

Ambrose Besson Interview

Interviewer: Earl Robichaux

Earl Robichaux: Okay, tell us your name, date of birth, and where we're at now?

Ambrose Besson: My name's Ambrose Besson. I was born April the first, 1934. And we're in Grand Isle.

R: In Grand Isle.

B: Delivered by a Mrs. Santo ban Rigaud.

R: Midwife.

B: Midwife.

R: If you would talk a bit about the early days of farming. The early days of farming.

B: Farming. When I as – when I was growing up, we had um, my grandmother's brother, which was one of the original people in Grand Isle, Santini, it was strictly a farming town. They planted cucumbers, bush beans, pole beans, and a lot of other vegetables such as eggplant and all that, but mostly tomatoes, but that was used by the local people on the island. But the cucumbers and the beans – that was sold – Mr. Boudreaux that used to pass with a truck and pick that up, and he'd we'd go to school like from eight, we'd pick cucumbers early in the morning, go to school at eight, get out at two, so you could pack those cucumbers in bushels so they could be sent to New Orleans to the French Market. Grand Isle always had the first crop at the French Market. Always had a good price for it. And that lasted for years. I mean and then – with that, like my father and all, they were fishermen and trappers. They'd fish in the summer and spring, wintertime they would trap. Sometimes they'd leave Grand Isle and go to the mouth of the river around Venice, which is Venice today we know it as. And they had a tent. They would spend the winter down there trapping muskrat, mink, and then bring it back to Grand Isle and people usually people from Houma – an old man from Houma used to come buy those furs. And there was a good – you know, and that's how we – that's how we made a living – that's how they feeds us with – there was no industry - farming or fishing. That was it.

R: Can you talk a little bit about how the island looked back then?

B: Yeah, well, back then, like where we're sitting today in this office, there was nothing but trees here. This was known as the Margot – old Ben Margot, that's how we'd call Margot subdivision, now they use the word subdivision - where we're sitting today. All this was trees. And the beach – there's maybe one or two camps –summer camps that people from New Orleans, or from the West Bank, some would come during the summer to fish on the surf. Then right, oh maybe a couple of streets in there down the back – that's where they had the old hotel with the tracks were – people used to come in by boat from New Orleans – they would get on the railroad track, and they'd bring them to the beach to fish. The old hotel was back there. They still have parts of the hotel that is still there- the bricks that had the wall of it, it's still there. Of course I don't remember the hotel. That was a little bit before my time. But I

remember my parents speaking about the hotel. Old Grand Hotel. And Like I said, farming was it. We had wooden stoves. We didn't have electricity. It was um, well, I was born in '34, right in the Great Depression so to speak, and that's how we made a living. They had a road from here to Golden Meadow. It was shell, and you know, like a washboard, the old washboard. I used to go with the old man that - first start delivering the newspaper down there. I used to go - I used to work for him delivering the newspaper. We used to have to go partway to pick up the newspaper. But like me, I don't remember getting off of Grand Isle till I was a teenager. You didn't go nowhere. You didn't know wheres to go.

R: So I understand there were a lot of cattle.

B: Cattle were free to roam free on Grand - horses - that would roam free on Grand Isle. People - different people owned them - they'd brand them so you'd know which one is which. Horses too - they were owned by different people. The Chigazola - old lady that would have milk cows, that's how we used to get milk. You know, they had powdered milk during the Depression - during the - in '35 and '36 you had powdered milk.

R: Was there any like meadow areas where just - crowd of cows would obviously eat stuff- they'd eat grass?

B: No, they ate grass all over Grand Isle. Trees, and then they - these cattle were raised so to speak in the marsh. They were used to that type of grass, which a lot of those were cross bred were Brahman cows - Brahman they could take anything - they'll eat sand. But that's how - and the cattle survived. And then uh, the horses go down and - you know, they mostly belonged to the - they'd once in a while sell the horse, but mostly they'd ride them. They used to pull the plow with the horse. Old Man Rigaud used to sell water on the, on the - with a cart and his horse. The only water you had on Grand Isle was cistern water. When it'd rain, you'd pick up water in the cistern. That's the only water you had for many years. And uh, but farming was the number one thing on Grand Isle in those days.

R: So we're talking early part of the twentieth century?

B: Yeah, we're talking in the thirty - after thirties, forties, fifties. Yeah, we're talking that because that's when I was growing up.

R: So you mentioned your dad was a fisherman.

B: My daddy was a fisherman all his life.

R: Okay. So can you tell us a little bit about that? Like what he fished, the kind of boat he used, that kind of deal?

B: My daddy was a - they used to have what they called a seining company. They'd have fish with a net. And sometimes they'd fish with a slaughter pole too. And they'd sail all that trout. They'd string the trout on the palmetto leaves. String it through the gills, and the whole pack of trout - that used to sell two dollars - they used to sell that to the Chinamen at Manila Village, or right here across the channel from the end of Grand Isle, there used to have a Mr. I.E? - they had Chinaman platform there - they

would dry fish, and that's where they would sell their fish. You would keep what you wanted to eat. In those days you didn't have any ice, so you had to salt the fish down in crock pots. A little salt, a little fish, and that's how you preserved it. So that's uh, then they would trap in the wintertime. Sometimes we'd get to see my daddy maybe twice during the whole winter months. They was always gone.

R: So if you would go over this trout thing in? They would string trout through the gills...

B: Through the gills.

R: ...and put them on a – lay them on a palmetto?

B: They, no they string the palmetto through the gill of the fish. If you look at a palmetto, not a palm leaf, you can split it, and where it does like a fan, it holds. So they would string that so many trout to, to a piece of palmetto. Instead of putting string or rope – they didn't have that. They'd string it to a palmetto – tie it, and bring so many packs to Chinamen, and that's what they would – and they would pay them for it.

R: (inaudible)

B: Because I remember going with my daddy sometimes and bringing that fish.

R: Well how would he fish for trout?

