

Narrator: Eddie Joseph Sapia, Jr.
Interviewer: Susan Testroet- Bergeron and Lane Lefort
Transcriber: Taylor Suir

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SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: My name is Susan Testroet-Bergeron. I am interviewing Mr. Eddie Sapia about his memories and experiences concerning Louisiana's coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted at Mr. Eddie's home on Friday, June 22, 2012 at 9:40 in the morning. Mr. Sapia's home is where we are doing our video. Do you understand that portions of this tape and the pictures that we're going to take will be used in a variety of publications?

EDDIE SAPIA, JR: What you want me to say? Yes.

BERGERON: Yes. [Laughs] Thank you. Alright, thank you for speaking with us today. And we've signed all of our consent forms and we're going to get some basic information from you first and then we're going to talk about your memories. So, start by stating your full name.

SAPIA: Eddie Joseph Sapia, Jr.

BERGERON: And what is your date of birth and where were you born?

SAPIA: [0:59] March the 27th, 1934. My place of birth was in New Orleans.

BERGERON: Good. And where did you grow up, Eddie?

SAPIA: Right here. [in Lafitte, LA]

BERGERON: [Laughs]

SAPIA: On this bayou. On Barataria.

BERGERON: Very good. So tell us a little bit about a childhood memory that connects you with all of these beautiful wetlands.

SAPIA: [1:24] Good Gracious. My grandfather...I used to follow him. When I quit school and went to work for him on boats, driving his boats at an early age. And when I wasn't doing that I was trapping and fishing and trawling and everything and the fishing lines. And that's why I love this place.

BERGERON: So tell us...you say you grew up here, where did you stay as an adult?

SAPIA: What's that?

BERGERON: Where did you go as an adult? I mean, where was your adult life?

SAPIA: Here.

BERGERON: Here. So, tell us what you did here in your adult life that's connected to....

SAPIA: [2:07] Well, I got older, huh with trawling and all that. Then I got married in '60 and I made my living here. I lived on Barataria. I lived on there for a while with me and my wife and then I bought this place from a fellow by the name Banker. Royce Banker sold me this land and then I built my home here.

BERGERON: So when we started today you showed me some pictures of your trawl boats.

SAPIA: Yes.

BERGERON: So, tell me a little bit about what it was like to go trawling and how your family life was.

SAPIA: [2:50] If heaven would be that good, I don't mind. That was the best. Whenever I get out trawling, it makes me feel just so wonderful.

BERGERON: Ok, so tell me about, like, let's say I've never been trawling, I've never been. So tell me a little bit about what it would be like if I could go on a trawling trip with you...

SAPIA: What it would be like? You'd enjoy your life. Honest. You sure would. Because one you're out there it's a different feeling altogether. It's not like going to the city of New Orleans or something like that. To me, I'd rather be out in that Gulf than anywhere.

BERGERON: So when would you leave the house?

SAPIA: [3:35] Like, well, how you mean?

BERGERON: You'd leave on like a Monday and you'd go out....

SAPIA: It don't make no different days. Whenever we're ready to leave you just leave; you go out. Like me, I used a stay six, seven days out then I'd come back home. So all my shrimping and all that right there.

BERGERON: So, how many people...what kind of boat did you have? How many people would go with you?

SAPIA: Well my name on my boat was the Special Lady, the last one. And my wife and my daughter was my crew. And we went out and stood, like I say, eight, nine, or six days or seven days and we went all over. We went towards Delcambre, towards Mississippi, most of the mouth of the River. And here and Delcambre were the places we most liked to fish.

BERGERON: When you weren't trawling, what would you do?

SAPIA: Different....I used to work for Wyatt's Construction. When I was younger I used to drive speed boats for different companies.

BERGERON: So, When we were inside, you showed me a picture of a big ole' alligator head. Tell me about that.

SAPIA: [4:53] I used to fish that. I fished that for around seven years, fishing alligators. And that's pretty good. I love it.

BERGERON: So, I've never been fishing alligators either. Tell me about what it's like to fish alligators.

