Stephanie Scull-DeArmey: I have got the recorder on, and it looks like it is working. This is an interview for the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum in the University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mr. Eley Ross, and it is taking place on Wednesday, April 7, 2010, at 9:00 a.m. in Hattiesburg, on my end, and in Biloxi, Mississippi, on Mr. Ross' end. I am the interviewer, Stephanie Scull-DeArmey. First, I would like to thank you, Mr. Ross, for taking time to talk with me today. I would like to get just a little bit of background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So, I am going to ask you, for the record, could you state your name, please.

Walter Eley Ross, Sr.: Walter Eley Ross, Sr.

SSD: For the record, how do you spell your name?

WER: First name, Walter, W-A-L-T-E-R; middle name, E-L-E-Y; last name, Ross, R-O-S-S, Sr.

SSD: Where were you born?

WER: I was born in Biloxi, on 1st Street.

SSD: When were you born?

WER: March the 16th, 1924.

SSD: So, you are about to have a birthday here soon?

WER: I just passed it.

SSD: Oh, that is right. We are in April already.

WER: Eighty-six, yes, How old are you, hon?

SSD: I am fifty-five.

WER: You're sixty-five?

SSD: Fifty-five.

WER: You sound like you're in your thirties.

SSD: [laughter] I feel like it.

WER: I'll tell you why I always ask that. It's just a joke. Some nice lady, I say, "How old are you, hon?" She says, "Oh, I'm thirty." I said, "I wished I was thirty-one."

SSD: [laughter]

WER: That's a compliment, see?

SSD: Well, I hope I make it to eighty-six.

WER: You will.

SSD: I am trying to take care of myself, so I will.

WER: My mother lived until she was ninety-two. Well, my brother says ninety-four, but I think she was ninety-two.

SSD: Was she a Biloxi resident also?

WER: Yes. Most all of them, matter of fact. She was born in Alabama, in a little place called Alabama Port right on Mobile Bay. My dad was born on Dauphin Island.

SSD: My father grew up in Gulfport. I meant to ask you if you, just by chance, might have known him.

WER: What was his last name?

SSD: Scull, S-C-U-L-L.

WER: Scull. I knew most of the fishermen. I guess there might have been a few I missed, because I used to go on Gulfport and unload years ago and talk to a lot of fishermen on a radio.

SSD: Well, he left Gulfport, I guess, around World War II.

WER: Well, I was only twenty years old then. I was in the service too.

SSD: So, did you get drafted for the war?

WER: Well, it was a long story. I was drafted, went into Camp Shelby, was there seven days, was put on a cattle car, and shipped to Keesler Field. While I was shipped down there, when I rode into Keesler Field, the old sergeant says, "Who are you and where in the hell did you come from? An eighth grade education, and this is a cadet basic field." I said, "Well, Mr. (Henry Green?), he was a bar pilot. He was a friend of the family. He wanted the Biloxi boys on his crash boats." He was a commander on the crash boats – commander of all the crash boats. I said, "He wanted the Biloxi boys on his crash boats, because these Yankees was getting the crash boats aground and tearing all the bottoms up." Well, that old sergeant, he just got hot, let me tell you, because he was from up north. Most of them boys was from up north. He said, "Well, I got news for you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "They shipped the crash boat division out two weeks ago." So, that left me at Keesler with a cadet basic. One day, an old colonel got us in the hangar, and he said, "Boys, we've racked our brains. We don't know what to do with you. But as of today, you are aerial gunners." I was shipped to Las Vegas, Nevada, to Las Vegas, (on the?) airfield, and took training to be a ball turret gunner.

SSD: That is a far cry from being in the water on a boat.

WER: A long ways from being on that water. Most all the Biloxi boys went in the Navy – even ones drafted. But see, I was married. What saved me from getting killed was that – oh, I got to think now. I had two deferments because my father had a heart attack, and I was running the family boat. When I went in the service, well, naturally, I was about a year later than what I should have been, see. The ones that was there the year before, they caught hell. I was just lucky. When I got to England, the bombing had stopped. There was nothing left else to bomb, see.

SSD: That was lucky. Well, I am glad it worked out that way so we can have our interview. You are still here. Well, Mr. Ross, what was your initial opinion of the turtle excluder device itself?

WER: Honey, it was terrible. When I read to you what I wrote down here – and this is a while back, – I was in doubts whether I should send it to you, because it was so bad. But if you want, we'll start off now. When the TED was first introduced in Mississippi, fishermen thought that would be the end of shrimping. The next one, it said, "Describe the first TED you used." It was a horrible monster – a big steel frame that, if you wasn't very careful, you or your crew would be hurt or injured. The next one, "What was your opinion of the TEDs requirements when it was first enacted?" It lost a lot of shrimp. It had big holes in its side. "Did your opinion of TEDs change over time?" It was through fishermen's efforts and improvement that, slowly, it began to work. Most fishermen thought they wouldn't be able to feed their children with this contraption. The next one, "How and why did your opinion of TEDs change over time?" Never did, hon. It took a long time to improve and its size to get smaller and more productive. "How have TEDs affected the shrimp industry?" It affected it so badly, also with the influx of foreign fishermen. That was when the Vietnamese come in, though, and the pie had to be made a little smaller. I made that statement when I was president of the union. I got a lot of flak from it. I'm a Catholic, and all my girls went to Catholic schools and the boys did too. They had them nuns call me and want to know what I mean. Well, it was just fortunate that I wasn't the one to answer the phone. My wife was. When she got to talking to them, they understood what I meant by it. The next one, "What was your role in the situation?" I was president of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Fisherman's Organization, and I gave a lot of speeches against it.

SSD: Where did you give those speeches?

WER: Where did I what, hon?

SSD: Where did you give those speeches?

WER: Well, I don't understand you.

SSD: You said you gave a lot of speeches as president?

WER: Right, right. Where did I do it?

SSD: Yes. Where?

WER: Well, at the conservation offices. I also did have meetings down in the big place, which is the Isle of Capri now. That was an old shrimp factory. I would give speeches there, and they had situations – people that was on that board that Mr. (Swingler?) talked about. He was the one I addressed most of the time when I was talking. I would tell him something, and I would tell him, "How do you like that, Mr. Swingler?" He was something to do with the TED excluder thing, the program. They had this meeting with all the fishermen attending. I was the president at the time. So, I was giving a speech against it. That's when I told you, my daughter had sent me a whole page out of a newspaper that talked about how this turtle excluder thing coming up – how it affected the fishermen in Florida. She was from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It said in that paper that even the fishermen was so dysfunctional – maybe I'm using the wrong word. But anyway, it was so bad that even some of them couldn't even keep their family going and they got – might as well say sexually dysfunctional. That was in that paper. When I read that paper, they shut that meeting down after that. But it didn't do any good. I also went to Louisiana who was a friend of mine, to some of their organizations over there – meetings over there in Louisiana. I went to Jackson a lot of times on different businesses to make changes in laws that would be better for the fishermen – none of that includes the turtle excluder.

SSD: Did they change some laws to make it better?

WER: No, they didn't change any laws. The fisherman worked on them. It's just like what you said the other day that when the Florida fishermen tried to get what they call a cannonball shooter or jellyfish shooter – to get it certified as an official TED for shrimp, and they had a lot of trouble. Remember you told me that?

SSD: Right.

WER: There never was any law change, but they allowed them to adapt that. But then they had different regulations on it. They had to be so much bigger, and it had to be made out of aluminum and a whole lot of different things. We had different people here in Biloxi like the (Saunders?) that made them. One of the first ones I had, Mr. Saunders made it.

SSD: What was that one like? Can you remember?

WER: It was a big aluminum, and it was a flat bar. It was square, and it had bars in it that was like five inches apart. At first, the flounders would go on through the chute and then go out the net, see. So, then they'd put a bar across the bottom about five inches from the bottom that held all these upright bars, and it left a hole for the flounders to go into the shrimp bag.

SSD: Were you fishing for flounder? You wanted to catch the flounder?

WER: No, no. You'd just catch flounders at the time, and we noticed that we started using this turtle excluder that we didn't catch any more flounders. We'd save flounders mostly just to bring them home. You never caught enough to be selling commercially.

SSD: But you ate them?

WER: Oh, did I eat them. My family too.

SSD: They are delicious. That is one of my favorite fish.

WER: Yes. Well, one thing about them, they freeze so well, too, and they never lose their flavor.

SSD: So, was that a disappointment then that you were losing the flounders?

WER: Oh, yes, it was. Almost anything that worked against the fishermen, we always fumed and raised hell about it, because we didn't want the thing to start with. Well, we still got some more questions.

SSD: Well, you said that you were president of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Shrimp Association?

WER: Yes, I was president at the time.

SSD: Now, what did that association do?

WER: Let's see. It made laws that had better for the fishermen. It didn't make any laws that constricted the price, because you couldn't do that, of shrimp or different other things. It just made situations better for the fishermen. My son was a marine lawyer, my oldest son, and he was the one that put this thing together.

SSD: He put the group together?

WER: No. Well, not the group. He put a charter. He got a charter from the state of Mississippi for the union. It was the only chartered union organization in the state of Mississippi.

SSD: Well, is there anything else that you want to tell us about the Mississippi Gulf Coast Shrimp Association?

WER: Well, like all fishermen, usually, they want the president or the vice president to do all the work, and they just want to go to a meeting and listen. They don't want to get involved. Eventually, the union just fell apart. There wasn't enough fishermen in it to keep it going. So, I had to give the organization charter to a friend of mine in bayou county. When I gave it to him, he was going to form an organization down there, and I was joining that organization with my deckhand. I told him, I said, "Listen, it'll fall apart eventually, because the fishermen just won't put anything in it. They'll get on the radio and talk a lot on the street corners and talk a lot. 'We'd do this, we'd do the other.' But they won't do anything." That's what happened to him too. Eventually, it fell apart. I don't know whatever.

SSD: Why do you think the fishermen were like that?

WER: I don't know, hon. It's just what it is. It's how they really are. There's a lot of fishermen

that get the interest and do things, but it was mostly boat owners that done it. It wasn't deckhands. They didn't want to be bothered, to tell you the truth. They wanted you to do the work for them.

SSD: Well, how did you get involved in the conflict about the TED?

WER: Give me that first part again?

SSD: Looking at number seven, "How did you become involved in the TED situation?"

WER: Well, being the president of the Gulf Coast Fisherman Organization, naturally, we had to do something or talk about it. That's when we'd give speeches against it, because it was such a horrible thing to start with, that it had holes in it – not only that it was supposed to be made to let the fish out, but it let shrimp out too, see. I'll tell you the difference in what it done, even when we got the little, small ones, the flat ones. I got involved around some TEDs – there was some big double-rigs that came from down the Mississippi River up on the Chandeleur, and I went on to Chandeleur to work with them. But at that time, you didn't have to have the TED. So, I didn't have a TED in my sixty-five-foot net. These big boats with the two-fifty-foot double rigs had TEDs in them. I caught as much shrimp as what they caught, and as a rule, they always doubled me. So, that gave you an idea what the ones had the TED was losing, which was the first TEDs.

SSD: That was about fifty percent of their catch then.

WER: Just about, yes.

