MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Ronnie Dressel

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio
Ronnie Dressel was raised on a sugar cane farm in Loreauville, LA. He started in the oil field in 1964 working for J&L Engineering, Big Mac Welding, and Avondale Ship yard. He opened his own welding business and contracted to National Supply and Texaco. In 1979, he opened Regional Fabricators at the Port of Iberia with three other welders. He runs the refurb and new construction of shallow water drilling rigs.

Early career: Wanted out of farming business, so he began at J&L Engineering welding on farm equipment, then to Big Mac welding for oil field work. He became skilled in both welding and fitting and worked at Avondale (Morgan City) before opening up Ronnie's Welding Service in New Iberia, where he ran a truck for contract work building tank batteries and land rigs for Texaco, National Supply, and Big Mac.

Company's history/significance: Began a company with a line of bank credit, low overhead, and rented a shop with a crane on Highway 90 in New Iberia during the height of the land rig/shallow water rig boom (1979). Regional got their name from Acadiana Regional Airport, which was thought to become a major fabrication center. After a property deal at the airport fell through, the partners moved to the Port of Iberia on the water front. They began building barges and land rigs. In 1981 and early 1982 had 150 employees. Regional built 8 rigs in 1981 at over $2 million a piece. Dressel went to Shreveport and East Texas with a crew to install completed land rigs for Butler and Johnson, while the other partners began building new rigs. Overflow of business carried them through the early "bust" into 1983. The downturn forced Regional to lay off entire work force except for a secretary and 3 welders. They survived on small boat repair work, building barbeque pits, and yard maintenance. In 1981, Regional couldn't build top-dollar rigs fast enough. A year later, a $200 job got three bids. Worse part of the bust was laying off loyal employees: "I won't go through that again--I'll close the doors next time." Regional was 30 days from shutting down. But low overhead and small jobs in diversified areas allowed them to survive. Two of the partners went back to contract welding. They changed their name from Regional Rig Fabricators to just Regional Fabricators to attract boat work. Today, Regional is one of the oldest fabricators at the Port of Iberia.

Work force/other issues: Regional was built on hard work ethnics of the 4 partners and their personally trained employees. The partners trained from within, molded helpers into combination fitters/welder and into supervisors within 2 years. The State, port commissioner's office, parish, and industry in general supported the 2-year vo-tech training schools in the 1980s and 1990s, which provided a bulk of new employees. Today, the labor force has changed, though the market demand has not. There is a high demand for fabricated offshore equipment, but few local, skilled workers to employ. Since 2003, Regional has been using local employment contractors who bring in Mexican workers from across the border. When big jobs come in, Regional may employ as many as 50 Mexicans at no liability cost to the company. Regional pays a flat rate per worker.

The contractors provide medical care, if needed, along with housing and visas. Many are skilled in fabrication tools, reading blue prints, and calculate degrees, but few speak English.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an interview with Ronnie Dressel, on 18th December 2006, Regional Fabricators, by Jason Theriot, and this is tape one, MMS Ship Fab Project.

RD: My name is Ronald Dressel. I started in the fabrication in 1964 at J & L Engineering, mostly fabrication, general fabrication, on farm equipment and then worked there two years and moved to Big Mac Welding, which was more in the oilfield production-type drilling rigs type of work. Worked there for about six months, went back to J & L for two years, and ended up moving to Avondale Shipyard in Morgan City, which we did mostly production jacket deckwork, offshore work. Worked there for a year, went back to Big Mac and ran a welding truck for them in the production work and some rig work.

From there, in ’71 I left there and went in business for myself with Ronnie’s Welding Service and worked there from ’71 until about ’79. In ’79, we worked at National for a while and different places, but in ’79 we left and opened up Regional Fabricators.

JT: How old were you when you got involved in this industry?

RD: With Regional?

JT: No, the oilfield.

RD: I was nineteen when I went to work at J & L, nineteen years old.

JT: You're from Loreauville?

RD: Loreauville, yes, went to school.

JT: Your father, was he in this industry or was a farmer?

RD: My father was a sugarcane farmer, yes. I worked with him in the summers and helped him out when he needed help, but I just decided that farming wasn't for me, so I just got out and went to work somewhere.

JT: Why's that, man, you grew up with it?

RD: I know, but I just didn't want my life depending on the weather, you know, if you had a good crop. I heard my dad complaining about worrying about a freeze, worrying about the price of sugar, worrying about that, and I just had a negative

outlook on farming, you know. They do well today, but they're struggling with worrying about the cold weather, worrying about the rain, worried about the sugar mills, worrying about—I heard my dad do that all his life, and I just chose not to do that.

So I wanted a steady income, whatever that would be, whether it would be 20,000 a year, 30,000 a year, but it would be an average income with the whole with everybody, and the more I worked, the more I made it. With farming, it wasn't that way. It wasn't controlled by what you worked. It was controlled by the sugar industry. It was controlled by the weather and everything and Mother Nature, that's right, storms and everything else.

JT: So at J & L you were welding?

RD: I started off as a helper and from there I worked my way up to a welder and then I worked, I started fitting, and that's normally the procedure that you do. You start off tacking, helping, you become a welder and then you do some welding. Then if you care to, they want you to go fittings, because fitters are harder to find. So I moved up quick into fitting, and like in two years I was the leaderman over there, so that's rare. That's out of the ordinary.

JT: At twenty-one, huh?

RD: Yeah, twenty-one years old, twenty-two-year-old guy, you know, and I was a leaderman, next up for a foreman job when I left there, you know.

JT: Then Big Mac, where was that, Morgan City also?

RD: No, that was in New Iberia here on East Main, yes. They would run about six or seven trucks like welding trucks. You would go on a job and work. They did a lot of work for Texaco. You would hook up tank batteries and production work for Texaco, and you and a helper, and then they would send a roustabout crew, and they would put a tank battery together, which is—you see them on the side of the roads now, hook up a few heater treaters, separators and tank batteries or pipelines or whatever. That's how we did most of our work was that.

JT: So natural gas, mostly?

RD: That was oil, too, both oil and natural gas, yes. So it gave me a production side. I mean I learned how to fit and weld and read blueprints and stuff at J & L, and J & L, they had material prep. They had a fitting department. They had sheers and press and all that. They had a layout department, and they worked hydraulics and everything. So it gave you a good background of everything, a little bit of everything. So I learned a lot at J & L.

But going to Big Mac and then moving on to Avondale, it really just put the finishing touches on your fitting and your welding, you know what I mean? Like Avondale, all you would do is weld. It wasn't a combination type job. You either was a fitter or a welder, and I went as a welder. But it really put a finishing touch. It just put the icing on the cake on welding part, showed me how to x-ray weld and really dress up a weld, you know.

JT: What was Avondale building at that time?

RD: That's, I guess, the era of platforms, shallow water platforms, like a hundred feet of water, two hundred feet of water, and decks, production decks, and the jackets. In other words, they would put the jackets, set the jackets, and then put the platforms on top, and that was just the boom. In other words, it was going crazy with that kind of work. Every—McDermott was filled with them, Avondale was filled with them, and that's what they were doing.

That later on dropped off where the market just saturated with jackets and decks, you know.

JT: So you were driving from Loreauville to Morgan City?

RD: I would drive every day. We would carpool. We were like five of us, so we would drive once a week. We worked five days a week, and if you worked six,

you just took your own vehicle and worked. But most of the time we worked five days a week, so we'd just take turns driving. If I would drive on Tuesday, I would drive every Tuesday, you know, pick up all the guys, the five guys, and we'd communicate that way.

JT: Then you, from Avondale, you ended up back here at the Port of Iberia?

RD: No, I went to work for Big Mac again. I worked six months for Mac, and J & L called me to go back, so I put in four years, a total of two and two, and then from J & L I went to Avondale and worked a year. Then I went back to Big Mac and I worked at Mac for like two years. That was running a truck for them. In other words, I was operating.

So it kind of gave you, looking back at it now, it gave you an idea of you almost like you're in business for yourself because when you went on a job, you were the welder and you would kind of tell them what to do and how to do it and this is what we're going to do and all this. So it was kind of—

JT: You were running your own small little company.

RD: Yes, and it was hooking up a huge tank battery. You might have five wells coming into that, you know, and you had the responsibility of doing the x-ray work, and we're going to do this today and tomorrow we're going to do this. So

it was kind of like you led the roustabout crew, and then they had a guy with Texaco over you, but you still, you were kind of running the job. So it pretty much gave you the experience of what was coming, you know.

Most of the guys do that. They work for somebody as a welder, and then they break off and go on their own. I had a brother in the business, welding business, and he was working for Texaco, but he was real busy working seven days a week and he asked me to kind of go in with him. He had worked for Big Mac, too. So when he left about a year later, then I broke off and went in with him.

Then he got out and went into farming with my dad, because my dad and them was going to retire, and he liked to farm, so he—then I just kept Ronnie's Welding Service and just kept going with the welding, you know.

JT: Now, were you involved at National at all?

RD: Well, in about '71, I went in business for myself, and I worked a little while for Texaco offshore three or four years, and then I moved to National. Texaco kind of—the field was kind of depleting out, so they laid me off and I went and came to town here, and I went to work for National.

I worked for National about five or six years, and that was putting land rigs together, building drilling rigs.

JT: These guys right here?

RD: Yes, same. That's clears, but it was the same, basically the same thing as those land rigs, structural.

I met Larry [Berges] and Bruce, two of the partners that we in business. I knew them before, but I got to work with them for like or six years, you know.

JT: It seems like you personally had a lot of experience in being independent, being a contractor, that really this was a logical next step, was to go in business, serious business.

RD: Yes, right, right.

JT: See if you guys could make it work.

RD: Well, at National, we were kind of like we were independent welders, but we were like foremens. In other words, Larry would build substructures and stuff like that, and he would work like four or five of the National hands. I would build compounds, which is a mechanical part of the rig. Now it's no longer—some rigs have them, but most of the time, they're diesel electric and they have done away with the compound rigs. But I would build all the compounds and I would the

mud tanks, so I would work like six or seven contract welders, same as I was doing.

I was a worker. In other words, they were on the same level as me, but I was working them and telling them I was in charge of a portion of the shop. Do you see what I'm saying? And Bruce did the same thing, so we pretty much—we had to do our work, plus run a crew. You know what I'm saying? At National. So that made it even better, and it made you feel that, hell, if I can do it for them, why can't we break off? We were like the top three guys, four guys over there, so we just decided, started slowly planning that one day we're just going to leave this place together and go start up a company, and that's what we did, you know.

