MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: TERRY MAYON

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Bio

Terry Mayon is from Morgan City, Louisiana. His grandfather went to work for The Texas Company in 1925 and his father went to work for Texaco in 1945 and then for Kerr-McGee. Mr. Mayon worked for Kerr McGee for 22 years. He was also an air-traffic controller for many years. Mr. Mayon specialized in safety at Kerr-McGee and discusses World War II veterans in the oil field, accidents, unions, and women and Blacks in the oil field.

Side 1

JC: This is Jamie Christy and today is March 3, 2004. I am interviewing Mr. Terry Mayon at the Morgan City Archives in Morgan City, Louisiana. Mr. Mayon, could you tell us some of your earliest memories of the oil field here?

TM: Well, I guess since I come from a line of people that worked in the oil field . . . my grandfather went to work for Texaco around 1925. He spent 41 years with Texaco before retiring, I think around 1966. He passed away in the beginning of 1968. My dad went to work for Texaco, end of 1945, first part of 1946. Worked for them for a while and then left them, went to work for a local shipyard, then went to work for Kerr McGee Oil and Gas in the late 1940s, and worked for them for about 33-35 years. Then, of course, I went to work for Kerr McGee and put in 22 years with them. So I've been around people that have worked in the oil industry including uncles and cousins and even one of my sons works has a service company to the oil industry . . . one of my sons works for a shipbuilder here in town that a lot of their work, of course, is with the oil industry. Plus the fact I enjoy talking to all the old people about all the stories, so that is part of it.

When my grandfather started, of course, back in the 20s, it was pretty rough on them. They were young boys at that time. My grandfather was in his early 20s

when he went to work for them. He eventually had three daughters. And they moved from Morgan City to Houma to New Iberia to Jeanerette as he worked for the company because part of that is they would move around and the crews would go with them. And my grandfather started off, if I remember correctly, it was called the *Barge Wind*. Their job was primarily, they went out and put in cribbings for new drilling rigs and for new production. And, of course, in those days, all the cribbing was creosote. Posts. They would go out and drive the posts in the ground and build all the cribbing works. Of course, there are stories about them boys just being burned seriously with that creosote and being out in the sun. It was a pretty rough and dangerous occupation. They did not have the safety equipment that we have today, of course. It was not unusual for people to be cut and hurt, broken bones, and that type of thing. Those old boys would work through that because there was no sick leave, there was no pay if you did not work. If you got hurt and did not work, you just did not get paid. So, a lot of those boys tell stories about working through with casts and whatever it took to make the day. It was during the Depression, of course, in the 1920s. Of course, the Depression did not come along until 1929 but in those early . . . 1925 through the end of World War II and even before in south Louisiana, jobs were not easy to find for uneducated Acadians in this part of Louisiana, primarily with fishermen, trappers, working the logging business. So, in this area, there was not really that big a difference between the Depression and not the Depression. They did anything it took to make that nickel for the next day.

My grandfather then went to work, in those days, they called them pumpers. You would call them pumpers, gaugers, switchers, production operators. Part of his job was to go out and make sure that the well itself was properly producing oil and gauging tanks. That is where the expression of gauger came from because they had these long tapes that they gauged the tanks with so they could figure out how much oil they made daily. They were called pumpers because you pumped the oil down the line, so some of that came from . . . that is where you get all these different names of the same thing. It is all the same job – pump switch – whatever it is. In the last part of his life, that is all he did was gauge because, at that time, he was in his late 50s and early 60s. My dad came back from World War II in 1945 and after his rehabilitation and all, he went to work for Texaco doing the same thing. But he went to work in not the same thing – he went to work in the drilling section with Texaco. And he worked for them, if I remember correctly, the way he tells it, for just two to three months. And he thought it was so dangerous that he was not going to put himself through that. He had spent 3-1/2 years in Europe during the war and in his mind, there was just no way that he was going to put up with working under those conditions and being treated the way that they were treated in those days.

