

ROBERT COLLINS
Louisiana Dried Shrimp Co.– Grand Isle, LA

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Location: Louisiana Dried Shrimp Co.– Grand Isle, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 1 hour, 8 minutes
Project: Down the Bayou – Louisiana

[Begin Robert Collins Interview]

00:00:00

Robert Collins: Let's do it.

00:00:01

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, October 17, 2011. I'm in Grand Isle, Louisiana, and I'm with Mr. Robert Collins.

00:00:13

RC: Beautiful day, too.

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SR: It is a beautiful day. Could I ask you to introduce yourself—tell us your full name, and what you do for a living?

00:00:21

RC: Okay. I'm Robert Collins. I'm a dried shrimp processor. I was born September 29, 1959.

00:00:30

SR: All right, thank you. Now, we are in a facility that's fairly new, and we'll talk about that in a little while, but I'd like to know first where you grew up, and what--what brought you to the dried shrimp business originally.

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RC: Oh, okay. Let's see, I was brought up in the town of Grand Isle in a small area that was called Chénière Caminada, and at the very end of Chénière Caminada was a small area they called China Town. And China Town was called China Town—it was a nickname because a long time ago the Chinese used to unload their shrimp from these marsh-surrounded platforms over the water. And they would come to the mainland and they would unload their product. And once a week the Chinese would get there and they would walk around, and people gave it the nickname China Town. And that's where I was born and raised at.

00:01:26

SR: Where is that from here? What direction is that in?

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RC: Well it's on [*Laughs*]—it's on the northwest end of Grand Isle, and it's a little peninsula on the very end before the town of Grand Isle.

00:01:44

SR: Well that's--that's real interesting. Not a lot of people grew up here. I mean, this is a very small place.

00:01:48

RC: Be hard to find under those directions, too. [*Laughs*]

00:01:52

SR: What did your parents do for a living? Were they—?

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RC: They were in the dried shrimp business.

00:01:56

SR: Oh, they were?

00:01:56

RC: Yeah, my grandfather also. My grandfather started in the dried shrimp business probably in the—uh, probably the early '30s, and it was done outside in the sun, and eventually it progressed to inside dryers. And that's what we're doing now, and I'm just following up on the same generation, same culture, same type of business. And my son would like to do the same thing. It's a little more complicated than what it used to be, so—. It's good--a great living, great life.

00:02:26

SR: What was your grandfather's name?

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RC: Theodore Collins. They called him Borbar, Borbar Collins [interviewer's note: Robert uses a French pronunciation of Collins here] from Chénière. **[Laughs]**

00:02:33

SR: How do you spell Borbar?

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RC: Oh, that's a French kind of word. It's B-o-r-b-a-r, I believe—Borbar, yeah. And that was what they called him. That was a nickname. His name was actually Theodore, so—

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SR: Was his facility on the water like this one is?

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RC: Sure thing, yeah. It was on the water, and the boats—we were buying from the boats back then, and the shrimp boats would come in and we'd unload the product fresh, and you know it was boiled right on the dock and pushed straight into the dryers—or outside on the platform at the time when *he* started.

00:03:10

SR: What would you do if you were drying outside and it rained?

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RC: Well, back then the whole community worked together and if it started to drizzle, then what would happen is the whole area—anybody around that was available would come and they

would help push the shrimp up. And, in fact, I know you won't see it on the recorder, but I got a few pictures of it. And the platforms were built on a slant. And you'd push the shrimp up to the top of the slant and you'd cover them up with tarps. And that would keep the rain off. But everybody would help pick up the shrimp because if you couldn't sell your shrimp, they couldn't get paid also. So it was a community effort, really, so it worked out good.

00:03:49

SR: Wow, so you--you were alive when they were drying in the sun?

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RC: Definite, yeah. I was blessed because I was able to see the old dried shrimp platforms and how they operated. I actually remember helping on the platforms, and I was back in the block ice plant days with the open shrimp trucks. I'm only 52 years old, but I remember all those days well, you know.

00:04:11

All the little boys, we were born and raised on the shrimp dock, and that's where we hung around and that's where we played and grew up and learned business at, so it was pretty good.

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SR: What is your heritage? What is Collins? It sounds like you speak some French, but was your family from France originally, or do you know—?

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RC: It's a French name. It was actually Collin [pronounced without the 's']. The name—it was spelled C-o-l-l-i-n, and it was changed to Collins because it was more of an English name. And back in Golden Meadow at the time, they were trying to convert everybody really to English, so they actually changed a few last names around. **[Laughs]** I like to think it was changed to protect the innocent. **[Laughs]**

00:04:57

SR: That's probably a good way to look at it. So then your grandfather passed the business on to your parents, I guess?

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RC: Yeah, to my dad and his two brothers, and eventually my dad ended up with it, and he eventually sold it to me and I lost it for Katrina. And we're just getting back to--getting back into business and getting back up again, so—.

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SR: What is, or was, your dad's name?

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RC: Robert Collins, the same as mine, and I got a son named Robert Collins—pretty traditional, you know. We're pretty simple; basic, you know, traditional people, so—.

00:05:30

SR: At what point did--did they go from sun-drying to air-drying, or bringing the process inside?

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RC: That happened when I was probably—I'm going to say maybe 13--14 years old. And that would have probably been in the '70s, you know kind of mid-to-the-early '70s. That's what I would say. I don't remember the exact year that they switched, but Mr. Louis Blum was actually the one who designed the first indoor shrimp drying, and he kind of gets—he never got the credit that he deserved for it, but he's actually the one who invented it, yeah.

00:06:05

SR: Is he from around here?

00:06:06

RC: Well, he died since then, but his family is still in business, yeah. His family is still in business and been in business for I think right at 100 years now, which I'll give you those numbers too. *[Laughs]*

00:06:18

SR: Where is that business?

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RC: Out of Houma, yeah. They got a tremendous history too, and good people. And we deal with the same people; they're going on their fourth generation in the business, and we're going on our fourth generation in the business, and we still have good business together, and we look forward to many more years in it, so—.

00:06:40

SR: So the competition doesn't make you enemies?

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RC: Oh no, you get along with your competition. Competition is healthy, you know. I don't know if they like me, but I like all of them. [*Laughs*]

00:06:50

SR: When you were growing up, was there—I mean, you're the only shrimp dryer on the island right now, right?

00:06:55

RC: Right. I'm the only one on the island that does that. At one time there was—in just South Louisiana, there was 21; the way I understand it, there was 21 dried shrimp platforms over the marsh, all Chinese-owned. And then when I really got into the business, I could remember about 12 different drying plants that were around. And now I could think about maybe four that's still existing. Four to five, and that's it. So it's a tough—not everybody wants—the younger people

don't really want to do that anymore. There are simpler ways of making a living, so—. I guess you have to enjoy it. You have to love it to stay in it.

00:07:29

SR: So all Chinese-owned, but you all weren't Chinese-owned?

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RC: No, uh-uh, no. We're all American, yeah. At first the Chinese tradition of drying shrimp, they're the ones who had the skill and the art of doing it, and they slowly taught us how to do it, you know.

00:07:44

SR: Did your grandfather learn from Chinese people?

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RC: Now, my grandfather was taught by the Chinese how to dry, yeah. When the--when the marshland-based platforms were shutting down, they were looking for more land-based platforms. And my grandfather being friends with them over the years of letting them unload their product on their property and stuff; then what happened is they got to be friends, and he was one of the--one of the first Americans that they taught to dry shrimp. Yeah, so you know we've been in it--been in it ever since then.

00:08:15

SR: I don't even encounter Chinese people in this area. Are there many Chinese people in this area?

