

Narrator: Sherrill Sagrera
Interviewer: Susan Testroet- Bergeron
Transcriber: Taylor Suir

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SUSAN TESTROET- BERGERON: My name is Susan Testroet- Bergeron. I am interviewing Mr. Sherrill Sagrera about his memories and experiences concerning the Louisiana coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted at Mr. Sherrill's home at about 9:00 A.M., in the morning, on August 2, 2012. The interview is being conducted in Ester, Louisiana. Mr. Sherrill, do you understand that of the taped interview or pictures taken during the interview may be used in a variety of publications?

SHERRILL SAGRERA: I do.

BERGERON: Good. Thank you. Thank you for speaking with me today. We've gone over all of our consent forms and I'd like to get some basic information and then we'll start with the interview. So, could you please state your full name and spell it?

SAGRERA: [0:45] Sherrill Sagrera. S-h-e-r-r-i-l-l S-a-g-r-e-r-a.

BERGERON: Thank you, Alright...

SAGRERA: I'm seventy years old, ok, you're just going to have to...

BERGERON: [Laughs] That's good. So give us your birthday and where you were born.

SAGRERA: 11-12-41. I was actually born in Abbeville but we were living in Cheniere au Tigre.

BERGERON: So talk about Cheniere au Tigre with us. Tell us a little bit about that.

SAGRERA: [1:14] Cheniere au Tigre is an island in South Vermillion Parish between Southwest Pass and freshwater bayou. Its owned by... well, most of it is owned by my family. It's land that originally was a resort. My great-grandfather established the island and it was a thriving community. The community itself had all the needs of the people which is a hotel, a dance hall, a school, just about everything you needed to live. It was the place, I guess, where people recreated in the summer time. People that lived there lived off the land. They'd farm in summertime and trap in the wintertime until the war broke out. When the war broke out the Coast Guard commandeered, basically, or inducted some of the local men to patrol the beaches because there was some talk, I guess, about some subs in the Gulf of Mexico. They did sink some ships out there during the war. My father and my uncle and his two brothers served in that same Coast Guard which was known as the Swamp Angels. There is some literature on the Swamp Angels where they saved a lot of the pilots that were down and out in the marsh. They tried to bring people in, away from South Louisiana, to serve in this Coast Guard unit but they couldn't stand the environment with the mosquitoes and the heat and everything else. So they had to go back and commandeer, I guess if you'd want to call it, the locals to be able to work in that environment. So that is part of the history of the island.

BERGERON: So, you've shared a story with me before about how your ancestors got to Cheniere au Tigre. Tell me about that.

SAGRERA: How they got there?

BERGERON: Yeah.

SAGRERA: [3:31] Well, they got there...My great-grandfather was a doctor. He had an illness, I don't remember what it was, though I guess I should remember. The only cure... there wasn't really a cure but the only thing that prolonged his life was to move to the seashore. So, he moved to the seashore. And then he started building his...building up his holdings, I guess you would call that there. And in the later years, my grandfather opened up a hotel and the hotel was basically the place where the people would recreate in the summer time. That's how the island really got started. Of course, it wasn't just my family. It was a lot of other people; some of the Shultz, some of the the Hebert's, and some of the White's and some of the other people lived there as well, not just our family.

BERGERON: Tell me a little bit about, for people who aren't from here, what it was like, or how do you get to Cheniere au Tigre?

SAGRERA: Well, there's ways to get there. Years ago there was only one way to get to Cheniere au Tigre and that was by horseback from Pecan Island, which was kind of, before they build the road over there, it was an island like Cheniere au Tigre and you couldn't get there other

than by boat. And a lot of people, like on Saturday nights when they had dancing and everything, people would ride from Pecan Island to attend the dances at Cheniere au Tigre. I mean, it was a thriving community at one time. Over the years, they ended up digging canals to where you could get there by boat from Intercoastal City or well, whenever the hotel was going we had people from the Pinhook Bridge in Lafayette, in Milton, that had boats. And that's what they did, brought people to the hotel. People in Lafayette would get on the boat. They'd put all their belongings to last a week, because they'd go for the week. They wouldn't go for overnight, they were going for a week. As a matter of fact, if they didn't have enough room at the hotel, as they saying goes, if there's no room at the inn, they would camp out on the beach. They would put mosquito bars on and they would camp out on the beach. The hotel would charge a dollar a day room and board. That's a pretty good deal in today's...[Laughs]... And now you get there from Intercoastal City or you get there from Pecan Island or you go around by the Gulf, that's the only way you can get there right now.

