Preserving Oral Histories of Waterfront-Related Pursuits in Bayou La Batre
Dillard Wilkerson Oral History
Date of Interview: August 22, 2008
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 01:05:50
Interviewer: MS – Michael Stieber
Transcriber: NCC

Michael Stieber: All right. So, what is it you're doing there?

Dillard Wilkerson: I'm hanging a new net. Hanging it on combination cable. So, when you hook it to your door, it'll stay spreaded out.

MS: What is that cable made out of?

DW: It's made out of a stainless-steel core and – the stainless steel on the inside of the core over here.

MS: Okay. What are you using to tie it on?

DW: It is forty-eight spun nylon. It's the size of it.

MS: The net is made of nylon as well?

DW: It's nylon, but it is called spun nylon. It makes it soft, see. If you feel of it, it's soft. If it's not soft, it isn't spun. It should be. Makes able to pull your knots down a lot tighter with this right here.

MS: How far are those spaced apart?

DW: What?

MS: How far are you spacing those?

DW: These are three and three-eighths. What I'm hanging now is three and a quarter. What you call the points is three and three-eighths.

MS: What's the difference between them?

DW: Well, that's bars. See across there, it's all bars. See down here. That's points there. That's your point.

MS: I'm wondering how long you've been doing that. Where'd you learn how to do that?

DW: Well, I've been doing it all my life. Not sewing all my life, but I've been commercial fishing and stuff. My brother-in-law taught me a lot of this right here. I knew how to patch and everything, but he taught me a lot about all this.

MS: What type of commercial fishing did you do?

DW: Shrimp. Yes, I was a shrimper. I had my own boat up until about – what? Four years ago, George Henry?

George Henry Sprinkle: Yes.

DW: About four years ago and I sold it. This net will be about 65-foot on the lead line when we get through with it.

MS: Is that typical?

DW: No. It's different size nets according to what size boat it is and what size net they want.

MS: How long does it take to –

DW: The net itself is going to be a 55-foot because you're bedding it on the court line. This is the lead line I'm hanging now.

MS: How long would you say it takes to make one of these nets?

DW: Probably fourteen or fifteen hours if you stay after it pretty hard, huh, Henry?

GHS: What? This net here?

DW: Yes. Or longer?

GHS: It takes longer than that. It takes about twenty-four hours.

DW: About twenty-four hours, probably.

GHS: Three days. Three, eight-hour days.

DW: Three, eight-hour days, yes.

MS: So, what made you get out of the shrimping business?

DW: It got to where I couldn't make it. The rules and regulation and the price of fuel and the price of everything went up. Just couldn't keep up with it.

GHS: They've actually put some more regulations on it now, more [inaudible].

DW: Yes, they've put so many restrictions.

MS: Do you live in Bayou La Batre now?

DW: Yes, right out on north edge of Bayou La Batre. I live up here by Bryant High School. That's where I live.

MS: How long have you lived in Bayou La Batre?

DW: Well, in my home I got now, I've had it for right at thirty years. I was born in Andalusia,

Alabama. I came here when I was two years old. I lived in Alabama Port. It's about 12 or 13 miles down the road here.

MS: You've got other family members in the seafood business?

DW: Well, my sons were doing it, but they work at the shipyard now. Well, I've got five boys. I have three girls. I've got one adopted son. But, yes, all of them just about done some kind of seafood. The girls either picked crabs, [inaudible], or something like that. Well, my wife used to pick crabs, but she doesn't pick no more. Not able to really.

MS: You guys been pretty steady?

DW: It's been slow now.

MS: Is it?

DW: Yes. We haven't been getting no whole bunch of work here lately. A lot of people got rid of their boats, lost them, and everything else.

MS: How would you describe slow compared to good?

DW: Compare what?

MS: Compared to good.

DW: Good, you get to work every day there.

MS: [laughter]

DW: Here, you don't get to work every day [laughter]. We had a little work here before Christmastime there. I think it was three or four months or longer than that – probably four or five months before we even got any kind of work at all.

GHS: Even the boats are tied up.

DW: All the boats are tied up and everything. There is just a little spot right here. We've got this big net here, and we've got two small nets to build right now. He got some TEDs to build.

MS: Do you miss being out on the water?

DW: Oh, I loved it. I used to enjoy going out. You knew you were going go out and make you a few dollars. But now, you don't know what you're going to do when you get out there. You can't go look for nothing. You better go out there and find something as soon as you get out there on the kind of price of fuel and everything. You used to kind of look around and find you a good little spot, maybe catch a few shrimps. But there is no such thing as that now. Just go all over the Gulf Coast, Texas, Florida.

MS: How long were your trips? Various times or lengths?

