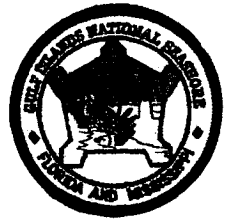




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Tales of Ship Island

The Skrmetta Family

September 26, 1999

Interview by Park Ranger Mike Hobbs with
Capt. Pete Skrmetta, his oldest son, Louis
Skrmetta, and his cousin, Peter V. Skrmetta.

Transcribed by Robert Spilsbury
Layout by Kim Bennett

Tales of Ship Island The Skrmetta Family

A presentation September 26, 1999 at the Visitor's Center auditorium, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Ocean Springs, MS as a part of the Sunday afternoon series of programs celebrating the 300th anniversary of the French arrival on the Gulf coast in the year 1699. Participants include Capt. Peter Skrmetta (CP), Louis Skrmetta, and Peter V. Skrmetta (PV), Mike Hobbs, host.

Transcribed from audio tape by Robert J. Spilsbury, a volunteer at Gulf Islands National Seashore.

After some introductory remarks concerning the tricentennial program at the park, Mike began the program by centering remarks on the beginnings of the Skrmetta family on the Gulf Coast.

Mike Lots of history, some sad, some very happy ... we're happy to bring some folks whose family has been around on the island for about 75 years, is that what we decided?

Louis 1926

Mike 1926 Ok We're talking about when the First Captain Pete went out in 1926 ... the original Captain Pete came from the old country [Croatia]. I'm going to ask Louis and Captain Peter to tell us about that. We're also going to ask you folks to introduce this gentleman beside Captain Pete which is the other Captain Pete, Peter V. Skrmetta, right ...

Together Right.

Mike ... who worked on the island several years ago working for Captain Pete's father for the grand total I'm told of 3 dollars a week. [Laughter]

CP Seven days a week. [Laughter]

Mike Seven days a week. And I believe that was before the wage and hours board was around, right?

CP Right.

Mike These folks have had an interesting time on the barrier islands and I think all that can have fantasies one time or another about living on a barrier island, what it must be like, we'll they've done it, they supported a family for a number of years here

on

the Gulf Coast. And what's interesting, along with the story of the family, we're going to let them represent one period of history when a lot of new immigrants came to the Gulf Coast around the turn of the century. Now during the next month, the month of October, we're going to try and have some programs talking about different folks. We hope to have some more of the Slavic families around come talk to us about times in the old days, but we're going to start off with the Skrmetta family. And if you will help me out, Louis, and Captain Pete, I'd like to give you folks a chance to understand how the Skrmettas wound up on Ship Island. Is that fair enough? Louis, you start off.

Louis Well, of course I wasn't around at the time, Captain Pete wasn't there either, we're talking 1920's, during the tourism boom in the 1920's, post World War I, prosperity on the coast. The fishing industry, the shrimping industry was at its peak. Biloxi rivaled Baltimore for oyster production and seafood production. People had a lot of money. At the same time you had the tourism boom, the land boom of Florida, people had money, they were buying property. One of the local hotel owners, Colonel, I believe it's Anderson, I think his name was, decided to build, who owned the Buena Vista Hotel, had just built the Buena Vista, decided to open a speakeasy out on [the] Isle of Caprice, which at the time was Dog Island, renamed it Isle of Caprice. I know there are some old timers in this audience that can correct me. So if I'm telling you something wrong, feel free at any time to step in and adjust my story 'cause I'm hearing from people like Jake Mladinich and other folks in the audience. I'm hearing stuff secondhand, you heard it firsthand. Now Captain Pete, you need to correct me too, because you know I talk a lot, you need to stop me once in awhile and interject. [Laughter]. I understand that Mr Anderson and the other family that owned the island, Jake, and I can't think of the owners, who owned the island ... was it ...

Audience [Walter] "Skeet" Hunt.

Louis The Hunts. I don't know. That's a good question to ask. I don't know how my grandfather was chosen or hired to run people out to Isle of Caprice. Do you know how he was chosen?

CP Well, around the turn of the century, they needed men to run boats for the seafood industry. Sailing schooners didn't have any engines in those days. They would shrimp during the winter. They didn't shrimp in the summer time because of refrigeration, and they didn't shrimp at night. Only when the weather was cool. During the summer, he would clean his shrimp boat up and run to the islands. He first started running to the Isle of Capri, in, I understand, in 1928. He bought a little part of the east end of Ship Island and started running to the east end in 1933. He started running down to the old fort. The American Legion, Judge Maples in Gulfport was buying up the island, the old fort, there wasn't anything there, and he wanted my father to start running to the fort. So he told Judge Maples if he would give him a lease, the only one carrying passengers for hire to

Ship Island, he would give him his part of the island. Then he started running down to the fort I understand around 1933. I was born in 1930. What year was you born?

PV 1917.

CP 1917. Now you told me about a hurricane I think was in 1917. He was out shrimping in the marsh, and he had to cut the masts out of the schooner, tie up to oak trees, and he told me that he saved 35 people. He took them off the roofs of houses.

Mike And when he first came to this country, he didn't speak English, did he?

CP I don't think any of them spoke much English. Came from Croatia. Jake's father also. He came around the same time, didn't he Jake? [Jake Mladinich, who was in the audience.]

Jake Came off the Island of Brac in the City of [unintelligible] which was a seafood area in the Adriatic.

Louis Boat building, seafood expertise. That's how the Croatians wound up here by the way. And the story goes, and Captain Pete you might want to tell the story about how Mr Lopez I think was the factory owner who met one of the first Croatian arrivals ...

