Preserving Oral Histories of Waterfront-Related Pursuits in Bayou La Batre

Brett Dungan Oral History

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Interviewer: MS – Michael Stieber

Transcriber: NCC

Brett Dungan: Yeah.

Michael Stieber: How does Master Marine fit into the history of boat making in Bayou La Batre?

BD: Actually, Master Marine was started in 1961. It was one of the first shipyards in this area. I came here in January [19]78. But I was familiar with the previous records. We looked into – and actually, Elmo Horton was one of the original steel boat builders. As a matter of fact, the story reported that up to that point, the fishermen all had wooden boats. The first steel boat that was constructed was at this company. The town came out to watch the steel boat sink when it hit the water. It obviously didn't sink. So, there's been kind of a real evolution of the boat building that's happened since that time.

MS: What markets are you building boats for today? How has this changed over the years from the beginning of the company?

BD: Well, I came to Master Marine in January 1978. At that time, the entirety of the construction, the backlog, was all commercial shrimp trawlers. Master Marine hadn't built commercial shrimp trawlers for a number of years. Primarily we service the offshore oil industry and the inland transportation sector right now.

MS: Was there any early opposition to Master Marine when they started? Was there a competition among boat builders in Bayou La Batre or –

BD: Well, in actual fact, it was a pretty interesting situation. 1976, the federal government came up with what was called the Magnuson Act. What the import of that was it basically took 200 miles from the coast of the United States. Gave the United States the exclusive economic jurisdiction, whatever. So, there were a lot of foreign fishing vessels that were basically pushed out. So, through the [19]70s, late [19]70s, early [19]80s, there was a real void or vacuum to build commercial shrimp boats and also scallop boats for the East Coast. Actually, at one time, 1979, I think there were over thirty shipyards in the area, Bayou La Batre and Coden. Really there was enough market to go around that even though there was competition – matter of fact, I think in the late [19]80s, Bayou La Batre had been referred to as the Detroit of fishing trawlers.

MS: If you would just briefly state your name, where you're from, where you live currently, and what your position is.

BD: I'm Brett Dungan. I moved to Bayou La Batre in 1978. [clears throat] Excuse me.

MS: Do that again.

BD: I'm Brett Dungan. I live here in Bayou La Batre. I moved here in 1978. I'm the president of Master Marine.

MS: Okay. How long have you held that position?

BD: This is my twentieth year.

MS: Twentieth year.

BD: Yes.

MS: How has the work in waterfront changed through your years in Bayou La Batre and being active in the boat-building industry?

BD: Well, I guess I would say that when I first moved here in 1978, the waterfront property was really not in a lot of demand, real estate-wise. I'm kind of digressing. But I noticed that there were not a lot of regulatory agencies that were paying attention to issues here. Over the years, there were environmental concerns about pollution and controlling the discharge of oils into the navigable waters and this and that. That has really changed tremendously. So, what I'm getting at is that Bayou La Batre is a very clean, pristine place now compared to what it was thirty years ago. Along with that has come, I think, more interest in the waterfront for other alternative uses. Waterfront is a limited resource. So, I think now what we've seen over the last several years especially is there's more competition for the waterfront. That's kind of spurred, if you will, a growth of people looking at the waterfront as it pertains to the society of those that derive their living from the waterways.

MS: Have you ever been involved in the seafood industry personally in any of the trades?

BD: When I came here, I was young and got a lot of on-the-job training. I started in the stockroom at Master Marine and advanced my way up the corporate ladder. I went shrimping for several months on a commercial shrimp trawler. So, I do have some knowledge which I think was helpful to apply to boat building. We tried to understand more the circumstance of the person that was using our equipment. I don't know if that answered your question. Yes.

MS: How many employees does Master Marine –

BD: Well, we have forty employees right now. There's probably over a hundred people who work here. What's happened from a business point is that, I would say, twenty years ago, basically all of our workers were on our payroll. Then over the last ten years or so, a lot of craftsmen have decided to start their own businesses. So, they're more like subcontractors, so various trades or crafts. They may work here, but actually, they're not a part of my company directly. They're not on our payroll. They're more like subcontractors.