DW: Yes. Well, I had an ice boat. I didn't have no freezer boat. Probably about fourteen, fifteen, sixteen days about my tops, staying out before I went to the dock to get unloaded. Well, I could go to Texas or somewhere like that, I'd stay gone a month, a month and a half. I'd go in there and unload. Because it wasn't feasible to run all the way back to Alabama. It takes you about sixty-eight or seventy hours to run over that on a boat.

MS: How much fuel would you go through in a trip?

DW: Well, I was burning about twenty-three gallons an hour on that boat I had. Towing – if you tow real hard, anywhere between seventeen to twenty-three gallons an hour.

MS: How big of fuel tanks did they have?

DW: Well, I carried 7,200. That's what I carried on the front tanks and the stern tanks. I had four tanks in there. All these nets like this, according to what size of webbing is, how you hang it, all the hangings aren't ever the same now. If it's like say an inch and three quarter, an inch and seven-eighths or two-inches, well, it'll be a different hanging on it. Like this here is three and three-eighths on the point.

MS: So, everybody I've talked to, it seems – and that I see that seafood industry is declining.

DW: Oh, yes.

MS: Can you talk about that a little bit?

DW: It just isn't out there to be out there. Like I say, you can't look around to see. I imagine there's still a few shrimps out there, but you can't look for them on kind of the price of everything. Everything's high. Diesel and all of it. Webbing high, ropes high – everything concerned with commercial fishing is high. Like I said, they've got so many restrictions. You're always worried about you going to be doing something wrong, and you know you're right in your heart. You know you're right, but you still worry about if some little something's wrong.

MS: So, when would you say Bayou La Batre's heyday was? Good times?

GHS: Probably back in the [19]60s.

DW: [laughter] Yes.

GHS: Probably back in the [19]60s.

DW: Well, now, the boats that were operating had done good right after the storm, but there wasn't no boat to operate. I mean, because everything was all sunk and tore up on the beaches and everything else there. But, yes, in the [19]60s, I would say, in the [19]60s, yes.

MS: Can you talk about that a little bit and what it was like to live here then?

DW: Well, in the [19]60s, I was in service then. I wasn't here right then. I was in service then. But I came back home in [19]61, I believe it was. [19]62, I came back home. We did real well. There was no price or nothing, but there was enough of it to overcome everything and fuel it. It was real low. If you keep your expenses down, you made a little bit of money. But now, like I said, they went to four rigs instead of pulling two rigs, which is more power, bigger boats.

MS: Did your father or grandfather or anything, were they in the seafood industry?

DW: My father, that's what he was. Well, my daddy's daddy was a commercial fisherman. He caught oysters. But my mother's parents were farmers in Andalusia, Alabama. I guess sharecroppers is what you call them. Well, my dad, that's what he did. He done a little bit all of it. Up in later years, he got out of it.

MS: So, what was it like growing up in it when you were a little boy and coming up?

DW: Oh, I guess I was always poor people, I guess [laughter]. But we had a good life I guess. I mean, never did go hungry. Because you always catch you something to eat if you didn't have no money to buy nothing. If you get some Greek lard or something, you could always catch enough fish, shrimp, crab, oysters, or something to eat. It was no picnic, but we never went to bed hungry.

MS: What about summertime and stuff? Ever after school or just for fun?

DW: No, that's what I did there. There wasn't no fun. I worked with my dad after school, either crabbing or oystering or shrimping or something to do.

MS: Is that still taking place, children learning the trades of their parents?

DW: Most children now are getting away from all this stuff. A lot of them I guess you would say, they're still in it because they're working in boat building business. But mostly getting built now are tugboats and crew boats and stuff like that. There are no shrimp boats being built. A lot of the boys there from the younger generation are going to work for the oil company.

MS: How has the waterfront here in Bayou La Batre changed over the years?

DW: [laughter] It's changed a lot. A lot of businesses are shut down and went under and aren't near the boats there were.

MS: What type of businesses?

DW: Shrimp shops and boat building business, a lot of it shut down. They've still got a few in it, buying shrimp, fish, oysters, crabs, stuff, but some of them are gone.

MS: When would you say the decline started?

DW: What'd you say, Henry? Around the [19]80s or [19]90s?

GHS: What's that?

DW: When it started declining?

GHS: Oh, early part of the [19]70s. I had my boat. I sold my boat in [19]75. Took it to California. That's when fuel started going up. Fuel was eighteen cents a gallon back in the early [19]70s.

MS: What is it now?

GHS: It's about $4 plus now.

DW: All of it. A little $4. Given the boats are burning twenty-five, thirty gallons an hour, you better be catching something to –

GHS: So many boats are burning fifty gallons an hour.

DW: Yes. You better be catching something to overcome it. Price of shrimp isn't worth the flip. They've still got a lot of foreign shrimp coming in, from what I can hear. I don't keep up with that hauling no more since we got out of the business.

