

Stephanie Scull-DeArme y: It's on record, and the seconds are ticking by, and the volume looks like it's working. This is an interview for the University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project in conjunction with the Marine and Seafood Industry Museum in Biloxi, Mississippi. The interview is with Frank Parker, and it is taking place on Wednesday, February 24, 2010, at nine – what do we have?

Franklin Parker: 9:30.

SSD: – 9:30 a.m. at his home in Biloxi, Mississippi. I am Stephanie Scull-DeArme y, and I'm the interviewer. First, I'd like to thank you, Frank, for taking the time to talk with us today. I'd like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So I'm going to ask you, for the record, could you state your name, please?

FP: My name is Franklin Parker.

SSD: For the record, in case all of our labels are lost or damaged in the future, how do you spell your name?

FP: It's F-R-A-N-K-L-I-N P-A-R-K-E-R.

SSD: When were you born?

FP: Born July 4th, 1973, in Biloxi, Mississippi.

SSD: You were an Independence Day baby?

FP: That's right. My name was almost Firecracker.

SSD: [laughter] Right here in Biloxi too. Okay. Well, let's just kind of jump right into these questions that the grant writers wanted to have answered and ask you what your initial opinion was of the turtle excluder device [TED] itself.

FP: Pretty much I've been shrimping probably since I was around fifteen, sixteen years old. The turtle excluders really started coming implemented in the '80s – mid-'80s, late '80s – and I do remember some of my first shrimping where we didn't pull turtle excluders. In '93, I want to say it was, was when they became law – and everywhere where you had to pull them. At first, it was a big hoopla. Nobody wanted to pull this big monstrosity. The first turtle excluders they had – some of them were six-foot-long in a big box. When you're working on a small boat, it was really kind of a hazard if it got rough and this thing's swinging and swaying around and all. But I didn't really like it a whole bunch at first. But over the years, with new technology and some modifications and the work that people did – the ones who designed the TEDs – working with fishermen to get their input on this and that – when they're working properly, I don't really see a real big problem with TEDs as far as shrimp loss and things like that. Now, with hurricanes and storms and stuff, you get a lot of debris in the water. They are a nightmare. I mean, you will lose a lot of money because if a piece of debris or an old crab trap or a log or anything gets jammed up in that TED, well, it keeps it open, and you lose your whole catch.

FP: Wow. Your whole catch?

FP: Yes.

SSD: Has that ever happened to you?

FP: Oh, yes. It seems like it always happens on a good drag when you're catching a lot of shrimp. My boat is a traditional Gulf-style shrimp boat. We pull two nets. Of course, we have two turtle excluders, one on each net. If you pick up one net and it's got five-hundred pounds in it, and the other one's got a log or an old crab pot or a tire, and you got five pounds in it. It's that drastic at times.

SSD: Wow. Well, tell me a little bit about shrimping. I guess my first question is would it be easy to stop and check every few minutes to see if there's debris?

FP: No, it's not. It's not feasible to do that. What we normally do is, when we put over our big nets, we'll drag it, and then we'll have a small net. We'll pick up the small net every fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes. We call it a test trawl. We'll pick up, and we'll check for debris or how much fish we're catching because if we're catching a lot of bycatch at times, we won't want to make a big drag and have a ten-thousand-pound drag of fish you got to throw over. But the thing with the debris is there are certain times where, say, a storm comes, we'll call up our local wildlife people and say, "Hey, look, we need a TED exemption." They will do that. They'll work with us a lot of times because they know if we're catching a lot of debris – especially after Katrina, they had to pay a lot of money to get that cleaned up. Well, we'll clean it up for free. Just let us drag. If we can make money, we'll catch it. They'll do that. They'll give us like sixty-day extensions, where we won't have to pull TEDs for sixty days, thirty days. But the restriction is they time your – you can't drag more than ninety minutes, sixty minutes, things like that.

SSD: So how does that make it better, to limit the time?

FP: Well, the thing about it is, if you do catch a turtle, a turtle can only hold its breath so long. So if you're dragging four hours with no TED, that turtle's probably going to drown because he needs to get air. Where if you make a short drag, if you catch him, he can hold his breath an hour, hour and a half. And a lot of times – I've caught several sea turtles. I can say not very many of them died. Usually, we can keep them on deck. If they're kind of lifeless, we can mess with them. If you just leave them out there, they do have a certain way that you can give them, I guess, CPR.

SSD: Wow. How do you do that?

FP: You flip them over upside-down, and you just push on their belly with your foot – not real hard, just kind of pumping. You'll see the water come out of their nose and mouth. You leave them there, and they'll – we'll keep them on deck all night long, sometimes eight, ten, twelve hours, and they'll catch their breath, and they'll be frisky, and you throw them back.

SSD: Wow. So now, you said, if you're pulling a net after a storm and there is debris, that it cleans out the debris. How does that happen?

FP: Whenever we're catching, we catch the debris.

SSD: It goes into your net?

FP: In the net. Right. That's where the problem with the TED comes, where if you have a TED, you have a hole. As long as the water pressure keeps that flap closed – well, when a turtle hits that – it's a grid – it'll hit the grid, it'll come up, and it'll go out that hole. Well, if a tire gets there, it'll wedge in there. The tire won't fall out – or a tree branch or a microwave, a refrigerator. I mean, we catch everything.

SSD: Good grief.

FP: That'll get in there, and it'll hold that net open. It'll make a big hole, so all the fish, shrimp, everything go out that hole. Where, when they give us an exemption, and we don't have any TED, all that goes in the net and stays in the net. The shrimp don't get out. The debris don't get out. So that's when we have to limit our drag times.

SSD: So the net is strong enough to hold a refrigerator?

FP: Oh, yeah.

SSD: What do you do with the refrigerator when you get it on board?

FP: Throw it up on the dock and bring it home. After Katrina, I pretty well caught everything. The worst are the big garbage cans, the big BFI [Browning-Ferris Industries] garbage cans with the wheels on it because they'll fill up with mud, and they'll weigh four or five-hundred pounds, six-hundred pounds.

SSD: Good grief.

FP: It all depends how you handle your nets. A refrigerator will tear a hole in it, or that big garbage can will tear a hole in it. But if you're real careful and it's not rough, you can usually get it out.

SSD: So the hole's going to be torn in it when you're lifting it up out of the water?

FP: Out of the water. That's right because the weight of the object exceeds the amount of pressure that that net can hold.

SSD: Yes. So if it makes a hole at that point, you're going to lose some of your catch then too?

FP: Yes, because a lot of times, a lot of the – whenever your debris is in there, the fish and shrimp will pile up in front of it because it can't go all the way back to the tail, so you'll lose some of it like that. But the big thing with the TED is that whatever debris you have will get obstructed in front of that TED and hold the flap open that lets the turtle out. That can be as small as a tree branch. Where normally, if you didn't have a TED, you wouldn't lose anything with a tree branch.

SSD: So is it reasonable – let's say that you have two situations. You have one situation where you're using a TED. The other situation is you're exempt from using a TED. You said, when you're exempt, you have to check maybe every ninety minutes. Well, is it not practical to check every ninety minutes when you are using a TED?

FP: Not necessarily. Sometimes we'll make hour-and-a-half drags. But certain times of year, when there's not a lot of shrimp, we might drag four hours, five hours. It's more work to pick up your net every ninety minutes.

SSD: How long does it take to pick up the net?

FP: Depending on the depth of the water, I can pick up my trawl just probably ten minutes pick up, set back out.

SSD: You can empty it in that same amount of time?

FP: Yes. That's pick them up, empty them, and set them back out – about ten, fifteen minutes.

SSD: How big is your boat?

FP: It's sixty-foot by twenty-foot.

SSD: Wow, that sounds huge.

FP: It's a mid-class boat. It's a bay boat. I would call it just a big bay boat. It's comfortable.

SSD: Bay as opposed to open water?

FP: As in a Gulf trawler. I do trawl in the Gulf, but I rarely exceed – I work on the outside beaches of the Gulf, maybe within six, seven, eight miles of the mainland – as far as all bays, sounds, lakes.

SSD: Are the Gulf trawlers bigger?

FP: Oh, yes. Sixty foot's about on the small end of the Gulf trawlers. And some of them [are] fifty, but the Gulf trawlers go all the way up to a hundred-foot.

SSD: Okay. Forty more feet can be a lot –

FP: Oh, yes.

SSD: – when you're trying to take care of it.

FP: That's right. When it's rough.

SSD: Yes. When I lived here, we had a nineteen-footer. [laughter] Sixty feet just seems enormous. So were you pretty young in 1993 – how old were you in 1993?

FP: 1993, I was twenty years old.

SSD: So you were pretty young then when the first turtle excluders became law for you to use them.

FP: Right.

SSD: So maybe, for you, it came with the territory.

FP: That's right.

SSD: They've always been there.

FP: Yes. It's pretty much always been around. But I remember, in 1993 in particular, my brother had a boat at the time. He had a thirty-two-foot skiff – [inaudible] skiff. Whenever we had to put that big monstrosity of a TED on that little boat, it was a big deal. But I've been in the fishing business probably since I was around fifteen years old. I started when I was in high school, running crab traps and doing some fishing and stuff.

SSD: So when you were fifteen, they were already developing the TEDs.

FP: Yes. But it started in the offshore waters first. That's where most of the sea turtles are at. Here in the Gulf, we do get them in here at certain times of the year. But that's where it started. Then it eventually moved into all bodies of water.

SSD: Did you have a kind of a specific opinion about the turtle excluder device?

FP: Like I said, back then, I didn't like it at all. But now, being in a business going on twenty years, I don't really see it as that big of a deal. The problem I have with NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] and them ones is, at first, [inaudible] going save Kemp's ridley turtles. We had a certain size grid and stuff like that. Well, then, Kemp's ridley make a good comeback. Well, now we got to save the loggerhead turtles.

SSD: They're bigger.

FP: So they make us get a bigger TED. This is all money out of our pocket that we have to spend. I don't know. It seems like a conspiracy. They want to make us pull one, regardless of

whether or not. The problem I have with it also is you go to other countries that we import their shrimp; they don't even have to pull it. It doesn't seem fair. Here we are with – I would say, on an average year, pulling my TEDs, I probably lose – I would say a fair estimate would be at least ten-thousand dollars a year in shrimp, especially if we have any kind of little tropical storms. The big thing is derelict crab traps. They're probably the biggest nuisance to a TED.

SSD: Are the derelict crab traps the ones that just get lost and abandoned?

FP: They get lost. Say a speedboat comes by, cuts the cork, and it drops.

SSD: So those get caught up?

FP: Oh, yes. Yes. Like I said, the shrimpers pretty much keep the bottom clean, especially when we're dragging that.

SSD: I'll bet. I had a question. Let me see if I can call it back. It's not a question, actually. It's something I read, which is astounding. In Thailand, for example, for every pound of shrimp, there's seventeen pounds of bycatch.

FP: Oh, yes.

SSD: I can't eat a shrimp anymore unless I know it came from the Gulf because it just goes against my conscience to know that seventeen pounds of something died, probably, so I can have this pound.

FP: Bycatch is another issue too.

SSD: Is it?

FP: A lot of environmentalists say this and that. My biggest problem is the American public is misinformed. Bycatch isn't that big – I wouldn't say it's hardly no problem at all, especially in the – you just go out on my boat one time. We do catch – there is some bycatch. A lot of it's trash fish. I don't know. Me growing up in the industry, if we catch any, I would say, a sportfish, like a speckled trout or redfish, a lot of that stuff's alive.

SSD: You can throw it back?

FP: I throw it back. I'm probably as big of a recreational fisherman as anybody. I love to recreational fish. I don't know if that's just my own personal belief – hey, I can't let this die. Let's throw it back. But even if you try to throw it back, most of the time, they don't make it past the birds or the dolphins.

SSD: Wow.

FP: There's not very much that goes to waste.

SSD: So the birds and dolphins are following you?

FP: Oh, they are, and the sharks. I don't know how more people aren't eaten – or bitten, I should say. [laughter] The sharks are really, really bad.

SSD: So when you're throwing back something trying to save it, it's being consumed by these other marine animals?

FP: Yes. Right. Pelicans, seagulls. They're just there by the hundreds. I'm sure, if you've ever been out on a boat, you always see birds around shrimp boats, and that's because, when they're sorting your catch, that's a free meal. That's a buffet for them.

SSD: [laughter] Salad bar?

FP: That's right.

SSD: Excuse me. What are some examples of trash fish?

FP: Trash fish would be anything from croakers to spots or seabream.

SSD: Seabream?

FP: Yes, they've got a bunch of names.

SSD: Why are they considered trash?

FP: Because there's no really commercial value or a recreational value on them. Croakers used to have a commercial value here at one time when we had like the Kozy Kitten cat food plant because boats would go catch the croakers and turn them into cat food. But they're really considered a trash fish. They're good to eat. If they get big enough, croakers are good. The bream are good. But they're considered trash fish.

SSD: No commercial market?

FP: That's right. Yes.

SSD: What happened with Kozy Kitten? They're not catching the croaker for them anymore?

FP: No. The croaker industry went south too, like all the –

SSD: Do you know why?

FP: I don't really know. I had a couple of my uncles used to catch – it was real big back in the '60s, '70s, and even up until probably the mid-'80s. For some reason, they just – I don't know if it had something to do with – I'm sure they were regulated out of business, like any American business, but I'm not real sure. I just know it seemed like, growing up as a kid, down there

around the docks, it was probably in the late '80s they started selling off all their boats. Then the one family here – it might have been something where the younger generation of the family didn't want to take over the business. Then casinos came in and bought out the property, so it's probably a good –

SSD: Yes. The price of gas was going up. That might have had something to do with it. A lot of things conspiring: the casinos wanting the property, price of gas, younger generation not choosing that as a profession.

FP: That's right.

SSD: Yes. Well, can you describe the first TED you used?

FP: The first TED that I remember was pretty similar to the one that we still pull today. They had so many different variations back then. Now, over the years of testing it and fisherman input and stuff, it's pretty well either a square or an oval metal grid. Most times, anywhere from like a one-inch pipe all the way up to about inch-and-a-half pipe, depending on the size of the boats. The bigger boats with more horsepower have a bigger pipe. But they're all a minimum now. I want to say, of – the minimum grid is like thirty-two inches by thirty-two inches is the minimum grid. But we found out, within the last ten years, the bigger the TED, the better off you are size-wise.

SSD: Why is that?

FP: It seems like if you have a small TED and you catch something – debris – it plugs it up, where if you have a big TED, instead of blocking off the whole TED, it only blocks off a small portion of the TED, so you still have all this area around it. So a lot of us went to the bigger TEDs just for that reason.

SSD: Yes. Can you notice a change in the amount of fuel you use if you're pulling a bigger TED?

FP: Not really.

SSD: That's good.

FP: Not really. I wouldn't say there was any – I would say it's such a small fraction; it's not even an issue.

SSD: Great. That's really good. Yes. Maybe we've already touched on question number three – what was your opinion of the TEDs requirement when it was first enacted?

FP: Yes. Oh, I hated it. I was working on a small boat. If you have a TED that's three-foot-wide and your boat's only twelve-foot wide, well, that's twenty-five percent the width of your boat – this piece of equipment that you have no idea what it is and never used before. It seems like we had a lot of problems at first just getting used to how to set out a net because a lot of

times, a TED will twist up. If you don't put your net out fast enough, the water pressure will make it spin, and it'll spin up in a knot. When you're dragging your net, you don't even know this.