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RC: Not too many now. We have a few Philippine people still around, but now as far as Chinese, we're still dealing with the same Chinese family that we dealt with back then, too. So we're actually going on our fourth generation on that side too.

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SR: Chinese people who live here?

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RC: The Chinese people still own property over here, in fact. Yeah, and we're still dealing with the same people.

00:08:41

SR: What do they do for a business?

00:08:43

RC: They're still in the dried shrimp business.

00:08:44

SR: Oh?

00:08:46

RC: Yeah.

00:08:46

SR: Oh, on Grand Isle or—?

00:08:46

RC: They don't dry it themselves. They--they're on more of the sales end, and that's—and they always were on the sales end, but they would actually supply themselves. And now we're supplying for them.

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SR: Oh, is that one of the wholesalers that you supply?

00:09:00

RC: One of the wholesalers, yeah, one of the wholesalers.

00:09:03

SR: What is the name of that family or that business?

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RC: It's Gulf Food Products out of Harahan—New Orleans, you know. And the first one we talked about was Blum & Bergeron out of Houma, yeah. So good business, you know, four generations on both sides, on both companies.

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SR: That's pretty fascinating. Did you always know growing up that you wanted to go into the family business?

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RC: Definite. That's all I wanted to do. It's--it's good, you know. I don't regret it. It has its tough times, tough years, but it's a good living, good life. I don't intend on ever [becoming] a millionaire unless I win the lottery. **[Laughs]** But it's a good life, and I want the kids—the kids are going to go on to college, and if they're still interested in it, they're more than welcome to take over the business. And if they're not, then they can move on, and then there will be another part of the seafood industry that dies off. So hopefully one of them will have a little interest in it.

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SR: What do you think—so, there are less shrimp drying facilities in this area than there were. Do you think that there's less consumption, or—I don't know. What--what do you think the reason is for that?

00:10:10

RC: It's a combination of a lot of things, I think. I think the price--the price of the seafood has gone up, which has driven the price. I think the sales are a little slower than they it used to be. I think our biggest market is Asian people. They consume dried shrimp, and I think like any other culture, the younger people are eating at McDonald's and Burger Kings and they're not going back home to eat dried shrimp that their parents cook. Just like our—you know, just like American children do, and that's what I think. They're just not consuming as much of it, you know. But I think there's a lot of room for new development and new marketing in it, which I think we could bring it back up to a level that it might have been at one time, so—. Maybe just a little more modern focus on it. Maybe actually some new products that we can do with it. I think it would be great. So I'm--I'm waiting to see what the future brings.

00:11:02

SR: When you were growing up, did your mom or whoever the cook was in your family, cook with dried shrimp?

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RC: Well, definite. We cooked what--whatever came off the dock, and dried shrimp was—. Yeah, she made fricassee; she made gumbos with it. And it was all good. Even shrimp spaghetti with it. So it was real good, you know. And that's kind of what we ate just off the tables, so it was all good. You know, we ate whatever--whatever seafood was around. If a shrimp boat had a few fish on it, we would clean the fish and we would eat that. We would eat oysters from the oyster boats, and where else could you eat that good? *[Laughs]*

00:11:37

SR: That's true.

00:11:37

RC: You know.

00:11:37

SR: And is it still like that? Do you want to let your dog in, or no? Or should I let her in?

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RC: Yeah, she don't want to miss out on anything.

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SR: I know the dog wants to be part of the interview.

00:11:44

RC: She don't want to miss out on it.

00:11:46

SR: What's her name?

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RC: Miss B.

00:11:47

SR: Miss B.

00:11:48

RC: Miss B happens to be the boss.

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SR: What about your kids? Do they enjoy eating food prepared with dried shrimp?

00:11:57

RC: Definite. They enjoy everything about the business, you know. There you go—

00:12:02

SR: Did you--do you have siblings?

00:12:04

RC: Yeah, I sure do. I got two older brothers and a younger sister. My two older brothers moved to McComb, and they live up there. One of them has a seafood market up in McComb; the other one has a--a woodworking business and does signs—is a sign company and stuff. And my younger sister is married to Dean Blanchard, and they own Dean Blanchard's Seafood.

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SR: Oh, so she's in the—?

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RC: And that's also—Dean Blanchard is also three generations in the seafood business, too, so we were all born and raised in the business. And we like it, and we want to keep it--want to keep it, you know--want to keep the culture going, and it's good for Grand Isle. It's good for Louisiana. Good for Jefferson Parish, and good for the whole country, so—. We're interested in—we'd like to stay here in it, so that's all. We'll fight whatever we got to to stay in it and maintain our livelihood, so—.

00:12:53

SR: Well, you've definitely had some fight. The--the plant that you lost in Katrina, was that where your father had his business?

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RC: Sure was, yeah. That was my daddy's plant that I had purchased with him, and I had been there for probably close to 10 years operating when Katrina came around. And then, like I say, I lost it then, and I'm finally—like I said earlier, I'm finally getting back to where I'm getting back into the business. And I missed it, but it's like riding a bike. You know, you learn and you get back on it and you ride again. So it's going well.

00:13:26

SR: I want to ask you some things about the process of drying shrimp. Now, you took me on a tour of the plant, which is not operating right now.

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RC: Because of the lack of shrimp. [*Laughs*] There's not much small shrimp. The first time in my life that I haven't seen small shrimp at this time of the year, and we just have a shortage of shrimp right now. Sometimes we have a shortage of sales; this time we have a shortage of shrimp, so it'll come around. Maybe, hopefully, the next cold front or two, if the water temperatures drop, maybe small shrimp will come out. So we're waiting on that. We're anticipating a good season, hopefully.

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SR: What would make the—where would the shrimp be hiding right now if they're not coming out?

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RC: We're hoping that they're way back into the marshes right now, and maybe the cold weather will drive them out. But we should be seeing signs of them by now, and we're not. That's the only thing that's a little--a little scary. I don't want to blame it on oil companies or anything like that. I don't want to do that. I like to be a little more optimistic about it. And I think it's just going to come. Maybe we're just having a late season, so—. Until then, I don't want to rule out anything either, so—.

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SR: Well, I have been hearing from a lot of people that it's not a good season for shrimp, but I guess for you, because you're not taking just any shrimp—you need a very specific size of shrimp—that it's more of a challenge.

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RC: Right.

00:14:49

SR: What--what size? And, like, when people talk about counts of shrimp, what count is the size that you need?

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RC: Well, the--the bulk of what we do is probably 80--100 count. That's more or less the ideal dried shrimp. But we've dried--we've dried a lot this summer, like 40—50s and--and smaller. Very seldom you'll dry anything larger than a 40--50 count. And 40--50 drying, if it's dried right, is beautiful, real nice shrimp. Sometimes we dry six barbes [pronounced "see bob"]. Six barbes are a third species of shrimp. We call it the third season. We dry brown shrimp for the first season. White shrimp, there's a second season, and six barbes is usually around—we used to call it our "Christmas money." We dried that around the Christmas holidays, and it was a small shrimp that was caught on the beach. And the market had kind of played out on that, and it looked like it was just starting to redevelop a little bit, and then lately they haven't been catching much of it. So, we're waiting, and hopefully we'll have a few six barbes to dry, too, this year.

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SR: I've never heard of that term. Is it c--b-o-b?

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RC: "Six barbes" is actually French. "Six" is six in French, and "barbes" is a whisker. And the shrimp has six whiskers on it, so they call it "six barbes." It's six whiskers. So that's just—I don't know what the official name of it is; we just call it "six barbes," and everybody I deal with knows what that is, so—. [*Laughs*]

00:16:06

SR: And you catch them off the beach here in Grand Isle?

