FO-FO GILICH
President, Slavic Benevolent Association – Biloxi, MS

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[Begin Fo-Fo Gilich Interview]

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Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, July 28, 2008. I'm here with Andrew "Fo-Fo" Gilich at the Slavonian Lodge in Biloxi, Mississippi, and today we're going to be talking about the Slavic community he grew up in here. Would you please state your name, your age, and your occupation?

00:00:19

Fo-Fo Gilich: Okay; I'm Andrew "Fo-Fo" Gilich, Fo-Fo being the nickname, but I'm—I'm actually Andrew Gilich, Jr. and I'm in the software business. I'm a software development—I'm head of a software development company and it's located here in Biloxi, Mississippi, in a very special place. That's why I located this company here.

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FL: And you were born here?

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FG: I was born here 1947, so that makes me, at this point in time, 60 years old.

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FL: And where did the name Fo-Fo come from?

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FG: Well, I had two older brothers and they would read to me. And my oldest brother is 16 years older than I am. And I guess a point in *Jack and the Beanstalk* there was a *fe-fi-fo-fo-fum* and that was the story that I got: that every time that part was read to me I would start smiling and that's —everybody has a nickname here in Biloxi and Fo-Fo is my nickname, so that's how it came about.

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FL: You—we had actually talked about this a little bit before. And this morning I talked to Corky and he's always just Corky, Corky, Corky; it turns out his real name is Nick. Why is it that everyone has a nickname down here?

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FG: Well, in the old days you were named after a grandfather or—or an uncle or—or that sort of thing. And a lot of times, because we had big families, and most people relocated here and their families were here. That means brothers and aunts and uncles and so I think a lot of it came about where, you know, Nick and his dad's name was Nick so they had to call him something else but Nick. My dad's name was Andrew and—so that—just happens to be; a lot of—because there's a lot of multiple generations that were named probably after, a generation, it just happened. I mean everyone has nicknames down here, you know? And you probably have seen a lot of that coming around our organization here. But anyway it's fun. And that's actually—Fo-Fo is on my high school graduation diploma. **[*Laughs*]** Not on my college diploma but on—on the high school diploma.

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FL: And where did you—so you were born here. Where did your family originally come from?

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FG: Well all of my parents, my grandparents on the Gilich side and the Sekul—that was my mother's family, they were actually—originated from Croatia, which at the time was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And they hit here about 1903—1904; I think my grandfather Gilich came through Chicago to get here about 1908. But primarily relatives started landing here and finding jobs in the seafood industry, in the shrimp and oyster industry and I guess word of mouth got around because I'm—the one side of my family was from an island called Brac, and all four grandparents were from in and around that island, but the seafood in the— they were fishermen. And so the climate was similar and there was opportunity here and that's how they got here. And started as laborers and got into fishing and got into packing, so between the time of 1905 —by the 1920s they were able to put partnerships and JVs together, joint ventures and that sort of thing and usually with relatives or brothers. And wind up as—in the seafood processing end of the ballgame instead of just fishing. So they were able to really dominate; by 1923—1925 even up to the Depression they had more Croatian-based operations than anything. And today, if you look at Point Cadet which is actually officially east of Oak Street and that's where all the canneries were; that's where our original Slavonian Lodge was—was built down on the Point. And right now you see a lot of casinos, after Hurricane Camille. It wiped out a lot of—a lot of those operations and right now we got casinos on most of those sites. So it's—it's pretty—it's very interesting. I know my first job was at—my grandfather and his brother, my grandfather Steve M. Sekul and his brother, Peter Sekul had a cannery called Sea Coast Packing Company and—and for $1.35 back then, I was catching cans off of the canning line. That was before IQF,

individual quick freeze and that sort of thing, so you would can shrimp and send it across the country.

And that was my first job along with all my other cousins that were—that were here at the time. So it— the seafood is in your blood and, I could almost still smell the shrimp as it's being cooked on the line and put in cans. So it was an interesting childhood. I moved back to Biloxi after graduating from college, so my kids—and now my grandkids, can enjoy Biloxi with the relatives and—and—and the—the colorful folks that —that kind of made up our community, so—. I'm real, real pleased to be part of it and every effort that we have in—in our organization, you know I'm President of Slavic Benevolent Association and we're in the midst of recovering from the hurricane but all of our efforts are to preserve that heritage and move forward with a continuation of the great life that we have I think here as a community.

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FL: Could you tell me about some of these colorful characters that you encountered growing up here?

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FG: Oh yeah; well like I said some—yeah everybody has comments about different folks that worked around the canneries. We had—of course it was actually a cousin of mine, Zode was—was a deaf and dumb person that would always be strong as a bull, strong as a mule; he was one of our cousins, and he was a character that would keep everyone moving at the cannery. So I mean if there was a dull moment, Zode would get things moving. Just the different characters; we had another relative of mine, Peter Scrametta, Peter V. Scrametta and his nickname was

Troubles because every conversation he'd start with he would make some trouble **[*Laughs*]**. So there was all kinds of nicknames and characters that are a part of this Biloxi heritage. So it's—some of it's related to gambling; some of it's related to some of the card games that used to take place and that sort of thing, so it was very fun memories—fond memories that I have of being a kid here in Biloxi.

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FL: And can you talk a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in like who lived there, who your neighbors were?

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FG: Well like I, really 1947 I was born right across the street from the place we're talking right now. We had a place called Central—City Hall Grocery, Old City Hall was right next door, but most of my family was from Point Cadet, which is like I said east of Oak Street. And you had relatives on every corner. You had grocery stores on them. My grandmother, Elaina Sekul, of course they had the factory and they would have groceries —they would supply their boat captains and the boat crews with groceries. And then as I grew up we actually in 1948 moved to what was called West Biloxi. That's right now where the lighthouse is and I think that's really Central Biloxi now. But we opened the first supermarket there. My parents operated a supermarket for 40 years there. And the supermarket we—meant that you didn't have to go ask for something and the clerk would take it off the shelves and put it in front of you. Well you had a grocery cart, so we had I think six aisles of groceries that you'd just go up and down and pick what you wanted. So that was—that was interesting, but I grew up there.

