

Danielle Sayre: My name is Danielle; I am a student at Georgia Southern University. I am here with Lester Perry, conducting an oral history interview as part of the project Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures, Oral Histories of Commercial Fishing in Georgia. I have already received informed consent and permission to record from Lester. But could you please confirm that out loud?

Lester Perry: I do.

DS: Thank you. We are going to go ahead and get started. I just have a few questions to start us off with. The most basic one is, can you tell me where and when you grew up and how it affected your fishing career?

LP: Well, I was born and raised in North Carolina. I grew up there. I come from a fishing family. To buy school clothes and stuff like that, go ahead and shrimp on the water. I mostly grew up in a fishing family. Then I started shrimping, [19]83. I've been on the water ever since. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

DS: Did you start off with your family's fishing?

LP: No. I started off, a cousin of mine brought me to Georgia. Then I got on a different boat. I've been there ever since.

DB: What brought you to Georgia?

LP: A cousin of mine, because in the summertime, right when April came, we always came to Georgia for row shrimp season. I came out and got on a boat. We've been going ever since.

DS: What was your first position on the boat?

LP: Deckhand.

DS: What kind of job is that?

LP: It's just where you start out, if they need somebody to pick up some shrimp, they need somebody to go out with another guy. There were three of us on the boat. Then we start out, well, you'll be a crew man. I didn't know nothing about it. He said, "Well, that's good that you don't know nothing because when I tell you to do something, you aren't going to turn around and tell me, "Well, my other captain did it like this. My captain did it like that." A deckhand is like pick up shrimp, pull the nets, and dump them, help clean the deck up, help keep the boat clean, just regular work.

DS: So, you said when you were a child, your family fished. You were introduced to it.

LP: Well, I started out when I was 15, 16. I started out getting shrimp to get a little money to buy school clothes and stuff like that. It was mostly on a weekend thing. I liked it. Here I am. [laughter]

DS: So, what made you decide to do it is you liked it?

LP: Yes. You don't got nobody overlooking you. Then I would start out as a deckhand. Then I went from deckhand to first mate. Now I'm running a boat. I'm a captain now. I'm running a boat.

DS: What's your boat name?

LP: Well, I run a boat for TK, the *Blessed Assurance*. I ran that boat with him.

DS: Oh, good.

LP: Yes.

DS: How do you like being a captain?

LP: It's good. It has its ups and downs, which a captain's job is he's responsible for the boat. He's got his crew's life in his hands. I can pretty much make my own paycheck. I can make my own paycheck. It's fun. [laughter]

DS: What would your daily routine look like as a captain?

LP: From about 5:00 a.m. till about 3:00 the next morning, you always – you know what I'm saying? If you aren't got nobody to watch the wheel, you've got to stay at the wheel all day long. You've got to make sure the engine's running right. You've got to make sure your rigs – you've got to watch electronics all the time. It's good.

DS: Do you like it more than being a deckhand or first mate?

LP: Yeah, I like it pretty much. I like it pretty much.

DS: When did you become a captain?

LP: Been a captain now since, I think 2000, 2002.

DS: How did you become a captain?

LP: Well, a boat that I was on, we were just working two-handed, just me and the captain on there. At the time, I always try to learn everything I could learn. He would see you're trying to learn, he would teach you. So, he was going through divorce problems with his wife and all [inaudible]. So, one day, he went home for the weekend. We were going out that Monday. He never showed up. So he called me and said, "You think you can find you another man?" I said, "Yes." "Our first mate," he was always like, "there's always a captain on standby. So, if the real captain stepped down, the first make can step up and keep things going." I've been a captain ever since.

DS: You must have done a good job.

LP: [laughter] I try to.

DS: When you were a child, did you spend some time on a shrimp boat ever? Or when was your first time on a shrimp boat?

LP: First time on a shrimp boat was an uncle that married my aunt. He had a little small boat. Sometime, like during this time of year, I went out oystering with him. He had a little boat. Oyster, crab, shrimp, whatever the season was, he had a boat for it. I said, "Well, I can do this [laughter]."

DS: So, today, in this generation of fishermen, what do you think about any new generation coming into the line of work?