MS: I've noticed since Hurricane Katrina – and like I had mentioned before, I did some archeology on some of the boat building places that did not rebuild after. Has that kind of left a void or –

BD: There are probably seven or eight shipyards that are actively really engaged at this point. I don't know that the storm has had so much impact. In our case, we sustained $700,000 damage to our facility from Katrina which took us – that was a good hit. It was a big hit to overcome. But we've seen a resurgence in the oil industry and the offshore – I'm sorry – inland

transportation. What I'm getting at is there's plenty of boats to build and work to be done that I think it seems like those seven major ship builders, they've all kind of found their own little niche.

MS: Are you a member of the working waterfront community? Is that –

BD: Yes. Actually, I was one of the founding members of the Alabama Working Waterfront Coalition.

MS: When was that? Do you remember?

BD: I want to say that's been eighteen months ago, about eighteen months ago.

MS: If you would explain kind of your goals, what the committee is.

BD: Well, one thing that we started to see, especially in other areas, but also coming to Bayou La Batre, was real estate development for non-industrial uses of waterfront property. Even though I'm not involved in the commercial fishing industry, we saw that a lot of shrimpers were having – where they tied their boat up. All of a sudden it was being sold to make a condominium. So, they were losing the access to launch their vessels to go out and catch seafood. As far as the shipyards, we are an industrial activity. We are in an industrial zone. There needs to be mutual coexistence of different uses of the waterfront. But there are some issues that had to be taken into consideration. It's hard to operate a shipyard in the middle of a residential area, for example. Rather than being one user just calling out, we felt that if we could get a broad constituency from throughout the state – these are people involved in commercial fishing shipyards. These are people involved in Orange Beach, Dauphin Island charter boat people. There's quite a diverse group that actually needs to have access to the water. Even recreational fishermen need to have a place to launch their boat. So, we felt that the starting of our group was to really educate the public and also policymakers about the economic impact, the positive economic impact that the waterfront has and how we need to support and sustain, allowing various users to have access to the waterfront.

MS: So, you definitely would say that is having an impact for the seafood industry in Bayou La Batre right now, having correct access or good access –

BD: We have several issues. One that became kind of glaring from Katrina was that we would like to see a safe harbor, a place where the commercial fishermen can go in inclement weather, especially hurricanes, to where they could protect their life and property of those vessels. Yet again, that requires development of some kind of jetty or bulkhead to protect from winds. We need to address those issues before we lose the available land to sustain that. There are actually thirty-five states in the nation that have working waterfront issues. Just like our initiative in Alabama, there are concurrently other groups in other states. We're trying to work together to formulate some type of national approach to this issue.

MS: Were there other key businesses that existed in the past that are no longer in existence that had an impact on Bayou La Batre when they were around?

BD: Yes. I think that business changes. Things go in cycles. It may be that there was an over recapitalization in certain parts of the fishing fleet, for example. Those businesses that basically provide ice and nets and fuel and supplies, there probably are not as many companies now as there had been at one time. The interesting thing is that shrimp is an annual renewable resource. So, if you allow the shrimp to spawn, you can basically capture the shrimp. It's not a problem. It's not like a fish which takes two or three years where you could have overfishing. So, it's actually a wonderful thing. It's very hard to overfish the shrimp fishery. Now, what's happened is that there's about half as many boats right now in the shrimp industry as there were four years ago. So, there's still the same amount of catch. So, it means that each boat is getting a little bit bigger piece of the catch. I think that the shrimp industry – although it's not what I'm really involved in – has really been under attack, been shell shocked with the dumping of imported seafood at below market prices, with the high price of diesel, insurance. There've been a number of things that have really made it very difficult. Those people that are shrimping now are probably stronger. They probably have less mortgage on their boat or whatever. Yes.

MS: Have you ever built a shrimp boat yourself? If so, how long ago?

BD: Yes, Master Marine, 100 percent of our new construction thirty years ago was building shrimp boats. We've built, I think, over 230 boats. Probably, the lion share of that is commercial fishing boats – could be shrimp boats. I know in 1979, for example, we had seventeen boats under construction. They were all commercial fishing boats.

MS: How long would one of the commercial fishing boats take to – from start?

BD: Depends. Master Marine has built primarily custom boats for individual owner-operators, as opposed to some of my competitors that are building more stock designs. Probably, the average timeframe to construct a shrimp boat is six months.

