

Angelique Jennings: So, my name is Angelique Jennings. I am a student at Georgia Southern University. I am here with Scott conducting an oral history interview as a part of the project, Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures, Oral Histories of Commercial Fishing in Georgia. I have already received informed consent and permission from Thurmond and Marie Kern. But could you please confirm that out loud, you are ready to conduct this interview?

Thurmond Kern: Yes.

AJ: Thank you. [laughter] I have just a few questions to guide us. But I just want to encourage you to just talk from the heart and just tell us your stories. Yes. I just want to start with my first question then. So, since this is a tandem interview, I will be asking both of you some questions that can pertain to the subject that affects both of you. So, can you tell me where and when you grew up? What was life like within your family and community?

TK: Well, I grew up in Brunswick, Georgia. My daddy was a shrimp fisherman. We have been in the fishing industry all our lives. My granddaddy, my daddy, and me and my son were all shrimp fishermen. We made our living out here in [inaudible] in Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Campeche, Mexico, all around. [laughter]

AJ: You, Ms. Kern? [laughter]

TK: Well, say something.

Marie Kern: I was not in the fishing industry [laughter] until I got with you. [laughter] No.

AJ: Okay. So, since your family – you have large and new generation of fishermen, did that affect your decision – your connection to your family affects your decision to give into the industry?

TK: Well, our family was – got four in the family. I always wanted to stay in the shrimping industry. There are some painters or whatever, went on with their own lives. I kept right on shrimping. Then I got married. My sons now took over. They used to, until they passed away. But it's been in our life for a hundred years I reckon.

AJ: That is impressive. So, over the years, did your involvement in shrimping change?

TK: Well, I shrimped awhile. Then I started working with University of Georgia. I ran the *Bulldog* when they first got it. I went to Tampa and got it, brought it over here in the port of St. Augustine. I came here in port. Over 1 year or fifteen months, I got bored or whatever. I had to go back to shrimping again. I got Lindsey Parker the job on the *Bulldog* to ran it.

AJ: Can you just walk me through, on average, what your day-to-day routine is on the water, the time you wake up, what you do first, things like that?

TK: Well, what we're doing if we stay out on a trip, we have work daytime. We try to pack at nighttime and get up next day. We start again. If the weather is real terrible, we come home.

We don't make no real long trips no more. We used to make ten, twelve days trip. But now, we're just day fishing now. That's about it.

AJ: Do you find it difficult to work those long hours and get up at all times in the morning and get in late? When you were taking the long trips, was that difficult for you?

TK: No. It's average for a regular shrimper to get up in the morning and go shrimping, like the long days or short days. You work the tides and the wind or whatever. You either anchor up at nighttime, or someone drags around the clock, twenty-four hours a day. Most of us come home or either anchor up at nighttime. Just start another day routine the next day.

AJ: With the eating part, were you able to eat some of the catch you caught from your net?

TK: Yes, ma'am. We all have fried fish and grits and eggs in the morning. We have fried shrimp at nighttime, a bowl of crab, and stuff like that.

AJ: Is fishing central to your community? How would you describe it if it is? How have you seen it change over time?

TK: Well, really, Georgia is a small town. It was like a fishing village years ago. We had to pull up [inaudible] on a railroad by the shrimp fishing. Over the years, fish declined. They closed us down. That really hurt us real bad. We used to fish in the sounds, fish inshore. We caught swordfish, 3 to six miles on the shore. But when they closed the sounds up, I reckoned they called it bacteria, closing up on the bottom. The bottom closed up. The fishing industry on the beach really declined, went downhill. We need to get the sound back up again, which we've been trying and trying and trying over the year, with the DNR and everything, to get them back up. But it hasn't worked yet.

AJ: So, what are some positive changes that have happened over many years in the fishing industry?

TK: Well, years ago, we didn't pull on a turtle shooter. We didn't pull up, they call it BRD or the Fisheye. We didn't pull them. But now, we have to pull a turtle shooter and a Fisheye. The Fisheye is what really hurts us to catching a shrimp because we have active boat law and boat law for Fisheye to see what caught the most. When we closed the Fisheye, both ends, it caught more shrimp. When it was open, declined on the shrimp.

AJ: What about some of the mechanisms with boats, like the new technologies? Has that been a great improvement?

