



T.J. Ward
13 Mile Seafood Market
Indian Lagoon Fish & Oyster Co.
Apalachicola, Florida

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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
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[00:00:00.00]

A: All right. This is Annemarie Anderson, recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Apalachicola, Florida with T.J. Ward. Today is Wednesday, August 4. If you will, would you introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us your name and tell us what you do.

[00:00:22.21]

T.J. W.: My name's T.J. Ward. I work at 13 Mile Seafood Market and also have an oyster farm, which is Indian Lagoon Fish and Oyster Company. I started with Buddy Ward & Sons Seafood, which is 13 Mile, where it originated at.

[00:00:37.27]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell us a little bit—if you would—introduce us to Buddy Ward & Sons and 13 Mile. If you would, just describe your business, your family business, and tell us what y'all do.

[00:00:57.23]

T.J. W.: So, in the late [19]20s, early [19]30s, 13 Mile is west of Apalachicola, it was a fishing village during the Great Depression. That's where my grandmother's family, which the business was called Miller Fish & Oyster Company, started. Then, in 1957, they bought it and named it Buddy Ward & Sons Seafood. That place is still there, that's where it originated at. In the [19]60s, they come to Apalachicola and started shrimp as well. So, we also have oyster leases on St. Vincent Island, and also on the north shore of St.

Vincent Sound. So, we started off pretty much as a fishing community. There used to be a bait and tackle shop, a tower, a water tower, and forty or fifty families, gas pumps, and all that. There was also other fishing villages all down between there and Apalachicola.

[00:01:54.23]

Annemarie A.: Did your grandmother tell you about living there when she was growing up, what it was like?

[00:01:57.18]

T.J. W.: Yeah, she told me a little bit about it. You know, running around barefoot and the snakes, all the animals, bears and everything, and all the families, how they all got along. We still are kind of like . . . we're not actually kin to each other, but we still know that we come from that place and it was hard times back then that I'd never had to experience. Luckily. But yeah, they moved here in the [19]60s to downtown. The last house that was there, I was still alive, and it was a little bitty, probably twelve by twelve shack. Old Man Cleve lived in there and he had a cot and a little kitchen and that was it. He made sure nobody messed up anything down there until probably . . . it was the late [19]90s. That was the last house that was there.

[00:02:52.03]

Annemarie A.: Did Old Man Cleve, did he fish? Is that what he did for a living?

[00:02:56.12]

T.J. W.: At one point in time. When I knew Cleve, he was so old, he didn't do anything anymore. I was a young boy. But I actually got to see the house where my grandmother started raising the boys up. My dad has four brothers, so there was five boys. After . . . about 2000 or so is when that house finally deteriorated. We still have the old eagle claw tub, though. [Laughter] That was in there.

[00:03:19.22]

Annemarie A.: That's so cool!

[00:03:19.22]

T.J. W.: Yeah.

[00:03:19.22]

Annemarie A.: Did y'all refinish it and use it?

[00:03:24.04]

T.J. W.: No, we just have it saved. We haven't refinished it yet, but we have it.

[00:03:28.15]

Annemarie A.: Sweet.

[00:03:30.21]

T.J. W.: Yeah.

[00:03:32.05]

Annemarie A.: Well, tell me a little bit. What was the name of that fishing village?

[00:03:38.21]

T.J. W.: We just called it 13 Mile. They name all—like once you leave Apalachicola, I mean, right here is Two Mile is where the last gas station's at. There was 2 Mile Oyster Company, which a friend of ours owns, and then it goes from 8 Mile and 9 Mile. You can see the road signs. There's another family there at 11 Mile, the **Shellises**. They have oyster leases. They used to be one of the largest leaseholders in the bay, but now we are. But they still—their family still lives there. So, they didn't really think about it much. They just put a mile marker on it.

[00:04:14.24]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:04:16.06]

T.J. W.: It's right before you get into Indian Pass, so.

[00:04:17.07]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell us a little bit about some of the things that y'all sell and y'all catch. You've already mentioned oysters and shrimp, but tell me a little bit about some of the ones that y'all have—

[00:04:32.13]

T.J. W.: Well, mainly bay fish. Besides oysters and shrimp, we have four shrimp boats. Besides that, we have those oyster lease, and we're producing oysters, obviously, like you were saying. Like you said, we do flounder, triple tail. We unload squid, sometimes, off our shrimp boat. You know? Our grouper and snapper and things—tuna comes from Water Street Seafood down the road. His owner's Steve Rash and we buy from him. We sell him shrimp, or freeze shrimp for him. We work together. Him and my dad are friends. So, we kind of work together on that. We're mainly fish; bay fish, oysters, and shrimp.

