

## Jeane Landry Interview

Interviewer: Earl Robichaux

Earl Robichaux: Now we're rolling.

Jeane Landry : Okay.

R: If you would please state your name, date of birth, and where we are?

L: Silvia Jeane Barre Landry. I'm 61 years of age, and we are at the Methodist Church on Oak Street, Grand Isle, Louisiana.

R: Okay Jeane. Um, I remember speaking with you before, and we talked about – well I was told that you may have some stories about Jean Lafitte. Is that true?

L: Only what I've read and what I have gotten from other people.

R: Well, why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

L: Well, exactly what is it that you'd like to know?

R: Where he lived...

L: Where he lived? Okay. Lafitte came to the Grand Isle area somewhere between um, 1803 and 1805. and established a colony on Grand Terre Island. And he had approximately, um, twelve hundred people - men women, and children – living there at the time that um, General Andrew Jackson sent his troopers there to destroy Lafitte's stronghold. And um, it was – it was a village. Probably more people living there than living on Grand Isle at that time, and um, it was his headquarters. He had his uh, fleet of ships moored on the north side of Grand Terre. There are a lot of us um, treasure seekers, so to speak that like to go to Grand Terre and um, go treasure hunting, which means looking for bits and pieces of dishes and buttons and um, shot, gold coin if you get lucky. And um, taking those home and cleaning them up. I've been over there with a group from Galveston – the Jean Lafitte Society. And um, the very first trip that they made here, they had an archaeologist with them, and he verified that the dishes that – pieces of dishes and other artifacts that we were finding were from that time – from around the 1800s. And um, verified also that that was probably um, the trash pile for the settlement, you know. That's why were finding such a concentration of things like dishes and buttons, and um, those kinds of things.

R: Um, it's widely known that Lafitte traveled the waters from Galveston Bay to all the way to the Caribbean.

L: Right.

R: Um, but I understand that Baratavia Bay was sort of his home base.

L: That was his home base – for many years, um, for at least a ten year, maybe twelve year stretch. That he called it home, and um, whatever booty they captured, that uh, was taken into the New Orleans area

around the town of Lafitte – what is now the town of Jean Lafitte now. And um, they would set up their um, market for um, people from New Orleans to go and choose from his merchandise. Um, there are a lot of stories about Lafitte and um, his association with Grand Isle. He would um, visit the homes of people on Grand Isle because some of the people here sailed with him. Um, some of the people who settled on Grand Isle originally came with him when he came from the Dominican Republic down in the West Indies and settled in uh, Grand Isle. When he – when they weren't um, when settlers of Grand Isle – when they weren't sailing with Lafitte, they were farmers, and um, they harvested seafood – that sort of thing. So um, go ahead.

R: Okay.

L: A lot of the um, people that sailed with Lafitte also fought in the Battle of New Orleans. And when Lafitte left after the Battle of New Orleans, a good many of those people that sailed with him stayed in this area. They either settled in the surrounding area of New Orleans, down in the um, Plaquemines – what's now Plaquemines Parish area. The West Bank of uh, New Orleans, which is Jefferson Parish now, and some settled here on Grand Isle, and we have some of those descendants still living here.

R: Tell me this. It's widely known that there are a number of waterways – back ways between Barataria Bay and back of New Orleans.

L: Right.

R: Can you talk a little bit about that?

L: I know that three hundred years ago, when all of this took place, or two hundred years ago, I'm sorry. Two hundred years ago, that was um, there was a lot of marsh. You still had coastal forests of um, uh, cypress and live oak. Much closer to what is now – what is Grand Isle. And um, it was a more sheltered route in there. Um, two hundred years has taken its toll with industry, the shipping industry, the oil industry, um, fishing industry, and just the weather, and now a lot of that is uh - it's gone. It's eroded away. So you would be hard-pressed to find some of his little canals of his people would hide in. But the basic waterway, which is the Barataria Waterway, it is um, one of the main routes that was used.

R: And what would Grand Terre have looked like at that time?

L: At that time, Grand Isle - um, Grand Terre would be bigger than Grand Isle is. It was longer, probably by another half a mile or so. It was wider than Grand Isle, and um, it had some forest, um, probably not as much forest as Grand Isle, but it id have some forest. It was um, a Barrier Island with a good marsh on the bayside of it. And um, made for a great area to um, moor their boats and come in. It was big enough to, in – to have one concentrated area of homes for the um, for the settlers. You know, where the twelve hundred people this uh, that's a big settlement area. Um, later on, you know, Grand Terre was um, bought by a duelist from New Orleans – um, Pepe Lulla, I believe his name was. And he had a – that was his refuge, and he had a sugar plantation there. And um, then later after that, um, Fort Livingston was built. So it's seen a lot of, um, development and then um, less people living there, and um, over time, it has eroded because of cuts that were made into Grand Terre for um, access for docking boats.