My dad found it dangerous because of the fact that a lot of the things that they wanted them to do, some of the climbing that they had to do, working with the pipe

the way they had to work with it back then, was all manual labor. You did not have a lot of machinery. Even though machinery was available in a lot of cases, it was not used that often because it added weight to the barge to get to where you were going, so a lot of those things were left off. There was no special clothing that you wore. Gloves – you had to buy your own gloves. There were no hard hats to really talk about. You had to buy that. Leg and foot protection – there was no leg and foot protection that was given to you. Again, you had to buy that if you wanted it. And after those boys, and especially the boys that came back after World War II, there was a change in the way they looked at life and they were not going to put up with someone bullying them into doing something that they felt was going to cause them injury. I mean, these guys had been off the battlefield now. Come on! They were pretty tough when they came back. So, those were some of the things that I remember.

I know my grandfather, from hindsight now, looking at him going out and gauging those tanks, and they would just open those big old tanks, and all of these fumes would come up and they were breathing all this stuff, of course, benzene, my grandfather never heard the word "benzene" . . . and most produced oil had some amount of benzene. So, here he is in a situation, he has the creosote all over him, right? Here is benzene. All of the carcinogens that we know about today, may have been known then but the people that worked did not know that. To me, which, of

course, was the most dangerous.

My grandfather, worked in his later years, I can remember him gauging. He only gauged at night. He worked at night and he worked by himself. So, here he is out there in the middle of a cane field behind – it was in between Jeanerette and Loreauville. There was a little placed called "T" Bayou Field and I can remember him out there – that was every night he went out and he was by himself. And things happen rather rapidly around pressured equipment, climbing up and down on well heads, climbing up and down to gauge tanks, fooling with the different chemicals that we used at that time that those guys just had no concept of what it was. To me, those were the dangerous things.

Some of these guys that I have talked to, they called them swampers, more or less, they tracked through the swamp out there to help with the seismograph crews. And they were out there in the cold and the wet. There were no hip boots. There was no protection other than your clothes and you are out there getting soaked and wet and freezing, carrying dynamite and everything else through the swamp and through the marsh south of town. So, there were a lot of dangerous things going on. I guess it was to save money, more than anything else, because the equipment was available. We had marsh buggies in the 1940s. I mean, there was equipment available to do a lot of this but it was expensive. So, I think a lot of things were done to save money

and whether or not the guy . . . people were not the top priority because there were so many people needing work that the turnover rate was pretty rapid at the beginning. After the war, you do not see that as much because guys were a little . . . I think they gained a little more self-respect or something. They were a little tougher. They did not put up with as much. Just like after Vietnam, you see a change in the way people operated in the oil field – at least I did. I do not know exactly what all the factors could be or maybe a better education which I think is the majority of it. Most of the people that I know that work in the oil field today have at least a high school education, and a very large percentage have at least some college. And then, there are quite a number of college educated guys doing the same work that was being done years ago by guys with no education. So, these guys are much smarter. They understand better what is going on. My dad always said, "Your greatest power is your knowledge." Well, here was a guy with a third grade education telling me that his biggest drawback in his whole life was the fact that he did not have the knowledge to understand what was being done to him. I know my grandfather was the same way because I think he went to school for one year or something – if he went to school at all. So, I understand what it is not to know what is being done to you because you do not have the knowledge. Today's guy in the oil field – it is a completely different story.

JC: What was your grandfather's name?

TM: His name was Adam Dupre.

JC: And your father?

TM: My father was Alcide Mayon. And, again, these families – the Dupres, of course, came to Louisiana in about 1785. The Mayons were here in 1785 to 1787 era, somewhere in that two-year period. So, the two families have been in south Louisiana for quite a number of years now and they were all farmers and fishermen and trappers and all of the things that were done in south Louisiana.

The oil industry, when it came in, was a way for people to really get out of the poverty in south Louisiana. A lot of the risks were taken, knowing what the risks were because even though, in today's standard when you look at it, these guys were not paid anything – it was more than they had ever made before. So, eyes wide open – a lot of guys knew what the risks were and knew it was unsafe but they did it anyway because they needed the money. They needed to survive. So, I guess if you look at it, you have to take that into consideration. They were not stupid. They were not led like sheep in that sense. They were caught in a bad situation financially. What else were you going to do in this part of south Louisiana if you look at what we had here? I mean, you either were a farmer, what I call a subsistence farmer.

