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Interview with  
Mr. L. E. Casterline  
October 1, 1971

Place of Interview: Rockport, Texas  
Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens  
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(Signature)  
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Oral History Collection  
Mr. L. E. Casterline

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Place of Interview: Fulton, Texas

Date: October 10, 1971

Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mr. L. E. Casterline, Fulton, Texas, October 1, 1971. Mr. Casterline, would you introduce yourself and tell me how you got into the seafood business.

Mr. Casterline: My name is L. E. Casterline. I was born in Fulton, Texas, Aransas County, March 9, 1919. My parents are Frank Casterline, born Fulton in 1890. My mother was Florence Weber Casterline, born in Fulton in 1893--some of the earliest settlers in Fulton. My father, he fished for a number of years with net fishing and oysters. Then in later years, in the late thirties, he went into business with my brother and himself. Over the years, we had opened up oysters and fish and with boys growing up and going to school so we got into . . . . After World War II I came back and got into the seafood business with my brother and my father in 1945.

Dr. Stephens: Let's see. You grew up here and worked along the fishing docks when you were a child. What was your impression of it at that time?

Mr. Casterline: Well, we grew up with it. We liked it and saw the fish

swim, crabs, oysters--all kinds of seafood that we dealt with. That's where we learned how to open oysters when we were big enough to pick up an oyster knife. And before I finished high school, I was able to open twenty to twenty-five gallons of oysters a day. At that time, the going price was from fifteen to twenty-five cents a gallon for the opening. Today, that same oyster brings you about \$2.50 a gallon for shucking and opening alone.

**Stephens:** My goodness. Well, you decided that you wanted to get into this sort of business even though it's a lot of hard work. Tell us about the average work day of a person then comparing it with now, as what sort of improvements have been made as far as labor is concerned--the hard work involved in the seafood business?

**Casterline:** Well, at the time we got into it we headed all, as some are brought to the dock with their heads on, and they'd be headed in the processing plant at night. We worked in head shrimp until twelve or one o'clock in the morning. We'd ice the boats to get them ready to go back out the next day and we'd just about meet ourselves going home on the way back. We'd go home and change clothes and come back. And we had old boats that . . . well, you had to put them up on the beach at night to keep them from sinking. That's in how bad of shape they were.

They were small boats, but they made trips every day to the shrimping grounds--fishing grounds.

Stephens: In the bay.

Casterline: In the bay.

Stephens: Weren't you afraid they'd sink?

Casterline: Well, we kept pumps on them, and every now and then we'd have one sink and we'd go out and raise it and we'd bring it back in.

Stephens: Did you have anybody drown?

Casterline: No, we never did.

Stephens: The people know how to swim. Is that one of the prerequisites for getting on the boat?

Casterline: Well, they knew how to swim or . . .

Stephens: They had a life preserver.

Casterline: . . . life jackets. They would use the other boats around them. They could usually manage to keep them afloat enough to get in with them.

Stephens: Oh.

Casterline: But in those days, the boats were pretty weak and pretty shabbily built.

Stephens: And that's one of the changes you've seen--better construction for shrimp boats?

Casterline: Right, yes, sir.

Stephens: They were wood then and they are metal now. Is that correct?

Casterline: Right. They're steel.

Stephens: When did you see the change?

Casterline: Well, it was about 1965 we saw the change going to larger, more power. We saw more profit of production in steel.

Stephens: Nineteen-sixty-five. So it's just a recent thing.

Casterline: A recent thing. In 1953 we went to larger, wooden-hull boats with more power. We built a boat each year in 1953 through 1958 right in front of where our processing plant now stands under my supervision with the labor that we had in the processing plant. In 1948, my brother passed away. At that time my father and I purchased his interest. An then in 1963, I purchased the interest of my father. Everything was going to showing that more power was needed for the production of shrimp. We went to four sixty-foot steel trawlers in 1965. And in 1966, we repeated the order for four more sixty-foot steel trawlers.

Stephens: Who makes them?

Casterline: They were built here in Rockport by Rockport Yacht and Supply Company. And in 1970, we went larger still with three sixty-eight steel shrimp trawlers.

Stephens: From sixty to sixty-eight.

Casterline: Sixty to sixty-eight. They're powered with V-12,

sixty-one reduction gear engines. And in 1971, we repeated the order for four more sixty-eight-foot trawlers with the power larger nets to bring in greater production.

Stephens: You can go farther and farther out in the gulf.

