Oral History Transcript
Interview of Ken Milstead
By Samantha Jenkins
November 2, 2012

Samantha Jenkins: Today is Friday, November 02, 2012. My name is Samantha Jenkins. I am interviewing Mr. Ken Milstead at the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum. Can you please state your name and the year you were born?

Mr. Ken Milstead: Kenneth Milstead. August 16, 1935.

Jenkins: Thank you.

-Pause to check recording-

Jenkins: Ok. Mr. Ken, where were you born?

Milstead: Where?

Jenkins: Where were you born?

Milstead: Selma, Alabama.

Jenkins: Ok. Uh, what were your parents like? What did they do?

Milstead: Ah, my mother was a stay-home mother. My father was a worker in the steel mills. He was also a coal-miner before that. And they worked for the Alabama Power and Light Company before that. But his profession was a rigger in the steel mill.

Jenkins: How many siblings did you have?

Milstead: I had one brother, older, and one sister, younger.

Jenkins: Oh, ok.

Milstead: *[clears throat]*

Jenkins: Ah, what were some of the things you did as a kid? Some of the things you did for fun?

Milstead: Well, most of my family were farmers. And during, especially, during the summer months we stayed down there with them and worked on the farms: ah, fed the cattle, picked peaches, tomatoes. Ah, the fun we had was riding tin sleighs down gulleys that were lined with pine straw. We would go out in the woods and find enough pine forest and the pine straw would be on the ground and we'd find a gulley. And we would use that as a sled.

Ah, we fished and hunted. I fired my first shotgun, which was a 12-gauge, I believe, just before my 12th birthday. I'd fired 22's before that but a shotgun was a little bit stouter. And I want to say at about 12 years old I was hunting with a 12-gauge shotgun. And we did a lot of fishing—pond fishing and river fishing—with poles and, at that time, with baskets. We also, um, gigged frogs, went frog gigging at night. And we also hunted. And these were the family outings with my dad, and my cousins, and my brother. We'd go out possum hunting, or coon hunting at nights. And that was a lot of fun. We brought them in and give them to our people who lived in Bessemer. We didn't cook too much of them.

During, on into high school, I played ball: football, a little bit of basketball and baseball. I played four years of football. Then, I worked a—at night, during the weekend when I wasn't playing ball—at a, ah, installation of air condit— *[clears throat, corrects himself]*— TVs. There, we had to, at that time, you had to put an antenna on the roof. Ah, we sub-contracted through Winn-Dixie—puh *[corrects himself]*—Western Auto, instead of Winn-Dixie. They sold Silvertone air conditioners and radios and we installed all of their antennas for them. Some of the people did not want a bracket on the houses, so we would take a tree and cut the top out of it and mount the antennas on the tree. Then we'd have to aim it just right to get the reception.

Then I worked a little bit, during the summer months when I wasn't playing ball, riding on a wrecker, picking up stolen cars and whiskey cars, working for the ABC—the alcohol beverage board. I was in on watching, or after they did it, when they would raid moonshine stills around in the country around Bessemer. At that time, that was in Bessemer, Alabama where the steel mills were. From then, where you want me to stop?

Both: *[Laughing]*

Jenkins: Well, ah, what were some of your—you said you played college football—where'd you play and what was that like?

Milstead: Ok. I, ah, played college football at a junior college in Moorhead, MS. That's where I met my wife my sophomore year. It was a real—the state of Mississippi had thirteen junior colleges and it was a pretty tough league. You were offered—you had to go in and try out each year, both years—so if you did play, you could go to a senior college and take a transfer. I was looking to go back to the University of Alabama, ah, but at that time Bear Bryant wouldn't take junior college transfers. So, in the mean time, I married my wife. And I got caught between semesters by the draft board. And my wife and I were married, ah, eight months and then I shipped out overseas to Germany for two years, without her.

Jenkins: When did, When did you get married?

Milstead: 1957.

Jenkins: Oh, ok.

Milstead: We're celebrating, this year, 56 years, I think.

Jenkins: Congratulations.

