

## T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

### ABSTRACT

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Evelyn Cheramie Kuyrkendall      **COLLECTION:** 4700.2140

**IDENTIFICATION:** Galliano, Louisiana Native [b. 1950]; Baton Rouge, Louisiana resident; Louisiana School for the Deaf graduate [1968]; florist; deaf; American Sign Language; Catholic

**INTERVIEWER:** Natalie Delgado

**SERIES:** Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project

**INTERVIEW DATE:** October 9, 2010

**FOCUS DATES:** 1950s-1960s [childhood]; 1960s-1970s [early career]; 2010

### ABSTRACT:

#### Tape 3932

Interview conducted at Jennifer and Evelyn Kuyrkendall's house in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for the Coastal Sustainability Studio at LSU; Kuyrkendall born and raised in Lafourche Parish, Galliano, Louisiana; lives in Baton Rouge now; Galliano is a small town far south; maybe had 8,000-12,000 people in the area; Kuyrkendall played with friends in neighborhood; a lot of cousins lived nearby; Kuyrkendall attended public school made friends at school; went to a hearing school from ages six until eleven; then Kuyrkendall wanted to go to somewhere they had "people like me" who were deaf; parents were concerned but listened to wishes and sent her to Louisiana School for the Deaf [LSD] in 1961; parents were both hearing; Kuyrkendall has two aunts on dad's side who were deaf but they never went to school, spoke Cajun French but couldn't read or write; Kuyrkendall spoke French growing up [could hear enough to do so]; lost hearing in one ear but with amplification was able to communicate with friends or family; didn't think she was deaf "didn't know what that meant, didn't know I was any different"; to Kuyrkendall there was no problem [she didn't feel isolated]; understood everyone, sometimes she had to say "what" but hearing people do the same; she fit in; when she arrived at LSD parents said there would be kids like her [could speak but didn't hear well]; Kuyrkendall was excited to make new friends; kids came running up to her that first day of school, signing; Kuyrkendall didn't know sign language and didn't realize she would learn it there; kids kept making the sign "I can't hear"; Kuyrkendall cried because she couldn't speak to anyone; house mother at the dorm found four girls who were oral [could speak like Kuyrkendall]; felt sense of home; eventually learned sign language: picked it up in two months; started with finger spelling and then moved onto signs; down the bayou Kuyrkendall enjoyed the public schools; they knew Kuyrkendall was deaf and tried to communicate with her; more people like Kuyrkendall in "my world" at the deaf school; sometimes [in bayou] Kuyrkendall had to keep asking speaking person, "what, what, what?"; could always communicate with a deaf person, which was different but she didn't give up friends in hearing world; enjoyed living along bayou; it's her home and