[00:05:16.21]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about—I'm interested in, I think, Apalachicola has changed a lot in the last, probably, thirty years.

[00:05:27.29]

T.J. W.: Yeah. It definitely has. I mean, it's no longer forgotten. They call it Forgotten Coast, but it's actually been a good thing, because it keeps people busy working and all that. The town can only grow so much, especially if planning and zoning keeps the zoning the way it is right now. We're surrounded by preserves, national forests, state, and everything like that. But it's grown; it's popular. St. George Island's popular. Eastpoint's growing. But . . . I think it's still the same, and I think that people come here so much because they feel kind of like relaxed. It's not meaning anything against what I'm about to say with, like,

Destin or Fort Walton. It's nothing wrong with that, it's a beautiful place, but this is different. This is more homey.

[00:06:22.25]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Yeah, completely. I know what you're saying.

[00:06:23.15]

T.J. W.: If you break down on the side of the road because your tire's flat, somebody's going to stop and change your tire with you.

[00:06:29.15]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:06:30.26]

T.J. W.: If that makes sense.

[00:06:33.10]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, it does. I wonder if you could take us back. You've done a really great job talking a little bit about 13 Mile, but take us back and maybe describe the Apalachicola of your childhood. What did it look like? How was it different?

[00:06:46.03]

T.J. W.: Well, it . . . it definitely, like right now, we're sitting here on Highway 98 and you're seeing all these cars go by. [Laughter] It wasn't anything like that. And all the parking spots are filled up. It was about half this much traffic. You know, the building fronts, half of these places wasn't in business. I could literally walk down the street—like, my mom would let me leave her office at the courthouse and just walk where I'm at right now and get ice cream at the soda fountain. Right now, I wouldn't let my little girl—because I mean, there are so many people walking around. But it's changed a lot. I think it's for the better. I mean, it's keeping people busy, if that's what you was asking.

[00:07:32.24]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, that makes sense. Well, tell me a little bit about—you're third generation.

Tell me about your decision to join and be a part of Ward & Sons.

[00:07:50.16]

T.J. W.: I've really enjoyed seafood. Ever since I've been able to realize where I was at, I've been around oysters and eating oysters and shrimp house. Loved boats. I used to draw boats as a little boy. My grandpa, he raised me a lot, too, because I was always around him. It's kind of his legacy and my dad's legacy. I see my dad cares because his dad did, so it makes me want to care. There's other people in my family that do care, but I feel like I'm the one that's going to hold the torch. It's not me bragging. I think I'm going to have to be that person to step up, and I want to stay here for that. I had other ambitions at one point, but you know, this is . . . like we were talking on the way up here, it's a nice place

to work when you go to see the river every morning. Or you get to go on the bay. I don't know; I just feel like it's my obligation. Does that make sense?

[00:08:50.21]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. It makes perfect sense.

[00:08:56.11]

T.J. W.: So.

[00:08:57.25]

Annemarie A.: Tell me a little bit about when you were a boy, your relationship with the Gulf and the river.

[00:09:04.29]

T.J. W.: So, the river, most of the time I would go up there with my dad. We'd go hunting on the river, especially during open squirrel season. [Laughter] And stuff like that. That was one of my favorite times, because my friend, Little Smokey, would go. Big Smokey and my dad were friends, so it was like an awesome thing. Another friend, his name's Paul Standish, and mainly that and doing bush hooking and trout lines and stuff like that. But on the bay's mainly been shrimping and oystering. The Gulf of Mexico, we just go pretty much to have fun out there most of the time. You know? The first time we went, it was really, really rough. We took clients from Alabama, and it's a place called McLin's. I

might not should have just said that. [Laughter] Place called McLin's, it's been there for a long time. It's a steakhouse in Daleville, Alabama.

[00:09:59.24]

Annemarie A.: Yeah! It's a good place.

[00:09:59.02]

T.J. W.: All the boys got so sick because it was so rough. We went with David Barber, which owns a seafood house in Eastpoint. You know, my dad's got a center console boat. We still go out with David Barber. I mean, just . . . the Gulf of Mexico, I really don't do too much besides pleasure and have fun with my family and friends. But work's in the bay. That's what I do, mostly.

[00:10:23.09]

Annemarie A.: What would y'all—I'm interested about your hunting and fishing on the river. What would y'all catch with bush hooking and on trout lines?

