

Mark Staton

Don/Carl: We are ready to

Mark: Can I ask you a question?

Don/Carl: Sure

Mark: So what we are going to do is just have a conversation, is that right?

Don/Carl: Yes

Mark: And you will try to prompt,

Don/Carl: steer the conversation

Mark: steer the conversation, get me to just expand upon whatever is pertinent to what we're talking about.

Don/Carl: Exactly

Mark: And also I assume you aren't using everything right? So I don't have to sound brilliant at all.

Don/Carl: No, no, no, exactly. Just please relax.

Mark: Alright, yes

Don/Carl: And we're here today to continue a conversation we had several years ago and that your business is unique to Louisiana because we do have alligators and with the television show "Swamp People," it has suddenly become very ovanguard.

Mark: That's right.

Don/Carl: And as a result you have positioned yourself very well but it's not been an easy business to get involved in. When we left last time, you had come from New Guinea and you are now in Louisiana. If you could just pick up the story from there and tell us about your business model.

Mark: Well as I'm not sure it was that well planned that there was a business model. When you start out, you pretty much do what you have to do to succeed, to bring in business. Um early on, I think I told you that I was involved with the feeds. And so early on I actually did some consulting with farmers really all over the world: Africa, South American, here, and actually began to manufacture a seed, feed supplement for a while, a vitamin-mineral pre-mix. But that was really sort of a side line. In New Guinea I had begun to trade in the skins, basically sell it to some of the major tanneries around the world. And that put me in a position to either get some skins sold or actually what I really got into was buying the skins, having them tanned, and then selling to manufactures. And I was able not only to do that with alligator, I actually, before I got into selling alligators. I started bringing in some of the crocodiles from New Guinea where I had actually been farming. And that was good for me because that particular

crocodile is very, it's fairly rare and it is actually very highly sought after. It makes a nice skin. So that when I went knocking on manufacture's doors, I had not only that particular skin, but I could sell alligator as well. So they kind of, that past connection to New Guinea actually helped me get into and eventually expand my alligator market. My alligator experience as it were because it then grew into not only trading in the tanned skins but then cutting up the skins and selling belt strips to manufacturers, selling wallet panels to manufacturers, and then eventually actually manufacturing some products ourselves. Go ahead

Don/Carl: No. go ahead and finish. I have a question.

Mark: Well that was kind of where I was going to stop. I like questions.

Don/Carl: What kind of infrastructure was in place when you worked in Louisiana?

Mark: In terms of?

Don/Carl: of the alligator

Mark: of the alligator industry?

Don/Carl: industry, right.

Mark: Well the alligator industry infrastructure, if you want to call it that, began, the current one began back in the 70s really with the pioneering of farming, primarily by people at Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge, Ted Joanen and Larry McNease and eventually Ruth Elsey and others got really involved in it. But at that time the state put in a, established a program by which they could help alligator farmers get into business and then eventually the were weaned off of any help from the state and many of those farms went on to become successful ones that are there today and some of them actually didn't make it. But as a result of those successes, other people got in and so back in the early 90s when I came back from New Guinea, there were a good many farms, some very small, some very large scattered around the state. Some at that time had over 100,000 alligators on a farm which at that time was pretty big and there were some with even more than that now. The trading of the skins was then and still is today dominated by a few relatively large dealers because they are in a position to buy from many of the farmers, many of the trappers as the skins come in from the wild season and then so on to tanneries around the world.

Don/Carl: So basically they were shipping these skins out of state?

Mark: Yes, yes. Back in the early 90s there were no tanneries in Louisiana and then eventually the one here in Lafayette got established. RTL as it is called today and was called the same then, though the initials were a little different. It was established again through the help of some state aid and today it is totally owned by the French factory, excuse me the French Fashion Leader if you want to call it. So that all the shipping was done out of state back then and today much of it does go through this one tannery here in town but still most are shipped overseas and even the ones that they process typically go overseas. They don't sell a lot of their production here in the United States.

Don/Carl: So essentially none of the end product is being manufactured in-state?

Mark: Very little, it would have been done on a small, almost craftsmen, hobby-like basis. There probably were some, well there were some belt manufactures in New Orleans that were fairly well known. Crescent City Torino Belts, but not a whole lot more, even today most is not made here, you know we are trying to change that but we are still relatively small and it is something that we hope will continue to grow.

Don/Carl: Well I visited belt manufacturers in Santa Fe and on Richmond Avenue in Houston, both carry your product, I didn't mention that I knew you but apparently your market has expanded pretty well.

Mark: Well we do, as I mentioned, our primary market is not necessarily manufacturing the belt, but in the case of the people you just mentioned, what we do is of course we have the skin, we buy the skin, then we have it tanned, and then we cut that strip up, we cut the skin into strips. We do the splicing, I'll be glad to show that to you as we walk through the office and warehouse and we then sell a long strip of alligator to those specifications: how long, how wide, and that then is what they prefer to buy as opposed to buying the whole skin. It gets their costs fixed and you know if they buy from a tannery, they may get a great skin they are happy with, they may not. There is just a lot involved with it. A good example would be let's say a small belt maker in middle town America who gets and order for a red alligator belt. Well they don't want to buy a red alligator skin because when are they going to sell the rest of it? But they can call here and we can sell them a red alligator belt strip to their specifications. And we can do it because we sell it all over the country and we have enough business to justify cutting a small, a skin and producing a product that only involved part of it because we know we will use the rest of it later on. But yeah we do sell to, I'm not going to mention the names but we sell to manufacturers whose products end up in the highest names of retail in the country.

Don/Carl: Now in our previous discussions, you mentioned that you got started by basically going to trade shows. Do you still do that?

