MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Captain William "Bill" Robb

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Bio

Captain Bill Robb grew up near a seaport in Scotland. He went to sea as an apprentice at age 16. When World War II broke out, he joined the Merchant Marine, transporting cargo from Europe to the Far East. He participated in the Allied Invasion of North Africa in November 1942; his ship was bombed by a German torpedo bomber and was never recovered. After the war, he became a captain and continued to work at sea, until he came to the Port of Houston in 1949 as a superintendent for a stevedoring company. He retired as Vice President of Young & Company Stevedoring after 50 years in the business.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Captain Bill Robb, R-o-b-b, on August 19th, 2006, by Jason Theriot. Captain Bill Robb, history of the Port of Houston Ship Channel, tape one.

And if you'll just introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about your background, Captain.

WR: My name is William Robb. I started working in the Port of Houston in 1949, and retired about five years ago, four or five years ago.

JT: Where are you from, sir?

WR: I'm from Edinburgh, Scotland, born in Scotland and immigrated to the States in '49, and moved right on down to Houston, where they were desperately looking for superintendents at that time. They just didn't have any. The Port of Houston was picking up and, in fact, a friend of mine in New York told me, "If you're looking for a job you need to go to Houston, because they're calling up here all the time, looking for people."

So I took him at his word and came to work for Straun Shipping Company down here, when I first came down.

JT: That's interesting. So tell me about growing up in Scotland.

WR: Well, it was cold. And I've been back quite often. My parents lived there for quite a few years after I came here. It's very different, and education was quite different. I've taken my kids over there quite often, and they've all got some little bit of Scotland rubbed off on them, I think, so that was nice. I had a brother over there who passed away last year, and my wife passed away last year.

All my kids love Scotland, because Edinburgh particularly is a beautiful city, and it's quite a cultural shock for them when they go over there and listen to the people speaking, because it's quite different, too, you know. The pronunciations and the words are different.

JT: So Edinburgh, is that on the water, near the water?

WR: Yes, it's a seaport, and the seaport is Leith, but it's part of Edinburgh. It's not a big port. It's mostly inter-European, across the North Sea to Rotterdam,

Amsterdam, Germany, and Norway. That's one of the big imports is pit props, you know, for the mines and stuff, they come, and wood from planks from Norway. It's a busy little port but quite small.

JT: So what about your father, did he work down there on the docks?

WR: No, he was a policeman.

JT: A policeman, all right.

WR: In Edinburgh, city police. He retired about 1960 I guess, somewhere about there. So he came over here a few times; my mother did, too. They enjoyed Texas, you know. They thought it was a great place, but the weather in the summertime was too much for them.

JT: Oh yes, I can understand. Nice and cool up there in Scotland.

WR: Oh yes, all the time. But they're having heat waves there now, you know, abnormal, up in the eighties now and they have no air conditioning, so it's hard on them. I have a niece over there I talk to just about every day, and the heat is hard on them, with no air conditioning in the houses or cars. She said it's been bad this year. It seems like it's a trend worldwide, you know, the temperatures and everything—

JT: Just warming a little.

WR: —warming, yes. A few years down the road it'll probably get pretty serious.

JT: And then it may cool off again, you know. It's kind of cyclical. How about growing up near the ports and near the water. Did you have an early interest in maritime?

WR: Yes. They had a nautical college in Leith for trainees for master's license and chief officer's license and that, and when we were at school we used to go down there and there were always guys willing to talk about ships and the sea. And it was right in the port, the nautical college was right in the port, so we'd go down there and visit the port and visit the ships. I did that for a long time before I decided that that's what I wanted to do is to go to sea.

JT: About how old were you?

WR: Fifteen. And I went to sea at sixteen, and had a year in nautical college.

JT: What year was that, when you were sixteen?

WR: [19]38, '38.

JT: They let sixteen-year-olds go out to sea, huh?

WR: As an apprentice, yes. You have to sign articles as an apprentice. It's a four-year contract that you have to sign as an apprentice. Then, of course, the war broke out. I hadn't been to sea a month and the war broke out, and everything was scrapped and forgotten about then, so it was just every man for himself after that.

And we never had enough people. They never increased the crews on the ships. They increased the watches. You know, we did four on and four off, four on and four off indefinitely, and normally on sea you do four on and eight off. But, well,

when you're young it didn't make much difference. But looking back on it, it was just ridiculous to try to keep those hours that we kept all the time.

And sometimes in bad weather it would take over three weeks to get from, say, Liverpool to New York in convoy, because the speed of the convoy was the speed of the slowest ship. But we'd be doing three to four to five knots, you know. In a whole day we may not do a hundred miles. It was unbelievable. And just four on and four off, you could imagine by the time you got to New York you were just like this, you know. It was dreadful, but all part of the war, I guess. Everybody had to do something.

JT: Well, at sixteen that must have been quite an adventure for you.

WR: It was. But all the cadets started at sixteen.

JT: Is that so today, sir? Do young mariners, do they have opportunities to join at that early of an age?

WR: Yes. You get indentured is what they call it, indentured, and you sign your life away as what they call an apprentice. Then after four years—you can't go up for your—second mate's license is the first one that you get, and second mate's license you have to be at least twenty. So you start off at sixteen and you've got a four-year—and supposedly, they're supposed to, the various lines that have apprentices are supposed to teach them, you know, but mostly they ignore that and they just put you to work as an A.B., and you really just an extra sailor.

The line I sailed with had four apprentices on every ship, almost every ship, and they had sixty, seventy ships, so then, you know, they had a couple of hundred apprentices all at the same time. So it was great for them, it was sort of like free

labor, you know. So we did everything; everything the sailors did, we did, too. But, of course, that was all cut short by the war.

I was able to take my second mate's license when I was nineteen. They cut that back a year just to get more people. They didn't have enough mates with the war and building all the new ships, so that helped a whole lot.

JT: Tell me about, if you can recall, sir, about finding out that war had broken out. When did that take place for you guys in Scotland?

WR: Well, I was in Liverpool on my first ship. That was when Neville Chamberlain was going back to Germany and whatnot. We didn't really feel the effects of the war. That line I was sailing with was Blue Funnel Line, and they sailed to the Far East, so we continued running back and forth, went to Japan and went to China and Australia, and that went on till Pearl Harbor, and then all that happy time was over. Then that's when there weren't very many places you could go without getting in trouble then.

So that was, what, '41. Then after that there was no place to go that was safe, you know. It was just a nightmare most of the time.

JT: What type of cargo were y'all transporting in those early war years?

WR: In the early days it was just regular commerce, you know. We weren't carrying any war materials. We were carrying tea and coffee and all the things that you carry back and forth from the Far East, from China. That went on for a couple of years, and then, of course, everything started to change. The war got worse and worse. It turned out you were carrying nothing but war materiel after that.

JT: And so your ship or the company that you were working for was importing goods from Asia, from China? In other words y'all are sailing, coming back to Scotland?

WR: Yes, mostly, yes, yes, to England. Their homeport was Liverpool.

JT: Now, for the war effort, for the war materiel that y'all were transporting, was that mainly from the States, United States, back to Liverpool?

WR: Yes.

JT: What ports were y'all visiting in the States during those years?

WR: Mostly New York, Norfolk sometimes, Norfolk and especially Halifax. Halifax was the convoy port, which is in Canada.

JT: Nova Scotia.

WR: The convoys formed in Halifax. It's a huge bay in Halifax, just a monstrous bay. Sometimes fifty, sixty, seventy ships in there at anchor. Then they'd come out and give you a number, and when the time came to go you just had to follow those ships out, and then they got in line, of course.

You know, looking back on it, it was just a miracle that—well, of course, they had collisions, too, a lot of collisions, but a miracle that any of the ships ever got across the Atlantic, because the speed of the slowest speed every time, and always some ship showed up that couldn't do more than five or six knots. Instead of just sinking the ships and letting them get out of the way, these old ships, they'd just hang on.

They were so desperate for ships they hung onto them, and it made it so hard on other people, on other ships, to try to keep slowing down all the time, because you couldn't steer the ship when it was going so slow, you know. And you were bunched in a common convoy, ships on each side and ships back and forth, but at that slow a speed it was very hard. You had to really be on your toes, and four on and four off, you know, it got really old.

JT: How about your family, how did they cope with—

WR: Well, my mother was drafted. You know, everybody in Britain was drafted. She became a telephone operator. And, of course, my father was in the police anyway. Then they were bombed in Edinburgh, not terribly, but Glasgow was hit much harder than Edinburgh.

But it was a constant threat, because even at any time when the planes went over the sirens went off and blacked out and everything, so you were well aware that there was a war going on, and it was pretty close to Germany, too, a couple of hundred miles. So they got quite a share of false alarms, not so much bombing.

JT: And your brother, was he in the service?

WR: Yes. He was in the Scots Guards. He joined the army and he went to Italy and fought in Italy, but that was about 1944, I think, before he got into Italy.

JT: Down there in the Casino area?

WR: Yes.

JT: That was a tough battle.

WR: Oh yes, yes.

JT: Well, let's talk about this incident on Friday the thirteenth of, let's see, what month does it say, thirteenth day of the month, 1942, and your ship was attacked.

