

**NICK COLLINS**  
**Collins Oyster Company—Golden Meadow, LA**

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Date: September 25, 2011  
Location: The Collins Residence—Golden Meadow, LA  
Interviewer: Sara Roahen  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 1 hour, 52 minutes  
Project: Down the Bayou—Louisiana

**[Begin Nick Collins Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Sunday, September 25, 2011. I'm in Golden Meadow, Louisiana with Nick Collins. And could I get you to say your full name, please, and tell me what you do for a living?

**00:00:17**

**Nick Collins:** My name is Nick Anthony Collins. I'm an--I'm an oyster fisherman, fourth generation. I was born on September 20, 1971. And I've been oystering for, hmm, all my life I guess you could say [*Laughs*]. Family business, you know. I live and reside in Golden Meadow, Louisiana, in Lafourche Parish.

**00:00:51**

**SR:** Is this where your family has always been, here in Golden Meadow, the four generations of--of oystermen?

**00:01:00**

**NC:** Actually, my grandfather—great-grandfather and grandfather—my great-grandfather came from the West Bank and settled in Chénère and Grand Isle, sort of, but off of Grand Isle, and that's where he would fish. They lived off the land back then. He'd trap and fish the fish and shrimp, and his main job was he--he fished turtles. And while fishing for turtles he noticed all the oysters in the bayou and started fishing the oysters that the people was wanting. And that was in-

-that was in, you know, probably the 1890s. And--and people started wanting oysters more and more, so as they went further he went from that little bayou and back to camp. And he started putting them in--in Caminada Bay, so they have five reefs in Caminada Bay that was built by my great-grandfather and not by the nature, not by the State. And you know, and then my grandfather got into it. They were fishing back at the camp and still working in Caminada, and this is before leases. You could get a lease; this is just, you know, back in the day.

**00:02:35**

And when my father got into it, they still lived in Chénrière, and then they--they had made a road from Chénrière—from Grand Isle up this way, because all your traffic back then was done by boat, and--and it was done to the [*Phone Rings*]—sorry about that.

**00:03:04**

**SR:** You want to get that?

**00:03:05**

**NC:** No, it's okay. All the--all the traveling was done by boat or horse—you know, horseback—and they would travel to--to the French Market by boat with--with his oysters and sell them at the French Market. And--and back then that was--that was some rough work. I mean they would tong them, and--it's a lot of work.

**00:03:28**

And then when my father got into it, the business got a little bigger. When I was a kid we used to oyster in the winter and shrimp in the summer, and my grand--my great-grandfather had

passed, so I--I really never knew him. I'm the youngest of six kids, and a lot--most of them knew him in his--his older days, but I--I never did.

**00:04:01**

But like I said, we oystered—excuse me—in the winter and shrimped in the summer. When I was a kid, I'd get pulled out of school in May for the shrimp season to go help because we had two boats—well, three boats, but two would work and one they lived on. Like my grandfather and my dad would stay, and--and whoever was going shrimping in the morning would stay on the big oyster boat, and then like my grandma and my mom and my sister, they would stay at the camp and cook and--and whatever--whatever was needed—to peel shrimp or break heads on the shrimp to sell and whatever. And me and my brother, Tracy, we would go out and he would go out on one boat with my grandpa and I would go out on the other with my dad. And as--as time progressed, I started oystering. I was a kid and got, you know, doing some foolish things and got a girl pregnant at 16, and I quit school and I went to do my family business, you know, because I felt that's where I would always go anyway. Which, my father was upset because he really wanted me to go to college. And you know and I did great in school. I had good grades. It's not like I was a dropout because of any of that. I just knew where I was going and—.

**00:05:34**

And then oysters became a little more of a commodity, the demand for them, so with--with our abundance of lease, which ain't much—2,000 acres—but for us it was a lot, and we [*Sighs*]-we began fishing oysters year-round. And--and we did that until the oil spill.

**00:06:05**

**SR:** Let me backtrack for a minute and--and ask a few questions. First of all, how about, could you tell me the--the names of your great-grandfather and your grandfather and your father?

**00:06:18**

**NC:** My great-grandfather was Levi Collins, Sr. His son was Levi Collins, Jr. And most everybody called him Braud. Don't know the reason to that.

**00:06:32**

**SR:** B-r-o-a-d?

**00:06:33**

**NC:** B-r-a-u-d. And I think it came, like it used to be Brud. His brothers would call him that. They had a lot of older guys, in them days, a lot of people would call Brud, and he just, when--when we built our new oyster boat in '91 or '93—I'm not sure—he named it the “Braud & Tracy.” And he wanted it spelled B-r-a-u-d. I don't know; don't ask, and you know it didn't matter. It was--it was Paw-Paw to me, you know. So, but, my father's name is Wilbert Collins, Sr., and that's their names.

**00:07:20**

**SR:** Do you know where your ancestors came from?

**00:07:24**

**NC:** Uh, um, my--my brother's wife had went to LSU and she had dug up a long time ago, and Frederick Collins came from Scotland on a ship, and it's a--a Jew that helped him. And his name was Levi. So he named his son Levi. But they landed in--in Canada, I believe. And Levi wasn't born yet, and it wasn't until he made it down to Westwego with—actually, I think Frederick, Sr. came from Scotland to Canada, and then it was Frederick, Jr., if I'm not—I may be mistaken there, but I think it was the--the son that came down to New Orleans by--by boat and--and set up shop in Westwego, you know, so to speak. And he named--he remembers the story from his father and named his son Levi. And then Levi grew up in Westwego, and they ended up in Grand Isle.

**00:08:40**

**SR:** So that's true Cajun coming from Canada?

**00:08:43**

**NC:** Hmm, I guess. I mean, it kind of came from Scotland.

**00:08:49**

**SR:** Right, well, that's true.

**00:08:50**

**NC:** But they--they landed in Canada.

**00:08:53**

**SR:** Okay, and then I wanted to ask about your fish—. When you said that you were shrimping when you were a kid—your family was shrimping a lot. Where was the camp?

**00:09:07**

**NC:** In Chénrière, approximately a quarter mile east of Elmer’s Island.

**00:09:16**

**SR:** And y'all would basically live there during shrimp season?

**00:09:18**

**NC:** Yeah. Well, my dad built that house right over there [*Gestures*] when I was about three. And my grandpa had--they had lived there, and then this old shed here was my dad’s house. I’m not sure when they moved from there to here, but it--it was always a half-and-half thing. Once they lived up here, it was just for the winter to sell the oysters. And when we lived over there in the summer, all the shrimping activities and all, so it was always back and forth. But by my time there was automobiles, you know, [*Laughs*] so it was a lot--a lot different than when they started out over there.

**00:10:03**

**SR:** And around what year do you think that they completely phased out of the shrimping business?

**00:10:08**

**NC:** Uh, we kind of really never did but for financial reasons because we always still do it to fill our freezers or whatever. Because we can. But I would say probably late '70s, early '80s.

**00:10:31**

**SR:** And there was just more money in oysters?

**00:10:32**

**NC:** Well, my great-grandfather and my grandfather and my--my dad sort of had--had mostly had the vision that the oysters—. My great-grandfather noticed that even though he was getting them in a bayou that connected Caminada Bay, for some reason they grew better, they were prettier, and they were healthier in the bay when he put them [there]. As time progressed of him doing it, after a reef started, and you know they became living on hard bottom instead of the mud. It--it grew an oyster. Still to this day, it would be an awesome oyster. Maybe. I don't know; I ain't putting any over there because they're still have oil problems over there.

**00:11:25**

But, and then that hurts our business big-time, not to put oysters there. But you know, with our name—. And what I have living over here is--is wild ground, wild-growing ground. That's what the oyster farmers use if the public grounds for the State don't have any oysters; I got my wild oysters to come and I could bring them to Caminada. And we had two grounds. We had one on the east side and one on the west side. So we kind of took care of ourselves with always having oysters. If the State bottoms had them, we'd go get them over there and always left our farms grow and grow, and you know keep them cultivated and work them, but keep them growing for hard times—if it ever came about.

**00:12:12**

Which they did some years, you know. The biggest year I've seen us have to use the wild grounds was after Katrina, you know, because so much was wiped out.

**00:12:27**

**SR:** Let me—I'd like you to finish that thought except that I'm a little bit confused. So, just for the record, I'm going to ask some questions. So when you say "over here" —

**00:12:35**

**NC:** West side of Bayou Lafourche.

**00:12:38**

**SR:** Okay, the west side of Bayou—

**00:12:39**

**NC:** The west side of Bayou Lafourche. The east side was affected highly—95-percent mortality—by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the freshwater diversions that they unleashed to push the oil out. Either way you look at it, they're all gone, those oysters on the east side of Bayou Lafourche. And our abundance of oysters there that so many people say, "Well, they're dead, so you can say you had as much as you want." No, I can bring you and show you because they're still there. You know the dead oysters—full dredge after full dredge, of just dead oysters.

