March 2006

Robert Richards, Helen Richards oral history interview by Andrew Huse, March 27, 2006

Robert Sidney Richards (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

Helen Chattin Richards (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/flstud_oh

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the Community-based Research Commons

Scholar Commons Citation
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/flstud_oh/253

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

Copyright, 2009, University of South Florida. All rights, reserved.

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.
Andrew Huse: —Twenty-seventh, 2006. I’m Andy Huse, and I’m here with Robert and Helen Richards, the former owners of the Seabreeze [Restaurant], and they ran the (inaudible) Fleet and everything else. And today we’re talking about, I guess, an aspect of vanishing Florida. And first of all, let’s just—let’s get a few of the basics down. I know your story pretty well, but I just want to get a couple of parameters. When—first of all, when did you guys first start fishing in earnest for a living? About what year was that?

Helen Richards: Sixty-six [1966].


AH: Okay.

RR: We had acquired a thirty-six foot lifeboat from Tampa Shipyard, and built a double-axle trailer and took it to our house and worked on it for a year and converted the lifeboat into a small trawler, which we used for four years, and those four years were seasonal because I worked for CB&I [Chicago Bridge and Iron] and we would just go shrimping on the weekends during the winter months.

AH: CB&I, now that’s your boilermaker—(inaudible)?

RR: Yes.

AH: Okay.

RR: Chicago Bridge and Iron.
AH: Okay. So what prompted you guys to get into fishing in the first place? I know that you guys grew up, you know, in—around Palmetto—you know, Palmetto Beach area. But was there anything specific that happened?

RR: Yes. On Twenty-Second Street there is a Stoney’s Restaurant, a place that we hung out at periodically.

AH: Isn’t there still a Stoney’s Liquor store there or something?

RR: Yes. Yes, there is.

HR: It—it changed over the years.

AH: Okay.

RR: It was both back then.

AH: Okay.

RR: A young man named Ewell Beasly, which I grew up with, was telling me that he had stopped at a little restaurant out on Twenty-Second Street and Forty-One [U.S. Highway 41] the other morning for breakfast, and that he walked by a fellow’s pick-up truck, and the pick-up truck had a burlap bag over the top of it—a number three wash tub in the back of the truck had a burlap bag over the top of it, and he’d seen the bag was moving.

Being inquisitive, he lifted up the burlap bag, and lo and behold, there was a number three wash tub full of shrimp. And a lot of them there were alive. Well, he went into the restaurant and asked those fellows where they caught those shrimp at. And they said, “Down by the Alafia River.” Being myself then, I’d lived on the water around the bay all my life—Had seen some shrimp on the bottom when we were crabbing, they have two red eyes that really stand out when you shine the light on them. But I never knew that there were shrimp—that many shrimp in Tampa Bay. But these shrimp now are seasonal; it’s only during the winter months. So I got the bug.

Another friend of mine named James Fagan knew about these shrimp in the bay. So he took me one night with a tri-net and we caught—we caught a mess, but the season was about over. It was in the spring of the year. So I really got the bug then. Now my brother worked at Tampa Shipyard, and the government had bought some troop transports which they converted into grain ships, and they were moving grain to Russia at the time.

AH: Okay.

RR: And they were selling the lifeboats. Well, we bought one of the lifeboats for one-hundred and sixty-eight dollars. All steel, took us the whole year, and we converted it into a little shrimp trawler. Well, for the next three years we worked the trawler in the bay—seasonal, during the winter months. And then we got into it full time when we moved behind the Seabreeze.
Restaurant, and the way I was able to move over there was the Seabreeze was having an awful time acquiring salt crabs. Well, trawling in the bay during the winter months we would catch an awful lot of crabs, and a lot of those were crabs ready to molt. Tony Licata, then running the Seabreeze Restaurant, he says, “Well, come on, move on over here, and you can start shedding out the soft crabs for us.”

AH: Let me just back up just for a second. What—what’d you guys do with the shrimp for those first few odd years? What’d you do with the shrimp that you caught and stuff?

RR: Well, before we moved over to the Seabreeze, we docked at Hooker’s Point and we sold them to a fellow over there named Mickey Rhodes. He had a shrimp house.

AH: Okay.

RR: And they went to the process—

AH: So, was it a shrimp shop, or was it like a fry shack, or—?

RR: No, no, no, it was a—

AH: It was wholesale. Okay. Okay. You want me—

pause in recording

AH: Okay. So then you moved behind the Seabreeze, and Tony Licata was still running it then?

RR: Right.

AH: Was he the one who was running it at the end, when he sold it to you?

HR: George.

AH: Okay, it was George.

RR: His brother, George.

AH: Tony was the—

HR: The older brother.

AH: Yeah, okay. He’s the one that I remember from the Kefauver Committee\(^1\) hearings and the white suit. Yeah.

HR: (laughs)

---

\(^1\) The official name for the Kefauver Committee is Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce, which was active during the early 1950s, and targeted organized crime.
AH: Okay. So let’s just talk for a minute about your relationship with the Licatas then. Obviously you guys come from kind of different backgrounds, but what was—what was that like? Did you consider yourselves friends? Were you business partners? How did that work?

RR: Just good friends.

AH: Okay.

RR: It wasn’t long after we moved over behind the Seabreeze that George and Tony split up. They had the vending machine business. So, Tony took the vending machine business and George took the restaurant. Well, being a pretty good carpenter, because I’ve roofed and done carpenter work for about seventeen years, he needed a couple of rooms built on the side of the building that they have put up there after the Seabreeze burnt down in 1950. But it was a great big barracks building, and they needed a couple offices. So I built some—them a couple offices for them.

AH: Now, when you say a barracks building was—is it—you’re just referring to the style that it was built in or—?

HR: No, it was a barracks building, from Drew Fields.

AH: Oh, it was from Drew Fields.

HR: Yes.

AH: What did it get moved over?

RR: Yeah, they moved them over there—

AH: Oh, I see. Okay, I understand. Okay, sorry about that.

RR: No, that’s all right.

AH: So you built those outlying rooms for them?

RR: And—and got to be really good friends with George. And I told George that I’d like to build a small building over there. And move over there permanently. Well, that was fine with him. We first started off with a small open building and we put in two big tanks under this building to hold our crabs and our shrimp, which we could sell retail. At the same time, a boy named Lloyd Raimey was interested in doing the same thing so we kinda went into partnership. We—built a hundred crab traps, got started with the crabs in the summer months, and during the winter months we would catch shrimp and sell them, mostly live bait, to begin with. We didn’t have any way to keep them fresh or frozen. We just sold them live. Well, April came along and the shrimp migrated out of the bay, which they do every year when the water temperature gets up to about seventy-eight degrees.

AH: Now, when the temperature in the bay gets up to seventy-eight then they leave to get—stay in the cool water, right?

RR: Indeed. And migrate to the Gulf.
RR: And then you don’t have any more shrimp in the bay until October—about the fifteenth of October you’ll start catching a few shrimp again, when the water cools down again.

AH: Okay.

RR: A fellow came to me told me about how many shrimp they were catching in Alabama. So Lloyd Raimey and I packed up that little old boat and headed off to Louisiana. We got up to Crystal River and the clutch went out of the boat. So we brought it back on an idle to Tarpon Springs, pulled the engine out of the boat, rebuilt the transmission, headed off again. Went over there and caught some shrimp. Done real good. Went on down past the Mississippi River to the other side and the season was about over with. So we come on back to Gulfport, Mississippi, to some docks there, and stayed there for about three weeks, got homesick, caught seven hundred to eight hundred pounds of shrimp, iced them down, and headed home. And I never was so happy to be home in my life.

AH: (laughs)

HR: He got out and kissed the ground.

RR: I sure did.

HR: And had twenty-five cents between us.

AH: At that time?

HR: At that time.

AH: Okay.

