

Interviewee: Schwab, Frank

Interview Date: August 13, 2002

HHA # 00400

Interviewee: Frank Schwab

Interviewer: Steven Wiltz

Interview Date: August 13, 2002

Interview Site: New Iberia, LA

Interview Module & No.: MMS: SW021

Transcriber: Mary Good

[Transcriber's note: The majority of the interviewer's backchanneling has not been transcribed for the purposes of readability. Interviewer also frequently begins speaking before interviewee has finished his sentence.]

Ethnographic preface:

Frank Schwab started in the oil industry in 1953 as a cook's helper for Stanolin Oil and Gas Company. Shortly thereafter, he asked for a position on a seismographic crew and worked his way through several types of positions with the same company. He spent a total of 33.5 years with the company, 22 of which were offshore. He also discusses the dangers involved in his work and some of the cultural changes he noticed over the years.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [FS]

Interviewee initials: [SW]

Interviewee's wife initials: [MS]

SW: Let's set this up right there...just like that. Okay, interview with Mister Frank Schwab,

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August thirteenth, two thousand and two in his home. And Mister Schwab's wife if she wants to say something. [Chuckles] You can.

FS: [Chuckles]

SW: Oh, so you, you read our article in the paper, so you kind of have an idea-

FS: Mmhm, that's right, I still got the copy of it that I read, it's in the other room on my desk.

SW: You kind of have an idea of what we're looking for, huh?

FS: Ah, from what I can tell, just kind of experiences of what everybody did, while they were working in the oilfield in the early, in the early, from the '50s to the '70s or something like that?

SW: Yeah, that's, that's pretty much exactly, that's where you were, you ah, you worked offshore?

FS: Well, I started in fifty-three on a seismic crew, down in South Texas, on Padre Island.

SW: Oh, okay.

FS: And, I went to work as a cook's helper because they had a quarter on the boat, people were staying out in the, on the boat during the week. I worked as a cook's helper out there on it. I'd gotten out of the army in the year before, in '52, and was looking for work. Decided to try that for a while, I told 'em-

SW: Was that for a specific company?

FS: Yeah, at that time it was known as Stanolin Oil and Gas, which is now British Petroleum, after about six name changes. [Chuckles]

SW: Yeah. [Chuckles]

FS: It was part of, it was a subsidiary of Standard of Indiana, was actually what it was and where they got the name from.

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SW: So you got, you worked, ah, you didn't work for a company that hired out to Standard for the-

FS: No, no, we actually worked for the company itself. Right.

SW: You did just assistant cooking, or I mean-

FS: Well, I was cook's helper, or flunky, or gallery hand, or whatever you call it at the time.

SW: Whatever, whatever they needed?

FS: Yeah, whatever they needed. And, I told 'em at the time when I went to work for them, that's what they were looking for, I told 'em at the time that that was too much like Army KP and I didn't, didn't want to do that, ah, yes, I wanted to go into the field as soon as possible, as soon as they had an opening. And I guess I worked at that, six or eight months, something like that, a good while, and they hired several other people in the meantime to go into the field, and I finally told them, I says, "The next opening that's in the field, is either going to be me, or I'm going home." So that's what happened, and I transferred into the, actually out into the field, doing the, actually doing this.

SW: Had to put your foot down, huh? [Chuckles]

FS: Yeah. I had to, that was what I told them when I hired on, that I wanted to, didn't want to work in the kitchen all the time on it.

SW: But that was, were jobs hard to come by at the time?

FS: Ah, not particularly...they, down in South Texas, down in the valley there, there weren't that many good paying jobs, and this seemed like a good paying job at the time, and it looked like it might have a future if I wanted it or not, but mainly it was a good paying job. I hadn't, after coming out of the army I hadn't done anything at all, so, I was just looking, just looking for any kind of a job that would give me some spending money more than anything.

SW: So that's kind of why you gravitated towards ah, that...

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FS: Yeah, just got it to get a, get a job and start making money and then ah...

SW: Were these oil companies, they had a lot of them at the time, or there was, more activity?

FS: Ah, there were quite a few companies around at the time that did this work, but ah, that was the only one working down there at the time. I, I had seen other ones, working down around there at the time, and before that. But ah, this one the only one out at the time, and they was the only ones looking for work, looking for somebody at the time. I thought that was a good deal, go ahead and start doing that.

SW: So it was pretty easy to get on with them at that point? [Slight pause] How was the food out there?

FS: It wasn't too bad. It was alright. It's not ah, it's not-

SW: You were cooking it, right? [Chuckles]

FS: No, I wasn't cooking, I was more cleaning, and dishwashing, and making beds, and that part of it there. I didn't-

SW: That, KP, KP duty stuff, huh?

FS: More or less KP duty stuff, yeah.

SW: Yeah.

FS: And then ah, that was the one reason, that's what I told 'em when I, when I went to work. It sounded too much like KP that they wanted me to do, and I didn't want to do that forever on the, on the job.

SW: I don't blame you! [Laughs]

FS: [Laughs]

SW: But they finally moved you out into the field?

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FS: Yeah, after I told 'em, I says, "Either I'm going to the field or I'm going home," they finally decided to put me out in the field then. 'Course, I went out as the lowest paid, one of the lower paid field general hands out there, but still it was a little bit, little bit more than what I was making in the kitchen, and...

SW: Roughneck? Okay, you were like a roughneck, or a roustabout, or a...

FS: Ah, they just called them helpers out there on that one, yeah.

SW: Just rig helper?

FS: Just a, not a rig helper, wouldn't, wasn't even a rig, it's actually seismograph work, and-

SW: Oh, I see, sure, okay.

FS: And ah, that's where you go out, and lay out, big long cables, and drill a hole in the ground and drop some dynamite in it, and shoot it, and they have somebody else records it, and I was one of the flunkies that drug the cable around and did all the, all the hard work on it.

SW: Yeah. [Chuckles] Somebody else got the glory, eh?

FS: Somebody else that more or less did the important work on it, so. In fact, I started out helping the surveyor. And him and I didn't get along too good because after a while he wanted, he thought I should be able to read his mind whatever he was doing! [Laughs]

SW: [Laughs]

FS: And I didn't have the slightest idea what kind of work he was doing, or how he wanted it done, or anything like this, so. But I learned as I went along, and then I moved up into the different sections of the recording stuff. And wound up later as an assistant recorder on a crew, so. And that's what I was doing at the time that they ah, shut the crews down.