MS: I noticed as gas prices go up in general, food prices have gone up.

DW: Oh, yes.

MS: Why are the shrimp prices not going up?

DW: Just what I just said. Foreign shrimp, they get it cheaper there.

GHS: The foreign industry is shutting us down.

DW: The foreign industry shutting us down.

GHS: I mean, it could be worse. We're blessed. Just stop and look around, we're well blessed.

MS: So, what are you doing there, George?

GHS: I'm just putting a little piece of – maybe it wasn't quite wide enough on the end right there. I'm just putting a little piece on the end that will make it wide enough to keep from having to waste it. Keep from wasting the stuff.

MS: Where did you learn how to do that?

GHS: My dad was – I learned it from him I guess. He'd done it all of his life. He was a commercial fisherman up until the day he passed away. So, I started this here when I was about – sewing my nets when I was about seven years old. Of course, I had just started school. But he had a small boat. I learned to cut his nets on the boat. I'd cut a little hole and patch it, cut a little hole and fix it, until I learned how to do it. One day, he had built a brand-new net and just dipped it, had it all good, fresh-painted. I decided I was going to learn how to patch. So, I took a string of white twine, and I cut little holes all through that net patch. Boy, he turned to me good.

MS: [laughter]

GHS: But I've been doing this – well, I had my own boat, built my own nets, and then I sold my boat in 1975. Took it to California. Then I came out, and I worked with the police department from [19]78 until [19]92. I quit that and come back in, doing this again.

MS: What type of boat did you have?

GHS: I had a 72-foot Landry boat with wooden hole. Took it to California and sold it to the men out there.

MS: They used it for shrimping?

GHS: Yes, they'd shrimp with it. They'd catch those seed shrimp up there around Oregon – close to Oregon border. They took it to Eureka. That's about 100 miles south of the border. They'd catch some little seed shrimp up there. That's what they did with it. I don't know what they're doing now. That was in [19]75. I don't know if the boat's even still around or not now. The boat was about ten years old when I sold it to them. That's been thirty-some years ago. So, the boat might even be gone by now.

MS: Do you have any other family members in the seafood industry?

GHS: Yes, my brother. Two brothers, one of them deceased now. He passed on and my other –

MS: [inaudible]

GHS: My mother's gone. My father's gone. I've got one sister gone. I've got two brothers gone. Mom and dad gone, and two wives gone. I'm on my third wife now [laughter]. I've been around. I've got about all my cousins involved in it, something other than seafood. If they're not on boats, they fool on nets or work in the shipyard building the boat. So, they're involved some kind of way with it. I've got two brothers-in-law, got him and another brother-in-law. One of them works at Ingles. He's been working with me since he sold his boat. Whenever we get some work, it's been real slow.

MS: So, how was the lake, growing up around here as a kid?

GHS: I had a pretty good life. I always seemed to manage to get by good. I always had a car to ride in – at least one car. Might have not been new, but it was something posh to ride in. I always had plenty to eat. It might have been seafood or something, but we had plenty to eat. Or it might have been greens or something like that – taters. But we never did go hungry. That's the one thing I would say.

MS: What was the community like? So, it seems like there's a lot of tradition, a lot of close family. Can you explain that a little bit, what the community life was like?

GHS: Community life was real good. Matter of fact, my first eleven years I lived on Dauphin Island. I was born here, but I took to Dauphin Island for my first eleven years. We left Dauphin Island and came back over here. The house was right here where the shop sits – the old house was. I raised right here until I went in the Navy. That was back in [19]52. When I came back, the house was still here. But then I got married, and my mother and dad sold the house and moved out on 188 for – and then I married my first wife. I lived down in (Catalina?) about 2 miles from here for twenty-one years. Left there. She was deceased. I married another woman from Indiana. Nine years, she deceased. I'm on my [inaudible] sister-in-law. We've been together now twenty-four years. Our house was right back of the shop here. Got a new house, trouble living when the storm came. Took everything we had. We had 8-foot of water in here.

MS: In here?

GHS: Yes, 8-foot. It wiped everything out. We lost the house completely. Everything we had, except for the car, the truck, and the clothes on our back, we lost everything else.

MS: Eight foot –

GHS: Eight foot of water in here. Up all the way up, just about the ceiling up there. Sure did. Yes.

MS: [inaudible]

GHS: No, this here, I salvaged it. It was here, but I mean, it should have been torn down I guess. But the house was a step behind the shelf here. It destroyed it. When that water went in the house, when it came back out, it came out so fast, it sucked the refrigerator, deep freezer, all out of the house, just tore it all up and just completely destroyed it. Floors and everything came off the thing, and it fell and busted all the floors out.

MS: Hopefully, you were somewhere safe.