B: My daddy – they had a seine. Gill net and a seine. They would go on the beach during the winter months on the beach, and they'd circle a part of the beach, pull it in to shoreline, and it'd be full of fish because they had fish all over the place. They didn't have conservation like you have today. You catch what you needed. Of course people then just took what they needed. They didn't take more than – well we duck hunted, we marsh hand hunted, we lived off the land. So that's say - that's how we lived when I was growing up. Off the land. You'd go hunting, you'd kill four ducks – that's all they could eat the next day – the family. Don't kill five – no ice box. And your daddy would get – you'd be reprimanded when you got home if you killed five. You had to kill four. It's what they could eat. And then uh, because a lot of people today – man the good old days. There was nothing good about the good old days. Ha ha. It was too rough.

R: Well it was rough, you know.

B: It was rough.

R: But there's always good and bad things.

B: Yep – it was good, as family wise. Because family was always together – people stuck together. Neighbors would help neighbors.

R: And I think they would be a lot healthier in terms of just eating.

B: Oh yeah. Lived off the land. You didn't have no doctors in Grand Isle. You didn't get sick. I remember growing – I remember at one time I stayed forty years before seeing a doctor. And then I got – I went to

a doctor in Thibdoaux, and I had three major bypass. But you didn't know what that was in those days, you know.

R: Yeah. Now can you talk a bit about um, you know, how people braved the mosquito swarms?

B: Mosquitoes were there all the time, but you got – in other words, you were used to that. Getting back to the palmetto tree – it served a lot of purposes. You take a, a leaf off the palmetto tree. Where it comes together – you know what I'm talking about - palmetto. They would slice that in a bunch of pieces, and when they got to the stem, they would tie it. So make like when you go to a car wash, they got all those things that wash – that's how it would, that's how you'd swat the mosquitoes. Everybody had one. Swat the mosquitoes with that. Everybody had one – it was like an umbrella – everybody had one. Well you go and swat the mosquitoes.

R: So living on the island, were mosquitoes blown in from the marsh?

B: From the marsh. When you had a north wind or a northwest wind or west wind, and you were on – what we call the marsh, then you get the mosquitoes because they, they breed out in the marsh. You'd get the mosquitoes. And then of course, they had a lot of um, water holes on – all over Grand Isle where the cattle would drink – water – collect water from the rain. In fact, we used to drink in it too when we were kids – we used to – you could go in right here we'd go in the back there sometimes and shoot a blackbird or something, roast it right there, to eat. We lived off the land – strictly off the land.

R: I hear you.

B: Uh, my grandmother – I remember my grandmother used to make – that hardtack bread - every once in a while, we'd get bread from somebody that would come down here – hardtack – if you hit somebody over the head with it, you'd kill them. So you had to dip it in your coffee about twenty times to make it soft enough to eat it. That's why I don't eat crust on the bread today. Ha ha. But uh, Grand Isle, to see it then at – I lived the old and the new. To see it now and to see it then – it was like night and day. Totally different. The young people today couldn't survive off the land – they'd starve to death. They couldn't do it.

R: They wouldn't know how.

B: They wouldn't know how. I can go from my house – I live on the middle of the island. I can walk a country block back, and go catch me some oysters if I want to eat oysters. Crabs. Or I can walk a mile – a country block to the gulf, catch me some fish, anything you – you won't starve on Grand Isle – I won't. The young people, they might, because they don't know what it is to throw a cast net to catch mullets.

R: So tell me a little bit about oyster reefs.

B: Oyster reefs – the oyster reefs was all over. They used to – the old-timers used to names. Today you look over on the map and they got different names. They got all um, make names for this and that. In the old days they had French names for the, for the oyster reefs. We knew what they were talking about. Because those oyster reefs is where my daddy and them would fish. That's where the trout

would gather – on the oyster reefs. You know, they'd feed there. And that's where they – with that slaughter pole, that's where they'd fish. We knew where all the oyster reefs were. But we used to fish wild oysters. It's still there in the back of my house. When my daddy used to have oysters years – it's still there. The oysters are still there. Every once in a – now you can't fish wild oysters no more. They got so many restrictions with the state. That you have to have an oyster lease to fish.

R: You named some of the French names of the reefs?

B: The reefs – oh. They had – I'll start, the first one when you leave the end of the island. They called it Monkey reef would be in English. The (*macac*) in French. *Petit quois telle*. I don't know what name they got – they got a map right here. They got names on there.

R: That's okay.

B: Okay and they got – they got a place where they got – the state's got pelicans where they sit and all that – they call that Bird Island. (French term) they used to call that. (French term) means shave? And the island was sharp, so they named it Razor Island in French. That's – and then they got those island is gone – that we used to fish oyster reefs. Some of them – a few of them are still there, but most of them are gone. Right back of Grand Isle. They (Bay la Bere?) right there not too far from my house. The old Justice of the Peace had a camp there. That was an oyster reef. She had the oyster rights on that. They'd fish oysters off of that. Then a government reef a little further down – that's what they'd call it. They'd call that Government reef.

R: Were some of the camps built on the reefs?

B: They were built on the shoreline close to the reef, if not on it. A lot of them – the reef was, would wind up – a reef would be like a, uh, a half moon. Thing like shells would grow on there and cultivate oysters on there. Shells grow oysters. You throw the shells back, make some more oysters. The oyster camp used to be either on the edge of that, or right on the shore of that. That's where the people went there in the wintertime – when they cultivate the oysters because they're gone three or four days because in those days, you didn't have a – a system of dredging oysters like they do today. You had – they had those hand – the tongs by hand. That's how they caught oysters in those days. So it'd take you all day to catch a few. Today they got those – they ride around there like crazy with them. So they get plenty oysters today. A good friend of mine is still in the oyster business. That's how – we eat oysters a lot. Well I'm not allowed to eat them too much because I have the – I have the gout. I have arthritis, and I'm not allowed to eat too much shellfish. I eat it anyway, but I kind of limit myself on it.

