

Oral History Interview

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

“The Culture of Tugs and Tugs in Culture”

Interviewee: Robert (Bob) Dempsey (B.D.)
DOB:
POB:

Interviewer: Michelle Zacks (M.Z.)

Also present: Erick Applegarth (E.A.)
Steve (Deck Utility)

Date: December 2, 2011

Location: Wheelhouse, *Robert E. McAllister*

Comments: This conversation occurred inside the wheelhouse as we headed out to the Key Bridge to meet the Panama-flagged *MSC Rachele*, a Mediterranean Shipping container ship, which was docking at the SeaGirt 3 terminal. The *Rachele* is 1095 feet long, 140 feet wide, 101,874 pounds deadweight, 90,745 gross tonnage, and can hold 8,238 TEUs (containers). The ship also has its own 3,399 bow thruster.

This was a Moran job, but the *Rachele* was so big that it required three tugs. The docking pilot refused one of Moran’s tugs because it wasn’t big enough. McAllister in Baltimore is a smaller company with less business relative to Moran, but they have the advantage of having the very powerful *Robert E.* tug, so it’s not infrequent that Moran will call them in to help.

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M.Z.: Is that SeaGirt, over there?

Steve: Yeah. The first one's Dundalk, it's Dundalk and SeaGirt, both of 'em. Yeah.

B.D.: At least seven cranes on SeaGirt, and then you'll see there's some different shaped black fendering systems down toward the right. That's all new. You can see all the cranes down there. They're finishing that. Right now it's SeaGirt 1, 2 and 3. That will be SeaGirt 4, which will handle all the bigger ships, bigger than the one that's coming in, that's *MSC Rachele* that's inbound.

Steve: Is that one of the 1,100-foot jobs?

B.D.: Yeah.

Steve: Yeah, that's amazing. But yeah, that's Dundalk down there and SeaGirt.

M.Z.: Oh, okay.

B.D.: This side's Fairfield, and we have three car terminals there and one, two, three oil terminals on this side.

Steve: There are a couple coal. It's really amazing the industry that is out here.

M.Z.: So I guess Greg was telling me that the bulk of the cargo that you guys deal with is probably cars?

B.D.: Yeah, pretty much, probably for us. He would know that, because he is doing the logistics on that, because we do a lot of car ships and mixed row, you know, the agricultural gear, Caterpillars and stuff.

M.Z.: What did you say? Mixed row?

B.D.: Mixed. What it is – (radio announcement) – some car carriers have very short ramps in them, so that only cars fit in. Some have extremely tall ramps and adjustable ramps that they can roll in something that's 12, 14 feet high. You'll see 'em going through the back ramps and stuff. A true car carrier that, only cars, can handle 4 or 5,000 cars, where if they're a mixed –

(radio call:)

Operator: *Calling Robert from the Nora Vancouver (ph).*

B.D.: Yes, sir. Come in. Standby.

Operator: *Hey Bob, I'm turning in. You're number three. I don't know if you saw me swinging.*

B.D.: I see you now. Thanks. I'll pull out of your way. Keep her coming.

Operator: *All right, thanks, Bob, I appreciate it.*

B.D.: So I guess Greg, having that – he'll know whether we do more cars than anything.

Operator: *Sorry about that, Bob, I didn't see you there.*

B.D.: That's all right. We're sneaking by.

Operator: *All right.*

B.D.: Kind of seeing it as you landed on me.

Operator: *Yeah, I thought you were coming in on the south.*

B.D.: MSC arrival.

Operator: *Okay. You've got the Rachele?*

B.D.: Yeah, you coming out for that one?

Operator: *Yeah, that's (inaudible 5:58). We'll drop hook here. We'll be heading out to that one.*

B.D.: Okay. See you in (indiscernible 06:02). Sounds good.

Operator: *All right. See you in a bit.*

E.A.: That's a fancy looking rescue boat they have there.

M.Z.: Does it make much of a difference to you guys what kind of cargo it is, or is a job a job?

B.D.: No. Right, a ship's a ship. Right, exactly. The car ships in heavier winds can be tougher to dock; but that's more on the pilot than it is our equipment. You know, and that's another group you should interview is really them. Most of those guys came from the tugboat industry.

M.Z.: The pilots?

B.D.: Yes, that are now docking pilots. Like Al Watts (ph) up there, right now there's an apprentice, Nick Watts (ph) and then there's – that's funny, Al Watts, but they're not related. Anyway, he's up there. He was MariTrans – ran big ATBs that they had back in

the day, in the eighties and nineties. Then he became a docking pilot. So they have lots of good info as far as how the whole industry works that way, too. And then they get to that point, where they dock the ships. But as far as for us, it doesn't matter if it's cars, coal, gypsum, whatever it is.

M.Z.: So you don't really need that information ahead of time?

B.D.: No, not at all. We just go out, you know, not at all.

M.Z.: You do what you're supposed to do.

B.D.: Exactly.

M.Z.: And it doesn't vary very much, like depending on what kind of cargo it is?