GHS: We were out in Grand Bay, about 8 miles from here. FEMA gave us $13,000 to rebuild it, but $13,000 wouldn't even put the floors back in it. So, they turned around, and they got this – I don't know what this whole money it was. Then they built us a new home back there. Now, it's not ours until ten years, but we've got to live there ten years. The home was $103,000 and something. Every year, ten percent comes off of the – after ten years, it belongs to us. If we decide to sell it before the ten years is up, we've got to pay the balance back to the people that put

the house up.

MS: Now, are these the houses I've been seeing around town? Are they up on the –

GHS: Yes, it's up on the – I think we got about nine blocks of – we got an elevator on ours because my wife, she's not able to go up the steps. I'm not too much able, but we got a lift put into it. It takes a full minute for the lift to go up and a minute for it to come down.

MS: So, how long did you shrimp for?

GHS: Well, I started shrimping steady – I worked with my dad when I was thirteen years old, I quit school. Worked with him until I was nineteen. I went into service when I was nineteen. I come back out, I was – what, twenty-three? Or twenty-four years. Twenty-three up to seventy-five, I sold my boat. So, the rest of the time, I've been on the Beach Police Department or whatever, building nets.

MS: What type of advancements have you seen, like from when you began shrimping in the boat? Technology, radar?

GHS: Oh, yes. Way on back there, see, when I first started, all we had was just a compass. An old, sounding lead, took it down to the bottom. Then they came out with this government surplus, the APN-9 LORAN. The boats started using that. Then they went to the C-LORAN, and everybody started getting the LORANs in. But now, they've got GPSs. I mean, I want to say since back in the early [19]60s up until the last few years, it's been quite an advancement into it.

MS: What did you say about sounding?

GHS: Sounding lead. We had a piece of lead about so big, weighed about five pounds, had a rope on it. In the end of it, it had a hollow. You put soap in the end of it. You throw it. It goes to the bottom. You see what kind of bottom you on, gravel bottom, mud bottom, or what. That's where we had to sound the bottom out there. Of course, back in the days, we didn't work no deeper than maybe 40-, 50-foot of water, see. But now, they're going out there in 200- and 300--foot of water working. So, you couldn't very well throw a sounding lead now.

MS: Navigational wise, why is it important to know where you're at when you're out there?

GHS: Right now, there's so much stuff on the bottom that have been put out there since the storm. They put so much debris on the bottom. It used to, but years ago, you could go out there and just put the net anywhere and drag where you want to drag. Now, you've got to have points where you go and drag to. If you don't have a LORAN, you wouldn't last five minutes out there. Or a plotter, you wouldn't last five minutes. There have been so much debris put on the bottom out there since the storm. If you don't have a LORAN, you're just out of business. Or a plotter, they've got GPS to go with it. A GPS will pinpoint you right on the spot.

MS: You used to do it just with a compass?

GHS: We used to do this just with a compass way on back there. But now, in the later years here, you've just about got to have that to operate with. If you don't, you're just messed up.

MS: Pretty accurate with the compass?

GHS: Pretty accurate, yes. Well, you might have to allow for your grip for your tide and stuff. But the most we ever ran was like from here to Pass-a-Loutre , which is about 30 miles near to the pass and about 67 miles on about – that's about as much as we ever run. LORAN was 67 miles across the Gulf here. You have to allow for your tide some, whichever way. There wasn't no landmarks to go by. But now, there's rigs all over the gulf now. It's kind of hard to get lost out there now. But the equipment they've got nowadays, anybody that can read them, work them, can go anywhere in the world with them. I've been to Africa twice in the last four years. He went with me one trip.

MS: Traveled by boat?

GHS: Yes. Took the shrimp boats over there. It's about a twenty-three-day trip. I think about 5,800 miles to run. You've got to have some equipment to navigate the weather, or you would strictly get lost. But times have really changed in the last – I'd say in the last fifteen, twenty years, things have really changed considerably.

MS: Can you give some examples?

GHS: Well, like I said, you've got your LORAN. You went from your C-LORAN to A-LORANs. Then you went to plotters to the GPSs. So, this one's just a little bit better than the other. Just about all your boats now have GPS on them. Even the skis, you have GPSs to navigate with. Like I said, if you don't have one, there's been so much debris carried out there and put in that gulf, just all over the bottom out there. It was designated to put it in spots where the natural reeds were at, say for the snappers and stuff. But they put that stuff out there all over the bottom. Without some equipment to navigate with, you're just up a river without a paddle.

MS: Bringing you more business?

GHS: Yes. Well, I don't like to get that kind of business. I mean, I don't mind building nets, but I hate to see anybody tear their equipment up. It's not necessary because you're looking at something right here. To get through with it, you're looking at about $1,700 worth net right here. You go out there and drop it and drop two or three of them right quick, that's a pretty good lick.

MS: A lot of shrimp you've got to get.

