

Oral History Transcript
Interview of Mayor Peter Gitz
By Samantha Jenkins
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Samantha Jenkins: Today is November 6, 2012. My name is Samantha Jenkins. I am interviewing Mayor Peter Gitz at the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum. Can you please state your name and the year you were born?

Mayor Peter Gitz: Peter L. Gitz, born 1935.

Jenkins: Alright.

-Pause to check recording-

Jenkins: Mayor Gitz, when, during World War II, you were about 6 to 10 years old. What was that like for you? What were some of your experiences as a child during that time?

Gitz: Well, we—*[clears throat]*—it didn't bother us a whole lot. We lived on a farm. And my dad was a rice farmer and we had strawberry farms. We had a pretty good size farm so we always had plenty to eat. We went to school. Only thing we knew about the farm—*[corrects himself]*—the war was the newspaper and the serial on a old picture show we used to have here in town. We'd go Saturday night and watch the movies and they'd tell us about World War II that was going on. Other than that, I had some uncles and I had some cousins that all went to war, but they all came home.

Jenkins: That's good. Ah, were there any scrap metal drives or that kind of thing going on in this area?

Gitz: Yes, there was. Ah, Ms. Deanie Chatelier was a school bus driver and they had, ah, on Saturdays we'd go out, sometimes, and pick up tires and old batteries, ah, rims for automobiles. Also picked up scrap iron because everything was rationed and people couldn't get tires for their cars. Batteries. So we picked that up and give it to the government and they recycled or whatever they did with them.

Jenkins: Okay, ah, You've owned Badeaux's Drive-In since 1974. How'd you get into that business? How'd you get started with it?

Gitz: Ah. Just by accident.

Both: *[laughter]*

Gitz: Ah, a good friend of mine owned it and said he wanted to sell it. And I know the construction company I was with, I, we built all the bridges throughout the South and was about

finished up and I knew that was gonna happen, in the '80s. So, I decided to go ahead. He wanted me to buy it, so I did. That's how I got started in that type business.

Jenkins: Ah—

Gitz: But I still did construction work for eight years.

Jenkins: Who was that with?

Gitz: I worked for Brown-Root until [T.L.] James and Raymond International, sometimes its called Pre-Stressed Concrete Company. There was three owners. And sometimes I worked off the job and I'd be under Brown-Root.

Jenkins: Okay. Ah, You talk about working, building bridges and all that. What do you remember about your part of building the—was it the Causeway, the Twin spans?

Gitz: Yeah, I worked on the first Causeway.

Jenkins: Okay, okay. Well, what that was experience like and getting finished and—?

Gitz: Well, I was real young and it was a job. I worked with the engineers and that's how I got started. After the first Causeway, I decided I go try something else and they called me back to work. I mean we got on some government projects after that. So, ah, I stayed there 27 years.

Jenkins: Oh, okay. Ah, they've said, I've heard that you were one of the first to drive across the Causeway.

Gitz: *[laughter]* Yeah. What we was doing—the bridge was finished except the south end of the abutment was not completed and T.L. James was doing that. So, we, me and a chief engineer and I run and asked *[unintelligible]*. We shot elevation from one side of the bridge to the other *[meant one end of the bridge to the other]* to see if it was sinking anytime, especially when any cars were on it. Just work cars was on it. We'd work on Saturday evening. We was on the other side of the bridge so I decided, I took some boards and said "I'll be the first one to drive across the bridge and get back home." So that's what I did.

Jenkins: *[laughter]* Do you feel some pride anytime you go across it?

Gitz: I think about it; a lot of hard work.

Jenkins: *[laughter]* I'm sure. Ah, in the spring of 2012, you were re-elected mayor of Madisonville after already serving 35 years as mayor. What's been your motivation for public service after all these years?

Gitz: I guess because I was born and raised right here, just right out of town. I went to school here, went to Covington High School. I knew everybody here and—I was real busy with my construction job and, plus, I had my farm. I run some cattle on it. And I just—they asked me to

run for council and I said “ No, I don’t want no part of that.” But, people talked me into running. So I ran and I was the high vote getter on council. And, ah, my good friend was up in age that’d run for mayor. And he only stayed about six months and I was elected mayor pro temp. So I had to take over a job that I didn’t even want. And I’ve been here ever since.