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RC: Right, on the beach. Yeah, it's not an inside shrimp. Brown shrimp or white shrimps come inside; six barbes have a tendency of staying on the beach, and they'll catch them on the real cold days on the beach. And it's--it's a cheaper product and it's caught more plentiful. Usually, when a boat catches, they catch a lot of it at one time, so it's pretty neat. And I like drying six barbes. Six barbes has got a good unique flavor to them. Some people prefer six barbes than any other shrimp. It's just they're very small, so the personal consumer to peel six barbes for like personal consumption, it's a little bit more trouble. So a lot of people just stick with the white and the brown shrimp, yeah.

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SR: And what is the flavor like? Is it a stronger seafood flavor, or is it sweeter, or—?

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RC: It has a sweeter flavor than other shrimp. White shrimp have a sweeter flavor than brown, but the brown shrimp has a perfect color, good shelf color, very attractive color. White shrimp have a little paler orange compared to the brighter orange of the brown shrimp. And the six barbes is a smaller shrimp, and it--it's a little bit duller orange color. [*Laughs*]

00:17:12

SR: Interesting. When you were growing up, would you catch those and--and eat them not dried?

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RC: Six barbes, yeah. We'd boil them and eat them like that, you know. And they're good, a good boiled shrimp, very good.

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SR: Well, because it's a poor season at the moment, your--your plant isn't functioning at the moment, but you took me on a tour. And I'm sorry to ask you to repeat yourself, but do you think that we could go through the process again, for the audio recording?

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RC: Sure.

00:17:44

SR: The first step is getting the shrimp, and so can you start there?

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RC: Right. The first step--the first step, yeah, we have to go out. We don't buy, we don't purchase directly from the boats. We go out and we actually go to the different shrimp docks. I would say probably 95-percent of our shrimp comes from Dean Blanchard's Seafood because of the location. We'll go out to the dock; I usually--I call it "shopping." I'll go in the morning and I'll pick out shrimp that are perfect to dry.

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If the shrimp are not fresh enough, we stay away from them. We're very particular on what we dry. Size, depending on the demand, we'll pick out the sizes we need, but mainly we're looking for the quality. And once we find the quality, we'll load them up into our trucks and we truck them into the plant. And from there they're unloaded in 600-pound vats, and from there they're dumped into the boiler and boiled 600-pounds at a time. And from there it goes into the dryer.

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SR: I'm just going to interrupt you when I have a question, if you don't mind?

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RC: Okay, sure.

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SR: So I don't know a lot about drying shrimp, and I was actually surprised that you cook them first.

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RC: I thought you were applying for a job over here. [*Laughs*]

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SR: Not yet.

00:18:53

RC: Yeah, you boil them first. Definitely you boil them.

00:18:54

SR: What--what would happen if you didn't boil them first?

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RC: Well, actually, there was a market for that at one time. It was called raw-dried. And they was dried out in the sun, and you actually took fresh shrimp and you dumped them out in the sun, not--not cooked at all, and you left them in the sun to dry. And there was a market for that. I

haven't seen that around probably since I was 10 years old. So I don't know if it's something new, but I--I might look into it and maybe try do a few like that and see if we could sell them.

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SR: What was the difference in flavor or texture?

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RC: I never--we never had the heart to eat one of those things. [*Laughs*] We--we left those. We didn't eat those at home, no. [*Laughs*] But it--it looked just a real light brown color to it. And they would actually dry, and you dried all the moisture out of them, and there was a market for them. We didn't peel them; we didn't—that's one thing we didn't do is peel them. They were sold with the peeling still on, which you call "whole-cooked" when it's done like that. And they had a decent market. It was always a very small market. It might have been a one, two-percent of your market.

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SR: Well, you were very young, I guess, when you were doing that, but do you know who the market was? Who was buying that?

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RC: It was Asian. It was definitely an Asian market, yeah, because I don't remember Mr. Blum buying any. But I--I do remember Mr. Bob Hoy buying quite a bit. And his partner, Mr. Huong, they bought quite a bit of that stuff. Also, dried speckled trout, too, they used to buy. And we--

we learned—I don't know if you want to go into this right now or not, but my dad had to seek permission from the old Chinese family in order for Mr. Dip—. Mr. Dip used to own a grocery store on the island, and he was a Chinese—well, when we say “Chinese,” we're probably talking Taiwanese, you know—and he owned property down here. And we didn't know it at the time, and my dad didn't know it at the time, but he knew the secret to drying speckled trout, which was a very tricky and--and very tedious process in doing.

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And when they ordered dried speckled trout, they told my daddy to seek Mr. Dip and he would teach you. But he had to get permission first from the old family. And he actually had to write to the Old Country to get permission. Yeah, and then once he obtained the permission, he taught my daddy how to dry fish. And we used to dry speckled trout until they made it a non-commercial fish. And then we had to stop. The price had gone up, and it wasn't feasible to dry fish anymore. But that was something to see. *[Laughs]*

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SR: And were--was that at the point when you were drying in the sun or drying indoors?

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RC: That was dried in the sun. That was dried on racks in the sun. It was different than drying shrimp. Shrimp you dried on the platform, just laying on either a wooden platform or a cement platform. Fish had to be dried on racks where the air could circulate through it. I remember that. Like I say, I was blessed. I was raised at a good time, and I remember a lot of very old-school things, and I was also young enough to get involved into the little more modern stuff, so—.

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SR: Did y'all ever eat the dried fish?

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RC: No, no. [*Laughs*] No, we never did.

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SR: Were the fish cleaned totally before they were dried?

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RC: They were gutted. They were gutted and that was it. They were gutted and they were packed in salt barrels until they arrived, in a heated building, and you'd bring the temperature up over 100 degrees. And the shrimp—I mean the dried fish, you would take salt and once you gutted—you'd leave the head on the fish and you'd just pull the guts out.

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I remember, as a little boy I would help do that, and you would pack the inside of the fish with salt. And then you'd lay them in these wooden barrels. And I remember going with my dad in a truck and we'd go to the pickle factory and they would give us these old wooden barrels. And that was the ideal thing to pack the fish in. You'd take the top off the barrel and you'd put a layer of salt and you'd put a layer of fish. And then you'd put them in there. And after a while in that heated room they had a smell that you couldn't imagine. And we hated walking in there. And my daddy would say, "It smells like money. Don't worry about it." And we'd go in there

where you had to take the fish out of the barrel, and it was awful-looking stuff. And we'd take them out and we'd put them on these racks, and every day during the day you'd go and you'd flip each fish individually over so he'd get the right amount of sun on it.

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And how much sun—I was a young boy. My dad was good at it, and we'd more or less just follow his commands, like go turn them, pick them up, and every night you had to pick them up. And then the next day you'd put them out. And if I remember right, it would take four--five days to dry them at that pace. You know, and that's what we did. And all of a sudden they were all put into sacks. And this was head-on, whole fish, and they were brought to New Orleans. We used to deliver on St. Louis Street to Gulf Food Products. And that's where we sold the fish at.

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And I remember going. I don't know why, but out of the--the four kids in the family, it seemed like I always ended up going with my mom and dad. And the other three kids went to school. And for some reason they would take me with them. And me and my mom would go walk to the little local coffee shop and my daddy would more or less make the sales. And if my mom didn't come along for the ride, then I would go with my daddy and I'd sit in the office and I'd learn how they dealt business. And I would just sit around and listen. And after a while, you know, you'd see their different cultures and how they presented themselves to each other, how they departed after business was over, and it was a pretty amazing thing. And we still—you know, we're basically still doing business the same way today, so—. And it's a great culture, and I like my kids to see it because it's a culture that's—it's pretty much going away now. People don't communicate in person as much as they used to. Now it's all through computers and email,

and back then you went out there and you sat down and you did business face-to-face with the product sitting next to you.

