

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Capt. Roosevelt Mack
Galveston History

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

EV: Okay Señor are you ready?

RM: Yes.

EV: Let me ask you again, give me your full name please?

RM: Roosevelt Mack.

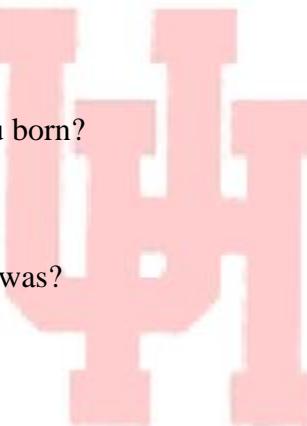
EV: Mr. Mack where were you born?

RM: Galveston, Texas.

EV: Can you tell us when that was?

RM: 1953, November...

EV: November what?



RM: November 3, 1954, Galveston, Texas.

EV: '54, did you go to school here?

RM: Yeah Galveston Ball.

EV: Were you a jock when you were there?

RM: Not really.

EV: Okay. Did you take any extra-curricular activities when you were in school? Did you sing in the choir, did you play in the band?

RM: I moved away and then I came back to Ball High and graduated.

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EV: Where did you move away to?

RM: Texas City.

EV: When did you graduate?

RM: 1974.

EV: Did you go to any college or community school?

RM: I went to Prairie View A & M University for 2 1/2 years.

EV: Okay what were you studying?

RM: Business Administration.

EV: Okay and did you ever go in the military?

RM: No I didn't.

EV: Did you ever finish up your college degree?

RM: No I didn't.

EV: Okay. When you got I assume you just finished college and started doing some kind of work?

RM: Yeah.

EV: What kind of work did you do?

RM: I worked for the Texas Bus Line of Galveston. They sold their company to Transportation Enterprise out of Austin. So all of us had to look for jobs and I applied for this job at the Ferry and I came to work here.

EV: What did you do for the bus line?

RM: They sold it and eventually they shut it down after a few years they couldn't keep up.

EV: What kind of a job were you doing?

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RM: I was a ticket agent, assistant manager.

EV: And you've been over here with the Ferry System, what's the official name?

RM: Texas Department of Transportation – Galveston Ferry.

EV: Okay and how long have you been working for this department?

RM: I worked 28 years, retired and I'm back working again.

EV: The retirement didn't work out for you huh?

RM: Yeah it worked out. I got a little bored and they were short out here so...

EV: So how long have you been back this time?

RM: A few years.

EV: Do you have any hobbies or anything you do?

RM: I love fishing and boating...

EV: Do you have your own boat?

RM: I did but I haven't been able to use it in a while so much stuff changed around here.

EV: Obviously salt water fishing, do you have a favorite spot?

RM: Oh all over the island.

EV: The whole island?

RM: The whole island.

EV: Does that depend on what's running? How do you know what's running on that?

RM: Well you have your seasons. At this time of year we catch the redfish, the flounder, the whiting, the speckled trout.

EV: Let me... what is your, let me get your address Mr. Mack, I mean your telephone number.

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RM: 409-599-3925.

EV: Okay. The reason I ask that is because I'm not a fisherman and – although I liked it, years ago I went out somewhere down close here they had a fishing boat that fishing red snapper.

RM: Okay, probably down in Freeport.

EV: Yeah and I went out there to 7500 mile snapper bay and I have never been so sick in my life.

RM: You got that right.

EV: That little thing was going like this – I mean pretty choppy water – going like this. I was doing okay as long as we were moving. Once they shut those engines and we starting bobbing up man, I turned green. I was upchucking the whole time. I said I'm not ever going to get on one of those damn things again. So, although I see guys like you all the time fishing off the coast fishing, just as comfortable as can be, sipping beer and...(laughter) but it was a... I may need to call you because my son loves to fish. He's moved up to Colorado he does a lot of trout fishing. But then he went up at one point all the way to Canada and did some, what's the big silver fish they yanked up there?

RM: Sergeants.

EV: Sergeants yeah. I've had friends ask me – I did some scuba diving a while down there and I just got to where to the thing and I just got to where I didn't want to necessarily sneak up on God's little creatures. Fishing's fine – they have a choice right "I'm going to eat this or I'm not going to eat it."

RM: Right, right.

