



**Susie & Larry Bowen
Oyster Farmers
Panacea, Florida**

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Location: The Bowens Home, Panacea, FL

Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Diana Dombrowski

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Project: Saltwater South- Forgotten Coast

[Interview begins]

[00:00:01.10]

Annemarie A.: Started! All right. Today is August 12. It's a Thursday. August 12, 2021, and I am here with Ms. Susie and Mr. Larry Bowen. Would you all go ahead and introduce yourself? Give me your name, and tell me what you do.

[00:00:17.26]

Larry B.: Well, I'm Larry Bowen and I'm an oyster farmer. This is my wife, Susie, and she's an oyster farmer.

[00:00:31.19]

Susie B.: And we're both retired, so this is our retirement job, and we love every minute of it.

[00:00:40.10]

Larry B.: And we work harder now than we ever did.

[00:00:41.01]

Susie B.: Yes, we do. [Laughter]

[00:00:44.08]

Annemarie A.: I bet, I bet. Well, if you would, for the record, would you give me your date of birth, please?

[00:00:46.03]

Larry B.: 10-23-[19]60.

[00:00:50.01]

Susie B.: 1-13-[19]62.

[00:00:51.17]

Annemarie A.: All right, thank you. Well, maybe we can get started. Could you tell me a little bit about your growing up years? Maybe the time that you've spent here in Panacea and maybe describe what it was like as a child?

[00:01:05.18]

Susie B.: Oh. As a child, it was . . . it was very peaceful. I grew up on Otter Lake Road and, as a kid, we could—my cousins lived across the street from us, so we grew up like sisters. We would ride our bikes to the store and get bags of candy and we just could ride our bikes all over Panacea and not worry about anyone bothering us. It really hasn't changed a whole lot, as far as numbers. Still pretty much the same; it's small. We hope it stays small. We raised our children here.

[00:01:51.18]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:01:53.19]

Susie B.: Yeah.

[00:01:55.25]

Annemarie A.: What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:53.29]

Susie B.: My mother worked for the school board system, and my father was in construction.

[00:02:04.12]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Did you have any water roots growing up? Anybody who—or what was your relationship like with the bay?

[00:02:12.14]

Susie B.: I didn't have any relationship with the bay until Larry and I married. That's when I got involved in the seafood industry.

[00:02:21.21]

Annemarie A.: Okay. So, I know you have a connection, as well, to Panacea. Could you talk a little bit about your family history?

[00:02:28.08]

Larry B.: Yes. My family has always been in seafood, three generations. Some of them own their own markets, some of them are in and out of the business. We have, now, one

family, which is—my mother's maiden name was Nichols, so that's the relationship I have to Panacea and Wakulla in general. The Nichols were all in the seafood business for, like I say, three generations. So, when I got out of school—my dad was in the service, so we travelled a lot, from Panama City to up north in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey. When I finally got out of school, at seventeen, I shot back down here and I've been here ever since. My first job was right back into seafood, which my mother didn't like. She always told me to, "Get a good education and you won't have to work as hard as your uncles, because they worked themselves to death." But they're doing something they enjoy. I used to come down here during the summer and spend time with them. From a young age, I knew that was what I was going to do no matter how much education I got. So, once I got graduated, I came on back down and that's what I've been doing ever since. I had several jobs that go along with the seafood industry, but even though I had a steady job, I still fished, oystered, shrimped, on the time that I had because I live so close to the water that I can get off work, I can get off work and go jump in my boat and go work four or five hours and get right back to work the next day. So, it worked out just great. I've been working for St. Mark's Powder for thirty years, shift work, so I got a lot of time during the week to go to work. Working all night and I'd work half a day or all day once I got off, fishing, oystering, whatever; seasonal.

[00:04:52.16]

Annemarie A.: What drew you to really pursue a career in the seafood industry? What was it that you just really liked about it?

[00:05:04.12]

Larry B.: The money. Quick money. When I was in high school in Jacksonville, Florida, I worked at a friend's grocery store. He and I were the same age and we did the same work, it was part-time after school. At the end of the week, I would have a check for about forty-five, fifty bucks—part-time after school—I'd come down here and I'd work one day, I'd make a hundred and fifty bucks. Multiply that by five or six days a week, and it didn't take long for me to understand where I needed to be working. Now, granted, everybody didn't make that kind of money that worked in the bay. But if you pushed yourself and had the knowledge of what's going on behind you, which I had three generations of it, teaching me how to do it, you can make a good living at it. That's what happens. It's the reason I stayed with it.

[00:06:13.28]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Could you tell me, I'm interested in your family history and the water. Could you tell me a little bit about those three generations? Maybe your uncles, your granddad, whoever it was who did that work?

[00:06:24.24]

Larry B.: Well, I can remember when I was a kid, I went to third grade here. My grandparents always owned an oyster house which shucked their own oysters. They had three sons. They'd go to Apalachicola and bring home boatloads of oysters. My grandparents had about four or five people that would shuck those oysters, process them, all during the week. When they weren't oystering, they were fishing. When they weren't fishing, they

were shrimping. It all went into that seafood market, and it was a wholesale retail business, so just all week long, they were working—making money—through the seafood business. I got to go out with them a pretty good bit when I was a kid, and if it was enough to hook me, well.

[00:07:26.04]

Susie B.: It's something that you do get hooked on, because I didn't grow up in it. I grew up here in Panacea around it, but was never involved in it, like I said, until I got married. But it's just something about being out on the water that's just peaceful. It's God's creation, you get to see God's creation, get to see the sunrise. We've worked, going out and watched the sun rise, come in, take a break for a little while, go back out and work some more on the oyster lease and watch the sun set. Not many jobs you get to do that. Not to mention the commute is much easier.

