MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Kerry Neuville

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Place: Loreauville, LA

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Keywords: Crewboats, aluminum, Bayou Teche

Bio

Bio: Kerry Neuville was born and raised in Loreauville, LA and started a shipyard, Neuville Boat Works, on the Bayou Teche with his father and brother in the late 1960s. Neuville Boat Works is one of the leading builders of aluminum crewboats.

Early career: Kerry started out as a welder and fitter at Breaux's Baycraft and began building airboats on the side before his family started their own shipyard.

Work force/other issues:
The Neuville's have chosen to keep their operation small, consequently they only need a small workforce. That workforce lives within a 4.5 mile radius of the shipyard. A few years ago Kerry gave $3 an hour raised across the board. It increased his payroll by $400,000 a year. When the labor shortage became a crisis after the hurricanes, the skilled and loyal workforce stay with him.

Company significance/history: Neuville Boat Works is one of the oldest and well-known builders of aluminum crewboats in the GoM and around the world. The shipyard got it start in the late 1960s when aluminum boats became very popular in south Louisiana because of aluminum's durability and lightweight. In the 1970s, the inland oilfields created a high demand from small, shallow water, aluminum workboats and Neuville took advantage of the business opportunity. They built a few crewboats every month. When the industry moved further offshore, the Neuvilles jumped at the opportunity and began building 105 ft crewboats. During the oil field crunch of the 1980s, the Neuville shipyard went "dormant". The brothers laid off the workforce and waited out the downturn. With little or no debt, the shipyard survived. And with several canceled contracts, the nearly completed hulls that sat in the Neuville's shipyard for much of the 1980s became highly valuable when the market picked up, particularly in Venezuela. From the 1990s forward, the brothers, with help from pioneers like Norman and Joe McCall, have made a mark in the deepwater aluminum crewboat industry

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Kerry Neuville on January 22nd, 2007 by Jason Theriot. Kerry Neuville is part owner of Neuville Boat Works in Loreauville, Louisiana. This is for the MMS ShipFab Project. Kerry Neuville, tape one.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: All right. Just introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about your background.

KN: My name is Kerry Neuville with Neuville Boat Works. We started this shipyard back in 1969 and it's been a rollercoaster ride for a bunch of years, but it's been good. It's been bad. Now things are great right now. They're not good, they're great, you know. But you better enjoy them while they're there, because prices of oil can drop down to twenty-eight dollars a barrel, you know.

We have a lot of people working right now, but this could be a ghost town, you know. That's the oil field. But I believe with the Iraqi War going on, you know, it kind of puts the demand on the price of oil and it keeps us frozen, you know. We're building high-tech boats, you know, right now. That's into the future, you know.

But SEACOR International gave us a chance about eight, nine years ago. We started building boats for them, and we learned what Joe McCall, he's one of the head personnels of construction of aluminum construction boats, and we picked up all this knowledge that been gathering for thirty, forty, fifty years, you know, and his dad and them started building 160s twenty-five years ago, one of the boats that we're building right now. So it gives you an idea the jump of technology we have over everybody else, you know. It's a busy world right now, but you got to sit down and enjoy life, you know. If you just keep on working and working, you just don't live that long.

JT: Tell me, you and your brother are from Loreauville?

KN: Yes, we're from Loreauville, born and raised within a quarter of a mile from this place.

JT: Who is your brother?

KN: Errol Neuville. He's a vice president of this company. I can't believe Errol's been in business like that.

JT: Tell me how y'all got started.

KN: Well, Errol had come out of Vietnam in 1969, and I graduated from school around that time. My dad wanted an air boat, so he went to the local dealer, Breaux Bay Craft, which was one of the major boat builders in the world. They didn't have time to build one, so he bought a welding machine and me and Errol, we built one he liked. Then a neighbor wanted another boat, and a neighbor wanted another boat. This is little four-by-twelves, and we just grew up, grew up to twenty-six, thirties, forties, fifty-footers. When the boom hit in '79, '80 and '81, we were manufacturing forty and forty-two footers and hundred footers.

JT: As crew boats?

KN: Crew boats. We'd put out maybe three a month, fifty foot, forty-seven footers, like that, and 105s every three months. We employed around a hundred people at that time, and it was great. Then the boom hit again, it went down. We've had two, three little spurts since then, you know, but we've been doing great with it, you know. It's a great business.

JT: Your dad was in the car dealership business?

KN: My dad was a car salesman. He worked at a dealership. When we made these little boats, he had a friend that lived across the highway when Dad was selling

cars, and he put the little boats across the highway. They were shiny, looked like a Coors Lite, you know. It was real attractive. They'd go out there to see them.

In those days that was real neat when you could buy a boat that nobody could bust a hole with it shooting with a shotgun, a .22 rifle, and something that wouldn't waterlog or rot or break, for about four or five hundred dollars. You couldn't make them fast enough, they were like hot cakes, man, you know.

JT: So you're talking about the aluminum technology, that was something new?

KN: The aluminum technology started. That was something real new, coming in strong, you know. I was a welder, my brother was a fitter in those days, you know, and we just picked it up from scratch, you know.

JT: Had you welded on aluminum before?

KN: No, I haven't. It was a one-time deal, you know.

JT: Where did you learn your welding skills?

KN: I learned them from all over. While I was working at Breaux Bay Craft, that showed me how, you know, and he was a good teacher and a good friend of mine, Francis Dubois, doesn't live too far from me. He's still living. He welded about

forty, fifty years, you know, and he showed us. In those days, hey, when you could learn a skill, it was something, you know.

JT: So did you go and work? Were you working as a welder before you guys started this?

KN: Yes, I used to work as an iron welder at J&L. It was a sugarcane harvest production plant in Jeanerette, Louisiana. Once you had the fundamentals, it was pretty close to all the same, you know. You had to fit something. Something had to fit tight, you know, look good, you know. Building boats, you know, boats doesn't have no square frames in them or nothing, all different shapes, so if you messed up a little bit, you could compensate by just bending it a little bit, kind of blend it, let it look good, you know.

JT: How old were you when you were working for J&L?

KN: Oh, must have been nineteen, twenty, you know, around nineteen, twenty years old.

JT: Then do you remember what year it was when you and your brother decided to make it happen?

KN: '69. '69. I got the same little boat we built, the first little boat outside. Just a little boat; bought it back from the fellow. He was a Theriot, J. Theriot.

JT: Is that right?

KN: Yes. He had come up with a little insurance settlement and he wanted a boat to go fishing with. We built him that boat, and we still have that boat in the front yard right now.

JT: So you all went from airboats to fishing boats?

KN: To fishing boats, to small oilfield boats like for Halliburton, Exxon.

JT: Let's talk about that. Do you remember who that first customer was for the offshore business?

