MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: ELDRIDGE "TOT" WILLIAMS

Date: March 23, 2004

Place: Morgan City Archives
501 Federal Avenue
Morgan City, Louisiana

Interviewer: Jamie Christy

Code: MMS028
Keywords: Exp,Shell, Drill

Bio
Eldridge "Tot" Williams was born in Morgan City, Louisiana in 1927. His father, George Williams, was a shrimper /trapper turned crew boat owner who grew up on Bateman Island (across the Bayou Shaffer from Morgan City). His father had a second-grade education and became one of Morgan City's wealthiest citizens because of the oil fields. Eldridge worked as a deck hand on his father's crew boats and then went into the family business as a crew boat captain. He also took out seismograph crews and invested in tug boats and moving rigs. He worked for large companies like Shell, Texaco, Mobil, and Exxon, but also for smaller companies like Mallard and General Geophysical. Eldridge remembers gas explosions in the bayous and while he admits that the oil companies did some damage, he insists that they did not pollute and / or harm the environment as much as people think they did.

Side 1

JC: This is Jamie Christy and I am interviewing Mr. Eldridge "Tot" Williams at the Morgan City Archives. Today is March 23, 2004. Mr. Williams, could you just tell us maybe from the beginning how your family has been involved with the oil industry? Your father, grandfather, and all the way down the line?

EW: My father was George Williams, III. He started in the trapping business and from there, in 1926, he built his first boat, the *Sea Dream*.

JC: Did he build it himself?

EW: No, he had it built. A man by the name of Mr. Rhodes built it over by the Old Shell Crusher on Bayou Bouef, at the intersection of Bayou Boeuf and Atchafalaya River. He built it there on the bank. My father, from there in 1926, started with Shell Oil, leasing the boat to Shell Oil, and from there, he started building other boats and servicing Shell's seismograph work. At one time, he had four quarter boats. They were about 110 foot in length and were capable of housing about 20 people and they used the quarter boats to tow into the marsh, into the bayous where they started doing seismograph work in early 1930s. After the fields were developed, West Lake

Verrette, Orange Grove Field between Houma and Morgan City, Bayou Pigeon, Atchafalaya Bay, West Cote Blanche Bay . . . started with boats supplying the drilling rigs, bringing supplies to the rigs, barges. At one time, in the peak of his business, he had about 50 boats ranging from 22 feet to 104 feet. He serviced the oil field until the 1960s when he retired.

JC: Was Shell his biggest customer, would you say?

EW: Shell was his biggest customer. He did a lot of work for Shell and General Geophysical. After the war, he bought three government surplus boats in 1945 and I was captain on one of the boats and we did seismograph work from Aransas Pass, Texas to Ship Island off the Mississippi/Gulf Coast. We shot the Gulf Coast from Aransas Pass to Ship Island to about 50 miles out offshore at that time. That was in early 1945, 1946. They did not have anything out there then other than Ship Shoal Light southeast of Morgan City.

The way they would do this work, they had a land base, they had what they called a low rack station that was operated from a tower. When you would anchor up four boats . . . at that time, the only boats available were shrimp boats, so he bought four shrimp boats and used them what they called as a target boat. And we would go out, we would take a reading from Eugene Island Light south of Morgan City, take a

bearing there, go to Ship Shoal Light, take a bearing there, and then they would set the boats at different stations. They called them target boats to get a bearing off of each one so that they could run their lines north and south and east and west. They would run them from south going towards the beach out to a certain distance out and they would shoot. Anyway, at that time, they were using about 100 pounds of nitro to make their shot points. And you recorded . . . I was captain on one of the 104 footer recording boat, and they would record what the shot points, when it would explode, they would record it on the boat and get a reading from the jug line that we were towing about 1,500 feet behind the recording boat. It was very interesting work and from there, that is when the oil field developed, started developing with Kerr McGee's Ship Shoal, Block 28, Block 32, and from there, it just kept expanding on to the west, and to the east.

JC: Was that your first interaction with your father's company in the oil business, was when you were the captain . . .