Casterline: We can carry more fuel and more ice and stay longer-- just take better care of your production while you're at sea.

Stephens: I see. And that saves on labor costs because you don't have to be running back and to with either a load of fuel or trying to unload a small load of shrimp because your people go for . . . fifteen days at a time?

Casterline: That's right. They go fifteen-eighteen days at a time where back when we first started out they went every day and came in every night. You were continuously working. Now, you get through in the daylight hours where you were working both daylight hours and night hours.

Stephens: Well, that automatic unloader you showed me also helps them in speeding up the unloading, doesn't it?

Casterline: That's right. That suction unloader, it takes the shrimp out of the boat and then you have an automatic scale that weighs them on every hundred pounds and automatically dumps them. So it speeds up your operation very much. It cuts down on the labor costs.

Stephens: How much of a catch do you get now in pounds and then compare it to previous years with the smaller boats.

Casterline: I'd say that back in the beginning . . . our catches today have probably doubled. Or, a boat which catches 500 boxes a year, the boats we use today catch 1,000 boxes a year, which is . . .

Stephens: There's much more profit.

Casterline: . . . much more profit.

Stephens: Now your boats cost more and labor is higher, so are you really making more profit? Or do you have to go to larger volume catches in order to make the same profit that you used to?

Casterline: You really have to go to the larger boats to get larger catches to make the profit that you used to make because you have a lot more profit. You didn't have much investment to what you have an investment of the fleet of boats that we have today. The replacement value of the boats we have now would probably be \$1,000,000.

Stephens: What does a sixty-eight-foot steel trawler cost?

Casterline: It will run around \$110,000.

Stephens: Fully equipped?

Casterline: Ready to fish.

Stephens: I see. Now are these the products of Mr. Albert Silchenstedt's design?



- Casterline: That's right. They're built there by Rockport Yacht and they're designed by Albert Silchenstedt and Mr. Mitchell, manager of Rockport Yacht and Supply.
- Stephens: But these are Mr. Silchenstedt's actual designs. Do you specify what type of design of boat you want and make some modifications of his design for your own use?
- Casterline: Yes, we do that. I mean, we get together with him and explain what we would like in a boat and then he'll modify it any way that we want it, but they have a real good standard boat there that . . . it doesn't take much modification to apply.
- Stephens: Now why are their boats good?
- Casterline: Well, they have good supervision in their yard. They have fellows that have built boats for years. They know what a boat should be. They have some good welders, good design.
- Stephens: So they do good work and this helps to bring them more business.
- Casterline: That's right. And they're good seaworthy boats.
- Stephens: Have any of them ever broken up--the steel boats?
- Casterline: No, they haven't.
- Stephens: But the wooden boats do in rough water.
- Casterline: Well, the wooden hulls, sometimes they do when they get beat and sometimes they'll beat the caulking out of them when they get caught in heavy weather. But the steel

trawlers seem to be more productive than your wooden hull because the weather doesn't seem to affect them. I mean, they have enough weight that they can just ride about anything that they encounter.

Stephens: Is that right? What do you do to your boats in storms?

Casterline: In the storm season we take our boats out of the harbor. Fulton has a channel that goes to Victoria--a canal--and we run our boats up the canal and anchor them. We run our anchors right into the bank, tie everything down.

Stephens: Anchor both sides to the canal?

Casterline: No, we just anchor on one side of the canal where boats can pass through. We tie all of the boats side by side together so that if one anchor doesn't hold, why, the boat has a chance to hang to the other boats.

Stephens: Don't they hit against each other?

Casterline: They do, but the high banks--the protection we have where we have the boats--it doesn't, or has not so far, got rough on us at any time that we secured them in this canal.

Stephens: So you leave them in the Victoria canal until the storms are over and then bring them back and put them back in Fulton Harbor.

Casterline: That's right.

Stevens: What do other folks do that have shrimp boats?

Casterline: Well, some folks go there. Some folks leave them in the

harbor and take a chance that it won't get too bad. Sometimes they get caught. Like in Celia they got caught in the harbor at Aransas Pass and they lost, I guess, fifty or sixty boats there. They were beat to pieces and damaged and washed up on the beach by not properly moving them and being prepared for something of that nature.

Stephens: Can you get insurance on boats?

Casterline: Yes, you can get insurance on the boats, but when you get caught and get damaged your loss of time really hurts you worse than what your damages are.

