HHA# 00074
Interviewee: J. C. Chargois
Interviewer: Steven Wiltz
Interview Date: May 2, 2003
Interview Site: Lafayette, LA
Interview Module & No.: MMS: SW049
Transcriber: Lauren Penney

[Transcriber's note: The majority of the interviewer's back channeling has not been transcribed for the purposes of readability. The interviewee clears his throat many times throughout the interview; unless they seemed to disrupt the interview, I did not transcribe them. The interviewee refers to a lot of people and place names; I have looked up quite a few of them, but those I was unable to confirm the spelling have been noted with brackets and a "?".]

Mr. Chargois was born in 1924 in Lafayette and was the third child of Kezz and Louise Chargois. His father was the first city marshal in Lafayette parish in the late 1920s. His grandfather and later his father owned a plantation and opened 450 acres of land that included four springs, which serviced as Lafayette's only swimming pool. After graduating from Lafayette High School in 1942, he went work for the Southern Pacific Railroad where he started out as a clerk on the road and later became a crew caller and worked in the time keeping department. During that time he also went to college at Southwestern Louisiana Institute (SLI). When his department at Southern Pacific was relocated to Houston in 1963, he went to work for Doutree's Furniture as a designer; he went into the decorating business for himself in 1968. He provides a detailed description of downtown Lafayette in the 1930s and 1940s. Then he discusses the influx of oilfield people (early on called "oilfield trash") and the departure of the railroad.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [SW]

Interviewee initials: [JC]

SW: This is uh, interview with Mister J. C. Chargois. It's uh, May second, 2003, in his home. And as I had sent you that list to, to kind of look over uh-

JC: Yeah. And so you want to know when and where I was born.

SW: If you don't mind.

JC: I was born here in Lafayette, Louisiana, on June third, 1924. Uh, I was the third child of uh, Kezz and Louise Chargois' union. And I've lived here all of my life.

SW: That's what uh, your sister had told me there's a four and a half year gap between you and your brother and a four and half year gap there.

JC: And my sister and I. And we were all born uh, at three oh nine Polk Street. Uh, my nephew, who's Missus Kennedy's son, is an attorney and he occupies uh, our old residence. And back in those days, everybody was born at home. We didn't go to hospital. So we were all born in the front bedroom.

SW: Of that house?

JC: Of that house.

SW: Yeah, I remember uh, Miss Kennedy mentioning that her son was [Inaudible, JC clearing throat]. What did you, what did your father do for a living?

JC: Uh, my father at that particular time was city marshal. Uh, when my mother and my father married, my father was a bartender for a Mister [Pellerang?] here in Lafayette. And uh, then after a short time after then he ran for city marshal and he was the first city marshal in uh, Lafayette Parish. I would imagine um, Steve, that would be somewheres in the very late '20s when he was elected city marshal. Because he was city marshal during the Depression, which was in the early '30s, and I do remember that uh, I don't remember it, I remember them saying uh, that uh, for four years of Depression, uh, daddy did not receive a check in the whole four year. But my grandfather on my fa-, mother's side was a conductor with Southern Pacific Railroad between Lafayette and New Orleans. And he actually supported the family for those four years. And my father re-, remained to be city marshal uh, for a period of 28 years. At which time then he ran for sheriff and uh, was elected. And he was elected and he stayed in office for four years and at the tend of that four years that's when all of the um, scandal came out with Dick [Leche?] and the Earl Long and the Harry P. Long Administration. And so my father was running for reelection on the Long Administration ticket and Sam Jones was running and that's when Same Jones and Mister Mark Mouton, who was a doctor here in Lafayette, ran for Lieutenant Governor. And they were elected and just about everybody on the Long ticket was defeated throughout the state. And my father was, got caught and he was defeated. Gaston [Herbert?] was uh, was the new sheriff after that. He was, he was running on the Sam Jones ticket. And Gaston Herbert was the father of Lionel and Jay Herbert, who were great golf pros. Okay? Alright. Um-

SW: And I understand your uh, your mother was involved heavily in the recreation-

JC: And my mother, yeah, my mother uh, in fact I'm sure my sister must've told you, that my mother and Miss Inez Neyland, and Missus Frank Debaillon, and Missus J. J. Davidson, uh, they formed recreation in our living room. I think it was back in 1930 or '31, somewheres along in that area. That they formed recreation. And uh, I must also a-, uh, inject that during that time they also included the colored people in recreation. Uh, a Mister Dorsey who was uh, an employee of Maurice Heymann, he was on, I think on the board when they first organized recreation. So they always included the back, black people as long a-, along with the white people. They did not have segregation. Well they did have segregation in a respect, but I mean they still included 'em in recreation. You know, they had their park and we had our park. But they were included. Which was a, a great thing. They were far, far above and ahead of their time. And uh, which I'm sure my sister must've told you that those four ladies and with the help of Paul [Barshet?] and Maurice Heymann, uh, they were the ones that helped these four ladies to accomplish their goal. They had the, the know-how and they had the money. [Chuckling] So, they can accomplish their goal with the help of those two men. You see.