CP It was Nick Skrmetta, it was Olivia Marvar's father. He was one of the first who came from our area. That's what I understand. He sent and got five of his cousins. One of them was my father, one of them was Steve M. Sekul. I can't remember the other three names. They brought all their families over.

Louis To work for Mr Lopez in his factories [oysters,shrimp]. Was it Lopez?

CP It was Nick Skrmetta.

Louis The story goes that this Croatian came from New Orleans on a schooner and took the trolley over to Biloxi and ran into Mr Lopez on the beach at one of the trolley stops.

CP Right.

Louis And Mr Lopez couldn't understand the language that this gentleman was speaking and some how, they talked, they spoke about three languages until I think they got into Italian and they could communicate a little bit. He befriended Mr Lopez, is that the story?

CP Right up by the lighthouse there was a brown brick apartment building there, right

up to the west, they had a little place where you get out of the sun, a pavilion. He would ride the streetcar during the daytime, at night he would get off. Mr Lopez drove up in the horse and buggy with his wife and children, spoke to him in one language, didn't understand, they speak about four or five different languages. Spoke to him in Spanish, he answered him, invited him out to his home. And when he went to work for him, he said you work like ten men. Got any anybody else that works like you? I can get you all you want. So he sent over and got my father and four of the cousins.

Mike And your family comes from the Dalmatian Coast?

CP Yes. Same place as Jake's father. Around Brac.

Louis Islands on the Adriatic, just across from Italy.

Mike I think most of you know the Isle of Capri or the Isle of Caprice (which ever it is, there was some discussion about that) was a resort back there in the 1920's on a small island that popped up out of the Gulf of Mexico in the late 20's, and then by the late 30's had disappeared completely. It started to wash away before that, but one time there was quite a complex of buildings out there if you ever see the photographs including a few places which had gambling devices. Believe it or not.

There's also a story of a very fast boat anchored off shore which made runs from Cuba. We'll guess what the cargo was. [Someone in the audience said rum.] Was the island disappearing, is that the reason why your father moved from that island over to East Ship Island?

CP I think it was if I understand.

Louis I think there was a series of storms that washed the island away, and I heard that the people were picking the sea oats. They were picking the vegetation. Now that's something I don't think contributed totally to it, but I believe it sure didn't help the erosion problem on the island.

Question from audience Tell us where Croatia is located.

Louis It's on the west coast of the Yugoslavian peninsula, former Yugoslavia. It's centrally located directly across from the center of Italy. East of Italy. Croatia is not an island, but it has a series of islands like the Greek islands. And off of the City of Split, there's an island called Brac. From that island came the Sekuls, Pitalos, Skrmettas, Barhanovichs, Mladinichs, I can't think, hundreds of them. From that one island, and they came to Biloxi.

Mike Let me say if anyone has a question, feel free to just jump right in. This is very informal. If I get to none of these questions on this pad, that's quite alright.

We've

done these programs before with the Stone family who ran the Ship Island lighthouse. If everyone wants to ask questions, that's fine. I'll sit back and be quiet. Otherwise you'll have to listen to me. Yes, ma'am.

Question The island that you were talking about that had a lot of buildings and washed away, are there remnants of the ... can people scuba-dive now?

Louis Yes. It's a shallow shoal area. It's known on the charts as Dog Keys Pass. They went back to the original name, Dog Island, Dog Keys Pass. It's between East Ship Island and Horn. Very shallow. On stormy days you can see the surf breaks over it. It's that shallow. I understand the Hunt family still owns the property rights or the mineral rights or something. They pay taxes on it. Hopefully one day it will come back, and the park service will have to buy it from them. [Laughter]

Mike Captain Pete, what's your earliest memory out there on Ship Island?

CP Well, one of the boats ... when I was about seven years old I used to ride out on the Pan American Clipper with my father. No particular memory.

Mike Did you work right away?

CP Right.

Louis On the Pan American Clipper, you need to tell the folks of how the boat was built, the story about it.

CP My father was employed with one of his cousins in the Marvar family and they had built the boat here ... they had the contract to run to the island with their particular boat.

Louis This was John Marvar, Sr.

CP It was probably built in '36.

Louis The boat was built in Biloxi on the beach at Marvar factory by Mr John Tosch.

CP Built in Tosch. Yes. I think it was close to De Jean. Isn't that right, Jake?

Jake Yes. It was in between De Jean and the Mladinich factory.

CP Right.

Question Is that the boat that's in operation today?

Louis Boat's still in operation.

Question When was it built?

Louis 1937. But you have to understand something. I tell people that in 1986 we completely put a new bottom on this boat. Two new engines and a new bottom. Captain Pete didn't want to give it up. I tried to talk him out of it, but we still have it. It still runs and the most reliable boat in the fleet by the way.

Question What's its length?

Louis Sixty-five feet long. It carries 200 people. It's designed from a Biloxi oyster boat, a traditional Biloxi lugger. You can load it down with a tremendous amount of oysters and the boat doesn't draw very much water. They based this design ...

CP Well it never did dredge any oysters, but my father used to shrimp with it during the winter. Then he would clean it up during the summer and run to the island.

Question It didn't have a mast and sail on it?

CP No. In those days ...

Louis Pretty much gone to power by the late 30's. But the original boat was a Biloxi schooner. The original Pan American ...

CP ... the one before this ...

Louis ... was a schooner, converted, motorized in the 20's.

Question What was the boat out of Gulfport? Sun Downer [Sun Down] or something like that?

Louis Yeh. There were a couple of boats back in the ...

CP Les Estrada [phonetic spelling from the tape not the proper spelling] Cavalier.

Louis ... there were several boats. There were other people who were running to Ship Island. There were people out of Gulfport running boats ...

Question On excursion?

