Mark Staton Interview

Interviewer: Carl Brasseaux, Don Davis

S: Catching minnows to sell to the bait shop. Can you hear me okay?

D: Oh yeah, you're fine. Again, um, if you would introduce yourself, please, that you're truly Dr. Mark Staton. Um, and elaborate a bit about your business. Carl has a few opening remarks that he'd like to refer to.

B: Basically what we'd like you to do, Mark, is to give us authorization on tape to put this interview in three repositories. Um, the one at University in Lafayette, one at LSU, and the other one will be at the Sea Grant office. That's what's gonna be in Washington DC. But to make them available for researchers in the future so a hundred years from now, if we're studying the coast – the American coastline, wherever it may be…

S: Wherever it may be a hundred years from now, yeah.

B: Right. That they can utilize this to – in their studies.

S: Sure. Of course I grant permission. That's fine. And um, so yeah. Let me tell you a little bit about myself – for what it's worth…

D: Please.

S: If that's what you want. Okay. Um, my name is Mark Staton. I'm 57 years old right now. Um, a native of New Iberia. All my life I've lived in a lot of different places – grew up in South America as a kid. Um, my father worked for an oil company, came back to New Iberia, and eventually um, went to UL. And…

B: Is it Venezuela?

S: Um, Argentina. Later on I went to Venezuela. Yeah. Um, in Argentina, I grew up there ages six to fourteen – something like that, so my – my memory of those times was um, well that I – I wish I'd have appreciated it more because at that time, you think, well everybody goes off – grows up in Argentina or grows up somewhere neat. You know, that was really interesting, and I certainly enjoyed it, but I don't know if I appreciated it so much later. So um, it was actually – with some gratification that I was able to take my children and live on a foreign country for a few years and let them see a different culture. But when we got back to um, I came back to New Iberia basically for high school and then went off – went to UL for um, for college. Um, I was in the biology department, and took a special interest in reptiles, and um, Dr. Ed Kaiser – I don't know if you remember that name. He was a -

B: I remember the name. Yes.

S: He worked with me a lot, and I enjoyed his herpetology classes, and there are a lot of good people there, and I had a fun time in that department.

B: Well I was there the same time you were.

S: Really?

B: You're a year older than me...

S: Oh! You were an undergraduate the same time as I. I think I graduated in '74. Is that sound about right? You graduated in '73?

B: Well actually it was '74. I graduated in the summer of '73, but there was no summer graduate.

S: I think it's exactly what I did. You know, I hate to say – I don't even remember, but I have to go back and look. Because I immediately went off to um, Texas A&M to graduate school, and um, yeah. So I either finished in '74 and graduated in '75 or '73 '74, something like that. Because it was a mid – there was some discrepancy there. I didn't finish when everybody else did. Anyway, took an interest in reptiles. Um, between my junior and senior year, I went to Aiken, South Carolina to the Savannah River plant. Um, so that would've – run by the Potomac Energy Commission back then. There were some nuclear reactors there. And um, I got – I forget what they call it. Basically they paid me a little money to go out and help people do some research, and have a good time, that summer, which I did. Um, in one of – I worked on snakes – radio cesium of taken snakes, but um, the professor I was working with – a guy named Ilar Brisman. Um, he had another student who was doing some work with alligators. And so I took the time to work with him, and I kind of had fun doing that, helped him out. Um, at that time, I still just had a general interest in reptiles in general. Um, but when I graduated from UL and went on to Texas A&M, I went to um, graduate school with a professor named James Dixon who was a very well known herpetologist, and I got in there about two weeks later, they said oh, we need a student in Venezuela to work on caiman which is a relative alligator. Anybody wanna go? I raised my head, and I spoke Spanish, and I didn't want to hang around school I wanted to go down there, so I went. So I think – I don't' remember how long it was, but very soon after I got to A&M I was – I was off to Venezuela, and um, spent eventually eighteen months down there just doing research on the spectacle caiman – just a basic natural …natural history type things – reading, growth rates, movements, we had some radio telemetry(?) equipment – had a good time.

D: Where were you based?

S: Well, um, there was a little, little town called Camatagua. Um, and I was at a camp some fifty kilometers south of that.

D: Okay.

S: Um, also spent some time in San Fernando de Apure. They had – and another ranch. So I kind of went back and forth between those, but primarily it was at Camatagua. It was run by, or owned by a very wealthy Venezuelan who just had an interest in conservation in general, crocodiles in specific. Um, his last name was Blohm. B-L-O-H-M. And Thomas – Thomas was his first name. And um, he actually um, personally underwrote some of the work. Um, and there were – there were other sources of funding as well, but he ended up personally funding a good bit of it. Um, he worked with um, all the major

conservation agencies in um, Venezuela. He brought the Smithsonian institution down there. There were some Smithsonian people running around this ranch as well. Um, it was you know, a neat little place. Um, so I did that um, for 18 months in Venezuela. That was spread over I think two and a half to three years because I think I came back for a period – took some coursework and then went back. And then I decided I was – I don't know. I didn't finish my masters. I um, I got back to school in maybe for whatever reason, decided to go off to Houston, and get a job and work. Um, while I was back, between my two trips to Venezuela, I met Allison and we were married, and um, we – we got married um, May 28, 1976, and I think within a week we were back in Venezuela on our second um, our second trip, and I guess that became our honeymoon. Ha ha. Um, well when we got back, we I guess being a married couple and all, it was a little different back then, and we decided to go and try to earn a living, and we did that for a while. Um, eventually went back to A&M, got a master's degree, and um, still – and during this whole time, I had developed a lot of interest in alligators. Um, I had the chance to work with them in um, South America. Also, when I was at A&M, there was a project at Sea Rim State Park down in Sabine Pass. Um, which is I think now washed away by one of the hurricanes – Rita if I believe – if I'm not mistaken, it's pretty much gone. And I worked down there for a good bit of the time, or during my research assistantship, um, at A&M while I wasn't in Venezuela. So a lot of work with alligators, a lot of exposure to literature - I published some papers, that sort of thing. You know, real sort of academic background. But I'm real practical person too, and um, I saw the need, or I felt the need to become a part of – if you will, to the industry. The alligator industry, and sort of take the academic side of it and apply it to the industry and help the thing move forward. I mean I didn't do it strictly out of altruistic purposes or anything, but I mean, that's kind of where I saw myself going. Um, so what do I do? I worked for a chicken farm. Now why did I do that? Because the best most efficient farmers in the world are chicken farmers, and I thought I can learn something from these people. I can learn just basic animal management, animal husbandry, nutrition, and health, what do you do, just management and application of agricultural science to um, an animal husbandry setting. And I thought, I'm going to do that and work around this setting for a few years, and then when I'm going to figure out how to apply that to the alligator industry. And that's what I did. Um, I ran this little farm in Douglas, Texas outside of Natchitoches, and I was the manager. I mean, we did everything. It was an egg farm actually. And um, they had a feed mill, and – I just saw the whole thing there on a fairly small scale basically. 125 to 130 thousand hens, which is a lot of animals, but it's not a huge thing, so one guy and six, seven, eight workers. I can't remember. We could run it, and um, learned a whole lot, which later I felt I could fly to um, the alligator farming business. I don't know if this is going where ya'll want it to go.

B: No, it is.

D: It is - nope. We'll interru8pt, but there's no reason.

S: I don't tell people this very often because they usually think I'm crazy, but you know, that's kind of – that was my rationale anyway. I mean these were literal thoughts that I had whether they were right or wrong, that's the kind of way it went. So um, I worked on this little farm – it was called Feathercrust Farms. I really don't remember how long – a year and a half, two years – something like that. and one of the things I did there was run this feed mill. We had our own little feed mill, so I oversaw putting those little vitamins were putting this grain and that grain and this and we're getting protein, we're getting