Um, I'm sure that that has contributed to some of the land loss because once you start breaking up the marsh, you're going – eventually it's going to hit the mainland. So um, Grand Terre is now just um, a mere thought of what it once was, yeah.

R: And what would you say at that time, say two hundred years ago, would've been a buffer to Grand Terre - would've been sort of a reef or sort of that thing - oyster reefs or...

L: There would've been oyster reefs behind it. There would've been viable marsh that the tides could come through, and just having all of that marsh would lessen the affects of say uh, a tropical storm passing around that area. And um, the – I guess the biggest um, asset that Grand Terre was um, was the buffer zone that it created as a barrier island to the mainland going into um, what is now the New Orleans and Jefferson parish area. Um, the more marsh we lose, the less protection we have, and we've lost um, all of that land in between here and there. Maybe not all of it, but more than fifty percent of it is gone, and more than fifty percent of Grand Terre is gone.

R: Would you say that one time, it will be safe to say that there were coastal prairies that extended out from Grand Isle?

L: There were because there is um, the story of um, on of our residents who has um, is now deceased, but um, Mr. Herman Bartholomew's parents came from Pointe a la Hache, and they came as a couple in tow pirogues with all of their newlywed possessions, and trekked across the marsh from Pointe a la Hache to Grand Isle to establish a home, because he had a job here. And um, back then, there was some protection. There were um, there were um, lots of tall grass, there were tree ridges all through there, and it was just a much more protected area because you had miles and miles of marsh and mangroves before you got to the Gulf of Mexico, so that lessened the effects of, of whatever the weather was down around the gulf.

R: Would that be black mangroves?

L: Black mangroves, yes. You would've had ridges with um, live oaks on them, and yaupon, uh, a lot of what is native here on Grand Isle, you would've found on those ridges. Few hackberry trees, you know, because that's all a part of the Mississippi flyway, and you would've had a good bit of the same habitat there that you have present on Grand Isle. We're very fortunate not to have totally depleted our habitat here, and we feel like that's really important because that's what's holding us together lessened some of the storm surges from Rita, and Katrina and Gustav and Ike. Um, if we had more, we would have even more protection, and we need more protection between here and New Orleans because um, every mile of marsh and tree ridge that you have lessens the effect of the effect of a tidal surge by about a foot.

R: Mmhmm.

L: New Orleans could still be dry if we would've had a lot more um, marsh between the gulf and the city when Katrina hit. So it's vitally important, and um, that's one of the problems with uh, some of our areas – for instance Grand Terre, the few trees they did have were cut down to make way for homes, you know. They um, and eventually erosion and salt water intrusion has left them with no trees except for a

few scrub oaks and a few hackberry trees, and toothache trees, and some marsh grass. They don't have much else.

R: Well, we'll get to that in a minute.

L: Uh huh.

R: If we could back up a bit...

L: Okay.

R: Around the time of Lafitte.

L: Alright.

R: You mentioned sugarcane plantations.

L: Yes.

R: Could you tell us a little bit about what Grand Isle may have looked like at that time?

L: Grand Isle at that time, two hundred years ago, would've had um, where we now have developments for homes and business would've been more like a prairie marsh. And um, there would've been more – probably um, 90% more trees than we have now. Because it's estimated that we have only 10% of the forest we once had. So you would've had more trees. You would've had a bigger um, marsh area on the north side of the island. Um, maybe not more beach area, but surely on the north side it would've been a wider on the marsh side of the island.

R: And the sugarcane plantations would've been sort of on the beach side? Closer to the beach?

L: No, they would've been on the north side of the island. Um, they would've been on the, on the bay side in that marsh plain area. Grassy, prairie type area. And they would've used windmills to drain the property. And then they would've planted in there. And they would've kept it drained until a hurricane came and um, brought in extremely high tides that washed over it and maybe decimated their windmills, and then they had to start over again. That's one of the reasons that sugarcane plantations failed is because they might have two years or three years of crops, and then they'd have a storm that would wipe them out. It would take them another two or three years to...

R: Rebuild.

L: ...rebuild, so they were going bankrupt. And some of the plantations were sold two or three times due to bankruptcy. Debt that was incurred in the good years, to produce a crop, you know, when they could grow a crop. And then a storm would come and they'd have to start all over again, so all these properties were sold. Eventually people began to see that um, sugarcane farming was not the route to take. But because you had people from New Orleans and um, other large metropolis areas, coming, wanting to escape the heat in the summer and the yellow fever epidemics, they were looking to come to the coast, so tourism came into play. And some of these um, sugarcane plantation homes and slave

quarters that they had were converted to uh, cottages for the tourists. And then eventually, some big hotels were built and then eventually those were wiped out by a huge storm in 1893, but people came to Grand Isle for many years um, within the thirties and forties of the 1800s looking for respite from the yellow fever epidemics and the heat from the summer, and they were here. One of the stories that I've been told is that people would come from New Orleans and other areas to be buried in the sand on the beach and let the sun bake them, and heat it up because it was good for rheumatoid arthritis. So we were um, a destination for um, not just playing in the sand and in the gulf waters to cool off, but also medicinal purposes.

