Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Ronald J. Baker

Interviewers: Linda VanZandt, Stephen Smith, Kate Ellis

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Biography

Ronald Joseph Baker was born on Deer Island off the coast of Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Baker on July 29, 1943. He married Velma Ann Walther (b: December 17, 1943) from New Orleans, Louisiana, on October 12, 1962, in Biloxi, Mississippi, and they reside there still. Mr. Baker’s father was a fisherman all his life, and Mr. Baker followed in his father’s footsteps as a commercial fisherman from 1980 to the present. Ronald and Velma reared six children: David Joseph Baker (b: August 19, 1963); Larry James Baker (b: December 6, 1964); Cynthia Lyn Baker Powell (b: November 5, 1965); Ronald Joseph Baker, Jr. (b: September 16, 1965); Thomas Wayne Baker (b: April 8, 1972); and John Baker (b: June 26, 1977). Mr. Baker is a Catholic and attends Saint Michael’s Catholic Church in Biloxi. In his spare time, Mr. Baker likes to repair old wooden boats, mostly sailboats, and he enjoys sailing.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

RONALD J. BAKER

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Ronald J. Baker and is taking place on May 17, 2007. The interviewers are Linda VanZandt, Stephen Smith, and Kate Ellis.

Baker: And not a soul, out of thirty-four houses that was on my block, there’s not another soul even thinking about that. I loved it there because I’m close to the water, my boats, you know? Where in the world would I go to live? You know, I want to be close to the water; I don’t need to be on the water, but close to the water. No, I don’t want to sell, but I’m probably going to be forced to. You know I mean because if everybody else sells then you can’t be—it’s a hard situation, really.

Ellis: You’d be in a community of one, essentially, surrounded by casinos.

Baker: Yes ma’am, that’s right. This Palace [Casino] right here, they’re going to move south. In other words, they’re going to build another great big Palace in front of that one, but they not interested on this side of the street. They’re strictly buying that side of the street. So the one that’s interested in me is the casino on the beach, Isle of Capri; they want to come north. So that’s the only ones that’s talked to me so far.

Ellis: I see.

VanZandt: And, from what I understand, they’re supposed to be moved across Beach Boulevard. So they—

Baker: Yes ma’am. You see, I’m in 800 foot off the water. You wouldn’t think it, but I am. I’m right on the edge of it. So that’s something else too, you see; at 800 foot, that’s what they can come inland, 800 foot. And I’m in that buffer zone—

VanZandt: Right where you are.

Baker: —when you think about it, so. (laughter)

Smith: So you’re sitting inside a casino right now.

Baker: Well, just about; that’s what it makes you think, you know, because this is going to be a massive casino, this Golden Nugget, I believe it is, on the other block over there. Landry’s Seafood, I believe it is. They bought that whole block for eleven million dollars. So (laughter) what’s going to happen?
Smith: How much property do you own here?

Baker: I’ve got 3400 feet.

Smith: Thirty-four hundred feet. And what do you—I mean, what do you reckon that’s worth?

Baker: Well, I had one real estate man come by and told me—he didn’t want to, you know, he didn’t want to, like, he was trying to buy my property or anything. He just said he wanted to let me know what my property was worth, so I could go from there. And he said, he give me the price $75 a foot. That’s what he said my property was worth, $75 a foot. And then Isle of Capri offered me $20 a foot. And the other block sold for $40 a foot. Across the street sold for $50 a foot. I’ve heard of some people over here sold for $80 a foot. I don’t know why they don’t have a set price, square footage set price and let everybody—then you wouldn’t feel bad, but you don’t know what to do when they got—this one’s getting eighty, this one’s getting fifty, this one’s getting forty, they offered me twenty. (laughter) Maybe if I take it, they’d get a good deal, you know, so.

Smith: I wonder when you say you couldn’t afford to live here, is that because the taxes would just be too high?

Baker: Well, I think it would. I think they would evaluate it as that seventy-five foot, for instance, or $80 a foot, and me living in a little house here, and they want to charge me $80 a square foot. You know, taxes on $80 a square foot, and it would be probably—in fact, right now I pay $1200. See, this is commercial, this warehouse here; so I had to get my back half zoned R-3 for commercial, and it’s like $1200 just for this back half of my property. Of course my house, well, my house was $600, and that’s $1800 right there before any of this stuff come into effect, you see, which I guess, I don’t know what they pay in other parts of the country, but—

Ellis: Are you going to apply for one of those grants to rebuild?

Baker: Well, I can’t because I didn’t—I had let my insurance lapse. I didn’t have insurance, and so I don’t qualify. You had to have insurance. Like the governor said, they’re not bailing people out that was too incompetent to buy insurance. (laughter) So I guess I’m incompetent. So, I had a bad—2005 was a bad year for me. Three days into the shrimp season, which opened in, I think June the twelfth, when shrimp season opened, three days into the shrimp season, I burned my arm, and I layed up June. I was just getting ready to go back; it had healed enough, and I was just getting ready to go back to work when Katrina hit. So, I worked three days, you know. And of course I turned sixty-two right before the storm; on July 29, I turned sixty-two. So with the storm and my arm, and everything I applied—I was going to wait till I was sixty-five. I applied for Social Security; so I went on Social Security. So that’s kind of getting me by right now, you know. And of course I’m able to work now, and so
when the season opens—the season hadn’t opened yet in Mississippi. It'll probably open about the second week of June, and I’m hoping to go back to work.