SSD: What made you decide to be a part of the Gulf Coast Shrimp Association? Did people ask you to do it or did you just…

WER: Well, we were involved in it. If you're outspoken a little bit, they'll always try to get you elected to be a president or whatever position you'd hold, see. Like I said, the majority of them didn't want to do anything like that. There was just a very few ones that did. But one thing about it, I had a lot of help from my son who was a marine lawyer. He put it together, and he would come to our meetings and he'd help us out with things you could do and you couldn't do, because you had to be careful no matter what it was. You had to be careful you didn't do the wrong thing.

SSD: What is an example of something that you could not do?

WER: Well, for instance, you couldn't set a price for shrimp. That was against the law. The dealers had to do that, see. It's hard for me to remember all the things at my age. But that was one of the main things, that you couldn't set prices on shrimp.

SSD: So, that put you at the mercy of the buyers?

WER: Oh, well, we was always at the mercy of the buyers, see. How we counteracted some of that, if you were an independent fisherman and didn't owe money to any dealer or factory, you

could go to any place that paid more money, and sometimes, you would end up getting more money – more money, more dollars per barrel.

SSD: How did you find out what they were paying?

WER: Fishermen that would unload before you, got to where you was going, they would tell you. It was through the marine radio that you found out a lot of things. You knew who was paying what. I've seen times where I'd go to Gulfport and unload because they was always paying $5 or $6 a barrel more. I worked for $25 a barrel, hon. Just imagine what that is, two hundred pounds at $25. Eventually, it kept coming up, raising up as the times went by.

SSD: Do you remember about what year that was, when, for two hundred pounds of shrimp, you would get $25?

WER: Oh, let's see. When I come out of the service in 1945 – it was around [19]45 or [19]46.

SSD: Do you remember what your fuel cost was compared to today?

WER: Oh, back in those days, fuel wasn't but about ten to eleven cents a gallon.

SSD: How much is it now? Do you know?

WER: Pardon?

SSD: Do you know how much it costs now?

WER: Oh, today, hon, it's $2.88 at the filling stations. Usually, it's about twenty or thirty cents a gallon less at the fuel docks.

SSD: That is a big difference.

WER: You better believe it. But when you buy fuel for a commercial boat, they put an additive in it. It's a coloring, see. If you're caught putting that in an automobile, you can be fined for it.

SSD: Oh, because they do not…

WER: Well, what it would do, the gasoline would leave a bluish residue on the carburetor, see.

SSD: So, that is to prevent people from buying it at that price and putting it in the cars?

WER: Right. It didn't bother or hurt it. It's just that that additive would do that to the carburetor, is change it to a blue color – a blue stain, more or less.

SSD: Well, looking at number eight, Mr. Ross, did your group of Mississippi Gulf Coast Shrimp Association ever work with other individuals or groups during that conflict about the TEDs?

WER: Let me tell you what I wrote down for that answer. "Did you align with other individuals or groups during this situation?" Yes, I did, but to no avail. This was like your new healthcare law. That alone would tell you plenty, huh?

SSD: A lot of different opinions and conflicts.

WER: Oh, yes, absolutely.

SSD: Well, do you remember who these groups were?

WER: Well, a lot of times, we would go to Alabama. I went one time, and most all the fishermen know each other, especially since my parents come from Alabama. But we got up there one time. They were milling around. They said, "Captain Ross, how about you talk to us? Give us a little speech." I'd sit home at night and think about things to say in speeches. So, I got up on the back of a truck. I said, "Well, I'm not prepared for this, but I can tell you this. You stick together, and you'll get things accomplished. If you don't stick together, you won't accomplish anything." That's an age-old law from way back.

SSD: Do you think they did stick together?

WER: Well, they were like our organizations. They were really gung ho when they started, but after a while, they wouldn't make the meetings. I've seen we'd go to a meeting when they have ten people in there, and half of them was officers on the board. It made you aggravated. You're just putting yourself out. Even coming on trips, you have a meeting set and you'd come in trips to go to this meeting, then there wouldn't be hardly anybody show up. You just would go ahead and do whatever you thought you could do without them. Long as you had ten men, there was a lot of stuff you could do.

SSD: What are some examples of what you could do?

WER: Well, I have to think about that. You mean the examples about what you would say or the laws you would make or…

SSD: You said that if you had ten people, there were some things you could do.

WER: Well, right off hand, I can't think anything. But as you're talking, things might come to me. At age eighty-six, that happens a lot.

SSD: Well, it happens to me too, so do not feel bad.

WER: People liked to form committees and to pick out people to go to Jackson or maybe to a neighbor state to go to one of their meetings. You'd do things like that. Other things you'd try to do is get the fishermen to pay dues so you could support this kind of project. A lot of times, I've seen me go to Jackson and take money out of my pocket to pay my expense when I was doing work for an organization. That was what I meant about doing different things and trying to find out how you could raise money or do anything. There wasn't no other way to raise money. You

had to depend on the fisherman's dues.

SSD: Now, when you would go to Jackson, was that to go to the legislature?

WER: Well, I never ever went on the turtle excluder, but I went on different other things. If they had different laws they was trying to make, we'd stop them. There were some good things we'd done. We went one time to try to get money to help the seafood industry. Do you know who got the money?

SSD: Who?

WER: The dealers.

SSD: Oh, man.

WER: Absolutely. Listen, me and my son and three or four other fishermen would go, and my son would just beat his heart out. Him being a lawyer, there's a lot of things that he could say and do. After it was all over with, these dealers ended up with new tractors and new tractor trailers and all kind of stuff. So, for all the work we'd done – and we talked to a lot of representatives and stuff in Jackson. They'll say, "We'll do anything to help the fisherman," and they would pass the law. But we never ever got the benefit of anything that we'd done.

SSD: Boy, that sounds really frustrating.

WER: Well, that would. That's what kept a lot of people from wanting to do anything and going to meetings. We didn't even get nothing done, because they don't ever help us.

SSD: They could have been spending their time just catching more shrimp instead of…

WER: That's right. That's exactly right. You couldn't blame them.

SSD: No. Well, do you think that as time went on, the shrimpers realized, "Well, this TED thing is a law. We are going to have to put them in our nets. Might as well stop fighting it."

WER: Just like you said, you just have to do the best. Some of the fishermen were so desperate in the very beginning, you know what they'd done?

SSD: What?

WER: The bag that let the fish, the turtles, or whatever out, they would sew it up because they was losing so many shrimp. If they were boarded, they could be arrested and fined for having the opening sewed up – with a needle and twine and sew it up. It shows you how bad it was in the beginning. Listen, there were such few turtles that you ever caught. It was just sad. I'll give you the answer I wrote down for that. It says, "How was TED perceived by your group?" The first word I got is sickening, S-I-C-K-I-N-G. I said, "Lady, there were only a few turtles at times in the Mississippi Sound, and hardly any are ever caught in Louisiana. Louisiana had terrapin.

You never caught them either because they stayed in shallow waters.

SSD: So, in all your years of shrimping, about how many sea turtles do you think you have seen aboard your boat?

WER: Honey, I've been fishing for about seventy years or better. If I had one or two, that would be plenty – in seventy years. It shows you how few it was. As a rule, turtles didn't swim on the bottom. They swam up on top.

SSD: Your trawl net was on the bottom?

WER: On the bottom. They would go under it, see.

SSD: Well, is there anything else about number nine that you wanted to add?

WER: No.

SSD: Do you have time to go on and do the other questions?

WER: Yes.

SSD: Well, can you tell me about growing up? Where did you grow up and what was it like?

WER: I grew up in Biloxi, and back in the times when the most fun you ever had in anything you'd done was to go out on your parents' boat. A lot of my friends would go out with me. See, I come from three generations of fishermen. I had six children, and I educated most all of them. Now, the girls, some of them went to night school and got degrees, but they're all educated.

SSD: How many children do you have?

WER: I had six. We had seven. We lost one. But they start off with a marine lawyer, a paralegal, a radiation therapist, a realtor – she sells real estate – the youngest girl is a computer analyst, and the youngest boy is a geologist. But I think they got most of their thing to do what they was doing, because their oldest brother was a lawyer, see. I just never wanted them to be fishing because it was just too hard a thing. Today, fishing has gotten so bad that I thank the good Lord that they do have a good education. They entered different fields.

SSD: What makes fishing so hard today?

WER: Well, the price of fuel is exorbitant. That's one of the biggest things. The price on shrimp is lower than what it was in 1980.

SSD: Are the fuel prices higher?

WER: Back then, the fuel was maybe seventy, eighty cents. Today, it's $2.70 or $2.60. I haven't bought them just recently. Everything was so much cheaper. But today, fuel is high, grocery is

high. Shrimp nets – and I make my own shrimp nets. I'm making two right now for a friend of mine, because he don't have the money to make them. Today, if you bought two twenty-five-foot nets, some of my friends have paid as much as $1,600 for those two nets.

SSD: What does it cost you to get a turtle excluder device in there?

WER: I don't know. I haven't checked it. I bought another little boat, and it had a turtle excluder device in it. I never had to buy any. I knew they were up around $100, that flat bar. But I think they're a lot more than that now.

SSD: What was Biloxi like when you were a kid? What was the typical…

WER: Well, the reason why I never got an education – out of fourteen kids, I was the first one that could have went to college. But I've seen boys that went to college come back and stand on the street corner, shake a few quarters in their pocket, while we was shrimping and making money. I said, "There's no future in that." My family wasn't rich enough with all those kids to put you up in business. Some was a pharmacist and others was doctors. But it was very, very few that had that opportunity. I couldn't see where an education would benefit me other to be the best fisherman that I could be, coming from three generations of fishermen. I knew what to do.

SSD: Mr. Ross, have you ever thought about writing a book about what you know about shrimping and fishing?

WER: I have, hon. My kids are after me all the time. I don't know. After you retire, you don't want to be bothered with doing other things. You think, "Well, who wants to hear about you writing a book?" But I guess a lot of people would be interested because I've seen some things that (turn a coil and a half?) on your head. I caught a devil fish one time that was about twenty-four foot, the wing span. I'd seen something big in the bag, but I couldn't make out what it was. But times were so bad that what few shrimp you caught, you had to save them all. So, I tripped that that monster on deck by myself, on a forty-five-foot boat. He was upside-down, and he was about seventeen inches thick. I'd walk on him and he'd breathe, and he'd raise me up and down. I cut a hole in one wing about three foot from the end of the wing and put some nylon rope in it, put it on a block and tackle, and started up the mast in hopes to get him where he would go overboard, because I still had to work the rest of the night. So, I start up with the block and tackle and tore that part of the wing out. It flopped back down on deck. So, I got back about six foot and cut another hole. Now, you talk about the blood. That was the worst smell you ever smelled in your life. This time, at six foot back from the end of the wing, he came all the way up when I got him up just about where his back was even with the rail. He'd give a heave, and the old booty went. I was tickled to death for that, I'll tell you.

SSD: Did you have to cut the line to let him off?

WER: Whether he survived or not, I don't know. But he was still alive when he went over.

SSD: Now, is the devil fish the same thing as a stingray?

WER: Well, no. It looks the same, but it's got wider wings and it don't have a long tail. It's got two projections sticking out across the mouth about five foot across, and then two projections that curl out like horns on the front of the head. The mouth is underneath that.

SSD: So, because of the horn, it is called a devilfish?

WER: As I talk, I'll think about the name of it.

SSD: So, did you have to cut the line to let him go?

WER: No, he tore that line out too when he got overboard. Halfway through the water, the weight of him tore that wing out. So, I was lucky in that respect too.