JT: Where did that first talk come about, at the lunchroom or at—

RD: Basically, what it was, we just got to talking and decided, man, and I think Larry might have approached me about what I think about just moving out going, you know, just going and start up something, and really didn't have any big forecast or plans in the first stage. Then the more we talked about it, we wanted to protect our jobs over there. We didn't want to quit and have to spend two months without a check, you know, and you're trying to planning this thing.

So we kind of started doing it after hours and talking about it more and meeting, and we had a good friend that had good experience in starting it off, people off, and putting them into business, and he kind of organized it. We'd go

to his office and help. Then he would—the first thing we wanted to do was get to the bank and get a line of credit, and we didn't want to stumble. We wanted to do it right the first time, because then you got to come back and it makes you look like you're not organized. So this guy really put it together for us and, you know, filled us in on this and what we need here and cash flow problems and stuff like that.

I mean, you were kind of familiar with, but not the same deal there, you know.

JT: Who was this fellow?

RD: Mr. Dugas, J.D. Dugas. Do you know J.D.?

JT: No, sir.

RD: You don't know him? He's from New Iberia.

He had sold us some insurance and he was in the financing management and stuff like that, you know, so he was going to sell the insurance so it was a plus for him and he was a nice guy. I mean he was a good friend with him, you know, and he kind of helped us through.

We went to a bank in Jeanerette, and we started off with another partner, Joe Colletti. I don't know if you know Mr. Joe Colletti. Well, Joe Colletti and

Larry, Bruce and I started the business, and we started on Curtis Lane, which is the little shop where Dynamics at now, the shop that runs perpendicular to the road, not parallel. They didn't have all that. It was just that one shop.

Mr. Dugas convinced us that the best way to do it was you just pay rent by the month, because I mean we didn't know if this thing was going to get off the ground or was going to make it or whatever. So and here we were, four welders, planning to do everything, you know, the office management and everything. So we just walked in, paid the guy twelve hundred dollars' rent, had a huge shop with an overhead crane, a huge overhead crane, so we didn't need any cherry pickers, we didn't need no yard foundation like limestone and we didn't have to worry about any of that. We didn't have to worry about the weather. The work we had could easily be done in that shop, and let's give it a try three months, four months, five months, six months, if it don't work, we turn the lights off. We're down four, five thousand dollars, and everybody go home. You know what I'm saying?

JT: Go back to National.

RD: Well, whatever, you know, and so.

JT: It was a good gamble.

RD: Well, at first, first of all, what we were trying to do is only having, only being nearsighted or whatever, we couldn't see the future, and nobody could, we wasn't worried about that. I was thirty-four years old. Larry and them were probably twenty-nine, maybe, at the time, because they're thirty. I was like I'm four years older than them, so I was probably thirty—they were probably thirty years old. I mean we had a—we were just work, work, work. You know what I mean? That's all that was on the agenda, you know.

We didn't even really do any studies to see, but we knew that the land rig business was awesome, and we just thought that we could get all the land rig work we wanted. So we were trying to locate at Acadiana Regional Airport. They were selling tracts of land. That's where the name Regional Fabricators comes from.

JT: So you guys were trying to fit into that niche, and describe to me the whole idea behind building this Acadiana Regional Airport. What was the goal for that?

RD: Well, the thing about that was that land rigs was—I mean they was just going crazy with land rigs. National was just building land rig after land rig. Everybody, like in Texas, the yards in Texas were building land rigs. Everybody around here was building land rigs. I mean you just had to know a couple of people and you could get in the land rig business, you know. I mean it was just—and they just wanted them, wanted them. They wasn't worried about the money.

They wasn't worried about the—they just wanted the delivery. When can you get me a land rig? I need this land rig.

We were very familiar in just about every aspect of a land rig, I mean, you know, rigs also. Because I worked on barge rigs and platform rigs before I went to work for Big Mac, you know. So I had experience with that, and Larry and them, too.

So the draw of Regional, the Acadiana Regional Airport was the convenience of customers out of Texas, Oklahoma, wherever, or anywhere in the world, could fly in to Acadiana Regional, we could pick them up at the airport, they could come view their rigs or rig show or whatever, fly in everywhere. We was going to build a nice facility and everything there, probably have two or three rig-up pads where we could have rigs going all at the same time. That was the purpose of doing it there. We wasn't even concerned about the water because water wasn't really an issue, you know. We was just going to put a nice shop, nice office, and then was going to use the rest fabrication and just do that, about a ten-acre tract.

Well, what we were doing, we were kind of planning that way and trying to meet after hours until we had to go to the first airport authority meeting, and whenever that happened and we asked for ten acres of land and we had a little spot all picked where we want it, and it was prime property, and a lot of it was concrete already.

So, well, it hit the news media and then, guess what, it just went ballistic. Then National found out about it and they got all bent out of shape, and they threatened to fire us and whatever. So we had made up our mind we were going. We were prepared for them to fire us. Well, when they first found out about it, they brought us in and they asked us what was going on, and we told them. We're just trying to go in business. If we make it, we make it. If we don't, then we're going to continue contracting. Well, then they told us—this was like a Monday or a Tuesday. They told us that Friday was our last day, so okay.

Well, the National hands—see, we were there as contractors. So the National hands started reflecting on, well, what kind of people are we working for here? These are the best hands they have, and just because they're trying to better themselves, they're going to fire them, you know. They started getting a little repercussion there. So they called us in, talked to us again, and then they said, look, you-all can work until you-all get situated, and then, so they let us work there until we got all our plans.

Well, in the meantime, Red Fox found out about it and they did a little research and they wanted the property. Well, Fox having more money than Regional or potential Regional, the airport authority kind of swapped over and offered the property to Fox. So that fell through. I look back at that now and say, well, there was somebody watching us, because if we would have located at Acadiana Regional, we would have been out of business a long time ago.

So the first slowdown, probably ’83, ’84, would have had to close the doors, you know, and probably go bankrupt because we would have probably invested two or three hundred, four hundred thousand dollars in land, office and everything else, where you just couldn’t have paid it back, you know.

But anyway, when that happened, we lost the property there. We just abandoned that project, and we started looking at a place to locate. This Dynamic, we knew the guy, Mr. Red Hebert, he had that shop to lease, so we talked to him and we got a month-to-month lease with him. Twelve hundred dollars a month, I think it was, and we just walked in and turned the lights on and went to work.

We had three mud tanks to build for National, which the guy used to be my helper over there, Mark Gautreau—do you know Mark?

JT: Sounds familiar.

RD: Yes, I’m sure you know him. He hunts ducks and all that and everything, and he’s a financial guy now. He’s kind of like financial management.

Well, he was a friend of mine, and he started with me as a helper, and he used to work for me as a helper. I mean I trained him, showed him, you know, a lot of things, and what he did, he became a supervisor at National and they transferred him to Houston. Well, the New Iberia office wouldn’t give us any

work because that was competition, but out of Houston, he gave me a set of mud tanks. So we built the mud tanks.

Then Larry hustled a set of big tanks, sewer treatment tanks from Red Fox at the time for their treatment units, and then so we built the shells for those. Then we picked up a little bit of work from Resource Drilling. Resource Drilling was just starting to build the rigs. They had about a twenty-something rig fleet, land rigs, and they had just started building the first one while we were there. It was about, I guess, about 25 percent from being complete.

But we got to know everybody in their organization, and then we pulled out at the same time. They saw the work that we did, so they kind of gave us some smaller work, you know. They're just, they're not going to give you a drilling rig. They're going to test the waters. You know what I mean? So they'd give us some small work and we'd do that for them, and they just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

Then not long after we were at Dynamics building on Curtis Lane, Drayco, which is a drilling rig equipment place, they build drill work and pumps like National, they needed a place—and they do derricks and all. So they needed a place to locate here, and they talked to Mr. Hebert and he made a deal with them and he sold it to them.

Well, us having a month-to-month lease, it was convenient, but it was always that shadow that if somebody came in and bond, you got to go. You know what I mean? But he reserved the right to let us finish our projects. In other

words, if we had another thirty days, forty-five days of work, he'd let us finish that, and then we had to move out, and that's what happened.

They sold, so when they sold, we had to locate here because we had a barge to build, a small barge, a little deck barge, and we didn't have any waterfront. So we had to locate somewhere at the port. Again, that was the good Lord just steering you to where you need to be, you know.

Joe Colletti got out then. He just couldn't—he was like forty-nine. He was older than us, and he just couldn't stand, I guess, the moving. We came here and there was nothing but grass here. There was no electrical. There was a lot of swamp area right here, and you could work up on the hill but that was about it, you know. Then paint cans, where 4D would just do a little painting once in a while. I mean it was just a pasture, you know. You had to have either a big heart or you wasn't too bright [laughs] to do what we did. I wouldn't do that again. You know what I mean? [laughs]

But anyway, we looked at it and we had a barge to build, so he had this leased off in three sections, like A, B and C. So we knew if we leased A, the road coming in had to go through A to get to B and C. There was only one. This was all swamp here. So we knew if we got A, then somebody could come in and get B and C and that would choke us off. So we figured if we'd get Lot B, we would be in the middle. Chances are he wouldn't lease C to someone to go through us, and maybe he would do A, but we were just going to take our chances. So we just leased the middle section.

JT: Who owned this property?

RD: Dan Regard and Joe Regard owned it at the time. Dan was an attorney.

I'll tell you a little bit of history about it. When they dredged the canal, there was a drainage ditch just like you see in the front here. Okay? That's called the Rodel lateral. Well, when they dredged it, Mr. Lancon across the canal didn't want them to tear his oak trees up, so that's why they stopped there. They were going all the way to the bridge. So they stopped it and the parish did it, and the parish put the spoil bank right here where we got our office and everything.

They had a—Mr. Leleux, Sue Leleux, owned it at the time, and he had a contract with the parish that they would dredge it and spread the spoil bank. Well, they dredged it but the spoil bank stayed for like two or three years. He kept going to them to try to get them to do it, and they wasn't worried about it, you know. They just brushed it off.

Well, Dan, Mr. Sue, got real good friends, Mr. Leleux, he would let him hunt there and all that and pay him and all this, so Dan said let me take this piece of property or sell it to him and he said, "I'll go to work for you and I'll get this dredged, spread." They had done some work on his property he still owned.