vitamins and minerals and put them together in a balanced diet. We're feeding theses hens, and out popped the eggs, and if I'm a little wrong on this grain, well guess what. We don't get quite as many eggs, and I mean – there is no animal farmed, I don't believe, that presents such a good model, um, for experimentation than poultry because you can see everything, um, you can see the science being applied. From a genetic standpoint, they start back, um, back in the probably thirties or forties or something like that – maybe the twenties – with these small little chickens, through genetic breeding, they got them to be monsters, and they had these huge breasts, and you know, we can go down the kernel um, right now and KFC, and get big old chicken breasts that weren't available fifty, sixty seventy years ago. So anyway, you could really see the science applied to the um, poultry industry, and my hope was to somehow do a little bit of that with alligators. And I kind of found my niche with the nutrition. Um, so um, after a few years, we left Natitoches - went to San Antonio, Texas for a while. That's where Allison's from. Somewhere in there I got my master's degree. Oh, it was before the chicken farm thing. Anyway, um, I actually um, had a – had a little job that didn't last very long working with a feed company and selling some of their ingredients, but I made an acquaintance there in San Antonio with a little feed mill, and I told him I wanted to develop alligator feeds. Of course, um, if you looked at the scientific literature at that time, basically they said it couldn't be done – that it was pretty much impossibility. And of course that kind of, you know, that looked like a challenge to me. Well I go to this feed mill and I tell then what I want to do and how I wanted to do it, and they said, of course you could do it. What's the problem? So my goal was then to sort of merge the information from two worlds and try to produce something. So we did, um, produce um, a couple batches of feed, which I paid for myself early on, and eventually I got Rockefeller to pay for it. And we've – we- I sent this feed down to Rockefeller, Ted Joanna was there, Larry was there at the time, and we did these little experiments, and they said my golly, these things are growing better than they ever have on any formulated feed – any feed mill type feed. Still not good enough, but something is better than it had ever been, so they were really impressed. And so I'm not sure exactly how it happened. I don't know if I talked them into it or they talked me into it. But basically Rockefeller said, look. Go find yourself a school, go get yourself a PHD, and do some animal nutrition research – real alligator nutrition research. Um, and so that was – that fit well at the time. That fit really well. And I didn't want to go to a biology department because the kind of nutrition they do there is not applied. I wanted to go to an agriculture place. So this is where my background with the chickens helped out. And I wanted to go to an animal nutrition program somewhere. Back to my experiences in South Carolina, Dr. Brisbon, the aforementioned professor that was working with alligators. He was really an unusual person – had a great, um, can I say that in a complimentary way. We called him Bris for Brismond. And uh, Bris was um, an adjunct professor in the department – in the poultry science department at the University of Georgia. And um, so I talked to Bris, and he said, well, we can figure out some way we can get you in there, so he brought me over, and I met some really good professors, and um, I said look, I've got some money, and I probably need a little bit more. Actually they didn't have – I said I've got some money. Because Rockefeller was giving me some pretty good money. He was like fifteen grand a year or so – for a graduate student at the time – it was pretty good. And um, and I – I need to learn about alligator nutrition. I said we've got a little farm industry back in the mid 70s – the alligator farming industry starting back up – it had gotten back off the endangered species list, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries had started a pilot project type of program, like I think they originally had ten farms. And um, one of their greatest needs,

and this is the reason Rockefeller was in it – interested in it, was they needed a reliable, affordable, nutritious food stuff that they could provide for these alligators all the time, and up till that time, the best thing available was nutria meat because nutria out there – Wayne Marrero was in the nutria business. They were selling the heck out of – you know, at that time, the pelts were hunted, but there was a good market for them. And um, Wayne was um, in the business - his family was in the business. And he – I don't know. He must've bought the whole carcass and skinned them, of if he was buying the carcasses separately, but I remember going to these big blast freezers or walk-in freezers or whatever they had there in Abbeville, and just box after box after box of nutria. Well that was the best thing available to feed alligators at the time, which um, and it did – it did a reasonably good job. Um, when we ran the original experiments back at Rockefeller, I think we had done turtle food and nutria and stuff I'd come up with, and maybe one other or something – I'd have to go back and look. And nutria. Still best performing lot, but the food's – the feed that I came up with had done better than any kind of formulated feed up to that point – so that was my target. I had to do better than nutria. Nutria was actually fairly expensive because if I recall, it varied between six cents and sixteen cents a pound, but animal meat is 70% water, so you're actually paying more like, I don't know, I'd have to do the math. Maybe – that'd be twenty to fifty cents a pound from the dry matter standpoint, which fifty cents a pound – that's a thousand dollars a ton – pretty expensive for feed. So you know, I had a project then, and um, I had a goal. I had some funding. I even found a school to talk to them to let me get in there. Um, is this where ya'll want to go? Is this okay?

D: Yeah, go.

B: Yeah this is…

S: Does this sound like academia to you?

D: Yeah. haha. And that's – and quite frankly, it's very nice not to have to ask questions.

B: Well it's – frankly it's almost too easy.

S: Well I'm sorry. I don't get to tell this story very often. I just don't know if you're interested.

B: No – as Don said, this is as good as it gets.

D: We're both sitting here just enthralled, so please.

S: Well it's just a little, you know, I guess I – it's not that I'm – I'm an unorthodox person- as you can tell, but you know. But just a nature – just sitting here doing what I'm doing. And I don't – I don't do anything quite by the book, and not that I do anything wrong that I think but you know, I'm sure my wife wishes I'd have just run a hardware store or something – just done something, you know, not too out of the ordinary, but it wasn't for me. It wasn't in my um, future. Anyway, so I had a project - I had a school. Um, Rockefeller supplied me with – I think it was a couple, maybe two or three hundred little alligators each year. I could do – buys experiments, but where do you do experiments with alligators? So um, in the poultry department there were several professors that I worked with, and Brisbon was off in South Carolina, so he was on night committee, but he in – my real professor that I worked with was a guy

named Harvey Edwards – was a Louisiana native, went to UL. He um, he took organic chemistry from Mrs. Savoy I think in 1949 if I'm not mistaken, back when it was S…

B: SLI.

S

S: SLI. Well I think he was in her first class and I was in her last class. And Dr. Edwards – boy he um, well he died a few years ago I understand, and he would've been pretty close to ninety right now. But Harvey Edwards – um, he had a real – he and I got along because um, he was – sort of a maverick himself, and he had gotten to be the dean of students – some dean over there. And um, I think he got into a contest of – I don't want to get more specific than that maybe with the um, chancellor of the university or something. So he got ranked back down to professor, but he was a good guy to work with there. Had a great – a great understanding of what I was trying to achieve, and a good, really good basic mind – a true intellect, and someone who knew the ins and outs of nutrition, and was happy to work with me. So he said, well look, we can't get you on to the research farm. What he did was he got me some additional funding from my – for my salary and allowed me to take the fifteen grand or whatever it was and build myself a little facility. Well I happened to live out in the country. Now I guess this is all equal, and I guess it was. Anyway, I lived out in the country – in a little house out there. We we bought a house, and it was this little dilapidated barn – which we got it to come along and straighten and come back up and brace it up, and insulated it, and I went down to Lowe's and bought some of these white washtubs, you know, and I rigged that thing all up, and also, I actually built some wooden boxes and lined them with fiberglass, and put little feeding troughs out there – so basically I built my own facilities. Went over to Rockefeller, picked up the animals. Went out to the feed mill in the um, the poultry – they had their own research farm there. Um, manufactured my feeds – and then some of the feeds were actually laboratory – were laboratory um, fabrications as opposed to experimental ones – I mean the uh, the um, production type feeds. We had to do both – ran all the little experiments, published some good work.

B: Well if I can stop you right there.

S: Sure.

B: Just in sort of broad strokes, tell us what you were putting in the feed.

S: Well okay. Several things. Um, the – the thrust of the – the research that needed to be done was to understand the – the types of energy and protein that the alligator can use. Um, one of the reasons it had been stated in the nutritional history of the alligator – nutritional literature of the alligator was that it was basically stated that they could not digest carbohydrate – literally, now let alone utilize it. So that pretty much meant that you had to build a diet completely out of protein. Now, if you take something like soybean, um, for um, for a chicken or for many agricultural animals, that's considered a source of protein. That's a relatively high source of protein, but in fact it's got more carbohydrate it than it does protein. It's not particularly good carbohydrate. Um, corn – fairly low in protein. Um, lots of starch, and in fact, if you look at the feed stuffs that are available to feed mills, you'll see that there are some high protein um, feed stuffs available like blood mill and feather mill, and bone mill – not so good meat mill,

there are different meat mills, but um, they're all expensive kind of like the nutria, and so we're gonna get our cost down – that would be nice to use some corn in there – some proteins, excuse me - some grain of some sort. And also strictly from a manufacturing standpoint, it was important to get some carbohydrate in the diet because um, the goal was to come up with a pellet, and I – they can't eat a mash – just a meal, and alligators need something to bite into. So we wanted to come up with a pellet. Ideally, one that would float, but certainly we needed a pellet that maybe produced about the end of your thumb or something like that. Depending on the size of the alligator – it could be different sizes. So to answer your question, what we did – we did put corn and things like that in it, but we also had to rely in the higher protein animal-based feed ingredients like meat and bone mill, and meat mill – that sort of thing. And what we were able to do was to design some experiments where we varied the amount of the various ingredients and look for the ideal um, production, and we used growth rate primarily, as the um, criteria for production in this case – what we were looking for growth in length and growth in weight. Of course, the overall health of the animal. Um, the little things like the vitamins and the minerals – basically we over formulate it. You know, you can go to the literature and find out what most animals needed and say various vitamins. You put in a little extra, and you've got a coverage, you see. Now, there was the odds chance that maybe the alligator had an unusually high vitamin requirement for one of the vitamins, but pretty much just by over formulating a little bit we were able to take care of the – the micronutrients, but the thing we had to address was the macronutrients – the protein and the energy – namely the starches. Also the fats – the fats became very important. So we varied fat, protein, carbohydrate, and came up with a diet, and by golly, they actually used carbohydrate – and not in great amounts. They were able to utilize um, well let me just – the maximum performance was achieved with diets that I have – frankly, I could go back and look at it very carefully, but probably around 12%. Which was very helpful.

