

RAYMOND JOSEPH “JOEY” FONSECA
Des Allemands Outlaw Katfish Co.—Des Allemands, LA

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Date: November 16, 2011

Location: Joey Fonseca’s truck, and La Boulangerie Bakery—New Orleans, LA

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Project: Down the Bayou – Louisiana

[Begin Joey Fonseca Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, November 16, 2011. I am in New Orleans, Louisiana, driving up Bourbon Street with Mr. Joey Fonseca. Could I get you to say your full name for me and tell me what you do for a living?

00:00:20

Joey Fonseca: Yes, of course, but I'm not sure it would be considered *up* Bourbon Street. You might have to say *down* Bourbon Street. Fonseca, Raymond Joseph Junior for the record. I've been a commercial fisherman for most all of my adult life. And since I'm right around 60 years old give or take, I'd say that's a few years at the very least.

00:00:45

SR: Could you tell me your birth date please, for the record?

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JF: Yes I could but I'm not sure I want to. October 8, 1952.

00:01:01

SR: Thank you. So you don't--you don't fish in the French Quarter. Could you tell me, for the record, what we're doing here right now?

00:01:07

JF: Yes. For the fact of the matter being a commercial fisherman does not represent all the jobs entailed as such. I happen to be the delivery man, salesman, pretty much the fix-it-all guy if it breaks on the boat, and quality control. That kind of stuff.

00:01:31

SR: So today we are—?

00:01:32

JF: Today we're here on Bourbon Street enjoying the beautiful day, of course; delivering the wild Des Allemands catfish, which for the record, I think it's also been documented in Nichols State University—some of the stuff pertaining to catfish and other fishing stuff in a similar fashion under Chef John Folse's tutelage with some of his—one in particular of his students of which I don't remember the young lady's name. But going back to the wild catfish, believe it or not—and really it's all on you whether or not you believe it—it's better, and it's better for you. It has what's known as the correct LDL, or HDL—and I think it's the LDL cholesterol profile which are the good ones for you. And the wild catfish is predominantly abundant with these little critters versus the farm-raised catfish—not nearly as much.

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This was done in a study in the Louisiana State University, which was conveniently paid for by the Farm Institute of the State of Louisiana with all of the catfish farmers wanting the study so badly because they just knew the farm catfish were better and better for you. But as it would be, it turned out to be a flop not in their favor.

00:03:21

SR: Well that's fascinating. I didn't know about that. Were you surprised?

00:03:26

JF: Yes, totally. I was completely surprised that it took them so long to do the survey, and I was completely surprised it wasn't a bigger flop in our favor.

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SR: What about the wild catfish would make it better in cholesterol profile?

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JF: Okay, being the dumb commercial fisherman that I am and not the rocket scientist that made the discovery and/or the study, I would presume—and presumptions are like everybody's opinions—I would presume it's diet—diet-related. Strictly and above most all else, I think the fish we have from the wild are related back directly to what they eat sort of as in you-are-what-you-eat scenario type deal thing.

00:04:28

SR: Well, tell me: What do the catfish eat in the wild?

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JF: For the most part they like anything in their immediate domain, being other smaller fish and all, mainly because as a boy growing up when I was a little, bitty kid, we used to bait troutlines in the bayou to fish catfish. And the main bait we would use as bait would either be the red worms we would dig from the ground and/or—and mostly the fish we would catch as the little minnows swimming in the bayou. We would drag a--a rake on side of the boat, which was known as a--a silver fish net, and we'd catch these little tiny silver fish and these tiny sprats and the fish would become bait for the larger fish. And again, the larger fish would be looking for the smaller fish for the next meal.

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Okay, we're going to make the block one more time. We're here now at Muriel's Bistro fine eating establishment, and like a duck we got to circle, so—

00:05:51

SR: Because there isn't parking.

00:05:52

JF: Yeah, but that's okay.

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SR: I know you're not a catfish farmer, but farm-raised catfish—what do they eat generally?

00:06:01

JF: Okay, first and foremost I'll try to quote directly from whatever magazine it was—I completely forgot at this time—but I remember back when we was doing the catfish pros and cons and politics in the Louisiana Legislature in Baton Rouge that I read an article which was directly related to: Farm-raised catfish did not become prevalent until the late 1960s when it was learned how to produce the needed seed stock.

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And then that in turn—thank you all of the politicians in Baton Rouge [who] were giving all of the commercial fisherman from Des Allemands their nickname of the Des Allemands Outlaws. It relates back to the outlaws from Des Allemands having showed by actually holding your hand—let-me-cross-you-on-this-street-here-type scenario—how to produce the needed seed stock so all of the farms could produce enough catfish fry. They're called fry, the little eggs that are barely half an inch long and all you see is like a little wiggling tail and a pair of eyes within an egg yolk sack.

00:07:42

Well once they learned how to produce that, which came back directly from the Outlaws, at least they were in business. But remember now, in a certain sense of the word it's directly related to you are what you eat. Otherwise the farm-raised catfish would taste and have the same benefits of the wild catfish. And it's directly not true with the study from LSU being the governing issue as to which fish were the best for you, and not even the talk about which fish were the--the best-tasting, which you know I'm a commercial fisherman and--and I really don't have any bias in my opinion. It's just a simple fact.

