DONALD AND MELINDA PUNCH
Punch's Seafood Market—Lockport, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen
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Project: Down the Bayou—Louisiana

[Begin Punch's Interview]

00:00:01

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, September 19, 2011. I'm in Lockport, Louisiana at Punch's Seafood Market. I'm sitting here with Melinda Punch, the owner, and if I could ask you to introduce yourself—tell us your full name, please, and then also, if you could, give a brief description of what you do for a living?

00:00:22

Melinda Punch: My name is Melinda Punch and we own—my husband and I own—Punch's Seafood Market in Lockport. We wholesale and retail seafood, Louisiana seafood.

00:00:35

SR: Thank you. Could you tell me, for the record, your birth date?

00:00:38

MP: September 21, 1957.

00:00:40

SR: Thank you. Could you maybe start by telling me—when I first visited you, you told me the story about how you got into the owning the seafood market, and if you could give me that story, I think that's interesting.

00:00:53

MP: Let's see. I'm trying to get the right year. About 1990, my youngest son developed Type 1 diabetes. He was four years old, and I was teaching school at a local high school. And when he--when he got to be the age to go to kindergarten, I could no longer leave my job and tend to his diabetes at school, so my husband decided that we needed to open something—open a seafood store—so he had access to the school while I was teaching.

00:01:39

SR: So you had to go to school and--and administer medications? Is that what you mean?

00:01:44

MP: It was medications, and deal with the lows and the highs. They would--they would have him test his blood sugar, and if it was really low they didn't know how to—. He was actually the first person at that school that ever had Type 1 diabetes. It was a small school, so then they really didn't know how to handle it. Since then they have nurses at school, but they hadn't had that in 19—let's see, 1991.

00:02:12

SR: Okay. So you really educated them on that too?

00:02:16

MP: Yeah, it was an education for them on how to deal with diabetes. And after he—there was other people that followed him that had it, and it made easy for the school at that time to deal with it because then knew how. But the legality of it was that they couldn't do any blood sugars. They couldn't give any medications because the school didn't do that at that time. Since, they--they have a nurse at each school that administers that for them.

00:02:40

SR: Wow, so that's a real hardship on a parent who is trying to work.

00:02:43

MP: It was at that time, yeah. So we decided—good for us. I mean, my husband had a shrimp boat. He decided to sell it and to--to stay in the seafood business, but on the other end of it **[*Laughs*]**. Instead of catching it, he was selling it—buying it and selling it.

00:02:57

SR: Okay, so I wanted to ask about that. Before you opened the market, he was a shrimper?

00:03:02

MP: Yeah. I think if you open a seafood market, you have to know a little bit about catching it and--and pricing and things like that. If you don't, you're going to really get sucked into some bad prices. **[*Laughs*]** People will kind of a gouge you and everything. And we knew when to buy shrimp, and you know, we just knew a lot about the seafood, and we--we pretty much did that—

he did all his life. And we know a lot about it; that's why we decided that would be the avenue to get into, is to retail and wholesale the materials he was actually catching before.

00:03:41

SR: Your husband's name is Donald, is that right?

00:03:44

MP: Donald, uh-hm.

00:03:44

SR: And did he grow up in a shrimping family?

00:03:47

MP: Oh yes. His--his mom and dad work for us now. He--his dad shrimped. Since--since Donald was about five years old, he's been on a shrimp boat, so it's all his life.

00:04:00

SR: Were those some of this parents who were—?

00:04:02

MP: Yeah.

00:04:04

SR: Oh, okay. So right now they're making crab patties and—

00:04:07

MP: Making crab patties and stuffed shrimp and I don't know what else. Maybe stuffed crab today.

00:04:11

SR: What are their names?

00:04:12

MP: Hazel and Leroy Punch.

00:04:16

SR: Did you grow up in a fishing family?

00:04:19

MP: My dad worked in the oil field, but on his seven days off from the oil field he would catfish. And he did that pretty much all his life. You know, he just liked the avenue of getting out on the water—after seven days on the water, but working for the oil field. So, yeah, he--he did. He did fish a lot, but it was mainly catfish; it wasn't--it wasn't saltwater. It was freshwater.

[*Phone Rings*]

00:04:46

SR: Do you need to get that? Okay. Did he sell the catfish?

00:04:50

MP: He sold some to locals, but not really—for self-consumption, so you know, house consumption. We ate a lot of catfish. **[*Laughs*]**

00:05:02

SR: Always fried, or—?

00:05:03

MP: Yeah, yeah, pretty much always fried. We don't like it baked. **[*Laughs*]**

00:05:06

SR: I hear that so much when I talk to people in this area, is that when they're not fishing for their livelihood they're fishing for sport, or when they're not on the rig they're fishing or—.

00:05:19

MP: Yeah, it's beautiful out there. If you ever get a chance to go, go. It's pretty. It's like a different—it makes you feel like you're in a different--on a different planet, because you don't really see other people, and it's just the water, the sky, and the boat. That's it.

00:05:39

SR: I imagine that that would be a pretty big adjustment for your husband, not being out there, when you first opened the shop.

00:05:46

MP: It was very much so, but he still stayed in contact with his friends that fished because he was buying from them instead of fishing with them. And we're still in contact with people in the--in the western part of the state that--that fish.

00:06:01

SR: Did he miss being out there on that boat?

00:06:03

MP: Yes, he did. A lot, yeah.

00:06:07

SR: So, you know, I'm kind of going all over the place, but I'd like to bring your sons into it. They're now grown adults, and they--they fish?

00:06:16

MP: Yeah. Travis is 30 and Jason is 25. Jason is the one that has the Type 1 Diabetes, the 25-year-old.

00:06:23

SR: And do they—one of them—I'm not sure which one it is—is working on his boat. Is that their main occupation, is going out on the water?

00:06:36

MP: That's their only occupation, uh-hm, yes.

00:06:38

SR: So it got into their blood.

00:06:41

MP: Oh definitely, yeah. Even when they were small. I was trying--trying to get them to go to school—you know, mechanic or whatever interested them—and nothing interested them except being on the water.

00:06:54

Once you're out there, it's kind of addicting. It's kind of, "[I] want to go back."

00:06:58

SR: And now they're some of your suppliers?

00:07:03

MP: They're my main suppliers. They supply me with crab. Travis also has a shrimp boat that we have at the bayou side. He—just the inside season. It's a small boat, and he also catches shrimp.

00:07:17

SR: Okay, so let's--let's start now with what the seafood market was like when you first opened it. I mean, you have a very broad selection now, which I'd like you to tell me about, but was it like that from the beginning?

00:07:35

MP: No. From the beginning—we started in February—February 2, 1994—and that was the beginning of crawfish season, and it was an excellent crawfish season; in fact, the biggest one—we've never had a big one since. And I think it was attributed to some of the floods they had in the Midwest. The water came into the Mississippi and they opened the spillways and they had gobs of crawfish. And crawfish sold like—like I bought crawfish for 50-cents a pound. And it sold for like 99-cents, you know. It was just unreal, the price. And now the crawfish—when I first started buying crawfish, I paid almost $3 a pound, and it retails for almost $4 a pound, so it's a big--a big difference in pricing. But a lot of that is attributed to the fact that this—when you first start crawfishing, the spillway is not in operation. And it only gets in operation—becomes in operation—when the water in Mississippi is high and they open the spillways. If they don't open the spillways, then you rely strictly on pond crawfish. And the pond crawfish has to be cultivated like a crop.

00:08:52

So the diesel prices are driving the crawfish prices higher, so the fuel price is affecting the crawfish pond also. Plus, the person—I have to leave here and go to New Iberia and pick it

up every day; that's fuel price, too, so that's all added onto the consumer increase price in crawfish.

00:09:11

SR: What about this past spring? The Mississippi flooded pretty majorly. Was that good--a good crawfish season?

00:09:18

MP: It did, but it was kind of late. It was late in the season, and the crawfish really didn't have that much water—not much crawfish because of the--the lateness of the flood. It should have been—if it had flooded a little earlier, March, it would have been better. It was more like a May/June thing.

00:09:38

SR: It's interesting to me because I didn't move to Louisiana until 2000, and to me, the price of crawfish still seems really reasonable. **[*Laughs*]** But not if you've—

00:09:52

MP: Not if I bought it for 50-cents and now I buy it for $3. Now during the season it might—if they have plenty and the conditions are right, it might go down to like $1.50, $2, I'll buy it. And I have to—you have to make a living on it, so I up the price at least $1 or $1.50. And that's not really that much profit being made on that at $1.50 for all the stuff you have to do with it after, and the loss. If I buy a sack of crawfish and I pay the man for it and I get home and there's five

pounds dead, it's my loss; so there goes the profit on that sack of crawfish. So you have to sell volumes.

00:10:30

SR: Tell me: What are the things that you have to do with the crawfish after you buy them, before you sell them?

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MP: Well the first thing you do is you have to--you have to grade them through and pick out the dead, because you will have some dead in it. And then you pass it in a tub of water and let them spit out mud. You have to purge them and clean them—wash them—and then they're ready for the pot. Then you're seasoning it. The seasoning is in the pot as you boil it.

00:10:56

SR: When you're purging, do you put anything in that water?