B: 12% carbohydrate.

S: 12% carbohydrate. Correct – which was very helpful in making the pellet because you see the way these pellets are made, the carbohydrate, as you know, starches are a glue. And that's what you need- you need a glue. And on top of that, the machinery that's used, um, to produce a lot of these diets for um, many animals is – are called extruders. It's not just an old pellet mill that you use on a chicken farm or the old rabbit pellets that you see – but actually an extruded diet – much like you see in dog food. They're kind of puffed up. Well in fact, they're cooked. You run it through a um, the dies, just like you do normal pellets. When they're extremely high heat and pressure, and they have a certain amount of moisture in them. When they pop out of there, they're just cooked. They're just like little biscuits that plop out of there. But you can only do that with some carbohydrate in it. So our goal was to figure out how to get enough carbohydrate in there to produce a pellet and to produce a pellet that was nutritionally good for the alligator. Um, in other words, not have an excess of the carbohydrate. Um, so you know, that's what we had to do. We had to deal with all those factors. Fat is actually a good thing for them up to a – up to a certain amount, but you can't put too much fat in these pellets either. It just kind makes them crumbly. So there were some manufacturing constraints, um, so what we were trying to do was come up with the ideal nutritional profile, and then try to bring that into the manufacturing process as much as possible. And in that regard, we didn't do a lot of research for manufacturing per

say, but what we did was we basically fed our information with no recompense, I might add, none sought, none gotten – to various feed companies. They can then go out and start producing these things. Because we wanted fast results. We had an alligator industry out there ready to grow, but really with not a very good food supply. Nutria, as you might know, in the early 80s was a good um, a good crop. There was a good crop of it. The animal rights people took hold and killed that market. And all of a sudden, there was no nutria around. And so the alligator people were – they buying trash fish off of trawlers – off the coast, you know, off the coast. They were – they'd go to the glue factories, or I guess all these dead horses, where they would go – just any kind of meat that they could get, they would buy. In some cases, they'd buy a truck of fish from Florida and truck it on – you know, and 18-wheeler and truck it all the way over here. But on our lease it's mostly water, and then you have the transportation charges on top of that. See that's where it became important to have a good source – um, diet that you could call up the feed mill and say hey, send me a ton of alligator feed, and that's what we were trying to get to, but it started with some really shaky premises about what the alligators could and couldn't use nutritionally. And um, so we had a lot of work to do – it was fun. We learned a lot, we worked out in my barn. Eventually the poultry farm got me out a little room – probably a little bigger than this one easily, but I had two – you know, I had experiments going out of my house, I had experiments going – now, you're living in North Georgia, right? You don't tell your neighbors you got alligators in the…

D: Ha ha.

S: So that was always a challenge. Um, yeah - so there was a lot of fun. And I mean, it just wasn't your standard research project. The uh..

D: But keeping track of two or three hundred alligators must've been a huge challenge.

S: You remember – I had fifteen thousand dollars. I employed someone to help me. I had my own assistant – Abdul from Morocco. He's a great guy. I don't really know of his name – we just call him Abdul – real good guy. But yeah, I had an assistant, and I mean he'd come around and he'd feed and wash for me. I'd tell him what to feed, and um, I mean, I did some of the work obviously myself, and occasionally the poultry science department would have a research assistant or a technician to do what we told them to do and they'd let them help me, and so um, begrudgingly, they accepted me, and um, not too long ago I actually got a call from the agricultural experiment station there in charge and saying hey. We heard you do some work with alligators back in um, late 80s. We've got a farmer down here to get some information. So you know, it all comes back.

D: Now, how long were – what's the time frame from, you know - patching up a barn and starting it too, where we are in this part of the story?

S: Well I was in Georgia for four years.

D: Okay.

S: Um, and went there in 1984. Um, took about three and a half years to do the PHD, but since I had my own little money, I paid myself a (post dot?) at the end, and um, and then we got out of there and um,

you know, I got some real good basic information out to the feed industry. I mean I didn't have a feed mill. I had no intention of buying a feed mill. Um, now, if I could've – if I could've run a feed mill and done nothing but produce alligator feed, I've done it, but you can't um, sustain a feed mill just feeding the alligator industry. It's not big enough. Um, so when I left Georgia, I interviewed (inaudible) Purina. I think I didn't make it. I was their next guy to work in their mono-gastric um, nutrition. Um, up in um, up in St. Louis. They have a lab up there, and I don't know exactly what they wanted me to do. They flew me up there and interviewed me, and San Diego Zoo interviewed me to go out there with them to feed the reptiles and those things. But meantime, I actually had taken a job in New Guina. Um, I was giving a talk somewhere, and a guy named Graham Goudy, another really good guy. There are a lot of really neat interesting people in this business, and I've had good fortune in meeting many of them. Graham Goudy was sort of a legend. Um, and he was in New Guinea. Um, ran a little – ran a big company called Mainland Holdings. Mainland was a national company. It was owned by Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea had gotten its independence in 1976, and Graham had been there probably all his life, or most of his adult life, and he had started numerous companies. Um, but he was an Australian national. When 1976 rolled around, he very wisely sold all of his um, various companies to a national corporation – I guess I'm not sure if they had corporations over there, just some nationals, okay? Um, they – they were um, villagers, and um, but the different villages somehow got together enough money to buy him out. And he employed like twelve hundred people. Um, coffee plantations, and electrical companies and trade stores – the biggest chicken producer in the country, which was small, but you know. And so I kind of fit in there, but lo and behold – Graham, his pet project was his crocodile farm, and he had heard me talk, and he said he wanted me to come over. Actually I'd gone there several years before – I was at a crocodilian conference - um, crocodile specialist group. Yeah, that's it. Graham asked me to come over and give a talk at a crocodile specialist group in 1988. '86, '86. In Papua New Guinea. And when I was there, he had actually signed me up as a consultant to help them out with their feed which was good for me, and I certainly could use the money. At that point, remember I had uh, a wife, and at that point I had two children. So I was still in graduate school, but I had certain financial demands. And that worked out good. And then when I finally graduated, Graham asked me to come over and work with him, and so I did. I went over there for three years. And ran um, uh, first I went over as the technical manager. Um, and then in about a year and a half into it, I became the, quote unquote, "general manager" of the crocodile farm, which was, you know, which was nice. The title sounds good. It was a pretty big farm. We had about 38,000 crocodiles, and sometimes a hundred employees. Um, Most of whom were skinners. We employed um, ladies from one of the villages down the way, ladies were very careful of what they do. the men would cut holes in the skin – we couldn't have that, so we'd send a truck down there every day and pick them up, and bring back as many as we'd get on the truck, and they'd skin at certain times of the year. So I left Georgia having, I think helped the alligator industry somewhat, you know, in terms of getting us feed out there.

B: Well to bring back – interrupt you because you said earlier on that you had turned over your farm pellets. You never did say whether they were utilized by the -by the industry and the mills.

S: We didn't really – we really didn't turn over formulas – what you turn over is information. Um, the commercial feed manufacturing – you know, they – what they want is not necessarily this much corn

and this much protein – this much soybean and this much um, feather mill, but they want to know is how much protein and how much of that protein needs to be methynene and necalucine, and …all the various amino acids, for example, you know. How much energy and how much of it can be fat. How much of the energy can be from carbohydrate. How much of it can come from – from the protein itself. So they're – it's not really a formula so much as it is specs, you might say.

B: Okay.

