

Interview of Ernest Desporte
(1888 - 1977)
Interview Conducted October, 1973
Biloxi, MS

Mr. Desporte was in the cannery business from 1917- 1929 and then entered the insurance business. He also served as alderman for the City of Biloxi. Mr. Desporte whose great grandfather came to the area in 1832 begins his reminiscences with the Civil War blockade of the Gulf coast.

The interviewer is Melvina Lee Bulk. Transcription of the audio tape by Robert J. Spilsbury, a volunteer at the Gulf Islands National Seashore, July, 2000.

Mr. Desporte

... established a blockade to keep provisions from coming out of New Orleans to Biloxi. My father's father, Victor Desporte, bought a sloop, and had his crew and they would go to New Orleans and load with provisions and bring them back to Biloxi. Of course there were others who were doing the same thing. They would sail at night and hide during the day time. They come into the Biloxi channel at night. Ahead of them all lights were extinguished so they cut a path across Biloxi, the peninsula, so they could steer by that and come through into Biloxi channel. There was a Biloxian who was defeated for an office in the local home guard company, and he went to Ship Island and joined up with the Union troops. He led a squad to catch the blockade runners. When they stopped my grandfather, Victor Desporte, ordered him to lock up. Grandfather told him alright Art [Holley] I know you and when this thing is over we're going to hang you to the tallest pine tree in Biloxi. Course they didn't.

They took them to Ship Island and imprisoned them. And later they took the oath of allegiance and were given the freedom of the island. Victor Desporte, my grandfather, being a brick mason, there wasn't but one Negro slave in Biloxi that knew how to mix mortar. He belonged to a (Mr. DeVries, Debuys?) who lived down on East Beach near Oak Street. When Victor Desporte would get some brick work to do he'd go hire the slave from his owner, Mr. DeBries and apparently treated him very well. The slave was an habitual thief. Whenever he would steal anything [unintelligible, background noise] he would go hire this Negro slave to mix mortar. Well, when this slave being pretty smart, when he learned about the Union troops being at Ship Island, he made his way there and joined up with them. They made him a corporal and placed a guard with him. When Victor Desporte and his crew were given freedom of the island, and this Negro slave saw his former employer, he was elated. And he served them well. Desporte and his men or crew would hide out in the sand hills of the island at night and this slave would steal fresh vegetables from the commissary and bring them to them. Scurvy set in among the Confederate prisoners, and lots of them died of scurvy. But Desporte and his crew came

through and didn't catch it. They attributed their life you might say to this Negro slave stealing fresh vegetables for them. When he thought they should leave the island, he reported to Victor Desporte .?. He arranged for a skiff and oars and oar locks to be placed in a certain point. Some of Victor Desporte's men were afraid it was a frame up to kill them because that was one of the practices of this Negro corporal and his guard. When the Confederate prisoners went to escape, they would shoot them as escaping prisoners. But Desporte had confidence in this former slave. As they rushed to get in their skiff and shoved off and started rowing, the guard rushed up there and they fired to kill them. It had no effect on them because the corporal had loaded the guards' guns with blanks. So Desporte and his crew then rowed on to Biloxi.

Desporte took his family then to Mobile where he joined the Confederate Navy on the gunboat *Selma*. He was on that gunboat, *Selma*, in the Battle of Mobile Bay. My father, Victor Desporte's son, was then seven years of age. His mother would make some pies and put them in a basket for him to go and to sell. He would go down among the Union soldiers to sell pies. And they were naturally suspicious and would make him bite and eat a piece of each pie before they would eat it. One time a kid fell overboard and one of the Union soldiers jumped overboard and rescued him. After the battle and the war was over the commissaries were thrown open and the Confederates took whatever food they wanted from the commissary. He and his family made their way back to Biloxi and remained here ever since.

Ms. Bulk

Do you remember any stories about what the fort was like itself? Were the men actually imprisoned in the fort?

Mr. D

The fort Massachusetts was as fine a piece of masonry as ever existed .?. off the ground and all along inside, they had these, you might say dungeons, they had little cells, and the only ventilation to each of these dungeons was a low opening between the bricks, of about a foot long and two or three inches wide. That was the only ventilation they had. Inside the fort, they had stairways and construction for observation towers, two or three of them, at different angles. Large cannon was placed on top of the fort. That's about as much description as I can give of the fort itself.

Ms. Bulk

Any other stories from your grandfather now about his days on the Island?

Mr. D

No, it's the only story that I can remember about grandpa being a Confederate prisoner.

Ms. Bulk

What about your father now? When was he harbormaster, do you remember what year he became harbormaster on Ship Island?

Mr. D.

When he became harbormaster. Harbormaster was an appointive office by the board of supervisors. I don't remember. I apparently was very small when he was appointed. He kept that position for thirty-five years. Not altogether harbormaster. When Gulfport became a port in 1898, he would have had to move to Gulfport to continue on as harbormaster. So he made a deal with Captain Scull who was then a bar pilot and lived in Gulfport. Captain Scull was appointed harbormaster and my father, Ernest Desporte, was appointed pilot in Captain Skull's place.

Ms. Bulk

What did his job entail as pilot? What was his job as pilot?

Mr. D.