00:08:39

SR: That they taste better?

00:08:39

JF: That they taste better and they're better for you. And I would let whoever would be sitting down at the plate of a fried catfish be the judge. But remember to be a good judge you would need to sample both, one right after the other.

00:09:02

Okay, here now we are parked at Muriel's, so let's storm the barn.

00:09:10

SR: All right, we just delivered at Muriel's. We're back in the truck. And I wanted to pick up on our catfish conversation and ask you: What is the difference in taste between the farm-raised and the wild catfish?

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JF: Okay, here's a really sweet scenario. My daughter and wife is selling catfish at the Crescent City Farmers Market, and she had a customer that approached her with a puzzled look on her face. And the lady asked my daughter and wife, how much sugar did she sprinkle on the catfish before she put them in the pack because they were just nice and sweet—? And a lady that was standing in line behind the first lady is the one that reported that to me. But I found it really interesting and I know it to be true, so if I had to guess I would guess definitely that the wild catfish had a much better flavor. No matter which preparation technique you would cook it with, you're going to lend some enhancement to the catfish flavor because the wild fish is very light in

flavor, very flaky and tender in texture, and I think the farmed-catfish is somewhat similar in texture but in flavor I don't think there's a real good comparison there because for one I've heard from more than one source of a thing called farmed catfish tasting green, which probably relates back to a certain time of the year in catfish farms when they have what's called an algae bloom.

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And really to be honest with you, if I want to get green taste I'm looking up spinach or something else, turnip greens, anything in that neck of the woods—not catfish. So I don't think there's too much of a close comparison.

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SR: What about, I've heard people describe farm-raised catfish as muddy-tasting. Have you heard that?

00:12:11

JF: Yeah, catfish in general, when you have people—*people that know or in the know about catfish*—and don't really like them refer to them as having a muddy taste. But to those people I would plead and beg of them to continue in their ignorance because it's also much better for me and the other people that have yet to experience this muddy taste.

00:12:57

SR: We also—so we just saw where we were delivering—well, where you were delivering catfish, there was some farm-raised catfish already there and then you brought in some wild and

there was a much different look. Could you tell me about the difference? And these catfish are already cleaned and filleted. Could you talk about the difference in look?

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JF: Yet—. I agree with what you said in appearance of the fish being different, yet they are still somewhat similar. The filet is basically the same size, same width, same thickness, whereas on the farm catfish you have a much more of a pale white, smoky white color, which because I've been into this business for so long, I know how it got there and why it's there.

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And basically what it is, it's a true representation of what goes on when man gets to put his hands on certain things because some men are different than other men. Whoever was the quality control guy with these particular farm-raised catfish actually soaked them in ice-cold water for over an hour, and so doing the catfish becomes that certain smoky white which enables the fish filet to gain approximately 10-percent in weight, which on the end of the scale means a lot more money honey, whereas personally myself, any and all fish that we do pack, even though we may rinse them shortly in ice-cold water, we don't ever soak them for any length of time.

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The easiest way to tell that these fish have been soaked like this—even though you can tell by looking and seeing the color difference, because my catfish has a slightly yellow tint to it, which is the correct natural color—but there's another way to tell also. In case you're confused by the color, when you fry fish that have been soaked in water for any length of time, the water pops on you in the frying process, whereas if it's a fresh piece of catfish filet it's not going to pop like it will if it's the same exact filet soaked for any length of time.

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SR: Okay.

00:16:19

JF: The natural yellowish tint is the one you want. End of story.

00:16:24

SR: There's also some pink and--and red in your fish, like your fish looked like they had actually been alive once, whereas the other ones didn't really.

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JF: Once again it's just the water doing the same effect. And it tells you—when you think about it common sense rules: For it to remove the reddish color, the water has to soak through and through to be able to gain access to the red color, which is on the inter-side of the sub-skin. The sub-skin being the coloration difference I showed you in the pack of fish being silver on one side the flesh tone on the other—the flesh tone with the yellow tint versus this white, smoky white, color—that's the first indication, and then the--the silver and with the red tint in the dead middle of the filet is also correct.

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If you have a larger piece of fish, the right process you do to remove what some people consider a fishy taste, is you re-filet the fish from the sub-skin, and then you can remove the red line. There was a once famous chef, Jamie O'Shannon [Interviewer's note: His name was Jamie

Shannon] , that worked at the Commander’s Palace, and one of his favorite recipes with this catfish, and he would take a shortcut in order to take away any fishy taste derived from the fish. He would cook his fish using any form of citrus available, because the citrus, I think, had an acid content that would fight the line content, which would be the opposite from acid, I believe. But once again, I’m only the coonass that caught the fish; I’m not the taste-tester with the really experienced buds of a top chef.

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SR: When you’re cooking fish for yourself at home, do you take out the red line?

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JF: Only if it’s larger than 15 pounds. If it’s a smaller fish—and I might even go down to 10 pounds—but if it’s a smaller fish, and which my preference is a fish that’s barely legal, it has such a delicate flavor the red line and/or the silver both actually affect the flavor none whatsoever. So there’s no need to remove the red line or the silver.

