MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Norman McCall

Date: February 19, 2007

Place: Lake Charles to Patterson, Louisiana

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Keywords: shipbuilding, aluminum crewboats, SEACOR International

Bio

Bio: Norman McCall is an 83-year-old crew boat owned and operator. He owned an operated McCall Boat Rentals for several years before merging with SEACOR International in the 1990s. He is one of the pioneering operators of the aluminum crew boats built in South Louisiana beginning in 1950s and has seen the industry progress for half a century--in many ways he has helped to lead that progress.

Career: Norman McCall grew up in Grand Chenier in the 1920s into a family of boat builders. He joined the Navy and served in a submarine in World War II. After the war he worked for Pure Oil Company as a captain of an ex-minesweeper in the Gulf of Mexico during the first days of the offshore industry, hauling supplies from Cameron to the platforms. He worked for Pure Oil for 19 years.

Union Oil bought out Pure Oil and closed down their marine department because they only wanted to rent boats, not own them. McCall purchased his first boats in 1966 and, after loosing his family in Hurricane Audrey, he started his own company, Cameron Crew Boats, later renamed McCall Boat Rentals.

In 1969, McCall built his first new boat, an aluminum crewboat, the "Phyllis McCall" at Seward Seacraft in Morgan City. A few years later, he built several 110-foot crew boats--the first crew boats of that size to work in the GOM. By the mid 1970s, McCall and his boat builders began experimenting with multiple engines. He built the first quad-screw in 1975 and the first five-screw in 1981, all at Gulf Craft.

McCall Rentals/SEACOR International: In 1996 McCall Boat Rentals (38 crew boats) merged with SEACOR. McCall was approached by Mobile Oil Company to send two boats to West Africa. He was reluctant because of the great distance. However, he signed a contract with SEACOR, who was already operating in West Africa, to operate his two boats. At the end of the contract SEACOR offered to buy the boats and Mr. McCall stated "I'll sell you the whole fleet if the money is right." Mr. McCall and his son, Joe, have continued to stay on for the last ten years, building state of the art aluminum crew boats for SEACOR at Gulf Craft, Inc. in Patterson, La on the Bayou Teche.

McCall and Gulf Craft, Inc.: Since the 1970s, when Scotty Tibbs, owner of Gulf Craft, began building crew boats for Norman McCall, there has been a special business relationship between the two. Rarely has there been a contract signed to build the boats, and occasionally the boats were simply ordered by a telephone call. This working relationship has carried over with SEACOR. Essentially, Mr. McCall and his son Joe deal directly with Gulf Craft to use their entire shipyard only for building SEACOR crew boats. It is a partnership that has designed and built some of the most modern crew boats in the GOM.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Norman McCall, M-c-C-a-l-l. The date is February 19, 2007. This is for the MMS Ship Fab Project. Interviewer is Jason Theriot. Norman McCall, oral history interview, en route to Morgan City. Tape one.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Alright, en route with Mr. Norman McCall to Patterson to take a look at his new boat. What's the name of the boat?

NM: *John J. McCall.*

JT: *John J. McCall.* At Patterson at nine-thirty in the morning on a Monday.

Tell me about growing up in Grand Chenier, Mr. McCall.

NM: I was born and raised in Grand Chenier. It's a little community about a thirty minute drive, today, from Cameron, Louisiana. I went to high school there. My

graduating class was a total of twenty-one kids. That's the largest graduating class ever from that high school. After graduating, I went to Louisiana Tech for one year. World War II broke out. I left college and volunteered for the Navy.

I volunteered for submarine duty, went into submarines. I was assigned to the *U.S.S. Jack.* I made eight patrols on the *U.S.S. Jack.* The vessel made a total of nine. I was not on it for the first trip; I started on the second patrol. The ship, *U.S.S. Jack,* got credit for sinking thirty Japanese ships during the war.

We picked up two Japanese survivors. Normally, submarines do not pick up survivors, but we were asked to try to sink a coastal freighter off the Philippines, and picked up some survivors so they could be questioned just before MacArthur re-invaded the Philippines. We picked three survivors up, brought two in. They were questioned as to Japanese forces on the island. Once we turned them over to Australian authorities, we never saw them again after that. We also picked up one American aviator off the coast of Japan whose plane could not make it back to the aircraft carrier. I remained on the *Jack* until he was decommissioned after the war.

JT: Tell me about Grand Chenier. What was that like in the early twenties?

NM: Grand Chenier was just a little small community. Actually, it was kind of isolated. The only way you went out was—as a young boy, the only way you could get to Grand Chenier was by boat. Grand Chenier is a ridge surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico on the south, the Mermentau River to the north, which tapers into the Gulf of Mexico, and then White Lake and Grand Lake to the east. So it was a real little island out, isolated from the rest of the mainland, surrounded by either water or marsh areas, which consisted of the Gulf of Mexico, Mermentau River, White Lake, and Grand Lake.

The little community was sort of self-sufficient. My grandfather, in the early days, owned a three-mast sailing schooner, and he used to run from Grand Chenier to Galveston once a week with his schooner, carrying supplies or products that the little community could sell, such as cotton, oranges in season, a lot of fur, bear skins and hides in the wintertime. Also, ducks and geese in those days were unlimited and could be sold on the open market. A few potatoes and a little bit of corn, but mainly cotton and oranges was the primary source of the income of the community.

JT: What was that run? How long would that run to Galveston take, round trip?

NM: In good weather it would take all day to get to Galveston. They would lay in Galveston one day and unload the vessel, and load the vessel. Then he would

return on the third day. Most of the time he could make it back in to port before dark if they left real early.

JT: Was he the only guy doing this type? You're kidding me?

NM: He was the only guy for a while. After a while a second sailing vessel, belonging to a Captain Nelson, also made runs between Grand Chenier and the Galveston area.

JT: Your grandpa made a pretty good living doing that?

NM: Well, he survived, but I don't know whether it was a very good living or not, and I really didn't know my grandfather. He died about the time I was born.

JT: Now, the McCall name. It sounds a little Irish. How did the McCalls end up in little Grand Chenier?

NM: The McCalls actually migrated from Tennessee and several of the other states, migrating to the Grand Chenier area and acquired land and began farming, trapping, hunting. My daddy eventually married one of my grandfather's daughters. About the time my grandfather died, or just before he died, the

gasoline engine had been developed well enough to be put in boats as power for boats, so that put the sailing boats more or less out of business.

My father built a 65-foot freight boat, or had one built, and he ran this boat from Lake Arthur to Grand Chenier, or Grand Chenier to Lake Arthur, back and forth, once a week, hauling supplies for the community and bringing supplies in and out. The same as my grandfather was doing. One of my grandfather's sons, Eunice Miller, built a boat. He operated the boat from Grand Chenier to Lake Charles and Port Arthur. So the community had two or three boats hauling supplies back and forth, scheduled once a week. A man by the name of Adam Nunez also had a little freight boat that run from Grand Chenier to Lake Arthur. So there were two or three boats supplying the community.

JT: So it was essentially landlocked? There was no road access?

NM: Grand Chenier was landlocked for a long time, until Huey Long run for governor, and he promised the people of Grand Chenier that if they voted for him, he would build a road across the marsh. He was elected. He kept his promise. He built a dirt road. They covered it with oyster shell and clam shell. That did give the community road access out of into the Lake Charles area, and of course, that put the two boats, or the boats that were still in operating—there were only two by then. My father's and my uncle's. It put them out of business because trucks

could now deliver the supplies that were needed for the community, and haul out any supplies that were available for the community to sell.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So down there in Grand Chenier, what was it like for a kid coming up? What type of trouble did you guys get into? What kind of fun y'all had?

NM: I tell you, it was a whole lot different than it is today, but I wouldn't trade it if I had the opportunity to do so. Of course, we didn't have all the toys and things that kids have nowadays. For example, ice cream was something that we didn't have because there was no ice plants or any ways to make ice cream. I can recall my father, two or three times a year, would buy big blocks of ice in Lake Arthur, pack it with sawdust. Of course, it was preplanned. My mother would have the ingredients already made, and when the boat would come in we'd run out there and help haul this big block of ice to the house. My dad would chip it, and we had an old hand crank freezer, and mom would make ice cream, which was a real delicacy for us.

We had a good life. There was a lot of fishing for the kids. The kids kept busy. In those days each kid, as you grew up, had a chore to do around the place, so we kept real busy and active. We didn't have any movies to go to, or no televisions.

