MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: James Manzolillo

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio
Jim Manzilillo (died 2007), a native of Pennsylvania and U.S. WWII Merchant Marine Veteran, is the founder of the Houston Maritime Museum. He owned and operated a ship building company for the Mexican Government and for the United Nations. He is a naval architect and world traveler.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with James Manzolillo. Jim Manzolillo is the founder of the Houston Maritime Museum. He is a nautical engineer, has traveled the world, been a seaman for most of his life. This is Jim Manzolillo on the history of the Port of Houston, oral history interview by Jason Theriot on June 23rd, 2006.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself and your experience in the maritime world, sort of your career in a brief paragraph or so.

JM: Well, I don't know if I could do it in a paragraph, but I do have something here written that you can copy. I lived in Pennsylvania along the Schuylkill River, and when I was about six years old I used to go down to that river and pick up pieces of wood and so forth, and try to carve them into a boat. Then when I was about twelve years old I decided to try to build a raft, so I got old wood that I found floating around, and then I had a long pole trying to push myself up and down that river, and I wasn't able to do it.

So this is a rectangular raft, of course. So I decided to go home and get a saw and cut the front of this raft so that it's a little bit more pointy, so instead of pushing the water I would move it, and that lets you through, and it worked. So I decided then I would like to study more about ships.

At the same time I was selling newspapers, and the editor took an interest in what I was doing, and he managed to get me a scholarship to Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken. So I went up there for an interview, and they wouldn't accept me because the name on my birth certificate was an Italian name and not the English name. So they said, "Well, who are you?" So I had to go back and get what is called the alderman, so it's like a city councilman, to verify that I was the same James Leon Manzolillo, so that's how I got in.

So I was in school up there studying naval architecture until, let me see, I was in my last year and the war broke out. So the degree that you get is naval architect, marine engineer. Well, I had learned a lot about how to design ships and build ships and so forth, but mostly design them, but I thought I needed more knowledge about the marine engineering part, so I decided to join the Merchant Marine.

JT: Good choice.

JM: And I made sure that I worked in the engine room, which I did. I remained in the Merchant Marines until June or August '46, and I advanced up to —you know, your licenses keep going up. I got my second engineer's license in diesel, steam, and what they call unlimited horsepower, which means you're not limited to a tugboat or something like that.

JT: What types of ships were you on during the war?

JM: During the war I was on oil tankers, all oil tankers, Esso oil tankers.

JT: Transporting to the Pacific?

JM: No, Atlantic and Pacific. For example, convoys would leave Newfoundland, so we would be carrying diesel fuel, gasoline, say from Aruba in the Caribbean up to Newfoundland, so these convoys could load up and then head up the—for example, the ones that went to Russia, up to the North Sea, the Mermansk run, which was extremely dangerous. But we were also delivering wherever the fighting people were, fighting men.

We also would load ships, naval vessels, at sea. In other words, a destroyer runs out of fuel, so we would come alongside. So, most of Latin America, etc., etc. And then, of course, I had the experience about being torpedoed off the coast of Brazil, and spent four days on a life raft.

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

JM: It was the *Aruba*, Esso *Aruba*.

JT: Tanker?

JM: Yes. Well, anyway, so much for that. When the war was over I decided to go back to school to study mechanical engineering, so I went out to Colorado, got in, got a degree, and then I went to work for Caterpillar, and my classmates thought I was crazy working for a tractor company. What they didn't realize is that Caterpillar was a great manufacturer of diesel engines for their tractors.

JT: Still are.

JM: They knew a good engine. But Caterpillar felt there was a market for their tractor engine to be used as a marine engine, so I was hired to help to develop a marine department.

JT: Is that right?

JM: So that's where I worked, and my job was to train salesmen on how the marine engines worked, and what we had, and how they can be installed in various vessels, so that they can go out and try to sell them. So Caterpillar also, I gave classes there at Caterpillar when they would bring in some of the salespeople from different countries. Then they decided to send me to different countries to preach the same thing about the engines, which I did.

Then they decided there was a big market, well, first of all in the Belgian Congo. I spent quite a few months over there. But they felt there was a bigger market in all of Latin America, so they asked me if I'd like to move to Mexico City and cover Latin America, in other words, from one end to the other, which I did.

I was down there a couple of years, then I decided I was getting a lot of the people that I had met in foreign countries writing to me about, "Can you help us with this design, or that design, and can you help us find some machinery for ships, like propellers and shafting?" And then they wanted to know if I could help them find

a place to build them. So I decided to go in as a consultant, open up an office in Mexico, which I did.

JT: So were you still retained by Caterpillar, or had you moved on?

JM: No, no, I quit, and Caterpillar, of course, wondered where I was going to go. So some of my drawings that I had of ship designs got in the hands of, evidently, fishing co-ops in Mexico, because, you know, Mexico was great for shrimp vessels and tuna vessels and so forth. So the co-ops, one of them at least, went to the Development Bank in Mexico, said, "Look. This man is building a good ship, or he's designing a good ship. Why doesn't he build these ships, or design them for Mexico?"

