviews is preserve the history of these fishing techniques. So could you explain? I mean, I know what a seine net is, but could you explain for the record what a seine net is, and how you use it, and where you would use it?

Thomas: I used to use it all year round, the seine all year round. We used to fish the Gulf with my daddy and them, the sandbars out there. And know people have the wish, and the Good Lord give them that wish; it's unbelievable. I had a uncle was trapping, and his wish was always to die on the deck of his boat. That's how he died. I had a first cousin; his wish was to die with his hip boots on, trapping otters. Him and his brother was trapping otters. They had a set on this end and a set on this end. He had a otter in this one and an otter in this one. He took this one out, and his brother, his youngest brother took that one out, and when they was going to run the next trap behind a windbreaker—you see how they got them cabins on a boat—he dropped dead behind the windbreaker. He got his wish. It's unbelievable. And people don't realize how precious life is. See me; I'm like that duck flying south. I don't give a quack. I'm enjoying my life. I go dancing every Saturday night. I can't go on Sundays because the boss can't handle it two days in a row. (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: Well, so your dad and your grandfather, and even you as a young man—

Thomas: That's all I did.

Kyriakoudes: —used seined nets. Again, what were the principal finfish, redfish?
(0:11:00.6)

Thomas: Redfish, drum, sheepshead, garfish, just about every fish that we could sell.

Kyriakoudes: [Speckled trout]?

Thomas: Speckled trout.

Kyriakoudes: And where would you sell them? Would you take them out to New Orleans and sell them? (0:11:12.0)

Thomas: No. I didn't have to leave here. They had dealers here. Sydney Morales(?) used to buy the fish. Adam Mellerine(?) and Randy Cootee(?), all them used to buy the fish they had. They buy the seafood right down here. I don't haul nothing. They got the dealers; that's the middleman. He buys it from us, and he ships it. Now most of the crabs go to Alabama. I went to a restaurant one day. My wife's niece was singing there, and we went there, and I went in the kitchen. And a guy showed me this container, Alabama crabmeat. I say, "You might have Alabama on it, but that's Louisiana crabs." "Oh, no, no, no." I said, "Don't tell me," I said "because that's where my crabs go, to Alabama to the processing plants," say, "and you're buying it back."

Kyriakoudes: Is that in Bayou La Batre?

Thomas: Yeah, Bayou La Batre.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah, yeah. There's a lot of big—we've been down there and talked to some of the folks down there.

Thomas: It's unbelievable how things goes around and come back to you.

Kyriakoudes: Tell me how when you were—try to remember back when you were a youngster and you were first starting to learn how to fish. Tell me. What are some of your earliest memories of being on the water that you can remember? (0:12:26.6)

Thomas: Been on the water since I was old enough to walk; I've been on the water. They used to tie me. They had the shade on that, to fish white trout and channel mullets by hand. They used to tie me so the fish wouldn't pull me overboard—that's how big I was—to that post that was in the back.

Kyriakoudes: So to keep you on the boat.

Thomas: I trapped muskrats. (0:12:48.6) I got the evidence on the end of this finger. That's how big I was. I had a brother eighteen months older than me, and I got traps—no, they downstairs. It's a jump(?) trap, and we used to carry a boat. Like he was heavier, I used to put it down, and he used to put his feet on it and push it down, and I was sitting, and his foot slipped off. And it was cut behind this fingernail, and I had to paddle the pirogue across the bayou, back to the camp because I used to spend three months in the wilderness out there, trapping muskrats during the winter. And my mother took Octagon soap and that and washed it and put it back together, and that was behind the fingernail. You see the end of the finger as I grew out?

Kyriakouides: Yeah.

Thomas: See where it wind up at, on the end of the finger. (laughter)

Kyriakouides: Yeah, I see it, yeah. (laughter)

Thomas: So that's how big I was.

Kyriakouides: Wow.

Thomas: So that was my way of life. I don't have no education. They had a principal, came by my house. I was making a trawl, cutting out a trawl with a knife, a webbing. I was making a trawl, and he come there. His name was Frank Fernandez(?). He was from Yscloskey, was the principal down there. He said, "I'm going to get you back in school." So I gave him the knife, I said, "Here, finish cutting this trawl out." He say, "I can't do that." I say, "I can teach you. What you going to teach me?" He tells my daddy, he say, "He's a fisherman."

Kyriakouides: (laughter) Right. Well, you can get your education in a lot of ways.

Thomas: Oh, yeah. That's all I ever done. I enjoyed it. I'm going to tell you what, about fishing; it's the freedom of life. (0:14:14.0) You go when you want. If you don't get up in the morning and you don't feel like going, you stay home. But if you work on a job, you got another man telling you what to do. You see? So me, I accepted it as a freedom of life, and I enjoyed every moment. My son's just like me; he used to fish with me.

Kyriakouides: Tell me about when you started out on your own as a fisherman.

Thomas: Started out on my own, I'm going to tell you; it's when I got married. I was almost twenty-six years old. Before I ever got married, all the money I used to make fishing and all that used to go to my mama and my daddy. I didn't keep a penny. I started getting my money after I got married, and I was almost twenty-six years old. I used to get ten dollars to go bumming on a Saturday night. That was it.

Kyriakouides: Where would you go on Saturday night?

Thomas: Oh, I used to go to the Camellia Club. They had a place in Saminar(?). They used to call it the Three Leaves Music Box. And sometimes I used to go to Raceland to go dancing.

Kyriakouides: Have a little fun.

Thomas: I still do. I enjoy it. People say they ain't ever seen nobody that can dance like me, yet.

Kyriakouides: So before you got married, were you working with your father?

Thomas: Worked with my daddy till he—I'm going to tell you how my daddy died. (0:15:34.4) He died burned. The boat caught on fire on him after I was married. I had my first daughter, and he was sixty-five years old, and that's how he died, burned.

He swallowed the flames. The boat caught on fire, gasoline, and he swallowed the flames, burned his lungs.

Kyriakouides: Oh, that's horrible.

Thomas: And I tell you what. He was at Charity Hospital. The doctors and the nurses and that couldn't get over it; he didn't feel pain. He was never in no pain. They didn't have to give him nothing for pain. And I tell you what; he didn't feel pain. He didn't know what pain was. He had this, over here with the sinuses. They had to remove that bone, and they told my mama he had to take his aspirin or something. He say, "No." Never did complain once, didn't feel pain. And I seen that on TV one time, with these kids, they would get burned and all; they didn't feel the pain. I say, "My daddy was one of them." He didn't know what pain was. He didn't feel pain.

Kyriakouides: Yeah. About when was that? What year? Do you remember, roughly?

Thomas: Nineteen sixty-five, a couple of weeks before Hurricane Betsy. (0:16:37.8)

Kyriakouides: Right, yeah.

Thomas: My mother's house down there was a little straight—like the trailer here. What it was? One, two, three, four bedrooms, four rooms. And they used to lay the bodies up in the front room in that house, and I used to sleep where they laid the bodies. When I first got married, me and my wife moved in my daddy's house till I moved over here, and I told her, I say, "They laid the coffins this way; they laid them this way." Twenty-eight bodies were laid out in that house.

Kyriakouides: These were people that drowned in Betsy?

Thomas: Yeah, not down here.

Kyriakouides: Yeah. Oh, OK.

Thomas: Not down here. We move out. When it storms, we go up to higher ground. When I was a kid we used to go Caernarvon [St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana]. But here it was a big jungle at one time. It was nothing but oak trees and all that, high land, and we used to leave from here and go to Caernarvon. In 1947 we was in Caernarvon for a hurricane, and they came and evacuated us out of there and brought us to the courthouse. Not that new one, though. Now it's a school. Over here in St. Bernard, that used to be the old courthouse, and they brought us there. It rained for seven days and seven nights, nonstop. So my mama had a niece that lived in the city, and my brothers and them walked all the way to Poydras and called a cab, and we went to the city for about a week, [stayed] by our first cousin, my mama's niece for a week.

Kyriakouides: So when you started out on your own, fishing, after you got married, had you saved money for a boat? How'd you get started? How did you get the money to get started? (0:18:13.2)

Thomas: Oh, working, working, because we had boats. My daddy had a boat. I'm going to show you a picture of his boat. It's old. You wouldn't believe the name of that boat. That was my daddy's boat right there. That's where I grew up. That's the boat.

Kyriakoudes: Wow, yeah.

Thomas: Took his life, right there.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. That's the one that was burned, later burned.

Thomas: The one that got burned with him, right there.

Kyriakoudes: Could I take a picture of the picture?

Thomas: Go ahead.

Kyriakoudes: That way we can—

Thomas: You go on a computer; you get all the pictures you want from this area, here, trappers and everything. You see me; I got the same problem as my daddy with this right hand? It shakes. And that was his boat. You know what the name of that boat? The *Good Time* because he loved to dance; he was a dancer. He used to love his good times. And his brother tells him—he say, “I don't know what to name the boat.” And my brother tell him, he say, “I know the name for your boat.” His brother, he say, “The *Good Time*.” And that's what they named it.

Kyriakoudes: Great. That's terrific.

Thomas: Now you go on the Internet; you'll find a lot of pictures of this. All this here is on the computer and that. And you can find a lot of history of St. Bernard Parish, of this little part of St. Bernard Parish. I got a second cousin—you see that paddle up there?

Kyriakoudes: Yes.

Thomas: He made me that. He engraved that. It's all burned in and then painted. That's that flat boat I got right there on the side of the house.

