

PETER NGUYEN
National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies – Biloxi, MS

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Interviewer: Francis Lam
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Project: Ethnicity in the Seafood Industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

[Begin Peter Nguyen Interview]

00:00:01

Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Friday, August 22, 2008. I'm with Peter Nguyen at the Hope Coordination Center in Biloxi, Mississippi, and we're going to be talking about his days shrimping the Gulf and his experience growing up here in the Vietnamese shrimping community. Would you please state your name, age, and occupation for the record?

00:00:24

Peter Nguyen: My name is Peter Nguyen and I work with the NAVASA, National American Vietnamese—yeah Vietnamese American Alliance. [*National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies*] And I do research with the local fishermen and get some data—information about how the fishermen life in the Coast.

00:01:02

FL: And your age also?

00:01:04

PN: I'm 40 years old.

00:01:07

FL: Where were you born, Peter?

00:01:08

PN: I was born in Vietnam, Phuong Chou, Vietnam— Phuong Chau, Vietnam in 1967.

00:01:17

FL: And your family—when did your family come here, and by here I mean the United States, and then when did they arrive in Biloxi?

00:01:25

PN: We came to the United States back in 1975 and my family got sponsored by the Catholic in Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and we lived there and we—about a couple of months and then we moved onto Oklahoma, and then Texas, and Louisiana and then we came to Mississippi—Biloxi, Mississippi back in 1980. And since then we've been living here for 28 years now; yeah.

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FL: And why—so you traveled—your family moved in a lot of different places and it sounds like a short period of time. Why did you come to Mississippi; why did you come to Biloxi?

00:02:19

PN: Well before we—our parents, my parents, they don't know what to do with their occupation. They don't speak English and they don't —before they started and how to heard a rumor that Mississippi people they have like shucking oysters and doing the shrimping business that—that's the only time they can earn money and make money to support us. And they have in Mississippi and Louisiana, they—a lot of Asian and Vietnamese people that are shucking oysters and trying

to be—for the woman it's shucking oysters and for the man it's trying to get a fisherman's life — Background before, there was my parents and my uncle and brother and sisters; they were all fishermen in Vietnam already. So back then that's the only thing they know how to do, and to support family and that's—. When I grow up and I taken over my father's footsteps and follow him and be a fisherman, too and I've been a fisherman over 15 years now. And right now my father, he's retired and I just been out of the fishing, shrimping business just after Katrina, after the storm about three and a half years now.

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FL: So I definitely want to come to your experience fishing the Gulf, but maybe we could go back to when you arrived. Do you remember arriving in Biloxi; do you remember your first impressions? Do you remember—?

00:04:07

PN: Well, my first impression, I was still in school at that time. I was about—I think I was only about 12—13 years old. I'd go to school and I didn't finish school and I got up to about middle school and ninth grade. After that my dad, he's a fisherman at that time and he needed my support. And we—we need—I need to help him how to operate a fishing vessel—shrimping. You have to be an American citizen, so he don't have American citizen, so I have to drop out of school and so at that time I was 18. After that I have to drop out of school for a couple of years until I get 18, and to get American citizen and to operate a shrimp boat. That's the law. So since that I've been helping him and working with him and being a shrimper all my life.

00:05:10

FL: So you said you were in school; you came here at 12. You were at school here for five or six years and then you left school to run the shrimp boat?

00:05:20

PN: Yeah; I left school. I dropped out school to help my—my family because they needed me and—they don't speak English very well and they needed my support and I have no other choice beside helping my family. And I got two sisters and a brother, and just trying to help the family out on running the business to support the family. And we've been shrimping since then, so like I said after the storm, my family, my dad, he's retired. He been in the business for so many years and with all those kinds of—affect us and very hurtful. We got a lot of things destroyed by the hurricane and impact that we can't imagine, and it's making us feel very, very sad and after that we all started from the bottom and we get—got to the top where we wanted and Katrina just take everything away from us and we—are trying to survive now. *[Laughs]*

And so that now after the storm I had—I'm no longer in the business, the shrimping, and I started with the new job with the outreach working for the Mississippi State University Extension trying to help with the fishermen doing research. And help them out, whatever they need, like translation and all those kinds of work I done for them. And like put it on a lot of technical stuff like government, what I call it—it's like—I can't even think it. Like, help them with their documentation or regulation from the government and all the— From whatever they don't understand and what kind of—in the future, in the long run, what's coming down to them and help them to prepare them for the future.

00:07:54

FL: And the fishermen that you work with now, are these fishermen typically that you knew personally from the community or from working?

