MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Clyde Fitzgerald

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Clyde Fitzgerald is a native of Houston. His father and two uncles worked as longshoremen on the Houston Ship Channel. He started working as a longshoreman in 1959. He worked his way through the ranks and became president of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), South Atlantic Gulf Coast District, which represents longshoremen union members from Brownsville, Texas, to North Carolina.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an interview with Clyde Fitzgerald, President of the ILA International Longshoremen's Galveston, by Jason Theriot on August 14th, 2006. This is Clyde Fitzgerald, oral history of the Port of Houston, tape one.

CF: Clyde Fitzgerald, I'm president of the South Atlantic Gulf Coast District.

[NOTE: There are several other speakers, identified briefly in introductions, but in the body of the interview they will each be identified as UM, Unidentified Male, unless their name is given at the time.]

JW: James R. Watson, I'm general counsel for the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District, and have been since 1980.

AR: Alan Robb, District Representative for the South Atlantic Gulf Coast District ILA.

MD: Michael Dickens, Secretary-Treasurer for the South Atlantic Gulf Coast District.

JT: Tell me your background and how you got involved in the Longshoremen's Association.

CF: I started working in 1959 in the Port of Houston, out of Local 1330. Our jurisdiction was loading and unloading railcars and trucks, putting cargo on pallets to go on the vessel, and cargo coming off the vessel. We loaded them from the warehouse to the trucks and to the railcars. I started in 1959.

JT: And you're from Houston?

CF: From Houston, yes.

JT: And what about you three guys, where are you from sir?

JW: Houston.

AR: Also Houston.

MD: Houston area also.

JT: And so was your father maybe—

CF: Yes, my father, he was a longshoreman, yes, and two uncles.

JT: Is that right. So it runs in the family.

CF: Yes.

JT: So in 1959, how long were you a longshoreman there, and then when did you get involved in the association?

CF: I worked out of that local and became president of that local in 1969, and I stayed president for twenty years. In 1989 I came to the district office as a district representative. In 1990 I became secretary-treasurer. I served twelve years, became president in 2002, of the district, and this district runs from Brownsville, Texas, to Morehead City, North Carolina.

JT: Wow, that's quite a distance. Explain to me, what is the mission of the ILA?

CF: Mission of the ILA is to represent the members of the ILA in wages and benefits, trying to get them the best wages and benefits as possible for our members, represent them in their grievances.

JT: And what role do the longshoremen play on the ship channel here?

CF: They play a major role in Houston. We handle probably 95 percent of all the containerized cargo that's moving through the port today. We handle probably 60 percent of the break-bulk cargo.

JT: I'm going to throw out a list of names, and if any of you guys have any perspective on some of these early visionaries who helped develop the ship channel, I'd like your perspective on those. First of all, the Allen Brothers.

CF: All I know about them is what I've read, history of those guys, yes.

UM: It's the same to me. I mean, I know they were instrumental in designing the Port of Houston.

JT: What about Tom Ball and Mayor Rice?

CF: Same thing.

JT: Who were some of the early longshoremen, let's say bigwigs down on the ship channel?

CF: When I came to the docks, the president of the largest local was a guy named Bud Laird, and then after Bud I think it was Willy Wells, who also was a port commissioner back in the early sixties. And in the local I come from there was a guy named—the president of our local was Emmett Leveritt.

JT: Okay. What about some of these names? Malcolm McLean?

CF: I know him very well. He's the one that invented containerization. He brought the first container ship into the Port of Houston in 1956, and that's where it started from.

JT: That has changed everything.

CF: Yes, it has, yes.

JT: Explain to me that change. What was a longshoreman's life on the ship channel like before and after containerization?

CF: Before containerization it was nothing but hard work. It was all back-breaking work, and while the wages were decent in that time, containerization changed all of that to where today our jobs are more skilled, and the pay is real good compared to the rest of the community, because of automation. So it went from back-breaking, low-paying dirty jobs to good, well-paying jobs, because of the skills it takes to run the operations.

JT: Are most of the crane operators part of the—

CF: Yes, they're ILA, yes, they are.

JT: Okay, very interesting. What about Mayor Louis Welch?

CF: I don't know that much about him, personally.

JT: How about a gentleman who we spoke of before, Howard Middleton? What role did he play in providing for labor?

CF: Howard was—in fact, he referred to himself as the labor representative on the port commission at that time. We had five commissioners at the time, and Howard came from the labor movement and was appointed by the commissioner's court to serve, so we all referred to him as the labor representative on the commission.

JT: What types of major contributions did he bring to the association in his eighteen-some-odd years of service?

CF: Well, back in those years we, from time to time, would have conflicts with the Port of Houston, and Howard being one of the commissioners, they set and made policy for the port, so if we had issues that we were concerned with, naturally we would go to Howard, and he would help us in our struggles that we may have.

JT: And the way that he talks, he was pretty successful in most of those.

CF: He was successful, yes. I mean, it's just like all the rest of us. Sometimes your members only know what you did for them today, not yesterday; what you going to do today? Howard was the same way. He was almost 95 percent always with us. There were one or two occasions where we disagreed with him and had some issues, but overall he was good for us.