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Once you gain a fish that’s years older, being 10 or more pounds, then that would come into play.

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SR: Okay, you know we just got right into the delivery circuit, so I didn't even get a chance to ask you what I first wanted to ask you, which was if you could tell us about Bayou Des Allemands, where you live and where you fish. Where that is, and what’s special about it?

00:20:04

JF: Okay, and it just reminded me of something too. I'll answer your question first. Bayou Des Allemands is a small fishing village. As of 25 years ago. I knew everybody by first name practically. Not so much now; it's gotten a little bigger. It's gotten a little bigger, and it's gotten a little bigger. Because you have the influx of the "cancer alley" jobs on the Mississippi River at the chemical plants, and Bayou Des Allemands being in close proximity. But for the most part the people that were--been born and raised there 25 and more years ago, I still know all these guys by first name.

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We've been known far and wide as having the best catfish—period; end of story—and a really good abundant supply. It's almost like a whole other story in and of itself, but we had to fight the catfish farmers and we had to fight the politicians in Baton Rouge who actually could not prove us wrong in certain aspects of the laws and all regarding the catfish, because we had more knowledge and so forth and so on than they did, so we were actually branded the Outlaws from Des Allemands.

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SR: Who branded you that?

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JF: The politicians in Baton Rouge, the status quo, the flunkies of Fast Eddie. And don't get me wrong, I really love the guys, especially Eddie. I think ex-Governor Edwin Edwards was at the

very least a colorful flash to the past, but the status quo still remains to be political. And a lot of times that's why politics are considered a four-letter word. The status quo sometimes doesn't really care if it's right if it doesn't benefit them. Oh well, life goes on.

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SR: Why would you—

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JF: Oh yeah, wait, wait, wait. I forgot. The other thing I wanted to address was, at the beginning of this interview I wanted to tell you and I forgot: You're allowed one question per day. So you're getting over--to be over the limit.

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SR: Yeah, I have a problem then. *[Laughs]*

00:23:08

JF: Next question.

SR: Why would you and the other people who fish Bayou Des Allemands be called outlaws?

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JF: Okay, to bring you right back to what's now on a TV show called "*noodling*," the old boys from the Des Allemands were very prevalent noodlers. Well they took that a little bit further.

They used some common sense and they adapted something else. They realized that if they would take a five-gallon paint bucket or a 55-gallon metal drum, they could bend them and shape them, twist them and turn them, punch some holes in them, and make them look like a log if they'd sink it under water. After it had been slimed by the natural growth underwater for about three weeks, the fish would readily adapt to it, enter the container, and if you were smarter than the fish, which I probably am not, you could catch them. And what you had to do was sneak up on the can or the drum and cover the hole with your hand in such a fashion that the fish wouldn't get out before you could physically raise the can up and dump it into your partner's net, who would be sitting in a boat waiting with a net.

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The same thing with the drum, but the drum was a whole lot heavier. So after being discouraged so much by the heavier drums they began tying lines on them and pulling the line up, and if you didn't pull that line up just right and you moved—shook the drum too much—the fish would get away. So there was a little couple of things you had to learn first, but once they learned that well then it went right back to the noodling. It was basically noodling on steroids because instead of swimming along in the bayou feeling for the logs, you could put your own artificial—it actually amounted to an artificial reef believe that or not; the coonasses from the Des Allemands Outlaws were the first inventors of the artificial reef by placing 100 drums in a row on a line. You could run 100 logs in an hour and a half, versus swimming in the bayou you could only run 10. And an artificial reef is something consisting of an unnatural product that promotes the growth in all the--of the beginning of the food chain, the amoeba on up to the smaller food fish, and then on up to the larger food fish and the predators. And the predators love reefs because reefs are the natural habitat of all fish.

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SR: So the catfish would be a predator?

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JF: The catfish will eat readily a lot of the smaller minnows, silver fish, shrimp, hard fish.

There's a couple of different others of the smaller, little, bitty fish that catfish eat right quick.

They also have a natural supply of red worms that's a wild red worm that grows underwater and they'll grow on the sides of these cans and all. And once your can becomes full of red worms it's time to start fishing that can. And in the same sense of the word where you can run 100 drums on one line in an hour and a half or so, if you put out 10 lines of 125 cans then you can run 1,000 cans instead of running—yeah 1,000 cans. Your knees were killing you and your back was hurting but you had more fish than you could skin.

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So the coonass progressed from swimming in a bayou like the Native Americans and the cavemen by adapting the empty paint cans and with a little hatchet work shaping it in such a fashion as it became a tool for catching fish. And they now have—you need a can license and there's a can season. Well a can season is not regulated by Wildlife and Fisheries, but they do give you dates for it. The can seasons is regulated by the fish themselves and Mother Nature because it's the act of spawning.

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SR: Is this how you catch fish?