So Mr. Leleux sold him eight or nine and a half acres, really, here for a real good price and then—him and his brother Joe. Dan just called the parish and told them, he said, if you don't have a dozer out here to spread this spoil bank—I

mean they had a mud levee—he said, "I will do it myself, and I will send you the bill." He went to one of the parish council meetings.

Craig Romero was the—or maybe it was his daddy, Francis. But anyway Craig was moving up. Well, anyway, the next week, the parish had a dozer in here and they spread it. He had a contract. He would have got it done and didn't have to pay for it, no problem. Dan had done his homework. So they spread this out and they did the work that they had promised to do for Mr. Leleux.

JT: Describe to me what was the port setup out here, meaning what types of companies, what kind of work was being done, what type of water access was here in the late seventies, early eighties.

RD: Well, I was working for Big Mac in '69 and '70 and probably part of '71, and Bayou Pipe had just purchased some of this land like across the canal on Curtis Lane coming in. They had bought some of the land, and Big Mac had leases where Big Mac used to be at the port here on the end of Curtis Lane—I mean Mac Gemsy, Mr. Mac Gemsy and Mr. Bigler had leased the facility from Bayou Pipe because they knew that the port—this was like in probably '66 or '67—they knew the port was going to start building, and that was the place to be. They finally closed their little shop on East Main and moved their facility here.

I had left already to go in business, but that's what they finally—so in '68, '67, they were planning. But there was only Maloney Crawford here, I think,

which is where the big stiff flag is right here, where Allen Tanks at right now, where Superior Derrick is, but I think Bayou Pipe bought the facilities or bought the improvements there. It's owned by Mr. LeMaire, I think, that property. But that was one of the first ones here, Maloney Crawford.

Then I think a couple of others came in where Daily was working for them. Daily could give you a really good history on that.

JT: Daily Berard?

RD: Yes.

JT: Dynamic?

RD: Well, Daily, he's no longer with them, but he's retired now.

But there was a company name of Norman Offshore that was located here, and there was another one, and Daily worked for Norman Offshore. So Daily could really get you—and he remembers all that. I was still at Big Mac and before that, so I didn't know until we located here, then you start realizing what's going on. You know what I mean?

But there wasn't many. You had to—my brother worked at Big Mac on a drilling rig, he was still welding with me then, they would pull their trucks in with a bulldozer, get them to the rig, and then they would pull them out at night to the

road, drag them to the road, and that's how they would go home. That's how much mud and slush they had in there.

JT: There was no development.

RD: None. This guy, Mr. LeMaire, had a dairy, a dairy where Bayou Pipe and Dynamics old yard is right there. He had a dairy, cow dairy right there, and he just couldn't believe what, the money that this property and stuff. I think he—my daughter worked for Bayou Pipe, and that's between you and I and the fencepost, but I think he was picking up a check….for rent.

JT: Cool. So when you drive, let's say, coming down the Weeks Island Road and you see all the jackets, the big jackets, either the new ones or the refurbished ones—

RD: None of that was there.

JT: That's been for the last twenty years, I mean, down here as well.

RD: Oh, yes.

JT: But none of that that you see.

RD: Oh, no, none of that.

JT: Nothing, none of the drilling…?

RD: None of that. None of that was here. Back across the canal right here, you can look and see that Parker Drilling across. You see in the back of the rig right there?

JT: Right.

RD: Look at the four foot of limestone, look at the thickness of the limestone. They barged in twenty-something barge loads of limestone, Parker did, and developed that. That was just open pasture right there on the other side.

JT: So it was a move to offshore to deeper water, is probably the reason why—

RD: But for everything, for boats, for tugs, for barges, it's a docking facility. You know what I mean? For whatever reason you're there. You know what I mean? It just covers it all. When we talk about crew boats, when we talk about tugboats, we talk about supply boats, you know. It's convenient to get off of Highway 90 and drive two miles and you're at the Port of Iberia, you know. Once you're established there, you can run jack-up boats, you can run supply boats, you can

run crew boats, you can run rigs, you can run everything out of there, you know. So it's real convenient there.

In the early eighties, we bought property at West St. Mary Airport, Larry, myself, Bruce and our partner Lynn [Ronsonet], and guess what? We kept the property for probably six or seven years, eight years, and we leased it to some people just to let them store their rigs on it in the slowdown. When that went by the wayside, we leased it to a crabber from Vietnam, and his name Nip. We call him Nip. That was his name of his company, and he would do soft-shell crabs and all that. We ended selling the property to him. We got our money back in the property from renting it, and then we ended up still having the property and we sold the whole thing, you know.

But we were thinking that the West St. Mary Airport would build just like Port of Iberia did, so we were just kind of jumping the gun. It never did. It never did develop, and the reason why is because you got twenty miles or further of blacktop road that can hardly get two cars on. You know what I mean? It's just not as convenient as the Port of Iberia, you know.

JT: Transportation's access is to get there as quick as you can.

RD: Yes. I mean look how easy it is to get off the four lane and get on Lewis Street and you're at the Port of Iberia. You know what I mean? You might have to go

around this way or go this way, but—when you're trucking in equipment in and out, in and out, is very critical there. You know what I mean?

JT: You get any stuff from the rail?

RD: Yes, sometime, and we don't ship a whole bunch from rail, but we've gotten some things from the rail. But it's very convenient, like Bayou Pipe. They have a spear going into their yard. They receive most of their pipe by rail. Some of it by barge, but you know. Most of the stuff for us is trucked in, like equipment and stuff like that, you know.

JT: So from '79 to '82 is when you guys get your start, and ya'll were seeing a lot of activity. In '82 you've got a hundred and fifty employees. What are the things that ya'll are building and fabricating in '82?

RD: Well, let me back up a little bit. When we moved here, we poured a little slab right here, and on the middle piece of section, we had a barge to build. Well, Larry and a helper started building the barge, and they probably did most of it themselves, okay, two men. We cut a little slot in the—because the bank was straight down, we cut a little slot, a little angle, and we have a picture of it, and put it on the ground and it's a deck barge and that's how we built it or they built it.

In the meantime, Wheelers Drilling, which was a barge company, drilling rigs, wanted there—

Tape 1, Side 2

RD: At National, this guy, his name is Don Naquin, and I'm sure he's retired now, but Wheelers is no longer in the drilling business. He went to National and asked National to build him a compound. Well, I found out about it and I went visit with him. Wheelers had a rig when I was working for Texaco offshore, Wheeler's 5, and they had a drill on there or a tool pusher called Roy Breaux. I got to know him real good. It's not the Roy Breaux here, but it's the Roy Breaux from Houma.

But anyway, Roy Breaux, when I got into the machine shop where the old compound was to give him a price on doing it, he said I want you to meet my assistant, and it was Roy Breaux, so it made the contact there. They talked to National and see if I was qualified or we were qualified to build a compound, and we got the job. Well, that was like a three hundred thousand dollar job. That was a huge job for us, so that I built that on the slab right here. While Larry built the barge, we built a compound and it just started from there.

Then we kept hiring some people, hiring some people, and again working at National for Resource, this guy named Jerry Dodson, he was a tool pusher for Resource, and what he did, he got to know me real good. So left and went to

work for a company named Butler and Johnson in Shreveport, and he came down here and I started talking to him. I'd go visit with him and come back and forth, back and forth, and finally, he made me a bid on a bunch of stuff. Finally, one day he walked in and he told me, "I need two drilling rigs."

So we started from there, and I just—I designed the rigs, more or less what he wanted, him and I together, and we had no drawings or nothing. We just put a rig together. He bought the substructure and the derrick and the equipment, and we built the rest of the rig. I built five rigs for him in a matter similar to that, but that's the ones [pointing to picture on wall]. These are the smaller, a little smaller rigs than those.

But I was in Shreveport with a crew of men rigging them up, putting them together, and Bruce was here with a crew building them. By that time, Larry was working for Rod Verret and them with Drill Systems on the St. Martinville Highway, and he was putting rigs together and Bruce was fabricating for him over here. So that's why we had a hundred and fifty people working. Larry had like forty or fifty. I had like forty or five. Bruce had like sixty or something like that, somewhere around that neighborhood, you know.

It worked out perfect until like '82 got here. Well, '81 really was good, but then the first quarter of '82, I mean they walked in to Drill System and just told Larry, said, look—it's Monday morning. "Pick your stuff up and get out. Not at twelve, not at five o'clock that afternoon. We're shutting the doors down."

It was a Canadian company. That's how quick it happened, and it's going to happen again. You can count on it. Okay?

The guy that I was building the rigs for in Butler and Johnson, he said, "Ronnie, the day the first rig comes out of fabrication, you know you don't have a job, this thing is going to slam shut."

I said, "You're crazy." I mean we built eight rigs in '81, land rigs. I figured we would build like six or five and then maybe like four and then three and we just like it went up, it would gradually go down.

He said, "When the first rig comes out and they don't have a job, they going to shut this thing down." He was right. It was just a chain reaction for—

JT: That was the second quarter of '82, you said?

RD: First quarter of '82.

JT: Okay. What caused that bust?

RD: Probably saturation of the drilling rigs. They had like forty-five hundred drilling rigs. We're probably operating with twelve hundred right now or less at four—

JT: Something kinked it up.

RD: Well, supply and demand.

JT: And everybody was already...

RD: And what happens when you—the price for the derricks is just like it is now, it's going crazy. I need a rig, I need a rig, I need a rig, I can't get them, I don't have one. I'm going to build one if you give me a three-year contract, you know, and that's what they were doing. Some of these guys had three-year contracts. Some of them didn't. They were just building them, anything you could find. They'd pull them out of the grass and build them. Everybody was building them. They had forty-five hundred drilling rigs, and when they started, well, Joe got a rig. Well, there's two or three extra here. Well, how much are you going to work that one for?

Well, I'm going to give you a break because I don't have a job for it. I'm going to go down in the price, and guess what, just started trickling down. Well, he went down in his price, what about you? And I can get a rig over here now. I don't need yours. You're charging ten thousand a day. I don't need that. So they just started hiring and just started trickling down in three months' time.

We had a good—'81 was our best year in the business at that time. '82 was still a good year because we caught some overflow from '81 and good, good jobs. We didn't get stuck with owing somebody owing us like a half a million dollars, which would have bankrupted us. So that made '82 a pretty good year.

But ’83, we went ’83, we had three people working from a hundred and fifty, so just a matter of we’re past—we’re probably thirty days away from closing the doors and then so.