JT: Well, let's back it up into the 1930s. I know that there was a major labor crisis, a strike, a nationwide strike, I believe it was in '36 or '37 where there was a major strike on all the ports.

CF: [19]36.

JT: Okay. How did that affect business on the port, if you guys are aware of it?

CF: Well, obviously we weren't here then, so the only thing we can tell you is stories about it. It was a long, devastating strike. In fact, people got killed and a lot of people got shot, and I'm assuming it had a great effect on the city.

JT: What was the basis behind that strike?

CF: From what I've heard, and I don't know for sure, but I heard that the Port of New Orleans was not organized, and we were trying to help them get organized into the ILA. I understand that's what the biggest part of the strike was about.

JT: So it essentially spread from New Orleans.

CF: Yes.

JT: And what major changes occurred as a result?

CF: Oh, we all become stronger once we had all of the ports organized into the ILA.

JT: And that was all through the gulf?

CF: It was all through the whole gulf, the whole ILA. If one port was shut down, all of them were shut down, and that happened up through the early seventies. That was the position every time we had a strike, everybody was shut out.

JT: Well, how did the ILA's role change over the last seventy-five years from that incident, seventy years?

CF: Well, I think where we're at today is that we try to be more partners with the industry, with the steamship lines and the port authorities, and the ILA and the customers. We went from the days of having strikes and work stoppages to that we've now partnered up, and you know, we feel like we all have a part to play in this thing, and by everybody working together we haven't had a strike since early seventies. There's not been a strike since the early seventies, and we just think that the ILA has benefited from this.

JT: So good communication with all involved.

CF: Good communications, yes, because, see, in the old days back when we were having strikes every year, every two years, we never made up what we lost. If

you go on strike for thirty days and you end up getting a thirty-cent, or a ten- or fifteen-cent raise back then, you know, you never got it back.

JT: Were you involved in any of this?

CF: Yes, oh yes. I went through them, probably about four or five. One year we had a 105-day strike, over containerization, a 105-day strike.

JT: Because you guys obviously wanted increased—

CF: No, no, no, no. What we wanted, we wanted to stuff and strip all the containers, because the containers were taking cargo away from us. It was taking it out of the railcars and trucks, and it was taking it from the hold of the ship, and it was just coming right in off the road. So we were trying to say that we wanted to stuff and strip those containers, so that we didn't lose our jobs.

JT: And were y'all successful in that?

CF: No. We were successful to negotiate a certain percent of it would be stuffed and stripped by ILA labor, and then the courts came in shortly after that and ruled that it was illegal. We lost what we call the fifty-mile rule. There was a fifty-mile radius around the port, that if any cargo was going to be generated, or going to a customer within that fifty miles, then we had the right to take it out of the containers. If it went further than fifty miles, we wouldn't touch the cargo. But some court came in and ruled that that was—

JW: A violation of the Shipping Act.

CF: Yes, a violation of shipping act, so we lost the ruling.

JT: Where does that stand today?

CF: Where it stands today is that after we lost that ruling, we did maintain some stuffing and stripping if it was for the convenience of the vessel. If the vessel was paying for it to be stuffed, then we continued to do the work. If the customer was paying for it, we lost the work. So then in about I guess '87, '88, we came up with what we called a CFS agreement, where these steamship lines put money into a pot, and then they subsidized us stuffing and stripping some of the containers.

JT: Wow. How did you guys arrange that?

CF: We negotiated it. We negotiated it with them.

JT: So how much cargo is handled in bulk now, that's coming through Galveston and the Port of Houston?

CF: What do you mean by bulk?

JT: That's not in containers.

CF: Well, let me make sure you understand this. We're not stuffing or stripping all the containers. Even with the subsidy we're probably doing 10 percent, 5 percent. All the rest of that cargo goes right out the gate to the customer, so we've only kept a small portion of it.

JT: So 10 percent of the containerization you've got.

CF: Yes. If we do 10 percent we would be lucky.

JT: So what is the percentage other than containerized cargo?

CF: I think we said the other day probably 65 percent, yes, is break-bulk steel, heavy equipment, heavy lifts, bags, things like that, automobiles.

JT: And how much of that is oilfield related?

CF: Probably 20, 25 percent.

JW: I'd say a big part of it.

JT: What size of materials are you guys handling?

CF: Well, we're shipping out rigs, we're shipping out oil rigs and the whole rigs go somewhere.

JT: As a whole component?

CF: No, they're broken down and boxed and packaged, and then they put them together over there.

JT: Is that right?

CF: Yes. And then all of the cargo that it takes to supply the rigs, like drilling mud and any commodity that goes along with the drilling rigs, we're shipping a lot of that out. It's been real good the last three or four years.

JT: Now, you guys are just involved in moving the cargo from shore to the channel, is that right?

CF: No, from shore to the ship, and vice versa. Right.

JT: And, of course, you guys don't go out—

CF: No, no, no. We don't do that.

