MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Charles Arnold Mills

Date: June 27, 2006

Place: Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Keyword: Port of Houston/Houston Ship Channel,

Bio
Charles Mills is a native of Galveston, Texas and spent 50 years in the maritime industry. He joined the U.S. Merchant Marine in the late 1930s and sailed for Lykes Brothers Shipping. During this time he joined the National Maritime Union. In WWII he sailed out on the first Liberty Ship build by Brown Shipyard in Houston. He nearly lost his life during a U-boat torpedo attack in the Atlantic in 1943. After the war, Mills became a representative of the union and lived on the East Coast. He returned to Texas in the early 1960s and continued service with the union. He is now retired, but continues to be active in numerous Merchant Marine organizations.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history with Charles Mills, June 27th, 2006 by Jason Theriot. This is Charles Mills in the Port of Houston, tape one.

CM: My full name is Charles Arnold Mills, born Galveston, Texas, June 18th, 1920.

JT: Since I've sent you that letter I've learned a little bit about the history of Buffalo Bayou, and how essentially it was the original ship channel. What do you know in some of your readings and some of your talks with the people at Port of

Houston, what do you know about the Buffalo Bayou and its establishing the ship channel in 1914?

CM: Well, I became familiar with Buffalo Bayou when I first started going to sea in 1937. I had no idea that there was a channel to Houston, because the only thing I knew about ships was in the Port of Galveston. So when I first came up the channel on a ship, I was surprised how small it was, and though large vessels could come down the channel, if any other ships were going up, so they had set hours for ships to come down and go up the channel, because the channel wasn't wide enough.

Then after that period they began to widen and deepen the channel, and I'm very happy when Congress passed, gave enough money to deepen and widen the channel to where it is now. It really helped the convoys to get in and out of Houston at the time they were really needed.

JT: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Galveston and what made you want to get involved in the maritime industry.

CM: Well, growing up in Galveston there, my grandfather, my mother's father came from Mississippi, and his first job was working, helping to build a seawall. Then he left that and started to longshore, work on the waterfront. At that time they called them screwmen, because they were screwing the cotton. There was a lot of cotton going out of Galveston, and they used big screws to press the cotton in so they could get more bales.

Then after that he went to work for the City of Galveston, and he met the fellow that was going to be my stepfather in later years, and he gave him his position as a foreman on the waterfront, so it was continuously in my life. I was always around

someone who was either working on a ship or working in the longshore business, loading and discharging cargo.

So I had some cousins who started going to sea, and they would come back and tell stories, so when I had an opportunity—I was trying to get into the navy originally after I came out of school. I was trying to get into the navy, and the only job that I could get in the navy was cooking, and I did not want to do that, and I didn't want to be a waiter. So I met my cousin, one of my cousins when he came in, and he said, "Look. There'll be some jobs coming up, because the strike is over." In 1936, '37 they had a big strike, and a lot of the ships were tied up.

So the first cleared ship from the Lykes Fleet to Puerto Rico, I became a member of that crew on deck, and I stayed on deck until after I left to come ashore as an official in the National Maritime Union. So during the war, when the war came along—let me go back and talk about Lykes Fleet.

Lykes had the largest fleet out of the gulf, out of the west gulf, and they had a large number of ships that were running down to the West Indies, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Haiti, and the East Coast of South America. So I worked on a number of those ships, but the first ship was the *Carleton Lykes*, and it was the *Hog Island* that was built in the First World War, as were all the rest of the ships that Lykes had. There were no new ships, see. They didn't start building any new ships till World War II came along.

So I stayed with Lykes from 1937 until about 1940, and then I became adventurous and I wanted to get away from the West Indies, so I—there was a company that ran into Galveston from New York. It was a coast-wise company called the Clyde Mallory Line, and I made several trips with them.

Then the next thing you know, the war came on, and I went to work in a shipyard temporarily, until my shipping card got old enough, and I wanted to try to pick a run, which I was not able to do. Then I shipped out continuously from then until—the Brown Shipyard in Houston, they started to building liberty ships, and the first liberty ship that was built in the Brown Shipyard [actually it was Houston Shipbuilding Corportation], a crew out of Galveston manned her.

We loaded in Houston and Galveston, and picked up the cargo off the coast of Florida, and we went to the Middle East. They had a mix up in the orders. Well, where we were supposed to go, we were supposed to go to India, and the sister ship was supposed to go to the Middle East. So we stayed outside the Tigris-Euphrates River in the Persian Gulf for over six months.

JT: Doing what?

CM: Waiting orders. So we had a cargo of railroad ties, rails, and knocked-down boxcars. So after the six months was over they moved us into the Tigris-Euphrates River, and we stayed there about three months, and then they finally decided to take us alongside a dock and discharge the cargo. So by the time we got back home we had been away, what, thirteen months.

JT: One trip.

CM: One trip.

JT: And as you said, this was the first liberty ship built by Brown?

CM: Right.

JT: What was the name of that ship?

CM: The *David S. Terry*. *David S. Terry* was the first one that was built, and it was operated by United Fruit Company. They were the operators for it.

JT: I'm curious. How did you get to be a crewman on that ship?

CM: Well, I was registered in the shipping hall in Galveston, and the American Merchant Marine was the only service that was integrated. So to keep it integrated, most of the blacks were living in Galveston. Most of the whites were living up here in Houston. They had very few blacks that lived and shipped out of Houston. They all shipped out of Galveston because it was convenient to them, because of the Lykes Fleet.

