

MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: LEONARD AUCOIN

Date: June 2, 2004

Place: Bayou Vista, Louisiana

Interviewer: Jamie Christy

Code: MMS033

Keywords: Exp, Sun, Seis

Bio

Leonard Aucoin was born in Little Bayou Long, Louisiana in 1927. He was the son of a fisherman / shrimper. Mr. Aucoin worked on a dredge boat, as a dishwasher on a houseboat, as a deckhand, and then as an oiler. He went to work for Sun Oil in 1946 at age 19. Mr. Aucoin was most often working with seismic crews and he traveled with them all over Texas and Louisiana. He also worked for Geotech and Apache Oil for very brief periods and took a job with Band Marine of Berwick in order to return to his home near Morgan City. On his off days, he drove a cab. Mr. Aucoin was adept at operating boats and convinced Band Marine to promote him to captain. He retired with Tidewater Marine in 2000.

Side 1

JC: This is Jamie Christy and I am Mr. Leonard Aucoin's house at 721 Arlington in Bayou Vista. Today is June 2, 2004. Mr. Leonard, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? Where are you from?

LA: Well, I was born in Little Bayou Long in 1927, which is 76 years ago. We were fishermen for a living until I was 9 years old, then I went on the shrimp boat for a while. Then, I got off the shrimp boats and went back to school for a while.

JC: Where did you go to school?

LA: They had a little school on the levee up here. It was just a little one room schoolhouse, and all the kids went in that one room. I do not know if they had first, second or third grade or not. But I never did finish first grade. When I was 14 years old, I was expelled and I was still in first grade because I would start work a while and I would go to school a while, you know?

JC: Is that why you were expelled?

LA: That is why I was expelled because I did not want to go to school.

JC: And you spoke French in school?

LA: Oh, yes. We spoke French in school. What they were doing . . . we were trying to learn English, too, because when the teacher asked me the first day of school . . . she asked a little girl right in the front of me what the little girl's name was, the little girl said her name was Leona Solar. Then, I was next in line and she asked me, she said, "And what is your name?" I said, "Leona Solar!" All the kids liked to crack up laughing. You know, the ones that could speak French, they knew me and they knew that was not my name. So, Howard Percie told me, he said, "That is not your name! The teacher wants to know what your name is." He said, "That is her name." I said, "Well, Howard, you know what my name is" . . . they called me Leonard, you know, that was in French. "No," he said. "That is not what she wants to know. She wants to know what your name is in English." "Well, I do not know what my name is. That is the only name I know, is Leonard." So, he told the teacher I did not know. She had told him to ask me if there was any place I could go find out what my name was. I said, "Yes." So, I went to my aunt's house about two blocks from the school along the edge of the river and she told me my name was Leonard. I never was so glad in all my life. I hated that name Leonard, you know? I went back and told them. That is what she wanted.

But then, after I got expelled from school, I went back to work on the shrimp boats for a while, and then I worked for a company by the name of Bozeman and Gray. They were a dredge boat company.

JC: Is it Bozeman?

LA: Bozeman and Gray. I worked for them for maybe, I guess two or three months.

JC How old were you?

LA: At that time, I think I was 14 by then. And they paid me 15 cents an hour, 12 hours a day, 21 days on and 3 days off. That is how we worked. I worked a while – I was a dishwasher, you know, on the houseboat and then after that, I went to being a deck hand and then an oiler. The oiler then was the same as the engineer nowadays but you did not have to know how to read and write. All you had to do is know how to wipe up grease. You know, I loved everything.

But I did that and then, I guess, from dredge boating, I went back offshore shrimping. Did you ever know Mr. Buster Saul?

JC: I have heard of him.

LA: You have heard of him?

JC: Yes, sir.

LA: I shrimped with Mr. Buster Saul. When I was 10 years old, I shrimped with him on an old boat they called a *Crone*, and then I fished with him some when I was

about 15 on the *Doctor Guy*, a boat by the name of *Doctor Guy* was his boat. That was the name of the boat. And the *Spirit of Morgan City*, you know that boat we have got over there?

JC: Yes, sir.

LA: That is not the real *Spirit of Morgan City*. This is one they rebuilt a few years back. The *Spirit of Morgan City* was made to fish. I worked on that little boat when, I think I was 14 or 15. I went on that, me and a fellow by the name of Raymond Miller. The boat was rotten. You could stick a knife blade through the bottom and we went offshore in it!

JC: And it floated!

LA: It still floated. Everything was wood in those days. But I fished on that for a little while and got off of that. For two or three years, I just went from dredge boats to shrimp boats, you know, and fishing crabs and catfish out there in Flat Lake. And then, one day, I was sitting in the city park in Morgan City . . .

JC: Lawrence Park?

LA: The part that we have got there right now.

JC: With the gazebo and all?

LA: Yes, and they used to have some alligators in there. They had an alligator pond, and they had some monkeys and they had some parrots and they had some guinea pigs. They had quite a few different things in the park, you know. I was sitting there and this guy came along, we called him Big Eye. He had big bug eyes. Everybody called him Big Eye. By then, I could speak English. I had learned how to speak English pretty good. He and I got to talking and he asked me, he said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I am looking for a job." He said, "I heard that Sun Oil Company was hiring some people." I said, "You did? Where is their office at?" He said, "They have got an office right over there by the steps of the bridge. You go upstairs in that building. It is a yellow building. They have an office up there." Boy, I took off right away. I went over there. I went upstairs and when I got there, they were having a safety meeting. So, they were fixing that this guy had . . . I do not know where he came from, Texas or something, but he was to show us that he could put the dynamite in a box and blow it up right there in the room without anybody getting hurt, you know? Of course, I could not watch it because I was not working for Sun yet. So, he told me to step out in the hall and he showed the rest of the guys. I heard it when it blew up. I do not know how much of it it was. It could not have been too very much, I guess. But it did not hurt anybody. And after the safety meeting, Mr. Frances Noble, he was the party chief, he was doing the hiring and everything . . . he opened the door up and he said, "You can come in." So, I went in and he got my name, address,

everything. He said, "Yes, we need somebody. Are you willing to work?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "O.K., we will send you to the doctor and get you fixed up. We will put you to work." So, he gave me this paper, sent me to the doctor, I passed the physical.

JC: How old were you?

LA: I was 19 years old. I had made 19 in December, the year before and this was, I think, in March. I was 19 years old and just a few months. And Houston LeJeune was already working for him. He had gotten a job. Houston was about one year older than me, I think. So, the party chief said, "O.K., you be right here tomorrow morning at 7. So, the next morning, I was there at 7 o'clock, went to work. We were living on a houseboat. Sun Oil had rented a big, big houseboat. They had rented that from Berwick Brothers. Berwick Brothers lived in Texas and they had some houseboats that they were renting and they had some boats and some pirogues, I think. All kind of stuff. But that is who we started working with.

I stayed with Sun Oil with for three or four months.

JC: Do you remember your first day at work?

LA: My first day at work? Yes, indeed. I remember the first day at work. We were working on Riverside Island out here on old Riverside. We were working back in

the swamps out there and we were carrying everything. I got to thinking, boy, what did I get into over here! I think, Jamie, at that time, they were paying us maybe 55 cents an hour to work. For 12 hours a day, that was pretty good, you know? Six dollars a day. I mean, you could buy a lot of stuff with six dollars.

JC: Did you go to training before you went out or you just went out and learned as you went?

LA: I just went out. Everybody said, 'O.K., you carry this and we are going to carry this.'

JC: You carried dynamite and all?

LA: Oh yes, we carried 50 pound boxes of dynamite on our shoulders and we had to carry a drill pump. The pump, we had some drills like 12 feet long. They were aluminum drill rods. They were 3 inch rods and we had to carry about 150 feet of it. We would carry two or three bundles – like, me and another guy would carry one bundle and a couple more guys would carry another bottle. And we would get on each end of it and walk with it. When we got to where we could drill a hole, we would put them all down, put the pump down, hook everything up and start drilling. And I still got . . . you would not believe . . . I still have two of the aluminum wrenches we used to use, 36-inch wrenches. I still have two of those wrenches in my shed that we used to use . . . we would take those wrenches, put

one on each side of the pipe and like I would stand on this side, LeJeune on this side, and we would turn the pipe by hand. We did not have a motor to do it. And we would drill as much as 180 feet deep in the ground. And then, we blew the dynamite. It was natremond, we were using. And we had the primers, a red can for primer, and the natremond was in the white can. And each one of them weighed one pound, each can. And we would screw one into the other until we would get sometimes as much as 50 pounds of it to go in one hole. And we would shoot it when it got to the bottom. Houston was a shooter then, Houston LeJeune, and I was his helper. We would load that pipe down there, then I would run out here a little ways to get away from it. The operator was 1,200 feet over there and the truck with the instruments. And he would ask LeJeune, he would say, "Are you ready?" LeJeune would say, "I am ready." And we had a big old detonator about this big. He would raise that handle up on it and he would say, "I am ready." And he had the wires hooked up and all and I was like this waiting for him to shoot. And then, the operator would say, "O.K., shoot." Well, LeJeune would say, "1, 2, 3, 4." Boom. You could feel everything shaking everywhere. Everything was moving. I would laugh some time. The mud would fly way up and a lot of times, we would get caught in the spray, the spray would come down, and we looked like pigs at the end. It was fun in a roundabout way.

