

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAMES:** Chris Bourgeois and Todd LaViolette

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2356

**IDENTIFICATION:** National Wildlife and Fisheries agents

**INTERVIEWER:** Mark Gibson

**SERIES:** Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

**INTERVIEW DATE:** March 27, 2013

**FOCUS DATES:** 1970s, 1980s, 2000, 2005, 2008

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 4281**

Bourgeois states name; says he is from New Orleans, grew up in New Orleans whole life, went to Holy Cross School, spent most time hunting and fishing, and still lives in New Orleans; LaViolette states name, says he grew up in St. Bernard Parish, has been working with Wildlife and Fisheries for twenty-two-and-a-half years in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish area; grew up hunting and fishing as much as he could; Bourgeois says he and LaViolette work statewide but mostly in the southeast part of the state; LaViolette says he was in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish until Hurricane Katrina and now he works statewide, but mostly comes back to St. Bernard and Plaquemines; Bourgeois says they can see the environment and coast changing; mainly works Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Charles Parishes; grew up in Hopedale and St. Bernard Parish and he went to work oysters there; he can see the land eroding, what was land before now is water; in Jefferson Parish, Barataria Basin, Lafitte, Grand Isle, the islands by Manila's Village, he sees stuff disappearing; especially since he has been with Wildlife and Fisheries sixteen years, he's out there every day; at least once a week he's in the same area and he can see it disappearing; LaViolette says he's had the same experience; he's seen places in St. Bernard that were land when he started working there and a few years later there were ponds here and there and a little pass in between them; as time went on he could notice that the pass was increasing in size until now it's one big pond; several areas like Bayou Gentilly out of Delacroix used to be a distinct bayous that you could run down in your boat and know where the edges were; people would be hunting ducks off the side in the marsh, but now there are no more defined boundaries of the bayou itself; it seems like everything has turned into water with little patches of land the size of lakes on it; all of the bayous and canals have grown much wider; the land itself is gone; some of the land you could walk on twenty years ago has no bottom to it now and therefore you cannot walk on it; LaViolette worked on the West Bank of Plaquemines a lot; from the hurricane protection levees out to the islands on the coast; a lot of it is just gone; there's no land at all; can only tell what used to be bayous now from oyster pools that mark the oyster leases; the leases are still in effect for what used to be bayou so now there are oyster leases on

what used to be land; Bourgeois says Louisiana Land and Exploration has a guy from Plaquemines Parish, Terry Shelley, who has the rights from Louisiana Land and Exploration (LL&E oil land); continues to explain that Shelley's lease is still in effect but most of the land is now water; LaViolette says he thinks as long as these lease owners are paying proper taxes on it they own it. Bourgeois says the state wants these lands because of mineral rights so over time it might wind up in big legal battles; that's how LL&E land operates; continued revenue is one reason they have this guy out there giving him the rights to go get oysters off of their property that was once land, proving that it's their property; the continued use of it; if it's gone now, and the owners don't do anything with it, they may stop paying taxes on it and the state or some other individual could take it over; Bourgeois says it's not a good feeling to see the land erode away; the reason he took the job was that he wanted to be able to protect the land; even though they enjoy hunting and fishing they'd mostly like to have a future here for their kids and grandkids; since his family came from France and Nova Scotia all they've done is hunt and fish commercially and he wants to be able to have that passed on to his children; have them experience the same fun and happiness that he had; seeing all the land erode, it might disappear anyway; there's more fishing but you don't see people trapping much anymore, duck hunting's getting worse and worse; the land has not only eroded but it's actually changed; because of the salt water intrusion, a lot of places that used to have freshwater grasses have turned into salt water or brackish water grasses; so it is a lot different visually and that does have an emotional effect on him; at Bayou Loutre, there used to be a large oak ridge with big live oak trees; now they've all fallen into the water; there were plantations out there and now everything is just disappearing. LaViolette says nothing seems like it will be there much longer; doesn't think that any of the projects are big enough or will have enough of an effect on the coast to be able to try to save anything or slow much down; Bourgeois says the only thing he thinks might help would be to have dredge boats working along the coast twenty-four hours a day to build it back; but then it would constantly have to be built back because the river isn't dropping the sediment anymore; looking at the news, they had the floods up north two years ago with the high river, the whole river all the way up is leveed off now so all that sediment out of fields that used to come down the river and build land, is cut in more than half; not coming down and then it's all dumping off the continental shelf at the end; LaViolette states that the only place he's seen land actually develop is in Venice Pass; the actual city of Venice is where all the passes are and the river rises and dumps the sediment out; there are some areas where they've constructed some weirs or the openings to ponds and things like that that has actually built some land; other than that, everywhere else that he's worked is losing land; Bourgeois agrees and says that just like the fresh water diversions, he doesn't see that helping; if you look at Delacroix by Caernarvon, all that does is make fresh water grass or floating marshes and then a storm comes up and wraps it up like a carpet; saltwater marsh is different from fresh water marsh; what you have normally in salt water areas, such as pytheen, when you get out on it you can feel that its hard bottom; different type of grass; whereas in fresh water marsh, like in St. Charles Parish or around the diversions they are building, it's all becoming more fresh water-type swamp; looks pretty, but when you stand on it, they call it "floating" because it's nothing but weeds growing on top of the water; LaViolette states that there's nothing underneath it; the diversions do not deposit any sediment; Bourgeois continues that the diversion is not made to deposit sediment, it's designed just to put fresh water there, which is not going to help protect land, it's just creating different species of plants; might have more bass or fresh water-type fish; LaViolette says that the land loss will have a pretty large effect on the economy in one way or another; the lands that are

