

Skrmetta-Mavar Family Interview

Interviewers: Carl Brasseaux, Don Davis

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Eric Skrmetta: You know, but um, Presley, who is the commissioner from North Mississippi – did all this because he was mad that they brought a company from out...

Claire Porter: What's Presley's first name?

Eric: I don't remember he's a giant.

(tape skips)

Eric: I understand

Don Davis: Yeah.

Carl Brasseaux: And as I was told by Don yesterday, when you retire, you never have a day off. Retire is an oxymoron.

Don: Ha ha.

Carl: Work without pay?

Eric: That's it.

C: Um, what we'd like to do upfront guys is to get your permission um, and we're recording – that it's okay for us to put this in these repositories, um, so that they can be used by researchers down the road. Um, I understand there's no monetary compensation for any of this, but we hope that they will be used by researchers in the future, people running histories of the industry, cultural geographers like Don, um, and that they're going to be using them in books like – and this, by the way, is Don's latest book. It's the definitive work on the Louisiana coast. Um, and documentaries, articles. But basically we want it to be an educational resource and that people will continue to use and recognize your family's contributions.

Eric: Well if either of you two write a book or make a movie, you have to send us a copy.

Don Davis: Well that's understood.

Eric: Okay, well that was the deal at least one book.

Don: Well that's understood.

Eric: Ha ha.

Don: If we can run around the room, introduce yourself, ladies before gentlemen, and if you have a name that, you know, perhaps the student can't transcribe, spell your last name, please. Please.

(Background noise)

Claire Porter: I'm Claire Porter, and my maiden name is Mavar. M-A-V-A-R.

Don: Alright.

Claire: And we're – we're all related.

Don: Alright.

Eric Skrmetta: And I'm Eric Skrmetta – middle name is Frederick. F-R-E-D-E-R-I-C-K. And I am the um, fourth child of Grace Skrmetta and the youngest son.

Don: Spell your last name.

Eric: S-K-R-M-E-T-T-A.

Don: Thank you.

Denis: Um, I'm Denis Skrmetta, and I'm the second child of my daddy, Ray Skrmetta, and my name is Denis Michael Skrmetta.

Eric: Dad, tell them your name.

Ray Skrmetta: I'm Ray Skrmetta.

Eric: And your formal name is what?

Ray: My formal...

Eric: What's your birth name?

Ray: Raphael. R-A-P-H-A-E-L.

Don: Well thank you.

Eric: And his middle name is Clinton.

Don: Well what we'd like this - sort of before we got wired, if you could, either one of you, start – and we've heard a great deal about history, family history. That's critically important. We don't care who starts to dialogue, but start building that history, and if any of you are going to talk, please use your first name, because when students transcribe this, it gets really hard to try to define who's speaking at the moment. But what we'd like to do is just build – as you said, it was great to cone. Start at the cone and work outwards and we may have a few questions. I have some photography I'd like to share with you.

But right now just build the story of your family's pivotal role in developing the oyster and other industries in Coastal Louisiana.

Carl: And it's all part of the industrialization of the coast that people just don't recognize at all.

Eric: Right. Well um, and I'll do the focus on it because I kind of got - but historically, I was told by my godmother, whose name was um, Veronica Antonich.

Ray: Antonsich.

Eric: Antonsich. Um, Veronica told me the original story of my great-grandfather, whose name was Nicholas Skrmetta, and in the late 1800s, um, Nicholas came over as a um, as a - I guess a better description is a deckhand on a ship from - what at the time was Austria, part of the Austria Hungarian Empire, which then became Yugoslavia and is now Croatia. Um, they went into Galveston, and he was - decided to get off the ship. And he took a train, and not going in any particular direction, he ended up in Biloxi, Mississippi, where he um, got off the train and the story goes that he didn't speak any English or Spanish, and the um, gentleman who he had met at the train station did not speak Croatian, and um, there was no way to communicate. But through sign language, they figured out that um, he needed to work. He went to work at the factory in Biloxi. Um, it was a - one of the old canneries. And um, after a year, the owner was able to tell Nicholas that he really admired you know, his work ethic, and he wanted him - to know if there was any more people like him back home. And he said yes, and that's when he returned to what's now Croatia, and gathered family together and came back with his wife and his existing children. And um, they came back in approximately 1904, um, I think, or actually, a little bit earlier than that, and set up business working for the companies in Biloxi. I don't know when they started doing their own business, but I know, and my father may remember when Grandpa Paul started his first place. He was in Biloxi when he did it, Dad? Your father - do you remember his first factory in Biloxi?

Ray: I remember it but I don't remember the name of it.

Eric: Okay. And um, he was doing um, canned food?

Ray: At first it was fresh.

Eric: It was fresh?

Ray: And then they basically got the technique of cooking it and making it last longer.

Eric: Okay. And most of the um, the seafood processing at the time was - they would do cooked shrimp and then they would vacuum pack it in the cans fresh. Were they pasteurizing it?

Ray: No.

Eric: No, and so they would cook it, pack it, and in very large...

Ray: And chill it.

Eric: ...and chill it in very large, um, were they number one cans?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Number ten or number ones?

Ray: Number ones.

Eric: Number ones? The large institutional cans.

Ray: Gallon-sized.

Eric: Gallon-sized. But they would then take these shrimp and they would ship them to New Orleans, Baltimore, New York...

Ray: Chicago.

Eric: ...Chicago, and they would then be consumed in the restaurant trade from that source.

Don: They were shipped by railroad?

Eric: They were shipped packed in um, boxes on the railroad, correct?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: And they were in chilled railroad cars.

Carl: Was there a middleman? A distributor?

Eric: Um, at that time, who was the distributor. Do you remember? It was when you were a little kid, so I don't know if you remember who they were.

Ray: You mean, as in my daddy?

Eric: Yeah. Who did he sell to, do you remember?

Ray: Well we sell to, I guess they call them brokers then.

Eric: Do you remember any of the brokers' names?

Ray: Yes I do, but I can't right now.

Eric: Well if you remember them just say them out, but eventually um, the – while grandpa started, and probably into the 1950s, Dad became a broker. And he was a processor, a manufacturer, and he brokered from all the small canneries in South Louisiana. He would buy the production and resell it. So he was a broker for them.

Don: What was the name of the brokerage firm?

Eric: Um, the brokerage company here was Deepsouth – one word – Packing Company. And Deepsouth Packing actually was a packing company. But Dad also starting buying other productions from other canneries including the one at High Seas and Dulac. Before that, there was Authement Packing Company, and there were other companies there. Well let me get back on kind of a track for you. But um, but when grandpa – Great-Grandpa Nicholas came back to Biloxi, and sort of all the family was there, they all started sort of melting into the seafood industry. And um, what my recollection was, probably when my um, I would guess - Dad was born in 1920. Um, and I'm thinking that grandpa moved to New Orleans in about 1930?

Ray: I think so.

Eric: Yes, when permanently moved to New Orleans. But they were obviously moving back and forth – they were very mobile through the processing regions. But um, then, when you first moved to Louisiana, did you move to Patterson or did you move to New Orleans?

Ray: I think New Orleans.

Eric: Okay. And you were in Patterson –you were a little older?

Ray: I would say yes.

Eric: You wouldn't – did you go to – I know you went to Warren Easton to high school in New Orleans, but when you were in Patterson, you were in junior high school, or grammar school?

Ray: I graduated from high school in Patterson.

Eric: You graduated in...

Ray: In Morgan City.

Eric: Morgan City. So you went to Warren Easton?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Actually you graduated from Warren Easton.

Ray: Right.

Eric: But you went to school from – you must have graduated from junior high school in Patterson. And the reason I'm trying to research this because I know Dad – when he went to Patterson, Grandpa had just started to work on perfecting freezing shrimp. And before that time, people were messing with it, but grandpa was actually the first one to commercially freeze shrimp, and ship them out then um, mechanically refrigerated rail cars that were frozen. When he froze those shrimp, did he freeze them head on, or...

Ray: Head off.

Eric: Head off? Frozen raw?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Okay, so the first shrimp that were frozen were head-off and, we refer to it on the market as green shrimp. Basically uncooked, and were they in boxes or cans?

Ray: The frozen were in boxes.

Eric: Cardboard boxes? Okay.

Don: Or wooden box?

Eric: No, they'd freeze them in cardboard - a paper box?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Yeah. Because in order to freeze them, they had to be in small conventional packages so they'd freeze properly, so if you put in too big of a mass, it won't freeze properly, and it would rot. So um, but then um, Grandpa moved from Patterson back to New Orleans and opened up on Broad Street. Correct?

Ray: When you say Patterson...

Eric: I mean Morgan City.

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Right, so you went from Morgan City to New Orleans – and set up shop on Broad Street.

Ray: Yes.

(Background noise)

Eric: And um, I don't remember the address, but it was across from what was Mossy Oldsmobile. Where Mossy was on Broad Street near the pumping station, right?

Ray: On the twelve hundred block.

Eric: On the twelve hundred block of Broad Street. And then um, so – and then he kept that until – when did he move to Texas? In the 1950s?

Ray: I can't quite remember.

Eric: Okay, it was after the war though.

Ray: Yeah.

Eric: But during the war, just so you're aware, Grandpa, besides processing shrimp on Broad Street in cans, he also processed sweet potatoes and strawberry jam? For the military?

Ray: Strawberry. He had jam.

Eric: He had jam and sweet potatoes.

Ray: Yes.

Eric: And he'd pack that for military rations and military kitchens during World War II, right?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Alright. And also during that time that I remember, my grandfather was also engaged in business with – he was partners with other canneries. So he was partners with um, Billy (Longester's?) , Dad.

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Um, Billy's...

Ray: Grandfather.

Eric: His grandfather had a company in Algiers Canning Company, which was on the west bank in Algiers. But he was partners with other people, wasn't he? In small places? Um, what was the deal with Stans?

Ray: He had space in Biloxi.

Eric: And he also had a cannery in Biloxi (inaudible)?

Ray: That's where um...

Eric: (inaudible) is a gentleman – his name is Felix (inaudible).

Claire: Veronica's um, husband.

Eric: Veronica's husband. Veronica (inaudible) husband.

Ray: You know where um, the (Sicoux's) are on the corner?

Eric: Yes.

Ray: That was – Daddy sold that to them.

Eric: Okay. So you had a factory in Biloxi too then.

