

Brenda Bertrand Thibodeaux

Carl: Okay well I'm here today in Lafayette with Brenda Bertrand Thibodeaux, native of Henry, Louisiana. And Brenda before we get started I have to take care of all the legal niceties to get your permission to put this in the archives at the university here in Lafayette, at LSU, and the National Sea Grant headquarters, strictly going to be used for research purposes. There is to be no financial compensation for anyone involved (laughing).

Brenda: Darn! (laughing)

C: Good thing you are retired because you wouldn't be able to retire on this.

B: I understand completely

C: Is it okay for us to?

B: Yes. it is.

C: Okay, well Brenda as I told you, nobody ever talks about women

B: Right

C: Especially in Cajun society.

B: Exactly

C: It's almost as if they don't exist if you look at the literature.

B: Yes!

So that's what I'd like to talk to you about today.

B: Okay.

C: And I'd like you to look at your mother's generation and how things have changed over for your generation.

B: Okay

C: You were born in Vermilion Parish?

B: In Vermilion Parish

C: In?

B: In Abbeville, Palms Hospital

C: What year?

B: 1949

C: Okay and your mother was born in Vermilion Parish also, I'd take,

B: No she was born in Lafayette Parish.

C: Okay

B: and we didn't learn that until Seth started doing some genealogy.

C: Ah

B: Yes

C: When was your mother born?

B: 1929

C: 1929, okay so there is

B: There is a 20 year difference here

C: right

B: Yes

C: But there is also a world apart

B: A world of difference, yes! Yes!

C: So let's start by talking about, now you grew up in Henry

B: in Henry, exactly

C: Can you describe what Henry was like when you were growing up?

B: There was a church, a store, and a school and that was it. And well really we had two stores. We had two little stores and that was Henry. That was it. Now we lived out in the country and had to, you know drive to school and all that.

C: So Henry was town?

B: Henry was town, well kind of yes. Erath was more town but we went to school in Henry. But I guess if you wanted to go shopping shopping you went to Erath which was much bigger than Henry, had at least a department store.

C: Right

B: Yes, right

C: So, let's talk a little bit about your mom's generation.

B: Okay.

C: Now women of your mother's generation was expected to marry out soon and become a housewife and more or less that was the extend of her

B; Yes, she was the caregiver. My mother, her role was a caregiver and she quit school in 4th or 5th grade to caregive her grandmother.

C: Okay

B: Because she knew that her mother was not going to care for her, my grandmother's husband's mother.

C: Okay but her mother also had a bunch of kids I assume to take care of right?

B: twelve living children, had had fourteen but had twelve living children so

C: So she had to attend to those kids, her husband

B: her husband and then there was the grandmother that when the grandfather died, the grandmother had come to live with them and there was no one to take care of the grandmother. So my mother quit school to take care of the grandmother.

C: Okay

B: Yes

C: Now how old was she when she got married?

B: My mother was 19 when she got married on January 10th and turned 20 on the 16th you see, so yes.

C: Now how many kids did your mom have?

B: My mother had three kids. Three daughters

C: Okay, she also grew up during the depression

B: She grew up during the depression and that was the main focus of our lives. Very conservative, very thrifty, you don't waste, you don't spend because you never know when you're next.

C: But I assume your mother's main focus in life was the house and her family

B: The house and the family, that's it

C: Am I putting words into your mouth?

B: No, you are not putting any words into my mouth, that was my mother's role: the house and the family and she took care of our education. You know like making sure our homework was done and that we would get a good education because she felt she had kind of been robbed of an education. You know so she and she was a big proponent of education.

C: Okay, now we talked a little bit about differing life expectations.

B: Yes

C: Okay for your mom, the only real expectation for her was to become a housewife

B: Was to get married and become a wife and mother

C: a mother and wife, okay now

B: That's right

C: For your generation coming 20 years later.

B: Okay now, my mother was an advocate of a woman having a very good education for in case. In case the marriage didn't work, you didn't have to stay. My mother felt trapped. She felt that she had to stay in a relationship, whether it was good or bad, they felt they had to stay, she and her friends and everything.

C: And I think it's not just them,

B: No, no

C: All the women I knew from that generation all felt that

B: All felt that way and my mother wanted us to have options. You know she wanted us to and consequently all three of us are very well educated.

C: Okay, but the expectations, the options for you were

B: For me

C: at that point were becoming an educator, I assume a nurse, or

B: or a teacher or a secretary

C: Those were

B: Those were the three choices, those were our three choices and but then also to find someone and get married and have children. (laughter) She just added the education component, yes

C: (laughing)

B: That's how it was.