R: It was my understanding that during the 1800s, doctors would write prescriptions for yellow fever victims to go to Grand Isle as part of their therapy.

L: That's the first time I've heard a prescription was written, but I would say that probably um, very true that doctors would've recommended they come here for um, rest and recuperation. People are still coming to Grand Isle for rest and recuperation.

R: I'm one.

L: Ha ha.

R: Um, the um, story *Chita*, by Lafcadio Hearn?

L: Yes.

R: He talks quite a bit about not only the hurricane, what was it 18...

L: 1856.

R: 1856.

L: That wiped out um, Isle Derniere.

R: Yeah - Last Island. Well the impression I got was that there were a lot of yellow fever victims there as well as here all along the Cheniere coast – barrier island chain. Um, you could – do you know any other stories of yellow fever..

L: No, not really. No. I haven't researched that side other than just knowing from what's written that um, people came from the surrounding area to um, bask in the sun and the waters of Grand Isle, recuperate from yellow fever. Some to escape what was happening in, like New Orleans, um, while they were still healthy, getting their families out here to get them – get them away from the yellow fever.

R: Any stories or memories of the hurricane of 1893?

L: In 1993, we did a cent – a group of people got together and for two years, researched and brought together, um, family members, um descendants of families that survived the storm of 1893. And there were a few stories from that. One of the stories is that we had numerous families that um, escaped the storm waters by taking hatchets and cutting a hole in their roof, and getting on their roof. And isn't that

reminiscent of Katrina? And it's um, funny because when Gustav hit, I know several people who said well, I'm taking my hatchet, and I'm putting it in the attic just in case. Ha ha. But we all evacuated except for about seven people on the island.

R: Did um, the experience of Katrina serve to raise houses any more?

L: Oh it did because we actually are now having to build at fourteen feet above the ground. It doesn't matter what your elevation is. It's fourteen feet above the ground.

R: And prior to that it was what?

L: Um, prior to that I think it was twelve. So they've raised it by two feet. Yeah. Um, my children all had water in their homes. Um, my husband and I had water in our home, and um, the smartest thing you can do is raise your house now. No matter what architectural features of it you may lose, it's a smart thing to go ahead and raise your home because I'm – I think that they'll be – my personal opinion is that there will continue to be water on the island even for some of the lesser storms like a category one. Because we just don't have that protection and we have um, the rising um, sea – the rising seas, and um, I just don't think that we'll have those little storms come through that don't put water all over Grand Isle.

R: There was my um, kind of my next question. The National Academy of Sciences they said that Grand Isle is impacted by some sort of tropical event every two and a half years.

L: Yes.

R: So I guess my question is with the projection of increasing intensity, um what do you see in terms of hurricane protection in the future to the island?

L: Right now, I know that it's in the process right now of having more breakwaters installed on the north side of the island. That helps with the erosion. Um, there's an effort to um, reinforce a containment levee that's on Grand Isle that was built by private land owners back in the fifties – in the early fifties. And that's just to stop some tidal action for us – a small storm. And um, they're working on the levee on the – or sand dune on the south side of the island – on the beach side hoping to um, build it up so that it offers um, a little bit more protection and if you get another Katrina or another Gustav, um, you can't build a levee big enough or strong enough as a barrier island to stop it from being topped. But what you can do is build those dunes and, and/or levees that provide a little bit more time to get off of the island - to escape a storm. Because um, if you get hit by a twenty-foot wall of water like we were on the north side by Katrina, that's driven by 120 miles-an-hour winds, I don't think we can build a levee big enough.

R: Oh, no.

L: And if we build a levee like that and we ring ourselves, we're a bowl. That it will take weeks to pump out and to dry out – whereas after the storms, it took us a little longer to come back after Gustav, took us a little longer to get back on the island after Katrina, but it wasn't weeks and weeks before we could get back, and things were drying out already. Not like in other areas where they're practically in a

gumbo bowl and the water sits for weeks, and they're waiting for it to dissipate or to finally get enough pumps to dry it out.

R: Well with Gustav, I assume the wind came from the south.

L: Yes. And it hit us on the west end of the island. The whole island was impacted, but the west end of Grand Isle was more impacted than the rest.

R: And Ike. Was it primarily water?

L: Ike was primarily water. A little wind, but um, it was more water damage than wind damage. I had less water in my downstairs, um, when Ike hit, than I did when Gustav hit. I must've had three feet of – or four, maybe three and a half feet of water when Gustav hit.

R: I remember when I interviewed you last, you had said – you stayed for one storm – I can't remember.

