

Preserving Oral Histories of Waterfront-Related Pursuits in Bayou La Batre

B.G. Thompson Oral History

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Interviewer: MS – Michael Stieber

Transcriber: NCC

Michael Stieber: So, how do you buy the nylon? By yardage?

BG Thompson: By the pound it comes in. It comes bailed up. It's got it in bales. It's wrapped with (folder?) around it. This webbing here usually comes about 250 pounds to a bale.

MS: How much does it take to make one of these nets.

BGT: It takes about 75 pounds, this wet net right here, just to net the body alone. You've got your bag. All this is separate, but possibly about 75s pound a body that net, maybe 80 pounds body that net.

MS: I see this is a pretty lengthy and big operation. Is it all done in here?

BGT: Yes. We do it all in here.

MS: Do you build it all in here?

BGT: Oh, yes. All except we don't dip it in here. We take it down and dip things. We do the whole net here. Now, we have to buy the stuff bulk from companies somewhere, see. The supplies, we buy all that. But we do all the work right in here.

MS: How does the process continue from here?

BGT: Well, we – see, with this bottom line, we put the top line up hanging, what they call the cork line. It'll be corks on it. We hang all that. I've got this extension made, and we'll sew this – attach it right there to the back end of this right here. The cod-end, which we call the bag, it's a cod-end, goes on the back of the net, so back of that right there. Then it'd be completed.

MS: Where do you do the dipping at?

BGT: Right down in the road here. We've got a dip tank down there. I load it on the truck, take it down the dip tank and dip it.

MS: So, tell me about, somebody comes in the door, how do they know where you are? When they walk in, what do they tell you, what do you do, and how long does it usually take?

BGT: We've got people who knows where – we've been in for years. People know. If they don't know, they ask somebody, and they'll say, "Well, you go so-and-so." Just like Tide Marine out here, Tide Marine [inaudible] a lot of people down here, see, or [inaudible]. They know where everybody works at. I'll send Tide business. They send me business, whatever. But if a man walks in the front door down and says he wants a net or three or four nets or whatever, he'll want to know how long it takes to build them, when he can get them. If he's Vietnamese, he wants them yesterday [laughter]. We get a lot of business from the Vietnamese. I can't knock them. They do a lot of business with us. But normally, if a man comes and orders a net, just like that net right here, he can figure about three days to get through with it, from scratch to finish – to the end.

MS: Is there a pattern you use?

BGT: Yes, I'll build my own patterns. Oh, I'll fetch my own patterns, so you understand what I'm talking about. That part right here, and this part right here, see what's hanging up right there? That's the bottom of the net. This is what's called a wing of the net. This is the top of the net over here. It all folds over and makes up like a funnel. See? This is all sewn right. Because if you don't sew it right, get it started right, it won't come out right at the bottom end. See? One end will be longer than the other. But I've got all kinds of different patterns, a pattern like that.

MS: So, that one is specific to this net.

BGT: Yes. This is a 40-foot net pattern, see? Right there. See? This here is a 40-foot net right here, made for the *Lucky Tommy*.

MS: But show us the net you got here too, that first page.

BGT: This is it right here.

MS: Yes. How does it work?

BGT: Okay. This is the bottom of the net right here. It's 332 meshed on the bottom. That's 380 on the top body. This is the wing right here. All this all sews together, makes like a funnel. See? Now, on the back end of the net, what I'm doing right now, putting the extension on the back end of it back here, which is 60 meshes deep right there. Then on the back of this here, the cod-end – that TED's going to go on the back end of that. Then the bag, cod-end, goes on the back end of that. I get through this, it's going to be about \$1,800 net, really. Well, there's not too many people who can do this. You've got maybe three or four right now in the country around here that can figure out a pattern right quick. Most of the people ask to pick some patterns, which we do a lot of times. We've got to help one another. I've got an uncle who just got into it about a couple of years back, see. He's got a new shop. It's built him a [inaudible].

MS: Do you guys put a particular chain on it and everything?

BGT: Yes.

MS: Have you got any more floats to sew on there?

BGT: Not right now.

MS: Okay.

BGT: On a flat net, you want to pull it about 2.5-foot ahead because net fish is different, see. But on balloon nets, you've got to put it 4.5- to 5-foot ahead to keep the stuff up right. Without that tickle chain, you wouldn't catch a third of the stuff.

MS: How far down does it go? Just across the bottom?

BGT: You've got your trawl boards, see. Tickle chain is fast to the trawl board here, this board over here. It keeps your net spread out, see, goes in front of your net there about 4.5-, 5-foot ahead of your net. Keeps all the stuff off the bottom up. They've got a – I don't know if you've ever seen – they've got a movie you could probably get from National Marine Fisheries to watch it. It shows you going down – they're putting divers down to make sure the TED is working right. The diver will go down. He'll go inside – get inside the net and all and come out through the – yes. Crazy. Not me.

MS: You're not going in that thing.

BGT: No way.

MS: Do you know the name of that movie?

