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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Bio

John Henry "Dickie" Written was born in Morgan City, Louisiana in 1937 but was raised in Texas. His father worked for Shell Oil on an exploration team and as a consequence Mr. Written moved around a great deal. He moved in with his aunt and uncle in Morgan City to finish high school in one place and then graduated from Morgan City High School in 1955. Mr. Written began to work for Shell Oil in June 1955. He worked for Shell Oil in June 1955 and continued to work part-time in Baton Rouge, Louisiana while he went to Louisiana State University. Mr. Written was drafted in to the Army in 1956 and spent 13 months in Korea. After returning from Korea, he returned to work for Shell at and went to East Bay, West Lake Verret, Gibson, and New Orleans. Mr. Written began working for Shell as a roustabout then moved up to lease operator, operations foreman, production foreman, and then maintenance foreman for the entire East Coast and Gulf of Mexico. Mr. Written spent 30 years working for Shell Oil before his retirement.

Side 1

JC: Today is July 26, 2004. This is Jamie Christy and I am here talking to Mr. Dickie Written at his home at 301 Lagonda. Mr. Dickie, would you mind just telling us a little bit about yourself, where you are from and who your parents are?

JHW: I was born in Morgan City, May 24, 1937. My mother and father were both from Morgan City and Berwick. I was born here ,but I was raised in Texas. My dad worked for Shell Oil back in the real early days and he was in exploration. In that exploration, the crew, as they were called, which consisted of different components of the exploration unit, traveled from place to place to place and they would drill holes with a little drilling rig and they would shoot explosives, and vibrations would tell what your seismograph pictures of the earth for early oil exploration. So, that is what we did. And we moved from place to place quite frequently. In my childhood, I can remember moving as many as six times in nine months in a school year. So, I never started at any school in the same school. It was always two or three times down the road that I had to change schools. So, the last year of high school, my 12th year, I, if you want to say so, put my foot down to my mom and dad and said, "Look, I would like to start and finish school at least once in my life in the same place." And so, they agreed. So, I moved to Morgan City and I stayed with my aunt

and uncle – my mother's brother and his wife. I had three cousins. On Egle Street. And that was where I stayed and went to high school, and finished high school here in Morgan City.

JC: Who were your aunt and uncle that you stayed with?

JHW: They were the Rosses. Chuck and Harris. There were nine of them. The Ross family was a pretty prominent family here in the Morgan City area. My dad obviously was a Written and my grandfather came here from Hamburg, Germany, in the mid 1800s, and he could speak and write seven languages fluently. I have the family bible. He moved when he was a young man, I think, 16, 17 years old. He moved down the bayou, settled there, and raised his family and did not educate any of his kids. Why? I have no idea. But I have got the family bible like I said which shows my grandfather even as a young man. So, that is pretty much the story of how we came to be here in Morgan City.

JC: A little bit about your dad because he was one of the pioneers. Do you remember him? Do you remember Shell back then when you were a kid?

JHW: Oh, sure.

JC: So, you said you all were called "doodle bugs."

JHW: "Doodle buggers." That is what we were called. In some areas, some towns that we went to, we were welcome, and in some towns, we were not because they knew that we were transients, if you want to call us that. Itinerant workers, you know, if you want to call us that, which some folks did. In some places, we were welcome and some places, we were not. Some folks were real anxious to rent to us houses and what have you. Some folks were not because they knew we were not going to be there long. Obviously, they did not know us, they did not know what kind of people we were, whether or not we were going to move into their place and trash it and leave, or if we were good people. And we were good people, and they found that out. The people that would rent to us, whether it be for a month or six months, the people that did rent to us, they found that out in time. But it was tough. It was a tough life.

JC: Was there kind of a negative aspect to being in . . . like, they would hear oil field and think . . .

JHW: In some places. In some towns. Depending on the community. Some folks were glad to see us because when we came, we used a lot of local services. The trucks that we had, and it was a pretty good fleet of trucks, I would say probably one

dozen truck-type vehicles that were associated with our operation or more, plus other company vehicles which, they had to have gas, they had to be serviced, they had to have a place to be put. So, the local service stations, we would use their facilities to park the trucks at night and on the weekend and what have you, we would use their facilities to service the oil and gas and what have you, so they liked us. We would buy the groceries and what have you for the family, that helped the communities that we were in. It was not a tremendous economic impact to a community but it was a shot in the arm, so to speak, considering the time back then.

JC: Did you move with the same group of Shell workers?

JHW: Yes, the same group always stayed together and they were a group of men and their wives, like my mom and dad, and it was me. Some couples did not have children, some had one, some had two, some had three, and we were a family within itself. A lot of times, depending on the community, we were our own family. I mean, we were all we had as far as a social life and what have you. Like I said, some of the communities that we lived in, and particularly in Alabama, in Georgia and in some parts of Texas, they did not socialize with us too much. So, we were our own social club, if you want to call it that. We were just like family. I mean, we visited each other, we went out together, all the boys

on the crew, we played together, because we were all we had. We did not have many play mates at school because we were not in school in any one place long enough. So, we were all we had. So, we did the best we had with what we had.

JC: When you had to move like that, did Shell pay for you to move?

JHW: Oh, yes. Well, yes. Shell was moving you from point A to point B. If you chose, all you had to do was pick up the phone and call United Movers or one of the moving companies and say, "I am here at 301 Lagonda and I am moving to New Orleans at this address," and you, your wife and your kids, you get in the car and you drive. And you stay in a motel, which the company pays for. Then, a moving company comes in and they pack up your whole house. Everything. You do not have to touch anything. All your dishes, your clothes. They picked up everything, and they moved you and they set you up in your new house. Plus, they bought your house if you would like, because they do not want anything to keep you from moving. I can only speak for Shell. I cannot speak for the Mobils and the Exxons how they did business but from friends that I have that work for those companies, they did pretty much the same thing. When they move you, they do not want anything to hinder your movement – your kids in school, deposits on the new place, selling. No, you do not worry about any of that. They take care of all that.

Back in the day when my mom, dad and I . . . when I was a youngster, it was not that way with us because we moved so often, my dad had a gray two-wheeled trailer that he built, and all of our possessions and everything we were able to get on that one trailer. And we towed the trailer with the family car from place to place to place. So, we really did not have that many personal possessions.