GHS: You aren't kidding. The shrimp is not going to – I think about three something a pound for the big ones right now. You catch a shrimp for $3 or something a pound, a few or four something a pound. So, it don't balance out too good.

MS: Talk a little bit more about people in your family in the business. It sounds like you're from

a big family.

GHS: Yes. It was twelve in my family. But like I said, I've only got one brother now doing it.

MS: What's his name?

GHS: Shelton. Shelton Sprinkle. He's the only one doing it now. I've got some brothers-in-law still doing it and a bunch of cousins still fooling with it. Nephews, stuff like that.

MS: How do you see the future in this?

GHS: It looks gloom, I'll tell you. It really does. Before the storm, we worked every day. Every day, every day, before the storm. Since the storm, we might work a week and be off two or three weeks, nothing to do. It's really gotten bad. It looks to me, if they don't do something about this fuel situation to where the boats can go out there and work some, say, you can't go out there and burn $4 a gallon of fuel to catch $100 worth the shrimp. It just don't work out when you're burning four to $500 worth of fuel a night. The big boats are burning more than about a $1000 of fuel a night. If you don't get a couple thousand dollars' worth of shrimp a night, you're going behind.

MS: In the past, say when you were beginning your net making, how many net making shops or people were doing it, and how many are doing it now?

GHS: Well, when I first started this, I had my shop and the shop down here and (Bozi?). I think it was about four shops here. We've still got four, still got about four or five doing it right yet. So, it hasn't changed too much in this. But it's hard to get anybody to do it anymore. Nobody wants to fool with it. One thing, there's too much hard and manual labor involved in it. So, you've got to pull stuff. I've got a winch to pull hours around with, but most people have to handle it by hand. If you do, it makes it tough. You start old man like me, and the other day, I grabbed on something. In five minutes time, I'm whipped. These young people just don't want to get involved with it. They got better sense, I guess. [laughter] But I love it. That's all I've ever done. I mean, I love to do it. It's always something different to do. Not so much in the new nets. It's always pretty well all the same. But the [inaudible] net that's tore up, there's always something different and a challenge to fix it. Because it's never torn the same way twice, and it's challenging to fix it. But new work is just the same old stitch after stitch into it.

MS: One thing I noticed is all the shrimp nets I've seen and other ones in here are green, and this one's white.

GHS: That's net dip. This is white, but it'll be green when we get through with it.

MS: Okay. What is that process?

GHS: That's to preserve it. To help it, see?

MS: What's the process?

GHS: If you go out there with this webbing here and put it in a boat and pull it, in a week's time, it'll fall to pieces. You put that net dip in it, and it hardens everything up, seasons it real good, and it holds up better.

MS: So, you literally just –

GHS: We dip the whole net in a tank with paint. We let it drain and hang it up in the air, so it can dry, and you go on the boat.

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

GHS: Well, the regulations now are really terrible. I mean, I know we've got to have regulations. You can't just go out there and kill everything. But a lot of the stuff they're doing now is unnecessary. Just like that TED right there. When they first came out with the TED, it was supposed to have been for ten years.

MS: What's a TED?

GHS: TED, turtle excluder device, it was supposed to have been for ten years. Now, that's been about going on probably twenty years, I guess. It's still pulling them. That thing right there, I shrimped the guff all my life, I never killed a turtle. I caught some that was kind of drowned out. But you put them on the back. You press them a little bit, and they get good and alive. When you pick the nets up and throw them back in the water, see, let them go. The only ones I ever killed, I killed them to eat – the small ones. But what killed some of your turtles was the long line fishermen because they couldn't help it. Because they get on them hooks and they'd drown before they get them off. But they had a segment on TV there a long time back, but down in the islands. I don't know exactly which islands, down around Mexico somewhere down that way. But it was taking three and four thousand eggs of a lick out the nest down there and selling them, feed them to the livestock. Catching the turtles, killing the turtles, putting the meat on the market, and selling the shells overseas to make stuff out of it. The fishermen got blamed for killing all that. I've got no doubt in my mind, a fisherman did kill a few turtles. But what few the fishermen killed; they killed thousands of them down there. Just meaningly killed them. Unless something's changed – and now, they're fixing to put – they're going to cut some more holes I think now – two more big holes inside of it. That stuff out the bycatch. Our senator went out there about a month back, snapper fishing. The snapper was just so thick out there, they called the limit in just a few minutes. But yet, they keep hollering at the commercial fishermen is killing all the snappers out. I don't like to put nobody down, but what it all amounts to is a sports fisherman. I'm not against the sports. I like to fish myself. There's enough room for everybody out there. But the sports hollered that they put them on the limit. Say what? Put us on a limit? They'll be losing our business. Well, what happened to the commercial fishermen? Putting their stuff in their nets, losing all the catch out of it. It's hurting them too, see? There's enough room in that gulf and that bay for everybody out there. Like I said, I don't want to put nobody down because we've all got to do the same thing. I like to fish. I like to shrimp. Sports fishermen do too, I guess. But it's so unfair. The laws are so unfair.

