

Wilburn Bradberry Interview

Interviewer: Earl Robichaux

Earl Robichaux: If you would state your name, date of birth, and where we are now?

Wilburn Bradberry: Uh, Wilburn Bradbury, born March 21, 1952, and um, April 4, 2009 today.

R: and you're originally from...

B: Grand isle.

R: Mhmm. Okay. If we would, um, think about things that your grandfather or your grandmother used to tell you about how the island looked at that time.

B: Um, they used to tell us how um, in, in their days, people would go down there to um, farm and fish, and the island was pretty big. And there was beautiful farming. They could grow just about anything. In fact, a lot of the people that farmed there brought most of their produce to um, to the French Quarter in New Orleans. And um, fishing was great. Fishermen would shrimp and fish and it was galore. It was plentiful back in those days. And um, the island had large hotels in the back where they would um, people would come in and visit and spend time on the island. And that's what they would tell us about it.

R: So we're talking after the hurricane of 1893.

B: Right.

R: Okay. Do you remember the names of some of the hotels?

R: Um, they had the Oleander Hotel, and the biggest one that they had was on the bay side which we um, I don't recollect the name, but Grandpa and Grandma Bradberry had also uh, Grandma and Grandpa Santini and Mom and Dad used to tell us at that hotel was huge, and people just loved to go down there and be on the island. In fact, I don't know how true it is, but Mama used to tell us they used to have to take a trolley car from the hotel over the sand dunes just to touch the water. That's how big the island was. You know, and um, they had a – Shreveport Sulfur had a platform out there about a mile out. And um, at one time Mama said they went almost as far as that even to touch water. The island was huge.

R: In terms of width.

B: In terms of width.

R: Yeah. So at one time, there was what? All oak before you get to the beach?

B: It was all sand dunes. You know, rich um, I mean, rich farmland. Grass, and weeds, and everything else. And that's some stories they used to tell us. It was very rich. I mean you could just about grow everything. We had a – Mama had a, had a garden in the front yard, and we would live off of that.

Daddy would fish – daddy was a fisherman and he would bring seafood home – that was what we lived on – vegetables and seafood all my life. Haha

R: Yeah, that was the diet. Now did he, do you remember a little bit about how he fished?

B: Daddy uh, daddy did a lot of walking to the bay side, and uh, he threw a cast net. And uh, that man could stand in a pirogue and throw a ten-foot cast net.

R: Mmhmm

B: And um, he'd catch shrimp, he'd catch um, mullet, um, channel croakers and all that, and then he was an oysterman, and he would fish oysters along the bank. And shuck oysters for the family, and that was sort of a little extra money for him to uh, to help the family out. He had a big family to grow.

R: Now, I'm gonna diverge a little bit – could you tell us a little bit about, um, you said you mentioned the Santinis. The Bradberry's and the Santinis.

B: Mmhnmm

R: Could you talk a little bit about how they're linked?

B: Um, well, they were families on the island that you know, I didn't know too much before Grandma and Grandpa, but they were just families on the island that grew up on the island together, and you know, such a small community. You know, sons and daughters linked up together, and form the rest of the family, but uh, the Santinis were um, originally, um, some of them came in from um, Leeville and Golden Meadow, and Galliano, and uh, come back down this way and the Bradberry's – I didn't get too much information over the - over my lifetime on the Bradbury's other than Grandma and Grandpa. Um, which was a big family because I think Daddy and them had um, nine or ten of them, if I'm not mistaken. In our family, it was fourteen of us.

R: They lived on what, the bay side?

B: We lived toward the bay side, yeah. Right in the middle of the island towards the bay side where it was easy access for the shrimpers and the fishermen to do their bayside fishing.

R: So around Cemetery Lane?

B: Yeah. Cemetary Lane, or Santini Lane. We used to call this um, Chicazola lane, all the way down toward the back and then um, the Ludwig Lane, which those people owned the Oleander Hotel, which was a beautiful – in fact, when I was going to school, it was still functioning in my early years of school.

R: Well you mentioned Luidwig Lane. I call it Ludwig.

B: Yeah, Ludwig.

R: Um, the mayor's office is on that street, the Catholic Church.

B: Correct.

R: It seems like everything that's official is right there.

B: Yeah also they had um, Joe Augustine had a general store there when we were growing up, and it was, it was a little general store that had everything in there that you wanted. And um, we used to uh, go down there, pass in front of the uh, Oleander Hotel, walked out past Mr. Josephine's um, store, and they also had a uh, back when I was growing up, they had a uh, a fishing ward called Richard's Landing. Where people would launch their boats to go regular commercial fishing or just pleasure fishing. And um, and we used to go there and um, and fish off the wharfs – and the wharfs would extend out into the bay, and um, and swim. You know, it was beautiful, and then all the other areas on the island were uh, Bayou Rigaud, where most of the fishing, shrimp docks were – for people to unload their shrimp and everything.

R: We're talking about on the east side, right?

