MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Randy LeCompte

Date: January 30, 2007

Place: Port of Iberia, LA

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Randy LeCompte is co-owner of Geo Marine Incorporated at the Port of Iberia. Geo specializes in aluminum catamarans and shallow water crew/seismic boats. The company was started by Mac LeCompte in 1979 and is now operated by his two sons, Randy and David LeCompte.

Work force/other issues: Geo originally hired skilled labor from the same family in nearby Loreauville. The Theriots worked for Geo as shop foremen for several years before moving on. Today's work force is more sophisticated but not as hard working as the guys of old. Today's workers have to be Coast Guard certified and the type of specialized vessels--the Catamarans that Geo builds--require more precision, patience than building a work boat. For this type of work, Geo hires and trains multi-skilled fitter-welders who are good all around fabricators.

When Geo moved to the Port of Iberia in 1994, they had an order for new builds. However, as the market softened in 1997, Geo was out of work, so they gambled with diversification into the fishing/party Catamarans and scored big with a new market. Today, 95 percent of Geo's new builds are not oil and gas industry related, ironic for a shipyard located in an oil and gas service center at the Port of Iberia. The lack of labor has also discouraged LeCompte to diversifying back into the oil and gas crewboat industry. He is comfortable maintaining a small, highly skilled and well paid crew of 25 who work on small specialized vessels under a covered roof with no rain-outs, so as to stay on schedule working only five days a week.

Geo has carved a niche in this market and managed to stay small. However, when the market is slow, well known companies, like Breaux Brothers, turn away from the crewboats and turn toward the aluminum catamarans, which take business away from Geo.

LeCompte's main concern is who is going to take over the family business after he and his brother retires. He has two sons, but, as with most company owners, their sons and daughters are least likely to get into the business.

Company's significance/history: Geo Marine Incorporated started in 1979 at the Port of Iberia by Mac LeCompte to service the shallow water seismic industry. Mr. LeCompte had been involved in the boat business in the 1960s and started a company to built and rent boats to the oil companies. Geo began building flat-bottom aluminum boats to work in shallow water, but these boats could also carry a heavy load on deck. Geo diversified into international markets, which may have allowed them to survive the 1980s downturn. Today, they are thriving in the catamaran industry.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Randy LeCompte of Geo Marine at the Port of Iberia. This is January 30th, 2007. Interviewer is Jason Theriot. This is for the MMS Ship Fab Project. Randy LeCompte, tape one.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: …your background, where you're from, just introduce yourself.

RL: Oh, okay. My name is Randy LeCompte, and we have a family business, Geo Shipyard Incorporated, started—we formed the corporation in 1979, actually. We were basically driven by the geophysical industry for small boats, and my father was associated with several different seismic companies that were, you know, in the business of looking for oil and gas, and there was a need for small boats to do oil research in the shallow bays and bayous of Louisiana. So he basically went to the bank with a seven thousand dollar signature note and borrowed the money, and here we are today.

JT: What's your father's name?

RL: Mac LeCompte.

JT: Is he still alive today?

RL: He's still alive, but he's just not—you know, he's retired now.

JT: Okay. What was his background? How did he get involved in that industry?

RL: He was in the boat business most of his life and so by being in the boat business, he used to make sales calls to all these people and then he became friends with them and, you know, they all told him there's a need for a small boat for what we're doing and they said, "You go out and you build the boat, and we'll rent it from you."

JT: At the beginning for him, was it more commercial, recreational? Was it—

RL: No, it was commercial, strictly commercial.

JT: Back then that was, what, cypress or mahogany or what?

RL: No, no, no. That, this was, when we started, it was we were using fiberglass, fiberglass boats. Then—

JT: So when he got into the boat business, we're talking the sixties?

RL: He got in the boat business in the late sixties, and they were using a lot of steel in the industry then, and then but it needed a better grade of material, you know, of metal, and they wanted something that would last longer. So they went from, slowly graduated from, steel to aluminum, and aluminum, it's lighter, it's easier to work with, you know, it's not as corrosive of steel. So they went, they started going to aluminum and really making advances in aluminum whereas they used to use steel.

JT: So your dad not only had the expertise of boat building, but he also had the contacts.

RL: He also had the contacts.

JT: So when he invested, it was for the creation of his company, Geo.

RL: Right. That's correct.

JT: Then tell me about when you came into the picture. When did you start working here?

RL: I came aboard in 1981. I was actually in mud engineering school, and my brother came onboard first, and then as the business grew, then I had an opportunity to come onboard. So he made me part of the business as well.

JT: Who's your brother?

RL: David LeCompte.

JT: He's older?

RL: David's older, yes.

JT: Okay. Did both of ya'll two get college degrees?

RL: No. I've got a—David graduated. David went to the ninth grade, but he did follow up and get his, you know. He graduated. Then I went, I graduated from high school and went one year at UL and decided I couldn't afford it. I was working in the oilfields and then going to school at the same time, and then I had to drop out and go strictly work.

JT: One or the other.

RL: It's one or the other. Pop wasn't paying for my education. He said, "You want it, you go get it."