00:11:00

MP: Not at all. Most people put salt, but they don't realize they're killing them with salt. Salt is not a good thing unless you're going to really take them out and boil them right--right away. Lots of times I'll purge a few baskets ahead of time because I know my business is big on Fridays, so I might have 300 pounds already purged waiting to boil, and they're not dying then but if I put them in saltwater they'd be all dead by the time I'm ready to boil them.

00:11:27

SR: Huh. I didn't realize that. And how--how long do you keep them in the purging water?

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MP: At most 15 minutes. They'll purge right away because they don't like the freshwater. They like the muddy water. And their--their system is where, when they breathe, they exchange the water. So the water is like—so the gills are like a pump, so it pumps and it--it pumps the water—the muddy water—out of them so they--they do taste very good after. But I wouldn't ever eat a crawfish that's not purged. Nasty. **[*Laughs*]**

00:12:03

SR: Are there places that don't purge?

00:12:06

MP: I don't know.

00:12:07

SR: You don't eat anybody else's?

00:12:09

MP: No. When I go out and eat, it's not seafood. **[*Laughs*]** It's steak. I feel like a Midwesterner when we go out and eat—"Steak and potatoes, please."

00:12:20

SR: I can see that. So the crawfish that you sell here are already boiled?

00:12:28

MP: I sell some live, and when I sell live it's the customer's loss if they have a few [bad] pounds—. But it depends. I mean, if they have a lot dead in the sack I'll refund money, but a pound or two is acceptable dead in the sack.

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SR: When you say "sack," can you tell us for the record what—what does that mean?

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MP: It's--it's like a sack of potatoes, but it's smaller and it holds between 35 and 40 pounds of crawfish.

00:12:58

SR: Where do you get those sacks? Are they made for the crawfish?

00:13:00

MP: Yeah, it's made for crawfish. You can buy them at the local ag store, yeah.

00:13:06

SR: Could you tell me a little bit about the boiling process? What you put in your water and how long it takes?

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MP: Okay. I put Zatarain's salt and red pepper, and once the water is boiling and you boil the crawfish for—I'm not really the boiler, so I'm not quite sure. I think it's seven minutes. And then I throw ice water in. I throw ice in the water when I stop the boiling because when you throw ice in it, it makes the crawfish sink and absorb the seasoning. And then you let them soak for a little while, and that's where I finish the seasoning. I taste them as they're soaking, and if they need more pepper, they need more seasoning, I add it before I take them out. So the ice is the--the key; the ice machine is important during crawfish season.

00:13:53

SR: And purely because it makes them sink?

00:13:56

MP: It makes them sink--

00:13:56

SR: Not because of the temperature?

00:13:57

MP: —and it makes them exchange the water again, you know. The osmosis thing keeps going.

00:14:09

SR: But they're not still alive at that point?

00:14:08

MP: No, no. They're alive when you put them in the pot, though, which is kind of cruel. Crab are too **[*Laughs*]**. But they shoot cows, so—.

00:14:22

SR: Yeah. It is interesting, though. I mean, we were looking at the crabs today and they were alive. I mean, you're dealing with that every day, these claws coming at you.

00:14:31

MP: Yeah, yeah, I get bit only when I grade live crab. When they grade live crab, they--they dip the crab in ice water to kind of slow them down so they don't snap as much. And then they pass through them and grade them, and once in a while you get one that hadn't gotten iced enough and they'll catch a finger.

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SR: So you do use a lot of ice. Where do you get your ice?

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MP: I have an ice machine, and then sometimes I have to buy ice, extra ice, and put it in my trucks and shovel it out when my ice machine is not keeping up.

00:15:04

SR: You mentioned that Friday is the big crawfish day. Is that—why is that?

00:15:10

MP: I think it has to do with the Catholic tradition of not eating meat on Friday. And it's just—in this area, it's like party time. It's crawfish time, crab time. You buy a sack of crawfish and you can feed--you can feed 10 people, you know, whereas you go to a restaurant it's a pretty hefty bill for 10 people eating, and crawfish really are still cheaper than eating out. And it's—I imagine some people spend more money on their beer than their crawfish. **[*Laughs*]** So they enjoy it; it's party time.

00:15:44

Like, I'll watch the football season and if we're having a winning season, LSU or the Saints, sales pick up. They want to eat while they enjoy or eat before or after the football game. When the Saints went to the Super Bowl, it was great because I sold tremendous before. I got to watch the game because nobody called during the game. And after the game it was a lot of business after the game, so it was good for business.

00:16:12

SR: Are you open on Sunday?

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MP: I'm open seven days a week, yeah. You can't shut down when you have crab in a tank or crawfish dying in your cooler. You have to keep going. Now in the fall, like right now, September and October, we usually use—we usually take a few days off where we just close. My sons don't bring any crab. I don't have any crawfish right now, and all we have to worry about are the soft-shells. So we harvest them and still get some work done, some painting or some starting up freezers or cleaning up.

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SR: What about vacation?

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MP: **[*Laughs*]** We usually don't take any. We just take it during—you know, a couple days here and a couple of days there. But I also told my husband, we have 10 years left and then we retire. **[*Laughs*]** So we will retire very young.

00:17:04

SR: It's not a less labor intensive job than shrimping or fishing.

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MP: It's more hours, I think. I mean, the fisherman will go out at 5:00 [a.m.] and they'll come in at 3:00 [p.m.] and he's finished, where we start at 9:00 [a.m.] and we finish at 8:00 [p.m.], you

know, and--and the next morning you do the same thing. So it's not as much hard labor. I think they work harder physically, but ours is more hours.

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SR: Back to the crawfish for just a minute. How long, then, when you're letting them soak and observe the seasoning—about how long does that take?

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MP: Hmm. Five--ten minutes, because they do it pretty quickly because of the temperature change. The--the hot and the cold ice makes them exchange the--the water they have in them with new water quickly.

00:18:03

SR: So they're doing that exchange even though they're not alive?

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MP: Uh-hm, uh-hm. Yeah, the gills absorb it. That's why people in this area like to suck the head of the crawfish. That's where all the seasoning is at. And the crawfish, if you purge it, is really—it's just water. It's clean if you did it right.

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SR: Do you do that? Do you suck the heads?

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MP: Yeah. Yes, I do. And I also like the claws. The claws have the seasoning in them too.

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SR: How do you get the meat out of the claws?

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MP: Well you just, usually when it's--it's a fresh crop of crawfish, it's soft. You just bite it. You bit the claw and it peels.

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SR: I was wondering: Is there a difference besides price? Do you have a preference for the spillway crawfish over the pond crawfish, in flavor or size or anything else?

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MP: There's a difference in flavor. I find the spillway is better. The pricing, about the same. Usually they want a little bit more for their—I say about the same, but they usually want a little bit more for their spillway. But the spillway come in when the crawfish is usually on a downturn, like it's gone down, so that's why it always seems to be that the spillway is a little cheaper, is because it happens towards the end of the season.

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The spillway usually starts—they usually start fishing in February, but they don't really catch crawfish in the spillway until end of March and April.

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SR: What is different about their flavor?

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MP: It's a different flavor. I just can't—maybe a little sweeter. I'm not sure, but you *can* tell the difference. And also spillway crawfish look different. They're darker. And they have larger claws, I guess because they live in the marshy area and use [them] more than [if they were in] a pond. A pond is usually a rice field that they flood, and it's--it's lighter, so they're a lighter color and the other ones are darker.

00:19:56

SR: Oh I know: I was going to ask you to tell me, for the record, what you mean by "spillway" —where that is.

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MP: Spillway is, hmm. The spillway we--we get crawfish from is the Morganza, not the Bonnet Carre, although when it floods they do harvest some crawfish from there. That's an area—I don't know how to describe it—in Southwest Louisiana between the Mississippi [River] and the Atchafalaya [River and Basin]—best description.

00:20:38

SR: That's good. Thank you. So when you first opened, it was most—you opened in crawfish season. And then I'm guessing that you had shrimp and crabs. Your sons wouldn't have been fishing at that point?

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MP: Ninety-four, no. I was buying from other people. In 2000, six years later, my oldest was--was fishing on his own. And he was then selling me crab.

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SR: When did you start doing the soft-shells?

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MP: I really don't know. I'm trying to see—probably about 2004, 2005. I'm trying to think if I had to worry about the soft-shells during the hurricane. **[*Laughs*]** We always base things on hurricanes. Let's see, Katrina. I think we started—I think we had to run a generator. It was either Katrina or Rita, one of them. I think we—by 2004 would be approximate.

00:21:50

SR: Okay, and Katrina and Rita were in 2005.

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MP: Yeah, yeah. And you have to worry about that. You have to have a generator to run the pump so you don't lose all your crab, and that's—. You know, usually when we see the

hurricane in the Gulf like that and the projected path is towards us, we--we stop buying and start gearing--gearing up for a hurricane. We have a generator that runs my house. It runs my freezers and it runs one side of my business. It doesn't run the retail side, because at that point I'm not worried about retail. I'm worried about saving what I have. So it's pretty neat because it even runs my pool. I mean, it runs everything.

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The man, when he hooked up the generator, said, "Put everything in your house on, so I did—computers, everything. So we really didn't have a lack of electricity during the--the hurricane.

