Tim Jordan
Saucey Lady Oysters
Panacea Area Oyster Company
Panacea, FL
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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
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[00:00:00.00]

Annemarie A.: Okay. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Panacea, Florida, with Mr. Tim Jordan, and today is Thursday, May 19.

[00:00:14.21]

Tim J.: 20.

[00:00:12.02]

Annemarie A.: Oh, May 20! [Laughter] See, I don't even know what day it is. I know it's Thursday. Well, thank you for that correction. Could you start off, and would you introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

[00:00:28.26]

Tim J.: Okay. My name is Tim Jordan and I'm an oyster farmer and oyster processor. We have a processing house as well as an oyster farm right here in Wakulla County.

[00:00:42.11]

Annemarie A.: That's great!

[00:00:45.04]

Tim J.: Okay.

[00:00:47.10]

Annemarie A.: And you, let's talk a little bit about your early life. Could you tell me your date of birth for the record, please?

[00:00:51.04]

Tim J.: I was born in 1945 in Tampa, Florida. My family's from Hillsborough and Manatee County. My granddad had a cattle ranch down there. I grew up most of my life wanting to be a cowboy. [Laughter] I ended up coming up the school at FSU and went back down there, spent a little time kicking around the country, hitch hiking and living out in California for a while. Then I came back and started growing tomatoes for a living, and farmed tomatoes for quite a while. Then I moved up to Wakulla County and had a produce business. Then I got into real estate. I was in real estate for about thirty years and always missed being outside and farming. Sold my real estate business to my partner and wound up getting involved in the oyster—first class at Wakulla Environment Institute offered a class. Nobody knew what we were doing at the time; it was new to everybody, including our instructor. So, we started out and made a lot of mistakes. I kind of wish I'd been in the third or fourth class; I'd have benefited from all the mistakes that we made. [Laughter] But it went very interesting. Nobody—some people have done pretty well. It's starting out where, like I say, a new industry and having growing pains. Right now, this area is the biggest oyster producer of farm-raised oysters in the state, and on track to hopefully catch up with the rest of the world. Right now, Virginia is the biggest producer. We're going to catch them. [Laughter] We've got a unique environment here to grow an oyster in, in Wakulla County. Eighty-five percent of our coast is owned by the

government and it's natural, wooded areas, so it's a buffer to pollution. We're fairly protected from the weather and we're very shallow, which is a good thing for oyster farming. I think we're set up to . . . when we all figure out what we're doing and get really efficient, we're going to have quite an industry here. I'm really excited about it.

[00:03:13.24]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:03:15.12]

Tim J.: Okay.

[00:03:17.04]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, I kind of want to—I'm just curious about, you said your grandfather was a cattle rancher?

[00:03:22.28]

Tim J.: Um-hm.

[00:03:22.28]

Annemarie A.: Well, could you tell us his name and tell us a little bit about his operation and maybe the cattle culture down there in South Central Florida?

[00:03:30.15]

Tim J.: Okay. It was very unique and I miss it very much. Until I was twelve, he didn't even have running water or electricity because he was so far away from the nearest electric lines. He had five thousand acres under his fence, so you could get on a horse and ride all day. It was just a great deal of fun to go out there. They were what you call woods cows. You had real scrubby-looking cows and a real fine-looking bull, bulls that would breed them and then they would sell calves at about four hundred and fifty to six hundred pounds, depending on the market. It was a lot of fun. It was back in the olden days where you used dogs to catch them and they'd go in the woods and we'd pen them twice a year. It was days gone by. They don't do anything like that anymore. He had seven kids, so they split the farm up. He didn't own all of the five thousand acres; he had about thirty-seven hundred acres. They split that up, and then I started growing tomatoes. First, I came up here to FSU and I did a year of law school. Then I went out to California and kicked around there for a while and then came back and started farming. I loved it. It just got so—it got where the large corporations took over the small operations. We grew about a hundred and eighty-five acres a year, but it wasn't enough to be . . . if you didn't own a packing house, and even now, there's just a few, large corporations for the most part in Florida that grow tomatoes. So, the large corporations took it over and there was not a lot of room for small growers, so I came up to this area, where I'd gone to school. And I'd always enjoyed Wakulla County because I'd hunted and fished here when I was in school. Got into a produce business and then sold that. Started a real estate company, did that for about thirty years, but it got real tiresome being inside all the time and not doing what I wanted to do. I enjoyed it very much, but that's when I got into the oyster business. I'm real excited, especially for the younger people. I probably won't involved

much, too much longer, at my age. I'm seventy-four. But I've gotten involved and I really enjoy it. I sit on the Sea Grant Advisory Board and Florida Shellfish Association's advisory board. So, I'm trying to commit myself as much as I can and make this industry as strong as it can be. I think a lot of people get in it with delusions thinking you just put them out there and grow them and walk away from it. It takes a lot. It's farming on the water. [Laughter] It's an interesting challenge and I think it has a great deal of potential.