B: On the, yeah, on the east side. Um, and that was a very big commercial port. You know, as far as just shrimpers were concerned because that's where they...

R: So would they go from there up to places like Manila Village?

B: Yeah, also they had a place right in the back of bayou Rigaud, between Grand Isle and Lafitte, they had a sort of small village called Chinatown. And Daddy used to tell us stories about the fishermen with the um, you know, live out there and fish year round.

R: So Chinatown was like a little island north of Manila Village?

B: It was a little village, um, between Lafitte and Grand Isle. Yeah, right into the bay side going up towards Lafitte...

R: So Manila Village and Chinatown were separate.

B: Um, I would say so, yeah. I didn't know...

R: So Bayou Rigaud, if I understand this, now, is Barataria Pass?

B: Yeah, mmhmm.

R: I see, okay.

B: Yeah. Yeah, where Fort Livingston, Jean Lafitte's um, fort. Used to work out of there – I mean he used to be out of there – that was a big history thing. In fact, I worked at the marine lab at um, Grand Terre. And uh, there was a lot of history there. Beautiful history.

R: A lot of cannonballs, huh.

B: Yeah. They had a lot of cannonballs – people used to go over there and camp and then just spend the weekends over there.

R: I'm not a – what did Grand Terre look like when you were growing up?

B: Grand Terre was um, well they had the fort in the front with the Barataria Pass in the front. And then it was huge. I mean it was all land. Beautiful Land. Large land.

R: Yeah I mean I've seen – I've seen pictures of it like a hundred years ago; it was twice the size of Grand Isle.

B: Oh, definitely.

R: Yeah.

B: Definitely. And then uh, in fact, Bayou Rigaud shrank quite a bit – they had a lot of land in the back of Bayou Rigaud, going toward Chinatown. It was uh, the marsh was plentiful. You know, a lot of land, and then over the years with the hurricanes coming through, and they just washed it out.

R: Did they have and marsh south of Grand Terre?

B: Um, that kind of washed out a little bit. I mean a very little – it used to be big. That was – all the coast was large when I was growing up. It was very, very large.

R: That would've been like, what the twenties, thirties...

B: Um, I was growing up in the fifties.

R: fifties.

B: Yeah, yeah, fifties and the sixties. And I moved away in the seventies, and uh, Grand Isle was large then – I, we used to go on the island and uh, we'd swim on the beach all day. And in fact, when I was growing up, LA-1 right now on the beach side, it's not much beach, um, land. They used to have motels in front of that, and you had to go through the motel areas – lanes and all that – then to hit the beach. We had lost that much land in the last twenty, thirty years.

R: So LA-1 was a lot wider?

B: LA-1 was here – LA-1 – the island was a lot wider. LA-1 was in the middle. And they just started eating from both ends.

R: Mmhmm.

B: You know, all areas. And um, I mean, we used to go – we had baseball parks down there, large baseball parks, we uh, we had large areas – wooded areas where we – when we were young, we would um, play games and all that, camp out, and all that, and um, boy scouts were big then, and cub scouts

were big then. Troops, areas would go down there and camp for the weekend and stuff like that on the beach, and even in the – in the wooded areas. It was beautiful. I mean...

R: People talk about it being like paradise.

B: Yeah. I mean I could walk Cemetery Lane, um, we would walk down there and, and um, and visit the cemetery and all that. Well it was so beautiful. I mean you had hibiscus. You had oleanders. Oleanders, you had the white ones, you had the pink ones. They had the yellow ones. I mean hibiscus were plentiful. Um, what we call china ball trees, which, hardly any of them anymore, um, full of flowers. Um, I mean, hunting was good. Fishing was great. Birds – birds of all kinds. I mean, it was just beautiful.

R: Well mentioning of birds – in the Spring, any notable fallouts that you can remember?

B: Um, spring was uh, was a lot of bluebirds and redbirds, and towards the Fall, a lot of what we call cedar wax wings and um, and robins. And that was – that was good for use because they were plentiful, and they were good to eat. And we – we would um, we would you know, that was part of our hunting. Because that was a good uh, a good dinner.

R: The cedar wax ones are pretty.

B: Oh beautiful. I mean -

R: Real smooth looking.

B: Yeah, the yellow wings, that's why we called them cedar wax because they had the yellow wings – yellow spots on the wings, and then the robins were beautiful, and then if you could catch the bluebirds and the redbirds, the cardinals? Coming out of the trees especially in the uh, in the oleander trees, and the um, and the flowers...

R: So a lot of oleanders, mulberries ?

B: Yeah. A lot of mulberries. Mulberries in fact um, the berries off the mulberry trees – we used to eat. Blackberries were plentiful, um, we used to call these um, I'm trying to think of the fruit they used to grow there that was very, very good – pomegranates!

R: Really?

B: Pomegranates – we used to go in the yards and grab them and take them. Japanese plums – which we have a lot of trees over here, the Japanese plums – those were plentiful.