BGT: National Marine Fisheries has got it then. You can call them and find out. They've probably got more than one you can get to look at. It shows you how the net works and works at the bottom. Of course, when they show you a film, it's usually a film like in Florida, on sandy bottom where it's clear, where they can see it. See. So, naturally, it won't catch as much stuff. But they film it where you can see everything that's going on, shows your net working at the bottom and how the TED and all works. A diver will go down. They get back in to pull that flap up on that TED, make sure it's all working right. Sometimes you even get to decide to look at it. That's kind of a dangerous thing to do.

MS: Sounds like it.

BGT: Oh, boy. Of course, they've got cameras filming him,. So, if he was to get caught or something, they'd get him up right quick, see. But that thing right there, mesh, that's ridiculous right there. That just kills a fisherman.

MS: So, if a boat's pulling the four nets, each one –

BGT: Yes, four.

MS: Is that for shrimping in the gulf or the bay?

BGT: Fishing in the gulf. In the bay – 56 inches in the bay. In the gulf, 72 inches, that hole has got to be cut. Of course, now, you've got a flap that goes over it. Oh, [inaudible] talking about a flap. See, what I do, when I get through tying this thing in there – I get through tying it all in there, I'll measure up 26 inches from right here for the (gill?), see, and you've got a 72-inch hole right there. You take this webbing comes out of it. See that heavy green webbing right there? That's plastic webbing, back there on the floor. I'll use 39 meshes of it, strip, 87 meshes wide, goes in here, see, to cover this whole back up. It'll fit over the top of this – fasten there, it'll fit over here, you know, like so. It'd be 87 mesh, see, which would be a flap, and it's all this. It lays down against the frame as long as you're working. Something gets in, comes out, going out

through the hole, see. I'll come up here, and I'll cut this across 23 meshes that way and 23 this way. It's an 87-mesh hole – 72-inch hole, what it's going to be. When I get all of this done, see, I'll come back, and I'll cut the hole out. I'll come back, and I'll put rope around all of it. You've got to rope to keep them chafing on the bottom, see. I take a yellow rope like this right here and use a foot of it. You start it, and you go from side to side like so, [inaudible] like that. So, you go around it from there to here. That gets solid, see. Then on the side there, I go so much far apart on the side. But this is for the bottom, so it won't take your webbing out. It will chafe your rope. Because the bottom is like that, see. Your turtle and your big stuff comes in through the back of your net, goes in through here, hits that frame, goes out down through the hole, see.

MS: How long does it take to construct one of those?

BGT: It takes about two hours and a half to fix one of them, three hours if you're slow. I usually do about three, four of them a day, if I only stop doing something else, you know. Four of them would be a good day's work. A long day, I can do four of them. All right. Okay. This extension I'm sewing here back in the net, heavy webbing to keep them chafing out too bad. That TED right there, I'll tie on the back end of this right here. Tie them right back here, back in the – I guess this would be about 150 meshes around it, and the TED's 150, see. So, it evens.

MS: So, when it's done, how does it get transported? Does it get folded up or rolled up?

BGT: When it gets done, I'll just put it on a truck, take it down, and get it dipped. I don't roll them up, just leave them like they are. I'll put a put a line through the end of the wing lines. The bag's got a strap on it, put a line through the strap, and pick it all up one time, dry, and rig in down there.

MS: It that with a crane?

BGT: Use a winch. I've got a winch to pick it up there.

MS: How big of a vat is it?

BGT: Oh, that probably holds about – probably a couple hundred gallons of paint, about 300 gallons of paint. You can put two big nets at one time into it.

MS: Will that use up the 300 gallons?

BGT: No. It usually takes – a net like this right here, it takes probably about 15 gallons of paint to a net, maybe 16. Average net, about 11, 12 gallons, average net. You get those drums of painters – I think they're about 55 gallons to a drum. So, you can get about four nets out of a drum of paint at least, four nets. Oh, if you ever get a chance, go to Ocean Springs, the net company down there where they make this stuff at, and talk to Mark, Mark Ederer. He'll take you all through the shop and all through the plant, show you how to make the webbing, how to make the twine, everything. It's something to look at. It's amazing.

MS: How long they've been in business, you think?

BGT: Oh, God, since – how many years his daddy was in the business. His daddy passed away. Now, he's in the business. I know it's probably been – probably 100 years, I guess. It's been a long time. It's something to look at, making that webbing. They make their bale of webbing, sideways, you know. Because it makes 300 meshes – 200 meshes at one lick. They put a spool of twine on the thing, like bobbins, and grab that twine, come down with it, and 200 meshes. It's that quick. The twine, the thickness –

MS: Where is it?

BGT: Ocean Springs. You go down Highway 90. You see Walmart's on the right side over there. Right across the road is a big blue building. It says Ederer on it. Now, one of them is a machine shop. Ederer's back this way farther across from Walmart's. Go and talk to Mark Ederer. To make that twine, it started with a filament. So, they had a bitty old strand of it, making it, then it makes the strand. Then they put the strands together. Shows you all the process of doing it. That's something to look at. So, if you ever get a chance, you need to go and talk to him. I know he'd show you all through the plant, show you how to make it, and how to how to bale it and everything. You've got women working in his shop because – it's mostly all women, you know. Because they – that little hand and all their [inaudible]. If the machine misses a mesh, they'll go behind and check it all. I know Matt appreciates all that. This is the bottom end of the bag. See, we did arrange this here. You put a rope through here, and all that ties up, see. The rope around it, tie it all up.