Kyriakoudes: Here.

Hester: Oh, sure. You mind if I take a picture?

Thomas: Go ahead.

Kyriakoudes: Just since you mentioned it.

Thomas: Yes.

Kyriakoudes: So tell me about the first boat that you had when you were—

Thomas: This is the boat I worked on. And my daddy had a skiff. And they had a first cousin had a air-cool to sell, with the shaft, everything for it. So I told him, I said, “Why don’t you buy it for me?” He say, “No. You want it?” He say, “You get on the boat. We’re going to fish seine.” He say, “But you get you some knives and that and a hatchet and come and skin the garfish. You get ten cents a pound for it. We’ll send it to the factory, to the market.” So that’s what I did to buy it. (0:20:28.0) After I bought it, I fixed it all up. I was going to fish crabs. In them days we used to fish with the crab line. (0:20:34.4) (inaudible) with a hook and the bait (inaudible). And when I fixed it up and went and fished crab, when he quit fishing seine, he jumped on the boat. And we was fishing crabs. He’d go collect. So I wasn’t on my own. And like I say, I didn’t get on my own till I got married.

Kyriakouides: Yeah. And when you did get on your own, like you said you worked to get yourself set up, did you have your own boat then?

Thomas: Oh, yeah.

Kyriakouides: Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah. I had my own boat. (0:21:03.0)

Kyriakouides: How big was it? Tell me about it.

Thomas: Well, it was a crab skiff, something like that flat boat, but it was with a point on it. I lost that with [Hurricane] Betsy, and then I wound up having one built. My cousin built it out of plywood, and I shrimped and fished. I dredged oysters. I did everything there is in the fishing industry here, everything. (0:21:27.1)

Kyriakouides: When you were doing it all then, how did you balance it over the year? I mean, when did you shrimp? When did you oyster? When did you trap, if you continued to trap?

Thomas: I trapped. I fished crab, fooled with nutrias. I trapped Bohemia(?) down toward the river there for twenty-one years. It used to belong—the state was controlling it. (0:21:48.9) There was a game management. And I trapped down there for twenty-one years, trapped nutrias and rats and coons, otters, everything that I could make a living with. And I’m still doing it. I trap nutrias. I just picked up the trap the other day. I wound up; I done so much. I wore the body out. I wound up with fever blisters. See, when my body gets tired, I get fever blisters, and I’ll get up the next morning with fever blisters if I overdo it. Once you get that old, you know?

Kyriakouides: What’s the market for nutria? (0:22:19.6)

Thomas: This year they (inaudible) the nutria tails, five dollars a tail. They had a bounty; they got a bounty on them. The government put a bounty on them. Now, I used to sell the hides and that, and they had this old man, come from Galliano, and he died the other day at ninety-one years old, and his son comes. He’s supposed to come today and pick up an otter I got in the freezer and six muskrats that I caught when I was trapping nutrias. And I used to sell the nutrias and that, and the hides, too, and

sometimes I'd sell them whole. One winter I bought thirty-five thousand nutrias right in front of here, for this old man. I was loading two trucks a day from the trappers and the hunters. But they can't sell the fur no more. The fur went to China. The only fur they're buying a little bit are the otters and the muskrats, but the nutrias, no. They can't sell it no more.

Kyriakoudes: So it's pretty much just the state bounty.

Thomas: Right now he took, what it was? A hundred and nine from me, the whole nutria, and he was skin them and try and make dog food with the meat. See, they was feeding the alligators and that. The alligator farmers was buying all the nutria meat and that. You see? And I don't fool with just the meat, reading the gas meters or water meters. The water meters; there ain't no more gas. I made a living selling just the meat at ten cents a pound. I used to go hunt them at night and be back home for 9:30, ten o'clock with a hundred and fifty, two hundred. The next day I'd just rip the hides off them and cut the legs and all that off, and sell it for—they used to use it for the mink farmers, too. And all that went down the drain. And then, now the alligator, Purina Dog Chow is making the food for the alligators, so now they ain't using that no more. Because this way they don't need the freezer. You see? They used to grind it up. This used to be the next-door neighbor's boat, the Evans. But I say, if you go by the last names, you could tell what's their nationality because mostly down here was all Spanish. Moraleses, Gonzaleses, they have seven different families of Gonzaleses down here, and I wasn't related to none of them.

Kyriakoudes: Interesting, yeah, wow. Well, you had mentioned the mink trapping and the otter trapping. When you were younger, how big was that, and how does it compare to now?

Thomas: Oh, that were big. The last year we trapped back of Caernarvon, it was in 1957. It was a hundred and sixty acres of land; we caught twenty thousand muskrats. There was five of us on that; it was a hundred and sixty acres, it was. We was five trappers that saved the land because rats ate all the grass, made nests, and by the end of the winter, all the grass come back up. The land got solid again. And now you ride through it with a boat. (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. And tell us about how much land has been lost around here. (0:25:43.0)

Thomas: How much land has been lost? We ain't got no more land. I'm going to show you, when we get ready. They got a little levee right behind me here. If it wouldn't be for that levee, I'd have water under this place right here.

Kyriakoudes: I saw that. Right. That's just in your backyard, just about—

Thomas: That's in the backyard.

Kyriakoudes: About thirty or forty yards.

Thomas: You see, people don't realize it. When they dug that ship channel, it destroyed everything. They ain't never had—they had all kind of hurricanes over here. Nobody ever lost a house over here with hurricanes, but when they dug the ship channel, the ship channel was dug before [Hurricane] Betsy. They had three houses on this land. We was three brothers living here before Betsy; cleaned it all, took the three houses. If it wouldn't have been for that ship channel, it wouldn't have done that because you know how much land it took away from us? You go down there; them lighthouses used to be on land. Where they at now? About five hundred feet in the water, and that's what destroyed this place, started it.

Kyriakouides: Well, I know at Shell Beach—

Thomas: It destroyed it.

Kyriakouides: —you've got to cross the ship channel, and I know there used to be a road—

Thomas: Right.

Kyriakouides: —and houses on the other side of the channel.

Thomas: Right, on the other side of the ship channel, it go all the way to Shell Beach.

Kyriakouides: Yeah, as you head to whatever that fort, that old, stone fort is.

Thomas: Right. They had the fort and all that. I used to go, drive, to the fort. Now, no.

Kyriakouides: Right. It's just water.

Thomas: Yeah. You go fishing down there; you see how much it washed away, and the same thing over here; put too much water. And then this diversion put more.

Kyriakouides: Tell me about this diversion here. (0:27:19.6) When you say this diversion, you're talking about this channel right here?

Thomas: No, no. That comes from Caernarvon. It's comes from the river. You ever been down, going to the ferry?

Kyriakouides: I haven't been to that part yet, no.

Thomas: If you ever go down towards Belle Chasse Ferry? You're going to see it once after you pass RBBI(?). You're going to see it; they got that diversion that crosses, comes from the river. They got two, in Bohemia, of them diversions. I trapped down there with it, and that bayou when coming from that siphon during the winter, you had to be two people on a boat to run the nutria traps in that bayou because you had to hold it at a certain speed against the bank. Then one of them run the trap, and that's how you do it. If you slow it down, it'd wash you away. When I trapped there, they had a Southern Natural Pipeline, when I trapped down there. I used to anchor my boat. I had a Lafitte skiff; we built it in the backyard. The name of it was

the *Tom's Pride*. And we used to camp there when we got it from—now, where I used to camp with my boat, what they call it Bayou Lamoque(?), from that pipeline out, I used to trap nutrias and coons and otters and everything. Now, you go there from that pipeline out, there's no more land. So they got two there. If that was to build land, that land should've never left. Right there tell you; that land left. It's just like over here; the land left. You see they got a certain type of grass that we got here. It's a three-corner grass, and when it grows, it'll get roots about that thick in one little stem, and it's solid. You could walk in it with them boots and them shoes. It makes solid land. That destroyed it. And when they pumped all that water, it separated it from the bottom, and it floated up. You walk on it; it used to do that and make waves in front of you. Pumping too much water, it floated it up. You see this little bayou here was filled in after Katrina. Caernarvon Bayou, I had a big twenty, thirty-six-foot skiff, boat; my son-in-law used to run it. We had to dig Caernarvon Bayou out after Katrina. (0:29:36.8) You could walk across it. They had to dig the boats out. They had to dig the bayou to get them boats out.

Kyriakoudes: The storm had thrown up the mud?

Thomas: Right. It took everything from here, brought it towards the river. And you could walk across Caernarvon Bayou. It was filled in, and they had to dig the boats out, the skiffs, all them boats. I had one the size of that one there. It's still going around. I sold it. It had a three-hundred-and-seventy-five-horsepower John Deere. That's my cousin's boat there; had a three-hundred-and-seventy-five-horsepower John Deere in it. My son-in-law used to run it, but he never went shrimping or nothing on it. When I bought it, I paid—what it was? Seven thousand; had a three seventy-five Caterpillar in it. And when I bought it, I was going to deck it over and put a cabin and all that on it. He was sitting by the table, eating. He said, "Father-in-law" he say, "if I fix it up, could I run it?" I say, "Go for it." So he fixed it all up. He made a nice-looking boat out of it, and then he went; he was almost finished with it. He asked me if he could get it on a seismograph job for the oil company. I say, "If you get it on, go." So he did it. He got it on the job. He ran it for five years on the job, for the seismograph. It was three hundred fifty dollars a day he was getting for the boat.

Kyriakoudes: That's pretty good.

