Steven Rash
Water Street Seafood
Apalachicola, Florida
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Date: August 9, 2021
Location: Water Street Seafood, Apalachicola, FL
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
Length: Eighteen minutes
Project: Saltwater South- Forgotten Coast

Annemarie Anderson: Today is October 21, 2021. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance Saltwater South: Forgotten Coast Project, and I'm here with Mr. Steve Rash. Mr. Rash, would you go ahead and introduce yourself, tell us who you are and what you do?

[00:00:17]

Steven Rash: My name's Steven Rash, and I'm the owner of Water Street Seafood here in Apalachicola. I've been doing it for about thirty-plus years.

[00:00:29]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. For the record, could you give us your date of birth?

[00:00:32]

Steven Rash: September 30th, 1960.

[00:00:35]

Annemarie Anderson: Thank you. I was wondering maybe we could start, could you tell me where you were born and raised?

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Steven Rash: I was born in Missouri, in Columbia, Missouri, and I lived there, I lived in Colorado, I lived in Tennessee, I lived in Fort Lauderdale, and I lived in Tallahassee before I moved here.

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Annemarie Anderson: All right. Well, I was wondering what role did water play in your early life.

[00:01:02]

Steven Rash: Well, I love the water, I love the beach, I love fishing, I love seafood, and in my teenage years in Tallahassee, some friends had a house on St. George Island, so we'd come down to this area and always enjoyed it.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Does your family have a background in fishing or in—

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Steven Rash: No, none whatsoever.

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Annemarie Anderson: So what brought you to this line of work?

[00:01:30]

Steven Rash: I was in college at Florida State, and a friend of mine and I were painting houses at the time because we had to make money to live, and another friend of mine had

been in New York, he's from New York, and he'd been home and he was telling us about this grocery store that was selling seafood and selling lobsters at some really cheap price. He had talked to the manager of the store, and the store manager said that he wanted to run a seafood special with Gulf shrimp. Coming down here, I knew some people in the shrimp business, so I said, "Well, I know some people. We can get some shrimp maybe as we could sell some shrimp to this guy and make some money." So we tried to do that. We didn't know what we were doing, but we tried, and they actually bought some shrimp, and we came and got shrimp and packed them up and shipped them to them, and that's kind of how we started. Then we started selling shrimp out of a little trailer on the side of the road in Tallahassee on the weekends, and that went real well for a while until 1985, Hurricane Kate hit this area and tore the roads up and really put everything out of business for a long time. So then we had to come up with another plan, and that's when we actually wound up down here renting a small little place and starting to try to buy fish and seafood from the fishermen here.

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Annemarie Anderson: What year did you rent that little place?

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Steven Rash: It was about 1986.

[00:03:04]

Annemarie Anderson: Gotcha. So what was it about, I guess, like seafood distribution that interested you?

[00:03:11]

Steven Rash: I just like seafood. I like fishing and shrimping and like the idea of just—I mean, when we started out, I didn't know what I was doing. I was just young and just doing something, you know. [laughs] I didn't really have a big plan. Well, the plan was to buy fish and shrimp and crabs and stuff like that and oysters from the local fishermen here, and then sell them to whoever we could sell them to, restaurants, other distributors, ship them, you know, just whatever we could do.

[00:03:42]

Annemarie Anderson: I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit about that community of watermen and women who were doing that work. Were there any specific people who you bought from that stood out?

[00:03:52]

Steven Rash: Oh, there's been a lot of them over the years. Unfortunately, there's not as many people, there's not as many fishermen and shrimpers and oystermen around as used to be, but years ago in this area, that was certainly the main profession was some type of fishermen or seafood. Sure, there was one guy that stands out is Captain Wonderful, Steve Lima. He's a fisherman, a grouper and snapper fisherman. He's still around, but he doesn't fish anymore. He had so many stories that we wouldn't have enough time to tell

them all. But really a lot of people that just were real unique characters, you know, very independent, strong-willed, hardworking, tough, but really salt-of-the-earth people that would do anything for you. They worked hard, they played hard, they drank hard, that kind of stuff, but most of them are gone now.

[00:05:04]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Thank you. I was wondering if maybe for people who will never be able to come here and see this, or maybe they eat your seafood but they don't know that this is where it comes from, could you maybe introduce us to Water Street Seafood and tell us what you all do here and what you sell?

