

**Interviewee: Marquardt, Earl****Interview Date: June 26, 2002**

HHH # 00288

Interviewee: Earl Marquardt

Interviewer: Steven Wiltz

Interview Date: June 26, 2002

Interview Site: Lafayette, LA

Interview Module &amp; No.: MMS: SW006

Transcriber: Lauren Penney

[Transcriber's note: Evidently there were audio difficulties, so the first part of the interview was not recorded. The majority of the interviewer's backchanneling and repeated words have not been transcribed for the purposes of readability. Also, the interviewee misspells Hugoton Field during the interview. When this field is referred to in the interview, I transcribed it in its correct spelling.]

Ethnographic preface:

Mr. Earl Marquardt was born in western Kansas in the late 1920s and was raised in a family of six on a cattle farm. Facing few job opportunities, he went to work in the newly developed Hugoton oil and gas field in Kansas. In the late 1950s or early 1960s he was transferred to Lafayette. He was a district superintendent for General American and was charged with overseeing the whole Gulf Coast. He retired from the company in 1984 when Phillips Petroleum bought out the company. Over the next two years he worked as a district engineer for First Energy in Houston. After leaving that position, he began consulting, a practice he continues today. He describes how the oil and service industries made Lafayette what it is today and how the industry, particularly in terms of loyalty and trust, has changed. He ends the interview by describing his one and only experience with a blowout, noting how he felt helpless when he saw the well on fire. Unfortunately there were audio difficulties during the first portion of the interview and there are no notes describing what was discussed.

TRANSCRIPTION

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Interviewer initials: [SW]

Interviewee initials: [EM]

SW: We're having technical problems, we are back online now. [Recording breaks off]  
June twenty-sixth, 2002 at his home. This thing's workin' by the way.

EM: Oh you did.

SW: But I've been fillin' my notes in where you-

EM: Alright.

SW: So we don't have to go back. Uh, we had left off where the money, you said you were makin' pretty good money do-

EM: Well, you know, the oilfield when I started was always the best paying thing you could find. It's not necessarily that way anymore, but when I started it was. If you could get a job in the oilfield, you were gonna make a pretty good living.

SW: Was that part of the allure of it?

EM: Well [Sighs] uh, I don't know whether it was or not. I think the fact that uh, in western Kansas and you probably never been to western Kansas, but it's a very sparsely set-, settled part of the state, the western half of the state. At the time I lived there there were more cattle in Kansas than there was people. And uh, it might be 20, 20 miles between houses. So you either farmed, ranched, or went somewhere else and found a job. The county seat was 850 population. That was the biggest town in the county.

SW: Wow.

EM: So you can understand job opportunities weren't there. So everybody, and I came from a family of six, and I uh, left the farming and went to the oilfield.

SW: So it was good opportunities.

EM: Yeah.

SW: [For?] you to do something.

EM: That's right. A way to make a living.

SW: So others were maybe looking at it the same way.

EM: W-

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SW: At least from your neck of the woods.

EM: Yeah.

SW: Okay.

EM: There's a number a people workin' there where I was, because there was a lot of activity around there and there was uh, Amoco was drilling wells, Mobil was drilling wells, Texaco was drilling a well, Northern [Esso?] was drilling wells, everybody was drilling wells. They were just developing that gas field, which they had several wells in it.

SW: It was Huchatan or?

EM: Hugoton, Hugoton Field. H-U-G-U-T-O-N, Hugoton.

SW: Ah, I put a T-A in. There you go. [Chuckles]

EM: Yeah.

SW: That's, okay. Well that's go-, see I'm getting the progression here, how you got into oil over there and then you ended up in Lafayette.

EM: Yeah. That's how I got here.

SW: Um, was any of the work you ever did would you consider it dangerous? [Pause]

EM: Oh... I never looked at it that way. Uh, a lot of things happened uh, fortunately I've only had under my supervision, I only had uh, a couple people injured and it wasn't serious injuries, wasn't anything that crippled them. Uh... the eastern manager for Phillips Petroleum who bought General American in 1984 came to my office. At that time I was the district superintendent for General American for the whole Gulf Coast. I had everything Texas all the way through Mississippi, and everything up to Alexandria. 'Course most production is south of Alexandria anyhow. I had the [Inaudible] Mississippi. So [I'm at uh?] the mouth of Mississippi River, production at uh, Rock Port, down below Houma, and Jeanerette [Slight pause] Abbeville, Gueydan, Kaplan, uh, Bell City, Johnson Bayou, and then offshore at Cameron.

SW: Yeah, the two platforms you had out there.

EM: Two platforms out there.

