

Edmond Robin Interview

Interviewers: Don Davis and Carl Brasseaux

Edmond Robin: My name is Edmond Robin. I was born on March the 9th, 1926.

Don Davis: And when you think of coastal Louisiana, I think that if I remember right. You've been in the oyster business. How long?

E: All my life. Since 1947 when I started business.

Carl Brasseaux: Now was your dad involved in oysters before that Mr. Robin?

E: No. when I came up to Nabia, that was in WWII. ?? When I came out to Davey, I was the one who started the busines, and after 12 years that I was in the business so long, I took my dad and one of my brothers with me. And for many years, I took a couple of my other brothers with me and my ughh brother in law. And then after I turned the business over to my sons, who run it today.

C: Well the people who we have been talking too, have talked mostly about the trapping and shrimping. How many people were involved in the oyster business in your part of the parish when you started?

E: When I frist started off, ... there must have been maybe about 3 slovonians that came from Ugoslovia. I was one of the first from the parish that ever started fooling with oysters, and when I first started fooling with oysters, we started catching oysters by tongs, tonging them.

C: Now these were native reefs or were you seeding reefs?

E: No, that was natural reefs, and it was mostly hallow water. Also picking up oysters by hand.

D: Where did you get your oyster tongs?

E: made.

D: You made em yourself?

E: Right. in fact, it's like 2 rakes, like you rake the grass, and you combine both of them together and that's the rake. You see them in the water, rake em and put them in your boat. And after you get so many, then you (cull??) them. With a hatchet, you take the meat off and you knock the load off, throw em back over and naturally you sell the bait off. The little bit that you threw back overboard, that was for next year. So, here comes along some guy with a little smolder. He designed the oyster drudge? . The oyster drudge is made in an 8 frame with teet, and naturally grayed? on the bottom. When we first started off, we had to pull them up by hand with a rope. Pull it up on the deck. Dump it and then do the same thing. Take the bait off the cull, load the drudge back,.. and then like I said, the two that you I throw overboard are for next year.

Other Man: there are 2 drudge in the bag in the back for the oysters to go in.

E: the oyster drudge is that teet. on the bottom of it is made of is made of rings of ine. But on that ine is what you have rope tied to it. The reason why, it took time to develop them and come out with that it didn't just come overnight. The reason why the rings at the bottom are ine, because if you made it all out of rope it wouldn't last too long because they are still tied up. But we started off with rope, but then somebody else got smarter and they made the rings at the bottom out of steal, and you attatched the rope in the back like it's a bag, and that's where it got more improved. But then like i said, in those days, you had to pull them up by hand.

D: Now was your boat wooden?.. Your first boats, were they wooden?

E: Yeah. a little skip for about maybe 15ft. Made out of cypress naturally. no motor.

D: So how did you get to the reef.

E: Either by paddling or by ore. If you had a bigger boat, you had an ore. you have a paddle on each side and have to row it. Then they got bigger boats. No motor. Sail. Sail boats come out. that's how we used to drudge then.

D: Did you use a sail boat?

E: Yeah.

D: Where did you buy your sail?

E: it was made. You make em yourself out of a sheet. That's when it started off. Then later we went to the canvas. The first sail was made out of sheets. That's all we knew.

Other Man: Then you had the one sail and the motor.

E: then comes the one cylinder motor. Called a donkey right. Now we're getting bigger and smarter. That's how we get to the reef. You'd have a cane. You'd try to find the edge of the reef. you would keep going around and around that cane. If you can't catch anymore, then you move to Metairie and put the cane down there. you wouldn't touch every part of the reef. Some were for next year... So now, the donkey comes in and that's when they start picking up with the donkey. Picking up the drudge. Picking up with the hand is what we called a ??? So then We start to get more modern.

C: So with the motor, you're able to cover more reefs per day. I mean, it helped you get in and out.

E: Yeah. Yeah.

C: So how much more were you able to do a day with a motor?

E: you could imagine, let's put it this way, if you walk and you learn how to run, how much faster would you get to your destination? Before we had to sail, and paddle, and then you got to donkey down.

D: Now when you were involved, or you heard stories about the sail boats and the oyster men lived at their leases because they could not get back quickly, or did they live at the end of the road, I mean it's a long way sometimes to a reef.