LP: Only thing that's keeping the fishing industry going is the older generation. But now, drugs and stuff has got the world so corrupt, these young cats don't want to do nothing. Because when I started, you could always go down the dock. You could make a little money, you could get a meal, because there was always gear work going on. But it isn't many boats as it was when I started, compared to now, because I don't see a drastic change from then to now. When I first started, Brunswick, every port was slapped full of a number of boats, four or five deep. Over the years, a lot of boats caught fire. Some guys retired. Then there was a lot of shrimp. It used to be, when there's shrimp, we worked the row shrimp. Then when row shrimp was over, we had a couple weeks off before the brownies started showing up. Because you had enough boats to catch each season up. But now, before row shrimp season is over, you've got brownies showing up. There's a brown shrimp. It's not that there's just a lot of shrimp. It's just that you don't got the boat that you used to have, catching the product.

DS: When you catch your product, what do you do with it? How do you distribute it?

LP: Well, I mostly sell it. Well, when I'm down in Florida, I sell it to the fish house. When I come here, you sell it to the fish house and to the public.

DS: Do you go down to Florida a lot? Or [inaudible] Georgia?

LP: I go a little bit everywhere.

DS: Is that because you just go to shrimping?

LP: Yes, I go there shrimping. If the season is like this year here is kind of scary this year because they got the season close out 25 miles, federal. They don't really have to open it if they don't want to. You know what I'm saying? Which is, it's a good thing, and it's a bad thing. The good thing is you don't to worry about nobody going out there stealing shrimp before the season opened up. Steal shrimp before everybody opened up. That way, everybody gets a fair shake. I heard July, if they keep it closed to July, they get the season chance for the row shrimp to roll

out. Then we have a good fall season and a good cold-water season for the shrimp rolled out. But the point is, the reason why they closed was because of the weather, the cold weather that we had, to try to save it, make sure they wouldn't catch the smaller shrimp. But the point is, did they close it too late? But then when they go to test it, and if they're messing around to test the wrong spot, and they don't find enough shrimp to meet the requirements to open up for this year, they say, "Well, hell, we don't get enough shrimp. We might as well just stay closed for the rest of the year. You open up next year."

DS: So, when you are shrimping, how do you decide where you want to shrimp? Do you have a favorite spot or is there like a...

LP: Yes, everybody has their little honey holes, their little favorite spots they go to. It all depends on the time of the year that you go there. But everybody has their little favorite spots they just sneak off to [laughter].

DS: You got a favorite spot?

LP: Yes, I got my little favorite spot. [laughter]

DS: So, I am kind of just curious if you have any stories about when you were on a shrimp festival, did anything significant happen or anything funny happen or anything that sticks out in your mind?

LP: I've seen a lot of things in my years. When I fish up north on a cold weather, one day, it might be hailing. It might be blowing a blizzard, this time of year up north. It's hectic up there. But I've seen guys get killed on boats.

DS: How do you manage that?

LP: So, we had this one guy that we net scallops. Always, when you're on a boat, you wear a button-up shirt. You always keep it tucked in your pants. If you got long hair, you put it inside your shirt. He had his hair hanging loose. We were out there picking up the bags. His hair blowing in the wind. So, you've got a bag, say, 5,000 pounds up in the air swinging. Then the block is up over his head. The hair wrapped around the rope. He started messing, trying to get his hair out and took the tension off rope. The rope slipped out of his hand. It snatched his hair and everything right through the block. All your hair together is stronger than your skin. So, it just snatched. Out on boat, anything's possible. Stuff you say that won't happen, it'll happen. New blocks can break. The rigging can come down.

DS: As a captain, do you have a lot of responsibility to make sure there is a lot of safety on the boat?

LP: As a captain, like the one I'm on, that's why I set my own rigs. I don't want no man get caught in the winch. I set my own rigs. I know how to work things. I'm responsible for each and every man's life. That's what I do.

DS: The guys who work with you, do you hire them? Or have you known them for a while?

LP: Well, I haven't known him that long. But he's mostly helped my boss. He does a lot of electrical work. He knows a lot about a boat, how to keep maintenance and all that stuff. So, he's good.

DS: Are there any guys that you have worked with that have stuck around and hung out with you for a while?

LP: No, we don't do the hanging out thing. [laughter] We work together, but we don't hang out together. [laughter]

DS: Do you have a family right now?

LP: Yes.

DS: How do they feel about shrimping and that lifestyle?

LP: A lot of them don't like it.

DS: Really?

LP: No.

DB: How come?

LP: I'm staying gone all the time and everything. Then getting back to as far as when I was a crew, like I say, when I'm out, I'll be your friend all day long, as long as we're on the dock. But when we get out on the water, out on the boat, I'm not your friend. You know what I'm saying? Because when a person can see you their friend, they figure they get special privileges. That's why we're not friends. [laughter] We're not friends.

