BOEM DEEPWATER GULF OF MEXICO HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee:	Windell Curole
Date:	July 22, 2009
Place:	Galliano, Louisiana
Interviewer:	Jason Theriot
Ethnographic preface:	Windell Curole served as the General Manager of the South Lafourche Levee District for over thirty years, overseeing hurricane and flood protection projects. Previously, Curole worked as the Assistant Director for the Lafourche Parish Emergency Preparedness. Curole's involvement in coastal activities has led him to serve on various committees and organizations including the Governor's Coastal Restoration and Conservation Advisory Commission (between 2002 and 2006) and on the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. He also served on the Lafourche Parish Coastal Zone Management Committee for over 13 years and was the CZM Administrator. Curole attended Nicholls State University, where he earned a degree in Biology. [note: preface adapted from Louisiana Public Square website, http://www.lpb.org/index.php/publicsquare/lps_bio/curole_windell]

File 1

JT: This is an interview with Windell Curole. We're in the South Lafourche Levee District on the 22nd of July, 2009, talking about coastal restoration. This is Jason Theriot, the interviewer.

So, Bob Jones.

WC: Yes, Bob.

JT: Bob Jones. His wife has given me permission to go and view his papers. To my understanding, one of the first, if not the first, restoration project was Last Island in 1981-ish.

WC: Barrier Island, exactly. In fact, I remember we had started with Coastal Zone Management. I finished high school, went to Nicholls, got a degree in biology, and this is right when a lot of the real research on the coastal land started, documentation. I remember talking to Woody Gagliano, some of his first work out there, and in hearing about losing fifteen square miles a year, that's insane. How can you lose that much ground?

JT: You learned that in college?

WC: While I was in college. All this was in college. This was right at the time—you've got to understand, here's the Vietnam War, people looking at their own roots. You have, again, the black movement going on, and you start questioning everything. And music, music, so many different directions. As far as ideas, it was a great place. It was unsettling because what we had grown up being entrenched in believing, you realized wasn't always the truth, wasn't always the best way. So it was a great time to grow up and learn. You can go in any direction and you learn something. The blinders were taken off, basically. When you have war tied in with scientific development, stepped on the moon, all these things taking place. We had the Great Society going on. We had the assassination of Kennedy in '63, November 22nd. Then you had the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy, you had Martin Luther King. With the war going on, with science, with all these things, I mean, really, it was the time that I was in college. I got out of high school into college at that time.

JT: Not to mention the early stages of French Cajun cultural movement.

WC: Well, that's tied into, again, the black movement and then finally looking at—now, I have always wanted to continue speaking French. My grandparents, although they didn't speak French to me, I mean they would speak French to me, but I'd speak English to them. My parents would only speak English to me,

they'd speak French to each other, because of problems at school, discrimination and all these other things. I said, "The hell with that. I'm going to be who I am."

Even today I've seen friends of mine try to change the way they speak. Now, I realize that we don't speak what some people consider standard American English, and that's fine with me. That's how I want it to be because that's not me. I learned to speak English from French-speaking people and I want that to go through. Some of the terms are poetic in themselves and they can be learned by anybody and they make sense, the syntax, which is different. I say something and I believe in being able to say three-syllable words and if I mispronounce a chief sound once in a while, that's okay, too. The bottom line is we have a validity and a right to be who we are and where we are. We need to be able to work at least to be understood at some communication, so I do work at least being understood to some degree.

JT: Especially if you're on the radio, right?

WC: Well, on the radio over here's okay. It's when I'm on the radio somewheres else, giving a talk in, let's say, the Netherlands, that are standard English. So all these things tie together. All that's going on.

JT: In the seventies.

WC: You didn't have to be like everybody else. It evolved basically—the start of World War II was the beginning of all of this, really, when you stop to look at it. The world before World War II was not that tremendously different than—I remember seeing the movie *Quest for Fire*, and all the way through World War II, technology had not really affected the majority of the people. You had some technology in the cities, that was a very small percentage of the people of the world, even percentage of the United States. But after World War II, electricity was almost everywhere. I'm old enough, born in '51, to remember the outhouse, to remember the one single bulb coming from the ceiling, and still electricity going out a lot, the kerosene lamps just on regular thunderstorms. And just talking to my grandparents and seeing how their life was, basically was not that different.

Even when I did some research for the Cheniere Hurricane, we put on a centennial for the hurricane in 1993 of the 1893. I've got a whole bunch of things. I got a whole bunch of data on that. But the thing is, I'm watching *Quest for Fire*, and one of the stories I heard, mud ovens were the way you baked. You baked in mud ovens. Well, how did you light your fire? Well, people kept the braise, they kept the embers in the oven. That's how you kept your fire. Matches, there were some matches, but they weren't dependable, especially in the humidity that we have over here. You had flint stones to start a fire. Basically you kept

your fire in your oven, and if you let your fire go out, you had to go borrow fire from your neighbor.

JT: Go borrow some embers. [laughs]

WC: Now think about this. Right? I'm just researching 1893. I'm watching *Quest for Fire*. It's the same thing. Their fire went out, they had to go find fire from a neighbor or somewheres else. Think about that. The technology and the difference in life was just feeding yourself and getting by until World War II, and that's when the speed of change—

JT: Natural gas is a big part of that.

WC: At all times, think about it, the technology to even do the natural gas wouldn't have been there, except for so many of our guys in South Louisiana with the oil industry grew up here, hardworking, intelligent people, but never trained in anything else. All of a sudden they go to war, they run machines, they see machines, their natural abilities and their natural intelligence and ingenuity juxtaposed at what they see, what this can do over here. All of that technology, how many of the LSTs, the boats that were used, came and worked in the oilfield, developed the oilfield here? So that was the beginning. And then just using that and that's forming, even the fishing industry transformed, some of those things.

My grandfather talks about the first one-cylinder engine he heard coming down the bayou. Before, when you shrimped, it took a crew of twenty people. They had sailboats and you'd get the trawler out there, but you had a crew of twenty people on shore and they'd haul it in by hand. Then all of a sudden, it took one or two people and you could do the same thing. All of those things, again, talking to my grandfather, again, before World War II, not that much different from pretty primitive stuff. Post World War II, the changes that our society has been through and that I, again, grew up in the middle of that tremendous transition that took place.

JT: Let me jump forward maybe thirty-five years to a question I asked you on the phone. I'll get your answer to that and then maybe you can back up for me thirty years and give me your experience on why you think the way that things have turned out. If what you say is true about the development of technology, business, innovation that has been going on here since World War II, and really ever since our people first arrived here, we're so good at everything, mostly everything, we're very good engineering-minded people, why have we not been able to fix the problem of coastal land loss?

WC: Okay. Well, first, geology is not an easy thing to control. You have to understand geology before you even start talking about the others. You have geology first and then the biology on top of it, then the sociology.

JT: Chapter one.