SSD: But your net's all knotted up, and nothing can get in?

FP: That's right. Nothing can get to the back. So it was a lot of trials and tribulation to go through at the beginning. But over the years – and every fisherman's different; they all have their own style of TEDs they like and things like that. Some prefer to shoot out of the bottom. Me, I prefer to shoot out of the top. It's just everybody's different opinion.

SSD: So, how did you get them into your nets?

FP: Actually, when you buy a TED, they have a piece of netting sewed around it that is the same diameter as your net. We measured net diameter by the number of meshes, which is how many knots go around the net. You can buy them from a hundred-and-twenty meshes, hundred-and-sixty, hundred-and-eighty, two-hundred-and-forty. Then you just cut your net where – cut your net off and just sew this on each side.

SSD: How do you sew it into the net? Do you do it by hand?

FP: By hand.

SSD: Did you do your own?

FP: Oh, yes. I can put my own net and my own TEDs in the actual webbing that the TED's in, but sometimes it's just too – the labor involved – it's cheaper to go pay somebody to do it that does it every day. They're faster. They know it's going to be right. Because when it comes to discrepancies, you can have a big fine if something's not right

SSD: Yeah. If you made a mistake and didn't [inaudible]?

FP: Right. So a lot of the TED things – I have a guy in Bayou La Batre that does all my TED work for me. I'll call him up, "Hey, look, I need four TEDs," and he has them done. I'll go over and pick them up. For the little bit he charges, it's worth me hiring somebody to do the work.

SSD: What does he charge?

FP: A TED – the frame, the webbing, the whole nine yards – about two-hundred-and-fifty dollars a TED, on the lower end.

SSD: Is that to purchase it or just to have it installed?

FP: To purchase it.

SSD: That's the purchase?

FP: Now, if you have the actual frame, the metal frame, it's around a hundred dollars to install it.

SSD: Do you think he does that full-time? Is it a full-time job for him?

FP: He's a retired shrimper. He's an older fellow. Probably, I would say, he's in his late sixties, early seventies. He shrimped his whole life. His two sons shrimp. He's got a net shop there that he mainly is the net man for his two sons. If he can pick up side jobs to make a little extra money, keep the light bill paid, and the building to absorb some of the cost of the building and stuff, then he does that.

SSD: Not really making a living at it, but he doesn't really want to.

FP: Yes. Well, it's like anybody that's worked hard their whole life, once you get ready to retire, you still – "Hey, I got to do something. I can't sit around on the couch."

SSD: Yes. I think I could. [laughter]

FP: [laughter] Well, I enjoy it in the wintertime. But I get to do work on my boat. I do build my own nets and stuff like that.

SSD: Well, I guess it never occurred to me before to wonder just how many nets you might go through in a year. How many do you keep on the boat?

FP: Now we're getting in a whole different ball game. It all depends on the boat. Like my boat, it's rigged up for – there's mainly four different ways – four different rigs on a boat. There's what you call a single-rig boat, and it pulls one net. They'll mainly pull anywhere – depending on the size of the boat, they can pull up to – now this is for state waters. They can pull up to one fifty-foot net. The double rig pulls two nets, and they can pull two twenty-five-foot nets, up to fifty feet of cork line. Then, your bigger Gulf boats – those are four-rig boats. They pull four nets. In the Gulf, they don't have a net size or mesh size [inaudible], so if they can pull four 50s, four 70s – a lot of [inaudible]. Then, probably one of the newest ways to come out is skimming – a skimmer net. Basically, in Mississippi, you can pull two 25s. It's two nets. You can pull two 25s in Mississippi. Actually, there's otter trawl or a skimmer frame. An otter trawl has the big wooden boards that hold the nets open; those are used for your regular otter trawls. Well, your skimmer net actually has a square frame that the net attaches to, and the frame holds the net open.

SSD: Does the frame still drag the bottom?

FP: The frame goes all the way down to the bottom.

SSD: Okay. Oh, I had another question. That's a child being tortured in the background. We've got a train going by too. We might just take a little break if it's going to go by too long.

Let's see. I had a question. It was about state and Gulf waters. When you say Gulf water, are you thinking of the federal waters?

FP: Federal waters. That's three miles outside of the barrier islands.

SSD: Everything inside of that is state?

FP: State.

SSD: It's government by state regulations?

FP: Right.

SSD: Is there very much of a difference between the federal and the state regulations?

FP: Oh, yes. It varies state to state, too.

SSD: Right. So do you stick close to the Mississippi shore for that reason?

FP: No. The main reason why I shrimp here – I've shrimped everywhere from Tampa, Florida, all the way over to Cameron, Louisiana, on the Texas border. But the last few years, the economics of the business has gotten so bad, we're forced to retail a majority of our own shrimp, so for me to run off thirty hours, and then go catch shrimp and come back thirty hours – the closer I can catch shrimp to my dock, that's less fuel I'm burning. We've been pretty fortunate. The last few years, shrimping's been pretty good, biologically speaking. Economically, it's been bad. But biologically speaking, as far as the shrimp being close to the house and things, it's been pretty good.

SSD: Enough of them?

FP: Enough of them to make money. Two years ago, when the price of diesel was over four dollars a gallon, the price of shrimp was real low, but it was probably the best shrimp season I ever remember. Just this one dock, they unloaded a little over a million pounds the first week of shrimp season – one dock. The amount of shrimp there – it was probably one of our better years as far as profit-wise because you could go out there and catch you two-thousand pounds of shrimp a night. So even though the diesel's four dollars and something a gallon and the price of shrimp is a dollar a pound, the volume of shrimp we were catching was making up the difference.

SSD: Yes. What is diesel now?

FP: The last diesel I bought was around – this was back in November, December – was around two-fifty.

SSD: Do you buy a lot all at once and store it in tanks?

FP: My boat can hold about forty-five-hundred gallons.

SSD: How long will that last?

FP: Depends on where I need to go. My boat burns around ten gallons an hour.

SSD: So that's about four-hundred-and-fifty hours?

FP: That's right.

SSD: Well, if you go from state to state, how do you learn the regulations, so you know you're not going to be fined?

FP: Well, most of us just know it because we've been doing it so long. But they do change the regulations. When you go buy, say, your Louisiana state license, you can pick up a rules-and-regulations book. There's not a lot of difference, but there are some.

SSD: I have so many questions. I guess I just need to get through these for the grant before I go too far off of them. Number four is did your opinion of TEDs change over time. You said that it did.

FP: It absolutely did.

SSD: But just to kind of revisit that, how did it change, and why did it change over time?

FP: Well, I guess it's like anything new. You buck it and fight it and just don't want to do it. Then when you have to deal with it – I don't know – I'm kind of a positive person. If I have to pull it, then I'm going to do what I have to do. Let's do a little bit of experimenting with this thing. See what we can do to make it better for us because if we're in this industry, and I have to abide by this law, well, let's try to make it to our advantage. I guess that's how my opinion changed. Like I said, the TEDs really – they're not that big of a factor anymore. There's times when we cuss them when you lose a drag, but there's really nothing you can do about that, other than working with your local officials to get them to say, "Okay, well, we're catching a lot of debris. Let's get an exemption." They do that pretty regular. All it takes is a handful of fishermen to call up there and say, "Hey, we got a problem we need to address," and they'll do it. The majority of the time, when we call them after a storm, it's, "Look, we already got it in the works. We knew you were going to call."

SSD: [laughter] Yes. You've trained them?

FP: Yes.

SSD: Well, it seems like, to me, that it might be easier – instead of putting a TED and a net – to just check it every ninety minutes and empty it and save the turtles that are in there. Then you wouldn't lose ten-thousand –

FP: Well, that's another thing between skimming and trawling. Trawling – it's a pain in the butt to pick up your nets that quick. It really is.

SSD: But it takes only ten minutes.

FP: Well, that's on my boat. Some boats, it takes up to thirty, forty-five minutes, depending on the depth of water and things like that. But now, skimming, on the other hand – think about it too like this – when you pick up and say it takes you twenty minutes to pick up, dump out, well, that's twenty minutes you're not catching a shrimp, where – skimming, you're actually, instead of pulling the nets, you're pushing the nets.

SSD: I was just about to ask you that.

FP: If you pick up your tail, you're catching shrimp the whole time.

SSD: So you're pushing the net in front of your boat?

FP: On the sides.

SSD: It's on the sides? Where is the tail, so that you could –?

FP: The tail's behind your boat.

SSD: But you can pick it up and start emptying it?

FP: You can pull it up – that's right. Because it's a real long net. You're catching shrimp the whole time. You can pick up and skimming – because we don't have a test net, we really don't know what we're catching. So I can pick my net up every ten minutes, fifteen minutes. Skimming's a lot more probably friendlier to the sea life because if you drag a fish or a turtle or anything around in a net for an hour, well, he's going to be beat up, stressed out. You pick up that skimmer net; well, everything's alive, kicking.

SSD: So you're just picking up the tail?

FP: Just picking up the tail of the net.

SSD: You can actually unload it while you're still catching.

FP: That's right. While you're still catching.

SSD: That seems like the way to go.

FP: It is. I rigged my boat up for skimming about '04 – '03, '04 – somewhere around there. If I can catch a shrimp skimming, I will catch a shrimp skimming way before – but the problem with the skimming is there's a depth that you're limited to because it's an actual pipe. Really, skimming – you really can't skim over about sixteen feet of water, eighteen feet of water.

SSD: Do you catch a lot in there?

FP: Oh, yes. A skimmer net will whup on a trawl as far as catching the amount of shrimp. That's another variable. It's brown shrimp, white shrimp, pink shrimp. The white shrimp, a skimmer will just put it on a regular trawl in white shrimp. Now, brownies tend to be on bottom more, where a skimmer net will work from above the water all the way down. If a shrimp jumps out the water, the net's over him, and he's actually – where a trawl's underneath the water. It's very rare you see an otter trawl above the water.

SSD: Shrimp can jump out of the water?

FP: Oh, yes, they can jump out of the water.

SSD: I didn't know that.

FP: Yeah. They are very, very – they can outswim most boats – not jump, not kick – they can with their little feet kick, and they can outswim – I've actually seen them swim.

SSD: They're swimming with those skinny little feet?

FP: Yes. With their feet on their abdomen.

SSD: Wow.

FP: Yes. You can see the shrimp swimming out of the net. [laughter]

SSD: How fast is the boat going?

FP: My boat, I average about two and a half knots, which is maybe three miles an hour.

SSD: So people probably can't run more than five miles an hour. Those shrimp are swimming over three miles an hour.

FP: The big shrimp, when they pop their tails and jump out the water – I've seen some of them big shrimp jump six, seven feet in distance. I've seen some of them jump as high as maybe thirty inches out of the water. They'll actually – when I'm pushing, and the pipe that holds the net open is above the water, the shrimp will jump over the pipe and land on top of the net. They'll be on top of the net.

SSD: What happens to that shrimp?

FP: Well, some of them get away, but I got a long scoop net. I can get them out of there, scoop them up. [laughter] But a lot of them will land on top of the net and make another pop, and they'll be swimming.

SSD: So they can pop right out. They don't get tangled up in there.

FP: Yeah. Trawlers are very – I mean, it's a lot more efficient than other [inaudible], but it's very inefficient as far as the amount of shrimp that goes in and comes out of the net.

SSD: Well, what other choice would you have besides trawling?

FP: To make any money, that's about the only way. They used to purse seine shrimp.

SSD: How does a purse seine work?

FP: It basically is like a big seine, which is like a big panel, and it goes from the surface – and they'll circle a body of water, and then they'll purse it all in, and they'll catch everything that's inside that circle.

SSD: There's something in it that draws it –

FP: It draws from the bottom. The purse at the bottom draws it together. And then it makes like a bowl. Then everything that's in there – they keep pursing that net up tight and scooping everything out.

SSD: The old-fashioned purses did that. They had the little strings on them.

FP: They got a drawstring – that's right.

SSD: That's how you pulled the mouth closed. So the purse seine net has the same basis that you pull it tight at the bottom.

FP: That's right. Then you just keep pulling it in, pulling it in, and everything will get tight.

SSD: You pull the net up then?

FP: Yes. They pull it up a little at a time and then until it just gets smaller and smaller and smaller, and everything gets trapped. They still have a purse seine industry, but it's mainly for menhaden.

SSD: Well, it seems like, with purse seining, there would be a lot of bycatch.

FP: There is.

SSD: A whole lot.

FP: There is. There's a lot of bycatch. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of men [that has] got to operate that.

SSD: Really?

FP: Where, on my boat, if it's just my sixty-foot boat, I can get away – if I have a good deckhand, I can get away with one deckhand, just me and one deckhand.

SSD: One deckhand? Wow. That's pretty good.

FP: Yes. I like to take two. It's hard to find a good deckhand nowadays. The labor force has gone to the dogs.

SSD: Since when? Have anything to do with Katrina?

FP: No, not really. It's just nobody wants to work anymore, it seems like.

SSD: That kind of hard work?

FP: Then you're gone a lot from – you go out there, and you're gone from home for twenty-four hours a day. Say, on my boat, if we make a trip, it's anywhere from seven to ten days. So figure you put in twenty-four hours a day, ten days, that's two-hundred-forty hours you put in, in your workweek.

SSD: You all don't sleep?

FP: Oh, yes.

SSD: Oh, good.

FP: Yes, you sleep. But you're gone from home.

SSD: You're gone from home.

FP: You're not actually working, but you're gone from home. Well, say, okay, well, you worked two-hundred-and-forty hours, and you made five hundred bucks. That's not a very good hourly wage to be away from home. I don't know. I can just see a big difference in me since I've gotten married and had kids. I used to not think anything – when I first bought my boat in '99, I would take off. I would go wherever the shrimp were at, and I'd go to South Florida. I might be in Alabama, might be in Louisiana. I would just go. If I come home – I put probably three-hundred days a year on the water. But now, it seems like I get going; I miss my kids, I miss my wife. But I try to hustle and work hard in the summertime when the shrimping's good, so in the wintertime, I don't have to go off.

SSD: Yes. Go somewhere where the season is right for shrimp, which would be where?

FP: They're catching shrimp in west Louisiana now or south Florida. That's normal wintertime spots. But then, in the wintertime, there's the weather. You might get two or three days of good shrimping weather, then a bad northern would come in, and it would get so rough you can't work. So you got to go push your boat on a bank in a bayou somewhere and wait three days,

sitting there twiddling your thumbs on your boat, not making no money. That's wintertime work. I don't know. I feel like I've paid my dues for all that. Not that I'm saying I won't do it. I might have to do it eventually, but the last few years, it seems like it's been – I've been fortunate enough where I didn't have to do that.

SSD: Well, great. Let's go to number five, and then we're done with their questions, and we can just talk about whatever we want to. The fifth question is, how have TEDs affected the shrimp industry?

FP: The biggest effect, I would say, would be that the – probably two ways. One would be the way you lose catch with debris and things like that. The second would be how they change the regulations so often, and you have to buy new equipment. Just to basically get started on my scale of boat, you're talking seven-hundred-fifty dollars, and that's if you don't tear a TED up. That's for three TEDs. That's for two to pull and one for a replacement. Some of them bigger boats, it would be fifteen, eighteen-hundred dollars for TEDs. If you hang up on a wreck, or you catch something big, and it distorts your TED, bends it, or something, well, that's garbage. You can throw that away. You can't pull it no more.