DS: So, you mentioned that fishing was kind of central to your family. It was part of your life growing up. You were introduced to it and your community here. Do you think that is still important to your community? Do you think it is still a fishing community?

LP: No, I really don't think it's that no more because they are trying to get rid of all the fishing fishermen. We've got all kind of regulations, rules against us. Everybody worried about the turtles. Turtle this, turtle that. Everybody's saying, "Oh, the shrimpers are killing the turtles." The shrimpers are not killing the turtles. No, don't get me wrong. We catch some turtles in the nets, but we let it go. But what's killing the turtles is the home developers that's killing homes on the beach, so far from the beach with all the lights. So, when the turtles come up on the beach, they lay the eggs. They are going to that light. Then when they lay eggs, they are so tired. They can't make it back. They can't make it back to the water. So, then they die. "Oh, the shrimpers kill the turtles."

DS: So, you have seen a lot of change in the landscape where you fish a lot.

LP: I've seen a drastic changes. It used to be, you could see little, small fish. The crabs were so abundant and everything. But now, there's some crabs around, but aren't hardly none. Because when I was first started, we didn't have no peelers. We didn't have peeler factories that took peeler crabs. If they had [inaudible] shell crabs, they caught them out in the ocean. We caught [inaudible] shell crabs in the ocean. We didn't have no peeler. They got people going out catching peeler crabs. Peeler crabs are females. If you take getting all these peeler crabs, and you're taking all the females out, you aren't putting nothing in; over the years, the species' going to disappear.

DS: Just to change gears just a little bit, can you tell us what is your favorite aspect of this job and your career as a fisherman and shrimper? One favorite thing.

LP: One favorite thing I like to do?

DS: Or just some aspect of the job.

LP: Favorite thing is leave the dock, go out there, watch the meter on the way to the little honey hole, favorite little honey hole that we. Drop the trawl net, which is a small net that we pull to see [inaudible]. Or you watch the meter, we see something, what you call a Christmas tree, like a little tree, all different colors. Oh, boy. [laughter] Put the triad over. Pull it 10 minutes. Come up. You got a half a basket of shrimp. Everybody, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." [laughter] Put the big nets over. Make the big drag. Boom. Oh, boy, [laughter] just hit the lottery.

DS: You guys usually go out and celebrate after that?

LP: No. [inaudible]

DS: I do have a few more questions here on my paper. What type of things could happen in the next five years that you would think help the fishing industry, just beyond regulations? Maybe community involvement, more technique or training, or what do you think would be something that could change the industry, beyond regulations?

LP: What could really change the shrimping industry is they get rid of the farm-raised shrimp overseas. Now it's bad when you going out there, and you just paying for fuel. Shrimping aren't like it used to be. Used to be you made money. Fuel was cheap, caught shrimp. Now, the fuel prices are so high. The regulations, you got to have this, you got to have that, you can't do this. You can't clean fish on a boat. Now, if you want fish – it used to be you want fish to take home, you can take fish home. If you wanted to clean fish on the boat, you can clean fish on the boat, no problem. You want to clean fish to cook for breakfast. But now they got – they'll ride up on you. You clean your fish, he wants to write you a ticket for mutilation of fish. They call it mutilation of fish. Then a lot of times, when they board you, first thing they do is go to your refrigerator or your freezer to see if you got any clean fish on the boat, which I don't think that's right.

DS: Did that used to be a big thing, cleaning fish? That was a normal part?

LP: It's just that the laws is – [inaudible] they trying to put the shrimpers out of business, because there aren't really enough of us to stand and really fight for it. So, they're trying to – we're going to write this little law here. If nobody doesn't oppose it, we going to put it in effect.

DS: So, not to be offensive, this is an offensive question, but to that argument, why do you think fishermen should stay around? Why do you think that they have value in your community?

LP: Because that's our livelihood. We the ones that started the business, fishing industry. That was a big thing. Everybody wanted to be a shrimper. Everybody wanted to be a fisherman, a crabber or an oysterer. That was a big thing. That put a lot of jobs, a lot of work into the community. But now they want to farm-raise everything. Don't care how much seafood you farm-raise, if it don't get that salt taste in it – farm-raised shrimp, you cannot season the farm-raised shrimp. They're fresh. You cannot season them. A lot of stuff they use, for use for farm-raised shrimp, you got to have all these kinds of hormones, antibiotics in order for the shrimp to grow. But you go over Thailand, over there, they got farm-raised shrimp. They dig a pond. They put a hen house over, a chicken house over top of it. They feed the chicken. The chickens feed the shrimp. Why is that? Why they trying to put us out of business? I guess they get shrimp cheaper by getting them overseas. Now all the fish houses, developers want to buy them up, put condos. Next five years, I don't know if there're going to be any docks to talk of.

