

Oral History Interview

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

“The Culture of Tugs and Tugs in Culture”

Interviewee: Joshua (Josh) Roark
DOB: April 3, 1985
POB: Annapolis, MD

Interviewer: Michelle Zacks (M.Z.)
Unidentified Speakers (SPK)

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Transcription by:

Pearl Transcripts
P.O. Box 81
Woodford, VA 22580
410-310-5753
pearltranscripts.com
trevy@pearltranscripts.com

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M.Z.: Today is September 28, 2011. This is Michelle Zacks for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. I am in Higgins House, and I'm talking to Josh Roark. You're Joshua, huh?

J.R.: Either way.

M.Z.: Just to make sure that we have your last name correct, it's Roark?

J.R.: Yep.

M.Z.: I'm just going to ask you a couple of just basic questions, just to get the ball rolling, and to make sure we have just some of the basic information about you. What's your date of birth?

J.R.: April 3rd, 1985.

M.Z.: 1985, okay. You are working on a tug now, is that right?

J.R.: Yes.

M.Z.: What's the name of the tug?

J.R.: Currently I'm on the *El Paso*.

M.Z.: *El Paso*. What is your actual job title?

J.R.: Currently I'm a steersman, so basically I'm training in the wheelhouse. Pretty much right now, I'm running the boat with the captain over my shoulder, pointing stuff out to me, like, "Hey, it's shallow over there, don't go there," that type of thing. I'm learning the new waters and stuff like that.

M.Z.: That must be great experience.

J.R.: Yeah, it's nice. If you just got there and out by yourself, you'd end up running aground.

M.Z.: It's good to have kind of an apprenticeship.

J.R.: I mean, you have the charts and all that also, but where I run, inland a lot, it's real shallow. After storms, it shoals up and so there's a lot of – you know, it's only knowledge that you have from doing it. The charts don't really show a lot of the stuff you need, so I'm kind of learning all that right now, as a steersman.

M.Z.: It's steersman? Did I get that right?

J.R.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: How long will you do that before you're eligible? I mean, you're working towards being a captain?

J.R.: Well, right now I'm actually eligible right now, technically. My last job I worked on allshore towboats, and I was a mate on there. The captain does six hours on, and you do six hours on. When the captain's asleep, I run the boat, type thing. But because now I'm working down in Texas, they have kind of a different setup, where even though my license applies, the inland waters is completely different, and there's just so much stuff. It's not the open water in the ocean. You know, it's narrow.

So you've got to learn a lot of stuff about, you know, "Don't come around that bend too fast, because you'll slide into the bank, and smash somebody's dock." So it's a little different there. They actually call – there, you'll actually be a pilot first. I guess allshore tugs, they'll call it a mate. But in the inland waterways, they'll call the pilot the mate. You'll have a captain and a pilot. That's the same thing as the captain and mate offshore, but the captain does six hours on, six off, and the pilot does six on, six off.

M.Z.: I'm a little confused about that term pilot. I've heard a lot about harbor pilots that help kind of guide boats in through the shallow waters. This is different?

J.R.: Yeah, it's just the boats that run on the Mississippi River and the inland waters around the Gulf. I guess the inland tugboats and towboats; they call the mate the pilot. There's a couple differences between offshore and inshore. The inshore tugboats, or towboats, you know, the Mississippi River and all that, they go by statute miles, whereas offshore you're nautical miles. So, there's just some stuff that it's the same thing, they just have different names for it, from inshore to offshore. And the inshore, they just call it a pilot. You're the mate. It's the same thing. It's not the pilot like that brings the ship in or anything like that. The name just happens to be a little misleading.

M.Z.: How long total have you been working on tugs, then?

J.R.: Three years I've been working on tugs.

M.Z.: So first you were offshore and you were a mate?

J.R.: I was a tankerman for two years. Then by the time I got my certificates and all, I was about eight or nine months I was working as a mate on the boat.

M.Z.: How long have you been on the *El Paso*?

J.R.: I just started on there, maybe fifteen days, twenty days. Because I'm training, I was on another boat for six months and then it got to the point, from Houston to Corpus Christi I've done it a whole bunch of times. A spot came open on this boat, and it's more like Houston to Pascagoula, Mississippi. I switched boats so I could learn a different area.

I've only been on there twenty days, but I've been working down there for six or seven months now.

M.Z.: In the Gulf?

J.R.: Not in the Gulf, inland. So, you know, ICW, the Houston Ship Channel, all that kind of stuff.

M.Z.: Intercoastal Waterway, ICW, okay, and Houston Ship Channel. This is all new to me, so you'll have to excuse my ignorance.

J.R.: A lot of people don't realize that you see ships and big barges offshore, but in the Gulf Coast there's a lot of really narrow waterways that the towboats are running through with barges and a lot of commercial traffic, really. A lot of people don't realize that, because it's inland, but there's still a lot of stuff being moved around.

M.Z.: You must get into some conflict, I imagine, there must be interference from recreational vessels and whatnot.

J.R.: Yeah. I think the worst part, you know, you get the weekend warriors that are out drinking and fishing. They decide they want to scare their buddies and run right across your bow. You know, because you can't stop. So if they run out of gas or their engine breaks down in front of you, they're done. So I mean, that doesn't happen very often, but still, I hate having somebody run right in front of me like that, you know?

M.Z.: Does that happen a lot?

J.R.: Oh, yeah, yeah. You know, I guess people just don't think or don't, I don't know, but that's a lot of weight moving. You can't really, you can't just stop, you know? I've seen in the Houston Ship Channel ships doing fifteen, sixteen. Little boats, I mean, run right across their bows, speedboats and stuff. I don't know if they're trying to show off for their friends or what, but I think they're idiots.

M.Z.: Yeah, that sounds crazy. People just don't realize, I guess, what they're getting themselves into, or potentially getting themselves into.

J.R.: No, I think also, with the ships coming through the ship channel, it's so big, you don't realize how fast it's going, I think is part of it. Then they get close and they're like, "Uh-oh," you know? Because it's not rocking around on the waves, they might be going fifteen, twenty miles an hour. That's a lot moving that fast. So maybe just, I don't know. I don't know what they're thinking.

M.Z.: Well, it sounds like you're getting a range of experience in different kind of conditions.

J.R.: Oh, yeah, and that's part of being a steersman right now. That's part of that too is you see a lot of stuff that's just random situations. Hey, what are you going to do right now,

because this isn't written in the book type thing? The steersman on an allshore towboat or a tugboat, they call them, usually they call them a mate trainee. So steersman and mate trainee are kind of the same, you know, the same for the two.

M.Z.: How long is the vessel that you're on now, the *El Paso*?

J.R.: It's seventy-six long.

M.Z.: What's the horsepower?

J.R.: It's 2,000. It's pretty powerful.

M.Z.: I've been hearing about some of these really big, new tugs and –

J.R.: The last one I worked on was 6,000 and I mean, it would get it.

M.Z.: That was one of these offshore ones?

J.R.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: Wow, that's huge, isn't it?

J.R.: Uh-huh. It kind of was when they started building these new, integrated offshore units. But since then, it's probably five, six years old and there's other ones out now that are like 12,000. I mean, there are some monsters that they're making now. A big part of it is that if you're on a ship, licensing, it's documented differently. So if you have a ship, you're required to have so many wheelmen, so many engineers, and all this kind of stuff. Whereas if you're a tugboat, you don't have to have as much, it's regulated differently.

They're making tugboats that have 400,000 barrel barges, which is a ship. But because the tugboat can connect to it, and disconnect, and drive around, it's still a tugboat. But they get away, it's less crew. I guess that's better for money, or somebody's saving money. That must be why they're doing it.

M.Z.: Right, so how do you describe your ship? What kind of a tugboat is it? I've been reading some about these –

J.R.: What I'm on is more technically a towboat. You think a tugboat. You think the ones that have the big rounded bows, you know? The inland ones actually have the bows square and you push, you always push. You never pull. It has these big push knees, these big steel knees in the front with pads on them that you come to the back of the barge, and then you tie up to the back of it. You're always pushing. Whereas offshore, you have that more traditional rounded style boat that people are used to seeing.

You ever seen in a movie, in New Orleans you see the towboats going by that are square and they have like thirty barges tied together? It's like that. That's the inland boats. I don't know if you can think of it right now.

M.Z.: Yeah, I think I've seen stuff like that. So how many barges do you usually push?

J.R.: We push two. That's another big difference with the inland. The last company I worked with at Vane Brothers, they had 30,000 barrel barges. But they had 3,000 horsepower boats pushing them. That would be one barge. The boat I'm on now is 2,000 horsepower, and we have two 30,000 barrel barges that we push. The last boat I was on was 1,500 horsepower. We had two 30,000 barrel barges that we pushed. That's partly just being inland. You move a lot more with less horsepower, so it's a little more planning and agility needed when you're making turns, and trying to dock and things like that.