L: Hurricane Juan in 1985. Ha ha. I'll never stay again. That was um, really an experience, and it only had 80 mile-an-hour winds. We had – we had um, pecan trees in our front yard, and to see those pecan trees just bow down to that wind is an awesome sight, and to watch the water keep creeping up, and we didn't get water in our home, but we had about two and a half feet of water in our yard, and um, that's all in the, sort of the middle of the island because you know, Grand Isle's like a turtleback. So we have um, it slopes to the beach, it slopes to the bay, it slopes to the east and the west, but you have this high ridge in the middle of the island that's about five feet above sea level. And to have three feet of - almost three feet of water in the yard was really something to see, and um, it was scary. I wouldn't stay again. There – I don't own anything worth, um, risking the life of my children or myself, or anyone that I love.

R: Sure. So in that storm, was the wind from the south as well?

L: It was from the south because the storm stayed – was really offshore from us, and it was so slow moving that for almost a week, it had been creating a lot of rain for us and also pushing a lot of water into the island with extremely high tides and it just was there, sitting out there churning up all this bad weather before it finally moved on and went inland elsewhere, but it's – the damage that it did to us, just by sitting out there and driving the tide chain – you know, bring in high tides to us and a lot of water.

R: Yeah. That seems to be the big concern is that these low level tropical systems that move very slow along the coast will cause so much more erosion than a big storm, you know.

L: Correct. They do. Because they're just out there that much longer doing as much damage as they can, yeah. They do. I know that um, if you have a slow moving, um winter storm, that comes out of, say, the northwest, the backside of Grand Isle on the bay side just gets beaten up. If it's uh, three or four days of really bad weather like that. And it's the same thing in the summertime if you get a southerly storm coming in – it doesn't have to be a tropical storm. Just a weather system coming in, and um, beats us up. So if we're getting beat up, I know that the rest of the barrier islands that have less protection than we do are getting the same experience. Yeah.

R: Let me ask you this. If we could back up a bit, in the times of say the 1800s, nineteenth century, excuse me. What did Cheniere Caminada look like?

L: When it was first settled in um, late 1700s, early 1800s, it was like Grand Isle. It had a lot of trees, it had um, a lot of vegetation, a lot of wildlife. Then as people began to settle and they were looking to build, you know, to um, establish gardens, clear an area for their homes, they began cutting down their trees. And by the 1880s, there weren't any trees left over there – you know, a few, you had um, black mangrove, you had wax myrtle growing along the shoreline, but you didn't um, you didn't have the massive oak trees anymore because they were – they were being cut down. Um, grass fields are um, grassy areas, areas that were once high ground that were um, that they were able to farm, because tidal action, because they were cutting, um, clearing areas and cutting areas for their boats to come in and create a docking area. That was contributing to the erosion over there, but the biggest mistake that the people of Cheniere Caminada was cutting their trees down – clearing their land for farming.

R: So that would've been around 1880.

L: That would've been around the 18 – somewhere between the 1870s coming forward as it began to really grow as a community. Um, by the 1890s, um, that community was big enough that there were big homes, there were two or three little general stores, because it spanned a huge area from what is now the Grand Isle bridge going all the way back to what is now established as the parish line. You had people, um, living up in those areas, and um, they were farmers and fishermen, and um, a lot of fishing in this area that um, the catch was taken into New Orleans, so this area was the first area in Lafourche parish – in Jefferson parish as well as the gulf coast – Cheniere Caminada had the first ice-producing factory, and they used ammonia to um, cool the water to make the ice. It was by 1890, it was the first community in Jefferson parish to have a public school with the teacher paid by the parish through their Police Jury system. And um, all of that was washed away in 1893.

R: Then the hurricane hit.

L: Then the hurricane hit. It's the story of our lives. And um, for the last, I'd say sixty years, maybe sixty five years, um, what has lasted is um, even though we're impacted on a fairly regular basis, tourism is still strong for Grand Isle, the fishing industry is strong, and the oil industry is um, still strong on Grand Isle. It's a huge influence and huge employer for the area. Um, but the oil industry didn't come to us until after the Second World War.

R: Seventies.

L: Actually in the nine – in the around 1946 the first um, oil rig was um, offshore. And there was some oil drilling um, up around Leeville area, you know by the 1960s Leeville was a forest of oil derricks, and you saw a lot of inland oil drilling around that time too. And Grand Isle was um, the hub for um, offshore and what was then deepwater drilling. We're not anymore - deepwater drilling is 150 miles out in the gulf, and everybody goes – the ships go out of Fourchon because it's a deepwater port. We're not anymore.

R: Yeah, the Louisiana coast has been exploited like a pin cushion.



L: Exactly. Yes. But it's what makes the country prosper, you know.

R: Yeah. Let me um, stop this tape, and get to another one.

L: Okay.

R: Okay, Jeane is the, I won't say director of Nature Conservatory, but the person that represents the Nature Conservatory.

L: I'm the project manager for the Nature Conservancy at Grand Isle.

R: Okay. Um, can you tell us a little bit about your experience with bird fallouts and the importance of Grand Isle in the Bara – um, barrier island system for migratory birds?