E: Well no, you had to stay out there until you made your load. Alright, and that would take maybe a couple of days or so. that's when they came in and said oysters were only good for the month of war. The reason they said that, was because it was inly cold months. And that's why. Today, no. Today, everything is much more moderate. The day is hydrolic. The only things that have never been improved.. you still got to take the big oyster and cut out of it. And you got to go outside of that and everything is improved.

Other Man: and you got to dump the drudge. You got to dump the oysters out.

E: then you start getting more moderate. So now you shell them back. You have to take it out there and shovel back. You hold your boat up to shovel back, then you go to your destination and you start culling it out. Alright? Today, we got refrigeration on our boat. You can go out there, you can spend a couple of days no problem. As long as you got the refrigeration on. Now, you don't shovel back no more, okay? You pump it with water. Like if we got to go big. the way we come out with it, and we out so many boats to make sacks. Like when you fish in the wild reef. We put so many boats to make sacks. And we take and put 2 or 3 boats to bag. When I got off of the boat around 7 o'clock, and that was the last thing that year that I was doing. And all I was doing was pumping em off. It would take me about 12-15 hours to load my boat up. It would take me about 2 hours from the month.

D: Now that's the one's your covering?

E: Well, no. That's when you bend.

D: Okay.

E: When you're culling though, when you're culling at the different crews. It was only me and another guy that would bag, that's all I needed though on there. Well when you culling now, you got about 4 men on a boat. 2 on each drudge. Then you got coming over and they are culling all the time. Culling.

D: So there's a drudge on both sides of the boat.

E: You got 2, one on each side. And they start on the bottom. And not just anybody knows how to drudge. You got to let so much chain out. If you leave too much chain out, you're going to catch more mudd than anything. So you gotta set that drudge right, where it would be just be right on top of the oysters. And naturally, when you pick it up, you wash it. Alright? If you let too much chain out, it's gonna go to the back, and you're going to catch mudd and oysters, mostly mudd. So it's a trick in setting that chain. You've got to set that chain right. And then, let's get back to planting oysters. They are made to perform a funny thing. You can take this reef here and plant oysters on it, and they'll produce oyster, maybe all the sides single. Maybe 500 ft. or 4 or more, all bunchee. That's something that you don't know. And what it really is, the cullment. You've got to find a place to give you oysters, you got to find a hard bottom, safe bottom to start it off. You better find a hard place to bed it. If you plant your oysters in soft mudd, they are gonna sink. Put oysters where it's hard, and the bottom is hard, it's clay mudd. Clay mudd is hard. You cannot plant oysters in sand neither. the sand, the grain of sand will get in the oyster, and kill it. That's what kills your oyster when a hurricane comes. When a hurricane comes, and that water moves. And grain as sand gets in it, and that's what kills it.

D: Now where did you get your ice, when you were... before fridgeration, you had to have ice, where did that ice come from?

E: I had no ice.

D: You never had any? So you came in everyday?

E: No, you would'nt come in everyday. You would come in maybe every second day, until it got hot. When it got warm, then you had to come in everyday. So if right now, now they got logs out. When you hit to that reef now, you got to log it down. Every reef has got a number. You got to log it down: the number of the reef where you are at, where you started, when you quit, how many sacks you picked up, how long did you drudge, and where did you get when you got to your destination, the discharge. And you better have it logged down, and you better have it right.

D: Now, what's the weight of a sack. How do you determine a sack?

E: uhhh, it's a measurement. They got a regular standard measure, and the measure is a wire basket. It's just about 100lbs. that's how much it weighs. That's a sack. Now today they got what is called a little sack, which is half of that. So out of one big sack, they make 2 little sacks. And what they are doing now, these little sacks that they're doing is mostly for hair shell. Big sacks are going to the plant where the openings are, of the sack.

D: Now, where's the closest plant that you might send oysters?

E: We send ours to Biloxi, gulfport.

D: So Mississippi connection again?

C: You said now, when you first started out, where were you sending your oysters?

E: We used to bring em right here in Violet. Certain time of the year, when they had lots of oysters, Violet canal, Violet is attached to only one that shucked the oysters, and it shucked the oysters for years, and then it stopped. Right now, there's no factory that I know of that's canning oysters. But they are opening oysters on a half shell, but they are putting them in gallons. But they're not canning them that I know of.

D: Now one of the things Carl and i have had a hard time finding, are cans. The original oyster can with the label. It gives us the story of where these canneries were located. We know there was one at Happy Jack many years ago.