eroding are the estuaries where the juvenile fish and shrimp go to grow up; if that is not there they don't have as much area to come and grow up, so Louisiana won't have that many fish, shrimp, and crabs; for the commercial seafood industry, if there's not the amount of seafood to be caught, either the seafood industry's going to go downhill or seafood will cost so much the consumer won't be able to afford what the fishermen catch; could eventually have some pretty bad effects on the seafood industry; LaViolette says the only thing that's thriving is oysters because they grow in the water; Bourgeois says trapping is down; alligators have disappeared because they don't really live in salt water areas that much; LaViolette says they haven't seen muskrats in years; all of that stuff that lives on these certain types of marsh, if they live in the salt water marsh, they're not there anymore; even count as far as duck hunting; the ducks don't live here, they migrate down; if there's no marsh potholes where the ducks are going to come land and no feed, they're not going to stay here; therefore the duck hunters are not going to be spending the money to go duck hunting; gas, shells, pirogues, camouflage clothes; if there's no place to go, people aren't going to do it and they aren't going to be spending that money; economically it could have far-reaching effects of not having the land that we should have; we're not doing an effective job of saving it; LaViolette says most people in Louisiana and throughout the country are unaware of the economic peril that's currently facing the state; says it needs to be explained to people that actually a lot of the seafood that we harvest here goes to other places throughout the United States; one of Louisiana's big industries is crabs and a lot of them go to Alabama and Maryland; explains how crabs are shipped and processed up north; they paid top dollar just like Select Crawfish; now you don't get big crawfish here where before you bought a sack of crawfish, it was large size crawfish; all of that stuff is getting shipped even to Sweden and places like that now that people are wanting to eat it; Bourgeois continues that the price on alligators here in the past few years has been low, but ever since the fur trade going down with the economy in 2008 most of the alligator skins are shipped to France and Italy overseas on consignment to make purses for ladies and bags; those places overseas sent them back because with the economy they weren't selling them; well now with that TV show Swamp People, restaurants up north put some on the menu and it's selling; that helped out with the price of alligators but still, for a large alligator, over eight feet, last year it might have been thirty dollars a foot. So an eight foot alligator is only bringing in two-hundred and something dollars. LaViolette continues that shows like Duck Dynasty and Swamp People that would show what's going on, the loss of the coast, etc. could be great; they should advocate for wetlands loss. Bourgeois says that coastal erosion is going to help make the culture of southeast Louisiana disappear; with hurricanes, insurance going up, a lot of people are moving out of southeast or southern Louisiana and moving north where you don't need flood insurance, your insurance rates are cheaper, etc.; his uncle had a house on the Rigolets in Slidell; it was built in 1968, a two story, beautiful brick house; never had water in it until Katrina; when Katrina hit, you couldn't find a brick to it, just the slab; he thinks the islands offshore (Chandelier, Brett Island, Biloxi Marsh) let the water come in quicker because of erosion and subsidence; LaViolette adds that the cultures, looking at Delacroix, Hopedale, Reggio (the fishing communities), that used to be a very close knit community where only the fishermen lived; now he estimates probably half of the properties down in those areas are weekend camps by people that have money to be able to buy and keep a camp or summer home; people that live down there are moving out, not getting into the industry that their ancestors were in (commercial fishing and trapping), so in that aspect they are losing their culture; with the cost of things being so much higher now, to be able to buy a boat, the boats that they need have to be bigger, to catch more, to be able to make ends meet;