S: And basically Carl, we just - we publish what we have, and it's out there…

B: They're actually using the …

S: It's funny because even though Purina had shown an interest in the industry – and actually interviewed me. They never really got into it till much later. And the um, sorry, I didn't mean to abort, um, omit this. The um, the only company that showed any real interest in this was a little company over in um, eastern Louisiana. Burris Feed Mill. I'm trying to think of the little town – Franklin. Franklin. And um, Burris showed an interest in it, so they did manufacture a diet, and that went right onto the farms, and it was a big success. And um, but to tell you that they said, okay, this is Mark Staton's diet, no. They didn't do that. I didn't want them to do that because I didn't' want to take responsibility for what they were doing. You know, you bridge the gap between what – what you think is necessary for the animal, and what gets done on a very practical basis at the feed mill. That there's a certain amount of disconnect there, and no. I didn't want to be responsible. Glad to give them all the information I can. If they came ask me today, what do you think about this, I'd tell them. But in reality, these feed mills they have to make a profit, and they couldn't always provide the ideal diet. As a matter of fact I know they didn't. But here's what happened. We found that the animals – we came up with diets that the animals could live on and grow very successfully, but the best diet still remained not nutria and not the manufactured diet, but a combination of them. So by taking this manufactured diet and mixing it in with nutria or chicken or horse or fish or whatever they'd get their hands on, there was something about fresh feed – fresh meat that really turned the alligators on, and once they started eating, they were getting good nutrition from the pellet, but the pellet probably lacked a little bit in terms of the delicious factor and really, you know, really make them hungry. Um, alligators are carnivores, and that's – that's for their system. They have a very short digestive tract. They are built to eat meat. Run it through short digestive tract, digest everything that's in it that they could use, and let the rest go out the other end. So you put something like carbohydrate in there, which is a little complex for their digestive system, this goes back to the problem um, it becomes a problem. And so there's a lot of things – the anatomy, the feed mill technology, the ideal nutrition, you know. There's just a lot that went into trying to come up with this diet, and giving it to the farm – to the farmers. But eventually, um, there were other – Purina got into it, Lonestar got into it – several more that I can't remember right now. So it became something that – well something that the feed mill saw that they could produce and get a profit on. Some of them did a good job. Some of them did apparently a pretty bad job. Um, and I take no responsibility or really credit for that. All I try to do is give them the specs, if you will, so I hope that answers your…

B: No, it's perfect. That's exactly –

S: And so when I went over to New Guinea, I did the same kind of thing. You know, it was really neat. We didn't have an extruder, so that made it hard on us, but we did have a chicken farm, and we had a feed mill, so I was kind of like – brought back – regress like twenty or late 70s. Um, and the beautiful thing is, we had um, the um, I guess I don't know if it's beautiful, but from our standpoint it was good. We had to feed these animals. Every day so many chickens die on the – on the chicken farm. And um, what do you do with them? You know, we had breeder farms. And so all these dead chickens got –the crocodile farm had our own little special feeding area that the chicken farm didn't want anything to do with us because we were pretty dirty from their standpoint, but they'd bring all the dead stuff over to us, and I would have, at the feed mill I'd have manufactured a supplement, if you will. And we could mix in with the dead animals and produce sort of what – kind of like ground meat when it came out. It was supplemented. Um, also, we had the poultry processing plant. And actually this is where the bulk of the feed – the raw feed came. We had the poultry processing plant, um, which meant the heads were cut off, the feet were cut off, the guts were extracted – what did they do with all that? In the old days, they'd throw it away. Well we took that and we put it in the crocodile feed. We supplemented all that. We had the nutritional profile of feet. We had the nutritional profile of guts. We had the nutritional profile of heads. And I was able to supplement that – manufacture feed. The crocodile farm did real well, and we did that. We also had exper – we had um, nutritional drenches, we'd call them. We'd have a house sick is the terminology over there for hospital. House meaning the house – sick, sick people. Pigeon english is spoken over there. So we had our house sick for crocodiles. And over there, I think system's a little different. Here, most of the alligators come from um, hatching of eggs that come out of the marshes. Um, over there, we were allowed to collect eggs, hatch them out, hatch them out and grow them up, much like they do here in Louisiana, but we were also allowed to buy live crocodiles from the wild. You know, and um, went – and it was a very well-managed program. Louisiana and Papua New Guinea both ran extremely different but both very successful management programs with regards to their crocodilians, and I was very fortunate to be a part of that. Anyway, we – so we get in these small crocodiles, they were fairly young, and um, but they would get in and they'd you know, exposed to diseases out in the wild, and they'd get out into captivity, which is a stressful situation for them, and some of them would get sick. So we formulated special – we had a vet on staff as well. He was for the croc farm and um, a chicken farm. And so he and I would get together and we'd put antibiotics in there, and we were able to feed – we didn't' have to worry about having license for this or that. I mean he could buy the stuff straight out of Australia, and it was going primarily for the – for the croc - chicken farm, but we could get out hands on it and we could supplement the crocodiles and get them healthy, and that was very successful. I don't know that we could do that very easily in this country because of the regulations. But anyway, I worked there for three years, and first, as I said, on the technical side of it, and then there's the general manager and one of the things I did there was I actually began selling the skins. I mean, obviously I was part of a - I started getting in contact with all the tanneries from around the world. And we had to sell – sell our product, you know. Generate some money. That's what it was all about. And that was a good experience for me. Um,

B: What were the major markets then?

S: Well, the same as they are now. Europe and the Far East are the primary markets. US is an extremely small market. Um, Europe and um, we were selling primarily to France – a little into Italy, and a little to Japan. At that time, China was not the economic force it is now, but we sold a lot of skins into Japan that I think probably eventually were shipped off to the elite in China. Um, and nowadays, I think many skins we ship directly into China. There must have tanners there. But I don't know that. The (inaudible) tanning is different from other tanning, and alligator tanning is different still. There are a handful of really good tanneries in the world that can tan alligator. Now a lot of tanners can tan, but I mean turning it into the premium material that it's really capable of being, and from my standpoint, it's a crime not to turn it into the best product it can be. I hate seeing alligators or crocodiles killed and shipped to little tanneries that do a bad job on it. It's just atrocious to me. Um, so they're – at that time, there were probably ten or twelve really, really good crocodilian or alligator and crocodile um, tanneries, and we dealt with the best – people like Louis Vuitton would request skins from our farm. They would tell their tannery, you buy from that farm. That's where the best skins come from. And there were two species that we farmed at that time – saltwater crocodile and the freshwater crocodile. The freshwater crocodile is a – sort of an average run of the mill crocodilian – not the best, not the worst, usable skin – not very expensive. The saltwater crocodile is the crème de la crème. Um, I bought some last year for the raw skins I paid about four times what I have to pay for alligator – just to put it in perspective.

B: Is that because of the salt environment?

S: No, he gets the name saltwater crocodile because he can live in salt water. They've been found a hundred miles out in the ocean – some of the big males have. They can tolerate salt water, as can our own American crocodile. They have special glands that allow them to extract the salt from the water and utilize sea water, which you know, is pretty, well, not many animals can do. But in fact, they would do perfectly well in fresh water as well. Now we grew them on a farm, and we didn't provide any salt water to them, but they're capable of living in salt water. But they have um – they just have a, a very supple – they produce a leather. The leather produced from their skin is extremely supple, and nice pattern and nice grain pattern from a manufacturer's standpoint, and like a tanner once told me, he said in the "old days", quote unquote, when something had to be made for say a captain of industry or you know, politician or wealthy guy, whatever, alligator was good enough. But when it was made for a king, it had to be saltwater crocodile. So – I'm here in the middle of alligator country. I love my work and all that, but the saltwater crocodile is – is a beautiful, beautiful skin. And one of the things that makes it more expensive is that there are relatively few that are produced in the world. Alligators - four, five hundred thousand a year, saltwater crocodile – thirty, forty thousand a year, something like that. So that influences the cost.

D: Let me interrupt. Where does the caiman come into this? Because you can see where caiman on occasion might be advertised as alligator.

S: Absolutely. And it shouldn't be. It's a real problem right now. Okay caiman is a South American, Central American cousin of the alligator. When I went to Venezuela to work way back when that was on the spectacle caiman. And at that time, they weren't farmed there. They were being hunted I believe illegally. Um, and after that it became legal. Millions of them could be produced a year. It's almost like a

lizard down there. It's very common. Um, which is fine. I have nothing – that's not something a leather person would hold against it. A caiman is a very bony skin. It has a very bony skin. Um, which means it's very brittle leather. You see here, this is the belly, that's the tail. This is the alligator – or the caiman as it normally walks around in the marsh, see. Four legs, head. You can see its entire belly has bones in it. These are called osteoderms. Now most of the crocodilians have bones on the back. Like that one there – alright? No, the one to your right. There you go. See all of those are bones. It's the bony back. Now the caiman and some of the other species have bones all over their skin, which means it's not a very good leather. It's not in high demand. It's not good leather except for one part of it – the flank right here. This strip right in here, which is the side of the alligator, or in this case the caiman when it's sort of walking around. Um, so it's not – it's not a very good leather. However, now you probably opened a can of worms, and I give talks about this.