WR: Yes.

JT: What month was that?

WR: I think it was September, no, November, excuse me, November, because the invasion was in November, the invasion of North Africa. It was during the invasion of North Africa.

JT: Okay. So four days after the invasion of North Africa you guys are attacked. Tell me about going on the invasion.

WR: Well, it was the first invasion and it was a disaster from the word go, because they put these huge landing craft on general cargo ships, you know, not equipped to handle them. In later days they had them on davits, you know, hanging over the shipside and you just lowered away and they were gone. But we had to take these on deck, on top of the hatch with all these little old ship booms, and then manhandle them into the water, in the dark of course.

The invasion was about six o'clock in the morning, I think, the eighth of November I believe it was. I mean, it was a nightmare getting these big—I mean, they weren't big, you wouldn't think of them as big now, but on these type of ships that we had then they were monstrous. You had to get them in the water and then get the troops into them, you know, in the up and down.

JT: So where did your ship sail from, and who was aboard?

WR: We sailed from Liverpool, I think.

JT: And you had troops aboard?

WR: Troops onboard.

JT: Were they British troops?

WR: British troops, yes. They had as much experience as we had at invasion. They had no idea either, and then they were—and they had never practiced enough. You know, you couldn't believe the confusion, and in the dark. We didn't know where the landing was exactly going to be. They didn't have the charts, proper charts. They just sort of stopped and said, "Well, this is where we're going to put the troops ashore," and we'd be maybe two miles from the beach, you know, and then had all these landing craft.

JT: Was that at Casablanca?

WR: No, that was in North Africa, Algiers. We went first to Algiers.

JT: You went all the way to Algiers, okay.

WR: Went to Algiers, first Algiers, and then we went to—after we got rid of the troops they told us to go up to—Bougie was about a hundred miles east, further into the Mediterranean, so we went up there to take—we thought we were going to take some of the supplies up there. We had a full shipload of supplies of all kinds, but it was just chaos.

And then we had a hard time getting out of there, because we were all stuck in the shore, and nobody was the least bit interested. We'd go to the army and say, "Hey, how about trying to get us out of here?"

"Oh, well, don't worry about it, don't worry." Nobody worried about it, so nobody knew what had happened to us. You know, the parents didn't know, and nobody knew, you know, not even the convoy. The convoy just disintegrated after they started to put people ashore.

JT: What about the French, the French coastal guns?

WR: We had good luck with the people in Bougie, you know. They took care of us, they fed us. When I say they fed us, they gave us fruit and stuff like that, oranges everywhere. Then we just had to wait and wait and wait, until finally they sent a ship—there were a lot of—I don't know how many ships were sunk, but there were two or three ship crews that were trying to get out, and finally they sent a ship in there to get us all at one time.

JT: And so on the thirteen a German dive bomber attacked your ship. One bomb, one explosion?

WR: One bomb, one bomb, yes.

JT: And killed seventeen men?

WR: Yes. Well, we were never able to find out where—they disappeared. When we tried to take a count we were missing seventeen people. But some of them were Chinese crew, you know, and we think they might have got ashore and just—we never did find out; we never saw them again.

JT: You had Chinese aboard your British ship?

WR: Chinese crews, yes. All these British ships that sailed to the Far East either had Indian crews or Chinese crews; cheap labor.

JT: Yes, same situation as today, I'll bet.

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: Did you have any friends, good friends who were injured or lost on that attack?

WR: No. I had good friends, we left a couple of good friends there that they were going to stay and see if they could help the navy with the ship. The ship was still above water, partly above water. They stayed. I never heard how they got on.

JT: Do you remember that night, sir, when the bomb fell?

WR: Yes, we were looking straight up. We were on the bridge at the time. Matter of fact, we had a navy commodore, he was going to lead these ships to Bougie, and we were the lead ship. He was looking through his binoculars up, and he said, "Bombs away." And he said, "One of these bombs is wobbling horribly," you know, wobbling in. You know, here we're all sitting like this and the bomb's coming down.

I don't know which one hit us, the one that was wobbling or not, but a tremendous explosion. I mean, it just everywhere. Bombs came down in rows, you know, two or three. We never did—I mean, it was just complete confusion, and smoke, and then just settled down. We were actually in the harbor, settled down on the bottom. But getting out was the problem.

JT: What was the name of that ship, sir?

WR: *Glen Findless*.

JT: So you came ashore?

WR: Yes.

JT: You went to shore and French people took care of y'all for a little while at least?

WR: Well, they were in as much confusion as we were, because we had troops, you know, some of the troops that came with us, we'd dropped some off in Algiers, we brought some with us. Nobody seemed to know what anybody was supposed to do next, you know. The troops went ashore but they didn't know what to do. There was nobody there to fight in Bougie. The French were back in Algiers when they were fighting over there, but we didn't see any French troops at all.

So we just waited and pleaded with everybody we saw, you know, to see if they could get us out of there, because the army didn't care. Nobody seemed to care. [laughs] Well, you've done your job and that's it. We don't need you anymore.

JT: Too early in the war, huh? The old baptism of fire there in Operation Torch. So tell me, how long did you stay ashore, and when did you finally—

WR: Well, we got out about the third day, I think, just slept. We stayed in the post office. They'd let us stay in the post office, and we just slept on the floor. But nobody from the military or anything made any effort to feed us or do anything else. We just had to go out and beg, you know. The troops had K-rations, and they weren't going to share them with anybody, and I don't blame them. They had no way of getting any more, either. That was a big mess.

JT: And so you were finally able to get off on your ship, or?

WR: No, they sent another ship in.

JT: What happened to your ship?

WR: It's still sitting. It sat there for years after that. They tried to raise it, and I think they abandoned it finally.

JT: Might still be there.

WR: Yes, may still be there, yes.

JT: Okay. So tell me about the rest of the war, sir, from '42 until the end of the war, '45. Were you still sailing?

WR: Yes. Well, after the Far East closed up, most of the sailing, of course, was in the Atlantic, so it was just back and forth, endless. I met my wife on the North Atlantic, because she was a passenger coming from New York to London. So we met and I called her when I'd get back, and we finally got together after the war and got married, and moved back—thought we were going to move to New Jersey.

She lived in New Jersey, her parents lived in New Jersey, but I couldn't stand that weather up there. Wintertime, got there in wintertime. It was awful, trying to drive in slush and snow. So when I heard about there were jobs available, and there were no jobs available in New York anyway. I'd already tried that. And she was quite happy about moving, so we moved down here.

Her mother was a doctor. Her mother retired and followed us down here, and she bought this house and we had the house across the street. Yes, her father died, so her mother lived here for, oh, about fifteen years I guess, after she came down here.

JT: Had you ever made any trips to the Port of Houston before '49?

WR: No, no. My first trip was by air when I came into Hobby Airport, and that was the only airport here at the time.

JT: Well, you mentioned at the beginning, sir, that you had found out through a friend that the Port of Houston was desperate for supervisors. Now, if we're talking 1949, that's post-World War II. There was a lot of activity here on the port. Obviously the petrochemical industry was booming and emerging. Why do you think they couldn't find any supervisors?

WR: Well, I don't know if they couldn't find any. I guess a lot of people that did it during the war did it because they had to, and after the war they may have found better things to do, I don't know. But it was common knowledge in New York that Texas ports were looking for people, and seemingly so, because when I came down here, half of the superintendents that were working in Houston were from the East, Northeast.

In fact, the one that I worked for came from Boston. It was Straun Shipping Company. He was a captain, Captain Nick Scully. There were so many new stevedore companies. It was a strange situation. They had no stevedoring companies as we would understand them in New York, where you had big stevedoring companies that ran half a dozen piers. There were no stevedores like that down here.

The only stevedores in Houston worked for a shipping company, like Lykes Brothers. Lykes had their own stevedores, but Lykes would stevedore another ship. If you came in with a ship, they would not stevedore anybody else's ships. And States Marine had their own stevedores, and all the American companies had their own stevedoring company.

I don't know whether it was anything to do with their government sanctions. You know, the steamship companies got a lot of money from the government just to operate, and I don't know whether that conflicted with their—but they wouldn't—Lykes stevedores, if you had a ship next to a Lykes ship, they wouldn't consider even giving you labor or anything else.

So little stevedore companies started to handle the ships that were coming in that were not liners, like States Marine or Lykes. Captain [Jim] Baker was Lykes. They had their own stevedoring companies and their own people, and their own equipment. Back then there was no equipment in Houston. Lykes were the only people that had forklifts, so everybody else was using hand trucks and stuff like that, and it took a while to get organized just to come down.

I went to work for Straun, and Straun didn't have a forklift. So here we are, we had three or four lines, they had signed up for three or four lines.

JT: So what was your initial impression of the Port of Houston when you came down?

WR: Well, I enjoyed the people. I liked Texas people, and the longshoremen were easy to work with, you know. But that was another strange thing that, I don't know, you run into that, but they had white longshoremen and black longshoremen, completely independent of each other.

