

Mr. Sterling Fryou

Amelia, LA

12/5/12

Carl Brasseaux: Now the first thing I need to do is to get you to say on tape here that it is okay for me to record you. Like I said this is going to be recorded for researchers

Sterling Fryou: I can say my name first and then I can say it's

C: Yes sir

S: Okay

C: and what we need, what we are going to do is put a copy at the University in Lafayette, one at LSU, and one at Sea Grant, Louisiana Sea Grant

S: I'm going to get one?

C: I'm sorry?

S: I'm going to get one?

C: Well if you want one, I'll be happy to give you one. Now understand when it is in the archive over there for researchers, there is no money involved for anybody

S: I know that, I know that (laughter)

C: So you're not going to be able to retire on the proceeds

S: I know I never did get no money for nothing (laughter)

C: So any way,

S: That's good

C: it is okay for us to

S: That's going to be nice for my

C: But if you'd like a copy, I'll be more than happy to send you one. But what I would like to do is start by having you give us your name and tell us where you were born and what's your relationship with the coastal marshes.

S: My name is Sterling Fryou and I was born and raised on Four Mile Bayou.

C: Where is that Mr. Fryou?

S: St. Martin Parish, St. Martin Parish

C: That's in the Basin?

S: No, that's on this side of the Basin and I'm 75 years old. And I'll give you

C: No, no go ahead, I think it's working

S: And I give you permission to write all this down.

C: Well thank you, what we are going to do here is give it to students to write down every word you say

S: and 99.9% of what I'm going to tell you I either did it or I lived it

C: Right, that's great. Well tell me a little bit about your background. You said you were born in

S: I was born in a houseboat. Three of my other siblings were born in the houseboat. We lived in houseboats all of our lives up til when I moved into my house I'm at right now in 1963. Me and my wife moved out of a houseboat. We had a set of twins and we been in this, that's how long we been out of the houseboat, since 1963, but we lived in houseboats all of our lives.

C: But your mom and dad lived on one, you grew up on one?

S: Right, yes sir

C: Okay, and what were, they were fishing

S: Fishermen and part time trappers and moss pickers and a little bit before my time, of course I got in on it towards my younger, younger, younger days floating the big timbers in the Atchafalaya Basin

C: Right, I'd like to before we move on to the more recent times,

S: Okay

C: Let's talk a little bit about your childhood there. You're one of the last living people you know who has worked on those floating rafts of logs

S: Right. I used to jump, I remember I used to be like a frog, maybe 5, 6 years old jumping from log to log.

C: Well can you talk a little bit about that and also I assume you were on there to help try and steer the logs around the bends.

S: Just helping my dad try to chain all of them I guess, you know what the chains are

C: Yes sir

S: Used to put the big trees together, of course I didn't do that too many times, not plenty in my life but maybe one or two years that was on the bottom side of the floating you know in the I guess late '40s, '48 something

C: So they were still, I know a lot of mills closed by WWII

S: Right

C: So there were still a few going

S: Norman and Breaux here in Morgan City was one of the big lumber producers at that time. They were still because I could close my eyes right now and I wish I'd be a painter. I'd like to be able to paint that vision of how them logs were tied along the bank and these guys would, had a big ole skitter pulling up to the top of there and they would roll them logs. I'd like to be able to paint that but I'm not a painter so I can't do it but I can remember that and I can remember acres and acres of big cypress just drying up in the sun. The sun would dry them. They'd put them in some

C: They would cross them

S: They'd cross them, yeah and there were just acres and acres of it you know. Just big ole cypress, planks that were 42 inches, 36 inches and they were huge, huge big trees.

C: Now your family you said was, now before we change, they would float the logs out I assume at high water season.

S: Yeah, high water. Yeah, we'd leave here, sometimes we'd go to, some of my ancestors were trappers down in the marsh. We didn't do too much of it, we did some of it. We'd go, they'd go down to the marsh like in October, September, start cleaning out the traînasse and stay there until the rise would start hitting in the Atchafalaya when the water would start coming down and by that time trapping season was open and they'd move, go up to Kilmore pass in the Atchafalaya basin.

C: Okay, so they did it on a seasonal basis.

S: Seasonal basis

C: They'd trap for a while, work in

S: and catfish, run fish hoop nets too, you know

C: Well that was my next question about the commercial fishing. What did they catch? When did they catch it? And where did they send the catch?

S: We, a lot of us fished hoop nets, we'd catch a variety of fish. Carp, Buffalo, Goop, and Catfish and we used to have here in Morgan City; you had about 6 places that would ship the fish on trains.

C: Okay now, to get it to Morgan City, you had a live box?

S: No, no we had somebody that would take it from here, you know with some ice on a boat and bring it up there to the

C: Okay

S: They'd buy it from us along the bayous here and they'd transport it up there to

C: Okay so you had a middle man

S: Middle man, yeah

C: who would buy it, okay

S: and then towards the end of the years, the middle man phased out and then we'd go directly to the market and sell it you know.

C: Okay. Okay, now markets here in Morgan City, were they for local consumption or were they sending it to New Orleans for

S: They were sending it to New Orleans and different places, California and it would go to different places you know. I can remember, I guess it must have been maybe '51, '52 where they would load them up in wooden crates and put ice on them and bring them on the train 3-4 times a day. The train would pick them up there in Morgan City and deliver them to different places, north Louisiana, New Orleans, you know and places further to the east.