We didn't even have electric lights down there for a long time. We had kerosene lamps and generally carbine generating units were installed, which gave off a whole lot better light than the kerosene lamp. Later on a small diesel power plant was installed in Oak Grove, and we did have electricity as I approached, say, my junior year in high school. So that was a big treat for us. We enjoyed ourselves. It was a good life.

JT: Now you were growing up in Grand Chenier, by the 1920s and '30s, the oil discoveries in Jennings and Calcasieu and just off the Gulf of Mexico, all of that had started this fledgling oil and gas industry. Tell me how your family was involved in that world, that early development of oil and gas.

NM: In the early stages of it, my family was really not too involved in the oil and gas because most of that was seismographic work that was being done on a small scale. When I got out of the service the seismograph end of it was pretty active in the Gulf of Mexico, and the first wells were being drilled in the Gulf of Mexico. In those days, Mobile Oil, the Pure Oil Company, Superior Oil Company, and Kerr-McGee were the big players in the Gulf, or the biggest players in the Gulf, at that time. Of course, all the drilling was done real close in.

When I got out of the Navy, I went to work for the Pure Oil Company, and shortly after we started building a platform that brought 39 Vermillion. It took a long

time to build it because these platforms had to be built on site, piece by piece. They were wooden piling. In other words, you drive one pile in, then you drive the second one, then you put braces between the two. It was more or less like building a house. You started from scratch and built it up. It was a long process. I was involved in the construction of building Block 39, Vermillion. From there we moved over to Eugene Island, and built a platform off Eugene Island, off the mouth of the Atchafalaya River. Block 2 West Cameron, which is only a mile and a half offshore, had already been built by the Superior Oil Company, and it was in production.

The offshore started off, mainly, by using ex-government boats, surface boats, that were available to be purchased by the oil companies from the navy or the army, most from the navy. The Pure Oil Company, for example, bought three wooden minesweepers to start off with. Superior Oil Company, I recall, bought a couple PT boats. Phillips bought a minesweeper. Most of the boats in those days were wooden boats, ex-military surface equipment, converted to use in the oilfield industry. They gradually gave way to steel hulls and aluminum hulls as things progressed.

JT: Now, you had mentioned to me back in your office that your dad and your uncle were hauling supplies in their wooden boats. Talk a little bit about that.

NM: These little freight boats, in those days they were huge boats. To us they were big boats. Today's standards they'd be real small boats. My father would haul any supplies from Lake Arthur to Grand Chenier that was needed by the community. It could be food items like flour, or any kind of food items, flour, sugar, anything that the community ordered. It could be brick, it could be lumber, kerosene, just anything that the community needed to survive on. On his trip to Grand Chenier to Lake Arthur, he would haul produce or items that the community had to sell. Bales of cotton. There used to be quite a few orange groves in Grand Chenier, so seasonally when the oranges were available, he'd haul crates of organs to Lake Arthur and sell them. Ducks, in those days there was no limit on ducks. They could be sold in the open market for food, so they would bring ducks out. In those days there was a lot of trapping and fur, bearing fur for sale. He'd bring these fur, muskrat, coon, mink, otter, whatever the trappers had to sell, and sell them in Lake Arthur for the trappers and bring them their money back.

JT: At some point you said he was running barrels of fuel.

NM: That was my uncle. My uncle was running—his boat run mainly from Lake Charles to Grand Chenier and occasionally from Port Arthur, Texas, to Lake Charles. He was hauling mainly fifty-five-gallon drums of gasoline and kerosene. Now, I said that there were no roads there on Grand Chenier, and that's right, but people gradually started buying automobiles and small pickup trucks and bringing

them to the island, the island of Grand Chenier, and there was no real roads but there were a lot of wagon trials and they would use these trails. They gradually got away from the horses and wagons, and started using motorized vehicles. There were no service stations so everybody would buy their fuel in barrels, and that's what my uncle hauled on his boat.

JT: About what year is this? Are we talking about early thirties?

NM: Late twenties and early thirties.

JT: So he was going to the refineries in Port Arthur, picking up refined petroleum, and bringing it back to use in motorboats or cars or whatever?

NM: Right, and the kerosene was basically used for heat and lights, in the kerosene lamps.

JT: And your uncle was a miller?

NM: Yes, he was a miller.

JT: You had a lot of French-speaking Cajuns were your neighbors growing up on Grand Chenier?

NM: Quite a few. For example, my grandmother on my mother's side could not speak English. She spoke strictly French, and as a young boy I learned how to speak French with her. I was never really comfortable speaking French. She was basically the only one that I spoke French with, but I got to the point I could speak it pretty well with her. There were a lot of French-speaking people in those days on Grand Chenier, especially the older people.

JT: Right. So after the war, and you get back and you're working for Pure Oil, did your service in the Navy help you get that job?

NM: I wouldn't say it helped me get the job. The Pure Oil Company was gearing up to start drilling at Block 39, and they were needing people to work. They had to have people to run these ex-minesweepers that they bought, and being as I had worked with my daddy in the summer months on his little trade boat, being as I was in the Navy, it appealed to me to work on the boats rather than work on the platform or the drilling rigs. So I went to work on one of the boats as a deckhand, and within three months, due to an opening that developed, I was promoted to Captain of one of the minesweepers. Bear in mind, in those days it wasn't required that you had a license to run these vessels, although I started studying for my license and did get my license. Hundred-ton license. I think, if I remember

right, I was about the third person to get a hundred-ton license out of the Port Arthur office for the oil and gas service. I kept that license for fifty years.

JT: Now, we're talking those areas that you mentioned, Eugene Island. Are we looking at 1947, 8, and 9?

NM: Yes, somewhere in that time frame. Yes.

JT: So things were just really getting started offshore?

NM: Yes, things were really getting started. Actually, most of the early platforms were still inside of land. On a good day, a good clear day, you could see the trees or you could see landmass. They were fairly close in, eight, ten, twelve miles offshore.

JT: And you probably had quite a few of these spread out all along the Gulf of Mexico on the inshore, these land rigs?

NM: A lot of land rigs. Lot of land rigs begin to be developed in the lakes and bays, and on land. So things were just beginning to develop in the offshore.

JT: You had a lot of people making a lot of money, I bet, huh?

NM: Wages weren't that great in those days. I can recall a boat captain made $42 a day. Deckhands, $21 a day. Cooks about $23 or $24. You had to work a schedule of twenty-eight days on and seven days off. The boats you ran didn't have any air-conditioning. They were all very hot in the summertime. Not the best in working conditions, but that's what was available at that time.

JT: Now, you were involved on the boats, working around the construction of these platforms as they were being built?

NM: Yes. The boats would haul all the material out that was required to build the platform. Then once the platform was built and the derrick was set up on Vermillion 39, then we stated hauling the supplies, needed supplies, to drill the well.

JT: So y'all were running back to Morgan City, probably?

NM: Block 39, we serviced it out of Cameron. In those days, those boats were not equipped with radar. The only thing they had on them was a radio. No electronic equipment to speak of at all, other than a radio. Like I say, no radar, so you run time and course.

JT: So a lot of what you did was just running supplies back and forth to that landing?

NM: Right. That was the primary purpose of the boats, to run supplies back and forth. And the crews, because there was no helicopter service in those days, so anybody that went to the rig had to go by boat.

JT: If you're working twenty-eight on and seven off, were you married at the time? You had a couple of kids?

NM: When I first started, I was single. I got married after I'd gone to work for the Pure Oil Company. It wasn't the best environment for a married person, but there wasn't a lot of choice in those days as to jobs. My first wife, I met her at L.S.U. She was a classmate of one of my sisters that went to school at L.S.U. She was born and raised in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. We were married about eight years. We had two children. A little girl, four years old, a little boy, two.

They both drowned in Hurricane Audrey, along with her. I remarried a couple years after Hurricane Audrey, and I've been married to my present wife forty-seven and a half years. We have three kids. I have three kids by this marriage. My oldest son is an attorney in Lake Charles. His brother Joe works at the boat company with me. My daughter, Phyllis, is married to Billy Johnston, who also works at the boat company with me.

JT: So, as you mentioned, there wasn't a whole lot of opportunities in this area after the war. If you would have stayed in Grand Chenier, I guess you would have been running traps and oysters fishing, or shrimping, or something. I don't know. What types of opportunities were there outside of the oil and gas industry after the war?

NM: Basically, there was very, very few opportunities for anybody on Grand Chenier, because the orange groves had just about disappeared by the end. There was hardly any more farming done. So there was really nothing for a man or a young boy to do in Grand Chenier except hunt, trap, or go to work for oil companies. So most of the young labor force went to work for oil companies, in different phases. Either in the drilling end of it, the marine end of it, or production as stuff came on line.

