

GRADY LEAVINS
Leavins Seafood – Apalachicola, FL

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Date: January 9, 2006
Location: Leavins Seafood – Apalachicola, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 6 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

[Begin Grady Leavins]

0:00:00.4

[Walking across Water Street to the oyster freezing plant building.]

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Monday, January 9th, 2006, in Apalachicola on Water Street with Mr. Grady Leavins and we're walking across the street here. Where are we headed?

0:00:12.4

Grady Leavins: We're going over to our freezer plant for automatically—to observe the automatic shucking of oysters after they have been frozen for half-shell consumption to kill the Vibrio [bacteria]] that—Vibrio that live in the oysters itself.

0:00:29.5

[Inside the plant. Very loud sound machines in background.]

AE: And this automatic shucking is something you developed?

0:00:32.4

GL: Yes, I did. I started working on it a couple years ago—started working on it a couple years ago and knew I could automatically shuck by using liquid nitrogen and started visiting a private

lab up in Chicago and came back and forth to develop the process and this is—this is the result right here.

0:00:58.0

AE: Okay.

0:00:59.0

GL: What they're doing right here is spreading out the oysters on the conveyor to be frozen. The temperature is most of the time—I don't have that—I don't want it a matter of record, so I'm not going to speak to that.

0:01:09.9

AE: Would you mind if I took a couple of pictures?

0:01:11.7

GL: No. I don't have a problem with that.

0:01:13.4

[Recording is paused for about ten minutes, given the loud environment. Mr. Leavins continues walking the interviewer through the processing area.]

0:01:14.1

[Recording resumes in Mr. Leavins's office. Mr. Leavins is in mid-sentence, talking about where he is from.]

GL: Pensacola, Florida—Milton and Bagdad, Florida—you probably don't know what Bagdad is, but you came past it when you crossed from Pensacola across the Bay Bridge, I-10 coming this way and about two miles down the road to the left coming from Pensacola was Bagdad—just a small community, and that's where I'm from.

0:01:32.0

AE: That's where you're from?

0:01:32.8

GL: Yeah.

0:01:33.4

AE: May I ask your birth date? Do you share that?

0:01:36.7

GL: Eight, eighteen, forty-three. [August 18, 1943] I'm 62 years old, so I've been in Apalachicola for going on thirty-three years now. And my wife and I, we were working in the Research and Development Laboratory, and I started moonlighting as an oyster fisherman on the weekend. And I loved the outside work—loved it and it was quite challenging and I had to—I can't be second best to anybody; I've got to be the best, so—highly competitive individual and—and that's the way it's, you know, always been. And I guess it's part of being who I am and I—I couldn't help it I had to outwork everybody, out—out-do anybody at anything I ever did or—or tried very hard. Only one guy in school, he was shorter than me—could outrun me, and I tested him every day, and he beat me every day. **[Laughs]** But I never gave up trying to be faster than he was. But that pretty well characterizes the—the kind of person I am, to have accomplished what we have in this business.

And when we first moved to Apalachicola thirty-three years ago and became kind of friends or acquaintances with people, they told us the first thing we needed to do was leave; we'd never make it here. And I was—I was too dumb to believe them I guess, so—but we—we stayed, we worked real hard—.

0:02:53.6

AE: Did you come to oyster, or did you come because you saw possibility?

GL: No, I came as an oyster fisherman and leased a very small place with an option to buy right where we're at and I—I started as an oyster fisherman. And my wife, after the third year—six months or so—started running the little shucking plant that we had here then, which had nine positions in it, and she would go out to—and you could do this then—out to a competitor and get four or five sacks of oysters in the back of her Buick in the—in the trunk—at a time and bring them back, and the shuckers would help her drag them—help her drag them out of there and put them in their positions to shuck. And then we decided the only way we were going to be successful is go out and get our own business. So she took—I put like a camper shell on the back of my pick-up truck that I had then, and she literally put gallons of oysters in an ice chest and sacks in the back and went to Panama City and sold them. And then I bought us an—an International with a fourteen-foot box with a refrigerator on it, and then she drove it to Panama City and then Fort Walton and Destin peddling oysters right by herself because I was in the bay and had no choice—had to go work and harder. So for a long time I was the only oyster fisherman that Leavins Seafood had. And I saw that right away that the—we couldn't—the local oyster fishermen didn't necessarily trust us because we were outsiders, and the only way we were going to be successful was to buy the out-of-state oysters. So I took this same truck and drove the first time all the way down to Grand Isle, Louisiana, and all I could get on the truck was 150 sacks and—and drove them all the way back, you know. And with 150 sacks of oysters—I think I paid like four dollars a sack for them then and—and I was out for about—I don't know—about three days and I got back here and my wife called me and she said, *Look, we—you know the guy that was supposed to unload that truck quit; you've got to come back.* So I—I had just gotten a

bath and [was] ready to go to bed, and I came right back down here. So from Sunday night to Wednesday night it was completely without sleep. But that's the way it was then. I mean, you know, we did what we had to do—had to survive.

0:05:12.5

AE: Can I ask you to clarify that a little bit because I'm a little confused about you coming and being an outsider. So nobody was selling to you—none of the locals were selling to you, so you had—?

0:05:20.6

GL: None of the locals would sell to me because they didn't know me; they didn't trust me; they didn't trust anybody from another town—coming in here.

0:05:28.1

AE: So you were going to Louisiana—

0:05:29.4

GL: So I started going to Louisiana to purchase oysters, so we would be in the oystering business here. And as a result of that, I am still buying the majority of what we sell from the

States of Louisiana, Texas, and not—you know, I'd love to buy everything out of Apalachicola Bay; it just doesn't produce enough [oysters]. Because we—we're—we're buying everything we can get out of Apalachicola Bay and—and as much as twelve to fourteen trailer loads a week, which is 40,000 pounds per trailer load, if they're safe round numbers—twelve—that's a half million pounds of oysters in-shell a week that—that we're buying from out of state, basically, and then everything we can get out of Apalachicola Bay. But we have a fleet of eight tractor and trailers, two of which are going to Louisiana or Texas to—to pick up the oysters. And we got six of them that's running routes throughout the Southeast. We deliver to throughout Florida, a lot of Georgia, some of Alabama, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and into the edge of Ohio; so we get around.

