

SAMMY MONTIFORTE
Commercial Fisherman – Biloxi, MS

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Project: Ethnicity in the Seafood Industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

[Begin Sammy Montiforte Interview]

00:00:02

Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Friday, September 5, 2008. I'm with Sammy Montiforte at the Slavonian Lodge in Biloxi, Mississippi. Today we're going to be talking about his experiences as a shrimper and a boat-builder. Sammy will you please state your name, your age, and your occupation?

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Sammy Montiforte: Sammy Montiforte—age 53, commercial fisherman.

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FL: Sammy where were you born?

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SM: I was born in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1955—January 10th. My father had moved over here from Biloxi—from New Orleans in 1955 and we settled in here and bought—my dad bought a house here in March of '55 and been here ever since.

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FL: Why did he move here from—you said he came from New Orleans—why did he move here?

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SM: Well—well dad married my mom over here; my dad was a fisherman in New Orleans, living out of New Orleans and when they used to come to Biloxi to offload their catch. Well, he had met my mom here from—from the seafood factory that my grandfather had and then it was—he just—that was it. That’s what started our whole family—when he came here to offload his catch from fishing around here.

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FL: And what kind of fishing did he do?

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SM: He was a shrimper and caught shrimp and fish, oysters, and shrimp and we’ve been here ever since then.

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FL: Earlier you mentioned to me that your—your grandfather came over as well from Italy and was a fisherman over there. Was that your father on your mother’s side or father’s side?

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SM: No, that was my father—my grandfather on my dad’s side. He was from Sicily and he was a stowaway for when a ship came over here to—and the ship went to New Orleans and he got off in New Orleans. And that’s what started his life in the United States. And he—he worked as—as a fisherman in Sicily and when he came over here he worked on the fishing boats ‘til he finally, you know, got enough money to get his own boat built and he had one built and I think it was like in ’42 or ’43. And then he met my grandmother. My grandmother was from Sicily and this is

all on my dad's side—and she was from Sicily and he met her over here and they began a family of six; they had three boys and three girls on my dad's side of the family. And all three of my uncles were fishermen and he just—he worked and—and—and just—just that's what he did. I mean just shrimped; that's all we've always did—all of us have. And my dad had six boys and five of the six of us has all shrimped for a living.

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FL: That's a lot of shrimping going on in the family. So your—your grandfather, what kind of fishing did he do back in Sicily; do you know that?

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SM: I guess they were fishermen you know catch—caught sold fish and sold them to the markets and stuff. That's what they did over here when he first came here. And I guess that's what he did over there too you know.

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FL: Did you know him well?

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SM: No; I didn't know my grandfather. He—he—he had passed away I guess it was in the early '50s and I never did get to meet him. I knew—I met—my grandmother was—I remember her pretty well and she was just a little old Italian Sicilian lady and couldn't hardly even speak English and I don't remember what—quite what year she passed away in but—. After that it was just families just went all over the place, you know. My—my uncles—my dad was the only one

that came to Biloxi and moved to Biloxi because he had met my mom over here and he—he used to tie his shrimp boat up at my mother's—had a crab factory—my mother's father, my grandfather, Luke Dubaz, had his crab factory in Biloxi. And my dad used to tie his boat up there and unload to him. And that's where he met my mom and started the family here in Biloxi.

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FL: So your father crabbed as well as caught shrimp and oysters?

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SM: No, he just shrimped. He had—he—my grandfather, he worked for my grandfather when my grandfather got his first boat for years. And then my dad went in the Navy; he was the oldest boy and he went in the Navy and when he got out of the Navy my grandfather had a boat built for my dad. And they shrimped together; when my uncle—my dad's brother, Vincent, he worked with my—with my uncle. And they just shrimped together and that's all they did.

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FL: And did your mother—did you remember the factories when you were growing up? Did you remember the factory your mother worked in—that your mother's father owned?

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SM: Oh yeah, I remember it quite well. Until '69 and Camille came I was 15 years old and that's when Hurricane Camille took the—the seafood factory that was on the beach. And then my grandfather had moved inshore with his—with his factory and continued to process crabs and—and sell crabs to Upstate New York, and when I was a little kid I used to go with him to the

depot—train depot to put his seafood on a train to be shipped to New York and to the Northeast. And you know that’s—that’s all he did.

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FL: And they only process crabs in that factory?

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SM: Yeah, that I know of—at that time. I think in the earlier years you know probably in the ‘40s they probably processed oysters. I know that for sure; I don’t know too much about shrimp but I know mostly it was all crabs.

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FL: Do you remember how that worked? Do you remember how—so someone would come in with crabs off the boat. Do you remember what the process was at that time?

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SM: Yeah, well the crab fishermen used little skiffs, little old boats that had crab cages. Well in the earlier days they had crab lines; they used to run crab lines. They’d have a line of about 100-feet, 200-feet long and with little strings hanging down off of a long line with little pieces of—what they used to use back in them days was—was parts from pig—pig ears and pig lips and they used to put them in—in a barrel and a—and a bucket and salt them real hard with salt. And that would make it firm. And when they run—when they put it on their crab lines when the crabs would bite it they wouldn’t let go of it and—and the—and the crab line would be hooked to a—a little stick out the side of the little boat and when the crab line went over that little stick they’d

scoop the crabs up and throw them in the boat. And that was—it was pretty unique. I used to go with an old friend of mine back when I was like 10—12 years old and do that and they caught crabs tremendously but that's all I recall of my grandfather—was doing—was crabs.