00:08:02

PN: No; it's all we have a lot of—what 300 fishermen in the local shrimping and from—from local—from Gulfport, Pass Christian and Bayou La Batre and Long Beach all the way, you know? I do research, almost 100 fishermen in a month. And they're all local fishermen and work really hard and the majority is my—I still have some uncles and relatives still in the shrimping business right now, and they try to hang on—hang in there. And because of the economy is so different now, because the fuel price is sky high and the shrimp price is dropping each day, and we have a lot of imported shrimp and it's very—affecting the shrimping right now. And there's nothing we can do about it which is—. I know the local fishermen are trying to hang in there and do what—the best they can you know?

00:09:07

FL: You just mentioned you had uncles and cousins in the industry. Were there here when you—when your family first got here and got involved in shrimping here?

00:09:16

PN: No; they came after that, back in the '90s and then we started a lot of Vietnamese know about shrimp and business and then they come from everywhere. They come from, like different States like California, Florida, and Louisiana, Texas, and started out here. And same thing, like before, back then there were a lot of people—oyster business was very big at that time and—. But we—we still have a lot of shrimping. My friend and my cousin they're all still in the shrimp

business right now. And about probably just about let me see about 15—20 percent of others are in the shrimp business right now but the majority they—they still have some shrimping out there.

00:10:19

FL: Was that 15—20-percent of your family here?

00:10:23

PN: Fifteen—twenty-percent of the—my family, yeah. And we have a lot of shrimpers that is not related to my family, but in our generation yeah; that's what percent we have. And before we had more than that but they are starting like getting out of the business and doing something else. They still live here but they want to do like some other business besides shrimping now, like opening a gas station store or grocery or dry-clean or nail salon or something like that.

00:11:13

FL: So let's get back to the present in a little bit, and for the time being if you wouldn't mind if we sort of go back—back to when your family arrived. You said that your family came because they had heard that you can get work here in the seafood industry, and yet you didn't have family members here. When you arrived were there very many Vietnamese people? Did you arrive and live in the Vietnamese community?

00:11:40

PN: Well back—my uncle, he was live here before. We were living in New Orleans and he—my uncle, he got a big—my uncle, he got a big family. He got about 14 kids and the majority is boys and he lived here. And he know that seafood industry here because he have a good friend, Mr.

Richard Gollott. He's a seafood processor here; at that time he was the seafood oyster processor. Now he's no longer—he's now learned the shrimp processing. And he know him; he's a good friend of my uncle, and take care of the Vietnamese community. And showed them and guide them the way how to earn money, with like—at that time they're just shucking oysters and the man is going—started out as a deckhand for shrimping and—and the more we get into it and get experience, then we build up our community and we start—. My uncle started calling every friend and relative close—to come down here and we all started right behind him and setting up and we start moving up, you know?

00:12:51

FL: And so what were—what were some of the jobs that you've had in shrimping? You were a deckhand and you were a captain?

00:13:00

PN: Well I was a deckhand before, yeah; I was 18. I started as a deckhand until I became 18 and I get my citizenship. I became a captain and I know how to operate the boat with my dad, like helping him out and navigating and stuff like that. And as a part of the deckhand requirement, too. And we worked for many years until I started up —until I have family of my own and I have my own boat and everything. And not too long, I have a very nice boat and save up all the money for that. I got a very big boat and lot of money on that—spent a lot of money on that. And with the help from the SBA loan, government loan and help out with financing and working for about four years, and then Katrina start coming in and everything was completely out of the way I wanted. And we can't handle the mortgage no more, and right now, like if the price of the fuel is just so high and that's—I don't think I can make with this kind of payment with this. We—

before you can but now everything is so high that's—whatever you make is it's spending on the fuel and the equipment and all kinds of expenses—too much. We can't—not handle that right now. **[Laughs]**

00:14:50

FL: What's—you just mentioned the boat you had was very big. What was the size of that boat?

00:14:57

PN: Well I've got a 95-foot steel hull with a 720 horsepower on that, and my mortgage is so high that I can't keep up with it. I have to pay about \$10,000 a month and every trip I went, if I—back then it was 2004—from 2000 to 2004 it's okay. If you make around what \$60,000—\$70,000 or \$80,000, you can barely pay the money and all the expenses and your deckhand and your crew and everything. You probably have a couple thousand left for the home mortgage. I mean food and expenses for your family. And because insurance and the mortgage is so high, and I don't think I can make it through that way. That why I give it up and I—nothing I can do about it. And if I'm a couple months behind on the payment, then they just come down and took it away from me, everything I own. **[Laughs]** Well, now I still in debt and it's a very sad feeling and every time I think about it, you know, it's really hurting me and I— I just hope I can get it out of my mind but really a tragedy after the storm. A lot of people got affected and hurt by that.

00:16:33

FL: I'm sorry to hear that. So your boat—I'm sorry; did you—so you gave up the boat?