M.Z.: So this is petroleum, also, that you're mostly dealing with or –

J.R.: Yeah, it's mostly all liquid cargos.

M.Z.: All fuel of some sort?

J.R.: Chemicals, it could be anything. We've been on barges that have been full of pharmaceutical products. I don't know what it was, but that's what they told us, you know?

M.Z.: That's funny, that you can be on there pushing something around and you don't even know exactly what it is. Is that ever weird to you?

J.R.: Well, you have a HAZMAT sheet, so you know –

M.Z.: Basically.

J.R.: If it's something hazardous and somehow it gets on you – it shouldn't, because it's in a tank, but there's HAZMAT sheets that tell you how to rinse it off, or what to do if you're exposed to certain things. The reason why we figured out the pharmaceutical is they had all the tanks and everything had these zip ties locking all the hatch lids down. We were like, “Man, this must be some really nasty stuff, you know?” I was like, “I don't want anything to do with this.” If they're really tying it down, we're thinking it's some kind of crazy poison.

It turns out it was just worth a whole lot of money. They didn't want anybody stealing any out of there. Every single opening that went into the tanks had some of this cable zip tie-type thing that had a special tool to get it off. That's how we figured out it was pharmaceuticals. The guy cutting them off when we were getting the discharge was telling us, “Yeah, they just do this for security.” (Laughter.)

M.Z.: That's funny. I know from what I've been reading and talking to people, a lot of times you guys are involved with the loading or unloading of the stuff. I guess in that kind of condition, you don't –

J.R.: Yeah, yeah, we do it.

M.Z.: Oh, you do?

J.R.: As a tankerman, that's what I was doing as a tankerman, just pumping the barge off and stuff like that.

M.Z.: But under supervision, I guess, if it's that valuable.

J.R.: Oh, with that? No. I mean, I don't know why it was locked. That was just once. I've never seen it again. I think it was just a one-time thing.

M.Z.: What's the company you're working for now? You used to work for Vane Brothers, right?

J.R.: I'm working for Kirby Inland Marine.

M.Z.: Is that Kirby with a K?

J.R.: Yeah, like the vacuums.

M.Z.: Where are they based?

J.R.: Houston. It's a really big company. They've got boats the whole Gulf Coast, Intercoastal Waterway, all the way up from Mississippi up to Chicago, Ohio River, any inland waterway that pretty much branches off of the Mississippi, and more. It's just all the inland waterways throughout pretty much Central U.S. down to the Gulf.

M.Z.: Did you start out with Vane Brothers, after you were done with the Maritime Academy?

J.R.: Uh-huh. Vane Brothers was my first.

M.Z.: How long did you work for them? That's who you were a tankerman for?

J.R.: Uh-huh, yeah. I was a tankerman with them. It was about two-and-a-half years, roughly.

M.Z.: Where were you when you were working with them? Where was your field of operations?

J.R.: We were based out of Philly. That's where the company's based. Their main dock's in Philly, but they have a dock in Baltimore also. We'd be anywhere from Philadelphia and New York. I've been to Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Houston. I've been to Florida. Pretty

much that boat went anywhere between Houston and New York and the Caribbean. The vast majority of the time, we were in Philly and New York and we'd go down to Piney Point a lot, the Bay. We'd go through the C&D Canal from Philly and we'd go down to Piney Point. Sometimes we'd come into Baltimore Harbor, Norfolk sometimes. Mostly it was kind of Norfolk to New York. But then every once in a while they'd say, "Hey, you know, you've got to take this fuel oil to Puerto Rico." We'd have a long trip.

M.Z.: So you grew up right around here, right? You were born in –

J.R.: I was born in Annapolis, but I guess we moved to Sherwood before I started first grade. So I started first grade in Tilghman.

M.Z.: Was your family from Annapolis? Do you go back? Your family goes back in that area.

J.R.: Yeah, they're in that general area; not really Annapolis, but you know, that general area.

M.Z.: So the Eastern Shore, when you were growing up around here, were you a typical kid, in and around the water all the time?

J.R.: Oh, yeah, definitely.

M.Z.: What kind of stuff, like did you go crabbing a lot?

J.R.: Oh, yeah. We crabbed all the time.

M.Z.: Sailing?

J.R.: I didn't sail much. I had a little aluminum boat with an old little beat up motor. I spent most of the time in that. I even had the little pump that I dropped off the dock so I could shed crabs and get soft crabs and all that, you know.

M.Z.: Did you ever consider that as a – I don't want to say career, but as your occupation?

J.R.: I kind of thought about it, but it's tough. All my friends, maybe not all of them, but the majority of my friends that did that coming out of high school, just about all of them have come to a land job now. It's hard to make a living, you know? It's kind of dying. I think that's happening everywhere, but who knows?

M.Z.: How did you come around to the idea of the Marine Academy, then? Was it pretty much right out of high school?

J.R.: No, no. It took me a while. Actually, I went to school. I went to Auburn University, in Alabama, for a year and a half.

M.Z.: How did you pick Auburn?

J.R.: Originally I was doing industrial design. Where I wanted to go with that is I wanted to design, my idea was to learn how to design boats. I wanted to work for somebody like Boston Whaler, work for a boat company, and design fishing boats, and stuff like that.

M.Z.: That sounds pretty interesting.

J.R.: But after a year and a half I was like, "Man, I'm sitting in here inside in this – kind of setting myself up for a cubicle. I'd rather be on the boat. I can draw it as a hobby, in my spare time." Then I started looking around. I didn't know maritime colleges existed. I guess my mom had told Jack Austin that I was going around applying to people in shrimp boats, just looking for random stuff. He had told them, he's already got a year and a half of school. He ought to finish up, and go to one of these academies. You leave the academy, and you have all your licenses, and a bachelor's degree. So them and who else did she talk to? I think it was probably Ned McCall (ph). He's a ship pilot on the Chesapeake Bay. Him and –

M.Z.: Does he live around here?

J.R.: I think he's Bozman.

M.Z.: Ned, what was the last name?

J.R.: McCall. He brings the ships in. He's a pilot, like we were talking about before. They kind of said the Coast Guard's getting stronger. They're getting, regulation-wise, and what they want and expect of the managers, their expectations are just going up and up and up and up. Going to the school, you come out with it, you have all the requirements. It's a lot of money and a lot of time, if you take the classes on your own. It's a lot of money and time to go to college, and do it, too, but you're knocking it out. You're not working for three weeks, and then spending two or three weeks in the classroom. There's different ways to do it. But from what I've seen now, for the new generation of towboaters or tugboaters, the schools are the way to go.

M.Z.: That's really interesting. I haven't done too many interviews yet. I've done a little bit of reading, as much stuff as I can get my hands on about kind of the history of tugs in this area, and people's personal involvement with that. I get a sense that for some of the old-timers, they see somebody like you, a young man going to one of these academies, and then you're on a tug. They're maybe a little skeptical of, "You can't learn this stuff from a book," that kind of thing.

J.R.: Definitely, definitely.

M.Z.: Do you encounter that a lot?

J.R.: Some. I think whenever you've got a new person on the boat, whether they're from a school or not, everybody's kind of watching them. You can be from a school or you can be from anywhere, and you can be really good, or you can be really bad. I think they

kind of wait and look. There is some guys that are a little frustrated with it, because they're like, "Oh, you just went to school. I worked on the deck for ten years." Some companies will hire guys right out, and put them in a steersman program, like I am now. Vane Brothers doesn't do that. That's where I kind of worked my way up. You still kind of are on the fast track, but it's slowly changing, though.

On a ship, you come out with your ship license and you get right on there. You're an officer. There's no working through the deck or anything. You come out of school, you're an officer. The towboat, tugboat industry is a little bit different. It's a little, like you were saying, more old school. You come out of school, they're still going to expect you to go down, clean the galley up. If the toilets are dirty, you're still going to have to scrub the toilet. You're not an officer on a ship right away. You've still got to kind of pay your dues, I guess, so to speak.

M.Z.: How do you feel about that? Do you think that's a good thing, bad thing?

J.R.: It's good. The company I'm working for now, for a while was really short-handed. They were taking people, and rushing them through, not really having much deck experience. They were just, "Hey, you've got a license. Learn this. Okay, you can run the boat. You're good." They didn't do too much experience with working on the barge, throwing lines, tying the barges off and stuff.

They could do it, but what I've found is the two years I spent as a tankman and all that, I learned a lot of stuff. You know, just like when you're – we have a wheelman that you're coming to a dock and you would say, "Hey, we're going to the dock. Go out and get the lines ready." You'd think you were close, and you'd go out, and you were an hour from the dock. It's raining and you're soaking wet for an hour. So you learn a lot of little stuff, like hey, I'm not going to call these guys until I need them, where some guys don't even think about that because they never had to do it.