The whites had their own union hall and the blacks had their own union hall. Not only that, but then they had what they called the warehouse locals, who worked only in the warehouse. They didn't work on a ship. But they unloaded the trucks or whatever, and put the cargo in the warehouse, and then the longshoremen took the cargo from the warehouse, put it on the ship, or vice versa.

So you're dealing with two white locals, one warehouse local and one what they called a deep-sea local, and a black warehouse and a black deep-sea local, and you had to keep peace with them, too. You know, they didn't like each other. They didn't try to work together. If you ordered a gang—I mean, looking back on it now it doesn't make sense—but if you ordered a gang, one gang, you did not know whether it was going to be black or white. They talked about that at night. "Well, this is our turn. We'll take this ship, you take that ship, this ship."

So we were obliged to order what we called a walk-in foreman. He's a straw boss, you know, a walk-in foreman, but he's union. So we had to order two walk-in foremen, one black and one white, because we didn't know whether we were going to get a white gang or a black gang. So when the white gang showed up the black foreman went home, but he made a day's pay, a walk-in foreman.

So we fought that for years, were never able to do anything about it, not till the locals merged. You know, they all merged together finally. But that was a lot of—I didn't run into it, but there was a lot of bad feeling between the management and ILA, not so much the stevedores as the steamship lines. You know, they just couldn't believe the price of anything. [laughs] They were making millions, because they were all subsidized, but they fought unions. They fought the seamen's unions, too. But it was interesting to be in the middle of it.

Of course, I was independent. I was on everybody's side.

JT: Well, how did the rates compare, the longshoremen rates and the shipping rates, how did that compare from Houston to New York, where you had been working before? Were they comparable?

WR: Well, yes. Of course, New York was like nothing else in the world. It was Mafia. You know, they even checked your bags when you came off the ship, not the Customs but the Mafia, to be sure that you didn't have anything they wanted. I mean, they patrolled the docks. They just, it's unbelievable how they—you know, guys with big cigars and fancy suits, and he was your head honcho up there. You didn't dare say a word to them.

JT: Different kind of straw boss, huh?

WR: Yes, straw boss. But all expensive suits and stuff like that; different world. We never ran into that here. Our big problem was the constant war between the whites and the blacks.

Yes, the race relations. I had no—I got along fine with blacks and whites. In fact, in one case I'd only been here a few months, and I got involved in a—not involved. I was working a ship that had, loading grain, and she changed from AF of L to CIO, union. And the crew, one of the crew that was onboard was told they had to leave, because they had hired a new crew. The ship changed hands and the new owners belonged to this ILA, nautical union.

So we got in a big fight. I say we got in a fight; the crews got in a big fight. The one didn't want to leave the ship, and the other crew had been sent up from Galveston. One was AF of L. So they got fighting on the dock, I mean, really fighting, I mean with bicycle chains and god knows what else. So one guy came to me and he said, "We want you to stop loading this ship." I thought, how the hell did I get in this mess? We were almost finished. We were loading grain.

And I said, "I can't stop."

And he said, "Well, you'd better stop, you know, because you're in big trouble if you keep on like this." And these guys were really bloodthirsty. They fought and, I mean, really banged each other up top of the head. So I didn't know what to do, and nobody could tell you what to do, so I just kept on working, and when the ship finished it was dark.

So they came and told me that, "When you leave this ship you're in big trouble, because we're going to beat the shit out of you when you get off the dock."

So I didn't know what to do, and I'm telling these longshoremen, I said, "What the hell are we going to do?" They weren't bothering them at all. I was the only outsider. So they went to the union hall and told the president, who was Bud Laird, and he was a touch hog himself.

They told him that I was in deep trouble, so they sent a bunch of longshoremen from the union hall down to the ship, and told these guys, "Hey, this guy is one of us, and you'd better not lay a hand on him." So they waited there. I had the papers to get signed and all kinds of things to do. They waited for me, and I didn't know them, but I really appreciated that. I could have been in big trouble. So from then on, you know, I got along fine with them.

JT: So as soon as you got to the ship channel you were a supervisor for a stevedoring company?

WR: Yes.

JT: For Young?

WR: No, for Straun when I first came here, Straun.

JT: Okay. And about how many longshoremen did they work with?

WR: Well, you just called the hall and ordered what you needed. Some days you may not need any. But they'd have gear men, who made up splicing ropes and wires and stuff. They were ILA, but they were permanent. So they'd have maybe two or three gear men and one or two clerks, because you always had clerks out at different places, receiving cargo that you had to have them. So you had maybe ILA, six or seven permanent employees, forty-hour-a-week, and then when you needed the gangs you just called the hall.

JT: Now, how many clients did you guys have, and who were your clients?

WR: With Straun we had Royal Netherlands Line, we had Bank Line, which was a British Line, we had a Dutch line, I can't remember the name of it, a big Dutch company. So we had, oh, I'm sure they had six or seven different lines that they represented.

JT: Mostly foreign?

WR: All foreign.

JT: Really.

WR: Yes. Straun had no—that was what started the stevedoring business, because all the stevedores that were in existence were working only their own ships, own line. So the stevedoring companies who were agents is where the new stevedores

came from. They decided, well, we have to protect ourselves. We have to get a stevedoring company, so Straun's formed a company, Beale formed a company.

All of the agents eventually wound up being stevedores, not because they wanted to, because they had to have some kind of guarantee when you brought a ship in that somebody was going to work it. So that's how all the—at one time there was twenty-five or twenty-six stevedore companies, all operated by agents. States Marine, who was a steamship company, they had their own stevedores. Lykes had their own stevedores. Delta Line had their own stevedores.

But then they wouldn't work any other ships, or any other line. I don't know whether that was just because they didn't want to. It looked like it would have been better and cheaper to have branched out and did it, but none of them would do that, so they worked only their own ships.

JT: So a stevedoring company, when hired by a shipping company to either unload or load cargo from the ship to the docks and vice versa, the stevedoring companies are those who go to the union to find the longshoremen?

WR: Yes.

JT: So stevedoring is the middle man.

WR: Right.

JT: Okay. Now, did you guys give preferential treatment to one union group or one specific gang or another? Was there one gang that y'all worked more closely with?

WR: No.

JT: Or it was really who was available at that time?

WR: They had about forty gangs in both locals, and some of them were dreadful, you know, horrible. You just hated to see them come down to the dock, because they were so slow, you know. You could tell that they were not going to do anything, and you couldn't fire them. It was a hopeless situation. You just had to do the best you could. It was really horrible.

JT: Now, as a supervisor your job was to watch over the loading or unloading of that ship with this particular gang.

WR: Right. And you had to do it exactly the way that the chief mate on the ship wanted it. You know, he wanted this stowed here, and this stowed, because he was thinking about discharging it, so he had to have it available when he got to Algiers or wherever he was going, that all the Algiers cargo was right where it needed to be. So this was all—and this was hard to explain to longshoremen, but they just put it in there. But you had to keep it segregated, separated, and, of course, different types of cargo couldn't be close to other types of cargo. The odor or something might spoil it. It was a complicated business.

Of course when you're working with a foreign ship, too, then you had to get the chief mate's approval of everything that you did, and then you had to go back and see that the longshoremen did it that way. And, of course, they had their own way they wanted to do, the easy way.

JT: Did you run into any language-barrier problems with foreign ships?

WR: No.

JT: Maybe captains who can't speak English?

WR: They all spoke English.

JT: They all spoke English. That might have been a requirement.

WR: I think so, and these foreign ships, some of them spoke perfect English, you know, Germans and Dutch and French, Europeans. Of course the Indian line, they spoke English, too. We had Sindia [phonetic] Line, that was the Indian line.

JT: So in '49 and the early days right after the war, what was some of the main cargo that was being transported up and down the ship channel?

WR: Food mostly.

JT: Grain?

WR: Well, a lot of grain, yes, and oats and stuff like that going to Europe. We loaded grain day and night. It was a big, big, steady thing, and we dealt with the U.S. government on that. They were the—it was a giveaway cargo. So they had superintendents, too, that came from Washington to come down and supervise this. Some of them never seen the ship or grain, and that was interesting, too. We had to get their blessing before we could do anything. But grain worked day and night. It was a busy, busy thing, grain.

JT: Well, that sounds like a lot of people who are involved in one particular chore.

WR: Yes.

JT: A lot of people watching over, or watching other people doing a lot of work to get cargo from offshore to on ship.

WR: Yes. And sometimes these ships would be loading for fifteen or twenty ports, to discharge in fifteen or twenty ports, so it had to be laid out perfectly. You know, it had to be laid out so they could get it when they needed it, not have it buried somewhere and then have to shift other cargo to get to it. So they were very—and, of course, I had sailed as a chief mate, so I knew what their problems were.

But I know they had a lot of problems with some stevedores who didn't understand. They thought all you had to do was put it in the ship. They weren't going to be in Australia somewhere where you were trying to get it out. That was one reason that I went with Straun, because they had Bank Line, and Bank Line was not very happy with Straun's stevedoring, so I got along fine with them.

That's a Scottish company anyway; they were from Glasgow. But they were very fussy about it, because they went to Australia and New Zealand, and had a lot of union problems over there with longshore unions and stuff like that. So they had to make it as easy to discharge as they could make it, you know, just a constant—it was a worry for them all the time. And the longshoremen didn't understand that, you know. They're, you know, throw it in there and get it in and sail the ship.

