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The Rhetoric of Community Ritual: The Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana.

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The rhetoric of community ritual: The blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana

Gordon, Barbara Elizabeth, Ph.D.
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THE RHETORIC OF COMMUNITY RITUAL:
THE BLESSING OF THE SHRIMP FLEET AT CHAUVIN, LOUISIANA

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Department of Speech Communication

by
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August, 1991
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This study is dedicated to Monseigneur Frederic Brunet and the people of Chauvin, Louisiana who shared their community ritual with me with warmth and generosity.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rhetorical functions of a community ritual, the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana. Chauvin is a Cajun community in south Louisiana. Their annual fleet blessing was instituted in the 1930's and continues today relatively unchanged.

The author observed the preparations and performance of the blessing and boat parade and also interviewed community members about the blessing. The observations and interview transcriptions are the primary data used for analysis of the community discourse.

Fantasy theme analysis is used to demonstrate the community's use of discourse to develop and maintain group hierarchy. The discourse reveals six fantasy themes prevalent in the discourse of the people of Chauvin. The six—unity, security, perpetuation, pride, care-taking, and pioneering—are traits attributed to the shrimpers whose profession is "blessed" by the ritual. The fantasy themes chain into a rhetorical vision that reinforces the perception that the shrimpers are heroes. Their success or failure determines the economic status of the entire community. Thus they are crusaders whose quest is to defeat
the community's fears and enemies to ensure economic stability.

The discourse about the blessing reveals four communal fears: loss of land, of business, of religious roots, and of cultural identification. Fantasy theme analysis permits the researcher to investigate how these fears pressure the group, and how discourse about the blessing spawns new fantasy themes that group members can use to adapt to the pressures. Similarly, villains such as intrusive outsiders, non-participating insiders, and the forces of nature are revealed through the discourse.

This study shows how the discourse of the blessing of the shrimp fleet unites the Cajuns of Chauvin in combating their fears and their villainous foes. Through the ritual the members of this community continue to reaffirm their Acadian culture and identity in the face of internal and external pressures to conform to mainstream American social values. Eventually, the community members will have to fend off encroachments more aggressively. Fantasy theme analysis reveals that the community members currently lack verbal strategies to help them address the increasing pressures directly.
Chapter 1
Introduction

I. Statement of the Problem

Community rituals such as the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana, provide curious and informative areas of study for rhetorical scholars. In 1982, Ronald L. Grimes, an anthropologist and folklorist, pinpointed the need for a rhetorical methodology that was capable of taking the description of a ritual and interpreting it more fully than he had been able to do. Among the theoretical options and methods he dismissed as inadequate to describe and interpret rituals were phenomenology, symbolism, social functions, archetypes, psychological reductionism, theology, formalism, and structuralism. His criticism ended with this summary: "So far, ritual studies has no theory unique to itself." Indeed, rhetorical theory has made a significant contribution to ritual studies with the development of the concept of rhetorical rituals. The principles posited have been applied primarily to single speeches or to related groups of speeches such as eulogies and inaugurals. James L. Hoban wrote an essay in 1980 called "Rhetorical Rituals of Re-
His essay defines, illustrates and establishes a criterion for evaluating rhetorical rituals. Hoban states that "Rhetorical rituals are recurring acts of formalized language and gesture that are both instrumental and consumatory with neither motive seemingly dominant." Community rituals are among the "recurring acts" to which he refers; he mentions rituals found in periodic commemorations of a community. However, Hoban only refers to those community rituals in setting up the foundation for looking at public speaking situations. His emphasis is on ceremonial speaking such as eulogies, inaugural addresses, and propaganda speeches. These explorations, while valuable, do not address the problem Grimes described of applying a rhetorical theory to fully developed community rituals such as the blessing of a fleet.

Studies of rituals have been the domain of anthropologists, folklorists, theologians and sociologists. Communication research has been steadily broadening since scholars such as Walter Fisher began to look at natural narratives as rhetoric. With the direction research has been moving in anthropology, folklore, and communication, links between cultural and communication theories seem inevitable. Donal Carbaugh, a communication researcher, suggests that there are fundamental qualities of communication that are cultural. The goal of his 1988 article on culture in Communication Inquiry is to introduce "aspects in cultural
Carbaugh argues that cultural studies include phenomena that meet the following criteria: the pattern of symbolic action and meaning must be deeply felt, the symbolic behavior and its interpretation must be commonly intelligible and widely accessible. Rituals such as a local fleet blessing would qualify as a cultural study of communication because all of the community members are aware of the dangers of shrimping and share both common fears and common perceptions of the church’s role in helping them cope with those fears. Shrimp fleet blessings also qualify because the shared belief in Catholicism among participants allows them to understand the ritual, and because the processional past their ships encourages participation on both psychological and sociological levels. Carbaugh concludes that any exploration and interpretation of such a pattern is a cultural study.® Furthermore, he posits four central aspects needed to supply integrity to empirical communication studies of cultural patterns: the researcher should observe the pattern "in situ," use the actual cultural terms or discourse of the group, be able to explore the pattern through a conceptual frame, and afford insights through comparative study. I was able to meet Carbaugh’s first two criteria for a cultural study by observing the preparations and performance of the blessing "in situ" and by collecting discourse via participant interviews. Furthermore, I have
studied the ritual using a well-defined methodology, Fantasy Theme Analysis, as dictated by the third aspect. This methodology dictates use of group members' actual discourse for analysis. To meet the fourth standard, I will use my observation of the blessing and community discourse about it to determine the rhetorical nature of this ritual building upon approaches from anthropology, folklore, and sociology.

This study is designed to explore possibilities suggested by Grimes, Hoban, and Carbaugh. Specifically, I will investigate the potential value of interpreting a community ritual via a rhetorical fantasy theme analysis of the discourse. My goal is twofold: first to determine if this methodology can contribute anything significant to exploring how community celebrations serve rhetorical roles for the group they represent. Second, and more specifically, to demonstrate how shrimpers and their community use the rhetoric of ritual to define and redefine their community in the face of growing internal and external threats to their culture as well as to the ritual itself. I selected for study the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana, because the community has several cultural characteristics that simplify critical examination. The community is relatively closed, the Cajun culture there is homogeneous, and the ritual celebration is largely confined to local participation. By definition, a closed community is characterized by set physical boundaries, clearly defined community roles,
shared history over time, and a sense of community cohesion among residents. In addition to exhibiting those characteristics, the homogeneity of Chauvin is evidenced by perceptions of outsiders such as I encountered on two occasions. One man I met locally was referred to as a newcomer though he had married a local woman and had been living there for more than twenty years. I found that the residents tended to watch me covertly everywhere I went until I had been formally introduced by a community member. Finally, according to Monseignor Brunet, the parish priest, this blessing is not advertised outside the parish. The only notices about participation are printed in the church newsletter. The newspapers in Houma, a larger community fifteen miles north of Chauvin, announce the date, but offer no information about having one's boat blessed—which is the important aspect of involvement as far as residents are concerned.

My interest in the blessing at Chauvin began in the spring of 1986 with a folklore class assignment to produce a research paper based on a folk event that could be documented through observation and oral field work (oral collection of data from informants). The requirements emphasized the development of scholarly and scientific skills in interviewing informants, transcribing interviews, and keeping a field journal. The finished folklore project analyzed the blessing as a folk event reflecting a particular com-
munity's culture. One aim of this study is to draw out the particular rhetorical/communicative dimensions of the folk event. Ernest Bormann asserts that discourse has the power to change the behavior of groups of people. A paraphrase of that concept is the basis for my definition of "rhetorical" in this paper: "the power of discourse to change the behavior of groups of people."

Ernest Bormann's work provides theoretical ground for investigation with fantasy theme analysis methodology, which is built on symbolic convergence theory. In a discussion of humanistic studies of communication, Bormann offered symbolic convergence as a starting place to study group communication: "The central explanatory hypothesis of symbolic convergence is the dynamic process of the sharing of group fantasies." Bormann observed that the "fantasies" of symbolic convergence occurred whenever a group of people came to share common symbol systems that resulted from communicative interaction. Analysis of these fantasies can reveal rhetorical functions of group discourse. Bormann's work prompted me to refocus and extend my study to address these questions: How is symbolic convergence achieved within a community? Does community discourse about a folk event function rhetorically? If so, what is the rhetorical influence of the blessing of the shrimp fleet? To answer the above inquiries, even more specific research questions must be addressed.
(1) What discourse is part of the shrimp fleet blessing at Chauvin Louisiana?

(2) What discourse exists about the blessing?

(3) What vision of the community does the ceremony express?

(4) What does an analysis of the ritual meanings reveal about the community's sense of its past, present, and future; its dominant groups, values, and aspirations?

(5) How does the ceremony maintain community identity through hierarchy, symbolically accommodate social change, and reveal areas of conflict and consensual breakdown?

(6) What role does discourse play in the community hierarchy; how and why is this discourse rhetorically significant? What does a knowledge of the rhetorical function of discourse contribute to the recognition of communities as viable sources of communication practices?

(7) How is the blessing ritual acting as a rhetorical strategy for the community members in coping with the internal and external pressures they face?

By answering these questions, I hope to determine the effectiveness of fantasy theme analysis as a methodology for ritual studies, and to understand more of the communicative dynamics of a cultural group.

II. BACKGROUND

The entire economic and social base of the Cajuns who lived along Petit Caillou, the local bayou, was revolutionized with the adoption of shrimping in the 1920's. Almost simultaneously, the local Catholic mission church
instituted the fleet blessing. The religious ritual provided a sense of security for the fishermen and their families in facing the uncertainties of change, especially the dangers that would be incurred in moving their work from the slow-moving neighboring bayous into the treacherous Gulf of Mexico twenty-seven miles away. The discourse of the ritual itself, as well as what the people say about it, provides raw material for evaluating if and how the ritual achieved its unifying effect and how it functions rhetorically in a contemporary cultural milieu characterized by technological and other external intrusions, as well as by a growing lack of faith in cultural traditions.

A foundational concept of fantasy theme analysis is that when 'events cause a group to experience symbolic convergence, discourse will evolve that is specific to the group, that carries special meaning to group members, and that wields rhetorical power that can be used to influence or control group hierarchy. Furthermore, groups facing perceived threats to their identity will institute persuasive discourse that redefines the group as needed to protect their sense of identity.\(^1\)

I will be looking at the written documents of the ritual and transcripts of interviews with local residents to isolate communication patterns that evidence symbolic convergence, fantasy themes, and a rhetorical vision within the community.
III. Survey of Literature

The precedent for extended analysis of single events within a community can be found in two books: *La Terra in Piazza: An Interpretation of the Palio in Siena* by Alan Dundes and Alessandro Falassi, and *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe, New Mexico* by Ronald L. Grimes. Dundes and Falassi describe the annual horse race (palio) between ten of seventeen "contrade" or wards of Siena, Italy. Their study reveals the preparations and the event as models of metaphor for Siena's world view. The authors isolate patterns of symbolism to extract meaning. Their major contribution is the examination of the interaction of the city's political and social structures in the event.

In much the same way, Grimes seeks connections between culture, cognition, and perception via symbolic forms. He details a religious festival, then studies it from an anthropological view to find links between competing ecclesiastical, ethnic, and civic aspects. However, both books are sociographic studies that treat communication as a transparent conduit for information, as effect rather than cause.
Robert Anthony Orsi's 1985 study is also sociographic, but he focuses on the behaviors of the people as expressions of the inner life of a culture in The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1890-1950. Most importantly, Orsi specifies that devotion to the Madonna gave people an opportunity to act out their deepest struggles, thus expressing group perception of reality and reinforcing group values.

The preceding works are similar to a study of the fleet blessing in that they look at a ritual in a specific community. A more obviously relevant study was conducted by Richard M. Swiderski. In Voices, a book he subtitles An Anthropologist's Dialogue with an Italian-American Festival, Swiderski studies how an Italian fishing community transcends community disruption and uncertainty to maintain their celebration of St. Peter's Fiesta. The author bases his assessment of the survival of the fiesta on an anthropological approach to the various community roles the ritual fills. He uses the dialogue of the celebrants to gain the perspective of the unified and conflicting "voices" of the community. The concern of his study is the survival of the than of the community. Swiderski focused on the discourse of community participants in a celebration. He did not, however, look at that discourse in terms of its rhetorical influence on the community's future.

While all four studies focus on rituals similar to the
fleet blessing, they all lack a rhetorical methodology. While Ronald Grimes did not suggest rhetoric as theoretical foundation, Roger D. Abrahams, an anthropologist/folklorist, did specify the use of rhetorical methodology in three articles he wrote in the late 1960’s. Abrahams asserts that rhetorical methodologies would permit the dynamics of a culture to be explored because such methods permitted "focus on the movement of items as constructed and performed, as used by people in a living situation." According to Abrahams, "Just such an approach to literature and other expressive manifestations of society have been explored by recent critics who have revived the concept of rhetoric as the art of persuasion, and seen that the essence of persuasion resides in both effective form and compelling performance." Thus Abrahams sees applications for both dramatistic and genre criticism. He recognizes that participatory festivals such as fleet blessings are expressive manifestations of society. Dramatistic elements occur in the proceedings of the celebration; and the form or genre has set characteristics. Either form of criticism presents a viable methodology for a rhetorical study of the form and performance of a ritual according to his views because "each item of expressive culture is an implement of argument, a tool of persuasion."

A foreshadowing of the dramatistic study of community was undertaken in 1962 by Hugh Dalziel Duncan. Duncan’s study
rests on the assumption that communication patterns reflect the stratification patterns in the community. According to his basic axiom, community members are categorized according to their hierarchical role: leaders command, subordinates follow, peers debate. But Duncan does little to examine discourse; he ignores how status in the community is affirmed, threatened, or negotiated via communication. While he identifies the obvious community symbols (flags, historical pageants, memorial marches, etc.) and theorizes about the ways in which they might function to maintain the dominance of community leaders, Duncan does not look at how symbols actually function in the particular idiom of the community.

One of the most important ethnographers to explore the symbols of a culture is Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz: "In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse." Geertz demands that ethnographic theory provide the vocabulary in which symbolic action can express what it has to say about "the role of culture in human life." The repertoire of terms he considers valuable include "symbol," "identity," "metaphor," "ritual" and "culture." His goal is "To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action — art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense — in order to..."
produce interpretive anthropology that does not ignore reality for "sociological aestheticism." Geertz's emphasis on symbolic acts does include looking at the accompanying discourse as rhetorical strategy.

Michael Moerman connects ethnography and conversational analysis in his study, Talking Culture. His justification for adopting a speech communication methodology stresses the capacity of conversational analysis studies to analyze "everyday talk, language as actually used in social interaction." Moerman acknowledges that conversational analysis does have the drawback of losing the interactional meaning of such components as setting, costume, or physical orientation. He finds a complementary nature in culturally contexted conversational analysis when it is applied to ethnography. Moerman criticizes Geertz for not attending to the interactive organization of conversation. With his blending of ethnographic and conversational analysis techniques, Moerman explicitly advocates the union of techniques from two or more disciplines already evident in the research of others. Gerry Philipsen's 1975 article, "Speaking 'Like A Man' in Teamsterville: Culture Patterns of Role Enactment in an Urban Neighborhood," is a similar study of discourse that clarifies roles in the culture it springs from. The cultural pattern of discourse is also central to Richard Bauman's 1981 article, "'Any Man Who Keeps More'n One Hound'll Lie To You': Dog Trading and Storytelling at
These and other scholars are recognizing the inseparable bond between a culture and the conversations of its members.

Kenneth Burke's pentad is a method considered for this study but discarded for two reasons. First, although his dramatistic approach lends itself to the interpretation and analysis of a "dramatic" event such as the actual ritual of the fleet blessing, it would work most effectively in describing and assessing the blessing itself. Because of the obviousness of the visual nature of the event, getting caught up in the pageantry of the blessing could result in losing sight of the community motivations that brought the blessing into being and the interacting community relationships that the ritual continues to direct. Second, analyzing discourse about the event rather than just the text of the event requires going beyond Act, Scene, Agent, Agency and Purpose. A method is needed that focuses more on the dynamic changes that occur within a community as conditions, attitudes, and behaviors change.

In his article, "Rhetorical Rituals of Rebirth," James L. Hoban, Jr., clarifies how cultural roles are part of the communication interaction through which participants in rhetorical rituals establish their identities. According to Hoban, the rituals then help mediate the relationship between the individual and the group.

His examples of analysis are, as mentioned earlier, con-
fined to ritual categories such as rites of passage and rites of incorporation. His work as rhetorical critic focuses on symbolic transformation of participants, observable changes in the culture, and interactions of the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of the process. Although the studies he cites are oriented toward speeches, he agrees that the discourse of rituals is appropriate for rhetorical studies. Hoban’s rhetorical analysis of ritual in single speeches within genre types pinpoints the self-limiting perspective traditionally practiced by communication theorists. Only recently has the discipline of speech communication recognized and begun to study the impact of rhetoric in broader realms than public address.

Mary Douglas broadens the venue of discursive influence with her cosmological scheme that permits community or culture-wide analysis. In 1978, she published "Cultural Bias," a landmark study in cultural anthropology that proposed looking at culture from the perspective of "grid" and "group" dimensions. The grid dimension measures individuation - "the rules to which individuals are subject in the course of their interaction"; the group dimension measures group incorporation - the claims, boundaries and rights exerted by the group." Her proposal was offered as a way to discover interlocking structures of behavior that vary with the social environment. Although she does not use the label "hierarchy," Douglas provides a way to define
groups by their social contexts and by how individuals interact in each potential context. The grid dimension of her model shows progression in individuals' adherence to the rules that serve as controls within the group. These rules can be used to determine self-perception of one's place within the social context/hierarchy. Douglas explained that "...the relevant level of analysis is that at which people find it necessary to explain to each other why they behave as they do." 34

Mary Douglas's work provides the researcher with definitions whose flexibility would permit categorizing any subject, from an individual to a closed group. And she reminds us that some categorization is necessary for analysis. Douglas summarized that a taxonomy using grid and group dimensions "should feed into a description of cultural processes, and provide a systematic comparative basis for cross-cultural studies. It should also enhance our understanding of social change." 35 This summary indicates the potential of her taxonomy for rhetorical study. Although most intensive studies today begin with description and end with some comparison, for a study to be rhetorical it must go beyond enhancing our understanding of social change. It is not enough for the rhetorical researcher to stop with what participants say to "justify their actions." We need to discover how participants' discourse (other than overt expressions of motive and strategy) brings about changes
within the group.

In "Cultural Bias," Douglas gives examples of how the behavior and the discourse of the participants fit into her scheme. In this sense, elements in "Cultural Bias" sound much like rhetoric. She also mentions potential application of this analysis to ritual behavior of groups. In addressing the problems of comparing cultures, Douglas noted "a limited number of dynamic affirmations, which I shall call themes, can be identified in every culture and that the key to the character, structure and direction of the specific culture is to be sought in the nature, expression, and interrelationship of these themes." Her use of the term "themes" is informative, because that concept seems similar to fantasy themes or even rhetorical visions as theorized by Ernest Bormann.

Douglas's approach is also similar to Bormann's in her reference to metaphor. Douglas says people in the same environment with common attitudes about social contexts "have created for themselves a distinctive pool of metaphors." She adds that the metaphors are used "in the further work of developing their own identity as part of the social environment to which they are committed." In like manner, Bormann uses group metaphors to uncover the common themes a group share. The weakness of Douglas's work, however, is that it does not provide a detailed methodology to aid the researcher in applying her theories. The
specific steps to take in defining cosmology and the individual's place within it are not thoroughly developed; neither is the procedure for reaching conclusions about the data. The role of narrative is not mentioned in much of her work.

Richard Bauman has conducted intensive investigations of narration using fieldwork that deals with specific oral narrative traditions. Bauman explores the interrelationships between narrative genres and the larger expressive traditions from which they spring. He is a firm advocate of studying narratives to facilitate understanding the role of speaking in human life. He stresses the need to conduct the research of narratives "on the basis of soundly empirical, cross-cultural investigations." Bauman’s work gives us a sense of the culture that spawns certain types of narrations, but he does not consider himself a researcher into "ritual."

Victor Turner has investigated ritual as a social process. He contends that people resolve crises through ritual. Turner examines a variety of genres of social action such as religious rituals and legal ceremonies. His thesis is that all ritual is performance; his primary interest is exploring the relationship between ritual and theatre.

Ernest Bormann, a speech communication theorist, has developed a rhetorical methodology that has the capacity to illuminate further the discourse in and about rituals. His
approach lends itself to reevaluating rituals, to conducting rhetorical research into them based on the discourse of the participants. Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis is a method designed to permit the researcher to study common themes and metaphors within a small group. His fullest exploration occurs in *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream,* which analyzes the impact of rhetoric within a looser framework, early American ministers bound only by their common themes and use of metaphors. Bormann’s method for analyzing discourse also works at the level of community. Fantasy theme analysis, which focuses on the social reality of a group who have shared symbolic convergence, makes direct use of group discourse. The method has the advantages of acknowledging that a group’s development, evolution, and decay are always accompanied by discourse and of permitting a researcher to study the relationship between rhetorical communication and the community it represents.

Bormann’s research helps explain how "a dramatic theme might relate to the repressed psychological problems of some or all of the members and thus pull them into participation." His theory has been applied to several contexts such as small group interactions, the religious arena and political campaigns. One of the more interesting applications explores the role of the media and opposing rhetoricians in facing public events. According to Bormann, the fantasy themes developed by a group of people permit
them to use factual and fictitious stories about themselves to frame the past and future; the ultimate result is the formulation of specific rhetorical arguments to deal with the present.

IV. Significance

The survey of literature revealed several undeveloped areas of rhetorical potential for analysis that researchers from various fields have pinpointed. First, although Roger D. Abrahams suggested adopting rhetorical methodologies to study communities almost twenty years ago, his suggestion appears to have borne little fruit among speech scholars. His own application remains folkloric: he analyzes the conversational genres a group shares and what those genres mean, not how performance of group discourse empowers and structures the group."

Victor Turner conducted extensive studies of ritual. He investigated the ritual found in social process, especially in crisis resolution. His goal was to elucidate the relationship between ritual and performance, between social drama and aesthetic drama." As valuable as his contributions are, his work does not extend our understanding of the development of specific persuasive message strategies by a single community consciousness.
Second, with the growth of interpersonal studies in communication, small-group studies have proliferated. I could find no rhetorical studies by communication scholars documenting or analyzing community-wide traits, much less community discourse. Organizational communication studies of large groups do not study communities outside of business and professional realms. Community studies remain in the provinces of cultural anthropology, folklore, and sociology with corresponding foci. Intercultural communication reverts back to those fields without a communication emphasis on the rhetorical analysis of discourse within the community.

But this study is important in a more fundamental sense. In the past twenty years, there has been much interest in the relationship between human hierarchy and communication. As the cultural theorists cited here point out, the status of individuals, families, and social practices are constantly being negotiated within communities. This community stratification is negotiated symbolically, largely through language. The boundaries of the community, the ranking of its members, and its communal belief systems are transacted through discourse.

Hugh Dalziel Duncan's treatment of community hierarchy is extensive and is discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Other examples of the relationship between language, discourse, and hierarchy include Margaret Mead's observations.
about how children learn the social structure of their culture as they learn language practices, and several other researchers' discussions of children's use of language to create and maintain peer group hierarchy. Little of Duncan's work deals directly with discourse as rhetoric.

Mary Douglas's research also deals with hierarchy in a way. She has sought to explore community relationships by identifying combinations of beliefs in various possible social contexts that would impact on an individual. However, she has not attempted to analyze the sources or tactics of persuasive strategies as a speech communication theorist would. Instead, she has studied the level of social accounting, where justification and explanation are used because "moral judgments materialize into pressures from other persons to act in certain ways." She discusses the individual and individual's created experience rather than the effects of discourse on the group in "Cultural Bias." Her approach to cultural study is to present a typology to help map "the individual's subjective experience and conception of his social context." Singling out the individual is immensely valuable, and much of what we can learn from Douglas will be applied here. Still, her analyses for the most part focus on how individuals use persuasive discourse to appease the group rather than on how the group uses discourse collectively to influence individuals. Her terminology remains sociographic. On the other hand,
fantasy theme analysis employs rhetorical terminology familiar to speech communication researchers.

In general, then, all of the theorists treated so far focus much more on discourse as a social function rather than as a persuasive strategy. Even when they say otherwise, they tend to treat individual discourse as a response to community standards, and give short shrift to the way in which discourse forges individuals into a "community" and enforces the community standards, especially when the community is redefining itself and its standards in the face of imposing threats. Part of the rationale for this study is to elucidate ways in which explicitly rhetorical methodology can add to the study of community discourse, so far a province of study left almost exclusively to cultural theorists in anthropology and sociology.

This study does not hypothesize discourse as a mere effect of community, but as an influencing force within the community. Chauvin, Louisiana, did not form a human hierarchy and then use language to communicate its existence. This study proposes that the isolated people around Chauvin were forged into a unit by the persuasive force of discourse which included the blessing the new community instituted. The hierarchy developed as the community developed, through active participation. For the dramatists, hierarchy is generated through discourse. The persuasive strategies behind that generation are obscured rather than revealed by
a dramatistic analysis. Since persuasion is an active force, it needs to be analyzed in language that acknowledges its power to influence.

Douglas provides an impetus to view group discourse as an active force in culture. One of her works, *In the Active Voice*, spells out her view that discourse is a rhetorical action instead of a passive reaction. In her essay Douglas calls for adoption of active voice theory. She concludes:

This program requires the investigator to trace the controls that the human subjects of his research are laying upon each other. If the sociologist investigator always checks the constraints upon action which appear as penalties and moral judgments, the investigation itself is protected from his own imported subjective interpretations. The Kalabari and Tallensi make different judgments of failure; they deploy different resources for explaining, reconciling and reinstating or washing their hands of less fortunate fellow men. This is the essence of the powerful method in which action terminology can be used. Never denying active human agency, we can trace how people work their institutions as well as create the conditions in which their beliefs get plausibility.

Although Douglas's terminology - "controls," "deploy... resources," "work their institutions" - is not the language of speech criticism, the influence she is describing is what speech critics label "rhetoric." Douglas and her peers study social behavior in a community/culture to explain social environments. Speech rhetoricians look at social behavior to determine the persuasive strategies within the community/group.

One advantage of conducting a speech communication study of this ritual is to determine how the rhetorical strategies explicitly uncovered by a fantasy theme analysis would...
extend Douglas’s ideas. In addition, one goal of speech criticism is often to use group knowledge to help the members of that group or similar groups wield more influence to achieve desired outcomes. Knowledge of the rhetorical forces at work can be used to effect specific changes when necessary.

Second, a speech study of a community ritual would be more successful than cultural theory studies have been in informing speech communication researchers that community-wide rituals, not just ritual speeches, are valuable sources of rhetorical behavior. Recognizing that one community’s ritual can be studied using group communication principles will also further legitimize explorations into the discourse of entire communities. If fantasy theme analysis elucidates the data, we already have a workable methodology for further study. If not, we have reason to develop a better method. Finally, this study could help bridge the chasm created by the seemingly autonomous studies of ritual now conducted in different disciplines by beginning to establish commonly agreed upon definitions for terms such as "rhetoric" and "performance."

I chose to study the rhetoric of blessing of the shrimp fleet because it is a shared ceremony through which the participants use their ritualistic and descriptive discourse to constitute their hierarchy. The persuasive nature of the process is not an accident. Fantasy theme analysis looks
at the creation of groups and how groups use their discourse to accomplish their ends. Assessing the blessing with fantasy theme analysis broadens and enriches the study because the event fuses the rhetorical power of symbols, ritual, and discourse.

Finally, the discipline of speech communication has studied single orators, dyads, small groups, social movements, and large and small organizations not to mention mass media. We have ignored natural rural communities. As interbred, relatively stable populations locked into a web of tradition and intense face-to-face interaction, the communities provide a rich arena for the study of rhetorical ritual. It seems likely that the enduring social networks are at least as worthy of study as single speeches, temporary classroom groups, or brief political and public relations campaigns. Growing interest in intercultural communication will necessitate that scholars in speech communication be able to conduct research of subcultural groups such as Cajuns or shrimpers using methodology developed within our own discipline.

An additional goal of current communication research can also be met with this study. Interdisciplinary studies are desirable ways to extend our knowledge. The boundaries between disciplines are less and less clearly drawn as anthropology, sociology and folklore all examine the same events and groups. Explorations of the same events and groups by
speech communication theorists can expand the knowledge we share. We gain much by building on the groundwork already produced in other fields. In the same way, stronger links between the disciplines will increase the sharing of valuable knowledge. Communication perspectives can contribute much to the process through rhetorical analysis that extends the terminology and the interpretation of persuasive behavior.

V. Methodology

Ernest Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis provides a framework for studying communal behavior as exhibited in the blessing. From its inception, Chauvin’s shrimp fleet blessing was important to various segments of community participants. The advantage of studying the blessing via fantasy theme analysis is threefold: the methodology uses discourse to study groups; it enables the researcher to uncover group perceptions triggered by a single event, in this case the preparations for and performance of a local celebration; and it captures a sense of how members use their rituals rhetorically to create cultural identities.

Building on Robert Bales’ findings about the dynamics of group fantasizing, Bormann uses the theory of symbolic convergence to explain “how groups of people, after engaging in numerous discourse episodes over a long period of time,
may come to embrace similar social reality." The population of Chauvin, Louisiana, is a stable group involved in day to day discourse that shares the blessing as a local experience. Bormann says such a group reaches symbolic convergence "through a dynamic chaining out of group fantasies." Both Bales and Bormann say social reality is revealed through discourse that subsequently displays the underlying fantasies as well.

There are three preliminary definitions that need to be established. In this study, I will be using Bormann's conception of "rhetorical," which he defines as the power of discourse to influence the behavior of groups of people. By "rhetorical perspective" I mean approaching discourse from the assumption that it has formative or influencing power. Finally, I will rely on the theories of Duncan and Bormann in recognizing "rhetorical criticism" as looking at participant discourse about the ritual as the social reality of the event; that is, as representative of their attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding the existence of a particular set of social practices and their constitutive, objective meaning. Bormann describes the rhetorical critic's role with these words:

A critic can take the social reality contained in a rhetorical vision which he has constructed from the concrete dramas developed in a body of discourse and examine the social relationships, the motives, the qualitative impact of that symbolic world as though it were the substance of social reality for those people who participated in the vision. If the critic can illuminate how people who participated in the rhetorical vision
related to one another, how they arranged themselves into social hierarchies, how they acted to achieve the goals embedded in their dreams, and how they were aroused by the dramatic action and the dramatis personae within the manifest content of their rhetoric, his insights will make a useful contribution to understanding the movement and its adherents.\textsuperscript{54}

In other words, critics exploring rituals like the blessing of the fleet can make useful contributions via a fantasy theme analysis.

Two additional definitions are needed here. First, I will use "the blessing" and "the ritual" interchangeably in this paper whenever I am referring to the actual event I am studying. By blessing and ritual, I mean all of the preparations for, performance of, and discourse about the blessing of the fleet at Chauvin. Second, in this paper "performance" will include the activities on the Saturday and the Sunday of the blessing: the actual decorating process, the two masses, the priest's ritual to bless the boats and the shrimpers, and the boat parade and party.

Key terms needed to understand the process Borman proposes for analysis are defined in the opening chapter of \textit{The Force of Fantasy}:\textsuperscript{55}

(1) 
\textbf{dramatising message} - "a narrative or story about real or fictitious people in a dramatic situation or setting other than the here-and-now communication of the group." (p.4)

(2) 
\textbf{fantasy} - "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need." (p.5)

(3) 
\textbf{fantasy theme} - "content of the dramatising message that sparks the fantasy chain." (p.5)
(4) **fantasy type** - "stock scenario repeated again and again by the characters or similar characters." (p.8)

(5) **rhetorical vision** - "unified putting-together of the various shared scripts that gives the participants a broader view of things." (p.8)

Those unfamiliar with Bormann’s work might find these definitions nebulous. He provided examples that illuminate their interpretation in his study of the rhetorical functions of Puritan ministers’ sermons:

"dramatising message" - narratives of God’s wrath
"fantasies" - need to work harder and be better
"fantasy theme" - setbacks from God made you better
"fantasy type" - pilgrim beset with trials
"rhetorical vision" - those who persevered over tribulations in this life would attain the grandeur they deserved in afterlife

Another preliminary consideration in fantasy theme analysis is the investigation of general questions that must precede the more specific analysis. Bormann outlines the following steps that the critic should begin with:

(1) collecting evidence of the group’s communication
(2) discovering and describing the narrative and dramatic materials that carry the rhetorical vision
(3) looking for patterns of characterizations, of dramatic situations and actions, and of settings
(4) creative reconstructing of the rhetorical vision

Once these issues have been addressed, the critic can begin to look at specific elements represented in the three phases of a group’s symbolic convergence: the creation of a common...
identity, the establishment and maintenance of a group consciousness, and the accommodation of community changes without rupture of the shared vision. Each of the preceding procedures must be verified and scrutinized in a fantasy theme analysis.

Group convergence begins when people become aware that they are involved in an identifiable group that shares fantasies and identifies insiders and outsiders. The first step in determining symbolic convergence is proving the creation of a common identity. Bormann offers the following questions to determine who makes up the community:

Who are the identifiable members of the group?
How does the group differ from other groups?
What are the symbols of their unity?
What fantasies do they share?
What symbolic persona stands for the community?
Who are the outsiders?
Who are the heroes and villains?

Once the group is identified, it establishes and maintains group consciousness. At this level of development, the group attracts new members, weans them from other visions, and disciplines backsliders. Bormann says the critical study of this process could include these questions:

How does the fantasy theme convert the unconverted?
How does it generate a sense of community and cohesion?
For what are insiders praised, outsiders castigated?
What values are inherent in the praiseworthy characters?
What lifestyles are exemplified as praiseworthy?
What acts are sanctioned and praised; which are censored?

The final group activity, accommodating change, stems from the group's need to deal with pressures. The group must select tactics to handle discrepancies such as technological advances and challenges of rival groups.

Possible questions Bormann raises for analysis are:

- What changes have occurred?
- What are the sources of each change?
- To what degree can the community control each one?
- How does change alter group fantasy and group meaning?
- How does change influence the group's success or failure?
- Are the results of the influences good/bad for the group?

In the three areas of development, the communication pattern must be examined to determine how the blessing of the shrimp fleet (re)creates the shared rhetorical vision of the people of Chauvin.

Focusing on questions such as these affords the communication researcher the opportunity to unravel the dynamics of a community's persuasive influence on its members. Ernest Bormann developed his theory as an outgrowth of his observations of small groups working face-to-face. Fantasy theme analysis applications have ranged from studies of single political campaigns and political party trends to analysis of early American ministers who
were typified as a group only by their common use of metaphors and themes.\textsuperscript{15} Bormann and his adherents have used fantasy theme analysis of group discourse not only to record the explicitly expressed themes and metaphors that typify a group, but also to uncover metaphors and themes that the group members are unaware they feel or express. This paper will explore how effectively fantasy theme analysis can be adapted to permit a rhetorical analysis of an entire community whose discourse is being expressed as individuals, yet who are talking about a shared community ritual, the local blessing of the shrimp fleet.

VI. Type of Data and Method of Analysis

Much of the desired information did not currently exist in documented form when I began my research. This gap necessitated collecting relevant data from community/group participants. Interviews form the bulk of the research materials. For that reason they were taped, transcribed, and supplemented by a field journal. The transcripts are reproduced in Appendix B, the field journal in Appendix C. Additional sources included local newspaper and magazine articles, pertinent history of the region and of the shrimping industry from numerous sources, and parish files maintained at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Chauvin.
Accounts, experiences, and stories of group members have been the data base since the origination of folklore study and theory. Early examples are Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's collections of folk tales gathered for language studies published 1812-1815 and Wilhelm Mannhardt's collection of Germanic myths, published in 1858, which became a primary source for studying the origins of medieval European symbols. Subsequent folklorists have collected original data to observe a broad range of artifacts and events in cultural contexts. (Barre Toelken summarizes these studies in the introduction to The Dynamics of Folklore.)

More germane to my work were the techniques developed by sociographic researchers. Michael H. Agar's handbook, The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography, contains an excellent explanation of the role of the ethnographic interviewer. Agar's discussion of the distinguishing characteristics of ethnography includes the ethnographer's direct personal involvement in the community, forming long term and diffuse relationships with informants in a variety of contexts, and allowing variables studied to grow from an understanding of the group.

A preliminary concern I faced was the potential for distortion of data when I was an outsider collecting information in a relatively closed community. Possible problems could have resulted from my intrusion, i.e. lack of understanding on my part or noncommunicative behaviors from
community members.

The potential impact of an interviewer who is an insider or an outsider is addressed by Edward D. Ives in *The Tape Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History*. Ives notes a problem that occurs when the interviewer is a relative or a friend. He says familiarity with the informant leads interviewers to neglect to ask about many things that they would assume they already know all about, and that the informant would not bring up for the same reason. He further endorsed the "stranger value" this way: "sometimes people will say things to strangers that they would feel awkward or silly saying to members of the family." Still, because I was not a community member, my presence to collect data may have represented an intrusion to some of the participants. This problem is common with ethnographic studies. Toelken devotes five pages to his discussion of the process and ethics of collecting folklore materials in *The Dynamics of Folklore*. His main concerns are establishing a positive rapport with informants and being careful to avoid manipulation.

I used several techniques to reduce any distortion of material that might be caused by my presence. First, I relied on the parish priest, Father Brunet, in contacting potential informants. His endorsement was invaluable in getting people to grant me, a total stranger, an interview. He also introduced me to Mickey Duplantis, who accompanied
me on visits to many of the people. Mickey served as a liaison, especially with older people whose command of English was rudimentary. Finally, I paid rigorous attention to developing interview questions designed to avoid leading my informants to give expected or desired comments.

Methods of data collection for ethnographic interviews and fantasy theme analysis are similar in several significant ways. Both rely on highly flexible pre-planned interview guides of appropriate questions or categories to explore. Researchers using either method are encouraged to observe the group as unobtrusively as possible to facilitate taking advantage of serendipitous knowledge that may arise in the course of an interaction. But because the purpose of the interview differs in ethnography and fantasy theme analysis, the two methods require distinctively different questions.

In the original folklore study of the blessing, the questions I asked and the details I sought to observe were overt, as were my motives. When I wanted to know what people were doing, why and what it meant to them, I asked. Fantasy theme analysis is a much more covert system of recording data. Much of the information sought is embedded in interactive discourse of the group, and would be altered by a direct request for information or interpretation. One strength of fantasy theme analysis lies in its capacity to reveal perceptions about influence and its significance.
without interfering with the process. Bormann contends that it is in the natural evolution of group discourse that the real fantasies representing group values are revealed. The necessity to proceed obliquely presented me with a twofold research problem: first I had to learn to get my informants to tell me what I wanted without asking directly; second, I had to learn to listen for language patterns that would tip me off about the kind of shared perceptions Bormann calls "fantasy themes."

Because Bormann's development of fantasy theme analysis grew out of his observations of small group classes, his context was quite different from mine. I had to adapt to a less controlled environment with my "group." Fortunately, Bormann's methodology allows the researcher to look at group interactions or to isolate individual characteristics that recur from person to person to discern evidence of their symbolic convergence as group members.

In conducting interviews and gathering data, I was seeking evidence of group convergence. Because the community is relatively closed, I relied on the parish priest and the families I had contacted in my first study for introductions to new informants. Informants included retired fishermen, established fishermen, beginners, and those recently forced out of shrimping. In talking to these men and their wives, I asked them about their knowledge of and participation in the annual blessing of the local shrimp fleet. In their
replies, I listened for common threads that suggest shared fantasies in work tales, weather concerns, and shrimping lore. Tangential discussions that seemed to make points about their sense of community were also analyzed. In the data, I looked for topics or ideas that stimulated emotional responses, interruptions, subject transitions, metaphors, or similar signs of shared dramatizing messages.

The process I used began with transcribing the tapes of my interviews. I had both individual and group interviews to work with. Because I had conducted the interviews over a period of year-and-a-half, I recorded some informants on more than one tape. Some of them were interviewed both individually and in a group.

There are also variations in the formality of the interviews, since my relationship with some of the informants grew closer over that time. With transcripts of individuals, I looked for ideas that seemed to represent community attitudes rather than individual thinking, especially if I found similar themes or wording in someone else's interview. Where these "group ideas" showed up, I noted the topic and how the idea was worded. In group settings I looked for repetition of phrases and concepts, especially different people's use of the same or similar wording to describe experiences or attitudes presented as the speaker's own idea rather than endorsement of another. I also noted metaphorical references to group experiences.
The similarities formed the basis for assessing the presence of symbolic convergence. Studying specific examples of repeated metaphors permitted me to detect fantasy themes which I could then trace to determine if they led to the evolution of a rhetorical vision that was working as an influencing force within the community.

VII. Plan

The study will be divided into two sections. The next two chapters will trace the emergence of group convergence and isolate common fantasies about the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin that warrant fantasy theme analysis of rhetorical dimensions of the ritual. Chapter Two covers Chauvin history that corroborates the creation of a common identity in the community. Chapter Three deals with the establishment and maintenance of group consciousness ending with the presentation of common fantasies shared by the community members. Together those two chapters validate the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin as a legitimate source for a rhetorical analysis of a community ritual.

The final part of the dissertation analyzes the rhetorical function of the blessing and projects the value of the
study. Chapter Four explores the fantasy themes common to the people of Chauvin and how the community uses those themes persuasively in confronting current pressure they face. Chapter Five discusses their rhetorical vision, and how it has influenced the community hierarchy. Chapter Five also analyzes the rhetorical impact of symbolic convergence among the people of Chauvin. Chapter Six brings the study to a close by investigating the rhetorical potential of community rituals as suggested by this example, and the implications of viewing rituals as rhetorical vehicles. If these questions are successfully answered, the study will also validate fantasy theme analysis as a viable methodological tool for conducting speech communication studies of community rituals.
CHAPTER 1 ENDNOTES


23. Geertz, 27.


27. Moerman, 3-5.


31. The five terms I refer to are the key terms of Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Pentad as delineated in A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945).

32. Hoban, 279.


34. Douglas, 15.


42. Bormann, "Fantasy," 397.


44. Abrahams has published a number of books. Among them are Afro-American Folktales, Anglo-American Folksong Style, And Other Neighborly Names, Deep Down in the Jungle, and Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education.

45. See The Anthropology of Performance and The Anthropology of Experience.


52. Bormann, "Fantasy," 398.


54. Bormann, "Fantasy," 401.

55. The following data is compiled from three sources: Bormann's *The Force of Fantasy*, chapter one; his 1972 article, pp. 401-402; and the chapter explaining his theories from *The Rhetoric of Western Thought* by Golden, Berquist, and Coleman, pp. 431-440. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1984.)


Chapter 2
A Common Identity

Ernest Bormann says the first step in a fantasy theme analysis is an examination of evidence that the group studied had reached symbolic convergence. When convergence occurs, the group develop a common identity. The current community identity of the people of Chauvin is deeply rooted in their shared history. To verify that they have indeed experienced symbolic convergence, it is necessary to explain how their community image developed.

In the late 1920's, most of the residents of lower Terrebonne Parish were unlettered Roman Catholics who attended St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Chauvin. These descendents of Acadian immigrants from Nova Scotia were finding it increasingly difficult to support themselves by farming, trapping, and fishing in the inhospitable bayou area.

A young merchant, Desire Theriot, was one of the few local people who traveled outside the community. He learned about the infant shrimping business on a business trip to Biloxi. The young entrepreneur recognized the potential to expand his seafood business while employing the failing oystermen. Through his efforts, the men changed from oystering to shrimping, learned to use and repair nets, and
gradually adapted their boats for sea trawling.

Theriot also instigated the blessing of the shrimp fleet. He had seen the celebration practiced in Biloxi and asked Father Coulomb, the priest at St. Joseph's, to perform a blessing at Chauvin. The two men believed that the church's blessing would facilitate the adoption of shrimp­­ing. With the church's endorsement, the new venture forged the people into a more coherent group by adding economic unity to already shared religious and social bonds.

Twentieth century Cajuns share beliefs that contribute to their sense of community. Before establishing the rhetorical unity brought into play by the blessing of the fleet, it is necessary to determine what group beliefs bound the people of Chauvin prior to the introduction of the blessing.

Studies in fields as widely varied as education, history, and sociology have isolated a group of factors that contributed to "Cajun" identity in the early part of the twentieth century. The most widely accepted factors are shared history, language, religion, land division, isolation and occupation(s). A quick survey of how those factors defined the group will help clarify how and why the blessing (and its rhetoric) altered the community identity to the extent it did.

Louisiana's Cajuns get their name from Acadian French settlers who were expelled from Nova Scotia when it became British territory in the second half of the eighteenth
century. These emigrants had left France 150 years earlier to protect their right to worship as Catholics. When the British government acquired Nova Scotia, the Acadians were asked to sign a pledge of allegiance to the British Empire. They refused, fearing the pledge would be used to eradicate Catholicism. As a result of their defiance, the British forced them to leave Nova Scotia.3

Of the hundreds of Acadians who sought asylum in the deportation of 1755, the largest number settled in Louisiana.4 The settlers brought with them not only the name "Acadians," but also a collective cultural heritage that shaped their future. In Louisiana parlance, Acadiana refers to the parishes settled by Acadian or Cajun emigrants. (The region is generally considered to consist of the parishes in south Louisiana between Interstates 10 and 12 and the Gulf of Mexico.)

At the turn of the century, the people who lived along the bayou named Little Caillou thought of themselves as purebred Acadian descendants.5 Local surnames could be traced back a hundred years or more. In the remote community, "outsiders" were conspicuous. Two forms of cultural adaptation took place in lower Terrebonne parish: people who moved into the area settled in communities segregated by racial characteristics or they underwent acculturation.6 Even today, whole towns in Terrebonne and neighboring parishes are racially segregated. In Chauvin, acculturation
of racially and/or ethnically compatible newcomers resulted in the prevailing concept that everyone there was "Cajun."

The idea that Cajun heritage was undiluted gave rise to the idea that their value system was also standardized. One historian said Cajuns focused on "God, family and land." Historical accounts from the first quarter of the century verify the importance of religion, homelife, and property to the bayou people, but Glen R. Conrad and other mid-century historians have found no foundation for allegations that Acadians had intentionally settled isolated bayous in order to "preserve, protect, and project their Acadian way of life." While the Cajuns retained many practices of their forefathers, they were simple, hard-working, often uneducated people who had adapted to the environment they settled. Claims to cultural uniqueness came from writers in the second half of the twentieth century, not from the fishing, farming, and trapping families of the first half. They lived their values; they told tales about themselves that stressed common perceptions about religion, families, and work. The similarities in the stories reveal their sense of oneness, just as the same similarities suggest that they present themselves through group fictions rather than facts.

An important element of the history of south Louisiana's Cajuns is the impact of dual language usage. While romanticized portrayals of the contemporary Cajun errone-
ously suggest they still speak French exclusively, in the 1920's Cajun French was their primary language. Their heritage had been passed on through oral traditions in the absence of formal education. As a consequence, they had become a visual, participatory culture by the early twentieth century. School was a luxury when families relied on every able-bodied child to help with trapping, fishing, etc. Many of the men I interviewed were working full time by age fourteen. One octogenarian confessed that he never went to school. People from other places do not realize that both pupils and teachers spoke French in Acadiana classrooms. When state law made English mandatory in the schools, language became a barrier within the community. The educated spoke and wrote English, the uneducated spoke "Cajun." Teachers punished students for speaking French. A hierarchy of correctness was established in which oral skills and folk occupations no longer commanded respect. These language pressures from outside the community fostered an isolating sense of unity in joint inadequacy. The language tension was exacerbated by the widespread variations in "Cajun" language. Not only did variations distinguish bayou dwellers from marsh or prairie groups, but factors such as proximity to major waterways and presence of other ethnic groups nearby resulted in widely divergent language usage among communities within the same geographical area. Thus, language contributed to a sense of community autonomy
within Cajun culture. Throughout Acadiana, the contrast between educated and uneducated, between French-speaking and bi-lingual intensified the sense of being "pure Cajun." When the economic potential of the wage-earners was at risk, leadership became a language issue.

Language was a binding and a separating force in conferring leadership roles. In communities where the people's language usage set them apart from the rest of the state, only those who were bilingual were equipped to cope with business outside the community. This distinction exaggerated Cajun isolation while it encouraged a sense of group. Any communication setting where speaking or reading English was expected or required put demands on the people. Local men who were bilingual became community leaders, in the same way that those who could read and write often acted as agents for the cultural group whose language had evolved orally, outside literate channels. Even today, the words and phrases of Cajun language are incompletely recorded; there is no definitive dictionary of Cajun.¹⁵

Religion also exerted a powerful influence among the devout Roman Catholic Cajuns. The parish priest was often the most powerful community leader. He was also one of the few educated, bi-lingual residents. Fifty years ago, the Acadiana region of Louisiana was close to 90% Catholic. In areas where no other ethnic group had settled, the percentage was greater than 90%.¹⁶ Studies from the 1930's and the
1940's specify that the priest was consulted about much more than religious matters. The pervasiveness of Catholicism preordained coordination of church and social life. Parishioners relied on their local priest for knowledge and followed his advice. Because they saw themselves as a Catholic community, they accorded the priest power to influence them in economic and political realms as well as religious matters. They also recognized Catholicism as a qualifying factor for being part of the community/group. Thus, the priest's endorsement carried great weight in the community that equated "Cajun" with "Catholic."

Property practices controlled local geography and consequently contributed to group cohesion. The French system of building line villages was retained by the Acadians. In a line village the lots were laid out in long narrow strips which all bordered the bayou on the narrow side. The residents built their houses close to the water; thus, the houses were all close to each other for visiting and accessible to the navigable stream for easy transportation. The pattern of land division accomplished three things: it gave everyone access to water, provided transportation and facilitated communication. The bayou itself served as the local network for communication and transportation in the early part of this century. Many Cajuns, young and old, still identify themselves as from "down the bayou." That phrase is generic to Cajun per-
ception of the Acadian bayou parishes as "their homeland." The patterns of oral transmission of language, religion, and folk occupations were stimulated by physical proximity to extended family members. Thus, "Cajunness" was perpetuated by the property practices.

Most of the bayous of southern Louisiana empty into the Achafalaya basin or the Gulf of Mexico rather than into the Mississippi River. The swampy environment discourages road building and commercial development. That geographical limitation, coupled with the line village layout, perpetuated isolation from other cultural influences. The self-sufficient community closeness discouraged the need for interaction with other groups, thereby limiting members' exposure to competing loyalties, interpretations, and other social practices.

The residents of lower Terrebonne parish found limited opportunities for employment. The inhospitable bayou region was unsuited for large scale agricultural or business use. Trapping and oystering were the chief occupations in 1915. The Cajuns had family lots for gardening. The scant remaining arable land was planted in sugar cane by large landowners (usually not local Cajuns). The cane plantations were not major employers. A few small local stores acted as clearing houses to market the furs or oysters the men brought in. There was no local industry to provide a sound economic base. The self-reliance demanded by the isolated
hostile environment contributed to the most commonly self-described Cajun trait: fierce independence. That trait was alternately praised for successes and blamed for failures. Without fail, independence was seen as inherent in Cajun character and as such, considered integral in assessing all individual or group behavior.

Historically, the cultural distinctions that united Cajuns were the same traits that separated them from others. They came to Louisiana as outcasts, settled the isolated bayous, maintained a separate language, worshipped together, lived side by side, and shared common occupational limitations that forced them to work independently. By 1920, they defined themselves as a Catholic, as descendants of a common historic tragedy, and felt trapped in an unyielding environment. God, family, land were their outlets for expression.

Into this type of community Desire Theriot introduced shrimping and the blessing of the shrimp fleet. The common perceptions of the community were reforged in the evolutionary changes precipitated by the adoption of shrimping. According to current accounts, the community succeeded in making the transition to shrimping because they first achieved symbolic convergence that encouraged their united participation in the changes. The belief and behavior changes that took place resulted in a newly conceived group identity for the people of Chauvin. That reidentification process will be discussed at length in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER 2 ENDNOTES


3. Information furnished by Randy Whatley, author of a Cajun dictionary, teacher of 1984 course in "Cajun Culture and Language" at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.


5. Little Caillou is the bayou that runs beside Chauvin. The two geographical designations are used interchangeably by the residents.

6. Acculturation is the process by which nonmembers adopt the mores and folkways of a cultural group, becoming indistinguishable from original members, except possible by surname. Webster's New World Dictionary credits sociology for the coining of this word.


9. For evidence of the prevalence of Cajun group fictions see The Cajuns: Essays on their History and Culture by Glenn R. Conrad, (USL:1978). In addition to his coverage of this point, his book includes an extensive bibliography of writings by and about Louisiana Cajuns.


13. According to Carl A. Brasseaux, French has been "banned in Louisiana schools since 1983." Brasseaux, "Acadian Education: From Cultural Isolation to Mainstream America," in The Cajuns: Essays on their History and Culture, Conrad (USL, 1978) 223. William Faulkner Rushton's history The Cajuns: From Acadia to Louisiana has a chronology that lists: "1922--Compulsory education is adopted; French-speaking on public-school grounds in Louisiana is prohibited." I have not been able to verify what year private Catholic schools in the state enforced the language prohibition.

14. In The Truth About CAJUNS, Trent Angers explains that the educational problems of Cajun students in the 1930's included ridicule and derision from other students about their grammar and accents, and punishment from teachers for speaking French in the classroom or on the school ground. I have heard two Cajuns born in the early 1940's talk about being punished for speaking Cajun at school by the nuns who taught them.

15. Randy Whatley.


17. Parenton, 10.


19. Heard frequently by researcher in conversations with informants from Chauvin as well as with LSU students from Houma and Raceland (two Bayou region towns).
Chapter 3
Creation of a New Group Identity

Fantasy themes can be recognized when group members begin to follow often unconsciously created but recognizable patterns of language or behavior. The community upheaval created by the shift to shrimping at Chauvin resulted in group adoption of several rhetorical techniques or patterns. These patterns seem to verify that the community developed a new group identity to facilitate the changes in their social, religious, and economic lives. To establish the emergence of fantasy themes and determine what the new rhetorical patterns were, it is important to know what values undergirded their group identity, and how those values were reshaped.

The Cajuns of Chauvin shared common occupational problems in the 1920's. Fishing and trapping were uncertain; income was subsistence-level. The men, fiercely independent individualists, confronted economic pressures single-handedly. Because of the rudimentary social organization, it took the insight of Desire Theriot and the endorsement of Father Coulomb to weld the people into a cooperative group capable of moving beyond survival to success.

Each of the two leaders already had a forum to influence the fishermen and trappers. Theriot managed the Indian Ridge store where he traded pelts, oysters, and fish for
credit. The priest was the spiritual mentor to the Catholic community.

When Theriot learned about shrimping from contacts in Biloxi, he was convinced that the Louisiana coastal waters were suited to the industry. Two problems existed: the local men did not know how to shrimp, and they did not have the boats or equipment to do so. Desire Theriot was so positive that shrimping could change the fortunes of Chauvin that he was willing to undertake the risk of stocking the nets and other accoutrements of shrimping in his store and of providing them on consignment. The new profession strengthened the development of company stores - cooperatives that bound shrimper and supplier/buyer. To a degree, adopting this venture reduced the independence of these men. Before they had bartered their goods for supplies at local stores; now they would be indebted to the stores and committed to them for marketing.

Braving the Gulf was a bigger challenge. The danger triggered some far-reaching effects. Men who had poled the bayous alone in pirogues, luggers, and shallow Lafitte skiffs now faced less familiar and less predictable waters. As a consequence, the progenitors of the shrimping industry re-designed their boats for shrimping and became receptive to the idea of a fleet. For the first time, they saw value in sailing together, working side by side, and spending the night in company camps on the barrier islands.
Father Coulomb was responsible for carrying out the suggestions of Desire Theriot in bringing the blessing of the fleet to the people of Chauvin. The priest recognized that other phases of Christian life and daily routine were sanctioned by the church, and agreed to extend the same sanction to the fishermen in their new endeavor.

As shrimping altered the economy, the community identity was transformed. Traits that had been culturally imputed now took on occupational definition: individuality, ingenuity, hard work, and bravery were attributed to all shrimpers. Unified thinking was essential to the effective adoption of shrimping among these Cajuns who had not practiced consentual behavior since early Acadian settlement in Louisiana. Achieving oneness in their group identity was an essential phase in their transition to a community soundly based on the new joint economic enterprise.

The methodology of Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme analysis provides a viable framework for identifying and interpreting the resultant communication changes. Since no speeches or writings exist to document the changes, it was necessary to find another source of discourse. An excellent vehicle of community perception does exist in the annual blessing of the shrimp fleet which began in the 1920's and continues today. If the ritual is a true carrier of community belief, then changes in the ritual should parallel changes in local values. Because the blessing is a major
local event, and largely closed to nonresidents, it is easy to gather information from residents.

To ascertain the meaning of the blessing of the shrimp fleet to the participants, a methodology that can extract the rhetorical message embedded in the event is required. Fantasy theme analysis, most often applied to political rhetoric, permits rhetorical exploration of community values as expressed in an on-going local ritual. John Cragan and Donald Shields describe the advantages of the method in *Applied Communication Research: A Dramatistic Approach*:

> The focus of the approach is not on the speaker, the audience, or the situation, but on the message. The method allows a critic to describe the rhetorical dramas that form a community's social reality and analyze the meanings, emotions, and motives that are contained in these rhetorical visions.\(^1\)

The social reality of the community is the source of the values celebrated in the blessing. According to Bormann, rhetorical visions are expressions of social reality, and take form when a group, in this instance a community, share a number of values that give rise to the evolution of fantasy themes which chain out into a common vision.

Such an investigation must begin with definitions that allow appraisal of the communication behavior that constitutes social convergence. Bormann begins by isolating "dramatising messages" that tell "a narrative or story about real or fictitious people in a dramatic setting other than the here-and-now communication of the group." [p.4, Force]

While politicians paint pictures of hypothetical/implied
villains and threats, Louisiana shrimpers have similar stories in which the Cajun always won by dint of his wili-ness. I heard several of these hyperbolic and humorous tales about shrewd Cajun shrimpers who had outsmarted out-of-state shrimpers as well as big business representatives. These tales were related in casual conversations outside the interview context, so I have no documented examples. Not only do the shrimping stories exhibit the presence of "dramatizing messages," but the rituals surrounding the blessing also create a dramatic setting with reference points to the past and future.