JT: I'm sure by the late seventies, early eighties, you could make a really good living out here at the Port.

RL: Yes, you could.

JT: What were you doing? You said you were in engineering.

RL: I was training to be a mud engineer with Magabar Mud Company.

JT: Are they still around?

RL: They are. They've been bought out three and four times. I'm not sure what the name of the company is now.

JT: So tell me about that first line of crafts in the 1970s, explain to me a little bit more about the inland work. I interviewed Kerry Neuville, so I know a little bit about

what was going on back then with the crew boats. What types of vessels were you guys building?

RL: Well, back then we were building just a little small shallow draft aluminum workboat.

JT: Kind of like this?

RL: Well, this is a little crew boat here, but what we were doing is we were building essentially a flat-bottom boat to work in really, really shallow water but that could carry a lot of weight on deck. So we kind of—it was a new market, you know. No one was doing this type of work. In the industry that we were in, they were using fiberglass boats and they were open boats.

What we did was we built like a little barge-type boat, okay, and sealed it and foam filled it where it wouldn't sink, and they would use them in the bays and in the bayous, you know, in the shallow stuff. They needed something. You know, this is a rough industry. They needed something that these guys could essentially tear up with a ball-peen hammer and survive, and so that's where the need was created for what we did, and we just started building from there and essentially graduated to this.

JT: So the actual design of the boats, that was from your father?

RL: Right.

JT: Is that just from over the years of him working on boats?

RL: Just common knowledge working on boats and being around the field, you know.

JT: Because that flat-bottom boat that we know of here, that's a traditional style boat that is native to this group of people who have been using these flat-bottom bateaus for two hundred years.

RL: That's correct.

JT: I mean that's an old, real old technology, meandering through these waterways.

RL: Correct.

JT: Tell me a little about the inland oil and gas industry in the late seventies. Why was it so fruitful for you guys to get in?

RL: At the time, there was a—the price of a barrel of oil was good, it was high, it was—then, I mean, back in the '78, '79, and '80 and through the early eighties, I

mean the oilfield was just out of sight, on its way up. So the business opportunities were there, you know, and they were really looking hard for this oil and gas in these shallow fields in south Louisiana. Like I say, the boats they were using just weren't compatible with what they were doing. They were just tearing them up.

JT: Who were some of the customers that ya'll had in this industry?

RL: Company called GSI, which is owned by Texas Instruments. Another company called Geo Physical, which is owned by Geo Source. Oh, there's been several down the line. Western Geophysical, which is now Baker Industries bought them out. There used to be a Litton Industry. Baker Hughes bought them out.

JT: So if we're talking about seismic activity in the marsh, in the shallow water, less than, let's say, fifteen-foot bottom, were these boats also rigged up for transporting and actually conducting the seismic works and that equipment?

RL: Right. Correct. They would haul, they would transport the seismic recording equipment for the deployment and the retrieval of that equipment.

JT: Wow. So I'll imagine they had some kind of station set up in and around the marshes?

RL: Yes. What they'd do is they set up a recording. They call it a doghouse. It's a recording. It's where the computer is and it records the seismic shockwaves that are sent down. They send shockwaves down by different methods. They use air guns, they use dynamite and they'll either use marine vibrators, you know, or they use land vibrators.

JT: Which is different from what they're using out in the open water, which is one of the—it's like a long continuous cable that goes shooting down?

RL: Right, yes, that's called streamer. That's streamer work. Technically, the way their retrieval is the same, but going about it, the process is different than what they use in the shallow bays. In the shallow bays, they'll mostly use dynamite. Okay. Out there in the big deep water, they use air guns, compressed air.

JT: So give me a rough estimate of how many of those little boats that you guys built in the '70s.

RL: We ended up building twenty-eight of them, and we used to just be strictly rentals and then we, as we continued in the business, then an opportunity came up for us to build boats. We used to build all our own stuff, and then the opportunity came

up to build boats for other customers to use overseas, and then that's how our boat-building process started.

JT: Ya'll were here the whole time in this location?

RL: No, I used to be on Highway 90 before I was here. We bought this place in 1994.

JT: Okay. So before 1990, where were ya'll building the boats and launching them?

RL: I was building on Highway 90, right there where Geo Marine used to be, and then I would haul them on a truck to this shipyard or to the boat landing right here. So I was real familiar with this shipyard, and then one day it became available for sale.

JT: What shipyard was this?

RL: This was Jinjam Shipyard.

JT: What were they doing, do you remember?

RL: He was mostly—he had this shipyard. He had a fleet of small crew boats, forty-two, forty-eight footers like the *Miss Shirley*, and he had this yard strictly to repair his own vessels and to operate out of.

JT: So the channel here was already done. All of the infrastructure and the water access was already in place.

RL: Correct, correct. When I got here, it was.

We did some out—I put this building up. I put all this slab up. I put the building up next door, and then I did a lot of slab work in the back. So I did a lot of new construction here since I've been here to fit our needs.

JT: Okay. Tell me about the labor force. If we're talking about aluminum hulls and aluminum designs, you've got to have a specialty welder and fitter to put all that together. Who was working here in the late seventies? Who had your father hired to work on these boats?