EW: No, not really. During the summer, on one of these boats, I would go as the deck hand working on the boats and bringing supplies to the rigs and drill pipe and mud. These boats were 45-foot boats. At that time, they could carry about eight tons of supplies on the deck of the boat. In those days, most of the boats were wood. Later on in the late 1940s, they were beginning to build steel boats but I started out

working with him.

JC: What year do you think that might have been?

EW: That I was deck hand?

JC: Yes, that you first started doing that.

EW: Oh, about 14 years old. It was about 1935 when I started.

JC: So, what did you think of the oil . . . what kind of things did you see as a deck hand?

EW: Well, there was a lot developing then, especially West Lake Verrette. They had a big gas field there. In the bayou, gas was coming up in the bayou so bad, they were drilling one place and gas was coming up into the bayou. And when you would pass with a boat and a barge, it would really rock the boat and the barge, it was really making a big swell bubbling up, coming up. And it was real exciting to pass . . . I was a young kid and it was exciting . . . could not wait to pass that spot! When you were a kid, you would get a thrill out of things like that.

It was a great development for Morgan City. As I recall, the oil industry really took

off here for Morgan City, as far as developing the fields and so forth. Morgan City was the port, you know. Everything was out of Morgan City. Kerr McGee, Texaco - all out of Morgan City. Shell Oil Company.

JC: Wasn't your father a banker?

EW: Yes, he became a banker.

JC: That was after he had started with the crew boats for a while?

EW: Yes, he was kind of semi-retired. He was a director at Morgan City Bank and helped found the bank in Morgan City.

JC: But he had worked with the oil companies for many years, right?

EW: From 1926 to the late 1960s. He sold his boats and retired in the early 1960s.

JC: And how about yourself?

EW: I built my first boat in 1957. A tug boat. It was a 600 horsepower tug. Me and another man built it. Worked in the oil field. I was more or less moving drilling rigs

with this boat. And from one field to another, I moved as many as fifteen rigs in one month. The boat never stopped. It put in 720 hours in one month, working two men on the boat. It was rough at the time, you know, and then from there, moving drilling rigs, bringing drill pipe and mud to the rigs from Tiger Shoals out of Vermilion Bay, drilling in Vermilion Bay, moving rigs. West Cote Blanche Bay. Lake Pelto. Lake Vaughn. Mississippi Sound. Matagorda Bay. Towed rigs to Matagorda Bay. Block 18, Eugene Island, for Shell Oil Company. Kerr McGee, Block 32, Eugene Island area.

I built my second boat in 1980. I retired in 1990 out of the boat business. But my father and my two brothers, they were also in the business. In the early days, I got a little bit ahead of myself. We had bought three 85-foot air-sea rescue boats, surplus boats, and were releasing them to oil companies to shoot seismograph work in the Gulf. I sold my share of the business and that is when I built this tug and started there with the captain on the boat myself.

JC: So, you had a lot of experience with . . . you went out to the rigs yourself, right?

EW: Well, I started from the ground up, you know. Working on boats, I was familiar with the oil field. I shrimped for three years. I bought a shrimp boat in 1950. It was not what I wanted to do. I was more or less in the oil industry. That is all I ever

did . . . Captain on boats and working in the oil field, supplying . . .

JC: You were speaking about Bateman Island. Your father had Bateman Island, is that right?

EW: His father was a railroad engineer on a train, and he bought a portion of Bateman Island, 480 acres, and that is where my father and his two brothers grew up, on the low end of Bateman Island on the Bayou Shaffer side. And later on, in 1925 or 1926, he bought 580 acres on the front portion of Bateman Island. And then, from there, that is when he started in the boat business supplying boats and barges to the oil companies and business was really booming at that time. He built a railway to haul the boats and the quarter boats that he had out. And he had a machine shop . . .

JC: He had a railroad from the shipyard?

EW: No, they called it a railway. It was a shipyard. They called it a shipyard at the hull out on the bank. And they would paint the bottoms of the boats, quarter boats and all. These quarter boats were two stories. They were really large at that time. He would haul his boats out, and he refurbished the shafts and propellers. He had about fourteen men working at that yard at one time. He had over 100 men hired at one time with all the boats he owned. He was one of the first men in Morgan City to

really start in the oil industry. He only had a second grade education. He more or less taught himself, and for a time, he really did good with his life.

JC: He went to school till the second grade?

