

TRANSCRIPT: PHILIP SIMMONS

Interviewee: Philip Simmons

Interviewer: Andy Horowitz

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START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00 to 00:22 not transcribed]

Andy Horowitz: So I'm going to ask you some questions but you're the expert on yourself, so if I'm asking you the wrong thing you tell me that's not important and we'll move on.

Philip Simmons: Okay.

AH: But maybe just can you say your name and your birth date?

PS: My name is Philip Simmons. My birth date is 5/4/43. I've lived here sixty-seven years and my address is 32237 Highway 23, Empire, Louisiana, 70050.

AH: Now is your family from here?

PS: Yes.

AH: You know about how they came to get here or how long they've been here?

PS: Oh, they've been here since in the 1700s, so I don't know all of it but I know one of my great uncles is the last one buried in the Point Pleasant Cemetery across the river. He was buried in '60--.

Mrs. Simmons: '70.

PS: '76. Yeah, '76. He was ninety years old.

AH: So what kind of work has your family done down here?

PS: Well they fish, oysters and shrimp and crabs, and trapped, and for many years they even hunted ducks and stuff, years ago when it was legal, for the market. Then they worked in the oil field. My dad worked for Freeport Sulphur Company. My old uncles built boats and had a shipyard and a saw mill. We used to cut wood and I used to go with one of 'em, Uncle Joe, we'd go up the Mississippi River, and they had the big cypress trees would come down with the big roots on 'em and we used a *passé-partout*, the crosscut saw. We'd cut the roots off and we'd roll 'em in the river and tow 'em down the river and then pull 'em up on a [pile 02:07] and put 'em on the dock where the saw mill was and he'd roll 'em and when he'd get four, five, six of 'em, whatever, then he would cut the wood up and he'd take it out and dry it. He had to stack it so it would dry. Then he would use it in the boats, to repair boats or build boats.

AH: So you've been working with the land your whole life.

PS: Yes, pretty much.

AH: Can you tell me what it was like growing up in that kind of environment?

PS: Well, you run around barefooted. I could cross oyster shells and it wouldn't hurt my feet. Now I can't walk in the grass. It was nice. It was a lot slower pace. My old uncle and them had a wood stove and iron pots and they cooked over there and they would start something off in the morning and they would cook all day and that was your breakfast, lunch, and supper, you know. But it was a good living and I trapped when I was a kid for fur, mink and otter, coon and nutria rats and stuff like that, muskrat. Then

we fished oysters, by hand in them days with rakes. We lived off the land pretty much. We had cattle, goats, pigs, chickens.

AH: When you were growing up did you always know you were going to stay here your whole life?

PS: Not really, but I mean--.

AH: Did you think maybe you wanted to leave?

PS: No, I don't think so. I had left some. I won a 4-H trip one time to Chicago, Illinois when I was in high school and that was really the first time I'd really been far away from home, and it was good to get home. You always want to come back home, I guess.

AH: It's a hard thing to put words to, but could you sort of describe what makes it different down here that would make you want to stay?

PS: Well my family's been here for so long, I was born and raised here, and I fished and shrimped and oystered myself. I just sold my boat last year, my big boat. I had five at one time and over a thousand acres of bedding grounds. We used to trawl, my wife and I and the kids. Then I worked with Southern Natural Gas and if I couldn't get there early enough in the evening I'd send the wife and kids out in the bayou and they would put the boats and get 'em ready and start catching shrimp and I'd take another boat and go meet 'em and we would shrimp most of the night. We done double dipping, I guess you could call it.

Drew Landry: Phil, about the technology, not just like--. How much harder was it to do the work, like put those pilings in, and like,--

PS: Oh, yeah.

C: --you know, now that you have decent machines, can you explain--?

PS: Well back then they used to build bridges, my uncle and them, for cattle to go across. For the wintertime they would go out in the marsh away from the river further to get marsh grass to eat in the winter and they put all these bridges in by hand. You had block and tackles and a come-along and you pushed 'em down with a--. You picked the other part of the old bridge up, pushing the piling down 'til it went so far, then you bolted it, you know, and it was all hand done in them days. You put an A-frame up to stand it up and block and tackle with ropes, so.

AH: Is any of that work that you worked on still up and standing?

PS: Oh, yes, yeah.

AH: So it lasts. It survived all the storms.

PS: Yep, some of the pilings still stuck in the ground. That's about all that's left is the pilings but it went through Betsy in '65, Camille in '69, and Katrina in '05, plus all the other not-quite-so-bad storms.

AH: So can you tell me a little bit about what's it like to live down here when a hurricane comes?

PS: Well, it gets a little rough, but I stayed here for Betsy and Camille, but I did leave for Katrina and I'm glad I did because my house was gone. I think it was Betsy I was working for the Department of Public Works at the Ostrica Locks. I was assistant lock master. So my dad and my great uncle, the one I was telling you died in '76, was up here in the old house in the front and I went down to check the water at the locks in Empire and the water come up and I got jammed. So then I was standing up in the lock house up to my knees in water, there was seven of us in there, and a barge come up next

to the wall and stopped. Lucky it didn't knock us--come on across and knock the house down or we'd probably lost our lives, but at that time there was an old man got caught out there and I saved his life, Old Man Bowers.

AH: How did you do that?

PS: They had a life ring and I threw it across, and I could see that he had one of those little nightlights, you know, them [pen] lights, and he was going in and out of the water and the water was rushing over, and I threw that ring buoy out there and it caught on a nail on a piece of metal and he come across that rope. We held a rope and brought him across.

AH: And this is in the midst of the storm.

PS: The midst of the storm. Water was so--. It was terrible.

AH: What kind of damage did your family see during Betsy?

PS: My dad's house wound up back here where the new road is now, it wasn't in then, and my house up front moved about six or eight inches off the blocks and the roof went off and we had spent quite a while putting up stuff, you know, [Mobile phone rings] figured well if the water didn't get too high we would come back, but we didn't get wet from the bottom, we got wet from the top, so.

AH: Do you want to get that?

PS: No, I'll just cut this off. Seven-five-seven-six-one-five-six three--I don't know who that is. Let me write that--. Mom, write that number down for me, please.

MS: What is it [07:37]

PS: There you go. I don't know what that is. That's some--. That's got to be one of your buddies, Drew.

AH: Blaming it on Drew, huh?

PS: Oh, yeah. Gotta be the media. [Laughs]

AH: [Laughs] For bringing all of us down here. So were you able to save the house?

PS: Yes. We moved it, got it back on the blocks, and we put a new roof on it and put another porch on the front because that had blew off, and at my dad's house we jacked it back up, brought it back up front, built the foundation, and repaired it too.

AH: You did that all yourself, or did you have--?

PS: My dad, and, yeah, just mostly me and my dad.

AH: Did you get any help from anyone, the Red Cross or the government?

PS: SBA helped us, yeah. The Red Cross didn't help us but SBA did lend us some money and then before we could get that paid Camille come along, so then they lent us more money but we had to pay the first loan off and then they lent us more money for the second go around.

AH: So you ended up in some debt with the federal government. [Laughs]

PS: [Laughs] Yeah. But they forgave us some of the money so it helped.

AH: They had that loan forgiveness bill that came out, right?

PS: Yeah, mm hmm.

AH: So tell me about Camille and how that compared to Betsy.

PS: Camille was, I don't know, probably a little bit worse than Betsy was, but it didn't cover as big an area and it went more across the tip and went on over into Mississippi more. But we had a lot of water.

AH: Did that mess with your house too?

PS: Oh, yeah.

AH: What happened with Camille?

PS: It flooded, [Laughs] as usual.

AH: Did you ever--?

PS: But Katrina was worse than Betsy and Camille put together.

AH: So what happened during--?

PS: Oh, they had twenty-something feet of water here for Katrina. I had a boat of my neighbor's was up in the oak tree, fifteen, twenty feet from the ground.

AH: What made you stick it out through all those things? I mean, it seems like someone might have left.

PS: Well, I guess they'd been through many of 'em before, my family, and I don't know, they had bad storms before that. They had one before my time, 1915 storm, and people moved back. Some of the people move out and then you get more people more in, so, but we've been here so long it's just home to me. A lot of people don't know there's any place below New Orleans. We're sixty miles below New Orleans. I just-- Well, I got cattle, and like I say you can live off the land if you really want to work a little bit. You're not going to go hungry. You can shrimp, you can oyster, you can fish, but I don't know what all this oil spill's going to do.