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FL: And then—but you said and then they moved to traps; when did the—when did the technology move to using crab traps? And could you describe crab traps for me?

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SM: Yeah, there was—there was a fellow by the name of Dan Tyler that moved to Biloxi from the Northeast. I don't know if he was from Massachusetts or Boston or somewhere up there but the crab—I think the crab cages originally was invented up there. And when he came down to Biloxi I guess it was in the '40s or early '50s he had introduced the crab cages to the—to the Coast and a lot of people didn't like him for that because the process of—of—of the crab cages, you caught you know an overabundance of crabs and back in the day when the seafood industry—people—people used to take care of their own industry by not over-fishing it. So they didn't like him—care for him too much about that because he—they caught too many crabs at one time and they was scared that they would deplete the crabs. So a lot of people didn't really like—like care for Mr. Dan Tyler at the time but most of the crabs were caught on a line—a crab line. It's a very unique system to do that but, you know, it's—you don't never see that. I haven't seen that in years. But the crab cages really produce a lot of crabs and then you know they—my grandfather used to boil like - I don't know - thousands of pounds of crabs a day and just pick them; the women would pick them. There would be 50 women in my grandfather's factory and when I was a little kid I'd—like seven or eight years old—I'd walk in the door and one of the

little ladies would finger—point me out to come over to them and they'd have a big chunk of crabmeat that come out of the crab and they'd give it to me and I'd eat it. And then I'd see another little lady and she would take her finger and say come over here, come over here. And then I'd go over there and she had another big chunk of crabmeat and I'd eat that. But that was the good days—good days of the seafood industry back in the '50s and early '60s.

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FL: So you—you have good—you have really vivid memories of that factory. Can you remember exactly the whole process of when you'd walk in the door what would you see and where the crabs would get unloaded and where they would go from there and where did they get boiled; do you remember all that stuff?

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SM: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah; I remember it real well. He—the first process was the crab—they would bring them in and they'd boil them. They'd par-boil them for 12 minutes the crabs; that's what they did, and then when they were boiled they would put them on a table and let them cool. And then they would clean them or “back” them—is what they would say—we'll back the crabs and they'd clean the crab shells off and take the crabs and put them in great big buckets.—wash tubs. And put ice on them and cool them 'til the next day, because whenever the crabmeat is cool and cold it comes right out of the shell. It's easier for the women to pack—to pick the crabmeat.

And we'd walk in there—little kids—and grab a big crab claw and two or three crabs and go sit out on the dock and eat them. And then the next day you know after they had the crabs cooled and everything the women would pick them and there would be 40—50 women in there picking

crabmeat at long tables. And they'd pick hundreds and hundreds and thousands of pounds of crabmeat. And that was mostly my grandfather's thing was the crabs. I don't recall him working too many shrimp; most of the shrimp went to the canneries. And yeah, I have very good memories—a little kid going down to that dock and getting crabs and going and sit out at home and my Uncle George would say, "Y'all need to go sit out at the end of the dock because the inspector is coming and we can't have him see y'all eating crabs out here." So we'd go to the end of the dock or sit on my dad's boat and eat the crabs. And yeah, it was—it was good years up 'til '69 'til the storm came.

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FL: When they boiled the crabs did they just boil them in saltwater?

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SM: No; there was—it was this fresh—it was fresh water boiled. It wasn't no—I think—I don't know if they used salt in them or not. Most of the time you wouldn't use salt because it firms the meat up. Salt dries—dries them out a little bit and but there was a many a pounds that went through that crab factory. My grandfather was one of the largest crab processors in—in the Coast in the '40s and the '50s, you know.

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FL: And that would—that meat would get canned or would it get frozen? What would happen to that meat after they picked it?

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SM: Well they'd pick—the women would pick it and my—my grandmother was the person that weighed the meat. She would always weigh the meat and put them in the cans and then they would pack them ice and boxes. And then like I said, I'd go with my grandfather to the rail station up here in town and he'd put them on a train and ship them to wherever he had people purchase his crabs—from New York or—or Virginia or wherever. Most of the places was in the Northeast.

00:12:00

FL: And were they also separating the meat into like the different kinds of meat you see—like you see lump meat and—and claw meat and—?

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SM: Yeah, claw meat and lump meat and finger meat, yeah it was all separate. And all the cans, the top of the cans had a different color that I remember for—for the different styles of meat that was in it; yeah.

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FL: And the storm came in '69. I presume you mean that—the storm actually physically damaged the factory. But did they—did they close it after that as well?

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SM: No, no; it—it actually tore everything up on the beach. All the factories were tore up. His was an old building that couldn't withstand a lot of wind but after that he had moved inshore. There was a building close to Back Bay Biloxi. There was a building close to the car bridge that

he had opened up. And he—he worked there for I don't know several years and kept processing it and then finally he just sold it out and just retired. That was the end of his—I don't know how many years he had been in the crab business but it was some years.

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FL: So it was just because he personally wanted to retire? Or because he saw that the—the market was going in a direction that wasn't going to be profitable?

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SM: Yeah, they were getting old by then, you know. My—my grandfather and—and his brother was George and they had another brother named Dolphin. They were Dubazes and they were just getting old. They all lived to be up into their 80s—85, 87, 88 and they just—they just retired from it really and sold the business out.

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FL: So you grew up all around this—your grandfather's crab factory and you—but you had been shrimping your whole life. Can you talk about how you got into fishing and shrimping?