C: Now you grew up in a farm town

B: On a farm, yes, a working farm

C: Let's talk a little bit just for a minute about the roles of father and mother in a farm family and in this time and in this place. So your dad I assume was in charge of the crops,

B: Right, in charge of the barn, the cattle

C: the barn, the livestock, all that. Now your mom

B: My mom

C: I assume had some responsibilities outside the house too

B: Yes she did, yes she helped my dad if he needed help. She helped him. You know like when they put out hay, she would help with that and whatever else needed to be done. The feeding

C: She cooked meals, I'm assuming

B: All three meals were cooked, hot meals, all three meals, you know yes

C: I know where I grew up and for the harvest, especially for cotton

B: Oh

C: She also had to cook extra

B: for, exactly that is correct.

C: for everybody who came and worked

B: that's correct. We, Daddy would hire some people, hire people and she cooked for these people and she fed these people and so had my grandmother. They had done, now in my grandmother and in my mother's time, they would stay and live in the attic. The people that they would hire to work for them

C: Right

B: would stay with them and lived in the attic. When I was growing up they went back home and came back. They had transportation

C: Right

B: where in my mother's growing up years they didn't have transportation

C:

B: Yeah there was a baronyere in the attic and that's where they stayed. But my grandmother cooked three meals for her family and the people that were helping with the harvest.

C: Now what about the poultry and the poultry yard. Was that your mom's responsibility?

B: That was my mother's domain. Yes the poultry and she killed the chickens and plucked them and did all that, yes.

C: Okay and for, I don't know about your mother's generation, I know one generation older than that, the women would have used the eggs to buy stuff and barter.

B: They did, they bartered with eggs. Then we would take our eggs to the little country store, Mr. Ralph's and she would buy flour, sugar, whatever with the eggs and all that. Yes, it was mostly like, not just eggs, it was eggs and money. You know what I mean there was

C: Right

B: there was a combination there. It had moved to that point where it wasn't just goods that were being used to barter, it was then goods and

C: and money

B: and a little bit of money, yes. And my mother picked cotton. She helped my dad with the cotton and all that.

C: So how much cotton did you guys raise out there?

B: Not that much, I mean we were on a 60 acre farm so about 60 acres of cotton.

C: Because my grandfather had about that much but they only grew about 10 acres of cotton. It was about all he could handle

B: and it could have been that. We did have corn to feed the cattle you know because they did all that

C: Right. My grandfather had about a 2 acre garden I guess, huge

B: Exactly and also now another domain of my mother's was the garden. We had a beautiful big garden that was Momma's garden.

C: Okay, that leads to another question. Preserving food

B: Yes

C: How did your mom preserve food for

B: Momma canned the food. Now it was in jars and put in a little outhouse thing that we had, and she had all that in there. They would can in jars you know.

C: I know in Sunset and Church Point, places, little towns where I grew up there were canneries attached to the schools

B: Yes we had one

C: where women... You had one too

B: We had a canning center

C: Did your mom use it at all?

B: My mom didn't use that, she just did it at home.

C: Okay

B: Yeah

C: and mostly, I know back home they used, they canned figs, they canned feed

B: figs, corn

C: corn

B: Momma corned okra, canned okra, all that. Everything you could grow in, string beans. Anything you could grow in a garden, Momma also canned if there was an abundance of it. Yeah and my grandmother was big on, now my momma didn't do too much of this but my grandmother was big on canning tomatoes. She had tons of tomato jars and she loved cooking with tomatoes and tomato sauce. So my mother was not a big person on tomato gravy, so she didn't do that

C: What about children? ... Let's look at the roles of who is raising the children in what areas. Now I assume in most cases I know where I grew up, the boys going out in the field anything outside was dad's responsibility

B: Right, exactly

C: But inside the house, I assume

B: That was something my mother never really made us do. She didn't, I think it was because she had had so much responsibilities so young and had worked so hard because their family was so large. She didn't want anybody to do her work, her housework and stuff. I mean like we could help like fold towels or she'd make us, we had a buffer machine, we all had wooden floors so she would wax the floor on her hands and knees and then we got to buff with the machine.

C: Right

B: You know but otherwise Momma didn't want us to... she didn't want us in her kitchen; she didn't want us to help with anything. We were not going to do it like she wanted it done so we weren't, that was not a big thing (laughter)

C: Who was the disciplinarian? Mom or Dad?

B: I think

C: or both?

B: I think it was both. But I think it was both and my father would have been much more strict. I think my mother was not as strict as my father was. I mean he believed in the 'you don't date until you're 16' and you never go on a date, you have to have a double date, kind of like the chaperone thing and all that. But Momma didn't see it that way; you know she was a little bit more progressive I guess.

C: Well I know you talk, it's interesting what you were talking about, you know Mom being somewhat more lenient but also on the same token the dad was the ultimate ... (laughter)

B: exactly

C: because if you did something really bad, the case automatically went over to him

B: and it was always, "You'll have to ask your dad". If we wanted to go with someone to the movies or whatever, well ask your dad, you know. She would say yes but then she'd say but you have to ask your dad you know.