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JF: Okay, when they first made the study on cans and can fishing, they made the study because it was--it was discovered that these fishermen from Des Allemands were catching fish in cans, which was unheard of at the time. So then they immediately passed the law to make it an outlaw--illegal to do so. So then the commercial fishermen knew their representatives and the judges in their own immediate area filed an injunction against the law, which prevented the law from taking effect. So then the Wildlife and Fisheries and the fishermen got together and said, "Hey, stop. Wait. We're going to do some homework on this. We're going to bring in LSU and some biologists and we're going to study all this and then we're going to determine and we're going to know who is right."

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Lo and behold the Outlaws once again had to teach the biologists from Louisiana State University why they could live off the land, because can fishing was directly relevant. Now it was discovered after study that in the wild natural means, a stump and/or a log produced a successful hatch rate of fish eggs, of 12 to 15-percent, or something real, real close to that. Don't hold me to that, because like I said, I'm not the biologist. Rather I'm much more happy being the coonass. Period, end of story.

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On the other hand, the same study proved that the can fishing method gave a successful hatch rate of about 92 to 97-percent, which was unheard of, so all of a sudden we now had this lake that used to be rich in fish turned to be filthy rich in fish because we just happened to

mumble and bumble along and used common sense and got lucky, you know especially lucky. It's all that kind of good stuff. But it did make for a really interesting story.

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At one point in time the game wardens had set up a big net to catch all of these Outlaws from Des Allemands, but in so doing the Outlaws got word of what was going on. So they all got together; they all went to the lake fishing at the same time and they all saw the boats and the game wardens coming, and in turn what they did was [*Dogs Barking*]*—*a beagle and a poodle; I love that combination*—*.

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Anyway, the Outlaws had devised a plan: When we're going to see the game wardens coming, we're all going to jump overboard stripped naked. And [*Laughs*] what happened was it really threw the Wildlife and Fisheries agents off-course when all these guys come up just wearing buckskin for the color. Well they didn't bring any of them to jail and it all related right back to being nicknamed the Des Allemands Outlaws.

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SR: Were you one of these*—*?

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JF: Oh no, this was before my time, but they all told the game wardens they were overboard fishing. They were using worms for bait, that's all.

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SR: Wait, they told the game wardens what?

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JF: They were overboard fishing.

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SR: Oh, which wasn't true or was true?

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JF: Absolutely not true, and they had no worms for bait. They were running the cans and they were--they were actually catching plenty of fish back in those days. This is—

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SR: When was this?

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JF: Another interesting scenario related to the same thing. Years later—and not so many years later—my father, bless his soul now, actually got in cahoots with, I think it was a couple of ex-Navy men, and the ex-Navy men were involved with some catfish farming operations. And they were trying desperately to learn how to get these fish that they had in the--in the catfish farms to lay eggs so they could stock all their fishponds because they didn't know what they were doing.

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Well okay, my old man delegated me—and this was at the tender age of 14 or something—to go ride with these two strangers, and they were 40 or 50 miles down the road, so that to me was an unheard of place. I had no godly idea where I was going. And go study their attempts at hatching these fish eggs—which Raymond, my dad, had sold them two pounds of fish eggs in their attempt to figure out how to deal with the catfish eggs and the hatching of.

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Well their concern was, in a clutch of eggs you had some little—I'm going to say a quarter of an inch suckerfish that were eating maybe 20 eggs in a clutch of 10,000 eggs. And I was real used to fishing the eggs and all that stuff; I was catching them all the time in the cans when we were fishing. So I told them guys, “Just being quite honest with you man” —I was too young. I didn't even know how to lie. I told them quite simple, “Look, if that's what's really bothering you, get a spoon or something. Come along the edge of the tank and kill them each one individually,” because you only had like maybe 10 little fish to every clutch of eggs.

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Well the guys looked at it, thought about it, and looked it, thought about it, and looked it. Okay, fine, that was the end of that story. And they showed me how they were feeding them and all and everything and all this good stuff. Actually they—at that particular time they had no law whatsoever concerning catfish or their eggs or the sale thereof. For a couple of years the legislature was not going to convene, so for a couple of years in a row we made some serious money selling eggs, catfish eggs, which had already been fertilized, upwards of \$15 or \$20 per pound. And back in those days that was a real lot of money. But it also established big-time, that's where all of the catfish farms learned how to produce the needed seed stock.

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Ah, what an interesting story.

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SR: So you had a hand in that?

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JF: No, actually, I had more than that. I sold a lot of eggs; got involved with the--the very first study when it came down to study the catfish eggs. I remember running down the wharf, diving overboard, swimming back to a certain little—I'm going to tell you what it was. I had some--I had some cans overboard that I would run in the evening when I got back from school to make spare pocket change.

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Remember now, I was still—I was either 12, 13, or 14 years old—still way to damn young to remember how to curse.

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SR: To remember what?

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JF: How to--how to curse. I wasn't quite a sailor yet. Okay, the point is, the day before those game wardens showed up I had ran my cans that were alongside the bayou under the boat sheds. And when I was running my cans I caught fish in almost every can, and I had a certain one that was not a can; it was a pipe. It was actually a cement pipe about two and a half foot long, about

eight inches in diameter, and if you didn't cover one end of the pipe with one hand and stick your other hand in there in just the right way, the fish would get away or something.

