

NOTICE

Materials in our digital Oral History collections are the products of research projects by several individuals. USF Libraries assume no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewers or interviewees. Some interviews include material that may be viewed as offensive or objectionable. Parents of minors are encouraged to supervise use of USF Libraries Oral Histories and Digital Collections. Additional oral histories may be available in Special Collections for use in the reading room. See individual collection descriptions for more information.

This oral history is provided for research and education within the bounds of U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Copyright over Oral Histories hosted by the USF Libraries rests with the interviewee unless transferred to the interviewer in the course of the project. Interviewee views and information may also be protected by privacy and publicity laws. All patrons making use of it and other library content are individually accountable for their responsible and legal use of copyrighted material.

Tampa Food Families Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier:	DOI: T30-00016
Interviewee:	Robert Richards (RR)
Interview by:	Andrew T. Huse (AH)
Interview date:	March 12, 2002
Interview location:	Tampa, Florida
Transcribed by:	Kimberly Nordon
Transcription date:	August 25, 2008 to September 8, 2008
Audit Edit by:	Mary Beth Isaacson
Audit Edit date:	January 26, 2009
Final Edit by:	Maria Kreiser
Final Edit date:	February 9, 2009

Andrew Huse: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Oral History Program from the Resource Center of Florida History and Politics at USF [University of South Florida]. Today I'm talking to the owners of the Seabreeze Restaurant, which has had a long run of over seventy years here in Tampa, a quite extraordinary feat in itself. I'm talking today with Robert Richards, who ran the shrimp fleet for the restaurant and kept it on its feet for the almost ten years that he ran it. And he's got a lot of insights into {Tampa} Bay, the ecology of the area, and the restaurant business itself.

So first, I guess we can start off with your childhood and where you grew up, and some of the details of that. Where would you like to start?

Robert Richards: Well, I was born in Tampa in Palmetto Beach. I attended DeSoto School up to the third grade, and we moved to Seminole Heights. When I was twelve years old my father died. My mother didn't have any way of supporting us boys so we moved back to Palmetto Beach with my grandmother. It wasn't long after that till she got a job for the shipyard welding; that was back in 1943. She worked there until the shipyard closed, and then she started making cigars. We sold papers at the shipyard, my brother and I, to help support the family, buying our own school clothes. Well, I was almost sixteen years old when I decided that I didn't need school anymore, and the family needed a breadwinner, so I started roofing with my uncle, which was a roofing contractor, E. K. Richards.

To go back a little bit before my father died, we didn't need a frying pan or grease to cook our mullet. We went fishing on Friday night, cast netting, and on Saturday we went to the woods and cooked fish; mullet was the species that we caught. We built up a big fire, and as it was burning down into coals, we'd walk down to the creek and clean the mullet. You didn't scale the fish; you just cut it down the back and opened it up. And sometimes there weren't any palmetto trees growing in the area, so we would always stop en route to the woods and cut us some limbs off the palmetto tree. The way you done

that, you split the limb and you slap the two pieces—you stuck a stick in it and opened it up the right width. You found you a forking stick and you drove that into the ground. And the two prangs from the palmetto limb you would stick—you would protrude into—under the gill plate of the mullet. And before you'd put it up there you would salt and pepper it, and then you'd put the stick into the ground and you'd put that stick in the ground, and you'd put that mullet up against the fire—up against the coals, and that's the way we cooked a fish back then. That was something we really enjoyed and something that probably this—people nowadays wouldn't dream of cooking fish with that method.

Then after we moved back to Palmetto Beach after Dad died, us boys stayed in the Bay five or six days out of the week, and Friday night we'd go camping at Delaney Creek. I bought an old boat from Mike Morris for a dollar and a half, and then we'd take—usually six of us to operate the boat. Two would have to bail all the time and two would row, and of course I was the captain. I'd give the orders, only because I was the oldest. We had a big time back then; the oysters were edible.

AH: So this was what before the war [World War II], then?

RR: No, around nineteen—no, no during the war, 1943 and forty-four [1944]. That was before I started working, back when I was still in school. But during the summer months we'd be in the bay all day long. Not having a washing machine and living with our grandmother we would come home a couple of times a day in our old wet dungarees and pull them off and put on some dry ones, and my grandmother, she'd have to wash the clothes in the tub with an old rub board. [I'll] Never forget that, [she] but never complained one time about what she [was] doing.

So, then I married at nineteen, and had a little girl, that's Holly Richards. That didn't work out, so we divorced. And a couple years later I met my wife, Helen Richards, and in a couple years we married, had three boys. Well, during that time we were going together, and then after we married, an outing would be for us to go cast netting and course I carried—I had the cast net, I caught the fish and she'd lug the bag and sack along. She'd carry it over her shoulder till it got so heavy she couldn't carry it anymore, and then she'd drug it along the beach. And we'd go home and fry fish, and that was the extent of our activities together—

AH: Of your dating?