00:16:43

PN: Yeah; I gave up the boat because I still owe a lot of money on the bank, because I got to go through the bank and if you don't pay I mean if you don't pay mortgage, of course they come and get your— they just take it away from you and nothing you can do. And a lot of fishermen got—I think about 20—30-percent of the fishermen on those years, a lot of people got hurt by that because they can't pay their mortgage on the boat, yeah.

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FL: So when you were still shrimping, how long a time would you go out at a time?

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PN: Well we have in—in Mississippi we've got three types of boats. We've got a boat like mine I was talking about; it's a freezer boat, and we can stay out at least from four to six weeks out in the sea until our fuels and our food supply, our water, and our fuel is ran out; we come in. If nothing like—bad weather or anything or storming or hurricane we can stay out there and we can shrimp right along the Gulf Coast from Mississippi all the way down to Texas and you know? It's a long trip. But the ice boat they can only stay around two weeks because the ice boat has to come in and sell their catch before the shrimp get bad. But on the freezer boat you can freeze it up as long as you want just like freezing shrimp. You put it in the freezer and it'll stay like that fresh all the time. And we got a little skimmer boat working the Back Bay; they can only stay out there about three or four days and they come in because they—they're working right off the beach on the Coast right there. But on the freezer we stay out pretty long; we stay out about four to six weeks.

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FL: And you said you would go all the way down to Texas. Where would you—typically where would you go to do your shrimping? Where were the fishing grounds you would go?

00:18:46

PN: Well we're shrimping everywhere. It's hard to tell. We—we shrimped in Galveston. We—we shrimping in Cameron and we shrimp in—on all the way down to what you call—Corpus Christi when the Texas season is opening. We shrimp all the way down there, all the way down to Corpus Christi at the end of Texas, and Houma and we shrimped in Port Arthur and Galveston and Cameron, almost everywhere in—yeah that's when Texas season starts in—in July and—and we come down there and stay and shrimp down there through that area.

00:19:31

FL: So the season would start at different times?

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PN: Yes; every place—every State had their own different times of season opens, right. In Biloxi we have June; sometimes at the end of the June, sometime the end of June, and in Louisiana they have—I mean Texas they have in July and well, Louisiana, they open only different kind of zone for different kind of boat . If you are working offshore you can shrimp all year long if you have a license, and you're in federal water, you got a license, you can shrimp all year long and it don't close if you're in federal water—offshore outside three miles. You can shrimp until you renew your license.

00:20:31

FL: So even though you're based in Biloxi you can go out—

00:20:34

PN: Yeah.

00:20:34

FL: —far away and you could just follow the different—follow different seasons?

00:20:39

PN: Yeah; well if you live in Mississippi and you want to shrimp in Mississippi—I mean Louisiana water you have to get the license every year. Like you want to go shrimp in Texas you got to get that license and you want to shrimp Florida you have to get their license too—everywhere. You can shrimp anywhere as long as you have the license, yeah.

00:21:00

FL: How would you—how would what was a good spot to open your nets?

00:21:05

PN: Oh to—that's because we have a thing called a try-net and we'd drop it down and we'd work it and we'd test it and we'd pull up every 20 or 30 minutes and it's kind of smaller net than the one we're pulling right now, the regular net. And they tell us what is under there and what we catch and what kind of fish or shrimp we need. If we don't have it, we just pick up and go to different spot and we have friend and relative communicate with the VHF radio. And on a lot of people out there every day become your friend, or your brother or you relative, that's how we

communicate with them and—and with the—for—you're in the business too long what you're doing. How to navigate good. You have to know how to navigate and know what you're doing and listen to the weather and so you can predict the weather and the current and the water—high tide, low tide. That's the good thing; you'll become a shrimper and you have to know all these things, and being a shrimper too long I think you have no problem with that, yeah.

00:22:29

FL: And I heard from other interviews that there are different shrimp species at different times, different seasons—brown shrimp, white shrimp, pink shrimp, hopper shrimp. Was there a particular type of shrimp that you preferred to catch for any reason or they—would it be different? Would you have to do different things to catch the different kinds of shrimp?

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PN: No; the only thing is they have brown shrimp; we have species—brown shrimp. We have pink shrimp; we got white shrimp; and we have—see brown shrimp, if you catch them in deepwater, like 60 feet out to 200 feet or 300 feet, different kind of gear. And for this white shrimp, you shrimp in shallow water and different kind of gear. And that's how we compare to the—the shrimp season for the white is they don't start I think around September, 'til December. Sometimes they get a little bit earlier—August, right now and yeah; but the brown shrimp season is all year long. You can catch the brown every time of the month—every month of the year. You have to go deep—deepwater and you catch them. The more deeper you go it's—the bigger the shrimp yeah; it's shallow you get small shrimp but the more deeper you go that's how you see them big jumbo shrimp and it's more deeper—and it's brown shrimp.