Do you know what we would do? We could go swimming. While we were working, we could go swimming. We could chase rabbits. We could do anything we wanted while we were working. It was all in fun. We would wrestle. We

would wrestle every day. Like, me and Houston. I was the smallest man on the crew, I believe. We used to wrestle just like the wrestlers do. We would get all muddy and wet. There was nothing we did not do out there. It was fun.

JC: Did anybody ever get hurt when you were first learning?

LA: No, not that I know of. I cannot remember anybody getting hurt. We never had anybody but sick. I know Sun Oil had insurance on us but if we did get hurt, we did not say anything. We went on anyway. I got run over by an old Model T truck that one of my friends had on a Good Friday. I was here at the lake. We went out to the lake and we had drank some beer and we all wanted to ride that old Model T truck. And the guy that wanted to drive it, he died . . . you probably knew him . . . Ira Verrette. He had Ira Verrette's Outboard?

JC: Yes.

LA: Ira wanted to drive it and he did not know how to drive it. It was one of those that had like a little shift on the wheel. He put it down here, and it would come up, we put it up, backed up and I was on the fender of it. We were four or five guys in the old truck, and he hit a rut at the old lake and it threw me off and it turned me right in front of that little Model T. He ran over my legs. I was sitting down on the road like this. I caught the wheel, I guess, and I could turn . . . the tire hit and it had skinned all my hands over here. I had a great big old hunk of flesh out of

my hands over here, skin on my knees all up and everything. And then Ira said, "You have got to go to the hospital." I did not have but one pants leg on. I had some blue dress pants. It pulled one of my pants legs off. He had a big Harley Davidson motorcycle out there. We got on that motorcycle, he started to go bring me to the hospital. We went about three blocks and he was doing probably 60 or 70 miles an hour. He hit gravel, it threw us down and I told him, "I am walking. I am going home." I could hardly walk I was so beat up. I walked home. My mom and them were sitting on the porch when I got to the house and I heard my momma, she told my daddy, she said, "Look at him. He looks like he's dying." I was so sick, I swear, I felt like I was going to die. I got home and they all came running, my momma and them, and I told them, "Don't touch me. Don't touch me. I am going to take my bath and I am going straight to bed." So, I got the soap and I went to the river. We did not have any bathroom. I went to the river, got in the river, soaped up, took a bath. I was skinned up something terrible. I went to bed. The next morning, I had to go to work. We were working in the swamps. We were working by Six Mile Lake back there in the swamp and the water was this deep in the woods.

JC: Up to your waist or higher?

LA: Right up to here.

JC: Up to your chest?

LA: I had to get in that water, skinned up like I was. There was no way I could take a day off work. Lose a day's pay? No way! So, everybody, all they did was they kept telling me, 'You should have stayed home today.' I said, "No, I am not staying home for these scratches."

JC: Did they ask you at Sun Oil what had happened to you?

LA: Yes, the party chief did – Mr. Francis Noble. He asked me what happened and I told him. He said, "Man, ya'll are crazy." He was such a good man. Him and his wife, both of them.

JC: So, that was in your first three months for Sun?

LA: That was in my first three months with them.

JC: When you were that high up in the water, you were taking the dynamite out to do charges in one of the swamps?

LA: Oh, yes. We had to stand up in that water to drill. Sometimes, we were in water up to here.

JC: Up to your shoulders?

LA: Yes.

JC: Above your head?

LA: The end of the pipe was a good 12 feet above our heads and they had a hose running from a pump, and we had the pump setting in a little pirogue or a skiff. And the driller was down there and he was in the little hose running the pump and everything. And we were the guys that would have to turn the drill pump. We did that.

At that time, they had another crew that was the shooting crew. Maybe I was not on the shooting crew on a day like that. Some days, I was on the shooting crew. Some days, I was on the drill crew. Some days, I worked with surveyors. We had different crews to work.

JC: So, when you were on the drill crew, you were in there working with the pipe?

LA: I was working with the pipe. That is what I did. I carried the pipes and everything and when I worked with LeJeune, I was on the shooting crew then. I carried dynamite and I would help him to put all the dynamite together, screw all the cans together, and then we would take it and shove it down in the hole. They had something they called a pry pole. Each pry pole was about 10 feet long and

they hooked together. They were made to hook like this where you could hook them all together. And the first one had a round deal on the bottom where it would fit just right over one of those cans of dynamite. We put about 10 or 12 cans together and then we would put them in the hole down here. Like if we wanted to shoot 80 pounds of dynamite in the hole, then we would put 8 of them with 10 cans each, you see, where it made 80 pounds of it. And we would hold them down here and we would screw them all together. And then we would put the pry pole on top and we would shove them down in that hole, all the way down to the bottom. When we would get them to the bottom, naturally, they would stay down there because they were heavy and we would pull all the poles out. And then, that is when we hooked up . . . and the last one at the top, we would put a cap in there, what they called a cap. It was a little shiny deal about this long. We would put it in there. And then, we had a black top. They called it black top. You would screw that on top of that and it held that cap. When we pushed it down, it stayed at the bottom until we would shoot it. And after they would shoot one shot then, if they were not satisfied with the record that they got. Then the operator said, 'O.K., go ahead. Let's get another 80 pounds in there, get another shot.' We had to reload that same hole. And some time, they had gas in that hole, you know. Then we started loading, we started pushing that dynamite down and we would get a gas pocket and that dynamite would come shooting out the hole. You ought to have seen us running to get away from that dynamite before it fell. But luckily, none of it ever blew up when it came out.

JC: It would come out of the hole, shoot off the hole and hit the ground?

LA: It would come off, it would bend, and where it was screwed together, it would break loose. And then, we would have to get it . . . as soon as we knew it was not going to blow up, we would get it, put it back together and throw it in.

JC: And used the same dynamite?

LA: Yes. The same dynamite, the same hole. We did everything.

JC: And they never blew up on you?

LA: No. One time, Houston and I were out there at Shell Key, what they called Shell Key is on there close to Vermilion River.

JC: A key like a key you turn in a lock?

LA: Yes, Shell Key. Shell Key is the name of the island. It is an island. But we were shooting in the edge of the Gulf, you see, and we put a 50 pound charge on board and when we ran the boat about 100 feet away from it, that little boat we called the little black boat. It was a little bateau. And the operator had a little trouble getting his instrument ready. So, we drifted, the boat drifted and it got pretty close to a charge. And when Houston shot it, when they told us to shoot, when

we shot the charge, I guarantee it could not have been more than 30 feet away from us, 50 pounds of dynamite. And the water was only about 5 feet deep. It almost flipped us over with the little boat, you know. Water flew all the way up and came back on us. Houston would say, "Boy, we almost got blown up that time, didn't we?" "We sure did. It liked to kill both of us." And then we started wrestling and playing in the boat, him and I. But it was real comical! I tell you!

Today, if the young people would see how we did, they would not believe it. They would not believe some of the things we did.

One time, Jamie, we were working in Morgan City. We were not living on the houseboat then but we were going towards Belle River down here, towards Old River, and as soon as we get on board, I had took the top off of a dynamite box and I made me a little surf board about this long and about that wide. And I would ride back of the crew boat. I tied my little surf board with a sash cord and I would get on it and they dragged me all the way to work out there in the back of the boat. It was a lot of fun. They tried everything to try to make me fall off of it but they could not knock me off of that surf board. We would get on that, and once we would get off work . . . if worked called me in the evening, I would say, "Wait a minute. Let me get my surf board" I ain't riding with ya'll on that boat," and they towed me all the way back to Morgan City.

JC: From Belle River?

LA: All the way from Belle River coming back. We had a fellow by the name of Gizmo, we called him Gizmo but it was Vernon Michel was his name. He lived in Morgan City. He was running a little crew boat for Dudley Mayon. Did you know Mr. D.J. Mayon?

JC: Yes, sir.

LA: You knew them? Sun Oil was renting his crew boats . . .

JC: Mr. Dudley Mayon.

LA Mr. Dudley, the old man. And Herman was running the little crew boat. So, I got right on the front of the boat. The boat wasn't but about maybe 24 feet long, you know, and something like 6 feet wide but it had a car engine in it, a Chrysler engine, so it ran pretty good. It ran close to 20 miles an hour. I was standing right up on the front of the boat and Herman told me, he said, "You had better get inside. If I hit a log or something, it will throw you overboard." I said, "Go ahead and hit a log. I don't care. You are going to knock the wheel off the boat. I am not going nowhere." And I will bet you, I did not tell him that not one minute ago and he hit a log, threw me overboard! And they ran over me with that boat. It liked to kill me but I did not go to the doctor. I am not kidding you. I was skinned up something terrible. Today, if people do that, the first thing they do

is sue somebody, do you know that?