Louis Yes sir. But the thing was every time you hit a hurricane, there went the pier. Nobody wanted anything to do with the island. My dad and my grandfather were the only ones to put up the money to build the dock back. They had an agreement with the American Legion. And the Legion said sure, fine with us.

And we kept doing it over the years. I remember 30 years ago, a brand new building destroyed by Hurricane Camille. Forty thousand dollars in cash money destroyed. No insurance, no anything. Dock was gone, and Captain Pete rebuilt the dock with the Pan American Clipper and an old engineer. Two old guys and this boat.

CP We didn't have any money to hire drag lines. So I went up north of Ocean Springs to an old saw mill and got them to cut all the lumber for the dock. Eight hundred foot long. The dock and the labor and material cost \$7600.

Louis Right after ... I might be jumping a little into the future with the Park Service, but right after Hurricane Camille, the Park Service started to show an interest in the barrier islands. It was 1971 that Ship Island was purchased by the Federal Government and it became a national seashore. And that was an interesting time. I'm old enough to remember that because the family, my uncle who is not here today, Jimmy, was running a boat out of Biloxi, and my dad was running the boat out of Gulfport at the time. I remember the discussion at the kitchen table about what are we going to do now. The government has bought Ship Island. [Laughter]

Some one in the audience says for one dollar.

Louis And I remember the first thing the Park Service did when they came on the Pan-American Clipper. We used to have a juke box on the boat, it was a tradition. There was always dancing and music on the Skrmetta's boats. The first thing the Park Ranger said, "that juke box has got to go". [Laughter] I thought man, these people are tough. [Louder laughter] We're in for it now. But after about five years of kind a not knowing what to do with the Skrmetta family, the Park Service said, "you know you guys do a good job, we're going to adjust the schedule, and you know make some modifications to it. Captain Pete and the crew is going to have to start wearing uniforms. You know, gonna to make it a little more of a Park Service Concession and we're going to try you on a five year permit." So we worked with them for five years, and after a five year trial period, we bid on the contract, and that's how its been since. Since 1971.

Mike I should say the first time I got on one of the ferry boats out of Biloxi things had loosened up because I stepped on board the boat as a volunteer and over in the corner near the engine hatch was a PacMan machine. [Laughter] Peter, do you remember very much from, say, when you were working for Captain Pete?

CP You want to tell them about all that big money you made when you worked for my father? [Much laughter]

PV That's where I got my money from that I got right now, three dollars a week. Seven days a week.

Mike What were you doing out there?

PV The best part about it I hollared my lungs out.

Louis He was the promotion man. The promoter.

PV I had one of them big ...

Louis Megahorns. Megaphones.

PV I went to each hotel. Started down at one end at the Riviera Hotel, the Biloxi Hotel ...

CP The Tiboli, Buena Vista, White House ...

PV White House. No, got to the Biloxi Hotel before the White House. Then the White House was the last stop.

CP He used to advertise on the beach. He had a big horn out of an automobile.

PV The boat used to stop at each one of them to pick up the passengers.

CP He'd go into a place where people was eating, and what would you tell them?

PV I'd tell them in a nice way, can I have your attention for just a few moments? And I'd tell them all about what I knew them days.

CP One man asked him what about the mosquitos over there?

PV [Peter V laughs] You didn't have to mention that. [Much laughter]

CP He said they never had a single mosquito on the island [much more laughter]. 'Cause they was all married and had big families. [More laughter]

PV He said heh, buddy, never mind all that stuff, I've been on the island. Mosquitos galore out there. I said I'm sorry, but there's not a mosquito out there. He said don't tell me, I was out there yesterday. I'll still tell you, there's not a [single] mosquito out there. They're all married and got children. [Laughter] People didn't stop eating you know, just listened to all that bull.

Mike This was in the 1930's?

CP What year was that about?

PV Oh ...

CP How old was you then? About fifteen?

PV About fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Some where in there.

Louis See the boat used to ...

PV I'm older than the hills right now.

CP He wasn't making enough money so he went to work for his grandpaw, Pitalo's Hardware. And he was making ten dollars a week. He said grandpaw I'm getting married. How about giving me a raise? He said when you come back off your honeymoon, I'll give you a raise. So he went to New Orleans. When he came back, your grandpaw gave you a fifty cent raise? [Laughter]

PV In an envelope \$10.50. I said bye-bye. [Laughter] That's when I went to work with Mike Sekul.

CP He went to dredge oysters making that easy money. [Moans] You remember Jake's daddy, had the Winchester, right Jake?

Jake Yes sir.

PV I remember his daddy better than he does. [Much laughter]

Mike You folks in the audience may find it interesting that today the boats going out to Ship Island dock leave from Gulfport Small Craft Harbor from one point. But back in the 30's, during the beginning, the Pan American Clipper went from each dock at each hotel. This was way before highway 90 became four lanes, and after Peter here would go from eating establishment to eating establishment using his megaphone calling customers come on down to the waterfront, the ferry boat would come by next, is that correct?

CP Yes. You see what would happen, the front of the [hotel] faced the railroad track in those days. Very few people had an automobile, they used to come by train. New Orleans. Mobile. And my father would go to each hotel, go to the White House, the Biloxi Hotel, Buena Vista, Riviera Hotel, you know, and when he came back from the island, let the people off at each hotel.

Mike And there was always music on board.

Louis The story I hear from Ethel Stone, who was the lighthouse keepers daughter, when she was a little girl, they could hear the Pan American coming from Biloxi because the wind would be south-east wind would be blowing across the island. You knew the Pan American was out there.

Mike Would this be a jazz band?

Louis I think they even had tap dancers on the boat that would tap for money, according to Captain Pete. Or maybe you can tell us about that?

PV What's that?

