

MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Tom Kelly

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Place: Jeanerette, Louisiana

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Keywords: shipbuilding, aluminum crewboats, Shell Oil, Sewart Seacraft

Bio

Tom Kelly (died 2007) is a life-long boat builder. He was vice-president of operations at Seward Seacraft in Morgan City in the early 1970s. He owned and operated his own companies, mostly for boat repair. He is also a commercial fisherman and serves on the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

Kelly grew up in Shell Oil's Black Bayou community and learned at a very young age (5 years old) how to operate and maintain boats through his father, who ran boats for Shell in the marsh. He learned how to weld and repair boats and trailers at Vinton High School. Shell's Black Bayou oil field community (1920s-1940s) was a self contained marsh village located on the southwestern coast of Louisiana, due south of Vinton, LA. The community had roughly 100 people (mostly Cajun) who worked the inland oil fields. Kelly started at Consolidated Shipyard in Orange, TX in the 1950s building barges. After military service, he transferred to Morgan City to run Shell's boat repair yard. In 1966, he was hired as a supervisor for Seward Seacraft, aluminum crewboat builders in Morgan City. He eventually became vice-president of operations. Fred Seward began building boats in the late 1940s. He was contracted by oil companies and boat rental companies to design and build steel-hull crewboats for the offshore industry in the 1950s. In 1960, Alcoa Aluminum manufacturing approached Seward to experiment with aluminum boats. Seward built a number of aluminum crewboats for Tidewater Marine and in 1968 got a huge government contract to build the infamous Swift Boats for the Vietnam War. Later, problems developed with the new technology that caused the boats to break apart. After modifications to the material and design, Seward continued building aluminum crewboats into the early 1970s. When Seward Seacraft closed its doors in 1974, Kelly opened his own business, and then started a boat repair yard next to Gulf Craft, Inc in Patterson. He ran that business until 1992.

Work force/other issues: In the past, even in the early oil industry, fathers taught their sons multiple trades, and how to live off the land; it was teaching survival on all fronts. This began to change when oil field workers began working extended periods offshore and away from home. Today, kids are not encouraged to learn survival skills or to work with their hands because they don't have to. Formal education and college education has replaced learning a trade from your father. This is a problem facing the industry, as many would-be young oil field workers are not getting into the business.

Tape 1, Side A

JT: This is an interview with Mr. Tom Kelly in Jeanerette, Louisiana on February 28, 2007, with Jason Theriot. We're talking about Mr. Kelly's experience in the boatbuilding industry, a career which spans several decades. This is for the University of Houston MMS Ship Fab Project, tape one.

Mr. Tom, just introduce yourself and begin to tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up.

TK: I'm Thomas Edward Kelly, I was born in Orange, Texas, in 1938, and was reared in Cameron, Louisiana, in the area of Shell Oil on this Black Bayou oilfield, which would be approximately due south of Vinton, Louisiana. It was a self-contained-type facility, commune, or whatever you want to call it. Shell provided transportation, when we got old enough, for us to be able to go to school in Texas. They had a gasoline-powered lugger-boat that was used to transport us back and forth to school, which was twenty-eight miles a day.

I remember as a very young kid the outbreak of World War II, when they started drafting the people that were working out there for Shell Oil Company and sent them into the service. Of course, my dad wasn't drafted because he had a vital

position with Shell Oil Company, and he was with the Ground Observer Corps. During our stay out there and growing up, we hunted alligators with my dad, trapped for furs, we fished commercially as well as to eat. We ate what we killed and we killed what we ate. My daddy would build and repair boats, as well as Shell Oil Company where he worked. They had their own railway where they would bring up and do their own repair work, it's a shipyard-type arrangement, and the winch was manually driven by men to haul the boats out.

We have pictures showing a boat on the railway, that boat's name was the *Jesse G*, and it would do in the neighborhood of between fifty and fifty-five miles an hour. That was the main source of fast transportation if somebody was injured or somebody needed to get to the hospital in Orange, Texas, which was the closest doctor. It also shows the men that just through putting the boat up, and it shows the men sitting down in front of it and one standing up, and the next picture will show a couple men standing on the boat and one standing on the dock. Across from that would be the boathouse, and in one of the pictures it shows the boat, which was the *Western Star*, that we went to school on, it was a lugger boat with a gasoline flathead V-8 engine. We just sat around the engine. It has bench seats all around each side of the engine, and we sat on those bench seats to go to Orange, Texas.

Now, the Intracoastal, at that time in the forties because of the war effort, was heavily used by ship traffic. It was a shipping lane because the water depth from Lake Charles to Port Arthur was sufficient where the ships could go out in the Gulf from Port Arthur and stay inside in the Intracoastal, until they got to Port Arthur. In Orange, Texas, where we went to school at and where the Starks family and the Brown and Lutchter family lived, and the Moore family, which my grandmother and my dad worked for, trapped for, lived on their premises on Black Bayou.

My dad and my mother were living in a houseboat and my grandmother lived in a house on the ridge, and we would take and go to Orange, not only to go to school but to do all our shopping, and Orange during the war, you had Weaver Shipyard, which dated back from World War I or pre-World War I, you had Consolidated Shipyard, and you had Levingston Shipyard. We were able to pass by the shipyards each day going to and from school, and we saw quite a number of the LSTs and the landing craft, the larger ones, that were brought in there for repairs, and also that were being built in the time of the war, especially the wooden vessels that were built at Weaver. Weaver was more so a builder of the wooden vessels such as minesweepers, sub chasers, vessels of that type.

My grandmother, and my dad, and my grandmother's brother, not only did they trap in that area, but my grandmother and her brother worked at Weaver Shipyard

in Orange, Texas, in World War I when they were building wooden vessels for the war effort of World War I. She wasn't a janitor; she actually worked just like one of the men in the crew. She didn't take no lip from anybody, and she put on planks and swung the hammers just like the men did.

JT: What was her name?

TK: My grandmother's name was Philomine Moore.

JT: How do you spell her first name?

TK: P H I L O M I N E.

JT: Where was she from?

TK: My grandmother, and her brother, and my dad all were born in the Gateau/Lecompte area. After the war was over, my dad being a young man at that time, right at his pre-teens, they started trapping for the Starks family, on what is now Sabine Wildlife Refuge. They trapped that area, the Black Bayou area. Black Bayou goes all the way to the Sabine Lake area, so they had a vast amount of territory they could trap on, and all the transportation was boat when the weather was bad. Sometimes when the mosses would get dry enough then

they would use a Model-T Ford, and wrap tires with rope through the spokes that would enable them to go from ridge to ridge to get to Vinton by way of Gun Cove, to get to town to buy all the necessities or whatever they needed.

Trips to town—like in our case, we went to school every day, but during the summer months we would go to town maybe two or three times a month at most, sometimes maybe once a month, and that would be for my mother to do the main shopping or for daddy to get lumber if he was doing a boat building job or he was doing a repair. We'd have to go to town to get lumber, and everything had to be transported back out either by barge or by some of the wooden grocery boats, supply boats, that Shell Oil Company had in operation at the time, during that era in the Black Bayou oil field.

Then in 1949 we moved to Vinton, Louisiana, and bought a place in the country, but my daddy continued to build and repair boats. In either '56 or '57, I went to work at Consolidated Shipyard in Orange, Texas, on some dock barges that were built to go down to South America to enable, I think it was copper at that time, to be mined and shipped back to the states. These large barges were built so that they could be pinned together, and they would allow the trains with the boxcars to go out on the barges, on its dock, and then they would take and offload the boxcars into the cargo ships and bring them to whatever port they were coming to in the United States.

JT: Are you a welder?

TK: Yes.

JT: Where did you get your welding training?

TK: My welding training came up, basically, from being around it as a kid, as a child, and then watching the welders with Shell Oil Company. Play was not in our vocabulary, and definitely not in my dad's. He didn't go to school, but he wanted you to have a profession that you could do to make a living to feed your family when you got older. I was taught some by him, some by the fellas he worked with at Shell Oil Company, and then in high school I worked in an ag shop and took care of the ag farm. We built boats in the ag shop and built trailers, boat trailers, horse trailers, whatever had to be built.

JT: So that was at Vinton High School?

TK: Vinton High School.

JT: Let's back up a little bit here, Mr. Tom. I want to ask you a few more questions about your family's past. First of all, how old were you when you started going to school in Orange?

TK: I was five years old. I started running boats and started going to school at the same time.

JT: What do you mean, running boats?

TK: Driving boats by myself.

JT: Is that right? [Looking at photographs.] Tell me a little bit about this boat. We're going to go back to this first picture at the top left corner, of the men pulling up the fast boat and in the background we see what would be the school boat take you guys to Orange. How many kids would ride on that boat everyday?

TK: Fifteen.

JT: And these fifteen kids, give me an overview of maybe their background. Were a lot of them Cajuns, were a lot of them of German ancestry like yourself? Who were these families that lived in that Shell community?

TJ: We had a mixture of Cajuns, I would say 75 percent were Cajuns from the Louisiana/Texas area, say from Houma, Louisiana, as far north as Highway 190 and back down to the Sabine River, across the Sabine River, Beaumont, Port Arthur, Orange, would be the makeup of that 75 percent of the people and their background. That's where they were from, they or their families.

The other 25 percent were people by the name of Jack Larette, who was from Oklahoma. Slim Holloran, who came from Minnesota, he had two children that went to school with us. We had Bill Cloud, who was from the northern states, I don't know what northern state, but he was brought down. You had most of the supervision makeup of the higher supervision were people from either north or northwest Texas or northeast Texas, from the oil fields, or from up-state, that had college degrees. You had the Short family of German descent. You had some Lebanese descent, you had Tanious and they were originally from White Castle, but their family was originally Lebanese. They had two children that went to school with us. You had a Croaker family that moved in, and they were from up the country, and he married a local girl from Orange, so they moved out there. He had two children that went to school with us.

JT: So would you estimate the population of that little Shell community to be less than one hundred people?

TK: Of permanent residence, yes sir, but you had the working class that lived in boardinghouses out there that came and went, and the boarding in the bunkhouse. I would say, all total, you probably, at one time, had about one hundred and twenty-five residents, combined with permanent and temporary due to the housing being out there.

JT: How long did this community sustain? Let's go from its beginning, as Shell starts in the marshes of south Louisiana in the early twenties. Is that right?

TK: Yes, sir.

JT: How long did this little community sustain after World War II in the early fifties?

TK: 1949 they asked all the families to leave. We were the last family to move out, the reason being is because my dad was trapping, and building us a house to move into, it still afforded the ability to be able to trap and hunt. We lived primarily off of wild game, and when I say wild game I'm talking about a reptile, which is your turtle, alligator, your fish, ducks, geese, rabbit's, deer, marsh hens, coots, whatever was edible, that's what you ate.

JT: Your mom must have been a good cook?

TK: Yes, sir. Of course they had one gentlemen out there had some goats, and my daddy would milk the goats for some of the milk, so that would give us goat milk to drink rather than cow's milk.

JT: I take it that a majority of, say, your other home items, your medicines, even your vegetables and some other things, sugar, coffee, a lot of that came from the little store in Orange?

TK: Yes, sir. The rice came from my daddy's family in the Gateau area, the flour and cornmeal would come from the store in Orange. You had Farmer's Mercantile, which was a general merchandise store. You could buy everything there at the time.

JT: That was in Orange?

TK: That was in Orange, Texas.

JT: What about your coffee? Where did your coffee come from?

TK: Beaumont had the Seaport Coffee Company in Beaumont, Texas, so that was handy to get the coffee. Now, at times they used to buy the coffee beans and roast them themselves, and they had the old coffee grinder that you mounted on the

wall, and you had a jar you would screw to the bottom of it. You'd put the beans in it and you'd hand crank it to mill, grind up, the beans to get the coffee. That was done also. The papers for the outhouses, which we had three rooms and a path instead of three rooms and a bath. That was your Sears Roebuck catalog and Montgomery Ward, and whatever else you could find. You didn't have a cabinet full of toilet tissue, neither paper towels.

JT: So your father, and I would assume many other guys who worked for Shell, were oil field workers by day, essentially, and trappers, backwoodsmen, by night. They were able to work both occupations to probably make a decent living?

TK: Yes, sir. It was tremendous that my daddy was able to both trap, and he and I hunt alligators from the time I was a small fella, and what it allowed us to do—because there was no health insurance or anything at that time, all three of my sisters had some type of major medical problems, plus my mother had several major medical operations. Without any insurance at the time, my daddy was able to take and supplement his income, because Shell Oil Company—I'm not knocking Shell, I think highly of Shell Oil Company because they have afforded me the chance to get an education—they didn't pay that much, but they allowed him the ability to be able to trap. He and his mother ran hogs.

[Telephone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Aside from your dad's trapping, what was his job with Shell?

TK: My daddy did boat mechanic work, engine mechanic work, and a lease operator, which was to maintain the large gas compressors to keep the oil flowing out of the oil wells, because most of the oil wells were gas-lift operated. Also, he ran Shell's tugboats. He ran the *Cappy Ricks* in the late-twenties and early-thirties, he ran the *Miss Shell*, the *Miss Roxanna*—that's names of boats because Shell was named *Roxanna Petroleum*.