[00:06:38.27]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, for sure. What year did you move to Wakulla County?

[00:06:41.00]

Tim J.: In [19]85, 1985.

[00:06:44.20]

Annemarie A.: And tell me, what year did you start farming oysters?

[00:06:49.15]

Tim J.: Let's see, it'd be six years ago, and this is [20]21. Been around [20]15, 2015, somewhere in there. Before that, you couldn't farm oysters in the column. You could grow them on the six inches above the bottom. That's where the predators are, and there's more nutrients in the water column. So, Bob Ballard and Leo Lovell, they were all pioneers in the oyster industry. They're the ones that petitioned the state and created a permission, basically, to grow oysters in the water column. So, they were our pioneers in that area. A lot of people

make contributions, and we've made a lot of mistakes throughout the years. He's getting something. [Laughter] Okay. We're working out the problems. There's three different types of farming here, and the basic thing is the configuration of your lease, the depth of the water, and as to what type of method you might want to use. To me, in my mind, the best type is Australian longline, where we put out poles and a long line and hang baskets on the line. The other system we utilize is a floating cage system; there's a cage with pontoons on it, and you put baskets or bags of oysters in that. Then, the third one is a floating bag system. So, all three systems work. I prefer the SEAPA system, the floating Australian line, if your lease will allow it. That was our first mistake: we put a lot of it in areas that we shouldn't have. We were sold a bill of goods, and we spent a lot of money that we shouldn't have on putting lines in places we shouldn't. Now, everybody's learning from each class. Each year, everybody learns a little more. It's been very beneficial, and it's very interesting to watch the growth of the industry, and watching the ones that make it and the ones that don't. Besides just basic farming abilities, there's an entrepreneurship there that some people like that and they're learning. It's just a whole array of different obstacles to learn and to tackle and to achieve, you know? Success. We're really looking forward to becoming the number one oyster-producing state in the country.

[00:09:44.23]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Well, take me back to 2015. So, you have a background in farming, you have a background in produce. Why oysters?

[00:09:55.09]

Tim J.: Well, I always grew up fishing, and I've always loved oysters. [Laughter] I forked in oyster bars in my youth, and I just thought it was a challenge. My wife was working at WEI, the Wakulla Environmental Institute. The first class, there were ten of us in it. I think now, probably, there's four of us still farming maybe, if that. Each class has been ten to fifteen people and probably, I would assume that the attrition rate's about the same for each class. Everybody finds their niche and what they are interested in doing, you know? So, it's been very interesting watching the industry develop and grow. I'm real impressed with the way it's moving.

[00:10:48.15]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Where's your lease? Where do y'all farm?

[00:10:51.07]

Tim J.: We're in Oyster Bay, which is in Apalachee Bay. The Apalachee Bay is a system made up of, consisting, of more than one bay: Dixon Bay, Skipper Bay, Ochlockonee Bay. It's very critical to find the right spot for your lease. Salinity's a big thing. Water depth's another one. Protection from the elements is another. So, a lot of people have gotten leases that probably aren't as good as others and vice versa. So, it's been interesting to see which areas are the best. I think it's kind of narrowing down; some areas have been proposed that wouldn't be good. Oysters don't like a drastic change in salinity. Salinity's a big issue. You can have not enough and you can have too much, but the biggest thing, I think, is to have a constant salinity. That seems to be the ticket. You know? So, we're watching that and then, of course, you need some freshwater influx. So, there's just a lot

of variables out there that create a good oyster. And every oyster farm's different. Every farmer has a different technique. So, I'm going to switch over to our processing house. We have a little different model than the majority of the oyster processing houses. We've got about ten farmers or more, and we encourage them all to have their own label. Where they're building equity in their farm, we want them to become known when a restaurant features their oyster. We want people to say, "We want that name." A lot of the upper-end restaurants that are predominantly who sell our product, they'll ask for such-and-such an oyster. We hope they ask for Saucey Lady oysters, but we've got a lot of good farmers and a lot of good brands. By letting them use their own label instead of just putting them all under one label, we feel that the farmers have pride in what they're doing and they've got their name on the oyster. If it's not, if there's a problem with it it or something, people won't ask for it again. So, they're very diligent in producing the best oyster they can and bringing the best oyster they can to our packing house. So, that model has worked really well for us. Other people do it different; they'll have one brand name and put everybody's oysters in the same pot. Our oysters are so different. I mean, the demand is different. Some people want a small, petite oyster, and some people want the biggest oyster they can get. So, we have ranges from two and a half inches to four inches and sometimes five inches. It seems like here on the Florida coast, they all want big oysters. We try to get them what they want as best we can.