SAPIA: Well, we go out, put poles, we used to use bamboo canes, and you put in on an angle and you put a clothes pin on the end and then you put a line with a piece of chicken. And when you hook him, the next morning, like me and my brother-in-law used to go out on the boat and get it. He'd pull the alligator in and I'd shoot him. Then we'd pull him in the boat.

BERGERON: So, let me ask you this, I see this on T.V., all these alligator hunters, is it like that or was it different?

SAPIA: Well, you ever watch them people, them alligator hunters?

BERGERON: Yes. Was it like that?

SAPIA: Yea. Sort a like that but I didn't do it like they did.

BERGERON: It wasn't as crazy.

SAPIA: No. I just fished different, that's all.

BERGERON: [Laughs] Ok. If you've lived here all your life, have you seen these wetlands change?

SAPIA: If what?

BERGERON: If you've lived here your whole life, have you seen these wetlands change. Are they different than they used to be?

SAPIA: Change? Oh, yes ma'am.

BERGERON: Tell me about it.

SAPIA: [6:14] Terrible. Wetlands... When we used to go out we'd go out let's say and stay home for the winter when you went back out so much loss of the land was gone. Sometime you wouldn't even hardly know where you were at. I mean, seriously, and then with the radars on our boats we used to have them on and you'd look at that and you'd look at where the land used to be, nothing but water. And I mean terrible. I mean terrible losses. But, that's the way it is.

BERGERON: You told me you worked with Marnie Winter.

SAPIA: Well, I used to be on the boat with her in New Orleans, with Marnie Winter. And all it was, we'd get around and see all the areas that need to be done and we'd vote on it. And after we'd vote on it then they'd put in it. Sometime it'd go through and sometime it didn't. Most of the time it were very hard to get things to be done, you know.

BERGERON: It's expensive.

SAPIA: [7:29] Yeah.

BERGERON: It's expensive.

SAPIA: But like I told Marnie and them a long time ago. If we did want to fix this place up with the Mississippi River it's the best place in the world. You got all the sand in it and they could use it with piping. And they can pipe it all over, anywhere they want to go. But, they were supposed to be doing that right now towards, going towards Empire.

BERGERON: Yeah, they're still going to do that.

SAPIA: Yeah, I know. I heard they were.

BERGERON: We're going to show this video to people sort of all over the nation, and there are a lot of people who haven't been here, don't know what it's like here, what makes this place so much different.

SAPIA: Well, it's not different to us. It's almost the same for us. But I mean we love it. It's all like I tell you, Cajun country. And we fish and we do that. We don't notice all the difference in the land and all that because we know it's gone. And heck, when you get out there and when you go in the bays and the lakes you used to go in before and then you look at the place and you say, "Ghall, what happened to it since the little while I was home?", and that's the way it was. I just washed away. And it's like, I used to talk to a lot of people with Marnie and them and it was like that all over not just over here but it's everywhere in Louisiana. And I'm almost sure y'all know about all over by Lafourche. You said you was up that way.

BERGERON: Yes.

SAPIA: [9:20] And up in them areas, terrible losses.

BERGERON: We're trying to record how the jobs and stuff have changed here. How many people are still fishing out here?

SAPIA: Oh Lordy. We got about half of the people fishing.

BERGERON: Why do you think only half are fishing?

SAPIA: Shortage of the seafood. Shortage of the price of the shrimp. They don't pay us nothing. Crab. This man right here fishes crab, Murphy, but they don't pay hardly nothing for crab. They don't pay nothing for seafood, for shrimp. And that's the bad part. That's the worstest part.

BERGERON: Why do you think the prices are low?

SAPIA: [10:09] Don't know ma'am. Don't know that.

BERGERON: Ok. There's a lot of work that CWPPRA is doing to restore the wetlands out in Barataria Bay and we were talking about over in down by Lafourche, all over the coast we're trying to restore and we know that the problem is way bigger than the monies we have to solve the problem.

SAPIA: Yes ma'am.

BERGERON: So, Why do you stay teaching people? I mean you're teaching us today about what's happening here. Why are you still engaged? Why are you still teaching people?

