

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Augustin J. "A.J." LeBlanc, Jr. **COLLECTION:** 4700.2093

IDENTIFICATION: Lockport, Louisiana native [b. 1936]; Cut Off, Louisiana resident; retired insurance broker; Catholic; French-speaker

INTERVIEWER: Courtney Smith and Brooklne Hadley

SERIES: Bayou Lafourche

INTERVIEW DATE: October 24, 2010

FOCUS DATES: 1930s-1940s [childhood]; late 1950s-1960s [beginning of insurance practice]; 2010

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3939

Interview takes place in Cut Off, Louisiana; participants in Coastal Sustainability studio at Louisiana State University; everyone calls subject AJ LeBlanc [short for Augustin Joseph]; born in Lockport, Louisiana on July 9, 1936; [break] many generations [seven or eight] generations of men in family with his name; parents said "we have too many Augustins"; dad was called "Gus" to distinguish and interviewer is AJ; Parish is elongated; culturally parish is unique; certain people settled in different parts of bayou; unique to only have two brothers; three sons born one year apart [now 75-74-73]; everyone spoke French in central Lafourche; stayed that way until he went to parochial school; parents were devout Catholics; wanted sons to learn prayers in French; LeBlanc says rosary in French every day; parents would subscribe to magazines and church books from Quebec [closest source]; no radio or electricity in the LeBlanc house until after WWII; school nuns were Cajun or from Quebec and would love pupils to speak in French; other kids were punished for speaking French [law against French on (public) school grounds passed in 1915]; [public school] teachers would tell [French-speaking kids] they'll never accomplish anything if they speak just French; today it is an advantage to be able to speak, read, write French; LeBlanc goes on internet and reads in French; parents encouraged him; if he was high school student now he'd love to know three or four languages; America is going global; so many plusses if you know more than one language; Louisiana is very weak on teaching and encouraging other languages; knowing other languages opens many opportunities; evolution of community; travel from Raceland, big school at Highway 1 south to Grand Isle [70 miles]; span was isolated; great for parents to control upbringing, see that "we really became productive people"; later walls of isolation started coming down; played with brothers and neighbors, families were tight; people and neighbors bonded; example: if his parents decide to have a boucherie [? butchering of calf or hog, cut meat, make sausages], would invite all the neighbors; didn't have preservation so there was need for fresh meat; parents slaughtered hog, neighbor did it next week, perpetuate fresh provisions; people would share fresh-baked breads; at cookouts

everyone danced, had fun, established bonds; everyone was generally economically [equal] and mostly had same desires about how they should live life; changes began when “many of us” went to war; came back with “American” brides [French-American grandfather’s term for girl from North Carolina, rather than someone from local French-speaking community]; tearing down isolation; then oil field came in, petroleum companies offered many jobs; previously bayou was primarily farmers and fisherman; settlers had good weather, food and planting throughout the year, abundance of fish, shrimp; could sell, make a living, did not have any problems with the Depression; in father’s youth, unless you lived near school there was no way to get there [no busses]; to further education past Lafourche, dad had to go to New Orleans; dad was there and “had to run back here, he was starving to death while going to school” [during Depression]; there were blacks, they were friendly with LeBlanc; segregated because of laws; Lafourche has small minority of blacks; probably more Mexicans and Vietnamese at local school, historically and currently; blacks would participate at some social gatherings; LeBlanc cannot speak for other gentlemen; in Lafourche forty miles makes a lot of difference; parochial education had different attitude than some public school teachers; interviewer asks about physical construction of community; oil fields brought people from Texas, Mississippi; some people married into families, which started changing culture and customs; evolution of technology; television and radio exposed us to barrage of different cultures, hurt religion and music; lot of culture now is a reflection of what we’ve seen on TV; exposed to different lifestyles; transportation; abundance of vehicles here now; in LeBlanc’s time, not many vehicles at all; in 1936 top Ford cost \$650; oil was 12¢/gallon; education: mom went to local school, first four years in French then six years in English [were no high schools in this parish]; dad [born in turn of century, out of school by 1917] went to parochial schools through eleventh grade, got certificate; most important part of upbringing was church; fiercely devoted; kept everyone in line, virtually no crime in community; today [certain areas have problems] but in South Lafourche crime is very low; selling drugs are low; religions are no longer the force they were; physical geography of bayou; topography changes as you go south; “heartbreaking” as a child LeBlanc could go from Raceland to Grand Isle; 75-80 miles on Highway 1; you’d see rows of old trees, like Oak Alley Plantation [Vacherie, Louisiana], and an abundance of land on each side; today it’s all water; land is disappearing rapidly over last fifty or sixty years; predicted that in fifty years this house will be under ten feet of water; LeBlanc attend Catholic school; Nicholls was just starting; LeBlanc made a mistake to get married very young; it’s been “fruitful and good” marriage but it was a challenge; had a high school education; abundance of good paying job with oil companies; they had retirement, good salary; trawling/fishing no retirement, irregular depending on season and God’s will; “we loved the oil companies”; LeBlanc went to work for Humble Oil [now Exxon] in Grand Isle; one of first offshore rigs; after two years, two kids, realized that he wanted future, career; in 1958 left, saw advertisement for insurance agent in Donaldsonville; applied for job; HR was “very impressed,” graded high, but need a better education; insurance “in its infancy [fifty years ago]”; almost a necessity to advise, motivate people [to buy it]; tremendous need for insurance; can’t just live on social security, expenses [including retirement, kids’ education], hurricanes, liability; more lawyers coming out of law school and suing meant businesses needed liability insurance; LeBlanc learned as much as he could “to be the best”; only two schools had agreements with insurance industry [LSU School of Insurance Marketing and ?]; wife thought LeBlanc was stupid to leave \$5200 drilling job and go onto commission; but gave LeBlanc chance to go to school; USL [University of Southwest Louisiana?] for two semesters, received associates degree in insurance marketing; everything was evolving, “I was growing with it”;