JT: These were wooden boats?

TK: All wooden boats.

JT: Where were those built?

TK: Those were primarily built along—one was built in the Lake Charles area, some were built in Morgan City, one was built in Houma. You had a lot of the mom and pop, we called it, shipyards in those days.

JT: In the marsh, in the Shell community, I'll take it there were a few rigs, there was some oil that was being extracted?

TK: That's correct.

JT: You probably had a lot of barge and tugboat activity to move that cargo to Port Arthur, to refineries, possibly?

TK: To Port Arthur and Lake Charles. Higman Towing Company, which is still a viable entity as far as the business, had a little wooden tug called a *Tony T*. Higman Towing Company was owned by the Brown family, which my dad and my grandmother worked for. This little wooden tug was named the *Tony T*, and it was powered by an Atlas engine, direct/reversible engine, and it would come out to the Shell Oil Company oilfield and bring barges. It had what they called main storage. It would deposit the barges at main storage, and the gagers would load the barges, and the *Tony T* would come back out and pick up the loaded barges and bring in empties to replace them. It kept shuffling the barges back and forth to the various refineries. It did go as far as Houston.

JT: That must have been one big reservoir.

TK: Yes, sir. In fact, that field, to my knowledge, is still operating, there's still some oil. Shell has since sold it, but the last time that I spoke with somebody, they still had production, a minimal amount, but they still had production out there.

JT: Would it still be called Shell Bayou Black?

TK: Shell Black Bayou Field. Yes, sir.

JT: So during that time you probably had a lot of new inventions. We were looking at some photographs earlier, we'll return to those. [Looking at photographs.] The way that these guys were lifting a boat out of the water so that your dad can do some repair work, is your father in this photograph?

TK: No, sir, my dad is not in this photograph.

JT: He might be taking the picture?

TK: He could very well be.

JT: Here we're looking at a photograph of a marsh buggy. Explain this picture to me here. This is fascinating.

TK: That is a four-wheel marsh buggy that was made out of a tractor, and you can see the tractor steering assembly sitting up in the front, and the wheels were wood slat wheels. In order to pull from the rear, it was not four-wheel drive, because the

three machines that was primarily used was tractors, Model-T Fords, and Chevrolets. The Model-T Ford, because of it being light, lend itself in most places to be the best to use because it didn't take a whole lot of floatation to keep it going. When they would bog one down, they would get a rope tied up to it and they would line up six or eight men, ten men, on this rope to pull, and they would get men on the slatted wheels and they would pull on the slats to try to roll the wheels to get the buggy unstuck.

JT: Who had come up with these inventions?

TK: My dad was instrumental with some of the buggies. He and a group out of Houma, Louisiana, one of the fellas was Mr. Charlie Hebert, who was from Montegut, who worked with my dad, and he was also a mechanic and did engine repairs, but he didn't do boat repairs. My daddy would do boat repairs and could build boats as well. Mr. Hebert's background, his daddy had a machine shop that used to serve the oil industry and the sugar industry in the Montegut, Houma, Pointe-aux-Chenes area. Until they came out with the buggies with the iron wheels, this is what was used to be able to get around in the marshes.

JT: So the guys from Texas and Oklahoma had the experience of the oil industry, but yet the people from South Louisiana were the ones to be able to provide these types of innovations to actually get to the fields?

TK: Yes, sir. The people from Louisiana, not only were they able to provide the ingenuity, from uneducated people as far as school is concerned, but they had a tremendous background of what we call job related skills, and that was called survival. That taught them to be able to adjust to whatever their needs were, because there were storms on the boats because of the high waters, and even the design of boats.

You had the airboats that were designed to use in the oil industry with steps on them, with Ford V8 engines, some had Model A engines on them. That allowed them to be allowed to be able to provide the means of transportation that was needed for the seismic effort. As cruel as it was, because you were hand-carrying the dynamite and all this stuff through the marshes by hand, and when you got into the swamp area then you couldn't use the buggies, so then you would either wait 'till the tide came up, the river waters would come up to get into the swamp, or you would work in the open lakes and bays at that time, like Soil Bay, Lake Bongawa, Lake Chico, this is all lakes. The Grand Lake that my daddy worked in the early years with Shell, with the wooden boats, wooden barges, wooden quarter boats, wooden field barges, in order to be able to take care of the needs of the exploration at that time related to the oil industry.

JT: It sounds like your family has been a big part of the boating, of the oil industry, in southwest Louisiana for quite a number of generations almost, really?

TK: Yes, sir. I have two living uncles on my mother's side of the family. One of them is eighty-three and the other one is eighty-one, and both of them ran boats in the forties, during the war, because one of them had eye problems, so Shell Oil Company wouldn't hire him and neither would they draft him, so he ran boats, which was a necessity during the war years, as a youngster. He didn't need no—I can't think of it, when they give you a minor's release—emancipation. He wasn't emancipated, he had to make a living, because my grandfather, who was born and raised in what is now the generalized swamp, was also a boat builder and a boat navigator at that time, had got killed in 1940. That left my grandmother with about five minor children, and the rest were the older siblings like my mother and her three brothers, or four brothers, that were next to her.

JT: That's all living on the houseboat in the Basin?

TK: Yes, sir. Originally the people on the Basin lived in houses at communities such as Bayou Chene, Hog Island Pass, Keelboat Pass, Sawyers Bay, Chicot Pass, but then as the waters began to get higher and higher each year due to Captain Shreve and whoever else involved, enhancing, supposedly, the navigation on the Red

River about 1860 when they blowed up the log jam, which was nature's way of controlling the flood waters coming through the Atchafalaya.

So then that's when people had to resort to houseboats in order to be able to stay year-round in the basin. They didn't want to leave because they could make a good living fishing, and the oil industry was operating in the basin at that time. There wasn't no basin, but the oil industry was operating, so they could run boats for them. They had the boats that were powered with eight-horse Lockwood Ash, which was an engine built up north, and then the Nadler Foundry in Plackerman, bought the license and the permit from Lockwood Ash to be able to build the Nadler Engine, which they built a two-and a half horsepower, a four horsepower—which was two single-cell engines. They built a six-horsepower, which was a two-cylinder engine, and an eight-horsepower, which was a two-cylinder engine, and the six horsepower was two cylinders of a two-and a half put together, and the eight horsepower was two cylinders of a four horsepower.

JT: These innovations, the coming of the putt-putt, the motorboat, probably changed a lot of things for the Basin?

TK: Tremendously. What it allowed the people to do, it allowed them to be able to cut the timber and then use these small boats, with let's say eight-horsepower, the four-horsepower, whatever, to pull the timber out of the swamp. They would

deaden it when the water was down and when the sap was down, then they would cut it in the spring of the year, so that would allow them to be able to not only have transportation to go to and from town to get supplies, but they could also haul the timber out the swamp, and put it in log booms to be brought to Jeanerette, to Patterson, and Morgan City, where you had the large saw mills that would handle the sawing of the lumber.

Plus, they used these same putt-putt boats in the swamp doing seismograph work. They would take and, if the water wasn't sufficient, they would take and let the hull fill up with water. Then they would put the suction from the engine into the hull, and let it use, and it would keep circling the water within the hull. They would shorten the exhaust so they had to drop in the hull, and when the water got too hot they would bale it out, let it fill up again with water, and they would run again. That's how they would continue to use the boats, when the water wasn't sufficient to provide water for the engine. They had what they called an Arkansas pump and what they would do, they would take behind the propeller, and they'd bore the hull and put an elbow. When you went forward gear, the prop wash would shove water into this elbow in through a tube and supply cooling water to the engine.

JT: Are we talking about the nineteen-teens and twenties?

TK: Yes, sir.

JT: Wow. So all this innovations is all happening just in time for discovery of oil and gas in the marshes of Louisiana?

TK: That's right. In fact, the boats that my daddy started operating, the first boats that he operated, the tugs and that which Shell Oil Company, a lot of them were converted luggers, converted what they used to call fish boats, or bayou boats, that would go throughout the basin area and along the coastal areas. Mr. McCall's family, his daddy, had the *Marggie*, which used to run from Lake Arthur to Grand Chenier.

[Telephone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

TK: From 1949 through 1957, once we moved in the county, we maintained the contact with the boating world. We still built boats at home, we still repaired boats at home, we still repaired engines at home.

I'd like to interject this, it just crossed my mind. My daddy had two brothers, and one was named Henry Ford after Henry Ford by his mother because my dad's mother put him on wheels with the Model-T, and his other brother's name was David. Both of them, in World War II, one went into CVs [fleet carriers] and the

other one went in the cargo ships that were handling freighting the troops and tanks and ammo and what have you to the European theater. All of us lived out there at Black Bayou at one time, and they all trapped, all fished, hunted alligators. I mean, that was our way of life. One of my dad's brothers, Henry Ford, was still living in '49, so he was a mechanic also, plus he would cast propellers. In fact, some of the propellers that he casted are still being designed, still being used today.

JT: Which uncle is that?

TK: That's my daddy's brother next to him.

JT: What's his name?

TK: Henry Ford.

JT: What's your father's first name?

TK: My daddy's first name was Thomas Kelly. His grandmother couldn't say Thomas so she called him Domas, she couldn't speak English.

JT: She was a French speaker?

TK: Right, and my daddy couldn't speak English until he was seventeen years old. After we moved, when Shell told us we had to move, they sold my dad the boarding house and the bunkhouse, which was two huge two-story, prefabricated buildings, some of the first prefabricated buildings that were built out of longleaf pine, and the lumber was milled by the Longville Lumber Company, from Longville, Louisiana. They were so proud of the name it was stamped on the boards. We built a house in the country, and we continued to hunt, and fish, and trap at Black Bayou. My daddy continued working at that oil field until 1961, when he had to retire because of health reasons.

JT: So he was a handyman, a mechanic, and he was boat captain?

TK: That's right. He ran boats for Shell Oil Company all up and down the known seismic area that Shell was working in from Texas all up in what is now the Atchafalaya Basin, the Houma area, Weeks Island area, West Lake Verrett area.

JT: Where were a majority of these boats, these small inland vessels, wood and steel boats, where were the majority of those built?

TK: The earlier boats were built in Orange, Texas. Some were built, a company in Lake Charles, I think the sons are still in business there. He had some built in Morgan City, and quite a number were built in the Houma/Lafette area. A lot of them were converted lugger or fish boats that were converted to use as tugboats or school boats, in our case, and they had gasoline engines. After the war they took the Ford V8s out and started re-powering them with Chrysler marine engines.

JT: So you remember the name of some of those shipbuilders, the shipyards, other than Weaver?

TK: You had Olmsted, Mr. Olmsted was in Lake Charles. You got Mr. DeHart, was in Abbeville, that was another place that built boats. Mr. DeHart was in Abbeville, and in the Morgan City area you had Mr. Oscar Beadle had a shipyard, the Terrebonnes had a shipyard, and you had Mr. Rhodes used to build boats, and you had Mr. Bowen used to build boats in the Morgan City area, and Mr. Thompson. This is all wooden boats at that time, built for the various types of service, whether it be oyster luggers or whether it be bi-boats that would take, and they had an aft cabin, had a front deck, most of them had either a Palmer or a Lathrop engine in them, thirty horsepower or twenty horsepower, or a Kelly Perfection. Kelly Perfection made a single-cell eight horsepower, which was a real powerful engine for eight-horsepower. That's what they would power these luggers with. When Shell Oil Company would buy the boats they would re-power

them with either Model A Fords or flathead Fords, depending on the size of the boat.

JT: That was for bringing crew in and out, and also bringing cargo and any type of freshwater things that you guys did out in the marsh?

TK: That is correct. They had a water barge they would haul the water with, and then the grocery boat, as well called it, it was named the *Sally A*, and it was built in the Houma area. It had two flathead Fords in it, and it was 40-some feet long, and it had bench seating on both sides, you had mechanical clutches, you had two long shift levers and you would use them to shift it. Some of the earlier boats had a clutch pedal with the Ford clutch engine that you had to press on the clutch in order to be able to shift from forward to reverse or from neutral to forward or reverse.

JT: Let's talk about your experience at Consolidated. Tell me how you ended up over there in Orange working at a shipyard.

TK: Having a maritime background, if you want to say, from both my mother and my daddy's side of the family, not only from my mother's sisters and brothers and my dad's brothers and sisters, but also from my mother's great-uncles, and my dad's daddy was a steamboat captain. He ran the old sternwheelers, and having grown

up on boats and having ran boats since five years old, and I have living relatives that can verify what I'm telling you, that at five years old I could start a boat and go wherever I was told to go. So that always lent credence to me wanting to be involved in the boating end of the business, whether it be a captain or whether it be a builder or whatever, engineer or boat-wise.

I was working in the oil field, I got out of school, graduated school in '56, worked in an oil field, and I decided to go to work in a shipyard in Orange. These shipyards were very large during World War II, but after the war was over they had no work to speak of, and then the drill tender industry, after the war they started using the drill ship, the drill tenders were actually converted World War II vessels with generators. They would bring a ship up to a platform, they didn't have drilling barges for the offshore work which started in 1947. They would bring up a drill ship, a power source which was normally an LST or something like that that had generator capacity sufficiency, and they would tie them to the platform and they would draw the power from that to operate the drilling equipment. Reading and Bates started—and Humble Oil, which most of the oil companies had their own drilling rigs at that time. Kerr McGee, Shell, Humble Oil, Mobile, which it was Magnolia at that time, had their own drilling equipment.

