MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Royce Breaux and Roy Breaux, Jr.

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Royce Breaux is the chairman of Breauxs Baycraft, Inc. and Roy Breaux Jr. is the president. Both have followed in their father, Roy Breaux Sr.'s, footsteps and have continued the tradition of building custom aluminum crew boats.

Early careers: Royce Breaux work at her father's shipyard as a teenager doing clerical work. She went off to college and got a degree in law from Loyola University. Roy Breaux Jr. worked at the shipyard at a very young age and attended USL. In 1984, during the economic downturn in the offshore industry, Roy Breaux Sr. gave Royce and Roy Jr. the opportunity to work for the family business to eventually take it over. They both agreed to do so and took over the company in 1991 after Roy Sr.'s death.

Work force/other issues: Today, our economy is based less on the quality and pride in an individual's work. This pride has been replaced with "tangibles"--what is the maximum amount of money and material that can be acquired with least amount of effort and energy. The Breauxs also agree that the family ties that held the Cajun community together have broken apart. People no longer work to survive and start a family in their native communities; they leave and seek out opportunities with the most financial advantages. This has caused not only a decrease in the amount of available local labor force, but it has also led to an overall decline in work ethic from a once hard-working, loyal, devoted blue collar community. If young families were encouraged to stay and find a way to make a decent living at home, rather than leaving, the economy of south Louisiana would prosper.

The main water access, the Bayou Teche, also causes problems for the Breauxs. Historically, the sugar cane mills and barge traffic to service that industry kept the bayou from silting. However, with the decline of the sugar industry and the closure of most sugar mills, the bayou needs to be dredged more frequently. The 190-foot crew boats being built at Breauxs Baycraft to service the ultra deep Gulf of Mexico must now be tugged out of the Bayou Teche without any props installed because of the vessels' deep drafts and shallow water bayou. In light of this situation, this new process has created a need for tug boat service, which Breauxs Baycraft has now contracted with a tug boat service across the bayou.

Breauxs Baycraft: Today, the design, service, and quality craftsmanship of the Roy Breaux crew boat still goes into each and every vessel built at Breauxs Baycraft. The design may change with technology, however, the actual structure and layout and fabrication of the boat is exactly the same as Roy Breaux Sr. built it 50 years ago. It is his legacy that his two children, Roy Jr. and Royce, have strived to maintain.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Royce, R-o-y-c-e Breaux, of Breaux's Bay Craft in Loreauville, Louisiana, on the Bayou Teche. Royce is the chairman of the company. She is the [half] sister of Vance Breaux and the daughter of Roy Breaux, [Sr.] who is the aluminum crew boat pioneer. This is an interview with Jason Theriot on March 15th, 2007. Royce Breaux, Breaux's Bay Craft, founded in 1946. MMS Ship Fab Project, tape one.

Okay, we're here with Royce Breaux and Roy Breaux, Jr., of Breaux's Bay Craft. Ms. Royce is mic'ed up right now to the lapel, and Mr. Roy, Jr., is sitting right here. We're going to start with Ms. Royce. Introduce yourself and tell me a little about the family business here and how you got involved.

RB: My name is Royce Breaux. I've worked on and off here in the business, doing general clerical work for all of the different offices, since a high school age. After completing an education my father asked if I'd come and join my brother to manage the business, and that was in 1984. After coming back after a few years of learning, I became chairman and my brother Roy became president upon the passing of my father in 1991.

JT: Did you go to school at UL?

RB: No, I went to Loyola University.

JT: Okay, in New Orleans. How long were you there for?

RB: I was there through undergraduate and law school.

JT: So you've got a law degree?

RB: Yes.

JT: Outstanding. Okay, so what made you want to get into the boat industry, if you had so much education and had a potential career as an attorney?

RB: Well, I was asked to. It was supposed to be for a short term, but things change.

JT: I'm sure having a trained law professional here in the business surely does have its benefits. Is that right?

RB: Sometimes.

JT: So, 1984, things were not doing so well as far as the Gulf of Mexico was concerned. Describe for me a little bit about how things were going as far as the business here at Breaux's Bay Craft with the economic downturn of the early eighties.

RB: In '84 you were seeing you were finishing contracts you had that related to the oil industry, and you were seeing a rapid increase of cancellations. You used to have a backlog of, say, three to four years out that you'd have contracts that you had to fulfill. All of a sudden, over about a two or three year period, that log started to slowly dwindle, and it was steady, until there was no backlog. You filled the contracts you had and you tried to actively pursue other areas that you—we always did do other areas of commercial-type vessels like passenger vessels, excursion vessels, charter fishing vessels. So we tried to actively pursue those areas to maintain us while the oil industry was just dying, and we reached a point where we weren't even selling any crew boats at all. That was really what we're best known for.