wanted to return to Lafourche Parish; LeBlanc opened office in Larose; this area was [?]; if you needed an extra dollar, you could get a restaurant job easily; oil field was fueling economy with its income; visit the port; small community but provides 12-15,000 jobs; wife did not work; she as officer in corporation; "I just started rolling" within three or four years LeBlanc had largest State Farm agency in Louisiana; in "little bitty" Larose; people buy jewelry, wanted to protect it; "I insured everything people needed, and I was creating those needs," skills in insurance business; in past folks had no coverage, but then there was exposure, risk; lawyers "were after everybody"; right now there's twenty-five lawyers to represent 18,000 people [in Larose], "that's a lot of lawyers"; called AJ LeBlanc Agency Incorporated; industries: number one is oil, and its related hydrocarbon productions, natural gas, and sulfur, then fishing; spinoff from petroleum; contract work companies provide skilled labor, Danos and Curole, boat company and big-time shipyards; richest man in Louisiana [Gary Chouest] lives down the road, started on his father's shrimp boat; now owns part of Hornets, worth \$70 million; LeBlanc and wife have had four homes in fifty-five years; wife built and designed current house; smaller because kids are out; LeBlanc had four children; frame home based on Acadian architecture with porch all around; good because it provides shade, though now has AC; typical home of sixty years ago, faces bayou, on highway; houses next to him are similar; all neighbors work in oil field; lawyer, newspaper guy; this community is very different, very local; garbage, telephone, cable all owned by local [not national] companies; at one point parish had local electric company [sold to Entergy]; LeBlanc's brother lives one mile away; worked in oil field all his life; CIA clearance; started on boats but did a lot of dangerous stuff, all water related; my other brother was insurance in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in retirement works for LeBlanc's daughter; daughter started in marina with previous spouse; now owns marinas in Fourchon near Grand Isle; strictly servicing recreation fishing; most of tenants are from Baton Rouge, Gonzales, Memphis, Denham Springs; tenants love to fish in that area; rent a place to park their boat in enclosed shed, park fancy motor homes there; come down for weekend; has eighty spots; son started major [?] every time, successful, forty-two years old; wife and twelve-year-old daughter; son is a Shriner, very active in Masonic activities, just sponsored golf tournament for dyslexia; Louisiana has no public programs for people with dyslexia in elementary or secondary school; son is Catholic; daughter [marina owner] is member of her local nondenominational church, still very religious; daughter in Pumpkin Center, Louisiana; kids go to LSU and Southeast, she is of a different faith; she manages homes for the mentally challenged in St. Tammany Parish and Tangipahoa Parish, and one more parish on the north shore; interviewer asks LeBlanc about social space; camp in Leeville, Louisiana, which he sold to son for good price after twenty-something years; specifically built for that type of entertainment, family gatherings; interviewer asks what LeBlanc thinks of people of his cultural background [Acadian]; LeBlanc emphasizes how nice and kind people are; typical of culture; you are going to be welcome, be inspired by the family bond that you see in all that community; in Canada in Maine with first settled, but here too; people are the nicest people in the world; people have strong feelings for welfare of community; most people have tremendous passion for bayou; not growing because we have no land to grow; "all we can do is reap benefits of abundance of good things we have"; next door is Terrebonne Parish, means "good earth"; land provides us with opportunities; many of us could sell, move to more desirable community [safer from storms]; LeBlanc had \$90,000 of damage to camp recently; daughter had \$1 million in damages; just like in Grand Isle, unprotected; all these other communities cry, "look at what Katrina did to me" but Grand Isle was clobbered first; our levees help, built by our money and our taxes; New Orleans and Plaquemine Parish levees were built by