In the people's perceptions about the blessing, "fantasy" comes into play as "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need." [p.5, Force] Researchers have created lists of needs to document "fantasy" in political studies. Economic and environmental factors produce parallel needs among the residents of Chauvin. Religious involvement in daily life offers a rich opportunity for exploration of interpretation of needs. The blessing at Chauvin began when two men collaborated to institute a religious ritual, the blessing of the shrimp fleet, to facilitate an economic change they thought would be beneficial to the whole community. Thus, the ritual became an imperative from the Catholic Church to influence community action based on the local priest's interpretation of parishioners' need for a stronger economic
Fantasy theme analysis distills the "fantasy themes" that make up the "content of the dramatising message that sparks the fantasy chain" within a group's discourse [p.5, Force]. A "fantasy type" is a "stock scenario repeated again and again by the characters or similar characters." Again, the stock character is a familiar pattern in political realms. We have seen cycles, for example, of "the common man" rescuing the people. The annual repetition of the ritual of blessing the shrimp boats makes the blessing itself a fantasy type.

The blessing of the fleet embodies many of the community beliefs that evolved or found new expression in adapting the economy to shrimping. This study will look at ritual and discourse to determine what fantasies are shared by the people of Chauvin and expressed in their boat blessing.

GROUP IDENTITY

Past Image: Where They Have Been

No one knows what year shrimping began in Chauvin. Even today, people tend to date things by major natural catastrophes like floods and hurricanes or by family milestones such as births, marriages, and deaths. Both methods are inexact. In addition, dates are hard to verify because local (Houma) newspapers' files are incomplete prior to 1938, and
New Orleans papers did not cover the inception of shrimping in this isolated community or report the fleet blessing at Chauvin until the Bishop from New Orleans officiated in 1937.2

According to J.D. Theriot, the son of Desire Theriot, the first blessing in Chauvin took place in August of 1926 or 1927. His information comes from his memories as an altar boy and from his father’s pictures and accounts. J.D. Theriot’s description includes these details:

1. The blessing took place at the dock of Boudreaux Canal Store [owned by the St. Martin family as part of Indian Ridge Company].

2. Participants were the priest(s), the Indian Ridge Company employees, and the fishermen and their families.

3. The blessing was held on a weekday which was treated as a church holiday. People wore their Sunday clothes and work was suspended for the occasion.

4. The ritual began with a mass performed at a temporary altar constructed on the dock.

5. The mass focused on prayers for a successful and safe season.

6. The congregation received communion.

7. After the mass, the people returned to their boats, which were tied up five deep across the bayou.

8. The priest passed on foot, blessing the boats and their kneeling occupants with Holy Water and the Sign of the Cross.

9. After the blessing, the people returned to their homes.

Within a few days of the blessing, the fleet sailed. Often they went out the morning following the blessing. When
questioned, J. D. Theriot assumed the boats had been freshly painted and outfitted for the occasion, but he had no firsthand knowledge or memory of that taking place.³

Most of the other accounts I gathered about early blessings were less detailed. The only significant additions came from Thelma Duplantis, Imelda Pellegrin and George Sevin.

Thelma Duplantis was the church organist in the 1930's, and accompanied the choir in the pre-blessing mass. Because of that involvement, she kept newspaper clippings about the blessing from 1937 through 1942.⁴ Based on her accounts and the clippings in her scrapbook, the 1920's format underwent several changes in the 1930's:

1. Other participants and guests attended the blessings. A number of priests and nuns usually attended, including many from nearby parishes. Among the invited guests were politicians from Houma and a guest choir as well as the local one.

2. The mass was moved to St. Joseph's Catholic Church, approximately eight miles north of the Boudreaux Canal Store, and was held indoors.

3. Following the mass, the officiating priest(s) and acolytes led a procession of communicants, boy scouts, choir(s) and unidentified others from the church across the road to the bayou side.

4. The priest performing the blessing sometimes passed the boats on foot to bless them; sometimes he stood on a barge to bless them as they sailed by.

Because no one in her family shrimped, Thelma Duplantis, like J.D. Theriot, did not know what preparations boatowners made for the blessing.⁵

Imelda Pellegrin, Thelma Duplantis's daughter, also had
some contributing information. She remembers an early blessing because it coincided with her first Communion. In the 1930’s, St. Joseph’s was a mission, and having the bishop visit was a memorable event. Isolated congregations like the one in Chauvin combined ceremonies when possible. For that reason, the fleet blessing and the first communion were held on the same day. Imelda Pellegrin remembered that the shrimpers who lived miles down the bayou (south or seaward) needed hours to get to the church and get their boats aligned for the blessing. She related this memory for me:

What I remember about the blessing of the fleet, especially one year, is when I made my “big” communion. It was really confirmation and communion at one time. We lived further down the bayou then, on the other side of the church, about two miles down. And I can remember how excited I was! That morning I could hear all the boats pass. I [felt] the excitement of knowing they were going to be so many people there. . . . Mama sewed very well. She and her mama got together and made my communion dress. And it was just beautiful! I can remember how it was made, you know. And they were getting me dressed in the morning and I could hear the boats passing. I was just all excited about it!

Mrs. Pellegrin adds that the event provided one of the rare opportunities for the more remote families to gather socially. While the men were getting the boats in place, women and children visited.

A third informant, George Sevin, explained why some shrimpers started up the bayou the night before the blessing:

[For] them boats to leave in the morning, they could
have never made it to the church from Cocodrie [seventeen miles south]. That's how slow them boats was, you know? Like, from Cocodrie to church to get to the boat blessing at noon, they'd never have made it in one day. They had to go up and sleep the night before in front of the church for the next morning, in order to be there for the next morning.  

From these accounts it seems that those who came the night before slept at the church or on their boats.  

Leo Lapyrouse added a final detail. He explained that what appear to be decorative pennants on some of the boats were actually U.S. flags for registry and company flags for identification by the company ice ships who met shrimp boats at the barrier islands to pick up consigned catches:

Today they got all kind of decoration on the boat. But we didn't have that. . . . Let me explain you this — about them flags over here [referring to a picture he was showing]. . . . Say that you want to sell to a freight boat. See, that boat may be half a mile off, but you can recognize the boat by — with a flag, different flag. . . . See, all [the different companies] had different flags on it. Different makes and different designs. So if you want to sell to that boat, you know exactly which one to go [to].  

Within these early accounts of the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin, it is possible to detect several elements that reflect shared symbolic meaning. Susanne K. Langer has talked about symbolic functions in rituals in her book *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. She argues that ritual occurred when a tribe or group formalized overt behavior in the presence of sacred objects.  

As she expanded her discussion, Langer elaborated on how groups such as tribes develop patterns of
behavior or language that stem from unconscious mannerisms. The group members adopt these "tribal ways" without thought until a member of the group departs from the usual pattern. When a breach occurs, the pattern itself is suddenly endowed with importance. The group defends behavior patterns to preserve the status quo. Langer concludes that the pattern thus takes on "symbolic" function and comes to represent a far broader meaning and value to the group than unexamined behavior or language. Thus through recognizing symbolic patterns in a ritual and discerning how they function in that context, the observer can begin to discern what a ritual means to the community of celebrants.

Victor Turner's work is also helpful in understanding the blessing. From his perspective, the blessing of the shrimp fleet would be part of the recurrent forms of social experience that he catalogues under "anthropology of experience." He argues that ritual is derived from "heart of social drama, where the structures of group experience are replicated, dismembered, re-membered, refashioned, and mutely or vocally made meaningful . . ." His contention is that ritual, a major genre of cultural performance, originates from social drama and continues to draw force and meaning from social drama. He frames his interpretation of the meaning of ritual in terms of performance instead of symbols.

The notion of symbols for Bormann is different than for
Langer and Turner. Bormann considers symbols to be means rather than ends. To him they are stimuli out of which fantasy themes spring. The overt symbols in the fleet blessing at Chauvin are the presence of the priest, prayers of blessing, Holy Water, and the Sign of the Cross. The residents of Chauvin exhibit little variation in listing those symbols in their recitals of the actual ritual of blessing the shrimp fleet. In fact, the entire community describes and interprets them the same way. They only vary the order in which they describe them, or add or omit details of historical changes such as whether the mass is indoors or out, at the church or at the store. The priest, the prayers and blessing, the vial of Holy Water, and the gesture that signifies the Cross form the inviolate requisites of the ceremony by community standards. It is possible to detect evidence of group convergence through their perceptions of each symbol.

First, we must consider the presence of the priest. St. Joseph’s, the largest church in the predominantly Catholic community, has sponsored the blessing since it began. Naturally the blessing has been performed by the parish priest assigned to the church or by the diocesan Bishop. Without exception, the community members have perceived the ceremony as a natural link between the major local industry and the predominant religious institution. In the same way that the church represented religious stability, the church’s spon-
sorship of the blessing represented special dispensation to the shrimpers and their families in confronting the vagaries of the shrimping profession. Support professions have felt equally involved. For half a century, Chauvin’s economy has been shrimp-based; a successful season affected netmakers, marine suppliers, and shrimp processing plants. No one in Chauvin questioned the involvement of the Catholic Church in their daily community life because the tradition of having family members, homes, and various possessions blessed had linked sacred and secular realms among Catholics for centuries.

The second symbolic element in the blessing is the official wording used by the priest in the ritual. He begins with an opening prayer that ritually blesses the boats, the shrimpers and their families, and the coming season. Although the participants (when asked) assumed the same initial blessing began the event annually, the words were a matter of little concern to them. Few have heard the opening ritual of the blessing itself because they were on their own boats when the blessing of the fleet started. They were concerned with the second part of the priest’s official discourse, the individual blessing conferred by the priest’s actions as he blessed each boat and its occupants. The distance between the celebrants and the priest made it impossible for them to hear his actual words anyway. They responded to tradition, to what past experience had sug-
gested he was saying.

Another detail of the officiate's role has been consistent. His essential action has been making the Sign of the Cross with a vial of Holy Water as he passed each boat. It was the recognition and acceptance of his intercessory power symbolized by the Holy Water and its sprinkling in the cross pattern that gave meaning to his actions, that allowed the shrimp fishermen and their families to invest this ceremony with the power to protect them and to guarantee the season's yield.

These three overt symbols associated with the church—the priest's presence, prayers, and performance of the cross sign—form a foundation for interpreting the religious symbolic functions of the blessing of the shrimp fleet. The priest's presence is the link between the secular and sacred in everyday life; the prayers are part of the tradition that have prompted centuries of supplicants to turn to the church for the blessing of endeavors and material goods; the cross sign is the visible power of God available to man through the church's intercession. Together, the three symbolic functions bring to light two community perceptions that can be posited as fantasy themes and are those used to insulate them from change: "unity" and "security."

The first fantasy theme, unity, springs from how these people saw themselves (and the community) as Catholic. The designation became a qualification for "in-group" membe-
ship. Catholicness was also an important principle under­
lying the union of sacred and secular elements in Chauvin's
boat blessing. To the people there, the union did not need
explanation or justification; it just was. This "unity" fantasy undergirds all of the other fantasies shared by the
community.

Related to "unity" was their sense that the ritual of the
blessing gave them "security" in their profession. Security
was an impossibility in a business dependent on variables
such as tides and weather. Yet without a sense of security,
shrimpers would have had difficulty facing the uncertainties
of their profession. The lack of variation in interpre­
tation of the overt symbols of the blessing limited their
ability to express nuances of community roles, hierarchy,
and power. Rituals repeated with little change over the
years tend to become routine for many participants. When
routine takes over, community members may be unaware that
their discourse about the ritual is based on past
perceptions and offers little insight into the present
community.

Present Image: Where They Are

Today not only do community members share a united
understanding of the commonly-recognized symbols of the
ritual, but some of their unconscious attitudes about the
community itself are also embedded in their discourse about
the celebration. The most fertile province for uncovering unconscious attitudes lies in discourse about less obvious elements of the blessing that carry symbolic meaning. The chief of these are (1) the new outfitting and repainting of the shrimp trawlers, (2) the boat decorations and (3) the shipboard parties that end the boat parade. While the participants consider boat and party preparations integral to the boat blessing, they do not think of such practical or recreational considerations as symbolic. Yet these areas afford the most potential for exploring meaning via variation and interpretation found in the rhetoric of group members. The key to understanding what these less obvious symbols show begins with an analysis of what actions carry symbolic meanings, and how those meanings convey rhetorical data about the community.

As Susie Peltier describes the process, shrimpers such as her husband Rodney go through several steps in preparing for the start of the shrimping season. The steps include putting the boat into drydock to clean the hull, repainting the boat, overhauling the motor and electronic systems, and repairing or replacing the nets and rigging. The work is done by the shrimpers themselves for the most part. Depending on how much needs to be done, the process may take up to two months. The work begins in February or March. Although the official opening day of the spring shrimp season is not directly correlated with the date of the boat blessing, the
unofficial day to have the boats ready for the new season is the day of the blessing. The boat blessing at Chauvin is traditionally held on the third Sunday in April unless that is Easter. If that is Easter, the blessing is held one week later. The reason and year it was switched from August is a matter of speculation. The steps in preparing the boats for the season are dictated by practical experience. Collectively, the preparations symbolically tie together the familiar "new birth" concept associated with spring and the start of any new venture with the cyclical nature of the shrimp "season." Such cyclic celebrations have also been identified by Victor Turner: "those [rituals] marking a whole group's passage from one culturally defined season to another in the annual cycle." The annual recurrence gave rise to another fantasy that could be called "perpetuation" as the shrimpers repeat their preparations for the new season every year. There is a sense of eternal flow to their annual role of getting ready.

Preparations for the boat decorations also begin months in advance. The most creative family members, usually wives, select a theme and begin planning shortly after the blessing each year. They collect appropriate graphic aids such as embroidery and needlework designs and children's coloring books all year. Actual work begins in January or February and involves extended family members who gather to work on cold, rainy winter days and evenings.
The hand-made decorations have supplanted the priestly procession as the visual focus for participating families as well as for observers. Typical descriptions of blessings of fleets stress the colorful decorations of the boats on parade. Winning a prize for boat decorations is a matter of both pride and competition in Chauvin. Creative talents of wives and other family members come to fruition through the implementation of their original designs. Rivalry can be bitter when the prizes are as substantial as 500 gallons of diesel fuel or a new VHF radio for a trawler. As a consequence, rules are designed to reduce conflict. Since the prizes are provided by local businesses, competitors must be from St. Joseph's parish. (The priest and the parishioners do not distinguish between the church parish and the political ward, and had trouble doing so when asked.) To avoid favoritism, judges must not be from the parish. To establish parity, single-rig and double-rig boats do not compete against each other. Finally, to prevent monopoly, the first place winner repeats their theme and decorations the following year, at which time they serve as lead boat and are ineligible for competition. From this competition springs another fantasy theme: "pride."

The desire to excel in the eyes of the community is evident in Chauvin in several ways. Mickey Duplantis told me it was a local status symbol if one's shrimp boat(s) was large and well-kept. Everyone seems to know who has had a
good season. Their shared use of specified radio channels may be one source of knowledge about each other, but the amount of time and money they expend on decorations, food and drink for the blessing day events is a highly visible source. Participating in the blessing with a new boat, new or more elaborate decorations, a bigger party, or a hired band are some of the external signs of success. Although they do not seem to flaunt success, they do exhibit pride in being able to celebrate well.

The "pride" associated with winning the boat decoration contest is an area of overt conflict within the community. While no one I talked to was willing to go into detail, some frequent winners were distressed over the jealousy shown by their neighbors. They are unnamed here by request. Committee members were also sensitive to criticism about the selection of judges. Residents who have competed for the prizes unsuccessfully seem to perceive recurrent winners as having superior attitudes as well as achievement. Thus "pride" is at times a divisive force within the community.

Another fantasy theme stems from an unlikely source, the party associated with the blessing. The party is the culmination of the blessing and boat parade. It marks the end of the shrimper's toil in preparation for the new season as well as the end of his family's efforts to decorate the boat. In addition to the family closeness fostered by the communal work done making the decorations, they are further
united by the preparations for the party itself. The guests for these shipboard fests are the family and friends of the boat owner. Most of them contribute by helping to buy and prepare the food and drinks. Some boat owners even hire bands for the occasion. When the blessing has been completed, the boats continue in procession into Lake Boudreaux where they anchor. The occupants engage in parties for the rest of the afternoon. Food abounds and liquor flows. The phrase used most often to describe the ambience was that this was "like a Mardi Gras" to the shrimpers, a time for them to relax from the hard work of getting ready to return to the harder toil of shrimp trawling. The party has come to represent a time of freedom from work and from responsibility. The party itself represents the Cajun philosophy: "Laissez les bons temps rouler!" [Let the good times roll!] Paradoxically, the boat owner is less free to party than his family and guests because he must insure their safety while aboard. It is a monumental feat to navigate a narrow bayou overcrowded by gigantic double-rigged steel-hulled trawlers plus numerous smaller boats while carrying up to a hundred drinking revelers. This job renders the shrimper a "caretaker."

The praise accorded to the hardworking trawlers is the core of another fantasy theme: There are many who describe the shrimper's job as "pioneering." Again and again, members of the community marvel at the shrimpers on whom the
economy depends. They are lauded for their hard work, ingenuity in protecting their fishing grounds, and courage in braving the Gulf in fair weather and foul. Dickie Fakier expressed this concept when I interviewed him:

I admire 'em [shrimpers]. I think they're the last pioneers that we have, quite honestly. I think fishermen are pioneers, because when you think about it, they are dependent on the sea for their living. They are sole proprietors of the ships; they own the boats; they run the boats; they have to be mechanics. These people have to have a lot of courage. ... I think it's one of the last frontiers.10

Local residents are all too aware of the destructive power of the winds and water of the Gulf of Mexico. Economic dependence on their skills almost forces the community to glorify them. Certainly every one I talked to who had ever gone out trawling had a healthy respect for the dangers and difficulty of the job. They share a perception that the shrimpers of Chauvin are true pioneers, venturing where those who are shore-bound prefer not to go. Here are several comments concerning this pioneering theme:

Dickie Fakier: They have to definitely have a lot of self-confidence to know they can do this, and be dependent on the sea.11

Imelda Pellegrin: Let me tell you, I was out on the water once with Myoh [her husband]. He had a little boat that he'd go trawling in. I was out there with Myron, our older son, and Myoh. And weather came up and it was horrible. He knew what he was doing. I'd have threw my hands up and said "Well, this is it!" You know? But he knew how to steer the boat through the wind and the waves. It was just terrible. I just thought, "Well, this is how I'm gonna die." I thought we were gonna drown then. And I'm sure they had many, many moments like that - these men.12
It is the quest of the shrimper that has resulted in the establishment of the economic base of Chauvin.

Looking at the shared fantasy themes - "unity," "security," "perpetuation," "pride," "care-taking," and "pioneering" - it is easy to see how reverence for the shrimper developed. In taking on the new profession, the fishermen earned esteem not warranted by their previous pursuits. It is not surprising that after they had once rescued Chauvin from an economic morass, they were expected to be perpetual saviors. As a group, the people of Chauvin have shared one common vision since Desire Theriot first introduced the prospect. In their rhetorical vision, the people of Chauvin see the quest for a successful shrimping season as a "Crusade," with every shrimper a Crusader charged with bringing back his own contribution for the good of the group. His own redemption/success is a by-product of the quest. His strengths are defined by the joint fantasy themes; he embodies the group's desired traits: "unity," "security," "perpetuation," "care-taking" and "pioneering." Only one trait, "pride," is not wholly desirable, a judgment also held community-wide.

Perhaps the growing external pressure and the crusading spirit unite the community to help them overcome crisis. Their group commitment would foreclose attitudes and behaviors that were detrimental to the group. In fact, the only negativism I encountered in Chauvin was the dissension
over the judging of the boat decorations. Since the preparation begins as early as January, the conflict over rivalries of pride are reactivated each winter. Perhaps the off-season also foments unspoken fears of the need of the fishermen to succeed anew each year. What these conflicts reveal is that the sense of unity is not permanent. The decorations are an area of tension and stress—a chink in the wall of solidity, revealing a flaw in the "unity" theme. The community persistence in thinking they are one is inaccurate. Now that technology has reduced the need to shrimp as a fleet, each man (and his family) is more concerned with his own success, just as each family wants the thrill of winning the prestige and prize for their boat decorations. Today individual or family "pride" supersedes group "unity."

Clearly, as Mary Douglas would point out, the social environment of Cajuns in Chauvin generates the distinctive values and belief systems "necessary for the legitimation of actions taken within it." For example, the blessing itself was instituted to encourage and support a major change in local business endeavors. The blessing's initial influence on potential shrimpers came from their perception that the priest had both religious and economic authority in the community. The community and the blessing have functioned symbiotically; change in one has had an impact on the other.

Moreover, the ritual of the blessing of the shrimp fleet
contains many dramatic elements which subsume the discourse about it. For instance, even first-time observers unfamiliar with the community values can easily describe the visual pageantry of the blessing. It is important not to let the visual elements dominate the analysis to the detriment of the additional insights afforded by the discourse.

We must understand that the fantasy themes that evolve from this dramatic encounter are rhetorical. Each theme is a belief capable of influencing how the community members interact within the culture. The themes construct the community insofar as each one either dictates behavior to accept a recognized group value or to redefine a value currently in flux.

While this chapter has provided a foundation for understanding the commonalities of the community through their fantasy themes, as a group the people of Chauvin also exhibit four fears that are prevalent in their stories, common phrases, and daily observations. The communal fears are: (1) loss of land, (2) loss of business, (3) loss of religious roots, and (4) loss of their cultural identification. Since these categories parallel factors relied on to establish the Cajun sense of cultural unity, it is important to note what fantasy themes the community members depend on to help them deal with these stress-producing fears. The conflict between the sense of unity and their fears will be the basis of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3 ENDNOTES


2. Initial data reported by Thelma and Mickey Duplantis. Library files checked at LSU, State Library, and Terrebonne parish; data verified by Emile Theriot who has done research in Terrebonne Parish.


4. The newspaper clippings from Thelma Duplantis' scrapbook are not all identified by either year or paper. Some of them do not correspond to extant newspaper files of the area.


8. Imelda Pellegrin.


14. According to Monseigneur Brunet, the Official Ritual of the Catholic Church lists several standard rituals for blessing objects. Priests are authorized to adapt them as needed when new requests or needs for blessings arise. The rituals date back to the Middle Ages.

16. All of the people I asked about this had suggestions to offer, but no facts. See Mickey Duplantis, Emile Theriot, George Sevin, and Leo Lapyrouse.


19. Fakier.

20. Imelda Pellegrin.

Chapter 4  
Coping With Change

Rituals arise when a group of people are united by some belief or behavior that influences their common value system. Theoretically, performance of the ritual perpetuates the values it reveres. Though the group members may have individualized roles, they are unified by the interrelationships that evolve as they act out the ritual. Over a period of time, changes in roles or their relationships can exert pressure that alters the form or diminishes the influence of a ceremony. Victor Turner says ritual holds the generating source of culture and structure. Hence by definition, ritual is associated with social transitions while ceremony is linked with social states. Performances of ritual are distinctive phases in the social process whereby groups and individuals adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment.¹

Ernest Bormann adds that value changes/alterations have a corresponding impact on a group's fantasy themes and the ways in which these themes help to enact the group's rituals. When fantasy themes are challenged by stress, the rhetorical vision becomes most evident, because the group must either support their rhetorical vision to preserve their identity or redefine themselves. When faced with this identity dilemma, the participants introduce new dialogue to the performance and description of their ritual. This new
dialogue results in fresh fantasy themes that reinforce or replace the old rhetorical vision. This chapter will look at fantasy themes currently embedded in the ritual and descriptions of the blessing of the fleet at Chauvin as they reflect changes in the ritual and reveal conflicts affecting the residents. Although the chapter will be organized around fantasy themes pinpointed in chapter three, the four group fears given in the close of that section will be correlated as well.

UNITY

The theme of "unity" expressed by "community-wide participation" seems to be threatened, according to the rhetoric of residents of Chauvin. First, despite the local perception of the blessing as community-wide, not everyone is involved. Second, one of the characteristics of community membership, "Cajunness," is being redefined in ways that bring group values into question. Third, festivals that formerly encouraged Chauvin to remain a closed-community are undergoing transitions.

The rhetoric of the people of Chauvin reveals a widespread proprietary attitude toward the local boat blessing, regardless of the degree of participation. The residents fall into three categories of participation: participants-
shrimpers who decorate their boats to receive the blessing and join the boat parade; observers—those who take part by watching the blessing from docked boats or from the side of the bayou; and non-participants—people who do not attend at all. Each type describes the event with the same degree of enthusiasm that would suggest they were all active participants. Many of the people I interviewed about the blessing were unaware of the discrepancy between their perception of the event as community-wide and the fact that non-participation is wide-spread. Pronoun choices were consistently plural, identifying the information with the group rather than with the individual telling the account; instead of saying "I," they referred to "we," "our," "they" and "the boats." The following quotes are representative:

Helen Lirette: Now we go down to Boudreaux Canal — and the boats just pass us and go into the lake.° [observer]

Susie Peltier: They had like 120 boats that participated in the blessing last year.° [participant]

Eudras Prospere: We have a outdoor mass Sunday at ten, Sunday morning. . . Then after that we got to the boat and the parade starts. Lasts until about four o’clock, I guess. Depends on how many boats they have.° [participant/observer.]

Dickie Fakier: Shrimp blessings have been a part of our culture and our heritage in this area since the year one, probably.° [non-participant]

Roles in the ritual determine the areas in which participants and observers are separated. The original format consisted of a Sunday morning mass followed immediately by a processional across the road to the bayou side where the
blessing was held. The introduction of decorations forced a change in that pattern. The boatowners no longer attend the Sunday morning mass preceding the blessing because they spend Sunday morning finalizing boat decorations and preparing food for the party aboard. To accommodate them, St. Joseph’s Catholic Church holds a special mass for the fishermen and their families late Saturday afternoon. The special mass reinforces their role as "elected"; it also distinguishes them from the non-fishermen who attend the Sunday morning mass.

The separation of participant from observer parallels the working relationships between the shrimpers who bring home the crop and the service businesses that support the shrimping industry. The shrimp crop is the community measure of success for any given season. Three local businessmen associated with shrimping, Steve Braud, Dickie Fakier and Andrew Blanchard, provided insight into the participant/spectator split among residents.

Steve Braud runs the Boudreaux Canal Store on whose property the Sunday outdoor mass is held. He is not originally from Terrebonne Parish but moved to Chauvin to run the store owned by his wife's family, the St. Martins. As a newcomer, he has never taken the ritual and its unifying role in the community for granted. He actually knows more details about the blessing than some people who have lived on Petit Caillou all of their lives. He also
considers it professionally important to be on the site [the St. Martin property] the day of the blessing as a symbol of his support and dependence on the shrimpers. When asked why he felt it was important to attend, he replied:

For so many of the people down here, I think that is the big event of the year for them. Like Houma and New Orleans have Mardi Gras, these people have a blessing of the fleet... I think that most of the people down here think that it is a part of their lives.

Dickie Fakier, also a non-resident, is from nearby Houma. He is the manager of the Indian Ridge Shrimp Company which is also part of the St. Martin family holdings. This man, whose livelihood depends on the success of the shrimping season, holds no fealty to the blessing or to the men who supply his plant with shrimp. His relationship with the local shrimpers is purely business, and he does not think they expect his presence as an endorsement of the interdependence:

I don’t think their feelings are hurt or anything [by his non-attendance]. I’m not saying that they wouldn’t like for me to be here but the [other] problem is if you get on a boat... if... you pick out one boat to ride, then you may hurt more feelings.

He used to attend the blessing as a spectator, but now he uses his day of rest to get away from his work.

Of the three, the only Chauvin native is Andrew Blanchard, who manages IST [International Seafood Traders]. He shed the most light on the festivities from an alternating position as insider/outsider. Mr. Blanchard has
on occasion joined friends on boats for the blessing and the party. According to him, one should "ride" [be on one of the boats] to fully experience the blessing. Mr. Blanchard said:

Those that’s on the boats, they have a tremendous time. They just get drunk and polluted and everything else, a lot of ’em. Just have a real good time, that’s it.10

Father Brunet agreed:

Everybody gets on the boats. So, all the fun’s happening on the boats. Now, people do line the bayou to see the parade.11

Father Brunet’s listed the party on the boats as part of the process or elements of the blessing:

We get on the front, on the lead boat of the parade, and as we go down the bayou, we bless all of the boats. Those that want to join the parade just fall in line right in the back of us. . . . Then we all go out in the lake and they make like a flotilla of boats . . . . Then there’s a party. They have crawfish that they serve on the boats, food, barbeque. Some of ’em have a band on the boat, play some music. And they’ll stay out there about two or three hours and just enjoy the water skiing, speed boats, and all that in the lake.12

Boat ownership or access to owners constitutes "membership" for the blessing. When I attended the blessing in 1986 as the guest of Father Brunet, my actual host and hostess were Rodney and Susie Peltier, owners of the lead boat that year. Another guest, Laise Ledet, told me how fortunate I was to have been included. She explained: "Invitations to the parties aboard are usually reserved for family and close friends."13 People without a boat or an invitation are reduced to bayou-side spectator. It is possible to join the
party by requesting permission to ride someone's boat and providing money or food and beverages in payment. That option was explained by Mickey Duplantis and George Sevin:

Sevin: It's a get together and everybody party, pitch in.
Duplantis: They got offers. People will ask to ride it, these boats.
Sevin: Oh, yeah.
Duplantis: They say, "I'll pay, I'll give you so much to ride the boat." Just to have fun.14

Though being on a boat is desirable for many, being a spectator is an acceptable community role, one not deemed threatening to the group's unity.

Neither is the non-participant considered detached from the rest of the community. Non-attenders' unquestioned right to use plural pronouns in group discussions of the blessing makes it clear that residency alone confers belonging; consequently they are not restricted from discussing the familiar event. Not one of my informants noticed any inconsistency in allowing non-participants to contribute information. I suspect that the tradition is so familiar that it never occurs to any one there that group members might be uninvolved, or that uninvolvment could indicate community disunity. While observers and non-participants are non-threatening to the group, there are ways in which the split hints at other rifts, other ways in which group "unity" is threatened.

One of the most pressure-laden threats is the impending crisis with "Cajun" identity as it is influenced by tourism. A growing movement to capitalize on ethnic cultural traits
has been occurring in many cultures and is affecting the Cajuns who live along Petit Caillou. A dilemma occurs when people who want to preserve their uniqueness are pressured to market it. The request sets up an oxymoronic situation. If culture is not preserved, it will be lost; if it is marketed, it will be distorted.  

The people of Chauvin use several rhetorical strategies to mediate this conflict between public and private cultural behavior and thus to ease the pressure on their sense of unity. First, while the community is not truly closed, the people, particularly the older ones, want to know who outsiders are and why they are there before they self-disclose. Withholding community knowledge is a tool to disconfirm outsiders. They withdraw to discourage those adjudged as intruders. Endorsement by the parish priest or by someone they know is a prerequisite to effective communication with them. Recognizing this tendency, Father Brunet agreed to intercede for me when I first began my research in the area:

Would you want me to call 'em? [Informants he had suggested.] Or you want to call 'em and tell 'em I recommended you? That you've talked with me already?

...  

[Talking to Susie Peltier:] I'm going to give her your name, and just remember the name, Betsy Gordon, so that if she calls you, you won't say: "Who this?"

...  

Tell him [J. D. Theriot] you talked with me, and if he's got any questions to call me.
Furthermore, he found a resident, Mickey Duplantis, who was willing to arrange interviews with some of the older people in the community, and to take me to talk to them. Some of them have a rudimentary command of English, so Mickey's help was invaluable. Our visits were always preceded by two telephone calls, one to see if informants would agree to talk to me, the second to make sure our visit was at a convenient time. Clearly, "dropping in" with a stranger was unacceptable behavior. The need for intercessors was a clear-cut reminder of the past isolation of Louisiana's Cajuns. As long as non-residents are "outsiders," locals remain culturally unique. As more and more visitors are attracted to Cajun culture, the people of Chauvin will face more and more pressure to adapt their cultural artifacts and festivals to meet market demands.

Unfortunately, the residents are split on the issue of tourism. Some want to capitalize on their heritage; others, equally proud of it, do not. Because feelings run high, I could not convince people to talk to me about tourism for the record. A representative from the Houma tourist bureau, not a member of the community, did bring the subject up in front of me. The discussion was not encouraged by the local residents present.

There is one related activity that also distinguishes a local event from a tourist event. "Lagniappe on the Bayou," is a major cultural festival sponsored by St. Joseph's each
October. At one time a small fair was held on the same day of the blessing. The two events were separated in the early 1970's. The fall fair is a major fundraiser. Family unity is fostered when entire families create crafts and other marketable items to sell to the thousands of visitors who come to sample the food, fun, and crafts at the festival. "Lagniappe," as it is referred to locally, has attracted up to 20,000 tourists and netted up to $30,000. The success of this "tourist" attraction intensifies the contrast between it and the blessing which has been retained "for members only." Everyone seems to agree that recombining the two is not desirable. The blessing remains a religious ritual despite the secular preparations that precede and the rowdy party that follows it. It preserves a sense of unity: the blessing of the shrimp fleet is a major vehicle for asserting the people's identity as Catholics, reinforced by a ritual that confers community-wide blessings on their chief economic endeavor.

The second strategy for preserving private cultural behavior is directly related to the shrimp fleet blessing. Publicity about the blessing is intentionally limited. The boat blessing is not advertised outside the parish. The Houma newspaper prints the date, as do the diocese paper and the church bulletin. No other news releases are sent out. Houma's tourist bureau does advertise it, but only in response to inquiries.
In a third rhetorical strategy, residents retain their privacy by reserving certain areas of participation in the blessing for themselves. Non-residents may dock boats along Petit Caillou to receive the blessing and even join the boat parade and anchor in Lake Boudreaux to party like everyone else, but they are not eligible for the prizes for boat decorations. Eudras Prospere, the chair of the boat blessing committee explained:

For our boat blessing, now people from the outside can ride, but not eligible to win a prize. Once you start doing that, you invite the whole state... makes friction. So the best thing to do, we just kept it [prize eligibility] to our people.  

The reference to outsiders here highlights the instability felt by the community members who perceive an us-them dichotomy. The implied designation of "insiders" reaffirms community oneness by separating the members from all others.

In summary, the people of Chauvin practice three strategies that strengthen community bonds. The first, withholding information from "outsiders," is not specific to the blessing of the fleet, but the other two are. They intentionally limit publicity about the blessing, and they also restrict participation in the ritual. These three strategies reserve the ritual for the "insiders," the shrimpers of Chauvin.

The only discourse about overt community conflict concerned the competition for the best boat decorations. Sources requested not to be recorded or quoted when they...
discussed friction over the boat blessing committee's selection of judges or because some people were disgruntled when others were frequent winners. Competition over winning the valuable decoration prizes creates tension and stress. This tension is more proof of the inaccuracy of the community perception that the residents share the same values. Now that technology has reduced the need to shrimp as a fleet, each man (and his family) is more concerned with personal success than in the past, just as each family decorates their boat in the hopes of winning both prestige and the prize.

Further investigation revealed that the shrimpers not only decorate with their own family and occasionally their friends, they also leave port in groups of two and three, bound by family or friendship ties. They do not function as a fleet at work, with a couple of exceptions. During an unrecorded conversation, one of the men remarked that shrimpers from the same bayou tend to maintain radio contact at sea using a code to identify themselves. He said there were two advantages of knowing where "friends" were: if a ship had problems, other shrimpers could come to the rescue faster than the Coast Guard as a general rule; and if shrimpers hit a bigger run of shrimp than they could pull in, they called friends to capitalize on the bounty. He said when such a call goes out "You can walk on iron." In other words, Chauvin shrimpers radio friends who converge in
the area, working so closely they could almost step from boat to boat. The emphasis on "friends" made it clear that the code was often more specialized than community-wide; it was reserved for those who went out together. Fears of over-shrimping keep the men from being overly generous with others. This communal bond is an inconsistent reinforcer of unity since it bonds sub-groups rather than the whole community.

Looked at as a group, these examples of unity at work in Chauvin are chinks in the wall of solidarity put forth by the residents of Chauvin. The "unity" theme is flawed by their own admissions of non-participation, non-attendance, non-agreement and rivalry about the preparations, competition, and hierarchy of the blessing rituals. Tensions among the actual participants in the blessing are the strongest, and suggest that "the fleet" is a misnomer. The title "fleet" survives despite almost unspoken internal competition over catching shrimp and winning prizes. The competition is subtle, much like the almost indiscernible differences that threaten the community's supposed unity. And yet the rhetorical strategies discussed, along with the enactment of the blessing itself, help the group feel united.
Another seam showing strain is the community "security."
The blessing of the shrimp fleets parallels other blessing rituals with presumed mystical power to insure the attention and favor of God.

Rituals have formed a link between secular and sacred experience for centuries. The official liturgies of the Roman Catholic Church include some standard blessings which serve as patterns when other occasions call for a special blessing. When a blessing is extended into an extended paticipatory event, it merits more intensive analysis than simple invocation. Indeed, Victor Turner claims performance rituals are active rather than passive mediums:

Performances of ritual are distinctive phases in the social process, whereby groups and individuals adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment.²³

Although Turner does not specify how the adjustments and adaptations occur, he does not perceive performance as static. Frank E. Manning’s summary of the power of ritual also asserts an active role for rituals:

Ritualistic celebration thus conveys a version of the social order that is meant to be believed, or at least acknowledged and adhered to, and over which society exerts control.²⁴

While Manning’s goal is to explain how the dominant symbols of a celebration clarify its conceptual and emotional significance, he actually builds a strong argument for rhetorical or persuasive power exerted by the people who take part.

In the blessing of the fleet, the opening prayer is the
only written discourse used by the priests at Chauvin. [Copy in Appendix A.] As mentioned before, this prayer is heard only by those participants who are within a few yards of the presiding cleric. The specific boons requested are a good crop of shrimp, resultant economic security, and safety and good health for the shrimpers and their families. In this instance, the blessing’s unifying potential is evident. These appeals to God call for the common good of the community, a closer bond with their neighbors than the shrimpers might actually choose for themselves.

For many of the older residents, the church’s role is central to their sense of security because few remember when shrimping and the blessing were not inextricably linked by the local Catholic church’s part in planning and carrying out the event. J. D. Theriot described the religious composition of the area for me:

Theriot: You have other good religions coming in. All doing the same now, but in those days, that [the Catholic church] was it. Had very few. [Other denominations.]
Gordon: So - the church’s part of this was to help build the sense of community and the support systems of those fishermen?
Theriot: (Affirmative nod.)
Gordon: When it [the blessing] started, was practically everyone here a member of the church? Most of the fishermen?
Theriot: Mostly, yeah. You had -- I don’t know what you call ’em. They’re back-yard-Catholics, but they— when it came to the end, they were all buried [Catholic].

As far as Mr. Theriot is concerned, you can’t talk about shrimping, the blessing, or the history of Chauvin without
discussing Catholicism:

You mind if I tell you a little joke about the mass shown in a picture—what's concerning the Catholic religion which this was? We have to talk about it whether we like it or not.36

He recognizes that the celebration today is not as worshipful as when he was a boy:

There was nothing but the boat blessing. There was no parade. Everybody was there. It was strictly religious. You had no beer, you had no crawfish.37

Four other older informants contributed the same perception:

Mickey Duplantis: I remember it was very solemn. People would kneel and genuflect, and now—It's a big party. It's a big party.
Thelma Duplantis: They have to remind them though—
Mickey Duplantis: It's changed.
Thelma Duplantis: --to put in the bulletin to please be respectful, to be respectful when the priest—when they pass with the blessing. Cause some people are not interested in the religious part of it. They just pass by to go picnic in the lake.38

George Sevin: It's a great change from the boat blessing that you got. . . . I think today they get the boat blessing and everything, but mostly it's a big party they have. . . . And in those days when they have the boat blessing, it was strictly like a traditional way to get their boat blessed to go and start the season, start working. . . . Some of the old fishermen still have the old tradition where some of the young see it in a different way than the old fishermen used to see it. That's the difference in what I see in it. But the mass, it's the same. . . . . . . At one time, at that boat blessing a long time ago, you didn't have no beer and stuff like that. That was strictly—just a boat blessing. That's all it was.39

Emile Theriot: I think it was . . . probably more religious, I guess. Feelings were deeper in those days than they are today. A lot of the younger generation—it's just an outing. It's put it that way, a picnic.40
While none of them were consciously referring to a sense of security fostered by the blessing, they were lamenting the secularization of the total event, as well as the corruption of the actual moment of blessing. For example, we can contrast comments about the former religious tone - "It was strictly religious," "I remember it was very solemn," "I think it was probably more religious" - with the description of current secular corruptions - "Now it's a big party," "It's just an outing," "They have to remind them - to put in the bulletin to please be respectful." Mickey Duplantis mentioned several times that the blessing used to be more religious:

I can remember when I was an altar boy at the mass that preceded the blessing. And Mama can tell you the same thing. It was a very solemn thing... People were very solemn at the time. I can remember that. Cause I was standing there with the priest, you know? And they'd kneel. But now they don't kneel anymore.31

The pictures from the nineteen twenties, thirties, and forties show the audience wearing their Sunday clothes. Today they are more likely to be wearing shorts or swim suits and waving beer cans as the priest(s) pass by. Most of the older people blame the changes on infiltration by non-Catholics and non-locals after World War II:

Mickey Duplantis: We had a lot of transients come in here. They bought boats, and they got into the industry. [Shrimping] And George can tell you, there's a lot of people that's from away that's in business now. And that's got a lot to do with your blessing being changed too. Your younger people didn't have the same thoughts or they wasn't strict Catholics like their parents were, you know? Their
parents were very strict Catholics, and the younger generation just changed. I think that had a lot to do with changing the blessing. It’s more or less a fun thing now.

George Sevin: It’s a big problem. It’s changed plenty. Just for instance, in the last couple of years, we got a lot of boats that’s from Texas. . . . After the war a lot of these people came down here with their family. And some of them, like from Texas and Houma, they got remarry with the girls from around here. Some of the boys round here got marry with the girls from over— So it’s not the old families that you had on the bayou. That’s why you having the change right now [that] you having with the boat blessing. And everything.

The feelings of expatriation and dichotomizing expressed by these two men seem representative of the insecurity prevalent among the older generations. The reverse side of the security fantasy is evidenced by similar complaints about ways things have changed. The complaints reveal the uncertainty and frustration brought on by trying to hold on to past values, once sources of security. The blessing, then, linked inextricably with their history as a shrimping community, also provides a vent for anxieties about the secularization that is eroding the very values by which they had achieved group identity. Because so many segments of the community participate in the blessing, the ritual is an excellent forum for addressing their insecurities. Of the activities they transact as a community, the blessing of the shrimp fleet is a better conduit of community communication than "Lagniappe" because the blessing is an internal tradition meant for insiders.

Because the blessing has been the most memorable local
annual event, the residents find it easy to trace their recollections about community changes through memorable blessings, as if the blessings themselves were significant passages or events in their lives such as Imelda Pellegrin's memories of her first communion. Sometimes they may be unsure of details from years that seemed insignificant to them, but for the years that stand out in their memories, they tend to be insistent about the accuracy of their memories. When conflicting memories are presented, a verbal fight can result. Those with security conflicts now seem to have the strongest need to have their past validated.

Father Brunet's attitude seemed less critical than some long time residents about current practices that seem to violate past precedents. Some senior citizens still consider him an upstart when he makes changes in the parish. He did not seem personally worried that today's alcoholic consumption and casual attire diminished the religious element of the blessing. He commented:

You do have trouble sometimes, and there's no doubt that some maybe drink too much. They drive speed boats too fast. But these are all aberrations to what we plan. Some may drink too much on the occasion, it's true, but it's not, at this point, the main factor of it.34

In the preceding excerpt, the priest clarified that from the church's perspective, the important part of the blessing is "what we plan," in other words, the church's blessing on the shrimpers, their families, their ships, and the upcoming season. His description, by refusing to admit that
the "aberrations" disrupt the meaning and value of the blessing, is a discursive strategy that preserves the ritual while diminishing the evidence of its corruption (drinking too much, and speeding). Susie Peltier expressed a similar sense of security when reviewing the attitudes of devout young adults in their 30's and 40's:

I think we feel secure knowing that the boat is being blessed. It makes you look forward to a season, and maybe a better season than if you wouldn't have had your boat blessed. [it's like the security you feel with baptising a child.] Anytime you have something you value blessed, you feel [more] secure about it than if you wouldn't have had it done.30

Clearly, both Father Brunet and Suzie Peltier find security in the ongoing involvement of the church in this endorsement of the local shrimpers.

A dissenting view of youthful attitudes came from two sources: an unidentified young shrimper [a neighbor of Susie Peltier's who made his comments off the record] and criticism from the older people. The young man told me that he didn't believe in the blessing. He said most of the other young people in their twenties considered the practice superstition or empty ritual. Although he did not believe that the blessing influenced either the safety of the shrimpers or their success in shrimping, he did admit that he had his boat blessed every year--just to be safe.30 On the other hand, the older shrimpers consider the carefree, partying attitude among the young people a corrosion of the Catholic faith.
Mickey Duplantis: Now a lot of people are very sincere about it. . . . They majority now are out to party. And it's your younger generation that party.

George Sevin: Younger generation, that's right, the younger generation. They feel the partying attitude is corrupting Cajun values in the home and in business as well. This is a frightening concept to them because they believe the former Catholic domination of the community fostered positive values for family and work.

The sense of security promised by the ritual of the blessing of the shrimp fleet is faltering. The people of Chauvin cope with this decreased security by substituting a different concept familiar to Louisiana Catholics to describe their secular/sacred involvement in the blessing: they called it the "The Cajun's Mardi Gras." The comparison works on several levels: both Mardi Gras and the blessing of the fleet feature decorations started for the following year shortly after the prior year’s celebration is over; each has highly visual symbolism portrayed in parade form; both are church-based rites that appear to encourage/condone secular license among the participants who indulge in excesses of eating, drinking, and merry-making before the new season of Lent or shrimping begins. In a sense this secular element of the blessing seems to detract from the sense of security provided by rituals. Yet in tying the blessing to the ancient traditions surrounding Mardi Gras, the Cajuns of Chauvin are creating their own Mardi Gras
distinctive from the kind of reveling associated with the festival in cities such as New Orleans and Mobile. In that sense, these shrimpers are retaining their own separateness, inventing their own independent interpretation of the event. Whereas the more familiar parades mounted by Mardi Gras Krewes completely lose any religious symbols or performance, the blessing of the shrimp fleet is still visibly and emotionally rooted in the Catholic Church's ritualistic traditions. The priest is present in a highly visible role. Even non-believers want their boats blessed. In a period when Louisiana Cajuns are seeing their cultural distinctiveness dissolving, the retention of this local tradition modified only by local restraints helps the participants feel a sense of security insofar as they are visibly reminded that the "Cajun Mardi Gras" is distinctively theirs in a way that other fleet blessings which have gone "tourist" cannot share.

In summary, the "security" provided by taking part in the blessing can be only as strong as the religious commitment of the celebrants. Young and old alike agree that the religious fervor of the past has diminished. Catholicism no longer rules the daily lives of the people along Little Caillou as it did when the blessing was begun. As a result, there is a noticeable lack of consistency in the degree of faith placed in the ritual's power to insure God's blessings for the shrimpers, their families, and the upcoming season.
Perpetuation of the status quo in Chauvin is unlikely. Two major threats exist: the shrimpers of Chauvin find themselves pitted against nature and against their fellow humans.

Their biggest battle with nature is due to rapid loss of land to coastal erosion quickened by the ravages of flooding and hurricanes. People have created or aggravated most of the problems lower Terrebonne Parish faces with the sea. Without the protection of the barrier islands, Louisiana is losing coastline to the Gulf of Mexico every year. State commissions have studied the problems for more than thirty years but have taken no preventive action. Various industrial and educational concerns located at Cocodrie (south of Chauvin, nearer the Gulf) have cut straight canals to the sea, increasing the erosion rate of lower Terrebonne Parish. Rodney Peltier’s mother said the destruction of the muskrat breeding grounds around Lake Boudreaux are the result of ecological imbalances caused by oil companies.39 Eudras Prospere chronicled ecological changes in the area:

Prospere: In the nineteen hundred’s you could leave Montegut and go all the way to the island -- with a horse and buggy. You only had one little -- And they had some boards that the horse and buggy could go across. My daddy used to tell me about it. That’s how much it changed.
Gordon: Are there more bayous now than there used to be?
Prospere: Oh, there's more bayous. The lakes are eaten up. For instance, right there at Boudreaux Canal, on your right when you pass over the bridge? All that water they have? That used to be cattle grazing pasture. We used to play Cowboys and Indians in the back of them trees. There's hardly any more trees left. And I'm but forty-four.

Thelma Duplantis: The land is sinking.
Prospere: And I remember we used to play Cowboys and Indians in them pastures. And you look at that today and say that is how it was thirty years ago. It's unbelievable!

The area Prospere referred to is all marsh and has not been able to support cattle for years. Men with the courage to face the sea from the deck of a shrimp boat do not put their fear of the sea's destructive potential on the coastlands into direct statements. Instead, they couch their fears in euphemistic metaphors like the one above that substitutes the loss of childhood play areas for the destruction already visited on their environment. They imply that doom is encroaching in exchanges like the one below:

Mickey Duplantis: Sixty years from now, if nothing's done, this [Chauvin] will be like that [Boudreaux Canal Bridge area] is down there.
Eudras Prospere: When? How long?
Mickey Duplantis: About sixty years.
Eudras Prospere: I don't give it that long.

The language used to describe the impending danger is self-deceptive: the men compare "this" with "that" without naming the endangered landscape and comment that "Houma will be under water" eventually. Metaphorically, they substitute Houma to their north (and fifteen miles further from the Gulf of Mexico) for Chauvin and soften the implied devastation of being wiped out by the euphemistic phrase "under
water." Houma is almost twenty miles north of them. Gradual erosion or major inundations would have to submerge Chauvin before Houma, but they never can quite bring themselves to admit that. They speculate on whether Houma has twenty or fifty years; they never address the possibility that they could be homeless and landless sooner than those speculative dates if a full force hurricane hit that part of Louisiana. Erosion, flood or hurricane damage would wipe out Cocodrie to the south before Chauvin, but that potential is also too frightening to confront openly. Because the sea is uncontrollable, they vent their fears through comments about Houma's precariousness and with complaints about the state agencies that have contributed to their unprotected state. Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky explicate the kind of risk-taking and awareness evidenced by these shrimpers: "people select their awareness of certain dangers to conform with a specific way of life." They add that "people who adhere to different forms of social organization are disposed to take (and avoid) different kinds of risk."

In other words, locked into a profession and an environment that leaves them helpless in many ways, metaphor becomes a linguistic strategy for the people of Chauvin to preserve a sense of perpetuation.

The other enemy threatening their future is more identifiable. Cajuns have long prided themselves on their ability to scratch out a living from an unyielding environment. One
of their cultural "traits" is their hard-working nature un-
daubed by the difficulty of the task. The Cajun shrimpers' 
self-concept, born of grueling eighteen-hour days of trawl-
ing, is being challenged by Vietnamese shrimpers who make 
them seem lazy by comparison. To Cajun shrimpers the Viet-
namese are interlopers who distort the concepts of hard work 
by shrimping twenty-four hours a day, as evidenced in the 
conversations below:

Eudras Prospere: They close the [shrimping] season for 
about two hundred mile [of the coast]. That's about 
where the international waters start. But there's 
some that stay out there the year round. They stay 
out there whole year with the--

Mickey Duplantis: The Vietnamese are doing the most. 
They have two or maybe three boats--. They always 
keep a boat or two out there trawling. Night--all 
the time--See, people down here don't do that. They 
go out for a few days and come in."

Dickie Fakier: We have a serious problem with our 
domestic fleet that they may not survive in the 
years to come--with the inundation of the Vietnamese 
fishermen. They are very industrious people. And 
they work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a 
week--Where our fishermen work eight or ten days and 
come in, these people live off the boat, families 
live on the boat. And the shrimp are going to be 
there just so long. And that's that."

The most impassioned criticism of the Vietnamese came from 
George Sevin, who averred:

A lot of people don't realize, but that's [the 
Vietnamese shrimpers] a big problem. All the 
Vietnamese coming down here and--Our fishing industry 
was already overloaded with the Cajun--And bring in 
all them Vietnamese, that ain't gon' help. This is 
people that want to catch the last shrimp. They 
don't want no laws; they don't want nothing; they 
just want to go out there and work twenty-four hours 
a day. And you cannot have that with a fishing 
industry. They have to have close season for them 
[the shrimp]."
Although night shrimping is not illegal, it is considered ecologically unsound by the Cajuns. Part of their folk wisdom is based on the perpetuation fantasy. Emile Theriot expressed the local attitude best:

I think that the salvation of the fishing industry, even with as many boats as we have, is to stop catching shrimp at night—You work 'em twenty-four hours a day—anything—it's like picking beans four times a day. Don't do those things—eventually going to be none left there."

Shrimp do need time to propagate, grow, and replenish themselves. Over-fishing will have a permanent effect on the shrimp population in the Gulf, a solid concern the shrimpers of Chauvin share.

Verbal hostility toward the Vietnamese was the only refuge of the men to whom I talked. In spite of the fact that no one in the area will rent or sell land to the despised foreigners, local ship builders will take on commissions to build trawlers for them. According to Dickie Fakier "The Vietnamese are buying theirs [boats] cash." Locals take pride in having the boatbuilding skills their rivals lack and in demanding high prices for their work. Commercial dealings such as boat building offer the Cajuns one way to best the Vietnamese.

As the community sees it, the blessing continues the traditions set up sixty years ago. The reality of threats from nature and Vietnamese shrimpers are ignored in the boat blessing's emphasis on the local shrimpers and the ideal of "a new season" re-created by the annual performance of the
blessing. The cyclical nature of the blessing reinforces the "perpetuation" fantasy that life goes on the same from year to year, a theme common to all annual fertility celebrations. Here the sea and not the land is credited with fertility, and the season is for an aquacultural rather than an agricultural crop. As is typical of myth and ritual forms, the blessing has becomes a panacea that permits the participants to avoid direct confrontation with forces they cannot control. In their helpless position, they continue the ritual whose purpose has not been adapted to present pressures because only in its archaic state can it let them ignore current threatening conditions with impunity.

CARE-TAKING

The economic base for Chauvin is shrimping. There are few businesses in the area that are not dependent on the fortunes of the shrimpers. This is an area with no motels or hotels, no fast food restaurants, no chain stores of any kind. Shrimp processing plants operate seasonally; in other words, when the shrimp boats come in with heavy loads, the work goes on day and night until the processing is complete, but the plants close or go on reduced shifts when the shrimp season ends. The shrimpers set the economic pace for the community.

Because shrimpers provide the commodity the community is
built on, they are respected on the basis of their success. Those who do not shrimp have usually gone out trawling at least once, and appreciate the work that goes into a successful haul. The citizens also recognize that the shrimpers rely on a combination of handed-down lore and intuition. The best electronic equipment to monitor weather, the most sophisticated data from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, and the biggest boats and nets do not give these hardy men the skills needed to find and catch shrimp. Only experience learned on the job can do that, plus a little luck.

Shrimpers' knowledge must extend to ship-building, net-mending, and motor over-hauling. Susie Peltier explained:

Gordon: Most of them do all of the work themselves or the majority of it?
Peltier: Right. Most of these guys are jack of all trades, you know, and they paint them themselves. Now, some of them may have to hire mechanics to check their engines and some of their equipment—“"

Being able to repair or mend machinery or equipment is essential when they go to sea because they do not know what problems will occur when they are out in the Gulf. In addition, they rarely hire other people to do the repair work. Both wooden-hull and steel-hull boats built along Petit Caillou are constructed by the fishermen themselves. Like shrimp trawling, boat-building skills are learned and passed on communally. Susie Peltier showed me a scrapbook cataloging the progress of the construction of the shrimp trawler built by her husband, Rodney, and friends between
the Peltier's trailer and the bayou:

We built the new boat [Lady Sue Claire] in eighty-three. . . . I made a album of it. I took pictures everyday. . . . Now this is the first load of iron we got—and pipe. . . . Some of our friends in the picture that helped build the boat. And now you see that the boat's going up. . . . This is the day before the blessing, trying to finish it to get it ready to ride. . . . And so many of our family and friends just came by. . . . People were coming in and coming in to help us be ready. Cause they knew we were such in a bind to have it ready to ride the next day for the blessing.  

Based on her account, boat building is like old-fashioned barn-raising (except that it goes on for weeks) with relatives and friends helping one man one year, another one the next. The joint efforts confirm that these men are interdependent. Their work is the backbone of the economy.

Shrimpers have to master the folk traditions involved in every phase of their profession from boat building to trawling. One of those is participation in the annual blessing, and if they are building a new boat, their deadline for completion is not the start of the season, but the day of the blessing. A good or bad season is determined by whether or not these men live up to community expectations. When it comes time to assess the season, individual ability is weighed, not whether or not the boat and shrimper received the blessing, won the decoration prize, or any other factor related to the blessing. While the event elevates them as preservers of community conditions, they must accept condemnation alone unless the season was disrupted by hurricanes or other acts of God, such as a wide-spread scarcity.
of shrimp. The community is dependent on them for economic stability, and this is one area where recognition of circumstances beyond their control is considered so that the community's expectations of them are realistic. The blessing justifies their not meeting the expectations when warranted by an "act of God."

