MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Jim Giblin

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Jim Giblin, a native of Virginia, lives in Friendswood, TX. He spent more than 40 years in the maritime industry. He joined the Merchant Marine in 1942 and served on tankers and Liberty Ships during the war delivering oil and supplies to the Caribbean, Mediterranean, and the Pacific. His ship, the *Stephen F. Austin*, was torpedoed off the coast of North Africa in 1943. After the war, he took a job with Ogden Marine on tankers out of the Port of Houston. He made his way to captain and eventually became the company's port captain, overseeing the daily tanker operations. After his first retirement, EXXON hired him to be a pollution and safety inspector for their tank handling operations.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an interview with Jim Giblin on June 30th, 2006, by Jason Theriot. This is Jim Giblin, tape one, on the Port of Houston.

All right, let it roll. Tell me about where you're from and how you got involved in the Merchant Marine.

JG: I'm from the Midwest, raised in Indiana, and went to school up there. When I graduated from high school I had an opportunity to go to university in Indiana. It was Valparaiso University. I was eighteen and the war had just started, and I was subject to being drafted. After a semester and a little more time at this university I was close to being drafted, so a friend of mine suggested that we join the

Merchant Marine. He had heard about it and said he thought it would be a better service to get into, rather than the army or the navy at that time.

So we did join, and that was in late 1942. In fact, it was in December that we were accepted into the Merchant Marine, but we had to go to a school in New York, Sheepshead Bay. We did, and I lost track of him up there at the school, because he joined the engine department and I was in the deck department. But at any rate we left that school, at least I did, in May of '43, and in order to ship out faster they put me on a ship down in Houston. They said it was a tanker, and if I would go as a messman I could get a job right away, so I did.

Several of us went. We traveled by train from New York all the way to Houston to get on this coast-wise tanker. It was a Gulf Oil tanker called the *Gulfport*. The ship was loading gasoline, two grades of gasoline, I recall, and we sailed. This was the first time I'd ever been on a ship, and we sailed from Houston to New York in a small convoy that went along the coast, and I believe we anchored a couple of times before we actually got around to Florida, the straits of Florida, where we went north up to New York.

As I recall, we had no submarine scares during that trip. If there were, you know, I didn't remember it. But we got to New York safely and got rid of the cargo.

JT: This was what, fall of '42?

JG: No, no, '43. Yes, this was in the spring of '43.

JT: And there were a few U-boats still around.

JG: Yes, but the U-boats were getting further offshore, and there were fewer of them in '43 than there had been.

JT: Plus the armed convoys—

JG: Yes, that's true. We started having some escorts. But I don't recall too much of that on that coast-wise trip, about escorts. But after New York we sailed to the West Indies, to Aruba, and loaded cargo, more gasoline for South America.

JT: Had you ever been out of Indiana before the war?

JG: Yes, I had, yes. As a matter of fact, my father was a construction electrician and he had been down in Alabama, and I'd gone to school for a while in Alabama with my brothers and sisters, but then back to Indiana and farther away from ships. I'd never seen a big ship before.

JT: You were quite a young fellow to experience quite an adventure from New York to Houston by train.

JG: That's right.

JT: And by Houston to New York by ship. That's quite a ride for a young man in wartime.

JG: Yes. It was an adventure; you know young people. It's just the same nowadays with people. They just take these—at least most of them do—take it as an adventure. But I sailed on this ship for six months, this *Gulfport*, and we did have submarine scares going up and down the coast of Brazil, made every port in Brazil that could take a ship, all the way down to Rio, and a couple of trips into the Panama Canal. But eventually, of course, I got off that ship and got on a freighter, a liberty ship after that.

JT: What was your impression of the Port of Houston when you arrived in ’43?

JG: Well, I went straight from the train. Someone picked us up and took us directly to the ship, and it was at the Sinclair docks in Pasadena, so I never seen anything of the port, except I know there were ships all over the place. They were coming and going and that. [laughs] And, of course, I read later how the Brown Shipyard in Houston constructed many of these destroyer escort ships, small ships about 230 or [2]40 feet long during the war, and some liberty ships, too, in another shipyard here in Houston. But at that time when I first joined the tanker, I didn’t see any of the port.

But the next ship I got came right into the Port of Houston. It was a cargo ship, so I experienced going up and down the Houston Ship Channel, and the loading of general cargo down at the old Long Reach docks here in Houston, and the fact that there was easy transportation from the docks uptown by bus, and the sailors could get off the ship and go to town. I remember there were streetcars up in Houston that would take you to different parts of the city, but, of course, a lot of that went away later on. But Houston was one busy port back when I first came in here in 1943.

JT: Big difference from small-town Indiana?

JG: Oh yes, oh yes, wartime, you know, and busy. Everybody was working back in those days, it seemed like. I don’t recall seeing or hearing about too many people looking for work. Of course when you’re eighteen years old, or nineteen or something, you’re more interested in what you’re doing, and having fun, and thing and another. [laughs]

JT: Well, I'd imagine if oil was such a high commodity for the war, plus other goods that were coming through the port, I can only imagine how bustling of an excitement, and there was a lot of energy coming through that channel at the time.

JG: That's true, it's true. Later on, of course, I've done some inquiries on the computer, searching about facts, and then I've witnessed other things, too, in my working here in the Port of Houston. But Houston shipped out a lot of coal and iron and cotton, iron ore and cotton back there in those days, too, and I've been on ships that loaded coal out of here. I think that was later on in the fifties. Used to be we used to ship a lot of coal out of here, but I don't know if that's still true or not.

