

VICTOR “GOAT” LAFAYETTE
Oyster Picker for Bowen’s Island Restaurant

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Date: January 20, 2007
Location: Bowen’s Island Dock House – Charleston, SC
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 25 minutes
Project: Bowen’s Island Restaurant

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Southern Foodways Alliance
www.southernfoodways.com

[Begin Victor “Goat” Lafayette Interview]

00:00:01

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Saturday, January 20, 2007; and I’m out here at the dock house at Bowen’s Island Restaurant with Goat, an oyster picker for the restaurant here. Goat, would you say your name and your birthday, also?

00:00:19

Victor “Goat” Lafayette: I’m Victor Lafayette and my name—ah, birthday is May 23, 1941.

00:00:30

AE: Were you born out here in this area?

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VGL: Yeah, I was born right in South Carolina.

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AE: And you’re—how did you get the nickname Goat? Have you had that all your life about?

00:00:40

VGL: Yeah, we—we was playing one day, and all of us give up and give each other names and we used to play cowboys and all that, and that’s how we got the name.

00:00:54

AE: Uh-hmm. So when did you first start picking oysters?

00:00:58

VGL: Well I was picking oysters when I was nine years old. That way back with my granddaddy and my uncle and all of them.

00:01:10

AE: How far does your family go back in this area?

00:01:14

VGL: Oh my, I can't remember all that, but it's way back. It's way back. I know when I was nine years old, that's when I start.

00:01:26

AE: Has oyster picking changed much since you started doing it when you were a kid?

00:01:31

VGL: Well, it ain't changed too much. You—you—it's a little better now because you make more money now. [*Laughs*] Way back then we didn't get but 50-cent a bushel—50-cent, some get a dollar—just like that, you know.

00:01:48

AE: What are you getting for a bushel now?

00:01:49

VGL: Well we get twelve, thirteen dollars a bushel now, yeah.

00:01:55

AE: And did you grow up over on Sol Legare [an African American community just across an inlet from Bowen's Island]?

00:01:59

VGL: Yeah, I—I born and raised on Sol Legare Road, yeah.

00:02:04

AE: How has—how has that changed over the years? I know some people are building some million-dollar houses over there now. What was it like when you were growing up?

00:02:11

VGL: [*Laughs*] When I was growing up, there wasn't much there—no electric, lighting—nothing' like that. You just had pump—water pump and outhouse, yeah.

00:02:24

AE: And I know yesterday you delivered the oysters that you picked over there to Backman Seafood [on Sol Legare Road]. What can you tell me about that place? I know it's been around a long time?

00:02:32

VGL: Oh, it's been around a long time. I used to work there on the shrimp boat. I used to pick oysters for them. It's good over there, too. Everywhere you go it's good now, you know, yeah.

00:02:46

AE: What about Mosquito Beach over there on Sol Legare

00:02:47

VGL: Well the nightclub over the bridge right there. I used to run the club over there and that gone down to nothing, so I'm back at the oyster again.

00:03:01

AE: What was the club over there you were working?

00:03:01

VGL: It was nice; it was nice. It was nice—just a lot of fun. We had bands and all over there; it was good.

00:03:16

AE: I saw a flyer over there at Backman Seafood that there's just one club left over there that's open. Is that right?

00:03:22

VGL: Well there's two clubs over there open on the beach now—that's all.

00:03:29

AE: So what was that like back in the day out there right on the marsh and having big parties and whatnot?

00:03:35

VGL: Oh, well, see like—like we had big parties but we you know—was good then but now it's getting a little wilder, you know—little young people, more experienced than us. We couldn't be

out there before ten o'clock. But now the little kids are still there at 2:00 and all that; that's why there's a lot of trouble now, you know.

00:04:05

AE: So when you were coming up and you didn't have electricity and all that, were you living—were you eating everything that came out of the water here or what—what kind of things would eat at home growing up?

00:04:15

VGL: Well we had a lot of seafood; we had oyster, mullet, [*Laughs*] flounder, whatever we'd get and mostly we killed our own hog and goat, whatever. We cut—put that in—and put it in the barrel and cure it like that. That's when I was growing up.