KN: It was Eddie Dauterive with Dauterive Marine Services. He had an Evinrude and a Johnson dealership, and what he did, he'd sell the motors to go in the bayous and swamps over there. They had the little eighteen footers, twenty, twenty-one footer, tri-hull, comes with the little cab, you know, windshield wipers, totally enclosed. We'd make these little boats on a jig, and we'd make one a week. We'd put the two outboard motors, and he'd sell that as a package deal. He'd sell

a boat like that in those days for maybe seven thousand dollars. Now that same boat will run you a hundred thousand. Seeing how things changed since then.

JT: The oilfield was using those little boats?

KN: They couldn't buy enough of them. All the little swamps and the canals, the inland drilling was hot in those days around Weeks Island, Avery Island, the [Atchafalaya] Basin, all over the country in the South. There were inland drilling barges and all that, little bitty barges. Wasn't no big rigs like there are now. And boy, the inland drilling was hot and they needed little boats and they had two, two little boats to the rig, you know.

We put the Mercury drives in them, too, after a while. They got away from them outboard motors. We'd put the diesel drives in them, too, when they started to get along there. The gasoline was a little risk, you know, if you wasn't too, too careful. So we got with S & S out of Houston, Texas, Stern and Stevenson, and we'd buy these Stern drives they'd put out, and they'd work out real good with the little GM engines. It was a real nice package.

JT: So it's almost like you guys were just keeping pace with—

KN: With time.

JT: —the time, and you all were there right there at the right time.

KN: We got there at the right time, you know, and just started finally just started picking up, started picking up, you know.

JT: So that first airboat that y'all worked on, did you and your brother have any idea how to build a boat?

KN: No, we didn't. But we did have an old friend that lived in St. Martinville Parish, a little town of Catahoula, Louisiana, and he was an old fisherman. He built old fisherman boats. So my daddy had knew him. My cousin was married to his daughter. So my daddy knew him. So we went and got him over here, and we gave him a case of Falstaff's beer to come show us how to build a boat.

JT: You're kidding me.

KN: A case of Falstaff's beer. He showed us how to build a boat, you know, that the build of the angle, tuck the hull in so far to turn loose the water and all that on the flat, you know. Those little tricks that you picked up through years of knowledge, you know, how high the sides of the boat, how long to make the ribs of the boat and everything, so that it held good, turn good, and everything. That's how we started, with him.

JT: What was that fellow's name? Do you remember?

KN: His name was Mr. Olivier, Frat Olivier.

JT: He's a shrimper?

KN: No, he was a boat maker, out of wood, out of cypress in those days. He was in the business about maybe thirty, forty years. The guy was a good age when he showed us. Real nice guy.

JT: That's something else, man.

KN: Oh, yes.

JT: Well, if he'd be alive today, why, I'll bet he'd be impressed with what you guys are doing.

KN: I'll bet if Mr. Olivier is in heaven right now looking down, he's saying, "God dang, those boys did a good job." [laughs]

JT: When you got started, I'd imagine you guys had to have some kind of a financial back?

KN: Well, my dad. My dad was the financial backer. My dad was a car salesman. He was a super car salesman. Dad would sell more cars in that little town of New Iberia, where the population was only about twenty thousand at the time, than the Memphis zone. The Memphis zone consisted of so many southern states, and he'd only work six months out of the year and he'd win the master salesmanship award. You know what I mean? Six months out of the year, that's all Dad would sell cars for, you know, and then he would contract sugarcane. That's what we used to do before we went in the boat business, we'd contract sugarcane, cut sugarcane with the cane haulers.

But when Dad started working the six months out of the year when the cane season was over, that's what I used to do, cut cane, me, my dad, and my brother. When the cane season was over, was looking for a filler, and we started the boats as a filler and it came to be more than a filler, you know. We employed a lot of people, give a lot of people jobs. A lot of people retired with us, you know.

JT: You took some people out of the sugarcane industry to come work?

KN: We took a lot of people out of the sugarcane industry. We had two of our little cousins, just never graduated from school, but they had the knowledge. They were good people. We brought them into the shipyard. I had one that used to work on the jigs, design the boats, lay out the boat. We had one that used to rig the boats. These guys are good guys, you know. They pushed either twenty-five, thirty people, each one of them, and people that believed in giving you a day's work. Man, we did great with those guys. Had a bunch of other people in this area, all hardworking people. When they were working for minimum wages in the field and then making eight, nine, ten, twelve, fifteen dollars an hour back in those days because you were making some money.

JT: That was a lot, yes. You were a rich man.

KN: You were a rich man.

JT: So tell me, okay, so you guys, when did you all get to this piece of property here in Bayou Teche?

KN: Well, Dad had this piece of property. My dad owned this piece of property and when my dad's dad died, Dad was a little younger, so he settled for a piece of property across the road where we lived at and raised, and his older brother bought this piece. So his older brother was a sugarcane farmer. So his older

brother lost it through bad management, so it came up for sale back when I was a kid, I'd say late fifties, early sixties. So Dad and the guy that I was telling you had the piece of land across from the Pontiac garage where he'd leave his cars, the Calkins, Floyd Calkins was real good friends with him. So Dad couldn't buy the whole thing. It was fourteen thousand dollars for fourteen acres. That was a lot of money, you know.

JT: Here in the bayou.

KN: Right over here where we're at.

JT: It's prime real estate.

KN: Prime real estate. So Dad asked Mr. Calkin to come in partnership with him, so he did. So they bought the two pieces of land, so Calkin had seven acres and he had seven acres. But Calkin was a real estate investor. They'd buy land, keep it six, seven, eight years and sell it. So Daddy kept his piece of land, you know, and Daddy started a little shipyard in the pasture. It was a cow pasture. So we started building little boats and everything, started about two or three years, the boat business was doing fair. So Mr. Calkin wanted to sell his piece of land. He asked my father, "Would you like to buy it?"

And Dad said, "Things are pretty tight. I'm starting this business. I can't afford."

So Calkin sold the land for fourteen thousands dollars, after seven, eight years, you know. That's how this land went up in value.

So Dad couldn't buy it, so we just kept on building boats over here and building boats, you know. So Dad owned the piece of property. Dad turned around and sold. What he did, he gave us, each one of us kids, he gave us each an acre of land so when we get married. So he gave my brother an acre, my other brother an acre, my sister an acre, my other brother an acre, so he gave me and Errol each an acre, but it was in the shipyard.

JT: Right here?

KN: Yes, in the shipyard right here. So as things went on, we had a front lot and half of this piece, so Daddy wanted to sell it. So we bought it from him for thirty-two thousand dollars. That's eight, nine years later. Shows you how the land went up. We're talking four acres of land, you know, for thirty-two thousand. That was a lot of money. But it was worth it, you know, and just kept on growing, growing.

JT: That means you got the Bayou Teche that connects to the Intracoastal.

KN: It hits the Intracoastal and the Intracoastal goes to the Gulf. You're gonna hit the Port of Iberia, Bayou Teche, through the Intracoastal. I'll go through Mogan City and go through the mouth of the [Mississippi] River, whichever you want to go.

