

TOMMY WARD
Owner, 13 Mile Oyster Company – Near Apalachicola, FL

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Date: December 2, 2005
Location: In the bay on Tommy's fishing boat – Apalachicola Bay, FL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 30 minutes
Project: Florida's Forgotten Coast

[Begin Tommy Ward]

0:00:00.0

[The majority of this interview takes place in a small fishing boat on the Apalachicola Bay.

Sound of boat motor in background]

Amy Evans: Friday, December 2nd, 2005. I'm at 13 Mile [13 miles west of Apalachicola, where Tommy Ward operates 13 Mile Oyster Company] with Tommy Ward, and we're in a boat looking at St. Vincent's Island. And tell me that again, Tommy, what you started to say?

0:00:15.1

Tommy Ward: About Picaleen and all?

0:00:16.3

AE: Yeah.

0:00:18.4

TW: The Indians used to come over here and stay a lot in this little hole over here next to the beach—fifteen to twenty-foot deep called Picaleen—well Picaleen Hole. But anyway, there is a lot of Indian pottery and arrowheads and things along this beach over here you can pick up. But you're not supposed to pick it up, but you can pick it up and look at it and throw it back down.

0:00:41.0

AE: And that whole island is a reserve, you say?

0:00:43.3

TW: Yes, the whole island is—they done it for a bird reserve. I think that's a big bald eagle over there on the bar right there that we're looking at. I'm not sure. It looks like he's got a white head. But they've been oystering a lot in here through this little gulley we're trying to go through, and maybe we won't hit bottom, and we can ease through [in the boat]. And I'll try to ease up next to the bank, if you want. You want to get out and look for a minute?

0:01:15.4

AE: That would be great.

0:01:18.5

TW: Okay. I believe right there—[points towards the bald eagle].

0:01:27.7

AE: Right there on the shoreline?

0:01:28.7

TW: On the bar. See the—see right here? The little—follow this bar in and see that black thing right in there?

0:01:36.0

AE: Okay, got it.

0:01:37.0

TW: And if you'll look, you'll see his white head.

0:01:41.4

AE: I don't know if my eyes are that good.

0:01:43.0

TW: Here you go. [Hands the interviewer a pair of binoculars.]

0:01:44.6

AE: Oh, perfect. [*Recording is paused as the interviewer and subject get out of the boat.*

Recording resumes when the two are walking along the shoreline of St. Vincent Island.] So what time of year do you come here and do your—

0:02:35.4

TW: Hunting?

0:02:36.7

AE: —hunting, uh-huh.

0:02:37.3

TW: In January. They have a couple hunts. They have a Sandbur deer hunt over here, and it's like a lottery draw. You put your name in, and people from all over the country come. And I've been drawn a few times. Here you go. [*Hands interviewer a shard of pottery.*]

0:02:57.5

AE: Yeah, you've got an eye. Look at that. A piece of pottery in the oyster shell. And so—but when you come hunting you have to use the—the primitive weaponry like crossbow or—?

0:03:11.4

TW: Right. Or—or black powder. And there's two places you can come on the island, and one is down here at Indian Pass, and then the other one is over here at West Pass. They have two campsites that you can stay at. That's what aggravates the hell out of me, right there. [Tommy picks up a piece of trash from the shoreline.]

0:03:35.3

AE: Uh-hmm, beach litter?

0:03:36.2

TW: People just don't realize what it does.

0:03:42.1

AE: So you were saying before we left [13 Mile to get in the boat] about how this part of the bay doesn't close. Can you explain that?

0:03:46.8

TW: Well, this here, particularly the area from Eight Mile to the west is what they call approved waters. You don't have, you know, a bunch of homes, a bunch of pollution, you know, septic tanks and things of that nature draining off into the—into the aquifer or to the water. And the water just seems to be a lot more cleaner and—and all. And plus you're—you know, several miles away from the river, and so you don't get the flow down the Apalachicola River into the bay quite as heavy here. Which that has its advantages and disadvantages because the water—the freshwater and the nutrients that comes down the river is what your oysters feed on a lot of times to make them grow. But then again, you've got a bad part about it being, you know, like that—you have a lot of predators that come in that will kill the oyster bed. Your oyster drills—conchs, red fish—you know, will eat a tremendous amount of oysters.

0:05:17.7

AE: How exactly do they manage to do that—red fish?

0:05:20.1

TW: They got some really sharp teeth.

0:05:22.8

AE: Yeah, they can crack them open?

0:05:23.8

TW: Yeah. Yeah, well, you know, an oyster will open and feed, too, a little say—[points to a shell on the beach] right there—old conch shell.

0:05:40.1

AE: Somebody told me that you used to have or still do have a collection of odd-shaped oyster shells?

0:05:45.1

TW: Yeah.

0:05:45.5

AE: Is that true?

0:05:46.1

TW: Yeah, I've got a few. I got one that was growing out of the top of a Coca-Cola bottle and then on different pieces of driftwood, things of that nature. [You've] got to watch out for reptiles over here.

0:06:12.3

AE: I don't think I want to—or need to meet any of them.

0:06:15.8

TW: I'm looking for a piece [of pottery] with some design on it.

0:06:18.4

AE: Well you're picking up quite a lot. I can't believe it.

0:06:23.7

TW: This beach has been—[picks up a piece of pottery and inspects it] No design on it. But ain't it amazing they brought all this stuff.

0:06:50.8

AE: My goodness.

0:06:54.3

TW: I know there's got to be one piece laying around here with some design on it. Oh, look here. [*Excitement*]

0:07:00.8

AE: Oh, yeah. It's a good rim [from a pot]. Thick.

0:07:05.8

TW: Yeah.

0:07:06.3

AE: Yeah, that's pretty. So all of these shells that we're walking on—is this just a natural washing up of old [oyster] shells?

0:07:26.9

TW: Yeah, of dead oysters. And, you know, maybe somebody has come over here and sit around and ate them and throwed them down.

0:07:36.2

AE: Uh-hmm. When you[r shuckers] shuck at the [13 Mile Oyster House] over there, what happens to the shells that are used over there?

0:07:43.2

TW: Well a lot of times, you know, we use them around for driveways and all at the [oyster] plant. But we also—I also replant my oyster beds with them, use it for seed stock. In other words, on my leases I replant [the oyster beds]. I like to use scallop shells. They seem to grow oysters so much better than an oyster shell.

0:08:11.6

AE: Because of all those ridges on a scallop shell?

0:08:14.0

TW: Well, no. You take an oyster shell [picks up an oyster shell from the beach.] Take this oyster shell here, for instance. It's dry. When the oysters go to spawn and the organism floats

through the water—and it attaches to something. Okay. So say you get five of those organisms attached to this one shell. Well when they go to growing, it will be what they call a burr. And this oyster shell is so hard; it's hard to break them apart without killing some of the oysters. You take a scallop shell, when it grows—when it gets three or four spat [or juvenile oysters] on it, and the oyster goes to growing, they're brittle—easy to crack, so they'll break apart from each other. And that oyster—scallop shell has a tendency to roll around on that bottom a little bit with the current. And it forms and rolls up and makes a thick cup oyster.

0:09:22.5

AE: Can you talk about leasing beds and how that works?

0:09:26.2

TW: Well, we have two oyster leases. They—we acquired them from the State. One of them, I think, on my mother's side of the family [the Miller family] in the early 1930s to the fifties, I guess. My uncle, Dewey Miller, acquired the lease over here in Big Bayou in St. Vincent Sound. And then we have another oyster lease across the bay over here. [Points across the bay] See that big white pole?