SW: This was...primarily offshore? When you-

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FS: No, it was all onshore, all...

SW: But on the island.

FS: Um, we started on Padre Island, and in the bay in the back over there, and then we moved up to Galveston Bay I think, we worked around there in Galveston Bay a while, and then from there we went over and worked, I worked the whole coast of Louisiana, I might, you might say, between the Intercoastal Canal and the Gulf. All the way from Sabine Pass to down below Morgan City. I been in every bit of the marsh, all of the marsh of that area! [Chuckles] And some even back into Atchafalaya Swamp there, we went back in there, and we even worked over around Donaldsonville for a while, for a short job over there.

SW: When did you work in Louisiana? What years?

FS: About, let's see, I started in fifty-three, and I guess maybe fifty-four, we started over here in Louisiana. And we'd, I been in South Louisiana from fifty-four 'til...let's see...when did we, sixty-six when we trans-, when we shut down and moved to live in Marksville? Or was it, sixty-six, yeah. [Clock chiming in background] From fifty-four to sixty-six.

SW: Still with Stanolin?

FS: Yeah. At that time, they changed to, I don't know who, at that time, Amoco production, or...

SW: I think it was Amoco, yeah.

FS: Yeah, it was still, it was still part of the, it was still the same company, it's just that they changed their corporate names.

SW: Yeah. Bought out by someone else.

FS: Bought out by [Inaudible], yeah.

SW: And so ah, that's, that's about twelve years of-

FS: Yeah, well actually it was a total of thirteen years that I'd spend in there. I don't know just how that works from...beginning of...see, I went to work in February of fifty-three, and the first

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of July, I think, of sixty-six is when we went to Marksville, when I went to Marksville, when they shut down the crew, I think.

MS: Yeah.

FS: And then it's, in July, that's when we came offshore, in sixty-six. When I trans-, I went into production in Marksville, is what I did at that time.

MS: You went to Marksville in February.

FS: Yeah. Uh, but ah, I was looking for 'em, I was on the last seismic crew that the company had owned themselves, that they was actually doing the running on. After that, they contracted it out, to contract crews.

SW: To somebody else, yeah.

FS: And I always kind of thought that they would keep one crew on, as a check against all these contract crews, see how records were coming against them, the other ones, but they didn't do that. They transferred everybody that was on the crew to different places around into production-

SW: In the area, yeah.

FS: And I happened to get, go to Marksville, me and two other, one other man. And, some of them, some of them decided they didn't want to go anywheres else, they quit, and went home, and some got transferred over into different parts of Texas, to, it was all transferred into production in other words.

SW: When, going a little bit back in time, when you came to Louisiana, that was a transfer by Stanolin?

FS: Yeah, they just, yeah, actually-

SW: They asked you guys to go over-

FS: Actually, actually the crew, that was just where the crew, their next job was, was what that was.

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SW: And you'd move-

MS: [Chuckles]

SW: Okay.

FS: They was working down here in the island first, and then they had their next contract to go, they was going to look in, round in ah, Galveston Bay, and in that area, and then the next job was over here in Louisiana someplace, I don't remember just where, but, that's where we moved over to. It was always just the same company, it was just where their next prospect was-

SW: Where their next project was.

FS: Yeah, where they thought they needed to look at, and...

SW: And you were married at this time, too?

FS: Nope.

SW: Okay. So it was kind of easy for you, just pick up and go?

FS: Yeah, at ah, before that, shortly before I went to work with them, they had four or five key men that moved with the company, and then the rest of the people, just the field hands, general workers out there, they would hire wherever they happened to be working. And then, whenever they'd get ready to move, if you wanted to go, you could go, and if you didn't, you'd quit, if you wanted to stay where you was at, if you lived where you was, or you just wanted to stay there, you'd just quit, and they just, moved the key men, and...

SW: But they always had that core group?

FS: They always had a core group, but ah, later on, as we stayed, we got more and more where people stayed with the crew, and moved with it, and stayed together and worked together.

SW: Okay. Was the m-, it was good pay?

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FS: It was pretty good pay at that time-

SW: Is that-

FS: For that, for that time, yeah.

SW: Was it incentive to stay with the company?

FS: Well, yeah, it had good pay, and it also had good benefits, as far as hospitalization and retirement, and things like that with it, so.

SW: Better than what you could get in other industries at the time?

FS: As far as I know, I didn't ah...I enjoyed the work.

SW: Oh, okay.

FS: [Chuckles] So I did, I wasn't really dissatisfied with it or anything like that, we was working most of the time off of a quarter boat out in the marsh area someplace, where you couldn't get off at night, and we was working a schedule of ten and four.

SW: Ten and four?

FS: Where you worked for ten days, and then you was off for four, and then you went back out and worked for ten days again. In the sum-

SW: What did you, what did you do on those off days? Did you stick on the boat, or stay on the boat, or?

FS: No, came home, came-, at that time, I was pretty much centered here, around New Iberia, and we either partied here in, around New Iberia, we rented a, I had a room that was rented over here all the time. And, I'd either stay here, and what I would usually do, was every other weekend that I was off, I would stay here one weekend, and then the other weekend I'd drive down to South Texas, and visit with my brother, and uh, brothers and sisters and family and friends that I knew

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down there, and visit there for four days, and then drive like mad back over here and be back to work Wednesday morning! [Chuckles]

SW: Ten and four. Wow.

FS: But it was... And then the summertime, then, too, with the long days, we worked enough extra hours during the days that we got off, we just worked nine days, and then we had five days off always during the summertime. But ah...

SW: Oh, okay, so summer changed.

FS: Yeah, summer changed, actually, we didn't put in any, we didn't make any more hours, as far as, or money, by working, we just put in, the same amount of hours in a, in a day less time, you worked an extra hour or so, hour and a half every day for nine days, and then...

SW: So how many hours per day were you working?

FS: Ah, they w-, we worked ten hours a day.

SW: Ten hours a day. No nights, though, or anything like that?

FS: No, no, no nights or anything like that.

SW: Basically, y'all were, y'all were running around, blowing things up with dynamite?