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SR: Were you here that whole time?

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MP: Yeah, we stayed. It wasn't bad here. It was bad in Mississippi. The winds in Mississippi were really bad, and the water in New Orleans, which it's a bowl. You live there; you know. It's subject to flood. This area, I'm like eight and a half feet above sea level here. But as you go further this way, it--it drops a lot.

00:23:09

SR: Like toward Grand Isle?

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MP: Well, toward--towards Grand Isle, and even in this area if you go just a couple streets back, it kind of—the bayou side is where the ridge is, and I'm very close to the bayou side. And then as you go back, it gets lower and lower, so—.

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SR: That's kind of like in New Orleans near the river, uh-hm.

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MP: Yeah, exactly.

00:23:32

SR: Interesting. So, you didn't lose anything in those hurricanes?

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MP: Maybe I lost a few pieces of tin on the roof, you know, which we don't complain about. We just nail up some more tin and be grateful that we survived. And we lost business. I mean, you lost your--your sales. But I wouldn't say—no, no. And I'm the weather person, so they called me: "Ma, where is the rain?" I get on the computer and look at where is the rain. Cell phones are great. And then I saw this Katrina thing off of Florida, and while it was off of Florida, I told them, I said, "You better go pick up because this thing is going across Florida and it's coming in the Gulf."

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And they listened to me, so they picked up every trap they had and they put it on land. And when the hurricane hit, they were all nice and snug and nothing--nothing was lost. But a lot of people didn't heed the warning, and they--they left everything out so they lost all their traps. And a trap is approximately $30 apiece, and if you lose 2,000 you lost a good **[*Laughs*]**—you lost a lot of money.

00:24:46

SR: Is that how many traps one fisherman will have? How many—?

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MP: Well, my son probably has about 1,500 traps, yeah, and every year you have to buy more because every now and then your boat cuts the rope and the trap falls. The propeller cuts the rope, you get it hooked, or the wind is blowing and it just didn't pick up right. Or you just—the water will come up real fast and it will--it will pick up the trap and--and move it, and you have to go find it. And if you can't find it you lose. So every year they buy at least 300 just to keep stock up to where they have enough to fish with. Yeah, he's got 1,500 traps easy. My other one has about 800; he's working his way up. The other one has a six-year start. **[*Laughs*]**

00:25:38

SR: That's another thing, though, that I hadn't thought about that a fisherman has to—another expense. I mean, there's the fuel and the—

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MP: Traps, yes.

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SR: —and the repairs to the boat, and then—

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MP: Traps, yes, big expense. The biggest expense is traps.

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SR: Hmm. Was it a big decision to start doing the soft-shells? I mean, I saw the facility in—.

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MP: It was mainly my oldest son. He was interested in doing it, and he said—he went and observed somebody else's tanks and he actually built everything you saw there. He--he plumbed it, and he--he put the tanks and the—you have to get saltwater to put in the tanks, so you have to have pumps. You have to travel—this is freshwater, so we have to travel 30--40 miles and pick up some saltwater and bring it back and pump it in the tank. And then you have to have a filter system for that water because it has a lot of mud in it and it has a lot of—. So he--he used oyster shells, and then he found some little—I think I might have one—he found some little plastic balls that—. I thought I had one here.

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I was going to show you if I still had one. Well, it's a little plastic ball that—I guess I can't find it. It absorbs some of the—it picks up some of the [*inaudible*] in th*f* stuffing businesse water.

00:27:03

SR: Huh.

00:27:03

MP: He wanted to do it, so we--we said okay. And he's built everything and he set it all up, so—.

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SR: Okay. Let's talk about that a little bit. I got a tour, and you have tanks that can hold 1,000?

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MP: Probably about 2,000 crabs, because I have the bottom that we still didn't use yet.

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SR: And so from the beginning of the process, the fisherman goes out and—

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MP: He looks for a buster crab, which is a red lined crab. On the fin it has a red line on it, and he collects those separately and he keeps them separate from the rest of the crab. And then when

he comes in, he brings me those and I buy them for $1 apiece. And I put them in the tank. Well, actually, my son goes through them and counts them again to make sure they had a red line, because I'm not going to pay him $1 for a crab that he missed, or if the crab—the crab might be dead by the time he gets in. He might have lost it, so we only pay for the ones that are alive and good red lines. And we put them in the water. And then depending on the water temperature, it—the water temperature and the pH and the salinity are the three things you have to keep good in the tank. And it usually takes about—it usually takes about a day, day and a half, for that crab to shed. And to begin the molting process. And it takes—once it begins the molting process, starts to come out of the shell, it takes about four hours. And then if it's hotter, it takes two hours; if it's cooler, it takes longer. So it depends on the temperature there, I think, the most. The salinity and the pH keep the crab alive better. And you pretty have--pretty much have a pH problem, because it's a lot of base. The gel they secrete is a base. If some die, it's ammonia; it's a base. So you--you have usually a high pH in your tank.

00:29:02

SR: And--and your son is testing for that all the time?

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MP: We test the pH; we adjust it. We adjust it mainly by putting more water, because we--we refuse to put chemicals. I don't want to put any chemical in it; just keep it with water. I figure the water has enough chemical in it already. **[*Laughs*]** So we don't add anything really. We just--just flush it out by putting more water.

00:29:27

SR: Now, when you say you have to go get the water—do you buy it, or do you just take it out of the—?

00:29:35

MP: I just take it out of the bayou or wherever. Wherever we think the water looks nicer. We'll watch the winds. If there's a strong south wind blowing, you can get the water closer because the saltwater comes in. If it's a north wind like we've been having, you have to go further. You might have to go all the way to Port Fourchon for water, you know, and that's about—it's about 40 miles, 45 miles.

00:30:03

SR: And you have a truck with a pump?

00:30:06

MP: We have a truck with usually three plastic tanks and a pump to pump the water in and pump the water out of the tank when you get here. Of course it's mainly gravity flow when you get here, but you have to get the pump to pump it from to the tank on the trailer.

00:30:23

SR: And then when the—once the crabs molt, which I saw—I saw some in process and some that had already lost their shell. It's pretty critical to get them out of that tank soon. Is that right?

00:30:37

MP: Yes, because if you don't they'll--they'll get hard again. They'll turn into a white-liner, and they'll lose the red line and they'll get hard again and be snappy, and they'll eat--they'll eat the rest of the crab. **[*Laughs*]** They'll eat all the soft-shells.

00:30:56

SR: Wow. How long does it take them to get hard again?

00:30:59

MP: About four hours—

00:31:00

Donald Punch: Four to six hours.

00:31:02

MP: —four to six hours.

00:31:04

SR: We have a joiner. Could I just ask you, for the record, to introduce yourself?

00:31:08

DP: Donald Punch, the owner and operator with my wife.

00:31:14

SR: Yeah, co--co-owner?

00:31:18

DP: Yeah.

00:31:20

SR: So we're just--we're talking about what I saw with the soft-shells out there. I'm sorry; so, I asked you how long it would take them to get hard again, and you said "four to six hours?"

00:31:31

MP: Four to six hours.

00:31:32

SR: Yeah, so we were talking out there about how somebody is checking those thanks all night long.

00:31:39

MP: Right. Every four to six hours, every four hours.

00:31:42

DP: Checking--checking them about every two to three hours at night depending on your temperature, the water temperature, how fast they get hard.

00:31:52

SR: And right now the water temperature is pretty high?

00:31:53

DP: Yeah, the production right now, in the fall—what you would call it—?

00:32:05

MP: Molting.

00:32:05

DP: —fall molting, the production is higher and so you're checking the tanks more often because you have more coming out. And depending on the moon phase and condensation and pressure and all that—how fast they come out of their shells. With a good low pressure, they come out even faster.

00:32:25

SR: And the season starts in the spring and ends next month?

00:32:29

DP: Yeah, usually around Halloween it starts getting too cold and they won't come out of the shell fast enough, and they die halfway out, and we--we quit until next spring.

00:32:43

SR: But in nature they're constantly going through this process, just slower?

00:32:47

DP: Pretty much. The water temperatures are different in nature and lot deeper water. We're only fooling with, like, six inches of water in the tank so it cools off real quick. In the lakes and all you have—

00:33:01

MP: I think it's slower in nature when the water gets cold. I don't think it—I don't know for sure, but I don't think they really shed that much when it gets cold.

00:33:09

DP: They go through their season, you know. But you'll have some soft-shells year-round, but they'll survive down in the deeper water and won't in the normal water and more brackish water, compared to shallow tanks.

00:33:25

MP: And you have to realize, in nature when they soft-shell, they're easy prey. And so they go hide. They hide in—a lot of people that fish soft-shells use bushes. They'll put bushes on lines. Like they put a line in it, and they'll drop it in the water, and the crab will go in the bush to hide. And they pick it up and the crab will fall out.

00:33:47

SR: Hmm. It seems like it would be really difficult to fish for soft-shells.

00:33:50

DP: It is. Time consuming. You got to go cut little trees and tie them together and make a bush; put them out on lines. Some people use traps now, regular crab traps, and you put a—you bait them with a male crab that's a breeding male. Not all the males are breeders, and you'll find the breeder males, put [them] in the bait box, and it'll attract the little busters into the trap.