I guess it's good that the people that you're leading – basically, if you're a wheelman, you're telling your guys what to do on deck. It's hard to tell somebody what to do if you haven't done it. Even if you've done it once, it's not that much, you know? I think it's good, that progression.

M.Z.: Sounds like you have to have hands-on, practical experience. And like you were saying in the beginning, when we started to talk about just all the unexpected stuff that comes up, that there's no way you can really learn in a book.

J.R.: Yeah, and with the tugboats and all, more so than the ships because on a tugboat there's a lot more. You know, you're coming to a dock and you're docking. You know, you don't have a pilot a lot of times. You don't have an assist tug helping, pushing you to the dock. There's a lot of stuff there that your guy, the guy that's working on the deck, he might have to throw a big, heavy line ten feet, and catch a piling because it's windy, and you're having trouble getting to the dock. There's a lot of little stuff with the tugboats that it's different, more hands-on-type stuff.

M.Z.: What was it like after you got out of the academy and you were on your first ship? I guess you were a tankerman first, right? I don't know. Did you feel comfortable and competent? Did you feel like you could pretty much handle what was expected of you? Or were there embarrassing things, where you'd try to throw that line, and you completely missed the piling or, you know, whatever?

J.R.: Oh, yeah, I mean, there's a learning curve, for sure, every once in a while, even now, every once in a while, you'll still miss or something. Everybody gets a good laugh out of it. (Laughter.) But, you know, it happens.

M.Z.: And it happens to everybody? So the laughter goes around, right?

J.R.: Yeah, there's sometimes when you really need to get it on the first try, and that's when nobody's laughing if you miss it. But the tugboats in general, I guess I'm kind of going on what the difference from a ship is. The majority of the academy people go towards ships. But the shipping industry has been slowing down for U.S. mariners. So I think a lot more are going towing, to the tugboat industry, which is growing, from what I can see, anyway.

I like it because there's a smaller crew. It's usually the same group of guys. After you work on a boat for six months with the same group of guys, you become friends. You're all working together. Even the captain might come down in the engine room and be changing oil filters. The tugboats' a smaller crew and everybody has to work together to make it work. It's not like, "That's your job," or, "That's my job." Even now, I'll go down, I'm not required to, but I'll go down and cook dinner some nights for everybody, because they might all be working on the barge. Then when I'm running the boat, one of them will cook dinner.

So you're all living together more, whereas on a ship you've got a cook and all this kind of stuff. On the tugboats, it's more family-oriented, where everybody's got to work together, and if they don't, then it makes for a really rough couple weeks on the boat. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: Have you had that kind of situation yet? I mean, I know you haven't been doing this that long.

J.R.: Yeah, I worked under one captain. The crew was good, but the captain, not always. He could at times create a bunch of crap and then everybody would be stressed out and pissed off. It's like dominoes. As soon as one person gets in a bad mood, then it kind of gets – the morale kind of goes with each other.

M.Z.: What would you say, in your experience so far, what makes for a really good captain? What are the qualities that you think, "Yeah, I really want to work for this guy," or what do you aspire for, if you want to be a captain yourself? What kind of a captain do you want to be? You know what I mean?

J.R.: I'm not a big fan of the real strict guys. When I was a tankerman, I had a couple guys working for me. The way I did it is everybody knew their roles, and knew what they were supposed to do. At the start, I made sure that everybody knows what they're supposed to do. Then I let them take care of it. If they don't take care of it, then there's a problem, or you try to get rid of them.

I'm not a big fan of forcing people, and yelling at them, telling them what to do. I'd rather them do it on their own, you know? If they need help, they'll ask and stuff like that. I'm not a babysitter. They know what they need to do. They shouldn't have to be told. There are some things that come up that, "Hey, could you guys take care of this today?" or, "The boat's filthy; we need to wash the boat today," something like that. For the most part, you shouldn't have to tell everybody step by step. You're not a babysitter.

M.Z.: I guess part of it is trust, then. You let people know what's expected of them, and then you trust them to be capable of doing it?

J.R.: Exactly. You're coming to a dock, you're the wheelman, you're up high, looking down. You might be thirty feet up in the air and you can see your guys down on the barge. You still have to tell them some things. "Hey, I want this kind of line first," maybe because of how the current is or something. For the most part, you're still keeping an eye on them. If somebody falls, you want to make sure nobody gets hurt and stuff like that. You're out for their safety at the same time. I like people that take initiative, and do it on their own. You don't always have that, though.

M.Z.: Sometimes you have to be much more hands-on with people?

J.R.: Yeah. You know, when I was a tankerman, we had five tankermen, and I was the lead tankerman. I ran everything and the other guys, they knew what to do, and they took care of it and it was great. But I've also worked with guys who won't do anything. Then you have to tell them specifically what to do; I mean, every little thing, like, "Can you change the filters on that engine?" They'd change the oil filter. Well, it's also time to change the other one. "Okay, now take the old filter, wrap it up so we can dispose of it. Put the oil in the slot." You know, there are some guys and that's just – I hate that.

M.Z.: Yeah, that must be irritating.

J.R.: Yeah. Like I was saying before, I'd rather be able to just let everybody go and do their own thing. You still have to go over some stuff that you want to do, but it's nice to be able to say, "Hey, can you service that engine?" and know that everything that needs to be done is going to be done. Yeah, I guess it's hard. I guess that's the way I'd like it to be, I guess. (Laughter.) That's not always how it is.

M.Z.: Yeah. Let me just pause this for a second. Hey, Kate.

KATE:Hi.

M.Z.: I don't think I actually did pause it. Oh, it's yelling at me that the battery is low. Maybe I should go ahead and change that. Let me go ahead and stop it and then we can continue.

[End of Part 1. Begin Part 2:]

J.R.: Are you familiar with Piney Point?

M.Z.: I've been hearing that a lot, Piney Point. This is round two of the interview with Josh Roark on September 28th, 2011. Yeah, so you think Piney Point?

J.R.: Piney Point's, there's a school there. It's not an academy like I'd gone to. It's more just school for boats. There's no English class or anything. There's quite a few people there who have gone to that school. You can get your licenses and all that kind of stuff through there. I want to say they might have something to do with one of the big unions, maybe AMO or somebody. I'm not real sure about that. It's a school you could go, and you could get started out there. But that area, Piney Point, that area is kind of similar to here. I've worked with guys who, you know, were watermen around that area, and now are on the tugboats and stuff like that.

M.Z.: Well, thanks. That's a good tip. I'll start looking into that, and see if I can dig up some people there. Maybe even the school could recommend somebody, you know?

J.R.: Yeah, I know a guy, I don't know if I've still got his number. He's a character. I don't know if I might be able to get a hold of him or not.

M.Z.: Yeah, if you can I'd appreciate it, if you don't mind. I don't want to put you out, but that'd be great because I just want to spread out a little bit more, and not just focus on this area.

J.R.: Yeah, I think he's a born and raised Piney Point guy. He was a crabber for a long time, and all that kind of stuff.

M.Z.: Oh, that would be excellent. I'd appreciate it, if you can come across him. I don't know. Do you remember his name?

J.R.: Yeah, well, I don't know his real name, but Jimmy Crab is –

M.Z.: Jimmy Crab?

J.R.: (Laughter.) I guess his name's Jim. I've never heard anybody call him anything but that.

M.Z.: Okay. I'll do what I can to ask around for Jimmy Crab.

J.R.: Yeah, he's a character.

M.Z.: Well, I was wondering, you know, when you started out with Vane Brothers, and you were mostly up sort of in the Chesapeake Bay area, and kind of Mid-Atlantic area, Philly and New York and whatnot, what was that like for you to experience the Bay in that kind of way, on the tug and with these big barges, as opposed to your little aluminum skip and crabbing? Do you know what I mean? Was it a whole different way of seeing or experiencing that environment?

J.R.: Oh, yeah, because the boat I was working on at the time, the wheelhouse was real high up. I don't know, I can't remember now. Maybe it was fifty, sixty feet was the height of eye. It was a big boat, you know? I grew up in Sherwood, right inside of Poplar Island, right by Lowes Wharf. When you're coming down the bay, and you're fifty, sixty feet in the air, you're actually looking down on Poplar Island, as opposed to just seeing the trees on the side. It's definitely a different view to see from. It's amazing how much just being a little higher changes the perspective on things. It's pretty neat.

Of course, then the whole time I'm sitting there, and if it's a nice – there's been nights where I've seen friends out fishing. I've been coming down the bay, and I'm looking out binoculars, and I'm like, "Oh, that's so-and-so's boat." I'll give them a call. (Laughter.) They're out fishing and having a good time. I guess I'm still having a good time on a nice night, just cruising down the Bay. Sometimes you're like, "Man, it's time to go home now, you know?" (Laughter.)

