

SIG 1

Interviewee: Robert May

Interviewer: Deborah Hendrix

Date: March 12, 2004

H: I'm at the home of Mr. Robert May. We're going to be talking about his work experience at Sea Island, Georgia. Can you state your full name for us?

M: [My name is] Robert J. May.

H: Where were you born?

M: I was born in Houston, Texas.

H: What year was that?

M: 1938.

H: Where were your parents from?

M: My mother was from Texas, and my father was from Wyoming.

H: And what were their names?

M: My mother's name was Hesta, Brown was her maiden name, and my father was Joe L. May.

H: What did your father do?

M: During World War II, he was involved in oil exportation; finding oil in Illinois working for an independent oil company out of Texas. After World War II, he went to manufacturing lawn mowers. When he passed away, he was in the lawn mower business.

H: Did your mom work outside the home?

M: She worked with his business with the lawn mowers, and then worked outside the home after he passed away.

H: Do you think that your mother or your father was the bigger influence in your life in what you did?

M: Well, definitely my mother [was the bigger influence] because my father passed away when I was fifteen. So she was the biggest part of my life after that for sure.

H: She encouraged you in what you wanted to do, or she just was there to support you?

M: I think she encouraged participation in things that you would normally do. For an example, I graduated high school in 1956, [and] there wasn't any question that I was going to graduate from high school; that wasn't an option. Then I went to college, and there wasn't an option that I wasn't going to finish in four years. I never dreamed not to go to college. So she more or less set rules and groundwork to where you just kind of channeled into things.

H: She insisted that you go ahead and get your college education?.

M: Well, I don't know that she insisted, it was just that I didn't know I had an option not to. [laughing]

H: Okay, well, I think that's a pretty good influence in your life. Did you go to school in Houston there?

M: No, I finished high school in **Routen, Alabama**, [in] 1956, and finished the University of Alabama in 1960.

H: What was your degree at the University of Alabama?

M: I had a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Management.

H: When you started college, was where you were aiming, something in that area? Was that your interest?

M: Well, I entered the school of commerce and business administration, and then after a year or two then I chose that major. Junior and senior year you kind of concentrated in [in that major].

H: Now we'll move on to Sea Island. What year were you hired at Sea Island? Do you remember?

M: No, I don't remember, but I wrote that down. I was hired in August 1973.

H: From Alabama, how did you come to apply for a job at Sea Island? How did you get there?

M: Well, I don't know that I applied for the job, it's more that the job came to me. We'd moved to Brunswick [Georgia] and I'd worked for a company here that folded. So my wife went to work for the first time then, and she started working as a waitress at the King and Prince, and I started working for the King and Prince Hotel. Then Sea Island kind of approached us as a team to go to work for them by contacts we had in church.

H: So that's when you were hired, in the engineering and maintenance department?

M: Yes, I was hired in the engineering and maintenance department as a storeroom clerk and a purchaser of materials for the engineering department. My wife was hired in the dining room as a waitress.

H: Oh, so your wife worked at Sea Island as well then.

M: Indeed, she did.

H: Oh, well, it seems like I need to interview her too.

M: Well, you could.

H: I need to interview some women.

M: Maybe you'd like to talk to her about it; although she worked back in 1973, she didn't work in the whole career. But if that would help you, talk to her.

H: Sea Island approached you then, and they felt you were pretty qualified for the job, so you didn't have to go through all the interview process. They just asked you to come over and you just started to work.

M: Well, I was asked by the personnel department to come over, and I did talk to the director of engineering and maintenance [and] the director of purchasing, but it was my job to lose rather than my job to obtain.

H: [The interview] was just basically a formality.

M: Absolutely. They hired me, put me to work, and a year after that they asked me to fill out an employee application.

H: Oh, so they were needing some good workers then.

M: Well, they did things different back then. You could do things probably different back in 1973 than you can do in 2003.