EW: Yes.

JC: And then, was he working after that?

EW: Well, no, in the early days, people had to work. They had families to support and things were bad. There was not that much going on. It was either work in the lumber business or trapping. He trapped for years with one arm. A lot of people could not understand how he could open a trap and set it without being caught in the trap himself. In fact, one time, he came home with the trap snapped on his hand, and he came back to the trapping camp. My mother could not get the trap off his hand and my mother had to take the trap off his hand.

JC: How had he lost his arm?

EW: He lost it in a hunting accident while trapping. Accidentally shot himself in the arm in a pirogue. He was running the trap line and he saw a deer and he went to grab the

gun and the hammers caught on a rib in the pirogue and turned over in the pirogue and from there, he paddled back to his camp, about one mile away, with one arm. He and a friend were trapping together. West Cote Blanche Bay area. And from there, they brought him in a wagon to Bayou Sale and from Bayou Sale, he went from boat first to Bayou Sale Landing. From there, they took a wagon and brought him to a sugar mill in Bayou Sale. They took the train that was attached to the sugar cane car and then they brought him to Franklin to have his arm amputated. It is a wonder he did not bleed to death because when his friend came back, he thought he was dead. He was in the bed with blood all over the bed waiting for his friend to come back from running his trap line. It was an experience that he had.

Later on, he was hunting deer, and a young boy shot him. He was driving deer dogs and when he came out of woods, the fellow took him for a deer and he shot him. Until the day he died, he had five buck shots in his body. It was not bad enough for them to remove them so they just left them and there were no vital organs that he hit. He survived that.

JC: My goodness! When he got into the boat business, was he working as captain as well?

EW: He captained the boat himself. The *Sea Dream*. The name of the boat was the *Sea*

Dream.

JC: Did he ever talk to you about his trips out there or do you remember much about the early days when he was captaining the boats? Maybe you were a deck hand?

EW: I was very small then. I was born in 1927. I remember him working for long days at a time before coming home. I do remember that. And later on, as he built more boats, and naturally he had to get off of the boats and was more or less just taking care of hiring people and meeting business people with different companies and leasing the boats to them.

JC: Do you remember which ones were his favorite companies, the ones he liked to work with or did not like to work with?

EW: He did more work for Shell Oil Company. For some reason, Texaco at that time was not paying that much for boats, as good as what Shell was paying. He more or less stayed working for Shell. Shell Oil Company, I think, was his favorite company to work for. But he did work for different ones – General Geophysical, Stanolind Oil and Gas. He did some work for Texaco.

JC: And how about when it was your company?

EW: I worked for Kerr McGee. I worked for Exxon. I worked for Shell Oil Company. Mobil Oil Company, moving rigs and oil barges.

JC: Did you see a difference between your father's company, for instance, and your company – a difference in the industry? Had it changed by the time you were doing it?

EW: Not really. It was more modern. When my father started, there was only one place in Berwick that supplied the oil companies. It was just starting out. It was Kyle's Taylor Lumber Company. And they had a little hut there where they stored the mud for drilling and a little pipe would come in and they had a ramp that you could load onto a barge and from there, take it up to West Lake Verrette or Bayou Pigeon or Orange Grove Field. There was not that much going on.

JC: It was right there on Front Street?

EW: No, it was in Berwick.

JC: In Berwick on Front Street?

EW: Yes, on the river front in Berwick.

JC: They were the only ones that . . .

EW: They started out. Kyle's Taylor was the first one to start out in the oil field, as far as I remember.

JC: Who did you work with as you started to do the business?

EW: Well, like I say, I worked through Shell and different companies. Whoever would hire me. Or Mallard Well Service. Otto Cane, sometimes would call for my boat out of Des Allemands. Different companies. Whoever needed the boat, I tried to give them the service.

I stayed on the boat for fifteen years, running the boat myself. I built the second boat, I put it on a bare boat job in a local company here in Morgan City. And they eventually bought it.

JC: So, what was it like to go out, you know, just a typical day?