L: Okay. Gulf-wide, we are very unique as um, a part of the Mississippi flyway for migratory um, birds, both in the fall and in the spring. We're the only, um, barrier island that is a live oak hackberry forest. And we're dead center of the um, Mississippi flyway. So we're very important to the neo-tropical um, songbirds, as well as um, migrating water fowl that flies through here in the spring and fall. The uh, forest on Grand Isle is about 90, 10% of what it once was. And that includes the property that the Nature Conservancy owns and manages, where it is no – there are no homes built there, that includes also the areas that are dispersed with homes where you've had trees cut but people are planting trees in those areas, and we still have a lot of um, mature oak trees and hackberries throughout the island, but not near what we once had. And the island is um, important as a barrier island for the protection that we offer to um, the coast for the inland. To the New Orleans, Lafourche, Jefferson Parish areas, and um, the forest is important to the Grand Isle residents – it cools the island. It um, also lessens the winds in a hurricane situation, and the um, we experienced it for Hurricane Katrina – that the forest actually can slow the flow of the water and breaks some of the force of the tidal waves that'll hit us. The tidal surges that hit us in a hurricane like the one that hit us from the north side during Katrina because the forest was um, had debris in it, stacked deeper than I am tall, and that's five foot three inches. And it was just platforms of people's porches and businesses and um, items from – we're in a salvage yard from the oil industry, and the rooftops from people's homes, and for me the most um, we had – my family had damages, but to walk in the woods and to find a child's little toy, um, stuck in a tree, is um, an emotional event because you know that that storm just tore apart someone's home for that toy to be there. That's a home that no longer exists. It's not just damaged. It's totally gone.

R: What would you say – what would you say are the main components or maritime forests?

L: For Grand Isle it's the live oaks. The hackberries. The Yaupons, the bay trees. We have um, wax myrtle, red mulberry, those are our mainstays here. Those are the native trees that are here.

R: How did the live oaks um, survive surrounded by salt water?

L: It's because their genetic makeup is such that they can survive the salt water intrusion to a point. You have to have some freshwater coming through and washing it and uh, cleaning the soil, but um, as a rule our trees can withstand the high salinity in our soils. If you have water that comes – that um, let's say

we were surrounded by a levee, and the water sat in here for three or four weeks. Um, and was two or three feet deep, I would imagine we would lose a lot of trees because you're seeing that along the coastline where the tree ridges are being lost due to salt water intrusion. So we're um - but basically our trees are genetically um, fit for this kind of soil. They can live elsewhere, but they live really well here. And survive. We have trees on the property at the Nation conservancy owns that are anywhere from 200 to maybe 400 years old.

R: Now it's widely known that Grand Isle is the largest barrier island that's humanly inhabited.

L: Inhabited, yes.

R: Is it the largest barrier island on the gulf coast? I guess that'd be South Padre.

L: It's not the largest, no. because South Padre is what, 32 miles long?

R: Yeah.

L: Something like that. Galveston is bigger than we are. Um, Dolphin Island is bigger than we are, yeah. But we are strategically placed.

R: Okay. Can you describe for the listener, what happens during a fallout? The whole process.

L: Alright, the whole process. Um, if you have a - in the spring fallout, you'll have the birds staging in South and Central America getting ready, um, in the late afternoon to start their flight across the Gulf of Mexico. Generally they'll have a southerly tailwind helping them across the gulf. They're going to fly at night because there are less predators, and it's cooler so they use less body fat and muscle to make the trip across the gulf because you're talking about a bird that weighs maybe three or four ounces. Um, sometimes hardly an ounce - like a hummingbird. And they're going to make that fifteen to eighteen-hour flight in one trip. So when they get to Grand Isle, they're looking for water, food, they're looking for the protection that the oak trees um, afford them because the trees are so dense, there are lots of places to hide and rest. But it's daylight when they get here. So what you're going to see - let's say you have a - a um, some um, warblers coming across the gulf at night. Hundreds of thousands are leaving South America at the same time and they're flying across the gulf, and maybe they're within um, a couple hundred miles of Grand Isle, and they experience a front coming from um, Northern Louisiana and the northern part of the United States that's bringing some north winds. These north winds meet the south winds, and the birds that are flying on this southerly tailwind can't fight the north wind because they're too tired. And so then they see Grand Isle, what happens is they just fall out of the sky - literally fall out of the sky into the grass, grassy areas of the island, into the wooded areas, people's lawns and people's porches. They've been known fallout on the platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. And um, men offshore have actually picked the birds up, put them in boxes, put them on a helicopter and flown them in so that they can be released on the island. So um, a fallout is when the trees - when the birds actually fall out of the sky and onto the island or sometimes into the water or on a platform. And um, we had such a fallout - we had such a fallout of um, ruby throat hummingbirds three years ago - the spring after Katrina. You could walk in the woods or walk in your front yard and the birds were just on

the ground, they were – if you – they were flying around looking for food and water, and um, on the Nature Conservancy's preserve, um, in the middle of town which is the Groletta tract, we had a lot of thistle out there. And the, the hummingbirds were just all over them by the thousands. You'd walk through the trails – if you happened to have a shirt on that had any kind of um, red flower on it, they were just landing on you because they were looking for that food and um, shelter. So it's phenomenal. It's um - when my children were um, youngsters going to grade school, um one March morning, they got up to go to school, and as they were leaving the house, the three boys came running back inside. They were all excited because the front field in front of the house, which is a huge expanse about 90 feet by about 250 feet, was just a carpet of blue because it was nothing but um, indigo buntings – that there had been a fallout that night – southerly winds bringing the birds in was met by a northerly front, and they um, just fall out of the trees out of the sky to the ground.