JT: Yes, particularly if by '43 we weren't particularly winning the war, so to speak. I mean, it was still nip and tuck at the time.

JG: Yes, it was, both in the Pacific and the European theaters.

JT: Did you get a sense of that, it was a little bit of nervousness, maybe apprehension?

JG: Well, not particularly. You know, when you're at sea you're away from newspapers, and you know the war is continuing, but you don't know exactly how it's going, and I stayed on ships pretty continuously. And the radio operators weren't allowed to send any messages. They could receive stuff, but it was difficult to get any current news, because we're talking about a time that information was kind of difficult to get, especially wartime.

But the liberty ship I was on took a cargo of mixed general cargo and some commercial cargo, like iron ingots and lampblack I know was one of the cargos in that ship, because I was involved in helping to re-stow some of that stuff during

rough weather. But we carried that to Liverpool, and you could see that from the number of ships going into these foreign ports like England, that they were really helping the war effort out by delivering all this cargo.

JT: Was this liberty ship made by Brown?

JG: I don't know. This was the *Stephen F. Austin*, and I've forgotten where that ship was built, although I have a book at home that could tell me where.

JT: Sounds logical that it was built somewhere in Texas.

JG: That's right, the *Stephen F. Austin*, yes. But there were so many liberties, and how they named them—of course they named them after famous people, but I don't know if a ship was built in California if they'd name it the *Stephen F. Austin* or not.

JT: Well, tell me about April of '44. What happened to you on the *Austin*?

JG: Yes. It was on April the twentieth, and well, we were torpedoed by a German torpedo plane. It was in a convoy with liberties going through the Mediterranean, and we had just passed Algiers after, I don't know, fifteen or seventeen days at sea, and a bunch of us guys were hanging over the side looking at the city there as we went by, and we were wishing, you know, wouldn't it be nice to get ashore there. And long about six o'clock that evening when the sun was going down, the German torpedo planes came in, and we were the last ship in the convoy, and we got a torpedo in the starboard side.

But fortunately, the torpedo didn't hit in the engine room, and the ship—it hit forward of the engine room—and the ship settled down by the bow, because of the hatches flooded, and we took to the lifeboats and we all got off, the merchant

sailors and the armed-guard gun group. But then the captain saw that the ship wasn't going down any further, so he ordered the chief mate and a couple of sailors to go aboard the ship and check and see if the water had stopped infiltrating the other holds, where the cargo was.

So he did, and the report was that everything was settled down and the ship wasn't sinking any further, so the whole crew went back aboard ship. The ship was in such bad trim, it was so far down by the bow that the propeller was out of the water, so we had to be towed in the next day. We towed into Algiers, and that's where we stayed for a couple of months. [laughs] Most of us got our fill of Algiers, and I know I did.

JT: Interesting French town, isn't it?

JG: Yes, it was back in those days. I was going to add earlier that later on I was told, and I found out by a little research, that April twentieth was Hitler's birthday. I don't know—that has no, much significance in our getting torpedoed. It's probably just another job for these German pilots.

JT: What would be interesting is to figure out where those guys came from, because by April of '44 we had secured much of the Mediterranean.

JG: Well, I think they still had some fields in France, but I'm not sure. You see, we didn't get France occupied until after we invaded in June of '44. Yes, that's right, so they still had people in southern France. And I thought about, Spain was neutral during that time.

JT: That's right, Nazi sympathizers as well.

JG: Yes, and they could have had people flying out of there, too. But yes, that was an interesting experience.

JT: So what was the final outcome of the *Austin*? Whatever happened to that ship?

JG: The *Austin*, I'd left the *Austin*. They finally got it patched up where we could go to Gibraltar, and I don't know why the ship just went to Gibraltar. But we went to Gibraltar in August, I believe, of '44, or July. Let's see. I think it was in July of '44, and someone asked for volunteers to go aboard another ship called the *Matthew Maury*. That was a liberty ship that had been either torpedoed or mined, and it didn't have either a propeller or a rudder, had been blown off. They asked for some volunteers to go with the ship back to the States, to be towed, so I was one of them that volunteered out of the deck department.

So we'd left there, I believe, in the latter part of July, with a tug towing us to Newport News, and that trip took twenty-one days, at an average speed of about five and a half or six knots. So altogether I was on that ship for nine months, from December of '43 till August of '44, I believe, somewhere in that area. So that's how I got back to the States, and kept on sailing.

JT: So what did you do for the rest of the war?

JG: Well, after that experience with getting torpedoed on a liberty ship, I went sailing on tankers, and I sailed tankers. I got ABS endorsement, and then later on I was on a tanker that went out to the Pacific, and I was over in Saipan and Tinian, offloading cargo on barges to the airfield there at Saipan. That's where the B-29s were taken off. Then I was also over in New Guinea, Hollandia, on this same tanker.

I think we either delivered some fuel over there, or just went in there for orders. But at any rate, after that trip I got off of that tanker, and somewhere in between those trips I had made a trip back out into the Pacific in early 1945. This was a troop ship, small troop ship carrying troops to—not actually troops, they were B-29 service-mechanic types—to Iwo Jima. They'd just secured Iwo Jima in either March or April of '45, and there was a lot of action out there, too.

So that's about the last ship that I sailed on before I got a license. After I got off that ship I went to Officers Candidate School and got a license as a third mate or third officer.

JT: What port had you been coming out of on the tankers?