Louis About the tap dancers they had on the boat, I understand that there was some kids ...

CP Two little black boys used to dance and they would throw them money by the juke box.

PV All you could see though was nickels and pennies.

CP My daddy used to love to dance all the time. He wouldn't go home, he'd go out dancing all night. My mother used to bring him his lunch every day when the boat would come in, and she caught him dancing with some woman, and she threw all his lunch overboard. [Much laughter]

Louis We should talk about his sisters, the family, they were a big part of it.

Mike You introduce your sisters?

Louis We need to talk about my grandmother and my dad's sisters because they were a major part of the business. My Aunt Genevieve just happens to be here, one of the younger daughters, is here today. Would you stand up?

CP Stand up Genny.

Louis Very beautiful still.

CP A good looking woman.

Louis But the girls all had a role in the business. My grandfather ran the boat, but my aunts and my grandmother you know would manage the island. I remember as a little boy, my first memories of Ship Island was staying on the island at night with

my aunts. And when everybody left, they would lay out the bed rolls on the picnic tables. And they'd shut down this old two-cylinder diesel engine and that would be the power on the island. And it would be pitch black. I don't think I ever remember anything being that dark before 'cause I was a city boy. I'd never been around anything like that. They would light an old kerosene lantern. That thing ... that's about it. It was an experience for me 'cause we're talking like 1960, during that time, '59.

CP Your granddad had some beautiful cabins out there. [Some chuckles]

Louis They had overnight facilities on the island. [Sly laughter] The place was always, the place was always ...

CP See my father ...

Louis Hurricane after hurricane would destroy the building. They would patch it back up. It wasn't exactly a thing of beauty, but it was great. People loved it. People went out there and enjoyed it.

CP My father used to be kind of rough. He treated everyone like he would his family. So many came out there dressed up in a nice suit and his wife. They thought they was going to Hawaii. [Laughter] And up to the bar, he went a and got that ice tray out of the ice box, slammed it on the counter, and made 'em, said I'd like a Tom Collins. He mixed it. They said this is not a Tom Collins. So he tasted it. It is a Tom Collins. Treat everybody like his own family. [Some laughter]

Louis They sold whiskey on the island. This was back when Mississippi was dry but the coast wasn't. Everybody sold packaged liquor. Even little Henrietta's, my aunt's store over here in Gulfport sold whiskey. It was common, Ocean Springs here.

CP Most of the places had slot machines in the grocery stores.

Louis Yeh. Yeh. One- armed bandits were everywhere.

From the audience. In fact you had slot machines on the Pan American Clipper.

Louis Yeh. Yeh.

From the audience. They had slot machines at the Friendship House. I used to be a bell hop at the Edgewater.

PV I can tell you folks that will make you laugh more than that. My Uncle Pete, his dad was back of the bar one day and this soldier from Keesler Field, you know he come out on the boat. He wanted a sandwich with a pickle. So my uncle went to the refrigerator, had a little ice box, they called it a refrigerator and he got a jar out. You know all you women especially how hard and tight them caps ... You can't hardly get them out of the jar. So he couldn't find no fork so he took his finger like that and started digging in there and he finally got that pickle out of the jar. The soldier from Keesler Field said Captain Pete, you expect me to eat that? He said, hell, if you don't eat it I will. I can't throw it away. [Laughter]

Mike Did the inspection department come out there very often? [Laughter]

Louis It was a pretty rough place too because the shrimp boats would all gather around the island in the summer time. You always had shrimp boats anchored around Ship Island. It got kind of rough ...

CP Before the Park Service took over, the police wouldn't go out there. So I was a religious person, you know, I had to stay out there and run the place for my father when he was running the boat. In those days you didn't see any boats.

Louis Except for the fishermen, the shrimpers.

CP Any rough characters, one time in particular, a boat pulled up, everyone was gone, came up to the bar. And he talking amongst themselves, you can do anything you want out here. The police won't come out here. So one of these tough guys told his buddy, said you think you can whip that big guy behind the counter? I was stacking soft drink. Said give me a half pint of Seagrams Seven. I put it up there. You ever see that "Hulk" on TV? Whenever I get mad I got super-human strength. Give me a half pint of Seagrams Seven. I put it up there. Said you big ape, I ought to slap you between the eyes. I didn't know I was that fast. I came up over the counter and grabbed two of them and threw them through the screen door. I went back to get the other one. He took off. They must have said let's get away from this wild man. [Laughter] Cursed him out. The old man taught me how to curse. [Laughter] Don't never let me catch you back on this island, I'll kill all of you. [More laughter]

Louis It was a pretty rough place.

CP There was always something going on.

Louis There were always fights. I remember fights in the 60's.

CP Had to take a gun away from one man wanted to shoot another. These Cajuns from Louisiana would come down with the shrimp boats and anchor. They never gave us much trouble coming in and drink beer. There was always something going on.

Mike Can you talk about Aunt Mary?

Louis Oh yeh. We need to talk about Aunt Mary.

From the audience. She was our security. [Laughter]

Mike Aunt Mary is not here today, but if you ever go over to the boat dock, go into the gift shop. That's the only plug I'll give today.

Louis She's still working. Still working.

Mike And as I understand it, she was security on Ship Island. I was always told she walked around with a meat cleaver, but ...

Louis Mike, Mike, that didn't happen unless she had problems, and it was a butcher knife. [Laughter]

Mike Tell them how she would use the butcher knife.