[00:14:00.21]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Who are some of your farmers? What are their labels or their names?

[00:14:07.20]

Tim J.: Well, let's see. You have a minute?

[00:14:09.18]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:14:09.18]

Tim J.: I'll get our label folder. Okay. Do you want to hear them all, or just some of them?

[Laughter]

[00:14:48.25]

Annemarie A.: Either!

[00:14:51.07]

Tim J.: [Laughter] Okay, okay. Well, there's Skipper Sweets, that's a smaller oyster. Let's see. Super Salty Oyster Company, that's an ex-Marine that's growing those, and Top Hat Oyster Company, that's one of the Barwicks, which is an old seafood family in the area. They've been in seafood all their life. Let's see. Those aren't . . . let's see. Lee Oyster Company, that's one that's been around for quite a while. His thing grew up on the water. Dixie Oyster Company, they're from down around Suwannee, down in that area. Bay Beauts, that's another one that's in Skipper Bay. Blackwater Gold Oyster Company, they're out of Alligator Harbor. The salinity's higher over there and they've got a real salty oyster that a lot of people like. Let's see. Sea Salt Petites, that's just a small oyster

that's grown in Oyster Bay that's very good. Let's see. Harbor Master is a generic label that I use for people that don't have a label yet. They may start with us and don't have a label and want to think about it, what they want to do. So, we use that label just to make them happy. Stone Oyster Company, that's the young man that just stuck his head in the door. They're at Alligator Harbor. Sunshine Oyster Company, that's Bob Rhodes. He's a very good farmer in Alligator Harbor. Yesterday, we got a new one, Beasley's Pride. He's out of Carrabelle, but he farms in Alligator Harbor. And Nature Coast is another one. It's a young lady that's very good. Then we have Pelican Island and Palmetto Island, two different varieties. So, we're real, real proud of our growers. We've hand-picked them. Some of them don't work out; they go by the wayside, but the ones that we have seem to be, in my mind, some of the better growers around, and they've been consistent with their oysters. That's the other thing. The oysters have a consistency that we can kind of rely on when we're marketing them, because they're not going to be one way one time and another, another, for the most part. They all kind of have an image of what they want to put on the label, and that helps create their product. So, that's why we use that model, and it works good for us. Everybody has a different—it's just like the farming. Processing's similar to that. We've had problems getting our seeds, so this year, we haven't produced as many as we would like and haven't been able to expand the market beyond our current distributors. Our distributors, our biggest distributor is Evans Meats out of Birmingham. He mostly sells in the southeast, excluding Florida, and I have a young man named Colin that has Sublime Oyster Company. He's our Florida distributor, and he's doing a great job. Then there's Harper's out of Thomasville, Georgia. The thing I like: none of them

compete with one another. They're all in different areas, so they're not going to run up against another distributor that's selling the same brands. So, we're real happy with that.

[00:18:50.17]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:18:52.04]

Tim J.: That's, let's see. That's pretty much it on the distribution part of it, I guess.

[00:19:00.28]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:19:02.06]

Tim J.: We are now—this is funny that, at one time, Apalachicola with the wild harvest production produced ten percent of the country's oysters and ninety percent of the state's oysters. We are, from what I understand from Leslie Sturmer from the University of Florida, we produce five percent of what they did during the heyday. So, we've got a lot of room to grow and a lot of opportunity and a lot of expansion that's available for us. Hopefully, we'll get there.

[00:19:36.05]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:19:37.13]

Tim J.: Right now, they've closed down Apalachicola Bay because of a number of reasons. You've probably kept up over the water wars and overharvesting. The water wars have created a situation where the predators come in and decimate their oyster crops. So, we don't compete with the wild oysters. I'm proud to say that because, at first, I think people thought we're going to hurt them. It's very compatible either way. Their oysters are very good and quite a bit cheaper; they don't have all the time and labor and money in it that we do, but there's a place for both. It's really good.

[00:20:17.29]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, I can see that. I have a question about kind of community, because it seems that, in starting a processing facility and bringing all of these smaller farmers in and fostering a place for them to kind of have their own label and their own identity, you're creating community. Could you talk a little bit about, I guess, how you did that? And why you made that decision?