Stephens: Yes. What sort of damage have the storms done? Do you remember particular ones that were worse than others on the seafood business ships?

Casterline: Well, I guess about the worst on the ships was in Celia when they caught all those boats in Aransas Pass harbor and tore up so many.

Stephens: And the main thing is that it takes a while to replace them. And the down time is the worst thing.

Casterline: Yes, that's true. Some of those men didn't have boats for a year. They lost a full year's production of shrimp, which is . . .

Stephens: Does this help the production of other persons who didn't lose--is there more shrimp then for them to catch?

Casterline: Well, there always is more shrimp after a hurricane, it seems, that goes up the coast or down the coast. Our production usually picks up and is much better than before a hurricane, even if we have real high production before a storm. Well, it seems that as soon as it's over and weather permitting to get out within three or four days after, well, your catches will be real heavy and your boats will make much faster trips with a real good pay load than they do before a storm goes through.

Stephens: Those storms can be a blessing then as well as a curse.

Casterline: That's true. They can damage your boats and beat them up and they do a lot of shore damage--installations on land. In 1967, when we had hurricane Beulah, we moved all of our boats out of the Fulton harbor and we weren't hurt in our boats, but a tornado went through after the math of the hurricane and cleaned everything off of the waterfront in Fulton.

Stephens: Is that right?

Casterline: Including our ice plant, fuel docks, processing plant--everything we had.

Stephens: Just tore it all down. Your building too?

Casterline: That's right.

Stephens: So your building is new since '67.

Casterline: Since '67. We just hired a dragline to get in and pick up the pieces and stack it all in one stack.

Stephens: Did you have insurance against tornados?

Casterline: We had a little, but not very much since we'd never had anything like that, and at that time you couldn't get any coverage on the water. Always before the wind from a hurricane had never hurt us. Just the rising water would hurt us, but this time a tornado came through and it just made match sticks of everything we had on the water.

Stephens: Well, what about the preparation for shrimping. How do you go about getting out? You have the boats and you have your men show up at your building. Then what do you have to do? Put the nets in place and put on your ice? What is the whole preparation?

Casterline: The preparation for making a fishing trip . . . on all boats we have, we have a captain that signed on as master of each trawler. He sees to hiring his deck hands and crew members. The company furnishes all the fishing gear. The crew has to see that everything is on board. They get their ice. They get their groceries. The crew will pay for half the ice. The boat pays half of it. The crew furnishes all their groceries. And the boat owner, he pays for all other expenses--the fuel, all nets, cables, anything that goes with the boat the boat owner pays for. The boats will stay out for fifteen

days. And usually when they come in the crew will try to take off about four to five days before they return to the fishing ground.

Stephens: Do you have your own ice houses there?

Casterline: We have our own ice, our own fuel dock, our processing. We have our own mechanic. We do all our own repair work. So when they come in off their trip they tell us what's wrong with the boat and while they're getting their rest we're getting the repairs made so that they'll be ready to return.

Stephens: What about the other shrimpers? Do you sell them ice?

Casterline: Yes, we unload some independant boats. We sell them fuel and ice, do mechanical work for them.

Stephens: Now who else are the big shrimpers here besides the Casterline Company?

Casterline: Well, here in Rockport we have Jackson's Seafood.

Stevens: Are you larger than they?

Casterline: Yes, we're larger than what they are. We're the largest operator in Aransas County here in Fulton.

Stephens: In the seafood business.

Casterline: In the seafood business. That's right. We produce 1,000,000 pounds of shrimp a year. I'd say that to Aransas County the seafood industry gives about \$2,000,000 to the economy.

Stephens: That's at the present time.

Casterline: At the present time.

Stephens: About \$2,000,000.

Casterline: Plus another \$2,000,000 or more would be derived from the building of shrimp trawlers, repairs, maintenance, and supplies.

Stephens: So how does this fit in with tourism? Which is the leading economic function for the county--the tourism industry or the commercial fishing industry, taking in shrimping, of course, with fishing?

Casterline: Well, I'd say that . . .

Stephens: The seafood. The seafood is everything then, isn't it?

Casterline: Well, that's right. Seafood is all kind of seafood, whether they come out of the bay or whether . . .

Stephens: Yeah. So the seafood industry versus the tourist industry, which is the one that yields the best economic return to Aransas County?

Casterline: I would say that it would be kind of a toss-up. The tourists or tourism, I'd say we need both of them. They both contribute greatly to Aransas County. And I'd think that tourism probably produces as much revenue as the seafood industry does. It would be pretty close either way.