JT: ’83?

RD: Well, ’82 it started to slide, and by the end of ’82 it was bad, and then in ’83, it just slammed shut. I mean it wasn’t—you’re on? You got it on?

JT: Yes, sir.

RD: Okay. Well, ’82 in the first quarter when they laid Larry off, that let—at eleven o’clock Monday morning, not five o’clock, don’t wait till twelve, get yourself out, so he left at eleven, and they closed the doors. Fifty guys went home. So that cut us from a hundred and fifty to fifty in one hour.

So I was in Shreveport—well, I was in east Texas putting one of the rigs together, and for Butler and Johnson, and Lynn called me to tell me that Larry had got laid off. So he came here and we was trying to finish some of the jobs that we had here, and I had about a month left on the Butler and Johnson rig with no other rig in sight, and I wasn’t prefabbing anything to keep the flow going.

Well, when I finished that, I had about thirty-five, forty hands. When I finished that one, I came back to Shreveport, and I laid off my thirty-five, forty

hands, plus we laid off some here because we didn't have any hands, you know. Then we just finished out the jobs that we had started in '82 till the end of the year, and we just started hustling work, trying to hustle work, and there was just nothing to be done, you know. Few little jobs here and there, but it wasn't.

So '82, the end of '82, got real bad, but the total number of '82 wasn't that bad dollar-wise because we had a good first quarter and some a second quarter and all that. Anyway, we collected the money, most of the money that we had out, and that helped us. We wasn't big spenders, but the first three years, we had growing pains, like buying cherry pickers and forklifts and we had a lot of money that we had spent. But we had also kept some money, a bunch of money, so we did all right with those three years.

'83 was like a—you didn't do much for a month, and then you might have picked up a job, and then it was mostly repair work, very little new construction. So we knew we had to diversify and get into everything, tug repair, boat repair, jack-up repair, everything we could do, everything. We started working for Cardinal. We started working for Schlumberger, which had some jack-up boats, wire-line boats and everything, got into jack-up legs like MIF does now and Central Gulf Fabrication.

We always worked on those type of boats, but we just never focused on that because the drilling rig was easier, better and more profitable. So we just now we have to get into everything, any kind of general fabrication, truck repair, truck bed repair, anything. That's what we were, survivors. We just picked up

everything we could do. Barbeque pits, anything. Now, you can't make a living on a barbeque pit, now I'm going to tell you right now, just that's tough.

So we would work a month with very little work, lay off most of the people, and then you would get a job, so you would work that job and make a little money, not much. But you'd make a little money. Well, the money that you would make there would carry you through the next month and then you didn't have much work then. Then you'd get another job, might last two months, make a little money, and then it would carry you for another month till you find another job.

So it was you never put any money aside. It was just what you made one month, you would use it to carry to the next job, and it's just on and on. I mean I was doing some work, like for example, the guy from Butler and Johnson brought me a scratch pad with a complete drilling rig listed on it, probably a two million dollar job, and he just threw the scratch pad on my desk. This was in the seventies, '79 and '80. He said, "I need two like that." Now this was a drilling rig. That was probably two million apiece.

In '83, if they had a two hundred dollar job, not two million, two hundred, they would get three bids on it, and this is people we had worked for three years or four years, very trustworthy. They knew we was honest people. They knew what we were going to do for them. We'd kind of—they had to have three bids, and that's what we went up against.

JT: From a rig to a barbeque pit.

RD: Oh, yes, just do whatever you could, anything. I'm talking about anything you could do.

JT: Was there a crunch time? Was there a period when you-all said, "We may have to close the doors"?

RD: Oh, it got to the point where, and it was somewhere in '83, I don't really remember, but we had laid off everybody except Kathy Browning, the secretary that's been with us for probably twenty-seven years, a little over, and he had a purchasing agent that had been here like maybe ten or twelve years. I'm talking about those two individuals would do accounts payable, receivables, invoicing, everything. They took care of the whole office, insurance, everything.

We had a meeting, and Kathy was the first one we hired, far as office people, and we were talking about laying off the purchasing agent. So that was us four that was still in the office, in and out of the office, and doing work ourselves. We went back to work on the welding trucks. We went actually started welding and fitting again. I didn't. I kind of got on the road and started looking for work and trying to sell a little bit, going to Houston and everything else, trying to pick up everything we could.

But we had a meeting and talked about laying off the purchasing agent and the three welders. We got to the point where, and I discussed that with you before, we laid—we gave them their vacation. They had like a week's vacation. We told them that if we didn't pick up a job before they came back or after, we would probably have to lay them off and we were probably like thirty days away from closing.

I think Kathy got a whiff of that, and she made the remark to me that, she said, "Look, I'm not leaving until ya'll close the doors in this place." We gave those three welders—we never laid off the purchasing agent, but we gave those three welders a week's vacation. So we had no one here. I mean Larry and Bruce was probably burning rods and doing some of the jobs, and I was on the road selling.

Two days after they took their vacation, now, like the Tuesday or the Wednesday, we picked up a job that we had bid on and it finally came in and we got it. So we called them back. They came back to work and we hired probably four or five that we had laid off earlier that was out of a job. We hired them back and did the job. Again, it was like a two-month job or something like that. We did that and then we laid of maybe like just two of the five that we had hired back, so we had a total of five.

Then we went into the next little small jobs and did what we had, and also we would do maintenance work at the yard here for us, which was costing us money but we had to do it, you know. We'd build pipe racks that we knew we'd

need in the future if we picked up and everything, stuff like that, but anyway. We picked up another little job and we hired four or five more, and then we'd finish it up, we'd lay off like two or three, you know.

Then we started running about ten, fifteen hands in over like '84 and '85, and then one year would be pretty good, you know. You'd do pretty good, and then the next year was back down again, you know. Just never could get to where you had a steady, steady flow of it, you know, and just—and everybody was fighting the same thing, I mean, we—

JT: What was it like in just the community in general?

RD: Oh, it was terrible. All the welders and fitters that you worked all this time, had experience, they went do something else. They went into electrical work. They went into carpenter work. They went into anything. I mean the cement work, laying cement. They went laying bricks. I mean they just some of them moved away. The ones that had come here to work just went back home, I mean.

I remember in '81 or '80, four guys drove in and they had a newspaper. We had ads in the paper for people trying to hire helpers and stuff. They drove in and they had a New York license plate. Hear what I'm telling you? New York. And I sat them all down and interviewed them and they told me that they were looking for a job. They had heard that south Louisiana was really booming and they could find a job. It had dropped off everywhere else, you know, the

industry—not the industry but the economy had dropped off and they was—I said, "Well, are ya'll staying? I need somebody I can depend on. You got a ride to come to work. I don't like four guys riding in the same car, because one gets sick, everybody's missing, you know, and stuff like that."

"So we don't have a place to live, we just got here. We bought a newspaper at the first stand that we got to, saw your address here, you're looking for workers, and that's why we're here." They filled application and I hired all four of them. New York. They left here and they went looking for a place to stay. I don't remember how long they worked here, but they were working and they were good little workers. Then finally it started slowing down, so we laid them off.

But that's what the industry was doing, and that quick. Look, it just turned. You're going to have it again. I guarantee it. I talked to a guy just the other day, and he said we've probably got five years of this, but he said I'm telling you right now, save your money.

I hired most of the guys, and that's the hardest thing I ever had to do was lay off every, you know, all these people. So we're really loyal to all our people, and I'm not going through that again. I'm going to tell you right now. I'm going to close the doors before we have to go back to what we're doing before.

Now, it's a different circumstances now. We didn't have the clientele that we have now. Now over the years, we've diversified so much, we have the clientele that's much greater, and I don't see that they'll get in trouble like they

did before. You know what I mean? It might slow down where you get down to twenty people, fifteen people, but you would have enough to survive, you know, so it won't be as bad on us, you know.

JT: Plus I guess moving into a little bit of deeper water, more, you know.

RD: Yes, and the only thing about deeper water is that you don't have the structural work like the McDermott's, the Avondale's and all that, don't have the jackets, the Gulf Island and all that, you know, because you can't put a jacket in two thousand feet of water. Where they were just in that hundred feet of water and two hundred feet of water and sixty feet of water and they were building decks and jackets, I mean it was like—it was just popping up all over, you know.

But when it slowed down and I was out there selling, it was tough. I mean we got into competition with the—I was bidding on ferryboats. I was bidding on boats, smaller boats that we could build here. But when you would go to some boat people and tell them, look, our name was originally Regional Rig Fabricators, so we all got together and say, guys, we're not going to sell no boat jobs and stuff if we keep the "rig" in this thing. You know what I mean? So we just made a name change. Instead of Regional Rig Fabricators, and we went that way because of Regional Airport and the rig building, we just took the "rig" out. I tell everybody, we stacked it, just like rest of the rigs [laugh]. But we took the

"rig" out and it was Regional Fabricators. It stayed that way, and it really helped us sell.

Now, you know, they know that Regional Fabricators can do anything, or just about anything.

JT: Tell me how these guys have changed over the last twenty-eight years that you've been working here.

RD: The guys, like you're saying, drilling rigs?

JT: These inland rigs, barge rigs?

RD: Well, what we build in '79, '80 and '81 was a mechanical rig, but it was a—when I say the difference between a mechanical rig and an electric rig, mechanical rig, you used to have an engineer on every piece of equipment or pretty much so. In other words, you would have like if you had two pumps, you had an engine running those two pumps, setting next to the pumps and belt driven. If you had a drill works on top, which you did, you had two engines or three engines running what they call a compound and there's chains and gears to turn that drill works. Sometimes you had an engine on the rotor tail.

So you were—most of the rigs were running like five engines or six, sometime seven small engines on a regular drilling rig. Well, diesel consumption

was out of sight. So what they started doing was using the SCR. An SCR unit is just the brains of the outfit. It's just electrical panels in a house that you have like three generators or four generators running electricity for those rigs and everything is run by electric motors instead. That's all, even the drill works. But it's AC and DC. The big traction motors are DC powered, and the rest of the motors like electric motors running the smaller pumps are AC and the quarters is AC, you know. So it was alternate current and DC current.