MS: Say that again.

BGT: This is the back end. We call it the cod-end. We call it the bag. You've got a rope that goes through this here. You tie it up. When you're picking that up, this is the strap. Pull that in right there. You put a strap around it. Pick it up. You pull your trip line. That TED right there, passing on right here, see. So, if you get something big, it goes out where he goes into the bag.

MS: Hopefully, the bag's full of shrimp?

BGT: Sometimes.

Male Speaker: Mostly, it's where the shrimp end is.

BGT: Yes, where the shrimp is. This is what they call a (laser?) line, ties here, but you pull it in with, see. A lot of work to it. Thank you.

MS: -- for imparting the information, cut to the chase there. All right. Just state your name, and where you're from, and how long you been here?

BGT: Well, my name is BG Thompson. I'm a native in this area. I was born in Heron Bay in the [19]30s. We moved in 1961 to Washington – outside Washington, DC, and I worked in Washington. We moved back in 2004, came back home.

MS: How has your family been involved in the seafood industry and [inaudible] throughout the years?

BGT: We've been involved, going back generations, as far back as my great granddad's, my daddy's side. This is like in the middle 1850s. Your seafood industry wasn't just in Bayou. Most of the seafood industry at the beginning was in Mobile. But the seafood – the fishing was around this area. Until the railroad came down here, your product, to get to market, had to go by boat to the market in Mobile. But when the market then moved to the Bayou, like the canning plants then, we've been involved, say, since the [19]30s.

MS: Okay. In what capacity?

BGT: Supplier, fishing boats, crabs, shrimp, and oysters, primarily.

MS: Did you ever do any shrimping or fishing yourself?

BGT: Oh, yes, from the time I was a little bitty guy, up until – off and on, even after I went to school, while I was going to school. That's how I helped my way through school.

MS: Did you ever do any shrimping yourself?

BGT: Yes, I shrimped from the time I was a little guy, up until I moved away from this area in 1961. When I was in school, it wasn't full time, but it was how I helped pay for my education. I enjoyed it, and I learned a lot. What I learned as a commercial fisherman became the basis for my career over 40-some, 50 years.

MS: Describe a little bit what it was like fishing back then, shrimping back then, and how it's different nowadays.

BGT: Well, shrimping back then was quite different. When I was a little kid, the engines that you had in the boats were not the big engines like you see today. The boats were small. A lot of folks had like, two-cylinder engines, what they call a make-and-break, that you had a (coil?), a battery, not a rechargeable battery, in most cases. You had a huge flywheel on the motor. To make it back up, you would stop and crank it backwards. You did not have the lift rigs. You didn't have the towing cables, the winches. You let the net out by rope. When you pull your net in, you pull your ropes in. The (carting?) of the net, you would bring it up the side of the boat, put it on wooden rack, and with scoops, scoop the contents of the cod-end out, since you didn't have the hoist like you have today. Most cases, the boats did not carry ice. They either brought their catch in daily, and they kept it fresh by keeping it in cool water. Or they had what they call freight boats. These were boats with ice, with scales. So, the little boats will go alongside the freight boat, unload their catch, weigh it, get a ticket, and the freight boat will ice it and bring it in, most often, to a canning plant in the Bayou.

MS: So, how has it changed? What are some of the advances that you see now?

BGT: The advances really didn't occur until after the Second World War, when you had surplus

engines from the war effort, like the GM diesels. They started building bigger boats, where, before the war, the fishing was inshore. You could only sell one species, what we call the white shrimp. It moved from being able to sell the white shrimp to the brown shrimp, which you caught at night. Again, the only way you could sell that is it went to canning – into canning. There was a problem at the beginning with the canneries and using that shrimp because it had a different chemical compound which would turn the inside of the can black. But it was soon discovered, just a few drops of lemon juice would prevent that. The Kissimmee, they don't know it's a brown shrimp, a white shrimp, or a pink shrimp. So, that started enhancing the industry, the – with the better motors, winches, steel cables, the – building the boats from bay boats to offshore fishing boats with the cabins on the bow, the wings, like you see today. But when I first started, one net was pulled from one of the wings, a trinet from the other wing. Then it was discovered that you could put a net on each side of the boat by just putting a difference in how far you let one out versus the other. You increased the fishing capacity of the boat. Of course, all the boats then started carrying the ice. Ice became much cheaper. You went from blocked ice back – which was used when you had the freight boat. You had 300-pound blocks, which you would lift out of the hull of the boat – to the new method of making ice, which was what would be crushed ice back then, where you had to grind the block, okay? They would blow this ice right in the hull of the boat. So, that made a huge difference. Then the next change occurred in the late [19]60s really, in the [19]70s, with freezing. You could freeze right on the boat. Then you had IQF right on the boat, bigger boats, from 60- and 70- to 80-foot boats. You went from wood to steel boats, what you see today.

