

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** John William Barker, Aline Barker and Dee Dee Gaubert

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2091

**IDENTIFICATION:** New Orleans, Louisiana native [b. 1923]; Lockport, Louisiana, resident; St. Stanislaus High School alumnus; LSU Agricultural School alumnus; US army veteran [WWII, Pacific theater]; resident of Clotilda Plantation; sugarcane plantation owner/farmer; former employee of Valentine Sugar and A. E. Staley; Catholic; father of six

**INTERVIEWER:** Karrah Drummond

**SERIES:** Bayou Lafourche Oral history

**INTERVIEW DATE:** September 17, 2010

**FOCUS DATES:** 1920s-1930s [childhood]; 1940s [WWII]; 1940s-1950s [sugarcane production]; 2010

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 3937**

Interview conducted on Sept 17, 2010, Clotilda Plantation in Lockport, Louisiana, with John Barker [87], wife Aline, niece Dee Dee; Johnny grew up in Lockport, has been in business a long time, fourth generation, doesn't know if it will go into fifth generations, kids today not interested in the same kind of stuff [prefer to make money]; good sugarcane varieties; price of sugarcane now is good; discusses quotas, that many farmers have switch from cane and into soybean and "we pick up slack"; it was getting hard to produce sugarcane; equipment costs a few hundred thousand dollars; Johnny's childhood was good, "the best thing I've ever done"; has been out here [at Clotilda Plantation] all his life; kids played in back; integrated a long time before anyone [else]; [black and white kids] played ball together; [black woman] helped raise him from the age of two; "never had trouble with that" [race relations]; his family respected them [the African Americans on plantation]; African Americans never went to school; it was sad that they had no education; Johnny's sister taught African Americans in afternoons sometimes, but they were doing pretty good [without education]; he knew white people that weren't any better, didn't want to study; Johnny didn't like to study, but had to study anyway; didn't do as well as others [Aline points out he was a LSU graduate in Ag Engineering]; Johnny went to St. Stanislaus [?] High School [Bay St. Louis, Mississippi], then to LSU for one year, then to Army; came out and finished LSU; went to work for family; went to Valentine Sugars; when they closed went to Bollinger [Shipyards], then to A. E. Staley [corn processing] of Decatur, Illinois, worked for year

then they shut down; "I shut them all down" [laughs]; Bayou Lafourche has changed; more people have automobiles, in those days roads were gravel or dirt; if it rained he had hard time going to school; windshields broke all the time; Johnny says that before sugarcane became the thing, family grew cotton; gin mill in [? down from Valentine]; had old truck they used for school; when school was out they'd use it for cotton; everyone was glad to go for sugarcane because cotton was hard to do [so much rain]; once cotton gets wet [it's lost], and boll weevil was a challenge; used bayou for sugarcane hauling; one time had mill; go by water or barge; small rail system on farm; interviewer asks about church; Johnny attended Holy Savior in Lockport, Louisiana for a long time but now goes to different parish; [Dee Dee reminds that Cardinal [John Patrick?] Cody was responsible for reorganization]; archbishop when he came, demoted to cardinal, used to Holy Savior and St. Mary for the whole area; Cardinal Cody created Holy St Hilary and other parishes; home means everything; outside of service Johnny hasn't been anywhere outside area; most people don't know who I am; don't like to drive [Dee Dee comments Johnny is not a traveler]; when he was at LSU another guy would drive; he has seen too many accidents; oak tree in front of house, on corner, killed two people [unclear if it was limbs falling or a collision]; Dee Dee asks Johnny where he was in service; Johnny: started in [Camp] Claiborne [near Alexandria, Louisiana], then went overseas to Guadalcanal [small island in South Pacific] and Quezon [? City, Philippines]; didn't have enough points so he went to Japan [after the bomb dropped], stayed for about a year; interviewer asks about impact of service; Johnny says that didn't change his [outlook]; getting married had more impact; has been married sixty years; Aline adds they got married in 1949, after she had just graduated from LSU; they have six children, five boys and girl; lived Clotilda, never anywhere else; interviewer asks Aline how long they've been in this house; she answers fifty years in this house, started off in a smaller house; with fourth child we swapped with the overseer, moving into his house next door; he retired, and "we practically had five kids in one room"; interviewer asks how community has grown and changed; Johnny responds "To tell you the truth, I don't know"; the oil business came in and took labor from sugarcane; boat-building business took more; [sugarcane] couldn't afford to match wages, "that's the sad part;" wanted to give them a decent wage but still don't; Aline comments that most families had one car; now every person who drives has an automobile; before was just one car even if they had six people in family; Johnny notes that before they had any autos at all doctors would come and stay at the house until you delivered [birth]; if there was a medical situation you'd get doctor and bring him back in car or tractor [if it was raining]; Aline comments that people used to deliver babies in homes, but she had her babies in a hospital in New Orleans; Johnny is the oldest [sixty years old]; Johnny comments that his son probably knows more about this place [Clotilda Plantation] than him; after school he'd run over to grandmother's house and stay there until we got back [from work?]; he found her after she'd had stroke; he was close to her, she told him everything she knew about this place; daddy had a boat, in summer, during harvesting and working; would use boat from Valentine; make a barge, put a floater in it so kids could swim; half of Lockport would come swim; Dee Dee says the lady chaperones could not swim or rescue someone drowning, but they'd make sure there was no impropriety between boys and girls; Aline remembers they would sink barge in bayou, put chorine in it [to chlorinate bayou]; water wasn't as muddy; Johnny doesn't think anyone got sick; mom and aunt would watch but they couldn't swim; Dee Dee asks about the boat Antoinette; Johnny doesn't remember it well; boat had two rooms: one for boys and one for girls; never went to Lockport except for Sunday to go to Mass; Aline asks Johnny about theater on Saturday night;

