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Houston History

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Interviewer:	Debbie Harwell
Transcriber:	Michelle Kokes
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Abstract:

Houston Pilot Holly Cooper discusses how she came to be a pilot, following her father's suggestion to turn her love for the water into a career. After attending Texas A&M in Galveston, she began sailing on foreign-flagged ships working her way up from third mate, second mate, chief mate, to captain with an unlimited master's ticket. Often the only woman on board a ship, she discusses the challenges that women faced getting into the profession both at sea and as pilots.

A pilot's job is local knowledge of the waterway, and Captain Cooper describes in detail the uniqueness of working the Houston Ship Channel, which is much longer, more narrow, and winding than other ports. In addition, it has become the nation's largest port in terms of traffic. It requires specific procedures for pilots to follow, particularly when large tankers are passing in close quarters. Cooper details the steps to taking a boat out to sea, explains how pilot boats are used to transport pilots to and from their ships, the dangers of boarding and disembarking, and training protocols for new pilots. She also discusses the changes she has seen implemented along the channel over the last twenty years of her service.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Holly Cooper

Interviewed by: **Debbie Harwell**
Date: **August 21, 2014**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Houston, Texas**

DH: I'm Debbie Harwell, and I'm here with Holly Cooper at the Houston Pilot's office in La Porte?

HC: Deer Park.

DH: Deer Park, Texas. And thank you for being with us. Let's start with, please state your full name for me.

HC: Okay, Debbie. My name is Holly Beth Cooper.

DH: And when and where were you born?

HC: I was born in Austin, Texas, a long time ago.

DH: Well, I wasn't born in Austin, but it was a long time ago. Can you tell me a little bit about some of your experiences growing up?

HC: Yes, I was the middle daughter. The middle child. No sons. My father had three daughters, and I was also the most adventurous and the most wayward. I always had good grades, but by the time I hit high school I was truant. I did not want to go to class so I got expelled out of three high schools, and finally my grades were excellent because I would come in for the exams but I was never there to sit through the classes. I would borrow the material from other students and try to pass the exams, which I did successfully. So my father was worried

about me. He was a very loving (he still is) concerned dad, and he saw me going as a beach bum surfing, scuba diving, or sailing. So I think that's what prompted me into this was his suggestion.

DH: So you explained to me a little bit about high school. Where did you go to college?

HC: I went to Texas A & M at Galveston. But, before, I also went to Mass Maritime for one summer, and I went to a community college while I was currently enrolled in high school.

DH: Okay and I assume that the, by the time you were going to Texas A & M you were definitely focused on a career on something to do with the maritime industry?

HC: Texas A & M was an opportunity for me because I had grandparents close to me in Texas, whereas if I went to any of the other maritime academies (there are five in the nation plus, of course, Kings Point), then I would not have someone to do my laundry and serve good, home cooked meals the and whole bit. So I was quite happy to come down here. I lived on the *Texas Clipper* the entire four years that I attended Texas A & M, and that was a merchant vessel.

DH: Were there many women?

HC: No.

DH: Were you the only one?

HC: No, there were other women enrolled. Our classes were extremely small at that time so there was just a handful of us.

DH: I read that being a pilot is one of the world's oldest professions (not the world's oldest). But one of the oldest.

HC: We all know what the oldest profession is.

DH: Yes. And that it's been in existence as long as there has been shipping, and so I wanted to know if you could please define for us what a pilot's job is.

HC: A pilot's job is local knowledge, to safely bring vessels in and out of harbor and that has been done since the Greeks. It's been done since the Phoenicians. There has always been pilots on the water that knew the area. So it perhaps is the second oldest profession.

DH: And then could you describe for me please, a description of the hierarchy on a ship when the pilot is present?

HC: A normal vessel, a merchant vessel, would have a captain, now this is different than a naval vessels. You'd have a captain, you have a chief mate in the deck department. You'd have a second mate, a third mate and then you'd have your able body seaman and your ordinary seaman. The engine department is completely separate including the steward, which is separate from the steward's department. The engine department you have the chief engineer you have your first assistant, second assistant, third assistant, you have the oilers and wipers. And in the galley you would have the chief cook and his assistants. So that's the typical large vessel, a vessel that would be over 1600 maybe more than that 30,000 gross tons.

DH: And when the pilot is on the vessel, and you are bringing a ship into or out of the port… I don't know how to ask this delicately, so I'm just going to ask it bluntly: do you outrank the captain?

HC: No, this is the captain's vessel. We are there for local knowledge. We take over command if he allows us to.

DH: Okay.

HC: I've never had any problems with a captain not wanting the pilot to take over command because this is our waterway in Houston and we know the area, and they do not.

DH: That makes sense. I mean they want to protect the vessel.

HC: Their transit is across the oceans. Ours is in the harbor.

