

Archival collections preserve history in books, manuscripts, maps, photographs, video images, and exhibits. Early forms of historical research, however, were oral. Herodotus, the Greek historian credited as the “father of history,” constructed his history of the Greco-Persian Wars (fifth century BCE) from interviews he acquired traveling around the Mediterranean and Black Sea area. Thus, Herodotus brought into his stories the myriad details of the lives and culture of his narrators.

History comes from stories, often told in grand narratives, and one of this nation’s grand narratives is the rise of the offshore energy industry. History tends to be written from documents, but oral history collections preserve the memories of ordinary and extraordinary people. Where could one find answers to the question: Who were the people who built the refineries, dug pipelines through the swamps, and staffed the offshore rigs? Answers abound in our UH Oral History Project interviews in Special Collections at the University of Houston Libraries.

Picture Louisiana after the Second World War. Bayous, wetlands, fishermen, farmers, and hundreds of military men returning from combat. Many of those who served in the military had worked for oil companies prior to the war and found jobs again when they returned as activities related to the offshore energy industry invigorated the Louisiana economy. The Energy Development series of the UH Oral Histories Project contains 700 interviews about the energy industry. Among those are the Second World War cluster with interviews and recollections of service during the war and the return to civilian work in the offshore energy industry in Louisiana after the war.

A vivid example of the Second World War cluster is the interview with Lloyd Anthony “Pete” Rogers describing his thirty-five years with Shell Oil, starting in 1935. Pete worked in the saw mills around Patterson, Louisiana. When the mills closed, the local economy plummeted, and Pete hired on with Shell. Wartime led to layoffs at Shell, so Pete joined the Army. Trained as an airplane mechanic, Pete tells stories of bombing missions, food rations, and living conditions during the war and his service in Africa, Italy, and India. When Pete re-entered civilian life in 1945, he rejoined Shell and laid pipelines in the Louisiana swamps, then worked an

offshore rig until his retirement in 1976. Pete’s everyday stories of a regular guy illuminate the action of World War II and offer substance beyond news reports to the rise of the offshore oil industry along the Gulf Coast, giving insight into Louisiana’s post-war culture, the development of pipelines in the Louisiana wetlands, and the economy stoked by the burgeoning offshore industry.

Another cluster in the UH oral histories collection features interviews conducted with the Offshore Energy Center Hall of Fame recipients. The Offshore Energy Center (OEC) established its Hall of Fame in 1998 to recognize individual and technological achievements in the offshore energy industry. Dr. Joe Pratt, now professor emeritus at UH, led a team of interviewers to preserve the memories of the OEC nominees and inductees. The Energy Development series includes thirty interviews with recognized offshore industry pioneers. Each of the interviews offers a different perspective on the development and implementation of technologies and their applications, but details often overlap in terms of personnel, technologies, and events.

With thirty-plus years of experience, Dr. E. G. “Skip” Ward is associated with advances in ocean, arctic, and structural engineering. Ward started at Shell Oil Company in 1968 with a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering and became, in his words, an “oceanographer/meteorologist by default.” When Skip started at Shell, the company had installed South Pass 62 platforms in 325 feet of water, the landmark of Gulf of Mexico deepwater activity at that time. An interesting focal point in the interview is Shell’s experience with Hurricane Camille and its effect on the offshore rigs Shell had constructed. Responding to Camille’s seventy-foot waves, instrumentation installed on the platforms brought in tremendous data that contributed to future design knowledge. Ward managed a team that designed deepwater structures and production systems. His interview offers insight into his work on “hindcasting,” or the application of historical data to predict future events and responses. Robert “Bob” Bauer’s interview places his early work in the California oil industry where he worked initially for Union Oil Company of California. Bauer graduated from the University of Southern California with a degree in petroleum

## THE POWER OF VOICES: NARRATIVES OF OFFSHORE ENERGY

*By Teresa Tomkins-Walsh*



*Pete Rogers and a co-worker slog through Louisiana wetlands to construct pipelines after the Second World War.*

All photos from the MMS (Mineral Management Service) and BOEM (Bureau of Ocean Energy Management), Oral History Project, Houston History Archives, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

engineering in 1942 and describes his work following the government's redirection of steel to military purposes.

