

Don: Well what we want to do is and you've talked to us before Sherrill, and we understand that you are still trying to get back. There is a lot of people still trying to get back. And you can share those stories with us and we'll just put it out there for people to understand. Michelle is working in Resource Economics and its one thing to sit in a cubical and it's another thing to talk to somebody that's lived the situation, so if you don't mind

Sherrill: We were supposed to turn that off.

Carl: Yeah the people who are going to be transcribing this are going to

D: If you don't mind Carl will just start asking questions. I may chime in.

S: When you said that we deal with equipment agency people. Well you know, they'll go, they'll come down here and say this is what you have to do, this is what's needed in the marsh. But they don't know what the hell the marsh looks like. If they went in New Orleans and looked in the marsh, they say this is the way it is. This Cheniere plain is totally different. It's a different animal all together, but they say well if it fits here, its going to fit there and it don't and it's so aggravating. We were with Wildlife and Fisheries a while back and the fella said will I have to take you and sink your head down in marsh for you to see? (laughing) He was trying to explain what it was and they could see plain as day what it was but he was arguing that that wasn't it...frustrating for

C: Don and I wouldn't know anything about that. (laughter) Well before we get started we want to keep the administrators happy, we just want you to say on tape that it is okay for us to record

S: Yeah

C: this interview and to put it at the University in Baton Rouge and at Lafayette and at National Sea Grant for people to use as a resource in doing research.

S: I have no problem with that. If the camera can stand it, I can stand it (laughter)

C: I think we can manage.

S: Okay!

D: You know that we know that, where's your frustrations?

S: My frustration is that there is too much, there is a limited amount of funding to start with and there is too much of the funding falling in the crack before it gets all around and the bureaucracy is like you know is slow, is hell. I mean if they would eliminate half of the bureaucracy cause you know take Cooker for instance if you got a project you got to do and its approved all this kinds of stuff and a federal agency takes it. He can only do a certain amount without other agencies looking at it before he can proceed on with it and in all that time, when that's transponding, its taking time and its also costing money because when that other agency looks at this agency what he's doing, they are getting part of the pot. So they always tell us if you are going to propose a project for a million dollars, propose it for 2 million, double the cost. Well half of that stuff is just going to administrative, it's not going on the ground.

D: So what's been your biggest frustration getting back into your normal daily economic routine, whether it be cattle or whatever

C: Yeah because the last time we talked to you I think it was just before Ike hit, it was after Rita but before Ike and you were beginning to get your herd back together and but we haven't really talked back to you since then.

S: The big thing right now is *company*. You know the cattle market is terrible.

C: Yes.

S: Its good for sellers, what they have to buy? You know if you want to go buy a heard of cattle, especially after you lost everything to start with so you just trying to , you lost all your income, I mean I lost a 150 head of cattle, lost a rice crop for two or three years, I mean money that you could almost bank on but you don't have it no more so you have to try and find a way to build up a few dollars to start and then with the price of beef so high, its hard to go buy, to build your herd back up. With 150 head between me and my son we ain't got but about 50 head right now to start going up.

D: Now where are you grazing those?

S: I got a place leased in the woods right here. I can't bring them back where my normal grazing land because I don't have any fresh water.

D: Still?

S: Still, right now I monitor. ...Locks which separates the Chenier Plain from the Teche Vermilion, well it came down but it was on the inside, was 125 grains, I kind of forget how they figure. We use grain per gallon.

D: Okay.

S: Okay, on the outside was 760 and I'm on the outside. So cattle can take 200 grains per gallon and do alright, its not good but they'll do alright, anything over 200 grains, they start aborting them, diarrhea all the time, they don't do good. It's just like us drinking sea water, you know before long we'd be dehydrating and all that kind of stuff. You can't really raise cattle, I've got all the grass I can say grace over but they have to have water with that grass.

D: So that would mean you would have to bring water somehow.

S: You can dig a well, we've always dug *curbing* wells which is, its kind of funny people don't understand that, if you go on *Cheniere au Tigre*, you can dig a well ten feet deep, but a *curbing* well has to have a lot of volume, its got to be big! But you have to contain it like you dig a hole 60 inches and you put a casing in it, curbing, and then the veins furnish the water into the that curbing and you pump out that curving. Now you'll get water about 75 grains per gallon. If you go below that, you start getting salt water, unless you go down 500-600 feet. You have to go below that level of the Gulf of Mexico.

