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Tampa Food Families Oral History Project
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Andrew Huse: Welcome back to the oral history of the Seabreeze [Restaurant]. I'm Andrew Huse, and now I'm sitting here with Helen Richards, the other owner of the Seabeeze Restaurant, and we're going to talk with her a little bit, just about all these other sort of things. Helen has quite a way with words, so without further ado—

Now why don't you tell us about just—I guess we can just start at the beginning and you growing up and—and, you know, what led you to the Seabreeze.

Helen Richards: It's hard to know even where to start. Do we start when I was a child?

AH: Sure. Sure, wherever you want to start.

HR: Oh, okay, well let's—let's start back—when we grew up next to Drew Field [Tampa International Airport], that's where—that was during the war [World War II]. It was during the Depression. I grew up during the—born during the Depression, and we grew up—had a wooden house out there, over by Drew Field. We had not much of anything, but course when you're—children, you don't realize you don't have nothing much, we didn't have a bathroom or anything, and it was a rough life, but we didn't know it. And when the war came along, then we moved over to Hillsborough Avenue. And then we—when my father came out of the Coast Guard then we moved out here because somebody had stolen our house. Somebody had just moved our house completely when we were gone. When we went back to move in, it was just gone.

AH: Was that the house that was bombed?

HR: Yes, that's—no, no, that's not the house that was bombed.

AH: Okay.

HR: That was the house that, where the planes from Drew Field used to practice dive-bombing it. They would come down, and just—just before they would hit the house, they would go up, and they'd come out, and just before they'd hit the house they'd—they'd level out. But no, when we lived—when the war was on, and they had a bombing raid—a blackout, that's what it was called, a blackout—and the whole city had better become black, cause they didn't want the enemy to know where Tampa even was. My grandmother had electricity, it's a only electricity, I—

(noise on tape)

HR: —seen but we had left the— There was a light on in the bathroom, and the planes came over and bombed my grandmother's house with sand bombs. And just a few minutes later the military police was there banging on the door, and—I mean angry, angry tones—that my grandmother know that if the war had been on, that our house would have bombed and we would all be dead, and that if they come back over again and those lights were still on, that she would go to jail, and that everybody in the house would go to jail, and that it was a serious, serious offense and that was ah—that was pretty scary.

But when we moved out here to—when my father bought the property that he has, because somebody did not pay the taxes; back then it was—everybody lost property, everybody had a hard time, nobody had the money to pay their taxes or anything, and my father bought the land for just a little bit of nothing, for taxes, and we grew up and we had a one room and it was only, like—very small room, it wasn't very big. There was—we had one—what we called a studio couch, it opened—during the day it was a couch and at night it formed a bed for the five children, and one of the children had a little—was a baby—there was always a baby in the house we had seven, seven children, my sister lived with my grandmother, so that made you know, less, but—lived in a—the baby had a screen playpen that was a baby bed and there was no electricity, no running water.

We had outside pumps, hand pumps, and—I guess we got electricity when I was thirteen years old, there was no bathroom, no bathtubs, not anything, and the thrill of our life was to get to go to my grandmother's house and see that bathtub and see that toilet.

To me—to us, over the whole house, it was the most miracle of them all. You just push the lever. It was just amazing to a child who [had] never seen anything like that; we thought it was the most fascinating thing. And to have that porcelain bathtub, it was like magic, it was just unbelievable that anybody could take a bath in something that big, after all you've had all your life is nothing but a galvanized tub or wash pan, and all of or lives we had to use wash rags and finally I said, "The day will come when I'll never have to use a wash rag again," because everything was—all the clothes were made of feed sacks and you wore the same dress everyday, and all—nothing was wasted; every scrap of material was used for something. You either make dishtowels out of it or wash rags out of it or quilts out of it. There was no scraps that was wasted, nothing was wasted, and finally the day did come that I didn't have to use wash rags anymore, and I just do not allow them to say, "Go get me a wash rag," I say "Unh-uh, I have passed that, I don't need wash rags anymore, I can finally afford wash cloths." So (laughs), that was a big thing to us.

But then we—I had to—my brother, after he got drowned, my older brother, a part of my life, I had to do all—take over all of his chores, and it was quite a hard life because we had to—I had to chuck all of the wood, carry all the water, and I became—even though I was very small for my age, I was muscular like a man, and I—everybody wanted to say, “Helen, let me see all your muscles, let me see your muscles.” Finally, I would just—I just quite, I didn’t want any muscles, I would just—muscles just do not impress me a bit. (laughs). Not when they’re on a girl.