SSD: But it did not hurt your block and tackle and your…

WER: No, it didn't bother that. I just had some half-inch nylon rope I had doubled up, threaded it through the wing where I'd cut the hole, about four or five inches back from the edge of the wing, but about six foot from the very edge.

SSD: He probably made it. I mean, if he was twenty-four feet across, he could…

WER: Well, one thing about fish and anything in the water, they heal up. They heal up with a thick, heavy scab over wounds. They get by with a lot less than what we do. They have a slime all over them anyway that protects them when they cut themselves – I guess so they don't get infected or anything.

SSD: Well, what did you do for fun when you were a kid?

WER: Oh, well, we'd go down to the beaches back in those days. They caught so many oysters that shell piles fifty to sixty foot high. We'd run up and down those shell piles and throw shells at each other. Didn't even own a bicycle then. On the weekend now, they had a big theater in Biloxi called the Saenger. Our family could afford to let us go to a movie on Sunday. But the rest of the time, we just played around like kids do. You'd take a broomstick and cut out a six-inch thing and taper each end, and we'd called it a (caddy?). At the other end of the stick, when it come up to the head, you'd knock it. You'd knock it through a ring with a bunch of other boys, or maybe see who could knock it the furthest distance. That was one of the things we had. Other than that, we didn't have any kind of toys.

SSD: Did you swim a lot?

WER: Huh?

SSD: Did you swim a lot when you were a kid?

WER: Did I do what? Oh, yes, we swam. Deer Island is about half a mile offshore from Biloxi, and we'd swim to Deer Island, run down the beach to the west end, and dive overboard and swim

to what they call the community pier. But we'd swim. We'd swim like fish. We could swim so well.

SSD: You were not afraid of something getting you out there in the water?

WER: No. I had a cousin that – something had scraped his leg, and it must have been a stingray or something. But we never did worry about anything like that. We'd swim around those walls where they picked crabs and shucked shrimp, and all that trash just went overboard. They'd pay you. They'd make them put the trash into a big container and take it off somewhere and bury it.

SSD: What were the beaches like then? Did they have the man-made beach when you were a kid?

WER: Well, I'll have to remember back. All it was was beaches at an island, but maybe six foot of the beach was grass from the six foot. Later on, they put a seawall up, and I think it was the longest seawall built ever. It ran all the way from way on down from bayou county, Mississippi, on through to Pass Christian, and Pass Christian all the way to the east end – not the east end of Biloxi, but just short of where the factories was, which would be right where the Grand Casino is today at the foot of Oak Street. That seawall, I believe, was twenty-six miles long.

SSD: Now, for people who do not know what a seawall is, who might be listening to this interview, can you explain what a seawall is?

WER: Well, a seawall was, I'd say, about ten, maybe twelve foot high. It was a concrete thing with steps on it, cement steps, all the way from the top, which was about four or five foot wide like a walkway, and then steps, eighteen-inch steps, all the way to the bottom, about eighteen inches wide and eighteen inches deep, all the way down to the sand – which wasn't a sand beach, because they didn't build a sand beach until after that. But as far as the dates, I can't remember things like that anymore.

SSD: Where did you go to school, Mr. Ross?

WER: What did we do about storms?

SSD: Where did you go to school?

WER: Oh, I went to St. Michael's Catholic School on the Point. It was right up one block from the Isle of Capri, straight up to the north up that street there. I can't remember the name of the street. There's two streets down in that area. One's Myrtle, and one is similar to that. Sometimes, it's confusing when you say, "Well, this street here, and so-and-so lives there," and they could be in the other street, because the name's just so similar.

SSD: St. Michael's Church has been there a long time then?

WER: From 1917, I believe. The old church was on 1st Street, and we lived right across the street from the church. The school was on the opposite corner going to the east, on the south side

of 1st Street. The bell could ring for the church or school, and we could be sitting at home. You'd pick up your books and run. You'd get to the line before the line took in.

SSD: [laughter] That is great. Now, the St. Michael's Church is built in the round, is it not?

WER: It's on a beach. When I was about four or five years old, they started a fund to build a new church. I can remember then, my dad, he was a boat builder, a house builder, fisherman. He was a jack of all trades, and very good at all of them. He always owned his own boats, and we lived fairly comfortable. But my mother would donate every week $5 towards the fund of that church, and that's what the factories donated. That was all they donated.

SSD: It is a beautiful church. I know it took a lot of damage during Hurricane Camille.

WER: The outside still needs a little work, but the inside is finished for the walls and the ceiling. The lights can change from a beige to a white. The columns used to have square blocks on the columns in between the stained glass windows. They took all those blocks down, and they've cemented the holes. It looks better than it did before, but they still got to do the floor and the doors – the doors that still are makeshift doors, and the floor is just concrete. It's bad. We went to church Easter morning, and my two daughters that live in Gulfport and one granddaughter come down and go to church with me. Every once in a while, they would do that. They would come and go to church with me.

SSD: My father said they built the church round so the devil could not get you cornered in it.

WER: So, you couldn't get what?

SSD: So, the devil could not get you cornered in it. [laughter]

WER: I don't know about that, but I noticed that it's one of the most beautiful churches on the beach, on the Gulf.

SSD: It sure is.

WER: What was so wonderful was that a lot of the stained glass was broken at the bottom for about the height of the water and the waves. About twenty foot or better inside the church up, that stained glass was all broken. People from New York had put that in, and the man that had done that, he was retired. But when they talked to him, he agreed to come down and do it himself, and he still had the patterns, all those wonderful…

SSD: Oh, that is so nice.

WER: Yes. It's beautiful now.

SSD: Is St. Michael still on top of it?

WER: They had to put him back up. He's over the little section where they baptized the kids.

Then there's a cross over the top of the church. Both of those came down. St. Michael came down. He wasn't damaged, but what it was, they fixed it back up and put him back up.

SSD: Well, you mentioned storms. What hurricanes do you remember going through?

WER: Oh, hon, I remember them all. Whenever we got them, we always took the boats back up, back to Ocean Springs, or back up the Biloxi River up into some bayou or something up Biloxi River. The last fifteen, twenty years, we'd go up Fort Bayou behind Ocean Springs. You'd have to get in the area where there's trees on both sides. You tie the boat off with heavy lines and leave a little slack in them because the tide will come up. Now, I'd never seen it myself, because usually, I'd bring my boat up there and tie it up. Then I would come home to be home with my family. We spent the storms at home. We never went anywhere back then. But in Camille, we had about, say, four foot of water in this house. Katrina was eight foot, hon.

SSD: Camille, it was four. Katrina, it was eight. Where are you in relation to the beach?

WER: Well, my house is on Rosetti Street, but my back line opens up on Crawford. We're only about one block from the beach. It's a big block. It's not as short like some city blocks are short. I would say it's about, say, ten houses on one side, and there's fifty foot for each house. So, that's like five to six, seven-hundred foot from the beach road.

SSD: That is close. Where did you stay during Katrina?

WER: I went to my daughter's house in Gulfport. My wife had died in [19]95, and usually, I'd go to one daughter, the other one. There's another one that lives in Stanton Place. It's a big subdivision. But she was gone somewhere, because she usually goes a lot. She does PR work for Kenny Stabler, and she goes with him to these meetings and stuff. She was gone at the time. So, we went to my daughter Jan's house on Courthouse Road, which was my daughter's kiln house. Then she moved to Stanton Place and sold her house to my daughter, Jan, who's the youngest one, see.

SSD: How far north were you on Courthouse Road?

WER: Oh, I'd say it was about a mile and a half or more. But you see, back around Courthouse Road, we got little bayous that comes in from the Back Bay of Biloxi. The water had come up. Our house was – I got to think now how many foot above sea level is – around twenty foot on the ground, and the house is up about three foot. The water had come for being eighteen inches of coming in her back door. She had a swimming pool. Poor thing, she was so upset. She said, "Daddy, I don't have flood insurance." That's when the water was coming up. I sat in a chair and watched the water come up. It come up on the swimming pool ladder, and it come up right even with the top of it. Oh, she was crying. It was something terrible. It's hard to tell anybody anything in something like that because you really don't know what's going to happen. After a while, I noticed a little crack of light showing between the ladder where (it makes the curb?). I said, "The water's going down." She was better then. But I had picked up a glass ball, which was a float that come from fishermen from – they used these glass balls on their nets to tell how long it's been in the water. I was out fishing around in a Louisiana marsh when we was tied up in

bad weather, and I found it. I gave her that ball, and she had it sitting at the back of her house. We watched it float out of her house and over her back fence, which was six foot high. Then the water kept coming up more all the time. It was a terrible ordeal, because you didn't know what was going on in Biloxi. You felt so much for my daughter, and yet, there was nothing you can do. We didn't even have a hatchet if we had to get up in the attic, because you didn't know how high the water would come. It was the first time we had ever seen anything like that ever in my life. For seventy-some years of fishing, we never encountered anything like that.

SSD: A mile and a half from the beach and up twenty-three feet.

WER: Yes.

SSD: Yes, that is really something.

WER: It was an ordeal, I'll tell you. Even the wind; the wind was so strong, it was like a 180-something miles an hour or two hundred, maybe. But there was a little vacant spot in between the house on the next street and her house, and it was suddenly like a little ditch back there. That's where the water had come in from the bayou, I guess, where the water drained into the Back Bay of Biloxi. The wind was blowing through those trees, hon, and it sounded like banshees screaming. [imitates sound] Like that.

SSD: Were you all afraid for your lives?

WER: No, honey, I wasn't afraid in my life. I worked in all kind of weather, had people go out when weather was bad. People say, "Man, you're crazy." I'd go out in bad weather. I'd be going in fair wind, and I'd go all the way down the Mississippi River, which is eighty-five miles south of Biloxi. But the thing about it, I'd go into one of these bayous when I got down. As soon as the weather let up and tide stopped running, I could get out there and catch twenty, twenty-five, thirty barrel of shrimp before the other boats had even come out. I'd meet them going in there, and I'd be coming out. I didn't think I was crazy then, but I knew that was a way of life. These things happen. If you waited until the fleet went out, that twenty-five or thirty barrel would only be about half; half of what you'd catch after the fleet got there, because it would diminish so quickly.

SSD: Then I guess you got to be the first one to sell.

WER: Well, it really didn't make much difference. The price would be the same whether you was first or last. But at least there wouldn't be no boats there while you was en route. Once in a while, there would be one or two other boats would go, and there was fellow I knew real well. Him and I would always go out. We'd ice up Christmas Eve. People said, "Man, you're crazy. Icing up on Christmas Eve?" I said, "Well, the day after Christmas, we're going out." Sure enough, he would go, and I would go too. A lot of times, I went by myself, on the boat by myself. It never bothered me, the weather, because the boat was new. I had it built in 1965, fifty-six foot long. The fellow who built it was married to my cousin, and he was a good boat builder.

SSD: Who was he?

WER: Gene Weems.

SSD: W-E-E-M-S?

WER: Yes, W-E-E-M-S. Weems Brothers, they was on the bay out between Crawford and Oak Street, out on the bay, on Back Bay Road. I worked for them about twenty-five years. In fact, he was half owner of Weems Brothers. He was the one who built a boat during an off-season, like in between shrimp season and oyster season.

SSD: So, was that the boat that you sold when you retired?

WER: Right.