he went sometimes, but “not all the time”; Dee Dee asks Johnny where did he meet Aline; Johnny says she was working in sugar house; Aline explains that during war they had women working; Johnny says “she went to see how much sugar I had in my cane”; tried to treat [trick?] me; Johnny remembers they used to bring kids down there to watch them run mill; too bad kids don’t go to see mill [anymore]; Aline notes insurance purposes don’t allow tours; Johnny has six siblings; three sisters [one living]; and three boys [he’s the last one and ‘on his last legs’]; Aline says she was one of six, mother lost three boys; one sister, rest were boys; Herbert is French name; Johnny says daddy built their original home, which burned down; he doesn’t remember too much about what went on back then; father didn’t tell kids much; Dee Dee asks Johnny if he remembers living on Carrollton Avenue in New Orleans; Johnny does not; Dee Dee explains that Johnny was born in 1923, and moved away from New Orleans when he was three years old [cross talk]; Johnny says his childhood was good, “I’d do it all over exactly like I did, except I might study a little more” [laughs]; Dee Dee mentions bishop’s ring; shows picture at Clotilda; Johnny explains his daddy was close to bishops and people in New Orleans seminary; their house was across the street from the seminary; after the storm [Katrina?] somebody set it on fire, and it is not standing anymore; Dee Dee asks who Johnny was named after; Johnny named after archbishop John W. Shaw; he would come over from seminary and sit on the front porch with daddy; watch them build seminary; notes the kids always had enough to do; Johnny and Aline got married in Larose [she’s from there] at Holy Rosary Church; [they show a photo of house in New Orleans]; Johnny doesn’t remember house; Dee Dee asks Johnny why the family moved to bayou; Johnny explains that Valentine had gone under because they hadn’t sold sugar when they should have [daddy told them to sell then price went down]; no money to distribute [to field hands?]; owner [Mr. J W Gee?] met dad in New Orleans; needed someone to take his place [bought out?]; Johnny’s dad didn’t want to raise kids in New Orleans; Johnny never considered living anywhere else; wouldn’t leave for storm; army service was extent of travels; “we had our share of fights between us’ [Johnny and Aline?]; Aline says bayou had good schools; Aline learned to speak English in first grade; at home spoke only French [mom was a Barbier “as French as they come” and dad was a Herbert]; went through eleven grades; Aline went to Tulane Business College, didn’t finish [came home during war]; went to work in Valentine in lab [hiring women during war]; worked there two or three years; then Johnny was discharged and met him; [at Valentine they were making] Valite [plastic] out of bagasse; paper, too; Aline worked in paper lab for a while; decided to get married a month after Johnny finished college; they had small wedding [Johnny’s father had died year before]; settled in Lockport and had six children; Johnny notes Valentine produced first paper made of bagasse; it was hard, needed [to buy] the fiber; mill would take extra fiber [after paper] and make cattle feed; most of their contracts were with government; making white paper was the only challenge; Valentine was the first to make white paper in the country; Dee Dee explains bagasse is residue of sugar pulp after squeezing; Valentine Pulp and Paper was the only in the country to use that fiber to make paper; went through several acquisitions: later called MD Valentine, then bought by German, Mr. [Karl Heinz] Nicolaus; sold again a couple of times; closed in 2008; Johnny was working for feed place [Staley], sent to Decatur, was ice cold, with no one on the street; Johnny asked “what time is the next plane out of this place?”; didn’t want to stay up there; Dee Dee notes paper mill used residue from sugar; Staley used residue from paper mill; Johnny had elevator that went right to mill; Aline says McIlhenny’s lab was right at Valentine complex; that was where they developed paper and patented it [process involved fiber, cooking, and bleach]; Aline was working in the lab