R: Well while we're on the idea of oysters and oyster reefs, were there anything other than trout that ever worked the reef like redfish or...

B: Oh yeah - all kinds of fish. The fish would gather for the simple reason that on the oyster – on the shell, barnacles grow on there. A barnacle is, is a type of uh, it's a, it's not a fish but it's um, it's something that the fish eat. Let me put it that way. Some type – I use the word worm in the barnacle. They eat the barnacles off the, off of the shell so – and the same thing with the, with the shrimp. Shrimp

feeds – all the fish, shrimp, and – feeds off of an oyster reef. In fact, the drum fish will destroy an oyster reef because they eat the oyster. They'll destroy an oyster reef in a week.

R: You talking black drum?

B: Black drum. Um, black drum – they eat sheepheads. That feeds off oysters.

R: So what about redfish?

B: Redfish, well – redfish is a scavenger. He eats anything. But they didn't – they didn't – a drum fish will suck that – drill a hole through that oyster shell and eat the oyster. Other fish will not do that. They might eat the oyster if the oyster comes out, but they will not break the shell to eat the oyster.

R: Now in your life, do you have any notable memories of big fish coming out of the passes?

B: Oh yeah.

R: Like what?

B: Like swordfish that they don't have at all no more. You don't see that in Grand Isle at all, and your swordfish. You know what I'm talking about? The old sword sticking out with teeth on each end. We used to catch that in the gill nets with my daddy and them when we'd go fishing. They'd tear up the net. I've seen them by the hundreds. You don't even see one anymore. That's one type. Another type of fish that you don't see too much anymore is the garfish. We had garfish galore around here. We used to trap – go catch them when we were kids. You don't see - once in a while you'll see one or two. That's gone. Swordfish has completely disappeared.

R: And what about mackerel?

B: Mackerel – you see a few. If you're in the lakes sometimes fishing – you'll see a few little Spanish mackerel. But the big mackerels are offshore. They still catch a lot of them. The king mackerels – they, they catch that way offshore –they got. But you - but the tarpon. You could go right back of my house you could see tarpon every day. You don't see that anymore. You see them way out there, but all that is gone. And I don't know why, but it's gone.

R: They feed in the uh, west delta area.

B: Yeah, in the gulf. In the Gulf of Mexico. Yeah. They feed down there, but they don't feed around here no more. We used to catch at the end of the island – we used to go fish garfish. We'd put a – make a lasso. Not a hook – put a fish on it, the garfish – he had a snout that long with teeth. He would grab that fish like that. You had him by the teeth. Couldn't get away. With the fish that would hook. And they'd make garfish patties with that. You – that was something good to eat. You don't see that no more. I haven't seen a garfish in twenty years.

R: Yeah. We used to catch a lot in the basin.

B: Yeah!

R: Um, when was the first – do you know, the Tarpon Rodeo?

B: Oh my Lord, I don't know that. I was a little kid. I heard about the Tarpon Rodeo.

R: Twenties? Thirties?

B: Oh yeah. That was way back in the – I had the book. I should've brought it to give you the exact date on it. The first – the Tarpon Rodeo in those days, they give you a, an Albion boat if you had the biggest tarpon, or a, a present. Not trophies. Today it's trophies or plaques. It wasn't like that in those days. It was a – something you could use, you know. So it's not like that no more. And they used to have the gang from Lafitte would come with the fleet. We used to wait for that, you know. That was a big thing, that.

R: Well that brings me to uh, Jean Lafitte.

B: Jean Lafitte – I...

R: Any notable stories about Jean Lafitte?

B: Well, you hear what you'd – what you'd hear from, from the elders, you know, your grandpa and all that. A *pirate* – they'd call him a pirate, you know. Everybody spoke French in those days in Grand Isle. I didn't speak English until I was about, perhaps, three or four years old. Every – everybody spoke French, which, that's gone too. But they would speak, and then the children weren't allowed to stay around when the grownups were talking, you know, you'd better be out of there. But every once in a while, you'd catch a little story that you'd hear about Lafitte came to the camp, and he went in the tree where they used to have a little house back there they called it Lafitte's – and then I've seen the hole in the tree. Oh, I remember that distinctly. They used to put the messages supposedly in the hole. They would come pick it up and leave you know. And Nez Coupe, which is Chigazola, he was here. That was his – his lieutenant. And you'd hear – you'd hear stories about that – like the old people used to say. I – all I knew about Jean Lafitte was what I heard and read like he helped them with the war, and the Chigazola's, I don't remember Mr. Plaisene, which was my grandmother's brother – daddy. I don't remember – that's was before my time, that.

R: So during your dad's time, Mr. uh...not Picoult, but uh...

B: Besson.

R: No, uh, the guy with the hole in the tree.

B: Oh, uh, Lafitte?

R: No, the other guy.

B: Chigazola?

R: Yeah. I'm just saying, your grand – your father might've lived during that time.

B: Oh yeah. He would – he was here during that time. My daddy was, yeah.

R: So did you ever remember him talking about anything?

B: Well not, not too much about that because he wasn't allowed to stay around when grownups would talk, you know. You hear stories, you know, you never knew if it was true or not – if they were just joking, or what the case was. That was far back, you know, that uh, I remember from when I used to get around, till today, you know, that I remember that – my grandmother used to tell me some tales about it. Like you know, "if ya'll don't behave, we gonna get the pirates to come get ya'll when they come to the island" or something like that, you know. That would scare us, you know, it would scare us.

R: Well could you do this? Tell a story about Jean Lafitte in Francais.

B: Francais?

R: Mmhmm.

B: You understand French?

R: No, I'm gonna put it on the CD.

B: Oh, ha ha.

R: You know, just a short one, you know.

(Subject tells story in French)..you know, I told you that in English a while ago. And then you'd hear a little slangs about Lafitte, you know.