M.Z.: That's interesting. So what made you decide to go down to the Gulf, or to the inland stuff that you're doing now, down around Texas and whatnot?

J.R.: I've been trying to get into a steersman program for a while, and it just wasn't happening. They had enough people. They weren't really taking people into any training programs. I was in a situation where I kind of hit a wall. I was starting to realize that it was going to be a while before I could get a – I was running the boat as a mate, but I was still running the barge, too. I wanted to take the full step

My roommate from college works for Kirby. There was a hiring freeze for a while, because of how the economy kind of crashed before. It had just opened and I called him and said, "Hey, I'm done here. I can't really, you know, I'm stuck." He said, "Well, they're hiring people right now as steersmen." It just happened he called the office and talked to the guy who he knew there and said, "My buddy's calling you." I called him, and a couple weeks later I was down there, getting my physical and all that kind of stuff.

M.Z.: Well, that's cool.

J.R.: Yeah, it worked out well.

M.Z.: That must be one advantage of going through the academy, is you have those kind of connections.

J.R.: Yeah, definitely.

M.Z.: Your name gets around.

J.R.: Definitely, and I could still go back to a ship, if I wanted to. You know, I've got friends I keep in touch with that work on various types of ships, and stuff like that. If I wanted to, I could go back. It's the same thing, all those guys; most of them got their jobs that way. One of my buddies is like, "Man, this job's great. It's not the best pay, but the boat's great. The company treats you well." He's like, "Hey, there's an opening." He'll call ten friends, and one of them might end up getting there.

With the school, you do kind of have that network of people in the same situation as you. Whereas, if you're just starting out, and you just step on a boat, you don't know anybody. It's kind of hard, you don't know about other companies, and what's going on, and stuff like that.

M.Z.: It sounds like you're pretty satisfied with having chosen this path.

J.R.: Oh, yeah, it's great. Right now the company I work for, the majority of the boats work twenty days on and ten off, which is kind of pushing it. With Vane Brothers, I was working two weeks on and two weeks off, which was great. Who gets two weeks off every month? I mean, you're gone for two weeks, which has its downs. You miss friends' weddings. Sometimes you can get off for them. You miss holidays, and you're going to miss things here and there. Then again, you've got two full weeks to make up for it. Those two weeks, you don't have anything to do, except for whatever you want. I like it.

M.Z.: This schedule now, with only ten days off, that's a little harder.

J.R.: Yeah, it's pushing it.

M.Z.: How long will you do that for? Or that's just how they do it, period?

J.R.: That's just how they do it. They do have some boats that work two weeks on and two weeks off. When I get done with my training, I'm going to try to get on one of them. You know, plus because it's out of Houston, so a direct flight's three, three-and-a-half hours.

M.Z.: Do they pay for transportation or that just comes out of your pocket?

J.R.: They reimburse. I think they give you so much per mile. Usually it covers it. This last time, I flew home on a Sunday, so the tickets are always more on Sunday. Still, I may have lost ten bucks on the whole deal. It's not a big deal.

This past time, my hub's Houston, but I got off the boat in Pascagoula, Mississippi. So buying a plane ticket home can be a little bit tricky sometimes. Actually, I bought a ticket out of Houston and one out of New Orleans, because I didn't know where I was

going to be. Then I just cancelled the Houston one, even though that's where I'm supposed to be. If I'm getting off in Pascagoula, it might be six, seven hours to get from Pascagoula back to Houston and then by that time, I'd missed whatever flight I booked.

Sometimes there's some guesswork with stuff and it can be frustrating, because that's my day off. If I was to get off at 10:00 a.m. or something like that, then that's normally when we – I've got to buy my flights at three or so, because you don't know where you're going to be. That's a whole day, so now I'm down to nine days. The day that I go back to work, like this coming Tuesday, I got the last flight out Tuesday night, so that way I'm there Wednesday morning for crew change.

With the distance, you kind of lose some time. With being a little bit of uncertainty of where you're getting off, you've always got to get your tickets. You burn up a day. Your twenty and ten's turning into twenty-one, nine, twenty-one-and-a-half, eight-and-a-half. You know, it really starts chopping it down.

M.Z.: Yeah, that must be hard.

J.R.: Yeah, it's starting to push it.

M.Z.: Is it mostly younger guys, guys your age that you're working with?

J.R.: All over the place. I mean, it's all over the place.

M.Z.: You were saying, I think, on the phone yesterday when we talked, it can really put a strain on a relationship, having that kind of schedule. I don't know if that's an issue or you, if you have a girlfriend or whatever.

J.R.: I've had a girlfriend for a long time. You know, it's been fine for us, so far. I definitely know a lot of people who have been divorced, some of them several times. I don't have kids. But I'd imagine having kids, it makes it hard when you miss your daughter's prom or when stuff like that's going on, birthdays and all that. I guess you just make up for it in all the time you've got off.

M.Z.: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about life on the tugboat. When I read some of the stories, there's a couple of books. I don't know if you've seen them. There's one called *Tugging on a Heartstring*, Emily Lambert. You know the Lambert family?

J.R.: I don't know them.

M.Z.: You maybe have heard the name. Frank Lambert was her father.

J.R.: I think Jack Austin, I think he'd said he knew the family.

M.Z.: Yeah. Then there's another book that's a little bit older than that one. But both of these books, it's funny, they were both written by women when I imagine there's few women in the industry.

J.R.: Not very many, no.

M.Z.: Have you ever worked with a woman on a boat?

J.R.: Not on the same boat, I haven't. But there's a few around. Not a lot. There's a few, though.

M.Z.: I bet it would be hard, as a woman, to try to make your way in that kind of environment. It must be a pretty male culture.

J.R.: Yeah, it definitely is. It definitely is. There's ones out there that do it, though.

M.Z.: These books, there's a lot of stories in them about different things that happen on the boat. I was just wondering if you could describe some of that. You know, they describe what it's like to stand watch at night and dealing with that. Can you just kind of paint a picture for us a little bit?

J.R.: Like a daily routine?

M.Z.: Yeah, a daily routine. In particular, some of the challenging stuff that comes up that you have to deal with.

J.R.: You know, the day-to-day, generally what the vast majority of boats do is six hours on and six hours off. The captain works from 6:00 p.m. to midnight and 6:00 a.m. to noon. And then the mate, or an inland, like what I'm doing, the pilot, would work from noon to 6:00 and midnight to 6:00 a.m.

It took me a little while, but I've gotten it down pretty well now with my sleeping patterns. If I go to sleep, it's six hours that you're working, but then you're done. By the time you go down and you eat and you have a shower, then the time that it takes you to get up before you start to work again, you're cutting it down to maybe five hours max that you can really sleep at a time. Twenty days straight of only sleeping maximum five hours at a time can kind of – after about two weeks I'm never really – I'm awake, but when I get home I sleep for like twelve hours straight. You just start to get run down a little bit.

M.Z.: I'll bet that's really hard to get used to.

J.R.: I've gotten it down pretty good now, where I'll sleep as much as I can once, and then I'll take a two or three hour nap in my next time off. I've done it before where I'll sleep five hours, and then I'll sleep five hours, and I'll sleep five hours, and my timing is off. That third or fourth time, you can't sleep at all. Then because you can't sleep at all, you end up

working your six hours, not sleeping for six and then being up for six more. Then that's eighteen hours and you've only had five hours of sleep before. It took me a little while to get balanced out, but I've kind of gotten a routine down now, where I've figured it out, got myself a pattern.

That was a little hard at first, especially when you're on that fifteenth hour at 3:00 a.m. It's dark out, a real dark night, and you're just kind of standing there by yourself in the wheelhouse, kind of like, "Man, time to drink another cup of coffee." It's not that often, but it happens occasionally. Sometimes you just don't sleep well. I guess just like being on land, some mornings you wake up and you're a little groggy all day.

M.Z.: It's like being on land, but there you are, running the ship and a lot of stuff can happen if you're not on the ball, right?

J.R.: Definitely, definitely.

M.Z.: Is it hard to stay, like at night, when you're on watch, and you're drinking another cup of coffee.

J.R.: I've never fallen asleep on watch.

M.Z.: Does that happen?

J.R.: Sometimes, I don't think it happens that much. It has, but I don't think it really does happen that much. I think for the majority of the time those people are used to sleep schedules and all that kind of thing. I think the other thing is I've found that even when I am tired, you're doing something. When you're standing there and you're running the boat, even though you're by yourself and you're tired, you're still alert and you're still focused. You still have a bunch of oil or something that you don't want to run into something. You're still on the ball. Even though you're tired, you're still good to go. At least, that's the way I look at it.