00:24:12

FL: So would you prefer to go for a particular type of shrimp? I mean the bigger shrimp get you a bigger—a better price, right, so do you prefer to go for that or do you—?

00:24:21

PN: Well it's kind of hard to tell but sometimes it's a deeper, go, but if they don't catch as much as the small shrimp. Because in shallow water the majority of the shallow water have more shrimp than—the deeper shrimp because the—because—because they're so big and it's deeper and—and it's very—affect you like you go like 200 feet, 300 feet and it takes about 30 minutes. You got your fishing gear up and how much you catch, but on the shallow water it takes you about 10 or 15 minutes, and you can get your gear up and get back to work. But out there in the deepwater everything—you take too long, and it's dangerous and you can —working on deepwater it's very—affect your equipment, a lot, because you take too long and to operate the equipment and put it down and pick it up and check back 30 or 40 minutes, get up on the—. In the shallow water you only check about 10 to 15 minutes and you're back on your feet again. But it's kind of hard, but the majority of people —it depends on the season, like what month—opening season from June—. I mean usually we open in May, and people are working in shallow water more than deepwater. Only the brown season they work on the deepwater since like from around October, November, to January and through February. That's because when the—only the brown season is good for that kind of month; uh-hm.

00:26:19

FL: So actually could you describe a little bit how you would use the gear, how it actually works? I know you said first you put a try-net and you pull that up—the smaller net to see what

you have there and then later can you actually—can you describe the process of actually catching and then hauling up the shrimp?

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PN: Yeah; we have doors and we have trawl nets and you have to see it to describe but I'm going to tell you a little bit about how they—. Well the bigger the boat, the—they use a bigger net, like a 50-foot net. That's the net. And this is what we call a door and this is the outrigger. We let it down and we come down and we check everything out. This is the try-net right there. That's one —24/7 you have to be underwater and you have to pick up every 30 minutes or 40 minutes; sometimes you can leave it for an hour. And then you pick it up and while all this is still underwater and working you see they have shrimp and you just work right along, navigate your GPS. But yeah; we use—that's what—how we know if we have a—probably we're from here to here and they have shrimp or something we just turn around and go back and stay in the same track, and that's how—. Yeah; we use net—nylon net and door. We call this door and we have particular chains—how to—the shrimp had to hit the chain to pop up in your net or you have any kind of—just on the ground when you pull the chain, it got a little bit of chains under—everything you pop up. This is the chain that pops up and the fish or shrimp or whatever they'll come into your net, and that's how we—we catch them.

00:28:12

FL: And then when you haul—and then you haul the whole net up onto the boat and empty the net and then what do you do?

00:28:18

PN: Well when—when we empty the bag we got a bag right here. We empty it out and every deckhand has to sit down and pick it and sort it out. Like which shrimp go with which one—small, big. And fish go—any kind of fish you want to catch you’ve got to separate—all the rest of it; you just—the chum, what we call a chum, a non-specie that you don’t want you just throw them overboard; yeah.

00:28:43

FL: Did you enjoy this work?

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PN: Before yes; **[Laughs]** but now thinking about, I don’t think I don’t want—. Yeah; before it’s—because our economy before was very good and everything was going great and smooth and nothing so bad. And these days, but now everything is changed so much. You can tell even gas prices—fuel prices are sky high. And I miss it a lot but — I don’t know if I ever want to come—be back in the shrimping business anymore. **[Laughs]** It’s very hard work and you have to focus, and you have to stay away from home and spend too much time out there —stay from your family and you kind of miss the family and everything, all kinds of stuff, you know? And—and when you get in you don’t get to stay pretty long—got to see everyone three or four days—two or three days and you had to go—go back out and shrimping again.

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FL: So even if it were economically viable for you at this point you said you wouldn’t go back out anymore?

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PN: No; I don't think I ever want to do it because it's very tough work. And it's take over halfway of my life and it got me going nowhere. I'm still the same, you know? And I just want new life now—change the whole thing around because I've been there—spend so many times in the shrimp business and I got nothing out of it, you know? I built it up; I start it up. And when I came to realize I had something, and the world—the whole world is changing around me now. And I've been through that and I don't think I want to be a fisherman or shrimper anymore. I know a lot of fishermen, they're out there and hanging onto it and I know if they can't do something—they can sell their boat with a good deal or a good price, I think they want out of the business, too.

00:31:09

FL: Really? That's the fishermen you work with now you—that's the general feeling you get?

00:31:13

PN: Yeah; they have the same feeling. I've been running into them now—even if they're doing good and everything, but they just got tired of it or something and it's hard work and—and it's very kind of lonely life out there; yeah. *[Laughs]*

00:31:32

FL: And your work now in doing outreach to fishermen do you work specifically with Vietnamese fishermen or do you work with—?