RR: —of our dating. And we'd crab some during the summer months. Twice a month the tides were right to go crabbing; that was on the full moon nights and on the dark nights. And that was when the tide was low, right at dark or right after dark, and the tide would recede and the crab would be sitting on top of the grass, waiting for that tide to start back in. We'd have a gas lantern up on the front of the boat, and we'd pull along the shallows, and it was nothing to catch fifteen to twenty dozen crabs. Sometimes you'd see eight or ten crabs on top of the water and you'd just pick out the size that you'd wanted. You wouldn't get any of the small crabs—you'd take the large crabs.

Then after a few years—well, let me go back a little bit.

AH: Sure.

RR: The other way of catching crabs was with a little inboard boat with an air cooled engine in it, and the way you steered it—it had a little rudder in it, an outboard rudder. And the ropes came along the side of the boat, inside the boat to a stick. If you wanted to go to port then you pull the stick to the port; you wanted to go to starboard you went, of course, the other way with it. And there was a board that had a bolt through the end of it, about four feet long, and had a roller on the end of it. Well, it was similar to a trotline, didn't have hooks on it.

You tie your bait on this line about every four feet, and it had a buoy on the each end of it, so you could line yourself up or you'd catch this buoy on this end and the one a half a mile away. And you'd take that rope and pick it up and put it over that roller. Put along like that, that line would come to the top. The roller would bring the line to the top and crab would be hanging on that meat, and you'd just dip them up. And you could catch twenty-five or thirty dozen crab in a day's time. Sometimes some of the crabbers would have more than one trotline.

Then around 1950 the Cranes came to Tampa. Well, I won't say that they squatted, but they came to Tampa and located themselves over on Palm River. They brought a crab trap along, a wire crab trap. I'd never seen one in my life and none of the other fisherman in this area had ever seen one. They would put those crab traps out, and there were so many crabs back then in Tampa Bay that they would have to run their traps twice a day or three times a day, because there would be so many crabs in the trap until another crab couldn't go in. Well, they've caught so efficiently through the years, until—I think one of the reasons for the depletion of the crab population is because of the efficiency of the crab trap. It fished day and night. You'd put it out one day, it caught crabs until you got there the next day. The old crab line we used, when they ate the bait off of it, then the crab would go elsewhere. Twice a month we could catch crabs at night with a light, if the tides were right, but that's just four days out of the month. So, we didn't hurt the population real bad.

Then about 1960, shrimp were found in Tampa Bay, and some of those large shrimp boats that were docking at Hooker's Point down there started shrimping the Bay. A boy named James Fagan had found out about it a year before I did, and him and Gene Loffely would carry a little small net with the little kicker boat, and go out there at night and catch some shrimp, during the winter months—the shrimp that's for themselves, not for commercial use. Well, he told me about it, so I went with him one night. Well, the season was about over with, so we didn't do real well, but in the meantime, I talked to a boy named Huel Beasley, which was another friend of mine. And he says, "Robert, you know we tried keeping this a secret, about the shrimp in Tampa Bay." Not so many people knew about it, because back then they thought it was against the law.

AH: What, the shrimp?

RR: To trawl Tampa Bay.

AH: I see.

RR: There was a state law prohibiting trawling in Tampa Bay—and there was during the war, and the reason for that was because security reasons for MacDill Field—

AH: I see.

RR: —they stopped trawling, which there never was any to speak of before that anyway, I don't think. But anyway, he told me that he stopped at a little restaurant down on [U.S. Highway] 41 one morning to eat breakfast and he walked by this pick-up truck—

AH: You want to stop for a second, okay, okay.

(noise on tape)

RR: So he walked along aside this pick-up truck and there was a number three washtub—

[woman speaking in background]

AH: Okay.

RR: He walks along this pick-up truck, aside this pick-up truck, and looked over on the inside of it, and there was a number three wash tub there with some burlap bags over the top of it. The burlap bags were moving. He was nosey and lifted up the burlap bag, and there was a number three washtub full of shrimp. So when he went in and sat down, he asked the two guys that were in there, “Where in the world did you catch those shrimp?”

Because him and I had crabbed Tampa Bay with the lights at night all our lives—all our childhood and had seen a lot of red eyes—shrimp on the bottom—but never realized that they grew to commercial size, because during the summer months, they'd be small, but then in September when the water started to cool down they disappeared—along with the crabs. Now the crab would disappear also. The crabs, they kinda hibernate; they go to deep water during winter month. Like us, when they're cold they put on a blanket; they cover up in mud and stay kind of dormant all winter long.

The shrimp go to deep water, because they're real sensitive to temperature change, so us—we just figured that they disappeared, you know. We didn't have any idea that they just migrated to the deeper water in Tampa Bay and stayed there during the winter months and then during the—when the water temperature starts to come up during the spring, then the shrimp migrates to the Gulf, and they're mature by then and they spawn.

