



Jules Melancon
Caminada Bay Oyster Farm - Grand Isle, Louisiana
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Interviewer: Rien Fertel
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Rien Fertel: All right. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is February 6th, 2020, and I'm in Grand Isle, Louisiana. I'm at my friend Jim Gossen's house, and I'm going to interview oysterman Jules Melancon.

Jules, I'm going to have you introduce yourself, please.

[0:00:25.4]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, I'm Jules Melancon. My birthday's 3/22/58. I'm sixty-one right now, but my birthday's coming up. [Laughter] I been a oyster fisherman, been fooling with the oyster industry since I was about eleven years old.

[0:00:45.4]

Rien Fertel: And how did you—I mean, eleven is early, so how did you get started that young?

[0:00:49.4]

Jules Melancon: Well, my whole family, that's what they did for a living, and at that time, the oysters were in abundance, and my whole family, that's what they used to do is fish the oysters, and that's how we made a living. It was hard. It was hard work.

[0:01:08.0]

Rien Fertel: Going how far back? Who was the first?

[0:01:10.4]

Jules Melancon: My great-grandfather, he was a entrepreneur. He would buy and sell real estate, and that's how he made his money. They had an island. When we first came down here, we didn't live in Grand Isle. They had an island out there called Independent Island—Independence. We had two camps there, and my grandfather and his brother, their dad invested in the oyster farm. The owner of the original farm was Emile Bouvier, so they bought the farm from him, but it was my great-grandfather that got them started.

[0:01:57.7]

Rien Fertel: What was your great-grandfather's name?

[0:02:00.5]

Jules Melancon: Duard Eymard.

[0:02:08.6]

Rien Fertel: How do you spell his last name?

[0:02:09.7]

Jules Melancon: E-y-m-a-r-d. And my grandfather was Louis Eymard.

[0:02:20.1]

Rien Fertel: Louis, L-o-u-i-s, Eymard.

[0:02:22.6]

Jules Melancon: Yeah. And his brother was—let me think what his brother was. It's so hard.

[0:02:35.1]

Rien Fertel: So we can come back to it. But you said they moved down here. Where did they come from?

[0:02:38.5]

Jules Melancon: We just lived up the road by Lafourche, Galliano. That's where we was born and raised, in the next parish, but we fished down here all our life. And then the camp we had, the camp site we had at Independent Island [Interviewer's Note: Occasionally, Jules pronounces the Independence Island's name as "Independent."] when they started, when my dad started with them, my daddy was the son-in-law. It was my mother's father. Well, he came down, and what they was doing, they were tonging the oysters with flatboats when they started. And then when my dad was eighteen, he married my mom, they started to dredge the oysters at that time. So he started with the tonging and then they switched to the dredging when the dredging started.

And the oysters were in abundance. When my grandpa started, they were making 1,000 sacks a week, they had seventeen men working on the island, we had like a mess hall, where it was a big kitchen, and the other camp was the bunkhouse. It was two huge camps, and they had one palm tree on the island. The island was shaped like a half-moon, and they had like little docks to park their little flatboats.

And then the big boat, when they first started, was a steam engine. Then they converted to Gray Marine diesel later on as they kept going, and then they would go to town—they had like a pen right by the camp, it was a hard reef bottom, and it was like a fenced-in place. They would go out with the skiffs in the bay, right on the oyster lease, and tong up the oysters. So they didn't have no refrigeration at that time, so they would take the oysters out the skiff and they would put them in that pen by the camp so the fish and the crabs wouldn't eat the oysters, you see. So they would fill up the pen.

Then the big boat, the steamboat, would come down—that was the *Wyoming*—would come down and they would load the boat down with oysters, 1,000 sacks.

[0:05:11.6]

Rien Fertel: How often would the *Wyoming* come?

[0:05:13.9]

Jules Melancon: They were trying to make two trips a week, but they would make at least one trip every week. It depended on the weather because they was working in flatboats, and depends on the time of the year because the sails. So most of the time it was either one or two trips a week, and every trip, it was not less than 1,000 sacks. And at that time, they were selling at the French Quarters twenty-five cents for 120-pound bag of oysters.

[0:05:50.4]

Rien Fertel: Wow. And Jim's showing me a picture.

[0:05:52.3]

Jules Melancon: That's the boat.

[0:05:52.9]

Rien Fertel: That's the *Wyoming*.

[0:05:53.8]

Jim Gossen: It's been redone.

[0:05:56.1]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow. So it still exists. Wow. And can you describe what that boat looks like or your memories of that boat? That's an incredible—

[0:06:03.9]

Jules Melancon: Well, it's like a round-bottom canoe, but it was sixty-somewhat-foot. I think it was sixty-five foot, and it was only eighteen feet wide.

[0:06:16.5]

Rien Fertel: And it was diesel-powered, you said, or how—

[0:06:18.3]

Jules Melancon: At first. The first engine they had in there was a steam engine.

[0:06:21.2]

Rien Fertel: Steam engine. Wow.

[0:06:23.1]

Jules Melancon: The boat's old. The boat must be—I want to say the boat would be 100 years old or more. It was built in the early 1900s, and it's still there today, but they fiberglassed it. The boat was made out of cypress.

[0:06:41.6]

Rien Fertel: And what is the boat's use today? It's just a museum piece?

[0:06:44.3]

Jules Melancon: They using it, one of the family members. My grandpa's brother's family turned it into a yacht.

[0:06:57.4]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow. [Laughter]

[0:06:58.5]

Greg Nick: It's on the bayou.

[0:06:59.5]

Rien Fertel: Oh, okay. It's here in Grand Isle.

[0:07:01.9]

Jules Melancon: It's on the bayou.

[0:07:02.0]

Rien Fertel: Oh, it's on the bayou.

[0:07:03.8]

Jules Melancon: It's on Bayou Lafourche.

[0:07:04.3]

Rien Fertel: Okay. What was your father's name, just so we have it?

[0:07:08.9]

Jules Melancon: Loyman Melancon.

[0:07:09.7]

Rien Fertel: How do you spell that?

[0:07:10.4]

Jules Melancon: L-o-y-m-e-n. [Note: The name is very likely correctly spelled with an 'a.'] And then that's how I got involved in Melancons, got involved with the Eymards.

My dad was the son-in-law. Now, he had two sons, my grandpa, and his brother had two sons, and then my dad, so that was five young men. So what they did, they built up the fleet to five boats, so they built a sister boat to the *Wyoming*, that was the *Equator*, and then they worked for a while with the two vessels and then they were tonging.

And then at that point, my grandfather's brother—the *Wyoming*, the oil company wanted to lease the boat for a supply vessel, so he took his boat and he said he wanted to sell out, so he sold his share to my grandpa. So he took his boat and he went to the oil field, him and his two sons. So we were still at the camp. My grandpa bought out the whole thing.

Then we started—they had, like, my dad and then he had two brothers, so my grandpa started building up the fleet because we started dredging. We got rid of the flatboats, and the dredgers were making more oysters.

[0:08:52.1]

Rien Fertel: So that was the reason for the switch from tonging to dredging.

[0:08:55.4]

Jules Melancon: Right. We could make more. With one boat we could make what we was making with the seventeen flatboats. One boat could make that whole order.