00:31:42

PN: I just—specialize just Vietnamese and because they know, but they don't speak English a lot. And that's the kind of problem they have now because every—they don't want to speak and some of them speak a little bit English, or some of them don't speak it at all. And they don't—I don't know what the— if I can help them with it, because I've been there. I know how they're doing and I know their thoughts and their feelings, and I just trying to help them out the best I can. And help them—better future or something to help them out, new kind of special equipment that I'm working on right now just kind of saves some fuel on the long run, you know? That's what I'm working on—the webbing and the technical stuff for the future. Even if the fuel is high that's what I'm working on right now is this new kind of webbing that is imported from Indonesia, yeah. And with the webbing the net and help them catch better shrimp, more shrimp, and reduce—it's very light and it's reduced the fuel; saving, you know?

00:33:15

FL: You don't—but you had also mentioned that part of you misses being on the water; part of you misses the work. What do you miss about it?

00:33:25

PN: Well the good thing is I miss the seafood, the fresh fish and fresh shrimp you eat. You catch them while they're still alive and you cook them right away and you eat it. And all these nice things when you—all kinds of fish you catch and all kinds of shrimp and all this—there's a lot of species. And you can watch the sun rise and get to navigate the boat and working through the weather and all kind of stuff. Communicate with other fishermen and—and how you— sees things different from the inside world, from the land compared to the land job and the fishing job. Everything is very different. Like even the whole—different thing out there when you're in

the water and everything is not right and you see something—you see something you've never seen before, something on the water or wherever you go it's different. You see a lot of—interesting every day, you know? The best part is see the sunrise in the morning. **[Laughs]**

00:34:48

FL: You mentioned one other thing—the first thing actually, you mentioned when I asked you what you missed is you missed the food—you missed the seafood. Did you grow up eating a lot of seafood? You said your family were always fishermen.

00:35:01

PN: Yeah; we eat—the majority we eat a lot of fresh I mean food and not even—not too many frozen, fresh catch like ice, but when you're out there you eat everything is fresh, live like—. Of course and shrimp is fresh and fresh catch and it kind of tastes a lot different and very juicy and because it's live, just like when you go out there to go fishing you bring home with a live fish and you cook them. Of course it's got to taste better than when you put it on ice or something. And crab, fish, all kind of stuff that you can name it; whatever you want—whatever you want to eat—. **[Laughs]**

00:35:40

FL: Do you cook?

00:35:42

PN: Yes; I cook. I do—when I was the captain and owner I always cooked for my deckhands and they love it; they enjoy it. That’s why they say I’m good cooker and I cook at home and I love to cook.

00:36:00

FL: What are some of your favorite dishes or what are some of the favorite things you would do with this—with your catch?

00:36:06

PN: Well we cooked our fish a lot out there in a special—what kind of fish we got. Sometimes we’d get a good fish, like flounder or red fish or some—lot of nice fish out there you got. And we usually cook it in our Asian tradition way. We fry and we bake them and we do rice paste rolling, like with the shrimp we can do spring rolls. And we cook—we’ve had a lot of this—I got lot of this and it’s hard to tell—to explain—interpret to an American dish; it’s kind of the other way around —. [*Laughs*]

00:37:00

FL: Can you, well can you describe—like would you do a lot of soups, would you do a lot of stews? Can you explain some of the—some of the dishes you’d like to cook even if we don’t know the name?

00:37:12

PN: Well on a fish we call in the Vietnamese dish we use it with white rice and we call it *canh chua* [*sour and spicy soup*] — or *ca kho to* [*fish stew*]. Or on the shrimp, we call it *cuon banh*

trang [*rice paper rolls*] and *tom kho* [*shrimp stew*], *tom rang* [*shrimp tomato stirfry*]. And sometimes we crawfish style—crawfish style flavor like in the South here, how the Americans—they boil crawfish. We use that recipe—I use that recipe to boil shrimp and boil crab. Oh, it tastes delicious, awesome and I’m good at that too. I love crawfish and I got that flavor and I cook them, same thing like—it’s only a different species, but you can represent shrimp and then crab and then crawfish, beside crawfish, you know? And yeah, I think my crawfish style is very good. I have never had a friend that—no, **[Laughs]** well where did you get this recipe? I made that recipe and they enjoy it. And some of them, they don’t believe me or my friend when they eat it and they tried it and they said, “This guy is very good at crawfish boil—shrimp boil; you should try it. It’s the best in the Coast.” I don’t have no restaurant but —**[Laughs]** and they don’t believe it, so next time I saw them, okay I boiled for them, and the rumor get out—out—the word but—yeah. **[Laughs]** We have crawfish season every—in Mississippi, we have crawfish boils, very popular and very good.