SSD: Yikes. So you might have to replace one more than once?

FP: Oh, yes. After Katrina, I think I went through about – I probably tore up about fifteen nets that year and, let's see, three TEDs that were screwed. We threw them in the scrap pile.

SSD: What did it cost to replace the nets?

FP: I built most of my own nets. When we're making good money, and we're catching a lot of shrimp, I don't have time to make [inaudible], but an average twenty-five-foot net will cost you around – depending who makes it – anywhere from four to six-hundred dollars for one net.

SSD: Wow, that's a lot. That's a lot.

FP: You can build them yourself for about half price.

SSD: How do you do that? What are the materials? How do you do it?

FP: You'll buy the webbing and then cut out a pattern and then sew it together.

SSD: Twenty-five feet. Where do you do it?

FP: Underneath my house.

SSD: Under the house?

FP: You can do it in the yard. Well, this is a pattern of a net. That's how many meshes you got to cross, and this is all straight, and then that four in one – that's four points, one bar. That's all the pieces of net. You sew that net together, and there you go. It's basically a funnel.

SSD: So you can buy the netting that's already made?

FP: Right. Yes.

SSD: And cut it out? Wow, that really looks like it could take some – it's like, measure five times, cut once, right?

FP: Yes. Oh, yes.

SSD: Do you have any old ones of these that you could let us archive? I don't want to take something that you're really going to use.

FP: I might have some copies of some. You see all these patterns?

SSD: How do you decide on a pattern?

FP: Well, a lot of these are just – they're different nets – white shrimp nets, brown shrimp nets – different lengths. This right here is all – these patterns here are really old. Well, you can see this datebook is from 1977.

SSD: Wow. Did those get passed down to you?

FP: Yes.

SSD: Oh, that's so good.

FP: When I was about nineteen years old, twenty years old, somewhere around that, I started working with a cousin of mine, and he was seventy, and this is all his patterns.

SSD: Wow. So he's gone now, huh?

FP: No, he's still alive.

SSD: He's still alive?

FP: He's eighty-five years old now, and he's still got him a little boat.

SSD: Oh, that's great.

FP: He gets around good. If somebody has a net – it used to be more, I guess, secretive because –

SSD: It was intellectual property? [laughter]

FP: Yeah. Well, there were literally dozens of net makers. Then some fishermen made their own nets. If they came up with a pattern that worked really good, well then, say, if I'm working with somebody else on another boat, and I'm beating them, well they're like, "Hey, what kind of net are you pulling? What size webbing?" I need to work on my stuff, you know? It used to be, back when there were a lot of fishermen; it was really secretive. You didn't want to give up something where you – your edge, your advantage. But nowadays, I still have a lot of family left in the business – not as many as what there once was but – let's see. There's one, two, three, four, five, six, seven – about seven cousins, including myself. We all pretty well work together. There's still a little bit of that competitiveness between us. But we're not going to do something to hurt each other. There's a couple of other guys that I consider real good friends. We try to help each other. Well, you can see every one of these patterns – you see, that's (Jerry Jones?) box net and Otis net, and (Lynn?) Florida legal net, and Ricky's twenty-five-foot skimmer net. Mr. (Krill?) was a net maker here in Biloxi. This was his pattern for a (Krill?) net. So all of them – they're all good. They say, "Well, what net works good?" Well, a new net. It doesn't matter. As long as it's new and it's rigged up right, it's going to catch shrimp.

SSD: Do you have a prevent-a-hole-from-getting-bigger plan? Do you look at them –?

FP: Well, just about all of it can patch. There's not too many fishermen out there that can't patch their own nets. But sharks and dolphins probably do more damage to the nets than debris.

SSD: Can the dolphins get out with the turtle excluder device? Are they too big?

FP: I don't know anybody ever that's caught a dolphin in a net.

SSD: Really? Oh, they get out?

FP: They can swim really, really fast, and they're very, very smart. If you're pulling a net at three miles an hour, for a dolphin to go in your net – I've only caught one dolphin in my net, and he was dead. He was decomposed.

SSD: Amazing.

FP: I actually thought that I had – there was a guy [who] had come missing off of a boat. I'd seen this dolphin, and it was probably six-foot, seven-foot-long, and it was decomposing. The rib cage was there. When I first saw it, I was like, "Oh, I've done caught this guy that's missing." But it was a dolphin. But like I said, I don't know of anybody that's ever caught a dolphin.

SSD: Well, that's good.

FP: They're just too smart for that.

SSD: Dolphins are good. I swam with dolphins once in Islamorada, Florida. They were captive. It was at a place called Theater of the Sea, and they had a place where the dolphins

could swim and get away from us if they wanted to. They did go over there, but they'd come back. They enjoyed interacting with us.

FP: Yes. They're a big nuisance to the fishermen.

SSD: How so?

FP: Well, that net is corralling everything that they eat. So they can see in there; they see that fish in there. Well, they're going to bite a hole in that net to try to let that fish get out.

SSD: They can bite through your net?

FP: Oh, yes. They can ruin a net in one night.

SSD: Wow.

FP: They will completely destroy a net beyond – and we've tried all kinds of things, from tying little pieces of chain on the bottom of the net where, when a dolphin comes up, maybe it'll hit them and scare them, to some guys tie PVC because it makes a whistling through the water. They've even come out with some beepers that send out like an ultrasonic sound that's supposed to keep them off. But they get used to all that. The only real way to get away from them tearing your net is [to] put a heavy enough twine in the net, where the net's heavy enough to where, when they bite it, they won't tear a hole in it. But a lot of us, over the years, have gotten away – we try to go to smaller, lighter webbing because it's less drag. You burn less fuel. Then, with these new twines that come out – we have Kevlar-style twines. We have all these space-age-type netting that's lighter and stronger and all that. And if you pay – that four-hundred-dollar net – I have nets out there that cost sixteen-hundred dollars for one net.

SSD: Because of the materials?

FP: Because of the material it's made out of. It's like made out of – it's called Spectra. It's the same thing that's made out of bulletproof vest. It's very, very small twine. It's very, very small twine. It's almost like the size of a thread. So when you're actually pushing it through the water, it's less drag, so you burn less fuel, you get to move your nets faster. But a dolphin will wreck it. It seems like the only really problem we have with dolphins is if you're the only boat out there. If there's like thirty, forty, fifty boats out there, and you're all throwing fish overboard, well, then the dolphins won't go to the nets. But if you're the only lone soldier out there and you're not throwing enough food over, well, then they're going to bite them nets – the same thing with a shark. You can tell the difference between the two bites. A dolphin's more of a – like he'll grab and maybe pull three or four meshes and nip it and tear it, where a shark will just come up and bit it, and he'll make like a big U bite in the net, the shape of his mouth.

SSD: Yes. So I guess it might be impossible to answer this question unless you send a diver down, but do you think that the dolphin stays with the hole they made, and they kind of –

FP: Yes.

SSD: They stay with that hole and, while the fish are coming out, they eat them.

FP: Yes. Or a lot of times, a fish will get gilled in there too, where his head gets stuck in the mesh. They'll come up and bite that fish because we'll find just the bodies. All the heads of the fish are missing. So every time he bites that head off, that's a hole in your net. Like I said, we've tried all kinds of stuff – throwing firecrackers in the water, trying to scare them off. It works for a little while, but they don't – like I said, it's bad at times, but it's not bad all the time. It all really depends on how many boats are around and stuff.

SSD: Have you lost nets to dolphins?

FP: Oh, yes.

SSD: You have, personally?

FP: Yes.

SSD: Just had them torn up so badly, they couldn't be repaired?

FP: Well, what you have to do is you have to cut the whole bottom of the net – like this pattern here. This is the top of the net; this is the bottom. They'll eat that hole. It seems like it's mainly back here in the funnel. They don't bite up here on the top. They'll bite in the bottom of the net, in the funnel. So what we have to do – a lot of times, we'll just take and cut this section out right here, where they bite a lot and put real heavy webbing in that one spot.

SSD: Target the dolphin's favorite spot?

FP: That's right.

SSD: So is the top of the net underwater also?

FP: Yes.

SSD: I thought of another question, but I should have written it down because I lost it. Oh, I know what it was. If you're using a push trawl, a skim, and you're unloading the fish as you go, do the dolphins – are they also attacking that net, or is it more likely that you're throwing things out that they're going to –?

FP: They will bite a skimmer net. But a skimmer net they don't bite as bad as a trawl. The main reason for that is that that skimmer net is – I mean, it's right there. You can look down and see it, where that trawl might be two-hundred feet behind the boat.

SSD: So they don't like to be close to the gaze of your eyes.

FP: Well, if you're throwing firecrackers out there, and if they can – when they come out and stick their head up, and you can see them, they can see you, they know. It's more like, "We better stay away from here."

SSD: I see. Interesting.

FP: I have had them bite my skimmer nets before, but not like the trawls. Not like the trawls.

SSD: I'm liking skimming nets more and more. Well, if this had been just an interview for the Center for Oral History, this is how we would have started it off. We would have asked you where you grew up and tell me about your childhood.

FP: I grew up right here in East Biloxi. My generation was probably the last old Biloxi generation to grow up. When I was growing up as a kid, there were no casinos. There was really no big – there was a small tourism industry, but it wasn't – it was mainly still the quiet little fishing village that it was for a hundred and some years. I grew up in a neighborhood where everybody knew everybody. They didn't know my name as a little kid – just say this one instance for particular – I was on my bike, me and my friend, and were nine, ten blocks from home. We threw a rock through a window of an old, abandoned house. Well, before I even made it home, my mama knew about it. They didn't know my name, but they knew who my mama was. All that's changed since the casinos came in here. Of course, all the shrimp sheds and the docks are gone. But I loved growing up in Biloxi. I don't know. That was one of the – I've been attracted to the water as long as I can remember, just as a little kid. My father was a part-time commercial fisherman growing up. His family was from north Mississippi. His dad had come down here during World War II and worked at the shipyard. But my mama's family were all fishermen. All of her brothers and uncles and grandpas were all fishermen, all the way back to the 1850s when they came to Biloxi. I've always wanted to be a fisherman.

SSD: So your dad was a part-time fisherman. What was he catching?

FP: He caught shrimp. He had a small skiff that he'd supplement his income with. He started fishing with some of my mama's brothers and all. But my mama didn't like him being gone, so he got into the furniture business. He was a furniture refinisher. He worked for Sears back when Sears sold furniture, and they did maintenance agreements and stuff like that. If you got your furniture nicked, well, he would come and repair it and stuff. Then he did side jobs and things in the furniture business.

SSD: About how much of his time was spent shrimping, you think?

FP: Well, because he had a small boat and he'd stay here in Mississippi, it was pretty well seasonal. He'd shrimp in June, July, August, September.

SSD: And not fool with the furniture then?

FP: Well, no, he would do it on weekends or on his days off, things like that.

SSD: He was busy.

FP: It was mainly just to supplement his income. I remember, as a little kid, like I said, he didn't have but like a twenty-eight-foot boat and going out on a boat with him. I just remember, from the time I could leave the house – maybe eleven, twelve years old – riding my bike down to the docks. I remember all those docks down there because I was always down there with a fishing pole fishing or a dip net catching crabs.

SSD: How do you catch crabs with a dip net?

FP: You get you a piece of chicken, and you throw a string on there. When he bites that chicken, you pull him up real slow, and you scoop him up with the dip net.

SSD: How many would you catch?

FP: It seemed like we would catch a bucket full, half a bucket full.

SSD: SO how do you keep them where you can eat them before you get home? What do you put them in?

FP: Just a regular five-gallon bucket. We'd throw them in there, and we'd bring them home. My mama would cook them.

SSD: You put some seawater over them?

FP: No.

SSD: No? They're okay in there.

FP: Yes, they're all right. They'll live almost all day in the air. Yes.

SSD: Did you have to clean them? [laughter]

FP: No. My mama did. [laughter] Then, going around the docks [as] little kids, we'd go by, and a lot of the men would say, "Oh, hey, you want to come scrub my boat? I'll give you some fish. I'll give you some shrimp." So we'd come home with a bagful of shrimp. We thought we did something.

SSD: What did she do with those crabs and shrimp?

FP: Oh, we would eat them.

SSD: In what?

FP: Oh, she'd make gumbos, and we'd have boiled crabs. We cooked all kinds of stuff.

SSD: Yes. I can remember seeing my mother dip net crabs. She had a washtub. I was a kid in the late fifties, early sixties. You could catch so many shrimp in 1961. You could see them, and they were everywhere. You could just see them scurrying around those concrete piers, like Moses Pier.

FP: Right.

SSD: Well, can you just paint us a picture of what the docks looked like when you were a kid? What would you see when you went down there?

FP: Seemed like there was always a bunch of junk around, like old nets. I remember, one time, me and my friend dug this old net up out of a trash pile, I guess it was. We went down to the beach. We rigged it up like a seine. It was an actual small shrimp trawl. We put a stick on one side and a stick on the other side, and we pulled this trawl down the beach. We'd catch all kinds of shrimp back then.

SSD: So you guys were walking in shallow water pulling a net?

FP: Yeah, right on the edge, pulling a net. Just like a seine, we were pulling it.

SSD: What did you catch?

FP: Oh, we caught everything you catch with a regular trawl. But we spent a lot of time down on the beach just I guess because it was so – we really didn't have no money. We could go down there and buy a bag of bait shrimp for fifty cents, and it would be like four or five pounds of shrimp. We could stay all day fishing and crabbing. Plus, whatever you caught, you could eat. That was a big thing. I remember my dad working at Sears – probably like six, seven years old – I have a twin sister. Every day, when we'd go pick him up, we'd throw the cast net in the back of the truck, and we'd ride down there and pick him up. We'd stop on the beach, throw the cast net, catching mullet. Me and my sister would fight over who got to hold the sack because when we caught them, we'd put them in the sack. Well, one time, my sister dropped the sack, and all the fish swam out, so I was good to go then. She never got to hold the sack anymore after that for a long time.

SSD: [laughter] Did you make her drop that sack?

FP: No. Well, I probably did. I probably did.

SSD: How does a cast net differ from the other nets that we've talked about?

FP: Oh, it's actually a net that you cast, that you throw. It's a net that's on a handline, and you throw it out, and then you pull it up, and the fish get snared in a little bag.

SSD: Does it have weights on the sides?

FP: Right. It has chain on it. The one that he would throw had chain on it.

SSD: So does that make it sink to the bottom, and then it kind of drags along the bottom?

FP: It drags on the bottom. That's right. Most of them – he would throw an eight-foot net, so that's like sixteen-foot in diameter.

SSD: That seems like a lot to be throwing around and pulling in when it's wet and full of stuff.

FP: It seemed like we ate mullet every day.

SSD: Biloxi bacon.

FP: Biloxi bacon. That's right. Well, I didn't really realize it was called mullet until I was probably about fifteen because I thought it was called supper. We're going to catch supper.

SSD: [laughter] Oh, that's great. Did you pull the cast net up to the shore? Did you get them into the air?

