MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Jim Baker

Date: June 6, 2006

Place: Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Keyword: Port of Houston/Houston Ship Channel

Bio
Jim Baker is a retired Houston port captain for Lykes Brothers. A native of West Virginia, Baker is a graduate of King's Point U.S. Merchant Academy (1949). As a cadet, he traveled throughout the Caribbean and West Indies aboard ship for several years before landing a job with Lykes Brothers. His career with the steamship line spans nearly three decades. His positions included: port captain, marine division manager, and assistant vice-president of the traffic department. He also served as chairman for the Port Safety and Advisory Council, and also served on the West Gulf Maritime Association. Capt. Baker has been involved in nearly every aspect of the Port of Houston, including environment and safety regulations, dredging, pipelines, Houston Pilots and Coast Guard.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Jim Baker on June 6th, 2006, by Jason Theriot. It's Jim Baker on the Port of Houston.

Let's talk about the M.D. Anderson Medical Center and its connection to the Port of Houston.

JB: It's an interesting story. There were three brothers with the family name of Anderson, who moved to Houston probably in the twenties, and they were in the commodity business. What attracted them to Houston was the fact that Houston was a great cotton export port.

They formed a company called Anderson Clayton. They built docks in the Turning Basin area on the ship channel, and these docks are interesting because they're very low-ceilinged docks, because you didn't stack cotton. You put it end on end. One of the brothers who went by the initials of M.D. was a bachelor, and as he got near the end of his business life he was quite wealthy. I understand that his wealth at that time was around eight million dollars, which doesn't sound like a lot today, but it certainly was then.

M.D. formed a foundation, and he was able to get some very astute Houston businessmen to serve on that foundation, and they used his money to enhance Houston. At that time Baylor was building a medical school in Houston, and they offered Baylor land if they would—and that was the whole idea. They used their money as seed money, not to totally fund something, but to get it started. So they offered land to Baylor if they would move their college to its present location, which is now called Houston Medical Center, and that's where the name of the hospital came from, M.D. Anderson. It's named after this brother.

So there's a definite connection, then. Those are the two biggest business machines in Houston, the medical center and the Port of Houston, so I like that story.

JT: That's fascinating, and from what I've heard is that the medical center, M.D. Anderson Medical Center, is the largest medical community in the world. There is nothing as far as acreage-wise in circumference of size as this entire medical center. It's its own fully functioning, servicing, little community.

JB: And it grows every day. And they're building something down there right now.

JT: As far as geography goes, is the medical center anywhere near Buffalo Bayou or an access to the water?

JB: Well, it got flooded out during Alison.

JT: It sure did.

JB: Yes. I think it's Sims Bayou that is, no, Bray's Bayou area is where—it's not the close. Well, it's not that far either, a couple of miles. But no, there's no maritime connection other than the fact that M.D. Anderson was in the maritime business.

JT: I wonder how M.D. himself came to acquire that land.

JB: I think they bought it from the city. It was part of Herman Park at one time.

JT: Is that right?

JB: Yes.

JT: I guess when an eight-million-dollar man comes to town looking to purchase—

JB: It gets their attention, doesn't it? [laughs]

JT: Back in the twenties. Let's talk about the twenties and thirties from some of the stories that have been passed down to you. What do you know about the early days of the port from some of the materials that you've read, stories you've heard?

JB: This man [M. R. Farrar] touches on that in this pamphlet, and it's an interesting development. You know, Houston was the first group to go to Washington. In 1910 they went to Washington and made a proposal to Congress that if they would authorize the construction of a deepwater channel to Houston, that they would pay for half of it. Houston would pay for half of it. Congress accepted that idea and authorized the construction, so they had to fund it, and there's a very interesting allusion in that pamphlet about the time, how important the port idea was to the average citizen in Houston.

Jesse H. Jones is our hero. He's the one that really put the package together, because although the channel was authorized and they created bonds, nobody would buy them. Jesse Jones was an astute, successful businessman and banker, and he went to all his banker friends and twisted arms, and got them to subscribe to these bonds, and so that was the start.

But they raised, the citizens of Harris County raised eleven million dollars back at a time when, well, he gives figures in there. I don't remember the population figure that was very small. The whole county was maybe 120,000 people, or something like that, and they committed to eleven million dollars to construct that ship channel.

You asked an interesting question about the early years, the competition between Galveston and Houston, and the gentleman that wrote that pamphlet—

JT: M. R. Farrar [*The Story of Buffalo Bayou and the Houston Ship Channel*]?

JB: Farrar remarks about that. Apparently, Galveston didn't see any competition. He quotes a friend saying that the Houston Ship Channel was the biggest outdoor hoax ever created. They thought, you know, here this port of Galveston is just on

the doorstep of the Gulf of Mexico, and they thought they had a lock. Why would anybody take a ship fifty miles inland when the big, beautiful, open port of Galveston existed? What they didn't realize was it was a lot cheaper to take a shipload of cargo to Houston than it was to offload it in Galveston and then move it by land transportation to its destination, because the cargo wasn't destined for Galveston.

You also ask an interesting question about why did Houston meet such great success and not Galveston, and I think there's several reasons there. One is the size of Galveston is very limited. The population's limited. There's no industry in Galveston. Houston was a burgeoning industry center. Houston has a tremendous consumer population, not just in Houston but within 300 miles of Houston, tremendous consumer population.

And the third reason, I understand, was the railroads. The railroads bypassed Houston going into Galveston, because they were interested in getting cotton from the cotton-growing areas, into Galveston. Galveston was one big cotton port. You know, they had compresses everywhere down there, and storage. I've also heard that the cotton brokers liked to store cotton in Galveston because of the high humidity. The cotton would absorb moisture, weigh more, and cotton was sold by weight.

JT: Oh, interesting.

JB: I don't know if that's true or not, but that's a story that's been around for a long, long time. And, of course, then there were the great storms of 1900 and 1915; severely hurt Galveston. But I think it was the entrepreneurial spirit of people in Houston who then realized the importance of creating a world-class port. The first channel was only twenty-five feet deep, but the ships weren't that big in those days either. They didn't need more than twenty-five feet. That came later.

Where was I going with this?

JT: Do you think that there was also an arrogance on the part of people of Galveston in the early period?

JB: That was another point that I missed, was that in those days Galveston, the Port of Galveston, the wharfs were owned and operated by a private company called Galveston Wharves. Of course they still use that name today to describe the port. And the businessmen in Houston were outraged by the wharfage rates that Galveston Wharves charged, and that was one of their incentives in creating a deepwater port in Houston.

And, of course, in the very first part of 1910, 1914, 1914 was the official opening of the port at a twenty-five-foot depth. I worked at the port when we had the seventy-fifth anniversary of that occasion, made quite a splash. At first it was a city function.

There was a city harbor board composed of businessmen, usually headed by the mayor, and I remember there was one story that I read. The port used to have some typewritten copies of the minutes of those Harbor Committee meetings, and one of them talked about an incident where the mayor, a man named Campbell, met with a businessman who wanted to open I believe a cement plant, and this was down at a location that presently is very close to the Sixth End bridge, and he didn't consult with the harbor board.

