MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Larry Berges

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Larry Berges is one-forth partner of Regional Fabricators at the Port of Iberia. His father was involved in industry as a permit man. Berges began welding right out of high school. He worked for Avondale and McDermott, then as a contract welder for National Supply in New Iberia specializing in land rig building. He and three other contractors decided to start a business at the height of the oil boom in the GOM in 1979. By way of his mechanic experience, and a demand for mechanization on seismic boats, Berges began designing and fabricating safety and new equipment on existing seismic vessels. He holds several patents and has run his company's ship building, repair, and upgrading facility for more than 25 years.

Early career: Learned welding as a mechanic. In 1966, at age 18, he started in the oil field driving from New Iberia to Morgan City every day to work for Avondale and then McDermott building portable offshore drilling rigs and platforms. Later the big yards began building "jack up" rigs which improved the efficiency of the offshore work, but took away business from smaller, traditional platform building fabrication yards. After military service in the National Guard during Vietnam War, he became a contract welder building land rigs for National Supply in New Iberia. The pieces were transported via truck to work in the oil/gas fields in north LA.

Company's history/significance: Regional was and is a small to mid-size fabricator of offshore equipment. The diverse backgrounds of the four partners has allowed the company to diversify into many areas of offshore work, including boat construction and repair, sandblasting and painting, new rig construction, refurbishing, etc. One partner runs the office, while the other three each run their respective departments. When one area slows down, the other two are able to keep the yard busy. The multiple skill sets of the original partners have been passed onto the employees, many of whom have become superintendents, who themselves have continued the on-the-job training process to the next generation of hands. Unlike big yards with large labor force, Regional has a smaller force of highly specialized "combination hands"--those trained and experienced in many facets of fabrication, including welding and fitting. The company has primarily been involved in seismic boats and shallow water rig construction. The four-partner setup, and low overhead, provided enough diversification for Regional to withstand the "bust" of the mid-1980s. They are one of the oldest companies at the Port of Iberia.

Work force/other issues: Berges has continued to see the decline of the local labor pool over 25 years. He blames the downtown of the 1980s for running off most of the work force. Those that have remained are still very weary about the volatility of the industry. The change in culture and business philosophy in offshore work is geared for short term, "quick fix," gain, rather than long-term investment and a sustainable future for employees. Also environmentalism has led to increase standards of work, safety, and performance, which has enhanced the industry and improved efficiency, but because of the costs involved has made it difficult for small companies with smaller work force to compete. Berges is most concerned about the disappearance of the

local work force. No longer are young local men getting into the industry. Most are encouraged to pursue other fields or go to college. Many of them are not college material and end up working in low paying, unskilled jobs (as did his son).

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Larry Berges, on December 18th, 2006, tape two (sic). Larry Berges and the MMS Ship Fab Project, by Jason Theriot.

LB: Larry Berges. I was born in New Iberia, Louisiana, raised here in New Iberia..

JT: What year were you born, Mr. Berges?

LB: 1948. I was born in 1948.

JT: Now, was your dad in the oilfield?

LB: My father was in the oilfield. He was a rig builder when he was young, and after he got about, maybe, forty years old, he went from being a rig builder to the seismic business. He was a permit man working out of Mississippi, paying the landowners to have permission to get on their properties to survey their land.

JT: Was he working for a survey company or the State or?

LB: He was working for a working for a survey company. Lofsco he was working for, and he retired with Lofsco as a permit man.

JT: Wow. So we're talking twenty, thirty years in the business, huh?

LB: Yes. He was there for a long time, you know, and he really enjoyed the people and the personnel that he met in the seismic.

But he stayed out of town a lot, you know. He had to go to the courthouses and pick up all their data and where they lived at and how many owned the properties, and he had to pay there and get permission to pay for their seismic work to be done on their property.

JT: Now, what about the fieldwork? Was he out in the marshes and the prairies?

LB: A little bit. He stayed a little bit on the areas where they had to do the seismic. Not often, though. Mostly he had to be in town at the courthouse trying to find these and get permission from these people to get on their properties and get the right-of-ways, because the crews couldn't go to work until they got the right-of-ways paid for and permits and then permission and, you know, all the liability that was involved in damage to their crops and their land going over their property. So they had to pay for these damages if something incurred with that.

JT: Then so you grew up in this field, essentially?

LB: No, not in the seismic. I grew up into as a mechanic. I started as a mechanic when I was young, then got into the welding field, then started working at some of the shipyards in Avondale and then McDermott, yes. Then from there, I came back in Iberia and worked in Iberia since it's closer and I have less driving. So I started off at some of them mechanic shops and some of the fabrication shops at the Port of Iberia.

JT: And Avondale being New Orleans?

LB: Avondale was Morgan City.

JT: Morgan City, okay at the yard there. What year was that Mr. Larry?

LB: That was in 1965, '66. That was right at the Vietnam area, yes.

JT: So you were about twenty?

LB: I was, and then I ended up having to go to AIT and boot camp. I had joined the National Guard. Then I went to basic and AIT in Fort Dix, New Jersey, kind of stayed six, seven weeks for training. Then I came back and I ended up being a

contract welder at the time. I started being a contract welder, self-employed, working for a national supplier building land rigs. So that's how I started in my own business and working for myself.

JT: Was that before the big boom was happening?

LB: The boom was already happening then and in that time of the year everybody was busy building drilling rigs and land rigs at that time at least, so that was a big industry for ship building at that time, especially offshore big platforms like Avondale and McDermott was building. There was a lot of drilling activity offshore.

But I was into National Supply, building land rigs. We wasn't doing any offshore work. We was building rigs for being drilling on land rigs, doing work like that.

JT: So you were doing this at both Avondale and McDermott?

LB: At Avondale and McDermott, when I worked either place over there, they were doing offshore work. We was building big platforms for offshore work.

But when I left there and then went as contract welder, I was working for National. We was doing drilling work, land rig work then, shallow water.

JT: Now what size rigs, if we back up to Avondale and McDermott? What size rigs are we talking about where you guys working on?

LB: Those offshore platform rigs, they was in the 18,000 to 25,000 foot depth generation, you know. These were portable rigs that were put on drill ships and then put on the back of supply vessels, and then they were put in place with the derrick barges at that time. After a few years went by, they got away from doing that type of operation. They went to jack-ups, and the jack-up boats came into play offshore. They was a little easier to work with go up against these platforms. They didn't have to have a derrick barge to set all the equipment and take it off, so they kind of took away from some of the activity in Louisiana when they went from a platform rig to a jack-up boat, you know, took a lot of the work away from the local people, building small portable land rigs and offshore rigs.

JT: Any idea where these jack-up orders were being built?

LB: Bollinger Shipyard, Avondale, a lot of your big, big shipyards was building the jack-up boats.

JT: So it was sort of like a new technology?

LB: New technology to get over the offshore platforms and they were cantilevered with a rig, so it was a lot less labor, lot less time to set up, rig up and make money.

JT: So you were living in Morgan City, actually?

LB: No, no, I was living in Iberia, and we'd just go back and forth, drive back and forth.