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Okay. What did you do with your factory in Biloxi? Canned shrimp or raw or what?

Ray: Canned.

Eric: Canned? Okay. And um, so you see that this is a thing with a lot of interactions – so it's getting off...

Don: No, no, no, it's perfect. I just want to ask a question – when you were in Biloxi and then you came to Louisiana and ended up in Patterson...

Eric: Mom and Dad were coming in from...

Don: Right. In Patterson? In Morgan City?

Ray: Morgan City.

Don: Did you run into the Karenas family?

Ray: I remember the name.

Don: Okay. Do you remember what they were doing in that area?

(Background noise)

Carl: Okay. Please start again. You're in the –

Don: Were they in the (pogey?) business? Were the Kerenas in the (pogey?) business?

(Background noise)

Ray: I'm not sure.

Eric: Okay, well Victor is coming in right now, and why don't we get a chair for them.

(Background noise)

Eric: Say hello to your cousins.

(inaudible)

Denis: Victor, why don't you come sit over here – why don't you come sit over here by Dad.

(inaudible)

Denis: Victor needs to sit –

Ray: Victor needs to sit over here with my good ear.

Denis: What ear? (laughs) What? What?

Ray: No.

(Background noise)

Eric: I'll just fill in and sit back here. Victor – Don, now you met Victor?

Don: Yes, yes.

Eric: Victor Mavar - this is Claire's father.

Carl: Nice to meet you sir.

Victor Mavar: What's your name?

Carl: Carl.

Victor: Carl What?

Carl: Brasseaux.

Eric: Brasseaux – it's like the arms. Brasseaux

Victor: That means the arms?

Eric: Yes, Brasseaux in Spanish.

Victor: The same spelling?

Carl: B-R-A-S-S-E-A-U-X.

Eric: Oh, well you're the Cajun for "arm".

Carl: That's right.

Eric: But it probably was originally the other one. (laughs)

(inaudible)

Denis: How are you doing? I just wanted to come say hi.

Ray: Doing alright.

Denis: Thanks again for letting me come to your house.

Ray: Oh...

Don: If we can have – okay. If we can just have you introduce yourself, you know, first name, middle name, last name, it would help us. Anybody else that's gonna join in – so we can keep the records straight.

Victor: Alright.

Don: So who's joining us – Victor?

Victor: I'm Victor Adrian Mavar Sr. from Biloxi.

Don: Wonderful. We've just been talking about – Eric has pointed out that there's this sort of cone of development of the seafood industry and many of you were involved in it, and we're just trying to get

the history from the points where the family survived in Louisiana and then began to get into the industry. And the things we're interested in are basically, for example, we just heard about um, you know, canned shrimp. We would want to know where the cans came from and how that happened. You're going to talk about labels – where the labels came from. And the reason we ask those questions is that if you were involved in the early oyster business, you were tonging oysters. So that's required a fresher product, but for those of you from Biloxi, who made your boats? What was the material used to make those boats? Who made your sails? Where did the sails come from? And Carl and I have tried to find the original records of the ship rights. We really don't know – we think there are some – let me show you.

Carl: But so much of that has been lost because of the hurricanes.

Don: Yeah.

Eric: There was a wealth of knowledge on boat stuff because we actually – you've found the *Perfection*, didn't you Dad?

Ray: I know where it is.

Eric: You know where it is?

Ray: It's going to be at the boat show in a couple of weeks.

Eric: Okay. Um...

Don: If you look at the – the luggers used in Louisiana...

Eric: And the Biloxi schooners.

Don: My roots are in California. I grew up in San Francisco Bay. There are design elements in the oyster luggers that have distinct characteristics of what we would have called the Chinese jump. It's particularly in the keel, and in the tiller. The tiller design – I can take one from San Francisco Bay and one from Mississippi, Louisiana, and I can overlay them, and they overlay almost perfect.

Eric: Just so you know, my dad worked at Higgins during the early part of World War II building boats because they had built boats in Biloxi, and Victor was a merchant Marine during World War II and his family were boat builders back in Biloxi as well.

Don: Well we know the Chinese had a huge influence – largely from shrimp drying. In Biloxi it was Dunbar and (Dakoti?), or (Dakoti) I'm not sure.

Ray: Dekate. D-E-K-A-T-E.

Don: And those – those folks shipped massive amounts of can products. We have no idea where the cans come from. You may think that's insignificant – we don't have a steel making tradition in the south – so the steel had to come from somewhere. Was it precut – how did you get your cans?

Victor: From the company.

(laughter)

Don: Okay, was that, was that Continental Can?

Victor: American Can.

Eric: Both continental and American.

Victor: And Continental was later.

Don: Now did they lease you the can equipment or did you buy the can equipment?

Victor: No. They leased it. The owner leased it.

Don: Okay. So they provided you then all of the raw stock to make cans.

Victor: No, they – they made the cans.

Eric: They delivered the cans manufactured in (inaudible) can and then they sent lids. And so the lids were attached mechanically through the seamer.

Victor: And the early cans with – I wasn't around then, but they sealed with them with soldering.

(Unrecognizable subject): soldering.

Don: Now was it – there's about eight of us in here. Was there a group of eight people – each one soldering? Do you remember?

Victor: I can't...

Eric: How many people at a time soldered, do you think?

Victor: That was before my time.

Don: Do you – have you heard any stories, Victor?

Victor: No.

Don: Okay.

Carl: About how long did the transition take place?

Victor: I don't know – I'm eighty four years old, and my parents got in the business the year I was born in 1926, and um, they started a canning operation in about 1931 or '32. And I was just a little kid, but I remember we bought tin cans from Continental and American Can Company, and the cans came to us in bundles of several hundred, and the lids were separate in tubes. And the can company provided a

machine for us to put the lid on. And they had a service man who came around to make sure that we were doing it correctly.

Don: That was in the thirties.

Victor: Yes.

Don: Alright. Now you were buying off of um, shrimp, fishermen, oyster fishermen, both?

Victor: Both.

Don: Alright.

Victor: In our case, we owned a fleet of boats. Biloxi had a union, and no boats could be unloaded in Biloxi that was not a Biloxi based boat. So processors were forced to own boats, something we didn't want to do. But um, so we had boats that caught shrimp during the shrimp season and they were convertible to be able to catch boats during the oyster season. And while I was young, like seven or eight, nine, only sailors were allowed to catch oysters. Um, later, engines came in to where the boats could pull dredges. But when they had sails, they operated at first with tongs catching oysters, and when engines came along, they began to use dredges. Do you know what a dredge is?

Don: Mmhmm.

Victor: Well they used those with engines. And little by little, the sail disappeared, and those schooners were converted to powerboats.

Don: Now can you name any of the boats that were part of your fleet?

Victor: Yeah. There's a slew of them. Um, they – most famous one of our fleet was a boat named the *Perfection*. And...

(inaudible)

Victor: Yeah. Right. And um, in the summer, when there was no fishing, there was a vacation period. There would be schooner races in Biloxi. And the *Perfection* won last two schooner races in 1937 and '38. And um...

Don: Were these Biloxi-based? Were those boats built in Biloxi?

Victor: Yes. And we had another boat named The *Wanderer*. And there was another schooner – a fast schooner. We had others, um, named The *Elroy*, E-L-R-O-Y, um, then we bought a fleet from our aunt. And they were named after European things, like the *Adriatic*, the *Baltic*, there was one named the *Pacific*, then there were some named after their children. There was the *Veronica*, and one named after my aunt, the *Mary*, then later, we began to build powerboats and those were named after members of our family. Um, one was named *Victor Mavar*, we had one named *Sam Mavar*, *John Mavar*, *Little Nicky Gerald Mavar* – we ran out of kids finally.

Eric: And at the same time, um, there were boats that Grandpa had in Biloxi had as well. They had the *Ray S.*, and *Cecil D.*, and what were the other ones? They all ended up all being pulled onto the beach and being burned by the revenue service, but that wasn't their fault.

(laughter)

Eric: That was during Prohibition.

(laughter)

Carl: Well we'll get to that in a second.

Don: We'll get to that later.

Eric: I had no idea – I wasn't there.

Don: And what's really important is – you were based in Biloxi. Were your reefs in Louisiana?

Victor: Yes.

Don: So you had reefs that you managed in Louisiana.

Victor: No we did not own the reefs – they were public reefs. There were some families – there were some families in Louisiana that got into the business of leasing land and water bottom from the state of Louisiana and growing their own oysters, but Mississippi did not get into that. Mississippi fishermen caught oysters on Mississippi public reefs and Louisiana public reefs.

Don: Okay. Alright. Now one of the early records show us that was that um, Dunbar, and is it – say the last...

Victor: Duquet.

Don: Duquet – they had at least one and maybe two barge-mounted processing facilities in Louisiana at a place called Dunbar. Do you – do you have any recollection of a community named Dunbar? And it would have been between Slidell and um, Pearlinton on the coast. Do you have any recollection – it's not on any maps anywhere.

Victor: No.

Eric: We ended up owning the Dunbar label at Southern Shell, and we still own the Dunbar label.

Don: Do you have any copies of that label?

Eric: I think we still have it.

Don: Okay. And the reason we ask that – apparently there were Mississippi cannery interests that had barge-mounted processing facilities.

Victor: That's the first I ever heard of that.

Don: One was at Dunbar – there was one at the (Rigga lease?), and one we know was at Grand Isle. And yet we can't find the connections – I mean how do you move a barge-mounted reef – barge-mounted processing facility in 1906?

Denis: Tugboat.

Don: There's no motors. Predates – predates internal combustion engine.

Eric: Steam engine.

Don: That's the only thing we think...

Eric: They moved a lot of things with steam engines, and I mean, steam-powered small ships, but that goes back to the '06 timeframe?

Don: Actually, we have a record that in Grand Isle, perhaps as early as 1895, 6, 7, and it – apparently this was a way that you could package a product and get it to the French Quarter relatively quickly.

Eric: Right.

Don: And then put it on trains or whatever.