E: Many years ago.

D: There was one named, that we believe, there was one at Nester many years ago. So we are always interested in labels and cans because they tell us the community that had the cannery. At one time, before the countertrade, canned oysters were the way to go, because we didn't have refrigeration.

E: The reason why they had that Happy Jack, is because that's where they had the oyster fisherman over there. We would send to the only factory that they had was Violet, that's why we came up, I mean our boats would come here. We couldn't afford to take all of our oysters from here and bring them to Happy Jack.

D: Gotcha. Sure.

E: It was too foreign.

Other man: What about that factory they had in ...

E: They had one in Canarvey.

Other man: They didn't have one in ???. A big factory?

E: ... We had one right there in Canarvey.

Other man: Oh yeah, they had one in Canarvey... Collette?

E: well Collette was closed to, because the oyster fisherman that were fishing in Plaquemine Parish, and was fishing in the St. Bernard waters, it was close to the come in over here by Canarey and like us that was in Wicclasskey, Hopedale, and Laybonne, our closest was in Violet packing company.

D: Did you ever take any oysters to Biloxi, or Gulfport?

E: Yeah. They had a factory in.. going to Biloxi, on highway 90, they had a factory there. That was the last factory when Violet closed, they'd open up. I hauled whatever to the last place we hauled.

D: Now have you ever heard of the Dunbar, Lopez, and the Cade companies? Is that a... Do you recognize those names?

E: Dunbar yes. Yeah I remember they had a company there.

D: Yeah. Well we know that there was a cannery between Slidell and the Mississippi boarder on the river, in a place called Dunbar. We know there was one at the Reguleese??. Cus we found information. So there was lots of canneries that ere functioning at one time, but clearly they have consolidated down. Almost all of them had rail, so you could railroad out to Shell Beach was really important. I think hat we are asking, is if you see a can with a label, let us know.

E: Ive seen in a couple of paces, where they got cannery oysters, but to be honest with you, I think most of the cannery of oysters that you see today, are from those days.

D: Yes. That's right. But the cans were really important. We were looking for an oyster can from Houma, found one, it was on eBay, I was bidding on it, the bid went to about \$125 for a rusty can. I decided my wife might not be too pleased if I spent that much money on a rusted can. It sold for \$2,275 and the important thing to remember too is it took 2 people, so if you got some, they are probably worth money. Don't throw them away. You'll appreciate this, because talking about recycle, when you had a can, you cut out the bottom to put over your tomato plant. They're really hard for us to find, and we've been looking for 7 years. So just keep that in mind. These kinds of things..

E: Oh you're saying, you can't find that?

D: No, it's just like your rake, or your early oyster tongs are very hard for us to find, we just want a photograph.

E: I doubt that you would ever find anymore, maybe but we have the first box. I got one in my house right now, the first box that we made with our name and our label and everything on it, with the boat painted on it. But we used to put the oysters by the box then, we came out with oysters on the half shell. We got 1 box at my house I got one.

D: Now where did you get the boxes?

E: There was a company that made boxes. The only thing, I think the original owner is dead. I think he died. But I think the company is still making boxes, which we don't use no more. We use now, like onion sacks. And the reason why onion sacks, cus more air can go through it when you put them in the cooler.

D: Not coffee sacks?

E: No. Big sacks is coffee sacks too. that's 100lbs. Now the little sacks is about 50lbs. because it's 2 little sacks to big sacks, but the onion sacks, that's what it really is. And the reason for that is because more air can go through that when you put them in the cooler and it's much more easier to handle. And less expense.

D: Now do you remember any stories, now these are going back a long time when cannery was on a barge.

E: On a barge, ughhh. I think I'm not sure, I think they might've had one that tried it out in Plaquemine across the river. Because, the ???? that came across from Moti?, they got stong into the oyster business. They was the ones that really got strong into oyster business. It took years before the locals got into it, for that reason, it was hard hard work and everybody knew something about shrimping, but they didnt know too much about oysters, and like I said, oysters were hard work. Shrimping was not that hard. Oysters was hard work.

D: Well we have found a reference to 3 barges, each weighing 49 tons, so there's gotta be some regulation that if you go to 50. Never 48, never 50. And we think because of where we found the information, they were actually mobile canneries. We suspect one was towed in behind grand isle. And it made sense, because..