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EV: Sneaking up behind some animal and just shooting and killing is just not my cup of tea anymore. So what, when you... what was your position out here with the boat now?

RM: I'm a Ferry Boat Captain.

EV: You're the Captain?

RM: Yes.

EV: Did you learn your OJT also?

RM: Yes.

EV: What is... when you all have priorities don't you on the – when I see the long lines that you have to get on these sometimes. Is there a priority if there is an ambulance or some type of emergency that comes up and maybe you're half full if you squeeze them on or pull somebody off – do you have those kind of things?

RM: Yes all the time. If we have emergencies they've got priorities over everything else. If it is really serious we will back up actual passenger and let this ambulance go on, a vehicle that has a serious emergency. Most people won't qualify.

EV: What do you do... did you have any incidents of any kind when you are moving these folks, evacuating the island or anything?

RM: No we didn't have any because we had to shut down. They had a mandatory evacuation that meant we had to shut down too. They had a shelter for us up in Houston so we could be the first people back after a storm.

EV: Oh really? Where did you stay in Houston? Where is that?

RM: They already had a _____ (6.4) that was staying up there. So they couldn't take all of us, it was a volunteer basis and it already had been filled.

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EV: Did you take your family?

RM: No you had to secure your family and then you leave and evacuate. I think they had a district office up in Houston.

EV: So you've lived in this area...

RM: All my life.

EV: All your life except you had a little stint up in Louisiana.

RM: Right.

EV: Were you involved in the same type of work up in Louisiana?

RM: No.

EV: Okay. What... your folks were from Louisiana from where?

RM: _____ (7.0) Jennings, Louisiana, Ronoak, Louisiana.

EV: Do you cook?

RM: Little bit.

EV: You cook your catch?

RM: I cook everything I catch.

EV: (laughter). That's another thing I was so sick after that thing I couldn't gut my snappers. Are they still... do you still have to go way out there to catch snappers?

RM: Yep, got to go out there.

EV: They are pretty pricey aren't they?

RM: Oh yeah.

EV: I mean to go out there in that big old boat.

RM: Yeah and they have the limits on them too.

EV: The limits really?

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RM: Yeah – they can go to two now.

EV: You pay hundreds of dollars to out there and catch two? Shit just go across the bay and get them from those Vietnamese folks...

RM: That's right. Get them on the shrimp boat out there.

EV: Yeah, God!

RM: But they spend the money. A lot of them like it for recreation. They just like to go out there.

EV: Have you ever seen, have you ever had any pretty spooky moments on the going back and forth across?

RM: Yes I have had a few.

EV: Can you tell us about them?

RM: I have had a few good ones. Crossing this channel we have a lot of traffic out there and if the fog is really thick and you've got folks just dropping anchors everywhere and nobody telling nobody what they doing and can't get them on the radio and it gets kind of hairy out there sometimes when they do that. Storms come up on you all of the sudden, 70, 80 mile an hour winds and you've got hail hitting you out there and deck hands out scrambling. Every now and again we get waves so bad that we can't even sit down you've got to stand up to drive.

EV: Really wow?

RM: Yes. Try and sit down and you get thrown out of the chair so.

EV: Well if it's like that here I guess it's twice as bad out in the open water?

RM: Open water's five times worse.

EV: So do you all run in any kind of weather I mean all weather?

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RM: Pretty much.

EV: What slops you down except for hurricanes I take it?

RM: Only time we normally will shut down is during a hurricane. When hurricanes, folks are so close and the sea level gets so high around here we can't dock the boats anymore. There's no reason to run we have to shut down.

EV: Do you all park your own boats when you shut them down?

RM: Yes.

EV: Is there any kind of connection you have with the Coast Guard or... what authority do they have over you if any?

RM: They monitor us around hurricanes but usually they... if they notice the conditions are getting worse they will ask us to shut down. Same way for fog... they ask us are we going to keep running this, reduced visibility or what are we going to do? We will contact our office and if they say keep running or the Coast Guard say stop whichever rides the other one is going to happen. If the Coast Guard says stop, we stop.

EV: So they kind of have the last word on some stuff?

RM: Pretty much if it is serious conditions out there.

EV: You must have in the summer time... maybe all time of year but summer time you must have real crazies out here huh?

RM: Oh yes, yes.