M.Z.: I was on a friend's crabbing boat a week or two ago. It was at night. It wasn't real late at night, but it was dark out already. We were coming back in. I went up in the cabin with him. I'm not a real boating person. I don't have a lot of experience around boats. It was just amazing to me how different it all was at night, and to be up there and looking out. We were coming in Tilghman Creek. He grew up there. He runs his boat there all the time, so he didn't need to use his lights much or anything. It's very familiar territory for him, so he was very comfortable. But for me, it's like, my God, I can hardly see anything. It was really, really cool, but it also seemed a little bit spooky. What's that like for you, especially if you're in unfamiliar areas?

J.R.: I mean, I've gone through the same place five, six times during the day, and then go through there at night and you're like, "Was that there when I came through there during the day?" Sometimes it throws you. It's weird how much different a place can look at night. A lot of it, too, is if there's a refinery or like going into Baltimore Harbor, you've

got all the lights from the refineries and just all the stuff going on, so there's a lot of background light. Your buoys are lit up. There's all this background light.

It kind of throws you off a little bit. Once you see it a couple times, then you're good. At night's definitely different. You have spotlights that you can hit on stuff if you need to check something or if you're coming to a dock, so you can see exactly where you need to go on the dock. But it's not like a car. You don't run with your headlights on. You turn all the lights off.

M.Z.: And you can see better without them.

J.R.: Oh, you can see a lot better. And really, on a clear night, you can see really well with all the lights out. If you're in a channel or somewhere that it's lit up well, I mean, you can see the lights blinking on the buoy lines. Sometimes you can see them for miles. Sometimes at night it's just as easy, it almost easier sometimes at night, because on a clear night that light's blinking. You can really see it from far away, whereas during the day you might not be able to see the little buoy with the sun hitting it or something. But yeah, on a dark night, no moon, a little bit hazy, it can get a little nerve wracking, definitely.

M.Z.: I imagine it must be really different being in a place that you're familiar with than being in a new place.

J.R.: Oh, yeah. That's a big part of – right now, doing my steersman, as a mate trainee, you're learning that stuff now. If you do make a mistake or you do get unsure, you have the captain or another wheelman with you that you can be like, "Hey, this doesn't look right." They can be like, "Oh, that's this." That's part of the training program. That's why they don't just say, "Here, go drive this boat." There's times when stuff's not what you expect. That's for sure.

M.Z.: Can you think of any particular story like that, when you've come up on something that you didn't expect?

J.R.: I don't know. I've come to docks before where I hadn't been to the dock before, but I had a picture layout of what the dock that somebody else had written, "Hey, this is what this dock's going to look like." I got there and it looked nothing like it. Then you have to run the spotlight around and try to figure out what's going on. You know, if it's windy, sometimes that can be – or if the current's running hard, and you're trying to figure out what's going on and you're trying to keep the boat in the middle, so you're not hitting anything. Most of the time, you can figure it out pretty quick.

M.Z.: You seem pretty even-keel. I don't know what it's like when you're actually in that kind of situation. Do you get really nervous or do you feel like, "I can handle this,"? Are there ever times when you're –

J.R.: You might get a little bit, but I think –

M.Z.: Have there ever been times when you feel really scared?

J.R.: I think if you get really scared and really nervous, something bad's going to happen. You have to be pretty level-headed, I think. If you're not, if you get all worked up, that's when you start making bad decisions and stuff like that, I mean just in general, in life. When people get all excited, that's when they do dumb things. You've got to kind of be calm and collected. Also, your crew sees that. If you start getting worked up, and they're like, "Oh, he's not comfortable," then a lot of times those guys will start getting nervous, too. You've really got to keep it cool, so that way, it makes it a lot better.

M.Z.: Do you get an adrenaline rush, when there's dicey stuff that you have to try to deal with?

J.R.: Not really. I don't know, I think really when you get in a situation like that, it's not so much that you – it's more you just kind of get real focused. You kind of just tune out everything else and you're just focused on what you're doing. For the most part, it's not like it's like jumping out of an airplane with a parachute. It's nothing like that.

M.Z.: I'm just asking that because in some of the books that I've read, it seems like some of the captains can sort of feed off of the nervous energy when there's something dicey going on. They kind of like the danger, you know?

J.R.: Yeah, there's people that like that. I don't. To me, a good watch is one where nothing exciting happens. I mean, it's neat to see some dolphins and stuff, but if you're in a situation where you start to get nervous, I'd rather never get to that situation. It's going to happen, but to me, the best way to do it is to avoid at all costs stressful situations.

M.Z.: That makes sense. What's it like when the weather gets real bad, if it's real rainy or stormy out there? Have you been in that kind of situation?

J.R.: Yeah, when I was working offshore I've gotten in some bad weather. That can get a little dicey sometimes. I guess I wouldn't say I've ever been in really a close call-type situation, but they do happen. Boats do sink occasionally and stuff like that.

M.Z.: I mean, you must have to deal with even hurricanes down there, potentially.

J.R.: I've been lucky. I've been lucky. Everybody that I've worked with has been in some type of hurricane somewhere. I've been in bad weather, but I've never been in really bad weather. You know what I mean?

M.Z.: If you stay down there, I guess you can expect that, huh?

J.R.: Sooner or later I'll get in one, definitely. I was talking to some of the guys on the boat that I used to work on this last – what was this last hurricane that came up?

M.Z.: Irene?

J.R.: They were in New York. I got off that boat and I hadn't gotten anything there, but they were in Irene. They were in New York, and had that one, which wasn't a bad one, but still.

M.Z.: You haven't talked to anybody that went through Katrina, have you?

J.R.: No, but I've worked with a bunch of guys that were down there during Ike that were on the boats. They were running around, figuring out where all the leaks in the boat are. You know, water starts dripping out of the ceiling. Where's that coming from?

M.Z.: Yeah, because I think with Katrina, in the Lower Ninth Ward, all the flooding that happened there, wasn't there a barge that punched through one of the levees or something?

J.R.: I'm sure.

M.Z.: I think something like that. I can't remember all the details.

J.R.: Yeah, they built some super-duper elaborate stuff down there now. The last couple weeks I've been around in that area, around New Orleans. You should see some of these walls and floodgates that they built. I mean, ridiculous, as far as the eye can see, huge frickin' things. It seems to me it would be cheaper just to rebuild all the houses, and not build that huge wall. I'm not real sure exactly what happened with all that.

M.Z.: You were talking before that you liked being on a tug, as opposed to ship, because it's smaller and you get to be friends and like family. Generally, what kind of people are working on the tugs, in your experience? What kind of ethnic background or experience?

J.R.: It's a little bit of everything.

M.Z.: Is it white, black, everything?

J.R.: Yeah, it's a little bit of everything. I think the crew I'm on now, between the people that are on and off, I think there's four white guys and three black guys, I think. We're not all on at the same time. It's a little bit of everybody.

M.Z.: Where do people tend to come from? All over the place, geographically?

J.R.: Yeah, yeah. But Vane Brothers tends to have employees that are in this area. The company I work for in Houston, most of those people tend to be Texas-New Orleans area, close to those main hubs of those companies, you know, driving distance. Then you have people like me. I fly from Maryland to Houston. There was people that I worked with at Vane Brothers that flew from Florida to Philadelphia.

There's people all walks of life. You have the very poorly-educated people, who never graduated high school. You have those guys that are captains running boats, and they're great at it. Then you also have very well-educated guys that went to college, and might have a master's degree in something. They might be the captain of the boat. It could be anything. It's all over the place, really.

M.Z.: International, do you get people from other countries?

J.R.: Not so much in the towing industry. I've worked with one or two guys that are foreign guys. Actually, one of the guys I'm working with now is Jamaican, but he's a U.S. citizen.

M.Z.: He's a black guy?

J.R.: Uh-huh. He's from Jamaica, but he's an American.

M.Z.: He's been in the States?

J.R.: Yeah, I don't know if he's a green card or what his deal is. There's the Jones Act. I know they were talking after the oil spill. They were talking about, "Oh, we need to get rid of the Jones Act." It kind of ensures that mariners have jobs. In World War II, merchant mariners had a huge, huge role in World War II, with moving supplies and all that kind of stuff. Afterwards, I'm guessing Mr. Jones (laughter), I don't know who it is, but they made this act that kind of secured U.S. jobs for mariners, so that way if there's another war, there's skilled mariners.

There's a lot of Filipinos that work on ships and stuff like that, but you can't hire a tugboat full of Filipinos. If you're going from a U.S. port to another U.S. port, you have to have – I think the wheelmen have to be – I don't know exactly what the – I used to know it. I knew it in school. There's something where only one of the crew members can be foreign. There's some kind of deal like that, where you have to have U.S. citizens running in U.S. waters. A foreign ship can come from abroad, and come into the States, and bring whatever.

