

Interviewee: Shaw, Capt. John  
Interview Date: January 14, 2009

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**  
**ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Capt. John R. Shaw**  
**Galveston History**

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés  
Date: January 14, 2009  
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes  
Location: Ferry Road and Highway 97, Galveston, Texas

EV: Okay I explained to you what we are going to do with these, what the University does with these interviews right?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: You went ahead and signed the release. Let me see if there is anything else. If you have any kind of question about my question, if it's not clear or something like that obviously just let me know and I'll clarify it.

JS: Okay.

EV: And with that we'll just proceed, can you give me your full name?

JS: John Shaw.

EV: Where were you born Mr. Shaw?

JS: I was born in Michigan, in Flint, Michigan.

EV: In Flint, Michigan?

JS: Yes.

EV: Can you tell us when that was?

JS: 1952.

EV: Did you get your education there in Michigan?

JS: Yes sir.

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EV: Up to how far?

JS: I graduated high school.

EV: Okay. Did you ever go in the military?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: What branch?

JS: Navy, four years.

EV: What was your job?

JS: Quartermaster.

EV: Okay. In the Navy the Quartermaster is navigation isn't it?

JS: That's correct.

EV: Okay because I was in the Army and that's supplies.

JS: Yeah right.

EV: Did you... when did you get out of the service?

JS: 1975.

EV: Where did you go after that, what was your employment?

JS: I worked just different jobs. Then I came down to Texas to visit my brother, up just outside of Amarillo, Vega and worked a couple jobs up there for about three years. I got a job with the state working highway maintenance and then I saw flyers that the state had out and transferred down here to the ferries.

EV: Did you have any additional training once you became, getting involved with the ferry service?

JS: Just on the job training.

EV: What level did you start at?

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JS: Deck hand.

EV: So you are one of the guys that just guides the cars in?

JS: That's correct, yes sir.

EV: What year was that do you remember?

JS: 1981. (?)

EV: Okay so then how long did it take you to become Captain?

JS: About three years.

EV: Better than the service!

JS: Yeah.

EV: (laughter) You went from a private to a captain in about three years?

JS: Yeah.

EV: That's not bad! Did you, in piloting, I guess that's the terminology you all use...

pilot?

JS: Yeah.

EV: In piloting these things did you all receive some training or was it just OJT?

JS: It's all OJT, there's no really school for our particular job. You work on deck and then when the boat's ready to go you come upstairs and the captain will... at the time I was here the captain just let you drive.

EV: Is that what you do now or do you have other training for them now?

JS: Now you have to be an AB which - Able Bodied Seaman to be able to take the wheel. You have to have at least a year of sea time to be able to sit for your AB, there is a test involved in that through the Coast Guard.

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EV: When you say AB does that literally mean “Able Bodied” or does that also mean some education, training...?

JS: There’s some education because there’s a test involved with it. You have to know lifesaving equipment, fire fighting, some of the local knowledge.

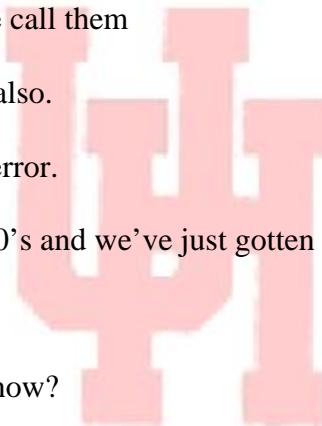
EV: Alright, so it’s more than having two arms, two legs and...?

JS: Yes.

EV: At the time when you started here you had a different fleet of boats did you not?

JS: Correct.

EV: Or ferries, that’s what we call them



JS: Well we call them boats also.

EV: Okay I won’t make that error.

JS: They were built in the ‘50’s and we’ve just gotten these boats, we have built the fleet up in the last 10 years.

EV: How many do you have now?

JS: Five and there’s a sixth being built at this time.

EV: Where are they manufactured?

JS: One of them was built in Indiana and then the last four have been built in Alabama and Mississippi. The one that is being built now is in Louisiana, just across the border.

EV: Those Midwestern states, how do you... do you have to bring them in by truck or do you put them together in port or is there some river up there I’m not aware of?

JS: The one that was built in Indiana came down the Ohio and the Mississippi and through the intercostals through here.

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EV: Wow that must have been a fun ride.