WC: And that's really where you have to start. How can we start handling this so people start understanding how this came to be? The most important thing to understand right off the bat is that this did not exist 5,000 years ago, that this is basically very recent land. Then you start to understand it's only through flood events that you have the greatest land building going on and that's basically turning what was water into land and that was naturally being done. You have places like the Netherlands where it was done artificially, shallow water, the sea, they built dikes to build out. Our area, floods built new land. Now, what we're doing is as it's receding and coming back at us, now we're building not to build out, but to protect what was. That's a little bit different, but it's the same type of thing. But that's the number one thing. You have to understand, understand what was going on.

JT: And you have to understand that, as we talked about, both through education and through hands-on.

WC: We live in a democracy. That's the other big issue, okay? A benevolent dictator who had the understanding of this could have attacked the problem immediately, if he had the understanding and the will. But we didn't have the understanding, we really didn't. The other thing is that we had tremendous losses going on and there were people in the thirties that were warning what was going on and then we go back to the '27 flood, which, really, we had done some leveeing of the river starting right after the Civil War.

Well, in fact, let me start from the beginning. The true beginning is when we first settled in New Orleans, people flooded, so they started building little artificial levees on the natural levee. So that issue about South Louisiana is that if you wanted to have an economy, you had to stay dry a reasonable amount of time. So that's why, after the United States bought Louisiana, it became a state in 1812, and you had no economy coming out of there, 1849, because the United States had bought Louisiana, they owned the property in Louisiana except for the Spanish, English, and French land grants. Congress said, "Okay, Louisiana, here, we're giving you just about all of the United States' holdings in Louisiana," they gave to Louisiana.

JT: Swamplands.

WC: The Swamp [unclear] Act. It was followed by the 1850 law that applied to other states in the union. But they basically said, "Look. In our economy, it's not implied in that law it's a flood protection," but that was really the idea behind it. "You go ahead, state, we give you the land, you set up levee boards, you sell the land, you make Congress offer the land, you take that and build levees so people

can form, can have an economy, can do commerce," and it worked. Before you started building levees, you have a farm, every three or four years get wiped out. You lose your crops, you lose your cow, you~~'s~~ lose a kid, you get aggravated. So they started getting better at levees.

But then 1927 happened and then major flooding, so the federal government said, "Now we can get serious about flood protection." At that point there were people like Percy Viasca, who talked about the need to, "Guys, this terrain here is this way because every once in a while we have these floods, as terrible as they are."

JT: Can you say that last name again and spell it?

WC: Viasca. I'm not sure. V-i-o-s-c-a or Viasco, c-o.

JT: Was it in the thirties? He was a geologist?

WC: A biologist.

JT: Where, at LSU?

WC: I think at Wildlife and Fisheries. I'm not sure. I've heard his name mentioned. I've read his name several times. But he, even back then, he was looking at, "Well, you know what? We can still provide this flood protection, but let's put some holes in it once in a while." He understood that just like the heart needs arteries to bring blood to the heart so it can function and do all the things it does, he understood that if you were going to block off the blood from the rest of the system, the system was going to die, and it began an increasing slow death.

Now, there's some research that tells you that the amount of sediment coming down the river started decreasing after the Civil War because people had better farming practices. Because you've got to understand, we live on land that basically was built by the river building land in fighting the Gulf. Well, the Gulf basically fights back. So there was some type of equilibrium, but as the sediments stopped coming down, you might have some water, but the sediment started—so that's less real material you have, mineral, to build land. So starting back at that time you probably started seeing some loss.

But as time went on, '27 on, we started doing levees, so all of these things combined. Now, we start in 1930 building levees real good, but what did we do at the same time? We're also realizing it's always cheaper to move things by going by water, so we started having navigation canals for commerce. The big ridge in New Orleans, to get to that big ridge in Lafourche and into Terrebonne, I mean, you traveled by water. To this day, it's still the cheapest way to move goods.

Then let's see. What can we do to really help knock down this environment? Let's go ahead and develop oil in the marsh. Let's go dig pipeline canals, let's go dig location canals, let's go get it. Now, the intent at that time was that when you live on this delta you have trembling prairie, *prairie tremblante.* It's all over the place. So we cut a few holes, what's the big deal? There was no big deal. Nobody cared. I say nobody cared, but evidently some people did care.

JT: This was in the fifties?

WC: Yeah, it started in the thirties. It started in the thirties when people found oil in Leeville [phonetic], then they found it in Golden Meadow. I've got pictures to show you. I think [unclear] has those pictures from our collection. I'll show you that collection. The blowouts in Golden Meadow, the stories of having the blowouts and here you've collected water through your fishery, okay? So they had to move out because you didn't have any water. Again, all these things kind of tie together because to get loans, we had to start getting potable water. Well, how do you get potable water? You need to bring water. We blocked off Bayou Lafourche in 1904.

JT: You had to get freshwater.

WC: So then we had to form the Bayou Lafourche Freshwater District to pump water from the river and get enough freshwater down for us to go ahead and get loans and have potable water. It all ties together, but by blocking it, why did we block it? To stop flooding. That was all part of it. It all ties together on the land loss we have. But you do all those things and then you add oil on top of it. So let's make it easy for the saltwater to come in and attack our freshwater and intermediate plants. Then when you study this area, where you have marsh and swamp, there's about 120 species of plants. As the water gets saltier, less and less species can survive saltwater, till you get all the way to the Gulf and you have just a couple species, a couple [unclear] that can grow.

So what happens when you get stuff more salty? It can go through a process, a succession where you go to a salty plant, but if that grass is killed and it's right at the waterline, and so those minerals leave and it gets too shallow, it can't transition to anything. With enough time, it can. If it's high enough up, it can. But what we've done, all of the sudden we've started getting these canals that cut through our natural barriers, our barrier islands, we've cut canals through, cut it through the marsh, connected through the ridges, cut through the ridges. All these things allow that salt to go into sometimes very pristine freshwater environments, and we had some transitions overnight in some areas.

So it was like, let's see. We have this delta, and how can we get more open water in the delta? Well, let's do these things. Let's block the freshwater sediment from the river that built it to start off with. Let's dig channels for navigation and

could block some of the sheet [unclear] flow that would take place to nourish it. We stop the major nourishment from the overflow of the river, and let's dig some more canals for the Gulf of Mexico to come in. It's a good way to destroy the delta.

JT: These are things you were learning in the seventies as a student. Did you go to graduate school?

WC: I didn't finish.

JT: Who were your professors? I mean, these guys must have—and who taught them? What I'm trying to get at is—

WC: Well, there was a combination, okay, a lot of what I'm telling you. I'm getting the basic science, which is really what I still do today. I get the basic science at the university, but I get the history from my people, my family, my grandpa. My dad tells me how the beach at Fourchon used to be a mile further out. He tells me by the sand he would shovel at Fourchon to make the concrete walkway cutoff in front of the house I spent my first four years at.