Bourgeois says with all the imports, now fuel is up, the cost of everything is up; hurting the culture because they still only get two or three dollars a pound at most for their biggest catch of shrimp; they're importing a bunch of stuff too; with the cost and everything and amount of shrimp these people can catch combined with the price of importing from other countries cheaper, that's helping destroy the culture too; LaViolette says some of the fishermen that have adapted to the new way of fishing are catering to recreational fishermen; instead of fishing for themselves because they can no longer go out and catch speckled trout as a commercial industry (that was outlawed several years ago), now they are being paid to bring people out to catch speckled trout; some of them have changed their ways, which also changes their culture, to cater to other types of industries, like bringing people fishing; see a lot of corporate people going on charter fishing trips and stuff like that, so some of them are still making money that way, but a lot of them have lost the fishing and trapping type of culture that they used to have; Bourgeois thinks if the land returned some of the people and culture would come back, but the main thing is the cost of things like insurance; unless you have cash to buy a house in these areas, people that have houses out in Myrtle Grove or Belle Chasse below the new wall, have said their flood insurance is going to go up almost ten thousand dollars a year; maybe if coastal erosion is helped by dredging and things like that it might lower the cost where more people can move back to these areas because it will have more fish and game to hopefully make more money, he thinks it would help. LaViolette continues that he would like to think that there were programs to be able to re-create or re-establish land that would help, but in reality he doesn't think that the insurance companies would come down on prices, because what's done is done; he thinks it would help as far as hurricane protection and protection from the Gulf in general other than just the levees; what happened in Katrina, everyone thought those levees were pretty good and safe, but looking at the way they were built and what happened with the water coming up, they found out differently; levees built now are raised to 30 feet, but who's to say there won't be another storm that could come over those levees and do the same type of thing; explains how levees don't just break, the land under them is eroded away first; Bourgeois and LaViolette think Katrina was a big wake-up call; LaViolette thinks Katrina raised advocacy for a little while, but here almost eight years later, the hype has subsided; not a lot of people up in arms about it anymore; Bourgeois adds that it takes money too, and LaViolette continues that it seems we quickly forget what happened; LaViolette states that in the future of Southeast Louisiana most any place outside of the actual levee system will disappear. Bourgeois includes that there are spots that used to be a little ditch before, couldn't even paddle a pirogue to the pond, where now if you have a twenty-four foot Boston whaler with two motors on it, you can ride straight to the pond where he used to duck hunt. LaViolette states that in his opinion it starts with leveeing the Mississippi River; right now we don't have annual floods depositing the sediment that needs to maintain or build the marsh; second is the oil field pipelines; can't go very far without seeing some kind of oil field pipeline; just a theory is that when you suck the oil out, the land is going to sink; seems like a lot of places that they had major oil industries like the [Garique] near Little League by Delacroix, used to be pipelines coming into one major pump station and now it's just an open lake; it's just gone; never see oil-drillers digging new pipelines but the pipelines that they dug forty to fifty years ago, once they dug the land out they didn't replace it; might have put dams to try to stop water flow, but the dams didn't last thirty years; Bourgeois says you can see a new project that didn't work in Jean Lafitte National Park; Bayou Signet is a new project within the past ten years; filled it in, planted big trees that are growing, but the water ate through it; LaViolette says he thinks that larger diversions or spillways should be built and left open; Bonnet Carre

