MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Mark Foret

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio

Bio: Mark Foret is yard supervisor for Chet Morrison Contractors (CMC) fabrication division in Houma, Industrial Canal location. He has worked in the fabrication industry for 30 years.

Early Career: Father was a welder and he grew up in the industry. Began in fabrication at Delta Services Industries as a helper and worked his was up. After the bust, he was self-employed, later worked for Dolphin Fabricators and then came to CMC.

Work force/other issues: Foret talks about how he and everyone else wants their kids to have a better future, to go to college, however, he understands that this is hurting the industry because fewer and fewer young people are getting involved. During the downturns, kids watched what their parents went through to struggle to survive and the kids don't want that in their future. No longer are kids following their dad's footsteps as welders and fitters. No longer are they encouraged by their families to do so.

CMC: CMC was one of the first companies to try the refurbish construction for shallow water marine construction and they have succeeded. Sixty percent of their business is in refurbishing old equipment. They have attempted to lessen the labor shortage and support their expansion operations by setting up a training facility at their Vera Cruise, Mexico yard to bring in skilled laborers into Houma, of which 60 percent of workforce in Houma is Mexican. Vera Cruise is a city of 60k people who have the drive to learn fabrication but no industry to work in. CMC depends on migrant workers for their growth and stability; they have safety meetings in Spanish and utilized translators. Currently CMC at the Houma Industrial location is building six structures with 120 personnel.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: Mark, I guess introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background.

MF: Mark Foret. I work for Chet Morrison. I've been in business thirty years. I, right out of high school, started up in Delta, same as Chet, pretty much. I worked there ten years. I worked my way from a fitter to a welder to a leaderman to a supervisor. Delta went under, that was in '84, big hit to everybody.

My background, basically, where I was growing up, my daddy was a welder, ran and had a welding rig, and I came up in the oilfield. It was implanted in me. My whole family is in the oilfield as far as my brothers and all. My sister, she couldn't be a welder, so she found some other trade, but we was raised that way.

And like I said I had about ten years with Delta and they went under. I went to work for myself for five years running a welding rig, just like my dad did. Then I hired on with Dolphin as a supervisor and worked my way up from there and then came to Chet Morrison. Since then I've been blowing and going, you know, the oilfield's been good, but then the other side, you know, the fence, labor's been the problem.

Background is a lot, I had a lot of new fab in the beginning, you know. I was basically new fab, then I got into the refurb market and started to learn a lot about the bidding portion of it, dealing with weights and monies and this and that and it got to be first nature to me. And there was a market out there. When I came on with Chet he was one of the first to put his neck on the block with this refurb stuff and it worked out good for us, you know. We have a good business.

As far as the labor, I mean, everybody here can you it's rough. We don't have the, like when I was coming up, and like I explained, I turned into a welder, and my brother went into the oilfield, too. Right now we all want better for our kids and I think that's what's hurting the economy down here as far as finding welders and stuff like that, because you know me in particular, you want your kids to go to college, go to college. Don't do like Daddy did, you know, basically, and that's how we brought a lot of them up, and it's self-inflicted. The oilfield had two big dives, you know, in the eighties and nineties and a lot of people got out, a lot of kids seen what their families went through. So that's my theory on what happened. And you lost a lot of good kids, smart kids, that they ain't—they're smart because they're all going to college now. As far as welders, it's hard to find them.

We learned, well, I guess we figured this out about a year or two ago, we got to be self-sufficient so Chet went and did that again, you know, he went ahead and tried something else and we're supporting ourselves right now with labor from Mexico and stuff like that, and plus local. But other than that, the oilfield's up and down, you know, and like I said I'm just trying to make it short and sweet and that's about how it boiled down to, us being supportive of foreign labor.

JT: Are you working here on this yard here?

MF: No, I'm on Industrial. I run the yard on Industrial. We build new and refurb decks from the ground up, you know, basically the piping, the plumbing, the way people would understand it. And more or less support the customer in anything he wants, you know, refurbing jackets, decks, and new builds.

JT: Okay. Let's back up a little back to '84 when you were working for Delta, you and Chet. Was that the typical worker that you had at the time down here?

MF: Yes.