C: But 10 feet will get you fresh water

S: Well I say fresh water, its not distilled water but its drinkable water, potable water

D: Right

S: I mean we've done that for years but you can do that but then because you don't have electrical power, well you know I can pump a thing full of water and then a couple days later you have to go back and crank it again and fill the tank back up and you can gravity feed and water the cattle but if you got any amount of cattle at all, you got to have something to *hellish* this tank.

C: Now you've got the cattle in the woodland

S: Across the swamp right there

C: You talked about the hay, where are you getting the hay? You said you were growing the hay yourself.

S: Yeah, we got some hay back here on the farm.

C: Okay. So you are rolling it and transporting it to the cattle

S: See I have a 150 bales in the shed right there and then I got 300 on the ground and then we are probably going to bale another 400-500 bales.

D: Now will you use all that with your 50 head of cattle or will you sell some?

S: No, my partner, my cousin and I kind of work together. He's got about a 100 head so he uses part of it and I use part of it and then we got some neighbors that got a few head of cattle and they need some hay so we always bale a few extra you know if they need some or we'll sell them some hay.

D: Now what about your rice land? Can you go back to farming rice now?

S: Yeah we can go back now but we still have spots and I don't know if I always envisioned that if salt water came on land and the water evaporated and the salt went in the land, that you would have salt in the land, okay I always figured I mean water is water, its over the whole land so everything would have salt on it. But we have some spots that we would plant the rice and then this part will die and then you check the salinity of the land and it's high right there and it's not high right here. So I don't know if some parts of the land is more porous than others if the salt gets down in it more or easier or whatever. It might be too hard in some places where it doesn't go in the ground and goes in softer spots, I don't know but we still have some places dying.

C: Normally about how long can you expect it to take for the rain to leech the salt out of the soil?

S: It will take 3-4 years. I mean with a lot of rain. The thing we have here is not the, if it rains the water just doesn't go over, you got to pump it out, it's not gravity drained. So that's an extra expense you got, you know after the storm LSU Ag said well look, why don't y'all flush it? Well what are we going to flush it with? All the canals are salt water. I mean I'm not going to flush salt out with salt water.

D: That was actually suggested?

S: Yeah, want us to flush it. Well you know we are not, I guess we try to raise rice the most economical way you can, that's using surface water. So we don't have aquifer water, or we got it but we not going to build wells to do that. Right now it is an act of Congress to get a permit to drill, build a big water well and then we don't want to because it's really cost effective to get water out the canal.

D: Now are you putting any crawfish in your rice fields?

S: Yeah, they had none the last three years.

C: So this is the first time since those storms that you're doing crawfish?

S: No we tried to do it since the storm but your normal, I guess you could say the average of a good crawfish crop is about 700 pounds per acre, that's over the whole crawfish season. I might have got 10 pounds per acre.

D: No kidding.

S: I've got nothing at all. I get 20% of it because my cousin farms the land so I let him do the fishing and all that kind of stuff. I used to fish myself but since I got tied up in all these meetings I've got to go to, I don't, I just don't have the time to do it. And I believe my take this year was \$700 which is it should have been around \$20,000.

D: Now, does anybody lease your land for alligator, this is alligator season

S: I do it myself

D: Okay

S: I just got through catching my last one on Monday.

C: How many tags did you have?

S: I only had ten.

D: Now where do you, where do you take your alligator when you have to dispose of it?

S: My cousin, we made *a gator farming*

C: That's Wayne?

S: Wayne, I mean I'm not going to go outside the family.

D: No, no, no that's not, I mean it has to go somewhere

C: And that's basically what we are trying to do, is trying to look for patterns where certain areas are sending their hides.

S: Well I believe probably what yall are looking at some over there today, probably.

C: Right.

S: They probably pass through him who is....

C: Okay.

S:

D: Well we were surprised. We talked to a fellow and the operation was run by a Tommy Stider who we did not meet. Very fascinating, can say that, very fascinating but they were sending their hides to Singapore, Singapore to be processed.

S: Well you see that's what Wayne does. He either sends them to Singapore, to somewhere in France, some other foreign country. They go all the time, go out there all the time, trips to over there, getting rid of alligators and all that stuff.

D: Now does he have an alligator farm himself?

S: (not sure what he said)

D: Okay

S: He probably has 7 or 8 locations, sheds, all over the country, I mean this area.

C: Now given the hardships that people have faced since 2005, Sherrill, how many people in this area have begun pulling out the traditional economic pursuits, whether just ranching or rice farming or crawfish farming? I mean are you seeing a lot of people dropping out?