federal money, Corps of Engineers; “we did it ourselves”; “wonderful” article about our levees; LeBlanc doesn’t care what Corps says, it’s unacceptable; retort: it’s been there fifty [fifteen?] years and never flooded; in New Orleans everything was devastated [with federally built levee]; community loves to travel; every year LeBlanc and wife travel throughout the year; try to avoid cold periods on East Coast; like to go to east in July and August, east from Tennessee up coast; New Brunswick, Canada, can go back to land of ancestors, three of four lines; all are Francophone, three are Acadians; fourth French from France; go where first LeBlanc settled; grandson was deported to Liverpool, England by British [Honore LeBlanc, eight years in British prison, buried in France]; one came to Louisiana in Spanish ship; lines are LeBlanc, Boudreaux; Prejean [paternal grandmother], Augeron [grandfather]; wife is also Catholic; two of her lines are Acadian, Guidry and Roger [originally Roger Casey from Ireland, British soldier that came to Nova Scotia during expulsion, married Acadian girl and was deported]; British wanted to secede and they did; deportation was 1755, became country in 1776; had no allegiance but rather wanted to clear out land [in north]; wife sings but LeBlanc can’t; reads music, as much French as English; reads news: two local papers, *Times Picayune*, hard to get *Morning Advocate* [used to subscribe and get it mailed]; gatherings: first was developed once/month, “La table Française”; group of men who reached point in life where they wanted to continue to recall words and language spoken by parents and grandparent [knew grandfather Leblanc, who died in 1952, at ninety-two, when LeBlanc was sixteen and spoke no English at all]; language was a little different, usages change; “I’m not a grammarian by any means”; talk only in French; words, phrases, expressions an older generation had used; started with seven or eight, some of older guys have died; Mr. [Al] Danos is youngest; his parents and grandparents spoke; brother speaks very little; wife had fifteen kids in her family; LeBlanc just three, though extended family was big [aunt with seventeen kids, which customary in those days]; sometimes gets emotional about parents, who were ‘just tops’; whenever LeBlanc felt badly he’d go to mom; she’d say, “if it is to be it’s up to me”; parents had been born in early 1900s, go to big city “every now and then”, doesn’t know how much literature they read, though he saw them read in French; always talked about “our future”; three boys were very productive; mom told them lifetime learning will always be a necessity; you’ll have to be continually developing skills to keep up change; applies to grandkids, too; life does not stand still; “applies to my job, my brothers’ work”; brothers continue to work into seventies; LeBlanc stopped at seventy-one because of health problems and “I just wanted to have a good time in the rest of my time”; but he has continued to learn; to keep up with changes; “what I’m doing in 1960s is surely different than 2000”; saving money; discusses historic growth of S&P over decades as good investment; land is good investment; LeBlanc tells his kids; not a multimillionaire but wife and LeBlanc are very comfortable; kids are “doing okay”; prayer of unity for the family is our lord’s rosary; as boy would say four rosaries on our knees with parents [in French]; LeBlanc’s kids [three daughters and son] all understand French, but some speak better than other; won’t be grammarians but they can survive; never studied language but picked it up from parents and grandparents; good because if they go to France, Belgium, Senegal, where they speak French, able to converse; interviewer asks LeBlanc about natural and environmental disasters; “the spill is not as damaging as the [moratorium] decision by the administration, the moratorium is more damaging economically to this country, especially the bayou”; eventually it’s going to hurt community; jobs are controlled by local companies that work for big companies; going to cut back outsiders first; if oil work goes to North or South Africa, Argentina, then “our boats go there”; Chouest owns shipyards in Brazil, here, Jacksonville, Florida, Houma; he builds boats all over, and will continue to build;

crews will be held on; first let go people from elsewhere; flooding has created tremendous hardship on people's budgets; we didn't flood but we are exposed to expenses of insurance companies and federal government; events in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish affect rates here; costs LeBlanc \$5000 to insure a house that prior to Katrina cost \$1000; growing up walked one mile to church; rode bicycle; parents did not own car until "we were quite old"; didn't use boat on bayou [boating primarily on southern part of parish]; people living in marsh, fishing and trapping; school boat provided transportation for public schools on bayou; transportation from kindergarten; LeBlanc was close with public school kids; parents didn't have much money in budget, but spent it on parochial school, for religious reason more than budget; momma wouldn't admit to this; stressed good education from get-go; north of bayou was treated better than south; South Lafourche has one-third of population but pays more than fifty percent of taxes; county seat is in Thibodaux, from there to Grand Isle is one hundred miles; money goes north; everything [court, act of sale, school board] happens in Thibodaux; money trickles back down, divided unequally; boats, pipelines, and oil company fixtures, are assessed as property; LeBlanc's favorite part of bayou is the south; even though he was born and raised in other part; people are first class, very cordial and very nice; likes it better; Still see friends from north part of parish; remembers living in Raceland and speaking French; today guys in mid-70s don't speak French anymore, some have lost it completely; they've lost something very unique that was part of their culture; offers perspective of someone from a different part of county; LeBlanc's dad used to tell him "always be the best that you can be"; played six-man football; Mr. Loyman [Melancon] would tell him the same; have tried to live by it; proud of family and accomplishments.

TAPES: 1 (T3939)

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OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewer bio; Interviewer index

RESTRICTIONS: None