MS: What changed from then to what it is now? Tell that story.

BD: My perception is that the shrimp boat market might have been overbuilt, was overcapitalized. There was a time where, as I said, there were thirty shipyards basically turning out boats. Not all those were shrimp boats. But I think once that vacuum or that void got filled with commercial vessels, not only for Bayou La Batre or the Gulf of Mexico, but also the East Coast even exported to West Africa and other countries. It seems like there's been cycles. What I'm getting at is I analyzed the history of – the record of Master Marine prior to when I came here. I saw a five-year cycle. Means that there would be shrimp boat production that would kind of peak after five years. Basically, the emphasis shifted to building push boats. Then five years later, there'd be another kind of cycle of fishing boats. So, it seemed like the small push boats for the inland waterways transportation sector were kind of opposite to the commercial fish boat. So, you had these two cycles that were changing position. But there was kind of a constant workload. We've seen probably over the last five years that there's been an incredible decline in fishing boat construction. I attribute that probably to overbuilding.

MS: The boats that were still lasting and still being used [inaudible].

BD: Right.

MS: Tell the story of Master Marine. Where did it get started? Who started it? What it came here for and –

BD: I've seen a lot of changes in the community. When I first came to Master Marine, for example, boat builders were pretty much craftsmen. They were pretty much kind of passed down from father to son to grandson. You kind of had like this, line up and say, "Well, let's put the boat together like this," and sight through your thumbs kind of thing. Matter of fact, I saw in the late [19]70s really the introduction of blueprints which were kind of new. It was kind of a new development. So, me coming from the West Coast and relocating in this area, I kind of had an outsider's point of view. But I've seen that the industry has become much more sophisticated to where we now have blueprints. We have a lot of regulatory bodies. Matter of fact, Master Marine has to file reports and report to twenty-six different regulatory bodies. These are state and federal agencies. So, there's, I guess, more – I don't know if it's any better. But it's more sophisticated than it was. To get skilled workers used to be that, I think, people kind of gravitated to this and enjoyed it. They passed on their trade from one generation to the next. It seems like we're having a harder time attracting younger people to this way of life. I don't know if that's a problem in manufacturing nationwide. But it certainly is affecting us here. Yes.

MS: Is it still visible here? Do you still have people passing it down, still working in the same industry from? Or is that pretty much –

BD: I think the skillset has changed to where people need to be literate. They need to be able to read and write blueprints. They need to be able to use their skills to assess problems, solve problems on their feet. So, it's a little different skill set that's required. I guess that's something the industry's grappling with. In Mobile, for example, we have large shipyards that are building much larger government navy craft, whatever. They're actually going into training programs that have not really been – I think the training programs have been kind of on-the-job in the small shipyards and, as you said, passed on from one generation to the next. There are really three things that are necessary, in my opinion, for this industry to continue to – the first one being – most important right now is training an adequate workforce for the future. The other one is, as we talked about, having continued access to waterways. The third one is environmental compliance. So, we've seen a lot of changes in the type of coating systems that have low VOCs, they call it. Changing our methods to, I guess, really create the least environmental consequences for activities, I think the industry has really responded to that. I think it's been pretty remarkable to see that.

MS: I'd love it if Brett could talk about what he saw when he got here from an outsider's view. Describe boat building life in this community, some of the tools they used, what you're struck with that has changed.

BD: I guess, the thing that struck me when I first moved to Bayou La Batre was that this was a fishing town. A lot of young people were able to go out on a shrimp boat in the summer when they were in high school. They'd make 3,000, $4,000. They made a lot of money. I mean, they