AH: Yeah, how are you facing that?

PS: Well, day by day. I don't know. I don't know what to think. I'm trying to get a job with BP. I put my application in but they haven't hired me yet.

AH: What kind of job would you like to do for them?

PS: Oh, anything. I got some little barges we could use to put oil booms on or fuel tanks on or whatever they needed, you know, and I got some little boats that I could push 'em with. One of 'em's got spuds and the other two are just little deck barges.

AH: How long have you been waiting to hear back?

PS: Quite a while. I don't know exactly but I guess two or three months.

AH: And you haven't heard anything.

PS: Yeah.

AH: Why do you think that is?

PS: I have no idea. They got people working that I never heard of down here from all over, and the local people are not getting to work, some of 'em. Some of 'em--. They got some local people working. Some of 'em got two or three boats working and I ain't got nothing working, you know, it just--. I don't know what's the problem.

AH: You must have seen the oil industry get bigger down here in the course of your lifetime.

PS: Oh, yeah. It was really booming back in the '50s and '60s, '70s, you know. I mean it was really rocking and rolling and jobs was no problem. You could quit one today and got to work somewheres else tomorrow, or that evening. Of course it's not that way no more and a lot of your major companies with all the rules and regulations have moved out, so it's more little independent companies here now, and the ones that are here, like BP and all, they're more offshore. They're in the deep water; they're not in the inside no more. Of course it's depleted some too.

AH: What do you think, as someone who's using sort of the natural environment-- you're raising your cattle and you're out in the beds--what do you think of the oil industry?

PS: Well I don't have no--. I mean I made part of my living on the oil industry too, and there's a lot of people here make a living on the oil industry and I think they shouldn't put that stop on the oil.

AH: The moratorium?

PS: Moratorium on that. But I mean, yeah, it is an accident. They had an accident, it's deep water, and they're having a problem taking care of it, but I mean how many airplanes crash and kill hundreds of people, and it's an accident. It's just an accident so why punish the oil company and the local people that work for the oil companies and all these service companies that service 'em and they're putting a lot of people out of work, and the country's already in bad shape.

AH: Will you tell me a little bit, just thinking about the oil industry, how that work changed over time for you?

PS: Well, it got slower. As years went by it got slower but I remember at one time in Quarantine Bay there was like three hundred wells and the Gulf Oil Corporation had it then, and they had several places. They had Grand Bay and West Bay and Black Bay and all over, and then they sold out to Chevron, and then of course Chevron sold out some of their--most of their fields are shallow water--to different companies, and Pennzoil bought some I believe, and this one and that, and then Conoco Philips, and then first thing you know they're selling out to somebody else. They change names so now

it's just little independents, a lot of 'em, and they've pulled a lot of those wells. There ain't no more oil there and they've pulled 'em out.

AH: Does that have any effect on you, when the companies keep changing everything?

PS: Not really. I mean I'm kind of retired now, and they've done a lot of improvements, stopping little leaks and pollution in the water, which is good, but you know I think they've gone overboard with it now.

AH: How so?

PS: Well, if they drop one little drop of oil in the water they want to fine 'em big money and all this stuff, and some things are going to happen when you're working. The one that don't make a mistake or don't have any problem, they don't do very much. That's my opinion.

AH: You said the word pollution. Has the situation with wildlife and fish populations, has that changed here over time?

PS: Yeah, but I think--. [Laughs] Of course I guess I'm bad but I think the Wildlife and Fisheries hurt us more than they help us a lot of times.

AH: Tell me about that. How so?

PS: Well, I don't know. It's like they don't know what time to do the seasons like they should and they either--. And they got all kind of rules and regulations, and I guess you got to have some, and the population's so much bigger. When I was a kid you could go anywheres and go fishing, and they never had no limit or they didn't have nothing. Of course I'm sure you got more population now, you got to have more rules and regulations and stuff, but I tell you when I was a kid you could take a white rag on a hook, go out

there and throw it and pop the cork and catch speckled trout. That's how good it was. Yep. You didn't have to have no bait.

AH: [Laughs] I'm a fisherman so that sort of excites me, the thought of doing that. [Laughs]

PS: Yeah, and I mean when I was kid we caught fish--. Of course we didn't waste it. We caught what we needed and if we caught more we threw 'em back, but we just caught what we needed, brought 'em home, and cooked 'em, and you go back the next time and get you some more, keep it fresh.

AH: There wasn't people going out and catching way over the limit.

PS: No, whereas now some people, they want to go out there and kill 'em all, you know? So I think back then people kind of conservationed their own self. They wasn't greedy and there wasn't as much--. They didn't have all these big fancy restaurants and all that where they could sell 'em and make big money out of it either.

AH: What do you think changed that made people want to do that?

PS: I don't know. It just changed with time, I guess, just like all the fancy stuff they got now with electricity and all that stuff. I was telling somebody a while back. They wanted me to get an architect to build this house, and I said, man, I don't need an architect. I know how to build it. I said I can understand maybe needing an architect if I was in a subdivision where I may damage somebody else's property but if I ain't got smarts enough to build it and not to hurt myself, you can't protect me from myself. So anyway I built it and then an architect had to come look at it and draw it up and make sure it was okay before they would sign off on it to get my permits, and he did and he was impressed the way it was braced and stuff.

AH: How did you learn to do that?

PS: Well I pay attention when I'm doing things. I look at what people's doing and watch how they do it. I build barges here in my yard, myself. I just comprehend by looking at things what you need to do to do it.

AH: Can you tell people who are listening to this who can't ever come here what they'd see if they were looking around your yard?

PS: Probably "Sanford and Son," [Laughs] with all the junk and stuff I got, but I got cattle and I use tractors and stuff for that. I got machinery, I got bulldozers, I got a track hoe, I got four or five different tractors and bush hogs and an auger and all kind of equipment and that's how I operate because that's what I use to do a lot of the work, and it's cheaper for me to buy it and then maybe rent it out some here and there then it is for me to go rent it and then I got to go turn it in and it's dead money, the way I look at it.

AH: So you're saying that you hate it when you see something get thrown away?

PS: Yeah, I'm a packrat, but you know I just--. Like these churches, they were tearing 'em down. I tore the church down for nothing just for the lumber. The guy that was tearing it down was just going to destroy it. I said, man, look. That wood's too good to just destroy. We don't have any trees left now and we're going to just keep throwing it away?

AH: What--?

PS: All of this house you see up here, all that floor? I tore a house down, cut the floors, cut the joists, and I did two-by-twelves by eighteen foot, I think, or twenty foot. Anyway, I cut 'em out in ten-foot sections and I put it back up here and I put it back together, and that's how this house is built.

AH: How long did that all take you to do? This was all post-Katrina, right, that you did all this?

PS: After Katrina, yeah.

AH: How long did it take you to get back on your feet?

PS: Well I'm not on my feet yet. [Laughs] But you know I work every day and I'm too old to do a whole lot but I got a couple guys that help me and I [18:45 point], and sometimes they tell me, ain't you tired of [pointing]? But I get the job done, and I got it in my head what I want to do, so, you know. Of course now I got to make notes because I'm getting old and forgetful, and then I lose the note, but--.

AH: You seem like you're still doing okay to me. [Laughs]

PS: [Laughs] I guess. I do all right I guess, for my age.

AH: Do you think, are there other people--? If I were to sort of go up and down the highway here would I meet other people that are living the way you do, or are you sort of unique at this point?