Louis That's just a story I always heard about my aunt. We always have problems with private boats getting in the way of excursion boats. To this day, we still have to fight these know-it-all characters from New Orleans with a big yacht, "I pay taxes, I'm docking my boat here. We're not moving!" Today the Park Service will say you got to move or you're going to get a fine. And they move. But back then, every once in awhile you get somebody that didn't want to move. My aunt apparently was pretty upset about them not moving. The Pan American Clipper was going to arrive in a few minutes with a bunch of people. So she went back down to the restaurant. And these guys got off their boat and walked up the beach by the way. She went back in the restaurant and got her butcher knife and just cut their bow line. That boat went drifting off [laughter] ... So you didn't have to worry about them any more. The boat docked, people got off and they didn't want any trouble after the boat arrived.

Mike Was the island always used continuously through the years since 19 what 33, did it ever close down, did it close down during World War II?

CP Yes. Second World War. The military was on the island guarding the beaches. They has submarines right out in the Gulf sinking ships.

Louis Cat Island. Horn Island. I think all the islands had military ...

CP And Cat Island, that's where they trained the dogs ...

Louis The Japanese soldiers ...

CP ... the war dogs.

Mike The Nisei, if you are not familiar with it, there was a top secret project on Ship Island during the war. A friend of President Roosevelt's suggested they train dogs to detect the enemy when American soldiers go into the South Pacific. So dogs were recruited from all the country and brought to kennels on Cat Island. And of course once they are on Cat Island, they had to have some one to follow, a scent, so they recruited members of the 442nd Combat Team which was training at Camp Shelby. These were Japanese Americans from the West Coast as well as Hawaii. So a select group of these gentlemen went out to stay on Ship Island and would take a small boat over to Cat Island, run through the woods, and have dogs chase them. [Laughter] You know today we have dogs

who do this for the military as well as the police department. But there were some bugs along the way, if I can mention this. Some where along the training process I understand that they discovered you know these dogs being trained to detect Japanese in the jungle, but who were they following? They were not Japanese, they were Japanese-Americans. Of course, what do Japanese-Americans eat? American food. They had to revise the program a little bit there. One thing we briefly talked about were hurricanes. And there have been plenty of them here on the Gulf coast. You mentioned the one in 1917, do you have memories of the hurricane in '47 which is one remembers before Camille.

CP Jake remembers it good. His father's boat was on top of one of those canneries down there, wasn't it Jake?

Jake Yes it was, the '47 hurricane.

CP Yep, 1947. The water came up in our house about 5 foot.

PV I had a Winn Dixie grocery store in front of boss's factory over there. We picked up about 20 cans of, I don't know what they was, but they was going in my yard. And that's two blocks off the beach.

Louis The '47 hurricane was pretty powerful. A lot of water. What happened to the island? Do you remember the island?

PV We went to 3 spots before we got it settled. We started out at my brother-in-law's house. I (unintelligible) started out at my daughter's house. She's here somewhere.

His daughter. That was Camille. That wasn't '47. [Laughter]

PV That wasn't '47? The '47 was at Nick's house. My brother-in-law, Nick. Nick Misko. By the way my wife's over there.

CP They had to cut a hole in the roof, the water was coming up. Right? But you remember Judge Week and his wife used to live on the beach across from De Jean's cannery. During the '47 hurricane, I took a wooden skiff and went down there and took him and his wife out of the house and brought them to Howard #2 school. That's when the water was coming up.

Louis This is off Point Cadet by the way. It's always under water during hurricanes.

CP Especially where we lived. It's low.

Mike Was there anyone out at Ship Island at that time?

CP Yeh. You had the people that stayed at the lighthouse during the '47 hurricane.

A man by the name, the lighthouse keeper, Brooks.

Mike They evacuated the lighthouse keeper's house and went to the tower?

CP They went up into the lighthouse. That's what saved them.

Mike Anyone inside the fort?

CP No, there wasn't anyone at the fort at that time. They had a horse inside the fort. I remember that when the water came up, you can see on the stair well, where he was trying to climb up.

Question How high up did the water get at the fort?

Louis For the '47 hurricane? I think about half way up the ...

CP I think Camille got high. There was two men in the fort during Camille. And the waves were washing over the fort.

Louis You need to tell them the story about that because I remember the day we went out. We tried to pick these guys. We said come on in, it's going to be bad. They wouldn't come in. My dad tried to talk them into it. But no, we're going to stay. Tell them that story. That's kind of interesting.

CP Made Christians out of them. [Much laughter] I tried to get them to go to church. They wouldn't listen to me. Before the hurricane. But after that ...

Louis They were carrying Bibles. [Laughter]

CP They was hanging on to the cannon.

Louis Captain Pete says that, but actually they stayed in the powder room on top.

CP There are two powder rooms on top of the fort.

Louis Near the cannons.

CP North and south side. Now I stayed up in a few small hurricanes. There was an old man that stayed out there that didn't want to leave the island. And the crash boats came out to pick everybody up just before the hurricane. He said me and Pete will stay out here. Jimmy, you and the rest of them go on in. So I had to stay with the old man. I wouldn't leave him by himself. But we stayed up in the powder room. You can watch the dock wash away, the wind blowing. But it never was real bad like '47 or Camille.

Question How high up was the ...

Louis For Camille? The water got to the granite ring around the top of the fort where the grass starts.

Question How many feet was that?

Louis That's about 35 or 40 feet.

Mike Getting around 25 or 30 feet. Somewhere in there.

Question I've often wondered, there used to be an artisian well that used to flow freely. When I was a boy we go and bathe there. We had a cabin actually on the island for one summer with a bunch of guys.

CP I think when you start digging all these wells here along the coast ...

Louis All the industry.

CP ... it dried them up out there.

Question What was that well for initially? It was further on down.

CP That was during the ... when they had the lumber boom. Schooners would ...

Louis Schooners would use Ship Island harbor. And that was a source of water.

CP That where they got there water supply. Carried all the lumber out of Gulfport.