JS: I'm sure it was.

EV: Did you... do you all have, I suspect from what you are telling me you have some relationship with the Coast Guard? I mean do you overlap or Dove tail qualifications or anything?

JS: We are under their inspection. All the boats are inspected once a year for their certificate of inspection.

EV: In terms of, this may be one of the things that you warned me about, but in terms of national security or whatever do you all have any kind of relationship there? Do they take over, can they take over your ships in an emergency or, are they like, the National Guard can go on the President's order, if he wants it he can take it out of the Governor's hands, is that the same type of thing?

JS: No sir they ask if they can use them for a platform but we at this point we haven't had to.

EV: Can you give me a little bit of the history of the ferry rides across, I understand you originally started back in 1927 or something?

JS: The state took over the ferries about that time and there were only two of them, they were wooden hull, The Galveston and The Jefferson were the name of them. Then they ran up until the '50's at which time we got two new ones, The Sterling and The Johnson. Then, I think it was like 8 years later, '58 was when the **E.A. Stork** was built.

EV: Those early wooden, they...how many did they hold ships and people and all that, I mean cars?

JS: Cars. I want to say they held approximately 50.

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EV: Cars or people?

JS: Cars.

EV: The people, do you have any idea how many folks they held?

JS: Right I couldn't say what the requirements were for those but right now we are limited to 500. We are a 500 passenger ferry.

EV: And has it always been, the service always been through these two points, this one here and then the one over on Bolivar or did they change?

JS: In general the same point here and the one on the other side has moved around at different times. The ferry landing used to be over at the fort in Port Bolivar and then it went to the end of the peninsula.

EV: Did you, what would make the difference just the depth of the water or why would they change it around, I mean just out of curiosity...?

JS: I'm not sure why they changed it, it may have been just because of the highway and the Fort. It may have been because the fort was there at that time.

EV: Okay. About how many men does it take to run one of the ferries?

JS: The crew is licensed to have six people on board: The Captain, Chief Engineer, Oiler and three Deck Hands.

EV: What does the Chief Engineer do?

JS: He maintains the operating machinery on board.

EV: Who is under that – the oiler?

JS: The oiler. The oiler just assists him.

EV: He oils things?

JS: Yes.

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EV: And then the crewmen are the guys that let the traffic on and off and all that is that correct?

JS: Correct.

EV: Do you all have... I suspect you sometimes have some pretty rowdy folks get on the boat. Do you?

JS: Oh yes.

EV: Do you have powers to arrest or how...?

JS: No we contact the local law enforcement agency.

EV: So by the time you reach the other side hopefully there's a squad car there?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: What kinds of things do these clowns get into?

JS: Sometimes there's fights on board. Sometimes they're just drunk and rowdy and they try to steal safety equipment off the boat, a prize for them.

EV: You don't have any mad streaker or guys jumping off the side of the boat?

JS: We haven't recently. We have earlier. I mean like 10, 15 years ago.

EV: Streakers or guys jumping off the boat?

JS: Both.

EV: So you don't have any more streakers anymore?

JS: No.

EV: Obviously your heaviest time is summer time right?

JS: Correct.

EV: How did you all handle... you were running before Ike I understand.

JS: Yes sir.

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EV: At what point does somebody say “That’s the last one” – who says it I guess?

JS: Well for Ike it was the Coast Guard, they gave us... there is a timeline before the actual storm hits that the vessels have to be secured. For this one we secured at 11:00 the night before.

EV: Did you secure them right here where they are or do you have another?

JS: Here.

EV: I guess you just tie them down?

JS: Tie them down. The docks float up and down with them so that there’s, on a regular dock and pier it would stay stationary and the boat would go up and down with the water. Well you can have damage to the dock and the boat but with our docks that float up and down there is minimal damage that occurs to both.

EV: There’s what?

JS: Minimal.

EV: Oh okay. So you park all of them right here?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Ok. On this side?

JS: Yes sir. The other side is open. There is no real protection over there. We have the seawall around here off on the beach and just the way the land is and we’ve got Pelican Island on the far side to keep, it keeps the wave action down.

EV: Did you have... were any of them damaged in this last... in Ike?

JS: Just some windows broke.

EV: What about, I’m getting all my hurricanes mixed up here. Katrina. Did Katrina or Rita hurt you all any?