He went ahead and made a commitment to let this person create a wharf down there, and then he was very disappointed because he discovered that this was domestic business, not foreign business, and the whole idea of creating the port was to attract international trade. I remember reading one of the comments by a

person on the harbor board. He said, "That's ridiculous. That's two miles down from the Turning Basin. It's outlandish." And now, of course, the port stretches for twenty-five miles, actually farther than that now with Bayport.

JT: Another thing that Captain Roy Murray explained was that Galveston, and we're following this arrogance, characteristics of the people of Galveston, the Port Authority, that they were not giving preferential treatment to various ship companies that had regular business coming in and out of Houston, and that was another aspect that led to the development of the ship channel. Essentially, the ship channel would give preferential treatment to companies like Lykes and a few others that were making weekly, if not daily, trips into the channel.

JB: Frankly, I'm rather unaware of preferential treatment for anybody. Certainly they wanted to attract those companies. But, for instance, Lykes frequently used the private docks at South Side, the Long Reach docks instead of the Port Authority docks. When I first came to Houston onboard ship, Dock 16 was the newest berth. Of course now in the Turning Basin, the last one is Dock 32, and that was built, oh, almost thirty years ago now, I think.

JT: What type of effect did the two world wars have on the Port of Houston?

JB: They both had much the same effect. They drained off all the commercial activity going on in the ports. Port of Houston in World War II had a huge ammunition depot down in San Jacinto. It was later bought by Bethlehem Steel, but the bunkers are still down there. Did you ever go down there? They have big old bunkers. They're concrete bunkers, very heavily built, and then they have dirt piled around. They had a naval gun plant, what was it called, the Dixon Gun Plant. The port owns that property now. It's just down channel from Dock 32. They made the big naval rifle barrels there.

JT: Really. I didn't know that. The sixteen-inch gun, eighteen-inch guns?

JB: Yes, the big ones. They built ships here, too. Brown Shipyard, that's gone, long gone.

JT: They were building Liberty ships during the Second [World] War.

JB: That's what I'm talking about, yes. And First [World] War I don't know. I'm not aware of what kind of activity they had here. Now, the Korean War didn't seem to have much effect on the port. The Vietnamese War or action, what did they call it, they didn't call it a war—

JT: Conflict.

JB: —conflict, okay, they didn't seem to have much effect on the Port of Houston. The West Coast ports, of course, were vitally effective, and Lykes was terribly effective because we had started a rebuilding program in 1960, so we had a fleet of new ships that were break-bulk ships, but they were very heavily rigged cargo-wise, heavy-lift ships, and the military loved that idea. So they had the right to requisition those ships, and they did. So Lykes for a while had two fleets. They kept the old ships beyond their usual retirement date, and we would have two ships with the same name, the *Mason Lykes*, the *New Mason*, and the *Old Mason*, and that type of thing. Sometimes it became confusing.

So we ran—you know, the steamship business is funny. If you stop operating you lose your customer base and you don't get them back, so it was very important that Lykes continue in commercial operation, and they had to do it with these older ships, which were a burden. They were getting old, they needed a lot of repairs. That was a pretty tough time.

JT: So you had the old version transporting the typical commercial cargo, while the newer version, the bigger cargos were bringing the tanks and the materiel and the machines to Southeast Asia.

JB: Everything, yes, everything, cereal, PX supplies. I used to go out on occasion, not very often, but I always sent people out to husband those ships when they came into the West Coast ports, mostly into Oakland. Oakland has a big navy base, or had. Now, of course, it's a huge container port.

JT: International trade before the big war. I realize that cotton was a major export coming into the Port of Houston. What were some of the other companies and types of industry and business and commodities that were being traded and moved around through the ship channel?

JB: You know, at that time I was in the operation side of the steamship business, and as such I didn't pay much attention to the customer base of Lykes. Cotton continued to be a major commodity, agricultural bagged goods very important, imports, steel was very big, very big, still is today.

At one time Lykes did a lot of trade in the construction business, engineering and construction business. There was a bank called the Import-Export Bank, and it financed a lot of companies, American companies doing business overseas, and they had to move American flagships to move their cargos. So Lykes got in. Lykes was probably the biggest American-flag carrier at the time. At one time, during the Vietnam War we operated about sixty-eight ships. Before then we had at least forty-eight, or forty-five ships running at all times.

JT: What's the dimensions of the ships you're referring to, on Lykes cargo ships?

JB: Small by today's standards. The one that I sailed on most often was called a C-1. It was just 400 feet long. The larger ships, the C-3s were, I think, 450 feet, maybe seventy-five-foot beam. C-2s were about the same; no, they were a little bit smaller than the C-3s, ten, twelve thousand tons of deadweight. There weren't very many big ships at all calling in Houston. There weren't very many big ships anywhere. The oil industry started that trend.

JT: Let's talk a little bit about that, the industry that changed the world, especially the Port of Houston.

JB: Well, you know, when I first came to Houston, Texas was a huge producer of crude oil, so the tanker business moved crude oil north to the refineries, and moved refined product back to the Gulf area. EXXON, Esso at the time, was a prime example of that. They had a very large coast-wise fleet.

The biggest tankers during World War II were called T-2s. I think they had 125,000-barrel capacity. These big tankers today carry that much in one tank, so that's been a huge change in the way product is moved, size of the vessels. I mean, many of them can't even come into Houston. Even with the latest enlargement they can't come in. They offload in the Gulf of Mexico to smaller ships.

I remember one time I had a call from, I think it's a minerals-management group that had TV tapes of strange gouges in the Gulf of Mexico on the sea bottom. I looked at them and I said, "They're not strange. Those are anchors; anchors dragging caused those trenches." And sure enough, that was what it was. It's a big worry, you know. We have the Flower Gardens off the coast, and the tankers offloading were a big threat to those flower gardens, and so they had to pass federal laws keeping big tankers away from that area.

But I'll tell you the very disappointing side of the oil business. In 1964 I was involved with a group called the Port Safety and Advisory Council. Matter of fact, I was chairman, and we were trying to get the corps of engineers to initiate a channel-enlargement project. So eventually they held here in Houston a hearing, full of the politicians, of course, and since my name began with B I was the first civilian group person to talk.

We convinced the port that this was something that was needed for the health of the port. So we didn't have any money, we were just a business group. So the port took on this as a project, and in order to satisfy the corps of engineers they had to do research into the possible value of this project, and immediately went to the oil companies, Shell and Esso especially.

And they got shocked. Those companies said, "We don't need more than forty feet," because their source points were limited in draft, and also, and this was a roadblock in the current enlargement, was the fact that their piers, their private wharves couldn't stand that deep, a forty-five-foot depth. Also, they had a lot of pipelines.

JT: They would have to move.

JB: Yes.

JT: Very expensive for the oil companies.

JB: And they fought it in court, and the port won. They were insisting that the port absorb that cost. I was very much involved with pipelines, because I saw them as a threat to navigation. As a matter of fact, if you look at a chart of the Gulf of Mexico you'll see safety fairways connecting all the ports and coming across the

Gulf of Mexico. They're only two miles wide. The oil companies are not allowed to establish any structures in those fairways.

But I still protested pipelines, and I think it's sort of interesting. First time I protested a pipeline was with a private dredging company. They were dredging the slip at what is now Wood House. The port owns it now. The elevator that they had there, called Good Pasture, had exploded. They had a dust explosion, so they had to rebuild the elevator, and in doing that they enlarged their plans and dredged the slip, and they used a port disposal area across the ship channel in the Manchester area.