**00:13:26**

Seven to nine crops. Four were ready for the market when the oil spill happened. I was going to have--I was actually going to buy out Collins Oyster Company from my dad. He's 74, he had enough, and there was so much oysters and we had such a great demand for our oysters that the price wasn't going down. It was going to stay where it was. And that was enough for me to know that I could do all that—buy out the company, buy out all his properties that the boats use, the docks, and--and relieve him of that stress and take it over. And I--I can't do it now. There are too many unknowns, and--and he knows it and we know it, and I mean we probably got a couple of million dollars of investment—you know, property and boats, and maybe more than that. And I mean you just can't decide, “Well, I'm just going to buy this out and make it back,” because I don't know if I'm going to make it back now. I--I'm hoping to pay the expenses for the last year, and a decent enough income to survive until this time next year. We'll have [oysters] on the *west* side of Bayou Lafourche.

**00:14:52**

**SR:** So, on the east side, those are leases?

**00:14:55**

**NC:** Leases. We lease them, but I mean we call them our “farms,” but you know everybody does what they want with their lease. If--if you're going to go put shells, if you're going to put them in baby-taking areas where spats take and--and wild oysters grow, and if you just fish everything out and make it mud—we don't do that. We--we fish it; we always--we always got a three-year system. We're going to fish this this year, we're going to fish this next year, and then we'll fish this next year, and then we'll come back and fish this the following year. So you

always got—it's like farmland. You know you just--you're just harvesting in different years instead of different months. And with oysters in wild-growing areas, they usually grow a lot slower than say if I haul them to a non-wild-growing area, which is Caminada. They'll live in Caminada for 11 months out of the year. But I put enough oysters there to last me 11 months, you know, if they're--if they have enough oysters to put because Caminada gives you a great oyster.

**00:16:13**

So we do that for the people. We do that for our name. We do that for—it is a little bit better money, but it--it costs double the expense to do that, you see.

**00:16:26**

**SR:** Because you're hauling and everything?

**00:16:27**

**NC:** Because we're hauling it. Even if it's our oysters, the State's oysters, whatever, it still costs that extra money because I could just fish them straight off of my wild ground if I wanted—you know, if I didn't care about quality and taste and just a healthy oyster. Which, they're all healthy oysters. They're just different tasting. They're different—you know they're not—. And they grow slower. In Caminada they'll grow two to three times faster than they'll grow in the wilder areas because of the salinity and the current and the healthy water. And it just—so if I put oysters in September in Caminada, I can fish them—. Now, these are market oysters probably already, and some of them are a little under three-inches. Most of them are three-inches or better, so they're ready to go. I'm just--I'm just letting them get that water in them, healthy, and then

starting November fishing them. And by July I'll have them fished out. Because in August, when your four tides in August, that's when your oysters die. The water just don't move enough and they suffocate. In Caminada, you see. So, but it's not a wild-growing bed. So we--we know that.

**00:17:45**

So you know, like a lot of people say, well you know they think oysters just grow there."And we don't go through it into detail with everybody about it, but they don't, you know. And that's the reason why they don't, is because it's too close to the Gulf and in August it's too salty, too hot, and too stagnant, the water, so they suffocate. But by July I have my oysters fished out of there, you know. And if I don't I'll move them back to the wild areas. And--and then you got--you got predators. You got snails that eat them. You got drum fish that eat them, and you got oyster thieves, poaching. And I mean all three of them are very bad. *[Laughs]*

**00:18:34**

**SR:** So are you saying that you'll have really good, big, fat oysters in June out of there?

**00:18:45**

**NC:** Out of Caminada, I would, yeah.

**00:18:49**

**SR:** That's interesting because there's this sort of general knowledge that says that you don't—you shouldn't really be eating oysters in those months.

**00:19:00**

**NC:** We eat oysters year-round. My daddy lives on oysters. You name it, he cooks it. And raw is lunch most days for us. I mean when we're working, it's a ham sandwich or raw oysters. And you get tired of ham. **[Laughs]** Nothing towards the pig, but I mean raw oysters, hot sauce, and crackers—to us, it don't get any better. And--and when you love it like that, it makes it that much more special. And I don't know.

**00:19:44**

**SR:** Now let me ask you: Can you just explain to me what an oyster lease is?

**00:19:50**

**NC:** An oyster lease is so many acres. At one time, it was whatever you wanted, however many acres, you'd just go and confirm it with Wildlife and Fisheries survey department. What area, where you want it, and then they'll come survey it and that's your lease, the--the bottom. And then you'd--you'd take that piece and then a couple of years down the road, you might have wanted to add onto it. So you grab some more. And you see, when my dad jumped in the business and took over, it used to be Grand Isle Oyster Company—when my grandpa had it. And my dad bought it out from him and named it Collins Oyster Company. But they still worked it together, you know as father and son. It didn't matter; it was just my daddy wanted to get bigger and--and do more things, and because my grandpa and all had a lot of leases already. They had to start leasing the good bottom, where oysters grew wild. And my great-grandpa, after he got a motor in his boat would start traveling and--and getting around all--all these areas and just checking out stuff and doing things and finding out where oysters were and then and making my grandpa go get the lease.

**00:21:14**

And--and I guess my great-grandpa got a little of that legal ingenuity because when he lived in Chénière/Grand Isle-area, he was sort of the--the peacemaker over there. You know, he held himself up sort of as the sheriff of--of wherever people lived in that area. And there really wasn't any sheriffs back then, but he was the peace-holder, you know. And he carried his 44 on his side and never wore any shoes, [*Laughs*] and he would walk from one end to the other and anybody who had any trouble he'd settle it, you know.

**00:21:59**

And I don't know if you remember the movie \$8.50 [Interviewer's note: The full title is *Huit Piastres et Demie/\$8.50 a Barrel*] from Côte Blanche Productions with the big shrimp deal in maybe the early '70s. The shrimpers had quit shrimping because the factories wanted to give them \$3 and the shrimpers wanted \$8.50 a barrel. Well it's my great-grandfather and a couple of others that kind of settled it, and they settled on \$5, you know. But it took him to go out there and kind of make the peace, and you know some shrimpers won't admit that because he was a shrimper/oystermen/turtle fisher, and some people just didn't like him. But it's pretty much him that--that made the--the factories sit down and listen to the shrimpers and made them, you know: "Before you leave this room, y'all are going to come to a meeting," and--and they did.

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**SR:** Was that a documentary film?

**00:23:01**

**NC:** It was sort of based off of maybe hearsay stuff, [*Laughs*] and I'm not sure. You know, but it--it was a local production. And you could get it at the local libraries, and--and it's pretty funny, but they do mention him in it, and--and they even came and asked my grandpa to play his part. And my grandpa was like, "You better get off my yard." [*Laughs*] But it was fun.

**00:23:29**

**SR:** He sounds like a character, your grandpa?

**00:23:32**

**NC:** He--he was a quiet, quiet man; tough, quiet man, but—

**00:23:39**

**SR:** So these leases, in the beginning, when they were just sort of—it sounds like it was just a matter of claiming land.

**00:23:48**

**NC:** Well, the bottom land.

**00:23:49**

**SR:** The bottom land. Did they have—did they then, or do you now, have to pay for your leases?

**00:23:56**

NC: You had to pay then and now. It went up a little bit, but it's not too much. But there are talks about the State giving up all the water bottoms to four major landowners. They're going to let them—the four—the State is going to give up their rights for these four major landowners to take over all this water bottom. Now, if you have a lease, you can keep it with one of these landowners, but it'll probably go out—probably triple or quadruple what you're paying now. And three of those four for sure—I know through the grapevine already—are oil fields. And you have no rights to your bottom anymore. If they want to pass with a rig, then I hope you don't have oysters in my route because you have no more rights. And that *will* be in effect and *will* be done and *will* be passed, because the--the oil field—. And I'm not going to mention the specific one that's already in place; it's already leasing out bottom that wasn't leased before—land lost, area where land is lost in-between leases, and they're leasing it out. And I know this because an oyster fisherman that's fishing back here, an oyster lease-holder because he don't fish anymore, the one that holds the leases—he just sends boats out fishing—we're having a lot of trouble with them because they don't know where the leases are. They're just fishing for this man. And he says, "Look, I got this and this and this, and just go fish. Bring me the oysters." And they're going wherever they want, you know.

**00:25:46**

And--and that's what happened with the oyster industry, is these big factories. Now, don't get me wrong; oyster fishermen needed these factories at some point. They needed the steam factories. They needed the oyster-shucking houses. You need them at some point. Sometimes you got too much oysters to sell out of my retail cooler. So what am I going to do with all these oysters? I'm going to sell them to a factory and usually who we dealt with was P&J on Toulouse Street [in New Orleans]. You know, and good—great—people: Sal, Al, and

Mary Sunseri. And they helped us and we helped them, and real good family friends, you know, with--with them. But you see, they're a little different from all these other oyster factories. They've been there a long time also, since the 1878 or something; I'm not sure. But a lot of these other factories, even some in Texas, which are mostly the--the ones that don't care too much about the oyster fishermen here—or your out-of-state companies—and these oyster fishermen just get dependent on fishing for these factories. And they don't care about leases anymore. They let go their leases and just fish off the State public grounds.

**00:27:07**

And then they become—a year like this year after the oil spill, when there's no oysters hardly except a little bit in West Lafourche and Terrebonne—and then--and then it's going to fish out. So then you got all these oystermen that don't have leases and looking for oysters, and they get paid by the sack, so it don't really matter.