PS: No, I guess you--. Maybe a little bit unique with all the junk I got, but you got a lot of people here that's been here a long time and they were more or less brought up the same way I was and I know a lot of guys here that fish that's all they've ever done for a living is shrimp and oyster. The Stipelcoviches, that's all they ever done, and they fish pompano, they trawl, and they fish oysters and stuff like that. But, yeah, they got a lot of people here that done that for years and years and years. I think I got an article somewheres here where in the 1915 hurricane where a lot of people come from Europe, Yugoslavia, and they worked oysters and it was in Grand Bayou and stuff and a lot of 'em got drowned for that hurricane. It's pretty good history. Like I say people used to

live on the other side of the river. I could take you and show you a cemetery over there. It's the Point Pleasant Cemetery. There was a settlement there at that time and there's quite a few people buried in there and one guy in particular that I remember was buried in 1844 and he was from [Flensberry], Denmark, and the tombstone is there. You could take a picture of it today. Another thing that's unique in it, they got a petrified tree tombstone in that cemetery, so it's very unique. And of course back when I was a kid it was more or less hard ground and when my old uncles and them was living they even had places where they would dig the, you know, hill up the gravesites because they knew there was people buried there. Of course that was before my time and since then I don't know where all them little gravesites are so I just kind of try and keep the grass cut in it and things like that, but they got some tombs and stuff in there too and [20:57] and stuff like that, and a lot of 'em's families that I recognize. I know four or five different people that's buried there. I know my Uncle Joe, which is my Uncle Sid's brother. He's buried there, and Uncle Sid was the last one in 1976, and then Mr. Tony [21:12 Cose], Mr. Isadore [Cose], and some of the Hengel family, and one of my old school teacher's family, Miss Claire's family, is buried around where that petrified tombstone is, and like I say it was high land then. Now it's starting to get to be a little marshy around in it.

AH: Yeah, tell me about erosion around here. What's going on with that?

PS: Well the islands are disappearing and it is eroding quite a bit, and I guess you take all the minerals out the ground and it's going to crumble some if you don't fill the voids, and I think that's part of it, plus you got the water levels coming up, so between the two it's getting under water quite a bit. And the erosion from these hurricanes and stuff and not having no repairs too much is hurting the coast. We're losing miles and

miles and miles of it. When I was a kid you couldn't see across the marsh out here it was so thick. All you had was bayous. Now it's all open water back here.

AH: Whose fault is that?

PS: I don't know. It's Mother Nature, I guess. I don't know if it's really anybody's fault, but like I say, you take all the minerals out the ground, sulphur, oil, and gas, so that's going to crumble it some, and then probably--. We're probably some of the fault for putting levees up along the Mississippi River so it doesn't run over and silt up and keep building, because now it all goes out the mouth of the river because there's a levee system here on the Delta, so I guess you could call humans part of it. I don't know. You got a lot of stuff out there if they would have done it a long time ago it probably would have helped a lot quicker, but they're waiting too long. They got to do too much studies. They raised three million dollars to work on the beach out of Empire here.

AH: Who's "they?"

PS: The government, give three million dollars. Well they spent the three million dollars studying how they were going to do it, and to me that's silly. Spend the three million dollars on the project then study how you can improve it, and that's the way I operate.

AH: So is that the local government that's doing that?

PS: No, that was the federal government, yeah, the Corps of Engineers or something. I don't know exactly who it was but I know I heard they were spending three million dollars and they wound up spending it all in studying. That's just like these barrier islands. They was building 'em up out here by Chandelier and all and they stopped all that, from what I understand. Hey, what it's going to hurt? Let it build up a

little bit and protect the land a little bit. The tide used to come in, it would take all day to come in. You get a norther, it would take a day or two for all the water to get out. Now you get a norther, in eight hours it's all gone. It's all gone in a day, so that tells me, you know, that all your canals is all--. There's no more canals. It's just all open water, more or less.

AH: Why do you think they're getting it wrong? You're sitting out here and you're looking at it and you're seeing the mistakes that the government's making. Why are they making these mistakes?

PS: I have no idea, just like they're bailing out the car companies and the banks and all this stuff. If I go bankrupt, that's my problem. They're not going to come help me. I'm an individual. If that car company goes broke they're not doing too good a managing, is the way I see it, so if you're getting ten million dollars bonuses at the end of the year and you done a poor job I don't think you should get that ten million dollars. That's my opinion. And if you go bankrupt then so be it. You better hire a new manager.

AH: You think they're just in the pockets, basically?

PS: Yeah, there's a lot of it in the pocket but they're so smart today and they got-- . I don't have no education, but they are so smart today that they got to study everything and think everything out. There's no common sense, is what I figure. It don't take a brilliant guy to figure out, hey, this is washing away. What can we do to stop it?

AH: So how do you think the situation is being handled with the oil spill?

PS: I think it's a joke. I mean they're just throwing money away like it's crazy. Same thing I think about after Katrina with FEMA and Road Home and all that. All these FEMA trailers, from what I understand these little boxes cost sixty thousand dollars

to put 'em on location, then it costs another five thousand or so to haul 'em off. Why not give everybody sixty thousand dollars to go buy you a big trailer and say, hey, this is it, bro, you better take care of it, and it would have got by a hell of a lot cheaper.

AH: Did you get one of those trailers?

PS: Yes, I did. That's what you're in right now, one of the bigger ones. But I got a box first and they let me have that after I fought for awhile because I lived in a truck body across the street after the hurricane for months, trying to get a place to stay in, because they had their people in here cleaning up, picking up stuff, and they were stealing the little bit you had left, and I was hot. They had 'em walking around in these little white suits, picking up paint cans and stuff. They took my oxygen and acetylene bottles. They took everything, tanks, fuel tanks, and stuff that I use for the farm. They took all that. So finally I moved back and I told 'em don't even get on my property. Get out. So I run 'em off. But eventually I went to the parish president and different ones and they finally gave me one of them little boxes, and my wife had come and spent a couple nights in that truck with me and she said she wasn't coming. Of course we didn't have any electricity, no running water, no sewage, no nothing. But, hey, I can survive. I'm a survivor. You see that "Survivor" on TV? That ain't nothing. [Laughs] But, you know, I mean I hooked up--. I got a [26:57 Weller] machine and I got it running, I hooked it up, I had lights. I got me electricity with the [Weller] machine. I got me a hot water heater, I put me a shower in, and hey, I was uptown. I got a little gas stove and I could cook, sleep, eat, wash, go to the bathroom. I had a little port-a-potty deal out there.

AH: So how long did you live like that before you got the house where you could move back?

PS: Oh, I lived in that truck for how long, Mom? About six months or more.

MS: Probably.

PS: Over six months.

AH: And how long until you came back?

MS: After that.

AH: After that.

MS: Well, [when we got the FEMA trailer].

PS: When we got that little box trailer, FEMA trailer.

AH: FEMA trailer.

PS: Yeah, and we put it out here.

AH: Okay.

PS: Then I went to the church. The church was supposed to be giving 'em through FEMA and then the preacher that collected the money got in trouble with dope and stuff so some of the people got 'em and some didn't, and I was in the first fifty. You had to put up twenty-something hundred dollars, twenty-two hundred, twenty-three hundred, something like that, so I put it up for me, I put it up for one son and my daughter, and my younger son went and bought another trailer, so he didn't get nothing. He never got nothing from FEMA and he never got nothing from Road Home. And then my daughter never got nothing from Road Home and neither did my other son. He finally-- Well the preacher went to jail and he lost the twenty-three hundred dollars so far, so we had to go through another deal that they--because he was in the top fifty--and they gave us a trailer from somewheres else. He just got it, what, about two weeks ago, Mom?

MS: Yeah.

PS: And we had to put it [28:36 in front of the house] because there's a zone. It's a V zone here now. We moved ours in but now FEMA changed the rules so you can't put it here now, you got to put it somewhere else, and it's no better over there than it is here. It's just a bunch of crap.

AH: Just so I understand, it's five years after Katrina when he finally got this thing that was supposed to help him out,--

PS: Yeah.

AH: --and then you were told where you could and couldn't put it on land that your family's been on for--

PS: Right.

AH: --how long?

PS: Hundreds of years.

AH: Hundreds of years, so that's how they're helping you.

PS: Yeah. Ain't that nice? So anyway we set it up over there now and he finally got his trailer but we had to put up the insurance money and stuff again, and I don't know what's going to happen. I guess we're going to lose the money on the other one.

AH: Did the insurance--? How did that process work for you, post-Katrina?

PS: Oh, I didn't have insurance.

AH: You didn't have any.

PS: I don't buy insurance. I had insurance for Betsy. Of course it was homeowners insurance then. It wasn't flood insurance.

AH: They didn't have flood insurance.

