

Narrators: Buddy Daisy and Earl Melancon
Interviewer: Susan Testroet- Bergeron and Lane Lefort
Transcriber: Taylor Suir

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SUSAN TESTROET BERGERON: My name is Susan Testroet-Bergeron and I am interviewing Mr. Buddy Daisy and Dr. Earl Melancon about their memories and experiences concerning the Louisiana Coastal Wetlands and the oyster industry. The interview is being conducted at Buddy's Seafood at 9:30 a.m. on August 23, 2012. The interview is being conducted in Houma, Louisiana. Do you understand that portions of this taped interview or pictures taken during the interview may be used in a variety of publications?

EARL MELANCON: Yes.

BUDDY DAISY: Yes.

BERGERON: Good. Thank you, Thank you for speaking with me today. Now that we have gone over all of our consent forms, I'd like to get some basic information from each of you then we'll start with the interview process.

DAISY: Ok.

BERGERON: Mr. Buddy, we'll start with you. Would you please state your full name and your date of birth and where you were born?

DAISY: [0:49] My full name is Walton Buddy Daisy. I was born in Houma, Louisiana. I lived down Bayou Dularge all my life. I was born in 1944. I've been in the oyster industry since I'm 16 years old.

BERGERON: Oh, wow. Ok, thank you. Earl?

MELANCON: Earl Melancon. I was born and raised in Thibodeaux, Louisiana and been in Thibodeaux all my life except for going off to graduate school at LSU and working for a short time at the marine lab in Port Fourchon. I am 61 years old born in 1951 and proud father of three children, two grandchildren and a beautiful wife.

BERGERON: Thank you. Do you want to talk about your family real quick? You don't want him to get away with that! [Laughs]

MELANCON: [Laughs]

DAISY: [Laughs] Yeah, I had four kids. One of my sons passed away and I have seven grandkids today and one great-great-grand kid.

BERGERON: Oh, Congratulations. Sounds like lovely families to both of you. Let's talk a little bit... We'll start this interview a little different than most of them. How did you two get to know one another?

MELANCON: Well, I guess I need to answer that.

DAISY: Uh, huh. I think so.

MELANCON: [2:09] Because, when I started my work as an oyster biologist, 38 years ago Buddy, I was befriended by a number of oystermen down Bayou Lafource and in Terrebonne and I wanted to get to know some of the oystermen down in the Bayou Dularge area and every one I spoke to said, "Well you need to speak to the Daisy Family because they've had a presence on Bayou Dularge for a long time, they're a hardworking family, and they'll give you direct answers." So, I just made a phone call one day to try James, your brother...

DAISY: Yeah, that's right.

MELANCON: [2:53] And James Daisy said, “Sure, come down and I’ll talk to you.” And when I did, I also met Buddy in the process and we hit it off pretty good. I was a young biologist, ready to learn how the fishery really worked and they were willing to share their experiences with me.

BERGERON: So, when he showed up, what happened?

DAISY: We just got to know one another and we had a liking [indistinct] seen that he was straight up and down fella, young, and he wanted to learn the industry. Oyster industry is different from a lot of other industries. And Earl was willing to learn some advice about the oyster industry and then he went on to be a professor, I guess. [Laughs]

MELANCON: [Laughs]

BERGERON: So, tell us what the oyster industry was like prior to meeting Earl. A little bit about the history. What it was like.

DAISY: [3:57] The oyster industry prior to Earl, we used to... In my... when I was coming up in them days I was a young boy. I worked for my brother. I started my brother. My father died when I was 12 years old and so I had to get out to help my mother for the living. And so I went to work for my brother in the oyster industry, and it changed. They oyster industry changes day by day. In them days you didn't have all the regulations you got today. And we would only fool with oysters mostly in the winter time. You didn't fool with oysters in the summer time. Winter time we would make our living fooling with the oysters' summertime we would go shrimping you know to pick up the spare time. Lot of people in the summer time that was in the oyster industry they would like transplant oysters in, you know, move oysters from bed to bed for the winter time. Well, today, everything is opposite. You got more rules and regulations and you got to have refrigeration and this and that and it's really a big change in the oyster industry, in my livelihood. Earl, you got something to say?

MELANCON: Well, I started working with the oystermen about 38 years ago. I came in, in the mid '70s, early '70s just when the oyster industry was going through a major transition in the way the fishery really work and was managed in the sense that if you look at the 1960's and before you had a very canning factory part to the industry.

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: [5:58] And then you also had the trade for shucked oysters and for half-shell trade. When I came into the industry and began to learn, the canning industry was essentially dead at that time, but there was still, because of foreign imports. It just destroyed the fishery; you just couldn't make a living doing that anymore. And I came in when you still had a number of oystermen bedding oysters in the fall...