**00:27:32**

And--and that's a big thing, that we always considered ourselves farmers. We held onto our leases; we--we kept them healthy, producing, and living. We never fish out an area, a whole bay. You know, we decided we'll never fish out the whole bay, all the leases in that bay on either side. We'll always leave half of it for the following year because you never know. And--and you usually had enough with half. So that's where a lot of the trouble is coming in at, and--and then with land restoration and the State, and you know a lot—. I don't know how in detail you want me to get, I guess, but a lot of these smart people ain't too smart, and I'm talking about the Corps of Engineers, the State, these land restoration people. A lot of--a lot of things they want to do are very smart—a little late—but you--you're already changing maybe the eco-system. I don't know, a lot to do with the water. You're pushing freshwater where it used to be salty, brackish, and now

it's fresh. And the flooding didn't help, but that's natural. You know, hey, we--we could take anything that Mother Nature wants to give us, and we can take it because what Mother Nature does in comparison to man is so different.

**00:29:12**

A natural disaster—Katrina, for example—killed probably 40--50-percent of our oysters.

**00:29:24**

**SR:** Because?

**00:29:26**

**NC:** Pushing mud up on the reefs; grass from the marsh settling in the bayous, the deeps, just smothering them, smothering them out. But Mother Nature is going to wash—she's going to push up mud on your reef and she's going to wash out a reef that was there in the '50s that was covered by mud for 40 years and--and fill it full of babies. Yeah, you've got to wait four or five years for it, but it's coming. So we've been struggling since Katrina because of that, and that's what gave this buffer crop on--on both sides, but we used the west side more because the east side had got killed off a little more; it was a little more hit than the west side. And we just let them grow and just, you know, cultivated them and made them ready for this 2010 year that we didn't get to have them for. So we spent a lot of money. You know, even though they grow wild, we take the time and the effort to go and break them up and don't let them grow wild like coon oysters, we call them, when you get out of the shallows by the marsh, by the edge, and they're growing real long and paper shell because they're growing in that mud.

**00:30:41**

We don't want them to grow like that—or packs of 15 together, as beautiful as it is because they're all alive and it's life, and you know that that's going to feed your family and pay your bills, and you break that up into triples and doubles. And then when you fish them again, they're healthier and prettier and they're easier to deal with.

**00:31:02**

**SR:** Well I didn't realize that. I've never seen that kind of thing. So you go out while they're growing and sort of—and tend to your crop?

**00:31:08**

**NC:** Right, right.

**00:31:11**

**SR:** It's like weeding or—?

**00:31:11**

**NC:** Exactly, exactly, and--and we still do that to this day. I'm doing that back here, right now. When I start selling in the winter, they're not going to be paper shell and paquet—we call them paquet, real big packs, and you break that up and—.

**00:31:30**

**SR:** Um—

**00:31:32**

**NC:** But it's expensive. We do more—we do double and triple the work to our grounds than most people care to even think about doing.

**00:31:42**

**SR:** Tell me: What makes them have a paper shell?

**00:31:45**

**NC:** Just growing so fast and not being messed with and just—a natural oyster will lay in the mud. They're growing so fast they get all that mud that they just grow so fast that their--their tip is just so you could break it, you know. But that's just survival to them, to the oyster. Now, when you grow them on reefs, they'll tend to be a lot healthier, stronger shell, because they don't have to fight to get out of that mud or to survive. They can just sit back and grow. You know, and that's a big thing of why we like our—you know, we maintain our reefs as well as our growing oysters.

**00:32:33**

**SR:** There's so much. But let me--let me ask—. So with your leases, first of all, it sounds like even though that's basically claimed land, like land that your family claimed at one point and that you've been paying a rent or a tax to be able to work and maintain and call it your own; it sounds to me like it's not really your own if--if the State can go sell that land or give that land to someone else, and they can start bringing rigs through it, or--or whatever they would do.

**00:33:11**

**NC:** Right, well, you know it's not. It's not, and it's getting worse. You're getting less and less, so to speak, authority. Authority on your own lease. You know you really—the State is ready to throw it in your face: “It's not yours; you're just leasing it.” You know, and an oil field--the oil field owns so much of Louisiana. People don't realize. They don't have to pay the oystermen when they pass through it. Their own lease it don't matter, you know what I mean? So that's why they become the major landowners, is because they own so much mud and stop people—as soon as people let their leases go, they're right there to grab it, you know. Now you can't do that anymore. If you don't pay your lease or sign it over to somebody, it's for the State [*Finger Snaps*], and that's got to do a lot with oil field also.

**00:34:15**

I'm not against the oil field. Look, I got a gas guzzler outside. I got a diesel truck, a diesel cooler truck. I mean you know we--that's how we was brought up. That's how we live. And we're dependent on oil and gas, and that's the government's fault—not mine. I just got to live that way because that's how we grow up--we grew up. And that's where we're at in life in America, you know. The whole world really. But I'm not mad at—no, I am, but [*Laughs*] it's just weird.

**00:34:52**

**SR:** It's very complicated.

**00:34:53**

**NC:** It is.

**00:34:55**

**SR:** Okay. Well, I just wanted to establish that--that your leases you don't technically own, which is a little bit crazy considering how long you've been dependent on--on them for your livelihood. But then you've--you've talked about—you know, we've talked in a roundabout way about the 2010 oil spill. But let me make sure I understand. So, after Katrina you spent basically five years really trying to build back your oyster supply, and you were about ready to have this bumper crop when the oil spill happened. Is that—do I understand correctly?

**00:35:35**

**NC:** That is very correct. That is on the money. And you know a great year, probably one of my best years ever, turned out to be—well, except for working on the Vessels of Opportunity, pretty much the worst year of my commercial fishermen life. I made a little more in 2010 on my W-2 because of Vessels of Opportunity. Other than that, the worst year of my life. I worked on the Vessels of Opportunity thinking, “I'm going to help them out. I'm going to clean this up and going to get our fisheries back.” And not just oysters—shrimp, fish, crabs, everything.

**00:36:41**

Got out there and saw that it was the biggest joke ever, money scandal. It was a tax scandal. “Here's some money. We're going to pay y'all to do nothing,” and made y'all's year. You know, you was going to be busy spending that money and not care about what the real thing is.

**00:37:02**

**SR:** Tell me, for the record, what Vessels of Opportunity was.

**00:37:05**

**NC:** Vessels of Opportunity was, individual parishes got the fishermen to go and help clean up the oil coming inshore. Now there was a lot offshore. We didn't--we were small boats so we didn't go offshore, but we went inshore, and my three oyster boats—well, my--my dad's three oyster boats worked on it for two months—two and a half months. And we were supply boats, so we brought the supplies out to the--to the guys that were skimming with booms and all this stuff that didn't pick up oil at all. [*Laughs*] At all. I mean I saw it firsthand, so—. They said they maybe picked up with--with everything, the whole Vessels of Opportunity thing, like four-percent of the oil. I think it's like .4-percent. That's how much oil I saw picked up. Those booms did not—the dispersant, the disbursed oil, would not stick to the booms. If it would have been straight oil, that would have soaked it right up.

**00:38:21**

And I understand that was way too much oil out there to leave, but really? So you hide it; you put it all on the bottom with dispersant, which is—you got so many cancer-causing carcinogens in it. Really? I don't understand it. But you know what? We didn't know what else to do, and--and you know I was actually fishing in Caminada Bay—had me and four hands with me on--on my big oyster boat—and I was fishing out my oysters so that I didn't have any left in August to die. And--and a plane was going—I later found out it was going down, but I thought it was going down when I saw it, but it flew right over us. And it was letting out all of its dispersant because it *was* going down. And this was actually—I forget her name, but she's with

the University of Connecticut. And she came down with her whole class and came and talked to me and my father, and--and I had told her that on the side.

**00:39:32**

And she came back since then and talked to me about it, and she pulled up records and said on that date—and I don't remember quite the date. It was May 20<sup>th</sup> or something, or maybe 19<sup>th</sup>, and she said there was a plane going down that day and he was told to release his dispersant. And so we were sprayed directly. And, you know, you would have told me “dispersant” that day? I don't know what in the hell that is, you know. Now I know what it is, and--and you know what can I do about it?

**00:40:06**

But the smart people, the scientists and college professors and all that, tell me not to worry about it. And I was--I was worried for my kids. I'm not worried for me. I'm not that old; I'm not ready to die or be sick, but I don't want them having to be sick, whatever is going to come of it. But you know what? Too late. Hopefully not, but all the information I got and believe—. Another lady—I can't remember her name—from Alaska came down and talked a lot to the fishermen about what happened with the Valdez, and you know she told me, she said, “You know, I'd like to tell you that y'all are not going to be affected by it,” she said, “But we live like 1,400 feet above the sea level, whereas y'all live below sea level, so this stuff traveled probably past Thibodeaux.” And you know, a lot of people don't understand that. I--I always—right when it was said, [*Finger Snaps*] I always felt something inside that was wrong about it.

**00:41:22**

**SR:** Right when what was said?

**00:41:23**

**NC:** Dispersant, yeah.

**00:41:28**

**SR:** What was the—when was the moment when you started getting worried? I mean an oil spill isn't that unusual necessarily. Like, there are always little oil spills. But when did--when did you know that this was going to be a problem?