He was put aboard ships out in the Gulf and stayed aboard them until they came inside of Ship Island or went on to Gulfport. On every ship leaving Gulfport, they had to have a pilot aboard. He stayed aboard that ship, in charge of you might say of the ship, til they got outside Ship Island in the Gulf. Then his pilot boat crew took him off the ship. You see, a ship coming in had to be boarded in the Gulf, put a pilot aboard, and then a ship going out, a pilot was put aboard at Gulfport and stayed aboard the ship until the ship got into the Gulf.

Ms. Bulk

Were these ships mostly square riggers or what?

Mr. D

Mostly square riggers in the early days because you had very few steam ships. But later on, in this day and time, you don't see a square rigger for the past number years. You see nothing but steamers.

Ms. Bulk

The square riggers were actually towed into Gulfport then?

Mr. D

It was too dangerous for them to undertake to sail into port. Of course later on in Gulfport they owned the tug, *Gulfport*, which was a big, powerful tug. It did most of the towing. I think the *Georgia*, that operated out of Biloxi, had been sold to the Mexican government. But I'm not sure about that. I don't know what become of the *Loxlay*. I know the tug, *Biloxi*, was finally sold to the (Salmon ?) interests, I think, in Slidell.

Ms. Bulk

What kind of cargo did the ships carry?

Mr. D

In the early days, most of your saw mills were around Handsboro. The Dantzlars in Pascagoula. The Dantzlars had a big saw mill at Cedar Lake, about five or six miles north of Biloxi. The Cedar Lake saw mill cut about 50,000 feet [of lumber] a day. Timber was brought down by flat cars and unloaded in a boom in the lake in north Gulfport. And there kept by timber inspectors waiting for the arrival of the vessel that was to take on this cargo of timber. The timber was about ten sticks wide, and maybe there would be about a thousand sticks in a tow. The timber inspectors, the only ones I knew in Gulfport, were the .? brothers. They had a camp there in the lake and they assembled this timber waiting for the ships. And also fixed up the tug boat's tow on Back Bay and on out to Ship Island or Gulfport after Gulfport became a port. The timber was assembled in the harbor out in front of Gulfport. They brought down [the timber] on flat cars and unloaded at the docks there in Gulfport.

Ms. Bulk

I think you mentioned before that the ships just carried ballast coming into the port ...

Mr. D

A lot of sailing ships came into Ship Island came in ballast because there were no imports, no incoming cargo. In those days, the deputy United States Marshall and also United States Deputy collected customs had offices in Biloxi. Ships had ballast and the ballast had to be unloaded, mostly rocks from foreign ports. Mr. Jim Swetman, as a stevedore, and he owned the steam tug *Carlisle*. The captain of the tug boat *Toiler* (?) was Captain Beauregard Roberts. Mr. Swetman also owned the big schooner barge *Anna Croffin*. They would unload the ballast from the ships so the ship could then take on cargo.

Ms. Bulk

Going back to the Island, what were some of your very early memories of what the Island looked like?

Mr. D

The only part of Ship Island that had any trees, pine trees, on it was east of the Quarantine Station. All the rest of the island which was probably seven, eight miles in length, there wasn't anything except sea oats and stuff of that kind growing on the island. However, a light keeper at Ship Island, in front of their residence on the island, there was a fig tree. I imagine they probably used good rich soil in a barrel or something that was originally planted there. I don't know when it was originally planted, but I remember that fig tree being there very well.

Ms. Bulk

What about any wildlife on the Island?

Mr. D

The only wildlife on the island was rabbits. We used to go out there and it was fun chasing a rabbit in that sand sending dogs after them. They would slip. It was fun to watch them. There was plenty of rabbits on Ship Island. We used to go out there with dogs and hunt them. Somebody put some turkeys out there one time. Somebody else put some fox out there. And that was the end of the turkeys. But you see, every time you had a hurrricane, it would cover the whole island with water. So naturally it killed any wildlife you had, especially rabbits. I think the racoons survived because they could swim.

Ms. Bulk

Who lived on the Island at this time while your father was harbormaster?

Mr. D

There wasn't anybody who lived on the island except the lightkeeper's family, and up at the Quarantine Station of course, the doctor's family. I don't know that the pharmacist ever had his family there.

Ms. Bulk

What about this Sergeant McCabe? [Sgt. James McCabe]

Mr. D

He was just placed there by the United States Government, and the Sargent was custodian of the fort while it was under control of the United States Government.

Ms. Bulk

He just lived in the fort then? He lived there by himself without his family or did he come back and forth every day?

Mr. D

I don't know anything about his family. He probably had a family because the other McCabes I remember very well. It was later on that I got to know them. The Sergeant was the first of the McCabe family that came to Biloxi as I understand.

Ms. Bulk

Anything else you remember about the Island? Any changes over the years that you have noticed?

Mr. D

Nothing except that it seemed to us on the inside of the Island, that is the north side [break in tape] and fell on the west point. I think all those islands out there, the

lighthouses onChandeleur, Ship Island, and Horn Island were all, what would you call it, were awash, erode, and collapsed. The old lighthouse that was at Ship Island, the remnants of the lighthouse, were at the water's edge. And the frame lighthouse that was active was a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet from the water's edge. And that's true of Chandeleur Island and Horn Island. Those islands originally were collapsed from the erosion. Chandeleur Island, the lighthouse is near the north end and well up in the middle of the island as far as east and west is concerned. And Horn Island is built over the water and inside of Petit Bois Island. As far as I know, there is no lighthouse anymore on Horn Island. You see I haven't been around in quite a few years.

