MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Vance Breaux

Date: March 15, 2007

Place: Loreauville, Louisiana

Interviewer: Jason Theriot

Keywords: Shipbuilding, aluminum crew boats

Bio

Vance Breaux is president and part-owner of Breaux Brother's Enterprise. He and his brother, Ward Breaux, broke away from their father's shipyard, Breaux's Baycraft, and started their own business in 1982. They have carried the tradition of custom built aluminum crew boats for the offshore oil and gas industry.

Early Career: Breaux began working with his father at a very young age. He learned to build boats, sell boats, and operate a ship yard. He and his brother opened up their own ship yard in 1982, building non-oil field related boats.

Work force/other issues: The main struggle is keeping the business within the family, keeping the next generation of Breauxs involved. Both of Vance Breaux's sons work for the family-owned company, have part-ownership, and manage and operate the yard now that the two original brothers are semi-retired. Ward Breaux's son is also involved in the ship yard.

Vance Breaux sees, as a major problem in the industry, the lack of work ethic among the young people. Not everyone is cut out for college, but those who are not need to be educated about the benefits of working in blue collar areas to make a living.

Breaux Brother's history: Started in 1982 during the economic downturn in the oil industry, Breaux Brother's immediately diversified into other markets, such as East Coast fishing boats, ferries, and catamarans. They survived the "bust" of the 1980s and in 1987 built their first crew boat for the offshore industry.

Through experience and quality craftsmanship, Breaux Brothers has kept a long list of customers in non-oilfield related boat work. When oil field slows down and day rates soften off, Breaux Broth turn to their customers on the East Coast to build yachts, fishing boats, ferries, and catamarans.

With 65 personnel working 55 hours a week building 5-7 boats a year, Breaux Brothers Enterprise are a major player in the crew boat market. The majority of the office staff and management are family members.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an oral history interview with Vance Breaux, of Breaux Brothers Enterprises in Loreauville, Louisiana, by Jason Theriot on March 15th, 2007, for the MMS Ship Fab Project. Breaux Brothers Enterprises is an aluminum boatbuilding, primarily crew boat boatbuilding, company, since the eighties. This is tape one.

VB: My name is Vance Breaux, Sr. We live here in Loreauville, about four and a half miles about the little town of Loreauville. We got involved in here through my father's shipyard. We moved here about twenty-five years ago, in 1982, and at that point we started our own business. We wasn't all oil related directly at that point, because we had to go into building other boats other than just oilfield-related stuff. We moved mostly to the East Coast at that point, and built a lot of boats for the East Coast ferries, glass-bottom catamarans, tour boats, pretty much everything we could.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

VB: This is Breaux Brothers Enterprises. Like I said, we started this in 1982, and this was the beginning of a new era for us, as far as for just doing a different thing altogether. Since then, we've done well. We've held on as far as everything goes, as labor problems has been our biggest part of this business, trying to get labor all the time. Some years are good, some years is just not, but right now, because of the two hurricanes, everybody's been looking for labor. That's the big fight.

But ah, no, we grew up out of my father's business, and we learned well. We had a lot of experience when we left. I left when, I want to say, I was thirty-eight years old, somewhere around there, and I'm sixty-two, almost sixty-three, now. We just kept fighting it, kept building, kept doing, just family run businesses that you try to keep together, that's the main thing. We trying to give it to our generation, which they own part of the business now, the two boys do, and we trying to hold it within the family. You give stock or you sell your stock to your kids, and that's what we've done, sold them part-ownership in this thing.

JT: So run through me all the family members that work here in this particular yard.

VB: The family members that work here, the direct family members, are my sister Joan, we call her Breaux Herring, and Big Breaux, and his name is Vance Breaux, Jr., but we call him Big for short, and he runs all the sales and does all the costing,

most of the engineering. Brandon runs our shipyard for us. Brandon Breaux is Ward's son, and he came in here, I'm going to say he graduated from college about fifteen years ago, so he's been in here ever since.

JT: And your brother?

VB: Ward, Ward Breaux, is the vice president of the company. I'm president, he's vice president, and he and I have been in this all our lives. We both semi-retired right now, and it's due to, gone into, health, mostly the health. It doesn't let us work a whole damn day, and, you know, just on a daily basis. At this point, we both check in. I'll come one day and he'll come another day and just check on the boys, check on John and him and see if they need anything. Right now, it's a family-owned business, you know.

JT: So from '82, building ferries and glass-bottom boats, look twenty-five years into the future. What is Breaux Enterprises building today?

VB: We building—99 percent is oilfield, 99 percent of it is oilfield for the last five, six years, has been basically oilfield. We build a yacht every once in a while, like this 110-footer right there [looking at picture on wall]. Build some yachts. When everything slow down and we can find a gap, we do put it right here with Hilton Head. That particular project came about, we been having a spot here for them

now for, I want to say, maybe it's four years, and we're just getting to build the boat now, so that's how long that spot has been here. Yes, it's been here four years.

JT: The type of offshore vessels, we're talking 150-foot-class crew boats?

VB: Correct, yes. Hundred and fifty-foot and bigger, and right now there's a hell of a backlog, you know. I'm just going to show you. [Flipping through book.] Right here, it gives you a list of just about everything we got in the yard.

JT: Okay, so you've got, like, five or six with Chouest coming up, and then a few for Chouest in 2010. You're booked up all the way to 2013, huh?

VB: Yes, right now. It gives you till an estimated delivery date on there. We're working on one, two, three, four, five, six, seven at one time right now.

JT: And these are all aluminum crew boats?

VB: All aluminum crew boats.

JT: What's your workforce out there right now?

VB: The workforce ought to be about sixty-five people right now.

JT: Okay. How many hours a week do y'all work?

VB: We working, right now, it's fifty-five hours a week, about. We're working nine-and-a-half-hour days right now, and a half a day on Saturday, or sometimes almost all day. We'll work that, like, three weeks out of the month, and we'll get one weekend off, and it's only because the lack of having people, that's the main thing.

JT: Who started all of this many years ago, Mr. Breaux?

VB: As far as that goes, you talking about the boat industry?

JT: Yes.

VB: My father did. My father did. He started that back in '45. His business was open in 1945.

JT: Let's talk a little bit about your father. He is Roy Breaux, Sr., from Loreauville.

VB: Correct, from Loreauville. He was born and raised here.

JT: The way that I understand it, his dad was a blacksmith, working on the sugarcane equipment. Did that have any impact on his ambitions to get into the shipbuilding?

VB: I don't think that had anything to do with it. That was more or less just a need in the industry, at the time. His brother is the one that asked him to build him a boat. Howard Breaux, asked him to build a boat so he could work in the oilfield. He thought you could work for Texaco up here in the Atchafalaya Basin. So they actually built the first one, then one led to another one.

Then you went from people down the Bayou Lafourche, then you went all over the area and people were just building all along the bayou, you know? Everywhere Texaco was at that time, it looked like, that's where the things were going. Whoever was in the oilfield business back in those day just flourished; it just kept on and kept on.