R: That's a nice tree.

B: Um...

R: And of course, a lot of – see I -bird, and going down the middle of the island, the remnants of what's left – just a few oak trees, and it goes into an area that's covered with like, palmetto and bamboo and stuff. Sort of a glimpse of what it probably looked like, you know.

B: Yeah.

R: So a lot of palmetto I would imagine.

B: Yeah. In fact, right now I think the prettiest place in the area would be Cemetery Lane where during the springtime, all the, all the greenage and other things, if you look at that, that would probably be back when we were growing up, that's the way the whole island was. I mean...

R: Like if you're facing the bay and Cemetery Lane's on the right, there's a big group of trees on the – over beyond the cemetery. That's what you're talking about?

B: That, and the – and it was like that all the way down. All the way down the roads. In fact, I sat in this lane, the trees would come over, and it was like a tunnel as you was going down the lane. It was beautiful. You'd see some of these plantation homes with the oak trees; well that's how Grand Isle was. And the uh, the oleanders, I mean they were – we used to cut them and use them as, as sticks – we'd cut the long sticks, and use them as horses to play with. I mean that was our games when we were growing up. I mean, cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians. We'd make horses out of oleander sticks, run up and down the road. I mean it was just beautiful – it was just – I enjoyed it, but um, it uh, it was a hard life for the people on the island because uh, it was – it was olden days just about.

R: You had to survive off of what nature brought you.

B: Yeah, you had to – when I was growing up, cisterns of water, we had um, the gas tanks, um, the they would come – the truck would come in and load up the tanks, and that's what – Mama and them would never cook um, other than that, they had chimneys and open fires.

R: Mmhm. Yeah. Now, somebody said that back when the dunes were pretty high, there was a lot of driftwood, and they would use that for firewood.

B: Oh yeah. Definitely. Yeah. Driftwood was good. In fact, when we were growing up, we used to go pick up the driftwood and they would make crafts out of them. You see, some of that driftwood in stores, people would make um, crafts and sell them. And uh, and some of that driftwood would come out of the river, the mouth of the river, and just drift down the island. It was just beautiful white and red mahogany. And some of them carpenters would take that and make furniture with it.

R: Hmm. Where do you think the mahogany was coming from?

B: Well, the coming off the ships that would come off the uh, off the river out of New Orleans, and they would drop it overboard, and it would just drift down the Mississippi, and it would into the islands.

R: It's probably coming from South America if it fell off the ship.

B: Right. Off the ship. But things like that – people would take it and use that, but the driftwood was beautiful, you know. You would see different sizes, different um, shapes, I mean, people got creative with that.

R: It's kind of funny though. It seemed to be so abundant back at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, but you don't find that much anymore.

B: No, I think what happened there is over the years with the oil companies coming in and making inlets and outlets and drilling wells and all that, it took away a lot of the um, a lot of the history of what was going on in the past. Progress was coming in, is what it was.

R: Mmhmm.

B: And what I think that's why a lot of our wetlands are doing what they're doing.

R: We'll get to that on the next tape.

B: Yeah.

R: But um, do you have any stories that your grandmother and grandpa told about hurricanes? Or mom and dad?

B: Well Mom and Dad used to tell us about hurricanes when they had to go to what is now the town hall, Coast Guard Station, and um, everybody in the area would go there, or the Catholic church for refuge. Other than that, they would wait out in their houses. But water would get pretty high, and get pretty nasty. In fact, um, I can recollect that one time that I was staying in the Coast Guard Station, I was about seven or eight years old. Um, when was Audrey? Fifty...

R: '57.

B: '57 or '58. I think it was Audrey. We were in the Coast Guard Station. That water rose, and you could see it going underneath the Coast Guard Station. And after that, you know, with the brothers and sisters, learning how to drive and everything, we started leaving, and the fam- Daddy would stay. Daddy would stay at the house, or he'd go to the Coast Guard Station, or he'd go to the Catholic Church, but the last one Daddy stayed for was for Betsy. And he told us it was unbelievable. I mean, they clocked the winds over 200 miles an hour, um, water eight foot coming over the island, Daddy – Daddy was in the Catholic church – he said that pressure was so high that it was coming through the seams of the church. He said another two or three minutes, the church would've collapsed. That's how bad the pressure was. It was like um, steam – steam or, take a air gun with water in the front of it, and just blow it, and it's coming out the seam, um, off the uh – he said it was like that. And – if I'm not mistaken he told us about Mr. Paul Terrebonne. He had that little Snack Shack hamburger stand on the island – right off of LA-1 about the middle of the island – he was at his business, and when Betsy comes through and that water comes through, and he was able to swim to the Coast Guard Station and save himself.

R: So let's say during a bad hurricane like Betsy or Audrey, the whole gulf would rise up and...