JG: It seems that the ships, the tankers, a lot of the tankers back in those days were loading cargo from Aruba or Curacao in the West Indies. I don't recall exactly why, you know, but that's where this ship I was on loaded when we went out into the Pacific, and stayed out there for a while, running from one place to another. But I know that in between that tanker and the trip I made to the Pacific in '45 I was on a general cargo ship that Lykes Brothers operated, that went to the West Indies, because I recall going around Puerto Rico and Haiti and the Dominican Republic on this particular ship.

JT: Yes, Lykes was very active in the Caribbean.

JG: They were, and they were up until the time that they lost all their subsidies. So my war experience lasted for over two years, I forget exactly how long, but from about May the sixth or seventh up until I went to school in June of '45, and stayed there for three months, and got a license as a third mate. And, of course, I kept sailing. I kept sailing and I got second mate, chief mate, and master's license.

JT: When did you move to Houston?

JG: In 1947. Actually, I didn't move, my family did, and then I moved in with them in '47, right. So I've been here for a long time.

JT: And so what kind of changes had taken place from '43 to '47 with respect to the port. That was post-World War II, a lot of things happened.

JG: Yes, and, of course, then I was in a position to appreciate the fact that the channel was being deepened by the dredging periodically, and the docks were getting upgraded. Private companies were putting a lot more money into their docking facilities and their cargo-handling facilities, as far as—I dealt mostly in tankers after the war.

You could see that there was so much business coming out of the Port of Houston. At that time we were exporting crude oil, you know, and a lot of people didn't know that we had so much crude down here that we used to export a lot of it, yes. Of course, some of the changes that aren't recognized by the general public is the fact that the Houston Ship Channel at one time, maybe the thing—twenty years ago—was so polluted that nothing could live in it.

JT: Is that right?

JG: Oh yes, absolutely nothing. The ships were at fault, both tankers and the dry-cargo ships were at fault, in the fact that they would discharge dirty ballast over the side. We used to hook up hoses to discharge ballast ashore, but we would also run it out, the sea suction, in the bottom of the ship, in order to get it over with faster. We tried to keep the dirtiest part of the ballast in a tank where we would sent that ashore, but some of the oil got into the channel, and it was common

practice for the human waste to be just discharged in the channel all the time. It was open. Nobody complained about it at all. They were just accustomed.

JT: And there were probably no restrictions.

JG: No, absolutely no regulations, Coast Guard regulations up until I don't know what year it was, but I was sailing and it was probably in the sixties they came out with the orders that every ship had to have their own facilities to chemically treat sewage onboard the ship, and that helped out tremendously, I believe.

At that time the Coast Guard was getting into—put more restrictions on the ships and the shore facilities. If it is the Coast Guard, it's the environmental, EPA that was getting on the refineries, because they were guilty, too, of pollution, because it was common practice. You know, people treated the channels and the rivers like they were just a place to dispose of everything, and then it would go out to sea, you know, and forget about it.

At one time I recall there were no pelicans in Galveston, around Galveston or the Galveston Bay, because pollution had killed them, because they'd swoop down to get a fish or get something out of the water, and they'd get hold of that polluted water and it'd kill them off.

JT: Probably destroyed the habitat as well.

JG: Yes, it probably did. But of course we all know the pelicans are back now, and it's great. I've seen shrimp and fish swimming alongside ships and along at the dock down at Exxon where I worked for a few years, so it's a good thing. Sometimes people in my profession say that the Coast Guard's got too much authority, you know, that the bureaucracies breed all kinds of bad things for

people that are trying to earn a living going to sea. [laughs] But at any rate, they've done a lot of good.

JT: Who was the company that you worked for after you began sailing?

JG: I worked as a port captain for Ogden Marine, a tanker company out of New York.

JT: In the late forties?

JG: No, no, no, this was after—I sailed up until 1978.

JT: With the Merchant Marine?

JG: Oh yes. I was captain on the *Mt. Washington*, a 50,000-ton tanker when I retired and I got a port captain's job.

JT: So you had thirty-plus years in the Merchant Marine?

JG: Oh yes, sailing.

JT: That's outstanding.

JG: Yes, that's right.

JT: In and out of Port of Houston?

JG: Well, not always, because I've been on tankers that carried grain to Russia twice, and, of course, we loaded grain, on one trip we loaded in Houston, and another trip in Galveston. Grain shipments have always been big out of Houston, and they were in a predicament to get grain to Russia, so they put it on tankers. A

tanker is a very good type of vehicle to transport grain in. It's a little bit more difficult to get it out over there. They use a suction system, like big vacuum cleaners to get the grain out, but it goes pretty fast. So not only did we ship oil and chemicals out of Houston, but we'd ship a lot of grain in all types of ships. Now they use mostly bulk carriers.

JT: You mentioned Galveston. Now, Galveston has always been behind the curve when it comes to the Houston Ship Channel and the Port of Houston.

JG: Right.

JT: Why do you think that is? Why is that the case, that Galveston was always running—

JG: Well, I believe that Galveston being and island, logistics were against it because you need a large transportation hub, I believe, for a big port. You've got to have rail and you've got to have a highway system, and to get to Galveston, of course, you know, it's difficult. You have to go across a bridge or a causeway to get in there, although Galveston did a big business for years in cotton. They had tremendous cotton warehouses down there. And right now they still ship some grain out of there, and sulphur, and some containerize.