D: Haha. Feel free.

S: Yeah, well you know, when ya'll want me to be quiet, I'll be quiet. The caiman was one of the - a caimen – a specimen was – are you turning this off or what?

D: No, no, no. I had a hiccup.

S: The caimen is being sold right now as crocodile, and it's not a crocodile. I have even seen boots at a very well known boot company stamped genuine alligator caimen. No such animal existed, okay? But it's cheap and the manufacturers are trying to make – they're buying public think – it's alligator or one of the true crocodiles. Now, here's what happened. Back in - when was Linnaeus? And when did he describe how the systema naturae? Okay. In there, he described many animals. Now he was a botanist. He didn't know much about reptiles, but he described um, he had on hand some crocodilians from various parts of the world, and he described this as crocodylus crocodylus. That was his speech and scientific name he gave it. Now I can't give you the entire history of it, but one of those specimens was in fact a caiman from south America. And so after fifty, sixty, seventy five years of biological nomenclature and biological classification research they figured out that this thing is actually a caiman, okay? Well we're going to call it caiman crocodylus in honor of the specific name Linnaeus had given it way back when. So it became cayman crocodylus. That is the scientific name of this species. Now a true crocodile belongs to the genus crocodylus. Not - and there is no species now called crocodylus crocodylus. But because this animal has the scientific name of cayman crocodylus, there are many people on the leather industry that have bastardized the name and said, oh it's a crocodile. It's caiman crocodylus. It's crocodile. And that's what they're selling it as. I had a guy earlier in the week calling me up and saying what are you selling your crocodile for? And he started talking, and I realized he started talking about the flanks, and I said, o, you're talking about the caiman, and he said yeah, caiman crocodile, of course. I don't' think he even knew there's any other crocodile. It's that sad. Um, in the old days, a crocodile and even today, it's – for those who know, the crocodile – is fabulous leather, as is the alligator. Saltwater crocodile, American alligator, nile crocodile. They are the crème de la crème. But many of the lesser educated, let's call it, manufacturers nowadays, or those who are educated but don't wish to educate the public, um, they just make no distinction. It's a real shame. So one of the things I do – I have it on my website and I talk to people about this. I gave a talk at a little boot maker's show not

too long ago so I had all my facts in front of me. Um, I try to educate them about this that a caiman is not a crocodile, and um, it's related. It's actually closer in biological classification, to an alligator than a crocodile. It belongs to the sub family of alligator near family alligator or something like that. So anyway. I hope I addressed the…

D: Now…

S: And I cut it short, but…

D: No, no. Let me interrupt again.

S: Alright, go ahead.

D: You were in New Guinea - roughly got there 1988.

S: '89 actually.

D: So you stayed four years.

S: Three years. Three years in New Guinea, four years in Georgia.

D: And then you leave. Okay. Is that operation still working?

S: Sure. I bought crocodiles – the crocodiles I told you I bought, I still buy from them. As a matter of fact, I'm very lucky that I worked there, or else they wouldn't sell to me. Their clients are – they could probably – they probably have maybe eight clients and they're people like Louis Vuitton, you know, all the top in the world, and their skins are already earmarked to go to all the major fashion houses. It's because I know them and worked there um, that they even mess around with me. I'll show you some skins if you wanna walk to the back.

D: Well yeah, because the next thing is when you get an alligator or a crocodile tanned, you're in New Guinea. I'm gonna make the assumption they don't tan in New Guinea.

S: No. Correct.

D: You're in Louisiana. Where did New Guinea get their skins tanned? Where do we in Louisiana get our skins tanned to your specifications?

S: Okay. Well what they do is they air freight the skins anywhere in the world. I've had them air freighted to France, to Paris. I've had them air freighted to Singapore. I've had them air freighted here in Georgia. Well here into New Orleans sometimes, or directly to Georgia – there's another tannery they use. Actually I've had them tanned right here at RTL here in Lafayette. So they – they have to air freight them, and it is a um you know, a product that can go bad. It's a perishable. So we have to be careful about that. So it has to be done expeditiously. We always put on the air way bill – Please put in the cool room. Store in a cool room. Don't store it anywhere. Rarely do they do it. The salted skin – when I take it off the animal, they salt it. You can use all sorts of salt, and there are opinions as to which is better and why and that sort of thing. Basically, you put salt on it just like curing a ham or something like that.

What that does is it sucks the water out of the skin which acts to dry it, and the salt actually kills most microbes - most germs, you know, bacteria, except for those that like super hyaline conditions, you know. But it'll kill most bacteria, and the act of sucking the water out of the skin is the first act of preserving it. Um, so under those conditions, if they're kept cool, they can last a good long time. So what we – at the crocodile farm in New Guinea, and they have similar operations here – similar procedures. We would – we would kill the animal, skin it, overnight into a supersaturated salt water bath. You know, we have the pump going so that salt was just penetrating into the skin. Then it would go to tables with salt. You'd put a layer of salt down, put a layer of skin – put a skin. Put a layer of salt, skin. And just back – and that salt sucks the water out. Now these tables are concave, and you could just see the water dripping off of it because they were – salt was literally just – you know, if you put salt out there right now, it'll get wet because it's just sucking the water out of it -out of the air. So after about four or five days, you throw that salt away and put more salt on. That's what – the second salting. And we also actually put antibacterials in the salt. So you do all that, you keep in a nice refrigerated – we keep them at about 40 degrees C. Excuse me – Fahrenheit, not C. and um, they were good to go. They could've probably lasted six months under those conditions, but we obviously don't like to do that. You pack them up – you shake some of the salt off because you don't want to be air freighted all over the world salt – a little expensive. You roll them up and put them in crates – we used to use coffee bags – they had a coffee company, um, we would air freight them wherever they needed them. As soon as they got to that tannery, believe me. They – they worked them because they were expensive, um, and therefore they'd get them in an air-cool room and work them as soon as they could. They might re-salt them there. So that's – that's the way it – the skins are handled. Um, now, I do. I mean, I um, when I send them to tanneries – I was on the phone yesterday with this lot I recently bought, they're in Georgia right now. We were talking about the thickness of the skin down to the nearest tenth of a millimeter -because my customers are very demanding. They want a - they want a product that will allow them to make a product that will suit their customers. Mind you, these, like in this case, it's a boot maker, and you know, they – basically are boots, kind of like the ones you have on – I think yours are lower – are yours full boot – like those?

D: Yeah. Just like these.

S: You know, they start at about four thousand.

D: Real Hondo.

S: Yeah, real Hondo. Good boot. Um, if it's a full alligator – excuse me, full crocodile boot, it might be seven, eight thousand. There's some people that charge more than that even. Um, so we're dealing with a fairly um, discriminate and um, in-consumer who's paying a lot of money but wants a very fine product, so I have to have these things produced to meet that – that demand.

D: Yeah, there's a belt maker in Houston.

S: Mmhmm. Max? Max Lane?

D: Yeah.

S: Oh yeah, he's a customer.

D: I know. Oh yeah. Been there. Ha ha. Did we have a long working relationship. I happen to have a belt that I bought from Mark and it's stapled, I mean it's branded the very well known big belt maker in Santa Fe. And our arrangement is um, I never say I got it here. I didn't tell Max.

S: That's good. Thank you very much. Ha ha. They're good customers.

D: Well sure. And that's the kind of – that's the kind – that's where you are today, but you had to get there, so we're in New Guinea. When did we make the decision to bring wife and children back to the states?

