

**CARL McCAPLAN**  
**Oysterman & Driver for Leavins Seafood – Apalachicola, FL**

\* \* \*

Date: March 20, 2006  
Location: Mr. McCaplan's Church - Apalachicola, FL  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Length: 55 minutes  
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

**[Begin Carl McCaplan]**

0:00:00.0

**Amy Evans:** I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself. This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance; I'm in Apalachicola, Florida, on Monday, March 20<sup>th</sup> [2006], and I'm at the First Pentecostal Holiness Church on the west side of town, and I'm with Mr. Carl McCaplan. Carl, would you mind saying your name and briefly telling me what you do and how will you—how would you describe yourself?

0:00:23.6

**Carl McCaplan:** Well, I'm Carl McCaplan—Carl Eugene McCaplan, and I harvest oysters. You know, I see both sides of it. Like I was telling you, I deliver the product [for Leavins Seafood]. I've been doing it all my life, more or less—as I was a kid brought up in it, and born in this [Franklin] County, raised, and I—you know, ask me the questions, and I'll give them to you.

0:00:55.0

**AE:** Why don't you—can you tell me your birth date first of all?

0:00:57.4

**CM:** It's 06/03/68 [June 3, 1968].

0:01:00.2

**AE:** Okay. And you said you were born right down at the end of this road where the church is?

0:01:03.2

**CM:** Yes. No, I wasn't born there. I was raised up there. I kind of started out in Eastpoint but by teenage—I was raised up down there when my daddy bought a piece of property. But I was—you know, actually he—me and my wife was born by the same doctor in Carrabelle, which you know is—in the same county—fortunate. So it's a little local community, and everybody knows everybody—that's how small.

0:01:30.0

**AE:** How long has your family been in the area?

0:01:31.7

**CM:** All their life—her family—what—they was from Holmes County, just north of here.

0:01:40.3

**AE:** But like your parents and grandparents and—and how far does it go back, that you're family has been in Florida?

0:01:45.5

**CM:** It goes back to my grandparents. They was actually born in Cottondale [Florida], my grandparents was. And on my daddy's side, they was—they was from here, which I never got to know. They had passed away when I was—before I was even existed. But as far as my daddy, my grandparents, my uncles, my aunts—they survived off this bay. I mean, the women shucked [the oysters]; they caught [the oysters]. It is a nice little history.

As far as now, you know, it's—I work five days a week on the bay, and I drive a truck two days a week, and I might, you know—on Sunday I go to church, so it—depending, four to five days on the bay, you know. I roll out of bed at five-thirty in the morning, and I walk in the door around four [o'clock] in the evening, and my day is finished. That's what, you know—most working oystermen's day, you know, life, they get up early and get home late.

0:02:52.2

**AE:** So what was it like growing up here?

0:02:53.1

**CM:** I—well, I tried to move away. As a matter of fact, I moved to Bayou La Batre, Alabama, when I was young, and I stayed there a month-and-a-half. Couldn't stand it; I come back home. **[Laughs]** So there ain't no place like it. You know, everybody helps everybody here in this little community, which it's getting big now. Things is changing. And you can see that every day. Land has gone up and just don't know what the future is holding, that's for sure.

0:03:27.9

**AE:** Hmm. When you moved away, how old were you?

0:03:30.4

**CM:** I was I think seventeen. I was young.

0:03:36.4

**AE:** Anxious to get out?

0:03:36.9

**CM:** You know, yeah. I—I quit school at shoot, fifteen [years old] and because I was kind of—lead into health problems with the parents and helping them, income and, you know—it all

worked out, you know, because I provide for my family and built a house in [nineteen] ninety-eight, so I don't regret nothin'.

Actually, my wife, she shucked oysters up until, I'd say [nineteen] ninety-five. She kept telling me, you know, *I want to do something different*. And she had her GED [General Educational Development, high school equivalency exam] because she went back to school to get it, and so she's into realty [real estate]. So but, you know—you know, the future—that—that will be there. Me, as a truck driver, that will be there. So we got our—you know, I got that to fall back on. But I see oystering going to be here—I think they want to, you know, keep some of the history here but—for the people to see. I don't see it just going completely away, but it is getting smaller. The generations coming up, [they're] not doing it. And I don't know if that's what you want but—.

0:05:00.1

**AE:** Uh-hmm. Well, and did your father work on the bay?

0:05:02.4

**CM:** Yeah.

0:05:03.6

**AE:** Did he oyster?

0:05:04.2

**CM:** He oystered when I was young, when I was a kid, and then he went to work for the County Road Department.

0:05:12.3

**AE:** Was it just a better opportunity for him when he took that job?

0:05:14.5

**CM:** Yeah, he retired in it, so, you know, retirement—oystering you're self-employed. The only retirement is if you put your money up, you know. And that's me—my truck driving job, that's my benefits. That's retirement. I locked it in two years ago. And that's the reason, you know, you—people is spoiled on the oystering because they don't have to, you know—they're their own boss but they, you know—the benefits is—is yours if you want to manage it.