Those that went to college took different subjects. Some of them became schoolteachers, a few of them became engineers and went to work for oil companies or other companies in their fields. There wasn't a lot of choice when I grew up.

JT: Where were you living for those seven days? After you got back from the war, I take it you weren't in Grand Chenier any longer? You guys living in Cameron?

NM: No, I lived in Grand Chenier after I come back from the war. I lived in Grand Chenier, and me and my wife Phyllis, my first wife, built a home in Grand Chenier. We lived there till Hurricane Audrey hit. After it hit, I moved closer to my job, which was Cameron. I remained there until Hurricane Rita hit last year. I lost my house again in Hurricane Rita. Then I built another home in Lake Charles, south Lake Charles after Hurricane Rita. I moved in it about four months ago.

JT: Tough place to live. Mother Nature, you never know.

NM: You never know.

JT: So Grand Chenier, if we're talking about the late forties, when did Hurricane Audrey hit? Was that, I want to say, '52, '54?

NM: No. Hurricane Audrey hit June 27th, 1957. June 27th, 1957.

JT: How would you get to work if you were living in Grand Chenier, and your minesweeper or whatever vessel you were working on for Pure Oil? Where was it docked and how would you get to it?

NM: There was a road between Grand Chenier and Cameron. It wasn't a paved road or a blacktop road in those days; it was just a dirt road covered with oyster shells. You could drive from Grand Chenier to Cameron by that time. Grand Chenier is sort of like a ridge out in the middle of a marsh, but this ridge also went west to the Creole area, Oak Grove area, and into Cameron. So there was communication between those communities, Creole, Grand Chenier, Little Chenier, Chenier Pardue, those ridges. There was communication amongst them, although the roads were just dirt roads to start off with, then gradually were covered with shells, and then later on they were blacktop, as they are today.

JT: As far as early warning systems for detecting big storms and hurricanes, like we have today, there really wasn't much available?

NM: No. That's why so many people drowned in Hurricane Audrey. The weather reports indicated that the storm was not gonna hit till late afternoon of the 27th, at the earliest. Most people, including myself, decided to stay and take a look at it the next morning, thinking that we'd have ample time to move into the Lake Charles area or somewhere else if it was still coming. But before daylight on the 27th, the storm hit. It hit during the night. We didn't have ample warning. We didn't have the warning systems that we have today.

JT: Had you experienced any type of storm like that, growing up in Grand Chenier, in the years before that one?

NM: No. My grandmother on my mother's side survived Hurricane Audrey in her home. My grandmother was ninety-three years old when the storm, Hurricane Audrey, hit. After the storm, talking to her, she told me that she was ninety-three years old, and she had never seen anything like that before. You can go back another hundred years plus. Her parents before her had never seen anything like that, or she would have known about it. So you can go back at least two hundred years before Audrey hit, and there was never anything like that. So the people in the community of Grand Chenier, Oak Grove, Cameron, were not really concerned about storms because nothing like that had ever happened to the community for over two hundred years, and maybe longer.

JT: Grand Chenier is *x* number of feet above sea-level. I'll imagine that that tidal surge had to come up a great deal?

NM: Grand Chenier varies, but I'd say most of the ridge is eight-to-twelve feet above sea-level.

JT: So did you stay on with Pure Oil all through the fifties?

NM: Once I went to work for them, I stayed with them nineteen and a half years, and then Pure Oil Company sold out to Union Oil Company of California. Pure Oil wanted to own all of their own equipment like boats and barges. Union Oil had a different philosophy of they wanted to rent everything. So when Union took over, or bought out the Pure Oil Company, they shut down the marine department that I worked in, and we were more or less without jobs. About that time there was a man in Houston, Texas, that had two small boats. One was a 50-foot boat, crew boat. The other was a 65-foot utility boat, working for Mobile Oil Company out of Cameron. He wasn't taking real good care of his equipment, and the Pure Oil Company notified; I mean the Mobile Oil Company. He worked for Mobile, not Pure. Mobile notified him that they were going to release his two boats, and he let it be known that he would be willing to sell the boats and get out of the business. I was made aware of this by some of the people working at the base at the Mobile Oil Company in Cameron. I contacted the man and he agreed to sell me the two boats, if I could find financing.

That was not an easy thing to do, having lost everything you owned in Hurricane Audrey. But I was able to find the financing through some very good friends of mine who believed in me and trusted me, and they helped me buy these two boats. That's how I got started.

JT: Were the banks not interested or available to give out loans in those days?

NM: The banks were not too interested because I didn't have anything. I lost everything in Hurricane Audrey, and having to start all over again, I didn't have much to offer the banks, and I can understand that. A good friend of mine by the name of James Farber, the Farber family, James Farber loaned me some money at no interest to get started. When he did that, it wasn't enough to buy the boats, but it was a start. The banks, Calcasieu Marine Bank, finally decided to loan me the rest of the money needed to buy these two boats. That's how I got started.

JT: What year was that?

NM: Let's see.

JT: A couple years after Audrey, so maybe '59, '60?

NM: No, it was about '66, '67, when I bought my first boats.

JT: You had a pretty long career already in the oil industry?

NM: I worked for the Pure Oil Company nineteen and a half years before I went into the business on my own. In a way, I'm glad it turned out like it did, because I was

really happy working for the Pure Oil Company, and would have most probably, if they were still in business today, I'd have most probably stayed with them.

JT: How do you think that the Pure Oil Company ranks with some of the other pioneer oil companies like Humble, and Gulf, and Superior, and some of those others that you might have had some dealings with?

NM: I'm not sure. Of course, Pure is no longer in business. They sold out to Union Oil Company. Pure did have some activity on land, but I'm not sure how much. They were one of the first to enter the Gulf and start drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico, so they were one of the leaders there. How much they had on land, I'm not sure how much they had.

JT: That must have been quite a gamble. If you think about it from an explorer mentality.

You say, "We need to build a platform beyond the horizon so that we can extract oil and natural gas." I mean, to be able to come up with the creativity and the ingenuity, and the guts, to go ahead and do that and then have the finances and the will, that's pretty amazing.

NM: It was a big gamble for the oil companies. In those days the dry holes hit were—you'd hit one well about every seven that you drilled. At least that's what the people with the Pure Oil Company told me. So it was a gamble for those companies. Seismic information in those days was pretty primitive. It was not near as good as it is today, and not as accurate as it is today.

JT: By this time, the Federal Government is controlling a good bit of the leases, so I'll imagine that when you're referring to these blocks on Eugene Island, Vermillion, that these are all tracts of land that Pure Oil leased from the government, correct?

NM: That is correct.

JT: I'm not sure what some of the stipulations were back then, but I believe today you've got a limited time to develop the resources that are in those tracts of land. After that time, you need to get your stuff and move out. Is that how it was back in the sixties?

NM: I think they had five years to develop it and start producing. That's my take on it. They had about five years.

JT: So if you're building a platform out of pilings, that's a permanent structure. That would be pretty difficult to pull that guy out and move him to the next block, the next tract, in five years?

NM: Yes. They weren't made to be moved. They were made to stay there. Of course, the drilling, that has changed radically. That started to develop pretty quick once they started working in the Gulf, where they come out with drilling barges that could go there and drill a well. If they hit, they'd leave the riser, and then build a platform around it. It wasn't too far down the road that they started building steel structures in places like Morgan City, Corpus Christi, different other places. If you hit a well, you'd leave the riser sticking out of the ground, and they they'd build a steel platform and pick it up with derrick barges and set it over the well, build a decking on it, living quarters, or whatever you wanted. So that progressed pretty fast.

JT: Where were these derrick barges and these vessels, these flowing vessels, where were these constructed early on?

NM: Jay Ray McDermott was a big operator, and they had a big base in Amelia, just east of Morgan City. Brown and Root was a big player, and they had a couple of derrick barges. So McDermott and Brown and Root were the big, big players in the early stages of the development of the Gulf, as far as the derrick barges were

concerned. Brown and Root, I think, eventually got completely out of the derrick barge business. McDermott is still in it to some degree, and now you got other players with derrick barges. There's not as many of the platforms being built today as there used to be because of the water depth. We get to a point where we can't use platforms anymore due to water depth, so then you gotta go to sub-sea installations.

JT: But all the while that this industry is growing and developing, you still gotta have those boats?