Mark: We stopped doing that, as far as selling the product. We'd go to shows and we were able to sell a lot of product, which for us was very good because we could always sell, and this is throughout the industry, every tannery, every leather house would tell you that you can always sell the nicest, best skins but what do you do with the skins that might have a bunch of holes in it or has the tail missing, or has some other defect? Well you want to do something with that skin and what we were able to do was if we didn't sell it as a belt strip, we were able to make belts or wallets or whatever out of it and sell that at these trade shows. Now in recent years we noticed a, at least from our experience a decline in the sales that were available to us at these shows. I don't know if that was because the internet is taking over or just what the factors were, I have my theories but I rather not be on tape saying them. (laughter) So we haven't done that as much and frankly we do sell here but most of our products we still depend on retailers and manufacturers throughout the country to sell something made out of alligator and we try to supply them.

Don/Carl: I was going to ask if the internet allowed you to fill the void created by the decline in the trade shows?

Mark: Um not really because we don't, we try actually not to have an internet presence. We could but then we would be in competition with our people that we sell to, our customers that we sell to throughout the. So when we have done trade shows, we always tried to do it locally in areas that would not impact the customers who buy our skins or who buy our belt strips or buy other things from us and so truthfully it just hasn't been necessary. We've sold more locally in our little showroom and I think our business has expanded to the point where we either sell directly to manufacturers or to local customers who are buying everything that we can produce.

Don/Carl: We don't necessarily need to know manufacturers names, that isn't particularly important. But what is important is that your physical footprint is pretty small, but yet I get the sense that your market is well beyond the United States.

Mark: We do sell some products beyond the United States but we really choose to concentrate on the U.S.

Don/Carl: Okay

Mark: When you sell internationally, there is, everything happens on a different scale and there are different regulations involved and we're relatively small and happy just to market here in the United States.

Don/Carl: Would you care to comment on say the two largest cities that you may market to?

Mark: Well there is a difference between the cities that we market to and the cities that end up using our products. For example we have a very large customer in Atlanta who sells almost all their products in New York City and so New York City is probably the ultimate user. And then if any, you know, Houston, San Francisco, Chicago, or any of the big cities would be end users. In many cases we really don't know who the end user is because we are selling to manufacturers who sell to them. But I can tell you just based on experience, any big city, any big name retailer, you will have seen products that we, that ran through here, that we cut up, or we just sold them the skin or in some cases made the belt strips. Yeah there are a lot of them right there.

Don/Carl: Any idea what they actually marketing in places like New York, are they mostly bags?

Mark: From us, it will mostly be belts because we do a lot of belt strip business. Yeah mostly belts. Some wallets and smaller things, bracelets, little things like that. And you have to remember also that for some products, there can be major sales out there that involve relatively few skins. For example, recently we've been able to make some luggage and luggage involve 10 or 15 skins at the most and yet the sales can be substantial. I won't say this is the case for what we have been able to manufacture but it's not unusual to see luggage sets on the market for \$100,000 in alligator which is a lot.

Don/Carl: It's substantial.

Mark: That's substantial. That one set of luggage equals a lot of belts you see. And we've for example sold a good amount of skins once, what I thought was a good amount. I thought it was between \$25,000

- \$35,000 worth of skins and it was being used to make two chairs. Because everything had to be just right, had to match up just right. Now these were very large winged-back chairs, very involved, lots of, if you were making it out of fabric, there is no telling how many yards would be involved. So again, relatively few skins can be, can represent a lot of finished product.

Don/Carl: Would you walk us through a process. The alligator went on the endangered species list. It came off. We now have a controlled alligator harvest. So basically your product is being confined to the month of September. After the month of September, unless it is farmed raised, that is when you have to

Mark: That's when we buy

Don/Carl: When you have to get the product that is going to last you for 11 months.

Mark: That's correct. We have, there is a small source you haven't mentioned, but you are right. The biggest source is either the wild harvest or wild hunt during the month of September or buying smaller farm skins which case you are able to buy relatively uniformed lots of skins but they will be on small. Another words if you go to a farmer and buy 300 skins, they are almost going to be the exact same size and that uniformity is highly desirable for some things. But say, and we aren't in that position, but let's say somebody had a line of purses and they wanted to manufacture a 100 purses and they wanted them all to look very similar so you need a lot of uniformity in your raw material. But we buy either from the farms, we buy during the wild hunt, or through out the year there are nuisance hunters who bring a few skins now and then. Actually I have a few on hand I can show you. So those would be the three sources. But yes in September we are very busy. We are very busy buying skins and that actually carries over into October because the trappers have to buy them in September but they can hold on to them as long as they want. Usually by October, November they know what they are going to do. They've sold them and either go to us or go to somebody else.

Don/Carl: Do you have a group of trappers that seek you out to sell?

Mark: I do have a some that like to bring their skins to me because I think I treat them very fairly and try to give them a very fair price. People that, you know it's one of those things that every buyer wants to have faithful suppliers and so I think I've managed to do that. I will tell you that we're certainly not one of the big dealers in the state, we aren't but we buy enough that I can't have all the skins brought to me here. So what I will do is have a, one of the buyers that has a avotoire, if you will, a processing facility actually buy skins for me and process them and then I get the skins that way. I participate in several ways in the hunt.

Don/Carl: By processing you mean tanning?

Mark: By processing in this case I'm talking about actually physically receiving the animals because I don't have a processing facility here. I can only take in skins here. If a trapper wants to skin the animal and many of them do still want to do that and cause they like to take the meat and eat it and give it to relatives and all that. This is south Louisiana, Louisiana, it comes from all over Louisiana. If they want to process the skin, or take the skin off the animal themselves then I am more than happy to buy that skin.

But by processing I was saying what I meant was there are place in the state that are processing facilities for alligators where they skin the animal, take the skin off, treat it just right and alligator skin really needs to be treated right just from the moment it comes off the animal til the time it gets to in this process by the tannery in order to make the finest skin at the end and therefore the best end product whatever that may be. So there are people that salt, tan, excuse me, take, skin the animal, salt it, treat it right, this involves ... solution and then big walk in freezers or coolers at the right temperature, usually a re-salting of the skin. They take care of the skin, that's very important. And so I pay them for that service in order to get the skins that I can't buy here on site.