SW: What about uh, I, Missus Kennedy mentioned something about uh, Chargois Springs.

JC: Chargois Springs? Uh, my grandfather who was Joseph Albert Chargois, he owned about 450 acres of land out there on Surrey Street. Mainly where um, Cadillac is, uh, Camel Construction Company, uh, Michael Allen Boulevard, River Oaks, which goes all the way up to Oak Barn, all of this was my father's plantation. And um, I don't know exactly when the swimming pool was built, but my father was born in 1888 and he, after he was probably 10 or 12 years old, that's when he began to supervise the swimming pool and run the swimming pool. Chargois Springs uh, we used to have, they used to have at least three or four springs on the property. And the springs serviced the

swimming pool, that's where they got their water for the swimming pool. And Chargois Springs was the only picnic area in the city of Lafayette. It was a recreational area. And when the flood of 1927 came around, then the springs dried up. And that was the end of the swimming pool. But from let's say the early '90s, uh, well, I would say mid '90s until the pool dried up, my father ran the swimming pool, you see. And the swimming pool was located uh, right in front of where the veteran's ad-, the veteran, veteran's of what are they? Foreign wars or whatever.

SW: Foreign wars, yeah.

JC: The VFW. That place is right there and the swimming pool was right in front of it. Right on the edge of where [Service/Surrey?] Street is today.

SW: It's an interesting story about how all that started. So that was almost the beginning of the recreation.

JC: Well, it was.

SW: Legacy of-

JC: In, in, in a sense that was the beginning of recreation. And then my mother and Miss Neyland and them, they picked it up in the '30s and continued it. And what recreation is today you can thank those four ladies because they're the ones that owned recreation in, in our city.

SW: And if you drive around and you see the names of these parks, you see Neyland Park-

JC: Correct, you see-

SW: Chargois Park.

JC: You have park, you see Chargois, you see Debaillon Park, uh, I don't know if they have a Davidson park.

SW: I don't think so.

JC: I, I never heard of it. I don't know that. Which I don't believe they do. And then Pete Moore, he came into the picture, and they have a park named after him. So all of these people that followed these four ladies uh, they're all parks named after 'em.

SW: But your mother was instrumental in that initial group that brought the city-sponsored recreation to the c-

JC: Correct.

SW: To Lafayette.

JC: That's right.

SW: And it all started in the living room.

JC: It all started in our living room at three oh nine Polk Street. Many thing started at three oh nine Polk Street. And uh, my mother was also very uh, she was very civic-minded, she uh, did many civic things in the city. And then she also formed a, which I'm sure Miss Kennedy told you, that the Rose Bud Club. And she had this co-ed club and uh, there must've been maybe 30 or 40 kids that belonged to the Rose Bud. And our house was their stomping ground. And I mean they gathered at the house, they danced at the house, mama went on hayrides with 'em, they played [Inaudible] until three, four o'clock in the morning. I mean, you name it and they did it.

SW: Goin' on when you guys were, that's really close to downtown, your sister was telling me you guys walked everywhere downtown.

JC: Well yeah, we were right uh, on the corner, well we were on Vermillion S-, on the corner of Vermillion and Polk, and the Masonic Temple, which is now the Pinnacle, is right directly across, you know. So and Lafayette, that was, that was Lafayette, right down in our area uh, Buchanan Street, Monroe Street, the Southern Pacific Railroad, the [Brown News?], I mean, that was it. Yeah.

SW: What was downtown like as a child for you, when you walked around? What did you do for entertainment?

JC: Hm, well now Steve, there wasn't very much entertainment. [Chuckles] There really wasn't. I mean, um, you'd walk downtown um, we'd know everybody that was downtown shoppin'. Uh, you'd stop and you'd visit. Saturday nights the stores would stay open until nine o'clock. Um, many citizens of Lafayette, old citizens, they would go downtown, they would park their car, people would be walking up and down, stopping and talking, and visiting. And basically that was our recreation.

SW: So downtown was alive on Saturday nights.

JC: Oh-

SW: People were-

JC: That's right.

SW: Even if it was just walking the street, people would see each other and-

JC: Correct. All the merchants had their stores open on Saturday night until nine o'clock. Nine o'clock was a curfew for Lafayette.

SW: So what happened after nine o'clock?

JC: Everything shut down.

SW: And everybody went home?