[00:20:47.23]

Tim J.: Well, okay. There is a reason for that. When we first started the oyster class, there were ten of us in the class. We had a lease. It was before we had leases out here in the bay. We all were on one lease in Alligator Harbor; it was an old clam lease that the state let us use for—we couldn't even sell off of them at the beginning. So, there were ten of us. We would have these work sessions and, usually, there were three or four of us that showed up. A lot of them didn't. So, the idea at that point in time was for the class to market the

oysters as a group, you know? And combine it. It became obvious that some people just didn't have their heart in it or didn't rely—they weren't committed, I guess, you know? Some were and some weren't. Most of them aren't, obviously, oyster farming now. But I got to thinking, "Wow." Because we showed up every time and it was important to us. You realize then and there that all oyster farmers aren't the same. So, we petitioned to Bob Ballard, who was the director of the program, to let us divide the oysters up into ten. At that time, we had a lease in Skipper Bay. It was an educational lease; it was a school lease. So, we all had our own line that we put our oysters on. It was very obvious that some people did a better job than others. So, then they started a co-op, and I was the first president of that, actually. I realized that's where I wanted to be; they've since gone out of business. So, I started myself, and another gentleman started this business. So, we kind of hand-picked the growers that we were impressed with and followed through, through the years, and just picked up the ones that we thought would help us and we could help them, you know? There's a lot of good farmers at the other packing houses. I mean, I don't think there's a lot of people that are consistently growing, probably doing a good job. So, it's not a competition thing or anything, but we just picked the ones that we felt were good. We probably—I'm not sure now, I don't know what the other packing houses pay, but at one time, we paid a little more. Our distributors wanted us to, to get the best growers and to get consistency. They paid us a little more for doing that. And our distributors like that method. It's not probably as important on the old-time Florida coast, because they just want big oysters, no matter where and what. But when you go to Atlanta and Nashville and in these high-end restaurants that serve millennials, mostly, they look at it like it's a wine list. They'll look at an oyster menu, and there might be ten different labels on it.

They'll say, "Well, I want four of these, and four of these." It's kind of an interesting and fun thing they do with it. So, that's kind of how we got into having the different labels. Our distributors really like it, and they'll ask for one label, and they'll say, "Well, maybe go lightly on this one." So, then I can go talk to that grower and say, "He's not—this is an issue here." And so, he'll work on that. Next time I buy his oysters, they'll be different or he'll go on somewhere else. [Laughter] But there'll be a marked difference, because they want to please the customers. It's not . . . we don't tell the buyers what they want; they tell us what we want. So, every label's different. They pick them out and choose them, and it's a challenge trying to get them what they want all the time, because sometimes, one grower won't have many or one will have a problem. We've had issues of deaths in some bays, mortality, and other bays will maybe grow slower than others. So, there's a lot of issues out there that prohibit your production or increase your production. You know, one area right now, Alligator Harbor's a lot warmer water than Oyster Bay and Skipper Bay. Their oysters are coming on much faster than our oysters over here. So, that's the challenge. Now, they'll start slowing down and we'll start picking up. It's good to have a number of oyster farmers like that. I'm always looking for more. I think—I know—we could increase our sales quite a bit if we hadn't have had the seed shortage. We have a tremendous seed shortage growing the triploids. Our company only sells triploids except during the months with an r, when it's cold, because the diploids will spawn out and not taste good. When a chef pays eighty-five to a dollar for an oyster, he doesn't want a lot of death. He can't afford it, you know. So, with our triploids, the mortality rate's real low, and they taste good year-round. You can eat them in the summer. But, it's a lengthy process for the hatcheries to produce them. They've had failures that have hurt us, too.

We're trying to find out if we can get some grants to hire, like, a marine biologist to help the hatcheries produce these triploids. It'd be a big advantage for everybody.

[00:26:43.29]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:26:45.08]

Tim J.: We have a specific issue here on the Gulf coast. Oysters on the east coast of Florida and all over the rest of the country have diseases that we don't have, and so we can't bring their seed into here, which protects us, but it's a challenge, growing your own seed just for a specific area. If we didn't have that, we could buy our seed anywhere. It'd be a lot cheaper and a lot more abundant, you know.

[00:27:12.00]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Could you tell me about some of the hatcheries that you work with to get your oyster seed?

[00:27:17.19]

Tim J.: Yeah. The biggest hatchery in the state is Curt Hemmel, down in Manatee County at Terra Ceia, and Bay Oyster Company, or Bay Seed Company, I think—he grows clams and oysters. He's been in it longer than anybody, so he has a lot of success. We buy some from Pensacola. There's a hatchery there. They're starting out, they've done fair. There's a hatchery in Apalachicola that's new, and I haven't bought anything from them yet, but I

will. Then there's a nursery—not a hatchery—Double D in Mobile, Alabama, that area, that we buy seed from. They buy it from a hatchery and put it in a nursery and grow it up. Then, there's some seed hatcheries in Louisiana and Mississippi. But it's very tricky. A lot of people have tried to get in it without . . . it's like oyster farming. They have stumbling blocks and issues. So, it's a very hard thing—the hatchery's the hardest part, and that's where it all starts.

