

**Narrator: Brenda Dardar Robichaux**  
**Interviewer: Susan Testroet- Bergeron**  
**Transcriber: Taylor Suir**

**4 October 2012**

**SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON:** My name is Susan Testroet- Bergeron and I am interviewing Ms. Brenda Dardar Robichaux, the former Principal Chief of the United Houma Nations about her memories and experiences concerning Louisiana's Coastal Wetlands. The interview is being conducted at Ms. Brenda's home at 1:30 p.m. on October 4, 2012. The interview is being conducted in Raceland, Louisiana. Do you understand that portions of this taped interview and pictures taken during the interview will be used in a variety of government publications?

**BRENDA DARDAR ROBICHAUX:** Yes, I do.

**BERGERON:** Thank you for speaking with us today.

**ROBICHAUX:** It's my pleasure.

**BERGERON:** Now that we've gone over our written consent forms, I'd like to get some basic information for the taped interview and then we'll begin our discussion.

**ROBICHEAUX:** Ok.

**BERGERON:** Would you please state your full name?

**ROBICHAUX:** [0:46] My name is Brenda Dardar Robichaux.

**BERGERON:** Could you spell Robichaux?

**ROBICHAUX:** R-O-B-I-C-H-A-U-X

**BERGERON:** Thank you. What is your birthdate and when were you born?

**ROBICHAUX:** My birthday October 15, 1958 and I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana.

**BERGERON:** Ok. And where did you grow up?

**ROBICHAUX:** I grew up on the south end of Golden Meadow, below the corporation limits of the town of Golden Meadow.

**BERGERON:** Ok, and where have you lived as an adult?

**ROBICHAUX:** [1:14] Most of my adult life I lived down the bayou in Lafourche Parish and for the last, about 15, 20 years I have lived in the central Lafourche, in Raceland.

**BERGERON:** Thank you for giving us the basic information. Can you tell us a little bit about maybe a childhood memory that connects you with our Louisiana wetlands?

**ROBICHAUX:** For me the wetlands have been a part of my life ever since I can remember. Our family always lived off of the land and so I had a Grandfather who trapped, and hunted, and farmed, for a living. He used plants that grew in our yard as traditional medicine for healing. And so, from ever since I can remember growing up as a child, I have memories of my Grandfather living off of the land. And then when you go to the next generation of my Dad, he was fisherman and so he trawled his entire life; still did it until the last couple of years. And he is an oysterman and living off of the land. And so we've had a great appreciation for what the wetlands has to offer and what nature has to offer for us.

**BERGERON:** When you talk about your role as the former Principal Chief, how do you feel now, as an adult, looking back on those childhood memories and your role in the Indian nation and Indian community?

**ROBICHAUX:** [2:44] I've had great concerns for many years now because growing up I spent my Saturdays on Elmer's Island. My friends and I would pack up the truck of my car. We'd spend the day on the beach just thoroughly enjoying ourselves and just the beauty of the area. And now, when I cross the Leeville Bridge and I look at all open water, it's frightening. I worry about what's happening to our environment with so many hurricanes in recent years, 4 within just a few years' time, and then the recent oil spill and so I have concerns about what's happening to our environment. I'm worried that the children that I've worked with for so many years are not going to get to see and appreciate the beauty that I grew up with. And so often times I feel that I need to apologize to them, that we should have done more to make sure that our wetlands were restored; that we should have made sure that we kept the oil and gas industry accountable for what has happened to our environment. And so I feel that responsible and I feel that often times we should feel a sense of that responsibility that we need to make sure that our children can enjoy the beauty that we've grown up with.

**BERGERON:** You mentioned that it's all about the kids and the next generation, how would you describe how the wetlands have changed in your lifetime?

**ROBICHAUX:** [4:10] It has changed so much. The wetlands have changed so much to my lifetime. It's frightening. I worry about all the beauty that I've witnessed. I worry about the love that I have for the community. Where we once had land, it's now open water. Some of our troubled communities, they would look out their back doors and have acres of land where they'd have farms and raise cattle and now the water is approaching their back door. And so it's frightening to know that our very existence is being threatened and so the changes are happening so rapid and so just in my lifetime, in my children's lifetime, and so it's uncertain what the future holds and that part is frightening for us because we live off the land. We have strong ties to it. My Father has passed on the traditional medicines that my Grandfather used for healing and when he walks around his yard, they're not all there anymore. A lot of the plants he used just for basic healing, he can't find. And so what we've done is with our youth, we've really made a concentrated effort on relocating some of those traditional medicines and so that way if our environment continues to change before something is done, we're not going to lose that part of our heritage and that part of our culture. And so, we're making a concentrated effort to make sure that our plants continue to grow and that we don't lose that part of who we are.