Don/Carl: So it goes from these facilities to a tannery?

Mark: Yes

Don/Carl: At some point

Mark: Right. Now once I have either bought the skin, here on site or bought it off site, then I send them to a tannery and that is all regulated by Wildlife and Fisheries and of course the skin has to have this Cites tag put on it. I don't know if we talked about Cites before but we can look at some tags. Cites just briefly means Conference on International Trade in Endangered Species, that's the acronym, is that right? And Cites maintains a staff. I think they are mostly centered in Switzerland for whatever reason but every skin that is traded worldwide has a Cites tag on it and it is a unique number to that particular skin. For example, the same number might be used in various places but then the tag will also mention Louisiana and the species name and so every skin has a unique tag on it. That tag is put on the animal at the time it is killed. You may have seen on Swamp People. You know they kill the animal and before they haul it out the marsh, one of the first things they are going to do is put that tag on it because if they don't have that tag on it, they can be fined significantly. And then that tag stays on it throughout the skinning process, all the salting, all the tanning, until it arrives to me in my case or to wherever it is gone and stays on that tag, on that skin until the manufacturing process begins. So in our case, once we start to make a belt strip or start to make something, then we can cut that tag off and but we maintain records of it as well. So this is the way the industry is regulated and Wildlife and Fisheries at the inspection of the skins leaving and going to the tanneries will make a list. Actually we make the list and they check it, make sure that everything is as we say it is, that those skins are being shipped to this tannery or that tannery. If it is shipped internationally, then U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gets involved and does what they call a Cites inspection and issues a Cites permit. So it's all very regulated and I'll show you some of the tags when we walk through the skin room.

Don/Carl: Now when you, when you send your skins out to be tanned, do you determine the colors?

Mark: Well, yes I determine the colors but what happens is, and again I'll show you some examples. The tanning process is many involved and complicated and interrelated stages but eventually they reach the point that the skin reaches the point that we call crust. In other words, a crust piece of skin is one that has been tanned, it's turned into leather but it is basically white or cream colored. It is ready for dying and finishing. And so at that point I, in most cases, go to the tannery myself and say to them, "Okay, this one I want to be black, that one I want to be red, and that one I want to be green or purple or

whatever," because I like to look at the skins and at that point start to envision either who I am going to sell it to or what can be made out of it and then of course I think about what colors would pertain for those uses, how many of those colors we have in stock, really I'm not on top of the fashion colors. We do pay attention to what's selling, for example, this year coral is interesting, the color coral. So we pay attention to things like that. We also listen to what the tannery says and they may be developing a new color. So I would then decide, "Yeah, I'm going to take that skin and put into whatever color." They then proceed to dye the skin, finish it and there is a variety of finishes but the two most predominate ones in the industry are the classic glaze shiny finish or what we call a mat finish, its a duller, softer finish. And then they eventually arrive back and go on my shelves.

Don/Carl: About how many skins do you need a year?

Mark: I probably, all total between wild skins, farm skins, crocodile skins, I probably do about a thousand probably. Some years I've done over a thousand, 1200-1500, but and that's, it's always in a state of flux. It depends on the market, you know and in some years we may buy more than we need if the price is right and in some cases when the price is really high I may shy away and use some of those skins or I may shy away knowing the end users are not going to bare that price, just are not going to pay that price. So it is in a state of flux depending on market conditions and my inventory and that sort of thing. But a thousand skins is something that we manage to sell and pays the bills and part of, and truthfully and I know this is the kind of thing y'all want to talk about but it is truthfully it is part of the utilization of a natural resource right, because what we're doing is using a natural resource in a way that is highly controlled, regulated by the state in a very rational way and we're bringing it to the market place and in such a way that we satisfy demand and the industry is regulated and in fact is the regulatory apparatus if you want to call it that way is in a sense supported by the commercial activity. We have the \$4 it's actually \$4.25 tag fee on each tag and that helps to support the various activates that go into regulation, the inspectors that go out, the wildlife agents that might be taking some of the farm releases back into the marsh. We haven't talked about that but I think you may know, but some people don't and that is that farms are, they get there animals from wild nests in most cases. So what Wildlife and Fisheries authorizes and permits the collection and harvest of eggs from lands throughout the state, again that is done in a very regulated way. They actually know just from marsh types and from years and years of data and transinsect life, they have a good idea of what the nesting population is and how many can be harvested. And so the farmers are allowed or somebody, the landowner maybe will go out and collect and sell to a farmer. Somebody collects those eggs, then they bring them into captivity and they hatch them in captivity and they will have a much higher success rate in captivity than would be the case in the wild because there is no predation, the raccoons and things aren't there eating them. Also when they hatch in the wild, frequently within a month or two, all the babies would be eaten up perhaps. So in captivity then they get a good hatch rate and there able to grow them in captivity and with good nutrients and you know good feeding and good growing conditions and then at some point what happens is the state says okay well you got to pick up say 100 eggs, but we want a percentage of them returned to the wild to the marsh they came out of and that way it supplements the natural population, it takes the place of natural recruitment into the wild population. And it's something that's been documented and has been fairly successful, the alligator population of the state continues to grow.

Don/Carl: Mark are the, is the quality of the skins of farm raised alligators, are they better generally than those collected from the wild simply because of the conditions, nutrition, the controlled conditions under which they are raised?