RL: We had a small group of family members from Loreauville, Louisiana. In fact, their last name was Theriot.

JT: Good people, no doubt.

RL: Good people, yes. They were here for—I guess they worked with us for probably thirteen to fourteen years at the old address on the highway and then when we got here as well. They were building our boats, and things changed and they moved on. So we've been through like it's probably the third generation of shop foremens, I guess, since the Theriots have left, and now it's just harder, harder and harder now to keep skilled people, you know, in his industry.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So the skill hand that you need to weld and to fit—

RL: Aluminum.

JT: These Theriots, where had they learned the trade?

RL: They had just picked the trade up, you know. They basically, they—I don't even know if they finished high school most of them. But just really smart people, you know, a lot of common sense in the boat industry. They started out building bateaus and crawfish skiffs and whatever on the levee over there, so they just kind of—it's a continuous thing.

JT: Right, into the oil and gas field.

So I'll imagine that, boy, this really opened you guys up by coming here, opening up a new field for repair work also.

RL: Yes.

JT: You couldn't do that over there on Highway 90.

RL: No, I couldn't do it on Highway 90. I didn't have the capability. I have a marine lift where I pick up all these boats up, and I didn't have that capability, you know. But when we bought this place in '94, I had a seven-boat contract to build boats that I sent to—we had a contract in the Caspian Sea for the Cossack government in association with Western Geophysical. So I had to get these seven boats and they were all custom-designed boats to fit into the Caspian Sea, and I needed a place to build them. It all kind of fell like dominoes. I was in jeopardy of losing the contract because I couldn't fulfill it, this place was available, and this all happened within a two-week period that I bought this place. So we moved over here and I automatically setup shop and built these boats and got them all over to the Caspian Sea.

JT: So you think that that's really what has made Geo, has made you?

RL: Yes. I mean that was—I was building boats before then, you know, but it was just like one boat here and another boat there and, you know, so forth and so on, and then boom, I got this seven-boat contract, which I fulfilled and then, you know. My biggest salesman is the last boat that I just delivered. That is my biggest salesman, because we have no salesmen here. One boat sells another boat, sells another boat, sells another boat. So that's basically, you know, my sales staff.

JT: How much work do you have in front of you as far as the next one?

RL: I've got work till the end of the year right now, as we speak, without getting any other contracts.

JT: Let's back up a little bit. Let's go into the eighties when things were really hot and crazy around here in the Port of Iberia, a lot of fabrication going on, a lot of fabrication going on, a lot of boats. Tell me a little bit about the vibe, about the excitement in '81, '82 when you first arrived here. How old of a young fellow were you?

RL: I was twenty-four years old.

JT: You were married?

RL: No, I was single then.

JT: This place was happening. I mean, this was busy.

RL: Yes. Oh, yes, we were busy in our business. The Port of Iberia was busy as well. Not like it is today, it was much smaller then, you know. But when I came into the business, it was eighteen, nineteen, twenty-hour days that we were working, David and I.

JT: You had a lot of people from out of town or it was mostly locals here?

RL: As far as for my business is concerned, it was mostly locals.

JT: Then it all falls out in ’82 and ’83.

RL: ’82, ’83, you know, the industry started going down.

JT: Tell me what was the immediate impact on Geo.

RL: Seismic in the oil industry is always the first industry to come up and the first industry to go down, so yes, in ’82, ’83, we were impacted very strongly by it.

But fortunately, what helped us is that we were, at that point in time, we were just starting to build boats for overseas markets through the seismic, the very same seismic companies that we used to rent our boats to. They would rent our boats here in the States and then they' have a project in, say, Brazil or Alaska and they'd say, well, you know, instead of renting your boats, we just want to buy our own boats. Will you build us the same kind of vessels that we rented from you?

So we had to make that decision because it was—you know, at the same time it was a diversification for us, but at the same time it was taking bread and butter away from our table, because we were in a strictly the rental business. So we had to decide at that time if we were going to build these boats for these companies or not, because if we weren't going to build them, they were going to have them built somewheres else.

JT: Right. Now, let me ask you this. Had the bust occurred yet? Had the downfall come?

RL: Yes, yes, the downfall was in place.

JT: So that was a quite a gamble because your business has dropped. I'm sure your labor force has dropped, things are hard times, and yet you've got an opportunity to jump into something totally brand new. Boy, that's kind of a gutsy move.

RL: Yes. At the time it was real scary, but it was the right move.

JT: This was you and your brother? Was your father involved?

RL: My father was involved then, as well, yes. That was in ’82, ’83. Then that carried us over through the eighties, you know, and we had a—we started a retail business on the highway as well with outboard motors and boats, so we provided a service in the retail industry. We did that actually up until four years ago, and we closed that part of the business down. It just wasn’t lucrative anymore. It’s a highly competitive business, outboard industry.

JT: Especially right here when you’ve got the big major players.

Okay. So the eighties come around, you guys survive, and do you think that—

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: How did you guys get involved in the international market? How did these customers fine ya’ll?