Jenkins: Okay. Ah, what can you tell me about—in your 2005 oral history with Sherlette Thompson, I mean Tyson, ah, you mentioned that your family farmed. And, ah, what were, what was some of the challenges of farming here, or what was more, what was the transition like with getting tractors in here, some of the different changes that have happened to farming over the years, since you were young?

Gitz: Yeah, ah, I come up on a farm. And, ah, way back in the early 1900s, my grandfather and then my dad and my uncle grew rice. And, also, after World War II, they put quotas on rice and the new equipment had just started coming out, combines and stuff. And they decided to cut back and we—Dad raised, we had a lot of help on the farm. We raised strawberries and we raised bell peppers. We raised like ten acres of sweet potatoes, which was a lot back then. But we always had plenty help on the farm. Especially after World War II, people would look for jobs. But we did well, my dad did well. I just liked it and always had a few cattle. My dad died when I was seventeen and I had three younger brothers, so. Kinda left me with a few cows and I kept it up and then we sold them. And then after I get a little older and had little more money in my pocket, I started back with the cattle. Then my kids showed cows in 4-H and FFA. So, [it was] something I really liked and, ah, been doing it ever since. I still have about twenty head of momma cows now. I guess at my age I’m starting to kinda slow back down.

Jenkins: What kind of cows is it?

Gitz: I had registered Shorthorn cattle that my kids showed. We showed some sheep. We didn’t show any hogs but we had hogs one time when I was small. I showed hogs in 4-H club in junior high in 1950, ’51. So, its kinda, ah, something I always liked.

Jenkins: And stayed with it.

Gitz: Huh?

Jenkins: Stayed with it.

Gitz: Stayed with it. Never made much money with it but I stayed with it.

Jenkins: Yeah. Alright. Ah, the Wooden Boat Festival. What are some ways the organization and preparation for the festival has challenged you as mayor? And, what do you think about what it’s become, how much it’s changed?

Gitz: Well, its been great for this area. We were doing Oktoberfest and we did some of the Celtic Nations Festivals. And then, ah, a young couple here had a sailboat, by name of Joy and Rob Curtis. [They] came to me and said we ought to have a wooden boat festival. I said “We’ve been noted for building boats, as a shipyard town,” which we were for many years. And we

decided to have a wooden boat festival. Joy, Rob, and myself and a girl that works for the office of clerks, Cindy Phelps; we were the key players for the first couple years. People volunteered. And at that time we had all the non-profits, which was the youth boosters, fire department—just volunteers all—the garden club, and chamber. And we always limited it to the non-profit organizations of Madisonville. We didn't know it was going to grow like it did.

And the same time, Allen Saltus, which was a professor at Southeastern doing research for the wrecks in the [Tchefuncte] River with, ah, John Hunley and Don Aucion. Those people have passed away [John and Don passed away]. And they came to me and wanted a museum. And the same time, it was getting too big for us so we needed an organization to run it and I turned it over to the Maritime Museum. We had just started and organized a board of directors and things. And that's pretty much the beginning of it and that's where it caught on. And they wanted a museum and I found these two lots here being developed by a developer. I was able to get the town to put a down payment on these two lots that the museum sits on. Until we got funded—and the Wooden Boat Festival was bringing in pretty good money—so the board of directors put that money aside. And we went to Baton Rouge and we got funding and that's the way, that's how it got started.

Jenkins: Alright. Ah, since your oral history in the spring of 2005, obviously some things have happened since then. Especially, hurricanes. Significant ones. Katrina affected this area in that fall of 2005 and Hurricane Isaac recently flooded parts of Madisonville in August of 2012. Ah, what are some hurricane experiences that stand out in your mind with these storms or with others that have happened over the years?

Gitz: Well, I remember a lot of the storms. We always had an elevation of about 6.5 [feet]. We'd get the water from the 1947 storm, and Betsy, and Camille, Andrew, Audrey, all those storms and plenty of in-betweeners, small storms but they always brought water in. Katrina brought in the most water we ever had as far as flood water. And then when Isaac come along, it tops it a foot more than we ever had. So we've had a lot of bad experiences. Some of our old homes in here are over a hundred years old, was built off the ground but wasn't built high enough. With Isaac, we got quite a few with water in it. 130 or so homes had got water in them. Its been a bad experience for myself, the Council, and also the people living here and we're still working on it.