DH: Is there anything else you'd like to say about how you got interested in the career as a pilot specifically?

HC: Pilotage… No one in my family has any exposure to the maritime industry. I was the only one that got into that. I have a father who is an engineer, a civil engineer. I have a mother who was a federal marshal for the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. My parents were pro-education. We could choose any field we wanted to, and they would support us in that. If I wanted to be a fighter pilot, they would say yes to that. It was a very positive strong influence, parents. A strong family background.…

DH: Remarkable…. What kind of training is involved in becoming a pilot?

HC: There are different ones for different ports. Each state regulates it. Do you want to know specifically for me or?

DH: Specifically for you, but also if there are some things in general that you feel, or in the national focus that might be a little bit different you can let me know that too.

HC: Okay my background is maritime academy, third mate, second mate, chief mate, captain, unlimited masters ticket, that's the highest in the United States. And then sailed for, over that period of time sailed for twelve years and then became a pilot. The training at that time was two years' program. We now have a three-year training program, which is much better. You ride with every pilot until you have your master who tells you whether or not you are free or ready to go on to your own. My background now is twenty years as a pilot in the Port of Houston.

DH: Um…

HC: You know the problem with interviews is you are always saying "Um."

DH: It's a place holder. Um…Let's see as I say one more and I'm trying to find my place on the list. Okay, so I think you basically answered this or I may be wrong about the different positions held leading up to your current position.

HC: I sailed foreign flag as well as U.S. flag.

DH: I'm sorry?

HC: Ships have different flags. It's the port of registry. There are so many U.S.-flagged vessels. When I came out of maritime academy, there were really no jobs for me. So I sailed Panamanian-flagged vessel, Norwegian-flagged and then eventually was able to work on U.S.-flagged vessels.

DH: Okay. And what challenges, if any, did you face in the profession as a woman?

HC: Almost always I was the only female aboard a ship. I remember these ships they were usually about 800 feet long, the ones that I worked on, and there was only twenty-six people on board. It was a very small society. So you had to carry your weight. You had to do your job. There was no one else to do it. And I was always the female out there. I think one of my last ships there was another woman on board. So that was a challenge in itself. You had to pull your weight. No one else could do it for you.

DH: Do you think women had to pull more than their weight to prove themselves? I mean, I've heard that in other professions, that women felt like they had to do more.

HC: I hate to say yes because I sound like a complainer, but, of course. Yeah. It was a new thing. Woman were brand new in the maritime industry back then, and it was unheard of so you did the best, you tried to be the smartest, you tried to be the best at what you do, and you tried to get along with everybody. That was the essential part, to get along with everybody.

DH: Do you think women entering the field today face the same obstacles?

HC: Lord I hope not! I think they have a tough route. But not what we did., the first wave. They are still going to have it tough.

DH: Saying first wave raises another question. Do you know about when it would have been that the first women pilots appeared?

HC: The Marine Academy…pPilots for Houston? I *was* the first Houston Pilot.

DH: You were?

HC: Sherri [Hickman] and I were voted in the same day for the two women coming in. She was, she couldn't start right away, so I became the first one to work. We were essentially voted in the same day, but I was the first one to start working.

DH: Well, congratulations, that's exciting! So please give me some background on Houston Pilots the organization and its purpose.

HC: On the wall over there is ever pilot that has been before me, and I am unit 1-5-1. That means I'm the 151st Pilot in the Port of Houston since 1925 when they were established.

DH: That's not very many.

HC: No, and now we have because the port has just grown astronomically, in the past twenty years I have seen, we used to handle twenty ships a day now we handle fifty to sixty ships a day so we have a lot more transits and a lot more pilots. Your question was…?

DH: About the Houston Pilots organization and its purpose.

HC: The purpose was to provide a safe transit for vessels in and out and we are also, we are commissioned by the governor of the State of Texas. We are licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard. We have completed pilotage up and down the channel, and we are owners of the company.

DH: Of this?

HC: Yes of the Houston Pilots; we are each owners. There are no seniorities. I may be here forty years and I will be an equal partner to someone who just became full pilot.

DH: So are you automatically a part of the organization once you become a pilot?

HC: After your deputy traineeship, you are voted in again and if you pass your second vote, then you become an equal member.

[aside to man] Stop me at any time if I'm talking…

Man: You are fine.

DH: Okay. So let's move now to what you do when you are on the ship. Can you tell me please about the logistics of how and when you get on a vessel to pilot it into the Port of Houston?