RL: Basically, like I was telling you before, they’d—a couple of the big companies, the international companies, came down to south Louisiana and they were doing

some seismic shoots in the marshes and the swamps here. They rented our vessels for these jobs, and once the job was over, they had this one particular fellow that came down to run the job who could see the potential in the boats that he rented from us. So his train of thought was, boom, I can use these boats in Uganda or Africa or wherever else, and so that's how that came about.

JT: Do you think that that business, those boats that ya'll are building during that period, is that what may have kept ya'll afloat?

RL: Absolutely, sure.

JT: Without that, what other work could you have?

RL: I mean that's where the big money was. Probably wouldn't have made it.

JT: About how many employees did you have during that downturn in '82, '83 up to '86, '7?

RL: Five.

JT: Five guys.

RL: Five, six, five to six people.

JT: How many had you had before when things were hot?

RL: We were probably—we never had a big labor force. I mean we probably had ten people, twelve people.

JT: So how many boats were ya'll able to build at a time over there at Highway 90?

RL: It was smaller boats. We were able to build two, two boats at a time there.

JT: Okay. Now tell me a little bit about getting over here, about the move to come. This was in the mid-nineties. How had business developed after the bust?

RL: After the bust? Well, what happened was in our industry, they had a new technology, a new recording technology that came out. It was in 3-D type form, where they could go down and look for oil and gas faults in the 3-dimensional way below the earth's surface, and that brought about—that new technology brought about an upswing in business. So all the oil companies were wanting to go back and reshoot all the old oil and gas fields in Louisiana and Texas in 3-D technology. So that's spurred a lot of business.

Plus, the international, we were building boats for international for to go to different countries, so we were busy with that as well, and it just all transpired at the same time.

JT: Wow, that's great. I mean it seems like you guys were at the right place at the right time.

RL: Right place, right time.

JT: Particularly with this yard coming available.

RL: Right.

JT: What's the acreage right here and what do you have room to do?

RL: We have a—we're right at six and a half total acres here with over six hundred feet of waterfront property with access to the Gulf of Mexico.

JT: Right. So when your international jobs, what, do they build a ship and they load it up on a bigger ship and take it overseas?

RL: Correct. We'll normally build the ships here, put them in the water and run them over either to the Port of New Orleans or the Port of Houston, and then they'll pick them up from there and put them on a ship and then bring them to wherever.

JT: So like the shakedown crews, if you will.

RL: Correct.

JT: So your own people will go and do that?

RL: Most of the time, yes.

JT: Okay.

RL: Make sure all the bugs are out.

JT: Deliver that boat?

RL: Yes. In '94 when we first moved here, the contract that had for the Caspian Sea, we actually flew two boats of here in a Russian Antenov transport plane from right here at Acadian Regional Airport. We loaded two fifty, sixty-foot boats end

to end in that plane and took. Yes, they were similar boats to these right here on the wall. And flew them straight into the Caspian.

JT: See, that's interesting, because in talking with some of the guys around here, particularly at Regional, and they were explaining to me about the development of this idea to build a regional airport, you know, the Highway 90, this whole area was going to be a huge boom because of the oil industry, kind of like Morgan City was in the late forties and fifties. So they built this thing with the idea that all these companies are going to come and all these big-wigs from Texas and Oklahoma are going to be able to fly in and kind of look at their rigs and what have you. But that didn't necessarily happen.

But on the flipside of that, it allows small little jobs like what you guys are doing to be able to fly these ships out of here, because it is such a big landing strip. Is that unique in that respect? I mean is that what has been what other folks have been using that landing strip for?

RL: I know several different companies have flown in some pretty heavy equipment. I know they flew the Russian Antonov in here on one other occasion. That was for some big polyurethane towrope on some big huge reels I think that Shell had to have and I know they landed them and flew them right into here, you know. This is just the last couple years ago.

JT: But very rarely do you see something like that, activity like that?

RL: Yes. Yes, it's very expensive for to rent that plane for a trip.

JT: Yes. That's something else.

How did ya'll come to determine that that was the best opportunity to move these ships out, or was that the customers?

RL: That was the customer's decision. He had to have two of them over there right away to start his contract. He had to have two boats in the Caspian Sea by a certain date or his contract would be null and void.

JT: So you said, well, we got a landing strip right down the road.

RL: Yes. So he said yes, and he said, "Well, what can we do?"

Said, "Well, we have an old naval base over here, you know."

"Well, can we build two of these boats to fit inside this plane?"

And we said, "Yeah." So they sent us dimensions of the interior of the plane with all the heights and widths of the plane were, and we built the boats to fit inside the plane.

JT: Wow. Let's talk about that design you said your dad had a lot of the original concepts for the smaller seismic aluminums, was your dad. What about these monsters, these big catamarans, these types of vessels? Where did you guys come up with the designs for that?

RL: I contract that through naval architects. Right. We'll do just top view and side profile and a general layout of a vessel. When a customer wants us to build a boat, we'll kind of just do a little sketch of what the boat may look like and where his accommodations may be, where his seating's going to be, so forth and so on. Then we take it from there and we go a step further by contracting with a naval architect, because all these, all these vessels that we're building now are all Coast Guard certified so everything has to be approved through Washington before I can even start building a vessel.

