

Transcription
Interview of Mayor Peter Gitz
By Sherlette Tyson
March 28, 2005

Sherlette Tyson: Today is March 28, 2005. My name is Sherlette Tyson; I am interviewing the Mayor of the Town of Madisonville, Peter Gitz. How are you doing today, Mr. Gitz?

Mayor Peter Gitz: I'm doing fine.

Tyson: Thank you. Mr. Gitz was you born and raised in the Madisonville area?

Gitz: Yes, I was.

Tyson: Can you tell us something about your earliest memories of life in Madisonville?

Gitz: I was born in 1935, right after the Depression. I started remembering things around 1940 when World War II started and we had the shipyards that were engaged in building ships for the navy during World War II. Equitable Shipyard, which is a part of the Jahncke Shipyard, was leased for World War II. And then I remember seeing them build ships here in town. It wasn't big ones, but the whole river was lined up about three or four abreast. They all were all lined up and painted gray with big white and black letters on the side. I guess I was about seven or eight years old then. We had the Jahncke Shipyard which was a repair shipyard for the armed self, which is right down here where Maple Drive, two subdivisions, and the Maritime Museum is today.

Tyson: I know you have a business down here in Madisonville? How long have you had that business?

Gitz: I've had Badeaux's Drive-In since 1974.

Tyson: It's very prosperous here in Madisonville?

Gitz: Well, it keeps me alive. [smiling]

Tyson: It keeps you alive? [laugh] Okay.

Tyson: What can you remember about the Jahncke Shipyard and the dredging of the Tchefuncte River? Do you know anything about that?

Gitz: Well, they cleared the river in about 1950 they come through and picked up a lot of old wrecks and dead trees and some of the things they could do; Corps of Engineers done that. But the history of the shipyards in about 1950 Neville Levy owned Equitable Shipyard. He brought the old Jahncke, the old Stanga Plantation upriver there where Trinity Shipyard is now. The shipyard during World War II worked about 800 or 900 people there; and they vary down there, I think they have over 400 people aboard where the shipyard is right now; they build mostly barges.

Tyson: Did a lot of the families own their own boats or they rented them?

Gitz: Well, a lot of people did fishing, but not as much in the last few years though. But there was some commercial fishermen here from way back up until the seventies they don't do so much commercial fishing up here. They do crabbing and out in the lake. But, the river fishing such as cat fishing or anything they don't do that anymore.

Tyson: Okay, you said that Equitable and Trinity, they are the same?

Gitz: Equitable was bought out by Trinity some years back; it is the same shipyard.

Tyson: What about Jahncke? Do they do anything?

Gitz: Jahncke [Shipyard] sold theirs out in about 1978 [clears throat] to Williams Mac Williams and they sold out to T L James and T L James sold out to the Blossom Family. That's where the subdivisions are now.

Tyson: Do they have a lot of the Blossom Family still in the area?

Gitz: Most of them in Covington.

Tyson: Can you tell me something about the Lighthouse?

Gitz: The Lighthouse originated I think in 1835, and the lighthouse keeper's house was there. During the Civil War it was bombarded with cannon balls. I understand there had some storms that did havoc to the lighthouse itself. The reason the lighthouse is still there and was intact is the lighthouse keeper's house was moved by ML Hoffman, the Mayor of Madisonville, and Doctor – [thinking of doctor's name] anyway doctor, I forget his name moved [the keeper's house] in 1952 when it was called the [Calwin?] Shipyard, which it was originally owned by the [Deninger?] family and the Fredericks Family where they had the first Electric Power Plant was here in Madisonville—the first in St. Tammany Parish! Anyway, they moved the light housekeeper's house to that area and within the last two years we got the lighthouse keeper's house back. It is on museum grounds and the plan is to put it back to where it was originally.

Tyson: Do you know how far into the future they might consider doing that?

Gitz: Right now we would love to get it rolling as soon as possible, but funding is the biggest problem.

Tyson: The biggest thing going on now in Madisonville is the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum.

Gitz: Yes! It is a real nice museum. It's sort of came in on its own in the last few years. In the years to come it's certainly going to be bigger and better all the time.

Tyson: What is the exact purpose, what do they do at the museum?

Gitz: It got started back in 1990; we had Allen Saltus (which was a professor at Southeastern) [Southeastern Louisiana University], Don Aucoin, and John Huntley (he was doing some research in the river). I met with them, they came to me and we got to talking. We decided they wanted a museum here in this area. At that same time the shipyard was being sold. The Blossom family bought it and I negotiated the last two lots that is where the museum site is now.

