

Philip Blanchard

Interview July 24, 2019

Carl Brasseaux: And I have to begin with your consent. This is Carl Brasseaux, and I'm at the South Lafourche Library at 16241 East St. Mary, I'm sorry, East Main Street, Cut Off, Louisiana 70345. It's July 24, 2019, and I'm here with Philip Blanchard. Before we get started, I'd like to get your permission to record this conversation and put it in the archives, so people who want to study this in the years to come can listen to it and get information and use it in articles, books, documentaries, or whatever kind of research project they're working on. Is this okay with you?

Philip Blanchard: Yes, it's fine.

C: Well, as I said, what we're trying to do is record and preserve as much knowledge as we can about local culture, local people, and local industries, and Roland said that your family was involved in shrimp for two generations. Three?

P: We're on the third generation now.

C: Okay. Can you explain a little bit, tell me a little bit, about your family's involvement in the industry?

P: My father originally, as far back as I can remember, had a barroom business in Golden Meadows, and he was located maybe a block or two from a guy that was in the seafood business, Gibson Collins. And at one point, Mr. Collins, either maybe short of money or whatever the reason, asked my father if he would he would go into partnership with him, and he did, so what my father learned was through Mr. Collins. Now Mr. Collins

C: When was this approximately?

P: In Golden Meadows.

C: Right, no, about what time period?

P: I would say 1950

C: Okay.

P: cause in 1952 is when Mr. Bertoul Cheramie went bankrupt, and he was the kingpin of the seafood industry on this bayou. I don't know if you have ever heard of him.

C: No, no, no, I've heard a lot about him.

P: Yeah. And so he was in business with Mr. Collins prior to that, and from there, he went to Grand Isle, wound up leasing some properties that were for the Cheramie's that they had shut down, and I guess when they were able to clear up all their bankruptcy thing, they were able to lease their property to my father and that's where he stayed. He leased from them, and that's approximately when I got out of high school and went worked with him. I worked with him for about a year and a half or two. Then, I bought my own place in Golden Meadows.

C: Now, basically, he was buying fresh shrimp or and and

P: Buying shrimp

C: and and

P: Buying shrimp off the shrimp boats and selling to factories. And at that time, all the, it was the small shrimp was basically going to canneries. Now, I don't think there's any more canneries in the industry. It's all peelers. It's peel meat. At that time, there was no peel meat. It was all canneries.

C: Now, there were local canneries still in operation at that time?

P: Here, they had one in LaRose. They had one in Golden Meadows that the Collins were operating which was originally a Cheramie plant, and that's the only two that I remember, but prior to that, they had four or five when I was a little-bitty kid, I remember those.

C: Now did they operate, your family, operate any boats also or did they

P: My father, prior to going into business with Mr. Collins, had two shrimp boats that he had bought. One was the Ocean City and the Atlantic City. It came from the east coast, and oh you know, I don't know

C: Okay.

P: exactly where it came from

C: Okay.

P: but

C: Okay

P: It came from that area, Black City and Ocean City right there.

C: Now, this was about the time that those Floridiane boats started to come in.

P: Right.

C: I think that was right after World War II.

P: That was Florida-type boats.

C: Okay. Now, were these

P: I would say that was during the war, you know, in the forties, you know, forty-five, yeah, whenever.

C: So, they were coming in as early as World War II, not after World War II?

P: I would say it was, it was probably after cause I remember the boats, and I was born in thirty-eight, so in forty-five I was seven years old, so that had to been in forty-five, forty-six.

C: Okay. Now these boats that you're talking about, the first ones, they were all built on the east coast?

P: No, no, no. My father had two boats that came from there. No. They had shrimp boats built on the Three M Way side of Golden Meadows left and right.

C: Okay, in the local shipyards?

P: Yeah, the Cheramies were the boat builders. That old Cheramie brought my buddy over here. His family, I mean, they had five brothers building boats in different, it wasn't a shipyard, it was

C: Their backyard?

P: Well, it was actually their front yard cause, you know, here's the bayou, here's the road, and the boats were built here, and they were living right behind.

C: Right.

P: And Fred took over with some old guy. It was like some big sheds, yeah, and they would build those shrimp dip, I mean, I guess there was a boat being launched every week.

C: Wow.

P: But that was ninety-nine percent Florida type, you know, the cabin in front.

C: Okay, well that's what I was asking, basically getting at, so the minute that those Florida-type boats come in, people start immediately building that type of boat here.

P: They started building them, and I mean building them and building them.

C: What was the advantage of the Florida-type boat?