But when I was a—I went to Brandon High School, and then the time that I met Robert, and up until that time I really wanted to be a man, really dead serious, wanted to be a man, because the men in the family, they got to go fishing, they got to go hunting, and the women were stuck with all the work, and I was just tired of it. I didn’t think it was fair a bit. Well—it [was] because my father was Indian and it [was] just the way it was they went out and did the manual labor, and then the women had to do *everything* else. There was no pleasure in being a woman, there was just—the men had all the fun.

So, until the day I met Robert, and then from that day forth I was so glad that I am a lady, and he taught me how to be a lady. Taught me how to walk, not like a farmer, you know, I had to learn to take small steps and all those things and, but—then when we—when we—the fishing was always in his blood. He lived on one side of the Seabreeze, and he lived on the other side of the Seabreeze in Palm River, he lived in Palmetto Beach and his idea of a big date was, I got to carry the sack or push the tub, depending whether we was fishing or crabbing, and to this day that still would be his idea of a big date and it suits me as long as I’m with him, it does not matter where on earth he goes, I’m just happiest as can be just to be—if he likes it, then I’m sure I’m going to like it too, just because I’m with him.

AH: So he taught you to be a lady, but not so much a lady that you couldn’t go fishing with him.

HR: That’s the truth.

AH: So, it sounds like the perfect balance of what you needed.

HR: Yeah (laughs). Yeah, and then, too, we would go rabbit hunting, you know—with—we knew how to have fun, nobody today—that’s what we see mainly with the lost generation today, is they are lost because there is nothing for them to do. Nothing for them to do. We could go to the woods, we could go rabbit hunting, we could go bird hunting, we could go crabbing, we could go fishing, we could go wading on the shores, we could, you know—have picnics, and you can’t do that—any of those things anymore, there’s no place to go, and that is—that is what is so lost about this generation.

It’s a desperation that they have, of not knowing what to do, because there is nothing to do, except a (inaudible) or something that you can hear or listen to. They do not know how to be by themselves, they do not—most of them do not know how to have quiet time, they feel like they have to have noise every moment that they’re awake, so—

AH: So, you got married—when did you get married? What year?

HR: It was March 24, 1955. I graduated in 1954 from Brandon High School and Robert—growing up, his nickname was “Captain Seaweed,” and it just stuck. I should have been forewarned then, he was going to spend most of his life in the bay. Every time we’d think about going to the mountains to buy some property up there, you have to think—nope, you couldn’t see the bay from there, you couldn’t see the bay from the mountains, you had to come—you had to come back (laughs). You had to come back so he could see that bay everyday, he had to go down and just make sure that the bay is there.

You know, just a way of life, and when he told me he wanted to spend that huge amount of money on that life boat, I thought that would be the end of it, you know, once he got the boat that would be it, but I didn’t realize it was going to take nine months to build that baby. And every penny that we made, every minute that we had, went on building that boat in our back yard, and then they went to Gulfport, Mississippi, and he was stranded over there.

He—they did not have the money to buy enough fuel to come home on, and did not had enough to catch one more load, but the shrimp was not big enough and then when he—we were home, about to starve to death with our four children and just no food, went down, tried to get food stamps and said, “Oh, no, you have property, sell your property,” and there was no help, no help any place. We did not find help any place, and when the boats— finally, finally the neighbors all helped us to survive, and my mother and father and when the—they—finally he caught—the [Hurricane] Camille was out, the hurricane was already spotted, and was out on, really on, off Cape Canaveral, and is one of those hurricanes that just went back and forth and back and forth, and didn’t know where it was going to go, and it was going across the Gulf up there.

When Robert finally caught enough shrimp to buy enough fuel to come back home, and when he got—they bailed, him and Lloyd Remi, bailed water all the way from Gulfport, Mississippi, home, because the waves were high, they were coming over the side and when they came in, he pulled up behind the Seabreeze restaurant and got out and kissed the ground. I can still see him to this day, and he had managed to get enough food to eat that night. We had twenty-five cents between the two of us, is all we had on this earth.

We already had our land was paid off, and our house was paid off, but we didn’t have anything, but we had that twenty-five cents. He had it in his pocket and we sold some, a little bit of stuff to the Seabeeze, and had enough to eat that night, and they asked him for some more—could he get them more soft crabs? They were in desperate need of soft crabs, so he went out and made some crab tins and got the soft crabs. And then before you know it, they asked him, did he want to build out here, have a fish market out here, and so that was the beginning of our really rough life.