PS: No. And they said, well that's a flood. We don't pay for that. So I said, yeah, and I ain't buying no more insurance. I had to buy it when I got this trailer because that was part of the FEMA regulations, so I bought it and then we got another little storm and it damaged it and the insurance did pay off for that. Of course they paid, I don't know, the church or wherever and then we had to get it from them to do it. But finally, to make a long story short, they kept wanting me to give the little trailer up when we got this trailer, but they never would give me the titles because they said we'd get the titles to it after a year, so I wouldn't let 'em pick the little trailer up until they got the titles. Finally they got me the titles and then I let 'em take the little trailer.

AH: So the insurance you had to buy, was that homeowners or flood insurance?

PS: Flood. I think it's flood and contents, yeah.

AH: Um--I'm just thinking about all this. That's quite a story.

PS: [Laughs] I could tell you some stuff here. It's amazing, what all went on. I could show you some pictures. I got pictures of my house, what was left of it and stuff, where I lived and stuff. I got that all in an album in there, some of my cattle. I lost six hundred cows and forty-three bulls for Katrina.

AH: Out of how many that you keep?

PS: A little over seven hundred. I salvaged about a hundred head, and they were all on this side of the river.

AH: Did they find some high ground? How did they live?

PS: I don't know how they lived. Some of 'em--. I lost cattle over here that were standing in water after the hurricane. I seen 'em, but what am I going to do? I can't get to 'em. I can't do nothing about it, and they ain't got nothing to eat, nothing to drink.

The water got bad, nasty, dead fish and stuff, and I mean it was pitiful. They just starved to death.

AH: And you had to watch it.

PS: Yeah. Nothing I could do. Finally after the water finally did get out they brought us some feed and hay. The Louisiana Cattlemen's Association helped us quite a bit afterwards and the Department of Agriculture finally come in later but as far as I'm concerned the Department of Agriculture didn't do a very good job.

AH: So tell me about the Cattlemen's Association that did a good job. Who was that?

PS: That's all of the Louisiana Cattlemen's Association. You've got different parishes belong, like I'm president of the Southeast Cattlemen's Association which is Orleans, St. Bernard, Jefferson, and Plaquemines, and then I'm also a member of Lafourche Parish organization. But Bob [Felner] and Robert Joyner and Danny Cole and the Smith boy, what's his name?

MS: Nicky.

PS: Nicky Smith. Nicky Smith brought me an eighteen--. They got an eighteen-wheeler milk truck somewheres, and we didn't have no running water, so they brought me an eighteen-wheeler full of Kentwood water that Kentwood donated to 'em and brought it here and parked it on the driveway where I had that truck body over there where I was staying in, and I could water the cattle on the levee and I also had water to take a shower or drink.

AH: Why do you think the Cattlemen's Association was so much better prepared to help than the government was?

PS: Well I don't know but they were ready to jump in, and we had help from all over the United States from different cattle associations, Kentucky, Utah, I mean all over the whole United States cattle people. The Department of Agriculture, their departments helped our Louisiana Cattlemen's Association, and the Department of Agriculture, I guess, but Bob [Felner] and Robert Joyner and Danny Cole and Clayton Brister and some of those people, and Nicky Smith, was the ones that really took the bull by the horns and come down here and said, hey, what do you need? What can we do for you? How can we help you? They brought feed, they brought hay, they brought water, and that's what we needed.

AH: Were those people that you were connected to before Katrina, or--

PS: No.

AH: --they just sort of came down here?

PS: They sort of came down, and of course I was in Lafourche, I believe, cattle before that, but I didn't know a lot of them people and they come out of the goodness of their heart to come help us, and not only did they do that but people in Kentucky and different places donated bulls to help us get started back down here. The people from Kentucky come down, I don't know, a year or two later and we had a cookout at Fort Jackson for 'em, took 'em down to one of the Vietnamese docks and had shrimp and stuff with 'em, because there are also cattle people up here at Citrus Lands, and showed 'em where the bulls went and some of the ranchers. They wanted to see how they was doing and what was what.

It's amazing that in my house I had my grandma's mandolin from years ago and for Katrina it went all to pieces, and it was a keepsake. It was from my grandmother, you

know, so I took all the parts and I put it in a five gallon bucket and said maybe some day I might find somebody that would be able to put it together. Well when that group come down from Kentucky it just so happened that a guy on the bus that donated some of the bulls built mandolins and so I asked him about it and he said, well, let me see what I can do. Let me know and I'll get it and see what I can do with it, because he lives in Kentucky and then he goes to Florida in the wintertime and then he goes back in the summer to Kentucky. So anyway, he wrote me a couple letters, I got with him, and sure enough he put that mandolin back almost complete, same old mandolin, just a couple little bitty pieces that he had to change. He put it all back together and it looks like a brand new one. He was going to mail it back to me and I said, no, I'm coming to Kentucky and get it. So I went to Kentucky and I went to the some of the cattlemen's meetings up there and they happened to go to Utah on a cattlemen's outing, a bus vacation or whatever you want to call it, and I told 'em I had been there to go to that gold and copper mine there. It's deeper than the Empire State Building down in the ground and I went to see that, and I told them about it. It was nice and it was really--and they had a cookout while I was there and me and the wife went. It was very, very good.

Also they got some people here in Louisiana that donated me--. Mr. Coy Fitch donated me a registered Charolais bull and Mr. Darrell Richarde in Carencro, Louisiana donated me a registered Simmental bull, so we still have some good people in the state of Louisiana that was willing to help because they wasn't hurt at that time and they helped me and they helped other people get back on our feet a little bit.

AH: Are there lessons that you learned or that other people should have learned from some of those earlier disasters that could be applied now with the oil spill?

PS: Yeah, I guess, but the main thing is--. Of course the oil spill's a completely different thing. The hurricane comes and it goes. This oil's going to be here a while and, I don't know. Look what it done in Alaska. I'm hoping they get it stopped so it don't kill everything in the Gulf but I don't know what's going to happen there. I think they're doing wrong by putting dispersant on it and sinking 'em because they should let the oil come up and do like in the Old West. Instead of circling the wagons circle the ships. Put oil booms inside the ships and put these suckers inside to suck the oil up off the water. So what if it's two foot thick? You could keep pumping it up and getting it out and getting the oil off the water and don't let it come all over the Gulf. I don't know why they don't--. That's another thing. Why not do something simple? Keep it simple, stupid, that's my motto. Circle the wagons. And all the ships they got, all these barges, they could have circled 'em a couple miles if they had to, and like I say, you put a ship-- you can't put 'em too close because they could bang and damage each other--but you put a cargo boat or a big offshore boat in between 'em, off a ways, and then you run your oil boom from the ship to the cargo boat along the side to the next ship and you keep doing that all the way around the circle and it wouldn't even get out.

AH: So if you want to share this good idea with somebody, is there someone who's going to listen to you?

PS: No, I doubt it. I'm just a dumb country boy. [Laughs]

AH: A dumb country boy who built his own house and survived multiple generations out here.

PS: Yeah. But I use common sense. I don't have no education. I don't have not a bit of college. Don't even have a good high school education as far as I'm concerned, but I got a little common sense.

AH: Are you seeing oil right here yet?

PS: Yeah. Not in my pasture, but on the west side here I took people out and showed 'em oil in Bay Batiste and around Port Bayou and the Grand Lake area.

AH: I went out at Grand Bayou last week and saw some. Could you describe for the--?

PS: Yeah, there's some out there by Grand Bayou too.

AH: Can you describe and sort of make a word picture what it's like to see the oil?

PS: Well it's devastating. I mean them poor birds get in it and die and wherever it's washed up on the marsh the grass is going to all die there, and how do you clean that up? The only thing I know to do is wait 'til it's over with because you don't want to do nothing before and then when it's finished you spray it down with something and burn it right on the edge, burn the grass and the oil off, and maybe the new grass will come up through in the dirt. If not you're going to have more erosion and if you get any bad weather it's going to put it everywhere.

AH: What do you--? Let me ask you this. What do you think is the best case scenario, moving forward from here? What's the best outcome that could happen?

PS: For the oil?

AH: Yeah.

PS: To get it closed off is the best outcome, but like I say the best thing they should have done, in my opinion, was to circle the ships and then keep it there. Don't let it spread all over the country. Don't let it spread. But it's too late for that now because it's all over the Gulf.