S: On our farm, I guess the family farm back here, probably 3,000 acres, there is only about 120 acres planted on it now and it used to be all planted. It's getting to where, well in the first place, nobody encourages young people to get into agriculture. First place it cost you a fortune to get into agriculture, if you don't inherit agriculture, you can't get in. It's not feasible; it's not cost effective what so ever. You just can't make a living at it. You got people that you know most of the people that lived here, I guess you can say the young ones, I consider myself one of the younger ones, anybody older than me they are almost down and a lot of them will retire soon but nobody took over when they retired so it is sitting there idle.

D: And they are not selling their land

S: No

D: They are keeping the land in their family, but it's either grazed or just sit there.

S: We got quite a bit just sitting there, its just not doing anything. Now some of it they use to get crawfish, but if you don't take the land and you are just going to use it for crawfishing, you basically

ruining the land because the land doesn't really dry out, you're not working it, getting rid of the trash, that kind of stuff, eventually all you are going to have is bullwhip and cut grass and all this kind of stuff, crawfish don't eat that. So unless you plow the land up, bush hog it, or do something with the land, you are eventually just going to have, it's eventually going to go back to wetlands and a lot of people want us to do that. Myself, so much time and effort we put into building this farm up, I don't want to see it go back to

C: How long has your family been cultivating this parcel of land?

S: Oh since in the '50s, let's see they moved from Cheniere au Tigre

C: Right

S: this way and they started rice farming

D: but they had cattle on Cheniere au Tigre and they also had I know watermelon, there may have been other things

S: They farmed, my great-grandfather was a horticulturalist besides being a medical doctor and he planted just about every kind of fruit tree you could ask for. I mean he had pears and plums and peaches, everything and then they planted row crops, watermelons, cantaloupes, you know all that stuff in later years they started planting produce, butterbeans, all this kind of stuff. You know they, the island itself when the people where living on it, everything was going, the hotel was going and all that stuff. It was a self-sustained community, where they would go to town once a month to buy the stables or whatever, the sugar, the flour, coffee, things like that and, but the rest of it was, it came from the land. I mean they lived off the land, they had just about every kind of meat you could have.

C: Now you also got oysters you told us at some point

S: Yeah

C: Used to go

S: Used to have an oyster reef, called little hills, petite butte, just east of Cheniere au Tigre. It was a really nice oyster reef until the oyster people tore it down, but they'd go there and get fresh oysters. I mean the hotel prided itself in fresh seafood, every day, well not every day but pretty regularly, couple times a week they would go over the siegn with an oxen, big ole 600 foot siegn catch shrimp and crabs and you know everything and bring it to the reef and pick up oysters for the people and for themselves too, the people and their guest.

D: How, okay how old were you when you went on your first cattle drive?

S: Probably about 12

D: And how, remembering now that you've also had grandparents, how long do you think they have been cattle drives from this part of Louisiana up towards Abbeyville, I think generally that's the way its gone. 100 years, 150 years?

S: Oh yeah, in the late 1800s there was cattle drives, but some of the, one of those, I've tried to find them other articles for you but I can't, I don't know where I put them. I guess the commencement of raising cattle on the Chenieres and in the marsh but I can't find it. I'ma look it up, find it and send it to you

D: We are just curious because you know at one time, 20 years ago there were cattle drives that you just stop traffic on bridges

C: Oh yeah I remember Mrs. Amanda inviting me to go over and photograph one for her. I think this was in '86.

S: Yeah, see we just did it one time because whenever they, we used to drive to Cheniere au Tigre and we used to go, well before that we'd barge them.

D: Barge them?

S: Yeah but we left from here and took the routes yall took all the way to Pecan Island to Freshwater City, Freshwater City wasn't there then. We'd go across the marsh, across old Freshwater bayou, of course that is through Freshwater Bayou

C: Now you would follow the ridges?

S: Well when they, as long as we could, but sometimes you had to cut across a pretty bad spot but we made it, we drove them from here all the way to the Chenieres.

C: Now the cattle yall used to run over there. Sure you're not using any pure bred stock. Tell us a little bit about what kind of stock people used to run.

S: They want cattle that are, I guess like the heartiest cows like the Mexican cattle, Brahman cattle. So if you got any kind of mix-breed Brahman, they'd survive all that, they can take the heat, they can take the insects. You got a pure bred cattle, they won't make it at all. They won't get their feet muddy. We had a cousin that had some Beef master cattle, big ole red cow and he said I'm not going to feed them all winter, I'm going bring them over there. Them cattle were in worse shape when we took them out in the spring than when we bought them. I mean they had grass belly deep on the edge of the marsh wherever but they wouldn't get off the ridge, but those old Brahman cows were up to the belly in mud, eating and as fat as can be.