SAPIA: Well, I'm hoping that y'all could do something but what you saying and you listen on the news the shortage of money that they can't do it. And I mean some places they do it and other places they don't. It's just the reasons I see when I'm on a boat that whatever they think they need the most that's where they try to get the stuff at. And whenever they do this, just

like I told you, when we go out there and we see the shortage of the land just like Lake Salvador. Lake Salvador since I was a younger man, I'd say its twice as big as it used to be. And by a pirogue that's all together now. There's no more land in the middle of it. It's all gone. And I guess it don't help out anything else.

BERGERON: So, how do you think we can get the nation to know that we need their help?

SAPIA: [11:53] I don't know ma'am. I don't know that. I wish I did. I wish I did but all it is, to me, they work from inside going out. They should work from the Gulf coming in. Fix the Gulf for all the sea coasts first then it would help out a lot better.

BERGERON: Yeah. And we're doing some coastal restoration...

SAPIA: Yes ma'am. I know that.

BERGERON: ...on the barrier islands. You're right. We need to keep after it. You talked a little bit about...I want to go back to one of the stories you started kind of trawling. You showed us some pictures of Blessing of the Fleet. Tell us a little bit about what Blessing of the Fleet was in the past and how it is now.

SAPIA: Blessing of the Fleet was a big, big thing at or one time. This year was the most boats I've ever seen. But most of the time there's hardly no boats at all to get blessed.

BERGERON: So, what happens at the Blessing of the Fleets?

SAPIA: I don't know. It's just that people just don't go to it anymore. And the big boats, where we got two boats we might have had fifty boats.

BERGERON: So tell me what the boats look like when they come and where do they bless them and tell me about that stuff.

SAPIA: **13:06]** They come... well they come up from they houses just like at this house. You'll leave from your wharf and you'll go all out and they'll run all the way to Lafitte and they'll turn around and they'll come back and by the time they get back by the bridge, then the priest start the Blessing of the Boats.

BERGERON: And how did the boats look?

SAPIA: And then they go from here to Lake Salvador, some of the boats. And then they turn around and some people go swimming. And some people just come back and go back to they wharf.

BERGERON: So how do the boats look? What do the boats look like? We're going to take a picture.

SAPIA: Well, they're beautiful. They are all freshly painted. They all decorated and they got a lot of music on some of the big boats. And they going to have a good time.

BERGERON: Did you trap? Did you used to trap?

SAPIA: Yes ma'am I used to trap. I trapped muskrat, minx, otters, just about any animal that they had that would catch in a blurry.

BERGERON: Tell me about a season of trapping. Tell me a little bit about what that was like.

SAPIA: [14:00] Well our season used to be like, I forget now, around November going in after...sometimes the winter would be longer and what we did, we put in for I don't know how you'd say it, put it in for a longer season and they would grant us that and we could trap a little longer.

BERGERON: So if you were going trapping out in a day, what would you come back with? On average, what would it be like? What would you bring back?

SAPIA: If you're trapping muskrat you'd say like me, we never used to use over three hundred traps and we caught fifty, seventy-five rats maybe more than that.

BERGERON: Where you would sell them?

SAPIA: [14:57] Oh, we would skin everything right there and we'd hang them on... We'd have like a line stuck in the ground with some wood and nails and you put them on the mold. I used to have all that. I wish I had it, I could show you. Then you put them on that mold then you hang them on that nail then the sun dries 'em. And once the sun dries them you take them off and you stack them all in boxes or in sacks. And once you did that then you'd brush them and all that to make them much prettier and then you'd get a guy come down and he'd come make a sale. If the wasn't satisfied you wouldn't sell them.

BERGERON: So how often would the guy come to get the nutria?

SAPIA: I never did fool too much with nutria like I told you, I didn't care too much to fool with them.

BERGERON: Sorry. The muskrat, how often would they come to buy? How often would they come to...

SAPIA: [indistinct] they had three or four people along the bayou that would buy them like Little Gilbert Pisante used to do it and one time but he passed away a long time. And they had Fuzzy. They call Fuzzy down in Laffite, he did a lot of that.

BERGERON: So how long would you have to keep all your rats before you would sell them?