Milstead: But, ah, I was two years in Germany and I was in the Military Police over there. I patrolled the Autobahn. Worked out of Augsburg, Germany, which is in Bavaria and Munich, Germany. I was over there in '58, '59, and '60. And I played two years of ball over there. I was drafted into the ball, ah, for the Augsburg Infantry Team. My job over there was patrolling the Autobahn. Patrolling, when I wasn't on the highway, what we would call a highway, we were in town fighting the drunks. We had a lot of problems over there at that time with narcotics, which I'd never seen before, never been around it. I learned a lot. Your Spanish and your African Americans were notorious with narcotics; that's where we found most of the narcs. The narcotics came out of Africa. So I was really a naïve 21—22 year old man. When I got over there, I didn't know anything about uppers or downers or marijuana or cocaine. It was all, all new but you had to know how to identify it so we had a quick training. But other than that it was a, other than not having my wife with me, we had a good time. And I worked—most of the time I was working. If she had been over there she wouldn't have seen me half the time. I got discharged, was out, moved to New Orleans, and took a job with State Farm Insurance and had the job for six months and I was recalled for another year in the Army to invade Cuba, Cuba. So the wife got to go with me then. We spent a year up at Fort Polk and then we come back and …

Jenkins: And that was at Fort Polk?

Milstead: Mmhmm, for a year.

Jenkins: Ok, ah, what was your wife's name?

Milstead: Fern.

Jenkins: Fern.

Milstead: F-e-r-n.

Jenkins: Did y'all have any children?

Milstead: One daughter.

Jenkins: What's her name?

Milstead: Stacy.

Jenkins: Alright, ah. What are some of the ways, after you got to Louisiana, what were some of the ways that you've been personally involved with Lake Pontchartrain? And, some of the boating, were you, did you participate in or attend any of the boat races, that kind of thing?

Milstead: Just before I retired, I retired in '89, I think. But I did, we moved over here from New Orleans to Mandeville and at that time I was a workaholic. I did a lot of work. I was in claims. We handled claims from Betsy, Katrina, Hilda, and all of that stuff that was going on. So I really

didn't have a chance other than my church volunteering to get out and do other things that I wanted to do. I was a, ah, I'll say a woodworker. I bought and I fixed furniture, you know, for the house. So I was a woodworker. I refinished furniture and did that stuff. I did a little electrical work and helped some friends on vacation build camps and stuff like that. But that was the basis of my outside activities until we moved to, well, New Orleans and then in 1977 we moved to Mandeville and I took an office over here. That's when I got interested in, ah, the next, it was, I mean still working as an alcoholic—not an alcoholic, a workaholic. *[laughing]* Not an alcoholic, get that straight!

[laughing]

Milstead: But, let me take a swallow of some coffee. My throat's getting dry. *[swallowing sound]* Over here, I hunted, did some hunting and fishing in the lakes and surrounding. And get home and your vacations were spent going to see your mother and daddy and your in-laws and all of that stuff. But over here, I did get, ah, active in my church: First Baptist Church of Mandeville. And did some work there, kind of maintained the building. It was a 100-year-old building and, eventually, it burned. But in 19— *[clears throat]*, I'm gonna say '90 or '91, I'm not clear, I had a friend, ah, Bob Hogan. Bob and Jeanie Hogan, who lived in Madisonville, mentioned something about a Wooden Boat Festival and said they were looking for volunteers and I said "Okay, I'll do that." So, I took some time off and come over here and met with Jeanie. Jeanie was an excellent cook so I would sneak off over here early in the morning. She made big biscuits. *[motions size with hands]* I liked the biscuits and honey; she had honey for me. But, ah, that was my weakness. So I started with the first festival that I worked, I worked the gates. And I'd come over, and I used to be stronger than I am now, and Bob Hogan and I would take the tables out of city hall and the chairs and set up gates. At that time, the festival was very small. It, ah, was probably just on Water Street, on the north and south side. That was it. The boats I, I really didn't pay too much attention to the boats because I was more interested in getting the money, working a gate. So, I worked gates every year after that and helped Bob set up and got involved with him. I wasn't really, really [involved] but I got to know the people.