JT: The barge ships in even early stages of jack-up barges, do you remember where these vessels were being constructed? I know you've got McDermott Yard in Morgan City, any other places?

TK: You had the McDermott Yard in Morgan City, you had Avondale in New Orleans, you had Marathon, LeTourneau was a builder of some of the early rigs that were built for Penrod Drilling Company.

JT: That was in the Beaumont/Port Arthur area?

TK: Beaumont/Port Arthur area, and also the Corpus area, Brownsville Area.

JT: Consolidated, those guys survived after the war and they were still probably a vibrant company by '57, and in walks this guys from southwest Louisiana who grew up in the marshes, his whole life working for Shell. Tell me about your first day on the job over there.

TK: When I went to work for them, they were building a dock which was three barges long and the barges were the 320-feet by 50-feet wide by either 14 or 16-feet deep, and this was to allow the loading of ships in South American. Plus, we had a drilling barge to build. So oil welders had to be certified, so they sent me to welding school and I went to welding school and then I went to welding school

for two weeks, and they pulled me out of welding school and put me welding in the barges.

Then when we got the drilling porch project, then we worked on what we called a slab, where we would construct all the bulkheads, you would take and everything was built by unit. You had all the bottom plate with all the frames attached, you had the bulkheads with all the frames attached, and you would lay this on the jig or on the dock that they were going to build it on and then they would come back and load the pieces. They had all the cranes at that time were track cranes and when I say track, I'm not talking about tracks on the crane itself, but they actually traveled on rails through the yard, both Levingston and Consolidated. They had these big cranes that were pretty high off the ground. Some were steam-driven and some were electric-driven.

JT: Were those the two big shipbuilding firms in the Orange area at the time, when you were there in the late fifties?

TK: Yes, sir.

JT: About how many people did Consolidated employ?

TK: Consolidated had around three hundred and fifty people at that time.

JT: What about down the road at Levingston?

TK: At Levingston they probably had a comparable amount. In fact, you could tell by the number of people that would line up at the gate as you would change shifts.

JT: Was it an on-the-clock shift?

TK: You normally worked two shifts, sometimes three shifts depending on the workload, but most of the time two shifts. You had a day shift and you had the evening shift.

JT: Sounds like they were real busy.

TK: Sometimes if we got behind on the barges they would just work us long days.

JT: Was most of the work barges and barge tenders?

TK: Most of Consolidated is work with either dock barges, cargo barges, drill barges, or tunnels.

JT: What's a tunnel?

TK: Tunnels, like Chesapeake Bay tunnels. They built a number of the tunnels when I was working there, tunnel sections, these huge tubes. Then they would float them up to the East Coast, where they were going to sink them.

JT: So a day was what, an eight-hour day? Eight-hour, ten-hour?

TK: Most of the time at least ten hours.

JT: Where would the majority of these three hundred and fifty fellow employees of yours—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

TK: In the rural areas around it, because Orange still had a lot of rural area around it at that time.

JT: Probably a lot of these guys, I would imagine, were sons of the group who might have worked there building the destroyer escorts and the LSTs during the wartime?

TK: That's correct, you definitely had as much as three generations working there when I worked there.

JT: Was there a lot of competition between Consolidated and Levingston, from what you could remember?

TK: Not really that I can recall. Levingston was primarily—they had large docks where they could drive out and do repair work, where our work was primarily all new construction. They had a different clientele of people, even though it might have been the same clientele, but the scope of work was a lot of times different than was ours. Reading and Bates, which was a major contractor starting out with the drill barges and the jack-ups and that and with the drill tenders, they had a number of their units built at Levingston.

What caused us to basically get out of the business in '57, we had a Tidelands dispute between Louisiana and federal government over the three-mile, nine-mile limit. If you check the record, Texas has nine miles, Louisiana has three, and I think Mississippi and Alabama has nine. So whenever the dispute started in 1957, then it curtailed a lot of the oilfield activity. I saw in Sabine River, the arm of the Sabine River where they had just barge after barge of Humble's drilling equipment stacked up. Until they got this dispute settled, they shut the drilling oil down.

JT: It must have been an economic downturn.

TK: It was terrible in this area. I left the shipyard, I went back in the oilfield, and then I worked in the oilfield in both work over and drilling, and we used to go in the post office to get our mail.

I walked in the post office one morning and the fella looked at me, he says, "Would you like to have a job working in the post office in Vinton?" This was in the wintertime, and of course it was cold and miserable in the oilfield and on the drilling rigs.

I said, "Well, can y'all use me?"

He said, "Yes, that's why I'm asking you."

So I went to work in the post office in Vinton, and of course, by being a substitute worker I was still able to maintain my ties with shrimping, fishing, hunting, alligator hunting. In order, I could still carry on my regular activities. After I worked there for a while, then they told me that I could get a much better job if I moved to Port Arthur. Being a small community like Vinton was, my chances of promotion were going to be slim to none. So I went to Port Arthur and I worked a

year in Port Arthur, but I still maintained my ties with the boatbuilding industry.

In fact, Mr. Homer Starks, who used to have the Sabine Yacht Basin in Orange, Texas, who is still living, he's about eighty-four years old and lives in Orange, he used to provide some of the crew boats, and they were built out of wood, for Shell Oil Company.

JT: What's his first name?

TK: Homer. H O M E R.

JT: You say he's still probably living in Orange, Texas?

TK: Yes, sir.

JT: How long was it before you got back into the boat business?

TK: I went into the service and I got out of the service in 1962. When I got out of the service in 1962, Shell Oil Company hired me and they hired me on Lake Charles, in Lafayette, and they said, "We're going to move you down to Morgan City." Shell had a large field in West Lake Verret, which had a large number of boats, steel, aluminum, and—no, we'd gotten ridden of all the wood boats. It was just steel and aluminum boats, built primarily by Sewart Seacraft. So they moved me

there, so that put me right back involved with boat repairs. We had our own railway out there, we hauled up our own boats, we did our own bottom scraping, pot painting, changing wheel shafts, engine rebuilding, that was my responsibility. Plus taking care of all the pumps and all the big compressor engines, and helping out in whatever other way I could. We were back into boats again.

In 1966, I mean, I still had the yearning, even though I was involved with boats and we built boats with Shell Oil Company, so we would take the boats to the shipyard, if we had to bring one to the shipyard to have some major work done on it, like welding repairs, we didn't have the aluminum equipment to do so. We could haul it out and do the steel work, but we couldn't do any of the aluminum work. So the aluminum boats we would send to Sewart Seacraft. I went into Sewart Seacraft with a boat, and while I was there a fella by the name of Mr. Burt Chauvin said, "Would you consider going to work for us?"

I said, "Well, I hadn't thought about it."

He said, "We'd like to have you."

I said, "What kind of work are you talking about?"

He said, "I need a supervisor that can come in and start immediately building, taking over the outfitting of the boats once they come out of sandblasting, do the electrical work, the rigging work, carpentry work, to be able to work in that capacity, to work those crews." He said, "Your primary responsibility would be the riggers." So I thought about it, talked to my dad about it.

He said, "I hate to see you quit Shell. Shell's been good to us."

I said, "I do to, but, Dad, it's kind of like you when you were working with Shell. It came time to go trapping and you told them 'Adios, I'm going trapping.' Then you went up there to get the slop from the boardinghouse to feed the hogs you and grandma was running, they asked you to go to Orange to pick up two barges and go by the Grisaw plant and get some timbers and piling and that, and you did. When you got back out there, they said, 'Look, if you want to trap, if you want to hunt alligators, whatever you want to do, do it. Just don't quit, stay with us.'" He stayed with them, so I quit them and went to work for Sewart Seacraft.

JT: Let me pause you there for a minute. Was that a rarity, the situation that your dad and Shell had, or did maybe Shell and other oil companies see the importance of that livelihood to the people of south Louisiana and help them maintain that way of living?

TK: I think that once Shell had some of the people that came down from the upper part of the country—when I say, like, Oklahoma, Minnesota, some of those areas—then they began to see that was a heritage to us. In other words, that was a way of life, and if you tried to separate that man from that way of life, you weren't going to be able to keep him. So they felt then that they could still have the benefit of the man's knowledge, because he knew all the bayous, wherever they wanted to go it was no problem.

JT: He knew about boats.

TK: He knew about boats. He knew what it takes to keep on running, there was no radars, and they operated in the fog. Myself, ran boats for years in the fog, no radars. So they felt like it was company-wise to be able to allow them to continue doing the things they were doing, and that's what they did. They allowed the men who did the things that my dad did to build houses out there.

Originally, the compound was only the supervisors, the supervisory personnel and the managers. When they realized that in order to keep good key people that was able to make them productive and make their managers look good, then they allowed the people to start building houses along Black Bayou, allowed some to live in boathouses, I mean houseboats, and we had a walkway called Poverty Road, which everything was over the marsh. Shell Oil Company built a walkway,

and allowed people to have a boathouse on one side of the walkway and to take and build a house with a deck area where you could take care of your furs and alligators skins and have your fur shed, which served as a wash shed and a fur shed, because you washed on a number three tub and rub-board. Once they saw that, then they were able to keep people like my dad, like Shorty Broussard, Vedai Pellerin, Mr. Steve, my daddy's two brothers.

JT: That's an interesting side of the story that probably goes overlooked in many respects, about the family, the partnership between the big oil companies and the local people down here who made a living and who were reared in the swamps and the marshes.

TK: You see, by doing that it allowed for the dad to have communication with his family on a daily basis.

JT: Right, instead of setting on and setting off like you see in the post-World War II era.

TK: That is correct. The one thing that was so vital to us as a youngster was to be able to have that relationship with my dad, to be able to learn the things that he knew, because I was able to go on the job with him, change oil on the boats, fill the boats with gasoline, take them out to the boathouse, go to the gas pump, the fuel

dock, fuel the boats up, change the oil, everything, whatever had to be done, myself. He just get me started and I would go on my own, bring the boat, park it in the boathouse, take another one, bring it to the fuel dock, and do that 'till we got all of them maintained and had them ready for the workers when the workers came off their next shift.

JT: That description right there is probably something that occurred in multiple generations of people in south Louisiana, and suddenly, in the nineteen-fifties, and sixties, and seventies, when the father is now going offshore seven days to fourteen days, then you have that fragmentation between the son or the daughter who is learning the traits and the skills that have been passed down for generations. Suddenly that father figure is no longer there, or at least not there on a daily basis. You may be looking at an answer to some even bigger problems that the oil industry, in the Gulf of Mexico in particular, has been struggling with over the last couple decades—people who are no longer interested in getting in the field.

TK: I can understand that because I know from my own experience—I have reared two families and I have my grandchildren that come stay with me now, one is seventeen, the other one is nine, that live here close by. I have three of them in the Houston area—no excuse me. I have four in the Houston area and I have one in the Dallas area. Me being involved with boats and commercial fishing, and

involved with the oil field and maintaining the boats from the sixties on, that's been involved in oil fields and commercial fishing, has given me a chance to bring my son with me many, many times.

Now, the youngest grandson, he's handy with tools, he can work on engines, and he likes to mess with boats. I have one up there right now, wooden hull, built in 1950 I think it is, that I've got to change the side shell on it. So I'm waiting for the weather to get right and I'm going to take him, and with he and I we'll be able to do that work together. So he'll learn something as a trade that he might not get in the school.

Now, they do have schools in Louisiana that are still teaching boatbuilding and that, but not on a scale—you don't have the craftsmen today that you had when I came up. Today everybody's more so secular education, such as college or high school diplomas, which I realize is very important, but in our days the educational background was on the job, if you want to call it, but survival. That's what you were taught.

My daddy told me many times, he said, "Son, learn to do as many things as you can, so if that fella asks, 'Can you repair that engine in that boat?' put up your hand. 'Can you rewire that boat?' put up your hand. If you can change a plank in that boat, put up your hand. If you can weld on that boat, carve a chunk out and

put it in, put up your hand. If you can cut the glass to put in the cabin, put up your hand.”

That’s how we were raised. “Can’t” was never a word in my dad’s vocabulary. You better never use the word “can’t” around him.

JT: What did your dad do from ’47 ‘till he retired when things began to change, companies began to move from one and two, three miles, to ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty miles offshore—the emergence of the offshore industry. What was your father’s role in that?

TK: My dad never worked offshore anytime for Shell Oil Company other than the seismic work in the basin. He spent his entire time, after he and my mother got married, then they went ahead and left him permanently at Black Bayou, and he spent all his working years with Shell Oil Company at Black Bayou after he and my mother got married. Prior to that, from the twenties and the early thirties before he and my mother got married, he was all over.

JT: It’s the family that buckled him down and kept him coming home every night.

