

Interviewee: Robin, Russel

Interview Date: June 13, 2002

HHA # 00376

Interviewee: Russell Robin

Interviewer: David DiTucci

Interview Date: June 13, 2002

Interview Site: Lafayette, LA

Interview Module & No.: MMS: DD003

Transcriber: Lauren Penney

[Transcriber's note: The majority of the interviewer's backchanneling and "uhs" and "ums" have not been transcribed for the purposes of readability. Audio is grainy and children playing in the background, so difficult to make out what is being said at points. Transcription ceased 21 minutes into taped interview due to audibility problems.]

Ethnographic preface: Russel Robin was born in 1931 in Breaux Bridge and was the oldest of three boys. His father was a farmer. He attended school up the sixth grade and, after taking an examination, got a diploma for the eighth grade. At 17 he got a job on a dredging crew with McWilliams Company and five years later served for two years in the Korean War. He was discharged in 1954, came back home, got married, and resumed his work dredging. Less than half a year later, he got a job as a deckhand with Phillips Petroleum Company on a drilling rig off of Eugene Island (35 miles offshore) where he worked until he was laid off. In 1961, he went to work for Tidewater and over the course of a year was promoted from deckhand to engineer, from engineer to captain. He left Tidewater in 1971 to go to work for McDermott as a boat captain; he retired from McDermott in 1990.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [DD]

Interviewee initials: [RR]

DD: Interview with Russell Robin. It is six, 13, 2002, 10 a.m. at his home. [Pause] Well I want to start at the beginning.

RR: Yeah, go ahead.

DD: [Pause] Where were you born, when?

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RR: I was born in Breaux Bridge.

DD: Breaux Bridge.

RR: On December the twentieth, 1931.

DD: What did your family do?

RR: My daddy was a farmer. He farmed all his life.

DD: Really?

RR: He lived 'til he was uh... 91 years old. And uh, my momma lived 'til she was 80. She died before my daddy did. [Pause] And uh, we were three, three boys in the family. Second to the oldest died... 'bout uh... 32 years ago. So there's still two of us livin'. The youngest and the oldest, I'm the oldest.

DD: You're the oldest?

RR: Yeah.

DD: Okay. What about your educational background?

RR: I have, I went up to the sixth grade education, then uh, I started to go to the senior uh, senior education. And uh, they gave me a, a free examination, you know. Then about a couple of weeks after that, uh, I had a diploma that was for the eighth grade. So I didn't go back, you know, I, I didn't follow through.

DD: You stayed on the farm or?

RR: No, uh, when I was 17 years old I started workin' [dredgers?].

DD: Okay.

RR: I worked 'til uh... 'til I was uh, 23 years old.

DD: Okay. Wha-, the dredging, what is?

RR: The uh, suction dredge for McWilliams.

DD: Okay. That's um, is that, what is that do exactly?

RR: That, that uh, that cleans out canals.

DD: Okay, yeah.

RR: And digs uh, digs canals and, and um, it cleans [Inaudible] out and stuff like that, you know.

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DD: Okay. Basically cleaning, yeah, okay. I've heard, now, now-

RR: Basic suction drilling is to make a levy or uh, whatever you want to, you know. But mostly it's to clean, clean out the canals so they'll get it deeper, you know. They suction dredge and they pump it out in the back. Then from there in 22, when I'm 22 years old, uh, February the uh... the nineteenth I think it was. Uh, 1952, I went in the service, the Korean War. And uh, I got out in '54, '54, January. And I went back on the dredging for uh... oh, before that uh, when I was out of the service, I got married in June, June the fifth, in 1955. Uh, uh, so I went back to work on the dredgin' and I stayed there about maybe six months. Not, not that long. 'Bout three months after that I quit. And so I started, I went to work for Phillips, Phillips Petroleum Company. And they, they were drilling, they were drilling out of Eugene Island.

DD: Which is near?

RR: Near Morgan City.

DD: Near Morgan City, okay.

RR: Yeah, that's uh, it would be uh, [longitude of about 90 degrees?]. Right, just out of Morgan City. And uh, they were drillin', at, at that time, they were the furthest out.

DD: Really?

RR: They were b-, they were drilling in, in Block 91. And uh, [Inaudible]. And that was a long ways out.

DD: Oh yeah? How far was that out?

RR: Oh I'd say it was about uh, from the seaboard, I'd say about 35 miles.

DD: Pretty far back then?

RR: It was then.

DD: Oh yeah. Then, just two years before, 12 miles was [Inaudible].