It was, he—Robert would shrimp all night. He would come in, and he would set up the showcase, bring all the heavy stuff, the ice, all that heavy ice, and bringing up stuff for the day. And I’ll be getting the kids up and fixing food for them, and he would come in and eat breakfast and the kids would go to school, and I would come down—we only had one bed, so he’d—when he got home, then I would come down and work all day long,

and then Robert would be sleeping. When it's time for the kids to get home from school, it was time for him to wake up.

So he would bring the kids down, and then we'd all work together and I would go home and cook supper—when he'd come back down there I'd go home and cook supper while he was finishing up. And then he would—ready to go back out again; and this is, like, twenty-four hours a day, everyday, everyday. And sometimes he wouldn't have anybody to go with, and couldn't find anybody to go with him, so I'd have to go out there at night too, and sometimes we'd work, like, around the clock. You know, cause we didn't have any choice, sometimes it'd be so cold out there and you couldn't feel your fingers on the back deck, it be—you couldn't bend your fingers, and I'd say, "I hope you don't catch any shrimp this time." (laughs).

It'd be so cold (laughs), oh, I know how bad it was, but it was also fascinating and wonderful and Robert promised all of the soft crabs to the restaurant, and when he makes a promise he is dead certain, that is just what he means. If he says it, you better know that is what he means. I was not allowed to have a soft crab or a shrimp, because that—"I promised the Seabreeze they're getting all of the soft crabs," so if I wanted one, I had to sneak it or something (laughs).

AH: Or go to the Seabreeze to eat it—

HR: (laughs) Yeah, yeah, or go to the Seabreeze to eat it, I had to go back over there to pay for it, before I could get one.

AH: So when you bought that little life boat, did you know that this is what the future held for you?

HR: I had no idea at all. I knew I hated the boilermakers because it took him away all the time, and hated it. Knew I hated the roofing business, because it got tar on everything, and then they came out—and I had to do all my washing by hand cause we didn't have a washing machine—and then when they came out with the laundromats, every laundromat ended up putting a big sign there, "Do not put any roofing clothes in these dryers," cause it would melt the tar, and—

AH: It'd get everywhere, right?

HR: (laughs) Get everybody's clothes so it was—it was—but the fishing, it was like a perpetual—we ended up with—having the most interesting business of any place in Tampa, next to Busch Gardens. We had big tanks out there that held sea turtles—back then it was legal, you know—and we'd have one big tank with nothing but sea turtles in it. Another big tank, big long tanks, it had nothing but horseshoe crabs in it. Another tank with all type of fish in it; another one just with blue crabs in it.

It was—people would come from miles and miles around just to come look, it was just like—they say it's the only place—you had to stop here, you know, any time anybody came, this is where you had to stop at, and it—the bay became my babysitter. The children all had to—you just look outside the window to see what the kids were doing; they refused to be at a nursery. That is the worst I have ever heard a child cry in my life,

is when I tried to leave them at the nursery. They did not like that, and even to this day, after all these years, if my children want to see us at all, they have to come here and work to come see us, (laughs) you know, so, everybody in our entire family, I think, has worked here at this restaurant at one point or another, all of our children, all of our grandchildren—if they're big enough to work, they've come here to work. So.

AH: And even before you took it over, you were right next door there at the bait shop.

HR: Oh, yeah, that was the—that was the fun part, was over there. Here it's just been a, just a blur, just—just the hours are so much longer and so much harder.

AH: So, during the sixties the shrimping business got—got built up stronger and everything?

HR: Oh, people used to line up for two blocks out in the rain in alligator shoes and just everything, cause we had the best tasting shrimp anywhere's and the—we'd have such big shrimp sales, and it was just so much of it out there, but when they came out with the myrex [a form of pesticide] and they did all the spraying. I really think that's what happened to all the sea life out there. It just wiped out everything and then when they put out the turtle extruders¹, that made it so much worse because we [would] catch, like, a thousand pounds of catfish a night, and we would send it to the catfish factory, and then we—when we couldn't catch it anymore—they were so prolific, they multiplied like flies, and they eat anything, anything that moves in the water they eat. I really think the catfish has just absolutely wiped out all the sports fish, and to me that is what's happened to the sports fish, or the crabs.

I really think the myrex had a whole lot to do with it, and like Robert said, the female crabs. It should be absolutely illegal to catch—to serve or sell a female crab—unless it is mature, because once they are mature they do not have any more young. And it's easy to tell which ones are the females. They all have nail polish on; it's what's easy for all the fishermen. Just look at them, you don't even have to turn them over; if they have nail polish on, they are the females.