So in order to keep that balance of black and white, they shipped some out of Houston and some out of Galveston. The deck department came out of Galveston, and we were integrated. They were black and white came out of Galveston in the deck department, and I was in the deck department. That's the reason why we were sent up here to take that ship out.

JT: That's interesting. Wow.

CM: I like to emphasize that, because all the rest of the services were segregated, but the Merchant Marine wasn't. We were integrated long before anybody ever thought about integration. Blacks and whites lived in the same quarters, ate at the same tables, and did the same hard work.

JT: Great. Was there ever any animosity between the two?

CM: Occasionally, yes, you run into some of it, but it wasn't anything that caused any grave distress to anybody. Whenever it happened there was always some of us

there to arbitrate it, get it straightened out. So sometimes you'd have problems, naturally. But on that thirteen-month trip we only had one fight between a black and a white, and that was really broken up in a hurry.

JT: What do you think explains the cohesiveness of the crew, the black and the white integrated crews? Why do you think there weren't as many racial problems?

CM: Well, I believe because the people realized they have to work together. They're doing the same thing. There's not a lot of people there to do this work; you have to watch my back, and I'll watch your back. People can get along. If people really want to get along, they'll get along.

Now, we had people, naturally, that would never ship on a ship where there was a black. They'd let their shipping card run out and re-register, but they were few, very few at that.

Let me go back to 1937. In 1937 the large group of blacks who were congregated in Galveston, at that time we met at a group house, just the blacks, and we stayed very close together. After the big strike in 1936, '37, the National Maritime Union—it was not the National Maritime Union then; it was another union—held their first convention in May 1937, and at that time I was the youngest member of the group, and they elected me to go to New York to the convention.

JT: What an honor.

CM: Yes, it was.

JT: How old of a fellow were you?

CM: I wasn't quite seventeen.

JT: Wow. How many group members did y'all have altogether?

CM: Oh, it must have been—

JT: Several dozen?

CM: I would say at least sixty, at least sixty blacks. There wasn't many American blacks. Most of the blacks were from the West Indies, Jamaica, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. I would say out of that group there may have been a dozen American blacks, because American blacks were not that interested in going to sea in the Merchant Marine.

So from that, going to that convention, I was elected as one of the founding fathers of the National Maritime Union, so I'm a chartered member of the National Maritime Union, the youngest guy there. So I have a history of being the youngest guy in many groups. But now I find myself, I'm the oldest guy in the group. [laughs]

So going back to the war, the *David S. Terry*, the ship that I made the thirteen-month trip on, so when I came back we used to get one day for every month, leave. So they weren't going to give you more than that thirteen days. So we took our leave and then we shipped out again.

So I shipped continuously during the war, and I was on one ship that got torpedoed. I was running a training program. They had these rubber suits, I can't remember the name of them. But these rubber suits, they would take crew members and send them to the school, and they would come back and train the rest of the crew on how to operate those suits.

I was standing on a hatch, the number four hatch, and we were heading for England. The convoy hadn't broken up, but we were just thinning out. Some ships were going one direction, so we only had about two or three DEs running with us at that time, and a torpedo hit us. Blew me off the ship out into the water. There was a standard order, "Don't slow up, or don't turn to come back to pick up anyone."

But the captain of this English destroyer, DE, came back twice. First time I missed the hook. They had a big hook and they'll catch you. So when I missed it the first time I said, "Well, I believe this is it," because the water kept coming into that suit. The suits were not built properly. They were faulty, and the water would come in because you couldn't tighten it up enough without choking yourself.

JT: Was it a wetsuit?

CM: It was like a wetsuit, yes, but it was bulky, real bulky. There were built-in real bulky, heavy weights in the bottom to keep you upright.

JT: Was this a diving suit, or was this for underwater?

CM: No. This is for if you were on a ship that was torpedoed, and you had a chance to get into this suit, which very few times would you have that much time to get into a suit. But this would keep you afloat till they picked you up. But they didn't work, they didn't work.

So you go up on a wave like this, and when you go up on the waves you can see around you. So I saw the DE turn, make another turn. I said, "Well, he's coming back." And that's a direct violation of orders. So when they came back he slowed down even more. That risked his crew.

So then they were hollering at the rail, "Catch the hook, Yank! Catch the hook, Yank!" and I caught it and they took me aboard. So then they took me into Liverpool and they sent me back home.

Then I had an occasion on another ship that got torpedoed, but the torpedo didn't explode. It was a liberty tanker and one of the tanks was slack. That means there's nothing in it. And the torpedo went right on through, right on through, out the other side.

JT: A dud, huh?

CM: Yes, must have been. But everybody says, "Gee, this is unusual for that to happen." And everybody said, "Gee, we're happy it happened. We were blessed." We were on the way to Philadelphia. So I never had anything that scared me so much in all my life. When I got knocked over in the water it scared me, yes, but this seemed to scare me even more, because it was a liberty tanker and it was loaded with jet fuel. If that thing had exploded, we never would have made it.

JT: Yes, the whole ship would have—

CM: Yes, jet fuel would have blown up. So I think that scared me more than anything else. So I came home and I stayed a couple of months, and then I went back.