[00:05:23]

Steven Rash: Well, we sell all types of fresh and frozen seafood. Our kind of premier line is our local seafood grouper, snapper, oysters, shrimp, different types of crab, stone crab, blue crab, stuff like that. We also import seafood fresh and frozen from all over the world, all types of fish and shrimp and scallops, lobsters. We sell primarily to restaurants and we distribute to restaurants from Tallahassee to Orange Beach, Alabama, plus some other areas. We run delivery routes in other areas. We also ship seafood all over the country using Delta and FedEx. We process all types of seafood here, fish, shrimp, oysters, and that's pretty much what we do.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I was wondering if maybe you could walk us through a typical day for you.

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Steven Rash: A typical day for me—well, actually, in 2011, my wife and my three children and I moved to Tallahassee just for the kids to have more opportunities. This is a beautiful area. It's kind of rural, though, school, education, sports, you know, all those kind of things, so we moved to Tallahassee, so I drive back and forth every day almost. So my typical day, like today I woke up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning, I left the house a little bit after 4:00, and I got here at a little bit before 6:00, and the first thing I did is pull my truck over by the dock and took a nap because I was sleepy from driving down here. So then I got in the office here at 7:00, and I'll be involved with buying and selling and putting out fires, mainly, a lot of that, solving problems, you know, helping make decisions, manage the business. I usually leave the office between 1:00 and 2:00. Today I've got to leave early to go out to Blue Parrot Restaurant. So that's pretty much what I do, a lot of buying and selling during the day, maybe not as much selling, some buying, inventory management, a lot of management with personnel and trucks and stuff like that. So it's always busy. Every day is busy.

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Annemarie Anderson: I hear that. So you buy a lot of seafood from a lot of places, but do you have your own boats that go out and catch?

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Steven Rash: We have boats that fish for us. We don't own the boats. We've owned boats in the past, I've owned boats in the past, and we don't anymore, but we have probably a dozen or so boats that fish for us here, primarily fishing for grouper and snapper. We have boats that catch stone crabs that fish for us, and blue crab. Used to, oysters, but the bay's closed now. Then we get a lot of fish from other places, other countries, other docks and other seafood—you know, we just got in a load of flounder from North Carolina and we got a load of snappers in from Mexico, so we get fish from all over the place.

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Annemarie Anderson: The last time I was over at 13 Mile, they were freezing some shrimp for you.

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Steven Rash: Mm-hmm, yep, they do that a lot for us. They IQ-up the shrimp for us, so—at Buddy Ward's.

[00:08:54]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit about the ways in which I think the seafood industry in this community has changed since you've been here, since 1986.

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Steven Rash: Okay. Well, that's an easy, easy one. The seafood industry has declined significantly here. When I first moved here, like I said, the shrimp and the oyster industry and the fishing business here was much larger. There were more processors, more fish houses, more oyster houses, more oystermen, more fishermen, more shrimpers, more boats, a lot more of everything. Eastpoint, for example, you go through Eastpoint at 6:00 in the morning, it'd be booming. There was trucks and forklifts and people packing oysters and unloading trucks, and shuckers and stuff going on, you know, and now there's one oyster house left, and there used to be a dozen. Here in Apalachicola, there's one or two shrimp boats that work out of here now, some bigger boats, one or two, some smaller bay boats, a number of those, but nothing like it used to be. I mean, I can remember the days when if you drove across the bridge at night during shrimp season, the whole bay was lit up. There'd be thirty or forty shrimp boats or more out in the bay. Oystermen, there'd be enough oyster boats in the bay, you could just about walk across them, hundreds of oyster boats in the bay. So all of that's changed, and there's just not near as many. It's harder and harder to make a living harvesting oysters or shrimp or whatever. Regulations have hurt a lot, competition from imports has hurt a lot, the lack of product available, costs have gone up, fuel and this and that, insurance, permits, licenses. So it's just made it much more difficult to make a living, and so there's just not near as many people doing it, and there's not near as many people looking to do it, new people, younger people coming into the business. It's slowed way down.

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Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. How do you feel about that?

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Steven Rash: Sad. I mean, you know, my livelihood and my life has been put into this, so I'd certainly like to see it progressing and growing and doing well, but it's not. We've adapted here to a lot of different types of products, selling a lot of frozen seafood and stuff like that, which isn't what we set out to do, but we had to change and go with the flow, so to speak. But when we do that, selling frozen seafood, we compete with the big food distributors like Sysco and U.S. Foods and people like that, and a lot of times it's really hard to compete with them on those types of items. They can't really handle the fresh fish and stuff like that the way we can, so we kind of leverage our supply and our sources of fresh fish and fresh seafood to help sell the frozen and create the business.