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If the product wasn't good enough, you talked about it right there. If the price wasn't good enough, you talked about it right there. And it was pretty good. And when you left, you left with a handshake and you departed by the square, and that was it, you know. So pretty interesting.

00:25:24

SR: What about now in your business? Are you pretty automated? Like, do you do stuff over email, or is it still kind of old—? I look at dried shrimp as kind of an old-school product.

[Laughs] And is it, do you still deal with people face-to-face a lot, or are you on the phone and on the internet now?

00:25:45

RC: No, I--I still—I got a computer because the kids said it looks good. **[Laughs]** No, I—actually, slowly—and I'm hesitant on doing it because my main customers I have, I still deal with them on the phone every day and deliver in person myself, or they'll pick up the product in person and we sit here like me and you are talking now. And we talk about family and—. And we still talk about, you know, the families and how everybody is doing, and we basically keep it very simple. I know they sell on the internet, but like I said, we still conduct the basic part of the business by—I still write handwritten invoices to them, and they write me hand invoices back. And it works out fine.

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And like I said, I like to keep it like that, although I'm capable of doing the same business on the internet, but it--it's good like that and I like it. It's traditional. I'm a simple man, so—.

00:26:47

SR: Wow, that's all really fascinating. Do you think that there's anyone in Louisiana drying fish, or is it just shrimp at this point?

00:26:54

RC: No, I don't think anybody is drying fish anymore. I think that's a thing of the past. It's a part of our culture that actually went away. I really believe that. And I don't know if it's the price of the fish, or maybe just it's a heavy labor intent. But I wouldn't mind--I wouldn't mind drying a few just to see and to actually maybe—it's a strange market. If you don't have it to sell, you're not going to sell it. And if you—you can't sell it before you have it, so it's a different thing. I wouldn't mind trying it again. **[Laughs]** I don't know whether I'd get permission to learn how to dry them though.

00:27:30

SR: Never know. You could go back to the family and ask.

00:27:32

RC: Yeah.

00:27:34

SR: Okay, so, thank you. I took us on a big detour, but I was—. I took us on a detour at the boiling point—

00:27:40

RC: Okay.

00:27:41

SR: So, you boil the shrimp. And I saw that you--you dump them from bins into the boiler. About how long do they boil?

00:27:47

RC: We boil about--about three and a half to four minutes, long as we get up to the temperature. We have to hit 185 degrees, and we have to maintain about three minutes at 185 degrees, which takes us approximately—probably four minutes. About the time we dump the cold shrimp into the boiling water, it takes us about three and a half minutes that we actually--we're hitting the right temperature. But it takes us maybe a minute or so to get up to the right temperature.

00:28:18

SR: And do you have to do it at 185 because that's the technique that makes them the best product? Or is that regulation?

00:28:27

RC: Actually, it's a regulation. It's--it's a government; it's a HACCP regulation. Which, basically, we were always using the same technique anyhow. I don't know if it--if the timing on it is something that they based on at the beginning, but it seems to follow suit that we've been doing that all along. There's never been anyone in the dried shrimp business that I know of that's ever eaten dried shrimp that got sick from it. So the regulations are pretty laid-back because of that, so—. It worked out pretty good.

00:29:03

SR: Do you put anything in the boiling water?

00:29:05

RC: Yeah, we use city water. We don't use well water or water from the bay or saltwater or anything. We use city water, and we add salt to it, and the amount of salt we add is dependent on the size of your boiler. And I adjust it a little bit on the size of the shrimp too. You know, if the shrimp are larger or smaller, you might use a little less salt or a little more salt. So that—you know, that works out like that.

00:29:28

SR: Just table salt?

00:29:29

RC: Well, it's actually—it's food grade salt. It comes in 50-pound sacks. I guess you could—yeah, you could use it at your house, I imagine.

00:29:38

SR: Okay. So, then, from the boiler?

00:29:40

RC: From the boiler they're brought into the drying room, and there they're put onto these drying tables. And we put 600 pounds on each table, and it takes us approximately five and a half to six hours to dry one batch of shrimp. And the plant that we have here, we're capable in probably a 10-hour turnaround, we could dry 16,800 pounds in 10 hours, which is a pretty good size plant. And if we really want to push it, we could do over 30,000 pounds a day.

00:30:15

SR: That's a lot of shrimp.

00:30:16

RC: That's a lot of shrimp.

00:30:17

SR: And that—but that weight is raw shrimp. Once they're dried, what would that equal?

00:30:27

RC: Well, we--we run about 10-percent. In other words, on--on a pound of fresh shrimp, we're going to get about 10-percent weight out of it. So when you go in the grocery store and you see

the price of dried shrimp and you say, “Oh, these people are getting rich,” well, you’d have to look back at the figures and see. A lot of it is water weight that you’re drying out of it. So, you know, it’s--it’s dehydrated, and when you rehydrate it, the weight actually comes back, so—.

00:30:53

SR: That’s not—I’m surprised that it only takes five to six hours. Can you talk a little bit about how you dry them? I saw the tables.

00:31:07

RC: Okay.

00:31:08

SR: And what’s going on underneath the tables that makes them dry?

00:31:11

RC: Well, we use--we use some natural gas heaters, and on the end of the heater there’s an air-forced blower, and the blower blows the hot air up through the screen, which rises through the shrimp. It’s forced through the shrimp. And every once in a while you have to turn the shrimp over and you have to keep an eye on them and make sure nothing happens. And you—once you flip them a few times to get the drying consistent all the way through where it’s uniform and the shrimp are all dried uniform, the same—you don’t want one end of the table still damp and the other end over-drying, so you monitor them like that. And then once they’re ready, they’re ready to be peeled.

00:31:46

SR: And I saw wooden rakes. You called them “Chinese rakes.”

00:31:49

RC: Well, the Chinese rakes—that’s a secret. We can tell you about it, but we’d have to kill you after.

00:31:55

SR: That’s what you use to move the shrimp around?

00:31:58

RC: Yeah. Actually, the reason for the Chinese—not that much of a secret. I’m kidding, you know. In case you die, and—. But actually, the--the Chinese rake is the length of the teeth, and these rakes were the same design that were used on the Chinese platforms a long time ago. And my grandfather had seen them. And we adapted them to the shrimp dried—the modern shrimp dryer. The length of the teeth of the rake is actually the trick because what they’ll do is they’ll go the depth of the shrimp when you’re stirring the shrimp up, compared to, say, a metal rake that the teeth might be three inches, three and a half inches long. They won't reach to the bottom, where these actually do. And that’s the trick to it.

00:32:36

SR: And they’re also—the tines aren't very sharp, so they probably—they don’t hurt—?

00:32:41

RC: No, no, they don't cut the shrimp either.

00:32:41

SR: Yeah.

00:32:43

RC: You don't want to cut the shrimp up, so actually it's—you want to be as gentle as you have to be with the shrimp, so—.

00:32:48

SR: I imagine that the room is pretty steamy while all this is going on.

00:32:53

RC: We run from—. We've never actually, since we've built this new plant we've never ran full capacity yet, and we're hitting temperatures on the--the upper side of 140 degrees, walking through the building, not standing on top of the dryers. This is just walking through the building at 140 degrees. So we anticipate--we anticipate probably a 150--155 degree building, so it should be--be pretty hot.

00:33:19

SR: How does a worker deal with that? I mean, I guess you just can't stay in there for very long.

00:33:23

RC: Pay them well. *[Laughs]* You pay them well. And you let them eat all they can eat.

[Laughs]

00:33:32

SR: I guess. I guess you can tolerate that. I don't think I've ever been in anything that hot, personally.