H: What was your pay was when you first started?

M: Back in 1973, I started at, I believe it was, \$200 a week, and \$800 a month.

H: In the 1970s, that was a pretty good paycheck.

M: Well, I'm not too sure they hired me, it's more they hired my wife [laughing].

H: You were just a perk, huh?

M: No, we both had skills that they wanted.

H: Well, they have an image [at Sea Island Company], and I wanted to ask you about that. When you first started, did they explain any kind of image that they wanted to project, any way they wanted you to dress or approach the guests for instance, that you can remember?

M: In 1973, no. Debbie, in her job in the dining room, went through some of that. But actually my job in engineering and maintenance was never designed to be a face-on with the guests, even in later years when the job grew. If I was seen by the guests, then we were in big trouble. It was rare, and we did everything to avoid anybody behind the scenes [being seen]. We really didn't like our troops, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, painters, and all those, to be involved with the guests because when we were involved there was generally something wrong. We had to get in and out as courteously and fast as we could without being over pushy and to make sure the guests were satisfied. So my involvement was through other people with the guests rather than directly with the guests. But that's where the job developed. Initially [it] was just on the job training; [I was] just put in a job and [it was a] go make it what you want kind of thing, [of course] with certain limits and perimeters and stuff.

H: That makes sense that they would want to keep the mystique of a trouble free environment for the guests. I wanted to ask you about your first day on the job. Is there anything that you remember that was particularly stressful that day?

M: It's been so long ago, but I think it was probably stressful. Any first day on the job, I think, would probably be stressful. Particularly [because] I had no training or anything, I just didn't know what the procedures were and that type of thing, which I learned, which put a lot of stress [on me], but it wasn't all that stressed because everybody's very helpful and encouraging and this type of thing. So I didn't feel threatened when I say I was [stressed].

H: Did you think that your degree helped you in any way on that job? Is there anything you learned from college that really came in handy other than just a broader knowledge?

M: I don't really feel that education is any way of a hindrance to anybody. In fact, it gives you more of a perspective and understanding of different disciplines and this type of thing. So in my degree of industrial management, [it] was mainly to get objectives and goals attributed through other people, so I think that helped me and I think it helped me get the job. It opened the door that you always hear about, and I think that was a contributing factor.

H: So after a few weeks, was there anything that surprised you about the job, or was it pretty much what you expected?

M: No, it was not what I expected it to be because prior to my working for Sea

Island, I'd worked for _____ Corporation in Pensacola, Florida, which was a manufacturer of nylon, and it was a 7,000 employee operation. Probably Sea Island, back in that time, was maybe [a] 700 or 800 [person] operation. The job I was in was a supervisor in what they called the **draw twist** department. We were machine-paced. We had **draw twist** machines that ran 86-75 and we were machine-paced. So when taking that experience and applying it to engineering, we were much more casual and the pressure of meeting a machine deadline [was not as stressful]. Machines, I know this is not about Sea Island, but the machines were paced in fifteen minute segments, so you was either on schedule or off within fifteen minutes, whereas it was much more relaxed out at Sea Island.

H: The people you worked with that had been there for awhile, did they seem satisfied with their position and their jobs?

M: I think overall that people were satisfied or they wouldn't be there. So yes, I think they were satisfied, although they might not verbally want to admit that at all times. [They] were always dissatisfied with something, but [overall they were happy].

H: How did you do your lunches and breaks?

M: They have an employee's cafeteria out there and you had thirty minutes to go to lunch. When I first started, I think it was you could eat five meals, it seems like, for \$2.14 a week. Or you could eat seven meals, you could eat out there on Saturday and Sunday if you wanted to. You used to pay by the week, and I think it was \$2.14. It was good meals. A lot of the meals, the desserts and stuff, were maybe leftover from the day before, and some of the food was left over, but a lot of it was fresh cooked. They had fried chicken and all kind of good stuff. That fried chicken was always a good day because that was fresh cooked, we knew that.