C: Right, that's amazing. One of the things I want to ask you about it there is nothing about this in any of books on the marshes, on the wetlands in Louisiana. You lived on a houseboat.

S: Yes sir.

C: What was that like?

S: To us it was just your ordinary living you know.

C: How many of you, how large was your family? How many people were on the houseboat?

S: I'm the oldest of 16 children. At these times we probably had, probably 6 of us, 5 of us at one time and then my momma started having twins. She had 3 set of twins and they came pretty fast and I don't know. We got out, we got back on the land I guess about 1958 when my dad got rid of his houseboat. But then I had a houseboat and I stayed in the houseboat until 1963.

C: Okay, well tell me what was the cycle during the year because you talk about doing things seasonally.

S: Yeah

C: So would you move the houseboat at different times of the year?

S: Yes sir, you'd move to where your floating was or your trapping was or your fishing was. You know, you'd move to those.

C: Now I assume there were other people living on houseboats that were doing the same kind of work

S: Oh yeah, several, everybody

C: Everybody would move together?

S: I guess, I don't really know the percentage but at one time you had half of the population on the bayous that were living in houseboats you know. They'd move from one place to the other, wherever the and then we'd make our living sometimes, sometimes the trapping wasn't good, you know. I don't know if it was the weather or but some winters the trapping wasn't good and then you'd go back to catching catfish and picking moss. Moss picking was big in my earlier, earlier years too. We used to pick moss and

C: You'd cure it yourself?

S: and cure it. Yeah, I was telling that to somebody the other day and they say "That's amazing you remember that." I say "Yeah, I remember that."

C: Tell me a little bit about how you would cure the moss, especially if you are living on the boat, you have place on the banks?

S: We lived along the bayou bank and then we'd take a little section along the bayou bank with some wire or stuff, especially like some poultry wire or something and make us, get us 7-8 feet off the shore cause you had like a mud flat and you'd carve that off and then you just throw moss in there, you throw moss in there for maybe a week, you know you go pick up a load of moss and throw it in there. A week, ten days, twelve days after that you get it on the bank with a pitch for and then you'd leave it sit there for I don't know, ten - twelve days and then after ten-twelve days you'd take that pitch fork and turn it over. You know take the bottom and turn it upside down and then leave it there another ten-twelve days and then we had barbed wire. We'd string out barbed wire and then we'd take that moss and shake it out good and put it on that fence and let it dry and then you'd take it and you'd weave it with your fingers to make your mattresses and your pillows and stuff you see.

C: Now you slept on moss

S: moss mattress

C: moss mattresses

S: Every three months, my mother would take them down and fluff them up cause they'd get flat you know.

C: Right

S: Yeah

C: Now who did you sell the moss to? Did somebody come in to the base of the bayou?

S: We had several, we had one boss, Jim Downs, by Shane, the Verets I think, they had a moss gin and somebody up around Napoleonville somewhere. I don't know the names of the people.

C: In fact that was the last one in the state that closed.

S: Yeah, and I know we used to get 2 cents a pound for moss after it was cured, 3 cents sometimes. That was real, but \$3 at hundred pounds of moss in those days, you made a 100 because the percentage was you had to pick so much green moss to get a pound of cured moss, you know because it would lose a lot of weight you know.

C: Living out there, I assume there is a certain amount of food that you can live off of while you are out there but you also have to buy some.

S: Well we didn't buy too much food. We bought, I remember we bought, I remember ... didn't have too many stores. They'd go to the store maybe once a month and then sometimes

C: Why would you go to the store?

S: Huh?

C: Where would you go to the store?

S: They had one store in Amelia right here and they had one store on Four Mile Bayou that was, But we had grocery boats that would come, and come like on a, I don't know like on a Tuesday and then the Thursday they would come back and bring you your groceries, you know. You'd buy potatoes and beans and rice.

C: You'd pay cash for it or would you barter for

S: Cash, pay cash

C: Now what would your momma buy mostly? I would imagine she'd have to buy coffee

S: Flour, coffee, sugar. Of course during the war all that stuff was rationed, you know. It was hard, we had to use, we didn't have much staples that you could use. You had to do with very little bit. And we did a lot on our own like killing rabbits and killing deer and ducks and then I remember some of the people would raise pigs. They had a big pig pen on the bank.

C: Well that was something I was going to ask because I know people who used to go into the marshes to trap and the whole family would move. They would often take pigs with them.

S: With them, yeah, yeah I can remember, I think one winter we did that. We went out in the marsh and I was real young and I can remember that it seemed like we were about 8 houseboats, 7-8 houseboats and it was all side by side, everybody lived side by side. Everybody helped one another out. We did that one year and we ain't did it no more. You know we moved, I don't know if, I believe that's when the muskrats started fading out. I don't know if it was the disease that came about

C: About when was this?

S: I guess might be '47 - '48, maybe something like that, I don't really. They had went away and they had come back a little bit and that must have been the time we went out there. You know that time we went

trapping and then after that I don't think we went back no more because it wasn't feasible, it wasn't paying us enough. That's when

C: Is this the time, I know it's just before the time the nutria is starting to take off.

S: The nutrias look like, the first nutria I saw looked like it might have been in maybe '55

C: And that would have been where? In the

S: In the Four Mile Bayou area. Now in the marsh they maybe was there before you know but up this a way towards the wooded area, that's, might have been '53, I don't know. But I remember the first time we seen some.