The SCR package allowed you to break, separate them, and you just have three engines running, generators, instead of having five. So it was more economical, especially in the slowdown, and SCR comes from the Navy. That's what they ran the aircraft carriers and the ships with, but it's just obsolete for them but roughneck friendly, you know. You could still use it in the oilfield and they've upgraded it a lot, but you could still use it in there, but you can have—train a roughneck to actually to check the breakers and everything that goes off and on and all this, you know. It could never be used in the ships again, and I met with a Navy guy that went through all that with me, but he said that was thirty years ago that we were using that and the military was using it. Now all they use any more drilling rigs, and it works for them.

So that's what they left the compound rigs left, because of the economics. But anyway, it just—the rigs that we built then, not these rigs too much, but the older rigs, they didn't have the safety factors that we have now and part of that is MMS and whatever. They didn't have the safety factors for whatever reason.

People didn't have safety. When we came onboard here, we didn't have a safety guy here, you know. We just didn't have one, and there wasn't OSHA.

OSHA wasn't involved with all this and that stuff, and it was like some of the safety regulations and stuff and the sand blasting and the air emissions and all that. We never had to worry about all that. That wasn't in there, you know. So we still respected the ground. We didn't just pour everything out on the ground and destroy all that. We knew better than that. But as far as for the regulations and all the MMS papers and every ownership regulations that we have to follow now, we have a guy full-time doing that, you know.

The rigs did the same thing. The rigs went from—I'm not saying they not safe, but to a lot safer now and a lot more automated, you know, bells and whistles, which relates to safety and everything. It's a lot more complicated now than it was then. New equipment and like a top drive. I mean years ago they didn't have a top drive.

JT: What is top drive?

RD: Top drive is put in a derrick underneath the block. You see the block hanging in the derrick [points to picture]? Well, they put a track in the derrick and they hook that block to the top drive and the top drive screws like, for example, when you take a—what they used to use is a Kelly, and now they don't use a Kelly. They use a top drive. In other words, if they're going in like they're coming out the

hole and changing pipe out, stacked in the derrick, they just grab it. They had to set the joint down and then put the slips in and hold it there, then get the Kelly and put the Kelly on top to tighten it up.

They don't do that now. They just grab it with the top drive when they go in with three joints. The top drive turns it, screws it from the top. Grab another. It's so fast, you know. It's just way quicker, you know, and it's just automation. I mean now they make them—Barko made the first top drive, and now Can Rig makes them and everybody else makes them. So it's just things like that that is going, come a long ways, you know. Like instead of 5,000 psi mud pressure, they want 7500 psi, they want more volume because they're going deeper. They're going deeper.

They drill like to drill a well twenty thousand feet, twenty years ago, it would take them a year and a half. They drill that in four months now. So that's why we can get away from 4500 rigs. Twelve hundred rigs can almost do the same thing that 45 was doing. The technology is so much greater.

Like seismic, like what Larry and them is doing. The seismograph, they go in, it used to be one out of two or one of five they would hit. I'm saying used to be one out of five. Now it's one out of two. If they can do seismograph and they're almost 50 percent sure they're going to hit right that way, used to be it was a gamble, you know. It's not too bad on land, but when you're in six thousand feet of water and you've got a semi drawing two hundred thousand a day, you know you want to make sure you're in the right place, you know. You

don't want to drill and spend fifty million dollars on a dry hole where you could have just went over another two miles and hit right into the sand, you know, just more accurate, you know. Just everything is just automated. Everything is just more up to date with it. So…

But the drilling rigs were basically—those rigs right here were like going to Total, which is a French company, going to Venezuela. That was '96 and '95 we did those, and that's...we hadn't built a drilling rig since like '81, and I was amazed the change from that timeframe to this timeframe, and it's even better now, or worse, whatever you want to call it. You know what I mean? I think it's more automated even more and it's just better now, you know, the drilling rigs.

TJ: A big jump in technology over those...

RD: Big, big time. What these people did, Total in particular, they hire a third-party inspector, and that third party was called MODU [Mobile Offshore Drilling Units] Inspectors. They come out of England. Total is in France, and the rig was going to work for Total in Venezuela.

TJ: And it was built here.

RD: And it was built here, refurbbed. It was a Penrod [Drilling] rig that they had picked up and they brought it here, we tore it all down, every bolt, nut and blast

and painted the whole thing and upgraded everything. Where it was bad, we added to and then added some more stuff to it, even put a foam system on it, so that if a fire broke out, the gases on top of the mud, they just press a button and they would drop foam on top of the mud in the mud tanks so it would kill all that, just stuff like that. You know what I mean? That you just didn't have on a rig before.

MODU inspectors came in and they spent a week here, and he crawled in every inspection door they had and just jotted it all down. We had to run the drill works so many rpms for like an hour, increase the rpms for like two hours, increase them again for three hours. The pumps, you had to stroke the pumps so many strokes per minute, and he recorded all that. They got inside where the bull gears are and magged all that, mag particled all that. One of them had a crack in it. Oh, yes, hairline crack, probably go down the road and then a year or two, it was the third pump to a standby. "You've got to fix it." A hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Well, Cliff Drilling went crazy. We not, we tell Total, we tell them, we not taking the rig till this guy says it is fit to be taken, and that's the way it is, and that's the way it was. Guess what? When the rig left, they brought it to Houston, pulled the bull gear out, put a new one in and it shipped out later.

So but everything was built here. They added some of the stuff, and some of the stuff we added. Blasted, painted, completely rigged it up, tested like they wanted, we put it on trucks, sent it to Houston to a packing company, they

packaged it, put it on a ship, went to Venezuela with it, went through Customs, brought it to location, spent a week rigging it up, or ten days, and I think today they still drilling with them, those two especially.

JT: It seems that particularly with the mid-nineties to present that it's not just south Louisiana, southeast Texas anymore in this industry. It's gone international now. You've got partners all over the world.

RD: Well, it's always been international to some degree, and I think the Third World countries are finally seeing what the Saudis did and what the Arab countries are doing with—I mean if you have oil and the West needs your oil or even Europe, France and everybody else, you going to be all right. Your country is going to do well, you know, like Saudi. I mean Saudi, you might have a bunch of people that don't have much, but the bulk of Saudi companies, people, have money. You know what I'm saying? So I think that the drilling was probably just as advanced. They didn't worry about MMS and all that. They just—I was working overseas a while, and they would just take a four-inch line and just pump oil overboard just to clean out the system. Or the well, when they would complete a well, we'd run it through separators in order to make and get all the frag in the water they pumped into the well, the salt water and all that. They keep running that through until they get it where they want it, then the put it on production.

Over there, they just ran it overboard in a jack-up. I'm talking about a four-inch line. I just could see a slick for as far as—oh, yes, this was like probably in '85, '87, they was still doing that, you know. That's why the oil companies kind of moved overseas at one time, because so much overseas or more than here because the rules and regulations were so much leaner. You know what I mean? Air emissions, they could flare a pipe, flare gas out.

When you hit an oil well, you have gas with it most of the time. So low-pressure gas in an oil well, they just flare that because they have so much gas. The only way to get that gas out of the pipeline is to compress it. So instead of spending a million dollars to put up platforms and compressors and everything and then to compress the gas to be able to ship it, they would just flare it. They would flare it all. Can't do that no more.

They do it overseas, you know, like Iran. Iran flares more gas than the whole United States can use every day. But there are no rules and regulations. You know what I'm saying?

JT: They don't want to try to contain that and pipe that and reuse some of it.

RD: When you see about their nuclear program for energy, natural gas it the most clean-burning fuel we have, and they're flaring more than America can use every day.

JT: If they were smart enough, they'd figure out a way to pipe that in.

RD: Well, they're not. That's what I'm saying. So when they're saying the nuclear program they're trying to develop is strictly for energy, they full of bull because they have more natural gas than they can use, you know. Why go to coal when coal's not clean burning, you know? It's good for us because we got a lot of coal, but still natural gas is the way to go though.

JT: It's cheap.

RD: Yes. I would think that overseas was just as popular in their drilling, and I think it fluctuated just like anything else, but I think it just evolved just like it did here. These companies now, like Saudi, they're saying they don't think they have the same reserves or the reserves they thought they had; it's starting to deplete. That's why you see the Rowan Drilling's going overseas in the jack-ups now. They're hiring them for twice the money they're paying them here because they want them, and they want a drill to keep there. The difference here is we going twenty thousand feet, they're drilling five.

JT: The crude is sweeter, isn't it?

RD: It's sweeter but it's—when you can pump out a seven inch case in a day, you're putting ten thousand barrels a day out of that well at five thousand feet deep. And we drilling twenty and putting in a sixty-four choke. You know what I mean? To get three thousand barrels or two thousand barrels a day, that's a big difference. You know what I mean? The cost of drilling is so much lighter and so much cheaper, you know, so.

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is interview with Ronnie Dressel, Regional Fab, on 18 December 2006. This is tape two by Jason Theriot, MMS Ship Fab Project.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So how many rigs is Regional working on right now? What's your main line of work for you?

RD: Well, my part of it is I'm working on Rig 8, which is a refurb for Parker Drilling. We just finished with Rig 50, which is a complete refurb, changed the engines out and elevated the drill floor eight feet, which was a major project, and we're working on Rig 8. We cut, demoed the rig from the quarters all the way back to the keyway, so they're going to change pipe rack, mud tanks, drill floor,

substructure, everything. So it's a complete rebuild. They changed the quarters out about three years ago, and that's just an upgrade that should have been done ten years ago or three years ago or five years ago, and because of the industry and the low day rates and trying to show a profit or a bigger profit and try to show the stockholders that they're doing well, they're not going to spend the money.

Now the day rates are elevated, so they're going to spend the money. So what they have done is put like three rigs into this year or four rigs and one new build. Then next year, they're going to do like three more upgrades and maybe one new build, and they're going to keep doing that until they finally get all the rigs back up to where they need to be.

JT: Now, the whole time that you're talking about rigs, you're talking about your specialty, inland rigs?

RD: Yes, inland barge rigs. We still do land rigs, but we haven't—we just finished two of them for Saxon Drilling, which was a refurb and bringing them up to what they need to be. I say "bringing them up," to industry standards. You know what I mean? MMS and everything else, and new mud equipment and all this evolves. You can't just have an oilrig with an old de-sand or de-silt it for mud cleaning purposes, you have to have the best or the newest equipment on the market. That's what the companies demand so.

JT: That's a barge rig?

RD: That's a barge rig, yes, Tetra [pointing to picture].

JT: When was this fabricated in?

RD: '97 and '98. We built two of them. They had a five-rig program. They were going to build those two, which is their structural design for two thousand horsepower rig but they have the equipment—they had thousand-horse equipment that was already in their yard. So they just made me modify the rig to accept that smaller equipment, and now they lease them out or work them and market them as a thousand-horsepower rig.