The places that we rented, we rented furnished because we did not have a lot of furniture. We just had the bare necessities. So, we rented furnished places, so we would take whatever we had to add what was already in the place and that is how we lived and when it was time to move again, we would just back the trailer up to the front porch and load everything in the trailer and off we went. And my dad had that gray trailer, God, I do not know how long it was. It was the whole time that I can remember. Even when he retired and moved here, the grey trailer is what moved him into this house! And what happened to the grey trailer, I do not have any idea but it was a trailer that he built himself and that is what we moved with.

JC: Do you remember him talking about his work in the early days with Shell?

JHW: Oh, I used to go with him. When I got older, I used to go with him from time to

time. Like summers, I would go out and I would work, you know, with the two man crew like you saw. Well, I was the third man. My job varied. I did not get paid, obviously, from Shell. It was just an experience. As the hole is being drilled like you saw in the picture - you saw the water – as the hole is being drilled, the cuttings are coming up through the hole and they are flooring out into that little piece of water that you saw. Well, the cuttings are there and if you do not keep those cuttings cleaned out of that little channel, it stacks up and the water runs all over the place. So, one of the jobs that I had with the shovel was to keep those cuttings cleaned out of that channel so the water could flow from the hole into the suction pit where those hoses were that you saw in the picture, that was the suction pit. The hole was right next to it. There was a channel that connected the two. And if you did not keep those cuttings cleaned out of that channel, it would plug up and the water would run everywhere. So, my job with Shell, like I said, was to clean the cuttings out of that channel so the water could flow from the drill hole into the slush pit.

JC: That is a big job for a little guy.

JHW: For a little guy, that was a pretty big job. That is right. And then another job that I had was when the hole was drilled and we moved off, we obviously could not leave an open hole there. So, my dad had taken some old tin oil cans, one quart

oil cans and had made a pyramid shaped form that I would mix concrete and pour concrete in the form to act as a plug. It was tapered, round at the top and tapered, kind of like a pyramid. But it was round. And after the hole was drilled and we got ready to move off, we put a piece of wire as a handle in the top of that thing. We would set that in the hole to plug it so if there was any cattle or goats or sheep in the area, then if they were wandering around the pasture, they would not step in that hole and break their leg. And then, when the shooting crew came behind, then they would remove that plug, do their work and when they were finished, they would put that plug back in the hole. So, that is how we left it.

JC: Did you ever see anybody get hurt back in the early days or did your dad ever tell you about it?

JHW: Oh, yes. It was foolish accidents. I guess one of the worst I ever saw was we were drilling a hole like you saw in the picture and the rotor was turning. The pipe that you saw. I do not know how familiar you are with a drill rig.

JC: Pretty familiar now.

JHW: All right. Well, you know what the Kelly is then?

JC: Yes, sir.

JWH: The initial string consists of generally a square piece of pipe. That is what fits in the rotary and be it square, that is what turns it. We were drilling a hole. We had a relatively new guy that was on the water truck and I was doing my cutting thing. And for some unknown reason, he had a rag, just a regular piece of rag and he was playing with the turning drill pipe. He had the rag and he was just running the rag up against the turning drill pipe. It was stupid. Just sitting there, killing time playing. Well, a bur or something on the pipe grabbed the rag and began to wrap it around the pipe. This happens very, very fast. I mean, it is not something that you can watch and predict. He was playing and a bur caught this rag and wrapped it up. He tried to pull it and before he could stop it, it mangled his arm. It broke his arm in I do not know how many places. And before we could get it stopped. It is lucky he got out with his life. But his arm was destroyed for the rest of his life. Foolish. Very, very foolish. Something that was just uncalled for. But that is the worst I saw. But, I mean, there were others. Pipe falling. Ropes breaking. Cables breaking. Just normal run of the mill stuff that happens around machinery.

JC: So, when you would go out, you were just helping your dad? You were just doing some help with whatever they needed you to do?

JHW: Right.

JC: And when did you start working for Shell?

JHW: Well, I worked for Shell all my life, because that is what my dad did. So, I guess you could say I am a lifelong Shell employee. I started my first true experience the summer of 1955. I graduated from high school in 1955 and I went to work at the Shell Exploration office on Government Street in Baton Rouge. That was my first experience. I was working with the paleontologists in the Baton Rouge office and we were processing well cuttings from drilling rigs, samples, for the paleontologists to look at. That was my first summer. The fall of that year, I went to LSU. And I would go to school for nine months and I would work part-time while going to school at the Baton Rouge office at the lab, and in the summers, I would go to a place called St. Gabriel, Louisiana. Do you know where St. Gabriel is? Out of Donaldsonvlle. The production department had a big office there in Donaldsonville, so I worked in St. Gabriel during the summer. I worked there in the summer time, would go back to school in the fall, and worked the Baton Rouge lab and I went to LSU for three years, did that for three years, and I decided I wanted to go to work full-time. So, I went to work for Shell's office when they moved the office from Baton Rouge to Lafayette, then we moved to Lafayette and I went to work in the exploration office in Lafayette.

I worked there for about one year, I think, one year or so, and then I got a call from Uncle Sam that says, 'Greetings.' That they needed my service in the U.S. Army for a couple of years. So, I left Lafayette and my wife came home back to Berwick when she was pregnant with our daughter at the time which I did not know. So, I went in the service and spent 13 months in Korea eventually and came back and I did not see my daughter until she was 4 months old because she was born while I was overseas. So, when I came back, Shell sent me to a facility called East Bay which is at the mouth of the Mississippi River. I stayed out there for seven years. Then, I left there and I came to West Lake Verret for, I think, five years. I went to Gibson for two years. I went to Weeks Island for five years. Then, I went to New Orleans at One Shell Square for five years before I retired. So, all total, I spent a little over 30 years with Shell.

JC: Were you changing positions with them at each place?

JHW: Well, yes. I went to East Bay as a roustabout. Well, I was promoted from roustabout to lease operator. I went from lease operator at East Bay to West Lake Verret as a lease operator. I went from West Lake Verret to Gibson. And then, I went as an operations foreman from Gibson back to West Lake Verret as an operations foreman. I went from West Lake Verret to Weeks Island as a

production foreman in which I was responsible for a whole bunch of fields. And while I was at Weeks Island, I had Weeks Island, Block 18, East Buck Point, Maurice, just a whole bunch of fields When you are a production foreman, you are head of that particular production unit and all the operation foremen and all the employees, they work under your supervision.