JC: Oh, yes. What did the guys at Sun Oil . . . would they come out with you or was it just local guys?

LA: Oh, no. The party chief used to come out a lot of times. You know it. He had his own little boat rented. He had a little air boat – one of those with the propeller up here.

JC: A mosquito boat?

LA: Yes. About every two or three days, he would come out and check on us, see what we were doing out in the field. And, of course, every morning before we would go to work, we would go in the office for a few minutes. And then when we would get off in the evening, then we would go back in the office and let them know everything was O.K.

JC: Were the people in the office from around here or were they from other parts?

LA: No. Our party chief was from Texas.

JC: Mr. Noble?

LA: Mr. Francis Noble. But that is all we had working in the office was him. This one guy worked in the office. All of our paper work, records and all that went to Beaumont, Texas. When they would take records, I guess, every day. Like what he took today, the next day, he would probably put it in the mail and send it to Beaumont.

JC: He was doing the recording?

LA: No, we had an operator that recorded and Mr. Noble was a party chief. He was the big boss. And then, when the records went to Beaumont, Texas, and those people there, they did all the work – the geology and all, you know. They would read those records and decide if they were going to drill for oil or whatever. But they had a lot of people from Beaumont that used to come to Morgan City. Once in a while, they could come visit us, see how we were doing in the office and all.

JC: What did they think of those Louisiana boys, those crazy boys?

LA: They thought we were crazy.

JC: Did they ever tell you you could not do anything because it was not safe?

LA: No. We had safety meetings every week.

JC: Even when you first started?

LA: Oh, yes. We had safety meetings all the time, Jamie, and they used to preach safety to us. And when we would do something that was not safe, they would laugh about it . . . ‘Didn’t I tell you last week not to do that?’ But it was like I said, all the time I worked for them, I do not know anybody that tried to sue the company for anything, or they did not claim they were hurt bad enough. I guess I got hurt more than anybody because I was a daredevil on the boat. Do you see that scar right there? You might be able to see it right there?

JC: Yes, sir.

LA: That is when we were working out here right in back of Eugene Island, right there in the bay, and we got one of the cables and the wheel on the boat. The name of the boat was the *Elvery*. That was Mr. Dudley Mayon’s son, the youngest one. He had named that boat after his son. And we got one of our seismograph cables in the wheel . . . I said, “We don’t have to be towed in. I can go in there and get that cable out of there.”

JC: You were saying you were working off of Eugene Island, right?

LA: Yes, I was working off of Eugene Island and we got that cable in the wheel. Well, he was going to get one of the other boats to tow us in and to go on dry

dock to get it out. And I told him, I said, "You don't have to do that. I will go in there and get that cable out of that wheel." "O.K., if you think you can do it, go ahead." So, I got on the boat and unwrapped it but the blade was so sharp from turning hitting gravel and sand, I just barely touched it and we just curled that skin up. It was so bad until I still got that scar right there from that. I did not go to any doctor or nothing.

JC: They did not tell you you needed to go see about that?

LA: No. They just said, "Well, now that we got the boat fixed, we are going to repair this line and go back to work." And that is the way we did it. That is how it was.

JC: So, the safety meetings were kind of a formality?

LA: Yes, but we had to have them. I mean, Sun Oil Company wanted the best safety that they could ever give to us. They did not want that definitely. Don't get hurt, you know? They wanted us to do the job but do not get hurt doing the job. In other words, safety came first. Safety before you did the job, in other words. It was something that really everybody did, too. When we went off and we had safety meetings a lot of times at the office, just the crew and the party chief, and a lot of times, we had people from Beaumont that would come down and they would get in on safety. And then, we would discuss other parties, you know, that might have had an accident, how it happened and everything.

JC: Did they tell you about some accidents?

LA: Oh, yes. They would tell us about a lot of different accidents.

JC: Do you remember any of the things that happened?

LA: Like we had one real bad accident one time on one of the crews that they told us about where this guy, a man and his wife, they were working for Sun Oil and something happened, he was going to change the light switch or something. And man, I could remember, changing a light bulb or something . . . he climbed up, one chair on top of the other chair. I mean, you could see how dangerous that would be. Like if I took this stool and put it on top of this one and try to climb up there to fix something . . . well, he slipped and fell over on the end of that bed, one of the bed posts, and it went straight through him. I mean, they told us that was a terrible accident.

We had another bad accident that happened one time when I was working for them . . . we were using shrimp boats as seismograph boats. This happened out here in the bay, too.

JC: In Atchafalaya Bay?

LA: Yes. We were offshore and one of the shooting boats blew up and killed 7 people that day at one time.

JC: Did they know what happened?

LA: Yes, they figured . . . I was not on the dynamite boat when that happened. I was on the crew boat that was laying out the telephone lines. We would lay out telephone lines all over because you did not have just radio to talk on. That day, the shooting boat was 1,200 feet back there somewhere and when it blew up, it was because somebody put the dynamite in the box and instead of throwing the box overboard that had the cap in it, they threw just the box that had some dynamite, and the cap was in a box on the floor. So, when they told them to shoot, they blew it up . . . it had probably, as near as I can remember, it might have had maybe two tons of dynamite on that boat. It blew up and it killed them. Before they all died, they got a couple of guys to the hospital but the splinters had went all the way through their bodies and all they could say was the one that made it to the hospital was "I don't know. I don't know." But they did figure out that what happened . . . the charge that had the caps stayed on the boat so when they set it off, it blew the boat up. The one that went overboard did not have a cap in it. But I am trying to remember the name of that boat. I cannot remember the name of the shrimp boat. But that was a terrible thing to happen.

JC: That is dangerous work.

LA: It might be? I am telling you, it was dangerous. We are lucky there aren't more of us that blew up. And we were real careless with it. Me and some of the other jug hustlers that were there . . . they called them jug hustlers because we had to plant all these little detector jugs that would pick up the vibrations when we would shoot down there. And we would take dynamite cans and throw them at each other, out here in the swamps, you know. "You had better run, I will blow you up." So, naturally we would run and they would throw . . . and sometimes the can would get all bent up. It was lucky none of it ever blew.

JC: So, the jug hustlers . . .

LA: What happened was, what they called the jug hustlers . . . we had a bunch of little detector jugs about this big . . .

JC: About five inches high?

LA: Yes, about five inches high and about maybe 2-1/2 inches in diameter. Well, we would lay out what they called a detector line – 1,200, sometimes 1,600 feet long depending on what they wanted. Well, one of us would lay that line out. It was rolled up on a big reel and this reel sat on our chests over here. We would put it on like a coat but it had a big reel sticking out here. Then, we had to walk and lay that line out.

JC: Put the reel on your chest?

LA: Yes. It was a big wheel. It weighed about 50 or 60 pounds. That is the reel with the line on it. We would lay it out and then here the jug hustler would walk in the back of it. I put out a lot of line. I used to carry the line plenty. This jug hustler would come in the back of them and they would carry the shovel with them. And they would dig a little hole and they would bury one of them detector jugs. And then, they would hook it up to this detector line. And when we got to the instrument, then we would take this reel off our chest and there was the end of the line. It had a plug in and we would plug it in to the instrument and then we would sit there and wait for the operator to get ready to shoot. Sometimes, it took him 15-20 minutes. That was our break, time to rest up. And as soon as he would shoot, then he would say, 'O.K., pull them up.' Put the reel back on, pick up this line, go on over here, 1,200 feet or 1,600, whichever it was that day, we dipped it in, we would roll it up. We had to walk all the way back up here to the instrument. And then, give him this plug and then lay the line out going this way. We did that all day. We would shoot sometimes as much as 10 or 12 holes.

JC: In a day?

LA: Can you imagine how much walking we would do in the marsh? Some of it was in the marsh, some of it was in the swamps, and some of it, we were on dry land.

I would judge to say that right here, where this trailer is, I probably shot some dynamite, me and Houston, right here. I know for a fact we shot all of those. Bayou Vista. We shot lines going this way, this way, all kinds of ways. We shot dynamite all over here. Sure did. But back then, this was nothing but woods, swamps, you know. And on the other side of 182, they had sugar cane over there on the edge of the river and we shot all over there.

JC: In the river, too?

LA: In the river, too. Oh yes, we would cross the rivers. We put those detector jugs. Believe it or not, as deep as that river is, we would put enough of those pry poles together and would plant those jugs down in the bottle, 25 or 35 feet of water and we would get them detectors to the bottom, hook them up to the line, and when we did that, some of the pry poles would stick up out of the water and we would hook the little connection to it to keep it from being wet. Did all kinds of things.

JC: But did you ever shoot on anybody's land or on their property by mistake?

LA: I do not think so. We had people that complained sometimes. They said that we shot too big a charge and it would rattle the windows in their house. We had some people complain about that. But then, as far as I remember, the party chief would go and he would take care of it, explained to them what was happening and everything. It cleared all up.