MS: – the natural bounty of its location, depth, waterways, how was it started? What's the history here?

BGT: Good question [laughter]. Okay. Like with the international situation where you have different player groups, different fishermen; you've got something similar at the local level. You've got state government. You've got your federal government. You've got your different user groups. You've got political pressure. Then you have, what is a wise way to manage the resource for the benefit of the resource, to maintain the resource for future years, future generations? One of the things, looking at changes for the future and what we know as –

MS: – before your time.

BGT: Well, before my time, it was quite different. You go back to the early years when you had sailboats. You didn't have motoring boats. How did they catch shrimp? Again, the – I am assuming that's why white shrimp became, what I'm going to say next, became the only shrimp eaten. In the summertime, the white shrimp start living out of the marshes, where the eggs float ashore from the gulf and the estuaries, grow into the adult shrimp, and then they migrate from the estuarine areas out to the sea. As they grow bigger and the water and the [inaudible] is getting cool and cold in the late summer, fall, and winter, they migrate offshore. Shrimp has a one-year life cycle. They go offshore. They lay the eggs in the late winter. The eggs explode on the surface. Then the winds primarily bring those eggs into the estuaries for another year cycle. Well, when the shrimp blew out of the estuaries, back before the boats with motors, they had what's called haul seine, beach seine. These were long nets that they would launch out from the beach, make a circle, and go down on the other side of the beach and then pull them in by hand.

Then like a trawl, the auto trawl, like they use today, it had a tail. They'd bring it up into that tail. Then they'd scoop the shrimp out of the tail into baskets and buckets and whatever else. That's how they harvested the shrimp back then, the same way they did mullet and finfish like menhaden. Menhaden were caught by these seines and shipped to Mississippi, which is still today, and turned into fishmeal for, primarily, fertilizer back in those days, but later, for animal feeds.

MS: So, what are the main industries here in Bayou La Batre and Coden area?

BGT: Well, the oldest one, as far as my knowledge, would be the oyster industry. The oyster industry going back – from what my dad used to tell me – in the late 1800s – well, middle 1800s, based on his granddad's stories and his daddy's stories, on up until today, was the primary moneymaker for the fishermen. If they had a good year with the oyster, then they could go freight business in the summertime or some other business with their boats. But as the old story, you know, oyster on every plate, that goes back to the 1900s, early 1900s. At one time, I was doubting some of the stories I heard as a kid. I went back and said, "Well, what were the prices for oysters, say, in 1900," and found that the oyster price between 1900 and 1906 was higher than it was in 1944 during the Second World War. Okay? The oyster, of course, was a raw market. Later, they had the canning. Over on just north of Alabama port, there was a canning plant that was, from what I understand, the first canning plant for this area of Bayou La Batre, Coden, Heron Bay, and Mobile, that canned seafood, primarily oysters. The plant, as I was told, was owned by some people in Baltimore. The labor they used for the processing of the oysters, shucking the oyster, and so on, they'd bring from Baltimore down to Alabama by train. They lived in a little town right next door to what is now Alabama Port. They'd worked the plant all winter. Then the next summer, they'd send them back to Baltimore. That particular plant was destroyed in the 1906 hurricane. When I was a kid, we could go over there and visit the cement slab it sat on. We saw the artesian wells which supplied the water and so on. You could see the outline of where the homes were in what we called Hardluck City. That's where the homes were destroyed, where these people lived in 1906. But oysters have been a mainstay as far as the seafood here for way over 100 years.

MS: How has that evolved? Has it, or is it still done the same way?

BGT: It's primarily being done the same way. You can dredge oysters. In Alabama, with the size of the reefs and the abundance of oysters on the reefs, if you allowed dredging, which they quit allowing in the late 1930s, is that you quickly overfish these reefs. You can do a lot of damage with these dredges in the type of reefs that they have here. Like you go into where they do use dredges, your oysters are spaced further apart. Whereas here, the oysters are in clusters. So, it was primarily tonging, which you have today. Dredging is allowed today but only on your private beds, okay? It's a way of maximizing employment with the tonging, is another aspect of that particular fishing year. Of course, back when my dad dredged – when my dad fished oysters – he couldn't dredge them because his was a sailboat. With the dredge, you've got to have a winch. They didn't have motors. So, they had to tong them.

MS: You had mentioned the 1906 storm. How have storms affected the seafood industry over the years?

BGT: That particular storm or storms in themselves?

MS: Just everything, when they come.