H: That sounds like a good deal.

M: You used to go through there and you used to serve yourself, they didn't have any servers, so you could get [as much as you wanted]. [Laughing.]

H: Was this the middle of the day, then, when you have your lunch?

M: Oh, yes, we started lunch, I think the cafeteria opened at 10:45 and closed at 1:00, so you had two hours to eat lunch.

H: [That is a good benefit] I would think.

M: It still is. Shortly after you quit paying by the week and you started paying by the

items, and when I left, you could have a pretty good lunch, you could have a great lunch, for anywhere from \$1.50 to \$2.00. You also had the benefit of taking your family too, so when I was younger and my children were younger, we used to go out there after church. They put on an extra special Sunday dinner and I could feed the whole family for \$5.00—that's myself, my wife, and two children—after church. So we did that occasionally.

H: What were your [work] hours? Did you work days?

M: I was very fortunate, I worked from 8:00-4:30, Monday through Friday. Outside of that, I worked two Saturdays through twenty-five years of service, so I worked 8:00-4:30, Monday through Friday.

H: You retired from Sea Island, then, after twenty-five years?

M: Indeed, I did.

H: So that would have been 1996?

M: [It was] 1998, August 1998.

H: What was your job title? If you had a title, what would it be?

M: I don't know that I had a title. I guess I had a title because I wrote my own job description, but it was a coordinating of the engineering department work request that required eight hours or less to do. Anything that required eight hours or more went to another individual because that was probably going to be [dealing with] contractors and [have] other things involved. So I kind of coordinated that, and I also bought the material, so my job title would be probably a buyer and coordinator.

H: That brings me to my next question, can you describe exactly what were your job responsibilities at Sea Island?

M: My number one responsibility was to make sure that the guests were satisfied. Whatever they requested was done to their satisfaction. In fact, we had a rule that even if a guest perceived that there was something wrong, we had to deal with that to turn them around to where it wasn't a problem, that we could convince them that we had done something to correct it. It was always guest satisfaction. There were all other means that we used to do this. Now there was a limit to guest satisfaction. For example, we wouldn't do anything that would harm them or harm the hotel. An example would be [that] a guest at one time wanted the sprinkler system disconnected in his room, and we would not do that. For some reason he wanted that done and we would not do that. But that's rare, very rare, that we wouldn't attempt to directly satisfy a guest. So guest

satisfaction, I guess, was job number one.

H: It seems to be their motto on Sea Island. But you would never really come face to face with a guest. You were always behind the scenes.

M: Absolutely.

H: They would make their request to the desk clerk or somebody, and then they would come to you?

M: Normally most of our requests were channeled through the housekeeping department. However, sometimes guests would call me direct[ly]. But it came from housekeeping [or] the front desk. We didn't care where it came from, as long as it was channeled to me as far as the engineering [was concerned], so that it could be properly distributed and followed up on. Sometimes we got written memorandums and that type of thing, but we preferred to be called by telephone so that we could get on the problem right away rather than somebody write it down and send it through the hotel mail where we might get it the next day. [That's for] anything that required eight hours or less, now. Somebody that did more than eight [hours], we encouraged them to write [it down] and it went somewhere else. But we wanted to strike while our iron was hot.

H: What kinds of problems did you commonly deal with?

M: The top problems that I dealt with mainly was [things] like a toilet [being] stopped up, showers dripping, curtains falling down, locks not working, little refrigerators in their room not working, headboards loose, just whatever, wallpaper peeling. [It was] that type of thing.

H: So it was just a really broad spectrum of things that you were required to deal with. Now the Cloister, that's the oldest building of Sea Island, isn't it?

M: Not anymore; I understand it's torn down.

H: Yes, I understand they were tearing it down.