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JS: No, neither one of those.

EV: Do you know what conditions or what are the elements that the Coast Guard looks for before they say, "Alright let's stop" or do you all have a limit or anything like that?

JS: It's usually by the category of the storm. You know, category 1 there's some minimal winds and wave action so we may run longer for that.

EV: Ike was 2 when it hit wasn't it?

JS: It was an upper 2, lower 3.

EV: Tell me again how much damage did you all get here?

JS: Like?

EV: In the building?

JS: In the building we had water about 3 feet deep. It knocked out some windows and damaged interior desks and file cabinets and paperwork and stuff like that. We had out in the shop area damage to machinery that was...

EV: So were the elevators not working?

JS: I'm sorry?

EV: Were the elevators not working?

JS: Yes that was what...

EV: Oh really? When you have emergency vehicles on the other side is there any kind of a protocol for emergencies coming across? I mean if you have an emergency coming in when there was a town across at Bolivar or Gilchrist when you had folks come in on ambulance or a women having a baby or something like that?

JS: They get priority on the boat yes.

EV: Have you ever had a baby born on you when you were coming across?

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JS: There's been on the boats and I don't... I've carried a bunch of pregnant ladies that were in a rush to get to the hospital. I don't remember one being born on the boat when I was operating a boat.

EV: Let me ask you a very stupid question, do you have any authority to marry people?

JS: No.

EV: There's some old Bob Hope or Ben Crosby movie where they got some captain to marry them on some kind of slip going across... anyway. During this hurricane how many trips did you all make? Was it... #1 were all the boats in operation I know you don't use them all the time do you?

JS: We had, I'm sure we had three boats in operation.

EV: Do they... it is just... if you have a hurricane coming doesn't it just make more sense to say just grab 45 then it is to move from say between here to High Island...

JS: Yes the evacuation route is from Galveston out 45. Bolivar is to evacuate off the Peninsula up through High Island area. They were given a days warning before that. They were under mandatory evacuation before we even got close to shutting down.

EV: I understand they are missing about 42, 43 missing individuals.

JS: That sounds about right. I'm not sure of the exact number.

EV: What is the largest vehicle that you all can put on these boats?

JS: A regular 18 wheeler, 80,000 pounds.

EV: You can put an 18 wheeler on here? Wow

JS: Yes. We can carry six.

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EV: Is there any particular time, just from a human standpoint. Is there any particular time of day you prefer when you were captain? Do you still make runs back and forth?

JS: I haven't in the last couple of years.

EV: When you were doing it was there any particular time of day you preferred?

JS: I didn't mind evening watches which is like 4:00 to 12:00 a.m. and sometimes midnights are nice. It's less traffic your not in a hurry to get back and forth. You are on a, what we call an hour run, so you have a half hour to get over and off load and load and get back.

EV: Isn't that when you get all the drunks and the happy people too?

JS: Yeah there's a lot of that but there's less vehicles out there so.

EV: I would have thought the morning or something just to watch the sun come up.

JS: You get that on your midnight watch.

EV: Your midnight? Is there a particular time when the dolphins are more active out here then regular?

JS: Not really. They are around all the time.

EV: Have you had any particular difficult trips coming or going because of the weather, the fog or anything like that?

JS: All of it.

EV: All of it? Can you tell us some of those?

JS: Can we pause a minute?

[interruption]

EV: Do you have any... you said all of the above but do you have any specifics that still scare you when you think about it?

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JS: Foggy... the first time I took a boat out by myself without another captain on board, under my own license it was foggy so that was a real experience there. Then when you are going across during the summer time you will have a storm front blow through. I had one, I was on an old boat, had the big wheel on it, and the wind came through at about 70 mile an hour with just the front line on it and it got to where I was heading straight in to the wind and full power and sitting still.

EV: Really? Man! What about the... who controls the traffic out here? You know the airport has a tower and they make sure everyone... I'm sure there's nobody seeing... people have their own boats they can zig zag in and out of anything right?

JS: Pretty much.

EV: I'm sure they drive you all nuts?