**00:41:44**

**NC:** I knew it was going to be a problem, and I actually had David [Interviewer's note: David Grunfeld, a photographer for *The Times-Picayune* newspaper] with me out on the boat and we was just going—. My oysters were still alive in Caminada, and these little contracted oil responder boats were hauling boom around islands I was fishing and blocking the islands. And I was like, "Man, this is getting real."

**00:42:12**

And--and it was intruding on the Barataria estuary, which is, oh, right there in my backyard like. So a couple days later I went out and I checked my oysters and they were all still alive. This is before they opened the freshwater. And you weren't allowed to go back after they closed the waters; we weren't allowed to go back, and then in September I believe I went and they had opened up some sport fishing areas. Well, they had most of it blocked off with boom; that's why I can never go back. And plus, the Coast Guard didn't want you back there. They didn't want you to see stuff and whatever.

**00:43:02**

Which really didn't stop me until I couldn't pass because of the booms, because I really didn't listen to nobody at that point. But I had to turn around one time because too many beds were blocked with booms, and you know, I can only pull a few off the line before the Coast Guard approaches you. And then they want to—all kind of BS. But I did get to go in September, and all my oysters were dead. And then I talked to somebody who was working—and really don't want to be known or mentioned that they said that, so I won't mention their name or nothing—but they said when the oysters died the meat was just—. After they rotted on the bottom, the stomachs floated up and they were just all over the bay. And he said, “As far as you could see,” he said. “It stunk.” And they would get out of there. Very, very heartbreaking for me and my family, my father, who really never—[he'd] seen oil spills in the '70s, seen oil spills in the '50s that they never dispersed. They just cleaned up what they saw and let nature take its course, because it's all natural. It--it eventually goes away.

**00:44:24**

Dispersed oil, on the other hand, is very different. So right then, September 2010, was when I knew that when that--that crop of oysters was basically gone—wiped out all the way to Mississippi, you know. It's not like it was just my oysters; it was everybody's oysters from there on. That was the scariest. That's when I knew, you know, but [I] expected BP to man up and handle their catastrophic event.

**00:45:13**

They gave me \$14,000, so I guess I'm good for life. **[Laughs]** You know, I'll put that in the bank and live off the interest. I don't know what in the hell they want me to do with that. So I

bought a truck, and I don't know if I'm going to have to sell it to keep my house. They gave the oyster company \$44,000, and I thought that was another joke—spit in the face, so to speak.

**00:45:42**

**SR:** Well what is that compared to what kind of money comes through the oyster company in a year?

**00:45:51**

**NC:** We usually do about \$300,000, which ain't much to a lot of people. And that's gross, so you're looking at paying me and a couple of hands and--and the company's bills, and that's since, probably, Katrina. You know before that we probably had some \$500,000--\$600,000 years.

**00:46:16**

That was probably basic gross, because after expense and taxes, I mean, shew. What you got left? So I mean, actually, this season if I could have worked two boats out of my three for 10 months, I'm going at least \$1,000,000 year. That's how good this 2010 would have been. It's not a lot to a lot of people; it's a lot to me, it's a lot to us. We're just a little family business, and probably we employ, when they—during the holidays and the winter, we might have up to 15 employees, so it's not a big thing, but to us it was everything.

**00:47:12**

**SR:** What kind of—you said that you--you are tending to some oysters right now that you'll be able to sell in the winter. And hopefully you'll break even for expenses. Do you have--do you have employees right now?

**00:47:27**

**NC:** I don't have any employees right now. I've got my brother and my best friend that comes and helps me out, but as far as you know expenses, the fuel and the boat, and their time is—they're not being paid. But they're going to be there for me in November when I open my doors to the public, and they're going to help me out, so that's why they're helping me out now. My best friend, he's a carpenter. And that's the only reason he's coming, is because he really can't find any work. And my brother has just been with us forever, so—.

**00:48:11**

**SR:** What's your brother's name?

**00:48:13**

**NC:** Levi. The one in the white shirt.

**00:48:18**

**SR:** We're looking at a photo that David—you mentioned David earlier. David Grunfeld is a photographer from *The Times-Picayune* newspaper, and we're looking at a photo of Nick and his father and his brothers.

**00:48:31**

**NC:** And my nephew, so there's really five generations. Well he went off and got another job.

**00:48:40**

**SR:** Well that's what I was going to ask. So the employees that you've had, the people you've had working with you who aren't working with you right now—what are they doing?

**00:48:45**

**NC:** They--they went off to get jobs. You know, if--if they could. In the oil field. Lucky to get a job, I guess, at this point because it's not easy. But they did. Two of them for sure. One was an old man. He--he's not going to work anymore. He retired. And I mean the rest it's a lot of family, you know. My brother Tracy went into the oil field. His--his wife's family was in it. My nephew went to work in [Port] Fourchon. Me and my dad, my dad's wife, Levi—none of us went to do anything because I can't go get a job and take care of my oysters, watch the thieves. You know, I just can't. And BP expects that I can. But I can't. I'm not letting my family business just go until it's gone. You know, and so I don't care who--who likes it and who don't; that's how I feel and that's what I'm going to do. And they just don't understand it, or they don't care. I'm pretty sure it's the second one, but—. **[Laughs]**

**00:50:12**

**SR:** Right, so there's the assumption that you could go get another job, but if you aren't around to tend to all this on a daily basis, it for sure will die.

**00:50:25**

**NC:** It'll die off. Not only the oysters—they'll get stolen. But you got the boats. I mean, you got to run those motors. You got to keep your batteries charged, or if you you leave that alone for two years, like anything else, you come to use it and you can have all kinds of trouble. You can have battery trouble. You're going to have filter trouble. You're going to have—just have motor trouble. You're going—everything is going to be rusted that can rust. I mean, and we got three boats. We got three docks. We got wharfs you got to build to get to one dock. After every little storm, with no land left you got to go rebuild the wharf. You got to—I got a cooler truck we just bought in the beginning of—well, at the end of 2009—and I mean we just put a brand new cooler in it, cooling unit, and all these things that—you know, that was \$14,000. The truck was \$25,000. The--the oysters—just the oyster cooler truck, you know, and then not to be able to use it. Actually, a month before the oil spill, I had put a cooler on my boat. And we was totally against that because my dad—we sold oysters all our life. My dad is probably—he's one of the oldest oystermen in Louisiana; you know, a farmer. He used to be a kid, and he would sell oysters from underneath a tree while his daddy and grandpa were fishing. He used to have sit and watch and sell oysters for \$2 a sack.

**00:52:22**

And I think he'd make a quarter a day doing that. That's a while ago.

**00:52:31**

**SR:** So y'all were against putting a cooler on the boat. But why did you?

**00:52:35**

**NC:** Well, I mean you can only fight so much, and the problems that would arise from not doing it would hurt our name and become very costly in fines.

**00:52:53**

**SR:** Well what--what could happen without a cooler?

**00:52:54**

**NC:** I don't know. I'm not sure because we eat them all the time, summer or not. We're all alive. *[Laughs]*

**00:53:02**

**SR:** So it was a safety--just a safety precaution?

**00:53:03**

**NC:** FDA, Board of Health deal.

**00:53:06**

**SR:** This must be really, really hard for your father to see this happening.

**00:53:10**

**NC:** I ain't never seen my dad discouraged, hopeless, any of those adjectives that would describe a bad feeling about oystering, oysters, whatever comes under that name, and I see it now. I seen him feel all those things—depressed. My dad was the strongest man in the world. Still is; he's--

he's very liked. And people listen to him, even though he got a seventh grade education. He knows and he's for the fishermen at all times.

**00:53:59**

At first we didn't think it was that bad and we didn't care. But after BP treated us the way they did, that's when I seen it. Because he expected enough [money] to not worry. And--and we didn't get it in dealing with Feinberg right now [Interviewer's note: Kenneth Feinberg is the "payment czar" for Gulf Coast claims against BP]. And Feinberg actually talked to him personally, called him out, because everybody—he wants to know who had the best oysters. Oyster fisherman, they'll tell you: Wilbert Collins. And he wanted to know what made our oysters so special. Well you know, it's a little tender loving care is all. And Caminada Bay—you can't leave Caminada Bay out of it, but—. He said, "Well in 48 hours we're going to take care of you," and that was like six months ago. And he won't talk to him now, you know. **[Laughs]** So it's—

**00:54:57**

**SR:** Can you tell me, for the record, who Feinberg is?

**00:55:00**

**NC:** Kenneth Feinberg. He's the financial law firm BP hired to distribute the money, the \$20 billion to the fishermen or whomever the oil spill may have hurt. Which, it's going to go to the federal government, state, and local government more than any fishermen, I guarantee you. New politicians are going to get nice funds for their campaign, things like that. That's where we see the money going—the State. You know, Wildlife and Fisheries, Board of Health, Wildlife and

Fisheries. I don't know; I don't understand. BP bought them all new boats, sea planes, helicopters, trucks. Well, they only got a little bit of oysters in the State of Louisiana. You think you could put your boat in the water and come help me watch them so nobody steals them? They didn't—you know, they don't care. They got too much going on—land restoration. It's an awesome thing. I think you would have needed to start it when the oil fields started digging up all these canals because that's really what got your saltwater intrusion going. And then you know maybe all the oil they're pumping out, land sinking; I'm not sure. I'm--I'm just an oyster fisherman.

