

Narrator: Marietta Smith Greene
Interviewer: Susan Testroet- Bergeron
Transcriber: Taylor Suir

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SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: My name is Susan Testroet-Bergeron and I am interviewing Mrs. Marietta Smith-Greene about her memories and experiences concerning Louisiana's coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted at Mrs. Greene's home, in the morning, at 10:00, on April 10, 2012. The interview is in Metairie, Louisiana. Do you understand that portions of the taped interview and pictures taken during the interview will be used in publications, and a variety of media?

MARIETTA SMITH GREENE: [0:34] Yes, I do.

BERGERON: Ok, good. Thank you for speaking with me today and now that we have gone over the consent forms, I'd like to get some basic interview information on tape and then we'll talk about wetlands.

GREENE: Alright

BERGERON: Ok, Could you please state your full name and spell it.

GREENE: Marietta Smith-Greene. M-A-R- I-E-T-T-A S-M-I-T-H G-R-E-E-N-E

BERGERON: Thank you. If you'd like, you can tell us your birth date and where you were born.

GREENE: [1:06] I was born in New Orleans Baptist Hospital October 18, 1935.

BERGERON: Good. And where did you grow up?

GREENE: Here in New, Orleans, Uptown.

BERGERON: Very Good, and where did you live as an adult?

GREENE: Oh, I have lived in, of course, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Houston, and Lafayette and then back in New Orleans.

BERGERON: We're interviewing you today because you have been a huge advocate for coastal restoration and when I've bumped into you before it's been kind of interesting that

you've had some interesting stories to tell me about how your family got involved. So, I'd like for to just share for us what happened and how you got involved.

GREENE: [1:152] Alright. First of all, I'd like to thank you very much for allowing me to share my legacy of the wetlands. It's an exciting one. My grandfather was Jim Webb, a graduate of Auburn University. He also played football there. So he was a big man. When my father died in 1990 he had been the manager of the land for his father-in-law for 50 years. And he died accidentally. No one knew where the property was and we didn't know where to start. So my cousin Skip from Gulf Port, Skip Haller and I got together and went through my father's files and we found out that we had property in 7 parishes, all wetlands, and it was really awesome to try and figure out how to do this. We started with the tax receipts because that's where the descriptions of the land is. It was quite a job but fun for us to work together and find out where our land was. So, our grandfather, Jim Webb was a civil engineer and he was hired by a saw mill in Boutte, Louisiana to find the cypress to bring back to the mill. And so he had to tromp through swamps and find the cypress with his good friend Eddie Sapgay, who was the Cajun who knew the land and so they went out and found the cypress and then he had to find who owned it. So he began to actually learn the townships, sections, and ranges in order to find out who owned it to get their permission to take the cypress back to the mill. Well, he had a partner, Robert Milling, and they were both big hunters and fishermen and when they'd find a piece of property that was for sale they'd buy it and low and behold, that's how they got most of our property. And the maps that we use today, the townships, sections, and ranges, on the tobins that are used today are some of the ones my grandfather did back at the turn of the century and into the 20's. So that's exciting to me that he really did start out finding out about Louisiana and where the property was

and buying it and they loved it. [4:45] Everything back then was wilderness and it was, oh the ducks, there was geese, there was muskrat, and of course alligators and the bayou was just thriving with all this. And it was beautiful and pristine. So, when my father started taking over we began to lose an awful lot of land and he worked closely with the Corps, especially Bob Gunn who was with the Corps, wonderful man and I was privileged to meet him before he passed on and he also helped us but my father also had, Tom Smith also had an intense love of this land and he and his, it was not his land, of course it was his wife's because my mother and Skip's mother, Skip Haller's mother were sisters. And I was born the first grandchild of Marietta and Jim Webb. So I have my grandmother's name which I'm proud of. And he and Robert Milling loved this land. It was full of cypress trees and oak trees dripping with moss. And I remember as a child going down to the camp that my father and his father built right at the entrance of Dupre cut, into the waterway and most, I would say the majority of our land is in Jefferson Parish and they built a camp there where the men went duck hunting and fishing and as a child I swam in that water which was clear and pristine and fresh. I remember on this property there was a high ridge overlooking the waterway. My grandmother had built a rose garden there and there was a bench where we could sit and overhead was a beautiful oak tree with hanging moss and I remember sitting there for hours watching the boats go by on the bayou. All of that has disappeared. And that's what's so sad. After my father died and we found... my cousin had hunted there, the men in the family had hunted in that area so they knew the area, at least what was around Lafitte and we knew the devastation and what had happened but I didn't know what to do when I took over and Skip didn't either and how we could possibly preserve it. So we heard about CWPPRA [Coastal Wetlands Planning Protection, and Restoration Act]. It was in its first year of existence. And as luck would have it, I was in Lafayette for a conference and ran