RR: I had to go back to work during the summer when I worked for Bob Clark, Tampa Steel Erectors, on a number six at TECO [Tampa Electric Company] until that fall. Well, during the summer months Lloyd would run the crab traps and sell the crabs and we started making a little money, and Helen [speaking to Helen], was it that year or the next year that we went up to Valona, Georgia and bought that little boat? No! No, no let me back up a little bit. The foreman that I worked with, with Chicago Bridge and Iron, for years, named A.J. Paul, consented to loan us twenty thousand dollars to buy another shrimp trawler.

AH: Okay. I’m listening.

RR: All right. The shrimp trawler that was for sale was up in Valona, Georgia. It was a fifty-five foot wood hulled boat.

AH: Okay.

RR: And the asking price was twenty thousand dollars.

HR: Name [of the boat] was Mary L—
RR: Yes. The name of the boat was Mary L; we changed it to Seaweed II.

AH: Oh, yes. Okay.

RR: Well, we’d done real well with it that winter; in fact we’d paid the boat off before that next spring.

AH: Oh, wow! You really were doing all right.

RR: We bought it for twenty thousand dollars and paid him back twenty-five thousand.

AH: Okay.

RR: Twenty-five percent interest. And he was real happy about that. So were we, because we had a boat that was paid for, in fact, two boats. The Seaweed I was the little steel hull boat, forty-five foot boat, and of course the wood hull boat that we bought up in Valona.

AH: Okay.

RR: Well, that next year we built a building and that consisted of an eighteen by twenty-four foot market with a— with a freezer built in one end of it. We find a fish case and put it in. And we had the— still had the building with our bait tanks under it.

AH: Okay.

RR: So, we were in business.

AH: All right, with just the two ships then?

RR: Just the two vessels.

AH: Yeah. So what year was that then—that you were officially in business with the two boats then?

RR: Honey, you going to have to help me just a little bit more—

HR: Well—

AH: Was it sixty-eight [1968] or—?

HR: I think about sixty-nine [1969].

AH: Okay.

HR: Yeah. I think you got the— maybe ’70.

AH: Okay.

HR: Well, around there.

(pouring liquid)
AH: There you go, sir.

HR: But people were not used to having heads on shrimp.

AH: Oh, okay. And so, that was a little different.

HR: Well, that—we were advertising them and showing people how to take the heads off and telling them how good they were with the heads on.

AH: Much better flavor when you cook them up that way.

HR: Yeah, it really—really—(inaudible)

RR: Well, let’s back up a little bit. When we were in Louisiana, we stopped at four or five different little fish markets. We come back intracoastal [the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway or ICW and Gulf Intracoastal Waterway or GCW], when we came back from Louisiana. From Gulfport you can run in the intracoastals all the way back to Apalachicola. Well, periodically we’d come to a fish market and all the fish markets had, the shrimp that they were selling all had the heads on.

HR: In Tampa, nobody did.

RR: They didn’t have—they didn’t—

AH: Why do you figure that?

RR: Well, because they could tell how old the shrimp was by looking at the color of the head.

AH: Ah! So what—how do you tell the color? What do you—?

RR: Well, the head starts to turn red.

AH: Okay. So the older it is, the more red the head is.

HR: The fir—yeah, the head is the first thing that rots on the shrimp.

RR: That’s what’s decomposing, because that’s where the digestive system is—

HR: Acid is—(inaudible).

AH: Okay. Gotcha.

RR: So, it caught on. We started selling heads-on shrimp. A few headless also, but mostly heads on. Well, as the production increased, we had the two boats instead of the one; my wife Helen, she advertised them in the paper once in a while. Well, the sales were excellent.

HR: They were the prettiest ads of any in the newspaper.

AH: (laughs) Is that right? Yeah. I’ll have to find some of those.

HR: People would line up—
AH: Was that in the *Tampa Tribune* or—?

HR: Yeah.

AH: Okay.

HR: People would line up for two blocks.

AH: Yeah.

HR: In the rain.

AH: Yeah.

HR: With umbrellas and high heels—

AH: I know I would. Well, maybe not the high heels.

HR: —to buy, to get those shrimp.

AH: Okay.

HR: And, uh—we were (inaudible)—

AH: I know I never got my shrimp anywhere else when you guys were still in business.

HR: You’d never see anything like it.

RR: Well, the two boats, after another year or so, the two boats weren’t enough. So—

HR: And a bait boat—Had a bait boat. We were selling bait, live bait down there.

RR: Well, we sold live bait when we first moved over there—

HR: Yeah. Ever since we first started. And we—

RR: —that we caught with the *Seaweed I*.

HR: Yeah, and people would be there, in line, at six o’clock in the morning, just the lines, you would not believe.

AH: As they’re going out to fish for the day.

HR: Yeah, yeah, because there was so much fish out in the bay then.

AH: Yeah.

HR: Anything that you wanted to fish was out there.

RR: And the size of the shrimp that we were catching. The bait shrimp that they catch up Tarpon Springs north, normally, are smaller shrimp. But the shrimp we were catching was much larger
and that just—that brought the snook fishermen. Boy, they would be there waiting, for when we—

AH: Okay.

RR: I would shrimp all night long. Get in there in time to get the shrimp and the live bait unloaded. I would head home. My wife would take over the market.

HR: Like ships in the night we passed.

AH: (laughs) Yeah.

HR: I cooked him breakfast—I don’t remember, did I cook you breakfast? You came home while it was still dark—try and make it home while it was still dark so I’d fix you breakfast and get the kids to school and then I’d leave.

AH: Okay.

RR: That’s right. That’s right.

HR: And when the kids came home—

RR: I have to go way back; this has been a lot of years.

AH: (laughs) Yeah.

HR: Yeah—and when the kids came home they’d wake you up, and you’d come down there and take over so I could fix supper. Yeah.

AH: Okay. So how many—you had, what was it, three boys?

HR: Three boys and a daughter.

AH: Okay.

HR: But Tommy was already gone—I think when Jenny was ten years old, she got married.

AH: Okay.

RR: We found that during the summer months, early in the fall, in September, that if we had a shallow enough boat we could start catching our bait early in the season, because until the water got real cold, the shrimp would be up in the flats in the grass; and then when the water temperature got down in the seventies, the shrimp would fall off into the deeper water. So we bought a little boat from Gene Loughlin, a little tunnel boat, and—kept it for how long?

HR: Years. Seven, eight years, because Walter Boleyn ran it.

RR: Yes, he did.

HR: Long, long time.
RR: In fact, we sold him the boat. It’s—it’s up in Crystal River now. Well, it was two years ago.

HR: Sunk it there—

RR: Well, it sunk with us, too, a couple of times.

(everyone laughs)

AH: So—

RR: Well, then we started building boats. We built the *Seaweed III*.

HR: At that—well, that time we had those two boats that was such a—so neat, every type of fish that you can imagine was in the bay. And, getting better all the time—

AH: Just kinda give us a list—what are some of the main things that were of your main stays?

HR: This was before turtle extruders\(^2\) and things like that. So we’d—

AH: Sure.

HR: So we’d catch everything. And—

AH: Like what? What were some of the most common stuff?

HR: —and sea turtles were legal back then. So we’d have ’em on display out there.

AH: Oh, sure, turtle soup.

HR: Yeah, yeah.

RR: No, no, no we never butchered one.

HR: We never—

AH: Oh, okay.

RR: We had a pen built out there, down in the water.

AH: I see.

RR: We had a couple of turtles in there.

AH: Okay.

HR: It was like an aquarium—(inaudible)

AH: But you just sell them live, then?