SW: Okay. That's uh, quite a bit. [Chuckles]

EM: I was busy. I had 200, a little over 200 wells, I don't remember. And I had 35 people workin' for me.

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SW: [That you kept in line?]. Okay.

EM: And uh, besides the office personnel here in Lafayette. And they didn't believe in a large staff. I had myself, one engineer, and five production foremen lookin' after all that stuff.

SW: [Hands on?]-

EM: That's drilling, workovers, and production. [Slight pause]

SW: That's with General American?

EM: Yeah.

SW: You stayed with them for a long time?

EM: 'Til they sold out and they retired me because I had enough years and I was 57 years old, and I chose not to work for Phillips Petroleum. They gave me full retirement.

SW: To Phillips. That was uh, what year?

EM: Nineteen eighty-four.

SW: Nineteen eighty-four. Okay. Uh. [Slight pause] We're makin' timelines, too. Just to get an idea of the progression of things.

EM: Sure.

SW: Um... what about uh, job security?

EM: Well [Clears throat] it used to be with the oilfield if you worked for a company, and a fairly large company, General American was a large independent. In fact, Phillips paid in 1984, paid one point two-five billion dollars for Phillips, uh, for General American. Who started some, 'bout 50 years before that from a bankrupt, little bankrupted oil company they, some guys bought and started it. In east Texas. That's where it has its birthplace.

SW: I see.

EM: And uh, they uh, but they had a, they didn't have a lot of people. They never believed in having a lot of people. You always kept, if there was two jobs and one person, you handled 'em both. [Slight pause] And uh, but they did give you a lot of leeway in making all the decisions you needed to make. And everything to make things run. [Pause]

SW: So you uh-

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EM: And I had the total responsibility down here of all their drilling, oil production, and all their people.

SW: But you didn't have anybody lookin' over your shoulder so much-

EM: Not here.

SW: As long as y'all got the job done.

EM: My boss was in Dallas, he was the vice-president. [Pause]

SW: And so it went the vice-president to you?

EM: And then, that's right.

SW: Okay. Str-, straight from the office to the field hand?

EM: That's right. From the horse's mouth to me. [Chuckles]

SW: Most companies are run like that or?

EM: No.

SW: No, that's just kind of-

EM: That was just a small, unique company, which was very profitable.

SW: They stayed in business for that long, then they must've been doin' something-

EM: Very good business people.

SW: Okay, well that's good.

EM: Not only did they pay you a salary, I got a 10 percent bonus every year in the form of stock in the company. I got all my health insurance, life insurance paid. It didn't come out of my paycheck. And everything else was paid and I was furnished full expenses and a company car. And no question that I could use the car for personal use.

SW: That's good, 'cause I've heard some stories about some companies that don't really care for the employees as more.

EM: No, they were, man, they're, nobody ever quit.

SW: They must've been happy then.

EM: Yeah.

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SW: Keep your employees happy, they're gonna stick around.

EM: That's right.

SW: Well we can shift gears and go along those lines then. Uh, you were married with children at the time?

EM: Yeah, I had four children. I was able to send 'em all through college on my salary.

SW: Did your job ever affect your family life? You goin' away and your coming back.

EM: Oh. Yeah that, you can't deny that, nobody can deny that I don't think. But uh, I might get a call out on a well and I might be gone over night and I might be gone seven days before I got back. But that's, that was the oilfield then.

SW: Nature of the business, yeah.

EM: Yeah. [Pause]

SW: It may have affected your family, but not-

EM: Well I'm sure probably-

SW: Not too terribly or anything.

EM: The only thing has, had three boys and they all said they didn't want make their living the way I did. [Chuckles] 'Cause they didn't like that business we'd be ready to go somewhere for a weekend and I'd get called out and we couldn't go. So it affects the family. There's no question about that.

SW: But your wife-

EM: Oh yeah.

SW: Took care of the odds and ends while you were out there.

EM: Yeah. That's the way it has to be.

SW: Yeah. Did she work as well?

EM: No. She didn't work. Very few wives worked back in those days.

SW: Oh. [Pause] But uh, the benefits package, that applied to you and your family as well?

EM: Oh, 'cause they got it-

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SW: [Inaudible].

EM: Uh, it was all, your retirement and everything was your money. And if something happened to you, your family got it.

SW: I see.

EM: What didn't go back in a pot someplace, like some of 'em do.

SW: Yeah. Well that's good. That's, what I'm hearin' from you is that they, that it was a good company to work for.

EM: Oh yeah, very good.

SW: And that they took care of you guys. Let's see what else we have here. [Slight pause] When did you start working for Toss?