But Houston and the area around Houston has the infrastructure to get cargos moving, both in containers, and, of course, all the big refineries were built down in Houston. Humble Oil, which is Exxon now, started up in I think it was 1919, or early in the 1900s. And natural gas pipelines run into the Houston area, feeding those, and crude, too, feeding those refineries, where it'd be a lot more difficult to get it into Galveston. But I think Galveston has found its niche in shipping now with the cruise lines.

JT: In 1947 Kerr McGee sets up its first offshore platform in the Gulf of Mexico. In '47, what kind of impact did this offshore oil industry bring to the ship channels in the Houston area?

JG: Well, I can tell you this, that I was on a coast-wise tanker in the early fifties, and again in the sixties, and those offshore drilling rigs were good navigation aids for us guys on ships with our radar. The rigs first started up at Ship Shoal on the Louisiana coast, where there were many of them, and then they progressively fanned out into all directions in the gulf.

But we used to see so many of these rig-tending boats coming and going into the port, carrying supplies out to the rigs, and people, and drilling mud and pipe and that sort of thing. It was a big business in Houston and in Louisiana. And of course the oil coming in, in the pipelines, that really helped out in the country's need for oil.

JT: Now, how about this. What do you know about the establishment of the petrochemical industry down the ship channel? Why was Houston chosen for this type of industry?

JG: Well, I believe that it all reverts to natural gas again, and crude, too. But it seems that the byproducts from natural gas are predominant in this business, although I'm not an expert on refining. But I've been around the Exxon chemical docks there for quite a few years when I retired from my active seagoing job, and they have the expertise to make any chemical that's necessary, and in large quantities. But I think it's all due to the big refining capacity that these, like Atlantic Richfield and Exxon and Phillips Petroleum, they all contribute to this chemical business. So I'm convinced that that's here to stay, too, that they make a lot of money for the Port of Houston and these refineries.

JT: Tell me about containerization and how that has transformed the port.

JG: Well, it's interesting that I was around when these containers first started to come into their own, and I made a note here that it was in May of 1956 that a tanker called the *Ideal X*, a T-2 tanker, brought in the first containers that were put on top of this tanker deck that was reinforced to carry containers from New Jersey, and this ship's name was the *Ideal X*.

I had an occasion when I was on vacation, I would load ships down here in the Port of Houston, and I remember being on top of these containers down at the city docks where they were hoisting them on, or off, or taking some off and putting some on, and that was probably in '57 or so, '56 or '57. But we would load the ships with cargo, oil, at the Hess dock to a certain draft, and then ship down to the city docks to put the containers on them. And that was, you know, to us tanker guys, we wondered if it was worth the trouble to not fill the tanks up and pick up these boxes down there.

But this man, Malcolm McLean, who owned a trucking company, he had the right idea about this containerization. And the reason he started out was, see, he had a trucking company, but it would cost a lot of money to send trucks down to Houston, you know, if he wanted to, and then bring them back up east, so he thought taking them down by ship and bringing them back, and then put the containers right on the truck, that it would save him money, and he was right.

There was something else about that. That *Ideal X* later was transformed into a cement carrier, and that was another project that I was night mate, or loading mate, or discharging mate on that cement ship one time or two.

JT: So were you in the port when the *S.S. Amoco* caught fire?

JG: Yes, I was, yes.

JT: Did you see it?

JG: I was on vacation from my seagoing job?

JT: What was the explosion? What caused the accident?

JG: The ship was loading gasoline from two barges that were in the channel on the starboard side of the ship. The barges were discharging gasoline into the tanker through a hose, and for some reason gasoline got in the water, either from the hoses leaking or a spill someplace that no one—I don't believe anyone admitted to that. But there was gasoline in the water and the people knew it. The people on the barge knew there was gasoline in the water, because they could smell the vapors, and they notified the ship that there was gasoline in the water.

But the barge people kept pumping the barges, and it seems the Coast Guard says that the fire resulted from a barge loaded with gravel or shell coming up the channel with open navigation lights—when they say open they mean a lantern with a flame they used as a steering light on the barge for the tugboat guys—ignited the vapors, and this spread, of course, to the ship and the barge, and as a result the tanker caught fire and blew two of the holds that I saw on the ship.

Number five and six tanks were blown up and the whole ship caught fire, and several people, including the captain, lost their lives in this fire, and the result of the explosion and the subsequent efforts by the fire department. One fireman slipped into one of the tanks from the foam-covered deck, and he drowned in gasoline, lost his life. So from that terrible tragedy the Coast Guard put out new regulations that specified that barges could no longer discharge into ships from the channel side, and that stopped a lot of problems with oil pollution and

subsequent, maybe more loss of life. But that's one episode that really changed the way they did business on the channel.

JT: There were a lot of technological improvements that helped out with safety on the channel; two-way radio.

JG: Yes.

JT: Mention some of the other technological improvements that you can recall in the forties, fifties, and sixties, that really made maritime travel through the port safer.

JG: Well, I believe, of course with the advent of the two-way radio thing it really helped out. It gave instantaneous communications from the ship to the shore when you were docking or maneuvering, and pilots to tugboats. They were very important.

Of course, radar helped a lot as far as being able to see what's going on in the channel in low visibility, and then this Coast Guard vessel traffic control came into effect in the late sixties or early seventies, and that helped out tremendously. They have radar stations stationed along the ship channel where they can view the traffic and see not only ships but barges, tugs and barges, too, and they can be advised, or advise the ships of problems they might encounter, and that's helped out tremendously.

JT: Captain Murray mentioned something called Texas chicken?

JG: Oh yes, the passing situation, yes.