EW: A typical day was not really a typical day. They would call you any time during the

day or night. Sometimes they would call at midnight, and they wanted you to be at West Cote Blanche Bay by six o'clock in the morning when the crews would change. They wanted to move the rig then, move the rig, come back to Morgan City. Sometimes, it was drilling in about 1,000 feet deep at that time and hitting oil production at West Cote Blanche Bay, Texaco. We would just arrive back at the dock, good, they would turn you around and go back to move another rig. West Cote Blanche Bay was a big field at that time producing from maybe 100 wells. They had living quarters there, where they housed the men that were working for Texaco. And camps were built on pilings. They are gone now but in those days, that is how they housed their people. And you would move one rig from one location to another. Usually two boats would move the rig, spot it back on a location.

JC: Did you ever have accidents or have problems with getting the rigs where you needed them to go?

EW: A lot of times, shallow water. You had what we called wash a rig on location. It would silt up. If they went back and worked a location, you know, after the well was producing a while, it would clog up and you would go back with the rig on a work hole and you had to do washing around a rig. One time I was taking a barge to Marsh Island - a mud barge, a loaded liquid mud barge – and a thunderstorm came

up. I could not close the hatches on the barge, and the barge sank while I was towing it. That was the only accident I had in all my experience since when I was captain on the boats in 1945 up until 1990. I had that one accident where the barge sank during this bad weather out in East Cote Blanche Bay.

JC: I'll bet the weather could get pretty bad out there.

EW: It did. It blew probably about 35-40 miles an hour. Waves over the barge and I could not dog the hatches off. I tried to turn around to come back to one of the passes and before I could get it back. I had a pump on it pumping, trying to keep it afloat but the wave was so bad, it drowned the pump out and the barge sank. Turned completely upside down. That was the only bad experience I had.

I had some near misses with different things. Sometimes, the bottoms of the rigs were bad. You would bring them out of a shallow canal towing them through stumps and so forth. Like one time up at Henderson, we came out of the canal into the main bayou and when it did, the rig started listing heavy over to one side. I was the lead boat. I was most always the lead boat. Not because I was that good of a captain but when I saw the rig listing and people running around, I knew something was wrong. And they had a sand bar across the bayou. I cut loose the other boat and brought the rig alongside the sand bar and pushed it up against the bank. They

managed to put some liquid cement in there. There was a gash in the hull about six feet long. And they managed to patch it. And then, we towed the rig to Morgan City and hauled it out in Bayou Boeuf at one of the shipyards, at McDermott shipyard at Bayou Boeuf. There was a lot of experiences, and I enjoyed it all. Working, yes, I did.

EW: Were there companies that you preferred to work with or relationships you established with different companies or different guys?

EW: Well, I knew most of the men on the boat, tug boats, working moving the rigs with them. I guess my favorite company was Shell Oil and Texaco. I did loads of work for Texaco out of Morgan City, Block 18, Eugene Island, Tiger Shoals out of South West Pass. West Cote Blanch Bay, East Cote Blanche Bay. Shell Oil, Orange Grove field, West Lake Verrette field, north of Morgan City. Bayou Pigeon field, Turtle Bayou. Shell Oil had locations, moving rigs in there for Shell.

JC: I know your father had connections with politics. Did you know anything about Lease 340 – the three mile, ten mile controversy over state waters and federal waters and Huey P. Long?

EW: My father was not that much into politics. He knew local politicians. I do not think

he was associated with any of the early governors. But with the local people, he was well-known with the local people here in Morgan City. St. Mary Parish.

JC: I know Texaco drilled in Bateman Lake. Did you have any part in that?

EW: Bateman Lake? Yes. They had a large field at Bateman Lake Field.

JC: Texaco?

EW: Texaco did, yes. I moved rigs for them in the Wax Bayou area. Sweet Bay Lake. Sun Oil Company. I also did a lot of work for Sun Oil Company here in Morgan City with the tug, moving rigs. I moved rigs for them. But the controversy over the three mile boundary, more or less with the state. There has always been a conflict between the state and the federal government. The state wanted more and the federal government wanted more, so I think the federal government won out.

JC: A lot of people complained about Texaco getting most of those state leases, since they seemed to get most of the ones . . . the other oil companies, you know, because they wanted it.