Smith: So, I’m sorry; for my tape, tell me who you are and what you do.

Baker: OK. My name is Ronald Baker, and I’m a commercial fisherman. I own my own boat, a small boat; I’m not a big fisherman. I got a small boat, forty foot, and I’m what they call a single rig; I just pull one net.

Smith: And where are we right now?

Baker: We’re on Point Cadet, Biloxi, Mississippi.

Ellis: Could you describe, just for a minute, just describe what was the place we’re sitting right now? What’s in this place?

Baker: Well, it was a warehouse at one time. When it was built, it was a warehouse for an offshore supply business. My brother was in the offshore oil business and the crunch in 1990—do you remember when the oil crunch was when everything, the bottom fell out of the oil business? Well, he had like five boats. I’m talking about 180-foot, 165-foot boats, and he lost all but one. They repossessed them because the bottom just fell out of the oil business; so this is what was left. We had the building. Of course now you can see we just got a bunch of old, wooden boats in here now because that’s the only place we’ve got to put them, but that’s what this building was, was a offshore supply office. He had his office in here and a little apartment and all, fixed up nice.

VanZandt: Are these other people’s boats that you’re repairing?

Baker: No ma’am, that’s all—

VanZandt: Are these your boats?

Baker: (laughter) I got eight of them. This is my brother’s, and this is my brother’s, that’s my son’s, and all the rest of them are mine. (laughter)

Smith: This is your fleet, but some of them are sailboats.

Baker: Well, yeah, most of them are sailboats. See, this is one of the old yacht club, like the yacht club boats. Their boats was built right after World War II; so that boat’s sixty, probably sixty-one, sixty-two years old. This little boat here is probably forty years old. The other little boat over there is forty. They’re all old, old, real old. I’m like antique boats like people are with antique cars, you know. And these other boats were built in the [19]50s and all. So they’re all really old, antique boats is what they are.
VanZandt: And are you a boatbuilder yourself?

Baker: No, I just patch; I repair more than build. I have built a few boats, skiffs, you know, small boats, but I repair mostly, fix them up.

VanZandt: And how did you get into the shrimping industry?

Baker: Well, (laughter) I was kind of—believe it or not, I worked for Coca-Cola for sixteen years, but my dad used to shrimp years ago. Then he went into—when they went shrimping at nighttime, they started nighttime shrimping. It used to be shrimping was strictly daytime. Then back in the [19]50s, I think it was, it went to nighttime shrimping. Well, my dad says nighttime was for sleeping; it wasn’t for (laughter) working. So he went into charter boat; he fixed his boat up and run deep sea fishing trips and charter boat and chartered it. So, we worked on the charter boats, and then eventually we went back to shrimping again. So I’ve been in shrimping for twenty-six, this is my twenty-sixth year of full-time shrimping, owning my own boat and shrimping twenty-six years.

VanZandt: Did your father live here as well in East Biloxi?

Baker: Well, he lived on Keller Avenue, right over just a few blocks down. But my dad died in 2000; he would’ve been, May the ninth, he’d have been one hundred years old, had he lived six more years. But we was born and raised on this—see this little island right offshore here? That’s where we was born and raised there.

VanZandt: Is that Deer Island?

Baker: Deer Island, um-hm.

VanZandt: Tell me about Deer Island and your home there and Camille. I understand you went through Camille.

Baker: Right, Camille. Well, we didn’t stay out there now; we left, but Camille cleaned, four generations Camille took. We had my great-grandmother’s house, my grandmother, and the house I was born in, and then I had—my mother’s people from New Orleans used to come over and spend the summer. So they had a summer home over there. So they had four houses over there and, of course, Camille cleaned everything. And nobody lived over there since. But we settled over there in around 1852, my great-great-grandfather.

Ellis: It’s amazing to look at that strip of land there right now and imagine houses there.

Baker: Oh, it’s barren. It’s the islands; all the islands are washing away real bad, all the offshore islands. It’s a shame. Something needs to be done before they’re gone altogether. When we lived over there, they had black dirt, and we had gardens and all
kind of fruit trees and everything. But now the sand has just—it’s just that deep to the
black dirt, you know. It just, the sand washed off the beaches, I guess, up into the
island. And the trees have died. When the sand covers the roots on the trees, they die.
And if you notice the trees are all red over there; so a lot of them’s dead. And once
those trees are gone, that’s the foundation, you know, of the island. And once those
trees are gone, that’s the foundation of the island.

Smith: This neighborhood must’ve changed an awful lot in the time that you’ve been
growing up here. When you first moved in, was it—when your family first came to
this part, was it still a lot of Slovaks and all that kind of stuff?

Baker: Oh yeah, Slovenians and French.

Smith: Slovenians, yeah.

Baker: Slovenians and French. Right across the street was the French Club, the Fleur
de Lis Club, and right over here in this corner was the Slovenian Lodge. So they had
their little organizations, you know. And then of course we had the Italians and all.
But, yeah, this whole neighborhood was mostly French and Slovenian. So, as the
older ones died out, the younger generation moved across the Bay or Ocean Springs.
They just didn’t—the Point was kind of boring, I guess, to them, you know, and so
they moved away. So a lot of the old-time houses was rental property here. And of
course the Vietnamese come in in the [19]70s, and they took up. This was, I guess,
like home for them, you know, because it was close to water and all, and they was all
through here. Like that’s all Vietnamese trailers back there, which was at one time old
factory people; all the factory men lived here and all, you know, that owned the
factories.