\(^2\) A device that is placed inside shrimping nets to expel accidentally caught sea turtles.
RR: No, no, they were not for sale.
HR: They were not for sale.
AH: Oh, they were just for display. I understand now. Okay.
HR: We had tanks full of just nothing but horseshoe crabs, tanks—people loved to come see those things—
AH: Okay. So it was kinda entertainment too, to come down and see you.
HR: All the blue crabs. Oh, my heavens!
AH: So what were some of the other kinds of fish, though, that you could sell, that, you know, were moneymakers for you?
RR: Silver trout, whiting, crokers, what we call spots, which are butterfish.
AH: Okay.
RR: And that was about all—
HR: Sheepshead.
RR: Yes, but we didn’t catch those with a trawler.
AH: Oh, I see. But did you—
RR: The species that I mentioned we caught with a trawler.
AH: So, did you actually go fishing for fish, too, then?
RR: Yes. We acquired a gill net boat.
AH: Okay.
RR: And caught mullet, and specked trout.
HR: And we were allowed back then to buy fish from the public. It was legal. As long as they had a license, you know, to—you know, a fishing license, you know, they could sell us fish.
AH: Okay.
HR: Trout—
AH: So, all right, so the bulk of the stuff was sold in your—the seafood shop, then?
RR: Right. That’s right.
AH: Okay. How mu—what did you supply to the Seabreeze, and did that change over the years? What you supplied them, or—?
RR: We supplied hard crabs for their enchilada or crab Chilau, which is how the crackers pronounced it.


HR: Crab Chilau.

RR: And—

AH: Describe that dish for me real quick. Was that with, like, a sofrito\(^3\)? The enchilada?

RR: You would stem the crabs, clean them, cut them in half, cut half the legs off, take the claws off, and crack the claws so this tomato sauce would cook into the claw meat.

HR: This tomato sauce, we’d cook half the day. You know, cook it—

RR: Very similar to a Ragu or Prego\(^4\).

HR: But it was made homemade, you know, everything—

AH: Yeah.

HR: —from scratch.

RR: And you’d eat that over pasta.

HR: And you’d put Chinese tablecloth on you. You’d layer the table with lots of little—real thick with newspaper—

AH: Okay.

HR: —And you’d tell everyone to wear old clothes because you spent hours eating and you—you didn’t get full because you ate so slow, cause it took you so long to do it.

AH: So—so they just simmer the crab with the legs and the claws cut off in the sauce—

RR: In the sauce.

AH: And it was up to you to suck all the meat out and everything, right?

RR: You’d take a knife—take a sharp knife and go down through that half of a crab between the legs and make, like, four pieces out of it. Then you can get to the meat of leg.

AH: Okay.

HR: And we always fold our own silverware according to how heavy the knives were, so you can crack the claws.

\(^3\) A Spanish base sauce found in Latin cooking.

\(^4\) These are both brands of spaghetti sauce.
AH: Okay.

RR: Even though we cracked that claw a little bit—

AH: Yeah.

RR: —to let that tomato sauce in, you’d have to continue to crack it so that you can get the—

AH: So they serve over, like, spaghetti, though?

RR: Over pasta.

AH: Yeah, okay.  All right, that sounds good.

RR: Excellent.

AH: What were some of the other dishes, like, before you guys took over, that you remember from the old days that they made?  Because I know that one goes way back, they had ads for that in the thirties, I think—or the forties? For crab enchilada.

HR: You mean at the restaurant?

AH: Yeah. I know some of them—

HR: Oh—the double crabs—yeah, the beef stew and yellow rice—

AH: Okay.

HR: —and the yellow rice and chicken.

RR: Spaghetti and meatballs.

HR: Spaghetti and meatballs.

AH: Well that’s—that’s a little different—and I don’t know if you have any insight into this, but typically in Ybor City and here in Tampa it seemed there was a lot of Spanish and Cuban restaurateurs but there wasn’t so many Italians, at least until, like, say, the forties [1940s].  I know the Seabreeze was a little unusual back then.

HR: Cracker—that Cracker blend in with it.

AH: Yeah. So kinda that Cracker and the Italian with a little—

HR: Spanish.

AH: Yeah. With a little bit Spanish in there.  Is there—

HR: It’s very Cuban in there.

AH: Yeah.  What’s the story there? I mean, it just seems like as much as I’ve looked at restaurants and studied them, there’s not a lot of old, old Italian restaurants that survived. Is there anything different about this place?
RR: I think what kept the Seabreeze going was Plant City, Lakeland, Bartow, and all those adjacent small towns. And they had to kinda go to a Cracker food to bring those—

AH: Okay.

RR: Rednecks in.

AH: Yeah. All—not the hinterland, though, around Tampa. And that’s why it really made sense, too, as a drive-in, ‘cause you had all these kids—you know, people driving in from, you know—the outside, right?

RR: Yeah. You could go in or buy your meal outside as take-out.

AH: Yeah.

HR: When they bought the barracks building in, there was not room for them—people to sit.

AH: Okay.

HR: So they had curb service.

AH: Oh, okay.

HR: Them coming in, they would send the girls outside.

AH: Now, before the fire. Did they have more space before the fire?

RR: Yes. It was a larger building, but they didn’t have the takeout.

AH: Okay. So—

RR: They didn’t have the drive-in, that they—

AH: That’s interesting. I never really, you know—heard it quite like that before, that they were kinda forced into it, the drive-in, to some extent.

HR: They had all these juke-boxes out there, that the music was so loud you could hear coming down the road, that was—

AH: So they had juke-boxes out the parking lot?

HR: Out in the park—well, it’s the same thing, there—the dirt buildings, then—

AH: Okay.

HR: Big area there where the girls would go up there and get the food. They had those one arm bandits out there, the slot machines.

RR: Backing up a little bit, just until the 1950s, when the Seabreeze, that great big wooden building burnt down.

AH: Yeah.
RR: We were living on Palmetto Beach at the time, up in a two-story house, renting from a lady named Mrs. Katurla, and I looked out the window across the bay and seen an awfully big fire. We concluded it was the Seabreeze restaurant. And we jumped in a little pick-up truck I had then and headed out that way they had Twenty-Second Street blocked off. Between the bridge and the Seabreeze—Old Seabreeze Restaurant was the city limits; the fire trucks had stopped right there because they wouldn’t go out any further. It wasn’t but a couple hundred yards further on down. (laughs)

AH: That’s funny.

RR: But the restaurant—but they wouldn’t go down there to go put it down, because it wasn’t on county property.

AH: Oh, man. That’s silly.

RR: And—

AH: The county didn’t handle fire—firemen, huh?

RR: I don’t know, if they did or didn’t. They didn’t get there before it was burnt down.

AH: Yeah.

RR: Big fire.

AH: Maybe the Licatas didn’t pay the right people. (laughs)

RR: Well—I wouldn’t say that or not.

AH: No, no, I’m—none of this stuff’s going—but um, one of things just to kinda get your point of view too, and however much you want to talk about it is completely up to you, but obviously Tony was called before the Kefauver Committee in 1950, actually, right before that fire. To testify about bolita operations. And it was reported in newspapers that he was a bag man, meaning that he—he collected money, selling the bolita tickets, and everything, this was widespread practice in Tampa, it was, everyone kinda winked at each other about it. To what extent, I mean—have you heard stories or—you know? Or was it just common knowledge or was it not talked about?

RR: Well, through the years, and especially after we moved there to the restaurant, it was small talk that the two of them had been mixed up with the Mafia in some way or another.

HR: I know, I didn’t know anything—that much about it, cause I know—I was just a kid but, when we went back past by the Seabreeze, all of us kids in the backseat of the car, my father would make all of us turn our head and look the opposite direction and not even allow us to look at the Seabreeze, because they sold liquor.

AH: Oh, yeah.