S: Okay, so 1992 rolls around. I had a three-year contract, and they wanted me to stay – I could've stayed. But life in New Guinea is getting tougher and tougher, and still is even today getting tougher and tougher. Social conditions were not good. Um, back in the – let me just use a little bit of history. Back in '76 when they got their independence, New Guinea was a very colonial country. Much like you might think of colonial Africa. Um, and basically, you know, there were the nationals, and there were the expats there who were there, in the eyes of some, to um, exploit the nationals and their natural resources, and in the eyes of others to actually help them develop their natural resources. Um, and – but the expats were pretty much off limits. There was a certain amount of social violence in New Guinea, but the expats were pretty much off limits. Shortly after I got there, um, in '88, there was the first incident of expats being attacked um, and I don't even remember the full story, but there's probably a pretty good reason for it. But nevertheless, it was very unusual, and over the course of the three years that we were there, it became a little more common, a little more common. So much so – and it grows on you. Um, so much so that you'd have said, well that happened, but it wasn't this, and if this ever happens, we're out of here. And the next thing you know, that happened and you say well, you know it wasn't this, if that happened, we're out of here. So we have friends that were attacked. I remember it was one lady was pushed into a ditch and broke her arm. She had to be taken down to Australia just for reasonable healthcare. Um, just – there were things, you know, that – and she was walking into her doctor's office for some routine checkup. So if you can't even go to the doctor without being attacked, it got to be worrisome. So after three years, we decided look. This has been a great experience, um, but we're gonna go back to the states. Um, I knew I wanted to go to Lafayette because it was in my mind the center of the alligator country, you know. It's a good town. I didn't know exactly what I was gonna do, but I figured I was gonna do something. Um, and shortly after we left, um, one of uh, one of the little girls in one of my daughters' classes was raped, you know. And so it just tells you, over a three year period it went from sort of an attack on an expat man that deserved it to that sort of situation, and so you know, we became aware that we need to get out of there. It's progressed to the point where I think now there are very few families living there. The expats that are there now are primarily singles – but I wouldn't think there are a lot of children there right now. And that's regrettable. The guy that took my place really super fellow – David Wilkins from England – he was a lifelong - he seemed like he was the kind of guy who would never leave New Guinea. We talked about him going (inaudible). He wasn't quite that bad, but he was – he didn't seem like the guy who would ever leave. His wife is an expat. Excuse me, a national. And um, a few years ago, they left. They left. They're living in

England right now because he says it's just so bad that he just didn't want to live there anymore. So there was a certain amount of this civil unrest, social downgrading that was going on, and I decided that you know, we just didn't want to do that. I probably should've never and put my family in that position to start off. Ha ha. In retrospect, but we came out in good shape, and it was a good experience while we were there. I think I told you earlier – my daughters got to be exposed to a really interesting new culture. We got to go to Australia a lot of times. We went off to Hong Kong and Thailand and Hawaii on the way – it was a good time for us. It really was. And so I don't regret it, but we did make the right decision getting out of there when we did. Stayed in close contact with them. Matter of fact, when I got back in '92, the alligator and crocodile skin market was pretty much in the doldrums. I think we'd just gone through the Gulf War at the time, which may or may not have anything to do with it, but…

B: There was a national recession after the…

S: Yeah, there was a recession. And the tanners were all saying oh this Gulf War, and you know, it just killed the market, and the fact that they were doing was buying up as many skins as they could as cheap as they could. Um, well, we – we had um, as I told you earlier, we were producing a lot of skins – had 38,000 animals, uh, and we were producing um, a lot of skins, and there were um, somebody's gonna get that. We had skins to sell. We had skins to sell when I left. And there was no buyers. I got back here, started talking – everything was in the doldrums. I did some consultancies, I did some feed work with some people, and I had some clients in Columbia, Africa, you know, they'd contact me, and I was able to generate a few bucks during that sort of thing. But um, you know I kind of thought well the real money in this business is in the skins, and that's kind of – at least some of the money's going to be dedicated, and so I – got back here, and I contacted the farm, and I knew they had several thousand skins sitting there that needed to be sold, and as I told you earlier, they are perishable. And I told them look, you know, send me three or four hundred. I'll get them tanned. I'll sell them. And when I get them tanned, I'll pay you. You know, they had nothing better to do with them, so I said send them to me.

D: Air freighted…

S: Yeah. Oh yeah, we air freighted them over here. I had them freighted to American Tanning and Leather in Griffin, Georgia who you may want to get to know – Chris Plott – owner of that. I talked to Chris and say Chris I don't have any money, but I have some super skins. So I traded a fourth of the skins to him to get them tanned. And so I had whatever I had leftover, two, three hundred skins. Went out – started knocking on doors. One of the very first people that contacted was Max Lane, and um, made several trips through Texas, and had a good price on them, sold some, got them all sold. I called him back – here's your money, send me more. And we just kept that going for a while. Well the thing about – there were a lot of alligator skins on the market, but these were saltwater crocodile. And I would sell them at a really good price. Now I wasn't selling the quote, unquote "grade ones". I was selling the twos and threes, but they were still beautiful, beautiful pieces of leather, beautiful skins. And some people would see them and they'd say yeah, what's the price? Great, yeah. I'll buy them. So I started – I had something that nobody else had. And so all of a sudden, I was able to sell some. I was able to you know, generate a little business.

D: So that was in ’93, ’94…

S: Kind of in ’93 when it really started.

D: Okay.

S: I went out to El Paso, and I had one particular customer that realized what I had, and what I was selling them for – I started selling them to him by the hundreds. And really, that was really a good business. And he remained my largest customer till probably about three or four years ago.

B: He’s a boot manufacturer?

S: No, he’s actually a belt maker. He was a belt maker, but he also um, like I know some of the original skins – he cut them up into boot maps and sold them to people like Tony Roma, and Justin, you know, the big boot companies out there. I don’t know which one for sure, but the big boot - he had that market. Um, he had a cutting operation. In other words, we can go back there and we’ll say uh – what he used to cut. But he had a cutting operation, and El Paso, Texas is the leather capital in this, in this country, and it’s even more so back then. Leather would just go into that place and it was like would evaporate – it would just get used up so fast. So once I developed him as a customer, he could really use the stuff. I moved a lot of it to him, but in the meantime, I started building up the Max Lane’s and the James Reed’s, and the small boot makers. Generated – I created um, a market with these skins, and created – and found a customer base. Um, created a customer base. A lot of small business - a lot of moms and pops sort of. Because they are my bread and butter today. There are a few big customers out there who I do cater to. And we’re glad to sell to them, but you know, the moms and pops as I call them – little boot makers here, belt makers, wallet makers, they’re the ones who appreciate your service. Um, who actually pay a higher price and pay it on time and are happy to get it, and they want a good product, because by and large, they’re dealing with a clientele that they want to take care of. The bigger companies – the big companies the big dog companies – they’re just producing a product and selling it off to some wholesaler sell who’s in for the retailer – some unknown consumer. But these moms and pops – they know their customers – they’re friends with them. They know them from way back when. And so they take care of them, so I take care of my customers – they take care of their customers. And so when I basically lost this big customer a few years back, it didn’t really hurt that bad, because over the years I built up all this other business. And I’m glad I did.

D: Let me interrupt for just a moment.

S: Sure!

D: Because one of the things Carl and I are going to have to focus on – we don’t know when because we – more people we interview, the more subjects we think we can write on, and use for these kiosks. The cattle business will be one. Um, after I bought my boots from you, I became curious. My background is western Oklahoma, and my family on my dad’s side is all cowboys. So I’m looking at boots, and I was curious because I’ve never heard of a Hondo. I’ve heard of the Lou Kacy and all of the other names. Well, by luck, playing on the internet, I find something called the cowboy boot trail.

S: Cowboy boot…

D: Trail. T-R-A-I-L. it starts up in Kansas and it just pinpoints small family run boot companies all the way into Texas.

S: And those would be people I sell to.

D: And that's what I'm thinking about.

S: Yeah.

D: And I'm looking at not – not this kind of alligator boot, but a working cowboy boot. And we're talking twelve, thirteen, fourteen hundred dollars. And I'm going, that's pretty expensive. Alright? And then I – I say that to myself, and then I remember, my cousin doesn't get out of bed without putting a pair of cowboy boots on, and when he's on a horse, that's what he wants. And it completely changed my understanding of the boot business. And with that as sort of a segway, I think what we have then are a lot of small businesses producing a specialized product that Carl and I will never know about because of our academic background, and yet you found the perfect place almost to sell a product to people who take pride in that product to meet the needs of their customers, and yeah. These are more of a dress boot, but there are some cowboys that put one on, and they get after it.

S: Absolutely. I've got pictures of them.

B: You know, you began I assume at some point to cooperate local, local leather? Alligator leather?

S: Well yeah, um, I knew all along, you know, I'm not gonna – I'm not gonna get these crocodiles at this price forever, number one. Number two, I was here in Lafayette, Louisiana for a reason, there's no point in – I could've been anywhere if all I was gonna do is bring these crocodiles in. um, that was my – that was my goal, but because I – I started the business with the crocodile, and I am happy to carry it as often as I can as long as there's a market for it. But I use that to create a market then from my perspective, for alligator, so then I was able to just start buying alligator skins – either from farmers or the trappers – and you know, I did all this small basis at first – I got them tanned – sold those. It just turned over and that sort of thing. But yeah. And today, probably 95% of what I do is alligator - 90% maybe. Because I also bring in some Nile crocodile from Africa too for different markets. Actually some of the boot makers like it as well. But that's right. I started with the crocodile because that's what – that's what allowed me to feed my family and get my foot in the door, and um, but I use – and I had built upon it. Um, and as Don well knows, you know, I not only sold to the manufacturers, but in this area, we get products made and sell them here on the local basis. We've been doing that since 1995 I think. Belts, boots, wallets.