So yes, you had a good hour and a half to two-hour drive going, and you had a two-hour drive coming back, so you was getting up at four o'clock in the morning and working till about seven o'clock at night by the time you left and got home. So—

JT: With National, that's right here at the Port of Iberia.

LB: Yes, National was actually in town in middle of New Iberia on James Street, and that's where they were starting to build a lot of land rigs for shallow-water drilling and all these land rigs was working all around the northern part of Louisiana. They had a real big boom in north Louisiana where they did a lot of land drilling, shallow drilling.

JT: How would they transport these rigs once they were finished and completed?

LB: All the land rigs was transported by trucking, and it took about fifty-four trucks to ship one land rig, approximately fifty-four truckloads to ship one land rig, and have it set up and ready to rock and roll, you know.

JT: So what was your specialty? Were you in the jacket part or maybe more of the valves and—

LB: The specialty I had when I was at National, I was building all of the substructures and all the derricks and all the heavy metal and got involved in doing a lot of the living quarters and doing some of the drill works and compounds and some of the components on the drilling rig. After all that was done, we would rig up the rig complete from the start to the finish in the plant at National. All the substructures, all the derrick was put together, all the mechanics and all the machinery and equipment was all installed. The rig was ran just like it was going to be run on site, and after that it was shipped off to location after it was finished and done with.

JT: You have some of your partners today who were working with you at the time; is that correct?

LB: Yes. Glen Broussard was just like I was. He was actually a single-handed guy working for National. He wasn't a contractor. Ronnie Drusell, my other partner, was a contractor welder, just like I was, self-employed. We actually all worked together. We all did different things on the rig, but we worked for, I guess, three to four, five, maybe six years together as employed by National Welding. We worked on a regular basis, like maybe five to six days a week. Most of us worked that kind of hours, ten hours a day, and this went on for maybe three, four, five years with the boom in the oil industry.

JT: Now tell me about the idea of developing and going into business for yourselves.

LB: Well, you get to where you get tired of going to work and then you're doing the same thing every day in and out, you know, and you start thinking about, well, what if I lose my back, arm, or legs or whatever, and you get a feeling where I need to go in business for myself, maybe I can employees doing what I'm doing, you know. The key to making money is to employ people and not just working by yourself all your life. You have to employ people to make good money.

So we had the knowledge in the oilfield to go in business for ourselves. We might not have the knowledge in as far as running a business, but we can always employ somebody to do that for us. So we just finally got together, and I had talked to three of the partners at National and asked them if they wanted to

quit what we was doing and then go into business for ourselves and try it for six, seven months and see if we would be successful being in business for ourselves.

So that's what we did, but we branched off as two of us, and the other two stayed at National working, while two of us started the business. The two of us that started the business had business to do with Mallard, CRC Mallard had some equipment to build. So we rented a little shop, and we rented some property and started there for about two or three months. As we got going, the other two partners came in with us at the last end, and that's how we began Regional Fabricators.

JT: This was in April of '82?

LB: It would be 1979, I believe, in the seventies is when we started Regional Fab.

Actually, we started at another location, not the location we're in now today. We had rented and leased some property further up by Highway 90 and stayed there for about six, seven months until we found another location by the water. We needed a water location so we could advance and build bigger equipment and then pull in more customers. Being by the water, we had a chance of building, bringing in boat customers, rig business would have been a lot better.

JT: So that was a key, having access and a deep-water channel here?

LB: Yes. Not only deep water, just so you had some kind of waterways to bring in shallow barges, and you had a lot of repair work on tugs and everything. So that was going to help us build our business up a little bit quicker than trying to stay with just land rigs where you just needed a small shop and somewhere not by water, you know.

JT: So ya'll were all in it for building rigs.

LB: Yes. At the time, we was in the land rig. We was actually design and drawing up and skilled at land rigs only, and as soon as we got by the water, we had to diversify and go into barge work and go into different types of fabrications. We just had to learn that business right quick like, because it was by the water.

JT: Learn on the job, huh?

LB: Learn on the job right quickly.

JT: Any of ya'll going to school for design or architecture or engineering?

LB: No, no schooling as far as engineering, no schooling as far as drawing or drafting. We just came about that as we worked around the work we had to do, you know.

JT: I'll take it that your other partners, they sort of followed a similar track going through the various different companies over—

LB: Yes, yes. Each company is different, and you're going to learn. You're going to get a little bit different skills. For every different customer you work with, you're going to have to pick up a different skill, and you just go with the flow and you learn these over the years and through experience, you know. You pick up these different skills with these guys.

JT: So tell me about that first year in business out at—did things work out the way you planned?

LB: The first year in business was really tough. We did a lot of—we had to put in a lot of hours. We didn't have a lot of skilled labor with us. We didn't have no employees. We all did all the work ourselves. We did the paperwork. We did the bidding ourselves. We went to on location and we looked at the jobs and gave prices ourselves. After we got the jobs or was awarded the jobs, we had to do the jobs ourselves and build the equipment and blast it, paint it, and then we had to do the invoicing to collect our money. So we had some tough years those first four, five years in business.

JT: Sounds like you probably put in more than just ten hours a day.

LB: Oh, yes, we put in more than that, plus we was worried about the cash flow. We didn't have money coming in, you know. We had to really struggle for money. Large jobs, we had a hard time accumulating enough money to do the jobs and worried about how are we going to pay for the material and the equipment as we needed it.

JT: So ya'll were established in April of '79, I have here in my notes, talking with Mr. Ronnie about that a couple of weeks back. When did ya'll actually locate here at this located—Regional?

LB: I really don't right on my mind right now what date it was, you know, because—

JT: Okay, but it was that year, it was '79?

LB: Yes. We had rented the other place, but that was probably about six months before we—on this location now that we have here. I really don't know what the actual date was when we started over here at Regional.

JT: Now, what was the Port of Iberia like as far as big companies during the '79, early '80? Did you have the big Dynamics and the Unifabs and the Red Foxes? Were those big companies here, too, at the time?

LB: Well, Red Fox was only actually the biggest fabricator at this port, and I don't say they was a big fabricator. I don't think they employed more than thirty-five to forty people at the port themselves, but they had a large machine shop in town in New Iberia that had been there for a quite a few years, and they located it to port because of the water and then the jobs was coming up along the banks and the water was needed for these jobs. So that's when Red Fox located at the Port of Iberia, and they was a small company at the time, too.

JT: Were there any big jackets being built at that time?

LB: No, there wasn't no big jackets at the time that was building at the port over here. I think there was some amount of platform rigs, more land rigs, more general rig type equipment was being done at the port at the time.

JT: You probably didn't have your hundred and twenty foot crew boats either, huh?

LB: No, I don't believe they had any hundred and twenty foot crew boats. I think the crew boats more than forty-five foot ranges, I think you saw more small supply boats of eighty-foot, ninety-foot supply vessels that was coming into the port, you know.

JT: So at what point in the eighties did you take on the role of the shipping department for Regional Fab?