We didn't have the museum at that time. So, when you were working a gate people wanted to know, when they were paying the money to get in, where the money's going. I said to build the museum. So eventually, over a period of time, we grew a little bit. We had the Children's Village and we had the Builder's Guild that builds the little boats for the children. And then we had a lot of people that were coming in. At that time, they were coming in from all over the United States, especially the East Coast, from Boston and I made some friends there. They brought in artifacts, brass trinkets—everything's made out of brass—and diver's helmets and cleats and just about anything that you wanted around a boat. So I had a chance to visit with them. They eventually left and we grew out and we started selling more food and other trinkets. And I didn't have anything to do with that. That's somebody else. But I did undertake, after a fashion, ah, security on the gates. And the gates, ah, I helped set up and I eventually helped set up the fences and the gates. Ah, I helped set up the tents for the gates and worked with the vendors, a little bit with them. But, I normally worked with someone and, you know, helping them out and doing it and, eventually it was assigned to me.

The signage. I'm trying to think of everything that I did. Ah, logistics, setting up the fences, the gates, and all of that stuff. The signage, ordering the signs, having them made and then putting them up. And we used to be able to put a big, big sign we had made over Highway 22. And we got the power company out and it was as big as that wall—I'm gonna say four foot high and all the way across the highway, front and back. So, we got the power company to come put it up. Well, eventually the State Highway Department says "After four or five years you can't do this." So, we went from there and I started helping out with the, ah, "Quick and Dirty" [boat building contest]. I worked that for some people. I say worked it; I helped. I was always helping doing something.

So in 19--, no, in twenty-02 [2002], we built the building that we're sitting in here, built the museum. And that was the result of a grant from the State of Louisiana by—who got it?—Senator John, no, Representative John Hainkel. He was Speaker of the House and he got us a grant to build the building and the slab on the backside. The building and the land and everything here is owned by the city of Madisonville. And the museum just runs it for them. We do that. I've worked with, dealt with quite a bit Mayor Peter Gitz. He's a fine man; I enjoy being around him. Ah, at the same year, we had some people who were running the museum. I helped out in building the displays. And doing the punch list on the building, I was around while all that was going on.

But we also enclosed a section downstairs in 20-02 and started a boat class. Again, I was involved in it—ordered supplies and material and picking up the money. And so you could come in 10 weeks and build a boat, or build as close as you could to a boat. And we had a gentleman by the name of Kenny Herbert, who was a, said he was a master boatbuilder. And he was the one that taught me, and, ah, the other people how to build a boat. So, eventually, we grew and expanded and we built the boats and after 10 weeks you took what you had made and went home and finished it. Most of our people did. Eventually, we extended the boatbuilding class to 12 weeks and if you wanted to stay another 12 weeks, it was another cost to building. What we were building was, they're called lake skiffs. And as close as I can gather, it was the replica of the Atchafalaya River Basin workboat.

The method that we used to build the boats is called freeform. And, I know this recording don't show my hands, but freeform, you build a shell—two sides and a transom and a bow stem. You've got your two sides on here and its curved around. And then you put it in a jig, and you get your shear, and the way the sides are gonna be up and then you build the ribs inside. That's called freeform. So you wrap it first with your plywood, that's marine plywood, and then build the ribs. And as you build it, each rib, you watch and you make sure you cover the lines. The regular way that a lot of people build boats is with the, they build the ribs and then put the sides on it. But since we were using plywood, we used this method. Along came my very good friend Bob Doolittle. And he, I had had a boat, and he had done some work on my boat. And Bob built one, built a lake skiff. And, ah, I felt that we needed a change and I thought Bob was an excellent person for it. So I asked him to take my job and then we, ah, did without Kenny, but Bob is the master boat builder down there. He said if I'll take it, if you'll stay. So, so far as we've got the students, along come Don and Catherine Lynch. And they built a boat. And Don stayed on and he and Catherine started volunteering. Bob volunteers. So we've got a lot of

volunteers. All three of us are on the board. But we still have the boat class going and Bob is in charge of it and, what little bit I do, I help out down there.

Jenkins: Ah, what do you think people find the easiest and the hardest about boatbuilding?

Milstead: *[Pause]* If they have any mechanical or been able to saw a piece of wood, say around the house, ah, you don't have to be a finished carpenter. But, a lot of times, we have some angles to cut, what we call compound angles. And they angle this way and that way. So you might be doing a compound miter angle cut, some of that. Most of the times, if they've been around a saw and can set up a saw, they can learn it. The hardest part about building a wooden boat is the sanding—that's a four letter word. But I've found that a lot of ladies, and the men too, really didn't know that they were capable. But a lot of the ladies, now, can come in there and, after you set them up and set the saw up for them, they will learn. And it's a joke that I have with the husband and wife teams, and I think I told Catherine [Lynch] this when she first started. But if a husband and wife comes in, and, you know, we interview them and they say we want to build this type boat, I say, "I sure am glad you're bringing your wife with you because she's much easier to train than you." And I'm talking to the husband. And they're looking at me and, most of them, some of them are contractors or what have you. And I'll say "She'll listen to me; I can tell her what to do. You think you know everything." So I don't have any problems.