Thomas: The first time he ran it, he ran it for three months. And he had bought stuff on credit in that Fisherman's Net up there. So he came; he say, "What you want for the boat?" I say, "Nothing." I said, "Go pay that, what you bought from Fisherman's Net over there. Go pay them off." So he done good with it.

Kyriakoudes: And is he still a fisherman?

Thomas: Yes.

Kyriakoudes: Your son-in-law?

Thomas: He's got his own boat. It's a little further up here, solid green, right there. He's got his own boat. He started that boat, and he finally finished it when he went to work for BP. It passed Katrina (0:31:35.4) right here in the backyard. I had a big oak

tree. It was tied up all over to the trees and that, and it survived Katrina right here in the back yard. My house was gone. Our houses was gone, (laughter) but that one survived. That house survived. Them two right there survived Katrina, and the one further down survived Katrina. So y'all know Barbara and Peter?

Hester: I have a friend in Picayune. Her name is Jean Hartfield. And she and Barbara are friends, and that's how I got Barbara's name.

Thomas: Yeah. Barbara grew up right there; not this trailer here, this next one right over. That's where Ralph and her husband and Ralph and Barbara live.

Hester: Yeah, yeah. Do you think maybe we could chat with her today, maybe get with her?

Thomas: With who, Barbara?

Hester: Yeah.

Thomas: No. They not here. They sold everything; they left. Yeah. They living in Picayune somewhere.

Kyriakoudes: I was wondering; maybe I could talk to your son, too, afterward. I mean, your son-in-law, if he'd be interested, make an appointment with him if he's still around.

Thomas: I don't know about him. He's kind of peculiar sometimes. (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: OK. Well, I'll call him.

Thomas: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: Tell me—

Thomas: He's from the Ninth Ward, my son-in-law.

Kyriakoudes: Is that right?

Thomas: He's from the Ninth Ward.

Kyriakoudes: OK.

Thomas: My daughter-in-law's from the Ninth Ward.

Kyriakoudes: It's just like when Katrina, we, I didn't leave the parish for Katrina. (0:32:48.3) Me and my wife spent it at my father-in-law's house, right there in Violet on Colonial. We had five and a half feet of water in that house, and we went in the attic, and I made a hole in the attic. I had a chainsaw up there with no gas. I had to (inaudible) swing it. And what I had was a hammer and a little, brand-new, little handsaw about that big she had bought, had all that up in the attic. And I looked up, and I saw that done in plywood, so I took the ears of the hammer, and I chipped a hole out, and I stuck the saw in there, and I cut a square where we could get out. So I got

up, got out, and she flew over, our governor; she flew over. She was all dressed in red with a helicopter, waving at me on the roof. I told her; I say, “The governor just passed over with the helicopter.” And so they had a puff of wind coming that took my cap, and she’s sitting down there. And I looked down; I say, “Hah! Thought I was a refugee; now I’m a full-blooded refugee.” She say, “Why?” I say, “I just lost my cap.” (laughter) Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: After Katrina you just came back to rebuild? Tell me about that. Tell me about rebuilding.

Thomas: I came back. I bought this trailer in Vicksburg. This trailer come from Vicksburg. But I had bought two lots of land up the road in a trailer park because I didn’t know if they were going to leave me come back down here or not. So I was prepared so we could come back down here. And when I bought this trailer, the guy raised it up for me. The insurance gave me thirty thousand for them to raise it up, but I had my flood insurance. I bought the trailer. So I talked to this contractor, and that’s what he does, build boat sheds and all that down here for the recreational, and he picks up trailers and houses and all. So he came, and I got him to do it for me, raise the trailer up, put the stringers and that. The rest of the work I did it myself, like that floor and that decking and that; that’s three-quarter plywood. I done all that by myself and the railing and all that. And what he did, he raised the—drove the pilings, raised the trailer up, built that set of steps and that one with that little porch. It was thirty-nine thousand. So I did the rest myself.

Kyriakoudes: How long did it take you to get back on the water after Katrina?
(0:35:08.1)

Thomas: Oh, it didn’t take me long. As soon as they start buying the crabs, I came back because I had launched the boat. Me and my wife launched the boat and went looking for crab traps, but I had to make all new ones. I lost them all. I had close to three hundred across the bayou there, and it took them all, wiped it out, the (inaudible) everything. I had stuff that belonged to my mother, dishes and that in that attic. Some of those dishes might’ve been worth big money today because it was old stuff. And then she had a lot of papers from her daddy and them that was going back to her ancestors.

Kyriakoudes: And that was all lost, too, yeah.

Thomas: Yep, because her grandpa was Mexican, and he was a general or something with Poncho Villa, her great-grandpa.

Kyriakoudes: That’s fascinating. Let’s talk a little bit about the [BP Deepwater Horizon] oil spill. How long did it take for this area to get affected by the oil spill?
(0:36:12.0)

Thomas: Ah, it’s affected right now.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah.

Thomas: Because before the oil spill, we was making some serious money, fishing crab, me and my son. (0:36:19.6) We had a good business going because I filed one year eighty thousand. The following year I filed ninety thousand. This year I don't know if I filed fifty thousand. That's how much it declined after the oil spill. We ain't making the money that we made with the crabs before, like we was before. So something is wrong there. Got to be something to do with the oil spill. Before the oil spill, we were doing great.

Hester: Could I ask a question? Is it because the crabs aren't as plentiful before, or is it because they're not buying crabs?

Thomas: It's just not as plentiful. But [three] things against us right now. (0:37:00.7) We got redfish; his favorite food is crabs. See, we had that grass before, and it used to protect them, but the redfish are so abundant right now. The other day I went to set a nutria trap and when I hit the bank, I got me one about that big. He jumped on the bank. They got so many, they jump like mullets because they got overpopulated. They don't realize it because we had crabs. We had to freeze out; they ain't had no crabs and that. They had so much fish, they couldn't fish the redfish or nothing no more. (0:37:35.2) We couldn't make no money with crabs. I run a boat launch, me and my younger brother. We got a boat launch. We was running a boat launch. We had rented it, and we was running a boat launch. Then in, I think it was [19]85, we had a big freeze. My wife's got pictures of my son walking on top the ice in the lakes; that's how thick it was. After that I had to shut down the boat launch. Nobody was going fishing. So my younger brother said, "What we going to do; we're going to go fish crabs." I used to catch more crabs with two hundred crab traps. Now that's what I catch with a thousand, after the freeze, because it killed the fish. The crabs come back. And if you don't have a freeze to defrost something, that's going to go down to the ground. They ain't gonna have nothing no more. And they don't realize it. Wildlife and Fisheries, they doing things that they don't realize what they're doing. We ain't had coyotes here. They brought coyotes to get rid of the nutrias. Come on. It's like the nutrias; they brought the nutrias here to breed with a muskrat. That's like trying to breed a German Shepherd and a Chihuahua. It's the same thing because a nutria goes twenty, thirty pounds. Oh, they make pets, now; they make a nice pet. I had otters for pets. I got a picture of the otter. The only thing came out in *The Times Picayune* one time, me and the otter, paddling the pirogue, playing in the bayou. (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: So if I hear you right, the crab catch is really diminished.

Thomas: Oh, yeah, it diminished since the oil spill, (0:39:09.6) a lot because during the winter they fish the she-crabs on the outside, and they ain't caught hardly nothing this year. A good thing they got a decent price; they getting a dollar ten a pound for the females. They'll go catch six hundred pounds; it helps out. They make a little something when before they was catching three, four thousand pounds of she-crabs during the winter out there. They got to go way out to catch a few she-crabs. Black Bay and that and what we call Lake Campo and that, we didn't have to go that far out to catch she-crab. Now they got to go way out where they got deeper water to catch a few, and they ain't catching that much. They ain't catching nothing.

Kyriakoudes: And that's since the oil spill. Before the spill—

Thomas: Since the oil spill. Before the oil spill, they made a good living here with the crabs. But they said that they had found oil in a little, bitty (inaudible) of the crabs. They found oil in it, so something is killing them.

Kyriakoudes: What about the other branches? Do you still do oystering?

Thomas: Oysters, that freshwater destroyed the oysters. (0:40:15.0) I got a crab trap. They had to shut—last summer and right here about where I fish, they call it Lake John(?) where that double pipeline, because you've seen that double pipeline. And on this side, I had oysters growing on my crab trap rods. It was full of oysters. They opened that diversion and killed them all. I told Wildlife and Fisheries about it. I say, "Y'all can't control that?" I say, "I guarantee you. Just shut it down for three years." I say, "The people'd have oysters again." You see, when the oil spilled, they opened all that up and destroyed the oysters, the bedding ground and all that.

Kyriakoudes: So when they opened up all the freshwater, their idea—

Thomas: Freshwater—

Kyriakoudes: —was to push the oil.

Thomas: —destroys the oysters. They was hoping that would push the oil out, but that didn't do no good. They just destroyed other stuff.

Kyriakoudes: What about this past spring, they opened up the Bonnet Carré Spillway; that didn't come down here, did it?

Thomas: No. That don't come here. That goes into Lake Pontchartrain. That goes out, goes straight out. You see, Lake Pontchartrain is deep. (0:41:19.0) That freshwater goes over the top. It takes a lot of freshwater to get to the bottom because Lake Pontchartrain is deep. But over here, no. What? Three feet, four feet of water and that thing's pumping so much. Like this bayou here, you see that? That's all river water in that bayou. Right now the river went low; that's going to help some. It's going to dilute with some saltwater, make a brackish water because right now, I can't put a crab to shed a soft crab by the bayou with that water. And (inaudible) could throw him away, killed it. Now, I shed them under my house with rainwater with sea salt. (0:42:01.2)

Kyriakoudes: And this is so you get the softshell crabs?