00:33:36

RC: It's--it's actually—it's not a heat like you'd be standing out in the sun. It's a dry heat, and it's not as bad as it seems. Of course I was raised doing that, so I don't think it was as bad either.

[Laughs] So, but we do; we hire a lot of local boys, and they have a rough time with it. We take--we take good men, and they're almost falling to their knees sometimes, but we give them a drink of water and send them back in. *[Laughs]*

00:34:03

SR: And you were also showing me how you constructed the room so that you can turn on fans to cool it down really quickly. Why would you maybe have to do that?

00:34:13

RC: Well, to--to control the humidity in the building. You want to keep the heat in the building, and the heat is re-circulated, which actually keeps your bills down. And it dries the shrimp that

much quicker. You're not depending on just the heat from the heater. You're actually re-circulating the heat that the heater is providing you. And then the--the fans, we're drawing air out of the building and we--we're taking the damp air out. We're taking the humidity out of the building at certain times. At certain times we actually cut them off to retain the heat in the building. So it's pretty—the design we got on the building is pretty--pretty temperature controlled.

00:34:48

SR: Well, yeah. I'd like to ask you about that. I'm taking us on another detour, but when you—. So, after Katrina you wound up here through a series of events, and you custom-designed this building how you wanted a shrimp drying facility to be. How different is it from the building you were in with your father?

00:35:12

RC: Well, the one my dad had was a wooden-constructed building, and it--it had more or less natural ventilation. And now with--with government regulations and HACCP regulations, your building has to be completely sealed off. And, well, that created a new problem. You now--you're keeping too much dampness in the building. So we had to come up with a series of exhaust events and fans that were approved to take the humidity out of the building. So the building changed quite a bit.

00:35:41

Now, I didn't design it totally by myself. Most of it was--was a copy from Mr. Houston's building. I seen how he did it, and he told me what he could have or should have done, and I kind

of adapted from there; plus, with what I've known from the building from being in the building before I constructed how I thought it should be, too. But I'm a good listener, and I listen--I listened to the old-timers and I respect their opinions. And believe me, I--I base everything on that.

00:36:12

SR: For the record, because we haven't talked about him on the recording yet, could you say who Mr. Houston is?

00:36:17

RC: Oh, Mr. Houston is a lifetime dried shrimp man from Cocodrie. And other than my family, he--he gave me this new opportunity to get back into the business. And he was probably—ah, he told me I was one of the best, but I'd put him as probably the best.

00:36:37

SR: And he—so, again for the record, you bought your equipment from him after Katrina?

00:36:44

RC: Right. He retired and I purchased the equipment. I lost all my equipment from Katrina, and I talked with him and he made me a—he was like the Godfather. He gave me a deal I couldn't refuse. And I purchased his equipment from him, which gave me a start to get back into the business, you know. Now, if it's to start completely from scratch, it would be tough to be in here

and survive. Yeah, you know the cost of everything brand new would be very tough. So it gave me an opportunity to get back in, and it--it seems to be going well.

00:37:15

SR: And the building now, you said it needs to be all sealed off. So this is aluminum—is this an aluminum—?

00:37:19

RC: Well, it's a metal structured building, yeah.

00:37:21

SR: So was your previous plant that you lost—was that grandfathered in? You could—

00:37:25

RC: It was grandfathered in. Yeah, it was all grandfathered in because it had been in existence for so long, but the HACCP people never did like it. **[Laughs]** And it was just an old-style building, and eventually those are going away and everybody that's still in it is going to the new-style building. And that's what you have to do, which is really better. We could see the point, you know—a lot better.

00:37:47

SR:

00:37:46

SR: Can you tell a difference in how the shrimp dries?

00:37:49

RC: No, no, you can't. It still dries the same. It dries—just the sanitary procedures are a lot better now than what it used to be back in those days. We're making a—like I say, we're making a cleaner product, because back then we just had to watch more what we done. The buildings are more sealed off for flies and stuff like that; that's all, and it's a better process. I could see the point.

00:38:15

SR: Okay, so you get to the point where you're—the shrimp on the tables are dry.

00:38:21

RC: Right.

00:38:21

SR: Then what?

00:38:22

RC: Then, from there we monitor them and we—. You know, when I say “monitor them,” that's where the heart of it comes in. You're actually physically checking the shrimp. You're feeling them, you're looking at them, and it's a very hands-on business. You don't just, say, turn

the switch on and it operates. And once they're exactly right, where the moisture content is to the right level that you want, then the shrimp are ready to be peeled. And then from there, they're brought to the beater, which is a round tumbl[er], which I showed you, but it's hard to describe. So, a round—it looks like a large raffle ticket machine, and the shrimp are loaded into there. And from there the machine turns and the peelings fall to the bottom and all the shrimp stay inside the machine. And then it's unloaded from there and you have a—

00:39:08

SR: Okay, I have some questions. [*Laughs*]

00:39:10

RC: Okay, go ahead. [*Laughs*]

00:39:12

SR: I just remembered that you told me about the regulation moisture content. So, can you talk about that?

00:39:18

RC: Right. Well, the HACCP regulation is about 8.5-percent moisture content, and actually we're drying the shrimp—we're bringing it down to about probably 7.5. And if you dry below 7.5, you actually are over-drying the shrimp. And if you go a lot above 7.5, you under-dried it, which you're going to—you're taking a chance putting them on the shelf. So actually, it's a business that more or less regulates itself. In other words, if we under-dry them we're not making

money, and if we over-dry them we can't sell them. So it pretty much regulates itself. We want to stay within those--those guidelines, which also are federal guidelines. But we stay in there and that—it's more or less very easy to comply with.

00:40:00

You know, it's not something like we have to suffer with making this compliance. It pretty much regulates itself.

00:40:05

SR: How do you measure that? How do you know when it's 7.5-percent?

00:40:11

RC: You can feel it. You can actually feel it in your hand. And you can feel the shrimp, and it's the texture, and you--you could tell. You could just—I guess it's an art.

00:40:24

SR: But do you weigh it, or you just—

00:40:26

RC: No.

00:40:26

SR: —you personally know?

00:40:26

RC: No, you just personally know. You get the feel for them.

00:40:30

SR: But if someone were to come in to make sure you were drying them enough how would they be able to tell--by weighing the shrimp or by--how can you--how would they measure the moisture content?

00:40:43

RC: There's actually moisture meters that I'm sure they would check with. One of our dried shrimp wholesalers has a meter, and if he feels—like when we get there to sell, if he feels like the shrimp are a little damper than what they should be, he'll actually put a sample in his--in his meter. And I think it takes like maybe 10 minutes or something, and he'll set the meter there and—that's why the on-hands business is nice. And he'll set the meter right on the desk, and we—as we're talking we're watching the meter. And the--the guy selling the shrimp is hoping that it doesn't go up too high, and he's hoping just the opposite. So actually—and if it does go up a little high, then you say, “Okay—.” If it's not over-dried, if they're under-dried, you could actually bring them back and re-dry them and take a little more moisture out of them, which you don't want to do that because it's cost involved. You want to get it right the first time.

00:41:42

And you know if they're under-dried, well, you're not really making much money, so you learn quickly--you learn quickly how to dry shrimp.

00:41:49

SR: You mean it's—yeah. And if they're over-dried, you're not making much money.

00:41:52

RC: Right. No, you'll notice that on the bottom line when you're going to take that certain lot number. For instance, say you buy 10,000 pounds of fresh shrimp and you dry them. And when you go to sell them the weight is not there. Then you over-dried them. You're not making any money. And then when you also go to sell them, like I said, on the self-regulating, if they're too damp the wholesaler—in other words, not just your opinion. When you get there, the wholesaler is also on-hand, and he's looking at that shrimp closely too. And he's going to say, “Hey, you need to dry them more than this.” And then you also know it. It's good communication. And after just doing it so long, you--you more or less know what's what. And it's not something that you acquire overnight. In other words, I've seen my grandfather drying shrimp, my daddy drying shrimp, and as a little boy you were told just to pay attention, just like a schoolteacher would do—pay attention.

