

RICHARD GOLLOTT
Golden Gulf Coast Packing Company– Biloxi, MS

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Project: Ethnicity in the Seafood Industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

[Begin Richard Gollott Interview]

00:00:05

Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Thursday, August 20, 2008. I'm with Richard Gollott at Golden Gulf Coast Packing Company in Biloxi, Mississippi, and today we're going to be talking about his work in the seafood industry as a packer, supplier, ice-house runner, oil dock runner and advocate.

00:00:27

Richard Gollott: Shrimp unloader.

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FL: Shrimp unloader [*Laughs*]; Mr. Gollott, would you please state your name, age, and occupation?

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RG: My name is Edgar Richard Gollott. I'm 64 years old and I'm a shrimp dealer and processor.

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FL: So where did you grow up?

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RG: I grew up in Biloxi—was born and raised in Biloxi.

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FL: Over the phone when we talked the other day you had mentioned that your parents had come from Alabama in the '20s. Do you—do you recall why they came? Or I'm sorry not your parents but your grandparents; do you recall why they came?

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RG: No, you know they told me where they was from but I don't—I don't think they ever told me, you know, why exactly they moved to Biloxi. It was probably, I don't know; my grandfather was—was a contractor but they was building houses and stuff but they was also in the seafood business, so I'm just—I'm not quite sure exactly why they ended up staying in Biloxi.

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FL: But they were—they were in the seafood business here?

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RG: Yes. They was in—they was in the bakery business here. They owned a bakery shop, worked for a baker here and then opened their own bakery shops and then they got—my grandfather was also a contractor and built some of the larger homes here in Biloxi that he showed me before he passed away. And then he ended up in the—the seafood business—the crab business first and then later on the oyster business, and when he retired he was in the oyster business. He had—he had seven children and all of them ended up working in the seafood industry in one way or another.

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FL: Yeah. Definitely I've noticed the name Gollott is certainly common when you look at the list of different seafood businesses that are still here. What—but you had mentioned to me also that—so your grandfather worked in the business, your father; you certainly do, your children do or your sons do at this point. Can you go through that history and talk about a little bit about what your grandfather did and through your father and—and how that business has come down to you?

00:02:53

RG: Well my—my grandfather was in the business and it was—it was actually my grandfather and one my uncles. I only had one aunt, and my uncle that married my aunt was in business with my grandfather. It was Gollott and Kinsey Seafood and they packed oysters and—and a few shrimp. Shrimp was—was a small thing but oysters was a big business. And then I had I'm trying to think; and then they had the other boys that had CF Gollott Seafood. There was EM Gollott Seafood. There was Gollott and Canaan and I'm just trying to name them. But there is—there is still four of us of the grandchildren left in the business now. And the way—the way I understand it all got started was one of my uncles started dating a girl in Hattiesburg, Mississippi back I guess during the Depression or sometime when things were really hard back in them days, and they started taking gallons of oysters to Hattiesburg and swapping them for chickens and—and produce. And from there it grew into he started going once a week, bought a little pickup truck and started going once a week. And they would put them in—starting going into the grocery stores and selling them to the stores that—that turned around and actually dipped the oysters out of little cans—or the gallon cans and put them in little pint milk containers, you know

the—paper containers and stuff like that; they would dip the oysters out. And people would bring their own containers and they'd sell them a pint of oysters out of a gallon in the grocery store.

And from there my parents started taking the gallon of oysters and started packing them in pint jars here in Biloxi. And it started out with little small cans. First of all, it was pint cans that they was able to buy and they could put a lid on it, and they started putting those in the grocery stores because the grocery stores didn't want to dip the stuff out and they—it was just a lot cleaner, a lot more sanitary by putting them in a container.

And one day, one of my uncles was at a feed store here in Biloxi and they had a lot of these small pint milk bottles with the lids, little stoppers that went on them and the guy asked my uncle if he wanted them. And my uncle said, "Yeah, I'll take them," and he said, "I'll put oysters in them." And when he put them in the grocery stores and people could see what they was buying instead of a little tin can they just went crazy. And from there with the little—when they run out of those little—when he ran out of those little jars he told the rest of his brothers about it - and that was James Gollott - and they started buying pint jars from Jackson, Mississippi. I think it was Knox—Knox Glass Company and because they was going to Jackson they would swing by Knox Glass Company and buy a truckload of pint jars and got the lids with their names on them and everything. And—and it grew from there and that was my grandparents.

Then as—as his grandsons came along we all bought trucks and started our own little routes through North Mississippi. My route used to run through Mendenhall, Magee, Jackson, Canton, and go up to Kosciusko and Philadelphia and Eupora and Oxford and Jackson, Tennessee—I