Ellis: What do you know about what their plans are now to do with this?

Baker: The Vietnamese?

Ellis: Yeah, like across the way.

Baker: Ooh, they’re suffering just like everybody, you know, just waiting and
waiting, I guess, you know.

Ellis: Waiting for what?

Baker: Well, to see if the property is going to sell, I guess, on the property, but on the
shrimping, a lot of the Vietnamese had the bigger boats. When you got bigger boats,
you got bigger expenses, you see. I got a small boat that operates cheap, and I run it
mostly by myself, most of the time. But they got the bigger boats, they got to have
two or three. Of course they family, you know; so they going to survive, but they’re
having trouble with the fuel price. A gallon of diesel right now is $2.26 for a boat, and
that’s high. So you figure those big boats are probably three, four thousand gallons of
fuel; that’s a lot of money. (laughter) So they catch them, catching the most. And the ones that got small boats, like me, they’re going to do all right. They’re going to go out and come in and sell their catch, you know, and probably get the best price they can get for it. But the bigger boats that catch a lot of shrimp have got to go to the factories. My son just come back off a trip. He went to Louisiana for the Louisiana opening, and they had eighty hundreds, and they got sixty-five cents a pound for the shrimp, and they had a lot of shrimp. They had, like, 200 boxes of shrimp, boxes on their count, and they only had like $4,000 worth of shrimp, but they had, like, $2500 worth of expense, see. So you’re working harder and catching more shrimp, but you’re not making the money. So that’s what we’re up against.

**VanZandt:** And they’re suffering from competition from the foreign markets as well.

**Baker:** Well, that’s what’s killing us.

**VanZandt:** How have you seen that change over the years?

**Baker:** Right, uh-huh, they get those shrimp in their little packages, just like they want them for, I guess, half of what they could buy them for from us, you know. But, yeah, the import shrimpers are a big, big hurt on us.

**Smith:** We’re going to—hang on one second, I’m going to just—if I may, I’m going to just try and—

**VanZandt:** You’re going to jump up and hold that, duct-tape it?

**Smith:** —do something with that piece of sheet metal there.

**Baker:** Oh no, I’m sorry. (laughter)

**Smith:** No, no, no, it’s all right.

**Baker:** You can see how much water—golly, that’s the water level, what you see here.

**VanZandt:** I’m looking at it.

**Baker:** That’s how high the water was.

**VanZandt:** I can imagine what it sounded like—

**Baker:** Ooh.

**VanZandt:** —coming through and just see how the wind’s just shorn them. (laughter)
(brief interruption)

VanZandt: —rode out the storm and where?

Baker: OK, well, I’ve got it right here, you want to—

Ellis: Sure.

Smith: Hang on a second. OK, now, I’ve got it.

Baker: OK, for Katrina—we always go up the back of the rivers in the boats, you know. My brother has a boat, and my friend had a boat, and my boat, we all went up the river—that they call Fort Bayou in back of Ocean Springs. And that’s where we rode the storm out. It got kind of hairy for a while. We were off in a man-made bayou, I guess you’d call it, with trees on both banks. And we had our bow lines to the trees to the south and our stern lines to the trees to the north. Well, when the storm first come, the wind was out of the northeast, and as the storm does that counterclockwise, well, the wind goes around to the southeast and south and then right on around, you know. So when we was—when the wind was out of the northeast and east, it was broadside. And the boats was tied alongside of each other, so that’s when we took our beating. We didn’t have quite enough bumpers between the boats; that’s to keep the boats from bump[ing]. We didn’t have enough. We didn’t anticipate that. We anticipated from the bow, you know, but we didn’t think that broadside would get that rough. But as the water come up on our—we got a foot meter on the boat; it tells you the depth of the water. We had four and a half foot on the foot meter, and during the storm, we had twenty-one foot. (laughter) So we had a seventeen-foot rise. And of course we watched the houses, the people in the houses, which was our friends because they always ask us when the storm’s in the Gulf, they want to know when we’re coming up, you know. We do that every year; we ride the storm out on the boats all the time. So anyway, we was tied up, and we was looking south because the boats was headed south. Well, when the water come over the marsh grass in the bayou, well, that left the bayou wide open, and there was about a five-foot sea coming across that bayou, and that’s the reason it got so rough in there. When that land mass that was to the south of us, got underwater, well, then we caught the devil, you know, with the sea. But anyway, we watched houses around us go to pieces from the wind. Before the water come up, we saw roofs come off of houses, walls blew out. And we saw just—we even saw wedding pictures going down the side of the boat, and all their furniture. Right alongside the boat was their shower stall and their fiberglass bathtub, just watched it go right on down the boat. So they caught the devil over there on the bayou, the people that lived on the bayou there. In fact, they had seven foot of water in their house where we was tied, you know. And they were—we’re looking up on a hill; they were real high, but they caught the devil.