Mark: You know generally, that's the case for the size animal that the farms produce. In other words, if it is successful farmer, he will be successful because he is producing a good skin and so they are producing a nice quality skin. And it will, you can feel the skin, I mean and it will be nice and you can tell it came from a healthy animal for example. And in some cases. the wild skin will be just as good but in some cases the wild skin maybe came from an area where there was a lot of predation. Maybe it's been pecked on a few times by some birds or had its tail eaten off by another alligator or raccoon or a leg is missing. So logically in the wild things can go wrong so buy in large the farmer will produce a very superior skin for the market place. Now in some cases that doesn't happen and if they do that year after year, then they won't be in the business long. I won't tell you that every farmed skin is highly desired, that is a superior skin, no enterprise is going to be a 100% successful all the time.

Don/Carl: Would you comment about how you can change the sex of an alligator by the temperature of the eggs?

(laughter)

Mark: Well, it can be done. Alligators, and I've never done this myself so I'm going to speak from theoretical considerations and what I've heard. But in briefly, alligators have what is known as temperature depended sex determination so that in the nest, in the nest, as they are developing as embryos in the eggs, there are a set of temperature regimes that will determine whether the egg developing, the egg as an embryo will develop in a male or in to a female. And so there is certain temperatures that will produce males and certain temperatures that will produce females. But it's not a 100% type thing and I think laying in a nest, if you can envision a nest cavity or an egg cavity within a nest, you can imagine that the eggs on top might be a little different, might be exposed to a little different condition to the eggs that are on the bottom and so then you have a rain that comes in. There is sunshine, over the course of what hundreds of millions of years and all kinds of varying temperatures the average has probably been 50/50 but in some years it has probably been more males, some years has probably been more females. But thank goodness they are long lived animals and it all averages out. In captivity that can of course be controlled. I don't think anybody has ever, I don't know this, I don't know that anybody has successfully said we are going to incubate at this temperature cause we're going to grow more males or females because what they would be looking for is faster growth and better skins. Fast growth does not always equal good skin quality. And my understanding is that the temperature differentials is very small so that you might at one temperature produce, and I'm going, I haven't read up on this a lot but you might produce a fast growing male at whatever temperature but at one tenth of a degree off or two tenths of a degree off you might have a slow growing male. So it's not on a commercial basis probably something that can be manipulated. Maybe if in a very controlled laboratory situation you could probably figure something out and whether that could be duplicated and replicated in a commercial situation in an incubator on a farm for example. I don't know.

Don/Carl: Is there an optimal size? At least from your perspective of farm skin?

Mark: Well, no it depends on what you're making. For me the optimal size is a fairly large skin. I like 7.5 - 8 foot skins. But if you are in the watch strap business, you wouldn't want that size. You actually want 3.5 - 4 foot skins because they want small scales. The size of the skin of course determines the size of the scales that are on the animal and the size of the scale pattern will be visible in the product and so if you are making a small product you are going to want to use a small skin. If you are making a larger product, then it depends on what you want it to look like. If, and this is progressively so, from a watch strap to a wallet to a purse to a set of luggage, you know you want a different size for those products. Now some and again you always have to think about what your customer wants. And your customer may want small grain even though it's on a set of luggage, in which case you have to use a lot of small skins. But truthfully there is an ideal size but it's based on who the end user will be. Now there is another factor involved and that is smaller skins costs less but in fact to a manufacturer they cost more. And what I mean by that will pay less for the skin but they get less useable leather out of it and so on a per dollar basis you actually get more useable skin out of a larger skin than a smaller skin. And of course that is a factor. So there is just a variety of factors you have to consider.

Don/Carl: Could you take a moment and just, you have three skins on the wall, and just use those as props to explain the difference?

Mark: Okay, well let's see. This is about a 4.5 foot - 5 foot alligator. This is a wild skin, this is a wild alligator. I can tell because it's a long lean animal. If it were a farm skin, the tail would be a little fatter, the belly would be a little fatter, and therefore look like a shorter, fatter animal. This skin is 27 centimeters and so it would be a nice skin to, it might be a little small for wallets. If it were just a centimeter or two wider, it would be an ideal size. Can I stand up here?

Don/Carl: Sure.

Mark: And you might cut a couple wallet panels out of this skin for example. This skin is large enough, the belly, and I'm looking at the belly because this is what people tend to look at. It might be good for a small purse, maybe a lady's wallet for example. You could also if you had another one that was virtually identical to it, you could use it for a pair of boots make the front of the pair of boots using it. And just to get back to what I was saying earlier, this is why farm skins are very desirable for products that involve multiple skins, say a pair of boots, or a run of 20 pair of boots. And if you really want them to look the same then you want a lot of skins the same size that look similar. And on these farms, you can actually see skins that you can imagine are relatives because the scale patterns are so similar that you thing gosh this had to be a sibling for example. So even though this is a wild skin, this is typical in width and overall size of what you might get from a farm.

Don/Carl: Now that would be a shinny finish, not a matte finish?

Mark: Yes, this is the glaze finish, the shinier finish. That's correct, and this is the classic alligator finish, this is a color what we call coniac or peanut, its different their terminology for colors which is very complicated.

Don/Carl: I want to talk more on this one. You talked about using the belly area. Um what would you do with the rest of the animal?

