

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Amelia “Amy” LeGaux

COLLECTION: 4700.2357

IDENTIFICATION: Audubon Nature Institute employee

INTERVIEWER: Nicholas Rouchon

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: April 12, 2013

FOCUS DATES: 1927, 1932, 1960, 1965, 1989, 2010, 2012, 2050

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4282

LeGaux states her name as Amelia Elizabeth LeGaux; birthday is October 5th 1960, born in Columbus, Ohio; Moved to San Diego where she grew up, stayed until 1989 when she moved to New Orleans; transition between San Diego and New Orleans was a bit of a culture shock; LeGaux currently works at Audubon Nature Institute and Restore the Earth Foundation, and Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries; LeGaux worked in the endocrine lab at the center for endangered species of the Zoological Society of San Diego; also did environmental education programs; LeGaux continued to do that when she moved to Louisiana; worked at Audubon Zoo and eventually transferred out to the Nature Center in New Orleans East; during last 10-15 years became very aware of wetlands loss issues; has always done environmental education; saving ecosystems is really one of the better ways to be able to save individual species; land is shrinking, more apparent after Katrina; at the Nature Center prior to Katrina subsidence could be seen out in the forest; each trip into the marsh or wetlands shows increasingly larger canals than the previous visit to the same place; impact of Katrina made how much protection was lost to the city really apparent; has become LeGaux’s passion to do wetlands education and restoration; done marsh restoration in “Passaloop” Wildlife Management Area and restoring pelican habitat on a barrier island in Terrebonne Parish; can look at pictures and aerial views and learn about all the different types of wetland restoration projects there are (terracing, diversions, and others); about three years ago she did her first fly-over, and what used to be marsh isn’t there anymore; can see how much open water there is; when you look from the air at some of the projects that cost billions of dollars, you think ‘that’s it?’ They are such large projects on paper, but when you see them from the air they’re just a drop in the bucket; Terrebonne Bay is in very sad shape too; realizing that miles of marsh that used to protect Louisiana from storm surge, and used to be nursery ground for all seafood and marsh creatures, is just gone; seeing Isle de Jean Charles from the air, there are miles of road with open water on both sides; also just a sliver of land where the Native Americans lived; next hurricane that comes along, it will be gone; LeGaux had never seen “Betsy Balls” before working at the Nature Center, which was heavily impacted by Hurricane Katrina, and seven and a half years later has still not re-opened; lot of it was because of impacts

from Hurricane Katrina and fifteen parts per thousand saltwater storm surge that overtopped Lake Borgne; one of the things that they found after Katrina were loosely formed marsh balls; very densely compacted marsh grass; grass got this way by first being unhealthy, then the wind and wave action from Hurricane Betsy caused the grass to break up and compact into these balls; if we had a healthy marsh, this wouldn't happen; describes how marsh balls kill healthy marsh; LeGaux does not think people are taking big enough steps in marsh restoration and thinks that most of Louisiana's citizens are unaware of the true magnitude of the wetlands loss issue in Louisiana; in some of the bottom line hardwood forest restoration at the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center, she tries to educate everyone about wetland loss in Louisiana; the 1927 flood spurred on the formation of the Army Corps of Engineers; this is when leveeing and harnessing the river became common place; this is really the biggest reason that we have wetland loss; no longer let the river follow its natural course and change over time like it used to, to build more land with different lobes; explains how dams and levees are a problem; we've cut lumber canals, and gas canals, oil canals, and shipping channels, like the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, which helps exacerbate not only the problem of wetland loss because of saltwater intrusion, but sometimes creates optimal conditions for storm surge to come through too; LeGaux says the government needs to help with awareness; people need to be told about the problem to begin with, and all of the different reasons for the problem; She talks about invasive species such as the nutria and the Chinese Tallow for quite a few minutes; talks about some groups like Restore the Earth, who have found different methods for growing trees faster and with larger root systems; people need to be educated on invasive species, how much we've lost, and the reasons why, as well as the different methods that we're using to restore the wetlands; there are some large scale diversion projects and long-distance conveyance of dredged material to build land; smaller projects like Gulf-Saver Bags that give marsh grasses and mangroves extra protection so that they will grow healthier and faster than your standard bare root seedlings into the ground; every little bit helps; there are plenty of volunteer opportunities out there through many different organizations like the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, Restore the Earth; need to educate people on the reasons behind wetland loss and need to educate people on the ecosystem services that the wetlands provide; 30-40% of the nation's seafood comes from Louisiana wetlands; 40% of the endangered species in the United States live right here; Louisiana has one of the largest ports in the world, without the wetlands we don't have that, we don't have good seafood to eat, and people north of us don't get heating oil to heat their homes, or gasoline to drive their cars; we are a working coast; need to find the balance between working in the wetlands and keeping them as storm surge protection of our nursery ground and all the other functions that they serve; Louisiana is an economic hub, so saving and restoring this area should be one of the top priorities of the federal government; talks about how most people don't really know anything about the plight of Louisiana land loss; LeGaux talks about animation by Tulane University professors at the State of the Coast conference in 2010 that took the current rate of subsidence and current rate of wetland loss, and then factored in and predicted sea level rise for 2010; animation showed that New Orleans is an island by 2050; people need to do more now; there is a lot of red tape involved in wetland restoration; LeGaux has gotten to see first hand how the BP oil spill has contributed to the coastal degeneration; some of the first marsh restorations that Restore the Earth Foundation did were directly as a result of the BP oil spill, prior to that they mainly did reforestation; when the spill happened they saw there was a need to restore oil to marsh and that's where the Gulf Saver Bag idea came from; LeGaux describes Gulf Saver Bags in detail; when she was down in [Passaloo?], if you put your foot on the ground and twisted it

you could see oil under the surface; they were finding tar balls and Wildlife and Fisheries were firing off air cannons to keep birds from landing in oiled marsh; every time they went to Passaloo, even through November 2012, they still had some oil; even though some people say the oil spill has been completely cleaned up, you may not be able to see it but it is definitely there; In late November 2012 Hurricane Isaac had uncovered more oil from the spill; they were cleaning up 1,000 pounds of tar balls a day off of Elmer's Island, which was just last fall; youth can help by just getting involved; make sure people are aware of the issues; LeGaux describes a CWPPRA meeting she attended last June, which was hosted by the City of New Orleans and the National Wildlife Federation; Colonel Fleming from the Army Corps of Engineers was one of the speakers; he said people need to seriously rethink their ideas on levee protection;

TAPES: 1 (T4282)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 34 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 8 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Video clips from interview

RESTRICTIONS: Copyright is retained by the interviewee and her heirs