00:42:45

And you didn't realize what you were learning at the time, but every time he'd reach down and he'd grab a few shrimp and felt them, he was feeling how damp they were. And he would more or less tell you to do the same thing, and you just did that and you didn't know what you were really looking for. But after a while you caught on to that's what you were looking for. And it was just a natural feel after a while for it, so—. Pretty interesting. I guess that's where the art of a shrimp dryer, or a non-shrimp-dryer, would be. If you--if you gave a plant like this to somebody that never dried shrimp before, it would be a very expensive education. [*Laughs*]

00:43:22

SR: It would.

00:43:23

RC: It would. It really would.

00:43:25

SR: Okay, so you put them in the raffle spinner.

00:43:29

RC: Right, we call it the “beater.”

00:43:31

SR: The beater.

00:43:32

RC: Yeah.

00:43:32

SR: And it was interesting to me that—so, the shells fall out the bottom and you store the shells in, I don’t know what it is—a little silo?

00:43:40

RC: Right. We store it in a storage container, yeah.

00:43:42

SR: And--and do you sell that to someone?

00:43:44

RC: It's sold, yeah. It's actually used. It's grinded up and it's used as a feed, or some of it used for fish feed like on fish farms and stuff. Some of it's used for fertilizer. It's not a high dollar product, and it's really a—it's a byproduct for us, you know. And if we could get just our expense out of it, we--we're all right with that.

00:44:06

SR: Does someone come pick it up?

00:44:08

RC: Yeah, they pick it up. They pick it up. We would make a call when we have enough of it, and they'll send a truck down and pick up whatever we have—all the peeling. So we actually—we don't have any waste at all. They're just a 100-percent natural product. It's very highly regulated, not only by the government; by us, because we want a good product on the market. If you put a bad product on the market, your sales go down. So we want to make sure that we have an outstanding product hitting the market. And we take pride in it.

00:44:35

And our wholesalers take pride in it, too. So by doing that and, like I said, there's no chemicals added to it. It's 100-percent natural. Only salt added, and it's dried in a clean environment, well-controlled environment, and it's well—how do you say?—well-monitored throughout the whole process.

00:44:58

SR: Right. And, also, you were telling me that you really have to monitor what's going on when the shrimp are in the beater.

00:45:03

RC: Oh yeah, yeah. That's--that's a critical time because once the shrimp are in there—in other words, from the point when the shrimp are actually ready to be beat, they still have heat in them and they're still drying. So it's critical to get them from the dryer to the beater, the raffle ticket machine like you said, [*Laughs*] in a--in a fast rate to get them there before.

00:45:23

Now, once you start knocking the shells off, they're starting to cool down. And they're spinning in this machine. And if you under-beat them, they'll have a lot of parts still left on the shrimp and they'll have shells still left in them. And if you beat them too long, then you're actually losing part of the shrimp itself. So it's very critical to watch on that--that step of the process. You know, that's a little tricky too. And if you—back to the drying learning technique, you can lose a lot of money if you're not paying attention, and it's a very expensive lesson. And I've done that before. I've made mistakes before. I got off track, you know, doing something else and had the machine running and came back and realized that you lost a lot of money in a little

bitty while. So you just take your beating and you say, “Let’s learn from this.” And that’s it, you know.

00:46:12

SR: And then, so, from the beater I can't really remember the next step.

00:46:18

RC: Well, from the beater, the way we were set up our first year back in business, we were set up totally wholesale, and we would sack the shrimp directly out of the beater into like 100-pound sacks. And from there they were shipped direct to the wholesalers, which is Bloom & Bergeron, Gulf Food Products out of New Orleans, and that’s mainly what we focused on. And we’re still maintaining--focusing on those two main—our main customers. Not only because they’re good customers, but it’s traditional and we’ve been dealing for so many years that we wouldn’t want anything to come in between it.

00:46:51

And what we’re trying to do now, we’d like to develop a few new markets, and that’s what we’re working on now. That’s what we’re focusing on now.

00:46:59

SR: I saw the--the—don’t know what they’re called—the conveyor belt that will help people sort out the little bits of sticks and possibly some shell.

00:47:12

RC: Right.

00:47:14

SR: That comes after the beater, right?

00:47:16

RC: Right. That's actually on the finished product end. You would use those, say, if you have an order to—that's ordering a finished product. Then it has to be completely finished. They're not going to go through it and pick, you know, little crab claws that might stay in there, little pieces of shell. They expect all that to be totally clean.

00:47:34

SR: But, before, the wholesalers would kind of deal with that if you sold them a sack?

00:47:38

RC: Right, the wholesalers would do that, yeah.

00:47:39

SR: Previously, or even now, when you--when you're going to sell to a wholesaler, you sell them a big sack and they put them—the shrimp—in their own packaging?

00:47:50

RC: Right, their own packaging under their own label. Now, there's a paper trail that comes all the way back—actually back down to the wood boat that unloaded the product. So we could trace it from the boat to the dock that it was purchased at, to what plant it was dried at, to what wholesaler got it, to actually what grocery store bought it, and almost down to the customer that would actually—may have a complaint. So you could actually—all the way down on paperwork, so it's a well-monitored industry, no doubt.

00:48:21

SR: So, when you do a batch, you're only dealing with the shrimp from one boat?

00:48:27

RC: No, no. We do them, the shrimp, from one lot. In other words, we might buy from—well, not. We don't buy from the boats ourselves, but that dock might have unloaded shrimp from 10 different boats when we got it. But each vat has a label of the weight, the size, and actually the name of the boat that it came off of. So we could monitor it all the way down. And then, if there is a problem, we could track it back down to the source.

00:48:52

SR: But now you're developing your own packaging?

00:48:55

RC: Well, we're starting to, yeah. We're working on it. We'll get there one day. That's a new project. *[Laughs]*

00:49:03

SR: And are you right now on a daily basis waiting to see more little shrimp, or are you waiting for the six barbes season, or—?

00:49:12

RC: No, we're waiting on a daily basis. We're waiting every day. We should be getting smaller shrimp already, and we're getting quite a few phone calls from the wholesalers that are in desperate demand right now. We're actually—we're losing money right now, and the longer that we do without shrimp on the market, the more danger it is of—how you say?—the final purchasers of the shrimp to seek another product to fill the spaces of it. And that's very—that's got us very concerned. In other words, if we can't fill their shelf space, somebody else will, and that's what we're very worried about. And I'm hoping there's shrimp that come in this year because it's a long stretch from now, where we are, 17th, until next brown shrimp season. That's a long stretch.

00:49:57

SR: That's what, May?

00:50:00

RC: That's in May, yeah. All the way down to May. And if customers do without product that much of a time, they're going to find it somewhere else. Whether they have to import it from other countries or not. And then once that happens, that creates a problem. Say the quality from

another country is not quite as good as our domestic shrimp; people get used to eating just lower quality shrimp. I'm not saying that there is worse quality, but I've seen worse quality come into the country. And they're getting a lesser quality shrimp, and they get used to eating that. And then after a while, they say, "This stuff isn't really good." So they quit eating it, and then all of a sudden you're going to try to introduce your domestic stuff back to them. And they're going to say, "We've tried dried shrimp, and it wasn't any good." So then you've lost a customer; it takes a long time to develop a good customer. It takes you years, so that's part of it. We hope the shrimp come in quick.