RR: Well, few years before uh, Magnolia uh, and Mobil, they were drillin' out of Morgan City. They were drilling maybe at 10 or 12 miles from the beach. And uh [Clears throat] excuse me. Then you had some other companies, which I, I'm not familiar with at the time, you know, because I was workin' for Phillips. I worked for Phillips for uh... 'til uh... 1961. We got laid off. [Slight pause] We got laid off, they uh, company was cuttin' their, their people down, you know. [Inaudible]-

DD: Do you know why?

RR: Well uh, the work, the way I understand, the work was, was uh, was gettin' scarce and the uh, unions had came in. [To the company?], you see. So the company uh, wanted to pull out, they went back to, see most of their, most of their uh... their people went back to Oklahoma. But they

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had a few wells that they had drilled uh, in Morgan City that, that had people there tending the uh, platforms. And from then, in '61, I went to work for Tidewater.

DD: Tidewater.

RR: [Inaudible] at the time.

DD: [Inaudible], okay.

RR: And they were, they were uh, uh, [people that worked?] uh, drilling, drilling people. What we do is bring materials to the rig: drilling pipe, mud, casing, tools-

DD: So you kind of service company?

RR: Yeah, they were. That's what they are, a service company. I worked there nine, nine years and, and uh... about six months I believe, six or seven months.

DD: Okay, so in '70 you left?

RR: Seventy-one.

DD: Seventy-one.

RR: In '71 I left, I went to work for McDermott.

DD: McDermott, okay. Welding or?

RR: No, I was a boat captain. I came down from the ranks. Uh, I, I educated myself, I took the uh, course in ICS... CSI. [Talking to himself] CSI? Uh, correspondin' course.

DD: Correspondence Schools Incorporated or somethin' like that?

RR: Yeah, somethin' like that. I took a course in that in, in, educate myself. And I started gettin' my license. I got uh, a hundred tons, and I got 300 ton, I got a 500 ton, then I got a sixteen hundred tons. Open, open license, you know, I could-

DD: Yeah.

RR: Made trips all over the world, you know.

DD: Wow.

RR: But, no education, you know, hardly any edca-, any education, but I educated myself by reading and uh... you know, listen to the other people talk and, and read books and stuff like that, you know.

DD: Continuing on this work timeline, what'd you do after McDermott?

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RR: After McDermott I retired.

DD: Okay, how long were you there?

RR: To nineteen uh... 1990.

DD: Nineteen ninety?

RR: When I retired.

DD: Let's go back to the beginning now. What made you decide to go into the oil business?

RR: Well uh, I had to find myself a job, I was married.

DD: Yeah. You needed the money.

RR: Well I had to have a job and I had a wife. And uh [Pause] you know, you have a wife you have to, you have to get a job, you know.

DD: Oh yeah.

RR: I had never been out of a job in my life. You know. So I, I quit and I worked, and I went to, I went to Morgan City. There's a friend of mine that I knew that was workin' for Phillips. And I went to work for them. They gave me a job over there.

DD: What was the pay like when you started out there?

RR: Uh, the pay was 350 dollars a month.

DD: Pretty good.

RR: Yeah.

DD: What, what were you doing making a dredge, when dredging?

RR: Dredging I was a day hand. I was makin' 32 dollars a week.

DD: Big difference.

RR: Yeah. [Inaudible, speaking softly] then at the time [Inaudible].

DD: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

RR: And I stayed, went on [Inaudible] you got more money, you know, for workin'. Thirty-two dollars a week and I, I started makin' 350 dollars a week, a month.

DD: Month.

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RR: But uh, but still.

DD: What did you do at Phillips, um-

RR: I was a deckhand-

DD: Deckhand.

RR: And [push?].

DD: Oh.

RR: We uh, my brother and I were workin' the same boat at the same time, [Inaudible] the same time, you know. And for the last, I had a little knowledge about boats and uh, you learned a little bit [at the night?], you know. So in, in nineteen uh... when I first, when we got laid off from Phillips I went to work for Tidewater. I made captain there. [Inaudible] First I workin', work as a deckhand and then they promoted me as an engineer, then from engineer to be a captain, you know, in the [span?] of a year I was a captain.

DD: With, with Tide-, or, I'm sorry, with Petro-, with Phillips Petroleum, um, what did, what did the boat you were on do? Were they um-

RR: [Little bit of every-?], they brought supplies to the rig.

DD: Okay. That's, okay.

RR: And personnel.

DD: Okay, so same as Tidewater basically?

RR: Yeah, yeah.

DD: Okay. Um, safety, you see, was that dangerous out there?

RR: Well [Slight pause] it was, but, you know, I mean, we were taught, we had a safety meeting every week. You know? We had a safety meeting every week and we were [told and taught?] what was a dangerous thing, you know. We always wore our lifejackets when we went on the deck. So if something would happen, if fall overboard, you had a lifejacket. But anytime you get on the water and it was rough, you know, sometimes get 10, 12, 15 foot seas, you know. It was rough, you know. You had to be careful.

