



\$ THE COLD TILE BLUES

By Greg Brownderville

“Here,” the old man said. His grandson parked the wheelchair. “They was a row through here where Daddy always planted watermelons, in amongst the cotton. Thataway, when you was picking, you could bust open a cool rind and snatch the heart out.”

Everyday low prices, boasted the employees’ vests. The old man said, “Jesus in a blue sedan! Muscadines, four dollars a quart. Used to, you could pick them here by the dishpansful. Fresh and free.” He continued, “I told myself I’d never darken the door of this hellhole.”

“How come you to change your mind?”

“When you’re dying, the hard things you been putting off seem like the only things worth doing.”

“You mean coming here or forgiving yourself for selling the land?”

Silence.

Rubbing an arrowhead between his thumb and forefinger, the old man mumbled, “Bust me open.”

Sweet home Ala

Larry to automotives please

Larry to automotives

so blue

Greg Brownderville, a native of Pumpkin Bend, Arkansas, was the winner of the 2007 Porter Prize for his “substantial and impressive body of work.”
Photo by John T Edge.

I’M ONE OF THE **ACES** IN THE BUSINESS

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Biloxi fisherman tells all

By Francis Lam

Frank Parker was talking. “Well, I don’t mean to be blowing my own horn, but if somebody was 20 years old and they seen me—‘Hey, that guy right there, he catches a lot of shrimp. He’s good at his game.’ Shrimping’s not like oystering or crabbing. The oysters don’t move; they stay there. The crabs, they’re a little bit more lucid, but shrimp, they’re a totally different animal. You always have your aces and then you have your jokers, and I really feel like I’m one of the aces in the business.” He said these things in a gentle, modest voice, but it was great to finally hear a little bravado from a Biloxi fisherman.

You see, they used to all have swagger. Biloxi once called itself the Seafood Capital of the World, where the Gulf of Mexico’s shrimp and oysters came to land, to be shipped across the world. But in the hundred or so years since, tougher circumstances have surrounded the industry. As I collected my oral history interviews for an SFA project, story after story ended with some requiem for the past—the market for shrimp bottomed out years ago, pummeled by rising fuel costs, and crushed by cheap imported stuff. Boats bob at dock, festooned with “For Sale” signs. Even those still making a living don’t think there’s much of a horizon left.

So it was with pleasure that I sat in Frank Parker’s home, listening to him tell me about being the seventh generation of fishermen in his family despite his parents’ displeasure: “My mother’s side of the family, we’re all fishermen. My dad’s father ran a gas station. My father grew up around the fishing industry too, but he got into the furniture refinishing business. ‘An education is one thing nobody can take away from you,’ he always said to me,” Frank recalled.

And so Frank went to college, despite always knowing he wanted to shrimp. “I got about 12 hours from my degree and I said, ‘Shoot on this.’ I dropped out and bought a shrimp boat.”

How did your parents react?

“They was disappointed, but at 24 years old, you’ve got to kind of step up and say, ‘Okay, well look: I should have done been done with school by now. I’ve been dragging my feet,’ And that’s what I told my dad. It’s all about being happy, you know? And when I bought my boat, my father went to work with me.”

I looked up. Excuse me?

“My father, he was too young to retire. And I think it’s something that he always wanted to do, but my mother didn’t want him gone all the time. So she’s on the boat with us, too. She referees when we butt heads. I guess it’s every kid’s dream. You’ve got your parents on the boat with you. Your mama cooks all the meals, washes the clothes, takes care of cleaning and stuff, and my father, he’s my grunt; I’m the boss, you know? I mean, what more could you be?” Frank laughed.



I was impressed. I count my parents giving up on me becoming a doctor to be the greatest parental breakthrough of my life, but this is on another order entirely. But what about the people who keep saying there’s no future left in shrimping?

“It’s just hard to be pessimistic when you’re doing something you love,” Frank said. “And yeah, you’re not making as much money as what you used to, but as long as you’re doing what you love and you’re paying the bills—it’s got its negative aspects to it but you have to stay positive. A bad day shrimping is better than a good day working.”

As we talked, I could hear his kids playing in the other room, a cherubic three-year-old daughter and a months-old son. What about them?

“This is something I want to do until I die; I’m going to stay on that boat until I can’t lift my leg over the rail. There’s still that sense of adventure, just striking out to get your fortune. That’s the same way I feel about with my kids; if they want to go to college, hey I’m going to support them 100%. I’m not going to push them to fish. But if they want to stay in the fishing business, then let’s do it.”

Francis Lam writes about food, cooking, and people. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan, the Culinary Institute of America, and Gourmet. Photo by Francis Lam.

THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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