JT: So you guys submit your—

RL: I have to submit drawings.

JT: —architectural drawings?

RL: I have to submit drawings to Washington, and they have to be red stamp approved before I lay the keels.

JT: Okay. Who actually does the designs? Is that you?

RL: My brother. My brother does a lot of the most of the new build.

JT: Okay. CAD, CAD work?

RL: CAD, yes.

JT: So you guys are in partnership in here?

RL: We have, we're a partnership, yes.

JT: What, do you run the yard and—

RL: I run the yard and I make sure that, you know, work is carried forth on the vessels, and I run the repair yard as well. Then in my spare time, I'll work with him on new builds as well, you know, and coming up with some kind of a design arrangements and whatnot. But in order to free his hands up to keep him in the office more with the drawing, then I stay back here and run the people, which I prefer to do anyway.

JT: Okay. Tell me about these people. Are they different from the material crew that you ran back in the day?

RL: Yes, they're a little more sophisticated, you know. You know, they're probably not as hardworking as the Theriots. The Theriots were very—those guys were hardworking. They would just get down and bust your butt for you. But the quality and the craftsmanship of the boats that I'm building today versus what I was building with the Theriots is a lot better, you know. I was building strictly workboats then. They didn't have to look pretty. But now my boats have to be pretty, they have to look pretty, so I have to build a straighter boat, and that takes a little more time and a little more thought than what I was doing back years ago.

JT: So a little bit more patience, I'll imagine, particularly with your hands, huh?

RL: A lot of more patience, yes, a lot more patience. Everything I was doing back then wasn't Coast Guard certified, versus everything I'm doing today is Coast Guard certified. So all of my welders have to be Coast Guard certified, so therefore I have to pay them more.

JT: That's what it equates to, huh?

Who are these guys? Where are they from?

RL: They're all local people. Some of them still from Loreauville, I have several of them from Loreauville. I have some from New Iberia. I have a few of them from St. Martinsville. One guy just started with us, this guy here, he's from Michigan.

JT: I'll be.

RL: He was living in a motel down here. He walked in through the door about a month ago and said, "I need a job. I used to aluminum weld in Michigan."

I said, "Well, let's see what you can do," because I get—before I hire anybody now, I automatically give them a welding test to see where they're at and how much I'm going to pay them.

JT: Okay. So does automatic—how do they get Coast Guard approved once that—

RL: Once they feel that they're ready to certify, I have a test procedure here that the Coast Guard has approved. It's a bend test to see how strong their weld is. Once they practice with this little jig that we set up and they feel that they're comfortable with it, then we bend it and if it bends and the weld doesn't crack, you know, then the Coast Guarders will certify him. But I mean it's very difficult.

So we let them practice in field until they tell us they feel that they're ready.

JT: In the meantime, what are they doing? Are they grinding and tacking?

RL: They're fitting. A lot, the majority, a lot of the people that I hire are multitasks, you know. They'll fit and weld. So I have fitters and welders.

JT: Specialty trade here.

RL: So it's really, yes, and that's what I try to pinpoint when I hire people, fit and weld, and a lot of these guys can also weld steel but they prefer to weld aluminum because it's cleaner.

JT: What about how many guys do you have working today? What's your workforce?

RL: I've got about twenty-five. I keep a small workforce.

JT: So you've got this big catamaran going, and then it looks like that's a new build.

RL: This is a new build. These two are repair. These are almost completed, in different stages of completion for repair. Then Saturday, I move this boat out and

put it on this side of the shop, and I'll have my jigs underneath my boat that I'm going to use to start laying out a new sixty-footer that I have to build.

JT: A sixty-foot catamaran?

RL: Catamaran.

JT: Okay. Where are those two catamarans going, this one and the new one?

RL: This one's going to San Diego, and the next one I'm going to start is going to—it's going to be actually be working out of Manhattan in the Hudson River.

JT: Like a ferry boat?

RL: It's a fishing boat. It's for an individual, yes, for a Chinaman.

JT: Really?

RL: Tom Chin.

JT: What's he catching up there, some halibut or something?

RL: He's just—we're building what they call just a party fishing boat where he's going to carry forty-five people out fishing on an excursion.

JT: Fifty bucks a day or whatever?

RL: Whatever they charge a head, yes.

JT: Well, that's good man. It looks like you guys have kind of figured out, carved out your niche and been able to stay going with a lot of international and a lot of private interests from individuals.

RL: It's a good mix now I do, you know. I still do oilfield work, although the ratio has changed, probably

JT: Now, you had told me a couple of weeks back when we first talked that what had occurred here in the eighties and the downturn, the slight downturn in the nineties, and I'm putting words in your mouth, but essentially left a bad taste with you.

RL: Well, I mean the only bad taste it left in my mouth is I mean we just, you know, we were on the verge of bankruptcy in '97 when the 3-D had come and gone, the technology, and everybody had reshot the old fields, you know, and even the international play was starting to slow down for us as well. So we were here and

we weren't building crew boats so we weren't in that market. So nobody knew us in the crew boat industry to say go out and build a crew boat.