Jenkins: *[Laughter]*

Milstead: So I make friends with the wives. The wives do do a good job. They do a lot of sanding. But, it's like a family down there. If you need, two or three people got something going on, one will stop and help the other and visa versa. So the hardest part is the length of time in preparation of the boat. Ah, you can see when you're putting a side on or put a rib on or you put a seat in—you see that. But if you sand there, if you sit there and sand for three hours a night, you ain't seen too much other than a bunch of sandpaper.

Jenkins: But the progress pays off in the end?

Milstead: Yes, it does. It's a good finish. It's a good finished product.

Jenkins: I've seen some pictures. Do y'all take the boats out and test them?

Milstead: After we finish, they take them and yeah. Oh, yeah. They take them once they finish and get them outrigged; they have to put lights on them and they have a motor installed and steering and we're not even around. We have some times that we'll all get together with their boats and bring them then. But once they leave, its their boat.

Jenkins: About how long are the boats? You—

Milstead: They're 18 foot.

Jenkins: 18 foot.

Milstead: 18 feet. It's really 17.6 or something like that. You've got 18 foot of plywood and then you pull them together. It shortens it a little bit.

Jenkins: Oh, okay. Alright. How do you think the Wooden Boat Festival and the Maritime Museum have affected the town by having this resource here?

Milstead: As a whole and a general rule, I think they compliment each other. The town and the city council are always, you know, ready to cooperate with us. Unfortunately, because they don't have it, we don't get a lot of financial support but we get a lot of other support. If we need something done by the city, trim a tree or something, we can get it done. The festival itself brings in, and we like to see, brings in about 30,000 people. We, ah, pay for the police force but, ah, it does bring people in. The merchants at one time, let's see, we have, since the storm, four major restaurants here: Friends, Morton's, The Bistro, and the one on the corner, I forget the name of it. So there's your four restaurants and then the other stores. We have some hardware stores that people go by and we've got a little chicken place. But everybody makes a little money and are very cooperative, I have felt. Over the years, I couldn't believe that the whole town, and the city council, and the mayor, and the police, everything was very receptive. And me, being from out of town in another little town over and we have things going on, but they've helped out each other. We have had some lean times in the museum itself. We've built quite a bit and I'll show you some of the things. Most of the items that we've, that's down there,

Jenkins: In the exhibits?

Milstead: —in the exhibits—were made by one or two of us. One of them, a man named Frank Louis, was an excellent carpenter and what you see, the boats, were a lot of the things that we made. And when we first opened the museum that room was just an open place like the other two rooms are. But a lot of the things that we done in building the exhibits and setting them up were done by other volunteers and that's why I spend a great deal of my time in working and helping during the off season, what we call the off season, especially after I retired. This was my place to be. I had the opportunity to do some consulting work but all my life when I worked, I worked hard. And I wanted to do something that I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. And this museum was what I needed and that's how I feel about the museum.

Jenkins: That's great. Well, it is very nice. Y'all did some good work. *[laughter]* What about the, have you been involved in the restoration efforts with the Tchefuncte Lighthouse and the Keeper's Cottage?

Milstead: Yeah. Ah, we had the cottage was just at one time sitting over here and it had been a bed and breakfast, an office building, and all. And the people sold the property and gave the cottage to the museum if we'd move it. So it was over there just south of us, and we moved it over here [on the museum grounds]. That was a big deal and set it up and tied it down. The last, the lighthouse used to be owned by the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Coast Guard gave it to the city and the museum if we would maintain it. I've done some work. We've repainted it. *[coughs]* Sandblasted it. Excuse me. Sorry. *[drinks some coffee]* We had a team going out there and picking up. And its painted inside and out. It was an active [lighthouse] until…What's the last storm?

Jenkins: [Hurricane] Isaac?

