

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Richard Thomas Gibbens Robichaux

COLLECTION: 4700.2094

IDENTIFICATION: Thibodaux, Louisiana, native [b. 1930]; Thibodaux resident; Brothers of the Sacred Heart School graduate; noncombat Air Force veteran [chaplain's assistant, Japan, 1950s]; Springhill College alumnus; retired organ player at St. Joseph Co-Cathedral; Catholic

INTERVIEWER: Kristin Foltz

SERIES: Bayou Lafourche Oral History Project

INTERVIEW DATE: October 4, 2010

FOCUS DATES: 1930s-1940s [childhood]; 1950s [Air Force service]; 1917-present [church history]

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3940

Interview conducted on October 4, 2010, at Nicholls State University; neighborhood: Robichaux born 1930, lived on St. Charles Street in Thibodaux, was last street in town, was born three months premature; grandfather [Eugene Godfrey Robichaux] was dying; introduced Gibbens to grandfather as "Alfred's new baby" and grandfather died at Touro [Hospital, New Orleans] three days later; Robichaux believes he came early so the two could meet; nice neighborhood, large Catholic school across street Mount Carmel Convent [Academy]; now Carmel motel [Carmel Inn]; ten thousand people in Thibodaux in 1930; music always a big part of Thibodaux; walked across street to school 1937; in 1898 Bayou Lafourche froze, people walked across it; Thibodaux owes a great deal to bayou; [settled because] Acadians were looking for water and bayou connected Mississippi River to Gulf; big thing was religion, ninety-eight percent of Thibodaux was Catholic; music was important; dad [Alfred Robichaux Sr.] played piano and taught Robichaux; "everything was sugarcane", Nicholls wasn't here; sugar remained at twenty cents/pound for fifty years, now it's forty cents/pound; sugar business: "how sweet it is"; went to Springhill College in Mobile, Alabama [first Catholic college in Southeast, established 1830]; graduated at twenty; graduated from Brothers of the Sacred Heart School at sixteen, only eleven grades in Catholic school; SHS building destroyed in Hurricane Betsy; Robichaux's memories of Thibodaux: required to go to church; lots of humor; music; turn of 20th century there were nineteen bands in Thibodaux but no radio or TV; nine black and ten white bands, would play for everything; concerts all the time; bayou was navigable; recalls steamboats from New Orleans carrying wedding parties with bands coming down bayou; "till they stopped it up"; [1904 dam] in Donaldsonville "killed it [bayou]"; used to connect to Houma, Bayou Terrebonne; Thibodaux

in 1930s was a quiet town, three policemen, movie theater [five cents for popcorn, twenty cents admission]; “Grand Theater” and later “Baby Grand”; no AC, blacks sat upstairs; Gene Autry came to town with a horse and brought him into theater; circuses came to town; no famous people visited town, not even [governor] Huey Long [thinks Earl Long came]; firemen’s fair was big attraction; Thibodaux had one of the greatest volunteer fire department; only cost was its fire trucks and supplies; as a kid Robichaux played outside, no TV, no computers, just piano and radio; went to bed at 8:30, got up at seven; simple, “now it’s too complicated”; Robichaux had one brother [Alfred Robichaux Jr.]; he and boys in neighborhood started club called the “Hinkety-dinkety Club”; Robichaux wrote book called “Hinkety-dinkety Club” thirty or forty years ago; whole town was related somehow; played football in rain and mud; came home from school, did homework, went out and “wouldn’t hear from anybody until momma said it was time for supper”; at seven became an altar boy at church; tells anecdote about arriving early for six AM mass; whole life as kid: play with friends, do your homework, church, radio; mostly stayed in Thibodaux; sometimes visited relatives in Lockport and Labadieville, Louisiana [sugar plantation]; walked in cane field; sugar cane is fascinating thing; hired black people from Mississippi to cut cane with cane knife; gave workers houses, no AC/fan, made \$10/week, had store on site; “blacks won’t do it anymore, we have to go to Mexico with the permission of the government”; last year [good season, 2009 ?] they’d work all night to cut cane if factory could receive the crops; Robichaux advises interviewer to go back on 308, that’s where to see activity: antebellum homes, old factories, cane trucks; nothing changed until high school, things started happening with WWII; many “uncles and older people” went to war; kept abreast of news by newspaper and radio; Robichaux remembers going to visit grandparents in Baton Rouge on “that day” [December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor]; announced on radio; didn’t realize severity of it [in Thibodaux]; from age seven to college, “life was simple and good”; “fortunately” before he left for college Robichaux met future wife [Joann] sitting on porch as he passed; she was thirteen and he was sixteen; she waited seven years for him [to get back from college and Air Force]; have been married fifty-six years; “everything was school. And eat...and play outside”; football, garage out back were headquarters for Hinkety-Dinkety Club; cost a nickel to join; Robichaux kept minutes [secretary]; club had bank account with seventy-five cents in it; after graduating in 1947 everyone spread out; Robichaux went to Springhill because dad went there; father attended 1917 to 1923, started a band [picture of him], five players cost \$10/night; when Robichaux got there in 1947 Springhill had no band so he started one; Robichaux’s son Tim now band director at Catholic school and two grandkids are classical pianists; music is in the genes; [Robichaux will play interviewer’s wedding for nothing, “just call me”]; Thibodaux hasn’t expanded too much; guy who built cathedral built most of big buildings [e.g. theater]; good old homes in Thibodaux; street names [after saints] stayed the same; canal street goes to Houma, fifteen miles away; Bayou Terrebonne connected with Bayou Lafourche at Canal Street, other side was Henry Clay Avenue; finally closed it up; haven’t added any streets, country club came in [that’s where the new homes are built]; no big businesses, and then...; Nicholls State University “changed everything”; don’t believe it will close; milk delivery every morning, came with cream on top; backyard of grandpa’s home [moved there after grandma died, Robichaux was seven] had chickens, cows, ducks, pigeons; would pick up eggs; one night found snake in nest “that was the last egg I ever picked up”; Robichaux recalls story about cow birthing calf in yard [involves vet and rope]; momma lost a little girl in miscarriage, colored man buried the body in backyard but didn’t mark it; Robichaux would have liked to have cross; that house was so old, moved to property right behind it [have been there fifty-one years], brother