JT: Right. Did you and your brother, did y'all see that ten, fifteen, twenty years in the future? What the potentials of this industry would be for you guys?

KN: You know, when we first started in the business my little brother had opportunity coming, and they had good jobs working offshore. My brother was a car salesman, and they couldn't see making money building little boats. We just fell in it, and we just stuck with it, you know? Dad helped us financial-wise. We're not talking much money, maybe $30,000, $40,000 in those years. It just grew, grew, grew into what it is now.

JT: When did y'all break ground here? Was that '69 when you started?

KN: We started the little shed over there in '69. It was just a little building, twelve-by-sixteen. A little tin building. We still have the little building on there too, if you want to take a picture. [laughs]

JT: So y'all went from building little small—

KN: Small boats, then we—

JT: What was the next jump?

KN: The next jump, we put a little building over here. Like I said, we were going for Exxon and Humble.

JT: How'd they find you guys?

KN: Through Eddie Dauterive with Dauterive Marine. He was a marine dealer. He was selling them fiberglass boats, and they were busting them up in the bayous and the canals, and he was selling them motors and he said can you get me some aluminum boats? He knew we build a little flats, so he set us up with building a few hulls, and we built a little shed, forty-by-sixty. Before we know it, we were building two, three, and four a month. Then we added on again and we were building ten and twelve a month. Then we added on again, then we started building little 26-footers, the little 32-footers—have you ever heard of a Mallard Well Services? We built them a whole bunch of boats. *Drake One*, *Drake Two*, and all of that. Before the mid-seventies started coming in, we built a little 32-footer, for all the independents along Bayou Chauvin and all of that. Cocodrie and all of that. Grand Island and all of that had a lot of boats to be built. Then we started building little 40-footers. You couldn't build enough of them. We'd build

three and four a month. Then 46-footers kicked in, in the seventies, ’78,’79. People started to drill a little further offshore, twenty-miles coast-wide, so they needed a boat to go a little bit further. We were still in the bays but it was kind of rough. Bay is pretty ruff but its shallow. Around Weeks Island, Marsh Island, all that, and we couldn’t build enough of these boats. Then the 105 started to come out. That was an animal. When you built a 105 with a triple screw, that was a big boat. It was around $650,000, $700,000 dollar boat in those days. When you saw the little boats were $4,000 and $5,000, man, it took a lot to make $700,000. Then we built a whole bunch of those. Then the drop hit back in about ’81, ’82, the bottom felled out the price of oil. Then we took and went into a dormant stage for about six, seven, eight years, building two or three little boats. Had to cut back the crew, keeping maybe ten, twelve top hands. That was about all. Then it picked up in about six, seven, eight years after that, gradually, until where we’re at today.

JT: Let’s talk about aluminum, because not everybody’s doing aluminum. What are some of the benefits other than the obvious? It’s much more of a lighter material than steel. Compared to some of the other guys who are still on the steel hulls, what are some of the benefits in the aluminum?

KN: Aluminum’s light. It’s durable. It can take a beating. It’s less maintenance to keep up, less corrosion. In aluminum right now they’re making supply boats.

They call them fast supply boats, from 170s. They're carrying close to four hundred tons of cargo and deck load, the 170. You put five engines in there and you can get on top of the water and do twenty-one knots, you're moving. A regular supply boat, you should just do twelve knots, you know? Right now they're building aluminum boats up to 190-foot mud-carrying boat. You wouldn't even think of it. So what it's doing, it's doing a two purpose deal. It's doing a crew boat deal and it's doing a supply boat. It's knocking some of the smaller supply boats out of whack, because that boat will run twenty-one knots. That supply boat will only do twelve. They'll go to the rig, come back with a load, come back with a load, bring a load, come back with a load, before the other boat can go to the rig. That's how fast it is. It's the way of the future. Around here, Morgan City, Loreauville, all that area, going further up North. New Orleans. You got a lot of aluminum boat builders. Before, it was just us, Breaux, Swiftships, Gulf Craft. That's the only names you would here, and Halter. You wouldn't hear of nobody else, but you get two or three dozen right now.

JT: Where are you getting your aluminum from?

KN: We get them from Aluminum Stainless, Reynolds Aluminum, Pierce Aluminum, anywhere, we'll buy.

JT: That's here locally?

KN: Yes, local dealers. But we can buy anywhere, you know?

JT: Do you ship it in by truck?

KN: By truck. We ship it in by truck. We ship it by rail to the distributors, and they ship those here by truck.

JT: In sheets?

KN: In sheets, plates, extrusions.

JT: What about your engines? Where do you get your engines?

KN: The engines right now we put in are mostly 100 percent Cummins. You might have heard of Mr. Norman McCall at McCall boat rental. He's one of the pioneers of the larger boats. Him and Cummins have been having a relationship for about thirty, forty years. Cummins exceeds everybody in the marine engines, because they have these engines down so pat, so good.

JT: Could you repeat that name again? You said he was a pioneer.

KN: Mr. Norman McCall.

JT: Norman McCall? Where is he?

KN: He's out of Cameron, Louisiana. He's the man that pushed the big aluminum crew boats, that built them. When nobody else built them, he built them. Him and Cummins been a team together, and his son Joe McCall, his younger son Joe McCall, is about forty-two, forty-three. They guy has a lot of knowledge. He picked it up from his daddy, and he knows what the marine industry needs and everything. The boats that we build for him are confidential boats. All the special equipment that he puts in his boats, we keep them confidential for him. He went to hard-knocks school and learned all the different deals, the prop sizes, the exhaust systems, the plumbing systems, what works in a boat, what doesn't work in a boat, preventative maintenance, and all of that. We hold that confidential for him.

JT: You think this guy's still alive?

KN: Mr. Norman's still alive. He lives in Morgan City. He passed two hurricanes in Cameron, could have lost everything, his family. Don't write that down, but his family, he lost all his family the whole go-around. Lost everything he got in the second go-around. He lost everything. Norman is a well-liked guy. He's a great

man. He gave me a chance to build seven boats; I mean, about thirteen, fourteen boats for him, big boats. They're still building. He's the one in charge of SEACOR Marine building construction.

JT: SEACOR. Is he still there, you think?

KN: Yes, Mr. McCall is still there. He works out at the airport.

JT: In Morgan City?

KN: No, in Lake Charles.

JT: Is that where he works at? Lake Charles?

KN: Yes. That's where the office is based at, him and Joe McCall, for SEACOR International.

JT: So, man, it sounds like there was a lot going on before you guys got here. Really, the contacts that y'all made with the aluminum, with the McCalls, with your father, with all of the people who saw you guys starting up from nothing and building these small aluminum boats. You guys were able to get in wit the right people.