JT: So that was a refurb?

RD: No, that was a new build.

JT: Okay. So ya'll did the whole barge, too?

RD: Everything. They contracted the barge, they did, to someone else, and we did everything else from the topside of it.

JT: The barge shows up here and then ya'll did like you said...

RD: When they gave the contract out for them to build the barge in the Houma area, we started the fabrication. We started building the quarters and the seawalls, the drill floor and the pipe racks and everything. Six months later, the first barge was ready. They came to me and we started putting everything together. Ninety days later, the rig was out.

JT: This is a typical job that Regional handles.

RD: Right, right, right. That's the way we normally do it. Let the barge people build the barge, and let the rig people build the rig. Now, we could build the barge, but it's not—we can't compete. Because the barge is like a box, just a matchbox, so anybody and their brother can build a barge. But these companies like Bollinger and Conrad, they have an assembly line to build those barges. The only way you can make money with them is to just move them down like a car lot, like an assembly on a car deal, like GM Motors. You put—one puts the walls, one puts the sides, and just keep moving it down. So you can't compete with these people.

So we let them build the barge and we start fabricating the rig, and they're being built simultaneously, but when they finish the barge, we build the first things we need on the rig. The walls around the side, we're going to put that first while the quarters are still being in the process of being built. The drill floor is

built last. The pipe rack is built last. So we do everything that we need that goes on the barge, then we set all the equipment in there. Then by then you've got the quarters finished, you got the pipe rack finished, you put all that in and then you put the drill floor on and start putting the rest of the equipment on.

JT: So they would bring the barge here from the channel?

RD: Yes, they just tug it.

JT: Ya'll would work on the water?

RD: Right. I just put—tie it to the dock, that's tied up in the dock or that we tie it to the dock and just with our cranes and stuff we just hanging the equipment.

JT: Now what is this rig capable of producing and what depths?

RD: That rig is it's a sixteen-foot-deep barge, and that has a lot to do with—that's the main stroke on it. Most of the rigs are fourteen foot. This little rig is sixteen. They tried to get more market share because you can go in deeper water, where a twelve-foot barge or a fourteen-foot barge can't operate in twelve foot of water, because the water will start splashing over, where this little rig can. You know what I mean? They can go in twelve foot of water, and if you get some wave

action, it still won't get to the equipment. But a regular barge fourteen foot high would go underwater. It would short out the equipment.

So this rig was designed to go into shallow water, like six foot of water, and that's what they're drawing. In fact, they wanted to go in five and a half, and if they pump out all the potable water, fuel and light light, they probably can get into five. A tug, most of the smaller tugs, will still draw five foot of water. So they can only go where the tugs can bring them. So the five-foot tugs that draw five foot of water or drag these in, these little rigs in, and they can go in five and six foot of water and they can still drill like fifteen thousand feet, you know.

If you get a bigger rig that drills twenty-five thousand feet, it's going to draw seven and eight foot of water, and you can't get in these spots. So they wanted the best market share they could get. They could go into twelve foot of water where a fourteen-foot barge can't. They can't run it. That way, if it's rub—in a canal, they can. But if it's out on the open in the bays and stuff, they can't do it. So they can get that market. They're small enough to work over and complete.

Most of the big drilling rigs, they'll go in and drill. Once they make a well, they set casing and they get out of there, and these little rigs come in behind them and then they work, they flush the well out, clean it, log it, do what they got to do and then they complete it, which is about two weeks', three weeks' work. So what most of the time, if you've got a bunch of big wells to drill, the big rigs will come in and drill them and they let these little rigs come in behind and work

over and complete the wells. They go on and drill another one, they come in behind them and complete it.

JT: What can he produce now a day?

RD: Produce? You mean like?

JT: This Rig 11 Tetra, how much barrels of oil?

RD: They don't produce any oil, they just go drill for it.

JT: Oh, they're just drilling it.

RD: Yes, they're just drilling the well, the hole that seismograph has done. First of all, they're leasing. The oil company, say, like Chevron, Texaco, have leased the area, and they'll survey it. They'll seismograph it, okay, and then they'll see the seismograph. They look at the seismograph, 3-D and all this, they say, "Well, we need to put a well right here." If it's into the marsh somewhere, well, they'll get a permit and dredge a canal to get a rig like that in there. Most of the time, they try to go around it now because permits are so hard to get, and then they got to get a permit to drill that well.

So what they do is they come in and a company comes in and they put a cribbin. You've seen the wood cribbins?

JT: Yes, sir.

RD: It's like eight-foot wide. The keyways on those rigs are like ten-foot wide. So they just slide it in. Most of the time they'll get a company to come in that builds the cribbins, and they'll run what they call conductor pipe. One joint of pipe like twenty-four inch or thirty-inch, depending how deep they going, because they got to keep going inside of that, inside of that, that's just a guide to start them off. They'll come in, or whoever, and they'll come in.

They'll put the well into the keyway, and then they'll line it up with the—and they drop two spuds to hold the barge in place, and then they'll sink the rig. Most of the time, they'll have a shell pad around that that they put so it's not mud, because a lot of time you start drilling and the drilling and everything will start making them slide off location. So they'll put a shell pad and then they'll sit, put the rig down. If the rig's flat, level, then they're ready to go. If not, they'll pull it back off, put some more shell on it, put the rig back on it till it's level. It's sitting on the bottom. It's not floating.

What they'll do is they'll come in and they'll drill what they call service pipe. Like if they're going, say, like fifteen thousand feet, they might drill. The first hole might be like sixteen inch, so the bit's going to be big, okay, and they

drill with water. Most of the time, if it's in a proven field, they know where the gas is at in that proven field, so they're not too worried about a kick with the gas coming back on them, so they'll use water, they won't use mud to drill service hole.

JT: How far is the service hole?

RD: Anywhere from twenty-five hundred to thirty-two hundred, somewhere in there, depending how deep they're going. Okay? Well, what they do, they come out, they'll drill that in two days, three days. It don't take long. Then what they do, is they go back in and they set casing, but huge casing, like thirteen and three-eight or whatever they're going to drill, depending how deep. If they going deep, they have a big one.

Now these little rigs don't go deep, so they'll probably have thirteen and three-eight, is the biggest casing they'll have. All right. They'll set that. Then they come back and they cement the bottom of it, and then they go back in the hole and they drill through that cement. You'll cement a portion of the bottom and they'll drill through that cement. Now that protects that upper string. If there's any kind of gas or anything, it can't penetrate that hole to kick back on them.

All right. Then they start drilling with mud. They go through that cement and they'll start drilling, and as they drill, the returns are coming back up. The

mud goes inside that pipe, comes back up on the outside, comes back up in the hole, and comes back through their cleaning equipment. They take that and analyze it, see if there's gas in it, see if there's mud in it, what's the weight of the mud, because if they're anticipating or because it's a proven field, they know they're drilling and there's gas down, say, like eight thousand feet that's got fifteen hundred pound of pressure, they know with the weight of their pipe and the bit and everything, they need to have eight-pound mud. So they'll mix eight-pound mud so when they get to that gas, it's not going to blow back on them.

JT: So they can mix the mud there on site.

RD: On site, yes. We got P-tanks to get dry mud, what they call it, and then they have mud in the mud tanks.

JT: Like here on these tanks [pointing to picture]?

RD: Well, those right there, that's—they have mud tanks all on the backside. All this, can't get up, but all the little sheds on the back of the rig, that's all mud tanks. They might have like twenty-two hundred barrels of liquid mud on site, plus they got P-tanks where they can mix it right quick.

If they get a kick, they call it a slug. They might mix a slug of twenty-pound mud and just pump it into it right quick, bam, bam, bam, and then it

weights this gas down and they can keep drilling. But if it don't, it blows back, and gas cuts the mud. So it makes it lighter. If you go in there with eight-pound and you hit a gas pocket and it cuts the mud and it goes to six, it might blow back on you. If it blows back on you, gas is coming up, it will blow the pipe out of the hole and everything and tear the whole rig up. If the sand hits the side, makes a spark, it will catch fire, and that's what you see when you see a blowout, you know.

JT: So once they get to their destination—

RD: Well, if they're going and they're anticipating a kick or they know where the zone's at, they weight up the mud, and they go in. Then when they're saying, the guy, the engineer on board calculates we got X amount of joints of pipe, we got two subs at the bottom, we got a bit, we got this, we got that, we need to be at thirteen thousand feet, that's where the seismograph showed us where we're going to be. Okay. So when they get to thirteen, they'll start slowing down, and then they'll go through that zone. They might go to fourteen. Okay.

Then they'll set casing all the way down. They started off with thirteen. They'll go to seven or nine, and they'll go deeper. They might do that at eight thousand feet. Then they cement that. Then they come back in and they secure it. They go back through and they drill through that and they go down a little lower

and they might go to seven the next time. They keep doing that until get beyond where they want or where they think.

If they, say, like thirteen looks like the hot zone or that's where the sand's at, they'll go below that, put the last string of pipe casing, and they'll cement it. All right. That secures the hole. All right. It might be like this and then like this and then like this, but it secures the hole. The casing went through that first set of cement, the next one and everything. All right. It's all secure now.

All they got to do now is go in and log it, so they'll go in and log it with these tools and take pictures of it, and you'll see exactly where the sand's at. Okay. So if the sand's at, say, like twelve-six and it's got fifty feet of sand, they're going to come down with their perforating tool at that middle of that sand, and they're going to shoot a gun and it perforates the holes in the casing. Okay?

Now, nowhere else. The only thing that's going to flow into that casing is where they perforate it. So if they're in a sand that's two hundred feet deep and that's all oil and gas in that sand, now it's running this way. Follow what I'm saying? Okay. They'll perforate the middle or wherever the engineer thinks they need to be. There's more oil on the top. Most of the time the oil will come to the top, so they'll do it at the top and they'll suck that sand. They might go through three sands like that, one at six thousand, and they might not hit another one till eight. They might not hit another till twelve.

Well, they'll go all the way down to thirteen and they'll perforate that twelve, and they'll flow that twelve till they suck it dry. Then they'll come in

when they figure there's no more in there. They'll pull up. They'll cement that bottom section and they'll come up to eight and they'll perforate at eight and they'll flow the eight sand. Then they'll do the same thing, cement and come up to six until they suck it all dry.

