

Interviewee: Fournet, Robert

Interview Date: June 11, 2002

HHA # 00177

Interviewee: Robert Fournet

Interviewer: David DiTucci

Interview Date: June 11, 2002

Interview Site: Lafayette, LA

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Transcriber: Lauren Penney

[Transcriber's note: The majority of the interviewer's backchanneling and "uhs" and "ums" have not been transcribed for the purposes of readability. The audio quality is not very good, so at times audibility is poor.]

Ethnographic preface:

Robert Fournet graduated in 1952 from Southwestern Louisiana Institute with a degree in geology; during his college years he did some roustabouting and roughneck work. Upon graduating he worked for Superior Oil Company as a roughneck, but was soon called into service with the Navy for a year. When he returned he went to work for Hycalog for two-thirds of a year and then for Eastman Oil Well Survey Company, where he stayed for 10 years. After leaving Eastman, he took a job with Directional Engineers, Inc., where he developed and operated a surveying division for eight years. His wife and he formed the Bob Fournet Company and bought the division he had been operating at Directional Engineers; they ran the company for 25 years, until they sold it in 1996 to a Canadian Company. Mr. Fournet stayed on with the company for two more years as a consultant before retiring in 1998. He talks at length about the early offshore industry, particularly about specific companies. He then discusses his own company.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [DD]

Interviewee initials: [RB]

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DD: Uh, interview with Mister Bob Fournet. It is June eleventh, 2002, 10 in the morning. Alright. So you basically own a consultant firm now? Or, or-

RF: No, I'm not. I uh, I retired from the oil and gas business when my wife and I sold our oil and gas service business in, in May of 1996.

DD: Ninety-six, okay.

RF: The buying, uh, the purchaser was [Computerlog?] of Canada. And they kept me on as a consultant for two years. So I actually retired in '98. But this office is the, is the office that runs the shopping center that my family owns.

DD: Oh, so you own the shopping center up there, on the corner of Johnston and College?

RF: Yeah, all of this back here. So uh, I'm up, [connected?] [Inaudible], but not anymore.

DD: Well what we're interested in is how, when you were connected to the oil business.

RF: Yeah, I finished in, I finished school at SLI. Which is now University of Louisiana at Lafayette. It was then Southwestern Louisiana Institute. I finished in 1952 in geology. And uh, then I went into a training program with The Superior Oil Company. And that uh, was a roughneck. Yeah. [Chuckles] While I was roughneckin' for Superior I called in the Navy. After spending a year in the Navy, uh, I returned to civilian life and uh, then went to work for Hycalog. Worked for Hycalog for a couple of years. Um, it wasn't a couple years, it was about a year and, no, less than a year. Make it eight or nine months, somethin' like that. At which time I went to work for Eastman Oil Well Survey Company. Which is a directional drilling firm [Inaudible], it's not the [only?] directional drilling firm in the world. Uh, company created directional drilling. Worked for them for 10 years.

DD: Ten years.

RF: And joined uh, a small directional drilling firm called Directional Engineers, Incorporated. And they allowed me to form a surveying division in that company. And I formed that division in that company and operated it for eight years at which time they sold the, that division. And my wife and I formed the company, the Bob Fournet Company.

DD: Okay, Fournet. [Pronounces "Fournet" with a hard "t"]

RF: We-

DD: Or Fournet. [Pronounces "Fournet" with a silent "t"]

RF: It, it's pronounced both. Bein' French it's Fournet. [Pronounces "Fournet" with a silent "t"]

DD: Yeah, okay. [Chuckles]

RF: It's been Englishized many years ago. Anyhow, we formed the company to buy and operate that division that I created with Directional Engineers. Uh, and we did so for 25 years. Went all

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over the world. And sold to Canadian company Computerlog.

DD: Yeah in '96.

RF: In 1996.

DD: Okay.

RF: Uh, had opportunities because of uh, when we started see [Phone ringing] the business grow in the Gulf of Mexico and that's what you interested.

DD: Yeah, we're interested in most in the Gulf of Mexico. Um, but we're interested in how the oil life in general affected the people in the region.

RF: Well uh, as far as the history of the operations in the Gulf of Mexico, uh, you might be interested to know that probably the best source of information would be the J. Ray McDermott Company.

DD: Really?

RF: Yeah. And the reason I say that they were and maybe still are the predominate construction-

DD: Yeah, I'm familiar with that company.

RF: At the time that move was made to operate offshore, they, they were the, probably the only people who had the capability to build offshore platform and installation of those platforms. And they built in 1946 uh, they built an old um, creosote piling platform offshore P-, uh, Cameron.

DD: Cameron, yeah.

RF: And uh, I'm sorry to say that I did some work on that old platform and had some pictures of it, but I can't find the pictures. I was gonna bring 'em to you.

DD: Well we can, if you ever do find the pictures just contact us and we'd love to copy them.

RF: I'd be glad to. [Take my pic?], it's out in my car, if you have one of yours I'd like to have it.

DD: Um, actually I remembered to, I remembered I didn't bring 'em [RF chuckles] halfway here.

RF: Well maybe you can mail me one.

DD: I can do that.

RF: Okay, and uh, uh, this was probably uh, historically the first move offshore. It was just a short distance offshore.

DD: Two miles wasn't it?

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RF: Um...

DD: That's what I've heard. About. Yeah.

RF: You can see the beach quite easily. Uh, and uh, and I did some work on that platform. And I'm gonna guess about 1954, somethin' like that, '54 [sometime?], we did some uh, some resurveying of some of the old wells [Inaudible]. Anyhow, I had some pictures of it and pictures of us goin' to it from the location. And how really primitive those [situations/installations?] were.