JT: Some of them grew up where their father was either in the industry or you guys are natives of this area and had come up from a family that had experience?

MF: Right, that was probably the, like you're saying, they was the typical family people, you know, they followed in their daddy's footsteps. Not all of them. At that time, you know, $10, $11 was good, you know, kids coming in from trade school. You know, we even had seen it where a trade school, the teachers at trade school would work with us part-time at night, we ran night crews, they'd be welding and stuff, and they was giving us good people. Because they'd train these kids and they took pride in their students. And they'd call you and tell you, you know, you had a couple of good kids coming up, man, give them a shot, man, and we'd put them to work. Right now you could call them same guys and, man, I ain't got nothing for you, you know. They're just making trade school because it's here, you know. It's their out to finish high school. And that's what's bad.

I think what happened was, you know, we wanted to raise our kids in a different way and we sent them in different directions and there's really nothing coming up. You know, if I'm running forty helpers over there at that other yard, if I got one of them in there that wants to be a welder or a fitter, they're just there to pass, you know, make a living, they can live off it then, the eight to ten to eleven dollars an hour, because they didn't make that step as far as, you know, wanting to get better.

JT: I see what you're saying, Mark. Essentially you were encouraged?

MF: Yes.

JT: Your family encouraging you to get into this business.

MF: Yes, well, it was basically it was put on us, you know. We watched him come up. You know, when we was eleven to fifteen, we was welding in the yard for my dad building pipe jacks with his welding truck, you know. Like I said we broke out, me and my brothers, we all broke out as far as fitters, you know. We didn't need no training, we had it all at the house when we was young, you know. But you don't see that right now. And like I said, I think labor's going to always be a problem, you know. I think we're heading the right direction supporting ourselves. You know, foreign labor, you know, we all like to keep the locals working, but I mean if they don't want to work, they just don't want to work, you know.

JT: Well, tell me about that labor force at your yard down here. First of all, give me a scope of the type of activity that you all having going on today. What do you all have working?

MF: Yes, right now we probably have approximately as far as structures, probably six structures we're working on and we load one out and we have some more coming up that we're going to be assembling. We're doing the pipe spooling in the shop.

It's already to paint, it's ready to go, we just need stack decks and start hanging equipment. We're probably running about a hundred and twenty people in that yard.

JT: Now, is that a refurb? All six of those are refurbs?

MF: Two of them are new, new fab. Two of them are new fab and the rest are refurb. I would say 60 percent of our business is refurb. It's because of the turnaround. Just like you're saying, you know, people know they can bring it in, get it in there, get it out before the engineering would be done on a new one. You understand what I'm saying? And that's pretty much our cup of tea, but like I said, 60/40. It has us right now so competitive on bidding, you know, now that the bidding's coming out, we're so competitive on the bidding, the oilfield's wanting to get the low price, but the cost of just the labor is killing us. I mean, you're having to pay more. So it's not like we can be as big as you want, don't mean we're making that much more, you know. We're suffering on that part as far as having to pay more for labor.

JT: Right. Let's talk about this, let's go from the top and work it down. Let's talk about your leadermen and your shop foremen. Who are these guys? Have they been with you all for a while?

MF: Yes, they've been here a while. I probably have as far as a good core of people for the last five years, you can't look ten and twenty years, because basically you look four to five years, and I probably have thirty of the true blue. I mean, they're there. And my superintendents and stuff there, we all came up the same way, you know. I got a couple of foremen and their daddy's were welders and they came up with that and that's where they're at, you know. But as far as that, when everybody's gone, you know, sitting at this table right here I don't know what they're going to do, but it's like, you know, it's just a cycle. We used to have a bigger pool, bigger cycle. Right now we've got a little cycle. Now, we got to get it bigger again and that's our labor.

JT: Okay. Now what about your typical, your guys that have been welding for twenty, thirty years, or who's a fitter whose got his start working in the summer or young seventeen or eighteen-year-old kid from down in bayou. Would that describe your typical crew?