M: It's my understanding—now you've got to remember I haven't been out there in five years, and you lose contact real quick, in fact I haven't been on Sea Island maybe in two years myself—but it's my understanding they have torn the main hotel building, which was the oldest building at the time. So I don't know what would be the oldest building [now]. The River House was torn down, which was an old building. They built the hotel first, then they added the River House.

H: So I would think that the Cloister, it was built in, I think, 1928, or at least part of it . . .

M: It opened in 1928.

H: I would think that it would be a maintenance nightmare with all the old wiring and the old plumbing. Did they update that over the years?

M: Well, of course the wiring and plumbing and all that was updated along the way, but you're right, it was absolutely a nightmare. But what the rooms that were built for in 1928 were not what people necessarily expected in 2000. Although guests did seem to appreciate that type of an atmosphere, so it wasn't necessarily a downsize to it, but it was hard to maintain over the years and it was really a nightmare. It was really expensive to keep it up. I think one thing that's unusual, and you might address this later on, we actually found that the hotel guests, most of them, really took a personal interest [in the hotel]; they bought into the hotel. They would call up and actually be apologetic. [They'd say,] I hate to report this, but . . . we really encouraged that because if they took interest in it then we got this thing brought to our attention much faster than somebody just having a problem and walking out and not telling anybody. [So] they actually bought into it, and this we felt was very good.

H: Yes, I think I'll ask a little bit about that later. I just want to ask one more thing about your job responsibilities, but is Sea Island self-contained as far as their sewage treatment and their water? Do they have their own well and things like?

M: The water system is all Sea Island owned and maintained. The sewage system is done by the county.

H: Okay, I was just curious about that. Is there anything over your twenty-five years that really stands out, an unusual event that you had to tackle, maybe a [problem with a] guest?

M: We had cottages down the drive, [so] there would be cottage 222 and there [would] be a room 222. One time I had a guy call me and he says, I just bought 222, and I made the assumption that he bought cottage 222. He says, my toilet is stopped up, and I told him that he would have to go to the yellow pages and hire an outside plumber to unstop his toilet. He said—he knew that there was something not right—but he said, I can't believe that I'm paying \$600 a night and I've got to hire my own plumber. It finally dawned on me that he was a guest, but he felt like he'd paid so much money that he'd bought the room, which was really good because he claimed ownership of the room, and when they claim ownership then that's good.

H: That's an interesting way of looking at it. That's pretty funny.

M: I thought that was rather humorous; it wasn't humorous at the time.

- H: No, but I can see how it would be now. In your work, you had good leeway as to how you get things done. Do you think the company encouraged you to take your own initiative, or did they have a set of guidelines that you should go by?
- M: Generally speaking, we had unlimited resources to satisfy the guests. Of course there might be some limits to what [we could do]. If a fellow had a problem with his windows, we might not tear out his windows and put new windows in while he was occupying that room, there was some limitation, but if there was a real problem, then there would be windows next time he came in there if he had pointed out something that needed attention. But most of the time, for the type problems [we had]—remember we're talking about the little nitty-gritty problems that aren't the huge things—we could buy or do whatever we wanted to to get that problem done.
- H: So they gave you a pretty good [leeway]. You took things on your own initiative and they encouraged that.
- M: Absolutely. They encouraged that they wanted results and not reasons for not obtaining the results. They wanted results, and we gave them results.
- H: That's a nice atmosphere to work in. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the character of the company and changes you might have seen. Start back in 1973, when you started, were there any remnants of segregation within the company? Were there separate facilities for African-Americans or separate entrances? Was there anything like that that you remember?
- M: No, [there was none of that].
- H: There was not. So by 1973, all that was just gone.
- M: Yes, [it was gone].
- H: That's pretty progressive for a real southern tradition.
- M: Of course you do realize, I understand in the past of that, they did have those type of facilities.
- H: They did. I'm sure if I could interview anybody from the 1960s I would find evidence of segregation, but after civil rights' acts in 1964 there was still discrimination even so.
- M: But not when I joined the company.
- H: [But it was] not when you joined the company. All that was already in the past. In the employee cafeteria that you were talking about, did the African-Americans

eat in there as well? Did everybody eat in there?

