

Interviewee: Boone, Earle A.
Interviewer: Peggy Pelt
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(Mr. Boone was a Wainwright Shipyard employee. The interview occurred 9 June 1992 at his home - 905 Clay Avenue, Panama City, Florida. His wife contributed to the interview.)

Pelt: Mr. Boone, what did you do? What area did you work in at the shipyard?

Boone: I was in the layout department.

Pelt: Describe that to me. What did that area do?

Boone: We would take the raw steel and lay out instructions on it and send it on to the various places that would process it until it reached the platen which they used in putting the ship together.

Pelt: Well, now when you laid it out, was that an area where they were going to be cutting it into the pieces?

Boone: Yes, we were in an area where it was cut. Also, bent, rolled, brackets were made, big sheets of steel were rolled, long sheets of steel were cut straight. We had to take flat steel and put instructions on it so that when all of the different processes were through with it, it was shaped to fit exactly.

Pelt: So it wasn't just getting it ready to cut out, but it literally had to be shaped in terms of bending it.

Boone: We didn't do that. Other departments did that. We took the templates that came from the mold loft and put the instructions on the steel.

Pelt: Was that your job throughout the whole time or did you change jobs?

Boone: Well, stupidly I checked in as an apprentice at 75 cents an hour. And I got a 4 cent raise every 500 hours. I wound up being a leaderman in layout. I had charge of the travograph machine, flame planner and the movement of steel in three bays.

Pelt: What was that machine, the travograph? What did that do?

Boone: The crane would lay four plates of steel on a grated table. The travograph, itself,

consisted of a torch to each plate of steel, going over to an arm following a pattern on an adjoining table. There were burners who tended to the steel being laid right and burned properly. And when the pointer had completely followed the pattern, they had cut out port and starboard inner bottom plates for two hulls.

Pelt: You signed on as an apprentice and then you ultimately became a leaderman. What were the different ranks, or whatever you called them, that were available?

Boone: Leaderman was a junior strawboss. Quarterman was a strawboss between the leaderman and the superintendent. And superintendent, of course, was responsible to the general superintendent who governed the entire yard.

Pelt: Mr. Appen -- was he the General Superintendent?

Boone: I don't know what his job was. I know that there was an Appen out there, but we didn't pay too much attention to what other people were doing.

Pelt: What kind of a shift did you work? Did you work a day shift?

Boone: At first I worked day shift. From then on I worked swing. Did that in order to start a business in the daytime.

Pelt: When you were working on a swing shift, was it one that rotated around or was the swing shift the night shift?

Boone: Swing shift was from 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon until around midnight. We worked 7 hours, got paid for 8 [hours] because it was night and got a 5 cent bonus for night work, I believe.

Pelt: Night people did get a differential. That was one of the things I was wondering about. For that time period, was that pretty good?

Boone: Yeah. Pretty good. We got paid time-and-a-half for Saturday and double-time for Sunday and holidays. oh, when we worked seven days a week, I think we were paid for 68 hours. I forget how many when we worked just six days.

Pelt: Did you get anything like vacation time or sick leave or anything like that?

Boone: No. That's the reason so many of the guys out there kinda, well, blew up. Some quit their jobs and never came back. In fact, I had one man with me that -- he blew up.

Pelt: When you say "blew up" -- just got angry or just got burned out?

Boone: He was just burned out.

Pelt: Did they have any insurance or anything like that?

Boone: NO-o-o-o!

Pelt: Did businesses back then tend to have insurance or was that very unusual for any business to have insurance?

Boone: Well, let's see, that was in 142. Workman's Compensation came into the picture about 1935. No, we just got it and that was it.

Pelt: You had Workman's Comp. if you got injured?

Boone: Right.

Pelt: When did you work at the shipyard?

Boone: I think it was from the Fall of '42 until about the Summer or Fall of '44. I worked from on Hull Number 1 and quit on Hull Number 102.