[00:10:32.01]

T.J. W.: Channel cat and blue cats and things like that. I like to fly fish for bream. I didn't mention that earlier. But pretty much just catfish. It'd be cold when we're up there, so we'd put them in a bucket full of the cold river water and just leave them there till we got back from hunting. Fry up fish and squirrel, squirrel and rice. [Laughter] Brown gravy.

[00:10:56.21]

Annemarie A.: Sounds pretty good.

[00:10:58.13]

T.J. W.: It is good. [Laughter] We catch this—I call that a mud fish and they're a pain in the butt. We really use it for bait most of the time. But my friend from Louisiana, Chase, he calls them choupique. He's got one tattooed on his arm. [Laughter] He says the best eating fish you ever had. I don't know if I'm ready to try that yet. [Laughter]

[00:11:23.02]

Annemarie A.: What kind of fish is it?

[00:11:22.00]

T.J. W.: We just call them mud fish. He calls them choupique. I don't know; it's just a river fish. It looks almost like a gar, but it's not a gar. But he's got one tattooed on his arm. [Laughter] So, that must be good. But I'm not trying it right yet. I'm not ready. You're going to have to get some Jack Daniel in me or something.

[00:11:41.24]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about your role, it at 13 Mile. What are your responsibilities? What's your day to day like?

[00:11:54.02]

T.J. W.: Whatever they tell me to do. [Laughter] Right now, my purpose is to show up in the morning for the seafood market and make sure everything is ready to go. Then if I get stuck there, I get stuck there. If not, then I try to do odds and ends elsewhere. And make sure I'm closing up at the end of the day. Right now, I'm not doing the oyster—we're not doing the oyster farming. Waiting on the seed to come in a couple weeks. But when that happens, when they start getting to a certain size, I'll be down there until at least noon every day. Then I'll come back and work the seafood market again or do something at the shrimp house or whatever they need me to do. I'm pretty much, I guess, utility. Whatever they want me to do to make things work. But my main goal right now is try to get the oyster lease back up and running. Possibly, I might be cultivating oysters. We call it cultivating, but other people call it dredging. But hopefully, when the oysters come back, I'll be doing that on my dad and uncle's lease, along with the farm-raised, and somehow fit in the market, too. And my kids. [Laughter]

[00:13:07.11]

Annemarie A.: That's a lot, a lot of life and living to cultivate. Well, I was wondering, maybe we could get into the oyster farming.

[00:13:19.12]

T.J. W.: Okay.

[00:13:20.26]

Annemarie A.: Tell me how'd you get involved in oyster aquaculture?

[00:13:26.00]

T.J. W.: So, I was working at our oyster house at 13 Mile, where we originated at. That's where my dad originally ran the place and my uncle ran the shrimp house. Wakulla Environmental Institute had contacted us about buying oysters. We were in need for oysters. They spoke with my dad about maybe possibly buying the first round of oysters, so my dad bought oysters from there for a little while. They asked me to participate in the class, and my dad wanted me to do it, so I joined. I learned a lot. A lot of stuff I didn't know. I'd never done oyster farming. We farm oysters, but not in cages or above water. I mean, not above water, excuse me, but not off-bottom. Went to class there. They helped me out a lot. Just got a lease in Indian Lagoon and started from there. Was doing very well until Hurricane Michael. Then a lot of other people started getting leases and it was hard to get seed, because you only have so many hatcheries. So, trying to possibly do a micro-hatchery one day at 13 Mile to kind of not have to worry about depending on someone else. But WEI, Wakulla Environmental Institute. Met a lot of people there as well. Met people from overseas; Australia, France, Canada, and that just really gave me a whole different outlook on things. I mean, there's still going to be wild oysters, but the farm-raised oyster is . . . it's going to help out a lot when times are hard. It still creates jobs. So, that's how I got into it.

[00:15:13.09]

Annemarie A.: That's cool. Well, tell me a little bit about some of the challenges, maybe, of starting, besides the difficulty of getting seed. Some of the challenges of starting your own lease.

[00:15:25.22]

T.J. W.: Well, one thing more than . . . I guess the biggest thing is the water that you're in. You can be on sandy bottom or muddy bottom. I'm on muddy bottom. So, some people can jump overboard and walk their lines. I can't jump overboard or I'd sink up to my chest in mud. So, I have to depend on the weather a lot. The wind and the tide means everything to what I do. It's hard work. It's not as easy as people think, unless—if I was sand bottom and I could walk, it'd be cake. [Laughter] It'd be so easy. But every day, you learn something new. You learn just . . . I mean, just little odds and ends. I mean, how many oysters to put in the basket and certain size oysters grow a certain way. Every day you learn something. I mean, it took me a while. At first, I felt kind of like a . . . like a idiot. [Laughter] I mean, because I'm supposed to be an oysterman, you know? But it slowly came to me. Another thing is just finding help, finding good help, because you got to have somebody that's going to be out there with you every day that you go out that's going to be dependable. I went for over a year by myself and it was not easy. I was wore out every day. But I can't complain; that's what I was doing. I mean, I got to do it. Why would I complain? I do sometimes, anyways, but. [Laughter] Every day you learn something. What you learn helps you make better oysters and more oysters, you know?