AH: You mean if they have color at the end of their claws there?

HR: Yes, that's right.

AH: So tell us about the Myrex [pesticide], then, you mentioned about the Myrex in the spring, and what was this, and why did they spray? And when was this?

HR: That was in—I think it was in seventy-five [1975] when the fire ants population was coming into Tampa. The fire ants were spreading and they did not know how to stop them, and they thought they—the best thing to do was to spread Myrex by plane, which was a granule, and me and Robert was out there in the bay shrimping that night, and we had—Robert was just as satisfied as he could be, cause he loved the bay, loved the water, and I was out there with him and he says he had never seen such a prolific supply of so

¹ A device that is placed inside shrimping nets to expel accidentally caught sea turtles.

many of different species of sea life, ever in his lifetime out there in the bay. There was so much of everything, so many blue crabs and species that we hadn't seen in so long. And about that time here comes these planes overhead, and they dropped all these granules. Why they were dropping them in the bay, I don't know, but we were—it got all in our hair, all in the deck of the boat, everywhere.

About three days later we went out shrimping again, and the crabs, it did not matter if they were ten inches across or three inches across, you pull the backs off of them, and it had liquefied all the fat in the inside and you could just pour the fat out, and we took—by the buckets over to the marine labs for them to test and everything.

And then just a short while after that we went out three days later, and there was no sea life out there, there was not any crabs, not any fish, and it took twenty-five years for it to come back. The mullet, the size—when there's a huge school of mullet, that huge school is how many fish was hatched from one fish roe. After the Myrex, the schools of the mullet got so small that you could count how many mullet there was in that school, and you could see the mother fish corralling the small ones into that—keeping them into that little thing, and it will be the size of—just a very small, small amount and it's taken, like, twenty-five years for them to come back.

We talked to some marine scientists in St. Pete [St. Petersburg], they had came over that we were—had taken the crabs to, and he said he was doing marine studies on shark—on the fertility and infertility of sharks. And that he had started it in Key West and the fertility rate down there and was like ninety-eight percent, and the closer he got to Tampa, the lower the fertility rate, and by the time he got to Tampa, it was only like a four percent fertility rate. That's all. That means only four eggs out of every hundred eggs is all that would hatch, out there in the bay. And so if it happened—so I told him, “Why don't you do the study on the mullet, because all the mullet had disappeared?” And he said there was no money, there was not any more money to do this—do the fertility studies. But we just assumed that being that those fish was sterile, all the other sea life had to be sterile too. And that's when, then it started on the net ban.

They tried to blame everything on the fishermen, and even though the fishermen may be responsible for some things, shrimp boats do not catch much sports fish, because they shrimp out there in the mud. They don't shrimp in the—where the sport fish stay, up in the grass, up in the rocks—that's where the sports fish stay. And so we weren't—they don't catch any mullet, and never catch a mullet on a shrimp boat. And if we were to fish almost year long, we cannot catch all the fish that just one mullet can produce, because there is so many thousands and thousands that that one fish produces, but it's taken—

Anyway, they came out with the net ban, and it was—it was a big farce, but it took away a livelihood of a lot of fishermen. Though I suppose it had to be done to make the fish come back. But now the fish is growing is because they are—the fish are becoming fertile again, and it's taken twenty-five years for the fertility of the fish to get so now that the—that the swarms of mullet are now about—probably about over a block across now, again. So they are—so the fertility is getting better, and everybody says, See what we did, we saved the mullet. But it was not them that saved the mullet, it was time.

AH: Okay. So now we're in the 1970s era.

HR: Okay.

AH: And you have the store next door and everything. When do you remember the Licatas first mentioning that they were thinking of getting out of the business? I mean, you said that they were thinking about it for quite a while, right?

HR: Ever since their son got killed. But their son had not—

AH: And that was in 1973?

HR: Yes, in seventy-three [1973]. If their son had not got killed, the history of this whole place would have been different, because he was such a fine young man and he would take over at age eighteen. He would tell his parents, "You go home, I'm running this place today. Y'all are tired. Let me do it." And he would just get the biggest thrill out of running it. But once he died, their heart died with him, and they just did not—their heart was not in it anymore, and it never was anymore.

AH: So they even set up a kind of, what would you say, a—

HR: A memorial.

AH: A little memorial to him at the wall, the wall right back here.

HR: Yes, and it was life-sized, it was beautiful. The painting—somebody in Cape Canaveral did it but it—they did a fantastic job. No matter where you stood in this restaurant it looked like he was looking at you. That's hard to paint like that, to paint that well. And they just loved it and thought it was the greatest thing that a person could do was put that memorial up, but the customers felt uncomfortable about it. That he was watching over them. It didn't bother me because I knew him so well, but it did bother the customers, and a lot of customers had quit coming because they didn't like him looking at them.