BERGERON: What happened to change what was going on at the resort? What happened?

SAGRERA: **[6:18]** Well, when they blew up the Mississippi River in '27 the silt from the flood just came down to Cheniere au Tigre. It built it up a half a mile or a mile, I don't remember exact footage. It was far enough out that people had to build jetties, kind of like to go out there to swim. But it got to where you couldn't maintain the jetties so people just quit going. I mean if they're going to play in the mud they can stay at their house and play in the mud. They just quit going. We kept on using the land to raise cattle. For quite a few years after that we still

had people living there but as it progressed on it just got to where, economy wise, people started moving to high land. When we got back out there, still raising cattle out there but we got the rice industry over here. My grandfather bought land over here so we just, we started growing rice over here.

BERGERON: So, tell me a little bit about farming here. Tell me about what y'all did as farmers.

SAGRERA: [7:27] We grew rice. And that was our primary income, rice, well cattle too but rice was what we were engaged in. Which, it's getting to where it's almost an impossibility to grow rice down here, with the storms that come through, with the saltwater, it's hard to grow a rice crop. I mean, you know, if you, not just the salt water, but whenever you get a storm that comes up here that salt gets in the land. Rice can tolerate 750 grains of salt in the soil. After the Hurricane Rita we had 6,000 parts in the land. And the only way you can really get rid of the salt in the land is to flush it out. What are you going to flush it with? The salt water that's leaking in? You can't flush salt out of the land with salt water. The only think you can rely on is rain. And after Hurricane Rita with the exception of Ike, we never...of course they just compounded the problem. We never did get a lot of rain to really flush that stuff out. As a matter of fact, last year we were in a terrible drought where we didn't have any rain to flush anything out. It's just slowly getting to where if we can get pockets of freshwater, surface water, to kind of flush some of that out, we are finally getting to where we can grow a crop again, on the rice.

BERGERON: And how far are you like due south to the Gulf of Mexico from here?

SAGRERA: Well, Freshwater Bayou is only two miles long. Freshwater Bayou starts about six miles back here. So, you looking at twenty-five to thirty miles to the gulf.

BERGERON: That's quite a distance. I mean...

SAGRERA: [9:21] Well, the big problem we having with storms is not so much the Gulf of Mexico, its Vermillion Bay. I mean, Vermillion Bay is connected to the Gulf through East and West Cole Blanche Bay plus Southwest Pass. Well, most of your storms come from the Southeast, well that's right there. As the crow flies, it's probably about two miles away. I mean, it's right there. And you have navigation channels like the Four Mile Canal and when it was dug, it was dug eighty foot wide and eighty foot deep. Today it's sixteen foot deep and a thousand foot wide. It's a hell of a conduit that goes right straight into Vermillion Bay that brings surges into Vermillion Parish.

BERGERON: Is that canal used for industrial purposes still, or....

SAGRERA: Well, it was dug for the oil industry.

BERGERON: Is it still used that way?

SAGRERA: Oh, yea. Still used. But the problem we're having is, we're trying to get them to more or less bring it back to the way it was more or less dug, which is put some kind of

sills in that where you don't have as much, I guess, fluxuation of the water in. It's sixteen feet deep, and your average water depth in the bay is eight or nine feet. So, why do you need sixteen feet in that channel?

BERGERON: Yeah.

SAGRERA: But we have some people that believe that's the way it should stay.

BERGERON: You lived here all your life...

SAGRERA: All my life.

BERGERON: ...in and around this area. Tell us a little bit about how you've seen the changes and what you've see and what it means to you.

SAGRERA: [11:15] What I've seen is that, you know, if you go back from the time of the people first settled down here, they managed the marshes. They managed the marshes to sustain the marshes. They put in flumes and they put all kinds of things in that were at certain times a year that they would leave the water in. Sometimes they would let it out and then whenever they'd let it out, you draw it down to where your vegetation would come up and you'd sustain the marshes pretty good. Now, because we're losing so many wetlands, personally, I think the only way we're going to be able to save a lot of these wetlands, especially in southwest Louisiana, is to manage those marshes. I guess you could say the regulatory agencies frown on