AH: So what do you think is going to happen? What's the most likely thing?

PS: I don't know.

AH: If I could ask you to describe what you thought it was going to be like down here next year, or five years from now.

PS: Well that's hard to say. It depends on what this oil does. And the thing is they're sinking part of it and it's not going all the way to the bottom. Some of it's maybe partway between, some's all the way down, so you're killing everything. You leave it on the top you only kill stuff on the surface, that comes to the surface. As far as the oysters and stuff that's down on the bottom, if you leave it on top it probably wouldn't hurt it too bad, but if you put it on the bottom it's going to kill everything. Now I know that we're going to have a lot of dead oysters here because they opened up all the fresh water, the locks and the fresh water diversions and everything, and just opened it all up because the river's up, and it's to keep the oil away from the coast as much as possible, which is a good think, I guess, but the fresh water's going to kill 'em because of that.

AH: So do you think you're going to harvest any oysters?

PS: None. There won't be no oysters for a few years, I don't think, if they come back. I know I won't be able to fish any. On the east bank I know I won't but on the west bank me and another guy's got a hundred and forty-five acres, something like that, we got together and if it don't come in too far we might salvage the oysters there.

AH: Did you put a claim in to BP?

PS: I did today. I went today and I showed 'em my bedding ground papers and stuff, and I had sold my big boat in '08 so I didn't fish much last year, but I got my commercial license this year but I didn't get it until after the oil spill was there so they looked at that and said well that's after the spill. I mean I've been buying it for forty years, but I mean it don't matter.

AH: I don't mean to pry into your personal finances but I keep hearing about people getting this problem where they didn't report stuff on their taxes trying to get a claim and they can't substantiate it.

PS: Well I brought my taxes with me.

AH: Yeah.

PS: I brought '06, '07, and '08 with me.

AH: So you've been paying your taxes.

PS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

AH: Because apparently a lot of people don't.

PS: Yeah, well, a lot of the fishermen used to do that. In the old days they paid a lot of the fishermen cash so they didn't report it, but now they got their social security number and all and whatever they sell they got to report it. They turn that in and if you don't report it well you're liable to get caught at it.

AH: You mentioned you have three sons?

PS: Two sons.

AH: Two sons.

PS: Two sons and a daughter.

AH: And they all live down here?

PS: Yeah. Matter of fact, my son's suffering from that a little bit. He works for [12:36] Fisheries. He's in the warehouse, but last week the boats didn't work at all because of the oil spill. I think they went out last night, they leave on Sunday night, but they got to go all the way on the other side of Morgan City to fish because all this out here is closed. So, I don't know what's going to happen there. And a lot of these oil field service companies and stuff is hurting.

I'm fortunate; I'm retired. I got a little income. I get my social security and stuff so I guess I ain't going to go hungry unless they cut social security out. I guess I'm fortunate but I always kind of looked ahead in life a little bit. I worked in the oil field and I shrimped and fished and fished oysters and I got two companies, Simmons Marine and Simmons Farm, LLC, both of 'em, plus I worked for Southern Natural Gas as a boat captain for twenty-three years. I worked ten years at [13:34] Navigation. While I was around all over the Gulf I was watching things being built and stuff and I watched shipyards building stuff and I just paid attention and I figured, hey, if they can do it I can do it, and I have. I got some pictures of some barges I built here and stuff.

AH: How long does it take to build a barge?

PS: Well depending on the size, but it's about--. What we took, Mom, about a month and a half, two months?

MS: About two months.

PS: But you got to get all your steel together, and I mean I'm not doing it by myself. I got a couple welders working. I don't really do much work anymore myself, I get other guys to do it, but I'm there showing 'em what to do and how to do it.

AH: And you design the whole thing.

PS: Yeah.

AH: And you said you sold one of them?

PS: I sold the oyster barge. It was sixteen by forty with a 6-71 Detroit, all aluminum.

AH: Can I ask you a stupid question, because I just don't know that much about this, but can you sort of walk me through a day in an oysterman's life, I mean can you tell me a little about the actual daily work that goes into it?

PS: Well usually in April the state has reefs and they call 'em seed grounds and they'll go out and fish oysters and then you got leases from the state to put 'em on. You go get your seed oysters over on the east side of the river, and they got a couple other places, and that's where I would go mostly and bring 'em on this side of the river or even on the other side where you got state leases, and you plant those oysters. Then depending on the area you can maybe harvest 'em in eight months, six months, whatever, depending on how they grow.

AH: Now when you plant them, how do you do that?

PS: You go over there and you dredge the seed oysters up. You got a big dredge you drag alongside the boat, you pick it up and you wash it back with pumps or you shovel it back in the olden days more, but now they mostly use pumps. But anyway, you put it back and then you come on this side of the river or wherever you're going to put 'em and you got some boards. You pull out a pin board 15:31 there, open up,] and then you take the water and you wash 'em back overboard. You could ask my wife about that. I took her before we had pumps fishing oysters, seeding, and we shoveled 'em back then,

and after they shoveled back all day we come over and said now you shovel 'em overboard, [Laughs] which is a damn good day's work, I'll tell you.

AH: Really.

PS: Yeah, that is work. Of course now they're improving things all the time and they wash 'em off and wash 'em on. They used to shovel 'em off the table back. Now they use the water pressure to push 'em back.

AH: Is something lost when you don't do it the old way?

PS: You lose some, yeah, there's a percentage of loss, but I don't think it's too bad. You do lose some but even when you're shoveling you're going to lose some because they knock the bill off and stuff when you throw 'em.

AH: So do you seed your whole bed in one day?

PS: Oh, no. [Laughs] You do that for maybe two months every day, every day that you can work as long as the weather's not bad, and you may put thirty, forty, fifty loads of oysters in the water, depending on how many days you work.

AH: How many oysters are in a load?

PS: Well different size boats carry a different amount but mine carried about eight hundred sacks.

AH: Okay and how many are in a sack?

PS: A hundred pounds, roughly, probably about twenty-four dozen.

AH: That's a lot of oysters.

PS: Oh, yeah.

AH: Now once you seed them how long do you leave them there?

PS: Well it usually six, eight months because they got to grow to big enough market size, they got to be three inch really to be market size, but some areas grow faster than other areas too. But I mean we bedded and maybe they didn't grow good enough the first year and we'd wait until the following year to fish 'em, and I fished three hundred sacks in one day on a boat.

AH: So tell me what it means to fish them. How do you get them out of the water?

PS: You do it the same way you bed 'em but they're just bigger. But you got to clean--. You know when you're bedding you're just washing 'em back, but when you're picking 'em up to sack 'em you got to take and knock the dead ones off and a shell in there you get rid of it, anything, you know, and then you put the good ones in a pile or in a basket and then you sack 'em up.

AH: And that's all by hand?

PS: All by hand.

AH: And is it just you or who are you out with?

PS: Oh, no, you got two men on each table, you and one man on one side usually and--. Sometimes you only use three. The captain will work both tables and one man on each table.

AH: And how long does it take to fish 'em, all the ones you put down in the spring?

PS: Depending on how many you bed, but I mean it takes months of work.

AH: So how were you able to do that and raise all these cattle at the same time?

PS: Work. [Laughs] It's not--. And I mean the cattle are beef cattle. You don't have to be there every day.

AH: So can you describe to me what goes into--? The way you told you about being an oysterman, tell me a little bit about the work of a cattleman.

PS: Well the worst part of that is hurricanes because then you got to build your pens back, build your fences back, get your cattle back where they belong. As a matter of fact I'm still not finished building pens from Katrina. I got one pen now, what we call the Island Pen, to build yet, I got to finish one up at [Bayou 18:46], I got to finish what we call Black's Pen, and I got the Island Pen to build back yet, and the other pens, I got two more down the road, one that we call the Wild Bunch and one we call the Terminal Pen, and those are pretty well built, but I built 'em out of steel this time. I got some pipe and I built 'em out of steel and welded 'em up. I'm hoping that that'll--. Because the wood I guess from the wash of the waves, it washes the piling out the ground and the wood and everything leaves.

AH: Well thinking about building back stronger, maybe for the microphone you can tell the tape how high up we are right now.