JT: And I guess you would agree that by widening, it seemed that that's a way to provide for a safe—

JG: Oh yes, for a safe—yes, of course, the pilots had been doing that system of passing one another by changing course just before you'd meet traffic, and then swinging the stern back in towards the bank, you know, in order to make sure that you're going to pass another ship safely.

And some channels, and Houston, too, have restricted—I don't know if it's still that way since they widened the channel, but prior to widening it, a deep-loaded ship, tankers mostly, could be some bulkers, too, but mostly tankers—if a deep-loaded ship was leaving, say, Exxon in Bay Town, they would restrict the ships from entering the channel until this deep-loaded ship got out of the channel. So that helped out.

And other ports have been doing that for a long time, and then Port Arthur is one of them. The pilots had control of the movement of the ships, so if a deep-laden ship was coming in, nobody could go out until he got to his dock. But with the widening of the Houston Ship Channel I imagine the traffic moves a lot better and safer.

JT: Let's talk about your friends the pilots. What's your experience with the pilots? What are your thoughts on these guys?

JG: I've always had good—of course, ship masters and officers, deck officers appreciate the fact that there's someone with extensive knowledge of the local area that you're taking your ship into.

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is Jim Giblin, tape two, on June 30th, 2006, oral history interview by Jason Theriot. This is Jim Giblin on the Port of Houston.

JG: They all know the problems that the ships' masters, captains have, and they appreciate the fact that, you know, you're bringing your ship in there, and offer them a safe way to get aboard out there at the sea buoy, and take care of them, and they do an excellent job. But I'm not going to go any further than that. [laughter]

JT: I'll save the more controversial questions for the pilots themselves.

JG: Yes, right. [laughs]

JT: I've heard that that profession has come a long way from the old days of pulling all nighters.

JG: Oh yes. You know, I could tell you all kinds of stories, because I was in and out of here on the Coast Guard ships and I knew all the pilots, and I knew that there were some of them that had just come from partying, you know, and you've got to watch them, because ultimately it's the captain's responsibility when something happens to a ship when there's a pilot aboard, because he's just there to offer recommendations and his expertise as to what's going on, but it's the ship's captain that's responsible.

JT: What role does the Coast Guard play in providing safe travel?

JG: Well, mostly nowadays as far as ports go, it's the special traffic control that they operate. The captain of the port is the head of that, and they offer a good service, a great service in letting the ships and tugs know where each other are, and if there's something going on in the channel, a dredge or something broke down, a ship broke down, they immediately let the ship traffic know about it.

And aids to navigation come loose, you know, or after storms it's very important to have someone in charge of directing traffic, so to speak, because a lot of the aids to navigation, buoys and other aids, get blown away, or sometimes barges hit them. Tugs and barges knock over different navigation aids. So the Coast Guard does a good job in that respect.

JT: Well, before we get into your career with Exxon, let me ask you a couple more questions about your maritime experience. Describe for me a typical day in your life as a master, running an oil tanker. How does the oil get put into the ship, and just describe to me that whole process.

JG: Well, loading ships, tankers nowadays, you either go alongside a dock and you load with hoses, generally twelve, fourteen inches in diameter and some larger, or the newer method is with the chick's end, which is an iron pipe that stretches from the dock to the ship. It's in the form of an inverted V, and this is the system that's used on most of the docks that handle large quantities of crude oil, where volume and pumping pressure is extreme.

So the steel pipe is chick's end, they refer to them as, is the way to do it, because a lot of people don't realize that these rubber hoses have a life expectancy of so many hours of high-pressure crude oil or other oil going through them, and the lining can be eaten up and disintegrated. I've seen it go right into ships and clog up the ship's cargo lines and their suction valves. So anyway, the steel chick's end pipes is the way they load most of them.

The present-day tankers have a closed-loading system. That is, the vapors are captured and not allowed to get into the air, whereas the old ships you used to leave your tanks' tops open and look at the cargo as it came up in the tank, and then when the tank got full, wherever you wanted it, you'd shut the valve.

Nowadays all the tanks are closed, and the cargo is loaded and discharged from a main console pumping room that is handled by the chief officer on the ship, and through hydraulic opening and closing valves he can load the ship or discharge it, start pumps, stop pumps, all from this cargo console room, with gauges showing everything, pressure and vacuum on pumps if you're discharging. It's a whole new, different system than it was twenty years ago, or maybe even, yes, say twenty years ago.

It's a very involved type of a procedure, especially when you're discharging ships nowadays, because the ships are so big, the tonnage on the average crude ship coming into Exxon there's about 150,000 tons, carrying 6[00,000], 700,000 barrels of crude. These ships have to be discharged and load water ballast at the same time, in order to keep them from breaking, causing structural damage.

I'm talking about these double-skinned ships where they have separate—the ballast tanks are on the outside of the ship, and you've got to be very careful in loading that ballast while you're discharging the ship. Not only do you have to have complete control over the discharging, you have to clean the tanks with the crude-oil washing system, where they pump, they re-pump crude oil from the cargo tanks into the tanks that are being emptied, to wash the residue off the sides and keep all of this whole operation going while you're taking on ballast, too.

It's a real involved type of a discharge, and the ship that I was last master on, we didn't have that. We had the old system where you had a small opening in the cargo tank where you visually observed the oil coming in, and you stopped it with closing a valve manually, not hydraulically like they do nowadays, but manually, and you loaded the ship to a draft that you wanted.