..I mean the pirates are coming, and uh, like a boogey man's coming. That's the things you'd hear a little bit about uh, Jean Lafitte. And my grandma used to tell me that her brother was with Lafitte all the time, you know. That he'd leave for weeks, weeks at, at time and you wouldn't see him, and he'd come back, you know, and she'd tell you in French, (speaks French). They were stealing something or doing something.

R: Now didn't you say that you're related to, I guess it was you mother, related to Jean Lafitte's...

B: Lieutenant, Chigazola, yeah, yeah. Well my grandmother was a Chigazola.

R: Yeah.

B: On my, my – Louis Chigazola was a, uh, was Lafitte's lieutenant, and they were related to my, my great-grandpa, which was a Chigazola. That was closely related. In those days, you know, they wouldn't tell you about things like that. You didn't – the kids they didn't discuss that. Secrets were kept secrets.

R: So where did Lafitte live on Grand Terre or Grand Isle?

B: Now, I, I never knew where he lived. I you know, you'd hear that he lived in Manila Village a lot of times with the Chinamen – that's where he'd hide. Sometimes at Grand Terre, he'd hide at that

plantation at one time. They would, you know, I heard about that. And then he would stay over there. He would never be too long in one place because they was always looking for him. According to the old-timers, you know. Now, these little books and all tell you a lot of Jean Lafitte.

R: Um, you mentioned Manila Village.

B: Manila Village.

R: Can you talk about how it looked or anything like that?

B: Manila Village – when I seen Manila Village the first time I've seen a storm had gone through. And it was tore up bad. What today they call – Manila Village - Bassa Bassa – I'm sure you've heard that name pronounced – it's on the way to Lafitte. Manila Village – Bassa Bassa. That's where the Chinamen – that's where they had their platforms where they dried shrimp, mostly fish. They'd dry fish, put it in barrels, and ship that to China. They'd buy fish from all the fishermen in this area. Well when - I remember one time we went there with my daddy, and it was tore up with the storm – a lot of it was tore up, and I remember seeing the old Chinaman – (I. E.?) was his name. I remember him real good, and he had – he had cousins. (Dim Jee?) They lived on the island for years right across from Bayou Rigaud right here. We used to go there all the time and play on that platform. I – I remember the platform, but it was tore up bad. And they had (Bayou Brulot?) which is not to far there. Brulot, you talk about – that's a gnat in French. A brulot means a gnat, you know? Bayou Brulot is what they named it. But they had so many gnats on the bayou, you know.

R: So Bayou Rigaud, like north of the island?

B: Bayou Rigaud is a bayou right back in the Grand Isle. All this is Bayou Rigaud.

R: Like it would go out to Manila Village?

B: It would go out to – to the lake. Grand Lake, and from the lake, you go into Manila Village. Now they got a Barataria Waterway that they dug since that. Before you had to go the old way – you had to go around the points and the bay and come back in. you'd go to Lafitte, Barataria, and you'd pass right by Bassa Bassa, Manila Village. In fact, you had to pass that to go there.

R: So before it was called Barataria Bay it was called Grand Lake?

B: No, no. Barataria Bay is still Barataria Bay. But from the bay you go into the lake like Grand Isle to Cheniere. One into the other. Barataria Bay is right there. The Big Lake – they used to call it. Big means Grand. You know, "*le grand lac*" in French. That's – that's going to Port Sulfur, to Empire, right through here.

R: Oh, okay. So between here and gong down to Venice.

B: Between here and Manila Village or Bassa Bassa. That's – that is a bayou now there. That used to be a – it's the Barataria Waterway now. It used to be a little – you'd have to go around and this and that, and you'd get in there. Now you go right – it don't take long to get to Lafitte from here by boat.

R: So Caminada Pass and Barataria Pass um, is it safe to say it flushes pretty much all of the system from Port Sulfur all the way down?

B: Right, correct. Yeah that's correct. Most of the passes go into the back. Water goes right through there. Goes all the way to Lafitte. They don't have – they had plenty land in those days. Today they don't have no more land. That's gone.

R: So in the back of Jean Lafitte was – because I heard he lived on Grand Terre.

B: Yeah.

R: During that time, they had a Barataria pass?

B: Well, they called it the Barataria – I know, like, they said – they, like Caminada, when you come across the bridge right here and you come to Grand Isle, well my grandma was a little girl, they had a seven-foot board there. You go from Grand Isle to Caminada. You'd walk across the little board. This part here – they built the fort there during the war and all that – so it was always kind of a – not as big as it is today, because I remember um, Barataria Pass wasn't that big as it is today. I mean it – it was maybe 200 feet wide. Today, it's two miles wide. Eroding – it's gone. Everything's gone.

R: Yeah. Well I'll talk about that on the next tape. But um, I was just wondering if like Jean Lafitte lived at a time when the pass was pretty, like it is today. You know...

B: Well, traveling wise, water wise, yes. But it might've not been as great, as big from one place to the other as it is today.

R: Not as strong.

B: Yeah, that's right, yeah. That it is today. Because he used to – from what we hear, he used to go to Lafitte. But from the tales we hear – you know, we heard from our grandparents and all, Lafitte stayed a lot with the Chinamen. The little blue book tells you about all that. He stayed a lot with – amongst the Chinese, and they would look for him. They'd look for him, but they never found him. But he traveled a lot.

R: Yeah. He called himself a privateer.

B: Yeah. Privateer, yeah. A Robin Hood. Ha ha.

R: Um, before we get to land loss, you know, I want to um, profile anything you might, you know, any part of history of the island. Is there anything else you can think of?

B: The only thing Grand Isle in those days – it was so much bigger than it is today. And it's – right where ya'll were at that restaurant this morning, across the street from there, that was a baseball park – we used to play baseball there. Now it's in the gulf. It's gone. I remember Grand Isle when it was a pretty big place. But now it's, not much of it left.

R: Okay let me rewind this. Okay. Um, can you tell us a bit about, like bird fallouts? Any memories of bird fallouts?