C: Who made the decisions about money? Mom or Dad?

B: Daddy did, yes, yes. Daddy had total control over the money, which is so strange because when they got older it switched and Momma had total control over the money and how things and my mother was much more thrifty than my father, you know. He was kind of, he liked to spend money on stuff, you know.

C: Entertainment? What kind of role did your mom play in that? You know because when I was a kid, whenever there was a family get together, it's the women who organize. Now I don't know what it's like over there, I'm just saying

B: Right that was exactly what it was and we would have... and it was so funny because we would have the aunts and uncles never called to come over, they would show up at your house at 6:30 in the morning. Momma would go to the freezer, pull out all kinds of stuff and by noon we had this feast and that was our entertainment. We made homemade ice cream was fun, when the watermelons came in we had watermelon, or people would call us and say "Come over! We harvested all the watermelon!" and we'd go eat as much watermelon as we could fit. And it was things like that and going to visit people that we don't do today

C: Unfortunately

B: No, we don't do that. And going to the movies. Now my dad was a very big movie buff and my mom loved the movies so we went

C: So they'd packed you up

B: They'd pack us up and take us

C: How often would y'all go?

B: I would say at least once a month you know. They would have loved it to be once a week but that would have been just you know

C: extravagant

B: spending too much money, you know, yes extravagant. So we went at least once a month. I mean I, I don't remember being little but I saw Gone with the Wind at 3. I mean they would take us, we all just went, you know.

C: I'm from a family that loved movies too

B: Loved the movies

C: They did the same thing, packed us all up and it was an adventure

B: Yes it was

C: Childbearing, Brenda, when a woman got pregnant, I assume that the whole women in the family all became involved in some extent

B: (laughing) I, that part I don't, that was never talked about in my home. We never knew if someone was having a baby or I mean I guess it was a little bit of ignorance, you never, my mother never said "Oh, so and so is pregnant!" it was "Oh, so and so had a baby!" but there was no

C: But that's what I'm getting at, but once the baby came and then

B: But once the baby came then, yes

C: Okay, that's what I'm talking about

B: Right, right, right, yes

C: Because I know back where I lived, the old aunts would show up with either meals or

B: and I guess it was convenient for us because we lived with three old aunts and so when my mom would have children, I mean they were there to kind of pick up the slack and you know help out and stuff

C: That's basically what I'm talking about

B: yes, exactly, yes

C: um, religion, I know where I grew up the women were the, especially where the kids were you know

B: My mom took us to 6:30 mass every Sunday morning, my dad did not come. (laughter)

C: That's pretty much the case everywhere

B: That's how it went, you know. My mom took us to 6:30 mass every Sunday morning.

C: Catechism

B: Catechism, my mom took us to Catechism, the whole 9 yards. Now he did come when I made my First Communion and you know, he would come to the special things, but not every Sunday, no. (laughter)

C: Well Brenda, am I forgetting to ask anything important here?

B: Um, let me think, no I guess we kind of covered it all. Um my mom was big on letting us, when we reached a certain age, like at 16, like I can remember one morning we had a killed and they were going to wrap it, so I stayed home and cooked lunch for them. There was no such thing as going to buy hamburgers or stopping at the McDonald's, there was no McDonald's. So you had to kind of you know and I had never cooked anything in my life, never cooked anything in my life, I guess it was just watching Momma, but I just got up and I did it you know. Now baking, I was in 4-H. 4-H played a big role in our lives because we were so rural and I have to say another thing, our home economics teacher did not want us to be, what do you call it, like the country folk. We came to Lafayette quite often, well they would take us to Don's to eat, she would show us how to use all the silver and where to put this and how to do this and I mean. They were really really good about doing things like that.

C: Well speaking of that, did your mom ever go to any classes by the Home Demonstration

B: Oh definitely, she was in home demonstration and did all that, yes. Very big in that and she also had the group of women that lived in the community, they had what they called a "Coffee Party" and once a month my mother would host it. There were 12 women and once a year you hosted the Coffee Party and so once a month you got together and visited and you did things like that. Which was another

C: Right but in an older generation, women in the countryside like that also got together sometimes and played cards

B: Right, play cards, my mom's group didn't do that. But I do know that my mother also, when she was younger was involved in a quilting group and they would quilt, you know.

C: Now they would give the quilts or

B: I think they were always making the quilt for someone.

C: Right

B: Like someone was either getting married, having a baby, so they would get together

C: That's what I was getting at

B: to quilt for whoever, whoever was either getting married, having a baby, or whatever, so.

C: Well Brenda, thank you so much for this. On another occasion I'd like to get together with you and Glenda and Mike and talk about moving from the country to town

B: yes, yes, yes

C: and

B: Yes, that's fine! We'd love to do that!

C: because that was a big part in all of our lives

B: It was

C: Well Brenda thank you

B: You're welcome, I enjoyed it