PS: It's twenty foot to the bottom of the floor joists on this house, and then you got twelve-inch floor joists, two-by-twelves, and then I got two double layers of three-quarter-inch plywood for the floor and it's all two-by-six studs and two-by-eight ceiling joists, and I got a tin roof.

AH: Do you feel secure?

PS: Yeah, pretty good, but I'm not staying for another one like Katrina. Now if it's only hundred-mile-an-hour winds I'll stay. I stayed for Betsy and Camille. But I'm

getting old. I can't do what I used to do, so my wife usually makes me go now. That was the first one I left for was Katrina, and I'm glad I did because I might not be here talking to you today. I know I got a couple friends drowned, a couple of them [20:12] boys and also Charles [Martinez].

AH: Where'd you go?

PS: Where'd we go, Mom? We went to Lafayette, and then Rita come along afterwards and we had to leave Lafayette and we went to Missouri. I got a sister in Missouri and they got a dairy farm so we went up there, and I had some shrimp in the freezer here for my sister so when I left I took the freezer and we went to Lafayette and then we wound up leaving Lafayette and bringing the shrimp to Missouri to my sister.

AH: She was happy to see you.

PS: Yeah. I think we had like three hundred pounds of tails, quite a bit of shrimp. Oh, yeah, she was happy to see me, of course she always is, and usually I go up there and I have a shrimp boil in May every year for 'em for the church, to raise money for the church that she attends, but this year I didn't get to do it with the oil spill and all. They had closed the season so that's the first year I missed in about ten years or more.

AH: How did your sister end up in Missouri?

PS: She married a guy from New York and then the taxes got so bad up there they left and they come to Missouri and they bought a farm there. She was married before and he was married before, but he had four kids and she had two when they got together and then they wound up having two together so they got his, hers, and ours, I call 'em, so they wound up with eight kids. The youngest boy now, he's a grown man but I mean we call him a boy, but he now is helping them to run the farm, and they got over a thousand acres

there and I bought a little land with 'em. They got over a thousand acres and they milk every day and every kid when they was coming up had their chores to do, and I tell you one thing I think he taught 'em well and all of 'em went to college except the youngest boy that's running the farm, and they've done good for themselves.

AH: You think she misses it down here though?

PS: She did for awhile but you know they've been there twenty-something years in Missouri and she's made new friends and I don't think she'd want to leave. No, she wouldn't want to come back.

AH: Do you have other family around here?

PS: Yeah, I got another sister that lives up front, my youngest sister, her and her husband, and her kids are all married. They've got one, she works for Mississippi River Bank and she lives in Jesuit Bend up there, close to Billy Nungesser up here. I forget what the name of it is. Anyway, and then she's got two other kids and they're both in Missouri though.

AH: You got this Louisiana-Missouri connection going.

PS: Yeah, I guess. [Laughs] Yeah. But I mean it's nice up there too. They got deer and turkey and stuff to hunt, but I go up there and spend a week or two and I'm ready to get back here though because they don't have enough water there for me. There's a lot of lakes and stuff there but it's not salt water and, I don't know, I'm just used to that salt water I guess.

AH: It's got a certain smell, doesn't it?

PS: Yeah. And here we've got fresh water and salt water. We've got the river fresh water and some freshwater ponds and then we've got the Gulf on both sides of us.

AH: So some people who have never been here are going to listen to this interview and they're going to here you talk about Betsy, Camille, Katrina, oil spill, 1915, all this stuff, and they're going to say, all right, well, salt water, fresh water, but it must be something more than that that makes you want to stay here despite all that. What would you tell them if people say, oh, you know, he should just leave? It's not safe.

PS: Well no matter where you go you have disasters. You got tornadoes, you got earthquakes. Look at Haiti or whatever it is. I mean, hey, you got danger anywheres, and at least I know it's coming with a hurricane because it's advertised on the radio and the television and I can track it pretty close, and I do, and if it looks like it's going to be a direct hit Philip's leaving. [Laughs] Before I didn't care; I'd stay. I'd send my wife and family out but I would stay and my dad would stay, my old uncle would stay. And then everything subsiding and it seems like the disasters are getting more rougher than they used to be, and personally I think if the good Lord's trying to tell the people something then they better heed the warning. It's too much corruption and too much bad stuff going on.

AH: Is there any way to put into words what it does to a person to rebuild their house four times like you have?

PS: Well, I told--. She didn't want me to rebuild this time because we had this trailer, but I felt like, hey, I don't trust FEMA. They might come back and say, hey, we're going to take the trailer, so I started this and I--. Well we had this here but we never could get the title so I started building this. I drove the pilings, like I said, on the outside here, I had 'em drove with a guy with a pile driver, then I dug a ditch with my machine and put twelve-by-twelve seals, bolted 'em to the piling then covered it over.

We call that a mud seal and you do that in the marsh so that your camp don't sink. So I done that and then I went to see--. First off I went to see about a permit. They said you can't build a house without an architect. I said, okay, I want to put a roof over my trailer, so I drove the pilings, put the mud seals in, I took this old house down, I put the floor up there, and then I started putting the walls up. Well that was a mistake because then they come and say, hey, this is not a roof over your trailer; this is a house. I said, well, I went to see about a permit for a house and you said I had to have an architect, and I don't think I need an architect. We went round and round and they actually cut my electricity off where I'm living here, took the [beater] and cut it off at the pole.

AH: That's the parish government did that to you?

PS: Yes, because of FEMA regulations, so they say. I got on the phone and I called the parish president and I told him you better get my electric going. I'm losing my groceries and if I lose my groceries there going to be a killing in Empire, and I didn't name no name, but I meant business. When they come to cut the electric on the next morning I was sitting on my porch with a shotgun and that guy said, man, don't shoot me; I'm just following orders. I knew the guy, and I wasn't going to shoot nobody, but I was mad, I'll tell you. So and it's just like I said, if I was maybe going to damage somebody else's property I could understand that but I ain't got nobody within four hundred feet of me so I'm not going to hurt anybody but myself if I hurt anybody, and I'm not that stupid I'm going to hurt myself if I can help it, so don't mess with me. Let me do what I got to do on my own property. You can't build a house on your own property? What is the matter with this country? Where's our freedom of choice? It just doesn't seem right. They can tell me what I can do and what I can't but I'm paying taxes

every year on it. I bought the land and it don't belong to me? I pay for it every year. I just don't think it's right. Just like an automobile. They sell these automobiles for thirty, forty, fifty thousand dollars. The guy that buys it pays tax on that money. Now he trades it in. The next guy that buys it, he pays tax on that same automobile and if they sell it ten times they collect taxes ten times on it. That don't seem right. Once the taxes is paid it ought to be over with.

AH: Do you see those tax dollars being put to work for you?

PS: I see 'em being wasted by the federal government and sent overseas. They got people going hungry in this country and they're worried about feeding 'em overseas.

AH: So you believe take care of us first.

PS: Take care of the American people first. We're out there--. Our men and women are out there getting killed for our freedom. Where is our freedom anymore?

AH: When do you feel like it started to go bad like that?

PS: I have no idea. It started a long time ago and it's just getting worse and worse and worse and worse. Well, the old Russian, Khrushchev, I believe, said he'd take this country without firing a shot and he's doing it with dope and all that kind of stuff. People are going crazy.

AH: When you were building back after Camille did you have to deal with permits and licenses the way--?

PS: Oh, yeah.

AH: Same thing then?

PS: Yeah.

AH: And Betsy too?

PS: But it wasn't as bad as it is today. We had to get a--. I don't know about Betsy--that was in '65--but I know in '69 we had to get some permits, but it was minor stuff. It wasn't nothing major. You didn't have to have an architect, I don't think, then, and all this stuff, but you had to have proper sewage, which I can understand, and you had to have your water line and gas lines tested and stuff like that, electric. I can understand that, but don't come to me with all this stuff, you can't do this and you can't do that.

AH: Can you tell me--? It sounds like part of the problem was with the parish government.

PS: Yes, it was.

AH: Can you tell me about what the parish government's doing wrong as opposed to the federal government?

PS: From what they tell me they're just following FEMA guidelines that's laid out for this parish because we got help from FEMA, or the parish did.