0:05:51.1

**AE:** Did your father ever miss it when he got off the bay?

0:05:52.5

**CM:** Ah, really I think he did. My daddy was somebody—he worked equipment all his life and he oystered. My daddy was somebody—and I believe that's the reason I hold two jobs now; that he'd always have something else going. He'd jump—he had any kind of animal you'd ever want to see from billy goats to turkeys. Firewood—he supplied this whole, you know—probably this whole County just about when we was young with firewood in the winter. He'd harvest scallops. You know, St. Joe Bay produces a lot of scallops in the summertime, so it wasn't never just one thing he did. And in the wintertime we—we did oyster. And I'd say from when I was—about eight to fourteen, you know, I oystered with him, you know, when I wasn't in school. And then when there wasn't no school, I worked.

0:07:00.2

**AE:** Do you remember your first time out on an oyster boat?

0:07:03.4

**CM:** I'm trying to think of that. It was with him. Definitely with him because my—my parents separated when we was young, so my mama, you know, she never forced us to work. And my daddy got us when I was about seven, and right then—he worked out—out west. Oil—oil rigs and stuff on land, though. So he moved back here, I'd say, when I was probably—well, I was in first grade, and that's how I remember it. So I'd—I'd say I was probably eight, and when he got to come back here, he went oystering, so—. Which my grandparents, they never moved from here;

they oystered when I was a baby, which he oystered before that, you know. I just hear stories. My uncle will tell me how, you know, how my daddy was a great oysterman. And, as I say, it's interesting.

0:07:59.7

**AE:** What is a great oysterman? Can you describe that?

0:08:02.6

**CM:** Well, it's just grit, and it's a lot of, you know—I've seen people move down here and become oystermen when they wasn't, you know—they couldn't never do what somebody who was born and raised here. But, you know, for them to go to—adapt to it, you've got to give them credit, you know. Somebody come here, a grown man who never done it before in his life, and he adapted to it, so I give them credit. But, you know, they couldn't never do what somebody did local that was born and raised. And there's some better than others, you know. A good oysterman is just somebody that protects the bay, you know—don't catch the little ones, clean it up, get the spats off of them, and leave them out there to grow and they—there's a lot of little things, you know, that, you know, you got somebody that's concerned about the future and the little ones, the spats. Spats are babies [or juvenile oysters]. And you get somebody that's interested in that, you know. That's a great oysterman. It ain't just about—only about quantity. And, you know, and volume—and, you know, we have the relaying. The Oyster Association replanted the bay [in what they call an oyster relay]. We have that during the summertime, you know, one—one day a

week. And that's really been a big help because this year we seen where—I was a kid planting with my daddy—my step-daddy—and they used to have us on the film that you had to watch to get your harvesting license every year—and relaying and—. But anyway, we relayed probably twenty years ago. I figured it up the other day. I believe it was twenty years ago—maybe a year or two difference—but this year was the first year we've been able to harvest there.

0:09:57.0

**AE:** The place that you planted?

0:09:59.5

**CM:** Re—replanted twenty years ago.

0:10:02.3

**AE:** Wow.

0:10:02.1

**CM:** So it did, you know—it took that many years but it—actually it paid off. So the State, you know, they—they like seeing that. That way they know the money is going to use that they used to move oysters.

0:10:17.9

**AE:** Can you describe the relay process and how it is that your step-father was able to be the person to take part in that?

0:10:25.7

**CM:** Well it was—it's about going in secluded areas where you ain't allowed to harvest and that's none—year-round and moving them in open areas—why the area is closed at that time of the month. And that way you don't harvest polluted oysters, and that gives them time to clean. And if you do go back and harvest them, you know, which these areas right here was making new [oyster] bars. It wasn't like you'd haul them to a bar that was already developed. And they were just used boxes and we—we'd harvest them, and we'd tong them, and we moved probably five loads a day. Back then, I forget, it wasn't much money but, you know, it wasn't much oysters, so you had to just do what—to provide for the family.

0:11:17.9

**AE:** So but the re-harvesting was the thing that—that your step-father was hired to do. It's not something that he just kind of volunteered to do?

0:11:24.4

**CM:** As—as—with your license, you know, it's an option. I mean, as long as you've got a harvest license, you—you get to do it. And it's, you know—some do it and some don't because it's very—it's hard work. You take some of the older men, and they won't, you know, go out there and do it because it is physical.

0:11:44.7

**AE:** But it's a reinvestment in your future.

0:11:46.1

**CM:** Yeah, absolutely. But like I say, some of the older men, they just—it's hard work, and it's a little too much on them. They'll still harvest oysters, but they don't participate in the relay. You know, this year I done it; I believe I made 5,000 dollars this year in the three months that we harvested, and you probably—I probably had 1,000 dollars [in] expense[s], so—not even counted wear and tear. But the thing is—is it's the future. You know, down the line it will pay off.

0:12:25.3

**AE:** Uh-hmm. With the—yeah—I've interviewed a few people, and everybody is talking about the regulations and the licensing and, if you let it lapse, you can't get it back. And all these

different hurdles that one needs to jump through to work the bay. Does that—has that weeded a lot of people out, or has it made it kind of more regulated in a positive sense in any way or—?