**BERGERON:** That's a huge responsibility.

**ROBICHAUX:** It's a huge responsibility but I feel that's it's something that really needs to be done because it's such an important, vital part of who we are. Our people didn't go to doctors, most of them went to traiteurs and that's what my Grandfather was. And so he knew what plants to use for different types of healing, whether it was with prayer, whether it was

boiling the leaves to make a tea or something that you might put on a wound, a salve. And so he knew what was used that way and so I feel that it's important that remember all of these things that we grew up with and just stress to our children the importance of restoration and how it's going to affect them on a daily basis. I worry about, just them. I worry about what their future's going to be. And we always want to leave our children better than we had. We always want them to have more, better experiences or to at least be able to enjoy life the way we did and even more so. And I worry that's not going to happen for them. I worry that we're leaving them something that may be even beyond their control of being able to fix. You know, when we look at coastal restoration projects, you know some of the areas are almost beyond repair and unfortunately, that more often than not, is the Indian communities. So, what happens to our children? You know, when I visit with our elders, and you talk to them, whether it's recovering from a hurricane, or whatever it is, how can I help you? You know, what can I do for you, with tears in their eyes; they just want to go home. You know and so it motivates you and inspires you to do everything you can to make sure there's still a home for them to go home to. And I worry about that. Are our elders going to be the last generation that's going to be able to call some of our low-lying bayou communities home? Is the next generation going to be able to experience that? And I don't think that they will.

**BERGERON:** It's very important, the message of home. And I tell people all of the time, you know, if this was a war and we were losing land like this to a different nation...

**ROBICHAUX:** That's right.

**BERGERON:** ...it would be a war. And I think our call to action needs to be strong. So, if you were going to give a message to the nation about why we need to restore coastal Louisiana, what would your message to them be?

**ROBICHAUX:** [8:13] Louisiana provides a lot to the nation, whether it's with oil and gas, whether it's with our seafood, whatever it is, our land is rich in so many ways. And the whole United States enjoys the bounty of what Louisiana has to offer but yet, Louisiana is paying the price for what we're offering to the nation without little or no compensation. And not only is Louisiana paying the price, I feel that the tribal nation is paying the ultimate price because we're right along the coast and so we're the first to feel the effects of land loss and of climate change. It's happening to us first but it's not going to stop with us. It's going to continue on. It's going to continue on to moving inland and further up the bayou and so it's not going to stop with us. And so I think that everybody needs to look in the mirror and play a role in what can I do to make sure Louisiana can survive this. You know, I reap the benefits of what Louisiana has to offer and how can I play a role to support them in making sure they can be sustainable.

**BERGERON:** That's very good. You know I'm here from CWPPRA, the Coastal Wetlands Planning Protection, and Restoration Act, and you know that CWPPRA has lots of

projects, you know, along the coast. How have you worked with CWPPRA and worked with coastal restoration over the years?

**ROBICHAUX:** [9:40] It's been a really tough battle trying to make sure that our communities are a part of the dialogue, to make sure that our communities' voices are heard when it comes to coastal restoration. We are on the front lines of what's happening to our environment. And so, unfortunately, more often than not, we're left out of the dialogue. So, more often than not, we'll hear that what it would take, the cost it would take to protect our community is not worth the value of the community. And it saddens me to think that a price tag can be put on a community, a price tag could be put on a culture, a price tag could be put on a people, and I understand that, but, at the same time, it should have never gotten to this point. Something should have been done before to protect our community. And so, when I look at it now, it's really tough because often times the restoration projects that are being put forth and put into place are leaving us out or it's helping us but maybe just to minimal amounts. I think it's just delaying the inevitable. And it even pains me to say that; that the future of our community does not look good right now. I don't know that there is enough money to be able to protect our communities and so we try our best to make our voices heard, to have our voices be heard, we try our best to make sure that when restoration projects or water control structures or levees are being built that they understand the importance and that we do have a voice and that we're included as much as we can be.

**BERGERON:** It's important that we save our native communities...



**ROBICHAUX:** That's right.

**BERGERON:** ...because they're the people that have been here the longest. They know things nobody else knows.

**ROBICHAUX:** That's right.

**BERGERON:** And your community has been very gracious about sharing information with the public and we certainly appreciate that. If you could tell us a little bit about what the previous generations and done to protect wetland and what you think your generation is doing and what you think your children's generation will have to do, sort of a generational perspective of what's been happening.

**ROBICHAUX:** [11:58] I've seen quite a bit of change over my life time with my Grandfather and just how respectful he was of the environment, seeing how respectful he was of only taking what he absolutely needed whether it was in the garden he was growing or whether it was his hunting or his rabbit hunting or his duck hunting, whatever it was, trapping, just taking what he needed to feed his family or to earn an income. You know, I've witnessed that with my father growing up as well. If you looked at poverty guidelines, I grew up poor, but I would have never identified myself as that because I grew up with a father who trawled for a living and if he didn't catch a lot my mom would put on a pot of beans and then we'd have fresh seafood to eat.