00:38:52

FL: Okay; so back on the boat. You’ve eaten; now you’re full. You still have all this catch that’s lying on the boat. You’ve sorted it out; you’ve thrown all the chum off. You had a freezer boat you said, so then—.

00:39:05

PN: Yeah; I had a freezer boat, freezer boat. Like anything you—you want to save it, you just put it in your freezer and it’s froze up when you come home. You come in the dock and you take it home with you—even shrimp, fish, what—anything you want. Yeah; that’s one thing good about freezer boat. You can get everything freezed up, but an ice boat you had to worry—oh we

ran out of ice. I got to go in and an ice boat you cannot stay long. The longer you stay, it will hurt you and it will, like your shrimp will go bad, and I mean you will lose money on that you know? That's how they work; that's how the ice boat work.

00:39:39

FL: So when you bring it back to Biloxi you would deliver it to a processor. Were—was it—was it one specific processor you would deliver to or did you—?

00:39:45

PN: Yeah.

00:39:47

FL: How did you decide who to deliver it—?

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PN: We unload—like we have a lot processors here, like before—still now my friend and relatives, they unload with primarily Richard Gollott. He's still seafood processing and going back—back in the '80s—he started in '70s. Well he's still in business now; very, very good man, he's just like a father to me and my uncle and a very good man. He helped with the Vietnamese community and bring up the Vietnamese community in Biloxi. Everybody knows him and comes to him that—those years because he worked so well with the Vietnamese and they—he understand us and the feeling and thought, and he help us out through the kind of—any kind of problem we had. Because we—he need us and we need him to stay together and build up together with the fishing way of life here. And yeah; we unload. He still— we still right now

we're still unloading shrimp off of his dock and that's where we sell our catch and he brings it to his processing and he do whatever he do.

00:40:54

FL: How much would you get for a catch?

00:40:56

PN: It depends. Sometimes you hit the jackpot and you get a better catch and you—sometimes you don't—on the right spot but it depends on where you're shrimping and how you operate your boat and how you navigate. And it depends what—. Right now, like for example, \$4.00 a gallon for fuel right now. And you need at least to make around \$2,000 or \$3,000 a catch so you can—so you can survive so you can make an effort. You spend about \$1,500 on the fuels already, you know? For my boat, if you're making about \$2,000 a catch, you, if you spend \$1,000 on the fuel and you only got \$1,000 or maybe sometimes you make less than that. Maybe you make \$2,000 a catch but you—your fuel is burning with the \$4.00 a gallon about \$1,500 really and you have a lot of expense going through there. But you need to average at least for a catch now from \$2,000 above or \$3,000 above to with this kind of—the economy—the fuel price right now.

00:42:14

Before, you can make about \$700—\$800 a catch and you can—that's good; that's a good catch. But now, on the big boat like I have—I used to have you got at least about \$3,000 to \$5,000 up to make—let's say you've been—let's calculate that up; you get \$3,000 a catch and you been out there 20 days and you divide it by the day you get four—four drags and then you do the math on that and see. If it's equal you make an average of about \$3,000 a catch and you

spend about let's say 30 days and four hours—four—four drags a day, 24 hours—four drags and you will figure out how much per day in the trip—sometimes less and sometimes more .

00:43:01

FL: So in a 20-day trip you might make \$3,000 and you need that at least to survive. And what about labor; how many deckhands would you have on a boat that size?

00:43:11

PN: We have—before, we had three for my boat right now because deckhands is cutting out every day each day I think because of the fuel prices. Everything is hurt on the fuel price and make no money on—and they complain about is fuel expense and whatever they're catching they make enough to pay fuel. Why they want to work, —got to pay about three deckhands—three deckhands about—sometimes on the ice boat only two deckhands right now. Before it's four—for the freezer, it's four deckhands; right now it's only three deckhands. For the ice boat it's three deckhands; right now it's only two deckhands. Because the deckhands want to cut the deckhands one off so they can make a little bit of profit out because—. Yeah; the fuels and the shrimp price, it's very different from back in the old days.

00:44:08

FL: I'd heard that, at least in the beginning, when the Vietnamese people started to get shrimp boats and started to go out and do the shrimping that they worked in a different way than some of the white shrimpers who were already out there. They had a different technique that someone referred to as chopsticks. Can you explain that?

00:44:30

PN: Oh the chopsticks. Before, but right—before you—chopsticks is like from a foreign country back in Vietnam we used chopsticks and it catch really good—better than any other trawl. But that's the reason why that the law—don't let them to do that anymore. Before it's not illegal; now it's illegal because, I don't know why, because —. It did catch more better shrimp and less fuels and it help a lot, but they're not allowed to no more.

00:45:05

FL: Could you explain what that was—what the chopsticks were?