[00:28:33.03]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:28:34.10]

Tim J.: Last year—we have a quota on our leases. We have to have a hundred and five . . . let's see, it'd be seventy-five oysters an acre, a thousand oysters an acre. So, it's a hundred and five. Most leases are an acre and a half, and you have to have a hundred and five thousand oysters on each lease. So, to meet our quota, like for instance, last year, we'd ordered six hundred thousand oyster seed. We end up barely getting the three hundred and fifteen that we needed for three leases. So, we had to get seventy thousand diploids, which I don't even care to buy, and now, we have to hold those things until winter to sell them. They'll be just as good when it gets cold, but a lot of them are growing fast, and they're going to be ready before—they'll be awful big by November. Plus, you don't have the opportunity to sell them and make a profit. So, this year, we're hoping that the hatcheries have more success. We try to order from more than one hatchery because it spreads the risk, you know? But if we could get the University of Virginia, VMI, I guess

it is, has a marine biologist that helps their hatcheries with seed production. We'd like to see that in the Gulf Coast, not just Florida, but if we could find an individual that would help the hatcheries develop triploids, it would be to everybody's advantage. You know? We're looking at trying to find grant opportunities and things of that nature to hire somebody that would help. They would need a hatchery to produce the hexaploids that we use to breed with the diploids.

[00:30:26.00]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, interesting. Well, I was wondering, maybe, if you could take us through the life cycle of your product, from spat to you're market ready and you're going to send them on their merry way.

[00:30:41.15]

Tim J.: Okay, I'd be happy to. It starts out in a hatchery. The leaders in the Gulf coast would be, like I said, probably Curt Hemmel. But the University of Auburn has a research in Alabama, on the coast, and LSU. They've been the two universities that have led the way in hatcheries. They provided seed to some of the—or sperm, anyway—to some of the hatcheries. They don't want to compete with private industries, which— [Telephone rings] Excuse me. If that works. They don't want to compete with private industry, and we understand that. We would love to find a university that'll help our hatcheries with any problems they may have. They need it, to produce the seed. The triploid variety was developed at Rutgers University, and a company called Four Seed bought the patent. A bunch of lawyers. They've controlled it for over twenty years, I guess. So, they get a kick

in every seed that's produced, understandably. But their patents expire, but they still control the process, and everybody has to work through them to make it happen. So, that's another issue that—hardship, I guess, on these hatcheries. So, they come from the hatchery, and they produce the larvae, and they introduce it to a hexaploid oyster that's been developed with four chromosomes and they cross it with a diploid with two chromosomes, and they get a triploid with three. That's not genetically altered; that's just chromosomes. It's like a steer, that's how I compare it, or . . . you know, it's a sterile animal. That's why we can eat them year-round, they don't spawn, and they stay fat in the summer and the winter. We've created something that widely expands our market and makes it a better oyster. When oysters spawn, if you open up a box of a hundred, you may have anywhere from fifteen to thirty that are spawned out and just not edible, you know? Or they've recently spawned out, and their meat isn't good. So, they've created something that's very good-tasting, and they fatten quicker. We're happy to have that opportunity. That's an advantage that farm-raised oysters have over wild-harvested oysters, although they did allow them to harvest. Some states do, and some don't. Florida was allowing them to harvest year-round, and they'd sell them in a sixty-pound bag and they were cheap enough because they didn't have money in it that, if you got a bad one, you'd throw it away. But in our case, when they pay the kind of money they have to pay for our oysters, they want a hundred percent good. We put a hundred and two in a box of a hundred, just in case there is a bad oyster or two, it covers that. So, anyway, they go from hatchery to a nursery, and they're minute when they—you know, they were probably one and a half to two millimeters in length when that nursery gets them from the hatchery. And the nursery puts them in a thing called an upweller. It force-feeds them,

kind of. They pump water into it, and when they get two to three, maybe probably three to four millimeters, they put them out in the water and grow them up to six millimeters. Or they leave them in an upweller, some of them do it that way, too; leave them all the way up to six millimeters. We prefer to buy our seed at six millimeters. So, we buy them by the thousand—hundred thousand. Usually fifty thousand at a time or a hundred thousand at a time or whatever, and they come on in three or four different sets, usually. So, we start usually in June and July and August and, by September, we get our last oyster seed. We put them out in what they call a three-millimeter, either a bag, if we use that method, or if we use the Australian longline, we put them in a cage that's three millimeters. I'll show you some of the baskets and all. We grow them until they . . . we put whatever container we use, we usually put about a fourth full. When that fourth grows to half, we've got these graders, and they have a series of sizers on them. We get three sizes out of them. We have two tubes, so we can do a total of six sizes. We run them through that process and it sizes them and we separate them; oysters are like people, some grow a lot faster than others and eat more, so, we try to size them by their . . . re-package them out there under their size. As they grow, we put them in a different-size container. Our bags, we have three-millimeter, six-millimeter, twelve-millimeter, eighteen-millimeter and twenty-five. As they grow, we put them in a proportionate container to feed them, and they feed better with a larger opening. These bags and baskets and things that we grow them in protect them from predators, but allow the nutrients to get in there. By growing them in the column, they get more nutrients than they would on the bottom, and they're protected from predators. So, that's a big advantage. They start out and, about every probably four to six weeks, we process