JT: That would have been the founder of this company, Mr. Roy Breaux, Sr. Now, if we can, for the record, the first aluminum crew boat?

RB: Supposedly, he built the first successful aluminum crew boat that has been used, and was still in use for many, many, many years. Aluminum had its problems in the inception of its use, which somebody else could probably explain better, but he was credited with being one of the first pioneers to actually produce a vessel that was successful out in the oil industry.

JT: That was 1955, or was built in '55 and delivered in '56, is kind of how the story goes?

RB: Somewhere in the late fifties. I don't have that date exactly.

JT: Was it, like, a 50-footer?

RB: I don't have that information right here.

JT: What about the name of the boat?

RB: No.

JT: That's okay. But your dad had been right here, just right down the road. I mean, this is your grandfather's property, but his father's place right here. So this whole community, this shipbuilding community, has been tied in for over half a century,

which is really amazing to see a third generation brother and sister team taking over from what was built in—

RB: No, the company, technically, is not third generation. Because it was just a small blacksmith shop, a country blacksmith. It wasn't what you think of as industry or anything. He was just a blacksmith by trade when he got started.

JT: For your father, I'm sure that working for his dad in his shop did have some impacts on his career choices. Do you think that working with his dad, that did have a tremendous influence on his entrepreneurial—

RB: To be honest with you, it would be only my conjecture because I've never had that conversation with him. Daddy always said it was survival. He saw an opportunity and something that was needed, a vessel, and he educated himself. He saw a need to produce something that was needed in the economy, and it was purely survival.

JT: What about the concepts for actually building these vessels? Is that something that he just envisioned and just created, just over time, from drafting and designing on his own?

RB: [Whispers] Can you turn it off a minute?

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: To repose the question, where did some of the naval architectural designs come from? We're looking at a pair of books from the fifties with some architectural drawings and specifications and schematics that Mr. Roy Breaux, a man who was educated up to the third grade, here are some of his actual designs from the fifties about the original aluminum boats, how he wanted them to look. Describe to me a little bit about these, Mr. Breaux.

RBJ: These actually, and not to make incorrect—the vessels in here are actually steel vessels. This is before the aluminum vessels started, but this is where he originally started with the steel vessels. They were barges, tugboats, little small workboats, we call inland workboats, that would work in Lake Dautrieve, in the small gas well area. From there it became steel with an aluminum cabin, and then it became all aluminum because I guess the longevity and the life of the aluminum was just—no one had an answer to how long it would last. It was faster, easier to operate, it was easier to work with.

In the oceans—well, I say the oceans. In the Gulf of Mexico inlands, lakes, bays, and sounds area, it was easier to operate than a steel vessel. The maintenance was way less. It didn't take as much upkeep on the aluminum versus the steel. That's

where I saw the main transition go to. [Looking at ledgers.] This is his ledgers here, both of them, and they're backdated back to the fifties, early fifties.

JT: So this is twenty years of his experience in the industry, building boats during World War II at Avondale, even some of the oilfields for Texaco. This is basically just his experience?

RBJ: He came in, and he knew what he wanted to do, and he put it in ledgers like these two the best he could, but this was done after it was built.

RB: He always said he was—

RBJ: He actually built it and then put it down in the book, what he built and how he built it. But he was the pioneer, and I can only say the only reason I knew of his reasoning for all of this was survival.

RB: And he always said he was a student of life.

He got his education through observation, and he always said, "Don't talk and listen, and when you finish school, now your real." How did he say it? "Now your real education begins with life," and that every single person, no matter what

their walk or anything, because they were a creature of God, they were valuable and you would learn something from each and every person you encounter.

JT: So he was a shipbuilder and a philosopher.

RB: And a banker and a farmer.

RBJ: And a banker, and a farmer, and a father, and I mean—they don't make them like that anymore.

JT: You mentioned something that's interesting which I think would be of some value here. The concept of patenting these designs, which, as you mentioned, your father did not act on any of those, but he did have a patent, so he had some experiences. Did you say he had patent for—

RB: As a blacksmith, he used to work for the local farmers before he built boats. He used to, you know, repairs their cane carts and we're told that he had—we've never seen it—but we're told that he had obtained, or tried to obtain, a patent on a cane loader that he built. I don't know if they're using it today or not, but that's what he did before boats, was assist the cane industry, before he went to work in the oilfield, and then saw a need there.

JT: So the ingenuity was just built-in?

RB: It's innate.