[00:08:09.23]

Larry B.: Traffic's not bad.

[00:08:09.10]

Susie B.: Yeah, the traffic's not bad at all.

[00:08:12.29]

Annemarie A.: I bet. Ms. Susie, I was wondering, what did you do for a living? Did you do mostly water work?

[00:08:21.29]

Susie B.: No. I worked for the local government, the sheriff's office, for twenty years. Before that, I worked with the credit union for a few years. When the children were young, I stayed home with them until they started school. Then I started working.

[00:08:42.16]

Annemarie A.: Nice. Well, I was wondering, I guess, the capacity that you also helped Mr. Larry on the water, what was that dynamic like? What was it like, what did you do when you went out on the water?

[00:08:58.21]

Larry B.: She's my getter. [Laughter]

[00:09:03.00]

Susie B.: I stay in the boat. I don't get out of the water, unless it's hot. Then I go overboard and get wet and get back in the boat. He brings the oysters. He goes and picks out baskets that need to be worked. And when I say they need to be worked, it's when they've overgrown and gotten full and they need to be thinned out, because in these particular baskets that we grow our oysters in, they don't need to be over a certain amount in each basket or the oysters won't grow and make a pretty oyster and then they'll start dying off. So, we just thin them out, size them out—large, medium and small—and, at this point this time of the

year, there's a lot of culling. I mean, by culling, we have to knock off the wild spat. That's hard. That's hard on your body.

[00:09:59.18]

Annemarie A.: I bet. I bet.

[00:10:02.20]

Susie B.: Yeah. This time of year is bad for us. But we get through it. That's what we do. Then when we get through, he puts them back on the line and I let him know when sharks are around. [Laughter]

[00:10:15.27]

Annemarie A.: Oh, man. Well, maybe we can get into the oystering. I'm wondering how you all decided—why farm oysters?

[00:10:26.03]

Larry B.: Well, it was offered about, what, six years ago?

[00:10:30.18]

Susie B.: Six years ago now, yeah.

[00:10:35.05]

Larry B.: The . . . I think TCC is the one that promoted it, a professor named Bob Ballard, through the state aquaculture program. There was one guy that was already doing it on his own, using his own money and his own resource in the Alligator Harbor area. He proved that it could be done and it could be done commercially viable. His name was—he's a good friend of mine, reason I know he wouldn't mind saying his name—is Leo Lovel, a great guy.

[00:11:09.19]

Annemarie A.: I know Leo.

[00:11:12.23]

Larry B.: Okay.

[00:11:15.07]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, he's great.

[00:11:17.22]

Susie B.: He is.

[00:11:15.29]

Larry B.: He actually proved to me that it could be done, and he persuaded me to get into it, because when I first it, I said, "Yeah, yeah. I don't think that's for me." But I was still catching a few wild oysters at that time. But it was gradually going down; the wild oyster

population was just . . . gradually going down. So, he told me, he said, "Larry, I've already got places in the harbor that's producing oysters right now." He talked to me for a while about it. So, I got interested in it and started checking things out. More I looked into it, more I talked to other people, I said, "Shoot. Only thing I gotta do is buy the gear and buy the seed, and I can try it." It don't work, I won't be out a whole lot. I start out small and we'll see what happens. Well, Leo said, "I got some gear if you want to just buy enough and try it. You won't be sinking a whole lot of money into it." So, I gave him five hundred bucks and bought a handful of gear, bought some seeds, stuck them out there and, lo and behold, I made oysters. Grew oysters. So, the next year, we sank about ten thousand dollars in it and we bought a lot of seed and we made a lot of oysters. That was five years ago. We're in our sixth year now. So, gradually, we're getting bigger and bigger and bigger. We don't want to get too big to where we have to hire somebody. We tried that. We used to have three guys working for us. It was just not as fun when you try to make a business out of it as more or like, to us, more like a hobby. We make money, but we don't have the stress you do when you got employees. So, we try to keep it small. We buy about three or four hundred thousand seeds a year, and whatever comes out of that, that's what we got.

[00:13:40.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Who do you buy seed from?

[00:13:44.07]

Susie B.: Whoever is available. That's become a problem, is trying to get seed.

[00:13:51.16]

Larry B.: You have to buy a little bit from everybody, because nobody's going to supply everything that you need. If you order five hundred thousand from one person, he's going to give you two hundred thousand, because he's trying to divvy it up between dozens of other people.

[00:14:09.06]

Susie B.: Yeah. I put orders in with three different suppliers this year, and so far, we've only got half of our order from two of the suppliers. We're still waiting to hear from the third one.

[00:14:24.05]

Larry B.: That's one major problem for this, is seed availability. The major colleges on the Gulf Coast are the ones that supply it. They supply the seed hatcheries, and the hatcheries actually have their own farms, and they're going to supply their own farms first. Whatever is left over, they'll sell to the aquaculture public. Until we get a hatchery that's not biased to anyone, like we need a local hatchery—

[00:15:06.26]

Susie B.: Yeah. Definitely we need a local hatchery. I mean, if we get a local hatchery, there's no limit to what you could do with the oyster aquaculture here in Wakulla County, and Franklin County, for that matter.

