

MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Phil Thibodeaux

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Phil Thibodeaux heads up the Domestic Operations for Chet Morrison Contractors (CMC).

Early Career: Thibodeaux worked on pipe laying barges for four summers while attending LSU. He graduated in 1975 in civil engineering and worked for a handful of contractors before joining CMC in 1991 to start up a pipeline division.

Work force/other issues: There are only some many divers available for work in the U.S. CMC is forced to pay huge salaries to keep their workers. It takes a special type character to become a pipeline diver, many of them quit after they discover the murky waters of the shallow GOM OCS so finding and keeping a skilled diving force is crucial to that side of the business, particularly during pipe laying and hurricane salvage.

CMC: CMC has specialized in refurbishing old ABS class supply barges and converting them into diving support vessels and pipe laying tenders. CMC has a fleet of several diver support vessels (DSVs) and 100 divers, some are from Peru and South Africa, and they are looking into Argentina for more.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: Introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background, Phil.

PT: All right. My name is Phil Thibodeaux. I head up the Domestic Operations for Chet Morrison Contractors. I finished college in 1975 from LSU, civil engineer. I went to work for a company, which was a pipeline company here in Houma called Santa Fe Offshore Construction Company. I stayed with them for about ten years, where I went through a merger with another company, a pipeline company, called Global Pipelines, at that time. They renamed themselves to Global Industries. I stayed with them through about '93, '94. Then ran a company for about four or five years called Torch, Incorporated. Then I started here in 2001 and started a pipeline company for Chet Morrison Contractors. I've done for about two years, given an opportunity to head up all the domestic operations here at Chet Morrison.

JT: So your background is laying the pipe, diving, and making sure that whole operation works. Are you a diver yourself?

PT: No, I'm not a diver.

JT: That's interesting work. That's kind of a wildcatter's role, the divers, in the offshore activity. What made you want to get into that area?

PT: As far as what, diving?

JT: Yes.

PT: That's a very pertinent part of the operations when you're laying pipe. When you lay pipe 50 percent of your work is done on the surface, 50 percent of your work is done underwater, so you need divers to do that work.

JT: And they say it's the most dangerous job in the world, is that true?

PT: Yes, it is.

JT: Does that also mean that you've got to have top of the line, the best out there?

PT: That's exactly right.

JT: Where have you found success in finding these—

PT: When we first started our diving company about four or five years ago we were able to hire divers, you know, we knew some that wanted to come onboard. We were able to hire a few divers from different competitors, all right. We built it that way. We have tied in with a couple of schools that actually train, they train divers, but when they come out of the school they're actually what you call a tender, which is an apprentice to being a diver. And usually it takes from that step, from a tender to get to what they call a diver it takes about a year to eighteen months. So what you've got to do is be looking at the future, hiring these tenders from these schools, which come from all over the world, all over the U.S., they'll go to these schools and then end up down here in the Gulf of Mexico or on the East Coast or the West Coast. So we try to tie ourselves into a school and then we hire a lot of these tenders from those schools.

JT: A long-term investment, huh?

PT: Yes.

JT: And tell me a little about these guys. From what I've heard they're somewhat different, a little on the edgy side, a little on the wild side. Does it take a special kind of person to be a diver in that capacity?

PT: Yes, it does. Yes, it does. The type of person, I don't know. I had something the other day I wish I would have kept it, it kind of defines what a diver is, but yes, it does. I find a lot when they get out of these schools and they come here to the Gulf of Mexico to work in the waters down here, I don't know what the figure is, but you probably lose 30, 40 percent of them before they even get to be a diver. You know, this is not what they wanted, you know. They figure diving in crystal-clear, beautiful water. Well, that's not the case down here, usually good visibility you can see maybe a foot, two foot, when you're on the bottom.

JT: So as Chet stated earlier the business for Chet Morrison Construction is really the shallow water up to the shelf. Is that where you're also laying pipe and diving and doing all that?

PT: Yes. Right now we're tackling to about 400-foot water range, that and into the shallow waters, the lakes and bays around this area.

JT: So you'd also have to have vessels that can support a team or a couple of teams?

PT: Yes.

JT: Where are those vessels coming from? You're on a building ship, so where—

PT: Okay, what we normally do is, we, when we first got started we found a barge, just a basic cargo barge. I say basic, we wanted to be ABS Coast Guard, and we took that vessel and through our knowledge it was really a quick way to get into the business. I mean, once you start buying the equipment and be able to get it to work. We actually put the quarters on it, put the lake gear on it. So we actually built it ourselves. When I say, built it, we'd go to a shipyard or we'd go to Foret's who had a fab yard and we would get the labor from them to put the equipment on the vessel. We didn't actually build the barge, but we actually—we looked and found a set of quarters. We took and modified that quarters. That's where the people sleep at. We bought the equipment from different suppliers, you know, the pipe handling gear, the rollers, the jet pumps, we built the jet sled, we bought the anchor winches.

JT: Customized it yourself?

PT: Yes, customized it ourselves, right.

JT: Now, tell me, explain to me a little bit so I can know the importance of a diving team, if you've got a two or four-man team down there on the pipeline, what are they responsible for doing? Is it welding? Is it installing? What exactly do divers do with the pipeline component?

PT: Basically when we're laying pipe we usually have a few divers onboard and what they're doing is watching the pipe as we lay it off the barge. So you basically got, let's say, three phases to the installation of a pipeline. You lay it and you've got to bury it below the Gulf bottom, and you've got to connect the ends. The laying is probably less diving intensive. That's most all surface. You know, we're welding the pipe and spitting it off the back of the barge.