M: Yes, although at one time they did have a white and colored [sections]. I believe when I got there, the colored section had been turned into some type of storerooms.

H: So by 1973, everyone was eating together. Since Sea Island is a family-owned company, did you ever feel like you had access to the owner, I think that would be one of the Jones's, could you just walk in his office if you had something to say or something to ask?

M: No.

H: You could not?

M: I did not feel like I had that kind of access.

H: There was a hierarchy.

M: Well, there was certainly a hierarchy, but while some people might feel like they had that type of access, I felt like there was a failure somewhere in myself and the organization if I ever had to go to that. So they went through channels, you might say. I just never felt like I had that type of access.

H: If you had a problem within your department you wanted to get addressed, you had to submit some kind of request.

M: But I never had a problem within the department that I either didn't get what I wanted or I was able to accept whatever decision was made and move on.

H: That's interesting. I ask that question because Sea Island portrays itself as a big family.

M: Some people may feel like they had that access, but I didn't.

H: You would think in a family that everyone should be able to walk through that door if they had a question. You never had any occasion to even do that you say?

M: Well, you've got to remember, there's a lot of people who can't measure up to the demands that are put on you out there too. So not everybody that was hired would necessarily stay as long as you would think. There was a lot of demands put on people that they weren't able or willing to measure up to. There might have been a lot of people being dissatisfied that might have went to the Jones's, but there was never anything that came of that.

- H: There was never really a question of who was in charge of that company?
- M: Oh, no, [there was] never a question of who's in charge.
- H: It was just one guy at the top. There were not any unions in that company were there?
- M: [There were] no unions and no talk of unions.
- H: That was totally discouraged, I would think, in that atmosphere.
- M: I'm sure it was discouraged, but I don't know that the problem at the level I was ever on, and I was working with the people who probably would be most unionized, is there was never a discussion about it.
- H: No union representatives came in to talk to you?
- M: Not that I'm aware of.
- H: Like you say, that would be the area they'd come into, I would think.
- M: Probably.
- H: Now I wanted to ask you something that I read in some literature about the company, and that's about the TV's. The TV episode, where they say they didn't even put TV's in until the mid 1980s, is that true?
- M: That's true.
- H: Do you know what the reason was for that?
- M: Maybe [it was] before [the] 1980s; I'm not sure when we put them in. It's my understanding that Mr. Jones Sr. said that if people were in their rooms watching TV, then Sea Island was a failure in keeping them occupied rather than television. It was always felt among the troops that that was a good philosophy, but he also failed to mention that they were out spending money if they weren't in their rooms, and there might have been some of that. It was a real tough decision on top management to put them babies [televisions] in there, and then it was an absolutely terrible job to put them in because you had to run cables and stuff in that old hotel that didn't have crawl space. You just couldn't run a cord down the wall. It was a major undertaking, a major expense to put them in, but it was done when decided.
- H: So finally the powers that be up there finally gave in or caved in.
- M: Well, of course Mr. Jones Sr. passed away before then, and then Mr. Jones Jr. was in

charge. It was, I gather, at his decision.

H: I think that's an interesting episode in the history of Sea Island, but that was something that would take more than eight hours, so that was something that was contracted out.

M: That was done on a contract basis, absolutely.

H: Was there ever a time when you were working for Sea Island that they did any layoffs for any reason that you remember?

M: Yes, when I first went there, and I alluded to my wife being in the dining the room, they had layoffs in the off season, which was something around maybe after New Year's until the first of March or somewhere like that. What was unusual about that [is] that people volunteered for layoffs, and the most senior got the layoff. They started at senior and worked down. You couldn't, if you was a junior like my wife, get laid off. The reason people wanted laid off is they got to draw unemployment. They also didn't have to go down, initially, to the unemployment office; they just had some setup in personnel where you go up there and pick up your check up, because everybody understood it was a like a six weeks layoff and that type of thing. Rather than laying off the junior person, it was the most senior [who] would take six weeks' vacation and get his unemployment or in most cases [that's what happened].