00:50:50

SR: Yeah, that's--that's a big deal, especially because one thing—. Before I moved to Louisiana, I had experience with dried shrimp, but they were foreign. And they're much drier than the Louisiana dried shrimp, which actually still do have some moisture in them and taste—and seem fresh.

00:51:14

RC: Right, yeah, it makes a better product. You know, so by making a better product, naturally your customers will be more satisfied, and they're willing to pay a little bit more for a higher quality product, so we take pride in that part. *[Laughs]*

00:51:27

SR: Is this maybe your son? Do you snack on dried shrimp?

00:51:34

RC: Oh definite, definite. Definitely do. The best snack in the world. The healthiest snack, too. It's--it's not fattening. It's healthy. It has no--no preservatives or anything else, other than salt, which is a natural preservative. So that's my son. He's actually a fourth generation in the dried shrimp business.

00:51:56

SR: Nice to meet you.

00:51:56

Son: Nice to meet you.

00:51:57

SR: You're Robert as well?

00:51:58

Son: Yes, ma'am.

00:51:59

SR: Very nice to meet you. I'm Sara.

00:52:01

RC: Being that we're being recorded, he's also a defensive tackle for South Lafourche High School. **[Laughs]** Hopefully he'll play for LSU one day. Hope the scouts hear that.

00:52:12

SR: Do you want me to pause for a minute?

00:52:14

RC: Yeah, yeah, do that.

00:52:18

SR: All right, so your son is sitting with us now. I wanted to ask you, so it seems like it would be to your financial advantage to buy from the boats. No?

00:52:31

RC: Well, actually not. In other words, we used to buy from the boats before, and the way I'm seeing it now is I really enjoy drying shrimp, and the purchasing from the boat part, it's almost a different division. And you would have to provide with ice, you'd have to provide with fuel, and by doing this you're going into a totally different line. And by raising my kids myself, I enjoy the freedom that when you're not drying shrimp, you lock the door and you can leave. You can go to football games and spend time with your kids and your grandkids, and it's nice.

00:53:05

Where a shrimp dock, it's almost a year-round, tied-down business, and it's a lot tougher. So I kind of like the freedom that this is providing us, you know.

00:53:16

SR: Right. I guess that would be difficult. I was just thinking, like, you could get a boat to come in here and there, but no. It wouldn't—if you invested in that, you'd become a shrimp dock?

00:53:24

RC: Right, and you don't want to mess the boats up either. A boat more or less sets his--his footprint with a dock, and that boat knows—or the dock will know this boat is good. He catches shrimp and he earns his respect with the dock. And by earning your respect, you treat it a little better than if you're not as good of a boat. Okay, and if I would get a boat once in a while to unload to me, then they would lose more or less their credentials going back to a regular full-time dock. And I don't want to put nobody through that, you know. And the next step to get into the dock part, I think I'm going to stay out of that. I'm getting at an age—maybe if I'd be 30 years younger, maybe I would.

00:54:03

SR: Well, that makes sense to me. Then, I was wondering just about profit. Like, I don't even know how much, let's say, a pound of dried shrimp—how much you can charge for that?

00:54:16

RC: Well, on the wholesale end we—it's from \$7 to \$10 wholesale, by the sack, and we--we're making a living. You know, we're making a living doing that. I'd like to see it increase, but we got to also grow with the market. And as long as our wholesalers are able to stay in business, and

we are, then we're all happy. Everybody has to make a living, and if we could keep it on a fair level like that—they need us, we need them. And if one of us falls out, we're all out. So we all have to make a profit. And one thing, the blessing about doing business with these people, these two main wholesalers that we do, it's at the end of the deal there's always that question: Are you okay? And what that means is: Are you making enough; do we need to increase your pay a little bit on it, or adjust it?

00:55:08

Now, you know everybody would say, "Yeah, I need \$10 a pound extra," but it wouldn't be honest, okay. So there's always that little margin that if you need a little bit more, they might adjust it for you a little better. Now, if they're having trouble in their sales, they might also ask you to work a little closer too. So it comes and goes. It's a level playing field, and I like to see it—keep it like that.

00:55:31

SR: What about buying from the dock? Is it the same sort of—I don't know—friendly atmosphere? I mean, do you negotiate on prices that you're buying from the dock? I guess you mostly buy from someone who you know really well?

00:55:49

RC: Well, no, you--you negotiate, but it's more or less a factory price that we buy. In other words, we don't buy on the retail price because we buy so much quantity, and so you more or less know what the market price is and what the peeling plants are paying for them, and we kind

of base ourselves off of that. And actually, the more you buy the better deal that the dock will give you, too.

00:56:08

If you—you know, if you're buying 10 pounds of shrimp for your personal use, well, naturally you can pay more than if you're buying 10,000 pounds a day, so it's a big difference on that too. And you--you know, you just got to keep up with prices and you'll be all right.

00:56:23

SR: One thing that I've heard again and again is how the price of shrimp has pretty much stagnated for—I don't know—many decades. The consumers are--are spending the same amount to buy shrimp, which is a problem for shrimpers because the price of fuel has gone up. But with this--this down time when consumers haven't had shrimp for a while, or not enough shrimp, because there's kind of been a shortage, will that affect the price of shrimp at all, do you think?

00:56:54

RC: I don't think it's going—I think it's basically—what it is is the seafood business actually moves slow in its prices because if all of a sudden you put the price way up, everybody gets used to living on those figures. And then the next year the prices are back down because you have a large amount of shrimp coming in. And it throws everything off. So I think it has a tendency of just keeping a steady balance on it. You don't ever want it to go up too high and you don't ever want it to go too low, because also if the boats are not making enough and they go out of business, then we're also out of business too. So it's--it's a two-way street on all of it. Everybody has to make a living out of it.

00:57:32

SR: I know. I wanted to ask you: You gave a good analogy earlier about the difference between selling, for example, lumber—dealing in lumber and dealing in seafood.

00:57:45

RC: *[Laughs]* Well, the seafood business is a strange animal to sell. You have to have it bought before you can sell it, and you have to have it sold before you can buy it. And it's kind of tricky if you think about it good. So it's always been a tough thing, which I guess that's what separates seafood people from not.

00:58:02

SR: How long is the shelf life of dried shrimp?

00:58:05

RC: Actually, it's depending on the moisture content. The less moisture in it, the longer the shelf lives will be. And I would say, comfortably putting it, you could go up to two years; in a freezer, probably long as you want. In other words it won't go bad on you. And no one has ever, that I've ever known, had ever gotten sick from eating a dried shrimp. It's the perfect food. If I'd be on a desert island stranded in the middle of the ocean, I'd want a bag of dried shrimp.

[Laughs]

00:58:40

SR: If that isn't a good pitch, I don't know—

00:58:43

RC: And a cold Dixie beer, too. *[Laughs]*

00:58:46

SR: So, switching subjects a little bit, although I want to bring shrimp back into it, can you tell me about your tailgating hobby?

00:58:59

RC: Tailgating, oh yeah, yeah. We have this massive tailgating hobby at all the LSU games, and we serve nothing but Louisiana shrimp. We fry them, we boil them, we make a--a fishermen's spaghetti. My sister makes the best fishermen's spaghetti, which is all cooked in one pot all at the same time. And what--what the definition of a fishermen's spaghetti is, is actually on the old shrimp boats you had a one-burner stove, okay. So everything that you cooked had to be cooked in one pot, all to be actually ready at the same time. So you might have put the noodles in first, and then you added the shrimp and then the tomatoes. You know, all along that process.

00:59:40

And she makes a fishermen's spaghetti that it is the best.

00:59:45

SR: What--what is that exactly?