DD: Oh really? How primitive were they?

RF: Well, for instance, today if you go out to work on a platform in the Gulf of Mexico there'll be a crane that lower a person off that. You get in a little basket and they'll pick you up, put you on the rig. In those years they backed the boat up the platform and they threw a rope out to you, you grabbed the rope and swung onto the [Both laugh] swung onto the platform see.

DD: That sounds kind of dangerous.

RF: It was dangerous. [Chuckling] Oh that's dangerous to say the least. Uh, living quarters, service company personnel had to very often bring their own food to eat.

DD: Oh really?

RF: Yeah. There was next to nothin'.

DD: Wow.

RF: Next to nothin'. Uh, I can remember going out on a drilling rig where I slept between [the motor?].

DD: Ooh, that's sounds dangerous too.

RF: Well, it was comfortable. [Both laugh]

DD: It was warm.

RF: [Chuckling] It was warm. Uh, that, some of the old barge rigs that we operated in the, in the uh, in the marshes and in the coastland, uh, the coastland [Inaudible] of Louisiana had, had just one little livin' quarters and that was for the toolpusher, the guy who ran the rig.

DD: That's it?

RF: And he not only had a boat skipper, but he had cook. And uh, if you were real nice and he was real nice to you, he might let you sleep in that boat skipper's bed. Maybe.

DD: Maybe. [Chuckles]

RF: Uh, it'll interest you to know that I went offshore on an old rig one time. It was a barge rig, it

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was owned by [Mobil?] drilling company. And it was known as the W. W. One. And, and all this seemed strange because most of the other rigs had a person's name or Mobil Four or somethin' like that. I, I asked this guy, I said, "What's the W. W. One? Where does that come from?" [Chuckling] He said, "Well this damn old rig is so old, it was built in World War One." [Both laugh]

DD: Pretty old rig.

RF: [Chuckling] That's not the truth-

DD: Well yeah of course he was exaggerating.

RF: But it was known W. W. One.

DD: Wow.

RF: Uh, I was fortunate to be with Eastman Oil Survey Company in the mid '50s when, when the man who created ODECO uh, dreamed up the idea of making submersible barges with drilling rigs on top of these barges for use offshore.

DD: In other words instead of just being out there on a, basically a boat, they kind of anchored, how, how did it work?

RF: Well, the uh, they had been building submersible barges for marsh work. And they were working in maybe four or five feet of water, maybe 10 at the most. And the, the, all the drilling operations were on a barge, steel barge. We would get it on location, get it lined up where they wanted to do, and they would sink it. [Phone ringing] And they would just sink down to the, to the bottom of the canal. And you would do your drilling from there. When you got ready to leave, you would pump the water and it'd float and you'd tow it to where you wanted to. Well they, they decided they could do that with offshore rigs. And uh, ODECO, which was Ocean Drilling and Exploration Company, uh, was run by... I can't remember his name. [Pause] This man was a... was a Naval architect that had been brought down to Morgan City, Louisiana, to work for Kerr-McGee. Kerr-McGee was the first-

DD: First off-

RF: Off-, offshore operator-

DD: Off land, yeah.

RF: I, I, we were, we [Inaudible]. And this guy was probably instrumental in getting that first location [put in off?]. But when he left Kerr-McGee he formed this Ocean Drilling and Exploration Company, we get to know as ODECO. And until they sold out to [Inaudible] operation in the '90s, they were by far the largest and most prominent offshore and drilling contractor in the world. Uh, the French name. Uh, I wanna say La...

DD: We probably have it somewhere, but I have two guys that were, I have a name somewhere of the guys who were with Kerr-McGee then.

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RF: Well anyhow, this guy's name was Labro or Labron or, not Labron, uh, Lacure. Uh, anyhow, uh, I had an opportunity to [meet this president?] with two of his uh, assistants when we showed off the plans that, of Mister Charlie. Mister Charlie was the first offshore submersible barge.

DD: This is the actual barge?

RF: That's the one that you, you go to Morgan City, they made a, they made a museum out-

DD: Museum, yeah.

RF: That was number one. They, after that they built the Saint Louis, the built the Margaret, they built the Howard, the Hayward, uh, [they were all?] rather shallow water submersible barges. Some years later they got into some submersible floating rigs. And the ones that I remember were the Ocean Explorer, the Ocean Driller, the Ocean... Queen, the Ocean Queen, uh, the Ocean Prince was [set?], uh, [Inaudible] went to the North Sea and then uh, it was sunk during a terrible storm out there. I remember that. Anyhow, they became super big operation. And they, their [domicile?] was in New Orleans and they were strictly a Louisiana development. Because of the opportunity that we had in the offshore, in the Gulf of Mexico.

DD: Yeah, that kind of de-, tellin' me about the his-, how did it develop from there? Um.

RF: Well, actually preceding that. Actually preceding the moveable barge uh, McDermott would make a deal with, let's say with Gulf Oil, then go out there and put a platform out there. And they would do that, they're wildcatting on, on a project that was uh, developed from seismic information. Uh, and they would do the wildcatting off of a platform, which may be successful, it may not.

DD: May not, right.

RF: They, and most of the, the uh, uh, the early offshore operations were on fixed platforms. But they would take, actually take land rigs and put 'em on a [damn?] platform. And then we'd [Inaudible]. [Both laugh] They were bad. We were bad.

DD: When did they first start using seismic information in uh-

RF: Oh right after World War Two.

