

Narrator: Susan Lauderman
Interviewer: Susan Testroet-Bergeron
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SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: My name is Susan Testroet-Bergeron and I am interviewing Susan R. Lauderman about her memories and experiences concerning Louisiana's coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted at 1:00 p.m. on May the 21st, 2012. The interview is being conducted at the Historic New Orleans Collection. And Sue, I want to thank you for signing all of our consent paperwork. Do you understand that portions of this taped interview and pictures taken during this interview may be used for various publications?

SUSAN LAUDERMAN: I agree.

BERGERON: Ok, Thank you. Would you please state your full name?

LAUDERMAN: Susan Ruppel Lauderman

BERGERON: And what is your birthdate and where were you born?

LAUDERMAN: December 14, 1937 and I was born at Baptist Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana.

BERGERON: So where did you grow up?

LAUDERMAN: [0:47] Both in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes.

BERGERON: Ok, tell me a little bit about where you lived in Orleans and Jefferson so we can kind of get a perspective of what the community was like.

LAUDERMAN: Well we lived in a house that my Grandmother owned off Esplanade called Le Page Street.

BERGERON: Ok.

LAUDERMAN: [1:09] And then after World War II, we moved out of my Grandmother's house and moved to Jefferson Parish which was the first suburbs that they had. My father and mother were just delighted that they would finally have a house without the extended family, with the aunts, and you know the cousins and everyone because there was really a house shortage after World War II. So we moved close to wear Ochsner's is today.

BERGERON: So what was it like out there when you moved?

LAUDERMAN: Well, I took the school bus and so I had to walk along like three or four blocks to get to Jefferson Highway and then after school we'd get the school bus driver to drop us, because the school was on Airline Highway, St. Martin's Episcopal School, and we would get the school bus driver, who was my friends, and we would walk through what we called the Indian Trail which was all between Jefferson Highway and Airline Highway. It was just woods and kind of swampy area, you know, and there was like an elevated path way that I'm sure was

some natural pathway next to a little ravine or something. And there was a Native American who lived there who said that he was a hobo. And our parents didn't know that we were going there to talk with him. He gave us a name. He had red fingernail polish on his nails. [Laughs] He was just...He was...We shouldn't have been talking to him but there were two or three of us...like, you know, I'd have my friends over and we'd walk through there to get to where we lived.

BERGERON: So, if you were to try and recreate for people who were watching what it was like to go to St. Martin's School, what was the habitat like around there?

LAUDERMAN: [3:26] It was all the way to what was...the school was on Airline Highway and it was an Episcopal school, went to public school before that, and at our church at St. Martin's they would say they were building a new school and Reverend Colony who was instrumental in raising the money bought the land all the way from Airline Highway past Veterans with using the church, I think, as collateral and got that block of land which they then sold off and actually paid off the property, not by tuition, probably by the sale of the lands because that was all... that became the suburbs.

BERGERON: So, what did the land look like back then?

LAUDERMAN: It was really... parts of it were wetlands. They brought in loads of river sand and built the land. There was not any...there as just a few houses from Airline Highway. The front was an old plantation and I don't know what it was named and that became the headmaster's house. That was where he lived. And the school started back and it was modern

construction. It went from Jefferson Highway...I mean Airline Highway almost to Veterans with a football field, or West Metairie, I guess or West Napoleon. So, that was all wilderness.

BERGERON: If you had to tell us a little about the urbanization of New Orleans, describe what you've seen in your lifetime.

LAUDERMAN: Well, that area was really close to the wetlands or were totally undeveloped.[5:43] When you left from Carrollton Avenue and went down Airline Highway you saw a few Wigwam Motel which was shaped like Wigwams coming out there. But, [5:56] there was very little development there. Somebody had foresight; even built a school out there because everything before that, where I grew up, before that was Old New Orleans near Esplanade and on Le Page Street that cut through to Broad. That was developed and had been developed for two-hundred years now.[6:32]My father called it God's country because when we got there, there were trees, there were swamps, there were canals. It was fun as a kid; we could go exploring and nobody worried where you were. You left the house, had breakfast, left the house if it was a weekend and we'd got back in the woods. We'd go see Carl, that's what we called the Hobo that lived back there. We'd bring him food and stuff. And he cooked and he ate. He had like a tripod he hung with an iron pot and he got minnows out of the swamp and put them in this pot and that was his protein. And he ate thistle and if we'd bring him salad dressing or something like that he would put it on his thistle which had...it was things that grew, I don't know if they grew all over the swamp but they grew on the trail and it was prickly. And he cut off the prickly sides of it, like celery, it would be a big celery, and then chop it up and eat it like that. And then if we

brought him salad dressing, he would kind of dip it in salad dressing. (Laughs) Our parents really didn't know that we were talking to this strange guy but he was harmless. He was just a hobo.