C: Now was there a market for nutria fur in '53 when you first started catching

S: Oh yeah, you'd get \$2-\$3 for them and then before I moved into this house. I guess it must have been maybe '60, 1960 I built me a camp out in the marsh. Didn't bring the houseboat, it was more feasible for us to build us a little hut out in the marsh and stay out there than bring the houseboat you know.

C: Right, right

S: And I can remember my wife, one year she come down with kidney stones and it was right before Thanksgiving. We had about 800 rats already caught. They had so many of them and if I can remember right I think we got about a dollar five round it, for the hides. It wasn't much.

C: Okay well before we go any further, I want you to tell me a little bit about the camp out there. And I would assume what you built out there was fairly typical of what other people had out in the marsh

S: Yeah, it was more or less a lean-to like a

C: About how big was it?

S: Ah, probably 14 by maybe 15-16, you know something like that. One room

C: Just big enough to sleep

S: sleep, have a couple of bunks in there and have a wood heater and a wood stove and

C: Well tell me about the daily routine when you're out in a camp like that running the traps. Let's start at daybreak in the morning and go all the way until

S: Well like I'm still doing now, I get up at 3:30 in the morning and I make my coffee, say my prayers, sit around watch the news a little bit, of course then we didn't do that but we'd talk with one another, you know and sometimes we had a radio so we listened to the radio and catch some of the, you know the national news. You didn't get the local news or nothing

C: Right

S: Another words, you had CBS and ABC and those

C: Which stations would reach out there in the marsh

S: WWL was strong and we'd listen to the Grand Ole Opry which was WSM Nashville

C: Right

S: and we used to listen to that quite often and we used to listen to Amis and Andy and those. But a typical morning is getting up, out there we get up at 4:00 cause you didn't have to travel nowhere, you was right there and hit the marsh and go start running your traps. Get in the boat and start running

C: About how many traps would you normally have?

S: I had as much as 200 at one time. Yeah and you know when the nutria was really running, whenever you were catching 60-70 in a day, you'd go run and catch 25-30 and bring them to the, we had a big ole dock like with a cover on it, and then we'd skin those and

C: Okay now, once you skin them, what did you do? Did you turn them over to your wife?

S: Yeah, she'd wash them and pass them through that wringer and hang them on the line and let them dry so we could put them on the mold that night you see. That's another thing too. At night sometimes you was up until 11:00 putting them nutrias on the mold and we had a drying shed we called it. We had a little shed off to the side wrapped up with tin with a heater in there and we'd put all them on rainy days you know. That's what we had to do. When it was nice, sunshine, and dry we put them on the line out there and let the sun cure them, you know.

C: Now you had to scrape the insides

S: Yeah, you had a scraping board, you had to use a, one of these knives, the draw knife that you worked wood with. You'd dull it so you could move it

C: So it wouldn't cut the skin

S: wouldn't cut the skin and take, I guess you take about 60% - 70% of the fat off so it wouldn't rancid on you

C: Right

S: and it would dry faster.

C: Now how long would you dry a pelt like that?

S: On a good, cold snap was hitting and the humidity was really, 36 hours, sometimes we'd leave them on 48 hours.

C: And then what? You had a shed, you kept them in a shed?

S: Kept them in a shed, put them in a sack and then kept them in a shed that you know that wasn't too hot, wasn't too cold you know so they could stay stiff.

C: Okay, now you've got them, you've skinned the animal, you've turned it over, you go back out again?

S: Go back out again. Well while I was, while my wife was washing, while they were washing and cleaning the hides and hanging them on the line, letting them dry, I was going back out again. By that time I'd come back with maybe 15-20 more

C: So how many rounds would you make a day?

S: Sometimes we'd make four, catch a 100 up to 110. That's about all you can handle you know. Your hands would get so sore from

C: Right

S: from um, from fooling with that. It's a lot of work that but especially the nutria. You try to clean it where you don't want to leave too much meat on it you know. The less meat you let on it, the easier it is for you to scrape.

C: Right

S: You'd save some time by being real careful with the, whenever you skin it. But we'd catch coons too, we'd catch coons and some otters and

C: Mink?

S: mink, yeah and then we'd catch our supper too. We'd catch rabbits, that was. Now when we used to hunt, when we used to trap in the woods, we used to catch ducks, a lot of ducks. You know we'd catch ducks, we'd save the ducks, that was our. We lived a lot off the land, you ate ducks, rabbit, and we had all the fish we wanted.

C: How would you fix them?

S: Just smother them down, um make a stew with them, you know with the roux. Rabbit you smother them down you know.

C: Now some people I know, I know that some people used to go out in a boat and they would have something like a planter... I grew up in the prairies where we grew cattle so it looked like a trough and they, but filled with dirt, that they'd plant vegetables and stuff. Did y'all do that?

S: Plant green onions and garlic and stuff like that

C: Yeah, so y'all did that?

S: We used to plant, I remember the old guys, well I say the old guys, like my grandfather and all, they'd try to find a place like a field or something along the bayou and they'd just chop it up with some hoes

you know and break it up and then take mustard seeds and just throw them out there and everybody had all the mustard they want. We had mustard all winter long you know. So that was real good

C: So how long would you, how many months would you be out there trapping normally?

S: I guess they would stay out there about three months

C: So starting in

S: November, December, January and about the middle of February

C: You'd shut it down?