JT: So how long did you work as a supervisor?

WR: I started with Young & Company in '53, and I think I became a vice president about '60, '61, or '62, or something like that. So I still worked ships as a vice president, because we had special lines and special people, and always had people from out of the country coming to visit their ships and stuff like that, so you had to be there when those people showed up.

Then we got a Volkswagen contract, and that was a big contract. That was when they first started. I mean, it was not a roll-on, roll-off business. You had to pick the cars up with a derrick and put them on a dock one at a time, and not scratch them or not do any damage to them, and that was hectic, trying to break longshoremen in to do that. To treat anything gently, you almost had to have a pistol.

But they got on, and, of course, once the drive-off came it was easy, easy money after they built those ships, fantastic ships. Some of them carried three or four thousand cars, and just amazing.

JT: Well, a few more questions about some of your first impressions about the port in ’49. As you were talking about it in ’42, with the Allies first invasion things were chaotic and not really well organized. Did you get a sense that the Port of Houston in post-World War II was completely the opposite? Was it well organized, or were they still trying to figure out the business?

WR: Well, see, there were private terminals in Houston at that time. One was Anderson Clayton, who were the big cotton importers, exporters, and they ran eight berths at Long Reach, what we called Long Reach. That’s now ’41 to ’48, when the port purchased Long Reach.

But when I started stevedoring they had Long Reach, where if you worked you were working cotton mostly, because that was Anderson Clayton. They didn’t do their own stevedoring, but mostly Lykes worked at Long Reach, because the cotton was all giveaway cargo, and they were working for the U.S. government. Foreign-flag ships didn’t get into much of that sort of cargo.

Then there was a Spruntz dock which had two berths, and Manchester had three berths. So the Port Commission when we started only had berths at ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen, and the grain elevator was fourteen and fifteen, and sixteen hadn't even been built when I started. So all these berths from sixteen on down to thirty-one are relatively new berths.

JT: Are you talking about the city docks?

WR: City docks, yes.

JT: This is a map that doesn't go further down here, but I believe these are some of the port docks here. Here's your big turning basin.

WR: See, this was the only port. This was the port when I came here, right here.

JT: Docks eleven through fifteen on the east side?

WR: Eleven through thirteen. Fourteen and fifteen were the grain elevator. So we didn't do a whole lot of business with the Port of Houston as such. This was Long Reach, this was Anderson Clayton, and they ran their—they had berths one to eight, and it's called Long Reach was the name of the dock. They made all the decisions there. They had nothing to do with the port at all. They didn't even speak to the people in the port.

But this was all the port consisted of, was here, plus the grain elevator, and the grain elevator worked day and night.

JT: Now, when you say the port, you mean the Port of Houston Authority?

WR: Yes.

JT: Okay.

WR: So they were just a small operation, and unless you had a ship going in here to ten, eleven, twelve, or thirteen, that was the only dealings we had with the port. All our dealings, 90 percent of my early dealings were with Long Reach here, and then Manchester. This is Spruntz here, I guess. Manchester was further down, had three berths.

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Captain Bill Robb, R-o-b-b. Bill Robb, stevedoring company since 1949, Merchant Marine at Young stevedoring company vice president. This is tape two of an oral history interview, Captain Bill Robb by Jason Theriot on August 19th, 2006, history of the Port of Houston Ship Channel.

Where was Straun located? Where was the office?

WR: Everybody's office was in Long Reach. This was where all our business was. We had an office here, Straun had an office, Lykes had an office, all of the stevedore companies, and they went out of their way to—they built offices for people. We had our gear room over there. They'd allocated space to the different—you paid rent, of course. So all our business, 90 percent of everybody's business was right here.

It was only after, in the fifties when they built. Sixteen was the first new berth; when I came here it was being built, in early, I guess about 1950 or '51 or so.

JT: So you guys were renting this long area from Anderson Clayton?

WR: Yes, and it was a horrible place to work. The ceilings were only about this high, because it was designed for cotton, and that was hand-truck cotton, not designed for any kind of forklifts. So when you worked, when they started forklifts in there you couldn't breathe. I mean, there was no ventilation, just a low little warehouse, but they made millions of dollars out of it.

It was a busy, busy place. Ships waited on berths to get in there. They made it their business to be—well, they're very efficient. They worked night and day. They were non-union. They had no longshoremen, so they had people working day and night, unloading cargo and getting it ready for the next day. Sail a ship today, and they'd work all night putting this cotton into the berth for the next ship. No longshoremen at all, no union.

JT: So they were working efficient, faster over time.

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: Now, what about over here at the Port of Houston? These were all union?

WR: These were union, all union. All the port was union docks.

JT: This was where you had some of your race troubles and some of the trouble with these gangs?

WR: Yes. You had to know a long time ahead, because you had to start putting your cargo in there, so that meant you had to have somebody over there to unload it. So, you know, people avoided that as much as they could, because it was inconvenient. You had to send somebody over there with a forklift, have a clerk over there, so if you could do all this at Long Reach you'd sit in your office, and

we had our office there, too. Everybody had an office; all the offices were here. This was the hub of the Port of Houston.

JT: So it was kind of two different sides of the railroad tracks, so to speak.

WR: Right, right, exactly.

JT: Two different worlds, really.

WR: And then very efficient, very efficient.

JT: On the Long Reach side.

WR: And then, of course, when pallets became that thing, that was just when pallets were being introduced, too. They set up a pallet plant and they started making pallets. They made pallets day and night, and they always had plenty of pallets. If you came to the Port of Houston you had to go look for pallets, and they didn't have any of their own. You had to go steal pallets from somebody else.

But, of course, when they started, when sixteen started and they started building all the way down here, as they built they got people that were, you know, more familiar with what had to be done. But you couldn't do much here. It was really an imposition if you decided to put a ship in there. It cost you money from the stevedore's point of view. You had to have somebody to receive the cargo on a daily basis, you know, because somebody in New York wanted to know, "Have you received this? Have you received that?"

So you had to go over there and check it out, see what you had and report it, whereas here, one clerk could take care of all your ships here. The berths were just numbered one through eight, and then you would tell you you were going to

Berth Seven, so then you could handle everything from—we had our office and our clerks in the office over there, and if we had something on the north side we had to send a clerk in a car over there to do that.

JT: So Berths One through Eight on the West Side was the Long Reach operation?

WR: And that was, yes, Anderson Clayton.

JT: And then the first Port of Houston berths were on the East Side, and those were all union run?

WR: Yes.

JT: And those were not as efficient as the Long Reach?

WR: No, no, no. Well, there were so many different people involved, you know, everybody. You had different steamship companies putting the ship in there, all fighting for a berth. This was all run by Anderson Clayton. They told you what you could do and what you couldn't do. When you got on the North Side you just had to try to make the best of it.

JT: Now, my understanding of the union is, the purpose for joining a union is to get better pay and to get better benefits for workers.

WR: Sure.

JT: Did you ever hear complaints about the employees on the Long Reach docks about low pay?

WR: They were all Mexicans.

JT: They were all Mexicans, is that right.

WR: Yes. But efficient Mexicans. I mean, they had all been with Long Reach. Long Reach kept their people forever. Once you got a job at Long Reach, I mean, that was a sort of ambition of people living in the East End, to go to work at Long Reach, because it was a busy place and you know, you had the same dock foreman and all their people, you knew them, and you could get things done easily. And then they were always willing to help. They were anxious to move cargo, and that was their business, very efficient.

JT: That's interesting. So has this setup, has this changed today?

WR: This is gone. I mean, the berths are still there, but I think they just put these laid-up ships in there now. There's no stevedoring activity at all.

JT: Mostly operated by cranes now, and containers?

WR: They had a heavy-lift crane, too, which was unusual. This was where you had to go if you had a heavy lift; you had to go there whether you wanted to or not. The port had no heavy-lift cranes. They had what they called a stiff leg at that time. It just sat on the ground, but they could lift thirty or forty tons. So if you had a heavy lift at all you had to send it to Long Reach and then squeeze the ship in to get it. You had to right at the—they couldn't move the crane, the crane was fixed. So that was a big deal when you had to go over to Long Reach and load a heavy lift.

JT: So Long Reach is gone now. Does Anderson Clayton still own this land, do you know?

WR: I think the port owns it. They sold it to the port, yes.

JT: The port has taken over the whole turning basin area.

WR: Yes, yes. Manchester is still independent. They have three berths down there. They still work non-union down there.

JT: Mexican?

WR: Mostly.

JT: Is that right. Do you have any non-union where it's mostly white males working, or have all or a majority of those groups joined unions?

WR: I think the majority would be non-union.

JT: Well, that's interesting. Well, let's talk about how long did you stay here? Did you say retired from the industry about five years ago?

WR: Yes, about five years ago. I still go down there every other day or so and talk to them.