Eric: Well you know the um – during the Civil War, if you look at the records, union troops were carrying canned oysters as a ration pack. They were carrying canned oysters as part of their regular diet. They didn't have that much from the southern troops – they didn't have the, because of the steel issue with cans. But I think at one time, my dad told me there were as many as a hundred and thirty canneries in the gulf coast – of anywhere from cottage industry all the way up to manufacturing because when – when we talked about these small factories that started, and at Southern Shell Fish Company, which we owned – which we processed it till the eighties. At one time, we were processing – I saw a million pounds of shrimp in the yard that we would process. We probably process about 700,000 pounds of shrimp in a day. And I went into the warehouse one day when Continental Can Company had a problem with the way they were manufacturing the cans, and my dad told me, there's too many cans of shrimp in the warehouse that have to all be gone for issues. And I actually went with my older brother who was still alive, who was a junior – Ray Skrmetta Jr. And we went through the entire inventory. So we went from small, small production to literally – they had a very, very large cannery. And especially in the cat food business, they actually went to dry but they were in um, in the solid packed cans as well. But um, went from small into the millions of cans.

Don: So when you talk about cottage-industry canners as opposed to something like this, how many cans...

Eric: This is our factory. So there you go. Um, you know, how many – what was the smallest cannery you ever heard of? I mean as far as like, you know, a couple of hundred cans a day? Or was it...

Ray: The smallest I heard was much larger than that.

Eric: Okay.

Ray: And I don't recall...

Victor: There was a – there was this seaming machine they call it – closing machine – that ran sixty cans a minute. That was the smallest operation that I remember. Then when a new plant was opened on a small scale, that's what they had probably. A machine that would use sixty cans a minute.

Eric: Just so you know, this – this building is still there. This building blew down in Hurricane Katrina.

Carl: Okay.

Eric: But um, the older building is still intact.

Don: Now as you've seen lots of changes. You've seen – you went from sail power, wood chips, to steel hulls. You went from tongs to dredges. Um, if you were characterizing the industry's changes through time, what would be the benchmark sort of inventions that allowed you to become more productive in the industrialization of what was a cottage industry originally?

Eric: I guess wouldn't it be the original – we went from hand-peeling to machine peeling, so I would say the shrimp peeling machine?

Don: Alright.

Eric: And then the shrimp deveining machine, which – did you or Grandpa invent the deveining machine?

Ray: We get into some legal parameters.

Eric: I understand, but was it you or Grandpa that started it?

Ray: I'm gonna say it was Grandpa.

Eric: Okay. Well there was a – but they went from hand peeling to mechanical peeling, and then to one of the – you know, they used to sell two different packs of regular, cooked, peeled, and then cooked, deveined. And so there were two different styles of shrimp size count. There was just two different ways of processing it. Some people didn't want the shrimp with the back vein in it. Um, and so um, but the earliest peeling machine was um, built by my grandfather, and my dad helped him in the early 1950s, would you say Victor, you would guess?

Victor: I would guess.

Eric: It was right – it was post-war, but it was a bit after the war material wise. And um, then – but you know, when you took it from volume of production, they would have working in the shrimp plants doing hand-peeling – how many people...

Victor: Several hundred.

Eric: Yeah, several hundred people hand-peeling at a time.

Don: Now there is a record in Biloxi where people were paid in what were called shrimp nickels. Can you explain what a shrimp nickel is?

Victor: It's just a nickel - plain old nickel. They were referred to as a shrimp nickel because when people would peel shrimp by hand, they would put the peeled shrimp in a um, in a trough, and they would flow into the packing line. And they would put the hulls in a bucket, and they would take the hulls up to a scale and the hulls would be weighed, and the people would pay cash on the spot. And they, at that time, nobody got paid in dollars. They got paid in nickels, dimes, and quarters. And they were mostly nickels, so the term shrimp nickel became a common term which was used in - throughout the industry.

Don: Well it's a term that we don't find in Louisiana, but we find in Biloxi.

Victor: Is that right?

Don: Yes. And in Louisiana, you were paid in tokens. These were tokens created by the companies.

Eric: When ya'll did peeling - Dad? When ya'll did hand-peeling, when you paid women for peeling the shrimp, did you pay it with a token, or did you do a (toke?) sheet, or what did you do?

Ray: Well in the early days, I remember the coins. And then the coin came later.

Eric: Okay. Did you um, did you - when it was your place, did you make your own coin? Your own token?

Ray: I don't know where we made them.

Eric: Did you have them made or...

Ray: I think they were brought in from someone.

Eric: Okay.

Victor: I remember the token. It might take me a few minutes to remember where it came from. Um, let me think about that one.

Eric: It was only in seventy five years ago, eighty years ago, in case you remember.

(laughter)

Don: And also, there has always been a connection between Louisiana, Biloxi, and Baltimore, and there's always been some exchange between the two.

Victor: Right.

Don: Um, not necessarily in shrimp but certainly in oysters.

Victor: And in people.

Don: That's what I'd like for you to talk about.

Victor: I never did learn for sure um, how it happened, because it was before my time, but there were some um, large groups of people who lived in the Baltimore area who were good at shucking oysters. And when the oyster season started here, they would be brought down from Baltimore.

Carl: Now these are immigrants? Or were these...

Victor: There were some immigrants. There was a large group of Polish people. There are still some Polish families left in Biloxi who got there as a result of that process. There are um, Zinsky's, Kazloski's, a whole bunch of polish names like that that are still around. Firms like Dunbar Duquet built places for them to live in, and they were called camps. And what they, they consisted of was a long shotgun building that had a room on one side and a room on the other side. And the bathroom facilities were out in the yard, in an um, outhouse. And the cooking was done on a fire outside of the camp. And these people from Baltimore lived in those camps during the oyster season. And when the oyster season was over, they got on trains and went back to Baltimore. But um, I don't know for sure why that took place. More than likely, it was because there was not enough labor down here to do the work.

Eric: Victor, was the oyster season you think different in Baltimore than it would be here? Maybe they had two seasons they worked?

Victor: I don't know about that for sure.

Don: When was your oyster season?

Victor: Well oyster season started in September and went through April, but the months with "R's" September through April. And May, um, was when oysters – we were not supposed to catch oysters because the same oyster is both male and female, depending on the season of the year. And during May, they begin to convert sex, and the oyster takes on a milky substance on them, and that milky substance is the eggs. And little by little, they release that milky substance into the water, and it drips around and attaches to any rough surface on the bottom, and another oyster develops as a result of that attachment.

Don: Now were you canning oysters?

Victor: Yes.

Don: How did that work? I mean I'm an oysterman, right? I have – I bring you a boatload of oysters.

Victor: The boats would be unloaded into - in the early days, into rolling cars that were about two and a half feet wide and maybe eight or ten feet long. And those cars had little wheels on them like railroad wheels on a track, and they were rolled into a box that was a little bigger than the car. The ends of the boxes were closed, and steam was turned on. And the oysters were cooked for several minutes. And when the cooking was done, the little dolly was rolled out, and the oysters were – the shell would open

just a little bit with that cooking process. And that cart was then rolled to the place where the mostly women would do the shucking. And the same deal – they would shuck the oysters and put the oysters in a cup and throw the shells down on the floor. And when the cup was filled, they'd take it up to a window and weigh it, and they'd get paid cash on the spot. They would take out social security, and I don't think income tax was their thing at the time, but it was all cash on the spot.

Don: Now we have...

Eric: There was a different – that was the hand – that was how they dealt with it by hand.

Don: Okay.

Eric: Then we went into, um, Dad, that factory you built for Mr. Defilise in Myrtle Grove; you built in the early 1950s? Denis might remember. You don't remember what it was?

Denis: I remember going there.

Eric: That was before I was born, huh?

Denis: That picture was in '55.

Eric: Okay. That photograph is of the first mechanical um, shucking plant. '55, it was in Myrtle Grove, Louisiana. I think it was built for, was that Chabert Defelise?

Victor: Chabert was one of the Defelises. We were part of that.

Eric: Oh, you were part owner? I didn't know that. That explains why we got the job.

(laughter)

Victor: Yeah, so there, and what's the other guy, and he married a girl that owns that – his family owns that restaurant on Napoleon.

Eric: De – well. Manale. Right. That was the other half of the family. Manale's Restaurant family came to...

Victor: Pascal's Manale?

Eric: Pascal's Manale was owned by the Defilise family. But that was in the fifties, and you – well basically the difference between the hand shucking like that and when it shifted over was the oysters were steamed in a large pressure vessel, and once they opened up, the oysters went into a – they came into what's called a reel. And the reel is the tumbler. And it would go through the tumbler, and the oyster meat would fall out of the bottom through slots into a salt grind. And that would be fluted into the canning room.

Don: Now are there any of those...

Eric: Yes. There's one – well it's not open, but we still have the full equipment line still in place at Southern Shell.

Don: Alright.

Eric: We were the last oyster cannery in the United States that I know of.

Victor: That was run.

Eric: That was run – everything is moved to basically East Asia – or Asia and South Korea, but we – well there maybe one on the west coast of Washington, but in the Gulf of Mexico, Southern Shell canned their last oyster in...

Victor: Before Katrina.

Eric: Yeah. Actually, back probably in the early 19 to mid 1980s.

Don: So...

Eric: Uh, I'm sorry, mid 1990s.

Don: So if we're talking Motivator Seafood in Houma, that's um, they developed a process where you use pressure to open oysters, and it kills...

Eric: Fresh. That's not any cooked product. When you get canned oysters, you steam cooked the oysters, and they popped open. And then when they gave, they would go into the reel and tumble, and the oyster shell would break loose, the meat would break loose from the mussel, and it would drop out in the brine and it would flip in salt mine, and then that would be fluted into the canning room because you can't take any raw oyster and can it. You have to cook them first to drive out the free oyster in that – like with shrimp. So everything's cooked for when you'd go into the can. So when you cut the can and you take them out the federal – government makes the standard on drain weight on most of these things. And so that's why they were all cooked before they were canned. What those guys did – that was only done recently.

Don: Oh yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Eric: That process is a way to do two things. Hamper bacteria, and two, to allow for a mechanical raw shucking versus using people.

Don: So when you say you're the – there's no – I want to make sure I have this right. There's nobody left in the United States that cans oysters.

Victor: Not that I know of.

Eric: There maybe one – I don't think many – any commercial scale. There's a couple of small, maybe one east point in Washington or Oregon, they don't do it anymore. No, I think that's it – they were the last one.

Don: Now, this is really important. When did you stop canning oysters?

Eric: We – I can tell you a different date. Um, 1993?

(Unrecognizable subject): We canned up until Katrina.

Eric: Did we can up until Katrina?

(Unrecognizable subject): I thought Katrina stopped it all.

Eric: No, we lost a contract with um...

Ray: If you got to go, you got to go.