So when Lucy—when we bought the place, Lucy asked us if we want to keep the picture here, and I told her really how I felt about it. I says, "Lucy, Victor knows how unhappy you are here, he knows that y'all are not at peace and he's not going to be at peace until you go home and until he goes home." And she says she was so pleased we felt like that, but it gave us, you know, a chance to let her take the picture with her. So—

AH: So, so was—around 1990, ninety-one [1991] that you got the restaurant, then?

HR: Yes, and even two weeks before that, we had no intentions of ever having a restaurant. We did not even have no idea, we never ran a restaurant, didn't have no intentions of doing it, and it's just that we just— Well, we found that there was just no place to, no place to put the shrimp boats. We had twenty-six people working for us. They would have all been out of a job, no place to put the boats, and we would have no income either, so we were, like, over a barrel, so we did—we only had one chance, one slim chance of even getting the restaurant.

Because the people who were getting—the people who were planning on getting it had every intentions of having this restaurant here, but they did not want a fish market back there, and did not want out shrimp boats back there. So we up—did a back up and said if we do not come through on the day that he was supposed to, then we could fall into that slot, and that is what happened. On that day we had borrowed and cashed in all of our insurance policies, everything, just to make the down payment. We already had a ten thousand dollar payment in there just in case, to fall into that slot, if they decided they—you know, if they did not come through on that day, and they didn't come through on that day.

But they did bring suit against the restaurant, because they had every intentions of doing it, just cause they were a day late, that they didn't think it'd matter. But sometimes being a day late made the difference between us having it and them having it. And we worked so hard—my husband did the work of twelve men, I would suppose, and he still does. And he promised me that we would only be here two years, but here it's nine years later and we're still here and we have done a fantastic job, we've had some of the best people come by and say we have the best food of any restaurant in Florida. And it is delicious, no matter what you order, the only—and we have less than one percent complaint record. Which is unheard of in the restaurant business, and you start talking to the people whose complaining, and you find out that they're either chefs or their family has a restaurant, or they own a restaurant, or they work in a restaurant. And it's odd that they do so much complaining, because you'd think that they'd more—

AH: Understanding.

HR: More understanding, for sure, but it's not how it worked.

AH: Well, you got—you guys went from one of the hardest businesses there is, to another one of the hardest businesses there is. Running a restaurant has got to be one of the most thankless tasks there is, besides being a fisherman of course, which is some herculean work. So literally, in the span of two weeks, you guys went from just being fishermen, you know, running the bait shop, to being restaurateurs—

HR: Yes.

AH: —just like that.

HR: And we knew nothing, we expected George and Lucy to come back and help us and show us how to run a restaurant and how to cook and what to do, and they said that they were going to take a one week vacation first and they was going to go to Texas and rest and they'd come back—no, two-week vacation, then they was going to come back and show us how to—how to run it, and while they were over there they found out that George had colon cancer, so he was never able to come back and help us, not any. So—

AH: So you guys—

HR: —we learned it all from our employees. We learned it—just trial and error, through all of our employees.

AH: Sure.

HR: And that's how we learned.

Ah: So what was the hardest part for you then, in this transition to being—to owning this restaurant?

HR: I was supposed to—used to knowing everything, every penny, all the bookkeeping. I did all the bookkeeping and everything, and trying to turn that loose and with the computers and everything it was just so mind-boggling. Because you could no longer have, with fifty employees, it's impossible to do it all.

AH: Oh, yeah.

HR: And you—it's—I think that was the hardest transition for me, is going from—from a small business to a business that had many more zeros at the end of it.

AH: Oh, sure—

HR: It was the same difference, just more zeros at the end.

AH: And two businesses, too, really, you know, although they weren't —

HR: But we never went back over there, we threw that to my son—

AH: Is that right?

HR: And we never even helped him, he had to come in and learn it the same way we learned it over at the restaurant (laughs), cause there was no time. It was mind boggling from minute—from the time we got out of bed to the time we went to bed at night—eleven or twelve at night, we'd go home, and I'd still have to go home and cook supper. Every night, till, you know—it was just—it was, just, it's all been just one long blur.

AH: So you though the fishing business was tough, and then you really got a wallop with this—with taking over the Seabreeze, huh?

HR: Yes, that was—it was not an easy thing, for sure.