JS: They do. There was one time, again an old boat. I was headed to Bolivar, there was a balloon or a ball that was in the water and it was up ahead of us about five boat lengths and had a small boat come head on at us and they saw it and they went around behind us, came back us and stopped right in front us to grab this ball or balloon that was in the water. I backed down immediately and that caused the engines to stop. The main engines just gave up because I was trying to stop so quick so I didn't run over the small boat. They rode off... we drifted along until the Chief Engineer could get the main engine started again. It was about 5, maybe 10 minutes before he could get everything...

EV: Bopping up and down. What about... I did ask you and I think I interrupted you, is there a central control?

JS: It's called Houston Traffic.

EV: Houston Traffic?

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JS: Yes it is operated by the Coast Guard. Now on like an airport, airplanes they tell you to turn left, right up and down whatever. They don't, Houston Traffic doesn't tell you how to turn. They advise you that there is other vessel traffic in the area coming towards you, coming up behind you. You have to make your own decisions on what you are going to do with that other vessel.

EV: Really?

JS: And you have to report in to them on where you are at, at certain places along the ship channel.

EV: They don't watch you on radar?

JS: They do watch you on radar. There are television cameras also.

EV: When you have traffic coming to you. I mean I've been on here on boats up and down and you have to stop and let these big tankers go up the ship channel. Is that the Coast Guard telling you to stop or are you eyeballing it and you say, "I'm going to stop and let this guy pass."

JS: It's you eyeballing it. There are times when there are closures on the channel and they may have it, just one way traffic so they will tell you, "You can't enter port" or "You can't leave port" until certain times.

EV: When you have, like I think during Ike or Katrina you have terrible back up of those tankers sitting out there waiting to come in. Where they diverted to other ports or do they push into the \_\_\_\_\_ (21.9)?

JS: It depends if they have something specific coming to here then they have to wait or if it something else then they can divert it to another port.

EV: So do they wait out there in open water?

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JS: Yes sir.

EV: They take the full hit of the storm?

JS: No if there's a hurricane coming they are gone. They don't even necessarily stay here in port unless you've got a problem or you wait for something specific. But for them it is safer to be out and go out around the storm and then come back.

EV: So if you have a storm coming in and say it's sitting... as we are told on the television, maybe 100 miles off the coast of Galveston they choose to divert, they won't go through it or around it. They will just on their own go to another port somewhere?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Okay. So they start bugging off long before the storm hits us?

JS: Oh yes.

EV: What about your employees, do you have a pretty fast turn over of man, or do they stick around? Do you have guys...?

JS: Some people come and go. Some stay. Recently we've lost a bunch of people. The offshore industry has boomed and they need people so they were willing to pay them boo coo bucks. Like \$500 a day for Captains and Engineers.

EV: Where do I sign for that one?

JS: Yeah. But on that you're gone, you're on the boat for 28 days and then you get two weeks off.

EV: I at one time when they were drilling for oil on the North Sea I thought I'd just learned how to scuba dive at that time and I thought I might want to learn underwater welding and do that. They were paying at that time \$200 bucks an hour. From the time they pick you up from \_\_\_\_\_ (23.8) until the time you come back. So all the

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time you are going down, you are in decompression, you are working, you are getting \$200 an hour. And I thought, "Man." Then I thought about welding upside down in the cold sea and I thought, "Maybe it's not such a good deal."

JS: Yeah.

EV: I assume you are married?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Do you have children?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Are they in the business or did they...?

JS: No they are still in high school

EV: Really?

JS: Yes.

EV: Any blooming captains in the bunch?

JS: The one may want to work in the marine industry but it will be on the shore side that he is looking at.

EV: Well UTMB kept their emergency room is that not correct? I mean they have... what I am getting to is in an emergency when you have to have someone here or someone hurt on board, where do you take them now that UTMB is gone but I think they kept their emergency room didn't they?

JS: I'm not sure how they are operating right now. We know that the ambulances are operating in the city. So if we have something on board we just call the ambulance.

EV: Alright. How did they arrive at the names of these boats?

JS: They are state officials.

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EV: State officials?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: So that's their ego.

JS: With TexDOT, yes sir.

EV: Because I think I saw one for the late... not the late but the last mayor.

JS: Robert C. Lanier.

EV: But he was on the TexDOT wasn't he?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Was there anything that you wanted to do besides this when you were a kid? (Not that you're not a kid now.)

JS: No I wanted to do something similar to this yes.

EV: Let me ask you this about your military service I meant to ask you earlier. Were you on a ship in the Navy?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: I'm sure you went overseas, what...?