DAISY: Yep.

MELANCON: ...and harvesting by early summer or mid-summer. And it was a type of fishery that was a time a little different from the Barataria system to what was happening here in Terrebonne. Where in the Barataria system it was more of planting oysters and harvesting and for here it was some planting and a lot of just natural harvesting.

DAISY: Yep, Yes.

MELANCON: And, so when Buddy speaks in terms of summertime not being a major fishery for them, an oyster fishery, that it was perhaps more economical and made a little more sense in management to shrimp. The Barataria oystermen were still harvesting oysters because they had planted bedded oysters from the public grounds. I saw that begin to dwindle as the '70s and the '80s came in. Again, because of regulations, state and federal regulations, also because we had some environmental issues at times on the public grounds where you didn't have the

oyster seed commodity that could be moved from public grounds to the private beds for bedding purposes. And, we had a change in the consumer. I think the consumer no longer had the very fine pallet that could tell the difference from a Grand Bay oyster in the lower part of Barataira Bay or an oyster that came from some other place that wasn't quite as delicious.

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: [8:02] There were a lot of changes that were occurring. [Phone rings] I was privileged to come in to see some of the more historical type of fishery and see a tremendous change in the fishery over the last 30 some odd years.

BERGERON: So, let me ask you this, tell us about a typical day or a typical week, whatever is comfortable for you, if you're an oystermen when you first started, when you were a young man.

DAISY: A typical day?

BERGERON: Yep, What would ya'll do?

DAISY: [8:37] Well, our days was start at 4, 5:00 in the morning. We would take our boats and go out to our leases and start to work about 7:00. And we would work all day long 'till about 3:30-4:00 and then we'd bring our merchandise in. And we'd load them on an 18-wheeler or on a regular truck. It depends on where they going 'cuz we used to ship oysters, a lot of oysters to Appalachia Coral, Florida in them days. And they would come down in 18-wheelers and pick them up. And our days, sometimes, wouldn't get through until 12:00 and night and we was back up again at 4:00 going out that next day and it was a steady routine. We'd work 5 days a week and Saturdays and Sundays we'd stay home with the family.

BERGERON: So, for the people not from Louisiana who have never been out to get an oyster, what does it take to get the oyster from the wetlands to their plate?

DAISY: What it takes, well, it takes a lot of time and a lot of experience and today if you're going to ship half-shells, you got to have it in a refrigeration within an hour on your boat. But, if you're doing shucking stuff, you can work them. You can come in late in the evening, shuck them the next day, process them, put them in gallons, quarts, pints, and ice them down, then you can ship them out. By the time it leaves me, I got my own boats, my own leases, and my own shop. I try to make everything fresh. Today it's caught, tomorrow it's shucked, the next day it'll be on its route to restaurants and different associations.

BERGERON: How many boats you got?

DAISY: I have 2 boats.

BERGERON: You have 2 boats.

DAISY: I have 2 boats. I used to have 5 but I got rid of them; it's too much of headaches.

BERGERON: [Laughs] So, you own your own boats?

DAISY: [11:04] I own my own boats.

BERGERON: How many people work here?

DAISY: Over here at my plant I got about 17 of 'em here and I got about 6 of 'em on the boats.

BERGERON: Wow, so who buys your oysters right now? Who's buying oysters?

DAISY: Who's buying my oysters?

BERGERON: Yep.

DAISY: [11:21] I got different dealers. I got two local fellas, I got a fella out of Lafayette, and I got a fella in Virginia that buys my oysters, too. Earl?

MELANCON: Well, I just look at this, when he speaks about his typical day in an oyster boat, I remember my late 20's, early 30's, I wanted to experience what it was like to truly be an oyster man, not just go out in the boats and learn from you as it is. I remember going out on Nelson Douay's boat, Shaul. I went to Shaul's house one day and I said, "Shaul, I want to go out on your boat for 3 or 4 days and just work as a worker." And he said, "You sure you want to do this?" And I said, "Yes, sir." So I went out and I was physically fit in those days. I went out and can remember working all day long shucking them oysters and moving those sacks to the back and then when it was time to go in I laid down on that front deck the first day and said, "It's over." And then when we got close to the dock, they hollered, "Get up Earl! You got to take them 120 pound sacks and put them in the truck." And, I worked 3 days like that and realized that my position, I needed to be an academic, man. I used so much Litament when I got home just to try to keep my muscles from aching so bad. I said, "This is work." And I think one thing that's always struck me about the oyster industry, without taking anything away from the other fishing industries, is that there's no down time to speak of. The dredge has to be working on the

boat, picking up oysters, and as 1 dredge is picking up oysters, the other one is being emptied on deck and you're having to cull those oysters and take the oysters you want to sell and throwing them off to the back and eventually sacking them and throwing the others overboard. So there's never any down time while you're actually harvesting.