FP: No. Well, he would throw them and hold the net up. Then he'd maybe throw it over his shoulder, hold it over his shoulder, and pull the fish out and stick them in the sack. As we got older, we could take the fish out of the net.

SSD: So you're just picking the live fish out of the net?

FP: Yes.

SSD: Putting them in a bag? Does anything else come to mind when you think about going down to the docks?

FP: I remember it was probably the late '70s when the Vietnamese started coming in here, and that was a big, big shock – just the way they did things. You'd go down there, and you'd see them drying out fish in the sun, just a fish sitting out there in the sun. What we would consider to be rotten, and they're cooking it. The big silver eels – I remember, one time, there was a Vietnamese lady who came down, and she had four or five kids down there with her. The older one was about our age. I was maybe about nine, ten years old. We're down on the pier. They come down there, and they're catching fish and stuff. Well, they catch a silver eel. Well, she throws it up there on the table. We don't think nothing about it. We're down there all day, in the summer sun, south Mississippi, ninety-something degrees. Well, about three, four o'clock that afternoon, that eel's ready to eat. They're eating this eel like beef jerky.

SSD: The sun cooked the eel.

FP: Yeah, the sun cooked the eel.

SSD: I wonder if it has anything to do with its color.

FP: It was dried out. It was dry.

SSD: Wow. It might have been part sushi, I guess.

FP: Yeah. But they chowed down on it. I was looking. Oh, that's nasty.

SSD: That's what you throw back, right, is the silver eel.

FP: Yes, that's right.

SSD: Did you ever use silver eel for bait?

FP: Yes, silver eel's good for bait.

SSD: Because it's shiny if you cut it up.

FP: Yeah. It's mainly used to catch king mackerel. They'll pay a lot of money for them silver eels for king mackerel tournaments.

SSD: Even when we were kids, they would have paid us for it?

FP: No.

SSD: No? But now they do.

FP: No. Nowadays, they do.

SSD: Yes. Are there very many out there? Do you see many silver eels?

FP: Oh, yes. Yes, there's no shortage of silver eels.

SSD: It's all I ever caught when I was a kid. [laughter]

FP: Yes. There's no shortage of them. Things have changed, things that you used to catch all the time, and you don't catch anymore.

SSD: Like what?

FP: Well, used to catch a lot of whisker fish, we'd call them. They were like half fish, half eel. They have long whiskers on the bottom. You don't hardly ever see them anymore. Then cannonball jellyfish – used to catch a lot of them. We don't see a whole bunch of cannonball jellyfish anymore.

SSD: What are they like?

FP: They're like a round, hard apple jellyfish that's like a jelly, but it's rock hard – it's real rigid, and it's just kind of like a mushroom. They have a core on the inside of them like that, and they're just round.

SSD: I think I remember those because when we were kids, we'd pick them up and blow into them, and it would inflate their – does that sound like – or is that a different jellyfish?

FP: That'd be a different jelly. Then, also, when something would be in the water, you'd really see barnacles and oysters and things like that growing. Nowadays, we catch stuff that's got a lot of soft coral on it now. Where that comes from, I don't – I guess it may have something to do with the salinity of the water.

SSD: And you're not seeing barnacles like you used to?

FP: Yes. Oh, yes, you still get barnacles and stuff.

SSD: You still see those?

FP: But the corals are growing on stuff.

SSD: How long would you say that's been happening?

FP: Probably the last seven, eight years.

SSD: Okay. Well, five years since Katrina, but it started before Katrina.

FP: Yes.

SSD: Interesting. I saw somebody catch a fish when I was a little girl. I've always wondered what it was. We were down on Moses Pier. He was being real careful with it. For some reason, he didn't pull it up all the way out of the water on the dock. He walked it down the dock. Then he crawled down on the rocks and kept walking it and walking it. I guess he thought it was so heavy that he was afraid it would break his line. But it looked like a catfish, and it was shaped kind of like a pear, I guess, with the big part of the fish, where the mouth was, would have been the bottom of the pear, and it was blue. It was beautiful.

FP: It wasn't a gafftop catfish, huh? A sail cat?

SSD: I don't know. I just don't know what it was.

FP: Yeah, because they're a real beautiful blue color.

SSD: That must have been it.

FP: It's got a roundish-looking head?

SSD: Yes.

FP: Yes, it was probably what's called a gafftop or a sail cat, something like that.

SSD: I don't know if he was going to eat it or have it stuffed. [laughter] He was real happy with that fish.

FP: Oh, yes, they're good to eat.

SSD: Are they?

FP: Yes.

SSD: Do you see a lot of those?

FP: At times. At times.

SSD: Yes. Have you ever caught one on a rod and reel?

FP: Oh, yes.

SSD: Yes?

FP: Yes.

SSD: So maybe it wasn't such a big deal. But he was just so happy with that fish. Maybe he was a tourist. Well, one thing I was wondering is when and how you learned to swim.

FP: I don't ever remember not knowing how to swim, to tell you the truth.

SSD: Very interesting. So it must have happened early.

FP: Yes. Well, like I said, I don't ever remember not being around the water, so I'm sure my father and mother probably taught me how to swim. I don't remember taking lessons.

SSD: Yes. They would want you to know how to swim here. It would be a real liability.

FP: Yeah. Well, you see, that's my mama. She doesn't know how to swim. She's been on the water her whole life. Back in the late '40s, when she was a little girl, [the] blessing of the fleet or one of them, where all the family would be on the boat, she just about drowned my uncle because she's terrified of the water. She just doesn't want nothing to do with it. She don't have no problem wading in it, as far as going fishing or even working on it. My mom and dad worked with me. When I bought my new boat in '99, my dad retired, and he was wanting something to do, so him and her went shrimping with me for about seven years.

SSD: Oh, that's great.

FP: Yes. All the way up until Katrina, they shrimped with me.

SSD: That's really fabulous. So did she fall overboard, and your uncle tried to save her?

FP: No. They threw her overboard because they were going to teach her how to swim.

SSD: When she was how old?

FP: She was probably about five, six. Of course, all the family's out there. That didn't go over very good. I think that was her traumatic experience. She won't even – she'll go in a pool, and she's not scared of the water. She just doesn't know how to swim.

SSD: And hasn't really tried to learn since she's been an adult?

FP: No.

SSD: Yes. My mother never learned how to swim, either. She was not terrified of the water. But she was very wary, very leery.

FP: Like I said, I don't ever remember a time that I didn't know how to swim. When I was young, we swam on the beach every day. As I get older now – I don't know – to me, now, swimming's a survival mode. You couldn't pay me to go swimming.

SSD: [laughter] You can do it if your life depends on it.

FP: Oh, yes, that's right. It's survival mode now.

SSD: But not for fun? [laughter]

FP: No.

SSD: Well, why did you choose a career in shrimping?

FP: Like I said, I was born and raised around the water. It's something I've always done. It's something I knew that I've always wanted to do. I don't know. Out of all my – my brother and my sister – I was supposed to be the family physician or lawyer or something. I guess I was the one that did academically better than any of them. Just education was easy to me. But I didn't want anything to do with it. Well, when I graduated high school, of course, my mother and father were pressuring me to go to college. I didn't really have the money to go to college, so I had to work my way through college, and I did. I started in a community college, and I was crabbing or oystering or shrimping or whatever to pay tuition and stuff. Well, I went to school up until – I guess I went about five years. I got twelve hours from my degree, which was in fisheries management, because I figured, "Well, if I'm going to go to school, I'm at least going to go do something I want to do." It would go back to when I was eighteen years old and I started college. Well, I [saw] a job offer on the research boat down here, the *Tommy Munro*, for

deckhands. So I said, “Hey, that would be pretty good. I’m going to school for fishery management. I get to work on a research boat.” So I applied for that job. I got a part-time job as a deckhand. I’d get to go out. Me being interested in the science part of fishing and then having the skills – I knew just about every fish out there, every way to catch them, this and that. Well, when the scientists and the students were out there working, well, I’m right there in the middle of them. I knew as much or more than what the students did most of the time because it was just second nature to me. Well, when I was twelve hours from getting my degree, I was on the boat. We were out on a trip. The cook that was on the boat was probably about twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old – me and him were talking. He said something about [how] he had a degree in fishery management, and he’s working as a cook on the boat. That just hits me in the face then. It’s like, “Well, you know what? Why are you a cook?” He said, “Well, I can make more money as a cook.” He could have got a job as a state biologist or something like that. But you’re not talking any money. Until you get a PhD and you’re the head of a department at a college, that’s the only way you’re going to make – or head of a state department or something.

SSD: Desk job, right? Not out doing it on the water.

FP: That’s right. That was the thing that hit me; [it] was like, “Hey, do I really want to do this?” I’ve never wanted to go to college. I want to fish. So when I was twenty-three years old, I bought my first boat. I dove into it headfirst – kind of against my mother and father’s wishes.

SSD: I was going to ask you: how did they react?

FP: I don’t know. It’s one of them things – fishing is a tough life. It’s really, really hard. I feel like I do have a little bit of an advantage over people just because I have family in the business. My family’s been fishing for over a hundred years, so that’s a lot of knowledge that I have right there, just in where to go, what to do. But it’s something I wouldn’t trade anything for because the way I look at it – and I tell people this all the time – is I have the best office in the world. I go out there. It’s me and God, Mother Nature – whatever you want to call it. I get to see the sunrise, the sunset. If I don’t feel like going to work, I don’t go to work. I guess it’s whatever you want to pay to be happy. You know what I mean? I don’t ever see me getting away from fishing. The economics of the business has gotten real bad the last few years – very bad.

SSD: Yes. How bad is it?

FP: Just like this past summer, the price of shrimp went to fifty cents a pound, regardless of whether it was jumbo shrimp or baby shrimp – fifty cents. If it was a shrimp, it was worth fifty cents. That’s just tough to do. But I’m reevaluating life a little bit right now. I’m actually in school right now for refrigeration – taking night classes. There are other things I can do. I’m a licensed Coast Guard captain, so I can go get a job in an oil field or something. I don’t want to work for somebody else. But if it’s something that I can do part-time and when fishing’s bad or just something else to do.

SSD: Yeah. Something to fill the gaps when you’re not getting the –

FP: A few years ago, I bought a little boat, and that's what I do. The last few winters, I've been – well, since Katrina, there's been a lot of construction work around. I like doing that kind of stuff, working with my hands, building stuff. So I've done a lot of that. Well, last winter and this winter, I've been commercial crabbing. I got an eighteen-foot boat and three-hundred crab traps. I can work a couple, two, three days a week and pay the bills, make a paycheck every week.

SSD: So crabbing's year-round?

FP: Yes, you crab year-round.

SSD: But you don't have to be gone weeks at a time?

FP: No. No. I'll be gone a few hours in the morning. If I leave here at 5:30, I can be back by lunchtime.

SSD: Somebody told me that floundering is very lucrative.

FP: Yes. It is. It's just hard to get in the niche with selling them. It's such a tight market. It can get flooded like that, and then they don't want to pay nothing for the fish.

SSD: It's really off and on?

FP: Yeah, it is. It's the same way with crabbing. But with the crabbing, too, when I started last winter, when it got time to pick up my traps, I was just getting back in the business. My clientele was starting to build up. So when I went shrimping, my father and my wife took over the crab business. They would go run the traps. Then, me selling the shrimp off the boat, they'd bring the crabs down there. That gave my father something to do and my wife something to do.

SSD: So you had said you guys had started doing some of your own retailing. I was going to ask you, how do you do that? You do it off the boat.

FP: We do it off the back of the boat. That's right.

SSD: And people come down to the dock.

FP: They come down to the dock to buy shrimp.

SSD: How much can you get for it that way?

FP: Well, like last year, when we were getting fifty cents wholesale prices, we were averaging anywhere from two to four dollars.

SSD: That's the way to go.

FP: That's the only reason why I made any money last year was because it was a real good shrimp season. You could go out there and catch you seven-hundred pounds in a night. Well, at fifty cents, that's three-hundred-fifty dollars wholesale. My boat burns a hundred gallons of fuel a night. That's two-hundred-fifty dollars in fuel. So you made three-hundred-fifty dollars. That's not counting the ice or the groceries. Then the boat gets a share. I get a share. The deckhand gets a share. So you might go out there and work all night for twenty dollars clear.

SSD: It's impossible.

FP: So if you can go out there and work and catch you seven-hundred pounds and get four dollars a pound, that's twenty-eight-hundred dollars. That's a big difference between three-hundred-fifty dollars. So you can go work two nights, go in – it might take you four days to sell them all, sitting there peddling the shrimp. But the wear and tear on your equipment, your overhead – it's a lot more feasible. But the problem – like I said, we started retailing shrimp maybe about five years ago. In the last five years, the shrimping went downhill so bad, now everybody's doing it, so it's a little more competitive market now selling shrimp. But if you have a good – me having so much family in the business, we have a pretty good clientele. If I run out of shrimp, I'll send them to my cousin. If he runs out of shrimp, he'll send them to me.

SSD: Oh, yes. Excellent. That sounds like the only way.

FP: It really is. But my boat's kind of big for that. The sixty-foot boat is coming and going every day.

SSD: Well, what about the other little boat you got for crabbing? But they're using that for crabbing?

FP: Well, it's really too small. You wouldn't catch enough shrimp with.–

SSD: What about you guys going back under sail power or solar?

FP: It is not going to happen.

SSD: Just won't work?

FP: It won't work. Like electric motors and stuff just don't provide enough torque. You could go electric, but the technology in electric motors – the motor would be as big as the boat. To provide that much horsepower and that much torque – they haven't got that down pat yet, I don't believe.

SSD: [laughter] Maybe they will someday soon.

FP: Yes.

SSD: I was thinking that, for the record, we should say that Hurricane Katrina was the worst natural disaster to hit the United States, and it came through in 2005 and hit the Mississippi Gulf

Coast, and that was five years ago. Just in case somebody's listening to this in three-hundred years, we'll put that on the record.

FP: That's right.

SSD: But that brings up another question for me. What was life like? Can you tell me a little bit about what you did before Katrina, what it was during, and then after?

FP: The week prior to Katrina, I was in Louisiana shrimping. The August season had opened up, and we made a couple of trips. We were working our way back to the house because the price of shrimp wasn't that good. We made some money when the money was there to be made, and we were coming back home. Katrina hit on a Monday. I come home that Friday. I come in with the few shrimp I had. I sold shrimp Friday, Saturday. Sunday, I moved my boat up to the river to safe harbor.

SSD: Which river?

FP: Well, it was actually Fort Bayou. I moved my boat to safe harbor. Monday, Katrina came through. I lost my home. My mother and father lost their home. Probably seventy percent of my friends and family lost their homes. My boat had thirty-thousand dollars' worth of damage done to it in the safe harbor where it was at. I didn't get back to work until the following May.

SSD: So almost a year, part of which was a winter that you wouldn't have worked anyway. But when would you have started working normally shrimping?

FP: We would have worked – we traditionally work all the way up until Christmas.

SSD: Through December? And then start back when?

FP: April.

SSD: April? Wow, so you missed almost half a year.

FP: Yes. There was just so much – Katrina was a good and a bad thing to the shrimp industry. The good thing is, traditionally, when a hurricane comes, shrimping gets good. It's, I guess, like Forrest Gump said, "Shrimping's good after the storm." For some reason – I don't know if it's the freshwater, the sediment, and stuff like that, but shrimping's always good after a storm.