VanZandt: And what kind of preparations had you taken for your home here?
Baker: (laughter) Not enough. We thought, like Camille, everybody made that mistake, compared it to Camille. So we put everything up high. I took my pictures and put them in the utility room, which was in the middle of the house with four walls around it, you know, strong: we put our pictures up on the utility room. And I had a model schooner that was probably my possession, you know, that I built, and I took and put it in the utility room on the washer and dryer, on top the washer and dryer thinking it’d be safe. Of course when we come back, (laughter) there was no utility room or no house or no nothing. So, we didn’t do enough. We took—my wife did take a few things with her, a few pictures, but not the album. She should’ve took the album, but she just took the little small pictures she had in a box and a few papers, but other than that, we never seen no furniture, no appliances, no clothes, no dishes, no pots, no pans. Found a few cups, a few silverware, a little bit of silverware. You probably can dig in the dirt up there and find stuff under the dirt. It’s amazing how stuff buries. You wouldn’t think how stuff buries.

Smith: Did you ever do that? Did you ever kind of go out and just start looking for your stuff?

Baker: Yeah, we do, we do; we sure did. In fact, we were digging in the yard there, you know, we work hard. In fact, you wouldn’t believe this; about, I would say a month after the storm, they cleaned my yard. My yard, as you looking here, this warehouse had four foot of debris. I mean just—you had to walk on top of it. It was four foot thick in this building right here. And all my yard, from these tree lines that a way was solid, just massive houses and debris, and they cleaned. They had to get a right of entry. There’s no way a human could’ve cleaned it. It was, I mean, a mass of stuff. So we had to get heavy equipment in. They come in and took a bulldozer and pushed it to the street and picked it up. And the guy next door, he didn’t give the right of entry in time enough. So they left his yard dirty. So, me walking along my fence line, you know, and I looked over there, and I seen under his, had a roof of a house, I seen a carpet, a brown carpet. And I said, “That looks like my carpet.” You know? It was my bedroom carpet, my file cabinet with all my stuff in it, the nightstand for my bed with the alarm clock—everything, it caught on a chain-link fence, is what it did, evidently, and stayed right there. But anyway, getting back to finding something, I had gone along there and found my wife’s class ring (laughter) over in the next yard here.

Ellis: Amazing.

Baker: You know, a ladies’ class ring, a girls’ class ring is a little, bitty old thing, you know, but they had a red ruby on it; that was Biloxi High. And I found her class ring. And I’d thought she brought it with her, you know. I thought she brought her jewelry box, but somehow she didn’t. (laughter) But that’s one of the things that I thought was unique was finding her class ring.

Ellis: That’s amazing.
Smith:  In a whole sea of junk to find that, I mean, you know, to find that one little thing.

Ellis:  Amazing.

Baker:  And we found—like I had slides and stuff, you know.  Of course, they was all yucky; they wasn’t no good.  But we had a little picture album, and you open the cover on it, and one picture would be just mud, and you thumb it, and the next picture would be just like it was just taken.  So I saved a few pictures, believe it or not.  And I was over in the parking lot across the street in this blacktop, and I was climbing over the debris, and I got down to the blacktop, and there was a picture just laying on the blacktop just as pretty.  I got it in my truck up there.  You’d think it was just taken, and it come out of my album, one of my albums, you know, and where the rest of them went, I don’t know.  But that picture was like it was almost wanting to be found, you know, just sitting there.  But most of my stuff was across the street.  My shed, I found my shed pretty well intact across the street and was able to get a lot of my good, old boat stuff, you know.  (laughter)  And all my tools; I saved most of my tools.  I got a lot of them going, electrical tools, you know.  I got a lot of them going; of course some of them, we didn’t.

Smith:  Still got to get some bicycles renovated over there a little bit.

Baker:  Yeah.  (laughter)  Yeah, the grandkids, they all, everybody on Sunday after church would come to my house, and we’d have biscuits and coffee and for the kids and all.  We had a bunch of bicycles, and they, of course, had plenty of room.  They’d ride around and have a ball, but I think they’re going to have to find some extra—

VanZandt:  Just hosed off, and new tires?

Baker:  —extra activities, I believe.  Yeah, they’re kind of messed up, I believe.  You just don’t have enough time to save everything.  I could’ve probably saved them if I’d had time, but I just had so much to do, you know, between the boats.  The boats got beat up pretty good.  I just, like I said, I just come off the shipyard this morning.  You can see the blue paint all over my hands, from painting.  But the boats—

VanZandt:  So how many boats do you have at the shipyard now?

Baker:  Well, just the one I took over this morning was my boat I make my living with, the *King Arthur*, which is a little forty-foot shrimp boat.  But I got my dad’s old boat I’m going to haul up Friday; so I got one more boat to go.  And she got a little storm damage to her, too.  Of course, my brother, my son and my brother works on their little shrimp boat, and they’re going to haul up Friday, too, at the yard.