JC: I mean, I know it is a lot but could we go start out at East Bay and just kind of maybe go over some of the memories that you have at different jobs, at different sites?

JHW: O.K. East Bay, sits at the mouth of the Mississippi River. It has, I do not know how many platforms. Dozens and dozens. It was the largest field that Shell had. Shell bought that field from Texaco. Texaco did some work there. They drilled some wells there. They did not hit anything. And Shell bought that from Texaco and they hit a gold mine. East Bay was one of the largest producing fields that Shell has ever had. At one time, our production there was 125,000 barrels a day. That was when oil was $3.50 a barrel many, many years ago. So, that was a monster. We have something like 250 employees on a ship that we work seven and seven – seven days on, seven days off. There were 250 people per shift, per seven days. So, we had 250 and the other crew had 250. That is 500 people working out there. There was a lot of activity out there. God, we had platforms

offshore, we had platforms onshore, and it was one monstrous operation. It was fantastic. And your normal duties there were just to work with the wells and keep them producing at maximum capacity. Well, not maximum capacity but depending on depth and since that was in state waters, production was governed by what they called a state allowable. Based on the depth, you were only allowed to produce so much from that particular well. That was the allowable. Even if the well was produced in dozens of hundreds, sometimes more than that, all you could produce legally was the amount that was allowed by the state. And the wells were tested regularly to get their current production test rate and the allowable always stayed the same because the depth of the well did not change unless he was worked over and redone. So, the allowable was the governing factor for all those wells. And again, obviously, if a well's allowable is ten barrels, there is no way that you can guarantee it is going to produce ten barrels every day unless you test it every day which is not possible. So, at the time it was tested, if the well was over the allowable from that test point until the next test point, you carried that production rate. If you tested the well at ten barrels today and it is not tested again for two weeks, for the next two weeks, that production rate for that well is ten barrels. It may be eight one day, it may be five one day, it may be fifteen another day. But unless you test it every day, you have no way of knowing. So, you judged the well's production by what they called LTR which is the latest test rate. In the event that the well tested over the allowable rate for that

particular well, you had an option: you could either choke it back which is a mechanical device that is put in the wellhead to restrict the production; you could choke it back to get closer to the production rate, or you could use the overage as a plus. According to the state, you were allowed three days over production - if the allowable was ten barrels a day, three day production is thirty barrels – you were allowed an overage of +30 for that particular well. When it reached +30, you must shut that well in for a day to eat up some of that plus, then you could produce it again. So, that is how the allowable situation works. Offshore in the deep federal waters today, there is no allowable. You produce whatever it will produce. That is why you see some of these humongous production rates for some of these wells. Some of these wells that Shell is producing offshore now, they produce 10,000, 15,000 barrels a day easily with no trouble at all. The new deep water structures, the Mars platforms, the Brutus platforms that Shell has offshore today, they are producing 100,000 and 150,000 barrels a day. At $35 a barrel, that is not a bad day's wage! But it is expensive to operate out there.

JC: Were you a roustabout at East Bay? Is that where you started that?

JHW: Yes, I started there.

JC: How was that?

JHW: That was just a day to day. We worked off of what we called boat trucks. These were boats that were unique. It was a small cabin in the front with a huge deck area. And that is what they were. The name implied boat truck. That is what they were. They were a boat truck. Land roustabouts, they used trucks to go from well to well or sight to sight for repair work and maintenance. Since we did not work on land, we worked on water, then we used boats to do the same thing. All of our tools and equipment would go from place to place wherever work was needed. Our crew, with a guy called a gang pusher, he was the boss. And he would get the day's schedule, what work needed to be done and where, and that is what we would do. We would go from place to place and do the work that required to be done. Whether it be cleaning and painting, whether it be repairing or replacing pipe, valves, fittings, cleaning out vessels, washing platforms, depending on what needed to be done, that is what we did.

JC: Was that hard work?

JHW: It could be very hard work at times, it sure could, because the days were 12 hours, six to six. That was six to six, 7 days. So, depending on what needed to be done, a lot of times, some leaks in some of this piping would occur in what we called the pan area which was underneath the top deck of the platform, there was this

pan to catch any drips or oil leaks or whatever to keep us from going in the water. A lot of the piping ran under the top deck between there and the pan. You develop a leak in there, there is no way you could get to fix it but to get somebody to crawl in there with a pipe wrench or pipe cutters and it is dirty, nasty, hot, grimy work. And that is what you did.

JC: Now about at Gibson? That was your next stop, correct?

JHW: When I went from East Bay, I went to West Lake Verret. I went there as a lease operator, as a gauger, as it were. And a gauger is a little bit different from the roustabout because the gauger, he is responsible for the observation of the wells themselves. He is responsible for the testing of the wells, for any type of maintenance that needs to be done like running pigs and what have you. He takes the tubing and casing pressure. He monitors the production and the production systems, the platforms, of all the wells that are under his responsibility. And at West Lake Verret, we had central, we had five platform complexes that were scattered over several miles around the area. And wells were scattered all over in the area, too. So, you had to make supposedly day rounds of all these wells to check one for leaks, if there were any problems, any wells that were off production for some reason, to monitor the injection gas rates. Most of the wells at West Lake Verret, practically all of them were on what we called gas lift. They

did not have enough reservoir pressure to flow on their own, so natural gas had to be injected which would aerate the fluid column in the tubing which would light it, which would cause it to get the reservoir pressure to take over and, with the help of the injection gas, push the oil to the surface and water or whatever else it produced. So, the gauger/lease operator's responsibility was to monitor all this on a daily basis and just do routine stuff on a day-to-day basis.

JC: Do you have some specific memories of particular days or events that occurred?

JHW: One day was pretty much like the next. You had your natural upsets. Power outages. That created problems. Oil leaks in pipelines. Oil in the canal. That is not good. That is a mess, in an environmentally sensitive area as the Atchafalaya spillway is. That is a problem. So, it was just constantly being alert and aware and constantly checking on what is going on to make sure that everything was doing what it was supposed to be doing.