DD: Oh really? Right-

RF: Now, now, now you, you mean offshore?

DD: Offshore, offshore, oh yeah.

RF: In fact uh, Mike [Adaman?] died here last week here in Lafayette. He was, he was uh, he came down here with American Exploration Company uh, when I was a young college student. They formed American Exploration Company with offices at the airport. You'll be interested in know that Petroleum Helicopter Service, PHI-

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DD: Yeah, PHI.

RF: Was formed as a branch of that exploration company. Because they were having such a hard time putting seismic people out in the marshes that they, they brought in a helicopter. And I was workin' with my brother at the airport at the time they brought that first helicopter in. And that was a little bitty old um, G model. I, if, if you's, if you've seen the MASH series on TV-

DD: One of those.

RF: One of those bubble-

DD: Yeah, the bubble with the-

RF: That was it, the very first PHI helicopter was a little bitty old bubble thing. And I would guess 1948. And uh-

DD: [Inaudible].

RF: And of course later on the uh, they, they became the largest... the largest helicopter eh, company in the world.

DD: Yeah, in the world. Now they-

RF: Commercial helicopter business. In fact I understand they're just finishing purchasing um, a big helicopter operation out of, out of the U.K.

DD: Really?

RF: Yeah. We-, Westland.

DD: Westland, okay. Um, when you did work offshore, you worked seven and seven or were you-

RF: No, I was, I wasn't drill crew. Drill crews worked seven and seven or sometimes 14 and seven. Uh, I was, I always worked as a service personnel.

DD: Yeah, which is-

RF: Where I would go out with my tools to do some directional drilling work or surveying work. And I might be out there five days, I might be out there two days, might be out there just seven hours.

DD: You were there on call or?

RF: Correct. We were, we operated on 24 hour call. And uh, we were, those early years we were either sent out of Venice, Louisiana, or Grand Isle, or Leeville, or Cameron.

DD: Leeville in Lafourche Parish?

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RF: Yeah. Not Leesville, but Leeville.

DD: Yeah, up in there. Yeah.

RF: Occasionally out of Intracoastal City, but not often. 'Cause you had to go through the marsh areas and uh-

DD: Yeah, that was an isolated-

RF: Yeah. But generally it was Venice, Grand Isle, Leeville, Morgan City, or Cameron.

DD: Cameron, yeah.

RF: Uh... surprisingly the uh, the Louisianan offshore was more successful in Mor-, Mor-, uh... earlier developed than the Texas offshore.

DD: Really?

RF: Oh yeah.

DD: How so?

RF: Well... I, they just didn't find the, well, I'll tell you what probably caused the problem. Um... the uh, the federal government insisted that, that the water's offshore belonged to the federal government three-

DD: Three miles out, right.

RF: Offshore Texas it was done the same way, only it was defi-, they was defined that three leagues, or three fathoms. No not fathom, three... I think it was leagues.

DD: It may be.

RF: And it turned out to be three times-

DD: Right.

RF: Bigger than, than the amount of coast uh-

DD: That Louisiana-

RF: That belonged to Louisiana. And the consequence of the Texas situation got mixed up in the courts and stayed there longer.

DD: Oh, okay.

RF: Stayed there longer, 'cause they held out for the three leagues. I believe that's correct.

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DD: They, they tried to keep it, Texas tried to keep the three leagues-

RF: And they did.

DD: And they did.

RF: [They didn't do it, though?].

DD: Oh okay.

RF: And as a consequence their development was delayed. But their development was not nearly as productive.

DD: Really?

RF: Early on they uh, they were not as productive as Texas-

DD: Because of these legal issues.

RF: Well the, their development was delayed, but when they did try to explore in Texas they weren't as successful as it was in Louisiana. Louisiana coast had, had uh, production almost immediately.

DD: Really?

RF: Oh yeah.

DD: They just struck more or [Inaudible, overlapping speech]?

RF: Well, you're familiar with that first Kerr-McGee-

DD: Kerr-McGee in '47.

RF: And, and they were p-, they were successful right after that.

DD: Yeah, and Texas took a little while longer to find a successful-

RF: Well that, they, they had the legal aspect first. But uh, I, it seems like it was maybe late '60s, early '70s where, before it really became an exciting thing to have operations off coast of Texas. Uh, the um, as far as getting real good information for new projects, I'm gonna suggest to you that, that you try to get in touch with J., J. Ray McDermott.

DD: J. Ray McDermott, yeah. [Inaudible]-

RF: Uh, or Kerr-McGee. You may have a bit of difficulty gettin' ahold to the old Superior Oil Company.

DD: Yeah, because they were bought out.

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RF: They were bought out by Mobil.

DD: Mobil, which merged with-

RF: Exxon.

DD: Exxon, yeah. So it'd be kind of difficult.

RF: Well I believe you could do it. I believe you could do it, but uh-

DD: Yeah, it'd be getting in touch with the right person.

RF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, if that'd happened when Superior was still operating I could've [Inaudible].

DD: Right.

RF: Because when they were operating here, there were good customers of mine, I knew all the people involved. In fact, when I was goin' to college I worked for them as a roustabout.

DD: Really?

RF: 'Cause I didn't work for them when I [Inaudible], I worked for them cleanin' the airplanes. [Laughs]

DD: So you cleaned airplanes while you were in college? Basically to pay for it?

RF: Yeah, yeah. I, I did some roughneckin' while I was in college as well. But uh-

DD: [Inaudible]

RF: For Superior. But uh, the best part of my college's jobs was washin' that airplane. [Both chuckle]

DD: It doesn't sound like too bad a job.