DAISY: Nope.

MELANCON: [13:30] So it's, the only down time is when you take a lunch break, a meal break, and the time between the lease and the dock to unload. And then you still got to scrub your boat down after and you still got everything else to do. So, they're very long days.

BERGERON: Ok. I've never been oyster fishing, never had that privilege, so tell me how do you... the oysters are at the bottom?

DAISY: Yes ma'am.

BERGERON: So, how do you get them up?

DAISY: [13:57] We have what you call a oyster drag. It's made like a rake. All except it has a bag on the back end of it and you put it on the bottom and it picks the oysters in the shells and everything else and you raise it up and you dump it on a table on the deck of the boat. And you go through them and you cull the good oysters out. You got a glove and a hatchet, a small hatchet in your hand, and you cull them out and you throw the good ones up on the deck and you push the other ones overboard. The as you going on doing that process, you got to sack them oysters up, tie 'em, stack 'em, put a tag on 'em, and stack them on the back of the boat. That oyster's ready to go to the market.

BERGERON: Ok, one of the questions I've always had about oysters, How do you make sure you have enough to harvest each year? I mean, that's a big deal. Salinities change, and we get new water with a big spring flood, so how do you protect your industry? How do you protect your living?

DAISY: It depends on different people that's in the oyster industry. See, like me, I protect my oyster leases. I transplant when state ground opens, I transplant shells and in my areas that I have, they are natural grown area. If the environmental is right, it be getting some salt water and some freshwater, it makes the oysters take better. If you got too much salt water, they not going to take good. You got too much freshwater, they're still not going to take good. Too much a fresh kills them and too much a salt kills 'em. So, if you get this mix water, it's like, I'm a say grass. You know, when you get a long summer time, with no rain and stuff, the grass dies, and if you get rain and the right thing the grass grows fast. And, so I'm one of the lucky oyster fellas

that's got natural growing reefs. And I protect my reefs. And I work 'em. I just take the big oysters out. I'm always looking at my leases as a 3-year process. I take the big ones. I leave the mediums and small on my reef. Next year, I can go back on the same lease. If I get 10,000 sacks off of this lease, next year I can go back and get another 10,000 sacks, maybe a little bit better. It depends how the spats take it and stuff on the shells and stuff.

BERGERON: I think that's a pretty important thing for people to understand. Most of the people that live here are very environmentally conscious. You know, they don't overfish, they don't take more and, do y'all have some comments about...

DAISY: [17:04] No, you got some that does take more than what's...

MELANCON: I was about to say that...

DAISY: Yeah, they look at it like this: why leave it in the water? Take it and sell it now. I'm not that kind of a fella.

MELANCON: One thing I've learned with the oyster industry, like all fisheries, whether it be shrimping or oyster, crabbing, people can't look at an industry and say everyone is the same. Buddy is an independent business man. Every oysterman is an independent oyster man.

[17:40] And you're going to run the business the way you think is the best for your operation. Buddy practices a very important type of conservation, but it's conservation based on how he can deliver his product to market. He will take just so many sacks of oysters off of a lease. When the size of the oysters are getting small or you're only getting so many sacks per hour of harvest, you leave it alone. Then you say I'm coming back either later this year or next year. You have other oysterman that say, "No, I'm going to harvest every single oyster off of this lease as I can and I'm going to leave it fallow for years and just let Mother Nature replenish it and I'll come back." So, every oysterman is on those two extremes or in between somehow and one is not better than the other in terms of conservation in the true sense of the word; it's more of your business practices. I think what Buddy does, though, is with his type of conservation is that if you have an environmental year where you don't get much of a set, what we call a spat set, the small larval oysters setting on the water on the bottom. If you don't get a good set that year, he still has a product that he can harvest off that lease whereas somebody who takes most of the oysters off the lease, if it's a bad year next year, they're going to have to leave it alone a little longer than anticipated. So, but, every oysterman is an independent individual. And it's also based on where their leases are in relation to the salinity environment that's out there.

BERGERON: Ok...

MELANCON: Make sense?

DAISY: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MELANCON: Ok.

BERGERON: So, I'm going to ask you a couple of pretty pointed questions about wetlands and then we'll see where we go from there. Can you tell me how the wetlands have changed over your lifetime?