M.Z.: But if it's a U.S.-flagged vessel, then the crew has to be a certain percentage U.S.?

J.R.: Yeah. Say even if a ship that's an all-Indian crew, they can't go from Philly to New York to Texas. They can't do a loop just around the States. It has to be American crews doing that. If you want to hop around and work in the coastal U.S. trade, it has to be American-flagged and American sailors. I guess the idea is that Americans get paid a lot more than the Indians and really most any other – I think maybe the Norwegians might get paid more. For the most part, the pay scale is way higher for an American versus the Filipinos, and stuff like that, or just the foreigners in general. I'm just using Filipinos because there's a lot of Filipinos that work on ships. I don't know exactly what it is. You could look it up on the Internet.

M.Z.: Yeah, I will. Thanks for telling me about that.

J.R.: In World War II, I think more merchant mariners died, percentage-wise, than did in any branches of the military.

M.Z.: Well, there they are, going back and forth across the ocean.

J.R.: Without any guns. A lot of merchant marines died. The Jones Act came from that. I think the maritime academies play into that. They get a little bit of federal funding. I don't know how much and how all that works out, but there's a little bit of aid to that. If we go to another full-scale war, we need to get supplies. If all the commercial traffic is done by foreigners, then all of a sudden you have no people to move your supplies around. There's Navy ships that can move supplies, but the merchant fleet, the oil tankers, you need that stuff.

M.Z.: That's good. I'll look all that up. If you have such a mixed crew, in terms of race and where people come from, and what their backgrounds are, have you experienced any kind of challenges or tensions along those lines? Are there issues that come up, or people tend to realize that you're in a small space, and you'd better work together?

J.R.: I've kind of been in some issues. I don't really want to go into it too much. I mean, not me personally, but I've seen issues come up. For the most part, I think everybody's – we're all here to work. With how stuff is nowadays, you've really got to work. You've got to do what you've gotta do, because everybody's suing everybody for things. I'd imagine twenty years ago, older guys off the boats; there was probably a lot more issues. From what I've heard, twenty years ago, if somebody had a problem, they'd get in a fight. Then they'd kick them off the boat at the next dock, or they'd get off the dock and have a fist fight. Whoever won went home or something like that. I've never been in a bad situation. I'm sure it happens.

M.Z.: I've heard around here that the crews tend to be mostly white. There's not a lot of black guys or other races on there, on boats, because of some of these historical conflicts and tensions. Do you think that's right?

J.R.: Actually, you know, in Texas, being kind of in the Deep South, New Orleans and all that, it almost seemed like on the boats I've seen. There's not much issue with it. Up here, I felt like there was a little bit more, which kind of surprised me. You would think that the Deep South would be a little bit more, it's hard to say.

M.Z.: Well, maybe there, I've lived in the South quite a bit. I think there's a lot more daily interaction between black and white people. They live closer together and stuff.

J.R.: Maybe. I don't know. Growing up in St. Michaels, I don't think it's ever been an issue. I've never really had issues here.

M.Z.: Did you tell me on the phone that a lot of shrimpers down there are getting into the tug industry, just like crabbers and stuff are here?

J.R.: I think in general, the fishing industry seems to be kind of dying. The guys that are still doing it, very few fishermen make decent money. I think a lot of them go to that. I couldn't really go real specific on anything about it, but it just seems to be like that.

M.Z.: Working on a tug is a way of staying connected to the water, but you can actually make money?

J.R.: Yeah. This can be a hazardous job. Everything is steel. Even if you trip and fall, you could bang your knee up pretty bad just falling. It's one thing to fall in a carpeted room and bang your knee, but if you fall on steel and do the same thing, it's going to hurt a lot worse. Most of these companies give good insurance and stuff like that now and everything. I guess security-wise, you're not worried about the whole, "I'd better catch fish today." It's a little more stable, I guess.

M.Z.: You briefly said, I don't know if it was when you were talking about how when you're in the Bay, and you're up so high, and you're looking down, and it's a whole different view of the Poplar Island. You see your friends and everything. Maybe it was a little later, you said sometimes you see dolphins and stuff out there. Can you say a little bit more about that, like what it's like to be in this big steel vessel and you're up high? You're in the water and it's got to be satisfying. You're a water-connected person. You grew up that way. Do you have a different experience of the natural world? Is that part of the experience for you?

J.R.: I mean, I like it. Some people don't care. I always have binoculars with me. If I can, I'm always looking at birds. If there's a dolphin or you see a whale, I'm always with the binoculars looking and stuff like that. I need to buy an Audubon Society bird ID book, because the Gulf Coast there, I guess it's coming to that time of the year there's going to be a lot of migratory birds and ducks. I keep telling myself I'm going to do it and I haven't done it yet. I need to go buy a good bird ID book.

M.Z.: That will be cool, yeah.

J.R.: I like it, yeah. I mean, that's part of the reason why I like the job is because I'm not inside. I send pictures to my dad and my brother and my friends that work in offices all the time. As I'm cruising down the canal, it's a beautiful sunrise and I'm like, "Another day in the office." It's enjoyable. I like being outside and I like all that. I could never work in the office. It just wouldn't work, especially since I've done what I'm doing now. I think it'd make it really hard to go back to a nine to five office job.

M.Z.: That's what I'm getting the feeling talking to the people I've talked to so far, is that it just becomes a real way of life. It kind of sucks you in, especially for the older guys. They maybe had to come up the hard way a little bit more and deal with some crap along the way. But still, there's a lot of satisfying things about it.

J.R.: I've only been doing it a couple years and I've been lucky. For the most part, I've been on nice boats. Twenty years ago people weren't worried as much about stuff like hearing protection. Some of those old boats, I've seen them go by. They are loud. To be on a boat that's running – I've worked on a boat for a couple months that's really loud. When you're sitting there, and it's just the generator running, and you've got the TV turned up all the way to be able to hear to watch the news in the morning, I mean, it can't be good for you. I'm sure the farther you go back in time, the worse that type of stuff is, like the daily conditions.

I've been lucky. Except for that one boat, all the boats have been nice and comfortable. There's always earmuffs laying around. I'm assuming that twenty, thirty years ago there wasn't that much around. A lot of these older guys that I work with that are sixty, a lot of them can't hear much at all. That's probably why. I think the overall conditions on the boat have gotten a lot better.

M.Z.: Yeah, yeah. You're entering at a good time, you think?

J.R.: I think so. I mean, I hope so.

M.Z.: You said you feel like the industry is growing and it's pretty stable. Mostly because of petroleum and fuel and stuff like that?

J.R.: Yeah, as long as people are driving cars and as long as you have power plants. We'll take the barge right to a power plant and just charge oil to them for burning in their plant. There's some companies that specialize more in coal. They might leave Baltimore here and get coal and take it right to a coal plant somewhere. The industry can't die. I mean, it can slow down, just like anything. Stuff has got to be moved. As long as people are buying and selling stuff and as long as there's refineries, it's not gonna end. Everybody wants to cut back on fuel and all this kind of stuff. Okay, there's less petroleum, but somebody's still got to bring all that corn down the Mississippi River to the refineries. It's still kind of the same, in some senses. I don't see it going away.

M.Z.: We've been talking for a long time, so we can wrap up. If you could just say a little bit more about the daily life stuff. Like I told you, part of the point of doing these interviews is to give a real human story to this kind of industry. If you could, maybe quickly, run through what a typical day is like. Even stuff like the food, who does the cooking, what kind of stuff do you guys eat? You were talking about the conditions being much harder on the old boats. Some of the stories that I've read about the galleys, where it's really dirty and nasty, is it still that way?

J.R.: It depends on the boat. Really, if you've got a captain that's a neat freak, the boat stays neat because he stays on everybody about "clean that" type thing. Then there's boats that are a little dirtier. It all depends on pretty much the captain. If he's a really clean guy, he's going to make sure everything stays really clean. If he's a messy guy, then

everything's going to be messy, unless you have some OCD neat freak that's on the crew or something.

As far as cooking, generally you have one meal a day that's cooked. There's always food in the fridge. The boat I'm on now, we've got two refrigerators, like you'd have in your house, with a freezer on top and fridge on the bottom. Then we also have a big standup freezer. We've always got food around. If you get hungry, just go back there. If you want a steak, you go take steak, you put it out and when it's thawed, you cook it. Almost always there's a meal prepared once a day, where somebody might bake chicken, and make mashed potatoes, and green beans. There's one square meal every day, one big meal. Usually you make a lot of extra and you end up eating it later.

M.Z.: Do people have pretty big appetites, mostly?

J.R.: I'd say for the most part it's a pretty overweight industry. I think a big part of that, too is when there's not much going on, you're sitting around. You know when you're cold, and if you come in from a cold day, you just want to eat a big, hot meal? Then there's days when there's not much going on. There might be days, for two or three days you don't really do much of anything. You might be sitting tied up to a dock, waiting to discharge, so nothing's really going on.