JT: The first attack, do you remember what the name of your ship was, and what was the date? Can you remember that for me?

CM: No. I'd have to look at a discharge.

JT: Was it 1941, ’42?

CM: It was ’43, I know it was ’43.

JT: And then the second attack, coming back to Philadelphia on the tanker, was that also in—

CM: I think that’s late ’43, because one was in early ’43. It was late ’43 or early ’44, and we thought things had started to settle down on the coast, but they had not. There was one still hanging around, one German submarine still hanging around.

JT: So what happened at the end of the war, did you make it back to Galveston?

CM: Well, yes. I went to New York and I started living in New York for a while after that. But before the war was over I decided that I was going to take a stab at becoming a union rep, so in 1946 I filed for the election and I won, so they sent me back to New York. In the meantime, in 1946 I also got married, a marriage that is a blessed marriage. We are still together, sixty years. And then I went to New York.

So as an official I took a couple of leaves, made a couple of trips during that period, but from 1946 to September one, 1989, I stayed on as an official. They sent me to New York first, and then from New York I went to Baltimore, and from Baltimore to Houston, Houston to Mobile, New Orleans, and I retired.

I had a very enjoyable life. The union was good to me. They gave me an opportunity to go back to school, further my education, and an opportunity to rear my family and give them a good life, a good education, so I really hated to see the National Maritime Union have to merge with another union, but it was the best thing for the industry at this time.

I was always an advocate for one licensed union. We didn't need two or three unlicensed unions, because we were continuously fighting one another. The master mates and pilots had one union, the engineers one union, the radio operators one union, so why did the unlicensed personnel need two or three unions? That really hampered our advancement in wages, in living conditions, for not only the men on the ships but their families.

So several years ago the union, National Maritime Union, decided that it was time to merge with the Seafarers International Union, and I supported that. I think that was the best thing for us, and the industry is beginning to grow again, but it's mostly operated by foreign companies under the American flag. Very few American-flag companies, very few companies operate American flagships. They're mostly operated by foreign flags.

They are under the American flag and they're operated by American agents, but the ships are mostly owned by foreigners. Canada owns the Lykes Fleet that's operated by Marine Transport.

JT: So Lykes is still in business?

CM: Yes.

JT: And they're out of—there was an office in New Orleans.

CM: Yes. Well, they were out of Tampa originally. Lykes Fleet was originally just in the cattle business. They operated cattle ships out of Tampa, Florida, to Cuba.

JT: Bringing, or picking up?

CM: Bringing down to Cuba, they was taking them down to Cuba. Cuba used to, I don't know about now, used to have a large cattle industry, and in later years they began to take cattle out of there, because they began to breed them and the industry began to grow, so they could sell. We used to go down, take cattle down and bring sugar back from Cuba.

JT: Good trade.

CM: Yes. And I don't see now why we are refusing to trade with Cuba when we trade with China, North Korea, all those communistic countries, and there's that little country down there that, because of one man we want to isolate them, and I don't think it's right.

JT: Well, the governor of Louisiana doesn't think it's right either. She's been down there a couple of times to try to stimulate some trade relations.

CM: That's trade that we need, they need, but they're living and I think they're going to really grow, because they're now connected with Chavez out of Venezuela, and he's thumbing his nose at everybody up on this end, so I don't know what's going to come from that.

JT: Well, let's back up a good bit to the thirties, and thing that has kind of interested me here since I've been working on this little project is you've got Galveston, which is a natural port, a natural major port in the northwest Gulf of Mexico. It seems a likely candidate to become even bigger than it should have been in the late thirties, and all along you've got this little ship channel through Houston, comes up Buffalo Bayou and comes into this soon-to-be-major metropolis, the city, and in 1914 the citizens of Houston partnered with the federal government to dredge the channel and to establish the Port of Houston. At some point the Port

of Houston surpassed Galveston. When did that happen, and how did that happen?

CM: Well, after the 1915 storm the economy in Galveston began to go down. The waterfront in Galveston was owned privately by a family, the Sealy Hutchins family, and they impeded the progress of that port. They did not want to expand beyond what they already had. They did not work with the railroads after the 1915 storm. They did not work with the railroads to come back into Galveston.

JT: That's sounds like a major key right there.

CM: Right. So the railroads found that they could save money and time by stopping in Houston, because they didn't have an incentive to go to Galveston. Galveston waterfront did not begin to move until they sold that, and they became a port authority. That's when Galveston began to scratch their way out. But they were so far behind that they were never able to recover enough to either really compete with Houston. So by that being owned by those families kept that waterfront from really moving.

JT: And I guess with the discovery of oil, and then, of course, offshore exploration, companies like Brown & Root and some of the other fabrication companies that essentially moved into Houston, because that's where they had an opportunity. Railroads were coming in, land was, I'm sure, affordable in that area. But did Galveston decide not to get into the oilfield industry?

CM: Apparently they did, because they didn't offer any incentives to the people in the oilfield business to come into Galveston, to build their rigs. It was way after Brown & Root had moved up the channel before Galveston had begun to make offers to people, companies to come in and start building and repairing their rigs there, because they had that Todd dry dock there, which was right there in the

front of the ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, where they could have built those rigs and got them out to the position faster than they could all the way up in Houston. Plus they had people who were experienced with steel in the shipyard. They were already there. But nobody made any offers to them.