AH: Okay, so, you took over the Seabreeze and had a really tough time, it was all a blur and you guys had initially planned on staying two or three years, and so—how is it that, that we're here, and it's almost been ten years now?

HR: Well, a lot of that had to do with [Tampa] Port Authority, as Robert wanted to, right away, he wanted to do great things here, he had so many great ideas, he wanted to go upstairs, built it up there, make it like Tavern on the Green in New York, you know; they have a big fancy place upstairs and he wanted to build nice docks out there. Right now the docks are just so high up that a person coming in a boat cannot get out of the boat—your nose touches the dock, and if you're pregnant, female, you have a hard time getting out of that boat to come up here and eat, it was impossible, people couldn't get out of the boat.

So we was going to lower the docks. And so Robert went over there, drew up plans, he'd always been in construction business and he's a good drawer, so he drew up these beautiful plans for docks and everything out there, what he wanted to do. So he went to the Port Authority and they said, Oh you can't do that, you have to have a marine architect do those. So then we went to a marine architect, had him draw them up and went back over there and they said, Oh, I'm sorry we can't do that, because y'all don't own that; we do. And so they started putting a claim in to—for our property and—

AH: Now, what part of our property?

HR: It was—it was really the perimeter, the entire perimeter of our property.

AH: Okay.

HR: And we cannot understand, you know, why it took us eight years of fighting with the port, to find out what all it is that they were doing to us and why they were doing it to us, and the horrible, horrible nightmares that they caused us. They caused my husband to have a massive heart attack, while he was here, they had—we come to find out that marine architect they said that, that was not, that was not legal either, because the marine architect did not put his signature on it, on the plans, so we went back to the architect, Why didn't you put your signature on it? They said that the Port Authority ordered us not to because they say that they own it, and I say "How can they say that they own it?"

And so we had to file—we can never sell the property because we did not have a clear title, we couldn't sell it at all. And the more we found out about it, the Port, the more horrible it became. First they took—our attorney—we had hired an attorney from this large law firm downtown, and he is Dennis Manilly, and he—the Port bought him, they paid him ninety thousand a year while he was still working for us, and he was trying to force us to sign all these papers giving them this land, and he's—kept saying, "You need those (inaudible) rights, what does it matter if they have them, here sign these papers." And I said, "No, that's not right, we can't say that they own it, they not—we pay for every inch of this, and we are paying taxes on every inch of it."

Because every—the first thing we did when we—when we got this property is, I went down to the tax appraiser's office, and I want to know what it is that we are paying taxes on exactly, and they came out here and walked it off with us from one end to the other end. They said, This is all yours. I said, "Are you positive?" and (inaudible) "Tell me again—tell me in your words and draw me a map." They went down and drew me a map, and said, Everything beyond the sea wall is yours. But the Port Authority says, Oh no, it's not either; it's ours.

AH: So how did the Port Authority, I mean, besides just saying that they owned it, how did they try to weasel that in, to say they owned it?

HR: Well, they—I kept trying to—I kept going to the law library to try to prove them right, and the more I went to try and prove them right, the more I kept trying to—I proving them wrong. Come to find out that they, every time I saw something in the law book that had—I tried to find out how much land that they owned here in this area, and I went through all the tax records and everything. I couldn't find anything out here that

they owned, nothing, nothing through all the tax records, nothing that they owned, in this whole area, nothing with their name on it.

And then, so, I started with the surveying. Every time I found surveying in the law books I would go to our surveyor, and I says, "I want you to plot this, I got a old—" what do you call it, the graphs, papers for the surveying, and I says, "I want you to plot on here where the Port's territory is, by the law books, go exactly by the law books, don't miss anything." And so it—by the law books, what was given to the Port was outside the city limits and it starts, the city limits—this was put inside the city limits in 1923 because the—because of the airport that was going in, because of the new—they was going to put in a new beach, they was going to do all these stuff here, and they wanted it in the city limits before it started, and so in 1923 this was all put into the city limits.

The point of the city limits is way out here in the water [points to map], way out here, and that is where the Port's territory starts. It starts there and it goes out to the county limits, from the city limits to the county limits, that is where every county line is, that is where their territory was. You cannot get any attorneys to believe it, it is like they—it's like they, oh, no, they have been told all their life that [the] port owned all that, there is some power lines out there in McKay Bay, and on the maps it's a dotted line across there and the Port goes, See those dotted lines there, that's the edge of our territory. And I found out that that's not the edge of their territory, the edge of their—edge of—that was the power lines that went across of the bay going to the power plant, and that's all that was. But they used it was the edge of their territory.