LB: Well, the seismic business started to come into play in that time when we was in business. There was a lot of barge work, too, at the time, so we was doing a lot of water work on the barges. We was trying to get a bunch of barges, repairs and blasting, and so when we got into the barge business, it kind of opened the doors for people coming in with tugboats. Then the seismic business came in right after that, because they needed water. They needed a place to land their boats and work on them and build equipment for the boats as needed, you know.

Then that's how we got into the seismic business. They needed a place to land their boats and keep them over the weekends when the rough water was—or the weather was bad and they couldn't work over the weekend, so they'd come in and just stack their boats. So as they stacked their boats, we were starting to get in some repair work on the boats, so that's how I got into the seismic business.

JT: Just kind of fell in your lab.

LB: It kind of fell into our lab, but they needed somebody that could build, you know, different instruments for the boats. They wanted somebody that was capable or had a little knowledge of not having to go out and get an engineer to build something on their boat. They didn't have the time and the patience to wait for an

engineer and then draw up drawings. So they needed somebody that had a lot of experience that could come in there and build something right quick like and get them back on the job in the next two or three days after the weather passed.

So that's why I came into play with all the experience I had over the rig building, and the material that I use and all the mechanic work I had done, I came into play doing a lot of seismic work for them, designing equipment for them.

JT: So you were the likely choice out of the four for that department.

LB: Yes, because I had more mechanical ability than the rest of the partners I had in my business.

JT: Right. It sounds like, and in talking with Ronnie a couple of weeks ago, is the key word here, Regional, and for the reason why it's able to, has sustained and prospered, is the diversity of the four partners, the different skills that ya'll have all brought into this industry that has allowed ya'll to do not only rigs but barges and seismic ships, etc., all down the line.

LB: Yes, and that's what really made us survive all these tough years. We would jump from one customer to the other customer. If this customer wasn't busy at the time, maybe because of the drilling business was down, well, we jumped and got into a different type of operation, you know. Even if it wasn't in fabrication,

we did a lot of blasting and painting. If it wasn't in blasting and painting, we did some mechanic work. If it wasn't mechanic work, we just did consulting work, you know.

We could leave the yard and go on the offshore. We went offshore with a crew, too. Sometimes we was asked to go offshore and work offshore instead of on our yards, so we'd just take our crew and transform and go offshore and do the work. So that really helped us out a lot to jump back and forth on different needs in the oil business, you know.

JT: Now, describe to me some of the designs of these earlier seismic ships back in the eighties that you guys were—

LB: In the eighties, all the seismic was really shallow water. It was in the shallow waters from ten feet to fifteen to twenty feet of water. They wasn't in the thirties. They wasn't in the sixties. It wasn't in the hundred-foot depth. It was really shallow so all the boats that was needed for the seismic was a rental type of boat. It was the oyster boats, it was the small crew boats, and it was even some of the little tugboats. We rigged these small boats up to do seismic.

When the seismic seemed to what they call that was a transition crew, as they call that shallow water. These transition crews were in two to three foot of water. They needed some vessels that had flat bottoms on them. They wasn't deep-V'd. The seismic, we was shooting with air guns, so they needed some

heavy equipment that was on some wide flat vessels so they could get over the oyster reefs and not get stuck on the reefs.

So when they got them to go in the deeper water, the boats went from forty footers to forty-five's to fifty. They went to hundred footers and eighty-foot vessels. These were when the aluminum crew boats came into play. So there was needing to go out there in deeper water. So when they got into deeper water, they needed to be able to stay out there with rough seas. They couldn't come in when there was rough seas.

They didn't want to come in every day and go back out the next day and come back in the next day when it was rough, and go back out. It was costing them too much labor and time, so they had to get into bigger vessels when they got into deeper water.

JT: This was occurring about, what, late eighties, early nineties, when you saw the change into the deeper V?

LB: Yes, yes. The seismic stayed steady for eighteen years. I mean just completely stayed steady. It never did drop off. It was a little up and a little down, but it just kept growing and growing and growing. But the seismic business, that had always been in a key to the oil business, but they had always had seismic in the deep water now. They've always had seismic in the thousand foot and eight hundred foot and seven hundred foot of water. It was always been there. But we

never had a key to that. We never played that game with them. That was a little bit too big of boats for us to handle.

JT: Describe to me some of the patents that you had mentioned to me before about some of the refurbishing equipment.

LB: Well, when we got into a little bit down the road, maybe three or four years into the seismic, the seismic business got into a little bit more high technical. They had—the water got deeper. They started getting into problems with liability and some of the people getting hurt on the boats by handling equipment. So when that came into play, safety came into play. Well, then they stepped in and said, hey, we need to modify these vessels for the safety of the people now. We need to be able to operate a little bit safer, quicker, you know. We need to make money, so we need to lay these cables down in a machine environment, not labor environment. So that's when the seismic and that's when it got into play when I started designing some equipment and started patenting some of this equipment.

JT: What was it like before? You're talking about moving from manual to mechanical. Were they going into the water and laying these cables out? How would—

LB: No. All the cable was laid off from the back of the stern of the boat. A lot of that was done by hand. Miles and miles of cable was thrown overboard by hand, and a lot of the that was repetitive work on your shoulders and your hands, and it was cold weather, so a lot of these guys was getting a lot of muscle damage and hands and fingers caught and all that. So that's when they needed to go into something a little bit more mechanical to work with so they can put a little bit more hours in per day and not have so much safety problems, you know.

JT: Because of your design work and your experience in engineering, you just came up with a concept?

LB: Yes. Well, most of the people that I work with in the oil business for seismic, they played a role in all what I had to design because they had to sit there and explain to me what they wanted to do. So these guys was very helpful in trying to design some equipment, because they had the experience offshore. So we'd sit down with them and then have like a think table, you know, a think room, so everybody could think about what they want to put on a piece of paper and then that's how we establish a way to throw cable overboard mechanically instead of doing it by hand, you know.

JT: How far were these cables stretched out?

LB: Some of these cables stretched out two and three miles at a time, yes. Part of the cables stretched out two or three miles at a time, and they have to have me watch so this period of time when they're in the water. They have to watch the shrimp boats from going over their cable and tying up with their—snagging with their trolls and all that. So they have to have a spotter or somebody else, some other boat to watch them and keep them on radio, yes, to keep them away from the cable until they shoot, and then they would pick up the lines, you know.

JT: How were they doing this in the early eighties? Was it a similar situation, just smaller scale?

LB: It's a smaller scale, lighter cables. They didn't lay out as far, due to they didn't have enough equipment to handle all those long, long runs, you know, and they didn't have the expertise to do that. So as it went on, they got a little bit better with their experience, you know.

JT: These cables would sink?

LB: Cables sink to the bottom, that's right, and in a rough-sea condition, you have to pick the cables up so you don't lose them or the sand don't bury the cables and you can't get them out the next couple of days. So you have to watch your weather conditions on and off every other day, you know, because if you've got

some bad weather, you've got some hurricane conditions coming in, you've got to take all those cables and pick them up, put them back on a vessel.

JT: How long does a job take, roughly, if you're—by the time you get out to a location from the time you finish landing, doing the shooting, and taking the reading and pulling up, about…?