used to run every week and then come back home and pack the oysters and go sell it and along with that we sold shrimp and fish and different—just different seafood off of the trucks. And that lasted until—with me that lasted until about '82—'84 and that's when I went into the shrimp business. But backing up in the oyster business, in probably '70—and I'm not sure—I think it was '76—'78—something like that, we was having a hard time getting oysters shucked because they're still done all by hand and it's all hand-labor. And the people that we was getting—the only people we could get to shuck oysters because it was so hard of work was, a lot of them was alcoholics, and they had to get paid every day cash and you know you'd go to work at—they wanted—they wanted to start at 3 o'clock in the morning and by 9 o'clock they was all gone and you—we just couldn't get enough production to keep the plants open. And that—at that time they was probably 10 or 12 processing—oyster processing plants in Biloxi. And a friend of mine in New Orleans, Stanley Pasina told me, he said, “Man,” he says, “I've just gotten some of the Vietnamese,” and he says, “They want to work.” He said, “You have to run them out of the place, you know. You can just get production.” I said, “Ah, you're crazy. There's nobody in the whole world that wants to work like that anymore.” He said, “Well, I'll tell you what,” he says, “If you'll come over Saturday,” he says, “Because we get so much production during the week we don't even work on Saturdays.” He says, “If you'll come over Saturday I will fix it up where you'll—you can meet a group of people—a group of these Vietnamese in East New Orleans and bring them back and let them shuck a day and see how they work.”

So I did—myself and Arnie Gollott, one of my cousins; I told him about it and I said let's go—let's go rent a van and I can't remember exactly how many people we got when we—when we went to New Orleans, but Stanley had set it up and we got back to Biloxi. We went over real early in the morning and got back to Biloxi probably about 6 o'clock in the morning, took half—I

took half of them and he took half of them and we put them in—in the oyster plant, and by 3:00 or 4 o'clock that evening we said, “Hey man, you’ve got to get back to New Orleans, you know. We got to take you back.” They didn’t want to quit working; I mean they worked all day long. So and they asked us; they said will you come back and get us tomorrow? So we did; we—we rented a van and went and got them for like, a week and then finally Mr. Mao Nguyen came to me and he said, “Look,” he said, “I’d like to move to Biloxi. Will you help me?” And of course I was tickled to death. And we went—I said, “Yeah; let me see if I can find you a place.”

So I called some folks that I knew on the Biloxi Housing Authority and told them what I was—I was—I needed—this family was moving to Biloxi and needed a house and I wanted to help them. So they said okay; and we filled out the paperwork and you know I stood good for the telephone and the—the electricity and all that stuff that—that had to happen. And they moved in and they were—you know, in about a month Mr. Mao came to me and he said, “Look,” he said, “I’ve got some more family,”—I think he said Kansas City, that was in the beef industry and they wanted to move down here where it was warm. And they knew—they was from Vietnam; they was from a seafood area. So I told them sure, and I helped them move in and it just—it just went from there. I mean pretty soon I had—I think I had at one time about 125 shuckers, people shucking oysters you know and—.

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FL: About what year was this?

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RG: That was probably in the late '70s somewhere you know—it took several years to evolve until—until we could get up to that kind of volume of shuckers and everything. And at one time, I looked back and we were shucking as much as 1,000 to 1,200 gallons of oysters a day. And that's—that's a lot of oysters; I don't think there's that many oysters—you know what we did in a day I don't think the entire State of Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana put together does that now. You know it's just a different world that we live in. But a lot—it was a big market for oysters back in them days and we processed a lot of oysters and—and had—and you know those people were very hard-working people, just good people—the ones that came here was hard workers.

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And there was a story in *National Geographic* on it and they you know it would give you the correct dates and everything on it, but—and we had—and there was a little bit of trouble. The Vietnamese came to me and asked me if I would buy their shrimp, because nobody—they wanted shrimp boats and nobody would buy their product and I told them sure. And so I rented a place and we started unloading shrimp. Well some of the boats that they showed up with you would—you would swear they wouldn't—wouldn't get out of the Bay they were so rickety dinky and everything you know. But what a family would do was the whole family would work in the oyster industry, and save their money and then they would pool it together to come up with some old boat. And they would get started and then they would lend the money to the brother or the cousin that wanted to get a—a boat and started. And probably in 2004 before—2002 to 2004, Biloxi had over 100 of these big double rigger freezer boats which ran up to, you know, like three-quarters of a million dollars that these people had worked all their lives and saved and put their money back into the business and everything. And some of my fishermen today—of course we've lost a lot of them because of imported shrimp being so cheap and the price of fuel and

everything but—and—and in 2004 I have a picture and it's—it's a great picture of the fleet that these people has actually—was actually built and I mean it was all first-class boats: television, air-condition; I mean they were just plush. They was—they was fine and they—they did real well as long as the—as long as the imports wasn't dumping shrimp into this country and we was working on a free market.

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But when you—when you have a country like China that's subsidizing an industry, and they don't care if they make any money or not; it's all about getting the hands on the American dollar whatever it takes and they just—they just have—they have killed our industry, as they have a lot of other industries in the United States. But we did get involved with the Southern Shrimp Alliance. We formed the Southern Shrimp Alliance, which filed a trade action with the United States Commerce Department and as far as I know it's the largest trade action that has ever been filed in the United States. And we won it. And started with—they started putting tariffs on these different countries. And we also got involved with Wild American Shrimp that the Southern Shrimp Alliance helped develop and—and put together and I served on both Boards. And it was to inform people of the difference between our domestic shrimp and our—and the pond-raised shrimp.

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We have been pressed in the last couple of years for funding for Wild American Shrimp. We need funds to—to keep promoting it, but that's where we're at today.