BGT: Yes. These storms will have a negative impact for a period of time. Now, it depends on what happened. Now, the Katrina – one of the things the industry is living with – Katrina made a cut in the west end of Dauphin Island. Dauphin Island is part of a barrier reef system in the Gulf of Mexico. You don't have, like in Mobile River coming down headwaters of Mobile Bay, that freshwater mixing with salt water. You have this lower salinity water which creates the major habitat for over 90 percent of the species, marine species. Because at one stage of life, primarily the early stage of life, begins in those estuaries. Now, where you have the bayou structure, which is not far inland, don't bring down a lot of freshwater, the barrier islands help spread that freshwater where you do have rivers – and of course, when you have your rains from your bayous – in creating your low salinity water. This is the prime need of like your shrimp, your oyster, your crab, and your finfish. Like I said, 90 percent of these fish in the ocean, at one stage, is in these estuarine areas. Now, in the case of the oyster, the first thing that happened – will happen, it's happened before, but not like it is today. Because the breach is so wide, the saltwater allows what we call the conch to come in, and just, it's completely – almost completely destroyed the oyster crop from – on the north side of Dauphin Island. It's really decimated. The only oysters is really up in the bay. Then when you get up into the bay, up the far reaches, you can't harvest the oyster because the quality of the water doesn't permit it. Back in the early 1950s, after the Second World War, with Brookley Field and the soldiers coming back and a lack of waste treatment – wastewater treatment, you had an epidemic of a disease. It was a parasite, and a lot of people died. One of the things that's led to is what we call the Clean Water Act eventually, but sampling of water, and if the water is not clean for the oysters, since they will be eaten raw, not fully cooked, to prevent that from happening. That is the law today, which is, of course, vigorously enforced and rightfully so. Because the industry doesn't want someone to get sick from that product. That will kill the market overnight. So, you want to follow that law. All of them to do, and they respect it. Rather than take a chance, they just draw a line and say, "Hey, we don't go above this line. We know it's clean here. Here we've got – the state will have to test the waters." Of course, you'll see where they – they'll test weather all the way out to the gulf. If the water is not safe, they'll close it, and I mean quickly, which is good, very good.

MS: Okay. Could you describe a little bit what it was like being in the seafood industry and fishing?

BGT: Well, it's got its positive sides. Like I said, I was born in the [19]30s, which is the beginning of the Depression. One of the things that I remember, we had migrants come from as far away as Wisconsin, to the gulf, for one purpose. We had food. They lived here. The last family that moved back, left right after the Second World War. So, you had good things and, of course, the bad – what a lot of people think of as a bad side, it's a tough way to live. You get up real early in the morning. You work hard. You may not make a lot of money. Your weather can get bad, and you may not be able to work for several weeks. So, what do you do? You have to manage your wages, so that when the times are bad, you have money that you can live off of. But like going back, I said, you know, when I was a kid in the Depression, to me, it was a

positive thing. I was fortunate. It was good food [laughter].

MS: What are some of the differences you see today?

BGT: The industry is modernized quite a bit. You have the big boats for the shrimp. You have a much more stable price for most of your products. There's a demand for seafood today that you didn't have. Per capita consumption of seafood in the 1950s was around 7 pounds of what we always call raw, edible flesh. Today, it's over 15 pounds, 16, 17, pounds. With the increase in the population from the [19]50s to today, just to feed that increased population, you've got to produce more fish. There are a lot of benefits which enhances the industry of eating fish. Like the National Institutes of Health, back in the [19]80s, released the discovery of Omega-3, which is an item in seafood, which was later tracked back to one pathogen – listen to me [laughter] – phytoplankton that creates the Omega-3 in the product. Fortunately, like I said, the consumption, the demand has – for a lot of the fisheries, they're overfished, and the ability to mass grow some of these species in farm ponds, like salmon, is a benefit. The discovery of the Omega-3, where you can put that into the feed you feed those fish, has helped quite a bit. But again, the quality of your farm pond isn't near as good as your wild-caught. So, the industry, in most cases, is healthy, except for like the oyster, where in a particular locality, like you have here today, or the discrepancy in the pricing, say, for farm pond, or shrimp, which, in my opinion, they're selling at below cost, because you have a grow out cost of producing farm pond products. Fifteen years ago, that cross had reached over \$2 a pound. Today, because of the competition from these ponds, the shrimping industry, in some cases, is not getting the equivalent of that \$2 a pound. But it's a lot better than what it was fifty years ago, a lot better.

MS: What's the importance of the waterfront to this community, and how has it changed over the years?

BGT: Well, there's – Sea Grant has what they call working waterfronts. You've got to have a waterfront for not only a seafood industry, for it to place – for it to be a broader shore, but also to maintain the vessels, the support industries those vessels have. Without a waterfront, you won't have a fishing industry. It's that critical.

MS: How is it different today than it was, say, fifty years ago?

BGT: fifty years ago, you had many more smaller ports where the boats could go in and out. One of the reasons, they either took the catch to the market, or the catch was unloaded offshore in boats which brought it ashore. Back in those days, it was a smaller boat which also permitted the boat being taken closer to the boat owner's – operator's home. That was necessary because you didn't have automobiles. When I was a kid, in our little community, we had two cars, and I think there were three trucks. You had a couple of hundred people. So, you didn't travel like you do today. If you needed to go into Mobile to shop, it was by bus on a Saturday. Today, the boats are bigger. These smaller places where they landed the boats will not accommodate because of the draft, the boat draft. So, that means your larger boats primarily are here in Bayou La Batre, where you have a deeper channel. You have some, but in the seafood industry, it's very, very small in Coden and Bayou. Coden has a little deep water because it's – the vessel construction business there. Then Dauphin Island was another area where you could bring in

boats. But that area would not accommodate a large number, let's just say, a dozen boats at the most.