So they proposed just to lay a pipeline, a dredge pipeline across the ship channel, just lay it on the bottom of the channel. I saw that and so I wrote a protest, telling them that it was quite possible that a ship's anchor could damage that pipeline, or maybe even lose an anchor, and I got a call from the corps. A man in Galveston called me and said, "You know, you're not allowed to anchor in the ship channel."

And I said, "No, you're not allowed to anchor as such, as a mooring. But people have to use their anchor frequently in bad weather, fog, emergencies." So I kept my protest in until the dredging company indemnified Lykes against any loss.

Then I went on from there to—well, the corps told me. They said, "You know, we don't have any regulations determining the laying of pipelines. All we insist is that they lay them at least two feet below the project depth, because we over dredge." They called it advanced maintenance. "We over dredge by two feet when we dredge."

I said, "You don't have any regulations?"

"Nope." So I got them to put in some regulations that it was only ten feet, and bury them ten feet, and I didn't think that was adequate.

JT: What year was this, Captain Jim?

JB: I started that probably in '65, and I got my tail burned. I objected to a pipeline; I think it was the Black Marlin pipeline. It turned out that pipeline was a consortium of all the big oil companies, and one of the members knew the Lykes family in New Orleans, an executive with one of the companies, and called Joe Lykes and said, "What are you doing? You know, we're big customers of yours, and here you're blocking the laying of a pipeline."

Mr. Lykes said, "I'm not blocking anything. What are you talking about?"

He said, "Well, there's a guy named Baker in Houston." So I had a call from a man named Buddy Lykes, who was the local executive vice president, and Buddy asked me about this pipeline, what kind of a danger it was, and I had to admit that it was one of the best ones that they had laid, because they not only dredged to ten feet, but they backfilled with gravel, which would help prevent penetration by an anchor.

So he said, "Then I think that maybe we should drop our protest." Well, I did, but I didn't drop my protesting. Then I started working through the West Gulf Maritime Association. Now, there's a man that you might want to talk to, Ted Thorjussen. He's retired as president.

JT: How do you spell his last name?

JB: T-h-o-r-j-u-s-s-e-n. He's Norwegian, but he's an American citizen, of course.

JT: President of Lykes?

JB: No, the West Gulf Maritime Association.

JT: Here in Houston?

JB: Yes. It's a maritime—how do I want to put it? They're still in existence, and they're headed up by a man named Walter Niemand, N-i-e-m-a-n-d. They represent about seventy companies that work in the Port of Houston, maritime companies. They represent them in dealing with labor, and they represent them in dealing with all the various federal agencies that impact the maritime business, which is a huge number, of course.

So from then on I protested pipelines through—I got the WGMA to do it instead of me, so that took the onus off of Lykes Brothers, and I didn't get any more calls from Buddy Lykes about dropping my protests.

JT: Well, did the ten-foot-dredging pipeline project eventually take place?

JB: Most of the companies still buried them at ten feet. However, a lot of them started using, what is it called, the drilling, where they can offset drillings, and they would go down as deep as forty feet. So those people are okay, they didn't have to do anything.

JT: You know, I don't think enough people, myself included, fully understand the idea and the mileage of underground pipeline that lays from southeast Texas all the way through Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. It's vast, isn't it?

JB: Oh, the gulf is riddled with them, it's riddled with them, because it's the only way you can practically get natural gas in from those platforms, and every well out

there produces not only crude, but natural gas. So they're interconnected and they just run everywhere.

There was a bad scene, oh, I guess it's thirty years ago. A fishing boat in around the Port Arthur area, the Sabine Pass area, that ruptured one of the pipelines. It had become exposed through erosion. It was a natural gas pipeline; it exploded. Of course it killed everybody on the fishing boat. We used to use that incident as a club, if you will, in our arguments against the pipeline.

JT: But for the most part, I guess, the pipelines are fairly safe, and there hasn't been many fatal accidents over the last sixty, eighty years that you can think of, other than a few?

JB: No. I have to admit—

JT: A fairly safe record.

JB: Yes, they do, they do.

JT: Let's talk about the impact of the oil industry on the ship channel and the Port of Houston, in particular with the petrochemical industry. What do you know about that area, sir?

JB: Not very much. All of the oil facilities, terminals here are privately owned. They have no real connection to the Port of Houston. They certainly have helped shape the future of the Port of Houston. The port understands that the business is extremely important to the economy of southeast Texas, probably far beyond that, so they welcome these companies. But these companies don't really contribute much toward the port itself.

I mean, you have to understand that there are two ports of Houston. One is the conglomeration of the marine terminals, stretching from Bayport clear to the Turning Basin.

JT: A district.

JB: The other one is the Port of Houston Authority, which is—do you know anything about ports?

JT: I'm learning.

JB: Now, ports are very interesting subjects. There are all different kinds of ports, you know, both physically—you have Galveston is a barrier-island port; Houston's a manmade port; Seattle is a natural port; the riverine ports such as Charleston; New Orleans is a riverine port, and they're all governed differently. Almost all of them, of course, they have a paid professional staff, but then they're usually governed by a board.

Now, those boards are variously appointed. Port of Houston Authority board is appointed by the city, the city council, the commissioner's court, Harris County Commissioner's Court, the city council of Pasadena, and another organization that is a collection of smaller cities on whom the port directly impacts.

JT: Interesting.

JB: Yes, that was changed. Now, that's another thing. You see, the Port of Houston is called a semi-autonomous political subdivision of the State of Texas, so we're subject—we create our own ordinances, if you will. But we're subject to legislation from Austin, and they can change, and they can have a huge impact, and that's what happened. That's how we got two new commissioners while I

was still at the Port Authority. We had five before, now we have seven, and that was done in Austin.

In the early seventies, I told you I belonged to this group called the Port Safety and Advisory Council, experienced mariners, steamship operators, and we decided that the Port Authority, which at the time was called the Harris County Navigation District, had only one fireboat, and we thought we needed more fireboats. So we went to the director of the port and he said, "We don't know what you're talking about. Those fireboats are meant to protect port property, not vessels."

So we went to Austin and had quite a few legislative changes made. At the time there was a representative from this area, a state rep, who was a vice president for the International Longshoremen's Association, also an ex-mayor of Pasadena, I think, and he helped us rewrite the legislation, and it even changed the name to the Port of Houston Authority, and it gave them jurisdiction over many facets of the Houston Ship Channel and its tributaries. So we've got three fireboats now. Yes, we won.

Maybe it was, we went to the newspapers with this idea, how unsafe it was. And George Altvater was the director of the port at that time. He invited me to lunch one day and he said, "You've got to stop this."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

And he said, "There are certain companies now that won't bring their ships into Houston because it's not safe." And this story appeared—matter of fact, somebody even sent it to me from Vietnam. It was a syndicated story that some UPI or API, one of the big chains picked up. I even got a copy of it from, what

was it called—there was a G.I. newspaper that was published; I can't think of the name of it.

