

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Kevin Savoie

COLLECTION: 4700.2358

IDENTIFICATION: LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant extension agent, lifelong resident of Cameron Parish, Louisiana.

INTERVIEWER: Logan Broussard

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: October 23, 2012

FOCUS DATES: 1880s, 1889, 1920s, 1960-80s, 1988, 2006

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4283

Savoie explains about the controversy surrounding the Cameron-Creole Watershed project; There is a conflict, typical of coastal Louisiana, between the many different users of the watershed: landowners, fishermen, commercial fishermen, commercial crabbers, charter fishing, shrimping, and cattle grazing all utilizing this big management unit; a meeting was held for the reason of addressing complaints by shrimpers about how the watershed system was managed; they expressed an ongoing concern, since the project's beginning in 1988, about shrimp not getting out into lake system; shrimping drives the estuary and fisheries production because the shrimp life cycle is so short; white shrimp are in the system for about six or eight weeks before they are sub-adult size and leave; Savoie explains how the process of growing aquatic plants in the marsh and their subsequent death and decomposition adds nutrients to the water; if a lot of grass goes into the water, then the shrimp and fish production is tremendous; after Hurricane Rita, the huge storm surge drove in all the little fish, shrimp, and crab into the coastal marshes across Louisiana; all vegetation was dying because the water stood over it so long; as a result, many nutrients were added to the water and the fisheries production, especially shrimp, was tremendous; explains more about Cameron-Creole watershed; in 1889, right after the Civil War, the bar channel was cut so they could have ship traffic into this system and further up; this system is part of the Chenier Plain region and if you wanted to mess that system up, you'd dredge a huge ship channel from the Gulf, which we did; during WWII dredged the Intracoastal Waterway from Florida down to Texas; made a huge canal that connected the watersheds and ecosystems of the Mermentau River, Calcasieu River, and Sabine River; then in the 1960s, we deepened and widened the Calcasieu channel from the shore all the way into Lake Charles, making it 40 feet deep and 400 feet wide; as a result, a lot of salt water was introduced into this intermediate and fresh marsh area; when they first dredged the ship channel, there was a continuous levee on both sides of the channel all the way down. There are huge oyster reefs in this area; in late 1960s, oyster production crashed, because they need lots of water flow to carry

food to them and keep them clean; Department of Wildlife and Fisheries asked the Corps of Engineers to stop placing spoil on the east side to allow little washouts; now it's a popular fishing area called the Washout; through the 1970s and 1988, whenever this project came in, you could track the erosion of this levee to the erosion of this marsh; the marsh was solid and green, but saltwater intrusion caused plants to die back in the 1970s and 1980s. This drove shrimp production; we had tremendous shrimp production in Cameron Parish and in other marshes; Savoie reads some of Ms. Nola May Ross's writings about pioneer families in this region, such as the Boudreaux homestead; his family lived in east Creole at the Savoie homestead. His grandfather traveled to and from Big Constance in the 1920s; would cross a ferry in the Marmontau River and come down the Grand Chenier Ridge; they had a trapping shack here where they would trap muskrats all winter; Mr. Boudreaux did the same thing; they'd travel by horseback with a sled; that trip would be almost impossible on horseback now, because of too much open water; it's not just the effects of the ship channel; Savoie looked at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration website on tide trends over time with over 100 years of tide data collected throughout the United States; no tide collecting station at the Cameron-Creole Watershed with much data; he looked at the average rate of relative sea level rise for the collecting stations at Sabine Pass and Eugene Island; averaging the site yielded a pretty linear trend over time showing that relative sea level rise is on the increase; the average of the two is 0.30 inches per year; carried out over a ten-year period, there is a loss of land of about three inches per decade; in the Cameron-Creole Watershed project, over the life of this project, we've lost about seven-and-a-half inches, meaning that much more water to manage over that 65,000+ acre area; this is a trend happening throughout our region, not just in Cameron-Creole Watershed, we see it everywhere; people are starting to believe it now; we have more area converted to open water and it's because of this; means loss of habitat for fisheries and wildlife production; there were a lot of shrimpers at this meeting we had; they said that after Hurricane Rita, when the levees were open on the Cameron-Creole to the lake, their income was great; they caught a lot of shrimp; in 2006, shrimp production in Louisiana was at an all-time high the year after Hurricane Katrina; driven by the detrital material from the large area of decaying marsh; in the future, if we're losing three inches a decade, we're going to have problems with roads and bridges and other infrastructure, like water sources; we've seen Holly Beach area have to abandon some of their wells and pipeline water in from the Hackberry System; this slow process has been happening for a long time; something we're going to have to deal with; for example, this school that we're standing in, we've made an adaptation, we've elevated it, made it stronger; people will have to make those changes as we go forward; a lot of scientists say it's going to speed up; that rate of relative sea level rise is probably going to increase; Savoie ends his presentation and Broussard begins the interview; full name is Kevin Andrew Savoie; born February 19, 1963 in Creole; Savoie says growing up in Cameron Parish was great for him; never enough hours in the day to do everything that he wanted to do; always a lot of work to be done with the cow-calf operation and big garden; Savoie family caught and produced a lot of their own food, butchered their cattle, caught their own fish, shrimp, crabs, had a huge garden. There was no big grocery store real close back then or even now; Savoie describes an old sketch that somebody did of the Creole area with the old Tarpon Freezo and all the gas stations that were there; Cameron Parish looked a lot different than it does now; the natural resources are still there but the infrastructure and all the people are gone; there was a true sense of community; if someone was working on a big project, everybody helped out; if you needed help, you always