Bauer worked in the research and drilling departments where he evaluated ideas such as electromagnetic exploration methods and a diving bell for gravimetric surveying in the Gulf of Mexico. From the beginning of his career, Bauer expressed interest in entrepreneurship. In the early 1950s, he took on the management of the Continental, Union, Shell, and Superior (CUSS) group whose mission was exploration technology for development of submerged lands. Leading this group, Bauer spearheaded development of the floating drilling rig. By the late 1950s, Bauer established the Global Marine Exploration Company to further innovations in offshore drilling.

Howard Shatto, inducted into OEC Hall of Fame in 2000, died in January 2018. Shatto earned the sobriquet, "father of dynamic positioning." Recipient of many awards and patents, Shatto described in his interview his pioneering work in the development of remotely-operated vehicles (ROVs) and blowout prevention (BOP).

After completing his degree in electrical engineering at Yale, Shatto took a job at Shell Oil in Houston in 1946. After company training, Shatto took his first job in New Orleans working offshore to assemble Shell's first diesel electric rig. In 1960, Shatto conceived the world's first automatic control for dynamic position on Shell's Eureka core drillship and followed that accomplishment by developing more than 1,300 dynamic and reentry systems.

An interview with Richard O. "Dick" Wilson reveals the fast-paced events of the early offshore industry across the globe. Sharing his experiences with long distance corporate authorizations and quickly arranged flights across continents, Wilson illuminates development of the marine con-



*Deep sea divers weld structures under an offshore oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico, undated.*

structions business in the North Sea. Wilson went directly from his work in the North Sea to Mexico.

With the election of José López Portillo in 1976 and the leadership of Jorge Díaz Serrano as director general of PEMEX, offshore exploration for oil in Mexico was a priority for the Mexican government that was importing oil. Wilson quotes the Mexican leadership: "We know we have oil. Let's go out and find it." Wilson helped design the structures for the, as yet, undiscovered oil field. Efforts were rewarded when Campeche Bay became the second largest offshore field in the world. Wilson's team started designing structures for 3,000 barrels a day and then converted to 150,000 barrels per day before increasing to two million barrels a day by 1982.

From this selection of interviews with inductees into the OEC Hall of Fame, the innovation, funding, cooperation among companies, and international scope of the rise of offshore energy development becomes apparent. Interviews include allusions to contemporary political events: Bob Bauer's reference to the Eisenhower Tidelands Act and Wilson's description of political leadership in Mexico.

Among the nearly 700 interviews in the Energy Development series are a section of interviews on Shell's shipbuilding and fabrication, multiple interviews with women who worked in the offshore industry, the segment of interviews related to those who served in the Second World War, and a set of interviews about work and policies on the Houston Ship Channel.

Interviews in the Energy Development series of the UH Oral History Project led to several energy histories. Mark Mau's *Groundbreakers: The Story of Oilfield Technology and the People Who Made it Happen*, published in 2015, relied on multiple resources including numbers of interviews from this collection. Interviewers who contributed their interviews to the collection and who used the research for publication include Tyler Priest, *The Offshore Imperative: Shell Oil's Search for Petroleum in Postwar America*, 2007; and Jason Theriot, *American Energy, Imperiled Coast: Oil and Gas Development in Louisiana's Wetlands*, 2014.

Teresa "Terry" Tomkins-Walsh, Ph.D., retired from her full-time position with the University of Houston in 2018. She continues working part time for the Houston History Archives on archival collections related to energy and sustainability. Dr. Tomkins-Walsh writes on topics related to archival collections plus environmental and Houston history.



*Drilling barge used for marsh and shallow bay drilling to develop networks of canals in coastal Louisiana, circa 1960.*