B.D.: Not really. I mean, you know, the ships – basically you know where they're going, as far as what berth, and it's all been pre-determined years in advance, I'm sure, and in months, what cargo is coming where, what the draft is. It's all been figured out. We just answer, dispatch, they tell us what ship. We would not do anything different going to the boat, knowing what type of ship we had.

M.Z.: So what matters to you? What are the kinds of things that you want to know ahead of time? Weather?

B.D.: It really doesn't matter. We're not really worried about weather really. We do this in everything. High winds, they're going to cancel. You know, there are limitations. The state of Maryland has limitations on certain piers, depending on, they call it the sail area of the ship. Like at NYK, it's probably 700 foot long by 110 foot, from water line to top rail, so it's got a tremendous sail area. So if the wind was northwest and pushing them right to the pier like fifty knots might be a little dangerous to take him off the pier, as far as just the equipment and getting all that sail area off the pier and back into the stream so he can get down the bay. So that would be the only thing is just really wind.

The wind does not affect the coal ships as much because when they're leaving here most of them are drafting forty-seven feet. Most of their vessel's below water and the wind doesn't affect them as bad. So it really affects the cargo ships.

M.Z.: I think that's what Greg said. It's mostly cars and then coal.

B.D.: Coal. I'd say those are the two bigger – right. There's two coal plants: CONSOL and then Curtis Bay, back in here. For about two years running, both those piers pretty much had a ship alongside every day. And it has slowed down a little bit, even though there is one at CONSOL today. But it was really hectic for two years.

M.Z.: So it's pretty routine at this point, right? You go back and forth between.

B.D.: Right, the pier and the (indiscernible 10:15), yeah.

M.Z.: What's it like for you being on this water? It's like your backyard, right? I mean, it's very, very familiar.

B.D.: Sure.

M.Z.: Is there anything kind of unexpected? Are there new things to learn?

B.D.: Not really, it's just watching out for little small boat traffic. That's our biggest thing. Summer is very heavy with small boat traffic. Wintertime, it falls off but then they have net fishermen in here. Sometimes they'll have gill nets set.

M.Z.: Oh, I didn't know that. How do you feel about that? Does that get in your way?

B.D.: Doesn't really get in our way. Sometimes they push the limit a little bit and ask the ship to veer away from his gear, which to me is – you know, yeah. The ships are coming and going. They shouldn't really have to veer around gill net stuff coming into Baltimore Harbor. But like we say, everybody's got to make their living, so that really doesn't affect us. Nobody's ever fouled a wheel. That would get expensive, and that would be a problem. If we hooked into enough of it to stall the engine, then it would be an expensive problem. They really should a little bit stay away from the deep water. I mean, it's all well-marked. I mean, you can see it right here. You know, here's our working area.

We've got this software that does it. Here's basically our working area for the main thing. And then you've got Curtis Bay back here, then there's one, two, three, four, five spots we hit back here, the fuel terminal there. That's not so bad. They seem to set their nets out in this area, and it's just like, you know, all's you've got to do is stay out of that zone. That's where we work. That's where the ships and us are at all times.

M.Z.: I would've thought that the commercial fishing people would be a little more conscious and respectful of commercial shipping needs than maybe the recreational guys. But that's not always the case, I guess.

B.D.: Not the case. No.

M.Z.: I guess everybody thinks that what they do is the most important thing.

B.D.: Absolutely, they do. And we're out there trying to work in between it. Like I said, when you ask a ship to move over, that's going a little beyond the call of duty here. They're coming in, at this point they're exchanging pilots. The pilots come up the bay from Norfolk, McHenry and come up, just had a ten or twelve-hour evening, night, whatever. He could've been up all night bringing the ship up.

Now he's got a launch coming, and he's got to get his gear together, all his electronics, whatever gear he's taking. He packs it all up. He gets off the ship, gets on the launch.

Docking pilot goes up, and neither one of them has time. And his really thing as we're meeting, to be worried about gill nets, where this guy's gear is set and, "Oh, could you hold over to the green side? I didn't know you were coming." Of course you didn't know we were coming, you know. The crabbers aren't as bad. Over there, in the shallows, they run trot lines in the summer and stuff. That's not in the way at all. But it's a resource usage. It's free.

M.Z.: Free for all.

B.D.: That's it. It's a free-for-all. That's exactly it.

M.Z.: So after this many years, are you happy? Content with this work?

B.D.: Yes, yep. I don't have to sail deep sea. I have a family of two girls at home, a wife, so it doesn't suit them to go away for three months at a time, you know. So I'm content, yeah. It's a good job. I like it. Still love boats.

M.Z.: So most of the people that I've interviewed kind of grew up with a sailing kind of background, you know, messing around on boats. Is that the case for you?

B.D.: It's just, let's see. Uncles had a place at the shore. We used to go down there and putz around on these little boats. I just always just really enjoyed the water. That's why I went into fisheries and then ended up being more the hardware than the biology under the medium there.