When you were in the area—this is what's so good about what I call the science that we have, I get a chance to talk to the scientists who does the detailed research for the little things that are beyond your senses. I get the data, the information, from generations of people that have grown up here. And I still do that today, and that's why I feel I know more than the scientists, I know more than the guys that are here, because I get a chance to go talk to the scientists because they have the training. But what is science about, too, it's about observations. Those well-trained scientists that didn't grow up in this area can't come close to the observations that seven generations of my family. And you need to be able to filter that information. You've done interviews. You've got to filter it to find out what the truth is. You know, in history, history is the story as interpreted by the guy writing it down. There's always some questions as to exact accuracy. It's always subject to bias and perception and position when you write that history. But tying in science that has some control of what's out there and when it fits what you talk about here, I think I know better than anybody else.

JT: The thing that really pushed me forward into this project, Windell, was I am a product of growing up in a brackish marsh in South Point. We have 2,000 acres of marsh. I know every square inch of that marsh because I've walked it ever since I was fifteen years old. When we'd try to dam off things, it's come back and changed this and bit us on the behind the next year. We've had ponds one year that are gone. Different grasses. So I know a little bit about it. Cocodrie was where my grandfather had a camp. It's still in our camp today. But as a kid, I can remember looking across the bayou and seeing this big, thick tree line. And

when I came to Cocodrie last summer for the first time in fifteen years, all it is is a few little twigs.

WC: Exactly.

JT: You look up over it and what used to be a small little pond is now a giant lake. And if you look beyond that, you ain't much further from Lake Barre.

WC: Exactly, exactly.

JT: It's only a matter of time before—

WC: What I tell people is that really the Gulf of Mexico is twenty to thirty miles closer to us than it was twenty years ago. That's how fast. Look at this map right here. We conducted back in 1973 an experiment to raise catfish in these well locations. Well, this was all solid marsh. The only open water was the canals and the well locations. This is all wide open.

JT: It's all water now.

WC: Seventy-three to today. I mean, I hadn't been in that area before very much till the experiment, and then from that time I was there pretty often. Now with the levee, I'm there all the time, and to see that transition so quick, it's really terrible. There's a crawfish pond over here with a pump system right here. Till about '73, '74, '75, they were pumping in here to get the water to right here. It's twenty-five, twenty-six parts per thousand right now. Crawfish can reproduce—they can live in about maybe seven or eight parts per thousand, but they can reproduce when there's only two or three parts per thousand of salt. So they had to stop pumping from there and now they pump from a drainage canal. That's in '73, '74, is when the transition took place. And if you look, that's when you see the rates of loss had jumped up from fifteen square miles, to twenty, to seventy-six square miles a year.

Now, again, as you talk to the scientists and you talk to people who see stuff, what happened that precipitated this great increase? We know we had pipeline canals and all that was happening. Now, did it get to the point that there was a certain line or level and all of a sudden it opened up a whole bunch of area? Maybe. We knew we had some subsidence. But, again, talk to the geologists. I talk to lots of geologists because, to me, we start with geology to have an inkling of what's going on. Woody Gagliano's talking about the fault lines. There was an earthquake in Alaska in 1964. You remember the '64 earthquake?

JT: At Anchorage? Yes.

WC: Yes. Talk to people over here. They saw a wave in Bayou Lafourche come up. Those stories were anything from a German submarine to sea serpent, to a guy on the side of the road getting water splashed on his car and he kept looking for the boat to go after the guy for making such a big wake. This is a fact from that earthquake. It caused a tidal movement over here.

JT: Little fault?

WC: Yeah. That energy showed itself and, you see, that's what they tell you with the kind of faults we have. It's soft on soft. You get an earthquake when you get built-up weight and tension and it's a hard edge and that's when it clicks. Well, ours don't click.

JT: They slide.

WC: They just slide. So that earthquake might have caused the beginning of a slide till it got to where it equaled, an equilibrium. Now, there's some theories that say that's what jumped it at seventy-six square miles a year.

JT: Between '74 and '80.

WC: Yeah. Again, theories that there's some things we see that might make sense of that. But those things are happening. What I do, I used to read almost any of the studies I could about the area, because there's always new stuff going on. Now I see a lot is just regurgitation of the same thing. I don't see new stuff anymore. But one thing was relative sea-level rise. That really reflected what I was seeing. And Shea [unclear] wrote that in '81, I believe. So I called up Shea right away. He had done the studies here in Terrebonne and along the coast. And what he found was that we have sea-level rises that's been rising for the last 10,000 years, since the last ice age, but that we have a subsidence issue. So the issue is not necessarily how fast your land is sinking or how high; it's a combination of both that's what's important. Because what's causing our concern is how much above the waterline is what we have and how do we deal with it. So when he came up with the concept of relative sea-level rise, I got to know Shea and stayed in touch with Shea.

I mean, that's all been very fortunate when these people do the research. Just like the theory, people thought the Mississippi River was static, I mean, it was always in that channel forever. I got a chance to talk to Dr. LeBlanc. He was with Fisk. Fisk, I think is the guy. He was with Fisk, he was an assistant, I mean a graduate student on those papers. I got a chance to listen to the man talk about what took place. You know? That's the fun part when you read about these people and what took place. And here's the guy—I mean the Geology Society in Baton Rouge had a—and one of the girls in there invited me. Man, it's like he's talking

[unclear], says, "The river went down these channels." [laughs] "The river's doing that." Just really good. But you talk about they thought it was static and then they were doing the coring. In a delta, you know what to expect. You expect to have the sand close to the waterway, then as you get further away, you get silts and the lighter stuff. And as they drilled, they found that. They found the sands. Then they got further down, they found the silts and then all of a sudden they hit sands again, then they sort of said, "Wait a minute. That doesn't make sense. It's not right." Then you come in, well, what if the delta was here? Then you'd see them silts over here. When it shifted over here, that's when the understanding—the Mississippi River Commission hired them to do the research.

JT: 1950s, is that when?

WC: 1930s. And from the thirties on, they started finding, oh, well, it's not a static river. That's what led to the control structure, the structure and all the things took place. I mean, it was really fun to see how that comes around, but it's also fun to see what science accepted as fact and how, if you really look at the data, and then someone provides enough data, you see that that fact was not a fact. That's the best that you knew at the time. That's why when people say absolutes about things—

JT: Levees only. It's got to be levees only, like the Corps in the twenties, thirties and forties.

WC: Well, yeah, yeah, but the point is, I call people outside of this area that come in, they're one-trick ponies. That's how the government is. The government separates what makes the community work. Here's the highways, here's the environment, here's the levees. It's all separate components. But the community, we all look at as it all works together. It's all the same, okay? And the government basically controlled what happened here. We had no voice, basically. I mean, it's democracy, but the way it worked is the way it worked. And that's the thing that goes back to this discussion on deltas, extreme risk, a lot of reward. If you are in the U.S. Government today and you study risk, you say, "Why the hell do people live in New Orleans, man? They want a flood," because that's what you focus on. That's what you do. The guy that does the economics says, "How can you not be there, with the river, the trees? Thomas Jefferson bought it." Okay? Well, that's the problem. That's a problem with America. That's the problem with whoever's speaking.