JT: Looking for where's the best spot.

RD: Right, and they're looking for the what's the most productive. They might say, well, the bottom's not worth fooling with. We never going to get anything out of it, you see.

JT: So then that's when this guy—

RD: Well, this guy sets the casing and they lock. Okay. Then he completes the well. When I complete it, they'll go in and the guy with the fracking tool that fracks the well or penetrates the pipe, well, he'll come in and run fresh water. They call it fracking it. They'll run fresh water to push everything away from those holes that they penetrated, pushes it out and it allows the oil to come back in.

Well, they'll do that and then they'll put a work string in, like a two inch, inside of that casing, okay, with a screen on the bottom, just like a water well. What they'll do, that pipe will pressure up inside, and then it will get into that work string. Then they put a choke at the end. I'm taking about a choke of this

size, depending on the pressure of the well, because if they open-hole it, it will either sand up. It sucks so hard the sand will get in it or sand up, or you'll lose pressure. But if they keep a choke, they'll get all the oil they want and that bottom pressure stays there and keeps blowing and keeps blowing and keeps blowing.

JT: That's amazing.

RD: That's called completing the well. That's what that little rig does. But far as for bringing a barrel of oil home, they don't do that.

What they do when they finish, they set a Christmas tree, which closes the well off at the thing, and they put a safety valve, what they call a storm choke, at the bottom. If that well starts producing like an open hole, that choke will close at the bottom and it can't produce anymore. Like if somebody would just come and knock the tree off with a barge after the rig's gone, that storm choke would automatically close. That's what they do with all the wells in the bay and everything for the storm choke. When they say they shut a storm choke in, it automatically shuts in because there's too much pressure going on. It's not designed for that. It's designed to do what you set it for.

So once they got the tree on and everything, that little rig leaves and goes, start another one.

JT: How long is that process, what you just described?

RD: It depends on what they want to do and how they're going to do it. They might have a dry hole. They'll just want to set casing and just get off. Another crew will come and pull the piling up, cut it below the mud line and leave. That's the dry hole.

You might come in and they might say, we got oil at six thousand feet. Log it one day, two days, and they might complete it in a week. Most of the time, a week is completion to put the work string and make sure it flow, frack the pipe and all that, you know, run water through it and then suck it back out, clean it out, you know. Most of the time it takes a week, you know.

But then once they leave, somebody got to come in and run a pipeline, so those trees, what they call a Christmas tree, has valves going off to the side, and that's how they flow them. So they'll run a pipeline in the bottom or under the mud, and they'll run a pipeline to the near little platform, separate it and everything, and they crack it open and that's how they flow the well. Now, they might tie into a pipeline that's existing, and they might make a deal with maybe like a BP Amoco has a pipeline that's existing, and they'll meet that oil going into their pipeline, and that's how they'll do it, you know.

JT: These rigs are going for, you said, thirty-five million, about what it costs?

RD: To build a small one like that, I would think about twenty-five, that size, you know. The worst part now is to get the equipment, because the equipment is supply and demand and, just like anything else, the equipment companies have downgraded or downsized in the bad times and now they're trying to keep up with the demand, and they just can't do it, you know. It's got a year delivery on drill works and pumps and stuff like that, you know. You can build a rig in six months, but you can't get the equipment.

JT: Who's building the equipment? National. Luco, which is a pump company and they build drill works. Drago and National Oil Well, I mean just the equipment people that's been doing it for years, you know. They still doing the same thing, but they just—they closed a bunch of their plants when the slowdown hit, and they just gradually trying to build.

I was talking to a guy, a main guy with Parker the other night and he was telling me that Luco has a year and a half delivery on pumps and drill works, and they going to add on to their facility and next year they're going to probably start delivering in nine months instead of a year and a half. So they're just trying to keep up with the demand, you know. Like I said, it's going to last four or five years or whatever, and then guess what.

JT: Get it while the getting's good, huh?

RD: Yes, you got to make it.

JT: Other than natural market forces, what are some of the things that you guys can do now? I don't mean just you here at Regional, but the industry in particular, how can you avoid a catastrophe like the '83 bust that is inevitable to come again in five years? What is some of the things that you can put in place to make sure that limited damage will—

RD: Well, what would keep you afloat right now, I guess, is what you're asking, would be or what would be the best thing for Regional to do, would be is we're not going to make any substantial improvements in the yard. We're geared up now with the yard and the facility we have because we've been in business twenty-seven years to probably run another hundred and fifty people in here. Because of the industry and the way we work and the knowledge we have now, working a hundred and fifty people in '83 probably could bring in probably twelve million dollars—or '82, rather, or '81, where today it would probably bring in twenty, twenty-five. So I mean how much more do you want? You know what I mean?

All we have to do, everything we have is paid for and we own the property, we own the buildings, we own everything here, so we all our twenty-seven years prior to this, we've figured on buying good equipment, keeping it up, and we knew this industry would slow down. We knew it would pick up again,

and it has and, guess what? We're in a position that we have everything paid for. I mean everything is clear and clean, and all we got to do is just get the work, and that's what's happening.

We're just picking up the work, and if we can work a hundred and fifty people year around, well, you know, this year has been a record year for us, you know. I mean just—in fact, in August we surpassed the best year we had ever had, so I mean this is profit margin is great, work is great, new work. Some of it's rebuild, refurb, but it's still good work, you know.

JT: But you got to have yard hands that know what they're doing.

RD: Got to have supervisors, and right now especially you got to have supervisors. It's really hard to get welders and helpers. Years ago, we used to hire helpers and we had like a helper with every fitter, and that's how you train them. We would actually have, along with the local vo-tech schools, you know, we'd push that at meetings, at board meetings and at port commission meetings and stuff. We'd ask the State to help us and they would put in money, and they would try to train some guys. But they were keeping them in the schools like for eighteen months, you know.

What are you teaching a helper in eighteen months? I mean teach him how to run a water machine, tack, and a little bit about the welding rods, the different type of settings of the machine, and cut a little bit with the torch, and

then in three months, let him go. Give him to us, and we'll on-the-job train him, you know, and that's the way the industry was then. You would hire twenty helpers to work with forty fitters. Some didn't need them, some did, but then but those helpers—I would preach that in two years if you're not making top or near, it's not my fault, it's your fault.

In other words, I did it. I was a supervisor in two years, why can't you do it? Hard work got you there. That's the only thing, you know. You've got to have a little brain, but hard work's going to get you where you need to be, and that's what we did. I preached that.

I got some supervisors today that are thirty-three years old, and in two years they're either leaderman or close to it, and that's—it paid off and that's how we used to train our fitters from helpers. But today, the market today is just—I mean we got a rig coming in tomorrow, how much work you got? I got to completely refurb it now, revamp it I mean.

But where do I get forty hands and twenty helpers to put on there overnight in two days? I mean I put ads in the Lafayette paper, in New Iberia paper, Abbeville, Franklin, everywhere, and I get one application, a welder. I'm serious. One. I run the ad for like two weeks or three weeks every paper, and I talk to everybody and their brother and I—the best way to get people is to hire them from the yard. You tell everybody, if your brother's looking for a job, your cousin, you know anybody looking for a cherry-picker operating job, a welder, a fitter, tell them come meet me.

These boys are making over twenty dollars an hour, you know, and they won't. You don't get anybody. I mean they just left the markets and they doing something else or they're working somewhere that's paying them twenty-one or twenty-two instead of twenty and they're satisfied there, and there just nobody to go around.

So guess what? The only way to say, well, like for example, the sister rig to this in last year in November caught fire, okay, and burned. You see the Tetra sign on the quarter end [pointing to picture]?

JT: Yes.

RD: Well, that beam across the bottom, we took all that whole area off right there and we put a false floor and I put some modular quarters on there for them to go to work. Well, in two months they were back at work, put new engines and everything in it, a new CSR, but I only hooked them up temporary. I have a quarter sitting on the ground in the back just like that right there, sleep the same amount of people. They're coming in on the twenty-first of this week, this month, and they going to—I'm going to take everything that I put on there temporary off, and I'm going to put their quarters on and weld it down, hopefully in two weeks, they're back at work.

Well, if they're coming in on the twenty-first, I mean, we the eighteen today, where I'm going to get forty hands to get on this rig? So I just pick up the

phone and I call two or three of the contractors that I'm working and I say, look, I need ten Mexicans or fifteen or twenty. Don't have to be Mexicans, just hands. And they bring them to me.

They might, out of twenty, I might have two or three that's not willing to work the way I like it, so I lay them off and tell them to bring me five more or maybe six, bring six, ten more. And I get ten more and then I lay them off till I got the crew I want.

JT: How long have you been doing that type of operation?

RD: Using Hispanic labor, probably three years. I was against that, because of the lack of communication, you know, because you try to—I mean even like with the Vietnamese guys, I got two or three that I worked, and some of these companies jumped on them big time, and I just felt that you couldn't make them understand what you wanted, and we're very particular on the kind of work we do and how we do it.

But some of these guys are bilingual. Some of these guys can come in and they want to work and they've no fabrication. And three or four—if you have thirty guys, you might have four that can speak English or understand it, and they just communicate with—sometime I would just call one that could speak English and understand it, and I would make him tell them what I want. First thing you know, we started getting good hands and we started—we were able to do the

Tetra rig and we had like sixty of them. Man, we could see which ones were good and which ones wasn't, and which ones that could speak a little English and a combination of all three, and we kept those. Now we're able to cut back, cut back, cut back, let the bad ones go, you know, and then we got some good hands now, you know.

JT: Where are these guys living?

RD: All over. Some live in New Iberia. Some are on green cards. Some are on visas. Some live in Mexico. Some live in Texas. I just had a real good one been with me probably for two years, got to go back to Mexico, he left Friday. He's got to go back till February.

JT: Green card ran out?

RD: Yes, yes. Then he's got to stay there two months, and then he can come back.

JT: How many other companies at the Port of Iberia are using your migrant system?

RD: Probably I would say probably 95 percent of them, oh, yes, 99. I would think that if they pull all of the Hispanic labor out of the Port of Iberia right now, they

would be in one hell of a bind. I know I would. I could work thirty people that I'm working now, but I would—I couldn't do what I got on the books, you know.

JT: You keep a real close on eye on immigration reform?

RD: Well, I don't have to worry about it and that's the beauty of it. I didn't see the whole picture when they first started. We tried hiring them, directly hiring them. Some of these boys live here and they speak good English, and that didn't work because different reasons. Some of them were coming in from Mexico and they wanted to hire on, and we'd hire them and then it just didn't work because you got to worry about the green card, you got to worry about the visas and all that.