NM: You still gotta have those boats. You still gotta have transportation. You gotta get all that material, all the pipe, all the chemicals, all the special tools. All that stuff has to be transported from land to the rig site, and that's where the marine equipment, the boats, come in. Now, this boat we're going to look at today, you'll see two big tanks on the back deck. This boat is capable of carrying two thousand cubic feet of cement, dry bulk, which consists of either cement or shale. We can carry three different products in these two tanks, and we pump it off with air. We have a big compressor down below in the engine room of the boat that blows this product to the rig, with eighty p.s.i. Eighty pounds of pressure per square inch.

JT: How many crew can you fit on this thing?

NM: This particular boat is Subchapter L boat—

[Begin Tape One, Side Two]

NM: —and the reason we can only carry thirty six is that this boat also can carry eleven hundred barrels of liquid mud below deck. It's our first crew boat that can carry liquid mud. Now, if we want to give up the liquid mud capacity, we can go to Subchapter T, and then we can increase the passengers on the vessel. So we have some Subchapter L boats and we have some combination Subchapter L and Subchapter T. This is strictly a Subchapter L boat so we could carry the liquid mud below decks.

JT: I see. What you've got with this boat, and it's a 190-footer, right?

NM: 190-foot by 34-feet-wide.

JT: What you've got now, it appears it's a combination work boat/crew boat, which is something that is relatively new, right?

NM: We've been having combinations of boats for a number of years now, but this is the first liquid mud boat that we've come out with. It's an experiment we're

gonna try. There's another operator, Tidewater, that has several liquid mud boats, crew boats that can carry liquid mud. We increased the capacity on ours by a hundred barrels more than Tidewater. We increased the horsepower of the vessel by putting a fifth engine in it, where we can carry the load faster than Tidewater can.

JT: What's the name of this boat?

NM: *John G. McCall.*

JT: *John G. McCall.* That's the latest product on the Gulf of Mexico. If today is 2007, when did they start building crew boats and work boats and offshore service vehicles? When did all of that begin? You were still working on minesweepers in the late forties. When did this technology take off?

NM: I'd say in the early fifties, middle fifties, they started building—the first crew boats in the Gulf were 42-footers, then they graduated to the 48-foot-class. Then Halter came out, about that time, with a 50-foot-class boat.

JT: What was that?

NM: Halter Marine. Came out with a 50-foot-class boat. The boats have progressed in size fairly fast over the years. My first new boat was a 65-foot aluminum boat, but there were 50-footers out there then, and 48-footers out there then. My first boat was a 65-foot-class. I built it. Tidewater was building some 65-foot-class boats.

JT: Let's back up a little bit. Where was Halter Marine? Was that out of Amelia also?

NM: No, no. They were out of the New Orleans area.

JT: Okay. So these early crew boat/work boats—

NM: Now, the 50-foot-class and the 65, they were basically to carry passengers. They did not have the capability of carrying much cargo. They could carry, you know, maybe a welding machine, or a few tools and stuff, but these boats were not designed or capable of carrying any great amount of cargo. They were basically carrying passengers, because still then, in those early days, helicopters were not being used. They had not really come into play yet.

JT: How'd you get your people out there? How'd you get the workers out there?

NM: We had to get them out there.

JT: So it's almost like the size of the crafts increased the further that the discoveries are being made, meaning further off of the shore?

NM: That's correct. The further offshore they go, requires bigger and faster boats. Now, this boat you're going to see also, it's the first in the world that is DP2-classed. This is the first DP2-class boat in—previous to this boat, we had some DP1-class boats, but not DP2.

JT: DP meaning direct position?

NM: Dynamic position.

JT: So this is not a typical twin-screw?

NM: This is a five-engine boat. It's got five screws under. It's got three bow thrusters. It's got, like I say, DP2 certified by the A.B.S, Coast Guard. The difference between DP1 and DP2, on a boat like this, is a half-million dollars. That's the difference. The main difference is you have more backup systems for DP2. In other words, we can lose one thruster and the boat will still DP. You can lose a generator, the boat will still DP. You can punch a hole in a fuel tank, and the boat

will still operate okay because it automatically will convert you to another fuel tank. So you can lose a number of systems, and you'll still be able to stay on station.

JT: Dynamic positioning means this guy can move various degrees, right?

NM: Dynamic position, basically, is the boat—the captain will bring the boat up to facility. A drilling rig or an offshore production facility. Some of these big offshore facilities, now, do not allow vessels to tie up to them. You can't tie up to them, so the boat has to just stand off *x* number of feet from this facility, and be able to load and unload the products. Dynamic positioning allows the captain to get the boat in the position, under the crane, that he is satisfied with. Then he flips a switch. Then the computers take over the operation of the boat, using satellite imagery and the computers speed the boat up, speed the engines up, slow them down, turn the rudders. It does everything it has to do. Shift the engines if necessary, the gears. Does everything it has to do to hold than boat on station.

One of the thrusters is an azimuth turning thruster, so this thruster will drop down from the bow of the boat. Drop down and it will swing 360 degrees. The other two are funnel thrusters that just push water either right or left, starboard or forward. But the computers handle all of that, once you put it on the computer system. Now, the captain stands by. When I say stands by, he's got a big chair,

he can sit down. He stands up by the controls in case there's a major malfunction where he can take over from the computer. But these boats, they'll stay on station within, depending upon the sea conditions, anywhere from one to three meters. Stay right there. Now, some of these platforms and drilling facilities are floaters, and those floaters move with the wind and current. Well, this DP system makes the boat—in other words, the two are out there dancing. If one moves, the other one moves in the same direction, or away from it, so they don't collide.

JT: How far offshore and in what depths are the sub-sea structures that this boat, that we're gonna look at, is gonna be servicing?

NM: I don't know what platform we're gonna start servicing. It depends upon what oil company we go to work for. The chances are good it will be, most probably, in water depths of anywhere between two thousand and seven thousand feet, depending upon what company, what area of the Gulf. The distance from land, we have boats that are working with oil companies whose runs are approaching two hundred miles offshore.

JT: So there's the need to have, you just explained it right there with that distance. There's the need to have these big behemoths to be able to stay out there for a long time, and sustain the rough seas and weather conditions, and the climate of the Gulf of Mexico?

So what we need to find out, Mr. McCall, is how we went from your uncle's little freighters and you working on minesweepers, to having a DP2, 190-footer. I can't even guess how much this vessel must have cost to construct, but you're looking about, going on about fifty years of technology?

NM: Yes, somewhere in that neighborhood. The technology has picked up dramatically in the last, say, ten years because people had the foresight to know that drilling was getting further and further offshore. For example, all the DP equipment on this boat is built in Norway. The main engines on this boat are built in Daventry, England, and shipped across to us. We have some jet boats. Instead of propellers we use jet. We have—I'd have to count them. I have eight or ten jet boats right now, and we build jet boats for certain applications, for certain jobs. The jets are built in New Zealand and shipped to us. So some of the components of these boats are built other than in the United States.

JT: Let's back up to those two vessels, the two boats that you bought out of Houston from that guy you were telling me about. Were those also crew boat-types?

NM: The 50-footer was a 50-foot steel hull crew boat built by Sewart. The 65-footer was a little utility boat built by some little small shipyard in the New Orleans area.

JT: So Sewart, that's a group that was from out of Morgan City, that eventually moved on to Swiftships?

NM: Not all of it. Mr. Sewart, he may not be there today. Mr. Sewart started this company, and his chief; well, not chief. His airplane pilot was a man by the name of Scott Tibbs. Mr. Sewart encouraged Scott Tibbs, his pilot, to get into the boat building thing, on a small scale at first, mainly building the mast of a boat, tie-up bits, vents, things of that nature. Mr. Tibbs opened a little shop and started building these components for Mr. Sewart, and then gradually Mr. Sewart got out of the business and Mr. Tibbs stayed in the business, but he expanded into building boats. But he actually started out as Mr. Sewart's pilot. I don't know if Mr. Tibbs, the man I first started dealing with, will be there today or not, but his sons will. He's got three sons in the business. Kevin is the one that—I'll introduce you to all three of them if they're there, but you need to talk to them about their shipyard.

JT: This is Gulf Craft?

NM: Gulf Craft, yes.

JT: So the way that I understand it, they got started in the sixties, early seventies, building fishing vessels. Oyster boats, shrimp boats.

NM: No, they got started mainly building small crew boats for Mr. Sewart, like the 42-footers, 48-footers.

JT: So this would have been the early seventies? Mid-seventies?