Mike That would be around the turn of the century.

Louis Or probably before that. I really don't know about the wells. I don't know who dug those wells.

CP You remember that well, don't you?

Louis I do remember what he is talking about though. Pipes in water with water flowing.

CP Had some down by the old quarantine station too.

Mike The wells around the west end of the island, to give you a little background, may have been dug by a gentleman who around 1916 establishing a business to supply the freighters coming into the harbor. The lumber ships and such, for water, supplies, ballast stone. whatever else they may need. He actually put out the effort to sink that well, that artisian well. Unfortunately his timing

wasn't the best 'cause he established his business on Ship Island to supply the freighters anchoring there at the same time that the gentleman in Gulfport was digging the ship channel from the city out to Ship Island so all the ships could come into Gulfport. So they by-passed him. That's the story in a nut shell.

Question Wasn't there an artisian well that the pipes used to come up out of the Isle of Capri bar too?

Consensus Yes. Right.

Louis People would tie onto those pipes and they would finally break loose and the water would be under, coming up on the sand. But the well at East Ship Island where the old quarantine station used to be flowed like in the early '80's, it was flowing cold water. For some reason it went to a trickle in the early '80's. And the Park

Service said let's cut it off. I think that just had to do with population, you know, the development of big industry, etc., the water table just went down. I'm quite sure that had an affect on it.

Question I want to ask you did you actually live on the island?

CP Just during the summer.

Louis From Memorial to Labor Day. That was the tourist season.

CP During the winter time, one person stayed on the island. I used to stay out there a little while. Then we had other people that would watch the place.

Question Was there ever any livestock raised on the island? It seems like I remember something about sheep or maybe it wasn't sheep.

CP They had cattle. On most of the island they had cattle.

Question For market or the few people there?

CP For people along the coast that you would raise them.

Mike A lot of people don't know that during the Civil War, when the Federals raided Horn Island, they took about 300 head of cattle off. It was a very big operation out there. And I think like Pop Stone, the lighthouse keeper, used to keep hogs out there.

CP You could see the cattle, when the mosquitos were bad, they would be out in the water with just their nose sticking up.

Louis Not just the cattle. The people out there too. [Laughter] I remember staying

out there at night camping and the mosquitos were incredible.

CP We don't have the problem with mosquitos like we used to.

Louis Not during the day, but at night they come out of the marsh.

Question Any good ghost stories?

Louis Ghost stories? Captain Pete told me a ghost story one time. About the fort and hearing chains at the fort. Tell the story, after the '47 hurricane ...

CP When I was a young man, I used to sleep out there and you could hear all kinds of noises in the fort. Chains swinging, men groaning. There was a lot of suffering going on out there during the Civil War.

Question You stayed out there all by yourself?

Louis Slept in the fort. Can you imagine? I don't know if you've seen that thing at night,
it's eerie.

CP After the '47 hurricane, the American Legion didn't want to build the concession back. So my father wanted to build it back, I was a young man who went out, was sleeping in the fort. I think every rat on the island ran up in that fort. [Laughter] At night, they would be eating on your toe nails. [Groans and laughter] You had to wake up in the middle of the night ...

Louis ... and shake a few rats off.

CP We were sleeping on an army cot. I got some rat poison, that white stuff that would smoke, it's against the law to sell it now ...

Comment Did you say you belong to the church? [Much laughter]

CP ... got some potatoes, sliced them up, we got rid of all of them.

Mike When did you take over from your father, as far as operating the island?

CP '63.

Mike You came back from Korea, you were in the Marine Corps then?

CP Yeh. Did a little hitch in the Marine Corps from '51 to '53, stayed one year on the front line, the First Marine Division. Seen a lot of action.

Mike Came back home and went back to work on the boats?

CP Right.

Mike In '63, get to the '60's, this is about the time that the whale showed up isn't it?

CP Around that time.

Louis '68

CP A baleen whale that came into Gulfport. We were coming in from the last trip from Ship Island. He got caught up on the rock.

Louis In front of the Gulfport harbor.

CP He freed himself and went out that night around where Camille Cut is. Went up on the island and died. The next night I went down there with the boat. Towed the whale down to the dock. It was a drawing card, everybody wanted to go to Ship Island to see the whale. Business improved. [Laughter]

Mike How big was the whale?

CP It was about 50 feet. [Louis offered 36 feet at one point. CP repeats 50. You can hear 40 feet, 35 feet. There appears to be no agreement.]

Louis Was it? I remember the whale, and Sonny you probably remember coming out to Ship Island. Your dad probably took you out there to see it. But we were jumping on it like a trampoline.

CP Everybody said that whale was stinking. I said that whale don't stink. Those pogy boats stink. [Laughter] So we got a big drag line and brought him down to the point of the island and buried it. We were going to save all the bones and put them in the fort. Right before Camille. And right after Camille, there wasn't anyone on the island and someone stole half of the bones. But I donated the rest of them to ...

Louis The J.L. Scott Marine

CP ... the J.L. Scott Marine.

Louis The whale is in there.

Mike And actually I remember when J.L. Scott was putting the whale on display, there was an announcement put out asking folks to bring any sections of the whale they may have in their backyard or whatever. Actually a number of pieces came back, including one that was decorated in 1970 psychedelic colors. [Laughter] You didn't have that whale around for a long time did you? Just for a month or so?

CP I didn't want to get rid of that whale.

Louis He loved that whale.

From the audience. It drew a lot of people.

Mike Along with the whale, there were some other guests that came to the island. Some of these we didn't know if we wanted to talk about or not, but Captain Pete said he'd be willing to talk about them a little bit. One was this gentleman right here. I don't know if he actually came out to the island or came in the parking lot.