Mark: Now it's not that the rest of, the rest will be used, nothing goes unused or you've lost money. Really the manufacturer in our case, whoever is using the skin has, either has to use all the skin or has to make a whole lot of money off part of the skin or they are not going to do well. We pride ourselves in making full use on all the skin. We actually, again maybe because I'm from South Louisiana and I'm really an alligator guy and biologist by training and in my heart but I feel like if you're going to take this animal, you have an obligation to send it to the best tanneries and to make full utilization of it. It's just my own personal philosophy. So this might be used say for a belt, it could be used for very small products, you could make a wallet out of it using the tail pattern. A lot of the tails, and I mean belts to be honest with you. Now this here is the Cites tag alright and again you can see a skin has a, at the tannery or in the manufacturing process the skins are split. In other words you might take it down form and 1/8 of an inch to a 1/16 of an inch and what happens is you have a lot of the skin cropped off and it goes into in the waste basket, you know its basically useless. But there is a tannery over in Italy that specializes in taking all this stuff and making like a fiberboard or a particle board or a, basically they make a leather, synthetic leather by gluing it all together. They must grind it up and glue it all together. So what they have is a fabricated leather but it is still genuine leather, right because everything that was put into it was alligator. So it, they have been marketing that, this back in the 90s anyway as the second skin. But I don't know, I really haven't seen much of it in this country and I suspect that they would have a problem bringing it into the country because they have no Cites documentation. You don't know what skins when into that and they would have no way of proving it or proving that it didn't come from an endangered species. So that's what the regulation of the alligator by Cites is all about. That is not so much the alligators were endangered, but there is something called scan, animals that are threatened due to similarity of appearance so that if we have a legal market on alligators, the fear is that some other endangered species that looks enough like it that could be confused with it is not being regulated, is endangered and that if you can somehow get it into the alligator market, then you can sell it. So alligators are therefore regulated in order to prevent that sort of thing happening.

Don/Carl: Would you take a moment and just walk around, starting with your display, pointing out the skins, some of the things you've manufactured. This is a marvelous showcase of what you can do with alligator.

Mark: Thank you. Well there is a lot in this room. This is a showroom where we show some of the skins, some of the colors, some of the products. And these pictures up here a basically kind of a story board if you will, they tell a little picture of kind of what I've been talking to you about. We buy the skins that have been taken from the wild and there is a lot that goes in to handling them properly and getting them inspected and going to the tannery. And then we get them back as finished skins which we manufacture in one way or another or sell them to manufacturers. And here are some of the products that we do here in house. Some sandals for example both of ladies and for men. The boots we get made out of house, we're not boot makers and we're not custom boot makers but if somebody has a standard size then we can get that made. There is just a variety of skins here that are really for show-and-tell purposes. This is a salt water crocodile horn back skin and this is a Nile crocodile skin and this big

alligator, sting ray, water buffalo. When you're in the skin business or in the leather business, you come across all sorts of interesting pieces of leather that have been tanned and made from the skins of various animals and so people like to talk about it. This is actually buffalo here, I don't know if you can get it in your picture but this is a buffalo, heroine buffalo that was actually tanned at mink tannery, well at a tannery that does mink so it's really nice and soft. And it's all legal, buffalo as you know is hunted for its meat and then skins are produced and go into the leather industry. Now here are just some of the colors that we're handling how a days. These all have matte finished skins which has become very popular. The classic glaze finish was by far in the past the more popular way of finishing an alligator skin but more and more the skins are finished in the matte finish. There is a variety of reasons for that and colors are, become a bigger part of our business and a bigger part of the industry in general for the last ten years or so. I would have never imagined 15 years ago having this selection of colors but these are all colors that do sell, that are popular in there own way. I ask you not to use that.

Don/Carl: Sure.

Mark: And I'll tell you why because I have many, many customers who are custom boot makers. This thing is going to be seen someday by someone and they are going to talk and talk, so while I don't mind showing the occasional boot we make I don't want to make a big emphasis about it.

Don/Carl: No problems.

Mark: So please cut this one out. I mean you understand don't you?

Don/Carl: Oh yeah, No it's a business

Mark: Well and it's like I was telling you earlier, I never want to do anything that will hurt my customers or want to give the impression even that I am. I sell to only, pretty much locally, local basis selling. I don't want to emphasis.

Don/Carl: No, Done!

Mark: Please take that off.

Don/Carl: Not a problem

Mark: Matter of fact, if so you want to pan over there. We can go back to over there, just to show you.

Don/Carl: But that's the thing that struck me when we came here the first time Mark was just the variety of colors. I never in my wildest dreams would have expected

Mark: And it's grown. Let me head over here. I guess you want me in it?

Don/Carl: Oh Yes, because of this

Mark: Well this is some more of the colors that we have. This is called Kelly green, this is a dark turquoise which was produced by a tannery that actually developed it for a very large well known fashion house. I won't tell you which one. We were lucky enough to get some of this color. We don't

market it as relative to that fashion house but it is a very desirable color. Again we have the very every present and popular, golden and purple or in this case yellow and purple and we have a red one over there for the local UL fans. So we are always happy to do things and I supposed we have green for the Green Wave. But now the colors have just got to be really popular and the good thing for us is that as the time goes on and more and more in the last five years I'll say, we have progressively gotten into manufacturing products that first of all aren't in conflict with our customers, but which have some local demand. One thing that we've done a lot of is ladies purses and what we are able to do is talk to a lady and she might bring in a purse and we are able to say this is what we can do in alligator, this is what might look good in alligator, then she can actually pick her skin and pick her color and that works really good for us. So because the ladies market has opened up for us then we're, and not just for us here locally, but to our customers nationwide, we're able to do more with all this variety of colors.

Don/Carl: This is great. This is great.

Mark: So this is the showroom and now we will go look at the actual skin room

Don/Carl: Alright, Yes, let me turn this

(a bunch of noise)

Mark: And matter of fact an episode on us, they'd get some pretty wild tales around here.

Don/Carl: Now this is your workshop?

Mark: This is the workshop, its part of it. This is what we call the skin room, another words, this is our inventory of skins on site by and large. There is some else where but we also have a lot of skins still at the tannery. But this if we get an order in, we'll come in here, go to the shelves and pull the skin either to sell as a skin or to make a product. Yeah, and as I was telling you a while ago, a lot of, a good bit of business now is people that have hunted their own skin and they want something made with it, right. So they bring them to us and we'll actually send it to the tannery with our skins and then we get it back and then they will tell us what they want made out of it. This is a nice little overnighter I guess you could call it that we actually made here on site out of a skin that a customer had tanned for, he actually killed this animal and now he is going to be carrying it around.