NM: I'd say in the late sixties, middle sixties, because the first boat I built with them was in '72, and it was a 77-footer. He was building smaller boats than that at his place then. So I'd say in the late sixties. I could be wrong by a year or two, but hell, when you're almost eighty-three years old, your memory's not as good as you young fellas. This old computer up here is going through a lot. Remind me when I get back, I got a picture of this boat I can give you. A drawing of it that I can give you, if you want to take it back with you, and give you some information on it.

JT: You see, we know a lot about the World War II era shipbuilders like the Delta, and the Higgins, and LeTourneau, and Consolidated, and Avondale, and some of those other companies from the Orange and Port Arthur area.

NM: Weaver Shipyard.

JT: Right. Some of those guys. We know that because of the types of vessels they were building, obviously for the war industry. But there's not a whole lot of information out there, as far as written material, other than what you can find in newspapers, about the early shipyards that were building the crew boats in the fifties and the early sixties.

NM: Your principal yards in south Louisiana for that area would be Gulf Craft, Swiftships, Neuville, and the two Breaux yards. They built the bulk of the boats for the offshore oil industry. Aluminum boats.

JT: Let's talk a little bit about—okay, so you bought those two boats out of Houston, they guy from Houston. Did you update them at all? Did you do any types of repair work? From there, how did you sell your services with those two boats?

NM: Those two boats had a contract with Mobile Oil to work six days a week. It wasn't a very profitable deal at first. The contract called for each boat to receive a hundred and fifty dollars a day for the days it worked.

On Friday afternoon, Mobile would say, "Only one boat this weekend," and they had the choice of picking the boat they wanted. If they wanted to carry some equipment offshore, they would pick the utility boat because it could carry the

weight. If they just wanted to send two or three people offshore to check the wells, they'd pick the crew boat because it was faster.

[Cellular phone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: That's interesting. So Mobile, it doesn't sound like they were all that too darn busy in the early sixties. Today, a day rate for a boat like those are going for three or four thousand dollars, and they work twenty-four hours a day. These guys were—

NM: It was mainly production. Those two boats were taking care of production. It wasn't drilling, it was strictly production. By that time Mobile had, maybe, six or seven—one main structure and five or six little satellite wells that they were taking care of, out of Cameron.

JT: Oil or natural gas?

NM: Mainly oil, but there was some natural gas.

JT: So you were the owner of the two boats. Were you also the operator? Meaning, did you go out with the boats?

NM: No, I hired the crews that were on the boats. They were all local people, all people I knew. They wanted to go to work for me. You asked if I did anything to the boats. I cleaned them up. The crews helped me. We repainted the boats and got them looking decent again. This was a gradual process, because the boats stayed on the job. You know, when a boat's working, you can't do a hell of a lot of painting on it. If you painted the dock, you gotta make sure the paint dries before you go back offshore, and stuff like that. But we did clean them up, and I made some improvements on them. The boats stayed with Mobile a number of years. About a year after I bought these two boats, Union Oil approached me and asked me if I would furnish a boat for Block 2 of the original platform that was drilled in the Gulf. They were using a wooden boat out there, belonged to a family friend, really. I told them I didn't—he was a friend, I didn't want to take his job.

They says, "Well, you're not taking his job. Mr. Nunez does not want to upgrade his boat, and we want an aluminum crew boat or a steel hull crew boat out here. We don't want a wooden crew boat." It really wasn't a crew boat. He had purchased, from the Navy—you see these little open-ended boats that run—you've seen them on movies. They run from a battleship to the dock, carrying people back and forth, in the Navy. A man stands up in the back end with a tiller, a wooden tiller. He'd bought one of them that came up surplus and just covered the deck and made a little cabin off it.

JT: A landing craft?

NM: Yes.

So I talked to Mr. Nunez, and he said, "No, I'm not going to buy anything else. If they want to let me go, that's okay, but I'm not going to invest in another boat." So I bid on the job, and I got it, and I bought another secondhand boat, and I put it on that job. Later on bought, let's see, one, two, three other secondhand boats, about a year apart. I bought five secondhand boats before I built my first new boat.

JT: So this was all in the sixties?

NM: Yes, late sixties.

JT: You had gotten out of Pure Oil after they sold out, and you went into business for yourself. What did you name your company?

NM: Cameron Crew Boats.

JT: Cameron Crew Boats?

NM: Cameron Crew Boats.

JT: So you guys were out of Cameron?

NM: Yes, we were out of Cameron.

JT: Block 2 ended—I mean, it's right there, right south of Cameron.

NM: Right south. You can see the platform. If you take what we call the Beach Road, you can see the platform. It's still there. Now, the old wooden pilings are all gone, and they built the steel structure in place over the wells. I'm not sure any of those wells are still flowing today. If they are, it's not enough production to justify sending pumpers out there. It's not a paying thing anymore.

JT: So you've got those two boats, and then you started buying some used and pre-owned vessels. Building yourself a little fleet there, it sounds like?

NM: I had five used vessels, and in 1969 I decided to build a new vessel. That's when I built the *Phyllis McCall*. I named it after my wife that drowned. That was the first aluminum hull. I told you I paid $96,000 for it.

JT: Where was that vessel built?

NM: That was built at Sewart's. That's the only boat I bought from that outfit. My next one was the *Gulf Miss*. I built it at Swiftships. I never did like the boat, never did like the design, but it was available. I mean, I could get a boat built there. So I kept it about five or six years and sold it to Manila Towing Company out of the Philippines. They bought it, put it on a ship, and brought it to Guam, where it was supposed to go out on the edge of the ocean, pick up crew members from American submarines, bring them into port so the sub wouldn't have to come all the way in, and bring them groceries and supplies. If it's still doing it, I don't know. I lost track of those people years ago.

JT: So the first one, the *Phyllis McCall*. Was that aluminum?

NM: Aluminum. The first aluminum boat I ever built, yes.

JT: That has to be one of the first aluminum boats ever built in south Louisiana, wouldn't you imagine?

NM: It was one of the first. When I bought it, Mr. Sewart had six aluminum hulls in his shed over here, in his facility. He told me I could have any one of the six. They were all identical boats.

I picked out the third one, just went and said, "Let me have that one."

JT: Now, the Sewart fellow. Where did he come up with the idea for using aluminum instead of steel?

NM: That I don't know, but Mr. Tibbs could most probably be the best to supply that answer to you.

JT: You see, I was always under the impression that aluminum technology had come well after steel.

NM: It came after steel, but what was happening—to build a crew boat that would travel at a decent rate of speed, building it out of steel, because steel is a whole lot heavier, they were having a difficult time building boats that would run good. To build them where they'd run halfway decent, they had to use such thin steel that the least amount of corrosion, the first thing you know you had a hole in your boat, you know what I mean? That was one of the drawbacks on this steel hull I bought. It didn't have the lifespan that an aluminum boat has because it was built out of such thin steel to make it run, with the horsepower and the engines that were available in those days, that the life of those boats were not that great. If

you built this boat you're gonna see today out of steel, it wouldn't' run but maybe fifteen, sixteen knots, with all that horsepower.

JT: I see what you're saying. But that aluminum technology by Mr. Sewart, that—

NM: Well, he didn't design, I mean, he didn't make the aluminum. But he had the foresight, I guess, to start experimenting with aluminum and building things with aluminum.

JT: Interesting. Now, you must have also had some foresight to go ahead and invest in a new construction. You must have saw that there was a big industry that was coming?

NM: I don't want to take credit for anything. I was convinced that aluminum was the way to go for high speed vessels over steel. The thing that intrigued me about aluminum, too, was that it didn't rust. [Laughs] I spent too many hours with chipping hammers on those old secondhand boats that I bought. Wood, you couldn't go with wood. So aluminum had to be the route to go.

JT: And I'm sure the oil companies preferred aluminum also. Much more durable, lighter, just a better product.

NM: Aluminum is good now. Aluminum would not be good for a big supply boat, or an anchor-handler, you know what I mean? Because aluminum is salt. It can't take the beating against steel structures, or big heavy anchors, and stuff like that, that steel can. It's a lighter, softer material. When you build an aluminum boat, you have to put more bracing in it. Ribs are closer apart. Your deck and beams are closer apart. You have to put more aluminum bracing into it, but all that extra aluminum is still lighter than all the steel that you would have put in.

JT: Where was the aluminum coming from? Where was it being manufactured?

NM: That I don't know. Mr. Tibbs would have to answer that. I know where they buy here, locally, but I think Alcoa makes aluminum. I know they do. I'm sure there's different manufacturers of aluminum throughout the United States. Some of this aluminum is coming from foreign countries now.