I was on the radio, on National Public Radio out of Minnesota, while [Hurricane] Gustav was hitting. I was at the hospital right here on the third floor, and there's a guy from the Hurricane Center. I can't remember the guy's name, but he was basically saying how people shouldn't be living in New Orleans, it's crazy to live there. I didn't want to get in a big debate about it, but you could see his focus was

just on hurricanes, hurricane threat, surges and the other side of it. But that's what government does. That's why government never knows as much as people here who look at the community.

So one of the things I keep talking about is community needs. Sure, we need to have the environment as good as it is, we're here because of the fishing, but like any place, you want economy, you want money in your pockets, and the oil industry has provided a lot of money in their pockets, okay? People have taken advantage, using their knowledge, but those same guys still like to fish, still like to hunt, still remember making a living doing that. So when they're understood, [unclear] the problems, they're willing to do something about it. That's the difference with the outside people, the environmental groups from outside, the people even in New Orleans. They're one-trick ponies. Now, if you're going to be a one-trick pony, you'll eventually be hypocritical because you're going to use something that you talk against.

JT: Like sediment diversion, for example.

WC: Or even doing restoration at all. I mean, when I started, see this levee district—again, I came from the LSU Extension Service, where, let's [unclear] the problem, see if it works and how it works, but also the ability to talk to the fishermen and talk to the researchers, because my job is to take research information and make it applicable and apply it so fishermen can take advantage of it and the public. So that was my job, so I just continued that same thing into this job.

When I got here, I told the guy, the board, "My job is to build this levee system," but they let me continue doing my restoration work and my biology work, and it made sense, because, number one, we get permits and we deal with some of the environmental issues. At the same time, we always felt, I always felt anything you put between the Gulf of Mexico and where you live is going to help knock down a storm surge, okay, whether it's a levee, a [unclear], a marsh, a barrier island. So it's not a matter of one or the other; it's a matter of the community and then the beneficial use of having that stuff, the productivity that we have.

That's why when we started doing some protection around the levee, where we've had erosion, I came up with the idea of a marsh apron. We've lost the marsh. Okay. Well, how much would it cost for us to reestablish the marsh vis-à-vis putting rocks? Because immediately that's how most people think, "Let's go put some rocks." Well, we had some money from the CIAP, Coastal Impact Assistance Program, and I started this concept of a marsh apron. You go in there, take a small dredge in open water, and you get high enough to grow marsh grass on the edge of your levee, where it was before. The reason you do it is everyday wave action starts eroding the levee.

JT: You're talking about the terraces?

WC: No. See, you don't know about it. A marsh apron. I have open water up against the levee over here. Okay. Everyday wave action started to eat up into the levee. I need to protect the total levee. Now, I can go put rocks, I know it's going to work. I can put some other stuff. I'm saying, how much rock would it cost compared to what would it cost to take a small dredge in here and reestablish the dirt high enough for marsh grass to grow? Well, I came up with that concept, and we did it, and we did it in 2004 before the storms hit. I mean, the concept was from way before, but we didn't have the opportunity, didn't have the money. We did it and that marsh platform is still sticking up there. You can see where I've started, you where I ended, you can see the open water, and you can see that I got marsh and the levee's protected.

Now they just came up with some research just recently saying how whether it's a strip of marsh, it's just as productive or maybe more than doing just—now, if you're going to restore some marsh, you're going to do a couple acres of marsh, if you do a couple acres of marsh in the middle of a lake or you do it along a roadway, a levee, or a [unclear] that's having erosion, where's it more valuable? Kill two birds with one stone.

But again, that's what my board—now, when I started doing restoration, it was 1980 when I started here, the people on the Levee Board Association, they called my board president and they asked if I was a communist or something. Doing environmental stuff? Think about 1980.

JT: The "E" word was a dirty word around here.

WC: Well, you build stuff or the enemy was environmentalists. Okay. Number one, I think the word "environmentalist" has been corrupted, because environmentalist is somebody who understands the inner workings of different species in the environment. To them, environmentalist means somebody who takes an extreme stance and ends up being a hypocrite.

JT: And it's much more politicized.

WC: It's all politicized. It's become a business. In fact, I've joined some organizations and had to step out. I believe in the basic concept that they're going with, but they always, always get to the point of being stupid and really being hypocritical. I was just thinking about that. The environmentalists want to a clean environment. I would think there's a valid life when you live your life to watch you espousing what you say. If you're an environmentalist, how can you smoke and be an environmentalist? Think about it. The hypocrisy is just palpable.

JT: Let me ask you this, speaking of politics, because this is a big part of the story, I need to know more about it, to what degree has coastal erosion been politicized over the last thirty years and how has that enabled—

WC: Well, let's start. You see, the thing is, people separated—they thought that was for the extreme, the communists, the other side, the people who didn't support making money, didn't want to work, hippies, all that type of stuff. We, those of us who grew up here—or I never separated the two. You worked. I worked. I paid my way through college on the shrimp boat. That marsh helped make the shrimp. That's one of the things I have to help teach.

I remember one of the first shows that I did in Franklin. It was a fishing show. I'm talking to the guy and I talked about, look, just like you have the pastures in the Midwest where the sun comes out and the grass changes that energy to something that the cows can eat, see, that's what marsh grass does. Marsh grass takes that energy from the sun, it grows and turns it not only into something you can eat, it also is the house for these larval species, the phytoplanktons, the ~~little~~ zooplankton, and then they grow and move from there, and the part is the marsh is critical because it is the beginning of the food chain in our estuaries, in these vast [unclear]. There's no competition for us here in the lower forty-eight states than what we have here. That's what we said. We said, "Before that, y'all been thinking about marsh as something that gets between your good fishing spots." And really that was totally the attitude; it was just a wasteland and nothing. That was really the message when I first started at a LSU Extension Service agent.

I remember I did a show for Channel 4 in New Orleans, WWL. It was the Sunday Journal, okay. We did a little twelve-minute segment on the concept that marsh has some meaning and does something. And he called me back and he said, "I've gotten more comments about it," because people still, they really never made the connection, continue not to make the connection. Now, we're out there pushing and saying, "Guys, you need to understand this," but really, the issue when people started getting involved in the coastal issue is when it started affecting roads and businesses and shrinking water.

JT: Pipelines.

WC: And pipelines.

JT: When do you think, in a broad perspective of residences, business and/or politicians or advocates, scientists, when do you think that the transition was made in the culture of understanding the benefits of all this? Was it early nineties, eighties?

WC: I've got to say it started in the early eighties. I remember Ben Bagert from New Orleans, in the early eighties, ran and even had that a plank in his platform. He talked about it. He lost the race.

JT: What was his name?

WC: Ben Bagert.

JT: Okay, B-a-g-g-a-r-d?

WC: Out in New Orleans. I want to say it's the early eighties. We still had all the stuff from the sixties and seventies, and it was still one side or the other and you're a tree-hugger hippie. And I did have long hair, [unclear]. But I played sports. I mean, people didn't understand it back in college. Either you was a jock or—well, I had long hair, but I played all the intramural sports, and people didn't understand. But again, you are who you are. And that told me he could run and talk about it, then he had enough people talking about it that it made sense for him to do it.