The town put up the first \$25,000 to hold it until we got some help. The state helped us with \$125,000. Then probably the state will come back and gives us another grant with \$150,000. With the Wooden Boat Festival, which is helping pay for the museum, that brings it to about a \$150,000 a year; right now, the museum is probably a three million dollar project.

Tyson: I have heard about the Wooden Boat Festival, what are the activities?

Gitz: In 1998, no in 1989, Rob Curtis and his wife Joy came to me about having the Wooden Boat Festival. And Cindy (the girl who works here in the office) and myself and that couple we put the first one on and it grew, so big. We done the first one with non-profit organizations, which was always a policy that we had to use boosters: the fire department, the garden club and the chamber [of commerce]. We put the first two on with some help of some people and then from there, when I seen the museum was getting ready to be kicked off and had a board of directors, we decided to go ahead and let the museum operate the Wooden Boat Festival. For the funding they get off the Wooden Boat Festival goes toward the Maritime Museum.

Tyson: How do the Town of Madisonville's citizens support the museum? Do they?

Gitz: It's all in the town's name and we have a management agreement. They have a board of directors. And the same thing with the lighthouse, we turned the lighthouse keeper's house and the lighthouse—the town owns it. It was purchased, donated back in 1998. I think that was when it was, and we turned it over to a management agreement to the Maritime Museum. So the lighthouse, and lighthouse keeper's [cottage], and the Maritime Museum [are] all in one as a management agreement for the town.

Tyson: Far as tourists and things, people coming in, how does that work far as the town itself? Does the museum help the town's business flow?

Gitz: It certainly does! Right now they have the Cotton Blossom, which is a tour boat that is going to be operated by the museum. When you visit the museum it is three dollars to go through it, which is I guess some nice exhibits, and in the future we will be able to take the Cotton Blossom out and see the lighthouse and see all the wrecks up in the river. We got Allen Saltus and Don Aucoin had made a temporary record of all the findings; its like a 124 findings of the river and we got those located. We have a map of that, so, that what at least be seen on the tour.

Tyson: Mr. Aucoin. He's still living?

Gitz: Aucoin, yes he's still living.

Tyson: What is his business here in the area?

Gitz: He's retired.

Tyson: Oh, he's retired.

Gitz: He's retired. He did that as a hobby with Allen Saltus.

Tyson: I also noticed when I was doing my research you have eight sites listed on the National Historic Register [National Register of Historic Places]? Are you familiar with them?

Gitz: Yeah I'm familiar with most of them, which is the Stanga House right here by the shipyard, which is an old plantation house. We have one at Bert's boatyard; that house there is on it. We have the little museum, which were the Jailhouse and the Town Hall at one time until 1976. We have about four or five other houses. Then we have some things we are getting ready to put as part of the history as far as some of the trenches that were dug during the Civil War. We still have them and we're going to have a plaque put on it and it will be a site for people to look at.

Tyson: Where is the original Jailhouse located? It is not the original jailhouse?

Gitz: It's up here on Rampart, just one block off of Main Street; we made a museum out of it too. We've got two museums here in town.

Tyson: I did notice you have pictures out front in the lobby. Is one of those the old jailhouse?

Gitz: Yes, it was one of the jailhouse.

Tyson: Going back to the Jahnckes, are there still any of the Jahnckes living here in the Madisonville area?

Gitz: No, in the Covington area. Herb Jahncke, Jr. still lives up there. I think his mother is still living; his father passed away. The history on the Jahnckes—they come to New Orleans in the late 1800's and they were the first ones who did concrete sidewalks and all that stuff in New Orleans. And they did the dredging and they sold gravel and sand and they had big dredge boats over there and they started dredging the shells. They had this yard here for a repair yard and they built some of their own barges and they built some of their own dredge boats and they sold out, I guess, 37 years ago when they—especially when they were dredging on the lake. They couldn't dredge any more on the lake; they went out of business and sold to someone else.

Tyson: Your family had a business when you were coming up?

Gitz: My great grandfather came here in the middle 1800's and he settled here. They were rice farmers and they did all types of farming and raised cattle and sheep and everything. Then my grandfather he kind of stayed the same way. He stayed right on the farm and he planted rice and my dad did too. Then they farmed up till he died young in 1953, but he was farming then. He raised strawberries, bell peppers, and stuff like that. And my mother is from here too. Her family did practically the same thing.

Tyson: I'm sorry what was her family's name?