MS: What about the amount of fishermen? I go down Shell Belt Road, I see a bunch of boats tied up. Was it bustling back then?

BGT: Well, what you're witnessing, when you see all these boats tied up, starting about six, seven years ago, as the shrimp imports from the farm ponds increased and as cheaper product became – started coming in, the large vessels that you see tied up couldn't make a living. They couldn't pay the bills. A lot of those boats were financed, the construction of it, financed. So, the owners started losing vessels. They lost quite a number. It's not quite as bad right now. It's starting to hopefully settle out. But the fuel price is the big enemy right now, with over \$4 a gallon for diesel. If you can't catch enough shrimp, you can't pay for your fuel. That's a huge risk. The way things kind of balance out with the fewer boats, means the boats that are still in the fishery, it increases their catch rates. That's what's keeping them alive.

MS: How do you see this playing out in the future?

BGT: It's a difficult question to answer. I guess my first answer would be, what happens in the energy side? Okay? Because it's not only the fishermen. There's a lot of industries that with the price of crude and what they would have to sell their product for and what the worker in this country and other countries earn and who can buy it? Who can afford to buy it? So, you're going to – over the long term, unless something changes, I see a lot of problems. If the energy situation works itself out, then I see a halfway decent future for the fishing industry. Fishing is thousands of years old. It has its niche in the food chain. I don't think it'll go away.

MS: You spoke about the Clean Water Act and the effect with oysters. What impact have other regulations had on the whole seafood industry as a whole throughout the years?

BGT: Well, for down here or for in general?

MS: For this area.

BGT: For this area. Well, for most of your fisheries in this area, back in the Cold War, the countries implemented what they called – we called the 200-Mile Act. They extended the fishery management authority of the countries and ownership of the fisheries services, 200 miles from the coastline, which was a good thing because population was – is growing. The estimated world production from the oceans of fish is something over a little over 100 million tons per year. As you go from 4 billion people to 6 billion people, and you divide that into your 100 million metric tons, the amount per person goes down. Then when you subtract out what cannot be directly eaten by the – as a consumer, it goes even smaller, like the species that you can utilize in making a fishmeal. But as far as a product for human consumption, they're not very good. It's a type of animal that you can't preserve that well for human consumption. So, the – having this conservation law, a lot of people complain about it. But I ask the question, what if it wasn't passed? Where would the resources be? Because for hundreds of years, like the Atlantic cod and – which brought the white man to this part of the world – it was envisioned as being

unlimited forever. It's a species which has been fish way down. In some cases, the resource, the stocks may not recover. Down here, the stocks or some of like the red snapper, they say they're overfished. I personally don't agree with that. The reason is that it's based on what was the natural fishing areas, production areas, for that particular species, which 50 years ago, was very small, especially right in this area. During the last 50 years, they built numerous artificial reefs. The scientific community really has not been able to update its knowledge of these resources. When the 200-Mile – the downside of the 200-Mile Bill when it was passed, was you had limited knowledge of the majority of the resource on the scientific side. Red snapper was one of the species. We knew about the reproduction time frames, not entirely where they were located, because it cost money to do this. Prior to the 200-Mile Bill, most of the money was spent on researching the more dynamic fisheries like shrimp. Then even that research wasn't the life cycle and what you do to manage the resources, but where can we go to catch more? Okay? The shrimping industries down in South America, those stocks were really discovered by the American government, U.S. government, back in the [19]50s. A lot of the pressure on the resources, of course, in the U.S. waters, came from foreign fishing. So, again, that was a necessity. That foreign fishing brought down the stocks. So, you had two problems; one, the knowledge to manage the resource, the correct knowledge, which takes years of data on where the – the maturity age, reproduction rates, times and locations. Because managing fisheries, you're having to manage not just the fishery, but you've got to divide it up into stocks. You've got to manage those individual stocks. So, you've got to have knowledge on those individual stocks. Just delineating those stocks from where they are, that's time consuming. It's expensive. Who's going to spend money [laughter] – this is what you run into in Washington – on trying to look at fish when we've got all these other problems?

MS: Well, this is one of the situations where we could boil it down a little bit to get your take on what conservation has done and what it can do. What needs to be done in this area?