DAISY: [19:34] The wetlands really changed a lot. We need siltation. We need to stop the salt water intrusion 'cuz the salt water intrusion is what's really [phone rings] tearing up the wetlands. It kills the marsh grass and then you don't have nothing to hold the land back. They need to go back out and rebuild these old islands out there that used to be. And to stop this salt water intrusion like its coming in. And once they do that, but then you're going to start getting this freshwater intrusion from the north. That's going to start helping building these ground back up and it's going to make you a better seafood industry. And your shrimp, your crab, your fish, your everything. And, let's see how I can say this, I done had ground surveyed with a Wildlife and Fisheries surveyor and we marked it off. And come back, well that night they had a bad squall came in and we had stuck our poles out. And I had one stuck on the bank that night. And the next morning when I went back out that pole was 2 foot in the water. That's how bad, you know, the environment, the land is washing away. 'Cuz you don't have the nutritions in the water to really kill that salt water.

BERGERON: So, do you think the change of wetlands have had an effect on the oyster industry?

DAISY: [21:34] The change of, yes, it did.

BERGERON: Tell me how it's changed the industry.

DAISY: How it changed the industry? As the salt water intrusion comes in, your land washes away, everything start moving north. You have, I'm going to give you an example. I bought some leases from a fella about 40 years ago, I guess, 35-40 years ago. And he told me he had some leases in, out there by Last Island at Lake Pelto. And my brother told me, he said, "Buddy, you not going to do nothing with them leases." He said, "Well." I said, "Maybe one day." So, right after Hurricane Andrew came through, I don't know what it done. It changed the environmental [indistinct] some way. And them reefs took up, they formed oysters some kind of way, out of this world. This boat I got up there on this wall would leave my house at 4:00 in the morning and run to Lake Pelto. That's a 6 hour run. And come back with as much as 300 sacks of oysters sitting on the deck of that boat. When you looked at one, you looked at them all. They was all pretty, round, single oysters, big oysters. And what caused it, I really don't know. I think the river was kind of high that year or something. I don't know exactly what river changed it but

something changed it. A oyster is an animal that's going to tell you the environmental how it is. Earl?

MELANCON: [23:26] Yeah, I mean I think that last statement, Buddy, is a lot of the crux of the whole thing. It's an animal that's on the bottom. It never moves once it sets on the bottom. It's only in the water column as a larva for 2-3 weeks. Once it sets to the bottom, cements to the bottom, it will never move again. And it does become a good biological sentinel for what's happening in the estuaries. I've been blessed to have been working with shrimpers, crabbers, oystermen, crawfish farmers, but when I look at the fisheries and I say how has it changed through the eyes of a fisherman who's out there on a regular basis, I always come back to the oysterman for that answer. Because, once the oyster sets on the bottom, it's going to thrive as an oyster if the currents are right, if there's enough food availability, if the salinities are right. If the salinity is too low there's going to be physiological stress and the animal is either not going to grow or die or maybe not spawn. If the salinities are too high, it could thrive there but so do its predators. So that natural predators will come in and eat it up. So that oyster needs to have that intermediate salinity, not too fresh, not too salty, but it also correlates with our wetland losses. Because if you have a lot of oysters there and they're not moving, all the food has to be brought to them by the water currents. All the waste that they generate has to be flushed out by the water currents and every time wetlands change in shape they change the hydrology of the environment. And as hydrology changes and water current patterns change then areas that were once productive are no longer productive. Areas that once had enough current to keep the muds from silting over are no longer there and it silts over and what's interesting too is just the opposite of that in that sometimes reefs that were not productive because of too high or too low of salinity

can all of a sudden become productive. And I think in the case of what you're telling me in Lake Pelto, the river was high. I think something like that allows you to get that set and it will survive for a while.

DAISY: There was a time the Corps put that wier in the...

MELANCON: [25:58] The wier in Wax Lake outlet, the wier? Yeah.

DAISY: ...that outlet and it pushed a lot more freshwater in the...

MELANCON: pushed a lot of that water...

DAISY: ...down the Intercostal, down the channel. And the ship channel brings it up and out in that area up in there. And I think it had a little effect on...

MELANCON: I truly think it did and of course one the Wax Lake outlet was taken out...

DAISY: Was taken out, yeah...

MELANCON: [26:17] ...that silt dam was taken out, a dam, not a silt dam, was taken out it changed the water current patterns again. And I think that's what people need to understand in coastal resource management and coastal restoration management is that oystermen are not anti-freshwater and anti-diversions. What they need to know is, when will things flow? When will things not flow? Can it flow at such a rate that you're going to allow me to have salinities that are needed when its needed? And there's something that I always say and that is, as the oysters go, so goes the estuary.