SSD: How many years did you use that boat?

WER: Well, from 1965 to 2005. It was a pretty boat. Listen, I got to tell you this, it was on a Mississippi State tourism poster for fifteen years. All you had to do was write them a letter and they'd send you one. But eventually, they stopped making it. I wish you could have come down. You could have seen all the pictures I've got in my house. Kim, my daughter Kim was on that seafood marine boat. The first one she made was a picture of my boat with a big old shrimp over the top of it. It was a seafood poster. This other one was a picture, and it says on it "Mississippi" over the top. It shows me on another boat doing a blessing to the fleet and running out the channel. You go all the way out the channel to the last beacon, come back, and the priest blesses the boat. The other one is a picture of the church with a little girl sitting on the beach, putting sand in a bucket, and there's a few fish around. But it shows all the church. There's a lot of memories in this house. I even got a picture sitting on the desk by the computer the kids bought me, and there's a picture of me and my crew on that B-17 during the war.

SSD: You all were on a B-17.

WER: I got some pictures of my wife when she was seventeen. She was a beautiful woman, I'll tell you – a picture of me and her when we was married. When I moved in this house after it was finished, I didn't have one picture. My daughter, Jan, got all these together and had them framed and brought them down here one night. Usually, we'd go to Kim's house for – we'd exchange presents Christmas Eve. After that was over, one of them said, "Daddy, we're going down there to help you bring your presents inside. I said, "That's strange. They never went home with me to bring my presents inside." That's when she brought all her pictures and hung them. Then Doffie had a computer in the back of his car. Kim said, "Doffie, go get that computer." They hooked it up. One had to go get a keyboard at Walmart, and the rest of them was hooking it up. I used it for a while. Back after the storm, there was a group of people – plenty of people came down here. There was untold numbers of them. But anyway, there was a bunch of ladies came here and was helping. They'd tear out all the stuff on the house to the rafters – floor rafters, roof rafters, everything. But then a bunch of them came when I was changing the siding on the house, because they had broke the front door taking out the refrigerator and the deep freeze that

had rotten seafood in it. They broke the door getting out, so had the siding pulled out. These sixty-five-year-old women got up on the ladders, took that old siding down. One man was a foreman, and he'd (mock and neg?). One of them was cutting, and the other two was putting it up. I took some shrimp jambalaya for them one day. I was in the trailer at the back of my backyard. They had a fit over that. They were writing me letters, one of them. These people, they were rich people. I never knew it until one of them wrote me a letter and said they had a summer home in Arizona. They lived up on the East Coast. They was talking about the trips they would take all up through Canada and going skiing. I said, "Well, that goes to show you, no matter how well-off they are, they still had that compassion in them to come down to help all these people in Biloxi."

SSD: Those are good folks, are they not?

WER: Yes, absolutely.

SSD: So, have you got everything back in your house the way you want it after Katrina?

WER: Oh, yes. I was by myself, but my daughter, Kim, she went and bought all the furniture. One of my cousins rebuilt the house. When we got ready to move in, it was finished. Now, it's all white. It's the same building on the outside, framework and all, that it was before. But it just looks so much bigger with the white paint. But Kim, my daughter, Kim, she's the one who does a lot of things for me. I give her a credit card, and she went and bought all the furniture, $18,000 worth. This is not going on the record now. I wouldn't want that to go on the record.

SSD: Well, we will have to take it out.

WER: Not this either, but Jan's house for the storm – see, my youngest son said, "Daddy, let's go to State Farm and see how we'd do it." Honey, I never paid no bills. I never bought nothing. I was gone, and she'd pay all the bills and do all the stuff. She was like a mother and father to those kids. They went in there, and there was a Black fellow that pulled up the computer what the insurance was. It's $125,000 flood. The majority of people in this area had $10,000, $15,000, and $20,000 all. How she got that much, I don't know. But through owning that boat and making enough money, she got it and paid it.

SSD: She was smart.

WER: She is a great woman, I'll tell you.

SSD: How did you meet her?

WER: Yes, it sounds like you. The way you smile.

SSD: Really?

WER: The way you smile. [laughter]

SSD: How did you meet your wife?

WER: Well, we were going to Ocean Springs. Me and my brothers, we all married girls from Ocean Springs. But we heard that they was having a dance at one of these clubs – some like the VFWs today. But back in them days, it was something else. All these girls would go to these dances. But in those days, their mothers went with them. They weren't allowed to go out. If they went there, they walked, because hardly anybody had cars. They walked there, which was about three-quarters of a mile, and they walked back. I was dating this girl, and a cousin of mine was dating her cousin. But another cousin by the name of Libby come from Mobile. My cousin called me and says, "She don't have a date. Would you come go on a date with her?" I said yes. So, we went out and we had fun, and Libby went back to Mobile. So, when I went back to see the other girl, she was fiery mad. She was sitting on a swing at her cousin's. I sat down, but she got up and moved. I said, "Well, it's time for me to go." Her cousin was there, a boy. He said, "Come on, Eley. Don't mess with them." So, we left. The next Friday night, they had a dance at this place. When I went, the old girlfriend was there. She was sitting there. She was grumbling to herself, [imitates grumbling] going on. I was kind of dejected and down a little bit. So, I went up to the end of the stage where they had like a little platform. There was a big cardboard box there. So, I had my back to that box and I was fiddling around. I put my hand down in it and I said, "Hey, it's full of costumes." So, I reached down in there and I come out with a bonnet. This part chokes me up. I turned around. It was this little girl standing there, pretty as a picture. I tied that bonnet over her head, and later on, I married her. But she was a pretty woman, I'll tell you.

SSD: Oh, that is so sweet.

WER: She was beautiful. She had black hair so black, she'd stand on a front porch, I'd be coming home down the street a block away, I could see that black hair shining in the sun. My daughter, Kim, is exactly like her. She's got two girls, and one of them is exactly like her mom and her grandma.

SSD: Is not that fabulous?

WER: Got the prettiest faces.

SSD: How many grandchildren do you have?

WER: Oh, I'll have to think. Let's see, I've got great-grandkids, too. I've got three great-grandkids. But I've got, let's see, three, four, five, six. That's about all I could think of. But one of my daughters, Karen, she had these three boys. The oldest boy's got a girl and a boy. The next one, he's not married yet. But the youngest one has got three boys. The youngest one looks more like him than the two oldest ones. He wasn't married to the youngest one's mom. He was a bad boy.

SSD: [laughter] Well, that is nature, huh?

WER: Yes, absolutely.

SSD: Well, is there anything else you would like to put on the record about your family, Mr. Ross?

WER: Well, my mother had fourteen kids. We had seven sisters. It's a good thing we did because we needed all those seven sisters to take care of all the kids. But we had a good life. We always had plenty to eat and good clothes, clothes to wear when you made your communion and confirmation and stuff like that. My mom was really – back in them days, they had the fashion shop in them different places. You'd buy on credit. She always made sure we always was dressed up for any occasion.

SSD: Those were a lot of children to get dressed up.

WER: Yes, absolutely. But my daddy, even off season, he'd build houses or he'd repair boats. There's one of these old Yugoslavs come to him one time. He said, "Mr. Ross," he said, "My boat's narrow and they don't carry much oysters. Can you fix it?" Daddy said yes. He said, "It won't look too good, but it'll be better." So, what they'd done, they cut all the frames and they made the frames bigger or just put extensions on them where they had to add two or three planks at the bottom on both sides and put a new stern in it. The boat was kind of – from the middle back, was almost the same width. My daddy told him, he said, "Well, it won't look too good." He said, "That's all right, Mr. Ross." He went out and dredged oysters. He come back, he says, "Man," he said, "That boat works good." He said, "It holds a lot more oysters now and it don't go way down in the water." But back in those days, when they dredged oysters, (steam?) oysters, those boats would come in with water on their deck.

SSD: Really? They were riding so low?

WER: They were riding so low. The hatch would be about a foot high. You'll found the house hatch, the way – where the house was built on, the pilot house, it was about a foot high, but there'd be water running across the deck. You would wonder how people could dredge and put that much stuff on boats and put them in the water, but they did.

SSD: Mr. Ross, how did they dredge for oysters?

WER: Huh? Where?

SSD: How do you dredge?

WER: Well, you got two steel frames if you used two, a dredge on each side. They are about four and a half, five foot wide in the back. It's a double frame going to a point with a curved neck, so it's got rollers on the side of the boat. You're running forward and aft in the horizontal. When you pull it up, it's got a crook in the head of it, so it'll come around them rollers and come up. When it goes back to the back to full bars, they separate. They're about a foot high on each side in the back and about five foot wide. They used to have a chain with a cotton bag. The chain was a ring with hooks in it that was on the bottom, so the oysters on the bottom wouldn't tear it up. On the bottom bar, they had teeth that stuck down about five or six inches, say, about

two and a half, three inches apart. That dug the oysters out the bottom and they went in that bag. But today, they come up with a steel bag, it's made by them coonasses, and it's automatic. When you drop the head of the dredge down on the table, which is about twelve inches lower than the rollers, the bag empties itself. When I was commissioner, I added the weight on that chain because it was more, and the conservation was writing fisherman tickets. So, the weight was, I believe, 115 pounds, and I had it changed to 140. They couldn't write no more tickets then. That's mostly what I'd done when I was commissioner. I'd do things that helped the fisherman. The conservation agents didn't like it, but…

SSD: Can you remember anything else that happened while you were commissioner that was good for the fishermen?

WER: I'll have to think a little bit, hon. I would get involved with almost anything that would help the fisherman. They'd have a certain time to get in to unload. Mostly, what that was for, was that officers wouldn't be working after dark. If you couldn't have it changed, you could ask them to do it. They would do it if you presented in a way that they would believe it was feasible. Things like that, I'd done. I always kept the fisherman informed about what was going on at the meetings, because they come sometimes, but the majority of times, they never come to a meeting.

SSD: Well, they probably were too busy.

WER: Well, they were working, a lot of them. They would be in when they end two or three days to rest. That's usually when we'd have the meetings, but they just didn't do it. They didn't come.

SSD: Mr. Ross, when you shrimped, did you stay out for more than a day?

WER: Oh, yes, hon. When we left to go down the Mississippi River, we would work all around the river, from North Pass all the way around to Southwest Pass. We would go out for four or five days. We didn't stay any longer than that because the shrimp would start to turn black a little bit. But after that, they'd start using that sodium bisulfite. It was a dip you put into a bow. When you got the shrimp cleaned, you just dropped the basket down that bow. That sodium bisulfite would keep from having them black spots. Now, if I want to stay out longer than the five days, I would go into Venice, the bureaus, down the mouth of the Mississippi River. I'd unload then and go back for five more days, make a ten-day trip. But sometimes, when there wasn't very many shrimp, you had to work those ten days. Now, when the season first would open, about three or four days, you'd use up all the ice you have, and by that time, the shrimp would play down or where they wasn't very plentiful. But I'd see me go down to Grand Lake and sit in between New Orleans and Grand Isle and catch fifty barrels of shrimp in three or four days. But that was back when they had plenty of shrimp. Well, I'll tell you a little story about that, too. I heard these people down there – I refer to them as coonasses all the time. A lot of good people. Some of them, not so good. But anyway, if they caught fifty barrels of shrimp, they'd put the American flag up. So, I had fifty barrels. I'd come out of Grand Lake, so I'd put a flag up. When I got home, they said, "What you flying the flag for?" I said, "Well, them coonasses catch fifty barrels and put a flag up. I'm as good as they are. So, I put one up." It got

to be a trend, and then everybody started doing it.

