

## **AMERICA WORKS PODCAST**

### **OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER**

#### **SEASON 2: EPISODE 3: James Hensley, Port Pilot. Houston, Texas**

**Announcer:** From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

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

**Nancy Groce (Host):** Welcome to “America Works,” excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is staff folklorist Nancy Groce and this America Works features Port of Houston ship channel pilot James Hensley, who has the daunting task of guiding giant ocean-going ships into and out of one of the world’s largest and busiest ports. The famous Houston Ship Channel is 52 miles long and in some places incredibly narrow. His is not a job for the faint of heart -- there is literally no room for mistakes. In this interview with folklorist Betsy Peterson, Mr. Hensley talks about learning and practicing his highly-skilled trade, and the pride he takes in his work.

#### **INTERVIEW**

James Hensley: The maritime industry is sort of a step-child industry. And we’re not highly vocal. We don’t come to the top. A lot of folk don’t know about us, don’t know how we work. Would you believe it: there’s some people in the city of Houston don’t even know we have a ship channel!

It’s good for somebody to come and take the time to get the real skinny on the industry out here.

I was born in Galveston, Texas. Affectionately known as BOI – Born on the Island. It’s a famous expression we have down there. I have a very strong background in maritime family down there: I have an uncle, father, cousin and also stepfather went to sea. So I did --started off from ground zero there. Started off as an ordinary seaman. Worked my way all the way up.

The route I took was on-the-job training. They called us “horse-pipers.” I went to sea and got the accumulated time. I sailed for three years as an able-bodied seaman. And I had enough time to sit for my mate’s license.

Each time you advance in your endorsements or documentation or license there’s three exams.—Coast Guard exams. And the main requirement is actual sea time. That opens the door

for anyone who was, I say, has enough ambition to want to better themselves. So the door was open for me and I took it.

I went to Page Navigation School in New Orleans and I studied to be a navigator, third-mate, and got my license, and I became a deck officer. From there I moved up, until I put an application here at Houston Pilots and got accepted.

The industry's changed. The availability of education has changed. When I was starting out, I didn't know anything about academies. I just wanted to go to sea. Here in the Channel I learned the basic logistics of what a ship does. In the school, I learned why. Now I know why, so I said, "Well, I'm going to avoid this because if I do this, this might happen.

We handle around 55 to 60 ships a day. That's in-and-out; that's not including the ships that go from dock-to-dock. Those ships, we call them "shiffters."

Betsy Peterson: How long does it take a ship to come in and get to dock?

James Hensley: Anywhere from 4 to 8 hour, depending on where, along the port, the ship is going. The Ship Channel itself is 52 miles long. The first set of docks is at mile 30. Depending on how far up a ship has to go; how fast a ship can travel—if it's loaded, it doesn't travel very fast.

Of course, they have this myth about pilots being—well, we are—fairly I would say prima dona. We are fairly aggressive in our attitudes. But the job makes you that way. We have two groups. The affectionate name is "black hats" and "white hats." I have to go back into the minutes of the meeting to find out where that came from. [laughs].

Betsy Peterson: And which one are you?

James Hensley: I'm in the black hats. Just like the hats are different colors, the personalities are different—each group.

The black hats are more, I guess you could say, reserved and quiet, laid back, off to themselves. The white hats are more active, aggressive. They like to do things together. They do have a strong comradeship. Whereas black hats we basically kind of hang to ourselves.

Betsy Peterson: Now are the captains when you get on a ship do you take total control? Are they legally in charge? Who's in charge?

James Hensley: Yeah. That's an interesting questions because basically the captain is responsible the entire time. He doesn't get relieved. A pilot comes aboard a ship, he's considered an advisor. He's hired by the captain to legally transport the ship from point A to point B. The pilot's given full authority, full control of the vessel because we know where the rocks are. [laughs]

This is where the gray area comes because they say, “Well, the pilot, you know, he runs the whole show.” Well, he runs the whole show, yes, but he runs it under authority of the master. So the master’s still responsible—and the pilot as well—but the mater’s still responsible for his ship at all times. There’s been some confusion in the past about that.

Betsy Peterson: So what do you do when, I mean, when they say, “No, I really don’t want you to do it that way,” but you know because you know the channel...