worked hard, but it seemed to be available. So, there was a big dropout rate in the high school to where people would just say, "Hey, what's the sense of going to school? I'm going to go out and make a living in the ocean." I think that a little bit the type of people that were in the boatyards was the same thing. They were not necessarily highly educated people. They were hardworking people, had a good work ethic. But as we started to build boats for West Africa – which we built quite a number for West Africa – and we started to have international surveyors and, like I said, had to start responding to even naval architects that did stability and declining tests on our vessels, those were things that were pretty much unheard of or not necessarily done in the late [19]70s. I think watching those people that could change and adapt, they made themselves a good life in the shipyards. Some people gravitated away. They were not able to, for whatever reason, I think, adapt to a more sophisticated work environment. There was one interesting thing that in the late [19]70s, there were a lot of refugees from Southeast Asia that moved to Bayou La Batre. I think some of these refugees had been originally signed to Milwaukee or other cities up north. Because they had some experience as shrimpers in Vietnam or in the waterfront, they kind of gravitated back to the Gulf Coast. At one time, for example, I had a night welding crew. I think twelve of our thirteen welders were Vietnamese. So, the reason I'm bringing that up is that I watched employees that were local, native Alabama citizens changing to working alongside Southeast Asians. I think at first, there was some – I don't want to say lack of respect but maybe lack of understanding. The Vietnamese people were very quiet. But then when they talked and they started talking about how their friend escaped from Vietnam and got shot swimming in the river and somehow they made it. They started telling these stories. They really moved the hearts of the native workers that may not have necessarily understood the circumstance. So, all in all, I think the influx of Southeast Asians has been really beneficial to the community, especially to shipbuilding.

MS: Because of the traditions of the industry, that it's a very close community. How did you find that when you first came here, being not from here?

BD: Well, I think from a sociology point, probably they know more about it as far as groups that are not really open to outside change agents. Certainly, there was some of that. I think I was viewed as an outsider. I think our company which was not a local company that bought this shipyard was viewed as possibly a threat. Because we didn't go to the same schools and weren't born and raised and grew up together. But it's not just necessarily that I was not from this area, or the management of my company was not from this area. Ronnie Steiner who was born and raised in Bayou La Batre and had actually spent a lot of time in Europe, when he moved back to Bayou La Batre and resettled, he was treated the same way. So, it's not just that you weren't from here. But it was that, he was seen, as Master Marine was seen, as kind of an outsider. What I noticed was that when we had one hundred and twenty employees and when we were economically supporting people's families, I think a lot of those things changed. One more point I was going to make about that. I think from a social point, basically, people are the same. Basically, they're trying to feed their families. I think that that's the wonderful thing about the people that work and live in waterfront communities, is they're very simple people. They really do respect the environment because the environment basically sustains their livelihood. You've got people that are a little closer to the production of food, people that are a little closer to building something, getting their hands dirty actually building some product. I have great respect and have really learned a lot. I think it's really critical that we, as a society, as a nation,

support this viable economy and social – the waterfront properties that really sustain this type of activity.

MS: As far as you know, have any of the ship-building companies in the past or currently, owned residential properties and rented out to employees or helped employees?

BD: I know that Master Marine did that. I know that at one time, I think, we owned twelve houses. There were some rented out to some of the employees. I think that hasn't really happened. That may happen still. I'm not aware of it happening right now.

MS: How long ago was that? Was Master Marine –

BD: It was in the late [19]70s, early [19]80s. Yes. I think in terms of after the hurricane, I noticed that – actually Frederic happened in 1979. I'd been there about a year before that. I noticed a real kind of cataclysmic event. This was where you had ice plants that had ice, but there's no electricity. All ice was going to melt. Well, they had given away ice to the residents. But the deal was you had to work in the line and shovel ice for the next people for some time. Then you could take your own cooler of ice away. In the aftermath of Katrina, we noticed that some of the seafood processing companies, their facilities were damaged. But they were able to retain their workforce. Some of the companies lost their workforce. Maybe their houses were destroyed, or they were displaced, whatever. But their facility was still intact. So, we really saw a synergy develop to where these before competitors were really pairing themselves together. You bring my workers into your plant, and we'll work together. The goal, I think, was to really try to get the economic engine of the town going again. I think that people that have experience living in this environment, they know how to do that. They can be entrepreneurial. They can solve problems if you give them the opportunity. We saw that, I think, from both Frederic, which pretty well hit Bayou La Batre directly, and from Katrina, which had a big impact on Bayou La Batre.

MS: That shows some resiliency of the local population. You talked about the people connected to the water. Is there still that kind of resiliency now in these economic times with this latest hurricane? Where do you see this community going from here?