H: One reason would be they get a lot less unemployment than they would be at full pay there. I would think that would save the company a little bit of money.

M: Now after maybe the first year or two when I was there we had no layoffs in the engineering department at all, but when I first got there, there was a man who was working in the boiler room who had actually grown up at Sea Island. His mother and daddy both worked at Sea Island back when they had married couples dormitories that you alluded to earlier. They had a double dorm in which they allowed married couples to live in. He actually lived in that dorm, so he just kind of worked into the job and he was working in the boiler room. He agreed to be laid off, he was single, so that a man that was going to be laid off that had a family would have a job. I thought that was very courageous of this individual. Later he came back to work at Sea Island, maybe a year, and went to school himself while he was working and trained himself as an air conditioning technician, and today he's the head air conditioning technician out there. He's had, on his last leg, maybe about twenty-five years [of] service now, because he broke his service when he went in there.

H: When they would get these layoffs, would that interrupt their service?

M: No.

H: It would not.

M: Then after the first year or two, we went into a major project of remodeling rooms during the off season, which required us to actually have more workers than we needed by contract. This was handled by contract.

H: That's interesting. In your department, maintenance, that's ongoing all the time, so you're not effected so much by laying off.

M: When the hotel occupancy was the lowest was when we did our most work.

H: Really? And what is the off season, would you think?

M: The off season most of the time when I was there was the period between after Thanksgiving until Christmas. They had a big Christmas and [it] tied over to New Year's. Then after New Year's, when we could do the most maintenance was between January and February. By March 1, every room had to be back and on line. It was really hard sometimes to get rooms because people took ownership of rooms like I alluded to before. They stayed in 222 the last thirty years, and they wanted 222, and we had it down for maintenance.

H: That was something I was going to ask you about. Some of these guests would come back year after year, right?

M: Some of them would come from, back when it first started, for three months.

H: Is that right?

M: Some of them, a few, not a whole lot back then. They more or less winter down there, maybe half a dozen back in the early 1970s.

[End of side A1]

H: We're on the last set of questions. In this part I will be asking about your personal observations, and some things that Sea Island likes to project and see what you have to say about that. There's one more thing that I wanted to ask you about the G-8 Summit [international conference] that's coming up in June and it's going to be on Sea Island. Do you think Sea Island [considers the event to be] a big accomplishment for them? Do you think they are aiming for international recognition?

M: Absolutely, no doubt about that. They would definitely be a big winner.

H: How do you think they managed to host the G-8 Summit?

M: Actually, I do not know how the intricate [details] of that type of thing works. You'll have to quote somebody else on that. I don't know how they managed to swing it.