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SM: Yeah, well let's—let's see in '69 I was like 15. I actually quit school—school in the ninth grade. I was in and I just wasn't a school person and I had got out of school and—and went on boats with—with some friends of mine that owned a boat down by my house and—and I just started shrimping actually right out of—when I quit school. [*Laughs*] Well a lot of us—a lot of people did that back in the day—in them days you know. That was probably in '74—1973 or '74

and just started shrimping because it was good money. We made excellent, excellent money and couldn't figure why I would stay in school when I could be out there making money. And—and I did that in '73 for about—with a friend of mine on a big offshore shrimp boat for, I think, four years and finally I just saved my—I said—my oldest brother, he had a shrimp boat that my dad had built in 1969 and I told him one day. I said, well look; we can—we can build a boat too you know. Dad has done built three or four or five boats and we can—we know how to do it. So I want to build me one. He said okay.

So we—we—I saved my money; I had like \$60,000 saved in two years I had made from shrimping and we started building my little boat. I had a 42-foot knuckle bottom boat from Biloxi and what I would do is I would work in the summertime on the big boat offshore and then in the wintertime in November we would stop trawling altogether and then my brother and I would work on that. It took like two winters to build it and then I started running that.

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FL: What did you build it out of?

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SM: Well built it out of juniper. We had—Bill—Bill Holland was a boat-builder in Biloxi and what we did was we went to him and told him what our project was and he said that he could cut everything out of—to frame our boat up with—all the skeleton and I think I paid him \$2,200 for all of that material. And then we brought it back to our house and we set it all up skeleton-wise in the front yard of our house and we went to Florida— Pace, Florida and purchased like 5,000-feet of juniper. It's wood that they used to build the shrimp boats; we brought it back here and

dressed it all up and—and built the boat. We built everything on the boat—all the rigging, all the—did all the woodworking and everything—him and I did ourselves.

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FL: How—how did you learn that? You said your father had built a few boats. How did—how did your family get into that knowledge?

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SM: Well back in them days there were a lot of backyard boat-builders and they would just—you know, just from being around boat-building places—in Biloxi, there was I don't know—several eight or ten boat-building shipyards around here that built shrimp boats and just my dad just from being around them—shipyards and stuff, and he just picked it up and so he just started building them in our backyard. It wasn't like you know model pretty boats, like people that construct boats and stuff, you know, but he made a go of it in '69 and my oldest brother got the first shrimp boat. And we just picked that up from him from being little kids, just watching him, you know. My brother and I said, “Well, you know, we know why—I know where this goes at here, so we'll just do it ourselves,” you know? And that's what we did; we just jumped in there and built it.

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FL: Aren't you nervous the first time going out in the water in this thing?

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SM: No, no; uh-uh. No, it was a good boat. It was—it was a nice pretty little boat. I named it after my mom and my dad, the Sam and Elaine. No, it was a good boat. We—we did a good job on it you know.

00:17:34

FL: And you said you built all the rigging and—and also—how do you—how did you do that? How did you learn how to do that? And isn't—I mean I've only seen the—the boats that are out there today where it's all metal and the hull is metal and all the—and all the equipment is metal. Was it all made of wood then?

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SM: The hull was all made of wood, just all the steel piping and the rigging and the frames that towed the nets, the outriggers and stuff like that was metal. My second to the oldest brother, Richard, he was—he had took metal trades in school and he learned to weld. Well he—of course we go right back to me hanging around with him and him showing me what to do and I—and I built all the rigging on that boat, all the steel out—outriggers and booms and everything that you use to trawl with.

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FL: And you would just buy metal piping and whatever and you would weld it altogether yourself?

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SM: Yeah, yeah, just cut it and weld it ourselves, yeah. Just figured what looked good to us and go with it; that's all you got to do.

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FL: So how many boats have you built?

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SM: Two of them. We've built two. My dad has built five of them—five shrimp boats and sold them.

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FL: And do you do—did you do—but this is just for your own use? Did you build boats for other people? I mean you said you did two; one of them was for you—who was the other one for?

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SM: Well the two boats that my brother and I built, one was for him. He—he built a brand new boat in I guess it must have been '80—'86 or '85. After we built mine in my yard; see he—he had the first shrimp boat my dad built in '69 and then he run that—he worked that boat for 15, 18, 20 years and then when I built mine he said well he—he wanted a bigger shrimp boat. So when we built mine he said after that well we'll build—I'll build me a bigger one. So he built—he went from a 48-foot shrimp boat to a—a 60-foot boat, and we built all of that in his front yard.

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FL: And what was the size of your boat?

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SM: Mine was 42-foot. It was called a knuckle bottom boat. In Biloxi you had two types of boats, a knuckle bottom and a model boat—what they call a model. Model boats are round on the bottom like a watermelon and a knuckle bottoms are square. They're square on the bottom where the sides meet the bottom it's square but most of the boats that were build in Biloxi for us—most of the seafood factories were all called model boats and they were pretty boats back in the day—beautiful boats—shrimp boats you know, by most people's standards.

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FL: So then I imagine you did all the maintenance on your own boat as well?

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SM: Oh yeah, we kept it all up. Hauled it up every year, cleaned it, painted it; yeah did everything to it. There ain't nothing about a boat that I don't know.

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FL: Did you always think you would go into seafood or the shrimping industry?