D: Yeah, well we actually saw an imbursement of yours in a local weekly I guess newspaper, for Christmas. And I went…

S: Haha.

D: …we need to interview him!

S: Well, you gotta sell the stuff. It don't do you any good to buy it unless you can sell it and make something off of it.

D: Now when you started getting – take Carl and I through the steps of you making a decision on what day to begin to buy alligator because generally it's harvested in the wild in September.

S: Yeah.

D: And take us through the steps of how this whole process ends up into a boot or a belt or some other product, please.

S: Okay, well fun. There's two sources of alligator primarily. Well, there's the wild skins and the farm skins. And of course the farm skins are available pretty much throughout the year.

B: Is there a qualitative difference between the two?

S: Well, some people will argue that. Yes, there is, but um, the very best farms can produce the very best skins. But some of the poorer farms can produce worse skins than what you might get out in the wild, so it's not as cut and dry as it might seem. Um, yeah. I think that's the best way. You can get some fabulous skins out of the wild too. The wild skins – the animals that are harvested from the wild, primarily cater to a different market. They're used for different – they average on the um, seven foot, um, on the average. They're big skins, whereas the farm is pretty small skins. Um, and they go to a slightly different market. The boot makers like the small skins. Um, but…Well, did you need something Cameron?

(inaudible)

S: Sure! This is my daughter, Cara Marie.

D: Well hey!

(Daughter): Hi!

D: You're the graduate from the College of Charleston! That's great!

(Daughter): Yes. Nice to meet you.

D: And I'm Don Davis.

(Daughter): Nice to see you too.

B: No, I – she's away at school.

S: That's good – well anyway, she's College of Charleston. Two others. Cara Marie helps me – I've gotten to where I can't do anything without her, matter of fact. I can't do anything sometimes, anyway. She needs to do it. Ha ha

B: Well your last statement leads to a question I want to ask you out of all this, because it's to any interest to Sea Grant that it's an interest down (inaudible) that we're working on. Um, given your own expertise with all this, um, and we're completely off track here, but in historical records, there are reports of alligators anywhere from twenty four to twenty seven, and in one case, thirty feet long.

S: Alligators or crocodiles?

B: No, no. Alligators. In the American south – primarily in Louisiana, and I know reptiles can continue to grow throughout their – their lives, at least that's what I've been told. Do you think that this is actually plausible that they could've been? You know, and back in the first few centuries – especially in the first century and a half of European occupation.

D: European occupation.

S: You may all have come across records I don't know about. My understanding was the largest alligator ever, um, recorded – um, believably, was twenty one and a half feet. Um, I know of no crocodilian of any species recorded to be twenty six, twenty seven feet. Um, not – not saying it's not possible. Um, I don't' believe there are some holes I don't think there are any specimens that would – that would allow you to draw that conclusion, and I think there is a tendency to exaggerate on some of these things. Furthermore, if you're dealing with a skin for example, as opposed to the whole animal, um, but there's whole animal – I've got a picture of a skin. The skin stretches a lot when you take it off the animal. Um, is it possible? Sure it's possible, but I don't know of those records. I believe you – don't get me wrong. I believe you. I just don't know of them. Um, in view of the fact that the records of salt – no. Saltwater crocodiles are supposedly the biggest, and crocodylus intermedous down in Venezuela's got some big records in history. And in scientific literature, which may be different from the popular literature. Um, I don't' think any of them were twenty six, twenty eight feet. And they were in that vicinity. And I think they were doubted scientifically, but sure. I think it's possible. Um, I'd hate to run into that animal

B: Well I'll send you ca copy of..

S: When was it recorded? Where was the um, published?

B: Well, the largest single sighting was recorded by Louis Judice, who was long-time come about by fourth district. And he recorded a thirty footer – during his exploration with two other people of the lower Lafourche area in the 1780s.

S: And how did they measure? Ha ha.

B: Well that, I don't know. They were scared out of their minds.

S: Yeah. And that – you know, there are different, um, standards now. You know scientific standards – now you have to have records, you know. I'd kill the animal and measure from toe to tail and you got this, and Mr. Judice – I'm sure he was a good man, but he may have looked out there and said, my God, that fence post is thirty feet from here to there, and you stretch it out that big, and ….

D: Ha ha.

S: I don't doubt it. I don't doubt it was one hell of a big alligator. Yeah, but – and really what – I don't – but you're right. They don't grow – excuse me. They don't stop growing, and when you get to be even a ten foot alligator, certain a fifty or – you don't have any, many threats. So as long as there's a good food supply, and the environment's pretty stable, they could grow for a long, long time.

B: Well I'll be sure to send you copies of what I have.

S: Okay. I'd love to see that. One of my jobs while I was in Savannah River – ecology laboratory to make some money, I did a pretty exhausting scientific – review of the scientific literature. I actually published the bibliography of the - of the American Alligator. Just a listing of it – and now, I happen to have upstairs every one of those articles. It's sad. Ha ha. And so I do have a good understanding, and I used to actually remember it a lot better than I do now of the – of the scientific literature, and of course, length is always an issue. Um, and that one was back in the 1700s – that twenty one and a half footer – something like that.

D: In the 1780s.

S: 178 – it was about the same time. But, oh gosh. I don't' know. I do know – listen. There is a tendency to exaggerate.

D: Ha ha.

B: You know, and especially when you see what's coming after you.

S: Oh gosh.

Yeah. well I –

I know I've got us completely off track.

D: That's alright – I've seen a really big one and – I'm terrible at guessing. I don't' know. All I know is it was big.

S: I'll tell you what – when I was in New Guinea, I – I visited this little farm. It was um, Wintaka – called. And it was run by the government, and they had um, crocodiles there, and one – one of them was sixteen feet long. That – and sixteen feet, which is only half of what you're talking about, alright? And this crocodile was blind. I don't – maybe I told you this story. But anyway, they had people that took care of him. The guys that would take care of him would walk up to the crocodile, take a dead chicken, bang him on the nose, you know, put his mouth and throw the chicken in his mouth – I mean the chicken in his mouth, and that's how he ate. And the crocodile was relatively docile. You know, he was able to do that. He'd get right up to it. So we thought, well okay. We'll go up to him. And we did. And I got to within ten feet of this animal – maybe ten, twelve feet of this animal. And the hair on the back of my neck literally stood up. He wasn't threatening me in any way. It was just a primal instinct type of thing that I knew what that animal was capable of. First of all, crocodiles are super fast. They are fast

when they decide to move. And you know, if you get lashed out in the right direction – at the right time, I could've been gone just like that. I'm serious. It just took us a sixteen footer to do that to me, so God only knows what a twenty one footer and a twenty five and a thirty…

B: His tow companions were in a pirogue, and this thing came after them, so…

S: Yeah. ha ha.

B: I'm sure they wasn't – that pirogue was uh, fifteen foot long? And my gosh…

D: It was paddled at Olympic speed.

S: Yeah. That probably had something to do with it. What is that – what is that effect? Um, when things are moving away from you from a certain speed they look longer, or…

D: Ha ha. Um, two things. I want to come back to what – the process.

S: Yeah.

D: But also I have just a little footnote for your – daughter and you to think about. You just mentioned that you have upstairs, I'm assuming here, a very large collection of alligator…

S: Photocopies. Yeah.

D: Alright. Sometime somewhere someplace, that needs to be stored – I don't care what university.

S: That's not the only copy.

D: Okay. No, but it is a collection. Collections are hard to come by, and it doesn't make – Carl and I are very aware of what happened in 2005 and 2008, and I'll – I'll make this footnote longer than it should be. Prior to Rita, I had visited um, Sherlyl Sugura. I've known Sheryl for a long time, and I said Sheryl, I would like your family photo albums because we were going to put them in a digital…sure Don! Whatever you need – glad to do it. Well, I did that, and then I procrastinated. I couldn't meet them, one of these things. He's not there – I'm not there. So we go through Rita..

B: They're gone.

D: No, I still have them.

B: Oh, okay.

D: I still have them. We go through the hurricanes of 2008, and the reason is after Rita, Sheryl had to rebuild everything. There was nothing left. It was all gone. So they elevate – his son, we go interview, just like we're doing here, because their family owns a portion of Chenier Otigue. we do the interview, and his wife's there, and I said, I have something I need to give you. I reach in my briefcase, and I hand the family photo album, and the Mrs had one tear. So we don't' want any tears.

S: No.

D: Because of the collection.