DS: Are you going to keep doing it?

LP: I'm going to keep doing it. If got to get in a little hub around, ride around, hub around, I'm going to be riding down the side of the boat, a little hub around. [laughter]

DS: Is that just because you love it so much?

LP: I love it. I love that ocean out there. [laughter]

DS: So, you did tell me a very terrifying story. Do you have one of you first starting out maybe, when you were first learning?

LP: Yes, first start out, first trip out on a boat to [inaudible] North Carolina [inaudible]. They had them Spandex twist bands on the watches. First started out laying the net down. I grabbed up the net to take the whip line off. Then when I took the whip line off, my watch got caught in the net. I got snatched overboard. I got snatched overboard. "Hey, hey, hey."

DS: How long were you overboard for?

LP: They are never cutting the net loose from the boat. But I got snatched over the rail. I was hanging on the net. So, they didn't never trail it behind the boat. It was just to the side of the boat, probably about 5 minutes. They then pulled me aside.

DS: Did they talk to you after that?

LP: After I got myself together, I realized what I did wrong. Don't wear no watches with no spread apart and get caught in the web.

DS: Do you think a lot of that is like learning on the job?

LP: Yes, it's like a hands-on thing. But the same thing, it is easy though once you learn it. Because you do the same thing with the net going out, you do the same thing with the net coming in. You do the same thing every day, the same way, going out, coming in, going out, coming in. Nothing changes. You do it the same way.

DS: I did not ask, but how many years have you been shrimping?

LP: I've been shrimping since [19]83.

DS: Over that course of time, I know there has been some technology that has changed, but what are some things that you used to do that you don't do now? Like technique, if you use radar now or GPS, but you used to do something else. Has it changed, or is it pretty constant?

LP: Used to be, I don't calm down a lot. I don't slow down a lot more now than when I first started. I was like gung-ho. I mean, go, go, go, go, go, go. Well, I worked on all kinds of boats, different boats, freezer boats. Some boats I worked on, out of a year, I might have spent 300 days on the ocean.

DS: What kind of boat is that?

LP: Freezer boat. We're pulling like 30 days. Come in, take three or four days off, go back out, put another 30 days, 32 days, in and out.

DS: Where did you go?

LP: Just out on the ocean, like off Key West.

DS: What did you catch?

LP: Pink shrimp, rock shrimp over on the east coast, rock, shrimp, just out there, 30 days going back and forth, north and south.

DS: What is that like?

LP: Work, work, work. We catch shrimp. We start work at 8:00 p.m. That's when we haul back. Sometimes, we won't get off the deck till this afternoon, 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. You might have gotten an hour of sleep. Then if there's reel there, you might load the boat up in seven days, eight nights, be back, come in, and throw that off. Go back again.

DS: What is that like staying in the cabin for that amount of time?

LP: [laughter]

DS: Do you all sleep at one time or shifts? Or what is that like?

LP: Oh, we all sleep at the same time.

DS: Do you guys cook on the boat?

LP: Yes, we cook on the boat. We've got stuff like a house, microwave, full-sized refrigerator, coffee pots.

DS: Seven days.

LP: But when scalloping, scalloping was different because scalloping, we did like eighteen hours on, four hours off. We cut eighteen hours, cut scallops. That's a long time. Staying there eighteen hours, cutting scallops for eighteen hours, laying down four, get back up, do it all over again.

DS: You are okay doing that?

LP: Scalloping is a young man's thing. The money's good. You might go out there, work ten days, come in, and catch the price right. Each crew man might make 40,000 up. But he worked for it. Don't get me wrong now. He worked for it. You think about you go out on 18,000-pound boat full-time, double-dredged, 18,000-pound trip. They get paid by – if they don't burn much fuel, they make more money. So, it's like five men. It's like cut, cut, eighteen, nineteen hours a day, which is bad on your body. It's bad on your legs, your joints. You got a lot of people that – most or all the scallopers up there, they're on like drugs because a lot of them got to take pills like Percocet's or whatever, just to be able to get up in the morning time, because they've been doing it so long. You got some guys that just got to take pills just to be able to get up. You got some of them that's been doing it so long. Once he closes his hand on the knife, cutting, once he starts cutting, you got to pry his hands open just to get the knife because – but the money's good. But the people's killing themselves to get it. A scalloper or a full-time cutter can make back about 150,000 a year just cutting. But he worked for every dime of it.