[00:15:23.06]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:15:24.16]

Larry B.: There's a few problems with this—that's the reason we're not going to get too big with it. The main problem is, if you buy three hundred thousand seed, right off the bat, you can split that in half. Because half of those are going to die. All right? That's when they're babies. As you're growing them out through the year, you can split that hundred and fifty thousand in half again, because what doesn't die off, they get either spatted up so bad that they're not producing what the market really wants, or they just don't get big enough. They're like, stunted, or they're slow-growing.

[00:16:20.03]

Susie B.: And the heat plays a role.

[00:16:23.25]

Larry B.: A lot of variables in it. If it was an actual land farm, there's no way in hell they'd stay in business. There's just no farming, no farm out there on land that can stay in the business when he buys the amount of seed that we buy and comes off with the amount of produce that we'd come off with. It couldn't stand there.

[00:16:49.21]

Annemarie A.: Sorry. I'm going to change this. [Feedback] That'll help a little bit with the wind.

Got my dead cat, that's what they call it. [Laughter] It helps a lot. I was wondering if, perhaps, you all could take me through the process of growing an oyster from spat to market ready, and then maybe talk a little bit about any of the processes that you might work with.

[00:17:20.05]

Larry B.: Okay. You want to do that?

[00:17:23.29]

Susie B.: Well, we buy it originally.

[00:17:27.28]

Larry B.: Six millimeter.

[00:17:31.07]

Susie B.: We call it R-6, it's a six-millimeter seed. Probably the size of your pinkie fingernail and maybe some even smaller. They really vary in size. You put them in—we put them in grow-out bags, four-millimeter bags, and we just, once you put them in the water, you don't touch them until maybe three weeks later. That helps them to adjust to their environment and you don't stand the risk of killing any more than are naturally going to die anyway. Once they grow out, you thin those out, spread them out into larger bags. The ones that are bigger have grown and you can put them in six-millimeter bags. What

have we got? Six-millimeter bags and nine-millimeter bags. Then, once they get to a twelve-millimeter seed, we put them in our cages, our baskets there, the Australian longline. They're SEAPA baskets, is what they're called. We hang those on lines, and in our opinion, the SEAPA baskets make a prettier oyster, it's a deeper cup, because of the rocking motion with the waves. It tumbles the oyster, and that's what you need to shape the oyster. We just tend to those the same way we do with the bags. As they grow, the basket or the cage gets fuller and you just thin it out and separate the small, medium, and large. Then, within seven to eight months from the time you buy the seed or plant it to three-inch oysters—is regulation, what size you can tell.

[00:19:29.02]

Larry B.: Well, there actually is no regulation on size.

[00:19:34.07]

Susie B.: Not in aquaculture.

[00:19:36.27]

Larry B.: You can sell whatever the market will bear. Right now, once it gets to two-and-three-quarter inches long, you can start selling it as a cup oyster. It presents itself nice on a plate as a half-shell oyster.

[00:19:50.20]

Susie B.: If it's a good, sturdy shell, because if you sell it too early, too young, the shell's brittle and they break when you try to open them. I think, in my opinion, that the SEAPA baskets help make a sturdy, healthy shell.

[00:20:10.27]

Larry B.: Yeah. They slow the growth rate down, keep it from becoming elongated, and get a chance to deepen up. So, it makes a nicer half-shell oyster, and that's what our target is, a half-shell oyster and not a shucking oyster.

[00:20:29.03]

Susie B.: Yeah, these oysters aren't shucked. They're served specifically for half-shell oysters, and so you want one that's going to look nice on a half-shell plate, because these people are paying a lot of money for those half-shell oysters.

[00:20:43.20]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. There's a lot of work that goes into making that half-shell oyster.

[00:20:47.02]

Susie B.: There is.

[00:20:48.23]

Annemarie A.: That's so interesting. Nobody's said that about the rocking motion of the Australian longline, but that makes a lot of sense.

[00:20:55.13]

Larry B.: What it does, it breaks off the bill of that oyster doesn't let it grow long.

[00:21:04.20]

Susie B.: Fat and deep.

[00:21:07.22]

Larry B.: Deeper it is, the more meat is in that oyster.

[00:21:09.12]

Susie B.: Right.

[00:21:11.01]

Larry B.: Stresses it a little bit.

[00:21:14.10]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I'm wondering about, you spoke about Mr. Leo Lovel a little bit and about your relationship, but I'm wondering about—the aquaculture community is pretty new in Florida, and here, it's not been around but for six years, like you said. I'm wondering maybe if you could speak to the community of aquaculture, of oyster farmers here, and about some of the relationships that you all might have and how you all kind of interact with each other, I guess.

[00:21:49.00]

Larry B.: Well, we know several guys with girls, ladies, out there that do it. To me, everyone we've met out there . . . they're hardworking people. I mean, they're not the drag-around lazy type people, because in this business—or in any successful business—if you don't put a hundred percent in it, you're going to reap what you sow. So, everyone that we see out there, especially now after the first few years—after the first few years, it weeded out a bunch of those drag-arounds.

[00:22:32.07]

Susie B.: A lot of people, yeah.

[00:22:35.01]

Larry B.: A lot of them just fell out, said, "Hmm, this is not for me. Not for me."

[00:22:38.07]

Susie B.: Well, a lot of people thought it was—they didn't realize how much work was involved with it and they thought it was just a hobby. They quickly realized it's not a hobby; it's a job. It's a full-time job. You can't neglect your oysters or you end up with a product that's not worthy to sell.

[00:22:58.13]

Larry B.: Now, the people you see out there are . . . I'm telling you, I just can't say enough about them. They're just actually hardworking people, and dedicated to . . . to what they're doing. They believe in it. They want to see it successful.