And my office is located very close to there right now; so—. I actually grew up in Central Biloxi but most of my roots and most of my heritage and—and most of my friends that I hung around with were Point Cadet—East Biloxi folks. It—it was—yeah; everyone knew everyone. You had— I had four or five aunts and uncles on each side of the—of the family and so you really couldn't raise too much Cain because word would get back so we would run to New Orleans when we wanted to raise hell. **[*Laughs*]** But that was before interstates and everything so it was a little trip to get to New Orleans, but—.

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FL: And at the time were there many recent—certainly at that time you're talking about in the '40s and beyond—the Croatian community had already really been established here. They started coming towards the earlier part of the century. At that time would it still really—was it still physically really a tight-knit Croatian community? Were there still a lot of Croatian families living close to one another?

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FG: Oh yeah; very much so. As I said, in the— teens—1910 to '15 and—and '20 my grandparents were having kids. My aunts and uncles and my mother and father were—were born then, and of course that brought you through the Depression era, but some of the things that was stressed to them—to my parents' generation was education. So that was another thing that I think that the Croatians excelled at. It showed you a little bit about some of the first doctors and some of the—the first attorneys and, and lawyers and, and pharmacists and that next generation I guess would be the first-born generation over here, education was the thing. And that was stressed through my growing up. They said you're going to get an education. You're not going to be a

shrimper like —. It's—life was going to be better for you than for me, so and that was and that was still even my parents stressed that. So it was never a question of what—like going to college. I was going to go to college, you know? So and that was as I showed you the other day, some of my aunts and my—Clare Sekul Hornsby who was—was the second female graduate from the University of Mississippi Law School. She was with Evelyn Gandy, and as a matter of fact she was Evelyn Gandy's roommate. And so as far as glass ceiling and some of the people you hear about this, well I asked my aunt (and she's now 85 years old); I said, "Why did you go to Law School, Aunt Clare?" She said, "Because my mama told me to go to Law School." And of course she—her oldest brother John Sekul was my uncle—was, you know he was—he was an attorney and became the judge—city judge for years and years and years. And so I mean it was sort of a natural path. So he—she had an older brother kind of focusing her attorney and law career. So but doctors and—and we had dentists and—and physicians and so we were all real proud of that generation as well as the generation that came here not knowing English and some of the things that you see some of the communities face now.

Well and it was no net, to keep them, if they couldn't make a living they starved and—and so that was—. We talked a little bit about some of my conversations with my parents' generation, my aunts and uncles and you're talking about the Depression and that was quite something. But Biloxi had a little relief in that they could always go throw the cast net, get fish, and buy stale bread. So it was tough, but at least you weren't going to starve because you had some fishing skills and some, you know, some ability to go outside and do what you needed to do with the shrimp and oysters.

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FL: But back then so certainly the second and third generations of Croatians then became very established. When you were growing up here though were there—do you recall there being very many recent immigrant families, families that were just coming over?

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FG: Just one or two. In my high school days we had a group that came over —a family, families at a time. It wasn't 20 or 30 families but you'd have a family of five or six that that I remember picking them up to go to school, helping them go to—. And we were predominantly Catholic and so we had a Notre Dame High School. We had Sacred Heart Girls High School and Notre Dame all boys high school so a lot of them would naturally go to that school. And so I can remember several families but not like it was in 1910 and 1915 and that sort of thing. And we do have some and I think you met Georgo Trojanovich that came over. He's been here 25 years or something like that but he's—I'm not sure how old he is, but and not like it was in 1910—1915 when a lot of stress and strife, especially World War I was getting ready to crank up and that was a massive group coming over.

I know my grandfather Sekul brought seven of his brothers and sisters and they all landed here. Now some of them went to—some other ones; I think he had 13 in the family but about four of them—couple of them landed in Australia and a couple of them went to Chile I think. So—but that was the big influx in 19—10ish, 1915.

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FL: And why do you think that phenomenon of families sending over for relatives to come back over here, why do you think that slowed down after that?

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FG: Well I really don't know. My grandparents had got—had already gotten most of their brothers and sisters over here. And we still have—my mother has a first cousin, who is in the 80s now, but he stayed there, so we have some relatives and their children of course that we communicate with. But for the most part everybody left that did— had some opportunity to leave and I just don't know what happened—after, I guess in Croatia and there were five or six republics that made up Yugoslavia and that was formed after World War I. And so that was a big political thing and of course they—they get—I guess being a communist state run by Tito, you know, things got tough. My cousin Sonya Sekul who was the one I'm closest to in age that if she came over in the '60s and '70s she had to leave her children there or her parents could come over and they would stay there, so they would return to Yugoslavia. And then of course in '92—1992 I think when the whole Yugoslavia broke up with Serbia and Slovenia and Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina—that all kind of broke up during that Civil War.

And a lot of bad things happened during those days. So between the Communists and of course the independence that there is today I can see things naturally slowing down. But I couldn't tell you, how—what the reason in the '30s and '40s why more people didn't come. But I know by that time all my great aunts and great uncles and everything—they're already here, you know?

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FL: And given that they all—there was this large, tight-knit community—Croatian community here, was there a strong sense of, "Okay, we're all Croatian; this is our culture, this is our community. We're—we're together here now."?

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FG: Oh yeah; I can remember in—I wish now that my parents, because they spoke Croatian and it was sort of a natural thing to speak at—we'd visit my grandmother's house on Howard Avenue every night. I mean it was every night and Croatian was spoken mostly there. But they were very proud to be here and very proud to be American, so I mean it wasn't—we just happened to be Croatian and we're proud of that, the way they think people came together. The whole purpose of our organization was to help the the needy and bury the dead because they were by themselves. But I don't know that… They were proud to be American; they were proud to be here because of the strife and everywhere else and where they came from. Just like I guess the Irish during the— Potato Famine and everything. They could eat here and make a living and have opportunities, so it was—they were tight, you know? And even I can remember as you go out in high school with different girls and I think my parents were favorable that I dated a Croatian girl —not that it was anything wrong but it just—it just made them a little bit more comfortable because they knew. Just like me: My daughter is now going to be 40 years old but—and she married a fellow that was—not only did I know his parents, his grandparents, and all his aunts and uncles; I mean because the family and that gives you a little bit more comfort level. Nowadays you don't know who your daughter would be marrying or you don't know what happened, so I mean that gives me a great comfort level that this person is from Biloxi. He's got roots in Biloxi. I know what kind of people they are and so that—I think that's what's cool about

this area. We know a lot of folks and we're related to a lot of folks and it just gives you a better feeling about what your—what your kids are going to do in life, so—.