JS: I was on a destroyer.

EV: Did you... what year were you on?

JS: From '72 to '75.

EV: So you missed any kind of... was Vietnam still going on?

JS: Yes sir. The first hitch in the Navy was two years... or excuse me a year and a half was at Guantánamo, Gitmo. I was down there for a while and then I transferred to a ship.

EV: What were you ranked when you were discharged out of the service?

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JS: Quartermaster second class.

EV: What was the name of the ship that you were on?

JS: The U.S.S. Steinacre.

EV: Which one?

JS: Steinacre.

EV: Steinacre?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Were you always on a ship while you were in the service or did you have shore duty?

JS: No the year and a half I was in Cuba I was shore duty.

EV: Did you like that assignment in Cuba?

JS: Yes I worked in the signal tower. We were like traffic control. We told the ships when they came in at night from their training where they needed to dock at and in the morning they let us know when they were getting underway.

EV: Did you all have any hassle from the Cuba? You had some Cuba civil servants came and worked with you didn't you?

JS: Yes sir.

EV: Was that all amicable? I guess it must have been to keep their jobs?

JS: Yes.

EV: Did you ever have any Cubans up on the hills yelling at you and making you feel unwelcome?

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JS: No, I didn't ever get near the fence line. I mean Guantánamo is fairly large and you didn't just roam around out there. There was a few mine fields so that you stayed clear.

EV: Oh yeah because one of my buddies in the army was on the DMZ in Korea and boy the things they used to say and do to each other. They would moon each other.

JS: No didn't have any of that.

EV: The same thing in Germany I think with the Russians. Once in a while sometimes like maybe Christmas time they were kind of a little more gentle to each other.

Otherwise it was just a bunch of harassments. Yeah one of my buddies was a ranger out there. Of course he would disappear for three or four weeks at a time and come back. He would leave in his class "A's" and come back in his [REDACTED] (27.9) but we never knew what the hell he was doing. But yeah he had some great stories to tell about how they bumped into Russians some where. It wasn't unusual for them in different places. I mean there is so much criss-crossing going back and forth.

JS: I'm sure.

EV: You don't even report it unless it's something really serious. What do they do with the old ferries do they just recycle them?

JS: They sell them. I think there is one still sitting down there in Freeport in one of the canals over there.

EV: What does it do there?

JS: It was sold to somebody and that's where they decided to park it. There were two down there at one time about three years ago I seen both of them down there but I don't know what they are doing now.

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EV: What is your... what is the totality of your responsibility, this is the kind of question they used to ask in graduate school. Briefly tell us what the totality was of your responsibilities?

JS: Now or as a captain?

EV: Now as head honcho.

JS: Okay. Marine operations: Make sure the boats are running correctly, on time. Handle any problems with deck crew which could be the Captains or deck hands.

EV: Problems like conflicts among them or...?

JS: Yes sir and some of the maybe, something between a passenger and a crew member.

EV: Training do you have any regular?

JS: Yes sir we have training. The first week that someone is here they are put through training. A lot of people that come here have never worked on a boat before. They need to know left from right and front to back and which is port and starboard and bow and stern and...

EV: Yeah I never get that right.

JS: How to handle lines and learn our fire fighting systems here.

EV: You know I didn't know until... I interviewed Maureen Patton who runs the opera house, the Galveston Opera House and I didn't know until... and I talked to some of the crewmen, not the crewmen I'm talking Navy talk... some of the stagehands and I didn't know that historically sailors were stagehands.

JS: Because they knew the lines.

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EV: They knew the lines and how to tie them stuff real quick and they could do it without even thinking. But that is as true of New York and down here. Some of a lot of those guys here they used to come in here part time or some of the old Navy merchant marine guys sailors. Let me think... are there any really neat historical areas out here that most folks don't know about? Like I know that there was a... I guess off of the... is Pelican Island the same place that the wolf pack was on? I mean the sea wolf was on?

JS: Sea Wolf yes.

EV: Because right there they had a battle in the civil war. There was, this is very interesting. A battle in the civil war, the captain it was a captain for the union army was killed there. His daughter was the one that they chose to have the lead when they opened the opera house.

JS: I didn't know that.

EV: They picked her just because that was where her father had been killed and she wanted to do that. But are there any historical things sitting around from back then that most of us won't know about?