Woman He went fishing on the island.

Mike He went fishing on the island. Everyone know who this is? Can you see?

Louis That was taken in front of the Bungalow Restaurant on the beach and this lady took the photograph.

Mike And let's give her a round of applause. [Applause]

Louis Have her pass it around, Mike.

Mike If you haven't picked up who it is, I'll give you one more clue. You ain't nothing but a hound dog. These other pictures we have here ... of course the one right here, one may have seen the photo in the newspaper this week. That's Captain Pete, the original Captain Pete.

Louis The Pan American Clipper.

Mike The old Pan American Clipper. This is about what time period?

Louis Late '50's. Mid-'50's.

Mike Now, this one right here. Before I tell you this, I want to go back a little bit. I read

that some of the celebrities who went out to the Isle of Caprice on various ferry boats include folks like Barrymores, and Talula Bankhead, maybe some of you older folks like my age remember Talula Bankhead. This lady right here came

out

to Ship Island. Captain Pete won't tell me why. If you don't remember her, this is Jayne Mansfield. If I pass this out, will I get it back? [Laughter]

Question Was that the week she died?

Mike I understand not the week she died. Not sure about that, but sometime just before that happened.

Louis Mr Gus Stevens brought her out on his yacht and she visited Ship Island. I don't know why my dad is wearing a suit. [Laughter] But he's got a suit on that day. [More laughter] People ask me about that, I don't know. He doesn't wear a suit very often.

Mike We better give Captain Pete a chance to defend himself. Do you want to tell them what you told me? Why you were wearing a suit that day.

CP Well, every Sunday I go to mass on Sunday, I like to dress up. [Much laughter]

Louis You just opted to have a suit on that day?

Mike You go to church in the morning and go talk to Jayne Mansfield in the afternoon.

Comment from audience. Jayne Mansfield must have been at the mass.

Louis Yeh. Oh, yeh.

Mike Louis, I don't know if you remember this story or not, but something you told me when I first came to work on Ship Island, this would be about 10 years ago working as an employee not as a volunteer. One of our favorite questions that we get while riding the ferry boat down at the island when someone not from this

area

comes up and asks are there any sharks out here. Our immediate answer is yes, which really brings a wide range of expressions across their face. And just to reassure them, come back and say there are twenty four different species out there. It really gets the attention of people swimming in the water.

CP But you know no one has ever been bothered by sharks out there.

Louis In 75 years that we've been bringing people. We had a lot of stingrays and cat fish problems. But never a shark.

Mike Never a shark. Maybe it gives you an idea about some of the legends you hear about sharks. Maybe it's not always the truth that ... But you did tell me a story one time about a hot day at the dock, people had gotten off. You decided to go swimming.

Louis When we were kids, we used to love to swim off the end of the pier. It was a great place to swim. The water was crystal clear. You could dive off the dock and snorkel under the pier. I was swimming and came up and was drying off and looked down. It looked like a skin diver. And I thought somebody is down there skin diving. It was a hammer head shark about 20 feet long. He had a head

that wide. And he came up and he surfaced. I never forget that big eye ball that kind of looked up and swam by. Nobody has ever been bitten by a shark on Ship Island. They would come around the deep water of West Ship and they would get in the currents and go back out to the deep water. But that was the only time ...

CP I was shrimping one time on a small boat by myself and I had to anchor and swim into the island so I could get back in take the boat out to Ship Island next morning. Had a small boat. I started thinking about swimming at night that phosphorous, lighting up, you never know when a hammer head or a shovel nose might take a bite. Even though on one has ever been bothered. When you're young, you do foolish things.

Louis Captain Pete needs to tell you the story about how he would run the boat during the day and shrimp at night. He anchored his boat one night off Ship Island and jumped overboard and lost his bearing. Couldn't figure out where he was swimming. It was pitch black.

CP No, one time I was started swimming to the island ...

Louis From his shrimp boat anchored off shore ...

CP ... and a squall came out. It was blowing. I didn't know whether I was swimming out in the Gulf or not. I just missed it. I just caught the point of the island ... you know how that undertow runs around? A little bit more and ...

Mike Talking about sharks and such, you told me a story like how they used to shrimp in the old days. We think in terms of booms and things like that.

CP Yep. Years ago they used to have to pick their trawls up by hand. They didn't have a hoisting rig ...

Louis Using sail.

CP The sail you was talking about when they had seine*, they used to put seines out. Before I was born. Then they started pulling trawls behind the boat. When they pulled seins, you would anchor the boat and just make like a big circle and take all the shrimp out. His daddy and some of my other uncles when they trawled with the big seins had to tie rags around their eyes and dive into the net and go to the bottom of the net and tie what they called a patten together so the shrimp wouldn't get out. Said that shrimp used to stick them, stingrays and everything else.

* Large fishing nets that were made to hang vertically in the water by weights along the lower edge and floats along the top.

Louis Catfish, sea nettles [a stinging jellyfish of the tropical Atlantic].

CP Then they would scoop all the shrimp out. Then later on they started pulling the trawl, but they didn't have a hoisting rig. They would pull the net up to the side of the boat and scoop it out with a scoop net.

Mike You developed some very good muscles back then.

CP That was the rough old days.

Mike Rough old days.

Question A question regarding the use of sail.

CP No, I don't remember the sails. That was ...

Mike Do we have any other questions at this time?

Question What do you know about the cannons on the fort that were blown up and taken for scrap iron. Who did that?

CP I understand that during ... was that the First world War ... some junk dealer dynamited them for scrap. Found out they couldn't use them 'cause it was cast iron.