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FL: Getting back to what you mentioned earlier about going to your grandmother's house and the language spoken there, was there an emphasis in your family to pass on that language? Did you pick it up; did you—?

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FG: No; it really wasn't. I guess that sense was that you—you're an American first I guess and—because it really never was them. Now I know when people were mad at me in Croatian. It was expressing some— some things you wouldn't say in public **[*Laughs*]** but I got those—I know all those words, and of course I know those words in French too, so—because here we have a big French community here too. **[*Laughs*]** So it really wasn't; I mean I wish it would have been. I really—I really do. And as a matter of fact I got some of the computer things to start picking that up and try to learn. I guess learn the alphabet first and some of the different inflections based on what the characters are, so we may make an effort here to come back and be able to do some things rather than curse you out in Croatian. **[*Laughs*]** Or, we know—I'll say, "Look at that," or some of those little bit—or "how are you," "good day," and those kinds of things. And but to have a big conversation with some folks and— And I think after the storm we had some folks from the National Broadcast Company from Croatia came in and we tried to communicate and I guess some of the—some of the folks of—of my—you met Lou Pitalo. I don't know if you met Lou, but Lou had visited Croatia a number of times and he was of that generation that spoke and his—both his mother and father were Croatian. And it's even hard to

communicate his—his Croatian; it's hard to communicate because we speak Croatian with a southern accent **[*Laughs*]** and so that's kind of a little different thing. So and I understand that there's a lot of different dialects within —within Croatia itself too.

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FL: Have you gone to visit where your family came from in Croatia?

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FG: Not yet; we're planning a trip with that— and actually my children have been. But—and they went with one of my aunts and even my mother and my grandfather—my grandmother had gone back. My grandfather wouldn't leave this country. When he got over here he wasn't leaving this place, so but I'm ready to go back and there's an island that we all—our roots are called Brac and it's a beautiful place they say. And we look forward to that day when everybody can get back there. We may plan a—a club trip so it's on the horizon but I definitely want to do that before my days are gone.

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FL: And I definitely want to get to a lot of questions about the club itself. But back to you; so you—I mean immigrants are in a sort of interesting situation right because they left a place. They've come to a place presumably because they wanted to come to a place and they're happy to be in that place. And they always—they constantly have to make decisions about what to leave behind, what to try to preserve, what to adapt in the new place. Can you talk about some of the traditions that your family or families around you—just your community in general really

tried to keep, maybe certain feast-days or certain celebrations or certain traditions that you would actively try to keep together, and how would you do that?

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FG: Yeah; well I—I can remember the songs, so the songs of the old country, it was a big thing. It's a big thing around Christmas time, Christmas and New Year's and even—and even Easter. It—that was always —and some of the costumes, so my mother was a big promoter of—. I don't know if I showed you that little picture of 1937 the *National Geographic*. So she was—she was a— out of all of that generation was a big proponent of keeping that that feel and that look and that sort of thing alive. And of course my singing days and all I can't—I lost track of when those were. **[*Laughs*]** But that, around Christmas time, a lot of Christmas carols and visiting folks' houses and singing Croatian Christmas carols as well just Croatian songs that festivals and that sort of thing. But Saint Nikola—the Mass of Saint Nikola was sort of our patron saint of fishermen. That's what they— that came over, so that was part of our organization, so that feast day was always big and Christmas was always big. And it was just a time for song; that's when you'd crank up the Croatian. Not so much the language was not stressed in my childhood anyhow, but I can remember it fondly, going to my parents' house and bringing some of my friends. And they would look at you—what are they speaking? **[*Laughs*]** But anyway it was fun and like I said I just wish I had picked more of it up.

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FL: And where there any foods associated with these traditions? Could you talk about some of those foods?

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FG: Oh yeah; a lot of great food. Around Christmas time there was some pastries that looked like donut holes we called pusharata, and then they use—and nothing exotic, but they had a lot of a little whiskey, a little bit of onion peel, some pecans and they would fry them like—. And they still do. And it's one of the biggest fund-raisers for the Ladies Auxiliary is the— thousands of these pusharatas they'll sell throughout the community, and everybody lines up. So they'll be taking orders and they can't make anymore. They'll start a day and a half ahead and it's a little pusharata that's—it's there at almost every wedding. And even non-Croatians want to have—some of these people that can still make it, make pusharatas. And there was a pastry, it was almost like a—it was a lot of—it's hrstule; what was—we called it a bow-tie and I can't even describe it to you but it's like flour and powdered sugar and that's all very **[*Laughs*]** low-fat. But I'd say you'd eat a few of those pusharata and it goes right to your toes and you can't shake that weight off. It's over with. So I mean and the different—I remember my grandfather, they would all— they'd prepare eel and squid and stuff like that, fishermen kind of food and baccala—baccala was—Corky might have talked to you a little bit about that. Baccala was a—was almost—it was a dried cod-fish and it actually came over from Croatia. Well, that was a fish that you could hang at the back of your boat without refrigeration and you would make a stew—like a potato stew out of it and it stinks to high heaven, but I mean it's good. It's so good, and every time that someone —and of course it's about $30 a pound. You can buy them at Central Grocery in New Orleans; it's a really—it's a fish about 18-inches long once you've removed the head and everything and it's dried. It's hard as a rock; you can actually assault somebody with the thing.

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But and Corky knows how to cook it and Red Pitalo and those folks but that baccala was a Croatian food; so the pusharata, the baccala, hrstule—some people call it bow-ties, but those are all great, great Croatian foods.

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FL: You had mentioned earlier that a lot of the people who came here from Croatia were originally from areas of Croatia that were sea-faring where they were fisher-people coming here, they continued that work; did you—do you recall the recipes that you would eat at home as being adapted to some of the seafood here that you wouldn't maybe have—? Well I mean obviously you didn't grow up there but do you remember a conversation about having to adapt certain things?