RF: It was great.

DD: Um, back when you were uh, a service man what was, how did that affect your family life being on call 24 hours?

RF: [Inaudible]. 'Specially the wife and children. I didn't find any difficulty. I really enjoyed the exposure to all this new stuff.

DD: Yeah. It was exciting?

RF: Oh yeah, uh, some of, sometimes it was very dangerous.

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DD: I'm sure it was.

RF: Uh, I, I got caught more than once offshore with a hurricane evacuation requirement. And uh, that was nail biting.

DD: [Chuckling] Yeah, I'm sure it was.

RF: In fact one time I was on, on, in fact I was on the, the drill barge Scorpion, which was one of the very first jack-up rigs. In fact I think it was the first jack-up rig.

DD: Really?

RF: It was, it was owned by Zapata, which was the company that George Bush worked for.

DD: Oh really?

RF: George Bush the Senior.

DD: H. W. Well, H, yeah.

RF: Herbert Walker, Herbert Walker. Uh, he was a, he was an executive with Zapata Exploration Company. And they, they got uh, Laturno out of Natchez, Mississippi to build this very first jack-up rig. It was called the Scorpion. And I was on it workin' for Shell one day at Eugene Island, Block eighty... [To himself] one eighty, one, one eight-eight. And a hurricane formed right off of the coast of Cameron. We didn't have time.

DD: No.

RF: We didn't have to evacuate, we had to stay on the rig.

DD: Wow.

RF: And uh, and the pusher was givin', I mean the drilling foreman on the job was giving the orders to come out of the hole uh, layin', layin' down drill pipe and [I said?], "I ain't gonna [deal?] with that. I'm gonna stay in the hole. If ever I never I need an anchor on this boat" [Both laughing] "I wanna be in the hole."

DD: It'd ya anchor down.

RF: [Laughing] Yeah. So we did and we survived. It was hairy.

DD: It was pretty rough?

RF: Yeah, yeah, lookin' back on it today [Inaudible]. Yeah. The guy who was the drilling foreman on, on that rig that day was a good friend of mine, his name was Will [Lofton?]. And uh, several years later uh... I said, I asked Will, I said, "What happened to the Scorpion? I haven't seen it around a long time." "Well you know, they sent it to the Mediterranean."

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DD: Really?

RF: But, no, he said, "It's in the Mediterranean uh, in about 300 feet of water." And I said, "What'd they do, make a floater out of it?" [Chuckling] "Oh no, it's at the bottom." [Laughs] He said they were towing it to do some work offshore Egypt and it sunk.

DD: It made it through a hurricane, but [Inaudible]-

RF: And, and one of the things that was really exciting about being in the business is it's a great opportunity. When I left Eastman Oil Well Service Company, which was the company that originally, originally a directional drilling, I joined the, a small firm called Directional Engineers and, and I was given the opportunity to develop a, some new kind of downhole surveying with gyroscopes. And the only people who had gyroscopic surveying at the time was [Kerry Sons?], was a, which is a division of Sun Oil Company. And they were very large multinational company. And we, we became a, their first competitor in that field, in 1967. And uh, my, my part of this gave me the opportunity to put that project together and we did it successfully and we became a big part of, of uh, what we ended up being. And we uh, we got our first project built in Germany and uh, and once we got the [Inaudible] we, we did all the production [Inaudible] the gyroscope [to where we were operating with manufactured in Superior Su-,?] I mean in San Diego. Uh, we took 'em to the North Sea, we took 'em to Africa, we took 'em to Egypt, we took 'em South America, and we did some real good things. And then uh, uh, 1972 they sold, my [partners?] sold me that division and my wife and I formed this company, Bob [Fournet Company?]. And we took that company foreign as well. We had operations in uh, in South America, in uh, Scotland, Denmark, then France, Morocco, Gabon, uh, in Egypt, in Abu Dhabi, uh, and about that time the bottom fell out. [Both laugh] So historically the oil business is just like that.

DD: It, yeah, it-

RF: And it-

DD: Up and down.

RF: And it's uh, and the service company you, you're wholly dependent on what the operators are doin'. Uh, anyhow, we uh, we survived that, that bad turndown in 1985 and we became salable in 1996 and then [Inaudible] sold out, so I could retire. [Both laugh]

DD: Um, tell me a little bit more about what Bob Fournet Company did.

RF: Well we were essentially a surveying company. And by that I mean we survey, after you've surveyed the bore hole, this just an old ancient equipment [Inaudible, sounds like he is walking away from recorder].

DD: Hm. [Slight pause]

RF: This, this wa-, this was made in, in probably the late '40s and early '50s. And we had cameras that would photograph this and if you down in here you, you'll see a [pendulous zitcometer?], a turn valve, a pendulous zitcometer, and a compass. [Pause]

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DD: Hm. So what did this-

RF: Can you see it, can see-

DD: I, I see the uh-

RF: Can you see the compass down there?

DD: I don't see the compass. Maybe-

RF: Get in the light. [Pause] We, we had, we-

DD: I see it moving.

RF: There's a, we had a camera rigged up on top of that and we would put it inside a p-, a pressure barrel and run it down the [Inaudible] and the measurements we'd get from this camera, you can see this one right there. [Slight pause]

DD: Oh yeah, I definitely see it now.

RF: Now this, this was the kind of things we started with back in the '40s and '50s. Uh, we decidedly reduced the size of these from this size to a little one inch to [like this?].

DD: Wow.