KN: The right people.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

KN: Pieces of puzzles, also. Had a big good span back in the early, ’79 to the eighties, for the Cheramies and all of that, all the people along the bayou. Galliano, you know. We sold two, three hundred boats out in that area. You build one, the brother wanted one, the cousin wanted one. The reason they hired these people is they all knew the swamps, they all knew the back bayous real good. So they had the boats, you know? In the old days they used to use oyster boats to go back there, shrimp trollers. But it was so slow and everything. Then they kicked in with the aluminum boats. They had a lot of boats, and when it fell down in ’81, 90 percent of these boats were all purged and sold all over the country. You’d go to the Cayman Islands, you see our boats. You’d go to Hawaii, you’d see our boats. You go to Venezuela, you see our boats. All over. All over the world you see 40 and 47-footers that were purged out of the Gulf that were sold for water taxies. Dive boats and all that. Sightseeing boats, whale watching boats, and all that. In fact, right after the eighties, about ’86, Venezuela had a big boom. Me and daddy were sitting in the office one day, and my dad came in and started hopping around. I said, “Dad, it looks like that guy can buy us a boat.” Daddy told me he didn’t believe that. I went out and got the man, and he said, “Man, I

need some 40-foot crew boats." I said, "How many you need?" He said, "I need about twenty of them." I said, "I can give them to you." He said, "What?" I said, "Yes, I can give them to you." We had that many hulls in the different stages of construction. Then he bought at least twenty-four boats with us.

JT: So when the boom hit, those boats that y'all had purchased—

KN: We had a lot that we had to pick back up. People couldn't' afford to pay it.

JT: So then they got out, busted their contracts?

KN: Busted their contracts.

JT: And y'all were stuck with half-complete hulls. Who was this guy that came in?

KN: Roger Smith. With the Lisa Marine out of Venezuela.

JT: The country?

KN: Yes, the country. They in a boom right now. They need boats right now.

JT: Boy, that guy must have saved y'all, with all that work y'all did?

KN: He was an angel from heaven.

JT: Invoices going out—

KN: We were strong financial-wise. We never borrowed money.

JT: Let's back up a little bit and talk about the crew boat technology. You were talking about getting into the marshes and the swamps with the smaller boats. When did this idea that crew boats—okay, now we gotta start sending people five, ten miles offshore. Who were some of the pioneers in developing these types of vessels, and how did y'all get into that?

KN: Like the 40-footers, our neighbor Roy Breaux, at Breaux Bay Craft, was building them, and we had an engineer that used to work for him. So he drew us out a drawing, so we copied off the drawings, changed the hull around, made it a little wider. To sell something you had to have it a little better. Breaux hull had, like, a twelve-foot beam. We put a fourteen-foot beam in our 40-footers. Instead of selling a 40-footer—he'd sell a 38-footer as a 40, and we'd sell a 40-footer two foot longer, give it a little something extra, a little nine-yards. His boats would sit twelve people. Our bats would sit eighteen people. It was just a selling point to get the edge on somebody, because nobody wants to buy with somebody that just

started in the business. There was days when you bought a boat, and at first it was $75,000. That was a lot of money for a boat, $75,000, man. You had to have the edge. Breaux has been there twenty-five years before us. Everybody said, "How's that boat going to hold up putting a lifesaver in that boat?" And, "Do they build a good boat?" So you had to give them an edge above, and my dad was supersalesman, I'm telling you. He knew how to speak French real good. I speak French too, not too good, but pretty good. He knew how to speak that broken French of the people on the bayou. Those are the people that had money for shrimping, crabbing, horseshoe people, you know? Saw that crabbing and shrimping were going off, and they wanted to get in a different field. The local oilfield companies came to them, like I told you, because they knew the rivers, the lakes, the bayous, and the swamps. We started building boats for them and just kept on rolling. You build one boat, the next boat. They ran out of so many names of boats that they put numbers on the boats after a while. So many kids, grandkids, grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles and nieces and nephews.

JT: How long did your dad sell for you guys?

KN: Dad stopped selling—that's my dad up there—he stopped selling—Dad is ninety-two right now. I say when he was about sixty-five.

JT: But he got y'all where y'all needed to be?

KN: Yes.

JT: But that's interesting. Because he could speak that Patois with those guys from—

KN: Dad spoke real good French. I wish he was over here. I would have called him and let you talk to him. Somebody saw him, and he could look at them in his eyes, and he was real sincere. He wasn't no salesman; he was real sincere. It's just in him, in his bloodline. He just ended up being nice and good to people. He could swing it. He still can at his age. He's still a good salesman.

JT: I tell you what, like you were saying, those guys from down the bayou, over on that end to where the offshore oil and gas was really booming

KN: Oh yes. That's where it boomed.

JT: And the guys who used to be shrimpers and craw fishermen—

KN: Oyster fields, yes.

JT: —and the Humbles [Oil Company] were saying, "Hey, we need you to go deliver some fuel."

KN: Well, they had their own boat down there, bring in drums of oil in the oyster boats in the off season. Those shrimp boats were doing that, and they were so slow. He said, "Why don't you bring a boat that goes a little faster?" You know, we put two 671s and a 40-footer, and it did twenty-two miles an hour; you put two V-8s and it did twenty-seven-and-a half. They thought they were flying. They thought were flying, man.

JT: That's interesting. If you look at the geography of south Louisiana, where on one end you've got guys with the expertise from their fathers, their grandfathers, the shrimper men. They go and start buying boats. They've got the finances to buy the boats. Then you come over here in the southwestern part of the state where you've got three or four little companies that are building and selling to them. So it's almost like two different communities that are involved in this industry that is supporting the Gulf of Mexico.

KN: Well, like I tell you, it was just the Breauxs that had been here twenty-five years. Then it was Swift Ship, then it was Gulf Craft, then Halter and us. That was the only major boat builders building at that time. A couple of those people, you know. Now they got a bunch, you know. But when a guy builds a boat with me, like he's got a six-and-a-half million dollar boat, in the same way they did back in those days. I'm putting six million dollars in a boat; I want that boat to last

twenty-five, thirty years, you know? And right now, if you buy a Neuville craft that you pay three-and-a-half million for ten years ago, you can get four-and-a-half, five million for that boat now. They went up in value because of the demand for oil. Some of the big boat people are getting out, selling their fleet because man, they use the boat for twenty-five years, and they can get a million dollars more than they paid it. A year ago, a forty-five [footer] was working for thirty-two hundred dollars a day. That guy was still making a good profit.

JT: He owned the boat too?

KN: He owned the boat. And today the boat is making seventy-five hundred dollars a day.

JT: Triple rates.

KN: Four thousand dollars a day more. If you multiply 4,000 dollars by thirty days in a month, that's 125,000. Multiply 120,000 time twelve months, that 250,000 almost, more profit.

JT: Yes.

KN: They getting rich. And they got the better boats, so that's why they're doing boats. That the whole story behind it. That's so great, the windfall profits is so strong, and now's the time for them to replace the new equipment.