Anyhow, they told Huel Beasley where they caught these shrimp, down at the Alafia River. Well, I really got the bug then, so my brother was working at the shipyard and they

were—they had five or six conversions. They were taking steel lifeboats off of the ships and converting them into grain—cargo vessels, to carry grain to Russia and different places. Well, these lifeboats were used, but they were in real good condition. These ships were troop transports, so they had to have large lifeboats on there in case, you know—

AH: Sure.

RR: —with those troops about the boats—those ships, they had to have accommodations if the ship went down. I don't know how many had to board the ship but there was a number of them. Anyhow, we bought one of those boats for one hundred and sixty-nine dollars from Tampa Shipyard. They brought it out to our house—we lived out on Seventy-Eighth Street at the time, when it was a wooded area; there wasn't very many houses in the area, so we were able to do what we wanted to do without disturbing the neighbors. So we converted that old lifeboat into a shrimp boat, and that was our first shrimp boat, *Seaweed I*.

AH: This was solely because of the discovery of the commercial-sized shrimp.

RR: Discovery of—that's right.

AH: That was what, you said about 1960?

RR: Well, nineteen—well, 1960—sixty-two [1962].

AH: So everyone knew—like, fishermen included, not just yourself—that there had been shrimp but just no one thought they were that big, huh?

RR: That's right. We just thought they disappeared, you know, being small during the summer months. So we started shrimping a little bit. I was still working with Chicago Bridge and Iron at the time, and we'd try and shrimp weekends during the winter months. We started catching some shrimp, and had to change the rigging on the boat, but we done quite well. About the second season—not the first season, because we didn't know enough about it.

AH: So, did you just learn by trial and error, as time went on?

RR: Right, right.

AH: Did you have anyone that taught you or anything like that, or you kinda just—?

RR: Yes, we did. We had an old black fellow—we put the boat in water at the Alafia River and took it down the shrimp boat docks at Hooker's Point. There was a black fellow walking by, his name was Coffey—in fact, he worked for us later on in years and run a large boat for us—and he came down and helped us set the chains on the doors. He didn't ever go with us, but then when we'd come in every morning, he'd come down and check, see how we'd done that night.

Second year we started catching some shrimp, and we'd catch an awful lot of crabs that were in the molting stage. Course we didn't have any use for them, other than—the ones that had turned soft, a lot of them we'd take home to eat as soft crabs. Well, during the winter months when the crabs leave the shallow water and go to deep water, they become scarce to the crabber that catches them along the shore, so the Seabreeze was real short of soft crabs. They were in short supply, and an old fellow named Hetticoat that was here at the Seabreeze at the time approached me and says, "Robert, can you furnish the Seabreeze soft crab?" I says, "Yes—" well, I said that, "They're shedder crabs." But he had the facilities to shed these crabs.

AH: Explain what you mean for the uninitiated.

RR: Okay, about every seven weeks a crab becomes—almost outgrows—the flesh outgrows the shell. So the new shell starts to form underneath the old shell, a soft shell. He expands himself and breaks that shell and backs out of it. And what that does, that lets him grow another size and it lets him clean his shell—the barnacles, the crustaceans that have grown on his shell in the seven or eight weeks that it takes between molting stages. He discards that old shell and then in a few hours that soft shell becomes hard and rigid.

And course there's not enough meat to fit that shell, because he expands himself. In another words, they almost double their size each time they molt. Well, there's not enough meat to fill that shell, so it takes them three or four weeks of eating to be able to—body meat back up to fit that shell again. Well, that's repeated about seven times, from the time that crab comes out of a larvae stage, that it's in, till it's mature. It's my feeling that it molts about seven times, and that's about every six or seven weeks apart, until it's grown.

Then after it's mature, it doesn't molt anymore. When that female molts her last time, a metamorphosis takes place. The female, before it molts the last time, has an apron, which is about in this shape. Well, when it molts the last time, that apron changes and it becomes round like this, to accommodate the eggs that she puts out. A male crab will take that female two or three days before she molts her last time, and he'll hold her until she molts. Then when she molts they mate for a few hours, but when she starts to turn hard he releases her.

Well, then she's conceived, and the eggs start to form in two egg pouches that are inside her body, and then as they mature then that apron opens up and they—the mature eggs are held in that big pouch here. Then that crab—that female crab—migrates to the Gulf [of Mexico], some say as far as Alabama, up the Gulf, where they rub those legs off in the sand. We feel like that larvae then—after the egg hatches, that larvae comes down the Gulf and a big circle—Fort Myers, Sarasota, Tampa, New Port Richey, all up in there. And that larvae comes into Tampa Bay in all the estuaries, then hatches into a minute sized crab. And then it stays in the shallows until it matures, and then that cycle is repeated.

AH: So you started doing the soft-shelled crabs for the Seabreeze in your second season then? You second—time you were shrimping—?