B: The bird – I was, I was always kind of interested in, in the beautiful birds that used to come to Grand Isle during the spring. We used to – when we were growing up, they had them by the tens of thousands. I'm talking about painted buntings, indigo buntings, grosbeak, all kinds of tropical birds. They still come to Grand Isle, but not as much. And we – in fact, there was a man from Baton Rouge – from LSU – came down here with – affiliated with LSU I think. His name was Ambrose Daige. D-A-I-G-E. I think he spelled his name. Well my mother used – we lived in one house, and she always had a little cabin on the side. He would rent that cabin while he was here, and he would take specimens of certain birds and mount them. He was a taxidermist. That's how I got my name. Ambrose. His works is still in the capitol building at LSU I believe. They still have his works there. And um, I was born at the time he was – the time that I – my mother named me after him. So there aren't too many Ambrose's around – you don't hear that name too often. So um, then always, we'd wait for, for the bird season. We'd wait for that. Today they got friends from all over – they'd come from Scotland, from New Zealand, they'd come to call me a lot – "Are the birds there?" The Bird Club in Houma and everything – "Hey Ambrose, are the birds there? Yep, oh yeah," they're here the next day. So we still do that today. And I was a person that always had caged birds. Always when we were kids. We'd trap them and raise them in captivity. My grandmother had a painted bunting for eleven years. Today, they catch you with a painted bunting, you serve life in prison! Might get by with killing somebody, but not a caged bird. So she kept that bird for – I could still see that bird in the cage. Now today, I raise pigeons, and birds that you legally – parakeets, and lovebirds, and I've got cockatiels, I mess with that all summer long, you know - nothing else to do. But bird season's coming – now right now the martins are here, the purple martins are here. We're starting to put up the cages – we put up three cages yesterday. They're starting to come out.

R: That's a sign of spring. But could you talk a bit about the conditions before the fallout?

B: The, Grand Isle had mulberry trees all over this island before the storm wiped them out. That's what the birds would come for – the mulberry trees. Sometimes you'd be sitting on the – we'd playing on the beach, you know, a bunch of the guys, and you'd look and you'd see black. That was birds coming and hit the mul – and they'll stay – as long as they've got water and food, they'll stay for three or four days – sometimes a week. And when they don't have food no more, they continue on to the bottom where they, they go lay their eggs and raise their families. But Grand Isle has always been known for the fallout –for the you know, the tropical birds coming through here late in the spring.

R: Well that's one of the big things they see the Barrier before land.

B: Yeah, oh yeah. that's – my son works offshore, and he'll call me and say "Oh dad, he said last night, he said they got a bunch of dead birds on the rig offshore." He said, "You know they'll be – they're down there right now," he said. I know when they're coming. If he's out there, he calls me. The next day, there they are, all kinds of them.

B: So are there any um, in your experience, any things like for instance, king birds come first, or is there any order to what you see?

B: The order, the order, the martins – they come first. They're the first ones – right now they've got scuttles, and by the end of March they in fact, they got (molding scouts?) now. They come. And then after that, from what I've seen every year, the orchard oriole - that's the first ones to come down. You always see them first as far as when we're talking about song birds. During the winter, you have the robins and all that. Well we talking about the tropical bird that comes in the spring. The orchard orioles are always the first ones to come. And then you might get up the next day – you'll see twenty five, thirty different species, they're here. They're in the yard. My yard – they stay in my yard. I got big trees in and all that – a friend of mine comes sit there on the swing and watch the birds. It's nice. I love that. I wait for that every year.

R: I'll be calling you.

B: Huh?

R: I'll be calling you.

B: Oh – I love to watch the birds. I have so many friends that – that they come down and they call me anytime, and they're here the next day. My daughter, I go to – my daughter lives in Mississippi. I go to Mississippi in the late part of the summer when they're hatching their eggs in the bottoms, and I've seen them there.

R: Well here we are in 2009, the songbirds have lost a lot of habitat in North America and South America. So what would you say about the island in terms of its global importance to the migration?

B: It's – I guess it's one of the first pieces of land that they hit when they're flying across the ocean, but it's so small, and it's built up so much that you don't get to I'll say like you don't get to visit with the birds for too long. If you get a couple of days, you're doing great. And where they used to be mulberry trees, there's houses. And uh, it's just not the same any – the marsh, they used to – the babolink which is one of the birds that migrates the furthest. They migrate up to six thousand miles. Every year. They come late. They come in the marsh – you don't see them in the trees. You see them in the salt marsh.

R: And you call them what?

B: The babolink?

R: Oh, babolink. Yeah.

B: Yes. You see them in the marsh. You don't see them in the mulberry trees and all. They feed off the marsh. Well they – you'll – last year, I think I seen five bobolinks. You used to see them by the tens of thousands. But where they used to come through – buildings now. Marinas and everything else. You know.

R: Yeah, I've seen them in the bird books, but I've never seen one. So what about things like uh, I think last year, I saw magnolia warblers, chestnut-sided warblers...

B: Oh, we got everything. We got a calendar right here with all the warblers on it. All those warblers on that calendar comes to Grand Isle. I see every one of them every year. One – at least one of them. In fact, I seen some yesterday in my yard. Three little warblers. They looked like the striped warblers. They are very early now because you don't see them till late spring. And I seen three yesterday. And another thing that comes through here a little early too is the goldfinch – American goldfinch. You see some come through here. They come in early too – they're not like the, the beautiful songbirds that come through here.

R: Yeah, if you've seen goldfinches move, it's gotta be a sign that winter's about over.

B: Oh yeah, that's it. But I've seen – I hunt a lot in Alabama. And I've seen the – in late January, I was hunting in Alabama. I've seen thousands and thousands of goldfinch.

R: Really. So again, in, in things you've seen in the fallouts in the pass, have you seen like a lot of, say, thousands of one species?