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FL: I definitely want to get back to that issue of—of where the industry is going, your thoughts on that. I also want to get back to the story about how you got into shrimping and how the

Vietnamese community came and how you were—my understanding of that is—or rather have you talk about your role in that or what you see as your role in that. But if I could sort of dial back the clock a little bit and get back to when your family was dealing with oysters. You had mentioned on the phone at that time your father’s generation, and certainly also in your lifetime, when you were working it that oystering was really a—really major part of the seafood industry in Biloxi. Why did that change?

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RG: Well you know, and you’re right; Biloxi, all the streets in Biloxi at one time was oyster shells. I mean Biloxi used to have huge mounds. But Biloxi did two things. They had a—an oyster cannery and then they had the raw oysters that were shucked. The oyster canneries I think it was Korea, or one of the countries came in with cheap oysters and just undercut—undercut the—the canneries in the United States. And the canners filed a trade action against the—the dumping of canned shrimp in the United States, but lost it; they lost the case. So they just went out of business.

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FL: About when—when—when did that happen?

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RG: I would think that was probably back in the ‘50s or ‘60s when that—that trade action was filed and it—it just kept pushing them out with—and—and the same thing with shrimp. These different countries, some of our domestic processors started bringing in shrimp from some of the—shrimp from different countries and they would can them over there and then they’d bring

them in and put their own label on them and they could make more money like that. But eventually people—the taste just wasn't there, the way I understand it and then they just—they just started dying off and you know to my knowledge, the last shrimp cannery was torn up during Katrina and hasn't been put back. And that was in Violet, Louisiana. And the raw oyster business, when we used to run trucks to North Mississippi it's my opinion that there wasn't a lot of shrimp or—or fish—Gulf fish or any kind of saltwater fish; it was—and that was when catfish was in its infancy. I remember the first catfish that I seen in a grocery store that was pond-raised you know. But oysters was basically the only kind of seafood you could buy in one of these grocer—retailers in North Mississippi. Now they have so much selection; I mean just about all your—all your grocery stores have big selections on fresh seafood. And oysters just—just shrank due to the bad publicity with vibrio and hepatitis and stuff like this—just killed the oyster industry.

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FL: And so at—at one point though you were still dealing with oysters here in this facility?

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RG: My brother was doing oysters here in this facility. I was on—in another facility on the Bay on Bay View Avenue where we was—we was strictly doing shrimp.

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FL: Can you talk about the work that you do here now?

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RG: Sure. We—we unload the boats with Gollott’s Ice and Oil Company on the Bay, which is a—a dock that we unload. And—and we sell fuel and—used to sell ice. We don’t have the ice plant anymore, but we, you know—just anything a boat would need to go shrimping we try to help them with it. We in turn—they’ll loyally come back; it’s privately owned boats. They unload—Gollott’s Oil Dock unloads the boats and pays the fishermen for the boats. It’s trucked to this facility and this is a processing plant where we grade the shrimp and pack them in five-pound boxes and freeze them and they mostly go out to the institutional trade, to your distributors like Merchants Company and—in Mississippi and Sysco and people like that is who we sell. But we sell all over the United States. We have a freezer that will hold about a half a million pounds of shrimp over there in this facility, and then we have—well we have two blast freezers which we can process about 40,000 pounds of meat a day of shrimp.

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FL: That’s a lot of shrimp. [*Laughs*] That—that is a lot of shrimp. When you talk about grading the shrimp what exactly does that mean?

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RG: That means sizing them, separating the different sizes. Shrimp are sold by the sizes, the count; in other words if there’s 10 shrimp to a pound it’s one price. If there’s 30 shrimp to a pound it’s a different price and that’s what we’re talking about grading. It’s—it’s sizing them. If there’s any pieces we take it out, any defective shrimp or any fish mixed in there; this is where we get it all cleaned up and get it ready and get it sized—all the sizes, so a restaurant, when they serve something, the plate is uniform.

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FL: And the sizes you're getting right now, what's the majority of your shrimp or are they scattered all over? I mean certainly larger shrimp are—are typically more valuable, they're harder to find. It's harder to find a U-12, a U-16 but what—what are the sizes of shrimp that you typically get in and does that change over time and does that change over—from year to year?

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RG: Well we—we actually do two things. Let me—let me go back a little bit. We actually had four Lathram Peeling Machines that we—we usually peel the small shrimp and they're graded and packed in five-pound boxes also. And then we do what we call headless shrimp which is—has a shell on it and then just the head taken off of it. Right now the headless shrimp is—I would consider the large shrimp, 16—20, 10—15 shrimp to the pound. With the peeled meat, where we completely take the head off and peel the shrimp, it's probably running about a 50—60 right now. And then when you're getting that size shrimp, you'll also get bigger shrimp and smaller shrimp, but maybe your majority size will be 50—60 and then it will jump up to 60—70, 70—80 you know and it will go both sides of that count. And when we get shrimp they're mixed up; you—you get them both ways—headless or head-on shrimp. The head-on shrimp we peel; the headless we pack for the restaurants but they're mixed up and that's what we do is we grade them and—and process them here.

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FL: Is that grading done by hand; is that done mechanically?

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RG: Mechanically; we have machines to do that but we still have to set them. You have to know what you're doing to set it—to set a grading machine to get the product uniform and get all the—the different sizes separated.

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FL: And you talked about—you also mentioned earlier that most of your—most of your product then goes into the institutional trade. What do you—what do you mean by that?