PIONEERING

In April of 1987, George Savin organized a fete to honor the old shrimpers of Little Caillou. He wanted to honor men over seventy who had revolutionized the community by accepting Desire Theriot's challenge to turn to shrimping more than half a century earlier. Mr. Savin and the men who helped him organize the fete located 104 of these men living along Petit Caillou. In the keynote speech at the fete, Bobby Bourdin reminded the honorees that the younger generations were indebted to them "for their foresight, courage, and wisdom gained through lives dedicated to their church, their families, and their profession."#1

J.D. Theriot's pictures of the earliest blessings in Chauvin show the boats used by the early shrimpers. They went out into the Gulf of Mexico in Lafitte Skiffs so small that six or eight could line up side by side across the bayou. The boats rose a scant four feet above the water
line. These boats had no mechanical equipment for lowering or lifting the nets and no radio to receive weather reports or send distress signals. The few maps that existed were generally hand-made and rudimentary. These men trusted their safety to their ability to read the ocean; they have passed these skills down so that their descendents laugh at the scientific reports about shrimp migration written by marine biologists. They act on oceanic changes hours before weather warnings are broadcast.

Most importantly, these men are following a tradition that is self-effacing. Their praise comes from their peers within the community who recognize heroism in men whose daily work is risky on all counts. They leave their home port with no assurance that they will return safely or with a full hold of shrimp to sell. The blessing of the fleet is one way the entire community supports and encourages the men who face the challenges of the uncertain profession that trawling for shrimp remains.

The shrimpers of Chauvin do not call themselves pioneers, but others in the community call them that. Dickie Fakier of Indian Ridge Shrimp Company compares them to early American settlers who went west, or to modern day astronauts. He avers that one of the greatest unexplored areas of our planet is the ocean, and that the men who face it daily are confronted with the unknown, the unknowable. His admiration is based on years of dealing with the men doing a job he
says he would not brave himself. J.D. Theriot agrees with Dickie Fakier's assessment. In a casual conversation he told me that he would not have been willing to go to sea in trawlers, especially the earlier small craft.

The blessing of the fleet, which originally took place the day before the entire group sailed out for the new season, parallels the centuries-old ritual of blessing men who were setting out on a mission. Ventures into new lands and new enterprises prompted such blessings. According to many, the sea is ever new. The ocean changes perpetually, as do the boats and equipment these men deal with. In that sense, the concept of "pioneering" is still fresh and vital.

These then are the fantasy themes that characterize the community today and help them confront current threats to their identity. What remains to be explored is formation of rhetorical vision and how hierarchy results. The role of the vision and of hierarchy in the rhetorical influence of the blessing at Chauvin will be covered in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER 4 ENDNOTES


3. A closed community is a sociological concept indicating a group or culture that resists contact with nongroup influences.


15. One of the paradoxes of my study is that I was privileged to observe and chronicle the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin with relatively few outside intrusions; yet my presence itself was an intrusion. See discussion in chapter one, pages 34-35.

16. For more than fifty years, field researchers in Louisiana Cajun communities have noted the value of going through the appropriate channels to ensure cooperation from their intended informants. See page 79 of "Form of Settlement as a Factor in Social Solidarity, with special reference to Southern Louisiana" by Clinton Louis Folse (LSU

17. Brunet.
18. See group interview.
20. Prospere.
21. Quote by an unidentified shrimper who took passing past in a conversation only recorded in oral journal on 24 March 1987. None of the other people present there could remember who had dropped by during that talk.
26. J. D. Theriot.
27. J. D. Theriot.
30. Emile Theriot, group interview.
33. Imelda Pellegrin, group.
34. Brunet.
35. Peltier.
36. For verification of his remarks, see oral journal entry, 24 March 1987.


38. See Blanchard; Braud; Emile Theriot, in group.


42. This phrase was repeated several times by various men, among them: Mickey Duplantis, George Sevin, and J.D. Theriot. None of the conversations took place during the course of a taped interview.


44. Duplantis and Prospere.

45. Fakier.

46. Sevin.

47. Emile Theriot.

48. Fakier.

49. Peltier.

50. Peltier.


52. Fakier.

Chapter 5
Discussion

The real rhetorical impact of fantasy themes occurs when the members of a group begin to chain themes into a rhetorical vision. This chapter investigates the "chaining out" process and the resulting changes in the rhetorical vision. It is through the rhetorical vision that we can determine what the blessing means to the people of Chauvin and how they are using this ritual. In this chapter we ask: Is the blessing a vehicle to carry the rhetorical strategies they have adopted to cope with today's pressures? And has their rhetorical vision been redefined in view of growing stressors? Furthermore, how has the blessing contributed to the building of hierarchy in the community? What is the rhetorical influence of the hierarchy at present? And given current pressures, can the blessing continue to help the people of Chauvin define themselves and negotiate the changes they must face?

EARLY RHETORICAL VISION

The blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin was influential in the adoption of shrimp trawling sixty years
ago. The Catholic Church was the guiding institution in the area at the time, and the blessing granted the church’s endorsement to the new enterprise. Setting aside time to gather to bless the men and boats at the start of the season conferred an entire set of community values.

With the new profession, many of Cajun people experienced an economic security they had been denied for over a hundred years of Louisiana residence. The success of shrimping made the annual ritual a celebration of the shrimpers. They were singled out for attention, given credit for mastering difficult skills, and respected for those skills. The entire community was unified by Catholicism, Cajunness, and the blessing—things they all shared.

Chauvin, today, still believes it is Catholic, Cajun, and united by the blessing. But these beliefs form three misconceptions about their shared fantasies and reveal that they are not always in touch with social reality.

The first misconception is about Catholicism. There are other denominations active in Chauvin now. The Catholics are still a majority, but not as many of them actively attend church or the blessing and its masses as parishioners believe. Father Brunet, who has been at St. Joseph’s since 1973, does not know many of the older Catholics, which suggests that they are not attending church.

Second, many of the residents deny that Cajunness is less dominant in motivating behavior and values. But a lot of
the young people are leaving. Nearby Houma has grown tremendously, bringing a lot of non-Cajuns into the vicinity. IST, which used to be Chauvin Brothers, is now owned by CONAGRA, a conglomerate from the mid-west. The employees are all local, but now an international business has expanded into an area that had not been previously developed by business chains. With these influxes of people from different cultural backgrounds, fewer and fewer Cajun communities are able to retain cultural consistency.

Finally, fewer residents share the blessing than is widely thought. Many residents do not attend as participant or observer; some do not even believe the blessing is important; others wish only to capitalize on the tourists it could attract. The participants compete for prizes; some of that rivalry is not friendly. The participation as practiced is widely discrepant from the local perceptions of it as a community-wide event.

In concert, the changing perceptions revealed in the dialogue of people describing the blessing are hard to categorize. Undoubtedly, the old rhetorical vision that formed a foundation for the elevation of shrimping to its lauded role has suffered from value shifts brought on by the need to adapt to present day considerations. Furthermore, a decrease in attendance at the blessing mirrors diminished reliance on the Catholic Church by the contemporary culture.
EMERGENT RHETORICAL VISION

It would never occur to the shrimpers of Chauvin that anyone might doubt their survival. The entire community's economy is dependent on the shrimping industry. While various members confess anxiety about their future, their expressions of fear are couched in metaphor. The dominant view that their various and often competing fantasy themes merge into is a perpetual struggle for survival. They are becoming aware of the need for resilience in that struggle. The vehicle they are openly using to question their values is the blessing of the shrimp fleet. The ritual that has been in place since the inception of shrimping in Chauvin had chronicled the changes over the past thirty years. For instance, historical records document not only the procedural variants in the performance of the blessing and the boat parade but also the emigration of young Cajuns from the bayous and incursions into shrimping from government agencies, Vietnamese shrimpers, etc. The ritual has become the conduit through which the community has responded to crises by changing its value system to correspond with changes in their rhetorical vision. For example, we have seen that the Vietnamese competitors exhibit many of the traits the Cajuns prided themselves on. The Cajuns had to reconceptualize their own image to criticize interlopers with the same
characteristics. Through the blessing they will also face future disruptions that they know they cannot avoid.

Without knowing it, the people of Chauvin revere and protect those community fantasies that help them face the future as they faced the past, as a group. When they do acknowledge the rifts, they generally defuse their tension by placing blame on external rather than internal causes. So competitiveness over shrimp catches is blamed on TED's or conglomerates like CONAGRA. Young and old, believers and skeptics, still take faith in the community, and consider themselves participants in their shared outlet - the annual blessing of the shrimp fleet. In that one ritual they bridge the problems caused by their differences. They affirm the community by taking part: participating in good years, observing in lean years, "owning" the ritual when they do not attend. On the third Sunday of April, they honor their heritage and recommit themselves to the community. They endorse their fantasy themes - unity, security, perpetuation, pride, care-taking, and pioneering - when they celebrate the local boat blessing. Their will to survive over the elements and other people is the driving force in the blessing of the shrimp fleet. Through that ritual, differences are put aside as the people of Chauvin reaffirm the strength they have gained from their cultural bonds in the past, the bonds that they know they will need to rely on in the future.
Rhetorical Strategies in Discourse

During this study the inhabitants of Chauvin, Louisiana, exhibited a pattern of specific rhetorical use of language and discourse concerning the local blessing of the shrimp fleet. Formal and informal discourse are part of the blessing. First, the performance of the two masses and the works of the actual blessing are the expected ritual discourse. Also included in the formal discourse of the blessing are the plans made by the boat blessing committee. In less formal discourse, the community members discuss the preparations of boats and decorations carried out over several months with the cooperation of family and friends. While those tasks and the accompanying discourse are more private, the activities involved are universal in the community. The community also shares discourse about the history of the ritual in Chauvin, and for each individual that history is linked to their own past. Their discourse about the blessing slips into and out of discussions of professional and personal aspects of the precarious future for Chauvin and for shrimping. Everyone I interviewed discussed the blessing with knowledge and ease. It is grist for group discourse because it is group experience.

The ritual at Chauvin is just one of many fleet blessings
observed on the Gulf Coast, and the community is just one Cajun group among many; however, there are ways in which both the community and the ritual are unique. The historical animosity of Chauvin's Cajuns toward the mixed-blood Sabines of Terrebonne Parish continues to reinforce an almost obsessive need to safeguard their cultural purity. Many other Cajun communities do not harbor the same kind of hostility toward other ethnic or cultural groups. For instance, the Cajuns in Golden Meadow appear to have had no difficulty assimilating the German emigrants who settled near them. In addition to insulating themselves against social interaction with unacceptible others, the people of Chauvin use non-verbal sanctions and property practices to limit interactions with outsiders. Strangers to the bayou who are unaccompanied by a resident are subjected to staring that clearly signals that the stranger is an intruder, someone "to be watched." Property ownership and business practices make no accommodation for outsiders. There are no fast food franchises, no chain stores, no property for sale or rent. These factors contribute to the separateness of the people.

Similarly, their refusal to advertise or exploit the blessing for tourist appeal sets this ritual apart from the highly publicized ones celebrated at Biloxi and Morgan City. Even visiting observers can recognize the private nature of the ritual blessing shrimp fleet at Chauvin.
The people of Chauvin identify among themselves as a Cajun Catholic shrimping community. Much of their shared history is retold in connection with the blessing which was instituted at the same time they began to bond as a community. As already discussed, the blessing helped forge the independent Cajuns into an interdependent group. The group identity they came to share, discussed in Chapter Two, is still expressed through almost formulaic language when they address community issues. As they have adapted to internal and external pressures, they have redefined their identity. Their group identity is a group perception that influences communal behavior. Each specific metaphor or structure within the overall pattern functions to maintain some aspect of group homogeneity. For instance, while the functions occasionally break down between generations, within age groups consistency is quite evident. Furthermore, the discourse safeguards the group from internal ruptures and external pressures. For example, in the past jokes about Cajun shrewdness in dealings with "outsiders" denigrated state officials or educators. Through these jokes the Cajuns asserted that their hard work, practical experience, and common sense helped them outwit those with "official" knowledge or "better education." Today, the butt of their jokes are Vietnamese shrimpers and tourists. Interestingly, both groups are ineligible for active participation in the blessing.
The reframing of the blessing of the shrimp fleet gives credence to the group's resilient capacity to control group attitudes and behavior in an affirmative way. Using the ritual as the community standard also permits the unassertive group members to enforce strictures without overt aggression.

Expressing the desirable group behavior through the blessing sets up a persuasive demand to which community members conform. Because the ritual is revered, even the disenchanted accept the standards it honors as the standards they must live by. Even though the people have not consciously set out to establish community hierarchy, the rhetorical message of the blessing does carry hierarchical information that they are acting on. That hierarchy needs to be studied more closely to get a fuller understanding of how the blessing is working to create meaning.

Community Hierarchy

Bormann talks extensively about the influence hierarchy has on the establishment of meaning throughout The Force of Fantasy. Without some perception of who is most valued in a group, it is difficult to understand the source and power of rhetorical messages that will influence the group to live up
to the social reality defined by their rhetorical vision. The divergence between the theories of Douglas and of Bormann is perhaps most evident when we compare the functions she claims for her cosmology with the influence he says is wielded by hierarchy. To begin with, the four dimensions or types of social environments in the model of her cosmology are meant to provide the researcher with flexible categories for assessing individual interactions. She posits that the degree of autonomy of the individual/s within the group is one of the factors that determines the boundaries of the group. Yet when Douglas begins to interpret her theory in context, she seems to focus only on individual dissent and justification. The process by which the group set the rules the individual is responding to is not delineated, nor does she provide a systematic method for analyzing interactions. Fantasy theme analysis, on the other hand, provides specifics for analyzing the sources of power within the group. Fantasy theme analysis assesses hierarchy not only through the discourse of existent groups but also shows how hierarchical patterns determine group development and change. Both scholars recognize the dynamic influence of the discourse, but Bormann gives us a more formally developed research tool to explore hierarchy than is provided by Douglas.

The first task in analyzing hierarchy consists of identifying the good guys and the bad guys, also called the
heroes and the villains. The roles assigned by the blessing of the fleet include three groups that could be loosely defined as the heroes. The first group are the priests, representatives of the church. The second group are the shrimpers and their families. The third group are the "common people," the rest of the community.

The function of the priests is to intercede on behalf of the next group. They follow in the traditions of both religion and magic in providing spiritual comfort to their parishioners. The practice of magic to help people cope with the uncertainties of the world around them precedes other religions by thousands of years. The magical practices of contemporary primitive groups have been widely studied by cultural anthropologists. Among the magic rituals are many that offer sacrifices, blessings, and other appeasements to the gods of the sea. Venice, Italy, was a major seaport in ancient times. During the Renaissance, long after the introduction of Christianity into the area, the doge of Venice continued the city's ancient ritual in which he flung a gold ring into the sea each year as part of a marriage celebration between the city and the sea.

Judeo-Christian tradition is strongly tied into the sea as well, and the Old and New Testaments of the Bible record several sea and fishing miracles, all of which claim power over the sea. The story of Jonah attributes both calm and angry seas to God. The Sea of Galilee calmed on Jesus's
command. One of the miracles Jesus performed was to produce a catch of fish so large that the nets of the disciples broke. The Catholic religion traces its inception back to the apostle Peter. Peter, who is considered the first pope, has also been referred to as "the big fisherman." Often sacred rituals spring from the desire to imitate the miraculous experiences of holy figures. Christian examples are Baptism and Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. Similar rituals exist in every major religion.

Religious ritual has evolved in many ways to incorporate both ancient fears that call for magic and more modern faith that calls for intercession. It is not surprising, then, that Father Coulomb would have readily acceded to Desire Theriot's request to perform a blessing of the fleet in Chauvin in the late 1920's. Nor is it surprising that the deeply religious community steeped in Catholic tradition and with bonds of respect for their local priest would have wanted to continue the ritual annually.

Because the blessing at Chauvin is sponsored by St. Joseph's Catholic Church, it might seem that the priest there, and the Bishop, when he attends, would be the most important figures in the hierarchy. Perhaps that was true in the earlier practice of the blessing when it was simpler, and the simply dressed people knelt on their docked boats to receive the blessing. The focal point of the pageantry at that time was the processional, which was led from the
church by the priest in his colorful robes. The choir that trailed him and the other elements of the ritual all supported his role. But today the mass for the shrimpers and their families is held the evening prior to the blessing. The shrimp boats are the focus of the processional now, and the viewers admire the decorations and try to guess who will win the decoration prizes. They rarely attend to the priest's performance of the blessing ritual itself. Even the resplendent attire worn by the priests during the event take a back seat to the gaily decorated boats. In photographs of the parade, it is hard to pick out Father Brunet amidst all the decorations. The spectacle of the priest at the head of a processional has given way to the visual pageantry of the parade featuring elaborately decorated boats.

What do these changes in the way the blessing is carried out tell us about the role of the priest? There is no doubt that there must be a priest for a blessing to be conferred. And it is true that the church has a further role; the committee that makes the plans for the entire celebration works through the auspices of the church. But as the boat blessing is now performed in Chauvin, the priest serves in a secondary role to the shrimpers. What most people mean when they refer to "the blessing" is actually the parade of decorated boats, a visual spectacle in which the priest is almost imperceptible. The separation of the mass from the
blessing, and especially the addition of the Saturday mass for the shrimping families, contribute to the diminished role of the priest in the scheme of the blessing.

Clearly the shrimpers are the main heroes in the hierarchy today. They are the backbone of the economy in a shrimping village such as Chauvin, and they are elevated to the level of heroes through the ritual. No other profession is honored with a community-wide blessing. No other profession is exalted by a parade in their honor or protected by blessings and masses. The additional mass was added to accommodate their schedules in decorating for the boat parade and on-deck party. Their fortunes, good or bad, are on display each year through the extensiveness of their decorations and party. Finances sometimes necessitate the decision not to decorate and "ride." That choice is also apparent, since the parade passes all the boats on the bayou.

Shrimpers' families are included in the honor because they overhaul the boat and decorate it together before the blessing just as they all share the danger and uncertainty that the shrimpers face at sea. The highest place in the hierarchy is also shared by the shrimpers and their families.

The shrimpers hold the highest position in the hierarchy precisely because their annual success or failure determines the economic status of the entire community. Not surpris-
ingly, relationship to the shrimpers determines others’ place in the hierarchy. Without exception, the fantasy themes that characterize the community express shrimping perspectives. The rhetorical vision of Chauvin acknowledges the entire community’s dependence on the shrimping profession. If their shrimpers are threatened by humans or nature, Chauvin’s economic base is equally endangered.

The third group of heroes consist of other members of the community. They respect the shrimpers and are dependent on them. These are people in shrimp-dependent professions such as net-makers, marine diesel and radio suppliers, and shrimp-plant managers and employees. These people serve as spectators to the boat parade, the chorus for the heroes. Their praise for the higher-up shrimpers is expressed in discourse about pioneering. Most members of the community, even women and children, have gone out trawling on a shrimp boat at least once. From firsthand experience, they know how hard the men work and how dangerous the work is. There is no blame attached to any failure of the shrimpers to succeed, just an awareness that the community will succeed or fail along with them.

The non-shrimping community members serve an important role in the hierarchy because of their reliance on the shrimpers. The shrimpers could be deemed self-serving rather than revered as self-sacrificing if they were not providing work for the entire community. The participation
of the community members in the blessing adds emphasis to
the attention that the ritual pays to the shrimpers.

The blessing clearly distinguishes the heroic roles of
the community members. Who and what is important in the
community is expressed in the ritual. The blessing elevates
the highest level of heroes, the shrimpers, through the
intermediary services of the next level, the priests, so
that the lowest level, the common people, can continue to
rely on them as the source of income.

The villains also fit into three groups, but they have
little hierarchical relationship to each other. Their
degree of villainy is determined by the severity of the
problem they create for the heroic shrimpers which varies
from situation to situation.

The first group are obvious enemies. They are all
outsiders such as Vietnamese shrimpers, tourists, and state
officials who actively interfere with local practices. They
are defused by exclusion from the blessing.

The second and third groups are less obviously villains.
The second group is made up of local people. The most evil
of them are the residents who actively seek tourist trade
because their efforts bring in intruders. Less evil are the
young people who move away and weaken the group by their
defection. The animosity felt toward them is contrasted by
the almost adoration granted to Rodney Peltier who went off
to college, got an engineering degree, but was not content
until he returned to the bayou to shrimp. On a par with those who defect are residents who ignore the group vision. These local people are not living the ritual and therefore are seen as contributing little to, perhaps even intruding upon, the culture and its community. If the annual preparation and performance of the blessing does not re-recruit them, they are well aware that they do not share the group vision, that they are not full-fledged members of the community. Hence they may attend to avoid the sense of being out of the group. They know from past experience that participating in the blessing is the mark of community membership.

The third and least visible group of villains are the forces of nature; hurricanes, floods and erosion all threaten to destroy Chauvin. Blessings are ancient rites developed to appease the gods before whom man is powerless. Just as incantations did thousands of years ago, the blessing today still mediates our fears of natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods and erosion. Instead of excluding them like the other villains, the blessing openly acknowledges their destructive power by calling for God's protection against them.

As shown, the Cajuns of Chauvin have explored and adjusted their community identity through the local fleet blessing. As individuals, they are cast into heroic or villainous roles by their degree of commitment to the
rhetorical vision. The heroes enact their hierarchal roles in the community in the performance of the ritual. The experience of participating bonds them in their struggle against the villains.

Symbolic Convergence at Chauvin

Community values are expressed in the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana. More importantly, the ritual is being used by the community to maintain internal stability and to cope with instability.

The residents of Chauvin see themselves as integrally involved in the local boat blessing whether or not they participate. To them, the boat blessing and shrimping are inseparable. Often during interviews informants talked about the blessing and shrimping interchangeably without being aware that they were mingling the two.

Fantasy theme analysis of this community ritual reveals several findings. First, the blessing and community discourse about it contain all of the elements necessary to establish symbolic convergence; second, the group's rhetorical vision establishes and later maintains a cohesive group identity; third, now that the values lauded by some of their themes face extinction, the themes are being recalibrated instead of dropped. For instance, their self-value as hard workers necessitates that they find ways to criti-
cize the efforts of the Vietnamese shrimpers who clearly work longer hours. The result of thematic revisions made to accommodate changes is a reforged rhetorical vision. The reformation process in itself affirms the new vision. Let us look at these three rhetorical functions more closely.

Rhetorical study of fantasy theme analysis begins with a general communication theory — symbolic convergence. Symbolic convergence exists within a group when they experience the four elements of the process that Ernest Bormann calls fantasy, fantasy theme, fantasy type, and rhetorical vision. The people of Chauvin exhibited all four elements during this study as summarized below.

First, the community members share one interpretation of the origination of shrimping and of the blessing at Chauvin. This "fantasy" is based on past events and the claim that the two were introduced almost simultaneously and largely at the behest of two men, Desire Theriot and Father Coulombe. The story is maintained orally, and those who are unsure of the details consistently refer others to Desire Theriot's son, J.D. Theriot, for verification. Thus, the community members unilaterally endorse the oral history as Theriot tells it. Richard Bauman tells us that identifying events "in ways consistent with local understandings" requires use of oral narratives. In his work, he legitimizes the role of oral transmission for carrying perceptions of social reality. In Chauvin, the past has been assigned the value of

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group folklore by local acceptance of J.D. Theriot's author-
ity to retell the story for them. This example meets the
criteria of a group's sharing a fantasy because they all
believe the "story" as Theriot tells it, accept it as
"their" history, and use it to help generate their "social
reality."

In the second phase of the process the content of the
fantasy becomes a "fantasy theme." The dramatizing messages
embedded in the events spark a chaining of fantasies that
recur in the discourse of the group members. At the time of
origination, the community shared a common identity based on
their history as part of a cultural group. Several fantasy
themes about the group characteristics are covered in Chap-
ter Two. In addition, fantasy themes can shape and organize
experiences as the themes discussed in Chapter Four demon-
strate.

The third step in the evolution of symbolic convergence
occurs when a prevailing "fantasy type" emerges as it has in
the blessing ritual. The components of the type are de-
scribed by the discourse that describes the event as well.
The dominant figures in the community are the priest and the
shrimpers - the two "roles" that interact in the ritual.
No other profession is recognized by the church or the com-
munity with special masses, parades, and parties. The abil-
ity to decorate for the parade and to be creative enough to
win a prize become the recognized symbols of success, visi-
ble to all on the day of the blessing. The elements of role and hierarchy which are celebrated in the ritual also form the core of the fantasy type. The idealized success story recognizes the shrimper as the lifeblood of the economy while it reminds him of his dependence on God. The fantasy type unites all of the themes into the shrimpers story line, preparing the way for the overshadowing vision that is the next step.

The fourth and final stage of symbolic convergence is the rise of the rhetorical vision. The rhetorical vision works within the group to present and preserve their social reality, but also to structure the meaning of their behaviors as they undertake the formidable task of shrimping and its plethora of related activities. Those who share the vision form a rhetorical community who express the same ideas the same way, who communicate effectively with other insiders by code words and phrases that evoke emotional responses specific to the group. The final section of Chapter Four delineates the rhetorical vision that has evolved in Chauvin.

To understand further how this rhetorical vision works, it is useful to examine Bormann's definition of three distinctive conditions of group consciousness. Bormann calls the conditions consciousness-creating, consciousness-raising, and consciousness-sustaining. The origination of fantasy themes led to the initial rhetorical vision. That vi-
ision had its roots in consciousness-creating, as the Cajuns formulated a new image to adapt to acceptance of shrimping as a new profession. Once that redefinition of the cultural group had taken place, it became necessary to switch to consciousness-raising, which is persuasive and closed to alternative dramas. The communication at this level of consciousness requires that members redramatize their shared fantasies for the benefit of converts. In periods of stasis, participation in the fleet blessing has served to reinforce group or community values. The third condition is maintenance or consciousness-sustaining communication. This aspect of communication pressures the members of the group to conform to behavioral norms set by the rhetorical vision. Conformity is accomplished by making insiders aware of the relevance the established vision has for them. In periods of flux, the blessing of the fleet has provided this function. The changes in the values of the community over half a century would have rendered a methodology that did not account for change inadequate.

A particular strength of fantasy theme analysis is its capacity to assess the impact of changes in the group under study. Bormann has said that fantasy themes can be most evident where they are under stress. In other words, a theme is more likely to be invoked when group members feel the underlying values are threatened. Such potential ruptures seem likely when a theme is no longer an accurate
reflection of the group’s values. That seems to be the condition facing the people of Chauvin now.

Unfortunately, a limitation of fantasy theme analysis is that it does not give the researcher any avenue to assess what is not being said by the group. Strategies that are posed by single individuals are dismissed as eccentric by Bormann; he offers no way to explore the implications of the absence of speech strategies that a group like this one should be developing to help them fend off the encroachment of the villains. When a rhetorical vision is challenged by problems the group has not anticipated, the vision may prove insufficient to insulate them.

The processes involved in cultural change are sometimes hard to categorize. Raymond Williams’s discussion of the difference between residual and emergent elements of cultural process offers valuable insights into how the pressures at Chauvin could alter the community culture. He says:

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.

According to Williams, both organized religion and rural communities are predominantly residual cultures. Chauvin’s religious, rural environment gave rise to their early rhetorical vision. The changes in the vision discussed in the previous chapter represent emergent forces which Williams
finds more problematic to define:

By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture (and in this sense 'species-specific') and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense rather than merely novel.

As Williams noted, residual elements are easier to define and to fall back on. Sooner or later, truly emergent elements demand substantial changes in a culture. In practice, new social values require alternate perceptions of others and new perceptions and practices in the material world.

Bormann describes the same processes in different terms. He says in times of crisis, so much stress is placed on the old themes, which reflect residual elements, that they will be reshaped or replaced, in an emergent process, which will result in a new rhetorical vision. The new vision will become imperative and act as a consciousness-creating form of communication for the newly defined group. As I see it, a new vision is needed to mediate the changes at Chauvin.

Fantasy themes exist in both the symbolism of the blessing of the fleet and the dialogue of the residents. The themes formed the foundation for the origination of a shared rhetorical vision, and now provide a basis for analyzing the shifts that have contributed to the new vision.

Louisiana bayou Cajuns are facing immense pressures as
the twentieth century draws to a close. They face internal and external enemies; they must cope with nature as well as with other humans who threaten their way of life; and their common identity as a culture is being redefined just when they need to call on the characteristics that helped them survive in the past.

Recognition of the submerged concerns of the people along Petit Caillou is one way fantasy theme analysis illuminates their dilemma. While the blessing of the shrimp fleet at Chauvin is only one event in one community, it is a vehicle that carries their feelings and their fears. Just as folklore studies of similar rituals have revealed the motives of the participants,7 so does this event. Yet major differences exist between this study and traditional ritual studies. Early folklore and sociographic studies posit that a community ritual reflects the culture it represents. With rhetorical visions, the results are much more dynamic. The ritual does not merely reflect the culture. In a much larger sense, the ritual acts out the vision to establish, maintain, and restructure community hierarchy.

An additional asset gained by using this method, as in other ethnographic approaches, is the insight gained by relying as much or more on the discourse of the participants than on detached observation of the event or pointed questions addressed to the celebrants. Fantasy theme analysis begins with a qualitative study of the communication
practices of a group and then traces the subtle and sometimes not so subtle persuasive manifestations of these practices. The oblique collection of individual and group discourse for fantasy theme analysis that I gathered is unique in its focus and purpose. First, my goal in asking questions was to discover topics which resulted in chaining of fantasy themes. Because I could not be sure what would trigger the desired responses, my questions were generalized to permit me to gather a range of answers that could then be analyzed to determine if any patterns of usage were recurring. My application, of course, differs from both fantasy theme analyses that have relied on speech manuscripts and from folklore studies that consider oral texts as artifacts.

A final important issue must be dealt with here. The ritual of the blessing of the shrimp fleet exerted rhetorical influence in the past and does so in the present. Can the blessing continue to help the people of Chauvin face their crises in the future? Can the ritual influence whether or not Chauvin will survive intact? Creeping secularization threatens the continuation of the blessing itself. When asked, Father Brunet told me that if the disruptions and aberrations that pervade the parade and the party ever made it impossible to carry out what the blessing is meant for, the church would discontinue the event. But he himself is part of the shifts in form and
performance of the ritual that accommodate the shrimpers and raise them above him in the hierarchy it endorses. According to the parishioners, the addition of prizes for boat decorations was Father Brunet's idea or his predecessor's. While he may not be the source of other recent procedural changes in the performance of the ritual, as chair of the boat blessing committee, he has the power to initiate, encourage, or discourage changes. Moreover, Father Brunet has been instrumental in promoting the growth of the Lagniappe Fair as a tourist attraction. His policies concerning Lagniappe could be interpreted by some as violating the traditional private nature of local celebrations. Still, it is unlikely that he or his parishioners would take actions that might lead to discontinuing the blessing. He is aware that the shrimpers of Chauvin feel the blessing parade and party are earned respites from the rigorous physical and mental demands of shrimping. And he knows the Catholic and the Cajun traditions that extend the license of the church to the revelers in this and other ritual performances, the most obvious examples being the secularized celebrations of Christmas and Mardi Gras.

The priest influences the retention as well as the form of the blessing, but the people of the community are equally involved. Members of the boat blessing committee have direct input in planning the "official" elements of the ritual. Meetings of the committee are announced from the
pulpit and in the church newsletter. Anyone in the church parish is eligible to join the committee. Theoretically, then, they all have the opportunity to take an active part in the decision-making. Although Cajun mistrust of government and state agencies typically discourages them from actively seeking to influence the laws and regulations that govern them, I suspect that they would not fail to act on the community level to preserve the ritual that carries so much meaning for them. They do know that their internal tensions and external pressures are mediated by the blessing. The one time all of the community comes together in harmonious action is when they celebrate the blessing of the fleet. (Remember that competition is more overt in the booths they man to raise money for the church in the fall fair.) The fears and threats they face may change from year to year. But their belief in their ability to combat those pressure is perpetuated by the blessing. Participation in the ritual is public affirmation of their commitment to the community/group identity. In performing the ritual, they can redefine themselves and reaffirm their faith in their ability to adapt year after year.

Shrimping competition will continue in the Gulf of Mexico, but the Cajun shrimpers, their families and all those dependent upon them in Chauvin have faith that the knowledge of these men along with their experience gives them an edge. That faith is strengthened by the blessing.
When it comes to the intrusion of Vietnamese, these people confront their insecurities by finding ways to capitalize on their native skills to retain the upper hand. Building "expensive" boats for their "enemies" is one way they can feel superior; not allowing those outsiders to participate in the local blessing in any significant way is another.

Tourism's encroachment will continue as well. By continuing to reserve this ritual for local participation, the people of Chauvin hold off the threat to their cultural identity. Shrimping is their lifeblood, the boat blessing is their private celebration. I found no evidence that anyone in the community would even consider promoting the blessing as they do "Lagniappe on the Bayou." In that sense, I believe that the blessing will perpetuate their "insider" identity when it comes to accommodating tourism.

The unpredictability of nature was one ancient source of fear that led primitive people to rely on rituals. Since hurricanes, floods, and erosion are perpetual threats to residents near the Louisiana coast, the people of Chauvin are never free of nature's specter. The church's continued blessing cannot insure the safety and success of the shrimpers, but it can provide more of a sense of assurance than any other source can even pretend to offer. The first year I went to observe the blessing, the area had suffered severe damage from Hurricane Juan. I was in Father Brunet's office while he talked on the phone to several shrimpers who were
explaining that they would be unable to "ride" that year. His insights into the financial problems created for them by the storm made it clear that the "official position" of the church and the community perception of the shrimpers about the unpredictability of storms were the same. The church and the shrimpers recognized their faith in God and the blessing did not obviate their need to accept the hardships visited on them. Those who could not afford full participation in no way indicated that the past year's bad fortune was evidence that the blessing did not work to protect them. As long as Chauvin exists, I believe the blessing will continue. The interdependence of the three levels of heroes creates a self-perpetuating reliance on maintaining the community's cultural identity.

Bormann's research in group dynamics might suggest that when the group/community adapts and alters its behavior to withstand pressures, the original group (culture) is diluted and the (cultural) identity is damaged. The people of Chauvin are struggling with that tension. There are healthy signs of their capacity to redefine their identity and still preserve their value system. The signs show up in attempts to generate new fantasy themes. I heard several individuals offer alternatives to current practices. Eudras Prospere said he'd have been more successful at times if he'd been set up to fish for sharks. One unidentified man related that a neighbor of his had "gone to boat building" rather
than continue to shrimp. In most instances, the comments were not recognized as suggestions nor repeated in discourse or action, so the fantasies that they represented did not chain into group dramas. But as the pressures increase and the options become more appealing, I believe a new set of fantasy themes will be generated from alternative actions. The result will be a reframed rhetorical vision that may very well redefine the community hierarchy. However, if shrimping ceases to be the economic base of the community, the shrimpers could lose their hero status. Shifts in the economic base would necessitate renegotiating their place in the community hierarchy. If the new hero role is not complementary to the activities and the values honored in the blessing, the ritual could be reduced to a tribute to the residual strengths of the past. Twice in the past, during World War II and during an oil boom in the area, participation in the blessing diminished. In both instances, the men returned to shrimping and the blessing was revitalized. The number of participants in any given year is a direct barometer of the current economic status that results from poor shrimp crops, flooding, hurricanes, etc. The endurance of the blessing for more than sixty years is proof of its capacity to adapt to current conditions and hierarchical variations. I see no reason to suspect that the Cajuns of Chauvin will stop using the blessing to aid their adaptation.
The small group classes and political campaigns Bormann looked at were peopled by temporary, special interest groups. A limited life-span characterizes those two groups. Based on this study we can conclude that re-defining fantasy themes with new applications that fit new conditions can strengthen a permanent group. If members choose to perpetuate the group, they will forge new themes and a new rhetorical vision to insure their survival.
CHAPTER 5 ENDNOTES


5. Williams, 123.

6. Williams, 126.

7. See discussion of the works of Dundes and Falassi, Grimes, and Orsi in Chapter One.

8. See Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," "Fetching Good out of Evil," and "The Eagleton Affair."
CHAPTER 6
Overview

Fantasy theme analysis permitted me to look at the interworking of one community’s hierarchy. Because the blessing is a carrier of values that are essential to the lifeblood of Chauvin’s economy, I could ask about the local event, rather than about the community itself. On the basis of community members’ discourse, I uncovered a range of fantasy themes that related to community self-concept. Commonalities as well as stresses were revealed through the discourse. I did not ask specifically about the significance or the value of the ritual to the group. Therefore, it is probable that what my informants told me was spontaneous and honest, and accurately portrayed the group’s beliefs and values. Direct questions about values, power, and success within the community might not have yielded the same results, especially as people tend to be influenced by what they perceive a questioner wants to hear. The presence of shared fantasy themes indicates that fantasy theme analysis can effectively reveal the inner workings of a community in flux, much as it has investigated small group interactions and generic groups of speeches. This knowledge represents an important consideration, that rhetorical scholars should investigate the hitherto untapped areas of folklore, ritual
and community communication as a basis for critical qualitative analysis. Bormann himself has said that the raw material for fantasy theme analyses may lie in the oral history or folklore of a group and that ritualized religious services are communication forms. The two are united in this study.

Also of significance is the fact that this study has shown how fantasy theme analysis deals directly with the dialogue of the participants. The themes are taken directly from words, phrases and figures of speech that spring from the group as they seek ways to express themselves. When the occurrences are widespread among of the residents of a community, the themes can be interpreted as representative.

I encountered two problems with this study. One problem was the high percentage of private and personal comments that my informants made to me. I had regular interactions with several people over more than a year’s time so that we frequently talked when I was not able to take notes or record our conversations. It was frustrating to discover on more than one occasion that I had no record of valuable data. When that occurred, I felt an ethical obligation to omit that data from my research report. The second problem was similar. As time passed, several of my new friends confided information that they told me in confidence. That information, too, cannot be included, though it often seemed to me to reveal as much about community perceptions as it
Implications

Fantasy theme analysis sees rhetoric as epistemic, and Bormann developed his theory to support that belief. In other words, a group uses rhetoric to create their "social reality." Their group identity and their formulation of hierarchy are created and maintained through the discursive interactions of the group.

Bormann's study of the impact of religion upon a number of aspects of American culture in *The Force of Fantasy* describes how the rhetoric accomplishes that creation:

> My interest in small-group communication led me to the discovery of a key dynamic in the development of a group subculture. Work by Professor Bales at Harvard plus my own work at the University of Minnesota revealed the power of dramatizing communication to catch up the members of face-to-face interacting groups until they come to participate in the drama. The force of fantasy as a power in creating social reality for small group members became increasingly evident.

Bormann followed this insight with applications both to small group communication and to mass communication. For example, Borman shows the social reality of Puritan ministers that is evidenced by the fantasy themes and metaphors common in their sermons. In like manner, he finds small group dynamics and political campaigns rich sources of epistemic rhetoric. For example, he explores the way politi-
cians create desirable social realities to sway voters."

Although cultural ethnographers use different terminology, they have documented the same kind of communication behavior that was my source for distilling the shared fantasies in Chauvin. Fantasy theme analysis helps group members or critics understand community events, thus it has practical importance.

Fantasy theme analysis also has important metacritical elements. A number of folkloric events such as the blessing of the fleet at Chauvin are being studied in other fields. Yet these events are rich in dynamic communication interactions. This methodology provides a way to unify humanists and social scientists because the entire process of communication becomes the object of analysis. It seems appropriate that rhetorical studies of communication practices which have been pioneered outside the field should now be studied by speech communication researchers whose field has rhetoric as its foundation.

It is important to note the two flaws I found in applying fantasy theme analysis to the study of a community ritual. First, part of what is going on in a group may be expressed only by single individuals. Some single voice utterances are valuable to understanding the group dynamic, yet fantasy theme analysis only allows the researcher to look at the ideas that become fantasy themes because they are expressed by more than one group member. Second, fantasy theme
analysis also neglects to account for concerns that are not spoken at all. Research using a method that relies solely on discourse cannot be as thorough as research that explores other avenues of expression.

One other consideration should also be mentioned. The almost illicit process by which a critic locates the fantasy themes suggests, and much of Bormann’s own research verifies, that chaining of fantasy themes occurs unconsciously, and therefore the group members may lack the capacity to recognize their own rhetorical strategies. Hence, the ability to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a group’s rhetoric would rest with the critic. The critic to have to inform the group about their own discursive strategies, especially if they are to take an active role in intentionally influencing the group. That is a paradoxical function for a method Bormann claims is a way to explore what Douglas called active rather than passive discourse.

Speech communication theorists have been slow to investigate arenas of communication that demand cross-cultural linkages. As fast as courses in interpersonal communication and intercultural communication are cropping up, we need to generate more research within our own discipline to support the communication principles we are teaching.

One contribution of this study is finding a carrier of rhetorical values for an industry [shrimping] that has no
other codified written or oral network to document perceptions and changes in the rhetorical beliefs and behaviors of the people involved. Fleet and related blessings are held on the Gulf Coast from Key West to west Texas from February to late October. They occur on the east coast, on the upper Mississippi River, in the Great Lakes, Nova Scotia, the North Sea, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic and the Sea of Japan, to name a few sites. The rituals may be highlighted as "the Blessing of the Fleet" or get lost in the midst of a seafood or other festival. The ritual may bless the sea, request a successful season gathering sea crops from sponges to shrimp, or marry some locale to the sea. Barring folk tales, no source for looking at the rhetoric of fishermen/sailers is more widespread than the blessings. These men who often form the backbone of a community or region's economy participate in similar rituals worldwide.

In this study I used fantasy theme analysis to explore community ritual as active persuasion. One of the things I learned was that communities do perform rituals that have a related body of discourse. More investigation needs to be done to discover how other threatened communities are adapting to clashes similar to those facing the shrimpers of Chauvin. Just as festivals such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated differently from family to family, so endangered communities may need to seek variant ways to perform the
rituals that preserve their value system. They may need to emulate Native American groups who exaggerate and distort some of their rituals and crafts for export, yet retain purer forms for private practice and consumption. Such studies might begin to evaluate if "created" or "exported" rituals can continue to serve rhetorical functions for their practitioners.

Potential exists to expand rhetorical study of rituals in other directions, as well. Collection of raw data gathered from a community through observation of a shared ritual and interviews related to that ritual would lend themselves to rhetorical and communication theory studies of conversation-al analysis such as Moerman does. Nonverbal carriers of group perception could be explored via all types of visually rich community rituals. Intercultural/community conversational patterns are also revealed in discourse about ritual. The influence of group member or non-group member on interviews is another area that can be explored more fully. Border areas (Texas, Florida, California, etc.) in the United States or other countries where a cultural group is being absorbed or not being absorbed face growing stress. Communication studies could make valuable contributions to understanding and dealing with those pressures.

Finally, any discussion of rhetorical activity that employs fantasy theme analysis must return to a discussion of the epistemic aspect of rhetoric. Gerald R. Miller and
his colleagues claim that "most communicators acquire relatively narrow strategy repertoires by learning and conditioning and continually employ these repertoires regardless of communicative circumstances." They posit that in face-to-face transactions, people do not choose strategies. In direct contrast, fantasy theme analysis says people’s learned repertoires are perpetually changing, their discourse expresses their values. When the interactants share the same values, they begin to share the same metaphors, their discourse creates a common social reality and the fantasy themes that they express lead to their rhetorical vision which itself then enforces their social reality. It is not vital that the people of Chauvin consciously choose rhetorical strategies, but their survival or failure may depend on whether their everyday discourse can help them bridge the conflicting views of reality confronting them. They must find effective ways to accommodate those conflicts or risk the collapse of their cultural identity.

The blessing grew out of what Williams calls the residual aspect of culture. Today it must function as an emergent element of culture to accommodate the community’s present needs. The hierarchy delineated through the blessing seems to be persistently diminishing the role and influence of the church in the community. The shrimpers, even when frustrated by state agencies and laws restricting seasons and equipment, are themselves equipping their boats with more techno-
logical aids. Their practical considerations are placing science over religion. At some point, their social reality must acknowledge those value shifts. I fear the choices they are making could reduce the blessing to a residual role in the community and that when any major cataclysm of either human or natural creation hits them, the community will not have a strong enough sense of group identity to survive.
1. I had a final concern regarding the possible contamination of the data I collected. One of my informants accompanied me to several of my interviews and asked leading questions I had intentionally avoided. I am indebted to Dr. Andrew King for his counsel about this potential problem. He advised me to consider the help as an evidence of a group member's perception of my purpose, and therefore a reflection of that member's values and representative of how insiders were interpreting my presence and my research.


3. See Chapters Two, Three, Four and Seven in The Force of Fantasy.

4. See "Fetching Good out of Evil" and "The Eagleton Affair."


6. Williams, 123.
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APPENDIX A

BLESSING OF THE SHRIMP BOATS

PRAYERS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SHRIMPING SEASON

ANTIPHON: The voice of the Lord is upon the waters.

Ps. 29. Bring to the Lord, you sons of God,
give to the Lord glory due to his name;
Adore the Lord in holy attire.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters,
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over vast waters,
    The voice of the Lord is mighty;
    the voice of the Lord is majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars,
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
    He makes Lebanon leap like a calf
    and Sirion like a young bull.
The voice of the Lord strikes fiery flames;
the voice of the Lord shakes the desert.
    The Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the
forests, and in his temple all say "Glory."
    Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
    and to the Holy Spirit . . .

ANT. The voice of the Lord is upon the waters:
The God of majesty has thundered;
the Lord is over many waters.

LET US PRAY: Our Father, who are all powerful, the under-
standing of whose invisible power is seen through the
things which have been made.

God, whose Spirit moved over the waters in the very
beginnings of the world, grant to us your Servants that,
as often as we behold with the eyes of our body, the
greatness of the waters lifting up their power to the
heavens, that we may be drawn to the appreciation of your
mysteries, and that we may call upon and glorify your
Holy Name with deserving praise.

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To You under whose rule all creatures are subject, we offer ourselves to Your Holy Will.

Lord Jesus Christ who walked upon the waters, and who commanded the winds and sea which had broken forth in a violent storm, and there came immediately a great calm, look on your servants placed in the so many dangers of the present life, and grant that by the power of your (+) blessing given to this sea, evil spirits may be driven from it. The harm of storms may depart, and all who are making a voyage by sea, may through the intercession of your Immaculate Virgin Mother happily reach the destination to which they are traveling and return safely at last to their own, Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

O Lord, who has said, "In the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread", listen to our prayers and (+) bless these boats so that all who push out over the waters to gain their living for themselves and their own, may, being enriched by your gifts, render due thanks to you through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*At (+), Priest makes the sign of the cross.
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Interview with Father Brunet

Date: Wednesday, March 13, 1986
Place: His office, St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 2:00 p.m.

B = Betsy
FB = Father Brunet

Actual interview is preceded by microphone test.

B: This is a test to check the beginning of this tape on which I am planning to interview Father Brunet at Chauvin, my first folklore tape about the blessing of the fleet. This is being done the night before with batteries. This is a test. This is an addition to my test tape. I am now checking what happens when I switch to auxiliary power, and in addition to auxiliary power I am also using an extension cord. This final part of my test is to check what happens talking at normal volume with this using the regular microphone. O-kay. Now I'm checking the microphone at a distance which I'm really kind of worried about. What is happening to it now?

Start of Interview

B: This is Betsy Gordon. I am doing an interview with Father Brunet at St. Joseph's in Chauvin. The date is March 13, and this is a test to see that the recorder is working. The first question I wanted to ask you was how long have you been the priest here?

FB: Thirteen years, I came in 1972.

B: Did you start performing the blessing then, when you came?

FB: Uh hum, right away.

B: When did the blessing here itself start? Do you know any of the background?

FB: Well, it seems that it's been going for a good while. I'm not sure exactly what year it started. We can look that up for you though and find out. It goes back a good while in the parish. Some of the gentlemen that I've talked to say that they brought it over here--from Biloxi, I think. They saw it there and then came and brought it on the bayou from Biloxi. And the gentleman claims that this was the first boat blessing in Louisiana. Somebody says, "How do you know that?" He
says, "Well, can you prove it ain’t?" [Both laugh] So, you know--

B: So as far as you know, some individuals did bring it, and that was how it started. Did they approach the church and ask for it to be done as far as you know?

FB: I would imagine that they would have because probably seeing the boat blessing in Biloxi, which would have been Catholic, I guess. And the priest would have been probably doing it. That when they would have come back with it, they would have probably talked to the local priest and said "Can we do something like that or--?"

B: Were you familiar with it before you came here? Are you from the coastal area?

FB: Yes, I was familiar that they had boat blessings. I don’t think I can remember going to one myself until I did come here.

B: Okay. I also wanted to ask: what is your actual job in performing the blessing? If you would, think through what you do to get ready. Are there any particular things that you take with you, like certain vestments you wear, Bibles, crucifixes? Just tell me what you do that day and what the ritual consists of.

FB: Okay. That day? Or you want the preparations for it too?

B: All of it, if you can tell me that.

FB: All right. Around this time of the year, right now, as a matter of fact, [checking calendar] we had scheduled for tomorrow night but we had to put it til next Friday, we have a boat blessing meeting. That’ll be advertised in our bulletin that anybody who wants to come to that is welcome. All right? We do have a committee that usually comes every year and they are the ones who are going to make this happen. You know, all the different parts of it that need to be done. So we’ll meet and some of the people kind of stay in positions so they know what they have to do. We have different little activities that they have to plan for. So there’ll be those who will try to get the prizes that will be awarded; there are those who will arrange to count the boats and find out how many they are. They plan a dinner, a lunch for the judges in the contest, so there will be those who will arrange for that—the cooking and feed the judges, take ’em out on the lake so that they can join in the party after. Okay? They’ll make a little gift for them, for the judges. Then there will be those who will prepare for the mass that we have at ten o’clock in the morning. There are those who prepare the dance that we have that night after the boat blessing and they will work on publicity in the paper in the parish. So, it’s quite a preparation. I guess it would take long except that we have the same people usually each year that know what they have to do. So we’ll meet like right now, in March, and the blessing
will usually take place around the third Sunday of April.

B: Okay. How is that date set? Do you know?

FB: Well, in this parish, it’s set just that way. The third Sunday of April unless that is Easter. If it is Easter, then it’ll be the Sunday after that.

B: Now, you said anybody who was interested in this. This is mentioned throughout the parish, generally this area? What would you consider the range of where the people who are participating come from? How far north; how far south? Basically, this area, though?

FB: This area, yeah. We comprise the same territory as Ward 7 in Terrebonne Parish. That’s the same, those same dividing lines make up St. Joseph Parish, churchwise, you see. That’s where most of the participants in this boat blessing will come from. However, boats from other parishes come and they get in the parade and we bless them also. They don’t take part in the contest though. That’s strictly for St. Joseph parishioners, you see.

B: Now, you mentioned parishioners, is there any restriction or limitation that these people are Catholic or—?

FB: No, we don’t, we don’t have that. The restriction, I guess, is not so much for the blessing as the winning of prizes. It has that—what—social thing about it too. I guess a fun thing at the same time so they can—. We give prizes like to the best eight boats in the double rig and the best four in the single rig, you see. They’re the different ways in which the boat is outrigged to catch shrimp. And there are certain little rules. It has to be a shrimp boat, it has to be decorated, the owner has to be someone from St. Joseph’s Parish to win a prize. But anybody can come in, put the boat in for the blessing, or to just join in the parade of boats. So that’s, you know—. The prizes are furnished by the parish, that’s why they’re just for parishioners only.

B: I think it’s a grand idea, because of the fellowship. It’s a marvelous idea. That is something that I think is particularly meaningful.

FB: Well, it’s a fun day. It’s a nice day.

B: I’ve heard marvelous things, and I can’t wait!

FB: You’re welcome to come this year, if you want.

B: I will be here.

FB: You can ride on the lead boat with us if you want.

B: Oh, how nice! Now, I wanted to ask you some other things. You mentioned a mass. Does it follow a particular pattern? Are there certain things that you traditionally include?

FB: I guess, yes, we do. The Saturday before—the boat blessing is usually on a Sunday—at the 5:30 liturgy or mass, there’s a committee that decorates the church. And they fix it with the shrimp nets around the altar and little shrimp, plastic shrimp, turtle shell, all the—
you know, anything about the sea. With some model shrimp boats, and so forth, they decorate the altar in the motif of the shrimp blessing, the fleet and so forth. Then at that mass we usually dedicate the sermon to the shrimpers. You know, their profession, asking God to help them. And that's what the blessing is originally and basically about: that we're going to ask God to bless them, make them have a good season, protect them, keep 'em safe on the waters, and bring 'em back home, that they'll be successful and, you know, have a good year. So that the gifts at the mass—usually we talk about the bread and wine that's brought up, that's going to be used in the sacrifice of the mass—and the collection which is the gift of the people to God, those are brought up by the owners of the boats that won the contest the year before, you see. So there'll be, like, usually two couples that bring up the wine and water and the collection and present that to the priest at the offertory of the mass, you see.

B: That's a marvelous, marvelous thing. Now, with the actual blessing itself, are there any prayers that go with it? Are there certain vestments you wear that have a symbolic meaning?

FB: Yeah, we wear what they call the alb, which is a white garment that covers the whole body of the priest. And the significance of the alb, of course, is the purity with which we should come to the worship and serve God. It's a white garment that covers everything and then we use the stole which is around the neck and over the shoulders and sorta down the front, you know. That's then, traditionally, the symbol of priesthood, the badge of priesthood. You know, he uses the stole in all of his official functions. And then we use the Holy Water to bless the boats as we go by them. The way that—I guess that—. Since I've been here, there's been two different ways in which we've done it. When I first came here, the priest stood on the wharf right at the place where the boats turned to go into the lake and we blessed the boats as they came by. After a couple of years of that, the committee thought that it might be better if the boat, the lead boat, came up here and the priest got on the boat and went down the bayou and blessed the boats as he passed and then go out into the lake. This appealed to us because, that way you can bless all the boats on the bayou. See, sometimes some of 'em are on drydock, some of 'em are not ready to be used, to go out. So, this way, we get on the front, on the lead boat of the parade, and as we go down the bayou, we bless all of the boats. Those that want to join the parade just fall in line right in the back of us, you see. So they're blessed and then they get into the parade. Then we all go out in the lake and they make like a flotilla, I guess, of boats.
Some boats tie up together. Some of them just anchor by themselves. Then there's a party. They have crawfish that they serve on the boats, food, barbeque. Some of 'em have a band on the boat, you know, play some music. And they'll stay out there maybe for about two or three hours and just enjoy the water skiing, speed boats, and all that in the lake.

B: How did you learn what was expected of you in taking on this job? Was this from the committee, were there records written, a prior priest tell you?

FB: Those who had been involved before, you know. When they told me they had a boat blessing, I said: "Well, okay, let's—what'd we do?" So they had a meeting and we planned it out of what things had to be done. There was a file of things that had happened before by the former pastors and the memory of all the people who were there. And we just kinda worked it out what we would do that year, and then I keep records ever since then, you know. So each year I have a record of what had been done and what committees we need to form to get it all done.

B: Other than changing from being on the wharf to being on the lead boat, are there other significant changes that you have seen occur or heard about from the past?

FB: I think it started very simply from what I can gather from pictures of the past too. It started very simply. As the boats passed by the priest or the priest got on the boat and blessed them. I think that was the main and only thing, that he blessed the boats. I think little by little the boats began to decorate for the occasion, you know. They would already paint 'em because they were getting ready for the season to open in May, see? So they would paint their boats and clean 'em up and get 'em ready for the work year. So they were already cleaned and painted and ready. Then they started putting little decorations on 'em, little flags which wave in the wind, you know. It's colorful and pretty. Gradually some of 'em began to make a motif about how they were decorated. Some of the motifs were religious, and some of them were not. Then that developed and then I guess, you know, they started having something to eat on the boats and started to invite friends to ride on the boats. Then I think eventually the contest idea came up of: "Which the prettiest boat?", you know, and "We oughta give a prize to the prettiest boat." And so they—I think it just gradually developed into the parade and fun that it is today, you know? I still think that we try to obviously maintain the religious significance of it, you know, the other things are added on. I fear the day that it might just become a social event, you know, and not have the religious significance which I guess could happen, but we try not to.

B: That's one of the things I wanted to ask you, was, what
do you see right now as the importance of this blessing to your ministry or the influence of this church in the parish?

FB: Well, I think it reminds everybody that this is all a gift from God, you know. The boats themselves, the shrimp, all of the seafoods we have, this is a gift of God, and we should be grateful. And we should be thankful that the profession is maybe not as dangerous now as it once used to be with the small boats and the sea and the winds and the waves and much better interpretation of weather now. They know when to go out, when not to go out. But that basically the safety of these fishermen when they go out to sea, that that's also in the hands of God. We call upon God to bless them, the boats, the profession and the catch and the abundance of seafood that--. So we thank God and we ask him for his blessings on the next season. Okay?

B: Okay.

FB: Now--the influence, I think--it's become a social in the parish, like, you kinda mentioned a little earlier, the fellowship that takes place. People enjoy it. The church is the center of it, you know, so that is has a kind of a social impact, a social influence.

B: And here the entire planning committee is associated with this church?

FB: Definitely, yeah.

B: That's the reason I didn't want to study Biloxi. It is so touristy that I felt like some of what they were doing was empty ritual. Do you have any other rituals here? Like, they have wreaths for memorials to any fishermen who might have died during the past year?

FB: No. We haven't done anything like that. No.

B: Okay. Some of this stuff sounds terribly expensive. How is it financed, or what are some of the financial considerations?

FB: (Clears throat) The dance is, they charge a fee to go to the dance. Not much is made there, but whatever is made goes to cover the expenses that the church might have, you see, like getting judges, and we usually give them a gift, and food, and, you know. We don't have that many more expenses because all of the decorations are privately done by the boat owners, you know. We sponsor a little contest called "Lucky Boat," and who ever wins that gets half and the church gets the other half to cover expenses and so forth. Sometimes we make a little bit on it after everything, and sometimes we don't, you know.

B: But the thrust of it is not in any way a fund-raiser?

FB: No, it's not a fund-raiser. No.