LB: It depends on how many square miles they have to shoot offshore for a seismic. They could stay out there, three, four, five, six months on one location, and some locations only take, can be, two or three weeks, you know. But sometime they'll stay out there maybe one or two or three years. It depends on how many big square blocks they got to do.

JT: Same ships?

LB: Same ships, yes.

JT: Just get them refueled and—

LB: They refuel offshore, if they can. If they can't, they come in and get fuel. But they usually somebody is going to bring them fuel offshore to keep them working. They work seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. They don't ever stop.

Due to weather conditions, they might shut down for two or three days, they might anchor off shore and stay off shore, and the bigger boats will stay offshore and won't come back in. They'll just stay there and wait till the weather conditions change so they can start laying cable out again.

JT: Who were some of the pioneers of the seismic industry and who are those companies today?

LB: Halliburton used to be one of the pioneers of the seismic. There's quite a few companies I don't know right offhand had done in those days, but Halliburton was one of them. A lot of these older companies had sold out to different other branches of seismic companies.

Wesson is another company. They're owned by Geco, or Schlumberger is another company. PGS is still in business. They're out of Houston. That's another seismic company. Has Global Seismic, there's another company. There's quite a few different types of seismic companies, but they're worldwide and they all do different type of seismic. Some of them work up in the Antarctic. They work in the cold country. Some of the guys work over here in the Gulf of Mexico. A lot of the guys work overseas in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Singapore and around foreign countries, you know. So they all got different methods of working and they got different environments all over. Some of them work in Mexico in a lot of the reefs over there. That's kind of some tough seismic work because

you're working over reefers. You're damaging reefs. You've got to watch your cables don't get hung up in the reefs. It's real expensive. You lose a lot of cable and you lose a lot of time, and you can't be damaging the coral reefs, either. So they have to—environmentalists are really hard on the seismic crews.

JT: Sounds like. Describe to me the cable. I mean I'm picturing a three-inch—

LB: We call it a cable, but it's really a wire. It's like an extension cord that you use to plug into your—at your house or work your electrical stuff there. It's not a steel cable. It's electrical. It's between one inch to a half inch in diameter, and it's not a real big cable, but it's real long. It's got a lot of small wires in it, and it's really very a delicate wire and it's very expensive. It's not a very cheap wire. It's very expensive.

JT: Is that manufactured in Louisiana?

LB: The cable is manufactured in Houston, Texas. There's other source that build cables all over the world. They've got different manufacturers of the cable. They have bottom-hole cable. They got streamer cables. They got different varieties of seismic operations and cables.

JT: Now, I'm familiar with how they run seismic in the marsh with the buggies, kind of the old traditional way of doing it and making your marks and putting in your dynamite and taking your readings. I'll assume that that's kind of the same scenario, at least you're looking for the same outcome.

When the cables are laid down on the ocean floor or the Gulf floor, is it giving off electrical charges? Is that how it's finding the data, versus a dynamite charge that you may put in the ground twenty feet?

LB: No. It's the same thing on land. You have what you call phones, and these phones is what picks up the electrical charges. Okay? You lay out a cable a mile, and you're liable to have every thirty to forty, fifty meters, you'll have a phone and this phone is what picks up the signals. These phones are attached to the cable, and when they come above that cable and they shoot air, air guns and make a loud noise, this noise hits the bottom of the ocean and reflects back up above. That's what the—the phones pick up this noise, and that's where they get the sensation, and that's how they pick up the graphs and the seismic numbers they need to know what's going on down below.

JT: Looking for fossil fuels?

LB: Fossil fuels, looking for gas and whatever, you know, and they're doing a lot of stuff for, what do they call that—they're looking for resources, too. They want to

know what's down there. They want to know how many gallons of oil there is down there. They're looking for resources, you know.

JT: Right. Like you said, it's very important to the oil and gas field. You've got to have seismic before you even move out to a location and begin to put in a well.

LB: Yes. The key to the seismic is they don't want to do a dry hole. They don't want to get over on a location and spend a million, ten millions or twenty million dollars and drill for two or three, four months and don't hit oil. The key to seismic is to try to find that oil in that location and let them get on top of it and drill for it. They would rather spend a lot of money on seismic than spend it on nothing in a dry hole. So that's the key to dry seismic work.

JT: So if you're looking at, let's say, let's jump forward about fifteen, twenty years in late nineties, they move now to the deep water, you know, the canyon area. Probably going to be a little bit difficult to run seismic in five to eight thousand foot of water. Is it still the same concept?

LB: Yes, it's the same. Well, you don't have OBC. It's not ocean bottom cable they're doing. They're doing streamer cables, and they've been doing these for years. The streamer cables is pretty successful. That's the only way they've been able to do seismic in that deep water.

Today, they're starting to have a new technology. They're doing a lot of R&D, they're doing a lot of research and development, and they're trying to get what they call pods to go down to the bottom of the ocean in four thousand foot of water. They're doing this now and they're really being successful with it, and this is giving them a lot better percentage of hitting oil now than it did with the streamer cables.

The streamer cables float on top of the water, and then when they shoot and signals and then they shoot air guns, they pick up reflection from the bottom of the ocean and that depth. So it's not as precise, you know. So now they're trying to go all the way down to the bottom like they do in OBC, and they're doing well with it in the last two or three years.

JT: What about the vessels? How have they evolved and changed?

LB: Well, I mean—

Tape 1, Side 2

LB: —quite large, but they can handle some rough-sea conditions, and they can handle a lot deeper water and they can carry a lot more comfortable for their crews, too, for eating and fuel consumptions and whatever.

JT: These seismic vessels, I'll take it that now as opposed when seismic first began, now these are customized, custom built for seismic work.

LB: Yes, yes.

JT: Where is the majority of that ship building taking place?

LB: Well, the ship building, some of the large, large vessels was being done at some of the bigger shipyards because the boats are larger and they need more manpower to build them. They were building heliports on the boats, you know, and the vessels are quite large. They're a little too large for me to handle in the streamer business. I handle mostly the hundred and eighties to one fifties to the one forty vessels at Regional Fab.

JT: These two hundred plus, they're probably being built at some other big yard like Bollinger and Avondale.

LB: Yes, Avondale and Bollinger Shipyard and stuff like that.

JT: How many crew are operating these vessels?

LB: I really don't know on the crews. I don't get involved in how many crews it takes to run the vessels. Most of the seismic crews or boats needed are between three to four vessels for one crew. You're looking at probably a million, million and a half per day costs to run a crew, seismic crew per day.

JT: That's a chunk of change.

LB: A lot of money.

JT: Now, what about your crew, the labor that you're using here, are these specialists in ship repair and ship refurbishing?

LB: Mostly the hands we have are combination welders and fitters, and yes, we've kind of worked with these guys and taught them to be able to do anything. They are not like a shipyard where they just have a grinder and a tacker and a welder and a fitter. We have combination hands. All these guys know how to use the drilling equipment here. They know how to do the drills. They know how to use the aluminum work. They know how to do steel work, they know how to do stainless steel work, and they know how do a lot of stuff with machine shop work material, you know. They can drill holes, they can use a lathe, they can use a different type of plasma cutting, and we just did this because we was so diversified in all our businesses over here and our type of equipment we build

over here and we needed to diversify the guys. We needed to teach them all the different types of tools to work with.