[0:09:02.5]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:09:03.0]

Jules Melancon: And the other boats, we could plant the seedlings in the farm. And back then, they didn't have no roads coming to Grand Isle and all of that. Then they started having roads. Back then, the trucks that would pick up the oysters, they didn't have no refrigeration, so we'd fish like one day and come in and we'd sell them right away. The truck would be waiting at the dock. But now they got laws, you got to have all kind of refrigeration and everything.

Then my dad, he hurt his back, I guess, when he was fifty, on a hunting trip, and me, I was working for Shell Oil Company and I was working about 125 miles offshore. I worked for them for four years. When I got out of school, I went to get a petroleum degree. Then I started working for Shell.

[0:10:07.0]

Rien Fertel: Where'd you get your petroleum degree?

[0:10:07.0]

Jules Melancon: I went to Nicholls, but I didn't finish the course. I did two years and I applied for the job with Shell, and they told me that I didn't have to finish the course at Nicholls, that they would train me. So I went offshore for four years with them. Then when my dad got hurt, I took a year of leave of absence, because he had the business, he had oysters in the water, the boat. He said he was going to lose his business, so he wanted me to go take over the business.

So I went and I farmed the oysters, and I made him money, and he paid me a little money. And then he told me, he said, “Look, if you want to take it over, I’m gonna sign it over to you.” The money we was making back then with the oysters was way more than what I was making with Shell Oil Company, so I decided to go in the oyster industry.

[0:11:09.3]

Rien Fertel: And what year was that, around?

[0:11:10.6]

Jules Melancon: That was, I want to say, 1982 I incorporated around, my own company, and I been in business since then. But it was good for about ten years, and then the industry started getting harder and harder and it started going down, and when Katrina came, that destroyed the oyster industry.

[0:11:44.4]

Rien Fertel: What was going on in the [19]90s?

[0:11:46.6]

Jules Melancon: The [19]90s, it was good.

[0:11:47.8]

Rien Fertel: But after that, before Katrina, when it started going downhill, what were the reasons?

[0:11:55.8]

Jules Melancon: Mostly, it was that it was getting overfished, and to me, the state, they had areas where they had oysters that we could've planted and took the seeds, but they considered it a polluted area, and they had abundance of oysters in those areas, but they wouldn't let us get them out. And then they started with you had to have a permit. They would make the fishermen spend money, like you had to put ten or 20,000 up on a bond, and you had to be like the FBI, under surveillance when you go and get the load and bring it here and dump it here. It all had to be—and you had to put a permit. A lot of times—I did it one year, and it was so much hassle, I decided not to do it.

[0:12:52.7]

Rien Fertel: What was the bond for? Why would an oysterman need to be—

[0:12:55.6]

Jules Melancon: In case I would've sold the oysters.

[0:13:00.2]

Rien Fertel: That made someone sick?

[0:13:00.6]

Jules Melancon: No. Let's say even though nobody got sick, if they caught me selling the oysters and I was supposed to be transferring the oysters to the lease, if I took the oysters and sold them, well, the bond, that would've been absorbed for the penalty.

[0:13:18.2]

Rien Fertel: I get it. Yeah.

[0:13:19.8]

Jules Melancon: You see what I'm saying?

[0:13:20.5]

Rien Fertel: Insurance, yeah.

[0:13:22.7]

Jules Melancon: And then you had to make phone calls and then you had to have agents meet you and make sure the dumping was done, and then you had a certain amount of time before you could finish the oysters. It was too much hassle. But eventually, it was starting to wind down, and then Katrina came and totally eradicated the business. About a third of the oysters were gone. Then I felt like we was still working. After Katrina, I went back, worked for Shell with the oyster boat.

[0:14:01.7]

Rien Fertel: What work did you do for them?

[0:14:02.7]

Jules Melancon: Inshore supply, like my grandpa's brother did when he left the oyster industry, well, my grandpa's son went in the oil business. He got out of the oyster business. I was the only one left after my dad got out. I had one of my uncles, he was an Eymard, he was in the business. He's dead now. Me and him was the only one left. And then my uncle was working. He had about ten or twelve boats working offshore, and Shell Pipeline needed an inshore supply boat, and it was after Katrina, and all these little pipeline stations went under water, so all the pumps had to be redone, generators, and they needed new grading, so that they were using my boat to haul that. I did that for about eighteen months after Katrina, and if it wouldn't been for that, I would've went bankrupt, because the oyster industry went down.

Then I started oystering again after that. The oysters were coming back. And then they had the BP spill. Since the BP spill, it totally eradicated Grand Isle, because we got direct—the oil went up in the estuary, where—and then with the chemical and everything else, to me it was a disaster. And it's over ten years since the oil spill, and oyster leases never really came back.

[0:14:02.7]

Rien Fertel: And why? Is it because people aren't—well, why?

[0:15:53.9]

Jules Melancon: The oyster is not spatting on the reefs, and, to me, I don't understand why, but we been getting a lot of fresh water. The salinity was right for a spat, but it's not spatting.

[0:16:12.3]

Rien Fertel: Among oystermen, why do you think they're not spatting? Or what are you told from the state or from the scientists?

[0:16:19.5]

Jules Melancon: I don't know what's going on. To me, I think it's got a lot to do with the BP spill. The chemical that went in, that sunk in the bottom, it's some kind of contamination that's killing the oxygen, depleting the oxygen in the bottom of the bay. They did a lot of stuff. They put microorganisms in the water to eat the oil and all kind of stuff, and the microorganisms eats the oyster.

[0:16:57.5]

Jim Gossen: Plankton.

[0:16:58.6]

Jules Melancon: Yeah. So it's bad for everything, even the little baby crabs and everything.

[0:17:05.3]

Rien Fertel: So the wild oyster spat just cannot attach to the—

[0:17:08.4]

Jules Melancon: No. It's not happening like it used to. Now we been getting a little catch, but it's not enough to make a profit. Like this year I went check with the test dredge. You catch about a bucketful of sample. Well, I went all over in my leases. The best test was five oysters and it was on a shoreline closer to Grand Isle, but it was further behind the islands. Then everything else on the beds, I caught one oyster. So there's no product there. Now, maybe that one oyster might make a spat, maybe this year that you might have a catch, but it all determines on the nature. I don't know why it's not spatting.

[0:18:06.0]

Rien Fertel: So before I ask you about what you do now to grow oysters, I want to ask you about any memories you have about Grand Isle. Did you grow up in Grand Isle? Where did y'all live? Where was the family home?

[0:18:19.3]

Rien Fertel: The family home was in Galliano. We had a fleet of boats, like I say. Camille came, destroyed the camp. I think I was around eight years old. I started living on the island around when I was about two years old. What year Camilla was, [19]65?

[0:18:39.5]

Greg Nick and Jim Gossen: [19]65.

[0:18:41.2]

Jules Melancon: So I was like seven years old.

[0:18:46.1]

Rien Fertel: So, Hurricane Camille. Okay.

[0:18:47.3]

Jules Melancon: When I was two years old, I moved there, and my bed I used to sleep in, it had a drawer where they used to put the clothes in. Well, when I was two years old, that's where I first slept at. It was a bunkhouse. That's where I used to sleep, because had my mom and my dad. My mother was the daughter of my grandpa. They would come and they would cook and do stuff to help out. It was like a family thing. And then after Camille, the storm took the camp and the whole island was gone.

[0:19:23.1]

Rien Fertel: This is Independence Island.

[0:19:24.0]

Jules Melancon: Independent Island. They got one piling left still standing. The whole island's gone. But the lease around the camp and the island, I own it. It's fifty acres. I still

own it. That was a family lease that was given to me. I inherited that from the family, so I own Independent Island.