lives across street; life was very simple, television, Twitter, Facebook changed all that; graduated from college at twenty, turned twenty August 17; US Army was drafting at the time and Robichaux didn't want to be drafted, so momma took him on trip [to Chicago], Robichaux told friend to check mail for draft notice; friend said "don't open your mailbox"; Robichaux met friend in New Orleans and joined the Air Force [instead]; eighty recruits travelled from New Orleans in middle of night; only three men with college degrees, so Robichaux had papers of all men; got to Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio at 2 AM; time for assignments, because of college degree officers ask him to learn Russian to put him in intelligence; asks for different assignment; music and Catholic meant Chaplain's assistant; "that's what I want"; never played organ before; March of following year [1952 ?], assigned to Far East; thought he'd go to Korea, sent to Camp Stillman in California for three weeks; assigned to Tokyo; put on boat, took seven days, everyone was sick; two thousand men and not one chair; toilet was only place you sat; [didn't want chairs flying all over during storms]; absolutely nothing to do [showed some movie]; let us sleep first night [in Japan]; choice Korea or Okinawa; "my brother's in Korea, I don't want to go there"; took bag with couple uniforms and shoes; first airplane ride of life; landed in middle of night; Quonset hut with people; went to chapel next morning, met the chaplains, "that's where I spent three years"; serving mass, teaching himself to play organ; started a choir though were no weddings, a few funerals [not active duty]; twice was able to go on leave; tried to coordinate with brother; called at 2 AM to airport; put him on plane that was just pilot, copilot, Robichaux, 20,000 pounds of meal [?]; "I get everywhere at two in the morning"; barracks downtown; woke up to brother in the next bunk; other leave in Formosa [Taipei]; proposed on telephone; came across from Japan on ship, landed in California, took train three days to get home; Joann [wife] picked April 24 [for wedding], supposed to report to Hensley Field in Dallas; got reassigned to Dobbins Air Force base in Marietta, Georgia; [discuss interviewer's connection to Georgia]; assignment worker changed Robichaux's orders to May 1, gave another week for wedding; St. Joseph Co- Cathedral; regular church now; Father [Charles] Menard, there for fifty years [1845-1896]; gives tours of church; built in 1820; 1917 [1916] caught fire but rescued statue of St. Valerie and sacrament; put her in convent; Father Barbier was pastor, moved downtown; magnificent structure cost \$300,000 to build church, now would cost \$17 million; construction used 400,000 bricks in 1920; took forty bricklayers three years to build [but wasn't dedicated until 1931]; stained glass in back of church [above front door]; Hurricane Betsy blew in Resurrection window; sent picture to artisan in Europe who rebuilt glass in sections; right before Katrina shut down church [for restoration]; repainted with gold leaf; guy got on scaffold "like Michelangelo", took thirteen months; church as center of Thibodaux: get married, baptized and buried there; St. John's Episcopal Church on Jackson Street is the oldest episcopal church in state of Louisiana [? Christ Episcopal Church in Napoleonville is older]; black churches; Thibodaux has a Jewish place but not synagogue; population is up to 16,000; Nicholls added 7,000 people and plenty of jobs; daughter-in-law is a professor of biology, son a band director; congregation started about 2000, now 6000 people; earliest mass was 5 AM; being in the middle of Thibodaux all functions took place there [parades, etc.]; only two blocks from downtown; organist from 1930-1964 was Mr. Hawthorne; one midnight mass wouldn't play for singer, so church fired him, "who was left but me"; taught seventh grade for year when came out of Air Force; went to work for welfare, visited old people, then did adoptions; had to go find mother of baby and get her verbal permission to complete adoption; "to find a loose woman, sometimes you had to wake them up, find them in a bar somewhere"; did that until organist retired, \$75/week [?], played every wedding, every funeral, every mass; sang requiem mass in