And so growing up and witnessing the respect that they've had for our environment you know and only taking what they absolutely need and so that's the environment I grew up in and hopefully that's the environment that I see my children are growing up in is understanding and appreciating what we have here and understanding the value of what it has. And I don't mean to just monetary value but just the richness that it is in our culture and our identity. And so, that's hopefully what we're passing on to the next generation and it's tough. Times change and people change and our younger generation changes as well but we host leadership camps, we host a number of activities in which we really try to engage them in what's happening. And I feel that it's really important that we engage them and that they learn what's happening and that they take up the cause because unfortunately, whatever position we're going to be in is going to be theirs to solve, to solve or to celebrate. And I would hope that it's a celebration because we are making great strides in protecting our coast and preserving our wetlands but the challenge is going to be theirs and so I encourage them as much as I can to get involved in the community to share with them the knowledge that I've had, whether it's traditional knowledge or things that I've witnessed just over the last few years with hurricanes and oil spills and the impacts it's had. And so hopefully they're going to be equipped and prepared and able to accept those challenges. I started school with the civil rights act. First year Indian children were allowed into regular public schools and so I have a high school education and so I've lead the tribe all those years with heart and passion with some educational background, but with heart and passion for our community. But, for our children, it's really important that they receive a strong educational background and have that heart and passion for their community because that's what it's going to take to be able to address those issues that our communities are facing and if our communities are going to survive.

**BERGERON:** And that's an interesting combination to be sure everybody has, the education and the heart to do those kinds of things. Tell us a little bit about what it was like during, sort of, the integration of schools and wetlands and plus a little bit about what that experience was like to be down here for all of that and how that affects kind of what your lifestyle was like.

**ROBICHAUX:** [15:27] So, I started school in the mid-60s. That was the first year Indian children were allowed into a public school. It was quite a challenge. Prior to that we had our own school which was an Indian school called the Settlement School. You could go up to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade so my father has but a 7<sup>th</sup> grade education. But my father is probably one of the most eloquent speakers and the brightest people I've ever met. Just the knowledge that he has in living off of the land, the knowledge that he has in our environment, in our wetlands, and so I look to him, often times, for that guidance. And so it was a challenge. We faced a lot of prejudices with that transition. It was not an easy task by any means. I had not found my voice yet and so I would go home crying and my Mother would come to school and, you know, make our stresses known, I guess to the principal to see how they could be addressed. And so it was an interesting time. I think it helped to shape the person that I am now. I think it helps me in my work with our youth because I can so understand where they're coming from; we have a common background. And so, it's a challenging time. When we work with our youth, often times we encourage them to have that strong educational background. And once we did a group resume activity and so they had to write down what type of activities they were involved in, in their school or in their

community. And I had one young man who was just sitting back, not saying a whole lot. And so you know, I said, “What is it you feel you would want to add to this group resume?” “Well, I’m not in any of these clubs and I don’t do that.” And so I said, “Well, how do you like to spend your time?” “Well, I love going trawling with my grandfather.” And I said, “Can you go trawling any time of the year?” “Oh, no, there’s the May-August season.” “And what about nets? And what about [indistinct] devices? And what about all of these other things? And it is better with a full moon or a new moon?” And he knew all of it and so I think it’s so important that we validate their cultural knowledge because that cultural knowledge is just as important sometimes as the other knowledge that people gain, you know, that our students gain. And so it’s been interesting to see walking in these children’s two worlds. To see how we have this appreciation for the environment, to see how we have an appreciation for the way we grew up. But at the same time to understand how times have changed but yet we always need to reflect back on what our coast and our environment means to us.

**BERGERON:** You’ve been an outstanding spokesperson for the Native American community, I think not just here in Louisiana, but in the nation, and I’m sure that members of your tribe are very happy that you’re willing to give that part of your life to the community. Well, were getting close to the interview, I kind of want to ask you, are there things that I haven’t asked you about that you think you want people to know about what’s happening here and to our Native American peoples and what they can do if they want to get engaged and how they can be involved?

**ROBICHAUX:** [18:44] I think everybody needs to look in the mirror and everybody needs to evaluate ‘what role am I playing, how can I become involved and active in helping to save the coast, you know, what role can I play’. Whether it’s a phone call to an elected official, whether it’s education if their teachers, or whatever it is, just to understand the plight that we’re struggling against. Often times we were just considered a hidden nation. Nobody really knew about the tribe or our people but, you know, we’ve been blessed in a sense by this curse we’re bearing of the impacts of the environment on our community, the impacts of coastal land loss on our communities. And so now it’s a call to action. You know, just don’t let us become something you’re reading about in the history books. You know, help us to make sure we can maintain our cultural identity, that we can maintain our communities for as long as possible so that way our children can grow up to enjoy the beauty that we grew up with.

**BERGERON:** That’s wonderful. I appreciate your time today and if we can do things to help you we want to be able to do that.

**ROBICHAUX:** Thank you.

**Tape Ends 19:56**