RR: Right. So they needed these soft crab so bad until we made an agreement with George and Lucy [Licata]—no, I'm sorry, Tony [Licata]. Tony run the Seabreeze back then.

AH: Okay.

RR: That was before George and Lucy took it over. An agreement that we would use an area over here, where our fish market is now, and our rent would be selling them the soft crab for a dollar and fifty cents a dozen, and all the hard crabs they needed free. That was our rent for a number of years. Then during the summer months after trawling was complete in Tampa Bay, then we had crab traps that we caught blue crabs in to furnish crabs for the restaurant. And that's how we got started, behind the Seabreeze. The market back there was [so] that we could furnish the Seabreeze the soft crabs that they needed.

AH: So when did you actually get the market back there—the building itself, I mean?

RR: We constructed that a long—the first year we just had some tanks out there, and the second year we build a shed over our bait tank, and then we built the market the following year. It took probably three years to complete what you see over there.

Then we started building our shrimp boats, the *Seaweed I*—no, *Seaweed III*, *Seaweed IV*. Then we bought a wood boat during that time and we called it *Seaweed V*. And then we started back again, didn't want to go to five, got to a smaller boat so then the *Seaweed I* and *II*. Then the last vessel we constructed was the *Little Weed*, and that was for our son; course it sank, and had a lot of trouble with it.

AH: So, so once you got the store into place and everything else, after how long would you say it took you to kinda get the shrimping thing down, as far as the technique and everything else? How many seasons would you say before you felt very comfortable with what you were doing?

RR: Well, I'd continued to work for probably three years after—after we put our first little boat in the water. Probably three years I guess, and then I quit working with the boilermakers and we started fishing full time.

But I've seen a lot of changes in Tampa Bay, and a lot of changes I don't like. Areas that we used to catch our crabs in that were areas that crabs just grew up in—

AH: You're talking about—

RR: —aren't there any more, you know; that habitat's gone.

AH: So you were talking about in the mid-forties [1940s] there were still oysters that were edible in the Bay? When did that trail off and end, what would you say?

RR: Well, there was some pollution going in the Bay during that time, but that was before the Skyway Bridge [completed in 1954] was put in—and the approaches to the Skyway Bridge—and there was a better flow of water coming into Tampa Bay then there is now. When we were boys we would jump off of Twenty-Second Street along Causeway Bridge [Tampa] down here and slip our britches off and tie knots in our pants. When the tide was coming in—a good summer tide—we could make it over to the pier—it was about a mile—in a couple hours. But now the way the water is restricted coming into Tampa Bay, you couldn't get over there in a nine-hour tide now.

AH: So you'd say the Skyway Bridge had a major impact on the Bay, then, as far as—?

RR: I certainly think so.

AH: What about all the other causeways and things like that?

RR: Anything that protrudes out into the Bay, or slows the tidal flow.

AH: Since we're up at the top end of the Bay here, there's so many obstructions in between the mouth of the Bay and right up here at the top.

RR: Right, right.

AH: So this area probably feels it the worst, wouldn't you say?

RR: I think so. Worse than old Tampa Bay, because it's got a wider mouth than we have here. Most of this is closed off here down here anymore, just one little narrow channel coming in, where when I was a boy it was all open.

AH: So when would you say was the kinda, the years where it was really starting to hurt the worst? Would you say the sixties [1960s], or before then?

RR: Well, after the bridge was put in, we seen a decline in the crab industry. Well, part of that was the Skyway Bridge, and part of it was us. So many boats were trawling Tampa Bay during the winter months and they'd bring in so many crabs. We were trawling in the areas that the crabs use to hibernate in during the winter months. So when we destroyed that, so to speak, well, then we seen a big decrease in the size—I mean, the amount of crabs in Tampa Bay. But now, since then Marine Fishers Commission [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] has limited us to the size nets that we're allowed to use and we—during one of the meetings we suggested that we be limited to two boxes of crab a night instead of the seven or eight or ten boxes that we used to catch. And I see a comeback in the crab population, somewhat.

AH: So when did—

RR: And—excuse me—and because the licensing of the trawlers in Tampa Bay. There's about nine licenses left, so the trawling pressure in Tampa Bay has been lessened by probably about seventy-five or eighty percent.

AH: So they're just not issuing new licenses, or—?

RR: No, no. If you didn't obtain a license by a certain length of time, you couldn't acquire a license. When the licenses came out six years ago, I think there were forty-seven applicants, now there's just nine of us left.

AH: Wow.

RR: So that's really relieved Tampa Bay of the trawling pressure.

AH: So you think that the fisherman and the fishing industry in general doesn't have that much to do anymore with any problems with the Bay might be having?

