

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Denis Rodrigue

COLLECTION: 4700.2372

IDENTIFICATION: Louisiana nun, teacher, and coordinator of Come Lord Jesus at Mount Carmel Academy. Lifelong resident of Louisiana.

INTERVIEWER: Roy Benoit

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: October 28, 2012

FOCUS DATES: 1928, 1946-1953, 1949, 1950, 1965, 1994, 2006-2011

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4297

Interviewee's full name is Marie Therese Rodrigue; born November 17, 1928 in Chackbay, Louisiana; Rodrigue is the ninth of twelve children, eight boys and four girls; Currently lives in the Mount Carmel Mother House next to Mount Carmel Academy; came there at age 15 to study to become a sister; made temporary vows after three years of study and then taught in Lafayette for a year before making her final profession vows in 1950; taught in Lafayette from 1946-1953 and then was transferred several times; details long history of teaching and moving to different schools; taught for longest time at E.D. White High School; in 1994 after taking care of her mother until her death on November 21st, decided she was going to take care of people in nursing homes rather than going back to teaching, so spent two years in Lafayette doing so; After that she was called back to New Orleans and took care of sisters who had retired and been placed in Our Lady of Wisdom nursing home in Algiers; then Hurricane Katrina hit and all of the sisters were dispersed; from 2006 to 2011 Rodrigue was the coordinator for Come Lord Jesus at Mount Carmel Academy; the girls there call her the Cajun Nun; Rodrigue then discusses her siblings for about six minutes; most of them are now dead; she is the fourth youngest, she and her three younger brothers are the only siblings still living; Rodrigue describes Chackbay when she was a child: people made their livelihood by farming; her father was a farmer and trapped in the winter; there was no electricity, no telephone, no running water, outdoor toilets for everyone in the area; a Canal was named after Rodrigue's father, and she and her brothers would fish there: Pap'ere Lot's Canal; when it rained the canal would flood and the water would fill Rodrigue's family's yard; they would scoop the crawfish right out of their yard and have a crawfish boil; however, when the levees were built the kids could no longer go crawfishing; Chackbay was almost a country of its own like Choctaw or Bayou Boeuf; there was a lot of intermarriage in Choctaw because people had no access to any other place; Rodrigue played outside all of the time when she was a child; her family had the biggest yard in the neighborhood so all of the neighborhood kids would go to their house to play; she was the only girl in her neighborhood around her age so she became a tom boy; had a swing her father had built in a Hackberry Tree, but they lost the

tree in Hurricane Betsy; Rodrigue loved her parents; they were strict but the children were allowed to express their opinions; only got disciplined every time it rained because she couldn't help playing in the mud; only place she played as a child was in hers and her neighbors' yards; the years are still there but the people aren't; when Rodrigue was growing up everyone in Chackbay spoke French; she goes on to explain all of the schools in Chackbay; in her school there were seven grades, one teacher, and all in one room; seventh grade was the end of your education because there were no school buses to get to schools offering older grades; luckily, when Rodrigue was promoted to seventh grade the school board began offering buses to Chackbay students; of her twelve siblings she was the only one who went straight through school up to eleventh grade and graduated; students were punished if they spoke French; tells a story of speaking broken English in school; the children learned to speak proper English in school, while they're parents spoke broken English; the children learning proper English improved the parents' English; describes the merchants on wheels of Chackbay; there used to be a lot of hunting and trapping in Chackbay when Rodrigue was a child; family lived on a lot of wild meat; not many people went to church because of lack of transportation; people in Chackbay didn't have much religious education except what their parents taught them; Rodrigue did go to church though and became the first person in her family to receive communion when she was nine; Father Arjonilla was a big factor in the development of Chackbay; Rodrigue believes he played a big role in getting Chackbay telephones, electricity, and public school service; Rodrigue's family was not ultra-religious, but they prayed in the morning and at night; her mother taught the children all of the standard prayers in French; talks about all of the religious ceremonies her family did participate in, mainly the Palm Sunday and the Corpus Christi; Rodrigue thinks the weather now is pretty much the same as back then; winters were not all that cold; open fire place was all they had, and big quilts, and she doesn't remember suffering in the cold; describes what "blessing of the fleet" is; Rodrigue thinks the disappearing coast could affect religious traditions; when you build levees, you are protected, but you're putting someone else in danger; during Hurricane Isaac New Orleans was protected by the levees, but the people in LaPlace got the worst of it because they were flooded; Rodrigue became a nun because her mother used to tell her stories of Saint Therese Lisieux; Rodrigue thought nuns were women priests and when her brother went to seminary school to become a priest she wanted to go with him to become one too; she found out she couldn't be a priest but declared that she would become a nun before her brother was ordained; made her vows in 1946 and her brother was ordained in 1949; Rodrigue's father was opposed to her becoming a nun because he thought she was too young; she always did love God, would talk to him under the Hackberry tree like he was a friend; her favorite thing about being a nun is the way that God has enabled her to influence people; she loves teaching and loves the students she's had; tells a story of her old students contacting her and wanting to take her to lunch; people have always reminded her she will never have her own children, but she always replies that she has had many spiritual children; Rodrigue is happy and there is a lot to living a communal life; sometimes things are rationed and times are hard, but God always takes care of her; discusses churches that have fallen and been built, and church membership over the years; cemeteries were taken care of by each family when Rodrigue was growing up; discusses cemeteries for a few minutes; thinks Chackbay may become an industrial area in the future, many people in Chackbay now are not originally from there; not too many people in Chackbay now know their neighbors; her advice for young residents of Chackbay is to get to know their neighbors; one of the problems with crime in New Orleans is that people don't know each other; if neighbors knew each other they would protect each other; Rodrigue loved the way she was

brought up; they all knew their neighbors and played with them every day; she also loved “veiller”, which means “to stay up late at night”; this is when all of the adults would come to her house; the women would gather on the porch, the men on the side of the road and gab; it was fun to overhear adult conversations, and the men had a band with a washboard, and one man could play the trumpet with his hands; the children could hear them singing and making music together and that enabled the children to become creative; they made up their own games; Rodrigue finishes the interview with a “Boudreaux Joke.”

TAPES: 1 (T4297)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 5 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 37 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Audio recording of interviewer's reflections

RESTRICTIONS: None