Eric: Well, call it 2005.

Don: So what we're saying is, we've heard a great deal of Katrina discussion about the lower 9th ward, New Orleans, but we are also talking about the death of an industry.

Eric: Well, in many ways, yeah, because a lot of these processors who are doing freezing plants now basically wiped out, and they had to rebuild, and you know...

Victor: The resource got wiped out.

Eric: The resource got wiped out in oyster reefs, and then it became an issue with the oil spill took out a lot of the reefs, but if you look at the oyster business, um, the biggest thing that probably put us out was the South Korean canned oyster business. Because when they would get (vitality?) of market, they would start raising their prices. And they would raise their prices until we could get back into the market and be competitive. So we went in and out of the canned oyster business from about the 1970s until 2000. Um, because we would – when we produced, they would drop their price. So it was a bit of an unfair competition and pricing issue, but there wasn't a whole lot we could do about it – we tried to get the federal government to look into it. But as soon as we stop producing, then their price can go up. And the other issue that was a factor was as communities in um, the parts of Asia that were producing this product developed economically, local folks started consuming the product versus packaging and exporting it. It also affected the market to some state. So um, they really became sort of a – I guess the real death knell for it was Katrina in the sense that it really messed up our resource, and then we had issues that came along with the market. So I think between the two of them, it was sort of a final punch on it.

Don: Well if we go back to thinking of this cone, and at the pinnacle of the cone, (inaudible). We already know there were a hundred and thirty processors.

Carl: My understanding about that...

Don: That's close.

Done: So if Carl and I were trying to put together the history, we could safely say a hundred and thirty, and we're talking to the last survivors.

Eric: Right.

Don: Wow.

Victor: I remember tokens was not something that was introduced to pay for work in seafood processing things. Tokens was something that was introduced by the state of Mississippi and maybe Louisiana as well. It was a way to implement a light tax, and in – a token was a tenth of a penny. And it was a coin that was about the size of a nickel that had a triangular or rectangular shaped hole in the center of it. And instead of a one percent tax there may have been a one-tenth of a percent tax, and you'd pay that tax when you bought something with a token. And the – some of those tokens eventually may have been used in the process of paying people for shrimping and oysters and picking shrimp. Now the demise of the oyster business is another thing. Um, in 19 – well to start off, not very many people realize it, but this marsh area at the mouth of the Mississippi River – on the east side and the west side is the most productive fishery area in the world. Not many people realize. The ones who live here don't know how productive it is.

Eric: Didn't your brother develop the concept of the siphons from the river into the marsh? It was you? Okay. I couldn't remember which one it was, but you know the siphons along the river?

Don: Yeah, at Violet for example.

Eric: Actually, further down all the way down to Plaquemine.

Victor: Canard.

Eric: Where the Canard (inaudible), um, Victor was the one that developed the concept of siphoning water out of the fresh water and putting it back in the marsh to re-stabilize the, the salinity levels.

Victor: What happened was...

Eric: I can't remember which one of them did it. Maybe it was one of them.

Victor: The Mississippi River flows into the marsh, and the Mississippi river is what gives the marsh all of its nutrients because it's the topsoil of the nation that's washed down the river. Every year, the Mississippi river would overflow its banks naturally, and all of those nutrients would come in and replenish the nutrients in the marsh. In 1927, there was a huge flood. And the, the river – the levees broke in some places, and in New Orleans area, the levee was dynamited to keep New Orleans from flooding. And Plaquemines Parish was virtually destroyed. Well after that happened, congress in its wisdom passed laws, getting the Corps of Engineers to raise those levees to the point that the river doesn't overflow its natural banks like it used to. As a result, the nutrients are not coming into the marsh, and the oyster industry suffered because of the lack of supply. That's what we got out of it. But when I was a kid, a boat would go out and I remember the captain asking my father or my older

brothers, what day do you want me to unload? And they would come back in with a load of oysters on that day. And when we finally got out of the oyster business, boats would come in with a half a load, and we just couldn't make ends meet. And that – and like Eric mentioned, um, I was not the one who conceived the idea of diverting water – that was conceived by the Corps of Engineers, but they couldn't get financing for it. And I had some political connections in Washington through a couple of senators and congressmen, and we got the financing to complete the project. There's one at (Canard?) And one on the west side at Davis (Pond?). And those diversions um, they weren't a certain amount of water that was supposed to be better than the natural flow because it could be controlled. And I think it is that, but it hasn't been completed. There are more diversions needed, and we got blocked by some environmentalists from completing the rest of it. They got all excited, and thought that the fresh water was going to destroy their quality of life and all of the things that they complain about. But um, that absence of fresh water is what caused the oyster business to come out.

Don: If we go back to the early industry, the early oyster industry, when a captain brought a full load of oysters, and I'm assuming the vessel could be one ton, two, three, four, five maybe as big as six tons. How was the captain paid? Was he paid by the oyster? By the barrel? By the basket? By the bucket? If I'm a captain, and I have a load of oysters, how do I calculate how much I made?

Victor: First, they were paid so much a barrel. And I don't know the cubic measurement of a barrel. But they were paid that way. And the processors were having a difficult time with that because in some parts – some time of the season, oysters are fat. And you take a barrel of oysters and you shuck them, and you may get to this many oysters out of the barrel. Um, a little bit later in the season, the oysters are not so fat. And when you shuck them, you only got this many.

Don: Say half.

Victor: Yeah. There was a smaller quantity. And it would vary all the way from the full amount to some small amount. And the processor was paying by the barrel. So when the oysters were fat, he got this much, and so um, eventually they came to a system of paying by the can - um, so much a can. And a can was a six and a half ounce can at that time. And um, so it was in the captain's best interest to try to find the oysters that were more fat. That was the tricky thing because um, the fatness was controlled by the amount of fresh water coming in, and the um, changing of sex, and all of that is involved in the weight of the oyster.

Don: So if I bring a six and a half inch can – a six and a half ounce can, how much, rough number, would that translate for the captain?

Victor: The captain didn't get um, paid that way. The, the boat was paid a certain amount per can. And it was totaled up. And in those days, the captain and the crews split evenly. If there was a captain and four men on the boat, and they got to, we'll say a dollar; each one of them got twenty cents. The captain didn't get a bigger portion than the crew.

Eric: They were company-owned boats too, I understand. So it wasn't the captain as owner with his investment. It was him and his, effectively.

Don: An employee.

Eric: He was an employee – well...

Victor: He was not an employee.

Eric: He was a subcontractor.

Victor: An independent contractor.

Eric: An independent contractor but he, in some ways, was doing the same work as the deckhands other than transporting the boat to and from the site.

Victor: And the union in Biloxi was responsible for all that.

Don: Right. When was the union established?

Victor: I'm not sure, but when I was a kid, like, like maybe six years old? There was a big organizational effort. And there was a strike at my father's plant, and they beat the hell out of one of my brothers. And I remember the other two brothers carrying him in while all – he had his arm around their shoulders, and they carried them into my mother's house.

Eric: Have ya'll been – read the books about the shrimp war in Louisiana?

Don: I – I don't know a book about shrimp war in Louisiana.

Carl: We do know about the oyster wars.

Eric: Well there was a shrimp war too, and I believe that was Uncle Paul, your brother, who was the one who made the local processors mad because he was paying the fishermen, what he paid them, a penny more or something? And absolutely they were dousing boats with – they were dousing shrimp with diesel to destroy them, and keep them from selling them. So there was a plot of inner activity at that timeframe probably from the 19 – post 1914, 1915, up until sort of tapered off around 1930. So that was the early development of unions, and they went to the east.

Don: What was the name of your factory – your canning operation?

Victor: Mavar Shrimp and Oyster Company.

Don: And you were based in Biloxi on the point?

Victor: Yes.

Eric: He was on the beach in the front on the point.

Don: Hmm.

Eric: He was on the sound – on the Mississippi Sound. Just so you know, when we're talking about volumes and stuff, um, and I'm trying to remember because now I can't remember. Is it a can of cooked shrimp is approximately one pound of whole shrimp, right? I think that's about right.

Victor: Well let's see. If you peel the shrimp, you get half. You've got a pound of shrimp, you get eight ounces of raw meat.

Eric: But you cook it, right? So it wasn't.

Victor: Then when you cook it, you've got four ounces. So that's...

Eric: So it's one pound of whole shrimp to a can of shrimp final product.

Don: Okay.

Eric: So if you look at (inaudible) and harvest, and too on oysters, oysters are different because of the shell but from meat to a five – let's say a six and a quarter ounce can, might've been thirteen ounces of oyster meat by the time it went from the raw state to - because the oyster gave up some liquid, but the yields were kind of close...

Victor: (inaudible)

Eric: It fluctuated if they were fat or not.

Victor: That's right. The fatness of the oyster determined that breakdown that Eric was describing. But that fluctuates from week to week in both of them.

Don: Now when did you go from barrels to basically coffee sacks? And measurement?

Victor: I don't remember that.

Eric: Sack oysters, I mean, everything was measured more barrel measurement at processor. The sack trade I don't think ever got utilized, um, more for the canning. That went into the fresh trade. There was no reason to sack an oyster if you were going to go to a processor who was going to take bulk and you were going to have to empty the sack. So all these boats came in and deck loaded in bulk, and used – they would actually, I remember seeing boats come in Biloxi and Louisiana as well aware the decks awash from the water in the canal on some part of the boats. The boats were designed to where the actual deck can go under water a little bit, and everything else is built up, so it's like that curved like jump style, you were saying? And so when they'd load these boats, they would load them until – we lost the *Camilia* in a storm off of Bay St. Louis because it was loaded, and it came in and it rolled offshore and was destroyed, and then um, the *Magnolia* was destroyed too. That was when we sell. We sold the *Magnolia*, which was the *Perfection*. Nope, the *Perfection* was a third boat.

(Unrecognizable speaker): It was the *Captain* – the *Captain* went down..

Eric: The *Captain* – we changed the name.

(Unrecognizable speaker): The *Melissa* (inaudible)

Eric: I know.

Don: Now wait. You used the term Captain Hayman?

Eric: (inaudible)

Don: I know. Is it named after Captain Hayman Pitre, who was a big oysterman on Bayou Lafourche?

(Unrecognizable Speaker): Uh huh. We bought that boat from him.

Don: So you bought the captain Hayman.

Eric: Yes. And we renamed it the *Magnolia*.