M.Z.: You grew up in Baltimore, you said?

B.D.: Yeah.

M.Z.: Do you still do any kind of recreational messing around, sailing or anything like that?

B.D.: I used to water ski a lot. I still do. My youngest daughter likes to fish. We don't do much of that here; we do it elsewhere, but not so much here. The schedule's sort of wacky. It's not a whole lot of time at home. The girls both play sports, so it's actually hard to find a given day to fish and stuff. But we still get out on the water a little bit. I manage some other boats on the side, and so I have free reign of those to utilize. For my daughter's sixteenth birthday, we took ten of her friends out on this boat for a harbor cruise, so that was good.

M.Z.: Oh, I bet that was a blast.

B.D.: Yeah, just about last month. November 6th I think we took them out. It was good. It was a lot of fun.

M.Z.: So the company is pretty generous with you if you want to do stuff like that?

B.D.: Yes, yeah. Well, I'm port captain, and so I probably get more than –

M.Z.: A few more perks.

B.D.: Right, a few more perks, correct.

M.Z.: Port captain?

B.D.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: So what does that mean?

B.D.: Well, that's more all three vessels. I try to keep track of all the maintenance on all the rigs, security, safety that go on. So I'm constantly going to all three of the vessels, looking at that, seeing what support the captains need to get certain things done that may not be getting done, or more support and what they need to do to keep up with stuff.

We'll try to crew the boats. Say we have an outside job. Everything comes about quickly here. You have to be able to really work on your feet. They could call us right now and say they need two boats down halfway to Cape Charles, a ship that was our contract broke down and you have to get right down to the thing. And all the sudden, we've got to re-man the boats, cover the harbor, get four men per boat to travel down the bay, make sure they're crewed and stuff. So that comes under my thing of just trying to get everybody together and keep it moving.

That's pretty much the port captain's responsibilities, all that, just more liaison between ownership and the boats themselves. So I do have more responsibilities. The Coast Guard – these are uninspected towing vessels that in another few months, few years, are going to be inspected towing vessels, so McAllister and many other tow companies are pushing hard to get everything in order so that when they become law, the vessels aren't tied to the pier for an infraction of any sort. So we go through these pretty tight. And it just takes lots of eyes and know-how to go around them and actually look at everything as tight as it's going to be regulated.

M.Z.: What kind of things do you have to be looking into for that?

B.D.: Oil pollution, we have a new thing, Vessel General Permit by the EPA. We have laws about that, about wash water and our effluent, any type of bilge waters, where they go, the distribution of that, how we handle them. We're under so many rules, it's sort of interesting. You've got pollution issues that you maintain. We actually run really clean, efficient units, but it's hard to do. It's expensive. Every time this bilge fills, when you reach down and every couple months you have to pump it out, it's 3 or \$4,000 to pump out and get rid of the water and oily mix.

Nothing goes overboard. We have what's called a Humphrey system on the MSD, marine sanitation device, controls the heads and everything goes through that before it

goes overboard. And eventually they'll go to a non-discharge. When that goes, we've already piped in things to handle that, so there's this constant – it would take days to go into all the parameters that we have to actually sail under.

M.Z.: With you coming from like a biology background, what do you think about these kind of regulations? Do you think it's necessary, or do you think it's a little extreme? Or do you not really want to say because I'm recording?

B.D.: Yeah. I'd say everything comes in time, but it's always an expense. You've still got to stay in business. Competition's tough, and every time they put a layer of another 10,000 per boat, or say three boats is \$30,000, so yes, they should be in place so we're not polluting. Rainwater coming off the boat that I've got to keep track of, I'm not quite sure that's really – you know what I mean? You have coal dust, how much coal dust that we rinse off the boat.

M.Z.: How do you even measure that?

B.D.: You know, everything always goes – the median of what things should be is good. It's always the extremes that get you. Every day we write down how much fresh water we use on board, estimated. They were going to make us, as we rinsed the boat, actually collect the wash water. Yeah, you know – but all in all, yeah. Oil just floating around, not a good thing, shouldn't be there. Ballast water is a huge issue now with the ships coming up, and endemic versus speciation coming in. And that's what's clogged the Great Lakes with lampreys years ago and now whatever mussel group that is.

M.Z.: The zebra mussels.

B.D.: The zebra mussels getting all over the ships, getting all over the intakes or any type of power plant, through the Great Lakes and all. Yeah, that's an important thing. I'd say on the bay, and I'm sure you know, they have a little barge that they just built a year ago, a year and a half. They're actually going around and doing research on, I guess, infrared sterilization and I don't know what they're using, but sterilization of whatever biology we had in the tanks that would be turned over.

So when these ships come in, if they have seawater in their ballast tanks, they're not allowed to discharge nor mix the fresh in, you know, say when they're up the Chesapeake, say they're anchored off of Annapolis with all of that, but they're trying to get it where these guys can ballast and do it without harming the environment. I know they're doing research on that.

M.Z.: I'll turn this off for a while.

B.D.: Okay.

[End of interview.]