00:34:14

SR: Because they—I learned out there that they only breed when they're soft.

00:34:21

DP: Yeah, when they're soft. So that's why you're looking for—like right now, the fall season, is mostly females. So if you put a male in the bait box, it attracts all the females and it will make a pretty big buster catch that day. Now when it's the male season, it's kind of slow. They won't go after the females because they're soft. You know, and then you got to more--more or less use bush lines to catch a better production of them. They'll do better, but right now in the traps they'll do pretty fair with the females.

00:34:59

SR: What was that word you just used? Is there—huh?

00:35:05

MP: [*Inaudible*]?

00:35:06

SR: No, I thought you said—so the female soft-shells are called "busters" or "red liners?"

00:35:13

DP: They're all busters.

00:35:14

SR: Oh, they all are, okay.

00:35:14

DP: They all are buster crabs.

00:35:15

MP: And they have different seasons of breeding. Like the females are breeding now, so the male will attract the females. But in the summer, like June, males breed. They can get a lot of soft-shell males, and they don't attract—because they can't breed while *they're* soft.

00:35:33

SR: Oh, right, right. So they're breeding when the females are soft.

00:35:37

MP: So I have a lot of females that are soft-shells right now. Very few males, and it was—

00:35:42

DP: Probably 90-percent of all of our soft-shells are now female crabs.

00:35:45

MP: And it was backwards in June. In June it was mostly males and no females.

00:35:47

SR: This might be a really silly question, but is there any difference flavor between males and females?

00:35:52

MP: Yeah, yeah, there's a difference in flavor.

00:35:55

DP: Not so much in the soft-shells—

00:35:57

MP: No, but in the regular—

00:35:58

DP: In the hard crab, the females—when you have eggs in this part of the country, a lot of people like the females because they like the eggs in them.

00:36:09

MP: The internal eggs.

00:36:10

DP: Yeah, the Asians like the females with eggs. People on the East Coast like the male crabs. They don't like the eggs. Very small market on females up there; most of your female crabs go to the West Coast. The Asians over there like a lot of females.

00:36:30

SR: What if you're just eating not the eggs, but just the meat—does that taste different?

00:36:37

DP: Yeah. To me, the females got a little sweeter meat. They're harder to peel. The shell usually runs harder, and the compartments between the shells where the meat is at is usually a little smaller. Yeah, your select male crabs, the shells are a little more—little tender, and it's bigger chunks of meat compared to the female crab. And you got a big jumbo lump out of a male crab, whereas the female crab, most of the time the lump wants to break on you, so we don't make too many jumbo lumps when we're peeling them.

00:37:13

SR: That's fascinating. So, last night—tell me what the wakeup schedule was.

00:37:21

DP: We checked the crabs at 8 o'clock, 11 o'clock, 2 o'clock, 4 o'clock.

00:37:27

SR: But you took turns with someone, your son?

00:37:32

DP: My son checked them at 4:00. I checked them all the rest of the night.

00:37:35

MP: Because he went crabbing today.

00:37:36

DP: He gets up at 4:00 to go crabbing—well, 3 o'clock to go crabbing—and checks them before he leaves.

00:37:43

SR: That's an early day.

00:37:44

MP: That's why the [*inaudible*] don't happen. **[*Laughs*]** And when he's home, they--they share. They check at different times.

00:37:53

DP: Yeah, and when they're fishing crabs, being they get up at 3 o'clock—and between 3:00 and 4:00, depending where they're fishing at—they'll check the crabs in the morning before they leave, and then Daddy comes in about 6:00 and he'll make a run between 6:00 and 7:00 and check them, and then I'll start back; 8:30--9 o'clock, I'll start back there, and on and off I'll go check them depending on how fast they're coming out, you know.

00:38:25

Right now the--the water is better in the afternoons. From about 5:00 to 9:00 is when they're coming out the best. When the water was real hot in the summertime, in the '90s, they weren't living as good and they was coming out better at 3:00--4 o'clock in the morning, once the water started to cool off.

00:38:45

SR: Do you regulate the temperature of the water at all, or do you just keep it air temperature?

00:38:52

DP: We--we got a 1,500 gallon tank buried in the ground where we try to keep it ground temperature. What's ground temperature—74 this year?

00:39:03

MP: It's just cooler.

00:39:03

DP: In the 70s is the ground temperature, and—

00:39:06

MP: It's like a pool.

00:39:10

DP: And like right now we're trying to—the water done cool off a little bit, so we're trying to keep it a little hotter so we—in the summertime we had our tank covered, and right now we got the top one covered where the sun can hit on it and try to warm up the water and make them shed a little faster. We find the best temperature for the water is like in the low-to-mid-80s, to where they shed the best in our system. Everybody's system is—also homemade systems, and some have closed systems. Like, we're far from the water source so we have a closed system, where we go to the bayou and get all the water with the salinity and bring it back and--and control our water. Other people are set up on the bayou, where they're just pumping water straight out of the bayou, open system, and just circulating bayou water, which makes a little difference too. You always have a different--different type of water, but you always have freshwater all the time, you know. And then the water—if they can get the water down deep in the bayou, well, they have cooler water where they can circulate. And us, we got to kind of watch the—as much as the sun is hitting on the tanks, and we have a couple other things in mind. We're going to try something this winter. We're going to do a different system and set up some heating coils on top of the roof

where the sun is going to heat up all the water, and see if we can't get a good early spring or late fall production.

00:40:47

MP: Do that for my pool. **[*Laughs*]**

00:40:50

SR: Yeah, I don't know if they'd like chlorine.

00:40:53

MP: No, they could do that for my pool. I have a pool.

00:40:55

SR: Oh, I see, yeah.

00:40:56

DP: She wants to swim late. **[*Laughs*]**

00:40:59

SR: I see.

00:40:59

DP: The only problem with that is getting her out of the water.

00:41:03

SR: So you buy them for $1 and you sell them for between—?

00:41:09

DP: Dollar fifty and $4.25. We make different grades depending on if they have their claws or if the claws fall off or not; the size. The big ones that have two claws, it makes a better crab. If he drops his claws, it's a negative. You know, it--it depends on the size and the quality of the crab when they come out.

00:41:34

SR: It seems to me like a really, really labor intensive process. I guess it must be somewhat lucrative, or you wouldn't do it, right?

00:41:44

DP: Oh, my two sons fish crabs, and there was nobody close by that was doing it. And a lot of times they had to leave and travel down to Cutoff and Galliano and sell crabs, and we decided to do it ourselves. And we picked up other fishermen in the Lockport area selling to us, so sometimes we have—like right now we've got seven or eight fishermen bringing us some, and sometimes we have up to 18 fishermen bringing crabs. It depends where they're at and how many you're catching, you know. And since we opened, you got six or seven other people that decided to get in the business. We're [not] making a fortune, so most of them done dropped out already. It's something you got to—it's taking care of a baby, you know, 24-hour-a-day job. You

got to kind of keep up with your water. You got to watch what kind of crabs you buy and separate them for the tanks. You don't want white-liners with your red liners, and if they're not a white-liner—if they're not a red liner, they're going to eat the other crabs, the white-liners and the regulars.

00:43:00

SR: Right. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'll just say if they're a white-liner, it means that they're not about to molt?

00:43:07

MP: It'll probably be about a week and a half to two weeks before they'll be ready to do anything.

00:43:12

SR: And then they're cannibalistic?

00:43:16

DP: Yeah. And chances are, right now when the water will start cooling off, they probably won't live to make it to red line. When they turn to a red line, then they're going--they're going to die. So fishermen don't like it. They look at the little crab and they go, "Oh, the color looks close," so they--they throw it in the box. And we got to separate all that, and my son is better at grading the crabs than me. He sees better. I got to wear glasses now, so—. But it's just a matter of grading the crabs right and putting them in the right section. You get some red lines that are

just starting, and we call them "pink lines." They're just starting to turn red, and you got to keep them away from the dark reds and kind of keep that a little separated too.

00:44:09

SR: I saw that line; it's not that easy to see.

00:44:12

MP: No.

00:44:12

DP: No. I showed you one of the most visible ones. That crab was actually on the way out of his shell, and it was real easy to see that one. Some of them are just a little thread that's barely—you can just barely see that little shape of the thread.

00:44:27

SR: Melinda, you don't see the line?

00:44:28

MP: No. I don't see the line even with my glasses. I don't know what they're looking at.

[*Laughs*]

00:44:34

SR: It's very subtle. So, it sounds like in order for it to be lucrative, it's quantity. Like if you're—?

00:44:40

DP: Yeah, you got to fool in quantity. We have about 2,000 crabs in the tanks right now. The crab business is rather slow on the shipping part. If they can't ship the crabs—the dealers that buy—the volume buyers, they ship crabs. If they can't buy the crabs, the fishermen won't go out just to catch busters. Crab production is real slow right now, and a lot of fishermen have even picked up their traps. They're not even fishing right now until things start to turn around.

00:45:12

SR: Do y'all know why it's slow? I've heard that from a few people.