them— not process them, but run them through the grader and size them and redistribute them, you know? We go from a half of a container back to a fourth and then, when they go to half again, we pull them out and work them again. One of our biggest issues in Oyster Bay, and it can be bad everywhere, but we get what they call spat and barnacles on the shells. So, every week, we go out and flip the containers out where they dry out, and that ills the spat from the wild oysters that have set on the surface of these oysters. So, we do that on a regular basis. It's a lot of work. [Laughter] And you do it rain or shine, hard wind or what. You have to do it or the oyster will get covered, and it's not as appetizing-looking. You've got to clean them up. One of the biggest problems we have is cleaning oysters with the ones that have gotten spat on them. So, if we do due diligence and get out there and keep our cages flipped, the Australian longline comes out of the water, it's tidally-influenced. We set it at a level, what we call our sweet spot, where they come out of the water twice a day and that defouls them. Defouling is a big process, and that's probably the hardest thing we do. So, when they get to be two and a half inches or so, two inches, we put them on. They're isolated on another line until they get to be what—and every farmer has a different dimension they want, but our ideal oyster from our company is three inches long and two inches wide and one inch deep. That cup is very important. It's where the meat is. Hopefully, the top part of the shell will puff out a little bit. We call that a double cup. I mean, that's what you want, you know? That's what the buyer wants. So, some people have to be real cautious, not harvesting too early before the shells develop. The shell has to harden enough where, when you open it up, it doesn't break off and you can cut that muscle on the top when you shuck them. That's very important. So, we just, we've got a lot of oysters out there now. Our production in my

farm is down quite a bit right now, waiting for them to grow, and in another two to three weeks, we'll have a lot of them ready. That's how it always works; they always come on in batches. But other farmers right now are enjoying good harvests with the ones that have grown faster. It probably has to do with the weather, the warm weather, and things of that nature. The other issue that makes farming difficult is when we get a storm coming or a hurricane, and you don't know until close to it if it's going to hit you or not. You have to go out there. If they're floating cages, you drop them to the bottom, you take the caps off and fill them full of water and set them on the bottom. Excuse me. If it's Australian longlines, we move the lines down to the bottom. We're doing all this in nasty weather, because the storm's coming. Then, if you're the bags, you've got a real problem, because they're hard to protect. Some of them pull them into the shore and tie them off and a lot of them—a lot of them lost them during Michael. Michael was a bad storm for us in [20]19. That impacted our production in [20]20. Then we had the pandemic in [20]21. So, right now, our growers are all in a bad place. The whole industry is because they've had two catastrophes, really. But we'll overcome that, that's just part of farming, you know. When I was growing tomatoes, you'd get the hailstorms and hurricanes. It's just a part of farming anywhere, and in particular in Florida, with the storms. So then, after the storm, you go out and pull them all back up, what you got left. So, it's a lengthy process. It's very difficult. So, then, okay. When we get it to harvest, we bring it into the yard here, to the house. You wash them. We have to get them in—there's always a designated time, depending on the time of the year. Right now, the farmers have to have them in by eleven o'clock. During the colder months, they have all the way to five o'clock, and that's because if an oyster sits out long, it'll get bacteria, which contaminates

product. That's one thing, another advantage farming has over harvesting: when they harvest the oyster, they pull it up and put it on a culling board and it sits in the sun until they go in. You know? We are enabled to go out and put all our market— we call them markets, the ones that have achieved that size we want— we put them on one line. When we go harvest, we just go out there, throw them in the boat, and they're back into the house, out of the water, in thirty minutes. Then, they go into the cooler immediately, and so the bacteria's just almost nonexistent. It's very much healthier and much safer, you know? So, that's the other . . . big plus we have. We've got a product that just hasn't . . . accumulated any bacteria in it. So, we have to wait about an hour after we put them in the pack house, and let them go if they come in. Right now, our oysters are coming in about seventy or seventy-one degrees. We have to get them down to fifty-five within an hour, or two hours, I'm sorry. That doesn't take long. Our cooler is thirty-three degrees, so they drop pretty fast. Then we wash them off and box them up and tag them. We have to put this tag here, it's got the date of harvest, the number of oysters, and the area it came from. That's how the state tracks if there's a safety issue, they can track that oyster to where it came from. That protects us and protects the consumer. It's a good law, you know? It's a good process, it's a health law. Because you do have people that go out and harvest in places that are restricted, and you have people that go out in the wild harvest and . . . like I said, they don't always pay attention to the times, so this keeps the restaurants honest as far as buying good, clean product, and it keeps the consumers protected if somebody did have an issue with their oysters. They can track immediately where it came from. We're real happy to have those restrictions. Usually, I think an oyster stays in a . . . we harvest it on, like, well, yesterday was the nineteenth. We harvested them. They shipped out this