EW: Yes. There has been some controversy with the oil companies – Texaco and Shell

and so forth. A lot of the companies now, it is so expensive to drill, they are all merging together. At one time, Texaco, Humble, went from Humble and Exxon to now they merged with Mobil. Due to costs, they are going further and further offshore now and drilling in deeper water. Costing more to produce the oil. But the oil industry here in Morgan City now, the fields are just about all depleted. It started up in the early 1940s, 1939. Texaco pulled up a lot of their wells – Wax Lake, Wax Bayou field and so forth. Bateman Island. Very little producing going on now. All the fields, they are just about depleted. The 50 or 60 years of drilling for oil, you know, it does not last forever. It is like the lumber business, the trapping business, the shrimping business. Now, the oil business. What is next for Morgan City remains to be seen. Other than a ship channel that they have been trying to get in here since . . . I have been hearing my daddy talk about it since I was a little kid, about bringing a ship channel to Morgan City. But in order to have a ship channel with 35 foot draft, not only would the river have to be deepened but you would have to go out to six fathoms of water from the Eugene Island into the Gulf of Mexico to have that draft of ships to come in here.

JC: Make it like Galveston or somewhere like that?

EW: Well, it is political. Maybe I should not say it is, but New Orleans and Baton Rouge, I think, would never let this happen where it would be competition for them. New

Orleans. Baton Rouge. Why go 200 miles up the river to Baton Rouge when you can come 30 miles up the river to Morgan City? But I think politically . . . I hope it does happen but I do not think it will. Maybe I am talking out of school but that is how I feel about it.

JC: So, you really saw the oil business rise and you saw it fall here in Morgan City?

EW: Oh, I have seen the best of it.

JC: What was the best of it?

EW: The best of it was in the 1980s. Everything was really booming in the early 1980s. Things were really starting up offshore. Really going in the early 1980s.

JC: There was a lot of money around town, right?

EW: There was, yes. Morgan City never grew that much because, really, they did not have a place to grow. They always had between 15,000 and 17,000 people. That is about the largest it ever was. Now, everyone almost left. You can go along the river front now from Atchafalaya River to Bayou Boeuf Locks and the only one there now is Kerr McGee, Shell Oil. That is about all. Nothing really going on out of

here. Everything is going to Fourchon because, one reason, they do not have the draft for the larger 200 foot boats to come in here.

JC: So, would you say the oil industry was good for Morgan City?

EW: It was very good. It was very good and had a lot of people worked for the oil industry in Morgan City.

JC: I am sure you saw people who did not have much and the oil industry changed that for them, right?

EW: It did. In the early days, people were making their living cutting timber, trees for the lumber.

JC: That is how your dad started out, right?

EW: Yes.

JC: I mean, prospering.

EW: Yes.

JC: Because he did not have much to start with, right?

EW: He did not. He tried fishing when he had both arms when he was a young man. One time, he went to a fishing outfit here in Morgan City to sell the fish and they were too small. He could not sell the fish. That was the end of his fishing career. So, he started trapping and during World War II, they were getting $1.50 a round for muskrats, which, in those days, was good money - $1.50 for a muskrat. They could catch maybe 200-300 rats a day if they were a good trapper. And then, the muskrats faded away. The nutria rat took over, destroying the nests, and wild muskrats just disappeared from the land. But a lot of people made their living during the winter months and in the summer, a lot of them, they did not do anything. They sat on the front porch and swang on a swing. I know some people that were living on Bateman Island at the time that did that. But my father, he trapped and he just kept going. He worked summer and winter trying to build up his business. When he quit trapping, that is when he went just strictly with the boats.

JC: That was probably more . . .

EW: Better money. It was more constant. It was regular money coming in. Trapping three months. Then you had to find fishing or something else to do in the

summertime. My uncles actually did this. They trapped in the winter months and they fished in the summer months. Put up nets and so forth.

JC: That must have been a big change, right, for people who did not have much to, all of a sudden, having a lot of money, right?

EW: It was a lot of money in a way for the times. You see, when I was captain on one of these 104-foot boats, I was only making $200 a month supporting my wife and a child at that time. And now, captains on boats make as much as $350 a day on the offshore boats.

JC: So, you were gone a lot from home as well, right?