[0:19:44.5]

Rien Fertel: So where did the camp resettle after Camille?

[0:19:47.9]

Jules Melancon: After that, we moved to Cheniere, that's across the bridge, and we had a camp right on the bay. And that was my grandpa's. My grandma, my grandmother, that's was when my grandfather was in the oyster business, well, my grandmother, her dad had a camp at Caminada, on the bay, and his name was Harry Hunter. So they were old people. The old man, he was dead and Grandma was dead, but the family still owned the camp, so we were using the camp to stay there.

Then they had another hurricane. Trying to think of it.

[0:20:57.1]

Greg Nick: Betsy?

[0:20:57.6]

Jules Melancon: It might've been Betsy. But had another hurricane came and it took the camp. Then after that, we started driving back and forth from up the bayou. My grandpa had bought a camp in town. I'm not sure where. He didn't like it. He sold it. It was an old block camp. We stayed there for a while. It was hot there. He sold the camp, and then the

Cheramies—remember the Cheramies over there? Well, they had some camps they were renting, and we was renting the camps and we was letting some of our people that worked for us stay in the camps there, and we would stay there sometimes, but most the time we was driving back and forth.

Now, in 1984, my camp I have now, I bought the camp.

[0:21:54.4]

Rien Fertel: Where I met you?

[0:21:54.8]

Jules Melancon: Yeah. I bought that camp. It was brand new. It was a turnkey job. In 1984, I believe, I bought the camp, and I incorporated in [19]82, so my grandpa told me, he said, “If you go live in Grand Isle, get you a place in town. Don’t live by the water.” That’s what he told me. So I bought that place where I’m living at. He says, “You can have a better chance.” And at that time, I wasn’t that rich, so—

[0:22:23.1]

Rien Fertel: A better chance of it not—

[0:22:24.9]

Jules Melancon: Of it not washing away, because all the residents they have on here, the state protects this island. The other islands in the bay, the state don’t protect. When they

wash away, they don't worry about it. The only one they worry about is that one, Queen Bess, where they're rebuilding. Well, Independence wasn't far from Queen Bess. They never rebuilt that island.

[0:22:51.4]

Rien Fertel: So what did Grand Isle look like in the [19]60s and [19]70s? What do you remember? Was there a lot of fishing camps like there is now? Were there restaurants?

[0:22:59.6]

Jules Melancon: No, they didn't have that many camps down here, but they still have a lot of camps, probably half the camps they have now, huh, Jim, in the [19]60s?

[0:23:07.2]

Jim Gossen: Yeah. They had a lot of Exxon. Exxon had, what, a couple hundred people back here?

[0:23:13.4]

Jules Melancon: Yeah.

[0:23:15.5]

Jim Gossen: Esso, back then.

[0:23:18.6]

Jules Melancon: And we had a big fleet down there. They had Hayman Petrie, they had Mr. Joe Vergos, they had me and my father, they had—

[0:23:43.0]

Jim Gossen: Rodney.

[0:23:45.0]

Jules Melancon: The St. Pierres, Richard St. Pierre, and then you had Mr. Carroll—I don't remember his last name—then they had—let's see. Batout, he had oyster boats. And then they had—

[0:24:08.7]

Jim Gossen: How about Wilbert [Collins], too?

[0:24:10.8]

Jules Melancon: No, Wilbert didn't come to Grand Isle. He was at Cheniere. But you could say Wilbert, too. He was at Cheniere. Then we had the Toups, remember? Cano? We had a big family, and everybody had more than one boat, so in the slip we had twenty, thirty boats tied up, and then it got down to just two or three boats. The industry just kept disappearing, and the older fishermen tried to make it survive, but we kept losing the fight. Now it's starting to turn around with the new way I'm doing the oysters.

[0:24:53.7]

Rien Fertel: Let's talk about that. Tell us about that.

[0:24:56.4]

Jules Melancon: Well, it's a lot of hard work. You get a better quality of oyster and you get a better price for the oyster. I have one guy working for me, but most the time I work—you can hear me?

[0:25:07.1]

Rien Fertel: Oh, yeah, yeah, I can hear you.

[0:25:08.4]

Jules Melancon: Most of the time I work by myself.

[0:25:11.2]

Rien Fertel: Tell me how it works, the new way.

[0:25:14.2]

Jules Melancon: Well, we buy the seeds or the larvae. I did both. One time I bought larvae and I made the seeds, but now I just buy the seeds because I'm getting at the age it's too much work.

[0:25:28.3]

Rien Fertel: And you buy them from—

[0:25:29.8]

Jules Melancon: LSU, Alabama, wherever I can get them. Then I grow them out on the shoreline. I got a facility where I grow the seedlings till they big enough that they can survive in the wild. Then I take them from there and I put 'em in those cages that you seen at my camp, and I sort them out in bags and put them in cages. Then I go put that in the lake. And then what we do just rotate the cages.

[0:26:03.1]

Rien Fertel: At what point do the oysters attach themselves to a bit of sand or whatever it is, the rock?

[0:26:12.0]

Jules Melancon: That is the first forty-eight hours of the process, where it goes from larvae to oyster, to a spat. Well, what it does, it floats around in the water. Then forty-eight hours later, it sinks to the bottom and it attaches.

[0:26:33.1]

Rien Fertel: To what will become the shell?

[0:26:37.4]

Jules Melancon: No, it makes its own shell. It'll attach to a crumb of a oyster shell, like, it's like sand, it's crushed up. It'll attach to that, but it'll make its own shell.

[0:26:52.1]

Rien Fertel: I see. But it needs to attach to something.

[0:26:53.8]

Jules Melancon: Right. And that's what's not happening in the wild, so everything's manmade, what we do.

[0:27:01.4]

Rien Fertel: Right. And so then you put them in cages.

[0:27:02.7]

Jules Melancon: Right.

[0:27:03.4]

Rien Fertel: And do the cages float or sink, or how—

[0:27:07.4]

Jules Melancon: I had the floating cages when I first started, but I had so much problem. You see how rough it is out there?

[0:27:13.0]

Rien Fertel: Mm-hmm.

[0:27:13.7]

Jules Melancon: And I'm in the bay right here. And at the time when I started the farms, they had a lot of laws that we couldn't put cages like where we wanted our best places, like Hayman's or here, closer to behind an island where we could be protected. So I got out of the floating business. I sold my floating cages and then I went to the bottom cages, but the bottom cages are sitting on the original oyster reef, so the oysters I grow, they grow real fast and they very beautiful.

[0:27:50.4]

Rien Fertel: And how deep are the—

[0:27:52.5]

Jules Melancon: It's not that deep. The deepest, probably about six and a half feet. Like right now in wintertime on low tide, probably about four and a half feet, but the bottom's hard like cement. It's solid shell, 100 years of farming.

[0:28:06.0]

Jim Gossen: Jules was the first one. For two or three years, no one else was doing it. He got license number one and license number three.

[0:28:14.6]

Rien Fertel: Wow. What year was that, did you get that first license?

[0:28:18.1]

Jules Melancon: I want to say it was 2011. It was a year after the oil spill.

[0:28:26.4]

Rien Fertel: And that's when the state started allowing this to happen?