JT: Back to the ledgers just right quick. As you're mentioning, these ledgers were written after the actual construction was completed, instead of a guide to actually doing the construction. So all of this came from his head, and someone was successful in regurgitating what's in his mind to his supervisors and the shop foremen and the people who were building the boats for him?

RBJ: From what I understand, and correct me—Royce can correct—but from what I understood, when this was taking place, that was it. That was the crew, was my dad and a few guys which, two of them are still in the yard today with us. That was it, that was the crew. There wasn't foremens or shop foremens, or bosses. It was three, maybe five gentlemen at a time who was trying to figure out a way to survive and make a living, and it started right here. Those dates, May 25, 1959.

So he would build something that somebody needed, which we keep saying his ingenuity and his mind surpassed any genius in the world because he could develop something, build something, and come out—something that people, we didn't—today I have a blueprint. I take a blueprint, I give it to a foreman, a foreman goes out, and we build it. But after a lot of thought has gone into it,

engineering time, naval architect time, calculations, figuring. He didn't have any of that. Just like anyone would know, the old saying is how do you know a boat's gonna float? That's a magic question. I mean, yes, today they can guarantee you it will float, but he didn't know if it would work.

JT: How did he communicate this with these four or five guys?

RBJ: He did hands-on. He was actually working—

RB: He worked with them. He was a laborer.

RBJ: He worked hands-on till—

RB: Mid-seventies, maybe, early seventies.

RBJ: I'd say almost late seventies. I was out of school, high school, in '79, but I was working here in '75. I was sweeping this shipyard. I grew into the business because that was my only love, was to build boats and go do that. By doing so, he was still—that's why, till 1991, when she said that earlier, till 1991, the day he died, he was still hands-on. He might not have physically grabbed the grinder, but I can promise you he was hands-on, and everybody in the yard knew he was still hands-on.

RB: I think I can kind of add to what—he had a mind that could—he had an analytical and categorically processing mind. For finance, and numbers, and labor, like, everything he ever did he would keep track of. So—

JT: On paper?

RB: No, in his head. He couldn't really write that well. So he always said to me, he could see it finished. He could see the boat sitting in the water, so he would start with his water line.

When he showed me how to do one boat, he said, "You start with the water line, you decide what engines for your speed, for the capacity of the vessel, and then you go from there because that determines your weight. From there you get the position, where that's gonna be in the vessel, to see how it's gonna sit." See how his mind worked? He could just see it finished, and then back up and get it.

Then for keeping track of where he was, he was very much into man hours. If Roy and I mowed the lawn, we had to know how many man hours it took us. So he always kept track of what he was doing, in his head. He could financially run this yard with just his head. He could go out and look, and he knew what things were gonna cost to finish. He could out-guess our numbers as far as how off we'd

be from bid to actual performance levels at the end of a boat, based on how long it's taking a man to do something out there. If it's taking him too long, he knew how far off, how much profits you're losing, stuff like that. It's the way his mind worked.

JT: With him and his four or five hands that started all this, I'll imagine that all four or five guys were about the same educational caliber as far as formal education. I'll also imagine that these guys didn't speak English.

RB: No, they grew up with Clifton Chenier. Its Clifton Chenier's first cousin out there who is—so that gives you a level of where they are?

RBJ: They were cutting cane by hand.

RB: A musical genius, and this man who, they used to cut cane together when they were young boys. Just the way they relate to each other. Their capacities to do things are phenomenal.

JT: Doesn't sound like the old stigma for the Cajun people, dumb, ignorant, stupid swamp people, does it?

RB: No.

JT: Okay, so as your father is developing this, and you can give a better perspective on this, I think, than before, when did this labor force in the business begin to grow? I think at one time it was over two hundred and fifty people?

RB: In the sixties. What he did was service a need for the oil industry, as the boats were needed to service. When the oilfields were traditionally on land, there was no need, and as they started to go offshore, he just serviced that need. That's why the first vessels were smaller and steel, and then they needed to be larger, more load-carrying capacity, more sea-keeping for rougher water out there and stuff, so he just went with the need. He didn't actively pursue sales.

JT: How did they find out about him in this small, isolated enclave of Loreauville?

RB: Word of mouth. He had no marketing budget.

RBJ: He saw there was a need for something.

They didn't come to him and say, "Build me an aluminum crew boat." He saw there was a need and he built something. From what I understand, sometimes in the sixties, at one point he had several vessels he built, that were just sitting in the yard. There was no demand, no need for them, nothing. When they realized what

he had built, and the industry needed, there was a need for that. That's why we keep saying he was the pioneer in it, because he developed. The Coast Guard was not even interacting, and Coast Guard came to him, the United States Coast Guard, and said, "Write me some specifications so we can write some rules and regulations."