So we started scrambling around for different markets. It was a decision we had to make. It was a do or die type thing, you know. It was just survival. We started looking to these other markets and, boom, I mean it just happened for us. Like I say, one boat, I mean we've now up built these catamarans. I've got these cats all over the world, everywhere. I've built dinner boats. This boat right here is working out of Maui. I just sent two more to Maui this year that I finished.

JT: What's a boat like that run for?

RL: That's about two and a half million.

JT: It's a sixty-foot catamaran?

RL: Sixty-five foot cat.

JT: Okay. Now let's say if, because the way that I understand it in talking with a lot of ship brokers, a lot of individuals in the marine transportation and also in the shipbuilding, is that right now they can't stop building boats. They've got business through 2010, triple rates, although it's slowly softening up a little bit.

RL: Yes, the Gulf is softening. The Gulf is softening up right now.

JT: But you know, during, before the hurricane, and especially right around the hurricane, people like Breaux Bay Craft and the Neuvilles and even the big boys, Bollingers and Chouest and all these guys were just knocking them out, have crews of two or three hundred. What made you decide not to want to go into that crew boat design building, workboat design building?

RL: Well, I mean, we basically we had started off with small aluminum vessels and we did a lot of—we had to do, make a decision back then. We were thinking about maybe diversifying into that market, you know, but it was a market that we didn't know. This market I know and I'm good at it because I can keep a smaller workforce.

We decided to try to stay the course, to diversify but not to go overboard and get into something like such as a steel boat business, building business, you know. I'm not good at steel. I'm good at aluminum, and I've turned down a lot of work in steel just simply because I know that I could get really hurt on it, you know, very badly. So we decided to stay away from that and concentrate on aluminum business, and that's what we've done and it's been successful for us.

JT: Now when you say "get hurt," do you mean—

RL: Financially.

JT: Because of the potential problems?

RL: Because of the unknown, because of the unknown in it, you know. I mean there's more people building steel boats than there is aluminum boats and my workforce and my shop is geared towards aluminum. So you know, like when I build a boat, aluminum boat, you know, I know my man hours, you know, I know exactly what, how much material is going to go into building this vessel. If I was to build, say, a hundred and sixty-five foot steel supply boat, the unknown for me would be not the material but the man hours because working steel is slower than working aluminum.

JT: Then there's always that potential for the price of oil to drop to thirty dollars a barrel.

RL: Well, yes, but I mean once you have somebody, once you have a boat contract locked up, then you know, they can't back out on you. They can, but I mean it's—

JT: But I see what you're saying. If you did decide to go that route and then you would have to expand not only your yard here but change out equipment, but you'd have to find new workforce and then—

RL: A whole new workforce.

JT: That would open you up to all the problems that all the other guys are having right now.

RL: That's correct. That's correct. And now, you know, building small boats like I'm doing now, my work's all inside, under roof, I don't have any rain-outs, you know. I work five days a week, I can stay on schedule.

JT: Forty hours?

RL: I work fifty-five.

JT: Do you have any problems with some of you guys wanting to go and work for a better deal somewhere else?

RL: Oh, yes, sure, all the time, you know.

JT: How do you keep them around?

RL: You either have to make a decision to pay them more if they're worth it, or just let them go, you know. At some point in time, you get a—with your labor, you get to a point of no return, and once a guy's here for three or four months, I know the potential of him. I know if they're worth fifty cents more or I'll know if they're worth a dollar more if I'm going to pay them that or just say, well, you know, thank you for your services and see you later.

JT: Where have these guys been trained, the local guys and then this fellow here from Michigan? Where have they learned to weld on aluminum?

RL: The guy that I have here from Michigan was building, he told me something up in Michigan, I don't remember what it was, but the majority of my other guys have all come from other shipyards and so they had experience when they got here.

JT: On steel, aluminum?

RL: It was on aluminum.

JT: So the other aluminum competitors would be the guys in Loreauville?

RL: Right. Correct. Breaux, Neuvilles, yes.

JT: Is there anybody else along the Gulf of Mexico that's working on aluminum?

RL: Yes, there's another boatyard here, Island Boats.

JT: Yes, they're new.

RL: Yes. He does basically the same thing that I do and he's fairly new. Yes.

JT: Well, then this has got to be an attractive area, this port.

RL: Yes, the port is. It's nice for me. I mean it's so accessible for me. But as far as the aluminum boat building goes, people from around the world know that they can get a boat built in the south Louisiana, they can get a quality vessel, aluminum vessel built in south Louisiana because this is where the best labor skill is.

JT: That's interesting.

RL: Really is.

JT: That says a lot for what's been going on down here the last twenty, thirty years.

RL: Because the Breauxs and Neuvilles, they basically stay busy. They have their ups and downs, but they're well known, you know. Those guys are well known. As long as they're busy building big boats, then they leave me alone with my little boats.

JT: And it works out.

RL: So I hope they stay busy, you know. But when they get slow, then they go after stuff like this.

JT: So Island, is that a guy that used to work here?