family; generations have lived in Galliano and Golden Meadow; boat trawling for shrimp; learned how to open oysters the appropriate way; always were things to do; remembers first job down the bayou [keep in mind there were not a lot of deaf people around]; small town, everyone knows everyone and they'd hire someone they know; a shrimp factory; shrimp come down line from boat, had to weigh and measure, because there's no communication [loud factory noises] she was successful; boss promoted her throughout the company; didn't really like working with shrimp, "it stunk"; then Kuyrkendall worked at a grocery store; for short time; hard because of deafness; was a challenge down there; graduated from LSD in 1968; by then started working at flower shop; father's boss's wife owned a flower shop, she knew Kuyrkendall could do the things she wanted; learned a lot about floristry; wanted to work on wedding and events [more than delivery]; church; family was Catholic and went to church; strong community; had to sit in front row to understand what priest was saying; went through communion; sometimes Kuyrkendall goes to catholic deaf church [Catholic Deaf Center ?] in Baton Rouge; [in Galliano?] very old church; kept it up very well; painting something every year; cathedral-like, statues of the saints, pews and benches to kneel on; stained glass of saints and scriptures; interesting to look at; Kuyrkendall still has Catholic faith and respects other religious affiliations; interviewer asks if religion effects daily life; Kuyrkendall still does Easter and forty days of Lent; follow customs [no seafood on Fridays, giving something up for Lent]; last year Kuyrkendall gave up Dr. Pepper, which helped with other areas of health, but now she's back to drinking soda; Kuyrkendall tells story about working at shrimp company with woman whose daughter was deaf; woman didn't believe deaf people should work [Kuyrkendall's parents allowed her to do things]; Kuyrkendall had to have conversation with woman; Kuyrkendall was cashier at grocery store, then worked at flower shop, delivered flowers at funerals, to hospitals; went to New Orleans to pick up flowers at wholesale warehouse; people she worked for were older; after Kuyrkendall she got married and moved to Baton Rouge worked at flower shop; had problem with hands [got an infection from particular flower] so decided to start working at LSD as house mother; started at elementary school dorm; now working in high school boys' dorm ; teaching boys life skills to get them prepared for the real world [how to cook, keep budget, wash clothes, eating balanced meals (vegetables, fruits)]; Kuyrkendall believes it is important for deaf people to hold jobs because they can; able to use their hands, read and write; deaf people can do whatever they want as long as they are motivated to do so; everyone needs training or education [trade school or university]; the deaf need to know that there's a future for them; not an easy road, have to work for it; interviewer asks if it is harder or easier for deaf to find work today; Kuyrkendall says living down south [in Galliano] everyone knew each other, it was family-oriented and people were more willing to hire; but not many deaf people lived there, [deaf people wanted to live in city]; today Kuyrkendall has noticed it's a little more difficult for deaf people to find jobs because everything is technology-related; computers; kids should know to study technology; beauty shop is good for a deaf person [hair, nail, cosmetology]; schools should have vocational programs where students can see, experience things before they graduate, so they can pick a field that interests them; Kuyrkendall advocates for vocational programs where deaf children have options other than technology; interviewer asks, what does home mean to you?; Kuyrkendall says it's my house, shelter, not to live on streets; home is where you are safe, your family, your upbringing; home as social space; Kuyrkendall was very social growing up, went to visit people, went for drives, someone would BBQ a pig; good, family-oriented southern lifestyle; interviewer asks about hurricanes; Kuyrkendall was at the deaf school during Hurricane Betsy [1965]; was sick and sent to infirmary at deaf school and assigned to quarantine room;

nurse said “we’ll sleep with you” which was puzzling because she was sick; wanted to be in small room with window but nurses insisted; when Kuyrkendall got up there was water on floor in infirmary; tree had fallen on roof above small room; nurse got call from Kuyrkendall’s mother, “there had been bad weather in Galliano”; hurricane destroyed house; a few weeks later she was able to go home; dad drove her; going down highway she saw telephone posts knocked down; floor was all that was left of home; family lived in a trailer; she always wanted to see a hurricane but dad said “no, you’ll never see one” she, mom and dogs would evacuate up the bayou while men stayed to ride out storm; dad’s warning: “you’re going to be dead before you see it”; Kuyrkendall finally stayed for a storm, but it wasn’t bad; noise of storm sounded like music from a neighbor’s house [through hearing aids]; Kuyrkendall had never heard it before; saw high water [three feet] and had pirogue underneath house in case of evacuation; now it’s much different, water comes through; Kuyrkendall wouldn’t want to have to live through it [especially after Katrina, 2005], but was curious to see it; father stayed with uncles in Galliano through every hurricane; the pirogue was for leisure, small canals; row to field or camp; dad had small shrimp boat so family didn’t have to buy shrimp; still had to clean it [peel heads, put shrimp in freezer]; one more thing about shrimp boats: Kuyrkendall didn’t know how to swim and worried she’d drown; wishes she’d seen how to shrimp; a deaf person could do that but she was afraid of water; friend let dad use bigger shrimp boat [could sleepover]; family went out to lighthouse; docked and swam there; [dad] forced Kuyrkendall to learn to ride in pirogue; water only came up to waist so she learned how to row boat; Kuyrkendall would pick blackberries but was afraid of snakes because she couldn’t hear; hearing girlfriends said they’d save her but Kuyrkendall was still afraid of wildlife; Kuyrkendall recalls a tomboy friend drove a tractor to haul dead cow off highway; one time a friend asked for help with orphaned baby calf; had to get milk from another cow but bull chased her [friend tried to call warning but Kuyrkendall couldn’t hear]; she didn’t want to help with farm business again; had alligators in small canals behind house; one day dad left with two dogs and came back with one [alligator swallowed other dog at watering hole]; dad was livid and “got that alligator”; interesting living down south; “country v. city”; can’t burn tree limbs [cops will fine you]; very different; interviewer asks which she likes more; Galliano is quiet, less traffic; one highway [LA 1] with new highway in back; no traffic; went down a year ago, a lot of changes; they restored some of the older homes; Kuyrkendall has wondered about moving back there; now it has a McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Starbucks; back then had to drive thirty miles to Houma to go shopping [at the mall]; in Galliano had a few mom-and-pop stores; had to go to Houma or New Orleans; but Galliano had great seafood; Kuyrkendall moved to Las Vegas because she had a friend who lived there who encouraged her to move; very different lifestyle, big city; first day of looking for a job she got one; explained she can’t answer phones; boss said “don’t worry, my brother is hard of hearing, I need someone who can fix flowers”; big shop, five ladies who answered phones; gave Kuyrkendall hourly pay a lot better than bayou; stayed for a year, got training; a lot of competition between designers; a lot of work: hotels, funerals, mostly weddings; shop had 24-hour wedding chapel across the street, a block away was the courthouse; after year Kuyrkendall came home; worked at same flower shop as before; Kuyrkendall went to friend with nursery/greenhouse and told her that she didn’t know enough about plants; led to opening florist’s shop at nursery; Louisiana requires a license [only state]; business partner’s father had lost hearing in WWII so she could trust someone with hearing loss; Kuyrkendall went to LSU to take state exam and passed first try; store opened on Mother’s Day; advertised through newspaper and radio; got word out and people started coming; worked with nursery for about year; left and opened another shop for a friend she grew up with;