RB: That's the story. We don't know. Stories get—

RBJ: But it is, because all the Coast Guard people that come here tell us, "We know your dad was the founder and starting—we knew he knew how to do it right."

JT: It seems that he was always, in his mind, trying to stay a step ahead of what the industry was doing and what the industry needed. Like I said, like a chess game. He was probably very good at playing chess.

RB: It was really a specialty in only one thing, a crew boat. So once that happened, and then it turned into a crew supply vessels. I know you have a lot of other companies that say they did the first one. Sure, if it was the first documented one. A lot of what he did, you don't have documentation. He might have sold it and somebody copied. I don't know, and we don't do that war at all. It's just survival, servicing a need, and he had a specialty.

JT: That's one thing that is really interesting to me is looking at how far these vessels have come. I spent an afternoon on Mr. Norman McCall's boat, the *John C. McCall*, 190-foot, five screw, top of the line, fast/crew ship. If you look at it, in my mind, the crew boats that I would see in Vermillion Bay at ten years old were the old-style, just a big old bulky aluminum crew or steel crew. Nowadays, you've got crew that can carry fifty people, but yet it can carry hundred of tons of equipment. For these guys, your father included and a few others, to be able to see that, to be able to put that piece together and to deliver that to the industry is, again, just another example of the ingenuity.

Okay, so the industry's building a little bit. I'm sure the yard was starting to expand here a little bit. He had the customer base. Where was he finding the people to weld and fit and put these things together?

RBJ: From what I understood, and what I was always told and the way it still went on till probably just ten years ago, fifteen years ago, the farming industry around here was big. It was a big industry, cane farmer. As you know, the cane farming had its times. When they would finish grinding he would pick up people who farmed. After grinding, you had a lay time that you didn't plant cane, you didn't do anything. They would come in and work. That's always been some of our best employees, farmers, farmer's children that didn't want to go into farming would come in to the industry, and they'd learn trades. He would teach them. It was on-

the-job training. Everyone who came into this industry, learned from him, still today.

We have on-the-job training. We take a person who comes out of school with just a high school education and no work background, and actually teach them a trade. It used to be where they'd stay a lot longer. Now they stay less, but it's still on-the-job training. It's something that you can't learn outside of this industry. I couldn't learn it. After high school I went to college, to UL, just for a couple years. Then, when I needed to learn, what I needed to know had to be taught here. That's where I learned it from. I won't say it's the proper way or the best way.

RB: It's an effective way because our hulls—we have a reputation for the hulls not coming in for repair unless there's an accident, so the longevity of the hulls outlive the machinery that power them. So what we've done is just continue to do it exactly like they do it, and don't change a thing.

A lot of other architects, famous naval architects—one has told me in person, "Y'all still overbuild." But we feel it's safer and it lasts, and it gives the customer what they need.

JT: Quality.

RBJ: Our main words, and you'll see them, is quality and service. Service is something you always have to offer them, and offer them on the spot. Twenty-four hours, three hundred sixty five days a year. It's a service industry.

JT: I have no doubt that your father was able to handle all the challenge, but I would imagine that running a yard of almost three hundred people would be very challenging for a one-man operation, essentially, with a small office, I'm sure. Can you interject a little bit on running a yard with that many people?

RB: Well, by that time it had departmentalized. He'd have a head of personnel, the proper bookkeeping staff. He grew along with it. By that time he had probably six or eight foremen out in the yard to run the men. His first five or six men became his foremen, with the knowledge. By then you're interacting with Coast Guard, you're doing everything, the regulatory bodies. He grew. It didn't remain, like they call it, one of the backyard boatyards. He grew and he did like he did everything else. He educated himself, and he had the people around him that could educate him and keep him abreast of what he needed to do. For labor, for finance, for everything...

RBJ: ...who was the first naval architect?

RB: ...he was with Coast Guard.

He surrounded himself by knowledgeable people to handle the details, but as far as the whole, the capacity. Like I said, financially, he always knew. He had a mind that could know from actually hands-on doing things whether he was going to lose a dollar or make a dollar. So he survived because he had means that he had to learn to be able to survive. Once you get staffed and you get the equipment you need, things become—they grow with time and efficiency, like anywhere else.

JT: I think the one key phrase that I often run into, and it's a fact, is that, for whatever reason, historically-speaking, three hundred years after it all began, is that the people down here have a tremendous ability to adapt to their environment, to the changes, and successfully, at that. I think your father is a prime example of that, to be able to continue to adapt as the forces around him are impacting his decisions. You guys standing here today, 2007, is an example of that.