RR: And other things.
AH: Yeah, though, what do you mean?
RR: Well, they had an upstairs and (laughs)—they had a couple of girls that worked up there.
AH: Oh, okay, yeah. I had heard that kind of intimations in that direction before. So—
HR: They said you could buy that you wanted at the Seabreeze.
AH: (laughs). So—
RR: And you could get liquor out the back door on Sunday morning, too.
AH: Okay, when you weren’t allowed to buy it.
RR: Yeah, and that was even after we moved there. On Sunday morning, you see—
HR: A line.
RR: —see them handing out liquor out the back door on Sunday morning.
AH: Well, I understand—
RR: We just—we always looked the other way that way—
AH: Oh, sure. That was their business.
RR: That was their business.
AH: Yeah. Well, that kind of reminds me of the story that you talked about when the Klan came to scare all the kids, cause they were selling liquor out against to some of the young-uns, right?
HR: Yeah.
AH: Yeah. That straightened them right up for a while, all right.
HR: All the kids thought it was them (laughs) that was in trouble.
AH: Yeah, so—now, in the seventies [1970s], then is when you really got hard and heavy into the fishing, right? I mean, this is when you started building your fleet?
RR: Yes.
AH: Okay. Now—now I know things changed quite a bit over the next couple decades, and let’s talk a little about the ecology of the bay and how fishing had changed. Did it become tougher, and if so, when did it become tougher? Certainly you guys had mentioned in the cookbook [Seabreeze by the Bay Cookbook], but we don’t have to cover that verbatim or anything—but we could—you know, talked about the spring for the ants and how that was a disaster. Tell us just a little about how fishing changed, and what were all the different factors that you guys felt.
RR: You mean the pesticide to kill the fire ants?
AH and HR: (speaking at the same time in unison) Yeah.
RR: I think that was a—dropped by a plane in pellet form.

AH: Yeah.

HR: Landed on our hair and everything, we were on the boat that night when he was spraying. But before that, I can still remember Robert telling us we’ve never seen so many fish, of so many varieties that was coming back into the bay for the first time in a long time. We hadn’t seen so many of those species. They were just, like, going away, and we were starting to see scallops and all kinds of things out then and after the myrex [a form of pesticide], after they sprayed with the myrex, we went back out shrimping a couple of nights later and you could take the crabs and you could peel the backs off of the crabs and pour the insides out—

AH: Yeah that’s terrible.

HR: It was just—

RR: That’s crab that had died.

HR: No, no it—they were still alive. We took them—

RR: —They turned white looking, remember?

HR: Yeah, but remember we took a whole bunch of them to over to the—to the St. Pete—over there to the—

AH: Oh, yeah.

HR: Yeah, over there where they do the research.

AH: Yes.

HR: And, but they were still alive. It didn’t matter how many you got still alive, they were like liquid on the inside, and it was a few nights later we went out again and there was no fish. None.

AH: So that’s one example. Were there any other—any other kind of things that you thought that were misguided?

RR: Well, the chemical plant—way back then was the name of it was US Phosphoric and they had an awful—quite a few frequent—chemical spills, and I think that had a factor—big factor on the bay.

AH: Okay. What did you—there was a—it made an impact every time they spilled something?

RR: Yes. We would have crab traps along the fill along the Tampa channel, and we could tell when they had an acid spill because the green—long slimy green grass that would grow on the crab line between the float [marker buoy] and the crab trap, instead of pretty and green it would be white, and we’d pull a crab trap up, and trap after trap all the crabs would be dead, even the crabs that were in the outside of the trap holding on to the trap would be dead. So, the chemical that they dumped in it had to be quite strong to—
AH: Oh, yeah.

HR: And burned your eyes.

RR: Quite acidic to kill that crab on the outside of the trap, it didn’t have time to—

AH: Oh, sure.

RR: The funny thing about it, wouldn’t be a few days later those crab come back. Not as many now. But the crabs that survived would come back.

AH: Pretty resilient, huh? The bay was pretty resilient. So—anything else environmentally before we move on to other issues?

HR: Well, the fish—there was one of the reporters—one of the scientists from the marine place down there, he was telling me that he had done research on the sharks, in Key West, he says that he did, on the reproduction of them and the sterility of them. And he says that in Key West that the infertility rate was very small, only like 12 percent infertility rate, but as he came up the coast when he got to Tampa it was almost like 98 percent infertility on the sharks. And I said, “Why don’t you test on the mud and all the fish that we eat to find out what’s happening?” He said, “There’s not enough funding for it.” So he could not—could not do it, but he just assumed that if it worked on the sharks I’m sure same is on the—on the other fish too. And that’s why he felt like (inaudible) was from all the acid spills and everything.

AH: Okay, caused infertility.

HR: Caused—caused—yeah.

AH: Well, it’s pretty amazing that the—the bay had so much bounty for so long with all these things happening. Now what—what were some of the other issues that put pressures on you? Was overfishing an issue, and if so, when did that become an issue?

HR: Never.

RR: No, no, I don’t think that was ever a problem.

AH: It was the environmental—

HR: It was never an issue.


RR: It was the things that were being put into the bay.

AH: Okay. Now let’s just talk for a minute—just want to make sure I got the story straight and everything about your turtle excluder [turtle excluder device, or TED]. When did you develop that and why? What were—and then what inspired it, I guess?

RR: Well, the state was going to make it mandatory that we use an excluder of some kind to let that turtle escape, instead of going back into the tail bag, let release that turtle before it got that
far back into—into the net, and we did some extensive study on it for two or three years and come up with our own excluder. It’s called “Seaweed Excluder,” and it’s still being used today. It works quite well.

AH: Now, how did—how did work, as far as it becoming expanding people using it all around, how did that idea kinda get out into the market place? Did people copy it, or did you patent it?

RR: No, there was a number of different styles of turtle excluders but—I can’t remember the gentleman’s name now that certified ours.

AH: Okay, so you had to have it certified by, like, a government agency?

RR: In St. Petersburg.

AH: Okay. Okay.

RR: I think his name was Rodney Sawyer, but I’m not sure.

HR: You might be right—I think you’re right.

AH: All right.

RR: In fact, they accepted it—the state accepted it and certified it, and we’re using it today.

AH: Okay. So at that point when it becomes certified then it kinda becomes open knowledge or for open use?

RR: Yes. Anyone can make that style if they wanted to make them. We didn’t have a patent or anything like it.

HR: We asked them about patenting it and he says, “No, that was his contribution to the shrimping fleet and they wanted to use it; they—if they helped them, then he wanted to help them.”

AH: Oh, I see. Okay. And then what are some of the other, I guess, responsibilities, I mean, when you’re in that—obviously, the turtles—that was an issue. Were there any other things that you had to be kinda careful about?

RR: I can’t recall now of anything else that—other than the myrex that they—that they would spray in the bay.

AH: The waste—

HR: The waste treatment plant. I mean—not the waste treatment plant but the incinerator, the incinerator.

RR: My brother was still working for the boilermakers—in 1981 or eighty-two [1982], and he had a job with—with the boilermakers, he was the foreman on the job to change out on of the precipitator. What this precipitator is that all the smoke from those burners had to be released, but it—it was released through a great big cylinder, and out of this cylinder on the inside they
sprayed water and that—what they called scrub the smoke. When the smoke released, it didn’t have all these chemicals in it. Well, I went to work with him for a couple of—two or three weeks, putting in a new precipitator, and I got to talk to one of the chemists there because all the water that come out this precipitator was going out into a pond out—and I says, “Well, what would happen if that would get out into the bay?” He says, “Well, it has.” And I says, “Well, what’s in that—that water—that’s going down that trough?” In fact it was a trough lined with brick, acid brick. That’s where the pond was at. He says, “There’s seven different acids that we can analyze that that comes out of this—”

AH: Process.

RR: “—Precipitator, this process.” And he says that he don’t know how many more there are; that we can’t. So when that’s released in the bay that’s another (inaudible) chemical that was—

AH: So what happened—did it overflow, or did they release a little at a time, or—?

RR: I’m not sure. I didn’t—I didn’t go out to this pond. But you could see that it didn’t have a—it wasn’t in a good reservoir, because it was up pretty close to the top of a levee back then.