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SM: Well that was a way of life then; everybody did it. Everybody did it back in them days. You didn't—hardly anybody went to school. You know nobody went to school back in them days. Everybody did it—even in the days before me, even the children used to work; whenever

they didn't have enough workers in the factory to process the seafood, but a lot of the kids went and that's what—what they grew up with and you know that's just what you did. That's what you did around here; everybody was—back in my day everybody was—wasn't nobody rich; they was all poor. But they was rich with the life that they had, you know. You ate good; you partied good and back in the seafood days around here, everybody did. There wasn't very few people that ever went to college, you know—or even finished school a lot of them, but that's what you did. I mean you know, you didn't—you didn't think of nothing to do or anything else. I mean it was just there—plus the money; the money was great. Shrimping was great and you made good money and you only worked six months out of the year at shrimping and then you would work three or four months in the wintertime catching oysters and that's what we did. We'd shrimp on the little boats and we'd—we'd stop shrimping and we'd go oyster fishing in September and fish 'til March. And then you would get your boat back and take all your gear off for dredging oysters and then you'd go back to shrimping. That's what you did each year.

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FL: So you'd dredge the oysters; you wouldn't tong?

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SM: No, we dredged oysters. We dredged steam oysters. The factories that we worked for—Weems Brothers was the main factory that we shrimped for in our neighborhood. And we steamed—or they steamed oysters and—and canned them. And the oysters were very abundant. You could load a shrimp boat with 300 barrel or 400 barrel of oysters in one day. And oystering was—was different from shrimping because shrimping you would go out for a week at a time; well oystering, you would only go out like two days or maybe three days and then you'd come

back home. But oysters was of great—great abundance back in them days. You didn't have to go far to get a load of oysters.

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FL: Which was actually more profitable?

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SM: Well, shrimping was. You made more money shrimping than you made oystering, but I mean it was—it was all good. I mean even oystering you could make \$500 a week, you know in the '70s—the early '70s. You could make \$500—\$600; as a kid that's big money. You know you was—you was—you was top dog. Everybody waited for you to come home, you know, and then you went out partying. But you—you made good money at both of them, but you know steam oystering—oystering is very hard work—very hard from daylight to dark and after dark bending over all day long picking oysters off the deck and sometimes if you were lucky to get into an oyster area where there was no shells then you could shovel all your—when the dredge come up and dumped them on the deck you would shovel them on the boat. And load the boat with 500, 600, 700 barrels of oysters and come back to the dock.

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FL: Well how—how would actually the dredging work? So you had—you would have equipment that went off the boat and dredged on the—on the sea floor and they'd lift it back up and you'd have to sort through the shells and the oysters? Could you describe that process a little?

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SM: Yeah, well the—the dredges were made like a—you think of it maybe like a rake with a basket on it, and when you rake—right when the dredge is drug across the bottom of the ocean floor they would—the dredge would throw the oysters up into the basket. It was made out of rope, and you picked it up and you dumped it on deck and you threw it back over. At that time you probably took about maybe every five to ten minutes an oyster dredger was coming up on the deck and you had four—most of the time you had like four people on a boat. And one would roll both of the dredges up and then two of them would sort the oysters out. Of course the captain run the boat. And we mostly fished in Louisiana and then we'd run the boat back up to Mississippi and unload and I did that when I was a kid. And it was—it was good times; I mean you know it was—just a memory now, but— because you'll never ever see that happen again, especially steam. Well, a lot of people don't never—a lot of people don't really—they you know they talk about shrimping here but they don't really talk about the oystering days because a lot of people didn't do the oystering. A lot of people, it was too hard for them, you know.

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FL: And when did you stop oystering?

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SM: God, I don't remember.

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FL: Or at least; why—why did you stop oystering?

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SM: The oysters got depleted; the oysters just got—from the storms covering oyster beds up and the oysters just got depleted and then they quit fishing them, quit processing oysters, quit steaming them.

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FL: Can you describe for me—so the boat that you talked about building, the Sam and Elaine, was that the boat that you used through your whole career?

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SM: Yeah, that's the boat I—that's the only boat I ever had. I had it for 26—27 years and then the fishing just got so bad I just got, you know—. The price of shrimp just started getting where you couldn't even make no money at it. The expenses got to be more than your profit. It was too much work; it was too much work killing yourself and stay ahead of it, and I just give it up and I sold it to someone else, and they finally wound up selling it off and I think it sunk somewhere in a storm during Katrina, I believe in Pass Christian. But—you know. And it just—it was good; it was good but you know just over-fished. Over-fished and the—and the storms and everything like that was just—made it stop.

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FL: Was it a hard decision to sell your boat when you finally did it? Was it hard to let it go?

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SM: Yeah, it was. I—you know it's at times I wished I still had it just to go out on and maybe recreational with it and stuff you know but yeah; I just—I just got rid of it, and just killing myself for nothing. I said I ain't—I ain't going to do this no more—just quit and that was it.

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FL: Do you miss that work? It sounds like you miss it to some degree.

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SM: Yeah, yeah sure you do. I mean you've been on the water all your life. The water—I mean the people that live on—around the water and everything love the water. They eat—they fish in it; they—they swim it; they recreation—I mean you know, yeah the water is the way of life where just about any—any village that you go to—fishing village where people ate—ate good, ate seafood good you know, and it was always good times and especially in the wintertime. Wintertime was whenever it was real cool and that's when you really enjoyed shrimping when all the conditions was right. Yeah, it—I wish I could still do it, but I don't believe I'll ever do it again.

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FL: What do you miss about it most?

