

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Mark Gerard Shirley

COLLECTION: 4700.2403

IDENTIFICATION: Aquaculture and Coastal Resources Specialist, Marine Extension Agent, Southwest Region, LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant

INTERVIEWER: Chelsea Arseneault

SERIES: History of Louisiana Cooperative Extension Services

INTERVIEW DATE: September 25, 2014

FOCUS DATES: 1970-2014

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4339

Introduction; father Louie and mother Cappy met in New Orleans after World War II; Shirley born in 1955, grew up in New Orleans; graduate of De La Salle High School and Louisiana State University (LSU); struggle to decide on major at LSU, earned bachelor's and master's degrees there; father worked on fruit import ships, then with New Orleans Public Service; fishing near the power plant developed his appreciation for the outdoors; grandfather was a pharmacist; New Orleans in the 1970s was neighborly; getting to school via public transit; wrestling in high school and college until LSU phased out the team; became interested in wildlife curriculum through childhood experiences; reasons why he chose LSU; encouraging his sons to shop around for colleges; work experiences in high school with the Wildlife and Fisheries, working for Johnny Tarver; that job influenced his career choice; when finishing his master's degree, a chance meeting with Tarver led to a job with Wildlife and Fisheries in Grand Isle, Louisiana, from 1979 to 1984; started working with cooperative extension in 1984; memories of course work and classrooms at LSU; wildlife classes with Dr. Leslie Glasgow, he later worked for the Department of the Interior; another favorite professor, Dr. Robert Noble, a Civil War buff who kept students interested; Paul Coreil's influence led him to extension work, he suggested an open position in Vermillion Parish; Shirley and his wife moved from Grand Chenier to Abbeville, Louisiana; position was with Louisiana Cooperative Extension and Louisiana Sea Grant, he worked primarily with crawfish and alligator resources; crawfish farmers are often rice farmers; benefit of extension is agents living and working in their communities, having rapport with locals; farmers have a different mentality when seeking guidance on rice crops versus crawfish; he counsels crawfish farmers on best harvesting practices; difficulties of crawfish as an "unseen crop" dependent on many factors for success; problems with rice crops are visible; attempts to mimic the natural cycle of the Atchafalaya Basin in crawfish fields; some farmers try to cheat mother nature and harvest crawfish early; Shirley's advice to farmers to plant vegetation, flush fields, and remove weeds; mother nature sometimes interferes with crawfish harvest no matter what farmers do; his job responsibilities extended from Vermillion to fourteen surrounding

parishes; working with shrimpers on federally-mandated use of turtle excluder devices; extension agents assisted fisherman in complying with regulations of the '80s and '90s; he has noticed significant land loss in southern Vermillion Parish; Vietnamese refugees moving into the area in the late '70s and early '80s; extension agents had information translated for workers in local plants; many large shrimp boats now owned and operated by Vietnamese; Vietnamese stressed education to their children; Shirley impressed with how refugees became successful despite their desperate situation; Vietnamese youth becoming Americanized, same problems as American teens; possibilities for earning money in shrimping and rising to own a boat is a question of motivation; most large offshore boats are now Vietnamese owned, smaller ice boats owned by Anglos; appreciates support from former governors; would like regular cost-of-living raises that other agencies receive; he works directly with the people, doesn't concern himself with what goes on at higher levels of government; Marsh Maneuvers camp started in the late '80s in response to a budget shortage, first held at State Wildlife Refuge on Vermillion Bay; small group of kids got there by boat, did outdoor activities; expanding the camp in the second year to host more kids; camp going for twenty-five years now; camp location now on Grand Terre, facility and dorms there were initially run down; receiving funding each year from the Barataria Terrebonne National Estuary Program; difficulty of transporting supplies; taking groups of kids fishing; educational aspects of the camp for 4-H students who learn by doing; camp attendees have gone on to jobs with Wildlife and Fisheries; importance of educating kids and parents about the role of the coast across the whole state; state and country must invest in keeping coastal Louisiana productive for as long as possible; coastal erosion cannot be stopped, but measures being taken to make communities more resilient; kids who attend Marsh Maneuvers tell friends and family what they've learned, are ambassadors for the coastline; memorable moments from past Marsh Maneuvers; keeping kids busy at the camp, always having activities prepared; he stays enthusiastic so the experience is better for the kids; cultural demographics of Vermillion Parish; industries include agriculture, oil and gas, fish oil plant, alligator farms; working with and appreciating other cultures; Vietnamese and Anglo fishermen and farmers are getting older, younger generations going into different professions; resources will still be out there, Shirley is unsure who will take up the reigns in the fishing and farming industries; Hurricane Katrina refugees entering Vermillion Parish, and soon having to evacuate for Hurricane Rita; Rita flooded much of the parish; 40,000 cattle lost; level of devastation different than in Katrina; extension office was in charge of agricultural assistance after Rita, was a distribution center for donated hay cattle feed; extension agents offered expertise in home demolition and rebuilding; extension hands out information every hurricane season; volunteers came to Vermillion Parish to help with rebuilding efforts; Hurricane Ike three flooded same areas as Rita three years later; people learn from storms and are resilient, will be better prepared next time; end of interview.

TAPE: 1 (T4339)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 34 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 12 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Bio Data Form (1 pg); Curricula Vitae (3 pgs); Photos (14); Interview Questions (4 documents); Correspondence (1 pg)

RESTRICTIONS: None