[00:23:17.01]

Susie B.: Especially since Apalachicola no longer has oysters.

[00:23:20.01]

Larry B.: We don't either. Our bottom is clean. Where there used to be—I used to go out there and catch ten, twelve, fifteen bags a day. Me and her used to catch forty-eight bags a day by ourself in between working somewhere else. We had an oyster boat. We tonged them up and you could not get a bag of oysters now out there because—I can't say exactly what the reason for it was, but it all went downhill after B.P.

[00:23:59.28]

Susie B.: Everything changed.

[00:24:03.18]

Larry B.: We were still getting . . . you could go out there and get eight or ten bags a day, bushels, I'm saying, before B.P. But after the—and we never got no oil here, is what's crazy. But people are telling me, which I don't have the expertise to agree with it or not, that it was the dispersant that they sprayed.

[00:24:28.19]

Susie B.: Well, something happened to the bottom that it won't allow growth. We've even tried saving the wild spat that we knock off of our oysters and dumping it on the wild oyster bars, hoping to regrow, and it dies. It will not regrow.

[00:24:50.28]

Larry B.: Never touches that bottom.

[00:24:51.23]

Susie B.: It will grow off-bottom.

[00:24:55.02]

Larry B.: Dead.

[00:24:56.28]

Susie B.: But it won't grow on-bottom like nature intended it to grow.

[00:25:01.24]

Annemarie A.: That's so wild.

[00:25:04.02]

Susie B.: Um-hm.

[00:25:05.21]

Larry B.: Yeah, it's crazy. You can take that wild—we still got bars up there that produce a little, old bitty what we call coon oyster, and it actually spats out. Well, that's what we're getting on our oysters. Once it hits our traps, it gets all over our traps, and they're on our oysters. We take those off and we harvested a bunch of them and I picked out this one designated spot that was just perfect for growing oysters, because historically, I've gotten just thousands and thousands of bushels out of there. Pour it on the bottom. Hopefully six or eight months I see a difference. Go back there and look, nothing's there. I mean, the shell's even gone. But if you can leave it in my cage, it'll grow out and bust the size out of the cage, as long as it's off that bottom.

[00:26:00.05]

Susie B.: Yeah.

[00:25:58.10]

Larry B.: It'll just keep growing and growing and growing. I got oysters on my poles now that we use to support our lines, wild oysters growing on her as big as your hand. Same way all up around Panacea Bay. All the docks are full of oysters, but if it hits that bottom, it's gone.

[00:26:16.29]

Susie B.: And the cages also protect them from predators. There's, what?

[00:26:24.10]

Larry B.: Black drums.

[00:26:26.15]

Susie B.: Black drum.

[00:26:28.14]

Larry B.: We had an invasion of black drums.

[00:26:29.00]

Susie B.: Yeah. I mean, there will be twenty around our boat, swimming around, waiting for us to rake off the cull that we've gotten off our oysters. And they're huge.

[00:26:43.21]

Larry B.: I have some videos of them. Those black drums, we've always got about fifteen of them hanging around the side of my boat in water about that deep, so their dorsal fins are sticking out of the water. Every time you rake some of that shell overboard, they run over there towards, swallow it right up.

[00:27:01.18]

Annemarie A.: The guys over in Spring Creek told me, Leo said—and one of the guys who works over there, he caught himself one that was this big—but Leo said that when you open them up and clean them, their guts are full of oyster shell.

[00:27:14.15]

Susie B.: Full of shell, mm-hm.

[00:27:14.24]

Larry B.: Yeah. And they learned that over in Apalachicola. I've seen it on YouTube a couple of years ago.

[00:27:22.28]

Susie B.: About the drum, yeah.

[00:27:21.15]

Larry B.: Where he got to that drum, and there was all your little, small oysters.

[00:27:24.06]

Susie B.: Just the shell. They eat the meat and . . .

[00:27:33.04]

Larry B.: And I blame a lot of that on the net ban. Before the net ban, the commercial fishermen kept those black drums to a minimum. A black drum, when he's about three to five pounds, he's a dadgum good eating fish. Now, once he gets to where he's at now, forty-five, fifty pounds, he ain't worth a dadgum for nothing. Maybe crab bait. Nobody's going to sell it for a crab bait.

[00:28:08.20]

Susie B.: I think this year, we've seen more drum this year than we have in the last few years.

[00:28:13.29]

Larry B.: When we had oysters, people caught those drums before they got to be mammoth. So, that probably adds to the problem, the black drum do.

[00:28:21.21]

Annemarie A.: That's interesting. I'm wondering if maybe you've seen any positive environmental change around your oyster farm.

[00:28:33.22]

Larry B.: As far as wildlife, fish?

[00:28:31.17]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:28:36.20]

Susie B.: We have more crab.

[00:28:39.15]

Larry B.: No.

[00:28:40.24]

Susie B.: You don't think so?

[00:28:43.06]

Larry B.: We have crab in our area, but we're actually baiting them up. We're giving them a habitat to live.

[00:28:43.07]

Susie B.: Yeah. Yeah, you can open one of our baskets and dump it out, and little crabs just go everywhere.

[00:28:47.04]

Larry B.: Shrimp—

[00:28:54.14]

Susie B.: Shrimp all around over there.