Now this—this plant across the street that we visited, that's where the frozen half-shell—those are—we call and you saw the name “Frosted Oysters,” and we have a Professor Atwell from the University of Florida that I helped get a grant assigned to the University and he—I told him that I could automatically shuck these oysters with liquid nitrogen. Number one, he didn't believe me and—and—but I needed a reservoir of liquid nitrogen to prove a point, so he, with an engineer that works for him under this grant, got a big huge flask with the liquid nitrogen and put it in their—back of a station wagon and drove it from Gainesville [Florida] to Apalachicola [Florida] as it was evaporating and had to drive with the windows down so they wouldn't be asphyxiated. So [*Laughs*]—because—but we got it here. And I had forgotten the formula. I worked on this in 1989, and I knew I could do it, but I had forgotten exactly the residence time and everything. So—so when they got it here and we had little things to drop—so we put about a dozen oysters in there at one time—three or four on little tables or shelves that stacked up like that—we could drop it down into liquid nitrogen and then I started off with twenty seconds,

thirty seconds, forty seconds, and by the time I got a minute, the professor was feeling—he was feeling embarrassed for me and—and he would walk around shaking his head like all of his time was nothing. But when I got up to—to where the range was supposed to be to where they automatically shuck, I pulled them out and they hit the table, and all the shells popped off and a perfect oyster [was inside]. And he just lit up. He said, *Oh, my God, I never believed it would happen.* I said, *I know you—you didn't think I could do it.* But I knew what I was doing.

And then they [the oysters] laid around and collected frost; it was fairly humid that day and they just frosted over. He said, *I've got the perfect name for that; we should call that "Frosted Oysters."* And so that's how we arrived at the name. And we get better—better bacteria—Vibrio [Vibrio vulnificus, a bacterium] kills with this process than anything that's been documented, I think, in this country now. And faster because now you get a complete kill with high-pressure technology that would—that I had previously mentioned but not being recorded.

There's a Mike Voisin in Houma, Louisiana, that's developed a process, and he could drive—he—number one takes a cylinder back—stainless steel cylinder about ten-feet tall and pours fifty-pounds of oysters and screws it and fills it up with water and screws the lid on it, sinks it into concrete in a—in a hole and then puts—then pressurizes it up to 40,000 pounds. To complete all of this, it takes six or eight minutes and then eight to ten minutes total for the pressurization and then pull it out and take it with a forklift and pour it all out on the table and everything was quite a lengthy process—and for only fifty pounds so he could get four cycles, four or five cycles an hour at the most—because ten minutes is five cycles an hour and with—with one cylinder so then you've got two cylinders for a machine. Because when you pull one out you can stick another one in. So call it—so call it ten. So that's 500 pounds of—let's say fifty pounds—two 5,000 pounds—at the very, very most in—in an hour. So—but then with this, I'll

do a couple thousand pounds an hour and—and like I said coming back across the street, we're only limited to the production capacity of an estuary because that one machine, the high pressure machine, and I really wanted to look—take a close look at it but the price scared me off. One point eight million dollars for one machine for limited production capacity. This right here, just the machine itself is probably 300,000 dollars. So I mean, for what he spends for one machine, I can put—it's a matter of—of arithmetic after that—.

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AE: Did you have a hand in designing that rig that's across the street, or how did that work?

0:10:49.0

GL: Praxair is the company I buy the liquid gas from; they're also the company that designs equipment. So I met with—they—they did something very similar to this. Number one, it's a freezer tunnel—a nitrogen freezer tunnel in a nitrogen immersion bath of which they—they had, but they had to redesign both these pieces of equipment to fit my application. And so they did that and when they—when they put it in place, they sent a whole team of engineers and down to install it to make sure it was—it—it would fit the criteria that I needed fit. And so far it's been right on, you know—no problem. And the only thing I forced them to do is do a confidentiality agreement so that—and so they couldn't—wouldn't divulge what I'm doing because they know more than anybody what I'm doing because they designed the building and equipment. Now if I should ever decide to sell it off or something, that would be a different story. Or franchise it—

another story. But then I—I kind of like being the only person in the industry that's got one thing specific to a certain thing, which is such a great quality product and so—I—I—there's not enough, you know—there's not enough room in this industry to be a McDonald's out there or anything; so I don't plan to go there.

And as far as the oystering establishment over here, we—we didn't—we were not born and reared here, so we didn't know how things had historically been. And when I took a look at it, I said, *My God, there's room for all kinds of improvement here.* So we designed a conveyor system to deliver oysters directly to the shucker, rather than shoveling them off the floor. The way they used to do it, [there were] high concrete bins capable of holding a—an oyster fisherman's catch for a day, and he would come in and dump them on an elevated piece of concrete in the evening when he came in, and his wife would shuck them the next day. So they laid completely out of refrigeration all night long, which was not good. And then the next morning, the guy came in and shoveled them up into a position for the wife to shuck. Well, what we did was go to a—a stainless steel conveyor system that we could put oysters on the conveyor, and they could raise the door; they'd automatically feed into them and—and twenty shuckers, as we have it in there—or thirty—could have oysters in a matter of minutes, rather than putting them—abusing them, putting them on the floor and all this stuff. They come directly out of the cooler straight to them within a period of just a half-hour—they're already back under refrigeration—or less time than that—and the length of time it takes for them to shuck a gallon, you know.

0:13:33.4

AE: Are the oystermen able to come up from their boats, or do they come and hand-deliver those?

0:13:37.4

GL: They—they came—they come—they could come by boats in here, but they come by truck. Because years ago, when I first started as an oyster fisherman, everybody had good boats and big motors and gas wasn't so expensive, and you could run from one end of the bay in just a short period of time and—and now they've cut down the size of the boat and the size of the motors for fuel economy, and people just don't work the way we used to a long time ago. They just—I mean my God, thirty—I started part-time from Panama City over—over thirty-five years ago, and my gross pay thirty-five years ago, [I was] getting two dollars and twenty-five cents a sack, I made 800 dollars a week on a consistent basis. I mean, my God, what would that equate to now—several thousand in—in a week's time. So I just—but it—it took hard—it took hard work and—and these guys today are not willing to work as hard as I worked—we worked then because, driving from Panama City, I was crossing the bay at daylight, and I was coming in at dark, all right? And then I had an hour-and-a-half drive in the morning and three more hours. So you know, I was spending fifteen hours working in commuting back and forth. That's the reason I elected to move to Apalachicola. Because I started as an oyster fisherman, and I was working in the Research and Development Laboratory in Panama City called the Arizona Chemical Research and Development Laboratory. And I worked for—I was—as a technician for one of the brightest PhDs I've ever seen. I worked for several people but, undoubtedly, he was the brightest I had ever seen. He—he could look inside of a molecule and—and tell you exactly how it was

structured. And I still—we're still friends, we still communicate, and it's been, you know, thirty-five years since we had—since we had anything to do with each other, as far as a friendly—well we're still friends, but then we just—I find it so interesting to talk with him, and he finds it so interesting to [hear about] what I'm doing. And I tried to get him to come up here and work on this project with me, you know, but he had—unfortunately he's a stubborn PhD. He didn't take care of his self; he had a mild stroke, so his wife is over-protective of him, but it didn't—it didn't destroy his ability to think and, you know, it's a highly intellectual capacity of which he has that.

0:15:54.3

AE: Did you go to college or did you just get—?