So we had to call off the dogs. Ralph Nader even sent somebody down, because we got to the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard agreed with us about certain safety aspects, and an admiral in New Orleans was quoted as saying, "The Houston Ship Channel is a wick waiting to be lighted." [laughs] And that appeared in this big news story. Nader sent down somebody to examine this issue, and he made a report that the ship channel, the waters in the ship channel were inflammable. [laughs]

No, they were bad. There's no question about that, because of the City of Houston. They dumped raw sewage from the Lockwood Water Treatment Plant, which is on Buffalo Bayou just a couple of miles from the Turning Basin. Houston kept growing, and they didn't expand their water-treatment system. And you know how we get our rain here. Well, you get it in Louisiana the same way. You get two inches at a time. When we would have one of those huge rains here, that water-treatment plant couldn't handle the sewage, so they would dump a lot of chlorine in it and then dump it in the ship channel.

We had an epidemiologist come down one time, and he examined the water in the Turning Basin area, and he said that it was simply unsafe, that if you had a cut, don't go near that water. If you had a cut on your hand wash it right away; don't go near the water. It was that bad. It was that contaminated. Now it's much, much improved. They have shrimp clear up to the Turning Basin area.

JT: Really.

JB: Yes. I wouldn't eat them, but they have them. [laughter]

JT: Well, it seems like the logical step would be to have more fireboats.

JB: We thought it was. We thought it was. And to change the rule that they—and they've saved—I know when I was there one of the fireboats saved a harbor tug from sinking. They had a fire in the engine room and the crew abandoned it, had to. They couldn't handle the fire. So one of our fireboats went alongside, and they went onboard and extinguished the fire. I had a letter for a long time from the owners of that tug, thanking us for the work.

JT: And now there's a full-time fire crew that works—

JB: Oh yes, 24/7. There's three of them.

JT: And also, is there a naval reserve unit that works all the port channels?

JB: I don't know. When I was at the port there was a committee set up by the Coast Guard called the Port Readiness Committee, and it was composed of the Port Authority, the Coast Guard, corps of engineers, and two naval units. There's a navy unit that boards ships, that one, and I forget what the other one is called. And the army, military transportation command, and we did games. What happens, how are we going to respond if a certain disaster happens?

It was so interesting when Desert Storm took place, that group worked together. They knew each other, they knew what the problems were, and it was really, really something that was useful. I used to wonder whether or not it was ever going to be useful, and it certainly was. Houston had the second-largest amount of tonnage that moved during that operation. I think Jacksonville had the largest, and I thought that was interesting.

I had a phone call here at the house one Sunday from a colonel in Virginia, and he said, "We want to take over Barber's Cut Terminal."

And I said, "Who are you?" [laughter] And I told him, I said, "No, I can't do that. I can't give you that terminal. If you take it over I'll lose my customer base and they'll go elsewhere." They were pretty tough about it. We finally compromised with them and gave them Berth 4 down there, and gave them the backup part of Berth 5, which was under construction at the time.

They worked at night moving tanks and so forth in, because that rail line, if you have railcars on that rail line you block off the entrances to the terminal down there. So they moved their trains in at night. It was so funny watching the longshoremen sitting up in this tank, driving along. We had what they called a circus ramp at Barber's Cut—it's still there—so that you can unload railcars by just driving them down that ramp, and that's the way they handled the tanks.

That's what—this is not on the subject, but I really get irritated. I read this story the other day that the [*USS*] *Cole*, the destroyer *Cole* was going back to the Mideast. That never should have happened.

JT: You're right.

JB: We had activities at Barber's Cut Terminal. The Coast Guard—now, here we are, what, 8,000 miles from the conflict area, and the Coast Guard had waterside patrols 24/7 at Barber's Cut. And here this *Cole* goes in, takes on a fueling operation in a hostile part of the world, and they don't even have any waterside security. I could never understand it. Beside the point.

JT: You're from the East Coast.

JB: I grew up in West Virginia, but I've been in Texas since 1950.

JT: When did you get your maritime training, and where?

JB: I'm a graduate of King's Point, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, in 1949. I did my first year training at Pass Christian, Mississippi. There had been a seminary there and the government took it over and rebuilt it as a school. We were about 350 students there. Went to sea for a year; that was a part of the program and still is, although they break it up now. But for a year we were assigned a deck cadet and an engine cadet. Actually, we were called cadet midshipmen at the time. Now they've dropped that term cadet.

Roy was a cadet. Many companies had their own training programs; people, cadets—

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is tape two of oral history interview with Jim Baker, June 6th, 2006, by Jason Theriot, Jim Baker on the Port of Houston.

JB: So they called these trainees cadets, so we were known as cadets onboard the ship, but our official title was cadet midshipman, and now it's just midshipman, as it should be. At the time, there were two first-year schools. One was in San Mateo, California, and one at Pass Christian. Of course, the pass has been blown away now. And the senior, subsidized companies had to accommodate two cadets, and we were sent out in pairs, deck and entry, a marvelous experience.

Here I am nineteen years old, and I'm going places that I haven't even read about. It was great. My first assignment as a cadet was on a United Fruit Company ship, a beautiful ship, almost brand new. I think it was a year and a half old. Twin

screw, all white, immaculate, refrigerated ship, carried bananas. I made twenty-six transits to the Panama Canal. I was there about five months on that ship. It was a beautiful ship, my room mahogany-paneled, air conditioned.

JT: First class.

JB: It was. Then I went on—they tried to get you experience on as many ships as they could, so I was transferred to a ship operated by Lykes Brothers. My first job on that ship, first day at sea was helping the crew shovel and throw over what had been the floorboards in cattle pens, still with a lot of manure on them. What a difference. What a difference.

I spent my first Christmas away from home in Ponce, Puerto Rico, went downtown Christmas Day and they had a beautiful square, traditional square, Spanish-type, and the girls were all walking in one direction and the boys in the other, and they weren't allowed to stop. They had chaperones. They had to keep moving.

JT: What did you learn in that first year? What did you learn about sea travel and about working on boats?

JB: Well, I learned navigation. I learned how to use a chipping hammer, a paintbrush. Our duties, we had what was called a sea project. It was sort of like a, what do they call them, the courses you take by mail, correspondence course. We had ATRs, Academy Training Representatives, in different ports, and they would come onboard and check our progress. They would visit with the officers to see what our attitude was, and then they'd check our sea projects.

The sea projects were mostly professional, had a professional aspect to—we would have to do various kinds of navigation, celestial, coastal. We had to learn about ship's business, learn how to be a doctor. [laughs]

JT: Had to wear many hats, huh?

JB: Yes.

JT: And when did you come to Houston with Lykes?

JB: With Lykes? Well, I went to sea until 1957, and we lived in Galveston. I got married in 1950. We lived in Galveston for three years, started having children. Matter of fact I had three of them while I was going to sea. I was there for the birth of only one of them, the first one, and that was happenstance. My ship was in Galveston. My wife was full term and she talked the doctor into artificially inducing the labor, so I got to see my first child born, but I didn't get to see the next two. Matter of fact I've got one of them coming up this year with his fiftieth birthday. I was in Havana, Cuba when he was born. [laughs] I think I had a couple of rum and Cokes or something.

The school, well, it's sort of an interesting development. While I was going to sea the wartime draft ended, and many of these people, these cadets, quit on this. I had a roommate in Pass Christian who lived in Forest Hills, New York, and he was onboard a ship in Manhattan when this was announced, and he called up the local ATR and said, "I'm quitting."