DD: So the, the company did a lot to try and protect you?

RR: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, the company did a lot, you know. They, they, they did safety meetings, you know, and teach us, you know, what to do and what not to do.

DD: Yeah. Okay. [Slight pause] Tell me about the union when they came in.

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RR: Well the union came in [Slight pause] uh, they had a majority of the people that wanted a union, because they thought that they weren't being treated right. Then after the union came in, there was a lot of people that took advantage of what the union would do for you. In other words, uh, union, as you know yourself, uh, if you're a deckhand you nothing else but the deck. You know.

DD: Right. That's it.

RR: But we were, we weren't used to that.

DD: Yeah, you did a little bit of everything.

RR: We done a little bit of everything, you know. And there's a lot of people that came in, oh, not a lot of people, there's a few people that were workin', that wanted a union, that, that didn't want to do anything but their [special?] job, you know. And uh, so what we done after the first year of the union, we got together and we got a petition [to kick out the union?].

DD: Oh really? Did it work?

RR: Oh yeah, oh yeah, because [they are?].

DD: Um, you said people didn't think they were being treated fairly and that's why the union came here?

RR: Well, you know, some people thought, you know, that we could have got more money, you know. 'Cause you know-

DD: So it was mainly a money thing?

RR: Yeah.

DD: Okay.

RR: Well not, not the [people?], because the company treated us good, you know.

DD: Yeah, that's what it sounds like, they didn't [Inaudible, overlapping speech]. What kind of benefits did they give you?

RR: Well we had a, we had like a, a retirement plan, [it was a good plan?]. You had that with the company. We had uh, vacation. Sick leave, you know, that's a major com-, it was a major company. Phillips was [Inaudible].

DD: Oh yeah.

RR: And we had all these, these benefits, you know. I hated to lose my job with the company, but everybody got laid off. And they had very few people that had uh, a certain amount of seniority, I mean, I mean 15 years [Inaudible], we didn't have that.

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DD: And you said the work was scarce at the same time.

RR: Yeah well, at the time for Phillips, uh, if you knew somebody you could get in, you know. It's still the same thing now, you know. If you're workin' on the job and [your team/you see?] needs somebody, you know, if you have a friend-

DD: You help [him get up?].

RR: "Hey buddy, I got a buddy that needs a job. How 'bout givin' him a job," you know. So that's the way it went, you know.

DD: Yeah. And you said there were a lot of people from Oklahoma?

RR: Well-

DD: Workin' with you?

RR: No. The company was from Oklahoma.

DD: Oh, the company was from-

RR: And only the uh, the uh, the people that run the company in the office was from uh, uh, mostly from T-, Oklahoma.

DD: Okay. How did that work out? Were people from Oklahoma interacting with the Cajun people?

RR: It didn't make any difference.

DD: Didn't make any di-

RR: No, uh uh. We're, the Cajun people get along with anybody.

DD: Oh yeah.

RR: [Inaudible]

DD: Oh yeah.

RR: They're, they're workin' people, they do their work and, and whoever you are it doesn't make any difference, you know. I, I don't know how it is now, but I don't think it has changed that way.

DD: I don't think so.

RR: No.

DD: No, [there's?] other things, hard work mentality and-

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RR: The hard workin' man that just loves, love to do their job, you know. You know what I'm sayin'.

DD: Good days work was worth a lot.

RR: Yeah an [honest way of livin', means a lot, you know?].

DD: When you were a boat captain with McDermott, you said you traveled the world, what kind of places did you visit?

RR: Well uh, we uh, we went to uh, Trinidad, South America, and we went to California, and then we made a trip from uh, California, from Port Hueneme, in California, and we made it around the Horn. Around in Argentina. The barge we was towin' was made in Japan. Uh, [a jacket on the?] and tow it California to [Shell?]. And, and took the jacket and [Inaudible] in place. And we had the barge anchored out there in Port Hueneme, offshore. But the barge was too wide to go through the uh, Panama.

DD: They had to go all the way around?

RR: Yeah. It was 110 feet, I believe. The uh, the uh, uh, width of the Panama Canal. And, if I'm not mistaken, I believe the barge was 150 feet wide.

DD: Big barge.

RR: And it was 600 feet long.

DD: Wow. A big one.

RR: [Inaudible] We started, it took us four and a half months to move that thing. 'Cause we stopped in different places, you know, and get fuel and water and, and [Inaudible].

DD: What was it like to spend four and a half months away from your family?

RR: Eh, it's kind of rough, but, you know.

DD: Oh yeah?

RR: You don't really know what kind of people you're workin' with unless-

DD: You spend that-

RR: Until you spend that much time uh, [workin' aboard] a vessel, you know.