marsh management. [12:10] We see too much marsh going away because we can't do nothing about it and if we wait on, and I like CWPRRA, but if you wait on the federal government to come in and fix it, it will all be gone before you come to fix it. It's a problem, you're seeing it where us as land owners could fix it but we're too regulated. We can't do what needs to be done, and I'm picking at it, it's not all the time... about science, science is not reality sometimes. I mean the person that lives on that land, and they in it everyday, he knows more what it needs than somebody who looks in a book and says this is what you need. And it might sound kind of radical, but it's fact. Whenever you see some of the agencies come in and say you need to do this but you living on that land and that ain't going to work. But, you have to do it because they said it, that's what has to be done. I mean, and I understand that point. I mean they're there and they're supposed to be smarter than me 'cuz they got some little letters behind their name. But, you know, I think if landowners and land managers would have more, I guess, more control or more right to do what needs to be done, we could save more wetlands. And, I mean, again, it may sound radical, but it's a fact. We created between four major landowners in Vermillion Parish, an alliance which is called the Rainey Conservation Alliance of the land owners with the Audubon Society, the McIlhenny Family, our family, and Vermillion Corporation that encompasses over two hundred thousand acres to where if we can get some private donations coupled with some government funding, community based and different....we're going to do it ourselves and we have. We have. We've done Crystal Marsh and we did Rainey Terracing, a lot of projects we're doing because we just can't wait. And I know all the stuff we're doing right now is within the State Master Plan, but when are we going to do the State Master Plan? When are we going to find the funds to do the State Master plan? And I know the funds are projected but it ain't right there and until it's right there you don't have it.

BERGERON: How long have you been working in restoration?

SAGRERA: [15:25] Well, I'll tell you a little story about restoration. I was working with an oil company and I had to have hip replacement surgery. And I couldn't go back to work. So you're laying up in that and seeing what's happening. Whenever you laying there; cattle used to graze is now Gulf of Mexico and you saying something gotta get done. So it's about, I guess, active, fifteen to twenty years. It's probably longer than that with me just sitting back, what can I do to do something about it and trying to find some kind of way. And when I finally, I got kind of involved with USDA and RCS and they said well, "Hey, they got a coastal..." at that time it was Vermillion Parish Coastal Advisory Committee. They said well you need to go to that meeting and propose what you think would help coastal restoration. So, I went, and lo and behold ended up having to be on the committee for the last, well since then it's PPL6. So I just think that, not that I made any difference, but I think the people that don't get out and try to get involved nothing will get done. Like, we want to open Palmetto Park but the public don't want to jump up and we need to do this, we need to do this. If enough people do that nothing's going to get done. And that's the bad thing about the human animal. They say well he's going to do it and he's going to do it and he's doing it. But, it's one or two people. Judge Edwards and I talk about the jury. We need for y'all to come to some of these meetings with us. They tired of looking at me and Judge. I mean we not getting any prettier. So, we never were but we not getting any prettier, so we need to have somebody else besides us that's going to, not that the Task Force thinks that way, but there's got to be somebody else in Vermillion Parish that and they might be just doing that for themselves, I don't believe they look at it that way but, still, the

only people that go is just those few. But with the size of Vermillion Parish, there's got to be more people that do it but you can't get people. It's like at the last meeting in Lafayette, we talked about stop having the public meeting in Abbeville, and I understand CWPPRA's standpoint, nobody goes. And the thing is in the courthouse, in Abbeville, and on the day that they have a police jury meeting, they usually finish by seven o'clock. They already there. Why some of them don't go to the meeting? I mean and I kind of tried to shame them at the last committee meeting, said, you know, y'all need to step up and explain why they not going to have the meetings in Abbeville anymore. They going to have it this year but after that they ain't going to have it anymore.

BERGERON: And I think if you had a really good turnout in Abbeville this year you can maybe change something. But, you have to have a really good turnout.

SAGRERA: [118:55] Well, last meeting, there was three of us there. There was like ten agency people and three of the public. The sames three that goes all time. I believe we going to have a few more this year but it's not going to be enough to change, to make a different decision.

BERGERON: So, tell me, personally, why are Louisiana wetlands important to you?

SAGRERA: Well, if you read all the statistics, and I see the statistics. I mean, we produce how much of the oil, how much of the natural gas, how much of the shrimp, how much of the crabs, how much of the oysters? What does that tell you? The more wetlands we lose, the less we're going to have of that. We're already dependent enough on foreign oil. Are we going to