[00:28:55.04]

Larry B.: You shake a basket and shrimp just go to your legs because you shake them out of that basket and you get them like little needles, whoosh. They're about that big. So, it's like a nursery. But that nursery was already there in the marsh grass. The structure that we set up, it's just adding to that nursery. That's why you have them predominantly out there on

cages. It's expanding the nursery. They were already there; we just didn't see them. So. Is it helping the local, the fishing stuff, the ecosystem? Yay and nay. It's already there, but we're expanding it a little bit, brought it out a little further away from the marsh grasses.

[00:29:40.04]

Annemarie A.: That's really interesting. I'm wondering, too, about maybe processing. Do you all do your own processing, or do you work with another person? And also, how do you market these oysters?

[00:29:53.17]

Larry B.: We sell to Barber's Seafood. As far as processing, all we do is, when we come back to the dock, we bring them home. We have a little work station right over there that's concrete padding. We have a table. We dump those oysters out of the basket and we wash them with a water hose.

[00:30:15.28]

Susie B.: Because they're very muddy.

[00:30:21.10]

Larry B.: Skipper Bay is real muddy. So, we wash them as best we can with a water hose, and then we count them out to a hundred-count bags. Bag them up and we truck them over to Eastpoint. That's as far as we go with them. We don't have the facilities to keep them

overnight and distribute them in any other way, other than off the boat, wash them, and straight to the market.

[00:30:46.29]

Susie B.: Yeah, we're not licensed. You have to—

[00:30:46.13]

Larry B.: By the designated time.

[00:30:51.24]

Susie B.: Yeah. You have to have a special license to be able to sell to individuals. We thought about setting up a cooler and keeping oysters so we could sell to individuals, but it's a lot of paperwork, a lot of regulation, and we just decided we didn't want to get that deep into it. It's . . . it's enough, what we have to do, just growing them and selling them to a wholesaler.

[00:31:17.27]

Annemarie A.: That makes a lot of sense, just your desire's to be out on the water, doing that work.

[00:31:21.25]

Susie B.: Yep. We're retired. [Laughter]

[00:31:25.28]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. You have to have something to do.

[00:31:25.26]

Susie B.: Supposed to be.

[00:31:28.14]

Annemarie A.: [Laughter] Yeah. I've been out there. Y'all work really hard, so.

[00:31:35.11]

Larry B.: As far as these local people that had the markets, in my opinion—they may have different opinion, and I hope, for their sake, that it is different than mine, because I don't see them making a lot of money—but the overhead that's costing them, the labor that's costing them, and the price that they're getting . . . I don't see them making a whole lot more money than somebody that just is doing it on the wholesale side, not on the retail or the distribution side. Right now, there is a good market for them, but the price is not high enough. Up north, they get a price for their stock.

[00:32:32.04]

Susie B.: Yes, they do. But they've been in it a lot longer.

[00:32:34.18]

Larry B.: That doesn't matter. Still, they get a price for their product. Always have, right across the line for all seafood. In the South, we don't get the money out of our seafood that seafood produces up north. That's one of the major reasons we have to ship it up north, but there's buyers in between that are making that money, besides the guys that start out with the business here.

[00:33:10.20]

Annemarie A.: Why do you think that is? Why do you think people are resistant to paying more for seafood here?

[00:33:18.00]

Larry B.: I don't think we have the population that they got up there. Say, like, well . . . wherever they carry it up there and sell it, I've seen videos on YouTube of New York, Connecticut, several different places. When we first started out, they told us we were going to get sixty-five cents. We were members of this co-op in Spring Creek. I said, "Wow." That just blew me away. Sixty-five cents an oyster, which most I'd ever got was, like, ten cents an oyster. They said, "Don't feel bad about that. They're getting four dollars apiece up north." Four dollars apiece for an oyster!

[00:34:04.29]

Susie B.: Apiece for an oyster.

[00:34:07.29]

Larry B.: We're stable at fifty-five cents right here now. If the mortality rate wasn't so high, I'd be fine with that. We could make a good, good living. But when you factor in the mortality rate, it's just a living.

[00:34:29.07]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense. I'm wondering how you got established with Barber's?

[00:34:32.19]

Larry B.: Well, I've always sold them fish.

[00:34:37.19]

Susie B.: He didn't originally sell farm-raised oysters.

[00:34:43.00]

Larry B.: We were one of the first ones—

[00:34:46.15]

Susie B.: We had to sell him on these farm-raised oysters, and Larry and Joseph were talking to, his name is John . . . I can't think of his last name. He goes by, his nickname is Peanut, that's what we always call him. But they had to sell him on the farm-raised oysters.

[00:35:05.23]

Larry B.: We gave him a bag and they actually shucked them out there.

[00:35:12.27]

Susie B.: It was in the summer months.

[00:35:13.00]

Larry B.: They all ate them and they were fat and they looked good and they taste excellent.

These oysters got an unreal taste about them.

[00:35:25.06]

Susie B.: Very salty.

[00:35:24.07]

Larry B.: Just can't say enough about the oysters. They're beautiful, inside and out, once you have a finished product.

[00:35:35.21]

Susie B.: There are certain times of the year, in the summer months, especially, that the wild oyster is poor because it's spawning. When it's spawning, an oyster is milky and it's probably not very healthy to eat, either. But these oysters you can eat year-round and, I think that's when y'all were selling Peanut on the oysters, was about the same time that the wild oysters were spawning, so these oysters were nice and fat and clear. He was very surprised. That's how we got to sell with them. That's who we sell to.

[00:36:23.03]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Do y'all farm triploids or diploids?

[00:36:25.12]

Larry B.: Trips.

[00:36:26.26]

Susie B.: We've done diploids.