JT: Is there training involved? Is there an extensive training period?

LB: I don't know if there's a training. I'm sure you would have to say it would be called a training. It's a hand-on-hand thing when we have to do a job and something comes out new. One of us supervisors will be out there supervising them, and we will show them our knowledge and we'll give them our knowledge. If we need to pick up more knowledge somewhere else, we'll go out and ask for it. As far as engineering, we'll hire an engineer. We'll ask for a civil or we'll ask for a mechanical engineer to come in and help us, and then we'll diversify there and pick up that knowledge from them.

JT: Did the majority of these guys, did they have technical training, like a vo-technical school with the—

LB: None of the guys that we've worked with have any type of experience with that. They've just worked in the field over the years and picked up all this on their own.

JT: Started as a tack welder at eighteen and—

LB: Yes, yes.

JT: And keep going up and up?

LB: Yes, yes, and moved on up as far as that.

JT: Very well skilled with all of the different areas you've described.

LB: Yes. These skilled guys are really hard to find today. There's not very many of them coming up in the ranks today, very few.

JT: How has the pay, the hourly rates, changed for these really skilled guys from back in the day where you just had a guy who welded to today where you have to be more diversified, as you said? How has that pay—

LB: The pay scale really hasn't changed much from the old days. Even the old days, the pay scale was quite good. You just had different types of scales. If you'd call a welder, a welder got paid a certain amount of money, and a fitter got paid a certain amount of money. You really didn't have a combination hand in those days. They came into play after the fabrication got into specialty work.

The shipyards always work on a pay scale of a fitter or a welder or a helper and when people started, the smaller fabricators came into play, smaller fabrication businesses came into play, they started specializing on building equipment. So when they started specializing, they started designing their people as combination hands, not single-handed personnel. They wanted one guy that could do the job. They didn't want five different people to do the job. So they specialized in trying to train one man to do everything so they could keep the overhead down low. As they guys came out, these combination hand guys came out, when they train another guy coming up, they train him as a combination hand. They didn't train him as a just a welder, just a fitter or just a tacker.

JT: That's very interesting. Is that something that has occurred in the last ten years?

LB: Yes, the last ten years the welding business has come into a specialty business. It's not like—it's like a doctor today. You don't go in to one doctor and he does everything to you now. You have specialists in doctors, you know.

JT: What do you think explains this move to a more specialty type work, particularly for the smaller fab guys down in the Port of Iberia? Is it because so much is moving deeper out, or is it because technology is now catching up with us? What do you think explains that?

LB: I believe that more of the equipment that is being built offshore and more of the equipment that is being built in the gas plants and all that is more high tech. It's more quality controlled equipment. You've got a lot of safety. You've got a lot of liability in equipment now that's running today than you had a long time ago. So this equipment that's running and it's got a lot of pressure on it, it's got a lot of liability built in it, a lot of that has to be done with specialty people. It can't be just done with anyone that comes in there and welds all these high-pressure pipes and fittings and machine shop equipment and links, and all that came into play in the specialty of these qualified guys.

These guys that are the combination hands are getting x-rayed. They're getting cards. They get specialty cards so they can only weld with certain type of welding rods. They need to know the heat treatment. They need to know what type of material they're welding on, you know. All this is due to quality control that's starting to happen into the high tech business.

JT: Does the environment or the need to sustain our environment, typically in the Gulf of Mexico, here, is that one of the factors, you think, as why this quality controlled as this liability is, it seems that there's really no room for error these days.

LB: No, there's no room for error because of the liability, and then that's a big cost to all the companies and they don't have time for shutdowns. They don't have time

for, you know, people getting hurt on the jobs. Your big major companies are really watching the safety of all the personnel, and they're making it real hard on the small fabricators.

Small fabricators have to pick up their so-called safety records. They have to employ their people and teach their people safety, and the quality of their work has to be a little bit better standards, the workmanship, too. This all costs money and this takes time, and that's why a lot of this small businesses that's in fabrication are specializing more in different types of businesses.

When they have to do ten, fifteen different jobs and they all different, that's kind of hard to do when you got each one as a specialty. But when you get a small fabrication and you only want to do two or three different type of jobs, you don't have to stretch yourself as far as specialty work. You try to stick to these two or three different jobs, and you keep a production line going on just for that, and when you get a different type of job, then you got to get another production line going for the third step, it's a little hard to employ people and you have to teach people the different quality controls of that next step.

JT: Sounds like you have to instill a lot of trust in your hands.

LB: You have to—a lot of trust has to be in your hands. You have to have quality people. You need to sit there and talk with them. You need to make them understand what they're building, and they need to know what they're building

before they build it. You need to teach them that, you know. They need to understand, because they're going to go out there and then build something. They don't even know what they're building. So you have to spend the time with them and show them what they're building so they'll have a concept to build it right and then do a good job on it, you know.

JT: Who are these men that are working in the yard for you today? Are they from—

LB: Most of the guys that are working for Regional Fabricators as of today are fellows that have worked within a fifty-mile area of New Iberia. A lot of them that used to work a little bit farther than that have found jobs closer. Traveling to and from your work is pretty hard on you if you have to drive an hour to two hours to come in and drive two hours out after a long day of work going back home. So a lot of these guys are within fifty miles of New Iberia.

We do get other contract labor to come in to help us. Due to the overload of work we have, we'll bring in contractor labor.

JT: Ronnie, your partner, has described to me that over the last, particularly last five years, is that a lot of the hands that you'll have now are from Mexico or come from across the border, so to speak. Are these some of the guys who are working in these specialized roles or do you have more local people who are essentially born and raised here who are, like I said, for start in the industry at seventeen,

eighteen, tack welding and then kind of move their way up? How is it in your department in your shift?

LB: In my department, the local guys that we've been having for Regional Fabricators, they kind of stick to doing all the specialty work for us, and a lot of these guys we've promoted them from as workers to supervisors now. So now we're trying to teach the Mexican laborers our specialty, and once we get them upgraded so they can do the specialty work, we're letting them to start to do some of the specialty work. But it's kind of a quality control we have to watch. I mean we have to pick which one is the best ones and capable of doing the specialty work, and that's how we're growing with the other hard times in labor. We're using Mexican, but we have to take two to three years to teach these guys. It takes time to teach them. We have to work with the Mexicans. We don't want to teach them for one year and lose them. We have to try to keep them coming back year after year so we can keep training them and pick them up to a specialty work.

JT: Back in the mid-seventies, did you have a similar situation with the Vietnamese immigrants who moved to south Louisiana? Do you recall working with some of those fellows?

LB: I, we, never had any problems with working with anybody. At that time, we had plenty of local people working for us so we never got involved in the Vietnamese.

We never did. We heard about them. We heard, mostly when they came in, they started doing a lot of shrimp boat business. They wanted shrimp boats built, and that wasn't our environment. We wasn't into the boat business at the time.