EM: Uh, I've been there about four years as a consultant. I'm still a consultant. [Pause] I've been consulting uh, I worked in Houston two years [Clears throat] for uh, First Energy, their, they sold out since. But and I was what they called a district engineer in charge of five states, drilling and production. Then I went from uh, they sold out and so down in nineteen... eighty-six, when oil prices and the slump come, you know, you get, we have a lot of this in the oil industry. And they sit down and I came back to Lafayette, I didn't like Houston to start with. I came back to Lafayette and decided I'd consult. 'Cause I didn't, I wasn't ready to quit work. And I started consulting for a firm over in Houston that tried to hire me and keep me over there in Houston. I wouldn't stay. So uh, I worked for them five years. Was [Altermore?] Oil and Gas. [Slight pause]

SW: So that's what your doing now is your still consulting basically?

EM: Yeah.

SW: Which is a good thing to have 'cause you tell other people how to do it.

EM: Yeah. Well that's, and I'm past goin' out and stadin' on the rig floors all night long.

SW: Definitely. [Chuckles]

EM: I can't do it.

SW: Show those other fellows how to do-

EM: That's my, my age has got me. [Chuckles]

SW: It's time for those young to go pay their dues, right? [Laughs]

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EM: Right. [They got a lot of 'em pay it, but paid as many as I did?]. [Both chuckle]

SW: You mentioned the boom and bust that everybody pretty much knows about. But you were at a position in your company where the downturns didn't affect your job.

EM: Well... I think, they didn't, they affect in a way, but there was a bust in Kansas in 1956. Lafayette, Louisiana, the Gulf Coast was just beginning. And uh, so I came down here and it stayed slow 'til about 1963 or so where it kind of picked up a little bit. And then it went back down again in the early '70s. And then about '74, '75 it started pickin' up and got completely out of hand by 1981. It was time for somethin' to happen, 'cause it was crazy. And it busted of course in '81 and a lot of people went out of business and lot of people lost their jobs, some good and some bad. And, but I'll say in my career in the oilfield I never missed a paycheck. Never ever missed a paycheck. When the first and the fifteenth come around, I was always workin' for somebody. So far as I'm concerned, it was good to me.

SW: Yeah, you had it where it should be. [Pause] That sounds excellent. Why Lafayette?

EM: Well that's where they sent me from western, Liberal, Kansas, I was transferred to Lafayette. It was either no job or come down here.

SW: Oh, oh, I'll rephrase the question. Why oil in Lafayette? Not necessarily you, it's my fault-

EM: Why oil in Lafayette?

SW: Why did the Oil Center get started, why was it centered here?

EM: Well Lafayette was just uh, the population was 17,000 and somethin' when I came here. And uh, that was the only industry here. [Pause] And the Oil Center is, was the secret of Lafayette bein' what it is today. 'Cause it got it start and then, you know, everything else happens.

SW: [It pulled in?]. So you guys were down there with the oil companies and your, the other oil companies next door, you could go over and talk to them.

EM: There wasn't many. There was only about four buildings.

SW: Those are the originals, yeah. One, two, three, four, I think they got rid of number two. They tore down number two and put something else up I think. [Pause] I'm not sure.

EM: Out on Saint Mary?

SW: Yeah.



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EM: No, I don't think so.

SW: It's still there?

EM: Uh they had, those were, there's two two-story buildings right there on the corner of Coolidge and Saint Mary. And while we were there, they built a building across the street. And uh, then further towards Pinhook they had built, or were building, or had built, I don't remember, I was out a lot, 'cause I worked in the field. And we'd been there about a year, but they were buildin' fast. Mister Heymann really put those buildings up in a hurry. And we moved up on Heymann Boulevard a ways. [Phone ringing] I don't know who's in that building now. But uh, that's... [it kind of went fast?]. [Phone ringing] [Recording may have turned off]

SW: Your telling me that oil built Lafayette?

EM: I think it did.

SW: More or less. Uh-

EM: Oil and the oil service companies.

SW: Did it make this town better? Was there a progression to the lifestyle they were living?

EM: Oh I think so. I think it is. Uh, there's a lot of things I think they should've did a little different, but I think everybody thinks that.

SW: Yeah, yeah.

EM: But uh, basically speaking, if I had to live in south Louisiana this is where I'd want to live. And uh, this is where I'm gonna live 'til they haul me out of here.

SW: I was born and raised here, I tend to agree with you. [Chuckles]

EM: Yeah, yeah. Well I wasn't, but I like it and I've raised four children here. I educated one of 'em through USL and the other three, one to Ruston and two to northeast. And uh, but it's been good, it's been good to my family.

SW: What did they, what did your children go on to do? You said they had an aversion to the oilfield.