[00:17:08.18]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Well, tell me, walk me through the process from getting that spat, putting it in bags, all the way to market-ready for you.

[00:17:18.22]

T.J. W.: So, when you get the seed, they're in little, small mesh sacks. I got socks that I put inside of our baskets which are made by SEAPA from Australia. It's so small that you have to make sure you rinse those sacks and shake the oysters around, get some mud out of the oysters, because they catch so much mud and suffocate the oysters. Or they won't be able to filter. So, you rinse those out as much as you can until they get to the next size, which will be like a six-millimeter. Once they get to a six-millimeter, you won't have to have the sock, because the basket can hold it. Then you can just shake them around in the water on the lease and make sure they're good and clean until they get up to a twelve-millimeter. Once they get up to a twelve-millimeter size, then you're able to sort out market size versus the ones that you don't think's good for market. So, we'll dump them out and pick out the ones I want to sell to, our seafood market or to a wholesale dealer, a restaurant, because my name's behind that oyster. Then the ones I think needs to grow a little bit, I'll throw them back in the twelve-millimeter cage and wait for maybe a week or so. It takes about eight months, six to eight months, and then you start getting a few. Then, after a year, you definitely have plenty of oysters from a baby. But some of the oysters, when they get to looking kind of ugly, I just have to throw them on ice and eat them for lunch. [Laughter]

[00:18:45.17]

Annemarie A.: That's not bad.

[00:18:47.23]

T.J. W.: No, it's not.

[00:18:48.08]

Annemarie A.: Tell me a little bit about—I think that, maybe, I think from talking to you and also talking to other farmers, that there's a difference in marketing wild versus a farmed oyster. Could you talk a little bit about, maybe, how you do that? Or what oyster you market for what space, I guess?

[00:19:08.29]

T.J. W.: It's probably going to make people angry, but I'm an oyster eater, so I like a decent oyster. When you have an oyster farm, that's your oyster. You don't have to abide by Florida laws or, if you're in Louisiana, same thing. You can sell it at one inch, if you want to, or two inch. The legal size limit for a wild oyster's three inches. So, the only state, I think, that doesn't have that, is North Carolina has two and a half, I believe. Might be wrong, but so, you can sell oysters at whatever size you want on a farm, and you're charging more for them because they're farmed. And especially now, with the depletion of oysters—especially our oysters, because we're from Florida and the Apalachicola Bay, everybody wants these oysters. So, kind of take advantage of some restaurants, sometimes, I believe. Like you go pay twenty dollars a dozen for raw oysters. I know that sounds cheap in New York, but here, that's crazy. You get there and you can put three on

a cracker, yeah. That's the only big deal to me. When the wild oysters come back, I think the price is going to be a lot higher, obviously, than it's ever been for wild, but they'll have to be three inches, and the quality be a little bit different. Now, don't get me wrong. There's a bunch of farmers that sell a nice, three-inch oyster. Like me, some people get mad at me because I won't sell them unless they're three inches. I got a measurement on a cull iron, I won't sell them with my name on the box. But anyways, yeah, that's the only difference, is sometimes the quality isn't there, because somebody's trying to make money really quick. I'm not pointing anybody out in particular about that; it's just some people do that, and then there's a bunch of people that do great. But the wild oysters, for them to come back, they're going to definitely have to manage it where they can keep the three-inch oyster law. Like if you go out there and you catch a redfish and it's an inch short, and they catch you with an inch-short redfish, you're getting a ticket. It wasn't like that much with oysters. It would have been busy for FWC to check everybody every day, too, you know? So, I can't blame them all the way, but I think more could have been done. So, hopefully that answered your question.

[00:21:22.21]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:21:22.21]

T.J. W.: Okay.

[00:21:26.27]

Annemarie A.: Well, I'm wondering, too, about—I think we can probably talk about the state of the oyster in Apalachicola and some of these ecological disasters and just natural disasters that have kind of contributed to what's a complex problem. But I'm wondering about your experiences. I think there's that other woman who was in the market asking you about the oil spill, and I'd love to know about . . . what that was like for you. Because I remember when that happened, and I remember how a lot of people I knew went down to Panama City and they found themselves pretty good jobs watching. Could you talk about your experiences during that time?