Ms. Bulk

Do you remember when you were on Horn Island were there any other buildings besides the one lighthouse?

Mr. D

I don't recall for sure on Horn Island.

Ms. Bulk

One more thing, I'd like to have you tell me about the legend of the buzzards [vultures], why there are no buzzards on Ship Island.

Mr. D

There is a legend on Ship Island that a priest died and he prayed that the vultures would not harm his body. And as far as is known, no one has ever seen a vulture land on the island itself. One time there was quite a number of cattle on the island, on the west end of the island, and a sportsman killed a number of them as if he were a big game hunter. And even then, no one ever saw that they know of, a buzzard landing on the island. They did see one like in a tree down by the Quarantine Station, and others went down there to verify, and the dead buzzard was on the ground. Now whether that's a true story, but as far as I'm concerned, I never saw one on the island.

Ms. Bulk

How did the cattle get on the Island?

Mr. D

I don't know. They were supposed to belong to one of the meat market people here in Biloxi. Just how he .?. brought them out there on a boat.

Ms. Bulk

Was there enough vegetation for them to feed on?

Mr. D

Yes.

Ms. Bulk

How many boats would you estimate were on the Island, coming and going?

Mr. D

These sailing vessels coming in there to take on a cargo of lumber or timber, they were usually in port pretty near thirty days, from the time they arrived until the time they left here. That business was a big factor to Biloxi's economy. That's the reason why you had these two big stores on the beach, DeJean-Mitchell and Rolf Seeberg Company. The Seeberg and Company didn't do any local business at all, only with the shipping. Each of those stores operated their own tug boats servicing the ships and soliciting the business.

Ms Bulk

About how many boats would you say landed on the Island each day?

Mr. D

Actually there would be between 15 and 25 sailing vessels at Ship Island at all times waiting for cargoes. Lumber and all. I don't think they had more than at any time more than 25 and probably less than 15. At that time before Gulfport was a port practically all the shipping coming into Ship Island was sailing vessels.

Ms Bulk

This continued until about what year? When did Gulfport then take over the shipping?

Mr. D

Gulfport's port was dedicated in [1898]. I think one of my stories covers my father taking me along with him on his tug boat *Georgia* for the dedication of the port of Gulfport. I'm satisfied that's one of the stories in there. As an interesting case [break in tape] I wrote that up as published in the Congressional Record. A lawyer we had here in Biloxi, [E.]M.Barber was employed by Mr. Jones [Capt. Joseph T. Jones an oil millionaire from Pennsylvania]. You see Captain Jones developed the Gulfport harbor at his own expense and then employed Barber who would go before Congress to try to get the government to reimburse him for his expense in developing the Gulfport harbor. It's a ridiculous allegation made by Barber claiming that the G&SI Railroad [Gulf & Ship Island] I believe absolutely controlled the shipping business of Gulfport and that the other railroads wanted to get in there and compete with the G&SI for the business. [A chuckle.] He appealed to Congress to recognize the port as a state port and reimburse Captain Jones so as to let the other railroads come in there and compete for the business which was as far as I know was a ridiculous statement. The business at the port of Gulfport was not controlled by the G&SI or any one railroad. Anyway, Congress did reimburse him to some extent. I don't know how much. [Long pause] Of course that banana business in Gulfport now is a big thing for Gulfport. After the shipping became steamships instead of sailing vessels, they didn't remain in port any length of time either.

Ms. Bulk

I wonder if you would tell us about the shrimp and oystering business, especially how they used to do the shrimping?

Mr. D

As boys we used to catch shrimp for our own use with what we call a brill net with small meshes. You would use it in shallow water you might say and catch shrimp for bait or home use in the Spring and the Fall of the year. The first commercial operations of catching shrimp, the boatmen used about a 24 foot cap rig and 2 big skips and their seines were about 100 fathoms long. They would use one man would be on the bow of the boat when they got into an area where they expected to find shrimp. He would throw a little tri-net which was a little cast net trying to locate enough shrimp to put the seine around. Then when they would locate a school of shrimp, they couldn't put the seine out to take in those shrimp in water over about five foot depth because they had no way other than [tape is blank] working the seine in through their lead line under the heel of the shoe.

Ms. B

Were they actually in the water?

Mr. D

Oh yes. The men went overboard. Yes indeed to pull in the net. There were men on the cork line and men on the lead line working it out. In those days most of the shrimp caught were along the coast off Pointe Aux Chenes beach, that's off from Ocean Springs, or along west beach Biloxi. Of course there were schooners that went into the Louisiana marsh. Now a seine crew was about six men to operate your seine and your boat. The owner of the boat got one share, and each of the crewmen got a share of their catch. When they first started catching shrimp, the factory men or raw dealers did not pay over \$3.50 a barrel for 200 or 210 pounds of shrimp. They allowed 10 pounds for waste in with the shrimp. The 200 pounds was a recognized barrel. Later, when I got in the business, the pretty much standard price for shrimp was \$5.00 a barrel to the freight boat, ice boat, or \$6.00 a barrel to the wharf. I never paid over that price for shrimp. Of course in the Spring of the year, shrimp were scarce, and wharf shrimp we would at times in bidding for a crew's catch, we would bid up a little higher price. In those days, we shipped a lot of shrimp to the New Orleans French Market on consignment on a guaranteed price of about \$10.00 a barrel. It depended on the supply and demand as to the price you would get for your shrimp. For the canning factories for years, \$6.00 to the wharf was the standard price. When we packed shrimp in cans, we made a gross profit of about \$5.00 a barrel. We packed 100 barrels of shrimp in a day with our calculations on our cost sheets, we made a profit of \$500. Today I think they pretty well, maybe I better not ...