Pelt: That's interesting. So you were there on Hull Number 1, the E. Kirby Smith?

Boone: Yeah.

Pelt: I have a book that lists [ships] by the Hull Number. I didn't know if people would remember exactly which ones they worked on or not.

Boone: Well, when I quit the yard, I think we were dropping one in the water every five days.

Pelt: About how old were you when you worked at the shipyard?

Boone: 32.

Pelt: What did you leave the shipyard to do? Was your business going or what?

Boone: Well, the business was getting started and the war was doing all right. They had started in the various, more or less, experimental ship building were the types ships they were building. And I was a little disgusted, too. I'd already had a run-in with the plant protection corp chief and I was ready to leave. In fact, I was working day times, too, and out there at night, and I was getting kind of burned out myself.

Pelt: Your business, what kind of business was it?

Boone: Insurance, general insurance.

Pelt: When you worked out there, were there many women?

Boone: Lots of 'em.

Pelt: Were there a lot of women in the layout department?

Boone: Not layout. We had a few. Most of the women out there were burners.

Pelt: Those were the ones who burned out the welding when there was a flaw in it?

Boone: Well, no. They'd take a track machine and run it down a piece of steel and bevel it, do whatever our instructions called for.

Pelt: Oh! So most of the women who were working in layout were inclined to be burners?

Boone: Well, yeah. Course, down on the wet dock they were in the ship and further down on platens in assembly, they were in the ships themselves. But most of them still, I think, were burners.

Pelt: Did you have many blacks in your area?

Boone: Well, we had, most of 'em were crane hookers on. We didn't have any working with us.

Pelt: When you say "crane hookers," were those the ones who, when the crane came down, attached whatever the crane was going to be picking up?

Boone: Yeah, that's the hook to the steel.

Pelt: I know they were using in the war time industry, nontraditional workers, and I know they were using women. In some areas they used handicapped, but I was wondering if there was anything at Wainwright that handicapped personnel could do and if you were aware of any handicapped people working out there.

Boone: Only midgets. Little people. They worked in the hull because, well, for instance, they could get in and weld the floor plates that we made on the travograph machine. That's the plate that sits on the bottom sheet of steel in the boat. And there's a top on that called a "tank top" and fuel is in between the two hulls. And in those plates are many holes, lightening holes, not for Ben Franklin's lightening, but to make the steel lighter and not take away strength. And there were some larger holes for inspection and so on which were so high and so wide. well, the little people could go through there and they could go in there. What they would try to do though

would be to weld those things in place before the tank top goes on. Then the tops had to be welded piece by piece and that would keep people from being underneath at the time the welding was going on 'cause that welding gas'll kill you, you know. It was quite a shop.

Pelt: Somebody was telling me in another interview that a female friend of hers worked in a different plant, that one of the things they did was in aircraft, and they were little enough that they could get into, crawl in, to do some inspection or whatever. There was really a need for people who could get into tiny places.

Boone: Right. There's plenty need for small people in ship building. The only time there was in any trouble out at the shipyard was when Raymond Jones, of the Jones Construction Company, made a speech one day when the day shift was leaving and we were starting. They kinda held us status quo long enough to listen to the speech. And he didn't know anything about handling men and people. And, in his speech to urge more production, he made the mistake of calling the workers a "bunch of pea pickers." 'Cause we did have a lot of farmers. They came in on the, well, Sarah Gay's husband had a truck and somebody said he hired a man to drive it by giving the man a free ride back and forth. He took a ton-and-a-half truck, put benches in the back of it and a canopy over it, and people came to work that way from as far as Geneva.

Pelt: From Geneva, Alabama?

Boone: Yeah! Every day. Trucks just came in from every direction.

Pelt: Where did you live? Did you live within walking distance?

Boone: We lived in the Cove on 2nd Street. We lived just across the street almost from Cove School.

Pelt: How did you get to work? Did you have a carpool?