And we found out so much stuff on them, that it was just unreal, and then we just get angrier and angrier and angrier at us, then they—then we felt like they bought our judge—our judge—we insisted on going—every time there was a meeting we would go, to every meeting, we didn't just have the attorney go do it.

AH: You mean like in the court?

HR: Yeah, in the court, every time there was a court, most people just send their attorneys.

AH: Sure.

HR: And, but we insisted on being there for every one, and I happened to be there when the judge was going to meet the Port's attorney going to the Super Bowl in New Orleans [Super Bowl XXXVI in 2002] and I just happened to hear it, this was right—and he would not pay any attention to my attorney, but he just hung on every word the Port attorney said, and so I raised such a fuss about it that they had to give us a new attorney, okay.

AH: New judge?

HR: I mean a new judge, and the day that—every time I went to see my attorney I cried. The last time he demanded I sign all those papers, I says, "I would want a second opinion." And he got real upset about it, and the Port got real upset about it. They wrote me a letter, a nasty letter, about it, saying how dare we think about getting another

attorney, after they—after all they was paying, ninety thousand a year to that attorney to get done what they wanted done. And so our attorney did a wonderful job for a long time until then they started taking him to parties and offering to make him mayor and everything, so we had to watch him, on top of everything else. We had to do all the work ourselves, I had to go down and find every law, everything about it to fight everything, and it's just like, if we hadn't—if hadn't done our own law work there's no telling where we'd be now. And he says "Well—you know they're old friends of mine, I don't want to step on their toes, you know, and they're going to make me mayor." And so it just—just a conflict of interest.

AH: Absolutely.

HR: But, we still had to keep him, and I tried to get him to say something about him—about us inside the city limits, that they're not even our territory. And he just refused, and finally I kicked him in the shins, I says, "If you tell them—" and he says, he sorta, like, made a joke of it, and you know all attorneys can stay so deadpanned, you know, and everything. But when he said that we were in the city limits, and it was outside their territory, every one of those attorneys sat up straight and shifted back and forth, looking at each other, I says, "Uh-huh, he hit a major vein." That's what we did, but they—that's the only time that it was ever mentioned, never brought up again, and but—but then the new attorney, bless his heart, James Whittemore [James D. Whittemore, U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida] he went over the thing, backwards and forwards and forwards and backwards, and all the laws that we had, and he said that—

AH: You mean it was Judge Whittemore, right?

HR: Judge Whittemore, yes, and he said that it was—he finally said that it was all our property, and for them to leave us alone and not to bother with us.

AH: So when was he appointed judge? What year would you say about?

HR: I'm not sure, but he's not our—

AH: He was pretty late in the game, though, wasn't he?

HR: I think so, but he's gone on to a federal judgeship now because of this case—

AH: Good for him.

HR: But when, back—but we need to go back some, we got a call from the, one of the dirty tricks that they pulled. We got a call from our bank. We just had been investigated for five years by IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. They took all of our records down to the IRS building, they had them there for almost a month. They brought them back, they said that the only thing that they could find wrong is that we're putting more money in the bank too fast, all of our 941 taxes [Employer's Quarterly Federal Tax Return] for our withholding and Social Security and that we were putting it in too soon. That we needed to put it in on the days that they had put aside for it, and they fined us seven hundred and fifty dollars for that. And I said, "That's worth seven hundred and fifty dollars, to say that we didn't have—that everything was perfect."

AH: Sure.

HR: Four months later the bank called and says, Helen, IRS has frozen—all your account for sixty-three thousand dollars. I said, “But I don’t have sixty-three thousand dollars.” They said, “Well, they have it in here.” I said, “We haven’t gotten any notice from the IRS or anything.” And so the next day we got three letters, all in the same day, plus a handwritten from this IRS agent, demanding sixty-three thousand dollars by return mail, and so we went down there, and said, “What is this for?” He says, “You didn’t pay any employee taxes—” this was 1995—no, I think ninety-five [1995], ninety-seven [1997], 1997, and he said, “You didn’t pay any employee taxes in 1993.”

I said, “We just had all this investigated for five years, and there was nothing wrong.” And they said, “I’m sorry, but they froze your account—” said that, and we produced all the records and had—all the cancelled checks and everything. He said, “They don’t mean we got the money.” We were investigated, Robert had a major—massive heart attack that night, we had thirty-three thousand dollars out floating from payroll and bills we had paid.

AH: All the stuff was going to bounce, right?