0:15:58.2

GL: No, I went to—I went to college. I—mostly at night because, you see, I've had a very interesting life. I—in a way I've—I moved away from home when I was thirteen years old and moved into an apartment and walked to school every morning and rode the bus. I worked in a supermarket and then—and then I decided I didn't want to do that the rest of my life because I—there was better things out there. So I started—I went to Pensacola Junior College, and then I went to Marianna [Florida]—a junior college out there [Chipola Junior College], but that's—and took courses and that was about the extent of—of probably a couple years—something like that but other than that it's just a self-motivating individual, as far as I can say.

0:16:35.3

AE: So what was that momentum like when you came here in—in [nineteen] seventy-two, was it? And you—you and your wife were working all these long hours getting oysters from all over the place and then the—kind of the genesis of your business here? What were those steps that kind of happened over that time span to get to where you are today?

0:16:52.8

GL: Well we—I mean I was the oyster fisherman and finally, I had two or three more come to work, but then I mean we realized right away that we had to pursue—there was plenty of oysters in the states of—in the state of Louisiana then, so we—we had to pursue getting those in. So after we—with the small place that we had here, there was another one down on the other side of the bridge, and we leased it for a couple years, and we moved our shucking operation from here to there, so we could take this place down and—and rebuild [*Phone Rings*] or build a new facility here. And so we started—like I said, the one truck into—into Panama City, Fort Walton, and then Destin, and we were running Panama City twice a week. So what happened—it got too much for her to handle to drive the truck and be the delivery boy at the same time, so I came out of the bay two days a week in—in the beginning to—to drive the truck and unload, while she went in and wrote invoices and everything. And then we decided to go on into Fort Walton and Destin, and I came out of the bay two more days a week, which were four days a week to run these routes. And so that—that was the basis of it.

And then it—it got to be entirely too much for her because she stayed—as things progressed and we grew, she had to stay in the office, and I ran the routes over there and delivered the product and everything. And then—then I decided well, you know, I think we can get a better price if we go to Miami and on into the Keys. So I just took off and went to Miami and to the Keys of Florida. I never will forget; Leo Cooper—he's still a dear friend of mine—he said, *Grady you just hang it up; you'll never break in down here. People will not buy that little Florida oyster.* I said, *Well Mr. Leo, if you buy from me, that's a start.* **[Laughs]** And he did. I guess he felt sorry for me. **[Laughs]** So—so I—I started there and then we—then I never—I hired—I bought a tractor and trailer and—and hired a guy to run it to—to for—to go into Miami, and I would take a flight to Miami, and I decided that was one place I didn't want to drive in. So I wouldn't even rent a car; I'd get down there and contact a major cab company and say, *I'd love to rent a cab for today.* They know the addresses, and I had a phone book, and I'd pick out people to go talk with, and this is the way I built a route in Miami and then in the Keys. Now, I like that place, so—and it wasn't so heavily congested, so I just rented a car and drove on down there and—and met and talked with a lot of people. And a raw—a raw bar of Key West, about this time he had just built a—he had just gotten into business for himself—Paul Tripp, dear friend. He—he sold—he sold about a year ago for 8,000,000 dollars and moved to Vancouver [British Columbia]. And we communicate via email still. But he—he made a lot of money. But then he was the one that kept me coming because he used so darned many oysters. He'd use 200-bushels a week and—and he just—we just, you know, instant like and respect for each other and mutual friendship and—and so that was part of my big thing in the Keys—and many other customers, too. There's Neil Cooper and several more that made it a very, very good trip, and the Keys offered a little more money.

So then, you know, I said well we have the ability to do more, so let's look at—the Hooters [chain of restaurants] we got a contract with the Hooters—a bunch of those. So then they would send a truck in here to pick the product up. Well, then they decided they didn't want to do that any longer, so I bought a truck. So we had to deliver to Naturally Fresh in Atlanta. Well, since we're going up there, we might as well drum up more business and then—then after that when we started—well the Coast of Georgia, South and North Carolina looks like a wonderful place, so she and I decided I'd—I'd go up there, too, and establish another route. So we got—we have one route going through Atlanta onto Tennessee and Kentucky and the edge of Ohio. We have actually one—one guy running two routes into the—into Georgia, north part of Georgia, North and South Carolina. He's up there twice a week. [We] have another guy going twice a week going up there. Have one that's going once a week, so—and then twice a week into the southern part of Florida and then through Tampa—I mean, Jacksonville and on into Orlando and Tampa. So we—we move a lot of—a lot of seafood in a week—a lot of oysters in a week's time, and that's predominantly what we sell. And we'll sell between probably around 9,000,000 dollars worth of oysters this fiscal year so—believe you me, that's a lot of oysters. So—but it's—it's been interesting. I mean it took us—it's taken us thirty—thirty-two years here in Apalachicola—two years from—from Panama City. But I just couldn't travel back and forth and then work, you know, and then work as hard as much as I did. And many times my wife and I would work here until Midnight—early on, Midnight to one o'clock in the morning, go home and take a nap and get back up at five o'clock in the morning and start all over again. But if I had it to do over again, would I do it? Yes. I—I mean I couldn't help it; if it wasn't this, it would be something else.

0:22:24.2

AE: And tell me your wife's name. It's Alice?

0:22:27.3

GL: Her name is Alice. She's my lover, she's my wife, and she's my business partner. **[Laughs]**

0:22:30.8

AE: Do y'all have any children?

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GL: No, unfortunately we don't. I have two by my former marriage—a daughter that's an RN [Registered Nurse] in Montgomery, Alabama, and my son. And he and I unfortunately don't communicate, so it's his problem—not mine, so—it's sad but it's true. But he—he was just spoiled by his mother and I mean—so that's a bad situation, but it's not for me. I mean I've gotten over it and he's—he's a real loser overall, but he let it be known that he wouldn't work as hard as we did or spend the hours that we did and—and he didn't want anything to have to do with this business. And so it was not a good decision on his part because early on we had to work real hard and—and he elected not to—so.

0:23:19.3

AE: Well do you see yourself retiring any time in the near future or—?

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GL: Well I—right now my—I have a wonderful staff of people, and I'll take off a—I work probably two or three days a week as it is right now anyway. So I mean why worry about it. They're fully capable, and they're paid well, and I treat them right and—and they're honest and just—they're family. I mean they're family, so what else can I say. I just—they know any major decision, if they don't think they can handle it, they call me because they know where I'm at twenty-four hours a day. But they can handle—I mean and they do.

0:23:56.9

AE: How many employees do you have now?

0:23:59.8

GL: Hmm, probably—wow—oyster fishermen and all it's over 100. It's quite a few but—.

0:24:05.7

AE: Now the oyster fishermen are they—they have an allegiance to you or do you just—?