SSD: Oh, that is funny.

WER: I don't know how you'd ever catch fifty barrels a day. The shrimp have depleted so bad. It's the influx of so many fishermen. Don't take me wrong when I talk about the Vietnamese, because in the beginning I helped them – show them how to rig their trawls and put a chain on it called a tickly chain that helps for them to catch more shrimp. But when they came, it just made the pie small, and we had to adjust to it. I had a lot of good friends that's Vietnamese. There was a lady, her name was (Bak Lu?). She taught Vietnamese and something else. She was really smart. But her husband was a fisherman. I got to be real close friends with her. She was a nice lady.

SSD: Is she still there?

WER: She moved over there to Gautier which is on the west side of the Pascagoula River. I haven't seen them because her husband went out the business. Her husband was an American helicopter pilot. She met him over there in Vietnam. He brought him back to this country.

SSD: What did he do back here in the States?

WER: Well, he had a little boat and he was shrimping. He was a pretty good shrimper. Usually, when people start out with a boat, there's so many things they don't know. My father taught us all the stuff we knew, without saying anything, too. We would watch what he'd done and how he'd done it, how he'd go out to find shrimp, how to tie the net on the boards and all kind of stuff, because everything's got to be done just right. If not, well, then you're on the short side of catching the amount of shrimp you should catch. But I had that little boat, and I made a fairly good living. But when that big one was built, it was fifty-six foot; had the same engine, same propeller, shaft, wheel, everything. Same boards and trawl come off the little boat. I made a lot more money because you could stay out longer. You could ice more shrimp. You could work in bad weather.

SSD: How small was your smaller boat?

WER: Well, it was only forty-five foot, but it wasn't but twelve foot wide. The big one was seventeen foot wide. It would carry ten tons of ice. The little boat would only carry about four tons, see.

SSD: What was the maximum amount of shrimp.

WER: The big one would ice seventy, eighty barrels of shrimp, while the little one only would ice about forty. So, you see, when the shrimp was plentiful, you could stay out and catch a lot more.

SSD: Well, tell me about a typical day of shrimping. What time would you start? What did you do all day?

WER: Well, in the wintertime, you seldom worked at night, very seldom. But you'd start just about daylight. You start dragging about 6:00, because if you was up in a harbor, in the wintertime, you have to move down the river. All the shrimp would leave the coast. The Mississippi season is only from June to December. Then about February or March, they open it for a short while for what we call hoppers, which is like a Brazilian species, and it's got spots on it. You ever ate any shrimp that was brown and had little red spots in the first segment of the body?

SSD: I have never even seen one like that.

WER: Well, we call it the hopper, but it's a Brazilian species of shrimp. We catch that in February and March and into April, I guess. In June, the brown shrimp show up, which is all brown. The difference in them on the top of the front of the head where the prong comes out, there's a groove on each side the prong. That's a Brazilian shrimp. The white shrimp don't have that, see. The white shrimp whiskers are black and long. The brown ones' whiskers are short and brown. People say, "What do they taste like?" If they fresh, they all taste the same. [laughter]

SSD: Good.

WER: When I go out to eat, anyways, that's what I'd get, is shrimp.

SSD: Really?

WER: Yes.

SSD: Can you tell if it is local wild-caught by the way it tastes?

WER: Really hon, you don't know. But they all taste good. If you freeze something, it doesn't taste as good. Wild shrimp is caught out in the Gulf and the sound. But up in Mississippi, they said they raise them up there. Man, there's the prettiest shrimp. They get real big, sixteen, twenties. They're just tender to eat and they taste so good. I've never eaten any, but I've heard people that's been up there talk about them, how good they are.

SSD: That is the farm-raised shrimp?

WER: Yes, the farm raised.

SSD: I did not know they were doing that in Mississippi.

WER: Yes. It's up there in the northern part of – are you familiar with anything around Winona?

SSD: Not really.

WER: It's somewhere up in that area. A friend of mine goes up there hunting, and he says

there's some farms up there.

SSD: What do you think about that, Mr. Ross, starting to farm-raise them rather than catch them in the wild?

WER: Well, I'd say each to his own liking and whatever they want to do. A lot of farmers have dug holes to grow shrimp in. Now, one time, we heard they got some kind of a disease from the ponds, whatever was in the dirt, because they just cut out a big hole and filled it full of water. But you don't hear that anymore.

SSD: Is it freshwater or seawater?

WER: Hon, it's not seawater, because it's so far from the beach, so far from the saltwater. Now, whether it's salt added to it or whatever, I don't know. Very little I know about farmed shrimp, except from what I just told you. What I knew, a friend of mine's been up there hunting them. He said that he was up around Winona, Mississippi, and somewhere in that area is where they got the shrimp ponds and how good the shrimp are.

SSD: Very interesting. Well, if you get up at 6:00 the morning and start shrimping, how long do you haul your nets?

WER: How long do you pull it? Well, it's according to what you catch in the try net. If you're catching plenty, you only need a big net over an hour. But if you're not catching very much, you could leave it over as long as three hours.

SSD: What is a try net?

WER: Try net is just a miniature of the big net. It's only twelve foot across the mouth, and the big net was sixty-five foot, see.

SSD: Is it kind of like a test net?

WER: Is it what, hon?

SSD: Is it kind of like a testing net to see what you are catching?

WER: Yes, it's made exactly on the same pattern as the big ones. You deduced how much you catch in it to how much you're going to get in the big net. What it helps is just, say, if you're dragging in a straight line and you catch ten or fifteen, which is not very much, but if you catch fifty, sixty, or a hundred, then you turn around and go back in that same streak. With the GPS today, you can go back exactly within inches of where you passed and come down, see.

SSD: How did you find it before the GPS was invented?

WER: Hon, you made just as much money or more than – that'll just help you for directions and keep your positions or heading somewhere else, but we didn't need that. I had all that in my

head. I could go anywhere and any place and tell you what to steer on, what degrees or what position on a compass.

SSD: You had it all memorized?

WER: All in my head, yes. I'll tell you what I would do to help the young fishermen. They'd say, "Well, what course do you see this?" I said, "Go get the lid from your compass box." They'd bring me the lid. I'd draw them on that for what he wanted, make lines in it, and put the directions on it and what course to steer to go one way or the other.

SSD: Why did you help them if they were competing with you?

WER: Oh, hon, you'd do that for anybody. Fishermen was always that way. I've seen times where somebody would pay off the net most old fishermen couldn't patch. I would sew that net back together.

SSD: How did you learn to patch?

WER: Oh, well, back when I was only about twelve or thirteen, my dad was rehanging an old net, and it had holes in the net. So, I had the needle and twine and I patched the holes. My uncle was a trawl maker, and he'd come by there to see my daddy. I asked my dad, I said, "Look, I know how to fill it out on both sides of that seam." I said, "But how do you fix the seam?" So, my daddy said, "I ain't got time to show you. Later on, I'll show you." So, my uncle says, "Well, you figure out what the cut is, and you put the cut back in both sides." When I say cut, when you start off with square webbing, you go one point in two bars. The bars is the half mesh, you see. It steps out a whole mesh and cuts down two meshes, and you fill it out. He said, "When you get it filled, you just look to where the twine was sewn together, put your needle in that twine, and sew them back together like it was made." So, eventually, I kept learning how to patch and do different things. My brother got a pogy bag, and it had a lot of webbing in it. The bag is heavy, but the webbing on each side is small like shrimp net webbing. I went to a friend of mine, Steve Marinovich, the trawl maker. He said, "I wanted a pattern for a full-seam balloon." He gave me the pattern and I come home and make him that. I've been making them ever since.

SSD: Now what is a pogy bag?

WER: A pogy bag is the bag that's on a big old net that the pogy fisherman put out. It's like a big seine. They put that thing out, and it might be fifteen hundred feet or two thousand feet. When they take it up, they put it out in a big circle, then they bring it in. When they get the net all the way to where they got to the bag, which is like the tail on a shrimp net, it's like a hundred-fifty meshes around and about seventeen and eighteen foot long. When they get to that bag, then they got a big scoop net that dropped down in the water and emptied that bag.

SSD: Is a pogy a kind of fish?

WER: Yes, it's like a sardine. It's a sardine and they use it for the oil. The flesh and stuff is made into food for animals. It's not tasty enough to eat. I don't know of anybody ever eating

them. But they get about eight to ten inches long. They'll catch them things by the tons, but that was years ago. Today, they got to leave Biloxi and go all the way down to West Louisiana to catch them. They done caught up the most of them. There's not enough left for them to breed to make more for the shrimp. When you diminish the amount that's out there, well, next year, you're going to have less. If you left it alone, it would increase, see. Back during the war, there was an area that was closed outside of Horn Island and to the south and down towards the next island, Petit Bois, which is at Pascagoula ship channel. All that area out in there was closed, and it stayed closed all during the war years. When they opened it up, there were shrimp everywhere. They had reproduced and increased the population. I'm going to tell you a lot about that. My son got me some books from the Galveston Laboratory in Galveston, Texas, where they run a survey from Galveston to the mouth of the Mississippi River; tell you what depth of water white shrimp go in, tell you what depth of water brown shrimp go in, and they don't commingle. At times, I've seen me catch both of them, but it would be right on the line where the white ones was inside, and the brown ones' out in deeper water. The little shrimp had the ability, through hereditary means, to raise or lower themselves into the tide that goes inshore, and they go into the bays and bayous and rivers. Then they grow until they get to a pretty good size. It's like a cycle. Then they go back out. I'd give speeches on that, but I had the books. But let me tell you what happened to them. I loaned them to the teachers in this grade school. They teach the children, and I never got them back. I would cherish them today, because my son, he had seven books, and there was one – oh, I got in a big argument one time with one of the head directors of the DMR. I told him, he says, "Well, Ross, you're all wet." I said, "You think so? You just wait a minute." I went home and got the book, and I slapped it down on his desk right during the meeting. Didn't say nothing to him, but I popped it down on the desk loud enough for everybody to hear it. I shouldn't have done that, because in that book was stuff they didn't know. Then another time, when I had the books on the boat, I'd read them all the time when I was late up at night during in bad days. Then my brother had a young fellow on it from the Mississippi Gulf Coast – the thing on Ocean Springs.

SSD: The Gulf Coast Research Lab?

WER: Right. That boy was from there. Every once in a while, I would take out some. Mr. Christmas was head of that thing when I took him off. But anyway, I was telling this young fellow – I know he was about thirty. He probably was a student. I told him, he said, "Man, you all wet." I said, "No, I'm not wet. You wet, because I got it in black and white." He said, "I don't believe that." He said, "I'd like to see that." He was talking about how they made a food that wouldn't disintegrate in the water to feed the shrimp. I said, "Man, you read them books." He took that book, and while we was out shrimping for the next three or four days, he was writing stuff down out of that book. He didn't even know any that was in that book. That was from that survey that they'd done from Galveston all the way to the mouth of the Mississippi River. Now, would you believe that one state would have the information on something that vital and another state wouldn't have it?

SSD: Yes. I guess before collaboration and computers, things were more isolated.

WER: Yes, computer, everybody knows everything. [laughter] Everybody knows.