Say the Houston Ship Channel a few years ago, before they deepened it to forty-five feet, was supposed to be a forty-foot channel, and we'd load to thirty-eight,

thirty-nine feet alongside the dock. But nowadays, you know, theoretically they can load to forty-five feet, and that causes larger ships coming in here. I imagine there's 200,000, maybe 250,000-ton ships can get into the Port of Houston.

JT: Now, the idea behind not releasing the fumes, the vapors, is that strictly environmental reasons?

JG: Yes. That's environmental and the Coast Guard now. Some of the crude oil coming in has a high H_2S, with a hydrogen-sulfide content, and that stuff will kill you, you know. If you have an open-loading system, or even with vents that are maybe head high to a person on the ship, they found out that that's not acceptable, so that's where this closed loading comes in. They have a vapor-return line that goes from the ship back ashore on dangerous cargos.

And not only that, but the present-day ships have inert gas systems where they keep the tanks inerted with the flue gas from the stack, from the ship's engine, and that's another safety precaution that has been put into effect in the last twenty years. It's the inert-gas system, keeps down explosions. And cleaning tanks, the tanks have to be, the oxygen content I think has to be down to 1-1/2 or 2 percent, or below that before you can clean tanks, to keep explosions down.

JT: So let's say if the oil that's coming out of the gulf was being piped into a refinery, and if your oil tanker is going to take on raw crude, it would be put through this V-system and you would send it wherever else, or if it would be refined you're also taking it that way.

JG: Yes, taking refined oil up. There's so much oil being transported by the pipeline nowadays. Back when I was active there was a season during the year where we would carry heating oil to New York from the gulf, because they were going to need it, and I mean thousands of barrels and thousands of tons of heating oil

would go from the Gulf up to New York, put it in storage tanks, getting ready for the winter.

But nowadays, pipelines have taken a lot of that business, and you know, I don't know how much, because I'm not really involved in it, but I know it's a considerable amount of oil. And then there's foreign tankers come in, too, with refined products.

JT: Is piping the fuel, is that a more efficient operation? Is it more environmentally—

JG: Yes, it is. It would be, yes, it definitely is. Now, offshore, Mississippi River offshore loading system, they call it the LOOP, Louisiana Offshore Loading, I've been down there. They pump thousands of tons of crude ashore via pipeline every day. There's a big ship down there continuously, and when I say big ship I mean 250[000] and 300,000-tonners sometimes.

JT: And that's crude that's coming from the Gulf?

JG: No, no, it's coming from the Persian Gulf.

JT: So it's being imported in as the ships pass.

JG: Yes, right. Pipe it up to tank farms there in Louisiana, over on the west side of the river. I can't think of the name of it, but it's a big terminal south of Baton Rouge about twenty miles, very large crude oil, and it all comes by pipeline from tankers that offload into it.

JT: Today, is the oil that's coming into the ship channel in Houston, is most of it coming from the Gulf, or is most of it coming from the Persian Gulf?

JG: Most of it's coming from the Persian Gulf, and Venezuela, and other—Nigeria. But the big quantities still come from the Persian Gulf.

JT: Is that because it's cheaper, or because we're running out of oil in the Gulf of Mexico?

JG: No, I think it's a necessity. Whether it's cheaper or not, you know, these big companies can't afford to quibble about it, because Baytown uses almost 600,000 barrels a day, and that's one big ship a day that they've got to have to keep the refinery running. So wherever they get it, you know, they have to have it.

JT: Yes, it's like oxygen.

JG: That's right, that's right. In order to breathe or live, yes, you've got to. And, of course, we're just talking about Exxon. We have other refineries, too, that are here on the ship channel that are burning it. Atlantic Richfield is.

JT: So was it in '78 when you finally retired and then took on another job?

JG: Yes. I didn't quit until I was sure I had a port captain's job.

JT: Your family must have been happy.

JG: Well, that's one reason I did it, you're right, yes, because I enjoyed going to sea. But I have no regrets. I had an interesting life, and I continue to have with ships and other interests.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: You were going to say?

JG: No, I didn't get through, answer all these questions on here. You know, you've asked me some, but I can give you this written stuff here, too, in case.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Your career with Exxon. Did they come looking for you, or did you go looking for them?

JG: Well, when I retired for the second time from this port captain's job with Ogden Marine, one of the pollution-safety-control people that I knew well, a retired Coast Guard, was in charge of the—or not maybe in charge, but he had something to do with getting more people, qualified people to do this work, so he asked me to come over and see him one day over in Baytown. I went over there and they kind of talked me into going back to work.

JT: I don't mean to interrupt, but I didn't realize you had worked for Ogden. When did you go to work for Ogden?

JG: That was when I retired from my seagoing career in '78.

JT: That was your first shore job.

JG: That was my first shore job.

JT: What type of company is that, sir?

JG: That's a tanker operator. At the time they had twenty-five or thirty tankers operating, and it was my job to see that they got in and out of port, and solve any problems they had when they were in port. So I did that for about eight years, I

think. Yes, I think I left them in ’86, and from ’78 to ’86, and then I retired. I was Social Security age at that time.

So then I went to work with Exxon as a contractor on pollution safety and tanker expediter-type job, and I stayed there for seven years, I think. I finally retired when I was seventy-two, I quit work.

JT: How safe is the port now?

JG: Well, I know the port is much safer. I couldn’t say 100 percent, but you don’t hear of problems like they used to, with ships running into tugs, and ships running into docks. I have a lot of friends that were pilots, and they’re most all retired now, and I know that they—no one can absolutely claim, unless it might be Captain Murray, that he’s never run into or had a problem on the Houston Ship Channel. [laughs]

Either a ship loses steerage, or the engine stops, or someone makes a wrong move as far as turning the ship’s wheel. But accidents will happen, but I can say that I haven’t heard of or talked with anybody that’s been involved in real tragic accidents here in the last quite a few years, ten, fifteen years.