AH: So it's the federal government you feel like is tying the hands of the parish government to be a certain way.

PS: Yes, I do. I think communism is in this federal government.

AH: Tell me about--. I don't know too much about Old Man Perez, but you must have seen him, right?

PS: Yep.

AH: Now what was it like when he was in charge down here?

PS: Well he took care of the people here. I'm not saying he wasn't a crook. Just like Edwards, I'm not saying he wasn't a crook, but the people liked him and he took care

of his home people. I don't see what they done here was totally right but they looked out after the people here. They didn't worry about what the government was doing and they didn't accept the government funds like they do today, and I guess of course times change and you can't do what you used to do back then, and I understand some of that, but I think they go overboard with a lot of this stuff. Yeah, we need conservation. Yeah, we need this and that. Right now in the south you got to have a permit in the New Orleans area, all along the Gulf Coast here. You can go to Missouri and still build an outdoor toilet without a permit as long as you don't build it near a stream or a pond. Now what's so hard about all that? You don't need a permit to build a house. When they get finished they come check the electric and stuff in it and they give you electric and you're there. You don't need a permit. Now you may need it in the cities in Missouri but I'm talking about out in the country, like this is. You don't need a permit. A permit, what's that?

AH: So there is something different--. Oh, but it's the FEMA money, you're saying.

PS: Yeah.

AH: It's the federal funding.

PS: The federal funding.

AH: That makes the local government have to behave a certain way [01:20].

PS: Right, and they put all these rules and regulations on them, see.

AH: So if you had your way--.

PS: I'd tell the federal government to shove it, that's if I had my way.

AH: You would rather--.

PS: I would rather battle it on my own.

AH: No federal funding.

PS: None.

AH: But some freedom to do it as you think it's right.

PS: That's right. That's my opinion.

AH: Do you think--?

PS: You know the thing is these people that's making all these rules and regulations never come up like I did. We had board houses. There wasn't no studs in 'em or nothing. You had a plank board on the wall with a crack in it that you put a strip of wood over the outside and then you went to the grocery store and you got cardboard boxes to nail on the inside so you could keep your behind warm in the wintertime, and we had a wood stove and stuff. We didn't have electricity back then. When we got a butane ice box we was uptown. We had a ice box with--. They had made a ice house and they had a [02:14] so you go get a three hundred pound block of ice and my old uncles and them had a box in the sawdust that they got from the sawmill and you better not get caught in that box because you was in big trouble, but that was the ice box for the whole week.

AH: So tell me what you learned coming up like that that they missed by not?

PS: You learn how to do things the hard way and the simple way, and you didn't have all this modern stuff. You done it by hand. You done, like I said with the passé-partout, you cut the logs by hand. You had a hand saw, you had a brace and bit that you drilled the hole with. You didn't have all this electrical tools and all that kind of stuff, what they call them things that make them fancy cabinets and all that--miter cutters, yeah.

You had a box, what they call a miter box, to cut your forty-fives if you wanted to put molding on the inside, and they had a lot of molding then. They used--. Mostly your houses was just plain walls, plain wood, and it was painted, if you had a floor. It might have been mud, you know.

But like I said they never come up with hard times like I did. You went to the store and actually got cardboard boxes and nailed 'em on the wall to keep you warm. That was your insulation. And the newspaper, that's what they used in the ice to keep the ice insulated. We used to trawl and that's where we'd put--. We had a box and we'd put newspapers on the ice and stuff to keep it cold and keep from losing the ice to keep the shrimp cold. I caught as much as two barrels of shrimp a day with a three horsepower Firestone outboard motor and we'd come in--. They didn't weigh 'em. They had a basket they throwed 'em in and they throwed 'em in the truck and went to the French market. If they sold 'em you got your money. If you didn't sell 'em they went to waste. You didn't get paid.

AH: It gave you an appreciation of how to do things.

PS: Yes. And like me and my old Uncle Joe, the one that I told you his brother was buried, we used to go fish oysters by hand and when the tide would be low in the wintertime I would go out and pick the oysters up and bring 'em to him in the boat and he would do the culling. Then we'd come in and we'd throw 'em in a spot that was clean with nothing but shells on the bottom, small shells, but it was a bedding area, put 'em back overboard, go back the next day and do the same thing, come back and put the other ones right there with them. Do that for a whole week, then we'd go out and fish 'em up with rakes, put 'em in the boat, then pick out any ones that was dead, sack 'em, then we'd

come across the river and we might get three dollars a sack for 'em, and you talk about work. You had to push-pole down the bayou when the tide was high to get out. Man, they don't know what work is today.

AH: [Laughs] Now--.

MS: [Mobile phone rings] Hello? All right. No, uh uh.

AH: I won't ask you how those oysters tasted.

PS: Wonderful.

AH: Did they taste different then they do today?

PS: No, I mean, but they were good.

AH: Did they taste different just because you'd done the work by hand though?

PS: I appreciated 'em more I guess. There's still a lot of work today even. It's more modern, yeah, but it's still a lot of work. That's why I sold my boat. I'm too old. I can't handle that no more, and my oldest son got kind of mad at me but--.

AH: He got mad at you for what?

PS: For selling it, because he wanted to inherit it more or less, and he said he might want to go work it, but my son's kind of half crippled up. He fell off a boat and got his back messed up some so he can't really do too much. So I had an opportunity to sell it before and I didn't sell it because he wanted me to keep it and all. I said, okay, I won't sell it, but you going to have to help me in the winter, you know, when we pick the boat up to clean it and paint the bottom and take care of it, do the maintenance on it, keep the batteries charged, and he wouldn't come help me, and I told the wife this time, I said, hey, look. He didn't do anything. I'm out there doing the work myself. She says sell it, so that's what we done. We sold it.

AH: Can you tell me what your two sons and your daughter do?

PS: Well I got two sons and one daughter, yeah. My daughter is a security guard with security. My youngest son works at the pogy plant. He's a warehouse man. He keeps all the fuel for all the boats, the oil and the filters and all the parts and all that kind of stuff. Then my oldest son works in the oil field. He's T-2 certified. He manages oil platforms, and right now he's unemployed.

AH: Do you think they're going to want to live their lives out down here?

PS: I think so. Of course my oldest one's thirty--. What he was, thirty-three, Mom? Thirty-four?

MS: The youngest one.

PS: The youngest one is thirty-three or thirty-four.

MS: Thirty-three. He just made thirty-three.

PS: Yeah. He was born 7/8/77, so, and that's what he's doing, in the warehouse, and he likes that. They got pretty good jobs I guess. They make a living; that's what counts.

AH: Do you think you were able to raise them with an appreciation for all the things you're talking about that you were raised with?

PS: Some but not as much as I know about it, and I don't think they appreciate it as much as I did because of the way I come up. Of course I guess like every family man, I guess, you want your kids to do better than what you had and you try to help 'em get along. Like my youngest son has cattle with me and he works with me and helps me when he's got time off, in the cattle pasture, and of course he's got his own to take care of out there with me, so. But I would like to see him do better but I guess every father

wants to see their kids do better, but they do all right, I guess. I can't really complain. None of 'em are on drugs or stuff like that so I guess I'm fortunate in a lot of ways, but I tried to teach 'em, hey, look. Sometimes things are going to go bad and they're going to be in bunches like bananas so you better be prepared. [Laughs]

AH: I don't want to ask you too many more questions because you've been so generous with your time.

PS: Oh, I ain't worried about that.

AH: But I'm going to be able with the museum to try to get some people to be able to hear this interview. Is there something that you want to say, if America was listening, from Empire? Is there something that--?

PS: Well I would like some kind of historical society or something to help me with that old cemetery across the river, because I'm the only one left and I'm sixty-seven and I don't think my kids is going to take care of it, and I promised my old uncle. He died at ninety in 1976 and I promised him I would take of it as long as I could, and it needs another fence. The hurricane tore the fence. I had put a chain link fence around it.

AH: Does that cemetery have a name, by the way?