**00:56:34**

The Corps of Engineers, they don't seem to be much brighter than me. [*Laughs*] I'm not the brightest star in the sky, but what--what they've done—. They didn't even fix the levees from Katrina; they knew [for] 40 years Katrina was coming. They got money every year from the federal government to do it, and—you know, I just weigh things out. They always weigh it for the wrong, [*Laughs*] to me, in my opinion.

**00:57:01**

**SR:** Well I think that's the opinion of a lot of people who are living this day in and day out. You mentioned the oyster thieves a lot. What do you—it sounds like nobody is policing it, but--but you, or individual oyster fishermen.

**00:57:18**

**NC:** If you don't watch your oysters on your lease, you're going to go there one day and not have them.

**00:57:24**

**SR:** Well what do you do if you see somebody taking your oysters?

**00:57:26**

**NC:** Well your first thing you're supposed to do, right now, these days, is call your local authorities, whether it be the local sheriff's office or the Wildlife and Fisheries. By the time one of them get out there, that oysterman is gone. He ain't hanging around unless you got him at gunpoint.

**00:57:52**

Now, let's go back 20 years and nobody was called. They were--they were ducking 30--30 bullets, okay. But you do that now, and then you're the no-good murderer, maybe, you know. It depends on what happens and where the bullet goes.

**00:58:15**

**SR:** So what do you do? Do you talk to--do you talk to those people, or do you just—?

**00:58:20**

**NC:** Well I let them know where my area is at. I got a lot of friends that go sport fishing, crab fishing, shrimping, so when I'm not back there somebody usually is, but nobody is ever there 24/7. You know what I mean? And I got a little abundance of oysters over there, and--and what I mean by that is it's enough for me but it's not enough for the State of Louisiana. Or anybody else

for that matter. It's enough for me, my family business—not just me, you know, but my family business. It's enough to probably get us out of debt, make a little money to survive another year.

**00:59:03**

But if these fishermen that steal them take out half of what I got, that cuts out my bills and my family's--food out of my family's mouth, and some of my expense. So you know that--that goes into my profit that I could put towards all that stuff—ongoing expense. Since Katrina, we still have expense. And my dad just don't like to tell us about it so that we don't worry about it, but he endures that expense all these years, hoping—. Well, we knew we was going to get it back in 2010, but we--we didn't because of the oil spill. So now we're looking at just, well, let's get some back and--and live and keep ourselves healthy and keep a name and see what's going to happen, because we still don't know. The spring spat take that was supposed to take on the east side, it's very grim, very grim. It's not--it's not happening. In five years, those spats that grow up, I'm not going to make money off of them because there's not enough to fish. There won't be enough market oysters in five years off of last spring's spat set. It's just not.

**01:00:29**

**SR:** Is that because of the spat died, or there weren't enough to begin with?

**01:00:37**

**NC:** Hmm, I'm not sure. There are a few spats—not many, not many at all. See, after Katrina, you went back there and you'd take an empty shell, a dead shell or a dead oyster, the two shells that was opened up, and you'd break that open and there was so many spats that you couldn't see

the shell. You knew it was the shell, but you seen all these spat. Every empty space available had a baby oyster growing.

**01:01:08**

Now all these oysters ain't going to grow and live. But probably 10, 20-percent of them will. The one is going to kill off the other one so it has space to grow. The weak will die and the strong will survive. And that's the nature of it. But out of those—say I had 50 spat or 100 spat on each shell; if I get 10 oysters out of that, you know that's only—oh, that's five oysters on each shell. Well, if I got five oysters that come out of every shell in the bottom, I got a lot. Sure, 100 spat is awesome. But I went out there and I brought David and brought Brett [Interviewer's note: Nick is referring to Brett Anderson, a journalist for *The Times-Picayune* newspaper], and I brought my lawyers, and we went and we had trouble—in a full dredge of oyster shells, dead oysters, we had trouble finding a dozen spat in a full dredge. Not on one shell. So yeah, it's--it's not happening. So when they talk about the oystermen and they tell you, “Well, in five years everything is going to be better,” well, they're lying. **[Laughs]**

**01:02:27**

**SR:** Now, do you think that that's because of the freshwater, the dispersant, or—?

**01:02:37**

**NC:** All of the above.

**01:02:38**

**SR:** Yeah.

**01:02:39**

**NC:** Mostly the freshwater killed everything. Now, why the babies didn't take—is the--the dispersant doing something to the reproduction? Is the water too fresh? I--I mean, I don't know. We—my dad—still monitors the--the salinity back where everything died. The water salinity has gotten salty enough for the babies to have taken over everything, and they didn't. So where's the problem? What are the biologists doing? They're all--they're all hired by BP for water health inspection stuff, but they're all being paid by BP. But where's the problem then? You know, nobody is getting down to the bottom of it. There's so many studies being done. That's what I told my dad the other day. I said, "Look," I said. "You're either going to have to get—we're going to have to get a job with the state or federal government or get on one of these studies," because it's all that's going on with the money, you know, and it's ridiculous. It really is.

**01:03:52**

**SR:** So your hope is just to make it to next year, basically, at this point?

**01:03:54**

**NC:** Make it to next year and it's going to give us a little. And this is—working this year, this winter, making oysters is going to give us a little breathing room, a little--little mind back to back where we was and little breathing room. And hopefully we got a fall set in November or October that kind of bumpers that spring set, because you do have two sets a year—fall and spring—for the spat. And we're hoping to see more in the fall, because I mean if we got to rely on BP, the state, local government, federal government—it's something we don't want to rely

on. We never did and we never—we just don't want to. I got a denial letter from the GCCF [Gulf Coast Claims Facility] right here. I got a—

**01:04:54**

**SR:** What is that?

**01:04:54**

**NC:** That's denying me emergency funds from the oil relief program. Now I got that letter after they gave me \$14,000, but—and I got another one from unemployment that says after seven—. I paid unemployment for 25 years this year. Twenty-five years. I've been getting paid with a check, paying my unemployment, and after seven months—seven months of getting \$220 a week—I've exhausted my unemployment. So you know, **[Laughs]** what you going to do? You know I can't--I can't wait until I could get my retirement. **[Laughs]** I'll never get that, you know. That's a joke on record. **[Laughs]**

**01:05:53**

**SR:** I kind of have a stomach ache right now. I can't imagine what it's like to be facing all that every day.

**01:05:59**

**NC:** You know, 25 years I've been getting paid with a check, and--and from earlier than that as a kid, I've never worried about nothing. I don't live an extravagant life. But I live a happy, fulfilled life. My kids are happy. My little boy plays baseball, football; he's a good sport. He's

good at school. I mean, I got a daughter. I got a grandkid. I got an older son that works with his uncle. And I mean, just the house note, yeah; I might have went two months without paying it, because I didn't pay it. Right now I'm two months without paying it because who is going to pay it, you know?

**01:06:52**

Now, I'll get the money somehow. I'm going to do something. I'll get a little job here and there, and I'm going to pay my house note. But to have to worry about where that money is going to come from is just so different. And--and it's aggravating and makes you angry. The press—. I mentioned angry? *[Laughs]*

**01:07:17**

**SR:** In a controlled—in a very controlled way, yes. Well tell me: When we talked on the phone, you told me what you love about your job and about being out on the water. Can you talk a little bit about that? Like why you would be working so hard to keep doing this?

**01:07:35**

**NC:** Well not only fourth generation in it; we--we uphold a great name for our quality oyster. I take big, big pride in--in being known nationwide for our oysters—even other countries. Some--some people want our oysters, or have tasted them and commented that they're the best. I always leave that up to the one tasting it. I know they're the best. They're my oysters. Of course they're going to be. Every oystermen is going to tell you that. And sometimes other oysters do come close because they get that right salinity and they're at that fat level, you know. But more than that, being out on that water is just a peaceful environment. You don't have none of the worries

of being on land. **[Laughs]** I mean, just the wildlife, the--the peace of mind of being out there. You're pretty much all alone. There may be a couple of sports[men] come during the day and fish around, but nobody comes to bother you, except Wildlife and Fisheries want to come check your licenses and stuff every once in a while, but—. Biologists used to come, which was—. You like to see people out there, but—because in the winter, an oyster fishermen, he's usually gone for six months, you know. You come home, it's late at night and you're up early in the morning, so you really didn't come home because all you did was take a bath and sleep and visit a little bit with your family. Other than that, you're gone all winter.

**01:09:36**

And you're on that water, and I--I love it there. I love being on that water. It's just a different world out there; I don't know.

**01:09:52**

**SR:** Do you listen to the radio, or—?

**01:09:54**

**NC:** Sometimes. **[Laughs]** Sometimes. Personally, I won't. I don't like to. My deckhands, sometimes they want—they always want to, but I like to listen to my engine. I like to make sure it's not going to run out of water or oil. And I can hear it if it does because I've heard that engine for 25 years. I know what it's supposed to sound like. I just like to hear when that porpoise jumps, or you know, ducks flying over. Or--or stopping for lunch when stopping the engine, and--and just the peaceful quiet. I mean, that's when you really hear the ducks, the fish, and--and you know you hear all that and it's--it's awesome. It's tranquility. **[Laughs]**

**01:10:49**

**SR:** Why do you think that you're the one of your—you know, the six siblings—that got this bug to carry this on?

**01:10:58**

**NC:** Actually, they all had the same opportunity I have, but like I said, when I got out of school I--I always knew what I was going to do when I grew up, and I always—you know, oystering stinks and it's dirty, and it--it don't matter. You can take a bath. Hell, you can dive in the lake if it's hot or whatever. But I always knew that that's what I was going to do. My heart was always in that, and--and why not? We was a great aspiring company that--that held up a pride and quality oyster, you know. And it--it was just—I loved it; I always took pride in it. I mean we work hard, we reaped the benefits from it, of course, but a lot of the benefits don't come so much financially. They come from the people you meet and the, just, I don't know.