JT: So today where you've got what appears to me a serious labor problem as far as the shortages, if you drive down Highway 90 for a twenty-mile stretch, every billboard is some oil company or fabrication company begging for workers. What's going on? Where's the labor these days?

LB: We really don't know where the labor's at. Actually, we're not out there trying to locate these laborers. I don't even know if anybody's really doing any kind of study why there's no labor. So where these young nineteen and eighteen and twenty-year-old boys that's not graduating out of high school, where they're at. My knowledge is that a lot of the high-school guys that get out of high school and graduate, they try to go to college for one to two or three or four years, if possible.

I find that the guys that go to college for one to two years and actually they don't graduate with any type of license or whatever you want to call it, these would be the prime guys to teach the specialties in the oilfield business, whether it's welding or it's mechanic work or carpenter work or electrical work, and for some reason, these young boys that have learned the vocabulary and learned the reading, writing skills that's needed to operate and run a business are not taking

the effort to go into the working with their hands for five and ten years and getting some field experience so they can open their own businesses.

I would like to see some process in the future that could grab these young boys that's not going to make college material but make them open up their minds and say, look, I've got two hands. Let me work with these hands for five and six years and pick up these skills. Once they pick these skills up, they have enough education with two years of college to be able to run their business and be able to take care of their paperwork and their invoices and receivables.

Whereas what we're doing, we're teaching the Mexicans to do it, and we're teaching the Mexicans these skills. After five and ten years, these Mexicans are going to have this skill, and they're the ones that's going to open their business and they're the ones that going to high fly these young boys that didn't want to pick up these five and ten years of hardship. But you have to learn the field experience to be able to run a business. You have to be able to know what you're talking about to be able to teach somebody that skill, you know.

I think that's where I think a lot of the young boys are going, and they're picking up jobs at the small McDonalds and Wendy's and working at K-Marts and Wal-Marts and that's the type of jobs they're picking up because they don't want to—they're scared to get into this field.

JT: That's an interesting point, and if you attempt to analyze it, you look, these guys are the third generation of the oilfield. Whereas you had sort of the World War II

guys in the late thirties, forties and fifties who started it, and your generation comes through, and now this third generation. Maybe they're looking at it as a field that you can get your hands dirty and it's hard and it's hot in the summer, it's cold in the winter. Maybe they worked a couple of summers and they didn't like it and they're trying to grow and do the college route and maybe that's not working.

Maybe they're not understanding that we're fortunate here in the Gulf Coast region that we are provided with a industry that's flourishing with plentiful natural resources and all you've got to do is just go out and get it, and maybe they're not seeing that as, you know, this is an industry that's going to be here for the next couple two or three hundred years, at least for their perspective, the next thirty years. There's always going to be a need for workers.

LB: Yes, and I believe that. I think a lot of the going to college is a plus, you know, and I wish I had a college degree myself to operate my business. I've proven that you can operate a business without an education. But in my days, when we got out of high school at eighteen or seventeen, whatever, we could go to work and make forty-thousand dollar salary there with no education. But we had to go out there and work. We had to learn. We had to work long hours. We had to work six and seven days a week.

But what we wanted to do this, we didn't want to go to college, and it's worked out well. But I wish we could get some of the younger guys today to put

their mind in that focus and try to get going, you know. They don't know the future, with working five and ten years of learning the trade. They just don't understand what the future's about after that. They could really make good money. They could have their own businesses, you know, and they're trying to do this. But they're looking at people that has all this and they want it immediately. They don't want to work for it.

I wish they had trade schools. I wish the trade schools would teach these young guys. I wish they had a trade school that could pick up college guys that in one and two years that couldn't make it in college and then take them and make them understand and have a program to better them, to learn these skills, you know.

JT: Now, what about the vo-tech schools that you had at the airport, Acadiana Regional? Are those still up and running?

LB: I'm not familiar with none, in any of the vocational schools. I really don't hear anything about it in the paper. I don't read any things on the vocational. I don't really talk to anybody that has anything. It's a shame not to have any knowledge of it. It's not publicized at all, you know, in New Iberia that I know of, unless I'm missing it and it's not on the paper.

But somebody, one of the Auto Cad men that we have here has gone to vocational, or I've talked to a few other Auto Cad guys, and they've went to

school for it and they've done well and that. But you have to train them. You have to put them over here. You have to work with them for two or three years. You have to make up your mind that you're not going to make a lot of money with them. They're not going to be a moneymaking, they're going to be an overhead to you until you get them up to par, you know, until you specialize with them, you know, and you can't make money until they get up where you can start charging for them, you know.

JT: Boy, it's certainly a shame. It seems like you have a perfect labor pool that's just sitting there, find a way to bridge now the industry with a potential labor pool to maybe do more promoting or maybe reaching out to these communities or try to figure out a way to reach these young fellows.

LB: Yes.

JT: Let them know that, hey, this is here. This is—there's an open door for you if you're willing to work hard and keep your head clean.

LB: Yes, there's a big, big opening there for them. I just wish somebody would put it together and get something going and make them understand, you know.

JT: Is that just here, Mr. Larry, or is that across the board in Fourchon and Morgan City, some of the other places where you've traveled?

LB: I see it all over the United States. I see it all around my area here, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama. I see it all in Morgan City, Fourchon, I see it everywhere, you know. I see an industry that needs a lot of special attention. I see an industry where there's a lot of young fellows that just don't understand. Somebody needs to start communicating. Somebody needs to open some schools and technical schools and make them understand that you can make a good living, you know. We're losing that and we need to hurry up and get it going because the Mexicans are going to take over.

JT: Yes. I would also say that there's, for me personally, a level of pride that I take in that hard hat when you drive down the road and you see big jackets laying on their side. This is an industry that took a relatively rural area of somewhat lower middle-class poor communities and elevated the standard of living because of the industry that has provided that over the last fifty, sixty years, and we want to keep that here.

LB: Yes, and we need to. But we're losing it quick, so we need to turn it around some kind of way, you know.

JT: What do you see in the next ten years as far as this move to deeper, deeper water? How's that going to impact your business here?

LB: Well, the deep water is not really good for us. The deep water has really hurt the small fabricators. The deep water is only good for the large, large shipyards, and I'm talking about with one thousand to two thousand employees because the deep water is just huge equipment, it's just huge jobs, you know, and a lot of this stuff is done with union laborers.

But the smaller type businesses like us are in the shallow water, and we're in depths of five hundred foot of water to two hundred to fifty to sixty, you know. Deep water has not really been the key to our operation. It's the shallow water that keeps us busy.

The boat people, the small shallow water keeps a lot of the boat people busy. The large boats, they're not as plentiful. There's not as many needed, you know. So you don't need as many people. You don't need as many shipyards. That's why a lot of shipyards went under. A lot of these big vessels were being built by real large shipyards because the demand time to build these big vessels, you have to have a lot of manpower, and you have to have a lot of time, a lot of men to do it. So the smaller shipyards can't compete. They're not rigged up. They don't have the waterfront. They don't have the—it's just too much overhead for them.

JT: Where are these little seismic ships that are coming in, the hundred and twenty and hundred and fifty, where are these being built?