[0:28:28.9]

Jules Melancon: Yeah. I was doing research before that, and everything I was doing was a success, but it was just a small sample, but now I'm trying to increase the business. Now they got a future in the business where let's say if I had ten employees and I could get the seeds, I could make millions of dollars, but the way it is, the seeds is not available year-round. It's just a short window you can get the seeds. And the way I operate, I just operate on a small scale. Like me, I'm in my sixties. I'm on my way out. I'm not on my way in. So I'm just trying to make me a living with it. You know what I mean? But I do real good with it.

[0:29:16.3]

Rien Fertel: Did you ever think that you would do this or could do this, to make the switch?

[0:29:22.1]

Jules Melancon: Well, I had people that pretty much convinced me. Like Jim, we went to Mississippi to see some farms. I liked what I saw, and it was small farms, just something to put money in your pocket to pay your bills.

[0:29:38.6]

Jim Gossen: Actually, they only had one farm when I took him there. It was Steve Crockett, Point aux Pins. That was the only farm on the Gulf Coast.

[0:29:48.6]

Rien Fertel: And it was in Mississippi.

[0:29:48.4]

Jim Gossen: Jules was the second—. No, Alabama, Bayou La Batre, Alabama. Jules was the second person to start on the Gulf Coast. Steve Crockett was the first. Bill Walton was working with him, from Auburn Shellfish Lab. I took him down there to see it and drove back, and he got into it.

[0:30:12.4]

Jules Melancon: So when I started to experiment, it wasn't legal to float a cage, but they was letting me use the bottom cage for research. So, me, I was doing real good with the bottom cages.

[0:30:28.8]

Rien Fertel: So you couldn't sell them, but you could—

[0:30:31.8]

Jules Melancon: No, I could sell them.

[0:30:31.8]

Rien Fertel: Oh, you could sell them. Okay.

[0:30:33.7]

Jules Melancon: But it was just 100 cages, but I was making real good off of what I was making off the 100 cages, the 100 cages I was working by myself. I was just doing research. So once I did the research, then when I went to the floating cages, you couldn't put as much oysters in the cage, then the ropes was always breaking. The cages, somebody called me two miles offshore, "Your cages are way over here." You know what I'm saying? It gets too rough. You know what I mean? And you go with some bigger and bigger anchors and stuff like that. Then you go with bigger rope, and it's still breaking ropes. It was like a fight, so I got out of it. Now they got couple of them by the bridge, they're still floating.

[0:31:23.6]

Rien Fertel: Right. I met some of them. I saw those.

[0:31:26.5]

Jules Melancon: And them, they been losing cages, but I don't lose none. About only way I lose a cage, from theft, if somebody steals.

[0:31:34.8]

Rien Fertel: How often does that happen?

[0:31:37.0]

Jules Melancon: Last year, it started happening last year, but people, once they see the oysters that I have, they want them. We're gonna go look at some downstairs. You're gonna see what I'm talking about.

[0:31:49.9]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, maybe describe how the oysters both look, the shell and the meat, compared to old dredge-style oysters, what we think of as wild oysters.

[0:32:00.0]

Jules Melancon: Well, it's basically the same like I used to have, like the oysters that me and Wilbert had, used to be about — and Hayman's — was about the best in the state, oysters, because of the estuary at one point.

[0:32:16.3]

Greg Nick: Best in the country.

[0:32:17.8]

Jules Melancon: But now the estuary changed so much, there's no more islands, and what's happening, the state wants to flood the estuary. But back then when we was having success with the oysters, they had a lot of islands in the bay, and all the islands washed away. And what the islands do is when the tides are coming in and the tides are going out, it's filtering the water and the currents. Like, okay, you got a island here. The salinity's so much. Let's say it's twenty parts. Then you got a island on this side of the island, the salinity's fifteen parts. Then you got some more islands. You go behind this next island, the salinity's ten parts. So like me, I got from Grand Isle ten miles to the north, oyster leases all over different areas. So if one year one place wasn't good, you always had another place that was good the following year.

Well, since all the islands are gone, when the water comes in, it's either one salinity, all over the whole the same salinity, and then when the water changes, the salinity's the same all over, instead of having your brackishness. It's either too fresh or too salty. There's no in between. Before when we had all these islands, it was like a strainer. You know what I'm saying? The water would leave out slow and it would come in slow. Now you got eight miles of current on top of the oyster lease. You know what I'm saying?

[0:34:03.1]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[0:34:04.4]

Jules Melancon: The water's running in and running out, so it's never the same water.

[0:34:09.4]

Rien Fertel: I see.

[0:34:10.4]

Jules Melancon: So like when you get a spat, let's say if the oysters do spat, there's no islands for them to go settle, like when the current's slack, for them to go settle down on the beds. They just going back with the current, and most of them land in mud and not on reefs, and it's not natural like it used to be. You know what I'm saying?

[0:34:10.4]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[0:34:34.4]

Jules Melancon: Like right here in the bay, the land's twelve miles before you hit land, right here back of the island. All the land's gone. Before that, you must've had at least fifty islands.

[0:34:54.4]

Rien Fertel: Between the Louisiana coast and to Grand Isle?

[0:34:56.8]

Jules Melancon: From here to that twelve miles, they had about fifty islands.

[0:34:56.8]

Rien Fertel: And there's none?

[0:35:01.8]

Jules Melancon: There's none. They all gone.

[0:35:02.3]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:35:04.3]

Jules Melancon: So you know what I'm saying?

[0:35:05.0]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. The water's going to flow differently and salinity—yeah.

[0:35:07.9]

Jules Melancon: Right. So the water don't stay. Different water's coming from different directions, so it's never the same. Every day the salinity's different, and the way that the estuary is, there's no more estuaries, it's like open water now. There's no place for the birds, there's no place for the fish to go lay their eggs and stuff like that. It's all gone.

[0:35:37.9]

Rien Fertel: So do caged oysters, do they grow—can they take advantage of that now rapid flow of water?

[0:35:48.9]

Jules Melancon: Right. It's to my advantage.

[0:35:50.7]

Rien Fertel: It is? These cages?

[0:35:52.1]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, because I can make an oyster—once I put the cage down, within six months, once I get them out the nursery where I nurse them, and put them in the cage, six months later I'm selling half-shells.

[0:36:07.7]

Rien Fertel: And what would be the time—

[0:36:09.7]

Jules Melancon: I would say nine months.

[0:36:11.2]

Rien Fertel: Ah! Okay.

[0:36:12.1]

Jules Melancon: Before, when we used to plant, we'd be like—well, when the oyster would grow in the wild, we had to wait like two and a half years before we'd get a sellable size. So we cut down on the process of the growth, but it's all manmade, by hand, and it's a lot of work, but we get more for the oysters.

[0:36:36.7]

Rien Fertel: How do you get the cages up from the—

[0:36:41.2]

Jules Melancon: I have on the boat, it's a little boom with a crane.

[0:36:45.8]

Rien Fertel: With a winch or—

[0:36:46.5]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, it's a little pivot, and I can pick up probably 1,000 pounds, but the cages weigh about 500 when they're loaded.

[0:36:59.1]

Rien Fertel: And how many oysters are in a cage?

[0:37:00.0]

Jules Melancon: I usually put between 1,200 and 1,500 oysters, but the cage with the foul and everything, that makes it more heavy. You seen the foul the boy was cleaning on the cage?

[0:37:12.4]

Jules Melancon: Mm-hmm.