Gitz: Her family who come here were the Rathford Family, the Stanga Family. That's all her kinfolks; and the Peterson Family. So all of us people came here pretty much the same.

Tyson: So, really in Madisonville, before they had the roads, it was just the riverboats coming through that was the transportation?

Gitz: Yeah, the history here, all those people planted cotton. All that stuff was done by hand up into the middle 30's when they started having tractors and stuff. The combines was coming in the late 30's and 40's. Everything was done by hand so it was all small farmers. But, they shipped cotton and they shipped wool. They shipped everything by boat to New Orleans; they shipped the rice by boat to New Orleans. They had a plant there they finished off the rice and sold it. A lot of stuff grown here was shipped by barges, schooners and different type barges and boats to New Orleans.

Tyson: When did they start building the road that connected across the bridge?

Gitz: They had a ferry to about 1932 in that area and they built the first bridge; before that all you had were horses and wagons. When the cars came out it got pretty popular here in about 1925 with the Model T's. They had to ferry across and then they built a bridge. In 1935, they built Highway 22. The original old Ponchatoula Highway used to come through Madisonville. Now it kind of bypasses on the south side of it; it comes straight through and goes across the bridge.

Tyson: I notice a boat outside of your window, what is it?

Gitz: That is the Cotton Blossom.

Tyson: That is the Cotton Blossom?

Gitz: Yes, it is a 300-passenger boat; it has a dining room, a small kitchen and a lounge. It is really nice; it's going to be the tour boat for the Maritime Museum.

Tyson: I see they are still making repairs on it, or renovating it, or something?

Gitz: Oh, they always got something to do; they are always painting or putting signs on it.

Tyson: I'm going to pause the tape for a moment. I have to ask you some more questions.

Gitz: Okay.

Tyson: We are now resuming taping.

Tyson: Mayor Gitz, what can you remember about when you were a child, about things that went on before your time with your parents, family members, or about the town?

Gitz: Like I told you, I am four generations here. My great grandfather, my grandfather and my dad's people settled in here. Most of them were farmers and Madisonville was a shipyard town. It was always active, even during depression times, they've had some work here. They raised cattle, rice, and later on in the years, they were truck farmers and they raised strawberries, peppers, and all that kind of stuff they could ship. And sweet potatoes. It was pretty good-sized farms; they had lots of people working for them. When the Model T's came and they starting getting tractors, they got a little bit bigger. Then when the big tractors came like combines and stuff, the farms were too small to have that kind of equipment. My uncle bought a combine in 1946, he and my dad used it for about four years and they put a quota on the rice. The farms were too small for that type of equipment.

But, the shipyards in WWI had 2200 people working in one [Jahncke Shipyard] and they still have, behind the ballpark, where they had built barracks for them to stay in. There are ponds still back in the swamp where they had buildings for that many people to stay here during WWI.

Commerce was always good here; they shipped all their supplies and stuff far as wool. They come all the way from Folsom, even farther up from Franklinton. They'd come to the river here to go to New Orleans. They had at least three riverboats running out of here and they had numerous amounts of schooners go across to New Orleans.

Another big interest here was the sawmills. We had the Meare Sawmills across the river. We had the Deninger Sawmill right behind the old cemetery down on the river. They worked a lot of people. At one time, before WWII, we had about eight or nine bar rooms in town. We had a few restaurants; a lot of people who worked here could eat out. Most people used to like to drink a lot around here. They made a good living here in the shipyards when they worked the shipyards in WWI and WWII. The shipyards are still going on now.

They always had plenty of activities in Madisonville. I know I was just a small kid when they had boat races here and the first V8 engines come out. About the late 30's they had boat races here and they had the Nationals here. They raced up until about the middle 70's. The boats got faster and the river got narrower. We had a few people get hurt; so they quit having them. But we've had activity on the river as long as I can remember. It was always something we had; something was always new like the Wooden Boat Festival we have now. We had the Kelsey Nation Festival here for the last few years. We had it last year and got rained out. They brought people from five different countries to the Kelsey Nation Festival. They come from Scotland, Wales, New Britain, and Isle of Man. About 400 people came from other countries just for the Kelsey Nation Festival. We're supposed to have it again this year. They have the paddle boat races in the river. They use the boat called the Curry, which is about 24 feet long. It is narrow and has two men paddle or two women. They have all kinds of games.

Tyson: Did I understand you to say the sawmills are closed now?