JT: Well, let's talk about this, Captain. Let's talk about how this ditch developed over the last hundred years. I understand you weren't here, you weren't born from here, but in your experiences in your, gosh, almost fifty-years-plus experience, you probably ran across some stories and did some research of your own. So I want to ask you a few questions about some of the early pioneers of the ship channel, and how this really developed, and please answer to the best of your ability.

There's a list of individuals whom I have listed here, and I want to go over this list and you tell me how these individuals fit into the history of the Port of Houston. How about the Allen Brothers, the founders of Houston? What do you know of their contributions?

WR: Only what I've read in the history of Houston and Texas, and of course, Allen's Landing is a busy part of town now. I think they were very farsighted to be able to dream of having a port fifty miles from the sea, and it really hurt Galveston. You know, Galveston could have been and probably should have been the seaport for this area.

But the people in Houston were just go-getters, the Allen brothers and the people that followed them, Morgan, you know, Morgan's Point is named after him. They were just determined that you could bring ships up here. There are pictures, I think, over at the Port Commission office of that. You could see what it was like when they brought ships up here.

JT: Like navigating through a big bayou, huh?

WR: Yes, just a big bayou, yes.

JT: What about some of these political leaders here, Tom Ball and Mayor Rice and those guys in the early days? [shuffling through papers together]

WR: I wrote someone about that.

JT: What can you tell me about their contributions?

WR: About whose?

JT: Tom Ball and Mayor Rice and those guys at the turn of the century.

WR: I don't know too much about their contributions. Our Mayor Louis Welch was active all the time. He was down, one of the latecomers. You know, the original people, I didn't hear much about them in the Port of Houston. You have to read about it elsewhere, you know, because most of the people who are involved in expanding the port came from elsewhere. You know, there are not too many native Houstonians.

I mean, when you look at it now, just in the short time—I say short time—fifty years that I've been here, it's just unbelievable what's happened to the port, and Barber's Cut and places like that. There was nothing like that. That was all completely new.

The military had a base out there on I-10 where they stored munitions. That paid double-time. It was a wonderful—the longshoremen would think they'd died and gone to heaven when they got a job out there, and the military brought ships out every once in a while. The Korean War was going on and that sort of thing. They must have had hundreds of thousands of tons of ammunition and stuff out there, and they worked day and night out there loading ships, and that was ILA, double-time.

JT: So this was ammunition that was coming from other parts of the country by rail?

WR: Oklahoma, going out, yes.

JT: And then getting on ship and going out to the Far East?

WR: Yes. And the whole place is just covered with underground storage, you know, bunkers or whatever you call them, so that was a big operation, great. Horrible

for the rest of the stevedores, because you couldn't get a gang then if there was a ship working out there. Everybody wanted to go out there, work for double. I don't blame them, work for double-time.

But if you needed a gang to load bags or something like that, good luck, you know. They'd rather sit out there all day waiting for somebody to get hurt, and get a job out there. Then they worked day and night. I mean, they paid double overtime, too, paid all night, day and night, government, you know.

JT: Was that during the Vietnam War as well?

WR: Yes, till quite recently. It's closed now. I think all the ammunitions out of there. It took a long time to get it out of there, but I think it's all gone. But it was a big, big operation. Jacinto Port they called it. I think it's probably on here, too. [looking at map]

JT: Is that on the east side, the northeast side?

WR: Yes, next to the dry dock over there. Yes, Jacinto Port Terminal.

JT: Yes, but I think you're right, to have the vision to be able to dredge this, and the funds, you know, to have that ambition to go out and seek a partnership with the federal government and the local community, to put up the money to do that. That was really a gamble.

WR: Yes. It took a lot of putting a lot of pressure on a lot of people to do it, I'm sure, politicians and stuff like that, just amazing, because you see those pictures of those original ships and, you know, they're mud up the sides. They were slushing their way, pushing them with poles trying to get them up here.

JT: Well, let's talk about this for a minute, and tell me if you have any perspective on this. In the late thirties there was a big labor strike on pretty much all the ports, and the longshoremen in the United States. What was your perspective on what that major strike did for the industry, for the stevedores and the longshoremen, and the unions?

WR: I think for the longshoremen it got them more money and better conditions, I think, and I think for the stevedore point of view, too, it made them realize that they were dealing with an organization. Up to that time I don't think they'd appreciated it, but I think when New York got dug in and started sending people down to places like Houston—well, Galveston, of course, was the main port in those days. Houston was just hardly doing anything at all.

We had a couple of pretty long strikes, too, since I've been here. It was just unhappy for everybody. It was not good for the longshoremen, and it certainly wasn't good for management, and we argued about some of the silliest little things, you know, just unbelievable.

We used to meet in Galveston. I was on the committee, the negotiating committee. No air conditioning. Go down there to a union hall. We'd meet in the union hall in Galveston, sweat just rolling off everybody, and trying to get some kind of contract put together. And New York would send them—and this is the minimum. You can go and then elsewhere, whatever else you can get, get it.

So initially we sort of agreed on the money, you know. It was only at that time two dollars and something an hour, or something like that, and that was kind of set up nationally. But then there'd be these little things that—and we'd sit for weeks talking about things that really were of little consequence, but oh, they were so determined that they were not going to back up, and our people were determined that they were not going to give in.

And, of course, the big steamship companies like Lykes, they sort of held the club, you know. They didn't like longshoremen anyway, and they didn't like unions, and so they balked and, you know, it was so obvious from the start that we were going to have to give something to get organized and get the labor that we wanted, and get some of the things that we wanted.

But they'd argue and sit and not talk. They were very frustrating times, and weeks would go by. You know, we'd travel to Galveston every day and meet, and talk about the same things we'd talked about the day before. Then Teddy Gleason would come down from New York and tell us all how dumb we were, that we could be back at work making money instead of—and a lot of what he said was true.

JT: So you think that the big strikes empowered the union?

WR: Oh yes, without a doubt.

JT: To be able to confront management and the private sector—

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: —and force them to make certain concessions?

WR: Yes.

JT: It sounds like it was really a turning point for the longshoremen and the union in that respect.

WR: Yes, yes. But over the years—and nowadays it's quite different. The ILA works hand-in-glove with management now. They realize, I think both sides realize that not only the longshoremen got smarter, but I think the owners got smarter, and, of course, there's no American steamship lines involved anymore. You know, they used to have a Lykes ship in here every day, or two or three a day. They ran to the West Indies and back, and they'd be back in ten or fifteen days, and they always went to Long Reach, so Long Reach was a busy place, sometimes three or four Lykes ships.

I think the harmony made them realize that, you know, if they could just keep harmony that they would make more money, may spend a little more initially, but you know, the whole idea is to keep the thing running, and eventually it worked out that way. It took a long time. But the American companies took over the negotiations. A little company like—and mine was Young & Company. We didn't own any ships, but they felt like since they owned the ships, too, and they were the ones that were suffering if they would—we as a stevedore didn't suffer under other than just not making any money.

But they were paying crews, and ships laid up and stuff like that, and they were the ones that were just so difficult to—it made you wonder what—it was just the idea that they were in charge, and they were not going to give into the longshoremen. And, of course, all the rest of the people at the negotiations, like me who worked for little stevedore companies, we were all for getting back to work, but we had little to say about it.

They just were determined, and they lost every time. I don't ever remember that we came out ahead, you know. It always seemed like some kind of subterfuge they'd agree to something, you know, but you couldn't do this and maybe you shouldn't do that, and after being out sometimes a couple of months, you know, it was just ridiculous and little to gain, nothing to gain.

JT: The American way.

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: And what has happened to those ship companies, Captain, in your opinion? Where have they gone?

WR: They are gone. Well, nobody went to containers, for one thing. American-flag were slow, slow, slow about containers. You know, the Germans came in with these barge vessels—I don't know if you've seen those—and they'd carry barges, eighty-two barges, General Lloyd and Hamburg-America Line, and they jumped at containers.

You know, Lykes fought against containers, didn't fight against them but they didn't think that was the answer to their problem, and then they didn't build container ships, and everybody else in the world was building container ships as fast as they could build them. And obviously, it's been a success, because everybody's got the containers now.

But these States Marine and Delta Line, and about four or five American companies that came to Houston, I mean, if you've got a container to put onboard, it was a big, big operation. You know, they didn't go to any container berth. They wanted you to drag that container down to Long Reach, then they had to shift the ship down to that heavy boom they had. I don't know, they just put themselves out of business, it seemed to me.

Lykes is gone completely. Captain Baker was port captain for Lykes. Before him they had a Warren Idaback, who was in charge of their stevedoring operation. He was a chief mate, too, with Lykes. He's dead now. You kind of felt that the

meeting, that the people who were talking for the steamship companies were not convinced that they were doing the right thing, but that was what they had been told to do, you know. There just was no give and take at all.

But now there's no—to my knowledge there's not any American-flag ships, I mean other than occasional ships, but I mean no American-flag line—

JT: That are based in Houston.

WR: —based in Houston.

JT: How did the oil-and-gas industry change all of this?

WR: Well, the oil industry changed it by shipping out millions of barrels. You know, we shipped oil in barrels, millions, to every part of the world. That was a big, big business here for a long time. Of course, it's all gone to little tankers now, and stuff like that, and containers, put oil in containers in barrels. But, well, I think that was the making of the Port of Houston was the oil-and-gas business.