Thomas: Um-hm, yeah. Yeah, I shed softshell crabs. I fool with that a little bit.

Kyriakoudes: That's about as good eating as it gets. (laughter)

Thomas: Yeah. I got a freezer full down there; it's frozen, been selling them, now to the restaurants. I hold them till Lent. I was selling, in the beginning when I was shedding them, fresh. But last year I shed out a lot in the end of the season, so I

wrapped them up. Nobody had—already they was stocked up, so now they're starting to buy them.

Kyriakoudes: Tell me a little bit about after the spill, did you work on any of the BP projects?

Thomas: No, no, no. My son did. I tell you what I did; after the oil spill, the boys out with the little boat now. This boy had a little boat with a one fifty Yamaha on it, four stroke. He wanted six thousand dollars for it, so I bought it. So I went and run the crab traps. I was outlawing. Anyway, I was running crab traps in a closed area. So I went and fished crabs. What I was catching there before the oil spill was a thousand to fifteen hundred dollars a day worth of crabs. So when the oil spilled, Wildlife and Fisheries shut us down for a whole month, (0:43:20.9) and they opened all them diversions up. And when I went back, I was making two hundred dollars a day, after the oil spill. So that flushed everything out of here. Now, we ain't making it with the crabs no more; down the drain. I got all the traps in the yard. My son had back surgery. Thursday it'll be four weeks he had it done. So I got the traps on the bank, the boat on the bank, on land, on a trailer. I'm going to go put them out soon as I get finished around here, doing other stuff.

Kyriakoudes: Have you ever seen the crab catch fall like this before, in your life? Has that ever happened?

Thomas: No. No. I seen those trawls; they ain't had no shrimp. I seen those trawl crabs, right here in Lake Lery(?). It's a big lake right there. That lake at one time was five miles; now it's over seven miles wide and long, over seven.

Kyriakoudes: That's just more land—

Thomas: You see, you look here; that used to be closed in. That was just one little lake. Now it's all one. It's all one. Lake Lery, and we used to call The Coralis(?), but that's all in one now. There ain't no more land, them little strips, little, bitty islands left.

Kyriakoudes: When that was land, when you were young, I mean, did people keep cattle there, or animals?

Thomas: Oh, yeah. They had right there where Barbara used to live, that old lady there, a little further that way, she had milk cows and all. She used to have her own milk cows. She had about seven milk cows. And us, we would play ball in the front yard, and we was breaking the lady's glasses. She had them French doors, you know, with all them little glasses on it, and the baseball was breaking it. So what we did; my brother told me he got tired of changing glasses. So we had to pay for her glasses. (laughter) So what we did, in the back, we took, and we cleaned the back. We made a ballpark in the back.

Kyriakoudes: Back there.

Thomas: Back there where there's no levee. They didn't have no levee. We made a ballpark back there.

Kyriakoudes: And that's water right now. (0:45:28.9)

Thomas: Now, it's water. We made a ballpark. And further down, before Betsy, they had Corkie Mellerine(?); they had a ballpark in the back. Now, there ain't no more ballpark back there. You could hit the ball, and further down they had—boy, they had men used to play ball here, grown men. We used to play ball with the men; they had a ball team. They used to go play all over. Old married men had their own ball team down here. They used to go play all over. Old, married men had their own ball team down here. Used to go play all over with it—

Kyriakoudes: It's hard to see now.

Thomas: —when I was a kid.

Kyriakoudes: It's hard to see now where you'd play.

Thomas: Now you look, it's all water; there's nothing left there.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah.

Thomas: But like me, I'm a rare breed. I ain't running. I didn't leave with Katrina. My wife left. We left with [Hurricane] Gustav (0:46:19.6), went up the country by her grandma's house up there because her cousin lived in it; her first cousin lived in it. Her grandma died. We brought her from north Louisiana to over here in a old-folks home over here. When she died over here, we brought her back to Louisiana and buried her up there in north Louisiana, in Kilbourne.

Kyriakoudes: Now your son-in-law is a fisherman. He's suffering from the same troubles you're suffering from.

Thomas: Right. He ain't been doing nothing in all winter. He ain't worked in all winter. He's been making crab traps and that. Right now he's fooling with nets, making nets. He shrimped a little bit during the August season catching them ten/fifteens; I mean, big shrimp that big around. Ten/fifteens, that's what he caught. You can't make a [living], selling to the dealer; they don't want to pay. You got to order. You know? People buy them. Sell them for three dollars a pound. It's just getting to be bad. Me, I got a few years left. I told them I'm going to be dancing at a hundred; I'm well on my way.

Hester: How old are you?

Thomas: Forty-seven, again.

Hester: OK. (laughter)

Thomas: Seventy-four. I say, "Man, I age fast from thirty-seven to forty-seven." Some of them don't believe it. They see me on the dance floor, and they see what I

do, but I got helpers. I'm rebuilt. I got plastic veins in both legs. I had ninety-eight seeds planted in the prostate for cancer. I got one lobe of my left lung removed, and I'm still going. I was trapping nutria by myself. My son would run the boat, and then when he had the surgery, I was by myself. He'd run the boat, and I would run the nutria traps. I wouldn't let him get in and out the boat. My (inaudible) say, "How you do it?" I say, "Because I'm born to die, so I'm going to get all the gusto while I'm alive."

Kyriakoudes: What's your wish?

Thomas: Eh?

Kyriakoudes: What's your wish?

Thomas: My wish? I'm going to be dancing at a hundred.

Kyriakoudes: That's a good wish.

Thomas: I'm going to tell you something about things. My brother was eighteen months older than me; he had a heart transplant for fifteen years, and you couldn't imagine—that's why I say destinies in life? You can't imagine what killed him. It's unbelievable. A branch off of his tree hit him behind the head that my nephew was cutting; killed him. So that's a destiny in life. Because his wife fussed at him, "Get away from that fence and walk away while they cutting the branches off that top of that trailer. That thing could fall and hit you." She turned around, went inside; he walked away. And he went right back where he was, so his destiny called him right back there. And that branch fell and hit him behind the head and killed him.

Kyriakoudes: That's terrible.

Thomas: So that's why I accepted my life. Like I tell them all, the doctor that done the vascular surgery, I say, "No matter what we do, or we don't do, we're all born for one thing." He's a young doctor. He said, "What you mean?" I say, "We all born to die." He say, "You know something?" He say, "You just made a good point there," he said, "no matter what." He say, "How you feel this way?" I say, "Because I grew up with life and death." I say, "My mama and my daddy's house was like a little funeral home. The last one was laid out was my daddy in 1965. Betsy came and put it on the highway. They had a five-bedroom house here. My mother lived with me till she died. And [Katrina] took it. Betsy took the first one. Was three here; took the three of them. The only thing I found was my brother; he had one across the back. His bathroom, no walls, no nothing, his bathtub and his washbasin was still standing, with no walls, no nothing, just that little one piece of flooring found way back of (inaudible), back there by the trees. (laughter) But mostly all the houses was put on the highway.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. That's what Bay St. Louis looked like after Katrina.

Thomas: After Katrina, oh, yeah, it done a—that thing hit about what? Four states or five, Katrina; hit part of Florida, too.

Kyriakoudes: It did. It hit Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. It might've hit some of Texas, too.

Thomas: Four states.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. I don't know.

Thomas: No. Texas, no. It didn't do nothing in Texas. It was Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida; four states.

Kyriakoudes: Did you get any of [Hurricane] Rita here? Did Rita or Wilma affect you here, or was that too farther south?

Thomas: No. Some of them don't affect us here. We usually get high water, a little high tide. We get water in the yard.

Kyriakoudes: Rita hit more—

Thomas: It comes over the road. Sometimes it come over the levee, too, but mostly it comes over the road because the road is so low. But we used to sandbag it. When we had a crew living down here, a bunch of people from here, we used sandbag the highway to stop it. One time we was sandbagging it. They was bringing the bags; the prisoners was filling the sandbags. So we was fighting it. And so Junior Rodriguez(?) was out past—he was a police jury down here in them times, and I stopped him. He had a news reporter and everything with him in that dump truck. I say, "Could you get us the sand down here with the bags? Don't even bag it. Just get it down here." I said, "We'll fill it out, ourselves." He said, "Where I'm going to dump it?" "In the middle of the highway. There's no traffic. Nobody's driving around." So he got on the radio, and he called them, and they started bringing us the bags and the sand, and we got there, a crew with shovels, and the news media say, "Y'all fighting a losing battle." The next morning they come down; he say, "Y'all beat it." I said, "We had the stuff to do it with." I said, "Bringing us twenty-five bags don't do it." So we fought it; we beat it. Quite a few times we stopped the yards from flooding over the road. We had sandbags all the way to here, that road, in the little spots.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Wow, that's terrific.

Thomas: But not no more. Now it'll just come over. There's all recreational camps down here. They ain't but, I say about thirteen families left, thirteen people that was from down here that's living here, about thirteen of us.

Kyriakoudes: When you were a kid, about how many families were there?