TK: Oh, yes, it's been a great improvement. Because years ago, we had no radar, no fathometer, no LORAN, nothing. Now, we've got computer. We've got radar. We've got fathometers, most anything that we use and has helped us tracking the shrimp and state where the shrimp is located.

AJ: Was it an easy learning curve getting used to the new technologies, like the radar and the computer, things like that?

TK: It took a little while. Everybody adjusting. You adjusted to it. You got your crew. You educated them on reading all that stuff, the technology [inaudible]. It kind of just played in to the field and just came along gradually.

AJ: What are the most rewarding parts of your career on the water?

TK: I reckon just having a good catch, and everybody get home safe, and everything goes smoothly along and have no accidents or anything, just having a good catch and coming in.

AJ: I should ask a little bit earlier, but about how long now are your trips when you are back in season, and it starts up again?

TK: It starts around Mother's Day. The weather warms up. We have roe shrimp now. We didn't have them years ago. But we've got them now. Roe shrimps starts around April 15, 20, something like that. We start from roe shrimp, then go to brown shrimp, then black and white shrimp again, on to the fall.

AJ: How is life for you when he is out traveling all around and collecting shrimp?

MK: Peaceful. [laughter] You get used to it. It's just like military.

AJ: How was your involvement, when you got with him, and you guys got married, being involved in more, in the fishing community and shrimping community?

MK: How was it?

AJ: Yes.

MK: Well, we have children. So, I was home-bound, as long as they were in school. But we did a lot of traveling where he was at, when the kids were out of school.

AJ: So, traveling, just vacationing, or did you guys move around a lot?

MK: We didn't move. If they were out of school, and he was out fishing or something like that, we would go, the kids. I would take the kids to him. The kids would go shrimping and stuff like that with him, spend time with him, because it was few and far and in between.

AJ: Do you see the differences now between the industry then, in regard to the times that he was out on the water, and how much he was able to interact with the family?

MK: Well, he did interact with them as much as he could. But it's better now. The kids are grown. He's just not going different places like he used to and having to work so hard. So, he's just in and out of the dock, daily.

AJ: So, back more on this other side, what do you think younger people or those who do not live

on the coast, should understand about the history and heritage of coastal Georgia?

TK: Well, the time has changed. Like I said, they closed the sounds up. That's really hurt the shrimping industry, because the pollution. The shrimp don't produce as much as it used to, like it was in the old days when they had the sounds open. We could come and drag and keep the sounds cleaned up, just like farmers. You know how farmers rotate their crop and everything, plow, and everything? We don't have that no more. The industry goes over. We used to have a bunch of fish houses in Brunswick. Now, we have two. We had twenty-seven fish houses. Now, we have two fish houses. That's how much the fishing industry did decline. The boat, we had probably fifty, sixty boats in Brunswick. Now, they have, I reckon about eight. So, that's a big decline over the year.

AJ: Do you think it has affected the taste at all, of the shrimp?

TK: No.

AJ: So, what are your thoughts on the future of the fishing community and the fishing industry as a whole?

TK: Well, if we don't change the laws, it is going to fade right on out. [inaudible] because it's real clean. It's always [inaudible]. It's raked like the farmers clean up the land. The settlement don't get it like it used to when it's cleaned right up. As far as inshore, it's going to decline. It's getting worse and worse every year.

AJ: What do you hope to see for the next generation of fishing or commercial fishing?

TK: I hope so many laws will change, which I doubt it ever will. But if some of the laws were to change and they open the sound back up, we clean them up and get some of these younger people back into fishing again, or it all just declines right on out. I say we ain't got but eight more boats and run it if we got eight boats.

AJ: So, in the short-term future, let us say, the next five years, what do you think could happen that could make the industry flourish, beyond changing regulations or anything like that, that could potentially even cause a revival?

TK: Well, I really don't know what could happen over the next five or six years. We have to wait and see really.

AJ: As you may recall, the title of this project is Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures. So, we have talked a little bit about the traditions. But can you tell me what do you think are the fishing futures of Georgia?

TK: Well, it's all up to the laws what's going to happen to us. I mean, they're still doing – I mean, the bigger boats are producing the shrimp. The little boats are declining every year. It gets less and less and less. That's all I can say about that.

MK: We don't have any younger generation interested in it either.

TK: No. We ain't.

MK: There's nobody.