So they went to the bank, the Development Bank. The bank called me, said, "Look. We'd like you to build some ships for Mexico, using these designs."

I said, "I can't. I don't have a shipyard."

Their response was, "Well, go find one." Well, then I had to figure out where the hell am I going to go to find a shipyard. So I drove to Acapulco, 240 miles, couldn't find anything there; went to Vera Cruz, that was the same distance, even worse; and then I did some more looking around and I couldn't find a thing. In the meantime the bank was putting pressure on me to get started. So I lived in Mexico City, 7400 feet above sea level, so I decided just to build the damn things there, at that altitude.

So then I had to go around finding a place in Mexico City that was big enough, and I found a place after looking and looking and looking, and I talked to the owner. He said, "Well, yeah, I'll rent it to you, but you get rid of the people in there," the squatters, and the pigs and chickens and everything else.

So we made a deal, and then I hired a couple of young engineers out of school, and I gave one guy a list of lumber that we needed, so he went to Campeche to look for it. I gave another one a list of the kind of men we needed, so he went up to Tampico and another place called Toco La Bampo, finding guys who build ships on the beach, you know, that kind of stuff.

So anyway, before you know it, why, a couple of weeks later the wood started to arrive. Then I went out and bought —I went to a used-machinery mart in Mexico City and bought some woodworking machinery, set them up. Boy, the next thing you know we were laying keels, cutting wood.

JT: What was the name of your company?

JM: Imesa, I-m-e-s-a. Now, for me to have a company in Mexico I had to use a Mexican name, something in Mexican. That Imesa means *ingeneria y machinaria especially sava*, S.A., means special machinery. I couldn't think of anything else, but yet I had to find something short. So okay, now we're starting to build these things, and the trolley car ran right outside of us, because we had a wall, and people figured what the hell's going on in there? And next thing you know they started saying, "This crazy Italian is building ships. I don't know why he builds them here. How's he going to get them down to the port?"

Well, to me that was another problem that I didn't worry about, because I knew they couldn't stay there. So we had the bank come over and look at them. They were pleased. Incidentally, I've got pictures of all this stuff. So after we got some of them ready to move, I had to design a trailer to put them on, and find somebody who was local enough to drive his tractor-trailer, drive his tractor to pull this flatbed with the boat on it.

JT: How big of boats are we talking about?

JM: These were forty-six feet, fishing vessels. And boy, I'll tell you, to get to Acapulco you have to go to a place called Cuernavaca, which is 10,000 feet up, and then come down, and then the highway and the road, of course, are about this wide while you're making these curves. You're looking down 5,000 feet and you're thinking *mama mia.*

So anyway, we get down to Acapulco. My next problem was where do I launch it? So I went to different places. Nobody could help me, and meantime I had the boat there. So I went to the navy department in Acapulco. They have a small base, and I talked to them. Well, their workers didn't have any work. So, "Yeah, we'll launch it for you." So they did, they launched it for me. So each one then that we built—I think there was eight of them—was launched in Acapulco. I didn't want any parts of Vera Cruz.

By that time I thought I don't want to build any more wooden vessels, because the market was in steel, so I had to teach these men how to weld. So I rented a warehouse and bought the steel, and showed them how you cut the steel. Of course, you have to first make templates, and we did that right in my office on the first floor. So from those templates we make the patterns, and you cut the steel accordingly.

Well, while we're cutting steel and welding the thing together, I thought I'd better go out looking for some business. We got a call, or rather I found out that FAO, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, they had an office in Rome, and in Rome it's the department of fisheries of FAO. What FAO would do is help to develop—Food and Agriculture Organization—help develop natural resources for poor countries, could be lumber, could be whatever, but fisheries was included.

So I managed to get some drawings, or some ink—and I found out that they wanted to build some training vessels for Salvador. So I decided to go ahead and do a drawing and quotation and proposal, specs etc., and I sent it to Rome to FAO. Well, they liked it, and they liked it because I'm telling them about this big shipyard we had.

JT: Plus, you're Italian.

JM: So anyway, I learned that Mexico had two free ports in the southern part of Mexico. One is called Coatzacoalcos on the gulf side, and the other one is Salina Cruz on the Pacific. They're about 220 miles apart. It's down where Mexico gets skinny. So those are two free ports. The Mexican government in 1925 decided to build a railroad between those two ports, and the object was ships coming in from, say, the Atlantic. If they didn't have enough cargo to go down to the Panama Canal, they could offload, take by train, load in Salina Cruz in the Pacific, and take it to Asia or wherever they were going to go. So that's how the free ports became.

The good thing about the free ports is I was only interested in building ships for foreign countries, not for Mexico. Anything that you brought into Mexico needed a license, and that was hard to get, because somebody would claim they could make it there. The other thing that was beneficial being in the free ports, Mexico allowed me to bring in anything that I needed as long as it went out of the country, didn't go into Mexico. So by building ships and exporting them, I was bringing in foreign currency, which Mexico liked. Every month they'd ask me, "How many more orders do you have?"