JT: So when you went to Sewart's yard, to that fellow's yard, and you said, "I want boat number three, hull number three," how long did it take him to finish it before he was able to deliver you that boat, and you could put it to work?

NM: Jeez, that's been a long time ago. Maybe a couple months. The hull was built, it was just a matter of buying the color of seats I wanted put in, and that sort of thing. Put the engines in and hook them up. Those are little boats. Of course, it

looked like a hell of a project in those days, but those little boats are real simple, you know what I mean? Sort of like a Model A Ford compared to a Lincoln Continental.

JT: So the designs were actually coming from the engineers who worked for Sewart or for whatever other boat companies?

NM: Yes, yes. Gulf Craft designs these boats.

What I would do is tell Gulf Craft, "I want a 110-foot boat." They would design the boat, and then they would let me help them kind of arrange the interior, and the tanks. What we wanted in to the boat. Just like the Neuvilles. They never built anything at all the size of what I wanted, when I started building boats there thirteen years ago. I think if you asked the Neuvilles, they'll tell you they learned a whole lot from the McCalls, especially my son Joe. By then, Joe had got the experience.

See that size boat there? That was one of the old-type that you used to see out in the Gulf a whole lot.

JT: That was for the shallow water, brown water?

NM: Yes, shallow water.

JT: So, for example, the installing these big tanks to carry your fluid mud, that's something that you guys came up with?

NM: No. A company by the name of Chouest started it, maybe six, eight months before we did. They started working for Chevron. A couple things happened, and I don't want to downgrade anybody. Chouest is a good competitor. We do a lot of work with them. A couple things happened.

Mr. Chouest would put—in other words, he says, "I can carry out two thousand cubic foot of cement." He put these two big tanks on the back deck, and he tied them down. Chains all over the boat, from one side of the boat to the other, which is a trip hazard. It took up space that could be utilized for other things. I'll show you how we tie our tanks down. Then he had a compressor on the back deck, which took up additional room. Chevron came to me. Chevron has always been one of my big customers. We have anywhere from twenty to thirty boats, per day, working with Chevron. It varies up and down, depending on their workload offshore, how many drilling rigs they have, etc.

They came up to me, being as I had boats working for them, and says, "Norman, would you consider carrying dry bulk?"

I said, “Yes, I’ll consider it.”

So they said, “We want tanks that’ll carry a thousand cubic feet of product.” It turned out the Chouest tanks could not carry a thousand. They were more like 895, 875. So if they ordered two thousand cubic foot, when the boat got out there—the tanks were a little bit undersized, in other words. So we built our tanks a little bit bigger—where you can’t fill the tank completely full. We built our tanks a little bit bigger where they could carry a full thousand cubic foot per tanks. We got some that carry twelve hundred cubic foot.

So that was one hurdle. The tying-down method was the second one. If they sent a boat out with—and please don’t use Chouest in your—I’m not criticizing, because they’re good people. Right off the bat, I saw where carrying a bulk compressor on deck just took up a lot of room, and a lot more chain tie-downs. So we installed our compressor below deck, and that gives the customer more deck space, and it also works to our advantage because the compressor and diesel engine driving it are no longer subject to salt water erosion from the waves and spray.

So we started with one boat, and it wasn’t long before Chevron come back and wanted a second boat. Right now, we must have eight or ten boats with Chevron,

hauling bulk as they need it. Everyday, or twice a week, or whatever. We must own close to twenty tanks that are in Chevron's yard for these boats, because each boat has two tanks. Like I say, you'll see the tanks when we get there.

JT: So basically, they fill the tanks up with fluid, and then—

NM: No, not fluid. This is dry bulk.

JT: Dry bulk. And then load them onto the ship?

NM: No. They're too heavy to pick up. Those tanks weighed a hundred and 86,000 pounds apiece, so there's most of your cranes at the dock and on the platforms can't pick up that much weight. That's why we pump it out. Now, you can pick up the empty tank. The empty tank itself weights 27,000 pounds. So most of your cranes offshore can't pick up a loaded tank of bulk. So we put these tanks on the boat as they're needed. After they finish pumping the bulk—they may stay on the boat for a week, or ten days, two weeks. They may stay on there just one run. Then we pick them up and put them on the yard, the customer's yard. Then we carry other things from deck. Pipe or whatever they need.

JT: These boats have come a long way, huh?

NM: They've come a long way. I never dreamed, when I first started, that they'd be to the point they are today.

JT: So by you getting into the actual new construction, it basically just took finances and some forethought on your behalf that there was going to be a need for bigger vessels, bigger aluminum, as the oilfield is growing in the Gulf of Mexico. Those are the two main components, right? You gotta have the funds and you gotta have the customers?

NM: You gotta have the funds and the customers. I can recall when I built my first—after the 77-footer, some people were building 85-footers and 90-footers. I decided to build a 110-footer, and I eventually built sixteen 110-footers. The first 110-footer I built, I didn't have a job for it, so when I picked it up in Morgan City, I came down to Intracoastal City, showed it to Union and I showed it to Pennzoil, and I showed it to all the different customers that were operating out of that area then. They basically all told me the same thing.

"Norman, that's a nice boat, but it's just too big for what we need. We just can't afford a boat like that."

JT: But the activity hadn't moved off the shelf yet?

NM: No, it hadn't moved off the shelf yet. But Mr. Roy, Mr. Sands, was the head of Pennzoil's marine department.

He looked at the boat and he said, "Boy, that's a nice boat." He says, "You know, I might have use for a boat like that." He didn't give me a commitment.

I took the boat to Cameron, and about three days later he called, he said, "You still got that boat?"

I says, "Yes, sir, I still have it."

He says, "I want to come down and look at it again, and take it for a ride."

So I took him for a ride down the channel, and when we got back to the dock, he says, "How soon can you have it in Intracoastal City?"

I said, "I can have it there tomorrow morning," because I had a full crew on it. So that boat went to work for Pennzoil, and stayed there for years, and years, and years, and years. I built a total of sixteen 110-footers over a period of, say, four or five years.

JT: All from the same template, basically?

NM: We made some modifications to all of them, but pretty much the same size, same width. Talking to Gulf Craft, we made some changes on almost all of them. Some of them were identical, but we made a lot of changes. From the 110, I built two 125-footers.

JT: What year was that first 110-footer built? Maybe mid-seventies?

NM: I'd say '75. '74, ''75. About '75.

JT: So the big boom hadn't really happened yet?

NM: No, the big boom hadn't happened yet.

From the 125s, I went to the—now other people are beginning to build a little bit bigger boats too. From the 125 I jumped to the 145, and I built two of those boats. The *Paula* and the *Caleb*. I put five engines in them. The reason for five engines is I needed more horsepower to shove these boats at the speed I wanted, and the engines available at that time with more horsepower were too heavy. Your weight ratio was too big or they wouldn't fit in the crew boats good. So I just start increasing engines. I went with a five-engine setup on the first one, and a six-engine setup on the second one.

From the 145s, I built two 155s, and I went with six engines in the second 155. Then I went to the 165s, then the 180s, then the 185s, then 190s.

JT: How many boats in all? I think you said forty-nine, is that right?

NM: I had thirty-eight boats when I merged with SEACOR in '96. I had thirty-eight boats. I had sold five of the older boats a year or two before my merger. At the height, I owned forty-two boats.

JT: So that first 110-footer. Had anyone else designed, constructed, or built an aluminum work crew boat that big?

NM: No. No, we were the first. Gulf Craft and I were the first.

JT: Now, what about the technology to put in four or five engines? Is that something that you came up with on your own, or working with Gulf Craft?

NM: Me and Gulf Craft together. We were talking about building a bigger boat, but I wanted to boats to be able to travel at least twenty-two, twenty-three knots in those days, and there was no engines available.

In talking to Mr. Tibbs, he says, "Well, maybe we could get another engine in." Some of the operators had gone into triple-screw. I never did like a triple-screw. That's three engines. I never did like a triple-screw application. Never did want one, never did build one. I jumped from the twin-screw to the quad-screw, four engines. Then from the four engines I went to five engines, and then from five I went to six engines.

JT: Had anyone, at that time when you were constructing these bigger vessels, the 120s, 30s, 40s, 50s, with the extra engines, had anyone else been utilizing that technology, or was that also just you and Gulf Craft?

NM: Just me and Gulf Craft.

[Begin Tape Two, Side One]

JT: This is tape two or Norman McCall interview with Jason Theriot on February 19, 2007, for the MMS Ship Fab Project.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

NM: —that I built and had entered the SEACOR fleet.

JT: So I've got the recorder back on, Mr. McCall.