[00:36:30.07]

Larry B.: We tried diploids and they work fine. They do excellent because you sell them before they get mature enough to start their spawning cycles. They don't actually spawn the first year; it's usually second or third year before they even start spawning. We want to get rid of each and every seed within fourteen months. It's not growing enough to sell within fourteen months, he goes to the black drum. Let them eat him. The triploids are just a little bit more than diploid as far as price. When we buy them as seed, and we don't get any less or any more, when we sell them as triploids or diploids, but they just look a lot better.

[00:37:23.12]

Susie B.: Because they don't spawn.

[00:37:27.19]

Larry B.: We don't have to worry about what he looks like when we open him up.

[00:37:34.14]

Susie B.: Any time of the year.

[00:37:36.27]

Larry B.: So, if we have some left over from the previous year, he's going to be a triploid, not a diploid. That's all we buy.

[00:37:47.00]

Annemarie A.: That makes a lot of sense, yeah.

[00:37:50.12]

Larry B.: Some guys do buy diploids, but they try to get rid of them before they start spawning.

[00:37:55.24]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, because that can be a mess, all that spat.

[00:38:01.01]

Larry B.: Yeah, all over your cages.

[00:38:04.06]

Susie B.: Yeah, we figured that out. [Laughter] We went through that process.

[00:38:11.01]

Annemarie A.: I bet. I'm wondering if you could take me through a day on the water with you. I know there's probably not a typical, like every day is the same, but maybe you could take me through going on the water and working your cages.

[00:38:24.27]

Larry B.: Show her that video of Clark and Joe and Alec.

[00:38:28.11]

Susie B.: Yeah. We were getting ready to go out to work for the day and Larry's three uncles, there's Clark, who worked for us for a couple of years, they've all three since passed. Then Alec and Joe.

[00:38:51.18]

Larry B.: They're all shrimpers, oystermen, and fishermen.

[00:38:54.09]

Susie B.: All in the seafood business. We were on our pontoon boat. That's what we work on most of the time, because there's so much more room and it's just easier to work on. We were pulling away from the dock, and one of the—the first pelican landed and Larry named him Clark. Then the second one landed and he named him Alec. Then the third one named landed and he named him Joe. So, they rode with us for a long way.

[00:39:28.06]

Annemarie A.: That's so great.

[00:39:32.03]

Susie B.: They rode on the front of the boat for a long ways. But that's the kind of things you get to experience. It's kind of cool.

[00:39:40.25]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. That's so great.

[00:39:43.27]

Larry B.: So, we leave out in the morning. We like to work low tide, so we try to get out there a couple of hours before low tide. That way, I can comfortably stand up in less than waist deep water, and I can grab hold of my traps without diving in the muck. We work till about two hours or three hours after, well, the tide starts rising. So, that gives us about five hours to work; five or six hours. If we have to work any longer, then we just tie a rope to each trap, one rope, run it through each trap, and throw it overboard like a crab trap. Right next to the lease, right on the lease. The next day, they haven't moved because we're restricted, put them on a line then.

[00:40:40.24]

Susie B.: We're restricted to working on low tide because of the system that we have. You can only work for it from a low tide because you have to get out. It's like hanging clothes on a clothesline. Then you take them off and you put them on and you try to work as fast as you can so you can put your oysters back on the line as ideal. We don't like to put them on the ropes unless we absolutely have to.

[00:41:09.24]

Larry B.: Some days, we'll get two tides, so we'll work the morning and in the evening. That's when you're right before seeing sunrise and sunset.

[00:41:18.26]

Susie B.: That's a long day.

[00:41:18.26]

Annemarie A.: I bet. I bet. That's like working a double shift.

[00:41:23.28]

Larry B.: Split shift, anyway.

[00:41:23.28]

Susie B.: Yeah.

[00:41:28.19]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Well, I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit about—I guess the last question that I really have for y'all is, what do you hope to see for the future of oyster aquaculture? In Wakulla County, in Apalachee Bay, the Forgotten Coast of Florida?

[00:41:53.12]

Susie B.: Personally . . . if it doesn't look like our wild oyster population is going to come back, and for the people who enjoy and just absolutely will not work anywhere else but in the oyster business or the seafood industry, that it will replace the wild oyster and it will grow so that it could support a family, support someone who wants to work in the seafood business.

[00:42:25.24]

Annemarie A.: That makes a lot of sense, yeah.

[00:42:29.11]

Larry B.: The only way that's going to happen is if we have an infrastructure set where seed availability—

[00:42:39.02]

Susie B.: There's still a lot of growing pains that it needs to go through to get to that point, agreed.

[00:42:45.23]

Annemarie A.: That's a good way to put it. I think I've heard that from a lot of people.

[00:42:50.22]

Susie B.: Um-hm.

[00:42:52.15]

Annemarie A.: Florida is maybe not as developed as some of the other places in the nation that have been doing this for a long time.

[00:43:00.17]

Susie B.: I think Alabama's been doing it for a long time, Texas, and everything up the East Coast has been into it a lot longer than we have. I guess the reason we weren't into it is because we had Apalachicola.

[00:43:11.01]

Larry B.: We had a wild—

[00:43:13.08]

Susie B.: We had a wild population.

[00:43:17.14]

Larry B.: Population that was envied by the world, actually. Apalachicola was the oyster—

[00:43:21.06]

Susie B.: Apalachicola was the oyster capital of the world.