They got ships and they started making commodities like carbon black and stuff that, you know, made from oil production. Carbon black was a big, big thing here. Hundreds of thousands of tons went to all over the world, to Europe and Australia, shiploads. Of course, I'm sure it still does, but it's in containers. It was a messy cargo to handle, you know, just black like soot in paper bags. [laughs]

And the combination of that and cotton in the same warehouse was—the cotton people just completely couldn't understand how anybody could be that dumb, but at Long Reach there was nothing else, you had to do it. Ships were coming to Long Reach and they had carbon black and cotton all in the same ship.

JT: Now, did your company, or the two companies that you worked for in the early days, did they do any work for the oil companies, for the refineries and for that type of industry?

WR: Yes, yes. We did a lot of loading of their products.

JT: Tell me more about that.

WR: Well, just I'm talking barrel oil and case oil and stuff like that. The owners were, you know, they would send representatives over here from Europe or wherever, and go to Dallas or you know, and just try to get a corner on that business. They'd offer them a better rate, cut rate or something like that if they could get a shipload and stuff like that. They pursued it pretty hard.

Of course, cotton was the big, big—you know, when the cotton season came the warehouses were just completely full of cotton, and by the grace of God there'd been invented a clamp machine that would pick up a bale, because we used to do it by hand, and a bale weighed about five hundred and some-odd pounds, and with a little two-wheeled truck, you know. You'd get one bale on it and run it to the ship. [laughs]

JT: Back breaking, huh?

WR: And it was piecework, back breaking, too, because it was piecework. They got paid by the bale, and a good gang would load two hundred bales an hour. They didn't make—you know, maybe at that time ten or twelve dollars an hour for a longshoreman, who was only making three dollars if he was working general cargo, so they fought to get that cotton.

JT: What about the barrels of oil, what was the rate on that?

WR: Well, we'd get full shiploads, and we'd have barreled oil as far as you could see, and just break them down and roll them, get them up to the ship and roll them, and pick them up with hooks, a hook on each end of the barrel.

JT: And that was a crane operation, or that was a two-man?

WR: We had very few cranes.

JT: So two men could pick up a barrel?

WR: With a winch, the winch on the ship. It'd pick up six barrels, with hooks. The barrels would be laid down and they'd hook them on each end. Yes, they'd load them all day long like that, and get good gangs, and they liked that work, you know, not as heavy as throwing bags. Bags was what they couldn't stand.

We'd get bags of ammonium sulfate at Pasadena, Phillips Petroleum down there. The bags weighed 240 pounds, and it was hard to get longshoremen to stay down there with them. You know, you had to toss those bags. You had to pick them up. I mean, two longshoremen picked up a bag, but to do that all day long in summertime, it was hard to get people. We argued with the Phillips chemical and people like that. They couldn't understand why it was so hard to get longshoremen. But they couldn't get people either to do it, you know? [laughs] But that was back-breaking work.

JT: Now, these barrels of oil, what companies—explain to me the process. Were you guys working for the ship or for the oil company that was unloading?

WR: You're working for the ship.

JT: Okay. And were the ships run by the oil companies?

WR: Not necessarily. But they would book space on a general cargo ship. You know, maybe they'd give them an order for 5,000 drums or something like that.

JT: This was oil that was coming out of the gulf?

WR: Coming out of Texas, yes, some were, yes. We'd get—oh, sometimes the warehouses would be full of barreled oil, you know. Get a big contract with somebody, they'd be loading barrels of oil all the time, stacking them on pallets. The pallets came into their own in the early fifties, and Long Reach started making pallets, and then the port finally got into making pallets.

But the port was much better equipped because of the height in the warehouses. Long Reach was so—you'd get about two heights of drum oil and that was it, couldn't get up a third one in a lot of places, and, of course, in the port's you could go up as high as you could reach with a forklift.

JT: Now, were the big refineries, the Shell and the Humble and the Gulf, were the big refineries on the ship channel by that time, the big petrochemical plants and refineries?

WR: I don't think they shipped barrels. I don't know where they drummed it.

JT: Was it possibly drummed offshore, coming out of the ground operations?

WR: I don't think so, no, no. I think all that offshore was pumped in.

JT: Pumped in and then barreled somewhere.

WR: Barreled somewhere, at some of their plants, yes.

JT: In Houston. And then you guys were loading it onto ships?

WR: Yes.

JT: And offloading. Now, did they have the big refineries down there as well? Did your companies do any type of stevedoring work for some of those guys?

WR: No. All the refineries, if they had a ship in there they were doing their own work. They didn't even use ILA labor. Phillips Petroleum used ILA labor because they had a lot of that fertilizer and stuff like that in bags, and they never had enough labor of their own, so they used to use ILA labor, complained all the time about it, but they did.

JT: Now, what about for some of the service industries, for the oil and gas, like building the rigs and some of the piping that's used in that industry; were the stevedores involved in any of that, in moving any of that?

WR: No, no.

JT: I guess those particular service companies had their own workers, dockworkers.

WR: Yes. Yes. Oh, they wouldn't allow longshoremen inside one of those refineries, not on a bet.

JT: That's something.

WR: We had one interesting situation that this Armco Steel, which is a big company in Ohio, they opened up here. They had a big plant here, and they brought in iron

ore from all over the world, which had gotten to be big business. They were bringing in 50,000 tons on a ship. So they didn't want to use ILA labor either, but they finally—we negotiated with them and we got their business.

We had ships out at Armco Steel, one or two a month with lots of iron ore, and it was a big job, because you had to clean the ship after you got through, sweep it and shovel it clean. When we started out we had a big problem with their labor. We were using their equipment, you know, their cranes and everything to unload, and they couldn't understand why their company had gone to the ILA instead of using the United Steel Workers.

But after a while we finally, everybody got to know each other and we had no problem. It's all gone now. Armco Steel is closed. It was big business for a while, and good business for the ILA, because they worked around the clock, twenty-four hours, paid the overtime and the double time and everything else.

JT: I've got a question here. Beaumont and Port Arthur, and as we've talked about before, Galveston, are natural seaport areas. Why do you think the Port of Houston, which is a very unique setup, a fifty-mile channel, why do you think the Port of Houston emerged as the petrochemical capital?

WR: I guess because all the money was in Houston, you know, the owners, I mean these oil companies. A lot of people pushed Houston. You know, I was always impressed with the ability of the council, city council and the mayor, and all the presidents of all these oil companies and everything. If you went to a luncheon or anything, they were always had to be Houston, you know, Houston this and Houston that.

It was a big, big—Glen McCarthy, you know, he was a multi-millionaire and an oil—he didn't own any oil, but he bought and sold lots of it on paper. But, I

mean, they were all gung ho on Houston. Glen McCarthy opened a cart club in the Shamrock Hotel, and it was just a meeting place for oil people. You know, he was a wildcatter himself, and any time you went out there to have a drink—we used to go out there, belonged to the club, and there would always be oil people in there.

In fact, our company joined the Shamrock, it was the name of the club—the Cart Club was the name of the club, sorry. The Shamrock Hotel with it's Cart Club, and a lot of the steamship companies and stevedore companies joined the club, because you met all the people that were big in the shipping business, the shippers.

So he was a real go-getter and, you know, people listened when he talked. Of course he'd been probably drinking when he was talking, but—and not only him but, you know, every day in the papers or on TV there was always somebody, one of these presidents or chairmen or their wives. I guess Houston was just a big deal for them.

JT: They were great at self-promoting.

WR: Yes, exactly.

JT: And they had the financial wherewithal, the financial backing, and the business infrastructure to be able to pull this off.

WR: Yes.

JT: Now, what about that infrastructure, about the freight side of the business, the rail and the trucking? Were you guys involved in any of that? Did that have some impact on your work?

WR: Oh, it had a lot of impact, yes, especially we had to unload railcars and trucks when they delivered to the port, and we set up a division of Young & Company to do that. That's all they did was unload or load out cargo from warehouses. That became part of the stevedoring business. Every stevedore, I think, probably did that. I'm not sure that all of them did it at the time. They didn't do it at Long Reach, because they did their own loading out.

JT: Was that a reaction to the containerization, meaning another part of work for longshoremen to do?

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: Now, some of the guys at the ILA mentioned about this fifty-mile radius law, I guess if you will, restrictions that didn't get passed, and the longshoremen fought the containerization, because that took away the majority of their business right there.

WR: Well, they thought it did, but it actually brought them a lot of business. They never could understand that. I mean, we were loading containers and unloading containers, and they just thought, you know, when that container went off that they should be following it to unload it, or following an empty container somewhere to Waxahachie or somewhere to load it, and finally, that went on for years we argued about that.

They went on strike about it one time, I think, but there's no way for people to follow an individual container to Dallas or somewhere, and find out who's going to load it or unload it. It just never did make sense.

JT: Well, yes, and that wasn't the purpose behind the container. But I see what you're saying, that the containerization really expanded everything along the ship channel, made everything much more efficient, brought more money into the area, and provided better rates and better living for the longshoremen and stevedores.