Don: That boat was built on Bayou Lafourche and it was put together all brass.

(Unrecognizable speaker): Is that right? It was a very nice boat.

Don: It was one of the finest. In fact, he built that boat that way so he didn't have to take it out of the water very often.

(Unrecognizable speaker): Well what he did, they actually had a separate cabin in there so he and his wife could go on it with the crew.

Don: Yes. Before he passed away I interviewed him. Captain Hayman was an interesting fellow. Yeah, that's another story, but the reason

Carl: Well we're running out of tape. So we'll stop for a minute.

Don: Probably everybody needs to...

Eric: ...on the coast. And then it kind of went back from there.

(inaudible)

Eric: Okay. Alright. See I was always told the other way, which is good to know.

Victor: He was the first one of our family.

Eric: He was the first one of our family?

Victor: Right.

Don: And who was this, please? We just turned it on.

Carl: Well let's go ahead and finish your line of questions. I was asking questions about how the Croatians came here – how the family came about...

Eric: I actually have Nicholas's portrait.

Don: Well that's super.

Eric: So across I have a big one.

Carl: Well go ahead and finish your (inaudible).

Don: So what we have here is, is two families that represent a continuous connection to the seafood business. Clearly you have been involved in inventing important equipment used in the business. Understand the dynamics of the Mississippi river, have seen the business change, and again, the – I'm really curious as – if you owned boats, what shipyard built your boats?

Victor: We had our own shipyard. We had a crew that was - out of necessity, we had to have a crew for maintenance, and there wasn't maintenance going on all the time. Sometimes everything was running perfectly. So when there was no maintenance to be done, we had a new boat under construction for that maintenance crew to continue working.

Don: And they were built out of pine? Cypress? Both?

Victor: Built out of wood. The keel was pine, the frames were cypress, and the planking was cypress originally and later, that was converted to mahogany.

Don: Now, the Rathborne Lumber Company - The Rathborne Lumber Company in Harvey – they had a mahogany mill in Ponchatoula. Um, they took a cypress mill and they were bringing in mahogany from Honduras. Were you getting your mahogany from Louisiana or were you getting it out of Central America or a supplier perhaps in Mobile or Biloxi?

Victor: Um, I don't remember where the mahogany came from, but we didn't build but just a handful of boats that used mahogany.

Eric: On a personal base...

Victor: Yeah.

Eric: I think one of your brothers built a boat from that – dad probably showed it to me. It was a sport boat.

Victor: That's right. We built a family boat, and it was planked out of mahogany, and I think that was the last wooden boat we ever built. Then we converted to building steel boats.

Don: Well now, when you lay a keel, the keel determines the height of the mast. The mast height – no?

Victor: The keel doesn't have anything to do with the mast.

Don: Alright.

Victor: The keel determines the height of the boat.

Don: Alright. How would you determine the height of the mast?

Victor: Um, you're talking about for a sailing schooner?

Don: A sailing schooner, yes.

Victor: Oh, now that was before my time.

Don: Okay. That's fine, but now, were they – where did you get the sails? Who – because sails have to be designed for every boat.

Victor: There was a sail maker in Biloxi named Buckingham.

Don: Hmm.

Victor: And um, a guy named Milton Buckingham. And his father was a sail maker of my time, and he had several people working for him. He had a sewing machine to make the long seams, and then to tie the ropes and the other things into the sail. He had some people who did that by hand.

Don: Now is Buckingham still in Biloxi?

Victor: No, all the Buckinghams are dead. They weren't very prolific family people.

Carl: Unlike the Skrmetta's.

Victor: Because um...

(laughter)

Victor: Um, some of their distant relatives operate the same business, but they don't make sails anymore. They make awnings and that sort of thing. Their name is Parker in Biloxi.

Don: So in Biloxi, you were building the boats and you were outfitting the sails, and the reason we're asking this is that we know that in 1906 there were about fifteen hundred registered luggers in Louisiana. I'm not ready to believe that fifteen hundred were built in people's backyards. And yet we can't find the shipyards.

Victor: Well there are some – there were some commercial shipbuilding yards in Biloxi.

Don: And are those families still in Biloxi?

Victor: Some of them are.

Don: Okay.

Eric: Do you remember some of the names?

Victor: Um, there was a Klosovich family. Um...

Eric: They were still in the business doing ships right up until um, the 90s, huh?

Victor: But they were in business, not building, but they had a shipyard for repair work. And Katrina did a lot of damage, and some people who thought they were gonna put a casino on that property bought the property from the Klosovich and the casino market fell apart and the people still owned the property. Um, then there was a Frentz – a F-R-E-N-T-Z family in Biloxi. Some of them are still around. There's a Toche, T-O-C-H-E, family. That's the – they're still around. Um, and if you interviewed them, they would probably know the names of some of the other shipyards.

Don: Yeah, because we're having a problem sorting through these shipyards, particularly the large Yugoslavian, Dalmatian, Croatian population.

Denis: (inaudible)

Don: In Plaquemine.

Eric: Right.

Don: Um, I just don't know of any early shipyards, say at Buras, Empire, that were building luggers. I can find steel hulls, but I'm interested in the lugger.

Eric: I think you're gonna find that if you find Louisiana boats that were wooden built, they're going to be further up on the bayous and on the coast. Up in to like Lafitte height away from the gulf because – you know, there was never that much early development down on the coast, you understand?

Don: Oh yes.

Eric: For transporting material or anything. So you had to go – you basically need to get a 1920s or 30s roadmap. Where the road ends? That's about where the shipyards are. You know, they didn't extend further than that. Um, but the – what might have been an issue, and if you think about it, it's a straight line from Plaquemines Parish to Biloxi across the gulf. And it's not that far, so it makes sense that they would go to places that were sort of established. And then – but further to the west side of the river, I think you're at position to where you have to go back and really get a road map and look where the end of the road was. Because that sort of how they all are. I mean all the seafood business and everything, even when I was a kid, and I'd go down to Dulac and all the other areas, all places stopped at like say Dulac, and into the early 1970s when the state extended the road to Cocodrie, you know, when you had a real road when they could move stuff back. You know, so I think you got a – that might be a way for you to look back and see where these areas just even could've been.

Don: Now one of the early problems in the oyster industries was either black drum, largely (inaudible) otters – they would just go in and take an oyster and crunch it, and therefore you're losing part of your harvest.

Eric: Sheepshead too.

Don: How did they protect against – let's just call them marauding fish? - so that your leases were not destroyed in some cases in two days?

Victor: I don't know anything they were able to do, except a lot of complaining.

Don: Yeah. Well that works.

Eric: We also had at one point we also had – there was a type of snail called the drill?

Victor: Yes.

Eric: We had a lot of that came in the 80s, you know, but the – unless we can get a you know, a submarine to sit underwater and shoot them with torpedoes or something, you know, you just wait them out till they move off.

Victor: A fair amount of um, those predators like the drills and the carps would destroy oysters. Fresh water keeps them away. So these diversion projects were designed to provide enough fresh water to keep those predators away from the oysters. I don't know all the predators, but I know carps, and these things that Eric mentioned, and others would be kept away by the right amount of fresh water. Marine biologists would determine the iso – what is it?

Don: Isohaline.

Victor: That's it. Isohaline level that was ideal for the growing of oysters, and they picked a point at the edge of the marsh, and they wanted the isohaline at that point to be a certain level, because that was considered ideal for the growing of oysters. Now you couldn't have an ideal situation all over because closer to the diversion would be fresher, and further away from there would be more salty, but at that point, it was figured that that point would be um, a good level for the growing of oysters.

Don: Now I got one more question before Carl asks. You had a union in Biloxi. Were Louisiana oystermen selling to Biloxi processors?

Victor: No. Um, no oysters could be unloaded in Biloxi if they didn't come off a Biloxi based boat. But we could go into Louisiana and open up a canning plant like we did at that Myrtle Grove place. And um, we could can oysters over there and bring the canned oysters to Biloxi, label, and ship them.

Don: Hmm. And what was the name of your facility in Myrtle Grove?

Victor: Myrtle Grove Canning Company.

Don: Okay. Alright. Now did you ever market your oysters to say, Baltimore?

Victor: Um, Baltimore or – the canned oyster business in my time...

Don: Okay.

Victor: ...was not a good market for canned oysters. There were too many fresh oysters available in Baltimore. But canned oysters were sold in the Midwest and in the South. And most of the canned oysters were used to make what they call oyster stew. And the way they made oyster stew, is that they opened a can of oysters and dump it in a pot. And they'd measure off an equal amount of canned milk and dump that in the same pot. And they'd put salt and pepper and heat it up, and that was what they called oyster stew. And the oyster business was um, dominated, certain sections of the country, certain brands had domination. The brand that – they ended up owning Blue Plate was um, probably had the most widespread distribution. Get ready for this. There was a brand called Nigger Head.

Denis: Ogenbaud.

Victor: That was owned by

Denis: Ogenbaud?

Victor: Ogenbaud Canning Company in Biloxi – changed to Biloxi canning company. And they owned that brand, and they sold it through the Midwest, principally up the Mississippi river on the town's east and west of the Mississippi river. And it was extremely popular. When I first came and worked after getting out of school, I got the job to travel the Midwest to try to sell ours up there. And we had a food broker in um, Little Rock. We were selling some of our shrimp. And I had my canned oyster samples ready, and I went to Little Rock and I forgot a can opener, so about two o'clock in the afternoon, I went into a five and ten cent store to buy a can opener. And the lady said, "What's a young man like you doing buying a can opener at this time of day for?" And I told her that I sell canned oysters, and I'm going to make a sales presentation, and I need this to open the can. She said, "Oh, do you sell – do you sell Nigger Heads?" Ha ha. I said, "No ma'am, we have another brand." So I called on the buyer, and um, told him what I was gonna have, made a little small talk, and oddly, I made my pitch about the oysters. And he said, "We buy Nigger Head. How's the fishing over there on the gulf coast? Do ya'll catch any fish in Louisiana?"

Don: So the discussion was over.

Victor: Discussion was over.

Eric: And then um, and then after segregation, the label changed to Negro Head. And um, the label changed, and from the artwork was sold from a black Americana caricature to sort of an Uncle Ben's art? And the - those labels are actually widespread on the internet. You could see them.

Victor: There was the original label Nigger Head – they had a black guy with rings in his ears and one in his nose, holding an oyster up like this. It was going in his mouth.