P: I would guess, well it's hard to say. The Biloxi-type had the captain in the back and all the rigging in front, and I was still a fisherman so I can't really say it, you know.

C: Okay, I know. That's fine. When your dad started working in the shrimp industry, what impact did the jumbo shrimp have on the industry? You had talked about the small shrimp going in the canneries. What about the impact of the jumbo shrimp?

P: When he started in Golden Meadows, I would guess, I mean, I'd go work, you know, I was young, but I'd go work, and the bulk of it was big shrimp. Now Grand Isle, the bulk of it is small shrimp, you know. What they were buying was mostly headless shrimp, and it was going to be packed. It was packed in five-pound boxes eventually.

C: And frozen?

P: Yeah. It was frozen.

C: Yeah. Where was it shipped? mostly to New Orleans or was there a national midpoint?

P: We hauled, I'm trying to think of that guy's name. Ponchatoula but what was that guy's name? I don't remember that guy's name, and Mr. Chermie, Bertoul, was buying ninety-nine percent of their production till he went bankrupt, you know. He did my father a favor, he quit buying (unintelligible) before he declared bankruptcy, but he didn't do everybody a favor.

C: No, no, I get it, I get it. Now, the shrimp that was being transported, you were sending those out in refrigerated trucks? How was that moved?

P: At that time, boxes were built over the trucks, but there was no refrigeration.

C: Okay.

P: They were iced in shrimp boxes, but it was, you know, all local, no one far, you know.

C: Right.

P: But when my father and Gibson was shipping shrimp, they would ship, you know, Morgan City, Hammond, Ponchatoula, different places, but I can't, you know, I wasn't involved in it.

C: Right, yeah, no no no. I was just trying to get a feel for how big the market was. Now, because you're dealing with retailers like that, what's and we're talking

P: Wholesalers, wholesalers, wholesalers

C: Wholesalers, excuse me. During World War II, with rationing, there was a huge demand for shrimp because meat was rationed, so a lot of people, especially in this area, tried to supplement their diet with shrimp and oysters. Was there still a strong and steady demand after?

P: There were no imports at that time, so you know, the shrimp, the price, well, the price was lower then also, you know. I don't know, Don is complaining it's too low, but I mean, I'd say

C: I'd say I'd need to at least make a living, I assume.

P: Right, yeah. During the war, I mean, I was seven years old, and it's finished. I know I can't remember, you know.

C: Right. I'd just wondered if you had heard stories from your father about it.

P: No.

C: Okay. Well, let's talk about your time, then, with the company.

P: Well, I was in it. I got in 1958, I believe, yeah, fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, and I stayed in it three years, but I never really got big in it, and my father-in-law was in the boat business, and I wound up shutting that down and going into the boat business which is what I retired in.

C: Okay. Well

P: I went off, and I went on a boat.

C: Okay, so what kind of boats are you talking about? Are they oil-service boats?

P: Yes, oil-service boats

C: Okay.

P: That's what I've end with, but my father stayed in the seafood business all that while, and my son worked with him.

C: Okay. Well, what I would like to do is kind split it up, the rest of our time, talk a little bit about the shrimp industry based on your family's involvement in it, and then switch over and talk about how the shrimp and oyster business evolved into the oil field and the offshore oil service business. Is that okay with you?

P: Yeah, that's fine.

C: Okay, well, let's, while we're, we've been talking about shrimp, why don't we talk a little bit, finish with that thread.

P: Edison Chouest was a trawler. You know what he has now.

C: Oh, oh I know what he has now, yes, so let's talk a little bit. How did the industry change from the time, let's say, when you, your dad became involved to, let's say, the time your son became involved in the industry or the time that you left? I mean how, during it

P: The biggest thing that I noticed when I was with my father, shrimp was twenty-five dollars a barrel on the Small Brazier. That's eleven cents a pound, eleven point nine a pound, and the guys had all the same type inland boats, small boats, very little power and very little money was being made, and I could see it disappear. You know I kept looking to this guy, 50 years old. I'm twenty, so fifty is old. Here's this guy sixty years old, and ten years from now, this will all be gone, but actually, what happened is it got bigger and better, nicer boats, more power, more different methods of trawling, different trawl systems, and actually, I've seen young guys, you know, maybe ten, fifteen years old, come in with a hundred-fifty boxes of shrimp, where a guy all season wouldn't catch that, so it didn't get, it didn't decrease. It got better, but the fuel got more expensive, the ice got more expensive, everything, you know, followed suit.

C: Except the price

P: Well, I mean, it's a world market, you know, it's, there's nothing you can do. It's a demand. I mean, the only one thing you can do with shrimp is eat it.