JT: Selling the old stuff overseas or wherever.

KN: Get rid of the old stuff and the market would get soft a little bit, you know. I had had the opportunity to replenish the old boats at ten, twelve, twenty years old, you know, and get new models. But what's bad about it, the boats we're building now, you can't make four a month.

JT: Yes.

KN: We can only make two a year. If you happen to be luck to get one of my boats, you know, just like Texas Crewboats. I picked up a new company out of Houston, Texas. Captain Elliot; he works out of Freeport, Texas. He's a crewboat company. I just sold him one, *Lady Clare*, a 155. I just sold him another 160 we building for him right now. And he has a fleet, about maybe eight or ten, he wants to upgrade. And these people here upgrade every other year. They're not a big, big company, you know, but I've got three or four people like that. So when it's upgrade with just three or four people every couple of years, you know.

JT: Would that mean refurbishing an old vessel?

KN: No; get rid of old vessel. When I say upgrade—get rid of the old and buy a new one. It's just like his old boats, you know, the 120s. They are getting a million dollars for them. They were never sold for that. And they're getting a million dollars and they haven't worked in twenty-five years. Huh?

JT: Yes.

KN: Just like if you had a car, and you kept your car ten years, you know what I mean? You paid your car, ten years ago, you paid your car 15,000 dollars, and somebody wants to give you 25,000 for that car after you put 4,000 dollars on it. You don't change your drive shaft, transmission, rear-end, and water pump or nothing big like that. That's how it's doing right now. It's unreal. It's a crazy business.

JT: Are you also doing any other type of vessels, in the past?

KN: Yes, we did a couple pleasure boats, a couple whale barges, a couple of ferry boats. But the money is in the oil fields. That's why, I'd say, we're ninety-nine-and-a-half percent oil field related. We could build one of the best yachts in the world. But it's too time-consuming, and me and Errol just don't like to put up with all that stress and get it all done. Crewboats, you know, we know where all

of our business is at to get all the best equipment—the pump, water pump, the fuel pump, the air compressor, the starters and everything. You know what I mean? Take the water to separate the fuel blenders and all that; the steering system. In the old days, the boats just had a hydraulic steering system, air controled. You used to have four more mans in the shipyard just to do that. Now look at the regular crew, got rid of the four guys, got down with an electric package that comes all pre-hydraulic wired, and everything; we stick it in the ready room, run two lines each a cylinder, they run a line, plug in an electric line. They run it to the front—that's electric steering over hydraulic. You save you 25,000 dollars worth of man labor. It's a little bit more expensive, maybe eight, ten thousand dollars more, but for one boat, two boats, three boats, and the control, the air control, the copper tubing, the activate, the relays. And you can run all that through every watertight bulkhead. And that boat's 165-foot long. Cooper tubing, how many clamps, and you have to put your clamps every fourteen inches center to meet with Coast Guard and ABS standard. And if you build ABS standard, you have to use special rap so you can't fall or nothing.

So what we do, we go electronic shift and control, with the batteries, the twin disc, you know. With two gm, they all come pre-wired, they run the wire they cut it at the best spot, and they just plug it in the boat. And you save another 30,000 dollars—more than that—because copper is so expensive right now, it is thirty, forty, fifty thousand; you go electronic. The only thing cheaper right now in the boat business is electronic. You used to buy radar back thirty-five years

ago for 175 dollars. For seventy-five hundred dollars you can buy two of the best radars and put it in a hundred-and-sixty footer. The best. Electronics is the cheapest thing right now.

JT: And you're saying y'all are buying it already pre-packaged?

KN: Yes, pre-packaged. We bolt the instrumentations down and the electronic people come hook 'em up.

JT: So the electronic people come to that particular company?

KN: Yeah, different company, Bibbins and Rice [Telecomm], or whoever it might be, you know. Usually the customer furnishes the electronics. Because in the area where they doing, they keep the dealership, because he services it. You know what I mean. So it makes a good relationship; he's going to service something he sold. It's in his area so we let the customer supply the electronics. But we bolt it down, we rig it up, they just have to terminate the wires when they come.

JT: Let's talk about this. When the industry is booming in the late seventies, what was Neuville Boatworks? What was going on here?

KN: Late seventies, we had about thirty-five, fifty people; we were booming. When we hit the boom, we had up to eighty, ninety people.

JT: What types of vessels?

KN: Forty and forty-six footers. And hundred and fives. And we sub-contracted out for your sandblasting, you're painting, you know what I mean.

JT: So y'all had a crew to do each one of those tasks?

KN: Yes, each one of those tasks. We keep eight, ten guys, man. They didn't have to be too well-educated. Once a guy was working in the field, he knew how to do something pretty good, we let him do it; he got better and better and better and better. If he need to make the fuel tanks, the oil tank, or make the bilge pipes and all that, the guy just went on another boat and looked at it and thought it was right. He couldn't go wrong. He took pictures. Pictures tell you a whole world. You show a coon-ass a picture, he says, “I can do it,” you know.

And we still use that same philosophy now. All our boats, with digital cameras and like that. We take thousands of pictures of the boat. Somebody says, "My pump's going out." Take a picture; has a serial number on it. We got the model, we know who sold it to us and everything. It's all printed out through the computer on the picture. Take a picture and just go to your vendor right there.

Hey, this you got it. With the computer now, like with the electronic heads, you can say you got Matters, you got Coppel, you got Twindisc, and put the model number. The guy in the office does that. So when you need something, you just flip it back and you get what you want. Saves us the leg work. Every time somebody has to remember something, it costs you, know what I mean? The guys don't remember. We've got a good crew here, you know; all good, honest people. We don't have nobody stealing. We furnish all the tools and everything.

JT: Plus it's a family-run business.

KN: It's family-run. It's tight, tight.

JT: And probably that falls over into your shop hands.

KN: It does, you know.

JT: It's a big family.

KN: If a guy misses two weeks work, we pay them. They get a heart attack or something, we help them out. Their in-laws die, we'll help bury 'em. And that means a lot to a Cajun person, you know what I mean? If somebody offers them two dollars more, they ain't leaving. We give them a week off at Christmas we

pay with overtime, and we give them a week off in the summertime, with pay overtime. Not just a forty-hour pay, if they work forty-six hours, they get forty-six hours of pay, plus all the holidays with pay. If a holiday falls on a Thursday and they show up on Friday, they made six hours overtime. We don't just give an eight-hour pay.

JT: And all these guys, you think they live in the—

KN: Ninety percent of them live in a four-and-a-half mile radius. Get somebody who lives close. When the price of gas went up, it didn't even bother them, you know what I mean?

JT: And these are guys who were born and raised here?

KN: Born and raised here.

JT: Have they ever moved here from out of town maybe?