He said, "Okay. Well, come in Monday."

And he said, "No, no. I'm quitting today. I'm not waiting till Monday." And a lot of those guys, when they reinstalled the draft later on, a lot of them ended up

in the army. But they had so many of us they had to restrict the—well, they lost a lot of their funding. Wartime, the war was over and the wartime funding was gone, so they told us that we would have to take tests, and the top 300 would be allowed to go back to King's Point. The others had to stay at sea for another six months. When the time came for the test, there were only about 250 in my class left onboard ship, so they took us all back.

The academic effort was tough, really was. They were trying to have this school accredited. My class was the first one that graduated with bachelor degrees.

JT: At King's Point, wow. What year was that?

JB: Forty-nine. Actually, it was retroactive to '48, but when they graduated they didn't get it. So to get accreditation they had to change a lot of the—matter of fact, they talked about making it a five-year school for a while, because we went to class every day from about nine until four, I think, every day, and Saturday mornings. To get accreditation you had to have a certain number of study hours available for each classroom hour, so that changed a lot of things at that school. A lot of things needed changing. [laughs] It still is a great school. I probably couldn't get in there now.

JT: Well, let's talk about you coming back to Houston. You said you moved down in Galveston in '57 is when your time on the sea, so to speak, came to an end.

JB: Yes, right.

JT: What did you get involved with when you returned back in '57?

JB: I became a port captain with Lykes Brothers. The Coast Guard at the time had a program where they were trying to attract Merchant Marine officers into the Coast

Guard, because they needed the expertise in their inspection service. You know, they inspect all the American flagships, so they made it attractive for merchant ship officers to enter the Coast Guard. I was getting worn out. I was chief mate on the West Indies run, which is a fierce run. You make fourteen ports in twenty-eight days, and it was physically and mentally demanding.

I got tired of it, so I said, "I'm going to go into the Coast Guard." So I filled out my application. The only thing that remained was a letter of recommendation from Lykes Brothers. So I wrote the port captain in Galveston, whom I knew personally, and told him what I was intending to do.

So my ship came in, first port into Port Arthur, and the agent came onboard and said, "Call Captain Hendrix."

I called him and he said, "Jim, I'll be glad to write you a letter, but I want to offer you something else. Jack Vetter, who is the port captain, has been accepted by the Houston pilots, so we need a replacement."

So we discussed the terms and I said, "Well, let me talk to my wife, and I'll let you know when I get in Houston." The man in Houston was actually the assistant manager of what we called the marine division, a crusty old seadog. He'd been master longer than I had been to sea.

I walked in and I introduced myself to him and explained why I was there, and he said, "Well, we'll see." [laughs]

I said, "Oh, okay." But then later that day he sent word down that—

JT: He was giving you a hard time.

JB: Yes, and that was his nature. He was really a softhearted old guy, as I found out later.

JT: So how long did you stay in that capacity?

JB: For seven years.

JT: What are some of the tasks and the responsibilities involved with—

JB: Port captain? Lykes is unusual. Most companies if they have a port captain, they're sort of like a super, stevedore supervisor. But Lykes, the port captain is a labor negotiator, because we had four shipboard unions. He inspects the vessels, the topside of the vessels, inspects the cargo holds. He is a liaison between the ship's officers and the office. This has to be a person who's acquainted with shipboard life and understands it. We had to subsist the ship, provide stores, steward stores and deck stores, work with the Coast Guard on inspections. Golly.

JT: Sounds like quite a task. So you were moving up, way up the chain.

JB: I worked every other weekend for seven years, every other weekend.

JT: So you would drive from your home to the channel, to the port.

JB: Yes.

JT: You had an office.

JB: We had an office. At first, when I first came ashore the office was downtown in the cotton exchange building, and that was in '57. In '59, January '59 we moved into a new office building on Avenue V as in Victor. It's over near the ship

channel, still there, still vacant as far as I know. Eventually we consolidated. That was an operational office. The operations division was there, the marine division, the M&R division, purchasing, customs, risk management. For a while finance was there.

And yes, I, whew. But it was, even though it was very active, it was nothing compared to being chief mate of a ship, nothing. I enjoyed my work very much. I liked ships. I just enjoyed ships so much, still do, still do.

JT: Well, if you were there from that particular period, tell me about some of the technological advancements that had taken place from when you started at King's Point to the mid-sixties. What are some of the major advancements that you saw through those twenty or so years, in particular with the ship channel in mind?

JB: Well, I saw your question and it brought to mind the fact that I worked for a company that very seriously took the catchphrase "collision by radar" to heart. Radar was a tremendous asset, and it helped the ship channel traffic by allowing the vessels to move in reduced visibility. It's still against the law to proceed in zero visibility, but they do it.

The biggest change—radar has some real problems, is that it's a relative motion device, and you have to interpret what you see. Do you remember a terrible accident in Mississippi when a tugboat got in the wrong channel and destroyed a railroad bridge just before a passenger train came through?

JT: I don't recall that.

JB: Oh, boy, it was terrible. That guy was using radar, but he misinterpreted it.

JT: Human error.

JB: Now today there are electronic chart devices that are absolutely stunning. They allow the shipboard operator to carry a little laptop computer, and he can actually see his ship represented on the channel. The channel limits important passing points.

And recently they've introduced a new service called AIS; Automatic Identification System I think is what it stands for. That uses transponders. Not every ship, but every ship in international trade is required to have those now, and using that device you can identify another ship, you get its speed, its course, even its cargo, what he's carrying. That used to be one of my arguments with the pilots. They said, "We don't care what kind of cargo is on a ship."

And I said, "You don't care if that guy's full of explosives?"

"No, no. We created the same." Okay, you guys are brain dead.

Two-way radio probably was as important as radar. For the first time—the pilots had their own system. They used CB radios at the beginning. I'm sure Roy told you that. But I was very proud of the fact that for the first time the pilots could talk to the tugboat operators, gain a better understanding of their problems. There was more cooperation between the two groups. Before, they were aliens to each other. So eventually, of course, it became national law. It became an international law to have the telephone. It's not always used, unfortunately.

Sometimes—oh, god, I've got so many stories. We had a collision with a Lykes ship that was inbound, and it was coming up, overtaking a tug that was pushing two barges ahead of it, in tandem, and it was well known by other ships that this guy wasn't using his radio. So the pilot on our ship came up, and they were going very slow, three or four knots. He wanted to pass him.

So when they got up to the Shell, which is the widest part of the channel, he decided to go ahead and pass. He'd blown whistle signals and everything; this guy never answered. So just as the ship was starting to pass this tow, the towboat operator broke his lashings on the lead barge and let it flop around, because he was going into Shell terminal, and the dock he was going to he had to go in in that configuration. He wasn't allowed to keep in tandem. So it was too late. We cut him, bad spill.

JT: What was in the container, or on the barge?

JB: It was some petroleum product, I don't remember now whether it was crude or something else, something nasty.

JT: So that would have been his fault?

JB: It's never that clear in a collision, never that clear.

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

JB: In 1957 I was chief mate on a light ship docked at Long Reach docks, and in came this strange configuration. It was a tanker with a false deck built above the weather deck. They used that technique in World War II. They would build that kind of a deck on a tanker and let it carry light cargo, usually aircraft, up there, and this guy had truck bodies on that false deck.