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SM: Well the money. And eating fresh seafood, you know and having to work for yourself, you know you don't have to work for somebody punching a clock 8:00 to 5:00. Be your own boss you know and the pride of having your own boat and I don't—I enjoy working on boats. I mean

not—not just working on it for a living, but repairing them you know. I like painting them; you know you sand them and paint them and they look pretty and everything. And yeah it's—the shrimp—I know everything about a boat. I mean I—we just do; six boys in my family from my daddy and we've all did it. What one of them don't know the other one does you know. And yeah; it was—it was pretty good but not no more.

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FL: So you don't have any chances to even work—work on boats in terms of maintenance and—and things like that—like you said sanding them and painting them?

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SM: Well there's not many shrimp boats around no more. I had run across a boat about three years ago; a friend of mine had a shrimp boat and it had sunk and he put it up on a dry dock and he left it there. And I went and talked to him. I said, "Well, what are you going to do with that boat?" He said, "Well I don't—I'm not going to do nothing with it." I said, "Well, look. I'll give you \$6,000 for it." I said, "The boat has been sunk, the motor is out of it; it's all tore up." I said, "I'll give you \$6,000 for it," and it was 48-foot. So I bought it from him and I went down—my oldest brother and I went down there and—and did a lot of caulking. And I—I replaced some planks in it which was boards on the bottom and re-caulked it, re-nailed it and put some new boards in it, and fixed all the bottom and the sides of it and I—I still have it now. I got—I have—I'm working on it little-by-little like I said, you know. I wish I would have kept my other boat just to go out for recreational or what have you, you know. And this little boat here I'm going to keep it and fix it up. I've put a new motor in it and a new running gear in it and I'm fixing to build a new rigging that goes on it, and we'll just keep it. I have a son that's 25 and he grew up

on boats too, but he—and he loves the boat. So I said well you know you go to school and get your college degree, and I'll fix this boat. I'll get it all ready, clean it up, and paint it all operational and then years to come you can have it for recreation and that's what I'm in the process of doing now with this boat.

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FL: It's interesting though. You're saying you—he should have it for recreational purposes. You're—because you're not thinking he'll use it commercially, or you wouldn't use it commercially?

00:30:16

SM: No, no. You couldn't—no you can't—. People today—my oldest brother still has his boat and you know when it costs—the cost of expenses, like I said, went tremendously, so all of his profits are eaten up in expense and he's—my oldest brother is 67 years old. And he's—he loves to do it; that's why he's still doing it, you know? But he—he'll be getting out of it here. He'll be trying to sell his boat pretty soon. But, you know, you get on your little boat and you go out there on weekends and you catch shrimp and your crabs and you boil them out there and you eat them and, you know—like I said, this is the way of life down here, like a lot of places. And people still do it—not for a profit, just to be doing it like that's what they did. You know so they just do it—go out and crab and shrimp and stuff like that.

00:31:09

FL: Do you remember the point at which you started to realize that you didn't think you could make money on this anymore?

00:31:14

SM: Yeah, it was whenever the—whenever the Free Trade Agreements came in and the—and the imports started coming into the country and after probably six or seven years of that you could steadily see a decline of the price of shrimp in the country and as it—as it—what happens is it—when your profits start going—turning over—going up to the top of the hill and going back downhill to your—to your expense, you know, then you’re just losing money. I mean you just—yeah; you just lose money and there ain’t no sense in doing it no more when you got to work that hard to try to make a few dollars. And you just can’t do it.

00:31:57

FL: Do—do you remember the—actually the year when that was? Was that—?

00:32:03

SM: Oh let’s see; ’70—probably about ’94—about ’94—’95. That’s what killed the industry is the imports. People used to blame—blame the Vietnamese when Carter brought the Vietnamese into the country. They were all fishermen in their country just like my grandfather was. Well when you go to another country you try to do the same thing for a living that you did where you were at. And then you know they kept saying well they’re over-fishing, over-fishing because of the Vietnamese, there was hundreds and hundreds of them that came here and—and they—a lot of them sell right here in this area. And they kept trying to blame you know—said well the Vietnamese is over-fishing; they drag day and night, day and night. Well, that wasn’t really the problem; the real problem was the government. The government—NAFTA, the Free Trade Agreements and all of that and we get—we get shrimp in this country from—from five or six

other countries. And that's what killed it; that's what hurt it. It wasn't—it wasn't the people
[Laughs]. They like—they like to believe it was but it wasn't.

00:33:16

FL: Do you remember there being a lot of tension around—around the Vietnamese shrimpers at the time?

00:33:20

SM: Oh yeah, oh yeah. See that was the ignorant part of it. That's the fishermen not knowing—tried to blame those people but y'all come—Carter brought them here—Jimmy Carter brought them Vietnamese here and yeah, that was—that was all kind of—. Of course you know there's documentaries all along the Coast where they have had fights. You know in Texas and whatever had a standoff with the Vietnamese and stuff like that. But myself personally I never blamed none of them for that. You blaming anybody you blame the government.

00:33:51

FL: Has that tension changed?

00:33:55

SM: Oh yeah, even the Vietnamese people, I mean, you know it—if you can't do it and you've been here all your life you know how can they do it, you know? The same things that's opposed to them is opposed to us I mean you know. They—whenever they came they had all the little boats and then finally they started building these gigantic shrimp boats—100-foot to, you know, 120-foot and fishing offshore. And they—they're losing their boats left and right, you know.