BD: Well, as I said, the shrimp industry has been extremely resilient in the last thirty years. There's been ups and downs in the shrimp industry. Some people write it off as not being viable anymore. That's not the case. There are companies that are investing a lot of money right now in the millions of dollars in rebuilding their plants or building new processing plants. It's really important that people eat and that we have a resource that we can process – harvest that resource. I think fishermen in general are resilient because they see their catch one day is great, the next day it's a problem. I think that we've seen that in the boat building. We've seen that there've been boom-and-bust cycles. Probably in my time there, I've seen three really boom periods in shipbuilding and really three bust periods. So, there is a resiliency among people that are connected more to the work, to the land. I think, that's really a wonderful characteristic that we need to continue to support.

MS: I think Brett should talk a bit about some of the boat building families that he found that were here, kind of what they were known for, what kind of vessels they had built over time, discuss it and talk about them in a way that probably other people can't.

BD: The interesting thing when I studied the history of this company – like I said, Master Marine started in 1961. I came here in 1978. The evolution of the shrimp boat was very interesting. It was like, some years you'd have 18-foot-wide boats. The next year, they'd be 19 feet and then 20 feet. So, it was kind of a trial and error that really the shrimp boat actually evolved to what was economically most optimum for being productive in the shrimp grounds. We saw the change in material. Probably in the [19]60s, most of the shrimp boats were wooden. There were some fiberglass boats that were built in other places that didn't really work out so well, for whatever reason. Pretty much the steel trawler emerged through trial and error. It seemed like as the boat of choice. Pretty much those boats ended up being 75x22-foot wide. Even though some years we'd see wider boats, it would seem like they would come back to 22 feet again. Like I said, a lot of this was because the people were craftsmen and they just kind of tried this to see what happened. Now, what we see is that you have naval architects that bring their expertise. You see the kindliness of their whole form and different things that I'm not sure they're any better. But that's certainly the state of the industry. Master Marine's a little different in that we have two floating dry docks. We basically repaired – we are the only dry docks in the area. So, for many decades, we repaired a lot of the shrimp boats. So, we saw the different whole forms. We saw the types of boats and which ones were more productive. We also repaired a lot of wooden boats. That's a lost art now. The Landry family was local here. They built wooden boats for years. When you pull a wooden boat out where the boards come together, you have to caulk that area. So, when the wood dries out, somehow when you put it back in the water, it doesn't seal unless you have new caulking. Even that's an art, how you used to install the caulking. I know that we had certain subcontractors that we'd try to find. The Zirlotts seemed like they were very experienced in wood boat building, the Zirlott family. I'll tell you right now, if we had a wooden boat to work on, I think we'd be hard pressed to find people with the expertise of replanking or recaulking. I think that's pretty much an art that we've kind of lost.

MS: How did the refrigeration in the boats change over the years? Run it back to how that happened.

BD: Well, that was a necessary step, I think. There are really two types of shrimp boats. There are those that go out overnight or for one day and in local waters, close waters. These are very small boats. They use ice to keep their product fresh after they catch it. Then you've got the longer boats that go further out. They may even go out for forty days even. They have freezer capability on board. They actually freeze the shrimp as soon as it's caught. The technology which came in the late [19]70s and early [19]80s, more sophisticated electronics, fish-finding gear, LORAN to coordinate with, now Global Satellite Positioning, GPS, the same thing with freezers. Being able to freeze on board really helped sustain the shrimp industry and make it really viable. Before that, it was almost, I don't want to say artisanal, but maybe – when I first came here, someone had told me there were four seasons: shrimp, fish, crab, and oyster. So, all the people went and caught the oysters. Then they went and caught the fish. Then they went and caught the shrimp. So, with the advent of freezing technology, on-board freezers especially, really made the shrimp fishery pretty much a year-round operation.

MS: Could that be the same with the evolution of the nets and that technique as well?

BD: Yes. Here again, it's not my area of expertise. But we saw that to pull bigger nets, you had to have bigger boats. So, we saw that it was kind of an evolution. We saw there was kind of an evolution to build bigger boats in order to pull bigger nets. Then we saw that all of a sudden they were pulling too big nets. Then they came back with smaller nets. The optimum nets, I think, were developed by trial and error, just like the optimum boats were. Although the two went hand in hand. It takes a lot of horsepower to pull a net. As the nets got bigger, you needed more horsepower. So, there's been quite a lot of development in technology as far as nets. Here, again, originally was basically net makers. That was a trade they passed on. I don't know that there was a whole lot of more sophisticated engineering. There may have been some brought into it later.