KN: No, nobody. Born and raised here. Out of towners don't want to work like the locals want to work, because this ain't a hard time. Like the Port of Iberia, they go out on a day like today, it's raining. They up sixty to seventy feet tall, welding on pipe, for less than my guys make over here. We've got to pay them the wages

they make, or better. And they're all indoors. The wind doesn't hit 'em. And in the summer time we've got big fans, and it's cool. Everybody got a fan. We keep 'em cool. A cool worker is a productive worker, you know. You've got to keep your people happy. A happy worker is a productive worker.

A lot of people get divorced around here. And they've got problems with their wives. When they get divorced they got to take a couple days off. I say, "Go ahead, hey, do your thing." Or they have to go bring their kids to the school or hospital, or daycare, or they got an award day for their kid, pay 'em. Let 'em go. You can't do it for all of them, but you can do it for some of them. They appreciate that, you know.

JT: Hey, Kerry, is that something that your father instilled in you?

KN: Yes, my dad, my daddy rewarded me when I did good. When I didn't do good, because he was a hard guy to deal with. You don't have to worry about doing nothing bad, man. Hey, five boys all turned out great, and one sister that's in the crewboat business has 160s, 150s. She's in the business, and she's doing super right now, and I'm glad for her, you know. She could probably buy us all right now with the money she's making.

JT: Where does she work?

KN: They have Iberia Crewboat Rentals, an offshore service company. Big boats. She started real small too, you know; her and her boyfriend.

JT: But they're not building.

KN: No, they're not building. They buy 'em and put 'em to work.

JT: Does she ever buy any of your boats?

KN: Yes. We have a boat in there under construction right now, a one-sixty for her. And we have another one, to start at the bottom of 2009; we work up to 2010 right now.

JT: Tell me about when you first began to feel the pinch of the bust in the early eighties and how that impacted Neuville Boats.

KN: Eighty-one. It crippled us. We were strong financially. We don't go throw all our money away doing all that. We had all that Mercedes Benz and all that, Rolex watches and all that, did all that, and that don't phase me. Right now I drive a Suburban. I could buy ten, twelve Mercedes Benz a year if I want. My dad raised conservative people, real conservative people. And we never borrowed a nickel since the first 30,000 my dad loaned us. This goes back thirty-five years,

and this shipyard has been self-sufficient, you know what I mean? We could make it more profitable, just jack our salaries up, make good salaries. Some of the executives in the big corporations don't make salaries we make. Ten people in one.

JT: And how much do you really need?

KN: I don't need much. My car is given to me; my insurance is given to me. I have credit card debt. We get by, what we going to do. I have three girls and a boy, we give money to him, that little boy. He's pretty expensive. He's about 25,000 on the motorcycle circuit. He's one of the top endurance motorcycle racers. He came out top in B class.

JT: How old is he?

KN: He's eighteen. I'd rather put that money and let him run his motorcycle. Good kid. Let him stay away from the bad habits, you know. But you see, that kid, that kid's a carbon copy of my daddy, if an executive wanted to take him and groom him, he'd be a top salesman, a top leader. He has the charisma in him.

JT: And you mentioned something, too, the conservatism of this area and the long-term outlook on your business.

KN: It's not the short-term at all.

JT: Let's just live a long, happy life.

KN: You see like right now, I have an oil field company that wants 35-40 little boats. I make two hundred-something thousand on the little boat. I got rid of the big boats and make the little boats and make almost a million dollars a month profit. But the way I looked at it, it's a quick high; it's a quick high. So what we do, we kept on making two big boats or two little boats. The two little boats makes half the money as the big boat. And we just feed 'em like that. We don't want to stop because once you get out of the business, then the customers will say, "When I need you, where were you at?" you know. So that's why—little boat business is picking up again. I could have sold forty this year.

JT: You talking about the inland water stuff?

KN: The inland water stuff. Venezuela called. I have a customer in Venezuela that called me, you know. We can't build 'em. It don't pay to get that quick high. Then after a year and a half, two years, you deliver 'em, and your big boat people went to here and there and they got two or three big boats and they don’t want to mix their style. A big boat, it takes fifteen, fourteen months to build a big boat.

You can go through a little slump, oil prices drop? It don't matter. I have a Seacore, Mr. Norman, they need a boat. He said, "Put me a slot down." He said, "If somebody backs out, I'll take it."

That's an ace in the hole, you know what I mean? This guy here, they got a lot of boats but they might have 175 boats in a Gulf. They're the largest aluminum boat company in the world.

JT: Seacore.

KN: Well, Seacore. Tidewater and them may have other boats, but in aluminum boats, they're [Seacore] the larger. But Mr. Norman, he had the pioneer for the technology of him and Joe McCall, to designed these boats and make 'em run right. They're the two leaders.

JT: You think those would be good guys to talk to?

KN: You could talk to 'em. Joe would probably sit down; Mr. Norman too.

JT: Do you mind if I use you as a reference?

KN: Use me as a reference that y'all are doing a research. Tell them what its about and it's not to hurt 'em or nothing, about the oil field industry.

JT: Let's back up to late '81 when you first got the word. Tell me exactly what you recall those couple of weeks when things started really looking bad.

KN: What I recall? See, I'm walking over here. See the light switch, the lights went off? [Kerry laughs] Like turning a light switch off. That's what happened. Like turning the light switch off, that's what happens. Like turning the light switch off.

JT: It was the price of oil.

KN: The price of oil, man. People were financing those boats for a quarter of a million, at 18 percent, 21 percent. They were given 18 percent in CDs; they were financing for 26, 27 percent. You could make 18 percent on a CD. If you had a million, you could make 180,000 dollars a year. That's how much the interest rates.

And now, you know, my little girl. I built a house in those days, not much, it was nine percent. Now my little girl bought a house two, three years ago for six-and-a-half. If somebody would have told me then, I would have said, "Man, you're dreaming, you're dreaming." See how things change. So it changed for the better.

JT: Tell me about that late '81, early '82, when things went south; what did that do to your labor force?

KN: We had to turn loose three quarters of our labor force, and we kept about ten, twelve guys on the payroll. We were still selling one or two boats a year from our inventory, you know, and we survived on that. And getting a couple of boats ready. It took a long time until I hit the Venezuelan contract about six, seven years after that.

JT: Things started picking up.

KN: Money wasn't the problem. Me and Daddy and Errol were financially strong. We just come and sit out here, five, six guys, and look at the shop the whole day.

JT: What did that bust do for the community here?

KN: It hurt. It hurt. It hurt. Even Breaux Baycraft. The whole company had to turn loose the majority of their people. It hurt the whole economy, when you had ninety people working over here, making good money. They had bought homes, they had bought cars, and everything. You've got to remember, interest rates were 18 percent on a CD, and some of those guys were making good money. They had homes for sale, a lot of bankruptcy, a log of depression in this area,

man. They even had a big bank, People's National Bank, you know, that went under. That was the largest bank.

My daddy was on the board of directors of that bank and about four years before that, he wanted to get out, when things were good. He said, "Why don't you take my spot?"