RB: Yes, you change. You have to change with the times and do what's required for every single aspect of your business, and keep educated on what you need to do. The only thing we still do the same is build that boat the way *he* designed it. The transverse framing with intercostal longitudes. We keep his hull design almost

like it's an art form, and still deliver that same product. But you learn and grow in every other way.

RBJ: What she was saying earlier, we find the people that had a pride, the pride that no one could—it was just a pride for survival. They were very, very proud of what they built, and everyone in this—even the guys now today, the guys we employ, the older guys, you still see it. They have that pride. If they're not gonna do it right, they won't do it at all. They gotta do it right the first time, and if it takes them more time, they'll do it, but it will come out right. They have pride in what they do.

RB: The workforce is really, to me—Dad started something, but the workforce—not myself. Yes, Roy sells, but I would count me out of the loop. You need the sales to get the boats in, but we still don't actively have a sales force. Everything is pretty passive, because the word of mouth and the history and reputation, the products, have lent themselves to and been out in the world. The workforce continues this progress, and with the older guys you do have a mentality and an emotional attachment to what they do in the South.

Having traveled pretty much around the world, you don't see in a lot of other areas. It's almost like in the far east, you have that mentality, that you have to be in it to live in it. It's just part of them, and I think that accounts for a lot of why

we can't get the labor we need here. Because today's economy is driven by tangibles, and what you can acquire, and what money you can get passively without putting forth any energy. That's really hit us harder. It's the livelihood of the people that I feel is missing in this whole general area, because people are constantly moving away to make a quick dollar, and to get all of the new toys out there that they can get.

RBJ: I don't see they're as much family-oriented as it used to be.

JT: That used to be the glue that holds people together.

RBJ: I mean, you went to work because you wanted to start a family, and you survived and worked for that family, and the family stayed around. Reunions was a real popular thing in the south down here, was family reunions. You don't hear of them anymore. Families have moved off, they've gone all over the country. I think it played in important part in the industry, and I think family plays an important part here. I mean, our generation—she has a daughter, I have a son, and my son is very interested in coming into this business. He's seventeen. He's cutting grass right now.

JT: You keeping track of his man hours?

RBJ: Keeping track of them. She has a daughter who, I'm sure, would be a great asset. I see both of them coming into this business.

JT: That's great.

RBJ: If they'd like to. Like she said, I came into it because it was just something I wanted to do, but I could have chosen. Our father would have let us do anything we wanted to do, it didn't matter.

JT: Did he push y'all?

RB: No. There was a time where, when the older boys left, he took us actually out of state, and gave us ten minutes to make a decision without speaking to each other. Do we each want to continue this shipyard, or turn away? He wouldn't be hurt or anything, but he told us three things. "If you make the decision to stay, I can promise you, you will be broke." He couldn't name the amount of time, but he said, "What's happening in the oil industry, you will either make it and stay in for the right reason. If you work hard there's a possibility you'll survive because you have a good product. Or you waste it all away and you play, and you won't have anything." The other part, which he couldn't foresee, which was the unknown. You never know what's gonna happen.

So we made our decision. We stayed. He was right. We only had a paid-for, operable yard, and we had to work hard. We just did it with his philosophy. You move forward with what you can do. You don't get highly leveraged, you don't go into financing that you can't meet. You sell a product and you sell it for what it's worth. You don't rip people off. Just good, honest values. We were lucky enough to survive, but that's about all.

We survived because, I know for me, you look at these people's faces, who that's all they've done for thirty and forty years, and you can't say, "Okay, now we're gonna close, and y'all go home." I wanted to give back what they gave to us. They gave us a comfortable life where we could get an education. So it was more of a reciprocal thing for me to continue.

JT: It was just something that, I'm sure, that his father instilled in him. That level of—

RB: We didn't know our grandpa. See, Vance would have known more because he died when I was two, so I never even knew him. Daddy didn't talk much to us about his parents, at all. Our father was a lot older than us. He was almost like a grandfather to us.

JT: So you got involved in '84?

RB: We both came back in ‘84.

JT: That was just a bad time as far as the industry was concerned. What do y’all recall of the hard times in Loreauville?

RB: That’s when you learn. I learned more through the hard times than all of the best years, financially, that this place had. When things are happening and everything is going along, you tend to learn how to—you can learn how to manage money and things like that, but you either have that innately or not. You’re either gonna blow it or you’re gonna know what to do to make more, but you learn how to survive through going through bad times. So the learning curve was so great that I wouldn’t replace those bad years for anything.

JT: The decision that y’all both made to come and work here and to take over, was that made separately or did y’all make that together?

RB: He didn’t let us speak to each other.

JT: So this was just a one moment in time, when he said, “You make the decision.”

RB: You remember y'all were putting me on the plane, and he was driving us to the airport, and he was in the backseat and he just posed the question.