[0:37:13.2]

Jules Melancon: Well, that's what you gotta do. We go out there, we bring the cage in the boat, we get the oysters out the cage, then we take the dirty cage, we put it in the boat. Then we got a clean cage, we take the oysters, we clean them good and we put them back in the clean cage. Then we put it back out. They grow fast. Now, if you just leave them in the dirty cage, a lot of them are going to start dying. You gotta know what you're doing. So, me, I been successful because I'm out there doing my time. And me, whenever God takes me, I hope I'm on my oyster boat in the bay, because that's what I love. I been

doing it all my life, and my best food is a oyster, so that's the way I feel about it. Me, I'm doing it part-time right now just to try to stay in the business so I can have my oysters and to make a little living. And as long as I'm healthy, I'm gonna keep working, but it's coming to my—I'm on my way out. I'm not on my way in.

[0:38:20.9]

Rien Fertel: I want to ask about that, you say the oyster leases you have have been in your family for 100 years, right?

[0:38:26.3]

Jules Melancon: Right.

[0:38:27.7]

Rien Fertel: So what happens to the leases after you? Do you have someone to take them over?

[0:38:30.7]

Jules Melancon: I sublease with the state. A lease is good for fifteen years. So at the end of fifteen years, the state releases you. They give you a new contract. As long as you pay your lease every year, they offer renewal. So at that point when I'm planning to get out,

I'm gonna put my leases up for sale, and if somebody wants to buy all my acreage, I'm gonna sell my acreage.

[0:39:04.4]

Rien Fertel: So you don't have family, children, that would take them over, that want to?

[0:39:07.2]

Jules Melancon: I have my little nephew that's working with me, but I'm trying to encourage him to do something better than the oyster industry, because, me, I seen it was good for me in the beginning, and at the end—it's starting to be good again, but they got a lot of downfalls that you can't protect yourself from.

[0:39:33.0]

Rien Fertel: So what do you think the future of the oyster industry in Louisiana, what do you think it's going to look like?

[0:39:40.0]

Jules Melancon: I think next year is gonna be worse than this year.

[0:39:42.5]

Rien Fertel: Why?

[0:39:43.5]

Jules Melancon: Because they gonna have less oysters, the wild oysters. Then the people with the cages like me, it's gonna be more of a threat for the thieves, because around the holidays, the oysters are worth a lot and they don't have them, and people'll go take them because they want the resource.

[0:40:02.5]

Rien Fertel: Why is it going to be worse in a year, the wild?

[0:40:09.7]

Jules Melancon: Well, this year the season opened. Three days later, they closed it. They didn't have no oysters. It should've never been opened, to me. You know what I mean?

[0:40:23.8]

Rien Fertel: Was the salinity of the water bad?

[0:40:23.8]

Jules Melancon: No, this was in Terrebonne Parish. The salinity was bad over here, but there's no wild oysters here. They had wild oysters in Terrebonne on state lease, but when they opened it, three days later they didn't have a oyster left, so they killing the resource. Before, when I was in the business, they had oysters in Vermilion Bay, Terrebonne Bay, Black Bay, Lake Borgne, they had oysters all over. I was hauling to the steam when I first built the *My Melanie*.

[0:40:23.8]

Jim Gossen: How many would you put on the *My Melanie*? You'd bring to the steam factory. That was making big money?

[0:41:13.1]

Jules Melancon: I had the biggest load of the steam factory.

[0:41:13.7]

Rien Fertel: And this is a boat, the *My Melanie*?

[0:41:16.3]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, that's my—

[0:41:18.1]

Rien Fertel: Your boat?

[0:41:18.1]

Jim Gossen: The big steel-hulled boat.

[0:41:20.0]

Jules Melancon: I had to sell it because there's no more industry.

[0:41:23.6]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:41:25.9]

Jules Melancon: It was a big vessel. Jim, you don't have a picture of it over here?

[0:41:29.1]

Jim Gossen: I probably have one over there.

[0:41:32.3]

Rien Fertel: So we're talking about a year in the future, but what do you think the—and it sounds like you don't have a lot of hope. What are your hopes for—

[0:41:41.3]

Jules Melancon: Well, what's happening over here, I don't have a lot of hope is because of what's going on with the government and the Corps of Engineers and everything else that's working against us. Okay, right here we have—last year we had a lot of fresh water. We already had a high river. They have Davis Ponds. You ever heard of Davis Ponds?

[0:42:09.6]

Rien Fertel: I don't know Davis Ponds.

[0:42:10.7]

Jules Melancon: Davis Ponds is a outlet that's feeding the lake from the river. When they have a high river, they open it up. It's like a floodgate.

[0:42:24.7]

Rien Fertel: So just like the Morganza or something.

[0:42:25.6]

Jules Melancon: It's the same thing as Morganza. So they opened that up last year, so they were feeding us fresh water. Now, me, I had oysters, that some of them were starting to die, but I was still selling. And then the hatchery couldn't make the seeds; the water was too fresh. So a lot of things working against you.

Then now they talking about making that place at Myrtle Grove. You had heard about that. Well, Myrtle Grove, that's in the master plan. Louisiana has a master plan for the future of Louisiana. Well, they're gonna put that diversion at Myrtle Grove, and what's gonna happen to the estuary is gonna be the same thing that happened to Vermilion Bay when they put the diversion over there at the Wax Lake Spillway, because after they made the—you see, the Vermilion Bay used to be the biggest oyster estuary in the world—

[0:43:43.0]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:43:43.8]

Jules Melancon: —at one time. And about—how long? Sixty, seventy years ago, you opened that up? That was before my time.

[0:43:51.9]

Jim Gossen: The Wax Lake outlet.

[0:43:53.7]

Jules Melancon: The Wax Lake outlet.

[0:43:55.1]

Jim Gossen: Killed it off.

[0:43:55.4]

Jules Melancon: This was told to me by my grandfather. It was the biggest—they had more oysters there than anywhere in the world, and the oysters were in abundance. Then they put that Wax Lake Spillway, and the place never came back. So they want to put this right here. Now over there in Vermilion, when they have oysters, the oysters are way out in the Gulf, growing around platforms and stuff like that.

[0:44:24.8]

Rien Fertel: They can't harvest.

[0:44:26.0]

Jules Melancon: You can go out there with a big boat, but it's not like—you're in thirty feet of water. You know what I mean? You need a ship to go out there. Even with the boat I had, I could've went way out there, but it's inconvenient. You gotta go thirty miles out, you gotta go make a day's work. Then the dock, when you come in, might be ten miles from the bay, so you gotta run forty miles a day, eighty miles a day, just to go make a day's work.

[0:44:58.9]

Rien Fertel: Right. Where an oyster boat used to be a skiff, used to be a small—

[0:45:01.7]

Jim Gossen: Well, it was a big—.

[0:45:01.8]

Rien Fertel: A small vessel.

[0:45:02.6]

Jules Melancon: No, no. My boat was big.

[0:45:04.8]

Rien Fertel: Oh, it was a much bigger boat? Okay, okay.

[0:45:07.5]

Jim Gossen: Oh, yeah, sixty—steel-hulled.

[0:45:08.1]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, that was my little boat right there.

[0:45:09.5]

Jim Gossen: Jules, how wide was it?

[0:45:12.5]

Jules Melancon: My boat was twenty-five feet wide. It was like the *Hayman*.

[0:45:16.9]

Rien Fertel: So you could fit a bunch of oysters—

[0:45:22.1]

Jim Gossen: Let me see if I have a picture of it.