I said, "Pop, what do I know about banks?"

He said, "A good experience, a good learning curve for you."

I said, "Yes, yes."

About three quarter of a million dollars of stock you had to buy. So I bought the stock, three quarters of a million dollars, from him.

So man I was in the bank business. I had a short career there. Me and my good friend Randy Moti said, "Neuville, it ain't going to make it."

I said, "What do you mean it ain't going to make it?

He says, "It's going under. Too many bad oil field loans."

Be damned, that bank went under. See the building, People's Bank? I used to own that building. Me and twenty others were the owners. We sold the building out and I lost all the stock in the bank. But that's what happened. Even though I didn't lose money with the shipyard, I lost about 800,000 dollars through a bad bank; a good bank, that was good, that helped out good people. The people they loaned the money to were all good people, doing good all their lives. They even mortgaged their homes and land to show good faith, you know. But the bottom fell out, you know.

Tape 1, Side 2

JT: A false economy.

KN: It showed you hopes and it turned you down. The whole area. I'm talking about, a lot of people bought trucks, a lot of oil field service companies, seismograph companies, everything that people built, cables for seismograph companies over here. It wasn't just the boats; there was a lot of things, your pipe people, your welders bought welding rigs and all that. A guy with a welding rig could make thirty dollars an hour when he was making twelve dollars an hour before. That's a big difference.

JT: I had a fellow who was one of the pioneers of the Port of Iberia, and he says, for every job they have in the port of Liberia, that equals two jobs outside, in the car dealership, in the restaurant business—

KN: Everything.

JT: —whatever. And so when it hit—

KN: People who had money were buying cars. Cajun people like to ride new cars, cousin. When they get a pocket full of money, they want to ride new cars, get a new suit, or whatever; look good. That's our lifestyle. You've got to reward yourself some time. But you've got to remember, bad times can come. Even right now, bad times could come.

JT: Do you see any resemblance of what's been going on here the last two years, to what was going on in '79 and '80?

KN: No. Interest rates are staying the same. You don't have high interest rates. So in oil fields, when the prices are paying good, we have the war in Iraq, gives us a little shot in the arm all the time. Say, if this is going on, we got to keep on drilling, we got to keep on doing things. It could start next week, tell you the truth; you start with another country, like Iran with all this nuclear stuff, you know. We consume so much oil; we need oil. And like China, China consumes so much oil. They're getting modernized. So, Iraq, giving us some of their oil. We need second alternatives of oil. That's why they're going to Mexico, or in Venezuela right now. They're kind of cutting down in Venezuela right now. There ain't the friendship no more. Some of our companies over there are kind of pulling out, you know.

JT: Have you seen some of that?

KN: I heard that through a couple of my friends, you know. Like, this other guy called me, I sold some boats, they need five more. You're not talking a 220,000-dollar boat no more, you're talking a 600,000-dollar boat.

JT: They don't have this technology in Venezuela?

KN: No. They're building boats, but one guy that has the shipyard over there, it's kind of local, you know, and they can't get the quality on that, you know. They paid about the same price as us and they get a better boat.

JT: Yes.

KN: You know, even though they have to pay the import fees, the duty fees to bring them in. And what's good about a boat that goes work over there, once it leaves the United States, it's picking up and come back to the United States.

JT: I understand.

KN: It can't come back and flood the market over here.

JT: That's that.

KN: That's that. Even a big boat, you know.

JT: Yes. What about the hurricanes of 2004. What did that do for your industry?

KN: It stirred up the economy. It tore up a lot of the rig platforms, a lot of the platforms out there. Everything is run by computer now. You have satellites telling the computers what to do. The people in Houston, in New Orleans, all along the Gulf Coast, that regulate the flow of oil. They got a couple of guys for that, but everything is run by computer. And they tore up miles and miles of pipeline, platforms that are, ones that are no longer there. They run them over with boats and busting holes in boats. And they have to re-locate that, re-do all of that.

All that computer stuff was in there, they had waves thirty, forty-foot high. Knocked the whole computer sheds off. Man, these computers are all high-tech computers and all that. All these people in the computer field have so much work. They had their regular work, then they got the surplus work, then they got all the subcontractors had to go build all these new buildings back and all that—the insulation people, the air conditioning people, the plumbing people, the catering people.

They just can't get enough people. They've got Panamanians, Mexicans, working out there, living on big ships. They have to bring in—they don't say that

though—they have to bring in on the job site, you know. And they're working in foreign waters so they don't have to have all the visa cards and all this crap like we have to have over here. That's why they need the crewboats to shutted all this equipment back and forth, service all these.

JT: Just for salvage.

KN: Just for salvage. Plus replace all of this. All this has got to be replaced. The ones that get replaced right now are the ones in the worser shape. With a million, two million dollars damage, they're just letting them slide. Those that were towed, in the hundreds of millions.

JT: The insurance companies.

KN: They took derrick barges from all over the world to bring into the Gulf to help everything get back up after Katrina. You know, how many boats were on land, supply boats, barges, and all that went into the marshes. You know how many cranes they needed. They couldn't get enough of those big cranes. They named their day rate, their price. If it was 100,000 a day, they're making 200,000. They name their price. Supply and demand. And they got to get it back on track, because we need that oil.

JT: What about going off the shelf into the deep water now. Do you see that impacting your business here? You've have the 150 class, 160 class

KN: One seventy.

JT: You got going up with the deep stuff—

KN: Yes; there are going to be some larger boats, larger boats right now—ninety-one and ninety-five we can build. Little boats are the gravy. We have to build the big boats, you know, high-tech. Five, seven engines. We build boats with five, seven engines. You got five engines, you got DP; you got maybe two, three bow thrusters in there; you got back-up systems for everything on that boat. You're talking a lot of more, instead of building two big boats a year, you build one. Nine million dollars instead of five. Way bigger animal.

JT: Take you an extra two, three months

KN: Oh, it takes an extra five months. A lot more boat now, fuel capacity, mud capacity too. But right now, like, Gulf Craft is building these larger boats for Seacore.

JT: Gulf Craft?

KN: Gulf Craft in Patterson. They are one of the leaders and boat builders too. They build for Seacore. Seacore got their whole yard sewed up, just building for them. That's how much work Seacore gives out.

JT: Who's your major customers now?

KN: Seacore, Texas Crewboats. I've got a bunch of others but we just can't build for them. If you get three people, that's all you can build. And we build a boat every other year, we build two boats a year. I have calls over here I can show you...a tablet that...since last year, all the pages are gone, front and back, all the customers.

JT: Asking.

KN: Asking for boats. And once they call two, three times, they get discouraged they can't build, you know. But they want one of my boats, you know, because they know it's one of the better boats. But you got to wait for it.

JT: It sounds like you guys have had many opportunities over the years to grow, to increase, to build more, to add more hands, and to really take this thing to the next level. You and your brother decided not to do that.