weren't as successful; with a deaf friend's cousin opened third shop; rented old store, fixed it up; had no flower shop in that area so people in area would come in to buy flowers; within a year partner was pregnant; Kuyrkendall bought her out; Kuyrkendall's dad was afraid for deaf to borrow money from a bank but eventually acquiesced; business did well, did great; first year had sixty weddings, plus funerals and holiday; had business for five years until she met husband; came to Baton Rouge for deaf school homecoming [and met him there?]; husband didn't want to come down to Galliano because of hurricanes, shrimp smell, so Kuyrkendall sold flower shop, all supplies to same lady from start of partnership; Kuyrkendall made good profit wishes she'd kept flower shop down there, dreamt of opening another location; might have added wedding dresses; instead moved and worked in Baton Rouge; today: Kuyrkendall only does weddings as a [paid] hobby; have had about ten weddings in past two years; hearing and deaf brides; baby showers too; state floral license; got tutoring from a very old lady with old-fashioned style; style is different, a long time ago they didn't have the flowers they have now; was able to start test early [two hours early]; filled out written test; had to wait for design portion; brought her own small knife [a florist needs to have a knife]; had to make three designs; with time limit; talks about not being able to understand feedback from proctors; after design portion is done had to wait for two weeks; still have certificate somewhere in house; kept all the annual licenses; interviewer asks if she was put in any difficult situations; Kuyrkendall lost her hearing progressively; became harder to hear at flower shops [resorted to reading lips]; people would have to come up and tap her; she sold shop when another person didn't have patience with a deaf person; worked at Edrie's flower shop, who were country people, willing to work with me; they sold business to [edited for libel]; turned her off to it; [friend of hers] couldn't find a job; no one would hire her because she couldn't read or write; very hard to work with; Kuyrkendall helped to get her social security check; family wanted her to work but how could she get a job if she couldn't read or write?; Kuyrkendall didn't mind helping her; hard for deaf people because they weren't educated; understood and felt bad for her; very good person; she was good cleaner; heartbreaking; did get disability checks eventually; just because they were deaf didn't mean they couldn't do anything; friend married and had kids; she can pay bills, count money; deaf people know what to do, "we're human beings"; [Evelyn Kuyrkendall talking without interpreter, difficult to understand at times] Kuyrkendall has another story about her deaf friend Dotty [?]; start working, made a lot of money with shrimp boat; another friend who worked at the bank in Mississippi, got married to Louisiana guy and could not find a job in Thibodaux; another friend could not write and read well; could not hear or talk at all; tried to work for one month; laid her off because she could not communicate; "I couldn't understand what they wanted me to do" [?]; she knows what she has to do; raised her two kids fine; deaf are still having a hard time; still do whatever hearing people do; pay taxes, jury duty; today we have better interpretation; Kuyrkendall never had one before; today she needs one because can't hear [anything] anymore; "we're about the same but we can't hear and talk"; "I see no difference, okay?"

**TAPES:** 1 (T3932)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 51 minutes

**# PAGES INDEX:** 6 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Interviewer notes

**RESTRICTIONS:** None