B: I had read about one that was also one that I decided I didn't want to go to. It struck me that this was totally
FB: (Interrupting) No, this is not a fund-raiser.
B: And I don't object to that. I just--this seemed to me like--closer to its original roots.
FB: Closer. Well, yes, I would agree. This is probably closer because it's not intended, you know--One time--there are many people involved, and at one time they wanted to put up booths and sell food or sell drinks and things like that, but it's not that kind of day for us. Everybody gets on the boat. So, all the fun's happening on the boats. Now, people do line the bayou to see the parade. I'm not saying some people don't sell it, but that's not ours. We don't sell things. We're not out to make anything. It's not a fund-raiser. So, it's just to bless the boats and have a nice day altogether.
B: You mentioned publicity. Is that primarily also within the area? Because I don't get the impression that--I had trouble finding out about it, that it was not a tourist affair.
FB: (Laughing) Oh, it's not--yeah. Not--publicity only in the local area. We don't go to New Orleans or any--Now, we have a big fair here. Lagniappe on the Bayou. That's a different story. That is a fund-raiser, and we go out whole-heartedly for that, to make money, you know. But this is not that way. The boat blessing is not that.
B: Can you think of anything you want to add? I think we've covered questions way ahead of where I--
FB: (Up at his files) No, no, go ahead.
B: Do you know about any--
FB: I'm just looking now.
B: --historical or cultural background of the participants here that would have made them particularly interested in this? Other places claim: "The people who moved here came from Yugoslavia and brought this with them when they came from the Adriatic", and then you look and they started it four years ago and their forefathers have been here a hundred, and you say: "What happened during the gap?" Is there any claim here that this came from anywhere other than Biloxi, that these people had that as a tradition somewhere else, and that it had been lacking?
FB: I really can't say that. I don't know. You know, these are Cajuns, and they came from France, I guess, and Acadian. Maybe they had something like similar to that--in the old country were they came from. It could have easily come from the idea that, you know, in the Catholic Church, you have blessings of different things, you know, in the rituals of the church. So that you bless a house, you bless a car, you know. In the ritual you have a little formula for the blessing of all different kinds of things. So, blessing of the boat would have very easily have come from things like that, I would think, because we do those little rituals. So, I would think that it could have easily sprung from the tradition of the church.
in that sense.
B: That gets me back to something I meant to ask earlier. I was reading, trying to do some background on some of the rituals and read that there were some very specific rituals for certain blessings and others that were more generic so that you could plug in the appropriate thing. Is there a specific blessing within the canon or rituals of the church, or is there one, a specific one, that has evolved, or does it tend to be more flexible?
FB: Well, when I came there was one that was made up here, you see. And so, I’ve used that one.
B: And it just followed a pattern that had been established?
FB: Yeah.
B: Using guidelines from other church rituals?
FB: Yeah. It just reads, and—actually, I guess the most significant ritual is when you actually sprinkle the boats with Holy Water. See, the water is blessed ahead of time and you put it in the container, aspergil, and you use it. Now, we say a prayer at the beginning of it, on the lead boat. But nobody hears that prayer, hardly, you know, because they’re all down the bayou.
B: So, it’s not something you publish or broadcast?
FB: No, we just say the little prayer—
B: Is it a set prayer, or is it spontaneous?
FB: It’s a set prayer. And I found it in the files of the boat blessing when I came here. It’s not something that you would find in the Official Ritual of the Catholic Church.
B: But it would be similar to ones that I might find at any boat blessing—
FB: That’s right. Or similar to those that you would find in the ritual, like the blessing of a car, blessing of a house, it’s similar to that, see?
B: I was speculating about that because I’m so unfamiliar with blessings. (Sound of papers turning as I hunted questions.) Do you know of any histories or documents in this area that have covered this, that have written about or recorded this as it has progressed through the years?
FB: No, I don’t, I really don’t. I’m sure that you’ll find it in different (clears throat) magazines or periodicals that may have covered it, or pictures that people take. It’s very colorful, you know. One of the posters of Louisiana has a picture of a boat in a boat blessing from here, the Sea Master.
B: It is mentioned in some of the Houma brochures.
FB: Yeah, that’s right.
B: Which is how I got your name, from calling their tourist (voice trails off).
FB: Yeah. And people know about it. I think last year, if I’m not mistaken (clears throat), it was put down in the, I might be mistaken, I think it was put in Southern Living as one of the top twenty things to see—
B: I wouldn’t be surprised.

FB:— in the month of April.

B: I’ve been looking through them, and I haven’t covered the last five years yet, but one of the things that fascinated me about this particular blessing was there are some that are in there year after year after year. Some that originally started out as blessings and have changed to seafood festivals. Some that are mentioned erratically, and one year they mention the blessing of the fleet and the next year they don’t, and you realize that’s not the thrust of it, if it ever was. That those have changed.

FB: I imagine some change. I can see how it would change because it becomes like a Mardi Gras parade—you know.

B: When people see it and like it, they want to participate even if they aren’t—

FB: That’s right. Of the faith.

B: -- of the faith, or involved.

FB: This is a copy of the ritual we use. (Hands paper to me.) I found it here when I came and used it.

B: Would there be any possibility of my getting a copy of this now or some other time?

FB: Uh hum.

B: That would be very nice because it would explain some things that I couldn’t. (Page turning as I read the blessing.) Oh, that’s nice.

FB: I’m just looking through some of the notes I have, and usually keep notes each year. (Pause, noise of pages in folder being shifted.) I know we have a picture of the boat blessing when Father Charles Paluzzi was pastor. I know it goes back that far, and he was two pastors before me. (Paper noise) So I know it goes back until then. And how far back I’m not sure, but there are gentlemen in the parish that I can find that out from.

B: (Referring to the copy of the blessing.) Is there a particular significance when it has the cross in here, is that a point at which you actually—

FB: The point at which you would (He made motion of cross) make the cross. Yeah, the priest would make the sign of the cross openly on the boats, you know, on the water.

B: That’s nice. Are there any other activities you know of that are traditionally practiced? You’ve mentioned things like the party, and those things that have been added. Can you think of others that are traditionally practiced in connection with it?

FB: (Pause)—Well—

B: You haven’t mentioned any kind of crowning of a court or things like that.

FB: No, no, none of that. I think it’s stayed pretty pure about that. It hasn’t gotten into other things of that type and not for selling things or anything like that. It’s really not a tourist trap. (laughs.) You know, if
they come to see it, all they are going to see is the boat blessing and the parade.

B: That's lovely. Do you think there are any functions other than the social or religious ones we've mentioned that it might serve for parts of the community?

FB: (Sigh) I think it serves, like, you know, (pause), every community needs a good time now and then, you know. And this is like a spring festival for the community. It doesn't seek to entertain others or to serve others. It's just like a family thing in the parish, you know. So, it's a nice opening of spring where everybody gets out and they get on the boats and they go and have a good time. So, I think it's like a big party for the parish. Brings everybody together, you know. They share that happy day. At the same time we have the mass and we have the blessing itself. And I think it has a religious significance, you know, so it serves that kind of purpose too. From both of these points of view, I think it helps the whole community be one, enjoy itself together, you know. I think it cements a lot of the bonds that are there in the fishermen, their families and the whole bayou. And then dance after, you know.

B: What have I left out?

FB: Trouble. (Both laugh)

B: What kind of trouble?

FB: Well, like— (Still laughing)

B: You mean the time and worry?

FB: Well, the fact that you can have troubles whenever you get a lot of people together like that and—

B: Well—

FB: I think that's been at a minimum.

B: Yeah. I had wondered if the church had an official position or stance about the kind of people who make comments--The first person I mentioned this to that I knew had any connection in this area is not from the area, and he said: "Oh, yeah, you go by and the priest blessed us, and then everybody gets drunk," and I thought: "I don't want to talk to you again."

FB: Yeah. (He laughs)

B: I don't want that perception to influence my information because I don't think that's what it means to the people who live there.

FB: No, I think for the majority that is not the meaning. That's what I say—you do have trouble sometimes, and some do—there's no doubt that some may drink too much. They drive speed boats too fast, you know. But these are all aberrations to what we plan, you see. Like I say, the speed boats run up and down the bayou. We get the Coast Guard to try to control that so nobody gets hurt. Sometimes out on the lake they drive around kinda crazy in the little speed boats that go out there, you know. And you could—Some may drink too much on the occasion,
it’s true, but that’s not the intent that we have and it’s not, at this point, not the main factor of it. If that ever came to be, I think the church would have to make a decision then: “Well, we no longer bless the boats. You want to have a party, you go have a party, but we’re getting out of it.” That’s why I say, you know, I think we hafta keep a perspective. And if ever it turned into that—we can’t stop them from having a party if that’s what they wanta do, you know, but I think we would be able to say we’re not going to take part in it. So there’s not going to be a blessing.

B: You would not sponsor or organize it?

FB: That’s right. If it got to any kind of point like that, you know, some of that does happen. And that’s why I say trouble, some of that does happen. Sometimes they don’t agree with the judges who should win the first place (he laughs), you know, because they all work so hard. (I laugh) And some drinking takes place and I guess, you know, some of ’em drink too much. You see that mostly around the end of the day, you know. But that’s not our intent, and if that became so prevalent, that seemed to be the main feature of the thing, I would think our church council and our committee would withdraw from it.

B: You’ve mentioned the lake several times; and I’m not familiar with the geography here. What lake are you referring to?

FB: We go down the bayou and we turn off and go into Lake Boudreaux and that’s where all the boats kinda make a flotilla out there, and they just stay out there a couple of hours and enjoy the sunshine or the good weather and the food.

B: And it’s a set route every year, the same basic—?

FB: Same. Uh huh. Right.

B: Okay. Do you mind, while we finish tying up some things if I take a couple of pictures of you?

FB: No, no. Oh, no.

B: I just want to have some background information.

FB: Do I look good enough for that?

B: Oh, you look wonderful. (He laughs.)

FB: I was trying to find a picture of one of the old boat blessings which we have, and I’m not being very successful.

B: I can sympathize with that.

FB: My problem is, I keep everything, you know. After awhile the files get so big, I just start another file.

B: And if you don’t mind, I’m just going to do this rather candidly while we’re talking.

FB: That’s okay.

B: And that way it’ll look more natural.

FB: Yeah.

B: Sort of.

FB: I wish I could find the picture for you, but—
B: Well, let me tell you the other thing I need from you if it is not an inconvenience. What I would really like to do is talk to some of the older fishermen here who have been involved with this for a number of years. And I wondered if you could possible introduce me to them or help me set up some appointments or interviews? I would particularly like to see them with their boats. Perhaps while they were doing some of the painting, overhauling, or— (Telephone rings, not answered.) And I also want to come down the weekend that this take place and attend the mass and perhaps see some of the decorations. I really would like to have a pictorial history as well as what I’m gathering--this information. So, I’d like to get as much information. I thought about talking to some committee members but I realized I want my real focus to be the people, the person who is performing it and the people for whom it was originated. So that the other activities are--tangential. Because I really feel like the focus I want to have on the meaning of this and the religious significance comes from that. So I wondered if you could possibly make some suggestions.

FB: Well, we have--I guess we can take different fishermen that you might want. Mr. J. D. Theriot is the one that told me and has some pictures and knows the history of it. He is not a fisherman himself, but he seems to be the one that knows the most about it. And I could, you know, find out from him and make an appointment or whatever way you want to--?

B: That would be grand.

FB: Or just give you his number.

B: That would be helpful. I’m going to be out of school for a week between spring break and I’ve got about ten days when I could come down and I’d like to possibly talk to at least two people. Maybe a couple of fishermen, and him if he’s got the history.

FB: He would be--he’s the one that claims that they got it from Biloxi and all that business, you know, and that he brought it over here. Or his daddy brought it over here. I don’t remember what exactly. Yeah, so he would be a good one to talk to. And then some of the older fishermen. I guess we could arrange a couple of those for you to talk to, you know. I don’t know what you’re looking for exactly.

B: Well, (sighs) as--from what I understand there are two aspects of the preparation, and one of them is actually out-fitting the boat for the season. I’d like to see some of them while they were working with their boats, perhaps.

FB: Okay.

B: I would also be particularly interested then, when they were decorating.

FB: Okay. Well, probably the lead boat of this year, the one
that won last year—they’re a young couple, but I think maybe that might be—You could—I’m sure they’d be glad to show you as they decorate. When—

B: Is that generally done the day before or is it—they work on it several days?

FB: Well, they may work on it several days, but a lot of it may be kept in the house, you see, until—They don’t put it on until like the day before or even the morning of the boat blessing, because some of them have become pretty elaborate with themes like Superman and some, The Wizard of Oz. And they’ll decorate. Some of them actually dress in some costumes on the thing, you know. We do give a prize for the best religious theme in both the double rig boats and in the single rig boats so that there is the incentive for some to display a religious theme. But that’s not, we don’t just that, you know. They can take any theme they want. Christmas, Easter, Wizard of Oz, anything, you know. But not all of them use a theme. Some just put flags, and some of them just put a few little things. It don’t look too much different from the way they look now, you know. But I think we could do that. That’s Susie Peltier. Let me see, I’m trying to think of his first name, not Richard. (noise of moving around, getting phone book, etc.) Then you could, see—Would you want me to call ’em, or you wanna call ’em—

B: Well—

FB:—and tell ’em I recommended you? That you’ve talked with me already or—

B: If you wouldn’t mind doing that, I would feel like that they might be a little more responsive. If—(pause) I don’t know any of these people and I’m scared of ’em.

FB: (He laughs) You don’t have to be scared of ’em.

B: Well, that’s sound, somebody with a speech major should be scared of things.

FB: Yeah. You don’t need to be. No, no.

B: But, I have heard such mixed things about this area of the state, most of which I find extremely flattering and extremely nice, but one of the things I’ve been told is that it’s—and one of the reasons I’ve wanted to study this here is that it’s a fairly closed society, (phone rings) and that they have kept a lot of their cultural and regional specialties. Things that might make them less likely to open up without an introduction.

FB: (He laughs) They can be—I think they’re very hospitable people. (Buzzer)

B: That’s what I’ve heard, if you, when you—

FB: Yeah. When—excuse me a second.

[Took telephone call, I turned recorder off.]

FB: Okay. Rodney Peltier and J. D. Theriot. J.D. might could give you some history on it. And he seems to be one of the spokesmen about it. He has pictures and
things that you might be interested in too. He has old pictures and may have some that would be interesting for you to look at. I know I have some pictures too, but I can’t find ‘em, not right off anyway. I don’t know when you—I don’t mind calling them up. Maybe they’re home now. You want to call now?
B: If you don’t mind. Would that be convenient?
FB: Yeah, just lemme see.
B: This isn’t a bad time of day to call people, is it?
FB: No, I don’t think--lemme just see if we can make any contact and then you can arrange with them. (Looked up numbers, wrote them, dialed.) You came down from Baton Rouge? You stay, you living in Baton Rouge now?
B: Yes, I’m in school there at L.S.U.
[FB: (ON PHONE) Sus - is your Mama home?/ Father Brunet, tell her I want to talk to her./ Father Brunet./ Uh huh!/ Susie, how you doing today?/ Okay. I wanted to check on you. We’re trying to have a boat blessing meeting next Friday night./ Oh, Lord, really?/ You got something on that night?/ Uh huh./ Yeah./ Right, yeah./ Well, we could had it another night but that seemed to be the traditional night. They used to always have it on a Friday, after (garbled)./ Uh huh./ Uh huh./ Oh, really? Oh. I was calling you about that. There’s a lady here that’s doing a paper on the boat blessing, you see. She’s at classes at L.S.U. and she wanted to talk to people and maybe take pictures. See a boat being decorated, you know, and—Ya’ll gonna ride this year?/ Huh? I know. That’s why I say you gonna lead?/ You not, may not be decorated that much; you lost some of that in the storm?/ Right, right./ Yeah, that’s okay./ I bet you a lot of people lost something in the storm./ That might be a bad year for her to be taking pictures of--/ Yeah./ Uh huh./ Right./ Yeah./ Oh, listen, I understand that. (To me: That’s what she said, a lot of people may-- She lost decorations this year in the storm. We just came through a hurricane. Everybody, about 90% of the houses were flooded in the area. (B: That’s awful.) So, it’s maybe not going to be a good year.) I didn’t think about that, Susie, but you still gonna be lead boat this year, huh, Susie?/ She can ride with us, huh?/ Okay, she can come on it with us, yeah./ Who do you—I don’t know how to pick this now. She wanted to take picture of boats, she can still come and take pictures of what ya’ll do put on, huh? And if she, and if you know somebody who is really not been hurt and is going to decorate a lot, maybe you can direct her to that too. I don’t know who that might be. Think about it. Thing about it./ Uh huh./ Yeah./ Oh, well, that’s okay. The main thing is the blessing, anyway, not the decorating, you know, and if they can’t decorate, that’s all right. We’re still gonna go ahead with the
blessing, you know./ Yeah./ Sure, and I think that makes sense, I might even say something that, you know, when we talk about the boat blessing from the pulpit, you know./ Well, yeah, but maybe that's better. (He laughs.)/ It might be better that we have a year like that, you know, because it brings back the original meaning more, too, you know?/ Right./ Yeah./ Uh huh./ Uh huh./ Well, that's right, and I think that make it-- Look, let me do this. I'm--this is her name--is Betsy Gorman. (I correct: Gordon) Gordon, G-o-r-d-a-n? (Me: d-o-n.) d-o-n. (To me: So, Betsy, when you think you would be--)

B: The week between Palm Sunday and Easter.

FB:(To her) Okay, between Palm Sunday and Easter she has a week. (To me:) But nobody's going to be decorating then.

B: No, I thought if anybody was working on their boat. Just on getting it ready. But is that early for them to be doing that?

FB:(To her:) Would anybody be getting the boat ready between Palm Sunday and Easter, you think?

B: In terms of cleaning it up, painting.

FB:(To her:) No, no, she's--not decorations. Just fixing it up, like?/ Noooo. (To me:) Making decorations, or you think painting the boat?/ Either.

FB:Making decorations or painting the boat. Either way. Someone will be painting the boat by then, huh?/ All right, well--/ (Telephone rings in background) Okay, suppose, would you be willing that, let her call you and maybe, you'll know something more about it by then, you think?/ Okay. Yeah, Thelma Neal might be doing that./ Yeah, okay. I'm going to give her your number and just remember the name, you know. Betsy Gordon, so that if she calls you, you won't say "Who this?" [We both laugh.] Okay, and then she may wanta come down and see some decorations or see some people or see some boats being fixed, you know? All right. And maybe, suppose we change the meeting to Thursday, would that do it? Be any good for you? I need to see if that's gonna fit with the rest, you know./ Well, let me see, if we're going to lose too many other people, we might just stay with the Friday. And if not we might be able to move it./ Uh huh./ Yeah./ Uh huh./ What time do you start your bowling?/ Well, I tell you what. Even if it was just for those twelve or fifteen, or half hour at most, at least we would know what you might be doing or think of-- so even if you just came for a little while. We'd handle you first./ (He laughs) All right. All right. Well, if I don't change it, it's seven o'clock next Friday. And even if you just came for a little while on your way to town, that would be a help, you hear?/ Okay, Susie.
Thank you. Bye bye. (Hangs up telephone.)

FB: Okay, so, you can call her.

B: Could you give me her last name and spell it?

FB: It’s P-e-l-t-i-e-r.

B: I spelled it right. I’m learning these Louisiana names.

FB: Peltier. And her husband’s name is Rodney, and she is Susie and their number is 594-5466.

B: I had a thought while you were talking, and I realized that if the person who had most of the history was J.D. Theriot, that perhaps if I made a specific appointment with him, he could suggest people when I was here that might be painting, or working on things right here. So when I came to see him, these other people may not know right now, but if I got a specific appointment with him, then—

FB: Well, he’s not a fisherman.

B: Yeah, but—

FB: He might know, he might be able to arrange it for you.

B: Yeah. Or suggest some people for me to call when I come back.

FB: Sure.

B: But, that might be the thing because I’m not so much at that time wanting to get interviews with them as to see some of what’s happening with the boats.

FB: Another good one would be Thelma Neal, but I’m sure Susie’s probably going to talk with her. She’s going to try to keep her eyes open for that.

B: Okay.

FB: [Checking phone number] Let me see if we can— 5293.

B: How do you spell his last name?

FB: T-h-e-r-i-o-t.

B: T-h-e-r-i-o-t. I was totally wrong on it. [Both laugh.]

FB: [Dials.] No, that’s—I was calling the same one. [Redials.] Now, we have pictures of all the boats in the modern, you know, like in the last couple of years. There’s a gentleman that took pictures of the boats, and he would have all of that. [Pause, phone ringing.] J.D.’s not home. [Pause] I’m afraid he’s not in.

B: Okay. Could you give me his phone number, and I’ll try to call him.

FB: Yeah, tell him you talked with me.

B: Okay.

FB: And if he’s got any questions, to call me, you know.

B: Okay.

FB: 594-5293.

B: And what is the name of the gentleman you said had the pictures of all the boats?

FB: Okay, that would be— Falgout. Let me see if I can get that number for you too. (Long pause, with pages turning.) Okay. Virgil, V-i-r-g-i-l, Virgil Falgout, F-a-l-g-o-u-t, and he’s 594-2275.

B: Okay.
FB: And he has pictures of, you know, modern day boat blessing. Mr. J.D. Theriot might have some of the old time. We used to have some, but I don’t know if I’ll find them. I’ll be glad to show them to you.

B: Well, this is tremendously helpful. And what I’ll do is to call Mr. Theriot until I can get an appointment, and then when I get here, just play the other things by ear during that week. What is the newspaper for this area? The Houma paper?

FB: Houma Courier, and then we also have a diocesan paper. They sometimes carry something on it, you know. And that’s the Bayou Catholic, they call it.

B: Where is it published?

FB: In Houma. It’s out of the diocese, the Catholic diocese, see—

B: And it’s called what?

FB: The Bayou Catholic.

B: Just like it sounds.

FB: Just like it sounds.

B: Okay, because what I’d like to do is come down here and check on talking to people first, and where that time runs out then go back to Houma and check in these newspaper files and some of the information they might have and compare some of the differences between what gets in print and what people perceive to be the truth, because there’s such a big difference.

FB: Well, what gets in print is not always right, you know.

B: So, you know, they may have some things in their file that would be contradictory or would elucidate. They may have some interviews that neither you nor I are aware of that are older.

FB: They usually print whatever they want. You know that.

B: Yeah. I’m afraid so. [I laugh.]

FB: You can tell them what you intend and what you want and all that, but, in the long run, they usually print what they want.

B: Okay. Now what arrangements do I need to make to get a copy of this? [Referring to blessing ritual.]

FB: Oh, you can have that one if that’s good enough.

B: Yeah, that’s fine. Thank you so much.

FB: You’re welcome. We have other copies of it.

B: Well, I think that’s all the questions I have today. If you think of anything else that you think might be important or significant since you jot down all those notes, just jot ’em down. And what I’ll do when I come back down is check by and if you’re in, see you, and if not, leave you a note.

FB: Yeah, okay.

B: And because I don’t want to miss coming down when they have the mass and the blessing, and I will be here before that and I’ll check by and see if you’re around and if not, I’ll leave you a note.
FB: Now, there’re two masses really, for it. The first one is on the Saturday evening where we decorate the altar with the fish nets and that would take place on April 19. Okay, and then on the day of the boat blessing, we usually have an outdoor mass down at what they call Boudreaux Canal on, out on the back, out on a flatbed truck, you know. And they usually have a little country-western band that plays hymns, spiritual hymns, country-western. It’s a little different than regular, you know. The Bishop will be here this year.

B: Good.

FB: You know, to say that mass and also to ride and bless the boats as we go down the bayou. So that’ll be—We usually don’t have him, you know. Once in awhile we get the Bishop to come here. This year—

B: Where is he ordinarily?

FB: Houma, Thibadoux, Houma.

B: Okay.

FB: He’s the head of the diocese which we belong to. So, he’d be here this year.

B: Well—

FB: You may not have as many nice decorations this year. She [Susie] made me aware of that.

B: Well, that would be a particularly interesting thing, because one of the things I wanted to talk to the fishermen about was: "What happens in bad years? What are some of the expenses you have, you know, what happens when you feel like you can’t participate to the fullest? How does that make you feel? How would you feel if this stopped—just in terms of—not in terms of trouble, but in terms of what goes on with you?" So, that’s something that I was planning to explore with them anyway. So that’ll give me particular insights.

FB: I’m glad to see that we have some boats that get into the parade that are not even decorated, you know? I think that’s good.

B: Well, if the blessing is the point, then that—

FB: Yeah. And then, of course, the way we do it now, they don’t even have to get into the parade to be blessed. We can bless ’em anyway. (He laughs) And so it may be a forced blessing now, because whatever boat we see, we bless, you know? (Laughs.) Whether they want to be blessed or not.

B: Well, I’m sure it doesn’t hurt them. Just like, I’ve been blessed by the Pope in 1975, and I’m not Catholic, but I don’t think it hurt me.

FB: I’m sure it didn’t. (Laughs.)

B: In fact, (laughing) I’m sure it probably did a lot of good—

FB: Yeah, I’m sure it did.

B: --more times that I’ve realized. Well, are you going to say anything else important?
FB: No, I believe that's all I've got to say, Betsy.
B: I appreciate your time so much!
FB: Well—
B: You've been—

[Tape cut off]
Interview with J. D. Theriot

Date: Monday, March 24, 1986
Time: 9:30 a.m.
Place: His home, Chauvin, Louisiana

B = Betsy  JD = J. D. Theriot

Preface: This is a test, on Monday, March 84. I'm fixing to interview J. D. Theriot about the blessing of the fleet in this area and I'm checking to see that the tape recorder is working. (Alt. mike check.)

B: You're route one, Box 155. Is that Houma?
JD: No, ma'am, that's Chauvin.
B: And your zip code?
JD: 70344. My English is not perfect, you'll have to--
B: Neither is mine. (laugh)
JD: Yeah, but mine is mixed with French.
B: Well, if there is something I don't understand, I'll just ask, okay? (Some mike sounds) That should be fine right there.
JD: I don't blame--
B: Let me tell you what I'm really up to. I'm a student in school at LSU and I'm in a class where we are studying how, some of the events that go in communities have a lot to do with the people there and have some particular meaning to them because of how it ties in with their community life. So that's my particular interest in the blessing of the fleet. And I'm interested in this one here because so many other places it seems to be more of a tourist type thing rather than something that you can trace or something that the people there have been personally involved with getting started. So when I talked to Father Brunet, he told me that you had some of the history and that either you, or perhaps your father and you together knew something about this and that you were the person best qualified to tell me about it. So, what I'd like to do, if it suits you, is just ask you some questions and anytime that I'm getting off track or you have other information, just--I want to know what you know about the blessing of the fleet and are willing to share with me.
JD: Oh, well, that's correct about thinking that this place.
B: Okay, I'm going to stop and make sure that we're picking up okay. (Break in tape, resumes as we are both laughing.) Well, I'll be getting all kinds of things. What I wanted to do was just start of with some general questions about your background. You told me you're retired.
[Reference to prior phone conversation.]
JD: Yes, ma'am.
B: What was your profession?
JD: Seafood industry, mostly shrimp.
B: But you weren't a shrimper yourself? Weren't a fisherman?
JD: No, ma'am. I was operating a plant on the bayou here that's called Indian Ridge Shrimp Company.
B: I'll be taking some notes too, just in case there are any things that are confusing to me or just to have when I'm re- (?) the tape so if there is anything I don't understand. Now, was that a family business, or--?
JD: It is, but we did—we were just working there. But it belongs to, if you want the name, to the S. D. St. Martin family.
B: All right. Had your father worked there?
JD: That's where the story begins.
B: Oh, okay.
JD: My father was from Bayou Dularge, and about 1907, I guess, something like that, his father was a farmer and had a big family. Had stuff to eat, but not much work, so he started going to the St. Martin farm, and helped out as a young boy. And then about a couple of years or so after, they brought him down here where they had a store on the coast, dealing mostly with oyster fishermen. The oysters were then maybe shucked open and iced up and brought to Morgan City where you could get the Southern Pacific railroad, but that's way back. And in 1909, they bought a place on this Highway 56 about ten miles further south than here, and brought my father there. Then he was sixteen years old. And just a little bitty place it was, but they settled down there. It was September, nineteen nine, they had one of the most terrible hurricanes that ever hit the coast, I guess. And—I guess they worried quite a bit about it. Well, this was in 1909. They cleaned out and he told me they picked up about 150 bodies that had been drowned. Anyway, he survived through it and when everybody also mostly around. My mother, too. They weren't married yet. And in November—he was not in charge, he was just a boy—the manager died of typhoid fever. So the only one left was my father and they put him in charge and he stayed there for 45 or 50 years. And I, we made a fair living, never had plenty money, but anyway, he had a good salary and so— Then I was too smart to go to school; I knew better than the teachers, so they put me to work at about sixteen, too. And they have a big store down there, put me to work. Said: "You don't want to go to school, I'm going to make you work." So I did. And I stayed all my life there, too. I stayed 46 years with the same company. I transferred from the store to the shrimp business when he got more to do and everything else. Why when he retired, then I stayed there—foreman, everything for 46 years.
B: Okay. Well, that’s really interesting. Now, do you know anything about your family’s history back before your father came here that was related to the sea? In other words, is your family one of the ones that came over with the original Acadians, or do you have any family history of that?

JD: We have all that. It’s so big.

B: Well, but, do you know of any family members who were involved in fishing or shrimping during that time, or were they farmers?

JD: My family? No, they stayed farmers. Let’s see, others went to carpentry, and that moved out. Mostly, some of them, the family, still in New Orleans, you know. There was very little work here for them. There were lots of fishermen, though. (Coughs.) They moved into New Orleans, and became carpenters and different stuff like that. Some of them traded in furs.

B: Oh?

JD: The fur business in South Louisiana which was a big, big business way back, which I mentioned before.

B: Now, unless there’s something else that you’d like to tell me about your family, why don’t we talk about the blessing of the fleet. Do you know how it actually got started here? (Pause.) What actually happened?

JD: I’ll take credit for it.

B: (Laughing) Okay.

JD: Because nobody else can prove me wrong, I think. All right, now we have to start with the, again, the shrimping industry. I have checked up a little and found out which way we got to catching shrimp with mechanized— Would you care to—? (Gestured to scrapbooks.)

B: Sure, all right.

JD: Am I making too much noise?

B: No, it won’t—don’t worry about that. This is just to help me refresh my memory later so that I won’t forget anything.

JD: I’m looking for an envelope. (Sounds of turning pages.) You know, those’ll fit in later with the shrimp blessing. [Hands me a letter.]

B: Do you mind if while you’re describing some other things I just copy this information?

JD: That’s why I put it there, I thought it would be—

B: Thank you.

JD: You see, that would give you a longer story.

B: Yeah. Now, Father Brunet said from what he understood that you, or you and your father had seen a blessing in Biloxi, and that was where you got the idea?

JD: That’s what I’m driving at in this.

B: Okay. While I’m jotting down some notes here, would you like to tell me a little bit about that?

JD: Well, I knew all the time that the shrimping industry had come along the Gulf from Florida, the East Coast. Let’s
see, that was around East Carolina, down the Florida Coast, up the Gulf again toward Biloxi, Mississippi, which progress in there. And Biloxi had good boats and everything else, and they had put up, there was for awhile eight canning plants that could can shrimp process, can for the shelf shrimp. That's what these—(referring to pictures.) There wasn't much refrigeration to be known, everything was processed, that can shrimp, and my father and everybody, people on Bayou LaFourche and all South Louisiana, began to see what was going on in Biloxi and get interested.

B: Now, this is the business part of it, not the blessing?
J D: The business part—. But, he had to go and look around and see what the other fella was doing. My father, he always did like Biloxi, and one way or the other—(Laughs.) And he made friends with those people at the canning plant. And he'd go often to Biloxi even in the making of the shrimp nets to catch shrimp. We know nothing about it. We had to learn, the closest place was Biloxi. And he kept going to Biloxi, and learning all they could, and brought it back here and adapt it to our part of the country which is much more shallow water and inside water than Biloxi. Anyway, one day—they kept on for quite a while. He went back there to buy more materials, maybe more net, to bring back. The man that was selling him the nets, he said: "Let's go to Back Bay Biloxi." They call it Back Bay—I don't know what they call it now, but it's—Now, Biloxi is on a point of land or something. So that's where the boats are anchored for salvage. So they did go, and he say: "What's going to be going on?" Said: "They’re-- the fleet’s going to be, the Catholic Church—(Garbled section.) Then go back there and all the boats are tied up back there together. And they were blessed then. Just for good luck. So they went and like I told you before, this was not a rich country at all, and the Cajun were here. They were surviving. And he came back here and went to the Catholic Church and spoke with the priest. He had a French Canadian call—And I think he was from Quebec. And talked to him about it and said: "How about if we try that? Have a boat blessing?" Say: "It can't hurt. And maybe it'll help things get going a little better."

B: That was the priest who was from Quebec?
J D: Yeah. Name was—I have his name, Father Colomb. C-O-L-O-M-B.

B: So, now how many people were involved in that trip to Biloxi and who came back and talked to the priest?
J D: Oh, only him. He mighta had somebody else with him which were not educated at all, and they were with him to learn how to make the nets, the shrimp nets, which is a very—how you say that—a real craft or something, that you have like you're making a dress. It's gotta fit, and it
gotta fit right. If you don’t know what you’re doing, you never gonna get shrimp. And that’s what was going on. So, my father, he had somebody else with him that he had brought over there so they would watch these people mend their nets, repair, tie their nets if they were broken. And get them things like that. I know there were a lot of ways that were tried to catch shrimp. (Laughs.)

B: Yeah.

JD: So, yeah, they came back with that in idea, and that’s what started the boat blessing.

B: Okay. What was your father’s name?

JD: My father was Desire, Desire. D-E-S-I-R-E, you spell it. It didn’t have the French thing on the (pointing to my writing). Anyway, that’s—

B: All right. Do you remember anything that he perhaps told you or your family about what he had seen at the boat blessing? Or what he may have told the priest about what was involved in that?

JD: Well, what he said was that the only thing he saw in Biloxi was that the boats were there, but there was, in other words, no party or proper, or anything like that. Everybody was just—the boats would tie up and everybody was around and said they went there. The priest came and he just said a little prayer, the Holy Water, and that was it. He came back here, and we had. It was different.

B: Okay, when they did that, do you remember anything he said about it being, say, at the start of the shrimp season, or any particular reason that they were doing this in Biloxi?

JD: Well, asking Almighty God for blessing, on being out there—going to sea. And they were venturing, I guess it would be called, a little far out in those days with the boats they had, the danger they had. And that’s why we really went into it: to ask Almighty God for a blessing on the fishermen and everybody else.

B: Do you know anything about how the date got set? Or what—

JD: I know that it is a set date.

B: Is that related to Easter, specifically; is it related to the seasons, or the shrimp, or the temperature in the Gulf?

JD: Right now, they have changed it a little bit, but it’s still—All right, we’ll have a shrimp season beginning around May the tenth. I’m not sure yet—they can vary it, the legislature. They have acted on it. I thing they can go to somewhere on the twenty-fifth of May. They want to back it up. It all depends on the weather and stuff, conditions which they say they study the shrimp. That’s all, which we don’t believe nothing in it. (Laughs.) The biologists go out there— (We both

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laugh.) The old Cajuns don’t believe a bit in it. All right. Then they will close around the Fourth of July. Then you have a month then. You have another season begins in August. And the first boat blessing days, they were set on the fifteenth of August. August the fifteenth they were. August the fifteenth is a church holiday. I don’t know what they call it too much. Remember (garbled). And they set it, I think, just a week or so before the fifteenth. And it was on a weekday as I can remember.

B: Was it treated like a holiday at first? Did people dress?
JD: Yes.
B: Could you describe some of what they did to actually celebrate it?
JD: Would you like to go to the pictures?
B: Yeah, I’d like to see that.
JD: If I show you this— (Sounds of photo album being moved.) All right, that’s the first one.
B: Okay. And this is actually on the—?
JD: The bayou bank. On the bayou bank.
B: Can you tell me—can you identify the building?
JD: Yeah. These buildings that we are looking at in this picture is called Boudreaux Canal Store.
B: Yes, ma’am. Everybody is dressed with—not the—everybody is dressed as good as he had. (Laughs.) Now, you can see, some that’s with coats, mighta been a judge from Houma or somebody else. All right.
B: Now, from what I’m seeing, this was primarily just the fishermen or the people involved with the industry. It doesn’t look like there is anybody, any crowd there, any families or anything like that.
JD: All the family here (pointing).
B: Oh, they are there.
JD: The ladies are there. You mostly—They’re in the bayou, back. They don’t want—back. They’re mostly up— (He was pointing to their positions during this.) The umbrellas. See those?
B: Oh, yes.
JD: Can you see that?
B: Now that you mention those, I’d recognize them.
JD: They were there. But you mind if I tell you a little joke about?
B: No.
JD: What’s concerning mostly the Catholic religion which this was. We have to talk about it whether we like it or not. I was an altar boy. In those days, I was twelve or thirteen. But, as we—everybody would receive communion. Holy Communion. But in those days there was no such thing as standing up. You had to kneel down. Kneel with the church’s pew benches. Maybe some of them still have,
you know. And, see, we had communion. What we had there was a two by four nailed all the way from here to there (referring to picture). And they had put stakes in the other two by four so you could kneel against it. At least from here you could. But at the bottom of this the floor was layered oyster shells. You had to kneel on that, so you were really having a penance.

B: (Both laugh.) I can imagine.

JD: You had no carpet or anything. But I tell everybody, they were large enough so that you could put your knee in 'em. If you put your knee in 'em, you were all right, but if you—if it's turned around and you put them in 'em the other way then you were— (both laugh).

B: Oh, my!

JD: Oh, yeah. Everybody did. And the boats, as we went along, everybody started in. You see one or two—the little flags, there. Like I said, the people had no money to spend on any luxuries. Everything went for necessities, bare necessities.

B: Now, were those flags there particularly for that event? I mean, was this something people just did to decorate, or was that something that they tended to have on their boat anyway, originally?

JD: There's a reason. This is not what you see down there. This is more. They don't—but we'll come to that later.

B: Okay.

JD: They are not the American flag; they're mostly homemade pennants. They're boat, I guess you'd call them, pennants?

B: But, these flags, that are in the original picture would be some that the boat carried anyway? They were not special for that occasion?

JD: I have to tell you why they carry this flag.

B: Okay.

JD: I'm going to show you more of the— (flips pictures) All right, that's the boat blessing. We're getting there. That's the boat blessing. Or you want to keep on with the flags, what you think?

B: Whatever suits you.

JD: Oh, you see. This year we had it down--

B: Okay. Now, do you know what year this first one was?

JD: This is around the thirties, might have been nineteen twenty-nine. I think it was in the 30's, because this one is dated 1932. There is one younger than this picture. This was the first one.

B: Okay.

JD: I say the first one in Louisiana, you know. Everybody's got it everywhere. Everybody's—got it very big. But they went, like you said while ago, went the other way. But then this, where we at now is the shrimp drying platform. And then it was all out of rough boards, cypress boards that we used. They might have been fifty, sixty
feet wide, and then 200 feet long, which was built like that to dry the shrimp on it, you know. Boil, cook 'em, and spread 'em out, and they would take--it all depend on the weather--but some days would dry 'em up and then they would knock the hulls, and so--. Anyway, after, I told you about these rough planks here, the oyster shells went to the platform and that was a little lea here on the knees. (Garbled section. We both laugh.) All right. And they kept on and on and on. In thirty two, then we had this way. This was all local. (Showing pictures.) Houma, Louisiana, that's who take it (referring to Richard's Studio logo on old photographs).

B: Does that studio still exist?
JD: Huh?
B: Does that studio still exist?
JD: I don't-- Not this one, for sure-- (hesitant) They told me who take this. Something over the--. I forget their name, but it was a (unclear word). But you can notice that they're all very--this is all--homemade boats.
B: Oh, really?
JD: Yes, ma'am. Made locally. I don't know. Very few that would ever come even from Bayou LaFourche. So--
B: What is the name of the bayou here?
JD: It's really French. Bayou Petit Caillou. Little Caillou, but it's called "petit", p-e-t-i-t.
B: Caillou?
JD: C-a-i-l-l-o-u, Caillou.
B: And this is the one that you still, that goes down past St. Joseph's and that you take into Lake Boudreaux?
JD: Just keeps going on to the Gulf.
B: Oh, it goes on to the Gulf?
JD: It goes down to the Gulf, there (pointing to map.)
B: But you can get from that into Lake Boudreaux?
JD: Yes, ma'am.
B: And that's the route the flotilla takes now for the boat parade?
JD: Right.
B: Okay. I didn't know what the name was.
JD: That's a single bayou.
B: Now, are these boats in the water (looking at picture)?
JD: Yes, ma'am.
B: And it was wide enough then for them to get four or five across there?
JD: Yes, ma'am.
B: And so they were that size? And came down--?
JD: Right.
B: Oh, that's beautiful.
JD: That's the same thing there, see?
B: Yeah, I just was not seeing down the bayou there, and it was confusing to me. Now, this appears to be some type of, perhaps, a little temporary altar place. They would set up a place there for--?
JD: That's a temporary altar there for the priest, see? If you had a magnifying glass, you'd see a (unclear word).
B: Well, I can need him kneeling there. It's a very fine picture.
JD: There's a covered area.
B: If you don't mind, I'm going to make a quick sketch, just so I can--
JD: No, do what you want. I'm glad to help you. [He gets up and move to cabinet. Rummages and mumbles.]
B: And some of this, people are on the boats itself. I'm seeing some children. That's nice.
JD: There's a covered area. Glen Pitre, he's local, from Bayou LaFourche. He had his camera and took all these pictures. I think there's some of 'em in the--I think they call it Southdown, in Houma. It's a museum now. [Silent pause, he is looking.]
B: Okay, now originally when this happened, was there a boat parade, or was it strictly the ritual of the blessing? Was it like in the morning? Was there a mass?
JD: There was nothing but the boat blessing. There was no parade. Everybody was there. It was strictly religious.
B: Okay.
JD: You had no beer; you had no crawfish. (Both laugh.) You had no (unclear), and you didn't dance. And even then you had to abstain, and of course (unclear end of sentence). [He laughs.] So everybody—but, then after, you talk a little bit with your friends and everybody would get back in the boats and head home.
B: Did work stop for that day?
JD: Yes, ma'am.
B: And— was there a mass?
JD: Yes, there was a mass. You can see him saying mass for everybody. Then, they made prayers, and we kept on that way.
B: You happen to remember approximately how long that might take place? How long it was from the time you got there until you left generally, with the mass and the blessing?
JD: Well, no. The boats would file in during the early hours. They would, I imagine, maybe around 9:30, 10:00, and if he didn't, his sermon wasn't too long, only it would last, not too long, maybe an hour, hour and fifteen minutes or something like that, but if he was long-winded— (Both laugh.)
B: It could last a lot longer!
JD: Yeah, which you could—. But then as we got out of the woods and began to (unclear), I know he was then. We had this priest that got old and got sick so we had to begin to slow a little bit. So the diocese of New Orleans sent us down Father Giles Joseph Beauvais. [Silent pause while he looked in cabinet.] I'm just looking.
B: Okay. No problem.
JD: [More mumbling, hands me St. Joseph's brochure.] This is...
B: Do you mind if I copy these names? [List of pastors.]
JD: Oh, yeah.
B: I was planning to ask Father Brunet about this, but since
you've got it right here—I can just copy it down; it
won't take but a minute.
JD: I think I know it better that Father Brunet.
B: Well, probably, probably more because you knew them.
JD: I've been here (laughs). I've been here longer than him.
B: [Mumbles] Where there are two names here, is the second
one—?
JD: They're assistants.
B: Assistants. Okay. [Pause while I write.] I'll be
through in just a minute.
JD: You go ahead.
B: Oh, I'm glad to see how to spell Father Paluggi's name,
because I heard it pronounced, and I thought—
JD: He died about a month ago.
B: I'm sorry to hear that. He must have been—had he been
moved somewhere else, or was he still in this area?
JD: No, he was in New Orleans.
B: Um. Now, before we get much farther, if you don't mind,
I'd like to look at these again a little bit. It may
help me identify—. I wish though, that I had another
copy. That's the only copy like this. I would—I found
this in a book. (Show him picture of past blessing.) It
says it take place below Houma.
JD: Uh hum.
B: Do you recognize where or when that might be?
JD: That's here. That's it. I thought of this book, but I
didn't go back down there.
B: What church is that? Is that St. Joseph's?
JD: That's St. Joseph's church.
B: This is the (unclear)? Was that church torn down or
destroyed by a hurricane?
JD: No, it was moved back there when we, when Bishop Coley
came down from the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Maybe, I
don't know what he felt like. Like maybe he didn't like
our church because it was all out of wood. But it was
naturally finished. It was beautiful to us. But it was
all out of wood so they—. We don't know. The fire
insurance and stuff—all right. They moved it further,
they moved it out of the way, anyway, and built this
modern church which we have.
B: Is it in approximately the same site?
JD: Yes, ma'am. Oh, yeah.
B: Because when I saw that, I thought—
JD: Yeah, it had to move. So, yeah, that's it.
B: Now, where is that in relationship to— or, that's a
couple of miles north of where it was originally being
held there (referring to picture). This here—?
JD: This is north of where these other people are. It's five
miles from the beginning in the first picture we saw.

B: Do you know approximately when it started taking place at the church?

JD: I would have to—that's what I was—

B: Let me get that out of your way.

JD: Through this, you see, he came in. I don't really re--I think it kept on just at the original place with Father Colomb, but when Father Beauvais came here, he had different ideas and he had been around. He was—I think he was in Baton Rouge for quite awhile and he was in St. Francisville for a long time. He was a smart man. (He laughs.) And he had his own money. His family was from Thibodeaux, and he knew a lot of other people. So, he took charge of it, like I said. Brought us out of the woods, and invited Fox Movietone, back then news service, Paramount News, you know what I'm talking about?

B: Uh huh.

JD: You would go to the theater, and before the picture show, the movie, they would show you the news of the day.

B: Yeah, there are a couple of television channels that show these sometimes at night.

JD: They show it. Oh, wow, I love to see that. It would bring back old memories. And it would—. Like I say, he was smart. And he invited them, and they did come out. And that's when it started. Lot of these pictures in this. What we do. Anyway, we go to the boat blessing and maybe tomorrow night we'd drive to town and see our picture on the screen, or a day or so.

B: Oh! (He laughs.) But he actually had them filmed?

JD: Yes, ma'am. And there were some people here that touring the United States, and they were elderly people. We were not that— I guess people do that. They made their business and stuff out of those things. And I told them about that. They say: "You know, I bet those things are still on tape or microfilm or—"

B: Well, I was just thinking—

JD: "And I just imagine if somebody—" But I say, "Boy, I'd like to see those (laughing) again."

B: Wouldn't that be fascinating to track down!

JD: Well, that was around nineteen, see the, up to 1944 to '47. Now--[His grandchildren came in, and he stopped them.] Let me tell them. You go outside. Go outside—shh, go on. Good bye, good bye. That's the grandkids.

B: Oh.

JD: She brought me some flowers.

B: How nice.

JD: Well, I don't want to— (shifting around mike.) Now where were—?

B: We were (coughs) talking about the films. Now, this is a procession? Did that become a part of this, where the mass started on the side and then proceeded?

JD: On the sides, we don't have. See, you don't see the
boats, but the boats are there, the picture. They just lined up. You just have, in the bayou. As I said, about 9:30, 10:30, came to the church and looked real pretty in their—the ladies and their stuff. Everybody walked to the bayou. The boat owners would get on their boat, and then the priest would be standing on this—a little barge we have. And then there's a fellow priest with him, and have better than that.

[End of side one of tape.]

[Begin side two.]

B: Okay, the boats would pass by where the priest was.
JD: Yes, the barge is there; they would pass the barge. No boats south of the barge, the north side, so they would be going South.
B: Toward the Gulf?
JD: Toward the Gulf, or back home. No, hardly any fishermen lived above the church. Now you have. But in those days, you did not have. Everybody was living closer to the coast.
B: Now, originally, were these boats company boats or individual boats or a mixture?
JD: Mostly individually owned.
B: What about now?
JD: Now is just the individually owned, yes, ma'am.
B: Okay.
JD: 'Cause, that's another long story we can get into later.
B: Okay. (Laughs.)
JD: About owning boats. If you try it, if you have the wrong man. Had the right man on there, you can make it. But if you get yourself a crook, they'll ruin you in no time. I guess you've heard of that. Those different kinds of business. That's especially in this business, which they travel from Florida to Mexico. So, they can sell your nets; they can sell your water pump; they can sell your radio. Especially the nets, which the nets cost most probably about a thousand dollars a piece now.
B: Oh!
JD: And if they go into port and they want a little honky-tonk money, they'll sell one of the nets. They come back: "I lost the net. It broke; I lost it." Or "The cables broke and everything. I lost the net, that." What you say, okay? With one that part lost. (He laughs.)
B: Looking at that picture with the barge and the priest on it, there are some other people there on the barge with him. Would those be anybody in particularly? Specific people who would be there?
JD: Yes, ma’am. Mostly invited guests or the choir. This man, I would have to— (Sighs, hunts through pictures.)— see where going. I guess they would be—. When you are getting ready, they would be the same— (Mumbles)

B: Now, I notice they are getting more and more dressed. Is that still in August? Was this ever treated like Easter with that being when people got their new clothes or—?

JD: No, ma’am.

B: Not in this area. I’ve been told they did that in Biloxi.

JD: Oh, well, you know, this was along in April. It depends. Just stuff around here mostly. They wear their summer clothes, you know, which we didn’t have too much clothes at that, and in some of the old pictures and not even then. In there you saw when you go to the church, I guess. I don’t know where. You used to wear a coat. Hot. No air-conditioning, no fan. We sweat with a coat on, and a necktie.

B: I grew up in that kind of church.

JD: You did? (Laughs.)

B: I sure did.

JD: You know what I’m talking about.

B: We sat there with our fans.

JD: Okay. Well, this Father Beauvais come up here and he knew us better than we knew ourselves, because he had been born and raised in Thibodeaux. Right then always were poor people. And I guess he knew we didn’t have too many coats. So he said: “Leave those coats home, roll your sleeves up, and we won’t—. As long as you dress right, that’s all that—. Ya’ll can come to church like that.” And everybody had shoes. Anyway, that’s when the thing started. But then here—anyway, your boats would file by one by one, and everybody—you see the families back in here?

B: Uh huh.

JD: They would get on their boat, all right—

B: Now, where did they go when they filed by? Did they have any kind of parade, or they just went back home or—?

JD: They were going back home, yes, ma’am. They pass. You would pass in front of the priest and you would bless the boat and everything, and take the family home.

B: But that was a ritual thing? There was no exchange? They didn’t say anything, the fishermen themselves?

JD: No, ma’am. No. What we’d do--the Catholics nod sometimes, and we’d say (crossed himself) a silent cross.

B: Uh huh. To receive the blessing? But, so it’s not anything set?

JD: No, it wasn’t set. Now, you got the families on the boat going. (Referring to picture) That’s the family on their father’s boat.

B: Beautiful pictures! Now I’m having a little trouble seeing. Do these women have on dresses?
JD: Oh, yeah. They were--
B: I didn’t know. They’ve just got ‘em tucked where I--they won’t blow in the wind?
JD: They—no, no pants in those days. You didn’t—still have hats on, as you can see. Oh, yeah, and then when it goes, they leave the coats home. That was satisfying. Anyway, now we’re down to the going home. You can tell that these the old days. See the old mules. They work the mule back there. That was from a plantation we had. You see the plantation homes back here? Where all sugar cane, and was a big—was quite a (garbled section). I don’t think (mumbles). But those boats, I still admire them. [See] How pretty--
B: Um. They are pretty.

JD: They’re homemade, these boats. Then my uncle has two or three of ‘em; they were boat builders. No blue prints. You wanted a forty foot boat, why you measure out the keel and it come out to forty foot. (Mumbled.)

B: That’s amazing!
JD: No, very little electric saws they had, or stuff like that. They had luggers at time (unclear). And they built with the muscle. (Laughs.) And they kept on. All right. Now, see down to this part, and they went along. We call these smaller boats—and a few of them left now— we call them luggers. And they, I don’t know what—. We call them canauts, c-a-n-a-u-t. All right. That’s from the— that’s really French. But I didn’t know until last year why it went. And we went up to Nova Scotia and I saw a canoe. A (unclear) canoe, but it a canaut, but it’s round.

B: Oh?
JD: That was French. They brought that with them. It’s a round-bottomed boat. Now they make the boats kinda square and stuff like that, but in those, the thing was just round boat.

B: Now, as far as you know, how long has the bayou been navigable this far up? Ever since you can remember?
JD: I don’t know—yes.
B: It just looks so well-kept. Does it maintain itself, or do they actually have to--?
JD: They dredge it—(unclear) stream. It’s under the federal government jurisdiction and it was in the teens and twenties when it was started.

B: I had never been down here.
JD: The first I know it had been before. But, now, I was just a little boy then. So that my father would dredge or somebody came and they open up the bayou.

B: I was wondering when I came down two weeks ago and saw boats this size all the way up to Houma. I thought—(laughs) I mean, it didn’t surprise me on the inter-coastal waterway, but when I realized they were on the bayou, I wondered how long they’d been--!
JD: If you notice, right now the parish is coming down with a (unclear) and trying to rebuild the shoulders, the bank of the bayou. It’s rough when you get an erosion. And that’s all a (unclear) goes into. And it’s gon’ help drain Houma out and everything else that’s blocking down to the Canal, so—but it’s a federal stream. To do anything in there—pilings or bulkheads, you have to go the Corps of Engineers to get a permit now with the boat landing, what you know. But it’s well done and now—that’s the old days. We can come to the more modern days.

B: (Laughing) Okay.

JD: Now we down to—all right, let’s see—(shuffling pictures and mumbling) What happens now, you have a—the priest will go down to where the turn off to go to where Lake Boudreaux, which is call the Boudreaux Canal. And he’s on the bank there. And the boats still tie up individually. And they do the same thing. They told me that the fire marshall and stuff wouldn’t like to see ‘em pile up like we used to in the old days. (I laugh.) I guess the bayou and stuff like that—so—(coughs)

B: But when they actually come in for that, I understand that they don’t come and file up to the church, but as he passes them they file in behind now to avoid that?

JD: Yeah, oh, yeah.

B: So they don’t have that old procession like in a (unclear) you just fall in when you’re passed.

JD: Yeah.

B: Was that influenced by somebody like the fire marshalls, or did that happen to—that change take place another way? Why did they decide to change the way they organized it? You know anything about that?

JD: Well, I’m not too sure why. It’s just that the boats are larger and it’s hard to maneuver, and you have to know your (unclear) there. You can’t pile up those big boats like we did smaller boats. Stuff like that. And you have more room to maneuver and stuff. So, I think, that’s mostly the case. The people still on the boats. So, like I said awhile ago, when they come out for the benediction, why they start out after that. It’s quite a bit of beer and crawfish that they. Still we have mass. It’s mostly Sundays now we have on, at Boudreaux Canal on the school grounds. But we have done (unclear), say mass. It’s very nice.

B: They’ve changed from August to the spring. Why was that?

JD: ‘Cause mostly right now it’s really an off-season for shrimping all together, due to the winter. So we try to have it—I don’t know when they gon’ date it. It’s usually a couple of Sundays after Easter, when Easter hits, while most of the boats were in and nobody’s working right now. So that’s why it was brought this way. Which back in August, after it was set in May,
along then everybody would be out. In and out, in and out until next winter. So that’s mostly the case. You have, maybe, you come here and you see part of ’em in and part of ’em out. Now, everybody’s just about— Have you seen pictures of the [recent blessings]?

B: Yes, I have, but those are lovely! So elaborate. I understand a lot of people have lost stuff this year.

JD: Yeah, but they have the contest and the variety and stuff like that.

B: There were a couple of other things I wanted to ask you. When this got started, your father was not a fisherman himself. How did people react to his initiating something that had more to do with them? Did they feel it was a community service, or were they even aware of his involvement? Why do you think it caught on so well? ’Cause it seems within a very short time to have been well attended and important to the community.

JD: Well, I’m— When you talk to other people, he was not educated much, but he was a self-made man. And I’d say he was maybe a leader, and so—and the fishermen, education wasn’t a big thing. But he had been around. And anyway he’d been to New Orleans quite often. (He laughs.) Well, anyway, when he came up with that, what was going on, then, like I said, they were canning shrimp and working the shrimp, but he— just Indian Ridge and Chauvin Brothers, they were called—but he was part of that. They were the only two places that would buy shrimp, so that they—

B: So these were people that he was working directly with?

JD: Yeah. Yes, ma’am.

B: So he was trying—?

JD: He was in, like I said, he was put in charge of these, this company store and family store, and the very owner here. And he kept on and stayed here. I know he was 62 before he passed on and every(?) knew—and if you wanted to go out, if you had to go out, you had to buy gasoline. You had to buy a little groceries, and different stuff, and needed nets. This store carried totally. We carry net, but worked there for years. If you get, if you had a hundred dollars cash in the register at night, you were doing good. You (unclear), we sell thousands and thousands of dollars of (unclear) stuff. Everything was charged.

B: Uh huh.

JD: And these people would do that and maybe a week or so after, maybe fifteen days or longer, they would either come back or come around. The first thing they would do is pay off this bill here. They pay this one; the next few days, they come back, another. I like to show you— It was really a credit business. So that’s the way—. Let’s see, I had something— (mumble) Now, why don’t I tell you about my father. This is on the waterway.
That's up to Houma. They didn't have many trucks and stuff. In this boat, get. These are drums, galvanized. The whole fifty-five gallons, galvanized. All right, this: that's a little barge and in the boat itself there is 200 of these drums together, which would be brought down to Boudreaux Canal. And like I was saying, these people here would come down there and everything would be charged for a week to fifteen days and they would take, maybe, fifteen hundred gallons of gasolene with 'em. Hauling in these drums and these drums are return, and (unclear). We bring 'em back to town, have 'em refill, and haul 'em back.

B: Uh huh.

JD: That's the way the business worked. And everybody would pay off the boat account. The family account—that were different stories. But, it all depends on how much money to be made and how much their boats worth. How much shrimp they had to be caught. And some years were really bad, bad years, for no shrimp and stuff, and you get a hurricane. That's another problem. Now we're getting help from this down here. A lot of people have insurance. The Red Cross were a great thing. To be seeing the way they organized to help out people, and help them out as much as we could. And helped out some people were in trouble, and helped us out.