0:24:08.8

GL: They don't have allegiance to anybody. They sell to me because they know I can move their product easier and better than anybody else. So but they move around. We maintain about the same amount all the time one way or another and—and some of them are really trying desperately to get to work here, and if somebody drops out, we just put another one in his place because—but what I try to do is look for those that are—number one, catch a good quality product, which is very hard to find; but secondly, that one is going to be here and be devoted to—to the company, and I offer some incentives. I mean with—with my key employees—or all of them, as far as that goes, we—we offer a profit-sharing retirement plan, which is very uncommon in this business.

0:24:55.5

AE: For an oysterman? Wow.

0:24:56.3

GL: We offer—yeah, we offer a health insurance program of which the company picks up part of the—part of the tab for, and you don't find that in this industry. So overall what—I mean I've always believed, and it's been my philosophy if—if there's someone that comes to work here,

let's don't get them upset and make them quit. Let's just grow old and die together, but let's live to be old, you know. So and—and it works; I mean I have a staff meeting every morning at eight-thirty and of all my key people and—and if there's a problem, we discuss it and—and then—and that's—I started that about two years ago. It's probably the best decision I ever made because, you know, this guy in this department thinks he does more than that guy in that department, and it keeps everybody communicating. Because there's a lot of hard work here and a lot of hours, too. So if everybody knows what's going on and what everybody is up to, then—then there's fewer and fewer problems.

0:25:55.1

AE: About how many oystermen do you keep on at one time?

0:25:58.9

GL: Probably about fifteen.

0:26:00.9

AE: Now is that—?

0:26:02.7

GL: And that would be fifteen boats and—and then you start breaking that down, and some of them have their wife with them or their partner, so there's thirty people there. And then over there [in the oyster frosting plant] I've got probably a total of twenty people and then shucking, I've got thirty people; I've got about—I've got at least eight truck drivers; I've got a maintenance staff with three in it; I've got five just in the packing—packing room in there; I've got three in addition to the shuckers in there; I've got my outside staff that wash and prepare the product—it's probably fifteen of those. So you start adding them up, you know, it's—it's—it's kicking 100-plus. But then all I do is say, *Hey, this is your job; if you need me I'm here. And this is yours; if you need me I'm here.* They know what to do. Most of them have been with me for twenty years and—and it goes back to the same old philosophy. You know, I don't like changing people. Let's get a good one and treat him right and pay him good and keep him and keep him happy. If—if they have a problem, I want to know about it because it can affect their work. If they need help—if I can help them I do that; so.

0:27:16.2

AE: How have the frosted oysters affected—I mean it's obviously affected what you can turn out as far as quantity, but as far as, you know, that system of employees and working and—are there fewer people that it takes to work that frosting machine and—?

0:27:31.9

GL: Yeah. There's—there's fewer people that it takes, but then that will never take the place of this over here. That's in addition to. Because, I mean, we're killing Vibrio over there. This market is—I never thought it was as big as it is for the frosted oysters and the frozen half-shells. It is a very, very big market. And I—I'm just really shocked with the fact that it is so big. Last year we—we froze until I ran out of money, and then I borrowed some and ran out of it again and then—because it takes a lot of money to inventory this—this product and I thought I had more than enough, and then we had the storms and everybody else ran out because there was no fresh product around, so they tried this and they liked it and—and so as a result of the storms, we were thrown into markets that we probably wouldn't have had, and I ran out two months before I—I thought I should have run out so—and it's good, and it's bad. I mean we built—we're building a heck of a market for the product, and we've already sold in the last two months almost as much as we sold all last year. So I mean we've got a substantial increase in sales as a result of being thrown into the market much quicker but it's—it's a very high quality product.

0:29:03.4

AE: And as a product, you were explaining to me in there that there are a dozen on the trays that are open in the half-shell that are frosted.

0:29:08.6

GL: Yes.

0:29:08.7

AE: They're microwaveable and—?

0:29:11.5

GL: Well the ways—you can microwave them and put toppings on them; you can just let them thaw at room temperature and eat them half shell; you can thaw them in the cooler; you can thaw them in the microwave. So I mean I have thawing instructions on all of them. Now when I've finished this conveyor system that I'm putting in, then I'll do—then I'll do toppings myself and package them with—what do you call them—[Oysters] Rockefeller. There's no one—there—there are three—this is the fourth process that's out there. The first one was Clifford Hillman in Texas; he is the—he's the father of all frozen oysters and—and—but anyway, he—he shucks and then freezes, all right. And he uses CO₂ [carbon dioxide]. CO₂ leaves a residual and an aftertaste, but that's the—what he elected to use. And the people that's gotten accustomed to tasting it think that that's the way the oyster is supposed to taste, you know. But by—by shucking and then freezing, he's got liquor leaking out and losing some of the natural flavors and everything. But he's built—he's built the market. I give him full credit for all of it; he has done a phenomenal job.

And then there's AmeriPure that came on [the scene]. AmeriPure is a cool pasteurization process, and they take the oysters and—and load them into a crate, immerse them in warm water—128-degrees for X-number of minutes, pull them out, immerse them into cold water for X-number of minutes and then pull them out and count them and put them in boxes. And—and they want to call it fresh, but it's not. But they put a band on them [the oysters in the shell]—a

rubber band to keep them closed, so they won't open up. And so they won't get any of this muddy water—now some of them do break and they get the muddy water either from the cold water or the warm water side, and that stimulates the growth of bacteria even in the cooler environment, you know. That's the—another process.

And then came Mike Voisin with the high-pressure technology; that's number three. And then—then I'm here with the liquid nitrogen; that's frosted oysters, so this is process number four. Of all of them—of all of them that's out there, we have higher production capacities than anybody. Because if you take those little Texas oysters, which he shucks and pries them open with a knife, and then you put them on a tray, and then you're gathering up enough to run them through a tunnel, they sit around, and they're kind of—they're halfway temperature abused as it is, but losing a lot of the liquor itself. To where we take and—and freeze them and then shuck them. If there's any liquor missing, you may have noticed, we're throwing some away. That's where there was a void in the—in the oyster meat and obviously, the shell was fractured on the end, liquor ran out—we discard that. I mean there's nothing wrong with it, but it—the eye appeal is not there, so—so we discard that and—and do nothing but [package] the perfect oyster.

Now I would love to call this the “Perfect Oyster,” but Mike Voisin's called his high-pressure technology the “Perfect Oyster.” What he does with that—and I already explained—but he puts a shrink band around his because the high pressure makes the mussel release from both sides of the shell, so he calls it the gold band, and it's like a pack of cottage cheese that you buy. It's got the same shrink band, but his is gold in color and he's got “The Perfect Oyster” or something like that written on it. He's a good—he's a good marketing person; he's a real good person; he's a good businessman. He and I are personal friends and he—he told me at the Boston

Food Show last year, he said, *You're the only person in the marketplace that concerns me.*

[Laughs] I said, *Well Mike, I think I will take that as a compliment; I'm not sure.*

0:33:21.1

AE: Well let me ask you this: with all this high production and volume that you can do now with all of this technology, how does that balance out with, you know, environmentally speaking what the Gulf can produce, as far as oysters are concerned? I mean is there any—?