JT: Sugarcane and fishing has been a mainstay for the Cajun people down here, as well as boatbuilding. It's historically been, the Cajuns have been, excellent boat builders, and I think your dad and your family can attest to that, in this century at least, and built a ton of boats, and have essentially pioneered the aluminum boat industry.

VB: Correct. You know, my dad did pioneer this thing. There's no way to get around it. Him and this guy, Sewart Seacraft, that was up in Morgan City at the time. Since then, a lot of shipyards over the states have just flourished from it. Just like Gulf Craft, I know they've lost a lot of people to the industry that built their own shipyards, and that's what you get. You get a lot of offshoots when this boat business started. When you talking about 1945 to now, it's not many years, but look at all the shipyards we have. At one time, I can just remember maybe three or four, now you've got four, five, six hundred, maybe a thousand for all I know. I mean, it's just hard to see everybody that has a yard going up here and going up there. Right down the road you saw one starting, they started this year, this new little yard. That's another machine shop that started right on the left-hand side, where they used to build boats, now it's a machine shop. You saw Pro Drive, and a lot of these boys worked over here for the longest time before they ever started in the business.

JT: So your dad was born around the turn of the century?

VB: 1916, I think I'm right.

JT: So by the mid-thirties, when the oil industry first appears in south Louisiana, in the marshes on the inland. Around 1935 is when your dad was fifteen, sixteen years old?

VB: Yes, and he worked in an oilfield, that's all he did. He lied about working in the oilfields. I think he was sixteen when he started working out there, and that's how he started. Then the war came along, and then he went and worked, like, for Avondale, worked in the shipyards in New Orleans.

JT: Was you dad an educated man?

VB: No, he had a sixth-grade education. That was it. He was able to compile a good workforce, a good group of people around him, and he had an engineer that just was working for, I want to say it was in Entex at the time, it was another company, but he was the only engineer around, so he drawed up boats for them. At that time, you didn't need much drawing. You don't have to do what we do today. Everything has to be documented. You used to have one drawing, but now you gotta have sixty, seventy, eighty drawing, plus all the books and all the stuff that goes with it.

JT: Tell me about that first boat, if your dad maybe ever talked about it, that he built for his brother. What type of boat are we talking about?

VB: It was just a little steel one, we called it a "Joe boat", the John boat today. Had a little wooden cabin on it, and it was strictly just to service the oilfield. They wanted to get away from gas outboards. They used to even go in the basin, up in there, with airboats. It's just to get away from the gasoline, the explosion part of it, because I think back in those days they had quite a few mishaps. Then went to diesel.

JT: Where did he build that little boat?

VB: At the old yard. Up here when you go back, you're going to see it at Roy, Jr.'s.

JT: Okay, so that yard there has been in your family, maybe your grandfather's?

VB: Yes, a little bit of it, where the original shipyard is, right on the corner where the house is, there's an old building there. There's an anvil on the front of it. That was where the old blacksmith shop was. Then he just kept a little shop there for just a short period of time. I mean, it didn't stay in effect that long.

JT: It's on the bayou side?

VB: Yes, it's on the bayou side.

JT: So when your dad was coming up starting to build these boats in the thirties [sic, forties], that was the yard that your grandfather already had?

VB: Correct. It wasn't a yard; it was just a little shed, that's all it was. Like I said, when he started his first boat, I know he built a building to put it in there, and that's the original building.

JT: Where had your father learned to weld or to fit steel?

VB: Through the blacksmith end of it. He bought a welding machine and he knew how to weld and all from the—he knew how to weld and all from the service. Not in the service, but working out of Avondale and all, that's where he learned most of his stuff. Because at that time he hadn't started the yard yet.

JT: So about how many boats did he build before World War II started? If he got going in '35, then World War II—

VB: He didn't start it until '45 and the war was over.

JT: So he was just building a couple little boats?

VB: Yes, so he would have been-- [Using a calculator] He was older than that. He must have been around twenty-one when he started his business, about twenty-one, because there's a period there from—let's see, I'm wrong. 1945. Twenty-nine, twenty-nine years old when he started that business. He was quite a few years in there he worked for the oilfield, and he worked, did blacksmith work and all.

JT: Was he actually on some of the platforms or in the field?

VB: No, he was on some of the platforms offshore. He was a rousterbout, he worked in the derricks and all.

JT: Right here in the Lake Dautrieve, Texaco had a good business.

VB: Well, he worked mostly out of Houma, out of Bayou Lafourche and all, Lake Barry and all. They worked inland. Back in that time, you didn't have much stuff offshore, it was all in the bays and everything, back in there. Just like in Morgan City, all the bays back up in there. I mean, all you got is holes and oil wells back up in there. That's where he actually started. Then when the war came around, whenever it was, from 1940 or something like that, till '45.

JT: Why was he not drafted or sent into the military? Was it because obviously he had received a deferment to work in the shipbuilding industry, but there were a lot of people working in the industry that actually went into the service? What was your dad's role at Avondale, and how did he get connected with them?

VB: He knew how to fit and do welding work and all, and they needed welders and fitters and stuff. Well, they also used women back in those days, but he had an expertise that they could use, and that's how you get your deferments. That's all they did, was build those ships for what was going for the navy up at Avondale.

JT: Did he have a family at that time?

VB: He had a wife and Joanie was born at that time. Joanie's gonna be sixty-five in April.

JT: Okay, and then you said you were born in '44, so—

VB: I was born in '44, she was born in '42.

JT: Were y'all still in New Orleans at the time?

VB: She was. I mean, like I say, I was born after the war, when the war ended. Like I say, he started his first boat in '45. That's when he actually cranked it up.

JT: At the same blacksmith's shop?

VB: Yes, same place.

JT: And what kind of ship was that?

VB: That was the, I think it was, like, a 30-foot Joe Boat, just a regular flat-bottom. Flat-bottom boat, that's what the oil industry started off with in the inland waters. I most probably got a picture of one that we did that was built in, I want to say maybe 1956, of an old-style Joe Boat, what it was compared to what we doing today. I mean, to look at the boat, what's happened from that particular boat till then is something else.

Watch, stop it one second. I'm going to—

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: Your dad got started in '45, '46—

VB: It was just him, and his daddy worked for him at the time at the blacksmith shop. Once he started building boats he just started picking up people little by little. I want to say that one of the oldest people that's gonna be in the yard is at Roy, Jr.'s right now. He started off with my dad. His name is Mose Ardoin, colored guy. Another one is Lawrence Zachary. Now, my nephew just left here, I mean my first-cousin, and he was Ken Breaux. He was our shipyard manager from—he retired two years ago. Yes, two years ago. He was the shipyard manager at my daddy's, and he moved from there to here back in, like, '83. '83, '84, and he started off working with us. Ken was with us for twenty-two, twenty-three years. His name was Ken Breaux. His name might come up, but he was there for a long time.

JT: And this Ardoin fella, how long had he been with your dad?

VB: He's been with him ever since, and I was, let's say, nine years old. So he's been with him—

JT: Since the early fifties.

VB: Fifty-four years.

JT: And he's still over there?

VB: Yes. He started when he was sixteen. He wasn't old enough, but his dad let him work in the yard, but I don't think he ever graduated. He might have got a G.E.D. later, but I never knew him going back, but a very talented guy. He's one of the yard foremen, but he's been that for thirty years, thirty-five, forty years. You can see, fifty-four, fifty-three, fifty-four years is a lot. I mean, you put your time in.