You have Pelican Island there, which they use now, was available at that time, and that was privately owned at one time. Part of it was owned by the government and part of it was privately owned, so no one made any offers to them to come in and build here, because it's a hell of a lot more convenient to you. You're right at the oceanfront.

Galveston is the cause of its own economic decline, because the people who had the money there at that time did not want to see that island grow, other than being a tourist destination. They weren't interested in any industry. I remember when the coffee company first went in there. The people were not really interested in having Maxwell House Coffee Company come in there, because they wanted their waterfront, their beach to bring in the money that they needed, but it didn't work. It didn't work, and Galveston is really not the type of beach—once people discovered Florida and Padre Island, that hurt them to some extent with tourists.

JT: I see what you're saying. It's not like they gambled on the tourist industry and it didn't work and they missed their opportunity for high-yield economic prosperity through the oil fields.

CM: Right. At one time the tourism was controlled by a group called Maceo, because they had gambling, they had the restaurants, and there was another group in there that they still have a restaurant open, and I can't remember their name, Battles. Those groups wanted to concentrate on tourists, so everything else was just passing by them, going up the channel.

I remember that with Lykes we used to come up to the docks here, city docks in Houston or Manchester, or the army base, and load, and when we were going back out passed right by Galveston. There was no cargo there. The sugar refinery and Sugarland, they would bring in sugar occasionally to Galveston, but most of the time we would dump that sugar in New Orleans, and they would load it on trains and bring it all the way to Sugarland, or trucks. Then later we started offloading some sugar in Houston.

But Galveston used to concentrate on sulphur and sugar, bulk. The break bulk cargo that was loaded here, Galveston could have received some of it if they had a working relationship with the railroad.

JT: Interesting. So I guess that you'd also agree that some of the big visionaries of Houston, who saw the emerging oilfield really stepped up the pace and made a difference in bringing that industry to the ship channel.

CM: Yes, they did, because I can remember when I was a kid seeing them bring the rigs down, taking them out of the sea. We could stand out on the end of the seawall in Galveston and watch them bring them up, and people in Galveston were fighting against them drilling off of Galveston, just like they're fighting in Florida.

But for some reason they lost, and that was the best thing for the island, because they were beginning to get some of that business. Supply boats were coming to Galveston. They wouldn't go all the way up to Houston, they would come into Galveston, because it was closer to the rigs. And I can remember when some of the first rigs went up, way back in the thirties, and we could sit up on the seawall and watch them. We could see the lights better at night, but we could see the rigs.

JT: Now, during the war, obviously, you were shipping in and out of the ports down here, and around the late thirties was when the petrochemical industry really took off with synthetic products, the rubbers and vinyl and some of the pharmaceutical things that are byproducts of petroleum, and that begins to establish along the ship channel. Do you have any recollection of some of these petrochemical refineries growing up and blossoming through the ship channel during the war, which was a major contribution to the Allied effort?

CM: Yes. Well, I could see that as we came in. I was sailing mostly on freighters. I stayed away from tankers until I was on the one tanker. I didn't like tankers because they ran coast-wise most of the time, and I wanted to go offshore. But I could see the refineries as they built them in the late thirties and early forties, when the refineries began to really expand.

There were other companies, Texaco, Gulf, Continental Oil Company and a few others who had ships, and they began to come up the ship channel to Houston. Then Texas City began to expand, so there's a lot of tankers were coming to that area. But they expanded up the ship channel here, some of the companies. I was trying to remember some of the companies who originally had the refineries here, but offhand I can't.

But I know that the tankers did come, Keystone tankers, Gulf Oil, Texaco, Continental Oil Company, they all would come up this channel and bring in crude, and take out finished products up the East Coast, and they also did this for the war effort. They began to really expand during the war, and the ship channel was a very busy place during the war.

JT: Now, how did things change for yourself, like in 1946? I understand that you joined the union, but how did things change for the Port of Houston and the

economy of Houston, Galveston, the whole ship channel area? How did things change shortly after the war?

CM: Well, I didn't join the union in '46. I became an official in '46; I joined in '37. Well, the economy in Houston, my knowledge of that after '46 was what I received from newspapers and my visits down here on assignments. You could see the growth of Houston because of the manufacturing, the petrochemical industry expanding, and the decline of Galveston.

Galveston declined even more, because businesses began to close down that were supported by the war effort. They closed down the shipyard to cut back. But Houston kept growing because of the petrochemical industry. They kept expanding. Plants like Goodyear came in, using synthetics that came from oil, and they had a tremendous growth, and they're still growing.

I would say now all they need is they need some new refineries, but they need to get them away from the water, from the gulf area. They need to build them further away. I agree with President [George] Bush, who had made offers to oil companies to use government property that is no longer being used, because most of the materials are piped across country. There are not that many tankers running to move it. They move it faster by pipeline. So if you build a refinery 200 miles inland, you get it away from the threat of hurricanes, high water, and you pipe materials wherever you want to go. The product can go anywhere you want to pipe it to.

JT: One thing that has fascinated me, and I'm not sure if you're truly knowledgeable about all this, but the pipeline that they built from southeast Texas to go up to the northeast to where they were building ships during the war, that was the Little Inch or the Big Inch, that pipeline, that's fascinating, you know, the human

ingenuity at a time of crisis, that could build something like that and it actually worked, that's really fascinating.