B: Do you think the influence of St. Joseph's has been really strengthened by this, and by organizing and by being part of giving the blessing? What do you think would happen to the community and the shrimp fishermen here after a year like you've just had if for some reason the church decided to cease doing that?

JD: Well, it would be a hollow spot, I believe, because we've always—I did and all the other—you look forward to it, though how you can explain it? There my education not that big. But everybody's just looking to the church for support, I guess.

B: Uh huh.

JD: While you have other good religions coming in. All doing the same now, but in those days, that was it. Had very few. Nowadays, everybody else is welcome and they coming in—their churches, and doing a lot of good in helping out, but St. Joseph's did keep up with the bayou any way.

B: So—the church's part of this was to help build the sense of community and the support systems of those fishermen? (Affirmative nod.) When it started, was practically everybody here a member of the church? Most of the fishermen?

JD: Mostly, yeah. You had a—I don't know what you call 'em. they're back-yard-Catholics, but they. Everybody what they—when it came to the end, they were all buried [Catholic].

B: Well, even those who weren't attending, did they tend to
do things like come to the blessing?
JD: Oh, yeah. And Palm Sunday, which was yesterday, the church was full, And Easter. And Christmas. That was their main days. (Laugh.)
B: Even in the early days, were some of the people who were not Catholic taking part in the blessing?
JD: Oh, yeah. They were welcome. But you had very few so that, 'cause, like I said, we were hidden (unclear), somebody found us. Even the weather, like some (unclear). They didn't know we existed.
B: Do you think the meaning has changed some for the fishermen and their families through the years?
JD: Has it changed?
B: Has the meaning changed? You know, originally they were going out in small boats; they didn't have radar and things like that to keep them safe. Do you think the blessing is less important to them now?
JD: They still look at it, the older people for sure. Maybe the young ones don't. You know how there is--they have different ideas. But the older people, they still looking for that little bit of Holy Water.
B: I guess a year like the last one would make everybody--I was not thrilled all of last September and October [during hurricane season] to be in Louisiana, even in Baton Rouge.
JD: That's right.
B: Because I understand there was a tremendous amount of flooding here.
JD: Yes, there was.
B: Can you think of any other traditional activities or special things about the history that are significant or important?
JD: It's still--the best I could say--it still would be revolving around St. Joseph's Church, that and Lagniappe [on the Bayou] and the (unclear) parish. I don't know if you heard of that?
B: Dr.--Father (whistle) Brunet--I can't remember his name--mentioned that to me and told me how different the two things were.
JD: We didn't have it during World War II, do--
B: The blessing?
JD: The blessing. No, it kept on, but it was so little celebration, everybody would stay home, and get. We knew what time he would get there. And he would get one boat and follow down and bless the--the priest would leave St. Joseph's Church in a boat and travel all the way down, all the way to Cocodrie, and bless the boat. It was a mass and everything else, but no celebration given, because everybody was--. And as it went along, like I showed you, our old church. We would just--Father Colomb --we were having a hard time. There was no money, any--way. And during the thirties, and twenty-nine, every--
thing broke loose. (Coughs.) But we help one. Then comes this Father Beauvais, and the few little (unclear) come out all right. And we knew how to—and he put a little raise up and show us how. He had these different ideas. He was a money raiser. And he kept on and we built this church here. That was a great amount of money. (Laughs.)

B: Approximately when was that done?
JD: The church?
B: Uh huh.
JD: Let's see, when—? The book [pamphlet], it's in there. Let me find it here. Let's see, it was dedicated—that's the new church. [Pause while I copy.] And that gives us the—that put us in debt for just about—but they kept working and promoting this fair here that really brought in the money and help pay off St. Joseph Church and everything else. And Lagniappe is something else. More supported. Like the blessing too. Women works. They bake the bread, they'll maybe—[Phone rings, then cuts off.] Here are boat pictures I have, I brought 'em to have, and the man came and took 'em.

B: Ah. There were just a couple of other things I wanted to ask. One, do you mind if I take a picture of you while we're talking so I can see you with some of these pictures and remember what you looked like and how valuable your information was? (Both laugh.) And—now, you mentioned about the fact that they did the MovieTone News and the man, Pitre, that you thought had some pictures that you thought were on the news—in Houma. Do you know of any other studies, records, or reports that could have been done—that have collected any of this information? Any kind of history or journal or write-ups that have been in the Houma newspaper? That have—?
JD: Oh, yeah. And that, like I told you. All I know is his name. He stayed here most of the day with me.
B: Now, who was this?
JD: This was Glen Pitre. P-i-t-r-e. Yes, ma'am. He's, I think, mostly from Cutoff. Cutoff's on Bayou [La]-Fourche.
B: Can you spell that for me?
JD: C-u-t-o-f-f. (Points to it on map.) That's all. It's "cut off." Now, here's Thibodeaux; there's Cut-off.
B: You just don't expect something to be named that, or at least, I didn't.
JD: That's it.
B: Just go ahead and talk about something and I'm going to take this [picture] while you're talking.
JD: I don't know what to say.
B: Well, why don't you pick up one or two of those boat blessing pictures and—And I'll just see you with them.
JD: Okay. Boat pictures are here.
B: They really are. If you don't mind, I'll just take one
more from the side so I can kinda observe you looking at 'em. (Mumble.) Thank you for letting me make that, that will help. Do you mind if I ask you how old you are?

JD: I was seventy-three years old on February fourteenth, Valentine's Day.

B: Well, Happy Birthday, late.

JD: My wife was Saturday, the twenty-second. She was seventy-two.

B: Nice spring birthdays. Is there anything else significant that I hadn't asked about that should be part of my information?

JD: I guess I'll think of something else later, but as far as now, that's it. We've got those of the boat blessing, as of now. If you know when it would be--

B: It's April twentieth.

JD: Oh, it will be?

B: I'm going to come down. I understand there's a mass that day before--

JD: Yeah.

B: --to decorate the altar and then a mass that morning. So I thought I'd--

JD: Will you be down?

B: Oh, yes!

JD: I want--I be thinking, since you called me that it wouldn't be too far off and that if you could come, then we could--out here--see what's going on.

B: Oh, I'd love to see it. Since I'll be back then, if you think of any other details of rituals that families have done that you think of that might be important, if you would, just jot them down. A note, or mention it to Father Brunet. I will be down here that weekend, and I would love to just jog your memory a little bit and see if you've thought of anything else like how they've dressed or--. You've covered it so thoroughly I can't imagine you've left anything out. (He laughs.) But I may, when I look back through my notes, have some questions.

JD: Yes, ma'am.

B: I know when I talked to him [Father Brunet], I realized that I didn't know--I asked the name of the lake and not the name of the bayou. And he was explaining some things about the parish, and since I am not Catholic, I was not understanding the difference between the geography and the church membership.

JD: Yeah, I try to tell you, we don't like to brag about religion or stuff, but it's all involved this way, and so it had to be, and that's what I tell everybody, Glen, and-- (He laughs.) It'll revolve around this. So, it has to be. That's the way and so--

B: Well, I am very, very impressed with the way it is celebrated here because I think it has retained its original meaning here. And I don't think it has in other
places; I really don't.
JD: We try, yes, ma'am. But anything else on the Bayou that was going on, like I tell you, the boat blessing, Lagniappe, the fair. Now, I think next year, we gonna—it looks like the young ones are getting back their Mardi Gras.
B: With some of the changes that have been added, with some of the drinking and partying, do you ever feel that people are desecrating or interfering with what the blessing means to you? Or, you just pretty much overlook—?
JD: Or what, ma'am?
B: With some of the people who tend to drink and run the motor boats, and all with the blessing—does that bother you at all, or do you just tend to overlook that?
JD: No. Father Brunet will come out with a—our weekly church bulletin we have. And he says that he doesn't disapprove of the beer drinking and crab and stuff which it goes into, but as you're filing by him, just be polite and put the beer cans down. Leave 'em down. Even now, I'm sure. I don't know if he drinks any, but a lot of the others, they like their beer. We lost 'im. He been station—he was Irish; he was stationed in Sierra Leone in West South Africa. We're always short a priest anyway, and went quite aways, and here (unclear) a priest and very nice, (unclear) but he like his beer. He was Irish. (We laugh.) [Completely garbled section.] No, that's it now. The shrimp industry is still moving along, more mechanized and improved as it goes along.
B: Well.

[Rest of conversation covered Louisiana coastal marine lab and aquarium at Cocodrie, and he invited me to see it, when I have more time. Talked about where I'm from, about Mobile, Dauphin Island, and Hurricane Frederick. He explained that the last hurricane (Juan) created terrible loss, especially below St. Joseph's. The water was really different, with the wind offshore blowing water north. People had to remove the insulation from their walls because it smelled when it started drying out. Compared to 1926 storm (hurricane). This time, no wind damage, just the water. If they had had the wind too, could have drowned people. Invited me to join him and his family on banks for blessing. Interview ended.]
Interview with Susie Peltier

Date: Monday, March 24, 1986
Place: Her trailer, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 1:00 p.m.

Side One:

Test Tape

Betsy: I can’t tell if this running full speed, so I guess I’ll have to stop and rewi—

When the tape resumes, it begins with a journal entry that is in Appendix C rather than here. It picks up as follows:

Test Tape at Susie’s:

Betsy: --running right. I’ll pick it up from here. This is an interview--do you mind if I take my shoes off?
Susie: Go ahead.
Betsy: This is an interview with Susie Peltier in Chauvin, having to do with the blessing of the fleet as it’s celebrated in this area. And a test of the tape.

Side One is blank after test tape.

Side Two:

Betsy: --if you don’t mind picking back up.
Susie: That’s just, you know, in other words, how I feel. Is that on [microphone]?
Betsy: Yeah.
Susie: In other words, that’s how I feel. I have to speak for myself, you know. I think we feel secure knowing it—that the boat is being blessed. It makes you look forward to a season, you know, and maybe a better season than if you wouldn’t have had your boat blessed. You know that even more dangerous could have happened, even though you’ve had an accident, something worse could have happened by not having your boat blessed, you know? Like, that’s just--my--depends on the individual. I mean, if you don’t believe in your religion, some people may not even believe that they need to have a boat blessed at all, you know? I think most of the people though that do trawl are Catholics, and I guess they feel the same way. It’s the security. Like I said, I really can’t speak for any of them, but that’s how I feel.
Betsy: Now you mentioned just before the tape ran out, and I’m not sure if we got it, that this to you was like the security you would feel with baptizing a child?

Susie: Right. That’s how I would feel. I mean, any time you have something that you value blessed, in other words, you feel secure about it than if you wouldn’t have had it done. That’s what I’m saying by—now that’s my opinion, too. That’s how I feel. You know, you just feel secure. It’s just like when you buy a new home, you have the priest come in your home. You know, now, this is a Catholic; I don’t know if all religions feel this way. But you usually have the priest come in your home and bless your home for you. It—You feel secure about it, you feel better about living here. When we built the boat, we had Father Scott come here and bless the boat right before the launching. He couldn’t make it for the launching, he had other plans, but he still came before we had it launched and blessed it.

Betsy: What are some of the preparations, not the decorating itself, but the things that the fishermen do to their boats before the season starts?

Susie: Well, they usually have their boats put up on dry-dock. For the wooden boats they have to check and like recaulk it to make sure it doesn’t leak. Or they like to paint it up to help protect their wood. And like the steel hulls and your wooden boats both gradually—barnacles build up on it, you see, and if they don’t scrape these barnacles off, it does rot your boat, whether steel or wood. So they have to— In other words they clean the whole bottom. They scrub all the bottom and they repaint it. It’s to protect whether steel or, you know, a wooden boat. Or the steel boat will rust and you don’t want that to happen either. There’s a lot of work involved in that. And then they pull off of dry dock and then they repaint the rest of their boat to make it look nice. But also for protection. It’s really what it’s for, to protect their equipment. And then they have their nets to get ready. They, most of ’em end up—a lot of them—have new nets made—if they can afford it. Most of them have new nets made. Some, if they feel like their nets are still in good condition, they just have them rehung, they call it rehung in other words, and redipped to strengthen them. And they have that done. Then some have to— They overhaul their engines to make sure that they not going to go out there, you know, and run into engine problems. Which, even though you’ll have your engine, you know, overhauled, that can still happen the minute you get out there. That’s just
Betsy: And that is the one time of the year that is specially when they plan to do that?

Susie: Right, they try to, you know, check up on all their equipment, replace what's not good anymore, you know -- and fix it up. And if it is still in good condition, they just repair it.

Betsy: I think that you've answered all my questions. There--as long as you have a boat, as long as the fishermen have boats, they tend to participate in getting the boat outfitted and in the blessing?

Susie: Right. Now, quite--I think they had like 120 boats that participated in the blessing last year. That's an approximate figure, you know. They try to count and estimate, you know, how many did, from small to big, that participate. And usually the last couple of years, it ran about 120. Now, like I said, this year, I don't know what's gonna happen with this year.

Betsy: Have you ever heard any comments or incidents where people, for some personal reason, who had been participating for years and were not going out of business chose not to participate?

Susie: Oh, I guess that mostly depends if something else more important is--arise, then they, you know, have to tend to that because they do know that their boat will be blessed on the side the bayou. But most people participate. They enjoy it. Even though they may not ride in the blessing and they just keep their boat tied up, they'll still party on the side the bayou. A lot of friends still come over and still party on the side the bayou, even though they don't ride down the bayou.

Betsy: Are there any other elements of the celebration like the--? Here do they have any kind of anything that takes place at the church after the parade and the party on the lake, or is it over once the--?

Susie: No, once the parade is over and everyone parties-- okay, everyone parties in the lake. They tie up for a few hours and they finish partying in the lake. Then they can--then we come home. We kinda start taking down a few of our decorations so that dampness of the dew doesn't ruin some of our things because--most of our stuff is made out of plywood.
I’m sorry, most of the stuff is made out of paper and cardboard, and the dampness will make it flabby, you know. It does ruin it if you don’t take it down. So we take down most of our stuff. And then we all get ready and we go to dance. And at the dance, that’s where they announce the winners of the blessing. And then people dance and enjoy themselves once more. So it is a long day. Like I said, there is so many weeks of getting your boat ready. That’s why a lot of people look forward to this day.

Betsy: About how long does it take to do that with the boats and the riding?

Susie: It depends. How many boats participate in the blessing and how slow it takes, in other words, to go down. We usually leave about 12 o’clock from our dock and we get back—we don’t get home till about five. Almost six o’clock some times. It depends how long you want to stay and party and how much work you have to do when you get home and to get—before you get to the dance.

Betsy: With the—getting his boat prepared for the new season, does he work on that steadily for a couple of weeks or off and on for—awhile?

Susie: Well, most of them usually, like when they quit trawling, they usually tie it up, in other words, ’cause they know they won’t be making any more trips. Then they start. And it takes—it depends on how much work you have to get done. You know, that varies from year to year. Depends how much, how good your equipment has held up from the year before. I’d say it takes everybody at least two to three weeks. At least that much, depending on how much work is involved. And like I said, that varies from boat to boat, the different sizes in the boats. ’Cause Rodney’s one boat may take a little longer to paint than others cause he does have a big boat. You know, others take just a couple of weeks.

Betsy: Most of them do all of the work themselves or the majority of it?

Susie: Right. Most of these guys are jack of all trades, you know, and they paint’em themselves. Now, some of them may have to hire mechanics to check their engines and some of their equipment, but Rodney does really all of it himself.

Betsy: Susie, I think we’ve covered everything I needed to know, except whether or not you knew of anybody who might be working on their boat, or painting it, that I might be able to get close enough to get some shots of, cause I’d really like to.

Susie: Okay, I have a neighbor right here. Let me call him. And like I said, if you want, I could call my

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brother for a picture of some of the decorations, he can maybe have time to come.

Betsy: Oh, if that's not inconvenient.

Susie: Okay. No. Well, if he's there, you know. His wife is due anytime now. My sister-in-law is expecting anytime, so just—you know, I'll see what's going on there. Let me call Boo. He's not far; he's right close to here. He's getting his boat ready.

Susie: (On phone): Hey, how you doing? Is Boo working on his boat by any chance?/ Awwww. Okay. I have a lady that came down here today and she was wanting to take pictures of someone working on their boat, and I was trying to think of somebody who— [Muffled section.] Yeah, in other words, doing jobs, you know, in other words, like painting or something like that. [Muffled section.] Hold on. (To me:) Is this to be put in the paper or this is for an article you writing?)

Betsy: In a class. I'm going to make some slides that I'll be showing to class to explain.

Susie: (Back on phone:) Okay, in other words, they trying to cover the community blessing, and in other words, it's for her class. She wants to show pictures of some of the work they do here on their boats, you know, before the season. This is for [Muffled.]/ Uh hum. Okay./ I though maybe Bran, if he finish? Ohhh. I don't know who else. Okay. O--/ Uh huh. All right then. Bye bye. (To me:) She's gonna go check her husband's in town right now. But they have someone else, but he's got an electrician there, an electronics man there. So he, she said she's gonna go check to see if he has time for it. Because he has to pay this man by the hour, in other words. So she doesn't know if he really has the time to have, you know, to talk to somebody right now.

Betsy: I would be contented if he'd just let me take pictures. I wouldn't have to talk or ask questions.

Susie: Well, if he can't, I can probably find somebody else. I'm sure I'll find someone else that's getting their boat ready. Let me find--she's got to go all the way to the back, so let me call my little brother. [Tape recorder turned off briefly to check tape. Started back during phone conversation with her cousin:] And on the boat blessing. In other words. And I was wondering if you could go get, maybe, go get, like, a scallop and a couple of the little pictures that we made? For the boat blessing. So she can take a look at 'em. Would you be interested in doing that for me? I'd 'preciate it. You guess? You said you were—if you wouldn't mind. Okay. Nothing--whatever you wanta grab. You know
you wanta grab one like George Washington or you know, so she can see how I took it and I made a caricature out of it. You know, chopping down— huh? Yeah. If it's—you have a truck? Ohhh. Okay. My truck's down the bayou too. Okay. Well, whatever you can fit into your truck. I mean the trunk of the car or something you'll find. You know, a scallop. I'd like for her to see the scallop and maybe one or two of the little pictures. And if you could fit George Washington in the back. You know, him, kneeling down. If it's okay, I'd appreciate it. Okay, cause I'm babysitting for Johnny and Mike, so it'd be kinda hard for me to go do that. And you know how I feel about going over there. Okay, thank you. Bye bye. (To me:) He's coming. He said he was bored with (unclear). I give you something to do. The only thing, he doesn't have a truck, so he's got to be limited on just—. We went Fourth of July. Let me go get one of the bigger pictures. You might be able to see better.

Betsy: Oh. Look's like you've got some real treasures. (She is holding poster.)

Susie: This is our other boat—that we have—that made the tourist poster. This is The Sea Master.

Betsy: I've seen that! Now, when was that taken and where?

Susie: Oh, God! This would have been taken in the year— (deep sigh) ohhh—I can't think back. Curtis was alive this year, so what possible year that was? It would have been the year before he died. Ohhh! We built the new boat in '83. And the year before that we went Candy Land, which is '82, so this would have to been around 1981, I'd say.

Betsy: So that's approximately when it was made into a poster?

Susie: About '81. Someone took a picture of it and they had it made into a tourist poster. Now we also made Odyssey magazine. The same picture was also put on a magazine. See if I can find the magazine. I'm not sure where— [Muffled noises and garbled talk while she looked for other pictures and a scrapbook of the building of Lady Sue Claire.] I'd have to look for that. Everything got turned upside down in the house for the hurricane, so my pictures and things are not where they should be. Now this is the album of when we built the boat. [Lady Sue Claire] I made a album of it. I took pictures everyday. Now this is one of my bigger pictures of year before last—we had. It's a little bigger than some of the pictures we've seen. In other words, we have--

Betsy: That's beautiful. Could I get a picture of you
Susie: I look like a vagabond today. I feel terrible.
Betsy: You can turn to the side and I'll tell people, "I don't know who this woman was."
Susie: Okay. I guess.
Betsy: This is such a nice picture. If I can find the viewfinder. I'll have to get back a little bit. Thank you.
Susie: Okay. I'll be honest with you. As many times as I thought about you coming today, I forgot. When she told me that, when they called me, I had said sure, and I had. It slipped my mind, and when you called me, I said: "Oh, God, no make-up. My hair's not fixed. I felt--I feel paranoid.
Betsy: Well, if you look: no make-up, my hair's not fixed, because I had to get up at five o'clock. I'm on my way to Pensacola--
Susie: Oh, how nice!
Betsy: --which is my home. My brother's children are there this week. We're going to reroof my aunt's house. And so I--they called me last night and I had to pack not just to come down here today, but to go home, so I've been up since five. And I thought: "If these people want to see me, to look at me, they're in trouble."
Susie: Well, I don't judge people by their appearance--
Betsy: Well, I'm sure glad.
Susie: I judge them by who they are to me. How they are friendly to me, that's how I can--. Okay, this is also another year that we went Candy Land. We worked with that. Now the first couple of pictures are some of my kids.
Betsy: Is your name Sue Claire? [Name on boat in pictures.]
Susie: Susan Claire. My real name. And we call the boat Lady Sue Claire. Okay. This is where it starts. [Pictures of boat building.] This is my husband right here. This is my husband. And this is my father. And that's my great grandmother and my grandfather. He passed away two years ago November, Thanksgiving Day. Now this is the first load of iron we got. And pipe. That's where the trucks first came here with the iron. Some of our friends in the picture that helped build the boat. This is Boo. That's the one I just called to see if we could, you could go there, but his nephew is there on his boat. And that's them unloading the different iron stuff. And now you see that the boat's going up. They're putting up the sheets of iron. Now my camera -- this is a new camera, and I had to get used to it. (Both laughing.) That's why you have some blurry shots in there. And that's the stern they working on, and--
Betsy: It looks so different when you see it like that.

Susie: And this is the kids at the bayou side out while they were working. I took a couple of pictures of the kids. That was after—you could see it was cold. They were working on the boat and it was cold. They were having a couple of drinks, a couple of beers. After they'd work in afternoon, they'd have—he would, we would buy beer for our workers. You know, in appreciation for they were doing. And they enjoyed it. They were able to relax awhile.

Betsy: Oh, my!

Susie: This, we were getting ready to launch the boat when they—. My little brother's putting the last finishing touches on it. Well, the whole boat wasn't finished being painted when we did launch because we had problems with our painter. He messed us up bad. We had to end up firing him and finishing the job all by ourselves. And then I—they should have a picture of me cracking the champagne. That's where I was running. I threw the bottle up. It was fun! We had a good time. Look at the water that got thrown on the bank. I mean, it was a slush. I had mud from head to toe. You know, cause as the boat would try to pull ours in, it would throw water all over the banks, I mean! But it was so much fun!

Betsy: There you are getting ready to do that. And I assume this is—

Susie: That's my uncle.

Betsy: Oh, your uncle. Okay.

Susie: Yeah, my husband was on the boat. So that was my uncle trying to help me pop the next bottle of champagne so we could all drink from it, a toast.

Betsy: There it is in the water! Oh!

Susie: Oh, it was so nice. We went through a lot. Then that's us. Everybody partying after. That's a bunch of my family and friends that came.

Betsy: And this is on the boat? So you can see how big it is (unclear).

Susie: Right.

Betsy: It just (?). One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven of them. [Counting people on board.]

Susie: And that's not all of 'em. And that's us after partying, you know. We were—they were cutting up. That's me. And we were cutting up. I had mud from head to toe. I was so dirty that day. And it rained most of the day, so it was a mess.

Betsy: And then they are doing some of the finishing work?

Susie: Right. This is the day before the blessing, trying to finish it to get it ready to ride. It was a lotta laughs a minute. And so many of our family
and friends just came by, like on a Saturday. And we just did [Imitated blank stare.]. You know, we opened the door and we just went: "God!" People were just coming in and coming in to help us be ready. Cause they knew we were such in a bind to have it ready to ride the next day for the blessing. And people just came over here, and we just couldn't believe how many people came to help us out.

Betsy: Do you design all of your stuff yourself?

Susie: Right. I think of a theme and I decide what I want to do with it. That's our gingerbread house. I don't know if you could spot it.

Betsy: Oh, yeah!

Susie: And then we paper-macheted a tree. And I used that same tree in my Fourth of July with George Washington kneeling by the tree like he was chopping it down with an axe. That's what I was trying to get you, him to bring that one. And I put George Washington winking, you know, like "Ha, ha!" Tried to make a caricature out of him.

Betsy: So you prepare all of this for weeks or months in advance and just store it and then put it on—

Susie: Right, right. And that's my husband. You can see, this is the day of the blessing. The boat, the top of the boat is not even finished. We had to ride it like that. We were lead boat that year. We had won the year before with our old boat. So we had to come back. My husband decided to build a boat, and we just--It was a mess. We almost had to use a slop jar to--for the bathroom. And there were so many people over here they were able to manange to put us a bath--a toilet in the bathroom.

Betsy: Oh, how nice.

Susie: That's what I said. We had so much help, and so many people to be thankful for that really came and, you know, gave us their time. And that's Father Brunet, you saw Father Brunet. Now that's Father Scott, trying to--they're trying to get him on the boat. They cut up enough. And then for Candy Land, I had bought a bunch of these hand suckers for everybody to lick on, you know, and wave at the people, and he was licking his lollipop. That's why I took a picture. [Mumbling as her cousin came in.]

(To him:) Come in. Come in a minute. I just was bragging about you. I was telling her that that's my--you're my handyman. You the one that usually helps me out so much for the blessing. This is-- Betsy, this is Al Lyons (sp?), that's my first cousin, that's my daddy's brother's son. He helps me make the decorations, and paint 'em and get 'em ready.

Betsy: Yeah, and there's another picture of the Lady Sue
Claire.

Susie: And that’s just one of my kids in there.

Betsy: Those are so nice. Gracious!

Susie: These are some of the pictures. (Referring to decorations Al brought in.) Now I had these laminated to try and preserve them from year to year for—cause if they get wet—a lot of this is made with paper and markers, and they get ruined. So we did have some of these laminated, in other words. This is all things I draw, and I have them. They all help me draw ‘em and paint ‘em up. And that was laminated. I keep on forgetting what this thing is.

Al: Uncle Sam.

Susie: Uncle Sam. (Laughing.) My mind is blank. She asked me one thing today that I couldn’t answer and my mind was blank, and that’s how far the radios—reach out. And I know it’s far because we can pick ‘em up sometimes from the house way almost in Texas, you know. And I couldn’t tell her how many miles, that’s how it affect me. See how we put a double stick tape on the back, and it seem like it wasn’t used. So I have something left from last year. We just pull this double stick tape off. I can’t get it. We have, like all the women that are gonna ride the boat, a bunch of them come and sit down and they peel all this backing for me. And in that way, some of them are in the pirogues putting the decorations on, and they can—it’s faster than having to start taping them up that morning.

Betsy: Yeah. When do you do that? The night before or that morning, the morning of the blessing?

Susie: Really, we can’t put anything up on the boat until that next, until that morning, because with the dampness of the dew, anything that’s made out of that paper or this tissue, which you can see, this has faded, it will get ruined if we leave it out. So really the only thing that’s really put up the day before the blessing is the flags. And that’s those plastic flags. Now this is one of the scallops. Now, you see, it doesn’t look like a scallop cause we put—we have it—so it wouldn’t stick together folding it. Once we pull it off the boat, we back it with newspaper. And then right before we go to put it on the boat, we’ll pull all this off. And we tape it back. Now it looks a mess. Believe it’ll show, like what we do is, we get this a couple of weeks before the blessing. We usually take it and we refluff all our flowers to give it that dimensional look, in other words. Like you’ll see in the pictures. But this is from being stored. This is what happens. And then the
dampness did get in some of this from the hurricane. So--But if you work with it, in other words, we get it back --you know. And we just go along; we do this to all our stuff. And we can fluff it up again.

Betsy: Can I take a picture of you doing that? This would just be your hands, Susie.

Susie: (To Al:) Come do this with me. (General laughter.)

Betsy: Let me get two pair of hands working on this.

Susie: I forgot that you were coming over here today; I didn't put any makeup on. I was so embarrassed; I forgot she was coming.

Betsy: The top of those and that. And then I'll have a picture of hands and nobody will ever know it was you.

Susie: Okay.

Betsy: That will really protect you.

Susie: We need to really get started with this yet?

Al: Everything's a mess, believe me.

Susie: It got messed up, hun, for the hurricane.

Al: The hurricane, the dampness. The water was at the floor.

Susie: It didn't go in the house where I had it stored, but it came up to the floorboards. And it just stayed so wet that it affected all my stuff. Well, you can see. It's all--this was all dark, dark red, in other words (referring to pale pink of scallop). And you see, like some of it is like crispy up, but a lot of it, like some of this stuff is soft. Very, very soft. And very-- [Tape cut off for interruption.] (To Al:) Do you know if Mr. Neal's decorating?

Al: I don't know.

Susie: I haven't heard anybody decorating this year. I'm surprised. Captain B. J's not going, the Boumerierres (?) not going, McCovey's not going, Jesse Jo's not going. We're going; we lead boat. And that's it. I'm the only one I know of that's gonna have something on my boat.

Al: Are Paul and (unclear) not decorating?

Susie: No, they're not decorating either. I don't know who unless Spring Dance? Spring Dancer?

Al: I don't know.

Susie: Is that it?

Al: Sea Dancer.

Susie: Sea Dancer, the name of the boat. Sea Dancer, and maybe Mr. Neal. Sammy Lee's not going. Thelma and all. (Unclear) don't go anymore. I doubt if E going. So I'm--I mean, some of our main boats, the ones that go all out, in other words, that's the one's I'm trying to think of, are not going this year. Some of the bigger boats that really do a lot...
of decorating. Like I said, they will have—maybe Heartbreaker's decorating. That's in the single rig category. Now they won; they won first place last year? Did they? Or second place?

Al: I believe they got first.

Susie: With that western theme?

Al: Yeah, with little horse, little horse all over the boat.

Susie: They'll maybe decorate. You know what? After a few people find out about—

Al: You don't know until that day.

Susie: Right. A few people might say, "Oh, nobody's decorating; let's do something. You know, let's have, let's do a little bit. Just to give the people that all come down here. And so at the last minute, we may find somebody that will decorate. But so far, nothing. I think everybody's just been hit too hard by the hurricane. And they lost too many things. Not only their things that they—that was already made, but they also lost like their paint and the stuff that they make, you know, their decorations with, they lost. And then that's when it's really hard to start back from scratch, when you lose everything. So—(To Al:) Do you know anybody that's painting their boat right now? If Rodney would be here, Rodney would be painting his, because he said as soon as he came in, he's starting to paint.

Al: I know, that's what so many (?).

Susie: And last week he was on drydock. You would have had good—

Betsy: (Laughing) My timing's just bad. When do you expect him back? I can always come back to school this direction, catch him painting.

Susie: Rodney should be back anytime—well, he's gonna come back Thursday. And he said that he'll probably start after Easter. He'll start painting on the boat. So anytime after that you could come. And you could get some good pictures of them painting the boat. I'm sure of that because they—that'll last at least two weeks.

Al: When is the boat blessing this year?

Susie: On the twentieth. That's why Easter's on the thirtieth. So after Easter, from Easter till the blessing there's but three weeks to get that boat ready. See, he's been trawling. A lot of them've been getting their boat ready. The only things he's been here for was to pull up his boat and get all the bottom work on his. Now he still has all his—and he's got nets being worked on. Someone is making his nets. He's not doing it himself. But then he still has the rest of the painting left to
do. We have to repaint all of the top of the boat, and then repaint the name on it. And I could kill him, cause he's painting it a different color this year. What you think about it?

Al: The bottom looks alright. It's blue. It's got a (?)

Susie: Our boat is, well, like you saw, gray and white, trimmed maroon. And this year he wants to go with the gray and white trimmed ocean blue color. I'm not crazy bout it. I told him to do what he wanted, you know. That was him. It’s not the color of the boat that’s going to make him catch the shrimp, you know. But--maroon and grey is dressy. And it looks good on his boat. If he could see if before he painted, and then, a before and after picture. From the maroon and grey to the blue and grey and see which one you rather. I think I’ll rather the maroon and grey, but like I told him, it’s up to him. Do what you want. Then if you don’t like it, then you can go back to the maroon next year. So, it’s just something he wants to try. But, like I said, any time, I’d say. I’d say for sure like the second week of April, he will be painting, definitely will be painting. That should give you some shots of that, him working on the boat. And then you’ll be here the morning of the blessing?

Betsy: Yeah. I’ll actually probably come down on Saturday--

Susie: Okay--

Betsy: -- or that mass.

Susie: Cause we start in between seven and nine. We start putting decorations up. Early in the morning. We start as soon as the dew--we can get the dew--wipe up all the dew off the boat to where our stuff will stick. Cause we--dew on iron takes forever to dry. So usually we back there with towels and mops trying to dry up the boat. Try to get all the dew off, and hurry up and let the sun or the wind finish drying it out, or the pictures just won’t stick to it.

Betsy: What happens if it rains?

Susie: We’re in a mess.

Al: It’s usually cancelled.

Susie: Right. If its before we start putting up the decorations, they’ll cancel it. Father’ll cancel it to the next, the following weekend. So if that happens, people’ll have a chance to save their decorations. But if we’d start decorating, which it has happened, it started drizzling after we had things put up, you know, all we could do is say: "Oh, my God, you know. Please stop." You know, you just pray that it will stop. And your stuff won’t look too bad by the time it gets judged, you know.
But— cause you're losing. It's not because—the thing is, you're losing a lot of work.

Betsy: Yeah.

Susie: And a lot of money if it rains. Because, like I say, everything's made out of paper.

Betsy: Uh hum.

Susie: Everything is paper, you know. Some boats use plywood, but I think that's a lot of money used for that, that's why it's something—it varies on how much each person spends on the blessing. It depends what they make their stuff. And it depends how creative they are. If you can take a piece of paper and work it into something nice, I mean, you creative. You know, some people feel like they have to use wood, you know--

Betsy: Uh hum.

Susie: Because they can't use their heads. Like I say, I'm not—I don't mean to put anybody down, you know. I'm just trying to explain to you that that's what difference in the cost--

Betsy: Uh hum.

Susie: --of everything. Cause paper costs you hardly nothing.

Betsy: Yeah.

Susie: You start buying sheets of plywood, that costs a lot of money.

Betsy: Uh hum.

Susie: So it depends on the individual what they work with. And how much it runs. That's all, at least—when we --like last year, we no way we spend fifty dollars.

End of tape.
Interview with Steve Braud

Date: Tuesday, February 24, 1987
Place: Boudreaux Canal Store, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 9:00 a.m.

Betsy: You’re not from this area originally, are you?
Steve: No.
Betsy: Okay. Now. At last, I am organized. Where are you from?
Steve: New Orleans.
Betsy: New Orleans.
Steve: Yeah.
Betsy: So you’re used to the coastal area and--
Steve: Yes.
Betsy: Um, were you in shrimping over there or did you just get involved when--?
Steve: No, I’m here because this is my wife’s family’s business and that’s how I got involved. I--I just came because of that. We moved back from Baton Rouge.
Betsy: So she’s a native?
Steve: Yes.
Betsy: All right. Uh--
Steve: She and her--her grand--her great grandfather started this business. And then her grandfather ran it.
Betsy: And that was St. Martin?
Steve: St. Martin, that’s right.
Betsy: Okay.
Steve: Xavier St. Martin was my wife’s grandfather.
Betsy: All right. Uh, how long have you been working here?
Steve: Nine years.
Betsy: Explain to me this store. This is a company store?
Steve: Yes. It’s a company store and this company actually started on another bayou, Bayou Dularge. And they had a store similar to this and they provided provisions for people, uh--. At that time they had more trapping than they do now. It started in 1865. And they had a, uh, general store just like this, on the, on the bayou, and then they bought this store. It was an on-going store. Or they bought a going business is what I should say, in 1909, and was a Boudreaux, that’s why it’s called Boudreaux Canal.
Betsy: Uh hum.
Steve: This was built [pointing out window] in the 1890’s, this little canal here to get to Lake Boudreaux. And it was dug with a shovel, I mean, by hand, and it was only wide enough for pirogues. About--you know, it was just--of course they didn’t have as big a boats then.
Betsy: Uh hum.
Steve: And then you can see how wide it has gotten--
Betsy: Yeah.

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Steve: through the, through the years. But this store, we provide, we provide, mainly it's a marine hardware store. At one time we also worked just as much in the winter with fur trapping. And we would, we had a man who would—J. D.'s father [reference to J. D. Theriot and his father, Desire] who worked for this company, and J. D. ran this business for us also. But his father would go out during the winter and he would bring provisions to trappers, so we'd be busy during the winter too. Now with all the erosion, there's just not much land left, so we don't do too much trapping business anymore. And it's mainly in the summer, when we do our business, and we have an ice plant, and then the shrimp factory is part of this business also.

Betsy: Okay. Explain, just briefly, how a company store functions. (Pause) Who are your customers?

Steve: Well, our customers—we have, we have some customers, who deal, who sell us their shrimp, and we have some customers that just might buy ice, and we have some customers that just might buy diesel. At one time, a company store, I think what you're referring to is an older company store. Or an older version, and what they would do—they had a chip. They wouldn't have get any money—

Betsy: Um.

Steve: --and they would come here. And we would pay them in chips and they would redeem them here at the store.

Betsy: Uh huh.

Steve: And, uh, for, for the people who worked at the shrimp factory, and as well as for the—I don't know that the—I don't know that the shrimpers did. I think we always paid them cash for their—

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: --for their money. But people who used to work here, and, and most, we own all this property here, also.

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: And we had, we own most of the houses, not any more, we don't own most of those houses. And almost everyone dealt here. Also, it was, prior to having a—paved road, people were limited in their access, so, they purchased almost everything here. We had store—at this store we had, had furs, had fur coats, we had toys, we had groceries,

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: --we had everything. So people in this community would shop, do everything in here. And, that was more of a company store. Now they—we don't control 'em, or—

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: We don't have as much—they have more freedom and we have—we have more freedom also to have other accounts. They can certainly, are more mobile is the word—

Betsy: Uh hum.
Steve: --I'm looking for. But when it was a company store, at
one time we would pay people with a chip, and they
would redeem it here. Of course there wasn't any cash.
We would just make cash from the shrimp that we sold.

Betsy: Did the shrimpers have the right to perhaps come in and
get some of the supplies they needed for shrimping on--

Steve: Credit?

Betsy: --on credit? Yeah.

Steve: Yeah, they did a lot of credit, and then we would
settle 'em--

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: And then we would take off what they owe us and then we
would pay 'em the balance. They also--you can see back
here, we have a pretty large safe.

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: That concrete goes all the way down to the floor. We
were a bank. They would treat us as a bank. A lot of
people treated us--they didn't have banks--

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: --down here. And, uh, and they might leave--ohh--

thirty thousand dollars with us. We would of course
deposit it in our account, but they would just treat us
like a bank. They didn't--and we still do a lot of
that. It's surprising that people don't have checking
accounts. They come and they'll bring us cash and
we'll write checks for 'em. That's, that's about, you
know, the only--and we're still a bank. We used to pay
their social security, and on, on these boats, I'm
speaking of. And they would buy most of their
provisions here.

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: And their ice, their diesel, and their groceries and
their hardware. And then we would settle. We would
get the amount of cash, and now, of course, get their
check. Where at one time they treated us as a bank. A
lot of 'em, a lot of 'em did. They didn't speak much
English, and they didn't--wouldn't go to town, so they
would treat us as a bank and we would have on our books
a considerable amount of money for 'em--

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: --that they just wouldn't take until, oh, maybe till
the end of the year.

Betsy: Indian Ridge never owned boats?

Steve: We did at one time. One time we owned-- [Called out
secretary/bookkeeper in outer office] Sue, we owned
fourteen boats? I think it was--

Sue: Twenty eight boats.

Steve: No. How many boats did we actually own?

Sue: Oh, the company? Two.

Steve: That's all we ever owned?

Sue: Oh, no. There were-- [muffled response]

Steve: We were never a large owner ourselves, we owned a
couple of boats up until a few years ago.

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: And we sold those. Those were pretty old, and it’s really hard to get people to run--

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: --to run boats unless they own them themselves, and a lot of liability insurance is pretty expensive so we, we decided to sell the boats. We never really owned that, that many boats. Maybe, she said, four at the most.

Betsy: Okay, um, is there anything else that’s important about your job, or about the store that you just think is particularly significant?

Steve: Well, I think it’s still pretty unique in that we have, uh, so many people down here who we still, we carry ’em on, we carry ’em in credit. You know? And they still pretty much during these months, the winter months--

Betsy: Uh huh.

Steve: We don’t really get a whole lot of money in--

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: --and, they come in, and most of them will just pay us all out at one time--or they won’t take any money until we’re paid out. A lot of ’em are like that--

Betsy: Uh hum, uh huh.

Steve: --not too many any more.

Betsy: But it’s not the kind of set-up where some of these companies send out monthly billing and they have to pay an amount--

Steve: No, we don’t charge any interest. We still don’t charge any interest. And we don’t--we’re pretty low-keyed in our--

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: in our--collections, I guess.

Betsy: Yeah. Now how many shrimpers approximately, you think, might have that kind of running account with you now?

Steve: Maybe ten.

Betsy: Okay. And approximately how many, uh, are selling directly to you?

Steve: Hummm.

Betsy: I know that is bound to be a variable.

Steve: Yeah, you’d have to ask, I mean deal--when you said that we still carry all the time, I’d say ten but, I mean, of course we have a lot more, a lot more accounts than that.

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: You know, several hundred accounts. A lot of people that we still carry like that--

Betsy: Okay.

Steve: --probably only ten. And sell to us, you probably have to ask Dickie. [Dickie Fakier, manager of the Indian Ridge Shrimp Company which is part of the same business.] I’m not sure how many boats sell to them.
And the customers we have, well, like I said, it might, it varies. We have maybe 300 or so, say, people who buy from the ice place, that alone. We might have 200 who buy diesel and stuff, we might have just, uh, I'd say just maybe ten or fifteen boats now, who, who deal exclusively with—completely where we count him all the time. Uh—

Betsy: Uh huh.

Steve: But we have a lot of other people who pay us cash. Some of 'em might not buy diesel from us. They might buy diesel from someplace else, might buy their groceries somewhere else, but I'd say exclusively, that's about all that we have left.

Betsy: Could you give me a quick summary of the number of categories you sell items in, or, or sum up the—

Steve: All right. --categories.

Betsy: All right. We have a grocery department. And we have a dry goods department, which is pots and pans. We have gloves, we have a drug department. We sell appliances also. And we have diesel, gasoline, butane, salt, and hardware, marine hardware.

Betsy: Okay. Through with that part. Now we go on to the other stuff. Are you directly involved in any preparations for the blessing of the shrimp fleet here?

Steve: No.

Betsy: You don't do anything with the committee at the church or—?

Steve: No. We don't.

Betsy: Okay.

Steve: No, we don't do anything here. They used to use our dock for the, uh, where they used to bless, the boats used to pass here, and they would bless, and they would use our dock. And then we were involved. But the last few years now, now the priest gets on the boat—

Betsy: Yeah

Steve: --just goes up and down the bayou. And the boats pass in here.

Betsy: Do you have any, any perception of the shrimp fleet blessing as sea food industry related, or do you think of it primarily as shrimpers?

Steve: No, I think of it as more--I think of it as pretty (Telephone rings.) local and not a industry-wide--

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: --not a industry-wide phenomena, because I think that the people (sound of chair moving) predominately Catholic, and I think that's the, uh-- Excuse me a minute.

Betsy: I'll just stop this. [Cut tape off while he took phone call.] Talking about Catholics and we--I had asked you about shrimpers--

Steve: I think you asked me if it was industry-wide, the
blessing of the fleet or was it just—I--

Betsy: Yeah.
Steve: That's the way I understood the question.
Betsy: Yeah.
Steve: And I think that it's pretty local. I mean, they do have 'em on all, most of the bayous down here in south Louisiana--
Betsy: Yeah.
Steve: --and it's because it's predominately Catholic. I don't know if Biloxi and Alabama have that sort of blessing of the fleet. I believe they do.
Betsy: Their's are three-ring circuses, and they have what they call "sea-food representatives"--
Steve: Uh huh.
Betsy: --and I don't know what they mean. (Laughing)
Steve: Uh huh.
Betsy: But I'm gathering that--people in businesses like,
Steve: I see. Us here.
Betsy: --like you, and the shrimp company over here--
Steve: Uh huh.
Betsy: --are what they are talking about, and that they make it a big production to be a part of that. Because obviously, if the shrimpers don't succeed, then you don't have any cash flow.
Steve: Right.
Betsy: Or certainly, it's decreased.
Steve: Right.
Betsy: But, I just wondered if, if there was any sensation at all here when you came here, that you were supposed to be a part of that? Or if the company was?
Steve: Well, you know, we don't participate as far as the company. We usually come down and make our presence known. I do, you know. And, am visible that day here on the property.
Betsy: Yeah.
Steve: Uh, but we don't do, we don't have any of--
Betsy: Okay.
Steve: --ficial function, or we don't sponsor a--when we owned the boats, one year I got 'em to take one of the boats out just--
Betsy: Uh hum.
Steve: --but they didn't usually even participate in that.
Betsy: Yeah.
Steve: It's all dependent on that--
Betsy: Do you feel like it's an important thing for you to be here on that day?
Steve: Yes.
Betsy: Could you tell me a little bit about why you feel that way?
Steve: Well, because I think, so many of the people down here, that's one of the big--I think that is the big event of the year for them--like Houma and New Orleans have
Mardi Gras, these people have a blessing of the fleet. They spend a lot of money, they spend a lot of time, they decorate their boats, uh,--it's a pretty large expense for those people--

Betsy: Uh hum.

Steve: --that is non-deductible and non-, uh, doesn't enhance their fishing ability any. But it's a social event and they have a big dance that night that most of the community attends.

Betsy: Uh huh.

Steve: And, uh, I think that most of the people down here think it's a part of their lives.

Betsy: Yeah.

Steve: That and the fair. [Reference of Lagniappe on the Bayou, sponsored by St. Joseph's every fall.]

Betsy: Can you, uh, remember any specific things that, perhaps, you and your family do getting ready, or, or that's a part of that day for you other than just being here?

Steve: Well, no. We don't, particularly, since we don't own a boat. That's the main activities of the day. We just--we don't do anything special that day except come.

Betsy: Okay. Can you remember any stories or tales people have told you that are particularly vivid that are about blessings of the fleet in the past. Anything--I know you mentioned that they used to use your dock here. Has your wife described--?

Steve: Yes, they had a mass, and people seem to remember a Father Beauvais who I think brought the blessing of the fleet to the fore. And they had, uh, they had Movietone news or one of those and they seem to remember that, uh, vividly. And, uh, J.D. always says that his father had gone to Biloxi, see. And then they started the blessing of the fleet down here. But this one priest in particular, who was certainly here before my time, I think in the 30's, he brought the archbishop and he also brought a national news organization down here. And they seem to remember that (muffled end of sentence).

Betsy: Well, I hope to be able to surprise them with a copy of that.

Steve: (Reply muffled.)

Betsy: I'm looking for it. I've got three research librarians, on the East and the West coasts hunting it. If it's still in existence, Father Brunet is going to get a copy. And I'll make sure that J.D. gets to see it. What better way can I prove what it looked like fifty years ago than to find that. And a lot of those news reels are still in existence.

Steve: Uh hum.

Betsy: Any other things that you consider important about the blessing in this community?
Steve: Well, just that I think that it's a unifying force in the community and most of the people down here now especially are back into the fishing industry. And I think it's a highlight of their lives, part of their year. A real big part of their year. Whereas we have other social events, that seems to be a big social event for them--

Betsy: Okay.

Steve: --the people down here.

Betsy: Anything else you'd like to add?

Steve: No. I think you're doing a wonderful service to this community by researching this. And, because I do think it's important to their lives.

Betsy: I'm having so much fun!

Steve: You hate to admit that, huh?

Betsy: No, it doesn't bother me down here to admit it. Sometimes when I'm at LSU and my friends are spending all of their in the library and they are doing all of this really dull stuff, they're saying "Why did you pick something where you get to go someplace fun and people are terrific and the foods great?"

Steve: Yeah.

Betsy: And I said--

Steve: Yeah, people are nice here. And they--people are so wonderful down here.

Betsy: They really are. I can't imagine any place that I would enjoy researching more.

Steve: Uh hum.

Betsy: I think that covers it.

Steve: All right, thank you.

End of tape.
Interview with Dickie Fakier

Date: Tuesday, February 24, 1987
Place: Indian Ridge Shrimp Company, Boudreaux Canal, Louisiana
Time: 10:00 a.m.

Betsy: I’ve just got a couple of categories of questions I want to ask you—

Dickie: Okay.

Betsy: —about your background,

Dickie: All right.

Betsy: —and about the shrimp blessing. Um, if you were giving a definition of your job, what would you say your title was?

Dickie: General Manager. Which means everything as general manager.

Betsy: And—what does Indian Ridge Shrimp Company produce?

Dickie: We produce shrimp, frozen shrimp.

Betsy: Frozen shrimp. You no longer are canning?

Dickie: Well, we can shrimp, but it’s frozen. It’s not a water pack.

Betsy: Okay.

Dickie: Everything we pack is shrimp and everything is frozen. Frozen headless, frozen peeled, frozen cooked peeled, and frozen breaded.

Betsy: How long have you been in this business?

Dickie: Pret—myself? Twenty seven years.

Betsy: And always with this company?

Dickie: Always, yes.

Betsy: So what you learned, you learned on the job?

Dickie: Correct. On job training.

Betsy: All right. Okay. I’ll—what changes have taken place with production and just broadly with how you—in the time you’ve been here?

Dickie: Well, the biggest change in the shrimp industry is the imported shrimp coming into the United States. You know, when I started twenty-seven years ago, ninety five percent of the shrimp consumed in the United States were domestic shrimp. Last year, only thirty per cent of the shrimp consumed in the United States were domestic shrimp. Consumption of shrimp has increased tremendously, but imported shrimp, farming shrimp is the biggest change in the shrimp industry.

Betsy: In terms of—

Dickie: And it’s going to continue to—

Betsy: —in terms of what you do here, how has that changed, in methods, etc?

Dickie: Basically, it’s the same as it was thirty years ago, except that we are not a cannery. We process
shrimp, water pack. We discontinued that about fifteen years ago. Because our production of shrimp, we couldn’t do the frozen and the water pack. So we made a judgement about fifteen, sixteen years ago to get out of the processed water pack.

Betsy: That was an internal change and didn’t—
Dickie: Yeah.
Betsy: —have any impact on your market or on your employees?
Dickie: No. We just—no.
Betsy: Just keeping up?
Dickie: Yeah, that’s right. We’re just changing times. Water pack shrimp is less of a marketing item now then it was. Everything is frozen, or ninety percent of your shrimp is frozen.

Betsy: Is there anything else particularly important about your job that I don’t know enough to ask about?
Dickie: No, it’s a very difficult job, like anything in the shrimp business. It’s long hours; you’re fooling with a perishable item, so, I mean, it’s not like a manufactured nuts and bolts. So, it’s like a farmer. He has a perishable item; he has to deal with it. So it’s very difficult; it’s a lot of judgement calls, you know.

Betsy: Okay. J. D. Theriot was telling me, or maybe I read, I think I read, that in the thirties, plants like this were almost completely subject to when the shrimp boats or the shrimp catch came in.
Dickie: Right, right.
Betsy: Are you still—?
Dickie: No. Because we can take shrimp that’s frozen, either our own shrimp or other brands and imported shrimp, and we can process that shrimp. We can thaw it out, we can cook it, we can bread it and refreeze it. So that’s changed. We’re not just subject to the fresh shrimp coming off the boats.

Betsy: Okay. What kind of schedule, then, does your plant keep?
Dickie: Well, May to December your schedule is fresh shrimp production, normally, but in between, [is] when we do work frozen shrimp. May to—January to May, early May is frozen production. Very little—
Betsy: But it is a year round job?
Dickie: Oh, yeah. It’s twelve months out of the year. It has to be. The cost of doing business has increased so much that if you only work seasonally, you have a big overhead. And in seven months, for basically five months you’re not doing much, so—the overhead doesn’t change.

Betsy: Was it seasonal when you started?
Betsy: So in that way--
Dickie: That's changed quite a bit. And normally we work shrimp May to December, and January through April was repair time. You know, that type of thing. You work very little shrimp, because first of all, we didn't bread shrimp in those days. So that's given another new aspect. And we cooked shrimp, basically, from our boats, because raw peeled shrimp wasn't — so everything we had, we cooked it. But then raw peel started about five, six years ago. About eight years ago, and that's become one of the biggest selling items in the shrimp industry. Peeled shrimp in five pound boxes.

Betsy: So—?

Dickie: So that has changed considerably.

Betsy: Does your plant work, uh, an eight hour shift? Sixteen? Twenty four or—?

Dickie: Well, uh, when we not processing, it's an eight hour shift. When we processing shrimp off of our boats, it can be anywhere from eight hours to sixteen, eighteen hours, depends on how much shrimp that we can work that particular day. There's no set schedule when doing the shrimp.

Betsy: Well, when you, when it flows, you—?

Dickie: Well, when the shrimp are there, like I said, it's a perishable item, so normally when the shrimp season opens for the first two or three weeks, you have more shrimp than you can work in a day's time. So you have to work six days a week, sometimes seven. We don't work on Sundays, but a lot of plants do work on Sundays.

Betsy: Do you have a particular reason for not working on Sunday?

Dickie: Well, I think religiously—aspect for one thing is that, you working for twelve to sixteen hours a day, six days, after the sixth day, you should have a day of rest. If there was an emergency, a hurricane or something of that effect, we would work on Sunday. We'd be forced to. But I think everybody deserves one day a week off.

Betsy: Okay.

Dickie: Definitely.

Betsy: I would agree with you on that. Let me ask you some questions about the blessing of the fleet. Are you directly involved with any preparation—?

Dickie: No. Not personally.

Betsy: You don't work with the committee at the church—

Dickie: No.

Betsy: --or anything like that?

Dickie: I don't.

Betsy: Steve Braud was telling me that because of his connection with the shrimpers that he feels that it's important to be here on the day—
Dickie: Yeah.
Betsy: --on the property. And, do you feel that--
Dickie: I came. I've been here a couple of times. I don't--
---I'm not against that. We should be here, but my
philosophy is, I'm down here almost six days a week
as it is and--
Betsy: Uh huh.
Dickie: --but the first two or three years I was here [I
came], but after that I have not returned, you know,
for the blessing.
Betsy: But--are you originally from Chauvin?
Dickie: No.
Betsy: Where are you from?
Dickie: I'm from Houma, which is almost--eighteen miles
away.
Betsy: But you've always, you've worked here for that long,
so--
Dickie: Oh, yeah, I've worked here.
Betsy: So you, you don't worry about--?
Dickie: No.
Betsy: --fishermen who supply your--?
Dickie: No. I don't think their feelings are hurt or
anything. I'm not saying that they wouldn't like
for me to be here, uh, but the other problem is, if
you get on a boat. The first few times I went on
the boats that we owned, which was all right, but if
you have partying and you pick out a boat to ride,
then you may hurt more feelings--
Betsy: Yeah.
Dickie: --than you can help. And when we owned two boats, I
rode on our boats with--that made it okay, but now
that we don't own any boats, that's one of the
reasons.
Betsy: The we you're talking about is the St. Martin
family?
Dickie: Yeah. The St. Martin and the Share Water were the
two boats that we owned. We sold 'em, but, uh--
Betsy: Do you have any particularly strong memories of the
blessings that you attended? Things that have stuck
in your mind about--?
Dickie: No, but, you know, shrimp blessings have been a part
of our culture and our heritage in this area since
the year one, probably. What I think about the
shrimp blessing, is that, you know, we are a
religious community. At one time, probably about
ninety percent of this community was Catholic.
Probably it's fifty, fifty-five percent now. But
even the non-Catholic fishermen, I feel like, have
their boats blessed. Whether it's superstition or
what--I think it's more religious than superstitious
--
Betsy: Uh hum.
Dickie: --that, uh, I think that always fishermen have had a blessing, all over the world, I feel like. I've read articles where this isn't unique just in south Louisiana.

Betsy: Yeah.

Dickie: They have blessing of the fleets in other areas that have very few Catholics. I don't think it's just ours--but--I feel like it's always been that way. Anybody that's going out to sea in ships, that they have a strong relationship either with God or something. And you know, I think that's, to me, one of the things I think about it. And I admire these men for having their boats blessed. And if I were a fisherman, I would definitely want to have the boat blessed.

Betsy: Have you ever gone out with a trawler?

Dickie: No, not--well--I went into Lake Boudreaux for the blessing of the fleet but I've never--I've wanted to, and it seems like when I could--I wouldn't want to go out for ten days. I would love to go out for maybe a couple of days. But no way! And I'll tell any of them I don't want to go stay on a boat for ten days. No way. It's a very hard life. The people don't realize that. Most people think fishermen are lazy, you know? The average person says all they do is go catch shrimp a few days and come home and sit around, but it's not that way. And they don't just catch shrimp in those nets. You know, for every pound of shrimp, there might be ten pounds of fish and crabs or stingrays, or anything. So it's a very hard life, two men living in a small cabin, weather, you know.

Betsy: Have you, have you seen any change in the fishermen themselves or anything about their perception of what they're doing since the boats have become so much larger? I just--

Dickie: Well, they're more comfortable, the ones that have built new steel boats. A lot of your new boats are air-conditioned; they have showers on the boats. And prior to that they didn't have a shower. They took a bath out of the sea. No fresh water, you know, a sort of a sponge bath. And the didn't have air-conditioning or heat, but now your new boats have central air-conditioning and showers, so they live a lot better. Now they still a lot of older boats that don't have all that. But the newer boats all, you know--it's a better quality of living when they out there. Much better quality of living.

Betsy: And with the radios, safer?

Dickie: Oh, yeah. A lot safer, cause they all have radios and the weather forecasting's a lot better. They know it usually, if rough weather is coming up so
they can get in port or tie up. So I would say, it's a much better life. It's still a very hard life, but it's a lot better than it was twenty, thirty years ago. Maybe even ten years ago.