JT: Tell me about the boats that your daddy was building with his little small crew right there on the Bayou Teche in the late forties. Was it aluminum or was it steel?

VB: We didn't go into aluminum till 1956, '55, we started the first boat, finished it in '56, and that boat wound up—we ran it around here for a couple months, and then first thing you know, we sold it to a company in Venezuela, and I want to say the company was Tricamore, one of the oil service companies up there. Actually, Venezuela is like a pioneer in aluminum—

[Intercom rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

VB: Anyway, the business aluminum actually started off in '56 and from then on it just kept building more and more and more, and I'm going to say by 1968 or '69, we had gotten out of steel pretty much. We were building steel boats, steel was

the main thing. We'd build thirty, forty boats a year at that time, but it was all small stuff. Anywhere from a 26-foot to a 65-foot, and your range size of vessel was small in those days, even though we were building, like, some 80, 90-footers back in 1962. Sixty-three, started the bigger boats, then some 100-footers, then some 110-footers, all the way up to '69, then the oilfields shut down for a while. You tried to build any kind of boat or anything you can at that point, you know?

JT: So the fifties were really to service the brown water, the shallow water?

VB: Yes, that's what it was, shallow water stuff. Then we started going offshore, and it wasn't many years after—and that's your shelf work. We're talking about stuff right off the coast, maybe just in twenty, thirty feet of water where these post barges are, and you seen these barges, the drilling rigs, and that was the main, really, rig back then. That was them 65-footers they used, back in those days, 45-footers, until they just started getting further and further out.

JT: For somebody who was not educated, but certainly had an education in life, your father I'm talking about, growing up here along the bayou, working in the big shipyards during the war, it seems that he had an entrepreneurial spirit. Where did this come from?

VB: Just built within himself. He's one guy that, you can't explain why or how that did it, but the industry drove it. As the needs would come up, he could more or less foresee what they needed, and he'd go out there and look at, "Well, we need this." So they'd draw it up and go ahead and build it for whoever the contractor was. Back in those days in Venice, we had a lot of people that were already going offshore, and that's the people that really pushed us, like the Popich back in those days. Back in those days, also, like, was Tidewater was already in Venezuela, and we were building boats for Tidewater to go to Venezuela. So these things just actually, through the customers, just extended itself, kept extending itself.

JT: Sort of like a built-in advertisement gimmick, because if you think about it, Loreauville is really isolated from many parts of south Louisiana, but yet over a really short period of time, your father's craftsmanship and quality work really spread throughout Louisiana.

VB: You only had two yards for people to go to at that time that built these kinds of boats, and that was Sewart and us. There wasn't a whole big fleet of boats out there, most probably used shrimp boats at the beginning. Shrimp boats were forever, or the old lugger-style boats, were the kind of boats they used. Then they wanted faster boats, they wanted better boats, then the coast guard gets involved and you needed to get into that, you know?

[Tape recorder turned off.]

VB: At the other yard, at Roy, Jr.'s yard—and that shed is basically the same way, and that's a steel boat with aluminum cabin. [Looking at photographs.] Mose, he's probably in his late thirties right there.

JT: Where did this aluminum concept come about?

VB: It came about wanting faster boats, just as strong as steel, but what it did, it didn't rust. You didn't have as much corrosion, the life on your boats are a lot longer. The boat we have, there's a boat in Trinidad right now. That boat up there, you see the three? [Looking at photographs.] That boat was built, that was the first aluminum boat, right there. I don't know if dad and them have any pictures of it. The customer brought it back, it was the *Balladore I*, or better known back in those days was the *Big Cajun*, until the Venezuelans bought it. That boat there, it's still in service today, it's still running.

JT: That was the first aluminum boat built?

VB: First aluminum boat built in my dad's shipyard. At my dad's shipyard. And, I mean, that's the name of it, was the *Big Cajun*, and then it went from there when the Venezuelans picked it up, to the *Balladore I*.

JT: Are we talking 1955?

VB: '55. No, '56, I'm going to say. It left in '56, because I was there. I knew about it.

JT: So Sewart Seacraft was probably building one similar to that right around the same time?

VB: Yes, we both started at the same time, the same years, to build aluminum boats.

JT: Because Mr. Sewart and your dad were friends? They shared a lot of technology and business ideas?

VB: Oh, yes. We were competitors, but heck, they couldn't build all the boats, and I'm assuming for somebody—you know, Morgan City was the hub of it back in those days, and people from Houma and all. Daddy had worked in the oilfields and he had worked in New Orleans, and he kind of liked that area, he really did, and he knew a lot of the people, the Senacs and all. These are the people in the oilfields that helped him a lot. You take Bollingers and those people, Mr. Donald Bollinger at that time, you have Boyse Bollinger that runs Bollinger Shipyards. These were all friends. They kind of worked together, and he stuck his neck out

for them, got it cut off a few times, but he came back hard, and it was rough times.

JT: Different kind of people there on the southeast side, down on the bayou, so to say.

VB: Oh, yes, that's different from here. Oh, yes. I don't say we do business the same way all the time, but it's a different culture. All cultures, just like New Orleans culture, Houma culture, down in bayou culture, Loreauville, Lake Charles, everywhere. It's different. It's the Cajun culture, but it's a boat environment, the whole coast. All the way to New Orleans or it's all the way to Bayou LeBatre, and they got in it a little later than us, but, I mean, they still in oil there. Bayou LeBatre is one of your big hubs for building boats down there. It's just something that's grown, just extended and extended.

JT: Tell me about this *Big Cajun*. What size and how many engines did it have?

VB: It was a 55-footer and it had just two engines, two 671s, the original. They've changed engines in and out of it a hundred times. In fact, it went to a pleasure boat for Brown and Root at one time, in Trinidad, then they changed it back to a crew boat again, so it's back in its crew boat stage.

JT: And that's the benefit of aluminum. You can have a vessel that lasts fifty years.

VB: Yes. The Miller Group up in Trinidad is the one that wound up with it from Venezuela, they went in and bought it to use it as a crew boat, but they knew about it. They knew it was the first boat. They told us, whenever they gonna finish with it they gonna go ahead and let us have it back, but it's still running.

JT: Put it out in the front of the yard or something?

VB: Yes, I'd just set it out there. I don't know which yard's gonna wind up with it, the original yard or us. I actually played around on that boat. I mean, I was small, I was maybe nine years old, I think that's what it was. No, I was eleven.

JT: So your dad would bring you and your family quite a bit? The kids, he'd bring the kids out there to play around on the boats and kind of show them around?

VB: Oh, yes. I was working with him when I was nine years old, ten years old, helping him out there. I used to go work with him at night, pulling wires for him to do the wiring in the boats. He used to do that, a lot of it, himself.

JT: What type of a guy was he? Tell me a little bit more about your dad on a personal side.

VB: Kind of flamboyant type of man, he really, when you got to know him, and it didn't take long to get to know him because he was a very outgoing type of fella. He really enjoyed life, but he worked hard too.

