

**Narrator: Ron Boustany**  
**Interviewer: Jennifer Abraham Cramer**  
**Transcriber: Joshua Coen**

**14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013**

**JENNIFER ABRAHAM CRAMER:** Okay, thank you for joining us today. I am Jennifer Abraham Cramer. I'm with the LSU Libraries Special Collections T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History with uh...and we are here partnering with CWPPRA and I am here today with Ron Boustany. Did I say that right? And we are...it's November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and we are at Connoco Phillips in Houma, Louisiana. So we'll just start with your full name and when and where you were born.

**RONALD BOUSTANY:** [00:23] Yeah, my name is Ron Boustany. I'm with the USDA National Resources Conservation Service and I work in the CWPPRA program doing project management and, uh, technical support across the board on biological issues. Uh, I'm born and raised in Lafayette, LA right here in the heart of the Cajun Country! And, uh, and you know, avid hunter and fisher, I guess. Not avid anymore as much as I'd like to, I guess you could say. But, very familiar and comfortable with being out in the marshes and the swamps and the lakes and everything pretty much my whole life. So, you know, working in coastal restoration, it's a natural fit for me.

**CRAMER:** Alright. Um, do you want to get comfortable? Make sure, because we'll be here for like a couple of minutes. And where do you live now?

**BOUSTANY:** I live in Lafayette. And the office I work for, USDA, it's in...I call it the Wetlands Center Complex. It's sort of the universities, uh, research park for ULL. And uh, I work in the NOAA building there. We have, you know, all of the different agencies in there. A lot of different agencies represented. And across our parking lot is the National Wetlands Research Center, which is USGS.

**CRAMER:** And can you share with us a childhood memory that connects you to the wetlands?

**BOUSTANY:** [01:56] Well, gosh. There's a lot. But I'll tell ya, I always loved to fish. And my dad occasionally would take me out to ponds and stuff like that. And I just, you know, going out into the Atchafalaya basin when I was a young boy, we used to go out there and we used to rent a boat off the levee. You know they have the boat McGees and Whiskey Bay and all these different little businesses? And we'd just row out there and I tell ya what, best thing ever, you know. I couldn't find anything that comes close to the enjoyment I had when I was doing that as a kid probably, you know, ten or eleven years old. Uh, you know, over the years, though, the passion, the love for those environments, it's sort of as you start to learn...you know, even when you're that age you don't really say "Well, you know, I'm gonna be a wetlands scientist"...but as you go through your education, you get into college and you start learning about the different areas of study...um, it just sort of...it's kind of a mix of a natural gravitation towards it but also opportunity that comes along. You know the wetland, the coastal wetland issues, started to become big and while I was in college, you know, taking courses we start talking about it. And over time you sort of evolve yourself into saying, you know, I think I'd like

to maybe get into understanding that. And uh...Just a series of things happened, you know? Dr. Robert Twilley came to UL: A brand new wetlands scientist, which is a brand new science in general. And I started working for him and his lab and he taught me a lot of the things early on. Offered me a chance to get a Master's degree. Did that work, and from then on it was history, you know? I was fascinated with the science, all the different aspects of it. Not only just the restoration, you know? The restoration came over time focusing on restoration, because you really gotta learn something, know something, to rebuild it. But a lot of my interest in those early days was just discovery of the fascination of all of the aspects of the wetlands that we had not...we had just begun to understand. Wetlands have had a controversial, I guess, initiation into the world, because...as a science...because, you know, wetlands have the...probably the original looking understandings of wetlands came out of trying to explain to people why you don't drain and fill wetlands. You know, the 404 Clean Water Act...and that's the more controversial aspect. You know, a lot of that was the types of things we were looking at is, you know, why are they valuable? How do we explain this to the public in a way that they understand and can appreciate like we do? And over time you know as you're working in that career you see an opportunity to actually have an impact on something as massive as the coastal wetlands of Louisiana. Um, it kind of inspired my move to go from a research biologist looking at wetland areas to actually trying to go in and see if we could make some differences. And that's where I am today. We're trying to, you know, do these things.