00:45:09

PN: Well the chopsticks like you could see what we call a chopstick, like they have the two—how one of them like your—your light pole, yeah. They use two of those about—let me see about 40-foot long for each and they put it on—on top of the boat, about 40-foot boat and they—they put down in the water like—like this [*Gestures*] like that in the front of the—the boat. And they stick down in the water and all they do is they just pushing—and the net is right here; see the net—.

00:45:47

FL: So the net; so they—they would put the pole out at an angle?

00:45:51

PN: Yeah.

00:45:51

FL: To each other, like a V?

00:45:54

PN: Yeah; underwater and they're just pushing okay—the net—. When you put all—this is about 40-foot like the—the pine light pole underwater, they only can shrimp in shallow—very shallow water. The more shallow the better for them—I think about 10—15-foot less, nothing—nothing longer, because the light pole is not very long. And you want to go underwater and check the ground and the net is right here. And your propeller and everything and they won't disturb the shrimp, because the net and everything is so quiet and smooth. That's why they catch good and don't make noise and all kind of stuff —different, a lot of different from the door and everything. But catch good and very easy, very lightweight and they only can work on calm weather. If the weather is rough they can't do them; they're going to break their chopsticks, so they have to be smooth like—very like smooth and not too rough and that's how they catch them because that's—that's why —probably the government doesn't want let them use it, because it's very —. And it don't cost much and you have to put so many money on it—on the—they created it from their country. That's how they do it back in Vietnam, and then they—it just put that in their memory, and come over and see them trying it, and they work for a couple months and said what is this guy doing? [*Laughs*] What—that's the—before yeah; people used that. Now it's illegal; they don't let them do that no more.

00:47:27

FL: So the idea is the V—the opening of the V sticks out in front of the boat and you put the net—?

00:47:30

PN: No; the net is hooked up to here.

00:47:31

FL: Is hooked up to the opening so the net then drags underneath the V?

00:47:36

PN: Drags under the V; yeah. Your boat is right here and when you put this—these chopsticks this V thing underwater it's going to be all the way down here. Then the boats are way back here. And you just push it—push it and —.

00:47:49

FL: So you're pushing—the net is always in front of the boat and the propeller which is at the end of the boat never disturbs the water?

00:47:54

PN: The boat is right here; yeah. Your boat will be behind; yeah and then when they pull up they just pull up like this and —. But this is very, like it—like I said you have to work with the very calm, calm, weather. You cannot—and it's—you pick it up every 30—40 minutes and your catch is very fresh all the time. Everything is live, you know?

00:48:31

FL: So and then you stopped using that obviously when they made that illegal. But when you—so you started—your family came here in the early '80s. You started shrimping—your family started shrimping here in the early '80s, so among the very first wave of—?

00:48:46

PN: Yes; this happened come back in the '80s. This is back in the '90s; yeah probably '90 or almost '95 or '96 yeah. The people like—

00:49:00

FL: But they were using the chopstick up until the mid-'90s?

00:49:04

PN: Yeah; not in my family, but like in the other Vietnamese. They been in Vietnam and came here and worked—and fishermen and not too many here and they started out this technique. And but on my side of the family, my brother, my uncle, my relatives—they—none of them had used this. It's like what you call a different Vietnamese—from the North and the South it's different accent and like the North or, or, you know?

00:49:50

FL: So Vietnamese people from the Northern part of Vietnam would use a different technique to fish than the South? What was that difference?

00:49:58

PN: Well I think the difference was we because I don't know how in the country but in the South we used a boat but in—in the North they used like this.

00:50:11

FL: They would use the chopstick?

00:50:11

PN: Yeah; they'd use chopsticks, and in the South we used the boat and we'd trawl and something like that because we got beaches in there. In the North we've got just pond-raised or something like or—that's how we used it; it's different because they don't go deepwater. They only—these kinds of—very shallow water, and like you go on a beach and you're trying to make something—scoop something and you can make your own net [*Laughs*] and trying to catch a fish or crab or whatever right alongside the beach and have fun. And the thing is it worked well; when it's working they use it, you know?

00:50:41

FL: So the shrimping that your family was used to doing was much more like the trawling that they were already doing here?

00:50:48

PN: Yeah; yeah, yeah we used the door and trawl. We learned it from the American technique. We don't—we sure we don't know how to shrimp—don't know how the shrimp business is and how to operate a boat or how to work on the door. But in our country and my dad, when he was a fisherman in Vietnam, my brother and uncle—it's a different technique than—in Vietnam. It's

different. In Vietnam it is—I wasn't a fisherman; I was too young but I—when I grow up I listen to them in how they worked and asked them about the history of how they—in Vietnam they only catch fish. But they, two boats—only dragging one trawl, one net and like these two boats dragging a very large like 100—100 or some 200-foot of trawl and go along or beside each other. But one trawl—one—when you're ready to pick up one of the trawl you had to let this boat know that, okay your turn to pick up, so he dropped everything and this boat can pick up the trawl by himself. And the next dragging you're going—I'm going to let you do it so then like two boats operating one trawl. And that's—that's why the net is so big but they only catch fish and not too much is shrimp.