SSD: Yes. It has made the world smaller.

WER: I can't get over how young you sound, though. Fifty-five.

SSD: [laughter] Well, I feel young.

WER: Are you married?

SSD: Yes, I am.

WER: [laughter] Let me tell you why I said that. If I go out and meet somebody, the first thing I ask them is how old they are. The next thing I ask, I'd say, "Are you married?" Then the third thing I'll say, "I'd like to take you out dancing." They usually say, "Oh, I love to dance, but I'm married." [laughter]

SSD: So, you like to dance, Mr. Ross?

WER: Not anymore. I got this neuropathy in my feet. If I back up against something and hit my heels, it throws me off balance.

SSD: How long have you been diabetic?

WER: Oh, hon, it's long. I can't remember how long. It's got to be thirty years. Well, I'll give you a pretty good idea. My boat was built in 1965. I don't remember whether it was the new boat or the old one, but something happened to me. My wife, she was like that. She took me to the doctor. It was a female doctor, a woman. How she found I was diabetic, she said, "I want you to walk over here by this doorway." She had a green coat, like she usually wears. She's supposed to slip over that good cloth. She threw it over my head, and I stumbled backwards. She said, "You're a diabetic." Well, she never took a test. Still there?

SSD: Yes. Can you hear me?

WER: Yes, I hear you now. But listen, I've been very fortunate. I haven't eaten sugar in all that time.

SSD: Since 1965?

WER: Yes. I've used Sweet'N Low in the beginning, and then I'm hooked on Splenda now. I'll Splendarize anything that did grow. [laughter]

But I get off at times when the kids have a cake from their birthday cake. I eat a piece of that cake or two pieces. But don't let me bring it home, because then my blood will go to 175. But it don't come back down as easy as it used to.

SSD: Do you have to take insulin?

WER: No, I take glipizide. I take two pills in the morning and one at night. It keeps it pretty well. If I'm not a bad boy, it does good; if I change my candy and cookies and everything, all sugar-free. The only bad thing about it, they're loaded with calories. I don't know how to call the – what's that…

SSD: Carbohydrates.

WER: Carbohydrates, by changing it out, yes.

SSD: Yes, it is too much to keep track of all that stuff.

WER: Yes, that's a pain. So, I just watch what I eat. I don't use no sugar and use sugar-free candy and cookies because I love that. I always have. But when I was by myself on a boat, that's what I lived on, cold drinks and cookies and candies.

SSD: Well, that is not too healthy.

WER: But I've always been healthy. I never had any problems. I look back and think now, have a little problem with my hands stinging and hurting from whatever I eat that's wrong. I ate that cake for my birthday, and I'm paying for it. This morning, I got up and my fingers stung me so bad. I woke up about 2:30 and never could go back to sleep. I even took a hydrocortisone. I believe it's hydrocortisone. It's one of those strong pain pills. It didn't even faze it. Now, I don't know what it is, but I can get up and make coffee and walk around a little bit and my hands stop stinging.

SSD: Well, that is good.

WER: Today, it stings more than ever, this morning. But I believe it's from cutting on that net and sewing up all the meshes. I bet I've fold up – let say it's two hundred meshes deep. There's one, two, three, four, five, six things I sewed up all the way. That's twelve hundred meshes I made in the last two to three days.

SSD: Well, you need to take some breaks, probably.

WER: I don't know. But once I get started, ain't no brown shrimp like that. Once it gets started, you don't stop. That's the difference between making a little bit of money and a lot of money.

SSD: Well, Mr. Ross, did you ever hear of a band called the Stardusters?

WER: A boat, you say?

SSD: No, a band.

WER: Oh, a band.

SSD: Art (Sissle?) had a band called the Stardusters. It was a swing band.

WER: Who'd you say had it?

SSD: Art Sissle.

WER: Oh, yes, but I haven't heard it.

SSD: He was from Gulfport. Well, I used to sing in that band.

WER: You did?

SSD: Yes.

WER: Bless your heart.

SSD: We would play at dances at the D'Iberville. I guess it was the Royal D'Iberville on the beach.

WER: Oh, yes.

SSD: Did you ever go dancing there?

WER: I used to go to one down there. I believe it was the Broadwater. Was that it, close by? The Broadwater was outside the – was it casino or what it was – in the Broadwater Harbor. I've been there. But I didn't know the people there, so I didn't dance much. Usually, I'd go to Ocean Springs. They got a little place called Lynchburg Landing. Then they got the VFW out on Gay Road. They got the Moose Club up in the beach, one of those, for a New Year's Eve and dance there.

SSD: What kind of dancing do you like the best?

WER: Anything that puts you close by a woman. The best thing about dancing is holding a woman. [laughter]

That's true. I love to dance and women love to dance. But the best part about it is holding a woman. That's my cliché.

SSD: Yes, that includes a lot of dancing. Well, thinking back to a typical day on a shrimp boat, if you started dragging at 6:00 a.m., and say you dragged your net for two hours, what would happen when you pulled it up? What was the next thing that you would do?

WER: Well, you picked up and you dumped out the bag. You sort out the shrimp and washed them, relax them down. Well, you put back overboard as soon as you dumped the bag. Then you start dragging again for another two hours. You pull this little test net, and it would keep getting shrimp – or you'd talk to one of your buddies, and he might tell you, "Well, look, I've got a few more here than what you catch. Come over this way." But together, we had radios with as

much – I got one and it's sitting in my corner. It's got two hundred channels on it. The reason why they made more and more channels, people wanted that to get away from the regular people that talk on certain channels. Today, I believe there's sixty-seven that you're allowed to talk on. Before, it was three or four of the different ones. But you can switch on to these off channels where you figure nobody can hear you. But I even bought – I got to think what it was – a machine that would run through all the channels. When it would hit a channel, it would stop. Then you could hear them talking. My wife had bought that for me for Christmas one year. She said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want one of these little –" I'll think of the name of it when I talk a little bit more. But I brought it on my boat, and we was down in Delcambre, Louisiana – Dulac. We went out, and we was out dragging. I had this machine on, and I heard this coonass say, "Man," he said, "I got five barrels that drag." A fellow said, "Where you at?" He said, "I'm at Blue Point." Well, they didn't realize they had different channels like I did too, but I had a machine that would cover the whole – what do you call it – a spectrum. Well, my brother was there and a friend of mine was there. I made motions to him. I said, "Pick up." "What for?" I said, "Let's go." I said, "A boat down here is catching shrimp. Plenty." So, we were on there, and just before we got to Blue Point, I see him anchored up. He had a five-barrel drag, which is like a thousand pounds, and that much in the bag alongside the boat. So, we threw overboard, and we dragged that day and that night. The next morning, we went in, and I had thirty barrels, all from that machine. So, we went out again. Then I heard this guy talking. He said, "Hey," he said, "Do you see that boat over there?" He said, "Watch what you say when he's around because he listens to everything you say, no matter what channel you're on. [laughter]

He was the one that's pulling all them shrimp, see.

SSD: They figured you out after a little while.

WER: Yes, absolutely.

SSD: Well, you said you have not seen very many turtles in the Gulf of Mexico. Do you ever see them swimming on top of the water?

WER: I'll be honest with you, love. The only turtles I ever saw swimming on top of the water, I'll tell you where it was at. We were down at the mouth of the river and was running back into the north outside of Chandeleur, out about sixty, maybe seventy foot of water. I passed one swimming on top of the water. He had to be three or four miles east of the middle of Chandeleur. There's a bunch of rigs down in there. I forget what they call it. They're named after (Obama?) or something that's in Chandeleur. They call them rigs that at that section. I saw one there. That's the only one I ever seen on top of the water. Listen, there were such a few turtles in this area that when somebody caught them years ago, my daddy and his brothers ate them, see. That had to be at least seventy-five, eighty years ago when I was a kid. So, even when they caught them then, there were so few. To a lot of people, they were delicacy. But to me, I never liked them. But I guess I didn't know how to clean them up because they got a whole lot of different meats in them. Did you know that?

SSD: I did not know that.

WER: They got different grades of meat in them, and one tastes better than the other. But I never didn't know that. I never didn't know it ever in my life, but I was told that, see.

SSD: Well, I guess not a lot of people know that now because they have not been eating them in this country for a while.

WER: Yes, that's been for so long. But why they come up with that turtle excluder thing, I don't know. It's like this thing that happened out in the west, but they had this little fish, four or five inches long. He was in the waterway somewhere around the – what's that's big river comes out of the mountain? They had movies about it. Clark Gable was in it, called the River of No Return.

SSD: Oh, gosh. It is not the Red River, is it?

WER: Well, anyway, somewhere along in that area there, they had these little fish. They closed down a farmland, and the people was actually starving to death. They was on welfare. They was begging to get some relief from the government. Who was it? Was it Bill O'Reilly or they got Beck – went out there, and they made so much racket about it that Obama declared it was wrong and let the people go back to farming. See, they was using the water out of this river for their farmland, and they cut it off. I can't remember all of it. That happened just recently.

SSD: Sometimes, these things do change.

WER: I bet you never realized when you got a hold of me, you'd be this long in getting an interview.

SSD: [laughter] Yes. The interviews have been running about three hours. People have more to say than they think they do, usually.

WER: Yes. Well, see, if you prod me into some things and I talk about other things, it takes a lot of time. I love to talk.

SSD: Well, good. We take some side trips. Do you think that bottom trawling hurts the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico and the ecosystem there, Mr. Ross?

WER: I don't know how it does, because, here, my father was a fisherman, and I'd been at it for seventy years. It don't seem like anything's changed except that there's less shrimp, and what's caused that is so many more boats got into the industry. Then from them books I had, shrimping is just not on how many shrimp there is that you catch or what gets away, but it's the environment or disease, and why some years there's so much more shrimp than other years. They've never found that out. In some years, you have more – [phone ringing] excuse me. Now, see, that must be one of my daughters on my land phone.

SSD: Do you need to answer it?

WER: Hang on, just a minute.

SSD: Sure.

WER: Hello? Hey, love. Yes, babe. Look, I'm on an interview with some woman about – I'll talk to you about it when I call you back. All right, love. Love you, bye. That was one of my daughters. That's the second one from the top. I got some good kids, hon. I'll tell you.

SSD: It sounds like it.

WER: They love their daddy.

SSD: I am sure they do.

WER: I tell them sometime how good they all have been. They said, "Daddy, you don't remember. That's why you wanted to ask. That's the reason why."

SSD: Yes, that is right. It comes back around to you.

WER: Yes, it sure does. What was you asking me, hon, when the phone rang?

SSD: Are there other kinds of ways to catch shrimp besides bottom trawling?

WER: Yes, with a cast net, but you don't catch very many like that. You might catch twenty pounds. I had a brother-in-law, he used to fish up there on Popps Ferry Bridge. You know where that's at in Biloxi?

SSD: Sure do.

WER: Well, I say Biloxi. It's almost Gulfport, huh?

SSD: Yes.

WER: Well, he'd get on that North Beach around that land below that bridge. Man, they'd catch twenty, thirty pounds at night. That's mostly when they'd catch them, at night. I guess when there's darkness and you throw that net, the shrimp don't see them enough to get out of the way.

SSD: They cannot see the shadow coming over them.

WER: Yes.

SSD: Were they standing in the water when they did that or were they in a boat?