Ms. Bulk

Can you estimate how many barrels of shrimp were caught a day, that were brought into the Biloxi port?

Mr. D

I would have to do a little thinking. At one time I had a talk on what shrimp meant to Biloxi and I had an accurate as possible to get the number of barrels of shrimp that were handled in Biloxi in a year and an amount of money that was brought into Biloxi from outside from the sale of shrimp. The shrimp business was a tremendous factor on the economy of Biloxi. You had very little conflict between handling oysters, canned oysters, and canned shrimp because the shrimp season started about the middle of August and went on til at first until it got too cold for men to get overboard which was usually about the middle of October and not later than the first of November. And the boats had gone oystering about the first part of December. Oyster season ran on until April when oysters got what we referred to as milky. They were at a spawn and they got too milky. The only losses you had of canned oysters was when the oysters were too milky. We would usually ship a late pack out as quickly as possible and kept our earlier packed oysters that kept so much better.

Ms. Bulk

How did they catch the oysters, catch is probably not the right word?

Mr. D

Well, at first, you had oyster tongs which was just about you could describe them as two rakes put together on a hinge and they worked them. That method of course is still in use in shallow water. Later they were using dredges which were made up with a tooth bar with a bar of teeth [that included] fourteen, sixteen, eighteen tooth dredges. At one time Lopez DuKate Factory had some steam boats and they had the [capacity] to pack a couple thousand barrels of oysters a day. But 600 or 700 barrels of oysters a day was a nominal pack for most of the factories. In the days when Mississippi prohibited the use of power in dredging for oysters, we always had plenty of oysters. Speaking for my own business, about fifty percent of our catch of oysters was from Mississippi reefs and about fifty percent from Louisiana reefs. Louisiana permitted power dredging, and they opened the season earlier than Mississippi did. Now, Mississippi permits power dredging so you don't have any more sailing schooners.

Ms. Bulk

Where were some of the best beds for oystering around here?

Mr. D

The natural reefs in the State of Mississippi were Pass Christian Reef, Pass Marianne, Cat Island Channel and Waveland. Those were your natural reefs for Mississippi. And of course you had closed grounds you might say to dredging on the inside waters, the shallow waters, in front of Pass Christian and Bay St Louis as well as Biloxi and Biloxi Bay out in front was closed to any dredging only permitting tonging of oysters. They were mostly used for bulk shipments. Even Bayou Graveline, you could

grow a lot of oysters in Bayou Graveline which was privately owned. I think it's public now. But it was privately owned in those days. The Seafood Commission required us to bed unless we paid a severance a tax to the state a barrel and also to Louisiana for oysters taken out of Louisiana. We had to bed a certain percentage of the oyster shells back on the Mississippi reefs. In Louisiana, you license a number of boats based on the number of acres of leased oyster bottoms. If you leased ten acres, you were permitted five boats. If you leased one hundred acres, you were permitted ten times that in boats. But most of it you operated not over fifteen or twenty boats in Louisiana waters. Then of course when you got ready to bed the shells after the season was over, you had to send the shells on your own boats to Louisiana to bed on your oyster bottoms. The inspectors of the Seafood Commission in Louisiana told you where to bed the oysters, where to bed the shells. The same thing in Mississippi. You had to bed the shells on your own boats and your own crews out on the Mississippi reefs. And they were told where to put [the shells] under the supervision of one of the Seafood Commission inspectors. And we always had plenty of oysters. Now in shrimp I was telling you the operation of the seines. Later on, the otter trawl became more in use. Well I better get back on what I was first telling you the manner of catching shrimp. Men getting overboard and pulling the seines in. A Mr. Yancey patented a system of rollers that enabled the seines to operate in deeper water. They would hook the lead line into these rollers and the men stood in skiffs instead of getting overboard to haul the seines in. So they could operate in ten to twelve feet of water. That proved beneficial to the boatmen. Later the otter trawl became in use. Then they eliminated the schooners altogether and used strictly power boats to pull the trawls. The trawls, I'm trying to describe, were made with a bag and the ends of the trawls you attached boards that you played out attached to ropes from the stern of the power boat. In the operation, the boards would go to the bottom and your trawl [tape runs out] The lead line of your trawl dragged on the bottom. Of course the top had opened up and the shrimp went back into bag of your trawl. There was no limit you might say to the size of trawls. Some of the larger boats even used two trawls that they operated from riggings from the sides of their power boats. But most of them were from the individual boat. That, you might say, did away altogether with the seines after the trawls became in general use. There was no further use of seines.