VanZandt:  Is there a story behind naming it *King Arthur*?
**Baker:** Uh, well, Arthur, my daddy was Arthur, and I got a brother Arthur and a cousin Arthur and a nephew Arthur. But of all the Arthur’s, the boat was really named after my nephew because my brother was going to build a boat, and he, when he was in the oil business, he was building the boat; so he named it after his son. And before the boat was built, he turned it over to me; so we just left the name *King Arthur* because, like I say, Arthur was kind of a family name, I guess you’d say it. But I get a lot of static over that. Everybody wants to know where the round table is, you know. (laughter)

**Smith:** Well, it’s got a square one.

**Baker:** There you go.

**VanZandt:** So, you’re a few weeks away from shrimping season starting.

**Baker:** Yes ma’am, it usually opens about the second week of June. Now, we’re going to have the Blessing of the Fleet, which I don’t know how it’s going to turn out with everything in the situation it’s in. But the Blessing of the Fleet’s going to be on the eleventh of June. So—

**VanZandt:** Well, I was curious about the traditional ceremonies, like Blessing of the Fleet, different community events that you have in this industry to celebrate the beginning of seasons. And are those still continuing?

**Baker:** Oh yeah.

**VanZandt:** I understand there was one last weekend?

**Baker:** Well, that was in Pass Christian, I believe, last weekend. And I think they had one in Bayou La Batre last weekend, too. Yeah, these people kind of—I don’t guess you’re superstitious, but you feel like you need all the help you can get, to get your boat blessed. And it kind of gives you a little religious, you know, a little good feeling about your boat and all, you know, because the bishop comes down and blesses and the priests and all. And they have a king and a queen, and it’s kind of a tradition, like you said, you know.

**Smith:** And you’ll have your boat blessed?

**Baker:** Oh yeah, definitely. (laughter) Got to have it blessed. I need all the help I can get. (laughter) Oh yeah, we always have it blessed. We’re not going to decorate. I got—I lost all my decorations, but on top of this boat right here, I had made two big crosses that we put up with the banners and all, you know, to kind of make it look religious. And I got one whole cross and a broken one I found over in the other block there, you know, so here I am coming across the debris pile with a cross on my shoulder, you know. (laughter) So I’m going to hang in there, and next year we’ll probably be back to normal, I hope, by then, and we’ll decorate. But they’re not going
to probably be too many boats decorated. You put a few banners just to make it festival, you know, but we’re going to go.

**VanZandt:** Well, Mr. Baker, have you had any help from any relief organizations or faith-based organizations, nonprofits? There’ve been so many around.

**Baker:** Yeah, not really. I mean FEMA has been real nice. I mean they paid me, like, rent. Of course, they gave me the trailer, you know, which I don’t know how they can do that, but they do. And I got a real nice trailer; I guess you’ve seen that, and I didn’t ask for anything special now. They brought it, but I do have a nice trailer compared to a lot of people I heard, you know. But yeah, they paid me, you know, for my rent, and they helped me out a lot, sure did.

**VanZandt:** Do you know how long they’ll continue to do that?

**Baker:** Well, being as I got the trailer, of course you don’t rent no more because that’s over with, but no. What I did, I applied for SBA loan, but I’m on hold right now because, you know, there’s so many rumors around. That’s what’s bad; there’s rumors just flying. And you know, just by the time you—if it’d been me, I’d have been built already, you know, because I’m that a way. I’m hardheaded, you know, (laughter) but I hate to be backwards, I’d guess you’d say, to everybody else, you know, because—but I got a—I’m on hold on the SBA loan. I’ve got to July the tenth to make up my mind what I’m going to do; either relocate or build back here. So, that’s the situation I’m in right now.

**Smith:** If I can, I mean a lot of people would look at you or look at your neighbors and say, “Now wait a minute, this might’ve been bad, but now you’re sitting on a pot of gold.”

**Baker:** Well, if it—

**Smith:** But it looks like kind of a mixed feeling for you.

**Baker:** Yeah, it is. I’ll tell you. I don’t know. I just—I’m kind of afraid; I don’t know what money’s going to do, you know. It’s going to change my life definitely. I don’t want nothing elaborate. I want just the old simple; that’s all I’ve ever been. I don’t want nothing fancy. If I get my old boats, then I’m happy, you know, but the way I’m going to go is something to think about, you know. I couldn’t go in a subdivision; they’d run me out of the worst subdivision. (laughter) But I need a little space, nothing big, but just a little space for a workshop. That’s where I spend most of my time, in my little workshop.

**Ellis:** Have you been—I was just wondering because this does seem, for somebody who loves boats and has been on the water all his life, this seems like the ideal location.
Baker: It is.

Ellis: You’re right there.

Baker: Right there.

Ellis: Have you been scouting other places that might somehow replicate this?

Baker: Just kind of sneaking a glance, but I hadn’t really got serious yet. I’m really kind of hanging in there. I really don’t want to go anywhere. (laughter)

Smith: You’d like to stay here.

Baker: But I’m probably going to have to. I’m probably going to have to. I mean, of course this fellow right here, this fellow over here, he got an offer from Isle of Capri, I think it was, and they give him like $10,000. And if you don’t get the rest of the money, you keep the $10,000. And he made $10,000; they backed out. They didn’t want them.

Ellis: I’m sorry; I don’t think I understand.

Smith: They paid him $10,000 of [earnest] money, earnest money, right?

Baker: Right, earnest money. They give them $10,000, and May the first, I think it was, they were to come up with the balance, which would’ve been $500,000, or something like that. And they didn’t; they backed out. So, he made $10,000 off the deal, you know.

Ellis: But he just said, “No, I’m not selling.”

Baker: Well, no, no.

Smith: No, no, they backed out.

VanZandt: They backed out.