HR: They was just dumping everything out there into the bay and it was just filling up the bay much, much faster than what they expected it to, and they had an article in the newspaper, “does anybody in the public have any suggestions on what we can do to clean up this problem, any ideas or suggestions?” So me and Robert, we went to the meeting and we listened to what everybody said and they said, “How much should they dump into the bay?” And people would say different things, and—We just waited there till everybody ’bout finished talking, and then we suggested that they go to Switzerland, and—cause we’d already studied up on it, and what they were doing in Switzerland, and they were converting all their waste to energy, to electricity, and reclaiming most everything in there. And I think we had six or seven different suggestions, and they followed all six or seven of them. They came to us—I guess it must’ve been about a year later or two years later, and had a whole committee come there, to the Seabreeze, and tell us that they used every one of our suggestions and that Tampa incinerator was the first one in the nation that used—converted their waste into electricity.

AH: So how did they—

HR: And it was because of our suggestion.

AH: Do you know anything about the process?

HR: Not any.

AH: Okay.

HR: We just read about it in the—in the, you know, one of the scientific studies about what Switzerland—

AH: Was this a county meeting?

HR: It was just a—
AH: Was it a state or—the hearings?

HR: I don’t know. I don’t even remember where it was that we went to the meeting. I just know it was about the waste treatment plant.

AH: Okay.

RR: The waste treatment plant or the garbage burner, Helen?

HR: The garbage burner.

RR: Okay, not the waste treatment plant.

AH: I remember the story about that. Yeah.

HR: The incinerator.

AH: Yeah.

HR: It was the incinerator. They—

AH: Do you remember where that meeting was? [speaking to Robert]

RR: No, I do not.

AH: Okay.

HR: I do not remember where the meeting was.

RR: You know, when they first built that, all it done was burn the garbage, they didn’t use any of the heat for—for turning steam into electricity.

AH: Yes. Okay.

HR: Yes, and they just dumped all the ashes into the bay.

AH: Sure. And they just used—

HR: And it cleaned up the bay tremendously after they did that.

AH: Okay. So when do you think—environmentally, we’re talking—about all these spills and other things, when was the low point for Tampa Bay? I mean, when was it in the worst health, do you think?

HR: After the myrex. It would kill about everything.

AH: If we just look at it, like, in a long term, too.

RR: It was in the eighties [1980s]. Helen, when the—there would be some seasons out there we could not catch enough shrimp to pay the fuel. In fact, it got down so bad during the fall—what we called the peak of the season, you couldn’t catch twenty pounds of shrimp a night.
AH: Wow.

RR: And then—

AH: What was usual for you?

RR: Oh, four, five hundred pounds.

AH: A night?

RR: Yes.

AH: Okay. So—and that was, you say, in the eighties [1980s]? Was this, like, the mid-eighties [1980s], late eighties [1980s], the early?

RR: I don’t recall.

AK: Okay.

RR: Only I know that there was some years that were really—just nothing out there. There wasn’t that many fish to catch.

HR: The fish were—

AH: Did you ever have to use (inaudible)?

HR: Back then, the fisherman for the—disaster and the fish, they said that we were overfishing but (chuckles)—there was no way.

AH: They always seem to blame it on the fisherman. Yeah.

RR: That continued on into the nineties [1990s] even when the ban—the net ban\(^5\) went into effect.

AH: Okay. So did you ever have to stop and say, “Maybe I got to get into another line of work?” I mean was there a time where you ever questioned this?

RR: (laughs) Yes, we did. That’s why we went and bought the Seabreeze Restaurant.

AH: Okay, okay. So—

RR: Our son took over the fish market and as hard he tried, he didn’t—couldn’t make a go of it. Even though we had five boats then and—

AH: So, all right, so, was it just good timing, then, that you were kinda looking for another option and the Licata’s were ready were ready to get out?

RR: I think so.

\(^5\) The Gill Net Ban, a 1994 Florida amendment prohibiting the use of gill nets in Florida waters.
AH: This is in ninety-two [1992], right?
RR: No, ninety-seven [1997].
HR: Ninety-one [1991].
AH: That they sold the restaurant to you?
HR: We bought the restaurant in ninety-one [1991].
RR: That’s right,
HR: Ninety-two [1992] when we took over it. But we was already starting the process in ninety-one [1991].
AH: Okay, so now your son Jimmy took over the— the seafood shop. Now, so, how did that work? I mean did—were you guys kinda helping to subsidize it to keep it going?
RR: We did for years.
AH: Okay. Yeah.
HR: Always had to because we had to, you had to, buy—you could not—they did not allow you to buy—the laws became so restrictive you could not buy from fishermen anymore. Even thought they desperately needed the money, and it— to them before it was always a little source of income for different families.
AH: Oh, sure.
HR: So then they made it so you had to have a wholesale license. And to get a wholesale license you had to catch so much. It had to be your main income—(inaudible).
AH: So, why would they pass a law—what was the logic behind the law like that?
RR: Driving the commercial fisherman out of business.
AH: Now why would they want to do that?
RR: For the tourist trade.
AH: Okay, they what—but you figure they’d want lots of fresh seafood for the tourists but they figured, could just, they’d ship in the frozen stuff.
RR: They want—no, they catch them themselves.
AH: Oh, I see. So, what, the bigger fisherman then, it was for the what?
RR: The sports fisherman. The sports fisherman took over—over the—(inaudible) abolish the fish—the commercial industry.
HR: They would look out there and see the shrimp boats and say, “Oh, they’re just cleaning up on all the fish. They’re catching all the fish out there that we should be catching, hook and line and maybe we can’t catch them on hook and line.”

They’d just blame the fisherman even though the shrimp boats were not catching any of the fish that they caught, because the shrimp boats would fish for the mullet.

AH: Okay, so this is for all the people coming from up north and fishermen—

HR: Mainly, yes.

AH: Yeah, fishing contests and—

RR: Yes, sports fishermen.

AH: All this stuff, okay.

HR: They sure made it hard on anybody.

AH: So when did these laws start to be passed? Was this at the same time in the eighties [1980s], or was this in the nineties [1990s]?

HR: There’s starting in the—no, in the eighties [1980s], they started in the eighties [1980s].

RR: Little by little. Yeah.

AH: Yeah. And then—

HR: After—after the myrex spill—

RR: They became more restrictive.

HR: They was blaming everything on the fishermen.

AH: And the net ban, when did that hit? That was in the nineties [1990s]?

HR: Um no, that was in the eighties [1980s] too.

AH: The net ban. Now what was—what kind of net was banned and what was the logic there, once again?

RR: To save the species.

HR: They were going to save the mullet because the—

AH: So this was gill nets you weren’t allowed to use?

HR: Yeah, gill nets. They—they looked out there and they didn’t see all those schools of mullet going down anymore. There wasn’t any anymore. They were almost all sterile and yet they blame the fisherman. But it wasn’t the fisherman. The fish were sterile. They weren’t reproducing.
AH: So, when you got into the restaurant, then, obviously that was a whole new change and that’s documented in the cookbook and everything, but—so that was your profit then, was the restaurant itself, right?

RR: Well, as production declined in the seafood industry, instead of selling a lot of the product wholesale, our son would bring it to the restaurant there. We’d process it there and sell it at a profit.

AH: Okay. Yeah, I see. So that changed—changed the business?

HR: It fed the market, it—we fed off of the market and the market fed us. It was just a cycle.

AH: So with, without one of the other, if you just had the restaurant or just had the market, you wouldn’t have made it, you don’t think?

HR: Would not have made it. No.

AH: Okay. Now the Licatas, they never had their own shrimp fleet before you guys showed up, right? I mean, they didn’t have their own—their own crabbing and everything else, right? Did they?

RR: No, no; if you look back at the 1940s and 1950s there wasn’t but one little restaurant in Brandon. Now you couldn’t name the restaurants.

AH: Oh, yeah.

RR: You’d have to start out in the A’s and go through to the Z’s. (laughs)

AH: And now Brandon has so many restaurants. I mean you don’t have to look at Tampa to get over one. So—

RR: That had an effect on the Seabreeze Restaurant, also as those restaurants increased, and—

HR: People had so many more choices where to go.

