

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

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Denis Rodrigue

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2372

**IDENTIFICATION:** Louisiana nun, teacher, and coordinator of Come Lord Jesus at Mount Carmel Academy. Lifelong resident of Louisiana.

**INTERVIEWER:** Roy Benoit

**SERIES:** Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

**INTERVIEW DATE:** October 28, 2012

**FOCUS DATES:** 1928, 1946-1953, 1949, 1950, 1965, 1994, 2006-2011

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 4297**

Interviewee's full name is Marie Therese Rodrigue; born November 17, 1928 in Chackbay, Louisiana; Rodrigue is the ninth of twelve children, eight boys and four girls; Currently lives in the Mount Carmel Mother House next to Mount Carmel Academy; came there at age 15 to study to become a sister; made temporary vows after three years of study and then taught in Lafayette for a year before making her final profession vows in 1950; taught in Lafayette from 1946-1953 and then was transferred several times; details long history of teaching and moving to different schools; taught for longest time at E.D. White High School; in 1994 after taking care of her mother until her death on November 21<sup>st</sup>, decided she was going to take care of people in nursing homes rather than going back to teaching, so spent two years in Lafayette doing so; After that she was called back to New Orleans and took care of sisters who had retired and been placed in Our Lady of Wisdom nursing home in Algiers; then Hurricane Katrina hit and all of the sisters were dispersed; from 2006 to 2011 Rodrigue was the coordinator for Come Lord Jesus at Mount Carmel Academy; the girls there call her the Cajun Nun; Rodrigue then discusses her siblings for about six minutes; most of them are now dead; she is the fourth youngest, she and her three younger brothers are the only siblings still living; Rodrigue describes Chackbay when she was a child: people made their livelihood by farming; her father was a farmer and trapped in the winter; there was no electricity, no telephone, no running water, outdoor toilets for everyone in the area; a Canal was named after Rodrigue's father, and she and her brothers would fish there: Pap'ere Lot's Canal; when it rained the canal would flood and the water would fill Rodrigue's family's yard; they would scoop the crawfish right out of their yard and have a crawfish boil; however, when the levees were built the kids could no longer go crawfishing; Chackbay was almost a country of its own like Choctaw or Bayou Boeuf; there was a lot of intermarriage in Choctaw because people had no access to any other place; Rodrigue played outside all of the time when she was a child; her family had the biggest yard in the neighborhood so all of the neighborhood kids would go to their house to play; she was the only girl in her neighborhood around her age so she became a tom boy; had a swing her father had built in a Hackberry Tree, but they lost the

tree in Hurricane Betsy; Rodrigue loved her parents; they were strict but the children were allowed to express their opinions; only got disciplined every time it rained because she couldn't help playing in the mud; only place she played as a child was in hers and her neighbors' yards; the years are still there but the people aren't; when Rodrigue was growing up everyone in Chackbay spoke French; she goes on to explain all of the schools in Chackbay; in her school there were seven grades, one teacher, and all in one room; seventh grade was the end of your education because there were no school buses to get to schools offering older grades; luckily, when Rodrigue was promoted to seventh grade the school board began offering buses to Chackbay students; of her twelve siblings she was the only one who went straight through school up to eleventh grade and graduated; students were punished if they spoke French; tells a story of speaking broken English in school; the children learned to speak proper English in school, while they're parents spoke broken English; the children learning proper English improved the parents' English; describes the merchants on wheels of Chackbay; there used to be a lot of hunting and trapping in Chackbay when Rodrigue was a child; family lived on a lot of wild meat; not many people went to church because of lack of transportation; people in Chackbay didn't have much religious education except what their parents taught them; Rodrigue did go to church though and became the first person in her family to receive communion when she was nine; Father Arjonilla was a big factor in the development of Chackbay; Rodrigue believes he played a big role in getting Chackbay telephones, electricity, and public school service; Rodrigue's family was not ultra-religious, but they prayed in the morning and at night; her mother taught the children all of the standard prayers in French; talks about all of the religious ceremonies her family did participate in, mainly the Palm Sunday and the Corpus Christi; Rodrigue thinks the weather now is pretty much the same as back then; winters were not all that cold; open fire place was all they had, and big quilts, and she doesn't remember suffering in the cold; describes what "blessing of the fleet" is; Rodrigue thinks the disappearing coast could affect religious traditions; when you build levees, you are protected, but you're putting someone else in danger; during Hurricane Isaac New Orleans was protected by the levees, but the people in LaPlace got the worst of it because they were flooded; Rodrigue became a nun because her mother used to tell her stories of Saint Therese Lisieux; Rodrigue thought nuns were women priests and when her brother went to seminary school to become a priest she wanted to go with him to become one too; she found out she couldn't be a priest but declared that she would become a nun before her brother was ordained; made her vows in 1946 and her brother was ordained in 1949; Rodrigue's father was opposed to her becoming a nun because he thought she was too young; she always did love God, would talk to him under the Hackberry tree like he was a friend; her favorite thing about being a nun is the way that God has enabled her to influence people; she loves teaching and loves the students she's had; tells a story of her old students contacting her and wanting to take her to lunch; people have always reminded her she will never have her own children, but she always replies that she has had many spiritual children; Rodrigue is happy and there is a lot to living a communal life; sometimes things are rationed and times are hard, but God always takes care of her; discusses churches that have fallen and been built, and church membership over the years; cemeteries were taken care of by each family when Rodrigue was growing up; discusses cemeteries for a few minutes; thinks Chackbay may become an industrial area in the future, many people in Chackbay now are not originally from there; not too many people in Chackbay now know their neighbors; her advice for young residents of Chackbay is to get to know their neighbors; one of the problems with crime in New Orleans is that people don't know each other; if neighbors knew each other they would protect each other; Rodrigue loved the way she was

brought up; they all knew their neighbors and played with them every day; she also loved “veiller”, which means “to stay up late at night”; this is when all of the adults would come to her house; the women would gather on the porch, the men on the side of the road and gab; it was fun to overhear adult conversations, and the men had a band with a washboard, and one man could play the trumpet with his hands; the children could hear them singing and making music together and that enabled the children to become creative; they made up their own games; Rodrigue finishes the interview with a “Boudreaux Joke.”

**TAPES:** 1 (T4297)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 1 hour, 5 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 37 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Audio recording of interviewer's reflections

**RESTRICTIONS:** None