Preserving Oral Histories of Waterfront-Related Pursuits in Bayou La Batre
Rodney Lyons Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Michael Stieber
Transcriber: NCC

Michael Stieber: Just state your name, where you're from, where you live now.

Rodney Lyons: Rodney Lyons, born and raised in Bayou La Batre. I'm on Little River Road in Bayou La Batre.

MS: How has your family and yourself been involved in the seafood industry here over the years?

RL: For generations, back before the 1900s.

MS: Any particular trade or –

RL: All aspects of it, fishermen, crabbers, shrimpers, oystermen, seafood dealers, just some of it all, net makers.

MS: If you could, to get that again, just state your name, you've been here, and get a little more, if you can, specific as –

RL: My name is Rodney Lyons. I was born and raised in Bayou La Batre. My family has been in the seafood industry for generations. My grandpas, one of them was Henry Seaman. He was a commercial trammel net fisherman. He raised thirteen children. My other grandfather, Daniel Lyons, he was an oyster catcher, raised his family. That's only two things in the seafood that they've done to raise our family. But everybody else in the family has been involved in all aspects, catching it, processing it, buying it, or selling it.

MS: What did you start in there? At what age?

RL: When I was four months old, my father brought me from here to Texas on a shrimp boat, seven-day trip. Of course, I don't remember it, but that was my first trip on a shrimp boat. Growing up years, anytime there was free time, we were helping on the boat, making crab traps. If daddy was out shrimping or fishing or oystering, whatever, on the weekend, holidays, we were there with him. I know we didn't work as hard as we thought we did, but we were part of the work. We were involved in it. It seemed like that our playtime evolved around the work.

MS: How has the seafood industry changed over the years?

RL: I don't believe I'd have time to tell you everything. But I remember when I was, I don't know, maybe ten years old, that we went out, and we caught shrimp for 9 cents a pound. Fuel was about a nickel, ice about 50 cents a bar. I remember when shrimp broke a dollar, a pound to the boat. I've caught the tail end of the old. I've seen it change into what it is now. I'm seeing it decline again.

MS: How has the waterfront here changed through the years?

RL: It's more shipyards. It really hadn't changed that much other than the looks of the buildings. But pretty well, forty years ago, it was just about as many buildings on the bayou as it is now,

just newer buildings and different architecture. Other than that, it's about the same, bigger boats, but nothing drastic.

MS: What about supplies for the boats? Where do they get supplied now, and where did they in the past?

RL: Well, in the past, it's the same as now. You had supply stores. You had fuel docks. Back when I was coming up, it was a combination of fuel docks and supply houses, sold the hardware. We had like (AI Jones and Zuins?). They were dockside. But now, it's mainly fuel and ice docks and the hardware stores are away from the water.

MS: Does that make it more difficult?

RL: I don't know. I don't know if it's any harder or not. I don't think anybody ever thinks about it because one's just up the road a half a mile and the other one's just across the street from the waterfront. So, I don't think that's any problem.

MS: Have you ever owned any boats yourself or captained any boats?

RL: Well, I've done pretty well all aspects of the business.

MS: What do you do right now?

RL: I'm a seafood dealer.

MS: You own your own place?

RL: Right. We got – well, I say we. I own the processing. Well, it's not processing. Boat unloading place right behind me, Lyons Seafood.

MS: Well, hold on. Let's put those two together and tell Mike what you are and what you do. What is Lyons Seafood?

RL: I'm owner and operator of Lyons Seafood. We unload shrimp boats. We don't process. We just pack them in bulk, sell them to processors or to retail markets. It's a pretty demanding job. It's seven-day a week, but it's seasonal. In the winter months, it slows down, then you get a lot of time off.

MS: Do you do strictly shrimp?

RL: Shrimp and whatever by-catch comes in on the shrimp boat.

MS: Most of the seafood stays local? It goes to local places?

RL: What I sell stays local. It's sold on the fresh market. All my boats are fresh boats. They catch their shrimp in the inside waters, Mobile Bay, Mississippi Sound. I don't freeze or ship.

About the extent of it would be New Orleans as far as my fresh shrimp would go, or Pensacola.

MS: I see you have several boats behind you. Do you provide docking for the boats that you unload?

RL: Yes. That's the way we've always done it. This business here has been since 1964. If a person sells us his shrimp, we let him tie it for free.