Stephens: Now most of the seafood plants or companies in Aransas County are homeowned, is that correct? That is you

don't have any Corpus Christi, Victoria, or Houston capital invested here. Is it mostly Rockport and Fulton capital?

Casterline: That's right. Most all of it is local owned and operated--capital that's operating it.

Stephens: Is yours a corporation?

Casterline: No, we're just a company. It was my brother, my father, and I and it went under the name of Casterline Fish Company, which it still does. But at this time, I mean, I'm the sole owner.

Stephens: You didn't take out a corporation charter.

Casterline: No, I haven't. I sure haven't. I've considered it in the past few years since it's really grown so much that I know we're going to have to do some changes in some way.

Stephens: What kind of labor market do you have for shrimping or for the seafood business in general . . . getting workers?

Casterline: Well, I've been very fortunate. I've been able to get some good hands on my boats. I've got a pretty available supply. I do know that a lot of places have run into problems of getting good help. I made a practice of always trying to pay on a share basis with my crew a little more money than most other places do pay. Therefore when I get a man, he usually stays.



I've had men with me for twenty years. Some of them have been there just as long as I have. They haven't chose to move on.

Stephens: Now these are your ship's masters, then.

Casterline: That's right.

Stephens: And they have to provide their own workmen?

Casterline: Right, they hire their own deckhands.

Stephens: What about the deckhands? Are they itinerants or are they local people who are stable?

Casterline: Most of my deckhands are pretty stable. I don't have too much of a turnover on my crews there. The same way with my help in my processing plant. It's been real stable.

Stephens: Does this sort of seasonal business attract itinerants? Mr. Casterline, would you discuss the labor market for the seafood industry in the general area.

Casterline: In the Rockport-Fulton area we are very fortunate. We have mostly people who live and make their home here and not transients who come and go. And they are steady. But in Aransas Pass they have a lot of transient labor and they get in a lot of people that kind of do the business a lot of harm. They're always in trouble. They're kind of more on the bum stage. They're here today and they're gone tomorrow.

- Stephens: Why do you think they're attracted to the Aransas Pass area?
- Casterline: You have a large fleet of boats. You also have a fleet of boats that come in from Florida--all over the coast--that lands there in Aransas Pass. They come from Florida, Alabama--all over the Gulf Coast--for our season here. And most of them dock in Aransas. And then you just have a different class of people in the trade in Aransas than you do in the Rockport-Fulton area.
- Stephens: Some people say there's a difference in the townspeople, too.
- Casterline: Well, that's true. I believe it is. I think that we have a much cleaner town than our neighbors do. That might just be an opinion.
- Stephens: Well, what about the market then of the shrimp? Once it's caught and iced down and brought back in, both for bay marketing and gulf marketing, just say that shrimp is shrimp and you have different kinds and you send them to different places, don't you? You have the size of the shrimp and the white versus the brown, and . . . how do you go about marketing shrimp?
- Casterline: Well, we produce our shrimp from . . . that's caught, and they're brought in on the boats with the heads already taken off.

Stephens: What do you do with those heads--dump them in the water?

Casterline: Those heads are thrown back overboard and there's usually a fish there to catch every one that hits the water.

Stephens: Does that help then the fishing business because it feeds the fish and makes them bigger and attracts the fish to the bays? Bay fishing. And, of course, in the gulf . . . unless party boats follow your shrimp boats.

Casterline: That is one thing. In the gulf, your party boats do a lot of times follow the shrimp boats because . . .

Stephens: For the fishing.

Casterline: . . . the fish will be coming up around and they'll be feeding the fish and they'll fish around the shrimp boats. Even when the shrimp boats are anchored up you'll hear the party boats on the radio and they'll be talking that they're fishing around a group of shrimp boats that are anchored.

Stephens: And the catch is better there?

Casterline: And the catch seems to be better out there.

Stephens: Is that right? Do the fish know . . . they smell that a shrimp boat is around and they get conditioned.

Casterline: Well, that boat has usually fished there that night--

shrimped--and he threwed his trash fish overboard and his heads overboard and there's good feeding around that boat.

Stephens: Excuse me, I interrupted you there when you were talking about marketing shrimp. Okay then they head them at sea and throw the heads overboard.

Casterline: That's right. And then when they bring them in and unload them they're put on trucks, they're packed in ice, they go to a freezing plant. We have one in the lower end of Aransas County--Coastal Freezing Plant--that is actually located in the city limits of Aransas Pass.