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FG: Well — there was a court-bouillon, it was like a redfish court-bouillon that was—they use a lot of tomato paste and that sort of thing and I'm not sure how much tomato—on the island of Brac, I mean how much vegetables they had. I know they ate a lot of olive oil; I mean olive oil was big and so that was everywhere. Olive oil, onions, garlic, and that— they used a lot of that. I don't know how much was American. They took some of those dishes but I think you grew up with a lot of oily food **[*Laughs*]** and tomato gravy and that was in a lot of things. One of the big dishes that people turn out for at this organization is called daube spaghetti so it's a sort of—I couldn't tell you what part of the beef it is but it was—it's cooked with tomato gravy and spaghetti, and then this meat that just almost—just breaks apart and melts. So it's not a meatball but it's got the gravy like a spaghetti and meatball. But we actually cook it with mostaccioli, the little thick little pieces of pasta, so that daube spaghetti was a big—. Everybody that was

Croatian was— loves daube spaghetti, so—. And I don't know how much was adapted from over there—over here, but I know that's still a big deal around here.

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FL: And you said a lot of people come to the club and come to the lodge for that. Can you talk a little bit about—and I want to get to the history of the lodge too, but can you first talk a little bit about the events, the get-togethers, the meals that you have here?

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FG: Certainly. As in your earlier visits to the place, we have a very active membership. We've got 284 members and of course this present hall, we can stuff about 150 in here for a meal but that would be crowded, but we're building a bigger hall; in the process right now of breaking ground on that. But every Thursday there's some sort of social event that's based around a meal so we'll have chicken and baked chicken and dirty rice one day and then we'll have daube spaghetti is always on the menu and that's on each Thursday. We'll kind of vary the menu, but every Thursday there is a social function that everybody gathers, and you can bring your guests and like I said it's not a free meal, but it's a reasonable cost meal, so you can bring several folks without really breaking the—the checkbook. **[*Phone Rings*]**

But every third Thursday there's a business meeting. We have a monthly business meeting and that's a prime rib or steak night, so that brings— we always have the max that we can there. So that's every Thursday— every third Thursday is the business meeting and we conduct whatever we need as far as activities, fund-raising or whatever but of course we have a golf tournament and you see a little bit on this table for it—once a year. And that's in lieu of—in

the past we used to do bazaars and that sort of thing, so it's a big operation here and it takes a lot of 200 or so volunteers to make it happen. But we wind up feeding about 1,800 to 2,000 people on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. And about 800 or 900 players into the—in the golf tournament—actually 800 players—not 900. But it's one of the biggest in the Southeast and maybe in the country; we call it a four-ball tournament where two people form a team and then they're—you play for prizes. But it's always a fun event. And our Ladies Auxiliary prepares — they will actually prepare all kinds of dishes on the golf course so you eat and drink—not so much play golf, but you eat and drink for four days and **[*Laughs*]** both at night. And there's a lot of social functions related to that golf tournament. So that's our big push to make sure we've done our things properly, the invitations mailed out and of course the entry fees and people get scheduled to play. So that's like a big class—family reunion once a year. People come from—we have people from South America come just to play golf. In the past, we have had several groups come in from Florida; some come in from North Dakota and California and Green Bay, Wisconsin religiously, so that's a big event we're looking forward to in—September 26, 27, 28 of this year.

Of course the storm threw a lot of—Katrina, you know, everyone—a lot of folks went through Camille here in 1969 and kind of compared that 210 mile an hour wind, but not quite as much water. In 1969, we had about 18 inches of water; in—from Hurricane Camille. At —the organization established itself in 1999—1919 excuse me and built that building in 1939. That remained through the 1947 storm, what was the benchmark storm before Camille. Camille put about 18 inches of water in it. Katrina all that was left was a few bricks, and it did damage. It did, you know, like I said it—driving around there you can see what *it* did. And it was unprecedented as far as the water and the damage that it did. So it wiped us out and some of the

history and pictures and so forth; we lost—we were able to recover nicely with the help of some relatives that had some pictures to supply us.

So from 1919 to 1939 to—so we'll break this ground this year for another building that will last hopefully 100 years, but it's on Point Cadet also. So we were very fortunate to—to be able to make some land deals and some acquisitions to both selling land and buying land and of course setting up a—oh about a 15,000 square foot lodge that hopefully within a year we'll be in, so—anyway.

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FL: So the organization was founded in 1919 and you had mentioned earlier to—I'm sorry; what did you say—?

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FG: Help the needy and bury the dead.

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FL: Help the needy and bury the dead—almost 100 years old now. It seems to have—I mean having visited it a couple of times myself I definitely see there's a life here. A lot of members are clearly very familiar with one another. Does it seem like the mission has changed? How has—how has the sort of organization itself and the focus of what it does evolved over the years?

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FG: Well we do have death benefits so if you're a member in good standing and you do have a very minimal death benefit; I think it's like $500 if you're paid. Now the dues are not very

expensive. We have a big effort from our golf tournament and some of the other— we do have— make charitable contributions to people like St. John—I mean St. Jude Cancer Hospital in Memphis for kids. They do great work, and a very fine organization, as well as St. Vincent De Paul Pharmacy. So the—with the cost of drugs and the cost of medical alike and so we do some—through the money, we do—we're able to kind of raise we pass that around, as well as fund scholarships for our kids. Education was the main thing, so our focus is on getting a few thousand dollars in kids that go to schools, go to college and hopefully come and live in our community, but definitely part of our family.