EV: When you get stuff like "Splash Day" what was it they call it Spring Break, MLK Day and you got...

RM: Yeah. "Splash Day" you got your wall but Spring Break – you see.

EV: Bunch of drunks?

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RM: Oh man we get them?

EV: Streaking?

RM: Everything!

EV: Maybe you ought to let me visit your cabin when you've got all these young ladies flying around!

RM: (laughter) You come and ride you can see for yourself! Come out here and ride – it gets pretty interesting.

EV: Yeah. Do you kind of let them ride or where do you draw the line?

RM: When they start taking off their clothes and doing stuff up in the rest rooms, you know we have to draw the line.

EV: Doing stuff like getting a little carried away with the amore.

RM: Oh yeah.

EV: What about, do you ever have any fights ever break out?

RM: Yes we have quite a few fights. For a little while we had a lot of gang fights coming every weekend. We notified City Police Department and they will come down and monitor. Sometimes they just turn them all back around. They won't let them board the ferries.

EV: Oh really?

RM: Having too many fights sometimes like that. All them gangs come out of Houston and all these areas, come down and ride the ferries and they get in fights out there.

EV: Did you have any continuing training that you go through all the time?

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RM: Well every five years we have to renew our radar endorsement and every five years...

EV: I'm sorry your... what endorsement?

RM: Radar.

EV: Radar? Okay.

RM: Every five years we have to renew our Merchant mariner's license and our Merchant Mariner's documents.

EV: Do you all get... do you have to maintain some training too on first aid?

RM: Yes. We have first aid, CPR, defensive driving, hazard material training. We have our annual or every three year training and all whichever ones come first.

EV: You all can carry 18 wheelers and tankers on these things right?

RM: Yes up to 80,000 pounds.

EV: So do you have, can you say who can come on if you've got some volatile material inside of a tanker can you say "No you've got to go back?"

RM: That's right it's my call.

EV: What do you usually do, do you bring them on?

RM: No can't bring them on gas stays off.

EV: Alright, on volatile materials right?

RM: Right.

EV: So if you have a guy coming on a gasoline tanker you...go back.

RM: No.

EV: They probably know anyway.

RM: Most of them know but they will try every now and again.

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EV: Oh really?

RM: They try and play cards or whatever but if you ask them for their MSDS sheet it will tell you exactly what is in that tanker.

EV: You ask for what, what is that?

RM: MSDS, Material Safety Data Sheet. It tells you exactly what's in that tanker. Someone will get, like they change their play cards and they try to slip a card but we pretty much on it. We have stages where people check. If they are not sure they will call the vessel and we've got books or whatever, we know what it is, we turn them around.

EV: You ever catch any flack from those guys.

RM: Sometimes we do. Sometimes we have to get law enforcement if they won't leave.

EV: (laughter) It probably seems like dull moments all the time but...

RM: No it doesn't. It gets interesting.

EV: Yeah. Is there any particular time when the dolphins run out here?

RM: Pretty much anytime.

EV: Really?

RM: Pretty much anytime, summer, winter.

EV: I'll tell you what my daughter came down here this last Christmas and she wanted... she is a pretty accomplished photographer and she wanted to take some pictures. We went back two or three times and didn't see one.

RM: Really?

EV: But when we were little kids we used to come over here all the time and we saw them all the time. Now we want to take photographs and they weren't around.

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RM: We see them all the time. We usually work from 8, 10 to 12 hours. Early in the morning, maybe after lunch and then in the evenings they run really good.

EV: I don't guess you get any... you probably do get some sharks out here or something.

RM: They are in there but you don't see them.

EV: Did you have any folks from the other side from Boliver or Gilchrist over there that you knew that they got wiped out pretty bad?

RM: Well I have some friends that lost a lot over there and they are misplaced right now. Most of them are back rebuilding. Still some that is still misplaced.

EV: I haven't been over there since. I might go right after I talk to you, get over there and see it because I haven't seen it. There's nothing to see is there?

RM: No. They are working over there but it's not what you think it is. It's a lot of it gone.

EV: What was it 41, 42 folks missing or something like that?

RM: Yeah.

EV: Do you have the same crew that you work with all the time or do the crew shifts move around?

RM: Well we try to stay with the same crew as much as we can.

EV: How many boat captains are there?