RF: And um, and using sophisticated uh, electronic systems to photograph those, those, those uh, [angle units?]. And the data we'd get from the film we could ja-, actually calculate where the, where the hole is from the surface. And uh, we, we had uh, we would train and develop our own crews and we'd send our crews out to the customer, whoever wanted us. And they would uh, they'd get on location and they would supervise the rig in, during the surveying sequence. [Slight pause] This is all I keep [Inaudible]. [DD chuckles]

DD: It's a little souvenir. [RF chuckles] [Pause] So how bad did it get in the '80s when the bottom fell out?

RF: It was pretty bad. We had 155 people worldwide uh, and uh, we put ourself in survival mode, the Bob Fournet Company did. So by the time we got through cuttin' back we only had 18 people domestically.

DD: Wow. So what did you do to cut back besides letting people go?

RF: Well-

DD: 'Cause I've heard people where, where, when it was the good times they would um, spend all kind of extravagant dinners for their customers and just spend money very freely. Um, and-

RF: And, and I [Inaudible] [things like this?].

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DD: Yeah.

RF: But we didn't do it in a very lavish way. We did uh, some really nice events. For instance we were one of the uh, sponsors of a, of an oil men's golf tournament in New Orleans every year. And uh, every year my wife and I would go down and we'd participate in the playing of the golf tournament, but uh, on the Friday night of the tournament, we always had a dinner party somewhere where they would [Inaudible] Pontchartrain and then uh, [Inaudible]. We, we'd have some of our better customers and their wives join us. Those were just nice things that we could do. Because the [Inaudible] we got from customers were most of 'em on a personal basis. Uh, but um, uh, you asked me how we, how we cut back? Well, the first thing you did was call your people together and say, "We have entered into a survival mode. And that, the first thing we're gonna do is cut [income?]." And, and, and the first thing I do is I took myself out, out of income altogether. I told me people that, "I'm removin' myself from the payroll and I'm gonna live on what savings I've had. All you guys will get your, your quarterly bonuses cut to zero. Uh, and we're gonna layoff guys." And I had to go to Scotland and lay off 15, 20 people out there overnight, you know. We had to go into Egypt and do the same thing. Go Abu Dhabi and pack up all their equipment, send it back to the country or sell it [Inaudible] location. It was very difficult.

DD: Yeah I'm sure.

RF: It took us a year and a half to cut back from 155 people.

DD: So you cut your, basically cut other divisions, um, international divisions completely?

RF: Oh yeah. [Recording breaks off from 30:16 to 30:25] in the, in the U.K. [office?]. We had some operations in Abu Dhabi that were under contract with the French joint venture partner. That uh, that stayed in operation for probably a year after that, the collapse. But uh, there's only one thing you do is just decide what you could uh, what you needed to stay in business. What, how much business you gonna you [end?] up with and maintain the personnel support that did that.

DD: Just a minimal amount you could do to try to survive. When did it start to turn around for you? [Pause]

RF: Eighty-seven, '88.

DD: Eighty-seven, '88.

RF: Yeah.

DD: So how did you, how did you react to that when you started to turn around? Did you start to-

RF: Started hiring these guys back.

DD: Okay. Did you open up your international divisions again or-

RF: No.

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DD: No?

RF: No.

DD: You stuck with-

RF: No [Inaudible]. We sold uh, big part of op-, uh, Egypt, Egyptian operations. Uh, and we leased a whole bunch of equipment that we had in Scotland to uh, some operator over there. [Inaudible] [very helpful thing?] uh, they, then they didn't have equipment and we had already shut down those operations. Uh, but it worked out pretty good.

DD: So you finally got to, by the early '90s you finally got to where you were back where you were before?

RF: No, no-

DD: Maybe not-

RF: But we became profitable.

DD: Yeah, became profitable again.

RF: It became profitable and we, we didn't have to go to the banks and, and uh, restructure our loans anymore, we had those loans being paid off. In good shape by the, by the early '90s we were, we were creating new services.

DD: Really?

RF: Yeah, we created a system that you may be familiar with, it's called MWD, measurement while drilling. And uh, it's a system that you put downhole uh, that when you, when you sh-, when you shut down the drilling [Inaudible], either shut it down from moving up and down or rotating. It'll go into mis-, measuring mode. And then o-, once you, once you get into measuring mode you put your pumps on. And, and what it does it takes a reading down and it makes, takes a reading on direction and on angle and temperature and a couple other things. And it, it, it sends that information up [the service?] digitally. Uh, and those systems today are, are, are uh... are being utilized uh, oh, hell, it, it's actually a hell of a lot bigger, better operation than we had. We're, but one of the reasons why our company became salable uh, in the middle '90s is because we had the system and it was a retrievable system, you could just drop it in the hole and it, if it got stuck it was a very valuable system, you could just go [Inaudible] pull it out of the hole.

DD: So you didn't waste all the money leavin' it there.

RF: Didn't [Inaudible, overlapping speech] hole.

DD: You didn't have to leave it down there, yeah.

RF: Uh, but by and large uh, we just did some good things to keep us-

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DD: Innovation.

RF: Keep, keep us uh, our nose above the water.

DD: Yeah. [Chuckles] Um, did you find a certain period where employees were hard to find or easy to find? [Slight pause]

RF: We really, we were very fortunate. And I'm gonna guess about nineteen... seventy-eight we hired a, a man who was 39 years old, he had just retired from the Marine Corps. He had been in Marine Corps 20 years. And he retired from a, a geodetic surveying platoon uh, in the Marine Corps out of Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Now the interesting thing about these young men was the Defense Department uh, kept this geodetic surveying platoon together uh, they used all over the world. And they would use them to uh, wherever they happened to be. If they were in Vietnam, they were in Vietnam, or if they happened to be in Iran, they were in Iran. And they was, they were doing geodetic survey wherever they, our presence was. Uh, this, for data. And, and if ever we ever needed it in, in warfare or whatever. The became so very good at what they did that they were, they were sent to work for other foreign governments. They would work, they did work for NASA. Uh, and these were very talented young me and when they'd get out of the Marine Corps uh, after 20 years or thereabouts, they were lookin' for civilian employment.