RL: No, no, he's a—I'm not sure where he—he came out of the ashes from somewheres, I'm not sure where.

JT: He's after the catamaran market?

RL: No, he does. He does this, yes. Oh, yes.

JT: Got to keep up with the guys and make sure they stay happy, huh?

RL: I try to. Well, we all share in the labor pool, you know. I've got guys here that used to work at Island. You got fellows that left me to go to work at Island Boats, you know, and the same thing with the Breaux and the same thing with the Neuvilles, so they jump around. They'll find something why they're not happy here and they'll leave and they'll go over there and so forth.

JT: With a skill hand like you have at fifty-five hours, this guys ought to be making a pretty good living.

RL: They do well. They can make—you know, sometimes I'll have the opportunity to work overtime on weekends, since it's strictly a volunteer thing, you know, and some of them will step up and want to work and some of them won't, don't want to, you know, they want to go hunting, fishing.

JT: That slow-paced life that most people live down here in south Louisiana, right?

RL: That's right.

JT: How about you, man, do you get an opportunity to get out and do some other things outside of the shipyard here?

RL: Yes, I do. I like to fish, but I don't get to fish as much as I like to, but—

JT: You got some kids coming up in the ranks? You going to introduce them to this industry?

RL: No. Yes, I have two boys, but I don't think they're interested. One may be. It's too early to tell yet. So I don't know who Dave and I are going to give this thing to when we're ready to leave. I don't know. I don't know. It would be interesting to see. David has all girls and his children are all girls, so they're not interested. I may have one boy that may be interested, but like I say it's too early to tell yet.

JT: A lot of the guys who I've spoken with over the last couple of months kind of got into the same line of work as you-all did, meaning family related, back through their fathers and their uncles or what have you, a lot of you guys are questioning that maybe they're a little bit farther into that questioning than you are right now, but they also want to know who are we going to leave this to after they retire.

RL: When they leave. Yes, and I mean it's a problem and that's part of the labor problem that we're having now is it used to be that one generation came up in the boatbuilding business, the next generation would come up in the boatbuilding business, you know. They would teach their sons the business. But a lot of these,

they're just not interested in this profession anymore, you know. I mean this is a skill.

You know, let's face it, a lot of the young kids today, they go off to college, they get educated in other things now, they're not interested in coming out here and hammering with a saw and welding and you know, so it's tough.

JT: Not everybody's cut out to be in college.

RL: Not everybody's cut out. That's exactly right. That's correct. That's correct.

JT: So if that is the case for certain individuals, maybe they're more skilled with their hands, what have you, you know, why are they not being attracted to these types of environments?

RL: Personally, my opinion, because they're lazy. They're lazy. They don't want to do these jobs. One is my son, case in point. I had one of my sons working here over a summer for a summertime job, and he didn't make the summer. He quit me.

JT: How old is he?

RL: He's nineteen, he's going to be twenty now. But he just told me, he said, "Pop, this is not for me."

I said, "You better go back to school and get an education." So he did. He's having a rough go of it. He's trying hard, but he knows the alternative. He'll have to come back here.

JT: But as we mentioned, this is not a bad life.

RL: It's not bad once you—you know, there's no easy job in the boatbuilding repair business. It's not a glorified, it's just lucrative. But I mean as far as for, especially when you're working on old vessels, older vessels, they're not clean, they're dirty, you know, summertime it's hot, wintertime it's cold. But it is lucrative. I'd etched out a good living.

JT: What, in the future, because you've got some personal experience with this, what could you see as a way to help promote or market better that goes on here in this type of industry, not just the shipbuilding but the entire oilfield business fabrication industry in general? How does the industry attract people like your nineteen-year-old son, let's say, beginning at fifteen years old or how do you reach out and grab those individuals who are not sure what they want to do? Maybe they don't want to go to college.

RL: I think you have to make it attractive to them with, first, with pay, top pay and good benefits, you know. Those two things right there are what keeps—what enables me to keep my people. I pay all my people extremely well, and I have to provide hospitalization, 401(k), everything else for them, which is very costly to me. You know, it makes my boats go up and it makes it harder for me to stay competitive by doing that, but that's what I have to do.

You know, I have a good working environment. I work under roof versus whether somebody's going to go and build that rig back there, they're outside, they're in the sun.

JT: Or they're in the rain and thirty five-degree cold.

RL: Or they're in the rain, but I'm not. I've got a nice beautiful shop. So things like that, I think, are incentive to attract people today.

JT: Where in the seventies and eighties there was no benefits.

RL: That's correct. That's correct.

JT: You might have workmen's comp, but as far as full-term insurance or 401(k)s or—

RL: It wasn't provided.

JT: —paid vacations.

RL: It wasn't provided, but it's provided now.

JT: But that's how the industry guys like yourselves, industry owners have been able to keep people.

RL: Then it's still hard to do that, you know. Somebody will leave you for twenty-five cents, they're gone, you know.

JT: What about education? Is that something that may provide an answer or may show some success, is getting into the communities, even getting into the schools, starting out with the younger? The trade schools, they have their own problems. But there's got to be a way that companies can get into these kids' heads and says, "Hey, this is not a bad deal."