0:10:07.8

AE: Uh-hmm.

0:10:08.2

TW: That's another one of my leases. My dad [Buddy Ward] acquired that in—I want to say in 1961, sixty-two. Okay, you take a—you had to take a barren piece of bottom, and you had to have it surveyed and marked out, and then you planted with shell and all to make it a productive bed—oyster bed. And that's what he done. And it's for—in perpetuity and—but they do not give those leases no more to—they do not lease none of the bottom out anymore to the people. So we own over half of the leased beds in Apalachicola Bay. And we mechanical harvest off of these leased beds. We call it a cultivator. The terminology in Louisiana [and] Mississippi [it] is called a dredge. But I'm not dredging up the bottom; I'm cultivating my oyster beds and harvesting oysters just like a farmer tills his land and grows crops. That's what I do.

0:11:25.4

AE: When did you go from tonging to dredging?

0:11:29.8

TW: I want to say we got the rights to do that—I want to say the [nineteen] eighties. I'm not real sure the exact time. I'd have to go back and check the records, but they didn't—everybody was against using mechanical harvest in this bay, you know, and we had to go to court, and we had to

fight, you know, a lot of your old-time oystermen and all. They wanted tongs [used]. But what they don't realize is [that] I take that cultivator, and I work my leased beds with it. I'm turning the bottom up. When we was talking while ago about what oysters will like to grow on and what shells I like to plant, you get a lot of silt on your shells, and when this organism floats through the water and attaches to that shell, if it's got a lot of silt on it, just the current of the water will wash that organism off of whatever he tried to attach to. So you won't get a good spat set [or collection of juvenile oysters to settle and grow]. But with this cultivator, the boat is always moving, and it's a scrape. When he picks these oyster shells and oysters up off of the bottom with the scrape he's moving—so it washes the silt off of the shells, and then it spreads it back out over the bottom to where when they are spawning, they're able to float through and attach to them and stay without getting washed away. You—you follow me?

0:13:12.6

AE: I think so.

0:13:15.0

TW: Okay. A tonger will go out there, and he'll tong oysters up and put them on a cull board, and then he'll sit down in one spot and cull these oysters off [or break them apart so they are individual oysters, not in clusters. The broken shells or unusable oysters are then thrown back into the water, creating a pile in one area]. And that's what they call a cull pile. And so you take all these shells, and you pile them up in one spot. Well, the little oysters in that pile is covered

up. He's not able to feed and grow like he should, and the shells underneath that cull pile are not able to—to catch spat, if they don't have too much sediment on them. You—you kind of comprehend what I'm trying to say here?

0:13:52.9

AE: Kind of. I think so, anyway. [*Laughs*]

0:13:56.8

TW: Anyway, that's the difference in using mechanical harvest and using tongs. And plus, it's more productive, and it does not hurt the environment. It does not hurt the bed. It helps it. So—

0:14:18.0

AE: So is that—that boat *Miss Sara* up at the dock—

0:14:21.0

TW: Uh-hmm.

0:14:21.1

AE: —is that—that's the cultivator?

0:14:22.8

TW: That's the cultivator. I bought that in Buras, Louisiana—Empire [is another town close by].

0:14:28.6

AE: That's the—is that the only one you have? The only one you need?

0:14:29.5

TW: I've got a small one, but that's the main one I use.

0:14:34.5

AE: So if you go out one day and you cultivate one of your beds, how—how—how many—how much can you bring in relative to one boat out [harvesting oysters] with tongs?

0:14:44.7

TW: Well, that one boat can catch as much as three boats tonging or four. And it's just amazing what it can do. And I have oysters year-round off my leased beds. We don't try to catch

everything up, and I plant and I, you know, I enjoy growing oysters. That's—you know, I enjoy planting the shells, I enjoy checking out the spat set that I get. I've learned—a lot of things I've learned, I learned from my father [Buddy Ward].

0:15:32.3

AE: How do you check the spat set? You pick some up—?

0:15:34.7

TW: Well, I mean—yeah, you go back and check it, you know. You—you know, you kind of figure what time of the year that they're going to go to spawn and—and you want to put your shells out within two to three weeks before they go to spawning or right during the spawning season. That way you put a dry shell out, you don't have the sediment on it. And you throw a good dry shell out, and they attach to that shell a lot quicker.

0:16:04.1

AE: And then you check in on them and make sure they're still there?

0:16:06.0

TW: Well, several months later you go back and—and check it or, you know, a month later. But it takes a little while for that little organism to start growing to really see what kind of spat set you've got.

0:16:19.8

AE: Huh. And what do you look for when you check the spat set? Just that it—?

0:16:24.8

TW: Just for a small oyster, a baby oyster.

0:16:30.8

AE: And then when you—when you harvest them, about how old are they?

0:16:34.7

TW: This one area you can harvest within a year-and-a-half to two years; sometimes it may take three [years] to make a legal [sized] oyster.

0:16:46.4

AE: And a legal oyster is what?

0:16:49.2

TW: It's three inches long.

0:16:52.9

AE: And is it true that you can tell the age of any oyster by the—?

0:16:58.5

TW: The rings on it?

0:16:58.3

AE: The rings, uh-huh.

0:16:59.4

TW: No, ma'am. I can't tell you that. Somebody else might can, but I wouldn't dare tell you that story.

0:17:07.9

AE: Well I figured if anybody could tell me that you could.

0:17:10.8

TW: That's something that I don't know right there. [Looking out at the bay from the shore of St. Vincent Island] It's beautiful, ain't it?

0:17:23.1

AE: It's gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous.

0:17:30.1

TW: There's the road right back in here [pointing into the trees on St. Vincent Island].

0:17:31.7

AE: A what?

0:17:30.7

TW: A road. One of the roads on the island. And we might want to walk through there; I might want to take you through that.

0:17:41.0

AE: And you were saying earlier on the boat that there used to be—when they were logging over here—a wooden bridge that—?

0:17:46.9

TW: A wooden bridge from the mainland over there over to [St. Vincent] island—a one-lane wooden bridge.

0:17:54.5

AE: When did that fall down or get torn down?

0:17:58.7

TW: I'm not sure. That was before my time. To get back to what I was telling you about the scallop shell versus an oyster shell, look at the spat set on that oyster shell right there. [Pointing to a collection of little oyster shells that he picked up on the beach.] You see what I'm saying? See all the little oysters? That would be your spat set.

0:18:16.5

AE: You could never get them off?

0:18:17.8

TW: Well you could. They would grow but they would be burred up. Those are mussels [attached to the oyster shell].

0:18:31.2

AE: What's a really big oyster that you've harvested or seen come out of the bay?

0:18:36.2

TW: Well, I get big oysters off of this lease in Big Bayou [which is a part of the Apalachicola Bay at St. Vincent's Island]. Dr. Livingston done a study, and he's done it in Australia—all over the world—and that place grows oysters like no other place he's ever seen, he said. You know, now I don't have that documented in writing. I'm repeating [it] behind say, my father or someone else that I've talked to over the years.

0:19:07.4

AE: What would you attribute that to, any idea?