Thomas: Oh, it's hard to count. They had high as two, three houses on one forty-by-a-hundred-and-fifty-foot property. That's what this is, forty foot wide, and a hundred and fifty deep. They had three houses on it, and that's the way it was. Tell you; they went all the way to the seventh grade; didn't bus a kid from nowhere, just on the island.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Wow. Yeah, that's a lot of folks.

Thomas: There was a *lot* of kids; had a lot of people down here. That's what I'm telling you; 99 percent were Spanish. This was a Spanish village. (0:53:13.1) It was a fishing village. Everybody fished for a living. You know when people started getting out of here on jobs? When they built the Kaiser Plant. My brothers went to work at Kaiser, some of them, but I [stayed]. At Kaiser, that's when people started getting jobs out of here, was mostly then.

Hester: When did they build Kaiser?

Thomas: Mm, I think it was in the [19]50s? It was in the [19]50s, somewhere in the [19]50s, Kaiser Aluminum.

Kyriakoudes: Anybody in your family go work there?

Thomas: Not everybody.

Kyriakoudes: But anybody?

Thomas: Two of my brothers. Some of my brothers went and worked there.

Kyriakoudes: Did they ever move back and go back into fishing, or did they pretty much stay?

Thomas: The only one that worked on jobs a little bit, he's back to fishing, is my younger brother. My second-to-the-oldest brother retired from Kaiser, and right now he's got a problem. They done surgery on him, and they found cancer in the liver, so he went for one of them chemo treatments, but they can't give him the radiation because he's got a horseshoe kidney. And his older daughter had a horseshoe kidney, and they didn't know he had a horseshoe kidney till now. They found out he's got a horseshoe kidney. But they found it on his oldest daughter. She died with cancer, the oldest daughter, from the kidneys. So now they found him with a horseshoe kidney.

Kyriakoudes: We started off; you were talking a little bit about how BP's handled this claims process and all that. Tell me a little bit about your experience with that, again, just to kind of get it (inaudible). (0:54:52.0)

Thomas: I tell you what they sent me. They sent me nine dollars and fifty cents interest on the money that they holding from last year. And then he sent me a 1099 to file taxes on it, for nine dollars and fifty cents! See? That's a year. I say, "Something's going on here." (laughter) I say, "Where's the money?" (laughter) I got the interest but not the money.

Kyriakoudes: When did you first apply? I mean, did they open up an office down here for you to go to?

Thomas: I tell you what they did. They sent me two checks for five thousand, in the beginning. So I didn't keep the checks; I wound up giving them away. (laughter) My wife seen my granddaughter where she was working, and she had to walk across a bad area. And she was working at one of them sandwich places. So she got a friend of ours that used to work for Lamarque Ford; so she got in touch with him, and he got on

the Internet, and he found a car. She wanted to get her a car so she wouldn't have to walk to work. So she came, and she said, "Look," she said, "Ronnie's on the Internet; he found a car." I say, "What?" I say, "That five-thousand-dollar check that we got, I'm going to give it to Erica to get her a car." So I stay looking at her; I said, "How much is the car?" He said, "They want nine thousand." I say, "You might as well give her the other check, too." So when they went to get the car, they already had sold that. So she wound up she had to buy another car. So the other car cost seventeen thousand. So I gave her ten thousand, so she put ten thousand down on it, and her daddy was going to pay the rest of it on notes, financing. It's on her daddy's name. So come to find out, now I'm paying the notes, too, because he ain't working, making no money. So that's what I do with my money; I give it to the grandkids. Everything I own is going to my grandkids, my first grandkids. My son's got three daughters. That's sixty thousand dollars; I'm giving them each twenty thousand. So for Thanksgiving, I asked the youngest one, I say, "What could you do with twenty thousand dollars?" "I don't know." Bad answer. So I asked the middle, I say, "What could you do with twenty thousand?" She say, "Save it to go to college and get my education?" One good answer. I asked the oldest one that's fifteen years old, "What you could do with twenty thousand?" "I don't know." I said, "One good one out of three?" (laughter) But that's what I'm going to do with my money. I ain't taking nothing. You can't take it with you. So to help my grandkids to get started in life, that's what I'm doing with it.

Kyriakoudes: Any of the grandchildren going into fishing?

Thomas: No. No. I only got one grandson. Now, my granddaughter's got two little boys, and now the one I give her that money, she's got a little boy, but I call him the little hoodlum. She say, "Why you call him the little hoodlum?" I say, "Because the big hoodlum's in jail for stealing copper, for stealing." And you can't make her understand that. They ain't no telling how much he's going to serve.

Kyriakoudes: This her husband?

Thomas: No. They ain't married. It's her boyfriend; she had a baby from him, and that's why I call him the little hoodlum. Cute little boy. I got pictures of him there. (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: Oh, yeah. That's sweet. That is a sweet kid.

Thomas: Yeah. I call him the little hoodlum. They say, "Papaw, you're bad." I say, "No. It's the truth. It's the big hoodlum's in jail, so," I said, "what are you going to be? The little hoodlum?" (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: So right now you're just still waiting for this process to work its way through with BP?

Thomas: No. I ain't really waiting for that. I never did wait for that. Like I say, I went and fooled with nutrias and that. I ain't waiting for nothing from nobody. Whatever he give me, I'm going to take it. That's about it. I could go and take the twenty-five thousand, but then I got to sign a paper that I can't sue them. So there

ain't no way I'm going to do that. A bunch of them did that already, went and take the twenty-five thousand. Now, if something goes on, they can't sue them. I say, "I ain't doing that." I say, "I'm going to take whatever they give me, but I ain't going and sign that paper that I can't sue them," I say, "because I don't know what's going to happen down the line." I say, "This just is getting started." I say, "Look at this year." I say, "We didn't make the money with the crab this year." I say, "I don't know about this year." And right now I'm hearing them boys that went and put out traps, they ain't doing nothing. The boy ran eighty traps; he only had one of them little crates of crabs, with eighty traps. I say, "I don't know what's going to happen this year." I say, "So"—see, that's what happened with my son-in-law. He hired a lawyer right off the hand, so we got money replaced for crab traps, me and my son; we got that, but we didn't hire no lawyer to try and get us nothing. We went on our own. I got to go to Baton Rouge tomorrow and get some trip tickets, the last ones for the year, to turn in to them. So I'm going to keep on fighting with them. I ain't going to get a lawyer till I have to because I ain't going to take the twenty-five thousand because I don't know what's going to happen to me in the meantime.

Kyriakoudes: How has it worked out for your son-in-law? How's he handling it?

Thomas: He ain't getting nothing yet. He's got a lawyer. He ain't getting nothing.

Kyriakoudes: How is he getting by, though, day to day?

Thomas: I guess he might be starting to get money from the lawyer to get by, unless he gets on his boat and goes shrimping. Go make a trip and see if he catches a few shrimp. But right now he ain't doing nothing but fooling with webbing right now, making nets for people. He made crab traps, but he ain't done nothing with them; it don't pay to go right now.

Kyriakoudes: Well, we've talked for about an hour, and that's quite a bit. So I'm grateful for your time, and I want to thank you for sharing your story with us. Is there anything you want to add that you think people that might be listening to this interview in the future should know?

Thomas: No. That's about it.

Kyriakoudes: OK.

Hester: Could you—

Thomas: But I'm a Gonzales, and I've been a fisherman all my life. I'm going to die a fisherman. I'm my own boss. Hey, I got the head boss, but I'm my own boss when I go out on the boat. (laughter)

Hester: Could I ask a question?

Thomas: What's that?

Hester: What do you see happening? What would you envision happening around here, say, twenty years from now? (1:01:27.6)

Thomas: I see most of the land washing away now. We having less and less land. The bayous are getting wider. The lakes are getting bigger. The land is just gone. And it's keep on gone. And right now, I heard that they want to buy, where there's diversion over here in Caernarvon, they want to buy them people that lives in Braithwaite(?). And they want to make like a spillway, like the Bonnet Carré Spillway. They want to make a spillway. I said, "That's wrong there, too." If they put a spillway, and if they open it for the whole year to put water in here to try and build land here, what's going to happen: it's going to take the current from the river away from the river over here. At the other end of the river's going to be filling up. The ships can't come in to the ports in New Orleans. So right there tell you. You take the current away from one area, that area or that silt is going to be settling there. It's going to get shallow. The ships can't come through. (1:02:29.9) I say, "The best way to do it: put suction dredges in the river." They could build all the land they want. They could build mountains because they got this—her husband had this thing; now she's got it. He died, and she's old. They got that thing. Hey, I bought loads of sand after Katrina, three truckloads of sand from her to put in this yard; it comes out the river. Come on! Common sense tell you. They put a levee. This was built from the river. They didn't have a levee. This was all built from the river, this here. So come on; put suction dredges in the river. Take that money and put it to good use. Don't go spend billions of dollars, buying people out, and put something that ain't going to work. That's the corps of engineers. And another thing we got a problem with, environmentalists. It's like that mud from Katrina. They dug this bayou out. People wanted it. Oh, no! They hauled it away with dump trucks, contaminated. Come on! If that water, that mud is bad, why the seafood's living in it? If it's bad, that'd kill the seafood. Come on! Common sense.

Kyriakoudes: So they didn't just take—

Thomas: So everything is to do about money.

Kyriakoudes: They didn't take the mud and just dump it right over there.

Thomas: No.

Kyriakoudes: To help rebuild some of that.

Thomas: No. No. They took it and put it in dump trucks, hauled it away.

Kyriakoudes: Wow.