morning at 6:30 in the morning. The distributors will start distributing them today and tomorrow and so, the restaurants will have them. They've got about a two week window to use them. So, it's a timely process. I guess our most difficult thing is estimating what we're going to need for each distributor. So, we start—basically, there's a few of them that buy on Monday, but most of our oysters come in on Wednesday and we sell the majority of them Thursday and Friday. So, that's . . . pretty much gets them to the customer in a real timely way. And safe, you know? We have to deliver them. All our trucks that deliver are forty-one degrees, so, they have to keep track of that and we keep track of what the temperature is when they pick it up. The state comes in and audits our books on a weekly basis, pretty much, which is a very good thing that that happens. They do that with the wild oysters, as well, not just farm-raised, but it's a good process.

[00:45:48.28]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Sounds very in-depth.

[00:45:52.16]

Tim J.: Yeah, it is. A lot of book work, that's the part I don't like. [Laughter] But it's a part of it, so we track every oyster that comes in and where it goes.

[00:46:01.26]

Annemarie A.: That's so interesting.

[00:46:04.11]

Tim J.: Um-hm.

[00:46:05.00]

Annemarie A.: You kind of talked a little bit about some of the challenges. I don't know if you want to expound on maybe Michael or the pandemic, but I'm wondering—

[00:46:14.13]

Tim J.: Okay.

[00:46:14.13]

Annemarie A.: —about maybe the challenges or surprises that you've found since you started farming oysters.

[00:46:22.22]

Tim J.: The biggest challenge . . . of course, challenges present themselves in farming, so you're never sure what issues you're going to have. Like last year, we had a lot of—we were not very diligent in defouling our oysters, and we had a lot of spat set. That was a huge challenge. We had to clean oysters and we killed quite a few doing that, too. They don't look as pretty, you know. This year, we've got it under control pretty good. We're de-fouling on a regular basis and our young stuff's all beautiful. That's a challenge you have. Alligator Harbor had a harbor that they're not—they had a mortality issue. They were losing a lot of their oysters. So far this year, knock on wood, they haven't had that issue, but they're in a real shallow body of water with no freshwater coming in. They have a

real salinity that may stress their oysters, so they've got issues there with keeping their oysters alive. Let's see. Almost every area has a unique problem. Let's see. Skipper Bay, I'm trying to think of any. I can't think of any issues that they have. They're very muddy over there. One of the challenges in our packing house is, some of the oysters are muddier than others and we have to wash them twice. We have a conveyor machine that washes them. That's a challenge. Marketing's always a challenge. You have, even weather in marketing, if it closes all the coastal restaurants, you're . . . you're stuck with more oysters than you want. We put them back in the water a lot of times. If we over-buy and we haven't sold them by the weekend on Monday, we'll put them back and let them sit for two weeks and then sell them again. We're putting them back on our farm, but they're not basically our oysters that we produce. But you salvage them that way. You lose a few, but it's interesting. They'll sit in our cooler for two or three days and still survive. You know, an oyster's one of the few things that's basically alive when it's shucked, so you're eating an animal that's just met its match, I guess. [Laughter] So, it's a unique thing, because you want to keep them alive. The majority of them will stay alive for a couple weeks in a refrigerated environment.

[00:49:16.05]

Annemarie A.: That's interesting. I guess that thought never dawned on me.

[00:49:22.04]

Tim J.: [Laughter] Yeah, it's interesting. Other challenges, of course, after a hurricane when you've dropped everything, you've got to go pick it back up and hope for the best. There's

some federal programs, insurance programs, that help a little bit, but they don't come anywhere close to taking care of your losses. And it's not real cheap. It's like crop insurance.

[00:49:46.21]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, for sure.

[00:49:48.25]

Tim J.: But a lot of the challenges, we do get help from the University of Florida and IFAS. Dr. Leslie Sturmer and some other marine biologists are there to help when they can. We have county agents that try to do their best to help us. The University of Auburn and LSU have always been there to try to analyze what our issues are, if an oyster mortality rate is high or something. They had a huge mortality rate over in . . . Alligator Harbor and it was very frustrating for them. So far, this year, they're producing beautiful oysters. But when you buy three hundred thousand seed and only produce a hundred or something, it's costly. So . . .

[00:50:41.10]

Annemarie A.: I would imagine, yeah.

[00:50:44.09]

Tim J.: Um-hm.

[00:50:46.08]

Annemarie A.: Well, I'm wondering—I'll ask you this and then this'll be the last question. I'll open it up for anything you want to say that we haven't. And I ask everybody this question, but I'm wondering what you hope to see for the future of either Saucey Lady Oyster Company and your processing facility or just the bay in general or the future of oyster aquaculture in Florida?