TK: That’s right. Him staying at Black Bayou, of course it gave me a tremendous amount of education from the boatbuilding end, the boat operational end,

navigation, commercial fishing, hunting to have something to eat, care and keeping of the land—because if you don't care and keep your land then you're not going to have anything on it.

JT: That's right. Conservation.

TK: That's right. My mother likewise, she felt that way, she believed that you had to be a good steward of your land because your land is what fed you, whether it be from a crop you raised in the soil, or whether it be from the fish and wildlife or whatever that you might have killed off the land.

JT: Very interesting. Before we get into what could arguably be referred to as the pioneer of the aluminum shipbuilding business, Fred Sewart, let's talk a little bit about the emerging offshore industry and how boats—maritime transportation in general—is a big part of that booming industry with Kerr-McGee in 1947 up in Morgan City, and as companies began to move a little bit deeper and further away from the coast. Tell me what role the boats playing in the early days, from the LSTs and Higgins crafts, the U.S. Navy surplus in the late forties into the fifties when these types of vessels, what we know as the crew boats and the workboats, tell me about how that industry began.

TK: After World War II we had a surplus of 63-footers and 85-footers, which was called—63-footers were air search rescue boats—

[Telephone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

TK: The 63-footers were air search rescue boats, and the 85-footers were PT boats. Then you had the old minesweepers and the sub chasers. So what they did is most of these boats were powered, the 85s and the 63s, were powered with gasoline engines. So they would take and they would pull the gasoline engines out, and for just a little bit of money Mr. George Frost who started George Engine Company, started buying the surplus grey marines, which were built for the military role and the landing craft and come of their equipment. So they would take and put two 671s in an 85-footer or a 63-footer, and the minesweepers, a lot of them had diesels in them already, they had the old Cleveland diesel or some of the Fairbanks diesels.

In fact, Mr. McCall used to work for Pure Oil Company, and the boat that he ran for Pure Oil was a wooden hull, World War II surplus boat. A fella who worked for me, Mr. Landry, he had an 85-footer, Mr. Levy had some, and they converted these boats. Then you had some of the crew boats that were working in the bays that were built out of wood, so they started using them to go to some of the first offshore platforms. So due to the fact—and you have some of the shrimping

boats, shrimp boats, they took and used them for seismic work, and also started using some of them. The old Arstell luggers, Texaco had a world of the old luggers that worked out of Horseshoe Bayou, that worked out of Vermillion Bay, worked out of Lighthouse Point, then they later on went to Tiger Shoal, and that all started with the old wooden boats. They realized that, due to the maintenance of the wood and the burn-ability if you're out of ground for shelving to struck through the bottom, and then the lack of experienced captains.

As it began to grow it put more of a demand. Fortunately they had the shrimp boat fleet they were able to draw from to get captains who had boat knowledge and knew what to do with a boat, whether it be wood or whatever. Like the Tidewater, Twenty Grand, Arthur Levy, they were able to pick up some of the shrimpers, some of them with their boats, some of them they got the off their boats. They sold their boats and went to work for them as captains on the wood boats, at that time, and then later on Tidewater and Twenty Grand saw the need to build—in fact, most of the boats were owned by the oil companies themselves, starting out. Magnolia had their own boats, Shell had their own boats, you had the Muchowich family in Freeport, Texas, and they had shrimp boats, plus they had a charter boat dock where they run charters for snapper fishing and that, so they were able to use some of their boats in the rental business for the work going off the coast of Texas. They started off in the Sabine area not too long after that as well, because they just carried over from Johnson Bayou.

Whenever they saw that the problem they were having with the wood boats, and had a few of them that sank and had lost a few lives, and then you started having the withdrawal symptoms of the craftsmen, the wood boat craftsmen. The need for the amount of repairs, a lot of times you didn't have enough key people to do the caulking, the plank changing, to change the bow-stem, if you hit something and hit the bow stem, you had to change the bow stem. So like in Morgan City, you had Topley Shipyard, you had Intracoastal Dry Dock, you had Mr. Oscar Beadle, which later became Mr. Ayoub, you had Sam Syacusa. They could still do some woodwork, but the number of boats that was demanded for the oil field was greater than what they could handle.

So then Mr. Fred Sewart, there was a fella by the name of Mr. Sam Watkins went to Mr. Fred Sewart, and Mr. Sewart was a fair-good welder, and asked him to build him a steel boat. So he built him a steel boat, and then Mr. Roy Breaux, who used to work out in the basin, Texaco approached him about building them some, so he built some, and then Casey Craft with a company in Mermentau, they built some Casey Crafts out of steel. So you had Mr. Sewart building out of steel, you had Roy Breaux building out of steel, you had Halter building out of steel in New Orleans, and Equitable Higgins, this fella right here.

JT: We're talking about early sixties?

TK: Yes, sir, late fifties and early sixties. This is the late fifties and early sixties that we're into. So then that's when the boat rental companies, the oil companies began to sell of their equipment and start renting marine transportation. So that's when your Tidewaters began to grow, your Tidex, which is now Tidewater, which is the merger of Twenty Grand and Tidex to form Tidewater Marine. Then you had Arthur Levy, you had Mr. Slim Richmond who had crew boats.

JT: Was Zapata [Marine] another big one that was doing crew boats?

TK: Zapata was in the pogy fleet, but you had the Penrod Drilling and Petrol Marine. Petrol Marine was in the crew boats. Petrol Marine had boats built by, primarily, Roy Breaux, had them built through Steward Stevenson, which Petrol Marine was the Hunt Family. Placid Oil Company, now we built some for Placid Oil Company, which was still the Hunt Family, but the bigger offshore boats were built primarily by Breaux Baycraft.

JT: Now these boats in 1960, and '61, '62, when things are really emerging in the steel manufacturing of these boats, what size vessels are we talking about for crew and workboats?

TK: Most of those are running between 42 and 55 feet.

JT: We're looking at a photograph here in the Sewart's magazine from probably the sixties, right here on—these are titled “Joe Boats.” Is one of these one of the original early sixties models?

TK: Yes, sir, this is one right here, this is one right here, this is one right here, this is one right here, and this is one right here.

JT: So all these boats on page four and five are all between 20 and 35-foot crew boats?

TK: Yes, sir. This steel hull right here, that was a boat that was built in the late fifties and early sixties.

JT: When you showed up on the scene, when was that?

TK: 1966, when I actually went to work for Sewart Seacraft.

JT: So they had already been in the business for four or five years, they had probably built a reputation for themselves of craftsmanship and quality to be able to answer that demand. What was the size of that company when you started there, and tell me a little bit about maybe your first experiences at that shipyard, Sewart?

TK: When I went to work for Sewart Seacraft , we were on hull number 1456. But you got to remember that the bulk of the building before we went to work there—we actually became involved with Sewart in 1962. I was in and out of there with the Shell Oil Company boats. 1456 was an 85-footer that we were building for the Jamaican coast guard, and then the 1402, if I'm not mistaken, was the *Jan Tide*—let's see, *Comtide* that we built for Tidewater, it was an 85-footer. At the time we also were building two 55-footers for George Engine Company, and spec boats. What George would do to get you to build a boat, they would provide the engines and they would provide the financing for the boat and the engines.

JT: Here's an 85-foot boat right here on page 22. All aluminum, cargo, personnel transport, completely air-conditioned for year-round comfort. So this was a boat that was emerging in the mid-to-late sixties—

TK: Early sixties.

JT: That's quite an impressive leap in technology there.

TK: Well, that's correct. I personally owned the first boat, first aluminum boat, that was put in the oilfield industry, was a 26-foot boat powered by a six-cylinder

Chrysler, built in 1955 by Mr. Fred Sewart with Sewart Seacraft, and I kept that boat until 1974.

JT: When did you purchase it?

TK: It got the boat in 1956, I guess. It was ten years old when I got the boat.

JT: You purchased it for Shell?

TK: I purchased it from Mr. Sewart for myself. I converted it and made a shrimping vessel with it. I took and put a Mercruiser, Mercruiser was a popular engine, so I put a Mercruiser in it, and then I took the Mercruiser out and they were building 353'ss—they got away from the 451, which is a dog of an engine, they went to the 353 series, so I took a three-cylinder 353, put it on a two and a half to one gear, put a tunnel in it, and used it to shrimp with from approximately between nine and ten years.

JT: So, again, you're having to work for Shell and doing some other things, but in the background you're still doing the things that you and your family have always done, the shrimping and trapping, etc?

TK: That's correct, and we still do it.

JT: So Sewart got started in the fifties?

TK: Mr. Sewart got started in the, I want to say, the late forties that he actually got started really building the steel boats. In fact, I had a cousin, Sam Carline Incorporated, he had bought several of Mr. Sewart's—he had a construction company, an oilfield construction company, and he had bought several of Mr. Sewart's boats that he would use to ferry personnel back and forth to his dredges, along with some of the wood boats that he had.

JT: By the time you got there in the early sixties as a customer for Shell, and then later as an actual employee, about what time did the aluminum design begin appearing?

TK: The aluminum design started around 1960 when you started coming out with the larger aluminum boats. Due to the fact of Mr. Sewart being always wanting to build the best and the lightest and the well-constructed, Alcoa approached him to use a 54-56 alloy, which 50-86 was the marine alloy but 54-56 alloy had more magnesium so therefore it was a higher strength in a lighter material, because of having more mag. It had never been tested in the marine environment.

He had built a number of boats for Tidewater, some for Arthur Levy, some for the government, and then he got the swift boat contract, and we built through 1968, and we found out in 1968 all heck broke loose, because we found out that the material, when you would put seawater in heat, it would exfoliate. It would be kind of like sheets of paper, because the magnesium was not dispersed evenly throughout the rolling process in the aluminum plate. That set us back some because then we had to go back in and we spent—and Alcoa never would admit to the problem. The federal government built all these boats, that we had built for them, of course they had the problems. We had the problems with the crew boats that we had built for the Levys and the Tidewaters and some of the other people.

So we had to go in then and start changing bottom plate—sometimes we had to take an entire bottom off of a boat. We just would take frame and everything, just cut the transomes from the sides and drop the frames, go in and put in new frames, and come back in and replace the entire boat. Take a transomes completely off.

JT: So we're talking about ten years, roughly, of production in aluminum, before you guys realized that it was a faulty material?

TK: That's correct. The first boats were built out of 50-86, or 60-61. The boat I owned was built out of 60-61.

JT: What is that, the grade of the aluminum?

TK: That's the grade of the alloy.

JT: Where were these sheets being manufactured?

TK: In this country, you had Kaiser, you had Reynolds, and Alcoa, all domestically produced.

JT: Alcoa, Alabama? Where are they, Mississippi?

TK: Alcoa has a plant in Texas. Most of the aluminum was built up above us, up in parts of this country.

JT: St. Louis?

TK: I would say somewhere in that area there.

JT: They would barge it down or ship it down—

TK: Ship it down by—you had aluminum stainless. Of course, at one time you were dealing directly was the manufacturing. You dealt directly with Alcoa, directly with Reynolds, or directly with Kaiser. Of course, Kaiser had the big facility on the Mississippi River, between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

JT: Aluminum manufacturing material?

TK: Right, and you had the big aluminum plant right there by the old bridge in Baton Rouge, when you crossed the bridge on the Baton Rouge side, there used to be the ships of bauxite would come in to unload the bauxite there.

JT: So, for Frank Sewart—

TK: Fred Sewart.

JT: I'm sorry, for Fred Sewart, how did he discover this new design, this new invention, this new way of building boats? Did someone come to him with the idea for aluminum, or did he go to someone for that technology?

TK: No, sir. Mr. Sewart was a very innovative fella. He was a pilot, he loved airplanes. Of course, in our Patterson area the fastest planes in the world were built and flown there in the twenties and the thirties. So that fit just well with him

because he loved airplanes and he was familiar with the aluminum with the float planes, and he had one of the old—had a pusher prop on it, I can't think of the name. It wasn't a Mallard, I can't think of the name of it. Anyway, it was aluminum and it had an MFIB. It was an MFIB because you could have landing gear or you could land in water with it.

He had that for a while, and then he saw the need, due to get the speed up on the steel boats, he had to use thin material. He took and he would sandblast and metalize all the interiors of the boats, because the biggest problem with the boat deterioration is from the internals. The externals you see, but what you see you normally would take care of. So you were using fourteen-gauge, twelve-gauge, ten-gauge material, which is fairly thin material, to build the steel boats. Well, you put them in a saltwater environment and you beat them around—even the outsides were metalized but eventually you'd knock off the metalize, because you've got boats coming through your bulkheads, and bouncing off the drive pipe for you to tie up to. You could see where maintenance was a major issue with the steel boats, plus they still wanted speed.

JT: I'm sure the fact that the saltwater corrosion would cause you problems.

TK: So he took, and not only did he build boats for other people, but he had Sewart Boat Rentals, and Maritime also, Maritime Boat Rentals, which was two

companies owned by him, plus he owned a twin-disk dealership, which was Sewart Supply, which is still in business but it's owned by the Adams family, or the Griscos or whoever.

Anyway, so he took it upon himself, and him being a welder and a fitter, he built that 55-model 26-footer, and he had it in his rental fleet, he seen how it held up, and the oil companies, of course, they owned all their smaller boats. So then he saw that as an inlet to be able to get in with the oil companies to start building aluminum boats for them. The oil companies were trying to reduce the size of their crews, so therefore, when they bought an aluminum boat, primarily all they were involved with, especially in the freshwater areas, was to keep it running.