[00:43:22.09]

Larry B.: As New York was in the early 1900s, Apalachicola was in the twentieth century. They produced just a huge amount of oysters every day. I can remember, as a kid, when I'd go to work with my uncles. Once we hit St. George Island bridge—that was three bridges ago—you'd start seeing boats. They'd go all the way across the three-mile intracoastal waterway. It was just impossible to count how many boats were there.

[00:43:59.16]

Susie B.: You could walk from boat to boat.

[00:44:00.08]

Larry B.: They were averaging about fifty bushels a day per boat. My uncles and his two, three boys—which I worked with them when I wasn't going to school—we were catching seventy-five, eighty bags a day. They did it four or five days a week, year after year after year, and there was at least five or six hundred boats over there every day. Until those storms—Kate was the number one storm that started the downslide. It buried the entire bar with sand. Well, when Kate—

[00:44:37.07]

Susie B.: That was in the [19]80s.

[00:44:36.18]

Larry B.: Within a few months, it came back. No problem. The next year, we had another storm; buried it entirely. We lost an entire bar, called Hotel Bar, which was west of the St. George Island bridge on the island side. That was one of the favorite bars of all the guys over there because it produced a beautiful single cup oyster for half-shell. Overnight, that bar was gone. It was like—probably twenty acres big, square, and then you had other sections. As the years went by, these storms—this is another reason why Apalachicola's not here—these storms have progressively gotten worse and worse and worse. It has took its toll on that bottom over there.

[00:45:30.29]

Susie B.: Then you had the water war with Georgia.

[00:45:29.21]

Larry B.: Then you had the water wars with . . . Apalachicola River. After that came into effect, it just went downhill from there, and it was pretty much over with. There was no turning back. Once you starved it for the correct mixture of salt and freshwater, it was gone. Then BP hit and it just—

[00:45:57.26]

Susie B.: That was the nail in the coffin, so to speak.

[00:46:02.15]

Larry B.: Yeah. While oysters were still there, the powers that be, which at the time was . . .

FWC was telling people that oil's coming this way. I didn't talk to any officials, but this is the word that I got. I wasn't oystering over there at the time; I was fishing. They told them to get everything they can, because once that oil gets here, it's going to kill them anyway. So, those guys went out there. They actually just scratched up everything they could and sold it. If it was two inches long, they got it. But what they didn't get, then whatever they sprayed to disperse the oil drifted down here on top of us and every oyster out there turned to a shell. It just died. Overnight. We had some kind of law firm that was familiar with all that chemical they used, came in here and had a seminar, telling us to—this is during the BP oil spill—that there's nothing going to be the same. Everything is going to die in that water. There's not going to be any crabs, no oysters, no shrimp. But to my knowledge, the only thing is affected was whatever lays on that bottom, it can't move—that being the oysters. They were right about it. It wiped them out. I mean, within months, everything started going to hell. So.

[00:47:54.06]

Annemarie A.: That's crazy. I was wondering, too, how Michael affected you all and your oysters.

[00:48:04.20]

Larry B.: We lost some traps, about thirty bags of seed.

[00:48:07.05]

Susie B.: We lost a lot of seed, a lot of seed.

[00:48:14.25]

Larry B.: Susie had us enrolled in an insurance program, though. Luckily, we did get compensated for the seed costs and the restart, so it put us right back in business.

[00:48:30.26]

Susie B.: So, that's something that's new, too, is because in the very beginning of the aquaculture, farmers didn't have—they didn't have an insurance policy for aquaculture like they do. Because we're farmers or ranchers, is what they call us. So, it was new when they did implement it. It's probably three years old, maybe four at the most. It was a learning process for everybody involved, people who get the insurance through the state. So, it's been a learning process, but it's turned out to be a good program. It helps with situations like Hurricane Michael, because it can be costly if you lose—

[00:49:20.01]

Larry B.: It'll put you out of business.

[00:49:24.17]

Susie B.: It'll put you out of business, definitely.

[00:49:25.13]

Larry B.: If farmers didn't have insurance policies on their crops—and their cattle, their land—they couldn't stay in business. Mother Nature is trying to stomp on you the whole time, if you're a farmer or a rancher.

[00:49:42.23]

Susie B.: And the state realized that we needed to be covered under some sort of policy, as well, and so they implemented the . . . I can't remember what it's called. It's a good program, though. I appreciate them.

[00:50:02.18]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:50:04.18]

Larry B.: Yeah.

[00:50:05.27]

Annemarie A.: Well, is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about? About oystering or about fishing, about your family seafood business?

[00:50:19.10]

Larry B.: I don't know what . . . exactly how to say or what actually changed it, but this place in the late [19]70s or early [19]80s was a paradise right here in Panacea. If you wanted to

work . . . there's no problem getting a job. That bay was wide open, and there was, oh, probably ten different seafood markets, production-wise, in this area. A few in Crawfordville and a few in Sopchoppy. They all had boats. If you wanted a job on the water or around the water, a young man could get work. It's changed. We've got . . . I don't think we got any crab houses in here no more, do we?

[00:51:13.07]

Susie B.: No.

[00:51:15.03]

Larry B.: No fish houses. We got one, we used to have two fish markets over there, but they don't have fishermen; they don't fish. They buy their fish and grouper from . . . see, they don't buy any mullet, but they buy grouper from people. But they don't have their own crabbers or their own fishermen. It's just not the same around here.

[00:51:42.19]

Susie B.: We used to have a processing plant in Panacea for crabs.

[00:51:51.26]

Larry B.: Several of them.

[00:51:54.05]

Susie B.: Several, yeah.