JT: Was he an outdoorsman? Did he hunt and fish a good deal?

VB: All his life. He hunted until he couldn't hunt anymore, until he got sick and he was in his late sixties, you know. He hunted most of his life, always did like to hunt. Ducks, he was a duck hunter. Then he went and started hunting deer, then hunted a little bit of elk. Not much, but all his life he tried to do duck hunting and stuff like that. He and I traveled a lot together. You had customers that would invite you to go hunt, but we had Lake Dautrieve right here, that lent itself to all of our hunting, so we just did most of our hunting in our backyard.

JT: Tell me a little bit about the connection between the Breaux family and the oil industry, the offshore industry. It sounds like, since the thirties, it's been quite a match.

VB: It has. I mean, we were connected to that all our life. When I went on the East Coast to try to find other work, it wasn't because that we didn't keep in touch with them. Is the problem, is we didn't have any work down here at this oilfield.

Wanting boats and stuff, people didn't need boats, they wanted a boat. When I told you that thing about AIDS and boats had the same thing in common, there was no cure from them for a while. Thank God we had people like the [Edgar] Grahams [of John E. Graham & Sons Inc. in Bayou LaBatre] that showed up over here in '87 and cranked us off. They really cranked us off good.

JT: Tell me a little bit about the sixties and seventies, kind of an interesting period. Somewhat volatile, smaller ups and downs, but yet the industry continued to advance and continued to move a little further up and do more exploration.

VB: I'm going to say in the mid-sixties, early sixties, they started to move up before then, but there wasn't a lot of rigs out there. Let's see, they had thirty, forty, fifty drilling, but that's a lot of rigs when you needed two or three boats a rig. You needed supply boats, you needed a crew boat to bring them back and forth. The crew boat just mainly ran a seven-day hotshot, you know, back and forth. It was on seven and seven, and you'd have a crew change every Thursday, or whatever day it was.

JT: So by the sixties y'all were into the 85, 100-foot-class?

VB: Oh, yes. In the early sixties we had already jumped into building 65 and 75-foot steels boats, then we jumped, I want to say it was '62, we built a 90-foot

aluminum boat, then we built a 100-foot. This was built for a company out of Texas, back in those days it was Casparian Window, and we built them four or five in the 100-foot-class. Back, I'm going to say it was '64, we started building boats for Penrod, Penrod Drilling. The first one we built was a 90-footer, then we started on 100-footers for them, then we went into some 110-footers, and that went all the way through '69, '70, '71. Penrod kind of shut it down, just like everybody in the oil industry. It slowed down in late '69, early '70, and we had, like I say, about a three year gap, then the oilfields started picking up again.

JT: Most of the crew boats, were they servicing out of Morgan City during those years, during the sixties?

VB: Most out of Morgan City. Morgan City, Innercoastal City. Cameron was just opening up back in those days. Venice was opened up already. Venice had been open, because we were selling the smaller boats, I say the smaller boats, anywhere from 65 on down, a lot of it in Venice. Back in those days, a company named Popich, Popich Brothers, water transport, we built them some small boats in the 26-to35-foot-class. Then we started building them some 65-footers, they got out of that, and that's when you knew you were moving offshore. All in the sixties and early seventies. That company there, we built them, over a period of years, one hundred and seventy six boats, I believe.

JT: Popich. P-o-p-i-g?

VB: P-o-p-i-c-h.

JT: Okay.

VB: It was Joe and Tom Popich that had that down there, but so, was a lot of other people. The amount of people that were down there, it's hard to say, that had boats. We built a hell of a lot of boats. Back in those days your customer base might have been thirty, forty different customers. I'm not joking. I mean, everybody and his brother wanted a boat, so here you are building all these kinds of boats. A lot of it was the 65-footers, then you moved into 100-footers, then the 110-footers. Then about six, seven years ago we built them some 135s, three boats. Since then, they've sold out to a bigger company. The guys are old now, eighty-five years old, eighty-four years old. One of the brothers has died.

JT: So in the seventies as, of course, you've got an energy crisis that takes place, but the price of oil really stimulates a lot of activity, especially for fabrication and drilling. You've just got a surplus of activity in the Gulf of Mexico. Tell me about that rise to prosperity from the mid-seventies up until the 1980s, '81, after the bust. What was that like for the small community here in Loreauville?

VB: I can remember dad calling us all in the office and wanting to know who wants his job. "I can't be anymore, in fact, we're cutting back people. Anybody want to retire early or something?" But heck, they were all young people then.

JT: Are you talking about during the seventies?

VB: Yes, and my dad, he was up in age. I call it age. [Using a calculator.] Fifty-eight years old. Fifty, sixty, fifty-eight, calling a meeting and saying, "We're going to have some rough times we're going through," and we did. At that point, I got on the road trying to sell some boats. I was young, but shit, I was on the road trying to sell boats. I went to Mr. McCall and them at one time. I went to his brother, T-Boy McCall, the one they call T-Boy McCall, and it got some little boats out of him. I tell you what, everybody was catching hell at the time. Mr. McCall stayed in that charter boat and crew boat industry, and he just kept it going. Norman.

JT: Well, things picked up in '79 and '80. You guys must have been—

VB: It really picked up in '84, started slow. These things don't just start taking off. You're gonna look at that list that I showed you a while ago. That list start off slow. One, two, three boats, then first thing you know, monkey see-monkey do. Then it all builds up, and then one walks in and he wants five at one time, one wants seven. You wonder how much reality that is, then you start billing them.

When you send them a bill for a million dollars on a down-payment, then you know it it's right or wrong. You don't get your name on that list for free. If you don't start it, you start the next guy's boat, and you just go down the line and you keep calling on that list until somebody wants a boat, and sometimes you're gonna find that list.

In fact, I can tell you what. When I was with my dad back in '80, whenever these oilfields shut down, we had forty-four boats on order, from an October to the following September, we only had fourteen boats left. From that year to the next year we had seven, and for us that was building forty, fifty boats a year sometimes. That wasn't enough work. You understand where we were, and that's what produced all the bad stuff from the eighties to '87. By then, '87, had really gone way offshore too.

JT: When did y'all really, you and your dad and the rest of your family here down the road, when did y'all really begin to feel the pinch, begin to realize that this was much bigger than just a little bump in the road? That this was going to be a long ride?

VB: In the eighties, '80 to '81, as I was dropping off customers.

We had a lot of down payments, spot-payment money, and as I called them, "Look, before I start your boat, I'll send your money back, but if you don't, you need to send me $125,000 down payment to start the boat. We didn't start it yet." All these have spot payments on them, $25,000, $50,000, $5,000, depending on the size of the boat. You got an obligation to that customer to send him the money back, and at that time, that's what I did. I was running the yard at the time, and I had to make those decisions. The first time that I really had to do it and it really hurt, because you're laying off a lot of people at the time. You got a crew of, let's say, back in them days, a hundred twenty-five, a hundred thirty people, and you went back down to thirty, forty people.

JT: So you were returning the money because you knew that those companies couldn't—

VB: You call them up. You gotta call them, you give them—that's their shot, that's their shot to call. Do you want to start your boat now? Whether it's the Popich Brothers, whether it was Tidewater, whether it was SEACOR, I don't care who it was. They made that choice, and if they got the money they sent it to you. If they don't, well.