I think that there's a lot of pride in where we come from. And not everyone can be a member of this organization so that kind of— it kind of spins itself, so it's got a little momentum from you're able to join or you need to join. And there's a lot of young folks; we've got just more interest than I would have imagined. The young folks joining our organization, I'm talking about the kids that are in their 20s now. My kids joined when they were 18 and 19—my son anyhow. So but you see some good kids wanting to come around and be part of this and listen to some of the history. You noticed in talking to Corky and some of the folks around here, I was glad—I moved back here in 1972 and there was a whole generation of folks that I just enjoyed. I'd go to the bar and just listen to them speak about things of the old days and some of the things that they did in the boats and in the factories and those kinds of things. So I mean and I think that's a little bit of that same kind of desire to listen to the people like Corky and the people like Red Pitalo and the people. Some of the things that they did in Biloxi as a kid, because it was a great place. I mean my childhood, you couldn't have asked for a better childhood than I had. Growing up in Biloxi with— just a— the connections and just, you didn't have to worry about things you have to worry about now. And it's tough enough to be a kid but now you got to have

everything in line. You've got to have an education first of all. And then you've got to be— just a lot of things that—where it just came kind of natural for us growing up, and with times especially the economy today. You can have all the education in the world and want to work all—but if you don't have the opportunity and there's no market for what you, you busted your behind to go to school and here you go. You got to do something different so—.

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FL: You had mentioned that you were glad to see more and more younger members joining the organization. Had that slowed down for a while? Had the interest in the younger generation sort of waned for a period of time?

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FG: Well a little bit; I mean and I don't know whether the baby-boomers—I come from the baby-boomers, born in '47 and of course there was—I was a gap in time, you know, when—when they started having kids. So yeah; but I know it really took off after the storm. People got together and saw some of the things that we did as an organization. I mean we bounced back; I'm telling you. We were the—and from a financial situation to just getting it together, we got it back, and I think some of that—some of that generation that saw that wanted to be part of that. And the golf tournament played a big part; this is our thirty-fourth year—this tournament and some of these kids grew up — listening to their parents or their— hey I'm going to be a part of the golf tournament. So I think that kind of naturally spurred some of it.

There was always two or three—four or five, folks that—that would join just natural—because your parents were joined and everything but I think it's a little bit more than that now. So everybody that can is trying to join.

00:36:53

FL: That's interesting. So it sounds like what Katrina showed was the past—you can lose the past and so—?

00:37:01

FG: Oh yeah; that's true. That's true. Katrina I mean and I've seen other organizations in Biloxi just struggle. We—we were fortunate and again we—that's a little bit of our pride in that we, not that we planned for anything but we're able to play the hand that we're dealt and I think we played it very well over the last two or three years.

00:37:20

FL: So it seems that this has always been an important meeting place for this community. Were there others also?

00:37:26

FG: You mean other places?

00:37:31

FL: Organizations?

00:37:32

FG: Oh yeah certainly; of course the— our—our—and again, we're related to a lot of them too. The Fleur De Lis Society was the French; they even reached here before the Croatians got here but there was just one or two seafood factories—Dukate Dunbar that was the main packing—the shrimp and oyster industry. And some of the French came in from South Louisiana and formed their community. And actually a lot of them settled in North Biloxi. That's why you hear a little bit of—sort of a South Mississippi Cajun accent that's unique, but the French had their—they were called the Fleur De Lis Society and they were able to rebuild after their—of course we were all located on Point Cadet. There's an Italian American Society and now like I said the Vietnamese community is putting, having their —you drive down Point Cadet and you see some of the like, the Church of the Vietnamese Martyr. That's a big operation and they did a fine job on putting that church together. And of course the social part of that is they have their celebrations and of course it's still great—it's still Point Cadet and that's where the culture is, you know? You can see East Biloxi is where the roots are; West Biloxi you have a lot of the different kinds of casino workers, military, retirees and those kinds of things, but ask them who is born in Biloxi and everybody that was born in Biloxi was born in the east end of Biloxi.

00:39:07

FL: When you talk about being related to these organizations what do you mean?

00:39:08

FG: Well, being invited to one another's installations; I know in the past that every time we'd have an Installation Banquet, we'd invite not only some of the members of the City Council but also the President of the French Club, the Officers of the French Club and vice-versa, so they

were—. We put them—we did a big shrimp festival once a year and so both organizations come get together. And the shrimp festival is kind of related to the Blessing of the Fleet. And once a year and it's usually in June, and they would all—the French folks had boats and the Croatian folks had boats and— the Pastor of St. Michael's and now the Bishop of the Diocese of Biloxi blesses the boats for a bountiful season. So that was always a— where all organizations came together; the Vietnamese too. So now and of course you look at a lot of the Vietnamese that—that's their mainstay and—and so that's what—that's the festival and the kind of cultural things that everybody together does in Biloxi.

00:40:14

FL: Could you talk—because the Blessing of the Fleet is a big festival. Could you talk a little bit about some of the festivities that go around it?

00:40:21

FG: Yeah; again I think this is the first year they —well not the first year—. In the past it was on Sunday; all the boats would line up and some of them would decorate and there would be prizes for the best decorated boat. And there was just hundreds upon hundreds of shrimp boats. Now that was before different seasons and so forth but you could almost see boats lined up bumper-to-bumper, next door to next door—all of Deer Island at the end of—after they got blessed, they would all line up and everybody would picnic and party and drink and that sort of thing on Deer Island. And that was a Sunday event. And I guess in the '70s they started kind of coupling it with a Friday and Saturday night event, the Fais-Do-Do which was a street dance, dance 'til you sleep. That was at the International Plaza or Point Cadet Plaza and so there was a big band and you'd eat boiled shrimp and drink beer and those kinds of things. That was a big event and that

pulled a lot of folks together. And that was one of the first festivals. Now you have crawfish festivals; you have all kinds of wooden boat festivals and all that sort of thing but that was an event that was related to the Blessing of the Fleet.

There was a mass for the folks that had passed away—fishermen or died at sea and those kinds of things. They'd do it with the shrimp boats, oyster boats, or whatever, so there was a big kind of remembrance. And again everybody that was involved in the seafood industry was part of the deal, if they wanted to be a part of the deal, so—. That was —again that's the East Biloxi community.

00:41:59

FL: Switching back a little bit to talk more specifically about the lodge. What is required to be a member here?

00:42:06

FG: Well you have to have—be of Croatian descendants, your grandparents or your mother or you father. And it used to be in the past that if you didn't —if your mother may have been Croatian and your father was not you couldn't join. I mean so, and most everybody around here that ends with an i-c-h—their last name that ends with an i-c-h—well that was almost a given that you were of—were of Croatian heritage. But now it—it has changed, so just my grandkids even though their mother is Croatian and their father, well he had some Croatian in him—. But now it's more open to people who really have roots—they came from a Croatian family.