LB: A lot of those boats were all built many years ago. A lot of these are old vessels. There's not too many new ones being built in the last five, six years. They've kind of quit building these small vessels. A lot of the old ones are being repaired now. That's why a lot of the small shipyards are busy now today, because their demand for the small boats now. So they don't have time to build brand-new ones to meet the demand offshore. So what they're doing, they're trying to hurry up and bring these other small shipyards and build them back up with manpower and starting to repair a lot of these boats.

That's why the demand for labor is being extended now, you know. It's the works quick now in the shallow water. It's started up real fast and furious. So nobody's really ready for it.

JT: Right, and that has a lot to do with technology. It's improving in horizontal drilling. Is that what you call it?

LB: Yes.

JT: But that's interesting, because you've said that, and Ronnie has said that. A couple other guys who I've talked to have said that what has happened over the

last twenty-five years is now things are moving back in because the smaller service companies and fabrication companies can provide that industry and they're taking old stuff and just refurbishing it, like the rigs, like the ships instead of building brand-new stuff.

LB: Yes. Brand-new stuff, it's just no market for it. It's this thing, the oilfield's been up and down so people hate to invest in a year or two years to build a boat that about two years from now there might not be a market for it. So they need something quick and furious. They need to get out there and make money. They're asking for a rental right now, not six months from now, not eight months from now, not for two years from now. So they're grabbing these old boats and revamping them.

JT: Very volatile. Have you noticed—we're talking about what you just mentioned here. Have you noticed that that philosophy of rental, I need it now, I've got a six-months job, today in this modern time whereas twenty years ago guys were looking at ten years, twenty years, a long time? Have you seen that adjustment that has taken place over the last couple of decades that really it's bottom line, it's let get it while the getting's good and before hurricane comes and takes us out?

LB: Yes, I see that now. I mean you can't—you've got to understand that a lot of guys and a long time you ago you can see that things was just advancing all the time. I mean they knew they had ten, fifteen years ahead of them you could sell.

But when that first layoff and the oil business went down and went under, you know, people took a real hard turn on that and lost a lot of their businesses and stuff. Over the years, they've learned that it's a business where you don't want to wait two years. You've got to get it now and then they always felt that crunch before and they don't want to feel that crunch again. So when it turns around and there's some work out there, they hurry up and get in there and get it while they can. They're going to be protective for themselves. They're not going to do a long-term thing no more. They're going to do a short term.

They're going to want these boats almost paid for. They're going to finagle some kind of way that they don't overspend and get caught with a lot of debt, you know, if they have to bring the boats back in and not rent them. So all your businesses are like that today. Everybody is fast and furious, you know.

JT: I would equate that to like your father's generation. They lived through the depression and in the fifties and sixties, that's the last thing that they wanted to have happen, so they worked as hard as they could to keep that standard of living up and too keep working at it, because it's that that fear and the psyche of the depression or bust in '83, '84 that just crushed a lot of these communities along the Gulf.

LB: Yes, and then it crushed the oil community and then it crushed the labor force, too, and a lot of the labor force got out of this type of business, you know, and operation. Due to that bust, it's hurt the labor force over ten years, and it's just never come back, you know.

Then I think a lot of it hadn't come back because I don't think we have any type of trade schools. I don't think we have anybody out there teaching these guys and then grabbing them and then talking to them and then explaining to them and trying to give them a future with it, you know, and we've hurt ourselves because of that.

JT: Yes, it's a good point. If you look at, let's say, for example, McDermott or Chicago Bridge and Iron that was down in Morgan City for ten years in the forties, they had set up welding schools and fitting schools to teach people, pulling guys off the sugarcane fields and out of the swamps and putting a torch in their hand and showing them how to deal with. But then again, there's that long-term future, you know. Let's get someone in here and train them so we can keep them around for twenty years.

LB: Yes.

JT: But that sort of business mentality has really, really changed and that probably has a lot to do with the fear, the fear that tomorrow could be gone.

LB: Yes, here tomorrow and gone, and who knows? We don't run the business, so we're not at all major. We get work from them, you know, so we don't control them, you know. They control us, so we have to work around them and we have to be ready.

JT: How's 2006 been for Regional?

LB: Real good, real good. It just looked like a good future, and the next few years it looks like it's going to be good, you know. We have no magic ball to tell us in 2007, 2008, 2009 that it's going to be great. Nobody has that. Nobody knows what the world's going to do thing, nobody.

JT: What's the biggest change that you've seen over of the twenty-five years sitting here on this yard?

LB: I don't know if I would say anything's been a change, you know. It's just I really wouldn't know how to tell you that. I wouldn't know how to explain to you there was a change. The guys, they work the same. The customers are really the same.

It's nice working for everybody. I don't think there's been any downfall in the industry, you know.

The only change I see is in the labor force, and I hope that one day we can change that. I hope we can try to do something with the labor force. I see it going downhill worse today than I've ever seen it, but that's because so many people are busy right now and there's a demand for people. So when there's a six-thousand people like me in business today where they only had maybe fifteen hundred, so all these guys, all these good craftsmen are all spread out, you know.

When things slow down, all these will come back again. These six thousand won't be there. There will only be like two thousand again. So you'll have a lot of people left to work with, you know. You run out of—

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Larry Berges, B-e-r-g-e-s, on December 18th, 2006. Tape one. Larry Berges and MMS Shipfab Project by Jason Theriot.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So you've been traveling over the years, Mr. Larry. Where's some of the places that you've been that are kind of similar feel?

LB: The first seismic place I've been when seismic started was in Singapore, and we did a seismic crew over there. We actually rented boats in Singapore. We actually built their equipment at Regional Fabricators and shipped the equipment to Singapore and then went to Singapore and used their labor to rig up the vessels for a seismic crew. I was involved from that within—took two months to rig the boats up in Singapore.

We came back after the Singapore job and got involved in some boats down in Dubai in Saudi Arabia, and this was with WesternGeco, and we rigged up some boats in Saudi Arabia and did the same method. We built all the equipment in New Iberia, shipped it to Saudi Arabia and went over there for two or three months and rigged up the boats in Saudi Arabia.

I was involved in another one in Malta, Italy, the same thing. We rigged up the equipment and shipped it to Malta, and rigged up the equipment in Italy with their labor. It was pretty astonishing that going to each one of these shipyards overseas that the labor forces were fairly good.

They don't have the technical and they don't have the specialties that we have, so we had to go up there, and I had to supervise all the guys and I had to use really a shallow amount of labor to build the boat. I couldn't operate too many guys because I was by myself supervising, so I can't supervise two thousand hands. I can only supervise twenty or thirty guys on a boat at a time. So I had to bring in some of my own hands from New Iberia with me to help me supervise to

get the boats rigged up because of the capability of the laborers wasn't as outstanding as we do have in New Iberia.

JT: Were these American companies that were getting these boats built, or were these foreign companies or who were the companies that were—who were the clients?