Stephens: Is that in this county you say?

Casterline: It's in Aransas County. We have another freezing plant in Port Lavaca in Calhoun County. We send our shrimp to the freezing plant. They have grading machines that will . . . they'll run them through and they'll come out average sized, uniform shrimp. And they'll go into about seven different sizes when they come through these graders.

(Tape turns over)

Stephens: Let's see. Mr. Casterline, we were talking about the marketing difference white and brown shrimp and you say there's no difference now in the choice on the market.

Casterline: No, it used to be that your white shrimp even brought you a little more money than your brown shrimp, but today they all bring the same price. People eat the brown ones just as good as they do the white shrimp. And all your market on your bigger shrimp and jumbo shrimp is the highest price shrimp we've got which is around \$2.00 a pound at this time. But really for our own use, we'd rather have the medium size shrimp. They have much tastier flavor than what a jumbo shrimp does, and more trouble to clean and prepare. But actually they're much better eating than the jumbo shrimp.

Stephens: What has been the price change over the years since you've been in the business?

Casterline: Since 1945, when I came back out of military service, the price of shrimp was 12-3/4 cents a pound--heads on them--for your jumbo shrimp. Now, today, that same jumbo shrimp--head off--is on the market off the boat at \$1.90 to \$2.00 a pound, which is quite an advancement in the prices from the last twenty to twenty-five years. With the relation of catching food fish with nets, it's my belief that the types of netting that we're using today doesn't provide for the destruction of predator fish that . . . we used to use a drag seine in the

bays for commercial fishing. All the stingrays, gars--the fish that weren't any count--were drug upon the beach and killed. And the kind of netting that we use today this fish is just shook out of the net and remains in the bay. Therefore he just keeps eating our good fish that we have--our shrimp and our game fish. We get an overabundance of fish that's not any good for anything that are destroying production of our good fish. As far as any pollution in the bays of Aransas County, I think that it's been at a minimum and it's caused very little loss to our juvenile shrimp or fish in this area. I think other areas have experienced quite a bit of problem with it. But we haven't had any mercury pollution in this area and our oysters haven't been affected by shrimp or seafood. If we get the right kind of rain, the right time of year we have a good crop of shrimp. If we don't get the kind of rain we're just like the farmer--we don't make that crop. Your bay shrimping for food shrimp is a seasonal operation. And it's governed by the regulations of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. You have a season that opens commercially the 15th of August and closes on the 1st of December. You can take shrimp for edible market there. Now your bait shrimp operation is open the year round for

catching bait for your fishermen, your tourism, catch for them live bait, dead bait--whatever is needed. Also in the gulf we have a cloud area that's handled by the Parks and Wildlife Service, a forty-five day period that usually starts the 1st of June and runs until the 15th of July and lets our smaller shrimp move out of the bays and get into the gulf. We're closed 'til about nine or ten miles offshore and that lets the shrimp get out and scatter out. It gives them a chance to grow that forty-five days before the boats can get to them. But the gulf is opened year-round outside of this limit, which when all the boats usually fish there's enough fish to fish year-round outside--weather permitting.

Stephens: Mr. Casterline, what about the saline content of the bay water in relationship to the seafood business?

Casterline: Well, we find that if we get too much salt content--it's too great--in our bays that our shrimp is not as apt to reproduce as when you have rainy seasons. If we get rain in the right part of the season then we'll have a good abundance of shrimp in the bays where our shrimp hatch out. And also on our oysters if it gets too salty it'll kill the oysters.

Too much fresh water will also have the same effect. So if we don't get the right mixture it'll hurt us either way. Our crabs will disappear. Your fish won't be as plentiful. Your shrimp won't. The same way with your oysters. I mean, they just won't turn out. They get plenty of fresh water here in the winter time and get some cool weather on them your oysters will be real fat. If they don't get any rain, no cool weather, why they stay poor. So it has a lot to do with our seafood what our rains do and our salt content does in our bays.

- Stephens: Now, sports fishing is affected the same way. Depending on the rains--either too much or not enough--it makes the difference in the catch.
- Casterline: That's right. It would affect the sports fishing as well as your commercial end of the fishing.
- Stephens: Well, then tourism and seafood business is tied close together then depending upon the weather.
- Casterline: That's right. They're tied real close together.
- Stephens: So the whole county can have a good year or a poor year depending upon the weather.
- Casterline: That's right. I mean if you get bad weather and bad rain it can throw your whole . . .
- Stephens: Economy.