JT: Is it a twenty-four-hour service?

CF: Yes. Yes. Most of the container ships that come in work, when they come in they work till they finish, most of them.

JT: Let's talk about this, the competition between Port of Galveston and Houston. Why did the Port of Houston eventually surpass Galveston?

CF: Because I think the marketplace is closer in Houston to the customer, and all cargo is cheaper to ship it by water, so the closer you can get it to the customer, that's the cheapest way to move the cargo, and that's what happened here, that's what happened to Galveston.

JT: That's from Galveston—

CF: To Houston, yes. So by water it's cheaper to go close as you can to the customer, and I think that's basically what made Houston become the port that it is today.

JT: What about the hurricane, did that have some impacts, you know, in that part of the century on that?

CF: Not on Houston and Galveston. Of course, it [Hurricane Katrina] devastated Mississippi and Louisiana, and I would assume that some of the cargo that had originally went to New Orleans probably has come through the Port of Houston.

JT: And y'all are seeing a little increase in business because of it?

CF: We did right shortly afterwards, but I think New Orleans now is about 80 percent back full strength, so I'm assuming that cargo went back over there. We saw a little increase, but that same time we'd begin to have this big increase of the cargo, so, you know, I don't really know. You can't put your finger on how much actually came from these other ports.

JT: And what, if any, in Galveston, speaking of the Port of Galveston right here, what types of cargo are they bringing in that's related to offshore oil industry, and what types of manufacturing, if anything, is occurring here, fabrication?

CF: I don't know of any myself. They've got a lot of these little supply boats that come in here that supply the shores, offshore drilling, but we don't do the majority of that work. We do very little of it.

JT: I did notice a couple of big rigs. I guess it's rig repair or ship repair?

CF: Yes, plus they tie them up here if they bring them in and dock them here from time to time, to repair and do other things. But we really don't have a lot to do with that.

JT: Okay. Of course, you guys weren't around during the Second World War, but the history books teach us—what are some of the stories that y'all have come across about the impacts of the war on Port of Galveston, Port of Houston Ship Channel?

CF: Well, I can only tell you that in Houston years ago I've heard stories from my father and uncles and them, when they would go load the ammunition in the Port of Houston. It created many, many jobs for them, and it was double pay, so back

then they made a lot of money to handle it. But I can tell you in the ports today we handle all the military cargo in Beaumont, Corpus Christi, and Jacksonville, Florida, Charleston, South Carolina; it creates many jobs.

JT: Tell me about that ammunition. There was an ammunition factory on the channel?

CF: No. In Houston there was what they called the Ordinance Depot, and they had bunkers built out there, and they stored all the ammunition and bombs in those bunkers, and then when they'd get ready for them the longshoremen loaded them during the war, from Houston.

JT: Now, if you guys, well, you certainly were around in the fifties. Did you see a major increase in activity with military respects during the Vietnam conflict, and later on the Persian Gulf War?

CF: You know, I don't remember that much in Vietnam. I'll tell you story about that in a minute. But I do know that in the first Gulf War the Port of Houston loaded a tremendous amount of tonnage that went to Kuwait. Yes, we had lots of cargo. But all I remember about Vietnam was, is that our international union carried longshoremen basically from New York over to Vietnam to help them unload ships, because the ports were totally congested, and they didn't have the skills to unload these ships. So longshoremen went over there and unloaded those ships during the Vietnam War.

JT: Wow. Was that the first time in history maybe that that's been done?

CF: First time that I know of, yes, first time that I know of.

JT: Almost seems like a Merchant Marine type of job.

CF: Yes, but we just went just to unload the ships, and use their expertise on telling them how to unload them and get them out of the ports, yes, because they couldn't handle them.

JT: So what type of training does a longshoreman have, other than just coming in at a young age and following up from, you know, his forefather's footsteps? Is there training, is there schooling?

CF: Well, in the older days when we all started there was no training. You just learned. You came to work and you learned how to do things. But today with all of the automated equipment, like cranes and trucks and RTGs, there's a training program that our people have to go through, and they have to get certified before they can operate that equipment, yes.

JT: So it goes along with what you were saying before, the skill level has increased and the pay has increased.

CF: Yes, right, definitely. Although we lost many, many jobs because of automation, the ones that's left are compensated pretty well for it.

JT: Now, do the longshoremen operate on the private docks?

CF: You know, we used to. I don't think we are today.

JT: For example, like Shell, the petrochemical plant—

CF: No, no, no, no, no. We don't do that.

JT: It's the Shell employees that are unloading?

CF: Yes. Yes, they hook up the hoses themselves. We do nothing with chemicals or oil or gas, or anything like that. Those are all done by the plant people. We're at the public docks and some private cargo docks, where there's other general cargo being loaded. We do a little work at Omni Port. Most of the private terminals have their own labor.

JT: And then some of them may contract ILA members if they need to.

CF: If they wanted to they could, yes.

JT: About how many do y'all have along the ship channel today?

CF: What, private terminals?

JT: No, sir. ILA members.

