

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: John Doucet

COLLECTION: 4700.2099

IDENTIFICATION: Golden Meadow Native [b. 1962]; son of French-speaking Cajuns; son of oilfield worker; Louisiana State University Medical School Alumnus; Nicholls State University professor; Biologist; Geneticist; Playwright; Catholic

INTERVIEWER: Ryan Branton

SERIES: Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project

INTERVIEW DATE: October 4, 2010

FOCUS DATES: 1960s [childhood]; 1990s [early career]; 2010 [contemporary culture in Bayou Lafourche]

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3945

Interview conducted at Nicholls State; Doucet grew up in Golden Meadow [b. 1962]; lived on Palmetto Street, near North Bayou Drive [Highway 1]; spent entire childhood in 'handful' of places: his house, yard, grandmothers' houses, school; occasional visits to Grand Isle, Harvey, LA [for dad's work in oil fields]; Doucet grew up in family of five: two older sisters, one younger brother; played amongst themselves; occasionally neighborhood boys would play basketball or football; lived in community that was separate from surrounding communities; some unsavory households nearby; kids were protected from those areas; no gangs but economic issues caused divisions; as a child parents drove Doucet everywhere; would sometimes bicycle on street; no kids his age in neighborhood; cyclone fences [metal chain-link] set up between houses separated him from neighbors; modes of transportations: "certainly" cars; other kids would walk long distances; Doucet's family lived "down a lane," 500/1000 feet from bayou; grandmother's house was bayou-side, across Highway 1 from water; Doucet spent a lot of time there, sitting on screened front porch; he can remember smell of bayou: salt, seafood smells [sometimes rancid], diesel; learned to identify cars and boats; large part of heritage came not from 1950s-style home with immediate family but time spent with grandparents; grandparents: old retirees "cursing in French", telling French stories on their front porch; Doucet discusses home life; Dad [Herman Joseph Doucet] was working "seven-seven or worse, all his life"; dad died when Doucet was in seventh grade [1974]; rheumatic fever as a teen damaged heart muscles; Doucet probably spent less than 500 days with dad; only one parent for large periods, mom [Dora Rebstock Doucet] was responsible for seven [?] "evil" kids running around screaming; dad's presence meant everything was more subdued because he had to rest; reaction to Father's return from oil field; Doucet's father's family knew when dad was in town; people

noticed the company car; on drive from western to eastern Louisiana dad would bring lovebugs [grill was black with dead lovebugs]; Doucet family had thriving home life; stayed home on weekends; later Friday nights were spent at football games; Doucet briefly played football, joined marching band [instrument?]; Doucet is Catholic, went to church every Sunday; was altar boy, then lector and Eucharistic minister; grandparents all went to church on regular basis; parents brought kids to church regardless of whether dad was home; Doucet remembers Lent, somber events, incense in the big spooky church was “really thrilling”; Blessing of the Fleets: Doucet on boat in altar boy outfit; after dad’s passing Doucet felt a lot of anger, misunderstanding; can’t remember if he was altar boy before or after; with death he became a little “numb” to religion, was more automatic; after death community stepped into his life, esp. grandparents and teachers; grandparents were worried that he didn’t have role model and would be at risk; year after dad died [May 1975] Doucet was going to band camp, Grandpa [only speaks a few words of English] took Doucet aside and said, “Hey, don’t drink and no girls”; his family was example of how people took caregiving into their own hands; generation, culture paid more attention to boys than girls [no one worried about his sisters, who were older]; Doucet was distant relatives of teachers at junior high, they looked out for him; science teacher in high school, Archie Castell [Archibald Castell, Jr.; b. 1934, d. 1995], drove him to every science fair “took extra interest in [his] wellbeing”; mom did a good job of watching out, but she was busy with four [?] other kids; right before dad died he wanted Doucet to join science fair; after dad died Doucet did project, partly out of regret, won first place for whole school [in seventh-grade]; eventually won a bunch of awards; tells story of how in third grade parents were called to front office of school, Doucet thought he was in trouble, but he’d scored perfectly in science portion of standardized test; dad recognized abilities and encouraged science; Castell, one of judges in first science fair, took him to whatever fair necessary, including international science fair in Minnesota [twelfth grade]; Castell not origin of interest in science but still important; mom worked part time at Sears after dad died; she financially subsidized projects; for Doucet childhood was less community and more family; he was isolated to “my own backyard”; extended families pull together; a lot relatives were teachers, “if you did something wrong they could tell your momma”; Golden Meadow, like all bayou communities, is not a circular village, it’s long, families are miles apart and community was stretched out; developed linearly and established subcommunities; events for the bigger community: church, high school graduation, etc.; now a lot of things competing for people’s time; graduation and church compete with plays, movies, football; more things people go out to attend; interviewer asks Doucet about technology; Doucet remembers being driven to maternal grandmother’s house often; he doesn’t see children in this generation visiting grandparents as often; Doucet writes historical plays; first play based on stories from 1893 [written in 1993]; used grandparents’ Cajun French voices for characters in play; success because “I can write dialogue”; Doucet doubts if next generation could write the same because they didn’t spend enough time with elders; Doucet didn’t actively memorize syntax and patterns of grandparent’s speech but absorbed them; interviewer asks Doucet if Creole French voice is disappearing; Doucet says there are less people but among those people it still “incredibly strong”; wishes he had broken English/broken French accent but would never be a lecturer [laughs]; mom passed away in 2009; Doucet would fall into Cajun after visits; much more English around; every “English teacher from my mom’s time” onward tried to improve students’ speech; Doucet recalls mom being punished for speaking French [her native language]; 1915 law made speaking French on state property forbidden, including public schools; in Golden Meadow