[0:45:24.3]

Jules Melancon: I could hold probably about 3,000 sacks of oysters. It was a big boat.

[0:45:36.4]

Rien Fertel: So do you have—is the oyster industry going to exist in twenty-five years from now, do you think?

[0:45:46.9]

Jules Melancon: I'll tell you, the only ones that—if people start fishing in cages, they gonna have something, but as far as the wild oysters, it depends. If the people got the money to plant the gravels and the cement like they did across the river, they had a catch, but the fresh water killed everything. They invested a lot of money, millions and millions of dollars. Now, me with the cages, I just got a few hundred thousand invested. Now, then, they put millions and millions of dollars into their farm for a wild catch with a fresh bottom, and then the state opened up on them and it killed them.

[0:46:31.7]

Rien Fertel: So would you recommend cage oysters, that someone go into that business, to make the investment?

[0:46:38.6]

Jules Melancon: I think it's gonna be better in other areas, not here, and the problem's gonna be, like I said, it's gonna have to be an area, like I say, west of here, where there's no fresh water. The fresh water, once they open up over here, I'm gonna be out of

business. I had a meeting with the governor. I told him my situation, because I live in Grand Isle, and they say, “Well, we got money to build the dam, the gate, the floodgate, but we didn’t find money to pay the fishermen.” So they was talking about a buyout plan or a relocate. Now, my bottom is 100 years it’s been farmed. Now if they give me a piece of land in Terrebonne Bay that don’t have no bottom, it’s just mud, I can’t survive with my cages.

[0:47:39.3]

Rien Fertel: Right. And you have no connection to it, you don’t have a history with it.

[0:47:42.0]

Jules Melancon: Unless they give me my investment I got in the lease. Let’s say what the farm’s worth with the clutch on it, the shells and everything on the bottom, they’d have to evaluate me to what I invested in the land.

[0:48:03.7]

Rien Fertel: All right. So I want to ask just a few questions about the oysters you do do now. Is the spat, the variety of oyster, is it different from wild oysters?

[0:48:13.7]

Jules Melancon: The one I buy, yes.

[0:48:15.0]

Rien Fertel: How is it different?

[0:48:16.2]

Jules Melancon: It's a triploid.

[0:48:17.6]

Rien Fertel: So it's a triploid. Which means what?

[0:48:20.0]

Jules Melancon: It's a male.

[0:48:20.6]

Rien Fertel: So it's a male, so it can't breed.

[0:48:23.9]

Jules Melancon: It can't reproduce.

[0:48:24.9]

Rien Fertel: It can't reproduce in these cages.

[0:48:26.3]

Jules Melancon: Right. And it stays firm year-round.

[0:48:31.2]

Rien Fertel: It stays firm year-round.

[0:48:33.2]

Jules Melancon: Yeah. There's no skinny time for it. In summer, when oysters get skinny and poor and—

[0:48:39.4]

Jim Gossen: It'd be like a seedless watermelon.

[0:48:42.8]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So it's like a seedless watermelon. Is a male and a female oyster, do they look different or taste different?

[0:48:50.7]

Jules Melancon: No. Now, when the female gets milky, they taste different.

[0:48:57.1]

Rien Fertel: Right, because they have the—

[0:48:57.4]

Jules Melancon: The milk.

[0:48:58.1]

Rien Fertel: The seed. The milk in the shell.

[0:49:00.2]

Jules Melancon: Right, and it's got a cream taste to it.

[0:49:02.1]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[0:49:04.1]

Jules Melancon: Usually, the Cajun people, when they milk, we don't eat the oyster.

[0:49:09.0]

Greg Nick: They don't eat that.

[0:49:09.2]

Jules Melancon: But in New Orleans, they eat them year-round. They don't know what's going on.

[0:49:15.3]

Rien Fertel: Right. [Laughter]

[0:49:15.6]

Jules Melancon: That's what they call when the oyster's spawning.

[0:49:19.5]

Rien Fertel: Right. And you can tell when you open that oyster, it's a little milky.

[0:49:23.1]

Greg Nick: They don't eat them when they open them you see that.

[0:49:26.5]

Rien Fertel: So we talked about the variety. Do they taste different from wild oysters?

[0:49:33.5]

Jules Melancon: No, they taste all the same. Like let's say—

[0:49:36.1]

Rien Fertel: Are they healthier?

[0:49:40.0]

Jim Gossen: They eat more.

[0:49:41.3]

Greg Nick: They're all Blue Points.

[0:49:43.2]

Jim Gossen: Don't you think they eat more because they can get more floor?

[0:49:44.9]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, they got more floor and they grow faster.

[0:49:48.4]

Rien Fertel: So the water flows over them and around them.

[0:49:51.0]

Jim Gossen: They're not stacked up.

[0:49:54.4]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, and, you see, when they down in the reef, the current's passing on top. Now, got them in a cage, they got some legs on the cage, eight inches, so the water's going under the cage and through the cage.

[0:50:07.4]

Rien Fertel: Would that account for healthier oysters, too, because the water's flowing in and out of them, or no?

[0:50:14.2]

Jim Gossen: They have a bigger muscle.

[0:50:17.8]

Rien Fertel: Or are they cleaner? They have a bigger muscle?

[0:50:19.6]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, the oysters are clean.

[0:50:21.2]

Greg Nick: Aren't they all *virginicas*, though?

[0:50:23.7]

Jim Gossen: Yeah.

[0:50:23.8]

Greg Nick: They're all *virginicas*, the type of oyster.

[0:50:27.9]

Jules Melancon: Me, I enjoyed—a lot of people that came work with me, they said, “Man, this is too much hard work to make that money.” But to me, it’s nothing. I been

doing that all my life. To me, with the cages it's easier than when we used to make the oysters.

[0:50:46.5]

Jim Gossen: Because you know what you got.

[0:50:47.5]

Jules Melancon: We had to sell ten times more to make the same amount of money. Like I said, when my dad had his farm, when I took over the boat, when he was working for my grandpa, it was twenty-five cents for a big bag of oysters. When I started with my dad, it was only \$6.50 for a bag of oysters. And then the price went to ten dollars, then it slowly went up, and then after Katrina, it went up to like twenty dollars, and now what it is, thirty or forty dollars.

[0:51:18.4]

Greg Nick: Forty dollars a half.

[0:51:20.1]

Jules Melancon: For half a sack.

[0:51:20.6]

Rien Fertel: Forty dollars for half a sack.

[0:51:22.7]

Jules Melancon: Half a sack, a 110-pound bag for ten bucks.

[0:51:27.3]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. How do you sell your oysters? They're not in sacks.

[0:51:31.3]

Jules Melancon: It's in a box.

[0:51:31.2]

Rien Fertel: They're in a box.

[0:51:32.2]

Jules Melancon: The ones I got today are in a sack, but—

[0:51:35.4]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Usually in a box.

[0:51:36.9]

Jules Melancon: I sell them in a wax box.

[0:51:38.1]

Rien Fertel: And they're priced per?

[0:51:39.8]

Jules Melancon: Per piece.

[0:51:42.0]

Rien Fertel: What's the average? What do they run?

[0:51:43.5]

Jules Melancon: It depends.

[0:51:45.8]

Jim Gossen: Close to a dollar.