JC: And everybody went home and everybody went to bed. And even until today, I hesitate in calling people after nine o'clock. You know, it's just a stigma with us that has stuck. But nine o'clock was our curfew.

SW: So there were no uh, no bars staying open past nine and people-

JC: We didn't have bars.

SW: Cutting up or anything?

JC: We didn't have bars. I mean, if there was a bar, um, I really didn't know anything about it. We just didn't have that type of living back in those days.

SW: This was when you were a child in the '30s?

JC: Oh yeah, because in the '30s, well you see in the, well during the Depression, I was only then about six or seven years old, I was born in '24, the Depression was in '30 and '31, up to '34 I think it was, you see. And you'd go downtown and uh, you know, we, when I leave my house to go downtown, then Moss Pharmacies was on the corner,

the Masonic Temple was there, the Garden Hotel was there. Uh, we had the [Jim?] Restaurant, we the Azaleas Theater, we had the Jefferson, we had the First National Bank, um, we had uh, a couple of little restaurants outside of the Jim, there was a dress shop for women called [Inaudible, something in French] [Louisian?], uh, Heymann's Department store, um, in that other b-, where Heymann's Department Store was uh, then on that same side of the street was a family of Alphas. A-L-P-H-A. They had a piece good shop. And then J.C. Penney's was there. And Montgomery Wards was there. And across the street was um, [Paul Cross?] Jewelers. And uh, places along that line, you know. And uh, then we had Grimmer Coffee Company. Now Grimmer Coffee Company was on Buchanan Street, which was right in the back of Jefferson Street, you know. And then we had the Presbyterian Church, where [Dwyers?] is today. The Abramsons, uh, they had a ready-to-wear shop and then the Evangeline Hotel was across the street. And then across from where the Abramsons is, where I think there's a furniture store, Lee Furniture.

SW: Lees.

JC: That's where um, [B. Don Martin?]. B. Don Martin was um… I think B. Don Martin was, in fact I know he was a judge here in Lafayette. And that's where his residence was. And then the Evangeline Hotel. And then of course you walked on down and then you came up to the Brown News. And uh, then also right where uh, Washington Life Insurance Company is, right into that area, they also had Ernie's Bakery. Uh, Ernie had a bakery there, no, I take that back, it's not Ernie, it's [Peck?], the founder of Pecks. They had a bakery. Ernie had a bakery on Vermillion Street.

SW: That Brown, that Brown News building is, it was basically where [Inaudible, JC clearing throat]-

JC: Well Brown News, yeah, it was uh, it was right where Postal Square is, and it faced the railroad track. And then to the right of it, across the street was the depot. So, and I worked in the Brown News. Um, they had a restaurant downstairs and then they had the telegraph office above for the Southern Pacific downstairs. Very uh, division of engineers was downstairs and then the superintendents office was upstairs and we were about, I guess we were about 30 people working in the superintendents office. And then they had the chief dispatcher's office, that would dispatch all the train between New Orleans and Houston.

SW: I heard that restaurant was some pretty good eating there.

JC: It was a wonderful eating place. The cook there used to also work for a, my the name of Dora. Dora would make the best biscuits, the best pies you ever wanted to put in your mouth.

SW: Your sister said that you used to walk all the way down there just to eat biscuits. [Chuckles]

JC: Dora was a great, great cook. And I can remember her lemon pies and her chocolate pies, you couldn't beat 'em. Yeah, she was great. And then across from the Bro-, from the Brown News was the uh, the freight office. And uh, there were many employees working at the freight office. And then they had the Brown Ne-, I mean, the Round House. And uh, so I can remember when all the trains would come in, then they had a water fountain that was right in front of the Brown New, so that they would be able to go ahead and rewater the uh, all the locomotives. And during that time we had a conductor, an engineer, a fireman, two brakemens, and then we had the cabooses. But today you don't have the cabooses, you see. And we, as, I worked in superintendent's office and in the time keeping department and we would keep time for approximately fifty-five hundred employees, between New Orleans and the Texas border.

SW: When did you start working for the railroad?

JC: I went to work for the railroad in nine-, in May of 1942. I started off as a clerk on the [road?]. They would send me to different uh, railroad stations. The first one I went to was in Derrider, and then I went to Morgan City, and then I went to Alexandria. And then I came back to Lafayette and Mister Church was our chief clerk, Mister Church. And so he said there was an opening for a crew caller. And uh, so I said, "Well, I'll take that," because I was ready to come

back to Lafayette. So I had the midnight to eight shift. And the crew callers, we would go out and we would call all of the conductors, and the brakemen, and the firemen to go out on whatever train they were called. And back in those days very few people had telephones. So we had to ride our bicycles and we had to pump the bicycle to everybody's houses or their rooming house, and call everybody to go out on certain trains.