HC: Okay we have usually try to do two ships a day. You sail, you board the gangway onto the deck of the ship, you go up to the deck of the bridge, you take over the command from the captain. Of course he can override you at any time. Then you have tugboats come alongside and you untie the vessel, and you have men on the dock that take the lines. And then you give engine orders. you give port, starboard, and you give orders to the tugboat that will pull you off or the bow thruster depending on the design of the ship. Once you are under way, you either turn her around or you head out bound on the channel. Then you continue out bound anywhere between, it could be ten hours but that's extremely rare one way, or seven hours, or if you are lucky four and a half, and then you get off on the pilot boat.We have four pilot boats. They come alongside the vessel while they are making ten knots, and there is a ladder that you climb down, and you go onto the small boat and you take off. Sometimes you have time to lay down on the boat and sometimes not until your next in-bound ship and then you reverse the scenario.

DH: Okay are we talking small ladder, rope ladder? How many feet in the air?

HC: It's this size. Anywhere a free board from the water line to the deck of the ship where you have to climb down and that can be from anywhere from thirty feet to two feet depending how small or large a vessel and how laden it is and the draft. I think the most dangerous part of the job is boarding and disembarking while we are underway.

DH: Because both the ship and the pilot boat are moving?

HC: They are both moving. You are also walking down a ladder that's pretty rickety. You are just hoping as you are climbing up that it is secured properly on the deck.

DH: Okay so basically the scenario you described is getting on the boat at the port or on a ship at the port and taking it out. Then do you wait in the pilot boat in the Gulf or wherever it is that you are going to bring?

HC: Sometimes south of the jetties. Occasionally you will have an overlay anywhere from five to seven hours. Usually you have a quick turn around and you are just out there for thirty minute or out for an hour, and you have to board back onto a second vessel. And they are long transits in Houston, very long. You've got to be on your toes, you've got to be sharp-witted because we've got so much traffic. As I said earlier we have 200 transits of push barges a day that pilots do not handle, you have the fisheries, you have the pleasure boaters. There's a lot of congestion in the channel, and then you have the big ships that I handle and the other pilots, and that is fifty to sixty ships a day currently. And the port is still growing;We are still building docks.

DH: And there is no pilot for barges is that?

HC: No the…

DH: That's not a requirement?

HC: No, you are looking at the difference between an eight-foot draft to a forty-five-foot draft.

DH: Well I understand…I mean I understand a difference in size, but it seems to me that with the amount of traffic you are describing that perhaps it would be prudent if we had pilots on barges or for barge traffic.

HC: Generally…well the Houston Ship Channel is basically a ditch coming in from many bayous when they braced it out. At the moment it's at forty-five feet so you have this almost like a bucket coming down. Then along the sides you have the barge channels that they can transit up and down. Then you have the beacons that can guide you that can show you where you are in the channel. So most of the time the barges do stay out on the sides unless they are unfamiliar with the area and that does happen, or if they have problems with their tow. Many things can happen out there.

DH: So they should not be in the same lane that you are in.

HC: Technically, no. But things do happen.

DH: Yes. Okay, can you tell me a little bit about the characteristics of the Port of Houston, particularly as an inland port that might make piloting a vessel here unique?

HC: It's long and narrow and winds like a snake, and there are numerous refineries up and down. We are the largest in foreign tonnage in the United States, and we are the largest worldwide in petrochemical industry. So we have numerous refineries and a lot of traffic, and I don't believe there is anything in comparison to the Houston Ship Channel.

DH: That's amazing. I find that amazing. I've heard that but to hear it from your perspective it's different; that's good. So how do you go about negotiating that in terms of more twists and turns and…?

HC: Well you get to know your channel. You get to know the ins and outs of it. Every vessel that I walk onboard is different. It's a different journey a different trip. You don't know what

will happen. You don't know if there will be a breakdown if there will be a steering failure, if the helmsman is going to go the wrong way, if you are going to have a tow break down in front of you, or if the anchor is going to mysteriously fall out. You don't know what will happen. But that's also what makes this job so exciting, and the reason why I love it so much.

DH: I'm going to go back to the training question for a minute. How do you train for those things of eventualities?

HC: As a deputy pilot, three-year program, you work every day with the exception of a few weeks off a year. You ride with every pilot and you get to know their ways of docking, undocking a vessel, and it is a big step when you come from a ship, blue water, when you come into port and you hand it directly over to a the pilot and the pilot does a docking and undocking and gives it back to you when you go back to sea. That's what most of us come from the background of. So close quarters situations is something you learn, and you deal with. And we had something that we say on the channel, "no hits, no runs, no errors," and that's basically true. You do the best with what you have and what you are working with.

DH: Okay. I had are there any things that differ between bringing the ship in versus bringing a ship out? Just the same in reverse?

HC: The same in reverse, maybe just a different size vessel that's one thing that may be different. We did have, when we had Hurricane Ike hit us, we had a chopper take us back and forth. That's one of my loves, I'm a pilot. I fly airplanes and I live on a runway and fly helicopters. So it was something that was exciting to me being in the helicopter and taking off, but it was something that was kind of frightening to some of my fellow pilots because I guess the difference in transits.