AH: Sure, and they didn’t have to drive all the way out from Plant City or Brandon to come eat at your place, or then it was still the Licatas. So—all right, so, then we got ourselves into the nineties [1990s] now, and let’s talk about, kinda, the last few years and everything. At what point did you guys seriously start thinking about retirement then?

HR: (laughs). Since we bought it.

AH: Is that right? Were you working so hard? Is that right, Robert?

(Helen and Robert laugh)

RR: Oh, my goodness. Yes, I’d be there at six-thirty in the morning making up the dough and mixing up the crabmeat for the deviled crab, and about half the time the night man wouldn’t show up to clean the place and we’d be there till twelve or one o’clock in the morning cleaning
up, mopping the floors and cleaning up and trying to get closed up to get back down there at five-thirty or six the next morning, seven days a week.

AH: So just you traded one grind for another grind.

HR: Worse, much worser grind.

AH: Okay, it was much worse then? So—

HR: And see—

RR: The restaurant—it’s just so demanding.

AH: Yeah.

HR: And the seafood, again, you could not buy from the fishermen. You had to go through a wholesale house.

AH: Whatever you couldn’t—

HR: And that was from around the world, and you didn’t know what kind of seafood you were getting, or how clean it was, or germ-free or whatever.

RR: Bacteria free.

HR: Bacteria free.

AH: Now that’s a whole ’nother challenge there, is just being able to get supplied with decent seafood, right? Because there’s probably a lot of crappy stuff out there, right?

HR: You had to watch it—Robert had to watch it all the time.

AH: Yeah. So—

RR: ’Course we never did—we never did have a grouper boat, so the grouper and snapper we’d to catch, I mean, would have to buy them.

AH: Right, yeah. Okay. So. So, then, obviously, all right, you’re already starting to think about retirement, ’cause you got this grind, this new grind—

HR: We had a tiger by the tail. We couldn’t turn it loose. Then the [Tampa] Port Authority, then you—they wouldn’t allow us to turn it loose.

AH: Now when did you first, did you first become—I don’t want to get too deep into the Port Authority business, but it’s definitely worth mentioning. When did you first become aware that there was a dispute, or something to be disputed over, or that they were trying to pull a fast one? ’Cause that’s what it sounds like they were trying to do all along.

RR: It wasn’t long after we took the restaurant until—

AH: Did the Licatas tell you about this at all?
HR: They were not aware of it.

AH: Oh, they didn’t even know.

HR: The Port Authority never mentioned it to them.

AH: Of course not.

HR: It was not a problem.

AH: Okay. I’m sorry I cut you off.

RR: The Licatas got along a whole lot better with them, the Port Authority, than we ever did. Wasn’t long after we took over the restaurant till we decided to expand the size of the docks, so we could bring in some larger boats, have some lower docks for the small little fisherman, or people who wanted to come to the restaurant and eat—they could come by boat instead of having to drive. So I drew up the set of plans and took them to a fellow named Wipers, who was with the Port Authority at the time, and he took it to the board, and called me a few days later and says, “Robert, you’ve got to have a marine architect draw up these plans, it—we can’t accept them like they are.” So I went to a guy named Fritz. He had an office at Solomon Seafood, which was above the shipyard, and asked him to make these—redraw these plans and make them legal. When he redrew the plans, I went to pick them up. Back then, thirteen hundred dollars for a set of plans, we thought, was a lot of money. Well, I picked them up and took them to Wipers and he called me the next day and says, “Robert, we can’t accept these plans because they have not been signed by this fellow named Fritz.” So I took them back to Fritz [and] he said, “The Port Authority has called me and told me not to sign this.” We spent thirteen hundred dollars for the plans. That’s when the problems started with the Port Authority.

AH: Okay, now, and just so I know the story, but I just want to make sure that, okay, this was over land that had slowly been added on to the existing land, right, through dumping and—?

HR: It’s the land that had been—was dredged, attached to the Licatas’ land. They used to own eight acres up above where the, before the bridge was ever put in and the—all the land really belonged to the Licatas, but the Port Authority just sort of took the land and acted like it was theirs and they were trying to get title to it. And that was their whole motive for torturing us for nine years is because they never could get title because it was not theirs. The property appraiser told us—we spent a whole day there—he says, “The only way they could ever legally own that land is to buy it from us,” and or similar to that, so they proceeded to buy our attorney with—

AH: Oh, yeah, and the judges.

HR: They bought our judges, our second attorney, they even promised to make him mayor of Tampa if he could just get ’em to sign all the final papers. They tortured us unmercifully—

AH: Well, I know, and the—

RR: They finally consented to let us build the docks if we would lease the bottomland from them.
AH: I see. Oh, so you had to lease the land from them.

HR: Even though it was our land. It was not even theirs.

AH: So that was another way for them to try and—

HR: Harass us.

AH: Yeah. So now whatever happened with the case? Has it been resolved?

HR: It’s still, no—

AH: Pending?

HR: It’s still—well the judge, they had a way of buying judges and so forth and the last time we went to court, our attorney just beat up on their attorneys so bad it wasn’t even funny. We had a lot of witnesses, videotaped the whole thing and they said, “Man, you all won hands down,” but the judge says, “I’ll take it under advisement.” The next thing we knew it was in the newspaper and they never even called, the judge never even called our attorney or said anything to him, it was in the newspaper that he gave the—

RR: Awarded them.

HR: Awarded the Port the property.

AH: So there’s—

HR: So it’s up to the court of appeal now.

AH: Oh, okay. So it’s—you are appealing that decision?

HR: It is up for appeal.

AH: Okay. Man, what a—you know, well, it’s unfortunate. So, obviously that was another pressure, huge pressure on you.

HR: Huge, constant, constant.

AH: And then—and then the seafood shop isn’t showing a good—isn’t showing a good profit. It’s still working out for the restaurant that you guys are getting fresh seafood. Any other—are there any other pressures going in to the end here that we haven’t talked about already?

HR: Well, they pressured us with the IRS and (inaudible)—

AH: Oh, no, no, no, I mean outside the Port. You talked about the Port, I do know about that.

HR: Okay, okay, but then let me see, on the seafood trying to get fresh seafood you could just, not hardly, you could not get it from the public.

AH: Anything else? I just want to make sure I’ve got all the issues lined up here. We talked about the environment—
RR: I don’t know, maybe we could go back to the treatment plant, a little bit.

AH: Yeah sure, now this is the place that was treating the sewage.

RR: At Hooker’s Point.

AH: And they stopped dumping right into the bay, right?

RR: No, no they—after this sewage is treated, I guess, all the bacteria and the e-coli and whatever it is that’s in this sewage is killed. Well, all the water goes into the bay. Now I don’t know what’s worse—is to let some of that sewage in to the bay either untreated or partially treated, then fully treated and that it’s so full of chemicals until I think that’s got an effect on upper Hillsborough Bay.

AH: Okay, I see. So, now I remember you saying something about they stopped dumping sewage at one time and when they started again the shrimp coming back? Now was this a different facility or? I just—

RR: No, same facility. I think what it was, they had some trouble at the plant and some of the partially-treated sewage was emptied into the bay.

AH: Oh, I see, so it wasn’t so full of chemicals.

RR: Right.

AH: And the shrimp could eat it.

RR: Evidentially. The shrimp eat anything.

AH: (laughs) Okay.

RR: We had for two years, we had bumper crops, and then the treatment plant changed over some and—

AH: What, about what time was this? Was this in the nineties [1990s], or—? Was this back in the eighties [1980s], or—?

RR: In the eighties [1980s]. Late eighties [1980s].

HR: That when Roger Stewart [former chief of the Environmental Protection Commission] was in office—was in the EPC [Environmental Protection Commission]—

RR: Yeah, he was with the EPC then, that’s right.

HR: I remember he used to come down there cause he used to go out on our boats and he’d say, “Just because that water was crystal clear did not mean that it was clean, it did not mean it was healthy.” Because that water needs nutrients, all the fish out there needs nutrients, so that needs nutrients.
AH: Now here’s, like, a kind of a, twenty-five thousand dollar question. All right. You tried, upon retiring, you know, or giving up that facility, cause you had to give that up, you tried to find another place to do business, right? Like another place to base your fleet?