It's really easy to eat, because the galley's kind of like the social room. There's a big table, five, six chairs around it type-thing. There's usually a TV. Pretty much all the boats now have a TV. Some of them have satellite TVs. You're all sitting in there. You're all right by the refrigerator. One guy gets up and he cooks something to eat. "That looks good. Maybe I'll make something, too." There's definitely a lot of overweight – there's not a lot of room for exercise either, just because of the tightness of it.

M.Z.: I was wondering about that, what you can do. I mean, is there –

J.R.: I'm lucky now, the boat that I just got on has a treadmill. Outside, on the stern, there's a weight set, and all that kind of stuff. This boat that I just got on, the *El Paso*, I've been trying to get on the treadmill. But you're underway; you're on a treadmill, that's in the engine room. Texas is already 100 degrees out. Then the engine room's got to be 130. You go for a jog, in twenty minutes, I'll drink two bottles of water while I'm running in the engine room. It's not ideal, but if you want to, you can get exercise on this boat. In the past, the boats I've worked on haven't had anything. I mean, you could do some pushups or find a pipe somewhere and do pull-ups. It's nice having some exercise equipment around.

M.Z.: Yeah, I bet.

J.R.: I've been working with the captain, so I've been working from 6:00 to midnight and 6:00 a.m. until noon. From midnight until 6:00 a.m., in that off time I try to sleep as much as possible. Then usually after lunch I'll go out, and I'll try to work out, or I'll screw around

for a little while, watch TV, or whatever. But I try to get some stuff in. Around 2:30, 3:00, I'll go to sleep for two hours, three hours and take a nap before my next watch. That's kind of what I've been doing now. I'm training, so I might only be on here another two or three months before I go to another one. Hopefully, the next one has a gym.

M.Z.: Are more and more boats having exercise equipment? I guess younger guys probably are maybe a little more oriented towards exercise.

J.R.: For the most part, yeah. A lot of these companies go on now about crew endurance. They say if you exercise you'll be more alert, more awake and stuff like that, which is probably true. I think they're pushing that stuff a lot. There's a huge yacht going by. (Laughter.) I'm sorry. I saw the bow come across the window and it just kept getting bigger and bigger.

M.Z.: It doesn't sound like anymore that it's somebody's job to do all the cooking for the whole crew. Everybody just does their own thing?

J.R.: You know, the one meal a day generally, the guy in the morning will cook. The six to twelve in the morning, usually that guy cooks. But then, sometimes there are some guys, the captain might refuse to ever cook when there's tankermen on there. He's like, "You'll have sandwiches today." I think for the most part, when the tankermen are on the barge now – I don't mind cooking. If there's nothing going on, I'll cook a whole big meal. I think they appreciate it some, too. I think they're more willing to go all out, and make a good meal when it goes back and forth.

M.Z.: It's not like a real scheduled kind of thing?

J.R.: The main meal we usually have is lunch. Around 11:00, 11:30 in the morning, it's more like a dinner. They'll have baked chicken or make ribs. They'll have a big meal made then, and the guys getting off watch will eat, and the guys coming on usually – that's usually the big meal of the day. Other than that, you just go in the freezer and get what you want, a bowl of cereal, sandwich. If you feel like making eggs, make eggs. They try to do one big proper meal a day.

I was on one boat where the captain had two proper meals a day. That makes it even harder, because the guy cooked really good on there. Like you were saying about the weight thing, that can be rough.

M.Z.: Yeah, especially if you're down there in the Gulf. There's some really good cooks down there, like Creole.

J.R.: I got a Cajun guy that works there now. He's been cooking all kinds of stuff I've never even heard of. I don't even know the names of those crazy sausages and stuff that he's making.

M.Z.: Boudin? Have you had that?

J.R.: Yeah, boudin and all that kind of stuff.

M.Z.: It's good, though.

J.R.: Oh, yeah, it's great. I don't know what I'm eating half the time, but when he's cooking I know it's good, so I'm not worried about it.

M.Z.: That's great. Well, I'll let you go now. I could keep asking you questions for a while, but I know you want to get out and see Mike. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is really obvious and important that we should address, either right here, right now, about your own experience, or even in general, about the exhibit? Things that you think would be important to point out?

J.R.: I think people tend to get a kick out of seeing pictures, oh, that's where you sleep. I don't know if anybody's talked to you about this. The captain usually has his own bedroom. Most of the time, the rest of the crew will have like a small room with bunk beds. The six hours and six hours, when I'm on my six hours, the guy that's off is in the room. We share a room, but we have separate beds where we sleep in on opposite times. I'm sure people come up, and wait, where does everybody sleep? How does that work?

M.Z.: That would be good, if we could get some photos of all that.

J.R.: Yeah, a photo of a bunkroom. I mean, every one's a little different, but the basic idea of hey, this is a little better with bunk beds. This is how the sleep schedule works. The day to day life thing, that's a big part of it. A picture is always better than telling somebody that. If you show a picture and say, "They take turns, whoever's off watch has the room."

M.Z.: Yeah, that's a great idea. I'd love to go aboard a tug and get some of the sound. I was telling you you can do these different tracks and make a whole little audio piece. Somebody told me that's going to be hard with all the liability issues and stuff.

J.R.: Another thing is now the security. Since 9/11, it's like you've got to have all these special cards.

M.Z.: I wonder if I contact or if the museum contacts Vane Brothers or one of these big companies, if we can get permission to go aboard, even for a fake little trip, if they're doing some kind of little tour or something, just to record some of the sounds and take some photos.

J.R.: Vane Brothers is based out of Baltimore. It's kind of a family company type-place. I've never met the guy, but I've heard the guy is a good guy.

M.Z.: Duff?

J.R.: Yeah, Duff Hughes or something like that.

M.Z.: Something like that, yeah. I think that's right, Duff Hughes.

J.R.: I don't remember. I've never met him, but I've heard that he's a really nice guy. If you get a hold of any guys, the Baltimore office is a pretty good group of guys. I don't know if they still do, they might have an old boat. It's on the water. They might have an old boat sitting there. If you talk to them and go up there, you might be able to step on. I don't really know how that works.

M.Z.: We'll check that out.

J.R.: With a lot of that kind of stuff, people can be kind of wishy washy about taking pictures of things. Now they might not care at all, but I could see it could be potentially an issue. They'd probably be good to contact, though. A lot of people from Tangier and I guess Mr. Grosh, he works for them. I've worked for them. They'd probably be good to contact just about, "Hey, we're doing this exhibit about the stuff in Chesapeake Bay." By water, Baltimore's not far from here. They have tugboats that run up to Salisbury. It might be worth calling them, just to see what they say.

M.Z.: I think we will do that. That's a good idea.

J.R.: I'm trying to think who there would be good to actually talk to. I can't really think right now who.

M.Z.: I know the museum has published different magazines and publications over the years. They've put out a couple of articles about Vane Brothers. There might be people here who already have some connections.

J.R.: There's a lot of people that live around the Eastern Shore area that are from there. Just because it's kind of a local thing, they'd probably be more willing than some other big company to do something.

M.Z.: That's a good idea, to get some photographs and sleeping quarters. Is there anything else you think that we should be sure to pay attention to? You have my e-mail, I think. If things come up, please drop me a line if you don't mind.

J.R.: I guess you could say in general, most of the people that are on the boats and stay on it, you kind of hinted at this before, they stay. Not necessarily they stay, but I think it's a passion for a lot of people. Not necessarily the tugboat, but the lifestyle. I couldn't imagine coming back. I think you said some of the other people you've talked to have said the same thing. They couldn't imagine coming back to a real job.

M.Z.: So to talk about that would be good?

J.R.: Yeah, not necessarily the day-to-day of the boat, but maybe –

M.Z.: The whole lifestyle?

J.R.: The lifestyle of it.

M.Z.: I'm looking at some of the questions that I've written out, some of which I've asked you. Since it is such a big, all-consuming lifestyle and kind of a unique schedule, what's it like, either for your girlfriend or for people who are married, what's it like for them? Are they involved in the business at all? Do they do things for you? Is there any shopping or laundry or picking up parts? Some of the things women who are the wives or girlfriends of watermen do?

J.R.: Not anymore, with how the companies are now. They take care of everything. Like you said, the towing on a shoestring or something like that?

M.Z.: *Tugging on a Heartstring.*

J.R.: There's not very many –

M.Z.: Towing on a shoestring, that's good. That's a different title. (Laughter.)

J.R.: I don't know, there's not a whole lot of that left, I don't think.

M.Z.: That kind of mom and pop stuff?

