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THE EYES OF THE PORT

THE WORDS AND PHOTOS OF LOU VEST

*Interview conducted, introduced,
and edited by Carl Lindahl*

LOU VEST'S IMAGES OF THE PORT OF HOUSTON are a singular blend of talent, experience, and access. His photographs capture both the surface beauty and inner workings of what he sees, for he is both a visual artist and an insider who has piloted the port's waters for more than a quarter of a century. Viewing Galveston Bay and the Ship Channel from the commanding heights of a ship's bridge, he focuses on the men and women who work the ships and docks, as well as on the almost unearthly "beauty of the industrial landscapes" that take shape along the water's edge. He sees the port as the living product of a relationship among terminal operators, tugboats, stevedores, agents, pilots, and a host of other organizations, all performing their specialized tasks in an organic way.

Louis Carl Vest is known as "One-Eighteen" by his fellow pilots. As the 118th member of the Houston Pilots Association, he works among the very few to be entrusted with one of the most difficult and honored jobs on the port: piloting giant cargo ships up and down a 52-mile-long sliver of water known as the Houston Ship Channel. On the open seas, it is the captain who controls the vessel, but once the ship approaches the entrance to Houston's Ship Channel in the Gulf of Mexico, Lou or one of his fellow pilots climbs aboard to navigate it up the narrow, shallow waterway to a port dock for unloading. The giant ships, which may exceed 1,000 feet in length, regularly pass each other coming and going along the channel. The channel is only 500 feet wide, and the combined width of two giant cargo ships approaches 300 feet. That leaves the pilots with only an average of 70 feet to separate each ship from the channel bank and 70 feet to separate the two ships from each other.

Pilots, therefore, must know every quirk and bend of the Ship Channel. No more than 45 pilots are available at any given time to guide cargo ships like these into America's busiest port.

Lou Vest has been a Port of Houston pilot since 1986. He has powerful memories of the day he became a pilot.

I put in an application, and as I got to know some of the pilots, I got some support. I got voted in in 1986. They asked me to join the Pilots Association. And I was a very happy camper. In the maritime industry, being a pilot is like being invited to be in the major leagues. If you're a minor league player and you get to be a pilot, that's the big leagues, and it's like being invited to play for the St. Louis Cardinals or something like that. And I was very pleased. For several

reasons. Houston is a very good Pilot Association. And I was always impressed by the professionalism of the pilots there. And it's a very busy port. And I frankly liked the pilots I knew from Houston.

So, I was very pleased. I found out that I'd gotten in. I'd taken a barge down to Antofagasta, Chile. A big barge of grain. We'd traveled all the way down to Chile, and we off-loaded the grain, and I was about ready to leave, and I called my wife. They had a big telephone exchange downtown. You had to walk downtown. And so I called my wife, and she said, "Well, are you sitting down?"

And I said, "Well, yeah, I am."

She said, "Well, I found out yesterday, you got in the Pilots Association."

And I was so happy. I thought, you know, I'd just won the lottery. And all the way back to the boat—I had to walk, you know, a couple miles back to the boat—I thought, "My God, I'm going to get run over by a dump truck or something. I've used up all the luck I've had in the world. And one of these damn dump trucks is going to run me over here." I was really careful walking back to the boat.

And it really has been a good career. I've enjoyed it. I've been here since '86. It's 2011 now, and I've never regretted it. It's been a good association. And I like the Pilots Association very much.

Since about 2000, Lou has been photographing the Port of Houston. He recalls one of the incidents that spurred him to take his camera on board with him.

I had a job where I finished up about three in the morning, and I had to walk about a mile to get to my car down in the docks. And it was three in the morning. It was absolutely calm. There was a light rain falling. And the reflections of light in the water, the raindrops hitting the water, with the concentric splashes. And I'm walking down there, and there's all these ships, just ship after ship, and they're registered in Bombay and Bahamas and Cypress and Vanuatu, and they all have exotic names of one kind or another. And I thought, "Wow, you know, I could write a poem about this. I could use the exotic names of the ships." I even thought about writing down the names of the ships that day, but then I thought, "Ah, you could pick any day." It was really kind of a moving experience. There I am with the romance of going to sea: it was like Conrad, Kipling, you know, and I really enjoyed the moment. And that was before I started taking photos. I had been a photographer before. Amateur, when I was real young. I started



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thinking then about starting to carry a camera with me again. To capture that moment.

AMERICA'S PORT

When Vest teaches outsiders about the port, he starts with the same photograph (*opposite*).

It's a photo of the American flag in sort of an arch over a container ship in the background. And I took it when I was getting off a ship one night. I saw that and I said, "Yeah, that might be a nice photo." I didn't really plan on it. I took about ten photos but this particular one with the arch over the top [stood out]. And then a couple weeks later, they had some show on television called "America's Port," and it was all about Los Angeles. And I thought, what a bunch of bull. They don't do even a third as many ships as Houston does. And Los Angeles is a Hollywood city. I mean, Houston is a nice working-class city; the port is central to our economy. Houston's America's port.

Houston is the biggest port in the country. I was talking to a captain at a function for the Maritime Museum. We got to talking about Houston, how much traffic they do, and he said, "Well, I was at a meeting last month, and we had a consultant come in to talk to us about different ports and how we manage traffic and some of the problems we're having. And the consultant had this big dry-erase board, and

he starts writing up there, puts up a big circle, and he says, 'Okay, this is Houston, we're going to put this off here by itself for awhile, and then we're going to talk about all these other ports.' And he writes down New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles. And the guy from Los Angeles, he goes, 'Well, how come Houston's separate?'

"And [the consultant] said, 'Well, it's just a different case altogether.'