C: You talked about the underpowered boats when you were little. What kind of motors for, most people used on the inland boats?

P: Thirty horsepower Fairbanks

C: They were gas or diesel?

P: Diesel.

C: And when did they begin to switch to the bigger boats? Was that in the sixties?

P: Well let's see. Sixty-five, fifty-five. Probably no later than that. I mean the fiberglass boats started coming out probably seventies, yeah.

C: Seventies?

P: Yeah.

C: Okay.

P: And I'm guessing, you know, you would need a trawler here to clear that, you know, get a little more precise but that to me, that's the difference I saw, you know, and it got, I don't know if you said better or bigger or more productive, I guess, cause one boat would come in with what a guy caught all season now. When the production is there, I mean, there's some years where nothing's right. Some years everything's right. The price is right for the fisherman, and that is determined by the production also, I mean the heavy, heavy, heavy production, the price is gonna drop cause those guys that actually wound up with the product, you know. They peel it, they freeze it, but they have to hold it.

C: Right.

P: They can't, they don't. The fisherman gets his money that day. I get mine the next day as the seller, but that guy's gotta have a bank to deal with and too many holes plug up, and he's got a credit line. If he's got a five digit an hour credit line, I mean, that's all he can hold, so if he can't buy anymore, naturally the price has to go down, you know, or he has to dump what he has to start over because he wants to keep going because he's got people working. He's gotta keep going.

C: Yeah.

P: He can't shut down for two weeks and expect to crank back up, so he has to. I guess the fishermen will never understand that, you know. It's beyond them because they got their money today.

C: Right.

P: Nobody else did.

C: Well, the inland boats, a couple of other questions before we move on, Mr. Blanchard. The inland boats, how long would they generally go out for?

P: Some do it daily. When I was in it, those guys would go out for four or five days, you know, cause they'd come back with the shrimp with the heads still on, and you can't keep them that long out. The shrimp in the boats that would have the big shrimp, they would stay fifteen to eighteen days, but the little inland boats, four, five, six days in the boats.

C: Okay, and they use ice?

P: Oh yeah, definitely ice.

C: Okay, well let's switch over and talk a little bit about how the shrimp and oyster boats. Now, before World War II, boats were less specialized. People were using boats for seasonally for both oysters and shrimp.

P: Some did.

C: Are people still doing that after when you were involved?

P: Yes, yes. Oh Lord yeah. I would say through the eighties, through the seventies for sure.

C: Okay.

P: Yeah. They'd gear up for oysters. Then, they'd gear up for shrimp, same boat.

C: I'd like to ask you to shift gears and look at how those people who were focused on making a living with shrimp and oysters got involved with the oil companies and then became the principle means of providing logistical support for the offshore oil industry.

P: Well, when Exxon, well it was Humble, started in Grand Isle, they were using wooden shrimp boats. I remember that fuss, you know. Ajard Chermie had one. Ashton Chermie had one. I mean those boats got banged up bad, but that's, and then from there, some of them built steel boats, you know, and stayed in the oil industry.

C: But how did they, I would assume that they, you talked about the wooden boats being beat up, I assume that they had to replace them pretty relatively quickly, because of the wear and tear, with boats that were designed with new designs that were better suited to the oil industry or did they continue to use fishermen?

P: Oh, they used them for a while. Yeah, they used them for a while, wooden boats.

C: Okay.

P: My father-in-law started with a wooden boat, but he was in the inside the smaller boat, Then, he wound up building steel boats and wound up offshore.

C: What were they hauling in the early days? What were they hauling in the early days for the oil companies?

P: People mostly you know. Moving cages around in the field, hauling, coming in, bringing supplies out to the structures. Now my father-in-law had a net shop. He built nets for years and years, but he also, he had boats at that time. He always, he had both, oil field boats.

C: Now, the nets, he was dipping them in

P: Tar.

C: tar, okay, and just, I'm just curious, was he the only person in the community or how many net shops were there?

P: They had Mistalidar [Chine] Terrebonne had a net shop. They had Cut Off Net Shop which was Mistalidar's [Chine] brother. They called him Boozoo, but I don't know what his name was. They had my father-in-law, Webre-Collie. They had Adam-Ducet farther down, and that's, those were the major net builders, you know, those four.

C: Now, they would buy netting and then custom make the nets for shrimpers?

P: They wouldn't make them.

C: Alright. Where would they get the netting? Was that from New Orleans? Where would they buy

P: The webbing?

C: Yeah.