[0:51:49.0]

Jules Melancon: I think this year I'm gonna be about eighty-five cents. I don't like to overprice my oysters, because I like—you see the Alabama oyster on the menu, that's three dollars a oyster, \$3.25, \$3.50. Me, I let them have them a little bit cheaper. By the time they get the oysters, buy the freight and everything, it's over a dollar or around a dollar a oyster, so they gotta sell them high. Now, me, I go to town, I got fresh oysters. Let's say I got them for eighty-five cents. They could sell them under three dollars and still make a profit, and they sell more like that, because when I go with my oysters, most

of the time the people come, the tourists, they don't want to eat oysters from Alabama, they want to eat something from Louisiana, so mine sells more.

[0:52:41.9]

Rien Fertel: Right. And where can people find your oysters most readily?

[0:52:44.5]

Jules Melancon: I'm been selling independent at different restaurants in New Orleans and a few restaurants in Houston, I think two, one or two.

[0:52:53.3]

Jim Gossen: Yeah, Pêche has them.

[0:52:54.7]

Rien Fertel: Pêche has them in New Orleans most of the time at the oyster bar.

[0:52:57.8]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, that's my main—

[0:52:58.7]

Jim Gossen: Seaworthy.

[0:52:59.3]

Rien Fertel: Seaworthy.

[0:52:59.3]

Jules Melancon: Seaworthy. Bourbon House.

[0:53:03.6]

Jim Gossen: Tableau.

[0:53:04.2]

Jules Melancon: Tableau.

[0:53:07.6]

Rien Fertel: And what are the brand names of the oyster?

[0:53:11.3]

Jules Melancon: The one I have downstairs, that's an Independent Island. I got Queen Bess, I got Champagne Bay, I got Caminada Bay.

[0:53:23.2]

Rien Fertel: And do they all taste different because they're from different locations?

[0:53:25.0]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, they taste different. Caminadas, the flavor sometimes is saltier there, or the oyster tastes a little different. The one in Baratavia always has a stronger

flavor, Independent. It's got a stronger taste. We're gonna go eat some downstairs.

You're gonna see what I'm talking about.

[0:53:52.0]

Rien Fertel: That's the one from Independence.

[0:53:54.0]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, it's got a stronger taste.

[0:53:56.7]

Rien Fertel: And what about the Queen Bess?

[0:53:58.5]

Jules Melancon: That's in the same area. See, the Independent, Queen Bess, that's—

[0:54:03.8]

Jim Gossen: They're right next to each other.

[0:54:05.2]

Rien Fertel: It's close by.

[0:54:05.7]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, they're right—

[0:54:08.4]

Jim Gossen: You don't see Independence. You see Queen Bess because they—

[0:54:10.5]

Jules Melancon: You see the island where I'm at.

[0:54:13.7]

Jim Gossen: Where the bird rookery is, millions and millions of birds. It's unbelievable.

[0:54:18.5]

Rien Fertel: Right. And the only way to get there is by boat, get there by boat.

[0:54:20.8]

Jules Melancon: By boat. One day when it's a good day, you need to come ride out there to the farm and see. I got two farms.

[0:54:27.5]

Rien Fertel: I'd love to, yeah.

[0:54:30.5]

Greg Nick: And feed you oysters.

[0:54:31.1]

Rien Fertel: I'd love to. [Laughs.]

[0:54:33.9]

Jules Melancon: Then I got another guy that's gonna come in with me. I'm gonna lease him five acres of my bed, and he's gonna start his own farm.

[0:54:44.8]

Rien Fertel: To do caged oysters?

[0:54:45.6]

Jules Melancon: Caged oysters.

[0:54:48.0]

Rien Fertel: Is he a young guy?

[0:54:49.8]

Jules Melancon: He must be in his forties.

[0:54:49.8]

Rien Fertel: And is he a longtime oysterman?

[0:54:55.1]

Jules Melancon: He owns a wholesale market and he has problems getting oysters for his market, so he wants—

[0:55:03.4]

Jim Gossen: Is that Corina?

[0:55:05.4]

Jules Melancon: Corina Corina's. I'm gonna lease him five acres of one of my oyster leases, and he's gonna have—I think he said 115 cages' farm, a small farm.

[0:55:20.0]

Rien Fertel: Just to supply himself with fresh oysters.

[0:55:22.8]

Jules Melancon: This first year, the land I'm leasing him, he could put probably 300 or 400 cages on that land.

[0:55:22.8]

Rien Fertel: What do you think, if you could show these caged oysters and these traps to your grandfather or your father, what would they think? It would be so foreign to them, right?

[0:55:44.3]

Jules Melancon: To them at that time, they had so much oysters, they would tell me I'm wasting my time with a handful of oysters.

[0:55:51.1]

Rien Fertel: Right. So no one could have—could you have foreseen that this would be what you would be doing in 2020, that the oyster population in Louisiana would be so low, the wild oyster population, and that—

[0:56:04.7]

Jules Melancon: I didn't think it would get this low, but since the oil spill, it got worse and worse and worse and worse.

[0:56:12.8]

Jim Gossen: I don't think, to give you an example, I don't think *ever* in my lifetime that Acme and Drago had to take half-shell oysters off the menu. They had to choose whether they could sell chargrilled or half-shell, because they couldn't get enough to do both. So they can probably sell chargrilled a little more, I mean money-wise, and they did that before Christmas. Now, they were able to go back and—

[0:56:42.6]

Rien Fertel: This past year.

[0:56:43.2]

Jim Gossen: This past year. That never happened.

[0:56:45.5]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:56:46.6]

Jules Melancon: And next year's gonna be worse.

[0:56:47.9]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:56:49.5]

Jules Melancon: And a lot of the oysters they're gonna have in Louisiana is gonna be imported from other states.

[0:56:55.9]

Jim Gossen: A lot of oysters are coming out of Maryland, the Chesapeake.

[0:56:58.8]

Jules Melancon: Right. Alabama.

[0:57:01.3]

Rien Fertel: So I just have one or two more questions. Is there something special about—I mean, we're all from Louisiana, right, sitting in this room, so we all love Louisiana oysters. Is there something special about Louisiana oysters? Do you think they taste different or are different from, say, Alabama, Texas?

[0:57:16.9]

Jules Melancon: Well, me, I ate Alabama oysters. They good. They got a salty taste, but they don't have the flavor of a Grand Isle oyster. They're more salty. Now, the ones I have, they have a little creamy salt taste to them, but the flavor after you eat the oyster, ten, fifteen minutes, you still got that oyster taste in the back of your throat, and it's like a good food. Other places you go, you eat a oyster, you're tasting some salt and there's no flavor. Mine is a flavor that stays in your mouth.

[0:57:55.1]

Jim Gossen: Galveston Bay produces a good oyster because it has similar circumstances as Barataria.

[0:58:00.8]

Jules Melancon: Right.

[0:58:02.8]

Jim Gossen: It's got the Trinity River Basin coming into it, it's close to the Gulf and all, but the Grand Isle oyster in Louisiana always been known, people'd want to sell oysters, they always have salty Grand Isle oysters. It's always been known as producing some of the best oysters in the state. He was a oyster plate collector, like I was, and we met in Maryland and everybody took oysters, and I think I had Captain Hayman shuck me some, or with Jules, one or the other, or Wilbert, one of them, shuck me some oysters and we took them out there, and I took some in a box, and everybody was showing their oysters. Well, I think it was Jules' oysters.

[0:58:51.2]

Greg Nick: Yeah, it was Jules.