S: Well, it is valuable, and I used it in my research.

D: Well it is – we as academicians sometimes take our collections for granted. Our children – mine in particular – have no clue. "That's what daddy does". You happen to be working with your father. So that's just a footnote. Um, now, you have to go buy skins.

S: Well I appreciate – yeah. I appreciate what you're saying. Yes. In the fall we start the fall – Yeah. We use the farm skins – we can get the wild skins, and um, the farm skins are primarily sold, um, as small skins. Primarily for the watch strap market. that is the biggest single market for alligators, believe it or not.

D: Wow.

S: And I have not dealt with a single watch – I wanted one, and I sort of a customer, so I don't – most of these big watch trap companies buy them by the thousands, and we just don't even deal with that market. Um, wild skins – we get them in September, as you know, and um, around July, people start to talk the prices gonna be this year, and pretty much um, somebody like myself is a very small dealer who doesn't know or have any influence. We just wait and see what happens on opening day. There's a relatively few big dealers around, and whether they do it together or um, antagonistically, or synergistically – I'm not sure, but somehow some pricing comes out, and um, you know, whatever it is – we just kind of go with it. Right here at this building, I used to have a lot of skins show up. You know, people who hunted their own alligator through um, selling the skin, they put the meat in the refrigerator. Um, they were happy to come sell to me. But even in the short period of time that I've been doing this – about fifteen years, we've moved into this building in '95. In this short period of time, there has been a move away from the – that kind of trapper. And now, we see a lot of sports trappers, a lot of guys who you know, they get a – they get a license I think for three years. You know, they – and then they go off – it's by lottery, and many of them never see an alligator in their life, let alone skin one or anything. Um, and even – even the – the big land companies and their efforts um, to collect their alligators – they have also gotten away from having our own skinners, and they just sell the whole animal to the avatoirs – to the processors, to the Wayne Segrara's for example. To the American Tanning and Leathers. There's a number of them around that – that staked - early September, that's what they do. They buy a lot of alligators, and they skin them. So I still get a few that come in here, or in addition to that – I'll just give some people money and say buy you some skins. You know, I'll pay you to skin them. So I get them both ways. Now when we get wild alligators, we're gonna get animals that maybe two and a half, three feet long , or they might be thirteen, fourteen feet long. Like I said, you don't get a uniform batch. And they're gonna average around seven to seven and a half feet. If you buy them from a farm, they're almost all gonna be the exact same length and the exact same width, which has its appeal, especially if you're a large manufacturer. In my case it's nice if you can buy a certain size of skin that I know this boot maker there's gonna want a pair, and that boot maker over there is gonna want two pairs, and that wallet maker over there might use a couple, you know. Then I can use them like that or I can put them into my own products. Um, that's fine. But I do buy a lot of um, wild skins

because on a cost basis, um, not the fact that they're wild, but the fact that they're big makes them a quote unquote better buy. You get a better cutting yield from a bigger skin.

D: Now would that be a one? I heard you used the grade..

S: Well there's a trading system that's employed um, grades ones that are quote, unquote "perfect skin", and there very few if any of those around. Really, it means very nice skins that have fairly few and minor defects. A grade two's got something wrong with it. There are several systems for – for grading. Um, when I buy, I don't grade because I – I can look at skins, and I know that if you buy from the lot, you're gonna get a certain number of grade ones, grade twos, grade threes, exc. Now if they come in and they're all grade fours and fives, I know they sold the ones twos and threes to someone else, and I just won't buy them. They've just been cherry picked, or you pay them a very low price. But for the most part as a small buyer, I actually try to pay more above market price to get them to bring me these skins. Um, and I don't you know, if I pay a couple bucks um, a foot above everybody else, I'm happy with that. They bring me the skins, and I have to mess with getting the skin. I get to know these people over time. I don't have a huge number of suppliers like that, but I have some that very faithfully bring me skins every year. So that works well for me. But it's – it's not everything I need, so I do work with some of the processors to buy additional skins.

D: Yeah, we hope to interview Greg Limskins.

S: Yeah.

D: And I've known Greg for a very long time – well before his current job. Now, a skin arrives. Is it salted?

S: Should be.

D: Alright.

S: Not always.

D: Alright, and now the next step you would do..

B: So it's been salted once.

S: You know, again, we're dealing with few people - don't know what they're doing in some cases, and they could show up with a raw skin sometimes. Just bloody – sometimes they roll it up and throw it in their freezer, and so you have to decide whether that skin's really um, worth it that it can – can you apply salt to it and still salvage it? And they're – the things are remarkably um, what's the right word. They – we can work with them a lot. They're very forgiving of our abuse of them, but there are certain things you can't do. Like you can't set them in the sun. The sun will just deteriorate the outer scales and render the leather useless. You can't drag them. Some people put them on the end of a four wheeler and drag them through a forest till they get to the pickup truck. Ha ha. They'll throw it on top of their –

the hood of their car, drive down main street, say they've got an alligator, we'll all that's doing is burning skin. So you have to be careful.

D: Now once the skin gets here, and maybe you have to salt it. What's the next step?

S: Well, we accumulate them until we send them to the tannery. We keep them in a cool room – I don't have a refrigerated room for them here, so I just have an air-conditioned room. But I'll get them out of here once a week or once every two weeks at the very most. Um, and get them to um, either the tannery directly or indirectly through some of their buyers – some of their – take them to a location where they do have proper facilities. Now we salt them, sometimes re-salt them. Um, sometimes get our knives out and get some of the excess meat off if they haven't done a good job. There's a lot of – a lot of extra work that goes into that.

D: Now they get to the tannery. You can buy alligator any color you want. But in the wild, I've never seen a yellow one.

S: Ha ha. You're right. Well that's done at the tannery. Here, um, let me ask you a question. Can we take a small break, I would like to um, go to the facilities. We…

D: And we've done that. and Ha ha.

S: And then we can go back there and I can show you some skins, and maybe this is a good place to pick up on that. What do you think?

B: I think that's wonderful.

D: Sure.

S: Alright.

…

D: Ha ha. Watch – watch our messes. We don't intentionally try to be messy, but we do. Carl? ….

(inaudible)

B: Well we appreciate all the time.

S: Well it's been fun. I always tell people I'm out here – I'm by myself.

D: Well, thi si s fun.

B: This is like good.

B: And …

B: Unfortunately, if we don't do it, nobody else will.

D: Yeah, you know with the wetlands changing so dramatically, we don't know what's gonna happen in the next few years.

(inaudible)

D: And you – you have ….

(inaudible)

D: Our concern is – what's the next generation of researchers? there's only so much you fan find. We don't have –

S: (inaudible)

B: Yeah, and it's not getting any better. My son's in graduate school now. And if it's not available on the internet, (inaudible)

D: Well what we're trying – and that's why we will be back because we got you back in the United States. We got you into a building in 1995.

B: But especially where we need to pick up next time is 1995.

S: Yeah.

D: 1995, and we may take – This might because it's a bit more portable than us trying to haul…

B: And I have a hold that I can attach to it so we can just – I can just deal with this one.

D: Because we'd like that same tour – we've seen it, but there is just a wealth of information, and I'm kind of excited that um…

S: You know what the first use of alligator skins was in the south?

D: I think I know the answer.

S: Because I told you.

D: Ha ha. Go ahead. Carl may…

S: You might know this. This is what I've been told, anyway. It was in the Civil War. There was no – no good source of leather. So they got up there, and they got the alligator skins and uh, yeah they needed boots for the, you know, for…

B: For the infantry, yeah.

S: For the Confederate – I just thought I'd get this as a ….

S: Thank you Cara.

C: No problem.

B: Okay, well let me set..

S: How do you want it? This is your picture.

B: Let me…

D: Let's do it right. Let's do it right.

S: Leave it to the experts.

B: We could talk about the tag.

C: That's good.

S: You see the tag?

D: Yeah.

C: One, two, three. Okay let's do one more.

S: And that's looking at you, or?

C: Yeah, look at me this time. One two three. Alright it looks good!

D: So what – Carl and I plan to do – we'll look at our schedule. We'll come back again, and we'll start at 1995 and work through what you've done.

S: Yeah, we kind of

B: And then we sort of ran out of time.

D: Yeah, it is tiring. And then I'm gonna talk to Louisiana Sea Grant. I don't' know if it'll be that trip. I may do that trip because we can set up a camera and just thought – everything that we do, you'll get a copy of it.

S: Yeah, that'll be nice.

D: So you – it's an operating procedure that we developed. You get a copy of everything, so it's just a matter of us doing it.

B: Well I've enjoyed it.

D: Well trust us.

B: But listen – this really was one of the best.

S: Well you know…