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WORKING THE PORT

THE PORT OF HOUSTON is the great hidden engine of the city's prosperity. More than one million jobs belong to people who work the Port and its related industries, and everyone in the region is affected at least indirectly. The Port itself is a massive geographic complex: a constellation of docks, warehouses, railheads, refineries, and heavy machinery stretching some 50 miles along the Ship Channel. These structures exist for the sake of the water traffic: numberless vessels, at dock or in motion, ranging from tiny pilot boats, to sturdy tugs, to the massive cargo ships, more than one thousand feet in length.

It is hard to imagine an economic landmark of such size and importance, and yet so well concealed, as the Port of Houston. The massive Port of New York, in contrast, is plainly visible in almost any panoramic view of Manhattan; its docks may be seen from the Henry Hudson freeway or any of the tallest buildings in Manhattan; one of the nation's most visited tourist attractions, the Statue of Liberty, offers a commanding view. The Port of Houston sees far more cargo yet a Houston resident can drive the entire web of the city's major roads and find only wisps of evidence that the Port of Houston exists. If you look down from the one quarter-mile stretch of Interstate 610 East that rises far into the air to span the Ship Channel, you may see one of the massive cargo ships in motion; driving Beltway 8 East two miles south of I-10 will take you over another stretch of the port. Most Houstonians have to drive far out of their normal commuter routes to reach these impressive but still very partial hints of the Port of Houston.

Already concealed by the geographic accidents of Houston's expansion, the Port was further concealed, strategically, in the wake of 9/11, as the Department of Homeland Security re-

quired Houston to deter potential terrorist acts by closing previously accessible parts of the port to the public. Workers can no longer bring family members down to the docks. Job seekers hoping to secure employment for a day or a lifetime have a far more complicated task ahead of them.

Working the Port, as its first principle, gives pride of place to the expressions of the people who are the greatest ground-level experts on the Port of Houston and the Houston Ship Channel—the workers themselves. The following two articles are part of an effort to make the Port of Houston better seen, better heard, and better known. The words by Father Rivers Patout and spoken and pictorial images by Lou Vest address central parts of the story of the Port, but the story is as big and diverse as the Channel is long.

Working the Port takes its name from a project conceived and designed by Pat Jasper, Director of Folklife and Traditional Arts Program of the Houston Arts Alliance. Jasper has been joined on the project by colleague Carl Lindahl (Professor of English and Folklore, University of Houston) as well as other contributors, and supported by a wide range of partner organizations. Funded initially by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, *Working the Port* focuses specifically on collecting the stories of, and thereby giving voice to, the men and women who make up the diverse workforce of the Port and the Ship Channel. The project has collected over 50 narratives thus far, and the pieces included here are fragments from much longer interviews, forming a brief prologue to the far more extensive examination and celebration of the Port of Houston and the Houston Ship Channel that will occur when their centennial is observed in 2014. —Pat Jasper and Carl Lindahl



AN INSIDER'S CHRONICLE

FATHER RIVERS PATOUT ON THE CHANGING NEEDS OF SEAFARERS

Interview conducted, introduced, and edited by Pat Jasper

Photos by Jack Thompson

THESE EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW with Father Rivers Patout tell the inside story of an institution central to the heart of the Port of Houston and the Houston Ship Channel. Father Patout is a chaplain at The Houston International Seafarers Center, a building perched on the channel at the turning basin, close by the headquarters of the Port of Houston Authority. The Seafarers Center was built to serve the men and women who work on the docks and in the industries that line the channel, or who arrive on the ships that transport the remarkable amount of cargo that moves in and out of Houston annually. It is by no means a prepossessing building, but like the human heart, the muscularity of its mission is undeniable.

A native Texan, Father Patout was there at the center's inception—a young priest full of the vigor and social vision that infused the Catholic Church in the late 1960s. And through his long tenure at the

center, marked by his continued dedication to serving seafarers, he has witnessed many changes in the conditions and character of the work that is conducted at the Port of Houston. Most of all, he has come to know the seafarer community itself—its challenges and trials, its assets and strengths. Whether they agree with him or not, few would deny that he is one of that community's greatest and most vocal advocates.