BERGERON: You sound like you have very good memories spending time out in the wilderness and the wetlands surrounding New Orleans. Do you think that had an influence on what you chose to do as an adult?

LAUDERMAN: [8:20] It possibly did. I was a social worker first and actually most of my cases were on the East Bank of Jefferson Parish. It was age-dependent children and so I was involved with kids and I'm involved with students now and I love children and I love working with children regardless of their circumstances.

BERGERON: You've been very instrumental in bringing coastal restoration to the forefront for many students through your oral history projects.

LAUDERMAN: I have. Before this oral history project I did, I was interesting in cooking. I love to cook and I was concerned whether we were losing the creole cooking traditions that are passed down from one generation to the next. My family loved to cook and so I did a study with the school children first on that. I had all the recording equipment and everything and then I started thinking what would be something else that we might have students study that they actually are a part of but don't realize how significant and different it is until you study it. [9:45] I started studying about the wetlands and it dawned on me that we were in the wetlands. We crossed it, we crossed the Causeway, we crossed it if you went east or if you went west you were

finding swamps and wetlands and we had Lake Pontchartrain so we were basically surrounded by water. But it wasn't called the wetlands.

BERGERON: What was it called?

LAUDERMAN: They would say you go to the "Bayou Country". It wasn't really identified as a real resource which we all ate...so much of our food comes from the wetlands. It just wasn't mentioned as wetlands.

BERGERON: So you think there was some sort of communication challenge or?

LAUDERMAN: [10:53] I selected those two parishes, Lafourche and Terrebonne, because they were in the wetlands and I figured that we would learn...I knew that they were important, I had started studying that, and they were vanishing and that we needed an awareness project in the schools to make other people aware that they were important because you really don't bring things that you know as a child and really think that they are significant because you assume that this is the way things are. We grew up in a segregated world but never thought of it like that until you started reading articles about civil rights later and you just thought that's the way things were. Well the wetlands were not conceptualized as something different from New Orleans because you were near them, you saw them. You would say "on the outskirts of New Orleans" because that was my center, the city.

BERGERON: Louisiana's wetlands seem very important to you.

LAUDERMAN: Yes, because then [12:21] I realized that we were losing our wetlands and what would life be like if we didn't have the bounty of the wetlands. Thirty percent of the seafood we eat comes from the wetlands and coastal Louisiana. We depend on oil, we find oil in the wetlands. That's another of our big economic engines and that they were really important to preserve and they were being eaten up by our own... In the 1930s and especially in the 1950s when I grew up, nobody was concerned with the environment. There was no one saying we shouldn't fill in that swamp. And then we corralled the Mississippi River so we were no longer land building. We weren't flooding and land building, we were losing land and once I realized that was... were losing twenty-five to thirty-five square miles of coastal wetlands a year I was... Somebody put it in terms of a football field, we used to say every forty-five minutes but I think it is down to every fifteen minutes. I don't know how statistically or how correct or not. How do you measure it? You know, [14:00] as a lay person I couldn't measure how much wetlands we are losing but I am sure that there are people who can with aerial views and so forth can see that. And I just thought, "Well, we have to be aware of it and the best way to produce a generation of awareness with students is the best way to go about to make change and to stop whatever we're doing as people and that affects the wetlands to change that."

BERGERON: Yeah

LAUDERMAN: [14:37] And to begin preserving it.

BERGERON: You've been working with the CWPPRA project for a while and you know that one of our jobs is to rebuild wetlands. So, what do you think about that as a private citizen?

LAUDERMAN: [14:48] I think it's great. I mean that's the whole purpose of raising awareness is that something like CWPPRA is doing something about it. Whenever that act was passed, when was it? 2000?