DD: And that was-

RF: And we found this one guy and he came to work for us here. And we found out that there was a world of wonderful guys available. And what, what made it wonderful for us is one, they were very knowledgeable, they were well-trained, but they were Marines, they were Marines, Marines were uh, were used to being told, "Go, go to war," or, you know. In short notice you were goin' here. And, and [no answer?] [Inaudible], "[Yes, sir?]." At one time we had about 17 or 18 ex-Marines workin' for us.

DD: Wow.

RF: And uh, and they were all from that same platoon. In, in fact the Marine Corps was so happy with that that they sent a major general out here to uh, to visit with us and, and to present us with that [trophy?].

DD: Oh, wow.

RF: It's a, that's the, that's Iwo Jima. The, the raisin' the flag on, on Iwo Jima on Mount Suribachi. But uh, they, they brought it, they presented this to us because we'd hired so many ex-Marines. And those are the names of the Marines on that, on that plaque. And, and that was one of the reasons why we didn't have trouble. But the other reason was we had wonderful uh, knowledgeable people and we had a training program.

DD: Oh, okay.

RF: They, we'd hire young men uh, preferably college guys uh, most of 'em when we hired outside they were not, not Marines guys, maybe had two or three years of college and [didn't?] finish. Or maybe they finished and, and was not successful in gettin' work. We hired a [Chuckles]

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I'll never forget that, I got, I got a young black man come and see me one day. He [had a?] graduate from the university here. And uh, and I said, "[Rupert?], I, let me ask you a question. Why do you, why would you want to come here for, for uh, interviewing for a job?" He said, "Well Mister Fournet, I've worked for UPS during Christmas time and uh, while I was goin' to college, and I saw what you sent to your customers. And anybody who would send turkey to their customers [Inaudible]." [Both laugh] I said, "You're hired." This guy did finish college and worked his way through college. He was in business administration, uh, but he became an excellent employee. And uh, and of course because we were workin' for big oil companies and, and for, for the BLM and all the government [Inaudible], we needed to have minority people on our payroll. And um, it was not often we'd find one that would wo-, drop in who had all these qualifications and who wanted to be-

DD: And who was well-qualified-

RF: It wasn't easy to find a minority guy who would work on 24 hour call, I'll tell ya.

DD: It's hard to find anybody, but-

RF: [Chuckles] Well, we, we, we rewarded our field guys. We gave 'em percentage. "You, you bring back a ticket with 6,000 dollars, you're gonna get 15 percent of that."

DD: Wow. That's a good bonus.

RF: Well, that's what their workin' for. We, we, we gave 'em a fixed salary, expense account, automobile, and all that stuff. But uh, we didn't [pay more?], we didn't mind charging either. [Chuckles]

DD: Yeah. [Chuckles]

RF: Uh, so we did, we did well.

DD: But you had good people and, and your uh, your prices reflected that and your people-

RF: We had to be competitive of course with other companies that had the same services that we did. But uh, we were fortunate, we had good people.

DD: How was competition by the way?

RF: It was tough.

DD: Really?

RF: Oh yeah.

DD: Especially in the '80s?

RF: In, in fact because we were so competitive we had people who quit the larger companies and formed companies to compete against us.

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DD: Really?

RF: Just because they saw what we did. 'Cause when we got started we were the only independent surveying company in the world.

DD: Really?

RF: Oh yeah.

DD: Um, let's see. [Pause] So you found education for your employees to be fairly important?

RF: Well they have to be able to use the uh, mathematics and computers. And all our, all our calculations were done with, with trigonom-, uh, [Inaudible] with trig functions. Uh, we had hired computer programmers who programmed our, the program [that was?] the program [Inaudible] we took out in the field with us. Uh, we had engineers who uh, worked in our development shop that uh, that not only created those computers but uh, put [in?] downhole equipment. Yeah, we had [Inaudible].

DD: Um, let's shift gears slightly here. What about your children and their education? Did you-

RF: My boys?

DD: Yeah. Did you stress that with them because you saw the value of it?

RF: Of course.

DD: [Did it?], would it do the... okay, how should I word this? You were educated when you went into oil, well not, you were being educated when you went into the oilfields.

RF: [Inaudible]-

DD: And you, and because of that money you were able to educate your children, is that kind of how it worked or?

RF: Absolutely. Yeah. And, and the good news was that we, we had, we allowed our sons to work in the business uh, did that summers uh, workin' their way through college. Um, none of my three sons are interested in the business.

DD: Really?

RF: No. And that made it easy for me. Then I, I could put it up for sale, sell-

DD: Yeah, you didn't have to pass it on.

RF: Yeah and not have to worry about, well, you know, [junior might it want it uh?], might wanna-

DD: Dividing it up between the three of them.

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RF: You could divide money easier, a lot easier than a company. [Chuckles]

DD: Yeah, that's true. That is true. Um, what [other/are the?] impacts on not only your family, but the region did you see because of the oilfield?

RF: Say again.

DD: Okay, what um, what other impacts of the oilfield did you see having on your family and Lafayette, you are from Lafayette area? What effects did you see because of the oilfield in general?