0:12:47.4

**CM:** Ah—

0:12:48.3

**AE:** To protect the bay?

0:12:49.3

**CM:** They did it to protect, you know, the local—and really, when it comes to politics and stuff, Rex [Pennycuff in Eastpoint, whose father, Charles Pennycuff, owns and operates Fisherman's Choice Bait & Tackle] would probably be better on that. But I do know, I heard a survey the other day, it's like the license each year has went down, but it went back up, you know, because a lot of people use it for fallback. If they lose their job, they can fallback [on oystering]. So you see, out of 100-percent, fifty-percent only the ones on the bay. The other fifty-percent just got them in their pocket in case they need them. They get them—because, if they don't get—I don't know if they changed the law where it's going to be if you don't get them, it will overlap where you have to go through a process. Right now, I think all you have—the locals—if you're from the State of Florida, you have to watch a film—a three-hour film which is—they say is necessary.

0:13:48.3

**AE:** What does the film consist of?

0:13:50.9

**CM:** Well, it's some—it shows the safety—all the safety equipment, and it shows the areas of the bay—the legal harvesting areas and the closed areas. It shows, you know, it gives some pictures in there where you can see—like I told you, me and my step-father over there relaying years ago, they still got film of it, you know. It's kind of neat. And it just—it kind of schools you on, you know, where you don't get in no closed areas and the FWC, they—that's the Florida Game and Wildlife Commission—they make sure, you know, the safety equipment that you've got to have per foot of the boat.

0:14:37.3

**AE:** Do most oystermen know how to swim? Do they have to know how to swim these days?

0:14:41.9

**CM:** I know some that don't, and I know some that do. And I got a guy I went to school with that got in a situation. I think it was the year 2000, right there around Christmas—I want to say

right after Christmas—got the anchor rope in the wheel and got turned stern, and both of them was—lost their lives on the bay. One of them was older than me, but the other guy I knowed well, went to school with him. I knowed both of them, but the other one I went to school with. But we usually lose a life out there about every five years, you know. Some waterspout [water tornado]. That's where oystermen have to use their judgment. And my judgment is, if it's bad weather and they—everybody goes in, and I look around, and it's only me, it's time to go, you know. You've got to know—it's good to have somebody, if you get in a situation you can have help, which I've been in—I mean, right after that happened, I got in the same situation. I lost both of my anchors. My friend next to me loaned me an anchor, and it was rough, and I tied off, and we had to use a lot of line because we lost two anchors, and we replaced it with one. And we pulled up and got the rope in the wheel and got turned stern to sea, and I was just fixing to cut the rope, and I was able to get it out of the wheel and—which if something did happen there, my friend was right beside us. I mean, we had—but I—you know, that's one of the things I look at. If there ain't nobody out there, and it's rough, it's time to come in. They didn't use that judgment. And if they had to do it all over again, I know they would. But that's grit. I mean, sometimes you grit, you know, and you carry it too far. They—they call this grit water.

0:16:45.9

**AE:** Grit water?

0:16:46.8

**CM:** Yeah, a lot—over in Eastpoint they—actually a—a local band over there is called Grit Water.

0:16:53.4

**AE:** Oh, really?

0:16:54.5

**CM:** Yeah.

0:16:55.6

**AE:** What kind of band is it?

0:16:57.4

**CM:** It's rock and roll. And they're friends I grew up with. They—they good people but—.

0:17:04.9

**AE:** So is the oyster—the community of oystermen pretty tight, or is it pretty competitive or a little bit of both?

0:17:10.3

**CM:** Well it's narrowed down to—the biggest dealer now is Grady Leavins, the one I work for. And then the new one come—you know, that's come in the business, which he bought Allen Brothers out, is Water Street [Seafood]. That's pretty large. And Barber Seafood over in Eastpoint. And, you know, it's—it's—competitive is about out, you know, because I see the price of the oysters they've been trying to get, they're getting now. Because they used to compete and couldn't get no price, and all it was—was a battle back and forth and, you know, the company can't grow like that. And my boss [Grady Leavins], he invested in that frozen half-shell with his—it's really probably the smartest thing he ever done in his life.

0:18:04.3

**AE:** That is amazing technology. He took me on a tour of that [oyster frosting plant].

0:18:06.3

**CM:** I—you know, I go there and I told him—he wants to put me in sales, and I said, *Well let me go out there and see what I can do*. Which I've done picked him up customers on fresh [product]. And I landed the first one I went to and—.

0:18:21.7

**AE:** How did you sell it?

0:18:21.8

**CM:** Ah, well, I went to the guy years ago for fresh [product] and couldn't never get into his door. He was dedicated to the customer, but they didn't have his product, so really—he absolutely—he said, *I remember you*. And that's what really paid off. He knows I worked hard. I went in there three years in a row and talked to the guy—didn't push, just, you know—I just let him know, you know, I was still working for this man [Grady Leavins]. [I said to him,] *I told you he's a good man, and if he wasn't, I wouldn't still be here with him*.

0:18:50.9

**AE:** So when did you start working for Grady Leavins?

0:18:52.7

**CM:** Eight years ago. I'm working on eight, so actually, seven-and-a-half.

0:18:57.2

**AE:** Uh-hmm. And you went—did you go to him as an oysterman and then worked up to driving trucks or—?

0:19:02.2

**CM:** I was a logger. I would drive a log truck which I—in and out. I've done that for two companies, two years. One year for one company, and one for the other. And I drove routes. You know, seafood routes, before for other companies, and I went to him and told him I wanted to make—you know, I've jumped from job to job and I said, *Hey, I'm ready to make a foundation. I want to, you know, get somewhere and stay.* And right then, you know, that just, you know, because he didn't know me, and I didn't—we just—I knowed him because he's a big company man but, you know, I told him about five—you know, five years after I was there, I said, *See, I told you.* You know, so he believes me. He—he said that I'm an honest man and—and I tell him something, and he's just like him, you know. You communicate better when you got an honest relationship.