RBJ: Where were we?

RB: We were on a trip. It's irrelevant, but—

RBJ: He didn't fly. My father never flew; he just refused to fly.

RB: We don't want to bore him with that. We were on a trip and he drove us—

RBJ: So I would drive him a lot, wherever he was going.

RB: —and he summoned me my last year of law school and said, "Come here. You're coming for the weekend." I didn't know what he was going to hit us with after the weekend, on the way to the airport, ten minutes left. I'll never forget ... Turn it off.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So it was a quick decision, but you made the right decision.

RB: Yes, no regrets.

JT: It's been twenty-three years since, and—

RB: It's not about us. To us, or to me, it's about this product that should continue to be out there and available to the industry. Not matter who's gonna do it, it's bigger than me. It's got a life of it's own, and, in my opinion, needs to be maintained.

RBJ: His philosophy, his ideas, his thoughts, his knowledge, and his memory continues, we feel continues, as long as the shipyard, the industry keeps going. Whether it's myself, my son, her daughter, whatever, running it. We hope to instill the same thing in our kids, and so forth. It's something you can be very proud of. These guys, a lot of them do not realize the impact that this vessel that they have completed and worked very hard, blood, sweat, and tears over. They have no idea the impact it has on the world, on the economy. They just think, "It's a job, I'm gonna do my job, I'll do the best I can, I'm the best at what I do, and I'm gonna give it 100 percent." And they give. They give 110 percent all the time.

JT: But they don't relate that to what goes on—

RBJ: No, because they don't travel. Like what she said. When I traveled, and I've been all over the place, and I've seen our vessels. Other friends have called me and said, "I was in Trinidad. I was in Singapore. I was in Africa, and your boat pulled up and I see Breaux Bay Craft, Loreauville, Louisiana."

RB: Or you see them on movies.

RBJ: "Are you kidding me?"

I said, "No."

RB: And you can tell ours is different from the rest.

RBJ: That's something that's a tribute to my father. These guys, once it leaves the shipyard, it's going to work. They don't realize it has just employed hundreds and thousands of people that are going to be employed by this vessel, and the impact it's gonna have on the oil industry, and everything. When you drive up to the Chevron, you had something with this Chevron selling fuel. They don't look at it that way.

JT: Let's talk about this and then we'll wrap it up here. Right here on the Bayou Teche, there's some limitations. Tell me about the limitations that y'all have here

from the main three or four issues that have been affecting your particular business over the last ten years.

RBJ: I think that the biggest impact has been the reduction in the cane industry, the sugar cane mills. The sugar mills on the Bayou Teche also, that were major sugar mills here, that was gravel yards on the Bayou Teche, shell yards, and then there was shipyards. All of the industries together played an important part in keeping the Bayou a-flow, and a navigable waterway, and keeping the silt from silting up, and keeping the water nice and deep. The vessels have grown to a point where—my father, I think he knew it was gonna get big, he just didn't know how big. They've gotten very, very big. They've gotten 190, 200-feet in length. We're outgrowing the Bayou Teche, but the downside is the sugar mills are closing, the shell yards have moved, so you have less traffic. The less traffic you have, the more silting you have. The problems you have. That's gonna be, I think, one of the major impacts besides employment. That's the two major impacts on our industry until something is done about it.

I don't know what the answer is to it, but the environmentalists step in and they look at the impact on that. Today it's really hard to say, "I'm gonna go out there and dredge the waterway," because you have to go through an act of Congress to get something done, and the process in doing so. The parish has participated greatly. They've done a lot for us because of the industry, but nobody can predict

the future, or how long or what kind of repair it would take. All we gotta do now is build as big as we can build, and get them out as safely as we can. This first boat we'll deliver this June will be the first boat that was ever pushed out by a tug instead of going out on it's own power, because it's so large, the size of the vessel.

JT: You mean removing the props?

RB: Yes.

RBJ: We'll take the props and rudders off, and we actually push it out with a tug, which that's what the other competition does on some of the larger boats. Which is not bad, because now I am with a local tug company, which is right across the bayou, has been open for—

RB: Thirty years.

RBJ: Thirty or forty years. My dad used to build tugs for him. So we're going to give him business because he's gonna help us assist in getting out. It's gonna involve other people.

RB: Also, the bayou is the main artery to the world, literally. That should be kept in mind because these boats—90 percent of the vessels are ABS class, which is American Bureau of Shipping, beyond Coast Guard, so they are classed to work worldwide, and they go to work worldwide. A lot of people think oil, Gulf. Most of the boats we build don't even see the Gulf. They go all over the world immediately. When they leave here they go right to work, because they're not built if they don't have a contract to fulfill.