have to start depending on our food too from other countries? [20:02] I mean we can all live without the shrimp, we can all live without an oyster, we probably can, we have lived without oil. But we're too spoiled now to live without any of that stuff. I'm in agriculture and it's the same thing with agriculture. I mean if you look at trying to create another farm bill, they really trying to hurt them but in their decision agriculture is going to be kind of left out. We keep telling them that I haven't seen a rice crop grown in the city of New Orleans or a cow running on the street, well maybe some types of cows. I haven't seen that. So you've got to remember that food is a sustenance you got to have it and you can't depend on somebody else, especially a foreign country, regulated like we are here, what are you going to get when you get it? Oil's a different thing. Oil is oil but food is food. It's got to be. We raise, whether it be seafood or agriculture products, we raise the cheapest and most safest food in the world. But, we got to protect that. And the more wetlands we lose, the less we got. Vermillion Parish used to raise right at a hundred thousand acres of rice. Because of wetland loss and salt water intrusion and all that kind of stuff, we're down to about forty-thousand acres. That's the... in Vermillion Parish, that's the basis of our economy is agriculture. So, as that goes away, what will the tax base be? The few people that are left, they going to pay that tax base. And what is that going to do? It's just going to move more people out. You got enough of them that moved out right after the storm so if you're going to continue moving the people out, we may get just like the Corps kind of told us one time. They put a map up there and showed all the red down at the bottom south of 82, and they asked them, what did that mean, and they said, "That's a buy-out." Oh she said, "It's voluntary." But, it's a buy-out. They don't want nobody living down here. So, what are we going to do?

BERGERON: I hadn't heard that. So, it's interesting. You talked about PPL6 and that you got started with PPL6, we're on PPL21, so, yeah, you've been in the business a while. Tell me why CWPPRA is important to you.

SAGRERA: [22:53] Well, to me, CWPPRA is important to me because it's a...well, it's not enough. But, it's a funding stream. It's almost a dedicated funding stream to do coastal restoration. It's important but I can't get nothing done through CWPPRA but that's part of the process. I mean if you look at the WVA and everything else that you gotta go through, the agency has got to look at every aspect, science and technology, and everything else and make the decision. But you don't agree with it because they may not do your project. But CWPPRA is a good program, the only program, that has a funding stream that can, I mean a dedicated funding stream that can get restoration done. I think CWPPRA's a good thing, and I like working with CWPPRA. The agencies are, I don't agree with them all the time, but you know, that's human nature. You can't agree with them all the time. I think that the agencies that are within CWPPRA are trying to do a good job and they are doing a good job. Even the outreach people are doing a good job.

BERGERON: [Laughs] I'm glad you think so. If you could listen to the generations before you, you know, your grandfather, your great-grandfather, and kind of remember what they told you, about wetlands, what do you remember from them about wetlands and why we should take care of them and things like that? Were there messages that you got?

SAGRERA: [24:37] Well, my grandfather was a kind of, I hate to use the word because it's kind of controversial, but he was an environmentalist. He believed in, you know, there's practices that we do, those practices are now being used through NRCS with the farm bill, with prescribed [indistinct] and you know, water management and things like that. They did that in those times and they...I was saying a while ago about the flumes. They built flumes. The protected the marsh. The marsh wasn't just (*swoosh*) water going in and out at any time. They taught us that you have to be able to...you can't and it might be wrong to say it, but you can't let nature take its course when you have screwed with nature. And if you wouldn't have messed with nature, [indistinct]. An old commercial used to say, "Don't fool with mother nature." We have screwed around with the hydrologists real bad until if you don't manage it now, you not going to save it. We have land that, like the Rainey/Audubon site and marsh, there's such an influx of tide going in and tide coming out with the, I guess you'd call that the tidal flux, it's to where your wetlands cannot grow the fisheries, because the fisheries, the eggs, are (*poof*) they going in, they going back and forth, in and out. They need to stay in there until they grow to a certain age to be able to go out. But now, because of this tidal aptitude and this tidal flux they don't really stay in there. You're not really growing your fisheries like you should be growing them. And unless it's managed to an extent, you're not going to save it.

BERGERON: So, tell me, I agree, we have to take care of all these things and we have made some pretty big mistakes, so if you want to give advice to the next generation, and I know you have children and grandchildren, what's your advice for the generations after you?

SAGRERA: [27:13] Well, I'm trying to get the next generation and I'm making a little bit of progress to get involved. You've got to look at your surroundings and look at the benefits all that is back there and look at the possibility if it's not there, what's going to happen? I mean, right here, I lost my house. My house was totally destroyed. I had to rebuild and I rebuild it fourteen feet, well now I have to. It was twelve feet at the time. Well, when Rita came, well after Rita, when Ike came I had six foot of water in this house.

BERGERON: [*gasps*]

SAGRERA: Course it never got in the house.

BERGERON: Right.

SAGRERA: 'Cuz I built up. But, that kind of tells you that, I'll go back to Hurricane Audrey when we had this much water in the yard and now I have twelve, fourteen feet for Rita. We used to have protection out there. The marshes were there. We didn't have all these big navigation channels bringing in water. Started looking into surroundings and visualized what could happen, what this is going to look like in twenty years, in thirty years if nothing's done. So, you need to be involved and keep abreast of what's going on.