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RG: Mostly ends up in restaurants, versus retail. We are trying to change that; we are trying to develop some things for retail now. We have just—one of the reasons that we—we're just now struggling to—to develop that product is Katrina just completely wiped us out and we had to start all—basically all over again. So we're just now getting everything at this facility where we can start looking at doing other things. And we actually built a building. We—we did you know built all this—put all this equipment in ourselves and—and built a lot of the equipment ourselves because you just—after Katrina you just couldn't hire anybody. The labor was so short and a lot of people didn't know what they was doing, so we had to jump in and just do it ourselves. And while we were doing that we didn't have time to go develop other products or push to sell for retail.

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FL: I definitely get to the—the storm in a—in a minute but just—just for clarification's sake, what is the difference between something that goes into a—why does your product go into

restaurants and not retail? Is that the difference in marketing or is it actually a difference here in the point of production?

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RG: Well, it's basically the same product. The difference is the size of the packaging that you put it in and a retail product has to have a barcode on it and it has to have all this nutritional stuff on it, and—and the labeling and—and it usually goes to smaller packages. For years, we have been geared up to pack a five-pound box, block frozen shrimp for the institutional business. Because when we sell to a distributor they can buy you know they can buy 5,000 to 30,000 pounds of shrimp at a time, you know, versus going to each—having 15 retailers and—and maybe getting 200 or 300 pounds-a-piece a week you know. We've—we've been geared up for high volume and it just takes a little bit of different—different machinery and everything to bag it and freeze it.

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FL: And let's—let's talk about the storm a little bit. When you—I'm looking out the window and there's a lot of very complicated machinery out there. When you said you had to replace that and you did it yourself what—what do you mean by that? What—what were the losses that you actually sustained from the storm, I mean in terms of the business and the facility. Obviously personal is another issue, but—.

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RG: Well we moved from the Bay up here and that—you're looking at the machinery—it's on a second story right here; we had to build the second story with those steel beams—those steel

beams came out of the Grand Casino when they was tearing it up. Someone give me those beams, so we built that whole platform that you're looking at there, and then put—had to install the machinery on top of it and all the piping and everything. This building was completely empty; it was gutted after Katrina. It was nothing left in it so we had to start all over again and get everything replaced.

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FL: How long did that take you?

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RG: It—it's taken us about—probably we—we worked in the old building when we was working on here, so we're probably looking at about two and a half years we've been working trying to get this plant in the shape it's in right now.

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FL: And what was your observation on what the storm did to the industry in general?

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RG: Well it's—it's had—it's complex; it's had a lot of effects on the industry. Some—some people in Alabama and Louisiana, who are our competitors, had a little or no damage and where most of the plants in Biloxi was—several of them was completely wiped off of the face of the earth. I mean they were just devastated. I'm trying to think; it seems like we had about 11 processing plants—shrimp processing plants in Biloxi pre-Katrina. We have about five—let's see; let me think—one—about five left in Biloxi now, out of about 11. That's a lot of production

that we lost. But we don't see the demand for our shrimp that we had pre-Katrina either. A lot of people, when we was down for basically a year, went and started buying imported shrimp and a lot of people in our—in the United States, a lot of restaurants, you know if nobody complains about it and it works for them they don't care; they want the cheapest thing that they can feed the people and—and make as much money as they can. And they don't care too much about taste; they just—they just want something that's pretty.

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FL: So if I can go back again a little bit in your memory; you talked about being younger and driving trucks all around and delivering oysters back when you were still working with oysters. What are some of the earliest memories you have of—of working in this industry?

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RG: Well you know I used to—some of my earliest memories was when I was about 13 years old I had to come home from work—from school every day and go clean the oyster plant, you know. Our family believed in—in the children working in the business, and I can remember my grandmother keeping me and probably when I was nine years old and we would go to the—the crab plant and they would pick crabs and we would play in the corner or something, you know. And a lot of memories, you know, from 13 years on; I mean that's—this has been our life you know in this industry.

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FL: Do you like the work you do or have done?

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RG: I do. I like the—I like the challenge and I like—I like the work. Sometimes they get—the headaches get pretty bad, but all in all the business has been good to me and the people in it has been good to me, and it's—you get a sense of satisfaction when you make a good sale and—and things are going good. Pre-Katrina I think it was more fun than it is today but I think it will get back there, you know.

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FL: And growing up, since this was a business that your grandfather worked in—that your father worked in, did you always grow up assuming this would be the business you would enter or did you consider other options and other things you might want to do?

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RG: No, actually when I come out of the military I was thinking about different things. But you know, when you're raised in something you end up back doing what—what you know to do and the oyster business was very good to me. I made a good living for my family and everything when I was young, and actually went—went in business for myself, in the oyster business, I think it was in '68, so you know I was—I was pretty young and it was right after Camille. So I guess it was probably about '69 or—'68 I think I went in business for myself. One of my uncles had built a plant for me and rented it to me to get started, and then I ended up buying a piece of land right after Camille that the house was completely wiped—wiped away and the guy couldn't build it back because of zoning and everything. And it was on Lee Street and I built the—the processing plant on Lee Street, the oyster processing plant. And you know, we worked there for years. My wife worked with me and my son was around and everything, and you know—and—

and we've carried the tradition on. Our—our children and—worked in the business with us. I can remember when I was young we—we would go head shrimp at the factory and get paid by the heads, like everybody else did, and you know make our—our show money and stuff like that, so we—we was taught to work very early.