[00:51:56.11]

Larry B.: I mean, there was one at the dock. King's Bay or Ocean Fresh, Barber's down there, Barber's right over there, there were, like, three Barber houses.

[00:52:11.22]

Susie B.: One in Crawfordville, even.

Larry B.: Metcalf's, Barwicks's, Crawfordville, Sopchoppy. There was plenty of work.

[00:52:22.24]

Susie B.: I don't think Wakulla County has any processing plants for any kind of seafood. We have to take it out of the county.

[00:52:30.26]

Larry B.: That's why we have to go all the to Barber's to sell our product, because if we sell over here, we got to sell to a little retail place that can only buy a handful here and a handful there. You can't make a living like that. We carry them to Barber. You take him fifty bags a day, he says, "Can you bring me fifty bags tomorrow?" I said, "No, but I'll try."

[00:52:58.28]

Susie B.: Yeah. We were harvesting twice a week the month of July, right?

[00:53:06.08]

Larry B.: Yep.

[00:53:08.02]

Susie B.: That was hard, because we were taking two thousand, three thousand on Thursday—
so, that takes a lot for two people to go out and get that many . . . But that was before we
had a lot of spat on them and whatnot. We didn't have a lot of culling to do then.

[00:53:30.17]

Larry B.: See, we're down to summer months in our sale. The way we set it up with Barber, who
buys oysters from Texas—he buys them real cheap—

[00:53:46.02]

Susie B.: Three apiece and—

[00:53:51.08]

Larry B.: And he buys them oysters from Louisiana. Well, he sells them oysters all winter long
as half-shell oysters, predominantly the Texas oysters because they're smaller. They're
not a bad half-shell oyster. They got a good shape to them. They don't have nowhere near
the good taste that we have, but the price-wise, people overlook it. They can put a bunch
of stuff on that oyster to make it taste about like anything they want it to taste like.

[00:54:17.25]

Susie B.: These oysters, you don't have to put anything on it.

[00:54:17.16]

Larry B.: You don't have to put anything on our oysters.

[00:54:21.24]

Susie B.: They're so good. The taste of these oysters is distinct for this area. You're not going to find another oyster anywhere else that's going to taste like these oysters.

[00:54:34.24]

Larry B.: But once summer gets here, which is May—

[00:54:42.17]

Susie B.: May.

[00:54:45.06]

Larry B.: We can sell all the way till the end of September and unlimited, whatever we can grow. And whatever these guys out here want to sell at the market price, which is fifty-five cent now. It can go up or down. But they . . . evidently, they're not producing enough that they need to go out away from here to sell. None of them—except for one, which I don't know if you've met him. You may have. Honor?

[00:55:19.06]

Susie B.: Honor Allen.

[00:55:15.28]

Annemarie A.: I haven't, I haven't

[00:55:18.04]

Larry B.: Oh. I know you met John Harley.

[00:55:22.26]

Annemarie A.: I haven't met him in person, but I've talked to him on the phone a lot, and I'm supposed to meet him today. I hope.

[00:55:29.17]

Larry B.: Well, Bay produced an oyster. But Honor, he sells to Hunt's, Hunt's Brother is in Panama City, so they ship all over the place. But he carries his oysters way over there, because he can't sell those oysters right here. In volume terms. There's no facility set up to do that. Once he tried it, they just couldn't get it going. That co-op in Spring Creek, that was the whole idea of a co-op, is you get a bunch of people producing a bunch of product and they would move it. Well, they just could not get it going.

[00:56:12.05]

Susie B.: They couldn't get it going because of the price.

[00:56:13.09]

Larry B.: There's too many people.

[00:56:13.02]

Susie B.: They didn't want to pay the price for them.

[00:56:17.15]

Larry B.: There's too many people wanting to be the boss.

[00:56:20.28]

Susie B.: You can't sell—you can't do the work we do and sell an oyster for less than fifty-five cents.

[00:56:27.25]

Annemarie A.: No, not at all.

[00:56:30.20]

Larry B.: You'd be in the hole.

[00:56:28.28]

Susie B.: Especially if you have employees.

[00:56:33.03]

Larry B.: In the first year, we were just . . . we were about to get out of it. Then we got with Barber and the price stabilized.

[00:56:44.15]

Susie B.: Yeah. There for a while, we were having a hard time finding sales. The co-op was saying, "Give me fifteen hundred this week." Then, the next week, it would be, "We only need five hundred." Then they would go down on the price. They finally just closed up.

[00:57:07.14]

Annemarie A.: So, y'all sell more oysters in the summer months than you do in the winter?

[00:57:13.03]

Larry B.: Yes, yeah. We can sell a few in the winter months, but it's a thousand here, a thousand there.

[00:57:19.28]

Susie B.: Ideally—and this plays into the fact that we don't have our own hatchery here—ideally, we would like to be able to plant seed. Like the seed that we plant in July, we will start selling next May. But we would like to be able to plant . . . something after July or before July so we could sell all year long. But without a hatchery, it's kind of hard to do, because July is the month—July or August—I think October is the latest that we've gotten seed in the past. Here it is, almost September soon, and we still don't have our complete order.

[00:58:12.25]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, that's hard.

[00:58:14.16]

Susie B.: It is hard.

[00:58:16.13]

Annemarie A.: It's really hard. Well, I don't have any more questions for y'all. Anything else
you want to add?

[00:58:23.18]

Susie B.: Don't think so.

[00:58:26.25]

Annemarie A.: All right. I'll turn this off.

[*End of interview*]