Betsy: From what J. D. told me, you just have almost an oral contract with these people?

Dickie: There's no written--these boats can go anywhere and sell their shrimp to whoever they want to. And basically they come here, some boats every trip. We have some boats that may come here seventy-five percent of the time. They may sell to another plant or another dealer for some reason that maybe years ago this person helped them get their boat or something--

Betsy: Yeah.

Dickie: --and, uh--

Betsy: Or they end up with a big load over in Texas and they don't want to come all the way back.

Dickie: Right, right. Or they can't come all the way back here, maybe, for the reason. But basically, the boats that sell here come every time. Now, they come here for several reasons. I guess basically they like us and trust us. That's one thing.

Betsy: Because you're locally owned?

Dickie: That's right. We've been here since 1923. And they trust the people that are weighing in their shrimp and counting their shrimp. The second thing is, is that we're here twelve months a year. If they come in with a big load of shrimp, they know we gonna unload it. A hurricane coming our way and all the boats coming in, we're gonna move heaven and hell to get that shrimp processed off the boats if it's humanly possible. So they know when they come in, they have a place to sell 'em. But the whole thing is, is our price on that shrimp has to be competitive with other people in the area. They not going to come in and sell us their shrimp if we paying ten or twenty cents a pound less than the other people are paying. So you know, it's a price thing. But as long as our prices are competitive or within reason, they're going to come in and unload their shrimp. But the boats all know the prices, what's being paid everywhere, cause they stay on these radios. Sometimes they get the right information, sometimes they get the wrong information.

Betsy: Approximately how many shrimpers sell to you on a regular basis?

Dickie: I would say about thirty boats. On a regular basis.

Betsy: Would you say that was pretty close to the seventy-five percent of the shrimpers that work out of Petit Caillou?

Dickie: Well, uh--no. There's a lot of boats here. There's
a lot of places unload shrimp. And they sell Grand Caillou, which a lot of the Little Caillou, Petit Caillou boats, unload on Grand Caillou. Uh, one of the reasons, you have a lot of larger steel hull boats that can’t come to our plant. They can’t navigate the canal. They draw too much water. So, even if we’d have some of ’em, which we would, have some of those people on big boats, hundred foot boats, would like to come and unload their boat here, they can’t. Because the water is not deep enough. Where Dulac or Cocodrie they can get there and unload.

Betsy: Approximately how far offshore are they working?
Dickie: Ummm, in the May season, anywhere from the coastline to three or four miles out. In the winter months when the shrimp move out, they may be ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty miles out. See, the shrimp will move further out when the water gets cold.

Betsy: Anything else about the blessing or about the shrimpers that you--?
Dickie: Well, I admire ’em. I think they’re the last pioneers that we have, quite honestly. I, I think farmers, fishermen are pioneers, because when you think about it, they are dependent on the sea for their living. And, uh, they are sole proprietors of the ships, they own the boats, uh, you know, they run the boats, they have to be mechanics. [Interruption for a worker] But, you know, these people have to have a lot of courage, they have to definitely, have a lot of self-confidence to know they can go do this, and be dependent on the sea. And be able to handle the boat, do mechanic work when it breaks down, take care of a perishable product. Uh, and I think it’s one of the last frontiers. Farmers, fishermen, people like that. Course the government doesn’t subsidize your fishermen like they subsidize the farmer not to grow crops. There’s no subsidy. [Speaking to secretary: Bonnie, I’ll call ’em back. Just ask, see who it is.] That’s the only difference that I see.

Betsy: Okay. Well, I think that covers it unless there’s something you’d like to add.
Dickie: No, I think it’s a very challenging business, although from the fishermen catching the shrimp to the processors processing the shrimp, it’s—there’s no easy job in the shrimping industry as far as catching the shrimp, and processing the shrimp. It’s hard work, because like I said, you’ve got to work sixteen, eighteen hours a day, six or eight days. It’s tough work. And to catch the shrimp, it very hard work. Now, the fishermen think the processors make all the money; they’ve always thought that, you
know. But I think they're learning more and more that we're not just competing against other factories in our area, in our state, or from Florida to Texas, we're competing against shrimp from all over the United States. This is the biggest change in the shrimp industry. You know, we're working shrimp at Boudreaux Canal, and there's shrimp being shipped in from eighty or ninety countries. And this is our competition. And there's some very high quality shrimp being shipped into the United States. Very quality shrimp. Counts are great. Weight is great. And it's almost unlimited. The farm-raising the shrimp, the aqua-culture, is unlimited. And we have a serious problem with our domestic fleet that they may not survive in the years to come. And the years may not be that far off. And the other thing is, with the inundation of the Vietnamese fishermen, they are very industrious people. And they work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And as one of the shrimpers adds, they going to catch that shrimp and they don't stop. Where our fishermen work eight or ten days and come in, these people live off the boat, families live on the boat. And the shrimp are going to be there just so long. And that's that. And it's going to be hard with all the new shrimp boats being built. As you see, all the boats along the bayou. Okay? The pie is going to be cut up smaller, and smaller, and smaller, so our domestic fishermen that don't want to work that seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, are going to have a hard time making a living. Because I feel like the price of shrimp in general, with all the farm-raised shrimp coming in the United States, it gonna be, price-wise, it's going to be very difficult. And if they catch less shrimp and the price goes down, then they going to have a hard time operating. The boats that own, the people that own their own boats will make a living, but the ones that are building new boats with a very high note, they are going to have a very difficult time. Uh, the Vietnamese are buying theirs cash. They don't owe any money.

Betsy: And there're not any big corporations in here trying to--?

Dickie: Not in Louisiana. You have some big corporations in Florida, Georgia, uh, Texas. Louisiana is more family-oriented companies. There's probably more shrimp processors in Louisiana than anywhere else. But they all family companies. There's no conglomerates. Where you have some plants in Tampa, Florida, probably have six, seven hundred people working for them. They may produce in a week what
we produce in a month. But, uh, you don’t have that in Louisiana. It’s always been families, small companies.

Betsy: And you don’t see any signs of, of—
Dickie: IST?
Betsy: Yeah.
Dickie: The Con-Agra owning them. Well, since Con-Agra bought company, and, naturally, a large corporation—and they’ve produced a lot of shrimp there, but they haven’t changed the price of the raw material, to the point where they wanted to get all of the shrimp.

Betsy: Yeah.
Dickie: Actually, they had a very bad year last year. They worked a lot of shrimp and lost a lot of money. The general manager for them was fired about two weeks ago. Because they bought shrimp and worked shrimp when the price was too high. And now the price is coming down, gradually. So they have a lot of inventory and are losing a lot of money.

Betsy: Was that manager a local person?
Dickie: No, no, he was in Biloxi. He wasn’t in this plant. This plant is just a satellite plant. They just process shrimp, they don’t sell ’em at all.
Betsy: Yeah. The local people who worked there at Chauvin are still working there?
Dickie: Oh, yeah. It wasn’t their fault. I mean, if they have someone in Tampa, Florida, saying: "Buy the shrimp, and process it." and then the price goes down, it’s the person in Tampa, Florida’s fault.

Betsy: Yeah.
Dickie: They said buy it and process it, and things got out of hand. Prices on headless shrimp got astronomical. And, uh, the imports came in, and the imports selling cheaper than our domestic shrimp, forty, fifty cents a pound. What within the past six weeks, the processors with big inventories of headless shrimp realized they couldn’t get the money for the shrimp they had on inventory. There was no way, so they started cutting prices. But I would say they were losing sixty to eighty cents a pound. And if you have three or four hundred thousand pounds, you going to lost three or four hundred thousand dollars in a hurry. Or even more than that, depending on the inventory. And this is what we face right now. Fortunately, with this company, we worked a lot of headless, but we were able to sell ’em before the prices went down. Now we’re buying all Equadorean shrimp, right now. Farm-raised Equadorean shrimp. So—

Betsy: Okay. Well, I think you’ve painted me a pretty thorough picture.
Dickie: Well, it's, there's nothing in a text-book that you can learn about the shrimping business.

Betsy: I know that.

Dickie: It's, uh--

Betsy: I can find government brochures.

Dickie: No, it's strictly on the job training. You can not learn about the shrimp industry from a text-book, or a book. I've been here twenty-seven years, and I'm still learning things everyday. It's just a—the business is changing: it's challenging, it's hard work. Cause anytime you process a food, it's very difficult. And the laws are changing. Consumer demand is greater for better quality, which is correct, but we've always been a quality packer. I think being here since 1923 proves that. You have to do a lot of right things or you wouldn't be in business. But government inspection, continuous inspection is around the horizon, where the consumer is demanding—continuous inspection of the seafood industry, just like they've done for years with the poultry industry and the red meat industry. Continuous inspection. This is going to be a big problem. If it comes to that, there'll be inspectors inspecting these plants. The qualified people to do it, they're expensive, they very high. But there'll be one more person looking at that shrimp. Well, we have a volunteer. We have USDA inspections right now on a weekly basis, so we're a little ahead of the industry. We started it on our own—a certified plant. [Interruption by secretary.]

Betsy: Okay, I'm seeing Pearl [on label], Is everything you process—?

Dickie: Yeah.

Betsy: Under that label?

Dickie: Yeah, that's our brand name. Pearl brand is our label.

Betsy: Okay. I think that covers it except for two little requests I have.

Dickie: Okay.

Betsy: And they're—

End of Tape
Interview with Group at Thelma Duplantis’s
*heavily edited to omit unrelated or garbled sections*

Date: Tuesday, February 24, 1987
Place: Thelma Duplantis’ home, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 1:30 – 4:30 p.m.

Present:

Part One:
Thelma Duplantis
Mickey Duplantis
Helen Lirette
Imelda Pellegrin
Emile Theriot

Part Two:
Thelma Duplantis
Mickey Duplantis
Wilma Dusenberry
Helen Lirette
Imelda Pellegrin
Myron Pellegrin
Eudras Prospere
Emile Theriot

Part three:
Focus on:
Myron Pellegrin
Eudras Prospere
Emile Theriot

Part one

Betsy: --take notes very fast.
Thelma: Well, it’s easier that way. That way can check it over, when you, um--
Betsy: Ah, let me ask you a couple of questions getting, just getting started. How do you spell your name?
Thelma: Thelma Duplantis. D-u-p-l-a-n-t-i-s.
Betsy: Is the "p" capitalized?
Thelma: No.
Betsy: All right. And what is your mailing address?
Thelma: Route one, box 216 - A, Chauvin, 70344.
Betsy: Okay. Uh, and you were an organist at St. Joseph’s?
Thelma: Thelma Duplantis. D-u-p-l-a-n-t-i-s.
Betsy: Is the "p" capitalized?
Thelma: No.
Betsy: All right. And what is your mailing address?
Thelma: Route one, box 216 - A, Chauvin, 70344.
Betsy: Okay. Uh, and you were an organist at St. Joseph’s?
Thelma: In the--for twenty-seven years.
Betsy: Basically, what I’m trying to do is trace the history of the-- [blessing]
Thelma: Yeah, well my part has nothing to do with it, that--you know, my--being an organist doesn’t have anything to do with the history of it. Except that we had, they had mass, you know, (Uh huh.) every year, and they still do. They don’t have it at the church any more. They have a mass at the church, but the day of the blessing they have mass out at--they open
Betsy: No! They still do--
Thelma: Yeah, uh huh, they, it's-- when I was a girl, I was involved with it. They had mass at church and all the boats came up the bayou at night, the night before. (Uh hum.) And they came, they lined up as far as they could go, and then came past. They passed through the front of the church, and we sang a mass. We sang the Litany on the bayou side. (Uh huh.) Litany of the Saints, and we had, uh, mass in church. And they didn't have another--well, at that time there was only one priest here. In fact we were a mission. We weren't--we didn't have our own parish at that time, so we couldn't have all the ceremonies that they have now, the separate masses, you know? (Uh hum.) One for the fishermen. Now they have one for the fishermen the day before. (Uh hum.) And then the day of the blessing they have mass out in the open. And they, they let the boats pass by. They bless them out there. But they used to have to come up the bayou and pass in front of the church and go down. And the blessing is--it wasn't as elaborate a thing as it is now. But it was sorta a sacred thing, you know?

Betsy: Do you remember, uh, some of the really early ones when it was in August?

Thelma: What's that?

Betsy: Do you remember--

Thelma: They were in August. They--the Feast of the Assumption. Seems to me that there was a season that opened then.

Betsy: Yeah. The second season.

Thelma: And now they change it, but I can't tell you exactly when they change it, the date of the blessing. It's earlier in the year now. (Uh hum.) But I can't remember just when they did--just when they made that change.

Betsy: Do you remember back in the thirties when Father Beauvais was here? (Uh hum.) Do you remember a Movietone News [crew] coming in and, and filming that, and that being shown at the movies? --at Houma?

Thelma: I, I don't remember that.

Betsy: Okay. I have seen something written about that, and then J. D. Theriot told me that--

Thelma: Well-- (To Mickey) She says the Movietone people came and made a--

Mickey: I don't remember that.

Thelma: I don't remember that. Course, there were all sorts of newspapers that would come and--they'd write up about it, but I don't remember that they had this--film.
Betsy: Well, you know how it is. One person will remember one thing and—
Thelma: That's exactly right.
Betsy: --somebody will remember something else.
Thelma: My daughter's coming. She's going to bring Helen Lirette. You haven't spoken to her?
Betsy: No, ma'am.
Thelma: And they might remember things--I remember some things, and my age-- (Yeah.) Old (I laugh.)
Mickey: What time did you start playing the organ? What year did you play the organ?
Thelma: About 1937, I think.
Mickey: Thirty seven?
Thelma: Father Beauvais was here, though. And then, after that, I don't remember when I was involved that they had the mass out in the open. They still had it at church.
Mickey: That was after you got in the accident.
Thelma: I think so, because I think it was Father Roy who made the change, you know, (Uh huh.) when he was here. But I don't, I can't remember exactly when.
Betsy: Do you remember any of the discussion about why they made the change?
Thelma: Well--I suppose it was so that more peo--more people could attend mass who were not actually fishermen, you see-- (Uh hum.) --that would be interested in going to see the boats go into the--
Mickey: The lake.
Thelma: --the lake. And it was easier for some people to go to mass that way-- (Uh hum.) --than to come to church. But they have a special mass for the fishermen, I think the day before.
Mickey: The morning of the--?
Betsy: I got the impression from J. D. Theriot's pictures of those earlier ones that--you had the mass and--the procession went immediately into the boat blessing, but now you have some time between it, isn't there?
Thelma: What's that?
Betsy: I got the impression that at one time you went directly from the mass to the boats. Do they still do that?
Mickey: Well, yes. You went right out the church. (Thelma: Yeah.) Father would say mass and you went right out to the bayou.
Thelma: Go and sing the Litany of the Saints on the bayou side and then they would go on down. But I don't remember when they had the boats all decorated. You know? (Yeah.) The processions of--on the bayou that they have now. It just had the blessing and we went to--the people who were at mass--There was only one mass as I say. We had only one priest who had--
we were a mission at the time. (Uh hum.) He was at—might have been Sacred Heart. And so, you couldn’t have as many different masses (Mickey: No.) as you have now.

Mickey: Yes. All right. You see, this was a mission at that time. (Yeah.) And like she said, you had one mass and then they’d go out and bless the boats right after mass, right in front of the church. And, uh—

Betsy: How much time elapses now—between the mass—and the—

Mickey: Well, not very much, because the mass is said right at the dock—itself. (Uh hum.) It’s said—they say mass and then they just go right to the bayou, and the procession starts. No, you right. Mama [addressing Thelma, who is his mother], I take it back. He comes up—doesn’t he ride the boat now? He rides the boat now.

Betsy: Yeah, he rides the boat.

Mickey: Okay, that’s right, that’s right. I’m—I was confused. But he, he rides the boat now, Mama. It used to be that he’d stand in front of the church—

Thelma: Yeah. He’d say (Muffled section).

Mickey: —and the boats in the procession would pass by and he’d bless them as—. Now he rides the lead boat and as he comes down the bayou, he blesses the boats and they follow him down.

Thelma: It’s a different—

Mickey: You right. There is a—there is a lapse of time between the mass and the blessing.

Betsy: One of the reasons I thought there must be is, in the older pictures everybody is still dressed in their Sunday clothes. (I laugh.)

Thelma: Yeah, well, not any more.

Mickey: Not any more. Oh, no, it’s changed a lot—

Thelma: Nobody dressed like they dress now.

Mickey: Well, and—Betsy, another thing that was—I remember when I was an altar boy. And mama can tell you the same thing. It was a very solemn thing.

Thelma: That’s what I was telling her.

Mickey: People were very solemn at the time. I can remember that. (Thelma: Yeah.) Cause I was standing there with the priest, you know. (Uh hum.) And they kneel, but now they don’t kneel (laughing) any more. It’s a—(telephone rings.) uh—

Thelma: Excuse me. (Uh huh.) Hello.

[Recorder cut off while she answered phone and Mickey talked to caller. I asked Thelma about the alleged Movietone film.]

Thelma: —I came on home. [After the blessing.] And I
didn’t know—any newspeople that were around.

Mickey: (On phone) These people came film one of them.

Thelma: I’ll tell you something about the news that--

laughs). But anyway--

Betsy: I got the impression that he [J.D. Theriot] was at

the age when he really enjoyed going to Houma to the

movie.

Thelma: [Having trouble hearing me with Mickey’s phone call

going on.] Excuse me, I--

Mickey: (On phone:) Why don’t you come over to Mama’s after

while, and she’d [researcher] love to talk to you.

Thelma: I can’t hear when he--

Mickey: (On phone:) Yeah. Okay. All right. Thank you.

Bye bye. (To me:) You got another (laughing)

customer.

Betsy: Good, good!

Thelma: What did you ask me?

Betsy: I think J. D. was at the age when going to Houma to

the movie was a big thing for him and that’s why he

remembers it. (Laughs.)

Thelma: Right. Well, we would, I would have been excited to

know that too, but I don’t remember that it happen­
ed. (Uh hum.) So, um, I’m not saying it didn’t

happen, but--

Mickey: I never heard of it either.

Thelma: You know, I’ll tell you something about the news.

In these articles, sometimes we would call ahead of

time. We were expecting the bishop to come one time,

too, you know? And sometimes they had it [the

blessing] at the same time as confirmation. (Uh

huh.) And they have all the ceremony, and-- con­
nected with that. Well, they would say that the

bishop was coming. Well, the bishop would send

another person in to represent him, you know? (Uh

huh.) But the article that would come it [said]

that the bishop had come. (She laughs.) That the

kind of news--(I laugh.) See, it wasn’t as easy for

people to get the news right, is what it was. The

cars weren’t-- [Reporters] wouldn’t come and check

on their notes. (Uh hum.) They would be told this

was going to happen. It’s just like on teevee

sometimes, too, you know?. (Yeah.) They tell you

before what happens, what they think is going to

happen, and then they have to correct it and say now

--. These articles, some of them have that somebody

was here. The bishop or some prominent person that

-- (Uh hum.) --we were expecting. They were in­
vited, and the article would say that they were--

that they had come.

Mickey: Uh, you know, in that--in that book you have, in

that little notebook you have-- [Thelma’s scrapbook

of newspaper clippings about the blessing from the
in the 1930’s and 1940’s] -- they used to sing the Litany--
while they were having the blessing, or right be-
fore-- was it right before or during--?

Thelma: No, it was--

Mickey: -- the blessing?

Thelma: Well, we sang the Litany and then he blessed the
boats. But anyway, that was just a part of the--

Mickey: But you would stand on the bayou and sing?

Thelma: Yeah. I stood out there, but the--

Mickey: I could remember--

Thelma: -- priest that comes has--they change their little
ceremonies, you know? (Uh hum.) Or sometimes it’s
the parish council that changes the procedures too,
you know. (Uh hum.) But, umm, another thing, they
didn’t have all the boats decorated like they have
now. (Uh hum.) I guess they told you how they have
carved these boats have their-- (Uh hum.) -- their
themes, and they really go all out and have a-- You
haven’t seen the film they have of the blessing of
the boat? [Film: "Petit Caillou" - housed in the
Louisiana State Archives in Baton Rouge.]

Betsy: I came down last year and saw it. [The blessing,
not the film.]

Thelma: Oh, you did? Oh, well then you saw how they all--
decorate.

Mickey: Well, it was nothing like that. (Thelma: No, it--)
Nothing at all. It was very, very solemn. But
these people are--

Thelma: They had too--there were no big, big boats anyway at
time. I don’t remember--

Mickey: None at all. (She mumbles something.) The big
boats didn’t come out until about 19-- in the
sixties, I would say. (Uh hum.) Your big
schooners, like you have now. (Yeah.)

Thelma: It was not--just like everything, you know--

Mickey: It has changed a heck of a lot, Betsy. One heck of
a lot. (Thelma: Yeah.) The bayou has changed.
This is not at all like it was when, when I was a
child. (Uh hum.) It’s changed tremendously, you
know. It’s--

Thelma: Well, like most communities, you know, the oil--

Mickey: Well, have you seen the film Tobacco Road? I don’t
know if you’ve seen that, but it’s--

Betsy: No, but I’ve heard of it.

Mickey: It was--oh, it was very, very-- before-- this was a
very poor-- area at that time. (Uh hum.) People
were very poor.

Betsy: Well, I guess it started really during the de-
pression, didn’t it?

Thelma: Well, in the thirties, you see, was in about thirty
seven. But I don’t remember the first year. That’s
the first year that I was involved. But I don’t
know when it was the first blessing. It was before I began to play the organ or what. I don't remember.

Mickey: Mr. Colo [Nickname for Emile Theriot] says he has pictures of the first one.

Betsy: I bet it's got a date on it then.

Mickey: It probably does.

Thelma: I don't know when Father Coulomb was here, I don't remember if he had it, you know. I think it's when Father Beauvais was here. That was a French priest that was here before.

Mickey: And, and Eu--Eudras has gone to town, so-- (Uh hum.)--his wife said he'd be back in--awhile. I don't know how long it'll be. I'll call.

Thelma: Would you like a cup of coffee while waiting for the others to come, or--?

Betsy: No, thank you.

[Section of small talk skipped.]

Mickey: Let me, let me call Mr. Tad. Think Mr. Tad would know anything about this?

Thelma: He would. All the older people know, know a lot. But they might be like me and forget a lot too. (I laugh.) I can't--I was saying, I remember a lot of things very vividly, but some parts of the things I remember, I can't remember the whole--the details of, you know. Some parts of it escape my memory. I guess it's how it is when you get older, I suppose.

[Non-related talk. Section includes generous sharing of a family heirloom journal written by an ancestor in 1792-1823. Discusses translation problem with French words that are obsolete or local slang. Also talks about not being required to study French by her father. Her grandfather emigrated from France.]

Thelma: (To Mickey:) Did Colo say he was coming here?

Mickey: Yeah, he's gonna look up-- [his slides] --he said during the storm, they put 'em in boxes, and he stacked them up. And said he might have a little trouble finding 'em, but he's going to look for 'em. I'm sure he's going to find 'em. If not today, later on you can--he'll let you look (Yeah.) at 'em.

Betsy: Maybe when I come back. Father [Brunet] was going to check on--

Mickey: And then, he knows somebody that would have something from that time. And that's how you gonna find things out-- (Yeah.) --from different people.

Betsy: That's--Ohhh! [Exclaiming over journal.]

Thelma: How much time do you have to write your--?
Betsy: Well— (Laughs.)
Thelma: I mean, is there a time limit that you have to turn it in, I mean, or—?
Betsy: I want to finish it by the end of the summer.
Thelma: Oh, well, you have time then—
Betsy: And in order to graduate then, I have to have most of my material—by—
Mickey: Oh, no; Betsy, here comes—
Betsy: --first of May.
Mickey: Betsy, Betsy, here come the bull shooters. (I laugh.) They can shoot you all the bull, right here. These people can lie to you like you ain't ever seen before.
Thelma: (In response to unheard question:) All right.
Mickey: This is my sister, Imelda— [Imelda Pellegrini]
Imelda: Nice to meet you.
Betsy: Hi.
Mickey: And this is Mrs. Lirette—
Betsy: Nice to meet you.
Helen: Hi.
Mickey: Better known as Helen.
Thelma: And, what is your name?
Betsy: Betsy Gordon.
Mickey: Betsy Gordon.
Unident: Betsy Gordon.
Mickey: She’s from L.S.U. Well, actually she’s from Alabama, and she’s teaching at L.S.U.
? : You’re teaching?
Betsy: I’m teaching and, and working on my dissertation—to get my Ph.D.
? : What are you teaching at L.S.U.?
Betsy: Speech.

[Section of small talk omitted. Accents discussed, Southern and Cajun.]

Mickey: (In background:) --boat blessing. Colo says he has pictures of the first boat blessing—. Mama had that book—what’s that book she had? That’s the same one?
? : Did you see J.D. Theriot?
Betsy: Yes.
Imelda: He has the same pictures that are in that little book that I have. (Uh hum.)
Thelma: You saw the pictures that--at the store down there? At the old store?
Mickey: Oh, I meant to tell you, you can maybe jot it down in case Colo don’t come. There are pictures of the first blessing at Blum and Bergeron. I think that’s on Main Street in Houma.
? : It was.
Mickey: I don’t know where it is now, but they have, they
Thelma: Do any of ya'll remember that a--
Mickey: --pictures on the wall, he thinks, of the first boat blessing down here. (Okay.)
Thelma: Do you remember that there was a-- what did you say? [To me] What film company?
Betsy: Movietone.
Thelma: --the movie, that the movie company came and took pictures a long time ago of the blessing?
Betsy: Did a news reel in the early thirties.
Imelda: Really?
Betsy: J. D. Theriot says they did. And--the man who wrote \textit{Louisiana Hayride}, I never can remember his name--
Betsy: Alright--Harnett Kane has got a book--writing about --the bayou-- (Uh huh.) --and the people in southern Louisiana, (Yes.) and in there he mentions (Yes.) that that had taken place. Now, for all I know his information came from the same place mine did, word of mouth. You know? (Uh huh.) He does not footnote that or tell who told him or whether he saw it. He just says this has happened. You know, that's like that news stuff (laughing).
Thelma: That's what I was telling her--
Betsy: J. D. says that--
Thelma: --that you can read things--. The bishop was supposed to come and he didn't come, he sent someone else. But then the news went--the article would say that the bishop had come. You know? (They: Yeah.) Wasn't true, the information they--they were given before the blessing. That happened two or three times.
Mickey: But Betsy would like to know when it was switched over from August to the spring--you don't remember?
? : Oh, well that was--
? : That's been a few years.
Thelma: Do you think it's Father, Father Roy who did that? Because--
? : I think so, because--but when--they did a film in 1972--or 1971. Our fair started in 1970. (Uh hum.) That was the first year. (Uh hum.) And in 1972, they did a film, you know, about--it's called Lagniappe on the Bayou, and they do have scenes from the boat blessing. It's--it's very good. If you could-- (Yeah.) --get it.
Betsy: Do you think that's the film that's probably entitled "Petit Caillou," (Yes.) and is at the state-- (Yeah.) --archives? All right, I have that--I have access to that although I have not seen that yet.
? : It was already--that was what was--over fourteen years ago? Fifteen years ago? (Thelma: Yeah.)
Well, it was already in the spring. It was already set in the spring then. (?: It would have to be seventeen.) Yeah. Yeah. Right, right. Yeah.

? : And it was in the spring then? (?: Yeah.) I thought it had something to do with the fair, the change of time because there was so much work going on?

? : Probably so.

? : --for the fair, think they decided to do it in the spring. Now Mr. Leo Lapyrouse might know why. I think he was pretty active when he was still trawling.

Mickey: Let me call him. Find his number.

? : He was pretty active in that--you know, while he was still trawling. (Unclear.) I’m trying to think of who else.

Imelda: Yeah. As you said, some of the older trawlers.

Mickey: Well, that’s who she’d like to speak to, some of the older trawlers. And, uh, maybe Mr. Tad would know. (Ladies: Yeah.) 2311.

Thelma: Why, why did they change the season--open with the season? That’s what I don’t remember. And it used to be--

Helen: An August season?

Mickey: No.

Helen: (?) season--

Mickey: You always had two seasons.

Helen: You had the May season and the August one.

Thelma: Why--?

Helen: Your August season has the white shrimp, right?

Mickey: Yeah.

Helen: And the--

Thelma: Why--

Mickey: The spring season is for the Brown and the August season is for the white shrimp.

Helen: --brown shrimp-- (unclear)

Thelma: Why do we have the blessing in August instead of the first season here?

Imelda: They have it in the first season now--

Mickey: Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve--

Helen: It doesn’t make any difference to them, I suppose.

Mickey: 113--

Thelma: It was--it used to be, when they--before the trawlers went out, they asked the blessing on their work, you see? (Uh hum.) But now, (chuckles), they wait until after, wait till August.

Helen: I think--

Thelma: I don’t understand why it was changed. That doesn’t matter, but I wonder why they change it. And I don’t remember when they did-- (unclear)

Imelda: Well, because in the May season, that’s when they really--
Mickey: They change it on account of the storms. They had a hurricane one year. It says in one of the articles you gonna read— [Reference to newspaper clippings from 1930's in his mother's scrapbook.]

Thelma: Yeah, but, uh—

Mickey: --that they had to cancel it. And then I think they decided--

Helen: I think it had something to do with the--

Mickey: --to get it in the spring on account of the hurricanes. If, I'll let you have--

Thelma: But you have--the August--August and September are more--Well, maybe that's why, cause that's the stormy season-- (Garbled.) --objection to the storms. I suppose that's what it is.

Betsy: By the way, ya'll don't object if I record what we're talking about, do you?

Imelda: No.

Betsy: That all right? Yeah. Either that or I have to take all these notes. (General laughter.) Would you put your name and address-- (Okay.) --there for me. That way I will have a record of everybody I--

Mickey: [Referring to telephone call:] He's not there.

Betsy: --talk to or listen to.

Mickey: You got it? Mr. Leo's number? (To Imelda.)

Imelda: Not yet, I-- I was trying to find Blum and Bergeron, but I'll look up Mr. Leo's number.

Mickey: Yeah, Blum and Bergeron used to be on Main Street. They were dried shrimp buyers. Seafood dealers. And I don't know if they still on Main Street or not. But Colo, this fella can tell you more about it when he gets here--if he gets here.

Betsy: Oo-kay.

Thelma: J.D. told you how his father (mumbling in back­ground) went to Biloxi and--got the--how he--encouraged people to have this--blessing here too? That was way back. I don't know what year that was. Did he tell you?

Betsy: He told me an approximate year. He thinks it was--uh, late twenties, middle to late twenties.

Thelma: When? In the Twenties?

Betsy: 1927, 1928. But then, I think, then he says the first blessing was almost after that, and I think--Sometimes he says thirty-one, sometimes he says thirty-two. So--I'm not real sure.

Thelma: I think it was--

Helen: Theriot you talking about?

Betsy: Uh hum.

Thelma: Cause, I--when Father Beauvais came here, and he came about 1937, I think.

Mickey: [On phone] He's not there, is he?

Thelma: But I don't remember their having a blessing when Father Coulomb was here. Do you? Remember? Ya'll
Mickey: [To Imelda:] --the address. I, let me--

Imelda: Yeah, it's still on East Main. Uh, Blum and Bergeron. Okay?

Betsy: Okay. Mark that in my notes.

Imelda: All I remember is the year I was confirmed. I made my--we would call it my big communion and our confirmation all at the same time.

Thelma: And I was telling her you--sometimes it was on--connected with the confirmation ceremony.

Imelda: Right. The Bishop came, you see? (Thelma: Right.) And they wanted the bishop to be there to bless the boats too, I guess, to make it more, uh--ceremonial, ceremonious or whatever. But I can remember Mama had made me a--made my confirmation dress. And it was so excit--I was so excited! Because I can remember, ya'll putting that dress on me. (Her mother laughs.) And it was beautiful!

Mickey: I don't know about on the bayou, but it was started in Louisiana in 1916. (Okay.) It was spread from Brittany, or France. Uh, you can read this. [Scrapbook clipping] That's what it says.

Thelma: That scrapbook is not very, uh--

Imelda: It's not--

Helen: It's paint--

Thelma: --nice scrapbook. (Betsy: Hah!) But, it's the best I could do at that time. (She laughs.)

Betsy: Listen, I was so proud when I saw it. Because--

Thelma: I don't remember what I had in there.

Betsy: But you (To Imelda) were talking about your confirmation--

Mickey: She's (Thelma's) got her love life in there [the scrapbook], sooo, Betsy, you'd better be careful with it!

Imelda: Anyway, I remember the boats would come up to the church and line up on this side (north) and--

Thelma: We were telling her that--

Imelda: --and of course we didn't have all those big trawl boats that you see right now-- (Uh hum.) --the beautiful boats that were there.

Thelma: The what?

Imelda: But I was quite excited because I could hear all those boats coming, you know? And it was an exciting--

Betsy: Yeah.

Imelda: --exciting day for me. Now, I don't remember what year that was (Mumble in background.) But I remember that.

Helen: --fair at the churchgrounds. (Imelda: Yeah.) We had little stands, you know? With--sell hot dogs. I don't remember what else. But I think must have been a novelty, that was a novelty for me to have
the hot dog. I think had hot dogs and maybe some kind of lemonade, and maybe hamburgers. Cause I can remember like a little fairy church, in the church-yard. And the blessing was right there at the bayou at church. It wasn’t—now we go down to Boudreaux Canal—

Thelma: I was just trying to—
Helen:—and the boats just pass us, pass us by, you know, and go into the lake. (Uh huh,) And so the blessing as they pass. But this way, the boats were all in that area (Thelma laughs.) and the father—

Mickey: Oh, I remember, they tied six abreast, along the banks, you know? That’s all. They just—and they’d wait. And when it was time, they’d untie and take off. (Mumble) Father’s (?) He’d bless them right there. But I was telling her, I remember it was very solemn. People would kneel and genuf—
(Mumble) and all they talk (unclear) and now— (He laughs.)

? : It’s a big party. It’s a big party.
Thelma: They seldom have to remind them though.
Mickey: It’s changed.
Thelma: --to put in the bulletin to please be respectful, to please not be disrespectful when the priest—when they pass with the blessing, you see. (Uh hum.) Cause some people, some people are not interested in the religious part of it. They just pass by to go—
(Helen: They go party.) --picnic in the lake, you see? (Uh huh.) And he asks people—

Mickey: Oh, yeah, he does that.
THelma: To at least be respectful to--you know? Not to--but they not, some of them. They not—
Helen?: Leave it to the Cajuns. They take any occasion to have a party.
Thelma: They have big picnics on these boats.
Helen: Crawfish boils.
Mickey: Did you ride a boat? You have rode a boat?
Betsy: Last year, I rode the lead boat with Father Brunet and the Peltiers.

? : Then you know what it’s all about.
Betsy: Oh, it’s--incredible! There’s nothing else like it! That’s why I was so excited when I got the per-mission to come back. [omission-- topic change] I find this fascinating, I really do. [Ala. town comparison.]

Mickey: You hadn’t, you hadn’t been to the fair either?
Betsy: No. [Discussion of busy autumn.]
Mickey: That’s another fun time.
Betsy: Yeah—I’m just going to have to move down here.
(General laughter.)
Thelma: I think you should.
Mickey: You’d better hurry. Things are changing.
"Laughter.

(?) : Oh, yes they are.

Betsy: Oh, but they’re still nice.

Thelma: I like this community. I’ve lived a lot of different places. I mean, not too distant, but I’ve moved around a lot, but I like the people where I am now. I just like ‘em. (Laughs.)

Helen: You know everybody around, and the family--

Thelma: I think it’s they [are] more like a family, a huge family. You know? (Uh huh.) Of course, in all families, you know, you have problems. You have the black sheep, (Uh hum.) and you have--

Mickey: More so earlier that now. Earlier years, people used to work together and--

Thelma: Yeah. It’s getting to where--

Mickey: (?) people (mumbling under) sorta tend to their own business now.

?: I think there’s a lot of difference now.

Mickey: It’s still a lot of family in it, but--

Thelma: But the fair, the fair is a family-oriented thing, cause--the families--one family will take one booth, you know, and with their friends and neighbors, and another family take another. And it’s like--and then the families compete against each other and it’s like a big fun thing. Whereas some places it’s like a competition, but not the same ways, just, you know--It’s just different.

Helen: The party want to do something nice.

[Small talk of family relationships.]

Betsy: --She [Wilma Dusenberry, Imelda’s sister] had tried to call you [Imelda] when I was here last week, because your husband has trawled. Right?

Imelda: Uh huh. Yeah.

Thelma: She wanted Myoh, you know, I should have told Myoh to come.

Imelda: Well, I was going to tell him, but he’s not at home. Because you know, sometimes he--

Thelma: Myoh has--

Imelda: Yeah. I’m married to Myoh, and he trawled when he was a child almost. (Thelma: Yeah.) Fourteen years old, he was trawling. And he talks about how they used to--take risks--going out in the smaller boats, you know? And all excited about catching all the shrimp and all like that.

Mickey: Yeah. That time, they only had, like maybe two cylinder engines. And you go on the boat, where now you have eight, twelve cylinders. And it was just a --it was real business in those days. ?: Weather-wise.) And another thing, well, I used to work at Chauvin Brothers, I was sixteen years old when I
started working there. And I remember Mr. Birkherd. He was like an overseer. (Uh huh.) He'd come up and he'd tell these people: "Well, it time for you to go out. You gotta go." When they bought at the store, it was all on credit. Everything was on credit. (Uh hum.) And when they'd get their credit rating up to a certain uh, uh, -- (? Amount.) -- amount, he'd tell 'em, say: "You gotta go out and trawl." (Uh hm.) He's tell 'em--

Imelda: Yeah, but that's because Chauvin Brothers owned some of those boats, too.
Mickey: They owned 'em, but not all of 'em.
Helen: Not all of 'em. (Garble.)
Mickey: Everybody depended on this one store for their credit. (Chorus: Yeah. Betsy: Uh hum.) And these people got to where they told them when to leave, and how long to stay out.

Thelma: You know the song says "I owe my soul to the company store"? (Yeah.)
Mickey: That was the same--
Chorus: That the same like shrimp.
Helen: That was the same like "Shrimp boats are a-coming." He told them "The shrimp boats are going." (I laugh.)
Mickey: I distinctly remember--I used to clerk in the store. (Uh hum.) And the people would come and they'd charge stuff. And Mr. Birkherd would come in, and at a certain time of the month or the season, whatever it was, he'd tell us, said: "When this certain person comes in, don't give him any credit. Have him come see me first." So, when the person would come in, we'd say: "Go see Mr. Birkherd." And he'd come out, and he could have a certain amount of groceries. Not what he wanted. (?: The bare necessities.) The bare necessities. (Uh huh.) And he'd grumble, but he could have no more. And that was it. Until they paid their bills.

Thelma: There was one of these, I'm not going to call the fella's name. But this Mr. Birkherd, Birkherd Chauvin, who was-- (Uh hum.) --the manager of the store there, he called in some of the people to talk to them about not paying their bills. (Uh huh.) So this young man went in there and he said: "Mr. Birkherd, you've been worried about me?" And Mr. Birkhard said: "Well, yes. you have to pay." "Well, you know," he said, "figure if you were worried, there wasn't any use for me to worry. There wasn't any use for two people to worry." (Laughter.) Said: "I let-- " I don't know how Birkherd didn't--shoot him, cause he was very--

Mickey: I'm sure [ ] wouldn't mind you mentioning his name. [General laughter.]
Helen: Birkherd was (unclear) —?
Thelma: They thought he was uh, a, a Scrooge, you know?
But, Mr. Burkhard, (Yeah.) he had so much credit out (Yeah.) that he just had to watch it.
Helen: Well, you know, he did make money. In fact of the
matter, he was like a banker—is what it all
amounted to. (Chorus: Yeah.) And some people would
come in and instead of giving money to them on their
take of shrimp, (Uh hum.) he would give them a piece
of paper. So that (Mickey: Right.) they knew if
they were ahead of their record, you know? (Uh
huh.) If they had money ahead. Or if they were in
the red. And so he gave them a piece of paper, they
come back and buy from him.
Mickey: What they’d call it, they’d always say they were
going to “settle.”
Imelda: Yeah.
Mickey: We’re going settle. And that’s what it was. It
wasn’t paying a bill, it was going settle. That’s
what they call it. When they’d come in with a load
of shrimp—
? : He was like a godfather [Mafia].
Mickey: --they unload at the factory and then they go to the
office. The store was right next to the factory
(Background talk.) and he was--they’d go--they’d say
it in French, you know? (Uh huh.) "Un va allez--"
What was it? (?: "(Cajun phrase)" "(Phrase
repeated)— It meant they were going go settle.
And that’s how it was. There was hardly any money
involved. Mostly everything was on credit.
Thelma: There wasn’t much money rolling around then, I tell
you.
? : So he [Birkherd] was a good business man.
Mickey: Yep.
? : [Low comment, can’t hear.]
Betsy: Imelda, do you think I could possible talk to your
husband tomorrow or the next day? Sometimes?
Imelda: Yeah.
Betsy: Expect him to--?
Imelda: Tomorrow. I’ll tell him you’re coming.
Betsy: Okay. Cause I would, I would really like to hear if
he’s got some of those good stories.
Imelda: Uh huh. He doesn’t tell too many stories, but--I
mean, he’s had the experience. (Yeah.) And he
remembers some of the things. And he also talks
about how the erosion of the land. He can remember
where there was a lot more land--than there is now.
And sometimes when we eat the same thing, like when
we have left overs, and eat it at night and maybe
the next day, he’ll say "Don’t worry ’bout that, I
ate spaghetti for six days once when I was
trawling." Said they’d make a pot of spaghetti and
they'd eat as long as it lasted, (I laugh.)
(Scratchy tape) and they brought him on as a cook.
And said the only thing he could make was spaghetti.
And they didn't know that. And he said, first
night, "What ya'll want me to cook?" "Anything you
want." So he made spaghetti. With shrimp. And they
had spaghetti, didn't know he could cook. They said
"Anything you want." So he made another spaghetti.
That's all there was. And they found out that's all
he knew how to cook.

Helen: I was thinking of my father-in-law, Mr. Albert
[Lirette]. He's got a good memory.

Thelma: I was, I was just about to ask about--

Helen: He--know, and he used to have what they called a
"GLOSSIER". They have boats that went out with ice
and bought shrimp, and brought the shrimp in the
other-- [garbled] Want to hear some about it?
(Yeah!) And he may be able to--

Betsy: He make nets, right? (Yeah.) I've heard him
mentioned.

Mickey: He's like--Chauvin Brothers, and the St. Martin's
and the Fourettes had their own factories. Well,
like Helen said, ice boat. Ice boat.

Thelma: There wasn't refrigeration.

Mickey: Had them to ice their shrimp up. So they would go
out and trawl and stay out there. And they had a
little larger boat that was insulated. (Uh hum.)
Well, they'd go out with some ice. Well, they
weren't crushed ice like they have today. It was
block ice. (Uh huh.) They'd go out there and
they'd pick the shrimp up from these smaller
trawlers, and they'd come in say once a week or
twice a week. When they got a load of shrimp,
they'd come in and unload. Cause they could keep
their shrimp on ice. Well, the smaller boats had to
get rid of their shrimp every day because they had
no way to preserve them. And that's how it worked.
(Yes.) And each company had a different flag.
(Helen: Different flag, yeah.) Had a high mast and
they had a flag. Like the Fourettes had a different
kind of flag, and the Chauvin's had a different type
of flag. And that's how they could tell which ice
boat was for whom. And--

[Knock.]

Thelma: Come in.

Mickey: There he is. He can tell you--

Imelda: Come in.

Mickey: There's an old-- (Babble.) There's another liar,
Betsy. Another liar. (Laughter.)

Emile: [Referred to as Colo.] Where's my girlfriend at?
[Teasing Thelma.] I see her. (General laughter.)

Hi, gal. How you doing?

Thelma: All right. It's been so long since I saw you. I hardly recognize you. (Babble) Emile, this is Miss—

Mickey: Colo, you want a straight back chair or—?

Thelma: Betsy Gordon, Emile Theriot.

Imelda: Still you got problems with your back?

Emile: No, it's twisted my heart. (Laughter.) (Hubbub.)

By luck, I found this stack of slides.

Imelda: Ohh, some slides!

Emile: These are some I got in my office. I got so much of that stuff that's all I could find.

Helen: So you have some slides from the boat blessing?

Emile: The old one, yeah, way back then.

Helen: Really!

Mickey: Didn't you say you had a picture of the first blessing?

Emile: Yeah. That's all here. I've got copies.

Mickey: You better watch 'em, she's gon' grab 'em from you, and— (General laughter.)

Emile: She can grab these if she wants to, borrow them.

Mickey: No, that's--she'd like to look at them.

Emile: Go in the car, and on the back seat, I've got one of them x-ray white lights. (Mumbling.)

Mickey: You see that, Betsy, (garbled.)

Emile: And I thought I had a little one, I looked at home, I can't find it. (General dismay.)

Betsy: While we've got a lull, what is your mailing address?

Emile: It's Star Route, Box 109.

Betsy: E-m-i-l-e?

Mickey: Betsy, you keep on with these Cajuns, you going have more information that you want.

Betsy: That won't bother me a bit. Well, my only problem is going to be—

Emile: I thing I'm ready to do what I want to do.

[Several conversations going on. One underneath is Emile's mention of having collected oral histories all over these bayous, plus pictures.]

Betsy: You probably have a lot of information about some of the early shrimp fleet blessings.

Emile: I got pictures of the first ones that—

Betsy: Oooh!

[Clatter - end of side one.]

The interviewer did not notice when the tape cut off, so some of the discussion was lost. In addition, Eudras Prospere's arrival was not recorded.

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Side two

[Small talk - getting projector set up. Topics include handwork, problems with projector, Imelda’s leaving, Wilma’s entrance, tape stopped turning, cut off, replaced.]

Thelma: How on earth will you get heads or tails out of that tape?
Betsy: I probably won’t.

[More discussion getting projector set up, switching recorder from battery to cord.]

Mickey: Well, I’ll be doggone.
Emile: There you got it.
Mickey: Blessing of the shrimp trawlers fleet--of Boudreaux Canal Store, near Houma.

[More background talk. Others, unidentified, enter. From later talk, Imelda and Myoh are among them. Comments refer to people and places in the slides which covered a lot more that the boat blessing. Ran into additional problem with slides not being in right. Can hear Imelda give interviewer a Lagnaipe booklet with pictures of local people and events. Joking about Myoh’s age, Helen’s departure, mention of mutual friend in Baton Rouge.]

Imelda: Put out in about 1970--75. [Lagnaipe booklet.]
Mickey: Okay, when this thing starts, we gon’ let Emile--
Imelda: Actually, it was ’74, maybe--
Mickey: talk about it, cause he knows--
Betsy: (To Myoh:) Afterwards I’d like to ask you some questions and get an interview about some of the shrimp trawling.
Myoh: (Laughing) I don’t know about the bayou.
Imelda: Aw, honey you can tell her about some of the things you remember. I’ve been telling her all of the stories of yours.
Myoh: (Vocalized sigh of reluctance.)
Betsy: But you can tell me what you do know, wouldn’t you?
Imelda: Tell her what you ate when you went trawling and how it used to be, you know—when you started.
Myoh: When I started, I—about sixteen years old—when I started trawling.
Betsy: So after we watch these you’ll talk to me about it a little bit?
Imelda: Okay—he will. (Interviewer laughs.)
Betsy: And--
Myoh: It’s hard to tell--
Betsy: --I told you about the tape? LSU Archives wants a copy of my tapes for oral history, because so much of this type of information is not recorded anywhere, and Father Brunet also will get a copy. For those of you who came in late, I'd--

Myoh: What I do remember--
Betsy: You're here voluntarily and don't mind my making a copy of--?
Mickey: Please watch your English, Myoh, when you--
Mickey: Just watch your English, try to use the right--'cause she's an English teacher.
Emile: [Garbled reference to slide]
Betsy: Nah! Not English.
Mickey: A speech teacher.
Betsy: Speech, and that's scary to some people. Ugh!
Mickey: Okay, Betsy?
Betsy: Think you got it now?
Mickey: If this ain't right, somebody else gon' run this thing.
?
Betsy: That's out of the question.
Betsy: Well, one thing I'll say, you're persistent.

[Viewed slides, comments are related to whatever was being shown.]

Betsy: Now what is this?
Emile: This's the blessing of the fleet at St. Joseph's church.
Imelda: That's it. They lined up along the bayou.
Mickey: We used to have a barge tied up along the--you see the barge? Yeah, right there.
Betsy: Okay! Yeah!

[Throughout this section, group comment on slides and refer to people they recognize.]

Mickey: We told you, we told you a lie. We told you the boats weren't decorated, but look at the little flags on the back of them.
Imelda: Yeah.
Mickey: We didn't remember that.
Imelda: That was much later though, Mickey--. And that was the ice flag. [Explanation follows.]

[Slides and talk about an old trapper, shrimp, old stores, 1926 storm, old boats, St. Joseph's church, former priests, people in pictures]

Eudras: Old St. Joseph's.
Emile: That's St. Joseph's church.
Mickey: Father Bezula. On the left.
?
That's him.
Thelma: This was his first, um--
? : Yeah.

[Discussion of who is whom in picture of slide of procession leading from church to bayou side for blessing.]

Mickey: Who's that?
Emile: Look at--?
Imelda: That's Father Beauvais.
Mickey: Yeah.
Imelda: That's Father Beauvais, with the-- Who is this?
   No, that's not Father Beauvais right there. That
   might be him in the front.
Eudras: How come there so many priests there?
Mickey: That's him wearing glasses.
Wilma: The one with the beret on?
Mickey: Right. He always wore that.
Eudras: How many priests they got there? Three, huh?
Thelma: Uh hum.
Wilma: That would be a procession?
Imelda: Ya'll recognize the altar boy?
Thelma: Yeah, there was a procession.
Mickey: There was a procession.
Wilma: Oh, I remember ya'll would sing the Litany of the
   Saints. [Sings it in Latin.]
Thelma: [Joins in for one line.] It was so stupid. We'd
   get all messed up.
Wilma: [Continues to sing in background.]

[Comments about a boat they recognize in next slide.]
? : The Ruth?
? : Who owned that?
? : It was one of the largest boats at that time.
Eudras: In them boats there--
Mickey: Betsy, you will notice there is no machinery on
   there.
Eudras: Them boats there used to go offshore, too--

[In simultaneous conversations, Mickey explains how the
work was all done by hand, and Eudras and Myoh compare
comments about the bravery or foolishness of going out into
the Gulf in such tiny boats.]

Mickey: You look at this boat real good, and you look at one
   of today. They got winches and all kind of
   equipment to pick up the trawl, these didn't have
   it.
Eudras: This was all by hand. And they used to go off-
shore.
Mickey: Now you see this--
Betsy: Couple of miles out?
Eudras: Sho, four or five miles out.
Myoh: Four or five hours out. I used to do that. Straight south in the Gulf of Mexico.

Eudras: Oh, yeah.

Myoh: (Laughs.)

Betsy: She [Imelda] knew that about you when she married you? Did she know that when she married you?

Myoh: Uh uh!

Betsy: (Laughs.)

Eudras: I used to hear them old tales from them old people; they used to go ten or twelve fathoms of water, big swells would come, would take it all back. (They laugh.)

Thelma: When they tore this church down, I wanted some souvenir. I would have wanted the organ bench. It was a beautiful bench.

Eudras: That was a pretty church.

Thelma: It had a pipe organ. The people that bought the church--

Eudras: It wasn't big enough. It got to where--population, had too much population for the church.

Thelma: --asked for the knob on that door, and--

Eudras: It could only seat about 350--

Thelma: --all I got--

Eudras: 300 people--

Thelma: All I got, well, I had the knob, and somebody mounted it for me. What they wrote on it.

[Babble]

Thelma: --all I got of it.

[Babble]

Wilma: See, they were decorated.

Mickey: Yeah.

Thelma: I had the bench. I think I had squatter's rights on it.

Eudras: How come those boats there got some flags on 'em.

Mickey: Yeah, I lied to Betsy.

Betsy: But they don't have anything except the flags.

Mickey: I didn't remember them decorating like this, but they did--

Wilma: How many boats tied together? Is four there, huh?

Mickey: Yeah.

Eudras: Had a whole bunch of them. Could just tied--

Mickey: Six abreast as I remember it, in front of the church. Five, six,--

Eudras: See, all the bows to the bank--. You got some little dots coming there, it look like.

[General hubbub, discussion of individual boats and some kind of engine, mention of procession and individuals in it]
Imelda: That might be Ray Gill right there. See, look like he's looking at his camera? Said he came to take pictures.

Emile: Well, in thirty-seven, that was his first assignment with a camera.

Wilma: You know, it was the best of times.

Mickey: I don't know about that. Mama used to complain all the time.

Thelma: What?

Mickey: Wilma said that was the best of times. I remember you complaining all the time.

Thelma: It wasn't always best.

Emile: This is a trawl—

Imelda: At Cocodrie?

Wilma: I like my thoughts about that.

Thelma: You know what?

Eudras: I tell you, we used to live—that's not living we're doing today. Living too fast. In those days you lived your day. Today, you got to live today for next week. You got to hurry up to live it. You know? Living too fast! Today. That's why I--

Mickey: [Referring to slides:] Now things are changing—

Betsy: What year was this, Colo?

Emile: 1940's, I guess.

Myoh: I see the St. Martin—that's their boat.

[Chorus comments on it and other boats in slides, plus fish, fishing, cargo boat, school at Boudreaux Canal, Pellegrin store]

Mickey: Oh, Myoh, tell Betsy about the mosquito bores ya'll used to sleep in.

? : Oh yeah.

Mickey: They used to go out there, and have a mosquito bore, was just a net, (Uh huh.) they'd sleep under. (Uh huh.)

Myoh: That's the only way you could sleep under there. Otherwise you wouldn't sleep.

Eudras: It wasn't good for gnats though. Gnats could eat you up. Ohh, ohh!

Myoh: We sleep, we sleep on the cabin, and uh--

? : That's Cocodrie? [Slide.]

Emile: Yeah.

Myoh: In the morning to take a shower, we just dive in the bayou.

[Discussion of another old store, at Cocodrie, where families used to live, people, boats, no roads.]

Thelma: You couldn't go to Cocodrie from Houma in a car. You had to go by boat, you see? And there was,
that's why it couldn't be built up. Eventually when they had a paved road and they built the bridges and all—

Mickey: Mama! Did you ever ride that boat from Houma to Cocodrie?
Thelma: I don't know. It was something like that.

[General discussion of boat travel.]

Eudras: It's in the 1900's. In the 1900's, you could leave Montegut and go all the way to the island—with a horse and buggy. (?: Oh yeah?) You only had one little—and they had some boards where the horse and buggy could go across. My daddy used to tell me about it. That's how much it changed.

Betsy: Are there more bayous now than there used to be?
Eudras: Oh, there's more bayous. The lakes are eaten up, for instance, right there at Boudreaux Canal, on your right, when you pass over the bridge? All that water they have? (Yeah.) That used to be cattle grazing pasture. And we used to play cowboys and Indians. We used to play cowboys and Indians in the back of them trees. There's hardly any more trees left. And I'm but forty-four.

Emile: That's (garbled), that's (garbled) the canal.
Thelma: The land is sinking.
Eudras: And I remember, we used to play cowboys and Indians in them pastures. And, you look at that today and say that is how it was thirty years ago. It's unbelievable!

Mickey: Betsy, sixty years from now, if nothing's done, this will be like that is down there.

Eudras: When? How long?
Mickey: About sixty years.
Eudras: I don't give it that long. Because--
Mickey: Well, maybe not but--
Eudras: --Cause--
Mickey: --I say sixty.
Eudras: Like, right now, look how soft all of this is. And thirty years ago, that was all grazing pasture.

Imelda: Look, Myoh!
Myoh: Oh, I know? (Primrose? /That road?)
Eudras: So this ain't gon' last sixty years if they don't do something about it.

[Everybody talking at once about school boat.]

Emile: Now if you want to hear some stories about that boat, and those people, I've got-- (Garbled.)

[Talk about school boat, teachery/school destroyed by storm, storm, fire, tornado, Thelma's personal experience in]
cyclone in 1923, other storms in 1927 and 1921, parade in Houma, dried shrimp platform and drying process.]

Mickey: --They don't do this anymore. [Shrimp drying on platforms.] They have gas driers to dry the shrimp.
Eudras: That's why it costs so much to operate today. You
don't let nature would take care of it. Now-- (?: Technology.) --it's push, push, push. (We laugh.)
Everything is done overnight now.


End of Part two.

Part Three not included as unrelated to blessing and shrimping.
Interview with Andrew Blanchard

Date: Wednesday, February 25, 1987
Place: IST plant, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 11:00 a.m.

Preface: This tape will be recorded on Wednesday, February twenty-fifth in Chauvin as part of my research for the blessing of the fleet. This will be a tape of an interview with Andrew Blanchard. He works for International Seafood Traders in Chauvin.