**01:12:19**

**SR:** What about, I met your youngest son. He's nine, is that right, Jordan?

**01:12:24**

**NC:** Jaden.

**01:12:24**

**SR:** Oh, Jaden, sorry. Does he go out ever?

**01:12:26**

**NC:** Oh, he does, actually. Well he's not out right there, but he--he does come out with me a lot actually. He--he grew up just like me, from--from one year old to a five years old, he was out on that boat until he started school. And--and at seven years old, he was culling oysters. And--and eight, he was culling oysters, and for the oil spill he never came out on the boat because we couldn't go oystering. And I think he—he didn't forget, but--and he don't really miss it because it's really not his job yet. And I want him to have his education because it looks like commercial fishermen are going to be a thing of the past eventually here. I hope to God not. It's looking bad, though. It's looking bad.

**01:13:32**

That [photo] was taken by *Independent* news [*The Independent Weekly*] in Lafayette, and that's the same boat, just a different way of the front of it, and that's my father, me, and Jaden. And he did that—that was a school project he done on heritage.

**01:14:01**

**SR:** That's great. It's--it's like poster board. It says "Collins Oysters" at the top, and then there's a photocopy of this article that I guess they ran in *The Independent*, and then a report by Jaden and some photos. It's beautiful.

**01:14:18**

**NC:** He culled oysters. He--he knows how to shovel them, sack them up. He--he actually told me when he was eight, on his last outing with me on the oyster reef, that, "Okay, Dad. I know

how to do all the deckhand's work now. Now I want to do your job. **[Laughs]** I want to learn how to work the wench and fish the oysters.” So that was--that's something—you know, I remember being that age on the oyster boat because I *had* to go. It wasn't an option for me. **[Laughs]** For him, it was an option because I wasn't hard on him. I didn't make him do it, because he could have stayed in bed and sleep. And we got generators now so you got air-conditioning, TV, and Play Station 3, so he didn't have to come out on that deck and catch the crabs off the deck. Because, when you oyster, you catch crabs, and every once in a while fish—and different types of crabs. You catch stone crabs, blue crabs, and--and oysters, of course. And--and he'd come out and do that because he wanted to. It's in his blood, I guess. **[Laughs]**

**01:15:41**

**SR:** When you catch crabs, do you sell them, or are they just for you?

**01:15:44**

**NC:** No, we keep that for personal use. We always give it to some family member or boil them ourselves, you know, and make crab patties. Or, depending on how much you catch—usually enough for a boil for one family. So every--every other day we take turns bringing them home to our family, you know.

**01:16:06**

**SR:** I should ask you: I know you have a retail business. What percentage of--of the oysters—I'm talking like pre-oil spill now—what percentage would you sell retail, and then what percentage would you sell to--to either restaurants or P&J-type businesses?

**01:16:25**

**NC:** Well, on that note, I can't leave out Black's Oyster. There used to be Black's Oyster Bar and Restaurant in Abbeville, but after--after one of them hurricanes—Gustav maybe—

**01:16:49**

**SR:** Gustav, I think.

**01:16:50**

**NC:** I think so. It kind of wiped them out, and he let go of the restaurant. He was still hauling the oysters, but his grandpa—or his daddy and my grandpa—that's how far back our sales go with them. Now for the oil spill we stopped selling to them, but he--he was more like in-between wholesale and retail, because he don't buy as much as the wholesalers. But he don't--he's not buying that retail price.

**01:17:26**

But we did ship a lot that way, towards the Lafayette-Abbeville-New Iberia area, and--and he distributed them in that part of Louisiana, whereas P&J distributed—. But as far as the--the amount of oysters, I would have to say it depends on the season. You know, it depends on what amount you got. Since right before Katrina, it kind of declined naturally, to hardly sending maybe once every other week to the factory a load of 160 sacks, 200 sacks—going from, say, four days a week to once every two weeks, and then to none after Katrina—none at all. Because there wasn't even enough for our retail. So it depends on the year, really.

**01:18:30**

Very plentiful years, you're going to be selling a lot more to the factory than your retail. Your retail is going to always sell what it sells. But depending on--on the supply you have, depends on where it goes. Like this year, I may wholesale a little bit Black's if--if he even wants to deal with them, if he's still messing with them. Other than that, I really don't think I could afford to sell them wholesale to the factories, because I'm wondering if I'm going to have enough for my retail.

**01:19:09**

**SR:** And you make more money selling them retail?

**01:19:13**

**NC:** Yeah.

**01:19:14**

**SR:** When do you anticipate your retail opening up?

**01:19:16**

**NC:** November 1<sup>st</sup> we're going to open the doors. And we're going to sell until we run out, and it's not going to be long. You know, probably seven or eight months.

**01:19:33**

**SR:** You mentioned earlier that you don't--you don't fish with tongs, but your great-grandfather probably did that, and maybe even your grandfather?

**01:19:46**

**NC:** And my father even done it in his younger days.

**01:19:48**

**SR:** Does anybody do that around here anymore?

**01:19:51**

**NC:** Not around here much. West Louisiana, Calcasieu. I believe that's the only way you could fish them. Mississippi, they have an area just for tonging. So, yeah, it's still around.

**01:20:05**

**SR:** But tell me what method you use.

**01:20:09**

**NC:** Oh, I use two dredges on a boat. On a table; the dredge comes up on the table—very different. When I was a kid, we worked off the deck. The dredge came up on the deck. And you--you had to sit down or bend over and work that pile of oysters. Now, in--in the early '90s, my grandfather was sick with diabetes and couldn't come out on the boats anymore. And we had just built our new oyster boat—fiberglass—and we built all the specs to put in—the dredge came up on the deck, actually. The \$300,000 boat, you know, and--and people already had tables. You could stand up and work your oysters off the table.

**01:21:09**

And so I was going—I told my dad, I said, “Look man,” I said. “We need to put some tables on the boat.” And this is—and we were going with the three oyster boats across the river to Black Bay and sell to the--to the factory. And my dad said, “Well,” he said. “After Papi goes to bed tonight,” he said. “You grab the boat—our big boat, not the new one but our older one—and you bring it to the welding shop down the bayou, and they’re going to build you something to support the dredge and have a table to work off of.” But it was kind of a contraption, that first build, just to try it out.

**01:21:54**

So we went out and we—and then I had to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning to go get the boat and pass, because we went to take the Intracoastal [Waterway] so my grandpa didn't see, because he did not want tables on the boat. So we had to do it all cache, which means secretly, you know, that he didn't see. And when we got out there, my daddy and my brother were both skeptical because they listened to my grandpa, which I did too. I didn't want to be against him. It was the new way, you know. It was just time to accept it.

**01:22:35**

And *he* wasn't accepting it no matter what, and he called the shots. But when we got out there, my boat with the tables—at the end of the day, I made more than the other two boats put together. So after four days of that, my daddy said, “You know what? Let's go in, and we're putting tables on all three boats.” And that's what we did. And you know, it's just a funny story because it's a part of our--our family business history.

**01:23:12**

**SR:** Did your grandfather ever see that?

**01:23:16**

**NC:** Yes, he did, he did. And I wasn't there for the argument. [*Laughs*] Actually, my dad had to deal with that, but ultimately it produced more, you know, so he had to kind of go with it.

**01:23:33**

**SR:** You know so much about your--your family history and the history of the business. I guess that you probably tell a lot of stories when you're out on the water all together. Is there someone in your family who is, like, a really good storyteller, that you've learned things from?

**01:23:50**

**NC:** My dad, my brother Tracy—they--they keep up with that and take pride in it and enjoy it.

**01:24:03**

**SR:** Is anybody writing it all down?

**01:24:07**

**NC:** I don't think so. I don't believe—we're in a few books, mostly about food, and—

**01:24:24**

**SR:** You need a family historian.

**01:24:25**

NC: Yeah, yeah.

**01:24:27**

SR: Well I don't—you've given me so much of your time; I'm going to let us wrap this up really soon, but I have to ask you about oysters: How you eat your oysters. I mean, I know that you said that you love eating them raw, and that's the best part. I've heard about your oyster spaghetti. I'm wondering if you can tell me what that is, and--and also maybe some other ways that y'all customarily eat your oysters.

**01:24:53**

NC: We eat--we eat oysters fried—well, raw, fried, spaghetti, fricassee, Bienville, dressing. And our way is probably a little different than traditional ways in the restaurant, so to speak, because every little family's got their own little different ingredient, you know. Oyster marinade, which is a raw oyster marinated in a sauce—ketchup, hot sauce, onions. Now, this is our kind of--my father's legacy, so to speak. He--he started doing this. And a lot of people do it, but nobody does it like him, to a lot of people. To me, it's the best. I make it also, but he makes it great. And we got a little secret ingredient we put in there, but people go crazy for this oyster marinade. And--and it's still a raw oyster, you know, so it's not cooked or anything. It's just marinated and kept cold, and you eat it on a cracker and it's awesome. I mean, it's awesome.