EW: I was. I was gone working out in the Gulf when we were seismographing, I was working ten days out and five days in. And every other trip, I had to stay and watch the boats, wherever the boats were in. In Abbeville or Texas. I could not come home.

JC: I am jumping back again but did you learn much about the seismograph? Did you watch them do this, or did you learn yourself how to do it?

EW: No, I did not. I was captain on the boat, and my time was spent at the wheel . . .

JC: It is interesting to watch, isn't it?

EW: Yes. We would start out at daylight in the morning, as soon as daylight, about five in the summertime, five o'clock in the morning, worked until six o'clock in the evening.

JC: That is a long day on the boat.

EW: We were shooting about 150 shot points a day at that time. And they were using 100 pound shots of nitro for the shot points they would lower them off of the shooting boat on balloons, big heavy duty balloons. And sometimes, the balloons would pop and the shots would go down to the bottom and fish would come up. The shooting boat would go back with nets and we would have fish for supper!

JC: Plenty of it! You worked obviously closely with the land and then the oil industry. There is that old controversy is did the oil industry upset the shrimping industry, for example? Do you think there is any validity in that? You know, the old "Thunder Bay" movie where the new oil industry is depicted as ruining the shrimping business?

EW: Well, the shrimpers were against the oil industry. They claimed that shooting dynamite would affect the shrimp. Well, probably for maybe a mile around when that charge would go off . . .

JC: That is a big charge.

EW: Yes. In those days, they called them pogies (fish). In the summer time when you would shoot, you could see pogies jump out of the water a half a mile from around the boat. It probably did affect it. People complain about the oil industry, about California, for instance, drilling off the California coast. There are very little oil spills here off the Louisiana and Texas coast. Very little that might have affected the environment. Just for the few spills they had. So really, they criticized the oil company for destroying different things but the oil companies, in my opinion, were really great for Louisiana.

California, they drilled off the California coast. We went to California on a tour one time and a fellow asked us, he said, "Does anybody know what that is out there?" I said, "Yes, that is an oil rig." He said, "Well, how do you know?" I said, "Well, I get the work boat money. I am in the towing business." They had palm trees in front of the drilling rig and they had a waterfall to show the people that that is

California. Yet, they are hollering about the oil price in California now is high, they won't let them drill off the coast. But as far as I am concerned, the oil industry really did not have that . . . very few spills, very light spills that I know of.

JC: What about the canals? I know they cut some canals . . .

EW: Oh, they cut canals, a lot of canals were cut in order to get where they wanted to drill. In the event they cut through the marsh land, naturally, you had some erosion and salt water intrusion came in and kind of destroyed maybe a little bit of the marsh land but it was not all that bad.

JC: Can you think of anything else that you would like to say that might add to the project, or anyone else that we might interview?

EW: Not really. About all I can say is I made my living with the oil company. My father did. My brothers did. And had a good life. The oil companies were really good to me in my business. If I had to do it over again, I would do the same thing over.

JC: You would do the same?

End of Side 1

Side 2

EW: Most of the people on the oil rigs were friends of the tool pusher. They were a rough group. They called them roughnecks and it fit them perfectly. Some of the tool pushers did not think too much of the boat people. Maybe what you would call a lower class of people. But some of them were really nice.

Moving rigs, it was raining one time, the weather was bad. One of them took his slicker suit off and let me wear it. I was working on the stern control of the boat, and he took his slicker suit off and loaned me his slicker suit until we completed moving the rig. The majority were nice people. The people in the office, like Shell Oil Company, Texaco and Exxon, you could talk with them and visit with them. Sometimes take them out to lunch. Take them fishing or hunting on this pleasure boat that I had to take them out and entertain them. The majority of them were good people. They were honest. Some did not want anything from you. Others expected you to wine and dine them. In some cases, that is what I did. But most of them did not. All they wanted you to do was a good job and that is how they called for me when I was competing against a larger boat company here in Morgan City. It was $20,000 at the time. They called for my boat even though I was working for them, because I did a good job. When I went on a job, I did my best to try and satisfy the customer. Sometimes we would get stuck in shallow water moving the rig. Other

times, everything would go smooth and just move the rig and come on back home. Most of them would ask for my boat. And it was a great life. I enjoyed it.

JC: O.K., well, thank you.

THE END