EM: Well the oldest one was a pharmacist, the next one's a forester, the next one is, he had a degree in uh... criminal, criminal justice and he's now in [lost?] prevention, and uh, my daughter is an accountant here for Deep South Chemical. She graduated from USL in accounting.

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SW: No petroleum engineers.

EM: No [siree?]. [SW chuckles] And I, I'm kind of... it's got, it's not like when I was there.

SW: Yeah, yeah.

EM: It wouldn't be place that I would recommend to anybody startin' today, a young boy that wanted to get into somethin'. Uh, I read in Life Magazine before I ever moved to Lafayette, Louisiana, they named 10 industries that were dead industries in the United States. One of 'em was steel, you know what happened to steel. Another one was oil.

SW: Think the end is comin', huh?

EM: I think so. Well, it's uh, you know, it's got, it's changed so much offshore. I wouldn't go out there right now if my life depended on it.

SW: Really?

EM: Because the first place uh, of my age, because all the new innovations, and there's been a lot of 'em and they're good. And I read about 'em and that's about as far as I want to go with 'em. But uh, they, you know, there's drilling on the bottom of the ocean, completin' wells on the bottom of the ocean. Now this was, this barely being started when I was real active. And only the major companies were doin' it or tryin' it. And it was kind of experimental. And uh, but [Pause] it's uh, the problem is there's no company loyalty anymore from hardly anybody. And uh, either way, either to the employees, the employees to the companies. And this is sad. 'Cause when I grew up and came up, if you worked for Exxon and you took care of your job, you're gonna be there 'til you died. You knew you gonna have a job. If you worked for Texaco it's the same thing. And the same thing where I worked. But I did my job, I knew I was gonna be there.

SW: You trusted the company and they trusted you.

EM: That's right. And they trusted me with, at that time about 40, 50 million dollars a year with their money I was spending down here. Which is not a lot of money today for exploration, but when I was doin' it, it was a lot of money. So that 10 or 12 wells a year. [Pause]

SW: That's uh, that was gonna be my next question to you, if you have any more examples of the progression of the oil industry and specifically how it affected the workers. What I'm hearin' from you is that it's gotten worse for the workers.

EM: I think it has. And it's gotten worse for the companies, 'cause they can't depend on a man. They get somebody trained and goin' in a project and he, somebody offers him more money, he's gone.

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SW: And he's gone.

EM: Because the, with me there was a retirement there starin' me in the face, a nice retirement. And had I, coulda I work 'til I was 65, I would've been a millionaire. Just workin' for a living. Now how many people work for a living and didn't do something illegal or have a, own a side business or somethin' that could end up like that?

SW: Yeah. [Pause] But you could do it.

EM: And, yeah, but uh, you could do it. And another thing, and a banker told me this. I went into the bank when I retired to a trust officer, 'cause I didn't know what to do with my money. And I never had money like that. And I thought I might get some guidance. And this, First National Bank here in Lafayette, which of course is no longer here, that trust officer said, "How much money you got?" I said, "Well in my savings account I got 100,000 dollars." He said, "How'd you get that?" I said, "I saved it from my salary." He said, "Oh no you didn't." I said, "Oh yes I did." He said, "Well, there's not many people done that." I said, "Well that may be true." So I started askin' him about some other things. And I finally just got up and walked out. He wouldn't give me any straight answers. And I said, "Well, I guess I'll have to do this on my own." And uh, but, you know, come off of a farm in western Kansas during the dirty '30s and of course you, you may or may not have heard of that.

SW: Yeah.

EM: And uh, you never used to having anything. [Chuckles] Lucky to eat. And uh, so I didn't know how to handle things like that. I had to learn how to handle. But I learned that.

SW: That's good. [Slight pause] That's good. And you're still consulting now?

EM: Yeah.

SW: Any plans to stop that any time soon or?

EM: Well I think about it often. [Both chuckle] But I don't have a set date.

SW: It seems to me that this industry's such a huge part of your life that you maybe have a little trouble lettin' it go.

EM: [It is?], yeah. I really, until I got to where it bothered to stand on rig [floors?] and stuff, I loved that drilling. And I was drilling consultant. I worked five years for Apache. As a drilling consultant. On, that's all I did was sell 'em rigs. Drill wells, run pipe, log wells, stuff like that. [Pause] And I enjoyed it.

SW: There's not a lot of people can find uh, what, do what they actually like to do and

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make good money doing it.

EM: Yeah, well that's make a livin' doin' that, that's right.

SW: So I think you have a little luck there. Um. [Pause] I guess that's about it unless there's anything else you wanted to add, if there's, you have a story, any interesting stories? [Slight pause]

EM: Oh I don't know, I had-

SW: Anything interesting that happened to you.