BGT: In this area, some of the problems you have are not a conservation issue for, say, managing a stock. Let's take a blue crab. What you really have to manage is the habitat for that life cycle for the blue crab. The same is true for shrimp. You have to manage the habitat. On the other hand, oyster, you can plant and grow your beds for your oyster, but you still will need some form of monitoring of the resource and then regulating how many people can fish and how often they can fish and what they can catch. In the offshore resources and inshore finfish resources, again, you've got to manage. You can overfish the mullet. You can overfish the red drum. The red drum, since it was one of the early species that caught the attention of the government at all levels, is probably overmanaged, okay? Because of the lack of funds to have good knowledge of how much we have where, we may be overmanaging red drum. The other species, like white trout, ground mullet, where ground mullet's primarily a bycatch of the shrimp fishery, there is no real directed fishery. So, therefore, there's very little knowledge about those kinds of resources, including the croaker. You can go down and just make a list. What you have seen happen since the 1970s, as the quality of life for the Americans has improved and per capita income has gone up over the last 30, 40, years, you've had a huge increase in recreational fishing. Now, recreational fishing is an industry too, just like commercial fishing. So, you've got another problem for a government. Because this resource in that water belongs to everybody. When I say everybody, it's not the people on the coast who are commercial fishermen. It's not the recreational fishermen. It's the people up north Alabama. For those resources, it's the people in

the middle of the country. Why do you need to conserve it for them? The health benefits alone. Okay? So, you've got to assure some form of access to those people in your management program. So, you want recreational people, because, hey, these boats they build up in the middle of the country creates jobs. So, where do you limit that? That creates a real problem for the management – resource management people. You want to make sure that you have sufficient stock size for the commercial fisherman, so he can make a decent living, and at the same time, be supplying the needs of the consumer, not along only along the coast, but the inland area. So, those are the issues. It's not simple. It's very complicated. Very, very complicated.

MS: Are attempts being made?

BGT: They're trying to. It's expensive to do this. It takes a lot of knowledge. You have to not only – you've got to create a base knowledge, okay? Once you – and this is time consuming. Let's take cod. That's a four-year fish when it reaches maturity. This has been known for the last 60,70, years. But now, some of these other species, we don't know that much about them. One good example – it's not a species that's here, but it's one that I'm aware of – is what they call the Patagonian toothfish. That's that – it's a fish. It's Chilean sea bass is a market name in this area. It's expensive fish. Harvesting that resource began about 15, 20 years ago, to the extent that you see today. These stocks are way away from people and little was known about that. Now, you think of leaving southern Chile and sailing eight or 900 miles to where these fish are. Look at what that costs you as a government. Where they're located, there's really no government that owns them. Okay. Like with the international situation where you have different player groups, different fishermen, you've got something similar at the local level. You've got state government. You've got your federal government. You've got your different user groups. You've got political pressure. Then you have, what is the wise way to manage the resource for the benefit of the resource, to maintain the resource for future years, future generations? One of the things is looking at changes for the future and what we know as we see the population grow and with the limitation on wild stocks. You go back sixty years ago, and a fisherman and his family fished. Then the dad, who became a granddad, envisioned his grandkids fishing. So, you have a geometric growth of a population that would be using that resource. This is true today with the recreational fishing. Now, you have a new human growth, but now your resources are capped. So, now, what's going to happen? You can't – the grandchild, the great grandchild can't go on to be a fisherman. So, you're going to have to take a center of this tradition of fishermen, and that's what you're going to have for the future. These sides, no, they can't be in it. You may have migrating out and migrating in, but you're going to have to think of a fixed population with a cap. This is all the resource can afford. This is being recognized by your fishery managers. What is being – what has occurred in your regulations, they've set caps. Like right now, there's a cap on how many shrimp boats can fish to Gulf of Mexico. That's eventually going to be true even for those species that we now think we have plenty of them. We're going to have to be capped. How many people can fish in another 20 years? You're going to see limitation on recreationalizing. You've got to, as long as the population keeps growing. You just can't have – if I'm a recreational fisherman, the cap could be I could only fish once a year. So, it gives everybody an opportunity to go out and enjoy themselves. Commercial fishermen, we're already moving into that. It's just it's going to grow by fishery, by fishery, where these caps are going to have to be implemented.

MS: So, how is this affecting the Bayou La Batre and Coden community? Because you have this tradition of –

BGT: What you're looking at, you're going to see youngsters moving away, going into other types of wage-earning activities. As far as the communities themselves, they're going to be with the – the change that I see is there is a different perception growing about coastal fishing. This has happened in other states. Forty, fifty years ago, a fishing community in Alabama, Maryland, Maine was thought of low-class people. In the state of Maine – which I think is a good example – that fishing fleet is a highly respected community today. They're not thought of as a low-class people. They're adventurous people. They're doing something that we benefit from, going out there, and risking their lives to catch this lobster, so we can have a lobster feast. You're going to see – I think you're going to see that occurring more and more along the Gulf area. As that occurs, it's going to bring in a different type of citizen along the coast, people wanting to move in, to be close to it, to enjoy the benefits of being close to it. But again, a lot of this, what I'm saying, is going to be depending on energy, where we move. Because two years ago, who would have thought we're here? What happens on that side? Because we're not close to the employment areas. Traveling, we don't have in this part of the country, mass transportation. Now, if we get mass transportation – like I was mentioning earlier, you had just a limited number of cars and buses that took you into Mobile – then we can have that kind of growth around here. But I see some changes that I see them as positive changes.

MS: Some of this respectability you were talking about, and we see happening here, does that play into what are some of the goals, and how does the working waterfront committee you were talking about earlier, foresee the future of this waterfront here?