00:04:38

AE: When you were killing hogs, was that a community thing or was that just your family?

00:04:41

VGL: That's—just your family that's all. You put them up for the winter.

00:04:47

AE: Can you tell me about that a little bit more, what—how you would butcher it and what you would make from it?

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VGL: Well, see, like that, you know, we put it in barrels and then you wanted to eat it, you go and get some or unless you go to the store and buy something, you know—because we been kind of poor anyway. We didn't have nothing—not much. But we make it up—oysters, pick clams—do all of that—cast net, shrimp, mullet, everything—just to make ends meet.

00:05:25

AE: When you say you kept the hog in a barrel, were you like pickling it or were you smoking it at all?

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VGL: No, we would put it and cure it—to cure it—it cured and—and it taste just like cured meat, you know. And I don't know how they did it, but it sure was good to me. **[Laughs]**

00:05:43

AE: Does anybody still do that over there?

00:05:45

VGL: No, they don't hardly do that no more. Right now everybody buying food. But back yonder, when you eat that kind of food, you didn't bother about no high blood [pressure] or nothing like that. Like now we hear about it now, you know, because back then, you know—and more people were to get something out of the woods and go and give you, and you wouldn't know what happened; you'd feel better. And like you'd catch a cold, they fix you some nice molasses and all that, you know—mostly had all the ingredients to cure you, if you sick, yeah.

00:06:26

AE: Did people have gardens over there? Is the soil good enough to—to raise vegetables and whatnot?

00:06:33

VGL: No, we have fields—fields and fields—sometime we rent somebody else field and plant—plant corn, okra, string bean, lima bean, see. They put all that in a jar, you know, and jar it, put—mix it together and—and when you want okra soup, you just opened a couple of jars. But now you got to buy it because people don't farm no more because all the people—older people die out, you know, and these young generation—nobody don't farm no more, yeah.

00:07:12

AE: Did you eat a lot of rice coming up, too?

00:07:16

VGL: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah, lot of rice. When we—we grind we own grits. Yeah. We had a grinder, and you grind your own grits. But mostly you had to buy rice. When you buy rice, it wasn't 'bout 10-cent a pound like that [*Laughs*]. Three cents someplace, yeah. And we make it like that.

00:07:42

AE: Did y'all make red rice?

00:07:44

VGL: We made red rice—anything you want. And sometime we have, you know, the conchs. We'd catch a lot of conchs, and we'd put it in the box; and when we feel like conch we eat—we eat that and keep on going, yeah.

00:08:04

AE: How—how did you eat the conch? Did you fry it or was it—did you eat it kind of raw or anything?

00:08:09

VGL: No, no, we—we boil it. See, we put on neck bone, ham hock—what's in—skin meat all that and mix it up and make a stew out of it.

00:08:25

AE: So a conch stew?

00:08:27

VGL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:08:28

AE: I saw the conch shells along the—the shore here and it—there seems to be quite an awful lot of them.

00:08:35

VGL: Well them the wildlife plant them conch shells over there, you know, but we eat a lot of them too, you know, when we get it, uh-hm.

00:08:46

AE: So tell me about picking oysters and how you got connected with Bowen's Island here.

00:08:52

VGL: Well—well one day I come over and—and I asked him [Robert Barber] if he want me to work for him, and he said, “Why sure.” That's when I started and we been doing pretty good over here.

00:09:06

AE: How long ago was that?

00:09:09

VGL: I'd say about thirteen or fourteen years ago. But when I was picking oysters for his mama when I was nine—grand mom—grand mom [May Bowen] when I was nine, and then I quit and went on the shrimp boat; and I worked on the shrimp boat about six years, then I come back over here. That's how I started again, yeah.

00:09:40

AE: Do you prefer doing one over the other—oystering to shrimping?

00:09:45

VGL: No, you know, they ain't no money in the shrimp no more. We catch a boatload of shrimp, you almost got to give it away. I quit, yeah.