I think the name of the tanker was the *Ideal X*. A man named Mclean had the—he was in the trucking business, owned a big trucking business, and he thought it was silly not to use water to transport these trucks. And the first ones that I remember

were actually truck bodies. Later on he detached the van part from the wheels, and that's the operation today.

That was the biggest change in transportation, not just sea transportation but land transportation, that ever occurred, containers, and my company was behind the time. Our main cargos, we thought, were not containerizable. Today that's laughable. You know, cotton moves almost only in containers. Only occasionally there'll be a charter ship it'll take in break bulk. Bagged goods, containers. Everything's in containers.

And it's remarkable that we didn't have a single container in our fleet until it was forced on us. I mean, somebody finally say, "Hey, you know, we're missing out." So we built our own containers out of aluminum, and we carried them on break bulk ships mostly, which was terrible. They'd get mishandled, dented, always dented. Then eventually we stretched seven of our ships and added a container hatch, did that in Galveston at Todd's Yard. Eventually we got the sea-bee ships, the barge-carrying ships, and they were fitted out to carry containers on the barges.

JT: How did this new invention, this new technology, how did it transform the infrastructure of the port?

JB: At first it didn't. You know, when I was going to sea, land transportation out of a port was almost entirely by railcar, and it had slowly changed to predominantly truck transportation. So this containerization fit right in with that. Now there are very few companies that own their own, what they call, oh, my god, oh, boy, don't get old.

There are trucking companies in Houston that use owner operators. These guys own the tractors, but they don't own the trailers, and steamship lines own most of

those trailers. I'll think of the name of them in a minute. There must be two dozen different kinds of containers today. They did finally settle on some standardized sizes. Sea-Land, the originator of this business, had an unusual size. They had thirty-five-foot-long containers. Lykes went to thirty-foot trailers, containers to fit in the barges, and that didn't last very long.

But the other companies finally standardized the length as twenty and forty. Today that's blown. It's twenty, forty, forty-five, forty-eight. But there are flat tops, there are soft tops, there are, oh, just, of course refrigerated containers, specialized containers. They've been able to move almost everything except steel successfully. Some steel goes on flat racks, pipe, but the big coils and that kind of thing, they're just too heavy. You know, they weigh thirty tons a coil, or twenty tons, and you can't put them in.

One of the biggest problems with containers is loading off balance, and there's a formula out called the Bridge Formula, that regulates how much weight that a truck can carry, and it depends on—one of the factors in this formula is the distance between the front axle and the last axle. Normally speaking, a forty-foot container is built to haul about sixty tons of cargo. But the Bridge Formula limits that to around forty-five, forty-eight tons.

But some cargos, usually the twenty-foot containers are used for dense cargos, the drum products and so forth, and one of the problems is that they load these off balance, and then there'll be too much weight on one set of axles, and if one of these highway weigh stations stops it, they'll get fined. The trucker will get fined, not the steamship company or the ship or the receiver, but the poor trucker gets fined, and he's got to offload it. He's got to move it. They won't let it out of a weigh station, so that's a problem.

Of course, drugs became a big problem. Do you know that in the time I was at the port, when they really started inspecting containers for drugs, that the U.S. Customs never found a single pound of drugs in a container?

JT: Really.

JB: Never. They found some; they found some on ships, but it was all through intelligence. Matter of fact one of them—my career with Lykes changed in 1975. I became an assistant vice president in the traffic department, and that's a very unusual thing to happen. But one day there was an article in the paper that one of Lykes' ships had brought in a cache of cocaine, and there was nothing about the ship being fined or held up or anything. So I called my port captain, the man who had taken my place as manager of the marine division, and I said, "What gives? This doesn't ring right."

And he says, "Oh, it was a setup." He said, "They put the drugs onboard in Colombia," the Customs did, and made it known that it was there in narcotic circles, and they were just trapping people who were going to come down to pick it up, which they did.

JT: Wow, people on the Houston side.

JB: Yes.

JT: That's one way to do it.

JB: Well, that's the only way they ever did it. Now they've got, if you go into the Turning Basin terminal you'll see an x-ray setup for examining containers. It's right on the upper road in the Turning Basin.

JT: Really. So how many containers get checked and x-rayed?

JB: I understand it's 5 percent or less, but they do that selectively, you know. I remember one time somebody thought they were being very clever. They loaded a container with kitchen ware, pots and pans, and got a cheap rate on a ship that went to Colombia first. Well, that triggered the Customs. They had inspection stations at that time. They didn't have the x-rays. They had examination stations, and this was one of the triggers. Anything coming from Colombia was probably going to be suspect. So they unloaded that container, and it cost the receiver something like $1200 in labor costs to do that, and then they couldn't get it all back in. And they found nothing, they found nothing.

But the container has just revolutionized the industry. Huge ships now, huge.

JT: So from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies you were in a different position, as you mentioned?

JB: 1964 I became manager of our marine division in the West Gulf area. I had three port captains under me. I had a port purser staff, a couple of port stewards. That was just in Houston, and I had counterparts in Galveston that reported through me.

JT: And this is still with Lykes?

JB: Oh yes, always Lykes, yes. And then in 1975 they transferred me downtown to give me a look at the traffic side of the business, and I took it because, you know, you stay—I was there for seven years as manager, and you need a change after seven years in business. Five years, seven years, you need a change, so I welcomed the change. It was like a new world. I never knew what a freight forwarder was, or why they used them. I'm still not sure. [laughs]

JT: It seems like you spent an awful lot of time down there at the port. Tell me a little bit about the community of the port, the people who worked down there, the people who live down there, people who operate the security and work there on a daily basis. What is it like down there?

JB: I used to drive around every morning in the Turning Basin area and I would just marvel and say, "Baker, this is too big for you. You can't handle this." Fascinating work. That's the best job I've ever had in my life. I had a boss, a man named Jim Pew, who was the director, port director, executive director, and he let me run my business. He had faith in me. I kept him informed, of course, because a lot of things I did would get back to him through my customer base.

The customer base is, of course, your steamship companies, your stevedore companies, trucking companies, the freight-forwarding community, the customhouse-broker community, they're all customers of the port. The Port Authority itself is pretty much self-contained. They have their own environmental division, their own operations division, their financial division, P.R.

If you ever get down to that building go up on the fourth floor and you can see my museum.

JT: Your museum?

JB: Yes. Actually, it's a display area, but I talked them into letting me do that. They're mostly ship models, although I have a couple of cases of artifacts. One of the models is of a Lykes Brothers' barge-carrying ship, most unusual ship. I have a harbor tug there. I had a lot of contacts in the industry, and I would go to

them and say, "You know, I've got a place for a model of your tanker," Elias Skulios, port captain for Stolt-Neilson, and it's a small community.

He called me several days later and he said, "You know, I talked to Bob Matthis in Connecticut." At that time Stolt's home office was in Connecticut. And he said, "He tells me he's a classmate of yours from King's Point." And he said, "Sure. Give Jim one of those models."

So I got—it's an example of a very important trade in Houston called the parcel tankers. They're highly compartmentalized, they had special tanks, stainless-steel tanks, and some of them were specially coated, and they'll make three to five terminals each call in Houston, and load product. So I got one of those and I got—I had a friend who was vice president of operations with Hayden, Bay Houston Towing Company, and so I got a model of a harbor tug, the *C.R. Hayden*, named after the founder of that company, whom I hated, Cecil Hayden. We had a couple of battles together.