0:19:59.8

**AE:** Well in this community I've, you know—it's pretty apparent that, you know, somebody's word is really important, you know, and people—people live off of that.

0:20:09.3

**CM:** Absolutely. A man's word is only as good as, you know, he keeps it up.

0:20:12.6

**AE:** Yeah. So when you were—when you quit school when you were fifteen, did you go and you were helping to support your family and whatnot? Were you oystering, or what were you doing back then?

0:20:20.9

**CM:** I was oystering.

0:20:22.4

**AE:** Okay.

0:20:23.5

**CM:** My step-father, he was struggling with his heart and it just, you know, he—he's still living today, but he's had open-heart surgery, he's had a knee replacement—kneecap replacements on both legs. He—he's a good man, but like him, he—I'll give you a little bit of his history. He—he didn't grow up here; he grew up in Southport over in Panama City, next to it. But as long as I've known him, he oystered. But you know, actually, I got on that bay right by myself at that

age. I'd say thirteen or fourteen years old, you know. I quit school close to fifteen, but when I was thirteen, fourteen, the days [I was] out of school I'd—I'd oyster and give Mama the money.

0:21:15.6

**AE:** Did you have your own boat and everything?

0:21:17.4

**CM:** Yes, ma'am.

0:21:19.3

**AE:** How did you—how did you acquire that? Well did you work to get it or—?

0:21:21.1

**CM:** Worked, yeah. I had—I actually had a new rig. My step-father, he just—he—he put us in that position, if we worked, you know, which we was brought up workers. My—my real dad, he—thank God he—he did that. We didn't like it when he was doing it, but we actually, you know, worked hard enough with a small used boat and worked up to a new rig. As far as my step-dad, he did you know—he did anything—he'd give—he give us the opportunity and he—and if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have got it, you know.

0:22:07.3

**AE:** And then when you moved to—to Alabama, what did you do up there?

0:22:11.3

**CM:** Worked in an oyster house, you know. I worked for this lady called Maxie Carrol, great person. I worked for her here, and she sent me out there. So she bought a business out there, and I just helped them in the oyster house—the shuckers and—and the boats and loaded trucks and—which that—that didn't bother me, just being away from home. And I'd come back to visit and then go back. [*Laughs*]

When I was out there this—this lady that I know, you know—she's local and known her most of my life, [a friend's] mama. [] But to get back to her, she lost her finger when I was out there in a shucking machine, and I got an aunt that lost her finger. My mama, she's got a finger that's wounded right now.

0:23:14.1

**AE:** Your mama is still shucking?

0:23:15.7

**CM:** No, no, she's cleaning house for Realty—Vacation Realty. Bless her heart. She's too old to work, but she won't quit, you know. My daddy is retired and—

*[EDITED FOR CONTENT—Approximately thirty seconds of audio]*

0:24:08.9

**AE:** What—what is the DEP—Environmental Protection?

0:24:13.0

**CM:** No, they're the people that goes and inspects these oyster houses and they watch over us relaying, you know. See that we get, you know, the amount of boxes that's on your boat, they count and the area they—they—they put us in the areas they want it, so they watch—they watch over where the relaying, you know—you got two—you got them and you got the Oyster Association, they there just managing the money. And the DEP, they're managing the areas the—the oysters are planted. And also they got the inspectors that goes in and inspects oyster houses and, you know, you're talking about—I don't know, the farming on the cows or the chicken farms, but if these places ain't right they don't operate. They're real strict. So you know, these oysters, when they get on the market, they're right. It amazes me how strict they are so—

0:25:19.0

**AE:** Well how have you watched the industry change, since you've been in it so long?

0:25:23.6

**CM:** Well—well I just watch the land value go up, watch the—you know, the buildings, furniture, you know, for realty—vacation realty. The furniture stores is, being over in Eastpoint, where there used to be woods, there ain't nothing but buildings now. And I bought my land at 11,000 dollars. I believe they're selling that, you know, right now for 80,000 dollars, and it's just—you know, I can tell you, you know, just things like that. There's a big change. I just wish I invested in property around here. People who got property got gold.

0:26:13.6

**AE:** Yeah, well and it seems like a lot of people are selling right now, too. Do you know where they're ending up?

0:26:18.2

**CM:** Well you know where I'm at, we just—you know, they just told us that they're fixing to build a government house in between—in an area which we're not happy about. So that means our property will be—the value will go down and the poor—they try, you know, to put the poor in an area because, you know, all the trailer parks is getting bought up—being developed into something else—condos or whatever, so they just—mainly it's a little town called Sumatra [where people are relocating]. It's a lot of them moving up there in Liberty County, north of us

twenty-five miles. And I got some friends up there but, you know, right now, as far as the people that's getting, you know, in the trailer parks, they ain't got nothing for them. I don't—actually, they're living with neighbors, parents, you know—I don't know how it's working out, actually. But you know, they—they're looking ahead right now at building government housing. But you know, my—my mama, she—she is in one of the trailer parks—two of the trailer parks. One of them ain't sold yet, and one of them sold out, and we moved her to another one. And now she's living with her mama because my grandpa passed away a year ago, and she has somebody with her, which is—my granny passed away. My mama would move—probably move in with me because my two kids is raised. They—one is nineteen and one is fixing to be eighteen. And so my wife was sixteen, and I was eighteen when we got married. I keep up with my anniversary because my daughter turns—**[Laughs]** we turn—that same year—our anniversary she turns the age at the same time.