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: That means everything from shrimp to speckled trout to other fisheries as well. And, you know, if you have an estuary, it's supposed to be a balance of fresh water and salt water. At any given time it could be one more than the other, but, it's like, how does an oyster man or any fisherman manage his industry if you have to deal with the unpredictability of Mother Nature and the unpredictability of the whims of government if they don't have some policy in place that says this is when we're going to flow it and this is when we're not going to flow it.

BERGERON: Yeah.

MELANCON: ...type of thing. And I think it comes down to responsible management.

DAISY: [27:42] You know, it's like the diversions they have now. I think if they would flow that like in the wintertime instead of the summer time it would be better for the industry because it would give your oysters... 'Cuz oysters in the winter time they can stand more freshwater...

MELANCON: Absolutely.

DAISY: ...than what they can stand in the summer time. In the summer time, an oyster cannot stand fresh water. They got to have a mixed water or a little salt. But, in the winter time, they can take it and I don't know if it's because the coolness in the water or whatever. Earl might could explain that, I can't. But if they would flow them diversions more in the wintertime and close them down in the summertime it would help the industry out and it would help the environmental out complete all the way around.

MELANCON: Well, there's no question about that Buddy. 'Cuz what you're saying...He's an oysterman who witnesses first hand. I'm a biologist who studied to understand what they're witnessing...

BERGERON: Right.

MELANCON: [28:55] ...And when you look at environmental parameters; there's two environmental parameters that govern virtually everything else. One is salinity, and the other is water temperature. So when you look at oysters: Oysters like virtually every animal except birds and mammals out there in our estuaries, are cold blooded animals. Their metabolism is going to respond to the environmental temperature. So, in the winter time, what he's experiencing where they can take very low salinity. And I've seen them take zero salinity, no salinity for a month or two at a time in the middle of dead winter...

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: ...and not die. It's because their metabolism is so slow they're almost in a state of dormancy, almost. And they can tolerate that low, low salinity. But once summer comes along or the temperatures begin to raise up, probably in the mid-70's Fahrenheit and above. Then you're going to begin to see that higher metabolism and they can't cope with that very low salinity.

BERGERON: Y'all have explained that to me in a way that no one has ever explained to me before. That really makes sense, the way y'all explained that. That's awesome. I want to talk a little bit about coastal restoration. I'm here representing CWPPR A and one of our jobs is to do

coastal restoration. We have 150 or so projects along the coast. So, we're going to hopefully show this to people in the rest of the nation, so what do you want to tell the rest of the nation about coastal restoration in Louisiana. What we're doing, why we need it, do we need it, what do you guys have to say?

DAISY: [30:34] Well, if we don't have coastal restoration in Louisiana, Louisiana won't be here. It will be washing away. And the protection that y'all are trying to give to the people is really appreciated. I am a commission on Terrebonne Levee District. I've been on that board for 20-something years and we look at things like this. We building levees and a lotta people say they ain't going to work and this and that. Well, if we don't put up some kind of protection, there won't be no more Houma, Louisiana, all these bayous and stuff will be gone. This will be a ghost town. In fact, I don't know, maybe years to come if we don't do something about coastal restoration, start getting some of this fresh water in these areas out here, Houma's going to be under the water. It's going to be a city under the water. I'm not against coastal restoration. We need it bad. We need it bad for the seafood industry. We got kids that's coming up today that if we don't do something about rebuilding our coast and everything, these poor children ain't going to know what it looked like. Earl, what you got to say?

MELANCON: I mean you pretty much hit the nail on the head, Buddy. If someone asked me why save Louisiana's coast, my first response would be: we're not unique in the United States or in the world with coastal erosion, with sea level rise, these are issues that are national and international. We are experiencing it here more than perhaps anywhere else in the world in

terms of the severity of it. And I guess my first response would be: If you don't save us, help save us, are you going to ask me to help save you at a later time, 'cuz it's going to happen. We're just, we're on the cutting edge of what's happening that's going to be a national, an international problem that's already there. But, not to the severity we have. So, just look at it from that perspective first. I also look at it from an economic perspective, not just the economics of Buddy, not just the economics of the fisheries here, I look at the infrastructure we have along the coast where we're supplying at minimum 20 sometimes up to 40 % of the U.S. fisheries to this nation. People are eating our product all across this country. I just read an article where on any given day, on any given day in the United States, Americans consume well over 1 million oysters, per day, on average, 365 days a year, that's an average.