JT: And probably most of them didn't in the early eighties.

VB: No, they didn't, and so you just sent them that spot-payment back. Back in those days, I think we had, like—and that was a lot of money, because spot payments back in there was $5,000, $10,000. We were talking about $37,000 in spot payments we had over the years, just built up in there. Once you started the boat, you always put that payment against the boat. It goes with the boats.

JT: That was your cash flow, that's what kept the business moving along?

VB: Yes. It took time, it took a long time to get it going back again. This is the best I've seen, what we have right now. This is the best I've seen, this is the most work we've ever had in the last—since the seventies. I mean, we've just been going along. We've been going along three, four, ten boats ahead of the—and I thought that was great. I really thought it was great to see twenty-seven on that list, shy of maybe two, let's go to twenty-five. Ain't never had that before. We never had but maybe ten, fifteen million dollars worth of work ahead of us, a year's work. Now, you got sixty, seventy million dollars hanging on the line already, maybe eighty million. It's mind-boggling. That's what sits on that list.

When I used to have two and three million, it was great for me. When I only had a million, it was great for me when I first started. Nowadays, you're looking at something totally different, and when I walked out of here two years ago, I say

walked out. We started, I had about six, seven boats on that list and some were iffy. Since then, it's been a little different.

JT: Tell me about that downturn. What did it do for the Loreauville community?

VB: It hurt her. A lot of people moved out, a lot of people had to look for jobs. You still got foremen, when they go back to foremen or something like that. All it is, is the workers in the yard that are working, work hands, they can adjust to that a lot of times. That's what they had to do.

Like when we had this last downturn over here two years ago, we asked them, "Don't move too far. We might pick up something." A lot of them, I'm going to say about 50 percent of them, hung around.

JT: Now, your dad had been involved in the oilfield for so long. What was his opinion about not only what caused the downturn, but his own personal opinions about the oil industries in the eighties? Did he hold a grudge? Was he bitter?

VB: He was, in the eighties, but he was getting older then and he was frustrated. He had a lot of health problems, and back in the eighties it was turning on him. It just took its toll after that. He really got out of it, and he had people, good people, that ran his company for him. That was Jerry LeGrange. Roy, Jr. and them didn't

really get into the business until a lot later, but they had people, and my uncle Hugh Breaux, who was able to keep it going. A lot of key people, but they didn't have a turnover of people at that point. Whatever you kept was your core, your core is what it took this business to keep going.

JT: That's your long-time laborers and leader-men and superintendents that had run the operation from the area?

VB: That's it, and they're right there, and they stayed. These people are still there. If anything's wrong, they're just getting as old as everybody else. You gotta try to find new people to take their places. I got what's probably a lot younger crew than what they have over there. The first one to retire was somebody that came over from my dad, Murphy, and this guy retired about ten years ago from me, but he was old when he came in. Then Ken Breaux, when he retired his was sixty-seven, and he retired. Big [Vic Breaux] said he was gonna be around here, but I didn't see him. I saw him come in, but then I saw him leave. He [Ken] retired from us, and it was good for him. He was with my dad all his life, too. You never know, you just never know what happens.

JT: So in '82, right at the height, the zenith, if you will, of this worst recession, downturn, in the Gulf of Mexico offshore industry's history—of course, no one

expected it to last as long as it did. You, Mr. Breaux, decided to go into business for yourself? That was quite a gamble, if you don't me being frank.

VB: It was. I told my brother, he wanted to build houses.

He said, "Let's go into housing."

I said, "I don't know enough about houses."

He said, "You can't get nothing more complicated than a boat. They got a hundred thousand items to put in that damn thing." He said, "Here, we just got wood and labor."

I still said, "We can't make the kind of money we need to make for us to keep going, you know?" I said, "It's something we know," and then there's a lot of people out there right now, because a lot of people were out of jobs. To start a business when all of them were going out was insane, but we did it, and it's done well for us. If you do something, you know what you're doing. You're not right is to get into something you don't know what you're doing.

JT: Tell me about developing this yard here. Was this also property in the family?

VB: It was Ward's property. It's my brother's property. He had ten acres, so we just cranked it off here, and started off that first shed where this big boat is behind us, that was just one shed. We put up a little shed, then we grew into a larger shed, and then we built the sheds up front. We keep expanding a little at a time. I guess we could grow a lot faster if we wanted to borrow money and put it out, but we only worked for the money we had on hand. We didn't borrow, we didn't overextend ourselves. We don't owe anybody other than what's owed on the boats in the yard. So, that's the main thing.

JT: So how long did you and your brother work outside of the oil industry? You were talking about glass-bottoms and some pleasure boats. Is that what got you started? Is that what will keep you going?

VB: One of the first ones we did was an aluminum crew boat for Crew Boat Incorporated. We started a hull for him, but just as you go. We didn't have a job or anything for him, but then we started that and we did that up until—well, we still build yachts and stuff now, but once in a while. Back in those days, that was a big surge from '83 when we delivered the first boats. That was two yachts involved in there when we cranked off. Then some charter fishing boats, a whole bunch of charter fishing boats. [Looking at photographs.] That's what we call a charter fishing boat. No, that's a tour boat in Chicago. Look, the one on the right, right there.

JT: Okay. Servicing the East Coast?

VB: Yes, servicing the East Coast. That was all in Florida. Florida and up the East Coast all the way to—went to Maine, went to Sheepshead Bay in New York, places like that. South Carolina, the whole East Coast. Those little ferries, the one that's right here, that's the East Coast, and we built them seven or eight, ten of them up there, just for that one Hilton Head Island area, just right there.

JT: Where would be the architectural plans, the designs—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

JT: —these concepts and ideas come from, as far as the design of the boats?

VB: Well, your customer will tell you, "Look, I need this."

He'd say, "I need to carry so many passengers, I need to do it this way." In the case of the Hilton Head Island, it was done similar to, like, you get off a plane, get on a place, where they have the baggage carts that would come up, and we load the backend of those boats with six to twelve baggage carts, and everybody would

drive up to the terminal. You'd put your bags down, your golf clubs and everything, they put it one there, and they bring it to your cottage or your hotel you were staying at, and that's how we did it. Things like that, but you have to work with those people in order to get that. They tell you what they want, and you design it around that. We did our own designs. Everything in here is our own design.

JT: It would be the same situation for SEACOR or Tidewater? They would say, "We need to be able to carry x amount of crew, x amount of supplies, and I need to be able to go *x* amount of miles?"

VB: Correct, because I'm sure Gulf Craft and them—you know, you might buy a couple of designs off of somebody—not buy them per se, use an architect. We use a guy named Tim Graw. He sends his designs here for some of his customers that will say, "Look, my customer needs this. Let's bid on it." That's how this thing is coming about right here. The basic hull is our hull, then we work from the hull up.

JT: What about the mechanics involved, the technology involved in putting in two, three, four, five, six engines?