CF: I would say that there's about, there's how many locals in Houston, six? Six locals in Houston. That includes the loading ships, the terminal work, the guys that tie the vessels up when the come in. We've got the Port Houston Authority maintenance personnel who's ILA. I would say we've probably got 2500. Is that a good number? About 2500.

JT: That's quite a few jobs that y'all are providing. Beaumont and Port Arthur were also oil-related industries, have been for longer than Houston in the ship channel. Why did the petrochemical industry not make it as big in those two port cities, and we can throw Galveston into that mix as well; why did Houston become the mega-petrochemical industry in this region?

CF: I can't speak on that.

MD: I think Clyde hit on it earlier when he said, I think the city itself, just the population of the city caused product to be domiciled. I think that as Clyde said, if you're unloading 500 whatever it is, widgets, you know, it's cheaper to bring them all the way up the channel by boat or ship, unload them right where they're domiciled, rather than unload them at Galveston or Port Arthur.

And one of the things, you had mentioned hurricanes earlier. You know, a hurricane, the 1900 storm that hit Galveston is actually what created the Port of Houston, because Tom Ball was such a visionary that he had an idea to build an inland port, and it was actually that storm that caused—you know, he was kind of up against a wall getting legislation passed to get the Port of Houston built, because it was so far inland, and it was that hurricane that convinced the legislators to support him in that effort.

JT: So the petrochemical industry probably saw that as one of their main factors. Obviously, along the Gulf of Mexico you're always in harm's way in respect to mother nature, but Houston is still further inland than Beaumont.

CF: Yes, close to the markets. But you know what? Hell, Beaumont has a large petrochemical.

UM: Oh yes.

CF: Oh yes, they're large with that, Beaumont-Port Arthur.

UM: It's just not nearly as big.

JT: Well, in 1947 Kerr McGee built the first out-of-sight offshore oil platform, and that revolutionized the oil-and-gas industry along the Gulf of Mexico. Obviously,

you guys weren't working on the channel by then, but overall, what impacts has this offshore oil-and-gas industry had on the ship channel, on activity, on business and the longshoremen's jobs?

CF: I don't think any.

MD: Nothing.

CF: No, nothing.

JT: Without the oil-and-gas industry does the longshoremen's job change at all?

CF: Without it we still would be doing the jobs we're doing today, yes, because we're not involved in any of the loading of the chemical companies' operations, nothing. Now, I might say this. We probably ship millions of drums of oil or chemical that was processed there. We've shipped them overseas, yes. So, hell, I guess you'd say it has created a lot of jobs for longshoremen, yes.

AR: I would almost say, too, and I don't know if this makes very much sense, because of the petrochemical having such an attraction in Houston that it probably also had a lot to do with the port and the way that the channel was designed, and the dredging and everything else that might have given us greater opportunity to still have more business there. Had it not been there, maybe, you know, the container business, it's a possibility—

CF: So I would assume that if you stop and think about it, we probably—the chemical companies have generated many jobs for us. We just don't handle the bulk of the gas, the oil, the product. But as far as other stuff that they package, we probably handle everything that's left the chemical company by ship, we've worked it. We load it.

AR: Oilfield machinery is pretty substantial, too, and pipes, a lot drilling pipe stuff, loaded a lot of it.

CF: A lot of drilling pipe, yes.

JT: Now, is that material is that fabricated here in Galveston and in Houston?

UM: I would say so.

CF: Yes, it was fabricated, basically, in Houston.

UM: No, not Galveston.

CF: No, basically Houston.

AR: That's one of the problems with the Port of Galveston is they don't have manufacturing or industry there.

JT: Is there room for that?

AR: There's no room to do it all. Probably space is probably their biggest problem.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

CF: Some of it goes to the West Coast, by rail, by container. They'll put it on rail and send it to the West Coast.

JT: At one time cotton was king here in Galveston.

CF: It was, yes, yes.

JT: Much more so than in Houston.

CF: Much more so than Houston, yes.

JT: And I've heard stories of how that stuff was loaded. It's—

CF: Piecework.

JT: There were screws?

CF: Yes, cotton screws that would tighten it up. But then they got away from that; the latter parts they didn't use the screws. In fact, one of the locals here was called the Screwman's Local.

JT: Is that right. Interesting. I'm going to run across a list of some other entities that operate along the channel, and I'd like y'alls perspective on it. What is your experience with the pilots?

CF: You know, the pilots, they bring all the ships in and out of the port, and they're a big part of this, of the Port of Houston particularly. They do a good job. They're very flexible, and they do things to help the port be successful. They're part of the partnership that we all have together, the Port Authority and the pilots.

JT: What about the Coast Guard?

CF: Coast Guard, you know, they do their part. We actually don't have very much to—no dealings with them, but they play a big part in the port, and the Customs also.

JT: What about the [Army] Corps of Engineers?

CF: A big part. We had about a, what, four- or five-year issue with the corps, trying to get permits to build the new container terminal in Houston, and they play a big part.

JT: You mean Barber's Cut?

CF: Bayport, Bayport, getting it permitted so that we could build it.