Betsy: Are you from this area originally?
Andrew: Uh hum. Born and raised.
Betsy: Okay. How would you define your position?
Andrew: I’m plant manager here at this facility.
Betsy: And this used to be Chauvin Brothers and is now—what?
Andrew: Years ago it was Chauvin Brothers. Now it’s—it has changed hands three times since the Chauvins, and it’s now presented as International Seafood Traders. Owned by ConAgriculture.
Betsy: Okay. But in terms of local employment and everything, it’s still—
Andrew: It’s still International Seafood Traders.
Betsy: But it’s all local, local hired people.
Andrew: Yeah.
Betsy: In the Chauvin area?
Andrew: Uh hum. All the plant people are local people.
Betsy: How did you learn your job?
Andrew: Start from the bottom—
Betsy: And it’s—
Andrew: --and work myself up.
Betsy: --on-the-job type training.
Andrew: On-the-job training. That’s it.
Betsy: Can you describe briefly for me what you do? Or what the plant does?
Andrew: We process shrimp in five pound cartons, peel it, and pack it as handlers. We also do some IQA.
Betsy: I don’t know what that is.
Andrew: It’s individual quick frozen shrimp. It’s like french fries, it’s—you pour it straight out of the bag. You only pour one or two, whatever you want.
Betsy: Okay.
Andrew: It’s—that’s what individual quick frozen is. And, generally, that’s about what we do, you know. In general we try to work nine months out of the year; whenever the shrimp is running. And just run like the devil while it’s running. That’s it.
Betsy: How has--now I know you haven’t been here that long, but how has that changed? I know it used to be real, not seasonal, but--
Andrew: Years ago--
Betsy: The schedule was real peculiar years ago.
Andrew: Years ago, most of the shrimp had to be cooked because of lack of refrigeration. And it was cooked and either dried or ice-packed. Now on most of the stuff it’s all freezing. Frozen is what [got] more people involved in the season, the industry and all. The scheduling of them all. Much comes natural. It’s just there, buy it. What you have to do is buy it, get out there and hustle the business, that’s it.
Betsy: Are there times when you end up with a lot more shrimp than you were expecting and you have to work overtime or things like that?
Andrew: Yeah.
Betsy: Are there any other--?
Andrew: Shrimping is just like any other--I use a good phrase for it: "It’s just like going blackberry picking, when they there you gotta pick ’em, and when they not there, you take it easy." The shrimp are the same way. When the shrimp running, it’s best you work ’em whether or not you working day and night, cause if you don’t, you might not get your share of ’em.
Betsy: Okay.
Andrew: And that, that’s, I was brought up on that expression, and that’s--I use it still--every year of business is how I use it, and in running this business here.
Betsy: Have very many changes taken place in that type of thing since you started? (Pause) Uh, are you using more refrigeration, is the process much the same as it was--?
Andrew: The processing is pretty much the same as--it involves--I think it had increased a little more.
Betsy: Uh hum.
Andrew: The fourteen years I’ve been here, the volume has increased 300 percent. And over the years, had. And the reason for the volume is, you got more boats, more fishermen fishing. That’s the only reason you got a bigger volume coming in.
Betsy: Yeah. But now, your suppliers, the actual shrimp­ers, who bring you their catch, how is that set up? I mean, do they just--?
Andrew: It’s individual boat owners that own their product. And it’s just--whether or not they want to do busi­ness with you. It’s not a group of people that you do business with like a co-op. They--
Betsy: Yeah.
Andrew: It's just a mutual trust—
Betsy: Yeah.
Andrew: —that you have in one another. They going to bring you the products, and that's it. And you going to be competitive with the next guy.
Betsy: Yeah.
Andrew: And that's it.
Betsy: Can you give me a ball park figure of how many typically will be bringing you their catch?
Andrew: (Sigh.) Fisherman that's local, three--percent of my business is received through the fisherman. The rest of it, I have to rely on outside sources to supply the plant.
Betsy: What do you mean by outside sources?
Andrew: Outside vendors. You know, fishermen selling to other venders, and they closer to the water, and they want to unload quicker and return to the [Gulf] quicker. So they put 'em on trucks and they transport them, you know, in our direction.
Betsy: Has that changed since this was Chauvin Brothers?
Andrew: Yes.
Betsy: Can you tell me, maybe, about why that would have changed?
Andrew: Cause they--at one time we had a lot of boats.
Betsy: Uh hum. Did Chauvin Brothers own the boats?
Andrew: Correct. Right. They owned their own boats. And now more people got out of--more seafood companies don't own their fleet of boats. Independents own their boats. And in order for--the same philosophy goes for the fishermen. While the shrimp are running, just get out there and get, and get all that you can get your hands on. And they'll come in to port, the nearest port where they catching all the shrimp, unload and just return back to the fishing ground. That's what caused the difference. And fuel prices and ice, (Yeah..) that's causing the difference too. With fuel prices like they were, the boats didn't run all over the place. They wanted to be immediately closer to the Gulf, closer to the fishing grounds.
Betsy: Do you think outside ownership has any part in your suppliers? (Pause) Does that alter your power base in terms of the community perception of you?
Andrew: No. Not really, because most seafood processing plants rely on outside sources to survive. They--most seafood plants don't unload enough stuff by their own independent boats that would enable them to operate, or-- They have to rely on outside sources.
Betsy: Those you have that are doing that regularly, is that just--?
Andrew: Local, local.
Betsy: Local people? They check out your prices compared with others, (right) and they just happen to be in this area and it's convenient— (right) and economical to bring 'em—?

Andrew: Most of 'em, the fishermen that we have, they going home. And they pass right in the back—

Betsy: And you have regulars that deal with you again and again?

Andrew: Right. They just, like I say, they going home, and as they going home, they just—these are some of the old timers. They don't hustle for the shrimp just constant. They'll go home for two or three days and then go back out. They just want to make a living. They don't want, they don't try to get filthy rich with the shrimping. (Laughing.)

Betsy: Yeah. Do you— I forgot what I was going to ask. Oh! Have you ever gone out on any of those trawlers?

Andrew: I've been out as a little boy on a trawler. Really, it's not my cup of tea, though.

Betsy: (Laughing) How would you describe that experience?


Betsy: I can imagine. Even with the way they've modernized. (Yeah.) Now with the act—the blessing of the fleet— (Uh hum) —that is an experience that most of the community seems to be involved in. Are you directly involved with that in any way?

Andrew: No. Not directly. We just, you know—people that work in the industry don't, but [we] participate up there or know friends that ride in boats or if the boats deliver here, they'll issue invitations to ride on this boat (Uh hum.) Actually ride on—the participation, none of it, no. (Yeah.) No. No participation at all. Nothing that—

Betsy: You think the company probably was, back when they had their own boats, that they probably—

Andrew: Yes. Though I would imagine that the boat captain—the company owned the boats, but the boat captain, they left it up to the boat captain whether or not he wanted to participate in it. I think most of the companies, they didn't get involved, you know, real deeply.

Betsy: All right, When you said some of the people in the plants participated, was that primarily what they were doing, was going as the guest?

Andrew: Correct, correct. Uh huh. Or if their husbands own, own a fishing boat. Because we have some, some wives that work here that their husbands own fishing boats, and you know, they participate in it in that form.

Betsy: What actually goes on the day of the blessing? Can
you just give me a thumbnail sketch of what’s involved?

Andrew: In the blessing? Most of the boat captains, that morning, start decorating their boats. Putting ornaments, flags, and if they going with a religious theme, or some other type of theme, they just go out there and just dress the boat up. And then the morning—Catholic church, they have a outside mass if the weather permits. They have the outside mass for the fishing industry. And they bless, not to say they bless the boats, but they bless the people—you know, participating in this. Then around eleven o’clock, they parade down the canal, and people generate along the banks of the canal to watch the—just like watching a Mardi Gras parade, just about. Except beads and all are not thrown. And they just gather around and they picnic, and that’s it. They just [watch] the boats passing and have a good old time. Those that’s on the boats, they have a tremendous time. (I laugh.) They just get drunk and polluted and everything else, a lot of ‘em. Just have a real good time, that’s it.

Betsy: Do you have any particularly strong memories about a year when perhaps you have ridden as a guest on a boat, or anything unusual or special has happened?

Andrew: Not—nothing really. Nothing unusual that’s ever happened. I’ve rode on one several times, but nothing really unusual out of the ordinary. Just crawfish boil and just partying, that’s all.

Betsy: Are there any other things you consider important about the blessing?

Andrew: It’s nice to have. It shows the community effort. It’s like a binding of the fishing industry around here, cause it’s—this town is fishing industry. Now that the oil field is gone, it kind of holds the town together. Puts them all in one place for a little while. Competitors and people that don’t all like each other, they all eat together whether they like it or not, party boats passing, you know? I think it’s traditional more, you know, having any significant importance (Garbled). It’s more traditional.

Betsy: I think that’s all my questions.

Andrew: Good.

Betsy: Now I need to ask you--

End of Tape.

Postscript - on tape:

As I was putting things away, in Andrew Blanchard’s office, I mentioned the number of new boats on the bayou and
he said that there were supposed to be sixty-two being built in this parish right now. He also commented that he thought that was quite unusual, but that there were a lot of young people who had been getting residuals and such from oil companies and he thought that they were too young to retire so they were putting it into boats. And that he hoped that there was enough shrimp out there to accommodate all of the boats. He seemed a little uneasy about the building boom and laughed about the number of people whose boats were on sale last year, yet who are now building again.
Interview with George Sevin

Date: Wednesday, February 25, 1987.
Place: His office, below Chauvin
Time: 1:15 p.m.

* Mickey Duplantis present.

Betsy: When I can record things, then I don’t have to take notes. What I am studying, primarily, is the shrimp fleet blessing. But you can’t separate that from knowing something about the fishermen and--

George: Right. It’s got to be involved. In other words, it’s all together. The boat blessing and the shrimping industry. And it’s been on the bayou years and years.

Betsy: So I’ve got a little list of questions. Now if there’s something that you think is important that I’m not asking, you— (All right, all right.)— volunteer it. What is your profession?

George: Seafood industry.

Betsy: And what exactly do you do?

George: Well, I trawl myself in a boat, and my daughter, the one that’s running the business over here, the platform, the shed.

Betsy: Uh hum. Okay. And how long have you been doing that?

George: Oh, all my life, since I’ve been nine years old.

Betsy: Ah! How’d you learn?

George: From my daddy and my older brothers.

Betsy: Took you out when you were that young?

George: Right.

Betsy: What were the boats like when you first started?

George: Oh, the boats are, was small boats, and they don’t have the equipment that the peoples got today. It was all—everything was by hand, even with the platforms. Everything was, uh, uh, no conveyors. It was all—uh, either with a shovel or with a dip net, to dip the nets out the troughs. We used to have some old troughs, I don’t know, on the bayou side, taking the place of the conveyor. (Uh huh.) When the boat would come and just tie up, they would shovel the shrimp in the troughs and then they’d wash ’em. They use the water right from the bayou. And then they take the dip nets and dip ’em back in the tubs. That’s a half a barrel, and then they haul them to the scale to weigh ’em. Then they’d boil ’em. That’s the way it was done many years ago.

Betsy: When you went out then, what kind of things did you...
have on the boat? In terms of food, or way to sleep, or anything like that?

George: Well, it was that—in fact, what I seen last night. [Reference to special on television.] They talk about mosquito boys. Somebody should have saved some. That’s what in those day, for the seafood industry, especially the oystermen, the people that would shrimp for a living and even at the platforms. They had camps and all, but even in the camps, they leave the doors open and windows [had] mosquito boys. That’s, uh,—it was something like a—in other words, a little tent it was. [Mickey in background: it was cloth] It was cloth-like. They just their mattress in there and filling, (Telephone rings.) and they sleep out of that. (He answers telephone.)

Betsy: (Under breath) I’m going to cut this off while—(Tape turned off briefly.) Okay, you were telling me about the conditions in early, early part of the time when you were doing that. Um—How long did you stay out then?

George: Well, I remember we used to have the platforms on the coast, that was, you couldn’t get to it by car. Was just strictly by boats. I remember I got married. Two days after, I left, and I stayed out there for seventeen days. [Mickey laughing in background.]

Betsy: (Laughing) Still married? (All laughing.) I assume your wife was from this area.

George: Yeah, she was from down here on the bayou.

Betsy: So she knew what kind of life style—

George: Oh, yeah.

Betsy: You know, I hadn’t thought about that at all, but, um, shrimpers are gone—

George: It was rough in those days. It was, you know, people go out and sometimes stay for months at a time. The boats were slow coming in, and would almost have to be an emergency, till you run out of everything you had, your food, your salt, to cook the shrimp in, (Uh hum.) diesel and stuff like all that. It was out there in the boats. Some people would stay out there a month at a time and trawl. We’d bring ’em some gas and some diesel, and they’d stay as long as they had some groceries, you know. They’d stay, and when they run out, they’d come in. That’s the way it was.

Betsy: Now were they generally staying within a mile or two of the coast and then coming in like at night?

George: Right. They’d stay out there at the platform. See, the platform was sometimes maybe five or six miles from the coastline in the barrier islands. And sometimes out in the lakes, the larger lakes.
Betsy: I have trouble imagining that. Can you tell me some other changes that have taken place since you started working?

George: (Laughing) Ohh, it would take days and days. Uh, when we first started at the platform, working, we'd--the trawl that was for the May season, the people would trawl for the brown shrimp. I don't know if you familiar with the brown shrimp, but that's like our May season. (Okay.) That's the Brazilian shrimp. And they had a lot of big jumbo white shrimps there. And in those days you didn't have no ice out there. (Uh huh.) So we'd raise hell with the fishermen to get those big shrimps out of there. We didn't want to bother [with] them. We didn't have no way to process 'em, like that. We just--the platform was for small shrimp to make dry shrimp. (Uh hum.) And I remember myself, we'd just take 'em out of there, shrimp that's worth eight hundred dollars a barrel right now, we'd just take 'em out and throw 'em. There's nothing you could do with 'em. Because you'd, if you dry your big shrimps, that were dry enough to make some dry shrimps, your small shrimp at, you didn't have nothing at all left. And that was the majority of your--ninety per cent of your shrimp that we'd boil, (Uh hum.) you know, to make a living. And then, if you'd leave them large shrimp in there, like you'd dry 'em on the platforms, it was strictly wooden platforms, you didn't have any of them dryers or your fancy things like that--(Uh Hum.) You'd dry your shrimp, and after a day and a half, they'd be--The faster would take and beat 'em up, beat the shells and all. And if you leave your big shrimps in there, they wasn't dry, so you had to go behind it and pick all them big shrimp out. And that's why you'd want to pick 'em out of there before you process 'em. (Uh Huh.) Before you'd cook 'em.

Mickey: Tell her about the ice boats.

George: And the ice--at the same time the ice boats for the August season, that was for the other season, you see, the larger shrimp. They'd go out there, let's say, two [ice] boats, uh, would have a fleet of fishermen of maybe thirty smaller boats. Okay. But they didn't have no ice--the smaller boats. They'd go and they'd trawl, and they'd work till ten or eleven o'clock, and then they'd go to like their mother ship. That was their ice ship, he have a load of ice. And they buy the shrimps down at the seashore. And then they'd take 'em, the ice boats take 'em and bring 'em up in the bayou and trade 'em to like Chauvin Brothers, and all like that, St. Martin. In fact, at one time they used to have two
large processing plants in Houma. Factories. And then they’d bring ’em all the way to Houma. And then one of them would stay down the bayou, and then when this one would come with a load of ice, and diesel and stuff like that, then the other one regular load up and come back down--up the bayou, at the factory. And that’s how they, you know, go back and forth with the ice boats. (Uh hum.) And when the weather was bad or something, for a storm, well, the whole fleet would come in. But some of them old people would stay out there. Those that were trawling the small boats, maybe more than a month. Just strictly at the seashore and just trawl every day. (Uh hum.) And then after they ice their shrimp at noon, they go back in the afternoon and get another couple of drags to bring it in, back, and ice ’em up at dark. [Mickey: Tell her about the ticket.] They’d give ’em a white piece of paper that was like a ticket, for the amount of barrels they had, (Uh huh.) or baskets, you know, whatever they—(garbled with him and Mickey both talking) And then when they come in the end the month, they come in and settle with the stores. And sometime they didn’t have no money, they--it was just like, the man had charge a lot of stuff, and he’d break out just like even. He wouldn’t have nothing for his catch.

Betsy: Mickey, you were telling me--you mentioned in the truck about that. Tell me a little bit about how that worked from the store’s point of view.

Mickey: Well, when they leave, when they leave to go trawling, they’d make a bill--

George: At the stores.

Mickey: --they’d make a bill. They’d buy their groceries, and everything they needed to go out, and they’d charge it. They wouldn’t pay cash for it. (Uh hum.) So, when they go out, they’d sell to the iceboat that belonged to the stores, the people that owned these stores, (Uh hum.) and when they’d come in, they’d just go to the office and they’d settle their—they had so much shrimp. They’d get these tickets together, from out in--and they’d go to the store, and the man would say: "The shrimp is worth--" (To George:) what, five dollars a barrel at that time? Maybe--

George: Oh, at that time, Mickey, it wasn’t that much.

Mickey: Maybe three dollars a barrel, two dollars a barrel.

George: No. A dollar and a half.

Mickey: What they were worth. Say they caught thirty barrels of shrimp, well, they had sixty dollars coming to ’em. Well, they might have owed the store fifty-five or sixty dollars, so they didn’t get--
they break even. They might have got five or six dollars—

George: Sometimes they just break out even, break out even.

Mickey: Things were very, very hard in those days.

George: Look, I got an old—. You going be back and forth on the bayou? Cause you are, I can drop it off at Father Brunet’s.

Betsy: Yeah.

George: I’ve got a book, an old receipt book when Mr. Lee had the store.

Betsy: Oh, wow!

George: But, well, a guy I had loan it to, a lot of people has taken my stuff and not, and not return it. This was history. (Um.) Story of this here, the history of it. But Mickey can show you where it is [the old store]—two stories, and he deal with them old people. And every thing is mark in composition, old-time composition book. That’s history right now, that composition book.

Betsy: Let me tell you what I’m going to do, because I don’t want to take your book, ’cause you’re right. That is history. But sometime in a few weeks I’m coming back down, (Okay.) and Father Brunet is going to run something in the bulletin indicating that I’ll be here and would like to see that type of thing. It’s going to be specifically about the blessing, but I’d like to see that at that time.

George: Boy, that book is—

Betsy: And that way I’ll be—

George: You’ve got to see exactly—

Betsy: Yeah.

George: --how they settled ’em. They got all the names of them old fishermen, how much they owe the store and how much they get a barrel. It’s everything, you know, in, in black and white. And sometimes these guys made like a hundred fifty dollars to the share. They’d work that by the share. Yeah. (Uh hum.) And boy, a hundred fifty dollars in those days—Hey! That was, that was lot, a lot of money. A lot of money. But what really sad, me and Mickey talk about this, why in the world some of the educated people that was down here—like, like their kids and all, didn’t write books and stuff about it, and pick up all them—that’s history! That’s—this is—(Mickey: Oh, yeah.) it’s gone, you know? (Yeah.) It’s gone. Mickey told you what we’s trying to do (Yeah.) with them old fishermen? (Yeah.) [Reference to Fete to honor shrimpers over 70 on the bayou.] That’s gon’ be history, too, when we finish with it.

Betsy: Well, I hope ya’ll will keep really good records. That way—

George: Uh, but, so many things down here that—everything
used to be like families. Work together. Modern equipment, things like that change.

Mickey: Things have changed a lot.

George: Just, they just change a lot in the last thirty years. It's unbelievable how fast things, things--they really change.

Betsy: It's just, the more I learn about it [shrimping], the more fascinated I am and the harder it is for me to leave. How, how difficult it is, and people just keep doing it.

George: Well, people had a rough time down here in these bayous. It's, just when they could, like really, enjoy and everything, everything went out of hand with the [Noise of unidentified visitor coming in] modern equipment. I guess it's just like that with the farmer, owns everything like that. [Background talk continues.]

Betsy: You need to stop and talk to him?

George: No.

Betsy: Uh, now, particularly, I'm interest in the, uh, fleet blessing. Have we left anything else out about--I mean, I know there's a lot more about shrimping. Is there anything in particular that you'd like to be sure that we record?

George: Uh, well--

Mickey: You could tell her about what you told me yesterday about the boats dwindling, on account of the war.

Betsy: Oh, yeah.

Mickey: Pick that up on tape.

George: Well, the record I'm telling you, that lady got my record over yonder, uh, if they have a, if they have a miss of that [do not record data], a lot of people don't understand. Like in the forties, the early forties, part of the shrimping industry. like the licensing and all had disappeared, you know. (Uh hum.) That's what happened. A lot of them young mens would, you know, uh, trawl with their daddies and everything. And when the war came, a lot of these boys just had to give up and, you know--

Mickey: They was drafted.

George: Drafted, you know. They didn't have no choice. Even some of the daddies, they had to go. So that's why them boats, in other words, see--Uh, I think in my record that I got since 1913, [that] I picked up with the Wildlife and Fisheries, uh, say about four or five years there that, uh, it was depleted. (Uh hum.) It had gone way down, you know. The marine, the number of license that was issued to the commercial fishermen. And after the second world war when some of them mens came back though, that was lucky enough, that's when it--the license started to go back, go back up, because (Uh hum.)
men started coming back from the service and everybody got into the seafood industry.

Mickey: That’s the same reason why for the blessing, the amount of boats went down--
George: That’s what happen right there. It, it, it dwindled down right away. It went down. But the, the really sad part about this, the— a lot of people was thinking about the seafood industry, about shrimping. That’s not, that wasn’t the most important thing. I talk to some old mens. In other words, the Cajun inheritance down here, it was trapping and oystering. (Uh hum.) That was the two top things on top. (Uh hum.) Because they didn’t started buying license, uh, on my record I got, in 1913. That’s when they started. The trawl license. That’s another record I--if I could pick up--But if you want to pick it up, if you’d have time, you go to the Wildlife and Fishery, and they got the record. They can give you the record. Well. (Okay.) They give you the record and then you could see, in other words, and trace it back till today, and from 1913 when they first started, the difference that have, the thousands and thousands of trawl license.

Mickey: George, for the blessing, the people would go the night before and sleep on their boats, or--?
George: A lot of ’em would go where?
Mickey: At the church?
George: Where the old church was, Mickey. Maybe somebody showed you that book? Somebody’s got that book. You can see where, to compare to the boats of today. You didn’t see one? (Mickey: No.) Somebody’s got some pictures.

Mickey: Well, we saw some slides yesterday. (All talking at once.)
George: You saw some slides yesterday? Well, you can compare it with that. Compare the boats. It would have been--them boats to leave like in the morning, they could have never made it to the church from Cocodrie. That’s how slow them boats was, you know? (Yeah.) Like, from Cocodrie to church to get to the boat blessing at noon, they’d never made it in one day, you know. They had to go up and sleep the night before in front of the church for the next morning, in order to be there for the next morning.

Betsy: Do you remember when they switched from August to the spring for the boat blessing?
George: Uh--Not down here. I don’t remember. In other words, since I can remember, the boat blessing was always in the spring.

Betsy: Okay, let’s see where I am on my sheet. Uh, are you directly involved in any of the preparations that take place before the blessing that have to do with
it?

George: I used to be involved, but not no more.

Betsy: Tell me when you were involved what you did.

George: Well, I, I change—at one time the bayou used to be shallow. In other words, from Boudreaux Canal, going up, and what was happening at one time, them, all the boats could go, and you know, at the church, and get their boats, vessels blessed. But when you went to larger boats, you, we had to change it. Them big boats couldn’t go up there because they’d bust up their propellers. Stuff like that, and then you know, so, we change it. They change it where they were starting it off at Boudreaux Canal, right there at the bridge. But then since they, they redug it— (Uh hum.) In other words, they redug it out back again, the deep draft boats can go back up there again the church. And then they leave and work from up there the church, and they bless the boats coming back down the bayou. And they go in the lake back there, (Uh hum.) in Lake Boudreaux. Maybe Mickey told you about it?

Betsy: I came last year. So, I’ve seen it.

George: Well, that’s the way they work it now. So--

Betsy: When you were actively involved in any preparations, what kind of things did you do prior to the blessing to get ready for it?

George: Well, my job— I worked on the committee— was to get the coast guards. (Uh hum.) Now I think Father Brunet get the coast guards, and he’s got a few, uh, people that help him out with different things. One of them has got to call. They got to get the sheriff’s office and the coast guard and different things (Uh hum.) to put on the boat blessing. You got to get a date, to try to open it up. You try to get a date the Sunday before the, uh, I know we-- right after Easter. (Uh hum.) So if they do have an early spring and you don’t get caught with all your boats up [out of the water] and the shrimp start giving, then you won’t have the boat blessing, because all the boats going to be out, you see. (I laugh.) So you gotta (Yeah.) try to get in between them two weeks right there. (Uh hum.) To prepare for the boat blessing.

Betsy: What-- I know you do things to get your boat ready for the season. Do you think of that at all in terms of getting the boat ready for the blessing?

George: Right. It all fits in in a way at that time, yeah, the boat blessing. And then—right after the boat blessing—that Monday, they start, you know, they start leaving. (Uh huh.) To go out and start shrimping.

Betsy: What do you do then to get the boat ready for the
season?

George: Well, it's repaint them and go over them and anything they got wrong with, try to fix up all that, that gear and everything. And get it ready for the boat blessing.

Mickey: Put 'em on dry dock.

George: Drydock. That's one thing they do. Uh--

Betsy: Ah--Some of the pictures I've seen from the 1930's or 1940's, uh, everybody was dressed up for Sunday. Ah--do you have any memory of differences between how the mass was held then, and the boat parade as compared with now?

George: Oh, it's a great change. It's a big, big, change they got from the boat blessing that you got. I say in the last, uh, fifteen or twenty years from how it was in the fifties and the forties-- (Uh hum) --the difference.

Betsy: What were they like--?

George: I think today they get the boat blessing and everything, but mostly it's like a big party they have. (Uh hum.) It's attempt like Mardi Gras, or something like that. And in those days, when they have made the boat bless--when they have the boat blessing, it was strictly like a traditional way to get their boats blessed to go and start the season, start working. (Uh hum.) 'At's the difference.

Mickey: Well, it was more religious.

George: It was more religion in those days that it is right now. But it change a great deal.

Betsy: Uh, can you describe for me a little bit what it might have been like in some of the earliest ones you might remember? Say, starting with that morning, just what went on?

George: Well, it mostly like, uh, a family affair. They, the man owned each one of these boats had his wife and the family on it, and they'd all be on it for the blessing, and get the boat blessed too. And ride down the bayou. But today it's, uh--I couldn't explain exactly the way it is, but it's a great change. It's not the same thing anymore (Uh hum.) It's not, it's not.

Betsy: Do you think of the mass as being part of that? The mass that's just before the blessing as being part of the event?

George: It's been, it's been. I think the mass, in other words, some of the peoples, some of the old fishermen still have the old tradition where they-- Now it's mostly some of the young. They are--it--they are, uh, see it in a different way than the old fishermen used to see it, you know? (Uh hum.) That's the difference in what I see in it. But the mass, it's the same, you know, it goes by the same
Betsy: I almost got the impression that if you were busy decorating your boat that morning—I tried to figure out how you would get to mass. I mean, is there a-
-
George: Well, a lot of people decorate their boats, uh, ummm, the day before. I say the evening before, the Saturday evening when they start decorating their boat. And then the other decorations they got, in case it got wet, rain during the night, they keep that for the next morning. (Uh hum.) And they put that the next morning, and then they have the ten o’clock mass, and then they come back and put some more, more after the mass to follow, to follow down. But the last few years, the last two or three years, we seen less boats decorated and come down the bayou. Most of the boats are tied up on the side. And then the priest pass, they bless the boats. They on the side the bayous.

Betsy: Why do you think that change took place?
George: Well, uh, some of the boats might say, uh—why go and ride the parade when you can get your boats blessed (Yeah) right at the wharf there. That’s the only thing I can see. And you having a lot of harassment, in other words, with the smaller outboards. (Um. Yeah.) Uh, that bothers some of these big boat, when they go on the bayou, cause the bayou not that wide. And they have--go on these boats sometimes they have invite a lot of his friends, they might have a hundred people on these boats. (Yeah.) And it’s dangerous. I’ve seen a lot of—at Boudreaux Canal one time, one of these boats was almost pushed up on the wharf. One of them big boats with a gang of people on, because of an outboard. Because he didn’t want to face that small boat in the bayou with some people in there. (Yeah.) So it’s--

Betsy: Well, when I was riding last year, it was, I noticed everybody partying, and I was on the boat Rodney, that Rodney Peeltier owns, and Rodney was very grim-faced and--

George: Well, he’s the captain, see. (Yeah. And--) He’s responsible for these people (Yeah.) that on these boats.

Betsy: And, and I thought: “Here we are partying on his boat, and he’s conscious of—lead boat, and the weather was bad.” [Mickey commenting in background.] And they were trying to decide--

George: They hard to handle. The wind--

Betsy: And it was a windy day. [Mickey still commenting.]

George: Well, that’s why some of the old people would stop. They told me that their ownself, you know? (Uh
huh.) They don’t want to go no more on the boat blessing because it’s too much. See, people don’t realize that. But let’s say one of these days, a boat, one of these boats have a lot of people on it. Crazy outboard come right there and ram one on the side of ’em. And some of these kids sometimes, sometime they sit down the side of the boat, and they have their legs out. Whenever you have a bad accident in one of these boats – hey, the captain, sure as hell, he’s gon’ get sued. (Uh hum.) And they can’t take no chances. A lot of these boats don’t have no insurance on. They cost too much, insure some these.

Betsy: When you say no insurance, we’re not just talking about liability, we’re just talking about total?

George: Right. They don’t have no insurance. It’s too high.

Mickey: It’s called P&I. Protection and insurance.

George: Right. Marine insurance. It’s too much. Very few of them’s got it. Only one’s that got it’s the one that owes the money, the ones that owe the notes to the bank and the bank tell them, well, they gotta have insurance till that boat is paid for. (Um.) They the only ones got it. All them that got their boats paid, they ain’t got no insurance.

Betsy: Well, it’s pretty expensive if you’ve got a hundred people on there and bands and all that food anyway, isn’t it?

George: Well, it’s mostly, I say, it’s a get together and everybody party pitch in.

Mickey: Everybody-- (garbled)

George: Everybody will.

Mickey: They got offers. People will ask to ride it, these boats. (George: Oh, yeah.) They say, "I’ll pay, I’ll give you so much to ride the boat, just to have fun." (garbled.)

George: It’s a great thing to have.

Mickey: The owner, the boat owner couldn’t afford to, to--

George: Oh, no. It would cost them--

Mickey: --like goes on, on those boats. Everybody has to contribute. It’s a big expense.

George: Course the family, the family-- (garbled.)

Mickey: And they buy five or six sacks of crawfish, maybe a dollar a pound.

George: And boil ’em.

Betsy: Yeah. (George mumbling in background.) And a lot of beer.

George: Lotta, lotta beer. Lotta beer. (Ohh.) See, at one time, at that boat blessing a long time ago, you didn’t have no beer and stuff like that. That was strictly, in others words, was--just a boat blessing. That’s all it was.
Mickey: That’s what I was telling you. It was very solemn.
George: Oh, that’s what it was.
Mickey: Maybe one or two would maybe (George: one or two.) have a drink of beer.
George: But besides that, it was--
Mickey: But the majority was not. They, uh, they very--it was a religious-- (Yeah.)
George: A few little flags, decorations, but that was it, you know.
Betsy: Why do you think that gradually changed? [Brief interruption when customer came in.] Why do you think the change took place? That people--started doing more of the--drinking and it being more of a parade-like thing?
Mickey: Well, times change.
George: Times change. I think it’s like that all over Louisiana. And you know, it’s just a, it’s just a change in the peoples--
Mickey: When people started watching television, things changed a heck of a lot. Uh, you know, they got (garbled.) (Yeah.) And you know, that’s what happened.
George: I see all, I see all the good times the people have, I see it’s changing back. I don’t know if it’s going to get back like that, but it’s changing back. [To unidentified man: Yeah? What you need? Response: Your phonebook.]
Betsy: What kinda changes are you seeing? (Long pause) Can you think of anything specific or is it just a feeling you have?
George: Uh--the change that I can see, it’s, uh, it’s mostly in the business, like that it’s dog-eat-dog these days, and in those days, it wasn’t like that. Each would try to help out each other. Ain’t how it was in them--brothers would trawl together, where like two or three brothers where they had each a boat, they get out there and tie up at night and cook supper and stuff like that. When they come up the bayou, it was mostly a friendly thing. And you got so many outsiders in here, it’s not a big family no more. You got too much of outsiders (Uh hum.) involved in the seafood industry. Now we used to have --we used to have local people that would buy from the fishermen on the bayou. Now it’s mostly all the shrimp are going to outsiders. We truck a lot of our shrimp to Mississippi, Alabama, Florida. (Uh hum.) At one time you didn’t have that. You--it was local and it was strictly, and you deal with the bayou. You know?
Betsy: Well, was that at a time when you weren’t perhaps also going to sail all the way over to the Texas coast--to sell--?
George: Well, that’s—in those days the boats wasn’t equipped much, just for trawling in a certain area. (Uh, hum.) They didn’t have the fuel tanks to hold lot of fuel, they didn’t have the—In other words, the ice hold wasn’t big enough and didn’t hold a lot of ice. (Uh hum.) They just strictly a day by day boat, except the big boat that fixed up, you know. We call 'em freight boats that was buy the shrimp out there and in the larger lakes. And they come in like mostly every night. (Uh hum.) And then the next morning, when this one was going out, other was coming in with a load back in port. (Uh hum.) That’s how they do it. Uh, but everything change now. You got the good trucks; you got the boats can stay a month at a time out now [catch] the shrimp. And now if the price is better in Texas, you gon’ go and he’s gon’ call in the VHS [radio] and tell his wife to call [where] they got the best price on the shrimp. Sometimes Texas got twenty-five cents a pound on a grade. (Uh hum.) And that man’s got a hundred boxes out there, you know, of shrimp, you looking at a lot of money.

Betsy: Yes, that’s worth the fuel it takes.

George: See who got the best price. He’s got most all his fill, he’s gonna go to Mississippi, or he’s going over there in Alabama where they unloading the shrimp. (Uh hum.) That’s, that’s the difference—

Mickey: Betsy, you asked about the blessing changes. You have a lot of—at that time, people down here were, I’d say ninety-eight, ninety-nine percent Catholic. It was a Catholic tradition, so during the war and after the war, well, you had other people moving in, your oil industry came in (George: Started coming in.) and all these other people. And they bought boats and started trawling. (Uh Hum.) And that’s started change things too. It wasn’t—it’s not a— you had a lot of people that aren’t Catholics that own boats now. And they just—they coming and they joining in the procession, and all, and they having parties [Tape drag. Changed recorders and lost part of lead in to discussion of seeing slides the day before.] (All three laughing.) —and Betsy was getting aggravated.

Betsy: No, I wasn’t. Listen, there was so much information, I wasn’t about to get aggravated. But the person [Mickey] that kept putting them [slides] in upside down was. (General laughter.) But, now, you were talking about what, Mickey, just before that started acting funny?

Mickey: Things change, before the war everything was local. You didn’t have any communications like you have today. The oil industry came in, a lot of people
from northeast Texas, north Louisiana, Mississippi came in here, you know, to get work and the oil industry. (Uh hum.) And eventually they picked up a little money, and they bought a shrimp boat, and they started shrimping. That’s how things gradually change. (George: Change.) I think it would be like that in any community. Before the war, people were more or less localized. And then when industry or--like down here, the oil industry was a booming thing at one time. A lot of people, we had a lot of transients come in here. They bought boats, and they got into the industry. And George can tell you, there’s a lot of people that’s from away that’s in business now. (Uh huh.) And that’s got a lot to do with your blessing being changed too. Your younger people didn’t have the same thoughts or, they wasn’t strict Catholics like their parents were, you know? (Uh hum.) Their parents were very strict Catholics, and the younger generation just changed. I think that had a lot to do with changing the blessing. It’s more or less a fun thing now. A lot of ’em want their boats blessed (Knock on door, another prospective customer. Brief conversation.)

George: (In an undertone:) It’s a big problem, it’s changed plenty. Uh, just for instance, in the last couple of years, we got a lot of boats that’s from Texas. Came on this end. And pretty soon, like Mickey say, when came the war, when the people came, in other words, like after the war they all go—a lot these people came down and some these people came to stay down here with their family. (Mickey: Oh, yeah.) And some of ’em, in other words them strangers, like from Texas and like them, and Houma around there, they got marry with the girls from around here, some of the boys round here got marry with the girls from over—so they—it’s not the old families that you had on the bayou. That’s why you having that change, right now—that—(Uh hum.) --you having with the boat blessing. And everything. It’s a big, big change.

Mickey: Now a lot of people are very sincere about it. They solemn, they want to, they want it more religiously that others want it. But, uh, you have so much--the majority now are out to party. And it’s your younger generation that party.

George: Younger generation, that’s right, the younger generation. Just like them things happen on the farms, on big, one time used-to-be old family farm. Now it all change with all kind of equipment and other people got in it when they had money to be made, and they went different in the way of doing these things. From the rocking chair, it’s just not
working. The old family farmers was better than [now] with the big tractor and everything. And I see from the seafood industry, if something not done in the near future, our seafood industry is going, too. I’ll give it another ten years if something’s not done about it.

Betsy: You also mentioned people coming in from other areas. This group was originally settled by—Acadians. Has there been any other large group that had moved in and live in this area—that are from another part of the country or another part of the world?

George: Well, from what I can see right now, the only thing that you got is the Vietnamese. I mean, a lot of people don’t realize, but that’s a big problem. In other words, all the Vietnamese coming down here and—Our fishing industry was already overloaded with the Cajun and the—they inherit, and the seafood industry. Bring in all them Vietnamese, that ain’t gon’ help. This is people that, um, they want to catch the last shrimp. They don’t want no laws; they don’t want nothing; they just want to go out there and work twenty-four hours a day. And you cannot have that with a fishing industry, no matter what kind of fish, or shrimp, or crab, or anything. They got to have close season for them. (Um hum.) And what I say there, they will not survive. As we seen, in too many parts the country where they overfish, like Norway. [Machine noise on tape.] [Shrimp need] time to repopulate. And I think that’s what we going—with the seafood industry, with the shrimp. I can see it in front of me.

Mickey & George: (Garbled.)

George: Every little bit helps.

[Tape replaced to get rid of mechanical squeal.]

Preface:Stopped while we were making a telephone call and checking the tape.

Betsy: --I figure what’s going on there. I hate equipment. If it can go wrong, it will, and if you’ve got two, they’ll both mess up. Oh, I need to get two things from you. Uh, one, do you mind if I take a picture? (Garbled conversation between George and Mickey.) Do you mind if I take a picture? And the other thing is—

Mickey: You can take a picture of him on the boat out there if you want.

Betsy: That’d be nice. LSU has expressed an interest, because this is an oral history, in my making copies of my tapes for the archives there, and Father
Brunet is interested in collecting [Mickey on phone: Mr. Albert?] all this stuff. [Mickey: Comment sa vais?] and I'm supposed to legally get your signature-- [Conversations continue to overlap, with Mickey speaking Cajun French to Albert Lirette.]--sign this [release form] that you just did this voluntarily (Garbled.)

Mickey: (Off telephone) He sounds hoarse.
George: The old man?
Mickey: (Laughing) Yeah. Lemme call Mr. Leo.
George: He should be at his house.
Betsy: (To one of two men who had come in:) You want to add anything?
Mickey: He won't open his mouth. Daniel wants to sell you some insurance.
George: He an insurance man.
Betsy: Ah!
Daniel: I hope to be back into shrimping soon. (Mickey: Oh?) I hope to be back by mid-season. (To me:) You know Rodney don't have a boat this season?
Betsy: Yeah. They're building. I called Susie and she said: "My husband has gone to boat building." She was beside herself. (Indecipherable talk in background.) She said it was a shock when he left his first profession to go into shrimping in the first place. It sounds to me like he builds every two years.
Daniel: Uh, he wanted a smaller boat than what he had. (Garbled) --a little bit smaller. See, I worked for him last year (garbled) and it's less expensive. he can make more, his share, if he--
Unidentified speaker: Rodney's a hustler.
[Mickey on phone and undercurrent conversation going on simultaneously until end of tape. Some of isolated comments are referring to a calendar with local pictures.]

End of tape.
Interview with Albert Lirette

Date: Wednesday, February 25, 1987
Place: His home, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 2:30 p.m.

*Mickey Duplantis present.

Albert: You didn’t take no picture yesterday?
Betsy: Yes, I did!
Albert: I saw you. I saw you take picture of that boat. [Steel hull in construction across the street from his house.]
Betsy: Everytime I’m trying to find out something about the blessing, I keep finding out—picking up extra information, like, people are telling me things like, these trawlers, these boats, a lot of them make their own boats themselves. And so I was interested in—
Albert: Where you live?
Betsy: Baton Rouge.
Albert: You live in Baton Rouge?
Betsy: I do now. I’m a student at L.S.U. Uh hum. I’m from Alabama. [He points to calendar on wall.] That’s a picture of you!
Albert: Yeah. Go see.
Betsy: Okay.
Mickey: That was in his younger days. (Laughs.)
Albert: Last year.
Mickey: Last year? Well, that was younger days.
Albert: At Lagniappe.
Mickey: That was taken for the fair.
Betsy: (Garbled.)
Mickey: That’s the same one George had. [Reference to calendar George Sevin had shown us.]
Betsy: Okay. That same calendar.
Albert: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.
Mickey: You see this, uh, Betsy?
Betsy: Yeah!
Mickey: Ah, these people are not educated at all—
Albert: Yeah.
Mickey: --and they make a trawl [net] like this that will catch all kind of shrimp.
Albert: Okay. I’m telling you all about.
Betsy: While you’re doing that, do you mind if I get my camera out, and take some pictures while we’re talking?
Albert: Yeah. You can take it.
Betsy: Okay. (Silent pause while getting camera out.) Go
on. Tell me about the nets.

Albert: Okay. I'm going sit down. You tell me when you ready.

Betsy: Okay.

Albert: I'm going to tell you about--

Mickey: Why don't you start on, about, about, ask him how the first ones, blessings took, uh, if he was around when the (Betsy: Okay.) first boat blessing took place?

Albert: Uh, I'll tell you. She had question. I'm gon' answer. You—I can start it—When you want? Listen, when my mother died 1911, (Uh hum.) don't tell that to nobody now, you know what I did?

Betsy: What?

Albert: I had to go to work. (Uh huh.) Nobody had teach in that time. I didn't go one day of school. And uh—when she die, 1911, I had to go work for one of my uncle. (Uh hum.) That's what I learned, how to work those right there. [Nets.] (Uh hum.) That's 1911 to today. That's a good while.

Betsy: Yes, it is.

Albert: And, uh—when my daddy remarried—he took me back, we went to Cocodrie. I'm the first man who made—You know those papailliers? Those butterfly nets? (Yeah.) I'm the first, I'm the man who made the first one.

Betsy: You are?

Albert: Yeah.

Betsy: How did you know how to do it?

Albert: Well, I learn how to sew. And my daddy was fishing. (Uh huh.) And uh, in the summer we used to have the little seine, we used to go seining. Didn't have no trawl yet. And uh—he say: "Well, uh, Albert, you gon' catch my fish and my crab?" Day when I go fish. Say: "Okay." And I knew how to work the webbing, but, fourteen, fifteen years old. And I made kind of a thing like this, (illustrating with twine on the table) like a papaillier. (Uh hum.) Like a little trawl. And I put me some stake like that (adding pencils to illustrate placement), one there and one there and I put that in the current. And the current bring that in my little trawl. I catch all the crab and the shrimp that he wanted. One day, Mr. Rene Dubois come—and say—Chauvin, down there, say: "Albert, what you do with that?" I say: "I catching my bait for my daddy." He say: "Make one like that for us." I say: "I'm not gon' make one like that. I gon' give you that one." And they put that on the boat and have just one. The boat was swing like this. They come back; they ask me for another one. I make one. Another one, 'nother. They still—So they call "the
papaillier." I still, we still can make it, like that. Yeah.

Betsy: And you've also done the trawling yourself?
Albert: Now listen, when I stop trawling, there's an old man used to make some trawl, you see, you put that, the webbing, on a plank like this. (Uh hum.) Now they used to take like this [illustrating with materials on table again]. Want me to show you the form?

Betsy: Huh? Yes.
Albert: I show you.
Betsy: Okay.
Albert: (Long pause while he works.) I'm sorry I don't have none to mend today. Now, you-- (garbled.)
Mickey: That's all right. That's okay. You can show on it. [On the sample rather than an actual net.]
Albert: As you see? 'Scuse my table.
Betsy: Don't worry about it.
Albert: Now, you see they used to make that like this, put that like this. (Showing how to cut a piece off diagonally with a yard stick to measure.) Spread it on a big platform, you see? (Uh hum.) Okay, now, I cut it like this-- (Uh hum.) --this here? Now me, I do better that that. Well, I start, cut it with a knife, like this. (Uh hum.) Okay, this knife won't cut, won't cut nothing. (Silent pause while he worked.) Now, you understand that? (Uh huh.) I cut it--like this: one, one, one, one. You see how it come out?
Mickey: It come out the same way.
Betsy: Uh huh!
Albert: I used to cut that one and two, you see? (Cutting as he talks) --one, two, one, two. That's what I used to cut that--one and two. And it come out like this now. (Uh hum.) Now, later on, they start to make those balloon net. About--fifteen year ago, no, more than that, 'bout twenty years ago. (Uh hum.) And, uh, Steve Renovich went to Russia and, uh, get--he find a net trawler over there, they had that to catch the fish. He bring one over there. And when he come back, he come and see me. Say: "Mr. Lirette," say: "I got a net from Russia." and say: "It a balloon net." He say: "That's a fish net." And he say: "You can make a shrimp net with that." So we make one, me and Steve Renovich. (Uh hum.) Biloxi. (Uh hum.) That's when I start to make the balloon net. I'm the first man make a balloon net in the United State too.
Betsy: Really!
Albert: The one they call the balloon net. (Uh huh.) They didn't have nobody else.
Betsy: So you could just figure out what it was you wanted and--
Albert: No, I--
Betsy: --and could make it yourself or if you'd seen it, seen one you could--?
Albert: (Indecipherable name) say come work with me there, and me and Mr. Ledbetter, we working together. The one [net] we making the balloon net. Then he die. Mr. Harry Lapeyrouse start work with me. The boy I got now—son-in-law. He start work with me. He start work with me, he quit, went to work with his daddy when his daddy got a big boat. You understand? (Uh huh.) And uh--now he quit, and Mr. Harry Lapeyrouse come to work with me. Mr. Harry Lapeyrouse work about—oh, a long time. But he can’t work. He’s sick now. Can’t work no more. (Uh hum.) Now you want to know about something else?

Mickey: Boat blessing.
Betsy: About the boat blessing.
Albert: Boat blessing.
Betsy: Let’s get a picture of you with this net. That’s beautiful. (He clears his throat.) I can’t imagine—My mother—does—little handwork, but I can’t imagine her working on anything that size.

Albert: Now, you--
Mickey: You see this, uh--
Betsy: She tarts and crochets.
Mickey: --Betsy? If, if you could, if we could take that trawl (a forty foot net) and spread it, you’d see how it came out--

Albert: (Indecipherable sentence) --Chauvin. You hold, you take the end of it down there.
Mickey: You hold this [one end of net], Betsy. Just come hold it. He wants you to, he wants to open it up.
Betsy: I know.
Mickey: To show you how it works.
Albert: (Unclear.) See that’s a forty-four foot net.
Mickey: That’s a forty-four foot net.
Albert: Would you like a picture of it?
Betsy: Yeah!
Albert: Like this. (Poses, simulating working on it.) Wait.
Mickey: Sit down right there.
Albert: I’m sorry. I’m sorry I don’t have nothing to sew today. You pick a bad day today.
Betsy: Well, I’m just so pleased to at all.
Albert: Okay, you want to take the picture like this?
Mickey: Yeah. Come on this end and you can get the picture with him. She wants to get you in the picture.
Albert: Okay.
Mickey: Just hold it together like that.
Albert: Like this.
Mickey: Huh? Good.
Betsy: Okay. Let me get to where I can--
Mickey: Just hold it steady, Mr.--
Betsy: Get that--Pull your end up a little (to Mickey) so I can see the floaters. Okay. (Takes picture.)
Albert: Okay. Now you watch.
Betsy: Okay.
Albert: I make the picture; you watch. Don’t get excited!
Betsy: Okay. (Mickey and I laugh, pause while he works.) He just works with these balls--?
Mickey: These balls of twine. That’s it. You see this? This is chain, you have a piece of it. You cork line, it stays, (Yeah.) it floats. When you cut this chain, you cut in lengths. Say sixteen inches? (Uh huh.) And you tie that on the bottom line, to hold the bottom down. (Yeah.) When they hold it the bottom is open.
Betsy: Mr. Lirette, do you ever get confused? (Albert: Er?) While you’re working on one of these, do you ever get confused?
Mickey: He’s been doing that for so long it’s second nature to him. It just comes naturally. He can, he can take a trawl that’s all busted, torn to pieces, and mend it, and it’ll look just like this. [Referring to new net.] They go out there and drag it and (garbled section.)
Albert: You want a picture like this?
Mickey: Take a picture. He likes to have his picture taken.
Betsy: I can’t decide where I want to be. (Mumble) right here.
Mickey: There you go.
Betsy: Let me get one with my other camera, too.
Albert: (Mumbled.)
Mickey: Let me call Eudras and tell him we’ll be a little--
Betsy: Well, I guess if you ever get old, you’ll retire, huh?
Albert: Yeah.
Mickey: (On phone:) Mrs. Prospere, is Eudras there? Could I speak to him, please?
Albert: You got?
Betsy: Uh huh. One more, I’ll get one more of you.
Albert: (Makes Cajun comment and laughs.)
Mickey: You could stay there all day, huh, Mr. Albert?
Albert: (Cajun comment)
Mickey: (On phone:) Eudras? We might be a little while. We’re at Mr. Albert’s right now, so--Okay. All right. Seems like him and Betsy getting along pretty good, so we might be here all evening.
Betsy: Oh, my! (Mickey laughs.)
Mickey: (On Phone:) Okay, well--we’ll see you. Okey doke.
Betsy: All right.
Albert: (Cajun comment.)

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Betsy: I think I've got enough pictures, so, now I've got some other questions for you.
Albert: You got the lines?
Betsy: Okay. Well, what's--what's the earliest boat blessing you remember? 'Cause I guess you were here and working when they started. You remember anything about when they started?
Albert: Boat blessing? The first boat blessing--? (Uh hum.) I get that down a net. I wish I could remember. Listen--the first Lagniappe fair we had was fifteen years, sixteen years ago. It going to be seventeen years this year. (Uh hum.) Lagniappe fair. (Uh hum.) And I believe the boat blessing--started--about--the same time. (Uh hum.) Not much difference. (Uh hum.) It's about eighteen, twenty years, the Lagniappe, the boat blessing (uh hum.) started. And, uh, I remember that 'cause every year they used to make a net for Lagniappe fair. (Uh hum.) Every year. And last year--they told me that I was too old. No use to me to make a net. Sixteen foot net Lagniappe for that--for blessing the boat. (Yeah?) I believe it started eighteen or twenty years ago. (Uh hum.) It started the Lagniappe, the (?, the blessing of boats, and never been to one?
Betsy: I came last year.
Albert: It was nice, huh?
Betsy: Yes! Very nice, very nice. Do you remember any of the ways of things they did in the early days of it? I know they were a lot different from the way things are now. Can you describe some of the first ones you remember seeing?
Albert: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's about the same as it was now-- (Uh hum.) --except, for their having [garbled!], and the people used to go in boats. And after the blessing of boats they used to go ride in the boats. I don't believe they go now. No more. (Uh hum.) After the blessing of boat. Yeah, they go ride. They go ride. (Uh hum.) The same thing. (Uh hum.) They used to take a boat ride, and pass the rest of them there in the boat.
Betsy: When you were trawling, did you ever do that, take part in that?
Albert: Yeah. No, no. When I was trawling, me, I had to come back again on that. I had trapping, you see? (Uh hum.) I had to quit trapping, to send my kids to school. And, uh, after that, uh, my wife told me. She say--I used to trap for Chauvin Brothers, that's before they have the blessing of the boats. That's before Lagniappe. And my wife told me, she'd say "Old man," when I come back from seashore, she say: "you know what you shoulda do?" I say: "What?" "You quit trapping to send the kids to
school." Say, uh, say: "You know what you shoulda do?" I had three boats for me. Say: "You better get rid of those boats and quit trawling, too." I say: "Lord, that's our living there." "You can do it." I was a good oyster shucker then. (Uh huh.) And I listen to her. I sold the three boat, I quit trawl. I stay with her. (Uh huh.) We make a good living. (Uh huh.) And now they start the Lagniappe fair. That I said, the blessing of the boats, after I quit trawl. Understand? (Uh huh.) I was making net.

Betsy: By the time they started?
Albert: By the time they started. (Huh.) Now they come and see me, they want a little sixteen foot trawl. I made it for them. (Uh hum.) I made it for them. In year, like nineteen fifty-one I make me some crew boat. (Uh hum.) She make me sell it again.

Betsy: Oh! (Laughing.) She did? She didn't like it--?
Albert: In fifty-one I make my crew boat; in fifty-eight I sell it.

Betsy: Were you gone too much?
Albert: I was gone too much, that's what they said. She wanted to be with me.

Betsy: Yeah.
Albert: Now, she used to come up to there, where I was making nets. I was making nets, then I got this crew boats. She had to change--She didn't like it. And uh--now I still make those net. She come work with me. But I was making net before the Lagniappe fair, you see? (Uh hum.) And, uh, before the blessing of the boat. That's nice.

Mickey: That's, that's good.
Betsy: Okay.
Albert: You didn't write none.
Betsy: Oh, I'm, I'm still recording. I've got it on tape.
Albert: On tape, oh!
Mickey: Got you all on there.
Betsy: Yeah.
Albert: So, you want went I start making the nets?
Betsy: Yeah!
Albert: What happened--uh, I sold my boat, you see? (Uh hum.) And one day I was along and some about, they start to make boat. They come here to make boat, them big boat pass here. Uh, Biloxi, Mississippi? (Uh hum.) And one bring a big boat here, and Mr. Alcee going buy it. And, uh, he, uh, took the boat over there and I see the boat. I see that little tri-net he had on his boat. I take a pattern of it. (Uh hum.) I come here; I make one. And my wife told me, say: "What you doing?" I say: "I'm making a tri-net pass time." Make some webbing here, and uh, it happened Alcee pass the same day.
He pass. He saw I was doing that. He say: "What you doing?" I say: "I'm making a tri-net." He say: "What kind of tri-net?" I say: "Like your, your fella in Mississippi make." He say: "Uh, let's see that." He say: "That's the same kind I got on my boat." But I didn't tell him I take a pattern on his." (I laugh.) He say: "You want to sell it?" I say: "Yeah, I sell it." And he say: "How much you want for it?" I say: "Take, uh, sixteen dollars." For trawl fish in that started. And uh, he went to Chauvin with that, the people that's own the store and talk to them, and Mr. Gaignier's wife worked there. And, he [Alcee] got there the store, and, uh, he [Chauvin] say: "What you got there?" He say: "What you got there in your arm?" He say: "I got the little tri-net." He say: "Where you get it?" He say: "From Albert." He say: "Uh, it's not the same kind we got on our boat." Cause he had about two boats, him too, with that. And caught on, you see? So he went on his boat, and he spread the tri-net and spread too. Both strung together. They look alike. That afternoon, Mr. Swat called me. He said: "Mr. Albert," say: "You can hang this trawl from Mississippi?" He say: "You can hang it and fix it?" I say: "Oh, yeah! I can do that." He say: "Uh, if you want to fix mine, I got two that want fixing and hanging." And, uh, I say: "Okay." And Chauvin, he say: "Albert, if you want to use my shed, you can use my shed and right there, where they got the webbing? (Uh huh.) The woodhop there? Say: "You can put your shop in there." Wood, and I got all the webbing I need to fix the net. You can make it. That's where I start in the business.

Betsy: Oh! That's--
Mickey: Was that--
Betsy: --great.
Albert: (To Mickey:) You know Mr. [indistinguishable name]?
Mickey: Oh! We lived right next to him. And his wife. Yeah.
Albert: He was old man. Everybody, Eudrus, everybody, come to me and, I made plenty money.
Betsy: Yeah. That's great.
Mickey: Yeah. You did good--
Albert: When I was making the net, me and my wife for fifty dollars. We hear somebody else, they started at hundred dollar. Fifty dollar, I followed the price, me. I went up in my price, made more money. Understand?
Betsy: Yeah! Good business sense.
Mickey: Yeah. (Mickey and I laugh.) Well, we got two more people to see. And, uh, we thank you very much.
Albert: I saw you take some pictures yesterday.
Betsy: Yeah. Uh, uh, looking at the boats. I was going up and down the bayou getting people in different stages of development.

End of tape.
Interview with Leo Lapeyrouse

Date: Wednesday, February 25, 1987
Place: His home, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 3:15 p.m.