RM: East vessel has one captain and you have three deck hands. You have an engineer and an oiler. You have a total of six persons on board the boat.

EV: Do you all... I assume you all... do you change your shifts around?

RM: Yes.

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EV: And then the whole crew shifts with you I take it?

RM: Right.

EV: That's right? Do all ships run during the course of a 24 hour day?

RM: No.

EV: So what do some of you guys have a day off or something?

RM: Yes.

EV: That is the way you patch it up?

RM: Yes we try to work five days a week and we go... like right now we... it's not many people over there so we are running up to two or three boats now. Since they opened up 87 to Louisiana we get a lot of oil filed trucks and companies coming back and forth and so that's making the traffic even worse. On weekends we've got a lot of sightseers, could be up to a four hour wait on the weekends to get back and forth.

EV: How much longer do you think you are going to take a run at it this time?

RM: Well not sure yet. Its fun coming back, you know helping out and getting to see the fellows again.

EV: Did you miss it?

RM: Yeah I got a little bored sitting around the house, fishing every day and nothing to do.

EV: Are you married?

RM: Yes.

EV: Your wife work?

RM: Yes she works for the GISD.

EV: Children?

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RM: Yes.

EV: Do any of them want to be a boat captain?

RM: I don't think so. They want to be nurse and secretaries and stuff like that.

EV: Is there any kind of... does any relationship exist between you all say and the Coast Guard as far as port traffic, other than what you have already told me but is there any kind of coordinated effort... I mean with all this Homeland Security stuff going on?

RM: Yes we are coordinated with the Homeland Security we are.

EV: Have you had any trouble with any of that yet?

RM: No, there's people leaving packages every now and then and having to call out the bomb squad and all this.

EV: Really?

RM: Yeah.

EV: Coast Guard has a bomb squad or...

RM: Local police call out the bomb squad but we have to notify the Coast Guard and they notify... we notify the Galveston Police, they will come down and secure the vessel, unload everything off, get all the passengers and the boat shuts down until they come and take care of it.

EV: And you wind up with a bag of popcorn or something?

RM: Could be or a bag of tools or something or a purse.

EV: (laughter) I was going to ask you something about the evacuation of the hurricane but most of those folks would be going north right, they would be going out 10, they wouldn't be coming down this way so that didn't effect you that much? But folks

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going this way... I know the evacuation is 45 but was there any evacuation going this way?

RM: No the ferries was shut down?

EV: Okay you shut down the day before?

RM: I think it was yeah the day before we shut down.

EV: There were no evacuees before that?

RM: Yeah. They gave them ample time to evacuate. They had like three days and if they not out of there on about that third day or so we shut down that's it.

EV: Okay. Did you lose... what is your turnover like with your crewman, you losing them quickly?

RM: We lost some. Some of them misplaced and it was taking them three hours to get to work, 3 1/2 hours and they couldn't afford the gas and the travel time so a lot of them transferred to the districts. They had to leave this job because they couldn't afford the gas and the travel time. So we lost several people that way.

EV: Are there any other ferries that Texas DOT runs besides this one further down the coast?

RM: Port Aransas Pass.

EV: Aransas Pass? Have you ever worked that down there?

RM: No we have people that were up there when the bridge got hit, they boats were out, we sent a couple of our crew members up there to help out up there.

EV: Have you ever been up there? Have you ever worked that area?

RM: No I haven't worked that area.

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EV: Okay. You've heard about... what are your feelings or ideas about this bridge that they keep talking about that they want to build between Boliver and here?

RM: Well I've been hearing about it for at least 20 some odd years. I really don't think it's going to happen. At least we won't see it right now. It costs too much. They have to have a span is humongous and I don't think it will happen now, too much politics.

EV: What about the idea that also pops up, this is several years ago I read that somebody suggested that they start charging toll charges on the thing and then most of the people wanted to kill the guy.

RM: Yeah a couple of years ago they tried it but after they had the meetings and decided that they were going to have to pay for this. Then all of the sudden people said they couldn't afford to pay for those passes. They started out like \$300 bucks or more. They said they couldn't afford those passes so it all just dropped by the wayside.

EV: What do you save in time if you drive... Texas City's on the bay over here isn't it?

RM: Texas City?

EV: Yeah.

RM: It's across the channel over there.