Ms. Bulk

You had mentioned something about the canning companies paid their employees in these tokens. Would you explain how this worked?

Mr. D

In the early days, the shrimp nickel was a popular coin. You paid for the picking the shrimp. [Too much background noise to understand Mr. D] ... to pay to the shrimp pickers. One girl would sit at a window to pay the pickers off. The picked shrimp to the window and along side that was a big vat. As you paid them they were dumped into this vat where they were thoroughly washed and then the blanching process. They were taken

from there in baskets and blanched for about ten minutes. And then they would be taken from there and put on conveyers that carried the shrimp on to your closing machines. You had girls on each side of the conveyer belt picking those pieces of shrimp .?. off that. As the shrimp came to the girls that take shrimp from the conveyer belt putting into can .?. In wet pack shrimp you add the salt brine on your conveyer [unintelligible, so much background noise] ... water into each can and [blank space on tape]

Ms. Bulk

Mr. Desporte, would you continue telling about the process for canning shrimp from 1917 to 1929 when you were in the canning business.

Mr. D

You want me to continue?

Ms. Bulk

Right. From the part where it's on the conveyer belt.

Mr. D

[Much background noise!!] ... wet packed shrimp the cans are filled with brine from .?. filled automatically and then they went on to a closing machine closed the cans and then put into crates and put in the blanching process, the sterilization process I should say. The wet pack shrimp were blanched or cooked you might say for ten minutes. Dry packed shrimp were cooked in the process kettles for sixty minutes. They were taken out of there and .?. labeled and shipped out to different parts of the country.

Ms. Bulk

Where did you ship your product?

Mr. D

All over the United States. That's one of .?. the Wholesale Grocers Association in Buffalo, I believe it was. All the wholesale grocers belonged to that association and bought through them. I shipped a lot of stuff up to Minneapolis and St. Paul and that market. But the A&P Tea Company at that time was one of the big buyers of canned shrimp as well as canned oysters.

Ms. Bulk

How did you ship your product, was it by boat or by train, or both?

Mr. D

By train mostly. Shipping to the West Coast to California we'd ship to New Orleans and then from New Orleans they were loaded on steamers. From there on to San Francisco or Los Angeles, different ports by water. Water transportation of course was

the cheapest. And we shipped a lot of canned oysters out there. Our main competition there was Japanese oysters. But speaking of shrimp, now there is a specie of shrimp caught up in the North Pacific waters that are very small shrimp. At that time they were being packed under Gold Dollar Brand, and they were delicious, a wonderful flavor. They really wanted competition with our shrimp because ours were some larger and ... so much better. They were in competition of course. There were plants that were packing those shrimp.

Ms. Bulk

Mr. Desporte, I wonder if you would explain the use of the tokens that the canning companies used [to pay the help]?

Mr. D

In the height of the packing season with both shrimp and oysters, the shrimp nickel was a popular coin used. The banks would run out of nickels, you might say, to supply the canners and the M canners resorted to using tokens which represented five cents. In those days, the most .?. the container of shrimp brought into the window .?. was about two tokens about a dime. Now when I was in the business later we used a lot of quarters instead of nickels because we paid more money for their labor.

Ms. Bulk

What did these tokens look like?

Mr. D

Looked just like the tokens that you see today in circulation, made of aluminium with the imprint of your plant's name on it. One firm had printed on the tokens redeemable at the company's office.

Ms. Bulk

Which plant was this?

Mr. D

E.C. Joullian Packing Company. When the grocers had cashed in a lot of those tokens and the plant, Mr. Joullian, refused to pay, to honor them. But I think he finally did go ahead and pay them. They were in violation of the instructions, they were redeemable in the office. There was no reason Mr. Joullian wasn't in any other business, [he] wasn't in the grocery business I think not. Lopez & Dukate Company, Mr. Lopez was a big merchant and of course making his tokens redeemable at his grocery store ...

Ms. Bulk

Only, in other words the workers had to go to his grocery store.

Mr. D

Had to go there to cash them in. It was only the larger packers like Lopez & Dukate, and Joullian, and Gorenflo, and .?. Canning Company that used tokens.

Ms. Bulk

How much could the average worker make a day?

Mr. D

I tell you .?. raw oysters .?. in the canning business because your labor worked , you didn't work every day. And you didn't work any particular number of hours. You'd start to work very early in the morning. I used to out to my plant before dark in the morning and everybody in the plant would be in operation. The foreman, or superintendent had opened up the plant and proceeded to can the shrimp or oysters whichever they were handling. Of course, I went out later, but the plant was in full operation by the time I'd get there. That was customary in the business. Not that they worked very long because you might say they finished packing, they finished packing shrimp oh anywhere from 10 o'clock to 12 o'clock in the day. You're through with shrimp.

Ms. Bulk

In other words your business depended on what time the shrimp boats came in with their catch and then ...

Mr. D

I'd have my [foreman] phone me at night if he knew, if let him know, if the watchman let him know of any boat. One thing I had to contend with, when some of these bootleggers with a boat load of liquor came into your wharf. We has a perfect setup at our plant. We had a spur track, a sidetrack, a Mississippi Power Company line because we fired our boiler with coal, and coal, you got your coal by carload lots and we had the sidetrack put in there so you could switch the car of coal right along side of the plant. If we had permitted a boat to land with a load of liquor, it was convenient for him to load a car, to have a car spotted there if he was going to come in at night. I understood that if you permitted him to do that you'd find a nice little bunch of cash in an envelope on your desk in the morning when you got there. Well my instructions were to my foreman was that if any boat came there with a load of liquor to unload then to call the police first and then call me afterwards. So we never were bothered with any boat with a load of liquor that wanted to land there.