Don/Carl: It must have been a fairly large one.

Mark: It was, it was about an 8' 5" - 9' and it took most of the animal, what you see here in this bag is what's left over, that's the scraps from the skin. And we will be able to make something from this for him, maybe belts or little things but the bigger pieces went into this. This is a good little bit of work and not a lot of places in the country will, where you will get something like this done, especially in alligator.

Don/Carl: So you did all the sewing and everything?

Mark: Yes

Don/Carl: In house?

Mark: From scratch, everything, all the sewing, everything you see was done in house.

Don/Carl: And the customer ultimately picked the color, also?

Mark: Well the customer picks the color of the skin, the customer actually showed us what he wanted the product to look like and we were able to duplicate most of what he wanted. Some cases it just wasn't feasible but, and this one isn't quite ready, still some work to be done on it, but it just came up this morning or late yesterday and we still have to clean it up a bit and polish it up, soften it, put conditioner on it. It's going to be a great piece.

Don/Carl: You can't use a conditioner name but you have a conditioner that you use on all of your products?

Mark: Yes, absolutely, yeah

Don/Carl: And it's a good thing to do this regularly?

Mark: We do suggest it and yeah it's good. Alligator is of course it is expensive, it's valuable, but it will last a lot longer if you take good care of it and that will involve cleaning it, conditioning it, and of course you want to polish it so it looks as good as it can. Yeah, you want to take good care of it. I have had belts brought in here that were worn back in the '30s and the man. It was actually brought by a man whose father had given him the belts and he had worn them for a long time and then finally he just couldn't fit in them anymore so he just bought new ones, but the product can last a long, long time if it is taken care of.

Don/Carl: Why don't you just walk across this table, explaining the little pieces and what you are doing all the way across?

Mark: Okay, well this is actually a sandal we're working on. It's not, this isn't everything, this is a prototype and it is going to wrap around the lady's leg like this and then have a little buckle on it. It's a style that's in right now. And we actually, this is just, the was the first prototype, we have a second prototype that has actually gone to a designer who I'm sure is going to sell some of them. That same designer just order forty pair of sandals. If you want to come this way, and all these little pieces that you referred to, these are all parts of the sandals. So these are pieces of alligator skin that were split to the right level, glued to a liner, cut, edge-coated and they are being made into the sandals. This is part of one right here, this is going to become part of what we call a T-strap. There is a little bit of work that goes into that. This is actually a finished one here, well not finished but the upper is finished, see? Then we have to glue it to the bottom part of the sole. All of this except for those soles were made, done here in house. And this year we are actually starting to do, once we get done selling all of those, we won't buy any more, we are making the soles in house as well. So again it's sort of, something we can do locally and to use alligators and it not only is something to use alligators but you know we have nine people working for us now. Which we you first met me, I don't think we, it was just my wife and I. So we are slowly, slow expansion but it has been good for some people.

Don/Carl: Well its, you pointed out, the alligator is a sustainable resources so what you are doing is finding, in some ways niche markets because I would have never guessed that you'd be making sandals with alligator. And when you have an order for forty, clearly you've found a little pocket where you can continue to market the product, but you are also creating an economic incentive for sustainability

Mark: That's right, that is correct. Yes, that is correct because if there is no economic incentive for sustainability to use your words, then something is going to give you know, either there won't be a need to use them or it will be an over supply situation. It reminds me of what went on in New Guinea alright. Let me tell you about that. In New Guinea, we were dealing with really, and I say this with very primitive people, alright. We are dealing with people who really didn't have much education, and didn't have much industry, they pretty much lived off the land in the areas that I'm talking about back in the Ceptic River Valley and back in basically the jungles. But they knew they had and they sold a lot of the crocodile eggs and in some cases the actual crocodiles similar to the hunt and egg artist we have here in Louisiana. They sold to the farmer that was working for them, but without anybody telling them, they knew that if the egg count was down one year, they weren't going to sell eggs or if they felt like the water was down and the crocodiles were leaving the area, or for any reason the harvest would damage their population, they just were not going to sell. So there was an economic incentive to sell but there was also an economical incentive to maintain the resource and so that's part of what they did and we're just part of that in a small way here in Louisiana. Yep, it has to be controlled and again everyone of these skins has a Cites tag on it just like we talked about and that's part of the program as well. Okay, now so here then this is just some of the sandals that are ... as I told you earlier, colors are becoming very popular and this here is a five ... in this color right here called magenta, very popular this year. So this is really a big effort. There is little steps that go into these things and we are lucky and happy to be able to do it.

Don/Carl: Are these iphone cases?

Mark: This is an iphone case, yeah. And we have some up there for sale. This is one honestly; we got back to refurbish it and to make it look a little prettier.

Lady: Here are some pretty ones.

Mark: Here are some prettier ones as Camary says. So this is just a case that we bought that, a protective case that anybody could buy at the store and we cover it with alligator and people love these. People rarely come in here who are iphone users who walk out of here without one on. They just love them because alligator not only is it pretty, people love the feel of alligator, you know. And there is something about alligator that, not for everyone, but for those who like it, it just makes them feel good. And so we are happy to take care of that. If you get progressively back here, I want to get you to another area where the work is really done. You know what, you are going to have to unplug, I'm afraid. Here is, let's see, where is the next one?

Lady: Is there one hanging down from the ceiling?

Mark: Right here, let's start over here where she is if that's okay? Maybe I think you will be able to come right here.

Don/Carl: Yeah

(lots of moving around)

Don/Carl: Alright testing 1, 2 go, yeah let's

Mark: Take your time. This piece of equipment ... know what if you position yourself right here and then we'll talk about this, we'll talk about that, and then we'll go into that room. .. So I don't know how well you can see this from here.