Casterline: . . . economy off balance then.

Stephens: The Parks and Wildlife Department maintains a marine lab in Rockport. How effective has this marine lab been for the seafood industry and the sports fishing industry?

Casterline: Well, they've made a lot of tests. They take a lot of samples of our bays to see the salt content, fresh water content, see the movement of our fish. They tag them--tag our shrimp. They check on our oysters--the movement in and out of the bays. They see what larvae looks like when the spawn of the shrimp is showing up there. And they can predict what we might have, but if the weather comes in and changes things up it can kind of destroy their predictions. They can tell what we should have, but if we don't get the rain at the right time it won't be there. It's just like a farmer putting his seeds in the ground. If he doesn't get the moisture, he won't have a crop.

Stephens: Do they do any genetic work--trying to build bigger oysters or better shrimp?

Casterline: Well, your shrimp would be pretty hard to control in the bays and in the gulf. Now in freshwater they could probably control it. But here your fish and

shrimp migrate. It would be pretty hard to change them too much here in the bay.

Stephens: I see. So their work is more one of spotting for pollution in the seafood?

Casterline: I think that's right.

Stephens: And checking the movements of the marine life.

Casterline: Seafood, marine life. Well, they're doing a lot of work. There's no doubt about it. I don't know how much that they really came up with yet. I mean that . . .

Stephens: What in your opinion has been their contribution to Aransas County?

Casterline: Well, they have quite a few employees. They contribute to the economy of Aransas County with the marine laboratory.

Stephens: By the salaries paid to the employees, you mean.

Casterline: Salaries paid to the employees. And they have a boat that checks stuff in the gulf and goes way off shore and it's checking samples that they might be able to come up with some data for later dates. When we deplete our supply of seafood inshore that they might be able to come up with something that we can do further off.

Stephens: But you really haven't seen any . . .

Casterline: But I really haven't seen any results.

Stephens: Any favorable results showing their contribution to the community other than state payroll as yet.

Casterline: That's right, not so far.

Stephens: What about the Univeristy of Texas Marine Lab at Port Aransas? What do they do that's worthwhile?

Casterline: I'm really not too familiar with what they are doing. I know they're taking a lot of samples. And I guess in research it takes quite a while to come up with the answer to what we really need.

Stephens: Of course, they've been in business for twenty years or more. How long would you give them?

Casterline: Well, we really haven't been giving them too much time. I mean we're really going on and trying to learn as much about this business on our own as we can. And I think that old Mother Nature is the one that's going to control the production of our seafood. And if she sees fit to give us a good season we're going to have. If not, well, we're not going to have it.

Stephens: The Intracoastal Canal plays a part in the Aransas County seafood industry in boats going to sea, whether bay or gulf, and then with a load of fuel and coming back hopefully with a plentiful catch. Is this accurate that the Intracoastal Canal has made the difference in a seafood industry being in

Rockport and Fulton or not being here?

Casterline: That's right, it has. Without the Intracoastal Canal our boats would have trouble as big as they're getting today crossing the bay. We do have a problem coming into our harbors at Rockport and Fulton from the Intracoastal Canal. But the depth of the water that our boats now draw and our harbors are beginning to fill up, we are in a position now that if we get any bigger we'll either have to have a channel dredged into the Fulton Harbor and the harbor cleaned out or we'll have to move our operation to another port.

Stephens: What do you think's going to happen?

Casterline: That is something that I don't know. We're hoping that we can get some government money and get a bond issue floated to match those funds and get our harbors--Fulton Harbor, Cove Harbor, Rockport Harbor--entrance channel dug to the Intracoastal waterway, which would give us much more chance to bring in more boats and increase our economy.

Stephens: Now when you started out, just the make-shift shrimp boats drew how many feet of water?

Casterline: Oh, when we started out the boats drew eighteen to twenty inches--two foot of water . . .

Stephens: Even loaded.

Casterline: Even loaded.

Stephens: And now it's . . .

Casterline: And now the boats are drawing twelve foot of water.

Stephens: Twelve foot . . . . Now the Intracoastal Canal is how deep?

Casterline: I believe it's about fourteen feet.

Stephens: So you don't have a lot of extra space.

Casterline: We don't have a lot of extra under us there. And when we come out of the Intracoastal coming into our harbors we have probably eight or nine foot of water so we're dragging at least from two to three foot of mud.