SSD: More shrimp?

FP: Right. But the thing about Katrina is it was such a massive storm. Everywhere from Louisiana to Alabama, every dock got destroyed that you could sell your shrimp to. So the few guys that did go out after Katrina caught more shrimp than they've ever caught in their life. But there was nowhere to sell them. What are you going to do with them? They'd have to go either all the way to Apalachicola, Florida, to sell them or all the way over to almost Cameron, Louisiana. Well, then Rita came in later, and you had to go all the way to Texas.

SSD: If you went all that way, could you possibly – what were you doing? Cutting your losses, or were you actually making anything?

FP: They was making – some of them guys would fill their boat up in two drags. You're talking ten-thousand pounds of shrimp in one drag.

SSD: How long does it take to make a drag?

FP: An hour, hour and a half. I mean, they would just fill their boat up – two little short drags.

SSD: Once you bring the shrimp on board, does it cost a lot more to get your boat through the water with the shrimp on there? Does the weight make a difference?

FP: Not really.

SSD: So then they just [inaudible] over?

FP: Some boats, they do. The small boats – when they load up – I've seen some of them small skiffs down in Louisiana come up the bayou. They've just got a mountain of shrimp. They're what they call deck-loaded. Now, my boat – I've never deck-loaded my boat. I don't think I ever will. My boat holds about – the most I've had on it is around twenty-thousand pounds.

SSD: Is it in the hold?

FP: In the hold. That's a lot of shrimp. That's a lot of shrimp.

SSD: How do they stay fresh down there – is it refrigerated?

FP: It's ice.

SSD: You take ice?

FP: We have ice, and we ice them.

SSD: I would think the waters act as a bit of an insulator, that your boat – I don't know how it's sitting in the water.

FP: No. My boat's got insulation. It's got anywhere from eight to ten inches of insulation blown into the actual ice hold. We'll put ice, shrimp, ice, shrimp, ice, shrimp – just layer it. It's got boards and compartments where you fill up each compartment and all that.

SSD: So it's not just all in one big space.

FP: No.

SSD: It's actually compartmentalized.

FP: Compartment. That's right.

SSD: So that would make it easier to load and unload?

FP: That's right. Yes.

SSD: Easier to put ice in? Gosh. So interesting. So, where were you during Katrina?

FP: We normally stay on the boat for hurricanes because if the water does rise, the boat would go up and go down and things like that. But my wife, being a country girl – we had a four-month-old baby at the time, and she's like, "I'm not staying on that boat with the baby," which I'm glad that we didn't because I did have thirty-thousand dollars' worth of damage to my boat.

SSD: What happened to it?

FP: A sailboat broke loose that wasn't tied up properly, and it got on my stern line. What we do when we tie-up, we'll tie the boats up crossway in the bayou, and we'll put two big ropes out in the front, two big ropes out in the back. When the water comes up, the boat rises. Water comes down, the boat goes back down, and stays in the bayou. Well, a sailboat broke loose and got on my stern line, broke my stern lines, and the boat washed around into the woods. We stayed in Vancleave, just north of the boat, probably about seven, eight miles north of the boat, at my brother's house. Up there, where his house is at in the little subdivision, it's five-acre lots [in the] subdivision, and he lives on the side of a hill. Well, all the wind stayed up high, and you really couldn't even tell nothing was going on. The houses up at the top of the hill – they all had their roofs blown off and things like that. The wind was probably still blowing about sixty, seventy miles an hour, I guess, that afternoon. It was about four o'clock that Monday afternoon. I told my dad, "Look, let's ride down the road and see if we just can at least see the boat. I'm sure it's going to be flooded because that area just floods with rain." So we went down there. We went down Highway 57, and the water was about three miles north of the interstate. I was like, "Man, I've never seen this much water in my life." That same time as we were coming down the highway, here comes a guy on a jet ski up the highway. I start talking to him. I asked him to give me a ride down to my boat. He says, "Well, I'll give you a ride down to your boat, but you're going to have to hold on," because, on Highway 57, they were building the Preserve Golf Course at that time right there. He said, "When we go down there, we're going to have to hit some of them fairways." He said there's about ten-foot seas on these fairways.

SSD: Seas meaning some rough water, some wave action.

FP: Yes, ten-foot waves.

SSD: Ten-foot waves?

FP: In the woods, eleven, twelve miles from the Gulf, as a bird flies. Well, I'm thinking, "Well, I've been on the water my whole life. This guys' telling me ten-foot waves. He's full of it.

There ain't no way." So I get on the back of this jet ski. Well, he told me I got to hold on because he don't have an extra lifejacket. So I said, "All right." So I get on there. We're riding through the pine trees, and it's calm. Well, when we come out of them pine trees and hit that six-hundred-yard fairway, it wasn't ten-foot seas, but it was probably six-foot. I mean, it was some big waves.

SSD: On a jet ski?

FP: On a jet ski. So we go over the waves, and we get back in the woods. In the trees, it calms back down. So we go down there. I see my boat had washed up into the woods. So I climbed up on my boat. I cranked it up. I drove it through the pine trees, got it back in the canal, tied it off, and the boat went back in the water. But if I wouldn't have went down there and checked it, it'd have been up in the woods. My boat would –

SSD: So it would have been beached there?

FP: It would have been beached, yes.

SSD: Probably suffered more damage?

FP: Yes. It'd have cost a lot of money to get it out of there.

SSD: Oh, man. Unbelievable.

FP: But I felt we were pretty fortunate after Katrina. Like I said, everybody that I knew – we all lost our houses down here. But being on the boat – we lived on my boat for about five months, I guess. We had air conditioning, a hot bath every night, a hot shower. So there were a lot of people living in tents and stuff.

SSD: And you can cook? You have a full kitchen?

FP: Oh, yes. Yeah. My boat's like a Winnebago on the water. It's got a full-size stove, full-size refrigerator, central air and heat, full-size shower.

SSD: You got a little houseboat? [laughter]

FP: Oh, it is. It is. It's got all the comforts of home.

SSD: Well, that's great.

FP: Yes.

SSD: Wow. You're so smart. Not everybody would have known to go check their boat and make it safer.

FP: That was the big deal with – on the Industrial Seaway in Gulfport [inaudible] boats. A lot of guys just put their boats up, tied them up, and left them – never even went back to check and never tied them up properly.

SSD: And paid for it?

FP: They paid for it. Yeah.

SSD: Yes, in terms of damage.

FP: That's probably where Katrina helped the shrimping industry, in my aspect.

SSD: How is that?

FP: There were so many boats lost; it took a lot of pressure off of the resource.

SSD: Less competition?

FP: Less competition. If you have a pie and there's a hundred people eating that pie, you're going to get a little slice. If there's only ten people eating that pie, you're going to get a bigger slice of the pie.

SSD: The shrimp being the pie?

FP: That's right. The economics of the shrimp industry was on a decline then. They weren't going to reinvest a lot of money to get back in the business, where just ten years ago, on an average night, you could go out there – if I left here and went to the mouth of the Mississippi River – just sixty miles' ride – I would probably pass up several hundred boats. Well, now, say, in July, if I want to ride to the mouth of the river, if I see five boats, that's a lot.

SSD: Good grief.

FP: Yes. There's a lot less competition now. I know more people out of the business now than I do in the business.

SSD: Wow. Do you feel like young people aren't coming –?

FP: There's no young people. When I bought my boat I have now, I was twenty-six years old. I was young. I was very young. I would say the average age of a commercial fisherman right now is probably around sixty years old. There's not too many – there's a few young guys in south Louisiana getting into the business just because it's their heritage, and there's a lot more – it's a lot easier. Like myself, with so much family in the business, I guess it would be easier for me, as a young man, to get in the business. That's like my son or my daughter; if they want to get in the business, I think there'll always be a future in the business. You just have to have a niche to stay in business, like retailing your own shrimp. Me and my family members and my cousins and all – we've even talked about trying to get some kind of a co-op going.

SSD: Like a plant?

FP: Yes, where we could harvest and market our own shrimp and not have some middleman over us.

SSD: Yes. It seems like, if several shrimpers or shrimping families did that, that it would be better than trying – yes, you'd cut out the middleman. Gosh, maybe there'd even be some stimulus money to get something like that started or a grant.

FP: There's a lot of – I don't want to get into all that. There's a lot of political motivation that's against us.

SSD: Really?

FP: We won't even go there. [laughter]

SSD: No, you don't want to?

FP: No.

SSD: You can if you want to.

FP: No, I don't even want to go there.

SSD: So there's some kind of human-created reasons –

FP: Yes.

SSD: – that Mississippi shrimpers are finding it harder and harder to survive?

FP: Oh, definitely.

SSD: Well, that's a real shame.

FP: Yes. Us being fishermen, it's hard – we go out on the water by ourselves. We make our own business by ourselves. It's hard to get anybody to stick together. Until you get backed in a corner and get poked with a stick four-hundred times, that dog ain't going to bite you.

SSD: You all are really independent.

FP: Very, very independent. That's probably the commercial fishermen's worst enemy is our independence. If we could all get stuck together – to stick together as one cause – because the way the world is now, money is power. If we could all pool our resources and be one organization, one voice, then we'd have a lot of power. We'd have lobbying power. But you got to think, majority of these people in the fishing business, they're uneducated. Just take the

Vietnamese part of this industry. They don't know any other kind of way. The majority of them come to this country – a lot of them didn't know how to speak English. They got in the business to work for themselves because, as a viable asset to go into another business. Nobody's going to employ them, you know?

SSD: If they can't speak the language – yeah – there's –

FP: That's right. That's the biggest problem we have. We have so many enemies. You always go fight the person that's going to give you the least resistance. As far as environmental factors, bottom trawling's got a bad name, really bad name.

SSD: Do you know why?

FP: I can't tell you why. I'm the president of our little local organization. A lot of the guys look up to me because I am educated, I guess you would say. A lot of these guys wear it on their sleeve – their emotions on the sleeve. You go after them, well, then they start cussing and raising hell and their short-fused temper. Well, I go in there, and I'm going to listen to what you have to say, and I'm going to give you my opinion. I'm going to give you fact. I'm going to tell you this and that.

SSD: You're rational.

FP: That's right. You have to be rational. But I'll get on the computer, and I'll look around at different websites, and Save America's Oceans or whatever they are – they showed a picture of this big, beautiful coral reef. Then the next picture is of a mudflat. A shrimp trawler came through there and destroyed that coral reef. Me, as a shrimper – there's no way that I destroyed that coral reef because, first of all, I'm not going to drag on a coral reef because what am I dragging? Nets.

SSD: It'll tear them up.

FP: It'll tear them up. There's no way that I can destroy a coral reef. Something else is destroying the coral reef. Then, you have these special interest groups, such as the CCA [Coastal Conservation Association] recreational fishing sector. "Well, I'm not catching as many fish as I used to. It's got to be them commercial guys catching them all." Well, just look twenty years ago, how many recreational boats were registered in the state. Now, with technology – it used to take a fisherman to catch a fish. Well, now, anybody that's got money to buy a boat, money to buy a GPS – he knows where all the good fishing spots are. It's got more pressure. The recreational sector outnumbers the commercial sector at least a thousand to one, I would say. You don't think more fishing pressure from the recreational sector could have something – you could ride down the beach and look at these man made reefs on any given Saturday in the summertime, and there'll be fifty boats fishing in one spot. You don't think it's going to get fished out? "No, it's got to be them shrimp trawlers dragging around there catching all the fish."

SSD: From your experience, those fish are really not showing up in your nets?

FP: No. No. Speckled trout, redfish – we don't catch that. I would say, on a yearly average, our total pounds of bycatch that we catch as far as speckled trout, redfish, is less than one percent. We don't catch that. Now, we do catch some ground mullet and things like that. But even with the TED – the TED is probably one of the best fish excluders we got because a TED's got a bar. A fish so big can't fit through that bar. He'll go through there, and he'll go out the hole with the turtle. Now we have to pull fish excluders. The fish get out.

SSD: In addition to the TED?

FP: To the turtle excluder.

SSD: So you've got to sew one in at one spot and sew another one in at another spot?

FP: That's right. But the fishermen get the brunt of all of it.

SSD: Yeah. You're identifiable.

FP: We're the villain. [laughter] That's like gillnets. I used to gillnet fish, and gillnets got a reputation of "walls of death." They show pictures of these big driftnets in the Pacific Ocean or in the Atlantic Ocean, and they got whales tangled up in it, and they have all this and that. When I gillnet, I never caught a dolphin. I never caught a whale. I never caught a sea turtle – not the first one.

SSD: What is a gillnet?

FP: A gillnet is a net that is like a panel. It can be anywhere – when I fished, it was twelve-hundred-foot long, and it was of a certain mesh size. When a fish swims in there, his head goes through there, he gets gilled, and he gets stuck.

SSD: He can't back out or go forward.

FP: He can't back out or go forward. Now, rationally thinking, that hole – a small fish will swim through that hole. A big fish won't fit in the hole, so he can get away. But, "They're walls of death. They kill everything and anything." That's just something that people with money have pulled the wool over the American public's eyes and say, "Oh, we got to get rid of these things because they're indiscriminate killers." The way I look at it, a hook is the most indiscriminate thing you have. You can catch a big fish, a little fish. A hook will catch any of them. But they don't look at it like that.

SSD: Yeah. Hooks are bad. They're bad. Well, it seems to me it would make a difference where you're pulling nets, too.

FP: It does.

SSD: There aren't that many whales in the Gulf of Mexico to get caught in a gillnet or bottom trawler.

FP: No. You're not going to catch that. Like I said, I've never caught a dolphin. Never. Turtles – I've caught some turtles. I don't catch too many in my otter trawls because we do pull TEDs. I remember, one time, in particular, I was dragging off of Florida, and I felt something. The boat just kind of felt like it was pulling, so we picked the net up, and we had about a nine-hundred-pound loggerhead turtle in that one net.

SSD: Wow. Could you get it out?

FP: Oh, well, we had a TED. But the only thing that fit through there was his flipper, so when we picked the net up, the turtle rolled like a tire out of the net. He hit the water. He looked around and swam off.

SSD: Huge.

FP: A huge turtle. I know this thing was eight-foot across, and the TED opening's only forty-something inches, the hole.

SSD: But the turtle, once it got a flipper in, just was kind of clueless about –

FP: He was kind of stuck. He was just kind of stuck, like, "What's going on here?"

SSD: Maybe the pressure of the water –

FP: Now, skimming – we don't have to pull TEDs with the skimmer nets. Certain times of the year, we catch them pretty regular. But as far as a turtle dying, in the last five, six years – or in the last ten years, when I was really shrimping hard, I might have thrown maybe one or turtles over that's been dead.

SSD: Dead? Yes.

FP: Like I said, trawling, we really don't catch them because we do have TEDs. Now, skimmers will catch them, I would say, maybe – it's hard to say. I've seen it at times catch two, three turtles on a drag, so I guess it's because, at certain times of the year, maybe they're coming up on the beach to nest.

SSD: But usually, you get those out, and they resuscitate.