TK: Oh, my. We had one boat which was shrimping. The other one, it went some other kind of way.

MK: Heavy equipment operator. [laughter]

TK: Yes, construction.

AJ: So, what ways do you think you could get the younger generation more involved in commercial fishing again?

MK: We are not until the shrimping goes full cycle around again. They make more money. They're just not interested in it because it's not there any longer, and until it changes one way or the other. Besides, there's not that many people in the fishing industry for a younger generation to come up. People are just not interested in getting in it. We're just a holdout room. [laughter]

TK: Yes. I was born on the boat. I'm seventy-five years old.

MK: [laughter] Tell the truth. You won't be seventy-five until September.

TK: September.

Scott Clark: Still running the boat?

TK: Yes.

SC: Nice.

TK: I quit. I didn't quit. I just sold my other boat. I worked with Johnny Bennett on his boat for a couple of years and...

MK: I thought you wanted to retire. It didn't work.

TK: I couldn't retire.

SC: What do you do for University of Georgia? You had mentioned them before. Is that the *Bulldog*?

TK: I went and got the *Bulldog* off in Tampa.

MK: He was scared to [inaudible].

TK: I was scared to move it. But David Harrington was over at the university down – but he wanted to get [inaudible]. David Harrington was here. I was working under David Harrington. I went and got the *Bulldog*. I ran it for, like I said, twelve, fifteen months.

SC: You mentioned Mexico early on, too. I am curious about that. What type of fishing did you do?

TK: Shrimp fishing in Campeche.

SC: Campeche?

TK: Yes.

MK: Last one, it was open [inaudible].

TK: Yes. We did in the fall.

SC: It is not open anymore?

TK: No. They closed up.

AJ: How different was the shrimping over in Mexico?

TK: It was the same thing. We caught white shrimp and brown shrimp. We fished days and nights over there.

MK: They were out of Texas, Brownsville, Texas.

TK: There's a lot there, Texan, Alabamian, and Louisianian. They used to go out in Key West.

AJ: But even those places are going downhill.

TK: Yes. There used to be a fleet in Key West. Now, there's just a handful of boats.

MK: Well, the tourist has taken over. It really pushed the shrimpers out because they don't have docks. He said that we used to have quite a few docks here, which is true. We only have one working dock now. There are a couple of docks here, but only one is working. We can unload there. So, it makes it hard. But then Darien is closing down for condos and things like that too. When that starts, they just push the industry right out.

TK: Progress. [laughter]

MK: You're fighting a losing battle, really.

SC: It is interesting what you said about the younger generation not being interested. Do you

think there is anything else, besides the overall decline of the industry, and then closing the sounds, like you said, that is keeping them from getting involved? Is there anything else that could get more interest from the younger generation in the industry?

MK: Well, to start with, you've got to find that younger generation. Because the kids that we had are grown. There're no other kids coming up to be the younger generation.

TK: You see what we do with our kids, get them educated where they can find them a better life than what we went through. We have a good life now.

MK: Yes.

TK: Don't get me wrong. I mean, we make good money. When we travel together, if I went Florida or Texas or where I went, when they got a common unload, take four, five days off. They will come and see me. We all got [inaudible] there.

MK: At times, it was hard for him to come home because somebody had to stay on the boat. But then we did a lot of traveling back in too.

TK: We educated our young and then got them involved with what we're doing .

MK: Well, it was already declining then. It's a gradual decline. But it's really getting bad. But there's just no younger generation to come into it. None.

AJ: Well, do you believe spreading awareness somewhat, like how Sea Grant is doing now, could help stir up more people, even in universities, like marine biologists, anyone, to gain interest in the area and in the industry?

MK: I don't know. They've got to go out on that boat and work. They don't like it because you've got to have money coming in. They won't, which you can't blame them. Here's money. If it's not there for them to make the money on, they're not going to stick around.

TK: We don't work on salary. We work on percentage.

MK: Right.

TK: Like I said, when the seasons, nothing going on and no [inaudible] coming in, making no money off the boats, they'd find something else.

MK: I mean, years ago, he had to go to other states to work because we had the children. We had bills to pay and stuff like that. So, when it closed here, he would have to leave, go to other states. That's how we survived. But that's not going on now. He's got another boat. He wants to get back into fishing. But he's not going to be doing traveling that he used to do.