SW: Lot, a lot more difficult than just picking up a cell phone and calling somebody [Inaudible, JC clears throat]-

JC: Oh, correct. And you know, then that, in 1942 that was the beginning of the war. And so uh, we had all these war trains that would come through. And in an eight-hour shift, uh, one time I called 15 trains in an eight-hour shift. And each train consisted of the conductor, the brakeman, the conductor, three brakemen, an engineer, and a fireman. So that was uh, that was six people, six people to call. And I did that, we did that all night long. And then when the passenger trains would come in, then we had a conductor and a brake-, uh, conductor, three brakemen, an engineer, fireman, and two porters. So we also had to go into uh, the black section of town, which was Twelfth Street, Fourteenth Street, to call all of these uh, black porters, which was not very safe. We got beat up several times.

SW: Really?

JC: Oh yeah. [Chuckles]

SW: It was-

JC: So uh-

SW: After midnight, yeah, [Inaudible, JC clearing throat]-

JC: Yeah. And uh, but the railroad days, I worked for the railroad until 1963. They moved to uh, our department moved to Houston. And so uh, I left the railroad and I went to work for Doutree's Furniture as a designer.

SW: It's funny the dates you're giving me, nineteen-fif-, forty-two, 1963, that's very close to Miss Irene [Trockul?].

JC: Well yeah, because Irene, Irene came to work as a telegraph operator. Uh, back during the war, uh, the, all the telegraph operat- [Recording beeps and breaks off for a few seconds] to employ these women. And so Irene was one of the first ones that uh, that was employed as a telegraph operator. I think Irene worked in Jennings at the beginning. And uh, s-, Thelma Toce, T-O-C-E, uh, Thelma was a great telephone operator. She was also um, a freight agent. And many of the telegraph operators, the women, they all stayed at Thelma's house. She liked on Parkside. And a lot of 'em stayed with uh, with Thelma. But we had a lot of women as telegraph operators.

SW: Um, did you see, in your eyes, did you see the town grow as a result of what was coming in through that railroad?

JC: Well, the railroad grew, that was, the railroad was growing before my time, okay. Because when I went to work for the railroad in 1942, well I think the railroad then was at it's peak, you know, as far as growth was concerned. And I would venture to say that 90 percent of the population of Lafayette worked for Southern Pacific. There was no other place to work, you know. We had no industry, we had no oil business, we had, we really had nothing except the railroad. So uh, then after uh, after '63, then uh, or even before '63, then the oil industry was beginning to really take hold in Lafayette. Uh, that's when I think in the early '40s, I would say the early '40s, maybe the mid '40s, right after the war is when Maurice Heymann bought where the Oil Center is. He bought 350 acres from the Girard Family. I think he paid 38,000 dollars for those 350 acres. And that's when the oil, well then he opened up the nursery, that was number one. And then in the '50s is when the oil industry begin to boom. And I think from what I understand that the oil business really want to locate in Crowley, but Crowley didn't want it. So they came to Lafayette and Maurice Heymann started to develop the Oil Center and that's how that got started.

SW: Why didn't Crowley want the oil industry?

JC: You know, uh, and I hate to use this terminology, but back at the beginning of the oil business, the oil people were all considered as oil trash. [Chuckles] You know? I mean-

SW: I've heard this before. [Chuckles]

JC: That's it. They were considered to be oil trash. Oilfield trash, that was it. And I think Crowley that was a stigma that Crowley didn't want to be affiliated with. But uh, we took it on. And we accepted 'em. And uh, so Heymann developed the Oil Center. And from there, you know, then things began to grow. The oil industry was being developed, people were moving in to Lafayette, houses were being built, subdivisions was being uh, developed. I remember in the '50s, in the early '50s, well 1950, Dwight Andrews developed Twin Oaks Boulevard, where the Fatima Church is. He developed all of that. And uh, from there then he developed Greenbriar, you know, it just kept growing. And in 1951 uh, I bought this piece of property, uh, where I'm living today. And there was nobody out here. I was number one, Kaliste Saloom Road, Missus Saloom had just uh, donated property to establish the Kaliste Saloom Road. It was a dirt road. And uh, when it rained, I very seldom could get out here, because it was just a muddy road. And when I did come out and I'd leave here to go into town to work the, at the railroad, the first thing that I saw when I left my property was Poor Boys Riverside Inn, where the Hilton Hotel is. The next thing that I saw was the old Girard home, which is now Café Vermillionville. And then my sister lived down Pinhook Road, which she still resides at. And uh, then from her house, then the next thing I saw was the Methodist Cemetery and that was it. There was, everything else was woods. Where the Oil Center is, that used to be a cabbage field, you know. Over here it used to be cabbage and sugarcane. So I was out here by myself for many, many years.