0:19:09.9

TW: Just the water flow that flows through the bayou and the nutrients coming off of the island. You know, I—I went out to Oregon and went on up into Washington up around Ayock in the oyster field and they—they grow oysters up there, just—it's unreal, I loved it. I really enjoyed it up there talking with the oystermen in that area and the—the growers. And—but they have the cold water, and they have the tidal flow to go with the cold water, so that's the elements you need to really grow oysters. Cold weather—when the bay gets cold, when the water gets cold in the bay, and then you get a good tidal flow where they can feed and—it's just something about the cold water and all that just makes them grow like crazy.

0:20:19.3

AE: So the perfect blend of salinity and—and fresh [water] and temperature?

0:20:25.3

TW: Yeah, all that plays a factor.

0:20:28.7

AE: And then John T. [Edge] was telling me [that] you were talking to them about the wind having an effect on the salinity of the water?

0:20:34.3

TW: Oh, the wind-driven bay?

0:20:36.4

AE: Uh-hmm.

0:20:38.7

TW: [*Distracted*] Well, look at the deer tracks.

0:20:46.0

AE: It feels like they're just watching us. [*Laughs*]

0:20:46.7

TW: They might be. There's no telling what you—. Hey there—right back in here there's a savannah and a big oak ridge that lays down in here—them big Sandbur deer that I was telling you about, they—they like to hang out down through there, through that savannah and that marsh. I'm talking about some 500—600-pound deer. [They] look like big elk.

But to get back to the wind-driven bay, you take an east wind, water—east wind blows fresh water from the river down the bay, and it will make the oysters fresh tasting. You get a west wind that blows the water in through Indian Pass, which is saltwater [from the Gulf of Mexico], into the bay, and it will make the oysters a lot saltier. The east wind oyster will be fatter than the west wind.

0:21:47.2

AE: Why is that?

0:21:48.3

TW: Because you're getting the nutrients from the river and the freshwater coming down the bay and there's—I don't know, it just makes them fatter. You can tell the difference in the oyster on the east wind and the west wind, as far as the meat content and the shell.

0:22:06.2

AE: But then so if an oyster is harvested at, you know, a couple years over time, how does that effect take hold? Or still, does it matter at the time of harvesting the most or does it matter?

0:22:19.5

TW: When it's harvested, but you've got to have that mix of freshwater with the saltwater to make the oysters grow and survive. But if you get too much freshwater, it'll kill them. And if you get too much saltwater, it'll either kill them or the predators will come in and kill them.

0:22:46.8

AE: Delicate balance, huh?

0:22:48.8

TW: Yeah, really. And—and it's amazing. But that's like the red tide [which is a bloom of dinoflagellates that causes reddish discoloration of coastal ocean waters, which is often toxic and fatal to fish] come in and—and then had to shut down for several months. But it gave the bay a break to where the smaller oysters was able to grow up and mature in—in those few months, you know. You get some cold weather and everything and some freshwater oysters will grow quite rapidly, you know. But—and—and we—we have a problem sometimes, maybe the oystermen catching them too little, and you don't have enough enforcement from the law to—to manage it and oversee what's going on.

0:23:45.2

AE: So what have you been doing with this down-time? You had [Hurricane] Dennis that wreaked havoc on your house and [oyster] house over there?

0:23:52.1

TW: Well Dennis—well, it wiped it completely out. I mean, I can show you some pictures where, you know, the walls and—and everything was just gone. And I've worked for—since July 12th [on rebuilding 13 Mile], and you see the shape it's still in around there. But we've been working—I've been working every day, seven days a week. I've worked sometimes to ten, eleven o'clock, which—you know, it's took a toll on my family life. My son is a senior [in high school] this year. **[Back in the boat. Engine starts]**

0:24:31.5

[Recording is paused as the engine roars. When we idle again on the water, recording resumes.]

AE: *[Interviewer asked about Tommy's father and 13 Mile. Recording begins again.]* Okay.

0:24:33.9

TW: Okay, my dad [Buddy Ward] got out of the Service in 1957. He come back here December of 1957 and started running the oyster house here [which is called 13 Mile]. He had bought it from some of my mother's family that had it [The Miller family], and he worked here and built an oyster house and built his business up. And then when I started kindergarten, we moved to Apalachicola—to downtown Apalach [from 13 Mile]. He had bought an old home, the old Fowler home, in Apalach, where [my parents] still live today. Then he got into the shrimp business, as well as the oyster business.

[EDITED FOR CONTENT-about two minutes]

0:26:06.1

[Recording resumes]

AE: All right, we're in the boat, and we just saw a dolphin. And Tommy was just telling me about them coming up in the bay.

0:26:14.8

TW: Well, they bring their young up here and teach them how to fish. And there he goes right there [*points to the dolphin in the water*]. But they bring them in and teach them how to fish and, you know, I have my own little *Sea World* here—gators, snakes, dolphin, eagles, fish, shrimp; it's all right here. This here lease is 178 acres that I have right here that's up in St. Vincent's Island called Big Bayou.

0:27:02.3

AE: So right now we're on the south side of the bay?

0:27:06.0

TW: Right, correct—the south—south side of the bay, coming up into Big Bayou and St. Vincent's Island.

0:27:17.4

AE: And you were saying that these white posts mark the edges of your—?

0:27:20.5

TW: These mark the boundary line of my [oyster] lease. They—they come in here and tear my poles down, the oystermen do, when I pull them up, so they can slip across the line and—and steal my oysters.

0:27:39.2

AE: You mean they move them around a little bit thinking you won't notice a few feet?

0:27:41.8

TW: No, they pull them up and throw them away. [*Laughs*] No, they don't move them. They just throw them away. All my signs are gone. [*Pointing across the bay*] Look at—the white pelicans—is that white pelicans? I don't know, but it looks like white pelicans. I'm not sure. Anyway, back in the [nineteen] sixties and seventies, we had a house built right here on this point [in Big Bayou]. It was a guard house to watch over the leases. ***EDITED FOR CONTENT-about one minute***] We had it built on stilts out here in the middle of the—in the middle of the bayou here. In 1985 [Hurricanes] Kate and Elena blew [the house] down. And the Federal Government wouldn't let us build it back because they said it interfered with the nesting of the ospreys over here on the island. [*Looking at the birds across the bay again*] Yeah, those are white pelicans. But our house was right there [points to the spot in the bay near where we are sitting in the boat]. I learned how to swim right there. My brother [Olan] threw me overboard right there and told me to swim or drown. Sure did.

0:29:36.6

AE: Well this is awfully remote [and accessible only by boat]. What was it like growing up here? I mean how many—how often would you go into town or—?

0:29:42.6

TW: Oh, I don't know. We'd go into town, you know, maybe on the weekends. We went to school there [in Apalachicola]. We was known as 13 Mile Trash. We was poor white folks from 13 Mile.

0:30:01.0

AE: How did you get to school? In a boat?

0:30:02.8

TW: No, a bus—a school bus picked us up down there [at 13 Mile]. There used to be forty and fifty families that used to live down there. *[Interviewer's note: See the interviews with James Hicks and Bobby Shiver for more information about the families that used to live and work at 13 Mile]* It was a big community. They—but it was a lot of houses down there. My dad moved a lot of houses out of Kenny's Mill over in St. Joe and built down there. One of the houses that I lived in come from Kenny's Mill when I was a kid. So anyway, this is—this is Big Bayou. This here is paradise right here. It does not get any prettier than this. Yeah, right there by that old pine tree, we had a nice house built there. We'd come over and stay when I was a kid coming up. You know, a teenager. We would—we would—me and my friends, we'd come down here and stay in—in that house on the weekends and all. *[Distracted]*

0:31:08.8

AE: You see something. What are you looking at?