So anyway, meantime I'm traveling to different countries, and I'll tell you how I knew where to go, or thought I knew where to go. Meantime, this ship that we

started in this warehouse started getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. And then FAO, F-A-O, came to visit Mexico City, and I was down at this new shipyard, which was a swamp, so I had to fill it in. Then I bought some army tents here in Houston, took them down, tried to set them up. Well, the wind was blowing, this and that.

And then here I bought some used welding machines, gasoline-driven, diesel-driven, whatever, plus tools, shipped them down there and I just had them underneath the tent. So the guy from FAO comes. He's a naval architect. He called my office, my office called me. I'm down in Coatzacoalcos. Said, "Jim, we have a problem. The representative from FAO is here. He wants to see you and the shipyard." Well, how do you stop that? You couldn't.

So he flew down to Coatzacoalcos. I picked him up, took him to the hotel and bought him a luncheon, hoping that he'd accept my word that everything is okay, don't worry about it. He said, "No, we're spending money from the U.N. I must see the shipyard." So, flew him out to this fenced-in area and he said, "Well, where's the shipyard?"

I said, "Over there under the tent." [laughs]

He said, "Jim, I drove all this distance or came all the way to see your shipyard, but you don't have one."

I said, "I will have."

He said, "Well, you can't do it. You don't have anything."

I said, "Tell you what. You want that first ship, you give me an order for it. And you want it in six months, I'll have it for you."

He said, "You can't. It's impossible." He said, "Besides that, I can't give you an order because you have nothing." So I finally convinced him that if he gives me his word, that I would deliver this vessel. So he said, "Well, you give me a letter, handwritten, that FAO has no obligations." Okay, here it is. So he left for Salvador, I go back to Mexico City, and I go to look in that warehouse. By that time the hull was too damn big to get out the door, but that's the hull I was going to use. So I decided to cut it in four pieces and load them on flatcars, and take them down.

So, got into port. Now it's a problem of how do I lift them up and put them together? Well, we worked that out, and then the next thing you know, why, we're working, finishing it, etc., etc. Next problem was how do I launch it? Well, on the Coatzacoalcos River you have tankers going by, and the navy would not allow me to put anything in the water, and it was permanent.

So I had to design a floating barge hinged on the shore. So I rolled this thing out and then I had a tank on the back seventy feet away, and fill it with water until it got down to this level, and then launched the boat. So that's how we launched it. Well, then I called the guy from FAO, said, "Your boat's ready." Can't believe it. Anyway, he came. They accepted it. They had it inspected, then he became one of my better salespeople. He was very impressed. So the next thing you know, I'm building boats for here and there.

Well, I had to go out and look for more orders, and what I would do is take a map of the world, but it just shows the ocean floor, and I knew from research that shrimp, for example, big market for shrimp. Shrimp are caught on the shelf, continental shelf, and countries that have a continental shelf. They go out maybe five miles, six miles, that's where the fish are. But the shrimp are only in warm

waters, say twenty degrees above the equator, and maybe five degrees below the equator, but around the world.

So I'd look on this map and see which countries are in that area and have a continental shelf, and those are the ones I'd mark down and go visit. So next thing you know I'm visiting Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, not Baghdad, I went to Baghdad, but Iraq. Then next thing you know, why, I start getting inquiries from England, so I built a couple of ships for them, and they liked them. They gave me a repeat order. I built ships for Germany.

JT: Shrimp vessels?

JM: Well, yes, but shrimp and fishing, because they were fishing in different areas. And then I decided to go to India. When I got to India I realized that Indians don't catch fish. It's against their religion. They don't kill animals, they don't kill birds. I thought, how the hell am I going to convince them to fish? So anyway, it took several trips over there, and I finally convinced them that they had this area, the shelf, with lots of shrimp on it, because nobody ever shrimped, and the market was great. In other words, you can sell that stuff to anyplace, Japan. They'd buy your catch before you even catch it.

I told them, I said, "Your market is there. It's a payment in dollars, and you need the foreign currency."

So they were hesitant, but I think I convinced them enough for them to say, "Well, what we will do is allow other countries to come in and bid on these ships." I think there were eleven countries. Meantime, I had been going around different ports, learning about which port had ice, which had refrigerant, etc., etc., etc., and where I could find fishermen. Well anyway, the competition was pretty stiff, because the U.S., Greece, Spain, they were all quoting, and Norway, but

they were quoting these large refrigerated shrimp trawlers, eighty feet, ninety feet, a hundred feet long. They were using deep freeze, put the shrimp in the hold, etc.

I came up with a design where we'd be using tanks, Fiberglas tanks which we made at the shipyard. These tanks held one ton of shrimp. The Fiberglas tank, I would wrap copper coil on the outside of it, because that was going to be the Freon on the outside. Then I would take that tank and put it inside another tank, larger, and put foam in, so now you have a double-walled tank, but the copper tubing is on the outside of the inner tank. And then you'd turn on your refrigeration system and those tubes get cold. Next thing you know you have ice forming on the interior of the inside tank, okay?