One time, this was in Texas. It was west of San Antonio, Texas, up there – a little town we were living in. We were shooting along the road, laid out our detectors out along the road and everything, and we hooked up all the detectors to the lines and when the operator turned on his switch to check and see how many detectors were hooked up, there wasn't but about half of them hooked up. Then he would say, "Leonard, go back down the road. Go check that line." He could tell what station was out. He told me what station was out. He said, "For some reason, your detectors are not hooked up." I said, "Well, I hooked them all up." He said, "Go down there and check them all." I went down there and the detectors were gone! The little detectors. They probably cost one thousand dollars a piece. This was expensive equipment. So, I had the telephone line. I had my little telephone. So, I plugged into the telephone line and told the operator, I said, "The detectors are gone. They are not even here anymore." He said, "Do you see any dogs anywhere? Is there anything? A little bear or something that could have taken them?" I said, "No. But there is a little boy sitting on a porch over there in that house. That little boy looks like he is about 10 years old." He said, "Go over there and ask him if he has seen the detectors." So, I said, "O.K." So, I went over there and got to asking the little boy what his name was. He told me his name. Junior somebody or something. And I said, "Did you see those little old deals that we put on those lines? Did you see any of those things, those little detector jugs?" He said, "No, sir. I did not see them." I said, "Is our daddy home?" He said, "Yes, my daddy is home." I said, "Go tell your daddy I need to see him."

This was a big house and it was on blocks. So, he went around the house and he came back, him and his daddy. And his daddy said, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yes, sir. Maybe. I work for Sun Oil up there. We laid out a detector line along the road and some of the detectors are missing. I thought maybe your little boy here took them to play with or something and I asked him and he said no." So, the man said, "You know, there are kids around here. Let me talk to this boy." He told the little boy, "Boy, what did you do with those jugs? Do you know those things are going to blow up in about 3 minutes. There will not be anything left here. The house will be gone. We will be gone. Everything is going to blow up around here." That little boy said, "I did not see them" but his little eyes . . . His daddy said, "If you took those jugs, you had better tell us because they are going to blow up any minute right now. We are just sitting on a keg of dynamite." Boy, that little boy took off running, he went under the house, he got all the little detector jugs. He had taken them and hid them under the house. And, you know, I told them thank you, told the man thank you. I called the operator on the phone and I told him we had them and I told him, I said, "I am going to hook them up and I will be back down there." I went back. The operator got on the telephone and he called the party chief. The party chief was probably 4 or 5 miles from where we were at, told him what happened. And the party chief went out and he offered that man to pay for his trouble, give the little boy something for giving the detectors back, and the man said, "No" . . .

End of Side 1

Side 2

JC: O.K., so you said that the man did not want to give the little boy money. He wanted to give him something else.

LA: Give him something else, he said.

JC: So then, when you left there, you worked for . . .

LA: I worked for Geotech the first time and then I worked for Apache Oil Company.

JC: So, like two weeks for Geotech and one week with Apache.

LA: Just a short job with them. And then back to work for Sun Oil Company.

JC: So, why did you think Sun was the best?

LA: They were the best because they paid us more money, they had a better safety record and everything. Naturally, we had a good crew. The whole crew was so good. We got along. Everybody got along good. We had a good party chief. When we moved, they always paid us good to move. Like, sometime if we would move from . . . when we lived on a houseboat, if the houseboat moved from Morgan City to Lake Charles or something to do a job, then they paid us for

moving expenses, did not let us take our car from Morgan City. They would say, 'Well, meet me in 3 days in Lake Charles,' and they paid us. They paid us just like we would be working. So, we could stop and spend those 3 days at home while we were getting paid. It was a good company to work for.

JC: Where are some of the different places you worked?

LA: Oh, God! We worked all over Texas. We worked back in New Orleans. Louisiana. Just every place. All the way up to Monroe, Louisiana. We worked all the way up that way. We worked around Lake Charles. In fact, we shot one line during the years that I worked for them, we started shooting one line close to Lake Charles up there and we ended up in Venice. This was almost on the Louisiana coast. From the back of Lake Charles to Venice. The cove went like this – we went on a straight line. We would work sometimes for three or four weeks shooting on that line and then they decided they wanted to move to maybe move to Cameron to shoot a few holes out of Cameron. We would pick up everything, get everything out of the marsh, load it up and we would move to Cameron. We would be in Cameron for maybe a couple of weeks and then they would decide, let's go back and start on the line again. We had to drag the houseboat all the way back, tie it off out here in the wilderness somewhere and then start working on that line. And it took us . . . it must have taken us two or three years to finish that line. We worked on all of them.

Do you know where Dulac is at? We went between the Gulf in the little town of Dulac with that line all the way towards Venice shooting the holes every 1,200 feet, we would shoot. And then, we had some more lines. This line went straight like that. We had some more that crisscrossed and some in some places.

JC: When you shot offshore, how was it different?

LA: Well, offshore, we had what they called a survey pool first. The survey would survey offshore and they would run a line and they would put some flags up with some bamboo cane and some anchors on them. And naturally, these bamboo canes . . . I do not know if you know what a window weight is. It is something they used to use when I was a little boy for a house for the windows. They had a window weight they would put between the walls so when you raised the window up, that weight would go down and it would hold the window up. The window weight was about this long and about that big and it was solid iron. They were heavy. Well, we would use that for our anchors to anchor the bamboo canes. That way, we knew every 1,200 feet, the bamboo cane, one of them had a red flag on it. That was a shot point. That is where we were going to shoot a charge of dynamite. So, we had one boat that would go along and survey that line and then the next boat was the instrument boat. He had the detector line, hooked up the instrument boat with the instrument and all in it. He would move up 1,200 feet, in other words, and then we were on the shooting boat like me and LeJeune, and then we would come up with the dynamite. I threw the charge of dynamite

overboard most of the time. I threw it overboard and then I would hurry up and make up the charge to the detonator because the cap was all ready and I had already put in the charge. And then, Houston would holler, "Charge overboard." When I threw it, "Charge overboard." And the operator would say, "Are you ready?" LeJeune would say, "Ready." "O.K., shoot." 1, 2, 3, 4 and boom. The water and the fish would fly all over. You would see all kinds of fish flying up in the air because, you see, a lot of times when you threw a charge overboard, those little fish come running up there to see what it is and they get blown up. And we would laugh. We would get a big kick. I would bring some extra bread from the houseboat with me and I would feed the seagulls. And when I threw that charge over, I would hurry up and throw some bread overboard. This was wrong! This was bad! I said, "Watch this. Watch this, Lejeune. Watch." All the seagulls would come to get me, he would shoot the charge of dynamite and it blew those birds up 300 feet up there. Some of them, it would kill. Some of them, it did not kill. The ones it would not kill, boy, they would come out and they would be spinning all over. They were shell shocked! Lucky there was no game warden. We did have a conservation man with us at all times.

JC: On the boat with you while you were shooting?

LA: Yes. He would get so mad. He would get so mad. "Don't do that! I am supposed to not let you do things like that!" We called him Pop Peyton. He was from Jena, Louisiana, and he carried a little suitcase about that long with him like

a little doctor's bag, a little black suitcase, and he had a big old pistol in there, a big old 41 pistol he had. He said the reason why he carried that was because when he was young, he was on the police force and he had killed a man and his life had been threatened so he carried a gun. In Texas, you know, he used to get so mad at me because I would say, "Watch this, Pop! Blow them up this time." At one time, he had what they called a grobeck at Lake Barnes. That is over there right close to Mississippi . . .

It was a big houseboat then that Sun Oil had rented and that evening, we came in from work. I went and sat on the porch of the houseboat and they had a grobeck out there. I know you have heard of what a grobeck is.

JC: Oh, I know a grobeck, yes sir.

LA: And a grobeck sitting out there. I know that grobeck must have been 75 feet away from the houseboat. Then Pop walked out on the porch. I said, "Hey, Pop. Lend me your pistol. I am going to shoot that grobeck out there." "Oh, no," he said, "I will get him. I will get him." He went back inside and got his little pistol, he came out . . . this old man could hardly see, old Pop, and he took the gun like that, boom, and he shot that grow back and killed it. I could hardly believe it! I went out and got that grill back and I cleaned it, I cleaned it, I said, "We are going to have us some fried grobeck." And I did, I cooked it and made it. Me and a couple more of the guys ate it. Old Pop would not eat it. But things like that

were fun.

JC: He had better eyes than you thought.

LA: And one time, we stayed on the house boat, me and three or four more guys, we would stay out there sometimes for about two months and we would save up our money so that when we would get off, we could have a blast. Boy, we could really have a blast. And again, we were working back on Lake Barnes, up in there. We had a boy by the name of Latchalay. He was from up there close to Lake Carson. He had a pistol. He had brought a pistol to the house with him. And while everybody else was on their day off . . . at that time, we were working 10 days on and 4 days off. So, me and Latchalay and LeJeune and somebody else, we stayed on the houseboat to save our money. And Latchalay was fooling around with that pistol and he dropped it in the kitchen on the houseboat, on the big houseboat, and we could not find the bullet. Where did the bullet go? Here are four people in the galley, he drops the pistol, it went off and nobody can find the bullet anywhere. So, we looked all over. About one month later, the cook went to get a pack of rice out of that cabinet to cook some rice and the bullet was in that pack of rice. It was in that cabinet in that rice. Boy, we were surprised when that happened! And, at that time, Mr. Dudley Mayon, we were all working together. He was on that, too. He would tell you the same thing if he would still be living. He could tell you some stories that happened.