Anyway, so one day we had an evening function that was a reception for a Coast Guard admiral, and attending also was a man named Burton Lawrence, who's now the head of, what's it called—he used to be head, at this time, of Hollywood Marine. Now it's Kirby Corporation. Anyway, he was there and I pulled him out into the display area and I said, "I've got a place right here for a model of a very important piece of equipment, as far as Houston is concerned, one of your towboats and one of your barges."

And he turned to his vice president of operations and he said, "Jack, get it done." [laughs] So I got—they're still there. It's a beautiful model.

JT: I'll have to go see that.

JB: Yes, beautiful model.

JT: What's your experience with the pilots? We could probably sit here and talk for days about those characters.

JB: Yes, we really could. I've had an intimate relationship with the pilots since 1964. I used to tell them that I was the best friend they had in the business, and they didn't believe me, but I was. I was one of the few people that really understood their problems, and appreciated what they were up against, but I thought they were overpaid. So I was the head of a committee under the West Gulf Maritime Association that negotiated about every two years, negotiated rates with the pilots. So they considered me the enemy, rightfully so, I have to say, although I worked with them.

I helped them establish an organization, and it's still there, called the Pilot Advisory and Recommendation Committee. The pilots came to me one day and said, "We're getting attacked by the Coast Guard," and I knew that, because I had sort of initiated the attack. We had two ships, two of our own ships that were in a collision, one of them leaving Galveston, one arriving Houston, and they had a collision right at Pelican Spit Buoy, I think it's called. And the Coast Guard determined that the ship sailing from Galveston was at fault, and they were going to give the master six months suspension.

The pilot, interestingly enough, was an ex-Lykes captain and ex-port captain. So when I heard this I blew up, and I called my boss in New Orleans and I told him about it and I said, "Something's got to change." Because the pilot was not under the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard. He was under the jurisdiction of the pilot board in Galveston. They didn't do anything to him at all. It was his fault, it wasn't the captain's fault.

Anyway, so Lykes Brothers, my boss in New Orleans had a long, deep relationship with the Coast Guard, especially at headquarters, and so the Coast Guard had been looking for a long time to try to change the court decision that said that they had no jurisdiction over the pilots. So the pilots knew that this was underfoot, so they came to me and asked me if I would help to inform this committee that would take the pressure off of the pilots, and examine every collision or accident and deliver a written report on it to the Port Commission. The Port Commission acts as a pilot commission in Houston.

So I agreed to do that. Unfortunately, the plan loaded this committee with pilots. There were at least three pilots on it. You talk about a brotherhood. They make the A.M.A. look like a bunch of separatists. They are close. I remember twice I sat in on a hearing for a pilot, and the pilots absolutely wanted to exonerate him completely. There were three industry members there, and I finally convinced the industry members that some action should be taken. So we did the weakest thing in the world, we wrote letters of admonition.

Later on in a private conversation the P.O.—the presiding officer of the pilots was always a member of this committee—in two instances later I met with the presiding officer and he told me, "Jim, you were right. We should have taken stronger action."

I said, "Why didn't you open your mouth?"

And he said, "Jim, I'm one of the brothers. Can't do it, can't do it."

JT: In 1984 the port celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, and you were involved in that ceremony. Tell me a little bit about that event.

JB: Well, it was a P.R. effort. They opened the port to public visits. We had various activities for them. I'm trying to remember now. I know that most of my staff came out on the weekend to help them run this, but to tell you the truth I can't remember how it was handled exactly.

Now, we were the port for the commissioning of the guided-missile cruiser, the *San Jacinto*, and George H.W. Bush was vice president at the time, and you know his story was that he flew off of the carrier *San Jacinto*, so he came down for this commissioning. The navy, this was a P.R. effort on the navy. The navy built, oh, quite a few of these guided-missile cruisers, and they were all named after American battle places. Of course San Jacinto is one of them.

And that was quite—I remember that one very cleanly. We had a lot of activities going on, and they invited the public onboard the ship, so we had big crowds, huge crowds down, and my function mostly was to simply oversee the crowd. I've never seen so many people walking around with earpieces when Bush—

JT: The president?

JB: Yes. But I'll never forget one man, the meanest-looking small man I've ever seen. He was wearing a duster, you know, a cowboy duster, had a cowboy hat on, and I swear, I think that he had a shotgun under his coat.

JT: Well, there's the channel. Now, Captain Roy told me that he had to memorize this, and he had to draw it on his hand backwards and forwards. Now, where was the Lykes area, is it even on this map, where you worked?

JB: No, not where I worked at Lykes, but the waterfront we used mostly sometimes what they call City Dock 2. You see, this is an official map by the Port Authority. The whole maritime community calls all these docks the City Docks. The port

hates that. "They're not city docks." These wharves were originally city docks, one, two, three, and four. They're falling into the channel now.

So we at one time used Wharf 2 for the West Indies trade. We used usually Dock 42. We had as an assignment Piers 30 and 31, with the transit ships, and we were the cargo handlers there. You see, that's another unusual thing. The port makes assignments to different companies—they're usually stevedore companies—to actually do the terminal operation. They receive cargo and they deliver cargo. So Lykes was the designated cargo handler at [Piers] 30, 31.

We also occasionally went to the Elko Elevator area. It's called the Old Manchester area. Sometimes we went to Manchester Terminal down, where is it?

JT: It might be cut off in this scene.

JB: Yes.

JT: Is Lykes still operating down there?

JB: Lykes is gone. Lykes is gone.

JT: When did you retire from the company, sir?

JB: They gave me early retirement in 1986. I hated it, really hurt me. I didn't see how they were going to operate without Jim Baker. [laughs] They didn't do too well, either.

JT: And so what was your experience in retirement? Were you involved in any commissions or any other activities down there, or did you completely shut yourself off?

JB: Oh no, no.

JT: Impossible, huh?

JB: Yes. I was still active; I'm trying to remember now. I was on a couple of national committees, once after I fully retired. It was called DTS-2000. It was a Coast Guard effort to predict the future of the vessel traffic systems.

JT: Oh, wow.

JB: Yes. It was a most interesting assignment, and the strange thing, our findings were pretty much rejected. We said that a vessel traffic system in the future should be voiceless. The command remains on the bridge of the vessel, but he can receive all the information that he needs electronically, and now they can do it. That was, I think, 1995. Took them eleven years. [laughs]

I was on a committee, study committee, as part of the National Academy of Sciences. They have a group called the Marine Board. Matter of fact, I've got a book-sized report that we turned out. It's called *Minding the Helm*, and it was—the Coast Guard asked that this be done, to examine the whole structure of pilots, piloting. So we visited a lot of different ports, held meetings with both steamship lines and with the pilots, local pilots, a very interesting effort. I don't know what came of it other than publication of the book.

JT: Well, let me ask you this question, and it's sort of a multipart question. I'd like to understand how—and we're talking here just generally maybe in the sixties, fifties, sixties, and seventies—how an oilfield derrick, Gulf of Mexico oilfield derrick extracts oil from the gulf. Explain to me the process by which that oil is

transported into the ship channel, into the refineries, and then sent via either cargo or pipeline to the consumer. How is the port involved in all of that?