JT: I spoke to Chairman [Jim] Edmonds. He was kind enough to give me an interview late last week, and he talked a great deal about that battle, that struggle for Bayport.

CF: It was a struggle. It was a struggle. In fact, to be honest with you, that's what really helped our relationship with the Port Authority, because we were able to do a lot of things for them in this battle, fighting this, trying to get the permits. We were able to mobilize manpower when they needed it.

We were able to raise private funds that they needed during this process, and we've just become good working partners, and I think, you know, they realize that we had something to offer, that, you know, this port was our livelihood and that we could do things to help them. And since then we've had a great relationship with them.

JT: That's outstanding. Let's talk briefly about the comparison between getting the Bayport up and going, particularly with the leases, and with the Barber's Cut, which occurred *x* number of years ago.

CF: [19]76.

JT: How did the ILA, what role did they play in getting Barber's Cut?

CF: Actually, we didn't play too much role in Barber's Cut. I don't think they had near the issues with getting permitted back then as they did today, and Barber's Cut, we didn't have that many problems. But Bayport there was a lot of issues, and we had to get involved because there's so much growth in cargo that's coming in the next few years, and without Bayport we couldn't have participated in that growth.

In fact, we're three or four years behind right now. There's absolutely steamship lines are being turned down, are bringing new services into Houston because the facility's not ready. So we've lost some market that we think we can get back once it's built. And had we not been able to build Bayport, Houston would have not only not grown, potentially they could have lost some of the customers they already had. So Bayport was the future of the Port of Houston.

JT: What was the opposition?

CF: It was the environmentalist issues, basically, environmental issues, and the residents, people who live around that area there, they fought real hard because they didn't want the trucks coming through their neighborhoods and on the highways. And you can understand that, but the Port of Houston also is what's made Houston what it is today, and had we not been able to grow, like I say, we would have lost business instead of gaining the new markets. Potentially, we could have lost business.

JT: What about the Port of Houston Authority? Let's talk a little bit more about the ILA's role in partnership with that particular group. How do those two units work together?

CF: It's great now. It's good, it's good, just like I told you earlier that during the Bayport permitting process we became partners with them. They depended on us to do certain things, and our relationship is as good as it gets.

JT: It's good now, wasn't always good.

CF: It's good now. Used to be tough. We had some bad times with them, yes.

JT: What were some of the major issues?

CF: We had a big fight with them when they wanted to give one of their big facilities that they owned to a non-union operator, and we protested. We did a lot of things, but we didn't win. And so then we all decided that the approach has to be working together instead of fighting together, because we were hurting each other.

JT: So the animosity has fled?

CF: Yes. Yes, it's gone now. I mean, everything's good. They don't do everything we want, but we feel comfortable with them, yes.

JT: I realize the Port of Houston is probably leading in many different areas, but if you look at the last ten years you see the development of Barber's Cut to handle the cruises, and mainly the containers. You see Bayport same thing. Is this a continuing trend with these deepwater channels—

CF: Yes.

JT: —to see these cuts being developed?

CF: That's the trend. Everybody is trying to build new terminals, because the projected growth in container cargo in the next ten to twenty years is supposed to double, and a lot of ports there's nowhere for them to expand. But in the South and particularly Houston, we're building this new terminal that will handle probably, when it's finished, three times as many containers as we've got today.

JT: So McLean was a genius?

CF: McLean was a genius, yes, he was.

JT: Is he still around today?

CF: Oh no, he died a couple of years ago. But he was.

JT: Did you ever have any personal—

CF: No, not really. I've been in some meetings where he was the guest speaker, yes, but I didn't personally know him. But, you know, he made all of this happen.

JT: What about the stevedoring companies, how does the ILA play into those groups?

CF: Well, we negotiate contracts with them. They contract to do the work for the steamship lines, and they hire us as their labor source. We negotiate contracts with them and the steamship lines. You know, we do both.

JT: Who is the ILA's greatest ally on the ship channel?

CF: APM Terminals is the largest employer we have in Houston right now. That's the Muller Group, Maersk Sealand. At one time it was Sealand, and then, of course, Maersk bought them out.

JT: How has mechanization affected the longshoremen?

CF: Well, just like I said earlier. We went from low wages, hard work, real hard work, to today's times with skilled labor making good wages and benefits.

JT: What is the future of that industry, would you say?

CF: It's good. We're just at the point where we're hoping that we'll be able to keep up with it, you know, that we'll be prepared and be ready and be trained when all this new business starts in November. We understand the first ship's coming in Bayport in November, and we're in the process now of training crane operators to be ready.

JT: What about labor? Do you guys see an increase in the amount of young men, let's say, who are interested in this business, or is there a decrease, or have things really changed?

CF: Because of the increase in the break-bulk cargo now, we see a need for some good young people who want to be longshoremen. And, in fact, you had asked a while ago about a training program. We're in the process right now of trying to figure out how we can train new longshoremen to do this break-bulk work, not the automated and not the skilled positions, but to be able to accommodate the break-bulk cargo, the bags, the rigs, the automobiles and things like that. We think there's going to be a need for some new longshoremen.