FS: Yeah. [Laughs] Well, in a way, yeah.

SW: Sort of. But you laid a line down, so you could make, make a reading...

FS: Yeah, we laid a recording line down, with recording instruments, and then, every so often, they'd drill a hole and you'd drop dynamite down into it, or different kinds of powder, and set it off and record the little wiggly lines over it-

SW: The activity, yeah.

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FS: Yeah.

SW: Did you ever move into any areas where, where people were living nearby, where you had to blast there?

FS: Ah, we moved, we went through some high land back around ah, let's see, where was...back of, oh back here by, behind Weeks Island, not Weeks Island, Avery Island, and back in there, we worked some in there, we worked some around Donaldsonville like that, but ah...ah, we didn't have to go, we didn't go too much where, actually around people's houses or anything like that. We was kind of out in the-

SW: Out in the marshes.

FS: Marshes and stuff, but. It was really, the only two places that we went where you we was actually, you might say, on high land, the rest of the time we worked in marshland everywhere.

SW: The people that were living nearby, how did they feel about ah, company coming in and digging holes in the ground?

FS: Well, the company, company, the company got a permit from them, to go across their land, and...

SW: They got permits [Inaudible]?

FS: I don't know what they paid for it, or they all received compensation for, for being allowed to go across their land, and stuff like that.

SW: So y'all never had any problems with anything like that?

FS: We, some of us, some of the old people around here want us to drill a well for them, we'd go out there, and...

SW: [Laughs]

FS: Back our drilling rig up in the yard where they wanted it, and drill a hole down in there, and they'd drop, and then we'd move out of the way, and they'd drop their water pipe down into it,

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and, we only did two or three of those that I know of, but ah, that was kind of a common thing to do, but that was, that was what would get you the permit.

SW: Yeah. Yeah.

FS: But ah...

SW: Kind of make, get them to trust you, and then you'd ah...

FS: Yeah, kind of a, kind of a, I want to say good humor, but it's not good humor, what I'm trying to think of, or good neighbor relations, or good company relations, and stuff like that-

SW: Yeah, there you go, good relations.

FS: Good relations is what it did, what it amounted to.

SW: Sounds like you worked hard for ten, nine or ten days, and then y'all had fun for four or five days to blow off the steam, right? [Chuckles]

FS: Yeah.

SW: And ah, how was life out on the quarterboat? Wh-, what did y'all, did you watch TV, or?

FS: We watched TV, and a lot of them played cards and bourre and things like that, and ah, if you just, didn't want to do anything else, you could read, whatever you wanted to do. A lot of times, you were too tired, when you got in at night, by the time you finished eating, you was ready to go to bed again.

SW: Tired and slept. Yeah.

FS: Depending on how, how, what you was doing during the day, out there in the field, as far as that goes. They had quite a few of them that was avid card players, and they'd play bourre.

SW: Did they gamble? I mean, with money?

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FS: Oh yeah, yeah, they gambled for money, but ah-

SW: Any hard feelings? [Chuckles]

FS: No, no, there wasn't no hard feelings, I played with them a few times, and I wasn't that good of a player, so I decided they, I didn't want to lose my, I enjoyed my, I wanted to spend my own money! [Chuckles]

SW: Oh, and you were playing Bourre too.

FS: Yeah.

SW: That's a Louisiana game, so, so maybe...you from Texas?

FS: Yeah.

SW: Yeah, so it's kind of-

FS: I di-, I knew the fundamentals, but not that well that I could play real good. I wa-

SW: Some of them old guys from here, they, they're crafty with it, yeah.

FS: Oh, we had some of them guys here, after you played two cards, he knew exactly what you had in your hand.

SW: Yeah. I don't play that game either.

FS: [Laughs]

SW: I'm from here, but I don't play that game. Not against people that really know how to play! [Laughs]

FS: Uh, those people that know how to play, they, once you play two cards out of your hand, they know pretty well what you've got in your hand, can tell whether or not they're gonna win or not

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on this hand.

SW: No more bluffing, huh? [Laughs] Different from poker.

FS: Oh yeah.

SW: But ah, wh-, and you said y'all hired local sometimes to help you guys out [Inaudible] around the site?

FS: Yeah, whenever, whenever we were shorthanded or something like that, they'd hire some local people from around in the area to, to go to work and do that. And af-, like I say, after a while, most of them, well, once we were here in South Louisiana, we stayed here pretty much all the time. And ah, working ten and four like we were, I mean, we was out on the quarterboat where you did-, couldn't go home at night, it didn't make any difference where you lived here in South Louisiana, we had some guys, lived in Jennings, I lived here in New Iberia with several of them, we had some that lived down around Shack Bay, and down in that area down around in there, and Houma, and things like that, but if you couldn't go home at night, it didn't make, any, whole lot of difference where you lived at the time, it just, it's kind of like working offshore now in the oilfields over there now, you work out there for ten days, and then when you get off, why, you can drive to North Louisiana or wherever for, for your seven days. They work seven and seven, something like that, so, whenever they're off, they go wherever they happen to live, and...

SW: Yeah, I hear some people commute from Mississippi and Alabama sometimes.

FS: Yeah. Mmhhh.

SW: Did ah, did you guys get along with the local people, everything el-

FS: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

SW: I heard lots of ah-

FS: Well, the thing is, when we, most of the time we were working out in the marsh and stuff like that, and all of land is all owned by big companies and things like this, so we really didn't have to get along with people on that land. There wasn't no, no problems as far as ah, getting along, having to get along with people and that, we ran across two or three people that was kind of touchy or nasty about what you did on their land, and things like that, and you had to kind of do what they wanted, but other than that, we didn't have no problems with most people. You know,

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most of that marshland is owned by big companies, and they're not even around, in, in your way, ah, so...

SW: But you must've seen some trappers out there sometimes.

FS: Oh, yeah, sometimes you'd see trappers, saw lots of alligators, we saw, in the summertime, you'd see lots of nutria out there, we had, we left a cable out one night, and nutria chewed it up all night long, to where it wasn't, it had two, ever-, they'd go down the line, and ev-, about every foot, they'd bite into it, and well, salt water would get into it and short everything out.

SW: Would they eat it?