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Annemarie Anderson: That makes a lot of sense. Part of what I'm really interested in as well is aquaculture, and specifically oyster aquaculture, but also in Florida there's clam aquaculture and other types of aquaculture. Am I wrong to say that you—did you do some experimenting with that, with oyster aquaculture?

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Steven Rash: I have a five-acre lease. I haven't started producing oysters or really working a lease yet, but I have a five-acre lease. We buy a lot of farmed oysters, a lot of farmed clams. We get farmed salmon, we get farmed redfish, we get farmed pompano,

cobia, striped bass, all kinds of farmed seafood. You know, here locally in Apalachicola, it's oysters. There's one large operation, a few smaller operations, a few smaller farmers that have, I don't know, kind of limited success. It's hard work. It's really hard work. There's a lot of risks involved, a lot of problems that can arise with weather, storms, salinities, all kinds of stuff, red tides now, getting the spat. It's hard to get oyster spat a lot of times, oyster seed. And it's hard work. Even when everything's going good, it's still hard work. But there are a number of operations here in Apalachicola Bay, and I think it's a great thing. It's totally different than the wild oyster industry and the wild oyster reefs. The two are kind of two separate issues, and a lot of times, people just think oysters, so it's kind of like one and the same, but it's not. This bay needs oyster reefs, needs oyster reefs to be restored for the health of the bay, for a whole number of reasons, all the ecological services that the oyster reefs provide, from water quality, to protect them from tidal surges, providing habitat for fish and shrimp and crabs and other fish. I mean, there's a whole range of stuff that oyster reefs do, so we need oyster reefs in Apalachicola Bay, whether there's oyster farms or not. But oyster farming's a great thing, and hopefully it progresses and develops and people can do that and still people are working on the water and that type of life. The overall culture and the historic society here's changed a lot, so there's just not near as many commercial fishermen as used to be.

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Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, yeah. I'm wondering about when aquaculture—it's a relatively kind of new venture in Florida. What interested you in aquaculture?

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Steven Rash: Well, it's certainly the way of the future. I mean, you know, aquaculture from oysters and clams to fish and shrimp and offshore, I mean, more and more, more and more seafood's being produced, you know, through aquaculture than wild harvest, and it's neat to grow oysters, neat to grow whatever, shrimp, and you're producing a really good product, high-quality protein, and feeding people. And plus you're on the water and you're outside, you're working for yourself.

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Annemarie Anderson: That makes a lot of sense. I have one more kind of big question for you, because I know that you're real busy, you've got to get stuff done, but I'm wondering what you hope to see for the future of fishing in Apalachicola. What do you see for the future of Water Street as well?

[00:16:04]

Steven Rash: Well, I worry about the future of Water Street and what's going to be available to sell, how much seafood's going to be available, and if you take all the wild harvested seafood away and you're down to just aquaculture, fish farms, catfish farms, big salmon farms, those are large corporate farms, you know. Companies like Monsanto and Cargill and people like that are the people that are controlling those types of industries, and then it's more of a commodity. So, you know, Cargill or big, huge, huge companies will operate big farming operations, and then they'll probably sell their product to big food distributors, you know. The smaller Mom and Pop-type businesses

like we are aren't going to be around anymore. So it's a little bit scary to think about that. But a lot of it comes down to management, the way that our state and federal fisheries managers manage the fisheries and how we protect the environment. You know, global warming, ocean acidification, a lot of factors like that that are really hard to control or change have a big effect on what's going on, you know. We have red tide out here now. We're getting more and more red tide. Down south, they have the green algae, and there's all kinds of stuff going on in the environment. If the environment won't support the fish and the seafood, it's not going to be there, so we need to protect the environment somehow and keep it so that the seafood can grow and thrive, and then manage the fisheries in such a way that, you know, commercial fishermen can make a living doing it and providing all this seafood for people, because people love seafood.

[00:17:57]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, for sure. I'm wondering if there's anything that you'd like to add. Did I miss anything to ask?

[00:18:04]

Steven Rash: I don't think so. That was fun.

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Annemarie Anderson: All right. Well, anything you want to add?

[00:18:10]

Steven Rash: I don’t think so.

[00:18:11]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Well, thank you so much.

[00:18:12]

Steven Rash: Thank you.

[End of interview]