S: The rivers were rising,

C: Oh okay

S: The rivers were starting to rise and then you'd go out there and

C: work on the logs

S: and then they'd stay out there, I remember the time, a couple times that I remember we did it. I got to close my eyes because I have to let my mind think just how it was and I remember after the water would recede, after they had knocked the trees down, I can remember my daddy and my uncle and my grandfather and all, the man would come give them a number of how many trees to go deaden,

C: Right

S: They'd go right there in the

C: Talk a little bit about that please because the, now I've only seen pictures of it. But the pictures I've seen basically in the drier season when the water goes down, the people would go out in the

S: in the swamp

C: swamp itself and they would girdle the tree. They'd cut it all the way around

S: In other words they took a chopping ax and cut until they got to the red.

C: Right

S: All around, all around

C: So the sap would just drain out

S: The reason, and then they'd tell them how many, you know they'd give them a section to. In other words, they'd do a section

C: Did they have minimum size trees or just all the Cypress?

S: I guess they told them what size I guess but mostly looked like they were targeting you know good virgin, the real big big Cypress that peaked you know that was hollow

C: Right, yes sir

S: They still out there, you know I can go show you some day. They still out there, they still standing. But the reason why they would go and deaden that tree, next year when they went, when they chopped that tree down, when it hit the water, it floated like a cork and then they'd cut that tree and cut it into chunks which I mean a chunk, a length of Cypress whichever, I guess the people that was wanting them told how long to cut them in different sections. And then they'd put them, they'd crate them together and then they put them together and then run some saplings across, small trees and then run chains all across and then they'd bring, the boat would bring them to the river and then the big boats would take them and bring them to the saw mill. And that is another reason some years ago some people made a lot of money with what they call sinkers. What would happen there, you know in those days, you didn't have the technology like you got now, the saw mills was vulnerable to breaking down, okay and those trees would stay along those canals and those lakes because they had big ole pilings and stuff in the lakes where they would tie them to you know. And those saw mills would get so far behind til these Cypress would start taking on water. What I'm saying is in other words these Cypress would get water logged and then they'd break off and fall into the lake and some years back, I don't know maybe 10-15-20 years back they had a couple fellas that made lots of money going and find those trees and you know and retrieving those trees that had sunk in the bottom of the lake and boy that was good Cypress, good good Cypress.

C: You, a quick question before we move on to the trapping. When you were a little boy on the houseboat, did you all get to go to school?

S: No, I went to school, I went to school about 6 months, about 6 months. We'd travel and then when I got to civilization where I had to go to school, I was too old to go to school but I educated myself. Now my younger brothers and sisters, they all went to school. Like me and my second brother and my third brother and my sister, we didn't get much school but we got some. We all educated ourselves as an adult. We did quite well.

C: Well the reason I ask, oh no, no, that's obvious. The reason I ask is because in the late '30s there is a picture of (French words for Bruley St. Martin)

S: Bruley St. Martin

C: a bunch of kids on a little boat, sort of a push boat going to school from a houseboat settlement. I wondered if y'all had something like

S: Now the people here in Bayou Shane, I got some of my kin people, my cousin used to run a school boat from Bayou Shane to Bayou Black. But I don't guess, I don't know why we didn't go. I guess we was out of range or something. And then my uncle on Four Mile Bayou, he used to run them from Four Mile Bayou to Attakapas Landing in Napoleonville. Now I was born and raised on Four Mile Bayou, I say raised, I stayed there until I was about 6-7 years old and then we migrated different places you know.

We went different places. When I got to be a young adult and I went back to live with my grandfather and my grandmother for a couple of years. But in the meantime while we was on Four Mile Bayou they had a one room school house with 7 classes in it you know. And that's where I went to school there for about a year and half. Then after that I don't know if the school, if the school dissipated or we left, I don't remember what. Then after that when we come back to Amelia then I was about I don't know 15 and I was so used to working you know, I couldn't go get in the classroom and you know start learning like the young kids learn. And then you get teased a lot you know.

C: Oh yeah sure, believe me I understand but you have done amazingly well for yourself so.

S: We did alright. I'm elected, I'm elected official. I'm a musician, I sing.

C: Actually, Anne sent me a copy of your DVD. A song list

S: I got one right here and I have a lot of fun. Every Saturday night I go out. We go up towards Houma and the people. I sing every Saturday night, Friday night. I really enjoy, I'm enjoying life. I'm trying to give back to what life has given to me. I do a lot of charitable work. I cook a lot for AARP, the CD. I made the CD with no intentions on making any money. It cost me \$1700 to make it just to have something that my ancestors can have something to giggle about when I'm gone. (laughter) But wife and my daughter told me, you know you can sell this for some charity and we did. We started selling it, radio station got a hold of it and they got me on there and we sold about \$5000 worth of CDs and we gave it to Relay for Life so.

C: That's wonderful, that's wonderful!

S: We enjoy it, and I'm still having fun with it.

C: Well let me ask you a little bit about the trapping. After you moved back here to Amelia in 1963, I think

S: 1963 we moved into this house right here. We were living in the bayou at that time. We were living on Bayou Buff which is Amelia, it's called Amelia Bayou but we call it Bayou Buff. That's beef bayou.

C: Right

S: Yeah and right at the edge of Lake Palourdes, which is Clam Lake, is Lake Palourdes. Palourdes is the French word for clams.

C: And you said you built a camp out in the marsh and you started trapping from the camp.