FS: Well, they weren't, they were look, they, they tasted the salt on it, I guess, from our handling it. And it tasted good. So they went down, and they'd bite into it, well, it wasn't good to eat. They'd go a little farther, and...

SW: Try it again!

FS: Try it again!

SW: Took 'em a long time to learn, and then your cable's gone! [Laughs]

FS: Well, [Laughs] they ruined the cable for us, I know that much, and we never did leave one out after that at night! Out in the marsh out there.

SW: Yeah, just run it again, don't want to...

FS: Do you uh, did you guys ever work with any women out there? Did they ever have any women?

SW: Not, not in the seismograph locale. Once, once we went offshore, we had women out there on the workforce.

FS: That was later?

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SW: Later on, yeah.

FS: And you'd say the same for maybe black people, or ah...

SW: Ah, no, we didn't have any black people either at that time on the seismic crews. I don't know whether they didn't hire them, or they didn't want to work, or what the deal was-

FS: You guys just never came across any.

SW: Yeah, I never had any at all as far as, when I was working in the seismic work. Now, after, after we got ef-, closed that down and went to work offshore, we got some out there, we had some women out there and we had the ah, black people out there, too, but ah, we got along good with them, as far as I could...we never did have any problems with them.

FS: Everybody had to get along out there with those-

SW: [Laughs] Well, yeah, yeah.

FS: Because of the water all around you! That was ah, that was, so after nineteen sixty-six you quit the seismic crew?

SW: Well, they shut down the seismic crews, they transferred us into production there, and like I say, I went to Marksville for, from April, no February, to July, and worked up there out of Marksville in production, as let's see, a relief pumper, I think my, my title was.

FS: Did you, did you prefer that, or did you like the seismic work better?

FS: No, well, the seismic work was good, but it could get awful dirty at times. [Chuckles] I had some, some blue jeans and stuff that I could-, that we never did get fully clean after working out there, but the thing was too, once you went out there, and started working some, rolling around in the swamp, in the marsh out there, and the stuff got black and dirty, and full of mud and everything else out there, it didn't pay to put a clean one on the next day because, the first time you jumped off the, off your little platform that you's working off of out there, a little sled or whatever you had, you was just as dirty as you had been with the other ones. So you'd usually wear the same pair of pants and shirt for, for four or five days out there 'til it actually got too stiff to move! [Laughs]

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SW: [Laughs] You'd take off your jeans and stand 'em up in the corner.

FS: Yeah. So. We never did ah, ah, worry too much about how clean we were.

SW: Yeah.

FS: We worked, one time, we was working out of, around ah, Johnson, Johnson Bayou and Holly Beach.

SW: Oh, okay.

FS: And, we working, it was during the wintertime, and we had the quarterboat over in Sabine Pass, and we couldn't get up real close to the shore. [Clock chiming in background] So everybody was getting ready to figure out, and it was snowing, it had snowed that morning, and it was still snowing when we was getting ready to go to work, and ah, the crew chief, with the people doing the work, he came down, looked around, said, looked at everybody, and said, "Everybody with hip boots, and slicker shirts, let's go!" He looked around a little bit, "Everybody that don't have slicker shirts and hip boots, let's go too!" [Laughs] Everybody went!

SW: You had to go! [Laughs]

FS: You had to go! So it didn't make any difference if you boots and slicker shoes or not there, you just put on an extra pair of pants and shirt, to kind of, or a big jacket to keep warm a little bit, and you went on to work.

SW: Like you said, even though our winters aren't that bad, working out in the water...

FS: Working out in the water, if you're wet, and getting damp out there, you can get pretty bad, and then working in the snowstorm, or while snow is falling, is kind of a unique experience. But that was the only time we ever run into that kind of a problem, about-

SW: What year, what year was that? Do you remember?

FS: Ah, I couldn't, I don't remember what year that was anymore.

MS: Well, were we married yet?

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FS: Ah, I don't remember that either! [Laughs]

MS: Can't you?

SW: What year did you guys get married?

MS: In fifty-six.

SW: In fifty-six, okay. So that's when you, sort of, came over...from ah...

FS: Well, yeah, we'd been here two or three years...

SW: Yeah, okay.

MS: Yeah, end of fifty-s-, October fifty-six, we got married.

FS: Yeah, we had been here, two or three, two or three years already, well we. Shortly after we left South Texas and came here, then we moved on over into this area here.

SW: Okay. After you're, ah, after your February to July production in Marksville, what did you do after that?

FS: That's when we went offsh-, into the offshore area, yeah.

SW: That was offshore, okay.

FS: Yeah. They, the company had a few platforms offshore that were being worked by contract people, and they decided that they were going to go more into their own personnel offshore, and they p-, had to bring on a bunch more platforms, too, so they looked for people to transfer offshore, and they were asking everybody onshore who all wanted to go transfer offshore. And I st-, we still owned this house here, we were living in Marksville at the time, and I says, "Well..." They interviewed us and ask us where we wanted to work out of, they said, we could either work out of Intracoastal City, or they was going to work out of Leesville, down, above, 'round Grand Isle, that area, that Leesville. And I said, "Well, I'll go offshore if I can work out of the

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Intracoastal City office.” They were going out off there out of the Intracoastal City area, and they said, “Okay.” Mainly so I could more back home here to the house. But I transferred, we went back offshore then. And we started offshore on the fifth of July of sixty-six, I guess it was.

MS: [Inaudible]

FS: I know it was the fifth of July.

MS: I think it was sixty-six.

FS: I think it was sixty-six that we went offshore, there, started working out here. When they-

SW: In, in production offshore?

FS: Yeah. They took us into the office, and there was five of us that decided we was going to work, they had three platforms offshore that we was working on. We had two of ‘em off here, out of Intracoastal City, they had one, off of Grand Isle, out in West Delta block, and they had one over this way about fifty miles, ah, Eugene, not, not Eugene Island ah...

MS: There is a Eugene Island...

FS: Yeah, but they had one on South Timbalier or something, South Timbalier I think, in that area. And there were five of us that came into the office that morning, on the fifth, and they told us we had been hand-selected to, to go to work in offshore area, and we found out later on we was the only five that were dumb enough, dumb enough to apply! [Laughs]

MS: [Laughs]

FS: Is, is the way of, is the way of putting it! [Chuckles] We were the only five that actually applied for the job, so.