Baker: They did. Right. They did.

Smith: So now maybe somebody else will come along and buy him out.

Baker: That’s what I’m wondering, you know. It makes you wonder. Now, and they all interested in that block over south of me because it’s closer to the casino. So maybe that, you know, maybe they utilizing it to buy that block.

VanZandt: It’s a real waiting game, isn’t it, for so many people?
Baker: It’s a waiting game. It is.

VanZandt: You know, between the elevation levels—

Baker: It’s kind of scary. Right.

VanZandt: —being decided.

Baker: They were supposed to—I thought yesterday, I thought they were supposed to have set. They didn’t? (laughter) Not again.

VanZandt: They couldn’t agree.

Baker: OK, and I didn’t get a paper. I don’t get my paper; my brother gives me his paper when he gets through with it, and I’ll get it tonight. (laughter)

VanZandt: Four to three.

Smith: They voted not to, uh—

Baker: They did really?

Smith: Yeah.

Ellis: Basically they voted to postpone the decision.

Baker: Now the mayor wants to go with FEMA because he’s got four hundred and something thousand dollars. FEMA’s going to help him build us something back; so he’s going to go with FEMA on that. So that’s what he wants to do, whatever they want to do. Now and they got a map I’ve seen up at Don Snyder Center up on Pass Road; I don’t know if y’all are familiar with that center. They pulled out the map and showed me; for my area, they want me to go twenty-five feet above sea level, and I’m thirteen, this slab right here is thirteen. So I’d have to go—that’s seven, be twenty, so it’s eight foot, really.

VanZandt: Sounds like a fishing camp.

Baker: Right, yeah, you don’t want a fishing camp. (laughter) My brother’s building; he’s down on the beach where the Pelican Cay is, the little condominiums right there. He’s building the first house behind the Pelican Cay. He’s going with one of these polished steel houses; it’s cement, you know, Styrofoam, and they fill it with cement, and that’s what he’s going with. So, there’s a few of them building on that up there, that end of town. Well, they’re really at the end of town. It’s just a little further up.

Smith: Now, where are your kids? How many kids do you have?
Baker: Well, I’ve got six kids, but they’re all grown.

Smith: Right.

Baker: They on their own. I’ve got one home still, but they’re all locally around here.

Smith: But in the Point or did they move?

Baker: No, no, they’re right here. I had one on Oak Street, which is right here; he’s in a trailer on Oak Street. That’s Ronald, Jr. He got wiped out. We spent Camille in that house on Oak Street and didn’t get any water, and now it went all the way to Howard Avenue; all the houses are gone. And he almost stayed there knowing that we didn’t get hurt from Camille, but at the last minute he decided to leave, and thank the Lord he did, but he lives on Oak Street. I had another son up where the VFW is in the curve up there; I had a son lives on Doris Street. He got wiped out. I had another son lived on Howard Avenue, too, at the corner of Rosetti Street where Rosetti comes into Howard; he got wiped out. His house was in the middle of Howard Avenue. Had another son on Main Street; he had to swim out of his house to a two-story apartment in the backyard, him and his three kids, wife and three kids swam out of their house. They had up to the ceiling on Main Street, flooded. So, my daughter—bless her heart—she’s the only one lives across north of Interstate 10, didn’t get any damage. So she looked like a rooming house after the storm. (laughter) Everybody went to her, and that’s where Miss Murella, that’s my son-in-law, is Murella’s son. I don’t know if y’all are familiar with that, or not. (laughter) Well, my daughter is married to Murella’s son, Kenneth.

VanZandt: Oh, Murella Powell.

Baker: Murella Powell.

VanZandt: Oh.

Ellis: Oh.

VanZandt: OK, the genealogist.

Ellis: The genealogist.

Baker: Yeah, OK.

Smith: OK.

Baker: That’s her son that my daughter’s married to him. He’s a real good kid. He works in Marine Fisheries Service in Pascagoula. He’s got a good job.
Smith: Wow, so, of all your kids, just one made it through with their house still intact.

Baker: One made it through, my daughter Cynthia. And like I say, she was north of Interstate 10, and she was thirty-five foot up above sea level, so. And my wife and my mother-in-law died since the storm. She lived in the other block down there and poor thing, they sold her property, and she didn’t get to enjoy it. Her sisters, two sisters died since the storm. So, there was one died in March; one died in April. We had a cousin died in May, and another one died in late June, so.

VanZandt: Was that storm-related in any way?

Baker: I would think on one of them. Well, my poor mother-in-law, I don’t know. She was bedridden. She was ninety-four years old, and I don’t know that she realized that her house was gone because she was staying, she moved into my daughter’s house for the storm. And of course she stayed there till she died, and she couldn’t—never did come back. And her sister—the French people, they always lived next door to their sisters or, they’re all community. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that or not.

Smith: Sure.

Baker: Down in Louisiana, if you ever noticed, there’ll be a sister, brother, sister, brother or cousins; they all related. So that’s the way they was. Well, the two sisters lived side by side, and when they wanted to talk, up went the windows, and they parlait vous’d across the yard, you know. That’s how they communicated, you know. So. But the sister, the younger sister died first, and then my mother-in-law, which as I said was ninety-four, she died last, you see. So, it could’ve been something to do with the storm because they lost everything in [19]47 hurricane, which we thought it, before Camille, was the baddest thing, and then Camille took them and now this one. So, it probably, it had a lot, probably took a toll on them.