B: Either the gulf would come over and through the gulf, or it'd come over from the bayside, depending on which way the current was coming through, it would rise up and come completely over the island. In fact for Juan if I'm not mistaken, water came over the island three foot. And my little brother got stuck

on the island one time, and he was sleeping in bed about one, two o'clock in the morning, and his bed started floating. He was downstairs. The water had rose from the backside. He had to get upstairs – he had lost everything downstairs.

R: Yeah. You know when I was a kid and there was a hurricane, I'd always hear on the radio a report from the Coast Guard Station at Grand Isle. And it was always like, 'The entire island's covered by water.'

B: Yes.

R: And I thought, how could you stay in a building when you can't even see land anymore?

B: Yeah, I mean it's – it's scary. You know, and my little brother, when he got stuck on the last one, he said it was scary. But uh, it's like, you're on land, and the water comes up, depending on how high it is, it's even scarier, you know. If it's one or two foot, you know, you can walk through it, you know, in the middle of the night. It's – it's very scary in the middle of the night. But when you see, when you see that thing rise five, six, seven foot, you gotta be bad. And Betsy, I think if I'm not mistaken, when Hurricane Betsy came through, it came through the gulf side, and it just completely washed out the – they had very few buildings when we got back to the island after Betsy. In fact, our home was sitting on the ground, and we lived in that home for three or four months before we got trailers down there. It was just devastating.

R: Now, because of erosion and things, no buffers, you know, it seems like even with a tropical storm is in the gulf, and a high tide comes, Grand Isle gets a dent.

B: Yeah, yeah. Back when we were growing up, they had these uh, wooden jetties that would protrude out there, and that was fantastic fishing around there. I mean it was great. You could walk on the jetties and fish out there. We used to go along the jetties and flounder. We used to crab, and we used to take Daddy's cast net and uh, go throw it around the jetty, catch specks, catch shrimp. In fact, when one day ata full moon, you could go out there and dip-net shrimp off the gulf. Around the jetties.

R: So would you night fish for specs?

B: You can night fish or day fish for specs. That's how plentiful they were on the island when we were growing up.

R: Do you have any memorable experiences with schools of specs?

B: Um, yes. I've seen um, I wasn't much of a fisherman. But I've seen – I would go out there and just sit on the beach and see these people just wade out there, surf fish, and walk out with strings of speckled trout. I mean beautiful speckled trout. They were catching Spanish mackerel and everything. I said crabbing, season for crabbing was – it's the season where you gotta have tennis shoes to walk in the water on the beach because you can go around and scoop up crabs. It's like, plentiful.

R: So tell me a little bit about crabbing. Um, Roger Carmadelle was telling me something about using a ping pong paddle? I didn't quite understand – I'll have to listen to that again. He said he put a rock on the bottom, and you tie a string, and you hold the ping pong paddle.

B: Haha. We've done some of that, we've done uh, we've done what we call trout lines also. We set up crab lines, well trout lines, but it's crab lines, about twenty, thirty foot of string, tie a little bitty uh, little bitty slips under there, and tie the chicken necks to the fish to it, and just lay about thirty foot of it, and just walk along – about every fifteen, twenty minutes, just walk along that string and scoop up the crabs...

R: Dip 'em.

B: Dip 'em like that. Now they also had single ones um, I never heard of paddle, but I've heard of the corks. They'd put single corks out there with lines and just different areas, and you'd walk out there and pick them up, crab still hanging on eating there, and scoop them up.

R: So all the flounder would probably be what, on the bay side?

B: Floundering was on the beach and the bay.

R: Hmm.

B: During the summer, spring and the summer, the beach is calm and beautiful and clear. You could, you could have a fantastic time floundering. The bayside was very good because it was used less. I know – I had a friend of mine – a school teacher from New Orleans – his name was Mr. Jimmy Latham. He'd come down here, and I'd cut his grass on the weekends, and he'd take me fishing, and he took me floundering one night, and we went to Elmer's Island – right across from um...

R: I know, I've been there.

B: Uh, the other island – west side.

R: I used to fish there.

B: Yeah. And we went there, we caught 115 flounders.

R: Really.

B: 115.

R: Well now they have a lot of sandbars on Elmer's.

B: Yeah. Uh, the bayside is good because it's less uh, less used, and the flounder's – it's pretty uh, pretty uh, pretty productive. But the beach side was beautiful. You could see people walking down with lanterns and, and uh, gigging shrimp, I mean gigging the flounders and doing real good. Night fishing was good too. People used to go on the docks, put a light at the end in there – beautiful specks and redfish.

R: Now tell me a little bit about reds when they come up in the pass.

B: When the reds when they come up in the pass – they would probably go toward the bayside and the um, people would uh, certain times of the year would go out there and fish the reds and do real good. And then once they got into the bay, they get into the uh, the slots in the bay area, and there's fantastic fishing there. Beautiful fish.

R: And when you say slots, you mean holes or something like that?

B: Yeah. Well, sort of like um, you got uh, the marshes – you got cuts in it and all that, and then you got what you call that is uh, ponds – what we call them. And they get in there, and they feed, and then grow.