TK: Because they retired. [laughter]

MK: [inaudible] [laughter] We just have to watch out. [laughter] Yes. It's a hard life. You have to work at it. But you get your rewards in the long run.

TK: You make money if you worked at it.

MK: But you've got to really enjoy it.

TK: Really want to do it.

MK: Really want to eat shrimp and fish. [laughter] Get out there and catch them. [laughter]

SC: So, you did enjoy it rather than the money?

MK: Oh, yes.

TK: There's more to it than just...

MK: It is good.

TK: We enjoy it. We enjoy it with our neighbors. Our neighbors like seafood. They help us. We trade them with shrimp. They're doing stuff for us. It all kept like that.

MK: Yes. That was vegetables.

TK: They grew – yes.

MK: Like a barter system, we trade out. [laughter] It works out. But you've got to figure. It takes time and effort to do it.

AJ: Was it more prevalent this sort of bartering system in the past to people going out and catching shrimp or fish, and other people getting their garden goods and –

MK: Yes.

AJ: – trade them out?

TK: Yes. We traded out.

MK: You give shrimp and fish and stuff like that, crab, whatever you have –

TK: To churches.

MK: – with other people.

TK: Churches have things going on. We donate shrimp to them.



MK: We had retired shrimpers that no longer could go out and catch their seafood that we gave.

TK: They can't lose the taste for seafood. [laughter] They've got to have it. [laughter]

MK: But our generation is dying out fast, along with the industry. [laughter]

TK: You want me to perk it up? That'll be a good thing. [laughter]

MK: It makes a good shot, Norm.

AJ: We are going to try to preserve your stories.

MK: There's a lot of stories floating around.

TK: We've got a bunch of photos in different places that we've been, different things we catch, and scenery and stuff like that. We have it. That might help. I don't know.

MK: You have to visit our archives.

TK: That's it?

SC: I think that will do it, unless you guys want to add anything else.

AJ: Any last parting words?

TK: Well, I just hope that we do a good job. I hope we helped you all. Anyway, just give us a holler. I'll be more than glad to. I'm most probably down here anyway, with Marty [inaudible].

MK: [laughter] Well, we've watched the Marty grow up. [laughter] His dad was an old shrimper.

TK: His granddaddy.

MK: His granddaddy. He's from an old generation too. See, he's got sons. But they were not interested in shrimping industry. That's the way it is.

TK: Most old fishermen, they raise a son. They get them in college, get them educated, where they find something else to do. But you can't blame them.

MK: Well, we're kind of selfish with that because we've seen the industry going to pot as always. So, we've got a grandson that's in college that we hope he does not go into shrimping.

TK: When he was younger, I bought him a pair of boots. He wants to go fishing and went fishing with me. He said, "Papa, I sure like this right here." I tell him, "Take them boots off and get back to the house. You ain't going no more." [inaudible] no more. [laughter]

MK: So, now, it was a different situation with his daddy because it was still there. He was really interested in shrimping. But then he got out of it and went tug boating. When they start...

SC: Tugboat?

MK: Yes. He was a tugboat captain. When the shrimping industry started slowing down, we said, "Okay. If you want to stay on the water, you got to do this." We sent him to school. He got his license.

TK: He got his license. He'd done really well.

MK: Yes.

TK: He went all over the country, seagoing tug.

MK: He went to the Panama Canal when he was, what, right out of college or right out of school.

TK: Seventeen years old.

MK: Yes, as a captain.

AJ: That is impressive.

MK: Yes. But that's just different branches. He didn't want to get off the water. He wanted to stay involved with the shrimpers since then. There was just nothing there.

TK: His heart was there. But his mind had to go somewhere else. [laughter]

MK: We had to give him a push. [laughter] Yes. But then our youngest one, he worked on the tug. But he wanted to do something else. He wanted to stay in one place. He went to heavy equipment construction. He works at the Seaboard.

AJ: So, I am seeing a lot of your family members just have a strong connection to the sea and/or to the water.

TK: Oh, they love it now. Don't get us wrong about that. They hate to break away with it.

MK: Yes. It's just not there. The oldest one had started having children and stuff like that. He needed more security, more money coming in. So, it was finding something else to do on the water. He was satisfied with that. It's not like we said, "Okay. You can't do this. You've got to do that. Stay off the water. Quit running your mouth." [laughter] Because he could do that. Those radios and telephones, he'd fit right in. [laughter] But I don't know. If you think about it, there are no more younger kids coming up. Are there? Nobody's got kids coming up to go into.