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: [33:47] Now, when you stop and think about how we're number 1 in oysters, number 1 in shrimp, number 1 in crabs, these are commodities that go all over the country, so a lot of restaurants, a lot of wholesalers depend on our fisheries. Let's move away from the fisheries. Look at the infrastructure we have with oil and gas. Look at where all of the oil and gas deep water drilling is going to be located in terms of infrastructure to support that operation. It's going to be along the northern Gulf of Mexico and a lot of it's going to be right here in Louisiana. When you look at oil and gas production and you look at how vulnerable oil and gas production's going to be, if we can't keep this infrastructure in tact by developing and keeping our wetlands and increasing our wetlands. That's going to hurt you in the pocket book

and it's going to hurt everybody across the country and the pipe good. And not only in your oil and gas tank but also for fuel to heat your home.

BERGERON: Yep.

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: [34:49] And people don't realize that we have pipe lines that generate, that start here and that go all the way to New Jersey. So, all of that comes into play. So, we need to be stewards of our resources, our natural resources, and we need to show the world, not just the United States, but show the world that we can be stewards of any financial assistance that comes to us. We're going to use it in the right way, and use it in such a way that we can demonstrate to others how it can be done.

BERGERON: Yeah, I think you're really right about that. We talked a lot about the oyster industry, I want to go back just a little bit and I want you to see if you can kind of think of something from your childhood that connected you to a job about being outside, about being in nature, about being in fisheries. Sometimes when you talk to people and they'll have a story. Something happened in their life that made them say this is really what I want to do. Do you guys have anything like that?

DAISY: [35:56] Well, [Laughs], I can tell you about my livelihood. Like I had told you before, my father died when I was 12 and he was in the oyster industry. My brother was in the oyster industry. And I saw an opportunity that if you work hard at it, you can make something out of yourself. I had people tell me that they wouldn't work with me. I was a mule. I'm going to say, the first one early bird gets the worm. You know, and I was out there making my living. I was supporting my family. And I just got more and more involved and it seemed like you could make a good living at it and so I just stuck in it, got bigger into the industry, and then just kept growing 'cuz I didn't leave nothing. I didn't leave grass growing underneath my feet. I hustled out there and nobody gave me anything. I had to work for what I want and I made a good living and a good life at it. And today, I could retire, but I'm not going to retire 'cuz I say like this, once a fella retires, 6 months they'll put him in the ground, you know. [Laughs] 'Cuz I'm active. I stay active all the time. I get up at 4:30 in the morning, and I come over here and I open up the shop for my workers, we work. I don't do nothing really physical and stuff but I'm going all day. And after we finish here, I take my truck I drive my truck and pick up my oysters from my boat and I bring them back and the I go home and I take me a shower and eat supper and my wife says, "Damn you ready for bed already?" And I says, "Yeah, sun's getting ready to go down, it's time to go to bed." But I enjoy my life with the oyster industry and you know, if you want to work at it, you can make a good living at it. If you do it the right way.

LANE LEFORT: You had said about your family being oyster fishers, how far back does your family go to this area and have they always been living off the land in one way or another?

DAISY: [38:19] Well, that's....my father'd been in the oyster industry before I was born and I'm 68 years old. And he came out of Morgan City, him and my mother, they moved down Bayou Dularge and he always did fool with oysters. He used to always tong oysters. It wasn't a mechanical and nothing. It wasn't done by...it was all hand done. And he'd go out there and he'd tong up a skiff load of oysters and work 'em out, cull 'em out. But, it was all done in the winter time; never in the summertime. 'Cuz they didn't have refrigeration in them days. And you didn't have all this new laws we gotta go by with oyster industry. And I'm going to say we've been in the oyster industry at least 100 years. So, what else? [Laughs]

BERGERON: Let's give Earl a turn, anything from your childhood that drove you to be in this business?

MELANCON: Well, in my childhood I always remember my family on Grand Isle. And I can remember as a child when I would go to the beach on Grand Isle, when we would get out of our car and walk across the highway and walk across the beach 'till we got to the water's edge, we had to walk 50-100 yards, at least, to get to the beach, to get to the water. And I just see now, it's literally as soon as you get out your car, it's right there. It's gone. So, I've always had that desire to be around water. As my undergraduate degree, it was working with a professor in their lab. When I was at the sophomore level, that the more I worked in the marshes and in the estuary, it was like I can't do anything else. But what got me interested in oysters more than anything else was not just the animal but the people involved with the industry. And to me, there