SW: All these people that were movin' in because of the oil industry, as it was growing, where were they coming from?

JC: Mainly from Texas, mainly from Texas.

SW: Is that part of the reason why that had that rough, you know, reputation, because they were not from around here-

JC: Oh I'm sure.

SW: They were considered outsiders?

JC: I'm sure, I'm sure. Because today, all of these oilfield workers were not from this locality. They were just being imported from Texas mainly.

SW: And the locals here considered them outsiders?

JC: Considered 'em oilfield trash.

SW: What kind of, did they, as you saw it, what kind of problems did they maybe experience trying to relocate here?

JC: They didn't make any problem-, they didn't make any problems at all. They, you know, I'm sure they're all very nice people, but uh, they worked in the oilfield. And, I mean, they were never properly dressed. You know, they were dressed in blue jeans and khaki, because they were working out in the field. And uh, they stayed in different rooming houses. Uh, we didn't have any hotels to speak of. I mean, we had the Garden and we had the Evangeline, but that was too high class for 'em. So they stayed in rooming houses. We had uh, I can remember we had the [Collin's?] Hotel, and people stayed there, uh, we, there was Miss, we called her [Toulang?], uh, she was a [couret?]. And she had a little rooming house and it's still standing at the end of uh, Lee Avenue, just before you cross the railroad track,

on the right side. It's all boarded up, but that was Toulang's Rooming House. The Collin's Hotel was across the street. Then we had the Crestwell House, then we had Missus Primeaux uh, [Luc?] Primeaux, she had a rooming house right across the track on Chestnut Street. And now it's a halfway house, you see. And Missus J.J. Davidson that I'm talking t-, I spoke to you about, she lived across the street from Missus Primeaux where uh, the Salvation Army is today, you see. So we had all these different houses and different people lived there, the railroad people lived there, and that's where I would go to call all of the railroad people uh, during the daytime or at night, because that was their rooming house.

SW: What about the interaction between the oil people and the locals? They must have stuck around because some of 'em stayed here and married and had kids.

JC: Yeah correct.

SW: And now we have-

JC: At the beginning, uh, Steve, uh, I would, I don't think our native people really uh… socialized with the oilfield people. That was really at the very beginning. And Lafayette was, like any other town, they had their little cliques, you know. And uh, this was an outsider and they didn't take to outsiders to quickly, you know. But as time went on and the oilfield people begin to stay in Lafayette and, you know, have roots here, uh, then our people begin to accept 'em more, you know. So that's how, you know, it just, it took a little time for us to get accustomed to outsiders. But today that's all we have practically is outsiders. We don't have very many natives around.

SW: It's changing.

JC: Changing. And I remember um, when I moved out here, I built, I bought the property in '51, I built the house, started it in '52, and completed it in '53. So I did have SLEMCO was out here, so I did have electricity. But I had no water and I had no gas. So I went to the city to see if I, when I could expect to get any water out here. And they looked at me and they said, "We will never cross the Vermillion Bayou." [Chuckles] That, that is, "We'll never cross the Vermillion Bayou. So, don't expect any water or any electricity or any gas from the City of Lafayette, because we'll never go that far out." And look at it today. [Chuckles]

SW: And they took a long, and that bridge is gettin' ready to be finished and [Inaudible, overlapping speech]-

JC: And finally the Camellia Bridge is gonna be finished out I would say the, you know, I would think between now and the end of June we should be riding the bridge. But we've been waiting for that for 20-some odd years

SW: And I'm sure you waited for your utilities for a long time, too.

JC: Well uh, yeah, I didn't uh, I didn't get uh, I had electricity, which I mentioned before with SLEMCO. And then the city, I guess I've been with the city probably 20 years. And uh, at that time that's when we were brought into the city limits and I did get water, so I was able to get rid of the deep water well. And uh, after so many other year, then they gave us sewage. So I, you know, now gas, I have natural gas out here, but I u-, my home is all electric and I just have a couple of things that operate by gas. So I'm still with propane. And I'm satisfied with that.

SW: It's okay?

JC: Yeah.

SW: Uh… so they did eventually make it out here and-

JC: Oh they did.

SW: And a lot further.

JC: Oh yeah.

SW: We know what's happened since then.

JC: Correct.

SW: After Maurice Heymann turned his gardens into that Oil Center, did you notice, like you would've been a bit older at that point than you were in the 1930s.

JC: Oh sure.

SW: When some of those oil businesses were downtown, did you notice a much larger influx of oil businesses from Houston relocating here?

JC: Very much so.

SW: And-

JC: Yeah, Lafayette really begin to grow.