But really, I think, after years and years, I think in the late eighties we had enough coverage, enough people talking about it and enough affected communities that the general public started saying, "Well, this is something that's worth something for us."

JT: Now you've got to get the politicians in the state and the federal government, which is what the Breaux Act does.

WC: Well, all of a sudden, you know, you get—the coastal zone management really started the first kind or organized—it's a permitting system, but in Lafourche Parish, we never looked at it as permitting. We were the first parish to have a program, okay, and we never looked at it as a permitting system because you're so limited. We looked at it, okay, we had a chance to say, "This is how we want the marshes to be." And we made a decision way back when. In the coastal zone of Lafourche, about 435,000 acres and about 30,000 acres is inside the levee system. So we said right away, "Guys, we want to develop inside of here. Here's our tradeoff. We give people a place to live, do business, work, inside the levee system. Outside, we're going to try to maintain it in the shape it's in right now, as much as possible," very early in the ballgame. And again, that's a rational approach. You need a place where people can live and work and do those things they need to do, and at the same time you need to have the environment kept up the best you can. So this gave us at least a starting point that made sense to most people. So everything really started at that time.

Then you get—I remember, Tozin [phonetic], it was right before he ran for Congress the first time, he had a meeting in Thibodaux and people talked about the land loss. Only had four people show up, and they brought pictures and stuff. But again, had not hit real hard.

The time that I knew it really went over the edge, 2000, 2001, when you turned on your faucet over here and it tasted like somebody had taken a tablespoon of baking soda and mixed it in your water. I said that's when we tasted coastal erosion. I mean, the intake for the water is forty-five miles from Belle Pass and that same intake is only forty-five miles from the Mississippi River. And we could not keep it fresh enough to keep that salt from getting in there. Then there was no doubt for any of our people down here. They had tasted coastal erosion. Forty-five miles up. That's the lack of will to do what you need to do.

JT: So let's finish on that note, the political roadblocks.

WC: And again, in politics, an elected official, you would want them to lead, but in most cases what they do is they find out what people want and what people think, so the trick is always get the people who want the right thing. That was good. You had the stuff already out there about what was happening. Then when they tasted it, "Oh, yes. Okay. Yeah, you're right, you're right." When it started affecting the roads, the water started going over the road in Leeville, "Guys, we see it. We see the loss. We see the marsh."

I'll go down to Grand Isle, I'll be going there. It's always going to be a good time. I mean, my whole life, as a little bitty kid, some of my first memories, we'd go crab all the way down and fish on the roadside canals and we'd have a tub of crabs before we'd get to Grand Isle. We'd get to Grand Isle, fish in the surf and catch some trout and cook it right there. I mean, all of those things. Still today, with water now lapping on both sides [unclear], I'm still going to have a great time, there'll be great fish and everything. But the sign that's annoying, what that open water means, that we don't have much left.

When I grew up, you could hardly see any open water along LA-1 when you'd leave Golden Meadow toward Leeville, toward Grand Isle. Very little open water. I remember seeing a muskrat mound, you mentioned that, early into the seventies, easily. Right there before you get to Fourchon, you had extensive marsh muskrat mounds. No marsh, no mounds.

So that switchover took place easily, it really hit home when the drinking water hit. But it started for me, I kept looking and waiting to see a drop in our fisheries. But what really showed itself was Hurricane Juan.

JT: When was that?

WC: In ’85, a minimal storm. It had hung around in the Gulf for three days and it flooded the west bank, it flooded through here, all through Terrebonne. I mean, you had a terrible flood event from a minimal storm for the land loss and subsidence. Again, the subsidence increases the land loss, invites the Gulf in, all those issues. Then it gets complicated. You want people to interpret correctly. Well, people in [unclear] politicizing of it. “Well, you don’t need levees. We’ll just build a linear levee. We’ll just throw a marsh pack.” Well, that’s not it either.

I mean, to try and get people to understand the need for the barrier islands, the marsh, the landscape, the natural landscape. I started quoting at 2.73 miles of marsh linearly, or estuary. [unclear] storm surge by foot. I always used it to try to get people to connect, because people will protect their homes. They won’t always do restoration. So I was trying to get that connection, so more and more people started using that quote. Then I started hearing people say—then it got overboard on the other side. [unclear] said, “Well, we don’t need levees. Let’s just build that stuff. Let’s just do landscape.” That’s not right either.

So I’d say, “Well, let me go see where I got that information. “ So I started researching where I got that number, because several people had mentioned it to me and people were using it, but I wanted to find out where was the data. Well, the data was a 1964 report that the Corps had done on flood protection for Morgan City, and what they did is they took hurricanes from 1900 to 1950 and estimated the height at the coast and where that height petered out, basically. And that’s where they came up with it. But you look at what the coastline looked like in 1900 to 1950, you had substantial barrier islands, you had substantial [unclear] all over the place. So it wasn’t just marsh grass. So you need the whole estuarine landscape. So that understanding of that’s what it takes, but the other thing is understand where you’ve got subsidence going on.

JT: You can’t stop that. You can’t stop subsidence.

WC: You deal with it, but you need to understand it. If you go along thinking you can just do wetland restoration and not protect yourself any other way, you’re going to lose. Well, I’m all about the truth. Let’s get back. What is reality? That’s not reflecting reality. Reality is we can go reestablish everything we can reestablish, and the land we’re on right here on the ridge that used to be six feet above sea level, today is now just four feet above sea level. That’s it. Is this forever? No. But nothing’s forever. This is the other thing we’ve had to get on the politicizing of things. It’s not a matter of doing things forever. It’s does it makes sense today and in the foreseeable future. Leeville didn’t make sense and doesn’t make sense as far as a community to protect a normal living. That’s why we moved out of Leeville.

This area, had we not built a levee system, Fourchon doesn't exist because the four-lane highway that you're going to drive inside the system in Golden Meadow, before you get outside the system, is two feet below sea level. If we don't have the levee system, Fourchon never develops because we would have had water over the road back in the nineties.

JT: You're talking about here?

WC: Yes, exactly. And in fact, right here by the park, that four-lane highway is two feet below sea level. LA-1 is only one foot. Now, as you get here, it gets higher. It gets to about a three- to four-foot elevation. And outside the levee system, the road is three to four feet above sea level.

JT: You said, "we" moved out of Leeville.

WC: Me and my family, my family.

JT: Not the community at large?

WC: The community, the community. You've got to understand this community was at [unclear] Caminada. Okay, the hurricane hit, people moved to Leeville and to W_____ and [unclear] to the Golden Meadow. The 1915 hurricane hit and the people in Leeville finished moving here and then you started seeing the decline in Leeville, till now there's just a couple of families left in Leeville. We'd be moving here if we hadn't built the levee system. People are still moving. They're moving out here even with the levee system. But we would not have a community again. This would all be shot. Again, to support Fourchon and Grand Isle, we had a road, still have some tourism, okay, still have that, but to have a business that you depend on, a road that gets water on it maybe a month at a time, that wasn't going to happen.