Now, you cannot freeze shrimp unless you put them down in the hold with deep freeze, but you need a special Freon called 502, if you wish. And I found out that India doesn't have that. They barely had Freon 12, like the stuff you use in your home. So I designed everything around Freon, so the refrigeration would use Freon, because that was available.

So in competing with these other countries I began to explain to them that since the fisherman were new they'd need something simple, and they don't want to stay at sea more than three, four, five days. They don't want to go out forty-five days. Otherwise they're going to do damage to the machinery so they come back in. Well, they bought that. Next thing you know I got an order for thirty ships, so now I've got the two shipyards full. We had about forty ships under order at one time.

JT: At the pinnacle of your development down there, how many employees did you have?

JM: Two hundred.

JT: All Mexican, skilled?

JM: Oh yes, I couldn't bring anybody in. I couldn't bring any foreigners in, and I had to get a special permit to work in Mexico, which I did. Well anyway, that takes care of that business, and the business grew to the point where some Mexican businesspeople thought that was a good company to have under Mexican control, so they approached me if I wanted to sell it. Sure I'll sell it, because I was down there about twenty-five years.

So I moved out of Mexico and had to find a place to live, and I didn't know where to go. I didn't have any friends up here. Any people I knew were the suppliers that I was using from Houston. So I decided I was going to drive from Pennsylvania, my home, out to the West Coast, and one of them called me, said, "Jim, why don't you stop in Houston on the way?" Why not? So I stopped.

Well, one day, two days, three days, four days, five days. Next thing you know I decided to lease an apartment, and I didn't like having an apartment so I decided to buy a condo. So I went looking for a condo, and the place I found, they had converted apartments to condos real nice, and I ended up buying twenty condos. Well, the next thing you know I'm in the condo business.

Anyway, then I didn't get to the West Coast, but I remained here, and I missed the sea, so I began to cruise. So I did ninety-five cruises.

JT: On a cruise ship?

JM: Well, different ones. No, cruise ships, Cunard primarily, seven times around the world. And next thing you know, why, you know, even on the cruise ship nothing to do, you get bored. So I began to lecture about different subjects, could be how

to utilize the waves, the energy in waves to generate electricity, that kind of stuff, which I thought would be of interest to the passengers.

I would go in these different countries and maybe go visit a museum, come back with a ship model, take them back to the ship and then they would keep them on the ship till we got to a port, and then I'd arrange to have it shipped to one of my condos, so I had my condo full of ships.

At the same time, I think I'll turn it into a small museum. Well, I couldn't bring anybody in in a condo, and I realized then that Houston today, largest port in the U.S., did not have a maritime museum. So I called up the Museum of Natural Science, made an arrangement to go see them, and told them I had about thirty ship models that I would like to donate to them with the condition they would display them. So, "Yes, we're interested."

So they came over to my place. They wanted me to take measurements and list the names, and write a letter of my intent, which I did. Well, two weeks later, didn't hear from them. So I went back over there again and tried to find the person I'd talked to; they wouldn't give me two minutes of their time. I thought, the hell with this, I'll open up my own museum.

JT: Good idea.

JM: So that's how this museum came. So I was out looking for a place and I didn't know where to drive around, because where I live is not too far from here. I drove by this place here and I noticed they were going to tear down houses over there, and this place here was three years abandoned, empty. It was a mess here. So I saw a sign out there, for sale by owner. I called up the owner; it was a lady. That was in the morning. That afternoon I made a deal and bought this place.

Then I had problems getting people, contractors etc., etc., to restore this place. I thought, hell, if I can restore a ship I can restore this place. So what we have today is that old building. Then this was open porch here. This was a window. I mean, the building stopped here. I didn't have any place to enlarge, so I decided to add these three rooms down here and the second floor. So this enlarged to 6,000 feet, because I couldn't go out any further.

Then it's only natural to develop a company like a museum, so we had the Ship Modelers Society that meets here every six weeks. We have the World War II veterans that meet here or down at the port every month. We have the captains and the pilots of the port that meet once a month. We have companies like the Propeller Club, the Transportation Club, these are all people associated with the maritime. They come here and have one of their social affairs.

And, of course, I'm embarrassed because we don't have enough room, so I thought we'd better look for more room. So I've been looking and looking and looking, and I thought, well, we'll go to the port and see if they could help us. Talking to the port, that we felt that a maritime museum was a necessity for Houston.

So I got talking to the commissioners etc., and I found out that downtown at 426 Austin, on the corner of a prairie there is an old garage that belongs to the county, two-story, and I told the port about this, if they would help us obtain that since it was empty for three or four years. So next thing you know, they start making inquiries and so forth, and we've had a number of hurdles to overcome, but we're reaching the point where we'll get that building, and then the next step is to restore it. And it'll be a big job moving all this stuff down there, but that's where we are.