[00:51:10.01]

Tim J.: Okay. I think, probably one of the biggest challenges for selling oysters on the process—there's three ends of it, you know: the farming, the processing, and the distribution. When we started out, we were going to do distribution. Then we realized, "This is crazy. We've got two businesses and more than we wanted to handle." So, we rely on other people to distribute the oysters, but one of the biggest challenges is educating and it probably starts with the chefs and the consumer, the ultimate consumer, what a triploid oyster is. It's been ingrained in everybody all our lives that you don't eat oysters that—not in the month of r. Now, we have this product that can be enjoyed year-round, and it's an issue to teach people that they are safe to eat and they're tasty year-round. That's where somebody like the Southern Food Alliance can come in big and be a tremendous aid for that. I'm trying to create, I've got a booklet. I haven't printed it, but I give to some of the restaurants, and it kind of—I'll make you a copy, if you like, but it's the history of our product and the history. We hope it enlightens chefs to understand that. Then, of course, in turn, they've got to turn around and educate their waiting staff. You know, the people that serve them. So, it's a lengthy, time-consuming process to get people—now, other parts of the United

States have been farming for years. I think those people are more aware of the benefits of farm-raised oysters. So, out on the West Coast and up and down there, New England states and Virginia and Maryland, they've been farming for years. Here in the Gulf coast and the Southeast, it's a new thing. So, educating the typical Southern oyster eater what we have and the benefits of it, it's a challenge. Our number one problem right now is what I just reiterated, was getting seed, triploid seed. It's an issue. I'm concerned we've got some farmers that just kind of gave up and are growing diploids and I hope, if they market year-round, they could destroy our reputation. You know? The chefs aren't going to like that. You know? So, I'd love to see on the containers, the boxes we ship in, I'd love to see, have to differentiate if it's a diploid or triploid. I think that would be very advantageous for us, providing everybody knows the difference. [Laughter]

[00:53:56.23]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, that's super interesting.

[00:54:00.26]

Tim J.: Yeah. I'll get you a copy of our booklet. It has all our labels in it.

[00:54:06.16]

Annemarie A.: Cool!

[00:54:05.09]

Tim J.: Or most of them. Some of them, we haven't added yet.

[00:54:12.07]

Annemarie A.: That's neat. Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add?

[00:54:18.12]

Tim J.: It skips my mind right now. [Laughter] We covered a lot of territory, and we really appreciate you being here, shining a light on our industry. We need all the publicity we can get at this stage of the game; it's a new industry. That's the thing that excites me. If it was something that I was getting into that had been around for a hundred years here, it wouldn't be as challenging and as interesting and as fun. And they have been farm-raising oysters for over a hundred years in France in places, and Australia's huge on it. It's nothing new, but it's new to our area. Every area's different. So, it's a fun thing to watch people grow. There's a young man here in the county that builds equipment. He builds our graders and stuff, and he is shipping them all over the world now. So, our neophyte industry has grown and there's other businesses that have come off of it. We have people that sell equipment, and they're doing well with that. So, I perceive something that's just going to grow and grow if people don't get too frustrated. It takes a year for a young farmer—or anybody—to even sell an oyster, so you've got a lot of capital tied up and a lot of time and energy. You've got boats and equipment, seed, and a lot of labor before you make a dime. So, it's probably closer to a year and a half before you see any return at all. So, that's got to be frustrating. Everybody, at first, was real excited and thinking, "Boy, we're going to get rich." Nobody's gotten rich, but it's been interesting. I foresee a

time when a lot of the people will drop out. [Telephone rings] And a lot of people will stay there and prevail. So, it'll probably be . . . a dozen to fifteen or twenty people that'll be in the business in the end of the game, and with more people coming in, I'd like to see more and more young people get in it. As a young person, it's hard to get out there and work when you're—even over fifty and sixty. Our crew is in that age range, and it's challenging. It's hard on them. It's back-breaking work. I'd like to see more of a labor force that likes to do that work and doesn't mind working hard. I'm real proud of my crew. I've got three people in there. I'll introduce you to them, but they're very diligent and very committed and very challenged. We took a film crew out yesterday on our boat, and if the wind was pulling fifteen to twenty knots. [Laughter] It was rough. They appreciated what they saw.

[00:57:23.15]

Annemarie A.: I believe it.

[00:57:25.17]

Tim J.: if you ever want to come out on the boat, you're more than welcome. Okay, we'd love to take you out and show you around.

[00:57:29.29]

Annemarie A.: Thanks.

[00:57:34.06]

Tim J.: I guess that's it.

[00:57:32.25]

Annemarie A.: All right! Well, thank you so much for talking to me.

[*End of interview*]