You were mentioning that you merged with SEACOR in 1996?

NM: Ninety-six, yes.

JT: Tell me what you know about SEACOR? We've been talking about yourself, about Cameron Boats, about Gulf Craft. What's the history of SEACOR? I know they're a huge company.

NM: SEACOR was founded by Mr. Charles Fabrikant. I don't know the year that they were founded right offhand. They primarily were in the supply boat business, and, at a later stage, Mr. Fabrikant bought out Edgar Graham's company, which was a hundred and twenty-four utility boats. A hundred and twenty-four boats total, if I remember right. Most of them utility boats in the 100 and 110-foot-class. There were maybe five in the 125-foot-class, and I think seven supply boats in the 180-foot-class. He bought out Edgar Graham's company out of Bayou La Batre, Louisiana.

I merged with SEACOR in '96. After the merger, SEACOR bought Galaxy Marine, out of Patterson, which was about twenty-four boats. We bought out a company in England that had twenty-two or twenty-four boats in the North Sea.

And we bought out a small company around Bayou Lafourche that had four mini-supply boats. Then we bought out Brian Cheramie's organization, Cheramie Boats, and that was another twenty-two or twenty-four boats.

JT: He was an old submariner also, wasn't he?

NM: Who was that?

JT: Cheramie?

NM: Not Mr. Brian, no. He was not. There is a Cheramie down on the bayou, I've never met him, that was in submarines. I've never met the man. I don't know whether he's still alive or not. After the war we formed an organization, and at one time, Louisiana had fifty-two ex-submarines sailors in the whole state, and we formed a Louisiana chapter. We'd go to a national convention where all the states participate in, and Louisiana didn't participate too much. Maybe three or four or five of us, at the most, that would go to the conventions. By now, most of those sailors have died, or a lot of them have died, and passed away. Those that are still remaining are up in their eighties, and health problems has taken it's toll. Last convention I went to had a lot of wheelchairs, a lot of canes, and that sort of thing. So it gets kind of depressing to go to them.

JT: How do you seem to keep in such good health? All this boat business that keeps you going?

NM: I kind of like to think it's that I've always worked long hours. On weekends, when most people relax and take it easy, I have two farms north of Lake Charles. One's a hundred and sixty acres, the other's a hundred and twenty acres. I raise cattle up there. I go up there and I'm either bailing hay, bush-hogging, fixing fences, repairing something, doing something. So I spend my weekends working. I'll take a few weekends off in the year, but not too many. I just enjoy going up there on weekends. I have seven tractors, and I got balers, cutters, breaks. I got the whole nine yards. So I like to go up there and abuse my tractors.

JT: What about fishing or any of those kind of activities? If you're in the marine business, I'm sure you fished a lot?

NM: I used to fish a whole lot, and I was a very avid duck hunter and goose hunter. When the limits got down to what they are now, it's just kind of depressing to go out there and hunt, so I haven't done much hunting in the last five or six years. I have a good friend who is a member of the Oak Grove Hunting Club. He lives in Baton Rouge. They have a club in Oak Grove. Storm got it, so they didn't hunt this year, but normally he invites me every year to go hunting with him. I've hunted there two or three times a year with him. Other than that, I've kind of quit

hunting. When I was younger I used to fish trout in Big Lake. I fished those places, quite a bit, say, ten, fifteen years ago. My fishing activity now, I mainly go fishing once a year. SEACOR puts on a little tournament for our customers, and it's about fifty or sixty people at the fishing tournament. I go over there, and I fish that tournament, mainly just to meet old friends and visit.

JT: Have about old camp outings, camp life? Going out and playing cards and cooking with the guys?

NM: No, I'd rather work on my farm than do that. I'm not big into that kind of stuff.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Alright, so the way that I understand it, you and SEACOR merged in 1996?

NM: That's correct.

JT: How did that go about, and what were some of the discussions that you had with your son and some of the representatives of SEACOR? How did that all come about? What were some of the reasons that you wanted to merge with that big company?

NM: In 1993, '94 time frame, I was approached by Mobile Oil Company to send a couple of boats, couple of my boats that were working for them in the Gulf, to West Africa, specifically Nigeria.

Backing up a little bit, what had happened, a man by the name of Charlie Taylor, who was heading up Mobile's marine department at that time in Morgan City, was sent to Nigeria to look over their overall transportation needs and situations. He stayed over there about a month, and his recommendations to Mobile was to upgrade their marine equipment and basically hire a couple of boats as starters, similar of the type that he was using from me to work in the Gulf of Mexico.

So at that point, I was approached by Mobile Oil to send two boats to Africa. These conversations went on for several months. I told them that I didn't feel comfortable in sending two of my boats that far away from my home base, as I didn't know the rules and regulations of Nigeria, and didn't have an on-shore staff in that part of the country to supply upkeep to the vessels. They countered by asking me to consider using one of the two operators that was already over there, to talk to them and see if I could work out an agreement through them, and have assistance over there for maintaining my vessels. When I asked what two operators they were talking about, they mentioned Tidewater and SEACOR. I talked to SEACOR. We had several conversations, and I finally agreed to send two boats to Nigeria. SEACOR, for a management fee, would service my vessels.

I would supply the captains, but they would service the repairs, dry docking and stuff, in Nigeria.

So I sent the two boats over, and things went real well. One day SEACOR approached me and asked if I would consider selling those two boats to them.

In a joking response, I says, “I'll sell you the whole fleet if the money is right.” That opened the door for another discussion that went on several months. In the meantime, I was approached by Sea Bulk, and one other company, to see if I was interested in selling to them. I wasn't. From the first day on, I felt very comfortable with the SEACOR personnel I was dealing with, and after two or three months of negotiations, I decided to merge my company with SEACOR. It was a merger. I did not get one red cent or one dollar in cash for my thirty-eight boats. All I got was paper, and that's what I wanted. They wanted a combination of money and stock, and I wanted all stocks.

JT: Straight [asking directions]?

NM: Straight.

JT: Are we headed to Mr. Kelly's?

NM: Yes.

That's how I came about dealing with SEACOR. They asked me to stay on after the merger. I agreed and signed a contact to stay on for two years. When the two years expired, they asked me to continue staying on. We never got around to, and haven't as of this day, signing another contract. I've been there ten years, and most probably will stay as long as I want to, or until my health deteriorates, or I feel like I'm not productive.

JT: So it's really you, your son, and the secretary who we met earlier? Three employees?

NM: No, no. There was me, my son, my son-in-law. I had four port captains on the back. There was a total of eleven people. We had my secretary, who you met today, and another lady. Two ladies, really. A total of eleven people. I took care of thirty-eight boats with eleven people, and we did everything. We did the payrolls, we took care of sending the bills out, payables, receivables, insurance. We did the whole thing. My wife worked in the business also until the merger, and then she retired at that point.

JT: So most of your customers with those thirty-some-odd boats—who was your biggest customer? Was SEACOR one of your big ones?

NM: No, SEACOR wasn't a customer at all. My biggest customer has always been Chevron, followed by Mobile, Kerr McGee, Shell, Union Oil of California. Then I worked for a geophysical company with three of my boats. So I had a base of about twelve steady customers.

JT: But you must have saw something in SEACOR that made you decide to make this--

NM: Well, it gave me the opportunity to send my boats to other foreign countries, because SEACOR had operations worldwide. So it gave me an opportunity to send boats to other countries if things slowed down in the Gulf.

JT: I see. They key word being if and when it slowed down in the Gulf. So you always had a backup plan?

NM: More or less, yes. It was a backup plan. But I operated those thirty-eight boats, I did not even have a salesman. My boats sold themselves. My crews—I didn't advertise for crews. My crews were my salesmen. By word of mouth, talking to other crew members. You know how conversations go. "How much money you making here? What are the benefits? How do you like this company versus that company?" That sort of thing. We had a steady stream of boat captains coming

in all the time applying for work. So I didn't hurt for jobs; I mean for captains, or deckhands. I treated my people real well. They liked to work for me. I was honest with them. A person could call me day or night if he had a problem, I'd talk to him. There was no eight-to-five business with us. We were on-call twenty-four hours a day.

JT: What's the benefit of having merged with SEACOR? The obvious, you get your stock options and somewhat of a retirement, so to speak, in so many ways. What's the biggest?

NM: Like I told you, we were now able to send boats all over the world. SEACOR, as big as they had grown by that time, had better benefits than I was able to offer my crews. They had a better hospitalization.

I gotta watch where we're going here. It's just down the road here, I believe it's the next street. We might as well take this off now because we're gonna be getting out in about two—

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Now, how old are you today?