R: All the stuff that comes out of marsh, collects in those deals?

B: Yeah. Yeah, beautiful fishing in there – beautiful crabbing.

R: So back in your parents' – let's say around 1900 when your parents were probably still alive, would you say there was enough marsh that say, from Golden Meadow to Grand Isle, it would be mostly like land?

B: Yeah. Yes. In fact, from there to Grand Isle, and from Grand Isle extending into the Gulf was very, very large. That's when I was telling you about Mama said they used to take trolley cars over the sand dunes to get to the water and all that. Fantastic fishing, once you got to the water, but beautiful farming land. A lot of – like I say – when we began, a lot of people would uh, would farm, and go there and bring their produce to uh, New Orleans French Quarter.

R: Now I know, you know, sugarcane farming took place probably, 150 years before that. Did you ever hear any stories of um, some of the hotels being converted into resorts for people that had yellow fever from New Orleans?

B: Um, no. Never heard anything like that. Um, but uh, like I say, the only um, the only resorts that I really knew about were the - that big resort on the backside of the bay – um, that Mom and Dad used to talk about, and then I knew of the Oleander Hotel, which is, I think it still stands.

R: Yeah it is. It is.

B: And uh, um, that was in – that was still being used when I was growing up and going to high school.

R: It's abandoned now.

B: Yeah.

R: That whole area, you know, they had like mail post office, the Coast Guard station, uh, Town Hall now, Catholic Church, it's the center.

B: Yeah. When we were growing up, they had areas um, around Chicazola Lane, um, and they used to call it um, Jean Lafitte's tree. Where they'd tell us stories about Jean Lafitte putting messages in the tree, and his comrades would go over there and get the messages and bring them out like that. And um, they had uh, different areas on the island where uh, they had lanes would go toward the bayside, where they used to have motels, but they never told us the names of the motels, but you could tell there was something there, and you know, and they'd give us French names like crooked tree, *chene croches*? And uh, things like that – used to be our playgrounds and stuff like that. Daddy and them used to tell us um, that that was good fishing, and people just loved to say there in that area.

R: Myself included.

B: Mmhmm.

R: Let me uh, switch to tape two here.

B: ...the back of the uh, shrimp sheds, shrimp docks, and fish around the pilings, and you wouldn't believe the gigantic bull reds and sheephead that you would catch. And sheep head was just as good in courbuillon as red fish was.

R: Now the goby would also get in that area?

B: Goby was mostly offshore. But uh, Courbuillion which is French uh...

R: Oh, Coubuillon.

B: Courbuillon, yeah, which was French delicacy for us. Um, you had the redfish, you had the uh, sheephead, and uh, um, had one of them they used to make it out of. But it was very good, very good. Very plentiful.

R: Oh, that's my thing.

B: Yeah.

R: Redfish courbuillon.

B: Oh yeah.

R: I learned how to make that from my dad.

B: I tell you what – if he'd ever get a snapper, try the snapper courbuillon. Snapper just, I find snapper a little bit better than redfish.

R: I was told that like in Caminada Pass, they used to catch things like tarpon, marlin, that kind of deal?

B: Yes, sir.

R: You remember anything like that?

B: Yeah. Yeah. They used to be very plentiful. In fact, when we were growing up on the beach, you could just about catch anything. They were catching, um, Spanish mackerel, king mackerel in the surf. Bluefish. I mean, it was beautiful. I mean, enjoyable, very enjoyable. And when we were growing up, they had the Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo; and they had the Fourth of July. And I mean you couldn't even walk on the highway – the people that would come down there. Just – to have a good time, or...

R: In the early days.

B: The early days.

R: What would've been the first tarpon rodeo?

B: I think Daddy – Daddy – the first Tarpon Rodeo - I think the first rodeo was in the 1950s. In fact, Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo was older than um, it's the largest international tarpon rodeo.

R: Now can you talk a little bit about Manila Village and Chinatown. What did they look like?

B: Um, the only thing – Chinatown I've seen from a distance. I never went there, but I've seen a lot of pilings and homes on pilings in the water. In that area. It was uh, a lot of – you would have your uh, they would have sort of like fences where they would put their nets across to keep their nets dry. That's the only thing I could remember. It was a distance away.

R: So that would've been mostly shrimpers there?

B: Yeah. Shrimpers and oystermen - oyster fishermen.

R: And did they dry shrimp? Did they...

B: Yeah. They dried shrimp.

R: Yeah. Both Chinatown and Manila Village...

B: Yeah.

R: ...were primarily.

B: Primarily dried shrimp. Daddy used to tell me how they'd have their areas where they would; I mean complete platforms, people out there just drying shrimp.

R: Yeah.

B: That's beautiful places to dry shrimp – especially if the weather was good and sun beaming down on there on that open sky, and they did a good job.