SAPIA: [16:15] Oh, Sometimes a month, sometimes two, three months. And whenever they come it all depend. See, like if you had a earlier winter and it was a little bit warmer, we'd call that a flat rat because it wouldn't have much hair and they wouldn't pay as much money. Then when you had the colder it would be the much prettier the hair would be and more hair so then it would get... you had a more choice muskrat. Most all the animals, most all of them, any one of them when there was a colder winter they got better money.

BERGERON: So let me see if I can kind of summarize this. You trawled, you killed alligators, you killed muskrat, is there anything else that you did as an adult in these wetlands to make money?

SAPIA: No, I don't believe. Nothing else.

BERGERON: Nothing else you want to talk about?

SAPIA: No. Nothing else I would do.

LANE LEFORT: Would y'all eat what y'all caught?

SAPIA: Plenty times.

BERGERON: So, what would y'all eat from you know that y'all would catch?

SAPIA: [17:29] Well, sometimes we would catch ducks in the trap but we use to always hunt ducks at part of the day when we wasn't doing nothing, in the evening or the morning. And we'd eat that. Oh lord, any wild animal we would eat, practically. I used to eat muskrat. Very good. Then we would eat rabbits. We'd catch plenty of that in the traps, caught marsh hens, they caught, like I said, the ducks that you'd clean and everything and then you'd have your meal the next day.

LEFORT: You didn't have to go to the supermarket for your meats?

SAPIA: We didn't care for a bunch of that. We had our own. My dad would raise pig when they got big enough. When it got cold enough he'd kill that. And all that people, each one would raise one and they'd kill one because we didn't have no freezer boxes that you could put all that. When you done it you had to cook it. Now, my daddy had a deal, he used to have a great big crocks, great big round crocks and all the pork fat they would get they would put in them crocks and in the winter time come, they'd pull those ducks, shove it down there and you could keep it a year or better without no trouble. And it tastes just as good as it tastes when you got it.

BERGERON: Humm. I've never heard of that.

SAPIA: Yeah. We used to take...my daddy used to put it in here and they'd put plyboard cover over them three, four crocks and it was like his freezer. We didn't know nothing about

freezers but you know that was the preserver. Now, my grandfather used to have a smokehouse. And he used to smoke a lot of his stuff.

BERGERON: Lane, you have any more?

LEFORT: Yeah, we had spoke before and you used to tell me when you were a child and you'd go out with your parents trawling and stuff like that.

SAPIA: Well, I went out but not that much because when I was big enough to trawl or go anywhere like that I went out on my own boat.

LEFORT: But did y'all live on the boat and everything when y'all went out there?

SAPIA: [19:45] Well, the only boat I lived on is this big boat I got now with me and my wife in that. The only before...actually I showed you them Lafitte Skiff, well we used to trawl in that. We'd go out and make three drags and come home. Wouldn't do it like the people do it today, wouldn't drag night and day all the time. We'd just drag and make enough money, what we thought we need and then we'd go back the next day.

LEFORT: What's the earliest memory you have being on the boats especially before motors and all that.

SAPIA: [20:20] Well, my grandfather, they used to go out, and he told me they used to go out like to Grande Isle and that's where they used to have like they called the Ice Boats. They used to go with seins and they'd go pull that on the sea coast and he told me when they pulled that seen in sometimes they had enough shrimp to feed three or four boats.

BERGERON: Wow!

SAPIA: And he told me that's what they used to do to in them days. And him...they used to...plenty of people used to live at Little Lake. They didn't live down on the bayou here. They lived in Little Lake. And my Grandfather told me he had a boat that never even had a motor in it. And he'd get to like him and two, three guys and they'd take a pole and they just walk from the bow to the stern pushing it, come all the way to Barataria, when they'd get down there to Laffite and Barataria they had a little row going to Harvey Canal like along the bayou and they'd throw rope to the fella down on the end on a mule and the mule would pull them all the way to Harvey.

LEFORT: How many generations of fishermen in your family?

SAPIA: Oh, in my family..

LEFORT: Your grandfather was first?