0:33:33.7

GL: Well any—any way you look at it, there's—there's going to be a balance one way or another. There's a shortage of oysters this season, and with the shortage the price gets higher, which backs people off from eating them so much and—and then as they—we get over the hurricanes from Louisiana, production gets high again, the price starts coming down, people start buying more of them, so it's—it's a natural balance that's there. So it's nothing to be concerned about even though the—our technology is—is capable of doing it. I mean of the production capacity to—to really make a difference. I mean first of all, you know, I've got to go somewhere, and it wouldn't be Apalachicola, but the cost of real estate is entirely too high right here. Taxes are entirely too high. Would it be possible in the state of Florida? I'm not limited to where I have to put that piece of equipment. I can put it in Georgia, as far as that goes, where they give you tax incentives and property is cheap and—and labor is available. I mean, you know, those Mexicans

over there [in the frosting plant], we have to bring them from Quincy [Florida] every day down here to work because there's—there's no labor resource here either.

So would it hurt Florida for this [company] to leave? Yes, it would hurt Florida. But it probably won't happen because at sixty-two years old, I'm not—I'm not really the Donald Trump of the oyster industry. We—we're making a good living, and we've developed something that I think is precious to the industry, and I have a highly qualified staff capable of running—I'm not going to go out and—and—and build a major, major production facility to try to dominate the country in frosted oysters. It's not worth it to me because number one, I know these guys that I compete with, and they could be vicious if they had to be. There's room for everybody to make a good living, and that's all what we—it's what it's all about, you know.

0:35:25.4

AE: And what about the immediate future, then, of this area here on waterfront, you know?

0:35:31.8

GL: Wow, that's—that's a good question. There's—I can call the name Steve Rash. I don't know whether you met him or not; he's basically in—in the fish business up the river up here. He wants to relocate out of town somewhere and have the availability of unloading his fish catch and moving it to the plant because he'd love to develop condos up there. It would mean more money to him, but then he's got to weigh where his values are. Ultimately, will he make more money in the seafood business or in the—in the condo business? And will—how long—how much of a

fight will it be to be able to switch it over from seafood to condos for—from the county level and the state level with the Environmental Protection Agency we have. From my perspective, [at] sixty-two years old, I ain't worried about it, you know. I mean I've—I've had a—I mean I'm not ready to die, but I'm not ready to start all over again either, is about what it amounts to. I'm satisfied with my achievements. It could be better. I could work more. It could still be better. But I'm very—at my age, I'm very selfish with my time also. I mean I want to enjoy my environment, I want to enjoy my lovely wife, and we have a lake house in Georgia. It cost a lot of money, and I'd just as soon spend as much time up there as I have right here. Even though I love my environment here, you know. This—that's—I can kind of chill out up there and—and if I'm here, I'm always working, and I'm always busy. You can't ever tell. It might add another two or three days in my life [*Laughs*] by doing it that way.

0:37:09.6

AE: Well then how many buildings do you have here on the waterfront? Is it just—?

0:37:12.4

GL: We have this—that one over there, not this one; I didn't buy it. I—I couldn't afford it when it came available, but I have a big cooler system over here. That whole half a block, plus corner lot over there. So we have 200-feet on the river. We have half a block plus a corner of which they're selling lots over there and a lot of—I mean we're worth a fortune in property.

0:37:36.1

AE: What was here before you—?

0:37:37.8

GL: There was a little oyster house right here. Next door was—about the turn of the century, there was an oyster canning plant there. The guy set up shop with—and his name was Roy V. Smith. He invented an oyster-shucking machine, the original that was ever produced for the industry. And I don't know—Barbara may still have one, the secretary in there, but he was a genius, as far as I'm concerned. He tried to develop and invent a wheel of perpetual motion; he worked on it all his life and never did develop it, but some of the things that he did do is just phenomenal. He was a great, great guy. I don't attend very many funerals, but his with pride I did, and I was a pallbearer and what a—what an individual. You talk about characters now that was one of them. It was Buster Lichardillo that stayed next door and made coffee and Buster never went to school a day in his life. Well he went a half-day, and he was down here at the elementary school. He jumped out the second-story window and—and ran and caught a shrimp boat and shrimped and got off on St. George's Island before there was a bridge over there fifty years ago and had them bring him food and pick him up going back and forth. And he finally got old enough [that] he didn't think he had the fear of having to go to school, so he came in. He had a house right behind this block where the County Courthouse Annex is at right now. They bought the family property and he—his office was right over there just to make coffee and cook for the owners of that piece of property from—from Louisiana.

Alice and I came down here in the early [nineteen] eighties, and there was a—a hurricane coming and—and Buster had a sailboat and this is around—not in Apalachicola; it was put together with wooden pegs—beautiful, beautiful old boat and they—they got it and restored it but he would—he would be on the mast hanging on and swinging back and forth like that with the wind blowing and everything. Lightning would strike, and he'd say, *Here I am; can't you see me. God-dang-it I'm right here; if you want to get me go ahead.* **[Laughs]** He wouldn't—he wouldn't cook coffee on an electric stove; you could taste the electricity in it. He wouldn't—what else would he not do? There was two or three things that he would not do that were—I found very interesting. And the day he died I was on a—running a route in Panama City, and he came by here. My wife was working in the—in the plant here. He said, *Alice where's Grady?* [My wife replied] *Buster, he's—he's on a route.* [Buster said] *What time will he be back?* She said, *It will be nine or ten o'clock tonight.* [He said] *It will be too late; I'll be dead then.* He was having a heart attack then and ran around trying to see his friends before he died. And—and I—unfortunately, I didn't—I didn't make it home to see him before he did pass away. But [he was] a lovely, lovely person. I mean God—and some of them—there's people out there they call river rats. They had—I've actually came to work twenty—twenty years ago and had thrown out a piece of cardboard in the trash and one of them had got—one piece of cardboard and laid down on the shells next to the power fence out there and went to sleep and covered up with the other piece. They were right out in the open.

One—one other time there was two of them down there; one of them with a two-by-four and another with a pocket knife and they were, you know, sparring. If they could have got to

each other, they'd have—one of them would have hurt the other. And I stopped and tried to break it up, and I decided it was best for me not to get involved and that—I just went to the jail, which was over here, and told one of the deputies that he needed to go down and take care of that situation. It could get pretty serious. But, you know, it's been so many interesting things like that—that have occurred throughout time. And some of the most lovely people in the world that I've met and—and I'm so thankful that I got to get to know them, you know.

0:41:34.2

AE: Well and tell me about that. You know, you talk about coming here in the [nineteen] seventies and not being able to get a foot in because you're an outsider, but then you're leading the industry in Apalachicola.