SW: But that’s the, what was left. But ah, they made you feel good for a little while, though, huh?

FS: Well, yeah, well, until we found out that we was the only ones dumb enough to go for the job! [Laughs] But ah, I enjoyed it offshore, it was good work and everything. I started off as just a platform helper, what they called at that time.

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SW: What would they call that now? Ah, roughneck, or roustabout?

FS: Well, they still, no, no, still a pl-, that dif-, what the production part, is different from the drilling section out there. Where you have your roustabouts and roughnecks in the drilling, we just have platform operators, and ah, well, that's what they all are, platform operators, now. They just have-

SW: You guys are monitoring the flow of the oil?

FS: Yeah, we do the actual production of the wells after they've been drilled and completed and everything's ready to go. When I first went to work, we was bringing on the platform, out here in Vermilion 35 for the first time, company had a contract with Florida Power and Light to furnish them twenty-three...million...I guess twenty-three million cubic feet, or twenty-three thousand, cubic feet a day of natural gas over there to Florida. And had a ridiculous low price that they got it for because gas, natural gas wasn't really worth anything at that time.

SW: Yeah, yeah. I heard they were just burning some of it off a lot of times.

FS: Yeah, a lot of places were, but by the time, we had a twenty-year contract with them, and ah, by the time twenty years was up, gas, natural gas was selling for a dollar and a half or something like that a cubic foot, and we was still selling it to twenty-three cents a cu-, a cubic foot over there because that was the contract we had negotiated!

SW: Man. Yeah.

FS: So the company was glad when that contract wound up, though, [Chuckles] for one thing.

SW: Well, they probably signed it hoping the price would go ah, would go down and they would make their money.

FS: Well, yeah, well, they was making money at that price at the time, when they signed it, yeah, they were making money at the time there, because there really wasn't any market for natural gas at that time, for a larger volume of natural gas.

SW: Did you ah, did you ever work on a drilling rig itself?

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FS: No, I never did actually work on the drilling rigs, I worked on, well, let's put it this way, I worked on the production side, a lot of times, we had production and drilling going on at the same time on a platform, and I worked on the production while the drilling rig was on there.

SW: Oh, okay.

FS: But ah, I never did actually work on a drilling rig that oil-

SW: What's the, what's the comparison in your mind, did you think it would be better to be on the rig or on the platform?

FS: Ah, the platform was a lot cleaner.

SW: I would imagine.

FS: Now, we us-, we talked one time to one of the roughnecks on the rig there, and we was asking how he was doing on that, and he said, "Well, okay." He asked what kind of ah, gas pressure we was working with around there. Well, everything on the gas pressure on all those platforms runs at about twelve hundred, thirteen hundred pounds per square inch. And then when I told him that, he looked at me like I was crazy! [Laughs] For working around equipment that had that kind of pressure on it! And I thought he was crazy for doing what he was doing over there, where he could get knocked in the head with a piece of drill pipe just any, or a broken chain just any time! [Laughs] So...

SW: Yeah, but there could be a blow out up on the platform? Yeah.

FS: Yeah, platform could, you could have a problem with a platform too, but if you knew what you were doing pretty well, and you, we never did have that problem with it there. Now we did have a couple of 'em catch fire from different things, we had one catch fire one time because of a oil transfer pump, well a seal, went to leaking and started spewing hot oil, spewing oil over the exhaust system on the pump, and it caught fire, and pretty well got destroyed, I got a picture of it over there, in the back, with it on fire, and ah, but ah, it pretty well melted the platform, or a lot of the platform on down, but nobody got hurt on it or anything like that. But ah, most of the production stuff was all automatic, your tank got loaded automatic, you kicked the pump on, this happened during the night, is what happened, and nobody caught it in time, 'til it got too big to put out. So that's one reason it got away from us on that one. Now they've had one or two where they've, while they were drilling they had, hit a natural gas pocket that they weren't expecting, and it blew out then, and set the rig on fire that way too, once or twice, but ah... They had one just lately down there off of Grand Isle, last week, or this week, where that, where that, 'course the gas pocket wasn't that much, but. We used hit a few of those too, while we was doing

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seismograph work some-, down around in the marsh down below Houma, that area is kind of notorious for having shallow underground gas pockets.

SW: Really? Oh, okay.

FS: And, ah, we left one night, we had drilled a hole and left the rig sitting, a little shot-hole rail rig sitting over it, and the next morning when we came back, there wasn't nothing there but a big pile of sand! WE don't know where the drilling, where the little drilling rig went to! [Laughs] But it had blown out during the night and evidently some of it had collapsed down, and then the rest of it kept blowing and filled the hole up with sand and stuff, but we never did find the little drilling rig that time, or when... But that area down there was notorious for that kind of stuff.

SW: People knew about it.

FS: Yeah, people knew about it.

SW: When you were offshore, how many years did you ah, did you spend offshore? On that, on those production platforms?

FS: Ah, I guess it was about fifteen years we've spent offshore.

MS: Sixty-six to eight-six.

FS: Yeah.

SW: Twenty years?

FS: Yeah. Yeah.

SW: All, you still, you worked for Stanolin all your whole, you retired from them?

FS: Mmhhh, the whole time I worked it was always the same. Last time, last part of it was Amoco production company, if I remember right, before they bought out by ah, British Petroleum.

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SW: And who knows who they're going to be next year, huh? [Laughs]

MS: [Laughs]

FS: And I retired shortly before, I guess a year or two before it was bought out by British Petroleum. But ah, I moved up from just being an operator into ah, automation while we were, while I was working here offshore in Vermilion area, we put a little, well, let's a little computer, it was a beg computer, almost covered this whole wall here, to monitor the flow of the wells and also to supposedly control them, 'course we was flowing the wells wide open at that time, you'd, all you'd do is to kind of monitor them to see what they was doing on this, but ah, I started going to trade school then on electronics, just so I could kind of keep an eye that came out and serviced the, the equipment. And I guess, I hadn't finished my first year with that when the boss came in one day, or one of the supervisors came in and said, "You're going to be our next ah, automation foreman. And you can't turn us down." [Laughs]

SW: Well, it's a, being offered a promotion with no other alternative. [Laughs]

FS: [Laughs] Well, in a way, he put it, there was, no. I never did ask him, well, what else, you know, so who, or what. I says, "Okay. If that's what you want." Because I was really the only one that, in ah, that was working in the offshore area that had even shown an interest as far as electronics was concerned. And so we was, they were getting ready to automate all the platforms that we had offshore, so that's what we actually did, and they started putting automation equipment on all the platforms to monitor the flow of the gas and the oil and all of this things on all of the platforms.