They're taking their boats back; people—mortgage companies because they can't make it. You just can't make it; when fuel is \$3.40 a gallon and—and ice is like \$6.00—I don't know exactly what it is now—probably \$6.00—\$7.00 a block and then groceries and—and gear you know. And it's never going—they—they're feeling the same thing we do, you know.

00:34:55

FL: So back when you were still shrimping where would you go? Where would you go to—to catch and how would you know where the good spots would be?

00:35:07

SM: Well you would—mostly people—most of the time you worked in groups. People had two or three friends and had—two or three friends that all had shrimp boats that would go together and we shrimped in Louisiana most of the time, probably 70-percent of the time and Mississippi 30-percent of the time of our shrimping during the year. And we'd just go to Louisiana and we had little try-nets. They have little bitty nets that you put down in the water and it's a sample net. You put it down for 10 or 15 minutes and pick it up; if you have any shrimp in it then you throw your big nets over and you start fishing with them. Most of—a lot of our fishing was done in Louisiana. Louisiana was—Louisiana is a great place to shrimp.

00:35:42

FL: And so did you—did you have places where you knew the shrimp was typically good or places you particularly liked or you'd just keep going around until you found a good spot?

00:35:53

SM: No, you traveled—you travel a lot. You might—you might run your boat for a day or two traveling and you can travel a pretty good—bit of ways on one day on a little shrimp boat in the northern parts of Louisiana, you know. And we would just go out for—and sample the bottom and if we found shrimp, we'd start shrimping and we'd stay right there 'til we run out of fuel and ice and then come back home.

00:36:17

FL: And how long would that take? How long would you go out for?

00:36:20

SM: Probably about six—seven days, depending on the time of the year. The wintertime, you could you know that little boat I had you could stay out for nine—ten days at a time. And in the summertime when it was hot—due to the ice factor you would lose you know—. But yeah, that was the good old days.

00:36:43

FL: What kind of shrimp would you catch?

00:36:46

SM: Brown shrimp in the summertime and white shrimp in the wintertime and as the story goes, my grandfather used to tell me that back in the day you know you never had brown shrimps which are called Brazilians. They used to just catch all white shrimp but the story goes that whenever the ships—whenever you—we started getting a lot of trade with South America, that the boats from North America—ships, would load on cargo and—and export it to South

America. Well, when they'd get to South America the cargo was offloaded which would leave their boats out of balance which would be too light on the water for them, so they had balance—what they called balanced tanks on these ships. And they had like great big old 30-inch pipes which—and a pump and they would pump that water back into these tanks and that would bring their boats back in the water. And they would travel back up to North America and they would have to offload that balanced water to take on more cargo. That's how the system works. And in the process of sucking this water up into the tanks in South America, they sucked up juvenile shrimp from South America, which were called Brazilians. And they would get back up here where naturally they'd pump them off and that actually probably transported Brazilian shrimp from South America to North America. And then—then they started multiplying and multiplying and—and they were—they usually grow in salt and—and warmer waters like in the summertime and then they—then they just opened—they opened the season on them and they started—well it was you know a new process of—of seafood back then.

But back in the early days the shrimping was done in the summertime when they was all big white shrimp. That's what my dad used to tell me when he was—he would shrimp and that was pretty—I thought that was pretty interesting—how those shrimp got up here, you know.

00:38:49

FL: And what's the difference between the two from the perspective of a—of a fisherman?

00:38:51

SM: It's just the color, mostly the color—the brown shrimp, the Brazilians are brown and the white shrimp are white and they're a little bit tougher because of the fact that they're probably

grown in salty—salinity—high salinity water and—and that’s where they grow. The higher the salinity of the water the faster a brown shrimp will grow. And they’re a little bit harder—texture-wise of them and in the wintertime, most—in the wintertime you see the white shrimp are softer shrimp because they’re grown in more brackish water, more fresh water than salt water. And—turn it down. [*Background Noise*] Hey. But that was—that’s the difference in the two shrimp. Hey turn that down, cuz!

00:40:01

FL: So did you—did you see the—you were talking about before the brown shrimp were around and when your father was shrimping he was talking about the size of shrimp that were really big. Did—did the sizing of the shrimp change through the years?

00:40:11

SM: No, no, they don’t—what—the brown shrimp?

00:40:15

FL: Or the white?

00:40:15

SM: No, no, they don’t—they don’t. All the—most of the time when your shrimp come into spawn you’ll have—you’ll catch smaller shrimp, I mean larger shrimp because what happens is the shrimp come in this morning and lay their eggs and then the large shrimp move out into a little bit deeper water and that’s the shrimp you catch first. We can—we’ll know if we have a good shrimp season by the size of the shrimp that we catch at the first of the season. The

Louisiana season opens in August and we'd go and if we caught—if we found good-sized shrimp like a 21—25 count or 20—26 count shrimp then that's where we would stay in that area—wherever that area was at because we know that there was small shrimp to come behind them, see what I'm saying? And that's where we would stay at. But we fish mostly—mostly the northern part of the Louisiana marsh which is anywheres east of the Mississippi River. And we fished all that area and all the way up into the Sound, Mississippi Sound and a little bit into Alabama. But whenever—at the beginning of the shrimp season wherever you find big shrimp or good-sized shrimp that's where you stay because you know there's going to be small shrimp come up behind them. The big shrimp that you catch and it's actually the mamas and the daddies—I mean the mamas that come back out to deeper water once they lay their eggs and stuff.