DD: Yeah, you see all things you don't see when you see 'em eight hours a day, you know.

RR: And I'll tell you what, [that weather over there is uh?].

DD: Oh really?

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RR: Oh, 30, 40, 50 foot seas in there.

DD: Wow.

RR: Man that's rough.

DD: That is pretty rough. When you were a service man, what kind of work [schedule did you have?]?

RR: What?

DD: What kind of work schedule did you have as a service man?

RR: As a, when I was in the service?

DD: Uh, no when you were with like Phillips and Tidewater.

RR: Oh. Well, with Tidewater I was a captain. And with Phillips I was a deckhand. And we uh, we uh, [Inaudible], you know, change. And I was a captain, I ran the boat and I seen that everybody else was uh, done their job. And uh, had our safety meetings, [Inaudible], and stuff like that, you now. And uh, we got supplies to the surveys and uh, worked for different companies. We worked for Tidewater, but we were subleased to another company, like Shell, Chevron, [Dale White?] [Inaudible]. So uh, my job was the captain. So my job was to see that the vessel was seaworthy and everybody was doin' their job.

DD: Like what kind of days did you work? Maybe you'd go out and then you'd come back?

RR: Well we worked uh, we worked seven and seven. When you left the dock, you didn't know how long you was gonna be gone, you know.

DD: Really?

RR: Sometimes you'd be gone two day, three days, sometimes four days, it all depend.

DD: But your schedules were seven and seven, but however long it took, however long it takes.

RR: If you were [caught?] offshore, you know, and you couldn't get a ride to come back, you had a crew change, you had to stay 'til you had a chance to go back in. [Inaudible] exactly what it was, you know. But we accepted that. We were used to that, you know, seven and seven. Of course when the seventh day came, we wanted to get off and go home.

DD: Oh yeah.

RR: Go see the family.

DD: Um, how would, how did that work with your family, bein' gone?

RR: Well, my wife, the wife would take care of the place while you were gone. She done the best

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she could, I think she done a good job.

DD: Really?

RR: We raised four kids. All my kids graduated. One went to college. All, they all have good jobs, you know. She done a good job. She was the one that was there to take care of everything when I was gone. When I came back, well, I'd go huntin', you know. Go huntin' and go fishin' or somethin'.

DD: Kind of relax.

RR: Yeah, I'd relax a little bit, you know, take the work off your mind.

DD: Take it e-, yeah. Have to do that. Did you value education very highly? Because-

RR: Yeah.

DD: [With your business?]?

RR: Yeah, I wanted my kids to graduate. Because, you know, when I was younger, instead of my folks sayin', "Well you have to go to school," they didn't force me to go to school, you know. Like I say, I quit school [Inaudible], you now, [Inaudible]. But I [Inaudible], my kids had to go to school.

DD: Made 'em go.

RR: That's right.

DD: Did you try to push 'em towards college, you know, or-

RR: Well, no. I asked 'em, I gave 'em I choice, they each had a choice if they wanted to go to college. I, we were poor, not poor, but, you know, we were a workin' family. [We would've found a way to, can support it?] if they wanted to go. I had one that went to college at USL and she graduated over there. And all my kids, I taught 'em how to speak English [when they were fifth or six years old?]. They went to school, when they were six years old they started school and I taught 'em how to speak English. Every one of 'em knows how to speak French. All four kids.

DD: So when you grew up you spoke French?

RR: Oh yeah, I didn't know how to speak English.

DD: When did you learn how to speak English?

RR: When I went to school [Inaudible] learn.

DD: Did they force you to or?

RR: Well I had to learn, you know, everybody in school, the teachers was uh, [Inaudible].

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DD: Did they punish you for speaking French?

RR: Nah.

DD: Okay.

RR: I don't remember bein' punished.

DD: Okay. This was in Breaux Bridge?

RR: [It's in, no?].

DD: Or were you, were you, was it-

RR: We had a, we had a little school not too far from my house by the name of [Paco?] School. That was first through the third. First grade to the third grade. We'd leave home and we'd walk across the fields and we'd go to school. About a mile, mile and a half. Then when you got to went to the fourth grade you ride the bus to go to school in Breaux Bridge.

DD: In Breaux Bridge, okay. And that's when you had to learn, did your kids learn English first or-

RR: Yeah.

DD: Okay. And you taught 'em French when they-

RR: My kids learned, I taught 'em to speak English until they were six years old. And they started school.

DD: Yeah.

RR: You know? And then taught 'em how to speak [French?]. They all know how to speak French [good?], oh yeah. I, I keep tellin', you know, I said [if the first one?] knows only one language and he graduated when he was [Inaudible] is. [Inaudible].

[Transcription ceased 21 minutes into taped interview due to audibility problems]