at the time but didn't know what they were doing [she washed the dishes]; bleach it with chlorine; had little ovens; that's where they discovered process, then [subsequently] built a big mill; inventors were two men from Iowa, including McIlhenny; McIlhenny was a brilliant man, interesting; if you see Valentine today there's nothing; interviewer asks Aline if she used French; she says she only used it to talk at home; didn't teach her children French [Dee Dee: "shame on you"]; Aline doesn't use it enough to speak fluently any more but could get by; her version is not the French you learn in books, a lot of slang; Johnny explains it used to be busy around here October to January; hauling sugar cane, chemicals; he used to go out and watch trucks, watch mill; too bad kids can't see milling action [today]; Aline remembers going to mill, "that was a big treat"; watching the hoist take cane out of trucks, put it on road; in factory it was loud, hot, and sticky; Johnny says they had evaporators to boil juice; stuff to dry the cane to 3-5% moisture, nice to watch; interviewer asks about coastal erosion; Johnny never worried about it "maybe we should have"; at one time the Mississippi ran down that bayou; shut down bayou, dammed at Donaldsonville so river could be used for sugarcane [1908]; Dee Dee comments the area had spring floods before the dam; just like with Mississippi, you try to control flood problem and make another problem; flooding builds land [through silt]; bayou doesn't have that anymore [which leads to erosion]; Johnny has book on 1927 flood of Louisiana; all the way up the Mississippi; cotton came from Mississippi for Civil War; Dee Dee says it is too damp to grow cotton here; Johnny said some places grew indigo [for dye] but Clotilda never did that; Aline says Clotilda used to grow cotton but it wasn't successful, too wet; Johnny says they would pick cotton twice a year; interviewer asks about changes on plantation; Johnny says nothing has changed [not enough black people left?]; he has papers on production of sugar cane; started off as a grass; sugar industry went broke in 1920s; brought bamboo and crossed it with [sugarcane]; LSU developed a system of sugarcane pollination; built a railroad track going into building; don't have long enough summer to grow sugarcane from seed; experimental station in Houma makes different varieties of cane; original variety was P.O.J. [Proefstation Oost Java, named after point of origin], that's starting to come back; noble cane [some pest [bozeaux?] killed them]; cross with different things to get what they have now; Dee Dee asks about harvesting and the transition from knives to tractors [after WWII]; Johnny remembers women cutting cane by hand and singing hymns from church; people were religious [Baptists], went to church; put cane across row, machine would come by and pick it up, put in mule-drawn wagon, until Mr. Thomson started Thomson Machinery [in Thibodaux], which offered tractors and machinery; harvest made about 15-16 tons of cane/acre; now average 30-40 tons/acre; used to go to field and cut stalk, grind in mill to test whether it's ready; now they don't test, just cut; Aline said you used to have to wait until it was cool [weather]; but now they start harvesting before end of the September; cool weather slowed the growth down so it won't produce as much sugar; now they spray with chemical to ripen the stalks; used to start harvest at end of October or November and by Christmas it was finished; Aline is stunned by the growth; it's a grass and grows like a grass; have to plant it like a grass; use cane for seed, make cuttings; it's an interesting process; interviewer asks what is one thing you'd want everyone to know about Bayou Lafourche; Johnny says right now it doesn't have too much of a future; Golden Meadow well [Deepwater Horizon oil spill?] is gonna hurt; people down the bayou; harvest seafood, shrimp, oyster; [when that's] gone, they're in trouble; Dee Dee says she has to be a little more optimistic because she's not eighty-seven; things will get better; it's going to be a long time; Aline notes the [drilling] moratorium [after Deepwater Horizon spill] is hurting [community]; Johnny says some of the oil

from that wells is not over with; shut them down; will have to go take the rigs down [physically remove to seafloor, rather than just abandon wells]; Dee Dee notes the big thing is oil, not sugar cane and right now “oil is zip”; Bayou Lafourche goes to Port Fourchon, where there’s lots of oil business; Johnny comments that at one time sugar cane was “the thing” here; it’s gone; oil people couldn’t separate oil like they do now; Aline thinks “we have big future here”; Dee Dee agrees but hopes it won’t become beachfront; Aline says news is very negative, newspapers rarely say anything good; *Times Picayune* is always reporting on a lawyer that’s been caught stealing; so much bad in the world and she knows there’s more good; Dee Dee comments that’s [bad news] what sells papers; Aline says that’s a shame; interviewer asks where do you find hope; Aline doesn’t know; Dee Dee says children and grandchildren give you hope; Aline agrees that they have to think positive; their daddy [Johnny?] is negative about everything; Johnny says hope is from religion, notes that’s how sugarcane used to be; could only hope next crop would be better; prayers every night; Dee Dee will only leave “if Bayou Lafourche leaves me”; intends to stay; Aline says her daughter-in-law says all will be washed away; Dee Dee is not worried about that happening in her lifetime; Johnny says they have good religion down there; Aline has they also have good levees; Johnny talks about neighbors evacuating during hurricane, he stay put [had generator so there was AC]; next storm they’re not going to leave; Johnny doesn’t think it will get that bad; Johnny thinks they’re hauling cane [in September]; Aline says it’s planting time; Johnny wishes they could go out to fields again and watch; too much here to leave; Aline tells that all their children are here but oldest [who lives in New Orleans].

**TAPES:** 1 (T3937)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 1 hour, 3 minutes

**# PAGES INDEX:** 7 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Obituary; Interviewer indexes; Interviewee information

**RESTRICTIONS:** None