0:31:12.9

TW: I was looking at that little stake there; it looked like it was moving. I thought it was something in the water. [*Boat motor stops*] This is a good fishing hole right here. [*Tommy brought a pole and some tackle on the boat, hoping he would get a chance to fish while we were out.*]

0:31:19.9

AE: Well, get to casting.

0:31:22.1

TW: I'm going to throw once or twice. I got a top water plug in here; I don't know how well it's going to do, but we're going to ease right over there to what they call—maybe Piney Point or something. That's that savannah I was telling you about when was back over there at Picalleen Hole. See how it goes down through there? There's some—

0:31:47.5

AE: All that marshy sea grass in there?

0:31:48.8

TW: Yes, ma'am. [*Sound of Tommy casting*]

0:32:01.8

AE: It's quiet.

0:32:07.0

TW: I love to catch a glimpse of a big Sandbur deer. Look at the osprey. It might be an eagle. He might have a fish and [is] going over there to land and eat. [*Sound of Tommy casting again.*]

0:32:29.9

AE: So being in this pristine Big Bayou and then knowing what real estate is doing on land, [are things] moving too fast for you?

0:32:41.5

TW: Well, yeah. You know, our way of life is going to be gone as I know it. I guess a new way will come in. But you can put too much pressure on the sanctuary with development with houses,

roads, and you got septic tanks or bigger sewer plants, and I don't know that the bay can withstand all the pressure that's going to be put on it. You know, that's what scares me. That's like up on the waterfront [in downtown Apalachicola], we have one of the last big shrimp houses left in this [Franklin] County. You know, Carrabelle [which is a town east of Apalachicola] don't even have a shrimp house no more. And Buddy Ward and Sons Seafood is one of the last ones. They want to build condos and homes and everything and do away with the waterfront—we—as we know it. And if you do away with the waterfront and take all the shrimp houses and fish houses and oyster houses [away], and you develop it with marinas and condos, then the seafood industry is no longer in existence. And it's coming every day, faster and faster. I guess that's the reason I love it so much down here. It don't get no prettier than this, though, does it?

0:34:30.1

AE: I don't believe it does.

0:34:33.8

TW: The fish is not biting too good, though.

0:34:36.7

AE: Well, that would sure make it a perfect afternoon, wouldn't it?

0:34:41.2

TW: Yeah. We might catch one before it's over with, you know. I'm just going to ease down the creek here a little bit. Usually right around this bar there's some good fish. So who else are you doing a story on?

[Recording is paused for casual conversation off of the record.]

[Recording resumes]

0:35:16.4

AE: Well, tell me about the place in Apalach on the waterfront.

0:35:24.0

TW: The shrimp house?

0:35:24.7

AE: Uh-huh.

0:35:26.2

TW: Well, we started out with a little old bitty building down there and a couple shrimp boats and we, you know—we all just worked in it. My dad had a boat built named *Buddy's Boys* by Bud Seymour, and it was a fifty-one-foot shrimp boat, and it was a nice boat. He had—I was in third grade when they put that boat in the water.

0:35:56.3

AE: I think I saw that down [in the water] on Water Street [in Apalachicola].

0:35:58.4

TW: Yeah, they used that for all the—he brought the Santa Claus in on parade of—or on Light-Up Night [during the Christmas holidays]. It totes the King and Queen at the Seafood Festivals. But that's a really neat boat. And me and my brother shrimped that boat for years, when I was a kid. That was Olan [*Tommy's older brother*]. Anyway, I shrimped with him when I was probably 13, fourteen and maybe, fifteen [years old]. We'd shrimp from Apalachicola, Alabama, Mississippi, and maybe down south. He—he was a good fellow. He—he had three kids. He—he drowned in February 23rd, 1978. He had been hog hunting over on St. George Island—little St. George Island—and coming back across it got rough, and the boat capsized, and two of them drowned, and one of them made it. But [my brother, Olan] was running 13 Mile at this time after I was sixteen years old. And I worked for him back then at the oyster house. [**EDITED FOR CONTENT-about thirty seconds**] But anyway [my father] leased the place out to some people—to the Pauls and they had it for several years. I went onto school and went off to college. I got out

of college, and I moved down to Crystal River. I drove trucks for my dad, and we built a shrimp house and all down in Yankee Town, and I moved down there and run it. I hired Smokey Parish, which works down there [at the shrimp plant now]. And me and him roomed together in college and we grew up together. So anyway, me and him moved down there and run a shrimp house and a stone crab plant and grouper boats and all for about a year-and-a-half. And then we was in partners with some people from France. Anyway, the partnership dissolved, and me and Smokey moved back to Apalach, and I drove trucks hauling shrimp to Singleton's, Red Lobster, Treasure Island, people like that, you know, at these breeding plants. And I worked for my dad for quite a few years. And then me and him had a disagreement or a falling out, so he fired me. And I went to work for Leavins Seafood, and I worked there probably a year-and-a-half or so. And then me and my dad talked, and me and him went in partners in the oyster business, and he still had this place leased out down here. And I wanted the place, you know, because of all the [family] ties. But anyway, over a period of a few years we ended up with the place, and he gave it to me. I've been here probably—you know, probably close to fifteen years, I've been running the place. The shrimp house is doing good. Dakie [nickname of Walter Ward], my older—my oldest brother now, he—he runs it, him and Smokey. And I've been out of the loop down there for about fifteen years. You know, I handled the—I haul their shrimp for them. I handle the trucking end, which me and my dad, we have become, you know, extremely closer than what we've ever been.

My dad got sick probably twenty years ago, I would say—fifteen—maybe not that long. It's close to twenty years, I'd say my, dad got throat cancer. They did radiation; gangrene set in on him. He liked to died. We flied him out of Panama, you know, they did a lot of surgery on him and they—it took several years to get him well and—but he had one hell of a shrimp business going on, you know, before he got sick. There's no telling where we would be if my dad

hadn't gotten sick and, you know, he had so many things going on that none of us knew about.

You know what I'm saying? I mean he—that's just the way he was. Dakie knew a lot about what was going on. But anyway—.

0:42:29.9

AE: Like what do you mean things going on—on the side, little businesses?

0:42:32.6

TW: Well, you know, different investments he had. Like out there in Biloxi, Mississippi, he owned a bunch of property out there, you know, that ended up getting sold off for near nothing, and people made millions on it. There's a casino sitting on one piece that he owned out there. You know, and—and that's like with the oyster leases and the oyster house and see, I—I didn't get all that 'til after he had got sick, and then me and him, you know—it took me a long time to convince him to let me get it, because he's—my father is a man of his word. He's one of the—the older people. You know, if he tells you something you can bank on it. You know, I mean I'm living proof because when he fired me, you know, I drove trucks. [**EDITED FOR CONTENT-
about thirty seconds**] And then that's when I to work for Grady Leavins [at Leavins Seafood in Apalachicola]. And a year or so—right—I worked for Grady, and I went back to my dad. Which, I mean, we had talked and all, you know, and we—we're a close-knit family. I mean, don't misunderstand what I'm trying to say. I mean, even though I didn't work for him, we were still

close to a certain degree. I'm going to move just so the sand gnats don't eat on us as we're talking. [*Gets the boat going again to drive us to another part of the bay.*]

0:44:49.4

AE: Okay.