00:09:56

AE: What can you tell me about Mrs. Bowen and what kind of person she was?

00:10:00

VGL: Oh, Mrs. Bowen. [*Laughs*] She was a fine lady, now. We come from to pick oysters and there used to be a lot of people when we come from picking oysters, and she said, “Oh, here my oyster picker comes. Y’all get—come ‘round the corner. I got to feed them—I got to feed them because they the working people. I can catch up with y’all later.” And just go on like that, you know. Yeah, she was real nice. I ain’t had too much to talk with her, but I know she was a nice lady. And then I went off from here and I went up—went to Jersey—I went to Jersey and I started working in Jersey at the steel plant. How come [*inaudible*] to each other, you know.

00:10:54

AE: Uh-hmm. So when you go out oyster picking, can you tell me about where you go and what the landscape of the water is like here?

00:11:04

VGL: Well like this—when it real rough, we pick close around here, you know—close right around Bowen’s Island; we pick close around there. As we go more on Clark Sound, we—we got to watch the weather. If the weather good, we go that way; if the weather not good, we ain’t going. We have to pick right around Bowen’s Island.

00:11:30

AE: Do you always go out by yourself, or do you pair up sometimes?

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VGL: We go in a group, you know—case if one boat broke down, the other one could pull it in like that you know, yeah.

00:11:44

AE: And then tell me about when you're out picking and you're—you're actually harvesting the oysters—what that's like.

00:11:50

VGL: Well it's nice to me because that's what I love to do, and we be out there picking oysters listening to—we have a little jukebox we got there, and we hear that and just keep on working. That's all we do, yeah.

00:12:08

AE: So do you—you're wading in the water, then, and—and picking them by hand, or do you use one of those scoopers?

00:12:16

VGL: No, no, we use gloves. We use gloves, like we pull the boat right by the bank, and we throw it in there with the gloves. Sometimes we pick in basket, can—what we get. And you got to walk so far; if you got to walk far, you ain't going to do too much of that because you'll be too tired, you know. You like the boat right 'side the bank, you know, then we pick it like that.

00:12:45

AE: And when you're picking them are they—do you have to break them off? Are they hard to get, or do they come up pretty easy?

00:12:51

VGL: No, some of them have to—we use—we use a hammer, piece of iron or whatever, and knock the dead shell off. Knock the dead shell off and then throw the rest in the boat—and the small one off, you know, yeah.

00:13:09

AE: And you had, when you came in yesterday, what looked like a pretty big load. How many bushels did you have yesterday?

00:13:15

VGL: Yesterday I had twenty-seven. I had twenty-seven bushel. That was a good day. **[Laughs]**
Yeah.

00:13:26

AE: Not always that good picking, huh?

00:13:28

VGL: Well—well sometimes—according to how you feel, if you feel good, you'll pick more. If you don't want to pick more, you pick less, and that's how we work.

00:13:41

AE: Well and I know that Robert has—there's an event here tonight and then his family oyster roast tomorrow, so are you usually always picking for an event, so you have to try and get enough for that?

00:13:52

VGL: We—well see, according to how much the amount of people it is we—we pick a certain amount, and we'll have some for Robert's family and the other party, too. Then we wait until next week—if something come up next week, then we go—go back and get some more. But when the restaurant opens, we have to work everyday. But see, now it's closed. We can't work but couple days, yeah.

00:14:24

AE: And then when you brought them in yesterday, you have to shovel them out of your boat and onto that platform to wash them. Can you describe that?

00:14:31

VGL: Well see, that's where it is because we got to clean it. You got to take it out the boat, wash it, then put it back in the boat and take it to the cooler. That's a lot of work.

00:14:48

AE: I'm telling you. Yeah, because those oysters are heavy, and that's a lot of moving them around.

00:14:51

VGL: You right about that; it is heavy. **[Laughs]** It wear your arm out, that's all, yeah. Yeah.

00:14:59

AE: And tell me about those oyster shell recycling bags that you were putting them into. You do not use croaker [or burlap] sacks anymore?