RR: No, because we're not trawling in Tampa Bay but just a couple months out of the year, and then maybe a night or two a week. There are a lot of other things that are causing depletion to the different species in Tampa Bay. There was one species that we called yellowtails [fish] that we used to catch when we were boys. Put two, three hooks on the line, it wasn't anything to bring back an eight or ten foot stringer. But now you don't see that species anymore at all, they're just gone. Another species that's called a spot, or butterfish, they've just all become extinct in Tampa Bay. Don't understand why. It's not because of the trawling pressure, because we don't catch that species.

AH: Sure.

RR: You know, that's a shallow water fish; we trawl deep water.

AH: So do you think the industries in Tampa have a lot to do with it?

RR: Certainly do.

AH: I mean, obviously the water circulation's a big problem, but pollution is too, right?

RR: I think so. Yes, sir. I really comment on that because I don't test the water quality of Tampa Bay.

AH: Sure. So by the time you got—by the mid-sixties [1960s], would you say that you were entrenched in the fishing industry? You were doing your thing by that point; you were done with the boiler making and everything?

RR: Right, right. And we were catching a lot of shrimp in Tampa Bay during those few years. It was good to us.

AH: So would you say over the years that the tie between you and the Licatas got stronger, spending so much time in close proximity here?

RR: Right. And then George and Lucy lost their son, Victor Licata, and they were ready to get out of the restaurant business. George thought a lot of me—and my wife also—and asked us if we'd consider taking the restaurant over, or buying the restaurant from him. And we were hesitant a long time, and I think he signed a contract with someone else to sell the restaurant. But I think that fell through, and by the time that fell through we took the restaurant over. And that's been about nine and a half years ago.

AH: So, at that point when they made the offer for the restaurant you were hesitant at first. This other person had signed on to buy the restaurant and you all looked for new facilities, is that right? At first you were thinking of moving out to another place.

RR: Well, we didn't feel like we could probably do business with the new owners, so we tried everywhere. We tried Clearwater, St. Pete, went up as far as Crystal River, Yankeetown, looking for a new facility where we could move our shrimp boats. But we couldn't find anything adequate that would accommodate our shrimp boats.

AH: If you—

RR: So we just—says, well, I said to my wife Helen, "We're going to have to—I guess go and take the restaurant." (laughs) Reluctantly, I says, "Well, we'll keep it for three or four years and sell it." That was nine and a half years ago and we still got it.

AH: Well, not for much longer, though.

RR: No, not much longer.

AH: It's the final stretch here at the Seabreeze.

RR: Couple of weeks and hopefully we'll close the contract. Don't know what will I do after that, probably start fishing again, I guess. We still got our trawlers; they don't want to buy the boats.

AH: So if you had found new facilities, do you think, do you think that you would have taken the Seabreeze?

RR: No, definitely not, no. I am not a restaurant person. I am a fisherman.

AH: So that was a tough transition for you?

RR: Yes, it certainly was, and—

AH: What would you say—

RR: I'm still not comfortable here at the restaurant.

AH: Even after nine and half years?

RR: Even after nine and a half years.

AH: What's the toughest part about running a restaurant, as opposed to fishing—well, first, what's the toughest part about fishing? Would you say—I mean, the life of a fisherman, shrimper?

RR: It's terrible. Away from home twenty days of the a month, away from his family, enduring terrible weather conditions, our troubling is always night, and the best trawling in Tampa is during the winter months, when it's cold—and it does get cold out there, too. When the temperature gets down in the high thirties and you're out there wet all night long and—it's just [a] hard, hard life.

AH: So then you went to that life to kind of a schizophrenic existence, I guess, because not only was the shrimp fleet still running and still doing its thing and bringing in the seafood for the restaurant, but then you had to run the restaurant too. What was—?

RR: I had to help run the restaurant.

AH: So what was the hardest thing about the restaurant, then?—I mean, you say you're still not comfortable. What's—?

RR: I think going from the employees being male to the biggest part of the employees being female.

AH: Really?

RR: Right. Me being an old redneck—cracker, whatever you want to call me—when two men had a problem you would either—you'd normally resolve it by fisticuffs. And after that was over with, if you weren't satisfied with that then you fight again or you shook hands and you were friends after that. But my biggest problem is trying to get along with the females that work here. I cannot—I don't know enough about the way females think to solve problems that we have here in a restaurant.

AH: Does that have anything to do with the sign I saw in the kitchen that says, "Leave your personal life at home"? Or, "When you come to work—"

RR: Yes, but they don't do that; they drag that along with them also, a lot of times.

AH: So you would say that was the single toughest thing for you?

RR: When you fuss at a man it's different then fussing to a lady. Damn, their feelings become hurt very, very quickly, and no matter who's wrong—if they're wrong or if I'm wrong—I apologize before it's all settled, before it's all done. Verbally.

AH: Sure. So, well—I guess that's another big contrast, is that when you're on the shrimp boat, you bark out something that needs to be done, it gets done. And it's a little different here on the land, back in the kitchen.

RR: Boy, it sure is.