it was first language of many students; corporal punishment; mom would have to kneel in corner in pile of corn kernels; she never ate corn the rest of her life; her brother [Doucet's uncle] would get whipped; Hurricane Betsy [1965] was first disaster Doucet remembers [three years old]; hurricane's path went up Atlantic, looped, touched Florida then headed directly for Lafourche Parish and Gulf [of Mexico]; dad was working 7-7, "impossible back then" to evacuate all the workers on rigs; Doucet recalls pitch black night as family was trying to evacuate, mom on ship-to-shore phone, crying; mother took kids to Cut Off; roads already had water, bad visibility; went to Aunt Winnie's house; bunch of other families; was it safe because of shallow roof, high on blocks?; Golden Meadow is below sea level; Doucet was petrified, threw up in bed, one of the windows crashed on top of bed; most harrowing thing was when the men got together to murmur the rosary; "When women pray, it's alright; when men pray you know something wrong"; when grandpa and other men started praying: that was "scary"; in morning, calmer, trees had all fallen, carport collapsed on top of car, dad was there; army truck to Golden Meadow; Doucet house missed water by an inch; Doucet's house was last one on street so other houses might have flooded; everyone had to change roof; Doucet wanted to help, would go yard-to-yard with huge magnet and collect nails; couldn't drink water, go to school, no electricity, hot; stray animals all over the place; people fixed their own houses, maybe with insurance money; different than today when people wait for "something" to happen [government intervention]; if cars were damaged, replace windshield; the concrete and steel church was fine; Doucet doesn't remember next time family went; mass was probably suspended because roads were bad; sisters said they didn't go to school for three months, "that's a good deal"; Doucet remembers preparing for Hurricane Camille [1969], category 5 storm that turned [away from coast]; wasn't an adult so didn't feel thankfulness, but the excitement [of seeing family] wasn't there; Doucet only had two natural disasters during childhood, Betsy and Camille; physically bayou has changed: more houses are brick [maybe economic thing]; Golden Meadow built a seawall [2-3 feet of concrete along Highway 1] to protect itself from bayou, every summer road flooded; boat entry required a gate but builders went out of business before it provided gates; people had to buy boards to close openings whenever high tide came; started building in lower parts of parish; Dad's professional history; after high school he could either go to war, go shrimping like their dad, or go into oil field; Doucet's uncles went shrimping briefly [grandpa had boat for short time]; when oil fields came everyone got job there; paid well, got fed well, and didn't have to maintain own equipment; dad entered oil field around age 19; worked his way up from roustabout to toolpusher in 1960s; then a succession of companies bought out his platform; turmoil in late 1960s, corporations growing; in 1973-4 oil production stymied; dad's "great" company had to sell to smaller company with less benefits; dad passed away; Doucet says now there is much less boat traffic on bayou, less trawling, fishing, and oystering; still some "beautiful boats" moored there; this season bad because of the oil spill [Deepwater Horizon spill, April 20, 2010]; more truck business on the highways [to Port Fourchon]; state built a four-lane highway ["back highway"] to the west of LA 1, behind Golden Meadow; presumably hurricane evacuation route but also thoroughfare to Port Fourchon; less traffic on bayou and Highway 1; Port full of greater ships than were ever moored on bayou; in 1960s dad showed Doucet different lifestyles [than fishing]; dad was surrounded by "greasy, stinky technology" and machines; Doucet learned about machines and drilling fields, drilling bits; Dad brought empty parts boxes home, Doucet studied all the logos and oil company names; dad brought home chemicals occasionally; being surround by science and technology was different than a typical kid on the bayou; Doucet was never concerned with