I never realized that till Reggie Dupre, Senator Dupre from Terrebonne, he said that. He said, "Well, if you're going to have those oil companies, when they wanted to concentrate, starting from the eighties after the bust, they wouldn't have picked Fourchon as one of the places." But the road outside the system was high. The road inside was protected by the levee.

JT: It's an environment of many contrasts.

WC: That's why those one-trick ponies don't understand it. That's why it's so hard for politics. You asked that original question, the original question you asked is, "Why is it so hard?" Because it's complicated. People talk about the rainforest, okay, slash and burn, no rainforest. Global warming, well, you have ten feet of

water. But coastal Louisiana, to understand how it works, how to deal with it rationally, it's complicated. That's why it's hard. And the will to do it, this is the other thing, that's why it's hard. We do so many things economically, recreationally, and just culturally in South Louisiana, that if we change anything, water, salinity, marsh, one thing to another thing, we hurt somebody. Anything we change, we hurt somebody. But if we don't get serious about restoration, everybody's going to get hurt. And any big project we do, somebody's going to be bitching. I really believe our best chance to hang on—they talk about restoration. Hell, we haven't stopped the loss yet. You can't get the train going in this direction unless you stop it going in that direction. We haven't stopped it yet.

So my philosophy is, number one, we get as much freshwater and hang onto it as long as possible. Now, how do you do that? As many diversions as you can, but also reestablish what we used to have. We used to have a barrier island system and there was a difference in salinity from one side to the other. That doesn't exist anymore. Those islands are so gone that it's the same salinity on both sides. Then the south wind blows, that salinity jumps up. Heavy rain or no wind, when an estuary was functioning right, you might have had a one-mile shift in the isohelium lines. Five points per thousand, maybe a mile. Now ten, fifteen miles in two or three days. What I would want to do, it would take big chunks of money to make our barrier islands do that again.

JT: Like something from the stimulus package?

WC: Well, well, anyway. [laughs] But the thing is, I don't see that kind of money. I don't see it coming. It might come, and if it does come, well, if we're going to build the Barrier Islands, then we've got to not only build, but a maintenance program to maintain them. Now I don't see that. So what I'm saying is let's get to a line that we can defend, where we have a lot of contiguous marsh, leave your navigation channels, leave your natural channels, but reestablish either marsh, a [unclear] a terrace, a levee, I don't give a damn what it is, but put something across that limits the saltwater from coming in.

We have unlimited saltwater in the Gulf, right? We have limited freshwater. Sixty inches of rainfall and what comes out of the river, that's it. That's the freshwater we have. But if we put a barrier to hang onto it longer and let it percolate out, well, like it used to when you had solid marsh and barrier islands and bayous and everything, you had a real system. We don't. So let's get a line and between these ridges get the skeleton back again. I'm not talking about draining those marshes behind that, but if you build a levee, put some openings there that you'll only close when there's a hurricane. See, the scientists don't believe in that. The guys that work in the field as scientists, the Wildlife and Fisheries guys, they do, because they see it.

We did a mitigation project. We drew up a levee right here. This is the Wildlife and Fisheries Marshland Reserve. I talked to the Wildlife and Fisheries guys. Is this more productive in here or out there? Which one? This is more productive. And it's a [unclear] levee, okay? We have some holes in it, poke holes in it, let some salt come in, let the rain go out, but we stop all the salt from just coming in.

JT: Is this the actual levee?

WC: No, that's the projected—

JT: Because I noticed that they're building something on the other side of Petite C_____. What is that?

WC: That's the levee.

JT: That's this?

WC: That's it right here. I used to run that levee district the last year, and I just had to quit because it was too much.

JT: They're going to build a levee all the way around, like you said, to close in—

WC: You see this? We do this, guess what? Lake Boudreaux had one opening. Used to have a little opening to Grand Caillou. One opening. With the canals that were dug, and that wasn't a big deal at first, when the canals were dug, but we once the lost the marsh to here and that salt could come on in easily, we started losing Lake Boudreaux. We're trying to reestablish this levee alignment with some holes in it, enough to let some stuff through, and that's what the environmentalists are fighting us on. That's bullshit.

JT: What's do you call this line?

WC: This is the Morganza to the Gulf. That's the big controversial one. [unclear] levee. The people from New Orleans, they have hurt the people of Terrebonne by saying, "Don't do this because you're increasing all this marsh." They say, "We want to have the marsh outside to protect the levee." Well, we agree with that. The fact of the matter is, we're going to build levees, we're going to maintain levees. We haven't done that with marshes. So at least we can protect these and at the same time try to encourage a development marsh on the outside here.

But I would take a line over here and say, "Let's reestablish, start here," and say, "We've got to build this and maintain it." Make it marsh, make it a [unclear] I don't care what. But have the levee here, we've got to have something.

JT: So this is a reality? This is going to happen?

WC: No, this is a law. Well, first I've got to tell you, 70 percent of this alignment is on a hydrologic barrier already. Now, we have a little mitigation levee here. There is a levee system here. There's a levee system here. We're going to build this levee hopefully starting this year. We're building this levee right now. But there is a levee that goes to here and cuts across Bayou La Cache. There is a ridgeline over here. Okay, it's a road, so we're going to go along, basically, that road here.

JT: The 57?

WC: Yeah. Then build a lock here, and this is one with saltwater coming in, but also, because you have the river building out here, it causes some hydrostatic pressure here, we're getting more freshwater.

JT: Well, that's good.

WC: Where you used to have this getting saltier and saltier, now it's getting fresher and fresher, the water intake in Houma.

JT: So they want to divert some.

WC: Well, because it's happening simply because this is building out here, it's mostly more water here. That's a good thing. Now, we put this lock on this, and it's designed to take care of environmental [unclear] flood. When you have south winds and not much water here, you keep it closed. Or when you have a lot of water come through here and you want to force it into the marshes here, you keep it closed. We can do these things, but we have the environmental groups in New Orleans that are fighting us.

JT: When was this project first researched and proposed?

WC: Well, '92. That's when it was first proposed.

JT: Who was some of the leading people involved in it?

WC: Well, you had Jerome, Jerome Zeringue [phonetic] was the manager. You had the people in Terrebonne Parish, all the people in Terrebonne Parish.

JT: This was a Terrebonne Parish-led initiative?

WC: Well, there was a study, a request from the people of Terrebonne for flood protection. Starting in '85, they created the South Terrebonne Levee District,

then they combined and the whole parish was in it. There was a study called "Morganza to the Gulf," and according to these studies—so there's a request for a study. They did they study and they looked at the projects that they could do. One of the projects that came out that was viable was hurricane protection for Terrebonne Parish, which is basically what Morganza to the Gulf is.

JT: Then it has since become something even bigger and then '92—

WC: Well, that's when Morganza to the Gulf, they said, "Okay, this is what we can do. This, we think, is viable." So they started the study. Corps of Engineers started Morganza to the Gulf. They finally got it. The study was almost ready for the [unclear] to actually implement, but it was obvious the feds did not want to implement this project.

JT: Why's that? Too expensive?

WC: Yeah, they just didn't want to spend the money. They just didn't want to do it. They wanted to get out of flood protection, basically, I think that's what it is.

