

Narrator: Ronald Paille
Interviewer: Jennifer Abraham Cramer
Transcriber: Joshua Coen

14th November, 2013

JENNIFER ABRAHAM CRAMER: Hi and thank you for joining us today.

RONALD PAILLE: You're welcome.

CRAMER: I am Jennifer Abraham Cramer and I'm with the LSU Libraries Special Collections T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History and we are also working with CWPPRA to do this project that Susan just explained to you. And so we do appreciate you coming today. And today is November 14th, the year 2013. So we will just start with a really easy one. When and where were you born and what is your full name?

PAILLE: [00:28] Uh, my full name is Ronald Paille. Paille is French for straw. And actually paille finne, if you know there is certain marsh grass, paille finne? It's spelled the same way "paille." That's "fine straw" is what that means. And so I'm related to paille finne. But I was born in Baton Rouge in 1955.

CRAMER: Okay. Thank you. And, tell us a little bit about what you do for a living and, um, what your occupation is.

PAILLE: [00:59] Well, I work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in coastal restoration and I work with, uh, Corps of Engineers civil works projects, restoration projects as well as hurricane protection projects where we help them assess benefits and impacts, but I also worked in the CWPPRA program from the earliest years, proposing and evaluating restoration projects there.

CRAMER: And where do you live now?

PAILLE: Right now I live a little west of Lafayette near the Duson area.

CRAMER: Ok, thank you. And can you share with us a childhood memory that connects you to Louisiana's wetlands?

PAILLE: Oh for sure. Uh, I was just talking on the drive down about how we used to go fishing out of Dulac and the weather would be so cold I could hardly turn the reel of the fishing rod. But we would be catchin' specks, two at a time. And we'd take two ice chests out on the boat and fill 'em both up and bring 'em back. And the next day was spent cleaning fish and going fishing. And so fish fries was a big part of my childhood memory.

CRAMER: And how have you seen the wetlands change as you've gotten older?

PAILLE: [02:15] Uh, well you know, back in those days, as a kid, I didn't remember so much about the wetlands cause I wasn't really studying them but I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service in '87 and, uh, there are some areas that I've worked in continuously since then and I guess one area is the marshes north of lake Boudreaux. And, uh, those marshes, once you got away from the lake, were fresh marshes. They were wax myrtle thickets. Bull tong was thick thick in those marshes. And those fresh-end communities are completely gone. They've been replaced by open water. We had even landed a helicopter on the marsh out there before. And that marsh is gone. It's open water. But, uh, some of those areas have undergone tremendous changes. There were cypress trees, uh, extending out towards the edge of the fresh marsh. A lot of those trees are gone. Some were dead back in the 80s but most were alive. But very little of them are left now. It's undergone so much change.

CRAMER: So what is it that makes wetlands important to not only Louisiana but the country?

PAILLE: Uh, well I guess, as being a fisherman, they're a good fish habitat and of course they provide habitat for other wildlife as well as fish, shrimp, crab and that sort of thing. So, you know, I view them as food factories almost; recreation places. You know, so many of my friends were fisherman and hunters and the marshes of coastal Louisiana are just great. You know, we used to have on our license plate "Sportsman's paradise" and that's what I view the

coastal areas as. Just a place where the wildlife and the fish were so abundant and, you know, it was nothing to go out and bring back ice chests full of fish.

CRAMER: So what do we stand to lose without coastal restoration projects?

PAILLE: [04:32] Well, we are losing a lot of the productivity of our wetlands. The fish use the marsh edge and as the marsh disappears, we have less habitat for the fish and certainly the wildlife. We've lost, like in the case of the marshes north of lake Boudreaux, all those fresher environments, coastal cypress swamps. We're losing many of those areas, so we've seen not just a loss in the acreage of some of these areas, but the diversity is also declining as many areas become just more brackish. So, you know, hearing the bull frogs and the alligators in some of the marsh areas are things we don't see and hear anymore because they've just become salty. So things are definitely on the downhill decline. And, you know, my kids will never see those things that I saw. And you know, now we have more restricting fishing limits so they're not gonna catch two ice chests full of speckled trout like I was fortunate enough to do.

SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: Ronnie, this is Susan Testroet-Bergeron with CWPPRA Outreach. Ronnie, you're a leader in a lot of communities and if you could speak to those young people who are gonna inherit what we have here, what would you tell them?\

PAILLE: [05:54] Well, you know, I might tell them what it is that they had. And if you know what you had, uh, 30 years ago and you know where it is now, you can clearly see the trajectory. And that tells you where you're gonna be in the future if you don't do anything. So, I think, you know sometimes they don't have a very long historical viewpoint of things so it's hard to get excited about it because they haven't seen thirty years of change and see what that looks like. So, they need to have a sense as to how rapidly it's changing. And you know the other thing too is that from the ground level, you often can't get the perspective of what's going on in the bank behind the bayous you're going down. But, in many cases, it's mostly open water. So you need to know the history but also, you need to have a bird's eye view. You need to look at aerial imagery, photography, that sort of thing, and then you can really see it with your own eyes.

CRAMER: How did you get involved in coastal restoration?

PAILLE: Well, you know, I was always fascinated with wildlife and being outdoors. I was always catching snakes and frogs and crawfish and what have you, you know? And so I just had this naturally affinity to fishing, wildlife, and wetlands. And so Louisiana was just the best place to grow up because we had so much of that. When I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service, marsh management was a big issue and I had been involved working on the management side of things for a duck hunting company. So you know, I was very blessed where my experience happened to be needed at that time cause marsh management was a big issue. So, you know, the lord has blessed me in many ways and has opened these doors. And the restoration end of things which developed shortly thereafter in the big marsh management push

was a very natural fit for me because I've always enjoyed looking at maps of areas and looking in to see what's changed and all those sorts of things. You know, sometimes I think maybe I would have been better as a naturalist. Just, you know, cause you like to go out and look at things, you know. And you lodge a lot of things in your mind, what you see. But you know, we do have to apply what we observe and, uh, the restoration program was a good opportunity for that.

BERGERON: Well Ronnie, you've been a very big propionate to create some really good restoration projects for Louisiana.

PAILLE: Well thank you.

BERGERON: And we appreciate all of your help and your continued service to the people of Louisiana.

CRAMER: [08:54] Do you have any other questions?

BERGERON: I think that's good. Thank you very much.

CRAMER: Thank you so much. Is there anything you want to add?

PAILLE: I don't think so. Thank you.

CRAMER: Alright. Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

[Tape Ends 09:08]