DS: Is that what made you decide not to do it, is just the labor intensiveness?

LP: I went out there, boy, I was on like a part-time. We only had like 13,000 pounds of catch. I went out there. But then know my hands would swell up, what you called a grip where you're holding your knife too tight. Then that muscle on there had to [inaudible] like a door hinge. I can't do the pills. I don't even like taking baby aspirins. But we rubbed down horse liniment, Bengay. When you stand on a steel deck, it's bad on your feet, boat rocking like this right here. But if I could back up the time, 20 years back, yes, I would do it. But now –

DS: What did you decide to do after that?

LP: Shrimping.

DS: Shrimping was just the best option?

LP: I've always been a shrimp - – [inaudible] Boats that I've been on, this time of year, they are up north, [inaudible] fishing. Then they had some scallops. They had a catch. Wherever the boat went, I went with the boat. But now, we jelly ball it now.

DS: What is that like jelly balling?

LP: It is fun. Have you ever eaten them?

DS: No, I haven't.

LP: Do you wear lipstick?

DS: Sometimes.

LP: You put lipstick, you put the jelly balls on you. [laughter]

DS: How do you catch them?

LP: Just drag a net around. Just drag a net around.

DS: What are the positives and negatives of doing that as opposed to shrimping?

LP: Only thing about jelly balls is the money is somewhat kind of good if you go regular. With the boat I'm on, I got 70,000. We get paid with 6 cent pounds. So, if I kept 70,000 pounds, I make \$700. So, every 10,000 pounds, I make \$100, me and the crewmates. It's a lot of heavy lifting because say you've got to cut off. The bag's full. That's like 3,000 pounds that you're lifting up. Then you must do it in slick calm weather. You can't do it in real rough weather because you got all this. The boats rolling back and forth. You know you've got to keep your pumps going at all times because jelly balls are more like water. The more they move around, the more they lose their weight. So, you got to keep pumps going. Then you got to be back on a schedule, which I don't like being on a schedule. You go out there for four or five days, come in and take a couple days off. With jelly ball, if I leave, I'm leaving out this afternoon. So, I am not got to be back by Monday morning. But since I'm the owner of the boat, I can pretty much make my own schedule.

DS: What made you decide to do that, jelly balling?

LP: Well, the man that I was working for, he always was the first one to start. His boat was the first one to start and always the last one to finish. So, I got stuck. [laughter]

DS: Was it your first jelly ball?

LP: Yes. I kind of got stuck with it.

DS: It is not too bad. Have you eaten them?

LP: No. Oh, yes. I might have eaten because they make ramen noodles out of them.

DS: Really?

LP: Yes. They make ramen noodles out of them. They make salad substitutes. They make stuff. They put some stuff from them that they might put in pillow [inaudible] . They might put in lipstick. So, I might. I'm going to say I did.

DS: You said that right now the older generation is pretty much what is keeping the fishing industry alive, especially here in Darien and basically anywhere.

LP: Yes.

DS: What advice would you give a young person who is interested in joining this industry?

LP: The advice that I would give them is you got to be on work on time. You got to listen. The young generation problem is they don't want to listen. They want to do it their way. It's only one way to do it, my way, because I've been doing it longer than you have. What you got to do is listen. The young generation, they don't want to work. Drugs, [inaudible]. They don't want to work. So, it's hard to find really – and if they do take a young man out there, you try to tell them something, they want to try to tell you how to do it. You've been doing it longer than they have. Other than that, now it's scary because crews are hard to find. Crews are real hard. They don't want to do it.

DS: Do you have kids?

LP: Yes, I have two.

DS: Have they thought about coming into the industry?

LP: No.

DS: Knowing what you know now about where the industry has gone, how it has kind of declined over the years, would you still do it again? If you could go back and choose what you are going to do for the rest of your life?

LP: Yes.

DS: So, do it again?

LP: Yes. I'm a diehard. I would do it right to the end. I love it.

DS: I think we are good. If there is anything that you have left to say or any questions for us or any stories or anything you would like to contribute.

LP: No, I'm good.

DS: You good? Thank you so much for your time. This was really delightful. I really enjoyed it. Thank you so much.

LP: Okay.

[end of transcript]