PS: Point Pleasant Cemetery and that is the community settlement, Point Pleasant. There were several towns on that side of the river in them days. Before the 1915 hurricane most everybody lived on the other side of the river and the storm was so bad in 1915 a lot of 'em moved to this side of the river, but they had also a train that run back and forth on this side of the river and they didn't have one on the other side, but you did have the old freight boats that run, the *El Rito* and the *New Majestic*, and they would come down and they would go all the way to the mouth of the river and they would bring

goods down and then they would also pick up things like going up, like my old uncle used to be like a broker with these diamond back terrapin turtle and ducks and stuff like that. They would stop and pick up--. They would be in barrels and they would put 'em on the freight boats and send 'em to New Orleans and I think they shipped 'em to China. I don't know where they went, but that's what I understood, but that was a little bit before my time.

AH: Did you learn this all from your uncle, by the way, from him telling you?

PS: Well I learned from him and I worked with all those old timers so they showed me. Just like building boats and stuff. My old uncle used to take--. He had what he called a steam box and these old [10:21 luggers] had a--. The board would start out like this and it may almost turn all the way in the back in the fantail where it come back, and it was a box about, I don't know, twelve or so inches wide and probably twelve, fourteen inches deep, and in them days the old fifty-five gallon drum was built real, real heavy and it was kind of a round, oblong deal. Anyway, and he had the big [10:44 bone] coming up into that box and he'd put oyster sacks in each end. Then he'd build a fire around it. That drum would be full of water and he'd build a fire around the drum and make steam, and he'd put that board in there and he may steam that board all day long, and when he took that board out he would start nail--go put it on the boat and it was all cut and ready to go and he would start putting it in and twisted it and nailing with the old C clamps and tighten it in and get it all in place, and that steam, you could twist it, you see. He might soak it two days before he put it in the steam box, in the water.

AH: Any of his hand work still around?

PS: Not that I know of. I don't know. I got--. No, I think I got rid of that too. I had an old motor that come out of one of 'em. It was a universal engine, they called it, and it was gasoline and it run off of dry cell batteries and it had what they call a Model A coil and a timer, advance timer, and it was in a little oyster boat, and my uncle had give me that oyster boat. That was my first boat and I lost the boat in one of the storms but I had kept the boat here up until Katrina and I think I sold it for junk iron because it had done got all rusted up and everything.

But it's just been a unique life and it's enjoyable and that cemetery is something to really see, with the petrified tree and the old, old dates, and I'd like to see somehow some historic deal to try to help preserve it.

AH: You know I'm a historian myself and sometimes people ask me--and I'm curious what your answer is--why it's important to keep this stuff and know about it?

PS: Well I know about it because it's been there since I was a child and it's got sentimental value because my family's there, of course, but there's other families there that's got sentimental value, and everybody just about of that time period is all gone. Miss Claire was the last one living and that was one of my school teachers. Her family, it was some of her family, and she used to send me twenty-five dollars every year to help keep the cemetery clean, and she was the last living one and she passed away a few years ago now, but she was the last living one to send money to support it. But like I was telling you there's several towns. You go up on the east bank there you got Bohemia, Bohemia Plantation, and that's where my mother was from, and their family owned land in what they call the Bohemia Spillway now, coming down the river, and there's a cemetery up there also. The last time I was there the only thing sticking out was the little

wrought iron fence around the pickets around the top, and part of the old church, but that's been forty years ago so I don't know what's left now. Then you had the Humble Camp, which is further down, and Humble Oil had a place there at the end of the road in Bohemia. That's it. You can't go no further by road. And then you had Nester, Daisy, Haspel & Davis, Nicholas, where my uncle and them used to live, and Point Pleasant, which is where the cemetery is and it was donated by [13:57 Cose]. I forget what year. I had the titles to it before Katrina. I lost 'em in the hurricane. Then you got Ostrica, Fort St. Philip, Augur, and then you got Pilottown, Port Eads, and all that going on down.

AH: And this was all--. Anyone still out there on that side?

PS: Pilottown there's still some. I guess Port Eads. I'm not sure about that. But Uncle Sid left the other side. When I was young Uncle Sid lived over there and he was in the family home, William Peter Johnson's estate, and Uncle Theodore Johnson, which was a cousin, lived maybe half a mile or a mile below him, then Mr. Isadore [Cose] and Mr. Tony [Cose] had one--. Mr. Isadore was--. Both of them was outside the levee system there. Uncle Sid was outside and Uncle Theodore was on the inside of the levee system, and when I was a kid my great uncle had cattle too and I used to go in the summer and cut the grass with a little tractor in the cattle pasture, and he paid my social security and made sure I was working. He was very I guess you'd call instrumental in kind of showing me the things about life. He told me--I'll never forget--one time, he said, "Let me tell you something, son. You can fly high but you got to come down to roost. Remember that," and I did. I remembered it.

Then Ostrica up until maybe Betsy or Camille there was people still living there, and Augur too, but they are pretty much all out now. I don't think there's anybody at

Augur, nobody at Ostrica. Mr. Earl used to have a store. There was a store in Ostrica. In Pilottown they had a school. They had the voting machines down there. Quite a bit of families lived down there. Then they had the Delta Duck Club, I'm talking about years ago, when my uncle and them would hunt and all that and that's where they used to go and kill ducks and stuff for the market.

AH: I'm amazed that you know, that you can start--line up the river and know who was everywhere. Could you do that today? If you drove by do you know who's in every house?

PS: Not every house, but I know a lot of 'em. But the houses are mostly gone from the hurricanes, you know. But they had a post office at Augur. They had one at Nicholas. But like I say I spent a lot of time with my uncles over there in the summertime when I wasn't going to school, cutting grass and stuff, and he had the shipyard. One uncle had the shipyard and he would saw the logs and build boats and repair boats, and the other uncle, he was kind of a--. I don't know. He was more like he went and got the ice, he went to the grocery store once a week, he had a little boat he would run on this side of the river and he had some property over here. Where my son works now was some of his property. Like I say when he was younger he done a lot of shrimping and trawling and fishing and trapping and all that kind of stuff but he kind of had retired when I was fooling around, but he still had his cattle so he was raising cattle more than anything else and I would help him cut the grass and keep stuff. In them days he had an old cast iron pot and he would cook on that stove in that cast iron pot and I can still taste it today. It would be so good. It would be all day cooking on the stove. It

might be ducks or goose or muskrat or whatever it was, chicken. He'd cook a big red gravy or something with spaghetti and get too dry he'd add a little water to it.

I tell you things was a lot slower pace then. Like on Sunday people would go visit other family members and stuff. You don't see much of that today. On my mother's side I used to go to my Grandpa [17:54] and of course they had cattle and chickens, they raised chickens, and back then they was able to sell the eggs to the local stores so they would candle 'em and make sure there wasn't no blood spots in 'em and all that stuff and of course they didn't have any roosters with the chickens. We would go deliver dozens of eggs, big old dozens, several dozens, in them stores. On his farm he had some orange trees but he had a pecan tree, a fig tree, and a pear tree, a pecan tree, fig tree, and a pear tree. The whole place was planted like that. He would sell the whole crop to some of these companies. They would come in and pick all the pears or they'd come in and pick up all the figs or they'd come in and pick up all the pecans. Plus he sold the eggs and raised his own food with the chickens. Once in a while he might raise a pig and kill it and then he had the beef, he was raising cattle, so people lived on the land more or less.

AH: It seems like you've seen so many changes.

PS: Oh, a lot, yeah.

AH: So many challenges.

PS: Yeah.

AH: Do you think the oil spill is a big deal in the context of all that?

PS: Well I think it's bad, yeah, but I mean what you going to do? It's an accident, it happened, it's an act of God, I guess. Maybe it ain't an act of God but it's a--. Mother

Nature'll take of itself eventually. It may take a while but I think Mother Nature'll take care of itself.

AH: Do you have hope for this corner of the world then?

PS: Oh, definitely, sure. I mean I don't know how much longer I got to live and my kids might not see it here. They might get flooded out. [Laughs] But I'm happy. I enjoy life. My wife and I leave here, we go cruising now and then or we go where we want to go, do what we want to do, and I work, I work a lot, but I do what I want to do. It's just country living. [Laughs]

AH: That might be a good place to stop, unless you have something else that you want to add?

PS: I'd like to show you some of them pictures if you'd like to see 'em, but you go ahead and get you a bite to eat.

AH: No. Well okay. Well we can do both at the same time.

PS: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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