Leo: One of the boats that was made, like the boat was made in those days. (Referring to model boat he has made.)
Betsy: Oh, really? Do you mind if I record what we’re saying?
Mickey: No, he don’t mind.
Betsy: I don’t take notes very well. It’s okay?
Mickey: Yeah. He don’t--Come see. [The models.]
Leo: I can (mumbled.)
Mickey: I can get-- (mumbled.)
Betsy: Oh, my heavens! Look at that! [Models]
Mickey: Yeah, she wants to see--Now he’s built these boats.
Betsy: Oh? How beautiful!
Leo: Now you see the boat, that’s how the boat was made.
Mickey: In those, in that time.
Leo: When the first started, when they first started with the blessing of the boats at Boudreaux Canal--I got a picture that I want to show you. The first blessing at Boudreaux Canal--
Betsy: That’s beautiful!
Leo: --that the way the boat was built. And you know right now, that the way, the way people want boats. (Uh hum.) I built one the other day for a fella from [unclear] and that’s what they want, old time boats. (Talk in background.)
Betsy: Could I take a picture of that? Let me get my--
Mickey: You want, you want to put it down where you can get a good--
Leo: You can put it on the table--
Mickey: Yeah. (Unclear comment.) Oh, this is something, ain’t it? Put it on the table there. (Noise as we switched rooms.) We went and talked to her [his mother, Thelma Duplantis] yesterday. (Garbled), she can’t get out any more; she stays in now. (He and Mrs. Lapeyrouse were talking and continued to talk in background during next section.)
Leo: Yeah, that was built in 1930.
Betsy: 1930? Now, is that when you built it?
Leo: Ah, we bought it with my daddy. I kept it with that for twelve years, ten years, and then I bought myself. (Yeah.)
Mrs. L. --and then-- (Garbled.)
Betsy: So pretty!
Mrs. L. [To Mickey] You know, when you get older—
Betsy: [To Leo] You want to stand by it? [Model]
Leo: —like you—?
Mickey: Yeah, oh yeah.
Betsy: [To Mrs. L:] You want to join him so I’ll have a picture of both of you?
Mrs. L. Uh! If you not afraid that, uh—
Mickey: No, it won’t--Sit down there--over there where she can get both of you. Like, uh,--sit down right here, Mrs. Lapeyrouse, (Yeah.) and we can get the boat like, (Asking me) between both of them?
Betsy: See that back part with the--
Mickey: With the rudder and everything in it?
Betsy: Yeah.
Mickey: Yeah.
Mrs. L. Oh, want to show that.
Betsy: Yeah. (Sound of picture being taken.) Oh, thank you.
Leo: Now, okay, you want some information on the boats?
Betsy: Yeah. On the boats and on the—
Leo: Okay. Okay.
Betsy: (Sound of another picture.) I see this one’s shy. Mr. Lirette also wanted me to take pictures forever. (Laughing.) He’s cute as he can be.
Mickey: Now that man can hardly talk any more. Yeah. He has emphysema and he’s--
Mrs. L. Oh, my God.
Mickey: He’s--
Mrs. L.:Sit down there, Mickey.
Mickey: Okay.
Betsy: First, let me get your mailing address.
Leo: That’s route one, box three eighty nine. Chauvin.
Betsy: Three eighty nine?
Leo: Yeah.
Betsy: Okay, tell me about these boats.
Leo: Okay. This boat here was built in 1930.
Betsy: (Pause) Okay. I’m--recording it, so you won’t see me writing very much.
Leo: Yeah. And you see this? In those days, when this, kinda boat was, they didn’t have no pick up like they have today. Everything was done by hand. Okay. This here (pointing), this where we used to put the water. (Uh hum.) Where we put the water-- (To Mickey) You might remember that?
Mickey: Uh hum.
Leo: Okay. This here--this what we call sleeping. Here in the front, see?
Betsy: Yeah.
Leo: Yeah, we used to sleep in the front. At night. (Uh hum.) And there-- in those days they didn’t have no--a push pole, this the (?). You could pole the boat or stop the boat. Okay, this here--we used to
get the shrimp out the trough and put here and we fix a put 'em in the back. See, that would take care, so we would take care the big boat. (Uh hum.) Those days we didn’t have no ice like today, see? We had to sell to, uh, the freight boat out in the lakes. (Uh hum.) And, ah, over here in the back, this is where we used to put the gasoline in. (Uh hum.)

Mickey: They didn’t have any fuel tank.
Leo: No, they didn’t have, because, you see, it was all gasoline motors in those days. You didn’t have no diesel motors. (Uh hum.) And this is where the (?) here. One thing I didn’t put on there—See, they usually put a flag on it, there? (Uh hum.) If you take/stay ten, fifteen men on, that’s a good day. That means you made a good trip. (Mickey: Hum.) (Long pause.) But--

Mrs. L. It’s sorta different now.
Leo: (Pause.) That’s exactly how the boat was built in those days. And they were (?)
Mrs. L: They (?) (Both laugh.)
Leo: Yeah. (Cajun comment) (We all laugh.)
Mickey: Boy, yeah, it’s—they got every detail on there.
Mrs. L. (?)
Mickey: It’s built to perfection.
Betsy: That’s really beautiful. So you really, uh, have worked as a shrimp trawler. How long did you do that?
Leo: Thirty-eight years.
Betsy: Are you still working?
Leo: No, I — retired. I spent thirty-eight years in the boat blessing. And in ’62, I had to sell out because my eyes and my legs were about to give out, getting bad to go in there, the shrimp boat, offshores. (Uh huh.) And then I went in the tugboat business. (Uh hum.) And in ’76, I retired completely. I didn’t want to, but her and the children said: "Well, you done enough. You stop. You retire." I was — when I retired in ’76, I was fifty years going on boats. I was playing with boats. (Um.)

Mrs. L.: But he loved barges.
Betsy: Yeah. Those models are beautiful. Um, so, having worked with it that long, then you ought to be pretty familiar with the fleet blessing.
Leo: Oh, yeah!
Betsy: Can you tell me if, um, what you remember about the first one?
Leo: Uh, this is—
Betsy: Or the first one you went to?
Leo: (Cleared throat.) See how them boat was built? (Uh hum.) See this boat here, you can hardly see it?
(Mickey: Uh hum.) See all way round this boat over here; see how they, they built? (Uh hum.) And this is how they--The first one, the one that my had--the blessing of the boat was at Boudreaux Canal. (Uh hum.) But I don't remember exactly what year was that. (Uh hum.) It was in the 1930's, you see, because this boat was built in 1930. And I know, you cannot see it in here, but he [the boat] was in there. But cannot see it. And then, after that, they would--The blessing of the boats--They change it a little bit on it. It was by the platform, the lateral platform you know where the factory is? (Uh hum.) You see they are--The priest was on the platform and they bless the boats. All the boats was tied up. (Uh hum.) And then a few years after that they had change it. All the boats was gonna go to the church. (Uh hum.) See, all the boats went by along, by the bayou below the, above the church. (Uh hum.) And the priest would bless them as they pass by. And there lately, they change that again, and they, uh, (cleared throat) the priest go on one boat and--they used to--before, they used to the blessing at Boudreaux Canal. I don't know why, and the boat pass by. And the last few years, why they go in one boat, and they bless the boats as they pass on the bayou. And that the way it is today, see?

Betsy: Uh hum. Do you know why they made any of those changes?

Mrs. L.: Well--

Leo: It's just like anything else. You see everything you wanta improve something and, uh,-- (Uh hum.) something new, see? (Uh hum.) But--see, in those days they didn't have no big boats at all. See, there was only small boats like--See this here? What like--they had very few bigger than that, (Uh huh.) because this one was forty by 'bout twenty five by twelve, I think. (Yeah.) But very few boats was bigger than that, you see?

Betsy: (Long pause=) When you were trawling and participating in the parade, um--. Earlier, they just had a flag here or there, but later on you started decorating. What kind of preparations did you make for the blessing?

Leo: Well, we just had a few flags on the ship. It's not like it is today. Today, they got all kind of decoration on the boat. But we didn't have that. We just have the boat well-painted, and that was it. (Uh huh.) It might have a couple of flags on it but we didn't have all that decorations on it-- (Yeah.) But this year (referring to picture), let me explain you this--about them flags over here. (Okay.) Now
you see over here? You see them different flags? (Uh hum.) How they got American flag, and this one here got--this a different flag? (Uh huh, uh uhu.) Okay. The reason why they have that is that the freight boat, see, they work for the freight boat. See, like this one here? Over here. Say that you would sell to a freight boat. See that boat may be half a mile off, but you can recognize that boat by --with a flag, different flag. That boat is where you sell the shrimp to. That way they know the different boats. (Ohh! Okay.) See, all the different companies, you see, like, well, uh, Chauvin Brother's had a bunch of boats, see? You see that bunch of boats come in with their, and Indian Ridge with that same thing. And folks all over. But all had different flags on it and different makes, you see? Design on it. So it shows you--if you want to sell to that boat, you know exactly which one to go. (Uh hum.) They didn't have no refrigeration and there weren't nothing go in, see? The only way you can distinguish the boat is with that, the flag.

Betsy: Yeah. When you sold your boat, you did not, you were not into all the big decorating? At that time?
Leo: No, they were not decorate. Sometime, see, like I said, like this (referring to picture) and they got American flags on it (Yeah.) and (Yeah.) very-- That's about the only thing they had. They didn't have the boat decorations like we have today. Today is to see which one has the most decorations on it.

Betsy: Do you know when they started doing that? Either of you remember that?
Leo: It was in the 19-- I'd say in the 1920, 20, twenty-something, 28. Or round there? What J.D.-- ? I think he's got some pictures of it.

Betsy: Yeah. I talked to him. Uh, when did they start with the fancy decorations?
Leo: Well, they started after the big boats, you see. After the big boats started. The big boats, see, started to decorate.

Betsy: And about when did they start being built?
Leo: I'd say that been about '45 or some-- '46 or something like that, you see. And seems that, see, every year they put a little more decoration on the boat. (Uh huh.) The boats needed more variety, not to buy something to put on there. There-- [in picture] --it wasn't more (?) then here. They didn't have money.

Betsy: Do you remember when they switched from August to the spring--for having the boat blessing?
Leo: (Pause.) When they--?
Betsy: When they stopped having it in August and started
Leo: Well, uh, the reason for that—see, the shrimp season opens in May. (Uh hum.) And they would have to have that blessing in April or March, just before the shrimp season opens in May. So they can get all the boats in, see?
Betsy: Yeah. Do you know when they made that switch?
Leo: No, I don’t. I don’t.
Betsy: Can’t find anybody that does. (He laughs.) Eventually I’ll track that down. But, um—do you have any particular memories about years when you participated in it? Any that were very memorable?
Leo: Well, I—when most of all, I was in the boat blessing, like I said, in that boat there, because like I said, in the parade. That was in the 1930’s. (Uh huh.) And most every year, uh, when I had the big shrimp boats, you see, I used either get the priests or the coast guard or somebody else. (Uh hum.) That was my job. But they were not decorated like it is today.
Betsy: And you—have you ever—?
Leo: Most of the time, my boat was in the parade. Ones that was in—they had to have boats working, not for some company like that there. [Referring to freight boats in picture.]
Betsy: Have you ever been part of the committee that planned for the preparation?
Leo: No, Ma’am. Never did.
Betsy: Is attending mass the—special mass that morning for the fishermen a special part of the thing for you?
Leo: Yeah. Yeah, right. See, they got a special mass. But the mass used to—used to be—at St. Joseph’s and then they go up the bayou, see? (Uh hum.) And instead of that they run—nowaday, they run the mass Boudreaux Canal? (Uh hum.) They start that there.
Betsy: You know why they—started doing it there?
Leo: Well—just to have more people, I guess, over there at Boudreaux Canal. So a lot of people that don’t come over here—rather go there, prefer it. Open mass over there.
Betsy: Okay. Uh, are there any other things that you, consider particularly important about shrimping or the boats?
Leo: The only thing I can tell you about shrimping—that boat there, the last trip that I take in that boat, out in the Gulf, I was too scared to let it go. I got scared. Some people from Bayou [La] Fourche scared the hell out of me that day. But I was with that little boat. (Uh hum.) And, uh, he told me: "Cher, I don’t like to see you over here." I don’t like him over here either. And he [garbled
word] down me in the boat and he had the trouble he had the week before. We left. Offshore at three o'clock in the morning; and never stop. We tied the boat up ten o'clock at night. So we hop offshore, we wrestle that big old boat. (Uh hum.) But--exactly see how crazy I was. Because I wouldn't do that no more.

Betsy: You wouldn't work by yourself that far off?
Leo: Not that, not in that kind of boat. That mean we went about thirty-five miles out in the Gulf. (Unn.) Thirty-five, forty miles out in the Gulf.

[Garbled Section where tape was dragging.]
Interview with Eudras Prospere

Date: Wednesday, February 25, 1987
Place: Prospere home, Chauvin, Louisiana
Time: 4 p.m.

*Mickey Duplantis present. Joan Prospere, Eudras’ wife, also present part of time.

Betsy: — ask you some questions. (Background talk as Joan entered.) Hello, how are you? I am Betsy Gordon. (Joan: Joan.) Pleased to meet you. I just came over to get some more information from your husband.

Eudras: That’s my wife, Joan.
Betsy: We just introduced ourselves.

Eudras: She’s the one has to put up with me all them years. (General laughter and talk.)

Betsy: Well, what I wanted to talk to you about today was the committee, and what they do—basically how far are you—advanced are you? Have you started, are you on it? And some of the types of committees you have, what they’re involved in, and—

Eudras: Okay.
Betsy: Just, uh, a general outline, maybe, of a time schedule from the point at which they start working through the completion of the blessing itself. Just give me—

Eudras: Okay. Start off at the beginning. When, uh, in the seventies we started getting involved in it. But in ’74, that’s when I really took over—about ’74. Uh, ’74, ’75, ’74, that’s when I got started with it. The prizes and all. That’s when boats really started decorating. ’76. That was a pretty good year. As far as the committee, um, as far as myself, as the chairman, I get the prizes, um, get in touch with Wildlife and Fisheries—part, organize that section of it. And we have, uh, some people that organize bands to play music for the dance Sunday. That’s when the winners are presented the gifts and all that. Then we have a committee that decorates the altar. For, uh, a 5:30 mass Saturday night. And we have, uh, (Joan prompting him in background.) people that sell tickets to the dance, and we have a Lucky Boat contest. The one that wins usually gives half to the church. (Joan prompting.) Hum? Oh, we have a outdoor mass Sunday at ten, Sunday morning. Then from there we go eat at Mr. Duplantis’s house. Then after that we got to the
boat and the parade starts. Lasts till about four o'clock, I guess. Depends on how many boats they have. This year (telephone rings) it didn't last as long because they didn't have as many boats. The economy's down and people's just not making the money they usually make. They can't really afford to spend that much money now, I guess. Father Brunet gets in touch with the coast guard. That's about the whole rundown of the committees.

Betsy: Okay. How many people, about how many committees are there--do you have?
Eudras: About eight or ten of 'em.
Betsy: Do they tend to be the same people year after year?
Eudras: Yeah. Same people.
Betsy: How long had you been working with it before you got drafted to be the chairman?
Eudras: Oh, uh, a couple of years. Then Father Brunet wanted to--the boat blessing to grow. How you make something grow? You got to give something to, you know, some--thing to bite on, and (Uh huh.) we started with the prizes and trophies and all that--and then started with the trophies and the prizes. Well, some them prizes at one time came out to well over a thousand dollars. Started to get into bucks so everybody wanted to win first place. (Yeah, um, that makes--) One year they had a VHF. That makes about six, seven hundred dollars, just that radio. Then you had, I believe was about 500 gallons of fuel. That was 500 dollars right there, just the fuel. (Yeah.) And it was--on down, you know. Let's see, we had--eight categories in the double rig and four in the single rig. Now we split 'em to have two first places. That's first place double rig and first place single rig. On down. But, uh, it gives them something to work for. (Yeah.) Probably it's getting out of hand now. Gets to where--well, it's kinda dropped back now because people got to have the money to spend to decorate. But I believe it got to the point to where they trying to win. (Uh hum.) I believe they kinda forgot what the boat blessing really was for. To bless the boats, start the new year. I believe it got a little bit out of hand.

Mickey: Too commercial.
Eudras: Yeah. Anytime you got dollars involved, look like it brings the worst in people-- (Laughing.)
Betsy: That's could be; that could be.
Eudras: So--I don't know what we're going to do. We might start cutting back on it, I don't know. (What--?) It might just cut back itself.
Betsy: What-- were there any committees before Father Brunet wanted it to grow?
Eudras: Oh, well, we had a—
Betsy: Specific new things did ya’ll have? You know you mentioned the prizes were added.
Eudras: Oh, just that was added. The only thing they have before--. They didn’t have prizes. They didn’t have that. It was just the boat blessing. And they had a dance.
Betsy: But they still had a boat parade and the party.
Eudras: Yeah. It was still on. Then, and they took a name out of a hat, whoever got the number, that’s who won. So--then--I don’t remember how it started with the, uh,--they had some trouble one time. I don’t remember exactly what that was about. But, uh, that’s why we got judges now. (Joan commenting to him) Somebody won; they wasn’t [from] here. Grand Caillou had some trouble. The priest ended up in the bayou, I believe. (I laugh.) So--that’s why for our boat blessing--now people from outside can ride, but not eligible to win a prize. Once you start doing that, you invite the whole state. And once you start involving money and prizes thats worth money, it’s when people will try to get it and--
Mickey: Creates friction.
Eudras: Yeah, makes friction. So the best thing to do, we just kept it to our people. You want to--you had a boat you want to get blessed, you want to parade, go to the dance, you welcome to it.
Betsy: Where does the money for the prizes come from?
Eudras: From, uh, well, from different business people. (Mickey makes comment too low to hear.) No. Uh uh. It’s all donations from people in business. Chauvin Brothers. (Joan chimes in.) We--give some, various business places.
Betsy: Okay. Father Brunet had mentioned that there was a charge for the dance, and that that was money that went to St. Joseph’s and-- (Eudras: All right, that--) --and to Lucky Boat.
Eudras: Well, what we pick up at the dance at the door, that goes to pay the band. Lucky Boat is separate. That’s, that’s a thing of its own. Whatever--when the ticket is drawn on that, it’s a separate ticket. And whenever that ticket is drawn, whoever wins it--it’s a one shot. So whoever wins it, then, donates half to the church. And they take the other half. Last year it was eight hundred dollars or something other? (Question addressed to Joan whose response was too low to hear.) It was more than that. It was six hundred dollars. Mr. Carroll won it, I think, the last year. It was something like twelve hundred dollars. He gave six hundred dollars to the church. I believe that’s how it was. Half of the
Bayou will take a ticket. But that—at one time, if you didn’t have no boat, you couldn’t take no—no ticket, couldn’t have a chance. And got to where, well, anybody could take a ticket, really. There wasn’t nothing special about it, just a ticket. Just a money deal to try to help pay for the band when they didn’t have enough money to pay for ’em. That’s all it was, so. We just voted, uh, anybody could buy a ticket.

Betsy: What’s special about those two masses, the one on Saturday night and on Sunday morning, compared with the masses the rest of the time?

Eudras: It’s mostly fishermen. It’s not that everybody on the bayou in the houses are fishermen. It’s more dedicated to the fisherman. Uh, but they have other people there, depending on—but the Saturday, now, the reason why we make that there—Sunday you don’t have time to go to church. See, you start putting your flags out on Saturday. (Uh hum.) All, all your flags set on Saturday. Times it rains and is windy, it doesn’t bother it. Sunday morning, then, you got to start drying them steel hulls. You like dry that with a rag by hand. So you can get that stuff to stick on. Then you got to start putting all your stuff. By that time, mass is over with. So it give the fishermen a chance to make the Saturday mass, to account for Sunday. Sunday they don’t have time to go to church. Take care of that boat, get all of their little decorations that you glue on there. And it’s—on a steel hull you can’t take no nail. (Uh hum.) And you take some tape and you just stick on boat side. And if it’s wet, it won’t stick. And you gotta dry it off.

Betsy: How long, how long does it take when you’re planning to decorate your boat, to plan your decorations and get ’em—made? What kinda procedure is that?

Eudras: Ohhh. (To Joan:) You want to tell her about that? (Laughing.) That’s, that’s your department.

Joan: Well, the year that we decorated, it took us four months. And it was a family gathering. Everybody helped. And just, just, putting all your heads together, coming up with a plan, you know, what you going decorate theme—

Eudras: You gotta have a theme.

Joan: And just get at it.

Betsy: Uh, who picked the theme?

Eudras: Just get our heads together and the one that come up with the best one, that the one we pick.

Betsy: Since there is some competition for that, do you keep it a secret from—?

Eudras: You keep it a secret from—because you don’t want nobody to copy what you got. Or—or they take a
theme and add on to what you got and so their— I guess most of ’em don’t reveal what they’re going to do. (Uh hum.) So that’s competition. So I said when you’re going for that big buck, (laughing) you don’t want nobody to know what you going do, so—. But it’s, it’s fun. It’s a family deal. And you have your own boat. Your have your family, friends, uncles and brothers and sisters, everybody pitch in. What takes time, you got to look to find whatever you need. Now you go to different catalogs and books and whatever, whatever you find that will match with that theme. And nine times out of ten, it’s gonna be a little bitty picture. Then you got to blow it up. Then you got to start from there. And then you got to make a bunch of those. It’s a lot of work.

Betsy: What kind of material do you use to make these decorations?

Joan: Poster paper.

Eudras: A lot of it’s poster paper. I wouldn’t advise crepe paper.

Betsy: I guess not with the—

Eudras: When it gets wet— one year we were purple and—uh, pink, our boat look like a zebra. And that stuff got wet and it just— it just streaked. (Mickey laughing.)

Betsy: And it stained?

Eudras: Hey! And that stuff don’t come off. Once it dries, you can’t wash.

Betsy: And you had just painted the boat, right?

Eudras: Yeah. I just painted the boat, (laughing) and that thing look like a zebra. (Ohh, yeah, that was—) where ever that stuff drips at—

Betsy: So wherever you want color, do you just paint it or—? What do you do to—?

Eudras: Uh, we used to color or paint.

Joan: We used, uh—

Eudras: Marks-a-lot? (She nods.) Marks-a-lot. That’s what we was using.

Joan: What’s that paint that glows?

Eudras: That florescent paint? (Yeah.) We use florescent paint. (You can buy your posters like that—) You can buy your posters, but they’re expensive. I tell you what, if you want to decorate to win, it costs— it’ll cost you big bucks. Back in ’70—

Betsy: Can you give me an example of what kinda cost—?

Eudras: (Sigh.) If you gotta start from scratch—

Betsy: And that includes your flags?

Eudras: You gotta buy your flags and you buy all you stuff, get ready costs a thousand dollars or better.

Betsy: How much of that is the flags?

Eudras: Let’s see. (Asking Joan.) The first year we bought
four hundred and something dollars worth of flags?
Had thirty two hundred feet of flags. Of our flags.

Betsy: Did you use those year after year? (Eudras: Yeah.)
They last pretty well year after year?

Eudras: Oh yeah, they last pretty well. Once you use those
flags—it's the stuff to start off the cost a lot, and,
see, you got a brand new boat. Say: "Well, this
year I wanna win. Gotta go all out." It’ll
cost you some money! It—you gotta compete. I'm
gon' show you my boat. Uh, the pictures in den?
(Asking Joan.) Give you an idea of what you're
looking at, and uh, depends what kind of material
you use. Some material, you can buy it on sale.
You can buy it pretty cheap. Some of that stuff,
you gotta buy is kinda expensive. Florescent paint
is expensive. You have a small boat it's not too
expensive. But when you have one of them big boats,
you have a lot of stuff that goes—I tell you what,
we thought that we had a lot of stuff the first
year. We started putting that on. Boy, that big
old box was full. We started putting that on there.
No time at all we say: "Cor! Law, it don't even
show." So you got a lot of stuff goes on there.

Joan: And what you put on one side the boat, you got--

Eudras: You got to match the other side.

Joan: --the other side.

Eudras: And what you put up on this side, you put on the
other side. What ever pictures you got to, you got
on this side—cause see, the judges going around,
and if you just decorate one side, it ain't gone do.
(Umm.) So whatever you do one side, you gotta match
it.

Betsy: [Garbled] look at the prize. Are you able to save
the flags, sides, reuse things—?

Eudras: Yeah. Uh, take like your seafood, your shrimp, your
crab, or whatever, more or less you can use it with
anything. Anything, you know? Now, uh—in '76, the
Bicentennial year, that cost me a lot of money. I
had to go with strictly Bicentennial, no seafood or
nothing that year, so I kinda got out of the fishing
industry cause it was the Bicentennial year. Chew!
Cost some money that year! 'Cause I had to buy all
new flags. You can't put your, your regular
streamers on, to go red, white, and blue, and uh, I
bet it cost close to fifteen hundred dollars that
year. Cost me a lot of money for sure.

Betsy: What about the, um--the other preparations for the
food and the guests you're going to have on board?

Eudras: Okay. Um, the one that has the boat puts out--most
of the food out, you know? Get some of the family
pitch in. It got so expensive, to where, what they
do--the one that’s got the boat buys everything, the
crawfish and everything, and what the cost is, whatever, peoples on the boat, they share it in between them. Everybody on the boat goes in. It makes it lighter. It’s very expensive. One year it was sixty half of chickens? (Checking with Joan whose answer was too low to hear.) It was beaucoup—see, in ’77, had a hundred fifty-something people on board my boat. You got to feed all them people, you—a lot of food, you know? (Yeah.) You want to go out there and just bring you and your family, or friends, it’s not that expensive, but if you’re going to party—you going to party, you going out there to have fun! (Telephone rings, Joan goes to answer it.)

Betsy: What about—liability? George, what’s his last name—? (Mickey: Sevin) was telling us about accidents happening on that day, and you’ve got all those people on there, and you got—

Eudras: Well—

Betsy: No insurance or—

Eudras: Well, the one that’s got the boat, most times, responsible for it. The only way you wouldn’t be responsible, you’d have to get a lawyer draw up some kind of agreement. And everybody would have to sign it before they get on to where it would relieve all responsibility. (Yeah.) But, nobody does it. So—Well, I’m not responsible for what happens. Come if you want. Drinking. All drunked up. Come of ’em fall. I never, I never heard of anybody suing anybody. (Yeah.) We never had anybody got hurt serious that I know. Nobody drown, which— (Mickey: couple, nobody--) Nothing serious. Um, one boat run over one boat, but that was at Robison’s they were up there making a crazy [muffled].

Betsy: When you were still doing that, did you find the, the main problem or nuisance was the speedboats that were—?

Eudras: Oh, definitely. You mean for the decorations?

Betsy: Well, for the decorations and for—in terms of there being a hazard. (Mickey: garbled comment.)

Eudras: See, at one time, the coast guard and everybody out there, got two or three boats like that. What they do, when the parade’s going on, they want to see—and they make waves. Like, the first year I decorated, they wash half of my boat off. The wave would just, get on the side the boat and just wash off. When that wave hit that—all it is is just glued—it’s uh, some stick-um tape, and it’s not something that’s real strong. It’s a hazard, because—you take some of them smaller boats that decorated, them single rigs? (Uh huh.) Then big outboards get out there about half speed, boy, they
bring them swelling, and them boats just rocking away. And they was was dangerous, so—we had to put a stop to it. So, now, if you go into the lake, you can't come back. If you come back, you gotta be very careful. But, they don't want 'em to come back. But, uh, I believe last year some of 'em got tickets?

Betsy: I saw some of 'em. They should have been ticketed.

Eudras: Uh, I, I seen some of 'em that should have had that thing in the marsh over there. I mean, they just go crazy. But, it's a day of fun. But's a day of safety too.

Mickey: You have to have rules and regulations.

Betsy: What else is involved in the preparation? Or is there anything else involved in the preparations—that I haven't asked about? (Long pause.) Believe we've covered it then. We'll stop. Go get your picture.

Eudras: I believe that's about it. Unless you want to ask, to interview Joan about our, uh, what a fisherman's wife feels. (He laughs.) She could maybe give you some ideas.

Betsy: I would love to hear that, Joan. Would you talk to me? (Laughing.) Besides strangling him, what—how do you feel about the boat blessing with it being involved—having at one time been more involved? (Men commenting in background.) What do you do in the?—

Joan: I'm the one that get—call everybody and ask them to, to give some, (Uh hum.) and uh—

Betsy: Are they pretty cooperative about that?

Joan: Quite a few are.

Betsy: Are they mostly seafood industry businesses?

Joan: It's just businesses from the bayou. The bayou. Or it's people that used to be from the bayou but moved. Then we ask them. And we don't pressure anybody—into giving. Want them to give what they can afford. And we find, each prize, you know, how much it costs, and the price range, and set 'em up by first, second, and whatever. But, uh, like Eudras was saying, what people—they've been strayed away from what the real purpose is of the boat blessing. They don't bring it back, you know, and focus on Jesus, because—it's him that we have to ask him for a good season. And, for anything. And they just going for teen watts. (Yeah.)

Betsy: What—what kind of feelings do you have about the blessing itself, of being aware that—well, particularly when he was trawling? Is that a particular comfort to you, or—?

Joan: Well, just one more thing to look forward to. You know, we enjoy the [too soft to hear]. (Yeah.) You
know, it makes, the family is familiar with you, they get together and things, and you, there's a differ­rent closeness.

Betsy: During that whole time when you are working on the decorations? (Uh hum.) What about when he was gone for—well, what was the longest he was ever gone?

Joan: Three weeks.

Betsy: (Laughing, Eudras joins in.) I wish I could record the look on your face. Is that why he's here making nets now? (Eudras: Uhh--) I don't think she was real pleased with his being gone three weeks. (All laughing.)

Eudras: One time I left out, about fourteen or fifteen days. So I just came to the shop, got me some clothes, I took me some, got me some clothes, I left back out another fourteen, fifteen days. (Mickey: Oh, my goodness.) (Eudras laughing.)

Joan: And he thought he could back, he could pull the same stunt.

Eudras: And I thought I could—

Joan: Said I'm going to see you, but I'm ironing no clothes. (Betsy laughing.)

Eudras: See, what's bad with the fishing industry, there's a certain amount of time you can really make money at. The rest of time you just surviving. And, and the time you need to make the money, you need to be out there. If it's ten days, fifteen days, or thirty days—if it's thirty days, you got to be out there just about thirty days. Specially after storms. Winter time, you lose a lot of time with bad weather. So you got to do whatever you got to do when they going. But, um, I spent a lot of time. My kids was growing up, I didn't spend that much time. Cause I was always working. Now, my grandkids—I'm super to them! (Both laugh) It's a different feeling. It's something that I didn't have when I was raising my kids, cause I wasn't with them all that much. Now I see it, I can—I see them growing up. I got 'em good; I got 'em spoiled. I didn't spoil my kids. I didn't have time to spoil 'em. And my grandkids spoil. I got them spoiled.

Joan: You know, a job, you on the job for so many days and you come back home so many days off, so you got that time to spend with your children. And the way it was with him, if he stay three days up the bayou, not home, just up the bayou, that was plenty.

Eudras: Has to repair whatever was broken. Get ready to go back out. Sometime I stay a whole week, had a bunch of nets I had to repair, sometines--

Mickey: You, you wasn't home. You were doing something--

Eudras: I was always-- (both talking at once) The only time I spent at home really, is if it was raining or at
night. The kids was in school. By eight o’clock they were in bed, so—

Joan: Usually he came in in time to tuck them in bed.

(Eudras: Umm.) We had to get them in bed so early those days.

Eudras: We didn’t really spend much time (Joan talking in background.) You take those, those smaller boats, now they spend a good bit of time with their family, Lafitte skiff [type of boat]. Anytime you gone work offshore, you don’t spend that much time with ’em. That, that’s the hardest part about fishing.

Joan: You have to be mother and father to your children, It’s rough.

Eudras: I don’t blame no woman that would leave her husband that stays out that long and then want to go back out. (He and I laugh.) They, they stay out. They don’t want, you know, that hard—(laughing)

Betsy: (To Joan:) Were any of the other women in your family married to men who were trawling?

Joan: I have, my older sister is married to, uh, still is. (Betsy: And he still--?) He still trawls.

Eudras: And he don’t go out for too long. (Jumble.) What? Twelve days, ten or twelve days.

Joan: Used to have five of seven, and out of the five, there’s only two of them that don’t trawl now. All the others stop.

Eudras: But down here most of them, most of your percentage, the biggest part of your percentage is fishermen. At one time, in between the fishing industry and the oil, it pretty well half and half. But now, got about eighty percent that’s fishing all the time.

Mickey: It’s going up all the time.

Joan: You see, once the kids got older, I’d go with him once in a while, (Uh hum.) you know. But I still had to stay home with them. But, um, I love going. You know, and he’d taken us out in thirty fathoms of water. (Section too low to hear.)

Ah, the furtherest I went twenty-one fathoms. They get—after twenty-one fathoms, what’s out there I don’t want it. (Laughing) There some guys going thirty, forty fathoms: "Ya’ll wanna go?" I ain’t going. I can’t make my living from twenty, twenty-one fathoms, on into the lake, if I can’t make my living there from Mississippi to Texas, I just as soon hang it up. All you doing right there is spending—. The only time it’s really good out there is in the wintertime. And when winter, it’s rough. Choo! I don’t get it.

Betsy: Joan, do you work with the nets too? (Can’ hear response, which was positive.) Do you mend ’em, make ’em from scratch, both?

Joan: He cut ’em out, start ’em off, and I do the rest.
Betsy: When did you start doing that?
Joan: (Very softly:) Ten years ago? (Looking to him for confirmation.)
Betsy: And why?
Eudras: So don’t have to— [Garbled together.] When I had sciatica. [Muffled section.]
Joan: Quite a few years. I don’t know how many years now.
Eudras: Twelve, thirteen. She was always after me. Show—
(Laughing.) Took her about thirty minutes to learn the stitch. And that was it. Uh, it’s just a straight stitch, but you got to know what you doing— (Yeah.) —with it, you know?
Betsy: You work with all size nets.
Eudras: All sizes. The biggest we made, sixty-eight foot.
Betsy: I can’t imagine that! We were looking at— (To Mickey;) —what size was that one Mr. Lirette showed us?
Mickey: Forty, forty.
Betsy: It was all over the room. His house is an experience.
Eudras: Two sixty-five foot fit in this uh—
Betsy: How do you measure it—when it’s that big?
Eudras: You go—it depends on what size webbing you use. (Uh hum.) Then you got to know how many mesh makes a foot. (Uh hum.) Then it’s just times whatever footage you need.
Betsy: Then you just keep folding it to—
Eudras: No. Let’s say you got, uh, nine mesh to the foot, (Uh hum.) well, what I, the way I figure it out is, I go nine times—let’s say you want forty foot (uh hum.) I go nine times forty three and it’ll come on, okay, right on forty foot. That extra three foot that’s where you lose—
Joan: With the weave.
Eudras: Yeah, with the—way it turns. See, you gotta have—
—add that extra three foot in take care of, pick that up. (Some background talking as their son comes in and Joan leaves with him.) —the man.
(Talk continues.)
Betsy: (To Joan as she leaves.) Nice to meet you. Thank you.
Eudras: Got to go to church. First communion for—our grandson.
Mickey: Oh, yeah.
Betsy: Oh, boy!
Eudras: Yeah, he’s seven years o—well, he’s going to be eight years old. He’s born on the eighth. So he’s just making his communion. He’s going confession today. Confession and communion today. (Laughing.)
Betsy: Oh, my! That’s exciting. Well, I’m glad she—had the time to tell us that—
Eudras: Uh—it’s hard on a woman. Uh—
Betsy: Well, Mr. Lirette was telling us one of the reasons he quit was his wife didn’t like it, he, you know, he was gone!

Eudras: It’s not all the women that— (Yeah.) It’s rough on ’em. Cause the husbands are home pretty much. They work close and they in every day. (Uh huh.) But when you working offshore, not something you can be running in every day. Uh, like my last grocery, last ice bill when the boat when out, was four hundred dollars, little over four hundred dollars for the ice. So— you got to catch a lot of shrimp if you want to make a lot of money. S’why you can’t go out there for just three or four days.

Mickey: What, what do you think all these boats they building now? Somebody’s going to be hurting pretty quick over this, right?

Eudras: Well, Betsy, it’s gon’ get like the oil company.

Mickey: Right, they deplete the shrimp crop.

Eudras: Probably it won’t fold up, but— you gone be limited to the number of days you gone be able to trawl. Or— how many pounds you can bring—. Probably they gone be limited to how many days you gone be able to fish, because—

Mickey: --there’re so many boats out there.

Eudras: The thing is, if you limit the time, it’s gon’ give the shrimp time to—

Mickey: What if they—

Eudras: --there won’t be time—. Like August season? They might have to split it— give the time for the shrimp to grow—. Eventually, they— if it keeps going— I believe, in a few years from now, a lot of them boats ain’t gon’ be catching shrimp. That’s how I feel. Not too many of them doing it. All right. They starting to make the processing plant, which we never had. And you talking about process fish, uh— crabs, whatever. A lot of these boats gone be catching fish. Uh— take like shark. There’s days on my boat, I wished I’d fixed it up to go sharking.

Mickey: There’s big money in that.

Eudras: Big money. And—

Mickey: I heard the Japanese pay as high as thirty-five dollars a pound just for the fin of the shark.

Eudras: Uh, I don’t believe they, they—

Mickey: That’s, that was in uh, uh, uh, a reputable magazine.

Eudras: Oh yeah?

Mickey: Thirty-five dollars a pound.

Eudras: For a fin?

Mickey: Not for the— that’s for the fin. A shipment.

Eudras: Oh, maybe so.

Betsy: They eat their fish raw. What can you expect from people who eat their fish raw? (Laughing.)
Eudras: Hey, we eat oysters raw.
Betsy: Hey, that's not the same thing.
Mickey: I eat 'em.

Eudras: Cause raw fish is just a different type of meat.
(Laughing.)
Betsy: I guess so. Well, if I was hungry, I wouldn't turn
my nose up at it.
Eudras: No. I've eaten shrimp raw. When I was young.
Betsy: What'd it taste like?
Eudras: Sweet. Got a sweet, sweet taste. I wouldn't eat it
now. (Laughing.) But, I mean, there's nothing--
dirty. (Yeah.) I mean, if you can eat a raw
oyster, you can eat a raw shrimp. (Uh hum.) It's
just the idea, the idea it's a shrimp.
Betsy: J.D. Theriot was telling me something about, um--
big companies trying to come in and shrimp off the
Louisiana coast, and, and not being very successful
here. Have you ever heard any stories about--ways
people in this area outsmarted them or did anything
to--?

Eudras: Uh, if they--offshore, in international waters, (Uh
hum) you got boats from--different countries, I
believe, that's out there. You got what you call a
mother ship, okay? (Uh hum.) That's what we
talking about, uh, yesterday? [Reference to group
discussion at Thelma Duplantis's] (Uh hum.) Okay,
you, you got a bunch of boats, and you got one boat
from the oil company, or two boats. You got a
mother ship that trades these ships. Okay, they
process, uh, that's a regular big ole ship that
processing plants on.

Betsy: On the ship?
Eudras: On the ship. Well, it takes about six, seven foot
long.
Mickey: They have blast freezers, things on there--
Eudras: Uh, in other words, they got the works on there.
Mickey: And that's by the Japanese. They're doing it now.
All--probably--
Eudras: Uh--
Mickey: They taking these sharks and freezing and bring them
over there to sell.
Eudras: Oh, yeah.
Betsy: How far out is the international limit?
Eudras: Over here, it's three miles, I believe--well, your
state is three miles.
Mickey: Umm--
Eudras: They brought the--a two hundred mile limit.
Probably that's what it is. (Mickey underneath.)
Two hundred miles. Probably that's what it is. Two
hundred miles. Cause they close the season for two
hundred miles every--that's about where the
international waters start--but there's some that

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They stay out there year round. They stay out there whole year with the—

Mickey: You see, with the, uh, the Vietnamese are doing the most. They have two or maybe three boats—and--they going to load everything on one boat, and a crew will come in. (Uh hum.) And they'll go awhile, and they gonna get on the other boat, and the crew's gonna change boats and come on in. They always keep a boat or two out there trawling. Night—all the time. And that's what is in. See people down here don't do that. They go out for a few days, and come in.

Betsy: It's legal, but--?
Mickey: It is legal.

Eudras: It's legal. What's gon' happen, I see it coming a few days, is gon' stop that night trawling. (Yeah.)

Mickey: That shouldn't be done here.

Eudras: Cause, well, when you don't have no jurisdiction, ain't nothing you can do about it. Uh--and now they closing the, the--the waters for three hundred if they can. See, in Texas, it's inside of forty-eight foot. If it's brown in, you can fish up to forty-eight foot. White shrimp, you got to stay outside of ten miles. Can't fish at night, white shrimp, inside of ten miles. You do, you get caught. Your brown shrimp you can, inside forty-eight foot.

Betsy: What do they do when they catch people shrimping illegally? Impound the boat, or the catch, or--?

Eudras: Well--
Mickey: Well, usually, it's political. They let'em go now.

Eudras: They let 'em go now. Last year, uh, some of 'em paid up to six thousand dollars to get their boat back.

Mickey: The district--
Betsy: So they take the boat and you lose the catch?

Eudras: Right.

Mickey: The district attorney we have now--
Eudras: He's strict on that.

Mickey: He's very strict on that.

Betsy: Is that a state law? (Eudras: Um.) It's, it's enforced by--?

Mickey: It's enforced. Is what it is now.

Betsy: But, in--in Texas--

Mickey: We always had the law--

Eudras: The laws were always there.

Mickey: The laws were always there. But not enforced.

Betsy: But, would that, would that happen anywhere across the Gulf coast? Like if you were over off the--

Mickey: No!
Betsy: --coast of--?

Mickey: Texas is more more stricter than Louisiana is on that shrimping industry.
Betsy: You ever shrimp over into, or did you ever trawl over into Mississippi and Alabama—?

Eudras: I fish Mississippi, but not Alabama.

Betsy: Well, there's not much of Alabama—

Eudras: Right.

Betsy: --to shrimp. But they do have a, a shrimping community down there. (Eudras: Yeah.) But as far as you knew, the laws there were the same, basically, as the laws--

Eudras: Pretty much.

Mickey: They were just enforced.

Eudras: Uh, some, some laws a little different. On the species. Take like Texas. One time, you couldn't catch turtle. That was a five hundred dollar fine. Which you could catch them in Louisiana. When they had it in Texas, they should have had it throughout the state, you know-- (Uh hum.) --every state should have had it, that law. (Uh hum.) What they ought to do is, when the law is enforce for one state, to preserve or something, everybody ought to preserve. (Yeah.) For instance, right now, the TEDS [device to keep sea turtles out of the trawling nets.] gon' be coming out. The want the boats to put a TED. I don't see where the TEDS going to do any good. Cause the 'mount of turtles that a fishermen's gon' catch, is not that amount. Not a big amount, cause --I didn't catch that many turtles. I'm not saying that they good. Where the main source comes from is in Mexico. Where they destroying all the eggs. (Uh hum.) Hey, you kill the egg, you ain't going to have no little chick. (Uh hum.) It's just as simple as that. So we're going protect the few turtles they got over here, they'll go to Mexico to lay eggs, the Mexicans gon' pick up the eggs. So what good is it? For us to be fighting is all it is, and then, just to go lay eggs--over there. And then--

Mickey: They destroying the source.

Eudras: Well, but then, in the last year I fish, I caught three turtles. The last year. Some years, didn't even catch none. It depended the area you in. You might catch one or two. Aw, the boat that have a-- pretty sure there's quite a few turtles that's caught, you know? But a lot of them don't catch no turtles. That's stopping turtles. Where it's hurting at is all them eggs they picking up in Mexico. That's what's--what's, uh, I believe, they going try to pick, work something out with Mexico-- As far as the fishing industry, I like to see it grow. But, uh--they--

Mickey: It'll have to be more regulated, with the--?

Eudras: It's coming. Yeah.
Mickey: Not regulated, it's not.
Eudras: What's gone happen, the federal's gon' take that over and say: "Well--"
Mickey: It'll have to.
Eudras: "--you going tomorrow, and talk about Communists, well, tomorrow you can go out."
Mickey: I don't think there's room for that. (Eudras laughing.) It's got to be regulated, but it's--
Betsy: (To Mickey:) That's the other thing that you said on that tape that I'm not sure we picked up, about what the stores used to say about when people should go out. Did we talk about that before everybody came over? [Reference to interview previous day at Thelma Duplantis's.]
Eudras: No. You talked about that when I was there.
Betsy: Then you [Mickey] need to talk about that again. About Chauvin Brothers telling people to go out so-- those tapes when everybody was there? I have no idea how much of that I'll be able to figure out.
Eudras: See, the thing is, then you can process the shrimp quicker. Because most of it is machine. In those days it was by hand. You take a barrel of small shrimp, (Uh hum.) it take a lot of women there a long time to peel a barrel of little bitty shrimp. (Uh hum.) So that's where they made the law. Sixty-eight count, catch anything smaller than sixty-eight, they was too hard to peel. it take 'em too long. So, in those days, a small shrimp, that was a drying process. That was it. They didn't, they didn't can 'em, cause they was too hard to peel. So, they take a bigger shrimp to where people could peel. So was all right. The reason was, they limited the boats, was because they couldn't handle that. And they wanted everybody to have equal opportunity. For instance, if you want to go out there and catch, say, at one time, shrimp platforms, the most you could put on there was about three hundred barrels. Two hundred barrels. Some of them, (Uh hum.) maybe, a hundred barrels. You could have gone out there and, with a boat like we've got today, you could have gone out there and put a hundred fifty barrels in no time at all. You could have came in, you'd have blocked up everything, just you. What about all them other people? So you'd--and if everybody was selling to me, well, you go out there and you catch ten barrels. You go ten, ten, they go catch ten. 'Stead of letting you go out there and catch a hundred barrels. (Uh hum.) So, it's more or less made it equal for everybody. Everybody trying to make a living at that time. But, uh--
Betsy: But the person that set that limit was actually the
The buyer would limit.

Mickey: The canner. You know, Chauvin Brothers? And another thing too, Chauvin Brothers was, owned a lot of boats. They owned 'em a fleet of little boats. (Eudras: yeah.) And they had people operating these boats for them. And at times--well, it’s like anything else, people would get lazy. (Uh hum.) They would owe, owe the store money, and Mr. Birkherd would come tell 'em: "Well, look, you gotta go out. Catch some shrimp, cause you owe me money. And you’re not, you’re not paying me back." And so, they had to send 'em out.

Eudras: Had to send 'em out.

Mickey: But you right (To Eudras), they--bout regulating the amount of shrimp comes in. But he also had to tell them when to go. And some of these people were lazy.

Eudras: Yeah.

Betsy: Well, like, particularly people who didn’t own their own boat.

Mickey: Right.

Eudras: Right. You see, like, here, that was on the shrimp processing plant, on the platform, you couldn’t ice them up. You couldn’t ice it up. Like Chauvin, them, they could ice it up and, and keep it, uh, uh, three or four days or a week. But out there, they didn’t have no ice, okay? What they would do is strictly dry shrimp. (Uh hum.) So if their shrimp platform holds two hundred barrels, they in one day could have filled it up. With, just a few boats. When they hit it right, at certain times, (Uh hum.) Two, three boats go out there, they could have filled it up. The rest of the boats, they--

Mickey: See, that’s how the shrimp boats, they could go out and catch the amount of shrimp they want at a certain time of the year. And now, it’s not like that no more. People trawl twenty-four hours a day to, to--

Eudras: People fish (Garbled.) They wouldn’t fish at night.

Mickey: Right. They wouldn’t trawl at night at all at that time. During the day (Eudras: That--) they’d catch all they wanted. That wasn’t, that wasn’t everyday. There’s certain times of the month, they could go out there and load a boat down.

Eudras: See, the only time they’d shrimp at night was brown shrimp offshore. But then they would fish daytime. They wouldn’t run from offshore, come inshore. Take too long.

Betsy: Even through they don’t go out as a fleet anymore, do people tend to go out together, two or three, or
--?

Eudras: Oh, yeah. Or they’ll meet. Take like, Boudreaux Canal, Indian Ridge gang, they’ll stick together. Now you got some in and some out, but when they get out there, they call each other: "Well, yeah, what you doing?" "Well, I’m going try right here." And they communicate. They stay in touch pretty much.

Betsy: Do they tend to tip each other off when they catch the shrimp running?—You know, call each other—

Mickey: If they’re good friends, yeah.

Betsy: --if they’re, if they’re—yeah?

Eudras: Yeah.

Mickey: Oh, yeah.

Eudras: Well, if it’s getting—

Mickey: They have code signals now.

Eudras: Yeah, you gotta go by code, or when you catch something, shut up. (All laugh.) Thet’s better in code, because when, somebody’s gon’ get that code, sooner or later’s gon’ catch on to it. The best thing to do is keep shut. (Laughing.)

Mickey: A good friend will call and tell, if you have a code,

Eudras: Uh—

Betsy: Well, you might run into more than you could pull in.

Eudras: Well—

Mickey: Not anymore.

Eudras: Not anymore.

Mickey: No. Un un.

Eudras: Not with the number you got today. I don’t believe they ever get thick enough to where you can’t pick it up. Some of the sea boom. And then, you judge about what you can pick up. And then, you pick that test net up, and whatever you catch in there, it’ll decide about what you catch in your big rig. So, you can say, oh, I don’t want to catch about ten, twelve, barrels, and no more. And you catch a certain amount with that little net, well, you better pick up, because you going to be putting in too much. It’s not so much how much you picking up at one time, If you wait too long to pick it up, then you just stay in idle. Doing nothing when you could have that shrimp on the deck and getting rid of that stuff that still got it in the net. The quicker you can put it on the deck, the quicker you can put it in the hold. The quicker you can pick up again. It’s not so much how much at one time you want to pick up.

Betsy: And you were telling me yesterday [at Thelma’s] that the amount of time that you’ve got the trawl down is maybe half an hour, maybe a couple of hours? Maybe a really long time?
Eudras: When you fish sea boom, I’ve seen forty-five minutes catch about all you want to pick up. Have to pick up. And I’ve seen an hour and you could almost pick that up by hand. I mean, a little bitty ole bag. (Mickey: Um.) I mean, certain times of the year. What, that was in ’74? That’s when I went to Texas. That’s when I came out with my brand new boat.

Mickey: You have real good years, and you have real bad years.

Eudras: That was a bad year. 1974. That was a bad, bad year. A lot of them almost lost everything that they had. That’s when I built my boat. Choo! That was a rough year. Choo! Spent everything I had in there, and then wasn’t making nothing. Choo!

Betsy: Making nets is more profitable, huh?

Eudras: Like to went bankrupted that year. I had everything I had worked for in my life in there.

Betsy: (Tape noise) (Under breath:) tape doing? We’re going to stop now.

End of tape.
APPENDIX C

ORAL JOURNAL

Entry #1: Oral notes made March 24, 1986 after interview with J. D. Theriot.

Entry #2: Oral notes made March 24, 1986, after talking to Susie and her neighbor. This was recorded in the car as I drove.

Entry #1
March 24, 1986

Betsy: This is a journal entry. I'm making it at 12 noon on March 24, 1986. I'm sitting outside St. Joseph's Church in Chauvin. Just dropped by to see Father Brunet who is not here. I'm sitting in my car waiting until time to go and see Susie Peltier with whom I have an interview set at one o'clock. This is part of the blessing of the fleet. I have just left J.D. Theriot's. We talked for a good little bit after the tape ran out on that. He filled both sides of a tape. The only relevant thing to the blessing of the fleet that we discussed was a poster that he had on his wall which he said I should be able to obtain from Nation--Natural Resources in Baton Rouge. It is a large poster, I guess 18 by 24 inches, brightly colored, of the Sea Master or the Sky Master, or some other shrimp boat, and highly elaborate decoration. I do not know what year it was done. But it was hanging on his living room wall. He also shared with me pictures of his family, his five children, his grandchildren, some oddments that they had from Dulac, a collection of rocks his wife had, information about their trip to Nova Scotia, tracing their roots there last year and the fact that they spoke French when they got as far north as Quebec and on from there. It was extremely gracious—and invited me to drop by to see them when I came back, invited me to attend the blessing of the fleet, to look for them on the bank, and mentioned at least twice more about the place that they are building down on the coast at Cocodrie. [LONCOM] Seemed willing to take me down there this afternoon except that what is there is not open and he did understand that I was going on home. He also looked at my map and gave me instructions of the best way to get to Dulac, and the best way to cross the river, thank God, going into New Orleans, so that I would not have to cross the old Huey P. Long
[Bridge]. As we left the house, he did put back on his "J. D. Theriot Himself" hat which he was wearing when he met me. When he first met me, he introduced me to his wife, Blanche, or something like that. It was a B name and a very French pronunciation. She left and went, I suppose, over to his daughter's. At one point the phone—I could hear a phone ringing or something like it in the distance, but he didn't answer. Later, there was a ring there and he did take a phone call.

He had a scrapbook of pictures, with a lot of loose pictures. He had a brochure from the dedication of St. Joseph's in 1966. He told me that church had been moved back. I cannot see it from here. I have just taken three pictures, two of them standing on the edge of the canal, which is on the same side of the street as St. Joseph's, one looking at the rectory, one looking at the church itself. The other one was standing in front of the church sign and standing looking across the canal so you could see how close the far bank was, how close that is to St. Joseph's itself. I'd like to get a long shot, but I'm not sure it's going to work, but I'm going to try it. I'm going to find some place to eat, and possibly run over to Dulac so I can get back to Susie's by one o'clock. It's a beautiful, gorgeous day, so I'm hoping to get some pictures of people working on shrimp boats. They are incredibly large, very nice. And it looks like it's going to work out perfectly.

Entry #2
March 24, 1987

Betsy: This is a follow-up to my interview with Susie--Peltier. I'm back in my car fixing to leave--the area down by the bayou on Chauvin. I've just been talking to one of her neighbors, Al, and his wife, Lorraine, and a man who was working with him on the electronics for his boat.

The information I garnered from this was primarily that--this young man like others here that I've talked to was not in fishing himself, from a fishing family, although he had an uncle in it and a grandfather who fished. But he has adopted [the profession] as a young man--what he did learn, he picked up from his uncle, from going out on his boat, which he says is basically how they did this here. The boat [his] was launched a year ago today, and while he did have it blessed, he does not
consider that vital. He thinks the old people do, but that now it's basically a party and that was what he said.

He told me that his wife could probably find me negatives from the old days during which the themes were all religious, but now they were very different.

The range on the radios, the VHS is about 20 to 25 miles talking to other boats. Talking to a base, it could go as far as perhaps California. But that would be something with a really large antenna. These men, according to him, do not necessarily go out in groups, but anyplace there are shrimp, he said: "You could walk on iron," a slang phrase that I assume means that the boats would be solid with calls in to each other.

That the coast guard tends to be on channel 16 and 22. That 16, I believe, is the emergency channel; 22, then, is procedures. Something along that line. That there are weather reports on certain channels, updated every hour—for these fishermen. There were a whole series of panels of different types of radios, and he said even though he did not consider the blessing essential, it didn't hurt, and he did have the boat blessed last year and would this year.

Back to Susie's house—we sat in the kitchen, at the kitchen table. She was babysitting the little boy who came and went. Her air conditioning and some other electronic things were coming on and off so there may be some static with that. She has a lot more interest in the decorations.

I am disappointed that I have not gotten to talk about this [the blessing] to a fisherman, in particular to any of the older fishermen. But—I figure that is something I will be able to do when I come down. I know what the preparation is now, and she seemed pretty thoroughly versed in the information except about the radios. I also don't have the proper camera equipment, because I would need both the telescopic lens and a wide angle lens to get pictures of some of the things that I think might be more appropriate for this. I'm also beginning to suspect that the best way for me to view and document this is not going to be from a boat, but to see the parade. I may see it best from the banks. That's a decision I'll have to make later on.

I can't think of anything else except that when she [Susie] was talking about the floor, because of the flooding this past year, some of her tiling is down. And what she has is some plywood laid across the floor. She was complaining on the telephone.
about the pressures---

Oh, by the way, that little fella that I just talked to, Al, said that you can look and see if a fella's got an old sloppy boat that's not well-kept, is living in a shack--and those were the criteria by which you judged whether or not he was successful, and the other man agreed with him. The two of them seemed pretty much equal, even though one was much older than the other. They appeared to accept each other with a sense of expertise. He [Al] certainly was living in a nice, nice two story house. I'm guessing oil money, although--well, that's what he said, that his family was in oil. That was where, where they did get their money. So maybe that explains it.

Another thing the guy added was that you meet your friends out in the Gulf. It's not like you call them up and say: "Hey, let's all go out." That he does carry a one man crew with him--but pretty much everybody does fish the same areas, and they knew the same areas.

It's three fifteen and I am leaving, leaving, leaving the Chauvin area headed for Houma and a bathroom, after which I am going to grab a co-cola, cross the river [Mississippi] at the Lutcher, or whatever that bridge is that whozedinger [J.D. Theriot] told me about this morning, and I'm going to Pensacola.

Susie was reluctant at first about taping. Not genuinely, but she did mention some apprehension. She told me specifically that she was misquoted last year in some type interview. I guess because she and Rodney have won this prize for decorations several times now, she has been hassled some about that. Certainly she has been interviewed several times and she made a comment about getting used to that. I don't know if that's on the tape or not, but it seems to have been based on the fact that they have, at least those two times, led the parade. When they owned the Sea Master, that's the one that's on those big, beautiful posters, and they won it last year and will be leading the boat blessing this year, will have the lead boat. It's hard for me to be real sure about this, but I gathered that it was a newspaper person, because she specifically wanted to know if this was going to be in the newspaper, and that seemed to be the interest the other people had. [Those she contacted for me.] So I was quick to assure her that I was from a class and that I was not planning to publish anything as such. I do think in light of that that I need to make it very clear, and ask her permission - exactly
what kind of information is included in this tape and transcript if I decide to use it, to document information—about the blessing if I plan to authenticate any of this by putting in the archives, if I do print any articles. But before I can do any of that, I need information firsthand from some of the older fishermen. And that’s what’s lacking right now. I need to talk to Father Brunet, probably write him. I need to write thank you notes to all of these people that I talked to today, Susie and Mr. Theriot. But I really need to try to line up talking to a couple of older fishermen when they’ll be in [port]. That probably could be done if I came back down in two weeks, when they are starting to paint the boats. Don’t know, don’t know, but I’ll check on that.

The one time while we were talking that Ceezee—(whistle) Susie seemed reluctant to go on with what she was saying because of the tape recorder was when she was talking about people drinking during the blessing, and she kinda pointed at it [recorder] and made faces like she didn’t want to comment on that aspect of the blessing, as though she thought that would perhaps—not what I wanted to hear. That was the one time I suspected that she was not being totally honest with me, or was presenting what is was she thought I wanted to hear.

Also, there was—something else—I’ll remember. And I did, almost immediately. The other thing that I was noticing—

I don’t feel like I’m in the right place. I hope to God I just made the right turn. We’ll find out soon. Yeah, I did. [This was recorded while driving.]

Okay. The other thing—was—she did mention two or three times things about—she was not talking about anybody. I got the impression from the way she said that that she had been under a lot of fire from other people. Perhaps people who resented the fact that she and Rodney did so well, that they had won several times. There was some kind of undercurrent going on there. I just don’t know what.

[End of Oral Journal]
VITA

Barbara Elizabeth (Betsy) Gordon was born and raised in Linden, Alabama. She received her Bachelor of Art in Drama and Speech from Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1969, followed by her Master of Arts in Dramatic Arts from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1971.

She taught art, drama, and speech at Patrick Henry State Junior College in Monroeville, Alabama, until 1984, when she began course work on her doctorate in speech at Louisiana State University. After completing her course work, she taught for three years as an adjunct in the speech department at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. In 1990, she joined the speech faculty at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois where she is an assistant professor.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Barbara Elizabeth Gordon

Major Field: Speech Communication

Title of Dissertation: The Rhetoric of Community Ritual: The Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

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