JC: Oil companies now obviously have become much more environmentally concerned, but back in the old days, was it different?

JHW: It was different, yes. You say, "the old days" . . .

JC: I'm sorry.

JHW: No, that is fine! Back when I worked at St. Gabriel. The connections from the well to the platform that carried the production oil and gas and what have you from the wellhead into the processing area naturally had to be by pipe. The pipe that was used back then was called Victaulic pipe. This was a pipe like any other pipe but each end of it had a groove cut. Now, when you put these two ends of pipe together, you had a clamp that would go around . . . you had a rubber gasket that would fit over the joining of the two pipes, you had this special clamp that went around this rubber gasket and used two bolts to hold it together. This was the connection. It was called the Victaulic connection. This was the joining mechanism for the pipe that ran through the swamp back then. Today, it is not that way. It is all welded and much, much higher class pipe than it was then. These Victaulic connections back then would leak. If it is leaking out in the middle of the swamp, the only way you had to get it out there and to go fix it was to wade that swamp with the snakes and everything else that was out there and go fix it. And the only way you knew a Victaulic connection or a pipe was leaking back then was when either you smelled it or it eventually made its way into the main canal. And then, when you did, that told you that that swamp or area that it was in was full of oil. And the only way to get out there to go find it and fix it was to wade. And you waded through oil and muck and whatever, you know.

And you looked like a sure enough grease monkey when you got there but that was the only way you had of doing things out there. You did not have all the modern stuff that you have today. We had the just plain vanilla tools and equipment and that is what you had to do if something happened.

JC: Did you try to clean it out back then or you would just repair what was broken?

JHW: You would repair what was broken and you would suck up as much as you could. But back then, not as much concern was shown for the environment as is shown today. You did the best you could with what we had which was back then, we did not have the oil mops that you have now and these sophisticated materials that you use to soak up the oil. We did not have the oil booms that you see now strung out from place to place. You did not have any of that stuff. You did not have any dispersants that you use to spray on the oil to let it go away by itself. We did not have any of that. So, you sucked up what you could. Back then, you did not suck it up to protect the environment, you sucked it up to get what oil you could and save it! So, that was the way it was then.

JC: Did you ever see any big spills?

JHW: Yes. We saw some and, again, it was human error that caused them. We saw

some barges . . . at West Lake Verret, we shipped oil by barge. Oil would flow into the gathering facility and processing facility, it would be processed, stored, and a barge was put on the main canal and there was piping over there to load oil into the barge to be shipped to Gibson. And it was transferred there into tanks and then shipped on to Shell refineries. Tanks would overflow. Barges would overflow. Human error, mostly. Folks not opening the valve that should have been opened, not closing the valve that should have been closed, and as a result, these things happen. I have seen spills of from teacup size to several hundred barrels. When you are coming to work in the morning and when you round the last curve at West Lake Verret before you get to the office and you smell oil in the canal, you do not know where it is yet but you know it is bad because we had another platform that was further down the canal and I will see that canal full of oil from bank to bank, and all the way to the back, they were just plumb full of oil.

One time, one of our employees . . . the way you measure gas, just through an orifice plate. I do not know if you know what an orifice plate looks like. He was changing the orifice plate in one of our orifice plate fittings and somehow or other, he did not close the valves that isolate the line from the source. He left that gate open. And somehow, that thing leaked back and I mean it was a holy mess! The gentleman still lives in town today and if you ask him about it today, he still

remembers it because I was his boss when it happened and it was a mess. I am telling you what – when I rounded the corner that day . . . that is why I made that statement . . . I smelled oil and I said, "Oh my God, what has happened now?" It did not take long to find it because it was bad but that is one of the worst ones I have seen. But there have been others. I mean, it is just mostly human error. Very little . . . there are some mechanical failures, that is true, but mechanical failures tend to manifest themselves into something not showing up where it is supposed to show up. And when it is low and one side is normal and the other side is low, that tells you that something from here to here is not right. If it is left here but it did not show up here, where is it at? And it can only be one place in a leak somewhere. And that is when you begin to look. But that is mechanical problem. But most of the time, it is personal error that causes it.

JC: So, Gibson was your next stop, correct?

JHW: East Bay, West Lake Verret, Gibson.

JC: Were you still a gauger at Gibson?

JHW: No, when I left West Lake Verret, I was an operations foreman. I had taken the next step up. One thing about East Bay was that they had a little bit of everything

as far as equipment types and the way it worked. Other locations, West Lake Verret, Gibson, other fields you went to, the equipment was more or less specialized to that particular area. But if you worked at East Bay, and I always told the people wherever I went, if you worked at East Bay and you learned the stuff out there, you could work anywhere in the world and be right at home. If you started at a place like West Lake Verret or Gibson and that is all you worked, and if you went someplace else, you had a problem because the equipment was different at each different location. East Bay, we had it all. We had the high pressure, we had the low pressure, we had the intermediate pressure. We had the gas lift, we had the nitro flow, we had the gas dehydration, we had everything. We had equipment, I guess, from every manufacturer in the world because East Bay was so big.

Gibson, when I went there as an operations foreman, I had a place called Turtle Bayou. Turtle Bayou, I do not know if you have heard about it. Turtle Bayou was all gas. No oil whatsoever. Nothing but a gas field. Gas and condensate. We were producing I guess anywhere from 30 to 40 million cubic feet a day when I got there. Our condensate production was about 400 to 500 barrels a day. Condensate is the liquid byproduct of natural gas. Through workovers and equipment modifications and what have you, at one time, we were producing over 100 million cubic feet of gas a day out of Turtle Bayou, and our condensate

production was about 2,000 barrels a day on that gas production. But Turtle Bayou was strictly gas, no oil whatsoever. And being all gas, that presents its own set of problems, particularly if, in the production of the gas, you start producing sand. Sand production, even with oil, is not good, but oil acts as kind of a cushion as it were from the sand on the material, on the iron that contains it. Gas is not that way. Gas is gas and sand incorporated in that gas is like a sand blaster. It will cut a whole in metal in a heartbeat. And that is what we had problems with more than anything else, I guess, was sand production. It would eat that equipment up alive.

JC: So, did you lose a lot of equipment over there?