Don/Carl: Hmm, let me see

Lady: Yes

Mark: So this is a hydraulic clicker, it's a hydraulic press and what it does is this head lifts up when we turn it on and then it, when we press these buttons, it comes along and comes down and hits a cutting dye underneath it. Like this for example is a cutting dye meant to cut belt strips 1 5/16th inches wide. So we would put this down on the alligator skin and then come along and press it and then it would produce a strip of alligator, of leather that width, and I'll show you some in just minute. This is how most cutting is done in the leather business, period. There will be a cutting dye that is in the shape of whatever you want to cut out. And then it comes along and it actually hits with 20 tons of pressure, pop, just like that and it's adjusted just right and just cuts right through the leather. So we will produce, let me grab something here. Okay so we would have for example cut strips like this, but then to make a belt you need, because we are cutting along the width of the alligator we need several pieces so we will splice the strip together like here, this end right here. This is actually three pieces of leather that we have skived down, what we call it, produces a little bevel on either side, the under side and the top side and it's glued together and it's done in such a way that the pattern flows together and you don't really see it, and this is the way 99% of all alligator belts are made. They are pieced like this. So we, what we do is (side conversation) so what happens is this particular piece of skin, 3 pieces of skin will be glued together. And then we come over here and we run it through another machine that splits down, splits it to a desired thickness, this is just a little too thick for a belt maker so this machine which is kind of like a planer, we can run, it's called a band knife splitter, and you can run a piece of leather through. Let's see (machine fires up) ... you feel that right there, okay, feel that, we run it through here, I don't know quite frankly where it is set ... now you feel it, see it's thinned it out. So we would do that with this entire belt strip to get it to the manufacturer's desired thickness and then we re-glaze it, re-shine it and that is a big part of our business. This young lady over here is Galia.

G: Hello

Don/Carl: Hello

Mark: is working on sandals today but she does a lot of the belt slicing like this. So she is helping to get that order of 40, of 40 pair of sandals ready.

Don/Carl: How long do you normally have to turn an order around like that?

Mark: We try to do it in two or three weeks. You know an order for one pair we can do, say, we can do in a week cause there are multiple steps that require glue to dry but for this size order it's going to take three or four weeks, probably three weeks we will have it all finished.

Don/Carl: And your client understands that?

Mark: Absolutely, they have to understand that.

Don/Carl: Well that's good

Mark: Yeah that's really good. So it is to their advantage then of course to get the order in as soon as possible.

Don/Carl: So it sounds to me like you have a very good working relationship with your clients.

Mark: You have to, you have to. They have to, you have to understand the situation they are in and they have to understand the situation you are in and you try and work together in such a way that you both make a living off of it.

Don/Carl: Now the reason I ask is you are dealing with a sustainable product of which there are only so many taken a year

Mark: That is correct

Don/Carl: And then you are on the other end of the design that perhaps hits with a product and they need a lot but they are still limited by the availability of skin so there is a real symbiotic relationship here.

Mark: Absolutely and that you know, this is you say it's a limited about and it is one of the reasons the price is relatively high. I mean here in Louisiana we think they are all over the place, but if you go other parts of the country it is, they realize that it's something that you can't get everywhere and it can be very expensive.

Don/Carl: Yes

Mark: It can be very expensive. Now let me show you. These are all belt strips here which are in the process of being made. See all these will eventually be belts. Here is a finished belt. But all these are going to be sold to belt manufacturers... They're not finished, they are in production. Now if you want to bring your stuff, walk through that door, I'm going to meet you, you can come this way if you want. This is where we do all the stitching, a lot of pattern work. Allison is working on a purse right now for a local designer who's given us a good amount of business and I think, and again we've been good for her and she's been good for us. And those are the color of skin called Sea Foam, which is beautiful. So again we, all the stitching is done in here. This is some card cases we are working on for a customer. Doesn't look like card case but when you fold it over and put in the little metal clips, it works just beautifully and it has room for credit card slots and all. And again this is something we've just made here on site, everything. We have dyes to cut all the pieces; we actually developed this particular style locally. Jerry

did, Jerry is helping us a great deal. He does a lot of the design work for small leather goods and he's been very involved in purse making and he has many, many talents and he has helped us tremendously over the last, almost a year now. Let's see.

Lady: Some skins came in with FedEx, if you wanted to

Mark: That would be neat... Okay well right here, there is some other stuff I can show you outside, but I think

Don/Carl: We'll go look at the skins

Mark: We'll go look at the skins as they come in. Let's unplug, know what, let's just bring the box this way. (walking)

Don/Carl: I'm going to pause

(opening the box)

Mark: Okay, so we've actually just had a box of skins being shipped to us from the tannery, delivered to us by FedEx. Let's see what's in there. I think (lots of moving around, digging in the box) Well let's see what color this is.

Don/Carl: So they all arrive in rolls like this with

Mark: Yes, so this is one way the tannery insures that the skin is not damaged in shipment. They are rolled up like this, they actually have in this case, a label showing the tag number, Cites tag still on there. It shows the finished width of the skin, and has a good bit of information, the color. This is a color called ...but this is the matte finish. So this one just came in. This might be typical because it's not beautiful, you know there are going to be problems with a wild skin that has been in a fight somewhere. See there are some marks there, there are some old scars right there, same thing there. To be honest with you, this little guy didn't win many fights. (laughter) He just had a rough life it looks like. Now this skin I am positive that it does not belong to me. This is one that a hunter would have brought to me. I say that because I would have never put this skin in this color. Generally the more damage there is on a skin, the darker you want to go with the color because it will tend to hide some things and it might lead to a little better utilization of the skin. But hey, the skin belongs to the customer and they wanted it that color, and that's what we did. Let's see what else is in here. Here is a big brown one. This is the chocolate brown matte, that's gorgeous.

Don/Carl: It is gorgeous. Whoa!!