WER: No, right on the bank. Now, at times, there's some boats go up there and anchor up right close by the beach. Listen, these people, men, they fight over a spot to catch shrimp – almost have fight sometimes. But whoever gets in a place, that's his spot. But then a lot of them think, "Well, I got a spot there and you in it. Get out of there." But he got there before he did that

morning. Sometimes, they'll go right after dark or what and wait until the shrimp move out, because they don't move all the time. They got to have certain tides that bring them out, see. But they said, one time, somebody had some shrimp nets similar to a crab trap.

SSD: What would that be like?

WER: Well, they would be just like – you know what a crab trap is?

SSD: No, I do not know what a crab trap looks like.

WER: Well, a crab trap is made out of fencing that they use for chickens, to house chickens, put around a chicken coop or something for the chickens not to get out. Well, they got a thing that's about two and a half to two-foot, eight-inches wide, square. It's about a foot high. It's got that wire wrapped all around it with the exception on each side. They got like a pocket that goes in with wire made into a funnel that the crabs can go in sideways, and he'd just scrape in the wire, see. But he can't get lined up enough to get out. So, they put bait through a little trap, see. The crabs go in there from the holes on each side and try to get to that bait. A lot of times, the bait will be in the little wire coil that's right in the top of the trawl with the opening, and they put fish in it or whatever kind of stuff bait they got to put in it. The fellow had made one a little bit bigger to catch shrimp, but he never could catch any amount of shrimp to make it profitable.

SSD: Does the trap stay still or is it pulled by a boat?

WER: No, no, it sits on the bottom. Got a rope and a clock on it, goes up to the top of the water, and they come by with a hook and bring the trap up, empty it out. If it needs more bait, another fellow would be in there putting bait in and putting it back. They'd put out a whole string of them, and they might have two or three hundred; some of them as many as seven hundred. I remember when the first ones come to the state of Mississippi, it was against the law to have a crab pot. So, they bought them traps here, and they call them a crab trap. They could use them, and it was the same thing.

SSD: Just with a different name?

WER: Yes, with a different name. I remember that guy. He was at a meet one time I was commissioner, and he was saying he'd like to have this done, they have to have that done. Well, I spoke out of turn. The head man was sitting right next to me. I said, "Mr. So-and-so, I know you. You brought the crab trap to the state of Mississippi, and if the crabs –" he was raising hell about the shrimp boats catching his trap. I said, "If the crabs trapped is declining because you caught so many of them." Man, he shut up. He didn't say no more. I didn't ask permission to say that, and you're supposed to ask the president for permission to talk about anything, see. But he went and sat back down. I never did like him anyway. [laughter] That made a difference.

SSD: I remember when I was a kid seeing a lot of crabs around all the wharfs and everything, but I do not see them anymore.

WER: No, they down like shrimp. A lot of times, they're overfished. A lot of times, I imagine,

they get disease, and they don't produce as good as they do. Do you know how many eggs a big mother shrimp has?

SSD: No.

WER: Well, it's around a hundred.

SSD: Is that just once a year?

WER: Well, there's some species of shrimp that do have that more than once a year, but most of the time, that's once a year. White shrimp will lay their eggs. All the little-bitty, tiny, miniature shrimp, they're the ones that have the hereditary means of lowering or raising themselves when the tide's going inshore. They go in and they get amongst the marsh grasses and stuff. They go up for protection.

SSD: Do you know how many of those hundred baby shrimp live to be adults? Does anybody know?

WER: Well, they say a majority of them die or they're eaten. If they would survive as many as what they have produced, there would be a lot of shrimp. But just a certain amount of them survive. I wish I had them books. I could read that to you for hours of the things that happened.

SSD: Well, what you are remembering is very good. How deep did you trawl in the Gulf of Mexico?

WER: How did I what, hon?

SSD: How deep did your trawl nets go?

WER: I don't get one of the words. How deep did they go?

SSD: Yes. What was the depth that your nets…

WER: Oh, well, there were certain different depths. Out of Horn Island, you'd get out to about five fathoms, which is about sixty feet. No, I'm wrong. It's thirty feet. It's six foot to the fathom. You dragged that on out to maybe ten or fifteen fathoms. I remember years back that when the brownies would first show up, they had them on the inside, which wasn't as near as many. But outside, they'd be so plentiful. You'd catch them two or three nights, you'd catch thirty, forty barrels.

SSD: Did you only shrimp for the brownies at night?

WER: Yes. You couldn't hardly catch them in the daytime. They were what you call nocturnal.

SSD: So, they were active at night?

WER: Yes. When we first caught brownies – I remember, years ago, we caught white shrimp, big white shrimp. In the evening, just about dusk start, you'd pick up, you'd have two or three barrels of brownies. You couldn't sell them because people was afraid to eat them. So, you shoved them back over. The first ones we caught, I'd come out of the service, and my dad was building a new boat. He had this old one about forty foot. One of my cousins come over there, he says, "One of my uncles comes from Louisiana. He's a truck driver. He has a big shrimp truck." He says, "How about you and this other cousin of ours," that was running his boat then, "go out there and get about thirty barrels of them brownies? We'll send them to New Orleans to see if they'll buy them." I said, "All right." The fuel was so cheap then. It was like $5 for a fifty-five-gallon drum. We'd go out there, and the little engine didn't burn but about fifteen gallons a day. We made two drags, and each one of the boats had fifteen barrels. We'd come in and load them on that truck, and they'd send them to New Orleans to the French Market. Well, back in those days, they all had was the old (Dagos?) was there. They just about controlled it. A man, he said, "That shrimp are not in a good look. They're pink. They're rotten. So, I said, "Look, they're fresh shrimp. That's their color. It's a new species." I said, "Take some home and cook them and eat them." So, they all took a few, and they went home and cooked them and ate them. Come back and they bought them, put them in the French Market and sold them. That was the first brown shrimp ever sold.

SSD: Do you remember about what year that was?

WER: Well, that was when I first come out of the home at about the end of [19]45.

SSD: That is amazing.

WER: After that, well, then the factories would say, since we sold them – this cousin of mine worked for (Dijon?) Packing Company. So, Mr. Williams was the head man there. He told (George?), he said, "Why don't you all go out there and catch some and see if we can cook them and put them in cans." So, my cousin had a bigger boat then he was running. That was one of the company boats. He had a couple of small boats, but he had this big one he was running. So, we went out there, and I went out there with my dad on another boat catching a few white shrimp. We'd catch maybe fifty, a hundred pounds a day. You can make a little bit of money. So, my cousin comes out, and he knows these shrimp go out night – because one time, they were all out, him and his dad and his brothers. The dad is anchored up. I guess he was old. He was tired. Well, this cousin of mine, he goes and puts overboard. He goes back and wakes his daddy up, and he's got about five or six barrels of shrimp on deck, about a thousand, twelve hundred pounds. He said, "Get up. I'm going to ice these shrimp." The old man was like, "Ice what shrimp? We ain't got no shrimp." "Yes." He said, "Look, I got that in this drag." So, then after they unloaded, they all went to dragging. He worked a couple of nights. I was on the inside of Horn Island. I called him on the radio and said, "How you doing?" He says, "I'm doing all right." I said, "Can I make a living there?" He said, "Yes." So, I picked up my anchor and I went on out there. I was on the boat by myself them. So, my daddy insisted I take my younger brother with me. So, we went out there and we caught twenty-eight barrel of shrimp in three nights before we went back to the (Victory?) Packing Company that owned the boat I was on. It was the first shrimp they caught, was those shrimp that I've caught in three nights. Then after that, well, I remember one time, when we first started, I was putting a – oh, they brought them in,

a freight boat did, and a lot of shrimp was rotten. So, they couldn't figure out what was wrong. They said, "What's wrong with those shrimp? When they got them in there, they was good. They weren't rotten." Then they turned – instead of brown, it was pink. You could smell them. The fishermen, they kept them on deck more than three hours. The acid in them was so strong that they spoiled the shrimp, where that didn't happen to the white shrimp. You could keep them on deck six, seven hours. Then they started having trouble with canning the shrimp. They'd can the shrimp, and when they'd go through the conveyors and different things, by hitting the edges of the conveyor running up and going into boxes, the cans would crack. They would spew out and the tops would raise up. So, they couldn't figure out what was causing that. They had a chemist come down that was working for Dijon, and he said, "These shrimp have more acid in them than the white shrimp." He said, "You got to do something with that can." The man said, "Well, what?" He said, "Well, you have to talk to the manufacturers and give them the tin." The cans were sort of like a silver-looking color, the color of tin, and they put this coating in that was sort of like a beige or a light brown. That kept the shrimp from eating through the can, the acid. You went to school today, didn't you?

SSD: I went to school, when?

WER: Today.

SSD: Yes. You are teaching me a lot, you are. It will teach everybody who listens to this. Well, Mr. Ross, do you know anything about the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico?

WER: Oh, yes, hon. I do. I had some of that where I was going. We never did get to the other page. But anyway, back when I first heard about it, it was a half a mile wide and five miles long. I read about it in a book in the dentist's office. I said, "I never heard of that." It wasn't anywhere we was dragging or nothing, because they had shrimp there. But in five to ten years' time, it was five miles wide and reached to Mexico. What caused it was the microorganisms that come out of the river. It's called plankton. What else? Zero plankton and something else. When they come out of the river and hit that saltwater, they die, and they go to the bottom and they use up all the oxygen that's in the water. That's why nothing survives.

SSD: It is getting bigger.

WER: Yes. Well, it's five miles wide and reaches all the way to Mexico. Just imagine how many miles it is from the Mississippi River to Mexico. Now, I can remember one summer at night, catching brownies, when we'd come inside by Ship Island by the fort, we'd put the try net over, we couldn't catch nothing. We kept running to the north. When we got to the inner coastal, we could see boats along the beach at Biloxi, from Biloxi to Gulfport. We tried there, there was nothing there. It wasn't until we got way in there by the beach – and when I say nothing, there was not a thing in that trawl net. No shrimp, no fish, no nothing. So, something had happened in that sound. When we got up close where the boats were shrimping, we could catch shrimp in the try net. We put overboard and start dragging.

SSD: Do you have any idea what that was?

WER: It must have been some kind of stuff that was in the water. Lack of oxygen, that's usually what happens.

SSD: But did it stay that way or did that change?

WER: No, it changed in a couple of months' time. When the brownie season was over, I believe it changed back. But there was nothing in that area. That was back when I only (actually know?). That was from 1952 to 1965, somewhere in the middle of that time. So, it shows you how things happen. Usually, it might have come from – when the season opened, there were so many fish. Telling you this makes it bad on the fishermen. But when that dead fish went to the bottom, it probably depleted the oxygen.

SSD: When they decayed.

WER: Everything died.

SSD: Was that dead fish that was bycatch and thrown overboard, you think?

WER: Right.

SSD: Now, one shrimper told me that any bycatch he gets, usually, the dolphins and the seagulls eat it before it even…

WER: Well, that's true. If you throw anything overboard, the dolphins eat a lot of it, and the seagulls eat a lot. But you can imagine, you shovel over a big shovelful, that dolphin isn't going to get but two or three fish out of it. They get more, but not that shovelful. Oh, I've got another story to tell you if you want to hear stories.

SSD: Yes. Good, yes.