Well, these contractors that pick them up, they pick them up and they worry about all that. They go into Mexico and hustle up, and they get their visas. They actually work to get their visas for them, and bring them in forty and a hundred at a time.

JT: Legally.

RD: Yes, legally. And I don't worry about that. So if Immigration comes in, they don't have to worry. They don't come to me. They go to them. I mean if I guy is not legal, then that's not my problem. That's theirs. I don't worry about anything. I don't worry about paying them. I don't worry about cost of living. I

don't worry about anything. I don't room them. I don't do anything. That's their business, and they charge me a flat rate.

JT: Per man?

RD: Yes, per man. Per man. I pay so much an hour for these guys.

JT: Is it the same rate as what you would pay your fitter or your welder?

RD: Basically, if you've got a top guy working for you, you're going to pay him that or more when you factor in your overhead, you know, when you figure a vacation. I pay insurance for the guys, and they pay for their families. When you figure on vacation and your profit sharing that you give them, like a 401(k) and you factor everything in and your safety and all that in. Look, if a guy gets a little piece of speck of something in his eye and he rubs it and it maybe like sticks in his eye and he got to go to the doctor, I mean, I don't bring him to the doctor. I just call and tell the guy, look, you got a hand that's got something. They punch out, they come and pick him up, bring him to the eye doctor, they patch the eye for that afternoon just for safety, and then they bring them back to work the next morning. So I don't have nothing to do with it.

JT: Who is this—I mean you don't have to name him by name if you don't feel the need to. But who are these individuals, these contractors that are working out of…

RD: Just local boys, local boys that I know well. I been working with them for twenty years. They just—one of them was in the fabrication business. He just decided that gradually weeding out the fabrication business, and he started doing this and saw the market for this, so he just started doing it.

JT: So he set up a network of businesses who are finding Mexican workers?

RD: Yes, and he hired a couple of guys that I've been knowing for years and I trust them, and guess what? They take care of me, you know, and all I got to do is pick up the phone and tell him, look, I need twenty guys. He tells me, just give me two or three days' notice. Now that's all I can ask for. If I know the rig's coming, and most of the time if you're going to refurb a two million dollar job, you know it's coming. I mean you still can't—and look, when I talk about it, I don't have to drug screen them, I don't have to do anything. They do that. Nothing. No physical. A drug screen and a physical a day could cost me anywhere from two to three hundred dollars, and there's no guarantee that this guy's going to stay with me. He might—

Tape 2, Side 2

RD: When you hire them here, they going to be here for the duration, and they want to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

JT: Are they skilled?

RD: Yes. They working in Mexico and Monterey and everywhere, into Mexico City and all that. They are fabricators. I was surprised. Some of these guys pull out a pocket calculator and they run the pump, and they punching in the degrees on the pipe and everything and the forty five what they subtract for, and at the end of the day, it's done.

JT: They can read drawings?

RD: Yeah!

JT: Do you have to have a translator or somewhere here who—

RD: Well, like I said, most of the time you have three or four. We probably got five or six that speak good English, and all they got to do is go over there and tell them, you know. But we've learned how to communicate with the ones that can't speak

English. You can get it done or get it, you know—like the little guy, Juan, that just left, little short guy, and he's probably in his forties, late forties, good little fitter, you know, laugh all the time, always laughing, always in a good mood, work his tail off. You know what I mean? But good little fitter, I mean he can do pipes, structural, anything, you know.

JT: Where are the eighteen and nineteen, twenty year old local, young workers—

RD: I have no idea.

JT: The black and white young men who used to—who used to start up in this industry?

RD: I really don't know where. I mean I look at my nephews and stuff that are like twenty-five and thirty. Some of them in the machine shop business. Some of them have gone on to college. Some of them, one of them works at the hospital as a x-ray technician and stuff. But for getting into this industry, I have two boys, one of them sells Allstate insurance and one of them's in telecommunications in Dallas. So they're not interested in this business. I mean Larry's boy wasn't in here. I mean he's passed away, but I mean he's not in this business. Bruce's boy is in the machine shop business. He's not in here. Lynn's five kids, or three

boys, they're doing something else. They're not into—so we have no one really that to take this business over, you know.

Shayna, my daughter, used to tell me, "Daddy, let me take over this. I'm going to go sell for you," and all this.

And, "Baby, it's way more than what you think." You know what I mean? She would probably make an outstanding salesman, but you've got to know something about drilling rigs and yard.

You know what, we joke about this all the time. First of all, the four partners, it's a miracle that four partners can stay together in what we went through with the up and downs, you know. If it's all good, that would be one thing, but to go through all this bad times. But you got to know it all or take care of every aspect of the business. You got to first of all go sell it, and that's what I used to do, and then you got to deliver it. You got to build it and deliver it on that timeframe that you promised, and you got to do it on the budget and you got to do it within the timeframe and the money frame that you told them. They're not going to continue dealing with you if you don't produce that, at least that.

Well, the salesman told me, first of all, that you could do it, and then you got it in the yard and on time. You started on time, you did an excellent job, quality work, and you got it out on schedule or before schedule before the deadline and you did it within that money frame so you can make money with it to be able to go on to the next job. After you collected the money, again, it's picking a good customer that's going to pay you.

After you collected the money in ample time, not a hundred twenty to a hundred sixty days, but in sixty, thirty to sixty days, you collect the money. Then you sharp enough or educated enough to be able to keep that money and use it in the right away after that, because I mean I look back at what we did. When we got a ten thousand dollar job, that was a big job, and man, I just couldn't see, you know. Then we moved up to like forty and fifty thousand dollar jobs, and then that was a big job. But man, when we got a hundred thousand dollar job or a hundred thousand dollar check came in, you know what I mean, that was a lot of money.

Now we might have owed sixty or seventy thousand out of that and only retained twenty, but still it was to spend it the right way to bring you into tomorrow and the day after and whatever, you know, and you got to have every aspect. You've got to sell it. You got to have the right insurance. You got to have the right people. You got to have the right job. You got to get it out on time, and then you got to conserve the money after the fact so you don't go—so many people just never had that kind of money or was involved, and it's not all yours. You've got to give it back out and keep going, you know.

So but anyway, to keep the money and keep it local and do what you got to do with it to carry it to the next level. So you got to have the whole thing. If you can't sell, you're not going to make it. If you can't get it out on time, you're not going to make it. If you can't keep the money after the fact, you're not going to make it. You just got to have it all.

Our little niche, I think, was that we all had the heart, hardworking boys, honest and hardworking. I never worried about anybody stealing from us, like one of the partners, and I never worried about anybody loafing off on the job. We all hardworking people and did our job. I think not having that worry, I don't think Larry worried about me, Lynn or Bruce, and Bruce worried about us and all that. We have two very, very aggressive guys in the business, Larry and myself, that probably alone could have been dangerous. We have two very conservative or slow moving that probably helped slow these two idiots down. You know what I'm saying? Instead of just jumping on anything, and we looked at it in a different way and they looked at it in a different way and said, well, maybe we don't need to go that route. You know what I mean?

Then a lot of times, the slow guys or more conservative guys would have missed a job if it wouldn't have been for the aggression of the other two. So, you know, over the years, like for example, those two rigs. You know why I got those two rigs? One word: energy. When that guy came here and talked to me about these rigs, he said, "I talked to two or three other yards, and they just don't have the energy that you have." They don't have the energy that Regional has. He said, "I'm going here because of the energy, for what I feel that you're going to do with this job."

JT: More energy in four men than there is in one or two.

RD: Yes. But I mean at least he could see. And look, when I put that one together, the grass was that high right there, and I told them, I said, we have a rig-up slab right here. He said prove it to me. Now this is what I'm telling you. We have a rig-up slab. We rigged up a rig back there years ago, but they had grass and junk scattered, we just didn't fool with it. We didn't need it. We was just using the front part of the yard. He said, "Prove it to me."

So I got in there with some hands and I cleaned the whole yard, the whole slab off, cut all the grass, cleaned it all up. He said okay, and then we started negotiating from there and we did the job, yes. I had worked with one of the guys there already. He knew of us, you know. He worked at National with us, but that's how we go the job, you know.

So we were the type of guys where we'd do anything, just about. The only reason why we didn't build a battleship here because we couldn't get it in the water and we couldn't get it out of here. But we always felt we could do it. You know what I'm saying?

JT: Adversity?

RD: Yes. We're survivors, you know. Like Dan Regard, we rented from Dan probably for twelve years, and then we needed bulk heading and he wouldn't do it. We knew that if he was bulk heading, he would just go up on the rent to pay for the bulk head. We needed a canal dredged, and we knew that if he had to

dredge the canal, he would go up on the rent. So I just went sit with him and I was the negotiator. Sell it to me, and I'll get it dredged and I'll get it bulk headed. Oh, and he just didn't want to. Sure, he had money in the bank coming in, you know.

One thing led to another one and I just told him, I said, "Look, I need something done." I mean the bank had fallen in from erosion, the boats were on mud flats, you know, so I mean I can't work like that, I said. He saw that, and so I went to John Oubre and told him, I said, you got ten acres of property somewhere? We're going to move. And I made John call him.

When John called him, he realized that we were survivors. We're going to move. We're going to do whatever we got to do. Then he finally negotiated and sold it to us.

JT: Is that something that you think has been instilled in all of ya'll from heritage, from your fathers, from your grandfathers, from the Cajun people down here in particular have always been—

RD: Oh, yes, most.

JT: —most adaptive and been real keen on surviving, no matter what it is?

RD: Most definitely, definitely. I mean there's never—the option is not to quit. The option was never to get out. It might change direction a little bit, but it never was to quit and do what? Get out and do what? You know what I mean? Go to work for somebody else, you know, I've done that. That was never an option. The option was surviving. The option was do whatever you got to do to get it done, and that's all there was to it, you know.

You know what we started to pick up iron with? We got this guy right here, Billy Leleux, which is the nephew of the man we lease from. He had an old one-ton flatbed truck, and he had Iberia Parish Government on the door. They had sold it to him or gave it to him. We went to work on the motor, got it running, and we bought it from him. On the weekend, Larry and I and Bruce came in, put some gin poles on it and a winch.

JR: That was your crane.

RD: That was our crane to start off of right here...

[end of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 7 April 2007]