had someone that was going to help you; that goes back to the old pioneer days when the first settlers came to this area; their mode of travel was through the rivers; first settlers in Grand Chenier came down the Mermentau River; folks over in Cameron came down the Calcasieu River; there were points of sale and commissaries that people went to in big towns and they did things for themselves; that carries on through today; Tarpon Freezo was a small restaurant/café where all the high school kids would hang out; it was there for a long time, long as he remembers; as a child, Savoie was always busy; we worked and played a lot; fished, crabbed, and sometimes caught crawfish; there was a lot to do; rode bikes; when Savoie was a teenager he wanted to enter a natural resources management field, which is what he ended up doing; Savoie says there is a difference in climate from then to now; it seems like there are extended seasons, summer extends longer into the fall season; last year they didn't have much winter at all; it seems like there are changes going on; Savoie grew up telling people stories about Hurricane Audrey that he had heard; his grandmother lived where he grew up and she lost her entire family except for his dad who was living elsewhere then; but he had no idea what a hurricane really was until 2005; he thought he knew just from telling those stories, but he had no idea it was like that; Savoie hesitates then describes his worst hurricane experience; Savoie says that the Louisiana coastline is retreating fast; doesn't think that trend's going to change; projects to re-nourish these beach areas, like west of Cameron toward Holly Beach, will help for a while, but sea-level rise is going to take its toll; Savoie has especially noticed the differences between the wild plants and animals as compared to the past after the storms; set back successional stages for a long time; Savoie thinks in the future Cameron Parish will continue to battle land-loss and conversion of land to open water; folks will probably keep moving to higher ground, to different ridges in the parish and nearby parishes; in the next 50 to 100 years, it'll be hard to have any infrastructure; people will have to adapt; South Cameron was a great place to grow up; everybody knew everybody and the families were close; there was a lot of prosperity here; a lot of people owned land and usually a small cattle herd; everybody had jobs; there was a lot of oil and gas activity; the fishing community in Cameron in the late 70s had the new cars, there was a lot of money made; everyone just seemed to have whatever they needed; it was a very prosperous time; in his mind, he couldn't ever see that changing, but it has; nothing's permanent.

TAPES: 1 (T4283)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 29 minutes

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OTHER MATERIALS: Video clip from interview; Interviewer essay

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