0:44:49.7

TW: We'll talk and ride.

0:44:51.7

AE: Okay.

0:44:52.0

TW: We'll ride a little further this way. But anyway, he fired me. And so after a year or so later, I wanted to come back to work in the family business. And, you know, I went to him and kind of told him I'd like to come back, and he kind of like told me, *Well, you know, a man ain't no better than his word. Do you remember what you told me?* You know what I'm saying? So anyway, it rocked on and a month or so later we talked and he said, *Listen, we'll go in partners you know, sixty-forty. I got sixty; you got forty. And we'll go back in the oyster business.* So that's what we

did. And I had a little place in town that I run my business through, and I ended up—he—the people owed my dad some money so we got—he took back one of the oyster leases and, you know, he gave it to me, and things just progressed from there. And eventually I ended up with the oyster house and 13 Mile and the oyster leases that I always wanted. But it's always been a partnership. So that gives you an idea of what kind of man my daddy is, you know. And he's a self-made man. He's—he's really, you know, respected in the community.

0:46:42.4

AE: Was he born in Apalach?

0:46:43.7

TW: Yeah, as far as I know he was. Yeah, he was born out at—at the airport. It used to be a Military Base at the Military Hospital out there, if I'm not mistaken.

0:46:56.6

AE: How old of a man is he?

0:46:58.5

TW: He's seventy years old—seventy or seventy-one. He talks artificial now; he's not in the greatest of health right now but he—he's—he's a really fine fellow—him and my momma [Martha Pearl Ward] both. They—I'm real fortunate.

0:47:20.0

AE: What's your mother's name?

0:47:21.9

TW: Martha Pearl—Martha Pearl Ward. She was a Miller—is her maiden name. And the Miller side of the family is the one that had 13 Mile years ago. But they—they both—really, really good people, and I'm not just saying that because it's my mother and father. And a lot of other people think so, too. You know, [in] my personal opinion, my daddy has done a great deal for a lot of people in this community, and he's done a great deal for the seafood industry, and he has stood by and has fought the development of things in this part of the world for the seafood industry. And he's spent a lot of—you—will you eat this? [*Hands interviewer an orange.*]

0:48:20.1

AE: Yeah, I'd love to.

0:48:22.3

TW: Okay. Grab it, and I'll peel it back.

0:48:26.4

AE: Thank you.

0:48:27.6

TW: Uh-huh. But anyway, he—he is—but he's a self-made man, if I may put it in those words. He—he's never been one to—to exploit his earnings and—and you know, maybe his wealth. He, you know, money hasn't changed him. And he still has his same values. He's a tough old bird, I can tell you that. You—you haven't met my dad, obviously.

0:49:13.5

AE: No, I've not.

0:49:14.7

TW: You need to meet my dad.

0:49:16.6

AE: I'll look forward to it.

TW: And, you know, I got a good family. I got a good wife. I got, you know, three good kids.

0:49:30.5

AE: What are all your kids' names?

0:49:31.3

TW: My oldest boy name is Kevin. He's—he's twenty-seven years old. He—he went into the Marines for four years, and he done two terms in Okinawa. They sent him to Indonesia for a while. He come back and went to college—or he come back and was going to work with me. And that didn't go over well at all. Then I got another son named Thomas Lee Ward, Junior [who goes by TJ] that—he's seventeen. He's—he's really, you know—he's—he's intelligent. He—and I'm very proud of him, too. And then I got a fourteen year-old daughter and her name is Sara. And she loves to dance; she plays the violin. And that's my heart, you know. **[Laughs]** She's precious. And then my wife is Patty, she—or Patricia. She works at the State's Attorney's Office. She's been there for about twenty-eight years. She's really a good woman, and she has put up with me, you know, for many years. She has put up with me working in the seafood business. It's been hard, you know. It's a lot of long hours. There's—you know, the oyster business is not, you

know, [there's not an] extremely great amount of wealth in it, but it's a good honest living, and I enjoy it. And she has put up with that.

And, you know, this storm, [Hurricane] Dennis, that just devastated my business, you know—you know, we had talked and—and, you know, we just wasn't going to build back, you know. I just told her [that] I just couldn't take it no more. You know, and that took—it had taken such a toll on me. But I was—the first day after the storm I went down there. I was depressed. I just moped around and looked and saw what had happened, and we went home, and I told her, you know, *We'll just clean everything up, and I can find something else to do, you know. I got tractor and trailers that are paid for and, you know, I got a grouper—a little grouper boat. And, you know, I got these oyster leases and that cultivator.* I said, *You know, I can—I can make a really good living and not have all the headaches and doing—you know, just do away with it.*

0:52:59.2

AE: Be less of a manager, you mean, and more of your own—?

0:53:03.4

TW: Well be—you know, fish and oyster and shrimp because I got a shrimp boat, too, that I own. You know, it's a little one but it's—it's mine and—and I could, you know, maybe work down there with my—my brother at the shrimp house or, you know, something. But anyway, the next day I come down there and started working cleaning up, you know, and my wife come down there and some friends of ours—the family—you know, of mine and hers come down, and

they started helping clean up and fix up. And this one couple that was helping, her husband is a contractor. He said, *Man, we can fix this place back up*. I said, *Yeah, you know—you know, maybe*. So that night I went up to talk to my dad, and [this guy] called me at my dad's. And put me on the spot. He said, *You know, if you want to build back, we'll do it. We'll start tomorrow*. I said, *Well, you know, let me talk to my dad*. And my dad said, *You do whatever you want to do, you know*. And so I said, *Okay, we'll do it*. So that's what I did. And for the last four or five months that's all I've done. And, you know, I've spent every day from daylight 'til after dark **[Emotional]**—not making no money for, you know—just imagine not making no money for four months, and everything you have in your savings and everything you can scrape to rebuild, you know. I was working. Then the shrimp business got pretty good over the last four months after the storm, and my truck drivers, you know, the couple truck drivers I had that drove my big trucks, they didn't want to do carpentry work and went and found them a job driving somewhere else. Well, the shrimp business got to going, and we got to hauling shrimp. So I would have to work all day. I'd work all day long and then take my truck down there, and they'd load it with shrimp. And I'd get off work at seven, eight o'clock at night, and I'd go home and take a bath, and I'd go down and crawl in the truck and drive to Alabama to deliver these shrimp at daylight the next morning. I'd get back home at one or two o'clock in the evening, and I would stop at 13 Mile, and I'd work 'til dark again. And then if they had another load of shrimp, I'd leave right out again that night. And I've worked like that and done like this for—for four or five months, and it has—it's—it's taken a big toll on me, you know, mentally, physically, and—and then when it—you know, I get to thinking about my home life and thinking about what it's done to my kids and to my wife, you know it—it has an effect on someone that you have to be strong to be able to do it. And I—I think I'm strong but it—it hurts, you know. And—and just think, you know, I didn't

lose my home, you know. I didn't lose none of my family members. The only thing I lost was a business. And that—that's taken—it's taken this kind of effect on me. And then you look around at these other people that has lost everything they had, you know. I got so much to be thankful for, but yet it's—it's still hard. But—but all you got to do is look around, and there's somebody in a lot worse shape than you are, you know. But I guess the hardest part is not being able to spend the time with my family like I need to. And like my dad, he's sick. My momma is not in the greatest of health either, and I haven't been able to spend the time I'd like to spend with them either. You know, maybe that's—maybe that's the hardest part about all of it. But other than that, really and truly, I love it, and I'm so thankful my friends come and talked to me and helped me to get started to rebuild, you know. Good things are going to come out of it for me, I'm sure—for me and my family, I hope, you know.