B: The biggest species that I've seen – most of the time there'd be the indigo bunting, the little blue ones? You see them by the (inaudible) plenty of them. You see, um, the (inaudible) years you've seen (inaudible) hundreds of them. (inaudible) and then there's another that I would say (inaudible) the um, grosbeak. You see them by the hundreds. Last year they were here by the thousands. They kind of come together. That's when you see the fallout. They are mostly the fallouts.

R: Yeah, they like the mulberries.

B: They, they uh, they're beautiful birds.

R: Yeah, I know.

B: I raised one for ten years.

R: Wow.

B: Ten years I had one. Ten years.

R: So that brings us to um, land loss. Um, which is, I know, a real complicated subject, but um, just in your lifetime, between, say, when you were a kid and now, how much marsh you would say has lost would you say from Golden Meadow to here?

B: Land wise? Oh, too much to talk about. Hundreds of acres because of the simple reason – I can tell you this. When I was a policeman, we used to have to go to court in Gretna. That's our parish seat – that's a long way from Grand Isle. If you drive, you gotta go through two parishes to get back to Jefferson.

R: Okay.

B: Well, over here Conoco has a plane that comes every morning, brings the mail and stuff, and goes back in the afternoon. One comes in an afternoon, makes two, three times a day. So I was in good with

those people. I used to fly to go to court. I didn't drive. Get on a plane in the morning; take me, land in the Harvey Canal. They would pick me up, I'd go testify or whatever the case may be, whatever business I had, and that afternoon, I'd fly back to Grand Isle. Well then, pontoon planes. When you take off in Bayou Rigaud right in the back, when you'd get up, man you had to kind of – you were always hoping to get to the, the Harvey Canal. That was all land. You didn't have to worry about that no more. They have four islands left. That's how I could see how much land is gone. They didn't tell me – I could see it because I was in the air at least once a week. Sometimes three or four times a month. I could see the land – we'd have to circle, kind of go out of our way a little bit to stay around the water in case you had a problem, you know, you could put it in the water. And then in fact one of the, one of the companies were – the pilot the deputy – he was a deputy sheriff. He was working for the Sheriff's department. He'd fly the sheriff everywhere, so he'd come get me and take me to court a lot of times. And that's how you'd see how much the land is gone today. And I duck hunt back there between here and Lafitte. Had duck leases back there since I was a young kid. That's all gone.

R: So between here and Lafitte, I mean not in the bays and all, say was there a, a lot of marsh to the south of Lafitte?

B: Almost – it was - from Grand Isle by the time you'd get off. Bayou Rigaud – you'd go over – Bayou Brilot, the Chinamen's place was, to Lafitte, over Lafitte, that was almost solid marsh. You had little bayous, little bays, you know, that's it! Then you had the way over there you'd have uh, Bassa Bassa. That was a bayou. then you'd have uh, Bay du Chene. Oil companies – they kind of – that's what messed it all up. They're digging canals to put oil the – that's the only water you had. Today, you don't have to worry about going down from here to Lafitte – there's water all over.

R: Can you tell me some of the islands that have you know, disappeared?

B: Well..

R: In your lifetime.

B: In those – it was all solid piece of land. They never had much names for those types of islands. But one place I seen that really washed away was around Bassa Bassa where the Chinamen platform was? The Chinaman platform was built on the land next to the water. It's all underwater now. That's all gone. Then you had um, Bay du Chene – that's what they called it – that's the only name I know it – Bay du Chene. In French. Bay du Chene. There was one tree there. A *chene* is a tree. There was a bay – Bay du Chene. That was a little body of water – a little body of water. Not that much. That's all in the middle of the bay now. That's all gone! All gone. They – there's no way that I think that they can restore land between Grand Isle and Lafitte the way it was - there's no way. No way. They don't have enough money in Washington to do that.

R: I agree. I agree.

B: Can't do that. Impossible. I don't care if they build levees from – like they want to build a levee from this way all the way to Houma, ways like the levee they're building on Grand Isle right – that's a waste of money.

R: I agree.

B: And that's a waste – the first high tide, that's gonna wash in the yard right here. Waste of money! They'll have the beach – your tourists, you can look at the beach when you pass. Because - now when Betsy hit, they had old houses and they had good sand dunes, natural sand dunes. So that took the impact of the storm. I was here for Betsy right there where the City Hall is now. We stayed right there. That took the first impact of the storm. So it kind of knocked it down. And still it destroyed Grand Isle. But today, that's nothing! Look what this last storm did. That was a breeze for us in uh, what was it name of it - Gustav? Oh, that was a breeze! In those days, we didn't worry about that.

R: I remember when they interviewed you about five years ago; I think you were talking about Betsy. Can you tell me a little – you know, you said things went by, and like, you were at the Coast Guard Station, and you saw cows, and houses...

B: We stayed here for Betsy – me and my cousin. We was going to leave, but we waited too long. Well I was a policeman, and deep down, I felt – I'm not afraid of bad weather. I was raised with bad weather. Deep down I felt that we didn't think Betsy was gonna be that bad. I felt that I should be here to take care of the people's property – that's what they pay me for. But I didn't have to. I didn't have to stay – I could've left. But we waited and waited, and we said well, let's go – go up the road..(inaudible) We started to leave, it was too late. She, they had plywood flying across the highway, so we turned around and went back to the station. They had ninety of us at the station. That stayed here. And let me tell you – that station was cracking because the plane that was in the storm was calling the chief at the station. When the first part of Betsy came, it was nothing. First part wasn't that bad. Then the eye came over. We walked outside on the porch – you've been to city hall, huh? So that porch walked outside – beautiful moon and all. But then the pilot, he said well now ya'll get ready - it's coming. And it came. I'm telling you – it came. You could hear the roar – every time you'd hear it like a freight train – something - house was busting up or something was gone breaking up and all that, you know. The Coast Guard station – man you could hear the walls cracking. So we rushed everybody to the third floor. Water was coming up. Came up to the first level, um, steps. I had a brand new police car. It wind in the church the next day. Church yard – destroyed. That Betsy – you could see horses coming down the street, pieces of houses – all that just floating right through. The next day, I couldn't even find my own neighborhood. I didn't know where I was at. Because we walked you know. We went look to see if there were still people left, we didn't know. The judge was still here (inaudible). And we'd call and call, and finally she finally comes out. And she asks us in French if we wanted some coffee. (inaudible) Ninety. Ninety – 9-0 that stayed in that station. They didn't want to leave. That's what that book is all about. Storm Riders? And that uh, Betsy was the worst storm I've seen on Grand Isle in my life. (inaudible) we didn't have no insurance. I had two houses. I wasn't married. And I (inaudible) and I had two houses (inaudible) when I was a young man that (inaudible) destroyed both of them. Now the (inaudible).