SW: So your reward is sort of a promotion, and I'm sure they gave you more money for that, too...

FS: Yeah, you, once-

SW: It was kind of worth it-

FS: Once, once I got into that, I was made, made a su-, it was a supervisor position, and got a straight salary then. So in one sense, it's a promotion, and in another way, well, it's not because you work, you work as many hours as they need you or something like this, and the-

SW: Pay stays the same.

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FS: Pay stays the same, yeah. The only good thing about it is, you knew at the end of the month, you got X amount of dollars all there.

SW: Yeah, it was consistent.

FS: It was consistent, yeah. So.

SW: What kind of schedule, before you got up to that, what kind of schedule did you normally work out there in the sixties and seventies?

FS: Well, before we got, when I first went out offshore like that, we was working a five and two. But it walked. You worked one weekend, and let's see, you worked, I forget how it worked out, but one weekend you was off Monday and Tuesday, I think, or Tuesday and Wednesday, next week, you was off Wednesday and Thursday, and then you had a four-day weekend. And you had ever so, ever, once a month you had a four, it worked out so that your two days off from this week and your two days off from the beginning, next week, came together.

SW: Came together.

FS: You had a four-day weekend ever-, once a month, it worked out to. The rest of the time and ah, you had a Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday, I think, and then a Wen-, Tuesday and Wednesday or Wednesday and Thursday, kind of, you worked an odd weekend, odd week, it's, six and two, or something like that was the way you worked, but it worked, five and two, but they walked itself all the time so there were, once month you had a four day weekend, and you know, four days off, so...

SW: That's nice.

FS: It worked out real good, and then once, I got raised up to the manager position, or supervisor position, supposedly it was a five and two, and sometimes it worked out to fourteen and sixteen, and whatever, whatever the job called for at that time, yeah.

SW: Called for, yeah [Chuckles]

FS: I remember one time, we had one platform [clock/music box chiming loudly] we was getting ready to bring online, and it had to be online, we rebuilt the platform, and it had to be online by this date. And we had about two weeks to get everything installed and hooked up and operated. We had men crawling around on that platform like ants! Hooking different things up and getting

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it ready, and, and doing everything that had to be done to make sure it got ready to go. And I was one of them out there, supervising the crew installing the automation equipment out there, monitoring equipment. I know we stayed out there fourteen or fifteen days, and did get the thing online and flowing when it was supposed to. But we had, we worked then from daylight to past dark to do stuff there, we was working by light, sometimes at night, up to ten o'clock at night, trying to get things hooked up, put together, so. That was really the only time that I worked long, strange hours on, on anything, but ah, I always looked at it as part of the job, and ah, I really didn't have, I had a lot to do in one-, I was responsible for a lot, during that. But as far as actually getting out and doing the labor, I didn't have to do the actual labor unless somebody needed some help to hold up an end of a piece of pipe, or help pull some wire or something like that, but ah. But that's all I did on that part of it and then, for, I guess, a year two or three, I was the only person in charge of all of the automation equipment. And I went from ah...

SW: So if you took a vacation you were in trouble. [Chuckles]

FS: Well, if they had any problems they were. [Chuckles] But I worked between Grand I-, well, south of, below Grand Isle, all the way over here to East Cameron area on platforms that we had automated. And at that time, after we got everything installed on the different platforms, I was more or less just racing back and forth troubleshooting whenever they had problems someplace, I'd go, had to go out and see what was wrong, and see about getting them fixed. And then after a while, they started hiring some people just to work offshore that stayed out there, ah, what was it seven and seven?

MS: Seven and seven.

FS: Seven and seven was what everybody normally worked out there, I was still working five and two, or whatever, whenever, what had to be done, and then we started hiring some men that was strictly automation technicians or whatever you wanted to call them out there that stayed on the platform to take care of that stuff at that time, and then later on, I didn't have to do quite as much running around then.

SW: And that was, that was in the more recent years?

FS: yeah. In the last, I guess in the last-

SW: As the technology advanced.

FS: About the last seven eight years, something like that, that I worked out off there, out offshore. But I was still more or less in charge, me, well, they actually got two more people to help me also during that time, we got two more supervisors that had the same job as I did, we kind of split the

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gulf up then. I took this area, and then one of them went ahead and took this area to supervise, and the other one took over that area. And got to where we didn't have, we still had plenty to do, but it wasn't quite as hectic as it had been. So we had ah, people working for us offshore, under us, all they did was take care of the automation equipment, and we had to supervise it, and if they had problems we had to either go out and see if we could figure out what was wrong or order parts for them, and get that out to them, or whatever needed to be done at that time. But then also, somewheres along in there was when they started hiring, well we hired a black guy while I was still working five and two out of Intracoastal City as a, as a rou-, helper out there, platform operator. We hired our first black guy. Who happened to be a teacher from Lafayette.

MS: Who's that, Joe?

FS: Joe, yeah.

SW: What year was that?

FS: Oh...

SW: Sixties? In the late sixties? Early seventies

MS: Oh, it was probably in the seventies, no?

FS: Oh, let's see...no....

MS: Maybe? I don't know.

FS: Somewheres in there, I guess we'd been offshore maybe two years or something like that when we hired-

MS: Oh yeah, it'd be about sixty-eight, sixty-nine.

FS: Sixty-eight, sixty-nine, somewheres in there is where we hired the first one that I know of, that I worked with.

MS: Yeah, because he had been there, I mean, a good while.

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FS: Yeah. He was really a nice guy, and he was a, he was an older guy, and ah, I talked to him a while about, talking about different things as far as people going actually slip up and not being used to working with a black, and they're going to slip up every once in a while and say the wrong word around him or something like this, and he said, "Well, that doesn't bother me too much," and he says, "That was alright," I remember one morning, we were all standing around, waiting to go out down there. And one of the salesman came up, and started telling stories and stuff, and started telling a story, I don't know if we want to record this or not... [Chuckles]

SW: Oh, well ah...