Jenkins: Ah, Madisonville is a quaint town with a lot of energy. Ah, how has Madisonville maintained its charm over the years? I know historic preservation is bound to go on with some of these old homes, and that there's places on the National Register. Do you think that historic preservation is active in this area and—?

Gitz: We don't have a historical society, which I've been working on that. Madisonville's been a quaint town because of the waterway. Ah, go back a hundred years from now and maybe a little bit further than that and we was a town that was a timber and boatbuilding area. We had the boats that, steamers, and the boats that carried people to New Orleans way back in the late 1800s all the way up until about the 1930s, when vehicles become used more by people. So the boats, they cut down the use of it. But I know my people, my aunts went to school in New Orleans, nursing school and different things. And they'd maybe come home on the weekends.

That's way before my time, but they'd ride the boats from New Orleans. That's the only way of transportation we had, so. Then the shipping of, ah, bricks and timber and tar and turpentine, those things that was plentiful here was all shipped to New Orleans and other areas. So, we've been a, its been pretty much a happy town that always had a lot of activity here. We had boat races for many, many years since 1938 and until about 1960. Well, really around 1978 was the last boat races that we had. But that was a big activity here. We had a lot of nightclubs in town when I took office. We had nine barrooms and a couple restaurants that had bars in them. And that's changed a lot. We got some restaurants now. Some of them got bars in them but we don't have no barrooms. Not as much of the dancing and stuff they used to have on the weekends that made it kinda a rowdy town.

Jenkins: *[laughter]* Well, ah, the—you were talking about shipping and that kind of thing. What can you tell me about, ah, the shipyard industry in Madisonville—the parts that you can remember?

Gitz: Well, I kind of remember from, ah, World War II. The history of Madisonville—the Civil War was here and a lot of activity here during the Civil War. And then in World War I, the Jahncke Shipyard had become—well, the grounds we're on now is 22 acres which is Jahncke Shipyard. And they built wooden ships and you might have seen pictures of them here. And they worked, I understand, between 1500 and 2000 people that worked here. And they had built barracks all through town. Some back, you can still see the evidence in the swamp behind the ballpark where they housed all the people because they had no way of getting here, either by boat or horse and wagon back in the teens. In, I guess, 1912 to 1917, it was active. And then the Jahncke [Corporation] had a dredging company that had a lot of dredge boats. And they had a repair yard here. And when World War II come on, Equitable Equipment Company, which was owned by Neville Levy of New Orleans, they leased a big portion of this shipyard and built boats for World War II. And they worked about eight to nine hundred people, with two shifts of workers. And, ah, so I remember that. My daddy come off the farm and worked in the shipyard for a while. I forget what kind of work he done. But anyway, he was a supervisor. And after World War II, he went back to the farm. But, ah, the history of Madisonville, we've worked a lot of people here during those two, World War I and World War II. I think in the 1950s, after World War II, Equitable Shipyard moved up the river where Trinity [Marine] is now. And they work about 300 people or better. And they've been active for all them years. And, so, we've had shipyards. We still do. They work about, I think about 300 people right now and that's been a lot of the workforce here in Madisonville.

Jenkins: It seems that some that I've read or heard, some of the, the launching of some of the ships was a big event in town.

Gitz: Right.

Jenkins: What was that like?

Gitz: Ah, I vaguely remember it, well, my dad and mother going to it. But my daddy got, ah, I mean all the people that worked in the shipyard got the Navy E flag—a little pin they got for excellent work. So, I do remember that. Ah, they did have launchings of the boats pretty

regular. Ah, I just remember as a little boy during World War II, you'd look across the river here, they'd be tied abreast four or five boats. They was all painted grey with the white and black numbers on the side. And I don't remember what kind of crafts they was but they had hundreds of them. The whole river just [*motioned ships lining the banks*] where the Navy would come get them and move them out. I remember that.

Jenkins: Alright. Well, is there anything else you'd like to discuss? Anything you can think of?

Gitz: Well, just that Madisonville is a quaint little town and I think its held its own because of maybe the way its located between, ah, located on the west side of the Tchefuncte River, and north, south side by Lake Pontchartrain, west by swamp. So, it don't give us much way to get in and out. So, almost an island, here. We stay pretty much like we are.

Jenkins: Its very nice. Well, thank you for your time. I really appreciate it.

Gitz: Well, thank you. I could've told you a lot more but I guess it takes time.

Jenkins: Alright.

Gitz: Thank you.

Jenkins: Alright.