AJ: Do your kids still live in the area or...

MK: Oh, yes. Well, our oldest son, we lost him three years ago. It's going to be three years ago.

AJ: Condolences.

MK: But, yes, the other.

SC: Are there any younger boat captains that you know of?

MK: No.

SC: Youngish?

TK: Well, Johnny Bennett, he got...

MK: One.

TK: One.

MK: But he's not interested.

TK: He's our grandson.

MK: [inaudible]

TK: He's going in his other boat. You don't have to need it. But most all of them, I guess, are going to college. [inaudible]

MK: Johnny, he's talking to somebody else right now. He comes from a long...

TK: Long generation.

MK: Yes. We're running out of replacements. [laughter] I don't see anybody going out and finding anymore. [laughter] Where we going?

AJ: Do you think they need to make a recruiting team? [laughter]

MK: We need to do something. But now, you can't. People get raised other ways. It's kind of hard to get them on the water and keep them there. Unlike sports fishermen, they like to go out, catch fish, go home. That is different to shrimping, when you have to make a living and stay out there and keep your nose to the grindstone.

TK: Ain't no easy job.

MK: Yes. It's an enjoyable job if you're really interested in it.

TK: Oh, yes.

MK: But now I don't know where they will go out and find a new crop to replace the older one. [laughter] I'm feeling down. [laughter] It's just not there. Now, we have a friend on Jekyll Island. He's from an old fishing industry too – family. But now his kids go and spread out. None of his children stayed and followed this [inaudible].

TK: They all went to college. They got a degree. They went elsewhere. They're all doing good.

MK: Coast guard, that was the nearest on the water that he...

TK: I went and worked for the feds, for border control.

MK: Yes. Then we have another friend, his son involved wasn't in shrimping. He took another route too. I mean, these are kids that are our kids' age.

TK: Yes. But most of them went on different routes.

MK: Yes. They just weren't interested in...

SC: Totally different route, or anything related to fishing or close to water?

MK: No. A lot them – well, the one on Jekyll Island, his son went coast guard. So he stayed water. But it's altogether different. But now, the other one, he went forestry.

TK: Forestry. Yes. His son went the coast guard.

MK: Right. But nothing to do with the shrimping industry. That's the way we see it. That's the way it's working out. It's shameful. [laughter]

TK: Yes. They're smarter than they are. [laughter]

MK: Yes. I mean, if the kids are dropping out, the industry has nowhere to reproduce. Then the rules and regulations, they don't like that either. But we've all got bosses. [laughter]

TK: Oh, well.

MK: I don't know what to do to – because even if we get laws changed and stuff like that, we've got to find the people to push to keep it going.

TK: We get some of the laws changed, I think that would help, I mean, if you open a bigger area than what they've got now.

MK: It would be for [inaudible] old people [laughter] because there ain't no more young ones coming in.

TK: Make them bring some in.

MK: Well, you go find them. [laughter] You can recruit them. [laughter]

AJ: Do you think imports have an issue as well with the whole entire industry, like the imported shrimps?

MK: Well, it did it one time when it was really bad. But then they've cut out a lot of the imports. There's not as much coming in, or I don't think there is. It's just a pond-raised shrimp. I don't think they did import it to people anymore, even though we still got imports and stuff like that. I don't think it's as bad as it was.

TK: We can't get enough shrimp feeds for the United States?

MK: No. We don't.

TK: We don't. We do a lot of – [inaudible] you're catching a shrimp. But M Board hurts us. But we could not do it by ourselves.

MK: There's not that many shrimp.

TK: People love seafood. [inaudible]

MK: We've got to keep the imports coming into the [inaudible] and things like that.

TK: Keep you all going.

MK: Well, yes. It keeps jobs going. But somebody has got to furnish the food. Now, I remember when they used fresh shrimp, but then they figured out they've got to – supply and demand – they've got to get them from somewhere.

TK: All the boats had declined coming in near the shrimp boats it used to be.

MK: I just watch them.

TK: You could go DNR and check the licenses and the licenses that sail and [inaudible], how much that they declined. Well, that's it. Go back to work.

[end of transcript]