At that time they just put—it was a cold tar paint base protect, creosote base paint. We'd paint that on the bottom to stop the growth, or sometimes we ran it bare-bottomed, no paint whatsoever. In fact, in the offshore, when offshore first started, all the aluminum boats ran bare-bottomed, because the only paint available was copper paint, and there were some problems between the copper and the aluminum. We weren't familiar with the barrier coats as we are today.

He built the first one out of 60-61, then 50-86, then 54-56, and then it slapped us in the face in 1968 when we started having all the problems with the hulls deteriorating from the inside. Like in the Laserette areas, you would open the

hatches and you'd get to looking, and you might have aluminum sticking up an inch thick on a three inch plate. What it was as it would start to layer or exfoliate, then it would form corrosion between the layers. So as it formed corrosion between the layers, it just keep stacking higher and higher.

JT: How did y'all correct the problem?

TK: We got with Alcoa, we got with Kaiser, we got with Reynolds—of course the federal government was involved—and there were formal class-action suit against us at Alcoa, the industry was, but then they decided not to. We tried to work with them as best we could—they paid for the repairs to change out the plate. The philosophy was, you've operated this boat for ten years and you haven't had to spend any money painting and sandblasting, and painting every year or every other year like you would if you had a steel hull. If you look at the cost, even though it was higher for the aluminum boat, you still had a salvageable value at the end if you scrapped it out. Because, one, they went and re-smelted the aluminum, then they could make it come back to be the alloy they wanted it to be. Most of them understood, and there was only a couple of them that was rebellious, but they took it on the chin as well.

JT: About how many swift boats did y'all build for the government?

TK: If I'm not mistaken, it was around two hundred and fifty. For the U.S. government we built 40-footers—no, excuse me—38-footers for the C.I.A., 40-footers for the Navy, 58-footers for the C.I.A., 65-footers for the Navy, 85-footers for the Navy, and 95-footers for the Navy.

JT: How many of those boats saw a tour of duty in southeast Asia?

TK: Probably two-thirds of the 50-footers.

JT: How many of those ended up with some kind of corrosive, faulty manufacturing problems?

TK: All the first ones.

JT: Did they have to come back and be repaired and sent back, or you just kept them over there?

TK: We sent people over there to study the problems, so then we found out if we would grind it out, we could pad-weld it if the areas weren't too large. In fact, I have personally pad-welded an entire bottom plate in a 55-footers that was built, delivered, in '66, but was built in about '65.

JT: Did you go over to Southeast Asia?

TK: No, sir. I hadn't see all Louisiana yet, chief.

So we had to send people over there, and they found out they could scrape them. Glidden made what we called a nupon primer, which was an epoxy primer, and we found out if we would take and grind out the corrosive spots, if you still had some material left, then you would take and wash it real well, clean it up and dry it real well, and coat it with nupon primer. So that bought us some time there, until it finally got to the point where the Vietnamese took over there anyway, so the boats didn't come back.

JT: I mean, I realize that Swiftships came into existence sometime—

TK: 1969. '68, '69.

JT: Was the problems that Sewart had with the military boats, was that what may have eventually led to the company's downfall?

TK: No, sir, not at all. Our problem was we were bought out by Teledyne, which was a conglomerate. Teledyne looked at things from the bean counter's perspective, so when Mr. Sewart, when we got heavily involved with the government

contracts, then that led to the Halters start building aluminum boats, that led to Roy Breaux really come on strong with the aluminum boats—

JT: For the offshore industry. While y'all were busy with the government, they were—

TK: That led to Camcraft, which was backed by George Engine Company, get started in Lafayette, Crown Point. So then all of a sudden your commercial market is being gobbled up by Camcraft, Breaux Baycraft, some by Halter.

JT: Tell me a little bit about Camcraft, I've never heard of that company ever.

TK: Camcraft, let's see if his picture's in here. [Looking through photographs.] It might not be. Camcraft was started by Cameron Thompson, who worked for Mr. Fred Sewart, and George Engine Company and he got together and he left Mr. Fred Sewart in, I want to say, 1966. I was employed there when he left, so I'm going to say '66, probably the middle of '66, somewhere thereabouts. He left Mr. Fred Sewart and went to Crown Point, and he and George Engine Company got together, which was Mr. George Frost. Mr. George was a solid partner, a moneyman, and they formed Camcraft. Camcraft built basically the same style of boat the Mr. Fred Sewart built. Same hull construction, longitudinally framed construction, same lengths, basically, and he operated for quite some time. Then

he was overseas and he dove in a swimming pool, broke his neck, so then he became a total paraplegic. So he operated for a while after that, in that state, but eventually the company became financially unstable due to the downfall in the oil industry in the early eighties. As a result, it was sold to a fella, and they called it Aluminum Boats, maybe? Renamed it Aluminum Boats, and after that it eventually—

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

JT: Alright, this is tape two interview with Mr. Tom Kelly on February 28, 2007, U of H MMS Ship Fab Project. Tape two with interviewer Jason Theriot.

As we were saying, Mr. Tom, it appears that Fred Sewart was running a farm club, if you will, where you've got men like Scotty Tibbs, who works for Sewart Ships and eventually goes on to open up Gulf Craft. You've got Camcraft, another prodigy from Sewart, who goes on to start up his own business. You've got yourself involved also—

TK: Ken Hidalgo who started Swiftships.

JT: That's right, and Leleux, Claude Leleux, who's at Swiftships now, also from that company.

TK: Right, and Leleux's name is—

JT: I thought it was Claude, first name? Maybe not?

TK: No, I'll think about it in a minute. But you also had Bergeron, who went down to Houma and started building boats in Houma. They built some for the Corps of Engineers, he and Elmo Burger, with Sewart Seacraft, were spin-offs. You had some of them went down to Brouard and worked for Brouard, then you had another one that spun off and went to Bertram. You had Alumiship, which was a spin off of the Sewart Seacraft employees, with Zack McClendon, when he formed Alumiship here in Jeanerette, so when you look at it, other than Mr. Roy Breaux...well Neuville, they used to come to our yard and take pictures of both Sewart Seacraft and Gulf Craft, and I was involved with both of them—which it was Gulf South Fabricators originally, when Scotty started it. Scotty set up Gulf South Fabricators to build handrails and ready boxes in parts for the 55-foot swift ships for Mr. Fred Sewart. Then he end up building two line handling boats for Shell Oil Company that Mr. Sewart had a contract on and we couldn't build, so Scotty built them. Scotty and Mr. Sewart used to fly together, as well as Scotty's daddy was a pilot, so that made a good connection there. So even though I was employed by Mr. Sewart, I would go to help Scotty to line up his people rigging up his boats and outfitting them, whatever had to be done.

JT: Other than the very competitive factor of Roy Breaux and Fred Sewart, it appears that Mr. Sewart may, in fact, be the pioneer of this whole aluminum boatbuilding industry in the Gulf of Mexico.

TK: That's correct, Mr. Fred Sewart. He is the pioneer. You're talking about competitive—Mr. Roy Breaux, we were all building steel boats in the smaller vessels, plus Mr. Sewart had built some larger ones. Some of the early steel boats to replace the minesweepers and that were built by Mr. Fred Sewart, Burton Shipyard, and the Burton Shipyard in Bridge City, Texas, but Mr. Sewart built some of the first ones, 87-feet long. He built some for Odeco, he built some for himself, he built some for Phillips—there's another company, it don't ring a bell right at the moment.

Mr. Roy Breaux, you couldn't buy a half-round pipe, steel pipe, and he would use a half-round steel pipe for a chine bar and for our rub rails, because you couldn't buy a half-round steel pipe. So we had a machine that Mr. Sewart had invented that would allow us to take a flat bar and run it through this machine, and when it came out on the other side it was a half-round pipe. So Mr. Roy Breaux had an old, early-model fifty Chevrolet snub-nosed truck, cab truck, and he had a black man working for him, which I knew well, who were all very friendly, and he would send his black man with a truckload of those flat bars to our shop, and I

would get somebody to run them through the bender and come out as half-pipe, so he could build his steel hulls and not have to worry about having to rip pipe to get his half-pipe.

JT: So what you're saying is that Breaux and Sewart were essentially friends, they were buddies?

TK: That's right, they would visit us, we would visit them. We communicated. If they had a problem with a boat that come in for repairs, I felt nothing wrong with calling them and telling them, "This is what you need to do to take care of the problem with your boat." Because not only was I helping him out, we were also helping our customers, because the only way these boats made money if they worked. Of course, oil companies were more liberal in those days with downtime than they are now.

But see, you came in with a broke strut, and the strut was due to the way it was manufactured, the way it was put in, or it might have been too close to the bottom sending up vibration, might split the entire transfer vault. So I wouldn't do nothing, I would get on the phone and call Mr. Roy or call Vance, his son, and say, "Look, got this boat in over here. Here's your problem. Need to change it. This is what you could do to help yourself out." See, they weren't seeing the repair end, but we were able to see both the repair end of it and the new

construction end of it, so we could take the knowledge from the repair end, and Mr. Tibbs, I don't know if he told you this, but a lot of Mr. Tibbs' innovations came from the fact that we were on the repair side and we were able to share with him some of the problems that not only his boats had, but other boats.

Mr. McCall can verify what I'm telling you. A lot of the firsts that's on these boats today were designed by this old bald-headed fella on the input from him and the people that worked for him. That's what made the aluminum boat become the viable boat that it is today. I can remember when they built the first 100-foot crew boat.

Well, let me backup a little bit. Alcoa built a ship, they had it built—I forgot who built it originally—and it had all kind of problems. The *South Cowboy Connor* was the name of the boat, it might have been built in Florida. Anyway, they brought it to Louisiana and they added a mid-body at Avondale, and when they put the mid-body in it at Avondale, they never did have any problem with the mid-body. What happened, the original builder had built the boat—in aluminum continuity of framework is very, very important. Steel might forgive you, but aluminum don't forgive you. It only cycles so many times, then it's going to split.

JT: At the weld?

TK: Not only the weld; the plate itself. That weld can only do like this, when you see them little stalagmites and stalactites or whatever on top of that water, that means you've got a vibration, you better find out what's causing it because it's going to crack that bottom. So when they saw the problem that they were having with the main part of the boat, the ship, they brought it into Swiftships, they had to sink it down to get it under the bridge, the old highway bridge, to be able to get it in. they brought it in and they did some repair work on it at Swiftships, and when they got to checking into it they didn't have structural continuity in the longitudinals.

So every time the boat would start working, instead of being in unison, the longitudinals working in unison, you had the bulkhead here and you had one coming in here, and one coming in here. So when the boat would go to work, this one would push this way, this one would push this way, that would pull that way, that would pull that way. So what you were doing, you had a piece of metal between the two that you were flexing. That's what was causing the boat to break up. I think they finally gave the project up, I don't know whatever happened to it, but I don't think it ever became a real identity in the shipping industry.

JT: Let's move a little bit ahead. How long were you at Sewart Seacraft?

TK: We closed Sewart Seacraft down December 31, 1974.

JT: Just after the energy crisis, right?

TK: What happened, we had taken a contract—Swiftships had taken a contract to build some boats for the Israelis, some 65-footers.

JT: For who?

TK: The Israelis. You had the '73 War over the Israelis and Egypt or whatever, so they came over here, we had bid on the contract, Swiftships had bid on the contract, and Swiftships got the contract. So an agency out of New York contacted us to build five boats, five patrol boats like the swift class. So we started the five patrol boats for this agency, but come to find out the agency was actually a representative of the Arab group over there.

JT: You've got Swiftships building some for Israel?

TK: For Israel. So Teledyne, being a conglomerate, has all these companies like Teledyne Orion, Continental, Packard Bell, in other words, all kinds of companies that were providing hardware and software as well, for the federal government. So after the '73 War, then the Israelis had all these engines, and engines were used in trucks, tanks, vehicles, motor-fueled engines, a lot of them were

Continental, planes. They had over one hundred million dollar of spare parts on order with Teledyne, so when they found out—because they were very snoopy people—when they found out we were building these boats for the Arabs, they wanted to cancel their order with Teledyne. Now, our contract was for two and a half million dollars.

JT: Do you remember what Arab company that was for? Hadn't been listed, huh?

TK: It was a country, not a company.

JT: It was Iran, or Egypt, or Saudi Arabia? One of those guys?

TK: I'm not going to say because I had a security clearance with Teledyne so I can't. but anyway, so I was head of the company, vice president in charge of operations, so the president of the company, Mr. Burlinghoff, called me in and said, "Tom, we got a problem."

I said, "What's that?"

He said, "The Israelis want to cancel their spares orders with Teledyne, which is over one hundred million dollars, which has a substantial amount of profit in it, and we have these five boats for the Arabs to build for this agency, that we didn't

know at the time.” So, he said, “What if we take and call them and tell them we’ll pay cancellation costs or whatever’s involved, and we’re not going to build the boats?”

I said, “Okay, that sounds good with me.”