LB: The clients were from Houston, American clients and they were going out there and doing seismic work in foreign countries and they would—our job was to find a foreign shipyard that can rig up their boats. Now, some of the like Tidewater Marine, they were using Tidewater Marine's boats for the seismic crews to rig up the boats. Now they're worldwide. They have boats all over the world, so they're actually an American company, but they have vessels that are leased out all over the world. So whatever port they use and whatever shipyard they use over the years, we went to that port to rig up the boats. That way we could use their same labor to rig up their vessels.

JT: Now, this international trade, this international business, is probably a more recent development, maybe the last decade. How does a little company like Regional Fab at the Port of Iberia get hooked up with an operation such Dubai or Singapore?

LB: Well, the only reason why we got involved in the international, and it's not a year basis, it might be on a—we might want to do it maybe two or three months out the year, only. It's not a twelve-month deal, you know. It come and goes. Maybe two or three years in the seismic it will be really hectic in the international waters, or they might do a lot of seismic work in Dubai and Saudi Arabia. They might do a lot of stuff at Malta. But it's a day-to-day thing. It's a month-to-month deal. If they get a job, they hustle and they go out there and they get out the overseas, you know.

JT: A lot of this comes from, I would imagine, Houston, right?

LB: All over. A lot, some—

JT: As far as the administrative or the negotiating, the people who actually make the connection between the service companies, fab yards and the international markets?

LB: Yes, a lot of it's out of Houston. Some of these companies out of Oslo in Norway. Yes, I've done some work in Norway. I've done some work in Alaska, too. We've done a lot of stuff on the slopes of Alaska. In Prudhoe Bay, we've done a lot of work with WesternGeco up there. We've rigged up a bunch of

equipment and shipped it and rigged it up over there in Alaska, too. We've been all over the world, you know, for quite a bit.

JT: Regional's left it's mark, huh?

LB: Yes, I have anyway. For Regional, I've been all over the world, you know. I've done a lot of small jobs everywhere, you know.

JT: How did that help you in your line of work back here in the small Port of Iberia and dealing with the smaller ships.

LB: I don't know if it has any help to me. I mean it was just a job. It was a money-making job and you just if you want to make money, you've got to go out there and you got to be able to be able to leave your place and then you've got to be able to want to leave your place for a couple of months. But you come back and they'll have other work for you overseas, you know.

It's not an easy business. It's tough on your hands. It's tough on your people. It's tough on your family life because you're not here at Port of Iberia. You're not with your family all night long. But you gain a lot of field experience when you go on these jobs, and when you bring your men and they learn a little bit more, too. They always pick up a little bit percentage of learning ability when you go to these other shipyards.

You get a future reference of people around the world what their labor does, how their labor works against yours, you know. I can see that the labor overseas is not compatible to Louisiana's laborers. They're coming up in the future. They're getting more westernized, the people overseas now. They're getting better, you know, and that's due to their getting a lot of work. They're starting to get a lot of work from American people and they're starting to learn their types of specialties, you know.

JT: Well, let's talk about that community, Iberia Parrish, New Iberia right here. As the port has grown, I certainly feel that the city has grown from 35,000 in the eighties to maybe 50,000 or whatever the population is today of New Iberia proper. But how has the Port of Iberia and this volatile industry over this last thirty years, what has that done to this community of Iberia? Is it attracting more businesses outside of the oil and gas? Is it attracting more people to move here?

LB: Oh, definitely, definitely, the Port of Iberia has pulled in a lot of people and a lot of workforce has come from Mississippi, a lot of workforce has come from Alabama to work over here in New Iberia. Then a lot of people live in Lafayette that work at the port. A lot of the people that live in New Iberia work in Lafayette, and it's back and forth.

I think the Port of Iberia has really pulled a lot of people from McDermott from Morgan City area. I think a lot of the people from Morgan City are working

in this area more. For some reason or another, Morgan City has went real downhill at their ports, and I think it's due to the shallow water work hasn't been around. I think now that the shallow water work is coming back, I think that Morgan City area is starting to pick up. The Port of Iberia has really picked up because of the shallow water.

A lot of the smaller shipyards were more in the Morgan City area, more in the Lafourche area and Houma area. A lot of the smaller shipyards have proceeded on this side of the port, Port of Iberia now. I think there's more in Lake Charles area, more in Intercoastal, more in Cameron. I think more of the shipyards are more in Sabine Pass, more and more now on the east side, you know, or the west side.

JT: Yes. What explains that?

LB: I think that the Morgan City was kind of a dump as far as place to stay. It wasn't a real big nice economy place to build a nice home, beautiful home. I think New Iberia area, Lafayette area has got better land, better means, better hospitals, better community, you know, to live in. So I think that's why it's tracking more the workforce in this area than in Morgan City.

JT: So not necessarily that the maybe the industry has moved far to the west in between southeast Texas and Louisiana. Is it a lot of the inland work? Is it

fluctuating along the Gulf Coast? Is there certain areas where there's more activity in the inland?

LB: I think the activity is still there in the same area in Morgan City and Fourchon, all that. I think there's just no living conditions, you know. I don't think the land mass is there. Of course, flooding. I don't think people want to live in those areas, you know, so I think it's picked up a lot better in New Iberia since we're in a better location for not flooding, you know, for people to live and build a community and have their home, and they don't mind traveling a fifty-minute drive now. The highways are better to go back and forth and to commute to these other areas, you know.

JT: I think also like the McDermotts in Morgan City and some of the other bigger companies have either shut down or have merged, and once those industries left, people left with them.

LG: Yes, yes, I believe that, too, a lot of them left, really left.

Today, I find the workforce. I find the people like to work in a small environment. I think I find they like to work in a smaller shipyard. I find these large shipyards where they work in thousand, fifteen hundred, two thousand people, I found the people are not as aggressive to work there now. I find they like to work in a small family-operated or inland area, you know. I think they get

along better. I think they learn more. I think they're taught more. They're not a number. They don't go to work as a number, like number 12-25 or you're number 61002, you know. You're a person, you know. You're not a number. You're a name now. I find that's why we're having smaller fabrication yards and specialty yards now.

JT: Now, over the years, both you and I have seen this Port of Iberia as far as the companies that have been here, have come, have gone, have merged. Why has Regional been able to sustain these last twenty-five years?

LB: I think that one reason why is I think because of the partnership we've had. We've done well with the four partners. Most companies have a real hard staying in business with partnerships, you know, and I think a two-man partnership is the worst partnership to have. I think the more partnerships you have, I think the better off the company will grow, you know.

But you do have a hard time even with four partners, and hard times is due to no work. If there's a lot of work, you have no problem with a business, you know. If there's a lot of work and there's a good profit to be made, you won't have any trouble with partnerships. But being divided into four like we have and then these in the past and this future is when they work real well for us.

If one of us is down or his business is hurting on his end, the other three guys are surviving and that gives him a little rest, you know. If the other guys are

slow and he's busy, well, that gives him a rest, you know. So we have a chance, they all take a break in twenty-eight years. Where if you're the lone owner of a company, they just work you to death. You have no time to rest. You have no break, you know.

JT: Sounds like a model for success.

LB: Yes, it is, and we can't complain.

JT: Thanks a lot. Thank you.

LB: Okay, guys.

JT: Appreciate it.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 5 April 2007]