00:45:16

DP: Uh, normally this is a slow time of the year, but this year is really bad. We don't know if it's something to do with the BP oil spill, where it killed off a lot of the crabs last year and made the production low. BP says everything is back to normal, but looking at the records, we--we're half off from what we normally are. Usually this time of the year we're turning fishermen down. We have too many crabs in the tanks. I've already had up to 6,000 crabs in the tanks, and at that point you kind of got to be—it kind of gets scary because you can't put too much in there and shock the system and kill everything, and within an hour everything is dead.

00:46:00

MP: There's a limited amount of oxygen per tank.

00:46:04

SR: Wait, so you've—

00:46:05

MP: Put too many crabs in the tank at one time.

00:46:07

SR: So you're saying at this point you've had 6,000 crabs, but not—?

00:46:11

DP: Not this year, but in past years.

00:46:14

SR: Right, but in years past.

00:46:15

DP: Past years, at this time, usually we're fooling with 4,000 to 6,000 crabs at a time in the tank. Right now, we got about 2,000, and it is just—I don't know if it's Mother Nature or the oil spill or it's just an off year, you know. Production is down.

00:46:34

MP: Our biggest fear about the oil thing is the dispersant they use. We're afraid that it might make the species sterile. And if they can't reproduce, then you're catching your last crab.

00:46:49

SR: And I guess it'll take some time to see how that all works out, huh?

00:46:53

MP: When you see the beginning of that, then you know the down on the crabs is because when they try to reproduce, they don't produce any viable eggs. We just have to wait and see.

00:47:06

SR: Has the oil spill—is that the biggest way that it's affected you, is if that's causing this crab shortage? Or are there other really big ways?

00:47:17

MP: Between Obama's moratorium and the oil spill, it hurt the area a lot.

00:47:25

DP: Probably the Obama moratorium hurt our area—is more hurtful for us right now.

00:47:30

MP: It hurts us.

00:47:31

DP: People don't have the extra money, oil field people working offshore. South Louisiana is mostly oil-field-related. You know, most of your jobs, somewhere down the line somebody is making something for the oil field, or oil-field-related. A lot of people didn't *lose* their jobs. A lot of them lost them, but a lot of them had their hours cut back. They were used to making 70 to 80 hours a week, and they're now making 30 and 40. And without that big overtime, lifestyles change. And we're not a necessity food; we're just a luxury food. And with the paychecks being cut, well, it cuts out a lot of that luxury food. You can buy ground meat a lot cheaper than buying soft-shell crabs and shrimp and oysters and fish and all.

00:48:26

And then when you look at every time on the TV when you have an article about a dead fish or bird or dolphin or something, business takes a drop for a couple weeks. The more--the more ads they put on the TV, negative ads, a lot of people look at that. A lot of people just say, "The hell with it. We ain't going to eat it. We'll eat everything else." But a lot of people still look at the TV and they shy away for a week or two, and then they don't show it on TV, and they come back and they start eating slowly again.

00:49:03

But it's just going to take time until the economy turns around, and--and hopefully by that time the production has picked back up and get back to normal.

00:49:15

MP: We co-existed with oil for so long. We're used to it. Every now and then you had a little spill, but they always cleaned it up, and then you got back to work and you were good. In fact,

some of the oil structures are some of your best fishing structures. We're not against oil; we just want them to do it a little cleaner. **[*Laughs*]**

00:49:34

DP: The only scary thing about the oil spill is the dispersant.

00:49:36

MP: Yeah, and then it just left the oil—

00:49:40

DP: From what we're hearing, they can't use it in their own country. It's outlawed.

00:49:43

SR: Say that again.

00:49:45

DP: The dispersant, from what we're hearing, is outlawed overseas. You know, they can't use it in Europe and all. But they can use it over here. Don't know if it's a government buyout or what it is, but the stuff is marked "toxic" on it, and we can still put it in our waters. You know, and **[*Phone Rings*]** that's the only scary part of the oil industry now, is what's going to happen with that part. If it makes our products to where they're not going to reproduce, or if it's going to be a

long-term effect, or—. But if next season gets back to normal, that's what nobody really knows. Not even the biologists, much less people.

00:50:33

MP: We got into the stuffing business because we had to have an outlet for crab [when] I boiled too many—so what do you do with it? Well, we peel it (and the small crabs) and make crab patties with it. Crawfish patties, shrimp—the same thing. So yesterday when I boiled—if I boiled four dozen too many, then they'll peel it and I'll use it to make—. So you try to keep your waste down to a minimum.

00:51:04

DP: We try to keep a good grade of crabs, a quality of crabs to sell to customers, so the skinny crabs, even though they're big, if they're skinny we put them on the side to peel them.

00:51:13

SR: So we hadn't really talked about how you boil crabs. You boil crabs here and sell them boiled?

00:51:19

DP: Yeah.

00:51:21

SR: By the dozen or by the—?

00:51:23

DP: Yeah, by the dozen. And we boil to peel. We got some ladies that peel crabs for us. And so we boil them; we grade them and all; and they peel the skinny and the smaller ones, and if they don't have their claws we peel them and try to give at least one claw to the crab, you know. And if it drops their claws, we peel them.

00:51:45

SR: It's like a very contained ecosystem here because your family is catching the crabs, and then you sell boiled crabs, and then what you don't use from that you put into another product.

00:51:58

MP: We also sell live crab on the weekend.

00:51:59

SR: Oh, you do?

00:52:01

MP: Yeah.

00:52:01

DP: A lot of people like to make their own crab boils at home, you know. Down here it's a past-time eating. Family reunions get together, or like ball--ballgames are good business for us. When

you got a home ballgame, a lot of people make a party and they'll boil crab and they boil crawfish and they'll barbeque and all, but they make a full day event out of it. And being we're the seafood industry down here, most people, when they can get it, they'll go with seafood. And we sell a lot of--a lot of live crabs on the weekend for them.

00:52:41

SR: Just like the crawfish, huh?

00:52:42

DP: For the parties, yeah, the crawfish.

00:52:44

SR: Yeah, I'm just saying the crawfish are—

00:52:45

DP: The crawfish is good. Depending on the price. The crawfish the last couple of years has been kind of expensive, but before the moratorium went in, when money got tight people didn't worry about it. You know, they were making good money and they just came out and got together and bought sacks of crawfish and made their parties on the weekends. Money tightened up. Instead of buying a sack of crawfish, they come buy five or ten pounds just for the man and the wife, you know, instead of making a party.

00:53:16

SR: Can one of you tell me a little bit about the stuffing? Because that is something that I wasn't familiar with before I moved to Louisiana. Like, what--what did you mean by your "stuffing business"?

00:53:32

DP: Well, we take crabmeat, and then we peel onions, bell peppers, celery; food process it; cook it down; and we mix that with--with bread and breadcrumbs, the whole batch mixed up together, a lot of seasoning. And either we make it into little patties like hamburger-patty-size where you can put it on a bun and deep-fry it or bake it, or we stuff crab shells where you can bake them as a stuffed crab, or we take a shrimp and we split the shrimp and make a butterfly shrimp and put stuffing on top and make a stuffed shrimp. And different applications—we make little balls, little crab balls for appetizers, and we put some of the crabmeat on top of bell peppers and make stuffed bell peppers. Claw fingers—we wrap around the crab claw fingers and fry that. Basically anything down here that can get deep-fried is considered good.

00:54:32

And you can deep-fry all that stuff, so it's all pretty much on the menu. We have some restaurants that use crab patties; the others want stuffed crabs and some want stuffed shrimp. So everybody has got a little--little area that sells better than the others.

00:54:52

SR: Where did that recipe come from, your stuffing?

00:54:56

MP: His mom.

00:54:56

DP: My mama. Mama is 74, and I'm 54, and as long as I can know, Mama has been doing that. Started off, they were selling out of the house, bootlegging, years back before the Board of Health come along I guess. And so I guess it's something I've grown up doing and knowing about, and--and she's still here doing it. She's still in the shop working—74 and gets here 5 o'clock in the morning, 4:30, 5 o'clock, and got pots banging.

00:55:33

SR: So that was her side business even like when you were growing up?

00:55:37

MP: The stuffing?

00:55:37

DP: Yeah, well my daddy was always a fisherman. Daddy was mostly a shrimper, and my last few years the shrimping got really bad and he started crabbing. As a kid, he was a crabber and a trapper with his parents. And then they got into shrimping, and I can remember trapping and shrimping and doing a little crabbing on the side, and it was mostly shrimping. **[*Phone Rings*]** And as the years went by, trapping got worse and we got out of trapping and stayed with the shrimping. And in the late '80s--early '90s, fuel got so expensive, where the shrimping got to where you couldn't really make money no more with your shrimp boats. And all our good crews

went and worked for the oil field, which you can't blame a man who had a family—insurance and benefits. And our--our deckhand situation got bad and fuel got expensive and shrimp got cheap from the imports. And I had four shrimp boats. I have no more. I sold them all. My son has one, which he doesn't hardly use.

00:56:51

He sticks mostly to crabbing. Both of my sons crab. And basically they can fish without a deckhand, and they can fish by their self most of the time. If they have a deckhand it's good, but if the deckhand don't show up in the morning they can still go out crabbing. Whereas in a shrimp boat you're leaving for 20 days at a time and you need two good deckhands, and that's hard to find two men to work 20 days at a time. So the culture all changed. Right now we're into the crabbing, and hopefully we can stay in that until it's time to retire.