MF: Well, right now you don't see them like every year right after Christmas you get a lot of nineteen to twenty-four-year-olds, you know, living with the in-laws or living with their family, with a family, they'll come and apply, but right now you can't even get them to come for a job right now. It's just there's no training. As far as the training, you know, you could spend as much money as you want on this guy, but if you only know he came in the business, he came in it $10, he

made a welding test and he's good, we're going to pick him at eighteen. Well, he can go down the street and get twenty, and they don't know this guy has never climbed on a scaffolding in his life. He passed that welding test, you know.

And that's the business right now, you know, they're trying to help something as far as opening a school, yes. It may give them an incentive right now, and they don't have no incentive, they go to college. And like I said, we doing it ourselves, you know, we're looking back and saying, hey, go to college, man, you don't want to get in this oilfield business. Sooner or later we're going to come up with a niche, something's going to happen.

JT: So generally tell me, and I think just for me personally and I think that at least in one area that definitely needs to be looked at and worked on better is the technical schools, the voc-tech schools. Tell me a little bit about who's operating those, where are they, what are some of the responses you all have had from the technical schools?

MF: Well, it's like I said, as far as the high schools we used to get a teacher, he used to call and say, "I've got a good little guy coming out of school." But now as far as voc-tech schools, they call when they got a good guy, but they just do like what I'm saying, they just run the numbers through to pay the bills. You know, these guys here they're—but they'll go to a shipyard. Shipyards are in big demand

right now, you know, like you said, they're looking for two hundred and fifty. And they pass through there, but they're drifters. You know, you can't get them to commit to stay there, you know, very long.

JT: And you're only talking about one or two at a time, is that what I'm hearing?

MF: Yes, that's all you're talking about. That would probably come out a ten that might go there. Like I said, we used to get calls all the time, you know, "I got a good guy, he wants a job. He wants to work part-time while he goes to school." Hey, we'd accommodate him in every way we could, but like I said, they move—

Tape 2, Side 2

JT: And so has that always been the case?

MF: No, it's just getting that way and it will probably last four or five years.

JT: Yes. How was it before? Because I can recall, I'm from New Iberia and New Iberia High School, we had a technical school right at the Acadiana Regional Airport. And they used to be able to, the guys with moustaches, you know, I was in seventh and eighth grade, and these guys were getting on buses and going down for afternoon training, refrigerating, carpentry, welding, fitting, whatever. And these are the guys that you would see at the Port of Iberia. I mean, we're

talking fifty that were going to these technical schools out of New Iberia High School. I mean, is that your experience with what was going on in the eighties and nineties and how that's completely changed now?

MF: Yes, that's pretty much what's going on. You had a lot of them wanting a job, you know, because in the eighties and nineties you was jumping pay, pay was jumping from $9 for a welder to $15, you know, in the mid-nineties and stuff. So everybody wanted to make that big buck. That was big bucks, you know, but then it got to the point where the oilfield took another dive in the nineties, you know, a little slowdown, so everybody said, well—or in the eighties, you know, I'm going to get stuck again, so either get out of the business, find another trade. I know welders that I was brought up with from Delta and they're carpenters now, you know. You know, they had the knowledge, they was good—they could fit their iron. I mean, he'd make a good carpenter. Well, they went into carpentry.

JT: So do you think the fluctuation, the instability of the market, is just—

MF: I think it is. You know, it's up and down. You know, if you was growing up with a family like that, like we seen it, but we stuck it out, because we was pretty ambitious to be like our dad, you know, when we was coming up. My dad he did give us a good life, you know, and we seen the oilfield, what it did, and at that point it was just come up, raise a family, and go to work. But right now with the

oilfield diving, you know, you probably lost 5 percent of the workforce locally here every time it did it, so at the end, and then the kids seen that—you know, the dad and the mom are having hard times, you know, we depended on the oilfield. Either that or go offshore and stay away from it, you know. So I think it's all just been implanted in the kids nowadays, but other than that my opinion as far as what it would take to voc-techs to do, I don't know. You know, because they're trying everything they can, but you don't see them coming in like that.

JT: Sure. So who is working for you?

MF: I have probably 60 percent of my people are throughout Mexico and the other 40 is locals that have been with us, you know. And then when we get more work we just got to gear up, you know.

JT: Tell me a little bit about that Mexican workforce, how many of that 60 percent can speak English?