R: Yeah, I remember that story. Are there any stories of uh, because I know I've been on the island and literally birds, and like the (inaudible).

L: Uh huh.

R: Yellow breasted, I mean yellow billed cuckoos, and you can pick them up.

L: You can just pick them up. Yeah. They just that tired that they just can't escape. Normally they would just fly away from you, but in a fallout, in a fallout, they're exhausted when they, when they reach land. Some near death. You'll see a lot of mortality in a fallout.

R: And this is an interesting question. Because most people just don't think songbirds are useful. What would you say, in terms of - what do they serve to the forest?

L: To the forest – they eat a lot of bugs. That is their, their um, main contribution. That and they disperse um, seeds. I can give you a for instance. In our um, in our Landrieu- LeBlanc tract right now, we have hundreds of toothache trees coming up. And it's because birds in the fall making the fall migration, were eating seeds inland, and when they reach Grand Isle resting in the trees here getting ready to make their flight south across the gulf, when they um, poop, they leave the seeds, and um, when Hurricane Katrina hit, it tore off the tops of a lot of our trees, and um, we had a lot of broken branches – that opened up a lot – put a lot of sun into the forest. And the sun helped to germinate these seeds, and where I'm seeing these groups of trees come up, seedlings coming up, when you look up into the sky, um, into the forest canopy, you have a hole where the sun's been able to come through. So you know that nature's been uh, doing its job. The trees – the birds brought the seeds and planted them, and Mother Nature has warmed the soil, and they're growing.

R: And what kind of trees are these?

L: These are toothache trees. They're um, if you bit the bark, if you cut off a little piece of the bark and chew on it, um, it has um, a natural um, Novacaine affect in your mouth. The Indians taught the settlers that this was a good toothache remedy. Thus, you have the name toothache. Don't ask me the technical name because I can't give it to you.

R: And they grow well on the island?

L: Yes they do. Yes. And you'll find them all along – especially along fence lines, um, further inland, and um, there used to be a lot on Grand Isle. We don't have as many because it has a thorn on it - um, a lot of thorns. And a lot of people cut them down because they don't want them - Um, someone getting hurt by them – especially children. So you've seen those disappear, but they're a great butterfly tree, and um, it has a fruit, um, it sets a flower bracket that sets a fruit that the birds eat in the fall. And the butterflies and the bees use it in the um, use the flowers in the springtime. So it's uh, it's a good tree for this area, and it's a pretty tree – it's just that they have some thorns on it. But it's a good tree and we should be cultivating it, so in the woods, it's allowed to grow.

R: So it's sort of an understory to the oaks?

L: Somewhat yes, because it doesn't get more than about 20 feet tall.

R: Mmhmm.

L: Yeah, so it's more of an understory. It's also a tree that you find out in open areas – grassy areas. It'll grow well there, but it never gets really big. And it's a tree that you find on the fringe of, of a forest like ours.

R: I was going to say a lot of work is being done now on aspects of DNA in the evolution of flight patterns in migration. And so it must, sort of um, testify to the fact that there were long coastal prairies that stretched to the gulf. Because these birds for centuries...

L: Have flown.

R: ...have traveled this route.

L: Have traveled this route, right. But they're losing their habitat. We have lost in the last um, twenty years, there is um, an oak ridge that um, stretches from just outside of um, the parish line in Cheniere Caminada all the way to Fourchon, and you would be hard-pressed to find a hundred trees still living on that ridge. And that ridge is um, probably close to two miles long, or once was. And um, it's dead now. And all along LA-1, on the sides of LA-1 and some other areas where we once had some live oaks growing, they're – it's just dead stumps now.

R: Yeah. John and I noticed that.

L: Yeah. And that's all salt water intrusion. There isn't enough um, soil around them. They're not getting enough fresh water. There's not enough soil to hold a good rain that the rain can wash the salt out through – the trees need a balance. And they're not getting that balance, so they're dying, even though at one time they were more salt tolerant. They, after a while, their root system just can't handle that much salt.

R: In terms of um, say black mangrove plantings, are there any projects now that are replanting black mangrove?

L: There are – all along the gulf coast there are projects for um, replanting black mangrove. Here on Grand Isle there's been a planting, um, at the State Park, there was a planting at Fifi Island, and um, there had been several plantings on this new maritime ridge that they're doing um, in Port Fourchon.