00:57:30

SR: Can you tell me—so, you said that your dad was a trapper, and I've heard that term in this area too, but I don't totally know what that means. What would he trap?

00:57:43

DP: When my dad was a kid it was muskrat, and then the nutria were introduced. Somebody brought in the nutria from South America and over the years they took over the marsh. They reproduced real fast, and he went from trapping nutria and coon, to muskrat and coon, to muskrat, coon, nutria, otter, or whatever they can trap. You know, whatever they can catch in the traps. And now it's mostly nutria, and that was a real good business at one time. Prices on the furs, they got real good, but the fur price went down and it got to where now they don't even

hardly buy the furs. Sometimes people catch it, and the nutria is cleaned, and you don't know if you can sell the fur. The State has a program where they pay so much for a tail now. They buy just the tails. They want you to kill them so that they don't eat up the marsh. And, yeah, eat the marsh, the grass, and all the levee supports. They make holes in the levees. So the State is buying them, just the tail. You kill it and cut off the tail and bring it to the State, they'll pay you. I don't know if it's $3 or $5, but it don't--it don't pay to clean the fur no more.

00:59:00

SR: So that's what it was—it was for the fur, the trapping?

00:59:04

DP: Yeah.

00:59:05

SR: And would those animals get eaten?

00:59:08

MP: A few times.

00:59:09

DP: Well yeah, we'd clean the meat and we'd save the meat for the alligator farms and different things. They'd make pet food at one time with the meat. And then in the '80s—late '80s, early '90s—that started going out when the animal rights people came around for the furs and all. And

then they went to synthetics instead of naturals, and so the fur business went way down. And it got to where—not going trapping for the fur. People just killed them for the tail and cut off the tail and bring it to the State people and collect the money.

00:59:52

SR: So interesting. But now your parents work with you?

00:59:55

DP: Yeah. My dad has done had four heart attacks and strokes and bypasses and several stints, and we say he's got nine lives. I don't know how many he had, but he got more than one cat in him, I believe. But he's here every morning. He says he's here to keep the ladies on track. He's the boss. I think they keep him on track more or less, but he's here every morning at 4:30--5 o'clock [a.m.]. Some days we got to tell him to go home, it's time to go get some rest, you know—5:00--6 o'clock [p.m.], he's still here. We kind of work in shifts. They--they come early in the morning. The crab pickers come in early, and they'll start making the stuffing. The crab pickers go in the other room and they pick the crabs, and usually they'll finish anywhere from 2:00 to 3 o'clock [p.m.]. You try to get through it, the processing. And in the afternoons I start boiling. I'll--I'll go ahead, 8:00--9 o'clock, and start doing all the other work around the shop—the buying and selling and ordering stuff and all. My wife runs to pick up the crawfish, and I'll stick around and handle the--the live crawfish and get ready for the boiling in the afternoon. And we boil—normally we got crawfish and crabs that come out of the pot at 4:30, and by 7:00 we quit and finish cleaning up. Sometimes 8:00--9 o'clock, we're getting out of the shop.

01:01:32

SR: So between 4:30 and 7:00, you have a lot of customers for the boil?

01:01:37

DP: The boil, yeah. That's normally knock-off time. Most of the people in this area work in the shipyards and all, and they start knocking off between 4:00 and 5 o'clock. So that's why I try to have all our product hot in the afternoon, you know. We're not on the highway; we're down the street, so we're not seeing thru-traffic. It's just local business, and we have people that know where we're at. And we do most—most of our boiling is done in the afternoon when the people is getting off of work.

01:02:10

SR: Well it looks—I've been here twice, and both times I mean you've been boiling and picking and making the stuffing. It looks like you have as much business as you have people.

01:02:22

DP: Well at times, yeah. You got to get ready for the—. This is basically our slow time, and we're getting ready for the good times. You know, we got to put up crabmeat for the winter, and we're packing shrimp and waiting on shrimp to come in. Pack some shrimp for the wintertime. Put some--put some headless shrimp up and some clean shrimp up in one-pound packs. The big factories do mostly five-pound box productions, and we buy it before they pack it and we--we pack it in one-pound packs. So we do--we do a lot of shrimp packing this time of the year. Our crabmeat is all packed basically in one-pound cups, and we do some five-pound bags of the

crabmeat for our winter stock for the crabs. The coldest we get, the less crabs you have and the less the crabs are going to bite. The colder it gets, the rougher it gets with the cold fronts moving in, so the fishermen can't get out and work. And the tides are real low sometimes, so last week the tide was really low—you couldn't get the boat out of the sheds, you know. So Friday they couldn't fish because the--the tide was too low to get the boat out. And normally when it starts getting like that, they can find a different place to put the boat. And the big cold fronts come so they couldn't get out. But usually the first couple of days of a cold front, it's too windy to work anyway. The wind is blowing 25--30 miles an hour.

01:03:57

MP: Now, crawfish usually start the week before Thanksgiving, so around Thanksgiving we start rolling again.

01:04:02

DP: So farmers' crawfish. Your wild crawfish come in--in March—the end of February, beginning of March—you start getting wild crawfish. Depending on the spring thaw, how much water is coming down the rivers, how fast you're going to get your wild crawfish crop in.

01:04:20

SR: And when are the fishermen bringing you product?

01:04:24

MP: Busters?

01:04:25

SR: Huh?

01:04:27

MP: Busters? Yeah, in the afternoon. They come in probably around 3:00?

01:04:30

DP: They get up between 3:00 and 4:00 [a.m.]. They'll go fishing. Crabs, they're going to fish usually until 1:00--2 o'clock in the afternoon and then, you know, head back in. They get here around 4:00 and we start processing crabs.

01:04:47

MP: See, I have all their checks made for the busters last week. When they show up, I have to pay. Monday is payday.

01:04:55

SR: Oh, Monday is payday. Every Monday?

01:04:57

MP: I collect them--I collect them all week long. There's a little chart right there. I collected some yesterday. And I collect them all week long, and then at the end of the week I just write one check. I have to write a trip ticket, too, for the Wildlife and Fisheries.

01:05:12

SR: What is that for?

01:05:12

MP: They want to keep a count of how much is harvested.

01:05:17

DP: They want to know where you fished at, approximately how many hours your trip was, how many of that species you caught.

01:05:27

MP: What you paid for it.

01:05:27

DP: What you paid for it, the size, and all the stuff like that.

01:05:30

MP: And where--where the fishermen, what area he fished, so there's a number—

01:05:36

DP: Wildlife and Fisheries has a map of the whole state and numbers for each little bay, you know, and it's all divided in those sections, and we go by that little chart for which area to put down the number of which area the fish is in.

01:05:54

MP: So Wildlife Fisheries at the end of the year knows how much was harvested in this area of this such-and-such—buster crab or regular crabs.

01:06:04

SR: That is a lot to keep track of. **[*Laughs*]**

01:06:05

MP: Yeah.

01:06:07

DP: Yeah. When we first started years back, there was no paperwork. You just, the fishermen came in and you wrote them a ticket and we got his crabs and made him a ticket and write him a check. And now you got trip tickets. They have to sign the ticket.

01:06:24

MP: And I have to get them to do a W-9, which is a tax. I have to, you know—

01:06:30

DP: And at the end of the month I have to take all these trip tickets and put them together and make us a submission sheet with the amount they caught, and we got to mail that into Wildlife and Fisheries. Now like when BP came, along the disaster, well I think we were one of the few states—well, at one time we was the only state doing trip tickets in the Gulf Coast. And when the BP program came in, these fishermen were going out there, and a lot of them were saying, "Oh, we caught so much stuff." Well, Wildlife and Fisheries come around with the—you know, "We got the paperwork and this is what you caught, or this is what you said you caught." And they caught some of them making false reports. Basically it's got its goods and bads, and the fishermen don't like it because a lot of fishermen sell on the side for cash, and then when some disaster happens, after the hurricanes or like BP, then they want to collect money and they don't have paperwork. And a lot of people think that because I buy from my sons—. I did fishing. I fished most of my life. I still have 350 traps sitting on land right now, but being it's a slow year, I didn't fish this year. I let my sons fish. And when it's a good year, I fish too.

01:07:59

And I let my boys fish, and a couple other guys that helped me out through the years, brought me crabs when I needed some, I can call. I buy a few extra crabs with other people too.

01:08:13

MP: But they all get their trip ticket in their checks, even my sons. **[*Laughs*]**

01:08:17

DP: Everybody gets their trip ticket. And if they don't like that, they can go somewhere else, you know. And I mean, my sons come; they--they get paid a little bit better than going to the--to

the dealer. Basically I pay them what I have to pay a wholesaler if I buy from the wholesaler. So my fishermen come out a little bit better. And in return I get a fresh crab. I know it's caught today, and I get a fresh product. If I buy from a wholesaler, I don't know the quality too much.

01:08:51

MP: And he gets help grading them. The new stipulation: "I'm going to buy your crab; you're going to help him get it ready."