FP: Yes, because with skimming, we don't make long drags because you don't know what you're catching. So I pick up – the longest drag I ever really make skimming is an hour. That's about the longest. I have made maybe an hour and a half just if we have a lot of shrimp, and it takes us longer to get them picked out, and we have to push longer. But the amount of turtles that die – it's very, very, very minimal. Very, very minimal. Like I said, since I've been shrimping, I don't ever remember maybe two turtles thrown back dead.

SSD: Yes. I'm thinking, since there's less shrimping after Katrina, that Katrina's probably helped the turtle population as well.

FP: Oh, it has. Another thing since Katrina is the amount of bycatch we're catching. We're catching a lot more now. And I think that's –

SSD: Really?

FP: Yes. As far as croakers and bream and trash fish. I think it's because there are not as many boats out there catching and killing them; there's more to reproduce because there are a lot less boats than what there were. That's the problem I have. A lot of times, they don't even take that into consideration. When they started this in the Gulf of Mexico with this bycatch reduction device that they've been shoving down our throats – “Oh, well, we got to save the red snapper and this and that.” Well, take into consideration the economic factor and the environmental factor that there's not that many boats left out there. So right off the bat, you have a fifty percent reduction in the fleet size – voluntary reduction. That has to be taken into consideration.

SSD: You think it's about fifty percent?

FP: Oh, easy. Easy.

SSD: You don't think they're taking that into consideration?

FP: Most of the time, they don't. Just from what I've learned in four years working on that research boat, the data they use is eight, nine, ten years old when they make laws. It takes them so long to process the data. That's the one thing I told them with the red snapper – here you are; you're destroying a multimillion-dollar industry to save a fish that's not even native.

SSD: But there are commercial fisheries of red snapper.

FP: That's right. And recreational fisheries of red snapper. But it's not even a native – look where you catch red snapper – man made reefs, man made oil rigs. If none of that was there, these fish wouldn't even be there. The guys that used to catch snapper fifty years ago never fished the northern Gulf of Mexico. They would have to go down to the Bay of Campeche, to Tortuga, somewhere where there was coral structure –

SSD: They need reefs.

FP: – because there's no natural structure in the northern Gulf of Mexico.

SSD: We don't have reefs in the Gulf of Mexico?

FP: No. Well, about eighty miles south of here, we have some coral reefs in about twelve-hundred-foot of water. That's the closest place you can get a coral reef.

SSD: Eighty miles?

FP: Yes. There's a bunch of pinnacles out – if you'll look – it's right pretty much where the Continental Shelf drops off. There'll be some coral heads stick up – pinnacles, they call them – and the water will go from twelve-hundred to a thousand foot up to about two-fifty, three-hundred foot. On that ridge, that's all coral reefs. It looks just like the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. Beautiful.

SSD: Wow. I didn't know that there were natural reefs.

FP: Yeah. Well, there's no natural coral. I mean, no natural structure. That's the big point I make all the time. And then the thing – well, you got this snapper that they want to save that's this big that's getting caught in that shrimp net. Okay. Well, that snapper goes in that net. What's in that net? Shrimp, fish. What do snappers eat? Baby fish, shrimp. That's like a buffet for them. He's got a net around him. He's protected. What's outside that net? Mr. Dolphin out there or Mr. Shark.

SSD: He doesn't want to get out.

FP: He doesn't want to get out. [laughter] So I mean, come on, take some common sense here.

SSD: [laughter] When you get him on the boat, he's saying, "Please don't throw me back." Oh, golly. Well, just in the interest of having a history that someone might listen to in three-hundred or four-hundred years, could you just paint a picture of a typical day on your shrimp boat?

FP: A typical day – whether we work in daytime or nighttime, it all varies at times. But we'll usually wake up, and first thing is a pot of coffee. You got to put the coffee on. I'll go down to the engine room and check the oil and the water and stuff. We'll crank up. Then we'll start moving around. We'll pick up the anchor, and we'll set out our nets. Then usually, once you set your net out, you'll have at least an hour before you pick up.

SSD: What do you mean by pick up?

FP: Pick up the net.

SSD: Bring them back in?

FP: Yes, to sort.

SSD: So you start moving?

FP: Yeah, we start –

SSD: Are you moving when you put the net out?

FP: Yes. We'll set out the nets. We might eat some breakfast or something. When we pull up the trawls, whether it's the otter trawls that you drag or the skimmer nets – a lot of times, we'll

pick up the – if we're otter trawling, we'll pull the try net every thirty minutes or so, pick up, and we'll take account of what we're catching.

SSD: What's a try net?

FP: It's the small net. We'll pull two twenty-five-foot nets, and then we'll pull a little ten-foot net or twelve-foot net. We'll pick that up and down, dump it out, and we'll gauge what we're catching – how long we can drag. Sometimes you got to drag short. If you pick up a big old wad of trash fish or jellyfish or whatever you're catching, that tells you how long you can drag. But on a skimmer net, we might pick one up, and we'll look at it – okay, well, there ain't a whole bunch in there – we'll set it back. We won't necessarily dump it out. We'll just pick it up and look at it. The same thing with the try net. If we pick up the try net or pick up that skimmer net, we got a lot of shrimp; then we need to turn around, go back because that's where they're at. Or, if we pick up the nets and say, "Oh, there's a bunch of fish there," we don't want to go back there. We didn't have but one shrimp. We don't want to go there, so that's probably the best bycatch-reduction device we have is the little try net.

SSD: Wow. So it's try as in T-R-Y?

FP: T-R-Y. That's right.

SSD: It's just to try to see what we're catching.

FP: And a lot of times, when you catch shrimp, when you really get in the shrimp, the shrimp will be super, super clean. When I say clean, that means no trash. Hold on one sec.

SSD: Okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

FP: – this is what you want your drags to look like. This. That's out of one net. That's about seven-hundred pounds of shrimp. Look how much bycatch is around it.

SSD: Not much.

FP: No. When you get in the shrimp, that's what you want them to look like – just shrimp.

SSD: Just a few little fish.

FP: Yes.

SSD: Are you guys sorting them out in baskets?

FP: Yes, we sort them out in baskets. Then we wash the shrimp off and then set them down in the hold. This was some pictures from last year.

SSD: I'm used to seeing them when they're pink. [laughter] They've been boiled.

FP: [laughter] That's right.

SSD: Just amazing.

FP: Well, that was some pictures that my – that was my deckhand last year. He gave them to me the other day.

SSD: These are great. I wish we could get some copies of them. Okay. So you pulled up the anchor. You're moving. You put out your net. You're looking at your gauge net or your try net, deciding –

FP: How long to drag.

SSD: And where.

FP: And where – that's right.

SSD: So an hour goes by, and it's time to empty the net. What happens?

FP: Yes. Or it could be up to four hours. We'll pick up the nets, we'll dump them out, and then we'll set the nets back. Then, we'll go to work sorting the catch.

SSD: So when you dump it, it's dumped on a floor.

FP: It's dumped on the deck of the boat.

SSD: On the deck?

FP: Actually, that's the leg of a table right there. Something like this, we'll shovel them up straight off the deck into baskets and just pick the handful of shrimp out. Now, if it's got a –

SSD: You mean the handful of bycatch, right? Yes.

FP: Yes, the fish. Yes, that's right – the bycatch.

FP: There's a couple of ways that you can sort. One of the ways is what we call a saltbox. It's just a square box that we'll put that – mine holds probably sixty gallons of water. We'll put seawater in there. Well, in that sixty gallons of water, we'll put a fifty-pound bag of salt. We'll make it super, super salty, almost a solid brine solution. You mix that up and dissolve all the salt. Well, then you can take and shovel off the deck the shrimp and the fish and all your bycatch into that salt barrel. All your fish with – like light fish with air bladders, such as your croakers, white trout, things like that, your jellyfish – they'll all float, so you can scoop all that off and get it off real quick. All your heavy shrimp – like your shrimp will sink, flounders sink, your silver

eels sink. Any fish that are real dense all sink to the bottom. Then you scoop that out of that barrel and throw it up on the table.

SSD: You don't try to sell any of the flounder or silver eels?

FP: Oh, yes. Yes.

SSD: You do?

FP: Oh, yeah. Everything we can sell we save. We save anything – we save flounders, we save white trout, we save ground mullet, we save squid, we save the crabs, we save the brown eels for bait. We sell the silver eels for bait. Even the big croakers, the big spots or bream – we save them.

SSD: People eat those?

FP: Oh, yes. Anything and everything we can sell or we can make money, we sell.

SSD: So the more salt that's in a solution, the more buoyancy something with air has? Is that why they float to the top?

FP: Yes, it's because they have bigger swim bladders. But flounders hang out on the bottom. They don't have real big swim bladders, so they sink. Your shrimp hang out on the bottom. They sink. Your silver eels hang out on the bottom. They sink. Most of your fish that hang out on the bottom will stay on the bottom. But the ones that kind of swim around in the water column all float.

SSD: So once you get them sorted out –

FP: Then we'll take them; we'll put them in these baskets.

SSD: Okay. They're in baskets.

FP: A basket, if you pile – we normally keep it around a fifty-pound basket. But if you pile it up, it'll hold about seventy pounds. These baskets all weigh about fifty pounds. Once you get them in a basket, you rinse them off with water and wash the salt off. Then we'll put them down in the ice hold. Well, one guy's got to get down in the hold. The other guy's got to hand it. So carrying forty or fifty pounds – if we've got a big drag, we might put thirty to forty pounds in it, just to make it easier to put down in the ice hold.

SSD: Yeah. I have carried around fifty-pound bags of feed for horses, and it's not easy.

FP: Yes. They're heavy. That's right.

SSD: It's not easy to toss around. So you just keep doing that until you fill up the boat?

FP: We just keep repeating the process over and over. And if we're catching shrimp, we'll work twenty-four hours around the clock. I have worked, I think, about four days straight, never stopped.

SSD: Oh, man, that's hard.

FP: But it's easy to do if you have a good crew. If I have a good crew, and I get back there – especially if you're trawling, you're making four-hour drags; it might take you two hours to get it picked out. Might take you an hour and a half. If it's clean like this, it might take you thirty minutes. So that gives you three and a half hours that you can tell the deckhand, "Lay down." You can go take a nap – get your nap. I'll say, "Okay, well, it's your turn to take a nap this time. Next time, I'm going to take a nap." So you're not actually up for four days straight. Then, we'll do different things. If it's a nice, pretty day, then I might get the deckhands to do a little painting or maintenance.

SSD: Yes. During those lulls?

FP: Right. I have one deckhand – he liked to play the guitar. He was like a songwriter. He was always back there strumming on his guitar.

SSD: That's nice. [laughter] Yes. So what happens when you fill it up, and you come back?

FP: Usually, it's very rare that I fill my boat up because the capacity of it is – usually, we either come to the dock – if we're not retailing our shrimp, we either come to the dock for two reasons. One's we're out of ice, which is good because we caught a lot of shrimp, or you're out of fuel.

SSD: What would happen if you ran out of fuel before you got back in?

FP: You'd have to get towed in.

SSD: You call the Coast Guard?

FP: Oh, no.

SSD: No?

FP: I just call one of my friends [inaudible] or something.

SSD: [laughter] With a towboat?

FP: Yes. They would come latch on to me, but we keep a close eye on it. We don't push it most of the time. Like I said, most of the time, on my boat, I'll run out of ice before I run out of fuel. I can probably work – if I'm just working days or nights, I probably have enough for forty-five days if the boat's full.

SSD: Forty-five days of ice.

FP: Of fuel.

SSD: Oh, of fuel? I was thinking about ice. I was trying to –

FP: Ice can stay – in the summertime, I really don't stay more than around eight, nine days. That's about all the ice will last.

SSD: Eight or nine days of ice? What do eight or nine days of ice cost?

FP: About six-hundred dollars.

SSD: Wow.

FP: Sixty bars, and it's like three-hundred pounds to the bar.

SSD: Okay. All the shrimpers need to get together and make ice, so the ice is free.

FP: Well, I actually have an ice machine on my boat.

SSD: Really?

FP: Yes. But it doesn't make enough to – it'll supplement.

SSD: Do you have to have fresh water to make it?

FP: Yes. My boat holds about four-thousand gallons of fresh water.

SSD: How long would that last?

FP: What I use my ice machine for mainly is like when I'm at the dock, peddling my shrimp, I can run it twenty-four hours, hook it up to the city water and make more ice – or, if I'm catching a lot of shrimp – and really, what takes a lot of ice is when you make your initial bed. You'll make your bed sometimes a foot thick. Then you start putting your shrimp in ice. And then you'll cap them off with ice.

SSD: Another thick –

FP: The big thing. If I start using ice, I'll turn that ice machine on, [it will] make me enough for a bed, keep them capped off, and things like that. It's just a supplemental type thing.

SSD: Have you ever had a situation where you lost a catch because the ice – something happened, you had to stay out too long?

FP: One time – and that was last year or year before. It was the year before last. We were catching a lot of shrimp really quick. We were catching like two-thousand pounds a night. One

of the boys just made a little hot spot in the shrimp, and I lost – out of about fifteen-thousand pounds of shrimp, I think I lost about three-hundred pounds.

SSD: What's a hot spot?

FP: A hot spot is when you're putting your shrimp in the bin, and you put, normally, a basket, a hundred pounds of shrimp, ice, a hundred pounds of shrimp, ice, hundred – you know. If you don't put enough ice in one little spot, and then that ice melts – well, rotten shrimp is kind of like a bad apple. Once it starts going bad, it gets heat.

SSD: And the bacteria generates heat?

FP: The bacteria creates heat, and it just keeps growing and growing and growing and growing. I've seen some boats lose five, six thousand pounds of shrimp – shovel the whole catch overboard because of lack of ice.

SSD: So, do you actually stack the baskets?

FP: No, we dump the baskets out.

SSD: You dump them?

FP: Dump them out.

SSD: Okay. Very interesting.

FP: But that's a really important job – icing the shrimp. In the summertime, it's not really too bad as far as too much ice. The main thing is enough ice in the summertime. In the wintertime, you can have too much ice, and the shrimp will actually freeze.

SSD: You want them to stay fresh.

FP: But you don't want them to freeze because, when you freeze them with ice, they turn – the shrimp turn black because it's a long, drawn-out process, and they turn black, and it gets in the meat, and then they can't get the black out of the meat – which there's nothing wrong with them. They just don't look appealing. But a lot of your Gulf boats, actually, instead of ice, they'll use a freezer system. They can stay out up to sixty days at one time.

SSD: So they actually freeze them?

FP: They actually freeze the shrimp on the boat and store them down in a freezer hold.

SSD: But then they can't be sold as fresh.

FP: They can be sold as fresh.

SSD: They can?

FP: Yes.

SSD: So you can actually –

FP: I'm sure you've seen all these little vans around town selling fresh.

SSD: Yes.

FP: The majority of them are frozen shrimp. I would say hardly any of them are selling fresh shrimp out of those little vans.

SSD: My husband's going to be very disappointed to hear that because he thinks when he buys fresh shrimp, it's fresh shrimp; it's never been frozen.

FP: No.

SSD: But that's not necessarily true.

FP: The way you can tell about fresh shrimp is you look at their – if you can take that shrimp and pick him up by his whisker – if you can pick him up on the very end of his whisker, he's fresh. If his head don't fall off, he's fresh. A lot of time, freezer shrimp will lose all their legs because the legs will get frozen, and then when they get –

SSD: Oh, they break.