MS: You pretty much have the same boats coming in and the same people, or does it vary?

RL: Well, from when the business started, virtually all them people are gone. I think we're working on some fourth generation that's working here now from when their grandfathers worked here when my father first started it.

MS: So, you think it's more of a bond rather than economic reasons, or a little bit of both?

RL: Well, I mean, I don't know. We try to treat people right. If you treat people good, they keep coming back. That's what we try to do.

MS: What are some of the biggest changes in gear, in the boats, refrigeration, or other aspects that have had effects on the (sea?)?

RL: Well, when I was a kid, you just had boats that had ice holes and no insulation. They bought ice in three hundred-pound bars. You had to shave it. They covered everything up with tarpaulins or sacks or whatever to keep it cold. Slowly, insulation became popular. They started insulating the ice holes, so it would hold ice. Then they got to where they would grind the ice where you didn't have to manually shave it and make chunks out of it. Then as they built newer boats, they started putting the insulation in the sides of the boats and covering it up where the whole ice hole was perfectly insulated. Then slowly evolved into freezer boats to where the shrimp are caught, packed, and frozen right on the boat just within an hour or so after they're caught.

MS: With just ice, how long were the trips?

RL: They'd go fourteen, fifteen days from dock to dock.

MS: What about navigation gear or depth finders? I mean, the boats nowadays have quite a lot of equipment. How has that changed?

RL: When we were coming up, the old-timers, they had a compass, a watch, and an Armstrong depth meter.

MS: What's an Armstrong depth meter?

RL: An Armstrong was a [inaudible] shoved up in the hole, tied with a rope with knots in it to ever so many feet. Somebody would stand on the bow, swing it out ahead of the boat. When

they picked it up, they'd grab the knot that was top of the water, and they'd see how deep it was. Then they could look in the soap and see what kind of bottom, whether it was mud, sand, gravel. They'd navigate it with a clock and a course. They would run it out when the weather was pretty. They'd time it. Then when it was foggy, bad day, or the night, they'd run that same course by the compass and their watch. I mean, they were dead on it, 100 percent accurate.

MS: Wow. That's amazing.

RL: I could do it, but I don't believe I'd ever get that good.

MS: When would you say the heyday of Bayou La Batre doing? Could you explain what it was like to be a part of it and living here during that?

RL: Well, when you live in something, you're not really aware of it until you sit back and look back. It was just the way it was then. Prior to the heyday, it was fishermen, all fishermen, born, raised, generations, and had their boats. Their sons would work on their boats. Then when they'd get too old, their sons would take over the boat. When this business was first started, we'd buy a forty, fifty count shrimp. We bought by the barrel. That was 210 pounds of shrimp. Every year, the price would start out like $35 a barrel. We'd come to around 16 cents a pound. That was for years and years. That was the opening price. It seems like in the early [19]70s, their shrimp opened at 16 cents a pound. Within less than a month, the price had doubled. It went from 16 to 32 cents. Fuel didn't go up. Ice didn't go up. Supplies didn't go up. All of a sudden, it was doubling your catch, money-wise. The shrimp just kept going up. That's when investors started coming in. People said, "Whoa, we can make a lot of money doing this." So, they started buying boats, putting people on boats, running them, and they made money. A lot of people lost a lot of big money. You had it down. I can't remember the exact year. One time, shrimp were up, selling to the Japanese, and the price fell. Then production fell off, shrimp and fish. Fuel had went up some. So, we about lost our fleet. All the boats were sold to Africa, but then it rebounded and came back. It's been going on up until now. Now, it's getting real critical. I don't know how many of these super-sized shrimp boats have been tied up down the Gulf Coast. Hundreds, I guess, literally hundreds, million-dollar boats. Just off the top of my head, I'd say that we probably lost 80 percent of the gulf fleet because they can't pay for them. A lot of that is because the cost of fuel. Going out, this fuel price was killing us.

MS: You mentioned right now the decline in the seafood industry here. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

RL: Well, what's happening is that the cost of everything has went up, and the price of shrimp is down. The production per boat is greater than what I've ever seen in my life. We got better rigs, more power, but the cost of producing and the price of shrimp is down because we used to compete with the Gulf Coast. Now, we're competing with the world. If we don't produce a shrimp here for a year, it wouldn't affect the boat price. They just bring in more import. So, we're caught with low-priced shrimp and high-priced fuel and high-priced everything.