You had a farm that was enough to take care of your family. There was no extra money. People did not have spending cash. So, when Texaco and those came in and they were offering fifty cents a day or a dollar a day, it was some pretty big money. If you saw $100 a year, that was a lot of money. And now, all of a sudden, you are seeing that you can put in 100 days of work and make $100. So, think of it that way because they were paying, if I remember correctly . . . I remember my grandfather telling me the story about when he first went to work and I cannot remember if he first went to work for Texaco when he was making that dollar a day but anyway, it got to that dollar a day and he was so excited because he was making a full whole dollar a day, and it was the first time he remembered he went to the store and he bought bread and he had bought something else, and they had money left over. And the excitement, he said, about being able to buy . . . a loaf of bread was a nickel. And store bought bread was like having cake to them. I mean, that was a treat because most people made their own bread. A nickel was too expensive for bread! So, that was one of the stories I kind of remembered him talking about.

Of course, by the time my dad went to work for them, they were up to . . . I think daddy said he was making a dollar an hour because that was the conversation. I remember my dad and my grandpa were sitting around one day talking and that is when I remember hearing the story about the bread being a nickel because daddy said something about when he went to work, he was making either almost a dollar

an hour or a dollar and a nickel or something like that an hour. So, that was big money because now, he was making enough money for the first time that they actually started thinking about building their own home – my mom and dad. And they were able to put enough money that in 1953, they actually built their first home. Prior to that, they were living in my grandma's wash shed. My grandma Mayon, my dad's mother, they had a wash shed. It was kind of funny – they took the wash shed and they drug it, oh I guess about 150 yards. My grandfather had some property so they drug it about 150 yards down from where my grandma and grandpa lived and they remodeled the wash shed and made a small house out of it. And that is where I was born – me and two of my sisters. The big thing was in 1953 – they built a house. They got the plans out of the newspaper and I've got the newspaper out at the house somewhere – I got it picked up. It was for GI Homes in the New Orleans newspaper and it gave all of the plans and everything. The plans were like $50 or something like that – it was not very much – and they built that house that is still there today. Without the oil company, I do not think my dad would have had that opportunity with limited education to be able to build that home, that size, for a family of seven people now but eventually . . . so, you look at that and you say, yes, those are some of the positive things. They allowed my dad to educate himself beyond what he probably would have ever done on his own. They did send him to a lot of schools. He was a diesel mechanic on the drilling rigs, so they sent him to a lot of schools, so there are a lot of good things that happened, too. I think as those

people, you can see the oil industry throughout the oil industry, along with, of course, the government requiring a lot of things. But you can listen to the stories and you can see as those boys came back in 1945 and 1946, as they joined these oil companies in 1947, 1948, 1949, into the 1950s when it really started booming around here, as those guys went in and started working their way up the ladder to positions of being supervisors and managers, you will see that the industry improves as far as its safety record; the attitude of the people changes as those guys came back from World War II.

Prior to World War II, and this is my own opinion here, the people of south Louisiana, the Acadians and those, were so used to being second-class citizens that they accepted a lot of that. All these boys would come from Texas and Oklahoma and Mississippi and all those places – had been in the oil industry a long time – they came down and these Acadians, half of them were speaking French only or, and I am serious - could not communicate as well because of the French and the English. And then, you get these guys coming back from World War II – they are different now. They do not put up with what was put up with before the war. So, you can see that accommodations were slowly and surely being made that made sure that the workers were a little safer, and I am not talking about huge leaps here. I am talking about a slow steady progression as these guys said, 'We are not putting up with this. We need better wages,' and you can see wages start to come up, as they become the

backbone of the industry, these World War II vets from around here. Safety becomes a little bit better. And then, when then they become supervisors, they treat their people a little bit better, and you can see the steady progression. Not only did the government want you to do it but the government was still run by those same types of individuals. So, to me, even though they had to fight a lot of battles, you can see this steady progression in this part of the country.

The discussion about unions, I think part of the problem down here with unions is that the concept of the union was probably more that it was . . . I hate to even say this but the impression was just like it was a Communist organization. We had just finished World War II. This is the Cold War. And a lot of people around here, and I have heard that before – not that the unions were Communist in here but it was just the idea that they did not like unions here. I was too young to really understand a lot of what was going on in this area but I do remember that, 'Unions were Communist.' I can remember that phrase. And I do not know how deeply embedded that was for my dad's generation. Our generation was a little bit different. We look at unions a little differently. Unions were more of a phenomenon of up north. It was not down here. There are very few unions even today down here. A lot of people that belong to unions in this part of the country, it is just because it is easier to go along than to buck the system at a lot of plants and things like that. But that is what I feel about it, even though I did belong to a union

at one time myself and still think that it is an important weapon for the working guy – if you want to call it a weapon but it is a way to be heard.