J.R.: There's some companies around that have four or five boats. They might have stuff like that. But for the most part, I'm not too sure about that. I know there's a couple mom and pop operations, but there's not very many like that style anymore, that I know of, anyway.

M.Z.: So for your girlfriend, there's no particular role that she plays in helping you to be able to do what you do?

J.R.: No. I mean, every once in a while I might have to be like, "I'm expecting something in the mail." That's another nice thing, on the tugboats now you always have a cell phone, where in the past you didn't have that. You could always have contact. Even though you're gone, you can still call, if you have service. For the most part, you can do it. The thing is, now you can do all your bills online. You can have stuff auto paid. I could imagine ten years ago that you'd really need to rely on somebody like that because somebody's got to write the checks to pay your mortgage, and pay your car note, and everything.

Nowadays you can set it all up online. My girlfriend, she doesn't really need to – other than every once in a while I'm expecting something in the mail. I've got a roommate that lives with me. When they were saying that big storm was going to come, I had somebody to take care of it. It's not that big of a deal. Plus, with the phones and stuff, it's not just like, "Oh, God, I hope they're taking care of the house."

M.Z.: Yeah, I guess that's something in general that we'll be addressing in the exhibit, how much modern communication and modern technology has changed the whole experience. I mean, that's very important, what you're saying and what other people have said, about cell phones and whatnot, and the ability to stay in touch.

J.R.: Having the Internet on the boat. You know, that's huge.

M.Z.: I couldn't believe that I could e-mail you.

J.R.: I mean, you just have to get an air card, like a Verizon air card.

M.Z.: Everybody has a laptop?

J.R.: All the boats that I've worked on have had a computer in the galley that everybody can use to check e-mail, and all that kind of stuff. They need the Internet, because there's stuff that they've got to send to the office sometimes. Sometimes you've got to e-mail the office. You're on a tugboat, but there still is some paperwork that needs to be done. Sometimes you still do need to e-mail stuff and do that kind of thing. The technology is really nice. We don't have big, fancy computers, but we can do all the stuff we need to do.

M.Z.: How about the navigation technology, just the electronics in the wheelhouse? Has that changed things a whole lot? I mean, it's hard for you to compare, because you weren't there in the old days. But you must hear stories.

J.R.: I can see, because GPS and all that is huge. Things have gotten so good now. Still, at the same time, you've got to know how to operate without them because things break. Really, the radar, that's old technology, but that's your best piece of equipment because it tells the truth. The electronic charts and all that stuff, it's not what's actually there. It's what should be there. But it's nice. All the boats have stuff where, on the chart there will be a picture of a little boat. You can click on it, and it will tell you its name, which way it's going, and all this kind of stuff. It's nice.

M.Z.: It's amazing.

J.R.: I've always been accustomed to that.

M.Z.: Are you learning, especially now where you are, in the more shallow water, inshore water, are you learning any kind of old school stuff or figuring out depth? How things have changed, how the channels have changed from storms or whatever?

J.R.: Well, the boat I work on now, we don't even have a depth finder and we're always in really shallow water.

M.Z.: You don't have a depth finder?

J.R.: Not on this boat, no. You can feel it. When you start getting in really shallow water, your boat starts vibrating more. You can kind of feel, you've got to feel what's going on sometimes. If there's only two feet of water below the barge, and it's loaded, sometimes you'll see, maybe on the starboard side, you'll see a little bit of mud kind of churning up. You'll know, "Hey, I'm getting shallow. I need to get off this bank."

It's a lot of feel with the inland. Offshore, you don't worry about that. But inland, it's mostly muddy creeks and stuff like that. Touching the bottom's not that big a deal. Offshore boats touching the bottom is like, "No, no, no, no." For us, if it gets foggy, and you can't see anything or if the weather's terrible, you can just push into the bank intentionally. Not run aground, but touch up on the ground, and push in the bank and wait.

I guess really, in the tugboat industry, why I went into it, there's a lot of feel. On a ship, you just cruise. That's like an office with a good view. That's what that is. But on the tugboats, you're in it. You're doing it. You're steering. You're always doing something. You're not on autopilot. A ship, you hit autopilot, you can just walk around and check your instruments, and make sure you keep looking in front of you. On a tugboat, you're running the boat, you're steering, you're going around turns. The wind's affecting you, so you're always kind of active with it. Like I was saying, all of a sudden you start vibrating and you see water sucking out from the bank and you're like, "Uh-oh, I need to get off that before I run aground."

It's pretty neat. I guess it's something that's hard to explain. The first time I'd feel some of those feelings, I'd look at the captain. I was like, "We just started vibrating a lot." He's like, "Yeah, turn off the bank. You know there's not enough water there, so the wheels don't have enough water going to them. Get off the bank." (Laughter.) It's pretty neat, though.

M.Z.: That sounds really neat. That's really interesting. I think you're explaining it really well.

J.R.: Yeah, I'm trying. I feel like I'm just rambling.

M.Z.: I'm letting you ramble, because I think you're doing a great job for really painting a picture of it. I think that's going to be great material for this thing.

J.R.: That's the same way with even the offshore boats that Jack runs. When you're coming to a dock, there's currents and there's winds. When you have a lot of draft, that's a lot of water pushing on the side, pushing you this way. If you don't have much draft, that's a lot of wind. If you have a thirty mile an hour wind, there's times when you're kind of crab walking, where you're facing twenty degrees up into the wind to go straight. You're pointing way off of where you're actually going, because you've got to counter for the wind. It's all feel. When you're coming to docks and all that, the currents are setting you. There's a lot of feel.

Like you were saying before, the older guys, do they worry about college? The other guys coming from college, you can't learn this in a book. You can learn the theory of that stuff, like the wind's going to blow you this way or the current's going to push you here. But to actually get there and actually steer and feel, that's where the skill comes in. That's what you've got to learn on the boat.

Some people just don't get it. There's people that try and try and try. Some people just will never be good. I hate to say it. Some people are really good, and some people just won't ever really be able to do it. I've only seen one or two people that really just completely – I know one guy who's been training for like four years. He still struggles sometimes. I don't know why, but some people, it just doesn't click. Like you were saying before, he's also one of the types that he'll get nervous. When he starts to get nervous, it's done. The wind starts getting him and then he goes into panic mode. Some people don't have the mindset for it. It is what it is.

M.Z.: That's so interesting. I guess it just takes a certain kind of instinct, a certain kind of personality, and maybe a certain kind of background. What do you think? Do you think it really helps that you grew up around here?

J.R.: I think growing up on the water helps a lot. A lot of the guys that are really good wheelmen are like these guys from Tangier Island, the people that were crabbers and stuff like that, because they've been running boats their whole lives. The stuff that I got taught in school, about hey, the wind's going to set you here and this is going to set you here, they understand all that, but they weren't taught in a book. They know it from instinct. When they were kids running around on a little boat, it was happening, and they were doing it. They already know.

It's a different type of knowledge, I guess. It's acquired. A lot of those wheelmen are good, though. A lot of the guys who come off of the workboats are really good wheelmen. There's guys that come from Idaho that are great wheelmen, too. I think it does help. They've kind of experienced the currents and stuff like that a lot throughout their life.

M.Z.: Well, it's kind of good that there is this opportunity, this channel for people to go into when the commercial harvesting is such a hard way to make a living now.

J.R.: It seems to me like people that work on boats, a lot of them don't want to ever go ashore. I've tried to get one or two guys that stopped crabbing to go towards it. Maybe they will, maybe they won't.

M.Z.: I guess it must be a big change, even though a lot of the skills apply. But still, when you're crabbing or oystering or whatever, like you're your own man, mostly. This is not that, right?

J.R.: Yeah, you don't have somebody telling you what to do. You're not living on the boat, and all that kind of thing.

M.Z.: It's an adjustment.

J.R.: Oh, yeah. A boat's a boat, but it's not the same. Every boat's different. You get on two boats that look exactly alike, and they handle differently. No boat seems to operate the same. Two identical ones seem to be different. There's always something different. I don't know how.

M.Z.: I guess in a way that's kind of fun. It keeps it interesting. It's not like you know it's going to be the same thing, time after time. Well, this is great, Josh. Thank you so much. I'll go ahead and turn this off. But if you don't mind, if I listen to this, or if we do the transcript, that's when you write it all out, which I hope somebody else is going to do. When I'm listening to it or reading it, if I think, "Oh, my God, why didn't I ask him, whatever," if you don't mind, maybe I'll give you a call.

J.R.: Yeah, you can give me a call or send me an e-mail.

M.Z.: And if you think of anything?

J.R.: You need to get one of those programs where you just play it, and the computer types it.

M.Z.: Yeah. I know. I don't have that, but I know it exists. But same thing, if you think of anything, just please get in touch.

J.R.: All right.

M.Z.: Okay. Thank you so much.

[End of interview.]