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Well the day before the fish bit me, scared the pee out of me, and the fish got away. The clutch of eggs had already been laid in the pipe, so the clutch of eggs remained, so I knew the following day the little fish was going to be back in the pipe guarding his eggs. So when the game warden showed up, the first thing I told him, I said, “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to dive overboard. I’m going to go catch that fish and I’m going to pull out the pipe and I’m going to throw it to you up here on the bank.”

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So one of them game wardens looked at the other game warden in quite a doubtful look and said, “Yeah, go ahead and do that.” So man, they give me the okay; my daddy had appointed me to—the little white slave to be there, and the other guys were the slave drivers. So I gladly set about my task. I ran down to the water and jumped in the bayou and swam back to that pipe, dove underwater, grabbed the pipe one hand on each side, and I thought to myself, “That’s it. I got him now.” I stuck my hand in the pipe, so then he bit me again. But I grabbed him this time. I came out and I threw the fish up on the levee just like I told the game wardens—who were actually not game wardens; they were biologists from the State of Louisiana—and immediately had both of their attention completely.

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“Oh man, how did you do that?”

“I told you what I was going to do.” And then I dove back down. I got the pipe. I brought the pipe, the cement pipe, and I showed them the cement pipe with the clutch of eggs in it. Man,

a paper came out, the ink pens came out, and they started writing. They took the clutch of eggs out. They studied it. They all had eyes and they were wiggling eyes in the--within the eggs. They were about three days old or something.

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Well they counted, I don't know how many of the eggs, [*Laughs*] and they weighed the clutch of eggs and all this, and that was the beginning of a study on the wild catfish of Bayou Des Allemands and the immediate area—all that good stuff.

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SR: So that was in the '60s?

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JF: Oh yeah, that was the '60s.

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SR: Wow, you were in the thick of it. So your dad was also a--a commercial fisherman?

00:41:02

JF: Hmm—

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SR: It sounds like.

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JF: —yeah, my dad was actually a commercial fisherman at that time. He had been born and raised on the bayou, done a lot of fishing all his life, went through the Navy, served in the Navy, and came back out of the Navy and then ran a profitable restaurant business for a while and then had enough of that. Got out of the restaurant and went back to his roots of fishing. And gladly, that's pretty much where he left this world; he was still a commercial fisherman.

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SR: And was it mostly catfish for him?

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JF: Yeah. He done several different fish, because in our area where we were from, you learned what you needed to know that was for your area. Like if you lived in Golden Meadow or something, you learned to shrimp a lot more than anything else. Where we were from, we learned to catfish more than anything else.

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Now Raymond, my old dad, still knew how to shrimp real good. And before he ever went shrimping he was doing it with his daddy, my Grandpa Joe. Well Joe was an indentured servant on a plantation and in his spare time he fished crabs to make spare money. So Raymond was a good crabber and he was a--a real good catfish fisherman, and they had like two distinct clans of fisherman in Des Allemands. One was pro-cans; one was anti-cans, pro-troutlines, which basically they were all born and raised in that same area. But some of them, like the status quo in

Baton Rouge, didn't think cans were the up-and-coming future of the catfish as it was known to the world at that particular time.

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And speaking of the world, I think it would be really good to bring this information to the 38th parallel, and specifically places not too far from Humphrey Bogart's best known places. What's that little place just north of Casablanca?

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SR: I'm not sure.

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JF: Marrakesh? Is that north or south? I don't know; whichever one it is, it's the closest one to the 38th parallel, and I'm using that as an example because it might be real close to the same conditions for salinity and freshwater and saltwater and all that kind of other good stuff.

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SR: Well I saw a pH meter in your truck. Is that--what is the--what is the salinity of the water that you're—?

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JF: Oh you're ruining my reputation now. I can't be even considered close to a pH meter.

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SR: Oh what is it? Oh you can't be considered—. Well you know it doesn't look like it's been opened, so—.

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JF: That's just trash on the floor. So you got to leave that alone and repeat the question?

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JF: What is the quality of the water that you fish in? Is it saltwater?

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SR: I can get out of that one.

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JF: Is it brackish?

00:45:01

SR: I'm just a dumb coonass that fishes them. I'm not the scientist that started that study.

[Laughs] But I have heard of a study they made at the house several years ago—and you got to realize each and every year is different. Weather conditions predominantly affect all of the aspects, salinity, content, so many parts per million are no good for catfish or successful hatch of, and all kinds of other good stuff like that. But actually we had a—one of the years—this year that was very low in rainfall, so we were under drought conditions, and we had a good southerly wind more than anything to bring in the saltwater, which produces a higher content of salt in the

bayou and in the--the little lake right here next to us. So we actually have shrimp if we dive off the wharf. We'll--instead of be playing with catfish, we'll be throwing shrimp around.

00:46:18

SR: And that's really unusual?

00:46:19

JF: Every 10 years we get shrimp—about. That's pretty unusual.

00:46:25

SR: And are you fishing those?