BERGERON: I'm going to show this video to people outside of Louisiana and hopefully we will get some people in the national audience to watch this. What do you want the nation to know?

SAGRERA: [29:03] Well, as long as you don't manipulate the reality of what's going on in Louisiana, like its being done now, I think we need to show it to people outside of Louisiana. I'll give you an example of that: whenever we were, after Rita, we were building basically building ourselves. I had people from all over the United States come help me build, volunteer. And we sat down, down the bottom of there one day and a bunch of kids, I believe they were from Washington, they started talking about, "Man, the gas prices or heating oil and all this kind of stuff is outrageous up there." And I said, "[Mmm Humm]", and you know me, I can't miss an opportunity. I said, "Do you know why?" "Well, no." "Well, I'm going to explain to you why. If you live in Washington D. C., forty-one percent of your natural gas that goes up there comes from that little place right there down the road." And I said, "It don't work worth a damn underwater. So whenever you look at supply and demand, when you can't get none up there, the price goes up." "Humm, I never realized that." So when they left they said, "What kind of message would you like to send back to people over there?" I said, "Just tell them that, look, tell your representatives and your senators and tell them if something comes up about saving Coastal Louisiana, tell them to go vote for it because this is what's happening down here." That's what I wanted them to take back, that. Whether they did or not, I don't know.

BERGERON: I hope they did. It'd be good if they did.

SAGRERA: And every opportunity, from all over the United States, different states and I guess the passion I have for coastal restoration, I can't help but kind of relate that message. You know, some kind of message like we need to do something about coastal Louisiana.

BERGERON: I appreciate your efforts to educate, not just the local people but the people around the nation. That's important.

SAGRERA: [31:30] When I got involved with America's Wetlands, years and years ago, I attended a meeting and what's her name, Phyllis?

BERGERON: Darisburg?

SAGRERA: Yeah.

BERGERON: Yeah.

SAGRERA: We were talking and I said, "Phyllis, we got to educate our people before we try to educate other people." We got people right here that still consider that marshland, swamp, no value, wasteland, not realizing what the benefits you get out of that. No so much personal benefits but benefits for the economy and the ecosystem. What that is? You got to put that even in your school curriculum so that people understand it, the importance of that. I get on my soap box every once in a while. One of these days somebody's going to kick it out from under me. And we're trying to do that. I serve on a Salt and Water Conservation District Board and we have a conservation trailer that we go around teaching kids about how to... Well, you met me at St....

BERGERON: Yeah, it's great.

SAGRERA: ...to try to show people what erosion is and what agriculture is and all this kind of stuff. And we'd like to expand that; again it goes down to funding. We got to get some funds to where you can continue doing that. I mean, we're going to continue doing it to a certain level but then to bring it to another level, well it's going to take some more funds to do it.

BERGERON: Well, do you have anything...um... We've had a nice visit and do you have anything else that you'd like to tell people before we...

SAGRERA: [33:20] We just need to tell people to get involved, to get involved. And whether they get involved through CWPPRA or involved through any kind of legislature that's coming through that's going to help Louisiana, they need to be involved. Contact their senator, contact their representative to see if that's something they can do to get the funding or to get the involvement of the public into it. We've been trying to get hurricane protection in Vermillion Parish for years and we had town hall meetings, you know, but people want to know, What you going to do? Well, this is what we're going to do. And they said, how you going to pay for it? And the first time you bring up the word t-a-x the ropes come out and they start hunting for an oak tree. But people don't realize that involved in the CWPPRA process and all the other restoration programs is there's a cost-share element in it. And if you don't have the cost-share your project ain't going to go through. Same thing in the event the Federal/State come and build you hurricane protection. After it's built, maintenance and operation falls on the parish. Who is going to pay for that? Somebody's got to come up with the money. But people don't realize that.

They say, “Oh, the government’s going to do it, the government’s going to do it.” Well, sure they may do it but it’s still going to cost you something, down the road and you gonna have the money to do it and if you can’t prove that you’ll have the funds to do it you ain’t going to get it done to start with. So it’s just the people get the mindset, this is not a give-me program. This is not a welfare program. Help is there but you’re going to have to help yourself.

BERGERON: Well, I appreciate you spending some time this morning...

SAGRERA: Well I hope I didn’t lead nobody astray but I...

BERGERON: No, you didn’t. [*Laughs*] It’s been great.

Tape Ends [35:31]