There was a report that was supposed to be due. They were authorized in 2002, once this report came in. The report came in late, so they were never authorized. And that was on purpose. They authorized it in 2007 at a cost of about 800 million dollars, and then seven months later, they said, "Oh no, well, with the new criteria it's going to cost 14 billion." When I started to work over there, I told them, I said, "You know, guys, I dated enough women in my life to know when I'm not wanted. I'm telling you the federal government doesn't want you. So what we need to do, what can we do to defend ourselves?"

Now, you understand, in Lafourche Parish, South Lafourche, We had no flooding. Last ten years, Terrebonne's flooded six times out of ten.

JT: So they desperately need some—they're building—

WC: I said, "Guys, let's go ahead." Now, building up is good.

JT: Yeah, but you need more.

WC: But you need a combination of—use whatever weapons you've got. You build up, but you want your road, if your road's under water. Anyway, so let's go ahead and let's see what we can build with the money that we have. I said, "Look. You [unclear] federal partner because they really don't want to be with you. Try to partner with the state." Sure enough, Jindal came up with 100 million dollars for us.

JT: A hundred million dollars. This is the latest news that came out this year, right?

WC: Well, yeah, it's over the last year or so that all this took place. Again, Garret Graves [phonetic] comes from Washington. I've dealt with Garret. He was a rookie with [Rep. Billy] Tauzin. When Tauzin left, he went with Vitter [phonetic] and I worked with him with Corps reform, Corps projects, a whole bunch of stuff. When [Gov. Bobby] Jindal came over here, he appointed him head of Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority.

The Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority is an idea I came up with after '93, when we tried to get water down in Bayou Lafourche again, and again, the people from Baton Rouge were coming down and saying, "Oh, we're going to put more water down Bayou Lafourche and we're going to put 2,000 cubic feet per second and it's going to raise the water level six feet." And they tell people that and don't tell them how they're not going to flood. Stupidity. So I said, "Look, we've got to combine restoration and flood protection because it's just different sides of the same coin." After [Hurricane] Katrina, the governor needed to do something and, boom, that was one of the things. CPRA, combining Coastal Protection and Restoration.

JT: Well, if you can build a levee around South Lafourche, you guys can surely build a levee to protect Terrebonne.

WC: You can do it. It's all doable. You've got to have the will.

JT: You've got to have the money.

WC: And you've got to have the right people. In our story, even B____ Levee was not big, but I mean, I could not get support from the Chamber of Commerce, nobody. We go on our own, luckily we had some profitable businesspeople who understood that we would not exist if we didn't, and only because they put their personal chips there, what they had accumulated business-wise and used it publicly, because everything that they own, everything they care about was here. Leon Theriot was the leader of that.

JT: Who's that?

WC: Leon Theriot. Leon's talked about [unclear] industry, because he was the—Nolte Theriot. You might have heard of Nolte Theriot.

JT: Sure.

WC: He's Nolte's cousin. He would go do the negotiations for insurance and the contracts over in Rotterdam and Amsterdam when they were doing the tugboats—

JT: North Sea.

WC: North Sea. So Leon played a big part. He was the deal maker. When people wanted to get a boat or get a boat business, they'd come to him. Okay. He'd go ahead, he'd line up the boat build, [unclear] the engines, the gear, get all that put together and not charge a thing. But when the guy would come to get his insurance, he'd go to Leon and Leon would charge and make his money on the insurance. Mowak [phonetic] is an underwriter, a worldwide underwriter of insurance. Leon was their top man for a couple of years.

JT: So like you're saying, you've got to have the will, you've got to have good people.

WC: You've got to have good people and you have to have powerful people to want to go do these hard things, because you're going to hurt somebody. When we built this levee system, I was not a popular guy. We were not popular people when we were trying to build it. We were taking property from people whether they wanted to or not, and people get upset when you take their property. You know what? This happened time and time again. It wasn't until Juan, and this area did flood from Juan, that people finally realized, the only thing sticking up was the levee we built, and we weren't finished with it. They understood and that's when support started coming. But now [unclear] tax when the feds didn't give us any money after Katrina. Billions to New Orleans and we got zero. Went back to the people. One penny sales tax they pushed hard on everybody else around us. Eighty-two percent approval.

JT: What's the approval for a project like this in Terrebonne?

WC: Well, right now they tried to get a tax passed two years ago and they failed, because they were talking with the parish. One thing I always did, I made sure that people understand we're not part of the parish.

JT: You're not part of Laforche Parish.

WC: No. We're a creature of the legislature, for the South Lafourche Levee District. I tell my people, "If anybody confuses you with a parish employee, you're doing something wrong or you're not doing anything." I mean, we make ourselves. We make sure that we're different from everybody else.

JT: But you think this is going to happen?

WC: Well, it is happening. They're going to build something. When I went over there and told them about—[unclear]. [unclear] a girlfriend, I'm telling you. And they

started the idea, "What can we build? We can't build a seventeen-foot levee, but we can build a ten-foot levee." A ten-foot levee would have protected the community from all the flooding in the past.

JT: It's a good start.

WC: That's not to say we'd [unclear]—that's right. You build something that works and then you improve on it. But talking about the land loss issue, a lot of the people only went back to 1956 because that was a good vegetative survey of South Louisiana.

JT: And aerials, too.

WC: So they started going back and say, "Well, here's the loss [unclear] 1956." Well, because my family living here always talked about, well, there used to be land here, I went back to Joe S____, that was here, I said, "Joe, go back. Cartography was not that bad in the past. I want you to digitize some old state maps like you would digitize a map today." Okay. That simple idea, I had him do that. 1839, look at this.

JT: Oh, that's a lot of land.

WC: Well, look at the Biloxi Marsh over here. Here's just a crack in the door between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi Sound and the Gulf. Again, a little erosion in 1870. But look, 1930. Then you compare it to where we're at today, and then a computer enhancement into the future. But you can see. Now, this tells people. This is part of the education. Man, if you can't see this. Now, it's really funny, again, why am I working here, have to come up with this type of stuff? Why, when people in Baton Rouge are supposed to be doing this? Why are they not doing it? Because they don't know. They don't know. They're one-trick ponies. They don't understand the relationship. They can't see those things. I said [unclear], "I've got buddies around here that do the same thing."

But I believe in building stuff, too, not just looking at it. See, to me, in government right now you've got the lookers, so they make money by looking and they keep on looking. If they look a lot, I call them hookers. Okay? Then there are the builders. I want to be part of the builders.

But it's really funny, I go to the Aquaterra in the Netherlands. All right. The first speaker talked about the General Conference, guess what pictures he puts up? The concept I came up with, I go to the Netherlands, it's up on the screen.

JT: So it's not just oil and gas technology that we're exporting all over the world; it's the understanding of deltas.

WC: Well, it's dealing with water. Exactly. It's dealing with water. That's what we do.

JT: Is there anybody else? I'd probably like to get in touch with Leon Theriot.

WC: Leon died.

JT: Oh, he died?