FP: – they break off. So if that shrimp's legs are all broken off and stuff, he's been frozen. If he's got a black head, a lot of times – especially the way that they freeze them – you can freeze a shrimp – a flash freezer doesn't use salt. It just uses cold air, and it blast-freezes them. You thaw them out; the shrimp look really good. Now, you stick them in a brine tank, where they put salt – just basically like a saltbox, but they lower that water down to like forty, fifty degrees below zero, and it don't freeze because it's salty. You stick that shrimp in there, you pull him out, and he's frozen instantly.

SSD: Good grief.

FP. But the salt is on the shrimp. Well, when you thaw that shrimp out, his head's going to turn black, just because of the salt. There's nothing wrong with it. You don't eat the head. But the shrimp turn black – the head will.

SSD: Wow. Interesting. That's not really a problem if whoever's going to sell them is going to cut the head off, and you never see it.

FP: Yes. Well, you can [inaudible]. There's a lot of times a frozen shrimp that's been frozen in them brine tanks will be real salty.

SSD: Yeah. You'd have to really wash all that stuff off.

FP: Yes. You have to wash them really good.

SSD: If you didn't know it was frozen that way, I guess you wouldn't –

FP: There's nothing wrong with a frozen shrimp. Not saying anything bad about them. But if you buy a shrimp – if you come to my boat and you buy a shrimp that's been caught that night, you can tell the difference.

SSD: Really?

FP: Yes.

SSD: I bet, yes.

FP: Yes, you can really tell the difference.

SSD: I don't know that I've ever had one like that.

FP: When my house got destroyed from Katrina, and I was building – me and a couple of my cousins and shrimp buddies framed the house all up, got the outside done. And then, when it comes time to finish it, we had some church groups come to help us. The people that were down here volunteering, helping were from all over the country. Most of them were from the Midwest. Well, shrimp – a delicacy. They don't eat shrimp.

SSD: Very expensive, probably.

FP: That's right. Very expensive. Every Friday, I would make sure I was home, and I would bring thirty pounds, forty pounds of shrimp. We just had this big shrimp boil. I would say, hey, look, "Everybody comes down. You tell them. Even if they ain't working on my house, you tell them to come over. We're going to have a southern Mississippi shrimp boil." They would see this big pile of shrimp on the table, and they're just thinking, "Man, how can this guy afford this? This is thousands of dollars."

SSD: No, fifty cents a pound.

FP: That's right. That's right. This don't cost me anything. But you'd be amazed how many people didn't eat shrimp. "Well, I don't really like shrimp." I said, "Well, I tell you what. All I ask of you is try one because I promise you you've never eaten a fresh shrimp." If you're in Iowa, you probably haven't eaten a shrimp that's been out of the water less than a year. I can tell you this: everyone that ate fresh shrimp liked them.

SSD: Oh, how funny. Yes, that's great. Well, you probably addicted people to shrimp now, and they can't support their habits now that they're back home. [laughter]

FP: That's right.

SSD: So I guess that really covers the typical day. Is there anything else about a typical day at work that you can think of that you'd want to put on the record? Well, one thing that comes to my mind is, do you all ever take their heads off and sort them by size or anything like that?

FP: Oh, yes. Sometimes. It all depends on what the prices are. I don't really like to head shrimp. It's just got a lot of labor involved in it. But if the price is where you can make money, then we'll head shrimp.

SSD: Do you have some lulls when you could do that, or do you have to make time?

FP: Yeah. No, no. Usually, we'll head shrimp when there's downtime. I have a big box on – like a big, huge homemade ice chest made out of foam and fiberglass. It'll hold about fourteen-hundred pounds of shrimp. If it's that size, we can make some money heading them; I'll throw them in there. The older shrimp gets, the easier it is to head. So if we wait until the next day to head it, then it's easier to head. We'll head them, and then we'll put them down in the main storage.

SSD: Are you just breaking it off by hand?

FP: Yeah. We just pinch them off.

SSD: Not using a knife?

FP: No. No, pinch them off.

SSD: Because it seems like it'd be rough on your hands.

FP: Got to wear gloves. Have to wear gloves when you're doing [inaudible] heading.

SSD: Yes. They're pretty spiny.

FP: My rule of thumb is you got to make at least seventy cents a pound for the labor – if you can get seventy cents a pound more for your shrimp – because you lose around a third. When you head a shrimp, you lose a third of your weight. So a hundred pounds of head-on shrimp's only sixty-six pounds of tails. So it really has to be a lot of money difference.

SSD: Yes. Somebody had told me that it was about half. But you're saying it's about –

FP: It's a third.

SSD: This guy was not a shrimper. He was a scientist.

FP: Yeah. It's a third.

SSD: Okay. A third, so thirty-three percent then?

FP: Yes.

SSD: If you were throwing away twenty-five cents – in other words, if you were handing somebody a shrimp and they were paying you fifty cents for a pound of it, and you knew that, by taking the head off, you'd get twice as much money, that would be one thing.

FP: Yes.

SSD: But it's really just a third as much, I guess.

FP: Yeah. Well, I look at it – well, if that hundred pounds of shrimp can make me a hundred, say – just use a dollar a pound. All right, well, if I can get three dollars for the tail, which normally, it's about that – well, then you're making two dollars a pound more. Well, you're making over a hundred dollars for every hundred pounds of shrimp you have.

SSD: Then it's worth it?

FP: A hundred-some dollars on a hundred pounds – that hundred pounds of shrimp helps pay the grocery bill, helps pay the fuel bill. But it's a lot of work, especially if you got a new deckhand that doesn't know how to head shrimp; they're back there forever heading shrimp/

SSD: Do they get some of it wrong, and they're wasted? Is there some wastage?

FP: Well, it's bad too if you have –if you got to sort your shrimp and head them because you can lose money by heading shrimp sometimes, just on the count. If they don't make that count, then if – just say you're getting a dollar-fifty for these one shrimp. Well, if you head them, if it's a 10/15 count shrimp – a jumbo shrimp, head on – it's only going to make about 21/25 count shrimp. So if it makes that 21/25 count shrimp, then you're going to make a hundred dollars a box – a hundred dollars on a hundred pounds of shrimp. But if you mess up and that shrimp count is twenty-six, you might not make thirty cents.

SSD: It's not simple.

FP: And me – it seems like, anytime I ever had shrimp – well, the price of tails are up this trip – we're going to tail everything. We tail everything. When we get back to the dock, the price of head-on shrimp went down.

SSD: Oh, that's awful.

FP: That's what's bad is when you leave the dock; the price of shrimp's not going to be necessarily the same when you get back a week later.

SSD: When you get back?

FP: Or you call them and say, “Hey, I’m coming in tomorrow.” The price of shrimp dropped today. So I try not to head shrimp. I try not to head shrimp.

SSD: Good grief. I understand. I understand why. Yes. Anything else about a typical day at work that comes up?

FP: No. I don’t know. I’ve had some pretty wild characters work for me.

SSD: [laughter] Tell me about those.

FP: A lot of them are looking for adventure. Really, since the TV show *Deadliest Catch* came out and all that, they’re all just looking for the adventure. Most of them are Yankees; I guess you want to call them.

SSD: Not from the South, around here?

FP: No. Like this boy here – he’s from Virginia. He was a real good deckhand. He’s not working for me anymore, though. The other boy that was on the boat with him was from Illinois. I don’t know. We pull a lot of pranks on each other.

SSD: [laughter] Like what?

FP: Put a crab in their bed.

SSD: And they’re not expecting that.

FP: No. You’re dead tired.

SSD: They don’t have a clue.

FP: You go to get in bed – when they take their boots off and set them by the back door, we’ll put a couple of fish down there in their boots – and just different things. But it’s always a lot more fun when you have – I don’t know – more fun-oriented people.

SSD: Yes, people who can take a joke.

FP: That’s right.

SSD: Yes. Have you ever had any of them go overboard?

FP: No.

SSD: That’s good.

FP: No. Never.

SSD: Do you guys have drills? What would he do if there were only two of you on the boat and you went overboard?

FP: Take the boat out of gear.

SSD: So he knows that?

FP: Yes. That's rule number one; you take the boat of gear.

SSD: So will that stop it?

FP: Yes, the boat will gradually slow down. The drag on the nets or whatever will help slow it down.

SSD: Do you guys ever have lifelines on?

FP: No. No, we rarely use lifelines. They'd be in the way. And most of the time, (inaudible) I'm real safety-conscious. If it gets too – there is a point where the boat can take a lot more than the men. But there's a point where it just gets unbearable, and you're not going to work. You're going to go anchor up somewhere.

SSD: How often does that happen?

FP: Usually, when it gets rough in the summertime, we'll have them summer squalls come through. A lot of times, we see them come, we'll pick up and stop for a couple of hours, just wait until it blows through.

SSD: Just a couple of hours? It moves pretty fast.

FP: Yes. Now, in the wintertime, it's different. If you have a cold front coming, it'll blow for two days – makes life real boring. Stuck on a sixty-foot boat, it gets real small real quick. And then it helps, too, if you're catching a lot of things. If you got some deckhands out there and you're not catching nothing, morale gets down; tempers start flaring a little bit. But days like this, you're catching a lot of shrimp.

SSD: You've got work to do?

FP: Yes. I mean, you can see the smile on his face. He's happy. He's making money.

SSD: Thumbs up. Yes.

FP: Thumbs up.

SSD: So he gets a share, not just necessarily an hourly wage?

FP: No. It's strictly a share. I can say this – I've never went out there and not made money, as far as go out and – I've had a couple of brokers that have been brokers because I called it off early. It's towards the end of the season. Well, this drag, in particular, last year was probably one of the last drags I made last year. We went out. I talked to my buddies. They said, "Oh, we ain't catching a whole bunch." I really didn't want to go. Two guys I had said, "Look, man, we need to go make some money." I said, "All right, we'll go." So we go out. We work three days. Didn't do nothing – just paid expenses. So we come in. I said, "I'm not going back out. We ain't making no money. If you all want to come down, we'll work on the boat a little bit. That's fine or whatever. If you all want to find another job, find another job. You got a spot on my boat anytime we get ready to go back out." So we'd come in. It was about a week later. I said, "Look, I got fuel in the boat that cost two-something a gallon. I'm not going to waste that fuel. We'll just keep it on the boat." Had ice on the boat still. It was about a week later my cousin called me and said, "Wey, look, you need to get over here." So I called the boys up. I said, "Look, they're catching shrimp. We got to go. We got to go right now. Can you meet me as soon as you can?: So they come down, we jump on the boat, and we take off. We went over there. We got to work two days before the season closed. This was the last drag of the season. We left on a twelve-hundred-pound drag.

SSD: One drag of one net?

FP: One drag. This was six-hundred pounds in this one net, and we had two nets – the last drag.

SSD: They were on the move.

FP: Yes. We were like, "Man, I can't believe this."

SSD: That's great.

FP: We made some good money for the two days. We worked two twenty-four-hour days right there.

SSD: Yes. But you'd had quite a few days prior to that [inaudible] nothing.

FP: Oh, yes, we wasn't making nothing. That was when we made – we worked them three days, they come in, I said, "Look, here's a hundred dollars apiece." I can't expect them to work for nothing. "You all do what you got to do. I ain't firing you. But I ain't going back unless something drastic happens."

SSD: And it did. [laughter]

FP: It did. It did. And my cousin was there about a day before we got there because, a lot of times, you might catch them one drag, and then it's over with. That's happened a lot. Then, me, if I call my cousin – "Hey, look, I'm catching a lot of shrimp. Come over here." Well, he runs over there. It might take him ten, twelve hours.

SSD: And they're gone?

FP: He gets over there, and there's nothing. They're gone. So it's not like, "Well, you lied to me." We ain't going to lie to each other. But it does happen like that. People [say], Hey, you need to go over here. I'm catching a lot of shrimp." They ain't catching nothing. They'll use that as a ploy. "Okay. Well, if he runs over here, then that means he wasn't catching nothing. But if he doesn't run over here, that means he's catching something, so I better go back over to where he's at."

SSD: Go over there.

FP: That kind of makes you mad.

SSD: Sure.

FP: But like I said, the industry's so small now, you're better off, to tell the truth, because they're either going to not believe you or believe you. You know what I mean? If you tell them you're catching a lot of shrimp, they might think, "Oh, he's lying. I ain't catching nothing. He ain't catching nothing."

SSD: Yes, it's nice to have a good reputation about telling the truth, isn't it?

FP: Sometimes.

SSD: It's important.

FP: Sometimes?

SSD: Sometimes? [laughter]

FP: It could get in your pocketbook, too, sometimes.

SSD: Yes. Oh, I guess so.

FP: Like I said, you always want to keep that edge because there's always somebody out there. It's pretty well dog eat dog. But like I said, I have my little clique that we run with. We know it's straight-up information. But we ain't inviting somebody new. When I first got in the business, I was really – a lot of my older cousins said, "Man, you run your mouth too much. Don't be telling people all that stuff." Now I'm kind of – I don't know – I guess I'm getting older, a little more wiser or something, because if you're catching shrimp like that, the more boats – like I said, with the pie, the more boats you have – the more people you have eating that pie, the smaller the piece.

SSD: Yes. So you have to limit it.

FP: It's all about paying your dues, too, I guess. I don't know – your rite of passage.

SSD: You've paid yours, yes.

FP: But that's another thing – how the industry has changed too is the technology, as far as all the GPS [Global Positioning System] plotting systems and things like this.

SSD: Global positioning systems? Do they actually read where the shrimp are?

FP: No. No, but shrimp are, I guess, creatures of habit. You have spots where it'll seem like, if there's any shrimp there, they're going to be in with this one spot. With the plotting systems they have nowadays – I've had my boat ten years now or eleven years. I have a regular desktop computer – two of them. They track everywhere I go, plot everywhere I go. They have every hang, obstruction that you can hang your net upon. I probably have a hundred years of information on there, just from where my family traditionally fishes and this and that. It tells you a time and a date. You can get it to tell you where the salinity is, the air temperature, water temperature. If you were to buy a boat and you say, "Hey, can I get your information?" One little zip drive can give you a hundred years of my information.

SSD: Yes. Why would you?

FP: I don't give my information to nobody, really. I'm very selective. Now, as far as dragging places. Now, hangs – I'll give people hang – I don't want nobody to hang up and tear up their equipment. But there's still a lot of guys – that's top-secret information.

SSD: They'll tell you to go that way, right?

FP: Yes. They don't give that stuff up. I'm to the point now where I don't give my stuff just to anybody – especially tracks. I'll give them my hangs, but tracks, that's my own, because if you're looking at a chart, there'll be a little spot there that's just blacked out, where I've just drug back and forth across through there. Well, you move your mouse over, and it tells you the date, the time, temperature, salinity. Well, you look at your thing – "Well, what's today? Okay. Well, I see June 17th; I was dragging here. Well, next June 17th, they might be in the same spot if the temperature, the salinity's all the same. So that's really changed the business there.

SSD: Yes, I'm sure it has.

FP: There's still a lot of older fishermen that don't even use that technology.

SSD: They might have it all in their heads.

FP: They do. Well, they have a book. They all write journals. I have my own little book. I write – every day I work, I have a little calendar. I mark X, and I write down where we were at and what we caught.

SSD: Yes. Something that I thought of earlier was just to ask you what kind of food you all eat when you're out there.