RF: Well by, by the mid '50s this was an oil town.

DD: Oh yeah.

RF: I mean, the very economic structure of this town was uh, was oil business.

DD: Yeah.

RF: Uh, you know, just, just take my wife and I, our case, we were both students at, at SLI or UL Lafayette. We, it, we were fortunate to get a college education, but because of what we did in formin' our own company we put 100s of people to work. And uh-

DD: Most of the people from now UL?

RF: Pardon?

DD: Was it mostly people from now UL or?

RF: No. No, in fact [we did get?] 30 or 40 people workin' for us in, in [the Horn sector?]. And uh, there's, there's people we hired that were, were knowledgeable young men who, who could uh, who wanted to get educated in [our?] area. We had training. But, but the effect on this city, when I was a youngster in high school, and I, I finished high school 1946. Uh, it's around right at the end of World War Two probably had somethin' less than fif-, 15, 20 thousand people.

DD: Wow, this whole town? And now it's-

RF: Hundred [fifty/thirty?] thousand.

DD: Really?

RF: Well, uh, when you, when you take all of what Lafayette is, including Youngsville and Broussard and Scott and Carencro.

DD: Everything around it, yeah.

RF: You lookin' at maybe a quarter of a million people.

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DD: Oh yeah. And it's all because of oil.

RF: Yeah.

DD: Um, do you see where now, at the, after the bust of the '80s, do you see where Lafayette is trying to maybe move into other areas besides oil, where they're not so dependent on it?

RF: That's already taking place.

DD: Yeah. How so? By, what are they pushing now other than oil?

RF: Well, you, you just look at the income [centers?] in Lafayette today, the bank, banking.

DD: Bank.

RF: Medical, hospital, look at the hospital [Inaudible, overlapping speech].

DD: That's true.

RF: Uh, education. Uh... even manufacturing.

DD: Yeah, we do have a few manufacturing [plants?]-

RF: We had a g-, we had a guy moved in right there behind us, right down the street from us, I was on [Wall?] Street when, before we sold our business. And he started a company called uh... it was a container corporation.

DD: Oh, oh, I...

RF: Portable [Company?], not Portable Company-

DD: I, I'm familiar with that company, I don't remember the name of it though.

RF: Anyway, they manufacture big-

DD: Big containers.

RF: Containers. But they, they uh, they're made out of, you know, plastic.

DD: Yeah, plastic. Yeah, I'm familiar with that company uh, when I worked for FedEx Ground they shipped a, a lot of-

RF: That's right.

DD: A lot of [Inaudible, overlapping speech].

RF: That's right. Uh, there's a lot of those outfits like that in this town.

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DD: Yeah, the uh, Martin, well it just closed down, but they had a couple other uh, Fruit of the Loom [Inaudible].

RF: Well those were [political things?].

DD: Oh.

RF: Those were uh, [Mayworth?] uh, Mayworth got investment [there?]. Uh, you know the largest uh, the largest casing crew company in the world is right here.

DD: Really? [Phone ringing]

RF: Yeah. Franks.

DD: Franks? Okay.

RF: And uh, [Inaudible] it's an oil service company. Now they do all their own manufacturing right here. It's a big outfit. And the guy who heads it up is the guy that uh, I went, went through, all through high school and college with. Engineering graduate at UL Lafayette.

DD: So with this kind of economic diversification or whatever you want to call it, do you think Lafayette could maybe survive another bust like the '80s better than they did in the '80s or-

RF: Oh no doubt.

DD: We'd be better off?

RF: No doubt. No doubt. They're not dependent on oil like they used to. You, you could just drive through Oil Center and see that. Lot of the Oil Center offices are now uh, clothing stores and insurance business.

DD: It's really-

RF: [Kind of the?], the hospital's bought up most of that- [DD laughs]

DD: Medical offices. Um, what about that Oil Center, what do you think the impact of that has been?

RF: Oh it's been wonderful for Lafayette, no doubt.

DD: Oh yeah.

RF: It really has. Uh... it could easily, easily have gone to Crowley, could easily have gone to Lake Charles.

DD: They always talk about Opelousas and New Iberia also.

RF: That's right. Uh, uh, my wife is from Crowley and, and she can remember how the drilling

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and production part of Ex-, of Exxon years ago was a company known as Humble Oil and Refining Company. They had an office in north Crowley and they wanted to move, to build a new office in Crowley. And the powers that be who uh, who were in the rice business, industry, they didn't want that to happen because it was gonna raise the wages. So they came to Lafayette.

DD: Small town [syndrome?].

RF: Right.

DD: That's what Opelousas and New Iberia, small town syndrome.

RF: Well Opelousas had a great opportunity years ago but they were, they were goin' downhill.

DD: Oh yeah, it's nothing now basically it's just locally served and [looking bad that's it?]. But uh, anyway, it's wrap up time. Would you do it again if you had to do it all over again?

RF: If I was your age?

DD: Yes.

RF: Yes.

DD: You would definitely do it again?

RF: I'd do it better.

DD: Do it better. [Both laugh] Realize your, you, I'm sure you know your, what few mistakes you made and-

RF: Well uh, of course what made it uh, a thing to do was the opportunity. And uh, we, we didn't realize how great the opportunities were they were [hangin' off of the trees they were?].

DD: Oh yeah.

RF: Uh, it was a dream come true to be able to operate my own business for the last 25 years of my professional life. [Inaudible]. But you know what I'm [Inaudible] I financed it all [out of my back pocket right there?].

DD: Oh yeah.