00:42:52

FL: But it's a men's only club?

00:42:53

FG: Well yes; the Slavic Benevolent Association is a men's only, but we do have a big—**[*Laughs*]** of course a great Slavic Ladies Auxiliary that it provides just a great deal of leadership. And of course they're the wives. And the wives can provide leadership just by telling the—the husbands what to do, so—. And but they're active too, so they have about 150 of those and of course there's 284 of us as far as the members. But they're very active, and if you come around Christmas time those pusharata sales and the golf tournament, they're all a big part of that, so—.

00:43:30

FL: And earlier you had mentioned maybe trying to organize an event or rather a trip for the lodge to go to Croatia to visit. And certainly we had talked about pusharata sales and things like that. But what are some of the activities here at the lodge that really explicitly try to promote or preserve Croatian traditions?

00:43:57

FG: Well again, Christmas time everybody tries to gather and—and just remember our parents and our grandparents and our ancestry. The breakfast: the family day related to the Saint Nikola Breakfast; we have a breakfast almost like a breakfast, lunch, brunch whatever but we all intact celebrate as an organization the feast day of Saint Nikola which is the first—I think most of the time it's the first Sunday of December. So that is really the big family day for our-- to kind of celebrate the organization and our parents and our grandparents and everything that kind of formed this and provided this for us, so—.

Again we kind of make the golf tournament a big deal too because everybody—kids — the organization is being the richest and that sort of thing in Biloxi, well we're not really the richest, but we're the richest in culture, I think, and spirit and those kinds of things. I don't think anybody will can compare it to some of the—I guess the memories we have of the past and wanting to just move forward and keep that heritage alive, so—.

00:45:12

FL: When we first met I had sort of introduced this project a little bit and I didn't talk to you for more than maybe 30 seconds before you opened up your computer and started showing me photos. You were obviously really enthusiastic in talking about the history of this community and of the relationship with this community and the seafood industry. Can you talk a little bit some—about some of the historical documentation work that you've done, some of the historical research work that you've done?

00:45:39

FG: Sure; uh-huh. Again after Camille, I mean excuse me—after Katrina, losing every— all the memorabilia that we had and—and pictures and past Presidents of our organization, we were—we were at a loss. And we were able to—again through relatives and some folks that live in DC, we did some good things with some old photographs. And you saw some of the results of actually, history which is of what this area looked like. And we could take and point it out to you and well this was the Halat Factory – Chili Kunz's Factory – and this was my grandparents' factory and this was the Kuluz Brothers factory; this was the Dubaz Brothers Factory; this was the Mavar's—and these was all Croatian folks. And this was—I think some of the—. We all

grew up, all our first jobs were in those areas, and so everything was related to how many barrels of shrimp that you were going to process that day. And so that was something I wanted my children to see and something that certainly I wanted my grandkids to see, because if it wouldn't have been for our—my grandparents taking a chance and leaving and some of these other things, I would maybe still be over there without the opportunity we've learned through their efforts. That heritage and that history is important to me, and hopefully as it goes on and as we preserve, because now we're digitizing a lot of things and we're putting them in a lot of places and we won't ever lose that again. And we did—we made a significant effort and time and money to preserve this and to actually see, you saw some of the eyeballs and some of the, the ruggedness of that generation. And those were folks that knew what work was. And the first thing that they did was say, "My kids are not going to do the same thing I did." I want their—we're here in Mississippi or here in this country to have a better life. I'm going to work, like, as hard as it takes, so that can happen. And that's something we want to pass on is that ethic—that work ethic and work smart and not hard so to speak. And that comes with education and it comes with just interacting in this community. And I think we have a big opportunity because the whole world is the network that you're part in— you're part of. And it's just very helpful to be able to recall if you need something that one of our members can help you with; that's one big thing. That's a resource; that's —the people go to Harvard for it—not so much the education but for the network, you know? So and that's sort of—in microcosm we have that down here.

00:48:21

FL: So this means you still have connections and—and connecting experiences. Going back to your personal experience in finding these old photos and digitizing these photos and going through these pictures, what was that experience like for you personally, emotionally?

00:48:37

FG: Oh it was great. There was a picture of my grandfather's cannery with snow on the ground and the snow was covering oyster shells. So **[*Laughs*]** that was kind of cool. And when that's your first job, $1.35 an hour when you're 11 or 12 years old and you remember that and you remember the— some of the cars and some of the things you used to do. I—we used to go—it seemed like a World War II truck that we would load up and go to Pascagoula and pick up the cans so we could process. So and those kinds of things that—I was excited to see those pictures, and see the aerial photography and some of the the old spots on Point Cadet that you remember. I can remember dropping my grandfather off; I would some of my first opportunities to drive was to go take my grandfather to the Slavonian Lodge so he could play poker on Sunday afternoon because he never drove, you know?. And so you see some of those things that you're just looking around here on the wall. You remember those spots that you can only relive when you see pictures of it. And we had some great pictures of what Biloxi was and it's been the '38, '39, '40s and that sort of thing. So yeah; that was a tremendous it uplifted a lot of us to see—man, we'd put it on that projector on the wall over there and just go through them. We had about 100-something of them; well you saw them. And then people just—their eyes were dropping. I mean their eyes are wide open and the jaws are dropping to say, "Man, I remember that," or you look at some of the fish and look at some of the shrimp that they get or throwing the cast net. Those are things that only in Biloxi it means—it means so much to you. And you don't have to be just Croatian; I mean the people that were raised on the Point and part of this area knew what it was to throw a cast net or to go pull a seine and those kinds of things. So that's—it's pretty cool.

00:50:29

FL: Now, your professional career didn't take you into the seafood industry but you had mentioned that when you were younger one of your first jobs you had worked in the factories and so forth. Could you talk about some of those jobs that you had?

00:50:41

FG: Sure.

00:50:42

FL: Specific memories of them?