I was ordained in 1967—over the time when Vatican II was happening. My very first assignment was down near the Port at a place called Blessed Sacrament; that's where we got to find out about seafarers. [Serving seafarers] was a very big social concern. [In] 1968, we came to this Port to start ministering to seafarers, and we borrowed a building from the St. Vincent de Paul on Harrisburg, a number of miles to the south—upstairs, hot. But the very first days

we opened, people came in droves, walking up to these areas, and we said, “We must have something right here.”

Our first presumption was, “Why would seafarers ever want a priest or minister telling them they couldn't read Playboy or drink beer?” What a stereotype! That was a common stereotype, still today, that they are alcoholic womanizers. On the contrary, it was very evident soon that ... they were family people, great people, and, in fact, they taught us. They were probably some of the more tolerant people in the world because they had seen every culture and didn't hold it against you to be of a particular religion or race—that there were good and bad of all kinds.

Father Patout worked hand in hand with some of the city's most noted leaders to make the work of serving seafarers more than a ministry. Establishing a site and organizing a building campaign called for a broad



consortium of interests and a pragmatic sense of mutuality between social concerns and business interests.

In those early years, we were very, very fortunate to have people who really took an interest. We had a number of socialites and our churches, but I would say Howard Tellepsen—who was at that time head of the Port Commission—was probably more important than anyone else, because he made a commitment to build a building with his company and raised the funds we didn't have through his foundation—what an offer!

The first president was Albert Leidis. He was a Belgian captain, and he was a hard-drinking, fussing, and cussing person and he had seen the deprivations of the seafarers on the ships in his early days, when they were fed terrible food and [worked] under terrible conditions. And he really believed that seafarers needed a better life. I really credit him with being the founder of the center's idea here. He'd gotten permission to get Port land for where we built the building, but he didn't have any money. So when the churches came in with money, it was a great marriage.

And even the different philosophies—there was always a little tension between the business people and the social helpers [that were part of our board], because [the business leaders] didn't want the business slowed down. But again, it was a wonderful tension that helped us to look at both sides of the situation. How can we have a beautiful center to help people? How can we help the Port to have better efficiency?

Rather than accept the received model of how such an institution might work, the founders decided to take an internationalist, ecumenical approach to developing the center. It was a simple but revolutionary step, and it led to a center that was the first of its kind in the world.

I'd taken my vacation that summer to go out to the West Coast to visit a couple of seafarer centers and asked them what was right. So, we built a seafarer's center here in Houston, the very first in the world—none had ever been done before that shared all the interests of each of the denominations, shared the business, shared the poor. Every other center up until that time had to be either sponsored by a particular church or particular national government.

So we were the pioneers on that, and, thank you, Lord, it was a great thing. Now this is the model for the world. [And nowadays] seafarers are diverse on every ship, and [our idea] just makes more sense than ever—that they can come here without being asked, “What do you believe? Where are you from?” Our model spread throughout the world.

But in addition to furthering the work of chaplains like Father Patout and his associates, the center's fa-

ILITIES were key to bettering the physical and mental well-being of the seafarers who utilized it. Sports facilities provided respite from the confines of a ship and an opportunity for sailors and workers of all nationalities to connect with each other.

We first opened in a building some miles away. [It was] borrowed, but under construction was a swimming pool, the soccer field, and the track. We started using those in about two years. Meanwhile, the building was under construction, and, finally, when it opened in 1973, we knew a lot more about how to be chaplains to seafarers.

The athletic program was very important in the early days. We had sports week, and the winning ship got these big trophies and prizes, and there was a dance and a big hoopla. So, it was very active in the early days. We had one or two soccer games every night. We had uniforms we'd give them. We even had shoes that were donated. Sometimes, we had rivalry between two ships; sometimes we brought a local team out to play. [It was] very active in the early days because the seafarers had time, and they had larger crews, and they had young people!

I never will forget we had a tournament once at our festival, and some girls were playing on one of the teams and beat the ones with the Greeks. And they were just furious, throwing chairs, “How could you let women do this?” But it was a very active participation in the early days and very fun.

I remember one of the interesting events [involved some] Chinese sailors who wanted to go swimming. And we had one of those little shacks for a change room before our new building was constructed. But they didn't speak English, and so our volunteers would kind of point to the basket, and would point to their clothes, and then point to the shack. Well, these Chinese sailors bowed solemnly, took off all their clothes right in front of the volunteers, bowed again, and put the swimming suits on.