S: Yeah, yeah

C: So can you talk a little bit about the trapping in the '60s and '70s. I understand the '70s is probably the start of the golden age for the nutria, is that

S: They had so many nutrias, I'm telling you. You could kill, I remember, there were so many, they had a couple black gentlemen down here, they'd buy them. We killed, 25 cents apiece we'd sell them for. Fishing wasn't real good. You'd go out at night and kill, you could kill 300 you know and get 75 bucks.

You didn't have to go far. The landowners didn't mind, in other words we were doing them a favor; you know trying to alleviate them. And then they stayed strong there for a good while and then the fur in, let me see if I can remember exactly when, I guess the early '70s like '69, '70, '71. The nutria price had went up to about \$6 a piece so the trappers got pretty good at 'em, you know. And then there were still plenty, but here since they put this bounty on them, we've cut them down tremendously.

C: Well before we get to the bounty

S: Okay

C: The price, how long did the price stay high in the '70s

S: It looked like maybe for 4-5 years and then

C: it starts to go down

S: then, in the meantime too, the alligator farms were coming in pretty strong then and you know nutria meat is good for the alligators, lots of protein and they were buying it. They were buying the meat from it so. And then you know I guess they went with synthetic, you know, artificial I guess and then

C: Meal for the alligator

S: Yeah, and then

C: Right

S: I, they stopped buying it and then people started stop trapping, the, nobody wanted to buy them anymore. Nobody wanted to buy the furs anymore. I guess the last fur I, the last one I sold was maybe, I don't know, maybe 7 years ago, got a buck and a half a hide.

C: You said 7 years ago?

S: Maybe about 7 years ago, 8 years ago maybe. And then

C: And now you just go with the bounty

S: I go with the bounty and I feed the alligators with the carcasses.

C: So, well that leads me to question, with the collapse in the demand for nutria pelts, how many people, how many trappers got out of the business altogether? I mean are we talking, in percentages, based on your experience

S: Right now you got all the people got trapping leases down the bayou. Very few percentage trap, maybe, maybe 5% of all the land that is leased down in the marsh is trapping. They got me, I trap about 35-40 days cause by then the crawfish is coming in. And then by that time you know I've done got most of the nutria pretty well. And then the weather turn warm on you and you can't catch them. Very few that I know still do it.

C: Well, let's say out of every 10 who was trapping nutria before 2000 when the price goes completely, for every 10, how many you think left when the price just completely

S: Awe, 95% of them, they just

C: They just dropped out.

S: They just dropped out.

C: Now where did they go? What did they do to make their

S: They probably went to work, got a job, you know or maybe pursued fishing more

C: So this is a question I've been thinking about all the way over here and it's a question I don't think anybody has really asking. Since people have stopped trapping nutria and fewer people I assume are out looking for the bounty since the former trappers are doing something else, what is that doing to the environment? I mean there are fewer people going out for the nutria so there must be I assume there are more nutria.

S: Well, you can shoot a nutria anytime you want. Anybody can shoot a nutria. If you are in the system, you can shoot a nutria. If he is in the bayou you can shoot him. So a lot of them is going to that. But a lot of them shoot the nutria, they don't do the trapping another words. They wait until the grass is all down, you know from the cold weather and then they'll go out there the last maybe couple 2-3 weeks of the season and really give them, lots of nutria by shooting them, you see.

C: I guess what I'm asking is are we ending up at the end of the year with more nutria out there?

S: No, no

C: The same amount even though there are fewer people

S: You probably got less

C: Okay

S: You probably got less because some guys will go catch, will go shoot 200-300, you know so and the population is really strong. In other words, we giving them a pretty good, but we will never fully get rid of them; we'll never fully get rid of them.

C: Have you noticed a decline after the storms since 2005 when we had Katrina, Rita, and then Gustav, Ike, and Isaac, have you seen any decline with the storm surge?

S: Well what happen was they went up in the Spillway for like Katrina, we had a lot of water, a lot of them nutria went in the Spillway but we had high water and the people got their cars and they killed tons of nutria in the spillway. Another words it's very hard to see a nutria in the spillway. Now up towards the east of us like for Ike we had the last storm, it was something like 15,000-20,000 killed on

the Mississippi coast. Now where I'm at it look like it shoved a few more but they are not really sick, they are not really sick.

C: Okay you talked a little bit about crawfishing, you do

S: I do crawfishing

C: commercial?

S: Yeah

C: in the basin?

S: In the basin or in the marsh, depending on how much water we got. If we got like in the

C: Well can you talk a little bit about that because that is another thing people, I mean they talk about it but nobody really knows outside of people who actually do it.

S: Well you know we are in the floodway, you can tell them that, we in the floodway and you look at the United States and you got the mountains on the east and you got the mountains on the west and it makes a big funnel that comes into the Missouri and the Ohio and the Mississippi and we get 70% of all the water that comes down. It goes down the Mississippi, 30% comes down the Atchafalaya. So we depend on precipitation up in the, we call it the valley and sometime you get too much, it's very hard to regulate it. In other words, sometimes you get too much, other times you don't get enough. Like right now we don't have enough water in the Mississippi to push these barges up and down the Mississippi and we don't foresee none in the future coming unless you got some big system that's going to come down. Now like 2 years ago when we had that big flood, there was tons of snow up there and you got a big rain up there and they had a big warming trend that hit and that big ball just hit us all at one time. Well then there was too much water in the Spillway to fish so all the crawfish with the force of the water pushed them down okay and they showed up in the marshes like around Bayle and all in the prairies you know.