Stephens: Does that damage your boats?

Casterline: That doesn't do our boats any good. I mean, it wears our wheels, our bottoms or keels drag the bottom.

Stephens: You just plow through the sand.

Casterline: Plowing through the sand or the mud.

Stephens: Wow. Well, where would you move if you moved?

Casterline: Well, we have a chance to move either way to Port Lavaca or Aransas Pass. We've had offers made to move in and they'd set us up with our same installation . . .

Stephens: For free?

Casterline: . . . as we have.

Stephens: Is that without costing you?

Casterline: Without costing us.

Stephens: Is that right. And you pay quite a bit to the county and school district, don't you, in the form of taxes?

Casterline: That's right. We pay county and school taxes.

Stephens: I imagine it amounts to quite a bit.

Casterline: It amounts to quite a bit and then . . .

Stephens: And this is why the other communities want to court you to move there.

Casterline: That's right again.

Stephens: The tax dollar.

Casterline: Tax dollar and we also have a large payroll, which if you have 1,000,000 pounds of shrimp a year well, you're going to handle over \$1,000,000.

Stephens: Wow! Well, now surely the Fulton community would keep you there or at least the Aransas County community would.

Casterline: We're hoping that they'll keep us there.

Stephens: Well, do you have a deadline set up?

Casterline: Well, we're waiting now to see how our paper work comes out. The Navigation District is working to get some government money and then see

if the voters will vote a matching bond issue.

Stephens: I see.

Casterline: And at that time, if we get the government money and our bond issue doesn't pass then we'll see fit to leave Aransas County.

Stephens: You mean even though you've lived here all your life, that's still . . .

Casterline: Well, it won't leave us no alternative. I mean, we can't keep destroying our boats. I mean, we can't get any bigger and we've had to go from twenty-foot boats to thirty-eight-foot boats to fifty-foot boats to sixty-foot boats and now to sixty-eight-foot boats so we went from boats that drew from eighteen to twenty inches of water . . .

Stephens: That's in twenty-five years now.

Casterline: Yeah. To boats that are drawing twelve foot of water. So to keep pace with the times and the business, we either have to have more depth of water into our channels and harbors because we're taking and dragging all the mud we can drag with what we have right now. And our next building of boats will probably be a deeper draft boat yet from what we have today.

Stephens: You mean beyond the sixty-eights.

Casterline: That's right. It'll be probably larger, probably more power, bigger gear, more fuel capacity, longer range. So we'll be forced to hunt a place that we can get those boats in or we'll have to put wheels on them and run them down the highway. (Chuckle)

Stephens: The conservation laws have affected the seafood industry. Do you see the effect as being a meddling by persons who shouldn't fool with it--that is the Legislature? Or do you think it helps to keep the seafood industry a permanent part of the Texas economy?

Casterline: Really on our conservation laws, I can't see that they've really done us a whole lot of good. I can remember, my father, when we were just babies, telling me that he was fishing for a living back in those days when we didn't have overcrowded or a lot of fishermen. There was times then that they still couldn't catch any fish even in the beginning. I know that he told my mother he was making one more trip fishing--that was during World War I--and then they had the shipyard here--Heldenfels Brothers did, building ships. And if they didn't make a payday on that ship, well, he was coming in to get a job in the shipyard. And when he came in he quit fishing and he



got a job in the shipyard in World War I because the fish were that scarce at that time. And we had good clean bays. We didn't have no pollution. We didn't have too many people, too many inhabitants on this peninsula, at that time.

Stephens: So fishing comes and goes then.

Casterline: It comes and goes. It doesn't matter what the times are.

Stephens: What do you think about the closed areas for shrimping and oystering? Does that help the total industry in the Coastal Bend area?

Casterline: Well, I believe your oystering has to be closed for a season because they get poor and then at the end of the season they're spawning and they get too much milk in them. And right now they run through the middle of April. I would say they would be better if they would have the oyster season closed in the middle of March to allow those oysters that've spawned to float around. Of course, my fishermen like to get them because they can get a lot of gallons out at that time because they're real full. But really after warm weather gets there I usually quit eating oysters anyhow because they lose that flavor. And I believe that our shrimp in our closed season in the gulf for forty-five days, I believe

it helps us because it allows that smaller shrimp to spread and scatter out to where the boats would be laying right at the passes and they'd catch it as it came out. It wouldn't have a chance to move out.