VB: That's all done right here. Me, it started off with me. I've been doing that all my life. As far as installing four engines, that's a typical, that's a no-brainer. Five engines. Vic and them took that over from us, now everything is on computer. I don't use computer much. My brother does a lot, he started it, aw shit, whenever computers started he had a computer back at my dad's yard. He put everything on computer over there. Not a whole lot of people were computer-literate back in those days. Like he'd tell them girls, he said, "Look, use that computer. Look, it can't bite you, it can't screw you, and it can't eat you. Don't worry about it. Just hit the keys. I'll tell you what's wrong." [Laughter] That's how he tell them that, it can't hurt you. He said, "All it's gonna do is help you speed up your work."

JT: But the engineering concepts, for someone who's not as well versed in the mechanics of what's beneath the deck there, that may seem kind of complicated for—

VB: It would. If you walked into one of those boats, you're going to see how complicated it gets. They really are sophisticated in there. Everything develops one from another, you know. It's never something brand-new. I mean, you were putting four engines in a boat back in the seventies, and here we are in 2007. I mean, this is not brand-new. Not brand-new at all. We were building quad-screws back in '74, '75, '76. That's no different from doing it today.

JT: Those concepts, a lot of that was created by the McCalls and some of the other folks?

VB: And my dad and everybody. Back in those days it came from the owners. The owners had a certain size engine you were dealing with in the first place, so instead of using two, you know you need four to make it do what it had to do, or go to some kind of bigger package, and they didn't' have them back in those days. That's why we did that, just lay more engines in there. Nowadays, you went from a boat that had 2200 or 2100 horsepower back in the seventies, your standard horsepower. The boats, they have 8000, 9,000 horsepower now. The boats went from a 110 with four engines to, we're here right now with some 190s like Mr. McCall, 180s, 170s, 160s, all four-engine jobs. Everything is four engine. The boat going to Trinidad is four engines, but the engine in there is a Yanmar instead of a Caterpillar, a Cummins, or a Detroit. They in the four-engine class, they been in there for years with us, so we know what it takes for there.

JT: Tell me about the workforce that you brought in with you in '82, you and your brother in the early eighties. Did you pull some from your dad's yard or did you find some locals here?

VB: No, they had people that were layed-off, people were laid-off that we started picking up. It was me and my brother started it, and we had another guy. One man got in there with us, Tom Bonin, and then a little colored guy. He was our yard foreman, and then first thing you know we started putting the boat together and you'd pick up another guy as you needed him that was a welder. Like this guy Bonin could do all of the jobs. He could do carpenter work, he could do fitting the hull, he could do building a cabin, he could do everything. But we also knew how to do that. Back when we started, my brother was a grinder. He'd come out the office with me, and I was in the office and I'd go help him outside set up the jig and everything. You start one at a time, and that's how we started this, one at a time going. It worked out, it just—we gave ourselves a time limit, two to three years. If we couldn't get if off the ground or see daylight, we were going to back it up and try to find, do something, else. Don't lose all your money, you know?

Anyway, that's where we were. That's where we are now, is just picking at it still, still going at it. The business, more or less, pushes you. The supply and demand. You don't create a demand for it. What you gotta do is if the oil industry stops, you gotta go look somewhere else, because you're gonna see that they building every kind of different boat in the world you can think of. We try to stick to basics, that really has to produce for the offshore industry, just like what it does. The tour boat didn't change much from 1984 to right now. In fact, it's the

same thing, just a little bit longer, carries a few more people, and that's about it, but it's the same boat from now until then. From then till now.

JT: So, when did your dad finally settle out of the business, and kind of retired on his own and pulled himself away from it all?

VB: He did it right before, in the eighties. He didn't have anything as far for running the business, designing anything, but he did it well into—I'm gonna say it was '77, '78 when he backed out. He wasn't here much, he stayed at the Toledo Bend, he had him a home up in Toleda Bend from 1970 till—in fact, the house is still there. Roy, Jr. has it, so they have that over there.

JT: So he moved into retirement, enjoyed about twenty years or so of seclusion away from the industry?

VB: Yes, I think he died in '91 or '92, somewhere around there. I mean, his last years wasn't the quality stuff. He was in bad health all the time, really stayed in bad health. He lived in the shipyard itself, he made him a little room downstairs and just kind of squatted there. The guys took care of him at night, he'd go ride around during the day. To stay in the daily operations, it wasn't good for him, but he had a lot of good qualified people that was working with him, and that's what really, really helped.

JT: Tell me about this Bayou Teche here, if we're thinking of limitations. Obviously the workforce, we'll talk about that here in just a minute. Tell me of how your business is limited, has been limited, and in the future will be limited by Bayou Teche.

VB: It is. I'm going to say the only thing that keep that Bayou Teche dug out deep enough is us getting in and out of here itself. We constantly have trees falling in the bayou, we have to take them out most of the time. The parish governments don't help a whole lot. They try to, but to me the Corps of Engineers could have done a better study than what they do. It didn't cost them a fortune to come all the way from Jeanerette, way down there below Jeanerette, to dig that canal wider, all the way to the sugar mill. Just past the sugar mill they went a mile, I don't know why they didn't just keep on three more miles and finish us up, all the way up to here. They could have stopped it right here, as far as I'm concerned. We would have had enough land, I mean enough bayou, to do it.

JT: Did they widen it or just deepen it?

VB: They deepened it. They didn't really widen it. They widened the channel. The channel they said was thirty-foot wide, they might have gone to fifty-foot. Fifty-

foot in some areas, seventy or eighty-foot in others. They wanted to be able to pass two barges at one time, because you can't, right now you still can't do it.

JT: And this is a project that they worked on beginning around 2002, 2003?

VB: Yes, that's the one. They worked on the canal. You know, it's hard to take our businesses and the people, the way they settled already. They been here, and move them and bring them somewhere else, and say, "Oh, we're going to make it go." You're going to move it into another environment where you have a lot of competition in the steel industry, in the fabrication and everything else up there. Steel and aluminum doesn't mix very well as far as for working steel and aluminum together. People don't like to really work steel because it's heavy, dirty, you gotta work torches, stuff like that. Aluminum's a lot cleaner.

JT: You're talking about moving to the Port of Iberia, and this is something that's been suggested by maybe local city officials, or parish officials?

VB: No, more so just ourselves looking at it once in a while.

JT: Because you've got a deep port there?

VB: Yes, but then you live right on your job. You only live five miles away, and what happens is you try to grab from the area, you try to get people from, let's just say, Avondale, or you try to go all the way to Lafayette, it's hard to keep that person here, driving every day. If you keep him within a twenty-five-mile drive, it's not bad, but if you go any further than that you got trouble, on a day to day basis, keeping him.

JT: Just right here in the Bayou Teche, between the three boat companies, what are we looking at? Maybe a hundred and fifty employees?

VB: I would say, and that's a direct employee. That's not the contractor or people that come in and out. You got your people that install engines, you got people that do your air-conditioning, you got radar people, you got insulation people that come out of Baton Rouge. You got all kind of other services that come in from other places to service here.