JHW: We did not lose it. It was damaged. It had to be repaired. And some of it looked like an artist could not draw a damaged piece of equipment better because that sand is just like a hot knife through butter. It would take a piece of iron and just eat it away because sand is silica and it is very, very hard. On the Moh's hardness scale, it is not too far from the diamond. It is very hard. And so, it is harder than steel. So, when sand starts blasting on steel, that is where sandblasting comes in, that is why you see sandblasters when they clean the metal, that stuff will just eat iron away. If you just hold the nozzle there long enough, it will cut it to nothing. And that is what it does in a gas stream with sand and piping. It will eat it up in a

heartbeat.

JC: So, after Gibson, where . . .

JHW: After Gibson, I left Gibson and I came back to West Lake Verret as an operations foreman still, and I worked there for about five more years. Then, I had been offered several promotions, but the promotions that I had been offered, I was afraid that I would have to move, and moving as I did when I was a youngster, I had had my fill of it and when I put down my roots, I said, I do not want to go anywhere anymore. I am home. And I turned down a lot of promotions to go different places because of the moving thing. And then, they came along and they offered me the promotion to production foreman to take over the Weeks Island unit. And the only stipulation was that I would take the job if I did not have to move and they said, 'No, you do not have to move. You can stay right here at 301 Lagonda. You can live here and work in Weeks Island.' So, I said, "You've got yourself a deal." So, I had a company car and so I drove back and forth to Weeks Island every morning, which is not a bad drive on the four lane. You know where Weeks Island is – it is off of Lydia. So, I did that for five years. Then, they came to me at Weeks Island and they said, 'We would like for you to go to One Shell Square.' I said, 'Well, the same deal holds true. I will go to One Shell Square if I do not have to move' and they said, 'No, you do not have to

move. You can live right here on Lagonda and you can work in One Shell Square.' So, I had a company car again. So, I tried commuting. That was before the four-lane was finished so you had to come the old two lane route. I tried commuting. I would leave here about 3:30-4:00 in the morning to drive into New Orleans, to try to be ahead of the rush hour, and then I would try to get out of New Orleans about 2:30-3:00 to come back this way. I would end up most of the time getting home around 5:30 or 6:00. Come Wednesday, I was a zombie and I knew that this was a disaster just waiting to happen. So, Ray and I, my wife, we rented us a place in Metairie, a two bedroom apartment. So, we lived here on the weekends and we lived there during the week. At the same time I had Weeks Island, I also had an operation that is called Entity Materials and Tubing at the Morgan City terminal with the Shell yard here. So, I had an operation there. I had some employees here. So, I would leave New Orleans on Wednesday and I would come and I would spend two days over here. So, that worked out really well. And that is where I ended my career, was One Shell Square in New Orleans.

JC: What was your position when you were at One Shell Square?

JHW: One Shell Square, I was responsible for all offshore platform structural maintenance from Maine to Brownsville, Texas. Thank God we did not have

much stuff off the East Coast, but whatever we had, I was responsible for. That was the entire Gulf of Mexico. Anything that Shell had offshore, I was responsible for. I had a staff, not a very big staff, but most of my staff consisted of contractors. I had hundreds and hundreds of contractors. And we would do the structural maintenance on the offshore platform which was the sandblasting and the painting and the upkeep of the offshore structures. I would have a budget that was several million dollars big to do that kind of work, and we would go out and we would get contractors that could do the work to go out and perform the work. So, that is what I did the last five years.

JC: Did you yourself travel to the rigs and see what needed to be done?

JHW: Oh, yes. Yes. By helicopter. Where we had operations going and I had dozens of them going at any time during the summer, then I would go eventually and I would get to visit each one of them and see what was going on and look at their report. Of course, in my office, I had a computer and so I would get daily reports from our inspectors out there as to the progress and the costs and all this kind of stuff that is associated with the project, and that was on a daily basis. Yes, ma'am. But that was seven days a week, 24 hours a day. You try to run that big of an operation with several hundred contractors whose first loyalty is not to Shell but to their employer, you have got a problem. And it was a big problem. It cost.

Something breaking down, people not doing the work. And to get a crew out to a given platform, again depending on where but a typical offshore platform, to mobilize a crew to go out there and do the work, you are talking $100,000 to $150,000. By the time you hire the boats to bring the stuff out there, get this stuff trucked to the yard like the Morgan City terminal, get it loaded on the boats, get it out to the platforms, get it offloaded, get it set up, you are talking $100,000 to $150,000. If you get them out there and they do not perform, they are not doing the work the way you want it done and you have to fire them, that is another $150,000 you have got to spend to bring them back in. That is $300,000 now and you have not done a thing to that platform yet. That is getting them out there and if you have got to fire them, bring them back. And you have not done an ounce of work. So, it was a big, big problem that once you got them out there, to make sure that you could work with them to get the job done. Hopefully, you do that on land because we were to visit all of our contractors, we were to conduct schools to teach their people how to do their job. You would think that they would know how, but unfortunately, they do not, and to teach them how to do their job so that when they get out there, they can do what you send them out there to do. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it did not.

JC: Did you ever have to replace a crew like you were talking about?

JHW: Oh, regularly. Unfortunately, regularly. Drugs were a constant problem out there, like it is today, and these people that do this kind of work, they do not have a Ph.D. in sandblasting and painting, unfortunately. Most of them are uneducated. They are working minimum wage. And so, safety is a real problem. Getting them to use the equipment that is out there for them because when they are out there and they are working on these structures, they must work under safety nets, cables. If you fall out there, you know, and you do not fall in the water and you fall down on that hard iron 30 or 40 or 50 feet, you are dead. It is just that simple. You are dead. Or you are so badly mangled, you may never walk again or be a human being again. It is just that serious. But try to get them to do that, you know, sometimes it is tough. It may take them an hour to suit up to get ready to go out and do a five minute job. And rather than take that minute or an hour to get ready, they just say, 'Oh, it won't take long. I will just go ahead out there.' Then they slip and fall and you have got a problem. I have had some killed, unfortunately. I have had some maimed very badly. But that is just the nature of the beast. It is not a safe job, it is a very dangerous job, it is a very dirty job, a very ungratifying job, but it is a job that has to be done because these platforms, these structures are out in salt water. If they are not maintained, they are going to fall in the water. So, that is just the nature of the beast.

JC: Do you remember some of the contractors that you worked with on these

projects?