01:08:58

DP: I pay 20, 30, 40-cents a pound more. On number ones, right now we're paying 50-cents a pound more than--than if they were going to--to the dealer with them. But they'll come here and they'll clean the crabs and they'll help me grade them off. It only takes—depending on how many crabs they got—two hours, two to three hours at the most, grading time.

01:09:28

SR: That's a long time.

01:09:33

DP: It gives us a lot of time to talk to each other, you know, and there's always some other fishermen that come around, so they got a lot of bull that goes on.

01:09:43

SR: Where do you do that process?

01:09:45

DP: In the boiling room. Yeah, we got a chill tank. Throw ice in it—big tank—put ice-water in it; drop the load of crabs into it to chill them off, and then you separate them. The large, the medium, the small, your factory crabs; your dead(s) go in another tub. And even though we peel, we don't peel dead crabs. When it's dead, it's dead. It's mushy as—

01:10:11

MP: We feed the gators.

01:10:13

SR: You throw them back into the bayou?

01:10:16

MP: Uh-hm, and we have gators that come and eat them.

01:10:17

SR: For real?

01:10:19

DP: Yeah, people that pick up for gator feed.

01:10:23

SR: So literally?

01:10:27

DP: There's very, very little waste that can be done with seafood because most of the people want to feed gators. Some people like the crab shells for fertilizer. They go in and they put the crab shells in their garden. And they'll chop it up, it turns to lime. You got a little bit of crabmeat in it that sticks with the crabs, and you got crab legs, and then when we're peeling the crabs we don't peel the legs, because the legs are too small but they have meat in it. So in turn it dries up and used as fertilizer in the gardens. A lot of people do that.

01:11:04

And some--some of the cat fishermen come get the crab peelings to use for catfish bait. So there's very little waste going on with the seafood if you can get—.

01:11:16

SR: Do you sell it to them?

01:11:17

DP: No, we just give it to them. They're doing me a favor by taking it. And I don't have to haul it off.

01:11:24

SR: If you do have to haul it off, where do you take it?

01:11:27

DP: A lot of times my son is going to bring it and throw it in the lake. Away from all the smell and all. Spread it out in the lake while they're traveling across the lakes.

01:11:37

MP: It's fish food.

01:11:40

SR: Uh-hm. I wanted to ask you while you still--while we're still able to talk about your crawfish bisque, because I tried some of that the last time I was here. It was delicious. Whose recipe is that?

01:11:51

DP: My mom's.

01:11:53

SR: Also your mom's?

01:11:55

DP: [*Laughs*] Mama basically showed us all how to cook, so—. And it's something between her and her sister and friends and all. One started a recipe, and in three years this one changed it a little bit, and everybody has got a little different touch to it, and when they're stirring the pot they add something else—a little salt or a little pepper, or—

01:12:22

MP: She just had gravy; we didn't have meatballs in it.

01:12:23

SR: Could you say that again?

01:12:25

MP: It was just the gravy with the ground meat in it. It didn't have the meatballs in it.

01:12:31

DP: Yeah, one time they used to clean the crawfish heads and put the stuffing—the crawfish stuffing—in the heads, but it's so time consuming to clean the heads that it's not profitable to sell it. So we--we make some crawfish meatballs, and we bake them so they don't fall apart, and then we put them in our gravy instead of the head.

01:12:57

SR: So that's what you call the--the soup of the bisque—you call it the "gravy"?

01:13:04

DP: Yeah. Yeah, we don't--we don't make soups and bisque. We make gravies. **[*Laughs*]** Everything has a gravy.

01:13:13

SR: So she puts the ground-up crawfish meat in the gravy?

01:13:16

DP: Yeah.

01:13:18

SR: That was really interesting to me. I hadn't had that--that before.

01:13:21

DP: It's a different texture and makes it—I prefer the crawfish ground-up [rather] than whole crawfish. It gives it a different texture; a different flavor even. And then we grind up the crawfish and mix it with our peppers and celery and breadcrumbs and all, and we make—well, we do make some patties, too, but we make small meatballs and put in the gravy. I've seen the process—we used to put in the heads. The heads is too time consuming to clean, so we just make meatballs.

01:13:54

SR: Does that taste like the bisque you had growing up?

01:13:59

DP: Yeah, because my mom always made it and she still makes it. Just, as they're getting older they don't like as much salt and pepper, so when they turn their back I spice it up like I like it. **[*Laughs*]**

01:14:11

SR: Where did you grow up, in Lockport?

01:14:14

DP: A block away. Yeah, one street over, a block up. Basically almost 55 years in the same neighborhood. And at one time we knew everybody, you know, and now it's changing. Throughout the years the older people are passing away and we're getting a lot of new people coming in, but friendly people though still. Might not know them right away, but in time we get to know everybody.

01:14:48

SR: Well, they'll come by for crawfish at some point, right?

01:14:51

DP: Yeah, and we meet them down the street. They exercise or something, and stop and talk. My wife says I talk too much.

01:14:59

SR: People--people around here like to talk which is really good for me and what I'm trying to do.

01:15:03

DP: Especially when you—

01:15:05

SR: Yeah, when you're talking about food. Did you grow up in Lockport?

01:15:07

MP: No, I grew up in Raceland, which is eight miles north. Not far.

01:15:14

SR: And I--I never followed up and asked: Do you still teach?

01:15:19

MP: No, I retired in 2008. I did 30 years.

01:15:24

SR: What did you teach?

01:15:25

MP: Chemistry, physics—physical sciences mostly.

01:15:30

SR: Does that come in handy with this business?

01:15:33

MP: No. The chemistry a little bit; the physics sometimes. They always want to know volume. How much—he's building a tank, so I have to figure out how many gallons of gasoline to put in it. Things like that.

01:15:46

SR: How did you all meet?

01:15:48

MP: I was working—

01:15:48

DP: At her uncle's bar. **[*Laughs*]**

01:15:51

SR: Your uncle's bar.

01:15:52

MP: It was a seafood restaurant and a bar.

01:15:54

DP: She was working in the restaurant, and I was drinking in the bar.

01:15:57

SR: Oh, so it was Melinda's uncle's bar.

01:16:01

MP: Yeah.

01:16:00

DP: And me and her uncle was good friends before we met, and we used to drink together. Back then there was no curfew hours, so the bars were opened basically 24 hours a day. And I'd come in from shrimping, and the day or two we had off, I'd start drinking with her uncle and help him out with his seafood a little bit in the back, with his boiling and all, and we'd drink basically most of the night after the crowd was gone. We'd start a card game or shuffleboard game or something. Normally 2:00--3 o'clock, basically when most of the crowd was going and just—

01:16:39

MP: And he was selling seafood. He was selling boiled crab, boiled crawfish, boiled shrimp.

01:16:43

SR: Your uncle?

01:16:43

MP: Yeah, yeah.

01:16:45

DP: Besides his bar business. So I'd help him in the boiling part of it. And then the rest of the night we'd drink beer after everything was over and when the seafood was over with. We'd drink beer the rest of the night.

01:16:56

MP: I asked him for a job when I was going to Nicholls [State University] for my education degree, and he said, "Sure." So I had a job there, and he was working with him when we met and started going out.

01:17:07

DP: I wasn't on the payroll; it was a freebie. **[*Laughs*]**

01:17:09

SR: Say that again.

01:17:10

DP: I wasn't on the payroll with her uncle; it was a freebie. You know, he was a good ole boy. He had a lot of--lot of people, friends with him, and he was well-known throughout the South. His place was TB's Bar and—

01:17:26

SR: TB's?

01:17:27

DP: TB's, yeah, and a lot of people just stopped there to eat and drink and—

01:17:33

MP: It was originally the OST, Old Spanish Trail; it was a renowned place. People would come from different areas to eat. And then we built a new one and he just called it TB's for some reason.

01:17:48

SR: Is he still alive?

01:17:50

MP: No, no. He's gone. His bar is no longer there. They tore it down, so it's gone.

01:17:58

DP: Nobody could keep it running like he did.

01:18:01

MP: Yeah, nobody was dedicated like that to stay in there that many hours.

01:18:05

SR: So you all met over seafood, kind of.

01:18:08

DP: Well back then, like I said, the bars were—there was no closing time for bars in this area back then. And his time was when the sun come up, everybody gets off, the cleaning lady comes in, which was his aunt—was the cleaning lady. She'd run us all out of the bar, and usually about 10:00--11 o'clock then, the people started coming back in. Then he would take his little nap and his wife would take over, and then in the afternoon he was back in the bar all night and running the restaurant and the bar.

01:18:40

SR: He didn't sleep much.

01:18:41

DP: No, no. In the seafood business, you don't sleep much. Five hours is premium. And five hours at one time is really good. Normally, like right now we're doing soft-shells, two--three hours; you know, an hour or two—. I stayed up until—it was 2:30 this morning when I went to bed because when I finished **[*Phone Rings*]** yesterday afternoon, after we finished the boiling

part, my son was doing the soft-shells and I started with payroll and doing the weekly trip tickets. Because trip tickets, we have--we do them by the week and on Sunday we close out. Monday morning we start a new set of tickets. And last night I did payroll and I closed out the trip tickets and my bank deposit, and that was in-between going to check on the soft-shells.

01:19:34

And I came back in, and at 2 o'clock I went to check the crabs, and 2:30 when I laid down and I slept until 7:00. And then back until tonight.