MF: Well, they have a lot of them speak broken English. As far as the percentage, I didn't interview everyone, I couldn't tell you. But I have translators with every group. We do our safety meetings in Spanish in the morning. We do it in English and then we do it in Spanish.

JT: You're kidding me.

MF: Yes. But other than that it's—it's some good people though. I'm not going to knock them. We have a good—a high rate of talent, you know.

JT: Other than the fact that they are an available labor pool what are the best characteristics of this particular group of people from Mexico? Or what dimension do they bring to your shop, to your field, that another group might not? Do they have any other expertise that—

MF: Well, no, here you either weld, you fit, or you help. I mean, you don't ask for too much, you always got one better than the other, but I mean, overall they're pretty talented, do a good job. That's about all I can say about them, you know.

JT: And you've always heard that, you know, I live in Houston, I've been there for six years, but you always hear that these people who are coming here to work are hard workers, and if you don't watch them they'll work themselves to death. I mean, do you find that to be the case?

MF: Yes, I see that. You know, it's like holidays they always want to work, you know, but they're away from home. If I was there I'd want to work, you know,

why worry about it? You know, you're here to work, you work. And that's the attitude they have, they do that.

JT: Are most of them here on like a work program, like a timeline?

MF: John can tell you how their visas work, you know.

JT: And housing, that's more of a question for you, John?

JD [John Debleux]: Yes.

MF: Yes, that's more John's line. Well, then that, that pretty much wraps it up. You know, where I come from, like I said, I came from the welding part of the business.

JT: Let me ask you this one question and then we'll move on to some more details about the labor. Let's talk about the technology. How has that changed as far as the tools of the trade, so to speak, that the men have used traditionally over the last thirty years and how they've changed and how that's—

MF: It hasn't changed that much. We learned to basically replace the labor with equipment. If we can find a welding machine that can weld this, you know, we

go to automatics, you know, stuff like that. I mean, we basically—that's about the only thing that's changed for the last so many years. We've been trying the—labor's been bad, so you're try and get something to pick up the slack. Machinery, and that's about it. And that's what we do in the refurb business and new builds. We don't have that much of it, but that's the only way we supplement something on that.

JT: And even the expertise for your pipe fitting, is that—or any of the immigrant labor force that you use, are they that skilled?

MF: Yes, they are pretty skilled when it comes to the plumbing, but you got to understand we put them through a school down there before they get here. They basically do go to that trade school like I'm talking. They take a test down there, they do all that.

But as far as the locals, you only have so many of them and as the times change, you know, we do CAD, we do the drafting of it, you know, we can do all of it, all my people, you know, pretty much all my fitters, my supervisors, self-sufficient.

JT: So you're saying that it's a requirement of the immigrant worker to go and get specific training?

MF: Yes, he has to—he'll take that test there. Before I get him he took a test, he took a welding test and he took a fitting test. So I mean he's getting that training where he's coming from.

JT: Who's paying for his training?

MF: John would have to answer that. That's the Mexican.

JD: Well, most of them are already trained. We just go through the ones that are there to make sure we get the ones that we need.

JT: Okay. What happens if you have a problem with an individual at work, either showing up late or they have a problem or lack of—they're not working real well, do you—

MF: Well, they don't stay long. They don't stay long. You work with them a little bit, as much as you can, you know, but then—yes.

JT: Do you find that the guys who are coming out who've got long-term experience, not necessarily long-term experience, but at least have some experience in the field, and these immigrants that are coming from the welding schools, if you put them next to each other who is the one to be producing better?

MF: Well, they work at their pace. I mean, it could work either way, you know. You know, that guy could probably weld more today than the other guy tomorrow, you know. It's not a competition. I mean, everybody's just like attitudes, they're all different.

JT: And I guess what I'm asking is on-the-job training, I mean, you can't really compare anything to that, but how good are the training schools? I mean, are they preparing these guys to come to work?

MF: Oh, I don't know. They train for what we need them for. You know, we test them as for a certain test, stress test, and we do give them a fitting test. So where they're getting their training, I don't know.

JT: You have training for fitters also?

MF: Yes. Yes, fitting test.

JT: What about your helpers, your grinders and your tackers?