[00:22:10.12]

T.J. W.: Well, they use—it's called the VoO [Interviewer's Note: Vessels of Opportunity] program. They use vessels. You go out on the vessels and look for oil. I never seen oil, but I was out there every day. I was on one of our tug boats. I mean . . . they opened up the whole bay. The winter bars, the winter reefs, and the summer reefs, and the state let them just fish them out. I mean, not saying about size or anything; they just opened them all up. Everybody thinks that took a big toll on our bay, you know. When we were out there looking for oil, there was a certain amount of people that were going out there, just catching oysters from everywhere. So, when it ended, and then your next season comes up, there's no oysters on there because they've already caught them, and it started to go downhill from that. I mean, you had a little bit of a boom there for a minute, but after that, I haven't seen what I seen growing up as far as the amount of oysters coming in here. So, you say you got the summer oysters when the oil spill happened. Then they opened up the winter bars, too. Well, when the oil spill was over and they went to the

winter bars, there wasn't near as much as what they're used to, and winter's when you have your biggest season. So, they scraped, and scraped, and scraped more to try to—and probably threw stuff they shouldn't have thrown. But either way, that took a big toll. Like, that's something that takes years to do. After this closure of the bay this time, for five years, unless something different happens with the amount of oysters produced in the bay, they need to close it down in the summertime, I believe, and open the whole bay up during the winter like it used to be a long time ago before I was even born. Because in the summertime is when the wild oyster spawn. I mean, they don't even taste that good. I mean, they're trying to spawn. It just makes sense. You put a lot less pressure on certain bars. When you do summer bars, everybody's in the center of the bay; they're just on top of everything right there. In wintertime, they're on the other side of each of the river, in Eastpoint and then in the Miles. I think they should open it all up in the winter like they used to do, and fall, and close it in the summer and let them spawn, when it comes back. So, the oil spill just kind of put a big dent in it, you know? It was already kind of going bad, but that just really put a last point—like an uppercut on it, you know what I mean?

[00:24:44.05]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. Well, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind talking, also, about your experiences during Hurricane Michael. Could you maybe take us to that, the beginning of that week, and when you realized this was going to be something that was really going to impact y'all?

[00:25:05.10]

T.J. W.: So, a couple days before Hurricane Michael, we knew that storm was brewing. We didn't know it was going to come so fast. But we went to Pensacola for . . . you're going to edit this, right? I'm trying to think of the name. I can't think of it, the name. There's an oyster venue that—

[00:25:27.21]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:25:29.29]

T.J. W.: Pearl . . . I can't think of it right. I just had a brain fart, sorry. Anyways, we were in Pensacola and at an oyster venue for oyster farms, and all of a sudden, the storm started coming in fast. The day before, we had to really hurry and rush. I brought my wife and my girl. I brought my friend that helped me with my oyster lease; my dad and my mom. It was a great venue. We had to rush home. We got home and it was already blowing. The storm done picked up speed coming to us. My dad and I got our semi and parked it down at 13 Mile at our oyster house and grabbed as much stuff as we could possibly do and then the water started getting up to the engine the night before. So, we had to leave a lot of stuff. Anyways, we made it out of there. Next day, my family's at the house. We all stayed together at the same house. We do that during hurricanes. So, it was during the daytime, luckily, because I'd have been scared to death at night, but it was one of the worst hurricanes I've ever been through, and I've been through a lot. We just . . . normally, we'll ride through a hurricane, a 1 or 2, we'll ride around and check everything out. We wouldn't get out the house, so we just knew that everything was demolished.

After it was over, we . . . saw that 13 Mile was completely destroyed, where our oyster house is, and then 13 Mile and the seafood market and the shrimp house was a wreck because of the river mud and all. So, everything in the seafood market was flipped over and all that. It was just—it was horrible. But luckily, it didn't get into our freezers where our shrimp was. But my oysters survived it because they went underwater and the surge was so high that it protected them. But it was just . . . turned the table. It turned the table for everything. It was just, it was another uppercut. [Laughter] For at least our oyster house. We haven't rebuilt our oyster house yet because there's no oysters; there's no reason to spend that amount of money, especially right now. It's hurricane season. You go build it back, of course another hurricane will show up. Knocked all our docks out behind the seafood market. I mean . . . I don't know. My dad just rebuilt that oyster house in 2006, I think it was. Hurricane Dennis, 2005 or [200]6. Built it back great, sturdy. Just to go down there and see it knocked completely down, it knocked everything down. Threw boats across the highway. I've never seen anything like it. I felt bad for myself and for everybody around here until I drove to Mexico Beach and St. Joe Beach and Panama City. Then I said I have nothing to complain about; my family's still here. You know what I mean? They—about made me cry, looking at what they went through. It could have just turned, just a little bit, and that would have been us. We have people from Pensacola help us out, and other people help us out, to clean up the market and get back going to business. It's just tough.