0:41:45.5

GL: Well and—and you're right. And—and I think, probably, I'm still resented because we have been so innovative and everything. In fact, you can see that plastic gallon bucket on that top shelf [on my office wall]. When I—when—when we were here and first moved here, they used metal cans—tin cans, gallon buckets. In a matter of five days, if you put—put oysters in them, they would rust. I just could not see a food product going into—into a tin can and it rusting. So I got approval for—for—that's made by Mammoth Plastics. I—I don't know what they're doing now, but anyway, that was—in the whole industry that was the first thing that ever helped. A plastic—for a plastic container that helped oysters. And the guy that was in charge of us then for the

Health Department, it came under—his name was Bill Lunsford and he—he is still alive, but he's retired. I said, *Bill we need to get this approved for gallon buckets.* I said, *It's a damn shame that we have metal cans.* He said, *Well I'll tell you what, just fill it up with water and give it to me. I'll take it home and put it in the yard and turn it upside down under my oak tree and if it—if it didn't leak in a month, I'll approve it.* That is exactly how that got approved. But it was a food-approved product anyway—it got approved for putting oysters in. And then from there, on it went. And then I decided that—there used to be little tin cups with a plastic see-through window in it to hold oysters, and I didn't like the tin cup. I went to a Sweetheart cup—or made by Sweetheart Plastics and—and we started packaging oysters in that—another industry first. For the half-shell oysters I—I started looking at that. I said, *I cannot see a chef in a big beautiful restaurant picking up a muddy sack of oysters and dragging them up against a white uniform.* I said, *Well what I'll do is wash them and put them in boxes.* So I had some—some boxes made and I actually had competition come steal some from me because I wouldn't give them the name of the company that I—that I got them from. And [I] started putting—the first ones that ever put washed half-shell oysters in a box in a real neat container for—for your nicer restaurants. And as a result of that, you know, the industry was upgraded immediately and—and we were able to tap businesses that we—we never could tap before.

So—forklift, I mean nobody ever—I don't guess [they] ever saw a forklift. And the first thing I did was build this facility to accommodate a forklift and put—put a concrete pier out there, so I could bring the oyster fishermen's oyster in via forklift and one guy—I let him have—he's dead now, but I let him buy some oysters from—the State of Louisiana from me, and his worker said, *Well look boss, if you get us one of those, we wouldn't have to work so hard.* He

said, *If I got you one of those, I wouldn't need you.* **[Laughs]** So that solved that problem. But he went to forklifts and everybody has you know—it's an industry standard.

There's so many—so many things and—and now we have to bring us from there to here and jumping all from—from one era to another have also secured a half million [dollar] renewable grant every year for the University of Florida with Professor Atwell to do research on Vibrio and help solve some of the problems that we have. But as—as a result of that and communicating with him, we decided to put in an industry lab so the industry can have—as far as I'm concerned the—the lab technician comes by every week, picks up samples of these frozen half-shell oysters, run Vibrio on them and I have a—a sheet that at any time I can email to a customer, so they can know exactly what the status of the product is and use it for a promo to—to promote the product plus their—their business. So—and there's—there's no hiding anything from the consumer. If they want to publish it they can do that, too.

0:46:00.5

AE: Is that lab here in Apalach?

0:46:02.1

GL: It's at the airport in Apalachicola. You know, the Apalachicola Airport—yeah; and as a result of the University and this half million-dollar grant, renewable every year, we do have a lab and a person out there to run samples for us. And what I'm after now is funding to build a new lab building, rather than an existing building, and then we'll expand it on into—to doing work for

red tide, other bacteria, and to assist the state in some of the—the problems that they have. So presently, I'm forming an Oyster Task Force of which I'll finish up [January] the seventeenth, and that is to put one of our County Commissioners over part of it and—and what we'll do is do the Executive Director—I've named him—Dave McLean—and then we'll get the—the directors of it, and then we'll have subs under each one of those and—and responsibilities and one for this—Mr. Putnam, one of our County Commissioners, his—his—his job will be to help recommend management practices for Apalachicola Bay to recommend places to relay oysters to—to put shell in for rehabilitation of Apalachicola Bay. And I've just—I was on the phone with Mark Berrigan who is Director—when you came in—who is the Director responsible for the planting of—and management of Apalachicola Bay, and he's delighted to have this because what—what's happening and what has happened in the past, they make the decision that they can and then in some ways somebody is always critical of it. Why in the heck don't we just go ahead and get involved and make the recommendations before they ever do it, and then we don't have anybody to be critical of. Because they're the ones, in fact, that influenced the decisions that was made. But right here we have 200 dollars—199,800,000 dollars and—and the first real job for this Task Force is to go for some of this funding for the oyster industry. Will we get any of it? I don't know; if we don't try, we sure won't. And I've been told no many times, and one more time won't hurt me. But if they say *yes* we're—you know, we can—we can get funding for the—for the fisheries and rehabilitation of Apalachicola Bay, and that's the important thing.

0:48:26.4

AE: Well and tell me about these other organizations that I hear that you're a part of, International Shellfish Commission and things like that?

0:48:33.5

GL: Yes, I'm on the—I'm on a—we have three groups—Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference, and I'm on one of them, and they're like—what—what the heck do we call them? And I sit on that darned thing. It's like a Task Force, where people bring recommendations and changes, and it has to come through us first. And then if it has to go to Committees, we establish Committees for them to study it, and then it comes back, and we vote on it, and then it's adopted, so it's—it's very important—the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference, which a guy from North Carolina is the Executive Director. He and I didn't hit it off too good in the beginning because I tried to get him fired because I didn't think he was doing his job. And so I guess he's decided he's going to have to live with me, so we've kind of kissed and made up a little bit last—Kenmore is his name, and—and he's—he's a good person. He's a real politician. But then sometimes he tries to accomplish things that he wants to accomplish, rather than looking out for the best interests of the industry. And this is what really gets me going right away, if somebody tries to do that. And—and am I always right? No, I'm wrong ninety-nine-percent of the time, but at least I'm trying to make decisions one way or another, you know. But that—I'm past President for Southeastern Fisheries Association, and it's been around for over fifty years. And I'm on the Board of Directors of that now, which is a very good organization. It's in Tallahassee, and Bob Jones is our Executive Director. He's a lobbyist up there, and he's getting a little age on him now. He's in his seventies, of course. I'm past President of the Chamber. I'm past President of the

Rotary Club and past President of the Apalachicola Bay Oyster Dealers Association and helped reorganize that several times. I have gotten many awards from IFOS [International Festival of the Sea] one way or another, you know, which don't mean a lot to me, because my—my involvement in trying to make things happen is the important thing to me, you know, and getting involved in the industry. Because I'm not one of those that says—sits back and says, *I wish they'd have done something differently*. I may say, *Well I sure made a bad decision on—in that respect, but at least I made a decision*. And that's also very important, as far as I'm concerned, so.