00:41:30

FL: And 21—25 would be considered a good size at that point?

00:41:33

SM: Yeah, a 21—25 is a great count of shrimp. It takes 21 to 25 shrimp to make one pound and then the pound of shrimp that's enough for one person to eat you know.

00:41:42

FL: So where would you go and find the really big shrimp like the U16s and the U12s and things like that?

00:41:48

SM: Most of those are caught offshore in the deeper water, you know. Once those big shrimp get out to that deeper water they grow another size count—count or two because I’ve fished on both boats in my life. I’ve fished offshore on a 77-foot steel boat, like I told you before—when I—before I built my little boat and then I worked on little boats inshore. And I know you know from that experience that you catch the much larger—the U10s the stuff that you talk about in deeper waters, 30-foot—300-foot of water.

00:42:20

FL: What would you do with the shrimp once you caught it?

00:42:22

SM: Put them on the boat and bring them home and sell them. I mean you know? I mean once you caught them on a—on a boat you’d separate them by the catch and then ice them in the ice hole and you’d carry the ice and you know five or six—my little boat carried five tons of ice. And I could ice probably 8,000 pounds of shrimp you know with that little boat. Bring them in, offload them, you know, get ready to go back the next day—more shrimp.

00:42:51

FL: And you’d sell them to processors?

00:42:53

SM: Yeah, all processors in Biloxi, yeah.

00:42:54

FL: And did you work with one particular processor or did you just kind of go around and find the best price you could? How would you—how would you—how was your arrangement with that?

00:43:04

SM: It's mostly—it's mostly determined by the price that the factories are paying. If one factory—factory might pay five-cents more a pound then a lot of people would go over there. It all depends on the person that you were dealing with you know; a lot of fishing felt like—a lot of seafood factories were shady people. They would try to get over on you or try to Jew you out of shrimp or the price or whatever. And you—if you found a good factory and decent people to work for, then you would probably stay there you know. I worked for—Fayard's Seafood over here for you know probably 15 years—one place, because they treat you good you know. They take care of you; they—they—a lot of factories would—would help you through the winter months if you needed help with any of your bills and stuff like that, you know? And if you needed gear and stuff for your boat you would go up to the office and they would charge it; you would charge it. And then you would pay them each time you came back in with your catch. You would pay them, you know, whatever was agreed upon. And that's what a lot of factories did, but back in the day a lot of factories owned all their shrimp. There wasn't too many independent boat owners when it first started. The factory people had boat-builders build boats for them to operate their factories with and people would run their boats—the captain would and you'd find deckhands would walk up you know from anywheres and—. But most of the boats were owned by factories back in the—in the '30s; you know there wasn't too many privately owned boats. And then when the—finally people would—guys that would run the boats for 10 or 15 years, the factory owners would say well we'll go ahead and sell this boat to you and they would pay them

off—which was via share—a share of the profit that came in and they would pay the factory owners back off of that. That’s how a lot of people purchased their boats back then. You know they wasn’t like me—saved their money and built their own boat; you didn’t know how to build a boat well you had to buy it and you’d buy it from the factory owner that you—that you worked for. A lot of factory owners had 12, 15, 18, 20 little shrimp boats that they had built. And that’s what they’d do.

00:45:22

FL: Did you have a—a least favorite part of the work? What—what about the work that you’d just kind of dread?

00:45:26

SM: No, not really. I can’t think of none of it. I loved it all. You know you worked for yourself and you worked at your own pace whenever you wanted to and no, I liked everything about it. I didn’t like the end of it where we were getting you know—I didn’t like the part—that where we had to work hard and then come in and—and lose money that, you know—not make no money. That was the part I didn’t like about it. That’s why I got out of it.

00:45:55

FL: But this was an industry that you know you had come into from you know working—around your father and your family and he had come into from his father—this generational thing. Earlier we talked about how your son—you don’t want your son to go into it. Do you think it’s—and do you think it’s important to try to save this industry here?

00:46:21

SM: You can't—you're not—you're not going to be able to save this industry. It's not going to happen. It's—the prices of everything and the imports of shrimp you can't—the—I don't see it happening, not in the shrimping industry around here. Of course oysters—they're already depleted; oystering is depleted for years. It—it went out first. And then come behind it would be the processing of the shrimp in this area because you just can't work—you can't make no money. You know when your expenses get to be more than you know—I don't have no numbers now. I could probably have made some numbers up on it, but you can't—. You know it takes— whenever your price of shrimp is only like 60 or 70-cents a pound and you got to pay \$3.40 for a gallon of diesel, you know the numbers don't add up. They don't add up at all; here you are just working for—for nothing really. I mean the seafood factories around here get all imported shrimp. They don't care—you know they—they can import shrimp twice cheaper than what you can go out and catch them, you know. It's—it's steady dying—steady dying off; it will never come back around here. No. Uh-uh. I don't think it will come back around the Coast—never will be.

00:47:33

FL: So not all the seafood—not all the shrimping factories here are dealing with local shrimpers?