JT: Man has had some success in taming Mother Nature. I'm sure that the Bayou Teche problems do have a human fix for it, whether that's political or what have you. You do have a solution there.

What about the workforce? Is there a solution solving that problem? If so, what are some of the possibilities?

RBJ: I just think around here, people are gonna have to start instilling in their kids the same philosophies and things that we had. There isn't a quick fix, there isn't a quick buck to be made, but if you look, it's all about family and life. They gotta go back to family. To me, family is the main thing. Get families back and grow, and try and stay in the community and offer them something that they can be proud of.

RB: And traditional values. It's almost like the same answer for the question of poverty, for the question of children having babies when they're children, drugs, crime, it's the same thing.

RBJ: Today, I don't know how many people, but you can ask around—In New Iberia, I grew up with my generation. They were very unknowledgeable about this industry, and my shipyard. We didn't know anything. Now, today, the same guys I went to school with, I interact in business.

They're like, "We never knew you had a shipyard. I know your dad and my dad did, but you didn't know and I didn't know." But now they're starting to see I've created something, I've done something, I'm proud of it. That's what we gotta instill in these kids. Today kids just want to do something and make a fast buck. What have you built? What have you constructed? What have you left behind? It's not who you meet, it's the impression you leave with the people when you left them.

RB: Also being environmentally conscious. Our workforce, I think as a collective group, the older people, they're not destroying where they live and they care. Because of that survival nature you pointed out earlier about Cajuns being a hearty stock. Nobody else is gonna come down here and settle this land. That's the people you have out there, the same blood that settled Acadiana. They're here

to make a home and then protect their home. So the mentality in the workforce is a really nice one to have here because they take care of their environment like its their home.

JT: They're attached physically, and mentally, and psychologically, to the environment that they live in.

RB: And work in. That comes from their upbringing. Like he was saying, if it doesn't start changing in the home, I'd see possibly having, because of the Teche relocate and because of the workforce, we possibly might not exist. You can't continue something if you don't have the people do to it. It's so realistic that we're not a factory, we're not a manufacturer. This is labor-driven, and the people that are driven by the right goals in life make it all happen. It goes back to very basic, in my opinion, basic, basic needs.

JT: Barring going and knocking on people's doors or some kind of major family-value promotional campaign, that's something that's gonna have to be left up to my generation, your kids generation, to carry on that tradition. Is there anything that we can do structurally as far as politically-wise or economically-wise? What are some things that, maybe, you guys could have control over to be able to make some of these changes favorable to keeping industries like this around?

RB: [Whispers] Turn it off.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

RBJ: One of the things is we try and employ—I employ a sixteen-year-old kid. When he turns sixteen, in high school, he is allowed to work here.

RB: After-hours.

RBJ: After-hours. They usually work four hours a day, five days a week.

RB: Sweeping.

RBJ: They are allowed to sweep the entire shipyard with a broom and a pan, and a bucket. They clean the entire facility, which is twelve acres. Most of it is under shed, under cover. They pick up the dust and particles and so forth, and they clean up. I'm hoping to instill in them a work ethic where you come to work and at the end of the week you get a check. That's money you've earned, you worked for, at sixteen.

RB: You feel good about it.

RBJ: When I get out of high school, guess what? You're already employed. You can come right into the workforce at eighteen, and I can put you in the yard to learn another trade. I would prefer if you continued education and go to college, but in the meantime, I'll work you part-time.

JT: And not everybody is cut out for college.

RBJ: Not everybody is cut out for college. We are the only ones in the industry still doing that with children.

JT: How long have you been doing that program?

RBJ: I walked into it, because I started at thirteen years old.

RB: And he's forty-five.

RBJ: Well, forty-six.

JT: Is this something through the parish school board system?

RB: Yes, you have to get a release. We do it legally. Daddy's always done it legally. When you're a certain age you can work after-hours—

RBJ: And a certain amount of hours—

RB: Right, and get a release from the school board. It's all done—

RBJ: We use sixteen as legal. You can do fifteen, but you're limited on the time because of the nights and so forth.

RB: So we keep it sixteen.

RBJ: I started when I was thirteen, but the laws back then that required—

RB: The laws were different back then. [Whispers] Be careful, that they were.

RBJ: Well, it was my dad. You worked for your dad when you was thirteen also, I'm sure. Everybody did. That's something he started, and I grew up in it, and that's what I thought was the beginning stages of the shipyard. I think it still is, because these guys, sixteen years old, come in here. They learn a trade, they work. If they would like to continue that work in a program, I'll put them in the yard and they work.

RB: While they're in school.

JT: I'm not looking for specific figures here, let's just get a general understanding. How many people do you employ today?