R: Yeah I heard um, Ambrose was telling me they also used to dry um, specks. They'd put them on palmetto um, you know, when you strip a palmetto, a lot of times you have like a little, you know, fork, and multi fork, and uh, you know, things that stick out from the main stem.

B: Yeah, I've heard of it, but I've never seen it.

R: They would, you know, just put them through the gills and dry them that way. Well let me ask you this. Um, we did talk about hurricanes, was there anything that you noticed about the sky, or your dad used to tell you about the sky before a hurricane?

B: Yeah, looking in the gulf side it would be the, the sky would turn dark, dark gray - almost black. And the wind would start picking up. And he said, he used to call it a *grenouille*. It uh, that's what he called us - told us when we were young - a *grenouille* which was he said was a storm. That was just a French slang.

R: What about the appearance of any birds?

B: The uh, yeah, the birds would uh, the seagulls would start coming in, fly over the island, go towards um, the bayside.

R: The old people call this the storm bird; I've heard it referred to as the man of war bird; it's actually called the magnificent frigatebird. Real long wingspan, deep forked tail, and the male has a red pouch.

B: Mmhmm.

R: Ever see those?

B: No, I've never seen those. No, we uh, mostly seagulls and uh, and beach perch - those little beach um, sandpipers...

R: Mmhmm.

B: And uh, brown pelicans. Brown pelicans would come in when the weather would get bad.

R: So that brings up a question. Um, did the brown pelicans usually always nest at Queen Bess? Was that sort of the area they went to?

B: Yeah. Most of the time there and then they just started where, you know, started drifting towards the west a little bit. Um, towards Caminada and then um, Terrebonne and all that. I guess mostly because of feeding and everything, but mostly that area. Yeah, that I knew of.

R: Okay. Let's, before we leave the subject of shrimping, let's talk a little bit more about Chinatown and Manila Village. Um, you mentioned a lot of platforms around there.

B: Mmhmm.

R: So um, the platforms were built with what?

B: Um, were built with little um, little, sort of like um, fence poles with uh, flat wood where they could just throw the shrimp on there and let it dry. That's mostly how it was that I've seen.

R: But they would walk on it too, right?

B: Yeah. They would walk on them.

R: And then from there, because I know now, people like Bobby Collins and all, they have a ...

B: Dryers and all that.

R: ...dryers and all that stuff.

B: Yeah.

R: But back in that time, they'd dance the shrimp.

B: Yeah, dance the shrimp. They uh, they would uh, some of them would put sort of like little Manila sacks, and let the top dry, and then they'd flip them over with the help of the Manila sacks, and let that sun hit all areas of them. They would uh, just probably had some kind of wooden shovel or something that they would just turn them over like hotcakes or something like that.

R: For the purposes of the exhibit and the archive, could talk a little bit about dancing the shrimp?

B: Um, I've never heard that slang too much other than the kind of a way that they did it, but uh, I'm not too familiar with that.

R: I heard they used to put on these special shoes, and they had music playing, and they would get out and separate the hulls from the...

B: Yeah, I've never heard of – I've never heard of that. Daddy um, Daddy or any – Mama or any – Grandpa or Grandma or any of them. But we'd never get too much history in Chinatown other than what uh, we've seen and uh, and what we tried to learn over the years of growing up around that area.

R: Well I just – I just asked.

B: Oh yeah.

R: Bobby might be able to tell us more.

B: Yeah, the older generation from me back – they could probably tell you a lot more history on that. Like Leon um, Leon was in the forties, thirties and forties, he could probably give us a...

R: Leon's on the list.

B: Yeah, and then um, Ambrose should know, yeah. Should have a good history of that.

R: Well this tape is designed to start talking about um, land loss. Changes to the island and um, the marsh.

B: Mmhmm.

R: So let me start off by asking – would you say that – how much in terms of percentage of marsh would you say has been lost? From 1950 until today? From Golden Meadow to Grand Isle?

B: I would say a good 30, 40%. Good, 30, 40%, if not more. I mean, it's, but it's eroded that much. Between, between the cuts and the hurricanes, um, yes. Quite a – in my time, from the time I grew up, to now, yeah a good, 30, 40% if not more.

R: So the cuts made by oil industry, right?

B: Cuts made by the oil industry; cuts made by hurricane uh, erosion, which is, God made. Uh, yeah, just wear and tear over the years.

R: Well they say Grand Isle is sinking.

B: From when I was growing up, Grand Isle was anywhere from three to four foot, if not higher, above sea level. and uh, and I still find Grand Isle's higher than a lot of areas, you know, a lot of this area, and uh, but they were above sea level, and if over time, and uh, scientifically wise, if they've gone below, yeah, they – I was told that Grand Isle basically from stories that my daddy would tell me, the island was made mostly of deposits of sand and, uh, and over the years um, (deltazation?) from the Mississippi River, and everything else, which is probably deposited, old trees ; because we used to see drift trees come in, I mean logs. Huge trees – we'd stand next to them, and they'd just drift and come on the – on the beach of the island. And just over the years, just rot away.