RR: Yes, but we looked everywhere, like up in Crystal River.

AH: Now before we talk about the search, after you know working so hard for so long, you know, why did you try to continue then? I mean—I guess, for one, you wanted to pass it on to your son, right?

RR: No, let’s go back to when just before we bought the restaurant.

AH: Okay.

RR: We’re not so sure now that we weren’t in some way pressured into buying the restaurant, because four or five people came in looking at the restaurant before we bought it, anticipated buying, two or three of ’em come over to the fish market looking around. All those years, everything was built over there, we built with our own money. We had our own electricity put in, our own city water put in, the buildings were there we built, all the concrete that was poured we poured it, everything that was built, we built it. And of course we were afraid of losing that, but we didn’t have the money to buy the restaurant. What, were they asking a million and a half back then? They had no idea that we could buy it on time, which finally they extended to let us buy it on time. You think maybe that those two, three different fellows that come over there at different times—

HR: They just thought they’s going to just take over our fish market, you know, and everything. You could see ’em come in and look over like that’s going to be all theirs, you know.

AH: Now who are these people you’re describing?

HR: Buyers, they wanted to buy the restaurant.

AH: Oh, these are prospective buyers, so then—

HR: Yeah, and if that don’t give you an odd feeling—it’s just like somebody walking into your home and just start looking around—

AH: Picking apart everything.

HR: Yeah, like what are you doing, you know—

RR: But was part of looking a place to move our facility.

AH: Okay, this is back before you got the restaurant.

RR: Just before we got the restaurant.

AH: Okay. And what happened when you guys were looking around?

RR: Couldn’t find anything.
AH: Back then you couldn’t?

RR: Nope, even back then there wasn’t you know the—

AH: Now what was the issue? Was it the property was too high, the price for it, or there wasn’t a proper place for your facility? What was the limiting factors there?

RR: Dwindling space, that’s available that’s around the Gulf Port commercially, fishing fleets.

HR: Back then the water was deep enough that the boats could come up to the shore.

AH: Okay, that too. So you looked all up and down the west coast, right?

RR: Sure did.

AH: Okay. So when you came up empty handed after that search, buying the restaurant made more sense?

RR: Yes. At least we could stay, and have our seafood

HR: A place to put our boats.

AH: Yeah, absolutely.

RR: Place to put the boats, yeah.

AH: Okay. So then, now, you say you bought it on time. Does that mean you got, like, a mortgage, or was it an agreement, you know, more of a personal agreement with the sellers, or how did that work?

RR: How much did we pay down, Helen? Do you remember?

HR: Let’s see—I think it was one hundred and ten thousand dollars we paid down. I think it was. That we hocked everything that we had, cashed in all of our life insurance policies, everything that we could scrape together and put down for a down payment.

AH: Okay. Cause your only other option was just to get out of the fishing business all together.

HR: Yeah.

RR: You got five shrimp trawlers and, you know—

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

AH: So, so selling trawlers fifteen years ago was just as tough as it is—

RR: No, no there was a—

AH: You would have been able to sell them, then?

RR: Right.
AH: Okay.

RR: There was a little more of a demand but—but that demand has really dwindled.

AH: Okay. So yeah, what’s happened between now and then? I mean is it just the trends of development along the coast have continued and everything else? What has made it tougher?

RR: No, the quality of shrimp.

AH: Okay.

RR: And the fact that all the big grocery conglomerates have put in a seafood display.

AH: Oh, I see.

RR: And that has had an effect on our market. A big effect.

AH: Yeah, before that the supermarkets couldn’t keep up with—fresh—

HR: Then (inaudible)—didn’t have any seafood.

AH: And of course, most of it is still frozen when it’s in the case these days anyway.

RR: But it’s convenient for the customer to buy instead having to drive ten miles to a seafood market.

AH: Yeah, it’s one-stop shopping.

RR: And buy their groceries there, that’s right.

AH: But who—who—

HR: But that about killed the fish markets when they did that.

AH: Oh, sure. But it’s also an inferior product. I mean, a lot of this stuff is from the Pacific and they don’t have any—

HR: And so many preservatives on it you can—you couldn’t make a—

RR: It’s full of sodium bisulfate, which kills bacteria.

AH: That’s bisulfate, you said?

RR: Sodium bisulfate.

HR: Sodium bisulfate, yes. Sodium nitrates.

AH: Okay.

RR: Now—then some years back they come up with a tripolysulfate which enhances—is supposed to enhance the flavor of the shrimp and adds sixteen to eighteen percent weight to the shrimp. (laughs)
AH: Okay, that’s convenient.

RR: I was in Saint Marys, Georgia, some years back and a fellow named Tommy Green and his wife were running a seafood market there. And we’d been in Georgia and we stopped back by Saint Marys to see them, and they were processing rock scrap [scrap from rock shrimp]. And rock scraps, neat, after the shell—the head and the shell, is extracted off of it, is about as large as your middle finger thumb nail when it’s processed. Well, he had processed all morning and they had a big vat full of shrimp meat—rock shrimp meat, and it’s time to go to lunch and I says, “Tim, let’s go get us something to eat.” And he says, “Well, wait a minute,” and he went and (inaudible) two pound coffee can and dipped it down into that five gallon bucket and spread it out over the top of all this shrimp meat and stirred it in. I said, “What in the way you putting in there?” He says, “I’ll show ya when you get back.” Well, we were gone about forty-five minutes or an hour, and when we got back that rock shrimp meat was more than doubled in size.

AH: Oh man. So what was the chemical he was using, then?

RR: Tripolysulfate.

AH: Tripolysulfate.

HR: They do that now to chickens and everything—

AH: Oh, that’s disgusting.

HR: It— Yeah, it will say on the outside of the package, it has sixteen percent water, you know—if you buy it.

AH: Okay. So, that just makes the shrimp just hold more water then?

RR: Store water.

HR: (inaudible)

AH: Yes. It absorbs more water.

HR: Just till you thaw it out.

AH: Yes. And then all the water goes away.

HR: Yeah, all the water does.

AH: And then probably all the flavor too, along with the water, right? I mean and then—

GR: Yeah.

RR: Well, they say it adds to the flavor—I don’t, I’ve got my doubts about that.

AH: Well, it seems—

HR: (inaudible) on the packaging.
RR: Nothing, nothing is as good as a fresh shrimp.

AH: Well, of course not. And it seems like you’re—it’s kind of like bleaching flour and then fortifying it again, you know, you’re taking away flavor with all these treatments and then you’re putting something in to try to enhance the flavor, yeah.

HR: Enhance the flavor again, yeah.

AH: But okay, so that was an issue as well then.

RR: Now some of the markets and some of the restaurants are advertising wild shrimp, that’s—that’s domestic shrimp, that’s not pond raised in farm waters. And the ecosystem here in the United States is so that you couldn’t use estuaries to raise shrimp here just to EPC—they wouldn’t have it, the environmentalists wouldn’t have it. You couldn’t destroy the mangrove bushes like they do in other countries.

AH: Sure, and that’s the kind of irony that we have these standards here but we’re getting all of our shrimp from far away where they have no standards.

HR: No standards, right.

AH: Where they’re actually doing the overfishing out there.

RR: No—those shrimp being raised in captivity, I don’t think it has anything to do with the—

AH: I was referring to the fish more than the shrimp, but yeah, the shrimp are the farm-raised. Now that’s not the same flavor right, either, right?

RR: No, because wild shrimp has a selection of different of foods it can eat. Now then, I’m not sure what exactly what they feed the wild—the (inaudible) the pond-raised shrimp. But they don’t have that varied diet.

AH: Yeah, it’s there, probably got the one—

HR: If you add lemon to it, has a lemon flavor to it; if you add garlic to it, has a garlic flavor to it. It’s got no shrimp flavor.