The port on Tuesday will have a party for the new commissioner, [Elyse] Lanier, do you know who she is?

JT: I've heard of her.

JM: So they're going to set up about twenty-four tables, and they thought maybe having a marine talking on each table, so I said, "Yeah, we can help you with our gift shop." So next thing you know I get a call that Elyse, is it, Elyse Lanier, she was on the way to see what she could get, and some other people from the port. Well, they ended up buying ten ships and lighthouses, and this, one for each table. This has been a big help for us, to have someone like this new commissioner come here and maybe sponsor us, not money-wise, but push.

JT: Political-wise.

JM: We have a museum. Let's do something about it. Let's give them a place. They can spend money on this, this, and that. Let's help them, because after all, we're going to be doing a lot of things for the port. So we have an architect coming this afternoon who's doing the layout, and one of the big things that we will be stressing is the history of the Port of Houston. We probably will have a big display of the ships in the water maybe.

You've heard of Allen's Landing? Well, we were very interested in getting that building—it's the coffeehouse—and let that be part of the museum. I don't know if we're going to be successful or not. But we will be having one big room, well-furnished if you wish, with the necessary communication equipment and so forth, so we can have these different maritime groups—there's about ten of them—have their monthly meetings at the museum, but there'll be a lot of room, etc. And this is going to be a big help.

We have a board of directors now, seventeen. Now, these guys are all important people in the maritime. They took an interest. I mean, they're dedicated to this museum.

JT: That's great.

JM: Yes.

JT: We're talking pilots, Coast Guard, union—

JM: Well, not the union, but Coast Guard. We've had lectures here for the Coast Guard, for example. We have Cub Scouts that come in. We teach them how to make knots and so forth. And right alongside of us is a little passageway that was open; I decided to cover it, and we have a school to teach kids ship modeling. So we started in January and they can only get away on a Friday, and since the place is small we have four come in in the morning, four in the afternoon on a Friday.

So we have ship models, not plastic, wood models that we show them what to do, and then the Ship Modelers Society that makes the ship models, that meet here every six weeks, we have those guys come in as instructors, showing the kids how to carve, how to smooth, how to sand, put the masts in. Then, of course, in order to do a ship model they have to learn about geography and history, where that ship operates. What was it? Like the *Endeavor*, like this one, or the *Victory*. So they're learning history and geography at the same time they're making a model, so that's what we'll be stressing.

JT: And you can bring that to the new museum?

JM: Oh, absolutely.

JT: Now, Mr. Jim, let me ask you this. I know that most of the items in here are your personal collection, I'm sure.

JM: Most of them, yes.

JT: You've acquired a few things over the years, and you're going to be taking all of this, and I'm sure some in your warehouse, some of those artifacts with you to the new museum.

JM: Everything will go to the new place.

JT: Have you also acquired other artifacts from other collectors, other naval historians, maritime historians?

JM: We get some items, but most of it is what I buy, and I've spent quite a bit of money, but I'm also donating everything to the museum, because I want it to continue. Okay, that's the story.

JT: I know you've been working on it for a couple of years.

JM: What's that?

JT: Trying to get your new building.

JM: Oh yes, oh yes, four years.

JT: Four years. And how close are you? Last time we talked you were looking at fall of 2006 as a possible. I guess that keeps getting pushed back.

JM: I think now that Lanier was here, I had the impression that even maybe this month they will have it on the agenda. This is what happened. September 2005 the County of Houston, you know, the downtown, the county commissioners, they negotiated with the port. The port has a piece of property called Banana Bend that the county would like to have, so they're trying to arrange where you swap Banana Bend for the garage. There's a small environmental problem that came up. They're trying to work that out. I don't think that's going to be a problem. But it looks like it's going to be very soon, take place. Okay, go ahead with your question.

JT: Let me stop this tape.

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Jim Manzolillo, Port of Houston, June 23rd, 2006. This is tape two.

Now Mr. Jim, tell me what you know about Buffalo Bayou in the nineteenth century, and how that has translated into what we know today as the ship channel.

JM: Well, I gave a lecture to one of the maritime groups. In fact, it was the Propeller Club, and a lot of the people from the port were there, I mean the Port Authority. I mentioned that it took 170 years for the Port Authority to become number one in the U.S., and it has taken the museum six years to become number one in Houston, because we're the only maritime museum. But the comparison was of interest.

I can't tell you too much about the beginning, but I have stuff that I read, I have the books on them and so forth, and then when I went down to Allen's Landing—you've been there?

JT: I have not.

JM: Well, you've got to go and see the dock port that they put in. They have an old coffeehouse that was used back in the 1840s and the 1830s, or 1860s, because Allen's Landing would load cotton and coffee and other items onto these sternwheelers, or side-wheelers. You know what a side-wheeler is, and a sternwheeler? Because that's the kind of steam-powered vessels they had. The coffeehouse is still standing, and the dock is beautiful. It's right across, I guess it's from the community college, and the jail across the river where the bridge is, etc., etc.