EV: On the bay?

RM: On the dike.

EV: So if you have to go around from here I guess that wouldn't have any effect it, it doesn't have anything to do with the ferry does it? But if the guys that are here on Boliver want to get to Galveston the trip around is humongous isn't it? A hell of a trip?

RM: Yeah. It takes about two hours.

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EV: Yeah, it's just too much. Two hours and thirteen minutes. Of course you can be in that line and it feels like two hours.

RM: Oh you can sit in that line up to four hours.

EV: Really? My God! Are there any historical spots around here that you know that most folks don't know about? Do you know what I'm trying to ask you? There are... for example, in Houston along the Buffalo Bayou there's a place that was used as a cell one time, a jail cell. Did you know that I didn't know that? I didn't know until just a couple of weeks ago.

RM: Uh-uh (negative).

EV: But it where they held some guy and it was part of the old ice plant that they had down there by the old M & M building. Are there any old battle signs, forts, things around, Indian sites...

RM: Yeah but they are all marked. The Historical Foundation and the visitor center you could get brochures on just about all historical sites in Galveston.

EV: Did they not have that statute they built for the 1900 storm out there? Did that thing get blown away?

RM: Yes it did get damaged I'm not sure how bad. I've seen it.

EV: They've got it though?

RM: Yeah it did get damaged.

EV: But that means they didn't lose it?

RM: I'm not quite sure if they lost all of it but they lost parts of it.

EV: What's your... let me get you... the human side. What time of a which shift do you prefer?

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RM: I prefer day shift.

EV: Day shift?

RM: I've worked either shifts. We rotate from midnight to eight in the morning or eight in the morning to four in the afternoon, or four in the afternoon to midnight at night. You can come to work from ten in that morning to ten at night. Noon to noon... noon to midnight. We have a lot of schedules out here but we are up and running full force.

EV: I came out here... I don't know why I was out here but I decided to come to the center during the summer time and I rode the thing and caught the sunrise coming up.

That was kind of nice.

RM: Yeah, yeah.

EV: Traffic was down you know. I guess these yahoos out here on the private boats just drive you pretty nuts huh?

RM: Yes they pretty much drive you nuts. You've got a lot of small boat traffic out here.

EV: Don't they give these guys some classes or something about...?

RM: Yes the Coast Guard offers classes and... A & M over there offers classes....

EV: They don't pay attention?

RM: They can take all the class they want it still doesn't matter.

EV: Well didn't they... it wouldn't have anything to do with you all. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think might be interesting about your job or running these ferries that folks ought to know?

RM: Well the traffic we've had before the storm the last five years has been enormous.

I've seen it back... after midnight we might not haul but three cars until six in the

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morning. But now a days we pack a 65 cars pretty much to four, five, six in the morning sometime.

EV: Really? Even today?

RM: Right.

EV: Why the increase?

RM: I think it's a lot more younger generation out all night riding back and forth or going to the beaches over there at night and on weekends. I've seen it where we didn't see the end of that line for a day and a half on the Boliver Peninsula.

EV: Really?

RM: That amount of traffic. I left here midnight, came back the next day at noon and the traffic was still out there. I never saw the end of it. It's been like that for 24 hours. Traffic is very picking up. You've got a lot of oil field and regular personnel that take the food and stuff over there and it's been a lot more traffic lately.

EV: Well I guess... they are probably doing the kind of stuff I wish I could have done when I was in high school.

RM: Right that's where we missed out!

EV: (laughter) Yeah a whole different generation.

RM: That's right more kids now have vehicles. It wasn't like when we was in school. We got the vehicle in the 8th 9th grade. They out there all night long.

EV: I think I didn't get my own car until I got out of college and I got my own car.

RM: Yeah it took me a while. We didn't even think about what these kids are doing now.

EV: They don't have to pay all of \$500 for it too.

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RM: That's right. They driving \$40,000 vehicles!

EV: Yeah, isn't that amazing?

RM: It is!

EV: Crazy. I guess... are the people showing up to camp out on all these empty beaches now?

RM: Yeah some weekends we still get a bunch of traffic.

EV: Really?

RM: On weekends it will pick up. Even though it's not much over there but people are coming.