SW: Can you tell me a bit about that, that you remember? How Lafayette grew and things-

JC: Well, Steve, I really can't rem-, I can remember, but the growth uh, the growth w-, growth were very gradual. I mean, we didn't have a growth like what we're experiencing today. I mean, today I don't care where you go, there's a new subdivision that's developing. We didn't experience that back in those days. It was a very gradual situation. So we uh, it wasn't anything that was shocking to us, it was a very gradual, easy, easy development. [Pause]

SW: How could you say that uh, in terms of, and I'm looking specifically on here, as those companies were coming in and bringing more people from out of town, as we said before, the faces in this community changed. The last names changed, you see [Inaudible, overlapping speech] and things like that.

JC: Last names changes.

SW: But how did it affect the language and the cuisine and things like that?

JC: Not really.

SW: What are the things, you didn't see much of a change?

JC: Not really, no, uh uh. No we uh, everybody still spoke French, everybody still had that Cajun accent, uh, and the oil companies uh, they did employee a lot of our native people, you know. Because they were not bringing in uh, they were not bringing in their secretarial employees or their bookkeeping. They were bringing in executives, should I say, CEO. But uh, for office work and field work, they were employing our people. And many of the kids were going to USL and they were studying to, geology and they were studying chemical engineer. And so gradually all of these native people would fall into these different jobs.

SW: And so that kind of helped change the reputation [Inaudible, overlapping speech]-

JC: Oh it did.

SW: They were offering jobs to people and-

JC: It did and the economy begin to grow and Lafayette saw uh, a big change in the economy and we were able to get better roads and uh, expand our utility system, and, you know, it was really a beneficial for Lafayette.

SW: Does, what else say in the 1950s if you were a young man or a young women of 20 or 25 years old, what else besides the oilfield could you have done if you wanted to start a career or something? What else [Inaudible, JC clearing throat]?

JC: Nothin'.

SW: Agriculture?

JC: Well, yeah, we had agriculture, but we had no um, we had no industry. We still had the railroad, but we didn't have any industry to speak of. Nothin'. And of course, you know, uh, Steve, back in the '50s Lafayette was still, I would say in the '50s we may, we may have tipped eighteen, twenty thousand population. And, you see, in '42 when I graduated from Lafayette High School I went to USL, SLI, and we only had an enrollment of fifteen hundred. That was back in '42. And when my sister was at USL, I think the enrollment then was probably maybe eight or nine hundred, you know. Lafayette, I can remember Lafayette having a population of 5,000, you know. And that was it.

SW: When the oil came it-

JC: Then when the oil began to come in than we began to, we began to grow, you know. And by the-

SW: Not only from within, but other people coming in as well.

JC: Correct. And by um, the '70s um, yeah, by the '70s, early '70s, Lafayette was growing. Not only Lafayette was growing, but Morgan City was growing, Crowley was growing. All of these neighboring places around Lafayette, they were all growing. And I was, in 1968 I went into the decorating business for myself, I had, was working for Doutree before. In '68 I went into business and I had a clientele within a radius of 150 miles from Lafayette. So, you know, the oil industry was really booming back in those days and money was flowing, and people were spending money, and they were building houses, and they were redoing houses, and they were adding on, and uh, streets were being built, and highways was being improved. So, you know, we were in, we were really in good shape. And then of course here comes um, the '80s and we took a slump. [Chuckles] And everything stopped for awhile, you know. And I can remember uh, probably in the late '70s or the very beginning of the '80s, there was a big article in the Daily Advertiser, double sheet, where they had 300 millionaires in Lafayette. They had 'em all listed, they had their names and pictures of 'em and so on and so forth. And within two years I don't think we had three millionaires. The oil industry, everything came to a complete stop and all these people were living on credit and credit cards, and they had nothing to back, we had no more millionaires, you know. So it was a, it was a little disaster.

SW: Wow, yeah.

JC: Uh hm.

SW: So not only the [size?] because of the good money in the oil industry, a young person in twen-, in the '50s and the '60s, they could look to the oil industry here as stable employment-

JC: And, oh, that's right.

SW: Good money, and, and everything attached to it.

JC: That's correct. That's right. And people would stay in Lafayette. They'd graduate from college and they always had a job. So they'd stay in Lafayette. Today they're not staying in Lafayette. There's too much uh, people always anxious to see when their kids graduate from high school to see 'em go to an out of state college, you know. And of course when they go to [Interrupted by a bird] well, hello there.

SW: Friend, huh?

JC: Little baby bird. Uh, when they town, you know, very seldom they'll ever come back. And uh, but Lafayette is really still a wonderful place to live. 'Course I'm older and I, I'd never leave, but I've always enjoyed living in Lafayette, I would never leave. In fact when I was working for Southern Pacific and they moved to Houston, we had an option that we could go with our job or we could quit and take a severance pay, and they'd pay us for a year and a half our regular salary. So I decided that's what I would do.