NM: I'm eighty-two. I'll be eighty-three March 2nd.

JT: Eighty-three years old. Most guys your age, Mr. McCall, have long since retired. Some have gone back to work and have double-retired. A lot of guys are spending their latter years traveling or sitting at home, or finding small little hobbies to keep busy. It appears that, with your son coming aboard and taking over a good bit of the business, and handing over a lot of the responsibilities to your merging partner, SEACOR, that the company might be able to run without you. Why have you decided to continue to stay involved as much as you can, when, as you said, they gave you one year, then they gave you another year to stay on, and you keep staying on year after year. What is it that keeps you interested and keeps the drive in you to want to go and build new boats, and associate with people like Gulf Craft and Scott Tibbs and these folks? What is it about the industry that keeps you going back?

NM: First, to answer your question, I'm sure they can run without me. Everybody in this world can be replaced, so that's not a big deal. It's just that I am not the type that like to sit at home and watch TV. I watch the news and a few sport programs, but I'm not going to sit inside a house and just look at TV or the four walls, or play cards, or that kind of stuff. I want to keep active as long as I can. It's a challenge to me to stay involved with boats, to come up with new ideas, to experiment with new ideas, try to improve on old ideas. So it's sort of a challenge

to me, and boats is all I've ever known since I was just a young boy. I'm happy doing that. I've traveled enough in the world. I don't need to see anymore places. I see enough as they are.

I just come back from the M.T.U. factory two weeks ago. I'm going to the Cummins factory in June, in Indiana. I've already been up there three or four times. I'm scheduled to go to Cummins factory in Daventry, England, sometime this summer. So it's just the challenge of watching, or learning about, new equipment to see if I can help improve on the equipment we already have out. Just my love for boats.

JT: I see that. What really impressed me with that *John McCall*, I think out of everything, was the five-engine setup that you guys have down in the engine room. Until you see that, you really have no idea. That is a very, very impressive setup of horsepower.

NM: We been using the five-engine set up for over twenty years now. I first used it in the *Paula McCall*. I think she was built in '82 or something like that. I'd have to check my records. We been using the five-engine setup for at least twenty years. We even have some with six engines instead of five. That's an interesting concept, interesting setup itself.

JT: There's your guy [pointing out a billboard]. SEACOR.

NM: Yes.

The determination of whether we use five or six engines is governed by the size of the boat that we plan on building, the horsepower in the engines that are available at the time of construction, and the speed that we want to obtain with these boats. Multiple-engine boats maneuver better than twin-engine or triple-screw boats. That's a proven fact.

Another advantage is if you lose and engine and have to pull an engine out of a boat, a smaller, lighter-weight engine can be moved and replaced a whole lot faster than one huge, big pace of iron. So if we lose an engine, we can change it out a whole lot quicker than we could one big, heavy engine. Multiple-engines give you the benefit of if you lose—say you got a five-engine boat and you bent a wheel real bad, or it vibrates too much if you try to use it, so you have to shut that engine down. You've only lost one-fifth of your horsepower. You build a twin-engine boat, you lose half of your horsepower. So we can operate a five or six-engine boats, sometimes, and have done it for weeks, until the customer can allow us the time to change that one engine out, or repair that one propeller shaft, whatever may be the case, or gear plate.

JT: Is that something that you see more and more in the industry now, with this multiple-engine setup?

NM: Most of the boat companies have settled on the four-engine concept, and that is the most popular, but most of these companies are not building the size boats we're building. They're building more in the 135, 150-foot-class, and a four-engine setup for that class, with the horsepower of engines available, is a good application. There have been a few, relative few, but a few, owners that have gone to the five-engine concept. None have gone to the six-engine concept, that I'm aware of, except us.

JT: I have a question about a business aspect between you and SEACOR. When there's a demand for a new boat, let's say like the *John McCall*. Do you and your son Joe approach Gulf Craft with the idea of building a new, state of the art vessel? How involved is SEACOR in that whole relationship between you and your son, and Gulf Craft, your main shipbuilder? How do they get involved?

NM: It's kind of a hard question to answer. Let me try to answer it this way. If you want to build a new boat, and can build a boat that had already been built, you can do it cheaper than you can building a totally new hull. You already have the drawings approved by the Coast Guard and ABS. Now, if we decide we want to build a different hull for a different purpose, of course, you gotta go submit all

new drawings and stuff, and that runs up the cost of the boat. What we do, the way we normally do this, is Gulf Craft will inform us that they are ready to start building another boat. Joe and I and Charles Autin, who is in charge of overall Gulf Operations, John Gillard, who is second in command in the New York office, and Charles Fabrikant, who is the C.E.O., and the head of SEACOR, will have a discussion as to what size boat and type of boat we want to build for that slot. We'll decide on what we want to build, then my son Joe will get with Gulf Craft and ask Gulf Craft to price out a hull of that design, with the capabilities and capacities that we want.

In the meantime, my son Joe will determine how much horsepower we need to put in it. Sometimes we discuss that with Gulf Craft. Then he'll start pricing engines, gears, and those big items.

Then we'll go back to Charles, John Gillard, and Charles, and says, “Okay, we can build this boat for *x* number of dollars, and it will meet these requirements. It will have so much fuel capability, so much water, so many passengers, so much deck tonnage.” Then a decision is made amongst the group whether to build that size or not, and if the decision is to build it, we go ahead and give Gulf Craft the order. Tell them that's what we want for that particular slot. And the process begins.

JT: Because y'all have been such longstanding customers, and somewhat of a business partnership between you and Gulf Craft, they just automatically give you guys the first available opportunity that they have when space becomes available in their yard?

NM: Right now, the relationship we have is that we have asked for, and have been given, all the capacity of Gulf Craft. Now, what we will do, and we have done, to help Gulf Craft in the future, in case the offshore market just collapses. Being as they're putting all their eggs in one basket with us, we want to make sure that we don't do anything that hurts Gulf Craft. So Gulf Craft has some customers out there that, in the past, have built catamarans, passenger service, whale watching boats, dinner boats, stuff of that nature.

If they get a real serious contact from one of their old customers, saying, "I'd like to build a passenger vessel," what we have done in the past is allowed Gulf Craft to go ahead and build this vessel for them, take one of our spots, as long as is not an oilfield-type vessel, or can be used and converted to oilfield work.

Two years ago they built the *Key West Express*, which is a big catamaran for a group out of Florida, and we allowed them to build this boat for this customer. About two years before that they built them—this is the second catamaran that

they built for that customer. We also let them build a catamaran for a customer, one of their old customers, to operate out of Honduras.

Right now, we have, let's see, we've got the *John McCall* in there. It's just about complete. We'll be accepting delivery on it tomorrow or the next day. They got the catamaran, they got the hull you saw upside-down, the one that is plated. The *Harlan*, if you noticed the name on it, with the bow thrusters, that you took a picture of. So that's three hulls at different stages in their yard right now, and we got two more slots after that, behind those two. So that keeps them tied up, really, until sometime in '09.

JT: By putting in that clause, so to speak, for them to be able to continue to stay diversified, I find that just really amazing in this day and age of cutthroat corporatism and—

NM: There's no clause in there. There's no contract. It's just all verbally.

JT: Yes, it's a gentlemens' agreement.

NM: Gentlemens' agreement.

JT: And you'd be hard-pressed to find something like that in a traditional corporate setting.

NM: Right.

JT: That really is something. I think that goes a long way—

NM: Over half the boats I've built with Gulf Craft, there's never a contract signed. I pick up the phone and say, "Scotty, start me a 110." "Okay, Mr. Norman." Not until the boats got so expensive, where Gulf Craft had to start borrowing money from the banks to purchase all the materials, did we start signing contracts. It was only because the banks wanted some assurance I was going to take the boat, you know what I mean? I can understand that. But Scotty and I have always worked on, not even a handshake sometimes. A lot of times it's just done on the phone. You don't see much of that anymore, that kind of relationship.

JT: No, that's very, very unique.

NM: If we make a modification to the boat, or we change something once the boat is started, it's just a verbal agreement between us and Gulf Craft. We don't go through all these change orders and all that kind of crap.

I didn't know Lincoln made a pickup truck?

JT: Yes.

You know, that's how a lot of businesses used to be done—

NM: I forgot I was on the mic.

JT: In many respects, that's how it should be done. You shouldn't have to be so wary about business relations in today's world, unfortunately. That's what it's all come down to. You guys have a special niche going, and I hope it continues.

NM: It's a very good relationship, very good relationship.

[End of interview]