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FL: And you had mentioned also earlier that your son now—your son worked with you certainly when he was young but he's also working here now or he's in the business now?

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RG: He actually runs the—the boats, the unloading of the boats. That's a major job is taking care of the fishermen and making sure they get—get what they got coming to them and make sure we get what we—we got coming to us, as far as weights and counts and—and that kind of stuff. And—and the personalities and everything dealing with the—the fishermen direct is—is quite a job. He's very good at it; he's been doing it for over 20 years now. And the—the fishermen have to trust you; they've got to know that—that who you are are and that you're not going to cheat them and all that. That all plays in; the relationship you have with your fishermen plays into whether you're going to be successful or not in this business.

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FL: And who are your—who are your fishermen clients? How many do you have and—?

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RG: We have about 40 big boats left. We used to have 100 big freezer boats and we have about 40 left. They're all Vietnamese, and you know, been working with me a long time; most of them has been working with us since the '80s, you know, the early—the middle '80s to the late '80s—'90s you know and they—they've had children and they've come along and worked with us. And but 100-percent of them are Vietnamese people—yeah these fishermen.

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FL: Is that representative of all the other—all the boats going out there in general or is it just you having to attract that particular piece of the market?

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RG: Well, it has changed over the years; it used to be the majority of them was American fishermen, but American fishermen has retired and quit working and got out of the business, along with the economic hardships. And the Vietnamese has—has endured and—and suffered on with this thing and—and stayed in it. A lot of them are my age and they just—they can't—they don't know anything else. They fished in Vietnam; they fish in the United States. And I was talking to one last week who for the last—well this last shrimp season. He has a boat; he was trained as a welder; he—he went and welded this season but he told me he was going to come back to shrimping. He just couldn't handle it; he—you know when you're used to being out on the water and you're your own boss and you don't have to answer to anybody, and you know you're not on—you're not on a per hour basis, you can make good money when things are going right. And it's hard work but they—they like to—being independent.

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FL: When you said you had 100—you had 100 fishermen that you had worked with previously and 40 now, is that before and after the storm? Is that the difference?

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RG: Okay; I had—pre-Katrina I had roughly 100 big freezer boats which are about almost 98-feet a piece, and they're—they're large boats. Now we don't have but about 40 of them. A lot of them was repossessed; a lot of them went out of business. A lot of them just sold the boats—just got tired of fighting. The deckhands are one of the biggest problems on the boats, you know. It's a lot of drugs and—and—with the deckhands and it—it has been problematic for them to get deckhands. And a lot of people just got tired of it, you know, and went and did something else. A lot of them is old enough to retire. They just tied the boats up or sell them and—and leave. But pre-Katrina we had about 100 boats that we worked with; now we have about 40 boats that we work with. A few of them are small boats that fish just locally. But the majority of them is these big freezer boats. They—they freeze the product as soon as it comes out of the nets on the boats—beautiful product. They stay out anywhere from 30 to 45 days and then they come in and unload their catch.

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FL: And they come back to you—so they come back to you frozen on the boat. They come back to you frozen; here you grade them and do you thaw them out and then refreeze them? Is that—?

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RG: Yeah; yes, we—we thaw them and—and grade them and—and pack them and everything and with our commercial freezing it doesn't hurt a shrimp to thaw it and refreeze it. It's the

amount of time that it takes to freeze a product that makes it bad or good. That's the reason they use nitrogen to freeze body parts, you know, because it doesn't break the cells down and we use—we use blast freezers. Our blast freezers go down to 30-below zero and the winds blowing at 80 miles an hour in there, so it don't take long to pull the heat right out of that shrimp and get it frozen quick. We call it quick freezing and—and it doesn't hurt to handle the shrimp.

00:35:41

FL: When we spoke on the phone the other day and—and you alluded a little bit to this earlier in this conversation, I was wondering if you could tell the story in some detail about—certainly you talk about how you started working with Vietnamese families and Vietnamese folks and how they started coming to Biloxi. But could you talk about how you started getting from oystering into the shrimp industry?

00:36:06

RG: Well in the '80s I was in the oyster business and we—we was working very hard and wasn't making—hardly making a living. And the Vietnamese came to me and told me that they couldn't—nobody wanted to unload their boats and they wanted to—to—somebody to unload their boats. Well I know there was pretty good money in it, so I actually leased—rented a piece of property from one—one of my cousins who had a place on the Bay. We unloaded shrimp for oh, probably six months or a year or a season and one of my competitors and one of my good friends I was raised with—raised with the family and everything had the ice-plant in Biloxi. We didn't have an ice-plant. And at that time there was no freezer boats; everything was ice. And they told the fishermen the only way they would sell them ice is if they unloaded shrimp with them. Well, basically it put me out of business for a year or two. And then the people—my

cousins who owned the property I went to them and—and told them the situation and I told them that I thought we could make some good money if we would build an ice-plant and unloading dock. And—and we did; we went in partnership and built the ice-plant and by that time the—the fleet of boats had really started growing and when I got—when I got my ice-plant and—and got the piers and everything set up, we actually split the fleet. Half of the—half of the fleet in Biloxi went with me and half of them went with him and we remained competitors and—and friendly competitors up until Katrina and then they went out of business, and it was the Weems family. And like I say, we was close but we was still competitors when it came to the boats and—. I'm lost right now. But that—that's about the story of the transition from the shrimp industry into the—I mean from the oyster industry into the shrimp industry, whereas my brother decided to stay in the oyster business and there's a couple of more people in Mississippi that—that got wiped out by the storm that was in the oyster business. And the shuckers, the people who shucked the oysters actually moved away. You can see by this end of town this place used to be full of people that would work in the seafood industry and there's no houses or anything left here. And we're having a very hard time getting enough labor to keep this plant running.