0:28:13.1

**AE:** Uh-hmm. What is your family's names—your wife and your children?

0:28:16.4

**CM:** Cheryl and Denise and Justin.

0:28:19.9

**AE:** And are your kids going to stick around these parts, do you think? Do they want to?

0:28:24.3

**CM:** I think my son is, but my daughter, she's all adventure. She's outgoing. She's, you know—she claims she don't want no part of this town. But, you know, that's—not her.

0:28:41.4

**AE:** Well, what was it when you decided—when you went to Alabama and you came back and you say you just missed home? Was it family or was it you were tied to the—the landscape and the bay or—?

0:28:50.2

**CM:** It was more just friends and family, you know, and that young, you know, I was still young. I got married at eighteen, so when I got back, it wasn't long me and my wife, you know, got married. So if I stayed out there, it might not have been—**[Laughs]**—it might have been a different story. But you know—you know, most of the people my age was delivered by Dr. Sands over in Carrabelle. That was the only hospital in Carrabelle. And, of course, you know, she was—me and her was both—was delivered by the same doctor, and that just shows you pretty much, you know, when you're that generation—mine—everybody is, you know, went to him pregnant.

0:29:50.7

**AE:** So tell me about working at Leavins Seafood and what that's been like for eight years.

0:29:57.0

**CM:** Well, it's real professional, you know. I've worked for seafood companies that wasn't, and when I went there, that's the first thing I seen. I seen a guy that had things in order. He had people in positions that did their job. He didn't bump, move, or nothing, you know. He'd tell you something, you'd take it to the bank, and I never had that in a job—at a seafood, you know, industry and that's one thing that kept me there. And, you know, I had a young man tell me—ask me, you know—he's my nephew—about—he had asked about a job, and I said, *Well, what's wrong with your job?* He said, *People*. I said, *Well there's people at every job.* **[Laughs]** And I said, *Unless—unless you don't want that, you're going to have to get your own business and you be the boss.* But I matured at that company. You know, you go through them battles—people you don't agree with, people that might make it a little hard for you, and you know like I told him—I said I—I—you know, I had that same issue at my job. And you got to learn how to deal with it. But the boss. You know—he [Grady Leavins]—I don't know—he's a man that he—I—I could work for him. I don't know why at a lower payroll, you know. It's just that's the way he is. You could work, you know, because it's professional. Your job is easier because he's got people in the places that don't make your job hard, and that's the reason he's—he is where he's at today—able to be successful.

0:31:45.5

**AE:** About how many oystermen does he have or use or—?

0:31:50.4

**CM:** He's got more now than he ever had because of little places going out of business. He's got now—my estimate, I believe he's probably bringing in 300 bags [of oysters] a day. Just say, 300 to 350 a day. So you know, an oysterman averages twenty [bags], you know, and some less, but he has to have probably about twenty to twenty-five oystermen.

0:32:15.4

**AE:** So the oystermen that he buys from, are they—is it a loyal, regulated group of people, or does that switch up? Because it seems like some of the people I talk to, like they'll go one place one time, and one place another time [to sell their oysters].

0:32:30.3

**CM:** Yeah, that's where, you know, they spoil and, you know, they get crossed, you know, and get mad, and they'll go to work for somebody else. I watched a guy throw his oysters in the truck and go back, you know, go to another place, and that's where you get that. That's where that

young man, I was telling him [that] you're going to have issues. You got to learn how to work, you know—work through them. But I—I got friends that's hot-headed and—attitude and [go from] job to job, and they look at me and they say—you know, shake their heads and say, *I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you put up with it. Don't know.* And it's all maturity. You can't—I mean—that's the reason I—you know, I've been saved two years at this church we're at now, and one thing I didn't have but I—you know, God forgave us and, you know, why can't we forgive somebody?

0:33:31.4

**AE:** So how long do you think you'll be oystering?

0:33:34.7

**CM:** Probably—I believe I—you know, I'm going to do it as long as I can, for sure. You know, actually, this past year I was looking into buying my own truck and going in my own business and, you know I—I seeked God about it, prayed about it. And I said, *Well, if it goes through it goes through.* And it didn't go through, so I felt like it meant for me to stay here longer—stay. You know because if I ever quit Grady Leavins, I won't be working for another seafood company. I probably won't be on the bay. But my main job, my main, you know—is driving that truck. Because they might call me up tonight and say, *Hey, you got to go out tomorrow.* And I can, you know. So oysters won't be caught. But I do—do well oystering. You know, I believe I brought in 30,000 dollars last year—the year before. And plus, hold that job there driving.