SW: That was my, one of my questions that I was interested in. What happened during the '60s? Why did the railroad leave?

JC: They were doing a lot of consolidation and everything was going to the Houston office. Diesel, diesel engines had take over. We didn't need oil burning an-, engines anymore. The roundhouse, that was almost a thing of the past, you know. I don't know if you know anything about the roundhouse, but that's where all the engines would come in for servicing and refueling and, you know, and coal burning engine. Well all of that had, was coming to an end because diesel had come in, you see. So um, and then uh, automation was coming in to, so we were in in our time keeping department every other, every two weeks then two of us we would sit down and we would have to call out everybody's name, make all the deductions by hand. Well when automation came in, they didn't have any no need for us to make all these individual deductions, you know. Income tax deduction, insurance deduction, railroad retirement tax, we did all of that here in Lafayette. But when automation came in we didn't, they didn't need [us?]. So that's when they begin to move everything, consolidate everything in Houston. So when they decided to do all of that then I decided, well, I would uh, take up a correspondence course in interior design. And when the time came, I took my severance pay and I went to work for Doutree's. And that's how I got into the decorating business, you see. And I'm still in it. Yeah.

SW: What kind of impact and affect did the railroad leaving Lafayette have on the city?

JC: Bad impact. It was, it wasn't a good impact at all because many, many people lost their jobs, you see. Many people did go to Houston. And when I'm saying "many people," I mean personnel people. They went to Houston. And many of my friends and many of my coworkers that I worked with, they went to Houston and they still in Houston, they've retired and they, their kids grew up in Hou-, and they stayed in Houston, you see. But it had a big impact on Lafayette.

SW: More negative than anything you would say?

JC: Uh hm. Very much so. Many p-, everybody that had worked at the railroad, I mean, the roundhouse, everybody that worked in the freight office, in the yard office where all the switchmens were, all of that went out, you know.

SW: You went into interior design, but would you say any of your coworkers switched over to the oil industry when [Inaudible, overlapping noise and speech]

JC: Well uh-

SW: Pick up any of the slack of these people that were unemployed?

JC: I don't, some of 'em may have switched over into the oil business, but I don't know that there was too-, very many uh, because they really knew nothing about the oil industry, you know. They were not qualified to go into the oil. And I'm sure a lot of people back in those days, maybe a lot of 'em, they may have taken early retirement, you know. Some of 'em they had to go out and look for another job, you know. Just like I did, I had to, I had to find another job, you know.

SW: Was there uh, anything else you wanted to add? I've pretty much asked the questions that I wanted to ask you. [Pause]

JC: No, not really. Unless if you uh, have a question or question that you want to ask, I'll be glad to answer.

SW: I've pretty much got what I needed, but if you, if you uh, if you ever wanted to do a follow-up interview, we can always do more.

JC: Okay.

SW: If you want to tell me more about your own personal story we'll [Inaudible]. I have one thing, I have one thing, it's just, this is my own personal curiosity. What can you tell me about Heymann's Department Store when you were growing up?

JC: Well, uh, Heymann Department Store when they first opened, he was across the street, where Tommy [Gilmore?] has his law office. And uh, then they built this store here where the museum is and uh, they would open at eight-thirty in the morning. They had, and they would stay open until I think it was five o'clock in the evening. And then on Saturday, they'd stay open until nine o'clock at night. And uh, Heymann Department Store had lady's ready to wear, they had men's ready to wear, they had a shoe department, uh, they had a gift department on the third floor, they had an elevator, which, you know, we weren't accustomed of. All of that flooring was all wood floors. Uh, every Wednesday was sale day. And uh, they would sell um, ice cream cones and hot dogs for a penny apiece. [Chuckling] And that was a great day.

SW: Your sister couldn't remember if it was a penny or a nickel.

JC: Oh, it was a penny.

SW: Penny, huh?

JC: A penny apiece and listen, damn lucky if we had a penny. [Both chuckle] I'm tellin' ya. And uh, then he had um, at the back o-, when you walked in the front door, at the back of the building was a double stairwell. And when you got up to the top was a landing, so that's where they would have the auctions. Oh they would have, they would always give out prizes, so you had to register and the big machine was upstairs and they'd turn it around and somebody was there to draw the name, you know, and everybody was congregated down at the f-, the main floor waiting to get their number called. And on the side of uh, the building, which is Congress Street, yeah, Congress Street, that's where they would sell the hot dogs and uh, the ice cream cone. They had stand outside, penny apiece.