cultural aspects of bayou when he lived there; after he left wasn't homesick but thought about it; wrote 14 plays, all set in Cajun culture; edited several books on history and culture of area including *Lafourche Country III*, [Lafourche Heritage Society, 2010]; "if I would've been paying attention"; science "somehow got me back" [to Acadian culture]; studies genetics of Acadians, genetic diseases; dad's science influence; Doucet discusses Nicholls State; often visited as kid [sisters, band competitions, science fairs, literary rallies]; went to LSU Medical Center in New Orleans for PhD; got married, had kids; wife also had nice upbringing on bayou; Doucet suggested "let's raise the kids on the bayou"; commuted on Highway 90 to New Orleans; when his grant finished got a job at Nicholls [biology department]; ten years later department head; Nicholls was "the right place at the right time, right job and a good job"; Doucet has no regrets; Doucet discusses history of his work; doing PhD in neuroscience [biochemistry?]; had heard legend of blood samples that had been sitting in freezer, no one was doing research; Usher Syndrome [children are born deaf and they go blind later in life, severe but very rare]; Werner von Klepper [?] from Tulane rode unicycle into country to get blood samples and drew family trees to study heredity; found 66 people from an extended family, all from SW Louisiana and of Acadian ancestry; after PhD Doucet got post-doctoral fellowship to train in genetics; five years looking for gene; Doucet's team and one in Europe came to same conclusion: unknown gene on chromosome 11; mutated in the Acadians; still use that technology but is far more advanced [process that took five years in 1990s now takes under a year]; Doucet looks at other types of disease; Nicholls is rural university that addresses rural issues so includes non-human species; lovebugs study; crawfish and crustaceans are fascinating, 100s of chromosomes but prehistoric crawfish look exactly the same; Doucet encourages honors students to work on border of science and humanities; area is "lost" in modern science; interviewer asks how people perceive Doucet; he believes "I'm in a really good position;" people who used to collect samples had foreign names; "I'm the magic man"; Acadians understand his name; feels enormous responsibility to make sure something actually happens with their samples; Doucet hates to think he's perceived as a savior because "science takes time"; working solo at Nicholls so can't make a lot of promises but people appreciate effort; known better as a playwright, which is "accidental hobby"; Doucet discusses science and religion; believes in melding two; director of National Genome Project just wrote book about his belief in god [Francis Collins, director of NIH, formerly of Human Genome Project, wrote *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, Free Press 2006]; doesn't think argument between religion and evolution is necessary; chemical reactions are spontaneous and life is based on chemical reactions; those things happen in a world that was maybe supernaturally created; believes others in bayou accept technology and religion; hasn't seen a lot of frustration fueled by incompatibility; at Nicholls when he talks about evolution some students disagree; [Pope] John Paul had issued document that it was okay to use evolution as a teaching tool to understand biology [1996, Pontifical Academy of Sciences]; what makes Doucet sad is inability to accept other ways of thinking; so much to be learned, common things [across beliefs]; people would avoid frustration, hatred if they opened up and tried to understand different things; Doucet's kids went to church, attended Catholic schools; one is in medical school; one did biology minor, major in French; both appreciate biology; interviewer asks Doucet about concept of "home"; Doucet believes home is sitting with kids and wife doing something interesting, eating good food, watching TV; another "home" is going into office, surrounded by what he needs to write and create things; having time to create "with a good cup of coffee"; essential to work alone sometimes; wrote 14 plays in 10-12 years; used to

close my door when my children were growing up, “wife probably never forgave me for that”; money saved up from plays put into home construction; “when you come out you have to share the exuberation of creating something”; misery as driving force and power of conflict in creative process; Doucet discusses impact of technology on students; younger generation is “normal people, but more introversion problems”; a lot of people spending time with electronic things rather than “real” not-electronic things; not creating cyborgs, things will level out; Doucet wishes people would leave religion alone; “as if there’s something beautiful and the news media has to stab it in the heart, because that’s what makes news”; religion is being tremendously challenged, especially Christians; spread of Islamic hatred brings to light movements that are anti-Christian; believes membership is going to shift in our lifetimes; shift in bayou’s religious profile: more fundamentalist churches; less old-fashioned ‘Catholic’ tradition; Doucet believes it will remain Christian; Doucet had been a bit apprehensive, given the rest of [interview] group; not as old, history enthusiast but doesn’t have as much historical information; thinks it is interesting to look back because so much of science is looking forward; “now that I’m interested in my childhood, does that mean I’m getting old?”; interviewer’s first memory was Hurricane George [1998], evacuating to Baton Rouge.

TAPES: 1 (T3945)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 3 minutes

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OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewer biography; Interviewer index

RESTRICTIONS: None