JT: So you guys aren't necessarily hurting for labor right now?

CF: No. Not in Houston. In other ports sometimes we run into shortages of labor, but Houston right now, we're able to supply the people.

JT: In the last ten years we've seen a major push for more environmental improvements and sustainability, particularly when you're talking about marine life and activities along the Gulf of Mexico. After nearly a century of activity, why now do we see such a radical shift into that direction?

CF: I don't have no idea.

JT: Any thoughts, gentlemen?

UM: I think that the country is moving in that direction. I think society as a whole has become much more conscientious, and less tolerable about environmental issues. I think that it's just the direction society is taking.

JT: Is the channel much cleaner today than it was ten years ago?

CF: I don't know about that.

UM: I've been told that it is. I've been told by a lot of people that it's cleaner today than it was twenty years ago.

JT: I had one gentleman tell me, an old guy, Merchant Marine, early forties, he says—

CF: Old guy, early forties? [laughs] All right, Jason.

JT: He says, "You know, for thirty years we never saw a pelican." He says, "Now you're starting to see a lot of pelicans and other marine life."

CF: And you know, the Port Authority, aren't they going to a lot of this new fuels with less pollution, and everybody's headed in that direction.

AR: It's probably true that the containerization has contributed to that. It's a lot cleaner to handle containers than break-bulk cargo.

MD: We're moving much more cargo with less vessels, so it's a big impact in that sense.

CF: Oh yes.

JT: Let's talk about a favorite topic of y'all's, I'm sure. What legislation has had most impact, let's start off with ILA?

CF: You know, I don't really know, but I think maybe NAFTA could have something to do with some of this increased business that we, longshoremen are getting, although it's taken American jobs over. I would think that that might have helped increase our cargo.

JT: Do you have to be an American citizen to be a longshoreman?

CF: Supposed to be. [laughs] You're supposed to be, but that's like everything.

JW: Third circuit says you can't restrict it.

CF: You can't restrict it, yes, but I mean, you know.

JW: You have to be verified.

CF: Yes. But we do the best we can to make sure we abide by the laws.

JT: Does it concern you that a lot of what the United States is doing is sending a lot of its jobs and trade to foreign companies and whatnot? Is that something that the ILA or the longshore—

CF: No. I think as an American we're concerned with it that, you know, where are our kids and our grandkids going to have a job in the future? But as far as longshoremen, it creates jobs for us, because whatever they make over there we have to bring back, and then we have to supply them with products to build those things over there. So just from a personal standpoint, it probably helps the ILA.

JT: What types of legislation has impacted the ship channel and the port over the last twenty or thirty years?

CF: I can't think of any.

JW: Probably the fifty-mile rule.

CF: That wasn't really legislation. That was a federal court that ruled it illegal, yes.

JT: What about removing the tariffs on steel?

CF: Oh yes, that affected us when they did that.

JT: Tell me a little bit about that. I'm not too familiar with what occurred. It was around 2000 maybe?

CF: Well, yes, around 2000. Our steel business went to practically nothing for a period of time, for a couple of years, and now steel business is real good again.

JT: What explains that downfall in that industry during that period?

CF: Because it wasn't, when they took the tariffs off it wasn't cheap to import it into the United States.

JT: Did that hit you guys pretty hard?

CF: Yes, yes.

UM: It's another one of those, what do you call it, hyperboles or something, where it's bad for someone else, but it's good for us.

CF: Yes, right.

UM: Steelmakers were upset with it once they were lifted, but it brought in a lot of business for us, unfortunately.

CF: Right.

JT: All right, this is a long question. I'll just read it. [reads] There's been an increase in domestic demand for petroleum. It's jumped 17 percent in the last ten years. The MMS leases and oil companies are going deeper into the Outer Continental Shelf in search of our natural resources. What will be necessary for the Port of Houston and Galveston to keep up with this rapidly developing technology in deepwater exploration?

CF: Can't answer that.

JT: How about LNG technology, is that something y'all are familiar with at all?

UM: I'm not.

UM: No, we're not.

UM: I think the Port of Galveston is exploring the idea of putting in a facility here to receive energy.

JT: Is that at beginning stages?

UM: I don't really know, because it takes seven years.

CF: Again, that wouldn't create no jobs for us.

UM: Right. Strictly just liquid transfer.

JT: Okay. A few more questions here, guys.

CF: Okay.

JT: What was the port's biggest gamble?

CF: The port's biggest gamble.

AR: Probably building a ship channel in the first place. [laughs]

CF: You know, I guess you could say that when they build Barber's Cut and moved from the traditional, what we refer to as a turning-basin port, and going out

seventeen, eighteen miles away and opening this container terminal, you know, I guess there were some concerns whether or not that would be successful. And the first customer, again, was Sealand, who had been here since '56, and they were the first Cut customer that went there, and everybody followed. So whether that was a gamble or not I don't know.