C: Okay

S: Me and my brother, we had 250 traps out and we never could run them all in one day. We'd get 60 sacks and then we'd get burnt out and come home. You know it was tons of crawfish, but they haven't hit since, the last, year before last and last year wasn't real good at all and we not looking for a real good season this year so far. In other words we don't see nothing on the horizon that's going to bring us some water here.

C: Yeah

S: But I do, of course I'm 75 now but I used to fish hoop nets, crawfish, had a trawl boat, and I trapped, you know, all at different

C: Well can you talk about that? What season, exactly when did you do each one?

S: Well I trapped the nutria first, okay like

C: So that would have been November-December

S: December-January, that was probably my, now sometimes my trapping would fall into my hoop net season. I'd tar my nets and put my hoop nets out while I'm trapping because the water is coming. You see January, your water is coming down the Mississippi so you got to have your nets out when the water is ..flowsen... that's when you catch fish, in other words, I don't know what makes it, but it tends to make your fish run better when your water is flowsen than when it is not flowsen. Then by that time the shrimping season would almost fall into my hoop net season, you know.

C: So the hoop nets would be high water season basically?

S: Say from February to

C: February to May?

S: End of February to the end of May and then I'd go shrimping in May and then hit the May season and then by that time I'd rest a little while and then we'd hit the shrimping season again you see

C: in August

S: In August and then the trapping season was back then again and then we'd go catch the eels and the little eels for bait. And we'd fish the lines too right after in that same time so. It's real busy to be a fisherman to be successful. In other words if you want to make a living at it, you ain't got much idle time, ain't got much.

C: Well let me ask you these two questions. First of all Mr. Fryou, how many young people are doing what you do today?

S: There is a handful, I got one boy, one little friend in particular. He said Mr. Sterling I want to do like you. I said keep your job. He said you made a good living, I said yeah I made a good living but it's a little different. You could get rid of your stuff, you know everything wasn't as high as it was now. We paying \$3.50 a gallon for gasoline and right now we paying for manhating which we call a pokie, that's a bait.

C: Right

S: We used to get it for \$6 a 100, now we paying \$44 a 100 so that makes and we not getting that much up cost in what we are getting for our stuff. The price hasn't escalated

C: The costs keep going up but your profit doesn't go up too.

S: So to finish telling you about this young gentleman, I ain't going to name him. He said I want to build some hoop nets, he said you still fish with hoop nets, I said, very little, I don't fish much anymore I said I fish in the spring a little bit, might put 35 nets out, I got 8 out right now. He said will you show me how to make some nets? I said sure. So we, I didn't have a chance to make them but he got a friend of mine that he bought some with and he got 70 nets. He put them out and he did alright for a while and then it

kind of went, water so low, you know the fish don't move. So I seen him the other day, I said how you doing? He said I had to go back to work Mr. Sterling. I said I told you that, don't leave your job. If you're going to do it, do it as part time and when you get older, you might can afford to do it you know. If you get enough equipment like me. A lot of people, he said I got a lot of equipment, I had anything I needed. I had shrimp boat. I had my net boat. You can see all the boats I got. I always had a lot of equipment. I'd put a lot of money in my equipment so even if it got slow, I could always manage to scrap up a month's work you understand. Maybe some months wasn't real good but some months were a little better than the other. So that's why I do the trapping too. In other words, as long as I can do it I'ma do it. It's in my blood, I love to do it you know. Now we fish alligators too. We got alligators that we do right now. I been doing that for, I don't know, 20 years I guess. We got a season on alligators.

C: Do you skin them too?

S: We used to. Now the people that are buying them, the meat has become so popular, okay. The meat has become so popular, they want the whole alligator and they want to process it themselves, you know. I went on, I went to wedding in New Jersey the Saturday before the storm hit and I met a gentleman over there that buys all the meat that we get over here in south Louisiana. He buys all that meat and spreads it around all over the country. It's amazing how I found that guy up there, you know. (laughter) So, yeah, that's what we do now. We used but we used to skin them. I was one of the ones that helped got to extinct because that's another thing. When me and my wife was first married, I'd go hunting at night, kill one or two alligators you know. They didn't have no law on them, but in the mid '60s I guess they got extinct and then they put a

C: Right

S: and I'm glad they did because it pays back to me again

C: They come back

S: It came back with a vengeance.

C: In 30 years, do you think there's still going to be people doing what you do today?

S: I think so, some, but there ain't going to be nobody processing much anymore. It's going to be all mostly, you going to do it and sell it at your house, they ain't got that much

C: So you are going to bring it in and sell it to somebody else who is going to process it?

S: Yeah, and then they ain't got that many people processing anymore. You only got one fish market in Morgan City where I remember in the '50s you had 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 processors buying catfish.

C: Seven?

S: Seven and then you had one here in Amelia. That was eight and they would buy fish. You see now before you go out fishing, you got to check with the buyer see if he needs some fish. In those days you went fishing, you brought a create, you brought a live cage with you and you went down the bayou or

down in the marsh and you brought your live cage with you and you spent a couple days down there at the camp. And after a couple days you took the fish out of the live cage and came in and sell. Now you can't do that. You got to get with the, you got to get with the processor and see how much fish he needs and he can tell you when you can go out. You got one processor in Vacherie, I think you got one guy over there. And then I think you got maybe one in Cherington and then you got Reed Crappell in Berwick, which he got the old *Caso's* Fishing building and he's doing quite well. I'm sure glad he got into the business, it helped me out some.