P: Mr. Etienne Parrain was the, he was the distributor for some company, I forget who, but I know the bulk of them bought their netting from Mr. Parrain. Now who he got them from, I don't know.

C: Now what about the hardware? Did they buy that locally?

P: That was, no, not the, that was done yearly or come from New Orleans.

C: Okay, but general hardware for the boats themselves, not just the netting, I mean, did they use local hardware stores?

P: Yeah, yeah. They had the Western Auto down here but that was the only one I remember. I'm sure they had, they have another one. I think they had a Williams had a hardware store, but I never went there that I can remember.

C: Now, the, you talked about them hauling people offshore. I'm sure there must have been some kind of system where, was it like today where people gathered in one spot for movement offshore?

P: Well, they had a, Humble had a dock in Grand Isle.

C: Okay, so they gathered at the dock.

P: Yeah. Well, you know, those guys, the workers work seven to seven, and of course they had to have (unintelligible) people, but you had, you had to have a few boats within the field to move people around, you know, cause within the field there was probably one living quarters, and they had different, you know, K-sounds, satellites, other structures, but all the people lived at one spot.

C: Right.

P: But you had to bring the gauges all around, and that's what they did which I did that in a steel boat for years.

C: Now, the fishermen, I assume, were all speaking French, and when did radios come in on the boats?

P: I would, I would say around the Second World War I would think, yeah.

C: Okay. Now we're talking two-way radios, or are these just sharp-wave radios?

P: That, that I can't swear, you know, I've heard radios on the boats during that period, but I don't know what type they were, you know, but I guess, well, probably during the Second World War, it had to be then not prior to that for sure, no.

C: Well, let me get your general impressions about how things have changed from the time you were old enough to become personally involved in it and now.

P: The main thing is what I said earlier that when I was in it, all the shrimp, small stuff, was going to canneries. Now it's all going to peelers.

C: Now

P: There are no canneries that I know of that in

C: What happens to the small shrimp now?

P: It's peeled. It's frozen peeled. It's still raw. The canneries were cooking, and there was, it was cooked and canned, and that's the biggest change, and naturally the price is going up, you know. It's more expensive. Better product but I mean there are less boats, a lot less fishermen, a lot less. When my father was on Grand Isle, they had five, five, one two three four five, six docks between Grand Isle and Common Isle which is right before you cross the bridge. Now there's only one, my son, and he's not buying anymore shrimp. When he started in eighty-three, eighty-four, there were one two three four five, there were five, and he's buying about the same amount of product that he was buying with five other docks, so that tells you there, it's dwindling.

C: It's the imports, I'm sure.

P: Well, the imports hurt, yes. What hurts is, it's not the subsidies that help. What they should do is put quarters cause they go around the subsidies, you know. They'll ship to this country that's not being, I've got the wrong word. It's not the subsidy. It's tax. What is it, tariff, use tariff, and this country has no tariffs, so they ship here, and then it comes here, so they escape the tariff, but if they put quarters on imports, you know, cause we produce ten percent of the consumption. That's it. We can't feed the consumption, the production, so you have to have it. You have to have that ninety percent come in, but it's coming in and hurting.

C: Right.

P: It should come in at the same price, and if they put the quarter, well we can get rid of our ten percent at a reasonable price. The fishermen would do a lot better. Now some, you know what I mean, some fishermen make money no matter what price. Some fishermen never make any, you know it's just

C: I have a quick question for you. Do you still see young people going into the industry?

P: It, a few years prior to the BP oil spill, I was helping my son in Grand Isle a lot, and they had a lot of young boys getting into it, you know, and now since the oil the spill, I haven't, I quit going cause I was taking care of my business which was struggling. The oil field got bad too.

C: Right.

P: And, but a lot of young guys were getting in it.

C: A lot?

P: More than when I was growing up cause when I was growing up, my generation, our parents, I would say ninety-five percent of them, didn't finish high school, so then they wanted you to go to school. You had to go to school. You had to learn, you know. You had to, forcing you to have to get an education which they didn't have, but so a lot of people my age never gotten into it that I know of. There are a few, but very few, exceptions, very few, but later on, I could see young boys get, young men I should say, getting into it and doing well but did well with the newer stuff, the

C: But the younger people, were they doing it on seasonal basis, working offshore for a while then (unintelligible)

P: Some did. Some did, went out to get jobs, you know, during the offseason. Some had to, yeah, a lot of them, but the majority of them, their grandfathers and fathers were in it, you know, so they knew the trade. I mean you have to know something. You just can't get a boat and go fishing. Some guys grew up doing it, and they got into it you know.