JC: What union did you belong to?

TM: The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, so it was a different industry altogether. But no, unions just did not make it down here.

JC: How would you see those workers eventually . . . of course, you know, they are treated better after World War II because they demand it, but did the companies respond immediately?

TM: No. Small companies do. Kerr McGee, of course, I am more familiar with Kerr McGee than anybody else – any other oil company. Kerr McGee was a small company, so their response, even today, by most standards, is quick. In my time working with Kerr McGee, of course, I spent quite a large portion of my years with them dealing with safety issues. If we found something that we knew for a fact was a safety problem, within a matter of sometimes just hours, things were done to make sure that this would not happen. Well, plus the difference today. Telephones, computers, email – all the ways we can communicate with everyone . . . if we find a problem today, and let's say we find a design problem that is a safety issue, within a

matter of hours, everybody in the Gulf of Mexico is made aware of the fact that we had an incident or an accident at platform A and we have got 20 platforms out there that had that similar design, well, all 20 of those will know that within a matter of hours, that hey, this happened over here. Guys go out there and check and make sure that we are protected against this.

I know that there were some accidents and incidents with Kerr McGee that, within a matter of, say, 30 days to 60 days because when incidents or accidents happen, you have to investigate sometimes and find out what happened because it is not readily visible to you right off that this is what caused it because a lot of things happen – it takes you some time to figure it out. But I find, with most companies in the Kerr McGee size, things can be done quite rapidly depending on management. Of course, a lot of that has to do with management but again, we are looking at our managers today who are only in their 40s and early 50s. Very few of them are older than, say, 55 anymore. So we are looking at guys that were in an industry that, at the beginning of their careers, was pretty safe, and it has gotten safer and safer because you have got the U.S. Coast Guard out there, you have got the Minerals Management Service out there, you have got what is called the American Bureau of Shipping out there – all of these people – EPA – all of these people are out there trying to make sure that everything is done safely.

JC: Do you remember some earlier accidents from the early days with Kerr McGee?

TM: Yes, but there were so many of them – it is a shame to say that, but there were so many minor accidents, that it was almost a daily routine because I went to work the first time on a drilling rig – submersible *Rig 44* – and it was rough and it was dangerous work. It was inherently dangerous. People were constantly smashing fingers and, you know, abrasions of every kind. Broken bones every now and then. Fatalities were not an everyday event but they were not uncommon. A lot of it was macho problems, you know. A lot of guys would do things that back then when I started, just to prove that they were bigger and tougher than the guy next to them. We still have that problem today but not to that extent because the training today is better. We really pushed the training. They push the training. I am retired now. I do not push the training anymore. There is a better overall training program today in safety. There was no such thing as getting a safety briefing. You know, you went to work and they told you, 'You go do that. Go do this. Go do that. Go over there and help unload pipe. Go on that boat and start unloading the chemical or start unloading the food or doing whatever.' You have never been on a boat in your life. You did not know how to operate any of that stuff. That was tough. You had better learn quick and you had better hope the guy that was with you would tell you what to do and not just wait for you to get hurt. Today, before you even do the first thing, they have job safety analysis. They sit down and discuss all the things that could

happen to you while you are doing this and try to prevent them before they even start, so it is a different ball game. When you are 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, you cannot get hurt anyway. You are not going to get hurt. You are not going to die, so there is a difference in the attitude. As you mature, you find out, oh yes, I can get hurt. But back then, people were hurt constantly. Getting slapped on the side of the head with pipe or that type of thing. Cuts. It was not unusual – you can go around and look at these old oil men, you will see them with fingers missing, you know, because they got caught in chains when they were drilling. Screwing pipe together, they would sling those chains and if your hand got caught in that chain and that drill pulled back . . . there were a lot of accidents and a lot of injuries that you do not even hear about or see today. It is a much rarer occurrence to have any injury today. Companies go months and years now without what they call a reportable accident, which is something where you are hurt bad enough you cannot work. Even though there are still deaths offshore, they still happen. I mean, it is still a dangerous place out there. You are working with high pressure. You are working with machinery that is so powerful that it blows your mind to think about thousands of horsepower, you know, and things like that and what that type of force can do and cause bodily injury. The rate of death due to, let's say – I do not know how to put this – the number of people hurt because of poor engineering or because of poor procedure is really getting to be hardly anything. I mean, it is so miniscule, it is pitiful. Most of the accidents and injuries today are really accidents and injuries. They are