AH: So what about customers? I mean, on the shrimp boats it's just you all, you know, you're fishing, you're doing your job. There's no one there to please. And here in the restaurant, it's a different story.

RR: Yes, it is. I'm here seven o'clock, or ten minutes after seven every morning. We get started by mixing our bread for our deviled crabs, mixing our meat for our deviled crabs, getting things going in the kitchen. We work real hard at the quality, the food quality that we put out here. My biggest beef with the customers—some of them, some very few—that no matter how hard you work or how hard you try to put out the best product that you can put out, they are still going to complain about it. So that's why I don't do real well out here in the restaurant. I do better in the kitchen, or in the back, and I try and let my wife solve the problems out here. I just—when a person complains to me about something and has no legitimate reason to complain, it's hard for me to say, "I'm sorry."

AH: Sure. Well—

RR: (laughs) I'll try to do better because I've done the best I can do.

AH: Yeah, and you're involved with every stage, I mean, from catching the stuff out of the sea and everything, and it's still—to have them complain at that point it's pretty tough not to take it personally, I suppose.

RR: The shrimp we catch in this area, because of the brackish water they have a thinner shell. The meat is not softer, necessarily, but it's more tender. When a shrimp starts to decompose, of course it gets soft because it starts to break down the flesh. Well, you've either got a Tampa Bay shrimp or a shrimp that's going in estuaries, which is a tender meat, or you got a shrimp that caught off shore that are old shrimp that are starting to decompose. Well, we have customers that periodically come in, are eating our shrimp, and they complain because the shrimp are mushy. Well, our Tampa Bay shrimp aren't mushy, they're soft. Well, then they don't understand that, because they think they're old shrimp. We have people who come in who are chefs or restaurant owners and complain—not often now, you know—because our shrimp are soft. Well, they're not soft, they're tender.

AH: Yeah, well, that's what I thought when I had the shrimp here—that they were tender; I wasn't thinking they were bad.

RR: When the shrimp migrates to the Gulf, it acquires a heavier shell, and I feel like it is not as tender, because the flesh, I think, tightens up because of the saline in the salt water. Offshore, and as it grows, of course—like a beef, a young beef is more tender than an old beef. Now if you like half grown shrimp, [the] flesh is more tender than a mature shrimp.

AH: Absolutely. So what else, what else about the restaurant? Anything else? How about—let me get you talking about the deviled crab for a second. What makes it so good? I mean, me and lots of other people, they've had devil crabs all over town, and they're the best here. How is that? I mean, I know there's a secret ingredient that you don't want to divulge here, I'm sure, but is there anything else in particular? I mean, you think the—

RR: Well, we don't put any fillers in our meat. We use a sauce that we cook all night; I'm not going to tell you any of the ingredients in it. And then the next morning, of course, we add the tomato sauce, which is tomato paste and tomato puree, to these ingredients that we cooked all night long. And that's added to the crab meat. If that's not put in, the crab meat would not be tasty at all, because the way it's processed—a lot of the flavor is washed out of the crab meat, so you replace that with the sauce that we add to the crab meat.

And we put as much crab meat as we can in that crab without the crab bursting open while it's being cooked; you have to leave about a quarter of an inch of breading all the way around that crab meat. Course now they're not all like that; being made by hand, sometimes the crab meat is close to the surface of the crab. So when you put that in hot oil, the moisture that's in that crab meat—it bursts the crab open. It doesn't hurt it, but it just doesn't look as nice.

I think that's one of the secrets to the Seabreeze devil crabs. We don't replace the crab meat with other fish or any other type fillers, we use all crab meat, and the ingredients that goes into the sauce that goes into the crab. And the breading also has some different ingredients, to give the breading flavor also.

AH: And then, of course, there's the dash of hot sauce on top of the whole thing.

RR: If you want it. We add a lot of crushed red pepper to our breading—and to our sauce also, which gives it flavor.

AH: So what do you think is going to be the hardest thing about saying goodbye to the Seabreeze for you?

RR: I guess all of it. Coming in at seven in the morning and motivating myself, which I think is real important. I'm going to have to probably do something every morning after I retire, not laying in bed till eight or nine o'clock in the morning. Working all my life from the time I was twelve years old selling papers at the shipyard and now being seventy years old, I don't know what it would be like to lay in bed till eight or nine o'clock in the

morning, and I'm not going to do that. I'm going to motivate myself somehow, every day.

AH: Start a new ritual.

RR: Something. Yeah, it's the location here. I've been around the Seabreeze all my life, round the Bay all my life. Going to be a big change. And the people that work here, I'm going to miss them.

AH: At least some of them. (laughs)

RR: Well, the biggest part of them.

AH: Yeah, and eventually you're going to have to say goodbye to the fleet too, right?

RR: No, I'm—they don't want to buy the boats. They're only buying the property and the building. We're having a meeting with the Port Authority, and after that's solved, hopefully we'll be able to move our fleet down to the shrimp boat docks. There's one of the buildings down there that is vacant, and I hope to move down there.