R: Um, that brings me to an interesting question. I remember when I first interviewed Pat, he talked about Fifi Island, and I thought it was up around Leeville. Uh, I didn't realize it was around here, and it's still in existence, right?

L: It's still in existence, but it's a fraction of the size it once was. Um, recently, the Grand Isle Port Commission, and the Corps of Engineers, and some other agencies um, did a project over there where they actually put rocks out and then pumped in – they made a little ring around the island – pumped in some areas and recreated some marsh, and then there's been some plantings back there – black mangrove and uh, on the um, across the island, in some of the higher elevated areas, they've planted a lot of um, red mulberry and um, they may have planted some oaks – I'm not real certain about that, but I know the mulberry and the black mangrove.

R: And there are tree plantings on Grand Terre, right? Nature Conservancy is...

L: Not on Grand Terre, no. There isn't anything happening on Grand Terre at this time other than a few years ago, I'd say close to ten years ago, there was a um, project to um, put some rocks on the east end of Grand Isle – on Grand Terre and pump it in, and then they seeded it with um, with um, spartina grass seeds, and um, it's doing real well now. It's a lot of grassy area, but still grand Terre is a fraction of what it once was.

R: I thought I heard the Nature Conservancy had appropriated land on Grand Terre to plant...

L: No. Not – not the Nature Conservancy. It's – it's bound to be another agency. Yeah.

R: Yeah. So would it be fair to say that areas like Fifi Island and Grand Terre, if they were brought back with vegetation, would serve as a buffer to the buffer? Ha ha

L: Yes. They would. They would serve as a buffer for us, and in the event of um, a hurricane where we're getting the um, north winds that come after a storm, as the storm passes over, it would be a buffer for us then. Would also be a buffer for us in the event of a winter storm because we can get some winter storms that have fifty, sixty miles an hour winds. And um, one such event happened about fifteen years ago and ate up almost a hundred and twenty feet of land on the north side of Grand Isle. That's what prompted um, some of the efforts to um, continue with all of the, the breakwaters to start installing those because it was an opportunity to um, create a buffer where we didn't have one anymore. Just, you know, as a buffer against winter winds like that - northern winds.

R: In terms of national importance or even world importance, what would you say about Grand Isle in terms of the um, pathological balance of preserving Louisiana's coast, and how it has a rippling affect up and down the Mississippi.

L: This is not a scientific statement, but I would say that um, if Grand Isle washes away totally becomes an Isle Derniere, Baton Rouge and New Orleans are going to really be beachfront property. That's my belief. Because I think that when we're gone, if this island is gone, I think that erosion further inland is going to be that much quicker. And I think that they'll just be no stopping it unless they build a great wall across the gulf – across the coastline like that.

R: Could you repeat that again? Because this cell phone went off.

L: Haha. I think that – I think that as um, the gulf – let me back up. I think that when Grand Isle – if Grand Isle disappears and becomes like Isle Derniere, places like Baton Rouge and New Orleans will truly be beachfront property. Because um, if it accelerates here, and we disappear, erosion further inland is going to be that much quicker also. It will accelerate there. And the only way they'd be able to stop it is to just build a great solid wall, a dike, all the way across the coastline.

R: Well I think that parts of Louisiana coast can be salvaged in terms of the erosion problem.

L: I do too.

R: The big elephant in the room in fact the reason and premise behind this project is the rise of sea level. And I just don't think that anything can be done about that. What would you do if there were a sudden rise of sea level?

L: A sudden rise? Because we know it's rising about an inch or so – what, a century? I believe that's the rate right now. But um, suddenly we were just inundated by a great depth of water, Grand Isle would be Isle Dernier. I don't see that we could survive as an island and as a community if suddenly we were no longer five feet above sea level – the way we are now. Um, if it came up three feet and we were only two feet above sea level, a high tide would be detrimental to us. So um, I think that we are um; I think that we would suffer greatly.

R: So where are you now in relation to sea level?

L: We're five feet above sea level.

R: Oh. Higher than Morgan City.

L: Higher than New Orleans. Haha.

R: Interesting.

L: Yeah. The center...

R: The uh, projection – which has been revised a number of times, anywhere from one to six meters in this hundred years. Which would mean anywhere from three feet to eighteen feet, roughly.

L: That the sea level would rise?

R: Yeah.

L: Eighteen feet deeper?

R: Mmhmm.

L: I don't know - I hadn't read that.

R: Report that (inaudible) along the coast would you know, vary.

L: Yeah. Still, that would impact us greatly.

R: Oh, yes.

L: We would uh, yeah; we would have to seriously consider leaving town on a permanent basis.

R: Yeah, I hear you.

L: Yeah. But...

R: All of South Louisiana would be inundated.