The second part, burying the pipes on the bottom, you're setting the sled, you're pulling the sled along the bottom, and you're burying the pipe below the mud line.

Okay, now you need your divers about every two hours to make a dive. First of all, he's got to set the sled on the pipeline. Then he goes, what they call, checking, ditch checks, making sure the pipe's buried properly. And probably where you need them the most is the end connections, setting the risers on the platform, that's all diving intensify. That's twenty-four hours a day diving.

JT: Sounds like it's a major component.

PT: Yes.

JT: You've got to have it.

PT: Oh, yes, you've got to have divers in this industry.

JT: So tell me as we've talked about over the last thirty years the fluctuation of the prices of oil and the booms and the busts that we've seen, how have divers adjusted to that and how has pipeline adjusted to the coming and going of these various different groups of people from all over the country? What's been your experience over the last couple of years?

PT: My experience, when I first got in the business in 1975 there was a good group of experienced divers in the Gulf of Mexico, then in the eighties a downturn. That group kind of—you know, it's like anything else, supply and demand. You didn't need them, so they kind of dwindled off. Then all of a sudden you start getting some business back up in the nineties and you're trying to build your diving force back up. What does it take? You bring the salaries up, right? That's basically what you did. Then toward the late nineties it kind of went a little downturn, not much, but then I started back up in early 2000 and then the same thing. You know, especially when the hurricane hit, then you had to start looking at the salaries of these people. Salaries go up, you start—

JT: Keep them here so they don't go down the road.

PT: Or bring them in, and you've got to bring them in from other parts. Divers you've got to bring in from other parts of the world. You know, we actually had divers from Peru. Yes, we were able to get—

CM: South Africa, too.

PT: Yes, South Africa, Peru, and now we're looking at Argentina.

JT: What about the U.S. Navy, has that provided you guys with any kind of pool?

PT: We've made a couple attempts on trying to hire these divers when they come out of retirement out of the Navy and I don't think we've had any success. We've went to a couple of these and they would notify us, the military, saying, hey, these people are coming out, and we actually set up a shop down there and interviewed a few of them, a workshop.

JT: Well, as time has transpired have you seen any decrease in quality of, not necessarily the individuals, but the performances of these people from the first group in the seventies that were diehard, and it kind of goes along with everything, not just the offshore industry, but everything.

PT: Yes, the experience is not there. You've got to give them the experience. You've got a few experienced personnel, but yes, you've got to supply them the training and you've got to give them the experience, and the experience just comes with time.

JT: How many divers do you employ?

PT: We have about a hundred diving personnel right now.

JT: Do you?

PT: Yes.

JT: And these guys are, as you said, you're domestic, so that's within the Gulf, I'm not sure if that's the Gulf of Mexico or you also—Trinidad area, as well?

PT: No, just here in the Gulf of Mexico.

JT: That's a good lineup, a hundred divers.

PT: Yes.

JT: What are some of the shifts? I mean, you go out for two weeks or how does that work for a diver?

PT: I believe that during the hurricane these guys were probably, if I had to guess, 95 percent utilized.

JT: Really?

PT: Yes.

JT: So this vessel that can support them goes out there, they can stay out there for as long as need be, right?

PT: That's right. And what we do also is if we go down on weather, we'll try to get those guys, we'll give them some time off. But like last year you were probably 99 percent utilized with our equipment, so you've got to have divers to operate your equipment.

JT: Let's talk about the pipe laying. You guys have one vessel or is it a team of vessels that go out there?

PT: Yes, we have three pipeline barges and four dive vessels.

JT: Okay. Wow, so you have to be at multiple places.

PT: Right. Yes, but some of the dive vessels we built we took supply boats, 180-foot supply boats, which was used for rig-tending, platform-tending, we took those and converted it, we added quarters to it, we added anchor winches to it, and all that vessel does is support divers and basically do the end connections on the pipeline. You want your lay barges to lay and bury pipe. Then you want these diving support vessels, your DSVs, to do the end connections and do the picking and testing work.

JT: Where are the pipe-laying barges in that whole operation, where are those vessels manufactured? Is that here at Chet Morrison?

PT: Like I said, we don't manufacture. We found barges, which were actually cargo barges that we used to carry pipe, structures, offshore.

JT: And you put a crane on it?

PT: We took those added quarters, added a crane, put winches on it, and we converted it into pipeline barges.

JT: Okay, so your expertise bringing here was the pipeline laying technology?

PT: Yes.

JT: Okay. And is that something that—you said you graduated in the seventies from LSU. Is that something LSU taught you?

PT: I spent four summers offshore when I was at LSU on pipeline barges when I was going to college. I learned it. I had a year experience before I got out of college. And worked actually offshore on these barges as a rigger, dope hand, mechanic, you name it.

JT: And you've got to have some experienced personnel up there with these young divers. Where do you find the experience hands to go out there, sort of the supervisors of the—

PT: When we started the diving company there were people that, I'm not going to say I knew, but some of the guys that we hired to run the diving department actually knew them and recruited them and hired them.

JT: It's almost like there's a community of these divers. It sounds like they're amongst themselves.

PT: Right, yes.

JT: Competing for jobs.

PT: You might have, what, 1,500 divers in the Gulf of Mexico, a thousand or 1,500, something like that. So it's a small group of people. But a diver is usually in the industry eight to ten years, that's it, that's how long you've got them, where a welder you might have him for thirty years. But because of the type of work they do and I guess the wear and tear on their body, it's usually eight to ten years they can function as a diver.

JT: Like an NFL football player.

PT: Yes, exactly.

JT: If only they were paid close to that, huh?

PT: Yes.

JT: Okay. Well, Phil, I appreciate it.

PT: All right.

[End of interview]