0:34:37.6

**AE:** And you're driving for Grady [Leavins] also right?

0:34:39.7

**CM:** Yeah.

0:34:40.1

**AE:** And that's just shipping fresh oysters or the flash frozen oysters to his customers all over the region?

0:34:45.5

**CM:** Just South Florida.

0:34:47.0

**AE:** Okay.

0:34:48.0

**CM:** I mean, he's got trucks that goes north, but I'm a Florida boy. [*Laughs*] I run out to Louisiana and Texas—no, I don't—I actually don't like going to Texas. But I go out to Louisiana every now and then. And I went through where—where Katrina went through and went out there last year and seen it—sad. Just wonder where all the money is going to come from to put it back together. But as far as that, I don't like going. If I had went up there—I don't like it.

0:35:21.7

**AE:** What do you like about driving the truck in general?

0:35:25.1

**CM:** I was kind of raised up in that, too. I was fourteen years old—right after I quit school, right around fourteen, fifteen, in that area. A guy asked me, would I help him unload a semi [truck]. He runned Daytona, Florida, and south—a little bit south Florida, down to Sebastian on the east coast. I said, *Yeah, you know, I need—need money—income.* I was working in the oyster house a little bit and got in that truck, and I've been helping drivers up 'til, you know—see, I worked for that lady, and she sent me out to Alabama. So I was seventeen out there, so that was about three years on them routes and working in the house—oyster house. And I come back from out there, and she put me back on, you know—in the truck delivering oysters, helping drivers, and I was just born in that, too. As far as handling customers and—I do a well job with people.

0:36:30.2

**AE:** You like being out there and getting on the road and—?

0:36:33.8

**CM:** Yeah, I have to like it. I wouldn't be doing it. I've done it for many years.

0:36:37.8

**AE:** Well, and last week, like you said earlier, I called you, and you were in Miami.

0:36:41.5

**CM:** Yeah.

0:36:42.2

**AE:** How—how long does one of those runs take you, generally?

0:36:45.7

**CM:** I leave Thursday evening and get back Saturday night, Sunday morning. If I go in the [Florida] Keys—I didn't have the Keys [on my route for that trip], so I made it back early Saturday morning—about, you know, thirty-five hours.

0:37:01.6

**AE:** A lot of time on the road.

0:37:03.8

**CM:** Yeah. Yes, ma'am. The customers, they interest me because you—you bond a relationship. And after eight years down there, them guys, I believe if I ever wanted to move down there, I know enough people that would put me to work. And I—you know, that's the kind of relationship I got with the customers.

0:37:25.4

**AE:** How are folks liking those flash-frozen oysters? Are they—?

0:37:29.4

**CM:** The ones that is handling them, they love them. The—one guy told me he said, *Send me a box*. And you know, he said, *Your container means a lot, you know, how it—how it looks, even*

*though they don't eat the container, you've got to you know—you know show good quality containers, too.* And he sent it to him and he said it's a hit, you know. He said the container looked good, and there's a description on the container. And he goes to Boston to the food shows, and he puts his product out there, and he gets good compliments. He went to this new thing because, you know, his waste was—oysters that didn't stick good in the shell, so that was a loss. But now he's made [Oysters] Rockefeller's, and he puts spinach dip, cheese [on the oysters]—and so actually, they're going to pay more money. And so he—he found something for the waste.

0:38:34.4

**AE:** That's an innovative businessman, right there.

0:38:37.1

**CM:** Yeah. Yes, ma'am.

0:38:38.9

**AE:** So tell me more about oystering and what you like about it and—and—and what a day is like for you out on the bay.

0:38:46.1

**CM:** It's—well the best way to describe that, I reckon, is going to, you know, the feel of the bottom, you know. Like I say, somebody that ain't here—ain't been here and come to try this, ninety-percent of them wouldn't work out. And it's just, you know—it's something I was born into and—and working, you know. The manual tonging, folks you say you use them tongs, and you feel the bottom. Some bottoms is sandy and some muddy and—and if you—you know, find a good spot and getting the volume that day, and then you come in and you—you meet your goal, and you brag to your wife when you check it in, and you wait and give her that check. But it's just mainly just something that I was born into just like the truck driving. It's just, you know, I grewed up in it, love it. I don't believe I'd do it, if I didn't love it. But a lot of people ain't like me. They drive a truck, they ain't going to oyster. If they oyster, they ain't driving no truck. So I'm just—I believe I got that from my daddy. He, you know—he—seven days a week he's finding something.

0:40:12.8

**AE:** So there are parts of the season when you're not on the bay at all, and you're in the truck all the time?

0:40:17.0

**CM:** No, year-round I'm on the bay doing something. Like I said, the relaying, I probably made 5,000 dollars. I bet I made 5,000 dollars. To give you an example, my brother, he works for the

Road Camp. He couldn't get it on it until Daddy retired because they wouldn't—if you've got the same last name, they don't hire you. He retired and my—he got—my—my brother and his—you know, replaced him. And my brother, he worked Monday through Thursday, and he oystered Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Monday, he'd go back to work on the Road Camp—at the County, and he'll oyster them three days. To give you a little—now that—he, you know—that will give you the way we was brought up.

0:41:08.3

**AE:** Uh-hmm, always doing something.

0:41:09.6

**CM:** Uh-hmm. Yes, ma'am.

0:41:11.6

**AE:** So what would you want people outside of Florida and people who don't know the area and don't know anything about oystering, what would you want them to know about what you do?