So we called them from his office, and he called them and told them that, whatever the cancellations costs were, we would pay penalties or whatever because we didn’t honor our part of the contract. They go to the State Department, so the State Department says that we can’t do that, we got to build the boats. If you remember, I don’t know if in history, but you might talk to somebody, they were trying to negotiate peace between—now, the Israelis had done stomped their behinds, so the Israelis had already made peace. But Saudi Arabia, and Iran, and Egypt, and Egypt being a major one, those countries over there—I mean here they are under the threat of war because the Israelis done kicked their behinds. So the State Department says that our government’s trying to promote unity, not going to work on us in this country. So they took and they said you got to build the boats.

So they called me in, and said, “Tom, we got a problem. We got to build the boats. Do you think that you can keep about eighty men working in repair work if we take and convert both yards to repair work?”

I said, "Yes, I'm willing to give it a try. I think we can."

So we shut the new construction yard down, per se, and set up everything as a repair facility. They gave me a \$500-a-month raise, which was big money in 1974, gave me a \$500-a-month raise, so we started taking in the repair work. We had a good name in the repair business. Mr. McCall gave us work, Tidewater gave us work, Arthur Levy gave us work, the people from down Bayou Lafourche gave us work, the people from Houma gave us work. I would say we were the premier aluminum boat repair facility, so when they found out we still had a facility, they called us back and said, "As long as you have a facility that will identify with shipbuilding or ship repair, you will have to honor the contract."

So they sold the main part of the facility, they sold, I think, \$3,000,000 or \$3,500,000 to Cameron Iron Works, and they took the other facility, which used to be Safety Craft where they build steel—both pleasure and commercial—boats, crew boats, and sold it to Ben LaGrange for \$400,000, with all the equipment. Lathes, cranes, trucks, saws, welding machines, Ben LaGrange bought it. The third day after he bought it we were doing repair work in that yard. He bought it on a Monday, and Wednesday we opened it up and we had boats Wednesday, we already had our crew together and doing repair work, back in operation.

JT: How many men did you lose?

TK: We had laid off—we were down to eighty men, and then I had to lay off all of the men when we closed down, and then I hired just we needed back. We probably ended up with about fifteen when we started back over again, because all we had was just one facility.

JT: So, other than the fact that Swiftships had this major contract with the Israelis for the spare parts, etc., the fact that—

TK: Swiftships didn't have the contract. Teledyne had the contract for the spare parts.

JT: But Fred Sewart did not want to relent, it appears?

TK: Mr. Sewart had got out of the business by that time. He and his son both, had both got out of the business, as far as the active part of the business. Mr. Fred would come by and visit with us, and if he needed something done or needed to make something, he had the complete use of the facility, bring himself in. He was a tremendous brazer and welder, and he and another fella and his son started 3 S & T Oil Company, and they started buying these oil fields from the major companies like the one in Iowa that used to belong to Magnolia, that bought it,

and several other fields that they picked up. So he just worked himself away, they sold all the rental boats that he had, they sold Sewart Supply to Teledyne, sold it.

JT: He was just ready to get out of the boat business, I guess?

TK: So he just got away from it.

JT: Who was the new people that came in?

TK: Of course, Teledyne, Ken Hidalgo originally had it. What Ken Hidalgo did is he used that time, he and a couple other fellas, to set themselves up in a position where they could start Swiftships. It took contacts that were sold under the Sewart Seacraft payroll, while they were getting paid from Sewart Seacraft, and brought them contacts over to Swiftships. Mr. McCall's first new hull, which was the *Phyllis [McCall]*, a 65-footer, built in 1969, was built by us. His next one was a 65-footer, the *Gulf Miss*, built by Swiftships. He was so glad to get ride of that boat, it was nothing but problems.

JT: I see what you're saying, is that possibly the new guy who came in—what was his name, the new president?

TK: We had a couple new presidents. We had Ken Hidalgo and we had a couple others that came from the California area, Teledyne Moveable Offshore was also a company that they gobbled up, they gobbled up a company in Houma, a seismograph company. So they had Tom Gowan, who used to run Teledyne Moveable Offshore, they set him up to kind of operate with us, they brought in outside bean counters, then they started bringing in people from the West Coast, and that's where Mr. Burlinghoff came from. He had been with Teledyne, with Orion Aircraft Group.

JT: So the deal with the New York group—

TK: We took two of the hulls that we had complete and we sold them to James L. Gray in New Iberia. He bought them—the fella that worked for George Engine Company in Lafayette, I can't think of his name. Anyway, he and Jim Gray got together and they completed the boats over here in New Iberia, two of them. The other three, we had all the frames cut for them, and we sold the frames and that to Mr. Vergis Dooley, and he died without ever doing anything with them.

JT: So it was just a bad deal, sounds like? Was it a little bit of maybe under the table, some kind of sketchy conglomeration pressure from outside that really blew the lid off this thing?

TK: I think it was. We had decided to get back into the commercial work, we had built six boats back to back for Offshore Logistics, and then we built two jet boats for Offshore Logistics. We built one for Arthur Levy, so we were getting back into the commercial work, and we'd only taken this—plus, we had a 90-foot spec hull that we built that was so—we built a boat for Muchawich Offshore Service out of Freeport, we built them an 85-footer, we built the six for Offshore Logistics, and we built another one that ended up going to a company in Houma, I can't think of the name. Anyway, they ended up with the 90-footer and an 85-footer.

JT: I see what you're saying. So by '73 the business was really in the Gulf of Mexico, it was booming, there was a lot of activity, there was a lot of boatbuilding, and yet here comes a major conglomeration that takes over the company and decides to do a deal with the federal government, or who knows who, who knows where, and that was—

TK: See, they had taken us over in the late sixties, but we were still operating under our own. Mr. Fred still would show up to work everyday, Ken Hidalgo came to work everyday, Roland Hidalgo would come to work everyday, who was a salesperson, so we were going on, doing our thing.

JT: It was when those guys got out of the business and the outsiders from California and other places came in—

TK: That's exactly right. You had people that would come in from California and I think they all thought we had a pet alligator and we all lived on houses on stilts. That's the way people would portray down in south Louisiana, and we were all dummies.

Like I told them one day, "Where did you people come to get these boats built? What company did you chose to buy? When the federal government chose to get boats built to perform a military mission, what company did they go to? Sewart Seacraft."

Sewart Seacraft built one of the first hydrofoil boats, had to drop down legs on it. In fact, there might be a picture of it in this book, I'm not sure if there is or not. [Flipping through book.] That's a boat for the U.S. Navy. See right here, see these two winches? This was a missile retriever or torpedo retriever, we had two stages. The torpedo retriever had a hydraulically operated ramp in the back that would drop down, and you had a short cabin here, and these winches would allow to pull those torpedoes to retrieve when they were training, and they'd fire the torpedoes when they would surface again, they would go retrieve them and load them back on the boat, and bring them back in. This crane was designed and built

by us at the shipyard, at our machine shop. We had a big ram underneath, that ram would give us floatation from here all the way back around to here.

JT: So why didn't these California guys just decide to go ahead and build the five ships from New York?

TK: Because they were looking at the order from Orion, from Continental Motors, and Packard Bell, that's what they were looking at. They were looking at beans.

JT: And they knew that if they did the deals, then they would lose tremendous business from some of the other companies? [Looking at photographs.] I'll be, look at that, hydrofoil. What's that, a flag?

TK: I don't know what flag that is on there.

JT: It looks like Tenneco.

TK: Could be, because Tenneco had the oil boats, all the different companies.

Anyway, their feeling was the boat business wasn't as profitable as they wanted it to be, so now's a good time to get out of it.

JT: But they ended up being the ignorant dummies, it appears, because look what happened in the late seventies with the oil boom.

TK: See, Mr. McCall had the first—the first quad-screw boat was an 87-footer built by Swiftships for the U.S. government, it was to tow targets. With the cable behind it, it couldn't make the speed, so then they took and pulled one engine out, made a triple-screw out of it, and sold it to Charles Rayburn down in Texas, and he made a crew boat out of it. Then Elliot Cundieff ended up buying it and naming it the *Jacqueline*, it was an 87-footer. Mr. Sewart had built some triple-screw boats for the C.I.A., and we also built some triple-screw boats, 85-footers, for crew boats as well as Jamaican defense force. Triple-screws rather than two big engines. Then on the quad-screws, Mr. McCall had the first quad-screw boat built by Gulf Craft that was put in the oil field, the *Elaine Marie* in 1975.

JT: So where did you go after the company folded?

TK: I formed Kelly's Welding and Repair.

JT: Right here in Jeanerette?

TK: Right here in Jeanerette, and I worked in that until 1979, then I commercial fished. Did well shrimping, did a tremendous amount of work for Mr. McCall

and his brother at Tidewater, some of the other companies. Then Scotty, I was working on my boat over at Scotty's and he talked about us starting a repair venture, so in 1979 we took Kelly's Welding and Repair and the equipment and stuff we had, and made Eugene Island Shipyard out of it, and we operated Eugene Island Shipyard until March of 1992, and then Scotty walked in one morning and said he wanted to close it down—I didn't own but 25 percent of the stock.

JT: Where was Eugene Island?

TK: Next door, where that catamaran is being built at Gulf Craft. In other words, all Scotty originally had was that main building, and where his office space is, that was on the Eugene Island property.

JT: So he did new construction, you did repairs?

TK: We did the repair work, and we did a lot of repair work on his boats.

JT: We'll go with another question or two here, it's getting a little late. I'm really interested to know how you fared, and what are your perceptions about how the industry fared in the economic downturn, the bust, in the Gulf of Mexico beginning in 1982?

TK: In the beginning of 1982, I woke up one morning, billed eight hundred and fifty six thousand dollars—this is Eugene Island Shipyard—all we had was Chapter 11 let us to pay it with. We had people, and I'm going to name them, Howard Wheel of Breeze and Fredericks, Buddy Fredericks, investment firm in New Orleans. Barney Mercer, an insurance man at Lafayette. Roy Caulfield, a banker up in Appaloosas area. Jodal Sandoz at Continental Marine and Catering Service. He had crew boats, he was a black man, mulatto, whatever, and he—Charles Riley. I could go on and on naming—the Black Gold Group out of New Orleans. Ray Foster with his group who was tied in with Clipper Fleet, and he ended up beating us out of money.

We tightened up our belts, laid off—we had twenty-seven people, we brought it down to fifteen, and we all went to work. We went to every vendor that we owed money to and asked them if they would give me a chance.

I said, “You can either force us to bankrupt, or you can give me a chance and I promise you I'll pay you.”

The words were, from everybody except Reilly Electric Company, is, “We know your integrity and we'll work with you.” And they worked with us, and in two years we had everybody paid off.

[Telephone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

TK: So then, we had formed our own company. A boat hit the jetties in the early eighties belonging to Muchawich's, and then Muchawich's sold out to Captain Elliot, so Captain Elliot owned it, so it hit the jetties and destroyed the complete bottom on the boat, a 65-footer.

So we talked to him about it, and Papa Joe Muchawich, who always called me his son—it was named after his mother—he said, "I'd like for you to rebuild that boat if you can." I went and looked at it, there was no drawings available, it was a Halter-built hull built in 1970.

I told him, "Okay."

So they loaded it on the cargo boat and brought it back, and we took it, Eugene Island Shipyard, cut all the bottom off it, new bow stem and everything. No drawings, now, all your drawing came—and we put the boat back together.

JT: All the drawings came from where? From your head, from experience?

TK: We put the boat back together, then we formed Freeport Crew Boats with it. Then we built a 110-footer named the *Tom Kelly*, which is still in existence today.

So we started out as me being a part owner—it was third, a third, a third. A third for Scotty, a third for Elliot, and a third for me.

Then, as a couple more companies started up—anyway, the long and the short of it is they took my third, Scotty took my third, and gave Bill Elliot half of it, which is still working over at Gulf Craft. So that left me with 16 percent, roughly. Of course, the downturn in the business, and when we financed the boat I think I financed—on the *Tom Kelly*—was either 15 or 17 percent interest, so... So the day rate was \$750 a day. Now, you had a crew that you had to pay, you had your insurance you had to pay, and you had a note you had to pay. You had one boat was paid for, the 65-footer was paid for, so it was charter fishing, and running crews, and going to the ships on the bar out of Galveston and Freeport. That helped to take care of the slack on the *Tom Kelly*, and eventually it got where we made a little money with the boat, then it turned back again when a fella Elliot wanted to let in, and he wasn't going to operate, even though he owned a third of it, was getting 15 percent of the gross, and 33 and 1/3 percent of the net, that wasn't enough. He got the boat back, but not only did he get the boat, he got the company with the permits.

JT: So where did that leave you?

TK: That left me with just a small amount of money of the *Lady Anna*, and still interest in the *Tom Kelly*. So then we went all through with the *Tom Kelly*, and three years ago—we weren't getting anything out of the *Tom Kelly*.

So three years ago I approached them and said, "Look, apparently I don't fit in y'all's program," and I felt—I'm not going to say a little bitter, but maybe a little bitter at the time, because we busted our butts for those people, for Elliot and Scotty both, to help set them up.