00:46:26

JF: Yeah, that's what we are--we're going to supposedly go out tonight, and--we don't--we don't go out to shrimp. We don't go out to fish. We don't go out to crab. It's one of my little brother's favorite sayings: "We go out to sink the boat." And it's sort of like one of my other favorite sayings: Which weapon do you like to hunt with? "Okay. I *love* to hunt with whatever I have in my hand at the time, be it rifle, bow and arrow, muzzleloader, shotgun" —you know, as a couple of variables.

00:47:10

SR: What is the lake called?

00:47:13

JF: We got a couple of lakes. There's a little lake right next to the house that's called Petit Lake Des Allemands; the big one is called Lake Des Allemands. There's an extra big one just south, which is called Lake Salvador. That's the one that, every so often it chews somebody up and spits them out. It'll kill you, but the other lakes will too. It's just that one is a lot worse.

00:47:39

SR: So I still don't know: Is that how you catch catfish today—the can? With the cans?

00:47:45

JF: Okay, yeah, and it's a progression. You live and learn. In so doing, I went through hook and line fishing when I was a little kid. I used to do that to make spare change for school. And then I graduated to can and drum fishing. I went to gillnet fishing. I went to hoop net fishing, which hoop net fishing actually dates back to the time of the Native Americans. But it's—in itself it has been vastly improved. And that is predominantly the way the fisherman now of Des Allemands during the season of hoop nets, or the fall season, they fish hoop nets. During the spawn or the spring-summer season you still fish cans because that is the girl that you took to the prom, so you must dance with that girl. Way out the floor, right?

00:48:49

SR: What is a hoop net?

00:48:51

JF: A hoop net is cylindrical in shape and it is tarred black, so underwater it would feel almost like a log in shape and length and size and all that. And there's some--some nylon webbing that's on the outside of it, which after an alligator dances on it, it tears it full of holes and all. You got to sew it back together. So believe it or not I can sew pretty good—on a hoop net anyway. And it's--it's baited some times of the year; some times of the year it's not baited. It can be fished almost like cans in a--in a sense of the word, where you could--you could actually use sex for bait by leaving a pregnant female fish in the net and then drawing the males. It immediately attracts the males, which in turn attracts more females. So I mean [*Laughs*] it's a legitimate form of catfish fishing.

00:50:02

SR: Hmm. What do you prefer, the hoop net fishing or the can fishing?

00:50:07

JF: It actually has nothing much to do with preference. It has to do all with the season. It's the time of the year.

00:50:17

SR: Do you ever do troutlines?

00:50:20

JF: No. I kind of left that a long time ago. But I have--I've done it a lot. I've done it in the past quite a bit.

00:50:28

SR: Can you catch catfish all year round?

00:50:31

JF: For the most part, yeah; sometimes it's not nearly as good. When you become trying to maintain a--a restaurant and you want to have in fish all year round, what you need to do is stock up, vacuum pack, and then you're all right. But you--when you get to the dead of winter, it becomes real hard. Is that a parking place in the front? No, uh-uh.

00:51:06

SR: But stop.

00:51:06

JF: In the dead of winter it becomes real hard to produce any amount of catfish. And if you have a restaurant that's a large restaurant, and they may know you and understand why you don't, if you're on real good terms with them and they actually really know you, but it doesn't put fish on the table of their restaurant, so it don't cut it. You got to produce fish. So you think I can park right here?

[Interviewer's note: Joey parked his truck and we continued the interview inside of La Boulangerie, a French bakery on Magazine Street in Uptown New Orleans.]

00:51:44

SR: All right, Joey, so we don't have much time left. I could talk to you for hours, I can tell, but I will try—I just want to follow-up on a few things. We'll try to--we'll try to stick mostly to catfish here, but—. So you were saying that some restaurants need--want catfish on their plates all year-round. And so that means that you're out there trying to get them all year-round, pretty much?

00:52:17

JF: One of those trick questions, again, you have. Having done this for so long, I've come to the realization it's way better to fish hard when they're biting hard and skin like hell, which you—if I show you a couple of guys that skin fish you would be amazed at why they don't walk away with fingers missing because it's just so fast. And at the same time, finish the processing, rinse them, drain them, weigh them, pack them and freeze them, so they're still real high quality. And have enough freezers set aside to be able to maintain a constant supply throughout the times of lean and hard, versus the times of plentiful and rich.

00:53:32

SR: And so you do all of your own skinning?

00:53:34

JF: Actually progressed further than that; I'm a good skinner, and I used to do all my own skinning, but since I've been married and I have three sons now and a daughter, I can pretty

much regulate my skinning skills to the back of the shed where they got the old dusty place full of pictures and leave the skinning to the boys.

00:54:07

SR: How old are your children?

00:54:10

JF: You know, as a young man growing up, I kept track of my age until I was 18. After I was old enough to drink it didn't matter anymore. Well, all my boys are past that.

00:54:26

SR: Oh, but they work with you?

00:54:27

JF: Yes and no. They work with me and we work together and we also work separately. It's sort of like a family affair.

00:54:41

SR: Are they commercial fishermen too, or do they just do that in their spare time?

00:54:48

JF: No, they're true blue, true camouflage, whatever color it happens to be on that particular given day.

00:55:01

SR: Your daughter too?