BGT: Well, the working waterfront, what you've experienced – and you're going to see it here – is competition for the access to the open water, okay? As that competition grows, what happens – what is happening in other states, that price of the land goes sky high. When it does, you're taking away – because you can't afford the land for a fish business or for a boat dock. You can't compete with the condo or the recreational side or the huge home. What is – so, you have to develop means of securing for these uses of water to make sure they're there. Because you can't – you don't want to give up your shipyard. You can't give up your fishing boat. Where's your fish going to land? While the terrain here is different from, say, like a state like Maine, where these problems really began, this area – the South, is changing. This area is changing. Income rates are going up. As these income rates go up and education is increasing, the attitudes and the demand for this waterfront is going to go up. Now, what they did in Maine – and they've had to do this along the coast North Carolina, which has a lot larger coast than what we do – they've had to change their laws in Maine. Though the people said, "We've got to reserve – " the people in general – "we've got to reserve areas for our fishermen," which they did and made it affordable, so they could – to keep them [laughter]. I think that [inaudible].

MS: How do you first see the waterfront down there? Staying exactly the same? Improving somehow?

BGT: Well, hopefully, they've improved.

MS: How?

BGT: By having safer docks, by having – well, let me back up a little bit. There already has been a lot of change. Back in 1950s, Bayou La Batre water was filthy. You had so many catfish, hardhead cats in that water that they would just (boil?) because of the fish, trash, stuff that was thrown in the bayou. No one cared about dumping fuel. Bayou is clean today. So, there is changes already occurred. Now, the facilities along the bayou have changed as well, and it's in a state of change right now. What has happened, we had canning plants. We had three big canning plants, and they took up a lot of the waterfront. Then you had some small fish shops, shrimp houses, some of them still there, very small. But it's not going to be, you know, instant change. But we've had a new one completed. Oh, in fact, it's still in the process of being completed. In between the [19]50s, the city built the state docks, and they had facilities down there. Now, Katrina took that out. You had facilities along that state dock. You had some business to go under. A lot of it because of aging, the aging on the part of the owners, aging on the part of the plants. You're going to see those being either taken out and replaced because they're waterfront – or rebuilt. It's not going to happen overnight, but it's actually going to happen, depending on – the speed of this is going to be depending on – dependent on the industry itself and these fluxes that you're going to have, okay? Like the energy thing that's going to bring a flux. How long is it going to last? We don't know. People have got to eat, right? But eventually it's going to go away, and this change will be occurring. A lot of it, you'll see. I won't see. Because it's going to take time.

MS: Can you tie that into the discussion about as the population is increasing so much, but the resources of the fish are maintaining the same? There's a lot of pressure there, and speak to the development and the value of this harbor and this waterfront in general, because of the pressure of the –

BGT: Okay. All right. Let's go back to what I said about there is a resource – your fishery resource is a limited amount that can come in. All right? Because of that, when you say working waterfront, you're not going to see a huge growth on shoreside facilities for fish. Because you've got to remember, it can only – you're only going to have so much come in. So, the facilities for the processing of the fish that are landed and the type of product that will go out will be limited. So, there will be – depending on other uses of the waterfront, will determine what that waterfront development will consist of. But again, I don't think – as far as individual houses and that kind of infrastructure along the bay, I don't think you're going to have that. Now, condos you could – like down on where the state docks used to be, you might have a condo down. It'd be ideal. That could then help introduce into the bayou's economy, a new source of financial activity. Because for every dollar you bring in, it's going to create more dollars of a different kind within the community. Now, the other issue that hopefully will be addressed is having safe harbors and whether or not that eventually can be done here, like Brownsville, Texas. Think about the Netherlands, Amsterdam. They've got that breakwater, and they can open and close it. The new technology has made that affordable. You can have structures where you can put in barriers when bad weather comes. You can protect the area. Something happens on the inside, like fuel spills, what have you, you've got sewer spills, you can contain it. So, it's protection both ways. I wouldn't be surprised, 20, 30 years, that you have something like that here in the Bayou.

MS: What's that thing next to you right there? That can.

BGT: That can, that – my dad had a fish – the picture on this can is my dad. He started a fish plant, which was – I call it fish plant, but it was a crab, shrimp, and oyster plant, very few fish. It was a bycatch. He started that plant in 1936. What you're looking at, for the first 25 years of his operation of that plant, the product was in bulk. Like the shucked oysters were shipped out in gallon cans, okay? Crab meat was put in one-pound cans, and it was packed into barrels, 200 pounds in a barrel. It was shipped to Baltimore, New York. Then later, they started retailing. Like the oyster, the gallons of oysters would go to a seafood market. The grocery stores – it was very difficult to find seafood in a grocery store in the [19]40s and [19]50s. In the seafood market, the gallon can would be dunked into a pot. Somebody would come in and want to buy a pint. They'd scoop them out and put it in a pint. Retailing in the markets started growing. So, this can was an early version of moving into the retail market and the grocery stores and as well as in the seafood market. How I came by this can, when I was visiting one time, my kids wanted to go fishing. We needed some floats. So, it was a weekend. I went out and started up the machine. I kept some cans, and this is one of them [laughter]. We used them as floats.

MS: All right.

[end of transcript]