0:41:19.1

**CM:** Well actually if, you know, if you love oysters, feel comfortable and safe [to eat them], you know. With the DEP, you know, I mentioned they make sure they're up to standards—the business places and the quality—and feel safe about eating them. And I like to see it go onto the generation of my son and see another generation come up—a group of oystermen and—and because I think, you know, things is changing, and I think, you know, maybe, you know, the managing your money and managing your income and, you know, it's liable to be Grady [Leavins] owns the oyster boat, and they just work under him. You know a big business—a company man. So I'm looking for something, you know, different, you know, where they have something—something, you know, retirement or something, you know, some kind of benefit in line.

0:42:28.6

**AE:** Is your son interested [in working on the bay] at all?

0:42:31.4

**CM:** Well he just come in from shrimping. He's got his high school diploma; we seen him get it. He was four days on the—there in the Gulf [of Mexico] with a friend of mine and a—2,200 pounds of shrimp, and he had him a paycheck, you know. So he's on the water. He tried hill jobs [jobs in town] and [*Laughs*] it ain't worked out for him. So that might be what—you know, he's worked with this guy before, and the man brags on how good he is. I wasn't never a shrimper. I went shrimping a few times, and I ain't no Forest Gump.

0:43:06.5

**AE:** [*Laughs*] So is your son going to work up to getting his own rig, you think, and going to stay a shrimper?

0:43:10.3

**CM:** I—I would say he'll eventually probably get a rig of one or the other—the shrimp or the oysters. Most likely, oyster. He's a very good oysterman. He's just at a young age.

0:43:26.1

**AE:** Did you take him out early when he was a kid?

0:43:27.8

**CM:** Yeah, I brought him up out there. I didn't want, you know—it ain't that I want him to be an oysterman. I just want him, like my daddy did us, I want him to know how to work and not be scared of it.

0:43:40.5

**AE:** Hmm. Well do you think—when you were talking, too, earlier about that you don't see oystering disappearing, but are there many kids out there like your son still who are—who are working the bay and sticking around the area?

0:43:52.1

**CM:** Yeah, I got a boy I seen this morning that graduated the same year my—my daughter was a senior. He's oystering with his daddy, so you know, there's a few, you know—just don't say there's many. I'm trying to think of another one. But I know he is—my—my nephew, a young—another young man that's the age of my daughter. He's nineteen, and he does it, so there's a few coming up. But you know, the thing is that I'd like to see something where the dealers, the businesspeople get involved and take over. And you know, that's the biggest problem with oystermen. They just don't want nobody over them. But actually, it would benefit them when they get old and that's the—.

0:44:58.2

**AE:** And then the way the bay has worked is so unique because other places cultivate oysters instead of—or dredge for oysters, instead of using the hand tongs and—and all that. So I wanted to—you know, people come in and they take pictures of oystermen tonging on the bay and everything, but do people here have a sense of how unique all this is, do you think?

0:45:19.9

**CM:** I do. I don't think some of the older people like it because they just—they're old-fashioned, you know, they don't like seeing change. And as far as the dredging, now I worked Grady's dredge boat, and I've seen, you know, both sides of it and they—you know, people don't want—you mention dredging our bay, and they have a fit. But actually, I thought—I think it would help. They probably wouldn't like me if they heard that. But Grady, he—he's seen—you know, he showed me, and he talked to me and see, the turning of the bottom the oyster feeds better, and it's right now we—as an oysterman, there ain't nary a one of us that ain't smiling because I don't know why, but this year here, there's so many spats and that's baby oysters and we—we see a future of a good season coming up. Even after the hurricanes hurt us in July—[Hurricane] Dennis—we thought it's going to be, you know, one of them years. And it was tough and, you know it—but it come back, and it's coming back strong. It's coming back real strong.

0:46:39.8

**AE:** What would you attribute—would you attribute the hurricane and kind of the regeneration of the—of the bay to that?

0:46:46.0

**CM:** I—I really would. For the spats and the growth of the spats, it's—has all the ingredients. The freshwater is coming from up north. Everything has just fell in place for, you know, the best crop. We—which we had a good one before Dennis but actually, you—we had it so thick on the

west end of the bay—on the east end it—it took every—all the burrs—the burrs are where five and six oysters grow together, and just rolled them off the bar. It left all the—more of the single oyster that was heavy that laid on the bottom, and the oyster is of more quality. That's how the hurricane really helped.

0:47:35.7

**AE:** Hmm.

0:47:36.0

**CM:** It seemed like it hurt us, but actually it's going to—for the future, it's going to help. It's going to put out a more of a quality oyster. And at the dealers, that's what they want.

0:47:47.7

**AE:** Yeah, and the customers?

0:47:50.2

**CM:** Yes, ma'am.

0:47:51.4

**AE:** *[Laughs]* Well is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to add? I'd like to go through, before we end, and [have you] tell me your parents' names and your step-father's name and all that. But then I would like to know if there is anything that you want to add that I haven't asked you.

0:48:03.9

**CM:** Well, do you know the percentage of—I don't know if you talked to Mr. Leavins. He probably—I believe he told the FWC [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] guy—give him a report, he was using like three-percent of our oysters in our bay. The rest of it come out-of-state and give him an idea of what's coming out of this area right now. I think it—I think it's going to go up. I'm sure there will be interest in that.