JHW: We worked with contractors all the way from Mississippi, Alabama, into Texas, because our operation during the summertime, that is when our big push was on because that is when the weather gets decent so you can get out there and so some work. You get a hurricane, you have got to shut down. You get rain and thunderstorms, you have got to shut down. You cannot paint when it is raining. You cannot sandblast when it is raining. So, our operation during the sandblasting season was so big, along with the Chevrons and the Texacos and the Exxon-Mobils – they are doing the same thing we are doing, and they are using the same type of people that we are using, so you can imagine the number of people the company is just required to do that. So, we had to pull from Florida, all along the Gulf Coast, into Texas – whoever would do that kind of stuff, that type of work, do you know? And a lot of them did that type of work but they were not used to that particular environment, so we had to go to their yards and train them what to do and how to do it and what we wanted done. We had specifications. They had to meet our specifications. It is not just the case of here is a brush and here is a can of paint, now go paint. You know, it is not that way. The surface had to be prepared to a certain degree that was measured by instruments. The thickness of the paint that was put on the metal was by specification, a certain thickness. Measured. The finished product was put on top

of the primer, a certain thickness, measured by our inspector. So, all these were tight, rigid specifications and it is just not a matter of going out there and throwing some paint on something. It is critical. And these folks, a lot of them were not used to that kind of rigid performance. We had to train them. And to get these people from where we had to get them . . .

Side 2

JC: So, you said out there, you had your inspector.

JHW: O.K., out there on a given crew, you had us, Shell – that is the employer of these people. You had our inspector who is not a Shell employee but a contractor as well. Now, our inspector, by requirement, carried certain qualifications in order to be an inspector. He had to be NACE certified, (National Association of Coating, whatever the E stands for – Equipment or whatever). He had to be NACE certified. And by being NACE certified, that means that you are qualified to use various sandblasting and painting testing equipment which they have a whole series of testing equipment that you can use to test this type of stuff. O.K., the inspector under him was the paint foreman. He was the boss of that crew, whoever it was. The inspector and the paint foreman did not work for the same person. The inspector worked for an inspecting company or himself if he was self-employed, and he was the inspector over the painting crew. The painting

crew consisted of a paint foreman. Depending on the size of the crew and the size of the job, you could have any number of blaster-painters. They were the guy that did the blasting and painting. Then, you had helping them were people called helpers. So, a sandblaster and your painting crew, depending on what you were doing, could consist of one dozen people on one crew. You would have the inspector, the foreman; two, three, four, five, six blaster-painters; two or three helpers. But you generally had one helper for every two blaster painters. So, that was the size of the crew and as I just told you, in the paper, today's paper, look, you will see somebody looking for blaster-painters because it is a real high turnover environment. They do not stay long.

JC: I have seen them, I sure have.

JHW: O.K., well, you know . . . and if you see the people, you know, all you can do is shake your head but that is all you have got and you have got to work with them.

JC: When you were working for Shell, were there many blacks when you first started?

JHW: Not many, but as time went on, the number of blacks increased, it sure did. Sandblasting and painting, structure maintenance – there were very, very few. Mostly white.

JC: Why do you think that was?

JHW: I do not know. I really do not know. The work is hard, it is dirty, it is grimy and some folks do not like that, and I am not saying that is the reason we did not have more blacks. I really do not know because the jobs were certainly open to come one, come all, because there is certainly a lack of people that like or want to do that type of work because, like I said, it is not a glorified job, it is dirty, it is nasty, it is gritty, and when you get out on our platforms, we try to do the best for the people that we could. We had to even bring buildings out there for them to live in because we did not have quarters in our company quarters for them to stay in, so we had to bring buildings out there, portable buildings. We had to bring washers and dryers so they can wash and dry their clothes. So, we have to build a whole city with the room that we have to work with on our given platforms to house these people. We have to bring our own cooks to feed them because our facilities on some of our platforms do not have enough capacity to handle all these extra people, so we have to bring our own galleys in addition to our own quarters, our own wash houses. So, we had to set up our own little cities on these platforms for our people that are going to be doing the work that we have. And we were not welcome on our platforms because when we came, sand around moving machinery will eat it alive. So, that was special preparation and special caution

for reciprocating compressors, pumps because production has to go on even when we are there. They cannot shut down just to let us do our work. Oil and gas still has to be produced. So, try to do that and try to accommodate us – it is a real problem. It is a logistics nightmare, believe me! But, you know, it has to be done.

JC: When you were a roustabout or a gauger or a foreman, did you have blacks working for you then?

JHW: I sure did. I had some good people, some real good people. And I think probably some of them are probably still working today. Some that live here in Morgan City that I worked with. Some have since retired and moved on. I know one guy that lives now in Dallas, I think. I have one guy here that I think still lives here, a gentleman by the name of Arvester Smith and his wife Ruth, she teaches school. And I think he still lives over in the Bernice Street area somewhere.

JC: Was it a difficult transition? I mean, I imagine some of them were some of the first blacks to be coming out. Was it a difficult transition for the other guys or for them to get used to working?

JHW: Not really. We were all Shell employees. We were all working for a living. You have to do something, you know? So as far as being accepted, that was not a

problem. Everybody worked together and blended together. Whether you were black or white or green or yellow, it did not matter. It really did not matter.

JC: How about women? Did you have any women?

JHW: We had some and females at the beginning were a problem. They were a problem. And the reason they were a problem was being female, having to perform the jobs that they were hired to do, they just were not physically able to do them in a lot of cases as far as lifting, carrying, the things that you require to manhandle, as it were. The physical makeup of the females were not such, so at the beginning, a lot of the males were picking up some of the slack, if you follow what I am talking about. If two men could do a job and a man and a female were sent to do the job, a lot of times, that third male would go to help because the female, if it was lifting and picking and moving or pushing, just flat could not do it. That went along for a while but then, the males began to realize she is making X number of dollars an hour, I am making X number of dollars an hour, if she cannot do it, she should not be here. So, she is going to either have to carry her load or move on. And that was not cruel or unusual punishment, you know, that was the reality of the job. You wanted this job, you got this job, you are getting paid for this job, now do this job. And that was a little rough for some of the folks because some of them quit. They realized they could not do it and you

cannot ask . . . if you are getting paid a wage to do something and the same wage is somebody else and they are asked to do something and they do it, you ask to do it, you cannot. It is really when you look at it, it is not fair. It is really not fair. So, that was a problem.