EV: Is that... there used to be a place over there that would sell you some... just across the bridge, on the land on the peninsula, and there is a place over there on the left, some kind of warehouse that had the big metal place that used to sell the fish... the fish market that would sell the stuffed crab.

RM: Yes that was years ago. That place hasn't been there.

EV: O Mack or something

RM: About 15 years.

EV: It's been gone that long?

RM: It's a place called Milk's Seafood.

EV: Milks?

RM: It's destroyed now by the storm.

EV: Oh really?

RM: Yes.

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EV: Well then further down there was a little port out there where you could buy shrimp?

RM: Yes Shirley's Bait Camp, pretty big place. I think it's gone too.

EV: Well where in the hell am I going to get my shrimp.

RM: I don't think you are going to get much. I think I heard the Comos they have a bait camp...

EV: Off the peninsula over here?

RM: Right. They had opened up for the flounder season. I'm not sure its there anymore but that's the only one I've heard that was working.

EV: Shoot I'm going to have to go back over here to this side. I have to go back to the, is that Texas City where is that?

RM: Fort Boliver.

EV: Remember when the Vietnamese had those little stores, the Vietnamese, Rosey's or Roseanne or something. Kema.

RM: Kema's still...I'm not sure if they are back up and running. Last I heard they were pretty much wiped out too.

EV: Well I guess I'll have to go to Krogers!

RM: I haven't heard much from Kema. Last I heard they were pretty much wiped out.

EV: Man. Well I take it there is nothing else you might want to add?

RM: No that's about it. We trying to recover down here too. We've got a pretty good blow down here. Getting our homes back together and families and that's basically what everybody is doing right now.

EV: How long were you all shut down, you starting running pretty much...?

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RM: No we came back three days after the storm but there wasn't much... we couldn't do anything. All our docks were just about out. It took us a while until we could get all the docks operating and running two ferries, one ferry back and forth. We got two docks up to run one ferry to start transporting the vehicles to clear up.

EV: Oh the emergency vehicles?

RM: Right to put _____ (29.6) down for the roads that got washed out and get a lot of emergency response out here. Sheriff's Department and Highway Departments, Engineers, Corps of Engineers had to get all these people in place because the bridge that go over there... it was knocked off. So you only had one way in and out so we basically transported all the law enforcement, it was a curfew so and heavy equipment to build roads back and stuff like that. We did that for months before we opened up that peninsula.

EV: Did you come... every night did you have to go back and forth to that Houston house you were telling me about or did you go...?

RM: No I was somewhere else. I wasn't part of that. It was already filled up. We had a curfew in Galveston. We came in and worked and do what we can and when we get off we had to drive back out of here every night.

EV: It must have been a sad place to look at.

RM: Oh it was terrible. Never seen nothing like it. It was the worse that I've ever seen.

EV: I drove in just this weekend. This is the first time I've been here since the storm. First of all I didn't want to come back right after they opened it up because I didn't want to go gawking around, looking like an idiot. But, I did come down because... anyway we

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had to see somebody down here that Sunday. But you can see on Tiki Island blank spaces.

RM: Oh yeah.

EV: It is just incredible. So it must have been... I was just thinking what it must have been like to be a cop out here driving around the streets when the island was closed off.

RM: It was terrible. It was terrible.

EV: Did you get any pictures of any of that?

RM: I have some. I don't know where they at right now but I did get a few here. I was so busy when you come in here it was pitch dark coming in here at 5:00, 6:00 in the mornings you couldn't see anything, just debris everywhere until daylight.

EV: Deserted?

RM: Oh yes it was deserted. You saw few people coming around. A lot of emergency vehicles, that's mostly what you saw.

EV: Man! The wrath of the Lord, huh?

RM: That's right.

EV: Do you have a card by any chance?

RM: I had it in my car.

EV: You probably don't need one. This is... since you work for the state you know how slow things can be. Well I ordered these cards about two months ago. These are my old ones. Do you have any pictures of... well I'm trying to get some pictures of the folks that I interview from when we put them into the thing. I'll contact you the Captain... do you take any pictures of yourselves on the boats or anything like that of the crews and stuff?

RM: Yes I have a few of them.

EV: Would you mind sharing those with me so I can put them in the box with this stuff?

RM: Ok I'll see if I can dig them out.

EV: Okay. I guess that is the end of the interview. Thank you I appreciate you taking your time.

End of Interview.