Stephens: And pretty soon you've caught them all out there.

Casterline: You'd have them caught before they got anywhere away.

Stephens: After a short time with as many boats as we have then there may not be a shrimp left to catch.

Casterline: That's true.

Stephens: Would that be a problem? That's the reason for the conservation laws.

Casterline: Sure, that's right.

Stephens: To make a perpetual industry rather than just exploited and then gone.

Casterline: Yeah, this closed area . . . the commercial industry has been at work toward that end to do that.

Stephens: What are the closed areas of Aransas County?

Casterline: Well, you have . . . for net fishing, you have Copano Bay, St. Charles Bay . . .

Stephens: Now are these closed all year long or just a short time?

Casterline: They're closed all year long.

Stephens: St. Charles Bay, Copano Bay . . .

Casterline: Yes, and all these numerous other places that are closed, but I don't know exactly just which ones are and which aren't. But you have very few commercial fishermen that net fish for \_\_\_\_\_ fish any more, to what you used to have. Most all your netfishermen have discontinued fishing.

Stephens: Since what time period?

Casterline: Oh, it's been several years. I mean, you still have a few, but very few, that fish with nets, because you have all of your beach between Fulton and Rockport is closed to fishing. They have a small area along the island shores that you can still fish and strike. It just hasn't been profitable for them to continue in that area.

Stephens: Now is this since World War II--Second World War?

Casterline: Yeah, that would be since World War II. Oh, I'd guess I'd think in the middle 50's it probably fell off where you don't have too many fishermen in this Aransas County area. You might have a few around Seadrift, Port O'Connor area, but nothing like you used to have.

Stephens: Now that means in net fishing that they would drive and catch Redfish and Trout in a net.

Casterline: That's right.

Stephens: Aren't those the two main fish here?

Casterline: That's the two main edible fish--is your Redfish, Trout, and Drum.

Stephens: And Drum.

Casterline: That's what you would catch in your nets.

Stephens: I see. Well, now no more of those fish are around? Is that why they don't net them?

Casterline: No, they're still quite a few around but everything is so closed up--the conservation--it's not possible for them to fish like that anymore.

Stephens: That's good for the sports fishing though, isn't it?

Casterline: That's right.

Stephens: Is that the reason for this conservation law?

Casterline: Yeah, I think they're the ones that have really pushed the closing of these bays more than anyone else.

Stephens: Now, you were in the oyster business for a while and you had controversies over mud-shell dredging--that is, getting too close to the live oyster beds. And do you remember any controversy like that in Aransas County when you were in the oyster business?

Casterline: Yes, they had controversies over that in Aransas County. Of course, we had some reeves that were

dead and couldn't have any oysters. And the shells were ready to . . . at that time they usually worked on the reeves that didn't have any live oysters or maybe just a few. And I don't see where they really hurt our bays because they dredge it up and turn the bottom over and they'd build up some spoil banks. And then it looked like that maybe a live oyster crop would come up on these spoil banks that they've throwed up. They would also make some good holes there that would make some good fishing spots there. So I really can't see--although we're not into the oyster business anymore--I can't see that your shell dredging is really affecting your sports fishermen or the commercial end.

Stephens: Of course, how does it affect the oyster industry itself? That is if you get too close to the live beds then you're going to destroy the oysters, aren't you?

Casterline: Well, the only way that you really destroy the oysters, in my opinion, is if you dug the oyster up himself.

Stephens: Well, isn't this part of the controversy that the conservationists think that the dredgers just keep

going and don't stop with the dead reeves, but actually dig into the live ones.

Casterline: Well, your Parks and Wildlife I believe is in charge of that, and they take samples.

Stephens: But that's politically controlled though.

Casterline: That's true, but I know back in the time when we were having oysters only we used to check those reeves ourselves. And we didn't really have any problem. I mean, we knew where they were allowed to dredge that there weren't any oysters. If they did we'd take them out and show them that there was oysters. And that's what I'd say to all the squabble they have today. Now, if they really have oysters there, the conservationist could take a drag or a tong and take the people out on that reef and show them how many oysters there is on it that are really productive. And if there are, well then your Parks and Wildlife should stop it. But if that reef is not producing and just dead shell, well, it's really not doing you much good and if it gets turned over there's a possibility--I've seen it happen in the past--that a new reef will crop up from it. All along the Intracoastal where they throw those lumps up, a lot of places you can go along and find oysters

and shells growth.