CM: Americans, if they put their mind to it, we can do it. But I think we're getting like some other countries. We know how to do it, but we want somebody else to do it.

JT: Amazing.

CM: That's right. And it's happening in this country more and more every day. We're getting so that the knowledge that we have, we pass it on to other people and they improve on it.

JT: And surpass us.

CM: That's right. They surpass us. So we need to get back to our people using that knowledge to help advance this country, because I don't know whether we could depend on some of these people if we got in a crisis of any kind, because we thought during the Second World War that some of those foreign flagships were going to carry cargo and supplies to American troops, and a lot of them refused. They refused to sail the ships.

We never refused. We never refused. Some people say we did, but that's a lie. We never refused to sail. We didn't care where it was going. If American troops were there, Allied troops were there, we were going to take those supplies to them. So we just have to move away from depending on other people and get back to depending on ourselves. We have the brainpower. We have the know how. But I just said, we're lazy.

JT: And when you drive up the bridge coming over 610, when you look down at that Port of Houston, it's really fascinating. It's so big and so vast, to think that in

fifty years that whole area has really quadrupled in size, and the impact that's had on the economy in the region, not just in Houston but a 300-mile-radius region. It's really—

CM: Really. When they put that bridge in, there was a fight to put that bridge in. A lot of people did not want that bridge in, particularly the navy. The navy said if we got into any kind of altercation with anyone, war with anyone, that they could bomb that bridge and block that upper part of the channel off. So finally they were convinced that that upper part of the channel is not really that important for the shipping business, because most of the shipping is down at the lower end of the channel.

Then when they built that other bridge that runs—what the hell do they call it—the Sam Houston Parkway, the Sam Houston Tollway runs to that bridge when you cross the channel. There was a lot of complaints about that. Now you don't hear it anymore. When it was built a lot of people didn't want it, again including the navy, because they figured it'd block the channel. So now most of the cargo here is handled down below those bridges by the container docks.

JT: That's going to lead me to the next question. How has containerization transformed the area, and the port-maritime business in general?

CM: Well, the container industry has really vitalized the maritime industry. What it has done is made it a lot more compact, because they build the ships larger, they carry more cargo, their turnaround is faster, and the crews are smaller. So from an economic point of view, they save money by moving more cargo, less crew, and faster ships. So it has really impacted the Port of Houston.

Now, the Port of Galveston, it took them a long time to come around to building a container dock. No one in Galveston wanted a container dock, so all the containers were going right on by Galveston, coming up to Houston.

JT: Again.

CM: Yes. So it has really been a shot in the arm to not only the maritime industry, but to the surrounding areas for the Port of Houston. That's why the Port of Houston container area has grown so big.

JT: Barber's Cut?

CM: Yes, it has grown so big. When they first opened that up, they were going to open the container area at an old army base which is on the other side of the channel. It's no longer there now, but they sold it to private industry. But then when they built Barber's Cut, a lot of people said it wasn't going to work. But it did work.

When the guy—I can't remember his name—who originally started it, Mclean, when he put it, they said it wasn't going to work. But he put containers on a tanker, because he owned some tankers that were running up and down the coast, and he put those containers on those tankers that came down to Texas, with a load of—and opened the eyes of the maritime industry, because that meant, usually tankers came out of the East Coast. They're empty coming, and they load in Texas. So he had cargo going back and forth from both ends. He carried petroleum products in the tanks, and cargo in the containers on deck. So it caught on, and now it's a multi-billion-dollar business, and it really is a shot in the arm to this area.

Plus, it's a shot in the arm to the petroleum industry, because a lot of the pipes and other valves come from overseas. They come in containers. It's easier to

load that material into containers than it would be to load them in the hold. You load them in a hold, you have to spend hours securing them. But in a container, you put it in a container, lock it up, put it on, lower it on deck, lock it in and away you go. So it helps not only the population on both sides of the ocean, but the petroleum industry in this country.

JT: What are some of the other technological advances and improvements that have been made since the war, like two-way radio I know has really impacted the way that, particularly through the ship channel and around the turning basing, and radar and some of these things; what are some of your experiences and your knowledge about these technological advances that have moved maritime travel?

CM: Some of the advances they've made now, radar is secondary to some of the equipment they use today, because they use satellites. They use beacons to come up the channel, where you couldn't use radar too well once you got into the channel, but there was beacons that you'd beam in on, and it's a heck of a lot safer with the equipment they use. The technology makes it safer for the ship channel. It protects the industry along the ship channel, and it protects the ships.

The technology is really improving every day, because once they get to sea, say five years ago the captain and the navigating officer used sextants. They carry sextants now, I guess, just for extra baggage, because they use satellites to chart their course, which is a whole lot more accurate than using the sextant, because sextants you had to figure the drift, the wind and everything else. But the satellite, once you beam in on that satellite—

Tape 2, side 1

JT: This is Charles Mills oral history interview, Port of Houston, June 27th, 2006, interview by Jason Theriot. This is Charles Mills in the Port of Houston, tape two.

CM: It tells you where you are, and gives you your speed and everything else. Technology today makes it easier, but it makes the guys study more, because, well, you had to study when you used a sextant and all the rest of that, but all of those things were something that was invented sailing ships, and they just improved on the sextant as time passed by. But the sextant is probably generally obsolete now.