[00:28:59.22]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:29:01.01]

T.J. W.: Yep. I got to listen to Oyster Radio for a week. That was the only thing I could listen to.

[Laughter] How you doing?

[00:29:14.14]

Annemarie A.: So, did you have to sink your—you run an Australian longline?

[00:29:18.17]

T.J. W.: Yeah.

[00:29:19.25]

Annemarie A.: Did you sink your bags?

[00:29:22.18]

T.J. W.: No. If I would have sank my bags, they would have filled up with mud, and I'd have never got them back. The mud—believe it or not, in the baskets, will kill them, if they sit in that mud. So, I'm in about three to five foot of water depending on the tides. So, when that storm surge came in, the wave action was . . . I don't know, probably at least six, seven foot over my oysters. So, that wasn't catching a lot of the waves or any wave at all, to be honest with you. Luckily, I didn't lose any. A lot of people lost their floating cages, but I can't sink my cages where I'm at. That's another thing, we're talking about farming oysters; that's what makes it different. Locations is different, ways, techniques. That's

why I can't jump overboard. My friend fell overboard one time. I could barely get him up on the boat. [Laughter] It was freezing cold. He got so mad at me because I couldn't stop laughing. He fell over twice. [Laughter] First time, he jumped right on. The second time, he got stuck.

[00:30:24.23]

Annemarie A.: Stuck in the mud.

[00:30:24.23]

T.J. W.: [Laughter] Stuck in the mud. And I laughed the whole time. It was so cold, it was like, December. He's from Denver, Colorado, and originally from here. We got in my truck on the way home because he was freezing; I had to take him home. He's like, "You got to get me home." [Laughter] He poured a whole cold bottle of water on me. He says, "How does that feel? Laugh some more." I was so mad. I'm going off on a tangent, sorry.

[00:30:56.02]

Annemarie A.: No, that's great. I'm wondering how you picked your lease. You're in Gulf County, right? Even though you've been living in Franklin County?

[00:31:03.07]

T.J. W.: Yeah, that's kind of a political issue. I wanted to do a lease on one of my dad and uncle's leases, which is over two hundred acres, and they wouldn't let me. If I did it, then they would turn the lease over to where they can control it every ten years, where we're a

lifelong lease. So, if we were to put one on there, then they would take control of it. Every ten years, they can renew it or not renew it. We asked to do it somewhere else in the bay and they said, "No, you can't do it. You can't do it in Franklin County." I wish I'd have recorded it when I was in Tallahassee in the conference room, because I had to go to Gulf County and get their permission and it was no problem, and any lagoons right by 13 Mile. It's great water; some of the best oysters in the world comes from that area, right in that five-mile square. I mean, some of the best oysters you could ever eat. so, we did it there, and it's in a good spot. That's how it happened. Then, all of a sudden, everybody and their brother's got leases here in Apalachicola Bay now. They had Alligator Harbor already marked off for aquaculture, so I'm not talking about those people, but everywhere else, it just all of a sudden—they're letting people have leases in the bay everywhere. I'm like, "Why'd I have to go to Gulf County?" I would have put a lease in the back dock at 13 Mile, like right off there. I mean, that's approved waters. That would've been so easy for me just to go there every morning, but I had to go to Indian Lagoon, which is not bad. I'm in one of the best spots, so I shouldn't complain. At least I got a lease. But that's why I had to go to Gulf County. I'm not going to complain about it anymore; I did at first, but like I said, I'm lucky to have it and the oysters taste great. I've eaten oysters from all over, from all over the world, mostly. I don't think you can beat the taste from this bay nowhere. I've had some good ones, now, don't get me wrong. That's close. But when these are good, you can't beat it.

[00:33:09.00]

Annemarie A.: I bet. I'm wondering why you think that they wouldn't let you have a lease?

[00:33:19.12]

T.J. W.: I don't know. I really don't know. It's kind of . . . kind of didn't understand, and I really wish I had recorded the conversation. But they brought their lawyers in there to the conference room, I know that.