WER: When I was about seven years old, my dad had a little boat about thirty-five foot. We was out in the Gulf, outside of Horn Island, east of Chandeleur. We was dragging. He says, "Eley," he said, "You go up on the bow, but hold on good and look under the boat." I leaned over that boat and looked under it, and there was a shark underneath that boat as long as that boat.

SSD: Oh, my goodness. Thirty-five feet long.

WER: That's the first time I've seen anything in my entire life. Now, out in the Gulf, when the brownies' inshore, anywhere from Dogteeth Pass to Pascagoula shipping channel pass, out in that area, every once in a while, not many, but you hear a guy say, "Man, I don't know what the hell bit my trawl, but he bit a hole in the bag. You could put a shrimp basket through that hole."

SSD: How big is that?

WER: How big do you think that shark was, huh? A shrimp basket is about two foot, four inches in diameter at the top. So, that's how big the hole was. He bit that whole bottom out of

that tail. All of the shrimp that was in it went out. So, he had him a feast.

SSD: So, you think the shark was outside the net?

WER: Well, yes. The shark was out swimming around. Usually, when there's an influx of shrimp moving out, the sharks follow them. They feed on them, see. They know about what time they come into the Gulf to get with them when they enter in the sound, and then follow them all out into the Gulf.

SSD: That is amazing.

WER: It is.

SSD: They learn where the boats go.

WER: Yes. It's like hereditary means. It's been from one to the other, through generations. That's how they survive.

SSD: So, the dead zone then, nothing can live in there – no shrimp, no sea turtles, no sharks.

WER: Nothing, hon. Nothing survives. There's no oxygen. That's why. This was in that book I read about it. It surprised me. It was interesting. But they said what caused it too. So, it must have been some scientists or something that investigated it. A reporter happened up on the details, and he wrote a story in that book.

SSD: Well, what are the kinds of things that you catch in your nets? What are the things that live in the Gulf of Mexico?

WER: Well, usually, you'd catch ground mullet. You know what that is? It's a little fish that gets about twelve, fourteen inches in full maturity. It's brown-brown. The scales is brown, skin is brown. When you scale them, they're still brown. But they're good eating fish.

SSD: Are those the ones that jump out of the water?

WER: No. The ones that jump out of the water is the flying fish. The wings on its side is long enough that when it jumps, it kind of sails for a good distance. A lot of times, you'll be running out, and it's never in the Mississippi Sound. It's always in between where you go into Louisiana inside of Chandeleur, going down through that area. If your boat is low and the sea is splashing, the water up on the deck, you'll notice that the next morning, there will be them fish laying on the deck that jump, and they end up on the boats. They're pretty. They're all kinds of colors. But when they die, they change to dull gray.

SSD: Well, what else is there? There is ground mullet and…

WER: There's ground mullet and flounders. There's little flatfishes about three inches long or maybe a little longer. They're round, and they got a rough – they look like a little flounder, and

they got rough, rough scales on them, but they got little marks on their back, stripes. It goes all the way from one side of the head all the way to the tail; about quarter of an inch space for each one. Fishermen got a special name for it, but I can't tell you that. But it's just a little flatfish, we call it.

SSD: Did you ever catch any squid?

WER: Well, at times, you catch plenty. Other times, you don't catch hardly any. Sometimes, you might have fifty, sixty pounds in a drag. Other times, you don't see them. It must be times you catch them when they migrate, moving around.

SSD: Can you sell squid for bait, or does anybody eat them?

WER: Well, at times, you could. But the only people that buy them is these bait places. They have bait boats that drag for small shrimp. Now, they'll buy them and sell them to the fishermen that buy this small shrimp. But I'll tell you, it's a lot of trouble to save stuff that's the bycatch. Where would you put it? Well, you'd need the space to put shrimp instead of putting bycatch. It don't decline because you catch about the same amount of that stuff all the time. When the season first opens, you catch a lot of it. As the season goes on two or three months, well, it gets down. It gets down to almost just a fifth of what you caught when the season opens. Then in places where they got a lot of shrimp, you don't hardly get no bycatch. There's plenty, plenty shrimp. The fish won't mix in them.

SSD: Well, that is interesting. That is good.

WER: It is. It's only bad that you're dumping a lot of stuff back over.

SSD: Did you ever find sea vegetation in your nets? Any kind of seaweed or…

WER: You had that in that little pamphlet. But very seldom, like when before the season opens in June, you might see some weeds that come in. It's not plentiful, but they're like little red leaves with berries on them. When you pull them out of the water and shake it, it's just multitudes of little, tiny shrimp about a half-inch long. It's not all shrimp. The scientists in Ocean Springs says it's just a small shrimp, a species of that kind. But it's shrimp. It looks just like a shrimp. When you shake that grass, well, it'll be on the deck. But you don't see it every year. It's only certain times you see it.

SSD: Can you eat those shrimp or are they too little?

WER: No, they're too little. They're only half-inch long. I'd imagine they're not even a sixteenth wide across the middle.

SSD: That is as big as they get? Those are the adults?

WER: That's what the scientists say. That's as big as they get. Now, you can be anchored up in the Gulf, and when you pull your anchor rope in, when the rope's going through your hand, you'll

have something that sticks on your fingers. You barely can see it. That's the miniature shrimp. What it could be, it could be the white shrimp larva that's going into the sound, see, because it goes into the sound and don't come out until it gets real big. You see, when the white shrimp show up, the white shrimp are big – as big as they get when they come out of the sound, out of the bays, and the estuaries. But the brown shrimp, when you first catch them, they're small. They average about forty, fifties. Then when you get into the last of the month, like June, July, August, September, and October, then they've grown to twenty-one, twenty-five.

SSD: Now, you say they measure forty, fifties, what does that mean?

WER: It means there's forty or fifty shrimp to the pound.

SSD: Well, Mr. Ross, can you say that you have learned anything from using TEDs?

WER: I have such a horrible feeling towards them things that I don't see how they've helped you when I'm older for what you catch. The new TEDs now that come out, oh, I think they're about four foot wide. The first ones was only about thirty-six inches or thirty-two inches. Now, you can imagine all the way across the top of that TED, it's how you put it, it's how it unloads itself. You can leave the flap on the top, or you can turn it around the other way and let the flap open on the bottom. I always use it with the flap on the bottom. The reason, when the trawl was pulling, the weight of the TED would push that flap down, and hardly anything got out. But if you catch a crab trap, I tell you, it's got so many bad things too. If you catch a crab trap, it goes right against that TED, opens that flap up, everything you've got goes out of that trawl. See why I say I can't say nothing good about it? Because it causes so much problems. After a storm when there's a lot of debris in the Gulf or the sound, trees and stuff with limbs come all falling out. They'll come down and they'll hang up right against that grid. When it does, well, the shrimp can go right through them weeds and limbs and go right on out. So, you actually lose a drag.

SSD: Yes, you are not catching any shrimp.

WER: If it's a double rig, if a single load catches a hundred pounds, and he's got two hundred pounds, the good net will have a hundred pounds. The other one won't have nothing in it. That happens a lot. Any kind of object that goes in would hang up against that TED, and it would, because the opening is only thirty-two inches when there's a thirty-two-inch TED. The flap don't go, but, say if you laid the TED flat down and raised the flap up, the very center of it would be about twelve inches high. You understand what I'm saying?

SSD: Yes.

WER: So, if you laid it down and the flap comes from the trawl over that TED, and it's passing about twelve inches, if you grabbed it right there by the TED and raised it up, it would be like a V-shaped thing with twelve inches up from the top of the TED. So, anything more than twelve inches is just big enough for a turtle to go through. But anything bigger than a turtle – a turtle is about eight to ten inches at the biggest ones. They're normally about eight, and all are most six. Anything wider than twelve inches would hang up, see. Now, we have zippers – big old zipper that's about six or seven foot long. At the very top of that TED, you'd just zip it open and you'd

pull out what's got it clogged. Then when after a storm or a good bad blow, you'll have trees piled up in there. When you put them on top of the house, it looks like a forest growing on top of the boat's house, in the pilot house.

SSD: So, you go ahead and pull those trees up out of the water. What do you do with them?

WER: Well, we'll put them on top of the boat or on the house, out of the way, and we'll get in and we'll throw them on the beach wherever we're at. Whoever owns that area, they clean all that up and put in the trash and the city picks it up, see. But a lot of fishermen, they throw stuff back. So, you're just catching it over and over.

SSD: If you take it out, you are not going to catch it again.

WER: Right. They've got some that's conscientious and some don't care.

SSD: Well, Mr. Ross, is there anything you would like to put on this record that we have not talked about?

WER: Let's see. [phone ringing] Oh, see, my phone's ringing again, if you don't mind.

SSD: Do you need to answer that?

WER: Hello? I'm talking to a lady from the University of Mississippi about a survey. Yes. All right, baby. Bye. I was supposed to go visit my daughter in Florida. This one here, Kim, that's Kim Bush. She's the one that's on that maritime commission.

SSD: Kim Bush, does she work at the University?

WER: No, hon. She's an officer on the board at the Seafood Museum. She does a lot of work.

SSD: I have a friend named Kim Bush here in Hattiesburg.

WER: No, that's not the same one. She's separated from her husband, but he's from Hattiesburg. Probably somebody kin to him.

SSD: The Kim Bush I know grew up in Pascagoula.

WER: Well, my Kim is fifty-two, I believe. I got a daughter that's sixty-two.

SSD: Is that your oldest?

WER: Oldest daughter, yes.

SSD: Well, is there anything else you can think of that you would like to put on the record today? Somebody might be listening to this in a hundred years or two hundred years. Anything you want them to know?

WER: Number twenty-three, "What lessons have you learned from using the TED?" It's a nuisance. If you catch a rotten crab trap, you will lose that catch for that drag. "Is there anything else you would like to put on the record?" Lady, don't get me started. [laughter]

Hey, in the bottom one, it says, "Turtles/shrimpers." Do you know some woman up in Central State made that contraption? It's only very miserable to put up with. Thank God, I am retired. [laughter]

Zero. It's the end of that. But listen, I enjoyed talking to you.

SSD: I did too. Thank you so much.

WER: I'd like to meet you sometime.

SSD: Well, I will call you the next time I am down there.

WER: We'll go somewhere to have some coffee.

SSD: That sounds like fun, Mr. Ross. I will do that.

WER: You sound like such a wonderful person.

SSD: Well, so do you.

WER: Let me tell you how I am. I don't shake hands. I hug, like we do at church. Everybody hugs everybody.

SSD: Well, the world needs more hugs.

WER: But look, when it does – and to touch a person, some people, mostly like Blacks, if you touch them, they're looking at your hand. But to touch a person when you're by them, it's like a form of respect, that you can go out talking to them and you got to touch them. A lot of people don't look at it that way. But I do, and a lot of other people do too.

SSD: I think it is good for us.

WER: It is. You know, people in therapy, they tell you to get in the habit of touching your wife all the time. I always did. You know what she'd tell me?

SSD: What?

WER: "Would you leave me alone? I'm trying to wash these dishes." [laughter]

I would come from the boat, and my kids would be by the yard or back door or something. I said, "Where's mama?" They'd just looking and laugh, "I don't know. Hey, Mama?" Come in

the door, "Mama?" There's four bedrooms in this house – there was when I had all them girls here. She'd be in the last bedroom for the girls. When I'd walk in there, she'd be laughing because I'm so worried about here, wondering where she's at. That's how I loved her.

SSD: I know. Yes.

[end of transcript]