00:39:02

FL: And that's—that's both then presumably a direct result of the storm taking away the housing and—and just moving the population and also just the larger market forces that have been squeezing the industry in general?

00:39:16

RG: Exactly; yeah. One of the things I did want to mention, and you can check it out, is the Mississippi/Louisiana line was actually created for the oyster industry in Biloxi. That's how

important the oyster industry in Biloxi was at one time. But the canneries were in Biloxi, and Mississippi had a Fishermen's Union in it, and the boats that wanted to can the oysters had to buy the—the product from the individual tongers. And the big—the big canneries wanted to be able to power drudge the oysters so they could bring them in and it would cost them a lot less money to do it that way. They didn't have to do business with individuals and didn't have to do business with the Union. So the canneries in—in Mississippi got with the politicians in Louisiana and floated the barrel down, which came up with the Mississippi/Louisiana line and they waited until they had a—a heavy west wind and that way they put the oyster—the oyster beds mainly in Louisiana where they could be power drugged. And Mississippi lost tons of revenue; you know oil leases, all kinds of stuff, all kind of—the ramifications from that—that one decision over oysters has—has cost Mississippi billions of dollars.

00:40:51

FL: So getting back to when you first started working with Vietnamese families who wanted to go out and shrimp: why was no one unloading their boats?

00:41:07

RG: Well at that time they was having a lot of problems; if you had American fishermen they would tell you they didn't want the Vietnamese, period. They didn't want to be around them. They hated them. You know there was some shootings and everything down in Texas in—in the Vietnamese villages. And there was a lot of threats here in Biloxi. Mr. Weems was unloading the Vietnamese about the same time we—I was going back in business and everything or just prior to that and they put a bomb on one of the boats and tried to blow it up and luckily somebody found it before it ignited. And there was—there was a lot of people carrying guns. And you

know there's a story—a good friend of mine who is a sport fishermen was taking a—a group of Americans out fishing to Chandelier Islands—hook and line, and he—unbeknown to him they had brought a gun on the boat. So there was—there was about six or eight Vietnamese boats out in the Gulf, moored up together sleeping which they normally do; they'll fish at night and sleep in the daytime. They just tie their boats together and anchor up. This guy starts pulling this gun out and starts shooting over the top of these boats. And my friend just come unglued; he said “What are you doing?”

He said, “We're going to scare these gooks.”

He says, “You're talking about people that just come out of a war. You don't scare them. They've got guns on them boats too.” [*Laughs*]; he said, “Are you crazy?” And he took the gun and threw it in the water, you know, and said, “You're nuts.” He said, “You're going to get us all killed.” He said you know—but it was—it was just the times you know. It was the—the hate—the Vietnamese people and all that kind of stuff because—and they didn't want them in the shrimp industry but you know they—they came in and did well.

00:42:56

FL: Well what—what was the source of that tension?

00:42:58

RG: Knowing that they was in the fishing industry competing with them and shrimping. I guess; I don't know. Why does one person hate another one—just because they're different you know? I don't know.

00:43:12

FL: Was competition really fierce generally in—in the industry at that time among—among fishermen? Were they—?

00:43:19

RG: Well, you know, no. The fishermen—the fishermen pretty much—the American fishermen for the most part would go out and—and they would fish a week, and they would come in and tie up for a week, and just take it easy. Well when the Vietnamese came over here they worked every day—day and night. I mean they—they was hungry. And the Americans didn't like that; you know they felt like the—the Vietnamese was pushing the price of shrimp down which that had absolutely nothing to do with it, because that was about the same time the imported products started coming in. And it was just market conditions but like I say; I don't know what makes one group of people hate another one—I don't know. I've never—I hadn't—I hadn't—I don't hate anybody so it's hard for me to comprehend hating somebody just because they're Vietnamese, you know.

00:44:09

FL: I'd heard—I'd heard elsewhere that there was something and I don't really understand this and maybe you can explain this to me. There is something about the way that the Vietnamese were shrimping also—some techniques that they were using that—that the shrimpers who were working here before didn't use and—. Do you—do you—can you explain that to me?