R: You don't remember any marsh to the south of the island at any time right?

B: No.

R: Yeah.

B: No.

R: Because they say Grand Isle is sinking at a rate of, I don't know, maybe one centimeter every hundred years. Something like that.

B: Well the erosion – you could probably, you know, logically look at that, because if the erosion is going all around that, and it's constantly probably eating away towards the bottom, it'll lower out and then eventually be covered. Um, Daddy used to tell me years ago that one day Grand Isle will be under water. All they'll have is the houses sticking off of pilings. And what you see – because LA-1 just goes underwater at just about high tide now.

R: Yeah. But I think LA-1 will go under before Grand Isle.

B: Yeah. LA-1 will probably go under before. You know, unless the state fixes it up.

R: Yeah. What – I just saw on TV the other day – Bobby Jindal - just 50 million to build a new sand levee on the west end.

B: Mmhmm.

R: And I thought, well how many times have I seen that picture? You know?

B: Yeah. I think sand levee uh - to me, or a rock jetty in Caminada a rock jetty on pilings there or a cement jetty would be more efficient.

R: Yeah, um, I remember talking to Arthur Blanchard, and he said when he was on the council, he kept pushing for rock jetties in the center of the island. It would trap the sand, the sand would fall out, and what he called it was cultivate the sand, you know. In other words, in sections. So every time you build a jetty, you know, it fills in, and you know, eventually you widen that and create land that way.

B: Yeah, yeah. It'll deposit in certain spots and eventually fill in. But um, I found when I was growing up, it was wooden jetties – those pilings – three or four piling wooden jetties were very, very productive. And they would put sand – it would put sandbars in front of it, you know, and then the tide would go out, that was all land. You had to walk past the uh, the uh, the jetties to go fishing, which would probably be another fifty, sixty foot out there.

R: So why do you think the land would build up, like sandbars before, like I mean in front of the jetties?

B: I think because the uh, the current – the uh, the jetties would deter the current further up...

R: That's true.

B: ...and deposit the...

R: So as the water would come out, it would be slower?

B: Mmhmm

R: And just drop out there you know? So how far would these jetties go out?

B: Well, I would say when I was growing up, we could've walked from the sand to the end of the jetty was probably a good fifty foot. Fifty, sixty foot out.

R: And you say, you guys used to fish out...

B: Yeah, fish off the jetty. Fish off the jetty. In fact, more towards the west side uh, people would go in between the jetties and, and walk to the first sandbar, which they would call – would be deepened, and you get to that sandbar, and it would probably be ankle-deep. And they would fish off of that.

R: Now you mentioned your dad used to use a cast net.

B: Yeah.

R: And uh, did he ever take anything out, cut it up and use it for bait? To line fish?

B: No. daddy – when daddy did a cast net, it was mostly for um, food. You know, anything he caught in that cast net, he kept.

R: Hmm.

B: He'd go specifically for uh, mullet, and um, yeah. And if the shrimp were – if the shrimp were in the inlands, he would throw the cast net for the shrimp.

R: Well uh, let me ask you this because, I hear different stories about this. When a chunk of marsh disappears, the fishing gets really good. You know.

B: Mmhmm.

R: And it seems like as the marsh disappears, it leaves nutrients. And then over the course of time, maybe two years, three years, the salt water comes in and at the bottom, to replace, you know, the nutrients, and then it goes away. But, and that tends to make sense because I notice here up around Morgan City – between Morgan City and Houma – they got white ibis moving up and fishing right along the side – that's not good. You know, that tells me, there must be a pocket of salt water coming in. You know, if those birds have moved up from the coast, that far, you know.

B: Yeah. Yeah, I mean...

R: But would you notice any difference when the marsh would start to break up and all that? And the fishing?

B: Yeah, there would be a large area for the fish to get in, and uh, nutrients and all that marsh grass and everything, redfish love that. And the crabs love that.

R: So what would it do to the reefs? Would it kill them, or...

B: In fact, no – I don't think it would kill the reefs, but it would probably uh, the uh, it'd probably lower the uh, the amount of uh, fishing around the reefs. Because they would probably go towards the nutrients. Well see most of your fish are there in the reef to feed, you know, and if they found a better feeding space, they'll swim to that.

R: It seems like if marsh around the reef breaks up and disappears, then the salinity would get stronger.

B: Yeah.

R: Around the reef. There's that brackish.

B: Yeah. Yeah, more area for that gulf to come in. Gulf salt water.

R: So just in your lifetime, what would you say in terms of um, total square miles of the island, what it looked like when you were born as opposed to today?

B: I'd say it shrunk three quarters. I've seen myself – I used to run the island, and uh, it's, in some areas, the islands was anywhere from – when I was growing up, the island had to be anywhere from a mile and a half to two and a half miles wide. The length of it was over eight miles when I was growing up. I used to run track, and I'd run the island every day, and it was beautiful to do that, but over the years, right now in some areas you've got less than a half a mile in Grand Isle as far as the width from gulf shore to the main shore. Less than a half a mile in some areas.