Claire: With his mouth wide open.

Victor: Right. Wide open.

Eric: And that was a term that was used for the head of captives on the oyster boats. The one that became sort of a (inaudible).

Don: Oh, okay. So that's the term. Right – yes.

Eric: Now it became associated with the boat, which became associated with the brand – the brand associated with the nomenclature on the...

Don: Now you own Blue Plate?

Eric: We own dozens of labels. Blue Plate, Sea Kiss, Dunbar, Sea Treasure, sacks of them.

Carl: You still have copies of them...

Eric: We've got racks of them over at Southern Shell – I'm not sure what we have over there, but you're more than welcome to come and take samples.

Victor: Ya'll have some Nigger Head?

Eric: No, um, I had one. Um...

Victor: (inaudible) has one.

Eric: I had one. I may have to borrow one because I'd like to get it.

Claire: No, he had one. He lost it in Katrina.

Eric: I had...

Victor: No, it's in his office, isn't it?

Claire: No, he lost them in Katrina.

Eric: They're available on the internet.

Claire: Oh yeah?

Eric: Yeah, and I actually was going – we had one original, um, I guess up until the really into the 1990s I had an original one and then I had the deep-posting segregation one, and actually I was going to have it framed to make a before-and-after type thing, and unfortunately, somebody saw it and liked it better than I did.

Don: Oh no.

Eric: So you kind of – it was like leaving a pencil on your desk.

Don: Yeah.

Eric: So, but I do have a lot of the old labels. And also, historically, we had – Dad had people come come from like green card companies and sort of souvenir companies and basically bought the right to reproduce them onto things. So I've seen Southern Shell's labels. There was one – Deer Head. Um, there was – I think there was Deer Island? Antler Head. That's what it was. But it was um, but there's a whole range of them because first off, anybody who had a sizeable place had their own label. Otherwise, they just sold blank cans and then they were just custom labeled – they were labeled under the common label of the company that bought the blank cans.

Don: Well one of the things we're thinking about was it would be really neat to create a poster.

Eric: Sure.

Don: With just the labels. But to do that, we've got to get copies of the labels.

Eric: You sure about that?

Don: So it might be kind of fun.

Claire: We don't have anymore. They're all gone.

Eric: That's the original one.

Don: Wow.

Don: My wife will email that to me and I'll share it with you.

Claire: And you'll email that to me. And I'll share it with you. (laughs)

Eric: That's the old original one.

Claire: That's the one Mark had I think.

(Unknown speaker): Is that the one Mark had?

Eric: They never conceptualized the idea of what they're doing right now.

Victor: Yeah, that's it.

Eric: Because we actually used to have a steam engine at Southern Shell that can run a...

(inaudible)

Eric: And literally when somebody says you must've been something before electricity, they meant it.

Carl: Yeah. Well, the value of the cans is amazing. Last year, a shrimp can sold for – what was it? Twenty seven fifty?

Claire: That's it? (laughs)

Carl: Twenty seven hundred fifty dollars.

Eric: Are you - I actually have filled cans in a little glass case in the back for you. Just...

Carl: No, seriously.

(inaudible)

Eric: We could go to Sea Grant College and take a tax deduction.

Carl: Um...

Eric: There you go. She enlarged it for you.

(unknown speaker): Claire, it works just like your iphone. You can make it a little bigger.

Done: Actually, Carl and I have been asked to do this.

Eric: Are you going to buy something now, Claire?

Claire: Huh?

Eric: You're gonna buy one of those now?

Claire: And ipod...

Eric: Yeah.

Claire: That ipad?

Eric: Ipad, yeah.

Claire: That's awesome. Yeah.

Victor: And in those days, a little off the subject...

Carl: Yeah.

Victor: Now, the word – the word nigger was not considered a bad word. Um, it was just a term that was used to describe black people. And then when people began to get angry with some of them and began to confirm as a bad nigger, then it got to where it was unacceptable. But when I was a kid, the black people were niggers. That's all – and nobody meant anything bad by it. It was just another part of vocabulary. I remember when I was about en years old, all that began to change. And my mother told me not to use that word because the black people would get offended by it.

Eric: Now, you showed me this picture of the sundried – I mean the dried shrimp. Just so you know, High Seas Dulac was one of the – still I think – doing dried shrimp.

Don: Yes.

Eric: (inaudible) but um, all of the shrimp were – as my recollection, there were no Chinese dryers in Louisiana, but they bought dried shrimp and repacked.

Don: No...

Eric: But they might know better than me.

Don: We have found reference to at least two platforms that were run by quote, Manila men.

Eric: Okay.

Don: And the nearest we can figure is they're owned by Chinese. The Chinese actually patented the shrimp drying platform. And there is a patent that we discovered.

Eric: So they patented sunshine and piece of wood?

Don: Exactly right. Exactly right. Couldn't get better. This is the only label we've ever found with reference...

Eric: Show that to them, if they see that they might recognize it.

Don: The only label we have ever found of a shrimp drying company that had an office and a facility in the French Quarter.

Eric: Did you look up through the secretary of state – the company name?

Don: Well it's a (Francon?) went to the facil – to the building in the French Quarter, introduce myself, the lady who's running this (inaudible) has antiques started talking with her, and she could recollect stories. And...

Eric: Because all around the French Market, was a big buying center for seafood.

Don: Yeah

Eric: And that was when my dad and grandfather were in business. My grandfather used to go through and sit up all night and play cards with the fishermen. And they would kind of work on buying stuff.

Don: Who, who represented St. Bernard Parish for many years – he was a congressman or a senator?

Eric: Was it a Perez?

Don: No, not a Perez. Not a Perez. And he was a real force behind the fishermen. He supported fishermen's issues. All of his memorabilia went underwater in Katrina.

Eric: Oh, was it Sammy Nunez?

Don: Sam Nunez. Sammy Nunez's ex-wife owns the building where (inaudible) and so we were chatting, and as soon as I mentioned history, she got real excited. And literally said in that building was basically a Chinese town because of the number of families, but it was the only reference.

Eric: Do you remember when you were down in the quarter at the French Market with Grandpa and there being a Chinese?

Ray: I remember a Chinese mentioned but I can't recall.

Victor: That, that dry pack was that – sundried?

Eric: Sundried shrimp.

Don: Sundried shrimp. Right.

Victor: Well here was another – there was a canned shrimp that was dry-packed. Remember that?

Eric: Yeah, it was..

Victor: Dry-packed canned shrimp.

Eric: Yeah. Um, that's what my dad used to dry-pack refrigerated shrimp as well.

Victor: Normally, canned shrimp were, they were put in a can, and then water and salt was added. Then the top was put on. Then it was cooked in a pressure cooker to sterilize it. There was another process where cooked shrimp were put in a can and nothing else. The lid was put on it, and it was dry-packed. You could shake it up and down – it sounded like something rattling on the inside of the can. And the reason that was tried is because canned shrimp didn't – with the salt and the water, and it did not have a long shelf life. Um, when you first packed it, you open the can. Within a few days or a few weeks, they were beautiful. But after the shrimp were six months old, they begin to get soft in the can. And there was all kinds of efforts to improve that quality, and nothing was ever really satisfactory. They began putting citric acid in it to firm it, and other things were tried. They tried um, the pressure cooker is called the (retard?). And they tried bringing that temperature up quickly so that the cooking time could be shortened and improved the quality. And it helped a little bit, but nothing ever really made canned shrimp um, a product that you could open six, eight months after it was canned and it would be a good buy.

Eric: Dad's been a lot of times working with the FDA trying to develop the process schedules to do that exact thing. They'd use computers on it and we did sensor in the cans and it was a, you know, trying to basically um, get it to a point where exactly the percent. Now besides um, canned shrimp, there was a point where there was a (inaudible) packed in Louisiana under jar packing. And it was in clear glass, I remember they were packing...

Victor: There was some of that. All kinds of stuff to try.

Eric: Yeah, everybody tried whole different ways of, you know, getting the product out.

Don: Improving the shelf life.

Eric: Well the shelf life and the display because shrimp are very pretty in color, so that was more of a presentation issue, but you know, shelf life, you can actually open a can of shrimp that's ten years old and it's still edible, but it's soft. And so the normal procedure when you'd get a can of shrimp is you would take it through a colander, rinse it in cold water, and then put it in the refrigerator to chill, and it would improve for cold purposes, but if you took canned shrimp and you put it let's say in some sort of broth or tomato sauce, it would have a tendency to break up and disintegrate to a degree. So as a cold product – it was still a very good product. But when it got to be used in a warm product, that's when it, you know, didn't hold together than obviously fresh shrimp would.

Don: Yeah. Carl and I plan to go back and interview the people at High Seas. Um, we had an extensive interview with Louis Blum of Blum and Bergeron. Blum and Bergeron have been in the shrimp drying business for a hundred years. And they – they're like a lot of families - they kept everything.

Victor: They're still there?

Don: Yeah, they're still there.

Eric: Because and Authement was a – Raymond Authement has been doing it for ...

Don: They live in Houma, and um actually from New Orleans, came to Houma, and they've been very active still in selling the dried shrimp product when they can get it, and what was interesting – our largest market is still the Chinese. So last year, my wife and I went to New York City, and I specifically went to Chinatown, and specifically went looking for Louisiana dried shrimp. I can tell you it sells for almost thirty three dollars a pound. Growing up in California, I spent my early years almost growing in San Francisco's Chinatown. So I went back to the Chinese community that had – it's not necessarily in San Francisco. I knew an out buyer, and it's twenty eight dollars a pound. And it's Louisiana based dried shrimp. So that tells you that in the Chinese market coast to coast, it's still used.

Eric: It's really – we're the only people in the United States that manufacture factory dried shrimp, and they're not sundried anymore.

Don: No they aren't.

Eric: And the other element is – the reason it's not like it's consumed in any large volume. It's used as a seasoning condiment versus anything else.

Don: Exactly.

Eric: So it's not - but I've always found it very interesting that Louisiana is literally the only place that manufactures dried shrimp.