00:47:40

SM: We don't have—we—we—we don't have but processing plants around in Biloxi, I mean you don't have but—well, I think two—two of them, you know. All the processing plants are gone. There's only like two of them in Biloxi that process shrimp anymore. And it—it will never

come back; no—never come back. You can—you may be able to go out and—well the biggest thing today is that you can—if you retail your shrimp, you bypass the wholesaler and go to the retailer and sell your shrimp to individual people that's what a lot of people are doing around here because the catches are small you know and you have to get \$4.00—\$4.50 a pound for your shrimp in order to come out. And that's what a lot of people do around here now. They have—still have little boats. All the big boats are just about gone. And that's what they do; that's how they—the people that are still shrimping that—that's what we'll do with this little boat we have if we go out to fish. We'll go out and fish for 200 or 300 pounds and we'll come back in and we'll sell them to families or friends or people in the area. And just make a few dollars off of it and still be able to you know have fresh seafood and stuff.

00:48:56

FL: You wouldn't—you wouldn't go to like a particular place to sell it? You would like you said you'd come back and just tell friends and families that you got this catch and you'd try to sell it that way?

00:49:04

SM: Yeah, that's what you do. People know you got—the people—close-knit area around here and people know who you are and they know what you're doing, you know. And you'd make—you'd pick up orders; if people want 50-pounds and you'd write their name and how many pounds they want and you'd go out and you'd catch them and you'd come and you'd deliver them to them.

00:49:22

FL: What's a person do with 50-pounds of shrimp?

00:49:26

SM: With 50-pounds; they'll clean—clean them and put them in the freezer and just eat them over the wintertime or whenever, you know just like—just like doing farming work, you know. People freeze stuff you know and—and eat off it.

00:49:39

FL: A couple times during our conversation you had mentioned—well earlier when you were talking about the crabs just like sitting down and eating—eating a crab on the dock and then earlier—then later you were talking about how much you love eating seafood when you were out in the Gulf catching it. Obviously you have a taste for the—you have a taste for this stuff; what are some of your favorite—what are some of your favorite things to eat?

00:50:03

SM: My favorite thing is crab—boiled crabs. We have plenty of dishes—plenty, plenty of dishes. I mean you know boiled crabs, boiled shrimp, you know fried fish, fried shrimp, you know when you live in an area where you know your food is an abundance that's what you—that's what you grow up accustomed to. Very seldom ever eat meat; a lot of people don't eat meat around here. I mean that—because they're used to eating seafood. That's what their taste is, you know?

00:50:32

FL: You never got sick of it 50-some years later?

00:50:35

SM: No, no, no—no. No; we love shrimp. I love shrimp and crabs. Crabs are—crabmeat is a delicacy, and it always has been. Even since the earlier days since my grandfather used to process it and send them to New York to the well-to-do to eat you know. You were—it's a delicacy, crabmeat is; it's delicious. You cook it—you can cook seafood like Bubba Gump says any kind of way you want you know—100 different ways. Yeah; we mostly eat seafood to the day you know. My brother still brings shrimp in and we get shrimp and crabs and soft shell crabs and fish and—and we eat, yeah we eat—seafood is a big part of our diets—maybe three to four times a week. Yeah, we still eat it.

00:51:21

FL: Do you cook?

00:51:21

SM: Oh yeah. Yeah, pretty good cook—well when you work on a boat you know when you're out away from home and you—you have to eat, so you have to cook, so if you're out shrimping for weeks at a time, then yeah; you—you tend to cook dishes with seafood and create dishes and stuff. Yeah, I like to cook. Don't you like seafood?

00:51:42

FL: I love it. I love it.

00:51:45

SM: Yeah; I'd rather have that than meat. It's a lot better for you than meat is anyway, you know. Yeah; we cook a lot of dishes. My mom—my mom is 84 years old and she was cooking crab patties yesterday. I went to eat. Yeah, we eat seafood a lot.

00:51:59

FL: What's in the crab patties?

00:52:01

SM: Crab patties is bread crumbs and seasoning and then you throw the crab meat. The crab meat is always processed whenever you buy it—mostly—mostly par-boiled you know just pre-boiled and then when you cook it, it don't take long to cook. And you just take the crab patties and you dip them in bread crumbs and make little round patties like that—like a hamburger patty and you dip them in bread crumbs and you fry them—very good.

00:52:29

FL: I'm actually getting hungry myself at this point. So is there anything—I don't want to take too much of your time; I know you have to leave in a minute. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

00:52:42

SM: No, just that it's a dying industry, you know, and that the government is the one that killed it. It wasn't just the Vietnamese people that came to this country. All this Free Trade with everybody and we got like five countries that deliver seafood and they—they cut our throats with it. You know like I said, the price of them is—is what it is. Seafood—shrimp is—is a big thing

today in—in this country. Seafood—people eat a lot of seafood. They eat a lot of shrimp, and you know to—the local fishermen I think it was, they were accountable for like 15-percent of the consumption of seafood in this country. For catching, you know, and then the rest of it is imported. But you can't—you won't never—it'll never come back here—never. Of course, we have a new industry here—casinos, you know. They pushed all the—they didn't actually push all the—they said well the seafood industry—casinos pushed the seafood industry out of business but that's not—not true. The seafood industry was in dire, before the gaming casinos even came here to the State; this little town is very fortunate to have two big industries, you know, to be able to support people around here. Now in the coming years, as it was when I was a kid that we all shrimped for a living, that's what we did in our—in our area here. In coming years everyone will be working—the younger kids will be making a living off of the casinos. So this little town is very fortunate to have two big industries to support the communities, you know. But no; shrimping is gone. It's a thing of the past.

00:54:25

FL: All right; well thank you very much for your time, Mr. Sammy.

00:54:30

SM: Yeah. I appreciate it too and get the word out, but it's just—it's just going. That's it.

00:54:39

[End Sammy Montiforte Interview]