MS: What can be done to change this?

RL: I don't see any ready solution unless you get some type of subsidizing. I don't know if that would happen. What seems to be happening is turning it into a survival of the fittest.

Male Speaker: What can you do?

MS: What can be done to stop this decline?

RL: I don't see any ready solution for stopping the decline. Maybe some subsidizing by the government, but I don't look for that to happen. What seems to be happening is survival of the fittest. The people that are true fishermen seemed to be surviving. They're catching more shrimp. They're tightening their belts. This way, they're going to make their living. They are making a living. They're prepared to weather it out. But all the people that's in it just for the money and what I call not true fishermen, they're having a hard time. Now, even some of the good fishermen are losing their boats, but it's due to bad luck or whatever. It's not for their capabilities. So, what it's seeming to me is that the size of the fleet is going to reduce. So, that'll give them a bigger piece of the pie, more production. Hopefully, they can come out by catching more shrimp.

MS: It seems like there's a lot of tradition here and a lot of close family values and togetherness, and things are passed down to the generation. Can you explain that a little bit and talk about that?

RL: Well, it's just –

MS: It seems like there's a lot of family closeness. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

RL: Well, it's hard to describe your feelings, but you take right here, we've got a boat over here. This guy is my second cousin. We were raised up together. He's a little bit younger than me. It is no good. It's hard to explain feelings, but so many of us are related, went to school together, have worked together, have been connected all our life. We just have a bond. This boat over here is my second cousin. We've been together all our life. This gentleman here on this boat here, we're not kins. But ever since he started shrimping – he's from Grand Bay. We knew the family. I guess he's been around for forty years. This boat right here, (the boy?) on this boat is third generation that's worked here. Back when I was a kid, his father and his grandfather, we used to tie our boat next to their boat. We worked for the same fish house back before we had our fish house. So, it's just been people that's, for generations and different generations, been knowing each other for so long, and you have a bond.

MS: So, do you have any children for yourself?

RL: Yes, I got six.

MS: Are they in the business as well?

RL: I got two boys that work in the shipyards right now, and then one helps me. My grandson helps me. So, my grandson is the fourth generation working here.

MS: With the decline of the seafood industry here now going on, do you see the traditions being passed down declining?

RL: Yes, yes. One thing is because the boats have got so much bigger, where when we were coming up, the boats were small. We'd make one to three-day trips over the weekend. If we had a day off from school during the middle of the week, we'd go fishing with our daddy, shrimping, whatever. Now, the bulk of the boats are such big boats, they make thirty-day trips, and a kid can't hardly do that. Our boats, we'd tie up in the wintertime versus now, the boats work year-round. Our parents worked on the boats during the winter. Well, every day after school or holidays, if he was painting the boat or whatever, we had to be there helping, if he was crabbing. That's one thing that you don't have, the closeness. With the bigger boats, it's more like a guy having a job with a corporation. You can't bring your son there to teach him anything. That's hurting us. Also, the income is not there like it used to be. So, a lot of the kids coming out of school have to go find other jobs. We got some following in the footsteps, but I'd say just 10 percent of what it used to be.

MS: Being on the water, it seems to be that this fascination of the water and this closeness with the water. Can you describe that a little bit?

RL: Again, how do you describe feelings? But I've seen many, many times we'd come in out of the bay working, shrimping, be out three or four days, come in, and we'd get unloaded. The next thing we'd do, we'd go get in the skiff to go out in the water to play. We come in from work and go out back where we come from to play, so how do you explain that?

MS: How are the relations between families when the fishermen are out on trips for several days at a time? Are the families left on land, the wives and the kids close?

RL: Yes, yes. More so back when it was less communication, less television, less computers, less vehicles because you got so many things to do now, but they're still pretty close.

MS: Tell Mike about those golden days, your feelings when you all would just go back on the water to play, and what Bayou La Batre meant to you then growing up, what kind of place it was, and where you feel it is today and can be in the future.