Spillway, if the gates were left open, where the river rose to a certain level every year and would spill over into Lake Pontchartrain and into the marsh, it would be depositing the sediment from there all along the Gulf Coast; in his experience in East Plaquemines there are some areas that don't have a back levee to protect it from marsh, from White Ditch down to Phoenix; all they have is the Mississippi River levee; if there was way to build elevated road between the two levees and then take the Mississippi River levee down to a certain level where it would flood annually that would be a large spillway that would allow the fresh water and the sediment to go into marsh, which may be able to slow down the erosion some; Bourgeois adds that it could build land as well. LaViolette continues that you could do the same thing on the West Bank of Plaquemines. Bourgeois jumps in to say there are spots on the West Bank below Belle Chasse down there that aren't even a half a mile away from the Mississippi River levee to the back levee; no one living there, people haven't come back; all they'd have to do is build two little levees from there to connect the two and build an elevated road. LaViolette continues that West Pointe a la Hache has the same situation as the East Bank, there's no back levee; Bourgeois includes that they are dredging that right now; LaViolette agrees and continues that basically from Jefferson Lake Canal down to St. Jude there's no back levee; nothing from the marsh out to the Gulf; if Mississippi River levee wasn't there where river could come up every year, flood, and deposit the sediment, it might help to create a little bit more land; Bourgeois says he believes that is mostly the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation that freaks out every time the Bonnet Carre Spillway is opened because they want clean water. LaViolette says they want it to look nice but then explains that we get different special interest groups that have an interest in leaving it like it is; in grand scheme of things they don't see that this would help; their interest right now is to leave it like it is because that's how they're making their money; that's where their interests are at this time; in addition, this is where people's summer homes are and they don't want the diversion even though in fifty years it might build land, because right now this is where they go to enjoy their summers; Bourgeois jumps in saying the speckled trout fishermen in Lake Pontchartrain are mad when they open the spillway, but if you go talk to anybody who grew up around New Orleans, there weren't speckled trout or brown shrimp, it was white shrimp; during the summer they didn't really catch many because it was more freshwater but now with all of the coastal erosion letting it in—LaViolette interrupts to say yeah, white shrimp top grade fresh water is better than brown now; so didn't have the brown shrimp industry in Lake Pontchartrain; Bourgeois says they still have closures from the BP oil spill as they speak, in 2013, in Barataria Bay where commercial fishermen can't go put crab traps out, etc.; Three years later and the state still has closures for certain areas; LaViolette says that in Venice there were areas along the beach that were solid beach where the vegetation was killed by the BP oil spill, but BP has worked to replace some of the land that was lost because of that; the places that were solid sand beaches, they have taken that sand out and replaced it from out in the gulf; some of the places that were vegetation, they tried to clean the oil; caused an accelerated loss of the land along the outside edges of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish; it's hurt bad, and then there are still closures; Bourgeois says Cat Island is almost gone; at the bottom of Barataria Bay right in front of Full Bayou pass; they had a lot on that island because a lot of pelicans were nesting there, but that island's all gone; they used to have a bunch of islands there when Bourgeois started work because he would be around there a lot with shrimp patrols before shrimp season, hiding behind those islands to catch boats coming in Barataria Bay at night time, trying to sneak and catch shrimp before the season opened; now it's all opened up too, just like on the Grand Isle side of Barataria Bay, like Manila Village down, there were a bunch of islands there where the birds

would nest; doesn't know if it's from BP or just regular coastal erosion, but those islands are disappearing. LaViolette contributes that he thinks on Cat Island there were a lot of plants and long bushes and stuff that in two years have died away and it's almost gone; oil had a lot to do with the erosion of that particular island. LaViolette says depending on how it's used the BP payout could be enough; if they use it specifically to dredge silt or sediment from out in the gulf and rebuild the islands, and then plant the trees and plants that are needed there so the birds can all inhabit the island again, it would be worth it, but he doesn't know the economics of it and how much those things cost; Breton Island in the twenty-two years he has been working here, he has seen it go from a large comma-shaped island that recreational people would bring house boats out to and park them in the cove; there would be twenty or thirty house boats out there during the summer time for fishing and things like that; now the island has washed away so much that there's no protection from any kind of storms, so they don't bring any boats out there; federal government has said that they can't intervene by pumping land in because it's a bird sanctuary where the birds are supposed to be resting; but if there's no land for them to nest on then they're going to lose the birds, so as some point common sense must be used to say, 'okay, let's find the time when the birds aren't nesting and put a dredge boat and rebuild this land so when the birds come back to nest, they'll have something to nest on'; it's all along the islands, not just Breton Island, but also Gauchier, Grand Gaucher, Caraloo, and all the Chandelier islands too.

**TAPES:** 1 (T4281)

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