C: Now the horses yall used to run, yall used Creole Ponies or

S: Its a mixed Creole, yeah. Them big ole fancy quarter horses don't do it out there.

C: Well tell us a little bit about using them type of cutting horses with the cattle

S: Well

C: Now it was smaller than

S: Smaller horses, they are smaller horses and they had bigger hooves, and they'd go in marsh where you couldn't imagine going on a regular horse and they'd go in the marsh. I mean if you look at the horses they use nowadays, they'd probably laugh at you if you came up on a *quarter* horse but over the years they said, "Moma, buy me one of those fancy horses;" they walked more than they rode.

C: Really?

S: Oh yeah, their horses just couldn't do it.

D: Were they hard to handle, the horses?

S: No

C: Well I'm curious too because I had heard the Creole ponies were mean to handle

S: I mean no, a horse is a horse is a horse, its how you treat your horse and how you break him and all this kind of stuff, makes it either a gentle horse or a crazy horse, I mean it just depends on how you break them and how you train them. I mean you do that with people, same way (laughter)

D: Now where did you get your saddles?

S: Hm we got, a bunch of us went to Mexico and bought some saddles.

D: Really?

S: But it was a man in Pecan Island ... he would make saddles and we bought saddles from them.

D: We were talking to David Richard

S: Oh yeah, David, that's a character (laughter)

D: and he was telling us, we'll come back to that one but you are right, he was telling us that on their property they were getting them out of Anawack because apparently there is some saddle maker that is really good.

S: There are several of them somewhere in Central Texas, some where's up in there that makes saddles.

C: Now how many people would it take to drive your family's herd, how many people would go out to

S: Choo, it would range from 10-20 in that neighborhood, you don't need too many as long as you got, cattle, I'll give you an example. We used to bring cattle here in the summertime and bring them out there in the wintertime. And we had to patrol the fences when it got to the fall of the year so they wouldn't get in the rice fields. They'd walk up and down that fence, they knew it was time to go back and if you got some lead cattle and you got a couple of riders in the front, they will follow that horse

until they get back and they know it, they know its getting that time of year and its time to go home, they follow the whole way. When we put them on barges, we put 100 head at a time on a barge and go open the gate, and turn them up

D: Now how did you push them by barge? Did you go, what waterway did you go down?

S: Well we used, before all the canals were dug, we'd go around to Vermillion Bay and then come back around through the Gulf ... bring them to the marsh. But in my time we always did have a deep bayou which is really Vermillion Bay and go through the Audubon and go straight through the to Cheniere au Tigre. That's the route we'd take.

D: So you crossed Audubon Refuge

S: Yeah

D: Oh that was nice

S: Oh yeah, we got right away for perpetuity through all the Audubon

D: Okay, alright, now there is just a small amount of cattle on Cheniere au Tigre now?

S: I guess counting the calves, there is about 9-10 head

D: That's all.

S: That's it.

D: Now does your family own the entire Cheniere or you share ownership with the McIlhennys or something like that?

S: The McIlhennys own the west end of the island, the far west end of the island.

D: I got it.

S: It, well they own west of the island then going back towards Freshwater Bayou.

D: Okay

S: They just own a little end of the island. Now they got some other families that own some land, little bitty tracks, 10 acres, 15 acres, 20 acres, little strips here and there. I guess the bulk of it is owned by the family.

D: Okay, alright, clarifies. Now did your family ever get involved in the oyster business?

S: No.

D: Always been, for lack of a term, let's just call it agriculture.

S: Right

D: Not aquaculture, okay

C: When you set out to do the cattle drives, just what would you take along with you? Obviously you had your horse and saddle but what else did you take?

S: About as much booze as you could drink (laughter). I mean I got to be honest. (laughter)

C: Hey! That's what we want! (laughter)

S: Well you'd run to town, used to be able to buy salt meat in chops like pork chops but salt meat, we'd boil that up with some fresh potatoes and put that in the saddle bag with your 5th of whiskey on the other side and you would just go with it. When you'd get hungry, you'd reach in there and eat and just keep on going. I mean it wasn't like on television where you have to camp out at night and all of this kind of stuff. You made it in a day.

D: A long day.

S: Yes! When the sun starts just coming up you are on the horse and you going and when you get over there, the sun is going down. It took a while.

C: So what was the routine? When did you take them to the Cheniere and when did you bring them back?

S: Usually they bring them in at least before the 1st of June and then November you'd bring them back.

C: Now yall had somebody who stayed out there with them or you just went to check on them periodically or

S: One thing about and you know I keep telling younger generations that its an animal, the good Lord made that thing to go and eat grass and drink water and produce calves. You ain't got to play with them all the time.