- H: It seems like a coup to be able to do that.
- M: I think so. I can just imagine [them] planting oak trees out there. They have a place where they have oak trees, and they had presidents that stayed on Sea Island planted an oak. So Mr. [George H. W.] Bush [U.S. President, 1989-1993] Sr.'s got an oak, [and] Mr. [George W.] Bush [U.S. President, 2001-present] Jr. will put his oak out there. We also heads of states [with trees], so I imagine they'll try to get all those heads of states to plant an oak. I don't know that, but I can imagine that. I think it's probably publicity from the circles that Sea Island wants their clientele to come from. They'll probably get publicity in that circle that you would never get anywhere else. Although you do have to remember that a lot of people come to Sea Island that are active plumbers and electricians and stuff up North, where they make lots of money, these types of people. Occasionally you'll find a plumber down there that's been enjoying Sea Island's hospitality.
- H: If you were working out there right now, do you think your department would be really busy with [the G-8 Summit]?
- M: Oh, absolutely. Engineering is generally involved in most everything that happens usually before it occurs and then after it. We try not to be seen during an event, if possible, which is not always possible. But yes, we'd be involved. I was out there when President Bush Sr. came out and stayed, and we were definitely involved in that.
- H: When was that, was that during his presidency?
- M: Yes, he was president. There was a lot of secret service people around about starting maybe two weeks before he arrived, and then more and more would come. I noticed the younger secret service people would arrive early, and then the closer to him coming, the more seasoned secret service would come about two days before the big man got there. It was an interesting time to me.
- H: I bet. And did you see him? Did he walk around and play golf?
- M: I didn't see him at all.
- H: He probably stayed in his room and watched TV.
- M: He actually had two rooms in the **Harrington House**, connecting rooms, and one of the rooms was cleared out and he had treadmills and some stuff put in like that. They had the South Hampton, which was twelve rooms. He was due in on Saturday morning, I believe, and stayed until Monday. At 3:00 PM Friday, the Secret Service closed down the **Harrington House**, meaning full security tied around it. There were still guests staying in the other portions of it, but they locked it down at 3:00 PM on Friday. So you could go up to that point in and out without being inhibited. We was required to build a type of platform up on the **Harrington House** so that the Secret Service could stand up there

with binoculars and high-powered rifles and look the perimeter over. There was just a whole lot of stuff [we had to do]. We had to have designated plumbers and electricians and stuff, I don't think they were actually checked out by the Secret Service, but we had to designate people, and only these people could enter that perimeter and that type of thing. Of course we was there when President [Jimmy] Carter [1977-1981] was there as well, but Mr. Carter stayed down the drive so we weren't quite involved in that as we would have been when he stayed in the hotel.

H: Did he have a cottage?

M: No, but he had his guy [who was] the head of the budget department, what do you call that?

H: Was it Baker?

M: He come under some criticism, and Mr. Carter no longer stayed in his cottage and moved over to a place over on St. Simon's.

H: Right, the Musgrove Plantation.

M: [Yes,] the Musgrove Plantation.

H: Right, I remember that. I remember him coming with all the Secret Service. Of course, I remember when he came here when he was governor [of Georgia, 1971-1974]. He would come to St. Simon's and stay, again, with his friends here. But anyway, we got off the subject. Let's see, I've got a few more questions here. Since Sea Island has been out there so long, did you ever feel like you had a sense of its tradition? Was there a feeling that you were part of an institution?

M: Well, at the time I was out there, we were [rated] a five star, five diamond hotel. The major portion of it, perhaps twenty of my twenty-five years was that. [It was] first after I'd been there a year or two that we obtained the five stars [rating], and then another year or two we obtained the five diamonds [ratings]. Then later on we lost the five diamonds [rating]. One of the major reasons that we lost the five diamonds is that the rooms in the hotel and the River House were too small, and the bathrooms were too small. They wanted so many square footage, which was great back in 1928, but you're talking in the mid 1980s or so, or early 1980s, and the requirements of being a five diamond [hotel] changed. So they lost the five diamond and went to four diamond [rating], and the company made a decision that if you couldn't have five diamonds, we weren't going to play in your ballfield. So we no longer "played," so we're not listed at all in the diamonds. [When] I came there they had four [stars], and it wasn't shortly after I came there they got the five stars, then when I left they lost their first star. But of course I didn't have anything to do with it. Then the next year they lost another star, or the next year or two. I don't know where they stand right now.

