INTERVIEW

Richard Bludworth: My father grew up in the Galveston-Houston area. He and his brother built a boat from a landing craft that they purchased with their savings, and built it in my grandmother’s yard here in Houston. Launched it into the Houston Ship Channel, and eventually started their own business from that single boat.

They developed a connection system for tugs and barges that we’re still building today. And it’s one of the three or four connecting systems for ocean-tug-barge units in the world today, still. They were both high school students—no college—everything they did they learned on their own. All I can say is they were self-taught, entrepreneurial, and had creative minds.

Actually started riding the boats, working on them at about 14. I grew up in an era that you were able to tag along, just about anywhere. Everytime they had boats out of the water, getting work done on them, I was there – sometimes for days at a time. During summers, I worked for the business: pipefitting, welding, deck handing, working in the engine room. Any number of jobs...

So you’re a 14 year-old kid on a boat with probably not some of the most savory characters in the world. I think the marine industry has always drawn a lot of —some people would call them “less than desirables.” They lived hard, they drank hard, they worked hard, and they played hard.

Pat Jasper: And as a 14 year old, what kind or work were you assigned, to do—generally speaking?
Richard Bludworth: Same thing everybody else was. You picked up a hammer or a saw, and you cut or welded or turned a wrench, or carried stuff. It was just whatever was needed.

Pat Jasper: And were you given any sort of special status as, you know, one of the owners’ sons?

RB: No – I was basically... I’ll tell you a story. [laughs]: The first summer I went to work on a boat, I went down to Sweeney, Texas. I was up in the office on top of the hill getting ready to go down to the boat. The captain of the boat was talking to somebody on the phone. I didn’t know who. He handed the phone to me and walked out. It was my father still talking. And he was still telling the captain, the he “By God, better not hear of any favoritism; that he better make sure that I worked my butt off or he was fired. So I wasn’t given any special treatment. That’s the way he operated.

PJ: Tell me about how this company came about and the range of stuff it does.

RB: My uncle got into financial trouble; had to declare bankruptcy. Company was dismantled. I went to work for another marine transportation company. I had a chance to buy some assets: this location for one. So I basically started my own shipyard repair business, Bludworth Marine.

We started out with just a couple of people doing odd jobs. Most of the people that I work with right now, worked for other shipyards back when I used to work for my father. I’ve know them for 20 or 30 years.

You know, one of the things that’s really unusual about the marine industry is how small the world is that you deal with. And how many people you keep running into in different walks of the same industry over the decades. I would say that, you know, without those people, I don’t have a business.

We’ve got 5 locations: we’ve got 2 dry docks; a graving dock; and a couple of top side repair spots. Besides the fixed spots that we have, each site has its own set of mobile crews that can be dispatched to do jobs other than in our locations. It’s allowed us to compete in a way that a lot of other people don’t, and we’ve never dropped that niche.

I can tell two interesting stories: One of them was 2009. We’d gone three months without work. Hurricane Ike had destroyed all of our facilities. We got an opportunity to talk to some people on a container ship. We got an opportunity to talk to some people on a container ship. So that involved moving basically our entire work force to Port Arthur. Set up a catering service; worked two shifts around the clock for about 4 weeks; and did about a million dollar job. And pretty much got ourselves back on our feet.

This is a very competitive business, a very low margin business. Most of the shipyards are still friendly competitors. I think that we all have the same customers. We know we’re never going to ever get all the work, and while we may not be happy to share it, we’re realistic about need to share the business. Because everybody wants some competition to keep them honest.

Pat Jasper: Is there such a thing, in this day and age, as a master shipbuilder?
Richard Bludworth: No.

Pat Jasper: Why not?

Richard Bludworth: You have marine engineers, naval architects. So I would say those are the people who have taken the place of what you might call master builders. You know, for the most part, most of our people are self-taught; most of our people do not have college educations, but are extremely good at what they do. And they’ve learned by doing, and learned by making mistakes.

You find very few young people that are willing to stay in this business—hot, dirty, nasty work—long enough to learn it.

Pat Jasper: Richard, tell me why Houston is so much better than the rest of the Country?

Richard Bludworth: Well, that’s an interesting question. We were just talking about it at lunch today. Is it the Port? Is it the oil industry? Is it the medical center? You know, exactly what is it?

I think it’s all of those things. Plus, I think a huge part of it is you do find people here who are willing to work, and go beyond, and do things that they can’t do other places. We have no zoning in this city. I mean, you stop and compare what this city looks like to most cities and this place is a mess. But it’s allowed a lot of people to do a lot of things they couldn’t do other places. I mean, I think it’s still a wide open, Wild West kind of a town in a lot of ways. And I do think it draws a special group of people who come here to stay.

Pat Jasper: Well, this is a business you truly know, it seems like...

Richard Bludworth: Oh, yeah. I grew up around it. I always say, I tried to escape several times and it kept pulling me back...

Pat Jasper: Are you happy?

Richard Bludworth: I love it! I mean, it fascinated me when I was growing up. I had a great time hanging around the shipyards and being on the boats and the big equipment. It’s big toys—let’s face it. OK? It’s going to sea; you have all these pirates that work for you.

I did try to get out of it, but I kept being drawn back in and so decided to stick with it. I mean, people who get in don’t usually get out of it. So, yeah, this is my neighborhood. I didn’t fall very far from the tree.

Theme Music: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: You’ve been listening to shipyard owner Richard Bludworth of Bludworth Marine in Houston, Texas. He was interviewed for the Library of Congress’s Occupational Folklife Project by folklorist Pat Jasper of the Houston Arts Alliance.
To hear the complete interview with Mr. Bludworth, as well as interviews with more than 50 other Port of Houston workers -- including pilots, longshoremen, tugboat operators, port engineers, union organizers—men and women working other port-related occupations in Houston, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife .

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us a loc.gov.