E: I was there, I would say about that i think that they've tried some now, but I don't know if they were successful. It was in Grand Isle, I know it was across the river for months. Over here, in St. Bernard Parish, that's about an hour away.

C: Now, in every business there are good years and bad, between 1947-today, can you target certain times that were real good, and certain times that were real bad for the oyster industry here.

E: What made the oysters real bad was when they had hurricanes. When they had hurricanes, that's what made it bad. But, within the year, you could come back on it again after a hurricane, and what killed the oysters after a hurricane, is when the sand would become over the oyster and get in the oysters and that would be it, an then it would cover them up and then by winter time, in bad weather, they'd get rough, it would wash the sand off of the oysters, and that's when we would come back again. We would lower in and get on the reef after a hurricane, get on a reef and take the bag off and keep going round and round and round and round. And especially when the wind was blowing and it roughened I don't know why. We wanted that, because we'd go around and be disturbed in the water, and the sand would be drifting elsewhere.

Other man: I didn't know it. I didn't know the sand killed the oysters. I thought the sand made a pearl.

E: The sand does make a pearl, 1 grain of sand. But if anymore get in it, no. That would kill it.

D: Now if you weren't fishing oysters, what were you doing? Or did you fish oysters every month or every day?

E: I was in the seafood business. I bought everything, whatever came to the dock. If it was just shrimp coming in, I'd buy it, if it was crab coming in, I'd buy it. If fish come in, I bought it. Whatever came in the line of seafood, I bought it.

D: Now where was your market? Where did you sell it? Cus it's all fresh.

E: Most of it, alright. I used to handle 2 trailer loads of shrimp day. All went to Violet, then I used Violet packing company and I used to go to Scamidia to cross the river. I handled out 4 trailer loads of oysters today.

D: That would go to Violet too?

E: Some of it, it'd go on to Violet, Some of it would go on to Plantswood. They would go and put 'em in the gallons. Now, the hurricane really hurt us, but they didn't hurt us as bad as BP. BP really hurt us bad. We lost over 80% of our oysters around BP. The chemical that they threw in the water to dissolve the oil, it killed the oyster and anything around it, it'd kill it. Then the little oyster the stacked would not stick on. All the oysters that they had that they called black beauty ???. It's still a silly name thing that was solid oysters. Today, it is solid oysters. shells. ??.. So we're finding out now that we just learning more and moe about that in these last couple of years, that BP stopped. We are planting rocks, and gravel. That's what they're sticking on now.

D: So you're having to create your own hard rock?

E: Yeah. That's ehat we're doing now. We are pursant?? anywhere from 300-400 tons of oysters... ughhh rocks a day. We first set em out there by bardges. Plus with our boats. We got bardges that will hold, I don't know how many tons. And we are pushing it with our bardges and then we come back. We don't have to shovel em no more. We're pumping them more.

C: Well, after the oil spill, I know that many people in the oil industry were laid off. Were companies here able to bring those people back? I mean you probably.. I think the concern at the time right after the spill, was that these people once they got another job, would never come back to the oil industry.

E: Yeah. It hurt. Like I said, we lost 80% of our oysters now. Alright. Right now, we only got 3 boats that are sacking oysters right now. The rest are tied to the wall.

C: How many alltogether?

E: We have 8 boats, so now we're coming back. Alright. Before, when you take an oyster from a little oyster that ate its fat, would hit it on the shell. It would take anywhere from 3-4 years before that oyster would be market sized. Now, we're finding out just recently, that we got some reach that we made to put the rocks on it. And we just went and did it, cus we checked them every so often. Right now, we went check it, and we got some more oysters that's on one rock. It's one year old this month coming, September. They're just about this size and they got anywhere from 8, 10, 15 oysters on one rock. So the way we're looking at it, we see them that year, 2 years we'll be able to cull 'em and have 'em market sized, because of the rock; but not all of the reefs that we've been doing that to, because the reefs where we do 'em we've been planting rocks on top of the reefs we own, and we're building 'em up. But not all of them reefs are active like I'm telling you. It's a funny thing. You might be 500 ft. away from them and this one here is catching like i don't know what. And 500ft. from here, they're not catching at all. But what comes with that too now, is the current. The more current that there is where you plant the oysters. You try to find a place that's got a lot of current.