JC: How about on your sandblasting and painting crews? Did you have women?

JHW: We had blacks. We had no women, no. We did not have the facilities. Obviously, when you have to bring portable buildings out there and portable showers, and we do not have the room on these platforms for separate facilities for females and males, the production platforms, yes, they had some females. They still do. But they have facilities for the females. But our operation, we did not have that luxury. We did not have the room because in order to double the facilities for male and female, you do not have the room for that, you just do not. So, logistically, you cannot do it.

JC: Did you ever have any that tried to come out and work out there?

JHW: No, I cannot say that we did. Not with that type of work. If you had a chance on occasion in your travels to see the work they were doing on our water tower out here, and you see that air tugger that they ride up and down in, this was a sample .

. . now, take that and you bring that offshore 100 miles. That is essentially what you are looking at but offshore. No, we never did have any applications that I knew of. Now, we did not hire these people, we hired the crew. We hired the company. ABC Sandblasting. ABC, whether or not they turned down any females or what, I do not have any idea. But we hired the sandblasting company and we used the employees that they have now, but I never had any females, no.

JC: When you were working for Shell, did you find it was pretty easy to move up when you held a lot of different positions with them? Was it pretty easy? If you worked hard . . .

JHW: If you worked hard and you applied yourself . . . the oil field is not an eight-hour a day job. It is 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Whether you are there or not, oil and gas is produced out of the ground. It does not stop when five o'clock comes. It continues to flow 24 hours a day. Somebody has to be responsible and on the job 24 hours a day. When you are learning and when you want that next step up and when you want to advance, you have to walk that extra mile. A lot of time is spent working when you could be spending it with your family and what have you. So, there are some sacrifices that have to be made. Whether or not those sacrifices pay off down the road, it depends. As I moved up and I took on more and more responsibility, of course, I had people doing the jobs that I used to do

but if you have good quality people doing those jobs, you can rest easier. But if you have people doing those jobs that are just really not what you would really like, then you have to do some of the worrying. I should be home relaxing and enjoying . . . and that thought is in the back of your mind, you know, and you may have to make a phone call or two, or they may have to call you, but that goes with the territory.

JC: Back when you were maybe a roustabout or something, do you remember workers being in competition, you know, lifting the heaviest pipe?

JHW: No, it was not competition, it was just work. We did not have weight lifting contests, if that is what . . . no, we did not do that! If you did not have to do it, you did not do it. It was not recreation. A recreation, you sit down or lay down someplace and take a break while you can because heaven knows what is going to happen next.

JC: Most of the guys that you worked with in the earlier days were they from around Texas, Louisiana?

JHW: Are you talking about West Lake Verret?

JC: West Lake Verret . . .

JHW: West Lake Verret, they were all, I guess you could say local boys. Guys that went to school together, knew each other all their lives – they all went to work at West Lake Verret. They were born here, raised here, worked her, retired here, and many, many of them that I know today are still here. Some live in Bayou Vista. Some live in Morgan City . . . but that I worked with and they worked under me, they are still here. Still alive, thank goodness, and doing well. Retired now.

JC: Were many of them, and you were an exception because you went to college . . . I did not ask you, did you get a degree? Did you finish?

JHW: No, I went three years and I got married my freshman year. I was working. I was going to school at LSU. I was working part-time at the Shell office on Government Street and I was working for Hopper's Drive-In in Baton Rouge at night. And you talk about burning the candle at both ends. So, I had three jobs really, in addition to being a husband. Now, my wife was working, too. She was working in Baton Rouge but a wife . . . no family yet, thank goodness, when we were in Baton Rouge, but just the economics of a house and that responsibility, it got to be a little bit much for a college student, so I went three years, I did not

finish, and then I decided, well, I have had enough. I need to go to work, so that is what I did.

JC: What was your training?

JHW: Petroleum engineering.

JC: And most of the guys that you worked with before you were doing that, were they people who had been in the service like you and come back?

JHW: My recollection is most of the folks that I worked with in this area, local people from this area, they were the National Guard, and the local National Guard was the old 256 Infantry, which is where Courtesy Ford is today, that is where the old armory used to be. Right there. So, that was where the old National Guard armory used to be. And it was the 256th Infantry, the ones that just left to go to Iraq here in the last week or two. That was the old National Guard unit here in Morgan City. So, a lot of those guys, they joined the National Guard, did their military obligation in the National Guard because the draft was active in those days, which I am very well familiar with. So, that is how they did the military service.

JC: And then they came out . . .

JHW: They were National Guard which is what they called weekend warriors. You drilled one weekend a month, and you went to meetings I think once a week, one night a week, something like that, one weekend a month. And then you had regular jobs. You did your regular thing the rest of the time.

JC: And they could work for the oil companies . . .

JHW: Oh, sure. It was one night a week, meeting at the armory, and you drilled one weekend a month. And generally, if you had a five and two job or you could generally work a schedule around your weekend drill. So that worked out fine.

JC: I know you are too young for this but maybe you have heard of Lease 340? Do you remember hearing about Lease 340?

JHW: Lease 340?

JC: The dispute between federal and state waters, the three mile . . .

JHW: Three mile limit? Well, the allowable business that we just talked about earlier,

that is where that came into play. You see, state waters, you have an allowable. You can only produce so much. Depending on the depth of the well, that determined how much you could produce from that well. In federal waters, there is no allowable. Just whatever the well will produce, you can produce.

JC: In the early days, the Huey Long days . . .

JHW: Seesawing back and forth, right, between the three mile and the ten mile, depending on which side you were on. Yes. I am not that familiar with it but I have heard some talk about that.

JC: Did you ever hear of the Win or Lose Corporation?

JHW: No.

JC: Huey Long was kind of involved with W.T. Burton and this Win or Lose Corporation. Also, another question is do you remember Texaco getting a lot of state leases or getting a lot of state work?