(inaudible) Betsy was 150. I know better. I was here. I know (inaudible) Storm like that would hit Grand Isle today, where we're sitting today, we'd be fishing right here. (inaudible) little bit that my grandmother used to tell me about the girl that hung by her hair, and you know, little stories like that that you'd hear, you know, and you weren't interested, so you didn't pay much attention.

R: We've got that story – I wonder if there are any others.

B: That- that they had a lot of their relatives – distant cousins that lived in Cheniere. They drowned, those that didn't drown moved to um, Leeville, and from there to the West Bank, you know, but uh, I didn't know too much about that storm other than what I read later on in life. About that storm – that was a – but we can't afford a storm today on Grand Isle. Not even a little one. Because Grand Isle is history. Gone.

R: So what is it that you would say that makes living on Grand Isle so special, you know, as opposed to the mainland?

B: Okay. You're born and raised here, it's – born on – living on Grand Isle is a completely different kind of life. I was born and raised on Grand Isle – I left Grand Isle to go to school one year, and into the service for two years. You know, I leave a lot of times to go on trips, but Grand Isle – there's no other place like it. I mean you know it just – there's no crime to speak of, rapes, um, murders, when I was a policeman for 28 years, we had one murder. My cousin – my first cousin – his common-law wife shot him and killed him. Shot him. He tried to go in – they were separated – he tried to go back in the house. Not his wife, but his wife's friend shot him and killed him. He was hugging the steps when I got there. We caught her fifteen minutes later. Two murders – we had another murder, we had a family argument, and another guy shot a guy and killed him, and that uh, that's the only two. You don't hear about...

R: Well let me ask you a sort of deep philosophical stuff here. But wouldn't you say the island is represents freedom?

B: That's it.

R: And uh, the mainland doesn't?

B: Freedom. You could do anything you want here. Whatever you want to do, you do. You wanna go fishing, do this, do that, you do it. Do it. Go do it. It's not like the city – I lived in the city too when I was working. In the summertime I lived in New Orleans, um, I've lived there – on Napoleon avenue right, you know? Well today, you can't live there, they'll shoot you. But uh, I lived there, worked there summertime – I stayed there summers and worked at the Jackson Brewery company then. But then the world wasn't like it is today – you could go anywhere almost. But it's not like two or three are getting killed every night. Grand Isle is not like that. It's – I don't know, it just – you just don't have none of that down here. You could – you go down – if you're going down the street, you fall down, two, ten people are gonna stop and help you up. See if they can help you.

R: A lot of trust there.

B: Yeah, in New Orleans, they look at you and walk on, you know. It's – it's a free life. And I don't mean to be prejudice or anything like that, but you don't have blacks. And I'm not saying only black – crime is caused by white too. But if you look at the city records, nine out of ten is blacks that don't have a job and things like – you don't have that here. When I was a policeman, you'd come down here as a strange, you'd stay four five days walking the streets, didn't have a job? "Hey, what you doing here?" "I'm looking" – "well, you better find one by tomorrow, or you better be gone," you know. That was it. They were gone. So you didn't have to worry about that, so to speak – element of, of people that come here. It's local people that -not too many left. Now strangers are – when we say strangers, it's not people that were born and raised on this island that are moving in. They've got camps and – they're moving down here; leaving the city, and they're coming here. And that's not island – there's not too many island people left. I'd say on the whole island, they might have, from the, direct families and descendants, maybe four hundred at the most. At the most. Gone. History, all that.

R: Well, four hundred. That's pretty significant.

B: Not any...

R: If I could find twenty, I'm gonna (inaudible)

B: When I say this – it's not island people born and raised on Grand Isle. It's kids of the people that were born and raised, like all the – now all the young people are leaving because there's no work. They move up the road. If I was to build a house today again, I wouldn't build a house on Grand Isle.

R: Well that leads me to this question. Given the rise of sea level and the fact that the island is sinking, um, what do you see the future of Grand Isle being?

B: I'm not gonna see it because I guess I'm gonna be gone. But my grandkids or my great-grandkids will fish redfish over what is Grand Isle now. No doubt about it. It will go back to sea. There's no doubt – they can, they can – they can continue pumping sand and all that a little bit at a time – but sooner or later it will go back to sea. No doubt in my mind about that because there's none of it left. If you do like get on a helicopter - I'll take you for a ride out there and show you. When you look at that, you get sick. There's nothing left. It's gone. History. And now they're building big marinas – they're digging into the island, which is progress, hey, it's great you know. For the type of living they do today, but deeper and deeper. And right now I'd say that the widest part of Grand Isle is where we're at right now. And that's not even maybe a quarter of a mile – maybe. (inaudible) I remember the beach from when grandma and them used to take us swimming in the afternoon, from the highway to the beach, you had to, man you – quarter of a mile you had to walk out there to get to the water.

R: Well um, that brings me to a question. Um, any memories of like, swimming on the beach? When you were young?