Mike It goes back earlier than that. After the army decided the fort was obsolete and could not be updated, in 1901, a gentleman by the name of Marks out of New Orleans had a shop on Tchoupitoulas Street. He ran a junk yard, and he paid the army something like \$2000 for all of the scrap iron inside the fort. And if you ever go inside the fort, you notice as you walk inside the casements, the casemates, there are no tracks. You can see the outlines of the tracks, but there are no tracks. He supposedly pulled all those up, he and his work crew.

CP What year was that about?

Mike The contract was let in 1901. And I get the idea that it took them a long time after that to do as much damage as they did trying to break up those cannons. He got all the cannon downstairs, there were 17 cannon inside the fort. Four were upstairs including two fifteen inch Rodmans which weighed 80,000 pounds and 13 ten inch Rodmans downstairs. Of course they weighed less but still a very big effort. We suspect one reason why we have one fifteen inch Rodman cannon left because he just gave up. He ran out of explosives or decided it wasn't worth the trouble. The story was he spent about 20 charges of dynamite trying to blow that one fifteen inch Rodman. After he blew it up he said instead of one big piece of metal that weighed 40 tons, he had several big pieces of metal that weighed 40 tons. [Laughter] Any other questions?

Question How often do you see whales like that one?

CP That was the first live whale that I know of, I might be wrong, that was ever in the Mississippi Sound. There might have been smaller whales. I'm not sure.

Louis I think there was a whale caught in the '30's or the '20's.

CP My father was shrimping out by the marsh ...

Louis The Louisiana Marsh ..

CP ... and he seen what he thought looked like an island but it wasn't an island, it was a big Sperm Whale. I think it was 65 foot long. He went up to investigate. He didn't fool with it. He kept on shrimping that day. A couple of other shrimpers from Biloxi towed the whale right on the inside of Deer Island, had a boat on each side of it, and they were charging twenty five cents to go see the whale. Now they saved the bones and hid them out where Keesler Field is now.

Louis The Naval Reserve Park.

CP Naval Reserve Park. Still had some bones out there for many years.

Mike Speaking of whales, I don't know if you know this, Louis, or not, I hope you do, but Steve Skrmetta, Louis's brother, describes seeing dolphins out on the island feeding in a very interesting way. Do you remember that? You may have seen something like this on Jacques Costeau specials. Costeau had footage of dolphins over on the east coast around South Carolina making big waves washing mullet ashore up on the beach. The dolphins threw themselves up on the beach.

Louis Oh yeh. I have seen the dolphins corral up mullet up into the shallows. And they'll just like a torpedo hitting the beach, they'll go up on the beach ... mullet flying, whipping them with their tails, and catching them on the other end. It's common. We have a great dolphin population in the Mississippi Sound. People don't realize how wonderful our dolphins are here. The problem we're having now, and I say this because I see it every day, every Spring we start out with the tourists and everybody sees dolphins on just about every trip. Then the pogy boats come in with the spotter planes. They wipe out those big schools of menhaden and there are no more dolphins, you don't see any dolphins. They're not going to eat. So they move on.

Question What are these pogy boats you're talking about?

Louis Menhaden is like a sardine. And they have 150 foot boats that put these big round nets around the schools of fish. The menhaden travel in thick schools. They

grow about that big. Big sardine. These boats are outlawed in a lot of areas, but for some reason they still work in the Mississippi Sound.

Comment So that's the dolphins' food.

Louis Primary food menhaden and mullet.

Mike The menhaden are processed for oil and meal. They're used in chicken feed, cattle feed ...

Comment The Japanese consider menhaden oil a delicacy and they use it in cooking. And so they export a lot of it. There's a menhaden processing plant over in Pascagoula. They work from October to May and it stinks.

Louis I'd like to see the menhaden boats kept south of the intercoastal waterways so at least we could keep a good supply of menhaden for the fish, let them come in, but don't clean it out. Save some for ...

Mike Any other questions? We're coming up on three o'clock.

Louis By the way, I wanted to mention my mother is here. We haven't said one word about my mom over there.

Mike That's your fault.

Louis Mom, would you stand up? Jackie Wentzel Skrmetta. [Applause] We also have Captain Pete's grandchildren here, one of my son's is here and the newest grandson, John, and also a granddaughter, Jaqualine, over there.

CP Stand up, Jacqueline.

Louis And Robert, and John, would y'all stand up. [Applause] Robert's already working on the boat. He's discovered money and he can buy things. He likes to work. Like I did. I mean it was a great summer. It was the way to spend your summer. I don't ever remember a summer not spent on Ship Island. It's a great way for a kid to stay out of trouble. You work on that island, you work hard and earn your money. I always had an automobile. It was a good experience for me and I hope he'll be able to share in that same thing. I know Jaqualine will be part of it as well.

CP When I came back from Korea, I didn't know my wife and I was thinking I had a vocation to go off in the priesthood. She moved across the street. Her daddy bought a Buick. And the side facing my house, she'd get out there every day and just wash that one side. [Laughter] Ever go fishing? You ... said there goes the priesthood. [More laughter and applause]

Mike If you 're not in a hurry, would you mind people ...

Lady from audience Can I make an announcement before everybody gets separated?
Biloxi's going to have another birthday party for the Biloxi
Lighthouse the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Everybody is
invited.

Mike OK. Another party to go to. Very good. We hope you enjoyed the afternoon.
We've done several of these programs bringing folks who have a history to tell us
a particular part or side of 300 years of history on the Gulf Coast. Things are
always changing. It's nice to know where we come from before we know where
we're going. During the next month, we're going to continue with other programs
similar to this for the folks who live on the coast now. We made an agreement
for a group of Vietnamese dancers to come during the month of October. One
of our more recent residents in the last 30 years.

The program concluded as the tape runs out.