Milstead: Isaac. Yeah. Ike [Isaac] did us under. I don't know if you've seen any pictures, but everything that we did has been torn up. Even the steps. There's a spiral [staircase] step made of cast-iron and steel, that has been washed away from the inside of the museum [the lighthouse]. The lights and all the fixtures up on the top of it has been washed away. So its not a lighthouse now as such, not an operating lighthouse. So we, ah, [are] trying to raise some money and try to do, you know, get some work out there. We need some steps. Right now we can't get up and put a light up in it because five feet of the steps, as it goes around, is gone. Tore up. I never did think that welded pieces of iron could be torn up by water like that. The doors are torn completely off the lighthouse. Its not secure anymore. And some bricks and some chips and stuff like that. But we were in it; it was going good. We were trying to figure out somehow to display it, take a boat trip out there. But we had another problem in getting a landing. You just couldn't take anybody out because you had to pull your boat up on some riprap and wade in to get on the bogie or get on the island out there. So we knew we needed a pier, but if we had one it would have been gone. Or any improvements we had other than what we did would have been gone. So we're still working, very active in that.

And the lighthouse keeper's [cottage], we were very fortunate to get some volunteers through the Builder's Guild, a bunch of retired contractors. And they come out and put banisters up, built stairs for our steps for us, replaced doors and frames, and all we had to do was furnish the material. So that was good. And they did that last year. And then we got some group over, volunteers—we do a lot of work with volunteers—ah, to paint it. To paint the steps and all. But that's a—it was damaged. We've got buckled floors and the air condition has been totally destroyed. And we've got a lot of time there we gotta do something with.

Jenkins: Okay, ah, speaking about Hurricane Isaac, it—it came through in August 2012; Katrina was in '05. Are there any other experiences that stand out in your mind with those storms, that have affected you or how it's affected the museum?

Milstead: Well, Katrina was a major storm and it come up through New Orleans and we had some damage downstairs in the boat class. All of our fences went down and boats were floated out into the ballfield. But the water down there during Katrina was only about 24 inches, and thick mud. I mean the mud would settle. Isaac was a [Category] One, supposedly, and we had more damage. Even with the lighthouse, the lighthouse was flooded but we had more damage for Isaac, which was supposed to have been a smaller [storm] than we did with Katrina. Ah, we just pulled up, got volunteers. Again, we're talking about the city. I don't know if you ever tried to clean up a building or a floor that's got mud about 3 inches, gunk and mud—our fire department, we just went to see the fire department and they bring a truck up here and tie on to the fire hydrant and use their number, their three-inch hoses and wash the stuff out. So there's your help from the city or the parish to do some stuff. And the rest of it is just picking up and throwing away and figure out what we can use and what we've got to throw away.

Jenkins: And, again, that was a strong volunteer effort too.

Milstead: Yeah. Mmhmm, yeah. We have a lot of volunteers. We'll call on the people and send out an email and a lot of our boat owners will come back from Slidell or wherever they live. They come from New Orleans, Slidell, Hammond, and right outside of Baton Rouge. A lot of them come in down here about three, two nights a week: Monday and Wednesday nights. And we'll put a word out that we need some help and there they come. And then we had our own nucleus that we have.

Jenkins: Alright. Well, ah, is there anything else you can think of that you would like to share?

Milstead: Well, I wish there was some more—there were a lot of people that I would have liked to have identified that I'd been around. Some of them were dear friends and some of them have passed away. A lot of people that I worked for: one lady, Willy Paretti, was a manager and she run the museum for a while and was on the board and, also, she did the Wooden Boat Festivals. We have one that I have been working with that's a dear friend of mine is Roy Blackwood. And he works and gives, gives so much. And there's so many people that are involved with the museum that I find that they don't nobody know and I'm not, I just happened to be around a little bit longer than other people. But we have had people and we do have people that are giving everything that they've got to this museum and they live and breathe, and I think it runs through their veins a little bit. But being associated with them, and coming out from an old country boy, and working and just what I wanted to do. It was really what I wanted to do. I didn't make a whole bunch of money but I had a retirement and I didn't need another job. My wife was a stay-home mother. And my main thing is that I wanted to become a part of something, give a little bit back, if I could. And this is what I found and this is what I fell in love with. A good marriage.

Jenkins: *[laughter]* Well, thank you for your time and thank you for sharing with me and I appreciate it.

Milstead: Alright, now get with my other buddy out there.

Jenkins: Okay.