JC: So, they would contract these shrimpers boats, Sun Oil would?

LA: Yes. *Inez B* was the name of that boat that blew up.

JC: The *Inez B*?

LA: The *Inez B*. I am pretty sure that was the name of it. I do not remember who owned the boat but Sun Oil was renting that boat. They had leased it from somebody. But the boat had blown up so bad until there was no cabin left on it. Like I said, seven people got killed.

JC: That was in the 1950s?

LA: Yes, it was in the 1950s. In the early 1950s, I guess. It seemed like the man, the captain, it seemed like he was from Lake Charles. I do not remember his name though. I bet Lejeune could remember. He knew the guys mostly I think better than I did. The people that were high in the office. I was more or less one of the hard workers. I was one of the little “niggers” in the bunch! But they would do nothing without me. There was no way they would go anywhere or do anything without me. LeJeune probably can tell you some stories about it. I am sure he told you a few. He was something else.

JC: He did.

LA: Have you met his wife?

JC: No, but I am going to interview his wife.

LA: She is one of the finest persons you ever saw. She is something else.

JC: That must have been difficult for some of those wives, right, to move around?

LA: Some of them liked it and some of them did not. Like Laura and Houston Lejeune, they moved around . . . they went to different parties. He got transferred after he went in the service, when he came out of the service, he got transferred to different crews. At first, I do not think Laura liked it too much because of being raised around Morgan City and she had never been away anywhere. But after a while, I think she got to where she liked it all right. But they stayed with Sun after I quit. After I quit Sun Oil Company, they stayed with Sun a long time until Sun sold out. Sun Oil sold all the seismograph crew out and Houston came back and I think he went to work at the auditorium in Morgan City. Janitor at the auditorium. That is what he did. And at that time, I was working for Tidewater.

JC: So, your second stint with Sun Oil, you did 15 years with them?

LA: Yes.

JC: The second time?

LA: Yes.

JC: Did you see things change from your first days?

LA: Yes.

JC: How did it change?

LA: Well, it changed because the pay changed so much and the type of work we did changed so much. And the people got to where it was harder like to get a permit to work on peoples' property, you know. I mean, it was not hard for me because I did not have to go get permits. We had a permit man that did that. He went around and got permission for people to shoot on their land and everything. But I saw a lot. And definitely the pay went up plenty. I saw people go and come. People would quit. When I first started, you could get a job anywhere. I mean, they were crying for people to work. And the pay, like you would start at 50 cents an hour and every month, you got a 10 or 15 cents a month raise by the hour. When I left Sun Oil, I was making almost four dollars an hour.

JC: When was that? Which year?

LA: That was in 1962.

JC: So, you were making about four dollars an hour? That was pretty good?

LA: That was good money. Guaranteed 10 hours a day, 5 days a week. If it rained that morning, we would go to the office and the party chief would say, 'Let's wait a while and see if this weather is going to clear up.' So, we would make a big pot of coffee in the office and whatever and we stayed there for about an hour. He would say, 'O.K., everybody go home. See ya'll tomorrow morning.' That was 10 hours.

JC: And you would get paid for that day?

LA: We got paid 10 hours pay. We were getting all paid vacations, every day, holidays. We would get paid holidays. If we worked for the holiday, we got paid a double day. If we did not work, we got paid just one day.

JC: So, your hours . . .

LA: We made good money with them.

JC: Did you have benefits like retirement?

LA: No.

JC: Not in the beginning, right, or you did in the beginning?

LA: No. I would say after one year, we could buy stock in the company, we could buy stock with them. They had a credit union. They had a credit union. Like I could put 6% of my salary in it. So, I bought stock, I bought stock. I joined the credit union. Of course, I spent all mine. Every time I had \$400 or \$500, I would draw it out and spend it. And stock. When I quit the company, I probably had about 200 shares of stock, Sun Oil Company stock. But the stock dropped. It went down to nothing. In 1962, you probably were not born yet, I do not know but anyway, the bottom just dropped out. I mean, things just went to nothing. All the stock, Sun Oil Company stock that I had paid \$87 a share for, it went down to \$8 a share. But I sold mine before it got down that low. I sold mine for \$25.25 a share. And, of course, I went and bought me a new car and everything with it. Instead of putting it back in the bank and saving it, I bought a new car. But you could buy a brand new car for almost nothing. You could buy a brand new car for \$1,500.

When I first worked for Sun Oil Company, when I first started with them in 1945, I guess, or 1946, when I was 19 years old, you could buy a brand new car for \$1,200. Brand new. You could go buy a brand new spanking new Pontiac for

\$1,200. Can you imagine that?

JC: No.

LA: And you could hardly . . . the cars were so good, made out of such good material, you could take a hammer and hit that fender as hard as you wanted and you could not dent it. The bumpers were made out of iron.

JC: That was more money than most people around here had seen, so did most people spend it?

LA: They spent most all of it. Some of the people that worked for Sun Oil bought property. I knew lots of them that bought property and made trailer parks and all kinds of stuff. And they were well off when they died. But most of them did not have the same wife. They split up . . . the ones that saved money, they changed wives along the way. Lost count of their children. Their children did not like them anymore.

JC: Do you think that had to do with the job, with the nature of the work?

LA: No. The money they made went to their heads. Like me, I do not care, if I won the lottery today, tomorrow, I would be the same as I am today. In fact, I would give it all away. I would give it to people. But most of the people like Mr.

Freyou, he got killed in a car wreck about 10 years ago. Well, he was like me. He was a fisherman all his life and he went to work for Sun and he got out a seismograph and went in to production with Sun Oil out here at Belle Isle. When he died, he was not with Sun anymore. He did quit Sun Oil Company after a few years. But he was tight. He saved all his money and he had a big trailer park in Amelia and he had a big trailer park in . . . he had lots of money, and he was still fishing crabs and everything. His life had changed. He and his wife had split up. His kids did not want to have anything to do with him anymore or his wife. Things like that happen.

JC: It must have been hard to be gone for a long time and then come back.

LA: Yes. When I quit Sun Oil Company, I was living in Texas, my wife and I, and we came home for three weeks paid vacation. The first day that I was home, I went uptown and I saw a work boat going under the bridge headed for the Gulf. So, I went back home and I told my wife, I said, "You know, I saw a boat going down the river. I had a notion to go see that company for a job." She said, "You want to do that kind of work?" I said, "Yes, I think I would like that." "Well," she said, "I sure wish you would. I would like to move back home." She was from here, too, my wife. So, I went first to Tidewater and I asked them if they needed somebody. They said, 'No, we don't need anybody today but we will take your application. We might need somebody tomorrow.' So, I filled out an application, then I left there, went to Band Marine. Band Marine was right by the railroad

bridge on the Berwick side. They had their office there. I went there and asked them if they needed somebody. They had a little office upstairs. Mr. Gus Hill was his name, the president of Band Marine. "No," he said, "We do not need anybody today but we might need somebody tomorrow." And I said, "Well, I just filled out an application to Tidewater." "Well," he said, "Look, keep in touch with me now. I might need somebody." So, when I came down, Earlene's daddy, Pete Verrette, was standing there. He was standing by the office. Him and Mr. Milton Barrio. He says, "Do you know Milton Barrios?" He said, "What are you doing over here?" I said, "I am looking for a job." And Pete said, "Well, what did Mr. Gus tell you?" I said, "He told me he did not need anybody." "Yes, we need some. Come on, let's go out there." So, we went back in the office. Pete Verrette told Mr. Gus, he said, "Gus, you told this man you did not need anybody. You do need somebody." Gus said, "I do not need anybody." He said, "You do. You need this man right here. I know this boy here." I was only 34 years old then. So, Mr. Gus said, "Well, I guess. O.K." he said.

They had a hurricane brewing offshore at the time. So, he sent me to the doctor and I took a physical, I went back to the office. He said, "O.K., you go home. I will call you in a couple of days. You are on the payroll." Twenty-one dollars a day. Here, I was quitting a job at \$40 a day to go for this. And he told me, Mr. Hill said, "I do not understand. Why do you want to quit a job making that kind of money and come here for \$21 a day?" I said, "Well, I think I would be more happy over here. I think I can make up the difference fishing crabs and shrimping

every now and then.”

JC: And you would be home.

LA: Yes, I would be home. So, we stayed at my mother-in-law’s house on Apple Street in the project. That is where we were going to spend our vacation. I went back over there. Would you believe before it got dark that day, Mr. Hill called me up and he said, “We need you to go offshore.” I said, “O.K.” He said, “O.K., I am going to send a wagon to get you.” So, they sent a wagon to come get me. They sent me on a big tug boat, the *El Toro Grande* was the name of it. It was a Mexican name. I went on that boat with Mr. Giroir, Gilbert Giroir was there. I do not know if you know him.