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: Even though they may not have been hauling 250-pound sacks of sulfate, or rolling down barrels of oil, they still had a pretty good living.

WR: Oh yes. Well, somebody has to load these containers, from our point of view, or unload them if they come in loaded, you know, so that's longshore work. They get that work, too. But, of course, it's nothing like the money they get. They get double the money at Barber's Cut, so if a longshoreman's got a few years seniority he's not going to work anywhere else. He's just going to work at Barber's Cut.

So the newcomers coming in still get in those jobs of unloading bags out of containers and putting them on pallets and stuff like that, or vice versa, so that work will always be there. Somebody's got to do it. Then they're taking them into the union, but they're not getting any jobs at Barber's Cut, that's for sure.

JT: Well, if Malcolm McLean's invention and his idea really took off in the late fifties, and really began to emerge in the early sixties—

WR: You know, the first ship came to Houston.

JT: That's right. The petrochemical and the oil companies had already established a foothold in this area. Is it possible that the reason why containerization took off

so quickly from Houston is because of the infrastructure that the oil companies had laid down on the ship channel?

WR: Quite possibly, yes, yes.

JT: Because if we're comparing Galveston and Port Arthur and some of the other southeast Texas areas, they didn't have the big oil, the big companies and the infrastructure in place, and by the time containerization came aboard it was really a no-brainer to bring it here to Houston, plus everything was really already in place.

WR: Yes. It happened very quickly, you know. It just went not overnight, but over a few months. We were working everything by hand, and all of a sudden we woke up and everything was moving to containers. Of course, we had the same thing when we went to pallets. You know, when I started, pallets were a relatively new way of working then. Otherwise you put bags in a rope sling and just hauled them onboard.

After, when Long Reach got involved, everything was palletized before the stevedore came down to the job. They were doing that with their own labor. So if you had 10,000 tons of bagged flour or rice or something going out, and you went to Long Reach, you could all be sitting on pallets when you got there. That was their labor.

JT: You mentioned on the phone before, Captain, that stevedoring down here in the Port of Houston Ship Channel has historically been a family business, been in families—

WR: Well, I meant by that the families of the owners, ship owners, yes.

JT: Now, that industry has declined. You'd mentioned somewhere a few dozen companies were established here on the ship channel when you first came, and now that has really dwindled. What explains this decline in stevedoring companies?

WR: Well, containerization for one thing. It just greatly decreased the demand. I mean, in the busy days we would have gangs unloading or loading pallets in half a dozen different piers, you know, docks. So you had to have labor and supervision in so many different places. And then once the containerization got in in a big way, that sort of got eliminated.

The lines were not making as many calls, for one thing. You know, they were coming in and then they started going to Barber's Cut, and that eliminated all the calls up here, and all of the stevedore, there were so many little stevedores that depended on four or five general-cargo ships a month, and made a living out of it, and the ships just stopped coming and the stevedores just disappeared. I think at one time there was twenty-six different stevedore companies, and I think now there are, I don't know, maybe six or seven, I suppose, right now, something like that, eight maybe.

JT: Is the business down there today, is it stable for those six or eight?

WR: Oh, I think so, yes, yes.

JT: What's the next twenty or thirty years for those six or seven companies? Is there a possibility for them to get into some new areas of work, or is it going to stay consistent? What do you think?

WR: It looks to me like it's going to stay consistent. Of course, you can't tell what the world's going to do, because get involved in wars or something like that, the whole picture changes all over.

JT: There's still enough coffee and grain and flour and that kind of stuff coming through that there's a need for manual labor down there.

WR: Yes. There'll always be, and, of course, now, of course other than the containers, everything that you see going in and out on containers used to be handled by longshoremen, and they don't touch it now, other than the container. And, of course, that's why they're making that big money, and they'll always make big money because they'd be afraid to let anything happen to that operation out there, from the owners' point of view.

JT: So are the longshoremen down there at Barber's Cut, are they working that terminal?

WR: Oh yes, yes. That's their pride and joy.

JT: And they also get the opportunity with Bayport?

WR: Oh yes, they've already got that cornered.

JT: So you've got stevedoring companies there working those areas as well.

WR: Yes.

JT: And who knows, maybe fifty years down the road you'll have another cut.

WR: Oh, I'm sure.

JT: That's the trend now, is—

WR: I don't know what it'd be, but maybe we'll be flying the cargo in by that time. [laughs] I don't know. Oh yes, I mean as quickly as containers took off, and there's no telling what might be next on the list. But you know, they started barge vessels, too, and they just didn't work. It was a great idea, too, but I don't know how many ships they built, about seven or eight of them, barge ships.

One was American-flag, one was German, but there was always a problem with the barges, you know. They'd send them off and forget to bring them back. You had no control over—you know, with a truck line you can pick up the phone and say, "I need this cargo on the dock tomorrow," but with a barge line, the barge may be way up the Mississippi somewhere, and you don't know where it is or who's got it, or when it's going to be here. They had a lot of problems trying to assemble all the—

Tape 3, Side 1

JT: All right. This is tape three with Captain Bill Robb on nineteenth August, 2006, history of the Port of Houston.

Let's talk about how the segregation in the sixties and seventies, and how that affected the stevedores with the coming of the Civil Rights Movement on the ship channel.

WR: Well, it affected the longshoremen more than us, because they were obliged to do away with their black locals and white locals, and become just a general provider of labor, black, white, or Mexican. So they had separate union halls, four separate

union halls I think at one time. They had a deep-sea white, deep-sea colored, and warehouse white, warehouse colored.

But they didn't fight it. I think they realized that it was a long time coming, but it had come and they were told and that was it, and they got a deadline. So they moved into the white union hall on Harrisburg, and the colored union hall was on 75th Street. It just disintegrated. I don't think it's even still there. They work out of the hall at 7800 Harrisburg, and of course now they have blacks as well as Mexicans, and everybody is in there by election. So they have as many blacks as they have whites, because they have just as many voters of every nationality.

So it went very smoothly. Everybody thought it would never happen, couldn't happen, wouldn't happen, and it did. I mean, people needed to work and they wanted to work. First they tried to, even though they integrated the union officials, the gangs were still white and black, but then they finally stopped that and they told them you had to pick them up by seniority. This guy had twenty years service and the white guy had nineteen; this black guy was first out.

So it finally just disappeared. It didn't make sense. Some of these old foremen, you know, hang onto it, and because so many of them had their relatives on the payroll was one of the reasons, but it went very smoothly really, never had any problem. And by that time we were using blacks in the gear rooms and in warehouse operations. You know, it had become integrated before it was forced upon them.

JT: So, generally it was well accepted, integration?

WR: Yes.

JT: Tell me about working for Young. Run through those years again. What years were you involved with that group?

WR: With Young & Company? I started with Young & Company in '53, I think, and they sold to—it's now operated by P&O Ports, and has been for about ten years I guess now. I worked for P&O Ports for three or four years, but as a consultant. But Young & Company stevedored for many, many lines. They were one of the bigger stevedore companies, and did Volkswagen and some pretty large accounts.

JT: Did you say that you had become vice president of that company?

WR: Yes, I was vice president of Young & Company.

JT: So what are the major changes that you saw in the last fifty years, Captain, with stevedoring in Port of Houston?

WR: Well, one of the big one is the ability for both sides to get along. You know, when I first came here longshoremen didn't speak to stevedore officials, and officials, unless they were cussing them out about something. It's just so hard to believe how it has changed. The ILA has accepted the idea that they need the employers, and the employers have accepted the idea that they need the ILA. One can't get along without the other.

So instead of fighting like we used to fight—I mean, it was just so ridiculous. In fact now, and this is an indication of where I'm tied in now, but the—

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So what is this here, what does this represent?

WR: This is the ILA and this is Maersk Motors, and then ILA on the same hat, unheard of, even unthinkable a few years ago.

JT: Is that right.

WR: So now, I mean, the ILA has accepted the fact that they need the owners, and the owners have accepted the fact that they need the ILA, and it's become much smoother. The operation is smoother and they listen to each other. You know, if the ILA has a suggestion to make, "This could be better, this could be done better," and they do. I mean, they've always been available, but we never listened to them, and vice versa. [laughs] They wouldn't listen to anybody in supervision, because they thought you were trying to put something over on them. That's all changed, I think.

And people like—not giving my son any credit, but people like that, new people have moved into the ILA and accepted the fact that they need the owners, too. I mean, they need the ship owners and they need the stevedores, and it's working out well.

And I think not only here, but New York, too. I can remember going into New York and good lord, there was a wild place where longshoremen didn't speak English. They all spoke Polish or Slav languages, and these Italian dudes were walking up and down in fancy suits, telling everybody what to do, you know. And you didn't dare say a word. I mean, it was a strange place. I was amazed.

And they would even, if you came off the ship with a package, you know, one of these dudes would come along and say, "What's in that package?" He wasn't a Customs officer or anything like that. He was just one of the Mafia. He wanted to know you weren't taking anything that might belong to the Mafia ashore. It was a strange situation.

JT: I think the situation that occurred, what you're talking about between the labor and the management, is really one piece of a very intricate puzzle that has really worked itself out on the ship channel—

WR: Exactly.