Ms. Bulk

[Laughter] This was during Prohibition days I imagine. The liquor must have come from the islands, is that right?

Mr. D

A ship would come in from the Gulf [with] a load of liquor and the small boats would go out there and take the liquor off the boat.

Ms. Bulk

Back to the canning factory, how did the workers know when you were in operation or when you weren't?

Mr. D

We'd blow the whistle in the morning. We had a wildcat whistle, every plant had a different whistle. Your workers knew. Of course there wasn't any particular plant that your workers worked at. They worked where ever they wanted to.

Ms. Bulk

So which ever plant had a load of shrimp or oysters in they would blow their whistle and the workers would go there.

Mr. D

Now you had a preference. If we had work and other plants in the area had work the same day, we'd expect our labor to show up at our plant and work at our plant. But if another plant didn't have any work, then they would come in then too. There were no restrictions on that.

Ms. Bulk

How did the whistles differ from each other?

Mr. D

A different signal. You might have a long blast followed by a short blast. Now we had the only wildcat whistle. That brother of mine could .?.

Ms. Bulk

The workers, I understand, lived around the canning plants?

Mr. D

To a large extent, yes. Practically all of your labor, who worked at the canning plants, lived on the bay or near the bay and at the point. When we first went into the oyster business on the front beach, there were a lot of raw oyster openers lived right in the central part of town. But as far as workmen in the canning plants .?. lived in town that worked in the plants. And you separate your black labor from your white labor too.

Ms. Bulk

They worked in a different part of the plant or did they have different jobs?

Mr. D

The same jobs but off to themselves. You wouldn't mix in whites and blacks together.

Ms. Bulk

So you 'd have all your jobs duplicated, one for the black workers and one for the white?

Mr. D

The whole process has changed up so now in oysters canning is packing oysters in cans commonly called cold oysters. Oysters were unloaded into cars, each car would hold about five barrels of oysters. They would run through a steam box and handle three cars at a time. They were steamed and it made it easy to open. Today the plants don't use the steam cars. They're dumped into big vats. They're heated there, in these vats, and then released into water. The oyster shells separate and the oyster floats out of the brine, the oysters float and the shells sink. So you don't have your big areas, your big plant with your tracks in there and your cars on there. You'd work about eight shuckers to each car. You don't have that anymore.

Ms. Bulk

I wonder if you would comment briefly on how the canning industry affected the politics in the area?

Mr. D

The canning business was so big in Biloxi in the early days, you had two factions. You had two banks in Biloxi. Each faction did business with one or the other banks. Certain factory interests were supporters of the Bank of Biloxi. Other factory interests were supporters of The Peoples Bank. Each faction politically would have candidates for your different offices. Of course at that time your government was mayor and aldermanic form of government. You had elections, you had a mayor and nine aldermen, two from each of the four wards and one alderman at-large. And of course you had the clerk, the city clerk was an elected officer and the chief of police and your superintendent of roads, was all elected jobs. Each faction came out with a candidate for each of those positions. You can just imagine the competition taking place. I was reading somewhere where at one time Mr. Glennan and Tom Gleason were candidates for mayor of Biloxi. I think it was the 1890's. Each received 150 votes. It was a tie. So they cut cards as to who would take the office, and Mr. Glennan got the office. Mr. Gleason never did serve as mayor but became a very prominent citizen of Biloxi. He was a photographer. He came through Biloxi as an itinerant photographer about 1894 along in there and then became a very responsible and respected citizen of Biloxi. But in, let's see what year was it, I think around 1900 that the two factions got together and did away with the factionalism and the candidates all ran on one ticket known as the Citizens Ticket. It was either in 1900 or 1903 or 04, something like that.

Ms. Bulk

When the two canning factions got together, who put up the candidate that would run against their candidate?

Mr. D

You could decide yourself whether you wanted to run or not. Back in 1916 when Willy Alma, the city attorney, and Walter Skeet Hunt, a member of the Board of Aldermen from the second ward, called on me and asked me to run for alderman. I told them the only way that I would run if any opposition that came out against me, that they would do the campaigning because if I was going into public office, I didn't want to be under any obligation to anybody. So I was elected without opposition. Anybody who was a qualified elector could simply come out for whatever job he wanted. One time, I was trying to think as to who was running for mayor, that there was one vote decided. I was paid as a member of the Board of Alderman five dollars a month.

Ms. Bulk

How often did you meet?

Mr. D

I remember we got paid once a year, sixty dollars.

Ms. Bulk

How often did the Board of Alderman get together?

Mr. D

We would meet once or twice a month. For a period of time when we revised the tax roles, we met every night for forty nights.

Ms. Bulk

What do you mean revised the tax roles, what were you doing?

Mr. D

Anybody could come before the Board of Aldermen and could explain their objections to the amount of assessment. Then we would decide whether to reduce it or not.