00:50:42

FG: Yeah; well again we— depending on—in the summertime or the wintertime you worked the shrimp in the summertime. And there was always a job, whether it was to put labels on cans or to put—catch the cans after they came off the production line. They had a number of ladies who would—as the shrimp are dumped and peeled and deveined and then they would go through a cooking process; well there were people in line that—that do their—making sure those—the shrimp are the right shrimp that are graded the right way and no bad shrimp get canned. And once that they're put in a can after they're cooked—at least initially cooked and then salt is added and then the top is added, well here we are at the end of the production line and these little six-ounce cans and they would top them and it was scalding hot, they had to pour hot water in it and then the salt tablet as well and then the can is popped. So we would take four at a time and put them in a cage about this big and about this deep **[*Gestures*]** and about a foot and a half deep and they would take that after they canned and again without a label they would be put in a pressure cooker, so it really cooked the stuff, so it would stay good for a long time. And it was

shipped across the country and that was again ’58, ’59, ’60, ’61. And so anything related to either shoveling shrimp into the—some just pure labor you’d actually put the shrimp off of the basket into the peeling and deveining tub and then catching cans or putting labels on cans or stacking the boxes up or putting boxes—. So that was all labor that especially if you wanted to make a little money to go buy a little something or go to the show or take your girlfriend, there was always an opportunity to work. Especially if your grandparents owned the cannery. And most—a lot of them had some— most all of them—my generation was related to someone that either a grandfather or an aunt or uncle that that’s where you’d work. That was an easy place to work, and of course and then as tourist days came you could do—you could be a bellhop or you could go to the grocery store and do that. So of course growing up in a grocery store I always plenty of work to do there, too but it was always fun, to work at the factory. We called it the factory—the shrimp factory — it was really a canning operation.

Also I remember during the wintertime; that’s when most of the oysters would come in and it was always an enjoyable thing. Of course there was a crew that would get on the—on the boat and it’s usually cold and you had a big shovel and you’d shovel the oysters, that were stacked up almost making the boat sink. And you’d put them in a bucket and the bucket would—would go into a little—not a conveyor, but it was a—it would be like a train car on—on tracks and it would go into a steamer, so it would relax the muscles in the oysters. And then they would be put in the tumbler and then the tumbler would break the oyster out and the oysters would fall through holes and into it and so before the manual— you—just shucking oysters; this was an automated way. So we were all part of that; my first cousins and second cousins, we would actually go shovel the oysters to make your— especially in college when you wanted to come

home and make some money between breaks and semesters. So that was a way to make a few dollars.

And not a lot of brains **[*Laughs*]**; it didn't take a lot of brains but it was fun to be working with everybody.

00:54:06

FL: Did you think that you would grow up to work in that industry?

00:54:09

FG: No; I didn't, I didn't. I just knew that my degree was mathematics and I started working with computers in 1968 and I—. But let me tell you; I never forgot those days. And it—of course by that time, Camille had come along and removed a lot of opportunity, because if you didn't have a million dollars in cash to go buy and sell oysters and shrimp and stuff like that you couldn't—especially if your cannery was just wiped out. It was a tough time. So I mean as I graduated from college I knew that there was not a lot of opportunity in the shrimp and oyster industry, unless you were able to survive Camille and those things.

It's turned around just like anything else but I think today 85-percent of the shrimp that's consumed in this country is imported, so it's pond-raised and those kinds of things. And they do some value-adding like getting it individual quick-freeze, breaded, and quick frozen shrimp—some of the imported shrimp hit here and some of the— my friends, my generation have—some of these folks have processing plants, but they're mostly IQF, individual quick freeze. And they have a lot of sales, but they don't go catch that shrimp. The—just very minimal amount of the—

of the [***local***] shrimp is processed. Most of the shrimp is processed from out of the country. But we all say that—I mean it's the truth too—is that the best quality shrimp in the country—domestic Gulf shrimp and that's something that I think they need to capitalize on, is a little value added. And say this: "You can buy cheaper shrimp but go taste them." You'll see the difference. So I think that's the future is doing that sort of marketing across the world. We're a global society today and I think some of the things it's incumbent upon the people who are in that industry to be a little bit aggressive in promoting that aspect. And of course, the tariffs and everything I think they just implemented but it's a difficult business just like anything else. To export today American product, it's tough, whether you manufacture it or whether you catch it or whatever. I mean it's a tough ballgame, you know?

Even in my industry, you call IBM Level I Support you're going to reach Bombay, India, when it used to be just pure Americans kinds of things. So the—it's a tough ballgame today.

00:56:37

FL: I definitely want to get back to your thoughts on the future of the industry in a minute, but getting back to you—the decisions you were making. When you were in college you said you were working in mathematics and you were working in computers. Obviously you saw that there were other opportunities for you out there. You were maybe more interested in those things and at the same time you were also talking about the opportunities disappearing in this industry. But when you were growing up did many of your—the friends and family around your age of your generation, did they feel like they were going to work in that industry when they grew up as well?

00:57:09

FG: No; not really, not really because I mean they—like I said, to—there were only x-amount of things you could do. Be a part of the management or just be a laborer. And there were opportunities at the time if were a pipefitter at Ingalls Shipbuilding and they had 25,000 jobs over there and they had benefits, and that's what you didn't have as far as looking at a career path. You didn't have a bright career path in that industry unless you were a part of the team, a part of the owners. Even from the boat standpoint it was a tough business. The price of shrimp was always; the middle man would wind up making the money, so it's always been a tough future. And I mean I can see where my grandparents said, "Hey you're not going to go shrimp for a living." They were able to do what they needed to do at the time because it was— there was opportunity and they took it and they got in the right spot but I just don't think from the '60s on… There were a few families that were able to kind of survive and do it but for the most part of the people I graduated from high school with and went onto college, they were looking at professional ends of the ballgame: doctors, lawyers, and other kinds of business opportunities. But a lot of—I was just thankful I guess in the '70s and the only person—and this was before mini-computers and micro-computers and that sort of thing, so there was only one place that I could work to be back home and that was Ingalls Shipbuilding. That was— they had multi-ship contract with the Navy and they had computers and we actually did a lot of the utilization of mathematical models and steel burning and cable sizing and sheet metal development—those kinds of things computers were naturally setup to do, but they were million dollar computers. And that's where I was able to move home and have a decent job there, so it just wasn't —there wasn't a lot of opportunity like that to move home and work in a shrimp cannery, you know?