AH: Oh, really? Great—right across the bridge, you mean?

RR: No, back this side of the bridge.

AH: Oh, okay. Well, that'd be good, you don't have to say goodbye to all that, huh?

RR: No. I'll be able to go back down there, every day if I care to, back involved in that again.

AH: Would that be too much for you, Robert?

RR: No.

AH: To say goodbye to the fleet, and the restaurant, if you had to say goodbye to all of it?

RR: Primarily at one time, yes. This is something for me to fall back on. My son, of course, runs the fish market and the seafood market and maintains the vessels, maintains the five shrimp boats. I can go back and start working with him again, maybe run one of the boats. I'm not going to count my chickens till they all hatch. I'm going to wait to the eighth of this following month, which is January the eighth, and—

AH: February the eighth.

RR: February the eighth, I'm sorry—and just go from there.

AH: Well, it sounds good. You've had quite a story up till this point, so I don't imagine it's going to all end here.

RR: Nope, nope. Don't have much of anything else to say.

AH: Well, you know, you brought, just by virtue of you fishing and running a restaurant, you brought a lot of happiness, a lot of good taste to Tampa Bay, and I know there's a lot of people are thankful for that. There was just a poor chap on the telephone who called—I guess he just attended the Super Bowl and he wanted to bring a bunch of devil crabs back to his family. Unfortunately for him the Seabreeze is closed on Mondays, so he sounded a little forlorn. But that's just a good example of the kind of cheer that gets spread around the Bay through the seafood of this place. It will be sorely missed. Thank you for joining us, Robert, and—

RR: One other thing I'd like to share—

AH: Of course.

RR: I guess the Seabreeze has produced devil crabs for over sixty years now, and you know, it's something that people have never got tired of. We're selling from five to six thousand devil crabs a week, in the six days that we are open. I don't say Lucy didn't sell maybe a few more crabs back then, probably in the sixties [1960s], then we're selling now, but it is something that has endured. You see so many things that come out in the market, they have their time and then it's gone. But to be able to sell a product like we're producing for sixty years, and have it still be popular is something I've got to be proud of.

AH: That really is remarkable, really is. And not just the devil crabs, but the Seabreeze itself, that it could last so long and that people would never get tired of it. And there's still the old timers that come here and remember when they were just little ones coming through here, just like yourself. So, well, they thank you. And on behalf of USF and the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics, we all thank you, Robert. Thanks for joining us today.

RR: Okay, thank you.

AH: Thanks, Robert.

[*Transcriber's note: While the interview has formally ended, the tape continues, and another round of questioning begins, without the interviewee or the interviewer knowledge. However, during the second round of questioning the interviewer realizes that their conversation is being recorded, and the interview continues.]

RR: All right.

AH: Turtle excluder—

[Phone rings. Helen Richards is speaking in the background]

AH: So this is a thin fish excluder? Oh, this is the one that you were talking about, that they didn't accept?

RR: Ah—let me see? This is what you are talking about? No, this is the—he doesn't have any—

AH: What is that, for sports fishing or something?

RR: No, no, this is the turtle excluder.

AH: Oh, okay.

RR: This is what they [are] allowing us to use. But we revised this when the Marine Fisheries Commission was going to make it compulsory that we have—We've come up with a way, devised a way to separate the shrimp from the fish. Okay, let the bycatch go. So we've come up with a turtle fish excluder that we'd done a lot of work with here in the Bay, done a lot of testing, and in fact had some people with Marine Fisheries Commission go with two or three times, to compare one net that had the regular fish excluder in it and the other net with the turtle fish excluder in it. The bycatch was substantially less in the excluder that we designed to let the bycatch go. The problem with ours was—and with all the rest of them they've devised—is that we can't separate the fish from the juvenile—I mean, the shrimp from the juvenile fish.

AH: I see.

RR: But we were able to let the mature fish go. They say one out of every four hundred fish that hatch doesn't grow to maturity, four hundred or probably less. So I wouldn't—rather, let one mature fish go than the four hundred juveniles that aren't going to make it anyway. So I thought the Marine Fisheries Commission would probably accept our fish turtle excluder over some of the other designs, but they didn't, and we were really disappointed that they didn't accept it. It would have decreased our catch by probably thirty percent, and it would let those mature fish go. The only thing they are requiring now is a little basketball—I mean, a football-sized opening in the tail bag of the net, which is supposed to let the fish—the bycatch go, but it doesn't work at all.

AH: I see.

RR: So actually, what they're having us use now is not helping with the bycatch at all.

AH: Yeah, and yours would have helped with all the mature fish.

RR: That's right. They would have let those mature fish go because as close as the bars were, that mature fish, the adult fish couldn't go through those bars. So it had an escape

for the turtle and the fish to go out an opening, and I thought it would have saved that bycatch and not going into the tail bag and dying, like it's doing now. Shrimpers are quite destructive in destroying a lot of species, saltwater species that—of course we just trawl in saltwater, fishermen.