I would think there had to be some concerns whether that money that they built that thing would pay for itself, but it didn't take long to realize that it was the right move. Everything they've done, in my opinion, in the last, ever since I've been on the docks has been positive. I haven't seen anything that they gambled and lost on.

JT: It's quite an impressive record. And if you think back about some of these early visionaries, Allen Brothers and some of the guys we mentioned before, you know, these guys were strictly looking for a profit. You know, they were very wealthy entrepreneurs and businessmen, but to have the foreknowledge of, "Let's take this little bayou, this little ditch—,"

CF: Yes, dig it.

JT: —and dig it and convert it into a channel, and convince not only the federal government but the people of Houston that this is necessary, I mean—

CF: It was something.

JT: —that speaks volumes for who these men really were, I think.

CF: Yes.

JT: Now, do you think looking back that they'd be surprised at the amount of activity the channel has caused?

CF: Oh, I definitely think they would.

JT: Or is this something that they had planned out?

CF: I don't know.

UM: We continue to be surprised at the volume the port produces.

UM: I've heard that there's absolutely no way that could be done today, with all the environmental restrictions, that they'd get a channel like that.

CF: Right. Oh, can you imagine? You're right, it wouldn't have happened.

JT: If you think of the fight for Bayport.

CF: For Bayport, right.

JT: Gosh, yes. You'd be stuck in the courts for the next fifty years trying to get a ship channel dug. So Houston really is unique in that perspective.

CF: Yes, it is.

JT: Everyone has been saying, who I've interviewed, that it really is a partnership. Number one, all the entities have to work together in order to make it successful. But the vision and the actual idea of bringing a gulf into a city by digging this channel was really unique. Now, you guys have traveled a good bit all across the country, I'm sure.

CF: Oh yes, definitely.

JT: Is there anything that can compare to the Port of Houston?

CF: What do you mean, in growth? Yes, oh yes, many ports. Savannah, Georgia, which is in our district, is the fastest-growing port in the country. They've done a lot of things there right. They took a position a few years ago to go after the distribution centers, to get people like WalMart and K-Mart and everybody—

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview, Clyde Fitzgerald by Jason Theriot on August 14th, 2006. Clyde Fitzgerald on the Port of Houston, tape two.

CF: So Houston has picked up on that now, and they're out attracting distribution centers. Like we just built a big WalMart distribution center close to Barber's Cut, and now WalMart is shipping a lot of their cargo through here that was going to the West Coast.

JT: Business for you.

CF: Yes, definitely. Yes. So a lot of our ports, Charleston, South Carolina is growing, and they're fighting environmental issues themselves. In fact, one of their new terminals was completely turned down because of environmental people, and so they had to go with another plan.

So in the South Atlantic Gulf Coast District, we still have many ports with a lot of room to expand, and we're opening a new container terminal in Jacksonville, Florida. A group from the West Coast is going to open up a new container

terminal and shift some of their cargo to Jacksonville instead of the West Coast. So this area has a lot of growth for the next twenty years.

The West Coast is just totally blocked down, you know, infrastructure and everything. They've just got nowhere to go.

JT: Why is it that from my perspective looking in, that Texas, southeast Texas and Louisiana primarily had major success in bringing all of this infrastructure and all of the support business to their Gulf Coast, whereas if you look at Florida, who has absolutely no offshore rigs, and some of the environmental problems and the fights that you see on the West Coast, what makes Texas and Houston in particular, what gives them the ability to do that?

CF: There again, I don't know that much about the—

UM: I think Texas and Louisiana are the central area for the oil-and-gas industry in the first place, and there's a lot of manufacturing in Houston in particular, and also in the area that's related to that industry, so it just kind of naturally developed.

JT: And probably opened up these areas from Freeport all the way to New Orleans, really opened up for opportunities, where other regions may not have had that chance.

Let's talk about the local community. What role does the public play in port activity?

CF: The public plays a big part in the Port of Houston, because to build all those terminals we have to go out from time to time for bond issues, and the community has always supported bond issues for Houston, and without them we couldn't have done it.

JT: Why do you think most people, and I say most people, I'm just speaking in general. I've been here six years; I didn't know much about the Port of Houston until I got started on this project. But why do most people not understand the economic significance of the ship channel?

CF: I don't know why they don't. I think they're beginning to be more aware of it nowadays, because I think the Port of Houston, since the Bayport issue has went on the campaign to let the public know what the port means to Houston, and they run ads, you see them on TV all the time, about what's happening. Prior to that, you know, there really wasn't nobody selling the Port of Houston to the community, other than when we went out for bond issues. And I think in that case, everybody who was involved some way always supported the bond issues, and a lot of the community wasn't aware of the importance of that port.

UM: I think some of it has to do with just the visibility. It so happens that most people don't even know where the Port of Houston is, and they've never seen it. They may drive over that Sixtown [phonetic] Bridge, but that's as close as they ever get to it. In a lot of port cities the port is right in the downtown area, like New York, for example, where everybody sees ships.

CF: And Savannah, and Charleston. It's right there.

JT: Are you guys aware that they're getting ready to develop a Merchant Marine Port of Houston Museum downtown?