RF: [And all I did this?] was guaranteed by my wife and I. We didn't have anybody else guaranteeing [Inaudible]. So when the [Inaudible] came down with [the American dollars?] we took [Inaudible].

DD: Oh yeah. [Chuckles]

RF: We relieved 'em of [a few?].

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DD: [Chuckling] Yeah. It's the way to do it. Um, any good stories that you maybe wanted to relate for posterity sake or that you could think of? [Pause] If not. [Pause]

RF: One of my first, this is an oil job that has nothin' to do with offshore. When I came out of the Navy I could've gone back to work with Superior Oil Company and quote unquote be in their training program, but I really didn't like that operation. I just didn't feel like I [wanted to do it?], so I went to work for Hycalog. Hycalog was um, at that time was strictly a mud loggin' outfit, where they'd put a [Inaudible] location and they cuttings coming up from the ground, from the well. Where um, and ana-, analyzed on an ongoing basis. Uh, so they're [during?] production capability. And I was single. And uh, uh, I was a geology graduate, graduate, so they figured I was qualified. And they moved, they sent me to a couple of jobs here in north Louisiana and Texas. And because I was sig-, single about Christmas time 1953 they uh, they said, "We're gonna send you to Poplar, Montana." And I [DD chuckles] I [skipped?].

DD: That's way out there.

RF: That to relieve some of the older people for Christmas.

DD: And at Christmas time?

RF: Yeah.

DD: Three foot of snow.

RF: Well, I [Chuckles]

DD: [Oh yeah, easily, easily?].

RF: I uh, I got to uh, Poplar, Montana and I immediately was given the job of being the graveyard operator on that, that logging unit. You had three shifts. Day, evening, and graveyard.

DD: Graveyard.

RF: For, I guess I was on that rig for about, we had just set up uh... I guess about a week and a half and here comes a blizzard.

DD: Oh boy.

RF: Fifty-five below was nothin'.

DD: Oh yeah.

RF: And uh, and I'm, I'm, it happened to come at about two o'clock in the morning and come day break you can't see 10 feet out of your uh, beyond the rig. And everything's freezin' up and, and we became marooned out there. They couldn't, relief guys couldn't come out. And, and we, I had uh, the, the graveyard crew on the rig was there, they couldn't be relieved because of the blizzard. And they were mostly Indian guys from Oklahoma. They, they were equally as unaccustomed to the cold weather as I was. And to make a long story short, I got up on the rig and everything was

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freezin' up. So I told the toolpusher, I said, "Get a half gallon uh, five, five gallon bucket of diesel and go put it under that butane tank out there and light it. 'Cause if you don't do that, it'll freeze up and we'll all freeze to death." Because without that power, the only heat on the location was the heat from the, from the motors. He said, "You're crazy, it'll blow up." I said, "Damn, give me that bucket." So I just did it. And that kept the motor running. And I also told him, I said, "I want you to take your [travelin' box?], pick up your, [I want you?] to keep your motors and your pumps goin'. Take your travelin' box and take it [over the top?] 'cause the motor stop you can drop your pipe and start your motors." By puttin' it in reverse, you see. Said, "What'd you wanna do that for?" I said [Chuckles] "We fixin' to freeze to death if you don't keep this thing goin'." So anyhow I, I got the mud circulatin' through my, my uh... my trailer, my, where we had the mud goin' through our trailer. I had a little bit of butane in the trailer, I start uh, it kept the trailer warm. Uh, and they finally relieved us about... I guess it was five o'clock that next afternoon. Man, I had everything running, everything was warm. [Inaudible] but we wasn't freezin' to death.

DD: Yeah, exactly.

RF: That guy said, he asked the driller, he said, "How the hell did you get all this done?" He said, "That guy, that guy told me how to do it." [DD chuckles] He said, "That guy from south Louisiana, he don't know anything more [Inaudible]." [Both chuckle] Well uh, I was really proud of that, so about a week later my boss from Shreveport called me. He said, "The Carter Oil Company very pleased with you young man." [I said, "Well thank you, thank you."?] [DD chuckles] [Pause]

DD: Um, lastly, any contacts, any people I should get in touch with other than J. Ray McDermott, um, that you can think of right off hand or?

RF: [Says he used to have all kinds of directories. Asks for DD to mail him his card and tells him he'll look for the pictures. DD says he'll come back for a photo interview. Talk about pictures and how they use them. RF said that he's lost touch with people since going out of business and shows him an old directory. DD asks where he could find a newer directory. RF suggests he call the Desk and Derrick Club and ask for a Lafayette oil directory.] Desk and Derrick Club is a, is the uh, female. It's a, it's a secretary organization for the oil business.

DD: Okay, oh, well they could be interesting to interview also.

RF: Well you could call the [Inaudible] too. [Continue to talk about the directory and make arrangements for getting back in touch.] [Talking about his old company] Well it didn't take long for 'em to go out and change things, I'll tell ya.

DD: Oh yeah? [Chuckles]

RF: Well it stayed the same for about one year.

DD: On year?

RF: Yeah.

DD: They just changed everything after that?

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RF: Yeah. And the uh, the executive vice-president that we did the sale with uh, left the company's employer about two months ago. And it's really start changing.

DD: Oh really?

RF: They laid off people and changed things big time.

DD: Yeah, but you expect that, though. Well, it's been great talkin' to ya.

RF: My pleasure.

DD: I got some great information from ya.

RF: Well, I, I, I'll um, I'll look for those pictures.

DD: Great, great and whenever you do, just let me know and we'll set up something else.

RF: Okay. Let me get this-

[END OF RECORDING]