00:15:06

VGL: Well the—well see, you could put them in there, but they prefer the white bags. See they prefer—they said the brown bag might have germs. I don't know what they talking about, but that's all we used to put in—croaker bags, ever since I was a little boy—we put it in croaker bags. But now they bring bags—you got to buy the bags, yeah.

00:15:35

AE: And so since the—the fire here and it's not a working cooler, Backman [Seafood] has just offered his coolers to keep the oysters for Bowen's Island?

00:15:43

VGL: That's right. They volunteer, you know, if we got—have a party so we could put the oysters in there 'til the party, you know, that week—that week. We don't have it in there all the time because we don't—sometimes we just pick enough just for the party, you know, and like that.

00:16:03

AE: And I hear that sometimes you roast the oysters here for parties?

00:16:07

VGL: Yeah, I do it all the time. I got to do it tonight and tomorrow. *[Laughs]*

00:16:14

AE: [*Laughs*] Can you tell me about that and—and getting the—the fire right and putting the sack over the oysters and all?

00:16:19

VGL: Well see, we steam these—we steam—we put it in the pot and steam it because we're not set up yet for use the—use the place, so we just go use the pots and set up the pots, and then we steam it in there, yeah.

00:16:44

AE: And what—over the years, working parties and—and whatnot have you—what kind of stories do you have from working with people and roasting oysters at these events?

00:16:53

VGL: Well—well some of them—most of them are good now, but you could tell the fussy ones that they don't know nothing, you know. But see we know the whole score, you know. Which are nice people coming down here and they have fun. Some have fun and some don't, you know. But it ain't but a few you could say the whole year, and some got to get an attitude once in a while, you know, but we don't pay that no attention because we working, yeah.

00:17:27

AE: And what about the community of people here like Jack [London] and all them and just kind of how everybody interacts?

00:17:34

VGL: Oh my, **[Laughs]** we just like family. He calls me brother; I call him brother. Robert call me nephew, and I call him uncle. That's how we work around here. It's some fine people around here on this island. Because I've been around all of them and they're nice—mother, all of them. They good to me, yeah.

00:17:57

AE: So how long you think you'll be oyster picking?

00:17:59

VGL: Well, right there, I don't know. If I keep the good strength in my body, I go keep on going, you know. I keep on going. But if I don't have enough strength, I got to quit because that ain't nothing to play with out there. You know, when the more older you get, the less you could pick, you know. See, I'm 65 now. I ain't feel like those—they real cool days we used to go out there rain or shine. I can't do that no more because it bothers my arm a lot.

00:18:37

AE: Are there many young pickers out there?

00:18:40

VGL: Yeah, got quite a few—quite a few young white guys out there picking. That's all I know. And couple of older fellas picking like my age but ain't too many now—ain't too many. **[Laughs]** Ain't none too much of we left. **[Laughs]** Most of them die out, who really was oyster pickers, you know. But these—the young fellas, they ain't going to do that kind of work no more. They do something else.

00:19:13

AE: Have the—the beds changed much, like where you find oysters and—and the quality of the oysters?

00:19:20

VGL: Well it's like this, sometimes—some years oysters won't grow for nothing, and I don't know why of that, but this year they grow pretty good—and it's good bed. See, what about oysters grow—you grow in a good mud, the mud—mud not powerful enough for to keep them, you know, breeding and then some mud—some mud will kill out the oysters. You get black and they get stanked, and they get into the oyster and kill it, see. That's why I don't understand—they say oysters grow bacteria, but I was picking oysters all my life, and I ain't never know it hurt nobody. And—and then that time we don't never put it in the 'frigerator. When it cold—oysters could live. But now you pick them you got to put in the 'frigerator, take it out [*Laughs*]. It ain't nothing but work—make you work.

00:20:34

AE: Do you eat a lot of oysters, yourself?

00:20:36

VGL: Oh, when I was young. They don't hardly bother me no more, you know. I eat a few but I wouldn't eat oysters—just to sit down there and roast five or six bushels about five head of us, and we eat and we don't eat no more again that week, you know, because we get tired of them, you know.