0:58:12.6

AE: Well in all that, what has the red tide meant to you these few months? Has it been a relief to not be oystering or has it been more of the same—just kind of—?

0:58:21.8

TW: Well, you know, to be truthful with you, see and—and it's hard to say this the way I say it, but it's really been a blessing to me in one aspect. But in the—another aspect you look at it, the people that I employ that worked for me and the other families that depend on this bay for their living, they've been without for four months. So where it's been a blessing to me as one

individual, it's been detrimental or so bad on so many other people, you know. That definitely outweighs my needs. You—you follow what I'm saying?

0:59:16.8

AE: Oh, yeah.

0:59:17.7

TW: You know, so how can I sit here and say it's been a blessing to me, when I look around and see how many people it's affected.

0:59:25.0

AE: How many employees do you keep up at the oyster house, usually?

0:59:28.0

TW: Well, you know, you figure I've got two truck drivers, a secretary, three to five house men, then you figure I probably am—you know, at the time, I probably had eight or ten shuckers. Then, not counting the oystermen, you're talking about another thirty-five people. So you figure fifty, sixty people. You know, it's not no big corporation or no big firm or nothing, but fifty or

sixty people, you know, that have a wife and kids too. So that there is my outlook on that, you know. Maybe I'm a little strange or weird but—I don't know.

1:00:23.9

AE: So have most of those folks been able to stay with you through the rebuild and kind of help out in a different way?

1:00:30.9

TW: They really didn't—didn't come down there and work. I had a couple oystermen that I tried to, you know—to pay to come in and help me build and—you know, once you get this water in your blood, working on this water, nothing else satisfies you. It's hard to go to a land job and go to work. I mean could you imagine being out here in this all day, every day, you know, and you get paid for it?

1:01:05.8

AE: I can see the draw, for sure.

1:01:07.8

TW: You know—you know, and once you get that water—that saltwater in that blood, hey, they just—it's hard to be satisfied after that. But, you know, I'm—I guess I'm just so fortunate to have the family I got and, you know, the friends that I have. You know, a lot of people say if you can count your friends on one hand you're—you're a lucky person. You know, I feel like I can count my friends on my hands and my toes because so many people has helped me. [*Emotional*] And, you know, but that goes back—you know, I try to help a lot of people, too. You know people—people is good to me, and I try to be good to them. I try to treat people the way I would like to be treated, you know. That's just like you. I mean, do you think I'd sit down and talk to somebody else like this? No. I like you—you seem to be a real—you come across real good when I met you. So, you know—and far as me getting emotional the way I do, I'm sorry about that, but there's a lot of deep feelings here.

1:02:37.8

AE: No apologies, really. [I realize] it's all on the surface [for you].

1:02:41.3

TW: But how much beautifuler can you get than this right here?

1:02:45.2

AE: I honestly don't know. This has been such an amazing afternoon.

1:02:47.6

TW: I mean, it may not appeal to you as much as it does to me, but I love it.

1:02:51.2

AE: No, and I can see why. I've never, honestly, been to a place like this.

1:02:57.1

TW: And there's—you know, but you want me to tell you what bothers me?

1:03:05.4

AE: All right.

1:03:05.8

TW: Is so many people are selling out their heritage for money. I mean, I realize it's nice to have money. Don't misunderstand me. I've been broke—I'm broker now than I've ever been in my life. I mean, I'm being truthful with you; right now at this present time I'm probably broker than I've ever been. I mean, you know, because I've always worked ever since I was real little,

you know. That's the way we was raised, and you always had a little money, and you could always do—and maybe I spoiled my kids a little too much, but let me tell you—and there's a lot of other people around here hurting—but let me tell you. These—a lot of these people around here are selling out their heritage, their—their livelihood for—for one lump sum, you know. That's like me. What if we sold our shrimp house and all out? I mean, sure it's worth several million dollars, but what you going to do after you spend that money? Or, you know, what you—I mean, you know, people say, *Oh, you can do this or you can do that*. But you get—I just—
[distracted my movement in the water] Oh boy, there was a big old red fish or something that just hit right over there. See it?

1:04:34.3

AE: Uh-uh.

1:04:35.8

TW: See that water?

1:04:36.7

AE: Oh, way past that—yeah.

1:04:38.7

TW: Yeah, see that?

1:04:39.6

AE: That post?

1:04:40.2

TW: [*Continuing with story*] But, you know, I can't sell out my soul or my—my livelihood for a little bit of money, which that's where I'm different than a lot of other people. Money is not what makes me tick, even though it's nice to have.

1:05:03.4

AE: Well this is certainly a magical place, and you're certainly connected to it, and I can see why.

1:05:09.5

TW: You know, but you come out—you know.

1:05:18.9

AE: I've got to take a picture before the sun totally goes down.

1:05:20.9

TW: Okay. You want me to try to put you out there in the bay where you can get it, or you want it here and then one out there in the bay?

1:05:24.7

AE: Yeah. Both, please.

1:05:27.5

TW: Okay.

[Interviewer takes some photographs. Recording is paused for a while Tommy drives back across the bay.]

[Recording resumes when Tommy stops the boat on the water in another part of the bay.]

1:05:29.9

AE: I wanted to ask you where you and Smokey went to school, and what did you study?

1:05:32.6

TW: We went to Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, and we studied Business Management.

1:05:43.2

AE: Did you study that purposely to come back home and—and work in the industry?

1:05:46.9

TW: Yeah. Which Smokey come back home early, and I left there and went to Tallahassee for a year and did what a lot of college kids do—about pissed my life away, you know what I'm saying. Instead of getting a good education, I done other things. [*Laughs*]

1:06:16.1

AE: Say no more. [*Laughs*]

1:06:16.2

TW: You know, so anyway that's—that's what we did. Smokey is part of the family; he's just like one of the boys. My father thinks of him as one of his sons. My daddy shrimped with his daddy years and years ago, and Smokey is good people.

1:06:47.6

AE: And you know were talking about your—how you have in your heritage, you have some Indian and you have some Irish. What—were your father's parents—did they live here? Was he born here?

1:06:58.0

TW: My daddy's parents come out of North and South Carolina, I believe, and they was—my daddy—my grand-daddy and his daddy migrated from North or South Carolina down to Apalachicola. My grandfather used to be a tugboat captain on the Apalachicola River. He rafted the logs down the river for the saw mill years ago.

1:07:33.4

AE: Wow.

1:07:35.4

TW: I have my grand-daddy's houseboat. My dad gave it to me.

1:07:39.8

AE: No kidding?

1:07:41.0

TW: And Smokey—me and Smokey have it together. And it's up the river in Hump Creek Slew. But me and Smokey have my grandfather's houseboat. And so, you know, where a lot of things mean, you know—I guess I'm kind of simple minded and—and all, and I kind of like the old way of life a lot more than people do anymore. The worldly things, you know, a lot of worldly things don't appeal to me. Now, I enjoy—now, I enjoy flying out to Oregon. [That was] the first time I ever flew on a big plane. And I enjoyed going out there, you know, learning some of the history there. That was really, you know—really impressive to me, the west coast.