RR: It’s a type of meal that they feed them.

AH: Yeah. Okay.

RR: And in fact they have it so down pat now that if a customer orders ten thousand pounds of a certain size shrimp, they can tell them what day to come back to pick up that certain size shrimp because they know from day to day—

AH: How much—

RR: What that shrimp is going to weigh.

AH: Okay, I see. So they are going—
RR: What size it’s going to be on a certain day.
AH: Okay. Wow.
RR: By the amount of feed that they feed them.
AH: Okay. That’s something.
RR: By the amount of food that they feed them.
AH: Yeah. So they’ve done the same thing to shrimp that they’ve done with chicken and pigs and cows, right? Industrialize them.
RR: We were told some years back that, eventually, you’ll be able to buy shrimp as cheap as you could chicken.
AH: Yeah
RR: And it’s coming to pass.
AH: Yeah, it’s—
HR: Well, they’ve—they have not allowed the shrimp prices to rise. You can buy shrimp now, what the wholesaler gets—what the shrimp boat gets, if you were to look back on our records it’s the same thing that we got twenty years ago. And the fuel prices are astronomical they—it does not even close to balancing out.
AH: Sure, so that forces out the little—
HR: Forces out, yes—
AH: —businessman too. And it’s funny we got all these politicians who are always paying lip services to the small businessmen but that, obviously that doesn’t apply to farmers and to fisherman or any of these other things.
HR: Or the dairymen or the orange grove people.
AH: Oh, sure. All right, so let’s—let’s try to wrap up here, I guess. So at what point did you guys decide to sell the restaurant, and why?
RR: Couldn’t stand it another day.
AH: Really? It’s just too much?
RR: I was just so wore out, and my wife was wore out, and we could see that we weren’t staying afloat at all, weren’t staying in the black anymore. We were not able to keep our bills up, and—so George Lorton, International Ship [International Ship Repair and Marine Services Inc.], he deals in a lot of real-estate. He made us a good offer so—away the Seabreeze Restaurant went to a different owner.
AH: Okay, now, and of course there was a couple owners, people who tried to run it in the mean time, after that. There’s a Rita Carlino lady and she didn’t know what she was doing, it sounds like.

RR: (laughs) I don’t know whether she did or not—she had been in business for years.

AH: Well, yeah, she had other restaurants, but I guess—

HR: If anyone mentioned the Seabreeze and that this didn’t taste like the Seabreeze she’d curse them out and run ’em off.

AH: And, well, I think that it’s instructive, that—does she have any restaurants that are still going today?

HR: I don’t know.

AH: Because—

RR: Not where she’s at, I think she’s in hiding. George Lorton, the one who bought the restaurant from us, said that when he leased it to her, she kept it about a year, that when he finally run her off I think she owed him around fifty thousand dollars.

AH: Oh, wow.

RR: In back rent.

AH: So she really didn’t do well.

HR: And she’d pay off her liquor bills with bad checks and we had to clean all that up to keep our liquor license.

AH: Oh, geez. So then she took over briefly, and then didn’t your son—

HR: Yeah.

AH: —step in for a while, right?

RR: Yes, but the—rent—lease was so high that he couldn’t make it then. They were there about a year and had to finally back out.

HR: (inaudible) had the three hurricanes in [2004]—each time they lost everything they had—three different times, so didn’t have any other—

RR: I got to use the restroom—

AH: Oh yeah sure, right back there on the right.

**Pause in recording**

AH: All right so, you just couldn’t stand it. You went ahead and sold to George Lorton and International Ship. Now, is the building still there?
RR: Yes, it is.

AH: Okay, it’s still there today—that’s good, cause I want to go by and make sure I get another picture of it, especially with that rusty facility in the back. It almost looks like the jaws of progress, you know what I mean, just about to eat that restaurant—

HR: (laughs) Yeah—

AH: Doesn’t it look that way to you? I mean this thing looming over it you know? Just like—I don’t know.

HR: And the love rock—you know.

AH: Yeah, the love rock.

HR: Somebody stole that plaque.

AH: Oh, oh, they took the plaque?

HR: Yeah.

AH: You know people have no—

RR: Have you put in there the Port Authority has bought the property from George Lorton?

AH: Oh, they did?

RR: Yes, they own it now.

AH: Okay, now, so that complicates—does that complicate the court case at all?

HR: No.

AH: Okay. Man, this Lorton guy sounds like a rat too. I mean he was just—

RR: No, he’s not bad.

AH: Okay.

RR: He’s a businessman and the fact that we got our shrimp boats at the Solomon’s Seafood, that he had—he owns.

AH: Oh. So there’s a seafood shop there now?

HR: No.

RR: No. They have all their boats in South America.

AH: Oh, I see. Okay.

RR: But periodically they would bring boat up here to sell or buy a new boat to take down there, they would fit it out here at their dock facility, before it went down there.
AH: So now, it’s just basically impossible though, for a small fisherman to make it in Florida?
RR: Can’t make it.
AH: Yeah, yeah.
HR: The fuel is too—
RR: You know what makes me—agravates me all the years that we were—had our seafood market down there and in the fishing industry we were never allowed to catch a mullet that was under twelve inches long, always regulated. But now that the fishing industries all but gone, sports fisherman are allowed to catch those little finger mullet to use for bait.
AH: Oh, my God!
RR: And you can throw a bait net and catch two or three hundred sometime with those little—those little finger mullets. But we weren’t allowed to catch them and sell them for food. All—for the last fifty years.
AH: And instead they’re using them for bait.
RR: Using them for bait.
AH: Yeah, that is disgusting.
RR: Yes, it is.
AH: So, well, um, if you guys have anything to add, we kinda been through this odyssey. So now you’re basically stuck with a shrimp fleet that you’re having a hard time selling, and that’s the only connection with the old business now, right? Is that it, those shrimp—
RR: Yeah, we got the—three boats left that we’re trying—trying to sell.
AH: So did you sell some already then?
RR: Yes, we sold the Seaweed II four years ago.
AH: Ah, the old classic. Was that the first one that you built or?
HR and RR: Oh, no!
AH: Oh, yeah, you bought that one, okay.
RR: No, no we built the Seaweed—
AH: Three.
HR: This was our second, Seaweed II
RR: The Seaweed III and the Seaweed IV—
AH: Yes.
RR: And then we went back and got two smaller vessels, we called *Seaweed I* and the *II*. And in fact the one we sold was the last vessel, no, the next to the last vessel because then we built the *Little Weed* for our son. That was the next to last vessel that we constructed. That I sold.

AH: Okay. So—Well, like I said is there anything else you want to add?

HR: The last spill that we had, that the (inaudible) had did a lot of damage.

AH: When was this?

HR: Last year, was it last year?

RR: (murmurs in agreement)

AH: Last year. And who spilt this?

HR: (inaudible).

AH: (inaudible). What’s that?

HR: Yeah—the, um—

RR: Chemical plant.

HR: The chemical plant.

AH: Okay, and they had another—

HR: They had that big mound over there in back of us and the—it came up over the side.

AH: Was this gypsum?

HR: The gypsum, yeah.

RR: The gypsum factory.

HR: And just spilled everything.

AH: So it spilled into the bay?

RR: Into the bay.

HR: Spilled into the bay.

AH: Oh, my God.

HR: Horrible.

AH: Why did they keep it so close to the bay anyway? Shouldn’t be allowed to, huh?

HR: It should go back to the mines and be—refill—the mines.
AH: Absolutely.

HR: And then put a twelve-foot layer of good dirt over the top of it.

RR: See what there doing now, there having to put a plastic lining inside of those gypsum stacks. When evidently there was a flaw in—during this really rainy season last year so it broke and it spilt product out.

HR: Killed everything for miles and miles and miles, and it’s still killing everything. You know all the pigs around the stack—even their teeth is rotted out. Those little baby pigs—

AH: Yeah, that’s he was just saying—that’s disgusting. Well, I really want to thank you guys for coming over today and—

*end of interview.*