Boone: Yeah, I rode in the back of Willie Redman's pickup truck. He hauled about six of us. We paid him \$1.25 a week. Yeah, he picked us up.

Pelt: Carpooling was big back then, wasn't it?

Boone: Yeah, but you see, there was so much rationing -- both tires and gasoline -- that people that had cars didn't want to wear lem out going way out to the shipyard if they could help it. They couldn't go anywhere else then.

Pelt: Your family was here then, 'cause you were from this area weren't you? Did you have children in school?

Boone: Yes.

Pelt: Were they at Cove School? Do you remember, did they build any additional schools or rooms on schools to accommodate the increased population?

Mrs. Boone: I don't remember them building any over here in the Cove.

Boone: They ran some schools on shifts.

Pelt: Did they? I was wondering.

Boone: Drummond Park.

Mrs. Boone: Sometimes I would go out to pick Earl up and watching all the people at shift change would make you dizzy. I'd have to hold my head down. There'd be so many people coming and going. It was awful! There were too many people in a little town.

Pelt: I was wondering about the general reaction of the local population to the increase in the population. Some of the data says it tripled the population in one year. I was wondering how that affected the average people in Panama City.

Boone: We liked it. We were booming. Rooming houses up town. On the porches. They'd have a curtain down as far as - cover the outside of the railing and put bunks in. Some of lem slept in shifts.

Mrs. Boone: In the streets, sidewalks, and stuff like this.

Boone: See, Tyndall was going full blast then, too.

Pelt: When did Tyndall open up? Do you remember?

Boone: About 1939? '38? '39? I had the insurance on the Post Exchange out there when it was way over on Beacon Beach in a little oll hut. According to the Sanborn map, that's the map they used to make for all insurance agents, there was housing for 70,000 people. And, incidentally, speaking of Sanborn map, there was always a lot of propaganda about what the enemy might learn about places and all. All they had to do was get a Sanborn map of any city in the country and they had even the details of how each building was built. That's right.

Pelt: So it was always so readily available.

Boone: Yeah.

Pelt: In general, did you enjoy working at the shipyard?

Boone: Oh, I loved it. It was a lot of fun and the boys that were gonna be gunners on the

ships that would leave here, they would come through the fab shop and come around where we were and they were scared to death. Shoot, I'd be scared to death, too, with what you gon' do -- I was rather stupid to go in the yard like I did and I've always tried to be so above board. But I shoulda been sneaky. Now, oll Lambert Anderson, he buys him an old carpenter's box so long and an old rusty saw and a claw hammer, goes across the road over there to where they got carpenters working in the housing project. He signs in as a carpenter at \$1.06k an hour -- transfers into the shipyard. After I'd been there a while, I only had 75 cents, see, and he comes in at \$1.06. When I got to about 79, the boss said one night, "I got a new crew coming in, a couple of men for you to handle and a crew I want you to lead." I said, "Where are they coming from?" He said, "Across the road." I said, "I ain't got sense enough, 'cause I only get 79 cents and they get a \$1.06k. How can I lead them and be the leader of the group?" He said, "Well, we'll try to see about that." Oh, me.

Pelt: Did they?

Boone: I worked there a mighty long time 'fore I ever got to a \$1.06.

Pelt: Did you receive any training? Or was your job one that required training?

Boone: The leader of the three-man gang trained me. Of course he didn't know a lot more about it than I did. But we got along.

Pelt: Kind of "on-the-job" training?

Boone: Yeah. We were out there one day and had laid out some ship frames for Hull Number 3 or 4. Young feller came out and he was a quartermen; he was somebody's kinfolk about 19 years old and had on a pair of boots up to here and they were all shiny. [He] gave us a job order and said, "Lay out these frames for Hull Number 3." I said, "They're already laid out. They're over there where the crane dropped 'em in the sand." "That don't make any difference. So you lay 'em out and do it again." I said, "Well, you got the rank, we lay 'em out again."