1:08:42.7

AE: What did you go out there for?

1:08:44.5

TW: I went out there to [an] ISS Conference.

1:08:45.7

AE: What's that?

1:08:46.8

TW: Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference. I go to pretty much all of them anymore. I'm the Oyster Dealer President, Apalachicola Bay Oyster Dealer President. I represent a lot of the dealers when we go to these meetings, you know and—and I've got a little bit of sense of reality—what needs to be done, what kind of enforcement needs to take place, you know, from what I see from my business in this particular area. But, you know, it changes from state to state and bay to bay on how it needs to be managed and what rules and regulations needs to be set forth.

I pride myself in having the best oyster in the world. We have the best oysters in the whole world right here in this bay. I pride myself in 13 Mile Brand product. The old man with the pipe in his mouth, Old Salt, you know. That's been my daddy's logo for years. I hope I don't [unintelligible].

1:10:28.0

AE: You're fine

1:10:30.8

TW: But, you know, one thing my dad told me, you know, when we went in business together and handling oysters and—and shrimp and fish—I handle—I just don't handle oysters. I sell shrimp, fish, clams, you know—but we got our name on that product, you know. And when you see the old man with the pipe in his mouth, that's a sign of quality. You know, we take pride in it. That's just like our shrimp in our shrimp house. We take pride in the product that we pack and put on the market and—[*distracted*] look at the ducks. But, you know, that's—that's one thing that—that Buddy Ward and Sons Seafood strives to do is put out a good safe quality product for people to eat, for people to take home to their families to eat. I don't sell nothing that I wouldn't eat myself.

1:11:45.0

AE: Well, like when we were leaving out in the boat today, you had some people coming up on a boat and driving up to get some oysters. And that man in the overalls—what was that conversation when you said, you know, *I know you want something off of B-29*, or whatever?

1:11:59.0

TW: Yeah.

1:11:59.3

AE: What is—is that—?

1:12:01.4

TW: That's one of my oyster leases. And that's friends of the—those two people that come down that dock—my dad has a hunting camp, and we got a camp up in Orange [Florida] up towards Bristol, up in the National Forest, and my dad, he likes to hunt with dogs. He don't care nothing about killing no deer. He likes to run his dogs. And over the last four or five months my dad's health has—has failed him tremendously to where he's not able to get out and do much, and he was up at the camp with them and that lady is a real nice lady. Her and my momma get together and, you know—and—and cook. We got a big cook shack up there we call it where, you know, the neighborhood gets together and cooks every night—big fire—but my dad and mom is not able to be there now because of his health. And, you know, they drive seventy-five miles to get a bag of my oysters. I've had people from Jacksonville that will drive over here just to get some of my oysters. And I have people call me from all over the country that wants me to air-freight them oysters or shrimp.

But, you know, computers and things don't interest me. It's hard for me to sit down in front of a computer and spend hours on it. I can't do that; that's not my makeup. That's—you know, but I'm having to adapt to that so much more. Like I've never had the Internet down here [at 13 Mile]; I got it at home, but I wouldn't put it in my place of business, which now that I got destroyed. And I've rebuilt I've upgraded everything. I've got my offices wired where all the computers are interlocked or going to be interlocked. I'm going to have the Internet. My son, he

went to school for computers—to college. He—you know, he can put me together a web page—
TJ can do that. Sara, you know—my kids have always tried to get me to do that. Well it's just—I
can't sit down and look at that screen.

1:14:49.6

AE: Well, this [beautiful landscape] is outside your window.

1:14:51.2

TW: There you go.

1:14:51.8

AE: Yeah.

1:14:52.2

TW: I mean, you know, and that's not—but I've got to do it. I've got to change—you know
that's—that's something like my dad—it's hard for my dad to see the change in the times, you
know. Regardless of whether or not I want it, it's getting to the point I'm going to have to do it,
whether I want to or not. But I don't want to—that's like 13 Mile, that place right there. You

know, I put my heart and soul [*Emotional*] in that place. [*EDITED FOR CONTENT-about two minutes*]

I mean, I don't live in no big fancy home, you know. I got a nice little house; I got three acres of land. My wife and I got a chicken pen in the backyard. I'm putting a greenhouse together for my wife, you know. That's the type person I am and the type family that I have. My brother, Dakie, he's good as gold. I love him, you know. He's really a good person, but he likes to be the big wheel. I'm not no big wheel. What you see with me is what you get, you know. I'm tender-hearted but I'm also—can be a horse's ass, you know, when I get my mind set. But that—that bothers me with my business. You know, it's hard to get good help anymore. People, you know, as far as you can't afford—. But that gets back to—to what I was telling you about the money involved in the oyster industry, you know, versus other aspects of the seafood business. It's a good living, you know, and I can't afford to pay people a thousand dollars a week to—to be employed here. You follow what I'm saying? So it's hard to get good help with what you can afford to pay. Some people has been successful with it, but that comes back to the quality of my product versus other big business. The other businesses can't compete with the quality that I put out.

1:19:46.2

AE: And plus, I would imagine from an employee's standpoint, having people who have been raised up in it and know what they're—I mean, I would imagine that that kind of employee base is hard to—or impossible to come by or to replicate.

1:19:58.8

TW: Well, you know—you know, you—you take these young oystermen. They go out here on the bay, and they can make two hundred, three hundred, four hundred dollars a day. And are they going to come and work for me for a hundred dollars a day and have to work from daylight until sometimes dark? Or are they going to go where they can go to work at daylight, be in two, three, four o'clock and go home and be with their family and make twice the money and be their own boss and be stuck out here in this horrible environment? *[Laughs]* You—you see what I'm saying? So—but you know—.

1:20:42.4

AE: So what about all the oyster boats that are up on the—the [shore by 13 Mile]?

1:20:45.7

TW: On the hill? On them trailers?

1:20:46.5

AE: Yeah, yeah.

1:20:47.3

TW: Those oystermen work for me. They own their own boat. They—they're self-employed. In other words, they work when they want to work, and when they don't want to work, they won't work. But they work—they can only work for me on the days that I have orders for the product to come in.

1:21:11.2

AE: And they only harvest your beds?

1:21:13.7

TW: No, they harvest public bars.

1:21:14.9

AE: Everywhere, okay.

1:21:15.8

TW: Public bars. My little cultivator just went out and checked my one bed over there, and he caught twelve bags in just a few minutes and come in. I haven't been working that boat that—you—you—the little boy that drove the green truck [and put the boat in the water]?

1:21:34.6

AE: Uh-huh.

1:21:35.5

TW: That was down here? He works that boat for me. That there is Reggie's nephew. Well, his daddy lived in Buras, Louisiana. His daddy owned that boat. I bought that boat from his daddy. He was running okay, so I hauled the boat from Louisiana back here. I had that boat here about a year—six months to a year. Well, [Reggie's nephew] comes to Apalachicola to run that boat to get a job.

1:22:16.0

AE: Not knowing that you had it?

1:22:15.7

TW: Oh, he knew I owned the boat.

1:22:18.7

AE: Okay. I was going to say—.

1:22:19.5

TW: And he was running the boat when I bought it from his dad.

1:22:21.9

AE: Okay, so he followed the boat here?

1:22:24.1

TW: Yeah. And he's been running [it], and that little boy can catch oysters like nobody I've ever seen. He is just unreal the way he catches oysters.

1:22:36.5

AE: What does that mean exactly?