- H: So it was just a matter of space, it wasn't any kind of service problem or anything, it was just the standards had changed over the years.
- M: You took pride, I took pride and most people took pride, of having a five diamond, five star hotel, which is very, very rare that you had the contributions to make that.
- H: Yes, because you contributed to that in your work.
- M: Everybody contributed. If everybody didn't contribute, it didn't happen.
- H: Do you think that this area would have grown in a different way if Sea Island hadn't been there? Do you think Sea Island played a big hand in the way this whole area developed?
- M: Oh, absolutely, I think there's no question about that. They started the first zoning, as I understand it. The county had one of the first zoning ordinances in the United States. I'm not sure about that, but they had one of the first. The company had their own electrical power system and they started a phone system over here. They had a bus company from Savannah [Georgia] and Jacksonville [Florida] to bring guests in here and had a bus company and all that. Of course, that was way before I got there, and then they sold the power system to Georgia Power, and the phone system to Southern Bell. But I understand the power generator was somewhere along the airport property, or close to it.
- H: Sea Island was certainly here before the development.
- M: It still influences a lot of activities.
- H: Right, because they have a lot of property. If you look at the map, the Sea Island property takes up a lot of St. Simon's Island.
- M: Absolutely, [they] have a lot of undeveloped property.
- H: Yes, that they're holding in their land bank. One of the questions I wanted to ask is that Sea Island literature says it has one of the highest employee retention rates in the industry. I was wondering, why do you think that is?
- M: I think first, people take pride in that they work for a first-class outfit. The hotel industry is not known for their high wages. Within the industry itself, Sea Island probably pays one of the highest wages of that, and that helped retain [employees], and [they have] fringe benefits. When I came in 1973 and when I left, all my health insurance was furnished by the company. I never paid a nickel for it. So as the years went by, that benefit grew higher and higher. [So it's got great] fringe benefits, and regular working hours. I always said that no matter what I thought or happened at Sea Island, that one thing they always did, they always paid me on time and they always paid me what they said they would. There wasn't any waffling about it. To me that was worth something [because of] having a family and all that.

H: You have that stability that you could count on.

M: Sure did.

H: So looking back over your years of working for Sea Island, what do you think, overall, was your biggest challenge in your work?

M: The challenge was to stay motivated to deliver five star service everyday, day in and day out.

H: That is something that I can see would be ongoing. Do you think that there's one thing that you might have done for Sea Island all your years that nobody else would have done in your position?

M: I probably brought accountability to the work order system in engineering. When I got there, they had no accountability. Work orders were called into the front office and they were taken, hung on a rack out in the shops, and the wind might have blown them off or the engineers were able to pick and choose what they wanted. So I brought it together in one central office with the chief engineer. We set priorities, and then I applied them to what priority we went and this type of thing. I think that was a major contribution to [Sea Island].

H: You reorganized a little bit.

M: I had to set up the system and develop it. Of course it was a constantly [changing thing]. Just because we set it up last year one way, then we may have to make some adjustments to it and make it fit the thing. So current application [was involved]. That was a major accomplishment, I thought.

H: When you left, they were still following what you had developed. That's something to feel good about. If your son or your daughter wanted to work for Sea Island, would you recommend it?

M: Well, they both have.

H: They both already have.

M: They both worked there, but they were on a temporary summer type job thing. But they worked there.

H: Is there anything that you'd like to add that I didn't cover in all this and you feel might be important to record.

M: I can remember back in the early 1970s, when they had the gas crisis and the price of gas went up, and there were several properties on Sea Island that we had to shut down

because a lack of gas, I'm thinking in terms of Sea Palms and in terms of the Island Club. [We had to] cease operation because people weren't coming because the price of gas at Sea Island was able to operate. Mr. Jones Sr., I understand, said that the reason Sea Island made this crisis so well is that they didn't owe anybody, they didn't have any debt. It makes me wonder now with all the development of Sea Island and they're doing it, I imagine they probably have debt now where they didn't have it back then. So it'll be interesting to see how that works out.

H: Yes, because their policy is to go slow and that way they don't go into debt, but maybe that's changing now that they're trying to revamp their image.

M: But I don't know that.

H: All right, well thank you very much Mr. May. We are done.

[End of the interview.]