Like the balancing of business and social concerns, developing a single Houston International Seafarers Center avoided duplication but maximized interaction among the diverse religious and national communities. This approach contributed to heightened understanding and tolerance, but it often called for forbearance and diplomacy.

We try to be open and helpful. We don't proselytize. That's why the chapel is separated here, so that when there is a chapel service, those go that choose to go. The bar doesn't close down; the music doesn't stop. And it's worked out wonderful over the years.

I want to tell you one ecumenical story. When we were in our early years, we said, “We want this chapel to welcome people of different faiths.” And for Islam, they face Mecca to the east, they use a prayer rug, and they pray their prayers on the prayer rug. So

we had a prayer rug donated, and I said, “Isn't that wonderful? Let's go put it in the chapel. And find out where east is.” I deliberately went out when I was going to start the mass and asked some of these Islamic people to please come. Well, they're sitting in there dutifully, and I'm standing in front of them, saying, “Now, in respect to your religion, we have this prayer rug, and here is east. We want you to come and use this for your prayers whenever you feel.” They weren't smiling; they were kind of frowning. One of them started to get up, and, later on, I found out what an offense it was to stay with your shoes on the prayer rug. You learn a lot about those things. So, these are things they taught us over the years.

I have a favorite story. This was the Cold War, and the Russians definitely did not want their seafarers to be influenced by capitalism and Western things. So they always had a commissar aboard who is in charge of political thought. So we had to be very careful—one was the bibles: it would be against the rules for them to take bibles. Therefore, we put plain brown covers on them. And when the commissar wasn't looking, they knew when to take them. We wouldn't take them aboard ship.

But one of my favorite stories is about Christmas. I went aboard one [Russian] ship and I said to the commissar, “I have brought New Year's gifts.” They weren't Christmas gifts then, because Christmas is a Christian holiday. But they celebrate New Year's, and I said, “I want to bring them aboard for you. They're made by the people of this community, and they want to share it with you.”

“Nyet,” [said the commissar], who looked like a World War II veteran with his pockmarks, and his big moustache, and his Russian cigarettes. And so, the captain was sitting here. He wanted the presents. But the commissar wasn't sure. And they finally said, “Well, can we see one?” I said [whispers], “Please let there be no bible in it.”

So we opened up one: combs, socks, writing paper. And they said, “Well, we can't accept because we don't have a gift to you.” And I said, “Well, I'll take a drink of vodka, you know.” And the captain, smiling, said, “Well, we don't have vodka, but we just came back from Cuba, and we've got some great Cuban rum.” And I said, “Okay.” So we went upstairs now to the captain's office, and the commissar [is] wearily looking, he doesn't like what's developing.

So I said, “Toast to the American seafarers, toast to the Russian seafarers, toast to the friendship of all that gather.” And each one toasted, and after [a] few toasts they said, “Okay, we'll take the gift.” I said, “Nyet, not the gift, a gift for everybody.”

“Toast to the American seafarers, toast to the Russian seafarers.” By this time it has been toasted enough. So they've agreed, finally. The commissar's defeated philosophically, so I got the presents and put them on board. And I'm having [a] little trouble navigating down the gangway. As I was about to



“We try to be open and helpful. We don’t proselytize. That’s why the chapel is separated here.”

ABOVE: Meeting hall and reception window at The Seafarers Center.

leave, I said, “Happy New Year!”

And the captain looks around [and says], “Merry Christmas!”

It was a political game, you know, but that was very significant in the early days.

From the day The Seafarers Center was finished—despite how well received and lauded it was, and despite the many local workers or international seafarers who enjoyed its extras and its amenities—it faced obsolescence. The character of the work that seafarers performed was changing, and the number of workers needed aboard was shrinking.

In the early days, it would be ordinary to have 200 people a night up [here]. I didn’t have 11 people last night. Now, we do a lot of work. We provide the Wi-Fi so they could use their computers on the ship. We provide cell phones. We provide other aids to help them, but the number of people coming in to the center—I think the biggest night we [had recently] was 58, because the church was putting on a party, and they came to that. So, that’s a great night today.