00:59:47

RC: It's just a shrimp spaghetti. It's a tomato sauce, shrimp spaghetti. Very simple. And we can't tell you all the ingredients; we've have to kill you after.

00:59:58

SR: Well, I don't want that. Does she make that outside when you're tailgating, or does she make it the night before?

01:00:02

RC: No, no, everything we cook is cooked right there at the--at the motor home, and we sit out there and we fry. We got a big deep fryer and we fry—in fact, last game we fried over 50 pounds of shrimp, and we fried--we boiled 90-something pounds of shrimp, and we must have fed, hmm, probably I'd say comfortable 60-something people.

01:00:27

SR: Were these all people you knew?

01:00:28

RC: It's people that we know, and a lot of people just come around when they smell the shrimp boiling. They just stop.

01:00:34

Son: It's amazing what Louisiana shrimp could do. It brings people together, it fills you up, and it's just in the end, it's just a satisfying time.

01:00:41

RC: Oh, I agree.

01:00:42

Son: And I mean they got—everyone who is around will smell it, and then they start coming. And then you'll see people grab a plate, bring it back: they come back for some more. And it's amazing what Louisiana shrimp could do, you know. It really is.

01:00:57

SR: Do you charge people?

01:00:58

RC: No way in the world.

01:00:59

Son: That's--that's the thing about Louisiana shrimp. It also comes with hospitality.

01:01:05

RC: Oh, there you go. I like that. Yeah, you're right. That's a good way to put it.

01:01:07

SR: Is he already taking marketing classes?

01:01:11

RC: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

01:01:12

SR: I think so.

01:01:12

RC: You know, what he just said does make sense. We--we start up this big cooking, and we cook and we have the tables laid out and we just start dumping the boiled shrimp and everybody is welcome. We have all kinds of people that just show up. It's pretty interesting.

01:01:28

SR: So you're at the LSU game?

01:01:31

RC: Oh definite.

01:01:31

SR: Before the game?

01:01:31

RC: Before the game and after the game. So, we put on the dinner before the game and after the game.

01:01:36

SR: Do you go watch the game?

01:01:38

RC: Oh definite. Yeah, whenever we can. You know, sometimes we have tickets and sometimes we don't. So it--it's all good. If not, we watch it on the TV outside at the game, so it's all good. And then we eat even more if we're standing outside the game, and we cook even more and eat even more. But we fry shrimp; like I said, they got--they got people—once you start cooking, people are around, and you see people and they--they got good food too, and they're barbequing and they're cooking this and that. But once we start the seafood thing—and we see, and you know we kind of watch, and you see, they got four or five people at this motor home. They got six--seven people at this one. But we got 60 people, and it's like it kind of tells you something. It tells you what the people like to eat. And we do a good fresh seafood, and you and your husband need to come one time.

01:02:25

SR: I'll do it. Do you make it—?

01:02:25

RC: Long as you drop the Ole Miss stuff. [*Laughs*]

01:02:29

SR: Do you make anything with the dried shrimp when you tailgate?

01:02:31

RC: We bring some and we just put—we never cooked anything with them yet at a game, but we just put some out on the table for people to eat as snacks, you know, and that's a good little promotional thing too. A lot of people look at them and not sure what to do with them, and you open you a cold beer and eat you a few, and that--that goes well. And the people that know about them eat a lot of them. I find it's a product that you either—either you are familiar with it or you're not at all familiar with it. There's not much in-between, and that's what we're going to try to do. We're going to try to get it to where it's more of a—how you say—attainable product, and where people are more familiar with how to cook it.

01:03:13

I think over the years the sales were, you know, you could go in a store and you'd see dried shrimp sitting on a little rack. And you buy the little bag. And there's no instructions; there's no idea. You might look at it and not know really what it's for. Now, most Cajun people eat it as popcorn. Asian people cook with it. I just think that a little marketing strategy could bring it a long ways. And that's what I'm really—that's what we're looking at; we're focusing on that.

01:03:44

Son: Our goal--our goal is to almost make it the same as you would buy a bag of Lay's potato chips in a store. And one day, we feel we could reach that goal, which would be really great for all of us, but it's going to take a lot of hard work and we got a lot of things to figure out. But at the same time, we know we got that big task ahead of us, but we still know that it could be there one day. And like we said, we want to make it where it's like a bag of Lay's potato chips, or if you would rather cook with it, it's like buying some ground meat at the store. You would want to do it and it's known, so that's really our goal—where we want to get it.

01:04:22

RC: That's right, but we'll get there. And in the meantime, you know what? We're going to be happy.

01:04:29

SR: I think your tailgating habit probably keeps you happy.

01:04:32

RC: Oh that keeps us very happy, as long as we're winning. *[Laughs]*

01:04:36

SR: You said that you also do that for away games.

01:04:38

RC: We do a lot of away games, too, yeah. Not all of them, but we--we do like the—as far as Texas, Tennessee, Alabama—definitely Alabama—and the Mississippi games, too. When they're nice to us. If they're not nice to us, we don't feed them either.

01:04:52

SR: And where do you get the shrimp?

01:04:55

RC: All from Dean Blanchard's Seafood. Yeah, all of it is local shrimp caught right here and unloaded right there at Dean Blanchard's Seafood, yeah.

01:05:01

SR: And you have a motor home that you take all this equipment—?

01:05:04

RC: Well, actually, it's Dean's motor home, and Dean provides the motor home and we do all the cooking, and it's my brother-in-law so we all go together and we feed a tremendous amount of people—all kinds. We meet so many people, and just different people from all over the state, from out of state traveling with different football teams, and it's nice to see. And we try to provide them with a good—how would you say that—a good, when they leave Louisiana, they feel good and they want to come back. You know, and if they ever see our product on the market, they're going to also say, "That's a good product." Pretty good, you know. **[Laughs]**

01:05:43

SR: Well, I'm going to come visit you. I just have a couple—I'm ready to wrap this up, but I realized that one of the holes in our interview is that you explained to me before we started recording how you came about getting this building, and maybe you could just tell me, for the record, who you bought this building from and--and where it is.

01:06:06

RC: Okay. Well, actually—actually, I was getting ready to—I had purchased the equipment before the building, you know, so I guess you could say the cart before the horse. And I had--I had already purchased the equipment with the anticipation of buying a building. And then I was approached by the Grand Isle Port Commission, and they had this building already on the piece of property that they bought. And they made me an offer I couldn't refuse, so I ended up extending the building and adding on to it quite a bit, and we put quite a bit of money into it and we set up the equipment in it, and we've been operating ever since.

01:06:40

SR: You're--just for the record, you're right on the water. It's beautiful.

01:06:43

RC: Oh, isn't that nice? Beautiful sunsets, too, yeah.

01:06:48

SR: And what was in this building before?

01:06:50

RC: It was actually a shrimp dock before, and the owner of it before had retired and he sold the property to the Grand Isle Port Commission, and that's where we came in, after that, so—.

01:07:01

SR: Okay, and then one last question. You are a very positive person, and you've told me a lot of things that you like, but what is your favorite--your favorite part about being in this business and the work that you do?

01:07:14

RC: Oh, favorite part. I guess all of it. It would have to be all of it, yeah. Every--every piece of it. It's hard work, a lot of hours, but the people you associate with are great, and it's a perfect business, you know. I can't see anything else to do. *[Laughs]*

01:07:37

SR: Thank you so much for giving me your time.

01:07:38

RC: For sure.

01:07:38

SR: It was really, really a pleasure. And thank you for coming in and giving us the next generation's perspective.

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Son: I appreciate it. It was a fun time.

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SR: Thank you.

01:07:51

RC: And we're looking forward to many more years, really, yeah.

01:07:54

[End Robert Collins Interview]