[00:33:33.19]

Annemarie A.: Was this at a county level or a state level?

[00:33:33.13]

T.J. W.: State. Then, a year later, everybody's getting leases.

[00:33:39.13]

Annemarie A.: What year did you apply for a lease?

[00:33:43.16]

T.J. W.: I'd have to think about that. Like 2016? 2016, yeah.

[00:33:55.05]

Annemarie A.: Right when they were starting everything up.

[00:33:56.01]

T.J. W.: Yeah.

[00:33:56.01]

Annemarie A.: Well, tell me, maybe, a little bit about . . . I'm wondering about, do you have any other relationships or just working relationships with other oyster aquaculturists? What's that like, what's that community like here?

[00:34:20.08]

T.J. W.: I know quite a few oyster farmers. I talk to some of them when they ask me questions and I ask them questions and we try to learn from each other. I mean, I don't know them all; especially not like Wakulla County. But there's a couple of people around here that have leases that I've known for most of my life. If they ask me a question, I give them my knowledge of what I know. If I need something from them, they'll tell me. That's the way we work around here; that's just the way it is. As long as you don't go taking my basket off my line, you'll be good.

[00:34:55.10]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Is there problems with that, oyster poaching?

[00:34:58.13]

T.J. W.: I had a bad incident one time. But besides that, I've been pretty lucky. A lot of people don't know how to drive in to where I farm oysters. They get stuck. And I'd love to find them stuck on oyster bar with my oysters. [Laughter]

[00:35:14.24]

Annemarie A.: I bet. Oh, man. Well, I'm wondering, too, you farm and you were talking about getting seed. Where's the place in Louisiana that you get seed from?

[00:35:26.03]

T.J. W.: It's Triple N in Grand Isle.

[00:35:29.29]

Annemarie A.: Great. Do you usually use triploid or diploid?

[00:35:31.22]

T.J. W.: I use triploids, but when they grow in Indian . . . [Truck noise] When they grow in Indian Lagoon, even if it's a triploid, it looks like a diploid. It's just got a nice, round cup. It's not like what you see in other places with a lot more salinity, you know. Clearer water. It really does. The way I let mine grow—like I was telling you earlier—grow to three inches, it just looks like a solid cup, like they are a diploid. But I use triploids if I can help it. Last resort is diploid.

[00:36:13.00]

Annemarie A.: That's great. You were talking, too, about building a micro hatchery, maybe in the lagoon. Could you talk a little bit about that? What would that look like? What are your plans, I guess?

[00:36:25.22]

T.J. W.: I wanted to build a micro hatchery at 13 Mile once we get it rebuilt. I was working with a gentleman from Pensacola, and we've talked about it and talked about and never got actually to it, you know? Because we had to make sure all our ducks were in a row. We want to do it at 13 Mile and—not the seafood market, where the oyster house—and it would produce enough oysters for my lease, definitely, but then also . . . [Redacted
00:37:00]

[00:37:04.10]

Annemarie A.: I won't.

[00:37:06.05]

T.J. W.: But we had talked about maybe possibly selling to a few of the local farmers that we know. He didn't really want to; he just wanted to do us, but he also does wild reefs, too, with diploids. And we have two hundred acres. So, we want to do just our leases, but a possibility of maybe helping out a couple of local farmers that can't get seeds. Sometimes we'll have some extras, you know? If they come to us ahead of time and say, "I'm having problems getting seed." Well, maybe we'll be able to accommodate them. But all we need to do—we have a room set up, perfect, just for it, but we have to get the building back right. We haven't got to that yet because we've been so busy yet because all the parking lots are full. [Laughter]

[00:37:44.08]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. That's a good problem to have.

[00:37:49.26]

T.J. W.: Yeah, it is. We're lucky, especially during COVID, to be able to work.

[00:37:55.06]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Well, tell me a little about—I'm kind of interested in what you see as the future. I think one of the interesting things is, I've heard a lot of farmers talk about, at first, folks weren't really sure about the aquaculture industry, especially with oysters. Because in Florida, I mean, it's a lot newer here than it is in other places. But I'm wondering what you see as the future of wild and farmed oysters, maybe in Apalachicola Bay.