So today, I sold my share—to put a value on the boat, they were going to put a lower value, I said, "No, no, no." so the value of the boat is five hundred thousand dollars. I can go show you a boat right on Lee Feltermans' website that they sold for a million dollars, that wasn't as good a boat as the *Tom Kelly*. They got another they want a million-something for it, but my share was only paid on a \$500,000 value.

So now I no longer have any retirement. My only income now is Social Security, \$1274 a month, and if the Lord willed it, I'd get back to shrimping and try to get back on the job. I opened up a new shipyard for Conrad from the ground up, I'm talking about a fabrication yard that used to belong to Brown & Root in Amelia. We took it from day one and we started.

JT: How long ago was this, Mr. Tom?

TK: In 2003 we started. We took that yard, and when I say we, the fella up above and other people that helped, but there was a lot of mistakes, we were under budgeted, I must say some poor planning, possibly. All the contracts and all this was left when they hired me, so we had to come in after the fact.

The drawings to build the sections for the 330-ton travel lift to travel on were not correct. The building was laid out to be a piling supported building, but yet when they did the calculations they did it to be a slab supported building, where you would ground pack and come back and lay up slab X number of inches thick, just with rebar and stuff through it, your pre-stressed bars, but they didn't do none of that.

JT: This was for a platform?

TK: No, this is Conrad Shipyard. This is for a big shipyard on fifteen acres of land.

JT: What types of vessels?

LIII We would have built aluminum boats and repaired aluminum and steel boats. We had a 330-ton travel lift. Anyway, and then Cleco had overhead lying above us so

we couldn't put the building up. I had to negotiate with Cleco and Sleeker to let Sleeker let Cleco agree to use their right of way to run this line underground so we could get the overhead power out of the way. Cleco didn't have to move it, they had a right of way over there, and it got shut the whole project down, which they did. I got notebooks that I can show you where I negotiated with these people to make all this stuff happen, so we could all get it done.

After we got the shipyard up in operation, I had nine people working for me, and myself. These hands right there, they swung a sledgehammer, they pulled shelves, they lined up engines, they pulled wheels, they hauled out, whatever had to be done, but there were only nine people. Picked up boats—I strained so much on these bigger boats, pushing against them to hold them off the dock so we could bring them in, until I created a hernia in a hernia, in this ventricle hernia area. Almost died from it, that's right. Dr. Barrios gave me emergency surgery on me five days later.

The way I look at the industry as a whole, the industry had made tremendous strides, and I feel comfortable that our little bitty part has helped to have the industry where it is today. Mr. McCall has been a true soldier with me, he has stood behind me, he has helped me. There was many days when this old boy was mighty low, because when you see that you've put out your level best and it's still not good enough. Then I had a stroke—that Friday we had to turn an 80-some-

foot boat over for Diamond Services, first time it had ever been done in this part of the country, with a travel lift.

JT: Lifted upside-down?

TK: That's right, it was laying on this deck, and we had to take it and flip it over and set it upright so they could put the cabinet in the boat and work some stuff on it. We did it, first one had ever done it, and that day we had a fuel spill, I had a foreman didn't show up, they sent me uncertified cables, I had a foreman—I only had one man with me from my crew but they had a whole crew of new construction people. Had ten men that day, sitting on their behinds.

The fuel spill—we had to shut that down so we could take care of the fuel spill, because we're on the Intracoastal and you got a slip, and when them tugs are coming they pull the water out of your slip, so where you think that fuel has got to go? Fortunately, we had got us a boom, an oil boom, and we had a bunch of them in diapers, in oil pans, because we knew with that hydrolic system on that travel lift, if you ever burst through the line you wanted to be able to contain it. Or if someone will come in on the boat and pump this bilge out, contain it before it got into the Intercostals, because once it go in the Intracoastal, you're talking about megabucks. \$25,000 fine just to start off with.

JT: OPA 90, yeah.

TK: So we took, and I called the fellas. When the told me they had the fuel spill the safety man called me, because he and I got along real well. So I called my man, I said, "Look, run over there and shut that deal down, put them two little boats in the water, get them fellas with that oil boom and pull it across the slip." Then we had to deal with the Coast Guard. Coast Guard came down there, two of them came down in a Dodge van.

He got out and looked around and said, "Mr. Kelly, you don't have no problem here. You got everything under control. We're not even going to do a write-up on it." He said, "You just go on like you're going. We'll go take care of other problems."

He saw that we had planned for it. So then we finished turning the boat over, and man, we had all kind of problems. Not from the way we turned the boat over, but from a foreman we had three overhead cranes. The overhead cranes weren't large enough to handle the boat, but we used them to stabilize the boat as we were making the flips. Each time we had to change the position of the straps we would use the overhead cranes just to hold the boat in a stationary position. It was blocked on blocks, and all the crane was doing was just holding the boat in a

vertical position, or whatever position it was going to be in. We had one fella, a supervisor, and for the love of me, life of me, he could not follow directions.

The boat started getting squirrely. Now we got a boat 180 feet long. We got sixty feet between our straps, the outermost strap and the outermost strap, sixty feet. So that means you got sixty feet of boat hanging off each end of that. Now you get a fella and his crane is on the bow.

So I had load cells on all the cranes, and I said, "Boys, all I want to do, we want to keep the slack out of the cable so we don't develop any shock loads," because shock load is what tears things up. If you got a bind or something and you don't get a shock load, you can handle a tremendous amount of weight before it'll break something. But if you take a thousand pounds and you throw it within five or ten feet, then what happens to that thousand pounds when it hits the end of that ten feet?

JT: Comes in looking more than a thousand pounds.

TK: A whole lot more. So what he was doing, he had taken a couple of times, or three times, he had maxed out his crane, so that means the boat was starting to come this way, come up on the bow, and started to come down on the back, and of course the fella on the back, he's continuing to keep—because I had told them, "I

don't want over twelve hundred pounds on your load cells." Twelve hundred pounds would allow me to keep the slack out the cable, keep the cable pumped. So man, I shut it down.

I checked the fella in the back, checked the one in the middle, and he said, "Mr. Kelly, Burly got that crane loaded out over there."

Walked up, I said, "Burley, slack off on that crane, man."

So then as he started coming down I had to get the fella in the back set up so you'd keep your weight—because you got a weight indicator shows you you're low on your straps. You got to keep your straps loaded a certain amount of pounds, you can't get too many variances, because the 330 tons is over the keel lift of the straps, not one strap. So anyway, we get it upright, we get it vertical and we get ready for it to flip, and it wouldn't flip.

I said, "Man, this is not right."

I mean, you got a vertical deck, you got a side like this, you rest it on a shear right here, you got all this mass over here, and it don't want to flip. So I started checking the cranes.

So I went back up to the front again, and the fella come up to me and said, "Mr. Kelly, Burley got that crane loaded up again."

So I said, "Man, Burley, start slacking off." So then I had the other fellas bring up theirs and he started slacking off, and we got it when and she started up just as pretty as a picture. We had all our work planned.

JT: And it came down fine?

TK: We got it turned over and when we finished turning it over I went to the office, and that's when the manager, I won't call his name, he said, "We should have hired somebody else to do the job because it took too much time."

If you'd have hit me in the face with a baseball bat, you wouldn't have hurt me near as bad. I mean, we had a fuel spill, we had a supervisor that didn't show up, we got no excuse, and then we had the problems with the supervisors from the new construction crew, which didn't work for me. Their manager was there, their superintendent, but he didn't do anything with them.

So, basically what it's left me is left me a chance to look out there at people like Mr. McCall who's done well, he's tied in with SEACOR, that's a fine group of boats. There's been some fine boats built from the Neuville, the Breaux Brothers,

the Gulf Crafts, and I'd like to believe we've had a little bit of input into some of it. Then the association with people like Mr. McCall and his family has been a tremendous asset to me. I look at them like my family. He and his youngest son Joe and I got to travel around a tremendous amount together, had him under my wing in this early stages of his learning the boat business.

JT: I had an opportunity to spend some time with Mr. McCall also, and meet Joe, and Scotty Tibbs and that whole crew, and everything that we're talking about today—and if you looked at that *John McCall*, 190-footer, five engine, DP 2, the most impressive aluminum boat ever built for the offshore industry, and they really have come a long, long way. What do you see as the future?

TK: I think that you're going to reach—you've almost peaked out size-wise. I personally feel like your going to eventually see the mom and pop boat operators go by the wayside. I think you're going to only see the major, the large companies, continue to operate, and possibly a lot of the mom and pop operators might operate through them. As far as them going out in competitive bidding, I don't see them even doing that anymore. I think this is a reason, that the big companies, one reason that they will be able to keep the day rates up, because if they get the mom and pop operator operating through them, then the mom and pop operator is not going to be cutting day rates because their boat is working

through somebody else. That's going to allow the major companies to be able to hold the day rates up.

I think you're going to see some more good years in the Gulf of Mexico, I think. This last year, because of the storm and that, probably the heyday for the day rates on the boats, I think we're going to start seeing a decline in some of them, and it will only be people like Tidewater or the SEACOREs or maybe some of them, that are holding up—the Chouest, which is a very large company. They're not immune to cutting rates at time. Of course, he's been very fortunate, he's got a lot of outside contracts, a lot of government contracts.

JT: Now, is the deep—

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

TK: In fact, at Conrad, before I went to work for Conrad, Conrad was going to buy Swiftships, but they never could get their arms around the financial load, and just kept having to pull on further and further apart, because as they studied more and more, and inventoried more and more, and audited more and more, then after a while their fingers wouldn't touch anymore. When you can't get your arms around that financial load, it's best to leave it alone.

Anyway, they built 170-footer for Oceanic Fleet, which is owed by Brant Dufrene and Marguerite Dufrene, jet-powered, jet-driven by Cummins power. When that boat was built, it went to work for Murphy Oil Company, and it's running to some of the floaters in the deep water.

JT: What about with these bigger companies that are now taking over the Bollingers, the Chouests what about the labor force? I mean, you and I have kind of touched on it a little bit here. Not as many people are getting involved in the industry, not as many people are coming up through their fathers and learning the trade of the industry. With the change in the culture and the climate of south Louisiana, more and more people are moving out or into other types of occupations. What about the workforce who are going to be building these boats and servicing this industry? What do you see as that problem ever changing and maybe—

TK: Well, I'm going to start from say, '57, the reason why I'm going to start from '57, '57 is when we had the crisis with the titling issue. Then in '67 we had the issue with the down-turning industry. So then we had ten good years, so there's a lot of boatbuilding took place from '67 through '77, or from '57 through '67, '67 to '77—that's when your PBRs, that's when your Offshore Logistics, all these companies got involved in the aluminum crew boat business. So we saw that really develop, but then we saw, in the eighties—what happened in the eighties? Things fell apart. Then it turned decent for a while, then it fell apart again. Then

we saw the nineties come, and we seen a couple good years in the nineties, and then it went back down again. Then we seen it when 2000 came. Then when the storm came last year, or year before last, wherever the day rates at, they were down again until the storm hit. You go pull it up on the workboat deal on the internet, and I'll show you the progression of the rates up and down.

So I feel like that we're not going to see the ten year intervals of feast, and then maybe a year or two of famine. I think we're going to see more of the two or three years of feast, that's right, I think we're going to see a lot of ups and downs, day rate wise. Of course, day rate-wise affects the caliber of people you're going to get. Nowadays people are spoiled, they want big money, do little work. So if you cant' get the day rates up, then what are you going to rely on for people?

The other thing is the benefit packages. You got people like the Enrons. You got, right now, companies that are looking for ways to get out of paying retirements. Social security want us to start having our own retirement, but they didn't mind taking our money years ago, and not only put it in their sock, but put it in every other sock around the country where they thought they might need to pull from some Social Security money, they did, the politicians did. Because if they left all the Social Security money in Social Security, we wouldn't be in the shape we in today.

The help, I think unless you're able to draw from the immigrant labor forces coming into this county, the blacks, who, for years you didn't have any black skippers on the boats.

JT: And very few in the shipyards, from what I understand. I mean, there are welders and there are some fitters, but in the broad spectrum they seem to have neglected to participate in this industry, for whatever reasons.

TK: Well, for one thing, the government has made it so lucrative for people—and I got a prime example. I got a next-door neighbor, he's on disability Social Security, he's on Medicare, he's on Medicaid, he gets all his doctor's bills paid, he gets all his drugs free.

JT: They've made it a lucrative business to stay home.

TK: That's right. But this sorry sucker you're talking to, they don't do that for him. He got to still pull the plow. And the sad part about it is, the last company I worked for, Conrad, when I had all these health problems, Conrad and Zurich Insurance Group has got together, along with Patrick O'Keefe with a law firm out of New Orleans, and said that I'm lazy and looking for a free ride.

Look behind me and see all that medicine and stuff that this fella's on right now. Mr. Norman McCall can tell you if there's a lazy bone in this boy's body, he's never seen it in his life.

JT: Well, I can definitely attest to that the last three hours. Growing up in the marsh where you did, not too many folks from around here with your type of background. It's unfortunate Mr. Tom, but where do you see yourself—when you get yourself better, you might jump back on the shrimp boat maybe?