0:51:01.7

AE: Well as a former oysterman yourself, do you ever—do you ever go out anymore? When did—when did you stop going out?

0:51:06.7

GL: Oh gosh, I stopped working in the bay twenty years ago, I guess. And I have a[n oyster] lease in perpetuity down there, and I have a dredge boat—another battle I fought. Because the oyster fishermen didn't like the idea that we were pulling what they call a dredge. It's not like you go dredge up the bottom; it's like you're scraping oysters off it. And my lease got completely destroyed with—with this hurricane, you know. It just—just swept everything off of it.

0:51:42.5

AE: May I ask how you acquired the lease?

0:51:43.7

GL: Yeah. Yeah, I don't have a problem with that. Because back in the [nineteen] twenties—1920s, thirties, and forties, the legislators decided that they would do some political favors by leasing part of Apalachicola Bay. Now the State of Florida ten—fifteen years ago decided that they were going to make us comply to a lot of rules and comply with a lot of rules that I didn't think we should have to. And there's several lease holders here, but all of the sudden, you know, I lost my temper, and I said, *Well, one of two things are going to happen*—and they were going to try to take it away from us. I said, *They are going to take it, or I'm going to kick their butt in court because I am taking them to court.* And I took them to court to—to decide what my rights were. And the Judge in his closing arguments said, *Well our legislators back in the '[nineteen] twenties, thirties and forties, in all their infinite wisdom, decided to give part of Apalachicola Bay away. This guy owns part of it in the form of a lease, and the way this lease is written, there is nothing y'all can do about it but respect the fact that he has a lease. And if he wants to give five acres of it to his brother or—or cash in on it and give it away for a debt that he owes or whatever he decides to do with it, that's his business. Y'all got to follow through with all the transactions and—and—but I bought it from a guy that had probably cashed in one of these political favors and—and because you can trade them, barter them, give them away, sell them—anything. I mean that's the way the contract is written up. But there's no more leases like this, nor*

there will be ever anymore. And there's about between 600 and 700 acres total, and I have fifty-five acres, and I manage another 100 so.

0:53:34.6

AE: So then what happens to it when you stop working it or wanting to work it? Do you—do you sell it onto someone else who wants to work it?

0:53:42.6

GL: Well I could if I—you know, I could sell it on to someone else, or either I can, you know, replant it or—or let someone manage it for me, like I am this other 100 acres, so it's—it's in perpetuity. So that's—that's a pretty good thing, as far as I'm concerned. I've made money with it, so that was the whole purpose of it. I paid 35,000 dollars for it—to purchase it and I've spent over 100,000 dollars in legal fees to—to whip the State [of Florida], but I kicked their butt, too, which I had to. I mean what I tried to do was compromise, and we were compromising all our rights away. And then I found a good attorney in Tallahassee that would take it, and he was a bulldog, which was good for us.

0:54:25.6

AE: Do you see the leases as always being worked, or do you think there's a time when the leases will be just kind of preserved?

0:54:32.1

GL: I think it's the most wonderful thing that ever happened. Because I think dredging is probably the best thing that ever happened to an estuary because they really cultivate the bottom and make them [the oyster beds] much more productive. That's the reason the states of Louisiana and Texas are so productive. This bay could be the same way because visualize—and I'm sure you've seen an oysterman tonging oysters. They tong them and pile them up on a culling board, they anchor, they sit down, they rake them all—all the babies back overboard; they're stacked up in a pile like this **[gestures to illustrate a pile that would be about three feet high]**, and most of them smother. So—so that's what happens to about fifty-percent of the oysters in Apalachicola Bay—they're covered up in these cull piles like that and—and half of everything that goes on the culling board, if it's not taken, is going to die anyway. So it's—it's not a very good management practice. Don't even want to talk about that right now with the—with the—as far as the Task Force is concerned because some other people have got to see more clearly the way things should be managed and—and I think that's a very important part of the future of Apalachicola Bay.

0:55:30.7

AE: Well what about that lifestyle and that history and the—I mean it's such an immediate history that is disappearing. And talking to Corky Richards today, you know one guy in town

who still makes [oyster] tongs. But you have to use tongs in the bay, and it just seems like these dominoes are just set up to fall, and it's going to happen any minute.

0:55:49.9

GL: And it's—and it's happening. It's not—it's—when I moved here thirty-two years ago, there were sixty-five oyster places in Franklin County. There's five or six now. So they've been—they've been falling ever since I've been here. So what you do is make it—you know, you try to—you don't change the lifestyle, that changes people. You make people to where they can make a good living out of it, so they'll stay there. From the oyster fishermen on up through people like me. Now we've done well but then I—I think—I mean why—I didn't know how things were historically—should have been done—so therefore I changed things to—for the best interest of our business, and in doing that I played a major role in changing the entire industry, which has been for the best. But no, I—I think a lifestyle should be preserved. It won't be preserved if we don't make it better because the younger people are not going to work as hard. If they can get out there and—and take most of the work, hard—back breaking work out of tonging and—and go to dredging, you're doing two things: you're making it more appetizing for them to stay there, but you're also cultivating and better developing the bay. Will they change as a result of it? They'll just have more money to spend. **[Laughs]** And that's not bad.

0:57:11.9

AE: Well and what I—what I started kind of trying to ask you earlier was, talking about how you have experiences in oystering and working the bay, and you said earlier that if it wasn't this, you'd be doing something else—making strides in some other business or industry—but there's obviously a passion there about the bay and the oystering.

0:57:29.9

GL: Oh, yeah. There is—yeah, yeah, there is. I'm just glad I found this place. I mean and—and that's what I was referring to. I—I would be doing something but I—I discovered Apalachicola and—and this is where my heart is, you know.

0:57:41.8

AE: Can you—can you articulate that a little bit and—and tell me how—where that came from and how it manifested itself?

0:57:48.8

GL: Well, yeah, because you just said it yourself. It's—it's a way of life and—and it's the independence of—of the people that are here. They're so independent, but yet so dependent at the same time, if you really get down to the nuts and bolts of it. But—and it's their—it's their lifestyle—lifestyle, their attitude and—and everything. Mine is different, and I don't know whether that's good or bad but it—it's just—I was not born and raised here, so therefore maybe I

don't really fit into the—to the niche the way maybe I—the—the person that was born and reared here was and—and even my friendly competitors on the local—on the local level they have a different perspective than I do on any and everything and—and I respect the way they think and their attitudes, you know. But it's still—I—I just can't—I can't go there, unfortunately, and—but I—I love it, and I love the way they think. And it's just—it's—it's a way of life for the environment, you know, and for the people that have grown up here. And I've enjoyed it so much and—and the characters that you mentioned, as I have gotten to know, and many of them have died, but it's still a unique way of life.

0:59:08.8

AE: Well what do you think the future of the bay in Apalachicola is with you—you leading the industry? And this [oyster house] obviously isn't going anywhere, but there are so many other changes. When we talk about real estate and, you know, cosmetically—working the river—working on the river and things like that.