JT: So indirectly, you could even stretch it as far to say the little breakfast café down the road or the car dealership in New Iberia, or someone to build these houses for the workers that you have here, and—

VB: Well, you talking about indirect, you can double that. Indirect, you double that as far as for the people you actually helping down here, or doing business. Like I say, you're stretching a business now from 1945 until—

JT: Major impacts. Not to mention the number of aluminum crew boats that are working in the Gulf right now that have been built right here on the Bayou Teche.

VB: That's right. These three yards are most probably putting out, I would say, at least 50 percent, 60 percent right now. At one time it was a lot more than that. At one time it was 75 percent, because you didn't have a couple other yards spring up. You got Gulf Craft now, and you got Swiftships. What other yards you had going to?

JT: That's it. That rounds it out. As far as aluminum crew boats, those are the two.

VB: They got other people trying to build them, like on Bayou Lafourche. One yard down there, Lafourche Shipyard or something. I don't consider them a great competitor. Don't say I said that, but, I mean, they just don't build a quality boat, we do.

JT: Well, it's the generational companies, the three of y'all that's been in the business, in the families for so long, you cannot replace that type of knowledge and that type of experience.

VB: You see, like Mr. McCall. I must say, you gotta understand. He's been a Gulf Craft customer, and it's hard for a man to switch from one company to another, until you get into being a publicly held company like Mr. McCall is now. Then they'll go out on bid from different companies. Like Gulf Craft, that was their major customer, you know? The other things they did, you saw all the charter fishing boats and tour boats they did put on to the East Coast. They had a whole line of it, and that came because of the eighties. That's exactly what it came from.

Mr. McCall, we never did try to go get the customer, Mr. McCall, from Gulf Craft. Me and Gulf Craft, we are good friends. We even almost thought of merging at one time, in survival, and this was back in the nineties, when things had slowed down, but we had started picking— [Pause] What happened then was they had gone real low, and we thought of merging the two companies together to get—and Scotty came over here, and us and the boys talked. We wanted to see how it would do, but we had enough work. They didn't really care who was president, just to keep, survival.

JT: Survival. A key word to the people down here in Loreauville.

VB: Survival of the business. We talked with Scotty and—what's the boy? I don't remember his name. Who you did your interview with?

JT: Scotty Tibbs, and I think his son's name is Kevin.

VB: Kevin. Kevin and Scotty, Jr. Those boys, we talked with them, and we sat down. We had one or two meetings with them. It never came to pass. Things picked up a little and I guess it kept going good enough for them. So, everything must have worked out. But still in all, when you get in those kind of binds, you really looking at hard stuff, you know?

We were all right, we happened to maintain a lot better contract relations, I guess, whatever you want. We had more customer base where Scotty and them only had one, Mr. McCall. Now, he was a strong one, so he could keep them going if he wanted, and no doubt he let them build some boats at lower prices whenever they didn't have any work. It helped, it kept them going, it kept them going. Where we were able—we had a customer base that was just unreal, that we could draw from. I'd get on the phone or I'd get on the road and I'd go talk to them, and I was able to keep it going, picking up here and there. But you always needed six, seven boats ahead of you to keep this business going.

Right now, it takes us fifteen, twenty boats to know what's behind you so you can extend to have a bigger force. Right now, these boats go, let's say, they average anywhere from fourteen to sixteen months to build, building five a year, six a year. But you're working on seven all at one time, all the time. So you better know who's your next customer every two months, every three months, down the road. You gotta be able to grab that and they gotta be able to come up with money every time. It's not just money. I mean, you're asking for million dollar spots, a million dollars on your next round, a million, million, and a million, you know? Doing about five-million-dollar boat averages right now.

JT: But you gotta have the labor force to be able to build them.

VB: The labor force has to be there.

JT: When did you and your brother, particularly here—as we've noted, your son's now at the company, you got a sixteen-year-old grandson who works here during the summertime, then you got your sisters who are here. I'm sure you got some guys in your yard who have been here with you for a couple of decades, but your family and those old hands are not gonna be here forever. So what do you see as—just describe the labor problem in general. When did you begin to see that it was such a major crisis that it is today?

VB: Twenty years ago. It didn't start yesterday, it started back in the early nineties. It never really recovered. When we went from 1982 to 1987, we had a little turndown in '87. We only had one boat left in the yard, a 50-footer for the State of New Jersey. It was a patrol boat, we were building that. Then, that's when the Grahams walked in and started building 125-footers. We started then, and it started picking up, but the fine people, from that day. There was twenty-five of us in the whole yard total. I'm talking about me, the secretaries, my sister and my brother. The boys wasn't even here in the yard at the time. This wasn't an easy task. It's been an up and down on labor for a long time, but more so in the last few years, the last ten years, it's been a lot harder.

We only had one other downturn, and that was three years ago, that downturn. It started about three and a half years ago, and then we had that nine-month or year period where we had talked with the guys, asked some of them to take off for a while. We were down to thirty-three or thirty-six people, when we had eighty-five or ninety.

JT: You explained to me you've got great benefits, premium wages here, vacations I'm sure, the whole package to entice people to not only stay, but to come. What do you think explains this disappearance of your traditional eighteen to twenty-four year old, young, local hand that would get into the industry as a tacker or a

fitter helper and then slowly make his way back up? That particular hand is almost non-existent, from what I've been experiencing.

VB: You'd think the parents and the people would make their kids work harder. Well, they train them to want to go to trade schools and all, or go to college. You take ten people, you bring them through here to try to put them to work, eight of them fail drugs. Out of ten, one of them is gonna stay here for about two or three months. Then he's gone once he learns a little bit. You wind up a training school for somebody else that offers them a dollar or two more. The whole thing just keeps working in that cycle. The thing we try to do is find, sometimes, somebody that's just got irritated with another company or something and he'll come to work here. We don't try to go and advertise, from this shipyard, "Look, you come work for me, I'll give you some more." Or the other shipyard, "You come work for me, I'll give you." Because you know what it does, it just runs that price up between three shipyards right here alone. We just don't go after one anthers people if we can help it, and we don't.

What we get is once in a while we just pick up people. You find a good, talented person. He might have not worked in a shipyard, but he's a pipe fitter or he's carpenter or he's a welder or something, and you pick them up. That works. That seems to work pretty good, but the hard core of our people, the last twenty-five to thirty-five that we have in the yard, that's the sticking here part of it. Hell, we

got, like, 2.7 million dollars, I think, in their pension fund that we started from day one. The people that are going to collect most of that is the people that's been here the longest. The people that's been here the longest, twenty-three, twenty-five years, we got a whole damn bunch of them here in this shipyard. I mean, a whole bunch of them. That group that's got to make it from year one to year seven, when he starts collecting his full benefits—the longer you stay, the more you collect. At the seventh year, you're collecting 100 percent. But those people that quit at seven, they're just getting there, we'll they leave all the bulk of it there for the other guy.

I wish my superintendents and all would actually like to see these people come in, but they don't because they reap the benefits. That's human nature. I don't know if my kids would tell you the same thing, but I could tell you this thing. I've watched this thing go up and down, '62, '69, '74, '89, '92, 2000, 2002. Seven times, seven times go up and down, and it has not been good. That's the bad times, the really bad.

JT: So you're saying that in order to keep some good hands here and to get some new ones, you're offering some really expanded benefits here, but yet maybe some of your workforce, some of your superintendents, that have been around here long enough may not be so interested in the benefits that the new coming people—they put in their time?