RL: Yes, you probably have to have—you know, I'd think you'd have to start it. I know a lot of times we've called trade school here in town to see who was interested in aluminum welding, if they had any prospects, if they had any kids in their doing aluminum welding, or even if they do teaching aluminum welding.

But that's part of the problem. A lot of the trade schools here, they don't. You know, they don't go deep into aluminum welding. It's mostly steel. So that's a problem unless you do in-house, yourself.

Do you want to cut it off?

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So will it may have to come to that one day?

RL: It may have to. If ever I would have to step up and expand my shop, make my shop larger where I had to have instead of twenty-five people I had to have seventy-five people, I may have to do that.

JT: You may have to bring in-house training?

RL: Correct.

JT: Huh. And you got to supply the hours, the tools and all the things that go along with that and there are again increases of—

RL: And provide a trainer, sure.

JT: Okay. Well, the industry hasn't been able to adapt over the years, that may be an answer, in-house training.

RL: It could be. We've thought about it, you know. We've never implemented it, but we've thought about it on several occasions.

JT: Any thoughts on importing some labor?

RL: Yes, we've discussed that. We've discussed that as well. There again, 99 percent of them were acclimated to steel, not aluminum, so that's a problem for us as well. I can pick up as many steel welders as I want, but not aluminum.

JT: Your business is not going in that direction.

RL: No.

JT: Any time in the near future?

RL: No.

Tape 1, Side 2

RL: So we get it all local. We don't have any problems getting aluminum.

JT: Is there an aluminum manufacturing plant near here?

RL: Actually in Mississippi, different spots in Mississippi.

JT: Do they rail it in, or they truck it in?

RL: They truck it. They truck it in.

JT: Do you also have a paint and sandblast and do you guys do all the electrical work?

RL: Yes, we do everything, turnkey.

JT: Where do your motors come from?

RL: The engines? Different manufacturers, Cat, Cummins, just whatever, whatever the customer, whatever the engine he decides he wants in the vessel is what we'll install.

JT: You do all of that here?

RL: We do everything here.

JT: Then you can pick it up and drop it in the water?

RL: Pick it up and put it in the water and do all the test running on it, and once all that's done, sign off on it, collect the check and see you later.

JT: And don't forget to put a good word for us with the next guys down the road.

RL: Right.

JT: Tell me about this channel right here, this Port of Iberia, with how far it's come over the last thirty years from a, you know, boat dock to what it is today. How important is this area to your lifestyle and to what goes on in your business?

RL: Well, I think it's very important to a lot of people in the parish, absolutely, and I think the Corps of Engineers just recognized it. I think they're going to go ahead and deepen it to twelve feet—no, fifteen feet, and they're going to deepen it from here all the way to Intercoastal to actually fresh water bayou, to fresh water city, out through the locks so they can—so these company can get bigger, you know, vehicles and stuff out of here so they can stay competitive. That's going to help.

JT: Because you've got Fouchon, of course you've got New Orleans, even Lake Charles has got a deep-water channel.

RL: You've got Morgan City has got a deep-water port as well.

JT: So, yes, it almost seems as if the Port of Iberia's just kind of been holding on there consistently over the last twenty, thirty years and by this, doing this next dredging operation, they can continue on.

RL: It should help the industry around here. Not so much our business, because, you know, we're not in that, but everybody else, it will help.

JT: If you look at, let's say, Morgan City, I passed over yesterday, it seems to be an awful lot of activity right along that little channel area, but as far as the community and the St. Mary area, just from what I've asked around and what I've seen, it doesn't seem to be as a growing, lot of new growth, lot of new money, new people moving in, as you see here in New Iberia, Youngsville and the local areas.

RL: I wonder why.

JT: This area is growing quicker. I wonder if it has to do with connecting to Lafayette, you know, it was kind of the center of the hub of all this activity.

RL: It seemed like Morgan City never. For some reason, it just hasn't grown, and I don't know why, slow growth.

JT: Yes.

RL: Morgan City hasn't had an industry in almost thirty years. I don't know what the reason for that.

JT: I mean they've got a huge deep port right there.

RL: They've got a better access than we do for it. Maybe it's the city councilmen, I don't know.

JT: Now your talking politics, huh?

RL: Yes.

JT: What about the local guys right here, the port commissioners, are they coming to bat for you guys on a regular basis?

RL: I think as a whole for the Port, yes, they work hard. They work hard. They're really trying. Their hands are tied politically, but they're doing okay. No complaints.

JT: What about the next ten years, Randy, you guys going to keep trucking along, do see any new ventures, opportunities that you have?

RL: Probably, yes, probably bigger boats, bigger boats than what we're building now, longer, wider.

JT: But the same style catamaran?

RL: Same style.

JT: Aluminum?

RL: Yes.

JT: Any crew boats in the future?

RL: Maybe, maybe some big crew boats, yes.

JT: Good luck, man.

RL: Okay, thank you.

JT: Thank you very much for your time, really appreciate it.

RL: Okay.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 8 May 2007]