JT: —with respects to the pilots and the tugging and the Port of Houston Authority, how they're all connected.

WR: Yes.

JT: And then you've got the government, the Coast Guard, and the Corps of Engineers, and then the big oil companies. It seems like everybody now is really working in unison.

WR: Yes, yes, oh yes. I think it's turned out much better than I ever thought it would.

JT: Do you think that's just because of trial and error, or the older guys like yourself have now had the twenty, thirty, forty years of experience, and looking back now can impress upon the newcomers that it's much better to be united and to get along?

WR: Yes. I think that the management is doing that with their own people, and the ILA is doing it with their people, too.

JT: Is that just experience, maybe, the reason for that?

WR: Yes. Well, I mean, they can look at the container business and see how much—some of those guys get a container bonus of ten or twelve thousand dollars every

year, over and above all their time. You know, they split up the—so if you've got *x* number of years service you qualify for a bonus, and you get twelve, thirteen, fourteen thousand dollars bonus. It's my understanding that some of these clerks out there who are working day and night receiving containers, make $150,000 a year.

JT: A clerk?

WR: ILA clerk, yes. And crane operators same way.

JT: You've been down on the ship channel for a long time. Have you seen a major shift in more environmental sensibility, sustainability, more protection for the environment down there with all the entities involved?

WR: Oh yes, very much so, yes, yes.

JT: Has your company or the stevedores, have they taken it upon themselves—

WR: I think everybody has. It was thrust upon them, too, because they didn't, I don't think—it wasn't initially, that they happy to start doing that. Eventually they had to. You know, pick up your mess and clean up your mess, otherwise—they used to just walk away and leave it, you know. Now you have to clean up the area that you're working in and keep it clear, and the port employs people to keep cleaning. There's always somebody out there working now, and you didn't see it a few years ago. But they all are into that now.

JT: Well then, again, I think you have to point to the fact that it's been a century of activity at the port, and it's taken this long for everyone involved to realize what's the proper way to run this thing. It's kind of like, Rome wasn't built overnight, and it's taken this long to understand the environmental impacts of the work, to

understand that relations and partnership with all entities involved, including the private sector, is essential.

WR: Have you met Jimmy Jamison?

JT: No, sir.

WR: He's a stud duck with the port as far as operations is concerned, Jimmy Jamison. He worked for me as a superintendent. He was a stevedore superintendent, worked for me at Young & Company, a great guy. He came to me years ago and said he had an offer from the port and what did I think about it, and I told him. I hated to lose him, but he was a great superintendent, but I told him, I said, "Well, the Barber's Cut and everything is zooming." So he went out there and became the head man at Barber's Cut, and really did well.

JT: Well, maybe they realize that there was a Captain Barber who was, I guess, what the cut is named after.

WR: Yes.

JT: So, a lot of good history. Well, just a few more questions here, Captain, and we'll wrap things up. What is your impression of how our country, particularly in the last ten years, has really become so greedy and dependent on foreign oil? How do you think that is going to play out in the next twenty to thirty years, and how is the Port of Houston impacted by all of that?

WR: I think the Port of Houston is going to be involved regardless. It's just to be hoped that the government can solve some of these problems with Arabs and people like that. I don't know. It just seems like we're desperate to get involved with some of these countries that I don't think we should have anything to do

with. I don't see it getting any better. I mean, I think the Arab countries, or not the Arab countries but so many of these Arab chiefs or whatever they are, are taking advantage of the situation.

I don't know how it's ever going to solve itself. I think we just, we can't afford to leave these countries. We need all the products, but I don't think that war is the answer to it. I think that this jumping into these wars is not going to solve any—and I think Israel's finding the same thing. I think we're following them, and it's not successful. There has to be a better way.

JT: Well, I should say we are fortunate that the Gulf of Mexico has provided such natural resources over the last fifty to seventy-five years. Now we're realizing that that supply is running out, and yet the American thirst for oil is ever increasing. It's just unfortunate that we have to depend upon Venezuela and Africa and the Middle East.

WR: Nigeria, when you see them trying to get oil out of Nigeria and what they're—I mean, I wouldn't work in Nigeria. They couldn't give me enough money. I've sailed in and out of Nigeria, I know I've done business there, but it's a dreadful place. You know, you just can't imagine how you can negotiate with people like that. It must be very, very trying for—not only trying, but dangerous to go down and try to negotiate with people like that for oil.

And, of course, there's no laws, no rules. I mean there's oil floating everywhere when you go in the port there. It's just no clean up, no nothing. I've had friends that have gone over there in the last few years, and they say it's just a jungle, to go to Lagos and try to do business, and pretty hopeless.

I think the country's got a long way to go, and you're not going to accommodate all of those people; some of it. I don't know. A lot of the places that we were

getting oil from were folded up and not able to pump, and Nigeria is one of them. I think they just, they can't keep people out there. They either kidnap them or chase them away. It's hard to believe.

JT: Well, let me ask you this about the public, and the private sector. What role does the local community play in port activity and port development?

WR: The community? Well, we've had festivals and invited people to the port frequently. That's all kind of died now because of security. I don't know that too many people are coming in and out of the port like they used to. You know, people could drive in and look at ships, and that's all changed now, naturally.

But they still have a boat at the port to take people out, and they advertise it. They're still doing it. Every time I see the boat it's always full of people, especially school children. I think it's a great publicity thing, a great thing for kids to see and get down there. And they've adopted. There's an elementary school right behind the port on Clinton Drive, and I think the port has adopted—it's a black, mainly black school, and they have kids come down there all the time.

I think the port tries hard to put on a good impression, a good front, and succeeds, I think, pretty much. Of course, most of my friends have been in the shipping business, or are in the shipping business, retired and whatnot, but I'm always impressed with how much people know about the Port of Houston. Of course, the bridge goes right over the Port of Houston. That helps, too, I guess.

But, you know, you can go in a lot of places and people are not aware of the port, but it seems to me like Houston is, well, it's like it's always in the headlines. [laughs] That's probably got something to do with it. It's always having problems. But I think the Port of Houston is accepted by the city and the county,

and the state. You know, it's a big plus for everybody. And I think the Chamber of Commerce pushes it pretty well. They keep it to the forefront. You know, it's always of interest to people, and keeps them going.

JT: Well, you've traveled all over the world, and to other ports in this country. What makes the Port of Houston so unique, compared to the others?

WR: I guess it's unique because they sort of built a port from nothing. You know, other ports have been Liverpool and London and New York, and they've been ports for hundreds of years, and people grew up and accepted that and never questioned it. People are always amazed when they come to Houston, even now, and even the people that live here. People live here before they know it's a port, and they find out accidentally that they're living in a seaport. I know that happened to people that have moved here, didn't know it was a port.

I think that keeps people interested. You know, it's a thing that always surprises people, that ships are in the Port of Houston. I think it surprises them and then impresses them. People are impressed. And the people on the city council, and the mayor and everybody are all always pushing the port, and our state representatives. It's a big plus for everybody, and I think they follow up on it.

And like I say, New York and places like that, and Baltimore and Philadelphia, it's just old hat. You know, we've been there two or three hundred years, and nothing's changed except instead of sailing ships they're getting container ships. And I think Houston's keeping up, you know, with Bayport coming up and everything, and then I'm sure when Bayport's finished they'll have to start somewhere else. It's endless.

You know, and New Orleans is not going to keep up, apparently. I don't think so. So they were our biggest competitor. And I think Houston will become a supplier

for the whole Southeast area, clear into the Middle West, you know, big, big supplier.

One of the big things, I think, is the fees in the Panama Canal have gotten so high that owners don't want to send—not a case of not wanting, they can't afford to send their ships through the canal. It costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to make a trip through the canal. So now ships—all the cargo from Europe is coming to the East Coast and to the Gulf, Volkswagens, too, everything. And then they go by train to the West Coast. But they're all coming to Houston, basically Houston for this whole area to California, so there's a constant stream.

Now, we're getting all the Japanese cars by rail now. We used to get Japanese ships. We don't get those, and they don't get any German ships. Most of the cars coming this Volkswagen, but they used to go all the way through the canal and up the West. They've decided now that that's prohibitive, so all of this not only cars but cargo is coming and unloading here, so the railroad has quadrupled in size. I mean, they can't build trains fast enough; fantastic business.

And I think it's tremendous for the Port of Houston. We're probably benefiting more than any other port. I know Savannah and places like that are getting a lot of containers, but I think containers going to California and that are coming to Houston, and then going by rail. The railroad has really picked up tremendously, and then because it's prospered great for the railroad, too, that they're building new trains as fast as they can build them, new tracks, so that's a big plus for Houston, I think.

JT: And also, being along the Gulf of Mexico, obviously, you've got a close proximity to the oilfields and to that industry. But it appears as what you're saying is Houston is not only the center for petrochemical development, but it is essentially a hub in the Western Hemisphere.

WR: Yes, yes.

JT: All roads lead through the Port of Houston.

WR: Right. Exactly. More so all the time.

JT: Captain, thank you so very much for your time.

WR: Okay, you're very welcome.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 28 November 2006]