

The Shrimp Industry's Main Problem: Manpower

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THE OTHER NIGHT I was discussing with Oscar Longnecker what I would say today, and he suggested that I start off with some horrible examples of labor problems.

The most recent example happened this morning. It is not connected with the shrimp industry, but the very same problem that we are discussing here today caused me to be late. Yesterday morning I had a very difficult time, and I know a lot of you had also, getting breakfast. Last night I thought I would be smart and I ordered it for arrival at 8:00 o'clock this morning. It still has not arrived. A labor shortage, I am told, and this is what we are here to discuss.

Horrible examples? All right, I will give you a recent one that involved one of my own boats. I think about every sin in the book is wrapped up in it. Late in October, one of our boats departed from Galveston. For 10 days we didn't hear anything from it. We couldn't find it, even though our dock captain tried. During that time the crew bootlegged shrimp. For those of you who don't know what that is, they sold shrimp without authority, pocketed the money and used it for their own purposes. They went aground twice within 24 hours, and a third time shortly afterward. They damaged the boat, only slightly.

We received a letter from the Corps of Engineers towards the latter part of the 10 days saying that our vessel had approached a lock in Vermillion Bay. There the deckhand asked where he could get supplies. He was told he would have to go about 12 miles up the river, whereupon he roundly cussed the man and tried to beat him up. Then he jumped back in the boat and got away. The police picked him up somewhat later and put him in jail, whereupon the captain sold some shrimp and bailed him out. They kept on with their escapades, and they went aground again going out. This time they damaged the tiller chain for which they needed a shackle, so they stopped at an oil rig in the bay. They tied off the bow of the vessel, but failed to tie the stern securely. Consequently the vessel swung around, striking a sea plane that was attached to the rig, damaging it to the extent of \$10,000 or \$12,000.

We are not finished. We have not even gotten started. The crew fished for a couple of days, then put in at Cameron, Louisiana, and sold some shrimp. The captain—the deckhand said later when I interviewed him in the Beaumont jail where he was being held—doesn't drink, but with his money they purchased a fifth of vodka, a fifth of bourbon and two 6-packs. They went on to Sabine that night because the captain's wife was going to meet them there. The deckhand said the last thing he remembered was that he talked to her briefly at the dock, but then he proceeded to get drunk. The next morning the captain and his wife went down to the cafe to have breakfast, but when they came out the boat was gone.

This deckhand, in an intoxicated condition, took the vessel down the channel and into the Gulf. He started at 8:00 in the morning but it wasn't until 5:00 p.m. that the Coast Guard finally boarded the vessel. During that time, according to a sport fisherman witness, he headed straight for the fisherman

who thought he was going to get killed, but missed him by 40 feet. He side-swiped an oil rig and wrecked that boat, raking it from bow to stern. The damages were approximately \$20,400. Then he went on a joyride. He would put the vessel on full speed ahead and then he would throw it into full speed astern without reducing the speed, and then he would make tight circles for 15 minutes. He did everything that an intoxicated person could do to damage a boat. When I interviewed him I asked, "What did you hit with the boat?" He replied, "Mister, you wouldn't believe this, but I don't remember a thing. The first thing I remember is seeing a helicopter above me and I didn't know why he was there."

Well, this is what happens, and I think this is about the best "horrible example" I could give you. It includes the bootlegging, the lack of safety of the personnel, the lack of safety of the vessel, and so many other things. You can read the implications, I won't list them, as to what the shrimp fleet is suffering because of a lack of properly trained people.

Now the story should be finished, but it isn't. When I checked the man's name it developed that he was the same man who had come in to our company dry dock one morning. He was so drunk he didn't know where he was. He climbed up on a vessel, on the railway, way up high and proceeded to make breakfast for himself on someone else's boat. I wish he had stopped there, but the next thing he started the engine with the vessel in dry dock, and there was the propeller going like an airplane. This resulted in about \$6,000 worth of damage. And this same man . . .

I could go on and on with examples. Will Hardee says, "These are the kind of people that I give my \$80,000 vessel to, and I watch them go out to fish, but if they wanted to borrow my car to go downtown, I wouldn't give it to them."

Then there is the story about the helicopter that was hovering above a shrimp boat to drop a pump or take off a sick man or something, and the deckhand ran out and moored the helicopter to the vessel.

Enough of these horrible examples. Let me now turn the coin and assure you that it isn't this way all the time, fortunately. We do have a heck of a lot of good people, real good captains, real good deckhands, people with families, people who have the right outlook on life, and people who live like you and I do. But it is estimated that we have a 50% turnover among crew members. That is one out of every two who make one or two trips and leave to go to another job or to another vessel.

This shortage of vessel crews is disruptive and costly to our industry. This is a \$100 million industry, an industry that is expanding its domestic and foreign operations, an industry that operates vessels in the \$90 to \$150 thousand range sending them in all weather far and wide through the Gulf and Caribbean. This crisis is real! It is now. It is occurring at a time when a primary objective of the government is the increased use and development of our marine resources. Today we need many more skilled people to man our ships and reap the harvest of food from the sea.

So, if anybody wants to know what the greatest problem is in the shrimp industry, it is manpower. It is the lack of good crews and of people that are trained. We in the industry have the responsibility to do something about this, yet we feel the prime mover, since it is a field of education, should be the government. We look for some help because industry does not have the

money nor the skills and experience in setting up schools, but the government does.

We need to train these people in things like seamanship, handling of gear, maintenance of the boat, emergency repairs and safety. The Coast Guard bill alone would be reduced tremendously if we had men who could take care of themselves and the vessel and minimize the need of the Coast Guard's assistance.

We need to train men to handle the catch so that we would have a good product at the dock. We need to train them to handle the electronic equipment and the new gear that is being developed.

A word about earnings, and I will finish. A recent survey shows that rig men—not captains; captains earn more—earn approximately \$6,000 to \$7,000 annually, and this has been on the increase in recent years.

So we need to train these people; we need to train them now, and we need to train them in large numbers.