into Senator Breaux, and God I think, gave me the impetus to walk to up him and introduce myself to him because this was new to me and say who I was and that I owned a lot of land in Louisiana and we were losing it and I had just heard about CWPPRA and I was sorry that we hadn't gotten in touch with the money. And he said, "As long as I'm in Congress, Louisiana will have that money." And it was 50 million dollars a year that was allocated through his legislation to save Louisiana. And I told him about our problems and he said, "You go for it." He said, "Go with CWPPRA and you'll get things done." And so I talked to the man in the very beginning and I think that was my way of realizing that God wanted me to help restore the land. That was my first indication of what to do. [8:50] And we knew the problems that were facing us and it was a solution. And so we've been with CWPPRA ever since. I have been to hundreds of meetings. I have met some wonderful people with the state and the governor's office and the legislator's in Congress at that time and we've all worked together to do this. I can't count how many Colonels I've worked with because we get a new one every two years. But they also have helped. And one person in particular that I remember is Sue Hawes with the Corps and she's gone to glory. But she was a wonderful person and we've went on many trips to look at what the devastation was and what might have to be done. And so it wasn't just me and my cousin. We worked with all these people, this group of people who helped us and I have to give NRCS most of the credit for us because they were the one agency with CWPPRA that really backed our projects. They did the engineering, the planning, the organizing and were wonderful to work with all the way through and they are still helping us. So, very grateful that I have had this marvelous opportunity to help save the land, not just manage it, pay the property taxes and do all the things that you have to do in the office but to get out in the land to see what needs to be done and have CWPPRA to help us do it. I have traveled the world. My husband was a ship captain

for Tide Water and we took a lot of cruises because we loved being on the water. And so I've been all over the world. It's been my privilege to see how people all over the world live. But it's always good to get back home. I'm proud to live in the United States. And I'm also proud to be a resident of Jefferson Parish. I also have to give credit for Marnie Winter who is head of the Environmental Department in Jefferson Parish. She gets all the stakeholders together and we decide what's a good project for Jefferson Parish. She has worked selflessly and intensely on the projects that we do. So many people have helped. I could name so many but sitting in the meetings and listening to what's being done even if it doesn't affect our property and we don't get our project. It's still exciting that there's something being done for Louisiana.

BERGERON: I'm glad you feel that way.

GREENE: [11:52] It has been, I guess, the best part of my life other than teaching art and I have taught art for 40 years to adults. So I have an exciting life; saving the land and teaching people how to paint is more than wonderful.

BERGERON: That's great. I want to ask you a few questions for the people who are listening and watching who don't live in Louisiana about why restoration in Louisiana is important. Why would you explain to them that restoration in Louisiana is important for the nation? Why is it a national issue?

GREENE: If we don't start preserving our coastline and the marshland in the future I think the coast will be at New Orleans. I mean, it's slowly creeping up and [12:55] it's very important to save not only for the people who live around there and who like to hunt and fish but for the wildlife that is there. And one of the exciting things I've had to do is get tags for the alligators which is very permitted and very regulated and legalized but to work with alligators and alligator eggs and our alligator hunter has a helicopter business so he's taken me up in the helicopter to go over the land and see it from the bird's eye view and what the destruction has been and what the CWPPRA projects have done to help save the land. So I've seen it from the ground and I've seen it from the air and I've done things that I don't know how many women have gotten to do. And I'm also on the board for the Louisiana Land Owner's Association so I meet with all the major land owners in the state and learned the different problems that they've had and we have in common. That's also an exciting board to be on. I have a wonderful life.

BERGERON: For a woman in your generation, you've done a lot of things that very few women in your generation have been able to do. How does that feel?

GREENE: Awesome and privileged. I only can thank the Almighty for putting me in this position so that I could do it. I not only have a lot of people to thank but I have him to thank for putting me in this position.

BERGERON: I'd like to ask you, sort of looking into the future and kind of where we are at the crux, what's sort of advice would you like to give the people that are here and now and in the future about nature and restoration?

GREENE: [15:08] To do their part if they have a chance; to help keep it restored and not to destroy it in any way. My whole family is involved in it. My son goes fishing down there and he sees the destruction and he has given me a lot of advice too. He fishes all over Louisiana. I guess the best advice I would say is get involved. If you're not even from Louisiana you can still contribute money to coastal restoration. And come down here and see it for yourself and experience it. There's nothing like the wetlands we have. There's nowhere else in the country. It's exciting to own it, to help preserve it and to be able to talk about it.

BERGERON: Very good. Well, thank you for your time today. Is there anything else you would like to tell our viewers and our listeners?

GREENE: I think first of all, I would like to thank my grandfather for having the foresight to buy the land and to love it even though he was from Alabama. And then my father to love it and manage it for the 50 plus years that he did and he was from Mississippi. So neither one of them were born here but they came here and fell in love with it and took their time and their patience and their money to try to restore it. And now it's my legacy. It's a wonderful legacy to have. So, [17:01] it's been my privilege to work with the people who help me, and CWPPRA in particular.

BERGERON: Thank you, I appreciate your time today.

GREENE: It's good to be with you. Thank you.

Tape Ends [17:15]