FP: We eat all kinds of stuff. I do all the cooking.

SSD: Yeah?

FP: Yes. I'm an excellent cook.

SSD: Do you cook at home?

FP: Yes. We eat a lot of seafood. I bring a lot of quick food – sandwich meat, sandwiches, things like that just in case we do get into shrimp and you don't have to cook.

SSD: Get busy?

FP: Busy. We'll cook all kinds of stuff. I'm kind of an amateur sushi roller, so I'll even roll my own sushi out there.

SSD: With what you caught?

FP: With what I caught.

SSD: What kind of fish?

FP: Mainly shrimp. Shrimp. I'll use some fish. But I made my own little – I call it a Cajun redneck roll.

SSD: What's in it?

FP: It's boiled Cajun shrimp, the regular boiled shrimp, and I put some Thai spices – chili Thai mayonnaise on there. Then I put mashed-up barbecue potato chips in there and roll it up.
[laughter]

SSD: That sounds great, actually.

FP: Yes. I said, "Well, we ain't got no crunchies. What do we got? I pulled some barbecue potato chips. Let's throw that in there. Throw it up.

SSD: It's the secret ingredient. [laughter] That's great. You could use those Zapp's.

FP: That's right.

SSD: They're really, really spicy. Boy, that sounds good.

FP: But I'll cook all kinds of stuff. But I like to cook a lot of seafood.

SSD: Yes. Makes sense.

FP: I have a barbecue grill on the boat, so we'll grill steaks or shrimp or stuff like that. If we got downtime, it all really depends. A lot of times, if we're working a lot, I'll throw in like a pot of red beans or something in a crockpot.

SSD: Any salads?

FP: Yes

SSD: So you take some fresh greens out with you too?

FP: Yes. I love a good shrimp salad, so we'll eat salads.

SSD: It's pretty hard to shell fresh shrimp, isn't it?

FP: They're hard to peel.

SSD: Even when they're boiled – to peel – that's what I was trying to say.

FP: To peel them, yes.

SSD: Yes. So maybe you don't boil them so much, just because –

FP: Well, you can boil them fresh if you – the trick to boiling shrimp – you boil them too long, they're hard to peel.

SSD: Oh, really? It's boiling them too long.

FP: Most of the time, I just bring them barely back to boil, turn them off, let them soak, and they'll peel real easy.

SSD: Good. That's good to know.

FP: But if you boil them too long, they get real hard to peel.

SSD: I'll remember that.

FP: You don't ever want to boil them longer than – if I bring it back to a boil, I don't boil them longer than a minute at the most, and that's on the big shrimp because they take a little longer to cook.

SSD: Cook all the way through.

FP: Yes.

SSD: Not good.

FP: That's the problem with seafood – most of the time, people overcook it, especially shrimp; they'll get chewy.

SSD: Yes. I've had some like that. Well, what kinds of turtles have you yourself seen in the Gulf of Mexico?

FP: Kemp's ridley, leatherbacks – and when I'm Louisiana, we see a lot of terrapin.

SSD: Out in the Gulf?

FP: Along the marshes. Along the marshes. If you stay along the marsh, you'll catch a lot of diamondback terrapin. But it's mostly Kemp's ridley. I'd say ninety-five percent of the turtles I've caught have been Kemp's ridley.

SSD: Is a loggerhead the same thing as a leatherback?

FP: No.

SSD: So you just saw that loggerhead the one time?

FP: I have seen a leatherback, a couple of leatherbacks.

SSD: You've seen them swimming near the surface?

FP: Yes. You don't really see them a whole lot when you're trawling, I guess, because you're going so slow, maybe you spook them. But I've seen them more like when I'm transiting across somewhere. You can see them over there floating.

SSD: Wow. Are there a lot of them?

FP: No, not really.

SSD: No?

FP: No.

SSD: A scientist I talked to, my first interview, said that Kemp's ridleys are making a comeback.

FP: I've seen more Kemp's ridleys in the last six, seven years than I probably ever have. I've seen Kemp's ridleys right here in front of the Ocean Springs Bridge and all around there.

SSD: Wow. That's so cool. I'm going to have to go searching for some of them. Well, what do you think about the way bottom trawling affects the ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico?

FP: There's probably some habitats that were probably destroyed, but most of them places are protected, like grass beds and things. We don't drag on grass beds. It's not a big – I don't ever remember dragging on a grass bed. It's just, most of the time, the grass beds are in shallow, shallow water. But me, personally, I don't think it really has a big impact. If anything, I think it helps the environment because we clean up so much debris.

SSD: Picking up the debris?

FP: But of course, debris could mean habitat.

SSD: For fish?

FP: For fish, things like that. That's like beer cans – I call them goby homes or goby condos because every time you catch one, you got a little crab or a little goby fish in there.

SSD: Gobies are the little fish that like to get in holes.

FP: With the eyebrows.

SSD: I remember watching one – I had a snorkeling mask and fins on – and just watching a little goby. He'd come in and out of his little hole. There was a post. Boy, they look ferocious.
[laughter]

FP: Yes, they do.

SSD: Are there other alternatives to TEDs that you think of yourself, just from having been in the business so long that would help turtles?

FP: In the commercial shrimp business, no, I don't believe there's really no alternative other than a TED. Like I said, other than dragging shorter times – and that's going to be an unfortunate nightmare. There's really no way to enforce a time. It just don't happen.

SSD: Yes. If you did that, you'd have so many enforcement officials out there; you'd be killing turtles in the props of your boats.

FP: Yes. I just don't know. I don't see any kind of alternative.

SSD: What depths are generally trawled for catching shrimp?

FP: Anywhere as shallow as a boat can get. Some of the small boats, especially in Louisiana, will trawl up in what we call the little duck ponds and stuff that's a foot and a half deep, all the way out to – I would say a typical brown shrimp, white shrimp trawler probably wouldn't trawl over around three-hundred-fifty, four-hundred foot. But they do have, outside of that depth, the royal reds.

SSD: Royal reds? That's a kind of shrimp?

FP: Royal red shrimp, and they'll get that big.

SSD: What is that? Four feet long?

FP: No, probably two and a half feet.

SSD: Two and a half feet. A two-and-a-half-foot shrimp. Royal red.

FP: Yes, royal red. But that's a very small fishery. But they'll trawl all the way up to twelve-hundred feet of water for that shrimp. They're typically anything over three-hundred-plus feet. When they [inaudible] royal red, they look like they're cooked. They are red when you get them. I've only caught them when I worked on the research boat when we'd go out there and do sampling. My boat don't trawl over seventy feet of water. Seventy, eighty feet's about the deepest that I can trawl.

SSD: So why are you not interested in catching royal red? Is there not a good market for them?

FP: It's a niche market. It's Bon Secour, Alabama. That is the only market. They have a handful of boats that work out of there that catch royal reds. I think there's one little place in Tampa that catches royal reds.

SSD: What do they use the royal red for?

FP: They're really like a delicacy shrimp. They're pretty expensive.

SSD: So you eat the whole thing?

FP: No, you just eat the tail. But I say a shrimp is two-and-a-half-foot long, but probably this much of him will be his head, and the rest is the tail. It'll be almost like a small lobster tail.

SSD: Yes. It reminds me of lobster.

FP: I've never eaten a big one. But the small ones – we'd catch them – look like a regular jumbo shrimp. They didn't taste any, really, different to me.

SSD: That's funny. Do you know anything about the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico?

FP: I don't get out there very much because I'm not a Gulf trawler. But I know my brother – he works in the oilfield. He runs an offshore supply boat. He's been out there for thirty years now. He said he don't buy the dead zone, so he's out in the middle of the dead zone catching tuna. So I don't really know that much about it, personally, as far as my own experience. But it does make sense. I think a lot of it has to do with what's on the bottom because all the algae and stuff blooms on the bottom.

SSD: Yeah, it's the algae bloom.

FP: But I know, like he said, they catch tuna and snapper. All the pelagic fish that are up in the water column – they catch them in the dead zone, so.

SSD: Well, so it's not slowing down shrimping or fish-catching, as far as you know.

FP: Yes. Well, I know fish-catching – now, the shrimping – like I said, I don't trawl, and I'm really nowhere around the dead zone.

SSD: So you're mostly in the sound, the Mississippi Sound?

FP: In the sounds, bays, lakes. This drag here, when all the shrimp – that was in Lake Pontchartrain, where we caught them at.

SSD: Good grief. Lake Pontchartrain. Is it briny? Is Lake Pontchartrain kind of –

FP: Yeah.

SSD: What do you call that kind of water?

FP: Brackish.

SSD: Brackish? Okay. I didn't realize that. But of course, it makes sense. So what are the living marine resources that you find in your nets? What's the whole range of what comes up in your nets? Shrimp, squid –

FP: We catch just about anything and everything out there you can catch in your net. Like I said, a lot of your bigger fish – I mean, we'll catch some small redfish and small speckled trout – stuff like that – but your bigger fish, we don't really catch a whole lot. Dependent on how much weight you have on your nets, you'll catch a lot of invertebrates, such as sand dollars, sea stars, horseshoe crabs – a lot of things that actually live on the bottom. Like brown shrimp – you really have to put a lot of weight on your nets to kind of drag them up out of the mud because they –

SSD: They actually bury?

FP: White shrimp – they kind of move up into the water column – the white shrimp do. You can fish really high. A lot of your white shrimp nets have real deep nets that fish deep. Your brown shrimp nets – you won't fish three foot off the bottom, and you won't –

SSD: Do you think you get more bycatch with brown fish because they do have these otter bottom [inaudible]?

FP: No. It varies. No, like I said, when you catch the shrimp, you don't normally catch no bycatch. But at times, you'll catch all kinds of stuff. Especially if you bog up a net and you catch a big old clump of mud, you'll get a bunch of worms.

SSD: Wow. Yikes.

FP: Yes. You catch just about anything and everything out there, even the things you don't want to catch, like refrigerators and stuff. [laughter]

SSD: [laughter] Refrigerators? Yes. You said you don't find sea vegetation because you don't go in the grass beds?

FP: No. The only vegetation we catch, really – and we catch some woolgrass, which looks like a weed, but it's an animal; it's a bryozoan, it's called. It's like a brown grass. Then we'll catch what we call sauerkraut grass. It's real fluffy-looking white grass. And it's also an animal, but it looks like a plant.

SSD: Not really a plant?

FP: No. We don't really catch a whole lot of plants, as far as the vegetation. Like I said, it's mainly shallow water, and we don't really go in shallow water. A lot of the grass beds are inside the barrier islands. And that's all national seashore, so we can't go in there anyway.

SSD: You are outside the barrier islands?

FP: Or even if we're inside the barrier islands.

SSD: Oh, is it like up to a certain –

FP: One mile. One mile from –

SSD: Okay. Everything a mile around the barrier islands is national seashore?

FP: That's right. Yes.

SSD: Interesting. Yes. We've talked about what happens to the bycatch. The sharks and the birds and dolphins usually get them. You can sell, you said, some of the bycatch. I forgot what it was, though. Squid?

FP: Squid and the flounder, white trout, ground mullet, drum – things like that.

SSD: Okay. Do you think there are any lessons you've learned from using turtle exclusion devices that other people could benefit from?

FP: There's a few little techniques you can – TEDs benefit sometimes, especially with grass. If you're shooting out the top, you'll catch a lot of grass. But if you flip that TED over and make it shoot out the bottom, your grass will go out of that TED. So there's different techniques you can use on a TED. Even jellyfish – you can get a TED that's got real close bars, and the jellyfish will go out the net. You won't catch none of them.

SSD: Yes. It seems like you'd want the closest bars you could get to –

FP: To a point. To an extent.

SSD: Can they get so close together, they're keeping the shrimp out? A certain-sized shrimp?

FP: Yes. Well, if they hit that bar, then that gives them just a second to stall. Once they kick, they can go out that hole.

SSD: Yes. If they hit the bar, that's an advantage to the shrimp.

FP: That's right.

SSD: Yes. Do you ever think about putting a turtle excluder device on the top and the bottom? Would there be a reason to do that?

FP: I don't know how you would do that.

SSD: Really? Impossible?

FP: No, it'd be impossible.

SSD: Probably lose a lot, too.

FP: Yes, because it sits on an angle in that net. Once they hit it, they either go out – I mean, you'd have to have something like that. I don't believe that would work.

SSD: Well, the last question that we like to ask in an interview is this one: is there anything that you'd like to put on the record that we have not talked about?

FP: I'd really like to get it out there for the American public – just be aware of what you're eating. Try to support – if you buy good, local, fresh Gulf shrimp, whether it's frozen – as long as it's an American shrimp, it's by far, one hundred percent better product than anything you can get from China or Thailand. Even if you're environmentally conscious, we have so many rules and regulations that other countries don't even have to follow.

SSD: Oh, man, they're doing so much damage to the environment.

FP: Yes. Down there in Mexico, they don't pull TEDs. They eat the turtle eggs. Here we are, trying to protect them, and we're putting us out of business, the ones who's got to abide by these laws by buying foreign seafood.

SSD: Yes. I agree.

FP: But just because it's wild-caught doesn't mean it's a danger to the environment. That's really about it, other than the commercial fishing sector – they aren't all villains. We try to take care of the environment because not all of us have that live-today-die-tomorrow attitude.

SSD: Yes. You have children. You want the world to be a good place for your children.

FP: That's right. That's right.

SSD: Yes. I think that it's easy to scapegoat the shrimpers because they're an identifiable group of people. But no, I would say characterizing you as a villain is the complete opposite –

FP: Yes. I think there's a lot more problems we can solve, other than just – coastal erosion is a great big problem. Habitat degradation – in the bay here, people building all these houses, putting bulkheads over the marsh grass, which would be habitat. That's things that should be addressed.

SSD: Yeah. Those are huge.

FP: Other than me dragging my net out there. I just seen, in the last twenty years, that I've been going to south Louisiana, that there ain't nothing left down there. I mean, it's just every – just in my lifetime. Like I said, my one cousin that – I call him my uncle, but him and my grandpa were first cousins, and he's eighty-five years old, and he told me – he said the first time he went into Main Pass at the mouth of the Mississippi River down there with his little boat, his antenna hit trees – hit the oak tree limbs. Now, there's not an oak tree that you can even see. My uncle told me that, thirty years ago, they used to push behind – they had a cliff that they would push up behind for bad weather. Now, it's open water. There's not a piece of dirt around there, and you're talking a cliff twenty-foot high.

SSD: It was removed by man?

FP: It was removed by Mother Nature.

SSD: It was eroded?

FP: Eroded.

SSD: Eroded, yes.

FP: Coastal erosion, you know? I just see – and you can look at the plotter – just some of the charts that are fifty years old. We drag over land. There was land there fifty years ago. Now, there's twenty feet of water. That's more scary to me than any – because you can put me out of business. But if you don't stop the habitat disappearing, where all these animals and species live and grow up – put me out of business – that's not going to stop it just because I'm not killing any more fish or shrimp.

SSD: But if we're taking away their nurseries and their mating grounds and their –

FP: That's right. That's the big thing.

SSD: Yes. Well, thank you so much for this interview, Frank.

FP: It's no problem. I appreciate it.

SSD: Letting me come to your home and giving me your time.

FP: Yes. No problem.

SSD: I'll turn it off.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/19/2021