JHW: Yes. We have the family, the Written family, has a lawsuit against Texaco today that we have had against them for ages because they drilled and cut a lot of canals

on the Written estate which is a huge 2,500 acres south of the intercoastal canal that my great-grandfather that came from Germany, that he bought for twenty-five cents an acre. And that is all . . . if you go back there today, you will see these little white signs that it is posted the Written estate. Texaco now, they did a lot of things back in the old days that they really should not have done. They dug a lot of wells on land that they did not have authority to drill on. The Bateman Corporation. You hear of the Bateman Corporation? The Bateman Corporate leased land to Texaco that the Bateman Corporation did not have the right to lease because it was Written property. And that has created a lot of the lawsuit years today. But this goes back ages and ages and ages. So, what you said about Texaco, I know a little bit about Texaco!

With our situation, with the Written family, there was a location out there that Texaco had a drilling rig on, drilled a hole, had a barge load of pipe in Morgan City on its way out to that location so that the well could be cased and the wellhead installed and production begun. One of my great uncles happened to go by there and look at that and he looked at that location and just in his mind, he thought, that should not be there because nobody has got any permission to be there. So, he went to Texaco and he told them that he thought they were on the wrong location, that that pole should not be there, that he did not know of any permission which had been given for them to be there. That location is still there

today. Texaco stopped that barge from going out there and they left. And, as a result of that, my great uncle, the family, contacted a lawyer to have him look into that and see what . . . Texaco offered the family one million dollars. This has been several years ago to drop the law suit and they would not do it. Judge McNulty in Franklin. Have you heard of McNulty? He is the lawyer. He is the one that has got the case and this will probably go on for the next 100 generations. And McNulty, what he did . . . the family; again, my grandfather, my great-grandfather moving down there did not educate any of his kids. McNulty took the case for half. So, half of what the Written estate used to be now belongs to him. So, he took it for half and my dad, who I think went to the third grade, they all agreed. And so, it is in court, has been in court, will be in court forever, probably. But there is a lawsuit against Texaco for that same reason.

JC: And this is land near the intercostals canal, right?

JHW: Oh, yes, and they cut locations that they did not have permission to cut, they drilled wells they did not have permission to drill on our property. So, all the royalties and everything over the years that should have gone to the family . . . Now from time to time, companies will come through. The last one to lease the land was Chevron. Chevron leased it to do some exploratory work on it, you know. There is gas and oil on it but it is very deep. And so, whether that will

ever be developed, I do not know. But it is still out there. It is still in court. Will be there forever.

But a lot of chicanery went on over the years, with not only my family but with other families, too. I had an uncle, another uncle on the farm a little bit. We used to own the land all the way from the Berwick Bridge all the way over to the Berwick side, all the way down the Berwick side and around the point. We owned that at one time. My uncle gave that to Russo's grocery market for a grocery bill. He signed that all over to them for a grocery bill. They called him Uncle Toopte. He owed the grocery bill which probably was not but a few hundred dollars, if that much. And he signed it over to the Russos for a grocery bill. So, that is just some of the old stories, you know, that go back years and years and years. And that is not only our family, but God, there is no telling how many others have just been taken to the cleaners.

Today, I retired with a little over 30 years of service and I have still got all of my fingers and all of my toes. And if you look at a lot of old oil field hands, people that have worked in the oil field back in the old days, you look and they do not have all of their fingers and all their toes, particularly the people who worked on drilling rigs. The people who worked on drilling rigs, fingers and toes and hands and feet, they were just a commodity that you had to learn to live without because

you were not going to keep them too long, because that was truly highly . . . not so much today but back then, that was truly highly dangerous work. And, like I said, if you look at the old oil field people that worked on drilling rigs, you look at them. They do not have all their fingers and all of their toes. And that is why, because it was very dangerous work. Very dangerous.

JC: I know I have kind of jumped around a little bit but is there anything that you wanted to talk about that I might have missed?

JHW: I think we have pretty well touched on it all.

JC: You mentioned that there were some other people in town that you knew of that had worked in the oil field. Would you mind telling me some of their names? Maybe I could talk to them.

JHW: Conrad Beetle. Merrick Lesilal, he is right around the corner over here. Bill LeBlanc. Bill Alford. They all worked at West Lake Verret. Smitty, Alvester Smith, worked at West Lake Verret. A lot of them are dead. A lot of them no longer live in this area. Larry Tophan is down the street on Mars Road. Let's see, who else? That is all I can think of right off the top. One-half dozen or so.

JC: O.K. You were saying that guys that worked on a crew together, they had to work like brothers.

JHW: They had to be brothers of the blood because, I mean, you have to know the guy that you are working with. I have known people who were working on a rig and one member of the crew did now show up, for one reason or another, and they brought a new man in – they would not work with him. They would no work with him because the work that they were doing is so highly coordinated and so dangerous that if you get one guy out of the crew that is out of sync, he could cripple or kill somebody. Maybe more than one or two. So, everybody there . . . when you went to work on a drilling rig into a crew, you tended to stay with that crew, even if one of them quit, you all will quit and went to work at another rig. You did not change crews because it was too dangerous. The work was just too dangerous and too life threatening to change like that because the safeguards were not there that they have today. The equipment that they have today was not there then. And it was just pretty much up to the individual. You take care of yourself. You know, this is the job you have to do, now get it done the best way you know how. And if you did not have a coordinated crew to get it done, you had a problem.

JC: And you mentioned that maybe a guy might talk to another guy's girlfriend too

much on their offtime.

JHW: On their offtime. I have seen that happen, where guys are good, good friends and they go out and they are having a good time and one makes maybe an off color remark that maybe he should not have made to somebody else in the party, the guy's girlfriend or the guy's wife or something, and it is taken to heart, more or less. And the next day at work, the guy says, 'For what you said last night' . . . he does not say that but it is the nonwritten thing that, you know, for what you said last night, I am going to show you. And the practical joke gets out of hand too much and people lose fingers, lose hands, lose toes as a result of that because what meant to be a practical joke turned out to be very serious indeed.

JC: You were saying that when you worked for Shell, it was like family and they took care of you. You said, they took care of your whole family.

JHW: Yes. Shell . . . I have nothing bad to say about them whatsoever. They took care of my dad and my mother. They raised me. And they raised my family. And so, Shell is all I have ever known. I guess I can say Shell is the only job I have ever had. I was working for Shell when I was born and I worked with them through my dad's career, and he retired with 30 years of service. And I retire with a little over 30 years of service myself. So, Shell has been my whole life.

THE END