WC: Yes, I tell you, he died board president. He had cancer and he was really incapacitated. I remember his wife saying, whispering, "You want to resign?" "No, it's too important." He was on his death bed and he didn't want to resign because it was too important.

JT: Who else would you recommend? I'm going to meet with Kerry St. Pé tomorrow and I'm going to view Bob Jones' records. I'm going to meet with Restore or Retreat, another organization up there in Nicholls.

WC: Well, again, I think Ted and I kind of like parallel and stuff, Ted Falgrew [phonetic], with the Port. Ted, we've got biology degrees. Well, we played football together at South Lafourche. He's a defensive end, I'm the quarterback. He has his responsibilities, I got mine. We both worked for LSU Extension as fisheries agents. He ends up doing a job here, but still doing restoration work. I do this. What he does, we trust each other, so we work with each other, but we do opposite sides.

JT: Then I've got a handful of other folks. Woody Gagliano. I got a call the other day from Gene Turner [phonetic]. I was very surprised to get a call, but he sounded very interested.

WC: They talk about his wife with the dead zone. Okay, before it had a name, we trawled that. In '73, I'm out trawling and we put a ton of stuff on the deck, you know, a three-hour haul. Typically when you finish seeding your shrimp, your trash fish, 80, 90 percent you put out there alive. I started noticing, before we finished seeding the shrimp, the fish were dead. A couple of days later, the stress of being in the net, they were dead. Within a week, we were catching nothing. Now, my dad said he had never seen that, where you put up two sixty-foot trawls three hours and not come up with anything. To me it was obvious, that was the first—one of the first dead zones. But '73 was a high-river year, a flood year. So it all kind of ties together a little bit.

But Reggie Dupre, you need to talk to Reggie, because Reggie is the person that I went to talk to that was there and he took things and turned them into law. He

was the leader on coastal restoration issues in the legislature. He's made the biggest impact. Everybody else, to me, in all the legislation before what he did, are basically pikers.

JT: Is he a senator?

WC: He was a senator. Now he's running the levee district.

JT: Out of where?

WC: Lafourche and Terrebonne. He's running the levee district now. Morganza. You can learn more about Morganza. But Reggie was there at the beginning. And of course, talking to Jerome and to Garret Graves. Garret's super busy, but you can't miss for talking to those two.

JT: Garret Graves?

WC: Yeah, he's the chairman of the CPRA.

JT: And what is Jerome's last name?

WC: Jerome Zeringue. Jerome works for him, but Jerome was also—

JT: He's the secretary?

WC: Yeah. But he was a sea grant agent like me and Ted. Then he sort of did the levee work and now he's up there. Ronnie Paille's another person. Ronnie Paille with Fish and Wildlife.

JT: How do you spell his last name?

WC: P-a-i-l-l-e. I think he's located in Lafayette. But Ronnie's I like because he's a federal agent, but he's worked down here. He's in the water enough to see. He doesn't always agree with what the feds do. I just find him a real honest, straightforward guy, good guy to talk to. I use him a lot, maybe because he believes a lot of stuff I believe, but I think he's right.

JT: You've seen one of these before.

WC: Yeah.

JT: This project is mainly for me to qualify to get a Ph.D. But like I was telling you, when I went to Cocodrie last year and saw that, and we went in a little fifteen-foot skiff, my uncle, who now has the camp, he bought a little duck boat because he

likes to go in the oilfield canals and catch the redfish, and we pulled alongside and right behind the camp, maybe 400 yards from the camp on Laperouse Canal is a big pipeline with a big sign, Tennessee Gas. [unclear]. We got in there, we caught some redfish. Like I was telling you, that pond is now a lake. So when I take all this in, yeah, it's a qualification to get a Ph.D., but I have a personal connection in that if this is the least that I can do, or at least a start for me, and everybody has their own—

WC: But not only that, you see where you're at? There's no telling where you're going to pass on information to. I mean, you're the kind of person at this juncture, just like Woody was, and you put it out. A lot of this work is like you throw seeds out. Well, some seeds don't germinate, but if you throw enough seeds out, you're going to germinate some and there's no telling where that's going to go.

I worked with Tom Benoit [phonetic] when he did his oyster wetlands and stuff. [unclear] with Dr. John up there. Dr. John, you know what? His daddy and uncle are trappers in St. Bernard Parish. We talked about what makes a good jambalaya. He likes s_____, loves s_____.

JT: On a jambalaya?

WC: Yeah. Not only that, we're talking about—to me a good jambalaya, you've got to have a lot of oysters in it. That's Dr. John, I mean, icon. But you see how you throw these seeds out. So Tom Benoit, I started being his environmental advisor when he started Voice of the Wetlands. He goes ahead and does his wetlands CD that I did the writing in the middle of, and the first Voice of the Wetlands CD I did the writing for. I gave him a pep talk at the beginning, okay? So I knew [unclear] and all that stuff. Now, who was a fan of Tom Benoit, calls him up and wants to talk to him about the wetland problem? Kathleen Sebelius. She was Governor of Kansas. Now she's Secretary of Health for Obama.

JT: I'll be damned.

WC: See, you throw these seeds.

JT: You never know.

WC: And some day she may something to the right person in the right place. It needs to be heard. That's why you throw the seeds. Throw the seeds.

JT: The other thing is that you still have a lot of work in you, I know, but there's been many—well, maybe not many, but there's been a handful who have come and done their work and they've passed on or they're getting too old now, and there needs to be a next group that needs to come and take over.

WC: Yeah, and I see some of these people. I mean, Jerome's part of that next group, I think. You've got Duane Bourgeois [phonetic], he's worked for North Lafourche, an engineer, but I see him part of the next group. But I do my work, you know what I think about? I know these other people, I don't know what their—is it for the job, is it for whatever? But I think about my grandparents. This place means [unclear] people. When I do this work, whether it's the levee work or restoration, it's about this place and it's about doing it the right way because they never got help from the government. Now, our people went to war, their kids went to war, they were teased because they spoke French, and they saved people's lives because they spoke French, especially in World War II, and yet government—I'm part of the government and I don't believe in government. I really try not to work like government. I try to work like [unclear]. I see a successful business over here and then what they do is they see what the job is and they don't let the bullshit get in the way of doing the job. Those are two things that I guide the way I work over here.

That's what frustrates me about so much of the rest of the stuff, that it's bureaucratic, it's about government, and government's supposed to be about doing the job of the people, and it's not. Government's about doing the job for themselves, and the people are the sidebar or their function is a sidebar. I see that so much in so many different areas. That's why I say about the lookers, the lookers are looking just to provide food on the table and a house. They're hookers for me.

JT: Again, it takes back to possibly our first point, it is such an environment of extreme contrasts in all areas.

WC: Again, tremendously good, tremendously bad, this is the place, the proverbial cuts both ways. That's what deltas are about.

JT: Would you say the big risk—

WC: Big risk, big opportunity, big rewards, but big opportunity, big risks. And unless you live here, you don't understand, unless you live on the delta. I'm telling you, people in Bangladesh understand it, people in the Netherlands understand it.

JT: I'm going to turn this off.

[End of interview]