**01:26:16**

But like my mom would--would make this oyster dressing, and she would take these little bowls that you can bake in—glass bowls or whatever—and she'd put some oyster dressing in there. And not too thick—you know, maybe an inch, inch and a half—and then put some bread

crumbs on top and bake that until it was brown. And me and my brother, Tracy, used to fight for that. I mean, and me and my daddy will sit back; my daddy will cook an oyster dressing, like you know you stuff the turkey with for Thanksgiving, with no meat and just oysters and vegetables. And--and we'll sit down and [eat it] straight out of the pot; it never makes it anywhere, you know. **[Laughs]** We'll do that. He'll probably make one every other month. That's just—we love it.

**01:27:15**

You know, I hate to say it: I'm not too crazy for oyster spaghetti or fricassee. But if you throw some shrimp in it, I'm good to go—with the oysters, you know.

**01:27:25**

**SR:** Well, what is oyster spaghetti?

**01:27:28**

**NC:** Oyster spaghetti is just a spaghetti, but instead of using pork, beef, or shrimp, you're throwing oysters in there.

**01:27:35**

**SR:** So there's a red sauce?

**01:27:37**

**NC:** A red sauce, yeah. I mean, it's just spaghetti. It's just with oysters. And you know, yeah, I guess coming from, "life gives you lemons, you make lemonade." Well, it gave us oysters, so we make oyster everything. And we eat it. We love it.

**01:27:52**

**SR:** What is fricassee?

**01:27:54**

**NC:** Fricassee is the brown roux. It's not a gumbo. It's not soupy. It's thick with potatoes and your choice of whatever you want—shrimp, oysters, beef. I mean, you can make any kind of fricassee, but it's a thick—it's, after you make your roux, you don't put as much water to make the gumbo; you keep it at a low level, and it's thick, on rice.

**01:28:23**

**SR:** What--what about gumbo?

**01:28:24**

**NC:** Gumbo is—well, [*Laughs*] my dad will make a straight oyster gumbo. [*Laughs*] Straight. Personally, I make a seafood gumbo. I'm putting oysters, for sure, but shrimp. I'll put chicken breasts cut up, and maybe a couple of legs or--or thighs, just to get that broth out of the bowl for flavor. And I'll put eggs in there, and I'll put tomatoes in there. But that's me. I'm a little different on my cooking than they are. But my dad grew up in the old days when they had oysters, and it was, "Look, how are you going to eat it?" Because, look, they're raw? So, you

know, either you're frying them or you going to throw a couple of potatoes in there and make a little roux—my grandma would, and that was oyster fricassee or oyster spaghetti. And that's what was for supper. Eat it or not, here it is. **[Laughs]** You're not eating it, you're going to eat some raw, or you're going to open you a can of SPAM I guess. **[Laughs]**

**01:29:29**

**SR:** When your dad makes an all-oyster gumbo, is that a roux gumbo?

**01:29:34**

**NC:** A roux gumbo, yeah, from scratch. I cheat: I use roux in the jar. I hate—I don't like making the roux. You get burned all over, and it's just too much trouble. Too much technology: We got roux in the jar now, and it's *roux*. **[Laughs]** I mean, it's roux. If you know the trick to dissolving it and don't put too much oil, it's--it's good.

**01:30:01**

**SR:** Right now are you eating oysters?

**01:30:05**

**NC:** Yeah.

**01:30:05**

**SR:** This time of year?

**01:30:10**

**NC:** Every time we get some.

**01:30:11**

**SR:** I wanted to ask you: Are you nervous about eating the seafood because of the dispersant, or because of the oil, right now?

**01:30:20**

**NC:** You know, that's a good question. I was very nervous, and me and my family went four months without any seafood. And look, I got an ice chest of shrimp outside right now. I got fresh clean fish in my icebox. We just got to the point where it's too expensive at the grocery store. I mean, I could go out in a day of oystering, and I could catch me some oysters, some crabs, and--and if I'm sleeping out there during shrimping season, I got my little trawl so I'm going to catch me some shrimp. I'm going to have my fishing line when the fish are biting; I'm going to get me some fish. I'm going to clean all that, pack it—eat as much as I can fresh, but if I got too much I'm going to freeze it, and I'm going to bring it home. And--and my family is going to enjoy it. And we don't eat too much frozen stuff. I don't like—if I freeze my fish, it's for the week just so it don't—you know, two weeks tops—just so it don't go bad in the icebox. And then within two weeks, we're going to eat it.

**01:31:36**

Shrimp I'll go a little longer with. I try to--I try to stock up for the winter [*Laughs*]. I'm always out by the next May season. I mean, I love shrimp as much as oysters. I love shrimp. Crabs, I'm not the craziest about, but I love--I love a good crab patty; a good soft-shell crab, you

know. And every once in a while, the family likes boiled crabs, so we will boil them up. But as far as getting back to your question of being scared, I was scared. I was very scared. But I got more scared when I was broke and couldn't afford all that meat at the grocery store. That made me scared, too. And then you think about it, you know, yeah, all these animals are getting fed all this food and pesticides, and it's in our crops. It's in the vegetables. What's safe anymore? What is safe anymore?

**01:32:33**

You got to grow your own organic garden, or you--you don't know what you're eating. You really don't know anymore. At least with my oysters, I thought I knew what I was eating. Now with the dispersant, I don't know anymore. And you know what? It costs too much to worry about it, and it's too much—we're too used to have eaten the seafood to--to just stop. My friend owns a—his wife's family owns a Cajun resort, fishing resort, sport resort for hunting and fishing, and--and they had to shut down because of the spill also. So we decided to go back there. I brought my family, and he brought his, and we went back there, and--and they had—man, and we got back there and the tables were like four times the size of this one, and I mean there was just this big old pile of boiled crabs on there, and there was fried fish and there was fried shrimp. And you know, I told my family, I said, “You know what? This is it. We're eating seafood today.” We had been four months without it, and it just—we couldn't take it when we saw all that, and we just dove in. And ever since then, we ate it every day. Every day.

**01:34:01**

And, you know, scared. I'm still skeptical. I'm still scared. But you know what? We ate it, we breathed it, we--we tasted it. If it's there, it's there. And let that be on their conscience.

**01:34:16**

**SR:** Yeah. I mean, personally, that's—I kind of went through that too. I don't live the same lifestyle that you do, but for a certain amount of time I didn't eat it, and then—and then it's there, and that's what's there to eat, and it's good—tastes good—and it's what you do in Louisiana, I guess.

**01:34:38**

**NC:** Yeah.

**01:34:38**

**SR:** I mean, it's easier for me to avoid than you, but—. But you don't notice a difference in taste?

**01:34:44**

**NC:** Hmm, personally, *I* do. But I--I'm not saying it's a bad thing. I'm just saying I do. You see, we--we taste our seafood. I taste my shrimp. I can tell you where my shrimp comes from almost, in Louisiana. I can tell you if it comes from the fresher side, the Gulf, further out in the Gulf—because iodine more there tells you that role. But when you deal with your inside seafood, they got a different flavor. It's a sweeter flavor. When you get more salty, it just kind of plains out into a bland flavor. But your--your inside fish, shrimp, crabs, got a sweet, sweet taste to it, and that's because of the freshwater, *and* what they're eating is not—it's different water, actually. And even though most of these animals need brackish water, some of these are staying in the fresher part. So there's a very sweet flavor. And I can distinguish—excuse me. My dad could

distinguish it from the west side of the bayou to the east side of the bayou, where I could just distinguish the sweet from the fresh to the salt; from the north to the south.

**01:36:16**

And right now, the sweet shrimp that are from the inside, they're just not sweet. They're bland. So it's not that it's a bad thing that I'm not tasting—that there's a difference in taste. It's just, it's different because of what we're used to.

**01:36:34**

**SR:** And do you think that that's because of the water salinity or because of the dispersant?

**01:36:38**

**NC:** I think it's got so much to do with so much. You know, you got the floods; you got the--the diversions; you got dispersant; you've got oil; you've got the—you know, the Tropical Storm Lee kind of—. And that wasn't bad, but it did push up a high tide. And so you—I don't know. I don't know.

**01:37:04**

**SR:** It's hard to say. Well, you mentioned the floods earlier, too, and for the record, I'll say that it was a bad year for the Mississippi River flooding. And so they diverted water in this—.

**01:37:18**

**NC:** Right, right, and it--and it didn't hurt anything for the east side as much as—or the westside. Well, it did--it did probably kill a few oysters in the west side. You know, what bothers

me about the flood is not the water that came. It's what came with the water. That's a whole new pile of dispersant, so to speak, with the pesticides and heaven knows what's coming in that water anymore. You got nuclear power plants on the rivers. You got so much discharge of waste into those rivers that it's a shame. It's really a—as much as we're dependent on gas and oil, which is shame on you, government, for making us this way. Sure, it created jobs and money and all. Will it really pay off in the long run? No, it won't. And I'm not a scientist, but I know that answer. Shame on the federal government.