FS: He started telling the story, and it was about a black guy, and he was using the word "Nigger" and "nigger this" and "nigger that" and all of this, and me and Joe, he was standing on one side of the crew, circle, and I was on the other side. And we looked at each other, and we kind of winked at each other.

SW: [Chuckles]

FS: And he didn't say a word, and I didn't say a word, and we just waited for the old boy to get, get on through with his story, and man, about that time he got through with his story and everybody kind of laughed about it, and he happened to look around and see Joe and he said, "Man..." He started to apologize and everything else, and Joe and I just busted out laughing [Laughs] we couldn't hold, we couldn't hold it anymore! But he did-, he didn't, he was a pretty good old boy about stuff like that, he knew what stuff like that, and he was accommodating...

SW: Yeah. That it was going to happen.

FS: Yeah. And ah-

SW: And he was a teacher?

FS: He was a teacher in Lafayette, I don't remember which school or anything like that, but he was a teacher in Lafayette.

MS: Wasn't his, wasn't his wife a teacher also?

FS: Yeah, his wife was a te-, I think he was a math teacher in Lafayette.

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MS: I don't know.

FS: And, I don't know what his wife taught. But ah...

MS: They were nice.

FS: They were a nice couple, as far as that goes. They were real friendly, and-

SW: Did he get, he got into offshore to make more money?

FS: I guess, and maybe he got-

MS: Most likely.

FS: That, or got tired of teaching and stuff like that, putting up with the hassle of teaching, maybe, I don't know, probably to make more money.

SW: Yeah.

MS: Teaching doesn't pay. [Chuckle]

SW: Unfortunately, no it doesn't.

FS: No.

SW: That's interesting. That's interesting. And I'm sure you saw more later, as the years...

FS: Yeah, as we went on, years later, they got, they hired, several women, and they hired a few more black people, and I never, we never did have any problems with any of them as far as that goes.

MS: Well, I think 'cause all those y'all hired were...pretty good workers.

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FS: Yeah, they were all good workers, and-

SW: Well, that's what I heard from some people was he said there were no prejudices out on the rig except if you didn't work.

FS: Yeah, well that was-

SW: If you didn't pull your own workload, then somebody would have a problem with you.

FS: Yeah. But ah, no, we never did have any problem with them not doing their work or getting right out and getting just as dirty as you did or anything else as far as that goes. In fact, ah, this first guy that I worked with out there, Joe, he was finally made a supervisor out there too, he was made a platform foreman out there later on, so.

SW: Oh, okay. Did they have separate quarters for the women?

FS: Yeah, what we had was, not really separate quarters, we had ah, sections of the quarters buildings that had ah, couple of extra rooms off to the side with a separate bathroom for them. And that was the main thing that we did, that we did.

SW: Yeah, yeah.

FS: I teased one of them one night, we had to, I had to stay out offshore, I stayed out offshore, and she had the room next to me and I kept, I came down the next day, and I was kidding, I says, "You know I slept this far from you last night?"

MS: [Laughs]

SW: [Laughs]

FS: And she looked at me kind of funny, and I said, "Well, it was a big wall between us, but it was that wide!" [Laughs] She laughed about it too, but ah, it was, there wasn't nothing hanky-panky went on offshore, you know, in the first place, you didn't have time for it, and in the first, second place, you never could find a place where you could get alone long enough to have any hanky-panky or anything like that either, so.

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SW: Yeah. Too much work going on.

FS: Too much work going on and too many other, you had a crew out there of about fifteen pe-, eight-, anywheres from ten to fifteen people out there all the time, so, and those platforms don't have no place to hide, either, as far as that goes on, there ain't no place that....

SW: Yeah. Out there or the water.

FS: Yeah, so. It didn't make any difference. Nothing, nothing went on on any of the platforms.

SW: And ah, how many, how many, sounds like a strange question, how many children do you guys have?

MS: Three.

FS: Three girls.

SW: And so how was, how was back here when he was on the rig?

FS: [Chuckles]

MS: Hmm! Oh, for the ten days, that's when everything always went wrong. [Laughs]

SW: Naturally!

FS: That was, that was during the first part, when we first were married, when the first with the, when I was still working seismic work.

MS: Yeah. Yeah, from fifty-six until sixty-six. Oh, yeah. That was always, but ah, it really wasn't bad, it was kind of hard having him gone, but ah.

SW: But you make it work?

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MS: But the kids look forward to when he'd come home, they'd meet him at the back, back door and grab him by the leg real quick and he said, "Well, if you let go, I can get in."

SW: [Laughs]

MS: And they'd hide, and we were so glad to see him because he was gone so much, but I knew when I married him how he was working, and-

FS: Yeah, I had been working that way a while already, so she knew what she was kind of getting into as far as that part was concerned.

MS: We just took everything in stride, and sometimes he'd come home, first thing, "The washer's broken, the dryer's broken" he'd have to repair it! [Chuckles]

SW: You didn't even have to change out of your muddy clothes, huh? Go right to that.

FS: But ah, the other thing too, we were fir-, when we first married, we was living across the street from her mother, so. That helped a whole lot.

MS: Yeah.

SW: Oh, okay.

FS: And ah, she could help a lot with the kids and stuff like that, too.

MS: Well, ah, I did have one.

FS: Yeah, we just had one at that time-

MS: By the time Marty was born, we was moving from there.

FS: Yeah.

MS: Marty was only a year old-

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FS: But ah-

MS: I lived, yeah, I'd go across to Momma's, and I, at first I slept at Momma's at night, not to sleep by myself, and then I said, "Well, I've got to learn to stay alone," well, I took a flashlight and put it under my pillow, and ah, next morning, I thought, ah, maybe try the flashlight. It didn't work!

FS: [Laughs]

MS: Lot of good that did. So from then on, I just didn't worry. I started staying by myself. I knew had to eventually do it. 'Cause once you have a child, you can't be lugging a child constantly somewheres, and I said, ah I just got to adjust to all of this. And I did, and it was fine after that.