B: Yeah, it's – ha ha . When we – our grandmother used to take us swimming in the afternoon. After five o'clock at night in the evening. Not during when it gets too hot. The sun was too hot, you know. Even when we'd say our prayer at night, and, at the end of the prayer it was always, make it hot for grandma

so she'd take us swimming. But today, I wish – I wish I could bring her back to see what the beaches are today. I know – I patrol the beach every summer. I'm with the Harbor Police here. We patrol the beach in the summertime for bottles, you know, glass containers and stuff. So she'd see them in a bikini today, she'd die right away again. I could tell you that. My grandmother – I never seen – her picture's in there. Long dress up to here and a brooch right here. I never even see her neck! I guess not. They would've never known. Today, she would – she would die, poor Grandma, to see what they got on today.

R: So did ya'll go swim almost every day?

B: Well, at least two, three times a week, you know. If the weather would have to be just right. If it was too windy, we - we didn't go swimming. We had to go swimming by themselves, but we couldn't go swimming– we couldn't go nowhere by ourselves. We used to go to a dance on Saturday night. You had to sit on the bench while the elderly, they danced. You could watch, you know.

R: Well with the tape we have left, can you talk a bit about some of the, the clubs that existed on, you know, some of the night life on the island?

B: They, they had a lot of dance halls when I was growing up. They had quite a bit at the strip – this was the strip. And all that – in fact it was dance hall and gambling halls all over the island. But before that they had like two or three. They had Ocean Club, that bar that the elite would come from New Orleans and all – that's where they would be at the end of the island. Then they had um, I'm trying to think of any other clubs they had down there. Old man – old man Rigaud – he had a dance hall at the – they used to go dance there on Saturdays. That – but we was real young kids. Then they started building the strip. Oh, they had dance halls and casinos all along the strip. They had bands and all that, you know, that in fact, I worked for my uncle at a dance hall. We used to pick up the bottles and put them in a case the next day.

R: So like, the Ocean Club, for instance – what did it look like? What'd they do there?

B: Well that's – we never got to go there. We couldn't go there. It was more like a – like you would have a club in the city, just for the – more like people with money, let me put it that – the best way I can explain it. People that would come down here with their yacht, you know, they had – they land in Bayou Rigaud and go to the Ocean Club. That's – old man (inaudible) had something to do with that and he's – he owned most of the island. He bought a lot of property – he'd always buy a hundred and fifty feet more or less – always took more. But uh, that was the kind of club that I would hear that it was in those days. We didn't get to go there. And the CAP moved down here for the war, and the Ocean Club – it left with the storm, but the (Sea AP?) took that property and that's where they at – that's, that...

R: So Ocean Club was wiped out in

B: That's...

R: ...what storm?

B: Oh, I think it was, if I'm not mistaken, it might've been Flossie. Because the reason I say that – I don't remember when it broke up. And when Flossie hit Grand Isle, I was in Keflavick, Iceland. I was in the service. And they called me about it – a storm had hit Grand Isle. Red Cross had called to see if we wanted to come down, so I – but I did talk to my brother, and asked, anybody dead? He said no, nobody drowned, the other damage. Well there's no use for me to leave halfway across the world, to come down here, when I was coming down in another couple of months, you know. I had to extend my time in Iceland, and I didn't want to do that.

R: So they built the Ocean Club probably after...

B: Oh, they did.

R: The hurricane of 1893.

B: Oh, I would imagine so. I wouldn't remember, but I would imagine so that's when that was.

R: Because I read about there was a Barataria Club, the Oleander...

B: Yeah they had the Oleander Hotel – that was right here. That's still there. You know, you see Oleander Hotel is still there. In fact the old post office is still down the street from there. Old Man Ludwig's store, still there. That's where our post office used to be when I was a kid. That's still there – all that stuff.

R: There was um, the hurricane of 1840, 30 or something, hit Last Island. Um, you probably heard of it. And then the storm of 1893, and then I guess that the big one would be Flossie and Betsy in the 20th century, you know.

B: Betsy was the worst one I've seen in my lifetime. Betsy wiped it out.

R: Well like Katrina I would think the wind came from the North.

B: Well Katrina – Katrina, I know it went – we got the tail end of Katrina. It cut across the ocean like this. We got this little side here – this little thing here. That's what we got. If Katrina would've done this, man like New Orleans – would...

R: Well like the wraparound from the...

B: Oh, we got the little tail – I would say we got the left, left side of the storm a little bit. Look what it did to New Orleans, you know.

F: But it is a wraparound.

R: Oh yeah, that's correct.

R: And basically it hadn't got to land yet, so you would get the full brunt of what was wrapping around it.

B: We was in that little wraparound there.

R: Yeah.

B: And we were lucky. It did damage but not, you know, really not that much. I mean, like my house didn't get a scratch from Katrina. Didn't lose nothing. Downstairs I lost whatever I had, but upstairs, I didn't lose nothing. Not - I mean not even a cracked window.

R: Well before we close, um, the National Academy of Sciences says Grand Isle is affected by a hurricane or a tropical system every 2.5 years. So I want to ask you – could you talk a little bit about the resilience of the people constantly coming back and rebuilding?

B: They do it every year - I don't know why, but after Betsy we stayed 42 years without having a storm. So that 2.2 years that – I know they don't get that much – whatever. After Betsy, that's when everybody really built. I don't know why, but people still come to the water. Still want to build here. And at my age, which is the biggest decision I ever have to make in my life, and right now, I'm seriously considering leaving Grand Isle - considering getting me a place somewhere else. Let me put it that way. Not necessarily leaving, but I would like to buy me a place like where my daughter lives in Mississippi, and have a place to go like that's what we did after Katrina. After it hit, we might've stayed there three months. I came back, but my wife and them stayed up there. But you almost have to have another place to go. We used to live with my sister – but she passed away two months ago. And they're gonna have – she has one daughter who's gonna sell the house, that's in Houma. I bet every storm in Houma, but I don't stay in Grand Isle and go to Houma. Not too far, but one good storm, Houma, Thibodaux, Grand Isle, Cutoff, Galliano, Baton Rouge, all the way through. New Orleans - ain't hardly nothing compared to that. New Orleans is going again the next time.

R: I'm gonna go ahead and close this tape out, but thank you so much.