is one particular moment that was, I would consider, my epiphany, in terms of I want to work with the oystermen and oyster industry. [40:54] And that was on my very first day, very first day as a biologist collecting data for my very first project with oysters. Nelson Douay, from Bayou Lafource, Shaul, I asked Shaul if I could go with his men on one his boats to the public grounds east of the river where they were going to harvest oysters and bring them back to Barataria and bed them. So, it was the day before the beginning of the pubic season and I hopped on a boat, the Lady Ethel, down at Grand Isle and that evening Nelson's 3 boats and boats from Bayou Lafource and Terrebonne and some from east of the river they all came together and tied up together. So it was like a huge floating island of oyster lugers out in the bay, in Black Bay. I knew no one except, I didn't even know the Daisy's at the time, I just know Shaul and his old one crew and his two sons and they introduced me to the fishermen and I literally hopped from boat to boat just introducing myself and got to speak to all these guys and every one of them was willing to share their experiences with me and all they asked from me was to be honest. And to just say look say it like it is, don't put hype with it or anything like that, and by the time that evening was over and I had laid down in the bunk, back on the Lady Ethel, I had met such incredible knowledge of, treasure of knowledge that I'd also met a group of men who were just hard working and honest. So, what drove me into the industry more than the actual animal was just the people who I got to meet that night. I knew it was what I wanted to do.

DAISY: And another thing, you didn't tell them about all the good eating you had that night. [Laughs]

MELANCON: [42:59] Well, that's...that's [Laughs]

BERGERON: [Laughs]

LEFORT: [Laughs]

MELANCON: They had like...

DAISY: Each boat would cook a different meal, you know and all put it together and...

MELANCON: Oh, It was just...

DAISY: ...you just served yourself like...

MELANCON: ...I still remember that night and that was 38 years ago. I still remember that night. But it is. It was the one time that truly said, I think I've found my calling for what I want to do.

BERGERON: It's really interesting to see you guys together because you have the same goal but different backgrounds and there's a sense of community, I feel, between you...

DAISY: [43:28] Yeah.

BERGERON: ...and it's really, really nice. I think that's something we have in Louisiana that people don't talk about it, a really big sense of community.

DAISY: That's right.

MELANCON: And it is because I can remember, I'll always go back to my PhD. I worked with oysters to get my PhD. And I can remember going in to LSU and talking with the professors at LSU and telling them, "Look, I'm already established in Thibodeaux at Nicholls. I want to get my PhD and I'm coming in with my own project. You don't have to find a project for me." And I told them my project. It was going to be a biological/economic model of the Barataria Bay bedding industry. And my response...their response to me surprised me. It was: you're never going to get economic information from these fishermen. They don't just give information like that. We've tried.

DAISY: [Laughs]

MELANCON: [44:31] And I said, "I've already set it all up." You know and they said, "Earl, you'll never be able to get a PhD with that." And every oysterman I went to, every single oysterman I went to and I said, "Will you open your financial books to me, at least on this part of your fishery. I don't want to know your whole industry, but this part of the fishery so I can correlate it with the environmental issues that are there for you." I never had a single oysterman or his wife, who usually took care of the books, to say no. All they said was, "Are you going to be honest? Are you going to tell it like it is?" And I said, "Yes." And I said, "If I'm telling it wrong are you going to be willing to tell me I'm telling it wrong?" So, it was like, I've never had an issue. If you're honest with them, they're honest with you. And that's not taking away from other that have tried and attempted. It was like, you know, there's always like, who's your momma, who's your daddy? That's always part of it in south Louisiana. But it was like, these people didn't know me but once I got the confidence of one oysterman it allowed me to get doors open with other oystermen and it just was a network. And the thing is, if an oysterman said, "No, I'm not interested in working with you." I said, "I respect that." But I'll be honest with you, I never had...I had 1 oysterman in my entire career tell me he didn't want to work with me. And it was an old fella that was on Bayou Lafource and I just can't remember his name right now. And when that particular project came out, he saw me and he said, "I wish I would have participated with you." It was like, you know, people are honest with you if you're honest with them. And you also say, look, I'm not trying to pry into your personal business...

BERGERON: Right.

MELANCON: [46:19] ...I'm just trying to help the fishery. And every fisherman said, "If you're trying to help the fishery, I'll work with you."

DAISY: Yes. Earl's a good boy. I really like Earl. He's honest...

MELANCON: I like Earl, too. [Laughs]

DAISY: ...and he's tell ya the straight, you know. He comes over here in the winter time and gets his oysters...

MELANCON: Oh, this is where I get my oysters.

DAISY: ...and he stays here for a couple of hours and me and him we have a good conversation. [Laughs]

BERGERON: I appreciate y'all giving us time today to visit with y'all...

MELANCON: Oh, it's my pleasure.

DAISY: Yeah. It's my pleasure too.

BERGERON: Good. Before we go we always let everybody, we always ask them, you know is there something you want to tell the viewers that we haven't thought to ask you. You know, sometimes you guys are thinking of things that I don't know. So, is there things you want to tell people who you know...people in New York City or California, just stuff you want people to know?