unforeseen type things – a rope breaking, that you would not expect to break. We have had a couple of people killed on work boats and crew boats because maybe a bad sea hit it, broke the rope, the rope comes back – the equal action reaction – that rope comes slinging back, hits you in the chest and it crushes the heart. That has happened. I have been aboard where that has happened. Not on the boat, on the platform. No one did anything wrong. It was one of those things that they would tie it up, a wave hit it just at the wrong time, at the wrong place, and the guy was standing at the wrong . . . if he would have been two feet the other side, the rope would have missed him when it broke. Now, they require ropes to be changed out every so often. Whether it looks good or not, they change the ropes because of that.

We had an incident one time where a guy got hurt. A piece of pipe just came apart. There was nothing wrong with the engineering. There was nothing wrong with the installation of that piece of pipe or how it was put together. I mean, that pipe was tested half a dozen times to make sure that the pipe was still the right thickness and all of those kinds of things. And the piece of pipe came apart. Well, it came apart in a piece that was not tested. You know you may test every 10 feet down that pipe – bottom, top, side. Well, in between the two places that were tested is where that pipe had a thinness there, it had eroded out on the inside. Everything was done that you would normally think because you cannot test every single inch of that pipe. I mean, it is not physically impossible, you just cannot do it. I mean, there is just too

much pipe out there. Those are the types of things that happen today.

Incidents and accidents are things that are, to me, real accidents where one day, you know, they were picking up a guy off of a boat, the boat was holding himself in place and a side sea hit the boat just as he was being lifted. And those happen. The guy thought he had it pretty well under control, had been sitting there, the boat captain, holding that boat in place which in standard seas, two to three feet – you know, no big deal. And all of a sudden, you have got a six footer coming. Well, it picks the boat up and moves it maybe a foot, foot and a half, two foot, say, to the left. Well, if the guy is just being lifted off of the boat, well, the rail on the side in the back where they are lifting him . . . of course, as the boat moves the rail, the boat into the lifting basket, and the guy busts up his leg. That is an accident. Those are accidents. Those are the kinds of things we see more of today than back then, when people were being hurt because of poor management, poor engineering – those types of things.

I can remember when the first women were brought offshore or started trying to work offshore. By this time, of course, I am in the production side. I am not in drilling so I do not know what went on in drilling. But I know in production, the inconvenience of it was one of the many problems. All of a sudden, it was decided that we had to have women offshore. And the inconvenience being on a lot of our

places, we just did not have the accommodations for two genders. Everything was communal showers, you know, because you do not have much space. You have got to remember, there is just not space out there. So, you are pushed together. If you are lucky, you know . . . I am not talking about the boss. Now, the big boss, he would have a room for himself but most of us were you were in 4, 8, 16 man rooms. If you were real lucky, you got the 4 man room, so there were only 4 of you guys in there with very little locker space. You may have had four men and all their equipment that they used for their work, was in a room that was 9-1/2 x 10 – if you were lucky to have a big room. Some of them were even smaller than that. You could barely get between two bunk beds on either side. And then, now, we are bringing women offshore. A lot of the work that is done takes a lot of upper body strength. You have to tote tools. You have to tote pumps. You have to tote things that weigh a little bit. When the girls came along, not that a lot of them were not willing to do the work and mentally could do the work – physically could not, so that added to the burden, let's say, of the guys that were working in that . . . that, of course, immediately goes to resentment of having the girls out there. One of the other things, of course, was now, we had to give up sometimes a place where four guys were living, we now had to give up that four guy room so one girl could be in that room. And then now, you are in a room with sixteen other guys, so some resentment there came along.