MF: Grinders, tackers, they're basically just coming up, you know. Safety, that's all you deal with, grinders and tackers you deal safety. You don't deal with

knowledge right off the bat, you keep them safe first, then you try and teach them something.

JT: I would think that obviously the communication, as we mentioned, the language barrier may be one of the toughest obstacles, but I would think that that would cross right into safety issues. I mean, have you guys had some problems with that?

MF: Not really, because, like I said, we have translators. We have a mentor that is basically to them, you know, and he's our translator.

JT: And he's part of that pool?

MF: And he's part of that pool, right, yes. Yes, we don't just throw twenty Spanish-speaking guys there with nobody there.

JT: Who is in Mexico that's running that labor development operation, and would they eventually be someone we could—

JD: They're our Mexico operation, our Mexico office.

JT: Okay. Is there someone there that might be interested in talking with us a little bit? Maybe do an over-the-phone interview?

JD: He's here as a matter of fact.

JT: Oh, is Hector here?

MF: Yes, he's in town.

JD: Yes. I mean, I'll find him for you.

JT: Okay.

JD: I think it would be an excellent opportunity for you to talk him, but I got a question for you, Mark. Do you mind?

JT: Yes, let me turn this off.

CM [Chet Morrison]: On the hands that are coming to work that are homegrown, the few that we do get, they go through technical college and they do show up over here, and that stick, do you notice any traits about those guys, whether or not there is any certain

traits that—you know, parenting or discipline, anything out of the ordinary, other than a thirst, just a thirst for a paycheck?

MF: No, I think they just came up that way, the ones we have. And a lot of them they have better—we have more tools to teaching. It's like probably out of the bunch I've talked to you about, especially my foremen and superintendents, before, you know, in the last four or five years they learned the lofting, they learned this, and it gave them something more interesting to do besides run people. That's why I think our superintendents are more, you know, they're company-oriented. Because I try to get them—you know, you've got to learn it all and they're having fun at it. You know, don't get me wrong, you know, it's just he welded for twenty-five years, to come on a computer and learn lofting and drafting and 3-D and all this CAD stuff, you know, well, we gave you a chance at it. Well to be honest with you. They might not be on the floor, you know, I'll have somebody there, but I mean in the long run they pay off, they came back.

JT: I guess where he's going and I'm kind of curious about this, too, I mean, are you finding that the good hands are coming from parents that had good work ethic? It's where, I guess, they're following the footsteps of their parents and they were disciplined and kind of did that way?

MF: Oh, definitely, yes. Yes. Yes, that's definitely a big kick, you know. I mean, yes.

CM: And the flipside of that is that the ones that are given or a social or entitlement program at home are less likely to thirst for that paycheck and that work ethic.

MF: Right, yes. Yes, I agree with you there. I agree with you there.

CM: Would you really?

MF: Yes.

JT: That's what Leroy was saying at Main Ironworks, you'll have a couple of guys that will come in for twenty, thirty hours a week, and that's it, they won't work a minute more because back home they get that government subsidy.

MF: Yes. I'll give you that.

JT: Well, let me ask ya'll this, because this is very, very interesting. You've all got essentially a satellite program going with another country. I'm not sure if anyone else is doing that. But where did that come about? How did this idea evolve?

CM: Well, you know, when we took the opportunity to go overseas we went over there with the idea that we were going to have an abundant workforce over there and you were going to bring workers in to supplement our workforce here. That was an issue that we were never able—we kept running across roadblocks and John can tell you more about those roadblocks. It wasn't until the post-hurricane environment that we freed up some visas and were able to bring these workers in. Meanwhile, we worked our workers overseas, we worked them offshore, we have a facility overseas, and we actually have a training program overseas. So we have a welding school overseas. We work with the community overseas in Mexico. We provide the consumables and they provide the shop and the workers are abundant and we put our facilities strategically located in a town that had an abundance of skill labor sets, but zero opportunity. So we were in a town of about 60,000 people or so, and Hector could tell you more about that. He's here. I'll see if he's around right now and you can interview him. But since the hurricane we were able to get some visas and a lot of these guys that were working for us were always looking for an opportunity to come to America to have the opportunity to make more money. The wage differentials are very, very large.

JT: Very interesting. Okay.

[End of interview]