What else did you want to ask me about?

AH: I don't know. Why don't we turn this on, and why don't we go over that real quick? I'll just ask you how it came up, when they started asking for some kind of excluders, and then we can just cover that. I'd like to talk to—I'd like for you to talk about that—

RR: That was about 1960; seventy—about 1970.

Helen Richards: They've been on.

AH: Oh, they have been on, this whole time? Oh. Well then, we already went over it, didn't we? Well, why don't we—I'll edit it in. Okay, so when did the—well, first of all, who asked you guys to start using different types of excluders, like fish and turtle excluders, and why?

RR: Well, the Marine Fisheries Commission was going to make it compulsory that we have something installed in the net to release the turtles. So we were given a couple of years, I guess, for different people to design different way of letting the turtles escape.

AH: So this is for the trawlers, right, when you're shrimping and you're dragging along the bottom of the ocean there, or the bay, and you'd scoop up turtles and other things too?

RR: Them being a slow swimmer, you know, they couldn't get out of the way of the net a lot of times and that turtle was going into the tail bag. A lot of times we would trawl the length of probably four hours, and in that length of time that turtle, of course not being able to hold its breath that long, it would die. A lot of turtles that were being caught back then, we'd bring them on boat and turn them upside down and they would revive themselves. I don't remember losing but maybe two or three turtles in Tampa Bay in the thirty years that we trawled in Tampa Bay. You know, by that turtle being in the net—the tail bag—that long.

AH: You think all fishermen was as diligent as you as far as trying to keep the turtles alive?

RR: Heck, no! They didn't care whether the turtles lived or died. We come up with our own design, and we're using it to this day—

AH: For turtle excluder?

RR: Turtle excluder, right. It was accepted by—I'm trying to say National Marine Fisheries—National Marine Fisheries.

AH: But they didn't accept what, your—by fish—your fish excluder?

RR: No, then they—a few years after that, they—we were catching so much bycatch until they wanted us to come up with a way to separate our fish—our bycatch from the shrimp. We worked out here in the Bay with it, we designed it, and we come up with, for a couple of years. And in fact a couple of people from the Marine Fisheries Commission went with us, doing some of our testing to see if the difference in the bycatch from a net that had the turtle excluder from the net that had the turtle fish excluder. And it was extensive, the amount of mature fish that we were able to release.

What we'd done, instead of bars being on four inch centers, we bumped the bars back to an inch and three-quarters centers. During our testing, we had a bait tank here at the bait shop that was full of live shrimp—course we sell for bait—and we would have different designs, and we'd push through those shrimp to see how many shrimp—how the shrimp would go through those bars. We found that the bars that were side by side, those shrimp, a lot of times, would breach across three bars. So what we done was we let one bar ahead of the other and that one back here and than one back here and it let that shrimp turn and go in. So that was something else that we thought would help increase the shrimp catch, you know, and not let those shrimp block themselves off, considering those bars were so close together. Some of the fishermen were worried about the shrimp were going to block off the front of those bars, considering they were as close as they were.

AH: So you just staggered them out one—

RR: We staggered them, right, one bar ahead the other, across the opening. We were able to release probably ninety percent of the mature fish, but we couldn't separate the juvenile fish from the shrimp. But now, what they're having issues now, is a football configuration opening, with this stainless steel and that part has to be open with no webbing in it. That bycatch is supposed go out that tail bag, but it doesn't.

AH: And a lot of shrimp does, too? Does the shrimp go out the back?

RR: No, no. I don't think we lose so many. Except two years ago, *Seaweed IV* was in Alabama, trawling. The Commission over there have a certain time that they open their season and what they call "the lake," which is inside the sounds—well, they kept that closed too long. The water temperature got up and those shrimp moved outside of the sound. The *Seaweed IV*, in one night had over—I think it was three drags—had over a hundred—no, had over a hundred and fifty baskets of shrimp. We had so many shrimp on board that the whole hold of the boat was full, the deck was full. You couldn't get the bags on board; you had to let two of the bags trail along, alongside the boat. And the six hours it took to get them to the dock in Bayou LaBatre to offload the shrimp—well, the captain on the boat told me that shrimp were going out that opening, that football sized opening that the Marine Fisheries Commission is having us use. But only because there was so many shrimp in that tail bag, until—

AH: Just started pushing themselves—

RR: Like they were coming out of the front of the net, it was so many shrimp.

AH: So you got how many shrimp?

RR: That was the most we ever caught in our life, in that length of time.

AH: So you said you caught a hundred and fifty baskets. What's a normal catch, what would you say for a time like that?

RR: Ten baskets.

AH: Ten baskets, wow! Well, that's something else. Well, thanks again, Robert. We are just going to edit that part into what we were already talking about. Well, that's great stuff, you know.

End of interview