L: Yeah. We would all be under water. But when you ask about the importance of us ecologically, I think Grand Isle and science shows, Grand Isle is very important, um, to the neo-tropical songbirds, and they're - that's an indication - if we're not here and they don't have this respite, and if they continue to have to fly these great distances without us as a stopover in-between their flights, we'll have less songbirds flying north. You'll have less birds eating bugs further north and singing their songs that brings peace and tranquility to so many. Plus the um, disbursement of seeds - they're important in that the further north that you go, they're more important as far as helping to reseed wildflowers and trees, so um, ecologically, I think that we are a very important area. Um, we're important to the nation um, as um, for the energy that flows through us through the pipelines, and we protect a lot of pipelines here. But that's the eco - that's the economic side of it, but if you just look at the ecology side of it, um, if we become an Isle Dernier, and we're totally gone, just a little sandbar out there, then the state is um, the rest of the state especially in the Barataria National Estuary region, which is from the Atchafalaya to the Mississippi river. We're in serious trouble as a state.

R: When you - you brought up an interesting point. And I agree - excuse me. About birds - songbirds specifically controlling infestation.

L: Right.

R: And you have to realize that if you lose a great population of these kinds of birds - insect eaters - that the forest is gonna be totally out of balance. Yet I know that riparian forests for years, have, you know, been the, the normal course of the pathway of migration...

L: Right.

R: ...up to Illinois and that's the - sort of the -controlled now by development in afield.

L: Right.

R: So Grand Isle and places like Sherburne are extremely important just for the survival.

L: Just for the survival. Yes. Yeah. If we don't have the songbirds eating the um, the bugs, the insects, in the pine forests, then you have pine forests, um, infestation with disease, and then you losing the pine forests. You have the potential to lose your, um, cypress forests, and um, so on until you have huge areas that there are no longer trees there. And um, I don't think that we can live without this balance because trees have such a cooling effect as well as cleansing the air, reproducing our oxygen, so it's uh, if we don't help keep nature in balance, um, we'll be in serious trouble because we already are in serious trouble due to some imbalances and losing species of birds, and animals. And um, eventually, we'll be losing us.

R: Well said. Sometimes the most insignificant looking things are so important.

L: Are so important. Very true.

R: In the time we have left, could you talk about any projects that may spell hope for the future for the island? Such as coastal restoration projects and that sort of thing.

L: Well we have some costal restoration problems. We have, uh; I can talk specifically for the Nature Conservancy. Right now we have two projects. Um, we have an oyster reef project that is um, that is coming to, um, termination, it's - we're just about finished with that. We're in the reporting stage of it where we were um, actually um, helping - um, wanting to show that rather than continuing to pile the rocks on top of these breakwaters, perhaps we can put a veneer on them that would help um, oyster reefs to grow again. So that's one project that we have going on, and it's almost culminated. Then we have um, a project with the Grand Isle school that's - we have help from Entergy Louisiana and from BP America to um, build a shade house or bio-lab as it would be, for the school, and the children are going to collect, um, seeds from native trees and grow them out into seedlings. And then they're going to plant them on the island as well as give them a way to property owners to encourage more planting of trees. And the idea is - we can plant these seedlings now and as time progresses and our older trees here on the island begin to um, die off, we'll have this new crop of trees coming up and replenishing the forest and hopefully to have more trees growing across the island in places where were we didn't - where trees have been clear cut before, and replacing them. And hopefully to increase the size of the maritime forest at Grand Isle.

R: Excellent.

R: And the maritime forest and um, also grassland areas, um, the more the marsh that we can preserve, and some of the grassy areas - because a lot of our songbirds coming in - they need the trees, but they also, a lot of them use the grasses, and that's their habitat. And um, we need to preserve some of the tall grass areas also.

R: Um, have you been in touch with the like for instance, Bill Fontenot?



L: Yes. Bill is a regular visitor here both as a, a researcher and as a birder. Yes. He participates in a lot of our activities.

R: I know he wrote quite a bit on coastal forests, I mean uh, coastal prairies.

L: Yes.

R: And the reestablishment of things like blue stem, and those kinds of things.

L: Yes. He is...

R: Is that kind of thing happening?

L: I see it happening all across south Louisiana. He's worked with uh, several initiatives that the Nature Conservancy has had, um, all the way from Grand Isle to the Lake Charles area. Yes. Bill is a very knowledgeable and um, great to work with when it comes to native plants.

R: Oh yeah...

L: Oh yeah. That's his thing. He knows.

R: He knows plants. Well, we're about out of tape. All I can say is – do you have anything else you'd like to add?

L: I just want to thank you for this project. I think it's very worthwhile, and um, maybe it'll give insight down the road to other people, that get to view it over the next few years as it makes its rounds, and educate the public. Yeah. Send it to congress.

R: Haha. Um, that's our hope. We can develop a little repository information.

L: Right.

R: And it could be used if congress needs it. Um, it'll be available to the Library of Congress, and will also serve to educate the public.

L: Good.

S: So we um, thank you so much.

L: Thank you! I appreciate it.

R: Okay.