Thomas: Hauled it away. It's just common-sense things. I'm not educated, but I'm no dummy about my way of life. I make my own equipment. I make my own crab traps and everything. Like I say, I used to make the trawls and webbing you see on them skimmers. I used to make all that. I done a lot of stuff, and nobody taught me. It just in the head that we are fishermen. Like I said, thirteen years old I was making trawls. I quit school in the fourth grade at thirteen years old. I didn't go back to school. I was a fisherman.

Kyriakoudes: Well, I mean, there's no book to look this stuff up in.

Thomas: No.

Kyriakouides: That I know of. I mean, it's just talking to people like you that we can preserve some of this.

Thomas: Yeah.

Kyriakouides: Some of this history.

Thomas: Oh, yeah. It's a history down here. Like I'm telling you, get on that Internet, and you're going to find all this. You're going to find a lot. You're going to find most probably people camping out in the wilderness, trapping muskrats in camps. I used to spend three months of the winter out, trapping, during the winter. I didn't (inaudible) to go to school that much because my daddy and them, they used to have a freeze that used to kill the fish. They used to go trap muskrats, and they'd be three, four, five years, trapping muskrats for Delacroix Corporation, the biggest landowner they had. They even had a trapper's war here. (1:05:28.6) They fought. They killed people from Texas over here. They could kill—even a judge was involved in it.

Kyriakouides: Do you have any memories of that?

Thomas: No. That was my daddy and my older brothers; they wasn't that old then, but they used to call it the trappers' war down here.

Kyriakouides: What did they say about that?

Thomas: That what happened there, the people from Texas was trying to take it, take the land away from them, from trapping muskrats. So they had that trappers' war. The governor came down here and told them, he said, "Y'all pay the taxes on it; the land belongs to y'all," because they had a war over it. And what happened, they got this Manuel Molaro(?) and Leander Perez involved in it, and what they did; some of them was giving them six hundred rats to pay the taxes on the land. So what they did; they went and paid the taxes on their own. They paid the taxes, but nobody got the land. *They* got the land. So that's how come Delacroix Corporation wound up with the land, you see, because the people didn't have no education. My grandpa used to sign his name with an X and put a circle around it. These people didn't have a bit of education at all. And Manuel Molaro's wife, she was a schoolteacher. You want a drink of water?

Hester: (coughing) Please. Sorry.

Thomas: You want it cold?

Hester: I'll get it. Thanks.

Thomas: Yeah. And that's how Delacroix Corporation wound up with the land.

Kyriakouides: Yeah. So the trappers thought they were paying their taxes with what they'd catch. But—

Thomas: Some of them bought land after, from it, bought the land from Delacroix Corporation, after. Like Ralph Perez, his daddy, that he bought land from Delacroix Corporation; now, ain't no more land. It's all water. It's unbelievable what went on here. And it ain't going to get no better, unless they start putting suction dredges in the river and pumping stuff back. They pumped Chandeleur Island back. (1:07:45.1) I seen that on TV. A mile away, they pumped that island back. They had bulldozers, everything on it spreading that sand. They built that island back. A mile away they pumped that sand and built that island.

Kyriakoudes: They just put those—

Thomas: Like I say, I fished there. And Breton Island was a big island. (1:08:05.4) It was like a jungle there. They had rabbits, alligators, cottonmouth, and all, on Breton Island. They had, on the north end of Breton Island, the bar, they used to land on that sand with them little planes with the wheels, and fish trout, out there by Breton Island. I grew up fishing in the Gulf. Fishing, that's all I did since I was a little boy. I used to go with my daddy and them, out of school.

Kyriakoudes: Let me ask you. When you were young—

Thomas: Fish-seined.

Kyriakoudes: When you were just starting out on your own in the 1950s as a young man, like for the shrimp market, did you shrimp? (1:08:41.6)

Thomas: Yeah. Oh, we had a good shrimp market. They used to sell the shrimp, (inaudible) go straight to the trucks. They had the dealers, shrimp dealers; they had dealers to buy crabs and shrimp just like they got now.

Kyriakoudes: And just all lined up along here.

Thomas: Right.

Kyriakoudes: Here on Delacroix Highway.

Thomas: I tell you what. At one time, I think they had seven different barrooms down here. You know who played music down here when I was a kid? (1:09:04.5) You wouldn't believe it. Louis Armstrong. Yeah! He never used to drive down here; they used to go get him. Louis Armstrong played music down here on a Saturday night, and Papa Celestino(?), when I was a kid. That's how that name, that boat got the name the *Good Time* because he'd dance from eight o'clock at night till it's seven o'clock the next morning. Yep. Louis Armstrong used to play music down here, and people look at me, "You knew him?" I say, "Yeah. I knew him with his trumpet and his handkerchief." (laughter) Blowing that trumpet and wiping his face with the handkerchief.

Kyriakoudes: I've talked to some—

Thomas: Danced about seven dance halls down here. But every Saturday night they had a band play down here.

Kyriakoudes: Hm, wow. That's exciting.

Thomas: Yeah. I seen some big-time gamblers, too, down here, come from New York and Chicago, all over, big-time gamblers, come with valises of money and gamble.

Kyriakoudes: So you had like some casinos down here, or gambling halls?

Thomas: No. They just a barroom with a big dance hall in the back and one room where they'd play cards and shoot dice. Yep. I know a man on that dice table, drunk, won enough money to build his house. My daddy and them used to own a big truck, and they went and got the load of lumber for him to build his house. Drunk, he didn't know how much money he won. His wife thought he had robbed somebody the next morning when she finally opened his suit coat full of money. And his brother was there, say, "He got a hold of them dice," he say, "and he didn't let it go till he cleaned it." His brother took half of the money that he had, and the rest of it, he said, "Now, go home, drunk." (laughter) Boy, they had big-time gamblers; they used to have down here.

Kyriakoudes: I've talked to some old-timers who told me about they remember their grandparents; they'd dry the shrimp. This is before the refrigeration.

Thomas: Oh, yeah. um-hm.

Kyriakoudes: Do you know anything about that?

Thomas: Oh, yeah. Old Man Vincent Favre(?) used to have trucks, drive it. My daddy had a truck he used to haul his own trout and that to the market, to the French Market. He made a haul of fish, what they call a little lake over here. The last truck load was five tons of fish. (1:11:24.4) You know what they sold it for? Fifty dollars because he already had flooded the market. And his aunt died; my great-aunt died. My grandpa's sister died, and they went and picked up the net. They never did get the fish, all the fish out. They picked up the net and left the fish go, the rest of the fish go.

Kyriakoudes: The price wasn't good enough, worth to take—

Thomas: Yeah. That's the way of life. But in them days, you go—they used to send me to the store with twenty-five cents, get a pound of red beans, a pound of rice, and a big hunk of salt meat like that to go with the red beans and the rice, with twenty-five cents, when I grew up. And when I used to drink they had that Goble Beer, what? Ten cents a can, you could get loaded. But then now it's—(laughter)—a couple of times.

Kyriakoudes: That's right.

Thomas: Now, no. You better have—look at the bread. I tell you what, the bread before [Hurricane] Betsy, twenty-five cents a loaf. After Betsy, a dollar. Right now a loaf of bread cost you over two dollars.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah.

Thomas: You know.

Kyriakoudes: Expensive.

Thomas: Every time you got a disaster that wipes you out, they raise the price on everything because they think you getting money from somewhere to get it. But y'all ever notice that? Every time you got a disaster, everything jumps to the moon. Like the lumber, everything. After Katrina everything went up. That should be dropped down because that's a disaster. These people got to get back on their feet, back into their life again. But no, they don't look at it that way. They want that money because they think you getting money, I guess.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. I don't know.

Thomas: But it's true. It's twenty-five cents a loaf of bread, and after Betsy a dollar. Everything went up, every time you got a disaster. You go; you could put it in a book. Every time you get a disaster, you buy something, and I guarantee you, if you got a disaster that wiped things out, you're going to pay more money for it. The same thing you was buying before, the same thing is coming, but yet you going to pay more for it. What it is about this country? I can't figure it, (laughter) what they do.

Kyriakoudes: People want to make money. (laughter)

Thomas: But he's making money. At twenty-five cents he's making money. You understand what I'm saying? Then went to a dollar, what he's making now. Huh? Making seventy-five cents for that same loaf of bread that he was charging you right before the hurricane for twenty-five cents. It's a racket. It's just like with the fuel. I won't be afraid to bet. You pay less for gas over there in Mississippi than what you pay over here.

Kyriakoudes: It's running about three forty-five a gallon for regular gas.

Thomas: You paying more over here for it. We got the oil refineries.

Kyriakoudes: Yes.

Thomas: The gas is right there. Murphy, we got the oil refinery, and we pay more. I tell you what, when I left Florida after Katrina, (1:14:24.0) it was, I think, two dollars and ten cents a gallon. When I came back home, it was two dollars and forty-five cents a gallon, when I came from Florida. That truck that's there, I bought that truck. We bought it in Florida, that truck. She owns two trucks. I don't own a truck. I don't drive. She owns two trucks. She went and delivered that stuff and went to the hospital with that new truck. She say that one was giving her trouble. I say, "Go buy you a new one." So she went and buy a new one. We well off. But like I say, I don't have no bills, no kids to raise. Like my son, he got three of them girls in school. It costs a fortune. And now his back surgery, he ain't making nothing. So I told, I say, "Don't worry about it." He say, "Yeah," he say "but I'm going to owe you my life." I say, "You owe me your life anyway." (laughter) You know? I say, "You needed it. That's it."

