

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Ellis Butch Chouest III

COLLECTION: 4700.2364

IDENTIFICATION: Louisiana commercial shrimper

INTERVIEWER: Name unknown, grandson of interviewee

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: 2013

FOCUS DATES: 1700s, 1940s, 1945, 1953, 1970s, 1978, 1979, 1982, 2005

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4289

Full name is Ellis Butch Chouest III; he was born in Coco Solo, Canal Zone and was brought back to Louisiana as a baby; his family moved to Cypremort Point in 1945; grandfather moved there to trap fur animals and commercial shrimp; Chouest and his father have been doing that all their lives too; Chouest says they had to quit trapping around 1978 or 1979, because the fur was worthless due to all the protestors; they couldn't make a living off of it; that's what they used to do in the winter after finishing the shrimping; now he basically just does commercial shrimp; times have changed a lot since he was a kid; Chouest used to go to quite a few places on Blue Point that aren't around anymore; they would trap a lot of fur animals, including nutria rat, muskrat, otters, and minks; 95% of Blue Point is gone from when he was a kid; Point Pizette (?) is an island called Dead Cypress Point on the map; they'd camp and catch fish; the island is completely gone now; as far as coastal erosion, he's seen thousands of acres of land wash away since he was a kid; Chouest was born in 1953; Cypremort Point was a very quiet community when he was a kid; all they had was commercial fishing and trapping; since then, a lot of sport fishermen took over and built multimillion-dollar camps; they built marinas where he and his family used to trap; the marsh is not there anymore; they probably didn't hurt, as far as coastal erosion, because their bulkheads stopped a lot of coastal erosion on Cypremort Point; Chouest says shrimping has changed a lot; he bought his boat in 1982; he's been shrimping with his dad since the early 1970s on a big boat; the regulations on turtle and finfish excluding devices have gotten stricter; competition got real heavy when the shrimp price was good in the 1970s; Chouest thinks there is probably the same amount of shrimp in the bay, but it depends on changes in the water quality; their area, they fish in brackish water, so when the river stages are high and there is a lot of snow up north, they get a lot of fresh water; the freshwater hurts the shrimping; the shrimping is probably consistent over the years, with highs and lows, but price is not good; Chouest explains about the drop in prices of shrimp and the increase in fuel prices; even if they have the same amount of shrimp, they get less money than in the past; the increases in expenses hurt, like higher prices for nets; when Chouest was younger, he used to do carpenter work and construction with his brother; they built a lot of camps and homes at Cypremort Point; as he got

older, he couldn't handle the work anymore; now he just hunts and fishes in the wintertime; Chouest says that hunting on the Point has changed a lot since he was little; they used to have a lot of ducks and geese in the area marshes; in the last 20 years, the ducks and geese don't migrate down there anymore; they used to come back from one morning duck hunt with four to five sacks of ducks; it was all food they would put on the table; nothing was wasted; his grandmothers and great-grandmother would make mattresses and pillowcases from the feathers; things change, it's unreal; people change; they used to have people down there that would care for each other; now, there are only a handful of community people that actually live there; the people who live down there and commercial fish really don't get along; in the olden days, they used to all get along; they'd go out, catch their shrimp, and call each other when they were in shrimp; nowadays, everybody's like dog eat dog; it's not the same world as when he was a kid; a lot of nice, rich people came down and they act just like him; he's not a rich person, but he lives a wealthy life with the love of his family; he lives a peaceful life and a lot of people don't understand that, coming from town; any time there is an effort to improve the area, there are restrictions, even to build on your own property; he doesn't understand all the changes with restrictions going on; Chouest went to school until the eighth grade; he stayed out of school for 14 years then went back and got a G.E.D. in 90 hours; he's not a very, very smart person, but he's not a dumb person either; he taught himself a lot of what he knows, welding, and carpentry; he's a jack-of-all-trades. Chouest has been through every hurricane they've ever had in Cypremort Point since 1953; he was four when Hurricane Audrey came through; he can barely remember it, but his dad had just built a new house and they had to stay with friends; since 1982, he and his wife have stayed on the boat during hurricanes; for Hurricane Rita, they had 12 feet of water; it put a whole lot of mud and water in the house; they had to shovel and pressure wash the mud away; that's just part of living down on the coast; Chouest says it's changed; his grandfather, Paw Paw Chouest, lived to be 98 years old and he was still trapping fur animals when he was eighty-something years old; he finished his life fishing and trapping; his family came from Germany in the 1700s; they moved to Cypremort Point in the 1940s and were originally from Golden Meadow and Bayou Lafourche and La Rose and Houma; some good old Cajun people; he married a Cajun girl, a Thibodeaux; Chouest says that the interviewer has seen changes in his own lifetime and it's happening fast; it's hard for Chouest to comprehend how fast changes go; Chouest says he's still a young man; his father is 80 and he is 60; just seeing the changes in the world; he thinks people see a lot of the changes because they didn't have worldwide television when he was a kid; now people take this under consideration and it's messing with them; he tries to stay away from the news and not what's going on in the world, because this is his world; Chouest did Christmas tree jobs to help save the coast from erosion on Cypremort Point; they built pens and cuts in the marsh on the Bay Shore and stacked Christmas trees in the pens; it helped and built the delta back up at Hammock Island; the project did work in certain areas; if they don't do something with the coastal erosion, he probably won't see it, but the interviewer will see it; he thinks he'll have to bulkhead his property, even though they're sitting over a mile from the Bay Shore; he disagrees with scientists saying the land is sinking, he doesn't see any difference in the flood elevation; now they want them to build 16-17 feet above the ground, because that's how high the hurricane will bring water; Chouest says to suck it up, clean your house up, and get about your business; you live on the coast, learn to survive on the coast; he doesn't believe in FEMA telling him to build his house above ground, because that's his own business; expresses frustration about turtle excluding devices for his shrimp nets; expresses frustration with regulations based on school and books rather than firsthand

experience, which is the best knowledge you can have; Chouest isn't sure what it will be like for the next generation; the world is changing so fast; it blows his mind; he lives a simple, good life, with duck and deer hunting in the wintertime; Chouest explains how feral hogs are a problem in the area; rabbits are now very scarce; they used to catch hundreds of nutria rats a day, but between the hurricanes, coyotes, and feral hogs, they don't have any more of those; Chouest discusses how much he likes squirrels, and that he thinks bears are a nuisance right now; the interview ends abruptly.

TAPES: 1 (T4289)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 24 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 5 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Video clip from interview

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