

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Ophelia Lefort

COLLECTION: 4700.2098

IDENTIFICATION: Galliano, Louisiana, native; Larose, Louisiana, resident; mother; architectural preservationist; amateur painter; Catholic

INTERVIEWER: Blake Cwieka

SERIES: Bayou Lafourche

INTERVIEW DATE: September 24, 2010

FOCUS DATES: 1930s [childhood]; 1940s [teenage years]; 2010 [painting]

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3944

Interview with Ophelia Lefort, native of Bayou Lafourche; growing up was wonderful, everyone spoke French, all swam in bayou [no gators]; attended two-room schoolhouse [grades 1-3, grades 3-5, one teacher per room]; learning three grades at one time; just rows of kids, "okay, it's time to teach first grade, then she'd [teacher] abandon us and go to second line of desks"; born and raised in Galliano, Louisiana, Bayou Lafourche; tributary of Mississippi; also nearby: Bayou Raphael and Bayou Louis [goes to Grand Isle]; maybe ten arpents apart; Went to Cut Off for high school, attended some college [name?], too; met husband in movie house in Galliano; cost a dime to go in; saw young man in seat next to wall; went over and introduced herself; Lefort discusses family background; parents were descendants of Dr. Falgout, who was sent by king of France to treat soldiers wounded in the American Indian War [Revolutionary War?]; had twelve kids, lost six, but one of his daughters [probably Antoinette] was progenitor; then [le Grand] Derangement [the expulsion of French from Nova Scotia] [also brought French]; trappers and fisherman settled in 1700s; don't know exactly where they landed on bayou; Lefort recalls the vaze [?] family gathered on porch at dusk, made smoke to protect from mosquitos; talk about stuff, played games; invented a noisemaker to scare away mosquitos; Lefort went to dance halls when she was older; Bayou Lafourche was tributary of Mississippi; Lefort believes when they closed river in Donaldsonville [via dam or lock?] to prevent overflow and crop losses created land loss [silt didn't come down bayou]; most people that lived along bayou worked in oilfield later; trappers of muskrats, minks, otters; every year went to camp on marsh; used to skin pelts at age fourteen; was way of life; when winter was over returned home; stay out of school for three months [no school in marsh]; had to catch up after trapping season; after trapping season father would build boat and go shrimping in gulf; "that's how we lived"; houses along bayou: shotgun, bungalows, very modest, no two-story buildings; everyone lived along bayou, not far to reach *flotant*/floating marsh [later on drained land, put up levees]; bayou was main street, people lived on both sides; grocery store across bayou, ride flat boat to get groceries; paddle and tie to moor; interviewer asks if Lefort lived in close-knit community; Lefort replies you knew neighbors;

little old lady took us to church in her “little black buggy”; somebody didn’t have sugar or salt a neighbor had it; at sixteen worked at shrimp shed, packing house; pack into cans during World War Two; boats would tie up on bayou, shrimp brought into shed; shrimp were peeled, put into gullies, boiled, packed into cans; worked one or two years; lived in Galliano, “down the bayou”; made a painting of two-room schoolhouse now in school board office in Thibodaux; married, had children, husband went to USL [University of Southwest Louisiana, now University of Louisiana at Lafayette]; had two girls and two boys; oldest is 63, youngest is 46; oldest daughter [teacher] and youngest son lives with Lefort; husband went to war, married when he got back [1946]; engaged through war, never had any other boyfriend; moved to Lafayette; returned to bayou after school; husband worked for oil field, on rigs; had degree in engineering but did mostly pumping work; Lefort started working at local school [Intercoastal?], across bayou; secretary at LSU Jr. High [?]; didn’t need to import teachers anymore [had brought in from different parishes]; teachers had lived in [boarding] houses; three teetresches [?] in Larose, Raceland, and Thibodaux; for \$30/month, got room and board; only [this] one left, others are gone; on Choctaw [?] Plantation land; didn’t have educated people to teach [worker, farmer, trappers, fisherman] nobody went to college, so had to import teachers from Lafayette, New Iberia and then house them; when house went up for sale Lefort was still secretary at junior high; Lefort sold old house to second daughter; knew this house was going up for sale, put in sealed bid of \$12,000 and got house; built a sidewalk to the schoolhouse on corner; Larose is four corners, when Lafourche Parish turned two hundred years old Marge Parker [?] asked Lefort [to research?] Larose; two passing waterways makes four corners; Lefort paints on anything; saying is “don’t stand too close to Ophelia because she could paint on you, too”; paints on oyster shells; has painting of boat that would come from Grand Isle with fruit and vegetables; childhood memory of watching it pass, she wants to show her children; Grand Isle raised watermelon, cucumber for fresh market in New Orleans; they [boatmen] would throw kids bananas and apples; shares thoughts on painting; “you can lose yourself”, it’s rewarding; went to classes in Lockport, teacher encouraged her, said “you see things that other people don’t see”; knowledge of colors is a “special gift”; started in 1985; you can paint on anything; brick from underneath the house; boiled [tree] knees, almost like a banana peel; steam it, let it cool off, peel it; low and behold, the most beautiful surface to paint on; paint on cypress shingles; can paint on glass; sell at tourism center; raised Catholic; first had lady with buggy give them rides, later a priest would pick Leforts up on bayou, brought to church for catechism; two churches, one in Larose, Leforts belonged to Galliano church; had to go by car or wagon; remember first car on bayou; cousin and Lefort were playing on side of road, model T approached; cousin ran in front of car, hit him and broke his leg; younger than ten at the time; gravel roads; after that Lefort was scared to death of cars; mom would not let her ride bicycle [sharing road with cars]; never learned how to ride a bike; only one family with car, gravel roads, lots of holes in the road; working life: packing house as teen, after that she didn’t work until son John [youngest] was in first grade; housewife and raised four children; then went work at school; by then commuted in car; husband worked in oil field; when Lefort decided to go to work, youngest in elementary, wanted to contribute to family; kids all went to college; moved into school building ‘as is’; no renovation; it was livable structure from beginning; remodeled three times; I worked, he worked, children in school; all children except John are teachers; Intercoastal didn’t have its own [medical] specialists, had to go to New Orleans to see doctors; took care of parents; lovely area; Lord awarded me this house because I desired to live in this area; Lefort has a lot of faith in the Lord; sold place in Galliano and moved to Larose; some teachers were still living in house; kids liked it because it was closer

to school; two graduated from south Lafourche [High School]; Donna and John went to school with Lefort; was just house with an attic; always said I love antebellum homes, pleasant looking; did a lot of travelling in Louisiana; “what Lord said to me ‘I can’t give you antebellum home, but I can give you that one’”; house, built 1919, has been through many storms, very strong, “could build a ship out of it”; lumber yard was next door which meant choice lumber; two room school house took \$1000 to build; “William P School” [?], namesake donated the land for the building; Katrina didn’t do a bit of damage; just recently put shutters on house, working to get a grant [for shutters]; grew up with shrimping, best oysters and crabs; lived with food from the gulf; don’t know how much damage will be result of [oil spill].

TAPES: 1 (T3944)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 34 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 4 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewer Index; Group information; DVD with images of Lefort interview

RESTRICTIONS: None