"No, really. What's so special about Houston?'

"And he said, 'Well, how many ships do you do a day over there in Los Angeles?'

"He said, 'Well, 15, 20.'

"They're doing 70 ships a day over here. A different case altogether.'"

THE BEAUTY OF INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES

Vest sees the port both as a work of nature and a work of culture. He views the social bonds and interdependence of its workers as an organic phenomenon, and the industrial landscape as almost magical.

It's an industrial area, but it's not necessarily ugly, I don't think. You know, I always thought I was kind of crazy, because when I was a kid, I remember outside the small town where my grandfather had a ranch, they built a power station, and you could see

that power station for miles across the plains in South Texas, and it always looked like a fairy castle to me, with all the lights and the catwalks and the towers. And I thought, "That's kind of cool." And when I grew up, I still had that in my mind.

And, of course, the Houston Ship Channel, that's all it is: towers and lights. I had two nephews from Colombia; they were from a small town in Colombia. They came up, and we picked them up at the airport. And they were like eight or ten years old, and we're driving over the Beltway 8 bridge, and they're standing up in the car, going, "Wow, look at all the Christmas lights!" you know, and it wasn't: it was just the Port of Houston. The petrochemical complex. But

"It always looked like a fairy castle to me, with all the lights and the catwalks and the towers. And I thought, 'That's kind of cool.'"



ABOVE: Industrial landscape as crystal palace.



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LEFT: In a highly efficient and functional world, bright colors highlight the stunning forms of the ships. ABOVE: The mood is positive when the port runs smoothly.

they thought it was beautiful. They thought it was like a crystal palace.

So, to look at it with those eyes is different. So, I'm not going to be all Pollyannaish about it. I mean there's some serious things they do they should probably correct, but they try.

And my experience has been that nobody pollutes deliberately on the Ship Channel that I know of. People make a real effort to keep things clean. When I first started working as a young man, I think the first port I went to was Norfolk—in the Navy as a midshipman. And it was horrible. I mean, the banks of it were like black Crisco, with embedded eggshells and tires, and everything else.

And you don't see that at the Port of Houston. I mean, there's definitely a high tide line and a low tide line, but I think that's as much algae as anything else. You don't see stuff in the water. Now, you will see stuff after a heavy rain. But that's stuff that washes down from Houston. We see islands of trash wash down the channel from Houston, and it's plastic water bottles and tennis balls and abandoned tennis shoes and tires. And disposable lighters and acres and acres of Styrofoam cups. All that stuff washes down, but that's not thrown overboard by sailors. I'm sure that sailors are not 100 percent innocent of this, but for the most part, they put their trash away. This is my industrial landscape.

PILOTS AND PILOT BOATS

There's a guy jumping onto the pilot boat off the gangway (*opposite*). I have to say, pilot boat drivers are some of the best boat drivers in the world. You won't find better ship handlers, better boat handlers anywhere than the pilot boat operators. They're very, very good. [Often] there's rough sea. They have to bring the pilot boat in next to this ladder and hold it there safely while the guy gets on and off. We do 17,000, 18,000, jobs a year, and these guys are out there bringing these little boats out alongside these ships 17,000, 18,000, times a year, and I've seen them

“There must be 200 different docks, a couple hundred steamship agents, the Coast Guard, the pilots, the linemen, and the tugboats. Somehow it all comes together to make a big, organic entity.”

just come up, just as smooth as you could imagine, and put the ladder right within six inches of that gangway there, and you just step across, and they treat it like, “This is what I do every day.” And they're good. They're very good. And they should get a lot more credit than they do.

In spite of the highly interdependent work along the Ship Channel, there are moments when a pilot is alone. Lou reflects on such moments while describing one of his photos not featured here.

This picture is a metaphor for being a pilot. It's in the middle of the night, and this guy's probably just been woken up about ten minutes before, and he climbs up the ladder, and you can see this stairway going way up there towards the ship, and it's dark at the top. You don't know what's up there. And here's this guy. He probably got up there, and they said, “Okay, you've got your ship coming up.” And he goes up there, you know. He doesn't know what kind of crew is up there. He doesn't know if the ship is all in one piece or not. If the engine works right. Is it going to steer well or not? You know, he just goes up there

into the darkness, and that's a very good metaphor for a pilot's life.

AT THE END OF HIS INTERVIEW, Lou returned to the notion of the port as an “organic entity.” He portrays port life as the product of an interdependent relationship that binds the ocean to the Ship Channel, and the seamen to the natural forces that give them their daily work and daily challenges.

I think Port of Houston's a great place. It's been a very exciting place to work—in the best sense, you know. Not that “somebody-screwed-up” sort of exciting. It has been very good to me. And I think what's interesting is I've been impressed by the organic nature of it. How it all works together. All these independent people and agencies: the steamship agents and the terminals. There must be 200 different docks, a couple hundred steamship agents, the Coast Guard, the pilots, the linemen, and the tugboats. Somehow it all comes together to make a big, organic entity. And—like that [photo I took of a] captain and crew that were smiling (*above right*)—basically, Houston is like that. I mean, there are days when it doesn't function so well, and people get kind of crabby, but thus far it's a well-run, well-organized, happy thing that's trying to do the right, the right thing, for the city and the port. And I think they deserve recognition: the people who go out to these meetings, and talk about safety, and how to do things better, and how to clean up, and how to prevent accidents. You know, they really seriously try—and the thing organically works very well. ☺

Excerpts from an interview of Lou Vest by Carl Lindahl, November 8, 2011; archived as HAA-WTP-CL-SR001 with the Houston Arts Alliance; also on deposit at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the Houston Folklore Archive.



ABOVE: A pilot boat holds steady as a man minds the gap.