EM: I had one blowout. [Laughs]

SW: One blowout.

EM: Yep.

SW: How did, what, tell me about that?

EM: Well it up was up here at [Mire?]. And uh, we were uh, just staring to drill a well, we'd set surface pipe. And we hit a little charged up sand from an old field that Exxon had over to the east of us. [Audio goes out for about 10 seconds] started drilling and it was a contract footage job, which they used to do a lot in those days. They drill down to a certain depth on so much a foot and then you took it over and drilled it on day work. And uh, they always had a mud clause in there, 12 point five pound mud, which was [Inaudible] ready, most surface pipe depth. They uh, it went on company time, get the mud weight up that high. But it took 10 five mud to hold this thing at nineteen hundred feet, which is unusual. And uh, so uh, but it was contract footage and they went back to drilling, we made trip, everything was fine. Took proper amount of mud on five stands. You know, you get up on five stands if you know anything about drilling at all, I don't know.

SW: Little bit.

EM: Comin' out of the hole when, you know, you made your [pillows?]. You sure that hole's takin' a proper amount of fluid. And it took, I was there when we made the trip. And uh, and went back to drillin' and it was during Mardi Gras, and my, first time in my life I was invited to a Mardi Gras ball and it was a black-tie deal. I never had a tuxedo on in my life. So I rented a tuxedo and, man, we're goin' to the ball. 'Bout nine thirty I got an emergency phone call at my house. All of a sudden, called me and said, "Dad, I saw your well on TV, it's on fire." [Both chuckle] So I, and about that time the drilling contractor, who was also at the same party, I heard them page him, he had a emergency phone call. So I followed him to the telephone and his drilling superintendent told him what happened. And, back in those days in the wintertime they had oil burning heaters on

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the floor to kind of keep warm. Open flame. Standard practice. Well when that gas come poppin' out of that well, guess what happen.

SW: Anybody got hurt?

EM: I got a man singed a little bit, that's out on the derrick, but he got [Inaudible] alright. And uh, so I followed Bill [Leis?] out there. Bill was, owned that drilling company. And he said, "Looks like we got a problem." I said, "Yeah." So I went back and got my wife. I said, "We got to go." Like a lot of times. "The party's over right now." And uh, went home, changed my clothes, went out to the well. And man, it was blowing sand, and gas, and fire, and saltwater everywhere. So uh, that was at night, 'course there's not a heck of a lot you can do at night. Every, all the people were out, so there was no, it just surface damage from there on. So uh, the next morning... saltwater had come in, 'course all those shallow sands are saltwater sands and they've just been charged up from another well, so they depleted that gas. And the black, the flame went out, but it's still blowin' saltwater above the derrick. And sand. So uh, I went, I walked into the well, got on the upwind side. Walked in there and got underneath the substructure. You know where I'm talkin' about?

SW: Uh hm, uh hm.

EM: And I looked at the blowout preventers, they were still in place. [Clears throat] I couldn't see any gas or anything or water comin' up around where like it cut hole in the casing. 'Cause all we had were surface pipe and drive pipe in the hole. And so I looked at that and I [Phone rings] that guy that was my drilling superintendent for [Inaudible] Drilling Company was uh... went in there with me. And we determined that we might be able to pump those blowout preventers closed, the blind rams, 'cause the fire had uh, messed up the elevators and dropped what little pipe was still, they were makin' a trip out of the hole. And dropped the pipe, so it wasn't stickin' up in there. So I got a Halliburton truck and laid a tubing line to the blowout preventers and I went with the uh, roustabout crew in there, so they, you know, they were scared and I don't blame 'em. 'Cause it doesn't sound very good. And I went with them, we went in there and wedged into the blowout preventers, in the blind rams. And run a tubin' line back out to where we could get a Halliburton truck to. And I pumped those blind rams shut and shut it in. [Slight pause] All the while the company was getting ready [Laughing] they were ready to kill the well. That was my experience with a blowout.

SW: That was the only one you've ever had?

EM: Yes. I hope I never have another one. [SW laughs] [There's no?]-

SW: They're not good, huh?

EM: No. No. It's a terrible empty feeling to watch a well and you're responsible shootin'

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up there in the air on fire. Kind of gives you a helpless feeling.

SW: Yeah. It's a good story, though.

EM: Yeah. Yeah. [Inaudible] [Both chuckle]

SW: I think you need to make a phone call.

EM: Yeah, I gotta, that was my office.

SW: Okay.

EM: I'm sorry.

SW: Oh it's no problem.

EM: This is the way my day goes.

[END OF RECORDING]