Mark: That's a wild skin obviously, again he's big, I don't know how good you can see this. But this is the matte finish but even though it's the matte finish, it has a good shine on it, a good polish to it. You can feel it if you want, the leather is nice and soft and it's easy to, it's easier to manufacture with the matte finish than it is the shiny, glaze finish. This is one reason I was saying there is a, one of the reasons there is a trend toward the matte finish. It's not because the customers like it, but also the people who work

with it prefer to work with it. There are just certain things you can do with it that is very difficult to do with the glaze finished skins. But this is

Don/Carl: Mark do you have a feeling, what percentage of the skins are large, medium, and small in any market? Just a typical year.

Mark: The average wild skin, the average for the 40,000 or so that are taken in, in some good years is about 7 - 7.5 feet, somewhere in that range, depending on what part of the state they come from, who buys them and that sort of thing. So let's 7-7.5 feet, that's average. It is sort of a bell curve around that and so this is probably a ten footer and there aren't that many but there certainly are some, a good many. maybe 4 or 5% maybe

Don/Carl: How long does it take an alligator to get 10 feet? roughly? A foot a year?

Mark: A foot a year is the old rule but it doesn't really work quite that way. It's a foot a year while they are small. Then as they get older, that slows down a bit. But yeah its conceivable in 10-15 years he would have gotten to his size but it could have also taken 20-25. Just depends on how hard of a life he had. But that little guy we were just looking at, he didn't grow much that year, that's just the way it is. This skin, I can look it up on the computer and tell you, I suspect this one came from a river somewhere. The river alligators, the ones that are in rivers, deeper water, I think they get a bunch of fish for example, they tend to have really nice big tails like this one and not so much scaring, I think just because it's easier for them to get away from each other and fight. If they are in a shallow pond, or say out in the marsh were it's no real deep and they are kind of thrown in there together, it's, you do see a lot of fighting in those situations. Let me get one more out for you. Oh this is one I've been waiting for. Again this is a customer skin but it's a color that is not done very often, loaden green. The customer had requested this color so the tannery finally got around to doing it and they produced really a beautiful skin.

Don/Carl: Yes, yes

Mark: Kind of an olive green, but it's been a while since this one was requested. This is a 2010 tag I think.

Don/Carl: Wow

Mark: Yeah, so it's been around a while.

Don/Carl: That's gorgeous

Mark: Isn't it nice? Just feel that, and then the tanneries can make them softer. They can make them harder. They can of course the glaze finish

(part missing)

Mark: But occasionally somebody just hangs on to them over the winter because they don't get around to selling them or they think if I hang on a little longer, maybe the price will go up or something. So one of my regular suppliers had come to me about a month ago and said, "Hey Mark, would you just go

ahead and buy these from me?" So I did and there they are. And again you see the tags on it. They are kind of dried out because they have been in his refrigerator for the past month but they will be sent to the tannery fairly soon actually, I'm going to get them to them and once they moisten them, they become limber again and of course they will go through the tanning process (lots of noise) lots of salt

Don/Carl: Now these you can keep indefinitely? Mark as long as they are refrigerated?

Mark: Indefinitely is not a good word, but if you keep them cool and keep them well salted, they will last a long time. But indefinitely, I would not use that word, no. See they are fairly dry right now, but see I have them nice and salted. If I roll this thing up, you would see the entire alligator skin and it looks just like that. It's really so dry that I'm not going to do it.

Don/Carl: No, no, no, no. Now would you ship them that way?

Mark: Yep.

Don/Carl: So you would just put them in a box?

Mark: Yes, we call Wildlife and Fisheries, say, "Hey,". We actually have a nuisance alligator hunter bringing me 30 or 40 because it has been so warm this spring. But it has been so warm that the alligators are already starting to move around and be an nuisance in some places. So this particular, it's two hunters, they've, they kind of work together, but they have 30 or 40 they tell me and they are going to be bringing them in the next week or so. Then when they come in, I'll have these and those and I'll call Wildlife and Fisheries. I'll make up a shipping manifest and say this is what we want to ship. They will come out and look at it, make sure that's what goes in the box because it's all very regulated. I actually pay him the \$4.25 per tag, and then they can be shipped to the tannery. They will go there and they can be at the tannery 3 months, they can be at the tannery 6 months. I've had them at the tannery a year at times before they were even ready to be dyed and finished. But that's unusual.

Don/Carl: They have put dry ice with them when you ship them?

Mark: No, they are actually just if they are in a box for example, and they are not put in a truck that's going to sit out in the sun for a long time, it's not a problem. I can just use a commercial carrier; sometimes I can just carry them myself. It's after that inspection is done, the paperwork that goes with it, and then they can be transported in whatever way that I'm willing to risk them. And really a couple days over to the tannery in Georgia that I frequently use it not a problem for them.

Don/Carl: Well I'm hearing something that also has to go into your planning. If you get skins in September, and they go to the tannery in October, it could be March before you see them

Mark: Absolutely

Don/Carl: So having an inventory of skins helps you maintain production schedule year round, is that correct?

Mark: Really, that's correct. Really means I have to maintain two inventories of skin, the big selling season for alligator is the fall, okay. But the buying season is also September. So, and we can't buy in September and have them back for Christmas, you know in that fall period, so if I buy what I bought in September of last year, what I was actually buying for was for all of this year, and what I sold last year's fall selling opportunity I actually bought the year before. So there is, I mean the cash flow requirements and the investment can be significant, you know for a little guy like me anyway.

Don/Carl: Well Mark

Mark: Means you have to have a good banker. (laughter)

Don/Carl: It's been wonderful. You've been very kind and I think the things you've said, the only place that we're going to find them is in your knowledge of the industry. We can read a great deal and we wouldn't get what we got in an hour and half, so we really appreciate it. You may see us again because inevitably when you listen to these things, "Why didn't we ask that?" so

Mark: You are always welcome.

Don/Carl: Thank you, thank you.

END OF TAPE