Ms. Bulk

What were some of the other problems that you had to work on as an alderman?

Mr. D

One thing we had were the streets. We put into effect a street tax. Every citizen was required to devote one day a year to work on the streets. In lieu of that, they could

pay three dollars for the employment of somebody to take his place. Of course, most of the people paid the three dollars. During my administration, we motorized the Biloxi Fire Department. Prior to that, it was operated by horse drawn vehicles. That is a sight to see. I remember one alderman, every time he would get drunk, he would pull the fire down on the front street. He'd get the engines down there to see them pump.

Ms. Bulk

Was there a big celebration when you got your first motorized fire engine?

Mr. D

No. The big celebration in Biloxi was on the 19th of September which is Fireman's Parade Day. All the floats were decorated, mostly by the ladies. Each fire department company in different parts of town had the ladies auxillary. They would decorate the floats. There was quite a lot of rivalry you might say in the appearance of the float. Each company had its marshall and each marshall had so many aides. They would gild the hoofs of the horses and braid their manes and tails. A big banner for the marshall and you had a grand marshall over the whole parade. That was a big day in Biloxi, the 19th day of September believe me.

Ms. Bulk

Were the firemen volunteers?

Mr. D

All volunteers. We had one paid employee, each company did. On duty all the time. The rest were volunteers. Of course I don't know how many years now we have had paid departments. That was in the old volunteer days. Those were your real rivalry days you might say.

Ms. Bulk

Were there any other major problems that Biloxi was facing at that time?

Mr. D

Not that I recall. Let's see. In 1900, it was a fabulous year for Biloxi. It was the year of the big fire which started in a little negro restaurant located back of the Kennedy Hotel and facing the L&N [Louisville and Nashville] railroad tracks. The wind was out of the northeast, a pretty heavy wind. The fire department strictly volunteers. There was no way to check that fire you might say. They dynamited buildings to clear space to try to check it. It burned from the L&N Railroad tracks to the beach and covering an area about two blocks wide. Right down Reynoir Street on both sides and Fayard Street over to ..?.. Street. I think there was around 90 buildings destroyed in that fire. The Catholic Church, the rectory, the convent, and Sacred Heart School were all destroyed in that fire. Father Alphonse Kettles who succeeded Father Blanc in 1897 was only here for three

years before the big fire. After the fire, he arranged with the volunteer fire department to say mass in their building situated on the east side of Lameuse Street between Howard Avenue and Washington Street. He also arranged with The Spanish Society for the nuns to conduct Sacred Heart School in their building which was on the southeast corner of Washington and Lameuse just about 150, 200 feet space between the volunteer fire hall and The Spanish Society. And Father Alphonse after he appointed a board of directors, a building committee, to do whatever they could to raise money to rebuild the Catholic Church property. Then he went to Belgium, his native country, to solicit funds from his friends and relatives to rebuild his church property. And that, you might say, the property where the church is we have now. The school that they rebuilt at that time was a frame building and some years later built a brick building and also the convent is an all brick building today but the convent that was rebuilt then was frame. My father and mother had operated a private [boarding] house known as *The Cress Villa* and at that particular time [of the big fire] he apparently had no tenants in the house and papa came home with all of the nuns. They stayed in our home until a new convent was built. That year, Dr. V.A. Nash, a very popular dentist was mayor of Biloxi. Biloxi had the finest streets in the State of Mississippi. They were paved with crushed oyster shells which made a very good street, but the merchants of Howard Avenue didn't like the idea of shell dust blowing in on their stock of goods. So they got together and organized the Biloxi Commercial Club. And through the Biloxi Commercial Club they induced City of Biloxi to pave the business section of Biloxi. They issued bonds in the amount of \$25,000 and Howard Avenue from Fayard Street to Main Street and from Reynoir Street from the railroad back to Howard Avenue was paved with brick. Up to that time, the residents of north Biloxi to come to Biloxi had to come by ferry. The City of Biloxi then issued \$17,000 in bonds and built the first bridge across the bay. Prior to that, the ferry, The Old Sam, was a ferry boat. Along the Biloxi side was at the foot of Reynoir Street. But of course building the bridge did away with the ferry. The bridge was built as a wooden bridge. And today we have a fine bridge of cressote piling and concrete base.

Ms. Bulk

You mentioned the traffic across the bridge was horse drawn carriages, before the days of the automobile?

Mr. D

Oh yes. The first automobile came to Biloxi in the year 1900. You're right about that. It was before the days of the automobile. The first automobile was brought to Biloxi by Frank Shaffer. His son-in-law, no, brother-in-law operated it as a public conveyance. It was the only automobile in town.

Ms. Bulk

For how long? When did you start getting more automobiles here?

Mr. D

About 1900. Just a short while after that. It wasn't long after that that automobiles started coming in here because Ed Brady bought one of the first Fords. It was built, I think, in Memphis, Tennessee. When he came to Biloxi, he came in his automobile. It wasn't a matter of two or three years or so before automobiles started coming in.

Ms. Bulk

Did you have to be wealthy to own an automobile?

Mr. D

No. Automobiles were cheap. In fact along about 1910, I guess, my brother and self had been in the machine shop business, we were both machinists consolidated with the .? and the Biloxi Machine Works. One day a man drove up in front with a conveyance he called an automobile made by the Ford Automobile Company. All we had to do to get the agency was to buy one of them which cost about three hundred, three hundred and fifty dollars. We looked the thing over, and being mechanics, we decided it was too frail and wouldn't stand up. So we turned it down.