00:55:03

JF: It's a work in progress. I still have to tie her up. She has yet to be corralled. She looks for certain things to do, which I did when I was younger. And it was real funny; I always thought the answer was the last time I fished, sort of like my shadow following behind me, but one day I just got slapped in the face and realized, "What the hell? This is basically what I was put here to do." Jump right into those boots and they fit real comfortable and just carry on.

00:56:07

SR: Well it must be a little affirming too to see your boys wanting to do the same thing.

00:56:12

JF: Somewhat, because commercial fishermen as a whole, and Des Allemands catfish fishermen in particular, 10 years ago were a dying breed. So they ain't making no more of them.

00:56:42

SR: So they still are?

00:56:45

JF: Yeah, but it's not anything I would tell my grandchildren to even get close to. I would encourage them to learn what they could but to seek other employment. What once was is not always guaranteed to be.

00:57:10

SR: Well you know I've--I've talked to a lot of people down Bayou Lafourche, and you know I've talked to some shrimpers, and I mean they have the same advice and a lot of it has to do with the price of shrimp not going up—the price that they get for their shrimp not going up—but the price of fuel skyrocketing, you know, over the past 20 years. Is it a similar problem with catfishing, or is there something else?

00:57:34

JF: More so, I would say it's compounded. [With] shrimp, you don't have to bait your nets. Not true for catfish. One of the places that are etched in my mind somewhat is the state called Wisconsin, because from this very state my father would ship in truckloads of cheese, because cheese was a really important bait for some of the early forms of fishing catfish. Scrap cheese from a place called [Interviewers note: It sounds like "Debosko"] was 10-cents a pound way back when; right now it's 38-cents a pound. So not only do you have to fuel, maintain all your equipment, and all the other good stuff that goes along with fishing; unlike shrimping, you have to buy bait—catch 22.

00:59:07

SR: That makes a lot of sense. And what about the price of catfish? Since you've been aware of how much you're selling it for, has it gone up with inflation or not?

00:59:21

JF: Okay, market, supply in demand. If you as a commercial fisherman cannot reach out and grab a small niche, you will have to sell to the bulk fish buyers, which are few and buddy-buddy. Therefore, the price on whole live catfish has relatively changed none in the past 20 or 30 years, or close to it.

01:00:21

SR: But you have found a--a few niche markets. Could you talk about that a little bit? We talked about it in the car a little before I started recording, how you came upon, for example, the Crescent City Farmers Market, and how that might have changed things for you.

01:00:37

JF: Okay, I'll give you this much. If it's an alligator, I can skin it; I speak only for myself. And in order to maintain a civil relationship with my wife, I should not discuss anymore of my customers, relations with them, who they are, where they are, or how much I sell my fish for.

01:01:11

SR: Oh I wasn't asking you necessarily for the price, but just how it changed the way you do business to--to sell more direct rather than—. I mean, it sounds like you used to sell just to a

wholesaler and--and now you go to the market, or your wife goes to the market. And like today, we went on the rounds to restaurants. How long have you been doing that?

01:01:39

JF: I should repeat everything I just said in other words.

01:01:43

SR: Okay, sorry. Understood. Well let me ask you then—

01:01:47

JF: It's very delicate, of what you ask.

01:01:49

SR: Okay.

01:01:51

JF: For me to explain it in other words would be like a dog chasing his tail. I'm supposed to come back to the same answer. I can answer you so much; other words I should keep secret so much.

01:02:05

SR: Understood.

01:02:06

JF: Please forgive me.

01:02:09

SR: Forgive me for being so rude. What about your heritage? I know that Bayou Des Allemands has a lot of German heritage. Is that your family?

01:02:20

JF: Yes; my heritage is somewhat of a perfect blend of Southeast Louisiana. Some of my people came down with the Nova Scotia gang and the Cajuns all over the place. I have German heritage, which there's a large influence of that in Des Allemands. My namesake, on the other hand, brings me to the island of Spain. I'm Portuguese. On the back of a bottle of Lancers wine you find my name to be the same as the one on the bottle of wine—Fonseca. So I am a Portuguese man-of-war, or commercial fisherman, or several different variations of which I shouldn't divulge.

01:03:37

SR: Which side of your family is Portuguese—I guess your fathers?

01:03:41

JF: Yes, the namesake is Portuguese—Fonseca.

01:03:44

SR: But when it came to—you know in your household growing up—cooking and--and the language, was it pretty much Cajun? Did people speak French?

01:03:53

JF: Yes, it was French. My father spoke French fluently. My mother understood it very good and would speak it slightly. My wife is French. She doesn't speak it but she understands it readily. On the other hand, the few words I know in French I can't really repeat in public.

01:04:16

SR: Well you should tell me your wife's name because you've mentioned her a few times.

01:04:19

JF: Her name, Georgine Fonseca—Fonseca depending upon your pronunciation. Call her Jeanie.

01:04:39

SR: Okay, so tell me you know briefly, because we don't have much time: I know that you don't only fish catfish. I heard a radio program about you this morning that was all about your alligator hunting. Is that a significant part of your year?