00:21:00

AE: And when Nell was putting his boat in the water yesterday, I thought it looked like I saw a little kind of a—a little mini-roasting thing that he takes on his boat. Do y'all do that?

00:21:10

VGL: Do what?

00:21:12

AE: Roast oysters on your boat while you're out there?

00:21:15

VGL: No. [*Emphasis Added*] That to keep your hands warm. [*Laughs*]

00:21:18

AE: Okay. [*Laughs*]

00:21:18

VGL: No, that to keep your hands warm. See, sometimes you run the motor, man, your hands get so cold you got to keep the fire going, so you can warm your hands.

00:21:31

AE: Do you ever eat an oyster raw when you're out on the boat?

00:21:34

VGL: Yeah, sure. You know, sometimes you hit—you go to broke off some and you hit—broke up a big one and you say, “Oh, I ain't going to throw that back. I'm going to eat that, yeah.” But I know one day we had been stuck and shoot, we find some clams. We roasted them right on

there, and they was good. But lucky we had water because it make you drink a lot of water, you know. Yeah.

00:22:04

AE: So what kind of stuff do you see when you're out in the water, as far as like wildlife and—and dolphins and things?

00:22:09

VGL: Huh? What you say?

00:22:11

AE: When you're out on the boat, what kind of wildlife do you see when you're out in the marshes?

00:22:15

VGL: Well mostly you see seagulls and porpoise and shark. You see—and sometimes you see mullet jumping once in a while. You see all kind of things in there now. Sometimes it's—then it gets cold you hardly see nothin'. You might see a seagull or two, pelicans, *[inaudible]*, brown curlew [bird]—all that. See all that—it be on the bay and when we pull up the marsh they eating little crabs, you know, and they—they just like they're picking oysters, too. **[Laughs]** Yeah.

00:22:54

AE: Well what do you like best about oystering?

00:22:57

VGL: Well, what I like best about oystering is better money, that's all. That's it.

00:23:04

AE: Just a job, huh?

00:23:06

VGL: That's a job that's all, yeah.

00:23:09

AE: What do you like about Bowen's Island here?

00:23:12

VGL: Oh, well I like to come down here because it's nice people out here, and I could be out here all day, you know. That's what I like about it. Ain't no problem here. We could go fishing and we could—you could throw the line off the dock. You could do anything you wanted to do or find something to do. Sometime we don't find nothing to do, we sit down and drink some beer. **[Laughs]** That's it.

00:23:43

AE: So what—would you call yourself Gullah [*communities of people on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, who are descendants of enslaved Africans*]? Are you part of the Gullah culture here?

00:23:48

VGL: A what?

00:23:49

AE: Gullah?

00:23:51

VGL: Yeah, uh-hm, yeah—yeah.

00:23:55

AE: And y'all still speak the Gullah language regularly around here?

00:24:01

VGL: Well some—some could speak it and—but see, if I could speak that, the people I'd be around here, see, could be understanding each other quicker than you'll understand me. That's all it is.

00:24:18

AE: Could you say a little something in Gullah?

00:24:19

VGL: I can't—I can't speak that, no. No, they say I do, but I don't know. **[Laughs]** I don't know nothing about that too much. **[Laughs]** Yeah.

00:24:34

AE: Well is there anything that you want people who haven't been here to know about what you do and this place here?

00:24:40

VGL: Well I tell you so much of the people wanting to interview me, I think they know because there's a lot of people come, "Hey, Goat. I read about you. I see your picture in the paper."

That's it. They done heard about me [*Laughs*] even more I can say.

00:25:04

AE: What do you think about getting recognized for what you do here?

00:25:08

VGL: Well you know too much about that because I think everybody got to make a living and it wouldn't matter who—as long as you making an honest living. You still—you didn't do nothing wrong, so ain't no problem with me, yeah.

00:25:29

AE: Well I sure appreciate you sitting with me Goat. It's been lovely.

00:25:32

VGL: Well thank you, too. Ain't no mind.

[End Victor Goat Lafayette Interview]