

Narrator: Al Levron
Interviewer: Jennifer Abraham Cramer
Transcriber: Joshua Coen

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JENNIFER ABRAHAM CRAMER: And here we are. Okay. Hi and thank you for coming. My name is Jennifer Abraham Cramer and I'm with the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History with LSU Libraries Special Collection and we are working with CWPPRA on this project that Susan just explained to you. So I am with Al Levron and it is November 14th 2013 and we are at Connoco Phillips office in Houma, Louisiana. So would you please state your full name and when and where you were born.

AL LEVRON: [00:29] Sure, my name is Al James Levron. I was born in 1955 in the city of Houma, Louisiana.

CRAMER: So you've lived here all your life?

LEVRON: I have, in the same house in fact. Fifty-eight years and never moved, yes.

CRAMER: So can you share with us a childhood memory that connects you to the wetlands or coastal Louisiana?

LEVRON: [00:52] Sure. My parents are both, uh...my mother's now 94 years old, she's still alive...but both of my parents were born and raised in Pointe-aux-Chenes, Louisiana. Uh, it was an agrarian type of situation. My father grew up in a family of thirteen. His entire family members were trappers and hunters and fishers. Uh, in fact, he was exempt from the war effort, the World War II effort, because he was a farmer and involved in that activity. And growing up, while my family, my parents moved away from Pointe-aux-Chenes in the 1930's, they followed the nutria, the fur trade. A lot of the people of the Pointe-aux-Chenes area moved over to the Barataria Bay and the Lafitte area. My father used to actually construct trenauses. That was one of his jobs with the company he worked for. And he was also a trapper. And then ultimately after the fur trade kind of played out, they moved back to the Terrebonne Parish, to Houma, but the connection to Pointe-aux-Chenes was always there. And again, when I was a kid we had a camp on, uh, Bayou Jean Lacroix which is right near Lake Chiens and we used to go there probably every weekend, fishing and things...again, when I was a very young child. And one of the interesting things...my father being from the old school, he actually built his own boat. He put his own very small four stroke engine, in-board engine, in there. I remember leaving from the landing and going to the camp with his very small put-put boat as I called it. And then these other, more modern, out-board motors would pass us up and it was so frustrating to me as a child, taking so long to get to the camp. But once we got there, you know, it was always good fishing. My father would trawl. My mother, as it turned out, was a good shot. She used to take the twenty-two and shoot what she called "marsh chien" and cook right off the dock and cook marsh chien for lunch.

CRAMER: So what...why are Louisiana's wetlands important to you?

LEVRON: [03:12] Well, certainly as my vocation, I am the Parish manager of Terrebonne Parish government. I also serve as the chairman of the Barataria Terrebonne National Estuary program. So, it's certainly very important to me in terms of the culture. Our economy, historically, was based on oil and gas in the marshes, the fisheries. And now, more and more, we are seeing their importance to hurricane protection. And one of my roles is that I'm intimately involved in our hurricane levee construction project. So, you know, we're attempting to build these levees to protect the citizenry but there is no marsh on the outside. So, you know, finding that fine line of building a levee that can be resilient and stay there for generations is quite a task.

CRAMER: Yes it is. Thank you so much. And so, in your opinion, what do we stand to lose without coastal restoration?

LEVRON: Well, in terms of Terrebonne Parish in Houma, Louisiana, I think we stand to lose the entire economy; the entire community as we know it of Terrebonne Parish. I mean you're looking at sea level rise of upwards to two to three feet over a hundred years, land loss subsidence. I mean the coast is literally at the city limits at the city of Houma. We are a bedroom community to the oil and gas industry. So, these activities fit hand in glove and without the coast, without a secure and resilient coast, again I'm looking down the line and I don't see Terrebonne or the city of Houma being a viable community in a hundred years without coastal restoration.

CRAMER: So, this is a related question, but what do you think that the rest of Louisiana and maybe even the rest of America needs to know about wetlands and coastal restoration?

LEVRON: [05:18] Well, it's...they do have a stake in this. And that's obviously something that we're attempting to reach out and get the people to understand that message. But without Louisiana, so goes the oil and gas industry, so goes the price of fuel, so goes "let 'em freeze in the northeast" so to speak. So, I think everyone has a stake in this: the fisheries, the abundance of fisheries, the fresh fish, the fresh shrimp. That may seem to be a small area. Oh, I can go get other fish. But again I think it's what we all expect in America to have fresh seafood, reliable cheap energy, and we fulfill that goal.

SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: This Susan Testroet-Bergeron, CWPPRA Outreach. Al, let's talk about the next generation. What do you want to tell the next generation about coastal Louisiana and coastal restoration?

LEVRON: Well, if I could be very frank, you know, sometimes my coworkers call me Dr. No. I'm typically pessimistic unless someone can prove otherwise. And my job and my profession is to promote the continued restoration but personally, I don't have a whole high degree of confidence that we're gonna succeed in this effort. Unfortunately, and again I'm being very frank, my children I'm suggesting that for the long term they look elsewhere for the long

term. And that's the reality our situation. I'm hoping I'm wrong. I'm gonna continue to promote the advancement of the projects. I just don't have a real good vibe that it's gonna work out.

CRAMER: So, how did you get involved in coastal restoration?

LEVRON: [07:20] That's an interesting thing. By happenstance, actually. For years, I was the director of our environmental program here in Terrebonne. Primarily, our waste water program. We were building sewer plants and things. And in that profession, and Susan's probably heard this story before but I'll relate it, in trying to promote Terrebonne Parish's sewer system, I was actively reviewing federal regulations as it were being drafted. And one day in 1986 I happened to run across that the Clean Water Act was up for re-authorization and there was an opportunity to propose areas to be considered for the national estuary program. And I actually...and again, I was sitting on an island on this thing...I remember calling Kerry St. Pe' who is a friend of mine at the time. I said "hey, I got a great idea. We got to get an act to congress to create Terrebonne Parish as a national estuary program." He thought I was nuts. I was very young and naïve. I didn't know what I could or couldn't do. So in fact, I scheduled a meeting with then newly elected Senator John Breaux. He had not even taken his office yet. He was in senator Bennet Johnson's old office and I met with him and I presented the concept to him. And he was enlightened and within a few weeks I was getting a call from Dr. Don Bosch from LUMCON and apparently the seed of the idea...I don't know if it was only me...but just again, the timeliness of it, LUMCON was integrated and involved in the concept of developing this comprehensive plan to submit a proposal to the president and in fact ultimately

Barataria...the project that I envisioned, I was very self-serving, was Terrebonne Parish. But the people who had a much better understanding of this thought that the Terrebonne-Barataria complex was a better fit. And, in fact, the proposal was Barataria-Terrebonne, which was ultimately approved by the governor, accepted by EPA, and now is one of the nineteen national estuary programs. So from water quality, where I started, obviously when we got into the development of the proposal it became obvious that hydrologic modification land loss was the linchpin to whole issue, and hence I started moving more into interest into the restoration end.

CRAMER: Alright, thank you. And is there any other question you'd like to add?

BERGERON: [10:18] No. I'm glad he told that story.

CRAMER: Is there anything you'd like to add?

LEVRON: Nope. thank you so much for your time.

CRAMER: Thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

[Tape Ends 10:31]