RB: Sixty-five, total.

RBJ: Sixty-five.

JT: Of that sixty-five, how many, and this is just a general, how many of those came from that after-school work program?

RB: [Whispers] Turn it off. We can—

RB: You say that.

JT: So 5 percent, 5 percent of your workforce has come through these programs, generally speaking, at some point in time?

RBJ: Correct.

RB: And the CEO and the president.

JT: And y'all too?

RB: Yes, because we had to learn every area that involved us. We had to work underneath every single person.

[Begin Tape One, Side B]

JT: That definitely sounds like a program that's been very beneficial to everybody involved. As you mentioned, y'all are the only ones that—

RBJ: We're the only shipyard that does that program, that has that program. I would like to work even closer with the schools and teach them some of the trades, or let them know of the trades, that are here in this area, to stay in the area. Welding. We sent aluminum to some of the trade schools to teach them how to aluminum weld, but we do have on-the-job training here. I mean, there are opportunities here that are just—you can't imagine where you can go with it. They just don't. I think families instill, go to college, get an education, go and fly off somewhere and go into the stock market or whatever, and make a lot of money real fast.

RB: And they use it as a stepping stone. If you have some laborers who, say, want to go on and do something on their own, because you have a lot of craftsmen and

artists who work with aluminum. If they give us five years, they can get so much knowledge, and then use that to go and build their own business.

RBJ: We have several people who have worked here, including our engineer, who is still here. His son worked here, went to college, got a degree. He is now a naval architect who is now back—we employ him through a company he's with, but he's doing work for us. We think he's a better qualified naval architect because he had hands-on experience here, just like his dad did. I think it makes a better work relationship and a better understanding, and you have more pride in something than just knowing how to blueprint, put it together, and that's it.

JT: What about the trade schools? What are y'all opinions of how successfully they've been in molding people for this industry? Have you seen any success? Is that an area that needs to be targeted as far as helping to solve some of these problems?

RBJ: I don't want to say anything bad about the trade schools, but lately the trade school industry here has been educating people in different categories. For instance, diesel mechanics, auto mechanics, drafting, engineering, welding, but they send them off. They don't let them know that the industry is here. They send them—you have a welding certificate? Get as much money as you can for it.

Go get a job, and not really work up to it. Your welding certificate allows you twenty bucks an hour, go get it.

JT: Would a fifteen-year-old kid sitting down where I am right now, listening to the amazing story that y'all just told—I would imagine that any fifteen-year-old kid would be completely amazed and blown-away by what actually goes on here. Maybe that's an area that's missing, is just the young people just don't know that this industry, Port of Iberia, Bayou Teche, Port Barre, Houma, Southeast Texas, that those industries are here, they're thriving, and you can have a nice, decent living and learn a really good trade and be able to contribute. Maybe they just don't know.

RBJ: Most of my friends I hang out with and still grew up with, are family owned businesses, that they went into business with their families, and so forth and all that. They instilled the same workforce we did. The same workforce we were instilled in, of go to work, work hard, it's gonna come out. You're gonna get a great reward. Not necessarily money, but you're gonna have a greater reward than anything.

RB: That's still a very viable thing, I think, locally. Second and third generation families running the same type of business, and wanting to do it for the right reasons, because it's obviously not for the dollar. I mean, it does feed you, but in

bad times you wonder why you're sticking it out, because it's ultimately a hard thing to stick with if you have an education and you could possibly go to do something else. Even the farmers. We have a lot of farmers in this circle who their sons went on to college, and they come back and they farm. I think that is so cool.

RBJ: But I think we have to be completely categorized different than the rest of the big industry because we're not. We're family-owned, but when we're treated as big industry, looking at it from the government looking out, we're categorized with industry. That's wrong. We're family. We have to survive. We can't have the same rules that big industry has. Yes, we can all protect the environment, but we're family owned and operated. We don't have stock markets and we're not out on the public stock. It's a family-owned industry. If I make a buck, great. I go home. That's what we accomplish. That's what we strive for.

RB: I think that's what's gonna be the potential growth of Louisiana, is with this family based—I know we keep saying it. If families encourage their kids to kind of stay and find something that they could do, that they would like to do, here, it will continue. But you have so many leaving for money. If they stay, I think ultimately the money will be here.

RBJ: Economically, when you look at it from an economical standpoint and you look at the numbers, it doesn't make sense. The numbers we were presented. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out I would have been better off taking the check and going. Financially, yes. Financially I would have been way better off. Pride-wise, and part of what you learn and what you're instilled, no. It's just something. It's heritage and a trade, and something we want to continue. A legacy, I guess you'd call it.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 15 May 2007]