HR: It was going all—it was going to bounce. And Robert had that massive heart attack that night, they—for nine days they couldn’t even tell me if he was going to live or die, and within the next four months, Robert had to have a hip transplant and hand surgery too. We had to have—we were investigated five years by sales tax and three years by wage and hour, two years by child labor, all within a four month period. And every one of them was ordered to find something wrong, I asked the lady who was investigated us for the five years, “Is it possible that, that somebody is powerful enough to do that to us?” and she says, “Yes, ma’am.” So we were pretty sure it was—it was the Port Authority, cause we knew that they had this whole—I guess what would you call it a team of dirty works, when they won’t—they are insistent on getting what they need, and you wonder, How can something like that happen? How can a body of politics become so powerful that they can do this to people, how can they put all these buildings here, all this here?

How can they do this without anybody protesting if it is not even inside their territory? And what it is that all of your city council, they come in every two, three years or four years and they never learned anything that—before they were going, before them thought that anything in the water belonged to the Port Authority, nobody ever educated them about it. Everybody, even on the Port board, nobody ever reads those laws and find out exactly when—when these set of people retired and the next ones come in, they don’t realize where their territory is. They feel like if it’s water, it’s theirs, but it’s not. And they, we find out, well, why is that they are fussing so much about our place, why is it that they are trying so hard to take it?

This is the last place that is privately owned that’s on the water, that a ship can come up to in all of Tampa Bay, and so that makes it priceless to them. Instead of coming and offering us a price, they was going to try and beat us out of it and that’s what we thought. We thought that was why they were doing it, and in a way it probably was. But come to find out that it—we did not know until last year the real reason that the port spent a half a

million dollars trying to take this of the taxpayers' money, trying to take this piece of property.

And why they wanted just that rim all the way around our property is, like, some years back, that when they was going to widen this road out here. The Department of Transportation came and said that their records show that the Seabreeze own from here all they way across the bridge, and that they wanted George [Licata] to sign the papers, giving him the right to widen from here over there, and George says, "That's not my property, it's not on my deed." And the Port didn't—and George did not realize that even if it's not on the deed, anytime there is dredged land, it attaches to the land that's there, and that land has never been titled and—and even though, but it should have automatically have been his. All he had to do was just go out there and build anything he wanted to out there and nobody would have ever questioned it.

AH: This land was dredged in the twenties [1920s] back when the Tampa beach boom was in?

HR: Yes. That's right, and it had never been titled, and when the men—George—the man had asked George, "Well, where do I go? I have to have somebody sign these papers, saying—in order to give me the right to widen this road," and George says, "Well, go to the Port Authority, they ought to know who owns it." And when the man left I says, "George—" I says, "What if you really do own it?" He said, "Well, if that's so, the Port will send them back over here." And but that's not what happened, they said, "Oh, think we own it, do they? Well, sure, we'll sign that."

And they wrote out three pages of things they wanted in exchange for them giving them that property, and then they wrote themselves a letter, giving themselves permission to put the shrimp boat docks in down here. And it was on land that was not theirs.

AH: When was this about?

HR: About seventy-seven [1977].

AH: Seventy-seven [1977].

HR: Yes, they didn't start building it for about another four years, after that. But I think it was in 1977 that they first started thinking about it. And so, we started checking, and come to find out they had never been able to get the title down there. When they write to the Attorney General, the Attorney General tells them, "Unh-uh, it's not yours," and so that is why they wanted this land so much. If they got just that little parameter out there, where the land attached, then that would become theirs legally. And so that is what this whole fight has been about.

AH: So, it wasn't enough—

HR: And we didn't know it.

AH: It wasn't enough that they just went ahead and built those docks out there, they had to have a more legitimate claim, you mean?

HR: Yeah, they wanted to get the title to it.

AH: So, between 1977 and 1990 or '91 when you guys took control over the restaurant, they, they had just built on it like they de facto owned it, but in fact they didn't.

HR: Right. But they had been there—

AH: So, why do you suppose they—they would pursue the parameter of your property if they already de facto owned it, I mean if they didn't—if they didn't get greedy and ask for your parameter then you never would have known—

HR: That's right.

AH: —That that property was yours in the first place. So you just think they got ahead of themselves and got greedy, and that's—that's why they went for the parameter, or just to lock, fix the deal, or—?

HR: Well, Mayor [Dick] Greco was down here, and his wife, and we were talking about it. And she asked him, "Dick, how is the Port allowed to do such a thing?" And he says it's because nobody ever had reason to question it. Nobody ever had reason to. And so that's why they got away with it.

AH: Well, did he question it? (laughs)

HR: Let's stop right there.

end of interview