KN: We decided not to do it.

JT: Why is that?

KN: You die a long time, you live a short time. What you want to do?

JT: Live a short time.

KN: Hey, it's not the money. We got the money. We give our families money. My dad is ninety-two, he draws the same check, the same raises as everybody. You know what he does? He gives it all back to his kids at Christmas-time! Dad gives it to the kids and grandkids. That's what he does with his money. Everybody says "J.O., how you get all your grandkids and your kids those little jobs at Christmas-time?" He says, "Just give them away." That's not true. They come, they see Dad. We're a tight family, you know. I'm starting to do the same thing to my kids. Errol does the same with his kids. And just like this company here. My dad ninety-three and he's going to pass away. And one-third goes to his heirs.

Dad wanted to sell it to me. I said, "I don't want to buy." Errol don't want to buy it. I own one-third, Errol owns one-third. We control the majority. I said, "Look. Let your sons and your daughter inherit it, put it in their name. And when they retire and get old, they're going to draw each thirty, forty, sixty, a hundred,

and hundred and fifty thousand, whatever, a year. And that will be a steady income as long as this shipyard rolls. "You know, I don't want the money; I've been giving you one-third and you haven't worked twenty-five years." So what's the difference giving my brother and my sister. It's not a money deal.

JT: Living down here, growing up in this area, I mean, it gets to where you really, and I'm speaking personally—I grew up in Bayou Teche. How much is enough. It gets to a point where you really, you're only around for so long. You give to the kids and the grandkids

KN: Short. The kids and the grandkids. My daddy is real generous, you know. And I am too. What are you going to do? Blue jeans, shirts, that's it.

JT: When I drive down highway ninety, particularly since I've been involved in this project the last two years, I'm real discouraged about all the billboards and all the people just dying for labor.

KN: Dying for labor.

JT: They'll pay you to come. Whatever you need. They just need labor.

KN: Day before last year, we give a three dollar raise across the board. I give some of my workers a seven thousand dollar a year raise. People say, "Why you giving that?" Like when the Port of Iberia tried to steal some of my workers, you know, we just stopped it, you know. But the money is not the problem. The other shipyards are just jumping down. And it costs me like 400,000 that one raise. I said, "You can't build a boat without good help." People get, everybody's trying to get at us. We don't have labor problem.

JT: You are one of the few.

KN: Yes. That's how you stop that.

JT: With being one of the three aluminum boat-builders, big boat builders in the area, how have your relationships been with the Breaux brothers over the last three years?

KN: Breaux Brothers—

JT: Right down the road.

KN: Roy, Jr. owns that company, left him a fortunate, you know. His little boy and my little boy are the best of friends. He brings my little boy to his camp. His boy

comes to my house all the time. Good friends with Vance and Ward. Good friends with me, we graduated, and we went to school with them. They need help. We're all good friends. It's not a money deal. When you get a money deal, so what if you sell five boats, I'll sell two-and-a-half this year and I'm satisfied with that. So what if you sold four over there, so what. If I want a customer, things would ever get that bad, only one thing you got to do: cut the price. Anybody can give them away, it takes somebody to sell them. And we don't give them away.

JT: Between you and the two Breaux brothers, and maybe one or two other ones that you mentioned, over the last thirty years

KN: Gulf Craft—

JT: you guys have—

KN: —pioneered the boat business

JT: —pioneered the aluminum and the work boat industry and the majority of the craft that are in the Gulf of Mexico have been built by your—

KN: We could have sold a bunch of times, big money, but we don't need the money. Money's not the problem. Seven years ago we were thinking of putting up a shed at the bayou, maybe putting in a new 300-foot long, 300-foot wide and putting in a new launch systems but we've got one of the best launching systems in the world. We had a big ramp, everything with big winches. We can get it up, we do a 190 [ft] or a 195 [ft]. Cut back, let's cut back.

JT: Sixty, seventy, eighty years ago I bet you them old Cajuns used to come up to Bayou Teche—

KN: See, my daddy was a farmer going back sixty, seventy, eighty years ago. My Dad is ninety two. That's right, seventy years ago, when he was a young man. He was farming the land right across right there. He had two mules. And with the two mules he had a wagon, like in the horse-and-buggy days. They had an iron rings with the wooden wheels. So when he raised sugar cane and all that, and the cotton and the pepper, and the rims would dry up in the hot summer days. So Daddy used to tell me, he and Mama, used to back up that trailer in the Bayou Teche, and let the wooden wheels swell up on the iron rim so you could use it the next day, so the rims wouldn't come off. He did that plenty of times. He used to curse that bayou: "If they wouldn't have that bayou there, I wouldn't have to pack that damn mule in the water." And what do you know, forty years later, fifty years later, we started building boats.

JT: and launching them right there—

KN: —in that same spot, that little creek there. It was easy; you just have to pack the mules up in the water.

JT: Now the boats that ya'll are selling are between five and eight million dollars.

KN: They vary.

JT: It's unbelievable.

KN: It's unreal. Down over here, I come to work every morning at five o'clock, I leave at five. You start looking around, you say, "Man." When I was a poor boy I used to walk down here in a patch, it was a cow patch, I'd go to the bayou and fish, like Tom Sawyer did with the cane pole, with the hook and a worm and a cork, barefooted. My mama used to make my underclothes out of feed sacks and our shirts. I felt poor. My mama, she still lives like that, man. Whatever she's saving, a little bit from dinner, whatever. Life is good. When you had the bad and you had the good, you had both world. I tell my kids, you know, I give them everything they want underneath the sun. They say, "You spoil 'em." I don't believe that. That's the way I raised them.

JT: You mentioned, unfortunately, our demand for Middle Eastern oil a little earlier. What would you say to the folks in, let's say, in California, Oregon, and Florida, who would look at a boat like that, or look at platform and be disgusted, what would you say about what the oil industry has brought to your family and this community?

KN: This whole area, this is life source. It's pumps the blood through our veins. All the dealerships, like you said: the cane, the little grocery stores, the cafes, the subcontractors. Before you even get that oil out of the ground, you've got to spend billions, not millions, billions. You don't even see all the seismograph people coming; you don't even see the geologists from Houston planning all this. You don't see all these people, you don't see all these big investors, you don't see none of this. All you see is the boats running out there. All this has to happen before that happens. It's a long picture; it's not just pulling the boats and drilling.

JT: Yeah, and if its not here, then were are all sugar cane farmers aren't we, and we know what the price of sugar is today.

KN: Man, it's terrible, man, you know. If it wouldn't be for oil, you couldn't fix these roads that are so bad here; it's all oil revenues, you know. Louisiana might get a

little piece of that offshore drilling, you know? That would be nice for all those state officials. Help everybody out.

JT: Kerry. I appreciate it.

KN: Thank you very much. It was really nice.

[End of interview]

[Edited by Jason Theriot, 14 August 2008]