[0:58:51.3]

Jim Gossen: Yeah, it was Jules, because I had him pack me up some. But anyway, everybody ended up—now, these were all big oyster people from the Chesapeake and all, all coming, they couldn't believe. And when they got them up north, they wouldn't taste like that. I said, "Well, you know, we don't send out the best oysters." That's why I always came down here from Houston, drove 400 miles here and 400 miles back, because I was buying from Jules, from Captain Hayman, because I wanted the best oyster that I could get. A lot of people think an oyster's an oyster, but it really isn't. When you start

eating them and you start knowing the difference, it's like eating a strawberry that turns black on the vine, you never want to eat a regular red strawberry.

[0:59:44.2]

Jules Melancon: And one thing about the oyster over here, we always had the yield. Like the shucking houses always prefer Grand Isle over any oyster in the whole state because of the yield of the oyster. Even in summertime, we always had a better yield on the meat. They wanted Grand Isle oysters.

[1:00:05.1]

Jim Gossen: It might be yielding in other places five pounds. Like in the wintertime, what would be five pounds would turn into eight. But in the summertime, Grand Isle might be six or seven, even in the summer.

[1:00:21.6]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, they could make a profit on the oyster.

[1:00:25.0]

Greg Nick: I think when we went to those oyster plates things fifteen years or sixteen, seventeen years ago, that was the first time Jim ever encountered the first oyster farms on the East Coast.

[1:00:33.5]

Jim Gossen: Yeah, on the East Coast. That's why I started to look at—

[1:00:36.5]

Greg Nick: He jumped on that.

[1:00:39.5]

Jim Gossen: I saw that because I was traveling all over the world, and I said, France used to have all these oysters, New York used to have the world's—more oysters than anywhere in the world. They all gone. And I say why we have them? And I started thinking about that years ago, that if we start growing them in cages, that might be a good thing to start, because I was thinking about it when the oysterman would have their reefs, fish their wild, but have the ones in cages. They had the labor to do it, but it was too much work, when I thought of it.

[1:01:16.5]

Rien Fertel: Did you want to say something? I just have one more question. We've been talking about the loss of the wild Louisiana oyster, the loss of the Gulf oyster. We talked about how all of those islands between Grand Isle and the Louisiana coast have disappeared. A lot of people are talking about how Grand Isle might disappear in the future. A lot of people are saying we should come visit Grand Isle because it might not be here next generation. The *New York Times* just wrote an article encouraging people to come down here because it might be washed away with the next storm. Do you think about that? Do people you know think about that, that even Grand Isle, which is a much bigger island than a lot of those other islands were, and there's a lot of money in this

island, there's a lot of people who live here full-time or part-time, do you consider that?
Do you think about it?

[1:02:11.6]

Jules Melancon: I think a storm will eventually'll break the island, but they gonna rebuild it, especially when you're getting on the island, it's real narrow, by the bridge. It wouldn't take much for a hurricane to divide this island in two. But since they got a road there, they would rebuild it. They would pump it in. They would do something. It's a community now and they got corporations.

[1:02:40.2]

Jim Gossen: They say—I don't know if you look at before and after Queen Bess, it was this big and then it was this big and then now they've put rocks around it. I would think if they're gonna save it for the birds, they would probably save it—because without this island, then it's open land all the way to New Orleans.

[1:03:05.8]

Greg Nick: There won't be any land.

[1:03:08.0]

Jim Gossen: I mean open water all the way to New Orleans, and that'd be like an open gulf all the way there.

[1:03:13.5]

Jules Melancon: Yeah. We kind of like—

[1:03:15.0]

Greg Nick: —on both sides.

[1:03:16.3]

Rien Fertel: It's a barrier island.

[1:03:18.1]

Jules Melancon: With protection for the inshore. But we don't have no more protection from the north. Before, when you had a storm, when a hurricane would come in and you'd get a north wind, you got 100-mile-an-hour north wind, the water's coming from the back. There's no islands. Before, when we had the islands, it would take a long time for it to flood here. Now it floods right away. And then when we get a storm coming from this way, it's just eating it up more and more to the north till it's just open water. And then what's happening with all this river water, it's making a dead zone, so the bay is not a estuary no more, it's a dead zone, and it's all coming from this river water. What it is, there's no oxygen. So they got oxygen in the water if you got the cage up off the bottom,

but in the bottom there's not enough oxygen for the seafood to survive. That's what I'm looking at.

[1:04:27.1]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Just one more question. If oystermen were in charge, if they had the final say to tell the state what to do, to tell the federal government what to do, tell the Army Corps of Engineers what to do, like what would you say would happen to replenish the oyster industry, to keep it healthy? Like what would you have done?

[1:04:54.8]

Jules Melancon: Well, my recommendations was a lot of these islands washed away, to replace the islands and put rocks around them. The big islands that used to be there, like Beaugard Island, they got a lot of bunch of islands around here, Bird Island. What's the one over there? Cat Island. A bunch of islands. They had fifty islands back here with all different kind of names. They all gone, and they was some big islands. I'm talking about islands that are a mile or two miles long, half a mile wide.

[1:05:26.3]

Jim Gossen: Bassa Bassa and all that.

[1:05:28.2]

Jules Melancon: Yeah, I mean you had a lot of islands. When you had a storm, it wouldn't get as rough here. The bottom was protected. Now when you get a hurricane,

you got oysters on the bottom, that storm takes everything off the bottom like a vacuum cleaner. It destroys everything. When you had islands, it would stop the big seas and the current from breaking all the beds and destroying everything, burying everything. But the state, they would get federal money, they would build new roads, but they would never legislate to put the islands back. And to me, putting more fresh water, it's not gonna help. It's gonna be worse. It's gonna ruin the fishing industry, the shrimp, oyster, crab. It's gonna be completely eradicated from the customs, the old customs of Louisiana, of the fishermen.

Now, John Bel Edwards, "Well, we're gonna have to start selling catfish."

[1:06:41.5]

Jim Gossen: That's what he told Jules. He told him that.

[1:06:44.0]

Jules Melancon: Yeah.

[1:06:45.9]

Rien Fertel: The governor told you to become a catfish—

[1:06:47.0]

Jules Melancon: No, they're gonna have different industries when the fresh water comes out, like catfish and stuff like that. It's gonna be good for other fishing. But as far as the

oyster industry, he didn't have nothing to say that I'm gonna still be here. He was saying, "We're gonna have to find money to buy you out." And then me, if they got to buy me out, I gotta sell my camp, I gotta get out of here. You know? Just not don't buy my ground; you gotta buy my farm.

[1:07:18.7]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, that's your life.

[1:07:18.7]

Jules Melancon: My investment. You know what I mean?

[1:07:21.5]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[1:07:22.9]

Jules Melancon: So you never win. You never can win. Just like with BP, it wasn't fair what they done to us. And we still never settled. We still trying to get our settlement. And then we had to get lawyers, and the lawyers and the taxes take half of the money that you supposed to get. Why should we need a lawyer when we the victim?

[1:07:49.8]

Rien Fertel: Well, I think this conversation's going to continue, but I'm going to press pause or stop this. Can I get y'all to just say your names so the transcriber can link your voice to your name?

[1:07:59.9]

Jim Gossen: Jim Gossen.

[1:08:02.9]

Greg Nick: Greg Nick.

[1:08:05.2]

Rien Fertel: Thank you. All right. I'm going to let it run for a couple of seconds in silence just so we can have some—

[End of Interview]