In the early days, that would have been a terrible night. A big center like this? We don’t need the space. We need more mobile transportation. We need more aboard-the-ship presence. The ministry is alive and well, and The Seafarers Center is alive and well, and helping people, but in terms of the type of help, it’s different from when we started.

We would not have the large numbers of people and the swimming pool—which is fantastic—and those who come really love it. But again, the swimming pool would be full every night too. We had to hire a lifeguard. We don’t do that anymore but we would probably get the most use out of the basketball court, the ping-pong table, the pool tables, but even those things are not utilized in the way they had been before.

The biggest change, of course, is the time in port and the number of people on a ship.

When I started, 40 was an average aboard a ship. Now, 20 if you’re lucky is an average aboard a ship. They’d be here a week—they would have time to socialize, time to work, time to get their shopping done. Today, two days is a long time in port, and many ships leave on the same day they come in.

Containerization and technology continue to alter the workplace and the kind and quality of workers that find their way to the Port and Ship Channel. Today, the work and the worker hardly resemble the place and the people The Seafarers Center was built to serve.

So, everything is speeded up. [Now] we would never build this center with all these beautiful things. We haven’t played soccer in the soccer field in years. It is difficult for 11 people to get off at any one time, that would be over half the crew, and they’re older because there’s seniority. And there’s less women because they were brought in when [the ships] had need of more seafarers. They were excluded when [the ships] didn’t, because they were the last ones in.

Technology, technology. In the beginning, seafaring jobs involved a lot of backbreaking jobs: you had to pull this pulley and lift that bale and upload aboard. [Now] it’s all done automatically. You don’t need to have a radio operator aboard. You couldn’t even sail the ship when I came unless you had a radio operator that could do all the communications. No such thing exists anymore. You just turn your computer on, and you use satellite guiding, and you

push a button, and it does the things that you used to have to do by hand. And the economics of it all: “We need to reduce crews to reduce costs.” “We’re going to be competitive.” Containers came into being. [Before that,] everything came in bulk and had to be unloaded individually.

Now, you just have to lift the box out, and no human is doing it. It’s a big crane lifting them out. You can clear a container ship in a day, and you can roll off 5,000 automobiles in a day on a Ro-Ro ramp. Most of the things are so automated that you don’t need the personnel and you don’t need the time to do that. It’s part of the speed of the moving in and out of the Port, because the ship is working all the time in port. That’s their hardest work. When they’re at sea, they can actually rest a little bit, but here in port, they have to take on supplies; they have to load and unload; they have to repair anything that needs repairing. And so, they are busy aboard ship.

And now Homeland Security provisions, resulting from the 9/11 attacks, have completely rearranged the landscape of the Port of Houston and the Houston Ship Channel.

Homeland Security is the worst possible thing that could have happened to seafarers. The restrictions are so horrible. Seafarers have to get visas in their own country before they’re even allowed to consider getting off [the ship], and for some they’re very expensive visas. The restrictions when they get here—they’re inspected 96 hours out to sea for any possible connection to terrorism. Then they’re boarded by the Coast Guard before landing, and looked at and examined again. And when they’re docked, Immigration goes again and checks each one of them. If they don’t have the documentation, they cannot leave their ship. But even if they have the documentation, it’s often the facility [that] makes it very difficult. We have people having to pay a couple hundred dollars to go a couple hundred yards from the ship to the gate, each way. You know, that’s just horrible and an ordinary seafarer cannot afford that. I’m on a dock access committee for the Coast Guard, and our job is to guarantee that any seafarers that have permission to leave should be able to leave without cost and come back without cost to board the ship.

If you were a worker coming in, you have to have a TWIC [Transportation Worker Identification Credential] card. If you’re a seafarer—American—you have to [have one]; now, foreigners can’t own one. But even an American stationed right below our center can look up there and see the center, he can’t walk up to the center anymore unless somebody like myself with a TWIC card and an escort card picks him up, brings him up, and takes him back. So freedom of movement is horribly restricted. These are some of the real changes that have happened since 9/11. ☺

Excerpts from an interview of Rivers Patout by Pat Jasper, July 26, 2010; archived as HAA-WTP-PJ-SR001 with the Houston Arts Alliance; also on deposit at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the Houston Folklife Archive.