C: Well you're the expert, not me. What question didn't I ask that I should have asked you about your life and what you do?

S: I think you pretty well summed it up. The only thing you got to have a weak back and strong mind to be a fisherman, you know. And you got to have a lot of will and determination.

C: Well you obviously love what you do.

S: I love what I do.

C: I mean there is no question about it, the way you talk about it.

S: If I would have put as many hours on a job, I'd be probably ahead. But who knows probably I'd have a steel beam fall on me you know.

C: Or you would have died of a stroke.

S: Yeah. I spent a lot of quality time with my family, you know. A lot of time I was gone but a lot of time when something came up, I could make it my business to be there you know. But I don't have nobody following me in my profession. I have one son and he doesn't, he wants to be a fisherman. He doesn't have any sons so my name is gone. In other words, I'm going to vanish from the face of the earth you know as a. But I done good, I love, I love getting up in the morning and it's a challenge to see if you're going to catch anything.

C: But there must be something more than that too. Not just the challenge, and I understand that but you must love just being out there.

S: Love the outdoors

C: Right

S: People, my wife called up here a couple years back and I'm running my crawfish traps. And she said "How you doing this morning?" cause we got cell phones now. I said we doing good, she said who you got with you? I said I got the good Lord with me and you know it's nice. Nobody bothers you. When you fishing crawfish or running crab traps, I got crab traps out right now and I got 8 hoop nets over there, that's all I'm doing. From sunrise to 12:00 passes so fast. It's amazing how you, you know it, and it makes you feel good. So I don't know, it's just something about being in the outdoors. I try to tell that to everybody, you know, we got something down in south Louisiana that nobody got any where's else. You

know we got beautiful sceneries. I've seen so many beautiful sunrises and sunsets. I've seen so many beautiful birds and eagles and different types. Don't hunt no more, I ain't shot a 5 shot at a deer in 15 years. My son-in-law and my grandson, we got 2,300 acres lease in the marsh. And mostly what they do now is shoot them with a camera, take the pictures of them you know. And boy we got so much nice places. It's just, we do a lot of flying. I got a daughter living in Kentucky and we do, we visit quite a bit. And since I've been elected we been to Washington and we been to different places.

C: What office do you hold?

S: I'm a parish councilman. In some places they are county commissioners but in Louisiana we got parishes, you know.

C: Yes sir.

S: I guess people they want me for a long time because this was my 6th time that I ran (laughter) and low and behold, every time I ran I got good votes, I lost my 6 votes, I lost by 60 votes, 20 votes, I lost by 13 votes, so I was determined to win and I did so. And I'm having a lot of fun doing it. I'm having a lot of fun as a councilman. Somebody calls you, you try to fix up whatever they want you to do. And it's such a rewarding feeling to know that you've helped somebody, you know. I'm not in there to make any money. All I want to do is be in there to help people and try and better our local place. And you had talked to me about the erosion and stuff.

C: Well that, I don't want to keep you

S: Don't worry about me

C: Well let me ask you about that. If you could take a snapshot what it was like when you first went into the marsh over here, your earliest recollection and the last trip you made to the marsh and compare them one side by side.

S: When I was a little boy, you could take off with the marsh with some tennis shoes and you wouldn't sink. Well you had some holes, it's marsh. Now if you try that you going to to up to you. I can remember they had some beautiful, beautiful bayou banks and now it's all you know. What is happening is the storms are killing the roots and stuff on the good land and it all went into the main stream you see and all you got back there is slushes. But since we've kind of put the nutrias at rest I see a lot of progression, a lot of good. Now whether it's deep or whether it's just on top if the, I don't know.

C: What you see it coming back?

S: It's coming back, yeah, it's coming back. Now I've seen some places where it had beautiful marshes and now all you got is water. Now

C: What's the difference you think? What's making some it come back and some of it wash away?

S: A lot of it is salt water. Because you take from the Atchafalaya to the Mississippi River, we gaining, they're shooting big deer where I used to shrimp in the Basin. In another words like around Plum Island

Pointe and all those places. This is all built up. In another words you got beautiful delta but you go east towards Carencro and you going towards the Houma ship channel. What it will do is make a big ole cove and it's all eaten up. For the simple reason, you go up to the Mississippi River. Mississippi River is doing the same thing. It's building up delta. Simple reason why you not getting any silt is because they done cut it off. We not getting any more silt. I've talked to a lot of Senators and Congressmen. For years they dredged the Mississippi, go out to the outer Continental Shelf, and flush it out.

C: Right

S: Why not take a pipeline from the Mississippi, take a pipeline from the Atchafalaya, run them along the coast, spread that dirt where it's needed at. Because that dirt you're getting from up north is such of a fertile ground that it takes it, the trees and stuff grow rapidly in it. It's a lot of fertile and that's what we need to. But we gaining here from the Atchafalaya west like going towards South Marsh Island and all them places. That whole bay is getting real shallow and all the banks is building up. But they not throwing away the soil anymore. Now they pumping it on some ridges you know where they got some hills. But I've seen a big change, oh I've seen a big change. That land where I'm at right now.

C: You're talking about your camp?