JT: Well, but technology cannot run itself. You've got to have people. What is your experience with pilots and the Coast Guard and some of the other individuals that are a big part of what goes in a port?

CM: Well, when I first started coming up the ship channel, we picked up the pilot at, off of Galveston. The pilot had little raggedy boats that they'd bring the pilots out with, which was really unsafe, but now they've built new boats. The technology is, they can pick you up in the fog. Pilots at one time if you were anchored in a fog, a pilot couldn't pick you up unless you were blowing your whistle, and the pilots wouldn't come out. And now in some cases, if the fog is not too heavy, he can move that ship up the ship channel.

They have all types of technology that improves their movement of the vessel, because the vessels are larger. The radio phones, the contact that they have between the Coast Guard and the pilot on vessels is really to increase the safety of the port, when they're moving vessels up and down the harbor, because the petrochemical industry is right on the harbor, right on the waterfront there. And if, heaven forbid, there's any type of collision on that ship channel between two

chemical ships, it would be a disaster to the petrol industry on the waterfront, because it would completely cripple it.

But with the technology they have now, it helps them see to pick up ships that are coming downstream if they're going up. It makes them safer, because I remember when we first started coming into the ship channel in Houston, if one vessel was coming down and it wasn't extra large, we would lean—they would go over to the bank and just hang to the bank until that ship passed, and then you'd come off the bank and go, because you could lay a ship into the bank. Those captains had that type of experience, they'd lay it into the bank until the other ship comes by, and then you move up. That's what they used to have to do when I first started the shipping.

You had a problem. Even though Lykes Brothers, most of them weren't Lykes Brothers ships. They were coming up and down with smaller ships they would build during the war, the First World War, unless you had one of those big ships that what they call Hog Islands that was built during the First World War.

Other than that I think the ship channel is very safe now. The Coast Guard is continuously working to improve it, and I think it's an economic boom for the industry and the citizens of an area, like you said, over three to four hundred miles away, because a lot of people come down to work all week and go home on the weekends, and they live up in Dallas and other places. So they come to the waterfront to make a living, and the salaries are good, working conditions excellent. Most of them are unionized, so they're pretty well protected.

JT: Let's talk about this group. I'd like to know your opinion about the Port Authority and how that relates to the labor, to the unions and to the overall structure of the Port of Houston.

CM: Well, the experience I had with the Houston Port Authority back in the time when I was the assistant business agent here was very good. They were very cooperative. We had very good working relations with them, and I understand now, being on the outside, that that working relation is still very good as far as labor is concerned. I believe with some exceptions that they stopped at that infighting that they were doing, that they are really interested in the progress of the port and they're doing a good job. I think they're doing a good job.

JT: I want to know a little bit more in detail about your career with the union. Tell me a little bit more, exactly how you folks were involved with the maritime, with the port, and securing better wages, better standards of living. How does that actually work with unions and maritime?

CM: Well, we in the deep-sea industry were not too involved as far as wages and working conditions with the port authorities, but we did cooperate with the longshoremen, who had to deal directly with the Port Authority through the various stevedoring companies. Stevedore companies would hire the longshoremen for the loading and discharge of the cargo. The Port Authority obligation was to provide a safe and secure area for those vessels that come in and discharge that cargo.

We had to cross their property, so in the deep-sea industry, to my knowledge until 9/11 we never had any problems with the Port Authority in the Port of Houston, being able to come and go whenever we wanted to, because we always had our documents with us, and we showed it at the gate to the security officer.

So our working conditions during that period were very good, because any time we went to them for any problems that we may have run into with one of our steamship companies who had a problem, we worked with the steamship

companies very closely, so we went to the Port Authority. During that period I found that their cooperation with them was very good.

JT: You'd mentioned that you were involved in establishing contracts. Tell me a little bit more about that.

CM: Well, when I went to New York as what they call field patrol, my job was in the contract enforcement department. We formulated and negotiated and enforced contracts. That was the responsibility of the department I was in. The field patrolmen, you were assigned wherever the agent who was in charge of that department would assign you. A lot of times you had to go into areas, Philadelphia, Virginia, places where they had problems with the contracts, so we did a lot of traveling.

I worked in New York for about five years doing that, and then I went to Baltimore, because we had some internal problems there. So I was sent in there to try to clear that up, and I wind up staying in Baltimore. So I worked out of Baltimore down the coast, Virginia, Savannah, Georgia, and those areas, out of Baltimore.

Then we had an election and the fellow got elected for Houston. Now, I'd already been in Baltimore for about twelve years, and they asked me to come down to Houston to train this fellow. I said, "Okay." So I came down and after three months I called them and said, "Well, look. I think this guy could handle it, and I'm ready to go back. When do I leave?"

Fellow asked me, said, "Well, look. Aren't you from Texas?"

I said, "Yes. Why?"

He said, "Well, you want to stay down here?" He said, "But before you answer that, you ask Wilomena." That's my wife's name.

So I called her and I said, "They're talking about leaving me in Texas. What do you think? Do you want to come down here?"

She said, "When do we leave?"

JT: She was ready to come back.

CM: So we came to Texas and they bumped me up to another title. I was the director of political action for the West Gulf. So I naturally got involved in a lot of politics, and working with the Port Authority, City Hall, and we were able to have a working relationship with them that was very good. So then I stayed here sixteen years and I got transferred again, got transferred into another area where we had some problems, and then I got transferred to New Orleans. I was a troubleshooter or a cleanup-man, you might say, because every time they had a problem they would send me.