JT: You spent roughly half a century down there at the port. What are some of the major milestones that you can recall?

JG: Well, I believe that this vessel-traffic control that the Coast Guard has control of, where they know the exact position of every ship and barge, tugboat that’s in the channel, I believe that is one of the main safety advances that’s happened in the last twenty or thirty years on the channel. That and the fact that I believe that there’s more experienced people involved in the work. That is, the Houston pilots

have always had experienced people, because they have a good system of training their pilots.

And the tugboat operators, as competition with rail lines and other means of transportation get greater, they have more and better people that are working for them as sailors and tugboat operators, and I think that's true with the whole seagoing fraternity, the offshore people that supply the rigs out in the gulf, and the shipyards and the workers and the repair people. I think everything is picked up and in much better condition that it was, say, ten years ago.

JT: Is this next generation going to be able to keep pace with the older guys with experience?

JG: Well, it's kind of difficult to say because if the Houston Ship Channel pilots are going to rely on seagoing masters that came up through the ranks and sailed captain on ships to—if they're going to rely on them to keep the pilots going here, it's going to be tough because there aren't that many American flagships left, and that could be a problem. Where are they going to get these experienced people, you know, to pilot the ships in and out of the channel?

Of course, they probably know that and have figured out some way of getting these people, but I don't know if—they can't hire aliens, I don't believe. But anyway, they'll work that out.

JT: How does the Port of Houston rate with environmental standards today?

JG: Well, I really don't know what statistics are, but I would say from the people that I talk to that the port ranks very high, because they're so active in this pollution control with the EPA and the maritime interests, the Port of Houston Authority. It seems that, so to speak, they've cleaned up their act, and everybody is trying.

Got good city government. The city used to be one of the biggest polluters with discharging waste into the ship channel, but that's all be straightened out quite a few years ago.

JT: They've come full circle.

JG: Yes, right. Sometimes the governing bodies are some of the worst polluters, you know. But I think everything is coming—and it's not only Houston, it's these other ports, too, all the big ports. I read recently where Baltimore is—they used to have a bad reputation. Chesapeake Bay used to be polluted, but now it's getting cleaned up or is cleaned up. New York Harbor, too, used to be bad, because of people up the Hudson River polluting the river, and it running down into the New York Harbor.

JT: It seems to me that there's much more of an awareness—

JG: There is more awareness, right, yes.

JT: —of what we've been doing to the gulf and to the port and to the coastline for fifty years, and now it's, you know, if a man can put a semi-submersible in 10,000 foot of water, he can certainly come up with some regulations to have shrimp and trout come swimming back up the channel.

JG: That's exactly right. That reminds me of the new procedures and laws that pertain to dumping refuse in the Gulf of Mexico. It used to be, years ago when I sailed up and down the coast, we would have a lot of garbage in garbage cans on the ship, on the stern of the ship, and as soon as we got out past the sea buoys, maybe a couple of hours after we left the coast, why, we'd tell somebody in the

deck department, "Go dump the garbage over the side now." See, and things like that. That still goes on, but you've got to go further out now.

We used to wash tanks twenty-five miles offshore. You know, that used to be the law. You could go out there and clean tanks, and dump the oil in the water, oil and water. You see, all of that's changed for the better, and so the Gulf of Mexico is cleaner.

JT: Any run-ins with hurricanes?

JG: No, I've never actually. I've been on the border of hurricanes. But I've been in so many wild-sea situations, and wind and sea in the North Atlantic. For four years I ran steady across the North Atlantic from New York and the Philadelphia area over to Holland and France and Germany. And the weather in the North Atlantic on a small ship like a liberty ship, that only has 2500 horsepower on a 10,000-ton ship, is bad.

So us guys that sailed the North Atlantic regular, when people talk about how bad hurricanes are, well, hurricanes are bad, but storms in the North Atlantic, they won't turn you loose sometimes.

JT: You can't pay for that kind of experience, huh?

JG: That's right, yes. That's where they separate the men from the boys, so to speak. [laughs]

JT: You know, I'm not from this area. I've been living in Houston for five or six years, and I've only recently discovered the ship channel, mainly from you guys. But from everything, from the coffee that we drink, from the clothes that we wear, from the plastics that we use, from the cotton and the oil, all of the things that we

consume on an everyday basis, I would imagine a good bit of that comes from the Port of Houston, and probably not many people realize that.

JG: That's absolutely true. I have grandchildren, you know, that my children know about it because I've told them and showed them ships, you know, and been down there, but the younger generation, they don't get close to the channel hardly. It's accessible, but not too accessible, because the channel, the Houston Ship Channel is lined with off-limit businesses, refineries and other businesses that you can't get down there. You used to be able to years ago, but now it's difficult for a school-age child to get real close to the shipping business because of restrictions.

And if you take a tour on the *Sam Houston*, the Port of Houston excursion boat, you can see the ships from the channel side, I mean from the Houston Ship Channel, but you can't see it from the dockside, what's going on down there. It's all off limits, so that's difficult to get through to the kids, to the younger generation what's going on, and a lot of them just wouldn't be interested anyway.