C: Well, what you both have talked a lot about today is change, and the way things were as opposed to the way things are today. I'd like to get both of you, Don.

D: I think, if you can just..

C: I'd like for you to basically go back to as far back as you can remember here, and then look at today, and tell me, what is the difference.

E: The difference today is just like day and night. I tell ya. I mean from, you just look from sailing, and now you got motor boats. I mean that's you know, the big improvement that is. Alright, another big improvement is from picking it up by hand and now you got everything hydrolic. Another deal is shoveling back, now you got a pump. Now, you can't beat that, but the only thing that we got to do like we've done from the beginning, we're still doing it, is culling the oysters. there ain't no machine invented to knock them lil woods off, you had to save the big one.

C: Well one of the things you kept talking about was how people helped eachother in the earlier time, is that still true here?

E: Back then, they used to help eachother plenty. But the people moved out and the ones that didn't move out died. You know? They only got 2 people to die, my Uncle Ladiperez??, and I think Paul

Cerennay?? stayed down there a some time and Thomas Gonzales, he stayed down there and prayed. Thomas fishes crab, and they make soft shell crab too.

C: But in hard times, do they still pull together here?

E: Awww.

Girl: Yeah, some.

Other man: Some people pull together, I know all my friends, they help me.

E: Now you see, making soft crabs too. Making soft crabs is a catch. You gotta know what you're doing when you're making soft crabs. But it's work. It's every 3 hours, you gotta be checkin them boxes 7 days a week.

Other man: every 3 hours?

E: When them crabs start to get soft, and they change, a crab goes through 3 different stahes before it gets soft. Now not every crab becomes soft. There's certain crabs that become soft, and you gotta know when you look at that crab, you gotta know if it can be soft. First, when you catch it, it's a green crab we call. Mean, eat, bite, anything. Then about every 3 days, you gotta dis claw 'em, because it changes from a green crab to what we call a pink crab. Now, he bites, and he eats, but not as much. Now after becomming a pink crab, he becomes a buster. Now he'll bite ya, but he can't hurt ya and he don't wanna eat. And then within a couple or 3 days, that's when he starts to shed. Now all of this time, you gotta be dis clawing them boxes, you gotta seperate the green crabs from the pink crabs and the pink crab from the buster crab. You cannot leave em together, if you leave them together, when it gets tough, the green crab and the pink crab are going to eat the soft crab.

Other man: You see, the pink crab, you look behind the, I call it the head, the flap, the one on the back, you look at that, you see a little white line. A white line. Okay that's a green crab. Okay, then you see the pink line, now that's a pink crab. Then you see the little crack right in the corner, right over there, a little

bitty crack, that's a buster. Then you put the busters in a shin box, the green crabs in a green crab box, and all that, and you gotta check em like he said, everyday. Everyday, everyday.

E: and when they come out to shell, the crab comes out the back of the shell. The shell opens up. And it comes out the back.

Other man: It comes out the back, yeah.

E: Everything on that crab is empty.

Other man: everything.

E: It's eyes. He's long. Everything. When they loose that shell, it's just a shell. That's how it gets big.

Other man: You can take it's shell out and throw that away. Crush it. They don't need it again.

E: If you see the crab, if you watch it, you've never done that, that's amazing. That's something you all ought to see. If you see the crab when it comes out that shell, that's how it gets big.

Other man: That's how it grows.

E: If you say no, he didn't coe out that shell, he's almost twice that size. A lot of people say no, he didn't come out that shell. that's how he get's big.

Other man: That's a buster, he comes out and then it cracks. The shell, the top of the shell comes up and it does this. i can show you some like that right now.

E: it's amazing, that you all ought to see. Take pictures of that and look.

Other man: If he's coming out, when he's ready to come out, he's coming out fast. It's just like a lady, ya know, when they have birth. Same thing. It's in the same procedure.

D: Now the one thing I haven't heard anyone talk about are turtles.

Other man: I don't know nothin about turtles.

E: Turtles.

D: That's okay, that's okay, I didn't expect that. That's fine.

E: Turtles are... nobody has ever made a living fishing turtles, because they never had that many turtles. The most turtles that were ever sold is swamp turtles. They, we kept em in the swamp, in the marsh, that;s the ones we call snapping turtles. And they were bad. They bad.

Other man: They got the long teeth. Oooo they bite.

E: Those are bad.

*phone rings.

*Edmond answers.

End.