Ms. Bulk

Was this the old Model-A Ford?

Mr. D

Ye'll. Model-A. No. Model-T. Model-T, chain drive. We turned down the Ford agency, the Biloxi Machine Works. [Followed by a chuckle.]

Ms. Bulk

Would you tell me a little about the schooling here in Biloxi in those days?

Mr. D

I told you how Biloxi got its first public school didn't I?

Ms. Bulk

No.

Mr. D

The first public school building was, I better not put that in writing.

Ms. Bulk

What schools were in existence in Biloxi going back to around 1900?

Mr. D

We had Miss Austin's private school on Nixon Street. I'm satisfied that Mrs.

Austin came to Biloxi to teach mathematics in Roudebush's College in 1893. I know you got a story on Roudebush College. The Seacoast Academy. After they folded, then Mrs. Austin started a private school. Of course we had the Sacred Heart School, the Catholic School. I started school for years it seems before that. Mrs. Austin's private school and of course you had your public schools. I don't know when the first school was built. I imagine in the early 1800's.

Ms. Bulk

Was there a high school in the area?

Mr. D

The Howards had promised Biloxi if they was elected their candidate for mayor of Biloxi that they would give Biloxi a school building. Their candidate was Captain Walker. He was elected and the Howards gave Biloxi the first, supposed to be high school. It was built on Main Street and the railroad. Schools only operated then to the 9th grade. For two or three years after that each year they looked like they added another class to the school. They started in that school building in the 4th grade. They had other primary schools. Mr. Lopez gave a school building on Porter Avenue. Mr. Dukate gave a school building it was down at the Point. Mr. Gorenflo gave a school building on Back Bay. Those were all public schools. Later, those plain buildings were done away with and the city of Biloxi built the schools then, brick buildings. They gave them the names of the doners of the original schools. The Dukate School, the Lopez School and the Gorenflo School. [The two Howards, Harry T. and Frank T.]

Ms. Bulk

These original schools included what grades, the original frame school houses?

Mr. D

I really don't remember. I was just thinking myself when I first went to Sister School, Sacred Heart School, until I made my first communion, then went to Mrs. Austin's School, a private school. It seems like I went to public school then in the building that the Howards gave looked upon as the high school. It seems to me I started in there in the 4th grade. That school went up to the 9th grade. I quit school when I finished the 8th grade. Later I went to George Bemis College. [Obituary noted Draughans Business College, New Orleans.]

Ms. Bulk

After a student finished the 9th grade, did they have to leave this area if they wanted any higher education?

Mr. D

There were no local schools higher than that.

Ms. Bulk

Where would the nearest college be?

Mr. D

That was before you had the University of South Mississippi in Hattiesburg. That would be Columbus I guess. Rotterbush College, the Seacoast Academy. I don't remember how long I ... I started school in 1893. They started building in 1892. Well I wasn't 5 years old in 1893. But my eldest sister ... his mother went to that school. I don't think my other sisters went to Rotterbush, the Seacoast Academy. We always referred to it as Rotterbush's College. Because after I came along then, Dr. [H.M.] Folkes operated a sanitarium, used the same buildings that the colleges used.

Ms. Bulk

How many classrooms were there in Miss Austin's school or were you all together in the classroom, all the different ages?

Mr. D

In that school building, there were five classrooms. It was a two story building, and there were two on the first floor, and two on the second floor, and another one in the front part of the building taught by the assistant superintendent you might say. That was the 9th grade. I must have started public school later than the 4th grade, it must have been 5th grade. That's 6th, 7th, 8th, ye'll. Mrs. Armstrong was my teacher. In Mrs. Austin's school [unintelligible].

Ms. Bulk

What subjects were taught in the school?

Mr. D

The regular, nothing special.

Ms. Bulk

Just reading and writing and arithmetic?

Mr. D

Yes.

Ms. Bulk

Did you have any history or geography?

Mr. D

Of course we had geography and history, sure. Reading, writing and arithmetic. I remember in 8th grade we used to have debates. Edna Holley who was the dean, oh she taught pretty near every young man in Biloxi

The tape runs out at this point.

Addendum

Further explanation of Victor Desporte's blockade running can be found in *The Coast of Mississippi: Its Past and Progress* produced by Hancock Bank, 1982, p.41. More information on the Desporte family is available in a family file and an extensive oral history interview with Mr. Desporte, both located in the local history section of the Biloxi Public Library, Lameuse Street.

Brail net was pronounced locally *brill* net. An oyster dredge which is an iron rake and net dragged over oyster beds is locally referred to as an oyster *drudge*.

There is some confusion over the boy who fell overboard in Mobile and pulled to safety by a Union soldier. It may have been Ernest Desporte, Sr who was rescued. Pulled out of the water by his hair! According to a note in the family file.

RJS

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I hereby give and grant to Gulf Islands National Seashore as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Seashore shall determine the tape recordings and their contents listed below.

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October 22, 1973
Date of Agreement

Gulf Coast and Ship Island from Civil War to early 1900's
Subject of Tape(s)