Smith: Broken heart, really.

Baker: Broken heart, right.

Smith: Yeah.

Baker: It took everything. I mean everything gone.

Ellis: Yep.

Smith: Yeah, people do. People do.

VanZandt: Mr. Baker, did you grow up on Deer Island?

Baker: I was born over there, right.
VanZandt: What are your memories, some of your memories of your childhood there?

Baker: Well, believe it or not, I guess we lived like millionaires over there and didn’t know it, you know, but we was fishermen. We had everything. Our houses—instead of 110 volt, we had 32 volt. Our light bulbs were 32 volt. When we’d buy a washing machine, if a fellow bought a washing machine back in them days, you went to a little hardware store and bought your washing machine, but he’d change the 110 volt out and put a 32 volt motor on it. So we was, we was good. I mean, we had indoor plumbing and all. I mean we had nice houses, and it was great, really was. We was five boys. Had five boys and no sisters.

VanZandt: So you grew up helping your father on the boat?

Baker: Right, working on the boats, right, uh-huh. And if anybody, like the charter boats, if anybody needed a deckhand, they would know to come over to the island and toot their horn, and one of us would come out. And back in them days, we worked for $5 or $6 a day. Well, that was big money, you know; we thought we was rich. So, that’s what we did.

VanZandt: I understand it’s—

Baker: Swim anytime you wanted. Went swimming all the time, you know, or sailing. That’s what I say, sailing boats and stuff, you know. We lived on boats, you know.

Smith: Was it unusual—is it unusual—I’m not from here. Is it unusual for someone who’s in the shrimping business to also to be so engaged in sailing, still?

Baker: I probably will, (laughter) yeah. No, I mean I grew up—see, like this little boat right here. When I was a teenager we lost our boat in Camille like that, but it was built off of that same model. And when I dated, we didn’t have cars. So we dated in sailboats, you know. So, I’ve been—boats just been my thing. When I had to go to school, we rowed to school in the boat, you know, or to Church or a ball game. We’d row across; go home, row back to the ball game, go back home, and stuff like that. I rowed, coming across on a date, rowed back home, go back, you know, back and forth, so. I mean, boats have just been my life.

Smith: But would there be very many commercial fishermen now who’d go out sailing for their own pleasure?

Baker: No. (laughter)

Smith: You’re one of the few.
Baker: I’m the weird one. (laughter) No, you wouldn’t see them sailing; you really wouldn’t.

VanZandt: How have you—

Baker: Like I said, I collect old boats like I do old—like people collect old cars, but it’s stuff I grew up with, you know, I mean—

Smith: Well, you don’t have to convince me; I have two fifty-year-old boats.

Baker: Oh really?

Smith: A fifty-year-old sailboat that I grew up sailing and a fifty-year-old runabout that my son and I just—

Baker: Is it class? Is it a class boat?

Smith: It’s called a Flying Junior.

Baker: Flying Junior?

Smith: It’s just a little—

Baker: But this is a fish class, this one right here.

Smith: Yeah. No, my boat’s only fifteen feet long.

Baker: Oh OK.

Smith: It’s a trailer boat.

Baker: Trailer boat.

Smith: I mean, I’m up in the Midwest where we sail on a little pond. You’d probably call it a bathtub, but we sail on those things. So you don’t have to convince me.

Baker: OK. (laughter) It gets in your blood. I mean that’s a—I guess I’ll burn out one day. (laughter)

Ellis: No, I don’t think so. (laughter) No, it doesn’t sound like it.

Baker: Well, my goal is—see how the boats is tore up from the storm? You know, that boat there was over in the other yard. If you notice, we got the writing on the side of it. We thought—they had the rumor that they were going to come and bulldoze the whole Point. We were scared to death. I was running out in the debris getting my own stuff like I was stealing, you know. I’d run out, and I’d grab something, but we
thought they were going to come bulldoze our boats, you know. So we put our name and address on the side of them. We had all kind of time. They didn’t do this for four months after the storm, so we could’ve—we had all kind of time. But we had a job getting them out of the debris. This boat right here, you just could see it in the debris pile, and we didn’t know how in the world we was going to get that boat out of there, and the trailer was right next to it. So, my boys, you know, all my boys got together with their friends, and we jacked that thing back on the trailer, and there was plywood just laying all over the place, and old doors. So we made a bridge right over the debris. And we hooked the big rope to it and pulled that thing right back in my yard, right over the debris pile. (laughter)

VanZandt: It’s quite amazing the wooden boats made it through—

Baker: Yeah, they did.

VanZandt: —without being banged up.

Baker: Yeah, they really did. That one over there was upside down in my yard, and it was way over across the street over there. We found it in the debris pile, still upside down; not a scratch on it. You’d think the deck would’ve been tore out of it, or the combing would’ve been broke; never had a scratch on it.

Smith: I think I may have a picture of one of your boats because we’ve been—

Baker: Really?

Smith: —coming by here; this is about our eighth trip down here.

Baker: Oh really, OK.

Smith: And I think really early on, I know I took pictures of boats with people’s names on them.

Ellis: Yeah.

Smith: But I think I may have a Baker boat in my—

Baker: Yeah?