JB: Minimally, minimally involved. The product is moved from the production platform almost entirely by pipeline, and it comes—

Tape 3, Side 1

JT: Okay, this is tape three with Captain Jim Baker on June 6th, 2006.

So the transporting and commodification of oil into the port.

JB: Well, as I said, it moves from the offshore production platform by pipeline into one or more refineries. Now, Shell and EXXON have a lot of product moving in by vessels from foreign sources. Their production can move out by pipeline, it can move out by truck, by barge, a lot of barge business. You know, we have this marvelous gulf Intercoastal Canal; New Orleans is part of it. So there's a lot of barging, there's a lot of package movement, which probably now is by containers, in break bulk.

JT: So the oil is essentially sucked from the gulf, or it's transported from the Middle East or other areas, brought to the major refining plants where the oil is refined. Some of that product leaves again. Some of these products go to the development of petrochemicals—

JB: Right.

JT: —plastics, synthetics, which I understand is spread out sporadically through the ship channel areas, some of those major industries.

JB: It's a huge industry, huge industry. Strange, one of the byproducts is a product like carbon black. It's not called carbon black; what's it called? It moves through the Port of Houston's bulk handling plant, which is now operated by a private operation. A lot of that comes out of Lyondell. It's used for fuel. It's a very low BTU fuel, but it's apparently sought after, also used for making automobile tires.

JT: So the oil industry has been a major component of developing this very channel, and essentially emerging Houston, the major metropolis of Houston as a major economic city in this country.

JB: It's a big employer. It's a huge employer. I really appreciate the oil industry for what it does for the area, but I've never had this close feel for it, especially since they sabotaged this in the early sixties.

JT: With the pipeline incident?

JB: No, with their refusal to back up the requests for a deeper and larger ship channel.

JT: But most recently the channel has been enlarged and deepened. How is that going to affect—

JB: It lets them directly bring up some larger ships. I think probably they can deep load them. A lot of them are, you know, partially loaded when the come in, so now they go down to forty-five feet. This is a mud-body-bottomed channel, so sometimes they just drag the ships through the mud.

JT: Is that right?

JB: Yes. You have to be careful with it.

JT: You've got to watch out for your pipelines, too.

JB: Yes, yes. I forget where I was going with that.

JT: Let me ask you one last question here, Captain Jim. You've been working and living amongst this area since the late fifties. Why do you think that—and I'm going to go out on a limb here—why do you think that most people in Houston don't recognize the importance of the ship channel and the Port of Houston, and don't realize the amount of trade and resource, natural resources that flow in and out of this port every day?

JB: Well, first of all, let me say that under Jim Edmonds, the current port commission chairman, they have made a concerted effort to advertise the port. You see spots on TV all the time, and newspaper spots. Those have done a great deal to bring to the public eye the importance of the Port of Houston.

I've always called it the invisible port. You know, most ports, Baltimore's port was right downtown; New Orleans, the port's right downtown. Now eventually—and Montreal, I think, was another example—eventually, though, they had to move a lot of that activity away for two things. One, the real estate sometimes became too highly valued to keep running ships in and out, and the ships became larger.

But Houston, until they built the Sidney Sherman Bridge, a lot of people never saw the port, although they very wisely used the *Sam Houston*. They call it the inspection boat, but it's a tour boat. When I was there the figures they used were around somewhere around 50,000 people a year made that trip. As a matter of fact, I remember one time I was working the Houston International Show and we had a booth down there, and there's a woman came up, late thirties, had children

with her, and I handed her a brochure about the *Sam Houston*, and I said, "You ought to take the kids on this."

She looked at it and she said, "I rode on that when I was a kid."

JT: I'll be.

JB: Now with security on it's a little more difficult. I think you have to make advance reservations. Well, you always made reservations, but you usually could just go down and the boat was never full.

JT: Well, with respects to that for the new international terrorist threat, and with this ever-increasing technology, what do you see the port looking like in the next fifty to a hundred years? How is it going to change?

JB: If I've had one real fault, it's been the inability to envision things. In the last fourteen years there have been so many changes on this channel that I didn't think would happen. Bayport is one of them. The enlargement of the ship channel is one of them. I think somewhere in your questions you ask about the port's relationship with ecology, and that ship channel enlargement project changed everything.

JT: Is that right?

JB: Oh, it changed everything. The corps, even the way the corps dredges and disposes of the dredged material, you know, they have built bird islands. They've reconstituted one of the islands in the middle of the bay. They have started oyster areas, beds. They have created bird islands, and they've done this using the dredged material instead of just scattering it across the bay bottom. It was tough, very tough.

The port sponsored a group called the BUG, Beneficial Use Group. It was composed of every environmental agency, city, county, federal, state, private, and they would meet regularly to discuss what the port could do to lessen the impact, the environmental impact of enlarging the ship channel. At one point I remember one of the people on that committee, either the port or the corps of engineers told me, he says, "You know, I think we're going to have to dredge another channel just to get enough material to satisfy all these ideas that these environmental groups are having."

That was the first time that it ever happened, and it the port went out, I think, on a bond issue and got extra money to do that. I think it was around forty million dollars, and that sort of set the tone for this kind of activity throughout the United States.

JT: I think our folly is, if man has the technological marvel and ability to construct this type of operation for the primary purpose of consumerism or making a profit, capitalist ventures, he should in turn have the ability to help use those resources to help protect the environment, particularly now with what the oilfield companies have done in the last seventy-five years. So you see the recent development, the milestone of the dredging and of the building of the new marshlands as a turning point?

JB: Yes, very definitely.

JT: More environmentally aware.

JB: And you know, the thing is that I was against it at the beginning. I thought these people were excessive in their demands. They used to use the word preservation.

How can you preserve a natural environment? You can't preserve it. You going to gold plate it?

JT: It's constantly changing.

JB: Yes, absolutely. When Carla came through and wiped out all the, was it duckweed or something like that in the bay, which was a very important part of the structure of the marine life.

JT: Habitat.

JB: Habitat. And that can happen tomorrow. But we can't give up on it. So I was against it, and then finally I saw the light. They convinced me that not only was this possible but it was desirable.

JT: Thank you.

JB: You're welcome.

JT: I appreciate it. Before I go, do you know of any other individuals or folks involved the port over the year, maybe whom you worked with, maybe the Port Authority, other than the names that you've mentioned, that might be interested in participating in this project?

JB: Think, think, think. Have you approached any of the Coast Guard people?

JT: No, I have not thought about that until today, talking with you. That's definitely an area I'd like to look into.

JB: At one time this was called the retirement capital of the Coast Guard. It seems like we would get captains of the port here, and they would take retirement and go to work for private industry here. The problem with the Coast Guard is that they change so frequently. The average tenure now, I think, of a captain of the port is probably three years, so sometimes they'll move in and out. They'll come back, maybe in a different role. So that might not be such a good idea.

If you could get one of those old retired guys, they could talk, I think, about some of the things that I have talked about, because they were deeply involved with safety, marine safety, of course. That's the main function of the captain-of-the-port job.

JT: So no regrets, you would do it all again?

JB: You bet. I had a great life, great life, and I owe it to King's Point.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 18 October 2006]