Gitz: Yeah, they've been gone for many years. The Deninger Sawmill would pay everybody off in tokens. They owned a big commerce in Madisonville; a big building. They sold food, clothes, feed, fertilizer; they sold gasoline and they sold kerosene. I was just a little boy and I remember going there with my family to pick up supplies. You could buy everything there. If you worked there they paid you in tokens and you could buy all your food and everything from right there. If an individual would come do work for the Deningers, they could buy with cash at their store. That went on until about 1940 and then the store ran until 1950. But they didn't have the sawmills at that time anymore; they didn't pay people by tokens.

I remember my family going to buy stuff during WWII and the ration. Sugar was rationed. Gas was rationed. You couldn't hardly buy a tire for your automobile. So, I do remember all that.

Tyson: That was during the Depression times?

Gitz: No, that was during WWII.

Tyson: WWII, Okay.

Gitz: [In] Depression time, I was just a little kid. We lived right out of town; a whole lot of people were traveling, whole families, with nothing to eat. I remember my mother always cooked a big meal everyday. She always tried to give food to people who didn't have any food. It would be whole families with little kids. She would try to feed them. That was everyday; that was kind of after the Depression or when Depression was getting over with. Times were hard here.

Tyson: I guess it was in all the parts of the United States. But, tell me about the other crops here, you said your parents raised rice crops?

Gitz: Yes, they raised rice.

Tyson: Do they still have all that?

Gitz: No, hardly anything is raised here now; it's just about residential. It is very little land left down here in this area down this way. You get up to Folsom area and Ponchatoula is still farming, but it is very small.

Tyson: Was that the Kelsey National Festival?

Gitz: The Kelsey Nation Festival.

Tyson: You did say people came from all over? From Scotland and —

Gitz: Five different countries came.

Tyson: Because they had people here?

Gitz: Daniel Flaherty is the one who started it in New Orleans. He liked it over here and he was having a little problem having it in City Park. So, he moved it over here. Last year, we had it at the museum and at the riverfront a couple of times. We will probably have it again this fall. I haven't talked to him but I think it is scheduled for this fall.

Tyson: I know you don't have any motels here, but you have a bed & breakfast?

Gitz: We have one or two bed & breakfasts.

Tyson: So, how do you accommodate the people who come in for that?

Gitz: It's very small; maybe three couples at the most.

Tyson: You have paddle racing?

Gitz: No, not yet. (laughs)

Tyson: Just to go back a little, can you tell me something about your family? You have children?

Gitz: Yeah, I have four children.

Tyson: Do they live here in this area?

Gitz: Yeah, they all live here close. No, my baby daughter lives in Montgomery, Alabama. My oldest daughter finished [school at] Southeastern [Southeastern Louisiana University], my two brothers finished at Southeastern, my oldest son went to LSU, and my baby girl went two years at Southeastern. She got married and went to Montgomery with her husband. She finished at Auburn and she is a registered nurse. But, she got her start at Southeastern.

Tyson: That's good. You said your wife is from this area?

Gitz: She is from Abita Springs, yes.

Tyson: Going back to the museum, are they constantly bringing more things [artifacts] in?

Gitz: All the time. We just got two big [cotton] bales donated from the Coast Guard to come off the ship. We get all kinds of donations. You know, Southeastern is involved with the museum too. They have some classes down there. They got an office in the museum. So much is going to be added to the museum in the future. It's hard to believe. It is a really nice museum. I know you went to visit, but it has some really nice activities. The building is being used all the time. They have some festivals there; they got weddings there that help support it. One day, recently, the Louisiana Clerks of Court Convention was here in St. Tammany [Parish]; they spent one whole day and took a ride on the riverboat. They really enjoyed it; it was about 400 people so they were really impressed with the museum.

Tyson: The riverboat goes up and down the river and turns around?

Gitz: It goes up the river as far as it can; if the lake is calm it can go out and show people the lighthouse.

Tyson: People are able to go to the lighthouse?

Gitz: They can't get on it; they can just go to the boat and just see it. That's our plans for the future is to dock there and go visit the lighthouse and visit the lighthouse keeper's house. Hopefully, that will materialize one day and I'll get to see it. [smile]

Tyson: What is the oldest church here in this area?

Gitz: The Presbyterian [thinking]—I think it is 150 years old.

Tyson: 150 years old?

Gitz: (nods head). We have the Catholic churches here. One of those was real old but they were combined and made a new one in the late 60's. But that's the Presbyterian Church.

Tyson: Are there any boat captains still alive from the 30's and 40's that's retired?

Gitz: The last one was Comet Perkins; he lives in Madisonville. I knew Mr. Perkins; he died at 92 years old. I guess he died about 10 years ago.