CF: I don't think I've heard anything about it.

JT: There's a little Merchant Marine Museum at the museum district, and an old seaman by the name of Jim Manzilillo, he's been running this little museum for

five years, and they've just recently got the okay. They're going to do a City of Houston and Port of Houston Authority swap for buildings, and this little museum is going to get a building downtown, and they are going to invest a lot of time and money in building a really nice museum which focuses on the maritime industry and why the ship channel and the Port of Houston has made Houston, as we've mentioned before.

What would you guys, as representatives of the labor and the longshoremen, what would be an area that you guys would like for that museum to capture?

CF: I don't know, other than the fact of some role that the ILA itself has played over the years.

When you say Merchant Marine you normally think about the guys who've been on the ships and brought them in and out, but if there was one opened up, I mean, surely we'd like to see the part that we played, the onshore part of it.

JT: The onshore part of the maritime industry.

CF: Right, right.

JT: And how far back does the ILA go?

CF: We were chartered in 1900?

UM: Just about.

CF: Yes, around 1900.

JT: And that is an international—

CF: That's Houston.

JT: Okay, just Houston.

CF: Yes. The first charter was in 18-something, and it was on the Great Lakes. That's where the ILA first was chartered, on the Great Lakes.

JT: Describe the changes that have occurred in post-9/11 for the longshoremen in the ship channel.

CF: I don't think there's been a lot of changes.

UM: Security has gotten tighter.

CF: Security, yes, that's the main thing.

UM: They're talking about imposing a credentialing system that's going to be pretty difficult to deal with. That's not the reality yet.

CF: It's not here yet, which means that whatever procedure they come up with as far as background checks, you know, potentially we could have some people affected who may have had a problem years ago. We have many of them who have changed their lives and now they're a part of the community and doing well. We definitely don't want to see somebody come in and say they can no longer work on the waterfront. That's our biggest concern.

JT: What about security at the port? Is that something that the ILA stresses?

CF: Sure.

JT: Obviously, with this new terrorist world that we live in, you know, longshoremen as you said can be affected, infiltrated, whether or not, but is that something that you guys are a part of?

CF: We're definitely concerned with it. We want it to be secure. I mean, we think often about a box blowing up on a ship or whatever, when our people are handling. We're really worried about it. We intend to cooperate any way we can to make sure that the ports are safe and secure.

JT: And what about in respect to the hurricane problem, the hurricane threat, you know, if Hurricane Rita comes a little bit further this way, this whole area is really affected. How are you guys prepared for a major crisis?

CF: I don't know if we are. I don't know if anybody's prepared for it.

AR: Its probably past. I mean, last time we had a little bit of program where we all jointly, collectively communicated with each other—

CF: Yes, prior to, in case it is.

AR: —it's down, but we could get it back running as quickly as possible, and keep up with all the entities around, and I think we're probably a step further than what we were last time. So we have had some things to do a little bit of preparation.

MD: I think one of our biggest assets is we have the ability to mobilize mass numbers of guys into a certain area, so if Houston literally were to go down to some degree, and the labor force here was adversely affected, we could pull labor in from other ports to come in and work, and they would keep the port going.

AR: Which we've already done in other areas.

CF: Yes.

JT: Were you guys involved in that with New Orleans?

CF: Oh yes. We brought them—they came over here. A lot of our longshoremen came here and worked during that period of time.

JT: And stayed with our—

CF: Yes, some of our people.

JT: Our people put them up. It was amazing.

CF: And, in fact, the first Gulf War, we sent longshoremen from Houston, Galveston, everywhere, to Wilmington, North Carolina, to load military ships.

UM: Corpus Christi. We had literally a couple of hundred guys in Corpus Christi in a matter of thirty-six hours, which was pretty amazing.

CF: Yes.

JT: Well, that is really something unique that the ILA—

CF: Can mobilize those people.

JT: And not only to the ports, but to the country at large, you can mobilize groups of people like that at an incident.

CF: Yes, yes, yes. And, in fact, our international president got recognized at the White House because we were able to do that.

JT: That's outstanding, a tribute to all of y'all's hard work. Now, Mr. Clyde, I understand you've been in the business since the late fifties, and obviously you won't work here forever. But what would you like to see accomplished during your remaining tenure as ILA chief here?

CF: Well, I would just like to see the continued growth that we expect to go forward, and I think it will. I'd just like to see us be prepared to take care of it. There's a lot of contract issues in reference to break-bulk cargo. See, I don't want to mislead you. We don't make the kind of wages on break-bulk that we make on automation, and there's some issues on break-bulk that we think needs to be corrected.

Because of the competition we had with the private terminals, we changed a lot of procedures and policies, and it's been very successful. But there comes a time to where we've got to start looking at getting that cargo better pay and better benefits, because we've been trying to compete for the last ten years. I'd like to see those things be changed, that's my goal.

JT: Well, good luck.

CF: Thank you.

JT: Gentlemen, thank y'all.

CF: Thank you. Good luck on your project.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 28 November 2006]