**CRAMER:** So tell us a little bit about where you are today and what it is exactly that are some of the projects and why they are important to you.

**BOUSTANY:** [05:43] It's one of the most circuitous routes you can imagine to where you find yourself in this kind of a career. You can't imagine, you know, what comes out of something like this till you just sort of take the road. You don't see what's up there ahead of you but you take it. And you kind of trust your heart on it in some ways. But I'm real fortunate. I feel fortunate to be where I am today. You know, learning first some of the basics, you don't really have a good appreciation. Then, over time, you start to actually see those things. I remember as a young scientist: When you actually saw something that you theorize to be true, it was a phenomenal revelation. That's what every scientist looks for is a revelation of something that they theorized to be true. And you put it to the test and you see it come true. And that's what motivates us, I think. But uh, you know in early days you have a lot of the theory, the book knowledge. But when you start seeing that some of these things that you're thinking...and not only just maybe testing the book knowledge, but you're actually creating on your own in your mind. And you're saying well if this is true, I bet you, you know, this could be true as well and you know over the years people start to appreciate somewhat your knowledge and ask for your advice. And that's a great feeling too. But then you also start to develop ideas that go a lot further and I think that's what coastal restoration has allowed me to do. You know, I develop...I've been involved in just project management, but I've also been involved in developing some of the models we use to make predictions on what some of these projects do. And that to me, oh my God...you know, the project management is kind of the necessity. It's the job. The other stuff is a dream, to be involved, to be creative like that, you know? To be able to develop something and test it out and see it actually work. It's like, I don't know how it got there but you know, it just led you there. You just do it out of, you know...for us, it's you know, "where is the need?" The need is there and you feel like you have the knowledge to do it. You

can actually pull something off like that. It's a good feeling. You know, the science challenge is definitely the foundation of all of this and we try to use that to accomplish things for the public the best we can. So that's the objective. But, kind of the underlying motivation is just the natural curiosity in developing your mind and your knowledge and the enjoyment of doing that work.

**CRAMER:** So if you had to explain to just a random person why the Louisiana wetlands are important not only to Louisiana but also to the rest of the country, what would you say?

**BOUSTANY:** [08:53] You know, I mean, there's these kind of far reaching, far out there kind of things like it's a beautiful place and there's a lot of wildlife and stuff but when it comes down to the basic bare bones understanding, it comes down to the economics of it. This thing is, I mean, these wetlands...one of the things I know as a scientist and I knew this as a young scientist when I started to realize the value that we're getting out of these wetland systems. And we used to get people coming to the Wetland Center and I'd tell 'em, "you know there's four major things wetlands are important for to wildlife." Oh everybody knows that one. But, you know, it's managing water: kind of a place for water to go. That transition between the up land and the low land and the water. You have this thing in the middle. But the other things, the water quality aspects of it and, um, what's the other one I'm blanking out on? Uh, you know, just the, it's like...I used to say...and early on, some of the early scientist of the wetlands used to describe them as the kidneys of the earth. Well these functions are incredibly difficult to put a value on but they're priceless when it comes down to it. You look at every major waterway, every lake or stream in the country, almost all of them have a water quality problem. And it's

not...we're not talking about toxic chemicals, we're talking about things as simple as nitrogen and phosphorous. And you know...what happens in a wetland is it basically is a beautiful natural kind of transition. You have a high area. Water rains on it. It seeks out and finds a low area. And then that fills up and maybe trickles out into the aquatic areas, the open waters. And these areas have naturally evolved into something that can actually purify the water. It's so perfectly natural. So what we did over the years, we took those things out. We basically, you know, filled them in. These mosquitos in 'em, they're just nasty areas, you know? Fill 'em in, develop something, put a drain pipe in, get the water from upland to the river, immediately bypass these wetlands, and we didn't start figuring out what the problems were with doing that till, you know, after its done. And you start looking at that, piecing it together, and you go "ohhhh" you know? It's not...it wasn't quite as obvious what these things actually function in the landscape for us so, those are the kinds of things, like putting...when you're going back to your original question, what was the value...I mean, it's almost priceless when you look at commercial recreational fishing, uh, even the oil and gas exploration, the kinds of things that go on out there. But, uh, it has an enormous function that has a value that is very difficult to place a value on. But we have done some when you look at commercial takes and the amount of use in recreation and everything else people are doing out there. If you add it up, it's just a huge amount of money. And that all trickles back up into the rest of the country. We supply most of the seafood in the country, probably. So, that's where your, you know, primary value is to the rest of the country.

**SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON:** This is Susan, CWPPRA Public Outreach. I have a question for you Ron. As a scientist, you talked a little bit about the great feeling as a scientist that you get from creating the work you've done on modeling; the cutting edge stuff. How do

wetlands help build curiosity for youth. I mean, you've spent a part of your life making that happen.

**BOUSTANY:** [12:55] Yeah, well that's a good one too. Um, it's sometimes has been hard to translate some of these thoughts and feelings to youth, because it's not a real obvious thing, you know? I've tried to do it and I've spoken to 'em quite a bit. I mean I used to go out of my way at the Wetlands Center whenever Susan Hoover would say "Hey, we got a class coming in" and I would say "Hey, I'm your man" you know? But one of the things I liked to do when I would do it, I would like to get direct feedback and see if I could get them to define a wetland for me without ever doing it before. So I would kinda describe what you see, you know, with these areas and I would get them out. It's amazing. A kindergartener probably could almost come up as fast with the definition of the wetlands as a college student. My big secret that used to make me laugh is that I'd use the same presentation! I'd just describe it differently. But these kids are amazing. I even did it to a preschool class and the kids are just amazing. I try to help them to understand, you know, what they're looking at and translate it into something. And then I kinda tell 'em what it's all about: what it actually does to some extent. So it's, your start really fundamental with the little ones and you bring them up. And I think it helps them to, uh, be more aware of their surroundings, you know, and understand that there are differences. You know, I tell 'em about the vegetation, you know? I say well, "what's in your backyard?" Oh, there's, you know, grass and stuff. Then I show 'em pictures of wetland plants and I say, you know, would you... I look at a big thing of cat tails and I say "would you be comfortable walking in there?" "Oh no." Well, why? Have you ever thought about that? And, uh you know, you get it out of them that, well if that plant's there it's probably muddy, you know? That's hydric soils. I

mean, it's describing hydrology. So vegetation is the key to tell you what's actually going on. So you build it like that and you start seeing little light bulbs go off. It's neat to see that, you know?

**BERGERON:** You've done a phenomenal job of educating people, like you say, all the way from pre-school, all the way through your modeling some of the really good professionals here in Louisiana. So I appreciate not only your work in the CWPPRA program, but your commitment to education. You've been really great.

**BOUSTANY:** [15:39] That's part of the deal. Um, one of the things I always set out was, you know, I'll tell ya...stereotypically, scientists are just terrible communicators. A lot of them are considered introverts. You walk into any science, uh, operation, be it at a university, and some of these cats don't wanna talk to anybody, right? I thought, you know, we need to bridge that somehow. We need to communicate, like, the whole wetland issue with developers bothered me a lot because...it's like...you know, we need to make them understand how to work with this, not bash them over the head! The way to get people on your side is to convince them. And I thought that that's where we needed to be working towards. I've actually given presentations to development groups and various folks and I swear when you explain this stuff to 'em, they start...it starts clicking and they say "mmmm yeah. Mhm. I understand that a little better." Heck, why didn't someone explain that to 'em a long time ago? You know, rather than just slap a law on 'em and say "you have to do this!" You know, we need to explain things better. That's our job. We need to do that.

**CRAMER:** Outreach.

**BOUSTANY:** [16:56] Yeah.

**CRAMER:** Well do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

**BOUSTANY:** Oh no. I'm open to questions at any time.

**CRAMER:** Do you have any questions Susan?

**BERGERON:** No, I think he did a great job. I really appreciate you taking time to talk to us, Ron.

**BOUSTANY:** Yeah, sure. No problem. My pleasure.

**[Tape Ends 17:15]**