1:22:38.9

TW: Well it's [a] mechanical harvest. All you have around here is tongers. He knows how to adjust the scrapes and he's just—he's a hard-working little fellow, but he's one of the boys that I

tried—the doors through my oyster house, he built. This boy is an extremely good carpenter, but he loves oystering. He's got in his blood. He can make a mint in carpentry work or finish work. I tried to pay him one hundred dollars a day to work for me for four to five hours a day—twenty dollars an hour to work for me to rebuild this place. It drove him crazy. He couldn't stay in there and do it. I mean, [he'd] come in for four or five hours a day [and] I'd give him 100 dollars a day, you know, just to hold him over, and he just couldn't do it.

1:23:42.0

AE: Because he wanted to be out here [on the water]?

1:23:44.9

TW: Yeah.

1:23:45.5

AE: How old is he?

1:23:48.7

TW: He's probably twenty-seven. But he'll make—he'll make—running that boat, he'll make sixty, seventy thousand dollars a year—not a bad living.

1:24:08.7

AE: Not at all.

1:24:11.1

TW: You know, so—.

1:24:13.2

AE: Did you rename that boat after your daughter, or did it come called Sara?

1:24:15.4

TW: Yeah, I renamed it after my daughter. I've named my shrimp boat after my daughter also.
She didn't like her name on that ugly old oyster boat, so I named my shrimp boat after her.

1:24:27.4

AE: [*Laughs*]

1:24:29.2

TW: You'll have to meet my family, you know, to get a sense of what kind of person I really am.

1:24:38.7

AE: I think I've gotten a pretty good sense out here today.

1:24:41.0

TW: You know—

1:24:41.3

AE: This has been really special. I can't thank you enough.

1:24:46.5

TW: You know I'm not—

1:24:47.8

AE: Oh, man look at that. [*Looking at the sunset*].

1:24:47.5

TW: Now isn't that beautiful? I mean you tell—yesterday when I talked to you on the phone, you remember what I told you?

1:24:54.2

AE: You were watching the sunset. I pulled you away from it, too. I feel bad now.

1:24:57.2

TW: [*Laughs*] No, I mean a painting can't get no prettier than that, can it?

1:25:05.4

AE: No. And these pictures are not going to do it justice, I know, but—.

1:25:09.3

TW: But, you know—and I don't know.

[Recording is paused while interviewer takes more pictures. Then Tommy drives the boat back to the shore. Tommy and interviewer get everything put up and walk back into the oyster house at 13 Mile to talk about the operation inside.]

[Recording resumes inside the oyster house.]

TW: But this here is the skimming room, and this is where the shucked product is handled.

1:25:28.3

AE: Okay.

1:25:30.5

TW: This is where we shuck the oysters here. *[Walking through the room where plaster shucking stalls line the east side of the building.]*

1:25:38.0

AE: And they shuck them, and then they're carried over to that little window? *[There is a window across and back from the shucking stalls, where the shuckers deliver their buckets of shucked oysters.]*

1:25:39.0

TW: Right. And then they wash them and put them in those totes [plastic containers] or in pint containers or gallon buckets or whatever.

1:25:46.7

AE: How do they carry them from there to there?

1:25:48.9

TW: In a stainless steel bucket. Well, there's some right—this right here, which most of them got blowed away during the storm. All these walls was gone and—.

1:26:06.0

AE: And then this as far as design of a—what do you call it—it's a shucking counter?

1:26:11.0

TW: Yeah, a shucking stall.

1:26:13.1

AE: Stall. Is this like—this is what it traditionally looks like?

1:26:16.9

TW: Yeah, in the old-timey way. They got stainless steel in all your new modern plants. I didn't want to put stainless steel—.

1:26:27.4

AE: It's pretty.

1:26:27.8

TW: Look at that. [*Picks at a piece of the plaster that is peeling away.*]

1:26:28.9

AE: So you wanted to keep it the old style?

1:26:33.0

TW: Uh-hmm. Yes, ma'am. But anyway, this is where we process the shell oysters. I'm not completely through with this. Me and that black boy and Reggie built all this and—.

1:26:49.7

AE: What happens over there on that conveyor looking thing?

1:26:52.1

TW: They wash—that washes the oysters.

1:26:55.8

AE: Okay.

1:26:56.2

TW: There will be a loading platform going out this door here. We haven't built it yet—to load the trucks and that will be a loading platform for smaller trucks. But my doors haven't come in yet, and we haven't finished the loading dock on that area.

1:27:23.9

AE: So when you're harvesting and you say you get some from the south side of the bay in the Big Bayou, and you say those are good for shucking and—

1:27:35.2

TW: Right, out of the bay.

1:27:35.6

AE: —and then the ones on the north side are good for [selling to restaurants and individuals to be served on the] half-shell.

1:27:37.0

TW: Right.

1:27:37.3

AE: Are those ever harvested at the same time, and then you have to separate them in here at some point and know which is which?

1:27:42.1

TW: No, they—they keep them separated on the boat.

1:27:45.9

AE: Okay. And then you package them accordingly or—?

1:27:48.4

TW: Right.

1:27:49.6

AE: Or ship them—okay, okay.

1:27:52.6

TW: That's the way it works.

1:27:56.0

AE: All right. So have you made any other changes with the rebuild that was something—?

1:28:02.5

TW: This—this [refrigeration] room right here is, you know—is something that no—you know, no one in this area has. In other words, when the oysters come in off of the boat in warmer weather, we bring them right in here and we keep the climate at forty-five degrees or below. So the quality of the oysters is better, and they never get in the heat, you know. It just keeps the product cooler, and as you're processing them and washing the box, and you keep them in the same temperature all the time.

1:28:42.9

AE: And then where do all the boxes go?

1:28:43.8

TW: They go—I sell in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina.

1:28:54.9

AE: You have some customers that have been longtime Buddy Ward and Sons' customers?

1:28:58.4

TW: Uh-hmm, yeah. I—I start off in Savannah, and I work Savannah, Hilton Head, Beaufort, Charleston, Mount Pleasant. I used to go on up into Myrtle Beach and all, but I don't run that far no more. And then I run up to the lower part of Alabama and Florida.

1:29:20.9

AE: And then did the trucking part of the business come as a necessity to get your oysters out of the—?

1:29:27.4

TW: Well, I brought—when—when I come here fifteen years ago, that's what I did. I had those routes and those customers. I got some of the customers, I guess, that was here, you know, before I come here fifteen years ago, but mainly, it was a lot of the customers that I acquired over the years.

[Recording is paused while Tommy takes a phone call.]

[Recording resumes to formally end the interview.]

1:30:01.5

AE: Well, that sounds like it's going to come to an end, and so is this magical evening. This has been awesome.

1:30:08.1

TW: One big thing about it, that right there is pretty nice. [*Talking about the sunset.*] I guess I'm going to have to go home and get chewed out because she [*Tommy's wife*] didn't get to go to Panama.

1:30:19.2

AE: Well, you tell your wife that you took a city girl on the bay and just made her day.

1:30:27.0

TW: Well, I don't know why she didn't go. I wish Sara was at home. She's got somewhere to go tonight so, I guess—. I left my cell phone on the mantle, so she wasn't able to get up with me.

1:30:45.7

AE: Well, I'm going to put an official end on this and say thank you for a great day.

1:30:48.2

TW: You're welcome. I enjoyed it.

1:30:49.6

[End Tommy Ward]