MS: Where do you see Master Marine going in the coming decades?

BD: Well, we aggressively got involved to get our facility certified for government repair. We've been doing a lot of overhauling Coast Guard cutters, small naval noncombatants. There are a lot of vessels that the Corps of Engineers uses, training boats for the Army Reserve. There's a tremendous amount of boats more than people realize. Those boats need to be hauled out. They need to be repaired. They need to be serviced. It's critical to the ongoing economy of our nation that we allow shipyards to repair boats. I think we've really positioned ourselves. We've always done a lot of repairs and overhauling conversions. We're really looking at what is the optimum way to most efficiently be a viable repair contractor. We've really developed quite a reputation with the various federal agencies, government agencies, with the various sectors that we service. We really feel that the future looks bright for our company. We just need to basically be allowed to bring best-management techniques and practices to bear. I think the future is bright for those that are involved in energy and food production because people have got to eat. People need to heat their homes.

MS: You had mentioned that Master Marine had built numerous boats for West Africa. What type of boats were those?

BD: Well, it's interesting that the Niger Delta in Nigeria is very similar to the Gulf of Mexico as far as the Mississippi Delta. So, a lot of the technology that was developed here in terms of the type of nets that are used, in types of the shallow-draft boats, in terms of the whole forms for the shrimp boats, whatever, a lot of this technology was very applicable to Nigeria. Matter of fact, we built a number of boats for Nigeria, for Ghana, for Liberia. The fishery is very similar. It was kind of interesting the way that developed.

MS: Well, what are some of the best things that could happen in the world, in society that this community would be better to – I mean, you mentioned the fuel and eating. But a little more specific of what needs to be done because the working waterfront is threatened, and the fishermen are threatened. We have rich resources here and a rich culture that's in disarray or under pressure. What needs to be done?

BD: Well, in actual fact, at the present time, three of the top four fisheries in the world are in U.S. waters. That's the Gulf of Mexico, off Georgia's bank, and the Gulf of Alaska. So, basically, we have a resource that, through managing correctly, how can we use that for the United States to be a net exporter of seafood? Presently, we're an importer of seafood. We have an incredible resource with the waterfront that we have. In my opinion, the correct role of the government would be to support research and development. Sometimes the government tends to be involved in enforcement issues. I think that if the government really viewed the waterfront, how to use this for the maximum sustainability of the economy, how can we produce in an environmentally friendly way the best amount of energy? How can we produce seafood? How can we help to educate people about the recreational benefits of using the waterways? I just don't see that there's a national kind of policy, if you will. I don't think we need a national policy as far as restricting people. But as far as really supporting those people that have grown up on the waterfronts, those people – like the Sea Scouts that have sailboats. They go out, and they try to excite young people about the rigors of sailing on the ocean. There are so many ways that I think we have not really utilized the blessing we have in this country. Unfortunately, we're seeing that sometimes waterways, if people have money, and they buy the real estate, they put up their condominiums, then they've determined the use of that waterways. In my opinion, the waterways are a trust that we should hold. It's a whole purpose trust that who's to say how that's best to be used? I think that there needs to be different stakeholders communicating and come up with some type of strategic or cohesive plans that we can best take advantage of this resource. I traveled extensively in Central America about fifteen years ago. I was trying to export our commercial fishing boats to other Third World countries. One of their problems was they didn't have enough money. They didn't have enough financing to buy more modern equipment. When we approached the United States Export-Import Bank that had facilities for exporters to sell their goods overseas, we found there was kind of a resistance, kind of a feeling that, "We really don't want to give our technology away." My feeling was that really, the development of our resources, of our expertise, of our technology, we can only strengthen our relationships with Third World countries if we don't go there to exploit those people. But we go there as partners. We develop mutually beneficial relationships. To me, the United States has the potential to really demonstrate through our stewardship of the waterways on an international level. I think we can really use that in a positive way.

MS: Well, do you have anything you want to add? Or something that you thought we would talk about? Or you think is relevant in the subjects we've rambled on with or touched on that needs to be said about this area and the business you're in and the community in general?

BD: I think we covered it.

MS: Yeah?

BD: Yeah.

MS: Okay. Great. Thank you very much.

[end of transcript]