Well, the Allen brothers, you've heard of them, they somehow or another ended up in Allen's Landing, that area. And, of course, it was difficult because of the brush. The water was full of sand and so forth, and it took quite a bit. The first vessel to come up the channel was called *The Laura*, and we have a picture, a painting here of it. It's probably the only one that exists, but we have it.

But little by little Houston became an important place, and outsiders from New Orleans decided to help to develop Houston as a port. So as it developed you had more ships coming in, and then you had the Port Authority was born. At that time it was not called Port Authority. It had a different name. Then the dredging was important, so little by little they would dredge, but it wasn't deep enough, it wasn't wide enough, and they couldn't accommodate the type of vessel they would like to. That is the background as I know it.

Now, what has happened after that, I'd have to refer to the books I have on it.

JT: It sounds like it took some visionaries—

JM: Absolutely, yes.

JT: —like Tom Ball and Rice, Captain Morgan, just some of the big hitters.

JM: Yes, those were the guys.

JT: The Allen brothers early on, it took a big vision to see that this little channel that came up to this major city was going to be very economically important.

JM: Do you have the port book called *Before and After*? Let me see if I have it here. Who's the person you know at the port that you mentioned, Marie or?

JT: Felicia Griffin is—

JM: Okay, ask her.

JT: So these were the visionaries that saw the port beginning through, huh?

JM: Yes. And as I say, all that stuff is well written up. It's just a question of my putting my hands on it here. I have it here, but I keep it because I know we're going to do a story on it.

JT: Well, let me pick your brain about this. We know that Galveston is a natural port. It's a beautiful bay to come into the northwest Gulf of Mexico, a perfect location for international commerce, and yet that has been some competition early on in the early twentieth century between Galveston and the Port of Houston, and if you look at today, Houston has well surpassed Galveston. What do you know about that competition?

JM: Well, the competition, it was natural to start with Galveston, because that was on the water. Ships could come in. And that's actually before the channel was deepened and widened and so forth. Then keep in mind also, you have to have a lot of structures and docks and so forth when you start getting ships in. So another big thing that helped Houston was the ships that carry, what do you call it, the containers, container ships. Now, that's just about fifty years old now, and that is a big improvement.

For example, when I was in Coatzacoalcos and I would order something from Europe to come on a ship, I would specify and make sure and get a letter confirming that that ship would not stop in Vera Cruz. It would go right into the free port. The reason for that is, stevedores would break in and try to sell me my own stuff. The containers eliminate that. So containers was a tremendous improvement.

That has helped Houston, because to have containers you have to have huge storage facilities, docks, machinery, etc., and I'd say Galveston was not ready for that, and that's the reason Houston became so large. So many of the lines, big lines, shipping lines, cargo ships, tankers, you know, they get bigger and bigger and bigger. So they thought they couldn't stop at Galveston. It just wasn't enough space, if you wish, so that's how Houston became number one.

And then up until about a year ago—I think it's a year ago—the biggest port in the U.S. was the Port of Louisiana.

JT: New Orleans.

JM: Well, no, not New Orleans, south of New Orleans, the Port of Louisiana. It was big because a lot of stuff comes down the Mississippi, etc., cotton and corn and whatever, and it's the past year I guess it is that Houston surpassed. Now, when

you measure the size of a port, you know how you do it, by tonnage, tonnage, by tonnage, how much tonnage is handled, not by the number of ships, because if you had two huge cargo ships versus ten little bitty ones, why, it's not a good comparison. Okay, question.

JT: The channel has been dredged and has been widened over the years; containerization in the fifties obviously puts Houston on the map as one of the top ports in the world.

JM: It's fourth largest.

JT: What about the oil-and-gas industry? What kind of impact has that had on the development of the port?

JM: It is said that Houston produces 25 percent of the gasoline used in the United States, Houston.

JT: The refineries?

JM: So you either ship it out in pipes, or oil tankers, and I think there's quite a bit of oil tankers going out, and, of course, a lot of oil tankers coming in with crude oil to be processed, so that has had a definite influence. This is another thing that we will be stressing with displays about how important the energy industry is to Houston.

JT: About what time period did all of this begin to change? I realize that cotton was a major export commodity for Port of Houston in the twenties and the thirties.

JM: And rice.

JT: And rice. You have World War II, of course. Development of oil is slowly catching up. You've got the establishment of the petrochemical industry.

JM: No, I would say they were here probably before, yes, way before, primarily because oil was discovered.

JT: In Beaumont and—

JM: Yes, it was there, yes, it was there. Of course the first one was in Pennsylvania. But the oil was discovered here. In some of the places where they had lots of oil it was said that you could walk from one tower to another one; they had that much oil. So, obviously, it would be expensive to ship that oil, so you process it. So you have to find out when the oil was first found by Pa something. I don't have it in my mind right now, but that was, I would say, the beginning.

And then the oil pumps, you know, the ones that look like alligators, well, they're built mostly in Lufkin.

JT: Oh, really?