FS: One time during our, while I was still working seismic, we had the quarterboat, down in the canal just below Intra-, ah, Gueydan, and ah, it was listed, it's called the Gueydan Canal, and I had switched around, during our four days off, we had a different guy, that worked, he worked an opposite shift from us, so he was on the quarterboat while we were, the rest of the crew was off, he took care of the generators and made sure everything worked, and things like this, and then once or twice, when it was tu-, his turn to take a vacation, I would switch over and take that job. Well, one weekend when we were off, everybody was off, she came down with the kids, and spent the night.

MS: On the quarterboat. [Chuckles]

FS: On the quarterboat with me down there. And it was alright, it was an adventure for the kids and things like that, for her to-

MS: Kind of see where he, what he did.

FS: and see where sh-, where I lived and how it worked, things like this, but that was the only time, it was the only time actually where you could, where we could drive right up to the quarterboat there and just park our cars right beside it and get it out and go up on the quarterboat. But at that time we was working in the, the field land down there below Gueydan, but ah, BP Amoco just gave to the state, that was where we were actually working. So ah...

SW: Oh, okay.

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FS: But that was the only time that they actually came down to visit with us, but it was something different for them. Once while we were offshore, the company brought the wives out, one, over the weekend, they flew some of the wives out to the platform and spent the day, spent the day out there, they had a big dinner for them, so, on a Sunday, spent the day out there so that they could see where the husbands worked, they did that once or twice I think.

MS: I think twice.

FS: That they did that. But ah, it wasn't a, it wasn't a, I liked it, I liked the work offshore, but the only thing, after, shortly before I retired, it was getting to where, one of the guys, one of the bosses says, "Work's not fun anymore." IT got to be where everything you did had to be okayed before, before that, we had something that need to be done, we went ahead, got the parts, bought it and paid for it and everything else and got it all okayed regardless of how big the job was, aside from building a platform. But after a while it got to where, management wanted to make more and more of the decisions, every time you wanted to do something you had to submit a report to somewhere else, and second guess them, and see which way, how to write the report so that they would approve it or something like this, and it got to be where it wasn't, as he said, it wasn't fun anymore. Used to be, enjoyed it.

SW: [Chuckles] Not like the old days.

FS: Right. Used to go out, and you did your job, and got it done, and what, regardless of where, how much it took, or what it took, and everything like this. And then, towards the end there, it got to where, like he said, it wasn't fun anymore, so, when they offered us early, some of us early retirement, I took, they offered early retirement to me two years before I actually took it. But the package that they were offering at that time, I'd a had to go back to work. It wasn't quite enough to live off of. And I was only six-, fifty...fifty-five I guess. I was only fifty-five years old at that time. So. And what they were offering wouldn't have carried me 'til, sixty, or sixty-whatever, sixty-two or whatever. So I turned them down on that one. And then two years later, they came back, and offered us another package. And they said, "Okay, you've got this much money in retirement, we're going to give you this much severance money, and this much vacation," whatever, all the stuff they got, and you, take it or leave it, they says, "If you stay, we don't know where you're going to be working, you may be working in Montana next week, after this."

SW: Yeah, things have changed too much.

FS: Yeah. Or you may be where you're at, or you may take a demotion, or whatever, on the thing there. So. I st-, did a little bit of studying on what I was offered and said, "Well, I think I can get by with what I've got, what they're offering this time."

SW: Yeah.

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FS: So I took an early retirement at age fifty-seven and a half, I guess. I was hoping that I could've worked, retirement is effective, July the first or June thirty-first or thirtieth, and I was hoping I could've worked 'til over the fourth of July to make up the full years when I'd first started going offshore [Chuckles] but they, "Nope! First, first of July, you gone!"

SW: Oh yeah. They did that on purpose, huh?

FS: Yeah. Well, maybe so, I don't know, but ah, I had thirty-three years and...

MS: Thirty-three and a half!

FS: Thirty-three years and a half, thirty-three and a half years with the company when I retired.

SW: That's great.

FS: Yeah, like I say, what I was doing when I ended up, in fact, what I was doing when I first, when I shut-, finished doing seismograph work, I wouldn't have thought that I'd have been doing when I went to work, it was entirely out from what I'd ever done before or had knowledge of, or anything else, and when I wound up, at the end of production, when I retired, it was still entirely different from what I had done all my life, or ever thought I'd been doing so. It's, it's kind of, it was a good life, as far as I'm concerned.

SW: No regrets about the company?

FS: Oh no, uh-uh.

SW: What about ah...

FS: I kind of stumbled into dumb luck as far as retire-, [Chuckles] into retiring! I kept putting more and more money into retirement as I went along, every time I got a raise, well, "This only amounts to three dollars a check, put it in the retirement account." And if it wouldn't have been for that, I wouldn't have been able to retire when they offered it to me, because I'd been doing that all these years. So that was one thing, one reason that, like I say, it was dumb luck on that part of it there. But I wasn't paying that much attention to it. And the other thing, at the time, you couldn't put anything into retirement except company stock.

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SW: Okay.

FS: All the companies were that a way. You put, you want to put money into retirement, it dir-, it went into a company stock account. And it was only the last few years, three, 'bout three, four years at the most, that I was working where you could diversify, you could put it into some other stock or a different kind of account, retirement account and stuff like this. But I never did change mine, I just left mine company stock, and I had a right fair share of company stock when I retired, enough that I could afford to retire comfortable-, comfortably. We haven't gone overboard on spending or anything like that, but we haven't hurt either, as far as that goes, and like I say, it was just dumb luck that I kept getting the money into the retirement account! [Laughs]

SW: Yeah. It worked out!

FS: And I guess, for about the last ten years that I worked, I was putting as much as I could, or as much as they would allow me, let's put it that a way. You had only a certain amount that you could put into the retirement account. Of your total wages. And I was putting all that I could at that time, for about the last ten years into a retirement account. So I managed to, by sheer dumb luck, to have enough money to be able to retire comfortable when they, when it came time for it, so. [Clears throat]

SW: Looks like that worked out for you.

FS: It worked out fine as far as I'm concerned. So.

SW: Um, that's, that's about all I have, actually, unless you have anything to add. Do you mind if I take a look at that picture you have?

FS: Yeah, if I can find it, see how far down, where it's at, that might be the- [Door/chair squeaks]

[END OF RECORDING]