C: Well, let me ask you this because we're running, beginning to run out of time. What did I not ask you? What's important that I should've asked you about?

P: I can't think of anything you missed. I'll be honest with you. It was, the seafood business, when I got in, was an everyday business. The boat business was seven to seven, so you can see where I moved, you had more time to yourself, but seafood was Monday through Sunday. Now, I don't know Christmas. Christmas you were off. Good Friday you didn't work, but every other day the dock was open, Saturday Sunday Monday, so when I got the chance to get away from it, I did because of the time.

C: Right.

P: I had more time to for myself.

C: To yourself, right.

P: And some, my father did it, you know, and then as he got older, he started taking time off, you know, go on little trips, you know, during the January when things were slowly shutting down, whatever you know.

C: Right, but when the boats were running you had to be in too.

P: Yeah, yeah. I mean, you never could go anywhere, you know, when you'd open up in the morning, close at night, open up. Now some days, you know, during the season, I mean, you were till two o'clock in the morning, you know, and back up at seven, and it's just, it was rough, and everything was, at that time, was by hand. Now, it's more automated there. They suck out the, they flood the compartment, and they suck it out with a suction. Then, it comes into the conveyor which we had. Then, it falls into our electronic scale, over by the scale. We dumped it in baskets. We had to pull the baskets to the scale. We had to pull basket to the truck, dump them in the truck. Now, it's in a vat. They put sea celery prongs in a vat. Forklift comes, picks up the vat, goes put it in the truck. The ice is put in a hopper with a little Bobcat. I don't they have two shovels in the, at the dock.

C: Did you all dehead yourselves?

P: Very very little. Very very little.

C: The shrimpers did that, dehead?

P: I don't know. The big shrimp did do it, and the freezer boats don't even dehead. They bring it in with the heads, they freeze it. Now when my father and I were in it, we had to dehead a lot. Dehead, I mean that was, every dock had a siren. You'd put the siren on, and the neighborhood and women would come to break heads.

C: How much would they get? Was it by the tub or

P: Yeah. I guess a sheet metal bucket made with holes in the bottom, and if I remember right, it was figured a barrel of shrimp would produce seven buckets of heads. If I remember rights. Now who figured that out, that was way before my time, so and the bigger the shrimp, the less the price, the smaller the shrimp, the higher the price

C: Right.

P: cause it took them longer to break the heads, naturally.

C: Right. The, I know from doing it myself, peeling them, you know, the issue with the ammonia and the burning on the fingers

P: Yeah, yeah, but some ladies, you know, they struggled, some, no problem. I remember when fifteen twenty headless shrimp, that's a big shrimp, got to eighty cents a pound which made it a hundred dollars a barrel cause tails, a hundred twenty-five pounds of tails is a barrel cause if you break two hundred and ten pounds of head off, which is a head on barrel, you want to put a hundred and twenty-five pounds, roughly. Eighty cents a pound, and we kept saying, "Who in the heck is gonna eat that?" Who's gonna pay that price? You know, cause we give the boat eighty cents. We get eighty-five, whatever, and then, that guy had to package it and pack it, then sell it. I mean, it was unheard of that price, a hundred dollars a barrel. Unreal and it just kept on going, but I remember that, eighty cents a pound.

C: But that was, would have been an unnormal marking. When you sold to the wholesalers, how much was it normally marked up? Just a percentage

P: We would get five dollars a barrel for the head off. I remember that, and if you dealt with a factory, all season it would give you like a bonus at the end, a dollar a barrel which was like half a cent a pound. A barrel was two hundred ten pounds, but it was you paid twenty-five dollars, and you got thirty dollars. That's it, five dollars a barrel.

C: Okay.

P: Now it's around at twenty cents a pound is what you need to be, the docks. If you pay two dollars, a pound to the fishermen, you need two twenty but that floats, you know, but that's basically what it is, twenty cents a pound more for the dock than what you pay to the boat. If you got a heavy heavy production, you can get by with fifteen cents, you know, cause I mean you got the same expense to open that dock for twelve hours that you do, I mean, for twelve hours of production than for two hours of production. If you get two hours of unloading, the guy is still gonna be there, so the more you unload, if you work the whole day, you never stop, you can work on a small profit, a smaller margin, and still come out, you know, but I mean that, you gotta weigh the difference.

C: Well, we're pretty much out of time Mr. Blanchard. I can't thank you enough for sharing these memories, and

P: I wish I could have said more. I wish I could have remembered more.

C: you know we may be back, and we can (unintelligible) again. Basically, what you, you know, really need to do at this point is to think about it and have