[00:38:28.04]

T.J. W.: I think the wild oysters, when they do come back, you won't have near as many harvesters. I don't think that this generation wants to do that. I can't say that I really enjoy tonging oysters either, you know? So, I don't think there will be many unless you have to, to pay the bills. On the farm-raised . . . it depends on how hard you want to work. People think it's easy. I see a lot of people that get into it and they think that it's going to be easy and they'll make a million dollars. It's not like that and they give up. So, I mean, if you're determined and you have the money to back you and have help and the right equipment, then yeah, farm-raised oysters is going to work, especially in the summertime, in my opinion. But I don't think this is as easy as everybody thinks it is. There are still open

leases to be had, and there's people—then, on top of that, there's the hatcheries. You only have a certain amount of hatcheries, so you can only have so many oysters. That's one thing that I think's crazy, is they opened up all the leases. Where are you going to get your oysters from? You know? So. But I think the wild oysters are already coming back. It's just, who's going to go tong them? I mean, I don't know of anybody that really wants to do that unless they have to, construction's so big right now. Right after the hurricane. And then real estate's up, so.

[00:39:58.25]

Annemarie A.: That makes a lot of sense.

[00:40:01.28]

T.J. W.: Yeah.

[00:40:03.09]

Annemarie A.: Well, I only have a couple more questions for you, and one of them is: I'm interested—I think it seems like 13 Mile has a pretty good reputation around here, and it seems like a lot of documentarians and journalists, people like me, come asking you for your story. I was wondering if maybe you could share for the recorder, tell me, what do you want me to know about 13 Mile? What do you want me to know about oyster farming? What do I get wrong about this?

[00:40:34.23]

T.J. W.: Well, oyster farming is the last thing about this. I mean, to be honest with you, I'm just growing oysters in baskets. The whole thing is, is that it's a little fishing village that got started and it comes from my grandmother's family, the Millers, and they did a great job. Then my grandfather, Buddy Ward, married my grandmother, Martha Pearl, and they went from nothing to something and they made sure they had a good, quality product. I always grew up saying, if your name's on it, it's better than—I mean, the only thing you leave on this earth is your name. So, they try to make sure they did a good job, I mean, quality-wise. Never sell something you wouldn't eat and just respect them. I mean, that's—hard work. I guess people realize that. I don't know any other way to say it besides that, just make sure they put out a good product and they gave people jobs. They had a job. I mean, that's my grandpa always said. He wouldn't sell out because, "I'll always have a job." You know what I mean? Like . . . even though it's hard work and all that, you're going to have a job. When other people don't have a job, if there's something here to be done, you got a job. Just make sure you just sell the best that you can sell. If your name goes on it, then that's the last thing you leave on this earth is your name. You better make sure it's right. I think the Old Salt guy looks pretty cool. [Laughter]

[00:42:12.01]

Annemarie A.: I think he does, too.

[00:42:12.01]

T.J. W.: Well, actually, I asked my grandpa one time. I said, "Where did that Old Salt come from? Did you draw that or something?" He says, "No." He says, "This shrimperman in

the [19]60s come to the dock and hand it to me. He was a deck hand." I says, "He just handed it to you?" He says, "Yeah, he handed it to me. I just made it my logo." I said, "Well, isn't that cool." I said, "You don't remember his name?" He says, "Nope, never knew his name. He was a deck hand on a boat." [Laughter] So, that's pretty awesome.

[00:42:38.29]

Annemarie A.: That is pretty awesome. Well, is there anything that we hadn't talked about that you want to share? Anything about . . .

[00:42:49.27]

T.J. W.: Unless you have some random question, I don't really know. I mean, I just wish the oysters would come back. I guess I can say that I wish I had a cooler full of oysters in the back of my truck like I used to in high school. [Laughter]

[00:43:01.16]

Annemarie A.: You just carry around a cooler full of oysters?

[00:43:06.22]

T.J. W.: I'd have at least a half a bushel of oysters or something in the back of my truck. I'd stop on the side of the road with my buddies and we were on the beach and eat some. Apalachicola National Forest, there's several piles of oyster shells, not just from me, that we just ate while we were hunting or something. I mean, I miss those days. I can remember sitting in my neighbor's kitchen—which, his dad's a shrimperman and a

crabberman, Kevin Martina, and my friend's name is Tyler and his brother, Jody. We'd just sit in the kitchen and just shuck oysters. I mean, when we were like ten years old and just eat the heck out of oysters. We'd eat the big ones, too. We call them two crackers.

[Laughter] That's it.

[00:43:44.25]

Annemarie A.: I love it. That's great.

[00:43:48.10]

T.J. W.: I miss the oysters.

[00:43:51.01]

Annemarie A.: I miss them too, and I hope they come back.

[00:43:56.06]

T.J. W.: Yeah. They will.

[00:43:56.26]

Annemarie A.: Well, thank you so much!

[00:43:56.26]

T.J. W.: Yes, ma'am.

[*End of interview*]