01:04:57

JF: Somewhat of what I explained to you earlier; it's almost every—excuse me—almost everything is seasonal. The alligator season, although I love it dearly, comes in one of the other

seasons and interrupts everything. So I must, in order to catch my alligators, put everything on hold for crabbing and go fish alligators. So yearly I return to the swamp to go fish the alligators while I try to kick myself at the same time for leaving the--the process that was already ongoing, because it's just the way it is. It's torn between two loves, right? Damned if you do and damned if you don't.

01:06:03

SR: Well, is one more profitable than the other, or is one more enjoyable than the other or—?

01:06:08

JF: Both. At one time alligators were really high. Now they're really low. And once I have a season—or let's say I'm fishing crawfish and I'm catching fairly good; in order for me to stop that--quit that and go fishing something else, well all the while even though I'm only making half what I would make on the other job, there's a process where it takes you three or four days to quit, three or four days to build back up. And then when you're going to quit and go back and do it again, there's three or four more days again, three or four more days again. All different types of equipment are included in each type of fishing that you're going to do, so it's all relevant or irrelevant. It's still all—you got to make it work.

01:06:57

SR: And if I'm correct, is the alligator season just one month?

01:07:00

JF: Yeah, they give us 30 days.

01:07:03

SR: So I was wondering if shows like *Swamp People* have increased the demand for alligator.

01:07:14

JF: I guess it depends on what side of the table you're looking at. If you're the restaurateur selling the alligator plate of food to the customer, yes, it has picked up your business really good. If you're the man skinning the alligator it really hasn't done much. You don't even feel that part of it.

01:07:48

SR: Is that because you can only catch so many?

01:07:52

JF: No, it's basically because supply in demand. I mean you only get so many alligator, which is what you said, but because of the advertisement you have a lot more demand now. And since you're on the low end of the totem pole you receive the least of anything that ever happens. Whereas the man that's at the final end of the product, he receives the most.

01:08:27

SR: That makes sense. Has—well I guess my first question—

01:08:36

JF: Sara?

01:08:36

SR: Yeah.

01:08:38

JF: I want to ask you to do me a favor.

01:08:38

SR: Yeah.

01:08:39

JF: I want you to go over your notes and think of three questions.

01:08:43

SR: It's in my head. I have three. Ready? Number one: Is there a difference between life on Bayou Des Allemands and life on Bayou Lafourche, or other bayous nearby?

01:08:56

JF: Uh, I shouldn't curse, so I should refrain from answering that question. *[Laughs]* Yeah, there is quite a bit of difference. One of my early teachers in junior high school explained to his class at the time after I answered one of his questions, that the difference in a young man

growing up in the Raceland area—which is where I finished high school—and the Des Allemands area—where I grew up and--and I still live—although they're only like 12 miles apart or so, the boys from Raceland ,when the brothers and the cousins and all would play and fight, they would throw cow patties at each other; whereas the boys from Des Allemands would throw fish skins at each other.

01:09:58

SR: That's a good answer. Okay, question number two: Has your livelihood or life been directly affected by the BP oil spill?

01:10:11

JF: I'm glad that other one was a good answer. It was also a true answer. This also would be a true answer. If the BP Oil spill didn't directly, indirectly, mentally, and physically affect my life I would be the biggest liar in the state at the least. Having said that, I'll answer it in other words: Yeah, hell yeah, and we shouldn't repeat anything else I'm thinking. Okay, next question?

01:10:55

SR: Question number three, final question: What do you like most about your job?

01:11:04

JF: What do I like most about my job? Here's the way I'll answer that question. I worked for a couple of years with a cousin of mine on tugboats. A couple of the times we went through some pretty dangerous situations. He eventually left the tugboats; so did I. He went on to a job at a

plant. I went on to one or two odd jobs and commercial fishing, whereas I finally wound up staying with the commercial fishing. And every once in a while him and I would get together and go do some hunting, recreation, and he would always tell me when he retired from the plants he wanted to do just what I was doing.

01:12:07

My wife asked me that question almost yesterday. And I was quite honest with my daughter and wife in the sense of the word: Hell or high water, if I could or would or not, when I retire what would I want to do, would be the question I'd ask myself? It would be the same question you asked. I'm not too sure I would want to increase or decrease any one thing at all. In a perfect world there is nothing that's known as perfection. It does not exist. And in a sense of the word I could beg to differ on that point.

01:13:12

Did I lose you, or did you follow me? Because upon which astroplane do you soar, you might understand the answer; you might not.

01:13:26

SR: I'll think about that one for a while. Any final words, Mr. Fonseca?

01:13:32

JF: Yeah, I would always drink my coffee like it comes out of the pot.

01:13:38

SR: Thank you.

01:13:40

JF: Always drink my whiskey on the rocks. And I don't think I'd ever ride anything else but outboard motors and old trucks. I don't know if I could handle a Harley Davidson anymore, so maybe I should retire.

01:14:02

SR: Not yet. We need some of that catfish. Well thank you for being so patient with me and taking me on your rounds. I appreciate it.

01:14:14

JF: I'm sure glad we got this finished.

01:14:17

[End Joey Fonseca Interview]