JC: I know the Giroirs.

LA: You know the Giroirs? I went out there with him and with Mr. Malcolm Blanchard who was the captain on the boat. And we went out and got some pontoons from a dredge boat. And Mr. Malcolm told me that night about 12 o’clock when we were touring the pontoons, he said, “I am so darned sleepy, I can hardly hold my eyes open. Mr. Giroir and then won’t help me. Him and Monroe. They are not going to help me. I can hardly see I am so sleepy.” I told him, “Why don’t you go to bed and let me handle the boat?” “Oh, no. You just got on here. You have not been working on the boat.” I told him, “I was raised on boats.

I have been on boats all my life." I told him, "Why don't you lay down?" They had a cot in the wheel house. I said, "Lay down in there and take a nap. The sea buoy is about 10 miles from here. I will wake you up when we get to the sea buoy." He said, "O.K. Anything you see, wake me up." And he went to lay down and went to sleep and it was rough. The pontoons were about 1,000 feet long and I was towing. When we got by the sea buoy, the rope was breaking on by the back of the boat where it was rough, so I woke him up and told him, I said, "We are at the sea buoy. The rope is about to break." We had a big old polypro rope about that big. And I told him, I said, "If you take the wheel, I am going to pull that line in and I will put a bolt in there and put it back on the bit." He said, "Can you do that?" I said, "Yes. I know how to splice. I know how to tie all kinds of" . . . So, I did it. I put a bolt in it, put it back on the bit, and then I told him, I said, "If you want to go back and lay down, you can go back and lay down. I will tow it up the channel." I towed it all the way until I got to Rabbit Island. And then I woke him up and we came in. When we got to Morgan City, he told Mr. Hill, he said, "I want to keep this man with me."

JC: When they hired you, were you supposed to be a helper?

LA: A deck hand. That is what I was supposed to be. So, he said, "Well, he is not going to stay on the tug boats now. I am going to put him on the work boat." So, I worked 18 hours on that boat and then Mr. Hill told me, he said, "By the way, you got \$40 a month raise." After 18 hours!

JC: That is quick!

LA: It was real fast. But then, I got off that boat that day and the next day, I went on the work boat going to Cameron. Still going to work for, instead of \$21, I was going to get \$23 a day, \$2 a day raise. And I worked like that for about 3 months. And then, they told me they needed an engineer on the boat. I told them I could handle it. So, I went to engineer, \$35 a day. And when I retired, I was making \$220 a day. That is what I was making, working 28 days on and 14 off.

JC: Was that with Tidewater?

LA: With Tidewater.

JC: And that was in . . .

LA: This was 4 years ago.

JC: Four years ago? Oh, you just retired 4 years ago?

LA: I retired when I was 72. I worked until I was 72 years old. And I am 76 now. I will be 77 in December of this year.

JC: So, you were still, like in the 1970s and the 1980s, were you still working for Tidewater? What were you doing?

LA: Yes, I was a captain on a big boat. I had some pictures. I looked all over for them last night. I wanted to show you some of the pictures of the boats. I worked on one boat that the name of it was the John Adams. I was captain on that boat for 12 years, on that one boat. The boat was 40 feet wide and 180 feet long. It was big boat.

JC: And what did you do on those boats?

LA: Well, we serviced all the rigs offshore. After I quit Sun Oil, I serviced some of Sun Oil's rigs offshore and I was working for Band Marine.

JC: So, you would go work on the rig?

LA: No, we carried all the drill pipe, all the equipment that the rigs needed to work like drilling mud, you know, that they used to drill with, cement, fuel, water – everything they needed, we carried. Drill pipe. What they called drive pipe and everything. I used to haul tons of it.

When I first went to work on the boats, you did not even need a license. We did not have to have a license. By the time I got off of the boats, I had a 1,600 ton

license. I could run a ship if I wanted to. With no education. And everybody thought, huh, this guy is something else. In other words, with no education, I could go anywhere in the Gulf I wanted. I mean, miles, 200-300 miles out in the Gulf. I could take a boat from Morgan City to Mexico. I could take a boat from Mexico and go all the way to Florida with it. Anywhere out in the Gulf. I knew how to handle a boat and run a rig more than anybody they said they ever saw.

I offloaded in Hurricane Juan. Do you remember Hurricane Juan?

JC: Yes.

LA: I was on my days off and they called me to go to work that day. I was working for a company out of here, Getty Oil Company. I was working for Getty?

JC: Getty? Where were they out of?

LA: They were working out of here at that time.

JC: Out of Morgan City?

LA: I was running for Getty with the boat. They called me up and they asked me to go offshore. I told them, "I am on my days off." "Yes, but we need you to go relieve a man that is sick offshore." So, I told them O.K. I got on that big crew

boat. We went offshore and it was so rough, we could hardly get from one boat to another. They had to pick me up in a basket in the crane off of this boat, set me on the other one, put the sick captain on this boat and then from there, I went offshore to a rig out at 330 Eugene Island. That is a long way out. I offloaded some stuff in 42 feet seas. It was rough, I will tell you. It was rough.

JC: That was the hurricane . . .

LA: That was Hurricane Juan. I went through the eye of that hurricane three different times. I went through it in Morgan City. I came back with the boat, came back. They sent me back in to get some more stuff, I came in and got it and when I was going out, the eye of that hurricane was right there in the river. I went through that eye, I was going offshore. The hurricane came in, went all the way to Napoleonville, it turned around and went back out in the Gulf. And on the way back out, I hit the same hurricane over there towards the Shell Keys. And, I mean, it had 20-25 feet high seas. Everybody was sick on the boat. The whole crew was all seasick. But still, I went on. They said they needed me bad at 330 Eugene Island. I went out there, got out there, offloaded some stuff in that rough weather on the rig. And then, on the way back, the hurricane changed and I hit it again before I got to the sea buoy. I went through the eye of the hurricane again! And then, it went on up the river and went up towards Napoleonville and died out. But that was amazing how that happened, I will tell you.

JC: You have got 9 lives! Maybe more!

LA: I will tell you, I had a real exciting life, you know? Really exciting. I had a chance one time to maybe get into advertising for books when I was only . . . I believe I was working for Sun Oil. I was living in Laredo, Texas. One day, I came in from work one afternoon and Leo Hidalgo had a newspaper. He found a newspaper somewhere and it had a bunch of sketches on it. He called me "Blackie." He said, "Black, look here. Here is a picture of you in this newspaper." I said, "There is no picture of me in the newspaper." "Yes," he said, "There is a picture of you in there." He said, "This is somebody that drew a picture, sketch of you in here. It went to Florida. It took first place in a contest." So, I said, "You are kidding." I looked at it and I said, "No, this is a joke." So, one day, I went back to Lake Casablanca – that is a big lake right by Alameda. I was fishing out there, I was sport fishing, and this guy came up to me with a camera. He had real expensive cameras. He said, "Hey, you do not know me but I know who you are." He said, "I took pictures of you out here a while back. You did not know it. You were out here swimming," and I was. I had been out there swimming with some people from Salt Lake City, Utah that I had met out at the lake. He said, "I am a photographer. I also work with a place here in Laredo. We would like for you to come to this place." And he said, the offices, everybody could get pictures of you because he said I won first place with those pictures. He said, "I could get you into advertising very easily." I said, "Oh, no. Not me, Buddy. I am not going to do that. My wife would leave me if I go through this. I

am not going." So, I did not go. Later on, I told some of the guys on the crew about it. They said, 'You are crazy. You had a chance of a lifetime and you passed it up.' But I do not know, maybe it would have paid off, maybe not. But what it did . . . I used to be built real good. I mean, Lejeune and all them used to say I was like Charles Atlas, this and that. You know, it was because I worked so hard. I was little, I had big arms, a big chest, and all. But I had a lot of chances to really get any money and I did not do it. I was ashamed to go pose for somebody.

JC: Why?

LA: Because. Back then, it was not like it is nowadays. There is no way. What kind of pictures Lejeune still had of me?

JC: He had some pictures that were professional photos of you in the swamp and you were setting the line. And it looked like they were done by a professional photographer because they are like 5x7s. And some of you, you are carrying the boxes on your head.

LA: That was . . . probably yeah, I know there is a man from Beaumont, Texas who used to come out and take pictures of us working for Sun Oil. He was a photographer. I am trying to think of his name and I cannot remember that man's name. But I remember they used to come out and take pictures of us when we were drilling sometimes or carrying dynamite boxes, you know, and stuff like

that.

I remember the first time somebody in Beaumont out there, invented a little drilling machine.

JC: A hand drilling machine?

LA: Yes, a little drill rig. It was a little like two handles about this long, I guess, with a little table on it like this and the motor hooked up right in the middle of this. Said, 'Now, two guys are going to take this. Now, this is what we are going to do. 'One of us is going to stand here' . . . the two handles came out like this. One of them is going to stand in here and hold two handles. Another guy is going to get on this side, he is going to be between this holding two handles. Somebody is going to put the drill rod up here.