S: Yeah where my camp's at right now. You see that boat right there? I was with a boat company called Briley Marine in 1970. But we had leased that land for duck hunting, well they did you know. And I can remember the traînasse we had. We had a little 8-horse Briggs and Stratton. Very hard to pass through the traînasse because it was so small. Now you can run a barge through there because you know it just keep eaten up. After '73 you got, I don't know what happened, it was a progression that happened that we don't even know. The water got so high and ever since '73 when it really started to deteriorate. I mean really you could see a tremendous

C: After the flood

S: After the flood. It didn't bring in any silt like this last one did. I don't know why but this last one brought a lot of silt into the marshes. It brought some, now whether this is going to be a mat on top the, you know on top the flow, but at least it's something you know.

C: Right

S: But after the '73 high water we had about a 50% turn around in the marsh compared to what it was before. Yep it really turned it around. I mean it was so dry for so long that year and it come that rain and the water from the north and it just flooded that whole marsh out. And it stayed there for so long. You see that way late in June, you know like June, way late in the middle of June there was still, the water was still high.

C: You've talked about the boats up the, when you grew up you would have been using one of the, a boat with a putt-putt motor I'm sure

S: A 2-horse Lockwood, a pulling skiff was our biggest. We had some 9 foot oars and we'd pull a lot. We'd do a lot of pulling.

C: Now when you moved over here, you were, I assume you were using something that let you get out to your camp faster than

S: Well we started out with, we started out with Briggs and Stratton – 8-horse Briggs and Stratton. Then I guess it must have been, I don't know we started with some Scott Attwater outboard motors sold from Firestone. Then from then we went to Mercury, Johnsons. I got an old picture in there, it must have been 1957, 1958 I had a 25-horse Johnson on a skiff with some pulling and then after that we went to Mercury, 50 Mercury, 40 Mercury. Man those things used to make 20 mph. We was high, we was moving. But you know a lot of times in the early days the traveling down there was really tough. Water hyacinths

C: Right

S: You couldn't hardly navigate those canals. Matter of fact, some of them were so stopped up you couldn't even get into them until, I don't know in the mid '50s the Corps of Engineers established a quarter boat with some lily choppers and they had some barges with a crew boat behind, a small crew boat. And with a guy on each corner spraying that for 100 feet on each side and then they got rid of them you know. But here lately the Corps of Engineers had to back off of spraying and that's going to kill us if they got to do that. They got some money this year to spray a little bit. Now I don't know if they are going to continue but if they don't that's

C: It's going to come back

S: Oh, it'll come back. Lake Pollard right there I've been seeing some big floats of water lilies in it. I remember Lake Palourdes right there, you couldn't, you couldn't go into Lake Palourdes, it was just solid, long time ago when I was young. And then the Corps of Engineers killed them. They used to be at Cheramie over, Bayou Cheramie. They stayed there for a long time killing those water lilies all over in the bayous and lakes and stuff. And then after that they went to the marsh. They did that for, they used to stay in the Push Canal right there by Lake Kapasa. And boy they do some spraying! Boy, that was sure helping us out.

C: Well Mr. Sterling, I can't thank you enough for sharing your memories with us.

S: I hope I was

C: Oh no, you were excellent!

S: Okay

C: And I really thank you for the time

S: What you going to do? You are going to put all this in prospective?

C: We are going to put it at the universities and then we're going to make it available so anybody who wants to study the marsh, the wetlands, going to have access to it.

S: Well I'm a big advocate of helping. I wish I could be a little better entertainer, that's what I'd want to do. I'd want to down, you know, I'd want to go up all over and preach on how vital our marsh is. I'm looking, you know, I'm 75, in another 25 years you are going to lose so much more, you know. Right now we got salt water in places where I've never seen salt water before and that's due to a dry season and you don't have no more bumpers like you used to have. You don't have all them islands to stop the water from you know

C: Right

S: and the more salt water you get, the more deterioration you get. The further the salt water comes in, the more the deterioration gets. And until they are going to put some silt down in there that got some good nutrient in it to really bring that growth back up, it's going to keep eating up, going to keep eating up. I know I ain't going to be around, but I'd like to visualize what it's going to be 50 years from now, you know.

C: Well it all starts with benefiting from your knowledge and experience.

S: Well you know whenever you get into something like this, you got so many factors that you know, if you put too much silt they are afraid they are going to hurt the ecosystem or you're going to stop the fishing from doing this. You don't have much choice, sooner or later you're going to lose it anyway. I mean it's gone, you ain't going to have no more place and you know for years, for years and years the people said that you killing some of your estuary. But the Atchafalaya Basin right here is one of the best and they been saving the, they been saving the soil here for the last I don't know number of years. And we got some of the best fishing, the best shrimping there is anywhere you want to go, you know. You got more red fish over here than and speckled trout and, you know. It didn't hurt nothing over here. So somebody is just going to have to own it up and say well look we either save it or leave it go. I mean we are going to have it for a few years and then after that it's going to be gone. You know Bayou Lafourche for years was the life blood of the Terrebonne Parish. Used to you could go all the way up into Bayou Lafourche all the way up to the Mississippi River you know that was flowing.

C: It's been over 100 years now, almost 110 that they've shut it off

S: And then you see every year you not getting no silt, salt water moving in. You not getting no silt, salt water moving in. High water, salt water move in and it just, it's just a rapid progression, you know, it just keep going, keep on going, keep on going.

C: Well thank you sir

S: Wait, I'm going to show you my CD.

C: I'd love to see it, let me just make sure I shut this off, okay.