JS: Do you know about the cement ship?

EV: No.

JS: There is a cement ship out here you can see as you cross. During World War I they tried cement ship, building a ship out of cement and it got a crack in its hull and at that time they didn't know how to repair it. Anyway it... they took it out here and just sank it. It's still sitting out there. There has been... probably when there was more to it then there is now, it has worn away, there's just a small part of the hull showing now. Is people have lived on it.

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EV: Really?

JS: Yes and the one guy that I'm thinking of he kept goats.

EV: He kept goats?

JS: He kept some goats out there. I wouldn't say a whole lot, you know, two or three maybe...

EV: On the deck of the...?

JS: On the deck of the.

EV: How the hell did he feed them?

JS: I don't know.

EV: It wasn't your job! (laughter). Wasn't there gun ships sitting off here off of, God what's the name of that little town right down the coast? Seabrook! When I took an open water dive during my famous scuba diving there was an old mask that was sitting off, maybe 50 yards off shore of an old gun running... an old paddlewheel.

JS: I hadn't heard of that one.

EV: Yeah. We dove down to it and kind of looked around but your visibility is shaky around here. So is this one still visible from when you cross?

JS: Yes, just the main deck and just a little bit of the hull above the water.

EV: Wow! There is also a place that used to be an immigration port when this was Mexico.

JS: That's Seawolf Park.

EV: Seawolf Park that's where the immigration thing was?

JS: Yes.

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EV: They had one originally in Chambers County around **Anawack** and that's... It's funny but you know I can't find anyone who can tell me how **Anawack** got it's name. Most of the Texan's say Aniwack right? But it's a very... it's a legendary I don't know how to say it... It's a golden city or mythical city in the Aztec mythology in New Mexico and I think a lot of the soldiers they brought up here that the Mexican government had around here when this was Mexico must have come from that part of Mexico so they just named it **Anawack** and it stayed that way. But there's a lot, like all the rivers around here are all in Spanish so that is evidence of the early settlements. But I found a group, I found a group outside of Nacogdoches of pure Spanish, people who may have come in from New Orleans they have been here since the 1700's.

JS: Gene **Lafeat** had a house over here, you can still see the base of it.

EV: Oh really?

JS: Yes.

EV: Where is that?

JS: It's just past the hospital on Port Industrial.

EV: Do they have a sign on it?

JS: There is a historical plaque in front of it. It is sort of hard to see. It's three or four blocks past the hospital.

EV: There's a lot of things on this little island that are very interesting. They used to have a clump... the folks that used to land here and the Indians used to huddle around a little clump of trees that were down the coast there somewhere. There was... it was where everyone would meet because they were the only trees on the island at the time.

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But no one seems to know where that is anymore. I guess you have a lot of things that folks leave behind right? Lost and found and stuff?

JS: Yeah.

EV: Babies (laughter)?

JS: We try to keep those where they belong. We have a lost and found upstairs, yes that is turned in from the boat.

EV: Do you also manage the boats that run across from San Jacinto Park?

JS: No those are Harris County ferries.

EV: Alright. They are not TexDOT?

JS: No sir.

EV: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think that you might want to memorialize, keeping in mind that your great grandchildren will be reading this?

JS: I can't think of anything off hand.

EV: Okay. Are there any folks within your organization you think might be able to contribute something of their own knowledge, do you have some old salt sitting around somewhere that used to work that knew everything and everybody.

JS: I'm thinking there is one that might be able to. He is from Galveston. He may be able to put some light on other stuff.

EV: Do you know how I can get a hold of him?

JS: He should be here today

EV: Can I put my real phone number on here? Yeah my home phone, I work so much out of my office that... Let me give you another one. Are you going to stay down here

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when you retire or are you going to go back to Michigan? Why would you go back to Michigan?

JS: No probably stay around this area. My wife's from this area.

EV: Is she?

JS: Yeah.

EV: Where do you live, what town?

JS: Texas City.

EV: I put my email address on there.

JS: Okay that works.

EV: If he agrees to do, what is his name?

JS: His name is Roosevelt Mack.

EV: M-A-C-K?

JS: Yes.

EV: Yeah if he'd like to sit down, if he agrees to do that that would be nice, I'd like to talk to him. You know we did the recordings... End of interview.