00:59:19

FL: And why did you make that decision to move back here?

00:59:23

FG: Well, again, my childhood. And of course my wife is Croatian. Her maiden name was Sablich so we have Croatian on both sides of my kids' heritage. And like I said we both grew up Biloxi, both had big families and we wanted our kids to have that same kind of experience to be a part here. And my kids still can't believe how many people we're related to: "So that's one of my cousins? Who's that guy—how are we related to him?" So and that's cool for me to— and I guess and my mother kind of drove that home to—made sure I understood who was married to who and how they got here and whose brothers and sisters and everyone. So that was one of the motivations for us moving back from Houston in '72 was my oldest was born in '69 and I said it's time to move back home. And that's what we did; we had two children after that and now we got two grandkids after that.

01:00:20

FL: So there's this question in my mind now too, where it seems like—certainly the seafood industry was very important here. Has been for a long time, been very important to a lot of the communities here, the successive waves, but the pattern—but there seems to be a pattern, right? Where the first people who come here are laborers. They work in this industry; it's hard work, it's physical work; it's really demanding. It wears your body down. And as you were saying your parents and your grandparents' attitude was I always want to work it so that my children and my grandchildren won't have to do this work. And certainly a lot of the Croatian community that came in the early part of the 20th Century and a little bit into that century have since evolved out of that industry and taken professional career choices such as you have. And eventually the

Vietnamese community started to come here in the late ‘70s—early ‘80s. It seems like they’re following a similar pattern—a lot of the boats that are going out now are Vietnamese captained, Vietnamese owned; they’re doing that work but at the same time their children and—and some of them are opting out. They’re taking jobs elsewhere; they’re taking more professional or different professional career paths or maybe working casinos so on and so forth. And all this is happening—so it seems like everyone comes and they only want to really work one generation, maybe one or two generations in that industry, and all this is happening in the context of, as you were saying, really tough international competition in terms of price. Clearly now we’re looking at really skyrocketing cost of production for fuel and so on and so forth. So here’s the question: is that industry worth saving here?

01:02:10

FG: Well I think there will be a niche for that industry and—and if—from the—I guess from a processing standpoint if you can—you can make a market just like anything. I’ve kidded with a heart surgeon that goes to Dubai all the time and he said they love American products. I said well you get that value-added-ness and you can ship anything overnight anywhere. So that’s the niche. I think you can do some creative and innovative things that can make the market—I think that remains to be seen on what they need to do with this industry. There will always be shrimp, you know? They’re catching the same amount of shrimp as they did when I was a kid. But now it—at one point in time they had about 600 or 6,000 boats going out but now it’s gone down because of it costs you $10,000 to put a load of fuel on it to go catch $8,000 worth of shrimp. **[*Laughs*]** That’s not done—mathematically it doesn’t count properly.

So and I think is it worth saving—certainly; I do. I think it's worth saving and they will—they will dwindle down in numbers and then as opportunity, as niches pop up I can see that just in looking at some of the old pictures that they had one or two canneries in Biloxi. Then the Croatians came along and it was nine or ten of them, and it was Croatian based because they figured out- hey - where the niche was and you can always get people to go shrimp or you can buy your own boats and get you a crew and pay them fairly because it's got to be a good deal for everyone. You've got to be able to make money, know you? Your employees—you want your employees to make you money—treat them right. But you can see there was an opportunity to be a processor and I see that probably—and it's cyclic. It will come back again as someone figures out the niche. There will be competition within doing the same things that they—the people who were successful. You can't copyright that; you can't —if they figure out who you're selling it to and figuring out how you're doing it there will be other folks wanting to —entrepreneurial kinds of spirit will say, "Okay let's light this up." We'll do this and we'll make certainly a better living at that part of the deal than just going to go dragging for shrimp or oysters all night long, you know?

So it's definitely—it will always be worth saving and it will always be there I think here in Biloxi. Because there will be a family or there will be an operation that will be successful by either doing it themselves or just having a tight enough operation to be successful, to be profitable and that's the main thing. And if you have the resources and you don't have to go borrow all this money from the bank in order to do your product, to buy your product and then put the processing into it I think it'll be around. But if everything is driven out because of the external pressures, whether it's fuel or whether it's the market, I think the market—the dollarization of the product right now is like in the 1980s. And so I mean you're buying the

same—you—I mean if I'm a shrimper I'm selling it for 1980s prices but I got 2008 costs and cost of money and those kinds of things. So it remains to be seen how much will be around. But to answer your question though I think it's definitely worth saving because that's our heritage.

01:05:41

FL: All right; and actually do you—at this point do you—how many of the members or your friends are still involved in this industry?

01:05:50

FG: Just a handful, just a handful. We've got in our organization probably one or two people that are involved with the processing of shrimp—well, actually three families. And probably five or ten members of the organization that's actively processing shrimp, buying shrimp, selling shrimp and that sort of thing. Now we've got several of them that have shrimp boats but then they may be a carpenter in off-season and shrimping when it's right. And they're pretty wise folks, especially people that go dredge. They know when people are catching things and again with the price of fuel, man I'm telling you; you see a lot of them tied up at the dock. And the cost of everything is unbelievable, whether it's to repair a net or buy a net or get the fuel filled up to go take a chance at trying to catch a few barrels of shrimp. So it's interesting times.

01:06:57

FL: All right; well I want to thank you but before we go I want to give you a chance to say anything or anything you we haven't touched on that you'd like to add.

01:07:06

FG: No; I think we covered a lot of ground. It's just—it tickles me that someone is interested in our little corner of the world because it is a unique corner of the world. I'm proud to be a part of this heritage that we're part of, and looking forward to maybe another generation—my grandsons or their kids seeing our pictures on the wall and saying, "Hey; look at what we've got because of them," because that's why I'm meeting—that's why I'm here is because of my parents and my grandparents and what they did and I want to make sure that goes on generations and hundreds of years, so—appreciate it.

01:07:49

FL: Well I want to thank you very much for your time.

01:07:49

FG: Okay; man, thank you Francis.

01:07:51

[End Fo-Fo Gilich Interview]