And as far as my mother's name: Sarah French; my daddy, Mitchell McCaplan; and my brother Mitch—John Mitchell McCaplan.

0:48:51.5

**AE:** And your step-father?

0:48:51.2

**CM:** Jackie Hutchins.

0:48:56.9

**AE:** All right. so all good things coming out of the bay this year, huh?

0:49:01.4

**CM:** Yeah, looking great.

0:49:03.7

**AE:** One more question, I think, is about all the restaurants in Apalach and Eastpoint and St. George Island and using local seafood. Is that, over the years, since the area has become more popular, how—how has—have those things been connected: the oyster supply and the restaurants and the bay? Has it given more business or—?

0:49:24.3

**CM:** Well the people that comes here, the tourists that comes here they want this area oyster. I've seen Boss Oyster [which is a restaurant and oyster bar in downtown Apalachicola] not serve [oysters], if they didn't have an Apalachicola oyster. I don't know about the other places. I mean, I ain't going to guess, but I do know Boss Oyster, they won't serve the oyster. Even that

restaurant is named Oyster, they still wouldn't serve one. If our bay—completely red tide shut us down, and that gives you an idea of when people comes here for the history of the Apalachicola Bay oysters, and we are the oyster capital of the State of Florida.

0:50:09.2

**AE:** All right.

0:50:11.0

**CM:** Wish we had the volume Texas got; a lot of oysters come out of Texas.

0:50:18.9

**AE:** I've heard of some people going over there during different seasons and coming back. Does that happen often?

0:50:24.7

**CM:** We've had some local people move away from here to Texas and Louisiana and they—they used to do some season things. They oystered because, I think, their bay shuts down—they work leases through the summer months. They used to come back. It's just according to how the leases looked. And that's people that works on water. That's people that move away from home

and handle it. But, you know, I believe I'm prepared, you know, if I had to now—it's like I—that job I was looking into getting over the road, and I've kind of getting that one thing—get out and see the country, you know. I know it's some beautiful sights out there.

0:51:17.0

**AE:** Have you had an opportunity to take many vacations or get out with the family much?

0:51:19.3

**CM:** Ah, we go—we go on vacation—my wife is in love with Orlando and them [theme] parks. We going in May, but no, we don't go north. But I would like to. But I'll tell you, I was a Florida boy, and I need to get out of that.

0:51:42.6

**AE:** Well there's a lot out there. Just, you know, see what you can.

0:51:47.9

**CM:** And as far north I've ever been is Charlotte [North Carolina]—been up there.

0:51:52.3

**AE:** And what about Florida being part of the South as—as a region? You think it's just the panhandle or, you know, what happens south of the panhandle is not the American South?

0:52:02.5

**CM:** For me, being down there and seeing that—it's not the same as it is down there. But, you know, people told me when I took that job in Miami, they thought I was crazy when I did that because they—all they hear is the bad. But actually, if they went down there, they're great people. They're businesspeople, and you know, there's bad everywhere. But it amazed me, you know, I met great people in Jacksonville, Florida—Daytona, Gainesville, you know, Florida. I know all the cities and—but I meet—I can't remember a bad customer. It just might be the way I approach them. My wife, she went with me on trips before and people would make her mad, where they didn't affect me. That's just the kind of person I am. And they—they look at that and eventually, they see that side of me. But as far as going and traveling the state, it's—it's like throwing a rock. You know, it just don't seem like it's nothing to me to run down to Miami.

0:53:24.1

**AE:** But you're a Pittsburgh fan. [*Carl is wearing a Pittsburgh Steelers t-shirt.*] [Will] you [be] making it to Pittsburgh one day?

0:53:26.1

**CM:** Yeah. I fell in love with this team right down at the end of this road. I turned on the TV, and I seen them on, and I said, *That's my team*. I was—I figured it up, and I was ten years old, and I think they were playing in the Super Bowl with Dallas, and I'd go to school, and I'd see kids wearing, you know—back then, the Steelers were popular, and I was getting books and reading up on them. But the rich kids was wearing all Steelers stuff, and I never—my daddy, you mentioned buying something like that and—but after I got older, I could afford my stuff, and I growed in them, and I loved them. But I don't—you know, the University of Florida is my team. I've been watching the basketball team in the March Madness right now—the Sweet Sixteen, yeah. I reckon you're an Alabama fan?

0:54:16.9

**AE:** No, I live in Mississippi, but I'm not really a sports fan, anyway so—.

0:54:20.0

**CM:** Oh, you ain't much of one. Well if you go to the university you've got to pull—what—y'all got to have some kind of—

0:54:25.4

**AE:** Ole Miss football is big but, you know—. [*Laughs*] What do you do?

0:54:31.2

**CM:** Hey, I'm one of them men. I love my sports. I ask God sometimes, you know—I got to quit loving them and love God more. He's changing me.

0:54:41.0

**AE:** Yeah?

0:54:42.4

**CM:** Absolutely.

0:54:43.3

**AE:** Good. Well that's a good note to end on, I think.

0:54:46.4

**CM:** [*Sighs*]

0:54:47.2

**AE:** I'll let you get back to your family here tonight. But I appreciate you taking the time—

0:54:50.7

**CM:** Well you're welcome to come over.

0:54:52.7

**AE:** All right.

0:54:53.

**[End Carl McCaplan]**