R: I noticed – I went down there a bit after – about a month after Gustav this year, and uh, it just looks to me like the gulf wants to kind of bisect the island.

B: Yeah, in other words...

R: Places on the west end – all the sand was lifted up and moved on the island, but there were places where you could actually just see the gulf from the road. Yeah.

B: In fact, going towards um, Bayou Rigaud, that's the place where I find is eroding the most - faster. That's the smallest part of the island – it's getting thin. In other words, it's just like an "S" coming out.

R: So the area where the Coast Guard Station is now, that's what you're talking about?

B: Yeah. Yeah, and coming back towards – pass in front of Exxon and all that? Exxon right there between Exxon – when I was growing up in Exxon, that was all Exxon campsite. That was full. LA-1 – you could go another, I'd say another 150 foot before you touch water off of LA-1 toward the beach side when I was growing up. If not 200 foot. It's moved that much.

R: Let me ask you this. Um, I interviewed, um Ruben St. Pierre. I don't know if you know him, but he talked a bit about the resentment of the island people towards the Exxon people. He said they were always kept separate.

B: Yeah. I think what it was there was for education. The school on Grand Isle was a class "C" school – a small school – grades 1 through 12. And a lot of people wanted advanced education, which was up in Golden Meadow and South Lafourche - 4A and AAA schools. So Exxon would bus their uh, their campsite people from Grand Isle to...

R: Golden Meadow.

B: Golden Meadow and South Lafourche. I just – I guess they figured it was a better education.

R: Mmhmm.

B: Which I don't blame them.

R: Yeah, I can see that. Um, but was there ever any sentiment about the oil industry invading Grand Isle?

B: I would say over the years, yes. Because there were – they were uh, sort of like taking over, you know. They were – they would, they were the money makers and the money producers, and um, and they could say "yay" and they would go off. They could put the right people in the right places. Politics.

R: Because today, I go down there and see all these camps; new camps coming up. By Bobby Santini's house, there's a huge development going on, you know.

B: Now it's tourism. It's always been tourism, when the oil people came in and they found that oil off the gulf, and then all, you know, as of now, oil people are making the highest profits in the country. They, they take over. They number one boss. And if they could put the right people in the right places, but then when they started drifting away and moving to some other area, less interest, so you gotta bring in other ways of making money.

R: Mmhhmm.

B: Tourism is the best because of the years past. Fishing, swimming, relaxation. And that's coming back.

R: Yeah, yeah.

B: But you know, if it's washing away, you're not gonna have it. It's steadily going away.

R: Well I think we'll have it in our lifetimes.

B: Yeah.

R: You know, but uh..

B: Well somebody told us one – I keep hearing, you know, over, you know over history, if erosion keeps on going like it's going, LA, I-10 will be waterfront property if it keeps on like it is. Which you know, Gulf Stream, and it starts from Florida all the way to Texas, and it's a hole, we're in the middle of that circle. And it's going out.

Well if you think about it, going out from, let's say Grand Isle, Golden Meadow, up LA-1 all the way to Baton Rouge, it's not that far.

B: No.

R: You know, somebody said they'll have to be sandbagging the state capitol pretty soon.

B: I agree. They say New Orleans is uh, a bowl. And Katrina proved that. The levees break, you're under water.

R: So we only have a little bit of tape. We have enough tape here. Um, what would you say the global importance – national and global importance of having an inhabited barrier island? You know, for the coastal erosion problems the country faces? When you look at Grand Isle, what is the importance of Grand Isle to the country as a whole?

B: I, I think Grand Isle could be a good focal point um, in that uh, the area of visitation and history would be gone completely if erosion keeps on. Um, the country as itself would lose area and valuable land, but uh, history most of all. History. Louisiana History. American history.

R: And that brings me to the question – the culture of a people that live on an island; the only inhabited barrier island on the gulf coast.

B: The culture is a combination of all um, of many people. Cajuns, um, different nationalities, and it's just Louisiana is a place where people come together and make things work. They love each other. They build upon each other. And American History and Louisiana History proves the different nationalities got together and did what they had to do to make the state what it is.

R: And I always ask this question. The feeling to me, of freedom by being living on an island that's separate from the mainland, um, could you say anything about that?

B: It's beautiful. You're free. You're actually free. You're able to walk out and smell life. Smell the gulf breeze. It's open. Nothing there to, to harm you. You're there, and you're just about there by yourself. It's just open life. It's free. It's beautiful. Very beautiful. In fact, most of my – most of my life, that was one of my greatest things was to get up every morning and just walk the island – walk the beach, and just smell, and it's peaceful. Very peaceful. Peaceful and tranquil.

R: Well thank you so much Willie. It was a great interview.

B: I appreciate it.

R: And that – that says it all – right there.