Don: There's an important outlier – and this is just for you own information. Um, when Sam the banana man – Gene Murray developed the banana plantations in Honduras and Nicaragua, he was looking for a food item. Because if – those of you who grew up in New Orleans remember the great white fleet that

came in bringing bananas to the docks. Well they needed a product to go the other way. The family has not told us how many barrels of shrimp, dried shrimp, that they shipped annually to Nicaragua and Guatemala. Because you could take the dried shrimp, put it in the liquid, and rehydrate it and serve it over rice, and you had a very nutritious meal. So you – we all know about the Murray families' interest in Standard and United Food, but we lost sight of the fact of going the other way, and then Eric, it had to be amazing. I have seen photographs of the barrels. And we're talking several hundred, and I got a sneaking suspicion to add a zero to that, that was going the other way.

Carl: Places like Blum and Bergeron have their own (cooperage).

Eric: But you know, and before even fresh shrimp were packed in ice, and in barrels, and put in refrigerated boxcars and sent to Chicago and New York from Louisiana before my grandfather started freezing. So it's a cooperative use of barrels, and this goes back as far as somebody made a barrel.

Don: Oh yeah, and the whole concept of ice – I mean, these two – do you remember...

Eric: There's an ice house at Southern Shell in that photograph.

Don: Do you remember when ice first appeared on the gulf coast? From like an ice house – I don't mean block ice that was brought down from Minnesota.

Victor: No, in my lifetime, there was always an ice plant in Biloxi.

Don: And you?

Eric: 1934.

Victor: They made block ice.

Don: Alright.

Ray: I do recall.

Eric: Alright.

Ray: Yes.

Eric: Do you remember before, when they used to bring ice in from up north?

Ray: Yes.

Eric: On the ships, and you bring them in?

Ray: Yes, I think so.

Eric: And – because if you look at the photograph you showed me at Southern Shell from that book you have...

Don: Mmhmm.

Eric: There is a thing about - the prominent building on there is the ice plant. And it produced 300-pound ice blocks, because I used to put the cans and dump them. And they were done in a salt brine on the (inaudible) plant.

Don: The reason I asked because to my knowledge, the first ice plants in Louisiana were to, not freeze, but chill bananas that came off the banana boats. And the - it's an Italian family - they've got like AJ and then Castalano or something.

Eric: (Castalento)?

Don: Maybe. But they're still in the business - they're still in the produce - that family controlled the first ice plant that I know of in New Orleans.

Eric: Well Southern Shell - as soon as they started working seafood, built an ice plant.

Don: Okay.

Eric: And they started doing - their work was in the late 1800s when they were doing - besides canned seafood, pretty much that factory was all about canned seafood. They eventually had other factories when it was eventually owned by Southern Oil and Hunt Westing when they went into Texas and they did canned vegetables. But the brokerage all came out of Louisiana on the canned vegetables and seafood. But between - we did canned shrimp, canned oysters and canned crabmeat up until a time, and then we eventually just started importing the crabmeat and the oysters and the broker after we couldn't produce again. But um, that - I would imagine that ice house - we still have the basic footing of it. We didn't tear it down after Katrina. And we used what was left of that part. But um, it was functioning up until probably 1995. And then um, then it was destroyed partially in one storm, and then after that, just dismantled it because of the ammonia issues.

Don: Yeah.

Claire: Victor, did ya'll ship oysters from Biloxi, um, on the train in barrels with ice?

Victor: No, shrimp - shrimp - ship shrimp that way.

Claire: Oh.

Eric: Oysters - we wouldn't pack them in ice, but they kept them cool area with some...

Victor: When my father first got in the business, um, his shrimp sales were fresh. And they had barrels that were maybe about this big around and about that high made out of wood, and they would put a layer of ice at the bottom, a layer of shrimp, and so on till they got to the top. And then they would um, put them all on a truck and bring them to railway express. And railway trucks would take them. If we had a customer, say, in New York, when the shrimp got to Atlanta, railway express re-iced those shrimp. And then when they got further along the line, they may have gotten re-iced a couple of times by the

time they got to New York. And lots of people were in the fresh shrimp business that way – freezing had not come into the picture yet.

Don: Well.

Eric: I'm guessing commercial freezing was probably in the late 1920s or very early 1930s.

Carl: Well, I'd like – as I said, I'd like to revisit the question of the family coming over, Victor, now that you're here we've started – they were at ...

Eric: I was (inaudible)

Carl: Eric started the ball rolling, and basically, it's um, it's a subject that hasn't really hasn't been studied very much. But now the coalition's evolved. And what I'd like for you to do is to basically tell us – the traditional model is for young men, to come over, get themselves a job and get established, and then either go back to your married or have their sweethearts come over here and marry them here. Um, and very often, these migrations consist of family groups (inaudible). So I just would like you to tell us a little bit about your families experience in coming over and – the slight model, a traditional model, or is it different?

Victor: Um, my mother's – my mother and Ray's father were brothers and sisters. And it's my understanding that um, their father, who was my and his grandfather, came over here and he brought with him his oldest son named Pete. And the two of them worked to earn enough money and save to bring the – his wife and the other children over here. And when my mother came, she told me she was about ten years old.

Eric: And my grandfather Paul, um, was 6, I believe. So he was about four years younger than my mother.

Victor: And they brought the family over, and when they got here, there was – there were no child labor laws, and my mother told me that she went with her mother to the oyster factories to shuck oysters and then in the shrimp season she would pick shrimp. When she was ten years old.

Eric: Was it different – no child left behind at all?

Victor: Everybody worked. Everybody worked. Um, in those days, um, the reason they came is because the economy over there got bad for various reasons. Um, my mother – my mother's family was from an island off the Croatian coast named Brac. B-R-A-C. And a whole slew of Croatians in Biloxi came from that island.

Carl: Is that because of invitation from your family to relatives?

Victor: I don't think that my family was the first family to come. There were others there.

Eric: Were they the first from Brac? Or were they...

Victor: I don't know.

Eric: Okay.

Victor: I don't know. That was before my time. But my father's family came from another island called Molot. M-O-L-O-T. they will – just a handful of families from that island that ended up in Biloxi. And he told me that the economy in where for his family was growing olives. And his family owned acres of land – I don't know how many acres that was. And he told me that every year they produced a lot of olives and they were doing fine. And then for several years in a row, there was a drought. And the olives just quit producing and couldn't – couldn't make enough to live. So he took a job on a steam ship as a fireman, and when he was sixteen, seventeen years old. And he made a couple of trips back and forth to the United States. And when he would go ashore, there was lots of work to be one. A lot of people needed help for whatever. So on one of his trips, he got off the ship and went to the immigration office and told them he'd like to become a citizen. And they said, "Okay. Sign right here." It wasn't a big long process where you had to learn the – say all kinds of stuff, but um, he became a citizen and worked in New York for a while. And then he heard about the Croatians down here in Louisiana. And he got a job on a ship coming to Louisiana, and he got off the ship here, and worked around New Orleans for a while, and then finally he moved over to Biloxi because of the fishing industry. His family had a very tiny fishing operation over there in Europe – not anything to speak of, but he knew something about fishing. So he went over to Biloxi and got a job on um, on a boat, and went to work.

Eric: Do you know about what year he came to the United – that he came to New Orleans and Biloxi?

Victor: The best I can figure – it was about 1898.

Eric: That's about the same time as um, my grandfather –great- grandfather Nicholas came by.

Victor: Right. That's right. About that same time. Mama was born in 1887, and she said she was ten when she came over, so that was 1897.

Eric: Right.

Carl: Now at the time that he came over, Croatians were part of the Austria-Hungary Empire.

Victor: That's correct.

Carl: Now World War I comes along after – as they're getting established here. Does that cause a break in communications with the family back in the old world? Or were there communications?

Victor: Yes, there were communications of course. It was all by mail, and I remember my father would get letters from his family over there.

Carl: Were they harassed at all, because Austria-Hungary was um...

Victor: No, he never did say anything about that, so I presume there was no harassment.

Carl: Okay. Um, what impact did the Depression have on the business? Because we talked about – you're basically exporting luxury items to the Midwest and east coast.

Victor: My father started business in 1946 – the year I was born, and we sold that business in 1988 to the (inaudible) Company. And we had a secretary who worked for us since I was about real small. And she kept everything. And she had our first income tax returns where – and it showed that they made twenty six hundred dollars, and no income tax. (laughs) So um, my father told me that you know, he – when the Depression hit, that small firms did better than big firms because he didn't have any overhead – it was just him and my older brothers working. And if they had to, they worked for free, just for something to eat. But the small firms did fine – he told me that he did fine all through the Depression. Um, I really don't know how to figure how the bigger firms made out. But it must've been pretty devastating because um, when I started to become aware of things like those bigger firms, like the Dunbar Douquet Company were fading away. I don't know what caused them to fade away, but they faded away.

Don: Are there any members of the Dunbar or Douquet families still in Biloxi?

Victor: There's one guy in Biloxi named Bill Duquet.

Carl: Now, I'm sorry – go ahead and finish.

Victor: He was – he would – he would enjoy talking to ya'll I'm sure.

Carl: Well this brings up my last question.

Don: I know where it's going.

Carl: Um, I just – I don't want you to share any legal information, but Prohibition is something we all know took place out here. And um, it's devilishly difficult to get any real hard evidence about what was going on. I just wondered if there were any stories passed down in families. About Prohibition – and in the gulf – from Biloxi down to the mouth of the Mississippi.

Victor: Well Mississippi was a dry state for a long, long time. I can't remember when they became county option. But um, along the gulf coast, particularly in Biloxi, you would never know Prohibition was in existence because there were bars and nightclubs, and you'd walk in and they'd give you a scotch and water. And it was a political payoff. And the politicians um, took the money, and allowed them to operate. And the sheriff's job was the most lucrative of all of them. And there was as many as ten or fifteen people running for sheriff, because they all wanted to get their hands on that money. And um, and then the governor would threaten to send the National Guard down to shut them all down, and you know, I have no way of knowing what I'm about to say is true, but the governor would relent and not send the National Guard down. Well the object – I mean the obvious thing is that the – they paid off. Or they paid off more, or paid off the right amount that the government wanted, and um, it wasn't until a guy named Paul Johnson became governor, and he attended a party in Jackson where the governor was being served a party in Jackson where whiskey was being served. And um, newspaper headlines throughout the state – there was a statewide newspaper. And um, it was a real embarrassing thing because Mississippi was a dry state, and here's the governor participating in the consumption of alcohol. And after that, whiskey became county option. And it was voted in along the coast.