JC: In between?

LA: Yes, between us because they had a rotary on top of it with a little table for the motor. And we are going to put this up there. Somebody is going to crank the engine off and the chain belt is going to turn the motor and it is going to drill down. All you have to do is hold the drill rig. I looked at them and I said, "You have got to be crazy to even try this. This does not even make sense!" As soon as we hit a log or something down here because they have a lot of old logs, 15-20

feet deep that are buried here . . . we hit that, what is going to happen? It is going to jam this and this motor is going to keep turning it, it is going to spin us around is what is going to happen to it.' The driller that day was Dipsy Garrett. He was from Dequince, Louisiana. He said, "Come on, Black. Go ahead, try it." "O.K. We can try it." And they had a guy by the name of Graham Davis – he was from on the other side of Dequince somewhere. "Mr. Graham, you try it." So, Graham and I were going to be the drilling rigs, you know? And sure enough, they cranked it up and it went down about 10 feet and it spun me and Graham all the way around like this. We liked to crack up laughing. Oh, I am telling you that was comical. It bent the drill rod all up. So we sent it back to Beaumont for repairs. But so many crazy things happened, you would not believe it. I used to laugh. I swear I used to get a kick out of that. It did just exactly what I told them. "When you hit a log, we are going to go around instead of the drill but we did."

JC: Could you use the machine later or it would not work?

LA: No, it went in the junk. I bet they spent a million dollars trying to make that thing work, and it did not work.

JC: As time went on, did you see more college people coming in to the oil field?

LA: Oh, yes. Even on the work boats and all. Everything in the oil field changed. Like right now, I have got . . . my license just expired December 17, 2003. Like I

said, I had a 1,600 ton license and it expired but right now, if I want to go back on the boats, there is no way. Things have changed so much. The computers took over. Do you know what? If a guy knows how to operate a computer, you do not need to know how to run a boat. The computer does it. And the guy that operates the computer right now, the boats that I was captain on that I was getting \$220 a day, this is only 4 years ago. Those captains are making \$400 a day. And they do not even know . . . if something happens to the computer, they cannot move the boat. They do not know how to run the boat. And that is how much things have changed.

JC: How did the college guys get along with the guys that did not go to college and did not have a lot of school?

LA: Not too good. They had a lot of just people like me. When they sent me out with a captain . . . at last, we had two captains on one boat at the same time. O.K., I knew how to run a boat without . . . all I needed was a throttle and a wheel to make the boat do what I wanted to. The other guy, he had to have a computer. He was making more money because he can operate the boat with a computer than I could do manually. So, he made more money. So, I did not like it and I told them to get him off of my boat . . .

End of Tape #1, Side 2

Tape #2, Side 3

JC: You said you were working on a rig out of Sweet Bay.

LA: Yes, I worked on it one day only though. I was working for Sun Oil at that time and I came out and it was for Mobil Oil Company. My oldest brother was running a crew boat and at that time, I was working in Texas. I was working for Sun. I talked to my brother and he said, "Why don't you ride out with me in the morning? Come out to the rig. You can get a job on that rig if you want to." So, I said, "O.K." So, the next morning, I went and got on the crew boat, went out there in Sweet Bay Lake, out to the rig. And we went up on the rig barge and he told the rig man, he said, "This is my brother," and he introduced me. He said, "He wants to get a job with ya'll." And the boss man on the rig, the company man, he said, "Sure. We will put him to work. No physical or nothing. He said, "Do you have your suitcase with you?" I said, "No, I did not take a suitcase." He said, "Can you work with the clothes you have got?" "Yes," I said. "What I have got on right here." He said, "O.K." And he brought me up on the rig boat and he told the driller, he said, "Got you a new roughneck here," he said. He said, "Put him to work." And they put me over there holding a hose at first. The other guys had chains and pipes. This guy had to hold a hose and put some mud in a big tank, and the mud was flying all over. I got greased up mud from head to foot but I stayed all day and then that night when

we got ready to go in, the rest of the guys, some of them that were riding the crew boat to get to Berwick, they had some plain clothes to put on. But I had to come in with those old dirty clothes all full of mud and everything. And when we got to land and I told the company man that I was not coming back, I said, "I have a job just right now. I was actually making more money with Sun, you know, and I did not have to get all dirty all the time."

JC: Do you remember the name of the company?

LA: I think it was Mobil Oil Company if I remember right.

JC: But no physical or nothing?

LA: No, no physical. They did not have physicals. I do not know if it might have been a little torn track rig or something, you know, but I am pretty sure that the crew boat was working for Mobil Oil Company and I do not remember the name of the rig or anything. But things were funny in those days. Today, there is no way they would even let anybody go around that rig if you do not have a job with them or the company did not send you out, and they would not let you get close to it. I was surprised when he said, "You can go to work right now." So, I went on – my blue jeans on, my dress shoes, and went right to work. And one of the first things today

you would have to have would be steel toe shoes, a hard hat, goggles, work gloves.

You would have to have everything.

JC: You did not have any of that?

LA: None of it – just the clothes I went on there with. Dress shoes and socks and my blue jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, if I remember right.

JC: Was that in the 1950s, do you think?

LA: Yes, or later. It probably was in the mid 1950s.

JC: Because, at a certain point, they got real particular.

LA: Oh, God yes. About safety, you know. Real particular at one time. We had to wear, even to ride on the crew boat, we had to wear a life jacket from the time we got on it until the time we got off of it. They even had handrails made out of rope on the crew boat where you did not fall overboard, you know. They were real particular at one time. And then, it got to where, for a while, it kind of faded out. They were not as particular but then, later on, it got back again where they said, ‘Well, we are going to really enforce this. Everybody is going to use safety or

else.' And if you did not want to use safety, you could go look for another job.

JC: That was your later years with the oil company?

LA: Later years, yes. I left Sun Oil in 1962. That is the year that I left Sun Oil and I quit. But Sun Oil tried to get me to go back to work for a year. After I left them, they wrote me letters telling me I could still come back and not lose any seniority if I wanted, you know, and then after one year, I got a letter from them saying that I was still for rehire if I ever wanted to go back but I would have to start off at the bottom and lose seniority. But I never did want to go back after that.

JC: You had enough?

LA: Yes, after I went on the boats, you know, I enjoyed working for Sun Oil because of the way we worked – sometimes on land, sometimes on boats. Then, after I got on the work boats, then it was different. I got to ride helicopters and I would ride big crew boats and all, you know. So, that was different, a lot different. I had never rode an airplane before in my life until I went to work on the work boats. And then, they had to fly me out to the boats sometimes to go out and relieve somebody that was sick or something, so they would fly me out. And all that was different for me with something new.

Some of the trips I went on, I went with Lejeune, Houston. Lejeune would have been with me. Oh, he was so much fun to be with – that old boy. He and I are still good friends. We still see each other every now and then.

JC: Did he go offshore with you sometime?

LA: He used to . . . we did not go a long way in the offshore with the seismograph. We started when we started going offshore. But we did go out pretty far in the Bay. He was with me that time when that charge dynamite went up. Blew out the hole and liked to turn the little boat over. We were in the boat together that day, him and I. So, I know he did some work in the Bay. But I went a long way offshore. I wound up way offshore in the big boats.

JC: Do you remember some of the blocks you worked on, the numbers?

LA: I wish I did. I worked in Block 5 Eugene Island, Block 5 that they called the full fathom flare. I worked there. In fact, that is where they made *Thunder Bay*. Most of *Thunder Bay*, the movie with James Stewart and Joanne Drew . . . I got to meet them in person when they made that.

JC: You did? Out there at the rig or here in town?

LA: I met them in Patterson. They were doing something on the dock in Patterson one day and we were going there for some reason. I do not remember why I had to go there but we got to meet Joanne Drew and James Stewart, Dan Duyrea, Gilbert Rolands. They were all there.

JC: I think you should have played his part.

LA: Yes, probably!

JC: He did not look much like a Cajun.

LA: He did not. He did not look like a Cajun, did he? And that shrimp boat that they used, that belonged to my first cousin in that movie. It belonged to Thomas Rhodes from Morgan City. That was his boat. And Tom, when they pulled up to the rig, when they had their big fight on the rig and it was rough, believe it or not, Dan Duryea was standing at the wheel . . . I do not know if you have seen the movie or not.

JC: I have seen it.

LA: He was standing at the wheel like he was tending the boat. Tom was stooped down like this. He was down here in the boats to get it up to the bridge.

JC: He was really steering.

LA: Yes, because there is no way Gilbert Rolands could have . . . He didn't know how to operate a boat, you know?

JC: So, your cousin was really driving it?

LA: Tom is the one that was driving the boat. He owned a boat and he would drive it.

JC: Yes, they stayed in Morgan City. I think they stayed at the motel.

LA: Yes, they stayed in a Morgan City motel right across from . . .