Hester: Mr. Gonzales, what do you foresee as the future of fishing, commercial fishing? (1:15:28.3)

Thomas: I tell you what. It's coming to an end. I figure it ain't going to be long; they're going to do away with the crab traps. I figure just a matter of time. I been all over to Baton Rouge, fighting with the redfish. When they took the redfish away from me, (1:15:46.4) when that purse seiners had come, I don't know where they come, Florida or somewhere. Well, we hadn't destroyed the spawning stock, so they took the redfish away from us. So it was supposed to be for five years. So it came out; we agreed with it, in the beginning, but what they do up there: they got a bill to pass through the legislature. OK. He say he's got the bill. OK. People agree to pass the bill. Then you come along; you're a politician. You put amendments on it. That's what they call that—that's dishonest: put amendments on it. OK. When we went out there, nobody was supposed to fish redfish for three to five years, *nobody*. OK. They took the bill, fine. Nobody going to do it. So when they got to the bill, they put the amendment on it: give recreational five, commercial fishermen none. That's discriminating. OK. We go to Baton Rouge. The biologist want to give us one million, six hundred thousand pounds to harvest redfish without hurting the spawning stock. Go to Baton Rouge, OK, with Wildlife and Fisheries, sitting there. They got seven guys sitting on a chair, a board like that by the table, seven guys. So here the people talking. So they had a colored guy; he was sitting on the end, and he say, "Where I come from, it's a poor neighborhood." He say, "People on food stamps and that." He was a deputy, a cop in a city. He say "I come from a poor neighborhood." He say, "I'm a deputy." He say, "With the food stamps," he say, "they could buy fish to feed their family." So this guy was Jenkins; he was sitting on the side of him. He leaned over, and he started whispering in this colored guy's ear. I ain't never seen a man make a U-turn like that one did. He come out; he said, "Look," he say "I got to tell y'all." He say, "I'm not elected for this job. I'm appointed for this job." I told my next-door neighbor, "There he went down the river. Jenkins got him." Then they turned around; Jenkins was the head of the crew. It was a seven-member board. Think that's dishonest? Four of them represents recreations, and three of them reps commercial. Goes to a vote, four to three. I can't get nothing. That's that Wildlife and Fisheries. Then we wound up in Baton Rouge. Oh, I was some mad. They had—I mean that (inaudible) big man. They had this little guy. He fools with, oh, Jeff Anglus(?), and he's telling these politicians, "They help increase the spawning stock." But he's fighting for the rich people, the recreation and all that." He say, "We're help increase the spawning stock." Oh, he made me so mad. I jump up. I say, "How could you sit there and lie to them people? Y'all didn't help increase the spawning stock. The commercial fishermen did. Y'all taking five. We can't none." And this big guy sitting there, and he hit with the hammer. He said, "Sit down." I said, "No. I've got things to say, and I'm going to say it." He said, "I'll throw you out." I say, "If you think you big enough." He had me hot, and I'm a little, bitty man. I wasn't scared of him, either. I say, "If you think you big enough to come throw me out," I say "*you* come throw me out. Don't send these damn fools over here to throw me out. *You* come throw me out if you think you a man." I say, "But I got things to say. I don't

care if you like it or not.” So he sat down. He didn’t tell me nothing no more, so I said it. I say, “This man’s lying to y’all.” I say, “And y’all believe it.” I say, “But y’all don’t listen to the commercial fishermen what’s going on.” I say, “Give me [my] strike(?) net back.” I say, “Y’all took everything away from me, my heritage away from me.” I say, “Because my ancestors was here before them.” I say, “They was fishermans and farmers.” I say, “Here they are for pleasure?” I say, “Y’all took everything away from me for another man for pleasure?” Say, “He wants pleasure, go play golf.” You know? And he shut up. He didn’t tell me nothing no more. So when we walked out, Frank Patty(?) and Odina(?) , Frank Patty was our senator, and Odina was our representative. He say, “I want to shake your hand, partner.” He say, “You a man.” I say, “You goddamn right. I’m fighting for my rights and my way of life.” I say, “I ain’t fighting for pleasure.” I say, “He’s lying.” And that’s it. We can’t get it, and the biologists want to give it back, but the Wildlife and Fisheries made a vote to vote on it. So you can’t do nothing.”

Kyriakoudes: So there’s no commercial redfish season?

Thomas: No commercial fishing at all here. I think they still got a little bit of it in Mississippi, unless they finished taking it all away, too, with the nets.

Kyriakoudes: In Mississippi, the—

Thomas: I know they fish mullets.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah, that’s all we could fish; they fish mullets here.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. You know the gillnets are popular.

Thomas: Yeah, with the mullets.

Kyriakoudes: And they’ve really restricted the gillnets.

Thomas: Yeah?

Kyriakoudes: The finfishermen are really angry about that, up there.

Thomas: There’s still nets?

Kyriakoudes: The gillnets, you know the big gillnets that they drag behind and they kind of wrap them around, the—

Thomas: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: They still have a poggy fishery up there, specs, ladyfish.

Thomas: Yeah.

Kyriakoudes: You know the little, thin something we have in the Gulf—

Thomas: I know they fish mullets down there.

Kyriakoudes: Um-hm, mullets, yeah.

Thomas: Over here they fish the mullets, too. (1:21:06.9) Yeah. That was a big thing when it first came, but now that went down the drain, too, the mullets right now. Before, they used to get a dollar something a pound for the mullet, for the roe.

Kyriakoudes: But the redfish, for you when you were able to fish redfish commercially, was that profitable? (1:21:23.4) I mean, was that a—

Thomas: It wasn't—you would catch four, five hundred pounds a day, but it was profitable. The last year that we fished redfish, I was getting two dollars a pound. I go catch three hundred pounds of redfish, I had a good day's work and be home for 9:30, ten o'clock. And many hauls I made right out here. I had two thousand pounds of redfish, but you stop and look. It wasn't just me. That was seven different families. I had a crew of men, and there was seven different families. Just like my daddy and them with the seine, there was seven men in a crew, different. (1:21:57.4) Seven families was living off of one net, surviving off of one net. That's the way it used to be down here. Like me, I own the net, and what I used to do: I used to—three shares. There's seven men; they all got the same amount. I got the same amount. No. I didn't take nothing out for my equipment. If I made five hundred dollars that day, then everybody in that crew, that seven men made five hundred dollars. If they made two hundred dollars, everybody got their two hundred dollars. There was seven different families that used to make a living off of one net.

Kyriakoudes: When did they shut down the redfish fishery? (1:22:34.3)

Thomas: They shut it down when they had that big kill in the Gulf there, the spawning stock, when that purse seine wrapped that spawning stock, and they kept it too tight, and it killed the fish. They took what they had wanted. They was waiting for boats, but boats never did show up, so they kept it closed up, and it smothered them. Oh, they were floating all over out there in the Gulf, and that was the spawning stock. That's what I couldn't figure. My grandpa, now, he was an old man, didn't know how to read and write. My daddy and all them didn't know how to read and write. (1:23:07.7) And yet, a bull red and a bull drum, they used to turn that loose, and they always used to say, "As long as you got that, you'll never run out of fish. That's your spawning stock." But it came with that purse seine. They left them sell it, that blackened redfish. When they came with that blackened redfish and drum and all that, they killed the spawning stock because the fish don't spawn in here. They spawn out there, and the fish come in and grow up in here. You see? They spawn out in them sandbars in the Gulf, trout and all, because I fished the trout during the [summer] out there. (1:23:39.0) Had stingrays, swordfish, with a seine. You got your foot on that lead line, pulling, and you got a shark laying against your leg there about seven, eight foot You know?

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. (laughter)

Thomas: Stingrays, I mean, them big manta rays, bigger than this table.

Kyriakoudes: Yep, they're out there.

Thomas: I seen a man got—he went, his uncle and them made a haul, and he was with us, with my daddy and them. And me and my cousin we went on Baddledoor(?) Reef. They had like a pond in it. It was nothing but shells, but with a little hole in it. We catching (inaudible), the fish, trout, with a line, by the reef. And so he came over there with us, and my daddy told him not to go fool with his uncles and them. He say, “They all drunk.” You could hear them screaming and hollering out there. So they grabbed one manta ray about this big, and he went, and he was holding onto the skiff, and them guys took it, and they stuck it with that—because we got a pipe with a rod, and you stick it underneath. They didn't kill it or nothing. They just stuck it, and they drug it over the other side of the skiff and turned it loose. And I seen him, made one leap. That thing hit him right between the calf. (1:24:41.4) It went right between the bone. When he got to Charity Hospital, you know how much blood he had left in him? A pint of blood. He almost bled to death. And they had a boat there that would do about twenty, twenty-five miles an hour, a skiff. And he got hurt with them. And I asked the guy, owner of the skiff, I said, “Man, you want to put him on your little boat? Bring him in?” He say, “Oh, no. He ain't with us. He's with y'all.” I say, “Yeah, but you got a fast boat.” I say, “We got a lugger that only does about twelve miles an hour.” So, “Oh, no, no, no. Y'all do with him.” So I went with the little skiff, and I got him, and we put him on the deck of the boat, and I came first—you might know—by Point Fortune?

Kyriakoudes: No, I don't know where.

Thomas: On this side, and they had a quarter boat in there, and they had them crew boats in there, so I pulled into there. Put him on a crew boat and when he got here, they had a unit. He almost bled to death. And he got his share that summer. (1:25:35.4) All the while we fished he was laid up. He got his share, and he didn't get hurt with us. He didn't get crippled with us; he got crippled with his uncle and them.