Eric: It's always been a historical framework when you look at Mississippi that it was Mississippi until you got to D'Iberville and as soon as you cross the water, it became a totally different country. And the people in Biloxi and the gulf coast are I think more in tune to people in Coastal Louisiana than they are in West Mississippi. But I remember some stories that I heard when I was a kid about how some of the boats would come in offshore and um, people would, let's just say creatively buy somebody's fishing boat, effectively steal it, and they would go out and offload in ships and bring in liquor. And then that's where somebody had borrowed three of my grandfather's boats, and um, the revenue service - or the um, whoever the particular agency or federal government, and pull them all up on the beach and burned them in place. There wasn't - is that what happened, Dad? That was the last time anybody saw the Ray S, huh?

Ray: Right.

Eric: Okay, so. But um, and I don't know too much more about that, but I know that there was, you know, points where they literally were stealing boats and going out and hauling stuff in.

Don: I've never been told in Louisiana about stealing boats. But if you go to Delacroix, that's Spanish speakers.

Eric: Well, do you know what Baratavia Bay means? You know what Baratavia means, right?

Don: Go ahead.

Eric: It means "stolen marketplace". You know, *baratarie*, it comes from the word - that's the word, *baratrie*, which is "theft on the high seas." *Barataria* is the marketplace to sell goods. So everything basically in Baratavia down was a very pirate culture in Louisiana, so...

Don: But...

Eric: So in other words, it's a different world.

Don: So we know that because of the Spanish speakers, there were mother ships coming from Cuba. So you had speakers of Spanish in Louisiana dealing with speakers of Spanish from Cuba. We haven't found the families yet. We know in Louisiana, illegal alcohol was coming from French Canada - the French speaking population. We also know there was a very famous incident - a rumrunner coming out of Canada and being cut off in Vermillion Bay. So we know that there was some income exchange, but it's not like the Kennedy's readily admit, we made a lot of money in Prohibition. Okay, here it's like it's a negative statement. We don't talk about it.

Eric: They bought it all up before it started.

Don: Oh, they've got, you know, they were heavy duty.

Eric: Well there was no Croatian source of alcohol.

Don: Oh, that's true. That's very true.

Eric: So if it was done, it was on a minimal basis.

Don: Yes. But it had to be an important part of building income and building wealth.

Carl: Because in Louisiana, the cost of shrimp licenses goes up dramatically in the 1920s. Um, the cost of operation goes up – suddenly people are not only paying the licenses, but they're buying in bulk...

Don: Right.

Carl: So something's happening.

Don: Yeah, and yeah and there were several banks undercapitalized, that suddenly had a great deal of capital. I mean, there's one person that we know of in Houma who – he was in fact tried for illegal alcohol.

Eric: What's his last name?

Don: Cheramie.

(laughter)

Eric: He wouldn't be the the first one that was ever tried for something.

Don: Yes.

Eric: But that's okay. It's a very common name.

Don: Yeah, it is.

Eric: Do you remember Mr. Cheramie?

Ray: Oh yeah.

Don: Um, Batou?

Ray: Batou.

Don: Batou Cheramie. Well Batou– I can use the name now.

Eric: Yeah.

Don: Well Batou Cheramie was caught, and he went to Angola. He came out of Angola and um, developed additional wealth. And you could not do business with Batou Cheramie wearing blue.

Eric: Do you remember that?

Ray: Oh yeah.

Don: You do –

Ray: (inaudible)

Eric: He cut the tie off, is what my dad just said.

Don: Oh yes. Because blue was the uniform of Angola, and eventually everybody knew that if you were dealing with Batou Cheramie, you did not wear blue.

Victor: That's right.

Don: And he became a very successful business person. And he's the only person that we know that we have not been aggressive in trying to find a family. There are, they're there in Houma.

Eric: Well you can't, you know, you can't not be (inaudible) the whole prohibition thing.

Don: Oh, no. No.

Eric: Even though the family - I think people have gotten in the situation where - what's interesting about Dad's history, because Dad and my Mom got married in 1939- '39? '39. And my mom passed away last year. But they literally grew up during the depression, and Dad grew up in New Orleans as a teenager. So, you know, he - he, you know, he has told me stories in here that I've forgotten. And he probably has forgotten about, you know, the - just the general form of where the alcohol trade went here. But you know, it was - you know, it was just like anything else. There were just certain elements of certain groups that went and did it. But the one thing you did tell me was about how you know, they basically, um, all the boats in one fleet basically are gone. Because they got taken and they got burned.

Claire: Victor, did your family drink alcohol or just the wine that your mother made?

Victor: I don't remember whiskey in the house until I was older. When I was a kid, my mother made wine.

Don: Oh really?

Eric: Well that's back in Croatia in - in Brac. Um, my grandfather, Nicholas, the family - when I went to Croatia in the '80s and the 70s, they told me that the nickname for the Skrmetta family in um, (Babocia?) was (*turin?*). Because they were the ones who had the wine press. The grape press - and they would make wines, and that was his actual nickname was *turin*.

Victor: That's right. But um...

Eric: So she probably learned how to make it then when she was a kid.

Victor: Well when I was there, um, it was in 1955, and there was a lady I met who told me in Croatian that she was the last (inaudible) on the island. And I - when I came back to Biloxi, I bumped into BP, the cousin, and I walked up to her, and I said *kako si Turin*. That means "how are you?"

Don: Mmhmm.

Victor: So then he looked at me and he said, "How did you know that?" And I told him about this lady over there who told it to me. And I asked him, where did the family get that nickname? And he told me that his grandfather or great grandfather or maybe even further back than that, came from Turin, Italy. That's what he said. I don't know which is right.

Eric: Yeah, they told me – they showed me where the press was – by this old stone house, and they said that was where the *turin* was, and they said that was where the...

Victor: So *turin* – was a press?

Eric: Yeah, that's what they indicated that was. Because my problem is – I don't speak Croatian.

Victor: Well you speak a little bit.

Eric: I speak Spanish and Italian, and I went and saw my cousin there, and I think his name is Maritsa. Wasn't it Maritsa?

Ray: There was a Maritsa.

Eric: Maritsa – and Maritsa um, she was a partisan during World War II, and she had lots of medals for killing Nazi soldiers, but she met me and took me to the island, and unfortunately she didn't speak English, but we communicated in Spanish and Italian, and we were able to kind of go and see everything and she pointed everything out to me, and you know, took me to where my grandfather was born, which was in a very small house that was probably about – maybe about six or seven hundred square feet, and it had a stone roof, and the house is still there. And outback they had flat stone, with - they had like a metal increment in the middle, which they showed that that was where they would crush the grapes and make the wine.

Don: Who –

Carl: One more question – Don, excuse me. Victor, did you grow up, I mean did your parents still speak Croatian at home when you were growing up? You said you...

Victor: I spoke Croatian before I spoke English. Because that was the language around the house, and my mother ran a little small grocery store. You know, the kind with the kitchen in the back, and one day she called a meeting of all the children. And she said, listen. All of our customers are American. And if they all hear us speaking a language they don't understand, they may think we're talking about them. So from now on, you speak English. And there went my Croatian.

(laughter)

Eric: I only speak about five or six words.

Don: Yeah, but

Ray: But they're bad words.

(laughter)

Claire: Just stop talking.

Eric: Only one – the rest of them are “how are you” and “good”, and “butter” and mother and things like that.

Don: You used an expression that I’d like to just ask you about, because we’ve heard the term *kako*.

Eric: It’s actually *kako si*.

Don: That the Cajuns took *takosai*. Good morning, how are you. And being Cajuns, they shortened it to *tako*. And it wasn’t derogatory; it was just their word of saying hello - *tako*. Do you think that’s how that term developed?

Victor: No.

Don: Thank you.

(laughter)

Don: Great answer.

Eric: This is a moment of revelation.

Victor: Well the word *tako* is part of the Croatian language. Um, if I say “how are you,” ah, *tako*. That means so-so. That’s what *tako* means.

Don: If you read that in the book, just ignore it.

(laughter)

Victor: You have two options – if you want you say *kako si*, and if somebody says (inaudible) it’s good. If you say *kako si* and they say *tako*, well it’s so-so.

Don: So-so.

Eric: People weren’t actually saying everything was great when stuff was bad. They actually revealed that things weren’t so great.

Victor: That’s right.

Don: Carl?

(laughter)

Carl: Guys, I think we’re pretty much out of tape. But listen, thank you so much. This – this has been absolutely wonderful.

Eric: I'm glad that these are like the two bullets in the family history right here, and Dad, every once in a while, is unbelievable in some of these things and still remembers.

Don: Well this is what we propose. Um, the tapes will go to LSU and we have student labor who will transcribe it. Because of all the voices involved, it's gonna take a while.

Carl: We also have a tape this time, when we normally don't have.

Don: And we have a video. So what we'll do is we'll get back, we'll make you a copy. And be patient with us, because it'll take a while. We'll make copies for everything. There will eventually be a transcript – and sometimes it takes six months to be honest with you.

Victor: Takes what?

Don: Six months for us to go line for line –somebody has to sit there and – it just takes a long time.

Victor: That's quick – what are you talking about?

(laughter)

Don: And we'll make sure you get one.

Eric: Sure – that's fine. I'll share with everybody.

Don: And then we would certainly like to propose going...

Eric: We can go to the plant whenever you want.

Don: ...and look. We want to look – scan things.

Eric: I'm sure you're going to develop questions from everything you heard today, so..

Don: Yes. I'll tell you – probably just sitting around in this room, you guys are going to be thinking of things that you...

Carl: You guys will probably – as soon as we're on the road, you guys are going to be thinking of things that you...

Eric: I'll probably remember stuff that we weren't supposed to tell you.

Don: And then we'll come and we do plan to come to Biloxi, and we want to talk to anybody in Biloxi who can help us sort through the things. Yes, we are from Louisiana, but the boats don't – the water doesn't know that. Um, and we've done this before – Carl has grandchildren. I have grandchildren. This is important, but when grand-ones call - okay? So when they take us to where we won't forget.

Claire: Where can I get your book?

Don: Um, you can get it...

Claire: Do you have a card?

Don: I can give you this one.

Claire: Oh no, I want to buy one.

Don: You can get it – let me go to...

Eric: Victor, and (inaudible), would ya'll like to go to lunch?

Victor: Yeah.

Eric: You want to go?

Claire: I was just going to ask that.

Eric: Okay, Debbie, see if you can get us a reservation at Chateau Du Lac, because they're doing lunch right now.

Ray: Light lunch.