Pelt: So you had two Number 3's?

Boone: Yeah. Had a lotta that.

Pelt: Do you have any other general memories of things that happened at the shipyard or in the community?

Boone: Rained fish one night.

Pelt: Rained fish? Okay, I want to know about raining fish.

Boone: Andy McKenzie was a photographer. He got pictures of 'em now. Have you

been told to check with him? He was the official photographer of the yard. We had a rain storm while we were there and somebody hollered -- No! switch engine brought several flat cars of steel in. They had water on 'em and a fish or two bouncing on there. Somebody hollered and 'course everybody quit work and went out there to see. But, they were about that long.

Pelt: Little minnow-type things?

Boone: Yeah. When those boats down at the wet dock, when we, when they dropped one in the water, it went to the wet dock, and theoretically another one left. If you'd go down there, there were so many hoses, lines, electric lines all over the boat you'd just, it's all you could do to get past it. People working there to get that thing ready for trial run. And, you can imagine how fast they did it, 'cause toward the end they were putting so many in the water.

Pelt: Did you ever go on a trial run? Did people from the yard get to go on trial runs sometimes?

Boone: No-o-o-o-ol You couldn't get on that to save your neck. That's where the big money was. See, you'd get paid for the time you go to work until they got back from the trial run, which would be maybe a day or two. Straight time and overtime. Oh, they had a lottery going out there, too, based on paycheck numbers. Well, different parts of yard, somebody would run it, you know, get up the money and the betting. And we had a feller named Ekey that ran the brake machines. I thought it was awfully funny that his son-in-law would win too often. Come to find out, he was paying a man in the Pay Office to tell him 'cause they drew the checks up a week ahead of time. He gave him the numbers.

Pelt: Did y'all get the lottery away from his hands then?

Boone: Yeah. We killed that. I never did get in on it. I had too many ways I could gamble in business without getting in a lottery.

Pelt: So you were trying to get a business started and had a family going.

Boone: Right. One time Lucy told me I hadn't seen the boys awake in, what, ten days or two weeks or something.

Mrs. Boone: I would do my ironing at night. I took care of the family in the day time. Sometimes I'd wake him and feed him breakfast. I would let him sleep as long as he could 'cause he had to get up and go. He was working late at night on the night shift and getting up and getting his business done in the daytime.

Boone: She would wake me up a lot of times to get ready to go to work and I'd say, "Well, I'm ready for breakfast." She said, "You already had breakfast."

Pelt: Did a lot of people do that -- work at the yard and develop a business as well? Or were you unusual in that?

Boone: No. People had other form, yet, just like holding down two jobs for a lot of people. They did what they could. And the folk came in from out of town, they were all doing something. I had a feller that worked for me that was complaining because he didn't get journeyman's pay \$1.20 an hour. I think it went \$1.06, \$1.13, and then \$1.20. And I said, "Well, all you gotta do is fill out these little job tickets and lead a crew. I've been trying to get you to and you said 'I don't wanta do that but I want the \$1.20.'" I said, "You can't get it unless you're a crew leader." One night I missed him. And missed him several times. And I asked a man. I said, "He was over from across the big river." I said, "Where is Mr. S?" He said, "He's not coming back." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, the time he's been taking off," said, "He's been running for school superintendent." Said, "He got elected."

Pelt: What were you doing before you went to work at the shipyard?

Boone: I was working for Harry Edwards in the insurance business.

Pelt: So insurance was something you'd always been in.

Boone: I let my license die last year. I'd had it since 1931.

Pelt: Hmmm, long time.

Boone: And I completely retired last year at 81.

Pelt: Well, that was about time for you to relax and enjoy yourself, wasn't it?

Boone: Well, we planned it, and I began to taper off. Few years. Good thing I did, too, because what I was specializing in is kinda in a little trouble now. I specialized in marine insurance on commercial boats. And there are very few of them making a living now.