SAPIA: My grandfather, my daddy, and me. None of my grandsons or nothing was trawlers.

BERGERON: Had they ever been? Have you taken your grandsons trawling?

SAPIA: [21:49] Oh, yeah. They come with me now like that you know but for doing it they self they didn't do it.

BERGERON: Talking about your grandsons, if you want to give the next generation some advice on living here, and the culture and the people, what kind of advice would you give the next generation?

SAPIA: Humm. I don't know babe. I wouldn't want him to be a fisherman. Not no more, unless they'd be getting good price. And I think maybe, sooner or later, somebody going to wake up and they going to pay better prices and all that. It will still be a good place for fishing. We've got guys that fishing right now. They fish with skimmers but it's so hard for them to make money. They can catch a few shrimp but by the time they pay the expense and everything they ain't got all that nothing for themselves. And that's the hard part about it and that's the only reason. I got a grandson and he's in college right now and I hope he don't never mess up because he's going to be a wonderful deal. He's going to be a doctor's pharmacy. So he's going to be alright.

BERGERON: It's sure going to be different here when the next generation chooses...

SAPIA: [23:25] Oh yeah, because most of the people I know most of they kids they not trawl. Just a few of the boys, you know, the older boys and all that. That still have boats and getting them build even. They got some guys getting them build right now even.

BERGERON: A lot of us eat that sea food. A lot of us eat the shrimp and we eat the crabs and we need the fish...

SAPIA: Oh, I'm telling you, yes ma'am. I tell you what, if I could do it tomorrow, if somebody would say, "Eddie, here's a boat", thirty-five, forty foot boat, I'd take it and I'd go out trawling again. That's what I'd do.

LEFORT: What makes it different living here to living somewheres else?

SAPIA: Well something, when we live here we know what we doing. But I got a son-in-law that lives in South Carolina, got one in North Carolina. I don't believe I could live up there. I mean I'm too old too for a job or anything but I mean for say to go make a living, I would be able to go do that. Even if I was young I don't believe I could do that. When you live here, this is like branded in you, this stuff is, you can't leave Louisiana. Plenty of people leave Louisiana and they wind up coming back.

BERGERON: That's true. That's very true.

SAPIA: And plenty people say, “Man, how you like that with the hurricane?” and I say look up north, look all the tornadoes, look up wherever you want to go. There’s problems wherever you want to go. You can’t get away from problems. So what we do. See, me, I don’t even have insurance on this house. And they say, “What you going to do if something happen?” and I say, “I’ll pull my tools out. I’ll go to work.”

BERGERON: Yep. I think that’s part of who we are here.

SAPIA: [25:41] That’s why I say. That’s why you love it so much. You do that.

LEFORT: Is there anything you’d like to say about anything?

SAPIA: Ain’t too much. I rather y’all asking me that way it make me think of something that I said, you know.

LEFORT: Ok, how about when you were a kid going to school, what’d you do then?

SAPIA: All I did, I was living right there by the bridge. School house was there, no more than half a mile, not even a half a mile and we’d walk to school and go back home.

LEFORT: At that time education was kind of a balance, learning how to read and stuff but it was just as important to try and make a living on the land.

SAPIA: [26:23] Right, absolutely. Well most of the guys that was learning when they thought they's kids was old enough, all the people I know wanted they's kids to go to school. Like me, my daddy begged me to go to school but I couldn't learn nothing man. I'd go...I guess my mind was too much in doing the other stuff.

BERGERON: Everybody has different skills. Everybody knows different things.

SAPIA: That's right. Absolutely.

BERGERON: I look out and behind you I see some trawl boats and the bayou and I see some fish. It's very peaceful for me to be here.

SAPIA: Oh, God...

BERGERON: Tell me how you feel. It's peaceful to me....

SAPIA: Me? How I feel?

BERGERON: Yeah.

SAPIA: [27:13] There ain't no place better. This is the best place in the world for me. I mean I just love it and I guess that's why, been here all my life and I made a wonderful living. Have no complaints for sure.

BERGERON: [Laughs] Well thank you very much. I appreciate you making time for us today.

Tape Ends [27:48]