RL: Well, when we were coming up, we worked and played on the bayou and in the bay. We'd go out shrimping, fishing, whatever. We'd come in, and we'd turn around and go right back out to play, go hook and line fishing, or floundering, or soft shelling. These bayous used to be full of bass and brim. That was a big part of a young boy's life, hook and line fishing. We didn't really have anywhere to go, so we had to entertain ourselves. I don't know. Our whole life was centered around the bayou. It was work and play. I remember my father, he was crabbing. He worked for Mr. Robert Lee Bryant. He had to have crab bait every day. So, back then, they would dump the crab hulls in the water and the mullet would get thick, thick. So, me and my brother, we had two cane poles with snag hooks on it. We'd run home from school, change clothes, go back down to Mr. Robert Lee's, and try to snag daddy's crab bait for the next day. Well, I mean, it was work. But to us, it was the greatest fun in the world. We have two or three

big mullets on the line, bending a cane pole double. We'd brag about how many we caught or who caught the most. We didn't eat them. We wouldn't eat anything out of the bayous, but it was work plus fun and a sport.

MS: Is that still the case today?

RL: No. You don't see a lot of that. Number one, you can't dump anything in the bayous, so the fish don't get that thick. There's so many laws and regulations, so many conservation people running around. You don't know if you're being a criminal or having fun. You don't know what's legal anymore. But you still see a lot of the kids hook and line fishing for bass and speckled trout, but you don't see the work and the fun intermingled as much.

MS: How have regulations affected the seafood industry, both in the past and now, for good and for bad?

RL: A big part of our problems are regulations. The recreational fishermen look on us like we're the scourge of the sea. They don't realize that we get a lot of bad press. A lot of these people in position of power, they get up, and they talk about how much we destroy. In one night, we take in the whole coast of Alabama. That's just wrong. That's just fabrications. But they're the ones that get the media's ear. Then they get the legislators, and they change laws. It's really, really hurt us in areas. Then another thing is that you've got marine police, coast guard, conservation. You don't know what's right and what's wrong. It seems like when they board you, I mean, you're at their mercy. You don't know. You may be violating the law unintentionally, and you'll get a $1,000 ticket. Most of these boys, and it's sad to say, they know nothing about what it's like to be on a boat. They jump on the boat. They read the book. Most of them don't even know what they're doing. They cause the fishermen a lot of grief. Now, as they get older and more seasoned, and they learn what's happening, and then they usually turn out to be fine officers. But the enforcement officials caused us a lot of grief. That's one reason why the Fleet blessing is a bust now. That used to be a big event. People would load up on the boats. It's not the only reason, but it plays a big part that the coast guard started hassling people, too many people on the boat. They wouldn't let people ride on the boats. They had to stay on the beach. Well, people weren't going to come if they couldn't ride on the boats. Then people in skiffs riding up and down the bay, the marine police, they were arresting them for just little violations. Well, it got to where nobody was going to put their skiffs overboard. So, what was a great community affair was interfered with. Now, we just don't go to them. I mean, why do I want to go from here to go get a $1,000 citation? Or why do I want to take a boat, and I can't load thirty members of the family on it? I'll just stay home. That's what most people feel.

MS: Has this always been the case, or when did these regulations start affecting you?

RL: No. That's not the only reason. There were a lot of other reasons, but it just slowly happened before we even knew what was happening. You'd hear somebody say, "Man, I got a ticket." They said, "I was growing a wake, rocking boats, and I got this big ticket. The heck with this, I'm not going back." They wouldn't, and it was slow. I don't know if you've been to a fleet blessing –

MS: (I haven't?).

RL: – but there's not enough boats to even call it a fleet blessing.

MS: You said that's not the only reason. What are some other reasons?

RL: Well, there's economic times. One thing that the fishermen complain about is that the people that organized it kept changing the date from year to year. They didn't ever know when it was going to be. Then the class of boat changed. Back when they started it, they were all what we called a bay boat, the bulk of them. The fleet blessing was held the last Sunday of July, regardless, the last Sunday of July. That was right at the changeover from brown to white shrimp season. So, the boats were kind of idle. So, they could take their time off, take a few days off, decorate, and blessing the fleet. But now, with these big boats, they'll all be in Key West, Florida, Texas. They never know when they're going to be at the docks. That's another factor.

MS: When did the Blessing of the Fleet start?

RL: When is it now?

MS: No. When did it start?

RL: I don't remember. I was small when it did. It's been a long time now.

MS: It's gotten in your blood, hadn't it?

RL: Well, you're born in it.

MS: What do you think about for your grandchildren? What do you think is the best for them and what do you hope?