00:44:26

RG: Yes; the Vietnamese when they first come here of course they started out with these little rinky-dink boats. But they brought in what they called chopsticks and what it was—it was two

big telephone poles sticking out in front of the boat and they would tie the net to it whereas the fishermen around here just used doors and—and nets and—and doors that pulled the nets—it spread(ed) the nets. Well, the Vietnamese was using a technique that was a lot more fuel efficient. They didn't have to stop the boat to pick the net up—pick the tail up to dump it, so it was just a lot more efficient. And the American fishermen around here tried to get laws passed. I mean I was in the middle of all of that; I had forgotten about all that but I was in the middle of fighting all of that, where the Department of Marine Resources and - I mean - the Commission of Marine Resources they went to them and tried to get them to outlaw these nets. They tried to get it done through legislation; they did it in Louisiana. I think they made the chopsticks illegal. But from there, the fishermen don't use the—the Vietnamese fishermen don't use the chop—chopsticks anymore. They use what they call butterfly nets, a modified butterfly net or a skimmer and it's—it's a lot more fuel efficient and—but it's—it's pretty much for the small boats. And now most of the Americans has adopted fishing like that and gotten away from those doors. They—they cost a lot of money and they—they burnt up a lot of fuel and you know a lot of the American fishermen has adopted those ways. And some of that—some of that technology or—or way of fishing came out of Louisiana. The Cajuns fished like that and—but I was looking at a picture the other day of the chopsticks and thought about all the trouble those poor people had you know with—just because it was different.

00:46:21

FL: You said earlier that 100-percent of your—of your fishermen clients are—are Vietnamese. Can you guess what percentage they are as a whole of all the—all the boats going out now in the Gulf in Biloxi or coming out of Biloxi?

00:46:38

RG: Well, out of Biloxi I would say it's probably about 90-percent. I think it's probably about 90-percent in the Gulf of Mexico who are Vietnamese fishermen. They pretty much—yeah; you know I don't know about Brownsville and down in that area but along the—the Northern Gulf and—and here and Louisiana has still got a lot of American fishermen but a lot of them are Vietnamese, so I—you know probably 80—90-percent.

00:47:06

FL: So a large percentage anyway?

00:47:08

RG: A large percentage.

00:47:12

FL: So what do you think—what do you think is going to be the future of this industry right now?

00:47:22

RG: I think it all depends on our government's trade policies whether we survive or not. You know we've—we've seen so many—we've seen our government do so many crazy things with this free trade instead of having fair trade, you know. And I don't know when they're going to wake up. I think I was looking—watching television the other night where we lost 750,000 manufacturing jobs in the United States and they was talking about the ramifications of—of our trade policies, how our, you know our trade is just so out of balance right now that it's—it's

actually hurt—. There's—there's questions of whether the United States is going to survive it you know. It could make us a third-world country, the kind of money that we are—with oil and with everything else that—that's leaving this country, the transfer of wealth out of this country is—is damaging this country. And the politicians and the news media won't talk about it; it's—it's terrible. We need to do something to save our country. And exactly what I don't know you know but I know we need to change some trade policies. And look at—look at the people that's dying every year from—from imported tainted food—period, bad food—period. I mean I'm not talking about just shrimp. I'm talking about everything, you know tomatoes, peppers, you know look at all these people that died. But it doesn't look like the bureaucrats really care. They just keep doing business as usual, so our industry is—is you know—. We're fighting the WTO; they ruled that our tariffs are you know—our—our bonding and our tariffs and everything is illegal; you know we can't do that. And we know we're going to get beat in the United Nations if it comes down to that you know. But I don't—it depends on the government unfortunately.

00:49:35

FL: But aside from you know tariff—levying tariffs on imported shrimp I mean do you have other strategies on how to—on how to market the shrimp domestically and how to—do you have other strategies on how you want to sell the shrimp, how you want to market the shrimp and how you want to change the image of—of this product?

00:49:54

RG: We do; we want to educate the American people to the nutritional value and the health—the health values and the—the pluses of a wild caught product than just to come with—with a—with the pond-raised stuff. There's a lot of problems with the pond-raised shrimp. We did a

survey—WASI did a survey – which is Wild American Shrimp – did a survey and 95-percent of the people that they asked coming out of stores with shrimp thought they was domestic shrimp and they weren't—wasn't. It was pond-raised shrimp. People just don't know the difference in—in a shrimp and you can't look at it and tell but when you taste it you can tell the difference and most people don't know the difference unless they was raised on the Coast like we are, you know and they're used to eating shrimp. I can—I can taste a shrimp and instantly tell you whether it's domestic or imported.

00:50:51

FL: Do you like the taste of shrimp? Do you enjoy eating shrimp?

00:50:54

RG: I do; I like a good shrimp. Something that's out of the Gulf fresh; it's hard to beat.

00:51:06

FL: Something that I think about—I've been thinking about a lot in—in talking to some of the—some—talking to other folks and you know, whose family were Croatians and they came here 80 years ago—whatever and their families have worked in you know various different ways in the industry from—from in the plants to out on the water, and time and time again I hear this—I hear the story of that which is: a couple comes. They have their children here. They do this work and their hope is that the children don't end up in the industry. Their hope is that their children do something else; their hope is their children become doctors or lawyers and—and—and so on and so forth—find another profession because the work is hard. If that's the case and that changes from generation—and then you have this transfer from generation to generation

certainly that's beginning to happen now with the Vietnamese families, as I understand it where some of their—you know some of the younger generation of the Vietnamese families aren't expecting to go into the industry, why is it important to save this industry? Why is it important to continue having this industry here?