I guess as far as having blacks offshore, that did not come about to any extent other than say bedroom hands and that type of thing but with guys coming offshore to work as operators and working on drilling rigs, it did not come about until probably the middle 1970s, somewhere around there to where there were quite a number, and I guess the biggest problem, and I am going to say there was a lot of discrimination and a lot of that was the fact that the majority of the people that worked offshore, believe it or not, did not work with or live around other blacks, all blacks. Most of those people working at that time when we had school, were segregated schools. I think it was a lot of the discriminatory practices that went on and things that happened, primarily was we just did not know each other. A lot of stereotypes, stereotyping went on. And today when you go offshore, you know, you have got blacks working, you have got black supervisors which would have never been thought of in the 1960s and the 1970s – trust me. And today, it is just like any other business. People learn to know each other and once you get to know each other and you find out, hell, he is not any different than I am as far as what do they want? They are out there busting their butts trying to make a nickel because they have got wives and children and they want the same things that anybody wants – whether he is Hispanic or whether he is black or whether he is Chinese or Asian because we have a lot of Vietnamese now offshore, and even though there is still some prejudice offshore – don't get me wrong – there is still a lot of it – it is a big difference of what it was in the 1960s and the 1970s offshore when it first happened.

JC: Do you remember any particular instances?

TM: No. A lot of it, believe it or not, to me, the hardest thing was being left out, I guess. If you were one of two guys, like, let's say there is only one black guy on the whole platform, I think the hardest thing for that person is the fact of not being part of the group. It took a long time to become part of the group. Guys working offshore get very, very close. They are there 7 days on and 7 off. In some cases, 14 and 14. And you live with those people every day. I mean, you have got to put up with how they snore, how they sneeze, how they laugh, how they dress. You know? It is close. I mean, you are there with them every day – as close as you can be with anybody. And I guess the hardest thing for a lot of the young blacks and even some of the Hispanics that came offshore, and the Vietnamese, too, was the loneliness because you are exploited for . . . to me, that is the worst part of the discrimination. There was no overt that I was around. Never any overt thing done to hurt someone physically but just not being part of the group, I think, was pretty hard. A lot of guys could not handle that and left, of course. But those that hung in there and finally became part of the group, are now some of our superintendents and production foremen and those offshore. They had a rough go. They had a real rough go. The old saying, you know you have got to do twice as much to be equal. Well, a lot of that was true. I know a lot of guys that I always thought should have been promoted

long before, say, some white guy in the same job did not happen because they have to do damned near twice as much. They have to put in that 150%, in other words, constantly, just to be given the same opportunity. But in today's environment . . . of course, you may talk to a black guy and he is not going to agree with that. I think today, it has changed quite a bit. I think the opportunity is there if you are willing to work and to show, the discrimination is not there as it was. There is always going to be discrimination – I am sorry – I do not see it not happening. It is just as bad if you have to go offshore and you are slightly effeminate. And there are a lot of guys that are not super macho. Hell, I never was. There is that discrimination, too. We do not think about that but that is a tough one. We have some homosexuals over there. So, I mean, don't think of only women, blacks, say, Asians, Latinos. There are other discriminations that go on, too. It is like I mentioned earlier – discrimination or second-class citizenship for Acadians or for those that had maybe a French accent. There was that discrimination. You have that same thing today, so it is just not going to change. It is just tolerated better because our people are better educated and I think that is a key. The oil companies are hiring better educated people. We rarely look at people without high school educations. The chances of you getting a job offshore in today's environment without a high school or some college, unless you have a specific skill like electrician maybe, but you have got to have extra schooling for that. If you want to be a good diesel mechanic, you have got to have the extra schooling for that. So, you do not get those people without education. And I think

that has a great deal to do not only with the improvement of the safety aspect, living conditions, but it also has a lot to do with people just getting along better. Better educated people seem to do that. We are big pushers you can hear because I think education is important. So, that is about all I can tell you about what happened offshore. There were just not that many minorities that work offshore until just really recently. I guess I worked for Kerr McGee for probably 12, 13 years with just white males. So, until I was well into my 40s, before I had either women or any minority group of any kind working with us . . . and by that time, you have matured, I hope. Matured a little bit and you learn to go along and get along a little better. That is all I have got to say on that.

JC: All right, Mr. Mayon, is there anything else you would like to add?

TM: I cannot think of anything right now.

JC: All right. Thank you.

THE END