RL: I figure if I get through this, I don't know. I'm trying to diversify now. I don't see the seafood business disappearing. Unless they regulate us out of business, there's going to be seafood. If you're going to survive, you better diversify your business. I think the town needs to not necessarily become a tourist town or bulldoze the town down like they wanted to and build condominiums and get rid of everybody but start building on what we are. Start trying to build seafood related businesses, restaurants, shops, and start bringing the tourist dollar in to bolster our income. That way, for a good many of us or for the majority of us to survive, I think that's what we need to do. If we don't diversify, if a person thinks they're going to do what they've been doing for the generations, I think they're totally wrong. I'd like to see everybody in the seafood business now start trying to figure some way to diversify to cater to the out-of-town people to get more dollars in. That way, if we do good in seafood, great. If we have a bad year or whatever, we still got income, and we can keep our town.

MS: I know in several states out west, there's big seafood markets at the ports. Besides just getting them right off the boat, has there ever been one location where everybody can come?

RL: We've never had a seafood market or a fisherman's market. We've had several retail seafood markets in town over the years, but never anything that was a cooperative-type effort. I think that would work good, especially now. I wouldn't know the details of it right this second, but I think that would work good because that would bring people in. You sell it cheaper and give people a reason to drive here. They'd buy gas, eat in the restaurants, buy the seafood, go to novelty shops, and we'd bring in money. That'd just be one way to bring in money.

MS: Tell Mike about how important a working waterfront would be.

MS: Rodney, you talked about the importance of having a waterfront in this community and what being able to work it and everything is.

RL: Well, I've never really thought about the economic importance of having this waterfront in relation to the whole county or state. But as far as the people in the bayou, it's very important because it's the way they make their living, plus it's what they know, it's their way of life, and it's their love. That's what it means to the people of the community. It's a way of life.

MS: You said they wanted to build condos there.

RL: Yes.

MS: What would that do to you?

RL: Personally, I've got no problem with change. If my neighbor wanted to sell his property and have a condominium built, all that would do is help the community. There's a lot of people in town that feel that way. Back whenever they were wanting to do that, we weren't so much against the condominiums. We were against the way they wanted to do it. They didn't want to come in and let individuals evolve into it. They wanted to come in, zone us out of business, me in particular. I'm just one of them, but they were really after me. They were going to zone me out of business. In one flick of the pen, they were going to put the seafood business out, the shrimping part. They were going to bulldoze everything down and just run us out overnight. That's what we were against. We are not against the growth. We're against the tactics, the way they were going to grow because it was going to be money made for a select few. The people, the backbone of the town, were just going to be shoved out. That's what the plan was. I can tell you horror stories of what was going on in this town of the way they were trying to get rid of people. You know what they were going to do? I can show you on a map. It took me two years to figure out why. They come down on me so frigging hard. I told my lawyer friend, I said, "Man," I said, "I don't like the mayor personally, and he don't like me." I said, "I can understand that. You just don't like somebody." "This building inspector," I said, "I don't even know him." I said, "They down on me so hard. It's just unbelievable." What it was, the guy that owned this right here, they were going to come in, and they wanted everything. They were taking everything. Well, this guy right here wanted to sell. Well, I didn't want to sell. Why should I? Where am I going to go? What am I going to do with $2 million? I finally got my hands on a map that they never showed the planning board. I got it in my office up there. Right now, I'll show anybody. They were going to rezone the west bank of this bayou, which we call Snake

Bayou, to residential. It's always been heavy industry. I was going to be the only waterfront property that was going to be residential. I was the only business here that wasn't interested in selling. My neighbor wanted to sell. Well, after the storm, they wouldn't give me my power, told me that I didn't need a permit to fix my building. As soon as I started fixing my building, they gave me a citation and then tied me up in court for a year where I couldn't bill nothing. The building inspector told me he wouldn't. He wouldn't sell me a license, just all kind of stuff. I'm being real mild here on tape. [laughter] So, one friend of mine, not only were they trying to run him out of business, they had plans to dig his property up. They were going to make a big turning basin out of his property and just take it away from him. Then the parish property at the mouth of the bayou, the city tried to steal it. They even got a $100,000 grant and spent it and made a park on it on private land. That's documented now. I mean, that's fact. I got the map to show what I'm saying, what they were going to do to us. So, we got a lot of hard feelings about the condominium projects, but we're not against the growth itself. It's a method.

MS: Very good. It could evolve.

MS: Good.

RL: Right.

MS: Thanks, Rodney.

RL: Is that it?

MS: Yes.

[end of transcript]