JM: Yes. Yes, Lufkin is a good place where they have foundries and machine shops, and cater to oil machinery, oil necessities, the machinery that pumps the donkeys or whatever you want to call them.

JT: So along with some of that, the oil refineries, I imagine there's also fabrication yards. I know that there's probably Shell and BP and EXXON, some of the big companies are down there as well. What are some of the other—

JM: Wait a minute. Down where?

JT: All along the ship channel.

JM: No. No, they don't fabricate. No, they don't fabricate here in Houston. The drilling rigs you're talking about, offshore rigs, those, primarily because of labor, are made in foreign countries, Korea, Japan, Thailand maybe. Yes, they're the ones who make these rigs and then ship them, and then they assemble them. After they're tested they disassemble and then move them to the site. Houston would only make accessories, because those other items are too specialized. We have some drilling rigs. I don't know if you've seen them?

JT: Yes.

JM: On display. The Mitsubishi is a big one; well, some of the other shipyards in Japan, and that's where a lot of that is done. It's specialized. Plus, when these guys are drilling for oil they want the rig tomorrow, so you have to really be set up for it.

JT: Tell me about Barber's Cut and how much of an impact developing that area has had on Port of Houston.

JM: I don't know if I can tell you much about it. In fact, I'd better not elaborate on that one.

JT: Okay. How about the new big port terminal and the new things in the past couple of years that have come on.

JM: Well, if you're talking about the cruise-ship terminal, the cruise-ship terminal is a necessity, compared to Galveston. The reason for that is, the people that are going to come to get on a ship, a cruise ship, are coming from different parts of the country, so where would they fly into?

JT: Houston.

JM: In Houston, hop Intercontinental. And once they get there they don't want to be sitting around waiting. They want to get going. So the cruise lines, of course, they have a problem. "Well, if we pick up people in Intercontinental and drive to Galveston, then we have to come back and pick up people at Hobby, because we don't know when they're coming in, and drive to Galveston." Whereas this way it's easy to go from Hobby, Intercontinental, right to the terminal, okay? So the terminal becomes a very important part. In fact, I was talking to the port about putting in a gift shop there.

JT: Let's talk about some of the environmental impacts. I know with the most recent dredging that they have essentially built a manmade marsh island, a natural refuge, from some of the dredge material, and this has been going on during the last fifty years of the port's history. Talk a little bit about some of the environmental improvements. I know that Houston stands as one of the tops in that category.

JM: Well, it's always a big problem. First of all, you have to go back and say, why dredge? Where's the sand and so forth, where does it come from? Well, you have the waves, the tide constantly bringing stuff up into the channel, and then, of course, it settles, and next thing you know, why, you have a problem of how deep now is the water, because ships that come in, their draft is getting bigger and bigger and bigger. I mean, they're deeper in the water. So what you don't want to do, of course, is hit bottom. So the draft of a ship is very, very important, more important than the width or the length, the draft.

You have the mates, say the second mate, it's his job to constantly be checking draft. For example, some of the cruise ships I was on, when you got a draft of

27.2 feet, no more people, no more booze, no more food, no nothing. You're down too far. That's the limit. So draft becomes extremely important.

So if you're going to have a constant flow of debris, sand, and what happens, you know, coming in from the ocean with the tides and the wind, then you have to be checking that, and this is what also the Coast Guard does. Coast Guard wants to make sure that if you're going to do dredging, you're not only going to dredge down so far to satisfy all the potential ships that could come in. On the environmental problem, it's a question of, are you picking up stuff that's going to be smelly? Because what you want to do is save that stuff that you bring up. You make another island out of it.

It could be environmental, because you're going to have transportation of trucks and tractors and everything else moving around, and evidently there's no end to that. Then you're going to invite the railroad to come by and pick up some of this stuff and take it to different places, so how do you control the environment? Well, I think right now they control it by using gauges and meters and what have you, and inspections. And then I assume that people like the port have to submit, say, a certified letter if you wish, stating that we checked this and checked that and checked that.

JT: Environmental reports.

JM: Yes, and those are important. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

JT: Well, I know that with this most recent dredging that they've acquired enough material to build, like, a 4,000-square-foot island.

JM: Yes. Well, you've got to do something with it. It's a lot better than taking it out to the ocean and dropping it, because it's usable.

JT: The way that I see it, and maybe if you don't mind commenting, how there's been essentially a shift to more environmentalism, whereas in the fifties and sixties everything was looking at the gulf, let's see how much oil we can produce, how much oil we can refine, and now it almost seems like there's a trend since the nineties into becoming more environmentally aware.

JM: That's because of some of the accidents, like British Petroleum, the fire, the explosion. You know, there's a number of those going on, so immediately the environment becomes a severe problem. Then the other thing they want to do is constantly develop wetlands and parks. The county, that Banana Bend, Silvia Garcia, she was here. She's in charge of that project, so she wants Banana Bend to build a park.