Smith: —photo library, now that I’ve seen that.

Ellis: We’ll have to take a look.

Baker: OK.

Ellis: We did; we just walked around and took lots of picture.
Baker: OK. Yeah, my daughter, she’s big on computers, you know, and she went online somehow and punched my name in, and I believe the Boston Globe had my picture of me in the debris pile. (laughter) I said, “Good Lord.” You know, that shows you how things went. So we had people just all over the country and the world, I guess, in here.

Smith: Hm.

Baker: And you’d—

Smith: That’s where all the reporters came from. They saw that in the paper, and then they all came on down here to talk to you.

Baker: I wouldn’t doubt it. You know, I wouldn’t doubt it.

Smith: Yeah.

Baker: I’ve had some good times talking because I love to talk to people. I enjoy people.

Smith: Um-hm. You’re going to have to—is that, uh, it looks like that keel is all off center.

Baker: Right, you see, she washed off the trailer, and she was laying on her keel, but it’s just four bolts. So all I’ve got to, I’m going to drop that keel and straighten the boats out.

Smith: I see.

Baker: Jack it right back up. It’ll go back together good.

VanZandt: Have other people brought you their boats to repair?

Baker: Well, I try not to do it. I got too many of my own. But, yeah, I do it; I do a little work on other people’s boats. Can’t help it. (laughter) Wooden boats especially. I get on a fiberglass boat every once in a while, but that stuff makes me itch, just looking at it. (laughter)

VanZandt: You could keep busy for a long time doing that.

Baker: Oh yes ma’am.

Smith: So, is there anything else you want to ask right now?

Ellis: No, I mean I think I just want to—I mean I just want to underline that it just sounds like right now, where you are it’s a big—
Baker: It’s hurry up and wait.

Ellis: You’re just waiting to see what happens—

Baker: Yes ma’am.

Ellis: —with the casinos.

Baker: I don’t know. We got eighteen months in these trailers; so I don’t know what’ll happen if I get to that point, which I’m hoping not. I hope I can have something going by then.

Ellis: Is anybody in your family, your wife or your kids saying, “Come on; we got to do this.”

Baker: Yeah, the wife’s getting—I think she’s getting a little restless, but like I told her; I says, “You know, SBA loan, I got a $200,000 SBA loan for about $800 a month. That’s a lot of money. I don’t know if I can afford that, you know, because your utilities, and the cost of living is high right now. And I just don’t know if I want to go that route.

Smith: What’s that loan for?

Baker: It’s to rebuild my home.

Smith: To rebuild your home, OK.

Baker: Rebuild my home.

Smith: You’ve got the loan, but you actually haven’t started using it.

Baker: No, no, I hadn’t started u[sing it]. I got it on hold. I’m on hold on account of this—you know, they claim, “Oh, they’re going to buy you up.” You know, they’re coming. “Oh, they’ll be here next week, you know. Somebody’s going to come see you.” But they never come, you know. I mean I had that one offer, in writing, you know, but that’s it, nobody else.

VanZandt: What about the rest of your family, your sons who lost their homes?

Baker: Well, one of my sons is living in a house, which my brother owned, and it was a rental property. So he’s the only one that’s actually living in a house. I got one, two, three, my four boys, five boys living in trailers, and me, (laughter) FEMA trailers. Well, two of them’s not living in FEMA trailers. Two of them’s living in trailers, but it just so happened the people they were working for had work trailers that they put on-site, and they let them use two of them. So I got two sons that’s doing
that. It’s not FEMA trailers, but they are living in, same as my trailer, camper trailer. Fifth wheel is what they call them.

**VanZandt:** And what kind of work are they doing now?

**Baker:** Well, I got one son’s a roofer, which he is busy. (laughter) He works for Saucier Brothers, which is a big roofing company in Biloxi. I got one, two, three of them’s electricians. I got one of them that works right here with the Kopszywa Electric. I got two of them works in Gulfport off Canal Road with Ebberman’s Electric. And then my youngest son, well, he works with Ebberman Electric; two of them work together. And then I got one son, Ronald Jr., that’s a fisherman; he works with my brother. He’s a deckhand with my brother.

**Smith:** And all those electricians got to be busy, too.

**Baker:** Oh, they are. They don’t even answer the phone, (laughter) there’s so much. And they trying to do commercial work, trying to get the businesses going, the shrimp, ice plants and such as that, you know. And, yeah, they are; they unreal, the work they doing.

**Smith:** You know what I’d like to do? If you have a—I don’t know what your lunch plan is, if you need to eat, but I’d love to go see your boat.

**Baker:** OK, the *King Arthur*?

**Smith:** Yeah.

**Ellis:** Yeah.

**Baker:** OK.

**Smith:** Could we—is it right over here? Where is it?

**Baker:** Well, it’s at—are you familiar with Main Street?

**Smith:** Yep.

**VanZandt:** Mm-hm.

**Baker:** Right on down Main Street.

**Smith:** Oh, so you’re in the small-boat harbor.

**Baker:** The harbor. My brother and my boat’s side by side, and there’s quite a few shrimp boats in there, if you want to talk to somebody else, maybe.
Smith: Do you have time?

VanZandt: It’d be great, wonderful.

Smith: Do you have time to do that?

Baker: Well.

Smith: I mean if you need to eat, we—

(end of interview)