MS: So, how many different types of nets do you build here?

GHS: Well, I build a four-seam balloon, a two-seam balloon, a flat net, a mongoose, box net – about five different kinds of types of nets we build here mostly. Some of the shops build different – maybe that's eighteen, that's twenty-four. This is it. This is it. [laughter] This goes on all time. I'm always right. He's always wrong. The boss is always right, right?

MS: Absolutely.

GHS: [laughter] No, we both make mistakes. That's it. If don't make a mistake, you're not doing anything, I'II tell you. You're going to make a mistake.

MS: So, where do you get your supplies from?

GHS: Sometimes, I get them out of Biloxi. This here came from Sprinkle Net Shop down there. I bought it from him. I buy most of it from Biloxi.

MS: Same place for over and over?

GHS: Oh, yes, Southern Supplies down in Biloxi. They used to buy down all our net company in Memphis, Tennessee. But they went out of business I think. Once in a while, I'd buy some from Lee Fisher out of Tampa, Florida.

MS: I mean, you spoke a little bit about the regulation and the turtle exclusion device. Have there been other nets tried out to reduce bycatch?

GHS: The federal government's taking care of all that there. In the front part of the – you got that, and it ties onto the back end of your net with a bag. Also, you've got a fish excluder into the bag. It's a piece of metal triangle that goes into the bag. That's supposed to let some of the small fish out. The bad thing about that is that your seagulls now are out in the parking lots trying to find something to eat. Before, when you put bycatch on the deck, the small stuff, if it died, you threw it in the water. A lot of it flowed into – the gulls would eat it, see? Now, there's not very, very much stuff to put back in the water because it all goes through the TED and everything. Your seagulls – just look at all the parking lots, even up around (Mobile?) , anywhere you want to go is full of seagulls hunting something to eat. I just think that federal government is carrying this stuff too far. It's not so much of them as the environmentalists. People making our rules don't know what they're doing. It's just like if I try to come up and do the job you're doing, I'd be lost as *Hogan's Goat*. Same as you'd be doing this right here. I mean, the people that's making the laws and rules, a lot of them don't know what they're talking about. Like I said, it's the commercial fisherman that carries almost all the blame. The sportsmen carry just a little bit of it. Very little bit. But I know you've got to have rules and regulations to abide by. Because without that, you'd be messed up.

DW: Most of our fishermen are environmentalists anyway themselves. I mean, they wanted to take their industry.

GHS: There's no way that we'd go out there and deliberately catch a turtle and kill it – just destroy it. That'd be foolish. Just like your commercial fishermen, they go out there, they catch a snapper wreck, they'll fish snappers. The sportsmen catch the snappers out there, and they've got a limit on the size of them. Okay. If you're fishing snapper in deep water, you pull him to the top cap, he isn't going back down. If it's too small, you throw it in the water, it can't go back down for that thing because it was floating, see? So, that's one law that shouldn't be changed. If you are out there catching fish to eat, if it's only this big or this big, you should be allowed to keep it. Not throw it back in the water because it's going to die anyway. But if you get caught with one undersized, they'll arrest you for it. Some of the rules need to be changed badly.

MS: So, when you were shrimping, did you trawl with the same kind of net, or did you try various kinds?

GHS: Always used four-seam balloon nets for separate reasons – mud a lot. Like in a mud bottom, the four-seam balloon's got more strength to it. Other than that, they'll produce a little bit better, but they won't stand the pressure in a mud bottom. They tear up too easy. So, I'll always fished with a four-seam balloon net. But I'll build anything that a man wants. If he wants a two-seam or a flat net or a mongoose or whatever, I'll build anything he wants. But I prefer putting the four seams on the boats because there's so much durability about them. They hold up longer. The big old boats, some of them are 90-, 95- foot, with all that big horsepower. If you don't put something that'll hold up, they'll tear it all to pieces. This boat of his, to build this net for it is about 95-foot. It's got I think something like about six hundred horsepower into it. So, you just can't throw something together and expect for it to hold up.

MS: Are the fuel prices affecting what people are towing or what?

GHS: Oh, yes, definitely. Yes, definitely.

MS: Could you explain that a little bit?