Tyson: He used to work on this river?

Gitz: He was a riverboat captain.

Tyson: So you don't have anyone else?

Gitz: No.

Tyson: The Trinity Shipyard, they just build parts for boats?

Gitz: They build complete barges. The biggest one they build is 300 feet long, 48 feet and 12 feet deep. Big barges. Barges as long as a football field.

Tyson: That is big. I don't think I have anything else to ask you, except is there anything else you might remember you would like to tell us?

Gitz: I should go down and write this history down. What I remember sometimes it leaves your mind. Madisonville always had commerce. After WWII, I think we had six little mom and pop's grocery stores. We had about seven or eight bar rooms. We had [inaudible]. Something I forgot to tell you, we had the first Ford dealership in St. Tammany Parish was here in Madisonville. And that's right across from where the Coffee's Boiling Pot is now. There was a garage back then; he sold Ford Automobiles—Model T's. At one time, we had three hardware stores; right now we have two. We had the only hospital in St. Tammany Parish; that's where the library is now. That was from 1935 to about 1955. We had the only hospital until St. Tammany Parish Hospital was built. People tell me, "I was born in Madisonville," but they lived in Slidell or somewhere else.

The only hospital on this side of the lake was in Madisonville. Dr. Lewis was the doctor from about 1935 to 1944, I guess, and Dr. Kety and Dr. Mulligan came here and they stayed here until the new hospital was built in Covington, about 1952, I believe.

Tyson: The hospital closed because of the one built in Covington?

Gitz: Well, they just had a big new hospital and they did not need the small hospital; they had three beds and an operation room. [Inaudible] two broken arms. So, they doctored them there.

Tyson: How is the population here in Madisonville?

Gitz: Very small, less than 800.

Tyson: But, it is a big town?

Gitz: Yeah, the surrounding area, everybody's telephone is listed as Madisonville. All the rural area from here to Bedico is considered Madisonville. Even across the river some places is considered Madisonville. Maybe 8,000 people think they are in [the town of] Madisonville, but they are not; they are surrounding Madisonville.

Tyson: Is it because Madisonville has always been this small or because some of the shores have washed away?

Gitz: Madisonville has always been this small. We tried to incorporate back in the early 70s; people didn't want it. It wasn't that many people here. Now, they wish they had incorporated.

Tyson: It's too late?

Gitz: It's pretty hard to incorporate now.

Tyson: It's a beautiful town.

Gitz: We try to keep it small and nice. We try. There is always change; we can't help that.

Tyson: Do you see any other changes that might be happening in the future besides the lighthouse and the museum?

Gitz: Well, most of our areas where the industrial sites were, where the Jahncke Shipyard was and Equitable [Shipyard]—that's all residential, now. So, we don't have any more sites that are zoned industrial. The last site we had, people bought it, which is south of the museum. It was about seven or eight acres and they are making a subdivision out of it. It was rezoned to residential. So far as a future for any industrial, it's not going to be. We have a lot of mariners in the area.

Tyson: Well, I want to thank you for your time today.

Gitz: I must apologize for my voice; I'm so hoarse you may not be able to understand me. But, if it doesn't come out good, I will do it again.

Tyson: Thank you.

Gitz: All right, thank you.

Index

March 28, 2005 Interview with Peter Gitz by Sherlette Tyson

Track #\ Counter #Title

0:00-0:17Introduction of interviewer and interviewee

Track #2 0:00 -Memories on shipbuilding

1:24 -Peter Gitz's business

1:36-Jahncke Shipyard

2:46 -Fishing in Madisonville

3:11-The Shipyards

3:52-The Lighthouse

5:32-Origin and purpose of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin
Museum

6:58-Wooden Boat Festival

7:56-Town support of Maritime Museum

9:50 -Eight sites on the National Historic Register

11:22 -Jahncke's history

12:26 -Peter Gitz's family history

14:13-First Bridge across the river

14:52 -The Cotton Blossom

15:29-Paused tape

15:47 -More history on the Gitz family

17:17-WWI effect on Madisonville

18:58-Activities in Madisonville

20:23 -Sawmills

21:36-WWII and the Depression

22:14-Family Farming

22:40 -Kelsey Nation Festival

23:52-Peter Gitz's immediate family

25:06 -More history on the Maritime Museum

27:00 -Oldest church in the area

27:45 -Last riverboat captain

28:14-Trinity Shipyard

31:08 -Population in Madisonville

32:17-Future changes in Madisonville