

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Ted Joanen

COLLECTION: 4700.2361

IDENTIFICATION: The Alligator Man, Rockefeller Refuge employee / scientist

INTERVIEWER: Savannah Baccigalopi

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: November 14, 2012

FOCUS DATES: 1860-1865, 1885, 1945, 1960s, 1972, 1973, 1980, 2005

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4286

Ted Joanen; born November 4, 1937 in New Orleans; Joanen is a biologist; he's spent most of his career researching and working on alligators on the Rockefeller Refuge; spends extensive amount of time explaining alligator history, uses, breeding, biology, and all other aspects of alligators in Louisiana from the 1860s to the 1980s and up until today; Joanen's parents lived in New Orleans; his mother was a housewife; there were four children and he is the third; his dad was an accountant for a coffee concern in New Orleans that bought raw coffee from South and Central America; they sold the sac bean coffee to Luzianne, Blue Plate, and different coffee companies in the U.S.; his dad went to St. Aloysius High School in New Orleans and graduated in 1907; he and his brothers graduated from St. Aloysius; his oldest brother went to Louisiana State University and Joanen went to Southeastern in Hammond; he got his B.S. in zoology there and his master's in wildlife management at LSU; did his master's work at Rockefeller on marsh ecology, looking at aquatic plants, production, and health; spent a year going to Rockefeller on the weekends and taking classes at LSU during the week; a job opening came up at Grand Chenier and they asked if he would like to do it; he loved Cameron Parish, the marsh, and alligators; he thought it was really neat to be involved in the building and development of a new program; grew up in New Orleans and moved to Cameron Parish in 1962 when he was about 20 years old; Joanen always wanted to work with alligators; Even when he and his siblings were little, they always had pet alligators; they used to do a lot of frogging, alligator hunting, deer, raccoons, and things like that; alligators always fascinated him, because there was so little known about their life history: how fast they grow, how long they live; Joanen's mother spoke French; she was from Donaldson, Louisiana and was one of 15 children; her daddy was a Trucella; that was her maiden name; he spoke Spanish and his wife spoke French and he could speak French too; as they grew up there, just down the bayou from Donaldsonville in [Plotlandville?] They spoke French; during the Depression they moved to New Orleans and started speaking English and going to school there; as a child he played a lot of baseball, football; they had horses, deerhounds, and coonhounds and did a lot of hunting—squirrel; his brothers enjoyed it so they did it as a group; his first job as a professional was at Rockefeller. That's where he spent his

whole career; he traveled all over the world for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries but always came back to Rockefeller; that's the only real job he had; his master's thesis was a marsh ecology project; he looked at the environmental factors that control the growth of widgeon grass, an important duck food; Rockefeller was bought and given to the State of Louisiana as a waterfowl sanctuary; all the efforts at Rockefeller are primarily for waterfowl; they have other research projects going on: marsh ecology, alligator, and fishery projects; the marsh itself has changed quite a bit; in the oil boom, the big rigs were brought into the mineral sites through canal systems; the rigs that came in through the Gulf brought saltwater in and changed the ecology of the marsh; explains how when saltwater comes into a brackish, intermediate, or fresh marsh, it more or less kills the environment; built a lot of levees and water control structures to prevent this saltwater from coming into the marsh and destroying it; the marshes have changed; the big Calcasieu ship channel that goes up to Lake Charles has really destroyed a tremendous amount of marsh on either side of the channel because it brought Gulf water into marshes that could not stand the Gulf water so they died; the Cameron-Creole Watershed is a good example; there are levees and water control structures to prevent the saltwater from going into the system; now that marsh is gradually coming back; the marshes now, as a result of the drilling and oil removal, are subsiding at a tremendous rate; this is going to be a tremendous problem in the future, because all the elevation of Cameron Parish is settling, there is subsidence in the marsh and erosion on the beach; he measured the beach at Rockefeller and there is a loss of 35 to 40 feet of beach a year; the federal government has given the state a lot of money to build breakwaters out there to stop that erosion; oil companies have given the state lots of money to rebuild the interior of these marshes; the marsh is almost a very fluid type soil so it can't take a lot of harassment or saltwater intrusion; with the work that is going on, it's a brighter picture today as to the future of these marshes along the coast of Louisiana; Joanen says he has not noticed a difference in climate from when he was young to now; the heat is needed here in Louisiana to hatch alligator eggs; he's seen a fairly stable climate; says Rockefeller rainfall records have remained within average; marsh grasses are annuals, good seed producers, and bring the ducks in; he hasn't seen any real change in climate; they did have two very severe hurricanes, Rita in '05 and Ike in '08 that changed the landscape of this country quite a bit; they didn't lose any human life, but it changed their way of life; they all have to build up their houses; the number of people who used to live there didn't come back, some did, and some didn't; they'll always see the big change in their lives; they're subject to hurricanes and flooding and they're going to have to learn to live that way; if it means living up on little piers, then that's the way they'll do it; Joanen wasn't here for Audrey in 1957; caught everyone unaware and killed a tremendous number of people in Cameron Parish; today, with the satellites, radios, televisions, and communications, we can now see the hurricanes building off the African coast and can run computer models that can almost tell where that hurricane is going to go three and four days ahead; it gives everybody here a chance to organize, seek higher ground, move the cattle out, and get the house safe and secure; that's what they did for Rita and Ike; explains hurricane personal experience; the marshes have responded and come back; the duck populations are responding; they see good duck populations in the wintertime; the marshes are in good shape even as a result of those two tremendous hurricanes; the area called The Burns is north of Little Chenier; they had some tremendous droughts in the '20s; it was 1921, 1922, and 1923 that there was no rain and that marsh dried up completely; describes the Big Burns; all that organic debris was washed out and you had those big ponds set up; prior to the Big Burn, the marsh was solid cut grass; as a result of the fire, all those roots were burned up and it created a lot of open water,

ponds, and lakes, ideal fishing and duck area; Joanen says most animals are cyclic; they're seeing a low population of nutria right now and he doesn't know why; the nutria was an exotic species brought into Louisiana by Mr. McIlhenny over on Avery Island; they were released into the marsh in the late 1940s and they really exploded; now the population is decreasing; animals come and go; local model ducks that don't migrate are cyclic in that they're water-dependent; with lots of rain, lots of little fish and aquatic insects, the model duck does well; but a dry summer causes food chain loss; combined with the lack of water, duck nests are very few; there are also high predation rates because of the lack of water; Joanen thinks a tremendous amount of hunters come to Cameron Parish for the duck hunting; it's one of the largest parishes in the state with one of the highest waterfowl populations; when he worked at Rockefeller, there were a lot of people coming from Canada just to tour and visit the marsh; he thinks Cameron Parish will always be a tourist attraction because it's unique; they have long, natural ridges, the Grand Chenier Ridge, about 2,000 years old by the Gulf of Mexico; a beach was there at one time, where Rockefeller is; the Gulf receded over a period of about 2,000 years; as a result, there are stranded beach ridges all along Cameron Parish; Joanen thinks the most important thing for any young person is an education to help make a good decision; Joanen worked at home in New Orleans so there wasn't anything like a refuge and he didn't know what a biologist was; he read a lot and saw where biologists work with wildlife and decided he wanted to do it for a living; he had to get an education to do it, but as a result, he enjoyed every day of work on his job; that's what every student needs to do.

TAPES: 1 (T4286)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 53 minutes

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OTHER MATERIALS: Video clip from interview; Interviewer essay

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