James Hensley: We do have to inject our authority. The vessel’s master is not authorized to move his vessel in pilot waters. That’s why the pilot is aboard. He can stop his vessel and kick the pilot off...

I never caution him in front of his crew. I’ll take him out on the bridge, he’ll lay his law down; I’ll lay my law down, and we’ll agree either to agree or not to agree. But the fact is, he has to take the ship to its designated position, I’m the man to do it.

Our responsibility is, first of all, to the State of Texas and also to the Port. That’s where our loyalties lie. And running that vessel on the rocks is not contusive to the State of Texas. [laughs] So we use diplomacy as best we can. Some of our pilots aren’t quite as diplomatic as others, but we get our point across.

Betsy Peterson: Tell me about Texas Chicken.

James Hensley: It’s an unusual maneuver. It’s only done a few places in the world. We’re famous for it. This is where it started.

Texas Chicken was developed I think back in the ‘40s. We had one-way traffic in the Houston Ship Channel because by it being so narrow, we weren’t able to meet vessels. So they devised a system--as a ship gets out of the middle of the channel, the pressure builds up on the side that it’s favoring. And over a period of time, it builds up so much pressure that it forces the ship back to the middle. That’s why we can’t run down one side of the channel and meet another ship. We have to do it from the middle.

So, by doing the Texas Chicken, alter course, we head on to each other. And about three-quarters of a mile to six-tenth of a mile we alter course of starboard. So the two ships are turning away from each other and we head for the bank. And as the ships approach each other, you build up enough pressure where it forces the ship to start coming back to the middle of the channel. [Oh, OK] so as the ships meet—we’re looking down the channel—and as we pass each other, each ship brings the other back to the middle of the channel.

You can always tell a captain who’s never been here before. A captain first time, or crew a first time. Because you see a ship coming, you know, and the ship is pointing right to you. And he’ll say, “Pilot, are we going to pass port-to-port?” “Yes, captain, we’re going to past port-to-port.”

He says, "OK." Everybody's quiet. So when you finally do give the rudder order, you've got a lot of help on the bridge because everybody want to make sure they all understood what the pilot says. So they repeat, several times!

Betsy Peterson: The other thing I want to ask: you were the second African-American pilot?

James Hensley: Yes.

Betsy Peterson: How many are there?

James Hensley: There's three of us now. As a matter of fact, my master was Paul Brown. The first African American. And then I came in, maybe, 7, 8 years later.

Betsy Peterson: And there are a couple of women pilots?

James Hensley: We have two, three women pilots. And we have very competent lady captains.

I expected to have some problems with certain ship masters. I didn't know how the pilots would take it, but all I ran across on the ships were professional behavior. I've never had a problem with ship master who figured I was incompetent because my minority status. Might have been a little nervous about me when he saw my antenna shaking [laughs], but other than that, I haven't had any problems.

As far as the pilots are concerned, a few of them had to adjust to it, but the majority of them were basically ready to move on. So it hasn't been that big an issue. And with the ladies as well.

I, personally, have talked with two of the ladies when they first came in and told them what to expect and this is how you handle it—because when I became a pilot, I was always under a captain, so I was always intimidated by a captain. I had to learn to be authoritative. And to let them know that I was competent, and they could rely upon me. So, that's the lecture I give both of them. And one I didn't need to give it to her. When she got challenged, it took her all of 30 seconds to put them in their place. So, they've learned to respect the ladies! [laughs]

We try to keep the old traditions, the old seat-of-your-pants ship handlers. Those guys were great! They could do anything with a ship. They might not write their name too well, but they could take you through a ship stem-to-stern, know every nut and bolt about it. That's a tradition we try to maintain in our training programs, is to let a pilot know that even with our modern technology and all the implications, there's still no substitute for good old seat-of-your-pants know-it-all.

## **END OF INTERVIEW**

**Theme Music:** "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

**Nancy Groce (Host):** You've been listening to Houston ship channel pilot Jim Hensley. He was interviewed by folklorist Betsy Peterson for "Working the Port of Houston," an occupational folklife project support by the Library's American Folklife Center.

The "Working the Port of Houston" documentation project was directed by folklorist Pat Jasper for the Houston Arts Alliance. To hear the complete interview with Mr. Hensley, as well as interviews with more than 50 other Houston port workers, please visit us online at [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://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 at loc.gov.