JT: What were some of the problems?

CM: Well, it was a lot of internal stuff. When I was sent into New Orleans at that time we had a group, a communistic group, and they—now, this is back '47. To give you a little history about the NMU, the NMU when they first broke from the ISU they were led by communists, members of the Communist Party.

JT: In the United States?

CM: In the United States. They had a very strong cell in New York. So their living conditions at that time were very bad. The wages were low, living conditions,

sleeping and feeding, it was very low. So the communists who were then members of the ILWU, which was another union, they broke away and organized Maritime Workers something, I can't remember exactly what it was. And then they struck, got most of the people to go along. They convinced them that the wages would be better, the living conditions, so they went on strike, and they tied up the waterfront from Brownsville to Boston.

JT: What year was this?

CM: 1936, '37.

JT: That was the big strike.

CM: Big strike. So these people were still around at that particular time, and we—when I say we, there was a group of us that were against it. The industry had gotten so, because the maritime administration was putting pressures on the union to clean house, and we were trying to clean these people out. So when I went to New Orleans there was a fight between the communists and the non-communists. So it completely disrupted the port.

So I was sent down to relieve them until such time as there was a hearing here. I stayed on about three months, and when the hearing was held and over we had overcome the communists, and so I went back to New York at that time. So the communists had a lot to do with organizing of the National Maritime Union. Yes, they did that.

In fact, during the war the FBI would pick out certain people, and I was one of them, because I was a charter member of the National Maritime Union, and most of those people who were then charter members were members of the Communist Party. So they came down to a ship. I was in Lake Charles, and they came down

to this ship and interviewed me, and they asked me, "Are you a member of—?" No. "You associated with them?" Yes. They had beautiful parties, plenty of food, plenty of booze. "And you never joined?"

I said, "No. I ate their food, drank their booze, and went home." [laughs] But I never became a member of the party. But I got a lot of help from the party. They helped me, because at the time that I was trying to further my education they didn't have a program in the union for those officials who wanted to upgrade themselves educationally wise.

But the communists came up with a program, said, "If you want to go back to school we'll pay for it." So a lot of us went back to school.

JT: What school did you go to?

CM: Well, I went to finish high school in New York, and then I went to New York City College, but I didn't finish that. I went three years there. I should have; I was almost finished, but I had a lot of playing in my mind, so that kind of cut my education off. But I continued to do things to keep my mind as long as I possibly can. I read a lot. I go to a lot of seminars to learn about what's going on.

JT: Well, now that you're retired are you actively involved in any of the maritime or ship channel activities?

CM: Yes.

JT: What are some of the things that you do in your retirement?

CM: Well, one is the American Merchant Marine president, so that's one. I still work with the Seamen's Institute down there. There's a church here that's one of the

supporters, and I work with them through that church, and I volunteer maybe three or four times a year. I stay involved. I attend the meetings with the SIU. Occasionally they will call me in to give some advice on some things. Like they say they want me to keep my hand in, so maybe twice a year they'll call me in and I'll do some things with them, and work four or five days.

JT: And you're trying to get recognition for the World War II Merchant Marine Association.

CM: Right, so I'm working for that, and possibly the gods may smile on us and we'll get something before we all die. I was very active out here. I'm in charge of security and safety here. I'm on the board of directors, and I'm a director of the MUDD board, number four, so I stay active. Okay?

JT: Just a couple of more questions, Mr. Charles. As we've seen the port's ship channel enlarge, and the dredging projects over the last fifty years have really made a tremendous impact in allowing the deep-dredging ships to come into port, and most recently with the latest dredging project is they are using that dredged material to construct these manmade islands for environmental purposes.

CM: Right.

JT: I understand that Houston and the ship channel is sort of at the pinnacle of environmental regulations, and first in a lot of environmental areas, as far as keeping things safe, and less pollution and whatnot. It almost seems that there's been a trend in the nineties towards this environmental sustainability. How do you see the port in the next fifty years in relation to our environment?

CM: Well, originally, in the early fifties I would say, when they originally started dredging more and pumping into those islands, there were a lot of complaints.

People did not want them to do that. They said they were ruining the ecology. But they continued to do that, and I think some of the same people who were at one time adverse to that pumping of that spoils into those areas are now coming around to see the advantage of pumping those spoils in those islands, holding them in to keep them from flowing back into the channel to fill it up again.

There are resting areas and nesting areas for birds of all kinds. It helps the fishing. The drainage, slight drainage from that drains into the channel, helps fish, and I believe that in fifty years from now the channel will be even wider than it is now. It'll be even deeper, because they have to do that if they want to stay in competition with other areas that have natural harbors.

See, there are some natural harbors that they don't have to dredge at all because of the way the channel flows, and they have solid bottoms there. It's not sandy bottoms like here. And I think fifty years from now some of those same islands that they're building out of there, they'll probably be inhabited by people.

JT: Is that right?

CM: I believe so, because a lot of people are going to build close to water. They want to build close to the water regardless of the hazards, so I think that those islands are a real asset, other than the ecology.

JT: Jim Manzolillo had the same thoughts. He says in the next fifty years you'll probably see some condominiums or beachfront development down in that area.