01:19:48

SR: Do you drink a lot of coffee?

01:19:51

DP: Not at all. I used to drink coffee when I drank beer and I'd wake up in the morning and kind of sober up a little bit, but I don't drink no more and I don't drink no coffee. Soft drinks, got caffeine; you know, I'm kind of limited on that, too, what I can drink on that now. Just once in a while you get a little spell where you get kind of tired and you spring back out of it.

01:20:18

SR: I wanted to ask both of you what your favorite part of your job is. I mean, there are so many dimensions to this business.

01:20:28

MP: I like the idea I'm feeding my customers. And I--I think I'm feeding them a good quality food. That's what I like about it.

01:20:38

DP: Yeah, customers. I like to talk with the people. We got some really good people in the area. Just like with anything else, some people kind of give you a rough time. But basically your customers are all pretty good, you know. We've been in business with the retail part since '94; I've always been in the seafood since I was growing up, and that's what my daddy did for a living. I was in diapers on the boat, and Mama has pictures of—dad used to lock me in the cabin. And I always did it, and since '94 I'm on land. I sold my big boats, and in '03 I sold my last shrimp boat. I kind of miss her now. I'd like to go back, but the way the economy is, it's not good enough to go back. The prices of the fuel and the shrimp prices and all don't jibe. And they say once you've got wet feet, you always got a foot in the water. And it gets to where every once in a while I get kind of aggravated and shot. You might get a customer that gets you aggravated, and the next day I take off and I go crabbing, you know. I'll go drive the boat for my boys or something and go help them out to get away for a little while, and come back in the afternoon and you're ready for the same old thing again.

01:22:01

You have a different customer, good customer, come in and they can change your day around. Like I said, I like to talk a little bit, and some of the customers that come in like to talk, too. Especially like in the next couple of months, hunting season is coming around. And a lot of my customers come in and we talk hunting. We joined a deer hunting club, me and my youngest son, so it's a lot of deer hunting going on right now.

01:22:32

And it kind of changes the long hours, you know. You can get three or four hours of sleep in 24 hours, and you got a couple of good customers that come in and you're not tired no more. You know, it just passes time. And if you get one bad customer, it can make that--that whole day sour. It's part of life, you know.

01:22:53

SR: We were talking earlier, before you joined, us about how lovely it can be out on the water when you're all alone and there's no one around, and I hear that a lot from people in this area. And yet, it also seems to me that people in this area are real talkers and--and like the sense of community. And so that's--that's just an interesting dichotomy to me, that there are a lot of people who spend a lot of time alone out on the water—.

01:23:27

DP: Well, on--on the water, if I ever go back shrimping, it would be a small boat, probably by myself, no deckhands. I kind of like to be alone, but we have electronics now. You know we've got TVs. We got—

01:23:42

MP: I'm sorry, that was the Rouse's [supermarket]. I had to get that.

01:23:44

DP: We have radios. I can remember when I was a kid, my daddy and all was tickled to death they got a CB radio. You know, they had no--no communication. When I was real young, the only communication you had, you were able to flag the boat next to you and all. If you was in distress, you put up a white flag or hang a sheet up or something. And--and back then, if--if anybody had a white flag hanging—your friend or your enemy—you went and helped them. And it's still basically the same thing right now. They got a lot of these fellows that don't talk to each other. They're territorial, but if they see you're in distress, they'll come around and help. You know, and I stress that to my boys. No matter how much you don't like somebody or what they did to you—they steal your traps, they steal your crabs—if they're broke down or somebody is hurt, we help them out. You might help them and then once you turn them loose at the dock say a few different words about them, you know, but don't leave a man on the water in distress.

01:24:48

Now it came around with CB radios and it made life a little easier on the water where you can talk to people. When I sold my last big boat in '03, I had six radios hanging from the ceiling. We can listen to everybody talking around the scanners and—

01:25:10

MP: Plotters.

01:25:10

DP: —we had plotters, GPS, TVs, and basically the boat—the boat was like a camper. You know, we had a bedroom, bathroom, shower, toilet, microwave, freezer, ice-box. We had everything you wanted on a boat, we had it.

01:25:29

MP: The only thing, it all rolled. Oh, I got so seasick.

01:25:34

SR: Oh, you did? Oh, I couldn't do that.

01:25:38

DP: But now if they go make a 20-day trip, it's not as bad as the years back because it's you've got communication, because telephones and all now. You can call home whenever you want.

01:25:52

I can remember making some 15-day trips, and the only time you'll find out something happened at home is when the next boat is coming out or leaving the dock. She'd call the dock and tell them they had a problem or something and the next boat coming out would relay the message to you. And a lot of times when the message got to you, it was turned around. So you take off and come in and all worried, or you got to the dock and it was a whole different scenario going on. But now we got, say, all the communications now, and it makes life so much easier, on the water. I used to sit down in my--my little house on my boat and, like I said, six radios on and I knew basically what most everybody was catching and where they was at, and I can be talking to one on one channel and somebody is calling me on another channel. And it passed the time, compared to years back when you had no communication. Time was long on the water then. Or you had one radio and it didn't reach very far. Now we can—I was fishing mostly in Brownsville

and be talking to some fellows off of Fourchon over here, you know. And that made a whole lot of difference when you can communicate like that on the water.

01:27:17

The water has a whole different feeling than being on land. You know, especially if you don't get seasick, you can get out there—

01:27:25

MP: It has a whole different feeling on the water when you get sick.

01:27:27

SR: Yeah. So you didn't go out fishing much?

01:27:30

MP: I went, but I got sick. I couldn't take the seas.

01:27:32

DP: Just the sound of the water is relaxing. You can put an anchor at night sometimes. Basically, on the big boat we worked 24 hours a day. If I had another smaller boat—if I go back fishing and get a small boat, I would basically work daytimes. I'm getting too old for that 24-hour-a-day stuff. And you turn off the electronics and you just listen to the water and the birds, and it's--it's so relaxing on the water compared to listening to cars and trucks passing all the time.

01:28:10

SR: Right.

01:28:11

DP: You know, sirens and horns and—. [Interviewer's note: Melinda and Donald's daughter-in-law and grandson enter the room] That's my youngest grandson. I got two grandsons.

01:28:18

SR: Oh, he's adorable.

01:28:19

MP: This one has red hair.

01:28:21

SR: Hi.

01:28:24

DP: He's learning--learning how to feed himself.

01:28:26

SR: Yeah. I'll pause this for a minute.

01:28:33

Okay, we're back after a visit from the grandson. And I'm just going to ask one more question before we wrap it up, because I know you all need to get to work. One thing that I didn't follow up on was who you sell to, other than the customers who just wander in.

01:28:49

DP: Before the oil spill, we had 15 people we would wholesale to—customers. The oil spill slowed our business down, so we started looking around, and now we got 37 customers that we wholesale to. We do some Rouse's Supermarkets, the Frank's Supermarkets, and Cannata's. We do some retail seafood markets, wholesale dealers, and anybody who wants to walk in and buy.

01:29:20

SR: What are you selling to them exactly? Your prepared products, or the live crabs, or—?

01:29:25

DP: Oh, we have some seafood markets that buy, and restaurants that buy, the soft-shell crabs—some fresh, some frozen—and then everybody else is basically buying stuffed crabs and our prepared foods—crab patties, stuffed crabs, stuffed shrimp. Most of the restaurants do that, the grocery stores, and we--we have 37 people that we wholesale to now. That keeps us a little busy. And instead of sitting around and waiting for—hoping for BP to come around—we decided to hunt up more customers and stay at the same level of profit as what we were before. And hopefully when the economy turns around, with the extra customers we can profit off of it a little bit better.

01:30:18

SR: Have you been able to—I know I said one more question, but it just dawned on me: Have you been able to qualify for any of the funds that BP is—?

01:30:29

DP: Yeah. Yeah, BP helped out in the beginning when they shut everything down. We had the fishermen pick up the traps, and we stayed three months without eating boiled crabs—

01:30:44

MP: Yeah, they paid us. We--we never reached our level of profit from before the oil spill yet, though. We're still trying to reach that level where we--we profited more before.

01:31:00

SR: Even with all these new extra wholesale customers, huh?

01:31:03

DP: People are still—like I said, the economy went bad and the people is out of work and didn't have the extra money to spend. And the people are still scared—a lot of people are still scared of the seafood because every time they come out with a dead bird or a dead fish or another little article in the news about the oil spill or something, it kills the sales. And it's just a real slow time. I think it'll get better. It's just going to take some time. Basically waiting on—everybody says when we change Presidents, the oil field is going to turn around. I hate to see a man lose a job, but that's one time I'd like to see a man lose a job. **[*Laughs*]** The South is hurting, you

know. Without the oil production like it should be, a lot of people are out of work. And without the oil money flow, it just don't branch out. So it's going to turn around; we just take it in stride.

01:32:15

SR: Okay, well, thank you so much. Melinda had to run out for a customer, so I'll just thank you for giving me your time and your story. I really appreciate it.

01:32:25

DP: If you need more information we can help you with, just feel free to call.

01:32:31

SR: Thank you.

01:32:33

[End Punch's Interview]