00:52:19

RG: Well, and while you're talking I'm thinking of Biloxi the way it used to be. If a person wanted to make a living in Biloxi, they had a wide range of fields they could go into. If a man wanted to retire and then he wanted to go shuck oysters in a plant one or two days a week just to you know help his income it was there; he could do it. If a lady wanted to head shrimp or go pick crabs it was there; they had—I guess you would call it independent workers, you know. There was so many things that they could do in Biloxi to make a living. The oyster industry—we called it—we called it the State Reef back in the '40s and early '50s where a person can get them a little skiff and they could go right outside the bridge here, a couple miles, and where they were live oysters and they could get a set of tongs and they could go tong oysters and bring them in and sell them and get paid every day. And it was just—it was just a different world.

00:53:26

To me, looking at what used to be, and encouraging children to work and learn how to work and people learning how to take care of themselves was 100-percent better than what we've got today. I mean the kids, instead of going out and playing, they go watch—they go play with a computer or sit in front of a television and then when they start talking about obesity and—and this kind of stuff, and it was just a—you had a lot more opportunities back in the—the '40s and '50s and '60s than you do today. I mean if a person wanted to do something they

could—they could do something back in them days and make a living. And you—they could set their own pace. It was you know—

But why should we save this industry? Because it's our heritage; at one of the meetings I was in for the recovery after Katrina in Hattiesburg and everyone that was there said man we got—y'all need to save the shrimping industry. We go to Biloxi to eat good shrimp; we go to Biloxi to see the shrimp boats unload and tied up; it's just a beautiful site. It's part of Biloxi, you know and just about the whole State of Mississippi likes to come down and see the boats in the Sound fishing and—and—and see the boats tied up and—and it's producing jobs. I mean it's producing income; it's producing—and we don't—we don't have all of our eggs in one basket, to say—in other words, we have Keesler Air Force Base which is great. We have—we have the casino industry which has pumped a lot of money into our area. We have the seafood industry. We have Litton and Pascagoula so people can still do—you know still get jobs and it—it pumps it into the economy. It helps our economy. When we have a downturn most of the time the Coast don't feel it as bad as—because we're so diversified, you know but it's—it's shrinking you know. It's all the time it's shrinking—the opportunities for people.

00:55:38

FL: I'm sorry; I don't want to take too much of your time. Are you in a hurry to leave?

00:55:45

RG: Probably in 15 minutes.

00:55:46

FL: Okay; great. Something actually I wanted to ask earlier that I forgot about. Are there different types of shrimp in the Gulf? Are there different, like, varieties or species and different seasons for them? Would you—?

00:55:57

RG: Yes; there's—there's about—there's quite a few different species but most of—most of the species and I don't know their—their proper names but we have pink shrimp, brown shrimp, white shrimp, and what we call hoppers and then sea-bobs. That—and then there's a blood shrimp; that is probably six shrimp—the six species of shrimp that's harvested the most. That's—that's what makes up our industry.

00:56:24

FL: And do you—do you sort them according to those species or do they just come in naturally different times or how do you deal with that? Do they eat differently?

00:56:32

RG: They—they have different seasons. You know most of the pink shrimp in the Gulf is down around Tampa, Miami, down in that area. We very—get very few pink shrimp here. Most of the shrimp that come—comes in here is either whites, browns, or what we call hoppers. And a hopper is—looks like a brown shrimp but it has a little spot on the side of it and that spot can be black, it can be red, it can be pink, you know. It's—it's just a little bit different species of shrimp and it has a different size head on it than—than the white shrimp or the brown shrimp that we harvest in this area. One of the interesting things that I find that the shrimp on the west side of the Mississippi River whether it's brown, white—are a little bit different than they are on this

side of the River. The—the shrimp on this side of the River will actually yield more meat than the one on the west side of the River and it's the same species and everything.

00:57:30

FL: Do they taste different?

00:57:32

RG: No, they're about the same and all of them probably have just a, you know a little bit different taste depending on the estuary they come out of—how much freshwater and how much saltwater and that's constantly changing and what the—what the bottom is like you know. And they'll—they'll have different colors; you know we'll get—we'll get a brown shrimp that looks almost like he's white if he comes off of a white sand. I think they change with the color of the bottom that they're on—camouflage.

00:58:03

FL: So you don't have to deal with them—you don't have to grade them or I'm sorry; you don't have to sort them through in any way that way?

00:58:09

RG: Well we—we sort the browns from the whites and if we get the hoppers we'll sort those out but, most of the time it's like a little bit different season. When they're catching white shrimp they're catching a lot of white shrimp; when they're catching browns—sometimes they'll mix them and it gives us headaches. We have to do a lot of picking but most of the time it's either whites or browns and—and then in the wintertime it's when we get the sea-bobs.

00:58:33

FL: And that's done by hand I assume?

00:58:36

RG: It is.

00:58:36

FL: How many employees do you have?

00:58:38

RG: We employ about 30 or 40 people here when we're processing shrimp. At the dock we— where we unload the boats and everything, including the boats we probably are up around 200 people, you know including the boats and the deckhands and everything.

00:58:59

FL: Wow; well thank you very much for your time. I—I do want to give you an opportunity if there's anything else you wanted to add that I didn't ask or if you had anything in particular you wanted to talk about?

00:59:14

RG: Hmm; not really—I think you pretty well covered everything. *[Laughs]*

00:59:21

FL: Well thank you very much.

00:59:22

RG: Thank you.

00:59:23

[End Richard Gollott Interview]