CM: Right. I think there'll be some plants, I'm sure built along those islands plus I believe there'll be people there.

JT: From my own personal vantage point, I'm from south Louisiana, and particularly if you look at the Terrebonne area, of the destruction that has been caused on the environment and the wetlands from the oil companies, as far as coastal erosion and saltwater intrusion, it seems that that went on unabated for fifty years all along the Gulf of Mexico, and now maybe they're finally understanding that what they did, although it did impact the economy in tremendous ways, it also hurt the environment, and maybe now there's sort of a swing towards giving back a little bit, since some of these guys are sitting on piles of money, that they can make a difference now.

CM: Some of the companies that realize they've done all that damage, they want to repair it. Some of it are going to spend millions of dollars to repair some of those damages, particularly, say, in Louisiana, where they need to do something about the erosion. Some people say you can't do anything about it, and there can be something done. We have the knowledge to do it.

So those places in those areas, down Galveston Island and some areas along the Houston Ship Channel that's eroding, they're waking up to the fact, we did it so we need to cure it, and I think some of them are starting to spend money to that end now.

JT: And if you can put a rig in 10,000 foot of water, man himself, as mankind, the ingenuity of the human race can come up with ways with enough money to protect our coastline before it vanishes; I certainly think so.

CM: Yes. You notice in Galveston those groins that they built out? They started building those things when I was a kid, and people said they wouldn't work. It has worked, because the gulf was coming in close to the seawall. In some areas it was coming up under the seawall, so they built those groins, and now the sand,

you can walk out on a lot of areas that you could not walk before. So that's something they put in fifty years ago or more.

So there are places for improvement, and they are improvement, improving the saving of our coastline, and it's got to be done. Otherwise the water is going to eat us up, really.

JT: One last question, Mr. Charles. We get a lot of our consumer goods through international trade through the sea. Either it comes into Galveston, most of it comes through the ship channel into Houston, a lot of our petrochemical industries as well. Why do you think that most people of the four million people who live in this city, just this city alone, are not aware of the tremendous benefits that the ship channel provides?

CM: Publicity. There's not enough in the newspapers. There's not enough coming from those industries that need to put some money in to educate people. We should have a program in the schools to educate our kids to what the petroleum industry is doing and has done for particularly the gulf coast. That's one of the things that's wrong, is education. They don't run enough in the newspapers to let our people know.

They should have free seminars. The oil companies should get together and just have free seminars. I think the city could get those oil companies to have that, have free seminars in Reliant Center, serve sodas and coffee and tea and bag lunch. You don't go all day. You don't take all day. You can take three or four hours and have it opened up to people, like what is this oil when they come in, the oil, and they meet here?

JT: The oil expos?

CM: The oil expos. Something in conjunction with that. Make it free. Make it free. When they have a convention or whatever it is that they have, before they break down all that stuff, open it up to the public. Let the public see what oil companies are doing to help this country progress in the petrochemical industry, and what they're doing to help ecology-wise, as far as this country is concerned. That's what we need to do.

JT: I agree. Good idea.

CM: I think if they did that, because they have big spreads in the paper about them coming in here, how many. There are hundreds of thousands of people coming in here. Then after they finish their business, ask them to stay two more days, open it up to the public, all that big machinery. Kids would love to see all of that. Families would love to see all that, and then it will stay in their mind.

JT: And then they will see the connection that that has come from, you know, thankfully, right off of our nation's coast, right there in the Gulf of Mexico, and it comes fifty miles up this little channel that over the past seventy-five years the City of Houston and the federal government have continuously dredged and widened and opened to allow this commerce to come into the city, to allow us to have such a prosperous economy.

CM: That's right. Now, the *Sam Houston*, the boat that runs down the channel, they used to do a lot of advertising about that boat. They don't do that anymore. They used to go to the schools, encouraging kids, the teachers, field days. I don't read or hear about that anymore, if they're doing it, because I took my grandsons about a year ago, and I don't think there was twenty people on it.

JT: On, like, a Saturday?

CM: No, it was during the week, but it was in the summer vacation time. I don't think there were twenty people on it.

JT: You're right, it's not well advertised.

CM: This is what we need to let our people know what is bringing about their living, the improvement and the cost, their way of living, what's happening and how the petrol industry started, what's it doing. They don't know about all of the refineries and stuff on the waterfront. When I took them down there they said, "Gee, what is all of this?"

And I told them, "Well, they make this here. They make that over there."

"I didn't know that."

So then when I took them down to Galveston and pointed out the wells to them, I said, "There are our wells out there. Now some of them are abandoned. They don't use them anymore," I said, "but they're out there." And that's what they need to do, publicity as far as our kids are concerned. Field trips is what they need.

JT: Yes, exactly. I'm going to shut this off.

CM: Let me give you one thing. You asked one question about providing the name of somebody else. Do you know Howard Middleton? He was a former commissioner on the port authority. He was the first black member of the port authority, and I think he's in the telephone book, and he can fill you in, I believe, a heck of a lot more about—M-i-d-d-l-e-t-o-n, yes, Howard Middleton. And if you have a problem getting his telephone number or anything, let me know and

I'll check with some people and I can get it. But I think he's in the telephone book.

JT: Great. Thank you so much.

CM: I hope I've been of service.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 17 November 2006]