SW: Sounds like a good deal. [Chuckles]

JC: A very good deal. Oh yeah. And uh… and those ladies and Missus Heymann, Missus Maurice Heymann's his mother, she would sit down in the building, she had a big chair with a tall back, and she'd watch all of the clerks to be sure that they were always standing up. She wouldn't allow 'em to sit down. And they worked for a dollar a day. [Chuckles] Can you imagine? Eight hours a day, a dollar.

SW: Was that the going rate at the time or that was low or high?

JC: That's, listen, that was it. That was it.

SW: That's what you got.

JC: A dollar a day. And, listen, in the early, no, in the mid '30s 'til the end of the '30s, um, yeah, let me see, in the '30s. Yeah, I was about 13 years old. I worked for Jefferson Theater. And I worked, I went to work at one o'clock in the evening and we worked until nine o'clock at night. One dollar. We, I was the popcorn boy and the usher. And uh, we made one dollar a day. Now we also had uh, passes to the theater. It was owned by [Southern?] Amusement Company and they owned the Jefferson, they owned the Azalea, they owned the Roxy, they owned the Royal. So we could, we had passes to go into, you know, all of those different theaters. But it was a dollar a day. And damn lucky to get a dollar a day. [SW chuckles]

SW: [Inaudible, JC clearing throat].

JC: And when I went to work for the railroad as a crew caller, uh, we worked seven days a week, eight hours a day, and I made 120 dollars a month. And that was a good paying job. Hundred and twenty dollars a month.

SW: Comparatively speaking, yeah.

JC: Yeah. And, you know, and that was eight hours a day, seven days a week. And luckily we had what we call an extra board, so that if we wanted to lay off or we wanted a day off, then I could call somebody on the extra board to come and take my place. But I was not paid for that day.

SW: That's what Miss Irene Trockul was telling me about. She said there was an extra board.

JC: That's right, we-

SW: That was a uh, if you needed time off you could call someone, they would take your spot.

JC: And they would take-

SW: They would get paid, you would not get paid.

JC: That's right.

SW: But you would get a break if you needed it.

JC: That's right.

SW: They called this extra.

JC: An extra board.

SW: Extra board.

JC: And they had an extra board for everybody that worked for the railroad: the brakemens, the conductors, the engineers, the firemens, the port-, everybody had an extra board, you see. So today if I was looking, uh, having to call uh, re-, everything that went west was odd numbers and everything that went east was even numbers. So everything that went west was like uh, 241, you know, that was the name of the train. But if I couldn't find the conductor to go out on 241, then I had to start looking for an extra man to take his place, you see.

SW: And that's why they called it the extra board, because-

JC: Extra board. And the telegraph operators they had an extra board, we had an extra board. And if you got sick, then you had to have somebody to take your place. So that's why the extra board came in handy. So, yeah, I'd work uh, sometimes maybe six weeks, seven weeks straight without any time off. Then I'd lay off for about a week and I'd take a little trip to Houston, because we had a pass on the railroad, and things along that line. But living back in those days was easy living. It was fun living. I had a great time working on the railroad. Of course at that particular time we didn't think it was all that great, but when you look back on it and we see what we did and how we did, it was a great time. Great experience. And we had no air condition, nothin'. Hot as hell, but you had to dress up, you had to have a coat and a tie and everything. Oh, you know. Yeah, it was uh, and then we had, in our office we had about 30 people workin' and we had two telephones. And that was it. Two telephones. And we had a coal burning stove. The office that we worked in must've been maybe 60 by 60, and we had a coal burning stove. And each we-, each week each one of us had a turn that we had to shovel that coal into that stove to keep us warm. So we were shovelin' coal, you know, four and five times a day to keep that fire going. And in the summer time, well all those windows was open, the smoke, the soot, everything was coming in from the train, we were sweatin'. [Chuckles]

SW: [Inaudible] [totally the opposite?]. [Chuckles]

JC: Huh?

SW: You're cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

JC: Oh yeah. I'll tell ya. And our desks, we had double desk. So one sat on this side and one sat on this side. The top of it was covered in oil cloth. Black oil cloth. And we had com-, uh, compute-, not computers, [cartometers?], that we had to press on, you know, like we'd take our fingers and uh, we press on three, five, and eight. And then we go so many times and then we'd come up with our answer. It was easy. Typewriters, we, you know, if they wanted 10 copies, we had to make 10 copy. You made a mistake, you had to erase 10 copies. Times have changed, Steve.

SW: Very much so.

JC: Oh yeah. [SW chuckles] Times have changed. But anyway, that's it.

SW: Well thank you.

JC: Well you're quite welcome.

SW: I appreciated it.

JC: I hope I was of help to you.

SW: I, I'd say very much that you were.

[END OF RECORDING]