Latin in the morning; did that maybe 1000 times; Robichaux has played 1500 funerals, 500 weddings; funniest wedding: played for black wedding in Donaldsonville with twenty-five bridesmaids; funniest funeral was when bottom of coffin came out; 1500 people “waiting for me up there”; responsible for maybe 5000 babies [via weddings]; home life: big home, grandpa built in 1898 for \$5000 with contractor from Tennessee; “it was gorgeous”; daddy was born in 1901, only child by 2nd marriage; turned house across street over to Robichaux’s father; sold big house, gave property in back to Robichaux; no cows, chickens, or rabbits: “can’t have that anymore”; twenty duck eggs turned into twenty little ducks; raised pigeons, “squab is delicious”; plenty of chickens, two cows [Robichaux never milked]; Robichaux was given property in back; brother got property across street; one block from bayou, didn’t go in water often but played on banks, Thibodaux College was down street facing bayou; tells story about making hydrochloric acid bomb with materials from chemistry lab; “could’ve killed ourselves out there”; Bayou after dam: water flowing through “but not like 1700”; Robichaux doesn’t know why they wanted to stop it up; during childhood people would fish on bayou, couple of colored kids drown, see alligators occasionally; Lafourche means “the fork”; fork off Mississippi River; ferry cost five dollars to cross bayou, ten dollars for horse; no bridges “way before my time”; Robichaux doesn’t remember it freezing either; a lot of kids swim, remember one boy drowning; not a clean bayou; lilies would stop it up; Donaldsonville to Gulf, called it “longest street in the world”; Robichaux tells story about news of the end of WWI traveling down bayou in 1918; eighty miles can holler from one house to another; one hamburger place in house to walk to, “Park In”, across from pavilion with dances; first thing to come to Thibodaux was a bar; Jackson Street, not far from downtown, now state highway, had fire department [?]; one horse was trained to take off at sound of alarm, into harness; Robichaux could maybe name five restaurants [from his youth], now they’ve got fifty; everything was hamburgers and seafood, French fries; daddy would drive to Park In, a girl would come out with tray to take order, eat in car; everything was a nickel; hamburgers fifty cents, French fries twenty-five cents; finally took down; big dance pavilion every Saturday and Sunday night; ten cents/dance, grandma was there to watch to make sure you weren’t too close together; Band: Como Brothers [?], all blind; most eating was done at home; chicken was a big thing; waffles and pancakes; grandma came out with a cow’s tongue once, cut and ate like a steak; [interviewer tells about eating tong in England]; eggs and bacon, ham, grits at breakfast; noontime: sandwich; nighttime: chicken, gumbo, soup; walked across street to go to school; twelve nuns; remember classroom with sandbox, little village in it; carried lunch but would sometimes sneak back across street to get more food; learned catechism; chapel upstairs, recalls rescuing cat from Mt. Carmel roof; Robichaux is writing a book called “Monkeyworks”; about a man named “Gibs” and his cats, going to sell it to Disney; life was church, school, play, eat, pray; church still calls him back to play; not for weddings so much; doesn’t want to do funerals anymore; interviewer asks about changes in Thibodaux’s religion; mass has stayed the same; communion; biggest change was when they started giving wine, too; Robichaux never approved, it spreads disease; was asked to be deacon, but had to go class for three years and wife didn’t want that; mass is now in English, not Latin; church singing old songs again, “thanks to me”; during Katrina original pews were being restored in New Orleans; on ground floor, were destroyed, found dead horse in middle of all pews; [congregation] found place in Wisconsin to make copies of original pews, spent \$60,000; only difference is clip on back where man could hang hat; Robichaux only wore hats only in service [doesn’t like them]; talks more about Hinkety-dinkety Club; fishing in bayou, football; only has one book left; Robichaux wants to talk politics; twenty years is regular term for mayor; little city hall downtown, mayor’s office,

two jail cells, library; precious building, recently torn down; no traffic violations, no murders, biggest thing is fire; recalls big fire during LSU football game [Woman of the World Hall, 1957]; when church caught on fire, people crying on the corner “holy smokes”; stores, barbershop were on Main Street; a few clothing stores; Robichaux remembers an Italian woman who sold bananas on Sunday, “which was terrible,” because you weren’t supposed to do anything on Sunday; no NFL football; Robichaux remembers when TV came in 1947, channel 6 [WDSU] out of New Orleans; Nash Roberts, weatherman [d. 2010]; Tuesday night on for two hours, starting at six; one of first ads was a woman skiing downhill in her bra, dad turned it off; kids would play, take bath and go to bed; mom and dad played cards on porch but “we couldn’t watch that”; recalls when fire truck went up the stairs of the school; so wonderful to remember all these things; being Robichaux, there’s a lot of them; great-great-great grandfather was founder of the city, Henry Schuyler Thibodaux; he married a Brigitte, grandpa’s second wife was a Brigitte; Robichaux writes a column for the paper called “Tidbits,” [for Thibodaux Chamber of Commerce newsletter]; has made three CDs, one is church music.

TAPES: 1 (T3940)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 3 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 7 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewer index and notes

RESTRICTIONS: None