DAISY: [47:17] Well, I'm a say it like this, Louisiana's got the best seafood out, best eating seafood, best tasting seafood in the whole world. And you know, I don't know what it is about it, you take shrimp, crabs, fish, oysters, you know, I get a lot of people comes here to my place for oysters and I get a lot of calls from different people all over and they say, "You got some of the best tasting oysters I ever did eat." I say, "Madam, I got neighbors that got oyster grounds that say I won't buy nothing from him because his oysters taste like..." And I don't know why, it's all the same water and I don't know if it's the way its processed or but I like to sell fresh stuff. That's the, I think that's the important thing that fresh. Whenever you put fresh stuff out its always got a better taste. And just like shrimp, if you take shrimp and you catch them today and you cook 'tm tonight they got a better taste than something that's throwed on ice for 4

or 5 days, you know, 'cuz it loses the flavor. Earl, what you got to say on that? Tell them I got the best oysters, Earl.

MELANCON: Buddy does, I wouldn't buy them if I didn't like them.

DAISY: [Laughs]

BERGERON: [Laughs]

MELANCON: [48:43] [Laughs] Sorry Buddy, but if you didn't have good oysters, I might come to visit with you but I wouldn't spend my money with you, that's for sure. To me, I always to back to why do you want to save our wetlands down here. And when I have visitors down and I have the opportunity to speak with them and they say, "Why should we worry about your wetlands?" I tell them if you're coming from a coastal state, you probably have wetlands. It may be not much, it may be a significant amount, you have wetlands as well. And that I'm trying to save my wetlands down here. You need to save your wetlands as well and we all have to work together. When you look at the vastness of our wetlands relative to other states, we have the bulk of the wetlands in the country. But, it's not the only wetlands. So, I have to tell ya, initially I had a little trouble with this "America's Wetlands" term. And it wasn't that I didn't think that we didn't have great American wetlands here, it was the fact that we're one of America's great wetlands. We just have the most of it but it's not the only one. So, we're not unique in our

problems here, we just have them at such a heightened level of need and also awareness that what we do will help determine how you're going to save your wetlands, too, and you're state or wherever those precious wetlands will be. And wetlands are incredibly productive. They're one of the most productive ecological systems on the planet and preserving it is not only an economic treasure, it's a cultural and historical treasure. And when I say that I got into this industry because of working with oystermen and seeing who they were and how their families were, that's the culture, that's the history, and it's so tied to wetlands. And, you know, if you're out west and you're living on the prairies the people there have their ties to the prairies and their culture and their heritage, so that's just as precious as ours down here. And if those prairies are being lost, I want to do what I can in my way to help you save those. And we're all in this together, that's all I want to say.

DAISY: [51:39] Yep. We all together and I'm a tell you why: if we keep losing our wetlands the way we losing them today, in 50 years from now all your wetlands in the south here, especially, you take from Bayou Dularge going east, that changes over night. You take it from Bayou Dularge going west towards the Atchafalaya River, it don't change that much because you getting a little bit more fresh water into that area the other areas you get more high salinity and that means a lot. So they need to come in and start diverging some of this river water out the river through pipelines or any kind of way and start building our barrier island back and that's the important thing, if they build them barrier islands back. Your wetlands can start surviving and start building back some of their estuaries. Our estuaries down here, it's good for hunting, you know, we didn't talk about hunting, you got a lot of ducks down here, geese. When I was being grown up, growing up we used to geese came down and around Buckskin area they

were raised up like clouds. They had feed to eat. They had good feed. Today they don't come down, they stop off in the northern part of Louisiana and them stuff. They stop off in the rice fields and them stuff, but they never would stop. They would always fly south 'cuz they had, I guess the marshes was better fertilized and things like that. But as the days grow longer and shorter the wetlands just keep moving north. You know and we've got to do something about these barrier islands, trying to protect some of them, build it back up. I was told, I never did see it, Last Island, they used to have a motel and everything out there on it and Pelican Lake, Lake Pelto was just a little bitty ole' duck pond, you can say. Today it's wide open Gulf. Your Gulf is lapping at your doors now. And it's time to stop it, time to change it.

BERGERON: Well, I think your messages will be heard by the right people.

DAISY: I sure hope so.

BERGERON: I hope we can do that for you. I hope we can get the messages out to the right people. Well, I want to thank you guys very much for welcoming us into your business...

DAISY: You're welcome any time. Any time we can help you out I'm willing...

MELANCON: Any time.

DAISY: ...to say what I've got to say and you know and I know Earl will too.

Tape Ends: 54:45