VB: They put in their time. Now, they like to have good hands, and what I'm finding now is we got three of them that have their sons working in the yard, and them boys is making good money. They'll push them harder, you'll find that. It works out good because they boys really try, they do. We've often had to—not often, just one that I can remember, lay off a father and his son because the father was just carrying the boy's load and we couldn't make him do nothing, and he was just causing a whole bunch of problems. At that point, you have to make a decision. You let go of the boy, the father will follow him, something like that. So he goes to the next yard, you know? They had the same problem, after seven years they've had to let him go recently. You can follow these things because there's a small enough community. Everything you hear, you just hear things back and forth. It's a problem we lived with all our lives.

JT: What's the average age of your hands out in the yard right now? What would you say? Thirty-five?

VB: I would say about thirty-five. Thirty-two to thirty-five. I'm the oldest one in the yard, really. I'm the oldest one and I think after that we got, well, my brother, but after that is, let's say, in the early fifties, mid-forties. Then we have a whole group from, let's say, twenty-two to thirty. Then we have a whole bunch in the

thirty, thirty-five group. Thirty-five would be a good average here. Just like at my dad's yard, you're looking at a group that's a lot older.

JT: Well, Loreauville has a trunk stop. If fact, you're probably growing.

VB: It's growing on the outer edge, yes.

JT: Where are people who will be interested in working and building ships for a good living?

VB: Used to have the farmers that you used to be able to go to. The farmers take their sons in now, and if the sons don't work on the farm, they gone. They go and work as engineers. People are getting out, just a lot more educated. You live in Houston, you work for whoever it is, the university. The same thing happens. You didn't step in your father's footsteps, whatever he does, maybe. If he flew a plane, you'd be flying planes, you know? It's the thing to make the boys like it. To make a guy like this business—take my brother. One out of three boys stayed, the other two, they didn't want no part of it.

JT: With your company, and down the road also, you've got a couple of others that got interested?

VB: Yes. Well, like Joanie, she needed a job. She was in between divorces and all, had quite a few husbands, but she's not one to let anything stop her. She's a self-made woman, I can tell you what. Couldn't do a thing without her. She's topnotch. It would take ten men to take her place. Talking about the industry, when you talk about the ABS and Coast Guard, the drawings and all, and our customers. When they need anything information, they call her. She can give them all the information, everything from top to bottom. From pricing all the way to the size of propellers, to the nut on the coupling, you know? I don't care what it is, she's good. The ABS and Coast Guard respect her a lot because of that.

JT: That work ethic that your father instilled here?

VB: What it was is she started my father off with some good work ethics. His work ethics wasn't too damn good till she got in. She kept him on track on how to do things. She was really smart. She's really a hell of a woman, ahead of her time compared to a lot of women I know.

JT: How old is she?

VB: She's gonna be sixty-five this year.

JT: Does she have kids who are interested in this?

VB: One of her boys works at Pro-Drive. He's a part-owner, maybe 5 percent of it or so. The other one works, well, he moved to Orlando, he in the movie industry. Does the Mickey Mouse stuff with Disney, and he produces. He also has a studio on the side that somebody else owns, that he runs it for them. So he's doing pretty good. His wife is a doctor, a brain surgeon. We've all expanded out, you know?

JT: Do you see the problem getting any better as far as labor, or is it getting worse?

VB: I don't see it getting better. I don't want to tell my boys that, but they know it's not better. You know what's happened too? You have the hurricanes that passed, and you say, "Man, a lot of people out of jobs." Those people that came out of New Orleans, that ain't the same kind of guy that wants to work over here. He'll come and rob you, but he ain't gonna work for you. I can promise you that. That we done find out. I mean, they done unleashed that group of people on people, and they caused you more headaches than it did any good. One out of every hundred that came out of there, maybe, wants to work. One out of a hundred, and not going to work too hard either, because they don't have good work ethics over there. None at all. It's the type of environment.

You take the people that got all banged up in Cameron, and all along the coast here, from Erath all the way to Texas, Beaumont and Port Arthur and all, with that hurricane. Different environment of people. They'll put their life together themselves, ain't gonna wait for the government to come do it for you. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. A lot of people wait on the government, the other people gonna do it themselves. Those on this end, thank God we were able to work with seven or eight families that had gotten messed up, and we helped them. Whatever we could, because they work here. Even though they didn't work here, we'd help other people. It worked out well, and it's working out, but it's a long process. It's gonna be two years pretty soon, and they still ain't got their lives close to together.

JT: I'm sure that you're concerned about the future of the company here, and the family in general and your kids taking over, and grandkids, nephews and nieces down the road. If you had a magic wand and you could wave it to solve this labor problem, and if you had the power to do so, what would be maybe the number one and number two things that you would put in place to help change this problem? What would be a solution?

VB: I would say educating people as far as for everybody can't go to college, everybody can't do certain things. As far as for being well educated, everybody's going to be educated, what are we going to do? All push paper? We all can't

push paper. You still gotta have the farmers, you still gotta have the cattle farmers, you still gotta have the rice farmer, you still gotta have all these people. Gotta have boat builders that service the oilfield. It's where we're gonna create these people. We're not having that many more kids, it looks like. The way they're being brought up today, in the environments they are, they're not being brought up to actually want to work in a shipyard, but we're trying to find that.

We're trying to find that. The only place you can get that is people that came from another country. We're talking where the Pollacks come from, but these people know about how to work. Some of the Brazilians. The Mexicans are okay sometimes, but it's not the solution right now, especially with crossing the border. Those that want to work, don't want to—they'd rather steal than work, so you have that problem.

Where is the solution? I think it's in educating and actually—maybe like what Beaumont and all is doing, having schools that could do that. I wish Lafayette would produce some of that, but Lafayette has its own growing pains. They just expanding and expanding, they don't know how they're going to pay for it, but they're expanding.

JT: So education is the key? Educating the sixteen-, seventeen-, eighteen-year-olds?

VB: Yes. You don't have to go to college all the time. College is not necessary all the time. My father proved that as far as having a sixth-grade education. You're just a self-built person. I went to colleges two years, but I love the boat business. That's where I stayed, and that's what brought me back here. I was in it, I never got out of it, and I can't get out of it. So you gotta either stick it out or you're gonna die, and you gonna die in it, that's the way I feel. That's the way it's supposed to be.

JT: Unfortunately, our educational system, particularly here in Louisiana, is run by the politicians, so if you're looking to solve a major problem like that and to do a radical new program, unfortunately you have to get politicians involved. We know how difficult that is.

VB: Especially here. I mean, not everybody's going to be an LSU or USL graduate, or Tulane or Loyola, you know?

JT: Gotta start them young, huh?

VB: Yes. If you got the right work ethics from the beginning, you're gonna be all right. That's what we don't have, is the want-to, the loyalty, a lot that a family begins, that's where it will start. I gotta say, our kids are turning out damn good to want to do this.

JT: Mr. Breaux, thank you so much. I appreciate it.

VB: All right.

[End of interview]

[edited by Jason Theriot, 15 May 2006]