So, building parks helps, because you're going to be planting trees and bushes, and trees, of course, absorb carbon dioxide, and give off oxygen, which is good. That's why they're worrying about cutting trees down at the rainforest and so forth. Let's see, the parks. The other thing are the wetlands. You need wetlands where the birds can come in. They lay their eggs. They're a big help to the environment.

JT: Habitat.

JM: Yes.

JT: Sustaining the area for future generations.

JM: You can call it that, yes. Wherever you have wetlands you're going to have fresh ambient.

JT: What do you see for the next fifty years of the port, Mr. Jim? What types of major improvements or advances? Anything maybe something out of *Popular Science* magazine?

JM: Gads, I wish I could answer that question.

JT: What's the next big major technological advancement that the port is going to need?

JM: I would say the biggest one will be what I had in mind, is developing Allen's Landing into a San Antonio Riverwalk. This is what I—

JT: Yes, a tourist attraction.

JM: Yes. That means you have to get rid of a lot of brush, widen the channel, and then deepen it, and then decide who's going to—the city built a lot of docks there. As soon as you start widening there at Allen's Landing, you're going to have to go south, okay, and as soon as you start going south the developers say, "Hey, I want to get in on that." Next thing you know, they're building buildings, hotels, and both sides, and it's really developing as a tourist attraction.

So this is my opinion of what's going to take place, your next larger step, because the port can only go so wide. You know, they need the space for the containers, for the machinery, the railroad. If you drive down to the port, and as you're going up over the bridge and look down, you see this enormous acreage of pipes, I mean, millions of pipes. And on the other side you have, looks like millions of Volkswagens. So that's not going to change, and the people that have the property, they're not going to be leaving, because they want to be near the water.

JT: I know about the Port of Houston now in my time spent within the past couple of years working on this project, but I would guess to believe that a majority of Houstonians, the four million people who live here, don't know anything about the port.

JM: Absolutely, yes. Absolutely.

JT: Why do you think that is, Mr. Jim?

JM: Well, the port puts out that magazine. They've been sending a whole bunch of them to us to circulate. It goes mostly to the people in the maritime field. The people of Houston hear some of the bad comments about explosions and the environment and this and that, and they take less interest. If you ask someone how many pilots are there, nobody knows it's eighty-two pilots. You can't have the pilots unless you have the ships. A lot of the people don't take enough rides on the *Sam Houston* tour boat.

JT: You're the second person to say that.

JM: Yes. That should be really pushed. In fact, I had suggested to the port, if we get Allen's Landing and the museum, let us have that boat at Allen's Landing, and the people will come. Instead of going down through the port with all the security, which has to be put to a stop someday, we could manage that. We could do the same thing. But, you know, you're dealing with a lot of organizations downtown. Nobody wants to commit, or so forth. So the only thing we can do is continue to dream, hoping something will come out of it.

But there's so much that the museum can do, so much. We just need the space, the room, and a few grants, because right now we're operating on zero grants. Okay, what else?

JT: Well, with the Port of Houston, as you mentioned you've got administrative, you've got businesses, but you've also got pilots, you've got Coast Guard, and you've got captains, and you've got individuals. What is your impression of these types of groups of people; could the port run without them?

JM: No. The port cannot run without them. Let me see. See this? That one, directory. Look inside there. How many people are associated with the port? All of them, all those people, associated with the maritime environment, something to do with the maritime.

JT: Big business.

JM: Yes. Of course a lot of them, you don't hear of them because they stick to themselves, etc.

JT: Another thing that gets me, and I've just recently started thinking about this, but the shoes that I'm wearing, the clothes that I have, some of the food that I have in my freezer, the sacks of rice that I eat and the coffee that I drink every morning—of course, that's from community—but a lot of the products that we use, that we consume every day in our lives, have to come from somewhere.

JM: Yes.

JT: And a lot of these products are from overseas. I think a lot of people don't understand that it takes a whole lot of energy and effort and resources to bring those consumer goods into the channel, unload, and be distributed out.

JM: Yes. In order to help out that situation, the Port of Houston is constantly visiting different countries, trying to get them to bring their ships to Houston. For

example, a lot of ships from Asia, instead of going down through the Panama Canal, they could come to, say, Long Beach, California, offload, put it on trucks or flatcars, and deliver it right to Houston. So this is something that's being discussed and I think it's happening.

Well, you have the same thing. A lot of the shipping lines could come to Houston, offload, and then maybe other ships can pick it up and take it to Europe. So it's working hand in hand, and there's going to be a lot more of that.

JT: Well, I think everything that we've talked about today, Mr. Jim, and I know that you've been thinking about this for a while now, but if you could put all of that into a museum downtown where people could come, I think it would be a great learning tool, and maybe we can make that—

JM: We're going to make that effort.

JT: —make that jump to where we can teach people.

JM: With this group I have, the new group of board directors, those guys are movers. Boy, they're picking up this thing like, "hey, look what's here. We haven't done anything about this." So I'm glad to hear that, and, of course, nothing gives me more pleasure than to see progress being made.

JT: Turning this off.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 6 November 2006]