Kyriakoudes: Help me understand. When we were talking about the redfish, you mentioned the purse seine. Just so I'm clear, are you saying that the fishermen would come, and they'd lay out their nets, and they wouldn't get their catch, or they just would take too much for the—(1:25:58.3)

Thomas: I tell you how they used to catch it. They had a plane spotting them. You fly up there, you see the bottom.

Kyriakoudes: For the redfish?

Thomas: For the redfish. And the mullets, too, in the beginning they used to have a spotter plane and spot them. And they used to fly over and spot the biggest; they'd pick out the biggest school they had and let them surround it with the purse seine. You see? I fished (inaudible) doing that. They had a little seaplane, fishing pogy, that menhaden, in them purse seines, and he used to fly. Hey. And I've been on them purse boats. That's all they would catch was that, and the only fish they used to catch, bottom fish. It wasn't a bottom fish, top fish, Spanish mackerel; that was the only fish

they caught. They didn't catch redfish, drum, or trout, or nothing like that. That's what they was catching, menhaden, and the only other fish they used to catch, they had bins. They used to throw the—guys used to get down in the hold and throw the Spanish mackerel into a bin and ice it up. They used to sell the Spanish mackerel.

Kyriakouides: That's a good-eating fish.

Thomas: And they had a pogy plant in Rattlesnake Bayou, and he came, and he told us: every Thursday they used to buy a load of speckled trout to cook on that pogy plant to feed the workers, from us. Every Thursday they used to buy six, seven hundred pounds of speckled trout from us to feed the people on that because they didn't catch it with the seine.

Kyriakouides: So they started doing those techniques with the redfish?

Thomas: No. They didn't catch redfish or nothing like that. But I'm going to tell you what they used to do. They got a big wheel. If you put that—the lead line used to come off the bottom. The good fish go underneath it and only top fish they would catch. But then they come out with that purse seine. They got a big wheel they used to put down there and (inaudible), and that's how you used to hold that lead line on the bottom and close it from the bottom. And the redfish (1:27:43.2) would stay in that bag, make like a bag. You see? But them, no, they used to just pull it out on top. They didn't use the bottom. You see? They used to catch the top fish, menhaden and that, and the drum, and the redfish, and trout, they wouldn't catch it. And he used to spot it. Sometimes he stopped, and he used to tell us where he used to see the school of trout, by the beach on a sandbar, close to the bank. He used to stop and tell us; he'd say, "They got a nice school of trout." That man knew what he was doing on that plane. Said, "They got a nice school of trout," he said, "over there by Deepwater Point on that bar." We'd go there, and we'd catch them, trout like that, six- seven-pound trout.

Kyriakouides: Hm. That's a big fish.

Thomas: Well, I grew up out there, fishing. That's all I done. That's been my whole life, and I love it. And my son's doing the same thing. (1:28:32.8) He's a great little fisherman. Before they took the redfish away from us, he was good at it. He learned. He'd go with me; he learned. And I could leave him go on his own, fishing crabs, fishing fish, whatever. And when I had the boat launch, I made him a net, a twelve-hundred-foot net, and he used to go in the Grand Lake there, over here, freezing cold. I come from the boat launch that night, him and his little buddy. I say, "Where you going?" He said, "We're going to Grand Lake and fish tonight." I say, "Son," I say, "that net I made you, you don't have to go pass that misery at night, lighting a fire by the bank? Passing cold?" I say, "You don't have to do that." He say, "I can do that." I say, "You go about eight o'clock, nine o'clock when the sun come up." I said, "You slick calm," I say, "you ride around and around the lake." I say, "When you see them swirls," I say, "take the net and corkscrew it." I say, "You'll never go fishing no more at night, passing misery at night." So he tells his little partner; he said, "Phil," he said, "we going to try what my daddy say." He went the next day. He stopped by the boat

launch. He had six hundred pounds, all big trout like that. He say, “I don’t go pass no more misery at night.” (laughter) He said, “Without going with me, you just told me what to do.” He say, “Hey, that’s it.” And that’s what he was doing. He couldn’t fish the redbfish, but he was catching trout. Then that’s when they took the net away from him. (1:29:52.8) He had a strike net. You see? They took the nets away from him altogether. Took everything. But what brought it on, too, was the Vietnamese (1:30:01.0) with the still nets. They used to string them out there and just leave them there. I threw many of them on a bank with rotten fish. They used to strike that gillnet out there and leave it there. And I used to fish with the trammel net, strike net. I filled many boats of fish in my time.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. Well, again, thank you for sharing these stories with us.

Thomas: I tell you what. I fished with the old man next door, Old Man Vincent Roberts. You know how old I was? (1:30:30.3) I was ten years old, and I went and fished. My brother had a old type, they used to call it, a Fairbank donkey. It had a hole on top; you put water, used to be a pot of water. I used to boil the crabs in there when you fished crab with it, put it in there; it boiled the crab. So he tell me, he say, “I want to go catch some fish to eat?” He say, “You think you could borrow your brother’s boat tomorrow?” I say, “I go ask him.” So I went, and I asked him. So he say, “Yeah. I ain’t going to fish crab. Y’all could use it. Yeah. Mr. Santee(?) wants to go catch some redbfish to eat.” So he told, he say, “Look.” He say, “It’s going to run so far, and all of a sudden it’s just going to *brrrp*, kill. You take a can of water and pour it over the spark plug and cool it off.” So we going, boy. Get in the middle of the lake; that little motor stopped. I got a can of water and poured it, and boy, *shoo*, boiled it. And he tell me; he say, “Now you did it; it ain’t going to run.” I say, “No. That’s what my brother told me you got to do.” So I cooled the plugs down, wrapped the rope, kicked it off, gone. We went; we made one set. We filled that skiff up with redbfish. We come back in, and he sold them to Adam Mellerine(?), twenty cents a pound, and we give a bunch of it away to people to eat. And we sold it to him, twenty cents a pound. He went to Earl Lanasa(?) up in the city and bought him a air-cool to put in his skiff. So I was eight to ten years old, fishing trammel net with that man, and his wife used to fuss, “He’s nothing but a baby.” He say, “It’s the only one I can’t throw overboard, throwing that net out.” He used to take a skiff, with the oars, and get it on a slide. That man could pull the oars, and he’s just like this. No. I see a lot of people, used to go back and front; not him, just with his arm. I don’t know how strong was this man. He was muscular. I don’t know how strong this man was to do that with that skiff. Yeah. And that’s where I started fishing with a trammel net (1:32:23.8) and nothing but a little kid, nothing but a little boy with him on the weekends, mostly. And his wife used to fuss, “He’s nothing but a baby.” He say, “But that baby can throw that net.” (laughter) He said, his brothers, say, “I threw them,” his brothers overboard with it. “Can’t throw him overboard.” (laughter) Say, “He’s fast.”

Kyriakoudes: That’s wonderful.

Thomas: That’s what I say; I fished with that man. That’s what I was doing when Hurricane Betsy hit, me and him, fishing redbfish.

Kyriakoudes: Lifelong partnership.

Thomas: Yeah. Hey. He used to split it right down the middle. He owned everything, but he used to split it down the middle with me. And I'd go home, and throw it to my mama. You know?

Kyriakoudes: That's wonderful.

Thomas: That's what I say; I had a great life. I can't complain about my life.

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. That's a blessing. That's a blessing.

Thomas: You talk about something! When they done the stress test, they done it by injection at Ochsner Hospital, laying there, they put a IV [intravenous]. Doctor come in there, the guy come in there with that tube about that long with medicine in it. He say, "Look." They had me hooked up on a monitor and everything else. He said, "Look, I'm going to tell you, when I put this in you," he say "a lot of people complain." He say, "They feel like they heart going to run out they chest." I say, "Pop that in." He popped half of it in. He come back. He say, "You feel like your heart going to run out your chest?" I say, "I speed up that heart faster than that on 'Johnny Be Good.'" (1:33:44.3) He pumped it all in; [I] never did feel it. But I had a trophy; me and my wife had a trophy, standing that high, dancing to "Johnny Be Good," jitterbugging. I say, "I speed up my heart faster than that on the dance floor." And a lot of people don't realize it. I'll get on the dance floor to a certain song, by myself, and I move, and they say, "Boy, you can dance." And they don't realize that what I'm doing: speeding up my heart because if you don't speed it up, and if you got blockages, and when you do speed it up, it'll kill you. So if you got blockages, you're going to know it. And that's what I do, and they don't realize what I'm doing, and I tell them; I say, "I keep the blood flowing." I say, "Them plastic veins don't block up." (laughter) That was something, though. For the nuclear seeds, they done X-rays and that. The doctor said, "There ain't no way we can get in them plastic veins." And they wanted to operate and remove them. He said, "There ain't no way we getting in them veins." He said, "We ain't going to do the surgery. We're going to try something else." I say, "What's that?" "Nuclear seeds." It worked. That's what took the most out of me. I had four operations and four cuts on me already, and that's what took the most energy out of me, was the nuclear seeds, all radioactive. No kids or nothing could sit on my lap or nothing. I was radioactive. No pregnant woman, no nothing. Had to stay; nobody could sit on me. (laughter) I say, "I glow in the dark." (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: That's right. Hot in a different way.

Thomas: Yeah. If y'all need to use the bathroom, I got one right there.

Kyriakoudes: Well, I'm going to turn—

(end of interview)