DH: I have another question which may be various obvious to some people but I'm not completely sure the answer myself. I know we have a turning basin, which I've always thought… I'm a native Houstonian I've heard about the Turning Basin all of my life. And I've always thought, "Okay this is where the ships come and then they turn around and they go back out." Is that accurate or was that accurate at one point or no longer true?

HC: There are numerous turning basins up and down the channel.

DH: Okay.

HC: You have the turning basin at the upper city dock. You have the turning basin off of Brady Island. You have the turning basin off of Arco-Lyondell. You have the turning basin off of Green's Bayou. You also have the turning basin off of Magellan. I could go all the way down the channel where we turn these ships around.

DH: Uh huh.

HC: There's not just one. This is a channel that is fifty-six miles long if you go out to the GB Buoy. So you have numerous sections, and we can't go all the way up and turn a ship that's going to be docking way down here, it wouldn't be economically feasible.

DH: Sure.

HC: So we have different turning vessels, different turning basins depending on the location.

DH: Do you know by chance is that something that changed over time that they were added as the port was expanded?

HC: As it was growing… yes, as they built the docks, expanded.

DH: Okay. So as we look at the Port of Houston's 100th anniversary, which we will be celebrating here in a couple of months I'd like to know what changes you've seen in the ship channel and the port in the years that you've been involved in it or worked?

HC: I've seen it grow and grow and grow, more docks and more ships, more safety. A lot more safety than 20 years ago. We carry a computer with us, a GPS unit, that give us an idea where the other vessels were or will be in the future. In the past we did not carry that. We had to guess at everything. When it rained, you had the radar, but you could not pick up your targets because it was scattered. Here you have a display with GPS, the PPU the personal computers, that you are able to see the traffic in the area that carry the AIS target so it has become extremely, a lot more safe.

DH: And that requires additional training for you?

HC: Yes it does. We have a lot of training that we go through. We have a list of…a big thick list of courses that we can take that are offered all over the place and there are all different subjects in the matter. Some of them have to do with certification in the computers.

DH: I know in other industries you have people in a particular industry a long time and they are a little bit resistant to technology. Do you find that…?

HC: The men I work with I think are very open to new technology (and women). The… they seem to grasp it. We have lots of training, and we always seem to go to the training programs. We don't have anyone that says, "Oh we can do it without it." At least I haven't found them yet.

DH: Also the question of safety, how did you see things change after 9/11 in terms of security for the…

HC: I wish I owned a fencing company. Because there were more fences going up everywhere you look, and there were cameras everywhere, and then we had to carry ID's and we couldn't park on the docks like we used to, and everybody had to be scrutinized to make sure you had special clearance to come in and out. I don't want to get into my political opinions… I think we lost some of our civil liberties when it came.

DH: Well and also I think access to some areas that had been…

HC: That had been open in the past.

DH: That had been open in the past.

HC: Yes.

DH: You were talking about the oil and gas and petrochemical industry that is transported, industries that are along the ship channel and how that is transported in and out of the port. Are those type of ships handled any differently than any other ship because of the nature of the cargo?

HC: LPG's are, yes. Liquid petroleum gas tankers. They are not allowed to meet cruise vessels, and some of them are daylight transits only. You also have the larger wide-bodied vessels that have restrictions where they can go. You have two pilot requirements on them so the other pilot can take a break, take a rest. Then you have the reduced visibility ships that go up there and they are constrained by draft. All of them are constrained by draft. The deep draft vessels that exceed, or are just pushing the limits, you have two pilots are required on there. Those were changes that were made since I've been here, and they are safety…changes.

DH: Were those part of the changes that were instituted after the *Exxon Valdez* spill in Alaska?

HC: No that happened in '88, '89?

Man: I think so.

HC: Yeah. I used to run in there. I have pilotage into Alaska and pilotage into San Francisco so that used to be…I am very familiar with that area. In fact I fly to Alaska tomorrow. But that has very, that influence took place, yes, but it was more, not so much towards pilots besides the compulsory for that area, that Cape Hinchinbrook going into Valdez you have to take the pilot.

They moved it further down to take a pilot. We have not done that in Houston. It's always been further down. We have always required a pilot going down.

DH: I had a question that came into my mind while you were answering that and now I can't think of what it was. Maybe it will come to me in a minute. Which brings me to my final question, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to discuss?

HC: I have a 15 year old son who I'm very proud of and something very important. I don't know if you… my vacation is usually spent in the air and as opposed to the water and that is how I have a lot of stress release is going up and flying. That's about the extent of it.

DH: So you are a pilot in every sense of the word.

HC: I don't drive trains.

DH: Okay.

HC: I've never learned that. I'd love to.

DH: That's great.

HC: I never had that opportunity.

DH: Okay. Well thank you.