Let's face it, you know. They want these things, but they don't have a big interest in how they got here or what keeps the environment going, the business of transportation. So much transportation down there on the channel, you know. It's refineries making coke, big piles of coke that they ship out, you know, and grain, and oil, of course, and oil coming in, oil going out, and cars, big ships full of cars down there on the city docks, or steel, the whole business.

JT: Well, besides the ships getting bigger and the channel getting wider, and the next generation of pilots and captains and the like, and more exporting of foreign oil, what are some of the other big changes that you see in the next fifty years down at the port?

JG: Oh, I don't know. I think this enlarging the container facilities, and then I've never sailed on container ships, but I know that they have, not problems, but they're fast-turnaround ships and they're coming and going, and there are more of them coming in and hauling out containers. That's going to be the biggest change, I think, in the port.

I think the oil situation's going to remain the same, bringing in oil. Of course, a lot of people don't know that we have very large crude-oil ships out there in close to shore all the time out there in the Gulf, at different places. I've been to all of these off the coast of Louisiana, off the coast of Houston here, and Freeport, and Corpus Christi.

We have transfer stations there where these big ships that can't come into port anchor, and smaller ships, maiden ships of 125[000], 150,000 tons come and take oil off of these big ships and bring them into these ports, Houston, Freeport, Corpus, and passing over here to Louisiana and Port Arthur. You know, that's a big business in itself.

I used to fly out there on helicopters for Exxon and for Phillips Petroleum and drop down on these big ships and then oversee the discharge from the big ship to the smaller ship. The big ship meaning really big, and the smaller ship bigger than what I've ever skippered.

JT: Well, you mentioned something and we'll just cross over to that political line just for a minute and then we'll wrap this up. But you mentioned that there are less and less U.S. flagships flying. Is that going to become worse, meaning less, and is that going to become a future problem?

JG: Well, if there are less it is a problem, I think. It seems they are becoming less and less, and some of the people that are involved, and I mean in shipping companies,

say, "Well, it's a cost item, you know. American sailors, the cost of operating a ship with them is much more than other countries," like Philippines.

We used to have a lot of ships' crews with Philippine sailors, and then we had ships crewed with Indian sailors, because they spoke English, and now some of our ships—I'm talking about American companies that have foreign flagships—they crew them with Russian sailors. And I've been on ships that had multi-nationality crews, which some of them couldn't converse with one another, and that's bad, of course.

But it's not only cheaper labor, it's the regulations. All American ships are bound by Coast Guard regulations, and the foreign ships get out of a lot of that. But they have to comply with the flag port. Say they come into the U.S. into Houston, we have certain regulations for foreign flagships, but they're not as stringent as American flagships, and that causes less of a problem, and taxes.

It's just that the American Merchant Marine as I knew it years ago is disintegrating as far as qualified people go. Pretty soon we may not have enough if we should find ourselves needing them. But then the government has U.S. Army transport ships that have civilian crews, and that's helped out some with American seamen. It might be that's the way to go, you know. Let the government have the ships, and employ the civil service people. You know, the unions wouldn't like this, but it's a problem.

And they keep changing laws, too. They used to have the laws called the Jones Act, where they had to use American flagships on the coast, carrying cargo from one American port to another. But now the foreign flagships get around that by picking up cargo someplace just outside of the limits, maybe Mexico or maybe the Virgin Islands, or the Bahamas. Bahamas are only a few miles off the Florida coast over there, and they've got some big platform and transportation terminals

over there where you can offload cargo and pick up cargo. I've been over there, too, on some foreign flagships.

JT: So, are you enjoying retirement?

JG: Oh yes, I'm enjoying retirement. I have another avocation besides this. Prior to going to sea I played in high school and university bands, so now I've taken up music again.

JT: What's your instrument?

JG: I play trumpet, and I play with three different community bands here in this part of town.

JT: That's great. Some good old big-band music?

JG: Oh yes. Some big-band music, and of course, now it's the Fourth of July coming. We just had a concert last night with the Deerpark Band over in the park there, and that's a lot of Sousa marches and stuff like that, old national-type of music, bring a rousing cheer from the public. And I like it, I really enjoy it. Yes, I got back into it. I hadn't played the trumpet in fifty-five years, and I picked it back up, you know, practiced and got back into it.

JT: When's the last time you've been at sea, or just out in the boat?

JG: I put in a plug for my—I belong to the Merchant Marine World War II Veterans branch out in Long Beach, California, and they have a ship out there, a victory ship that served in the latter part of World War II. It's called the *Lane Victory*, and my wife and I made a trip on that two years ago.

That trip takes you from—it's not Long Beach, but it's right next to it there—Port of Los Angeles. They go out to Catalina Island, and it's an all-day thing. You start out at eight o'clock in the morning and you get back about four o'clock, and it's, to me, you know, it's a real fine experience again. They have food. They give you a continental breakfast-type thing in the morning, and then a nice afternoon lunch, hot food, beer and wine if you want, and they have a flyover of World War II planes. They come and chase the bad guys away, you know. [laughs]

JT: So were you itching to get back at the helm while you were on that?

JG: Well, I went up and talked. I know the captain of that ship, and I went up and talked with him, and here's a guy walking through the wheelhouse with a can of beer. I said, "You shouldn't let people up here with—."

"Oh," he says, "you've got to," he said, "because it's bad publicity or something to run them off."

JT: Yes, you're on guard.

JG: Yes, because they've paid to get on there, see.

JT: Well, listen, Mr. Jim, it's been a real pleasure.

JG: Thank you.

JT: I do really appreciate the time.

JG: Oh, I enjoyed doing it.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 27 October 2006]