**01:38:26**

Just like all these crops that are being grown with all these pesticides, and all these plants and all this runoff into these rivers—that's your water, man. Really, and--and it's our land. So to me, the federal government has—they're getting an 'F' with me. I'm tired of it. I know as a country there's a lot of waste, a lot of pollution, a lot of everything, but that—you know, the government was supposed to be the educator. We put them there to protect us. We put them there; now they forgot all that. And I wasn't there when they put them there, but they're still there to protect their people. And I don't—I don't think that's the way it is. I think they're a business now, and--and business wants to make money. Well, good luck, because you're ruining our country.

**01:39:36**

**SR:** Hmm.

**01:39:38**

**NC:** And state and local government don't help either, you know. I mean, just in this little parish of Lafourche, there's so much politics and wrongdoings for money. And you know what for? For oil. Do you know how much oil flows through this little parish? A lot of people don't know that. *A lot*. Probably, whew, 80-percent of Louisiana's oil comes through this little parish, through LOOP [Louisiana Offshore Oil Port] and Galliano.

**01:40:11**

**SR:** I didn't know that until very recently.

**01:40:13**

**NC:** A lot of oil.

**01:40:16**

**SR:** And then there's the reserve.

**01:40:17**

**NC:** Well that—they have the reserves, but they also got the--the pipelines going to the--the plants that turn it into gas or diesel or whatever.

**01:40:28**

**SR:** It's kind of—I mean, I hear this again and again in this area, but it's ironic that, like you said, your deckhands and people who work for you are now—like, they're making a living off of oil. It's such a—it works, the oil works in tandem with everything in this area. It's difficult.

**01:40:50**

**NC:** Well because long ago they decided that [Port] Fourchon was going to be a port for their-- their flow, because Fourchon is—so far it's a good place to come, so they decided to pipeline it. And--and you know, they decided this back in the '40s and '50s. This was probably the '40s. I mean, you--you go back and look at Leeville, Golden Meadow, Fourchon back in the '40s. Get water pictures, and you'll see more wells than you'll see today. Oh yeah, ridiculous. And right now there's so much inshore oil and gas exploration going—well, not exploration—drilling going on. Shew, it's unreal.

**01:42:00**

But it's business. If I would have been born in the oil business, I'd be fighting for oil, you know what I mean. I--I understand, but I wasn't born in the oil; I was born in the seafood industry, and so I'm going to fight for what I was born in. And it's a lot healthier business, what I was born in. **[Laughs]**

**01:42:24**

**SR:** As long as you can keep it healthy.

**01:42:26**

**NC:** That, I don't know. That's so much—excuse me—it's coming from every which way. You know, the waters are being polluted. There's so much oil in that Gulf bottom. Dispersed oil, I might add. It's scary for me. I mean we got a--a space station in space. We spend billions of dollars in space, but we don't know what the hell is in 5,000 foot of water, and now we might not

because it's all dead. How does that—how is that going to work in the food chain? How is that going to work in the ecosystem? How is that going to work for us as human beings in the long run? I don't—I don't have a good answer for any of them. And if that pipe is still leaking, you think they're going to tell us? If they're still dispersing it, do you think they're going to tell us? No. But they're killing stuff that we can't see with the naked eye—or maybe can. They're still killing it. Even though it's not leaking, and let's not do the what-if; let's do the what-they-did, in 5,000 foot of water. All the oil, all the dispersant, down there killing what used to live there, or pushing it out, and it's not living in its natural environment anymore.

**01:43:50**

You know, people eat oysters. That's what I'm in the business for. I--I make money off of oysters for people to eat. And I took my business—well, my father, family, took that business a little further to make them enjoyable. We bring them to better places, healthier, because we take pride in that. But you know, oysters were made not for us to eat so to say; they were made to keep the waters clean. **[Laughs]** So, to me, as a government or the FDA or anybody that's studying them, you would think, “Hey, let's get some oysters because we got a lot of pollution out there.” So, I don't know. First, I would think about, before eating, well, what they're really there for, and that's to keep the waters clean. They're filters.

**01:44:45**

**SR:** Hmm, it's hard to get that message across.

**01:44:50**

**NC:** It is, it is, because people think about oysters, and, “Oh, well, are we going to eat them or not?” Will you be able to swim in that lake next—you know, in 20 years? That’s what you ought to be thinking about. I--I need to think about it because I make my living off of it, but I go into the big picture of, I mean, you’re polluting in third world countries, you’re polluted in India and China, you’re—we’re next. And if you’re going to put that much oil and dispersant in the Gulf, man. I mean, if you don’t have a plan to stop that pipeline from leaking like that, then maybe you shouldn’t be drilling there.

**01:45:33**

And if you need oil that bad, I’m sorry. I don’t know which way to turn—electric. Because that’s a big hassle also. You know, electric—hydrogen. Do you turn to that? I mean I’m not saying I got a better way. I’m just saying, you know, as a government, federal government, a long time ago they should have known that [*Laughs*]—. I’m going to quote a show I saw: *There Will Be Blood*. [*Laughs*]

**01:46:06**

**SR:** Right, about the oil business?

**01:46:08**

**NC:** About the oil business.

**01:46:09**

**SR:** Yeah, it’s true. It’s controversial to say anything against oil in this area, too.

**01:46:14**

**NC:** I don't care.

**01:46:14**

**SR:** But— *[Laughs]*.

**01:46:17**

**NC:** I love to speak out, I guess. Because you know what? What are they going to do? Who is more wrong than them? I'm wrong. I'm a sinner, I'm wrong, and I'm all this and that, but you know what? You're never going to tell me I polluted the Gulf. You're never going to tell me I--I gave—. I'm not saying nothing about Haiti, but you know millions of dollars to Haiti when you can't even get FEMA to take care of your own people. I'm not going to be in none of those arguments. But they're going to have to have that on their consciences, the oil people, the federal government, even the state government. Because if you think [Governor] Bobby Jindal and--and President Obama ain't got paid off by the oil people, all these lobbyists, all this crap for oil—shhh. Hey look, I was being nice, but *[Laughs]*—for this interview—but I can get ugly about all these people and not care one bit. What are they going to do?

**01:47:19**

**SR:** Well, I saw online in some of the coverage that [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com) did about y'all; you had a sign out in front of your business. What did that say?

**01:47:31**

NC: It said: *Out of Business After 90 Yrs. Because of BP's Oil & Governor Bobby Jindals Fresh Water.*

**01:47:39**

SR: What kind of reaction did you get locally for that?

**01:47:42**

NC: Uh, locally we got a great reaction. You know, very, very—backed us up 100-percent. On a political level, hmm, we got a little bit of backlash; nothing bothering. You know, nothing really bothered us. It's the truth. It's the bottom line. Who is going to fight it? And then with all these re-elections coming up, I'm--I'm trying to get me a—my house is 66-feet long, facing Highway 1 this side. I have one window in my son's room, so about 40-foot I'm trying to get a banner made, and it's going to state: "Re-elect No One." You want change? Let's put new people in everything. Not just one here and one there; everywhere from the bottom up. And you know what? With all this oil field going on, they got—. We used to have a heliport for Chevron in Leeville. South. Now there's one at the airport in Galliano, and there's one on the four-lane highway, and helicopters are flying all the time. We haven't heard them today, but all the time, middle of the night—not too often at night, but a lot of times. And they're flying—. And I'm about to put on my roof: "This is a no-fly zone." Because they shake my house. And--and I don't think they should be flying over neighborhoods. C'mon, another 500-feet, you'll be on the other side of the levee, over water? Come on. I mean, it just aggravates me. And I don't believe too much in foreseers of the future, but Nostradamus [*Laughs*] said, you know, there was these flying—he didn't know what they were, and I think it's all these in the Armed Forces and all that.

**01:50:01**

And look, I'm not against the Armed Forces. I'm against the people that send them to fight for oil instead of their country. But you know, those poor kids are out there misled and misguided for oil. But they are protecting us. Their--their heart was in the right spot when they went in there, and--and God bless them. But it's—shew, the Federal government has become a-- a sad business.

**01:50:32**

**SR:** Yeah, and you're really battling the effects of it.

**01:50:37**

**NC:** Yeah, well, as a commercial fishermen, yeah. And I've been to—my dad is a very well-known man. Probably in the nation, throughout the country and the United States, and a lot in Louisiana and in Washington, because he will speak his mind. But I forgot what I was going to say. *[Laughs]*

**01:51:12**

**SR:** That's all right. I just realized a few minutes ago that I'm keeping you from the Saints game, and I feel really bad. I looked over there. I don't even know how long it's been on. But I think you've given me a lot of time and so much information that I thank you very much. And I think that it'll be really useful for people who--who access this oral history project to hear from someone like you, who is so forthright about what's going on.

**01:51:40**

**NC:** I'm very happy to help. If you have any more questions or anything I could do for you in your project, you just let me know.

**01:51:46**

**SR:** Thank you.

**01:51:48**

**NC:** You need me to speak out against the federal government, you just let me know. BP—  
*[Laughs]*--

**01:51:53**

**SR:** Well I am hoping to get some photos, if you don't mind.

**01:51:57**

**NC:** Okay, no problem.

**01:51:59**

**[End Nick Collins Interview]**