0:59:24.5

GL: Well I—I think the future of Apalachicola Bay lies directly in the hands of our [Franklin] county officials and—and the way—and the planning for Apalachicola Bay. If the water quality goes—goes south, then the oyster—oyster fishery itself is going to go south. I was reading an article from Bob Jones, [in] *Southeastern Fisheries* this morning the way there's a—a lady—I think an individual in St. Augustine has studied one lagoon there that was filled with oysters, and

they're slowly disappearing. And her decision—final decision has been that the weight from boats have played a major role in killing off the oyster industry or the oyster. Because what happens, they—you have an oyster bed, and it may be four-feet deep right here, and then it comes up to this deep because they're mounted up on top of each other and growing on top of each other. And then you have this wave action from a boat running down the channel and—and this constant wash, this washing the oysters off, and they're falling. It's washing the bleached shell that's—that have—oh there's a term for it; I can't think of what I'm trying to say right now—have turned white and black as a result of being buried with mud—they're being exposed and some of them washing up on the shore. They're literally destroying oyster beds in that particular lagoon in St. Augustine, Florida. Is that happening here? I've watched the demise of the oyster industry production wise for the past thirty-five years and when—when I started thirty-five years ago, there would be 1,500 boats out on Apalachicola Bay and every one of them catching the living daylight out of oysters to the fact that they were literally loading boats, and you could walk from boat to boat to boat on St. Vincent's Oyster Bed out there and it's gone—*schew*, downhill ever since then. And—and why? I just really don't understand why it has gone south the way it has.

Now production is—is—when—when I first started we—me and a guy that was working with me on the boat, we harvested forty bushels every day. And this time of year we'd get up to fifty, fifty-five bushels every day of real—of real good oysters. And—and—but then production is not anything like it was. And whether it's the—the water quality or—or the mixture of Bob Sikes Cut, I mean it's been in there for many, many years, and it used to keep all the fresh water contained in Apalachicola Bay; it had to go east or west to get out of Apalachicola Bay and doing that it would kill a lot of oysters. It's closer to the river, but it would keep the most

productive beds to the east and to the west really, really going. And I've seen it even after Bob Sikes Cut was there that we'd have a big rise on the river at Blountstown, and it would be twenty-feet, twenty-five-feet and a predominantly east wind rolling to the west and—and where oysters were literally dying—sour, the oyster meat would outgrow the shell and be on the outside of the shell. It grew so rapidly, the shell couldn't keep up with the growth of the meat—the growth of the meat, and it would sour and pop out, and there would be oysters floating all over the bay down there.

Well [back] then, you worked around them, and nobody was concerned about health and—and that was not—making a living was the important issue. We didn't have the controls then that we did have—that we have now. Did we make anybody sick? Probably did but there was—we didn't have the medical reports that we got today, too, so. But the next year we'd have a bumper crop of oysters where all the shells would open up and—and—and leave room for babies to attach and there would just be oysters all over the place; so. I—I don't know, you know, I think if the water quality goes then—then the bay is going to go, and that's a natural thing. And this is the reason I want to put cultch material [material (as oyster shells) laid down on oyster grounds to furnish points of attachment for the spat] in the bay to try to bring it back. I would love to reduce my dependency on the State of Louisiana. By doing that, we've got to have more production here.

1:03:27.6

AE: And what are you saying to put in the bay?

1:03:29.8

GL: Cutch material. Either rock or oyster shell to catch the spats to grow the oysters, and we do that by establishing new oyster beds out there in the areas to where they will grow; so.

1:03:40.8

AE: Is that a possibility?

1:03:42.2

GL: Oh, yeah. I'm—that's what I'm—this [Oyster] Task Force, this is what I'm going to be working on—yeah. And 200,000,000 dollars is really—you know, I don't know whether this has been appropriated where the nursery people get most of it, the poultry people get it all, but you can bet one thing: I'll be in Washington with my hand out, now. [*Laughs*] I mean—and part of it to go to—to planting cultch material in Apalachicola Bay.

1:04:04.8

AE: And that's next month you go to Washington? Is that what that trip is?

1:04:07.6

GL: The seventh [of February], yeah, yeah.

1:04:10.1

AE: And Leavins Seafood isn't just oysters, though, now; you do—you process some other things, too, is that right?

1:04:13.9

GL: No, we don't process anything else. We're—we're oysters now. We might buy some fish. We might buy shrimp, which we do. We buy and sell clams, but everything else we buy and sell. So no, we're strictly the oyster people. I—I'll tell you, it would be—you know we—to process shrimp it would take a plant equally as big as this; to process fish, a plant equally as large as this. So you'd have to—I'd have to tie up half the city of Apalachicola to do all of it. So I just don't—I'm busy enough. Or as busy as I want to be, doing what I'm doing.

1:04:46.5

AE: Well but when you say that you'll buy some fish or buy some shrimp just off-hand what does—what does that mean, exactly?

1:04:51.1

GL: I'll buy them from a person that's processing them like Buddy Ward and Sons Seafood down the street. That's what they're in—they're in the shrimp business so they—they unload the boats and size them and freeze them. And then Steve Rash is in the fish business, so he unloads the fish boats and may fillet them and weigh them for the restaurants and things like that, so I buy them from him.

1:05:11.4

AE: You'll buy from them and then—?

1:05:12.1

GL: Then I'll sell them to—to our customer base.

1:05:16.3

AE: But oysters is the—?

1:05:18.8

GL: Oysters is the mainstay. Ninety-nine-percent of our income is derived from—directly from oysters.

1:05:24.3

AE: So is the other worth it, or is that just something you're interested in doing or something the customer wants?

1:05:30.1

GL: Oh, the fish and stuff? Oh, yeah. Well you know, if I—I processed it, there would definitely be more money in it. If—if I buy it and sell it, there's only pennies involved, which is fine but to—but to accommodate a customer, if that's what they want I'll—I'll get it for them, so—you know. If they want it wrapped up in a newspaper, I'll do that. I don't care. We're in here to sell and make money and make a living, so whatever they want.

1:05:53.4

AE: Well is there anything that I haven't asked you that I need to know?

1:05:56.9

GL: I don't think—I couldn't think of anything else to tell you. I promise you that. [**Laughs**]

1:06:00.7

AE: Well this has been an education for sure. I really appreciate the tour across the street. That is something else.

1:06:06.0

GL: Sure, sure. But on your way out I'll take you in and just show you—they're finished up in there by now—the regular fresh shucking process and how I do things in there just briefly. Because that's quite interesting, too, in the way we developed that to take place, plus the washing of the shell style, and the piece of equipment that we do that [with]. So are you ready?

1:06:26.9

AE: Well let me—I'll turn this [recorder] off. So thank you for your time.

1:06:30.4

[End Grady Leavins]