TK: I got to, I don't have no choice. I can't live, I cannot live. My wife gets \$603 a month, and I get \$1274. Our insurance, just our hospitalization, is \$321 a month, our homeowner's policy, thankful to the Farm Bureau and the bureaucracy that exists today, costs us on the average of about \$175 a month, if you take the yearly premium per month. I got a truck and a car, between those two they cost us right about \$180 a month. The utility bill is going to run you about \$175 a month for the electricity, the water bill's going to run you about \$45, and natural gas is going to run you about \$100, and then when you go to the gas pump, Exxon-Mobile can put out this big spill, but the biggest profit they ever had in the history of the company, billions of dollars, fifteen or sixteen billion, gas is on the rise right now. You know what they're getting ready for? They're getting ready for the Easter holiday. I'm not a dummy.

JT: I see that too.

TK: So they're jacking that price up. If they raise it the day before Easter, it would create a problem. But you see, to show you how sorry and trashy the political system—I'm going to tell you I dealt with it at the oil companies, and one of them might be paying you, but I'm going to tell—and I worked for them.

I'd love to sit down with the CEO's of the oil companies right today and say, "Okay, big boy, let's think about something. You people have lowered the gasoline price, but yet the diesel fuel that I use to buy the shrimp with, I started paying nine cents a gallon for it, then it went to eleven. You hear me?"

Eleven. Okay, today I got two diesel powered vehicles. They lowered the price on gasoline, but let me ask you something, my man—the merchandise that's brought to the store, the oil that's transported in the barges up and down the Intracoastal, the ships, all the major trucking, the UPS trucks, all diesel-powered. So you see what they do, they pacify the people that sit behind from first base, kind of the like the oil man's bicycle. You know what an oil man's bicycle is?

JT: What's that?

TK: It's a bicycle that don't have a handlebar and a seat. It's called an oil man's bicycle, because in the early eighties he lost his behind in the oil business and don't know which way to turn.

JT: Good analogy.

TK: What is happening, they take and they've lowered the gasoline price, and it's all your hear about these EPAs. The truth of the matter, there's not an EPA average on any automobile that's sold in the United States that is factual. It's a fiction. If you get within three miles of the EPA average, you're doing quite well. Miles per gallon. So here they are, they lowered the price on the gasoline, now jacking it back up, of course diesels coming right on up too, \$2.58 or \$2.59 up here at the Chevron at John Barnell Road, but that's affecting all of us. What about the people like us, on limited income? The elderly group? We don't have no choice.

We going to probably end up having to sell our house, eventually, and use that to live on. So there's no one here for us. We've helped our children while they were growing up, and we still help the grandchildren. But is a man not supposed to? I thought his family was the most important thing in his life. They way it is today, my man, as far as the employment situation, unless Louisiana—which politics has been rotten in Louisiana and it's been rotten all over the world now, and everywhere you look there's a religious war going on. Whether it be South

America, whether it be Mexico, when it be the Israelis and the Hezbollah, whatever, Hamas or whatever, whether it be the Iraqis. Same race of people, killing one another.

So the immigrants that's going to come to this country, and there's going to be something, no doubt, just like it did with Vietnam, they could bring a bunch of them over from Iraq before it's over with, watch what I'm telling you, and they're going to bring them over and they're doing to do the same thing they did with them when they brought the Vietnamese over here. And I'm not prejudice in no way, shape, or form, not at all. I used to sell my shrimp at Cypermont Point. Vietnamese bringing in them old rotten-looking shrimp, he wouldn't even buy no ice. He was getting the same amount a pound that I was getting, because they got Hong Kong village down there where Louisa church used to be.

Where they ended up, the Catholic church supported the Vietnamese coming to this county, just like I had a fella come to Houma telling me about his problems, wanted me to help him. I said, "Well, chief, you got to go see your priest."

He said, "A priest, he don't want to give me no money."

I said, "All you do is you do this, put a little deodorant on you, get your hair straight, go see him, you're going to get some help. Put your name Phuong Phu or Hong Yong, or something like that, and you're going to get some help."

Because I'm telling you, in Port Arthur, Texas, there were sixty nine ship boats that were documented vessels, that were owned by the Catholic diocese.

JT: Is that right?

TK: That's right, and the Vietnamese would fish them. You see, if you're not a U.S. citizen, can you own a documented vessel?

JT: No.

TK: That's right. So you see—so what we're going to be relying on before long is immigrant labor to run this new class, these boats that they building, they would let some of these people drive their automobiles that they put on these boats, an automobile might cost \$50,000. You're looking at seven, eight, nine million dollar boats.

JT: You know Mr. Tom, when I think about those types of problems in this world, mainly political problems, I always turn to the little place down south, Cypermont

Point, or I'll go and try to forget about things. What's your experience down there in that little sportsman's paradise?

TK: I was in Cypermont Point before, when Cypermont Point was a shipping community. They had people like the Boilers, Alfred Etare, a few others, St. Germaine, that had camps down there. There was no drugs to speak of, okay, George Moresi came along and put in a drug haven when he took and bridged across, he took that piece of woods where Louis' Crab Dock is now, and made a deal for them hippies and yippies and all that back in them days to get down there and go to all them big concerts they were having or whatever you want to call it. You'd be parked at the road and they'd urinate on the side of your car while you were waiting for the Louisa Bridge, whether you had your family or not, it made no difference.

That was the beginning of the demise of the point, as being a fishing-friendly village. Now, Cypermont Point is what? A place of millionaires. I can name you on my hand the fisherman that are operating out of Cypermont Point. You got the Chouest, you got the Olandas—with the Chouest you got two of them. You got three of the Olandas left there, and you got T-Neg Trahan, as permanent residents down in that area. That's all offshoots of the Chouest family and the Olanda families, and T-Neg, of course, married Julius Chouest's daughter.

JT: What do you remember about years and years past at Point?

TK: I can remember at Point when you go to Mr. Mitchell's down there, you had the place where the Bayview is, you had a little narrow road that's pretty well washed out, they used to have an old railway at one time at Point, right there from Mr. Mitchell's coming back to where the slip is at Gary's. If you go in there, and if you had your little son with you, there was a little chicken running around, and, "Mr. Mitchell, my little son would like to have that chicken. Can I have one of them little biddies for him?"

"Yeah."

"How much you want for it?"

Give him fifty cents or give him a dollar. Then Richard moved in, Richard wasn't there yet. Richard and them had a camp down there, but they didn't live down there, they didn't own the store.

JT: Richard Legnon?

TK: Richard Legnon, and his dad and his momma. Richard was working at the saw mine, and his daddy as well. So then Jimmy Carpenter bought the property from

Mr. Mitchell, and he started filling in and getting—he was married to a Moresi at the time, and he started getting all these shavings from Moresi's and started dumping them all along the road and building up, and ended up putting a shrimp dock down there. I can remember before you cross the bridge, right there where they got Poverty Row, Jack Terrebonne used to have a shrimp dock right there by that bridge.

JT: So there was a lot of shrimping, fishing, oystering, and crabbing? What about the wildlife? Did it all resemble the Black Bayou that you grew up on?

TK: You know, in a lot of respects, because we used to fish all them bayous through Weeks Bay, shrimp Weeks Bay, Princess Ditch, Horse Bayou, there's another bayou there, got a bulkhead across, Hammock, a lake, Hammock Lake. Then you had all the pieces along going toward Point Maroune, you had bayous in there.

Then you had the Delcambre Canal, which we used to run in the Delcambre Canal, we'd take First Bayou, or we'd take the next cut if the water was high enough and we'd go up to Bayou Jack to bring our boats for the hurricanes. Then you're going down toward Four Mile Cut, which is the pogy boat channel, then you had State Wildlife on the west side of the bay, and you had Marsh Island on the east side, and you could look out there and there'd be geese landing alongside the Southwest pass. You saw alligators, you'd see the nutria at night, deer.

I mean, I been shrimping, put in my boat, I had a 62-footer, I got a picture of it. Many times the seagulls would lie right there on the deck with us, or they'd fill the outriggers, and if one of them would come in, the other one would get up and move over here, and he'd just keep doing that, just keep filling out and going to the end.

But today, for one thing, and I can't verify what I'm saying right now—because I can't drive any longer, they've taken that privilege away from me. I'm hoping to start again. But at one time, drugs were very prevalent at the Point. Cause normally, if you got money, you can have drugs...and I don't know what's going on down there now. I know you got all the new housing, camps, whatever you want to call them. It's hard to call a camp a two hundred and fifty thousand dollar place.

Got a boat landing, then you got the one that Gary Begnaud built. You know, it's hard to understand how you can take a marshland that used to be productive—I mean, you see the rat hills out there. Right where those condominiums are was rat hills. Ain't what somebody's telling me, it's what these two eyes saw.

I used to repair Mr. Chouest boat, the oldest gentlemen, Julius's daddy. I used to take care of his wood boat repairs, change planks, whatever had to be done. Paint

his bottom, fiberglass, etch it up, just help the gentleman out. Miss Hazel and them, they always been good neighbors, we never had no problem. Only issue I ever had was when they were buying shrimp and when they started paying the Vietnamese the same prices they were paying me, then I started retailing it at home.

JT: I see what you're saying. We're losing our wetland. The way that one of my professors described is that energy and the environment are two sides of the same coin. You have to learn how to co-exist, or we have to learn how to make them co-exist.

TK: One thing about it—according to the Bible, what's the first occupation that Adam was given? He was given two, what were they?

JT: Enlighten me.

TK: Dress the Garden of Eden, is that right? That was one, right? And what was the other one? Have dominion over what? The fowl of the air, fish of the sea, the creeping things on earth, and the domestic animals. He didn't tell him to manage it or to destroy it. He said he would have dominion over them.

Now you tell me—I was a commission member for there for six , as well as Mr. McCall was a commission member for, I think, either eight or ten years, with Wildlife and Fishes. Do you believe for one moment that the majority of our politicians—and I had the chance to set with some of them yesterday—not with them, believe me, not next to them, but in the same row of seats, but just on the other side in Grand Isle where they broke ground for the new marine lab that they're going to build on Grand Isle. They taken one off of Grand Tare, shutting it down. These people, they get their hand out and they get patted on the back because they done developed a lab, but what about the resource that that lab is supposed to be supporting? Don't it sound kind of stupid if you in the sugarcane business, and when your cane gets about that high, take a butch hog and butch hog it? When it gets that high again, you butch hog it again. What you going to have when it comes harvest time?

JT: Just a stub.

TK: That's right. Okay, we started out with a fishing industry which was a very viable industry in the state of Louisiana. I'm talking about from catfish, crawfish, everything between. Shrimp, oysters, everything. So what has happened to the diversion of the freshwater? What has happened to our oysters? I can remember when we had beaucoup of oysters in Cote Blanche and Vermillion Bay. I can go

show you the reefs where they were, but I can't show you too many active reefs.

A few by the pass, and a few going toward Hell's Hole, are still active.

The next thing with our shrimping industry, it used to be sixty-eight shrimp to the pound, that's the smallest you could catch. Every spring, we had a good season, twenty-six, thirty shrimp, or larger. I got documented proof for year, after year, after year, after year, showing that. Today, October the 15th—well, the first thing they did—this is political now—the moved the shrimp from sixty-eight count to a hundred count, that the way the politicians take care of their constituents. So the next thing they did, now October the 15th they take the count off and say, they can catch anything they want. They bring in shrimp a hundred fifty to the pound. Well, then shrimp used to go out along the edge of the coast out here, by the shoals, and they would weather the winter. That was just shrimp, they'd move back in the spring of the year, that's where you got your big shrimp from. But you see, we no longer have them big shrimp in the spring of the year. We get them in the fall of the year.

Now, the storm, sometimes I shut them down early and the boys from the Point will quit, but so now, here we are, we're managing not for quality shrimp anymore. The political system has, make us manage for quantity.

JT: I see what you're saying. Man has essentially broken its covenant with Mother Nature, now we are suffering the wrath.

TK: Exactly, and I'm going to tell you one other thing that's taking place, if you people know about it. They've now passed a rule that they're going to allow a man to be able to shrimp year-round under the disguise of being a bait fisherman by using a 12 and a half-foot frame, and put a 25-foot net on it. So what do you think is going to happen to that shrimp now? You can sell that bed shrimp for two dollars a pound, or he might get sixty five cents for that little shrimp at the dock. So now if he gets into some big shrimp, what do you think he's going to do with that big shrimp? You think he's going to sell them for two dollars a pound? He's going to retail his big shrimp. So you're going to have a lot of black market shrimpers start moving, again, and the next thing you're going to have happen is you're going to have people that's going to be making their year, they going to work their shrimp and when you start stirring their shrimp up in these estuaries, your shrimp start moving offshore, start getting out. So then what's going to happen that Bo-Jo is going to have his living made by May, for the year, and the man who depends on the May and August season to make his living won't have a living.

JT: He's going to be out.

TK: That's right. You can write down on paper, it's on recording, what I'm telling you, that's what's fixing to happen. Man has been a very poor steward, and I can tell you as a member of the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission for six years, we had more issues that were throwed at us between Bob Odom and the political system we have in this state than you can think about shaking a stick at.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 14 May 2007]