BERGERON: 1990

LAUDERMAN: 1990. I didn't even realize that. I thought it was post the turn of the century. But, someone needed to be doing that. And that's how I got involved in the wetlands study.

BERGERON: So, what do we stand to lose if we don't continue these coastal restoration efforts?

LAUDERMAN: Well, [15:34] we could lose New Orleans. I mean, we can lose everything. Everything we know of as land erodes. If you think of just lineal what twenty-five square miles are we could loose from here to Slidell. If you think about it, just from coastal erosion, the way its eroding right now without some sort of remedies for rebuilding the land that we can't rebuild as long as we have the Mississippi corralled.

BERGERON: We can't go back and change it...

LAUDERMAN: Unless we go under or through it. Maybe there's some sort of solution around that.

BERGERON: Yeah. We can't go back and change what the previous generation's choices were. But, you've spent a good part of your career helping young people think about what choices they should make. What kind of advice will you offer to this generation or do you offer to this generation?

LAUDERMAN: [16:45] Well, I think the more you become aware of what's causing the erosion the more you know that plants...when plants start being destroyed they grow in fresh water, you know they're fresh water plants that we depend on for our livelihood. As that becomes salt water, we're just expanding the oceans and the gulf and the bayous become all a part of the salty water terrain, fresh water plants just don't grow in it and we don't eat saltwater plants, that I know of, we eat shrimp and seafood that comes from those and we don't...we get our water from the Mississippi.

BERGERON: So, what do you want these kids to do with the information they've gained from oral histories?

LAUDERMAN: To respect their environment. To respect that we're all connected, that one generation is connected to the next. and some of the mistakes that we made. Like when I was

growing up in the 1950s, where everything... get rid of everything old. Just keep tearing down those buildings, we want modern houses. We're not backwoods. And then I realized, what a treasure trove we had and that we shouldn't have destroyed so many of the things that we did. Whether it was things man built or whether it was through careless use of our environment. We lost...and then you add hurricanes on top of that which we don't really have control of and you really see how the land is shrinking and we need to do something. We need to be proactive or their might not be that cemetery that was the farthest away from where your relatives...farthest away from the epicenter of the city. And so many graveyards are now taken... are now underwater. But, you see the videos of just the tombstones and things and you think, wow, that happened in somebody's lifetime. That happened since 1930. You know, I was born in 1937 and I'm thinking, "In my lifetime."

BERGERON: Usually this kind of environmental thing doesn't happen in just one lifetime.

LAUDERMAN: Yeah.

BERGERON: We're going to show this to people, not just here in Louisiana, but all over the U.S. What do you want the viewers to take away from our discussion about wetlands?

LAUDERMAN: That they just respect, [19:46] respect the wetlands, preserve them, you know. Don't lose anything more that we can be a part of first rebuilding. [19:59] And number one, stop destroying what makes Louisiana, Louisiana and what makes coastal...the whole coast.

You know, we're just gradually having salt water intrusion and it needs to stop if we want to continue eating shrimp and crabs and oysters. And I mean, my house, right next to the...you know. Everybody is a few blocks from the river.

BERGERON: That's a for sure. You've been very sweet and you've answered all my questions and I want to give you a chance. Is there anything else you would like to say or tell us about?

LAUDERMAN: Well, [20:48] I hope teachers perpetuate oral history projects not only just to find out about wetlands but also to preserve the history and culture of the city of New Orleans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries now. Nobody thought about doing that before. We just lived. And I think oral histories are just great...a great way...first of all the grandparents appreciate being interviewed by their grandchildren and I'm a grandmother and I would never say no to... and my grandchildren have interviewed me formally and asked me questions. And to just hear them say, "Oh, I didn't know that. I didn't know that." And say, "Yes," and you know it and you remember it because you're going to have children one day and they are going to say, "Oh, and you didn't have cell phones, you know, you didn't have TV?" Just the things...It moves so quickly. You know, It will be in the cloud...

BERGERON: Yeah.

LAUDERMAN: ...Before the next generation.

BERGERON: Yeah, you're right.

LAUDERMAN: I'm all for change. I think it's good. I do believe in preserving the past.

BERGERON: That's good. Well Sue, I thank you very much for talking with us today.

[Tape Ends: 22:21]