GHS: Well, some of these big boats, way back then, when the boats first started getting big, we used to just pull a single rig on a boat. Back then, I guess it was the early [19]60s or the early [19]50s, they started pulling double rigs – two rigs, one out rig on each side of the boat. Then later, they started pulling four rigs out there. When it started getting four rigs, bigger and bigger and bigger – because fuel was so cheap back then. Fifteen cents a gallon, eighteen cents a gallon for fuel, you could go out there and just drag and drag and drag. If you got thirty or $40,000 trip, you got a big trip. Now, if you go out there and you get thirty, $40,000 worth of shrimp, you're backing up because the fuel bill is going to be that much. So, I mean where we used to go out there, and the boat I had, if we come in with a $4,000 trip – shrimp was cheap back then too. But a $4,000 trip, we'd sheer pretty good off of that. Just on four thousand. Because back then, fuel was about eight cents a gallon, see? Groceries were real cheap. For instance, I used to smoke. When I quit smoking back in [19]66 or somewhere back there, I forget what year it was, I was still buying up seventy cents a carton. You can't even buy a pack now for less than $3. So, everything just has increased so much. The grocery bill is probably – it used to be $100 worth a trip. Now, it's $1,000 a bill for a trip. Fuel, the same way. Now, somebody of these big boats come in about sixty, $70,000 a trip, they say, "Man, you got a big lick." When they start paying

that thirty, $35,000 worth of expense off of there, there's not too much of it left. It's really costly. The ones in it now are still hanging on. As long as they can get a few shrimps, mostly don't back up too much. So, this boat here stays out twenty-five days at a time when it goes out. The last trip, I think he had $84,000 trip, and I think the expense was like something like forty something thousand. So, he made a few dollars on that trip. Trip before that day, did about I think thirty-something thousand dollars' worth, and its expenses were about the same thing. So, he about broke even on it. You can't do that on every trip you do. You'll wind up losing your boat. But the biggest majority of them have gone out of business now. There are very few of them left. The one that's in it now is either got a bunch of money they can afford to put back into the boat. The little fellow is just about gone.

Gregory Waselkov: Did you shrimp just whenever, twenty-four hours a day or was it a daytime –

GHS: Well, it depends on the summertime. Most of the time, like in June and July, we usually work at nighttime because it was so hot anyway. But in the wintertime, we used to fish around the clock, day and night. At summertime, most of the time, we work at nighttime because it's a little bit cooler, and the shrimp won't rot as fast.

GW: What are you using to saw that together?

GHS: What am I using?

GW: Yes.

GHS: This is a number twenty-four twine right here.

GW: What's the twine attached to it? What is that?

GHS: It's nylon. Just needle –

MS: He wants you to tell him about the tool you're using and how long they've been using those tools and for a long, long time and whether that's changed or not.

GHS: No, this is the same as it was fifty, sixty years ago. Well, what used to – long years ago, they were making needles out of piece of cane. Cut the needles out. Then they went to plastic needles. They went to plastic needles I guess about forty years ago. Then they went and switched some plastic, and that's because plastic broke so easy. They switched to nylon. This is nylon here, see? They ever break them. But they've been using this here as far back as I can remember, and I've been doing this for about sixty, sixty-five years along with fooling with nets. So, I started sewing when I was about seven, eight years old, and I'll be seventy-six next month.

MS: So, did you actually use the cane needles?

GHS: Yes, I've used the cane needle. I used to make cast nets. I used the cane needle to make cast nets. You can make a real nice needle out of a piece of cane. Real nice. You can make it as

wide as you want. Make it thin, limb, and longer if you want. While building cast nets, I like them a little bit longer because they hold more twine. But these here, like a little bit shorter when you're sewing like this,

MS: Does anyone use the cane needles anymore or they don't?

GHS: Not that I know of. I don't think anybody uses cane needles anymore. Maybe some of the cast net makers might still use them. But I hadn't seen no cane needles. I've got one at the house over there, one or two, but I haven't fooled with them in years. Oh, this is so much handy. It doesn't break none of this stuff here. There's a little bit of it. It used to be plastic, and they broke some. This would break off, the tine would break out, or the back end would break off. So, they went and switched to nylon. The webbing, years back, they used cotton. Cotton webbing, they were building this out of when I was a little boy. The cotton net might last a year. Sometimes, you might get two years out of a cotton net, and they just go to pieces. Then they went to – what was that webbing, Dillard?

DW: NyCo.

GHS: NyCo. Went to NyCo – part cotton and part nylon. They used that for years. Then they switched over to nylon. Now, this is supposed to be a hundred percent nylon here, this webbing.

MS: How long will one of those nets last?

GHS: If you don't lose it, you could probably get three, four years out of it, if you don't lose it – tear it up and lose it. Some of them get one trip out of them. Some of them get three or four years out of them. But the only thing that's hurting nylon is if it stays in the sun, the sun will burn it up – if it hangs in the sun too much. So, some of them built them out of this plastic. It's [inaudible] the stuff right here, now, the sun will really burn this stuff up if it hangs up long enough. A lot of people are still using that plastic, and it is smaller nets. Then they come out a while back with a sapphire webbing [inaudible] the webbing over there, that's sapphire right there. [inaudible] taking everything. We used to just use a chain on that. Now, they use the rolls on the bottom working mud bottom and stuff.