00:52:09

FL: So that's not something you would ever do here?

00:52:13

PN: No, no; that is very, very difficult and—and—.

00:52:19

FL: Do you remember what the relationship was like between the Vietnamese shrimpers as you were growing up in this industry—the Vietnamese shrimpers and the white shrimpers who were here?

00:52:27

PN: Vietnamese and Americans? Yeah, before we have problems. We have—we think like, we, the Vietnamese and we have kind of a lot of prejudice things. And coming in and like trying —

taking over a business or job—I mean a business or—but we have couple problems. We’ve run into people that don’t like us, and have difficult that time. And making fun of us. And sometimes do better, if we did better and they get jealous, or you know? But as life goes on, things start getting better and we are very—have no problems with that these days. And it depends on where—not too much in Mississippi, but a lot of—I notice it in Houma, in Louisiana, in—that’s a very heavy like prejudice before, those days.

00:53:29

FL: Still or not anymore?

00:53:30

PN: No, before, but not—not anymore. Probably a little but—not much; I don’t believe.

00:53:33

FL: Why did that change or how did that change?

00:53:36

PN: Because it looked the Vietnamese the population has expanded; we got a lot of—some like Vietnamese fishermen—a lot of Americans out of business for a long time and Vietnamese taking over the shrimp business. And they’re everywhere now and it’s growing and growing each year. And a lot of—right now, the majority is Vietnamese shrimpers—more than American now because that is what they love to do. That’s the only thing they can do.

00:54:12

FL: But you said to me your personal choice, after the storm made things too difficult, was to leave that industry. In the work you do now, you talk to a lot of fishermen now who are saying, “If I could leave I would.” And certainly the cost of fuel rising, and the price of shrimp dropping, it’s becoming harder and harder for people to make a living doing this. What do you think is going to be—what do you think is going to happen in the future for this industry?

00:54:41

PN: The future if—if it keeps going up and for the—and the shrimp price keeps dropping, or the fuel price keep come up I don’t think what the fishermen do. I think they’re—they’re going—they’ll just bail out or do something, try to see if they can sell their boat with the— cheap as they can or whatever or . Besides that I have no idea [*Laughs*]; I ask them a lot—people in—that really they can tell and they have no other choice. They just hang in there and see what—we’ll pull through but when they say if it don’t make—only if they can make enough to support family and they have to work. But if they can't, or like they go out like every trip and they keep losing and losing fuels and losing money and couple two or three trips they’ll probably wind up just tying the boat there and just waiting ‘til better things to happen. But it’s nothing that they can do, you know?

00:55:59

FL: Do you think it’s—do you think the industry is worth saving?

00:56:05

PN: Well right now, it’s starting getting a little bit better now. Fuel prices—fuel prices are coming down some and the shrimp price is coming up now, so that is helping the shrimper a lot,

and it depends on Mother Nature too. Sometimes you have a better season, better—maybe this year is a better season. But even if the price of shrimp is low or the fuel is high but Mother Nature supports them like better season and this year is very good. This year—people coming in with lots—double the price from every other year. The majority they make around what—\$50,000—\$60,000—\$70,000; people are starting making \$100,000—\$150,000 average per trip now. That's I'm talking about the big, big freezer boats. But the ice boat they're making about \$30,000—\$40,000—sometimes \$50,000 compared to \$20,000 and some thousand or \$30,000 because like I said the Mother Nature have—shrimp out there for them and keep them alive because. **[Laughs]** More shrimp; more money. **[Laughs]**

00:57:22

FL: Well do you also see a younger, a new generation of people who are going into the industry?

00:57:27

PN: No; I haven't seen that because I wouldn't blame them. A lot of my friends and uncles they have—my uncle have a lot of kids growing, 20—30 years old; they went with their parent or brother and sister—brother and very tough work, very hard work. And even if they want to, I don't think their parent would let them to because I have been through here. And you stay in school or do whatever, but don't come here and follow my footsteps and ending up like —. Kind of—it's kind of too late to start it now and you start it before but it kind of is too late for right now.

00:58:15

FL: Hmm; okay, well is there—thank you very much for your time, Peter. Is there anything else you'd like to add? I know you have—I know you don't have much time left; I'm sorry.

00:58:34

PN: No; I really have another meeting to go to and I got a couple of phone calls that keep calling me and I'm kind of delayed right now. [*Laughs*] I can't think of anything right now but maybe you can come back next time and we do a little bit more.

00:58:49

FL: Thank you very much, Peter.

00:58:50

PN: Thank you; sir.

00:58:51

[End Peter Nguyen Interview]