

**Narrator: Leslie Robicheau Soiseau**  
**Interviewer: Jennifer Abraham Cramer**  
**Transcriber: Joshua Coen**

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

**JENNIFER ABRAHAM CRAMER:** My name is Jennifer Abraham Cramer and I am here today interviewing Leslie Robicheau Soiseau and we're talking about the memories and experiences concerning the Louisiana coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and we are at the Connoco Phillips office in Houma, Louisiana. So thank you for joining us today.

**LESLIE ROBICHEAU SOISEAU:** Thank you. Hi Jennifer. How are you?

**CRAMER:** I'm fantastic and we're really thankful that you're taking to the time to be interviewed today. So will you please state your full name?

**SOISEAU:** [2:31] Leslie Robicheaux Soiseau. Robicheaux is a good ole French name and I had the good fortune about 10 years ago to marry a wonderful man who is Spanish originally from Honduras. But back to the French part. I grew up about fifteen miles to the east of here in a small town called Raceland, Louisiana situated in the middle of Bayou Lafourche. The longest street in the world. And spent summers on Grand Isle. My dad wasn't much of a fisherman but we all loved the beach and loved just spending time there as a family and of course traveling the bayou up and down. My sisters and brothers grew up swimming in the bayou and we saw fabulous tug boats and fishing boats traveling up and down, going about their day to day business and keeping our economy going. So it was a beautiful place to grow up.

**CRAMER:** Well thank you for sharing that. And can you tell us, can you give us a specific childhood memory that connects you to the Louisiana wetlands?

**SOISEAU:** [3:45] Um, I can't think of one specific thing because it's just really absolutely everything. I guess one of the biggest things would be when I was very young, I think I was 6 maybe 7, when hurricane Betsy passed. And I remember my mother being so afraid because the eye of the hurricane was coming right over us and I had this vision of a big Cyclops eye, you know, perching over our house and terrorizing us during the night. But my father at the time was a family physician and still made house calls. And so we drove after the hurricane, as soon as we could, we drove with him to a small town called Kraemer, Louisiana which is again to the east of Raceland and is in the heart of a freshwater swamp. Um, there's a place...Zam's swamp tours is located there. But he went to check on one of his patients and the streets were flooded, the access was terrible, and my mother did not want him to go alone because she was very afraid that he would, you know, lose his vision and drive off into one of the canals. So we all piled into the car with him. So it was my mom and dad and six kids going to make a house call. But there were alligators in the road, crawfish. My brothers were playing in the, um, the sidewalk catching crawfish and wanted to take them home in their pockets. So life after a storm had all of these challenges but a lot of funny, um, and interesting opportunities that were certainly appealing to, especially young boys. So that's one of my earliest recollections but as far as the need to save the wetlands, I think the most graphic experience was in 1992 when we were affected by hurricane Andrew. And my brother has a fishing camp down in Cocodrie. And I had lived away in Iowa for about 12 years and when I moved back home in June of 1992...first weekend I had an opportunity, he took me fishing and it was just beautiful. And when Andrew passed, I went with

him to collect the items that we could relocate and when it was safe to travel back there, went with him to clean up and put his things back in his camp or to see if it was still there. And he was very lucky. His camp was still there. It was elevated and very secure. But Lake Boudreaux had scoured so badly. Sections of the road, shoulder, uh, highway 56 were just totally gone and it looked like you would just drive off again. Like my mother had that fear all those years ago, that if you just, you know, took your eyes off the road for a second, you could just drive off into Lake Boudreaux. But homes, not camps, but people who had their homes on the concrete piers...they were wiped from the east side of highway 56 and were floating on the west side, floating in Lake Boudreaux...and I thought, gosh, how are these people gonna come back and how much our system has changed that that could actually happen. And Hurricane Andrew was a very powerful storm; you know what it did to Miami. But it was not nearly as devastating as some of the storms we've had since. But that was the first, I think, serious wake-up call I'd had in a long time, because living away, I'd only heard about Juan and the effects of that storm that just lingered off of our coast for a week or 10 days and just pounded us with rain but I'd not seen it and it was just...it was shocking. It really was.

**CRAMER:** So, what do you think that, um...If you could go back and talk to previous generations about the wetlands, what would you say to them?

**SOISEAU:** [8:37] Well, I don't know that I would say anything but I certainly have lots of questions. We certainly place a lot more value and a lot different values today on the wetlands and how we think of their functions and what they mean to the landscape and to our economy than they did back then. And I guess I would ask them "what did you know and when did you know it" along the lines of the congressional inquiry, I guess. Not to sound so intimidating, but,

um, what were they thinking? Because back then, you know when oil and gas which has been, you know, so tremendous to our economy, they dug a lot of canals. Nobody knew back then what the impacts were so I guess I would ask when they started to see the impacts. Um, you know, when...Certainly when the Mississippi river was leveed, um, that was to protect the life and property of the people along the river but you know that levee ended up doing a lot of long term damage to our ecosystem and when we damned Bayou Lafourche at Donaldsonville, that cut off a lot of fresh water to this area. So I guess I would ask what were they thinking as far as long term implications. Were they aware of what the unintended consequences? Words and phrases that are so, um, so much about our coastal discussions, were those at all considered back when those actions were taken? And all for good reasons. You know, not for any spite or...you know it's not like they were done for a bad motive. We have had a prosperous economy. We protected the city of New Orleans, you know, for years until we had our catastrophe with Katrina. But we all benefitted from a lot of those actions, but were there things we could have done back then just a little differently that might have made some differences in how we manage our system today.

**SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON:** I think that's good. This is Susan Testroet-Bergeron, CWPPRA Outreach. I have one more question for you. You've spent your life as an environmental advocate and very connected to the, you know, policy makers in our communities. What made you choose that with relation to wetlands? Why was it wetlands that you decided?

**SOISEAU:** [11:21] Well, it actually was an accident and I had the good fortune because I was in politics, to work for a cousin who was, at the time, a Louisiana state senator. And he had

grown up...his father was the fisherman, my uncle Dr. Phillip Robicheau...was the fisherman of the family. So, Mike grew up in every bayou. We went crawfishin' in every canal and spent a lot of time on Grand Isle and he would see the deterioration every time he made the trip which was once, sometimes twice a week. So that was his passion and working for him, it just couldn't help but rub off and when he left the senate, um, I couldn't give up that bug and I went to work for the estuary program and got to delve into coastal issues and wetland issues and all of those related issues, water quality and so forth, a little bit deeper. So working with Mike was definitely the catalyst, and I've had the good fortune since then to work for the Estuary program, Terrebonne Parish, and now Ducks Unlimited, and just kind keep that momentum going a little bit. So I'm really lucky.

**BERGERON:** You are a great advocate for us. We appreciate it.

**SOISEAU:** [12:48] Thanks. You're sweet to say that, but I am. I'm the lucky one.

**CRAMER:** Well thank you so much for your time. We're right at ten minutes and maybe we'll be able to do a longer interview with you at another point in time if you are interested in doing so.

**SOISEAU:** Sure.

**CRAMER:** Well again thank you and on behalf of LSU and on behalf of CWPPRA, we really appreciate your time.

**SOISEAU:** Thank you.

**[Tape Ends 13:22]**