JC: Where the shrimp boat is?

LA: No. Some of them stayed at the Blue Goose Café. They had a motel upstairs where they could live. But most of them stayed right there where Popeye's is at

in Morgan City. They used to have the White House Hotel or something they called it. That is where they stayed and that is where Joanne Drew and John Island . . . John Island was not in the movie but he was married to Joanne Drew. They stayed there because I drove a taxi on my days off, I drove a cab, and I brought them all over. They used to call me every time they wanted to go somewhere and I drove them. They had a place in Greenwood they called Claude's Tavern and Claude Green, which was the owner of it, that is why they used to go there. They used to go dancing out there. They used to go drinking all the time. They used to call for me a lot of times specially to go bring them in the cab where they wanted to go.

JC: You did that on your days off?

LA: Yes. I drove cabs plenty.

JC: You had your own cab?

LA: No, I drove for Bell Cab. My cousin used to own Bell Cab – Nelson Verrette. He is crippled. He was a war veteran and he lost his leg in Germany when he was in the war. I think it was World War I, I guess. And another one was Eddie Solar. Eddie had just one arm. He lost one arm when he was in the service. So that

between the two of them, they own Bell Cab, you see. So, I drove for them all the time. I also drove for Mr. Lee Mumphrey. He used to own the cab company. I drove for him, too. I guess I was about 21 or 22 years old but I was still good. I would do my work on the boats and then on my days off, I would drive a cab. I made \$3.00 a day driving a cab. Plus all we could take . . . what we used to do – we called it “cutting the trip.” Like, we used to go . . . we would pick up somebody in Morgan City and bring them to Berwick. O.K., for one person, it was 35 cents to bring them to Berwick, Morgan City. O.K., maybe when we were in Berwick, we would pick up . . . if somebody wanted to go to Morgan City, since we were going back, we would give them a ride, then we would steal that 35 cents! And the whole day, we made \$12-\$15 driving cabs but we cut the trip. That is what they called it and no one cared, they knew we were doing it but what could they do? They could not prove it. And sometimes, if they would happen to see one of us, they knew we were going to Berwick to bring somebody and the owner like Eddie Solar – he would see us when we were coming back and he would say, “Who did you have in the cab coming back with you?” “Oh, nobody.” “I saw you.” “No, we did not have anybody.” We never would admit it, you know, and we would get away with it. That was a fun thing to do – drive a cab, that was fun. We had a lot of excitement in that. You see a lot of things take place when you do that.

JC: That is a lot of work though . . . I mean, to work on the rigs and be on your rig . . .

LA: Yes, coming off of the rig on your days off and then go drive a cab, you know? But we drove nice cars, too. I had a nice automobile that I drove and if I would not have done that, I could not afford . . . you did not need any insurance. We did not have to buy car insurance. Most of the time when you bought a car, practically everybody bought a car . . . they would drive it for a week before they decided if they wanted it and the car company would say, 'O.K.' No financing. We did not have to go to a finance company. We would just go to the car . . . like, you want a Ford, you go to the Ford place, tell them you want a Ford. 'O.K., drive it around for a week, see if you like it.' If you liked it, you would go back and say, 'Yes, I want that car.' 'O.K., it is just going to be so much. No finance. If you only bid like \$1,200, when you get that \$1,200 paid, that is your car. That is the way we bought all of our automobiles.

JC: Is that because they knew you were working for one of the oil companies or would it have been that way for anybody?

LA: It was that way for anybody. And then, sooner or later, somebody decided, well now, we are going to make money, we are going to have to have insurance. Like a driver's license. You did not need a driver's license when I was 16. I got a

driver's license when I was 18. It cost fifty cents, my driver's license. You did not have to take no tests. They had a man, he had a table. He was at the courthouse in Morgan City, the old courthouse. He had a table sitting in the yard and you would go over there and tell him you wanted a driver's license, he would write you out a driver's license.

JC: No tests?

LA: No, sir, no tests or nothing. You were just a driver. That is it. You have got a driver's license. And then, after a few years, as it went on, it got more complicated where you paid more for the license but you had to know how to drive. That is how life went on. The more experience you had, the more money it would cost you. It is the same way like right now . . . when I went to school, for my first 100 ton license, I did not have to pay anything. I paid \$25 for the books. And then, when I got my license, they gave me back my \$25. And then, the \$300 for the license. I did not have to pay anything. Tidewater paid \$300 for me to get a license because they had to hire a 9th grade math teacher to teach me 9th grade math for 2 weeks. So, they paid \$300 for that. And for the \$510 license, Tidewater told me I did not have to pay anything. They were going to pay all the expenses. I do not remember what it was - \$1,000 or something, but they paid for everything.

JC: I hear a lot about when the oil business was big and the oil companies just had money to burn and they just threw the money around. Is that true?

LA: Yes.

JC: They had a lot of money and they spent it pretty freely?

LA: They spent it freely, yes. Very much. Pretty much, we had parties, like Sun Oil every so often would have a big barbecue and you could drink all the beer you wanted. It was something to keep the men happy, keep the crew happy. It went like that. No matter what – like skiffs – they could rent a skiff for 50 cents a day. O.K., Sun Oil must have had 50 skiffs rented. Then, the guys that had the skiff later on decided they wanted \$5 a day for their skiff. O.K., the party chief would say, 'O.K., we will pay you \$5 a day,' but they he had to come across a little money under the table. That would pay for his friend. I did not see that happen but I heard people tell me things like that. But that did happen. A lot of wasted money, oh God, yes!

The oil company would spend thousands of dollars on just trying something. Different things. And then, maybe a little profit to them. Maybe they did not

waste it. It was hard to tell. Like on different kinds of equipment, in other words. Like if we would go shoot a charge down to like one place and we would do it one way and then later on, they decided, hey, we were going to try something different. And then somebody would say, ‘Oh, man, they are just going to waste money.’ But maybe it was not wasted because those people in the office, already some of them had a lot of education and they knew a lot of stuff that we did not. We knew how to do the work but the people in the office really were smart people. They knew what was going on. So maybe it was not wasted. That is the way I always felt.

JC: They sure made a lot of money.

LA: They made a lot of money. Now, oil companies made money and we made money. The people working in the oil fields made more money than the people that were just bumming around mostly.

JC: So, do you think the oil companies were good for this area?

LA: Oh, yes, it was good for everywhere, to my idea. Even now, we are up . . . look at what is happening. Right now, our oil over, that place is like over here in Bayou Vista, \$1.92. a gallon. Can you imagine how much money it costs to make a

gallon of gas? Can you imagine what it costs to go get an oil rig, get an oil rig, drill a hole, and have to pay 20 some odd people to work on that – pay, I do not know how many 18-wheelers to go get the pipe all the way to Houston, Texas or maybe to Florida, bring all that pipe over here to drill a hole, not knowing if it is going to be good. Now, after they get this hole drilled, if it is a good hole, they are going to get some oil out of it. They have got to transfer that oil to a refinery someplace and work that oil over to where we get some gas out of it and get crude oil out of it. Probably get lube oil by the time they finish all of it and yet, we can go buy a quart of oil for seventy-five cents. Can you imagine that? We can buy a gallon of gas for less than two dollars. Think of how many cows a big rancher in Texas can raise on a ranch, how much milk they could get, and they could sell that milk for one dollar a gallon and make millions, millions of dollars. What are we paying for milk? The cheapest milk right now, we are paying \$3.69 a gallon for it. I am not kidding you. I think of that all the time. How did these oil companies make money?

When I worked for Sun Oil Company, one time we had a safety meeting in Victoria, Texas. I will never forget it as long as I live. We had a man that came from Beaumont to the meeting and they told us, they said, ‘One of the smallest countries there is makes more gas and oil than the whole United States. Venezuela.’ He said, ‘They make more oil, produce more oil in Venezuela than

anywhere in the United States. If Venezuela can sell the oil and profit one penny on a gallon of oil, they will make millions and millions of dollars.' At that time, I thought to myself, what is a penny, for crying out loud? I have got 10 or 15 pennies in my pocket and you cannot buy much with them. But then, through the years, you stop and think – pennies make dollars. If you get one million pennies .

..

One time, just for curiosity, I was laying in bed – I think I was still working for Sun Oil Company and I figured out the minutes in one year. This is in my head, you know, figured out the minutes in one year. It came to gobs of minutes. I told somebody about it the next day, I said, 'Man, I could not sleep last night. I figured out how many minutes are in one year.' He said, "You are crazy – you cannot figure out how many minutes" . . . They checked it out and sure enough, I had figured out the minutes, right to the year, believe it or not. So then I thought, well, man, that goes to show you how much a penny on a gallon of gas would bring you, you know? But no, the oil companies were one of the best things that ever happened to us.

JC: And for you?

LA: Yes, for me and for everybody.

JC: You don't regret it?

LA: I don't regret it. If I had to go all through it again, I would do the same thing. I would be riding in the 42-foot seas offshore looking for that oil and doing everything I did before . . . I would do it the same way.

THE END