MS: How much does a nylon cost?

GHS: That webbing there is 3.85 a pound if you buy a whole bale of it. You buy it cut; they charge you more for cut price. But it's about 3.85 a pound by the bale.

MS: Is that what it's always been?

GHS: No. It was about $2 a pound up until the last few years as the fuel started going up. That's a fuel product. Fuel goes up, this goes up. See, every time the fuel rises up, this stuff rises up because this is a fuel byproduct.

MS: Well, George Henry, tell me, it's a way of life, and Bayou La Batre has families like yours that have been in the seafood for generations after generation.

GHS: Yes. Right.

MS: Bayou La Batre is because of it. How important is that waterfront in this industry to your family at least?

GHS: The waterfront is very, very important.

MS: I'm sorry, can you start that over?

GHS: The waterfront is very important to the people that are in commercial fishing and stuff. That's why we all try to live close to the areas, which is bad in a way. But if we move way out somewhere out in the country, you couldn't very well move out there and expect to work on the water. So, we have to live closer to the water. The storms give us fits and nets gets torn. But without the waterfront or being close to water, we'd be lost. We need the waterfront. There's talking about putting condominiums and all that down here. But if they do it, it'd be like Key West down there in Florida. It'd all be fouled up. Key West was a good shrimping town down there years and years ago. Now, it's up with yachts tied up in there. That's it. This place would be the same way if they put the condominiums. That'll phase all the stuff out. Shipyards – all that would phase out. Now, they've got room to put the condominiums if they want to put them in the right places. But I don't think they'll be along this Bayou. Because that would harm the shrimp shops and the crab shops and whatever. Because right now, you've got one crab shop down here. Up the Bayou, a little further, you've got two or three shrimp shops up there. On up on the other side of the Bayou, you've got some crab shops, and you've got a bunch of boat yards building boats. So, if you put the condominiums, then you got all the shipyard, all that sandblasting, you know what's going to happen there. They'd shut all that down. So, we definitely need the waterfront for the commercial fishermen.

MS: Well, you've raised a family off the sea, and sort of a lot of people look at it. It's true, there's a romance to living on the sea and working on the sea.

GHS: It is.

MS: What's that like, and where's it going?

GHS: It's a good life. Me and my wife, we had a little boat until the storm there. We'd go out and work in the daytime in the bay out there. It's a good life. It's just a hard life, but it's good. You can go out there, you can make you a little week's work, whatever. I like it myself. My wife, she loves it. But since the storm, we lost the boat and everything. The storm took the boat. Busted it all up, and we don't fool with it no more. Getting too old for it anyway.

MS: What about your grandkids?

GHS: Oh, the grandkids, they won't even look at a shrimp boat [laughter]. They won't even look at one. They don't want to fool with it. I've got two grown boys. One of them is born [19]57. One's born [19]66. So, one of them is a carpenter, and the other one is in garbage hauling –

hauling garbage and stuff. But he is a good net maker too. I taught both of them how to do it, and it's coming up. But they don't want fool with it. The oldest boy of mine, well, he'll come if I need help. Or a bunch of work, he comes, and he'll help do it.

MS: Do you see that as a good thing or a bad thing? Is it kind of tradition being lost or?

GHS: Yes. To me, it is getting to be getting lost. It's just like right now. There's very few people who can sit down there and just figure how to build this net. I can sit down there and in five minutes time, figure out a pattern on a net. There's very few people who can do that anymore. Nobody wants to fool with it. When you've got Sprinkle Ball or Stevie, my cousin over there, he can do it. I've got another cousin named Douglas. He can do it. But nobody wants to mess with it. To me, it's a dying thing. Every time, just like right now, my cousin's got a shop down here, Sprinkle Net Shop, his boys have got two boats or three boats. When they come in with work, they'll call us to come out and do it. Can't get nobody to do it. So, to me, it's just dying away. I know I don't have many years left into it. He don't either. I've got the two cousins of mine getting up in age too. Just nobody don't want to fool with it. Out there on the boats, when you go out there and work fifteen, twenty, twenty-five days, if you come to dock, you don't want to be fooling with no nets. So, they bring their net to the shop to get them fixed, if they can't get them fixed, then they're messed up. Because the biggest majority of them don't know how to fix nets. They don't know how to build them. A few of them do, but very few. So, I'll just say it's dying away. I feel like in the next ten, fifteen years, it's going to be gone anyway completely. I believe it will myself.

MS: So, with that, do you see the closeness of the family also dissipating because it's not being continued on from generation to generation as it was?

GHS: Well, it could be something to do with that. But just a lot of them plain just think it's too hard of work to do. So, they don't want to do it.

[end of transcript]